

Confidently promoting equality

Equality Exchange conference report

June 2009



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The Equality and Human Rights Commission aims to reduce inequality, eliminate discrimination, strengthen good relations between all people and promote and protect human rights, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to participate in society.

The Equality Exchange is an employer network bringing together people working to promote equality and human rights. The network has over 100 members and meets regularly to share good practice and to learn from each other. We welcome new members so if you would like to join or want more information please contact us.

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Why confidence is so important

For this year's Equality Exchange conference we chose the theme of **Confidently Promoting Equality**. Our theme builds on the 2008 conference where we focused on leadership and how we, as an equality community, could increase our impact within our organisations and by joining up with others.

Now we are in more turbulent times with the current economic recession, how can we ensure that we keep equality high on the agenda? Budget cuts are likely and all business decisions, including those that impact on equality, will face much closer scrutiny. To tackle this challenge we need total confidence in making our case.

We need to be able to articulate the benefits of equality confidently at a time when confidence elsewhere is slipping. We need to be on top of the business case for equality and the law. But, most importantly, we need to be able to inspire others that a focus on equality is vital to delivering improvements to the public services we all need.

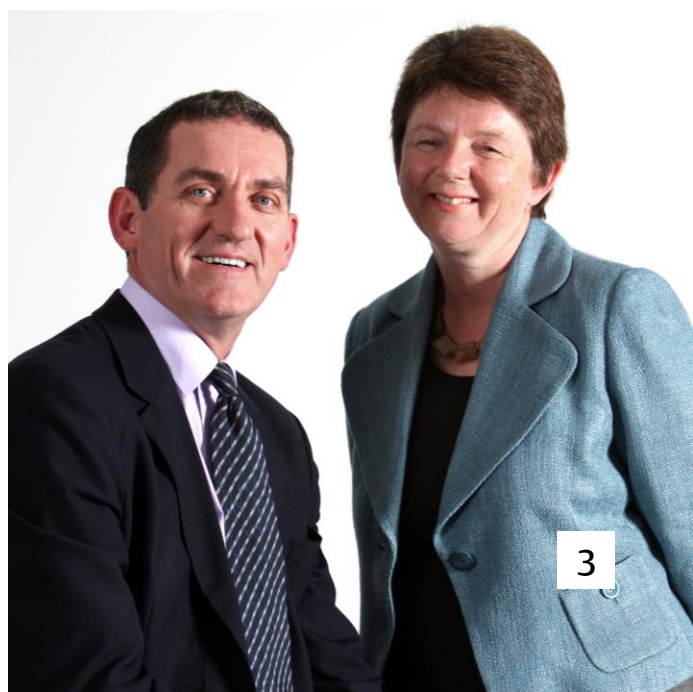
The conference brought together employers, trade unionists, service providers, advisors, consultants and campaigners – all with a commitment to moving the equality agenda forward.

Our speakers motivated and inspired us to build on our confidence. Simon Minty reminded us of the fundamental drivers of equality and our core values. John Palmer talked about confidence in creating change and, in particular, introduced an innovative approach being developed in Wales. And finally we heard from Sharon Coleman who spoke about how her belief in what was right has led to a change in the law and increased protection for carers.

Our workshops encouraged all participants to identify key actions they could take to increase their own confidence in promoting equality and to build confidence within their workplaces. The response was enthusiastic and ambitious.

We hope this report inspires your confidence and determination as you face the future challenges in promoting equality.

Neil Wooding, Commissioner for Wales
Kate Bennett, National Director Wales



Confidence to promote equality in the economic downturn

Simon Minty

Simon is a partner in a training and public speaking consultancy. He is a comedian too. Simon introduced us to the notion of 'recession depression' and flagged up the risk of complacency during a downturn. He gave us a timely reminder not to get demoralised, that driving equality in a time of recession may be harder, and take more effort, but that we should have confidence in where we want to get to.

Simon reminded us of the three main drivers underpinning equality, ethics, business and legal. In times of recession the business arguments will hold more sway within organisations, and we need to be confident about how equality delivers better business.

