Thank you for that introduction, Pandora.

I’m thrilled to be here with you today celebrating and promoting the Care Leaver Covenant. It’s inspirational to see the groundswell of support from companies wanting to support care leavers. It’s certainly the most energising of my diary engagements this week.

It’s fantastic to have Lemn Sissay on board as a champion of the Care Leaver Covenant in the Higher Education sector and to see you here today. And to see that Leon Reid 2018 Commonwealth Games bronze medallist is giving the Covenant his backing.

When we launched the Care Leaver Covenant last October I was delighted to announce the first 50 organisations who had signed the covenant. And I continue to be amazed by the energy and passion that Matthew and his team at Spectra have shown in engaging further organisations who can help care leavers to make that difficult transition from care to independence. Spectra’s work goes from strength to strength and I look forward to presenting some certificates of recognition later.

This afternoon’s event is about providing opportunities to release the potential of a unique group of young people and give them the leg up that we give to our own children when they start out in life.

Why, you may be asking, are care leavers unique? The simple answer is because the State took responsibility for them when it decided they could not live with their families and took them into care. So, unlike many of us in this room, young people leaving care don’t have the advantages of family support networks that I know I certainly needed at 18.

When I arrived on these shores I couldn’t speak English and sitting at the back of the class so teachers wouldn’t ask me any questions was a lonely experience.

What made the difference was that while it was a difficult time for a child fleeing from Saddam Hussein’s regime I had great parents who supported and cared for me as well as great role models.

The 10,000 young people leaving care each year don’t always have those role models. Nor do they always have the trusted adults they need to believe in them and see the person behind the care leaver label.

So that’s what the Care Leaver Covenant is about. Seeing the potential of young people leaving care. Nurturing their potential and helping them to realise that potential.

It’s unlocking that potential that’s really at the heart of the cross-government care leaver strategy, appropriately called ‘Keep on Caring’, and the five outcomes we want to achieve.

These five outcomes are the same aspirations we want for our own children:

* To live independently
* To engage in education, employment and training
* To be in stable accommodation and feel safe and secure
* To access the healthcare they need
* To be financially independent.

I had parents and wider family to steer me towards these outcomes. For young people in care this responsibility falls, in the first instance, to local authorities in their role as corporate parents.

What it means on the ground is that every part of a local authority asks itself this question when developing its services: ‘Would this be good enough for my child?’

That’s not enough of course because, as with parents, even the best local authorities can’t do it all on their own. That’s why central government introduced the Care Leaver Covenant so that organisations from the private, voluntary and wider public sector can play their part.

I was delighted that on the day of the Covenant launch I was able to announce that every Government department had signed the Care Leaver Covenant. I’m also proud that each Government department has backed its commitment to care leavers in the most practical way it can: by participating in the care leaver internship scheme, which offers care leavers a 12-month paid job in the civil service with the option of being made permanent at the end of that period.

It started with one intern working in the care leaver policy team. That’s grown over the last 5 years and in the recruitment round for 2019, 75 care leavers were successfully appointed across 17 government departments.

I’m proud that one of those young people is my diary secretary. Others have gone on to secure promotion and permanent jobs. With the right support and given the chance care leavers can blossom.

That’s why I’m so passionate about how the Care Leaver Covenant can create even more work-related opportunities from taster sessions through to apprenticeships. And that’s where you come in.

Last October I set a challenging goal: to secure 1,000 supportive employment opportunities through the Covenant over the next three years and 10,000 over ten years. I know that sounds very ambitious. But as a society we owe it to our young people leaving care and navigating the challenging path to adulthood to be ambitious. Matthew Gordon is living up to that ambition.

His commitment, energy and ability to think outside the box and spot opportunities to help care leavers is commendable and the soundness of our decision to appoint Matthew and Spectra to promote the Covenant is continually reaffirmed.

When I laid down the challenge to secure 1000 pledged work-related opportunities, Matthew and his advisory board set about developing a plan to achieve those opportunities. That plan focuses on the employment needs of three sectors where there are identified skills shortages: digital, hospitality and construction.

Since then, Matthew and his team have been working hard to secure opportunities in these and other areas. As Children’s Minister I want to pay tribute to them and all of you here for engaging and making that commitment. Some of you have signed a statement of intent. I hope all of you who haven’t yet done that will be enthused to do so later. And others are further down the road of making firm offers.

Every one of you here has the chance to make a difference to a care leaver today. I pay tribute to you all.

I want, however, to make particular mention of some of the Covenant partnerships that Matthew has forged in recent months.

* Spectra has been working with Amazon since November to develop a supportive employment offer to care leavers. Watch this space for more about that.
* Spectra has also been working closely with Compass, the market leader in contract catering. Compass will be offering a pre-employment two-week programme for aspiring care leavers who want to develop a career in hospitality. I wish them well for the launch of this programme on 8 April.
* I welcome Spectra’s partnership with Lendlease and the Mace Group. They, along with their supply chains, offer huge potential to benefit care leavers through the employment opportunities in Birmingham.
* Engie’s Claire Preston is also here. Matthew tells me you have worked tirelessly with Leeds and Wakefield local authorities not only in relation to employment opportunities for care leavers but to extend Engie’s offer to include maintenance and home renovation support for care leavers.
* And thank you to Rybrook BMW the Covenant automotive partner. Rybrook has consistently helped raise the profile and aspirations of the Covenant with youthful expression.
* I constantly hear how hard it is for care leavers to open bank accounts because they don’t always have the right ID or proof of address. Metro Bank’s Covenant offer solves that difficulty by helping care leavers build a relationship with their local store, understand more about managing their money and then, when they are ready, open a current account face to face through a simple, straightforward process that removes cumbersome ID requirements.
* Spectra has also been working with Remploy, a service funded by the Department for Work and Pensions. Through that partnership it means the mental health needs of care leavers can be better understood and met.

I am particularly pleased that Tony Hyland, a national account manager for the National Employment Partnership Team at the DWP, is here today. Tony and his colleague Ahmed Bhayat have been working with Spectra to help them achieve the Covenant’s ambition of getting more care leavers on the road to fulfilling their potential.

It’s also great to have the Covenant local authority champions here: Somerset, Lewisham, Leeds, Doncaster, Wolverhampton and Staffordshire. Local authorities are the other part of the supply chain, identifying care leavers to take up opportunities unlocked through the Covenant.

One of the nicer things that Ministers get to do occasionally is to present certificates. I’m very pleased to have that task to do this afternoon in presenting certificates to Covenant partners.

* Engie, for its great work with a number of local authorities in renovating properties for care leavers
* Metro Bank, for its innovative ongoing work with us to create covenant friendly banking
* Remploy, for recognising the particular needs of care leavers in their mental health support service

Today is a call to organisations across society to make a difference for care leavers. Today is an opportunity for you to make that commitment.

I hope you have been as inspired as I have by this afternoon and will add your name to the organisations pledging to sign the Care Leaver Covenant and help transform the life of a young person today. Thank you.