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***Happy families?***

***Supporting parents, improving relationships, strengthening families***

***NFPI - 14/11 Louise keynote address***

Hello, thank you for inviting me. I feel very privileged to be here today – you know, I think if we were to rewind to a year ago, it would have been pretty unlikely that I would be speaking at this conference. And I hope it is a measure of how far we've come that for me at least (and I hope for you), it seems entirely relevant that I am talking about parenting and how central it is to the respect drive. And if I may be so bold, can I also suggest that you change the title of the conference by adding to strengthening families "strengthening communities"!

It's struck me on my many visits to the towns and cities up and down the country that everyone I've met supports the vision of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century society where common decency and conduct is the norm – the standard. In the same way as we accept standards on waiting times for an operation, standards on literacy and numeracy, standards on people answering the phone after three rings with their bank. Respect for ourselves and each other should be taken as a standard and seen as part of a social contract –with good behaviour a central part of that contract.

The Respect drive is not about harking back to a past culture of deference. Respect is about going forward.

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The public want basic standards of decent human behaviour and interaction to be a 'given' in a modern, progressive and free society and this is why we have a Respect drive.

And why, at the heart of the Respect drive, is an unapologetic programme to deter bad behaviour and nurture good and give control of communities back to those who live in them. It builds on the Government's anti-social behaviour work, but it takes us further, deeper and broader – but with the same uncompromising approach.

To paraphrase a modern sound-bite it is about tackling both anti-social behaviour as well as the root causes of anti-social behaviour. The role of parenting is therefore a critical part of the Respect drive.

Through the Government work on anti-social behaviour it has become very obvious that very often the main causes of problems we were seeing among young people was what was going on at home and their relationships with their parents. Many of you in this room know that. But far too few of our interventions address this all important fact - all too often we focus our interventions on children and young people but not their families.

So, as the Respect programme promised to broaden the focus of our work, parenting was always going to be critical territory for us. And the evidence confirms that parents have a major influence on their children's behaviour and

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therefore they can cause or protect against bad behaviour. I am sure everyone in this room recognises this and that is why you are here.

And we need to remember that there is major public support for this.

Consistently when asked in surveys what are the main causes of crime/anti-social behaviour the vast majority say poor parenting – not lack of youth clubs, not poor housing but not even lack of police... but bad parenting!

There has been some debate about the appropriate role of government intervention in all of this. Some argue that parenting is part of the private sphere of life in which government should not intervene. Well for me it is simple. Government needs to intervene for 3 reasons.

### **1. Improving life chances**

Families where parents cannot manage their children's behaviour are often unhappy and disadvantaged. The parents know that things are wrong, and would like to put them right, but do not know how to face up to this, or what to do about it.

The lives of these children are often characterised by a cascading set of problems - academic failure, truancy, school drop out and negative peer groups, and later unemployment, poverty and drug misuse and involvement in crime. And these problems are passed on.

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Children who are raised in dysfunctional families have no good role models to draw on and so are likely to have problems raising their own families later in life. A step change in the availability of parenting and family support programmes therefore offers a way to significantly increase the life chances of children and young people.

### **2. To protect communities**

Anti-social behaviour has destructive and far-reaching effects on the quality of life of communities and is a top public concern. The well-being of our communities is intimately interlinked with the well-being of families - if we can help to improve family relationships and happy families, then we also create happier communities.

### **3. Finally there is the efficiency argument**

The costs of dealing with the problems that can develop from early problem behaviour are substantial. By the time they are 28, conduct disordered children have cost society ten times more than those without it.

**So what are we doing about it?** Well, Beverley Hughes set out yesterday the steps being taken by DfES to improve the availability, quality and co-ordination of parenting support.

For me what is key in this is how we get parenting help to the families of getting involved in anti-social behaviour. Some of the strongest evidence

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about the effects of parenting programmes is about the impact these can have on improving children and young people's behaviour.

When a child is coming to the attention of housing officers, or community safety teams because of anti-social behaviour, their first question should be where are their parents? Do they know what Billy's up to?

And at the moment when they ask those questions, they're not too sure what to do as a result.

My guess is that in most community safety/anti-social behaviour teams there's not a lot of referring to parenting programmes going on - most won't know what is available in the local authority, still less what a Webster Stratton or a triple P is.

