

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 27 May 2014  
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**Businesses can lead in combating racism**

Racial attacks on people in our community have been increasing over the last few years, with last year's 982 incidents reflecting a 30% increase on the previous year's figures. There has been a familiar pattern to such events - a succession of incidents involving broken windows, hate filled slogans painted on doors and even physical assaults including petrol bombs targeted at people for no other reason than their ethnic or national origin.

While the PSNI assure us that those attacks are probably caused by small group of people, this fact doesn't reduce the impact on a society which is trying to rebuild itself after decades of turbulence. While accepting that targeted policing, including a new dedicated report line, community safety policies and neighbourhood watch initiatives may serve to limit such activity: alone, they cannot change attitudes.

Protections against racism exist in many areas of public life including employment, services and education, so no one needs to experience racism in these contexts.

We have an increasingly diverse community. The 2011 census shows that there are 45,000 people who have come here from other European Union countries and that we now play host to more than twice as many people from minority ethnic communities as was the case a decade ago. It is therefore clear that the old "two communities" model is an outdated way of thinking about good relations.

So we all have to consider what role we each can play in countering all prejudice within our community and in providing support and reassurance to the victims of it. There are no quick and easy answers to the challenge of changing a mind-set that sees an enemy in everyone who is different: but that doesn't mean that nothing can be done.

Last week I spoke to a Conference attended by business people who employ thousands of workers, many of whom have come from all parts of the world to work here in Northern Ireland. They are making great efforts to provide a welcoming working environment for people of all races and backgrounds.

This work, done by employers within their own workplaces, can complement the leadership which must also be given by police, politicians, Government and statutory bodies, and by all those with influence in civil society.