

Not just another statistic

Life in Wales for people with mental health conditions, Gypsy Travellers, transgender people and asylum seekers and refugees



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Equality and
Human Rights
Commission

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Who we are

The Equality and Human Rights Commission aims to reduce inequality, eliminate discrimination, strengthen good relations between people, and promote and protect human rights.

November 2010

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ISBN: 978-1-84206-319-4

Foreword

“All I want is to be left in peace, without fear of harassment, prejudice or discrimination....no different rules. I don’t want allowances made, and at the end of the day, I just want to live a happy life”

Not just another statistic explores the life experiences of Gypsy Travellers, asylum seekers and refugees, transgender people and people with a mental health condition. We decided to find out more about these groups because our earlier research discovered they encountered more negative attitudes, prejudice and isolation than others living in Wales.

Our report offers the chance to see life through their eyes, and gives a deep appreciation of tough and painful daily experiences – at school, out shopping, at the doctors, but also with the family, at home or watching TV.

Our vision is of a society built on fairness and respect, people confident in all aspects of their diversity. Clearly this is a far off aspiration for some people living in Wales.

Being confident, being open, being yourself seems impossible for some. Feelings of fear and powerlessness are overwhelming and lead to hidden lives where lack of knowledge about rights, and fear of the consequences of seeking justice prevail.

Some negative experiences arise from illegal discrimination and poor treatment from public authorities, but much is outside the field of law. Our hope is that by seeing life as others experience it, all of us will be moved to take responsibility, in our own area, for tackling prejudice and speeding up progress towards our goal – a society where everyone can be confident, living without fear of reprisal for being open about who they are.

We hope that our report inspires you to rise to this challenge.

Ann Beynon, Commissioner for Wales
Kate Bennett, National Director Wales



Introduction

“You’ve got to take everybody as they come and respect them for what they are”

In October 2008 the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Wales published **Who do you see?** This report was based on the first major survey of attitudes in Wales towards race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, transgender, age, disability and human rights.

The survey reveals a Wales that is largely comfortable with people from different backgrounds. But it also found significant pockets of negative attitudes and prejudice. The most persistent negative attitudes centred around four groups of people – those with mental health conditions, Gypsy Travellers, transgender people and asylum seekers and refugees.

This report looks at life through the eyes of these four groups. In many ways the picture is bleak. It is one of fear, powerlessness, isolation and lack of confidence in going about daily life. Everyone feels this at some point in their life but for the most disadvantaged this toxic combination affects lives for years at a time.

- Information
- Advice, justice and advocacy
- Public services
- The community

In times of budget reductions and priority setting we tend to be interested in numbers and the scale of problems. But where fear prevails data collection is difficult, issues remain hidden and can easily be overlooked or discounted as small scale and insignificant. Although we don’t know how many Gypsy Travellers, asylum seekers and refugees, transgender people or people with a mental health condition live in Wales today, we can see that small changes would make big differences to individual lives. Our goal of a society built on fairness and respect remains unrealisable while groups of people – small or large – are ill treated by significant numbers of people.

As the people we talked to described the prejudice they encountered on a daily basis, solutions also emerged. Significantly the ideas on what needs to change were very similar across the four groups of people. They also match closely with priorities identified by many other groups the Commission has engaged with over the past three years. Our report is structured under these areas for improvement:

- The workplace
- Media portrayal
- Family and friends

Information

“A lot of time when I encounter discrimination now, it will be in work because everybody knows my situation. But it’s not blatant discrimination; it’s more ignorance or just lack of knowledge or people not thinking”

People in this survey feel that the wider public do not understand their issues and circumstances. This lack of awareness is seen as damaging to all aspects of life - in the family, community, and in work.

Everyone describes feelings of frustration about the gap in awareness as it leads to misunderstandings and being treated with a lack of respect. It contributes towards the sense of isolation that many people mention.

Clear, simple information is seen as a critical first step in increasing awareness and improving relationships between people. It can help to create better relationships with, for example, those providing public services.

Overall, people want the government, employers and other public organisations to carry out large scale and high-impact awareness campaigns. Such campaigns would change attitudes and behaviours and this is seen as the key to better lives for everyone in the future.

