

Equality and Human Rights Commission  
Research report 61 executive summary

# Significant inequalities in Scotland: Identifying significant inequalities and priorities for action: Executive summary

Equality and Human Rights Commission Scotland  
and the Office for Public Management

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and priorities for action**

**Executive summary**

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## **Executive summary**

### **Introduction**

The Office for Public Management (OPM) was commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) in Scotland to carry out research to inform the debate about the most significant inequalities in Scotland and how public authorities can focus their efforts to best effect in tackling them. There is extensive evidence to suggest that Britain is an unequal country (Hills et al., 2010), more so than 40 years ago – and the trends in Scotland are the same. In addition, the current economic climate and recent change in UK government, rolling out significant public spending cuts and proposing changes to the relationship between state and society, are likely to have a profound impact on equality in future years. Current public spending cuts could further widen inequality in Britain. There are real risks that women, ethnic minority groups, disabled people and older people will be disproportionately affected (Hogarth et al., 2009). Making transparent and proportionate decisions about equality priorities in the context of spending cuts means using the best available evidence to inform policy decisions.

Scotland has many of the right tools to build a fairer society. First, in the Equality Act 2010, Britain has one of the most developed equality law frameworks of any country. Second, equality is a founding principle of the Scottish Parliament. And, third, the Scottish Government has made an explicit policy commitment to ‘tackle the significant inequalities’ in Scottish society by 2017 (Scottish Government, 2010a). Yet, as the Scottish Government recognises, success in achieving this outcome will rely on: the quality of the evidence on the nature and extent of inequality in Scotland, and identifying where the most significant impact can be made on outcomes.

### **Purpose of this research**

This research aims to develop greater clarity about significant inequality in Scotland, the priorities for action and the importance of improving the evidence base.

In particular, this research set out to:

- gain greater insight into criteria used by academics, professionals and practitioners in defining significant inequality and identifying the most significant inequalities in Scotland

## SIGNIFICANT INEQUALITIES IN SCOTLAND

- gain a better understanding of the equality issues that stakeholders feel should be the focus of attention to address significant inequality in Scotland
- use the Equality Measurement Framework (EMF) to organise and measure significant inequalities, and
- develop and test a process for prioritising.

There were three phases of activity to complete this research:

- Phase 1 involved a rapid review of literature and interviews with 16 strategic equality stakeholders in Scotland to generate an initial set of criteria for defining significant inequality and an initial list of significant inequalities in Scotland.
- Phase 2 involved two full-day deliberative events attended by more than 60 delegates representing a wide variety of organisations and interests across Scotland. This built on, and refined, Phase 1 findings to produce final agreed criteria of significance and a final agreed list of significant inequalities.
- Phase 3 involved two inputs. First, we compared the list of significant inequalities with the EMF in order to analyse the relevance of the EMF as a conceptual, organisational and measurement tool in the Scottish context. Second, we developed a process for identifying priorities for action, refined a set of criteria for deciding priorities and applied these to identify two specific issues for further analysis.

We hope the approach taken in this research – using a series of criteria to define significant inequality and priorities for action – could also be useful to public authorities to do the same; understanding how they can focus their efforts to best effect.

### **Criteria to identify significant inequality**

The five criteria for identifying significant inequality that emerged from this research are:

- Scale: does inequality have an impact on a large number of people? Does inequality impact on one group more than the average?
- Severity: does inequality have a severe or enduring effect on individuals or society? Does it infringe on human rights? Do multiple inequalities exist?
- Persistence: is inequality experienced repeatedly over a period of time?
- Cost: does inequality have a high cost to individuals and to society, in terms of cost to the public purse and cost to the wellbeing of the country?

- Opportunity: is inequality the result of a lack of resources or recognition needed to enjoy a range of substantive freedoms in life?

All these criteria were selected based on their potential measurability.

### **Significant inequalities in Scotland**

Drawing on these criteria, we identified the following as significant inequalities in Scotland:

#### *Opportunities and resources*

- Poverty/low income: poverty, low income and economic inactivity have different effects on different people. There is recognition of both relative poverty (that is, the gap between the rich and poor) and absolute poverty (for example, having an income that is below a certain fixed amount).
- Access to services: this includes a wide range of services such as housing, leisure, transport, justice and healthcare; equal access to advice and guidance; and voice and dignity when using services.
- Employment: the key issues are access to and progression within the labour market, equal pay and tackling discrimination in the workplace.
- Education: key issues here are bullying and harassment in schools, segregation resulting from dividing children into mainstream/special and state/private schools and inequality of educational attainment.
- Health: the key issues are inequality in access to health advice and guidance, and inequality of health outcomes.

#### *Attitudes and awareness*

- Discrimination, social exclusion and lack of participation: the key issues include limited opportunities for participation in society (including digital exclusion) and in community groups, the impact of negative attitudes, and a lack of awareness of the needs and abilities of specific groups.
- Targeted violence and safety (physical security): the key issues include domestic abuse, targeted violence and other violations of physical security. Also included here are concerns with public violence and domestic abuse associated with sectarian football matches. Targeted victimisation and harassment based on visible or perceived difference also affect safety and freedom of expression.

