

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 17 January 2023 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Breaking down barriers for disabled people in employment

The issue of getting more disabled people into employment has been in the national headlines over recent days. The UK Government and its opposition have announced potential initiatives to help more disabled people secure and retain paid employment. There is no doubt this issue will only grow in prominence because of our ageing working population.

Northern Ireland's employment rate for disabled people continues to be the lowest across all the UK regions. With no Executive it is essential that this gap is not allowed to widen even further.

245,000 people in Northern Ireland live with a disability. This is a diverse group of people, with a range of skills, aptitudes, and abilities. Many are eager to enter the labour market and further their careers, yet they continue to face many barriers from prejudice or a lack of employment support to help them reach their potential within the workplace.

Employers have a role to play. You can improve how you manage and support growing numbers of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, our economy needs their skills and input to flourish.

Last year, over 53% of calls to our discrimination advice line were from people who believed they had experienced discrimination because of their disability, and over half of these calls related to employment.

These calls provide real examples of what disability discrimination and harassment in the workplace can look like. These types of behaviours and experiences create barriers to employment for disabled people.

Recently, we supported a young man, a university graduate, who was delighted to accept a role with a public sector employer. He lives with autism, and he made his new employer aware of the reasonable adjustments he required. But when he arrived for his first day of employment, he was informed that the employer could not facilitate his reasonable adjustments. His job offer was withdrawn, and he was left feeling rejected and totally disillusioned. This case was settled for £10,000.

Employers here, have a legal duty under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 regarding reasonable adjustments for their disabled employees. The very purpose of this duty is to "level the playing field" and to enable job applicants who have

disabilities to enjoy the same opportunities as all other candidates to obtain and remain in work.

We also supported another young man, who has special educational needs, who alleged he experienced disability harassment in his part-time afterschool job. He alleged he was harassed and called a 'retard' by a colleague, he felt he could no longer work there and contacted the Commission for assistance. This case was settled for £7,500. This employer was keen to ensure this never happened again and immediately sought advice and assistance from the Commission.

It is imperative that employers have procedures and policies in place to allow them to deal promptly and seriously with complaints of discrimination or harassment. Employers must ensure that their staff know how to access these and that their managers are appropriately trained to use them.

The Commission can provide advice on policies and procedures and on how to lawfully apply positive action measures to provide opportunities for work for disabled people.

We are also working closely with organisations who offer employment support services to disabled people. These services are key to getting more disabled people into paid employment, but these are under pressure of disappearing, as the EU funding which previously supported many of them comes to an end in March this year. The loss of this funding will impact on some of our most vulnerable and marginalised people, including disabled people who are furthest from the labour market.

There is no alternative, we need the valuable input and skillsets of our disabled colleagues in our workplaces, to help our businesses and economy thrive.

In these challenging times we must double down and commit to helping more disabled people to find employment.

We need employers to work with us to eradicate disability discrimination and harassment from their workplaces and our Government Departments must look at how they can find the resource to keep valuable employment support services up and running.