“Well I don’t think there is enough information put across about mental health issues and what mental health issues are, unless you have access to the internet. There is that information there, but you don’t have day-to-day materials on what mental health issues are – and how you can help somebody with mental health issues”

“I feel the government could help the situation by making more funds available to organisations to go and talk to employers, not about the issues of the laws but bringing them into a workshop environment...people who can answer the questions”

“Raising awareness of this through some campaign. If you have somebody who is well known willing to admit they had mental health problems. I think that would get through to people”

Advice, justice and advocacy

“There should be somewhere you can report it to and get something done about it”

Everyone speaks about how good quality advice is essential in helping them to manage everyday life. Support from advice services increases the likelihood of achieving a more effective dialogue with public authorities and through that, services that provide what's really needed.

Many people feel very strongly that they are unable to access justice for themselves. Everyone talks about their fears that challenging unfair treatment would risk making their personal situation, or the family's, much worse.

People describe how hard it is to fight for your rights when you are feeling low or vulnerable. They comment how dealing with the police, courts and other authorities requires drawing attention to yourself with no confidence that you will be believed. This could lead to further victimisation or discrimination. For example it could jeopardise an asylum claim or your place on a Gypsy Traveller site or your medical treatment. Overall the price was felt to be too high.

The lack of confidence in understanding and accessing rights is compounded by the practical barriers people face. This includes not knowing how or where to get information about rights. This is made more difficult if you don't read or write or speak English fluently. Gypsy Travellers and asylum seekers and refugees speak about how their children's reading, writing and language skills has begun to help in knowing their rights.

Several solutions are suggested for helping people to have better access to justice. This includes the government telling people clearly where to turn for advice and who to approach for help in accessing rights.

People say they need help from specialists such as advocates and lawyers as they don't feel able to secure their rights alone. They also speak about strengthening the law to prevent discrimination happening and enforcing discrimination law with more and bigger fines or sanctions.

“You wouldn’t complain to the police ... you don’t know where it might lead with your asylum claim”

“I don’t know what else I could have done. I needed someone to fight my battle for me because I wasn’t capable of doing it myself”

“There should be more support, more help available and make sure people know about it, because there are probably services that are there to help people....but people aren’t being told about them”

“And because we’re Travellers no-one believes us. That’s why Travellers don’t complain as much, because they know people don’t listen to us; people think we’re liars because we’re Travellers”

“I’m scared that if I go to court the opposition’s lawyer might be transphobic and say unpleasant things to me – I just don’t want to experience this. Nor any publicity in the media”

“Once you are outspoken...many people would actually start attacking you...the repercussions are huge. I have seen it personally. I think I’m very unlikely to speak out from now”

“Can you imagine if you have got depression? ...you can't deal with washing your dishes so how do you say ‘I demand this. This is my right?’”

“Us being Gypsies we don’t know our rights. We don’t know what law we’ve got”

“It’s about knowing who to approach because if you know your rights you can in some way enforce them”

Public services

“I’m just another statistic, I’m just another person on the end of the phone”

People describe their difficulties and frustrations in getting the public services they need. This includes key services such as health, education, housing and sites.

But generally people don't challenge poor decisions. They feel powerless or fearful of repercussions or worn down by the process of filling out forms etc. In fact filling out forms and understanding official bureaucracy is pinpointed as a source of difficulty across all groups.

Solutions include service providers simplifying their systems and their forms and distributing better information about their services. In that way people will be clear about what needs to be done and how to do it.

People feel service providers should try to change the attitudes and behaviours of staff by issuing guidance or by using positive case studies to show how relationships and results could be better.

“But the problem is on the forms... it says ‘can you walk far’ and yes I can, but the problem is I’m not like that everyday where I can walk...and I’m never going to fiddle, because I don’t want to get into trouble for fiddling. No way, I don’t believe in that”

“Because they are just a pain. I can’t, I can’t get it...I sit there and my mind goes blank. I think what on earth are they on about here, you know?”

“In organisations there is a lot of discrimination which I think is inbuilt in their policies, whether it is due to ignorance or personal opinions it is there”

“Nothing’s been done...like we’ve had all this in the past. We’ve had meetings with the doctors...with the MPs...they goes out, does a little bit of a report, waits for our votes and goodbye, forget about you. We’re still waiting”

Education

“It’s a waste of time, if you complain about things they’d only make things difficult”

“This day I was in school and this boy just came to me, he said ‘you n**’, I was really, really upset, so I cried”**

There are different experiences and views of the education system in Wales. Asylum seekers and refugees are generally positive about the experiences of their children in Welsh schools. But they are excluded from higher education because of costs. This reduces the chance of achieving qualifications which would help in eventually finding a decent job.

