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Diversity, Gender and Race

View from the Chair, Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Over the past few weeks I have had the privilege to attend a variety of events which addressed a wide range of significant issues faced by Northern Irish society.

The first was an Equality Commission event attended by almost 100 delegates, addressing how continuing gender inequalities impact on women's economic independence throughout their lifetimes. We know that more than a third of women of working age who are unavailable for work say that this is due to family and home commitments. The comparable figure among men was less than one in twenty. Research commissioned by the Commission shows that childcare costs in Northern Ireland make up around 44% of an average income compared to the UK overall figure of 33% and 12% across the EU. It also identified that the availability of appropriate childcare does not match demand, particularly for families in rural areas or those with children with disabilities. These are significant and important issues for families, not least because of the role childcare plays in a woman's ability to enter or stay full-time in the workplace. Around 46% of parents said that the cost of childcare had influenced the hours they worked, rising to two-thirds in the case of mothers. Although our Assembly has a key role to play in addressing this issue, employers, by developing more flexible working arrangements can also be of great assistance.

The second was an inter-ethnic forum in Ballymena attended by over 400 people. It was a joy to see a variety of acts from different countries and cultures perform in front of a capacity audience in Ballymena. It might surprise you to learn that the number of people living in Ballymena who came from those European countries which joined the EU in 2004 alone rose by six times, from 373 to 2398, over the ensuing five years. The 2011 census shows that there are more than twice as many people from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland now as was the case a decade ago (c33,000). In addition there are 45,000 people who have come from other European Union countries now resident here

Sadly, racism in the workplace is still an issue. Last year, 11% (374) of all enquiries to our legal staff were on race issues, over two thirds (68%) of these involved employment or the workplace.

The final example was the launch of a new micro-site, by the Equality Commission, some-ni.org, aimed at supporting members of the LGB community, which has attracted

over 1,000 hits in its first week. Work with the LGB sector is important because reporting of discrimination is so low – while about half of LGB people told us they had experienced discrimination, 8 out of 10 don't report it to anyone. The site emerged as a result of work which the Commission had been carrying out with individuals and groups from the sector over the past year.

The common factor linking all three events was that each took the opportunity to highlight the inequalities that still exist for many sections of our community. The latter two also reminded their audiences that diversity is not something to fear as it enriches us and helps us create and sustain a more equal and just society. No one needs to suffer from the harassment or discrimination which comes from prejudice, fear or ignorance of "the other". Understanding our neighbours is the first step towards building the culture of equality, diversity and good relations that we all aspire to as we move forward together. We all need to take the step to operate "beyond compliance" to serve the common good.