



Comisiwn
Cydraddoldeb a
Hawliau Dynol

Equality and
Human Rights
Commission

Equality and Human Rights Exchange

conference report

June 2015

Shaping the future



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Conference 2015: Shaping the future

Ann Beynon, Wales Commissioner

Our conference theme this year was **Shaping the future**. We chose this to build on last year's theme of the changing landscape in Wales. Last year we noted that the political and economic context of our work is undergoing significant change and discussed strategies for keeping equality and human rights on the agenda.

This year we chose to focus on ensuring we make the most of the opportunities provided by the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) and impact assessments to shape the future, narrow inequalities and address human rights abuses.

At our conference speakers shared their insights and experiences of how impact assessments and the PSED are driving change - making a real difference to peoples lives and improving their ability to access justice.

Delegates told us how invaluable they found the workshops, sharing what is working well in assessing the impact of changes and exploring improvements for the future. Exchange members talked about feeling empowered and inspired to drive change within their organisations.

Sadly, this conference was my last as Wales Commissioner. As Chair of five previous conferences I took the opportunity to reflect back on our time together and the tremendous value I place on coming together with Exchange members each year. It really has been a highlight of my work as Commissioner.

The Exchange has worked together to understand the role of values and leadership in promoting equality and human rights. We have shared knowledge and experience about the best way to drive change - particularly ensuring the PSED delivers improvements to people's lives. Recognising the importance of human rights, the network has changed its name to the Equality and Human Rights Exchange.

We should be very proud of our achievements, but of course there is more to be done.

The Commission's Is Britain Fairer? project will identify where there is progress, or lack of it, in narrowing inequalities and human rights abuses. The key challenges that emerge from this work will help us all to focus resources where they are most needed in the future.

At the heart of the Exchange is strong partnership working and this is an excellent basis for rising to the equality and human rights challenges ahead.



Setting the scene

Kate Bennett, National Director for Wales

Kate spoke about how we can focus our collective effort to identify the most effective ways to advance the equality and human rights agenda in Wales for the year ahead.

To be focused, and avoid distractions, we need to know exactly what our goals are. Kate reminded us of the need to protect people's human rights, combat discrimination and prejudice and ensure equal opportunities and respectful treatment for all. The landscape is still changing around us. Some big changes have happened and may yet still happen. Some changes are beyond our control, but there are many opportunities to shape the future, working together towards better outcomes.

Evidence shows that the Public Sector Equality Duty is making a difference in Wales. Equality impact assessment is critical when making decisions about where money should be spent, to avoid disproportionate impact on certain people. Sometimes the changes are marginal, but many people live in the margins and will benefit from the work of Equality and Human Rights Exchange members.

Sometimes big change can be achieved by a small number of people who have a strong belief, determination and confidence in what they are doing. The need to 'think big' was the clear message from Chris Holmes, EHRC Commissioner and Paralympian, in the filmed interview shown at last year's conference.

['Think Big' Chris Holmes interview](#)



Kate reminded us that we all need to avoid making assumptions. It is important to consult widely and be open minded about the routes and options for change. Making progress on our agenda is more achievable if we are flexible and adaptable and if we set some clear priorities and stick with them.

The conference is an opportunity to think about and explore the best ways for our organisations to take informed and robust decisions about where resources are allocated and the implications of policies.



Using impact assessments to drive change

Helen Mott, University of the West of England and Bristol Fawcett Society

Helen talked about the benefits to everybody of widening the notion of what an impact assessment can do and who could be engaged in doing one. In Helen's view the process of impact assessment can be as valuable as the product itself because it increases awareness and commitment to action.

Helen spoke about different ways of assessing impact.

Equality impact assessments can be used to measure the disproportionate number of certain groups amongst those affected by decisions and the impact of decisions or policies on certain groups.

Human rights assessments focus on due process and the severity of impact. They are an important check on whether rights are being undermined by decisions or policies. For example, proposals to reduce spending on social care could be assessed in terms of inhuman and degrading treatment.

