

**Deaf Awareness Week,
Hi Kent, Maidstone, Kent
1 May 2009, 12.00**

JONATHAN SHAW: Thank you very much for that introduction. Ladies and gentlemen, it is great to be here promoting Deaf Awareness Week in my County. I am a Kent boy - I went to school in Vinters Boys, which is now Valley Park, and so it is really good to be here. I recognise a number of faces in the audience - some know me in other walks of life, so I will watch what I say. I will speak for about ten minutes, then I am keen to have a conversation and you can ask me some awkward questions.

I am delighted to be here to launch the activities of Hi Kent and Deaf Awareness Week. It is important that we have this in order to raise awareness and understanding of the needs of deaf people. We know about the good work of Hi Kent. As a former social worker myself, I think all of us who have been involved in services for disabled people over the years know it has a strong track record and that Hi Kent has hundreds of volunteers who provide valuable support to the organisation.

So, I have been asked today to outline some of the Government's work relating to deaf and hard of hearing people. I will try to do that within ten minutes or so and then have some conversation with you.

I want to talk about rights; I want to talk about the legislation that has been put in place and how we are building upon that; and also I want to talk

about what we are doing to try and improve Access to Work - a really important part of our programme to support people into employment. There are too many deaf people with the skills, who have got qualifications, but what they haven't got is a chance to pursue a career.

Many of you will be familiar with a report that the Government published in 2005 entitled 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People'. Now, that set out a very ambitious programme for us to meet equality for disabled people by 2025. People have said, 'Why wait until then?' But it is about an ongoing programme, as we bring forward services to reduce the amount of barriers for disabled people. It is not a case where we wake up one morning and everything has changed. It requires government, it requires our partners in local government and it requires a number of different service providers to work towards those aims, whether it is in housing for disabled people, whether employment or transportation.

So we set an ambitious target and then shape our policies according to those goals. But in order to achieve those goals, as well as putting in infrastructure and changes, it is vital that we root out inequality and discrimination. Some people say 'It does not impact upon me'. Sometimes there is that unseen, unheard discrimination. So over the past 12 years we have improved and extended rights for disabled people by strengthening the DDA and introducing the Disability Equality Duty.

The Duty, as many of you will be aware, requires public bodies like councils to ensure that they are delivering services and carrying out functions in a way that creates equality for disabled people. I think one of the really

important parts of that, if local authority and public bodies are going to get that right, is about involving disabled people in the development of policy.

Yesterday, I was speaking to a group of councillors and government officers about the work that the Office for Disability Issues, in my Department, and local government have been doing together to develop new ways and build better practice about how we communicate with disabled people about developing services. It is no good local authorities and public bodies thinking they have got all the ideas and putting new policies in place if they haven't involved the local people in their communities. I know that Kent County Council is committed to doing that, but it is about building on good practice.

Now we know that we have a long way to go before all public sector services are accessible to deaf and hard of hearing people, but in its short life we think the Disability Equality Duty has resulted in some incredibly positive work around the country, and we are positive that we can continue to drive that change in the way public services understand and meet the needs of their customers.

We introduced the Equality Bill just recently into Parliament and we want to build on the progress of disability rights and continue to make sure the anti-discrimination law framework is as effective as it can be. Through the Bill we want to streamline the law. At the moment there are nine pieces of equalities legislation. Now in order for legislation to be effective, people need to understand it - both employers and customers. So, that is why we want to reduce existing legislation into a single Act, making it easier to

understand who needs to comply with it and providing better protection.

We want to strengthen the law to tackle discrimination where it still exists. There will be no easy solution - of course not - but the Act will continue to require reasonable adjustments, such as providing a BSL interpreter or installing a hearing loop. This continues to be a corner stone of the protection offered to disabled people.

New measures within the Bill will further improve protection. So, what will that do? Well, for example, we will introduce a common threshold for the duty to make reasonable adjustments, meaning that disabled people will only have to be at a 'substantial disadvantage' to claim reasonable adjustments when accessing goods and services instead of the current threshold of having to show it would be 'unreasonably difficult or impossible' to access the service. So reducing the threshold will have a significant impact for disabled people.

