

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Equality in Participation in Public Life

SUMMARY: Policy Recommendations

1 Priorities and overarching areas

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 Diversity in public life, and ensuring the participation of people from all types of backgrounds including those protected by the equality laws, enhances decision-making processes and provides for greater accountability. It is also vital to people's sense of status and belonging as well as helping to counteract negative attitudes and behaviours that different groups might experience.
- 1.3 The Commission is aware of the proactive steps taken by public bodies and others to promote equality across Section 75 grounds. Whilst we both recognise and welcome this work, it is clear that challenges remain.
- 1.4 Developed from a range of research and evidence sources, and the Commission's wider work over a number of years, this short document sets out the Commission's current priorities for action.

Priority areas for intervention

- 1.5 The Commission considers, following engagement with stakeholders and wider analysis, that there are immediate opportunities and / or a particular pressing need to secure change in relation to:
 - **Improving equality data collection and disaggregation** – action should be taken to address identified gaps in equality data; and ensure that data is sufficiently disaggregated to allow meaningful equality analysis and public policy development.
 - **Increasing diversity in government public appointments** – we call for action to increase the participation of those with disabilities; deliver on gender targets for boards and chairs; and implement a cross-departmental strategic action plan to advance participation more generally.
 - **Increasing diversity in political representation** – there is a need to advance the participation of women and minority ethnic individuals in political life.

Overarching areas for action

- 1.6 While the Commission will work to encourage prompt action to address the above, 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*¹.
- 1.7 The Commission calls for targeted actions across the following overarching areas to address key inequalities, and advance equality of opportunity and good relations:
- **Improve equality data collection and disaggregation**
 - **Increase diversity in government public appointments**
 - **Increase diversity in political representation**
 - **Ensure access to the voting system by those with disabilities**
 - **Tackle cross-cutting barriers to active participation.**
- 1.8 These overarching areas form a framework for the following more specific recommendations.

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

2 Improve equality data collection and disaggregation

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

- 2.1 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 categories.
- 2.2 We call upon public authorities to ensure comprehensive monitoring, analysis and reporting of equality characteristics relating to public and political life.
- 2.3 We also call upon departments to take more extensive action to encourage candidates for public appointments to complete and return monitoring forms.
- 2.4 We note and welcome that the Assembly has begun to collect disability data on an annual basis, and recommend broader monitoring of the MLAs.

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

- 2.5 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).
- 2.6 The availability of data is often limited, patchy and often not disaggregated². 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.

² 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'.

3 Increase diversity in government public appointments

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

- 3.1 The Executive Office’s 2016 *Public Appointments Guide*³ acknowledges the under-representation on public bodies of, amongst others, people with disabilities. Our 2018 *Statement*⁴ identified the under-representation of people with disabilities as a key inequality.
- 3.2 The Commission has identified a range of specific barriers to participation in public life, including physical and other accessibility issues; lack of capacity-building; and wider support⁵.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 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’.

3 TEO (2016) [Public Appointments Guide](#)

4 ECNI (2018) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland](#)

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

6 Cabinet Office (2018) [Lord Holmes Review, Opening up Public Appointments to Disabled People](#)

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

- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 Some of the targets agreed by the Executive in March 2016 for the appointment of women to public bodies have already been missed. 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.
- 3.7 We recommend that government departments move to address recruitment and selection processes which may hamper greater diversity in public appointments (see later discussion on 'cross-cutting barriers'). Action is also required by Departments to tackle the greater under-representation of women in remunerated posts.
- 3.8 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.

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

⁷ Commissioner for Public Appointments (2018) [Annual Report 2017/18](#) – page 5

- 3.10 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.
- 3.11 We urge early publication and implementation of the cross-departmental strategic action plan with associated actions, targets and review mechanism.
- 3.12 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.

4 Increase diversity in political representation

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

- 4.1 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, such as the Policing Board⁹, will also have a similar under-representation.
- 4.2 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 (see later discussion). We also recommend actions to develop and broaden candidate pools.
- 4.3 In relation to women specifically, we recommend steps, including the adoption of temporary special measures, to increase the representation of women in political life¹⁰. We welcome the positive action measures taken by local government at elected member, officer and service delivery level through the Women in Local Councils initiative^{11 12}, and at the Northern Ireland Assembly through the establishment of the Women's Caucus¹³.
- 4.4 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.

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

9 Six of 19 Policing Board Members are women (32%) – 3 of 9 independent members (33%) and 3 of 10 political members (30%) [NI Policing Board website, accessed 03.04.19](#)

10 In terms of temporary special measures, ECNI has welcomed the extension of the 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.

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

12 The 2019 local government elections resulted in a marginal increase in women elected (26% against 25% elected in 2014, 23.5% at the 2011 election and 21% in 2005). Three of the eleven council chief executives are women.

