

Speech: Social work and the Commonwealth

Good evening. Thank you, Ruth Allen and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), for inviting me today. I am delighted to be here for two reasons. First, it is rare that I am able to speak to a group of like-minded people from across the Commonwealth. And second – and I make no apology for this – it's a great chance for me to talk about the great work we are doing here.

I'd like to speak around three themes – the importance of social work, working in partnership and sharing our experience of how our vision for social work reform is working – especially for those on the frontline.

I am delighted to recognise the contribution that social work practice makes in improving people's lives, both here in the UK and across the Commonwealth. Social work is a human rights based profession with the overriding aim of improving social justice and citizenship for those we are here to serve and work alongside. It brings a unique approach to working with people and communities as a whole.

Social workers develop relationships with people, starting with where they are and what matters to them, recognising their strengths, gifts and aspirations – and building on these to support the wellbeing of families and communities, and to ensure the care and support provided is just right.

In the UK, social workers have been involved in responding to emergency and disaster situations including the Grenfell fire tragedy and terrorist attacks, as well as severe snow storms and flooding.

Many social workers in Commonwealth nations are also involved in supporting and working with communities dealing with the impact of environmental disasters such as flooding and earthquakes and the impact of movements of people because of war or conflict. There is much we can learn from each other in developing and improving our social work practice to best help and support those we work with across our nations.

The Commonwealth is a remarkable international organisation, spanning every geographical region, religion and culture. With 53 independent countries, it is uniquely placed to support and encourage international co-operation between people all over the world; and after 60 years, it remains a major force for change in the world today.

In the UK, there have been significant improvements in the quality of social work education over the last decade, with social work now an established graduate profession with national professional standards.

I know there are now over 90,000 Commonwealth students here. And we have 17 Commonwealth Scholars currently studying social work – as well as two Rutherford Fellows who, as you'll know, are highly skilled researchers

conducting postdoctoral research here.

Our world-class universities attract this range of global talent. We are a world-leading destination for study and research, with four universities in the world's top 10 and 16 in the top 100 – second only to the USA. But this is not simply about our institutions providing an excellent education – it is the people who really make the difference in building relationships between our countries. International students bring greater diversity to campuses, an international dimension to the experience of all our students, and add to the UK's impressive research capacity.

In offering a warm welcome to international students, we create lasting positive relations with future leaders, influencers and decision-makers around the world and improve the prospect of strengthened cultural, business, political and research links between our countries.

International social workers also play a vital role in the provision of child and family social work here in the UK. Their contribution is truly important to helping to connect the profession with the people it works with, and for. So when I speak about working in partnership, I mean working in a partnership without borders. We are a global community, we face so many of the same challenges, we can – and should – share with each other. This evening I am going to speak about some of our great work. But I don't want it to stop here – you have great practice too – and we want to know about it.

Indeed next week, I welcome New Zealand's Children's Minister, the Honourable Tracey Martin, to the country before she visits a range of local authorities, settings and practitioners to help share best practice across the Commonwealth. I look forward to hearing about her experience in this sector.

Good social work training helps students to think about themselves as a member of a profession and make connections between theory and research. In recent years, we have worked to raise the status of social work education by raising the bar to entry, and improving the consistency of statutory placements.

We have set out clear statements about what all child and family social workers should know and be able to do. These knowledge and skills statements are also now post-qualifying standards for those on the frontline and a key plank of our world-leading reform agenda.

I'd like to now use the opportunity to talk to you about some of our most exciting reforms in this area.

The first of these being our Teaching Partnerships. These are a collaboration that aim to bring educators and employers closer together to make education more relevant to practice – and to raise standards of training and drive quality at multiple points in the system, including recruitment, training, induction and professional development. We have funded 15 Teaching Partnerships so far, which include 31 universities, 73 councils and a range of other public sector, private, voluntary and independent organisations – demonstrating the depth of interest from the sector.

