

Thursday 5th August 2004

Single equality laws needed to avoid 'divisions' within new equalities commission

A failure to have harmonised equality laws in place prior to the creation of a new Commission for Equalities and Human Rights (CEHR) would 'cause rancour and division' within the new body from its inception, the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) said today.

Responding to the publication of Government plans to close the existing commissions covering race, sex equality and disability and to merge them along with new strands of religion, age and sexual orientation, the DRC also called for the new body to have a stronger legal enforcement role.

Speaking after the submission of the DRC's detailed response to the Government's consultation on its White Paper *Fairness for All* Bert Massie, DRC Chairman said:

"There is much in the White Paper to be applauded - and the Government has gone a long way to meeting some of the considerable concerns that we rightly held over the proposals for the new Commission. Disabled people needed guarantees that disability rights would not become marginalized within the new body and that future advances would not be compromised."

"What's good in the White Paper though is compromised by what is missing. The absence of proposals for harmonised equality legislation remains a critical concern and a potential source of rancour and division."

On the need for a stronger enforcement role for the new Commission and a clearer remit to take up cases under human rights legislation, Mr Massie said:

"There is a balance to be struck between enforcement and promotion, but the White Paper leans heavily towards the latter. The Government wants a light touch role for the Commission but the fear is that without a stronger enforcement role on equalities and human rights it will become a cheerleader rather than a player - not so much a light touch as a soft touch Commission.

"The latent power contained in the DRC Act 1999 to enable the DRC to help disabled people enforce their human rights must not be sacrificed."

The provision of a disabled commissioner and a disability committee with key decision-making powers on progressing the agenda for disability rights has been welcomed by the DRC.

Mr Massie went on to say:

"We are disappointed that the White Paper does not make a firm commitment to a strong and well-resourced disability unity to support the work of the disability committee. This will be essential if the new Commission is to serve disabled people and will need to be guaranteed in legislation. In our submission to the Government, we also underline the need for early clarity on what the size and budget of the new Commission will be. If it is to be successful it must have a suitable budget and must not be a cut price product from the bargain basement."

The need for specific provisions for Scotland and Wales were also highlighted in the DRC response.

The complete DRC response to the Government White Paper can be viewed at www.drc-gb.org.

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