

Speech: Sarah Newton speech at mental health and policing conference

Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

First of all, I would like to pay tribute to Mr Herbert, I can't believe I'm the only person in the room that thought that was an incredibly powerful and moving account, which starkly brings home the devastating consequences for both the person in a mental health crisis, their loved ones and the professionals working in that environment, when systems just don't get it right and work as we all would wish.

And also to our keynote speaker, His Royal Highness, Prince William. Both himself, and his brother, have been highly influential in breaking taboos by speaking out about mental health and I think their willingness to talk openly about mental health issues is illustrative of a wider trend in society to tackle misplaced stigmas; helping individuals to seek help; and galvanising all of our commitment to improving responses to all those people suffering mental ill health.

I also commend the organisers of this event, for their hard work in putting all this together, enabling us to reflect on recent developments and some successes, but clearly as we heard so well this morning, there remains many challenges I know we would all want to face honestly, openly with vigour and work together to take on.

Now every day I know there are many, many police officers who refuse to turn their backs on those in need. I have seen this for myself out on the beat with officers in my own constituency. They work professionally and humanely to help individuals to the best of their ability – often going well beyond what might reasonably be expected of traditional police

Sometimes police will have to be involved in incidents involving mental ill health. Mental health conditions, often in combination with other issues such as substance misuse, can cause people to act irrationally and out of character, and it is very difficult for the police in that situation to identify what is going on and that at the root of that behaviour that person is actually very unwell. And it is very difficult for police officers to know what to do for the best in such circumstances both to protect the individual and the community.

It is not necessary to be an expert in this field to be aware of the very high, and increasing, demand for mental health services of all types. Members of this audience will know only too well, that the police can be asked to deal with a wide variety of cases involving people who are unwell and in distress.

We have taken a number of steps to better equip the police and criminal justice system in this regard – we've heard this morning of improvements to

the Liaison and Diversion schemes for example. But the pressures on front line officers to make quick judgements and act appropriately cannot be overestimated.

As the Prime Minister has repeatedly said – we are clear that the police should not be expected to act in the stead of health professionals. They cannot be expected to do that satisfactorily – and it takes them away from their primary function of tackling crime. Nor can it be in the best interests of the people affected, who need quick access to professional mental health assistance.

There clearly remains much more to do to get this balance right. However, recent years have seen huge progress in the way in which we respond to those in crisis. In many cases the police have acted as a catalyst for changes that have occurred. And at local level they are often at the vanguard in driving innovation and solutions to local issues.

We've seen for example, seen dramatic reductions in the use of police cells as places of safety in the last few years, and a commensurate rise in the use of health based places and this has largely been achieved through determined, joint working at local level between the police and health partners. According to the 2015/16 police figures on the use of section 136, a handful of police areas have already managed to eliminate entirely, or almost so, reliance on police cells as places of safety and we expect further encouraging progress when the 2016/17 figures are published later this autumn.

To help maintain this, the government has already provided some £15 million of funding to 88 projects in local areas to invest in increasing the numbers of suitable places of safety. We have committed a further £15m to continue this work, and to explore innovative local ideas for maximising the provision of suitable safe places, working with a range of partners, including community and voluntary groups.

Changes to mental health legislation in the Policing and Crime Act – which we expect to come into effect before the end of the year – are also designed to further improve our response to those in crisis. They offer local areas greater flexibility to adapt and cater to local needs, while reinforcing good practice. The goal is simply to ensure the most appropriate course of action in each case, and to achieve better outcomes for those in crisis as a result.

As we have heard today, amongst the more significant changes are the banning of the use of police cells as places of safety for those under 18 years of age, and there will be severe restrictions on their use in the case of adults.

We are also reducing the periods for which people may be detained pending a mental health assessment. And we are making more explicit the freedom of local areas to work creatively and in collaboration with a range of partners to develop networks of suitable places of safety – including outside traditional health settings.

We have heard of some great examples today of innovation and all local areas will need to take a careful look at their local provision, in the light of the new legislation, to ensure that it is good enough. They may also need to refresh their local joint working practices to reflect the need to act more quickly and collaboratively to provide the most appropriate help for people in crisis.

In the meantime, we do not count this as a 'job done'. The government has made a clear commitment to continuing to improve mental health services – including but not limited to:

- investing a billion pounds in mental health services by 2020 to improve mental health support in the community; in Accident and Emergency Departments, and in crisis provision and treatment options both for adults and children
- implementing the recommendations of the Mental Health Taskforce review and its five year forward look
- and, will be reviewing the Mental Health Act as committed to in the Queen's speech

As we all know, legislation alone is not the answer to the complex series of challenges posed by mental ill health. Nor can these be dealt with by any single organisation. In addition to personal health and well-being issues, mental ill health can affect matters as diverse as employment, having a decent home, education and family life. It can also increase an individual's vulnerability to crime, illness, and social isolation.

Providing effective interventions and support in that context can be challenging, and they demand a partnership approach.

Effective multi-agency working is therefore vitally important in seeking to identify and iron out problem issues. Meaningful change is achieved by committed and dedicated leaders at local level being willing to grapple with the challenges, and work collaboratively to overcome them. I have said before that 'leaders' are not just the people in charge, not just the people at the top of organisations. Anyone in an organisation can be a systems' leader and effect change from within, and often in my experience this comes from those closer to the front line.

Now the Crisis Care Concordat has been mentioned several times this morning, and it has proved to be a really strong way of driving better change and led to far better working between the police and mental health professionals. I can assure you that it remains an important body. We will continue with this work, which is looking at what works locally as well as sharing practice, but also looking at what more we need to do at a national level.

To conclude, I would like to assure you that I and the government will

continue to do all that we can to ensure that you are properly supported in this vital area of work. And that we will move to a future where the response to those with mental health issues are delivered by the right agency at the right time.

In the meantime, I would like to extend my most sincere appreciation and gratitude for all that you do. Whether responding to individual cases; challenging the status quo; or driving innovation and change – you are consistently setting the highest standards of public service and I thank you.