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Speech

National Learning Conference

Minister for Children and Families Nadhim Zahawi addresses social work professionals from across the country.

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Good Morning. I'm delighted to see so many people have braved the arctic weather to be here today – thank you.

I know you all have incredibly busy jobs and that it's not easy to take time away, but I do believe that you will leave at the end of the day pleased that you did make the time. I hope you will leave enthused and with the ideas, connections and tools to continue that ever important quest of providing the best support to children and their families.

I am delighted to have been appointed to my first ministerial role – and even more happy and elated for that role to be focusing on supporting our most vulnerable children and families. I genuinely think I have the best portfolio in the department, if not the best job in government!

As you know, my background is in business and in particular in market research. But if setting up and running YouGov taught me anything, it's that if you want to really understand an issue you need to get out there and talk to the people who live and breathe it every single day.

So I wanted to get out and meet social workers and leaders across the country straight away – literally two days into the job I went to Hackney with our Chief Social Worker, Isabelle Trowler, to learn about how they turned that services around and to discuss our reform programme.

I've since been to Doncaster and Wigan, and have met with our Partners in Practice. I am excited and looking forward to getting out more over the coming months.

I can honestly say that the social workers I've spoken to are some of the most dedicated and inspiring people that I have had privileged pleasure to meet in my life. As an MP, I would often get people in my surgery talking about their experiences with children's social care, and it was often so overwhelming. By the end of a 15-20 minute appointment with a family, I would find it almost impossible to breathe, let alone think. You do this every day. So I have the upmost respect and admiration for our people who do this job day in and day out.

I have been particularly struck by the commitment and passion of the social workers I've met doing the best they can for the children and families they are working with. That includes constantly looking for more effective ways of supporting children, building their understanding of what works and learning from the experience of their peers.

I don't think I need to tell you that social workers are central to solving the challenges we face in children's social care, or that investing in them is absolutely key.

But as leaders, you know as well as I do that enabling social workers to do the best for children is about more than training, or caseloads, or staff turnover.

Not that those things aren't important - they absolutely are important. But to achieve the scale of improvement that Eileen Munro identified we need, we must build a whole system that creates the space for excellent social work practice to flourish.

That's the ambition that we set out in 'Putting Children First' – taking action across the whole system to transform social work practice. An ambition that I'm determined to deliver on – building on the hard work of my predecessors and working with you as leaders across the country. And of course I have to pay tribute to Graham Archer and my team who I have to say, coming from the private sector, are phenomenal human beings.

If we want dynamic social work where excellent practitioners can reach their potential then we have to build a permissive, creative and supportive environment in which social workers have the confidence and freedom to develop and test new ways of working.

That is exactly what the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme was set up to do – providing funding and support as well as the 'licence' to test different ways of working. And helping to build a system that is open to innovation and that learns from best practice as well as from when things go wrong.

Through the Innovation Programme we have invested almost £200m in 95 projects. Some of these projects are rethinking the whole of a children's social care system in a local authority. Others are redesigning support for young people around a single trusted person. And others still are adopting and adapting from elsewhere new ways of supporting foster parents.

Many of those projects are already having a positive impact on systems, practice and, most importantly, on outcomes for children. You will have the opportunity to hear from many of those today.

But to give just one example - the first ever project funded through the Innovation Programme was 'Focus on Practice' which aimed to completely redesign the Triborough's entire children's social care system so that professionals could spend more time with children and families, and so that practice was rooted in greater expertise and evidence. The project has already started to show positive results including Ofsted finding that Focus on Practice was making an effective contribution to practice. The independent evaluation found that, as well as reductions in placements costs, staff absence and use of agency staff had also reduced, indicating improved staff wellbeing.

And Triborough has now set up the Centre for Systemic Social Work to share their learning and enable other authorities to embed systemic practice, improving services and outcomes for children.

With the Innovation Programme we set out to support genuine innovation to catalyse a real step change in practice.

