

14 Sept 2017

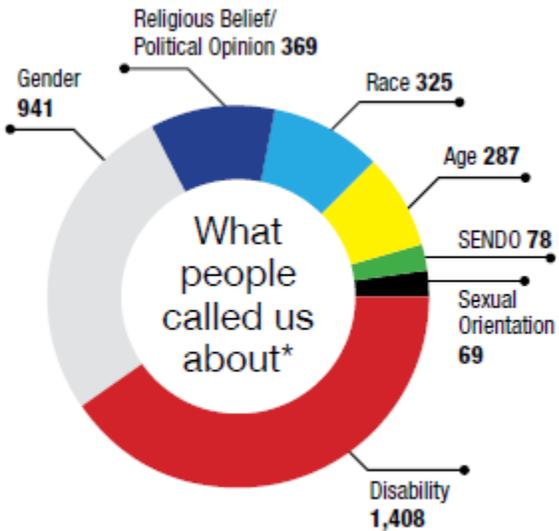
PRESS RELEASE

Review of Legal Services 2016-17

What issues brought most complaints to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland this year?

A report from the Equality Commission on complaints of discrimination it received in the year 2016-2017 shows some interesting facts.

The year saw the highest number of enquiries to the discrimination advice line in five years – 3,454 in total. Of these, 43% were complaints of disability discrimination, by far the largest category of complaint.



43% on disability, including SENDO
 27% on sex discrimination
 11% on religious/political discrimination
 9% on racial discrimination
 8% on age discrimination
 2% on sexual orientation discrimination

* Figures include complaints of more than one type of discrimination

Anne McKernan, Director of Legal Services with the Commission, says: “Over the past five years, the percentage breakdown of enquiries has been quite consistent. Disability discrimination is always the most reported, and sex discrimination is consistently the second most reported.

“That initial call to the discrimination advice line is the main point of contact for people in need of information and guidance. Our staff help by giving advice on rights and remedies and the process of taking a case. We also direct callers to the most relevant parts of our website and to other sources of help. Our aim is to help people to resolve their discrimination problems at an early stage, if that is possible. A very high proportion of callers are able to do that using the information and advice they get from our staff.



“A small number of those who call for advice are not able to resolve their situation and some return to us to apply for assistance in taking their case to Tribunal or court.”

The Commission’s Legal Funding Committee met 34 times last year and considered 255 new applications for assistance, granting assistance to 59 applicants.

The largest number of new applications was granted in the area of sex discrimination. Within complaints of sex discrimination, the largest single category over recent years has been maternity and pregnancy discrimination. Because of this, the Commission undertook a Formal Investigation into the issue, the report on which, *Expecting Equality*, was published in November 2016. The Investigation generated significant public discussion and the Commission also published and promoted new guidance for employers and for women affected by the issues.

In 2016-17 cases taken by 41 people, with the support of the Commission, were settled outside court or tribunal. Written settlements were agreed and the Commission’s Advice and Compliance team follows up with organisations to improve their equality practices. A total of £343,500 compensation was paid to claimants in settlements.

The Commission provided legal representation for nine people in cases which went to hearing this year. At the year’s end two were still awaiting a decision. Of the remaining six cases (on behalf of seven people), only one claim was dismissed. The rest, including two cases in the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal, were successful.

Anne McKernan says: “We’re seeing a gradual upward trend in enquiries to our discrimination helpline, though as regards applications for assistance in taking a case, the trend is downwards. Our advice can give people the tools and knowledge to consider resolving their problems informally and directly. Our support for the cases taken to court and tribunal raises public awareness of the protection afforded by the law. We believe it has a real impact on bringing about changes in discriminatory practices or procedures.”

Further information is available online at www.equalityni.org/legal