

Speech

Children and Families Minister addresses NCAS conference

Minister Nadhim Zahawi spoke to children's services leaders about best practice and innovation at the National Children and Adult Services Conference.

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be with you today. This is the first time I have been to this event and I am looking forward to meeting as many of you as possible throughout the day.

Now this may be my first time at this conference, but I see many familiar faces before me today. The last time I spoke to you at the ADCS conference, I was only six months into this amazing job, a relative

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newcomer. I said then that my plan was to listen to you about the challenges and opportunities before us.

I have to say I have truly been so impressed by what I have seen and heard – DCSs, chief executives, lead members, managers, social workers – all working relentlessly to improve the lives of children. Just a few weeks ago, Pinaki Ghoshal was good enough, and I suggest brave enough, to host me shadowing the excellent social workers at Brighton and Hove children's services. I'm not afraid to say that it was an eye opening experience. There is nothing that brings home the responsibility we all hold than spending a day seeing the direct work and results of what you do with children and families.

I was so impressed by Pinaki. Often when you do these kinds of visits, you get the feeling that everything is rather stage-managed. Pinaki wanted me to see things as they were – so it was a brief hello and then I was on my way with his team, unsupervised. One of the social workers even said to me – “I can't believe they let you spend the day with me, I'm the gobby one”. To have that confidence in his team is what leadership is all about. And, by the way, the social workers who I spent the day with, Ruth and Jen, were an absolute credit to the profession. The importance of listening to the front line is a message I take to heart. This is why I am resolved to spend much more of the time when I'm allowed to escape Westminster, shadowing social workers and other frontline staff. If anyone else feels as brave as Pinaki, then please extend an invitation to me – I promise I will come.

Brighton is a good example of a Council that has improved its services over the past few years. They are part of an impressive story, one that is building every week. Of all the LAs that have been inspected by Ofsted this year, 20 have improved, and only two have gone backwards.

We therefore cannot be complacent, but I think this demonstrates an increased confidence and an improved sense of what good really looks like. This speaks of the success of government, local authorities and Ofsted working together, and speaks particularly well of what all of you have done to improve services.

And this is what I want to talk to you about today: how we can work together, as leaders, to build a system that achieves the best possible outcomes for children – based on strong leadership, evidence-based practice, and empowered professionals.

We know, increasingly, what good looks like. The Innovation Programme, the Partners in Practice programme and the work of Ipsos Mori have given us a much clearer sense of what works.

As you know, we have invested around £200m in the Innovation Programme since 2013 so that local authorities can develop, test and scale new approaches to supporting vulnerable children in the social

care system. And we are beginning to see this pay off. We are now in a position to say with clarity what the main features of effective practice are. These are articulated in the framework we have published that outlines seven features of good practice and seven outcomes of success.

And from this, we have a cadre of models that demonstrate these features, and are seeing promising, positive outcomes.

Models like 'Family Safeguarding' in Hertfordshire, where multi-disciplinary teams and targeted parental interventions have safely reduced by half the number of days children in their area spend in care. Like 'Family Valued' in Leeds, where the team have shown how effective use of restorative practice and family group conferencing can reduce the number of children who are looked after and who are on protection plans. And finally, the North Yorkshire 'No Wrong Door' programme has taken a more integrated approach to its work with teenagers, with strong evidence of positive impact.

I have had the pleasure of meeting these authorities recently, and have been hugely impressed by the results they are achieving for children.

But these are just three examples. Up and down the country, spearheaded by the people in this room, we are developing a growing evidence base of what works best when supporting the most vulnerable children. Not only do we know what works, but we have a much better understanding of how to support LAs that are struggling. Again, this is through a combination of sector support, including through Partners in Practice, the Department, and expert advisers and commissioners.

The challenge is how to spread that knowledge more widely. Wherever we have innovation that is genuinely transforming practice, I want to see this scaled up and spread out. Wherever evidence is showing positive impact, all of you in this room should be asking yourselves 'why am I not doing this too?'

I am not naïve enough to think that this will not be challenging. But it is possible, because it is already happening. We now have Regional Improvement Alliances in every region, through which DCSs, Chief Executives and Lead Members are already working in partnership with each other. I believe these present a huge opportunity to drive improvement across the board.

