

Disability Confident Jobs Fair Speech

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here today to open this Disability Confident Jobs Fair at Hillman Street JCP.

I think events like this are so valuable for connecting disabled people with employers and employers with disabled people.

Because, no-one should be left behind, frozen out of the workplace or lose their potential simply because they have a disability or health condition.

Everyone should have the same opportunity for a fulfilling working life, to get all the benefits that come from a regular pay packet and to build a secure and resilient future for themselves and their family.

Work and progressing in work is the best route to raising living standards – and a disability should not disqualify you from being part of that growth.

The last two years though have been really tough.

But because of our sustained focus on getting people into work, we had the highest level of employment this country had ever seen when Covid hit.

And since then, by our Plan for Jobs – whether through the furlough scheme or our wide range of employment programmes – we have protected jobs and livelihoods and helped people back into work.

Now we are supporting families with the cost of living with £22 billion worth of help in 2022-23. But we're also focussing on the long-term solutions by growing our economy and getting people into good and well paid jobs. And there are so many opportunities out there right now, with record high numbers of vacancies and employers looking to fill roles quickly.

I want to help as many disabled people as possible to start, stay and succeed in the strong labour market we have at the moment. I want you to be part of our growth as a country, and the opportunities in your community.

That means helping the many disabled people who want to work to break down the barriers they may still face and blowing apart remaining perceptions, presumptions or stereotypes.

For example, the false notion held by some that disabled people have lower productivity or that making adjustments is too difficult or too expensive. Of course, many employers are already welcoming diversity and thinking profoundly about inclusion.

Today is part of how we break down even more barriers by showcasing the passion, skills, dedication and talent of disabled people and the benefits they can bring to an employer.

To see past a disability to a person's potential.

To focus on what a person can do rather than what they can't.

To complete the empowerment through employment that so many disabled people tell me they want.

I'm thinking about disabled People like Sukhraj, who has kindly shared his story for me to share with you today. He has a hearing impairment from birth and had been relying on family members for support. With help from a Disability Employer Adviser, specialist employment support, adjustments like the Calm and Quiet provision, and Access to Work, Sukhraj has got himself trained up and nearly ready to go into a job offer as a pastry chef.

I think his story shows how with the right support and employer approach, disabled people can succeed. It makes me want to say "ready, steady, bake!" to Sukhraj, and anyone else who will be a star baker!

This is why Disability Confident itself is such an important scheme to change attitudes, cultures and behaviours, as well as give employers the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to attract, and help people develop in the workplace.

One million milestone

I want to touch on a milestone we hit yesterday. The good news is that we know more employers are reaping the benefits of having disabled people on their payroll.

The disability employment gap has closed by about five percentage points since 2013.

And yesterday, the latest labour market statistics showed that we have smashed the commitment we made in our 2017 manifesto to see one million more disabled people move into employment over ten years.

The fact this has been achieved now, in just half the time, reflects our wider focus on, and success in, getting people into work and the extra support we have introduced to help disabled people move into jobs, as well as broader changes in society, and in the workplace.

I think everyone here can share in the success of having reached this milestone.

Employers, work coaches, charities, representative organisations – and most of all disabled people themselves.

And I hope we can continue that momentum as we continue to focus on improving accessibility and inclusion in the 21st Century world of work.

Because, we know that while reaching that milestone is fantastic, this job is not done.

There are still far too many disabled people who could – and should – be enjoying the benefits that employment brings. But this challenge won't be cracked by Government alone.

I am genuinely excited about the opportunities across the jobs market and in wider society right now to build on the progress that we have made.

That is why I am focused on improving, reforming and transforming the support disabled people can access both to get into work and while they are working.

I will talk about that, and then come on to how others beyond government have every bit as much a role to play.

White Paper

As our 2019 manifesto set out, we want to empower and support disabled people. The benefits system is one important lever we have to help achieve this.

That means taking a close look at how the system works, how disabled people interact with it and looking at ways it can be improved so it better delivers for disabled people.

Our Health and Disability White Paper later this summer will help disabled people to live more independently, including with more help to move into work, where work is right for the individual.

The White Paper will set out our plans to ensure the benefits system better meets the needs of disabled people now and in the future, informed by the huge amounts of feedback we received to the Green Paper.

It will set out how we will go further to ensure that disabled people and people with health conditions have every opportunity and the support that they need to thrive in life and in work, and to improve the experience of everyone when they call on DWP for support.

More Work Coach support

We will offer more support to the 2.8 million people with health conditions receiving Universal Credit or Employment Support Allowance.

From 14th June, we will be trialling an offer of additional Work Coach support for claimants currently awaiting their Work Capability Assessment, initially across a third of the country.

Later in the year, we will expand the offer to claimants after their Work Capability Assessment with limited capability for work but who want help to move closer or into the labour market over time.

This additional Work Coach support in jobcentres like the one we're in here today, will enable disabled people to access employment and wider skills support, and our employment programmes earlier.

Our increasing numbers of Disability Employment Advisors will help embed the benefits of this additional support, using their expert knowledge to help Work Coaches understand the challenges faced by disabled people and provide tailored support.

Access to Work reform & pilots

Turning to Access to Work, this is a fantastic scheme offering financial support to people who need extra help.

In 2020/21, it provided over £100 million of funding to over 37,000 people. But we want to do more, and support more disabled people to access employment.

I want it to be even better by improving the service, removing time consuming and bureaucratic parts, streamlining it for claimants and making it innovative, visible, and accessible.

