

**Speech**

I am delighted to be here today. We all know that a lot has changed since some of us met in July last year for the first Regional Skills and Employment Summit. The world is facing the most difficult economic conditions for several generations. All countries have been affected, including the UK. We, in the South East, have not fared as badly as some regions - employment rates remain high, 81% for men and 73% for women. But many of our people and our businesses are facing some very tough times. Unemployment has risen by over 40% and the numbers claiming Job Seekers Allowance have doubled.

Last year I committed to come back and follow up on the discussions we had on maximising skills and employment opportunities in our region. But this event is even more important now. Today we will hear about the benefits of all employers investing in our people; how the issues you raised last year are being addressed; how employment and skills support is helping businesses respond to this recession. And perhaps most importantly how we can work together to deliver the future skills we need to support a strong recovery in the South East.

The Government has acted in a number of ways to protect people and businesses from the worst of the downturn and to ensure we come through this recession strongly:

- Last year we acted quickly to prevent the collapse of the banking system and protect people's savings.

- We are providing real help for people and businesses. For example on Tax Bills – in the South East the Inland Revenue have made 30,000 agreements with businesses to spread the payment of their tax bills, amounting to over £540m.
- We are investing now for recovery - £3 billion worth of investment is being accelerated nationally for new housing, schools, hospitals, transport and energy-saving measures, creating and protecting jobs.
- Our plan - “Building Britain’s Future” is putting the UK firmly on the path to recovery. Including a new, more active industrial policy to build our competitive strength and create the high value jobs of the future.

At the regional level I have set up the South East Economic Delivery Council, bringing together key people in the region from business, the public sector and the third sector to make sure we do everything we can to support our people and businesses.

We have taken the Delivery Council out into the region to listen to what people and businesses have to say. In Milton Keynes we heard about the cumulative impact of lots of small scale job losses - Jobcentre Plus was able to respond by providing additional support to anyone facing redundancy in City. In Tunbridge Wells we heard about the vital importance of improved broadband access to the economy of rural towns. And yesterday we were in Crawley to hear how businesses there are doing and the way they are coming together with local authorities, local universities and others to make the Gatwick Diamond a world-class internationally recognised business location by 2016.

As Regional Minister I find this sort of intelligence vital – helping me to really understand the issues people are facing so I can feed our unique South East perspective into the Government’s decision making nationally.

However central Government does not have all the answers. The Delivery Council has also been instrumental in driving forward our own response to the recession for example:

Access to Finance - I know from talking to businesses around the Region this is a key issue. The messages banks are giving the Government nationally do not always reflect the realities for business locally. Therefore through the Delivery Council SEEDA have established the South East Financial Services Forum - bringing together regional leaders from all the major banks to promote better understanding with businesses and address concerns about access to finance.

The Delivery Council has also focused on Housing Delivery – the South East has always faced a huge challenge in building enough housing to meet not only need but at prices that people can afford. And the current economic conditions are not making that job any easier. We are taking advantage of the national measures to increase the delivery of housing and to help those who are facing difficulties and the Delivery Council is also looking to remove barriers to progress on strategic sites and release more public sector land for housing.

Whenever I talk to developers, local authorities, or housing associations, I am always keen to challenge them on what they are doing to provide opportunities, particularly for young people, to gain important skills for the future. I want people to be able to say “Yes, that development was important. Not only did it provide much needed homes for the community, but it gave me – or my children – a job and skills for the future”.

And this brings me neatly to the third main area for the Delivery Council which is, of course, Employment & Skills. In the South East we have benefited from a strong history of collaboration in this area and I have been tremendously impressed by what has been achieved. Most importantly in providing help and support to people who have lost their jobs. Over £20m has been committed in the South East alone to provide the advice, guidance and skills people need to find a job.

Jobcentre Plus, SEEDA, the Learning and Skills Council, the Sector Skills Councils and Government Office have come together to form the Employment and Skills Taskforce - working with a whole host of other partners in the region including local authorities, the Third Sector, ACAS, the NHS, Trades Unions and business organisations to develop a Recovery Plan for major redundancies in the South East. We will be hearing more about this multi agency approach later but I know the extra tailored support it provides has been effective and very positively received by those affected by the redundancies at Ford in Southampton, BMW in Oxford and Vestas on the Isle of Wight.

