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Speech

Children and Families Minister address at ADCS conference

Minister for Children and Families Nadhim Zahawi spoke at the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) conference 2019 in Manchester.

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Firstly, I would like to pass on the Secretary of State's personal thanks for all the work you do. He was looking forward to attending and sends his apologies for not being here. He has written a letter, setting out his priorities for children's services, which I hope you will find the time to

read.

It is a huge privilege to stand in front of you all today. You do some of the most difficult and heavily-scrutinised jobs in the country, and I'm looking forward to hearing from such a committed and enthusiastic group of individuals over the course of the afternoon.

I want to use my time here today to talk about the successes you have all achieved over the past year and also where we go from here, including the importance of whole system investment: in leadership, learning and workforce, coupled with targeted interventions.

I became the Minister of Children and Families back in January last year and 6 months into my role, I spoke here at this very conference.

I promised then to keep listening and engaging with the sector, and to really try and understand the detail of what is going on 'on the ground'.

In all the visits I have been on in the past 12 months, to all sorts of settings – shadowing social workers, visiting accommodation for care leavers, and seeing some of our Innovation Programmes in action – invariably my favourite part of these visits is speaking with children and young people; they really do help to bring everything to life.

Earlier in the year, I had the privilege of visiting the London Boroughs of both Bexley and Bromley – where I heard, first-hand, of the significant improvement journeys their children's services have been on.

With inspirational, strong and effective leadership, coupled with political backing, both Councils have shown what can be achieved through placing children's services at the heart of the Council's wider mission. And in doing so, they have ensured that vulnerable children and families now have access to the quality of service that they deserve.

Alongside this, it would be remiss of me not to offer my congratulations to Barnet and Tameside, who just this week have moved out of inadequate.

We are now in a position where 46% of local authorities are good or outstanding, compared to 36% at the end of 2017.

It also gives me great pleasure to be able to say a very big thank you to all of you for achieving a 100% success rate for publishing your new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements for children. This is a magnificent achievement, and an excellent example of collaborative working. We now need to make sure that the plans drive cultural change and secure the best possible outcomes for all our children. There is still more to do by the end of September, but for now, well done everyone.

I am sure you will have seen the analysis we published last month about

the experiences of children in need in the education system.

We learnt that:

- 1.6 million, or 1 in 10, children have needed a social worker at some point over the last 6 years;
- Children in need of social care services were 50% less likely to achieve a strong pass in English and maths GCSE; and
- Children in Need at the end of Key Stage 4 were around 3 times less likely to go on to study A levels.

This is not good enough. We need to have higher ambitions for children who have needed a social worker; we want them to have aspirations, which we can support them to fulfil. They should be safe, have access to high-quality education, and have the opportunity to succeed.

I am pleased that this Review has shone a light on the challenges faced by these children, and today I want to talk with you about our strategy for improving their outcomes.

As a former businessman, I cannot help but look at this challenge through the lens of my previous experience. In business, as in all sectors, there are two main elements to any organisational strategy, which run in parallel.

The first is the big systemic ambition. Our overarching vision for sustained, transformative change.

And then, there are specific interventions designed to address particular problems, where evidence indicates that targeted investment is required.

So let me start with the first part of a good strategy: the big things that make the whole system operate effectively and sustainably.

At the top, and fundamental to any successful organisation, is leadership. I certainly am in no doubt that the role of you all in this room is one of – if not the – most important part of getting this right.

Helping to put in place support for middle and senior leaders, is a priority for me, ensuring they have the support and opportunities to thrive.

The first cohorts of a new flagship national leadership programme will start in early 2020. This programme is for talented leaders to secure routes into Directors Children's Services (DCS) roles, and to help DCSs who are new to the role or want support as they move roles.

I want to build on where leadership is already excellent and work in partnership with ADCS to cultivate and sustain high performing leaders, to develop a top-quality leadership infrastructure and provide additional

support to places facing leadership challenges.

Together, we can ensure that we build on where there is already excellent leadership, attract and keep talent, tackle important issues such as diversity, all with the aim of meeting our shared goal – providing the best leadership possible to support the most vulnerable.

