

NCAS speech – final version

Thank you, Richard, for that introduction. I was particularly sorry not to be able to join you last night at your gala dinner. As you know members of parliament will travel a long way for a gala dinner.

When I stood in front of some of you - at the ADCS conference in Manchester this Summer - I said that while I knew a lot about farming, and a fair amount about politics, my knowledge of Children's Services was still in its infancy. But I made a commitment to you to work hard in this job and to understand both the strengths, and the needs of our sector. I said I would listen when you told me about the great work that is already being done across the country, and the even greater work that will be done – and that could be done – in the future. And what has emerged is a thread of improvement and learning that runs through the best local authorities – which is, I believe, the key to their success.

I knew it would be a fascinating journey of discovery and it hasn't disappointed. It's one that started, for me, just outside my own backdoor where North Yorkshire's 'No Wrong Door' programme is transforming lives by reaching out to families and young people – particularly those on the edge of care – an initiative that is supported by our own Innovation Programme. In the public sector we talk a lot about designing services around the needs of the people who use them. The incredible staff and foster carers I met in North Yorkshire have made that idea a reality – pulling expertise into the team when it's needed and funnelling help through a single key worker, instead of passing young people from pillar to post from one service to another until finally a crisis point is reached.

Everywhere I visit I am struck by the sheer commitment of social workers – and, as someone who every week commutes 250 miles to work each week, I appreciate the distances they travel, too. But more important is the day to day reality of their work. They are so often the one person in a child's life who engages with a problem head-on and does something about it; never ducking the hardest issues. And decisions that need to be made.

In Doncaster, in September, I met incredible foster carers who are now part of the first so called Mockingbird project to come to this country. I saw local networks of foster carers working like an extended family to make the experience of being in care more positive for young people.

Along the way I've talked to some inspiring care leavers, who talked honestly about the difficulties they had encountered. I was also interviewed by a care leaver – now studying law at university - for *Become* magazine, who certainly wasn't afraid to ask tricky questions. In Doncaster, I was extremely impressed by the care leavers I met who directly advise the Chief Executive of the Trust – helping to interview social work job applicants and highlighting changes, often quite simple things, that will make a difference to the experience of children in care. I am excited to begin work in earnest with Mark Ridde// – our new National Implementation Adviser for care leavers - who I know will bring his passion and experience of leading an outstanding care leaver service to improve the experiences and outcomes of care leavers across the country.

From young adults to our youngest children: I was also lucky enough to sit in on an NSPCC primary school session – watching young children learn what abuse actually means, with messaging tailored to the age of the child. The work the voluntary sector do with children is part of the fabric of children's social care in England, and the creative and ground-breaking 'Pants' programme, encouraging children to recognise and report abuse, has challenged our preconceptions about how much children can understand and help prevent child abuse.

But this still feels like the beginning of a journey to me, with so much more to come. I will continue to listen and to learn, and to come and see for myself what actually works in practice.

My message to you today is that I know there are challenges, but there is also fantastic practice out there: great people doing great work. And I am committed to propagating this and working with the sector to mobilise it across the system. We have a challenging agenda still to deliver, for which *Putting Children First* set the blueprint.

Over the past few years we have **invested £200m to test and develop better practice through innovation**. Our commitment from the outset was to evaluate and learn from those projects, but we want to do more than create a kind of reference library – the evidence we gather will become part of the foundations for a learning system. And the What Works centre is key to that vision.

The **What Works Centre** for Children's Social Care will do what it says on the can – it will focus on evidence to improve outcomes for children who are at risk of, or suffering from, abuse and/or neglect. It will identify the most effective interventions and practice systems and support their

implementation by practitioners and decision makers. Its goal will be to improve outcomes for children and their families by developing a powerful evidence base, and supporting its translation into better practice on the ground.

The What Works Centre will join the world's first network of What Works Centres, which support policy makers, commissioners and practitioners to make decisions based upon strong evidence of what works and to provide cost-efficient services. I am pleased to announce today that we are **awarding the contract to NESTA to develop and test the model for the What Works Centre - and we hope to announce the research partner soon.**

We will also run a **national learning conference** early next year. It will be a platform to share what we've learned through the Innovation Programme and particularly the evaluations of the many fantastic round one projects.

