

charlotte atkins MP writes



THE visit by Ed Balls MP to Ruddy Lake last Friday, brought a powerful focus to the real challenges faced by families who daily cope with the severe disabilities of their loved ones. As the recently appointed Epolitik Disability Champion, and the Treasury Minister responsible for disability issues, Ed was full of praise for the work of Sailability, the sailing club for families with disabilities, and Special Matters, the group of local families working tirelessly to give their disabled children all the opportunities they need and deserve. Ed may be better known as the right-hand man of Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but his commitment to disability issues is second to none. His praise for Sailability continued as he presented Dennis Priebe with the Royal Yachting Association's

first national award, recognising Sailability as a Centre for Education and Excellence. There will be only 14 such awards, and for Sailability to win the first is a real coup. Ed was on hand to launch Sailability's newest sailing dinghy - a servo-electrically-powered fingertip-controlled boat - generously sponsored by Britannia Building Society out of its community fund. This dinghy can be sailed by the most disabled of sailors, allowing them to compete on equal terms with able-bodied competitors. I have been out on the lake in such a boat, and got an insight into the sense of freedom, excitement and achievement that such an experience gives those who struggle with mobility on land. Perhaps before the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC) planners consider turning down Sailability's

second application for an essential boat store to protect these dinghies from the weather, they should give these boats a try. They should also listen to Jackie Griffiths' powerful presentation on what it means to receive the devastating news that your child will have to live with disability for the rest of their life. Jackie and her family have come through the trauma, the isolation, frustration and fear, with the help of Special Matters, Sailability and a load of agencies. But the daily challenges they and the 770,000 disabled children - 7 per cent of all the children in our country - face are still enormous. That is why I invited Ed Balls to visit Ruddy Lake to meet Special Matters on their home ground (he gave them an award in London last June), and to see the work of Sailability for himself.

One test of a civilised society is how it supports the families in greatest need. Hundreds of people signed a petition in support of Sailability's application for a new boat store when they applied for planning permission. I hope the SMDC proves itself to be a civilised council and finds a way to support Sailability, rather than close it down. There is now a national campaign called Every Disabled Child Matters, which aims to improve the lives of families with special needs. I am fully signed up to the campaign, which is hoping to collect 100,000 signatures. I urge you to register your support, and help lead these families away from the brink of despair. Please visit: www.edcm.org.uk or telephone 020 7843 6448, or write to EDCM, c/o Council for Disabled Children, National Children's Bureau, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE.