

# Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland

**Summary**

May 2018



**DRAFT STATEMENT**

- 1.1 The draft *Statement on Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland*<sup>1</sup> 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 draft *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 report<sup>1</sup> and associated stakeholder engagement has played a key role in informing this draft *Statement*
- 1.3 The Commission's understanding of *participation in public life* is that participation can be at all levels, including 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 Governors<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.4 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 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 belonging<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI (2015) *Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds*. ECNI, Belfast.

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

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

DRAFT (for stakeholder engagement)

- 1.5 Using the Commission’s guidance on what is understood by the term “public life”<sup>4 5</sup>, Ipsos MORI<sup>6</sup> developed a framework to investigate participation in public life. This highlighted nineteen possible areas as examples of public life, which was 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.
- 1.6 The starkest finding from our assessment is the absences of data in most of the areas considered to constitute participation in public life.
- 1.7 This research identifies **data limitations and gaps**, and **barriers to participation**, alongside a number of **inequalities and those the Commission considers key**, for the review period 2007-2016. These are presented below along with short explanations.
- 1.8 This draft *Statement* is presented to enable the Commission to test and refine findings with our stakeholders in order to inform a final Statement. We welcome your comments and views. Please forward your comments and views to [research@equalityni.org](mailto:research@equalityni.org) by **12 noon on 15 June 2018**.

---

<sup>4</sup> 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, paragraph 5.21, page 55

<sup>5</sup> ECNI (2008) [Lets Talk, Lets Listen, Guidance for Public Authorities on consulting and involving children and young people](#). ECNI, Belfast

<sup>6</sup> Ipsos MORI (2015) *Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds*. ECNI, Belfast

## 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 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 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

- 1.9 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.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, there is a complete lack of data for the specific Section 75 grounds of marital status, dependent status and sexual orientation.
- 1.10 The paucity in monitoring and reporting participation in public life on equality grounds has impacted upon the extent to which the independent research<sup>8</sup>, and this draft *Statement*, can highlight the inequalities in participation in public life in Northern Ireland.
- 1.11 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 limited, patchy and often not disaggregated<sup>9</sup>. A number of other data sets were available but no trends could be identified.

---

<sup>7</sup> ECNI (2017) Section 72 Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties. Acting on the Evidence of Public Authority Practices: Summary Report for Consultation. ECNI, Belfast.

<sup>8</sup> Ipsos MORI (2015) *Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds*. ECNI, Belfast.

<sup>9</sup> 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'.

## Inequalities

- 1.12 Where data allowed, inequalities and differences were identified. The Commission has also identified those inequalities it considers to be key,<sup>10</sup> which are presented below. An *inequality* was identified where a difference in expected representation<sup>11</sup> was found, and that this difference could be associated with identified barriers to participation for this equality grouping. However, due to the paucity of data, and the limited disaggregation of data, the true extent of inequalities could not be fully gauged.

### Key Inequality

**There is an underrepresentation of persons with a disability in government public appointments**

- 1.15 **There is an underrepresentation of persons with a disability in government public appointments.** No improvement has been made in terms of the levels of participation of persons with disabilities within government public appointments (2% 2006/07 and 2% in 2013/14). Further, during the period 2008-2014, there was an observed trend of decreasing numbers of applications to government public appointments from persons who had declared a disability.

### Inequality

**Persons with a disability are less likely to vote.**

- 1.16 **Persons with a disability are less likely to vote or be registered to vote.** Scope (2010) research from across the UK highlights that 6% of disabled voters had their ability to vote questioned by polling staff at the 2010 general election and many reported negative attitudes from tellers. Further, they

<sup>10</sup> See paragraph 2.25

<sup>11</sup> The NISRA (2012) [Census 2011](#) of population data tables were used to establish broad indicators for determining expected equality group profiles for Disability ([Table KS301NI: Health and provision of unpaid care](#)); Gender ([Table KS101NI: Usual Resident Population](#)); Religious Belief ([Table KS212: Religion \(or Religion brought up in\)](#)); Age ([Table KS102NI: Age Structure](#)); and Ethnicity ([Table KS201NI: Ethnic Group](#)).

found that 67% had one or more barriers to voting, including no accessible booths, inaccessible polling stations and a lack of hearing loops for deaf people.

### 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 (36%) and as publicly appointed chairpersonships (21%)<sup>12</sup>, having increased slightly since the inequality was highlighted in the Commission's 2007 Statement on Key Inequalities<sup>13</sup>.

### 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)<sup>14</sup> was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

## Barriers to Participation

- 1.20 The Commission is mindful that many of the inequalities presented in this draft *Statement* are the outcomes of a range

<sup>12</sup> This inequality is derived from analysis of OFMDFM Government Public Appointment data by Ipsos MORI (2015) *Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds*. ECNI, Belfast.

<sup>13</sup> ECNI (2007) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#). ECNI, Belfast.

<sup>14</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2017) [They Work for You](#)

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.

- 1.21 **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.
- 1.22 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<sup>15</sup>, may act as barriers to broader participation. Similarly, the use of professional language<sup>16</sup> in the selection processes may act as another barrier as some equality groups may be less familiar with the jargon.<sup>17</sup>
- 1.23 **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 of the process of mothers entering, remaining in, progressing in or returning to work and hence employment equality<sup>18</sup>, also acts as a barrier to participation in public life.
- 1.24 The **cost** of participation may limit the opportunities to participate fully in public life, for a range of equality groups,

---

<sup>15</sup> Common Purpose (2009) [Diversity of representation in public appointments: A study by Common Purpose](#)

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF, [Children and young people: Participating in the decision-making process](#), UNICEF; New York.

<sup>17</sup> The Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation (2009) [Engagement and Empowerment among older people: A case study](#). National Empowerment Partnership: London

<sup>18</sup> McQuaid, R, Graham, H, and Shapira, M. (2013) [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#), ECNI, Belfast.



either based upon a single or multiple identities, given the financial resources often required to participate, and the limited remuneration available to those who may wish to participate<sup>19</sup>.

- 1.25 As stated above, it has been identified that a **lack of promotion, engagement and outreach** by public bodies and political institutions towards some, and possibly a wider range of equality groups, may also act as barriers to broader public participation.<sup>20,21,22</sup> 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. Therefore, certain equality groups may **lack confidence and trust in politicians and the public bodies**, possibly resulting in a disengagement, dissatisfaction, and disempowerment.<sup>23</sup>
- 1.26 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.
- 1.27 Considering the perceptions, and actualities, of the cultures and processes relating to being on and being recruited to public board; a **lack of confidence by under-represented equality groups** may affect broader participation.

---

<sup>19</sup> The Executive Office (2006/07-2015/16) [The Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Reports](#)

<sup>20</sup> O'Toole, T.; Dehanas, D.N.; Modood, T.; Meer, N.; and Jones, S. (2013) [Taking part: Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance](#). University of Bristol.

<sup>21</sup> Ipsos MORI (2015) *Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds*. ECNI, Belfast.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> Ipsos MORI (2015) *Inequalities in Participation in Public Life: An Investigation of the Nine Section 75 grounds*. ECNI, Belfast.



## Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Equality House  
7-9 Shaftesbury Square  
Belfast BT2 7DP

**Telephone:** 028 90 500 600  
**Textphone:** 028 90 500 589  
**Fax:** 028 90 331 993  
**Email:** [research@equalityni.org](mailto:research@equalityni.org)

**May 2018**