As I outlined when I spoke to you in Manchester, the introduction of the **National Assessment and Accreditation System** will help embed a post-qualifying standard for child and family social work, allowing social workers and their managers to benchmark their expertise. It will provide, for the first time, a national, practice-focused, career pathway for high-calibre social workers to progress to the top of that profession.

We had over 400 individual responses to our consultation on the new system. We read them and we listened. We heard from you that we should focus much more on the support that local authorities and social workers will need.

Therefore, we will begin with a smaller, targeted national assessment rollout that will feature 'real time' evaluation alongside the overall assessment. By starting with six local authorities in the first instance, building to 13, it will allow us to work closely with managers and social workers to consider what additional support is needed. A national rollout will follow implementing any lessons learned from the pilots.

I know from talking to many of you that local authorities have an acute understanding of their responsibilities for the most vulnerable children in society. There is nothing more important than the safety and wellbeing of children. Yet, too many young people, and their families, are being let down

by poor quality services – or worse, left at risk of harm. That is why we must take decisive action where performance is not good enough. Our interventions programme is yielding real results: 36 local authorities have been lifted out of intervention since 2010 and we are seeing a positive impact from the independent children’s social care trusts that we have set up in Doncaster and Slough. The recent success of West Berkshire, now judged to be ‘good’ by Ofsted, underlines what can be achieved with a relentless focus on turning around failing services with the right help and support in place to do it. I am of course pleased with results like these, but I am not complacent; we will continue to act swiftly to drive lasting improvement.

One in five of the country’s local authorities - with an estimated 100,000 Children in Need, and 17,000 Looked After Children living in them - have children’s social care services that have been judged inadequate by Ofsted, and the number has been rising. Two thirds of the country’s most vulnerable children are being served by local authorities where care is not yet rated good by Ofsted – which falls short of the ambitions we have for the children in our care. In December, the Public Accounts Committee published their report into Child Protection - and the need to intervene earlier where services are beginning to fail, emerged as their main theme.

I know – and you know – that the picture is far more complicated than the headlines suggest. Many areas with a ‘requires improvement’ judgement are heading in the right direction, steadily improving their services, demonstrating solid practice in a challenging context under the guidance of strong leadership teams. But we also know that services don’t become inadequate the day that Ofsted inspectors arrive, and some authorities will have been in decline for months – even years – before Ofsted shines a light on the extent of the problems and my department has to step in. And while we are working at pace to implement *Putting Children First* – taking action across the system to transform social work practice – we must also recognise that there is a strong case to get involved in providing targeted support to local authorities *before* problems become acute.

Our Partners in Practice are leading the way – they have a unique role to play in understanding and building services that are strong and resilient across the breadth of children’s social care services. As part of their commitment to improvement, they model good practice not only from a distance but by working hand in hand alongside teams in other authorities that want to learn and improve their own practice. In Lincolnshire, for example, staff are supporting other areas who want to improve, offering a range of support including sharing their experience of implementing Signs of Safety. North Yorkshire are working with other councils to diagnose problems and agree on what support is needed, extending practical help to nine areas across the country. The Triborough is establishing a

centre for Systemic Social Work – pressing ahead with their Practice Leaders development programme with a cohort of around 20 *and* working with three local authorities each year on training in systemic practice. But what we are learning as each project has evolved is that there is more for us to do to ‘codify’ the learning from strong councils, and make sure that the capacity they have to help others is harnessed and targeted so it can make a real difference as part of a wider strategy for sector-led support.

We want to do more to understand where there might be emerging issues that can turn into real risks and destabilise the services we rely on to protect children – a preventative approach, working to avoid the crisis of failure. We want to move more quickly to establish when and where help is needed, and make sure that support is mobilised from within the sector. We want every authority to be challenged and supported to lead their own improvement, whether that’s moving from ‘requires improvement’ to ‘good’, or ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’ – and well done to North Lincolnshire on their recent excellent result by the way. We also want to understand and recognise where practice is already strong and improving, setting an example we can learn from but also creating an opportunity to offer help and advice to others.

