

**Background Information**

**And**

**Recent Achievements**

**2015/16**

**Background to the Equality Coalition**

The Equality Coalition is a broad alliance of non-governmental organisations whose members cover all the categories listed in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (‘s75’), as well as other equality strands. It was founded in 1996 by community and voluntary sector organisations and trade unions. It was instrumental in putting equality at the forefront of the agenda at that time, specifically in relation to PAFT, the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, and ultimately the public sector duty in s75. The Equality Coalition now has over 80 members, many of which are umbrella organisations. It is co-convened by CAJ and UNISON.

The Equality Coalition continues to provide a forum for unity between all sectors when campaigning for equality, while allowing for the diversity of its members’ work and views. By facilitating a strong message from diverse equality groups, mutual support between members, and consideration of the multiple identity aspects of equality work, it helps to ensure maximum impacts in a resource efficient manner. This approach is particularly important in the current environment, where organisations’ resources are challenged and cuts to public services are impacting disproportionately on the most disadvantaged groups in our society.

There are two key tenets to the work of the Coalition: the first is information sharing and capacity building; the second is lobbying and advocacy. Its aims and objectives can be summarised as:

* To ensure the equality duty is put into practice.
* To raise the public profile of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland.
* To facilitate information sharing.
* Strategic planning to effect change for critical equality issues.

The Equality Coalition has bi-monthly meetings, at which members can exchange information and discuss current equality issues. In addition, the Equality Coalition compiles and circulates information on public consultations, members’ and other events, and equality news. It also facilitates quarterly high level meetings with the Equality Commission. The Equality Coalition hosts several events to facilitate engagement with public authorities, build capacity and allow for networking between members. It is also available to provide advice and support on equality matters.

**Staffing**

The Equality Coalition and its staff members have always been run from within CAJ, with joint direction from UNISON. There has been and remains no other collective voice on equality for the sector in Northern Ireland. There remains no other overarching consistent ‘critical friend’ of the equality oversight bodies, public authorities and local government. CAJ employs a specialist human rights post in the Equalities Coordinator who both engages on CAJ-led equalities initiatives but also runs the Equality Coalition. Equalities actions requiring a formal legal personality, such as litigating on the absence of an anti-poverty strategy or issuing equality schemes complaints, can and are easily taken forward by CAJ or other member groups.

**Recent Achievements**

**Austerity and Inequality**

The Equality Coalition’s Oct 2015 major international [conference](http://www.nvtv.co.uk/shows/focal-point-friday-16-october-2015/) entitled [*Austerity and Inequality: ‘A threat to peace?’*](http://www.equalitycoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Austerity-and-Inequality-Conference-Report-November-2015.pdf)Addressed, among others by the head of the Stormont-House mandated OECD mission to NI, a member of the UN ICESCR Committee, the heads of the Equality and Human Rights Commissions and a range of civil society organisations who are members of the Equality Coalition, including PPR, the Human Rights Consortium, the Rural Community Network and ICTU. It also featured a presentation from the barrister instructed in the PILS-funded CAJ judicial review of the anti-poverty strategy, Gordon Anthony BL.

A Conference report was launched at the Northern Ireland Assembly in an event sponsored by the two NI equality Ministers. This and a range of follow up and related actions have helped challenge the backslide in the application of the equality-tools of the peace settlement in the context of public sector cuts. This has been in the context of the Stormont House Agreement providing for a structural adjustment programme for NI, with resistance to its implementation leading to a further ‘Fresh Start’ Agreement. In March 2016 at the Irish government secretariat in Belfast the Equality Coalition launched research conducted by Professor Christine Bell and Dr Robbie McVeigh entitled [‘A Fresh Start for Equality?](http://www.equalitycoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/A-FRESH-START-FOR-EQUALITY-FINAL-2.pdf)’. This report provided a comprehensive ‘shadow’ assessment of the state of sectarian inequality in Northern Ireland.

[The recommendations](http://www.equalitycoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/A-FRESH-START-FOR-EQUALITY-exec-summary.pdf) stemming from this report will be used as a lobbying tool by the Equality Coalition and members in the battle against austerity and inequality.

Rather than simply voicing concerns when the equality duties are not given due weight the Equality Coalition has taken an approach of ensuring breaches are responded to by formal complaints by affected persons. The Equality Coalition held an Equality schemes ‘complaints’ seminar and has held training with UNISON shop-stewards, and assisted a range of groups in taking complaints.