### **Using the Equality Measurement Framework (EMF) to organise and measure significant inequalities**

One of the aims of this research was to test the validity and model a use of the EMF in Scotland. The EMF defines equality as occurring where people achieve a range of central and valuable freedoms in life that they need to flourish. All elements of the EMF, including the areas of life, substantive freedoms, spotlight indicators and measures, were arrived at through extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders alongside specialist statistical and theoretical work. Nevertheless, we wanted to test its validity further by comparing it with the significant inequalities identified in this research. This analysis highlighted that the issues identified as significant through this research link well with the 10 areas of life within the EMF, and there are also significant overlaps with the EMF spotlight indicators.

In addition, our analysis shows how the EMF can be used at different levels:

- Conceptualising equality: prompting us to be clearer about ‘equality for whom?’ and ‘equality of what?’
- Organising equality: the substantive freedoms and spotlight indicators help us to focus in on specific aspects of equality that we can measure and track progress on over time.
- Measuring equality: the suggested data sources cited in the EMF provide robust tools to measure equality, allowing us to capture a rich picture of the state of equality.

There is already encouraging evidence of Scottish public authorities using the EMF in these ways to drive progress in tackling inequality and promoting diversity.

As a result, we conclude that the EMF is a valuable tool for analysing significant inequality in Scotland. It could also help public authorities set and measure equality outcomes appropriately. The rich information that can be drawn from analysis of equality issues using the EMF indicators and measures could help public authorities move away from a bureaucratic ‘tick box’ approach to equality towards a stronger focus on outcomes.

There are, however, important limitations to using the EMF in Scotland. Since some EMF areas of life (such as Individual, Family, Social Life and Identity, Expression, Self-respect) have not traditionally been the focus of equality analysis, there are significant data gaps in these areas. Although these gaps

affect equality measurement across Britain, there are specific limitations affecting Scotland. For example, due to small sample sizes for some groups, including ethnic minority and non-Christian religious groups, it is not always possible to capture these groups in national social surveys. Similarly, we lack a reliable baseline of how many gay men, lesbians, bisexual and trans people there are in Scotland.

Consequently, we lack a comprehensive evidence base on the state of equality for all equality groups in Scotland. This is important alongside doing more sophisticated analysis, including looking at intersections between equality issues. Success in tackling the significant inequalities in Scottish society by 2017 relies on high-quality, robust evidence on the nature and extent of inequality in Scotland and identifying where the most significant impact can be made on outcomes. The Scottish Government has already taken important steps to improve the evidence base. It has developed 20 core questions on equality for inclusion in five major social surveys and will add a question on sexual orientation to the Scottish Household Survey from 2010, adding to questions asked in the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey and the Scottish Health Survey. Having access to high-quality, robust evidence is of paramount importance in a time of tight budgets when public authorities need more than ever to target resources where they are most needed.

### **Developing a prioritisation process**

The final stage of this research developed a process to help identify priorities for action, with three prioritisation criteria identified:

- Is there a real opportunity to take action that would bring about positive change?
- Is there potential for the Commission to use the range of its available powers to achieve change?
- Would intervention support the Commission's role as a modern regulator?

An internal Commission workshop tested these criteria and applied them to identify two specific issues for further analysis. The two issues are: elder abuse and personalisation of social care. Our analysis of these two issues focuses on better understanding their potential as priority areas and what sort of action could be taken if these issues were prioritised by the Commission in Scotland.

*Elder Abuse:* Elder abuse is recognised as a significant problem in Scotland, and one that has been largely overlooked by policy and legislation. Following



implementation of the Equality Act 2010, public authorities will be required to promote age equality in the provision of goods, facilities, services and public functions. This new legislative context provides the Commission in Scotland with an important opportunity to shape the provisions of the age regulations to ensure that they address elder abuse within the health and social care setting.

*Personalisation of Social Care:* Personalisation of social care is an emerging policy agenda. While largely seen as a positive step in increasing choice and control within social care delivery, personalisation can exacerbate inequality. The Commission in Scotland could perform a valuable role in scrutinising the equality dimensions of personalisation, including progression of the Self-Directed Support (Scotland) Bill and the Independent Living activities being driven forward by Scottish Government.

### **Conclusion**

By informing the debate about significant inequality in Scotland, this research should help the Commission and public authorities operating in Scotland to direct attention to improving the evidence base in order to ensure decisions about resource allocation are based on reliable information. We hope the approach taken in this research – using a set of criteria to define significant inequality and priorities for action – could be useful to public authorities, providing an approach to setting and measuring equality outcomes appropriately, and understanding how they can focus their efforts to best effect.

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This Executive Summary highlights the main findings of a study to develop approaches to identifying significant inequalities in Scotland and priorities for action to tackle the most significant inequalities. Five measurable criteria have been developed to offer an approach to identifying significant inequalities, with a number of specific filters also developed to help the Equality and Human Rights Commission with identifying priorities for action.

At the heart of identifying the key inequality issues and priorities for action is the need for good-quality, reliable evidence. The Commission's Equality Measurement Framework is used to model an approach to conceptualising, organising and measuring equality. With increasing demands on scarce resources, it is critical that public authorities have the tools that they need to identify the key equality issues in their area of work plus a transparent approach to how they choose which equality issues to prioritise for action. This report offers some helpful tools to assist with making evidence-based and transparent decisions about the equality issues to prioritise to achieve positive change.