

Speech: Education Secretary makes inaugural speech to children's services sector

It's great to be able to join you here today and to have this opportunity to speak to so many of you.

Particularly so in Manchester because today the country is celebrating the 70th birthday of the NHS – which, of course, was launched not far from here by the then Health Secretary Aneurin Bevan, at Park Hospital in Manchester, now Trafford General Hospital.

Today the nation is saying thank you to all those people who make the NHS what it is – the doctors, nurses, paramedics, support staff. We can never pay them sufficient tribute.

But standing here today, there are many more people, who deserve greater acknowledgement and thanks for dedicating their lives to public service.

You and your teams have an enormous impact on our society and some of the most vulnerable people in it, an effect that stretches far in to the future.

And I wanted to begin my remarks today with a heartfelt thank you to your teams, from the office staff to the frontline workers. Thank you for your commitment, your hard work and your dedication. Thank you for all the patience, empathy and resilience that is required to do jobs like yours.

Of course, many jobs can be challenging, intense, long hours, but few jobs come with quite the same kind of stakes as yours. The weight of responsibility when you are charged with protecting and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society; the unique pressure of making decisions that will not just affect one child, but whole families. Whole communities.

I'm well aware that, at times, our social workers witness life at its bleakest, humanity at its most desperate... They glimpse worlds that many of us never see – and, perhaps, try not to see.

But, then, they and you also bring a lot of hope in to people's lives. So many children and families depend on you for your support.

Which, of course, you do not always receive a lot of thanks for.

Indeed, I know when it comes to social work, celebrating the successes can never be quite what it is in other workplaces. Not because they aren't hard-won but because success is rarely something you will hear heard shout about, success is what to many families feels like normal.

And, of course, there are no headlines about the children being protected

thanks to your efforts, the families who get the support they need to stay together, the children who you find good homes for and good schools for.

But as a society, we do owe you a debt of gratitude – a debt I want to acknowledge today.

One of the things that has come across to me since starting this job and speaking to social workers, teachers, staff at my own Department for Education, is that you come to feel responsible for an enormous and diverse family: concerned with child protection and nurture, education and character development, worrying about the preparation for and transition to adulthood and will the child of today be ready for the world of tomorrow.

The same questions we ponder as parents for our own children.

And for children growing up in 2018: on one hand, you look at life expectancy and technology, opportunities for travel, record employment – in some ways it seems young people have more opportunity than ever.

At the same time, we have to recognise that there are unique pressures on children growing up now that didn't exist a generation ago, as they navigate a virtual world as well as a real one. One in ten children and young people have a diagnosable mental health condition, which is a shocking statistic.

For those children with disadvantages that start from birth, or even before, it is much more difficult. They depend on our support from their earliest years, right through to adulthood.

And, yes, we have made significant progress on behalf of these children:

- We introduced 15 hours of free early education a week for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, which 72% of eligible two-year-olds now take up;
- We are trialling new projects to support parents to read at home with their children to help with early language and literacy;
- Our £200million Innovation programme in children's social care projects is helping us find new and better ways of supporting vulnerable children;
- Our Pupil Premium has made sure there is more support for those children who start school behind throughout their time at school;
- And we've seen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers at GCSE level shrink by 10% since 2011;
- And we're doing more to support care leavers when they finish school, including a £1,000 bursary for care leavers starting an apprenticeship.

But of course there is a great deal more to do.

Yes, there are examples of high performing Local Authorities and schools that defy the odds, with children succeeding despite a difficult start in life.

But, children in need across the piece still have some of the worst outcomes at every stage of their education – in early years, they are two thirds as likely as peers to meet the required standard, by GCSE they are just a

quarter as likely as peers to achieve good grades.

And these groups also struggle later in life. Many of them end up leaving education early and experience joblessness. Too many end up on a pathway to welfare or even prison.

We must be more ambitious for the most vulnerable kids, helping them to overcome the difficult starts and disadvantages. That is what progress for our country should mean.

I have the same aspirations for the most vulnerable, disadvantaged children in our society, as I do for anyone.

Whether they have special educational needs, whether they are in care, or come from a troubled home, I want every child to be able to do their best.

So, high ambitions, high expectations for every child. I'm going to talk about a number of priority areas for achieving this today.

To begin with, I wanted to say a few words about the workforce. Nadhim will be saying more about this later.

