

Speech: Children and Families Minister announces new early years funding

Thank you very much for inviting me. A particular thanks to the member for Manchester Central, Lucy Powell, for inviting me here today, and for continuing to keep the political focus on school readiness in Greater Manchester. I am truly delighted to see such a range of early years professionals here today, and I would like to personally thank you for the hard work that you do. I know that all of you – whatever your role – share my passion and enthusiasm for ensuring our children get the best start in life.

School readiness is hugely important, and that is why the Department for Education has such a focus on the early years, and on improving communication and language skills in particular.

This is something that is very personal to me. Some of you may know that, at the age of nine when I came to this country from Baghdad, I couldn't speak English, and I used to sit at the back of the classroom so the teachers didn't ask me to speak in class. Sometimes when I got a bit more confident I tried to bring a few sentences together. My teachers thought I had learning difficulties. I now stand before you as MP for Shakespeare! But I had great parents and some great role models, and I learned English and then learned that being able to express yourself is the gateway to success, not just in school but in later life.

It's these crucial early years that make the most impact on a child's future path – because for those children who start out behind their peers, it's so much harder to catch up. All the evidence tells us that we need to improve children's communication and language before they arrive at school, to get them on track to be confident, able learners.

The Education Secretary has set a challenging ambition to halve the proportion of children leaving reception without the communication, language and literacy skills they need to thrive, over the next ten years. If we are to meet this ambition, we need to find new and creative ways of supporting children and families – as well as our workforce.

Greater Manchester is leading the way, and I am delighted to be here to talk about how we can work together to design and deliver systems both locally and nationally that can hopefully ensure every child is able to thrive when they start school.

I strongly believe that a key role for us in central Government is to support local leaders and professionals to innovate; and for Government to ensure the best ideas are able to flourish. The Children's Social Care Innovation Programme has been a successful example of that approach. And our £6.5m Early Outcomes Fund draws on those lessons to help local authorities improve how they deliver services to improve early language outcomes. We will announce the outcome of that fund very shortly.

Today I want to highlight some further examples of where local innovation and central policymaking are coming together to drive progress towards our shared ambition. These broadly cover three areas. The first of these is to address the work of the wider professionals involved in a child's life.

This ranges from GPs, health visitors, speech, language and communication therapists and many more. Health visitors play a particularly important role in identifying and supporting children with speech, language and communication needs.

That is why my Department – in partnership with Public Health England – will train 1,000 health visitors. Wave 1 will begin shortly in areas of high need, including Oldham and Tameside.

This is an area where Greater Manchester is really blazing a trail – both through your language pathway and your investment in tools to identify speech, language and communication needs early. Together these are designed to support the local workforce to identify speech, language and communication needs as early as possible and put in place support that is needed.

Again, this is an important example of how Government can take innovative practice and take it to scale. My Department – again in partnership with Public Health England – is developing a new bespoke early language assessment tool, under government copyright, that will be made available to health visitors and professionals across a wide range of local authorities in need.

Today, I am pleased to announce that the University of Newcastle, led by James Law – Professor of Speech and Language Science – will develop our early language assessment tool. The team working on this tool has extensive expertise in speech and language therapy, health visiting and general practice, and academic expertise in linguistics, psychology and statistics.

We are also working with Public Health England to publish early language pathway guidance which will support local areas to develop and implement their own pathway – similar to that which you have done in Greater Manchester. You have really been the pioneers of this.

Of course, the most important people in a child's life are their parents. Which brings me onto the second area I want to talk about – improving the Home Learning Environment. Because the evidence is clear that what happens at home in the early years is absolutely key to outcomes later in life.

That is why, in November, the Department held a summit, at which we brought together a coalition of over 120 businesses, voluntary groups, community and public sector organisations. These organisations all share a common goal – to help parents kick start their child's early communication, language and literacy development at home.

We want to get across that there are really simple, everyday things that every parent can do more of to help their children's language and literacy.

Since the summit, I have been working with some of these organisations to bring their commitments to life, and it is no surprise to me to find that

there is some excellent, innovative practice here in Manchester. Today after this summit, I am visiting Manchester City Football Club, to observe one of their sessions that uses physical activity to enhance children's communication and language.

Our next steps are to launch a public campaign to encourage parents to chat, play and read more with their children. I recognise that it is important to get this message out there in local communities if we want to see a change in parental behaviour, and for this to work, I will really need your help and expertise.

Our public, private and voluntary sectors are all a vital part of this coalition. From early years settings to libraries, from health visitors to local employers, everyone has an important role to play as part of this society-wide mission to improve the home learning environment.

One of the most important contributions comes, of course, from early years professionals. And this brings me onto the third and final area I want to talk about today – which is supporting the work of our early years settings. I am always struck by the passion and commitment that I see first-hand when I visit early years settings up and down the country. I want to be able to support you to do your job as best as I can.

I know this is a key focus for Greater Manchester. It is for me too. My department's Workforce Strategy, published in March 2017, has resulted in a number of developments to support the early years sector in recruiting, retaining and developing its workforce. These include publishing new level 2 qualification criteria, and a new early years career progression map – both developed through work with sector stakeholders.

I am also delighted to hear that you are encouraging and supporting the use of apprenticeships for your early years workforce. For employers, developing well trained and highly motivated staff who work to the standards they expect is hugely valuable. I am an enthusiastic supporter of apprenticeships and the grow-your-own ethos of the sector.

I also want to address the importance of continued professional development, which I know is another key focus for Greater Manchester. This is why my Department – in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation – is investing £5 million to fund and evaluate projects focused on high quality professional development and practice in the early years.

And I recently announced a £20m Early Years Professional Development Fund, to help practitioners improve children's early language, literacy and numeracy. This will be delivered via a 'train the trainer' model – much like your planned workforce academy. We recently tendered for a national training partner and are currently assessing the bids. I hope to be in a position to announce the preferred bidder shortly.

Now there is one small but important group of early years settings that I want to mention in particular – Maintained Nursery Schools.

The supplementary funding that my Department provides local authorities to enable them to protect Maintained Nursery School funding and reflect their higher costs is due to end by March 2020. What happens after that will be determined by the Spending Review. But the Spending Review has not yet happened, and this has created an unusual problem for local authorities and Maintained Nursery Schools.

Rightly, you want to allocate places in Maintained Nursery Schools for this September in good faith, but without knowing whether the summer term of 2020 will be fully funded.

Today I can reassure you that you can indeed offer places in good faith. We will provide local authorities with a further £24 million for their Maintained Nursery Schools, to enable them to continue funding them at a higher rate for the whole of the 2020-21 academic year.

This should remove the immediate concerns about Maintained Nursery Schools. I know that this does not answer the question about their long-term future. But I think this is a pragmatic response – I hope you’ll agree – that recognises the excellent work that many Maintained Nursery Schools do. And it allows the Spending Review to determine the longer-term future of Maintained Nursery Schools, alongside wider early years considerations. I have set out this morning some examples of the relationship between central government and local leaders and professionals working at its best, taking innovations to scale. In short, if we are to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, we must think about how we can do things differently – including through parents.

No parent has all the answers – so we need to make it easier for them to kickstart their child’s learning at the earliest opportunity, whether by encouraging them to take part in educational activities as a family, support from trained experts at home to identify concerns earlier, or better access to high-quality early years education.” I look forward to working together to give all children the best chance to flourish at school and in later life.

Thank you.