

Speech: Children and Families Minister Launches Care Leaver Covenant

I am delighted to be here with you today.

Now, you probably think, he's a politician, I bet he says that at every event he goes to. I will grant you, there might have been occasions in the past when diplomacy required rather more delight than perhaps the situation deserved.

But this most definitely is a most significant event today and not one of those. I am truly very happy to be here.

Gabby just told you there that I came here from Baghdad, but what she didn't tell you was that when I arrived on these shore 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.

But I had great parents and some great role models in my life and I learned English and then learned that if you are able to communicate with people then people will help you. But sadly there are 74,000 children in care who currently don't necessarily have those role models and trusted people.

And Matthew Gordon, I remember when I first met Matthew to appoint them to deliver the covenant – it was one of the best decisions I've made.

Weren't Big House and Ryan's story fantastic? I can't tell you how inspired I've been to see for myself today how people who have had a really tough start in life can blossom, given the right encouragement and support.

I would like to talk to you now about the care leaver covenant in more detail. I want to tell you how it fits into our wider programme of work to make sure young people who don't have the same advantages many of us take for granted get the same exciting prospects as their more fortunate peers, when they make their way in the world.

Gabby rightly introduced me as the minister with responsibility for care leavers. It is a role I take very seriously. Out of all my ministerial duties it is the one for which I feel the deepest sense of obligation.

When children and young people get taken into care, the state automatically becomes their corporate parent. That sounds really impersonal and uncaring doesn't it? Believe me, it's not. The state needs to be as just as caring, just as ambitious and just as dedicated as any parent would be for their own child.

It needs to provide the care and support that all children need in order to thrive; it needs to help them prepare for the challenges of independent adult life; and it needs to help them make the most of the opportunities they need to progress towards fulfilling and rewarding careers.

This responsibility falls in the first instance to local authorities. They make the day-to-day decisions about where children in care and care leavers live, who supports them and what extra support they need to help them get a leg up where they need one, whether that's improving their grades or getting specialist advice to improve their health and wellbeing.

It goes without saying that what they do must be of the highest quality. It's a tough ask because it matters so much. We cannot afford to get this wrong.

Any young person who has been in care will have had the odds stacked against them from an early age. It is therefore important that enough extra help is available for those care leavers who need it.

The kind of things that may seem inconsequential to us can be very challenging when you don't have the normal family networks to call on for advice: learning to manage the household bills, remembering to put a wash on so that there's always something clean to wear for work or an interview, and managing to keep the fridge stocked.

Which is why we have strengthened the support that local authorities have to give care leavers, in particular we have asked them to consult on and publish their local offer for care leavers, and we have extended support from a personal adviser to all care leavers up to age 25.

As well as setting out care leavers' legal entitlements, the local offer encourages local authorities to think creatively about what more they can do. For example, around half have introduced council tax exemptions for care leavers and I want all councils to introduce council tax exemptions for care leavers.

I am encouraged by the feedback I get from Mark Riddell, our national implementation adviser, who is working with local authorities on what they do for care leavers in their own communities.

Mark has been in post for a year now and will soon publish a report of innovative practice from the visits he made to 40 local authorities. It will show how local authorities are responding positively to the challenges that care leavers face. I encourage you all to read Mark's report and think about how you can replicate these innovative approaches in your own areas.

Key though local authorities are, they can't do it all on their own. Central government and society at large, by which I mean each and every one of us, has a vital role to play too. Which brings me to the care leaver covenant.

I am delighted to announce that every government department has signed the care leaver covenant and today we have published each department's offer to care leavers.

For some departments, the most practical way to support care leavers is to offer them work opportunities. I am delighted therefore that all have volunteered to participate in the care leaver internship scheme, which provides 12-month paid internships in the Civil Service. We are in the process of recruiting more than 100 care leavers to fill these roles.

This scheme has grown from one DfE internship four years ago, to more than 100 internships across all departments in a range of locations across the country. One of the current interns – Zahra – is my diary manager and is doing an amazing job. I would hire her anywhere, whether in YouGov or anywhere else.

Some government departments have gone the extra mile. Apart from the DfE, the departments of Health, Work and Pensions, Housing, Communities and Local Government and the ministries of Justice and Defence have developed a much more substantial package for care leavers.

Examples include the extra support that DWP provides to help care leavers find work, the support that MoJ provides to care leavers in custody and the priority that MHCLG gives to care leavers in relation to housing. These have now been published on GOV.UK and I urge you to look at how collectively the government is trying to make care leavers' lives better.

I will be using my meetings with ministers in other departments to discuss how we can extend our support even further.

The covenant also seeks to make more of the contribution that the private and voluntary sectors can make as care leavers move from care to independence.

