

Re: Inquiry into the future of equality and human rights in Wales

I am responding on behalf of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) to your inquiry into the future of equality and human rights in Wales.

PCS is the sixth-biggest union in the TUC, with more than 260,000 members in the civil service and associated public bodies. This includes more than 160 employees of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

We welcome your Committee's inquiry, having previously raised concerns with Assembly Members, through various channels, about the implications of financial pressures and legislative changes for the important work done by the EHRC. The Commission faced formidable challenges on its establishment in 2007, through the merger of the three pre-existing commissions, but has maintained a record of successful delivery across all the equality strands for which it has been responsible. The economic problems that the country has experienced since the recession of 2008/09 have, however, exacerbated inequalities and social tensions and increased demand for the Commission's services. Yet, the Commission's capacity to cope with these pressures has been jeopardised by moves by the present UK government to reduce its funding and powers.

The government has reduced the Commission's funding by 62 per cent, resulting in a significant reduction in its staffing complement – exacerbating cuts already made since 2007 – which would leave the organisation with just 150-180 posts across the whole of Great Britain. At the same time, despite overwhelming opposition, during its own public consultation, from the public and expert organisations, the government is legislating to strip the EHRC of its vision and several key functions. Among other things, the Commission's legal enforcement capabilities are being reduced, along with its provision of grants to charities and projects such as law centres, disability groups and community organisations. It has also already lost its public advice helpline, which has been outsourced to a consortium made up of Sitel and Disability Rights UK. Whereas the EHRC helpline had dedicated staff based in Wales and Scotland, who had developed expertise relating to the devolved institutional framework, its successor, which is based in Stratford-on-Avon, has no staff based in Wales. The future of the Commission's Bangor regional office has also been in doubt. These developments risk exacerbating the problem of 'advice deserts' and weakening the Commission's vital link to the public.

PCS welcomes the statements by the UK Government and EHRC management to the effect that they want the organisation to retain 'a strong and distinct presence' in both Scotland and Wales, as well as the fact that the future of the EHRC Cardiff main office has at least been assured. We remain concerned, however, about how easily this commitment can be realised in the context of significant staffing cuts and a somewhat uncertain future for the organisation as a whole, given the expectation of continued spending cuts across the public sector for the foreseeable future.

Against this background, PCS would welcome any intervention by the National Assembly and the Welsh Government that might assist in safeguarding the important services provided by the EHRC. There has consistently been a serious political commitment to equality at a Welsh level, across the political spectrum, as reflected in the National Assembly's historic statutory commitment to promote equal opportunities. This contrasts with the apparent readiness of the present UK government to prioritise financial considerations and 'regulatory reform' over measures to defend and promote equality.

In this context, we note the submissions to the Silk Commission from the EHRC, the Welsh Government and the Children's and Older People's Commissioners, all of which make the case for greater devolution to Wales of powers in relation to equality in general and the work of the EHRC, in particular. While it would go beyond our remit as a trade union to make detailed proposals in this regard, we would certainly agree that there is a case for strengthening the links between the Commission and the Welsh Government and for addressing some of the anomalies that exist within the current legislative framework.

I hope that your inquiry will take these comments into account.

SHAVANAH TAJ

PCS Wales Secretary