

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 11 April 2023 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Fair Employment still matters, more than 30 years on

The picture of employment in Northern Ireland is definitely getting busier; in spite of the pressures on business of inflation, recruitment is lively and there's a scramble for staff.

The [March Labour Force Survey](#) from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency showed that payrolled employee numbers and earnings both increased over the last year, and employee job numbers are high. The unemployment rate has returned to its pre-pandemic position. However, although the figures on employment rate, hours worked and economic inactivity have improved, they have not yet returned to what they were pre-COVID.

This month I'm writing to remind you that no matter how urgent your need for staff, fair recruitment is always important – and so is fair employment monitoring of all your staff.

If you have 11 or more employees working 16 hours or more per week you need to register with the Equality Commission for Fair Employment Monitoring. All registered employers must monitor the composition of their workforce. This means keeping a record of your staff's community background and sex.

The legislation also requires employers to review their own workforce composition once every three years to assess 'fair participation' between the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities and where there is an under-representation, they must take appropriate affirmative action. Although the Fair Employment legislation is intended to ensure equality of opportunity in employment for Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, it also provides the opportunity to look at women's participation in the workforce.

Each year, for more than three decades, the annual Fair Employment Monitoring report has provided an overview of high-level patterns in the aggregate composition of monitored employment and in key sectors, public and private. The aspects of employment that are monitored include employees, applicants, promotees, and leavers.

Northern Ireland has not yet reached the status of the 'shared society' that so many

of us strive to achieve. We only need to look around us to see that both our housing and education systems remain significantly segregated, but our workplaces provide a space to respect differences and embrace diversity and this permeates beyond our workplaces into wider society to the benefit of us all.

Northern Ireland's employers have done much of the heavy lifting in lessening discrimination and harassment at work, creating an environment where people meet and work with others from different backgrounds and cultures, sometimes for the first time. We should acknowledge their work and the huge contribution they make to our society.

It remains a priority for us to continue working with and supporting employers on improving equality for everyone in Northern Ireland's workplaces. We endorse the Joint Declaration for Dignity at Work and Inclusive Working Environment signed by Confederation of British Industry, the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry. This states that everyone has a right to work in a harmonious and inclusive environment and atmosphere, in which all workers are encouraged to apply their diverse talents and in which no worker feels under threat or experiences intimidation.

Be in no doubt, monitoring our workforce continues to be as relevant and necessary as always.

The 32nd Fair Employment Monitoring report (2021) will be published later this week.