As you know, we appointed Spectra First to raise awareness about the covenant and attract offers from businesses and voluntary sector organisations. We have already heard about some of them today. These will make a huge difference to young people's lives, so thank you so much if you have come forward signed up. In particular I would like to thank Matthew and the team at Spectra not just for organising today's event, but more importantly for all those valuable opportunities they have secured so far for care leavers.

Many of these are employment opportunities – such as work experience, internships, or apprenticeships. This is just brilliant. But what's even better is that it doesn't stop there, Spectra is securing offers from organisations that will help care leavers achieve all of the outcomes set out in the care leaver strategy, Keep on Caring.

For example, Barclays has agreed to support care leavers by developing their financial literacy and money-management skills.

I'd also like to give a cheer to Tottenham Hotspur. Not something I do on a regular basis as I'm a Man U fan. But Spurs have agreed to provide a series of workshops for care leavers on managing a tenancy and avoiding debt.

The homelessness charity St Basils, where I have spent most of this morning, has also become a covenant signatory, and offers crisis support for care leavers who find themselves sleeping rough or at risk of homelessness.

I know that Spectra is also in discussions with Amazon who are also keen to be involved and sign the covenant. Discussions are taking place to confirm what Amazon's offer will be.

Thank you all for everything you have done and all these wonderful

initiatives. Please don't stop will you?

I'd like now to briefly set out a few areas where I hope the covenant can develop in the months and years ahead:

- The Civil Service internship scheme provides a model that I think could be replicated across a range of public bodies and major employers. As well as growing the Civil Service scheme, I have agreed with Spectra a target for them to secure 1,000 internships for care leavers over the next 3 years in a range of organisations. And going forward I want to think big – why not 10,000 over the next 10 years. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had an army of people leaving care in work and making a difference to help other care leavers have opportunities and support?
- Many universities already do a huge amount to support care leavers and some like Manchester and Leeds have already signed the covenant. One of my ambitions is to see more care leavers participating in higher education and I want all universities to set out how they will support care leavers to get into and succeed at university – for example by offering 52-week-a-year accommodation to care leavers during their first year.
- I would like to see an increase in the number of care leavers taking up apprenticeships. There is already extra funding for employers and training providers who recruit care leaver apprentices; and in August this year we introduced a new £1,000 bursary for care leavers that goes direct to the young person to help with the transition into work. But there is more we can do to ring-fence apprenticeships for care leavers. Many local authorities do this already, but all of them should. And businesses can – as part of their covenant offer – do the same.
- One of the things that care leavers need most is people who can advise them and offer them practical and emotional support. It would be great if organisations encouraged their staff to volunteer to become mentors to care leavers, offering advice on how to find work or play a more active role in their communities.
- And I would like Spectra to explore how businesses might be able offer care leavers free or discounted goods and services. Wouldn't it be great if we could encourage bus and rail companies to provide discounted travel, or internet providers to provide free wi-fi for the first year of their contract?

Since I took up this post, I have spoken to lots of people about the covenant and I have been really excited about people's willingness to engage with it. People recognise the challenges that care leavers face and want to do something to about it. Of course the challenge is to turn that good-will into

a something tangible and the covenant provides a way to do that.

The care leaver covenant has a crucial role to play in improving care leavers' outcomes, but it is just one part of the broader programme of work that I am leading. I would like to finish by explaining how the covenant fits within a broader spectrum of work:

- Not all care leavers will be ready to take up employment opportunities right away. That is why we have provided funding of £5m over four years to pilot three care leaver social impact bonds that will be launching shortly – in Lewisham, Sheffield and Bristol. These are payment-by-results contracts where care leavers are given intensive support to engage in education, employment or training.
- We are piloting Staying Close, which seeks to replicate the benefits of Staying Put, by providing an enhanced support package for those leaving residential care. We are providing £6m over two years to test out Staying Close in eight locations across the country.
- We have contributed to the Prime Minister's rough sleeping strategy by allocating extra funding to local authorities so that they can provide intensive support to small groups of five to ten care leavers at highest risk of sleeping rough or homelessness. Forty seven local authorities will receive funds topping £3m next year.
- And we are looking at ways in which we can improve joint working between local authorities and Jobcentre Plus to ensure that care leavers who are NEET get the best support possible to get into work.

I would like to finish by thanking you all for showing your support for the covenant today – please tell your friends and encourage them to sign up too. If your organisation has already signed up, keep at it! If you are thinking about it, I hope what you have seen here today will inspire you to get on board.

We're not talking about making commitments that necessarily cost lots of money. In fact for businesses, it makes business sense, to have diversity in your workforce which will lead to good outcomes. It's more about making sure we have the right environment to give care leavers a decent start; it's about making sure that every one of them gets a better chance of having a successful and happy adulthood.

As I said earlier, I am delighted to be here, but I'm even more delighted that you are too. I would like to finish with this thought – we are the parents for these children and young people and the way to think about that is what would I want for my child.