



3 December 2023

Helping disabled employees and customers - being reasonable pays

“This is an appeal to everyone who has the power to make or influence decisions in Northern Ireland’s businesses. We’re asking you to include people with disabilities as employees and as customers.”

To mark the UN’s International Day of Persons with Disabilities on 3 December, Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, is asking employers and service providers – shop owners and managers, businesses and public services – to think about what someone with a disability would need to apply for a job with them or to access their services.

“Northern Ireland’s Disability Discrimination Act is very nearly 40 years old. When it was enacted, it made it possible for the very first time for people with disabilities to challenge discrimination, and it had one other important provision – the reasonable adjustment duty,” said Ms McGahey.

“Reasonable adjustments are very necessary for many people with disabilities to allow them to get and keep a job, or to access shops, businesses and other services that we all take for granted.

“This is a duty on employers and service providers, and while I’m aware that many people will say it’s not a priority for them, I’d like to share some of the learnings from our last year’s legal work.

“First, not all reasonable adjustments are costly or disruptive. We’ve just seen a public body paying out £2,000 to settle a case where a severely dyslexic service user could not use its online service, instead of just taking the time to help him complete the form. This case was settled without admission of liability. Another government agency paid out £2,500 instead of supplying a visually impaired benefits claimant with his information in 18-point type, as repeatedly requested. These are tiny adjustments that should have cost next to nothing.

“Online recruitment processes or that use AI to make decisions can and do disadvantage many, many neurodivergent and other job applicants. This is a problem with mainly large employers, and we’ve had several cases so far this year.

“Employees with a disability, who acquire a disability or whose condition becomes worse, are having problems holding onto their jobs. A retail chemist has paid out well over £17,000 to a worker with rheumatoid arthritis, rather than just supplying her with a chair when it was needed. This case too was settled without admission of liability. We’ve had people with terminal cancer, cerebral palsy and mental health issues

who've had to leave work or been dismissed because their employer did not make adjustments to their work to allow them to do their jobs.

“A decent job is as important to all of us,” Ms McGahey concluded. “It means independence, purpose and a sense of self-worth. It means you can do your bit for your community and the economy as well as for yourself.

“If you have power over these decisions in your workplace, please take the initiative, use the reasonable adjustment duty to take positive action for people with disabilities, and reap the benefits.”

The Commission's advice for employers on reasonable adjustments is at equalityni.org/ReasonableAdjustments.

Advice is also available on [providing accessible services for your customers](#)