

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



KEY INEQUALITIES

IN PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

SUMMARY
SEPTEMBER 2018

- 1.1 This '*Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland*' highlights our assessment of inequalities and differences in participation in public life faced by equality groups across the Section 75 equality categories in Northern Ireland.
- 1.2 In compiling this Statement, the Commission has drawn on a wide range of sources including: research reports from government departments and the community and voluntary sectors; academic research; and the Commission's own information sources. The Commission also contracted independent research from Ipsos MORI (2015). The resultant research report¹ and associated stakeholder engagement has played a key role in informing this Statement.
- 1.3 The Commission also sought the views of Government Department representatives and community and voluntary sector representatives on its identified key inequalities and data gaps through a series of meetings and a seminar event. The Statement in its current form, therefore, reflects feedback received from the consultation process with stakeholders.
- 1.4 The Commission's understanding of *participation in public life* is that participation can be at all levels, whether community, regional and national. It can include participation as elected representatives or members of political fora. It can also include participation as board members of public bodies, or at a community level, such as members of community associations, and school Boards of Governors².
- 1.5 Diversity in public life, with participation of people from all types of backgrounds and with a broad range of characteristics, should ensure a more informed policy decision-making process. Diversity is important in increasing the voice and influence of underrepresented groups, such as women, disabled people and ethnic minorities, and in shaping the community in which they live. It provides opportunities for individuals to make a valuable and recognised contribution, ensuring that public policy and services reflect the needs of all citizens and residents. It creates the opportunity for people

¹ Ipsos MORI (2015) [Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds](#). ECNI, Belfast.

² ECNI (2007) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#). ECNI, Belfast.

from underrepresented groups to act as positive role models, which in turn can encourage the participation in political, public and civic life of others from those groups. Diversity can also help transform attitudes and behaviour and create an environment for equal respect. Participation in public life is vital to people's sense of status and belonging³.

- 1.6 The Commissions guidance⁴ notes that '*public life is a very broad term*', including but not limited to:

“government public appointments; the House of Lords; public bodies’ focus or working groups; community associations or fora; community police liaison committees⁵; neighbourhood watch committees; citizens panels; Local Strategic Partnerships; school Boards of Governors; school councils; youth councils; user groups for a service provided by a public authority.”

- 1.7 The Guidance also goes on to note that it can include how people participate in political life; for example:

“as elected representatives, members of political for a... access to the voting system ... their participation as litigants (in terms of access to the law and Courts), judges and jurors.”

- 1.8 Furthermore, Commission guidance⁶ on '*active participation*' also may include involving people at more formal levels for example, recruitment and selection panels.

- 1.9 Using the guidance, Ipsos MORI⁷ developed a framework to investigate participation in public life. This highlighted nineteen possible areas as examples of public life, which were used as the scope for the research study. The Commission acknowledges in its guidance that the list is not exhaustive; but it provides a number of examples of public life.

³ ECNI (2007) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#). ECNI, Belfast.

⁴ ECNI (2007) [A Guide for Public Authorities – Promoting Positive Attitudes Towards Disabled People and Encouraging the Participation of Disabled People in Public Life](#). ECNI, Belfast, page 55.

⁵ The Commission notes that Community Police Liason Committees were replaced by the Northern Ireland Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs).

⁶ ECNI (2008) [Lets Talk, Lets Listen, Guidance for Public Authorities on consulting and involving children and young people](#). ECNI, Belfast

⁷ Ipsos MORI (2015) [Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds](#). ECNI, Belfast

- 1.10 The starkest finding from our assessment is the absence of data in most of the areas considered to constitute participation in public life. There are significant and specific data gaps across a number of themes in relation to a number of equality groups, specifically: marital status, dependency status, and sexual orientation. In addition, there is a lack of data disaggregation in relation to disability and ethnicity. These shortfalls limit the Commission's ability to draw robust conclusions about inequalities, and there are inevitably gaps in our assessment and those considered key inequalities, and/or progress in addressing the same across the full range of equality categories and groups.
- 1.11 Alongside a number of differences and wider inequalities, three key inequalities have been identified for participation in public life, from data spanning 2007-2016. These are presented below along with short explanations.