13 [Politics Plus website, accessed 03.04.19](#), The Women's Caucus is: 'concerned primarily with the review of policy and legislation from a gender perspective, increasing the representation of women in the leadership of parliamentary committees, building capacity and empowering women MLAs, advocating gender equality on a local, national and international level and promoting gender-mainstreaming within the Assembly'.

Advance the active and meaningful participation of women in peace building and post conflict reconstruction.

- 4.5 The Commission continues¹⁴ to recommend steps, including temporary special measures, to increase the representation of women in political and public life, including in peace building and post conflict reconstruction in Northern Ireland.
- 4.6 We have welcomed initiatives designed to ensure greater involvement of women in peace building, including the 2014 publication¹⁵ of a strategic guide and toolkit¹⁶. This guide has recommended a gender mainstreaming approach including the inclusion of gender perspectives in all strategies, institutions and arrangements for peace building. The Commission was disappointed, therefore, to see that there was only one woman among the 15 appointments to the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition¹⁷ established in 2016.
- 4.7 The guide also recommended greater support for women, women's groups and networks to manage the mental health challenges resulting from the conflict and civil unrest and the continuing challenges of paramilitarism and gender-based violence, abuse and threat. It is our understanding that, to date, this recommendation has not been actioned. We call on government to do so as a matter of urgency and to address other recommendations in the toolkit in respect of gender mainstreaming.
- 4.8 We also note the Executive response to the *Report of the Panel on Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups*¹⁸ (2016) which recommended a programme for women in leadership as well as in community development¹⁹, by including such a programme in the associated Action Plan²⁰ (2016). We note the development of the Department for Communities' programme for 'Women in Community Transformation'²¹, in response and look forward to the programme's report on progress.

14 ECNI (2015) [Gender equality policy priorities and recommendations](#)

15 Hinds B, Donnelly D (2014) [WPS Toolkit](#) 'Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality, developing and applying women, peace and security practice in Northern Ireland'.

16 The toolkit was developed following a Women and Peacebuilding Project to put forward the imperative for involving women and to set out good practice models from across the public sector for involving women in peace building.

17 Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition - www.fictcommission.org

18 NI Executive (2016) [The Fresh Start Panel report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups](#)

19 Under the Fresh Start Agreement (at A3.9) there is a commitment for the 'development of a programme to increase the participation and influence of women in community development.' [DfC Website](#) (Accessed 21 May 2018)

20 NI Executive (2016) [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime](#)

21 DfC (2017) [Programme for Women Involved in Community Transformation - Advert](#)

5 Ensure access to the voting system by those with disabilities

Remove barriers across all stages of the electoral process to ensure that people with disabilities can exercise their right to vote.

- 5.1 While research in relation to voting registration and exercise of voting rights is limited, it does consistently highlight those with disabilities as facing barriers²², and also highlights socio-economic disadvantage as a contributory factor²³.
- 5.2 We recommend that the government, political parties and civil society take action to promote the benefits of voting, remove barriers to accessing the voting system, and support those with disabilities and other under-represented groups to register and use their vote.
- 5.3 We urge prompt government action to give effect to the 2017 CRPD recommendation relating to voting, to *'take appropriate measures to secure accessibility for persons with disabilities'*²⁴.
- 5.4 We further recommend that government, political parties and candidates take action to give effect to the Electoral Commission's 2017 recommendations²⁵ to tackle the barriers to access to the voting system encountered by people with disabilities. We welcome the availability of online voter registration, and recommend that steps are taken to monitor its impact upon people with disabilities.

22 Electoral Commission (2011) Great Britain's Electoral Registers

23 Electoral Commission (2011) Great Britain's Electoral Registers – young people, some minority ethnic groups, and those on low incomes were least likely to be registered to vote.

24 UNCRPD (2017) [Concluding observations on the initial report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) paragraph 61

25 Electoral Commission (2017) [Elections for everyone](#)

6 Tackle cross-cutting barriers to active participation

More effectively engage with, and foster the active participation of, people from across the full range of equality categories.

- 6.1 The Commission continues to recommend the full and effective involvement of those from across the full range of equality categories in the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of strategic actions; and to build capacity within relevant sectors.
- 6.2 The effective inclusion of individuals from across a range of equality categories will require specific and tailored steps to be taken. This will entail identifying, including with stakeholders, the specific barriers to participation which individuals from across a range of groups may face, and taking action to help overcome them.
- 6.3 Departments should aim, where they currently do not, to secure representative participation in decision-making of people from across the equality categories. Departments should identify and take the actions necessary to achieve this aim, across Strategies, and the development, delivery and review of government policy and services. Mechanisms, such as departmental champions, should be regularly reviewed to ensure their effectiveness.
- 6.4 The Executive Office's *Practical Guide to Policy Making*²⁶ states that engagement is: 'firmly embedded in the culture of the public service in Northern Ireland and is particularly important in the context of the statutory duties on equality and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998'.
- 6.5 While representative groups have produced ground specific guidance for public authorities aimed at ensuring more effective consultation and engagement, a range of research and publications highlight inconsistencies in levels of engagement and raise questions about the meaningfulness of engagement.

