

## **Dublin SVP speech**

**7<sup>th</sup> May 2016**

Good morning everybody. I'm delighted to talk to you this morning. Yesterday I had the privilege to meet staff and residents at some incredible projects run by DePaul here in Dublin.

Part of the Vincentian family of which you can and should be very proud indeed.

Way back in 2011, the Prime Minister asked me to take on what in many ways was my dream job- to help turn around the lives of 120 thousand of the UK's most troubled families.

Many had trodden that path before me, it wasn't the first time that governments of different persuasions had attempted it and many organisations and approaches had been tried. So I came to the role with a degree of humility and certainly not with all the answers.

The aim of the Troubled Families programme was to turn around the lives of families who had many problems and often caused many problems, and who ultimately cost cash-strapped services a lot of money just to contain them in their mess, rather than getting to the root causes of what was going wrong for them as a family.

These were families who, despite the best efforts of many of us over the years, in government, in social services, in the police, had not been changed.

Most of troubled families I met were families where no one was working, where children didn't go to school, often because they had been excluded for bad behaviour, families where violence was endemic – where mothers fled domestic violence only to take up with other violent men, where mums hit kids and kids hit mums.

Where violence seemed to be the day-to-day norm.

These families were noisy, chaotic and to put it mildly, not always very nice to live next door to.

These were families on the edge in every way - on the edge of eviction, on the edge of custody, on the edge of care.

These families are the epitome of 'hard to reach' or 'difficult to engage'. You couldn't find a tougher group to work with if you tried.

And where domestic violence is often both the cause and a symptom.

What I have learnt from listening families is that

- their problems are multiple
- their problems layer one on top of the other
- and their problems are intergenerational.

When I listen to troubled families, they nearly all talk about:

- o a history of physical violence and sexual abuse, often going back generations
- o the involvement of the care system in the lives of both parents and their children,

- o parents starting to have children very young and unable to deal with them
- o those parents in violent relationships,
- o and the children going on to have behavioural problems,
- o leading to exclusion from school, anti-social behaviour, crime and worklessness.

We worked out that our families had an average of 9 of the most challenging problems possible relating to employment, education, crime, housing, child protection, parenting or health.

- 40% had 3 or more children
- 49% were lone parent households
- 82% of families had a problem related to education – such as persistent unauthorised absence, exclusion from school or being out of mainstream education
- 71% of families had a health problem
- 54% of families were involved in crime or anti-social behaviour
- 42% of families had had police called out to their address in the previous six months.
- 29% of troubled families were experiencing domestic violence

Over a third of families had a child who was either a Child in Need, subject to child protection arrangements or where a child had been taken into care.

- One-in-five had been at risk of eviction in the previous six months
- In nearly three-quarters of families there was no one in work
- In 83% of families, an adult was receiving an out-of-work benefit

- 70% were living in social housing

Many social policy experts will tell you that just one problem like mental health or domestic violence can derail a family. It can hold them back generations and it does.

What became very clear to me when I travelled across the country, meeting volunteers, paid staff and the families is that there was a way to work with these families, to engage them and to lead them through to change. It was and is called Family Intervention.

Good family intervention starts with the worker. Someone who gets into the family, finds out where the family wants to start and builds from there. Not a long list of agencies' and their demands.

These workers are curious about their families' lives, their past, their interactions with each other.

It's striking that families would often say, 'Nobody had ever asked me that before'.

Nobody before had asked the right question that meant the mother opened up about the abuse in her past.

Nobody before had ever elicited the truth about the level of the violence from her current partner.

It is not that family intervention workers are 'jacks of all trades', they are masters of one – the relationship.

It is the relationship upon all of this is built. And in your day to day volunteering jobs you can and do build these relationships.

Good family intervention workers are both kind and tough.

They are incredibly skilled in negotiating a kind of 'managed dependency'.

And essentially we identified five factors of effective family intervention that was crucial to getting into the family and changing their outcomes.

And they are:

- o A **dedicated worker dedicated to the family** – someone who the family knows by name and who is alongside them helping them to change. Not making an assessment, going away and sending them a letter 6 weeks later.
- o That dedicated worker needs an **assertive and challenging** approach – they don't go away when the door is closed in their face or back off when a family won't engage.
- o That dedicated, assertive worker needs to look at what's really happening for **the family as a whole** – but in situations where there is violence or coercive control, looking at what's happening for the family as a whole may mean actually helping to get him out of the house or rescuing her to a place of safety.

- The worker gives **practical hands-on support** - so in one family I met the breakthrough with the mother came when the worker sorted out beds for the kids and a skip for all the rubbish in the garden, which included *all the internal doors in the house*.
- With the backing of an agreed plan – one family, one plan one worker. This is the often most difficult one to achieve – getting the system to change can prove harder than the family!

And it works when we go into their homes, onto their settees not when we make them come into our offices, our hubs and our assessment centres.

Those five factors are underpinned and made possible by the relationship built by the worker with the family.

