

Speech: Employment Minister addresses employers as part of National Inclusion Week

I want to begin by thanking Inclusive Employers for inviting me to speak at today's event.

Events such as this, where we celebrate best practice in inclusion and diversity in the workplace, and learn from one another, are vitally important for driving change in the workplace.

It is fitting that this event is being held at the British Film Institute. Film and drama through the ages have had a history of challenging stereotypes, holding a mirror to society and asking difficult questions, and championing diversity and inclusion.

A couple of recent examples.

The release of Black Panther earlier this year has been hailed as a hugely positive cultural moment in American black history.

On Sunday 7 October the first ever female Doctor Who hits our television screens. A highly anticipated moment, not least by my 2 daughters, who are dedicated Whovians.

And I really do think it is time to retire James Bond. In favour of Jane Bond.

Diversity helps to drive box office success.

And we know it can do the same for business, and all across our society.

When the Prime Minister made her first speech on the steps of Downing Street, she talked about tackling the "burning injustices" still prevalent in the UK. About creating a country which works for everyone, regardless of your background.

Brexit may be dominating the news agenda right now. But I can assure you that the Prime Minister, and her whole government, have not wavered from our mission to create that country which works for everyone.

Employment is a very visible area, demonstrating the government's progress.

The unemployment rate stands at a 43-year record low. The overall employment rate is close to a record high, as is the rate for women in employment.

3.3 million more people are in work than in 2010, and youth unemployment is nearly halved. That's on average 1,000 jobs created every day, with 75% of these being full-time and permanent, and around 70% in higher skilled

occupations which attract higher wages.

And we have achieved all this working in partnership with employers, working with businesses. Listening to entrepreneurs.

Today I want to share with you some of the specific progress we have made in driving inclusion and diversity in the workforce. But I also want to make clear where we want to, and need to, go further.

Since 2014, an additional 600,000 disabled people have moved into employment – we want that figure to rise to 1 million by 2020.

Many of you in this room are, no doubt, part of the over 7,000 Disability Confident employers across the country. Signed up to my department's scheme that guides businesses on recruiting and retaining staff with disabilities.

Along with helping businesses become confident as disability employers, our Access to Work program offers up to £57,200 a year to help with the additional costs which an employee's health condition may incur. From commuting costs to specialist equipment in the workplace.

These are 2 government initiatives that are having a practical and positive impact on businesses and employees right now. Driving forward inclusion in the workforce.

As I said earlier, we have seen record high women's employment. And the number of children in workless households is at a record low.

But there's more to do. There are around 1.2 million potential returners to work in the UK. Over 90% of them are women who want to get back into work following a period of childcare.

Helping mothers back into work benefits businesses and families alike. That's why the government has launched a Returners Fund. A grant programme available for organisations to run projects aimed at returners that create new job opportunities.

In the past, it has been the cost of childcare that has meant that work did not pay.

Our childcare offer, 30 hours free childcare for working parents of 3 and 4 year olds, is changing that.

Research published one year on from the launch of the 30 hours childcare scheme shows that, as a result of the initiative, more parents are increasing their working hours. Are able to work more flexibly. And spending less on childcare so they have spare cash to spend on their families.

And parents from lower or middle income households are more likely to say that 30 hours makes a 'great deal' of difference to their ability to balance family life with work.

These are practical policies that incentivise, rather than force.

With vacancies at a record high, employers cannot afford to miss out on talent because of care commitments or disability.

We have also broken a record when it comes to young people – with the youth unemployment rate at a record low.

Our jobcentres are working more closely with businesses in their local area to provide new opportunities that open up the world of work to the next generation.

Through our work experience programme and sector-based academies, we are helping connect businesses with talented, enthusiastic young people – over 300,000 of them since 2011.

Today, the local jobcentre is a champion of workplace inclusion – practically helping businesses recruit the diversity they are looking for to bolster their workforce.

And at the other end of the spectrum, we now have over 10 million people over the age of 50 in work.

The experience and wealth of knowledge that this group has to offer is finally being recognised.

I recently joined the older worker cohort. And one of my 20-something year old civil servants quipped:

Well Minister, you just prove that it is possible to teach an old dog new tricks

That particular civil servant has now moved on. Actually to a better role!

And as we live longer, healthier lives, many of us are choosing to stay in work for longer.

But age too often attracts a stigma. Our [Fuller Working Lives](#) strategy is aimed at tackling exactly this discrimination. Supporting businesses who are opening up their traineeships and apprenticeships to the older cohort, and being increasingly open to flexible working patterns – defying the stereotype that eager learners are young learners.

Ethnic minority representation is another area where we have seen great progress. The employment rate for people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds is at an all-time high.

But, we also know that employment rates are higher for white people than those from an ethnic minority background. On average, there is a 10 percentage point gap.

So there is work to do to eradicate this disparity.

In October 2017, the Prime Minister published the findings from the [Race](#)

[Disparity Audit](#). A comprehensive audit of British society, with the outcomes from public services, and of pay and income for all individuals, broken down by their ethnicity.

This was the first audit of its kind, a world-leading development, looking at how your race affects your life.

And following on from the audit, my department has identified 20 'challenge areas' across the country, where the employment gap is greatest.

We're targeting these places with specialist support, trialling new interventions, including mentoring programmes.

By working with businesses we are connecting employers with potential candidates. Providing those individuals with one of the greatest assets a jobseeker can have – a mentor to advise and support them into work and through their career.

I recently sat in on one of DWP's mentoring circle events. And I cannot overstate the importance of mentors, often from the same background as the mentee, as positive role models.

So our support for businesses that want to be more inclusive is comprehensive and growing.

As you all already appreciate, an inclusive employer is a more successful employer.

The challenge is about making inclusion a reality.

And I want employers to know our support is more than just words – it means practical assistance.

From supporting staff with disabilities, to helping employers retain older workers, and take on those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

So, let me close by saying that this government is absolutely committed to building a more inclusive society.

And as Minister for Employment I am personally committed to working with, and supporting, inclusive employers.

My door is always open to good, innovative ideas to increase inclusion in the workforce.

Thank you for everything you do to support inclusion and diversity. Let's continue to work together and drive forward positive change. Which is good for people, good for businesses. And transformative for society as a whole.

Thank you.