Simon spoke of his experience that 30% of the organisations he works with have disappeared in the recession and 30% say they can't prioritise equality any longer. For the other 40% it is business as usual – including engaging with equality - and he is confident these are the successful businesses that will outlast the recession.

Simon is looking forward to the new Equality Bill becoming an Act. For the first time there will be something in the legislation that includes everyone. For the first time the white heterosexual man might see why there is something in it for him.

There is a need to remember our key messages in these times, and to use both 'carrots and sticks'.

Simon warned us 'If managers get lazy they will recruit and promote the people they consider to be 'normal' and those may be the least able to do the job and cost more money and resources in the long run.'

He urged us to involve everyone – find their connection to the equality agenda and find champions. 'We still have a long way to go and equality is not just important when times are good.'



Confidence in creating change

John Palmer

John is Assistant Head of the Department of Health and Social Services in the Welsh Assembly Government. John put his comments about confidence in creating change in the context of a world of constant surprises. He is convinced that:

'Public servants need to be explorers of public value for individuals. Ask yourself 'do you know if what you are doing is valuable to the public, and can you deliver?'

He argued that implementing technical 'fixes' fails to resolve what he described as the 'wicked issues'. These are issues that remain entrenched and persistent such as domestic violence.

'Wicked issues need recognition and collaboration to create new solutions, and to do this, collaborators need to have trust.'

John then explained the 'Kafka Brigade' approach to problem solving, particularly in relation to Local Service Boards (LSBs) across Wales.

'LSBs are essentially about joining up local services with a big focus on intractable problems including mental health, drug abuse, and worklessness.'

The 'Kafka' approach is to use a citizen's experience and expertise to improve service provision and remove ineffective bureaucracy from citizens' lives.

John spoke passionately about many examples of where this approach has made a real difference to lives. He spoke particularly of 'Emma' a young woman who had experienced domestic violence. Domestic violence had been identified as a 'wicked issue' by a number of partners across Rhondda Cynon Taff LSB.

Emma told the story of the breaks and failures in service delivery, which made her experience so bad, to a room full of senior leaders and service delivery agencies. As a result great commitment to change was achieved.

John's lessons included 'Many little solutions can make a big difference' and 'a case, a story, can be more compelling than a load of data.'



Challenging discrimination

Sharon Coleman

Sharon told her own story to the conference. A story of how she experienced discrimination at work once she gave birth to her disabled son.

In 2001 Sharon worked as a legal secretary at a solicitors firm in London. She was well regarded and enjoyed the job. In 2002 she took maternity leave and gave birth to her son Oliver.

Oliver was born deaf and had respiratory problems, including a rare medical condition called apnoeic attacks. He would, without warning, stop breathing. When Oliver was 3 months old, Sharon split up with his father.

‘It was just me and Oliver, and I just didn’t know anything, except there was this little bundle and I had to keep him alive.’

When she returned to work Sharon found herself treated in an unfair way making it impossible to balance her responsibilities for Oliver with her job. Other colleagues, whether or not they had caring responsibilities, were treated better.

The company said they needed to cut staff, and even when another member of the team volunteered to leave, her offer was rejected. Eventually Sharon was pressured into leaving. She immediately got another temping job, and when she mentioned her experience to a friend, they suggested she approach a law firm about taking a case of discrimination.

‘I didn’t want anyone else treated the way I was. I didn’t want anyone to ever have to go through that again, and that’s what made me keep going.’

The Commission supported Sharon in taking her case to the European Court of Justice. They ruled she had suffered from ‘discrimination by association’. In other words by being ‘associated’ with her son’s disability she had been discriminated against.

Sharon’s story inspired us all and shows how with the right confidence and determination, one individual can change the lives of many. Protection from ‘associative discrimination’ is included in the new Equality Bill.



