Dear Mary

EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (EHRC) – SCOTLAND

I am writing to ask you if the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee will conduct an enquiry into the impact of proposed cuts to the budget of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Scotland.

Whilst we recognise that these cuts are being imposed by the UK Government they are going to impact severely in Scotland with regard to the service that they provide to Scottish communities. Examples are as follows:

- The EHRC has been subject to significant cuts in funding and staffing since 2010 – a 63% reduction in its budget by 2014/15, as announced in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR).
- In Scotland the team has reduced from 40 staff in 2007 to 21.5 staff in June 2012 with proposals to reduce that number to 10 staff (including 1 Director) by 1 December 2012.
- The EHRC helpline which provides expert advice to individuals experiencing discrimination faces imminent closure and will be outsourced to Sitel as of 1st October. Sitel have no sites in Scotland (they have a single site in Stratford upon Avon) which effectively means that there will be no helpline advisors in Scotland. It should also be noted that they do not recognise trade unions at any of their sites.
- These budget and staff cuts will mean that the EHRC may no longer be able to work effectively to fulfil its remit.

The EHRC has a statutory remit and unique powers to promote, monitor and enforce equality and human rights law across GB. This remit is relevant to some of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, relating to the protected characteristics of gender, gender reassignment, race, disability, age, marriage or civil partnership status, sexual orientation, religion and belief or pregnancy and maternity. Daily, EHRC staff work to protect peoples’ employment rights; promote good practice on equality across the public and private sector; provide advice to people experiencing discrimination and challenge discriminatory practice.
In Scotland a team of 21 provides:

- Advice and guidance to members of the Scottish public – a helpline service in Scotland takes in excess of 5000 calls per year and responds to high volumes of email and written correspondence from individuals, employers, public bodies, trade unions and other organisations.
- Take action to enforce the Equality Act, including the public sector equality duty, support strategic litigation including representation and running a successful ‘transfer of expertise programme’. In 2011/12, the programme saw 1006 people trained or advised on equality and human rights law in Scotland – including 370 advisors and 237 solicitors.
- Research and analysis of evidence to inform public policy and practice.
- Promotion of good equality practice, guidance and specialist advice to government and the public sector.
- Grants for community groups. Currently, EHRC fund 4 organisations in Scotland - down from 9 last year and over 30 in the first round of grants funding. Grants from the commission have brought over £1 million into the voluntary sector in Scotland. The key element here is that EHRC funding acts as a turnkey to other funders to fund equality work, especially public bodies. Research by CRE showed that £1 of commission work funded produced £8 from other funders.

Following the government’s devastating cuts announced in the CSR the Commission itself is now proposing to further axe the budget by 30% this year and they are currently consulting on a new Organisational Design (OD) that proposes to reduce the Scottish team by another 50%.

Staff working in Scotland are experts in their field; they are committed to the EHRC and deeply concerned about the proposed organisational design and as a consequence have produced an alternative structure to the EHRC managements proposals. We are deeply concerned about the loss of Scottish expertise and believe that it is important that the staff who are advising the victims of discrimination and human rights abuses have experience of the Scottish political and legal systems.

**The impact of the proposals in Scotland**

PCS members in the EHRC believe that if the current proposals go ahead it is likely that the EHRC will:

- Lose half its workforce and invaluable expertise in Scottish social, economic and political affairs
- Lose its Helpline to the public, business and the public sector
- Lose its Edinburgh office
- Lose its grants to charities and community organisations who are often the first port of call for victims of discrimination and harassment.
- Lose its current capacity to carry out legal enforcement activity, with only 11 legal posts in the new OD to cover all of Great Britain. Indeed, we have already seen the number of legal actions the EHRC has taken drop to 25 legal actions compared with 59 in the same period last year, following the departure of skilled staff under two voluntary exit schemes.
- Lose its current capacity to support the public sector.

Given the seriousness of the situation and the fact that final decisions will be taken by the EHRC board on 10th October we are requesting that the Committee call for an enquiry to the impact on Scottish communities as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

Joy Dunn
Parliamentary, Campaigns
Research and Media Officer

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