But it wasn't just the way we worked with the families that needed to change. The systems around the families needed a massive overhaul too. Often just as dysfunctional, just as chaotic.

Not only did the families have an average of 9 significant problems but often a legion of agencies and workers in their lives.

On one of my travels I met a mother called "L". 28 years of age, three children from three different fathers.

Her 14 year old girl out of school, committing crime, hanging around with older men who would not see her as a child.

Her 13 year old not in school enough and too much at home or on the street.

Finally she'd brought an 8 year old into this world with another man and endured 8 years of violence at his hands.

In other words, her 8-year-old child and two teenage daughters witnessed and lived in, to use a FIP manager's expression, a 'warzone' for eight years.

Amazingly, on meeting her she'd managed to stop shoplifting and thieving for her heroin addiction and all three kids are back in school.

I asked her how such a strong and intelligent woman ended up in this position and she said she'd witnessed domestic violence herself throughout her childhood.

No surprise there. Violence is endemic and it is intergenerational.

I met "L" in a probation office, where she had been on a 12-month probation order.

The history was, that when she failed to turn up for two probation appointments, the probation officer asked the family intervention worker to go to her house that very day.

She knocked on the door and said, 'Look, you're going to be in a lot more trouble if you stop co-operating. What's going wrong?'

‘Look, trust me, we can get all of these things you’re worried about sorted, but *you’re going to have to let me in to your life*’.

I met “L” and the two workers in the same room and you could see the bond between “L” and the family intervention worker.

*‘Family interference worker’*

Every time I meet a family and for every one of the 100’s of front line workers I’ve talked to over the years, what is unbelievably compelling is that all of this turns on something very simple – **the relationship between the worker and the family.**

I’m always struck when I meet these families that so many, if not all of the influences in their lives are negative – they are so isolated.

The worker may be the first positive authority figure that family has ever known – the relationship between the worker and the parent has to build resilience, so that when the worker draws back, which they have to do when the time is right – the family is OK and the change can be sustained.

You in the room today have the chance to be that positive authority figure.

I think of this as a kind of scaffolding that we – you – put around that family whilst we and they rebuild the foundations, the walls and the decorations therein.



Strong arms of steel around the families whilst they learn to change. So when we withdraw change is maintained and the families can thrive.

Some might call that relationship 'a dependency'. I don't I think it's a passage of time towards change. It's not a friendship – it might feel like one to the family. But it's a relationship.

The family relies on the worker, they trust them. Families often say of their worker 'She's always there for me' – something they may never have had in their lives before.

It is not a friendship; it is more like a life buoy in a storm, until they can be pulled to a place of safety and away from a place of danger.

Because it is not when someone is *told* they must change, but when someone comes along with the skill to make them *feel* they want to change.

So instead of walking in to a family's life with their own agency in their mind, their own agency's priorities and ways of working.

To get change, you have to start with the person. Not the issue.

Taking "L" who I've just talked about, a woman who has lived a life of abuse, who is from a family of abusers and simply categorising her as a shoplifter and dealing with her shoplifting would not get us anywhere.

In the same way, we'd always check now if a woman arrived now in A&E with a broken arm and a bruised face, that everything was OK at home. We wouldn't just put a cast on her arm and send her home.

But you know locally, as I know from Whitehall, that it can be too easy to look at things from our own silos, our own systems, our own professional disciplines and let those things dictate how we work.

When I was homelessness Tsar, I was utterly bewildered that all the outreach work was taking place between 9 and 5 – a time that was convenient for the system, but made no sense for homeless people.

That two major day centres closed at the same time every summer meaning there was nowhere for homeless people to go for a six week period in the heat.

That psychiatrists and doctors never, ever did an assessment or a conversation with someone on the street – however mentally ill – they'd expect that person to go to a surgery or to a day centre.

When I was anti-social behaviour Tzar, I was determined to stop the madness of youth centres closing on Friday nights because it suited the services to do that.

There I was in a New Deal for Communities area on a Wednesday evening. The police had told me that Friday night was a youth crime hotspot and I asked them in this wonderful youth club with fantastic workers, 'How come you don't open on Fridays?' and they said, 'Well, the kids go drinking on Fridays'.

We have to get to people on their terms, not ours.

We have to restore a connection that's been lost between the system and the person.

Yet we have professionalised, built systems and processes around something that is not a process or a system but a **person**, something that at its heart is a human interaction.

It is the humanising of people's problems that is the solution.

We change what we do, not because we're given a report or an assessment or analysis – that doesn't necessarily shift our behaviour or our thinking – we have to *feel* we want to change and we have to know how.

The difference with family intervention is that rather than give analysis, they make people believe in themselves and they show them how they can change.

And for a moment let me talk about volunteers. You have the biggest gift to give. You give of yourselves. And the families know it.

Your power relationship is different, as they know you're there not because you are paid but because you care.

You are the givers of hope, of light and indeed of love.