But I'm also going to stress my personal commitment to the people who actually deliver the care, on the front line. I'm determined to help you recruit, retain and develop the best, building on our great schemes like Step Up and Frontline to help recruit bright graduates, but also supporting existing social workers to get the skills and knowledge they need through new qualifications, continuing professional development, our leadership development programme.

People are by far our best asset in this effort – it's the people on the frontline who have the most significant impact on children's lives and I'm committed along with Nadhim to championing this profession.

I want to turn now to one of the profession's most fundamental responsibilities. A responsibility that we all share – that of keeping children safe.

We know the devastating consequences when we fail in this most sacred of duties. We need no reminders of the individual children whose names are indelibly written on our collective conscience.

Driving improvement is about those few terrible cases, but it is also about the many: the estimated one in five children who will have had some contact with children's social care by the age of five.

In response, Ofsted now have a better framework for inspection, based on a better understanding of risk. The Government have also been quick to intervene directly where the standard of care has simply not been good enough.

And I'm pleased that since June last year, 12 local authorities have improved their Ofsted rating from inadequate to requires improvement or good under

Ofsted's Single Inspection Framework, following intervention.

We know that Children's Services Trusts are improving services – Children's social care services in Doncaster are now 'Good', having improved by two Ofsted judgements since the Doncaster Children's Services Trust took over services in 2014.

But, of course, we shouldn't be waiting for failure when we could instead prevent it. And that's why our new £20million improvement strategy for children's social care is helping councils share best practice and deliver peer-to-peer support.

And if safeguarding is a fundamental responsibility, I'm clear that it is also a shared one, which is why yesterday we announced our revised statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children This puts in place a stronger and more collaborative local approach to safeguarding children and promoting their welfare.

We will now see a more integrated system where the police and health services work with local authorities and with schools and early year's providers.

I mentioned the poor outcomes for Children in Need and we have launched a review, to understand precisely why this happens, and what works to improve them.

We know Children in Need are more likely to have mental health needs but as I've said this is a wider problem, affecting too many children. And we'll soon be publishing further detail on our £300 million plans to improve mental health services for all children and young people – including reducing waiting times and mental health leads in schools.

I also want to talk in some detail about our efforts on behalf of children with Special Educational Needs and disabilities.

Right now, around 15% of children have special educational needs. These are often the already vulnerable and disadvantaged children who are much more likely to be identified with these needs. Half of children in need are identified with special educational needs.

And, let's be clear, our ambition for these children is exactly the same as it is for all children – we want them to be able to do their best in school and in college and reach their potential, and, afterwards, to find employment and lead happy and fulfilled lives.

Since 2014, we introduced major reforms to support these children – and I want to thank you and your teams for helping to deliver these reforms.

You have now reviewed over 98% of SEN statements, transferring children to Education, Health and Care plans where appropriate. The next step is to focus on driving up the quality of these plans.

And you can see many examples of local authorities, schools and colleges who are taking innovative approaches to working with these children and achieving

great results. For example, Ofsted and CQC local area inspections have reported that:

In Gloucestershire, the local authority is successfully developing post-16 internships through strong collaboration with local colleges and employers. As a result, young people who have SEND are increasingly successful in gaining high-quality work experience.

And in Wiltshire, the proportion of 19-year-olds with SEN support with qualifications at level 2 including English and mathematics is rising, and an increasing number of young people who have SEN and/or disabilities are getting and sustaining paid employment.

However, the experiences of children and their parents is clearly inconsistent across education, health and social care – with too many parents still saying it's a fight to access services for their child.

Ultimately, the gap in outcomes between children with SEND and other children is still far too wide. In particular, when they leave school, young people with an EHC plan are still twice as likely to be out of education, employment and training.

This needs to change. And I do recognise here that both Local Authorities, schools and colleges are feeling the pressure when it comes to budgets.

While we had record investment in the education for children with complex SEND at £6 billion this year – it's clear that budgets are under pressure. And, frankly, this is difficult – I can't say today that I have all the answers. But I am listening to your concerns.

And, today, I want to set out some key ways I believe we can work together, in terms of both addressing the pressure on budgets and delivering the best for children with SEND.

Firstly, on the role of mainstream schools in meeting special educational needs.

We know there has been a steady movement of children with special educational needs out of mainstream schools and into specialist provision, alternative provision and home education.

At the same time, rates of exclusion have begun to rise after a period of having calmed down.