Many Gypsy Traveller parents are unhappy about their children's experiences at school. They feel that teachers have negative assumptions about their children which leads to low expectations. It also prevents the correct diagnosis of conditions such as dyslexia.

Bullying outside the classroom often happens and is very upsetting for children and parents.

Some parents acknowledge that the Gypsy Traveller way of life can disrupt education. Moving around sometimes means that children drop out of school early. Some parents had bad experiences during their own school years and this causes them to mistrust teachers and schools.

Making a fuss about bullying is viewed as too risky for the children. Nevertheless parents want children to have the benefits of a good education and see this as important for adult life so they continue to send children to school. Transgender people describe bullying and harassment at school from both pupils and teachers.

“...discriminated in school by my PE teacher, who said I’d be a failure all my life because I didn’t like football or rugby”

“When I applied for university, I got the place...but then a few weeks before I could start, I was told that I couldn’t go because of the tuition fees”

“The primary school said they hadn’t done anything (to find out the reason for low academic attainment) because they were assuming he wasn’t going to high school”

“I could complain to the other teachers, but it’s no good because it’s their word against you...no-one believes us”

Health

“I had a ridiculous conversation with them on the telephone saying ‘I am agoraphobic. I can’t get to you, could I have a visit?’ and they won’t do it”

Transgender people and people with mental health conditions speak about the difficulties of getting the appropriate treatment from the health service. For transgender people the problems result from the lack of services available in Wales and the lack of funding for referrals elsewhere.

This includes both surgery and psychiatric support. If a referral elsewhere is secured it can be expensive and time-consuming for the person travelling. In desperation some people pay for private treatment.

Generally people feel that there is a low priority given to treatment and a lack of awareness of transgender issues amongst medical staff.

Frustration and demoralisation increase in dealings with NHS processes. Name and gender changes are often not reflected in NHS systems and these have to be continually challenged.

People with mental health conditions feel that the quality of mental health care they receive is poor. Some describe inaccurate diagnoses and treatment. Mental health conditions are often misunderstood and the views of the patient are ignored or dismissed.

Some staff treat patients with a lack of respect or even hostility. This results in people feeling totally powerless and unable to assert their views about treatment. This stress sometimes leads to a worsening of their mental health condition.

“There was urine on the floor, cigarette ends in the bathroom...they have these nursing auxiliaries that have about two days training...you are the lowest of the low, and the staff treat you as though you have some contagious disease. They talk to you as if you are not there”

“It makes you feel like you are being a nuisance and that you are being belittled, because your GP obviously feels there is nothing wrong. Or that I am just time-wasting, so you feel a right nuisance. It is really horrible”

“I’ve lost all my trust in human nature. I used to have faith in the NHS, I don’t anymore”

“Because if they can’t see it, they don’t think there is anything wrong with you”

“It just reinforces all those feelings that I should be over this, I should sort myself out, that I am a waste of space...it reinforces all those feelings of I’m useless and worthless”

“I felt I could talk to the GP because I felt that was a confidential situation...but I was very afraid when there were social workers around”

“Money is supposed to be provided for people in Wales to be referred to Charing Cross (hospital) but it very rarely happens”

“There’s a lot of dispute about the way that funding in the NHS in Wales, the amount of funding that’s given to transgender issues...I think that’s probably one of the major unfairnesses that there is”

“There are no resources for doing gender treatments...there is none of that in South Wales, so you have the options of either going to see somebody...Leicester, or go to Charing Cross or you go abroad”

Benefits system

“...why do I have to buy maybe a pushchair in Tesco when it is fifty pounds and they might have it in a charity shop for ten pounds?”

People with mental health conditions and asylum seekers and refugees speak about their struggles to understand and navigate the benefits system.

For people with mental health conditions applying for benefits this is particularly difficult. Understanding the forms and questions is a problem and, adding to this, is the challenge of explaining the impact of mental ill-health on everyday life.

