

Businesses across Northern Ireland are playing a key role in combating racism. As Race Equality Month continues, Equality Commission Chief Executive Evelyn Collins CBE reflects how they are leading change and helping our society to be a more welcoming and inclusive place.

Race equality at work

8 November 2010

In Northern Ireland we like to pride ourselves on the warmth of our welcome and for most visitors and migrant workers, their experiences here are good. But we cannot close our eyes to the reality that discrimination and racist attacks persist in Northern Ireland, as they do elsewhere, in the community and in the workplace.

Examples such as the expulsion of the Roma people from their homes in Belfast last year make national and even international headlines, but racism isn't always expressed so openly or violently as this. Lower level, almost casual racism, in the form of insulting remarks or a refusal of service may not receive as much publicity but can be a hurtful and troubling reality of life for many members of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.

That said, the Equality Commission has worked closely with businesses over the past decade and we have encountered examples of clear and effective leadership by many of them in creating an environment in which people from whatever country or ethnic group are welcomed and valued.

Problems of discrimination and exclusion remain, however. The Commission's last Equality Awareness Survey, published in 2009, showed that 20% of respondents felt negative towards Eastern European migrants, 28% would mind having a migrant worker as an in-law and 23% and 22% respectively would mind having a migrant worker as a neighbour or work colleague.

The largest proportion of the minority ethnic community in Northern Ireland is made up of workers from the more recently admitted (A8) states of the European Union (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). In 2008-09, over 60% of National Insurance Numbers registrations were by people from these A8 countries. They have found employment right across Northern Ireland, with the highest numbers found in Belfast and high concentrations in Dungannon, Craigavon and Newry & Mourne.

The Equality Commission's formal investigation into migrant workers and their use of recruitment agencies, published in June this year, showed a gradual move from temporary or casual work into direct employment. The percentage of those on agency contracts drops from 55% to 20% when people have been here for five years or more.

Five years on from the first influx of A8 migrant workers, the challenges for employers have evolved. Instead of the early problems with language and the practical problems of moving and settling a family, employers are now dealing with diverse and multi-cultural workforces.

We have found that increasingly employers are dealing pro-actively with the challenges this creates. We have helped them find solutions to issues such as employees speaking in a language that is not English and perhaps not understandable to their supervisor.

We have also seen an increase in the number of enquiries from people who think they have experienced racial discrimination, from just over 9% of our calls in 2005/6 to a current level of 12.2% of all calls.

Almost half (48%) of those enquiries are about employment or the workplace and around 30% of those involved racial harassment at work.

Most of the other enquiries were because people believed they had been provided with a worse or different service, or indeed been denied service, on the grounds of their race.

The Commission has a wide network of partners who help us with our work to directly support individuals with discrimination issues and these include the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Advice NI.

We also have a programme of free training and advice for businesses to help them provide services for all of their customers, including those who need specialist advice like the hospitality and tourism sectors.

And we work closely with all public bodies and government departments to encourage best practice in the promotion of good race relations.

More generally, we are working for change to the law. We would like to see the Race Relations Order changed to ensure that the protection from discrimination and harassment on the grounds of colour and nationality is afforded the same level of priority as other racial grounds.

The Commission is committed to raising awareness of the issues of racism in our society. We also want to highlight some of important work that is going on across Northern Ireland. Race Equality Month celebrates our growing inclusiveness and

acceptance of diversity and the leadership role that businesses, large and small, have played in this.

ENDS

If you think you have been discriminated against, or if you are an employer or service provide, the Equality Commission can help you resolve the problem. Contact our enquiry line on 028 90 890 890.

Race Equality Month runs from 1-30 November 2010 and aims to combat racism not just in the workplace but also in the provision of goods, facilities and services. A list of all the month's events is available at www.equalityni.org