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## **Kent charity launches conference centre where every booking helps create jobs for adults with learning disabilities**

A Kent charity is set to launch what is believed to be one of the first venues of its kind in the UK, where every conference booking helps fund training and employment opportunities for adults with learning disabilities.

Canterbury Oast Trust will officially open its new Inclusion Conference Centre at Highlands Farm, Woodchurch, on Tuesday 7 July, with Councillor Winston Michael MBE, the Mayor of Ashford in attendance

The launch marks the next chapter in the charity's 40-year history of supporting adults with learning disabilities and autism.

Located on the Canterbury Oast Trust estate, the venue has been reimagined with a clear social purpose. Every booking will directly support the charity's Supported Employment Pathways programme, helping adults with learning disabilities gain accredited hospitality training and progress into paid employment.

The opening event will include a ribbon-cutting ceremony, speeches, guided tours and opportunities to meet the staff and learners who will benefit from the programme.

Sarah Edwards, CEO of Canterbury Oast Trust, said:

*"People with learning disabilities and autism want what we all want: the chance to work, contribute and live with dignity and independence. Our Supported Employment Pathways programme is our commitment to creating meaningful, structured routes into paid employment, not only within COT, but onward into the wider workforce."*

*"We are building pathways that enable people to take that first step with us and continue into mainstream employment, opening opportunities that have too often been out of reach."*

The conference centre can accommodate up to 100 delegates and combines modern conference facilities with genuine social impact. The venue offers flexible event space, contemporary audio-visual technology, high-speed internet access and on-site catering, making it suitable for meetings, away days, training events, networking functions and community gatherings.

Facilities include meeting spaces, breakout areas, audio-visual technology and catering services delivered through the Supported Employment Pathways programme.

### **Canterbury Oast Trust**

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## **Training with purpose**

The Inclusion Conference Centre will act as a real-world training environment for adults with learning disabilities. The first cohort of 12 learners will undertake a 12-week AQA-accredited programme covering hospitality, catering and customer service skills, with the aim of progressing into paid employment opportunities. The programme is expected to support up to 48 learners annually.

The charity also offers a farm volunteering package that can be incorporated into conference bookings, allowing delegates to engage with the wider work of Canterbury Oast Trust.

## **A venue with a difference**

Canterbury Oast Trust believes the Inclusion Conference Centre may be one of the first venues in the UK to combine:

- A dedicated conference and events venue
- Accredited supported employment opportunities for adults with learning disabilities
- A working rare breeds conservation farm

Rather than simply hiring a venue, organisations booking the centre will be directly contributing to life-changing opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

## **Conservation at its heart**

The conference centre sits alongside Canterbury Oast Trust's wider conservation and environmental work championing rare breed conservation and biodiversity in Kent through its Rare Breeds Centre and Poulton Wood sites.

The charity runs Kent's only Rare Breeds Survival Trust-approved conservation farm park, which welcomes around 130,000 visitors each year and is home to 26 rare and native farm animal breeds.

A full-time conservation officer leads biodiversity projects across the Rare Breeds Centre's 100 acres of meadows, ponds and woodland, while the charity also manages ancient woodland at Poulton Wood.

Together, these programmes support rare breed protection, biodiversity conservation, woodland management and outdoor learning, reflecting the charity's wider commitment to environmental conservation through its five-year strategy, *Caring for our Tomorrow*.

## **Creating opportunities**

Founded in 1985 by a group of parents seeking better opportunities for their adult children with learning disabilities, Canterbury Oast Trust now supports more than 80 adults in residential services and a further 72 people through life skills programmes. Forty years later, the charity remains committed to helping people with learning disabilities shape fulfilling, independent lives.

Howard Clark, Director of Commercial Operations at Canterbury Oast Trust, said:

*"We've created something genuinely special — a stunning, high-spec conference centre that gives businesses a real reason to choose us for an away day or event. Set amongst the surroundings of the Rare Breeds Centre, there's also the option for delegates to get involved in volunteering, and the knowledge that their event is making a difference to the people we support."*

The charity believes the new conference centre will deliver both financial and social impact, creating a sustainable source of income while helping more people gain the skills and confidence needed to secure employment.

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Notes to editors

### **About Canterbury Oast Trust**

With a focus on inclusivity and empowerment, Canterbury Oast Trust is a Kent-based charity committed to providing accommodation, support, and education through their life-skills programmes for people with learning disabilities and autism.

