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The Rt Hon DAVID BLUNKETT MP

Mr Bert Massie CBE  
Chairman  
Disability Rights Commission  
222 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HL

| February 2000

Dear Bert

### THE DRC'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

1. It is customary, when a new Non-Departmental Public Body is established, for the Secretary of State of the sponsoring Department to set out some broad guidance on how he sees the body discharging its functions and the priorities and tasks to which the Government attaches particular importance.
2. The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) has a challenging task ahead of it. There are high expectations of the Commission among disabled people and their representatives, and among employers and providers of goods and services. I recognise the enormity of the task you have, not only to fulfil the role set out in the DRC Act 1999, but to be able to open your doors for business from April 2000 and start delivering the four initial services to which Margaret Hodge and I attach importance: the provision of advice; handling casework; policy work; and handling the media.
3. It will be important for the DRC to adopt an outward-looking and consultative approach and to work in partnership with other organisations to achieve its objectives. The Commission will need to have appropriate regard to the interests of employers and service providers as well as to the interests of disabled people and their representatives. You will wish to work closely with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), for example, in developing joint guidance materials on



equal opportunity issues for employers and providers of goods and services where this is helpful, and to develop links with other organisations. Co-location with the EOC in Manchester will provide an excellent opportunity for both organisations to develop their relationship and share resources. It will be important too for the DfEE and the DRC to develop a good working relationship and to ensure that we add value to each other's efforts, avoiding unnecessary duplication.

4. The DRC will be preparing its first corporate plan in the coming months and I know you will want to consult on it widely. Looking over the first year of the Commission's work, the initial priorities and tasks to which the Government attaches particular importance are set out below. They relate to providing services to the public; helping to implement the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA); and giving policy advice, including on European issues. I recognise that the attention that is given to some of them will vary over time. Other important issues will no doubt arise during the year, which will require on-going exchanges with my colleagues and officials.

5. Obviously one of the first priorities for the DRC will be to get all its services - information and advice, conciliation under Part III of the DDA, and legal - set up in their permanent form. The DRC will no doubt be making appropriate use of its enforcement and assistance powers, including to help clarify the law. It is equally important, I believe, to help prevent discrimination occurring in the first place by raising awareness of the DDA and promoting good practice and I am sure you will be developing plans for these.

6. Another priority will be to launch a public consultation exercise in April 2000 on the draft code of practice prepared by the National Disability Council (NDC) on the 2004 duties under Part III of the DDA, with a view to publishing the final Code by January 2001. I know that the NDC is keen to engage in early and full dialogue with you on the arrangements for transferring the Code to the DRC when it becomes operational in April to ensure a smooth transition. You will also wish to bear in mind the need to prepare a new code for trade organisations, linked to the duty to make changes to premises due to start in 2004.

7. Reducing discrimination against people with disabilities is a key function of the Commission and is one of the success measures we identified for disabled people in our Welfare Reform Green Paper in 1998. Measuring progress is essential, which is why it will be important for you to establish arrangements for monitoring both the effectiveness of the DDA and the Commission's own efforts. You will no doubt wish to build as far as possible on research already undertaken by the Department - in particular, last year's report, *Monitoring the DDA*, and the current follow-up research, both projects sponsored jointly by the Department and the NDC.

8. Past and future Government research will also help underpin the expert policy advice we will expect from the Commission. My officials will provide yours with information on DfEE research, including the programme for 2000-2001, which is due to be finalised shortly. Research is an area where there might well be a lot to gain from co-operation between Government and the DRC.

9. The Government is considering the final report of the Disability Rights Task Force, *From Exclusion to Inclusion: A Report of the Disability Rights Task Force on Civil Rights for Disabled People*, published in December 1999. A significant number of the recommendations made by the Task Force involve further work by the DRC. Margaret

Hodge will write separately on those recommendations that the Government considers should be priorities for future work.

10. Ministers have received a number of representations about giving recognition to British Sign Language(BSL). Margaret Hodge will write to you about how best we can take forward the issue of Sign Language.

11. We welcome the European Commission's proposals on Article 13 as an important contribution to combating discrimination and exclusion throughout Member States and accession countries and are keen to ensure that the protection enjoyed by citizens in this country applies throughout the EU. We are supporting the European Commission in bringing forward effective action to combat discrimination in Europe as a whole and we are looking carefully at the detail of the proposals to ensure that they have maximum and appropriate effect. I would welcome the DRC's views on proposals made under Article 13, relating to anti-discrimination measures for people with disabilities in the field of employment.

12. I hope that this guidance is helpful to the Commission. I look to you to ensure that the Commission's first set of strategic priorities and, subsequently, its first corporate plan reflect the guidance in this letter. I look forward to our work together and wish you, your members and all the staff of the Commission every success.

13. I am placing a copy of this letter in the libraries of both Houses of Parliament and will make it publicly available, if requested.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David Blunkett". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**DAVID BLUNKETT**