It is strong leadership that has paved the way for the success of things like the Regional Improvement Alliances (RIA) and Partners in Practice Programme.

We have come a long way over the last year and a half in our ambition to work in partnership for sector-led improvement. Nine regions now have active DCS-led Regional Improvement Alliances in place, with key partners around the table.

Through the RIAs we have seen successes, where we have ‘caught’ local authorities before they have fallen into Inadequacy; but we also have some lessons to learn through those that we have not managed to identify and provide appropriate support.

In addition, our 15 Partners in Practice have supported over 70 local authorities to improve. Feedback is showing just how valuable local authorities are finding their PiP support and how they appreciate the reassurance of learning from the expertise of similar local authorities.

We are using more Partners in Practice across regional boundaries, matching LAs to support each other based on capability and need. And to further support the growth of RIAs, the Memorandums of Understanding enable quarterly data sharing of key indicators with the Department for Education. This provides greater understanding of the national picture, and informs national policy, to better support the needs of LAs.

But a strategy that focuses just on leadership and learning is incomplete. The workforce is the cornerstone of effective children’s services, so continuing to improve the quality of social work practice is critical.

The launch of Social Work England is an exciting development and an important step towards achieving Government’s vision for the social work profession, ensuring social workers have the skills and experience to provide high quality care.

There has been good progress towards establishing Social Work England as a new, specialist regulator of the profession, and I’m delighted to announce that, subject to continued progress, I expect Social Work England to take over from Health and Care Professionals Council as the new regulator of social workers in England on the 2nd December this year.

Social Work England will establish new standards for social work education, providing protection to the public and helping to prepare new social workers more effectively than ever before.

I am also glad to see that the National Assessment and Accreditation System is gathering momentum with the recent widening of participation in the programme. This brings numbers of local authorities and Trusts involved to a total of 56, around a third of all local authorities.

And finally, while we're talking about the system-level, I would like to spend a moment on the issue of funding.

I absolutely recognise the financial pressures that local authorities are facing. I understand the dual concern of decreasing income and increasing numbers of children in the social care system and with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly at the more complex end of need.

As you know, we are working towards a comprehensive Spending Review. There will always be competing demands on public funds, but I would like to assure you that my department is working extensively with the sector – including with many of you here – to build the strongest possible evidence base for long-term children's services funding, including for those children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, as part of the Spending Review.

Of course, I was very pleased that we were able to secure the additional £410 million for local authorities to invest in social care services this year and the additional £250 million for high needs up to 2020.

And we must continue with our whole system transformation, such as supporting local areas to deliver the Children and Families Act reforms, to make sure all children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) receive the care and support they need.

But I know that success here is dependent on authorities having the right base level of funding. And so one of my absolute priorities is to work with colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Treasury to deliver a sustainable future for children's social care and education for our most vulnerable children and young people.

Alongside strategic reform and investment at the system-level, I am a firm believer in the importance of targeted interventions to address the knottiest and most pressing issues.

This is where we come to the second strand of our strategy: targeted investment.

At this point, I would like to address the point that Rachel made

regarding DCSs spending more and more time on SEND matters.

While funding for this is important, we also recognise that further targeted support is needed in some areas to tackle the challenges you are facing.

That is why the Secretary of State outlined in his letter to you today that we are focusing on developing support for Local Authorities to ensure that you have the right tools at your disposal to support children and young people with special educational needs whilst securing best value for money. As we have done with schools and trusts, we intend to provide further expert advice to Local Authorities that are struggling to manage their high needs spending, building on our existing specialist SEND advisers and on the Designated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit reduction plan process.

I also want to work with ADCS to help improve strategic commissioning. It's great that Charlotte Ramsden is representing ADCS on our new SEND leadership board which aims to provide cross-sector leadership, jointly with health, to enable all areas to work with their partners to plan, commission, and make best use of their resources.

This is part of our wider ambition to make sure all children are in the right place for them, both in education and at home. Whether this is in a mainstream school or a specialist setting, safely with their families, or in another home environment, we want to ensure that they have the safety, support and stability that they need to thrive.