Conditions can impact in different ways at different times and it is hard to reflect this in the paperwork. There is little support on offer to help get through the process and some people just give up.

This, in turn, causes further financial hardship for the family, leaving individuals feeling guilty about the impact of their condition on the whole family's well-being.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work. As a result most receive £35 a week benefit paid directly onto a debit card. These cards can only be used at certain supermarkets. Almost all told us about the effect of this on everyday life.

Sometimes supermarkets are a distance from home and are more expensive than local markets and shops. The debit cards cannot be used in charity shops so more money must be spent to obtain basic goods. It is difficult to live on £35 a week and the lack of flexibility makes it harder.

“We are among the poorest families living on that small amount of money. And the government says in their manifesto ‘every child matters’ regardless of status or appearance...I am sure we are not on that list”

“I am from Africa and what I eat I don't always get in Tesco. I get them in small shops but they don't take the card. Sometimes I cry”

“The attitude from the DWP can be horrendous”

“They don't give you enough information on benefits”

Housing and site provision

“You’ve got to wash children every day. They’re out playing, you’ve got to wash, there’s rats. We’re over-run by rats. You’ve got no water, you’ve got no toilets, you’ve got no showers, you’ve got no facilities, you’ve not got a thing, nothing”

“I was literally left almost destitute, living in one room with two children for months”

Some Gypsy Travellers in our survey are happy with the site they live on and are positive about the facilities and the community. But some people have strong criticisms about their sites as they lack basic facilities such as sanitation, there are dangerous roads and nowhere for children to play.

People living on local authority sites feel they are not listened to by the council and suggestions for improvements are ignored.

Relations with local authority site wardens are sometimes tense and the overall relationship with the local authority can be confrontational and unhelpful.

For asylum seekers and refugees housing is also a source of distress. Some describe the impact of living in very cramped accommodation with little privacy and poor facilities. Some people describe the upheaval caused by the dispersal system, which forces them to move to different cities, and splits up families causing anxiety and distress.

Police

“They were suspicious because they couldn’t understand why my son was a Traveller and didn’t have a criminal record”

“Police and people need to listen to us, take our word and don’t put us down as a liar”

For Gypsy Travellers relations with the police can sometimes be strained. Some people feel they, or their families, are targeted or victimised. They are pessimistic about resolving this and feeling under suspicion affects both health and well-being.

Gypsy Travellers share a reluctance to report crime to the police with asylum seekers and refugees and transgender people fearing possible repercussions.

The community

“Just shopping, for example, in the middle of the day, just walking around and having people shout abuse at you. Sometimes walking past pubs...and people will say things, you know”

Many asylum seekers and refugees have positive experiences in their communities and describe Wales as a very welcoming place to be. But some asylum seekers and refugees experience hostility and discrimination in their local areas. This is also the case for Gypsy Travellers and transgender people. People with mental health conditions explain how anticipating harassment limits their lives.

Some people describe how negative assumptions prevent them from using services in the local community such as shops and pubs. Some avoid using the local facilities for fear of abuse, others experience such hostility they quickly leave the premises. Some people are illegally barred from local shops or from using the pub.

Shopping in larger supermarkets is seen by some as less likely to result in hostility. But other people feel they have no choice about where they go as they are forced to use certain shops because of the voucher system for obtaining food.

Many people do not feel safe in their local community. Being out in the street sometimes results in harassment such as verbal abuse and throwing objects. This makes people fearful of walking around, particularly at night. Sometimes the hostility leads to violence.

Transgender people describe their experiences of sexual assault and rape. Many people comment that they lack the confidence to challenge hostile behaviour.

Solutions in our survey include implementing the current laws against harassment and discrimination more rigorously. Some people say the law should be strengthened and that there should be bigger penalties for discrimination.

Some tell us they would feel more confident in reporting discrimination and hate crime if they had a better understanding of their rights. Others feel the solutions are around building trust and better relationships within communities through personal contact.

