

Executive Summary

The Government has confirmed the new arrangements for providing equality information, advice and support. These will deliver a stronger, more comprehensive and high-quality service for the public, with a particular focus on individuals with the greatest needs. The new arrangements further the Government's objectives on access to justice, emphasising early and informal resolution. Decisions have been taken following consultation and engagement with interested parties.

As announced in March 2011, we are currently commissioning a new Equality Advisory and Support service providing information, advice and support to individuals who may be victims of discrimination. People will be able to use this service wherever they live in England, Scotland or Wales and irrespective of their means. The new service will provide expert advice and support, tailored to individuals' circumstances and, in particular, will encourage problems to be resolved early and informally where possible.

We expect the new service to help tens of thousands of people who face discrimination problems each year. People will also be able to turn to it for information and basic advice about possible breaches of human rights law. The new service will provide the same level of support on human rights as the current Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) helpline. It will work with the network of organisations that already provide information, advice and support on employment, housing, debt, and welfare problems – which are often linked with discrimination. It will help the organisations to which people often turn to first, to be able to spot discrimination and so recognise which individuals to refer on to the new service. The new service will also feed back information to those organisations. The new service will be a central point of access to authoritative, up to date information about equality law, helping foster the public's awareness and understanding of people's rights.

The Government has not been convinced by the consultation responses that discrimination cases, uniquely, merit central government funding in addition to that which will continue to be available through civil legal aid. It is not the best use of limited public funds to pay for legal advice about discrimination in a way which can be available to only a small proportion of the people who seek advice, who in turn are not necessarily those in greatest need. We are therefore confirming that state funding for legal advice in relation to a contravention of the Equality Act 2010 will be delivered solely through legal aid, for which it will continue to be available at current levels once the reforms are in place. Claims in relation to contraventions of the Equality Act 2010 are being retained within the scope of legal aid post-reforms, planned for April 2013. This is in recognition of the importance of the issues and of tackling prejudice and promoting equality of opportunity and is a clear demonstration of our commitment to battling discrimination.

We have decided against supporting a specific discrimination and human rights education programme. The consultation responses showed that while public education was generally seen as a good thing, there was no clear view on how best to deliver, target or fund it. The Government has decided that the focus should be on boosting the expertise of front-line organisations and will do so through the new service.

The Government decided not to continue to fund the EHRC's helpline and legal grants programme from the end of 2011-12 (the natural end of the legal grants programme) as they neither represented value for money nor supported the EHRC in carrying out its core functions. We will hold a round table early in the new year for those organisations who were most dependent on EHRC legal grants for their funding to ensure their views are considered in the Government's review of the not for profit advice sector. Organisations are being invited to say if they wish to attend

We are confident that these changes will ensure that information, advice and support about discrimination is available to everybody in a fair and accessible way.