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Challenging mental ill health in the workplace

Equality Commission Conference on International Day of Persons with a Disability

“The laws, institutions and Government policies dealing with disability issues must be judged by the extent to which they deliver practical improvement in the lives of disabled people,” Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission said today (Tuesday 3 December 2013).

Mr. Wardlow was speaking on the United Nations designated International Day for People with Disabilities at a conference on managing mental health and reasonable adjustments.

“Over one billion people world-wide live with some form of disability and face physical, social, economic and attitudinal barriers that can exclude them from participating fully as equal members of society,” he said. “In Northern Ireland just over 20 per cent of the population - 359,956 people - have a long-term health problem or disability which limits their daily activities. And this has an impact on a wider range of people - just over 40 per cent of all households in Northern Ireland have one or more people whose activity is limited in this way.”

The conference, at Riddel Hall in Belfast, was organised by the Equality Commission in association with the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health (NIAMH) and Employers For Disability (efdni). It deals specifically with issues around mental health and reasonable adjustments.

“People with all kinds of disabilities face great challenges on a daily basis,” Michael Wardlow said; “but the Commission’s own research has shown that people with mental ill-health face more negative responses than people with other forms of disability, from neighbours, from work colleagues and in accessing services. We have been working with groups like efdni and NIAMH to help employers develop plans to manage mental ill health and to counter the stigma of it in the workplace.”

The Conference also heard an address from legal expert Catherine Casserly, BL, an expert on disability law, on the subject of mental health and reasonable adjustments.

The Equality Commission, in its role, along with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, as the Independent Mechanism for Northern Ireland which monitors the Government's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, has been urging the Executive to develop and strengthen disability legislation to address areas where there is now less robust protection against disability discrimination than in Great Britain.

"Gaps in legislation, policy development and service delivery for disabled people have a considerable negative impact on the lives of many people in Northern Ireland," Michael Wardlow said. "We need to strengthen the rights of disabled employees, customers, pupils in school and tenants against unlawful discrimination and a failure to make reasonable adjustments; as well as providing additional protection against discrimination for those who care for disabled people."