Of course, I can't talk about evidence and sharing learning within Children's Social Care without mentioning the What Works Centre, and the wider learning system.

I am thrilled that we will shortly be welcoming Michael Sanders as the new Executive Director for the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care. Michael brings a wealth of experience in public service design and

research and I know he impressed with his ideas and insights as to how we can use evidence to ensure children and young people get the best care.

But what else is needed for us to accelerate this improvement agenda? What are the conditions for success? I know that many of you will say it is about money Minister, and I acknowledge this is a significant challenge. I am of course very pleased that we were able to secure the additional £410m for social care in the recent budget. But I don't pretend this is the complete solution. As you know, we will need to continue this conversation in the run-up to the upcoming Spending Review. And may I say thank you to those of you who have engaged with us on this thus far.

But as well as funding, it is also about capacity. Including the capacity to invest in the improvement needed to create and deliver a high-quality, sustainable service. Capacity and funding are not mutually exclusive, of course. This is why, just two weeks ago, the Chancellor announced £84m of new money to adapt and adopt some of these most promising models in their own settings, in Leeds, Hertfordshire and North Yorkshire.

There is, of course, much work to be done over the next few weeks and months to pin down our delivery plans and to identify where these models might have the biggest impact. I am excited to continue in the spirit of collaboration and co-production with Jenny in Hertfordshire, with Steve in Leeds, and with Stuart in North Yorkshire as we pin this down.

But my message to you today is that we will not stop with these three projects. I am determined to move at pace and to continue to spread what works, so I will be supporting other LAs to adopt and adapt a number of the best evidenced and most effective innovation projects over the next year.

So in addition to funding and building capacity to invest to save, what are the other conditions for success? Leadership is, of course, absolutely fundamental.

We all know how important strong leadership is; I don't need to go on about that here. But I don't think we talk enough about how we make sure that we have the infrastructure in place to support and develop our leaders. My department is working closely in partnership with ADCS, LGA, SOLACE and the staff college to put in place a national offer of support for Directors of Children's Services. This will increase the breadth and capacity of the current offer for existing DCSs and children's service leaders, and, because we have heard that induction for new DCSs is crucial, we will prioritise high quality support for newly appointed DCSs.

We also want to work with our partners to develop a national flagship programme for the best talented and aspiring directors. Good leaders

pave the way for future leaders. I want us to support the talent in local authorities and put in place career pathways that support progression. This means building a diverse talent pool from within the sector and ensuring we maximise the potential of the whole workforce. However, it may also entail looking outwards: few sectors offer such challenge, yet even fewer offer such deep rewards, and we should consider how we capitalise on this position to attract the very best leaders.

Of course, success also depends on a confident and empowered workforce, both front line and managerial. A key part of this is National Assessment and Accreditation, which launched in July this year. So far, over 100 social workers have taken part, with really excellent feedback. I was lucky enough to meet a group of social workers earlier today who had taken the qualification, and it was clear to see how the assessment has given them valuable insights about how they can improve. Those who are taking the qualification are seeing that NAAS isn't just about gaining accreditation, it's much more – it's about being at the forefront of effective practice. I want to challenge you, as leaders, to think about how you can get involved and how you could integrate NAAS into your future local improvement journeys.

And, of course, Social Work England, the new professional regulator for social workers, will play an important role in raising the status of the profession, and it's great to see it making real progress. Last week, SWE launched its first public consultation on its operational procedures – essentially its rules. I would encourage you to read and respond to this, and help to shape the way the new regulator will operate.

I have referenced funding and leadership, but more generally, any organisation looking to improve needs to understand its data, and any system looking to improve needs to share this data with partners. A number of you were in the room five months ago at the ADCS conference when I spoke about my ambition to see all Local Authorities sharing 'real time' data to help improve performance.

After some discussions with ADCS, I am really glad to say that we have now reached an agreement on sharing data, which I am confident will bring benefits right across the board. In the coming months we will be working together to tailor those agreements to each area.