Legislation is an important tool to bring about change and it provides the foundation for equality, but legislation in itself can only ever achieve so much. We need to deliver real change - real change that has a real impact upon the lives of disabled people and makes a difference in the way society reacts to disability.

Now hidden and invisible disabilities, such as deafness, are still not widely understood. That is why we are having Deaf Awareness Week. A lack of understanding can lead to communication barriers and limited opportunities for deaf people and this is far from our aim for deaf people to be fully

included members of society. As I was saying earlier, employment is a particular issue, so I think the aim of this year's Deaf Awareness Week to highlight communication with deaf, deafened, deafblind and hard of hearing people is really important.

Across Government we are taking steps to break down communication barriers. Let me provide a few examples:

- In May 2008 the BBC reached its target of providing subtitles on 100% of programmes on its main channels. We are taking advantage of the digital switchover to increase both subtitling and signing.
- The Department of Health has designed a new model for the delivery of community equipment, including hearing aids.
- BSL is recognised as a language in its own right and in June last year we announced funding for a project to raise awareness of BSL and increase the specialist work force able to provide courses in BSL.

Now, coming on to employment: breaking down communication barriers is going to be essential if we are going to make the very best of the pool of talent that there is amongst deaf people. We can't just say it's about improving opportunities for disabled people – although that's a major part - we have to look at the business case as well. If we are not using the untapped pool of talent, then the country is missing out too, so it is a two-way issue. Through our specialist disability employment services, such as Access to Work, we have opened up options for many thousands of disabled people across the country.

I also want to talk about Dering Employment Services. We do our work in partnership with a number of organisations. When I was first appointed back in October I visited Dering - an organisation that is owned and run by deaf people set up by a guy called Stephen Dering, which supports deaf people to access government employment programmes. They work in partnership with the Royal British Legion Industries which have a contract for delivering our Pathways to Work programme.

We know that many disabled people want to work and many organisations are employing disabled people. At Dering I met and heard about many disabled people who have been successful not only finding employment through a programme delivered by Dering, but also progressing in their chosen careers. So, I am delighted that Dering Employment Services is working in partnership with RBLI, the Shaw Trust, and Intraining to deliver Pathways to Work in eight areas across our country, including our own.

In these economic circumstances it is right and even more important that we seek to find employment opportunities for disabled people. Some people have said to me, 'Well, given that we are in a recession, should we be concentrating on helping disabled people get into work?' And my answer to that is, 'What is the alternative?' Do we say 'You are going to have to wait'?. What that means is that when we come out of the recession, disabled people will be even further from the labour market than they currently are. There is no letting up in assisting disabled people, and so we have made a commitment to double the budget for a scheme called Access to Work over the next 5 years, from £69 million to £138 million.

Access to Work. Who has heard of that? Some people have said that it is government's best kept secret, so I have been asking various audiences that I have been speaking to, 'Have you heard of it?' Yesterday, I was speaking to local government officers and councillors. Most people had heard of it, so I think it is not necessarily the best kept secret that it once was and I am very pleased about that. It has been particularly useful for deaf and hard of hearing people and, in fact, they represent one in six of the 24,000 people supported by the programme.

Access to Work can help support deaf and hard of hearing people in employment in a number of ways. First of all, by meeting the cost of interpreters or other language professionals at an interview or at work, or by providing a grant towards the cost of specialist equipment, or by funding awareness training for colleagues of a deaf employee – a very important thing indeed.

Hopefully it will no longer be the best kept secret because you will talk to your friends and colleagues about Access to Work. I want to see the money spent - that is what it is there for, to assist people.

Just in conclusion, I think that working in partnership is going to be very important and I know that it is very much the hallmark of what we seek to achieve here in Kent. We recognise that disabled people are the experts in their own lives and it is only by working together that we will change attitudes, offer chances and bring equality to everyone. We have got a long way to go, we have got an ambitious programme, but I think that working together we can indeed get there, which is not just good for us but

good for everyone across our country and society in general. Thank you for listening.