This is a fundamental part of the relationship – giving some furniture, explaining a leaflet or challenging behaviour is all about a relationship and you do all of this because you care.

So a good family intervention worker turns up at the house every day for a week, showing the mother how to get the kids up and fed in the morning.

She doesn't tell her the night before or give her a parenting leaflet or say, "We're concerned about your parenting capacity. We're also concerned about the family environment. We are concerned about emotional warmth and we're concerned about your ability to ensure your child's safety and provide guidance and boundaries".

That's a real quote from a social worker, I'm not making it up and I'm sure many of you recognise that kind of approach, that too often characterises the work of amongst other services, Children's Social Care .

And where does that typical approach lead? Agencies gather, each throwing their own agency's requirements into the plan.

Requirements which families are unlikely to understand or even be physically able to fulfil.

There are so many agencies, not just children's social care, but youth offending, housing, the police, anti-social behaviour, probation, health and others circling the family that the family need a diary to keep on top

of all the appointments they're required to attend – and they inevitably fail to turn up for them all and the system judges them on that failure.

I met a grandmother who had adopted three of her drug-addicted daughter's children. Her daughter had gone on to have four more.

She had been through assessment after assessment, she could not keep up with all the referrals and appointments – she was overwhelmed.

She'd been given a list of tasks as long as her arm, things she was required to do, to prove her suitability as a parent. But she had no clue *how* to do them.

And no one who could translate that list into something she could understand.

So the families get stuck in the system. Assessed by children's social care and put on plans over different periods, with the system withdrawing when the risk is lessened and kicking back into action when an incident is reported.

The family may be stuck, held in a position where its problems are contained - while the state watches them and god willing, mitigates disaster.

The parents may say enough and do enough to keep the children at home, while the system watches, preventing worse neglect and abuse – and I'm not undermining that very difficult job.

It's not that it's wrong - but it is not good enough.

Let me be clear - I don't want to leave kids with parents that can't or won't improve.

Let me be clear - if the capability and willingness to change is not there – of course, the child must be removed.

Let me be clear – the child and that child's future must dominate our efforts.

But the fact is that even if the ultimate step to remove a child is taken, if nobody works with the mother and father to change, in all likelihood they will go on to have another child and the cycle will start again.

So protecting that single child, of course, is not wrong - it's the right thing to do. But it's simply not enough.

Where family intervention works alongside safeguarding, it comes into those situations where a child isn't at risk enough to be removed, but not safe enough to be left alone and it lays bare what is really going on in that family, making easier the difficult and important job of safeguarding.

We need social work and we need family intervention.

And we do need a lot of the services around the families – but we need to take a look at ourselves and how then we translate that circling into action.

None of us can deny that we haven't got it right in the past.

None of us want to keep going back to the same estates, the same homes, the same families, seeing the same misery year after year.

I do go back to the same estates, seeing the same misery year after year.

Only recently, standing in a shopping parade I've been in various times in various jobs over the years, meeting the community workers, visiting the community centre, being shown the same graffiti shutters and I thought, 'Dear God, don't let me be back here in 5 years and it's still the same'.

Children deserve more.

Public services have gone about this the wrong way round.

We wanted to tackle poverty on the poorest housing estates. So we asked the tenants what they wanted and in response we put money into buildings and lighting and landscaping.

We wanted to improve outcomes for children. So we set up centres and hoped the needy would turn up the door.

We wanted to reduce domestic violence, but instead of tackling the brutal behaviour learnt at the knee of his own father, we gave his partner bars on the window and a panic button.

We missed something. Although a lot of that work was good, it wasn't good enough.

We missed our biggest asset – human kind. That which we all have to give – the giving of ourselves.

We walked away from the worst families on those estates and by doing so, we condemned their children to live the same lives as their parents.

We didn't change behaviour and it is the behaviour of human beings that dictates what it feels like to live in a community.

I profoundly believe that if we get this right we can 're humanise' public services and when we do so we will change the families and those communities for the better.

You – at the centre of all this - as volunteers are fundamental

You bring hope. You bring love and that brings change.

We don't have to live with a sense that these families will always be with us. I don't accept that the poor always have to be with us.

Vincent didn't and neither did Louise. Nor do we.

There are a lot of people out there who think that we can't change these families. Who think it's just not possible. It is possible.

So I want you to take this away with you today.



When the job gets you down and there are a hundred voices telling you why this can't be done or that can't be changed, remember the humanity of it.

Remember the person. Remember your equivalent of "L".

Remember her 14 year old daughter, her 13 year old, her 8 year old.

Dare I say it but this is about love. No one is above redemption. No one is without hope. We are all worthy of love. Hold in your heart love.

Hold in your hearts your common purpose, your common sense of belief, your common determination to help "L" and others like her change.

The mission, your faith, your hope transcends any organisation.

Start with that and you can transcend anything.

Just put that first and you have the power to move mountains.

And the children of any families in any circumstances deserve that.