

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 7 June 2016  
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

**Addressing growing diversity with welcoming workplaces**

A walk along any main street will soon demonstrate the signs of the increasing diversity in Northern Ireland. We will encounter food shops catering to Asian, East European and Caribbean tastes; church services in Portuguese and Polish; Islamic centres; and festivals reflecting a wide variety of cultures.

These are outward signs of the reality that this place we call home now embraces people from a wide variety of cultures and traditions, many of whom have come here to work in factories, hospitals, offices and service industries. There is clear evidence that by their industry they make a valuable contribution to both the economy and wider community. Indeed, a sign of a mature society is that it imports as well as exports people.

Addressing this growing diversity is nothing new to employers here, many of whom have been grappling with their responsibilities in employing workers from new communities for many years now. The Commission has supported this process by helping employers create a welcoming environment in their workplaces, one which embodies a culture of equality and inclusivity. These are safe spaces where people can mix and work side by side. Indeed, for many, they may be the only place where they engage with people from different places and different cultures.

Over the years employers have led the way in forging a more equal society. Indeed, it was by accepting that discrimination is clearly unacceptable at work that many people began to realise that it's not tolerable anywhere. Despite these major achievements, complaints from people who believe they have suffered discrimination on the grounds of race remain stubbornly in the top three areas of complaints or enquiries which the Commission receive. Last year this accounted for over 300 calls, of which about 2 out of 3 related to employment or workplace related matters.

So, we cannot ignore that instances of racial discrimination still occur and they must be challenged, wherever they exist.

The Race Relations Order will be 20 years old next year. Together with the associated Codes of Practice, the Order sets out the basic steps which employers must take to

prevent discrimination occurring. Following the law and guidelines can assist employers in ensuring they are treating all their employees fairly.

The law is only the foundation for addressing equality of opportunity for migrant workers, as many of our co-workers who come here from other countries find themselves disadvantaged through a variety of causes. Many of these potential barriers can be removed by employers putting appropriate programmes in place to anticipate issues such as language problems or unfamiliarity with local facilities and services.

The Commission is running a free half day event in Belfast on 21 June to help businesses deal with these issues. Leading academic Professor Peter Shirlow will speak on the challenges facing migrant workers and John McKeown, from the Department for the Economy, will have information on help and support available for employers in terms of skills.