None of this is easy. But it is achievable, I believe, if we work in partnership. Children’s social care can’t prosper in a vacuum: in the very best councils, children’s outcomes are the heart of what they – and of what you - do. For a new programme of sector-led improvement to be successful, we need us all to be leading the way: Directors of Children’s Services, Chief Executives, Lead Members, Mayors, Ofsted and the Department for Education. My commitment is that we will work with you to build a self-improving system, one that spots where challenges are emerging, and quickly puts the right support in place. **To support this we will invest up to £20million in improvement support** to help create a system of sector-led improvement, founded on systematic and effective self-assessment and peer challenge.

We want to work **in partnership with ADCS and the LGA to test the new Regional Alliances** - as the spine of a more robust universal improvement system. I believe this will complement the new Ofsted framework and engender a new phase of continuous improvement.

East Midlands, West Midland and the East of England are already leading the way, working within their regions to test new arrangements. I know ADCS and the LGA share our ambition to see alliances in every region from next year.

We want to work in partnership with you because you know what's happening in your services, and you can recognise when your colleagues are struggling. Not just Directors but Chief Execs and Lead Members need to lead and own their own improvement strategies if they are going to make a difference and we'd like them to demonstrate the courage to have difficult conversations with their colleagues too, where necessary. We know we can do more together to make the kinds of conversations that go on more focussed and systematic, and enable the new alliances not just to be more alert to potential issues but challenge self-assessments and to broker timely help. I am determined that this opportunity will not be wasted in a series of meetings and conversations where questions are asked but no real difference is made. It is in no-one's interest to set up just a series of 'talking shops'.

As part of this commitment to you, we will also expand the capacity in our strongest Local Authorities to provide support to their peers, through an expansion of our Partners in Partners programme. I believe these authorities have a leading role to play in supporting improvement. And we are talking to ADCS, the LGA and SOLACE about how we do that, to make sure that investing in our good local authorities translates to hands-on support for the areas that need it.

We will look to the new Alliances to help identify and diagnose where help is needed and when, so that this kind of support is mobilised and targeted effectively. It won't be enough on its own; and we will continue to work with ADCS and the LGA in particular to look at how we support improvement in all local authorities.

As I said earlier, none of this is easy. I know that children's services don't operate in a vacuum. Councils increased spending on children and young people's services to over £9 billion last year, but we also know that demand for services is rising in some areas and local budgets are under pressure. The Government has re-affirmed its commitment to the DCLG-led Fair Funding Review and we are keen to work alongside DCLG and the sector and get this right for children's social care services.

Today, I have spoken about children's social care. Of course my job goes much wider than that - with early years and special educational needs being just a couple of other responsibilities that can keep me awake at night. Many of your jobs are bigger still - making sure there are enough good school places for every child is just one example of what I know is a massive and vital job for the Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members.

Another priority for me, that I know you will all share, is ensuring that all young people have opportunities no matter where they come from. You will have heard Justine Greening say that improving social mobility is this Department's guiding mission. On Monday we published plans for the first six Opportunity Areas – Blackpool, Derby, North Yorkshire Coast, Norwich, Oldham and West Somerset. This is a major milestone in our programme. We want to make sure all young people get every chance to go as far as their talents will take them. Getting a good education is the key to unlocking that talent and we will drive social mobility through the whole education system, but we know that we cannot solve everything within the classroom. Children have to be ready and able to learn, and have the support they need to thrive in school, with the people who care for them setting high expectations, encouraging them and making the environment they live in as safe and stable as possible.

As I said at the start, I have met some really inspirational and dedicated social workers, foster carers, and other practitioners since my appointment. My commitment is that we will work with you, the professionals, to build a self-improving system, one that spots where challenges are emerging, and quickly puts the right support in place. I have seen your ambition for children and young people in every visit I have made. And I have seen what can be achieved when people get the help they need, when they need it. I am looking forward to working with you as you continue to rise to the challenge.
