

Descriptive account of interviews with KEY WITNESSES

The following are descriptive responses to semi-structured interviews. Q1 refers to question 1, Q2 to question 2, etc. A total of 17 people were interviewed.

Q1

Of the total 17 people interviewed 11 said discrimination existed in their service. Three said it did not, and 2 said discrimination did not generally occur. Irish travellers* were the people most frequently discriminated against. Discrimination was also said to occur due to the ethnic background and one person mentioned the use of the Irish language as a factor of discrimination. Gender, age and sexual orientation were identified as reasons why people were discriminated against. People with disabilities were seen as discriminated against. The structure** of Northern Ireland society contributed to discrimination, and one interviewee said it happened to the, “less educated client group.”

*Irish Travellers have been identified as an ethnic minority group in Northern Ireland. In Great Britain these people may more often be known as Gypsies, or on continental Europe as Romany. Travellers have gained this recognition under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, particularly Section 75, which identifies nine categories of citizen who must be afforded equality of opportunity.

**Northern Ireland has historically identified two traditions within its society. Both of these have religious and political features. Of course there are other traditions and cultures but these have not always gained the significance they merit. Basically the structure most frequently referred to is the recognition of two predominant traditions. One of these traditions is focused on the Catholic religion, and as being nationalist or republican in outlook, and favouring a united Ireland, totally independent from Great Britain in political terms. The other tradition consists of people from the Protestant religion, who are unionist or loyalist and wish to retain the political union of Northern Ireland with Great Britain. The latter is numerically stronger.

Q2

It was claimed that some cancer patients are treated insensitively. People in less prestigious work were said to get less favourable treatment. The media was said to contribute to an image of black people, which was less favourable than that of white people.

In a training context it was said that the jobs or roles people held determined their selection for training. Ex-prisoners from either a republican or loyalist background were often discriminated against when it came to training. However, in cases where these men and women were involved in community work, some had been selected for equity, diversity and interdependence training.

People felt discriminated against in accessing medical services. The provision of medication under the direction of a doctor, to people on the unemployed register, is normally provided free of charge at the point of access. This is usually done by a pharmaceutical chemist. It was reported that as people waited in the chemist's shop they were loudly asked if their prescription was free. This immediately identified them as unemployed. This left the person concerned feeling stigmatised. The result was that sometimes the unemployed person did not leave their own neighbourhood, as they did not wish others to know that they were unemployed and receiving state benefit.

Travellers were said to be misunderstood by others. * One interviewee recalled that when a halting or permanent site was proposed in the greater Belfast area 13000 objections were made at the planning stage.

*Travellers have a nomadic life style and may set up camp with their caravans at the side of a road. Local farmers and residents often objected to these encampments as they become untidy. Some local authorities provide permanent sites. This means that travellers can maintain their nomadic life styles style but are assured a place to live and go about their business.

Q2 continued

Discrimination occurred at the work place. Mature women were often called girls at work. Some buildings are inaccessible to people with disabilities.

One interviewee told of the difficulty he had in obtaining a chequebook in the Irish language. The bank in question operated on both sides of the Irish border, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The bank did supply Irish language chequebooks, and the border was only 10 minutes away. However, the interviewee said he experienced delay and difficulty when he asked for an Irish language chequebook.

Q3

It was said that discrimination could take place anywhere. Locations where people should be able to access services were particularly mentioned. These included schools and youth clubs. [Following the events of 11 September the mosque in Belfast had been attacked.] Insensitive treatment of cancer patients occurred in clinics, hospitals and doctors' surgeries.

In the case of travellers it was said that not all service providers realised that Travellers required a larger living space than those of the settled community did. The point was made that in a planning context and within policy development, discrimination occurred through lack of consideration of the issues involved.

Some organisations, and this came from a worker in the informal youth service, were said to be dominated by men and were not "female friendly." These organisations were characterised by a lack of flexibility that some women required due to family obligations. An example was the normal working hours of some organisations. This conflicted with taking children to and from schools.

Q4

All of the 17 agreed that there are other people in society who are discriminated against.

A lot of this discrimination was said to focus on gender issues, particularly on women from ethnic minorities, and single parents. It was mentioned that women from some ethnic minorities had been affected by a culture that left them reserved [shy in unfamiliar social surroundings], and this worked to their disadvantage in gaining access to services. The Travelling Community was seen as a category suffering discrimination, as were gay men and lesbians.

In the provision of services, socially disadvantaged groups such as those who abused alcohol or drugs were mentioned as suffering discrimination. In the youth service it was said that the 30 – 50 year old staff of the service discriminate against youth.

Although one local authority had a policy of using the Irish language it had an ethos of conducting work in English.

In the area of vocational training there was some cynicism. Young Catholics were receiving training in west Belfast, a predominately Catholic area. It was said that this ensured that they obtained access to low paid jobs. The training in basic IT skills was questioned. It was put to interviewer, “was this training service provided only so that the young Catholic population went into low paid work?” It should be said that there are few major employers in west Belfast.

