

Children and Families Minister speech at NCASC conference

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me here to speak to you today about how we deliver for the most vulnerable in our country.

I'm delighted to have been appointed minister for children and families.

Already today we have heard powerfully from our colleagues delivering on the frontline.

We have heard – I have heard – about the challenges this pandemic has caused. I have heard, loud and clear, what local and regional leaders have said about the tests and trials of delivering for all children. Yet, despite this turbulence, you have continued to keep children safe.

You have continued to provide support and most importantly affection to the most vulnerable children in our society. You have kept the door open for them to get a good education and go on to achieve incredible things.

So, before I go further, my most important duty and honour today is to thank you – from the bottom of my heart – for all that you have done, and all that you will continue to do.

Many of you may not know me very well yet, and I hope and promise that I will change that soon, by meeting as many of you as possible – and I want to assure you today that my door is open to you. Because our country does face challenges, and there is no greater challenge than making sure we are there for our most vulnerable children.

I am not naïve about the particular, acute issues facing these children. But I firmly believe that we're a country where, when children are given a world-class education and vitally a fair shot, they can achieve incredible things. And I believe that is the case for every single child. Every child has potential, every child has talent, every child deserves our help.

We've got to unlock this. To unlock this, we have to work together. The expertise of everyone listening today, when pooled together, is our greatest weapon in fighting entrenched disadvantage.

I know many of you, having seen Ministers come and go. I know many of you may question how what I am saying to you is any different to what you have heard before. Because we do all want the best for our children and we do all, when it comes down to it, know that we must come together to deliver it.

But my argument today is that under this Government, focused on building back fairer, you will have a true champion, one that shares your vision and gives you the tools to achieve it.

My evidence: a real-terms increase each year over the next three years, on

top of real-terms increases since 2019, announced at the Spending Review. We are already providing – and will continue to do so over the course of this Spending Review – councils with £4.8 billion of new grant funding for social care and other services. That is the biggest annual increase in local government core funding in over a decade.

This money will support the most disadvantaged, the most vulnerable, children and young people. On top of this, the department for education has secured £259 million over the next three years to maintain capacity and expand provision in secure and open residential children's homes.

This will provide high quality, safe homes for some of our most vulnerable children and young people. Some £104m will be available by 2024-25 (and I know many of you have been calling for this) to take forward reforms to unregulated provision in children's social care, improving safeguarding standards for some of the most vulnerable children.

And £7 million will be made available by the same year to implement our Adoption Strategy, 'Achieving Excellence Everywhere', to improve access to services and support for adopted children and their families. And these investments are absolutely vital if children are to take advantage of our world-class education, because we know that no child can learn if they face trouble and trauma at home.

Together with the rise in core funding for schools of £4.7bn by 2024-25 compared to previous plans – building on the largest cash boost for a decade provided at the Spending Review in 2019 – this money will have, I genuinely believe, a transformational impact. Together, this funding will deliver a high-quality education for all. It will protect those who most need protecting. It will make sure no child is left behind.

So the best way we do this, the most effective way of making sure no child is cast aside, in my view and the Government's view, is to strengthen families. Families are the very foundation of a strong society. I strongly believe that. This whole Government strongly believes it.

That is why at the Spending Review, the Chancellor announced a significant £500 million package for families. This is composed of two pillars. Firstly, a £300 million pillar to transform services for parents and babies, carers and children in half of the local authorities across England.

This includes £82m to create a family hub network – a model that builds on successful local innovations – and over £200m for local authorities for their Start for Life offer, and for support for breast feeding, parent-infant relationships and parenting programmes, which has been championed by Dame Andrea Leadsom. I know many of you will be eager to hear more information about this, and we will make that available as soon as possible. I'm working on it as we speak.

But make no mistake, this will provide thousands of family's access to support when they need it, under one roof.

Family hubs will bring local services together, strengthening the bonds between families and the professionals and services that help them. They put relationships at the heart of family help, because we are a government that recognises the importance of family.

Without strong families, we cannot tackle any of the great issues our society faces, from crime and antisocial behaviour to social mobility and poverty – and, ultimately, unhappiness. With strong families, we can make a fairer society, one in which children can escape the quicksand of disadvantage and all its perils. And we already have a positive foundation on which to build.