“They are like, those people should go back home. They shouldn’t be here...and they’re scrounging off our tax money. And you feel so bad because you can’t help being like that”

“People don’t come into this site. Like it’s not normal for the outsiders to come in. So in that way again back to discrimination about where the address was...I paid for a boiler with my guarantee and they didn’t want to come out to fix it”

“Where I live there are loads of little kids, and when they see me around they are like ‘n**, n****’...it doesn’t really get me upset because they are still young...but then it gets me thinking, where did they hear this from, and it’s obvious that it’s coming from their parents, and I live around these people”**

“An incident happened today whereby I was called by my previous identity male name and everything like that, which I find very, very hurtful indeed...it doesn’t matter what you’re dressed in or anything, people insist in calling you by the name they knew you as”

“I just wish that people would let me get on with my own life. I don’t tell them how to live their lives so why should they pick on me all the time?”

“You’re just scared because you don’t want to make the situation any worse than it is...it’s better to walk away and leave it (the abuse)”

“What you do see now and again is people sort of sniggering as they walk past you”

“They’ll be shouting out like ‘go back to your own country, we don’t want you here’...”

The workplace

“It's just hard getting a job these days. And I am damned if I do, and damned if I don't, kind of thing. If I don't tell the truth about my mental health, I probably won't get an interview. And if I do tell the truth, I will get interview but I am guaranteed not to get the job”

“I did not understand why with Cambridge qualifications and a degree, I would be signposted ... for a job in a factory”

People describe how much they would like to get and keep a job. They feel it would have a positive impact on their lives. But they are pessimistic about their personal prospects.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work and they tell us about how this undermines their sense of worth. They don't want to be on benefits, feel they are losing skills and want to contribute to society.

Gypsy Travellers, transgender people and those with mental health conditions describe the barriers that prevent access to employment. The possibility of an interview - let alone a job offer - is very remote. Barriers result in part from employers' negative assumptions about lack of skills or potential sickness absence.

Some people say that the price of securing and keeping a job is secrecy about the person you really are.

Some people fortunate enough to be recruited to a job struggle to hold on to it because of a lack of understanding from colleagues. Feeling excluded gives others no option but to leave.

Everyone speaks about how important it is to transform workplaces in Wales. It is suggested that better information for employers can break down the barriers to getting a job. Better information can also challenge some of the myths fuelling negative attitudes. This helps to improve relations between colleagues in the workplace.

People want employers to do more to promote good stories about individuals and the benefits of getting the right people into the right jobs whatever their background. One person suggests that the government should introduce incentives for employers to recruit staff from groups under-represented in our workplaces.

“I was told to go home and change the wig that I was wearing and I did that and came back, but after a while I just kind of...didn't think it was worth it anymore...because it was quite stressful sometimes dealing with some of the clients...”

“There were different customers you had to speak to who found it very unnerving to speak to someone with a foreign accent, and in that sense, they were very discriminatory”

“Then my boss's attitude towards me was quite aggressive...I felt as though I was being managed out of the company”

“Yeah, it helps my mental health to be doing something”

“I think if I went for a job I wouldn't tell them...because of how they might judge me”

“If you do want to get off benefits and you do go and look for a job in that town, as soon as they see your address, that's it. The interview is cancelled”

“I think probably they (employers) think you don't have the skills...they underestimate you”

“And a lot of employers now boast that 'equality and all this'...but deep down they are just words, because they don't follow through with half of that”

“A lot of it was very, very subtle...I started getting left out of meetings, information wasn't being passed to me”

Media portrayal

“They think about workhouses and mental asylums. And media reports about people with mental health conditions killing people”

The media is seen as absolutely critical in shaping public attitudes. People feel that negative portrayals fuel mistaken assumptions and this encourages misunderstanding, derision and hostility in the wider community.

Everyone wants to see much more positive media coverage and much better representation in, for example, the television programmes watched by millions of viewers.

Some tell us about how important soaps could be in promoting more positive images. Other people point to the role of celebrities in promoting a better understanding of the issues.

“There is always jokes on the telly about crazy people...something about OCD you know, on the telly... and it was just a big joke and yet, people suffer with it don't they?”

“But if he had done something bad, all people soon would have known about it, do you know what I mean? Like a Gypsy person, like a Gypsy child who is good, there is nothing said about it. It is like the Travellers that they put on in the newspapers the only thing what they shows in newspapers is badness...like they never shows nothing good”

“When there is elections coming they should actually be sensitive enough ...when they raise issues like immigration. They should discuss it but they should be sensitive you know because... when you are on the media, when you are on the TV screen you are speaking with millions”

“The press always portrays transsexualism as being sordid, about fetish, about homosexuality...”

