



Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Equality in Participation in Public Life

Priorities for Action



May 2019

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The identification of priority areas for intervention is impacted by substantive data gaps across a number of areas of public and political life.”

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There is a pressing need to increase diversity in government public appointments and advance the participation of women and individuals from minority ethnic groups in political life.”

Summary: Participation in Public Life – priorities for action

1. The Commission considers, following engagement with stakeholders and wider consideration, that there are immediate opportunities and/or a particular pressing need to secure change in the following specific areas:
 - Addressing identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy; and ensuring that data is sufficiently disaggregated to allow for meaningful equality analysis, to better inform public policy development.
 - Increasing diversity in government public appointments by taking actions to increase the participation of those with disabilities; delivering on gender targets for boards and chairs; and implementing a cross-departmental strategic action plan to advance participation more generally.
 - Increasing diversity in political representation by advancing the participation of women, and individuals from minority ethnic groups, in political life.

Equality in participation in public life

2. Participation in public life includes the way in which people contribute to, or are involved in, public decision-making (such as board membership). It can also include the way in which people participate in political life (e.g. as political representatives; members of political fora). This involvement can be at various levels.
3. Diversity in public life and ensuring the participation of people from all types of backgrounds, including those protected by equality laws, enhances the decision-making processes. It provides for greater accountability along with having more representative groups of people influencing and shaping the decisions that affect all our daily lives.
4. Action is required both to address key inequalities and to remove the barriers experienced by equality groups to participation in public life. Further, whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, it is clear that barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion.

5. The Commission is aware of the proactive steps taken by public bodies and others to promote equality across the Section 75 grounds. Whilst we both recognise and support this work, it is clear that challenges remain.

Wider recommendations

6. In addition to the priorities for action set out in this document, we also encourage action by government, officials and key stakeholders to advance our full range of recommendations, with a particular focus on tackling the inequalities identified in our 2018 *Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland*¹.



1 ECNI (2018) Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland

7. The Commission calls for wider action across the thematic areas to address key inequalities, and advance equality of opportunity and diversity:

- Advance the active and meaningful participation of women in peace building and post conflict reconstruction.
- Remove barriers across all stages of the electoral process to ensure that people with disabilities can exercise their right to vote.

8. We also set out cross-cutting recommendations to tackle barriers to participation which should be read in tandem with the above recommendations and priority areas for action.

- More effectively engage with, and foster the active participation of, people from across the full range of equality categories.
- Address structural barriers which can deter individuals from a range of equality categories from participating in public life.

- Meet the physical access and communication needs of prospective participants.
- Build capacity, overcome perceived barriers and foster a sense of belonging.
- Challenge stereotypes and prejudice.

This short guide sets out only our immediate priorities for action. Further information on our wider recommendations can be found at: www.equalityni.org/ParticipationPolicy



Improve equality data collection and disaggregation



Improve equality data collection and disaggregation



Participation in
Public Life

Address identified gaps in equality data; and ensure that data is sufficiently disaggregated to allow meaningful equality analysis and public policy development.

Even where data is collected, comprehensive coverage is often lacking.

E.g. gender is unknown for 26 (19%) of the public appointments made in 2016/17.



Address identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy.

9. There are substantial and specific data gaps across all areas of public life in relation to the participation of those from across the nine equality categories².

10. The Commission calls upon public authorities to ensure comprehensive monitoring, analysis and reporting of equality characteristics relating to public and political life.

² The nine equality categories are: persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without.

11. We also call upon departments to take more extensive action to encourage candidates for public appointments to complete and return monitoring forms.
12. We note and welcome that the Assembly has begun to collect disability data on an annual basis, and recommend broader monitoring of the MLAs.
13. There is very limited disaggregation of data across all equality grounds, which prevents an examination of potential inequalities encountered as a result of multiple identities (e.g. barriers faced by young, single mothers).
14. The availability of data is often limited, patchy and often not disaggregated³.

Ensure that data is sufficiently disaggregated to allow for meaningful equality analysis, to better inform public policy development.

15. We call upon government departments to ensure that in the areas of public life where data is collected it is routinely collected and disaggregated across the Section 75 equality categories.

³ 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'.

Increase diversity in government public appointments



Increase diversity in government public appointments



Participation
in Public Life

Establish and promote support measures, and targeted actions to increase the participation in public life of people with disabilities.

The under-representation of persons with disabilities in government public appointments has remained reasonably consistent over the period 2006-2016 (1-3%).



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16. The Executive Office's 2016 *Public Appointments Guide*⁴ acknowledges the under-representation on public bodies of, amongst

others, people with disabilities. Our 2018 *Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life*⁵ identified the under-representation of people with disabilities as a key inequality.

