

**Speech from Dame Sharon White, Chairman of the John Lewis Partnership to
Bloomberg Equality Summit**

*****Check against delivery*****

Hello, it's a real pleasure to be here this afternoon.

I want to start today by telling you about Ashley.

He was taken into care when he was a toddler.

Shuttled between foster homes as a child. Suspended multiple times from school.

At 15, Ashley was told that in three years he would have to live completely independently.

Other children his age were concerned with making money to buy a new pair of football boots, Ashley was worrying about how he was going to make enough money to *live*.

This made it much harder for him "to dream big".

Or to think that university was - in his words - "a viable option."

Today, Ashley is an award-winning BBC News journalist.

He has a degree in history from Cambridge.

You might have seen him presenting coverage of Her Majesty's funeral on BBC News, or his moving, poignant reporting on Grenfell.

Ashley is intelligent and he was determined, like so many young people who've grown up in care.

But what made the difference for him was opportunity.

The opportunity to visit a summer school at Cambridge, to believe that university was an option for him.

The opportunity to join the BBC on an access scheme where his talents shone.

And that's what I want to talk to you about this afternoon.

Because talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not.

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The John Lewis Partnership - the business that I have the privilege of heading - was founded on the belief in equality of opportunity.

The belief that when you raise *everyone* up and give them access to the same opportunities and living standards, society thrives **but so does business**.

Nearly a century ago, John Spedan Lewis gifted his company to his workers - Partners as we call them.

Because he felt it was wrong that the people who made the profits saw so little benefit from it.

Sometimes referred to as 'socialist capitalism' - profits would be shared by everyone, not just a select few.

Crucially, he wanted Partners to have the same opportunities as the professional middle classes.

This is why the Partnership introduced free health care before the NHS; and accommodation for young women who worked in our shops so they didn't face lone journeys after work.

The business stepped in to address social inequality. Before the Beveridge Report and before the modern welfare state.

And today - nearly a century later - we want to step in to provide opportunities to young people who've grown up in care. Young people like Ashley.

Less than a quarter of young people who've been in care are in education, training or employment.

If you've been in care, you are more likely to be made *homeless* than go to university.

If you are working, you'll earn around £6,000 less than your peers who haven't grown up in care.

This systemic unfairness is truly shocking.

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I believe deeply that our young people deserve better than this.

We want to be the employer of choice for young people who are care experienced.

We now have some fantastic, talented Partners who are care experienced and have joined us through our new *Building Happier Futures* care leavers programme.

We've brought together an Advisory Group of people who are care experienced or work in the care field.

They're guiding us on how we can collectively push for better outcomes for our young people.

We've got work to do to get there, but we are making small steps of progress.

But this is where you come in. Because we can't do this alone.

Employers are missing out on thousands of young people with potential. At a time when many businesses are struggling to recruit.

An incredible source of talent is being forgotten and overlooked in the national conversation.

Almost every business today is thinking about its social impact. And by working together we can make a real difference.

We can set a new course for people who have experienced care. We can help remove the stigma.

And while we as employers can play our part, we also need the Government to help.

We're calling on the Government to give our young people the tools to thrive in life. So that they can then thrive in work.

To ensure that our children in care have those basic building blocks that everyone deserves.

Somewhere safe and stable to call home. Because, every young person should have the same standard of high quality, regulated, safe accommodation where they are guaranteed care - regardless of age.

No young person should have to leave care until they're ready. Every young person should have a right to continued care to support them through adolescence. Removing the cliff edges that currently exist where support can stop at age 18, or in some cases even earlier.

And we need to think creatively.

What difference could it make to our care experienced young people if we used some of the significant amount of unspent apprenticeship levy to fund their education or training?

So that the 6% of young people from care that go on to further education becomes 16% or even 60%.

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We don't have all the answers but one thing is clear: we need to invest in our children and young people, and it's desperately needed for those who are care experienced.

We need to invest in their care and to invest in their futures.

Because *all* of our young people deserve the very best start in life.

And by investing in their future, we are investing in a happier future for our society.

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