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SHAW TRUST URGES GOVERNMENT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE NOW

NATIONAL charity Shaw Trust has welcomed a new government initiative which aims to achieve full equality for disabled people by 2025, but says ministers are missing the chance to make a real difference NOW.

The charity's managing director Ian Charlesworth is calling on ministers to harness the power of experts in the voluntary sector to help the millions of people currently struggling to take their rightful position in society.

"The report Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People is a radical step forward, taken by a government that has done much to address the problems of people with disabilities, but it doesn't go nearly far enough," he says.

"Organisations like Shaw Trust are achieving life-changing results for people every day, but we are frustrated by government programme limits.

"We want a cohesive programme of action, with government agencies working in partnership with the voluntary sector, who are closer to their client groups and making a real difference to their lives."

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report, published on January 19, acknowledges that barriers associated with disabilities often exclude people from society and asserts: "This exclusion must stop now."

It states that: "By 2025, disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities and choices to improve their quality of life and will be respected and included as equal members of society."

The report includes an action plan to make an immediate impact in the areas of Independent Living, Early years and family support, Transition to adulthood and Employment. The recommendations have been adopted as policies and implementation will be overseen by the newly set up Office for Disabled Issues, which will report to the Minister for Disabled People, Maria Eagle. Prime Minister Tony Blair will receive regular updates of progress.

Shaw Trust, which is the leading provider of employment services for people with disabilities, joined experts nationwide in applauding the government action. "It was an ambitious task to challenge inequalities and life chances for disabled people across the social, ethnic, gender and age spectrum. But whilst its remit is broad and far reaching, it is woefully unambitious in setting disabled people and their families and carers on a protracted 20 year programme of change," adds Ian Charlesworth.

"Many opportunities which the report debates could be brought forward into a more determined programme of reform with clearer goals and outcomes."

Among the welcome new policies, the Trust applauds the major expansion of the

Direct Payments scheme, in which disabled people are able to manage their own budget for tailor made care, and its foresight in linking the scheme with back to work programmes.

But the Trust regrets the heavy involvement of rapidly changing local authorities to drive forward the programme, insisting that expert voluntary organisations are best placed to do that.

It also regrets that, whilst the Independent Living budget will be boosted in the 2006 Spending Review, there are no apparent plans to increase spending on employment programmes for disabled people.

"It is crucial to target disabled people as a government priority for return to work programmes, with appropriate resourcing, if we are to redress the current imbalance," adds Ian Charlesworth.

Although the report criticises the results of some Job Brokers operating under the New Deal for Disabled People, Shaw Trust, which delivers 33% of the programme, is outperforming targets in all areas. "Our ethos is simple: we submit candidates for work that is achievable, worthwhile and sustainable," Ian explains. "We do not encourage candidates to opt for the first job that is available and, when employment is obtained, we work in partnership with the employer and the client to overcome barriers which may threaten success. It is disappointing that the report presents NDDP in such a negative light when that is not our experience or that of our clients. "We will help 35,000 clients in total this year, but we want to help ten times that, and we have the expertise to do so.

"There are a lot of expert voluntary organisations operating in all the action areas targeted by the government. It makes sense to use us.

"If they don't, the government is missing out on the big chance to make an enormous difference now to the life chances of disabled people."