



## ***Cumbria Humanist Group***

**Joel Rasbash, Equality Officer for Cumbria County Council,  
on the Cumbria Equality & Diversity Project.**

**Meeting at Morton Community Centre, Wigton Road, Carlisle  
on Wednesday, 18 November 2009 at 7.30 pm**

A major concern for non-religious people is the undue influence of the churches and religious groups on publicly funded services such as education, health and social care. So members of Cumbria Humanist Group were pleased to welcome Joel Rasbash, Equality Manager for Cumbria County Council, who spoke to us about the Council's Equality and Diversity project (EDP) at Morton Community Centre, Carlisle on 18 November. We had been in contact with Joel for some time and had held a 'focus group' meeting in June to identify members' main areas of disquiet and personal experiences of discrimination in this field, the results of which we had sent to Joel for inclusion in the project data.

The EDP is concerned with discrimination against both council employees and service users on the grounds of race, gender, age, disability and sexual orientation, as well as religious belief or non-belief. The services would include contracted-out social services such as home help and personal care, social and community activities such as after school clubs for children or lunch clubs for the elderly. These may be council-funded but provided by either the private sector or the third/non-profit sector, the latter group including established charities, many of which have a religious history. We were concerned that such organisations should not proselytise to clients and this should be stipulated in both their service contracts and staff recruitment and training.

Our main interests lay in the education system. A significant number of the county's primary schools are church schools and their application procedures can focus heavily on the family religious activities, some even demanding proof of baptism. We have, however, no reports of children being refused admission on the grounds of parental non-belief, as this only becomes an issue where schools are over-subscribed and there is need for a selection procedure; this happens rarely in the primary system. We have anecdotal reports of such potential discrimination at secondary level and Joel assured us that this is being monitored.

Another issue was respect for non-religious convictions at the end of life, both of the client or patient and of their family and friends. Living wills should be acknowledged and kept securely with client records. In this area the need for closer integration between social and primary healthcare services often becomes apparent, and although central governments have promised to tackle this over twenty years or so, little seems to change.

In a multicultural society with so many services no longer directly provided by local or central government, this is a complex situation, but we were strongly assured by Joel's report that local services in our county are setting the standard.

If you are interested in humanism, visit our website at [www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk](http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk) or telephone 01228 810592 or 01768 881245 for more information.

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(460 words)

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*Affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society*