Likewise, parenting people probably don't know what the anti-social behaviour unit/community safety team are. I met a woman who was responsible for parenting in the PCT and in the local authority – she is evangelical about the power of parenting programmes and had been responsible for rolling out provision – it was great. We talked for an hour or more, then she said oh and the other day this anti-social co-ordinator got in touch – no idea what they wanted.....!

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And that tells me that even in places where parenting programmes are developed and available there's a long way to go before we get to what we all want to see.

The exception to this is work being undertaken by some of the Yots who have pioneered parenting work in the community safety/crime context which is great.

But we need to see anti-social behaviour people round the table with local partners at discussions about local needs, planning provision and referral routes. We are considering what more Government can do to link up the parenting and anti-social behaviour parts of the universe – watch this space?

As well as focussing on structural factors and how we deliver parenting support, the respect drive is also about **making sure services reach those people who are in need of them**. In the light of all the evidence that all too often services do not reach those who need them most, I believe we need to be a little more assertive about getting help into people.

We need to challenge the urban myth that that people can and should only take help on a voluntary basis. It is the people who refuse help who we should be worried about. Persistence, determination, cajoling and sometimes compulsion will be needed – I'll say a little more about that in a moment, but in the context of parenting help, we do need to be worrying more about people

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who say 'its not Billy it's the others' 'its everyone else's fault', there's nothing I can do'....

So whilst most parents will accept help voluntarily for the small minority who won't I am entirely comfortable with the use of formal contracts and court orders. This is how we get the most difficult and challenging people to change. The evidence shows us that there is no difference in outcomes between those who go on the courses voluntarily or through orders and although initially resistant, most parents end up wanting to do more courses afterwards!

And the consequences of poor parenting are too great for us to sit back and say oh well, it's her choice not to come. We're not doing this for the parents, we're doing it for the children.

That brings me to a strong theme of respect – the importance of challenging and changing behaviour and the role of public services in making this happen. Our expectation of everyone, whether they are rich or poor, young or old should be that they uphold basic standards of decency towards others.

And we need to challenge and not excuse those who fail to meet those standards – even as we provide all the support they need to change their behaviour. I'm not dismissing the problems that people have, I don't deny they are complex and deep seated.

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Our job as service providers is to recognise and understand the problems that have engulfed people, but more than that it is to help people move on to live successfully within their community and so change lives.

### Family C

Some of you will know about the network of Family Intervention projects we are rolling out this year. I believe these projects embody the ethos of the Respect drive - finding ways to really confront those most challenging people - known to multiple agencies because of their complex problems, and known by all the residents because of their behaviour. Well, we know from evidence that yes they do have complex multiple problems but they are NOT lost causes.

These projects follow a model. They look at the needs of the whole family unit rather than just focussing on individuals. They make sure the right support services are in place and that families are clear on the aspects of their behaviour that need to change and the consequences if these changes are not made. The key to the projects success is often the efforts of key workers who 'grip' the family, the causes of their poor behaviour and the agencies involved with them.

The persistence of these workers is their defining characteristic. When the family doesn't turn up for appointments or the kids don't turn up for school or mum says she has had enough of the rules, these workers don't reduce their

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visits or take the family off the list. They increase their efforts, they knock on the door louder, they don't go away.

They also use the same persistence with other agencies to make sure they meet their commitments to deliver services to the families. These families probably have **on average** around 12 agencies working with them, but all too often they are assessing them, rather than rolling up their sleeves and showing people how to get the place cleaned up, how to get the kids up and out to school. I was speaking to a woman in one of these projects just last week. She said everyone kept telling me to do better at parenting, make sure the house was clean, kids were well fed but no-one ever told us how to do it.

And these schemes have astounding success – 85% decline in complaints about anti-social behaviour; nearly all able to keep their housing; and massive increase in school attendance.

These are tough projects and it is what's needed. We all know the consequences of not intervening: the unhappiness, dysfunctional families and ruined lives that result.

And I should underline, none of this is about short term programmes or initiatives. Protecting children who are at risk, tackling parents who refuse to co-operate and who are damaging the lives of their children and affecting others around them is a central to delivering outcomes for children and young people.

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This is at the heart of government programmes....Every Child Matters, Social Exclusion, Respect and beyond. This is central to tackling child poverty, delivering equality of opportunity and making sure that every child, irrespective of race, gender, background or circumstances, gets the best start in life and the support they and their families need to allow them to fulfil their potential.