26 TEO (2016) [Practical Guide to Policy Making](#)

Address structural barriers which can deter individuals from a range of equality categories from participating in public life.

- 6.6 Structural barriers can include recruitment criteria and processes; the requirement for previous experience; costs of participation and the balancing of family and working life.
- 6.7 Recruitment and selection processes, for example application forms, often asking for formal qualifications and previous board experience as essential or preferred criteria, may act as barriers to broader participation. We recommend that government departments take action to: focus on skills and experience *essential* for the role; place value on lived experience; provide associated opportunities for capacity building (e.g. training and/or board / work experience); and examine the costs associated with participation; to help overcome barriers and widen access.
- 6.8 The costs of participation and potentially limited remuneration for it may limit the opportunities for those from some equality categories to participate fully in public life. Furthermore, the impact of remuneration upon statutory benefit entitlement may deter people with disabilities and others from pursuing a paid participative role. Participation should be fairly remunerated, with clarity around its impact on statutory benefits.
- 6.9 The reconciliation of family and working life represents a significant barrier²⁷. We reiterate our call for accessible, appropriate and affordable childcare. More carer friendly policy and practices are needed.

Meet the physical access and communication needs of prospective participants.

- 6.10 Organisations have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people. This may require them to use appropriate rooms within a building to conduct a meeting, to change the venue itself in order to secure participation, and to give consideration to the provision of facilities within the building.

²⁷ The Executive Office (2006/07-2015/16) The Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Reports and Employers for Childcare (2019) [Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2018](#)

- 6.11 The Commission welcomes the progress of the provision of accessible transport in Belfast and Greater Belfast²⁸ but recommends the Department for Infrastructure give consideration to the extension of accessible public transport, particularly in rural areas.
- 6.12 Organisations should consider the communication needs of prospective participants, and produce materials in appropriate languages and accessible formats, or use a variety of dissemination channels.
- 6.13 As public services increasingly move to ‘digital by default’ whereby information is provided and accessed online, public bodies should ensure safeguards are in place necessary for individuals from across the Section 75 categories to participate fully. Particular issues may arise for those who do not have access to the internet or who may require assistance to use it.

Build capacity, overcome barriers and foster a sense of belonging.

- 6.14 We call for action to improve capacity building for under-represented groups. Capacity building opportunities (for example through training, board / work experience, and / or mentoring) aligned to common skills and experience criteria for public life posts should be delivered to overcome barriers and widen access.
- 6.15 Targeted actions to better understand and foster a ‘sense of belonging’ among under-represented groups should also be implemented to assist in overcoming perceived barriers.
- 6.16 Further, we call for action to engage with under-represented groups via promotion and outreach to raise awareness of the potential benefits for individuals and society, helping to overcome actual or perceived personal barriers to participation.

²⁸ The Department for Infrastructure in 2018 introduced the Glider service between the East and West of Belfast to provide easy to use, efficient and accessible public transport

Challenge stereotypes and prejudice.

- 6.17 Stereotypes and prejudice impact on participation in public life for those from across a range of equality categories. Assumptions may be made, for example about women, that they do not aspire to board directorships, or that they lack the necessary skills to sit on boards²⁹.
- 6.18 Action is needed across society, including by government, civil society and the media, to: encourage the participation and visibility of under-represented groups in public life; promote role models; and tackle the high level of prejudicial attitudes towards individuals associated with their equality group characteristics.
- 6.19 There is also a need to challenge stereotypes, including gender stereotypes relating to parenting and childcare responsibilities; support the sharing of family roles/responsibilities; and remove associated barriers to parents contributing to public life.
- 6.20 Wider societal prejudices and hate crimes must be tackled; including harassment both inside and outside the workplace; and bullying in schools.
- 6.21 The role of mass media cannot be ignored, for example in conveying the male dominated nature of public life³⁰. As such, local, national and social media, through positive and supportive portrayals, can have a profound impact on promoting positive public attitudes and encouraging representation.

²⁹ Women's National Commission (2009) Women in public life.

³⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly (2013) Research and Information Paper [Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly](#) p14.

7 Conclusion

Priority areas for intervention

- 7.1 The Commission considers, following engagement with stakeholders and wider analysis, that there are immediate opportunities and / or a particular pressing need to secure change in relation to:
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Overarching areas for action

- 7.2 While the Commission will work to encourage prompt action to address the above, 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*³¹.
- 7.3 The Commission calls for targeted actions across the following overarching areas to address key inequalities, and advance equality of opportunity and good relations:
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31 ECNI (2018) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland](#)



For more information: www.equalityni.org/ParticipationPolicy