Speech

Children and Families Minister speech at ADCS annual conference

Vicky Ford addresses the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) annual conference

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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

I wanted to start my speech today by thanking all of you, and the wider sector.

Over the last 18 months, you have shown your determination and commitment to supporting the most vulnerable children in our society.

As Children's Minister, I share your belief that no child should be left behind, that all children deserve to be safe and happy,

To do so, we need to harness the best of what we have learnt during the pandemic to lead the charge for innovative change and great outcomes for all.

This is a challenge for us all, and to meet it we will need to work together. As I speak today, there are more serious incident notifications being made from local authorities across the country, with more children at risk at home. That must concern us all.

By equal measure, I know we have all spent the last 18 months grappling with the challenges we have faced – and thank you all for your work during this time, as well as your constructive dialogue with the Department. I know the Permanent Secretary in her speech to you has spoken about how we have faced those challenges together and found new and innovative ways of engaging which we must continue as we move to recover from the pandemic. We have been through unprecedented times in recent months and the full impact of Covid on children's social care is not yet fully known, however, early indications suggest that more is required to help all LAs stabilise and build back better. More on this later.

But first, I wanted to spend a little time today reflecting on some of the key challenges I think we face together, and which we need to address as we create a better future for children. I have no doubt ADCS will be at the heart of these conversations.

The first is - how can we get the balance right between both supporting families, and ensuring we are taking decisive action when needed?

The Independent Care Review has moved at pace to gather evidence, and Josh and his team have engaged with over a thousand people who have lived experiences of children's social care. The Review offers a once in a generation opportunity to transform the children's social care system and reflects this Government's commitment to offering all our children and young people the opportunities they deserve. I encourage all of you to keep engaging in the review and the uncomfortable questions it may raise for both local and national government. By being open to feedback and challenge, we will be in a better position to make the proper lasting change our children deserve.

Another question I think we must all contend with is this: how can we change damaging cultures that keep some children unsafe?

The Ofsted Review into sexual abuse in schools and colleges has been a chilling reminder of the pressures our young people face. We set up a specific NSPCC helpline to support those who wanted to report sexual abuse or receive advice – today it has reported over 500 calls since its launch on April 1, of which nearly 100 have been referred to other agencies such as the police.

It is harrowing to think that our children face this kind of abuse and harassment on a daily basis.

The brave testimonies on the Everyone's Invited website show us that we all have a part to play.

I know there has been some good work happening with schools who found themselves named in the early testimonies on Everyone's Invited.

We have an opportunity now to make changes, to say enough is enough, and give children a better future.

I want to go further than the Ofsted recommendations; we are updating Keeping Children Safe in Education for this September and reviewing Working Together to Safeguard Children. We will expect to see the Relationship, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum implemented in full, from next term and we will work with school and college leaders, and others, to support teachers to deliver this well. We are encouraging all schools to use time in inset days to focus on safeguarding and on how they deliver this RHSE curriculum well. We have also asked all local safeguarding partners to review how they work with schools and to undertake this review before autumn half term.

As the senior leaders in your local authorities, my plea to you is to get fully behind this work. We can all make a difference.

We will also offer supervision and support to designated safeguarding leads in up to a further 10 local authorities which is up to 500 more schools, and we have requested that the Children's Commissioner do some immediate work on children's access to pornography and whether there are things we can do in advance of the Online Safety Bill coming into force.

We must also recognise the challenge of young people's exploitation by criminal gangs.

Together, we need to look at why children are drawn into the activity of these gangs and end up perpetrating or becoming a victim of serious violence.

Tackling child exploitation must be a joint effort involving police, local government, health and education professionals, community leaders and other key partners.

Violence Reduction Units continue to play an important role in bringing these organisations together with more than £105 million invested over 3 years, as do our continued efforts to support vulnerable teenagers in Alternative Provision (AP), including our AP Transition Fund, to give support to those leaving these settings at 16.

Last week, the Home Secretary also launched the Youth Endowment Fund Toolkit, a free online resource to help you put evidence of what works to prevent serious violence into action. This toolkit puts in one place a guide on how best to support vulnerable children. It is easy to access, and I hope that you will be able to use it in your local authority to support those who need it most with effective interventions.

Turning now to social workers, I cannot thank those working in this sector enough and I want to make clear the government's long-term commitment to the social work profession.