Civil society impact assessments combine human rights and equality, including socio-economic equality. They look at the cumulative impact of a range of decisions and they look at more than one aspect of each individual, for example, the impact on disabled women or older lesbian and gay people.

Helen explained the benefits of civil society assessments. These enable us to look at proposed changes from the perspective of the service user rather than the service provider. This process draws together a wide range of decisions and the

cumulative impact of these on different groups.

So it enables us to understand clearly how decisions work together to improve or undermine the quality of individuals lives.

Fairness Commissions have been created in several local authorities. These focus primarily on understanding the impact of policies and decisions in terms of socio-economic inequality.



Helen recommended that equality officers build alliances with activists in civil society and with university academics. These alliances can be powerful in bringing people with skills, time and commitment to work together on specific projects. In fact some universities are keen on ensuring their research is having impact and may be willing to work with external organisations on projects at little cost. One advantage is that when decision makers hear shared messages from a wide range of stakeholders, that message is all the more powerful in driving change.

In terms of the impact assessment process Helen emphasised that a robust evidence base is essential and including people's personal stories can communicate the importance of the decisions that are being taken.

Measuring success is not easy, but it is important. Sometimes outcomes are clear. Equally sometimes our work is part of a combination of factors that are acting to tackle inequality. Bristol Fawcett have measured success in a number of ways. This includes the number of times the Cutting Women Out report has been read or downloaded and it includes recording specific incidents of when the report has been referred to in Council and other meetings. Helen said the report had won hearts and minds at a political level too.

[Helen Mott's presentation](#)



The Public Sector Equality Duty: Making a difference to peoples lives

Kate Clayton-Hathway, Oxford Brookes University

Kate described the impact of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) on the lives of single mothers in Bristol. Kate had worked with a group of single mothers to gain an understanding of their needs as service users and to identify how and where public sector decisions are taken about their lives.

In the UK 91% of single parents are women and three quarters of children living in poverty belong to single parent families.

Kate found that the single mums were intensive users of public services including mental health support, childcare and GP services. All the women experienced social isolation regardless of age, social background, financial situation, and area within which they lived.

Based on Kate's research, the PSED and impact assessments had brought positive benefits to the lives of single mothers. Kate identified examples of where equality impact assessments were used to change budgetary decisions and ensure the continuation of vital services for this group.

Kate had looked at reviews of service provision at Bristol Council and the results of impact assessments. She gave an example of a local play park. The Council proposal was to discontinue staff supervising children's play. The Council carried out an equality impact assessment and looked at the possible adverse impact on people with protected characteristics. This found that there would be adverse impact on single parents and parents of disabled children. The proposal was rejected and council staff supervision continued.



Kate is continuing to track the difference the PSED and impact assessments are making to the lives of single mothers and she hoped to publish the evidence soon.

Kate concluded by urging delegates to 'go the extra mile' in consulting on proposed changes to public services and ensure that everyone's voice is heard. Please involve the 'invisible people'!

[Kate Clayton-Hathway's presentation](#)

Access to Justice for all

Sue Bent, Central England Law Centre

Sue gave an overview of Coventry and Birmingham in terms of both protected characteristics and poverty. She explained the Central England Law Centre strategy to ensure people are aware of their rights and get the support they need to access justice. This involves:

- public legal education
- casework
- campaigning
- public interest litigation

The approach of the Law Centre is to focus on people and their lives, understanding there are inter-connected problems that may affect the whole household, intervening to solve problems in a timely way, and joining up with other services.

Sue explained the impact of welfare reform, cuts to public services and Legal Aid reform on the most disadvantaged people in the community.

She described the work of the Law Centre using some real stories relating to violence against women, immigration and human trafficking.

Coventry City Council have awarded the Law Centre £1.5 million to work inside departments such as children's services and housing management. The purpose of this is to bring legal rights into people's lives at the earliest point. The Council recognised that shifting resources in this way will prevent problems escalating and so will save money later.

The Council is funding the Law Centre to hold it to account for the decisions it takes.