The partnerships are helping to raise standards of entry into mainstream social work programmes, and they incorporate the Knowledge and Skills statements into teaching and practice curricula. The partnerships also ensure that there is a strong focus on good-quality statutory placements.

We are currently expanding the programme and more partnerships will be joining shortly.

Another set of reforms that I'm really excited about is our national assessment and accreditation system – which we are calling NAAS. I'm sure, we all believe that the quality of practice is the most important thing to improve the experiences of vulnerable children and families. Clear standards and a learning culture will help achieve a universally high quality of practice. This is what underpins the work we are leading on in assessment and accreditation. And it is truly ground-breaking.

We have recently established a national post-qualifying standard for child and family expertise – providing a nationally-consistent benchmark.

And starting in July, we will be offering assessment and accreditation against these standards through the rollout of NAAS.

This is pivotal in Government's clear vision in developing and supporting a fully confident and highly capable child and family social work profession that has been properly trained with the right knowledge and skills. And it is a vital part of how we are working to raise the skills and the confidence of child and family social workers.

This is also part of our journey towards enabling every child and family social worker to see a whole career pathway in front of them. Our post-qualifying standards will strengthen existing good practice as well as trigger continuous development and support for social workers.

We are working closely with all parts of the sector – including universities – to make sure we get the delivery NAAS right before we introduce it nationally. That is why we are beginning with 21 sites with around 5,000 social workers. As I speak, local authorities which are part of the first phases are really challenging themselves on how they can prepare social workers for this.

These authorities are committed to working alongside us to co-create many of the ways of working, the guidance and the materials needed to make the national assessment work effectively. We know that this is what social workers want and we have responded in a very practical way – by building in much more scope for joint work.

I can't stress enough how important I think it is that NAAS will be in driving even higher levels of excellent social work practice. I am confident that we will lead the world on this.

We have also recently announced that we will establish Social Work England, a new, specialist regulator for social workers in England. Its primary focus will be public protection and, as a single-profession regulator, Social Work England will be able to develop an in-depth understanding of the profession.

Establishing Social Work England is a key part of achieving Government's vision for the social work profession. Social workers need to benefit from the highest quality initial education, access to continuing professional development – and frontline practitioners need strong, supportive supervision and leadership.

Social Work England will promote public confidence and trust in the social work profession, bringing real benefits to the social workers up and down the country who work to support vulnerable children, adults and families. Where we are on Social Work England is testimony to the importance of working in partnership both with the academic sector as well as with end users and representatives from across social work. Our hosts today, BASW, have played a vital role.

I recently announced the appointment of Lord Patel of Bradford, as the Chair of Social Work England. He is steeped in social work – he is a former social worker, trainer, tutor, and lecturer in social work – and he is committed to ensuring that the views of the profession are at the heart of the development of Social Work England. And soon will be announcing a chief executive of for Social Work England too.

The final reform I want to touch on is our new What Works Centre. Understanding what works effectively for those in need of social work support is at the heart of our work to improve the quality of practice in child and family social work.

We are working with the sector to devise new and better ways of developing and using robust evidence. Collaborating with Nesta, the foundation for innovation, and Cardiff University, we are setting up a new What Works Centre for Children's Social Care to develop the evidence base and support practitioners and practice leaders to make better use of evidence.

The early research priorities for the centre include what works in reducing the need for children to enter care proceedings and what works in supervision. The What Works Centre will also be engaging with a small number of pioneer local authorities over the summer to co-develop and test a range of tools and services to make evidence more accessible and relevant, to help people use evidence well, and to help practice leaders create a culture in which the effective use of evidence is the norm.

Social work is an amazing calling. It is truly a vocation for people who want to work to protect vulnerable children and adults. Across all of our countries, I know that we share the same values about how we help those who are most vulnerable.

I was honoured to be invited to speak to you today. To repeat what I said earlier, for me working in partnership means working in a partnership without borders. I am passionate about the great work we are doing here. You have great practice too – and we would be delighted to hear about your work – we are always open to new ideas – and challenges too.