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ARTICLE

Valuing our growing diversity

View from the Chair, as published in the News Letter, Tues 27 August 2013

Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commissioner NI

I think that now is an important time to remember that there are not just “two communities” in Northern Ireland, but that our modern society is a vibrant and diverse collection of differing identities and communities to be recognised and valued in their own right.

While, ten years ago, just 8 people in every thousand in Northern Ireland belonged to a minority ethnic group, the most recent census indicates that this figure has more than doubled, to 18 in every thousand - that’s 32,400 people and I am convinced that this mix has made Northern Ireland a more rich and interesting place.

I witnessed the richness of this diversity in the Botanic Gardens last Sunday, when I had the privilege of joining thousands of others at the annual **Belfast Mela** festival where we enjoyed food, music, dance and arts from over 30 different nations and cultures.

If we needed reminding, the daubing last week of racist slogans on a house where people from a Nigerian background lived, provided graphic and disturbing evidence that there is still too much racial prejudice in our society. We can all play a part in countering hatred and building good relations. I believe that every opportunity to promote greater engagement at a community and personal level between people with different cultures, languages and traditions is of value and that the more opportunities there are for people to meet and make friends, the greater likelihood there is that barriers and negative stereotypes will be broken down as people engage with one another in real life situations.

Many businesses have led the way in changing attitudes and promoting diversity in Northern Ireland. As well as employing people from many different countries and backgrounds, many have worked together with the Equality Commission to try to ensure that their entire workforce, regardless of race or nationality, are treated with respect and protected from discrimination and harassment.

Where discrimination does occur it can be challenged in the tribunals or the courts, and to this end the Commission supports people who have been subjected to unfair treatment because of their race – last year almost 12% of calls to our legal enquiry line involved issues of alleged racial discrimination.

We also advise business people and employers on what the legal requirements of equality legislation are, not only to ensure that they are providing equality of opportunity in the workplace and in their dealings with customers and clients, but also to demonstrate how this approach can deliver better outcomes for their businesses as well as society at large.

Celebrations like Mela remind us that there is a strong positive dimension to the growing diversity of our community. Many businesses go the extra mile to make sure that people from other countries and speaking different languages are assured, not just of fair treatment, but of a welcoming environment and open minded appreciation of their cultural values and interests.