The Equality Coalition – with our member groups - have been involved in significant ‘failure to comply’ challenges to the statutory equality duty:

* **Assembly Commission:** childcare scheme; challenge to austerity cuts to childcare scheme for public sector workers, resulting in mitigating measures, particularly for staff with disabilities;
* **Fuel Poverty**: challenge with fuel poverty groups over replacement scheme to £8 million a year NI Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) which would have ended mandatory private sector contributions to scheme and removed commitment to allocate on basis of objective need; resulted in policy change being aborted and original scheme extended until March 2018;
* **NI Programme for Government**: Coalition promoted review and complaint re scope of consultation and monitoring leading to changes regarding equality monitoring of programme for government indicators and pressure regarding equality strategies;

* **Bedroom Tax**: Coalition review challenge to equality screening that avoided consideration of several protected groups including LGBT and ethnic minorities. These groups were then considered, but inadequately and a formal complaint is now likely;

**Reforming and Enforcing Equality Schemes**

In 2016 we initiated a research project to assess the effectiveness of the current enforcement of the equality duty.

In 2016 the Equality Coalition engaged in a significant body of work on new equality schemes. We produced a comprehensive submission to public authorities seeking changes to standard schemes to provide for (among other matters):

* Explicit provision that schemes cover decisions on employment and procurement functions of public authorities;
* Explicit reference in schemes to the provision of women’s’ only services and funding for women’s organisations being consistent with the equality duty;
* A definition for the ‘good relations’ limb of the duty and methodology that moves away from considering good relations in terms of what is politically contentious;

Schemes are to be reviewed every five years. In 2016 local councils reviewed their scheme and a number adopted proposals by the Equality Coalition – this followed a protracted battle with the enforcement agency to get good relations changes accepted.

**Developing an anti-poverty strategy based on objective need**

In September 2015 CAJ won a landmark judicial review against the NI Executive for not adopting an anti-poverty strategy on the basis of objective need (a requirement of the peace settlement). This followed considerable concern and activism in the coalition against both the ‘rollback’ of the equality provisions of the peace agreements in general and the concept of objective need in particular. Following the judgement CAJ held a roundtable with Coalition members and academics to develop principles and activity for a new strategy in the new 2016 Assembly mandate.

We further organised a conference held in UNISON under the auspices of member groups the NI Anti-Poverty Network and Child Poverty Alliance in April 2016 to discuss and refine these principles, which have subsequently been used by member groups in their engagement with the NI Executive on the development of a new anti-poverty strategy. There is now a commitment by the NI Executive to produce a strategy in early 2017.

**European Union Referendum**

Whilst Northern Ireland voted to ‘remain’ and almost all persons in NI are entitled to be Irish (and hence EU) citizens the UK government following the referendum has stated that the UK in its entirety will be withdrawn from the EU – the terms of this are still unknown, but there are enormous implications for rights and equality in NI. Shortly after the referendum result we organised an expert roundtable, addressed by the coalition co-conveners and a range of member groups along with academics to take stock at the implications.

On the 27 September 2016 we organised, in partnership with Ulster University a major seminar ‘BREXITING and Rights’ addressed by the co-conveners and which considered [six expert papers](http://www.caj.org.uk/contents/1451) on the equality and human rights implications of the referendum – these included a NI specific model to retain equivalent levels of employment rights (which are devolved uniquely to NI).

This process has been followed by evidence giving to a number of UK and Irish Parliamentary committees and forums. The Coalition, supported by the UNISON GPF, has informed and developed public and political debate in relation to the impact that withdrawing from the EU will have for rights and equality protections.

**Countering Incitement to hatred**

A body of work has been initiated, and given new impetuous in light of racist attacks linked directly to the referendum campaign, to reform NI ‘incitement to hatred’ legislation. Whilst legislation has existed since 1970, and is more extensive than its counterpart in Great Britain, there has only been one sole known conviction in all this time. Legislation currently sets a high threshold in the context of the harms of sectarianism, racism and homophobia in the NI context.

The Equality Coalition has taken an approach of maximising the impact of its interventions and those of its members in relation to policy development and implementation. In practice this has meant that in recent years we have moved away from the approach of large scale responses to formal policy consultation documents to much more of a tailored activist approach.

The strength of collective action is not to be trapped in a world of submissions, but rather to take an outcomes focused approach at the big contentious policy questions of the day, using a range of methodologies including expert analysis of equality policy and practice, mobilisation of civil society organisations, and shaping power through high level lobbying and litigation. During the year we also undertook a number of initiatives relating to local government.

January 2017



The Equality Coalition have all publications and conference reports including equality scheme complaint templates, a guide on the proper application of section 75 and the updated guide to effective consultation on the website. Monthly equality updates are also available online including all information on upcoming events.

If you would like to receive any further information on the Equality Coalition, to become a member or to receive updates on our work please contact us on the details overleaf.



Equality Coalition

c/o CAJ

1st Floor, Community House

Citylink Business Park

6A Albert Street

Belfast

BT12 4HQ

Tele: 02890992548

Text phone: 07703 486949

Web www.equalitycoalition.net

Email: equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter @EqualityCoal