Already, £34m has been put to work to:

- create family hubs in 12 areas of England;
- fund a new national centre for family hubs to provide expert advice and guidance;
- develop data and digital products that will support the practical implementation of family hubs; and
- of course to deliver an evaluation innovation fund to build the evidence base. This will be one of the cornerstones to our approach to helping families.

But it will form part of a wider package, because our response has to be holistic. So, the Chancellor's £500 million package for families also included a second pillar, a £200m expansion of the national Supporting Families programme, taking the total funding of the programme to around £700m over the next three years.

This will expand the reach of the programme, so that it can provide up to 300,000 vulnerable families – including 660,000 children – with the intensive, integrated whole family support they need to improve their life outcomes. Just reflect on those numbers for a moment.

That's 660,000 children in our country – living in families plagued by mental illness, or drug addiction, or where domestic abuse is not only a horror but commonplace – those children given another chance.

That's 300,00 families given a helping hand to make a change, keep their family together, make it stronger, and provide the best chance for children.

I cannot think of a better use of public money. These are children who, given the right family environment, we know can thrive. Of course, we need to look at their education too.

To do so, we have announced an extension of the role of Virtual School Heads, starting in September this year and backed by £16m of new funding. The point of that is to ensure that there is a champion for children with a social worker in every local authority.

This will make sure expert advice and support is available to social care, schools and colleges to enable children with a social worker to engage with education and achieve their ambitions.

Many of you will have been instrumental in rolling this out, and you should be so proud of what you've done.

Whilst I do not underestimate the challenge in getting this off the ground so quickly, we are already seeing huge enthusiasm, appetite and innovation to make a real difference – with, for example, VSHs training social workers so that they too feel responsible for the attendance and attainment of the children in their case load... where no meeting or plan happens without proper consideration of both educational needs and the key protective role that education can play.

I will never forget that it is the work that Virtual School Heads – and all those on the frontline – do that makes the difference.

We make policies in Government, and through our interventions, life becomes better for those who have been held back the most. But it is your work that deserves the nation's thanks, especially in the context of this pandemic.

As we hope we leave Covid in the rear view mirror, I want to give social workers what they need to meet your challenges head on.

We have invested £100 million over the last two years on social worker training and development programmes, which are focused on ensuring the workforce have the skills and knowledge to support and protect children.

And our Covid-19 Recovery Action Plan will stabilise and strengthen children's social care as we transition out of the pandemic, so we deliver well for children and young people and we provide a strong foundation for longer-term reform, informed of course, by the all important Care Review led by Josh MacAllister.

Our plans are based upon data and intelligence, guided by your input. There's incredible work going on across the country, and I want to see best practice shared, improved, and reshared through a virtuous cycle.

We will continue to share guidance and examples of good and great practice to help local authorities, via the Local Government Association good practice hub and the What Works Centre. But this is not a job that is ever done, because we can always improve.

I promise I will continue to work with you on these growing challenges both nationally and regionally, so we can share best practice across the sector to build a resilient and stable workforce.

I want to touch on the SEND review and the Care Review.

I know the Care Review will be bold as I met Josh MacAlister just yesterday, and it will live up to the once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform systems and services.

I know that you have all engaged with the review, and I want to thank you for your contribution, because the Review has found the LA deep dive work particularly valuable. As with anything as game-changing as this, the Review does raise some big questions for local and national Government.

What I can guarantee is that this Government will not shy away from any uncomfortable findings, and we all need to remain open to the ideas put forward, no matter how challenging they may be. At the conclusion of the Review in spring, we will be considering carefully how we work with Local Government on delivering the next stage of reform and I look forward to working with you on that.

Of course, a second Review – the SEND Review – is still ongoing.

This pandemic has shone a light on some of the challenges that children and young people with SEND, and their families, face, which has made the need for improvements to the SEND system even more urgent.

To help us conclude the Review, we have established a steering group which includes representatives for parents, sector organisations including local authorities and schools, the children's commissioner and other experts and charities and other Government Departments. And we will continue to work with many others over the coming months.

Their views are influencing the proposals we will set out in a full public consultation in the first three months of next year. I strongly encourage people – please please please – get involved in that consultation. Your views really matter.

It is my firm belief that these interventions that will strike a blow to entrenched disadvantage in our country.

It is my hope that the work we set our minds on today will mean that in the decades to come, no child will have to fear growing up alone, neglected or without opportunity.

This is our chance, and we can realise it together. Thank you.