17. The Commission has identified a range of

4 TEO (2016) Public Appointments Guide

5 ECNI (2018) Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland

specific barriers to participation in public life, including physical and other accessibility issues; lack of capacity-building; and wider support.

18. We recommend action to involve those with disabilities and their representative

organisations to identify and implement specific measures to tackle the under-representation of disabled people. Such measures could include:

- Encouraging stakeholders to promote the participation of disabled people;
- Developing supported work and boardroom initiatives to build

experience, capacity and skills;

- Addressing physical, communication and other barriers to access, including covering the reasonable additional costs associated with the participation of a person with disabilities.

19. These align to the 2018 Lord Holmes Review⁶ recommendation that government use ‘multipliers, connectors and conduits to promote opportunities more widely’. The Review also recommended the establishment of a ‘mentoring programme to support talented disabled candidates’.



Participation
in Public Life

Ensure early implementation of an action plan to achieve the Executive's 2016 target for gender equality in board and chair public appointments.



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20. In March 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed targets for the appointment of women to public bodies. However, in

the context of an absence of Assembly Ministers since January 2017 to make appointments, we note the Commissioner for Public Appointments' 2018 observation that the current situation '*makes impossible the achievement of the equality targets within the set timeframe*'⁷.

21. Concerted action will be needed to catch up and to address the range of political; socio-economic; ideological and psychological barriers impacting on women's participation in public life at board and chair level. These are wide-ranging, including being part of the networks that gain access to boards, the availability of childcare and the confidence of individuals.

22. We recommend that government departments move to address recruitment and selection processes which may hamper greater diversity in public appointments. Action is also required by Departments to tackle the

greater under-representation of women in remunerated posts.

23. We urge the prompt implementation of a timetabled action plan setting out key milestones to deliver on the agreed targets for the appointment of women to public bodies.

Implement the cross-departmental diversity strategic action plan to address under-representation and support participation, including to give effect to the 2014 recommendations of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland.

24. It is our understanding that a five-year cross-departmental diversity strategic action plan for public appointments is currently in draft form.

25. In our view, it should include actions to implement the 2014 recommendations of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland. These recommendations included, for example: using the Public Appointments Forum to address under-representation at an NICS, rather than departmental level; making board diversity public policy and setting

measurable goals; and taking a centralised approach to raising awareness of public appointments.

26. We urge early publication and implementation of the cross-departmental strategic action plan with associated actions, targets and review mechanism.

27. Actions must seek to address not only under-representations and known barriers, but also to raise awareness of opportunities and their relevance to members of specific equality categories.

Increase diversity in political representation



Increase diversity in political representation



Participation
in Public Life

Advance the participation of women, and individuals from minority ethnic groups, in political life.



The Northern Ireland Assembly still has the lowest female representation (30%) when compared with other devolved legislatures in the United Kingdom.

Advance the participation of women, and individuals from minority ethnic groups, in political life.

28. Our *Statement on Key Inequalities*⁸ considered the under-representation of women and minority ethnic groups within elected positions in Northern Ireland to be key

inequalities. This under-representation means that, in addition to there being fewer women and minority ethnic groups in elected chambers, the bodies that are made up from elected members, such as the Assembly scrutiny committees, or bodies that have elected member representation,

8 ECNI (2018) Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland

such as the Policing Board, will also have a similar under-representation.

29. We call on government and political parties to take prompt steps to further promote and support the participation in political life of women, and those from minority ethnic groups, by actively tackling the barriers they may face. We also recommend actions to develop and broaden candidate pools.

30. In relation to women specifically, we recommend steps, including the adoption of temporary special measures, to increase the

representation of women in political life⁹. We welcome the positive action measures taken by local government at elected member, officer and service delivery level through the Women in Local Councils initiative¹⁰, and at the Northern Ireland Assembly through the establishment of the Women's Caucus.

31. Particular consideration is also required in relation to those with multiple identities such as women with a minority ethnic background or women with disabilities. Specific, tailored responses to address the barriers they face to participation may be required.

9 In terms of temporary special measures, ECNI has welcomed the extension of Sex Discrimination Election Candidates Act 2002 which allows for positive action in relation to women's political participation and including all women shortlists. CEDAW stipulates that States parties 'shall take all appropriate measures' to achieve equality between women and men including through the use of temporary special measures.

10 Which included the creation of gender champions, the development of family friendly operating and working practices and training and mentoring.



Further information
For further information, visit
www.equalityni.org/ParticipationPolicy

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