Data Limitations and Gaps

- There are **significant and specific data gaps across all areas of public life** in relation to the participation of equality groups within the nine equality grounds.
- In the areas of public life where data is collected, **the availability of data is often limited, patchy and often not disaggregated.**
- **Only three of nineteen areas of public life collect and report quantitative data findings on a regular basis**, namely: government public appointments; elected representatives; and access to the voting system.
- **There is a complete absence of data for the specific Section 75 grounds** of marital status, dependent status and sexual orientation, across all areas of public life.

Key Inequalities

- **There is an underrepresentation of persons with a disability in applications and appointments to government public appointments.**
- **Women are underrepresented within elected positions in Northern Ireland and within government public appointments.**
- **There are no elected representatives from ethnic minority backgrounds.**

Data Limitations and Gaps

- 1.12 Public authorities have statutory equality and good relations duties in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Equality scheme arrangements show how the public authority proposes to fulfil its duties. Despite the Equality Scheme monitoring arrangements, there are significant and specific data gaps across all areas of public life in relation to the participation of equality groups within the nine grounds. The Commission has found that the Equality Scheme commitments have not driven a data development agenda in the public sector, despite the particular monitoring arrangements and the Commission's longstanding advice.⁸ Specifically, there is a complete lack of data for the specific Section 75 grounds of marital status, dependent status and sexual orientation.
- 1.13 The paucity in monitoring and reporting participation in public life on equality grounds has impacted upon the extent to which the independent research⁹, and this Statement, can highlight the inequalities in participation in public life in Northern Ireland.
- 1.14 Even in the areas of public life where data is collected, namely government public appointments, elected representatives and access to the voting system, the availability of data is often

⁸ ECNI (2017) Section 72 Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties. Acting on the Evidence of Public Authority Practices: Summary Report for Consultation. ECNI, Belfast.

⁹ Ipsos MORI (2015) [Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds](#). ECNI, Belfast

limited, patchy and often not disaggregated¹⁰. A number of other data sets were available for other areas of public life, however, as the data were not collected regularly and / or consistently, no trends could be identified.

Key Inequalities

Key Inequality

There is an underrepresentation of persons with a disability in applications and appointments to government public appointments.

- 1.15 **There is an underrepresentation of persons with a disability in applications and appointments to government public appointments.** Little improvement has been made in terms of the levels of *appointments* of persons with disabilities being made to government public appointments over the period 2006 – 2016 (2% 2006 and 3% in 2016)¹¹.
- 1.16 Further, during the period 2008-2016, there has been a consistent underrepresentation of persons with a disability as *applicants* to government public appointments ranging from 2% to 5% annually¹².

¹⁰ The monitoring of ethnicity and disability within participation in public life does not allow for disaggregation by categories. For example, 'white' category by nationality would enable the experiences of Eastern European migrants and other minority ethnic groups such as Travellers to be determined. Similarly, disaggregated beyond the classification of 'disability'.

¹¹ Note that data pertaining to disability relates to **appointments made** in that year, no data pertaining to appointments held by persons with a disability is available from the TEO Government Public Appointment data (2006-2016) [The Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Reports](#)

¹² In 2010/11 the percentage of applications received from persons who declared a disability increased slightly to (4%) from 3% the previous year.

Key Inequality

Women are underrepresented within elected positions in Northern Ireland and within government public appointments.

- 1.17 **Women are underrepresented within elected positions** in Northern Ireland, including MPs (22%), MLAs (30%), Local Councillors (25%), and Council Mayor/Chairpersons (23%).
- 1.18 **Women are underrepresented within government public appointments.** There continues to be an underrepresentation of women, when compared to their share of the population, in government public appointments (41%) and as publicly appointed chairpersonships (24%)¹³, having increased slightly since the inequality was highlighted in the Commission's 2007 Statement on Key Inequalities¹⁴.

Key Inequality

There are no elected representatives from ethnic minority backgrounds.

- 1.19 **There are no elected representatives from ethnic minority backgrounds.** Currently, there is no political presence in terms of ethnic minorities within the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, previously (2007-2016) one MLA (Alliance party)¹⁵ was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

¹³ This inequality is derived from an analysis of TEO Government Public Appointment data by Ipsos MORI (2015) [Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds](#). ECNI, Belfast and by the Commission (2015 and 2016 data).