Confidence in leading

Neil Wooding

Neil spoke about the context of our equality work in Wales and current workplace pressures. He described how important it is for equality professionals to find a 'quiet space in a chaotic and complex environment'. With unparalleled changes on the horizon and severe financial constraints, Neil encouraged delegates to take the time to reflect on the valuable contribution of equality work and its relationship to the broader political landscape. It is this understanding that will provide a confident base for the turbulent times ahead.

In looking at the future Neil outlined some positive thoughts for delegates to consider. He pointed to the Equality Exchange network as a significant force in driving and promoting change in Wales. Working together we have the ability to find solutions and new ways to operate.

Neil saw the role of the network as a 'community of practice with the strength to communicate knowledge and wisdom across the whole of Wales'.

In the current climate our challenge is to hold conversations that establish our position and create new platforms for the future. This requires personal leadership and the ability to create a positive narrative that bring others on board to make real changes.

Neil pointed out that 'we do not lead to make things the same'.

He praised the local work of equality practitioners and emphasised the need to break away from our traditional role of providing information. We should try to have more 'clever conversations' that influence thinking and behaviour.

Neil concluded that 'Conversations are the DNA of human transformations.'



Five ways to build more confidence

Workshops Sessions

Our workshops looked at the different ways in which we can build confidence in our work. Delegates discussed what a difference confidence makes to their work when using equality data; in training; when telling a compelling story; when having difficult conversations and in understanding gender identity issues.

1. Telling our story

There was a clear call to personalise our messages and use the power of individual stories in creating change.

“Story telling is such a powerful tool, I’ll be looking at filming real life situations to use in training.”

Using language confidently, and tailoring it to our audience, is often forgotten in the messages we put across.

“We can use different language – not using language like ‘difficult’ or ‘challenge’ but more transformational language.”

2. Using equality data

Delegates recognised the need for more work around increasing our confidence in gathering evidence and using data.

“My key learning point is in using qualitative data to best effect and employing the concept of an equality evidence panel.”



3. Training

Training on equality doesn't necessarily need to be described and promoted as equality training but can be described as about good management or getting the best out of your team.

“We now need to work out a training strategy for our organisation which is SMART... to look at what we currently offer and deliver in training and what sort of training is needed for the future.”

4. Gender identity

There was recognition that we all face new experiences on which we build our knowledge of diversity. It is usual to doubt ourselves, but the key is to move on with confidence.

“I learnt about the importance of the individual and the difficulties caused by transitions.”

5. Difficult conversations

In our work we meet challenges, some are outside our control, however we can control what we say and how we say it, to win hearts and minds.

“Overcome my discomfort zone and ask difficult questions and keep asking.”

At the close of the workshops, each participant identified their own next steps in building confidence on equality in their organisation.

Across the workshops there were recurring themes around our behaviour and how that can promote confidence: honesty and openness; listening, hearing and acting, and seeing things from other people's perspective.



Next steps

We asked delegates to identify where they felt we should work together to build confidence. These included:

Persuading leaders to put equality and human rights values at the heart of business decisions. This covered policy, management strategy and budgets.

Leading change ourselves by not taking the line of least resistance but having the courage to dismantle ineffective workplace practices and to tackle the really difficult issues.

Helping others to be more assertive about their rights. Equality practitioners and trade unions raising awareness and increasing the quality of engagement across all areas of equality.

Communicating more effectively around the language of equality and human rights. Using ‘clever conversations’ and ‘the citizens voice’ to lever change.

The Equality Exchange network will look at these issues at our regional events over the next year. We will work together to build our knowledge and confidence in these and other areas so that we can change lives for the better.

Kate Bennett, National Director Wales, reflected on the next steps for the network:

“Confidence is crucial to making progress and keeping equality, good relations and human rights high on the agenda. This includes confidence to take tough decisions about our priorities. It may mean letting go of things we have worked hard to secure but which are no longer delivering benefits for us. If we work together, challenging each other, as well as building confidence, we will be successful.

As a community of equality practitioners and thinkers Equality Exchange members have the ability to advance the cause of equality even in difficult times. Together we will take up this responsibility because if we don’t no one else will.”