“So we're blacklisted before we even start...what kind of people are painted in your minds before you start?”

Family and friends

“So the whole big family, grandkids and all, went round at Christmas and I wasn’t invited...so that was quite obvious discrimination and that hurt a lot because it was family”

Family and friends play a big role in all of our lives. For asylum seekers and refugees the asylum process has a devastating impact on family, particularly children. Families are sometimes split up or forced to move to different parts of the country. This disrupts children's lives and education as they can't settle in one school or make friends. To make matters worse children can be separated from their parents causing great distress for everyone.

For transgender people family and friends are sometimes a source of hostility and discrimination.

People with mental health conditions say they often keep their situation a secret because of the stigma associated with it. Being open with family and friends can have a negative impact on relationships.

Many that we spoke to pointed to the vital importance of raising awareness with people about the issues to achieve a change in attitudes. They feel that only a change in attitudes could bring about a positive change in relationships with family and friends and, beyond that, within the wider community.

“Actually the biggest place where I have experienced discrimination is at home, and family and friends”

“I don’t want him (son) to suffer because of me”

“I’ve got five children, there’s four that know nothing...four of them do not know I take tablets or have taken tablets...”

“There’s nothing easy about what I’m doing...you do lose a lot friends”

“You just feel like being you is something wrong...and you have no right to be, like you’re on a lower level than anybody else...that’s how I feel”

Next steps

“The only thing that can make things easier is the education of people”

“There should be more support, more help available and make sure people know about it”

“I think there should be more awareness, right down to school age”

“If they strengthen their law like for discrimination and everything that might help”

The evidence gathered in this research gives a voice to people who are seldom heard and paints a vivid picture of life for those experiencing prejudice and negative attitudes on a daily basis.

Despite the challenges everyone we spoke to suggested improvements that could be made, how attitudes could be changed and what steps could be taken to make lives better. In each section of this report we have included people's ideas.

As a top priority everyone highlights the need to change attitudes and behaviours through awareness-raising and through education. People feel that changing public perceptions of the issues is a task for a wide range of players.

These include the media, government, public service providers and employers. Making a concerted effort to promote positive images in all of these areas would transform lives.

People spoke about the good stories that could be told about the contributions they make to society and how these are rarely promoted. They spoke about the media and the workplace as key areas where this could make a difference.

Personal contact is seen as the key to building understanding, trust and better relations within communities.

Most people talked about how important staff attitudes are in relationships with public services. They said that simpler systems acknowledging one size doesn't fit all would be a big step forward.

Many people spoke about the role of advice and advocacy as a life-line in coping with everyday tasks and in understanding rights.

Finances are very stretched for everyone. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for a broad range of individuals and organisations to take actions and make significant progress in achieving the positive next steps highlighted by those who participated in our survey.

The Commission's priorities are evidence based and outcome focused. The Triennial Review, 'How Fair is Britain' will underpin all of our future work and the findings from this research add to our evidence in Wales and will contribute to shaping our priorities.

We will use our regulatory powers under equality and human rights law and this includes promoting understanding and effective practice. We will be sharing the findings from this research with a wider audience. We are organising conferences and events with specific audiences, such as the media, to promote change.

But the solutions that emerge do not necessarily lie in the Commission's hands. In many areas it is for other organisations and individuals to make the small changes necessary to tackle these issues. Together these will enable us all to make progress towards a fairer Wales – a Wales where everyone is confident and treated with dignity and respect.

“We are human beings, we are not labels, we are human beings and at the end of the day, all we ask is a fair crack of the whip”

Contact us

You can find out more or get in touch with us via our website:

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This survey

Following publication of the Commission's 'Who Do You See?' report in 2008 we asked GfK NOP to carry out qualitative research to further explore the experiences of those people most at risk of discrimination: transgender people, Gypsy Travellers, asylum seekers and refugees and people with mental health conditions.

A programme of qualitative research was carried out early in 2010. This involved interviews with 65 people in various locations across Wales and enabled researchers to explore individual respondents' experiences and views in detail.

We would like to say a special thank you to all who took part in the interviews, giving up their valuable time to share their experiences and stories about living in Wales.

For more information and the full research reports please go to:

www.equalityhumanrights.com/wales