

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re: The Equality Standard and concerns from the West Midlands Local Authorities Equality Network. (WMLAEN)

The West Midlands Authorities Equality Network (WMLAEN) is a network that has been established for over 10 years. It represents officers who have an equality remit for local authorities in the West Midlands. It is also attended by representatives of the EHRC for the region and West Midlands Regional Assembly.

The network has discussed the Equality Standard for Local Government on a number of occasions, with many local authorities in the network having adopted it and working towards its various levels. Recently we have had a number of concerns / issues about the standard, which now appear to be coming to the fore with a number of developments happening nationally around equalities and the way local authorities will be assessed on performance. Our issues / concerns are highlighted below: -

- It is our understanding that the revised Equality Standard (ES), that was launched in 2007, was not endorsed by the three legacy commissions as working to the ES does not deliver or ensure compliance with the three general and specific duties on race, gender and disability. We further understand that **IDeA** is now proposing to revise this 'revised' ES. This is of concern as many councils will have started to put in place systems to comply with revised ES and any further revisions in such a short scale of time will only lead to further changes having to be implemented on authorities already grappling with constant change. This is likely to lead to confusion, frustration and resentment from managers.
- The ES is no longer a Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) and therefore its status is questionable, as it is not reflected in the National Indicator set. There is also the question whether local authorities should work towards meeting their legal obligations under equality legislation, or work towards the ES, which is in essence a good practice guide. Given the legal requirements, the ES appears to be another layer of bureaucracy and creates a division of resources.
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has indicated that it is looking at the approach to equalities and its intention to harmonise the approach to the general duties for race, gender and disability and the other strands of equality. It is also the responsibility of the EHRC to issue guidance on meeting legal obligations in equality. As this is likely to happen in the very near future, there is the concern that working towards the various levels of ES will not necessarily fit into the approach to be taken by the

EHRC. Also the status of guidance from the EHRC is likely to be more formal than the ES.

- One of the main concerns is the way the assessment process for levels 3 and 5 of the ES appear to be an income generation mechanism for IDeA and the consultants from Edge Hill: and the control / ownership of this process they have put in place. The costs are considerable and given that there must be external assessment for levels 3 and 5 these need to be questioned. There is also the issue of other organisations / groups not being accredited to undertake the external assessment, we see no reason why this cannot happen and thus be opened out to other organisations / groups. Why should one organisation have a monopoly?

We are raising the above concerns, as there appears to be a lack of honest and open debate on the role and validity of the Equality Standard. When these concerns have been raised individually by members, these have not always been addressed.

There also appears to be a lack of clarity as to whether the EHRC supports the ES, whether this is the way forward or there is likely to be a different approach from the EHRC.

Given the general duties, the LAA's and NI set and the Equality Standard, councils are confused in their approach. This is leading to a diversion of resources to meet different requirements / approaches to equality, rather than a focussed, coherent and consistent approach.

The group would be quite happy to attend any meeting to discuss the issues raised.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Clare Gough
Chair WMLAEN