Social workers have responded to the pandemic with incredible agility and commitment, continuing their most important duties protecting children from harms and neglect. And whilst across the country we have seen a reduction in children coming into care, very sadly we have also seen a continued rise in the number of serious incidents of harm and death reported, particularly of babies and very young children. It is really important that social workers are able and confident to intervene when a child needs protection.

Many children with a social worker talk about how challenging it is for them when their social worker changes. I know churn and agency rates are a concern for all of you, because of the impact on children's outcomes and because of the costs. The Department has seen how some local authorities have made fantastic progress in driving down their agency rates. I am keen to work with you to share learning and best practice across the sector to build a resilient and stable workforce and please do share your thoughts on this.

And just as I have asked for your help in tackling abuse and violence, I too ask for your assistance to ensure support is available to those in highest need including those whose mental health is at risk.

Getting children back to school has been vital to their wellbeing but re-establishing a more normal school experience is vital to support pupils to build back their confidence and enjoyment. That is why I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement this week. If we are going to make sure that all the efforts we are taking to support education benefits every child then they need to go hand in hand with the right support for those at risk of experiencing mental illness.

The £79 million extra we announced in March to boost children and young people's mental health support will increase the number of Mental Health Support Teams in schools and colleges to cover around 35% of pupils in England by 2023; as well as improving access to community mental health support, continuing crisis care for those who need it, and improving access to eating disorder services.

In addition to this, an extra £40 million has been allocated to enhance children and young people's mental health services across the country, including £10 million to provide extra beds at units which provide care for young people with the most complex needs, including eating disorders.

This all builds on the government's commitment in the NHS Long Term Plan, to expand children and young people's mental health services to support an additional 345,000 individuals by 2023/24, backed by record investment of an extra £2.3 billion per year.

To further support this, we announced more than £17 million during Mental Health Awareness Week in May, to improve the mental health and wellbeing support available to schools and colleges.

This included £7 million to local authorities for the Wellbeing for Education Recovery scheme. Authorities have already shown how they can bring together support, reaching up to 15,000 schools and colleges with training and expert advice through the previous Wellbeing for Education Return Scheme. This funding extends that to support schools to bring together local offers of support and help schools to navigate them.

We are also hosting a joint webinar with NHS England on July 14, which aims to help make sure that education, children's social care and health partners know how to work together to respond to the most serious mental health concerns.

We all know that the earlier families get support when they need it, the better the outcomes.

That is why we are championing Family Hubs approach - backed by £14 million investment.

They act as safe, non-stigmatising places for children and families to get support.

I have seen first-hand, in my constituency, Chelmsford, the power that Family Hubs can have in supporting children and families at the earliest opportunity and helping to prevent issues from escalating. Family Hubs can include a range of services, such as health visiting, mental health support, reducing family conflict and parenting support. Importantly they not only support families with very young children but can also support families with older children and teenagers.

We have just launched the new National Centre for Family Hubs, run by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

To build the evidence base for Family Hubs, I'm delighted to announce that we will be working with:

- Ecorys UK, partnering with family hubs and each local authority in Bristol, Essex, Leeds, Sefton and Suffolk; and
- Sheffield Hallam University partnering with family hubs and the local authority in Doncaster

We are also working with Bristol City Council and Lancashire County Council to develop data and digital products that will support the practical implementation of family hubs.

Overall, this will provide expert advice and guidance; share best practice and evidence; and work with local authorities to implement or expand their family hubs. Family Hubs will be a core feature of how we help families and children in the future, and I welcome your support in developing them.

Early years education is another area I am championing as Children's Minster.

The two-year-old entitlement is crucial for improving disadvantaged children's educational outcomes. Evidence shows us that 15 hours a week at the age of two can have a positive impact throughout a child's education. This is why I am incredibly keen to maximise take up of the two-year-old entitlement, especially as lockdown is likely to have had a negative impact on this group of children in particular.

And our recent education recovery announcement also includes £153 million for training for early years staff to support the very youngest children's learning and development.

This will involve rolling out new training programmes so that early years staff are better supported to help young children with their speech and language skills as well as their physical and emotional development.

I also just wanted to take a moment to say a huge thank you to you and your teams for your tenacity and enthusiasm for planning and delivering the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in your local areas. I'm delighted that we secured the £220 million to expand this exciting programme, building on the foundations that we have put in place since 2018. It is wonderful that so many children across the country will be able to access enriching activities and food, being active, learning about nutrition, but even more importantly having fun.

I spoke to HAF co-ordinators at their pre summer event last week and I encouraged them all to invite their local senior leaders and MPs along to come and see HAF for themselves. I personally cannot wait to get out and visit. Please do pass on my thanks to your HAF co-ordinator.