Q5

Discrimination was seen to be caused by lack of education, and that does not always come down to school based learning. Some people preferred to say the discrimination was a result of ignorance and lack of information. People did not necessarily intend to discriminate. On the other hand not everyone in the health service was said to be vocationally motivated. They were in that type of work because it was seen as compatible with their social conditions or aspirations.

Q5 continued

A lack of parental influence was cited as being behind the lack of awareness of other people's cultures. This lack of awareness led to ignorance, which in turn opened doors to prejudice. People were said to be reluctant to inform themselves. In Northern Ireland, it was said people quickly tend to categorise others, historically this would have religious and political connotations. Ultimately, it was said, this leads to a fear of anything and anyone who is different.

Q6

There was a general belief that people in authority discriminated and so did those who held influential positions. White, middle class men from the civil service, and the Department of the Environment in particular, were said to fall into this category. This was extended to include those who had a high media profile, and therefore had a voice to influence the community.

Another form of discrimination was identified. This was the electrical supply industry. Those responsible for the cost structuring in this sector of the economy were said to discriminate against the poor. Energy costs in Northern Ireland were said to be discriminatory against people on low incomes.

Paramilitary organisations of both republican or loyalist outlook and the armed forces of the state were seen as discriminatory. Others viewed as discriminatory were; school teachers and managers, evangelical Protestants, and middle class Catholics who might discriminate against working class Catholics to highlight their position on the social scale. Discrimination was said to occur within families

The media was seen to discriminate by excluding people from taking part in discussion.

Q7

Discrimination was seen to take many forms. Some saw sectarianism as the worst form of discrimination, but this was extended to include racial violence, and harassment against black people and refugees. This was said to show a lack of respect for people from other cultures. Damage to property, as against people, was also mentioned as discriminatory.

Some saw domestic violence as discriminatory. Discrimination that undermines self-esteem and is directed against people with disabilities was also mentioned.

Institutional violence was mentioned as one form of discrimination. Institutions were also seen as sometimes creating an imbalance in society. They sometimes pursued issues in such a way that members of the public or those who held positions in organisations that worked with the client group in question became alienated. The result was said to be that at times there was less than fair treatment, in the search for access to or delivery of service.

Discrimination in employment still exists in Northern Ireland, according to some, this is most likely to occur in small organisations. However one person said that religion was less important than it had been in the past on questions of employment. There was a reference to structural discrimination, which, it was said, was unavoidable. And promotion of discrimination was said to be promoted by an academic elite, which was 20 years behind the times.

Q8

Health was the service most people said they wanted to access. Next came the various services of local government, which includes public health and leisure services. Vocational training and guidance also share second position. Then comes education which is followed by social care. Leisure and culture along with registry services are the least used.

Q9

There was some concern that the medical profession had the power to direct money to acute services at the expense of other services. At the same time it was said that services could be more easily accessed by people with money, particularly in the context of information from medical tests. Concern was expressed at the lack of dietary considerations in hospitals.

In housing services it was said that the authorities saw gay men as a problem. This sector was seen as not changing quickly enough to shifts in social conditions and expectations. Some problems were overcome by working with the Housing Rights Office.

Bureaucracy within the services has meant that access is inhibited. This has led to people withdrawing from pursuit of the service. Some disappointment was expressed by people regarding the services they worked in. One person said that more should be done to accommodate those who wished to access services in the language of their choice, which in this case was Irish.

It was felt by some that discrimination existed at a policy level. Although it was indicated on different occasions that those implementing policy discriminated, perhaps not necessarily through intention. Those who formulated policy were singled out as being responsible for discrimination. One public sector manager said that sometimes managers had to discriminate for good reason. For the provision of services to the many, sometimes there had to be discrimination against the few, it was claimed.

Q10

It was said that the middle classes were good at accessing services and that if one lived near a middle class area the health service was likely to be good. The upper income earners were said to generally do better at accessing services, sometimes it was possible to buy your way out of a problematic situation.

Q10 continued

One manager of housing services said that his service was not moving quickly enough and thought that there should be a bottom up approach that would involve the client group to a greater extent. More ought to be done about incorporating an understanding of other people's cultures in the services. The education service was seen as being particularly bureaucratic.

Social workers were seen to work well as a team. The police service was open 24 hours a day, but it was admitted that there had been difficulties in obtaining an interpreter service.

Traveller's children and people from overseas and ethnic minorities groups experienced difficulties in accessing services. In Belfast Catholics were said to favour one hospital while Protestants favoured another.

Personalities were seen as a problem in some services. This was most noticeable at reception points where people first came to access services. Some workers in the services were said to hide behind policy and procedures. It was pointed out that this could also occur in the community and voluntary sector just as easily as the statutory sector.