And I'm delighted to announce today three new innovation projects supported by the Programme. We are investing up to £5m in Social Impact Bonds to support care leavers as they transition to adulthood and independent living in Sheffield, Bristol and in Lewisham. These Social Impact Bonds are a first for the Innovation Programme and a first for care leavers – testing new commissioning and funding models to support care leavers in to education, training and employment.

I'm also pleased to announce that Spectra First will deliver the Care Leaver Covenant on behalf of the Department. The Care Leaver Covenant is a fantastic opportunity for organisations in civil society to sign up to helping care leavers get the practical support other young people get from their families when starting out in life and becoming more independent. That means helping them in a range of practical ways. It could be helping them access and benefit from education, employment and training opportunities, for instance by offering apprenticeships, making sure they've got a set of interview clothes so they feel confident when they walk through the door, or providing discounted and free offers such as gym membership that helps combat social isolation and loneliness. The Covenant is a way of making that happen and getting a wide range of organisations involved providing care leavers with the chances they need and deserve.

We know the difference that local authorities at their best can make to the lives of care leavers and the work Mark Riddell did in Trafford before being appointed the Department's national adviser for care leavers is testament to that. I know from my conversations with Mark that together we could do so much more to help care leavers raise and achieve their aspirations. So I very much look forward to seeing the exciting possibilities that I know all those Covenant pledges will bring.

Now I don't underestimate the impact that individual innovation projects have had on systems, practice and on outcomes for children.

But the collective impact of the Innovation Programme is arguably even more important – the potential it has to build our understanding of what works in supporting vulnerable children and in driving improvement across the whole system.

Robust, independent evaluation is critical to building the evidence base of what works. I hope you have seen the 57 individual project evaluations that we have published to date, as well as thematic reports, and an overarching evaluation report? Huge thanks to Professor Judy Sebba and her team at the Rees Centre at Oxford University for their work coordinating the evaluations.

Understanding and learning from what works isn't enough, though. It's a bit of a cliché to say that we learn most from failing. But like most clichés, it is essentially true. Learning from when things go wrong is just as important – and we must make sure that the system as a whole learns from when things go wrong.

That is why we are committed to strengthening arrangements for learning from the cases involving the serious harm of children to swiftly inform child safeguarding policy and practice at all levels.

We are in the process of setting up a new independent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and hope to be able to announce the chair and members very soon.

This first National Learning Conference is an important part of sharing the learning from the Innovation Programme. And I hope it won't be the last opportunity to share learning nationally, both from the Innovation Programme and of course more broadly.

I'm delighted that we are working with innovation experts from Nesta, SCIE [sky], and FutureGov, as well as expert researchers from Cardiff University to establish a new What Works Centre for Children's Social Care.

The What Works Centre's focus is to improve outcomes for children and their families by developing a powerful evidence base, and supporting its translation into better practice on the ground. It aims to identify the most effective interventions and practice systems and support their implementation by practitioners and decision makers.

It will join the world's first network of What Works Centres, which support policy makers, practitioners and commissioners to make decisions based on strong evidence of what works.

I'm really excited about the potential here to make a real difference to establishing a credible, trusted voice on what works in children's social care that is integral to social work practice and development.

The What Works Centre will only reach that potential though, if it is delivering what you as leaders and practitioners in children's social care need in a way that is accessible and practical. And to do that they need to hear from you and to work with you.

I know the What Works Centre team have spent much of the last few months talking to you to understand what you need and how they can work with you to fill the gaps that are there.

I would encourage you to continue to talk to them, to challenge them, and to support them. They are here to work with you, to make your work easier and support you to do the best for the children you work with.

That's probably enough from me. Today is really about you going out and learning from the experts - each other. You are the experts. I look forward to meeting you and discussing ideas with you over the course of today and the coming months.

Enjoy the rest of the day - thank you for being here and for the work you do for our children.

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