I would like to turn now to the SEND Review as I know many of you will want to know how we're getting on with this piece of work.

We know systemic change is needed across education, health and care if we are to improve outcomes, and better prepare young people with SEND effectively for adult life.

We know the SEND system does not identify and respond to need quickly enough and is driving an adversarial climate where parents only feel confident their child will get the same opportunities as every other pupil through an EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan), which in turn is driving up unsustainable pressure on budgets.

The pandemic has inevitably slowed the pace of this crucial review, but more importantly, as the HMCI spoke about last month, it has materially changed the context the SEND system is operating in. We need to take the time to get this right and to ensure we are designing a system which is protected against unintended consequences.

The Review team and I will continue to work closely with ADCS and other sector and system leaders, at pace over the coming months so we are in a strong position to publish bold proposals for public consultation as soon as possible.

Children's social care already had its fair share of challenges prior to the pandemic. The impact of Covid on our services, young people and workforce has been multi-faceted, adding immediate pressures on top of all the longer-term systemic issues and challenges that we face.

But it has also highlighted your resilience, driven innovation and formed better, more powerful partnerships locally, despite the challenging circumstances – something in which we can all take pride.

I am keen that we work together to support you and your colleagues in the months ahead as we recover and build back better. Sometimes the role of central government is to lead, and sometimes our role is to facilitate and empower others to lead.

And that is why I am pleased to announce the department will support a regional approach to Covid-19 recovery, for children's social care, with up to £24 million, by bringing together funding previously allocated to three proven programmes: Partners in Practice, the Innovation Programme and Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances.

We will be inviting Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances to lead on the development of a Covid recovery plan for their region, which will include projects to address challenges such as improving safeguarding for vulnerable children and young people; easing system pressures from the impact of Covid; and boosting system resilience to future pandemics. I hope this is welcome news and my officials will be working with you to support the development of these plans over the coming weeks.

In addition to this, we know that finding the right placement can be very hard, so the Department is also developing a new capital funding programme to aid local authorities to establish new children's homes. We will finalise the details in the coming weeks but are proposing that local authorities will be able to bid for funding to establish innovative approaches to reduce the number of children needing care over time, address current shortfalls, including in geographic areas with fewer children's homes, and ensure sufficient provision for children with more complex needs.

Finally, I would like to talk about unaccompanied children. All of you will be aware of the challenges over the last year in caring for young people arriving on small boats across the channel. I am extremely grateful to all of you that have come forward and taken on the care of these very vulnerable young people over recent months. Our new Nationality and Borders Bill will prioritise those in need of protection while stopping abuse of the system, including by increasing punishments for people smugglers who facilitate illegal entry, so often putting the vulnerable at risk in the process.

But when unaccompanied asylum-seeking children do arrive on our shores we have a duty, as a nation, to provide these children with the care and support they need. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can be some of the most vulnerable in our care, having often faced dreadful exploitation from traffickers, and appalling conditions both at home and on their journey to the UK.

Sometimes local authorities say that these young people will not want to live in rural areas, or outside the big cities as reasons why some areas feel that they cannot step forward and play their part. I know that meeting these young people's needs can be challenging, but it can also be very rewarding. Many of these young people can go on and thrive wherever they go to live. The experiences of councils such as Norfolk which has gone from having very few unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to caring for a significant number as a result of moral leadership and a concerted effort, demonstrates that. I know too that others have made similar contributions.

But I also need to ask that you consider whether there is more you can do now to provide placements for the young people that are continuing to arrive and in need of help. If so, please do get in touch with the Department.

Recently announced changes to the National Transfer Scheme, with a voluntary regional rota backed up by increased funding, will help ensure that there is a fairer distribution of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across the country and that, together, we provide the care these young people need, whatever their future asylum pathway holds, so that where appropriate they settle and make valuable contributions to their communities. The Covid Recovery Fund I referred to earlier will include up to £50,000 per region to help each region play its part.

I have raised a range of significant challenges we face today in national and local government - many of which, we know the pandemic has exacerbated.

They are challenges that will keep us all busy over the next 12 months and beyond, but I wanted to end by sharing my gratitude and praise of the sector that you lead.

Local authorities, social workers and all frontline staff have always put children first, shown incredible resilience at an unprecedented time and worked at astounding pace to resolve the problems posed by the pandemic.

Using this spirit and commitment, I firmly believe there is an opportunity to drive change that benefits children now and into the future.

Thank you.

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