Turning now to focus on looked after children, I know that demand for care placements is rising and this is driving up costs. We are doing a range of things to help with managing this demand – either to avoid care all together where it is safe to do so, or to ensure the right foster placements are available for the children who can be in them.

The work of the Family Justice Board aims to drive behaviour change to ensure the system strikes the right balance between knowing when it is right to provide support to keep a family together, and when intervention in a family's life is required to protect a child from harm.

Local authorities have a key role to play here. I would encourage you to work with your local family justice board members to help to influence and drive forward this work.

It is great to see that the President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, is here today. I believe some of you will be meeting with him later, so I am sure those discussions will be rich.

Of course, you will know that children are less likely to come into care when a local authority has a strong local practice system, and effective services that build resilience and effectively manage risk in families.

You'll also know, if you've heard me speak before, how important I believe it is that we learn from evidence-based practice in how best to do this.

That is why I am thrilled at the interest from you all in both the Strengthening Families programme, and the Supporting Families programme. Between them we are investing nearly £100m over 5 years to work with the What Works Centre to scale programmes that have already shown promising evidence of being able to improve outcomes for children and families – from whole-system programmes such as Hertfordshire Family Safeguarding to the targeted work of the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts.

I am delighted to announce that today we are welcoming the Mockingbird Family Model into the Supporting Families programme, to work with 8 further local authorities.

I recently had the privilege of visiting a Mockingbird fostering hub in Tower Hamlets. It was inspiring to see the benefits that this programme is offering to the foster families there and clear that the strong family community had created a special environment for children living in those families to thrive. Local authorities have until 2 August to submit an expression of interest form to the What Works Centre.

We know that there is a specific need to improve the academic outcomes of children in care. Since I started in this role, I have had the ambition of expanding the role of the independent sector in the education of looked-after children.

We announced last December that we would launch a network of regional hubs, establishing partnerships involving independent schools and local authorities, to improve the academic outcomes of looked after children.

In the next few days, we are launching a procurement exercise for a delivery partner to run a placement brokerage service, and local strategic partnerships.

Up to 10 demonstrator hubs will be set up to run over a two-year period, with a national roll-out following the pilot. In each hub, children in care will be offered places at partner independent or boarding schools. They can also benefit from opportunities and activities at these schools without attending as pupils.

I want you to make sure that you are engaging with the hubs in your locality. I have every confidence that you will help drive forward the ambition for academic excellence for all looked-after children.

I will draw to a close soon and open up for questions, but before I do, I would like to take a step back and return to the very beginning of the

educational journey. If we are serious about improving outcomes and safety for children, we need to make sure every child has the best start in life.

Parents have a vital role to play in helping their children develop the early communication, language and literacy skills that will set them up for later life.

I hope you will have seen that earlier this week we launched a new campaign, 'Hungry Little Minds' – designed to encourage parents to chat, play and read more with their children in the early years.

I look forward to working with you as the campaign develops and gathers pace. As you will have seen from the letter I sent to you last month, I believe you and your teams – working alongside colleagues in health – have an important role to play in the wider early years social mobility programme, where we are investing over £100m.

I'm looking to you, as local leaders, to seize the opportunity presented by this investment and the new Hungry Little Minds campaign – to join-up, amplify and embed this work locally alongside your existing strategies.

I hope that I have been able to reassure you that whilst we face some stark challenges, we will continue to work together to invest in and drive those overarching systemic changes that are building a great foundation to ensure that no child, or local authority, gets left behind.

And in parallel, we will continue to engage with local authorities and wider organisations to identify and address specific issues through targeted interventions, in our goal to improve outcomes for every child and all families.

And whilst you may feel at times frustrated, not least because we are all living in uncertain times, we must remember the fantastic work that continues throughout local authorities. Despite the challenges, if we continue to work together, I am confident that we can deliver the outcomes that we all passionately want to see.

Finally, I return to what I said last year, here at this very conference. I said I believe that being Children's Minister is the best job in Government. Do I still think this today? More than ever!

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