

Race Equality Month

*View from the Chair, Business Newsletter, 23 November 2010.
Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.*

November 2010 is Race Equality Month and the Equality Commission has been highlighting the efforts that are being made throughout Northern Ireland to tackle racism and promote mutual respect and good relations between people from all cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

We cannot close our eyes to the reality that discrimination and racist attacks persist in Northern Ireland, as they do elsewhere, and when they occur they must be consistently challenged. Incidents like these will make headlines, but all too often the efforts that many people make to tackle racism, on a daily basis, can go unnoticed. One of the objectives of Race Equality Month is to highlight the steady efforts which many people are making, week in week out, to build a shared, equal and fairer society in Northern Ireland.

During the month we have been showcasing a number of events as diverse as a business breakfast in Ballymena, practical guidance for hospital staff on the religious and dietary needs of patients; an anti-harassment poster campaign by Translink, focussing on racism; a drama on race issues; art, photography, rights information sessions, seminars, training events and a specialised two-day Food Safety Certificate Course for the Chinese community in Limavady.

There is a great deal of good work being carried on in many workplaces in Northern Ireland to establish an ethos of equality and inclusivity, and it has made a major contribution to the way in which the two traditional communities in Northern Ireland have learned to come together. Workplaces are now, by and large, places where people mix and live harmoniously side by side and are also where many meet and get to know, perhaps for the first time, people from different places and different cultures.

One of the initiatives that the Equality Commission has been engaged in for some years is that of supporting and encouraging employability development programmes aimed at marginalised people. That is important work, particularly in difficult times. The Ballymena business breakfast, which was well attended and attested to the commitment in that area, heard an impressive presentation from Beryl Randall who is director of an employability forum in London.

She emphasised the role that employers can have in encouraging new or recently arrived residents to engage more with the society and communities in which they live and also demonstrated the real value that accrues to employers from playing such an active role. We know that our experiences here can be of great interest to others but we must remember that there are real lessons to be learned from the work that others do as well.

It is encouraging that there is such a variety of events, and it highlights the fact that the great majority of people here see racial diversity as something desirable and beneficial to society. There is a genuine richness in an increasingly diverse community. Hearing different voices, seeing different faces adds to our sense of being part of a wider world. Those different faces and voices enrich our workplaces, contribute a great deal to our economic wellbeing and also bring the full complexity and humanity of their presence beyond the office or factory to make real differences in the life of our community.