¹⁴ ECNI (2007) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#). ECNI, Belfast.

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly (2017) [They Work for You](#)

Barriers to Participation

- 1.21 The Commission is mindful that many of the inequalities presented in this Statement are the outcomes of a range of institutional, socio-economic and individual barriers encountered by individual equality groups. A review of such barriers provides a useful insight into some of the key drivers for the identified inequalities and differences in participation in public life. The barriers identified are mainly evidenced from the four areas of public life where data is available. However, these barriers may also affect the participation of a range of equality groups across other areas of public life where data is limited.
- 1.22 **Culture, stereotypes and prejudice** impact on participation in public life for a range of equality groups. Negative perceptions / stereotypes exist about the skills, abilities and experience of certain equality groups.
- 1.23 The **appointment processes** associated with participation in public life can place women and other under-represented groups at a disadvantage. Recruitment and selection processes, and application forms often asking for formal qualifications and previous board experience^{16 17}, may act as barriers to broader participation. Similarly, the use of professional language¹⁸ in the selection processes may act as another barrier as some equality groups may be less familiar with the jargon.¹⁹
- 1.24 **The reconciliation of family and working life** represents a significant barrier for women seeking to participate in public life. The inequitable sharing of family responsibilities between women and men perpetuates a double burden of paid and unpaid responsibilities upon women. Furthermore, the availability of affordable childcare, which is a fundamental part

¹⁶ Common Purpose (2009) [Diversity of representation in public appointments: A study by Common Purpose](#)

¹⁷ In respect to government public appointments, the Commission recognises the [Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland's Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments in Northern Ireland \(2016\)](#) which states 'When drawing up criteria for a public appointment, those involved must recognise the validity of non-traditional career paths, to encourage applications from as diverse a range as possible'.

¹⁸ UNICEF, [Children and young people: Participating in the decision-making process](#), UNICEF; New York.

¹⁹ The Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation (2009) [Engagement and Empowerment among older people: A case study](#). National Empowerment Partnership: London

of the process of mothers entering, remaining in, progressing in or returning to work and hence employment equality²⁰, also acts as a barrier to participation in public life.

- 1.25 Given the financial resources often required to participate, and the limited remuneration available to those who may wish to participate²¹, the **cost** of participation may limit the opportunities to participate fully in public life, for a range of equality groups, either based upon a single or multiple identities.
- 1.26 As stated above, it has been identified that a **lack of promotion, engagement and outreach** by public bodies and political institutions towards some equality groups may also act as barriers to broader public participation.^{22,23,24} Similarly, the **lack of support and / or development in terms of developing skills and providing education / training / capacity building** to underrepresented groups may also be considered a barrier to broader participation in public life.
- 1.27 Certain equality groups may **lack confidence and trust in politicians and the public bodies**, possibly resulting in a disengagement, dissatisfaction, and disempowerment²⁵ to participation in the political environment.
- 1.28 The presence of **physical and communication barriers** may also inhibit the participation of certain equality groups. Poor provision of accessible travel systems and accessible buildings can limit attendance.
- 1.29 Considering the perceptions, and actualities, of the cultures and processes relating to being on and being recruited to public boards; a **lack of confidence by under-represented equality groups** may affect broader participation.

²⁰ McQuaid, R., Graham, H., and Shapira, M. (2013) [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#), ECNI, Belfast.

²¹ The Executive Office (2006/07-2015/16) [The Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Reports](#)

²² O'Toole, T.; Dehanas, D.N.; Modood, T.; Meer, N.; and Jones, S. (2013) [Taking part: Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance](#). University of Bristol.

²³ Ipsos MORI (2015) [Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds](#). ECNI, Belfast

²⁴ Weller, P. (2009) How participation changes things: 'Inter faith', 'multi faith; and a new public imaginary. In (eds) Adam Dinham, Robert Furbey, Vivien Lowndes, Faith in the Public Realm: Controversies, Policies and Practices. Policy Press: University of Bristol.

²⁵ Ipsos MORI (2015) [Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds](#). ECNI, Belfast

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