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Disability Committee forms centrepiece of new equality commission bill

A top level disability committee formed the centrepiece of a Government bill to set up a new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) published today.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) welcomed the recognition of disabled people having a clear voice and powers in the new commission that will see it and its partner commissions merge with the age, sexual orientation and religious strands to create the new body.

The CEHR Bill makes legal provision for a fully resourced disability committee and a disabled commissioner that will be charged with driving the work of the new commission on disability rights in the areas of defining disability, education, goods and services (including transport). It will also play an important advisory role on employment matters.

Speaking after the bill's publication Bert Massie, DRC Chairman, said:

'Considerable progress has been made since the Government published its white paper. They have clearly listened to us with the result that, in its structure and remit, we have a new commission that is potentially well placed to meet the challenges of delivering equality and fairness for disabled people. The DRC will be working full time on seeking to improve the bill further when it is introduced to Parliament.'

Mr Massie went on to say:

'The disability committee and commissioner enshrines the principle that disabled people should have a leadership role in devising and developing a future agenda for disability rights and is a welcome part of the bill. In transport, education and receiving services there *are* differences in the experience and circumstances of discrimination that need to be reflected. A distinctive disability voice is needed and will be heard in the new commission.'

Mr Massie continued:

'The statutory guarantee of a well resourced disability committee will ensure that disability rights does not become marginalised within the new commission and that the expertise of the unique aspects of disability discrimination are harnessed and used to good effect. But we need to ensure that the promises of resources translate into action.'

'We needed also to avoid the Government's ambitions for a "light touch" commission being translated into a commission that is a soft touch. Strong enforcement powers can do just as much to promote equality. It will be crucial to ensure that there is no weakening of the powers currently available to the existing Commissions.'

On the need for single equality legislation to accompany the introduction and work of the new Commission, Mr Massie said:

'The review of equality legislation announced last week presents a real opportunity to make progress in a matter that all commissions remain concerned about - the need and necessity for

single equality legislation to accompany the work of the new commission. There needs to be rapid progress in the review's work in order to ensure the very best chance for this to happen.'