Q11

All 17 interviewed said they thought it possible to improve services. It was also felt that there could be more community involvement in the provision of services with a bottom up approach which would allow people to take decisions. School curricula were seen as another area where improvements could be made as were the interpreting services.

Staff training was an important area in service improvement. Consideration should be given to making the staff more aware of other cultures and developing a multi-cultural ethos in the public services of Northern Ireland. Included in this should be the provision of helpful literature in appropriate languages.

Q11 continued

A dual policy was suggested to improve the access to services. Provision of information should be taken out of the hands of what were described as “bureaucrats” but might better be described as “professionals.” In place of this it was suggested that specially trained staff should be employed at reception points. These staff members would work through forms with the clients, so that they would know what they were involved in and what was happening in the process.

Some change in project thinking was called for. It was said projects had to be re-defined every few years to appear “sexy” for the funders. Something more substantial was called for. Monitoring and auditing systems should be improved.

Some practical suggestions were made regarding the improvement of services to the public:

- ❖ Provision of trained signers at service outlets for people with speech problems
- ❖ Installation of hearing loops at service outlets for the hard of hearing
- ❖ Development of the use of interactive technology so that members of the public can more readily access information about services
- ❖ Break with the 9am to 5pm working day, as it does not always suit those who want to access services. Nor does it always suit those in the administration of services.

Q12

It was generally thought that some protection was afforded against discrimination. However protection by the law itself was not considered sufficient. Indeed, on occasions the law itself was thought to promote discrimination, due to some anarchic content. One person said that they now needed a lawyer by their side at work to interpret the rules and regulations regarding discrimination.

The political geography of Northern Ireland was said to support discrimination. People live in Protestant/unionist areas, or Catholic/nationalist areas or interface areas. [The latter are those parts of cities or towns where Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods border on one another, but usually not integrated.]

Q13

All those (17) interviewed believed that something could be done to fight discrimination. It was said that the law should cover more categories than the nine already covered by the existing legislation, in terms of equal opportunities. The state could make the policy become reality by putting the policy into action and involving people in everyday activities.

It was said that the organisations in which people worked were the best place to start fighting discrimination. One way of doing this would be to promote staff training in the area of anti-discrimination. Promotion at work should include multi-agency assessment, bringing people in from outside the organisation who are in a position to make informed judgements about a person's abilities in certain aspects of a job. It was also said that by selecting certain careers people could make a choice to be involved in anti-discrimination work.

Some felt there was a need to teach human rights in schools and to take up programmes of affirmative action in work places and in the community.

Q14

Of the 17 as many as 14 answered yes to this question, one person said no, and one person did not record an answer. People said they are involved in anti-discrimination activities directly through their work. Some of these do their anti-discrimination work in the form of staff training.

Two people claimed anti-discrimination work through trade union activity. Others said their involvement came through human rights/ civil rights work or activities on refugee issues, and Traveller's affairs. One director of a major community development organisation said his centre was deliberately located in a part of Belfast that did not have a political or religious identity.

Q15

Everyone interviewed said they believed something could be done to fight discrimination. Someone said, "discrimination was everybody's issue." It was also said that people needed to organise jointly to fight discrimination. One said the fight against discrimination was advanced "by people not joining political parties."

It was said that the government could do more, it could give leadership, in the fight against discrimination. The government was seen not to be following through in implementing its policies on discrimination. On the subject of discrimination one person called on the government not to fund what were described as aspirational endeavours, and were not solid projects.

The same person who worked in the building located in part of the city with a non-sectarian identity said, "discrimination has to be confronted, it lives on silence and acquisition." Another said that children should be allowed to develop at school as against following the curriculum. We should also stop creating hate figures. [This may be a reference to TV coverage of the war in Afghanistan.]

Q16

The general feeling was that where there is difference there is likely to be discrimination. Being different was said to make it easier to discriminate. Fear of diversity was said to be another reason for discrimination, especially among Protestants.

People in Northern Ireland, one person said, lacked experience of open government and there is a blinkered approach by government. This it was said added to discrimination.

It was pointed out that when difference was accompanied by affluence, difference was not seen as a problem.

There was a general belief that some differences were more acceptable than others. For example, there was said to be a greater acceptance of difference in physical disability than through mental health.

Some people were said to 'stand out' more than others. At times individuals or groups would see themselves as different. And indeed some chose to live on the margins of society. An example of this was the Travellers, who one interviewee said did not always want to engage with other organisations.

Furthermore, it was said that differences could be positive as well as negative. Though it was generally felt that differences would lead to discrimination, differences could occur by degrees. It was said the law and civil society should deal with these issues.

Q16 continued

In tackling differences it was said that education had a role to play in promoting tolerance of difference. Education should start with the young, in school, and should continue through everyday life

An Irish speaker said that often people who wanted to speak Irish were seen as eccentrics. He also said that one should feel comfortable with difference. That was complemented by another who said we should be critical in our attitude towards difference. However, the overall view was that difference should be celebrated.

End

