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Disability including transport

View from the Chair, Business Newsletter, by Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Using public transport – buses, trains or taxis – is something most of us take for granted, and we all enjoy a good moan from time to time about delays, poor communication or a lack of good manners on the part of staff or other travellers.

It is easy to forget, however, that what would be an irritant or inconvenience for some people can pose a complete barrier to a person with disability. For many disabled people guaranteed access to public transport is essential if they are to participate in society on equal terms. That can mean being able to get to work, visit their friends or just go shopping.

Since the Disability Transport Regulations were introduced in January 2010, the Equality Commission has dealt with calls to its legal advice line which show that not all transport providers understand that they are breaking the law by treating disabled people differently. Unfortunately they also show that sometimes the level of consideration given to disabled people by other passengers isn't all it might be.

The Commission has published a new Code of Practice which explains the changes to the law which came into force last year and what they mean for everyone in the transport business. The Code can help transport providers recognise the diverse nature of disability and avoid making assumptions about disabled people. It shows how to plan ahead to consider the needs of disabled people and, importantly, how to deal most effectively with complaints when mistakes are made.

Of course the Transport regulations are just the most recent part of the Disability Discrimination Act to be brought into operation. The DDA requires all businesses to make sure that people with disabilities get full access to their services and to employment opportunities. That would make a real difference to individuals, to their families and to the wider community, but we still have some way to go before it is achieved.

Challenging discrimination against disabled people is a core duty for the Equality Commission and we still get more calls about that issue than anything else –

almost 35% of calls to our enquiry line last year were complaining of disability discrimination.

Many of the problems we hear about are caused by unthinking or impatient attitudes by people providing services or managing staff and businesses. An essential starting point must be the realisation that everyone has different needs. Employers who anticipate and accommodate these needs can help disabled people optimise their abilities and talents. People providing transport or any other kind of services to the public should consider the needs of all their potential customers, and how they can best meet them. It is good business and it is the law.