[Sue Bent's presentation](#)



Workshops



Delegates worked together to identify how impact assessments can be improved and can lead to better decision making.

Five key themes emerged. These are:

1. Process - its essential but not enough on its own

There was agreement that it is really important to get the process right and there are some basic steps which can be taken to avoid excessive amounts of paperwork.

Progress is being made and processes are maturing, becoming more streamlined and effective.

The process itself yields benefits such as increased engagement.

Timing is critical - start early! Starting late can often be a way of justifying decisions that have already been taken. By starting early you can create a cycle involving collecting information, engaging and consulting, analysing the data, noting the feedback, scrutinising the decision and then building this learning into consideration of new proposals.

Transparency in the process and in communicating the results of impact assessments is key to people's confidence that robust decisions are being taken. Scrutiny and challenge should be encouraged.

We should consider impact on a regular basis rather than only when there are proposed changes. That way we will continue to ensure resources are focussed where they are most needed.

2. Engagement is critical

Engagement can help us to learn, understand, act, and take better decisions. It provides valuable evidence. Understanding what is really happening in people's lives challenges assumptions so it is important to engage as widely as possible.



There are benefits in linking the views of people with protected characteristics with specialists in the field, campaigners and with senior leaders.

Services could be co-produced with the people who have expertise gathered through experience of using the services. Involving people in service and policy design would help the impact assessment process.

3. Supporting impact assessments

The groups talked about the power of case studies and one group suggested a bank of case studies illustrating where impact assessments have made a difference.

Some of us like templates and guidance on how to conduct an impact assessment. Others suggested the best templates are blank pages because this encourages thinking about the principles rather than a tick box exercise. In fact stopping and thinking is the most important thing to do.

4. Influencing leaders

We need to help leaders to understand the potential benefits of undertaking impact assessments. One way to do this could be to use more short, digital stories. These have been shown to be more effective in engaging busy leaders and generating action than long reports.

Judicial Reviews had a role in helping senior and middle leaders, to understand the critical role impact assessments can have in decision making. Sometimes the law can be useful in motivating leaders to engage.

Some workshop groups suggested that Welsh Government Ministers should champion impact assessments and act as a role model for their sector.

5. Bigger, wider and more strategic equality impact assessments

Delegates identified the need for bigger, wider and more strategic impact assessments. This is not about more detail but about considering the wider range of proposed changes.

One example given was the proposal to close a leisure centre. This was considered to have little impact because an alternative leisure centre was a short bus ride away. Unfortunately this didn't take account of the fact that the bus service was being cut. So people were unable to get to the alternative leisure centre.

Health boards and local authorities often work together but this could be broadened to include fire, police, further and higher education and transport. If public bodies work more closely together they will have a much better chance of understanding the cumulative impact of decisions.

The Future Generations Act will lead to the creation of Public Service Boards and this could be an opportunity to focus on cumulative impact and would be a particularly good fit with civic society impact assessments.

Some delegates suggested identifying a geographical area - perhaps a city or a region - and undertaking a bigger scale impact assessment. This could include equality, human rights and socio-economic inequality. It could bring together a wide range of public service providers, third sector providers and - at an early stage - involving the people who use their services. A pilot of a large scale impact assessment would be useful for both service providers and users in shaping services for the future.



About the Commission and Equality and Human Rights Exchange

The Equality and Human Rights Commission aims to reduce inequality, eliminate discrimination and promote and protect human rights.

The Equality and Human Rights Exchange

Our Equality and Human Rights Exchange currently has over 150 members. It is a forum dedicated to the exchange of ideas and advice for employers, service providers, trainers and consultants committed to achieving equality and human rights in the workplace and in service provision.

Regular events and mailings keep members informed about latest developments in equality and human rights issues and provide an opportunity for members to work together. Events take place three times a year and are regional. We organise events in north Wales, south Wales and mid / west Wales. Venues change each time as network members host these.

Our annual conference usually takes place in mid Wales and is a chance for the network to meet and hear speakers, participate in workshops and exchange information.

For more information about the Equality and Human Rights Exchange please contact:

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