

Rainer/Communities That Care
Turning the Tide: Delivering Better Outcomes for
Children and Young People

“The Government’s View of Prevention and
the Benefits of a Scientific Approach”

(1546 words/20 mins)

Thanks very much. As Minister for Social Exclusion, I’d like to say how much I welcome this debate about the importance of prevention. It is critical to everything we do in Government - but nowhere more so than in our work with children and young people.

Successive governments have wrestled with huge, costly problems that you sometimes wonder if you are ever going to crack: crime; spiralling prison populations; drugs; low skills; unemployment; inter-generational poverty traps that are so difficult to escape.

The tragedy of broken lives and wasted potential.

But you **can** have success, and the Government has had plenty. With investment, reform and intensive support, you can turn lives around. Programmes like Pathways to Work, for example, are getting some of our most excluded back into work.

But – as you know - all too often it is too late. Problems are too entrenched, too complex, too costly to fix and people feel they have been failed too many times before.

While we would never write anyone off, and will continue our work to try to tackle these most difficult problems, we have got to be smart about this.

We have got to intervene early – to spot risks before they become problems, and offer people the help and support they need before these problems become too firmly entrenched. Before it's harder to solve, before it's more costly to everyone, and before more lives are irreparably damaged.

Of course this is hardly a new approach for us. We have been serious since we came into Government in 1997 about designing and delivering timely, evidenced-based interventions. The Every Child Matters programme for children and young people is an excellent example.

But we are in a unique position now – one that we have never been in before. We are now able to build on the progress of nine years of falling crime, rising educational standards, higher employment and improved public services.

We are now in a position to reach further back down the line. We are no longer battling the immediate crises of the scale that we faced in 1997. We have had real success in lifting 800,000 children and a million pensioners out of poverty and in narrowing the gap between rich and poor.

All this means that we see even more starkly a small but important group that has not benefited from our investment and reforms. A small minority whose persistent and deep seated exclusion has come to stand out even more dramatically.

So what do we do? How do we tackle this entrenched, intergenerational disadvantage, where children are brought up in families where no-one in the last two generations has worked? Where other family members are in prison? Where conflict and relationship breakdown are the norm? Where there are no role models? Where dreams and ambitions are things that other kids have?

The answer is - by intervening early. By providing the right support and the right challenge at the right time.

Analysis shows that it is far more effective to focus investment in the early years rather than the later stages of childhood and teenage years. And the positive impacts of successful programmes have been shown to last, thereby reducing the need for later forms of intervention.

There is a growing body of evidence about the different negative factors which can affect children's chances of a happy and healthy childhood, and a life free from the prospect of social exclusion. A range of factors such as household poverty; poor maternal health; harsh

parenting styles; low levels of stimulation; and poor nutrition can all have a significant impact on a child's life chances.

The period between birth and the age of two is one of particular vulnerability. If a child is not talked to, she will not develop speech and language capacity. If she is not given opportunities to use her developing cognitive skills, she will start school behind other children. And most devastating of all, if she is not loved, she will struggle to love others.

But this early period is also a real window of opportunity. Our earliest experiences can shape us profoundly and the impacts can stay with us for life. Longitudinal research is helping us to understand much more thoroughly how different risk factors can increase the likelihood of individuals experiencing damaging and costly problems in the future.

Moreover, this research is also beginning to tell us what can protect individuals by mediating the adverse consequences of risk and building individual resilience.

For example, the most effective forms of parenting can protect against risks in early childhood and can have dramatic effects on social and cognitive development. By contrast, poor parenting can expose children to greater risks and can contribute to the development of potentially harmful patterns of behaviour.

Intensive support can improve parenting and parental attachment. It can have dramatic impacts upon both parent and child outcomes. And it has been shown that these effects can continue throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

And research has shown that the stronger the bond or attachment between young people and the people around them – families, friends and peers and the wider community – the less the risk of adverse outcomes like drug abuse or teen pregnancy.

That's why it's so crucial that we identify those children and parents most at risk and intervene with support that builds on their own strengths – working **with** them - not doing it **to** them.

This is so important simply because, as it stands, not everyone is getting the most out of the universal services provided. The higher your income, the more likely you are to see a health visitor. That is surely the wrong way-round. The more in need you are, the more intensive support and intervention you should have. It makes sense for the parent, the child, and for society when it prevents problems down the line. We are not prepared to stand by and allow any child have their future limited, when we can 'invest to save' and make a real difference.

Furthermore, in this instance we do know what works. In the early years, high quality social support alongside antenatal clinical care, as well as intensive work with the midwife and health visitor, are all vital to building the resilience of the parents and the child at this most critical time.

That is why in September we announced £7 million for ten pilots around the country. These will demonstrate new approaches to health visiting and midwifery, drawing on evidence-based programmes from overseas. They will trailblaze practical approaches to the early years, building on the health visiting and community midwifery. The final date for PCTs and local authorities to apply is 15th of December, so do encourage yours to do so.

You may have seen some of the media coverage when we launched this. The Daily Mail ran a front page calling this programme “foetal asbos”. Others have called this “ludicrous”, or condemned it as “nanny state”.

But you and I know how important this work is, and we have a job to do here, together, to let people know that early intervention is vital if we care about preventing wasted lives and social dysfunction.

And that's why the work you do at *Rainer* and at *Communities that Care* is so important. Of course the Government can't do it all. Organisations like you have a vital role to play and can often reach those the state cannot. We want to work with you, and to learn from you.

The best Third Sector organisations can identify what works using evidence-based approaches driven by specific needs at local and community level. I know that this is the approach that *Communities that Care* has developed and implemented in a number of areas of the UK – including Bolton, Swansea and Barnsley.

Moreover, you are often more flexible and effective in dealing with people as individuals – equipped to offer tailored, personal support that deals with their complex and multiple needs. All too often a one-size-fits-all service lets down the most needy and hard to reach.

This is why, working with organisations like yours, we need to provide more services that are personalised and targeted to those most in need - and which get help to people as early as possible.

If, together, we can understand the risks faced by young people in their families and in the areas that they live - then we can unlock the hidden strengths and resilience that exist in every community, every family and every individual to make a real and positive difference to the life chances of children and young people.

Let's ensure every child has the opportunity for the best and brightest future.

I look forward to working with you.

ENDS