

Equality 2025's Annual Public Meeting, Manchester

15 October 2009

JONATHAN SHAW:

Thank you very much Rowen [Jade, Chair of Equality 2025] and good morning ladies and gentlemen. First of all can I thank everyone at Equality 2025 and Rowen in particular for the hard work that you do and the valuable contribution that you make not only to DWP, my department, but right across the board.

If we are to meet our commitment of equality by 2025 it does require an enormous amount of work. One of the important committees I chair as Minister for Disabled People, the Life Chances Ministerial Group, looks at the progress of the various different work streams that are being undertaken across government in order to achieve that important goal. I was appointed just about a year ago and it seemed rather surprising to me when I looked at the membership of that committee that, whilst there were Ministers from a range of government departments, there weren't any disabled people on the committee.

It is not just important for Ministers to have the expertise of disabled people, it's also very important for senior civil servants to have those conversations in the presence and with disabled people. It changes things completely. I know that many people have found Rowen's contribution, and the contribution of other disabled people who have attended that committee, to be extremely valuable. That's how we need to do business, that's how we are more likely to get it right than get it wrong. Of course we do get it wrong from time to time. But we are more likely to get it right if we include and involve disabled people in our processes before we arrive at decisions – “co-production” as Jane Campbell often refers to it. That's what we need to do, not just in the future as we move towards equality, but now.

But, looking towards the future, I think it is very pertinent that we are here in Manchester because a son of this great city brought forward legislation which will have its fortieth anniversary next year - the Chronically Sick and Disabled Person's Act. I am of course talking about my dear friend Alf Morris, now Lord Morris. He has, I

am sure you will all appreciate, a great deal to be proud of in terms of the work he is undertaking. That legislation, that came from Manchester as it were, wasn't just hugely significant for the UK and disabled people in the UK, it was significant internationally because there was nothing else to compare it to across the globe. So I think that it is worth us reflecting on what life will look like in 40 years time, when we have passed that important milestone of equality by 2025. To get us there, what will the challenges be? How will we shape services, how will access be improved? What will equality for all people, disabled and non-disabled people, look like?

I have been Minister now for just about a year. I have really appreciated the important work of Equality 2025, the formal meetings and also the informal advice - particularly just last month when I had a week's tour around the UK. I was very grateful that some members of Equality 2025 joined me on those visits, meeting a range of different disabled people and their organisations both in urban and rural settings across England, Wales and Scotland.

When I became Minister there were clearly some priorities. Disability rights was absolutely core, because rights are a springboard to rooting out discrimination, to creating a fair society with fair chances and fair rules for everyone. This year, we have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, which is an explicit statement that disabled people have, and should enjoy, the same human rights as others. That international perspective is so important. We have also ratified the optional protocol. Work now needs to be undertaken as to how we ensure the monitoring arrangements for the Convention are put into place.

As well as having rights, it's about how those rights change people's lives on the ground on a day-to-day basis. That was certainly something I was very interested in as I was touring around Britain last month, because we can't have a system whereby one size fits all. As Rowen said in terms of trying to provide the necessary access for everyone at today's conference of 100 or so people – and I'd like to congratulate Equality 2025 for bringing so many people here - of course one size doesn't fit all.

So the personalisation agenda is important as to how we shape services for the future. In the same way that policies are co-

produced, we have to have that co-production and that empowerment in the way services are delivered - which we are doing through the legislation that is going through Parliament at the moment under the Right to Control. People cannot and should not simply be the passive recipients of what the state says they need. But too many people are. So that's why next year we will introduce trailblazers for the Right to Control – to test how we can give control of certain funding streams back to the person they are there to support. It's important we have both rural and urban trailblazers to find out what works, to bring together all of the different funding streams to allow individuals to have more choice for themselves. But of course, if the Right to Control is going to work, it has to be equal. Not everyone will be able to make decisions without good advocacy and support, and that seems to me central to the success or not of the Right to Control agenda.

We also have the health bill going through Parliament at the moment, which provides the opportunity to have pilots for individual budgets. As I said during committee stage of the Welfare Reform Bill, we very much want to ensure there is some alignment of the two, the pilots for individual budgets and the trailblazers for Right to Control.

Rowen said there are important decisions and discussions around care and support which is absolutely right. We have set out some proposals in our Green Paper and I would be very interested to take your questions later on about that.

Rowen also referred to attitudes. Well, there is good and bad; bad is the high instances of hate crime, cases such as Fiona Pilkington. We know that hate crime can be, and has to be, prevented by work on the ground. I was in Blackpool last month talking to disabled people at the Blackpool Centre for Independent Living about the partnership they have formed with police and other agencies, to ensure that disabled people know where their community police support officers are in their neighbourhoods, so they can deal early with that low level type of hate crime that very often can escalate - and escalate into some of the appalling stories that we read in our papers.

On the good side, the Olympics. I think the Olympics offers an enormous opportunity not just to see disabled people win gold for Britain - I have every confidence that will happen - but it is also

about disabled people taking part, being volunteers, being paid members of staff. The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Delivery Authority are committed to doing that - which I think is very important.

Before I finish I want to talk about employment. Yesterday I was in Liverpool meeting young people as part of the Backing Young Britain campaign that the Prime Minister launched to ensure youngsters are not left behind in this recession. Included amongst those youngsters was a deaf young man. He had been appointed into a position by a partnership of Remploy as the employment agency, Jobcentre Plus and the Hilton group - a partnership which had formed to support youngsters who were out of work - and he was getting Access to Work. The manager said he was really proud of Billy, and that his staff would all be getting deaf awareness training with Jobcentre Plus. I said that's not only good for your staff and good for Billy but it's also good for your customers as well. There is the business case that people need to consider around employing disabled people, the untapped pool of talent that there is.

We have seen a rise in the recent years by nearly 10% of employment amongst disabled people, yet people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities remain left behind. That's why we launched our strategy 'Valuing Employment Now', our strategy to support people with learning disabilities into employment, and why we will launch a similar strategy for people with mental health conditions. Despite there being a recession there will be no let-up, no let-up whatsoever in assisting disabled people to move into work. That's why we are putting more money into the Access to Work programme.

I feel we are making important progress, but there is of course much more for us to do. It's not just for government to do, it's for all of us to do together. So perhaps as I conclude I can leave you with some questions to think about during the course of today. Are we as a government tackling the right issues? If something isn't working what alternatives would you suggest? What can you and your organisations do to help deliver equality by 2025? And how can we better involve disabled people in our work? Thank you very much for listening to me and I will happily take your questions.