And I hear too many stories about off-rolling, with schools finding ways to remove pupils, outside of the formal exclusions system. And of what is, essentially, pre-emptive exclusion, where parents looking at secondary schools are actively or in some way subtly discouraged from applying to a particular school for their child.

And I want to be clear right now: this is not okay. SEND pupils are not someone else's problem. Every school is a school for pupils with SEND; and every teacher is a teacher of SEND pupils.

And all schools and colleges – alongside central and local government – have a level of responsibility here, it cannot just be left to a few.

Nor should we forget that a significant consequence of this trend away from mainstream schools into specialist provisions is extra pressure on council's high needs budgets.

Children, young people and parents should – and do – have a strong say in all of this, and I am clear that specialist provision can be the right choice for those with more complex needs.

But mainstream schools and colleges – with the right support and training – should also be able to offer strong support for many more children and young people with EHC plans, as well as high quality SEN Support for those without plans.

So I want to both equip and incentivise schools to do better for children and young people with SEND.

This includes working with Ofsted to make sure our accountability system sufficiently rewards schools for their work with pupils who need extra support, and to encourage schools to focus on all pupils, not just the highest achievers.

Second, I want to look at how my department, working with the Department for Health and Social Care and NHS England, can support local authorities and NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups to more effectively plan and commission SEND provision.

In addition, I will be asking Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission to design a programme of further local area SEND inspections to follow the current round, due to conclude in 2021; and for their advice on further inspection or monitoring of those areas required to produce a 'Written Statement of Action'.

And thirdly, I want to increase our efforts to help young people with SEND access opportunities that will help them find employment – building on the work we're already doing such as the supported internships programme.

SEND is a huge priority for my department – and we'll be saying more about all of this in the coming months.

Another place where we need to raise our ambition, a place where the children with these different additional needs often end up together – in Alternative Provision.

Here again, we know there are amazing examples of outstanding Alternative Provision settings going above and beyond to help children in challenging circumstances to achieve their potential.

But, still, the quality varies greatly – too often expectations for pupils are set too low and when they reach the age of 16, they are not well set up to move on to further study, further training or a job.

Earlier this year I published a roadmap for reforming Alternative Provision that will see us focus on sharing best practice across the sector.

I also launched the AP Innovation Fund, and I look forward to announcing successful bids very soon.

I'm committed to improving the Alternative Provision offer for all pupils.

At the same time, I am clear that pupils should only be placed in alternative provision when it best meets their needs.

Moreover, I am clear that permanent exclusion should only be used as a last resort.

Which is why, earlier this year, we asked Edward Timpson to carry out a review in to exclusions, in particular looking in to why certain groups of pupils – including those with SEND and particularly ethnic minority pupils – are more likely to be excluded than others.

I know that, after opening his call for evidence, Edward received over 900 responses from parents, schools, local authorities and other organisations. He has also been talking to experts in local authorities and schools. We expect him to report back by the end of the year.

The final point I want to make this afternoon is around the importance of supporting care leavers when they leave school.

It can be a very lonely, very frightening time. And we share a responsibility to act as a corporate parent, making sure that care leavers get the support they need to make a successful transition from care to independence and adult life.

We know care leavers often say they don't know what support they may be entitled to. That is why we are introducing the local offer – one document, designed by each local authority together with their care leavers, setting out their legal entitlements, and also any discretionary support that the local authority provides, such as exempting care leavers from paying Council Tax or free access to all of the Council's leisure services.

We hope that the local offer will create a 'race to the top' with authorities comparing and contrasting their local offers with those of other councils and asking the question 'if that council is offering council tax exemptions, why can't we?'

However, I fully appreciate that councils can't do it all by themselves. Nadhim will be talking later about our care leaver covenant that we will launch in the autumn – which is all about how central government departments, businesses and wider civil society can all make a specific offer of support to care leavers.

We can talk about the cost to society – both economic and social – if we pay insufficient attention to those children who have the most difficult starts in life and the biggest barriers to overcome.

But, in the end, this what you do is about doing what's right. It is a moral right that these children should have the opportunity to reach their potential, as well as every other child.

That means not tolerating low expectations. It means setting our ambitions high and all of us working together – government, councils, schools, the health service, police – encouraging innovation to figure out what works, celebrating success and spreading best practice.

It is not easy – but we need to stick at it. So all children have the highest standard of education, training and care...so they can gain the knowledge, skills and resilience needed to build happy, fulfilled, independent lives.

I commit to working together, to make sure every child can do their best.