

DISCRIMINATION SERVICE UNDER THREAT

Cheshire, Halton & Warrington Race & Equality Centre's¹ discrimination casework service is under threat of closure from April.

The service, which has been funded through the Equality and Human Rights Commission² (and previously the Commission for Racial Equality) for over 10 years is now at risk with the government's decision to withdraw the EHRC's grant function from the end of March³. In a letter from the EHRC to grant holders⁴ they stated 'Ministers have confirmed that future Government funding for legal advice on discrimination will be solely through legal aid.'

The current service provides a free legal support, advice and representation to individuals who have experienced discrimination. Last year the service dealt with 172 complaints of discrimination⁵ and secured over £82,000 in compensation for clients.

'Government Equalities Office has stated that discrimination cases can be dealt with through legal aid, and don't require a separate pot of funding. However, this fails to recognise the real difficulties that people facing discrimination experience. Most of the cases we deal with are employment based and clients are not eligible under legal aid rules, but equally the claim amount is not high enough to justify the fees of a solicitor; combined with this is the lack of no win no fee options available – few lawyers want to take a case on this basis because of the notorious difficulties in proving discrimination cases,' states Shantele Janes, Director of the Centre⁶ 'often the clients we see are vulnerable, because of their circumstances and they require some support from us. As a charity that seeks to promote equality, we can offer that support unlike a private organisation that is ultimately focused on targets and making money. For us this service is grassroots – if we can no longer offer this, why are we here?'

The organisation also provides opportunities for volunteering; at the moment the Centre supports 8 volunteers through the College of Law who are working to gain experience in discrimination work.

Now, the organisation is campaigning against the decision of the government. 'It is of ultimate importance that we continue to offer this service and we have started an e-petition on the government website – <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/27071> or go onto our website www.chawrec.org.uk . We'd like as many people as possible to sign it – we can't just

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let this decision go without a fight' said Eric Bowers, Chair of the REC⁷. The Centre is also looking for alternative sources of funding to keep the service going and is calling for donations⁸.

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Notes for Editors:

1. Cheshire, Halton & Warrington Race & Equality Centre is a registered charity that exists to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and good relations. It has recently moved into and manages the Unity Centre, 17 Cuppin Street, Chester, CH1 2BN the first multicultural centre for West Cheshire.
2. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is a non-departmental public body which was established by the Equality Act 2006 and came into being on 1 October 2007. The Commission has responsibility for the promotion and enforcement of equality and non-discrimination laws in England, Scotland and Wales. It took over the responsibilities of three former commissions: the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission.
3. The Government carried out a consultation on major reforms to the Equality & Human Rights Commission, which closed in June 2011. One of the proposals was withdrawal of its powers to operate a grants programme, which has now been confirmed
4. A letter was sent to grant holders on 14th December confirming that the legal grants funding programme would not be extended past 31st March 2012.
5. 172 complaints of discrimination were dealt with by Cheshire, Halton & Warrington Race & Equality Centre between April 2010 and March 2011. 70 of those enquiries were taken forward as cases; the main types of cases were as follows – disability (17), race (43), sexual orientation (2), gender (3), age (2), pregnancy (2) and religion or belief (1). 22 cases were submitted to Employment Tribunal or County Court. 19 cases were settled totalling £82,571 in compensation.
6. Shantele Janes can be contacted on shantele@chawrec.org.uk or 01244 400730
7. Eric Bowers can be contacted on 01244 400730
8. The Centre will be making applications to Trusts for this work, but any donations to continue this service would be gratefully received. Donations can be made payable to Cheshire, Halton & Warrington Race & Equality Centre.