I know that there were some worries about how we would use this data and our reasons for asking for it. Please be assured my intentions here are entirely without subtext. This is about having an honest conversation and getting the right support to authorities that are struggling, as quickly as we can. We also want to recognise strength and illustrate where change is happening for the better.

We know that on its own data doesn't provide the full picture of an authority's performance. What it will do is help start a conversation about

strengths and needs, bringing data alongside intelligence, with everyone working from the same set of facts.

I've spoken so far today about children's social care, but of course this is part of a much broader system. There are key interactions with SEND and early years in particular.

In early years, we all know that early language and literacy matter. For example, children who struggle with language at five are six times less likely to reach the expected standard in English at age 11, and eleven times less likely to achieve the expected level in maths. That is why, in July this year, the Secretary of State set out his ambition to halve the number of children who finish reception year without the communication and reading skills they need.

Achieving this ambition means supporting professionals. This is why I recently announced the £20m Early Years Professional Development Fund, to help practitioners improve children's early language, literacy and numeracy. It also means getting parents on board, which is why yesterday the Secretary of State and I convened a diverse group of businesses, charities, media organisations and others to discuss how to unlock the potential of learning in the home.

But there is a third crucial component, the 'glue' which binds together what happens in settings and in the home – local services.

Local authorities sit at the heart of what can be offered to disadvantaged families. We have already committed £8.5 million through our local government programme to identify and spread best practice on early language outcomes. With this, we have successfully piloted the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review programme with LGA, which will start rolling out properly next month.

We know there is ambition out there – Greater Manchester's extensive work comes to mind, but they are far from alone – and the peer reviews are already shining a light on excellent practice.

So I am pleased to tell you that we can go further still. Today I am announcing the launch of the bidding round for the Early Outcomes Fund. The fund, worth over £6.5m, completes the £8.5m commitment I made in April, and aims to support a leadership focus on early language. This fund will enable authorities to kick-start work to improve local early language services, and to spread best practice around the system.

We are particularly keen to see partnership bids, so I would encourage any leaders in this room with a good idea, or with a strong existing approach, to look at those around you and see where partnership and collaboration opportunities may lie. The application process will open today and close in mid-January. This is an exciting opportunity and I am confident many will seize it.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I want to turn to an area of our work that is right at the top of my priority list, as I know it is yours: special educational needs and disability.

In 2014, we made some of the biggest changes for a generation in our provision for children and young people with SEND.

The Ofsted CQC SEND inspections are showing very clearly that the most effective services are those with strong leadership and joint working between the local authority and clinical commissioning groups. Put simply, strong and joined up leadership across education, health and care leads to better services and happier families.

As in children's social care and early years, I am keen that we learn from and spread what works. I am pleased the Local Government Association has been working with ISOS to set out important elements of good practice in developing and sustaining effective local arrangements for SEN. The importance of working in close partnership with parents and families is a key theme in their report, which is being launched at this conference, and I completely echo that.

Co-production is key to effective services and I recently asked the National Network of Parent Carer Forums to provide examples of excellent local practice. I want to learn from these areas, as we build our future strategy. For instance, in Peterborough, a new model of services for families with children with ASD and ADHD increased diagnosis and support rates for families referred from 10% to 70%.

But we are not complacent. We know SEND is an area of significant pressure for you and that there is still more to be done to fully embed the reforms and improve the experience of the system – and outcomes – of children and young people.

We want to support services in making funding go further. We will continue to invest in provision for children and young people with high needs, and this will feature prominently in our discussions with the Treasury as we head towards next year's Spending Review. We want to spread good practice through the SEND leadership board that my department is setting up to work with local authorities and CCGs to improve local planning and commissioning; and by listening to you about what works.

As DCSs, Chief Executives and Lead Members – and the other sector leaders within the room – it is your job to bring all of this together.

Improvement journeys require strong leadership, knowing what works, and working in partnership to create whole-system change. I have to tell you that is no mean feat.

I feel optimistic that despite the challenges, we are on an upward

trajectory, and there is a lot we can continue to do together to accelerate that. That must be our ambition, and is the only way we can deliver the outcomes that we all passionately want to see, enabling us to take the decisions that make life better for the children and young people in our care.

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