Jonathan Shaw, MP  
Regional Minister for the South East  
Visit to Slough, 16<sup>th</sup> Sept 2009

Much of this work has been focused on hotspots – at particular firms that are forced to make large scale redundancies or in areas, like Milton Keynes, with a high level of smaller scale redundancies. However I am delighted to announce that Jobcentre Plus has now declared the whole of the South East a rapid response region – this means that from now on every person in the South East facing redundancy will be entitled to extra specialist support and funding from Jobcentre Plus and their partners. This is great news and will I am sure be very much welcomed by everyone.

Today we are launching a CD-Rom to keep front line advisors in all our partner agencies informed of the range of support available for individuals and businesses. This will help ensure that we all provide the best possible service during these difficult times. I do not want a single business or a single family to suffer unnecessarily because they didn't know what support was available to them or how to access it.

This partnership working has been unprecedented. And all the more remarkable as it has taken place when organisations are facing huge internal pressures delivering and adapting services in difficult economic times. So thank you to everyone who has been involved – it is making a real difference to people's lives.

In previous recessions there have been some people, often the young, who have been left behind when the economy picks up. I am determined that we will not have a lost generation again in the South East. Backing Young Britain is the national campaign to create new

opportunities for thousands of young people. Over 150 top British employers have already pledged their support and I want to encourage SE employers to support every young person in our region to get the help they need to find a job, and more than that – to get their foot on their career ladder. If you as employers can put your weight behind Backing Young Britain, we will help prevent a lost generation. And just as importantly we will be working together to equip this generation of young people with the skills that you need for the future success of your organisations and of course Britain's future success in the global market place.

Government is funding Backing Young Britain through the 1.5m learning opportunities for 16-18 year olds so that every school leaver who wants to stay on in education or training can; funding twenty thousand additional internships for better quality work experience and funding 100 000 new jobs for young people who have been unemployed for over a year through the Future Jobs Fund.

There are several ways to show your support.

You could sign up to a local employment partnership if you haven't already. This will make sure job vacancies are advertised to local unemployed people – and Jobcentre plus will work with them to make sure they are job ready.

You could become a volunteer mentor for a school or university leaver to help them find their feet in the jobs market; provide work experience places, volunteering places or a work trial;

You could create one of the new internships - for a graduate or a non-graduate 18 year old who wants a chance to prove themselves; or provide an apprenticeship for 16-24 year olds.

And you could get involved with Future Jobs Fund projects. We already have commitments from partnerships and providers in Kent, East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and Hampshire to provide 3600 new jobs through successful Future Job Fund bids. I hope the other parts of the SE will be successful in future rounds.

I would like to see as many employers as possible in the South East commit to taking at least one of these actions. So I urge you to find out more about what your organisation can do to nourish young talent, provide that first break and recruit, retain and train through the Backing Young Britain website or talking to your local Jobcentre plus or Learning and Skills Council.

What about the Recovery? We need to consider now how we can create the best conditions for recovery and growth in the South East. Investment in education and skills is key to this. Train to Gain already provides advice and support to help businesses develop their staff – investment in Train to Gain nationally stands at £925m this year and will rise to £1 billion in 2010-11. However the Government wants to take an even more pro-active approach to deliver the right skills, in the right place, at the right time. Lord Mandelson is looking for each region to have a powerful skills strategy – part of the new integrated regional strategies. This will shape the investment on adult skills made by the new Skills Funding Agency. We want employers to be in the driving seat here - that is why we are considering asking the RDAs to lead on

these strategies in each region with the final strategies becoming binding on the Skills Funding Agency. We will set out our plans in more details in a new National Skills Strategy later in the autumn.

The effects of the recession are still with us. But the recession will come to an end and we in the South East need make sure we are ready when it does. The Government's New Industry, New Jobs strategy launched in April sets out how a more active approach to industrial and skills policy will drive growth and create the high value jobs of the future. To ensure people benefit from new growth industries, we are offering real help to business now so that they can invest in their staff, prepare for recovery and take advantage of the opportunities that will come from the low carbon, high technology sectors of the future. All this presents a real opportunity for the South East – working together I believe we can lead the UK towards a strong recovery.