I know applying for it and receiving it often takes too long and I want to radically improve the service disabled people get and the time it takes.

And I am pleased to be able to tell you that we are working to transform Access to Work and offer disabled people a more streamlined, digital service that is visible and accessible.

We are making good progress, with the first phase of the digital transformation, the payments process, being delivered this year.

We are also piloting Adjustment Passports to help support and empower disabled people to have a more structured conversation with potential employers about their disability, and to speed up the Access to Work process and reduce the need for assessments.

The passport is already up and running in three universities, including Kings College here in London.

The pilots are going well, and I was delighted to hear more about how it was going in Wolverhampton and hear from the students who are starting to complete the passport.

This month we are rolling out the Health Adjustment Passport across all jobcentres, helping all disabled jobseekers to have the opportunity to get access to that.

We are also continuing to develop our Access to Work Mental Health Support service. Mental health wellbeing is key to enabling people to sustain employment and I'm committed to ensuring that, that service continues to provide that tailored mental health support.

Access to Work Plus

We will also be testing a new approach, called Access to Work Plus to open up

employment opportunities for disabled people who have the greatest barriers to employment.

That will provide financial support to those employers who go further in the support they provide and consider how jobs can be flexed to open up even more opportunities.

My ambition is to enable disabled people who have high in work support needs, such as severe learning disabilities or complex autism, to see work as a real possibility.

That would be a huge step forward.

Reforming Disability Confident

Reforming the way those processes work is important.

But just as we can all rightly share in reaching the one million milestone that I referred to, we also all share in the responsibility to go further, do more to reduce the disability employment gap.

And to do that, I need more employers and businesses to sign up. Which again is why it is so great to be here with you today. And see so many Disability Confident employers here today.

In fact, there are over 700 such businesses in the East London JCP District area, including over 100 employers who have progressed to higher levels of the scheme including the London Borough of Hackney itself.

There are over 11 million employees who are reported to be employed by nearly 19,000 organisations who have joined the scheme with around 30,000 live vacancies with Disability Confident organisations. 30,000 chances that are likely to be suitable for disabled people.

But I mentioned that we have record vacancies at the moment of around 1.3 million, so that puts that 30,000 figure in context. I want all disabled people to be able to consider any one of those 1.3m vacancies in the U.K, and any employer to consider all the talent that is available.

So we need to ensure Disability Confident continues to provide the right support for all employers, particularly smaller employers, and stays fit for purpose.

That is why we have been reviewing the scheme with a range of stakeholders, including employers of all sizes and critically disabled people, to ensure the scheme remains up to date, credible and sufficiently challenging in support of disability employment.

The scheme is being refreshed with new guidance and supporting products, to provide specific content designed to meet the needs of small and medium sized companies, which should let more of the 12,000 smaller employers in the scheme to progress to the next level.

We are really pleased to be working with the Federation of Small Businesses, and smaller employers to make these changes.

And I was also delighted that DWP could partner with Disability Confident employer Microsoft, who helped to provide training for Work Coaches on accessibility fundamentals.

This will help the Work Coaches to create accessible experiences for disabled jobseekers and show them how they can use free tools at home as well, to get support with the use of technology and in the recruitment process.

We all have a role to play, and today I call on you to encourage more employers to sign up to the Disability Confident scheme to create more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

If you are not already a member of the Disability Confident scheme, please join the scheme by speaking to a member of staff today.

If you have already begun your Disability Confident journey, consider what you need to do to move to the next level of the scheme, explore the employer packs for Level 2 or Level 3, don't wait three years to progress.

If you are already a Disability Confident Leader, I want you to ask yourselves what more you can do to encourage employers in your business networks and supply chains to join up to the scheme.

I would also encourage you to consider the vital role that expert work and health services, such as occupational health, can play in helping your employees to remain and thrive in your workplace. Employers who use these services value the benefits they provide for their employees and their business. Retention is an essential part of success we're looking for.

Conclusion

Coming to a conclusion then, and I'm so grateful you've come here to be part of this jobs fair. Let's think about this in context.

One in five people are disabled.

One in three have a long-term health condition.

So ensuring that the same opportunities are available for a fulfilling working life is important to all of us.

I, myself, learned a little about this in a very personal way last year when I was recovering from cancer. The gamut of treatment reminded me how important my work is to me.

I'm lucky to be in a role about that I'm totally passionate about.

And I'm even more determined to ensure others with health challenges, and more people like Sukhraj whose example I used earlier on get into work and the benefits of it.

Sukhraj's journey to his job as a pastry chef is just one example of the kind of personal story that actually sits behind those big numbers I quoted from yesterday's statistics announcement.

Those all represent more disabled people leading independent lives and having the chance to reach their full potential.

I am immensely proud of the progress we have made.

But I know there is much more to do.

My ambition is to close the gap further, by working with you and a broad range of partners, seeking out what has been successful, here and in other countries.

We had that profound achievement by seeing 1.3m more disabled people go into work, that has improved the lives of many disabled people, but there's more to do to change lives tomorrow, the next day, next month and in the next decade.

As a key part of levelling up the country, we want disabled people to be part of our economic growth.

These have been challenging times, which demand leadership like this on issues like these.

So let's not rest on our laurels, let's keep going...let's keep pushing...keep reaching to ensure that growth, has employers finding the talent they desperately need, and disabled people finding the opportunities that are rightly theirs to start, stay and succeed in work.

Thank you for being part of that today, and let's do more of that together.