

'View from the Chair' article by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI, published in the Business Newsletter, 30 Sept 2014

Welcoming disabled customers makes business sense

There was an old business adage that said “A happy customer tells 4 or 5 friends – an unhappy customer tells 15 or 20”. With the growth of social media and the internet, that 15 or 20 has extended to hundreds or thousands; and so all businesses should do all that they can to ensure that they deliver a good service to every one of their customers.

It makes no sense to make any section of the community feel like second class customers; or to exclude them altogether. Yet this is exactly what a business is doing when it does not cater adequately for disabled people, as over one in five of the population of Northern Ireland (21%) has a long-term health problem or disability which limits their day-to-day activities.

That means, if your business is not welcoming people with disabilities, you're passing up on around a fifth of your possible customer base. There are also legal reasons to address this issue, - the Disability Discrimination Act – which requires businesses to ensure that people with disabilities get full access to their services.

The Equality Commission is embarking on a pilot initiative - 'Every Customer Counts' – working with Ards Borough Council, where we will be asking business people in Newtownards to think how welcoming their businesses and services are for disabled people. We're offering businesses help and support to assess how easy it is for people with any kind of disability to use their service. For example, are there barriers which might cause difficulty for someone with a disability?

Not all barriers are physical. There is often a low level of awareness of the range of difficulties disabled people face, and how these might be overcome, and this can prevent business services being appropriately accessible. In addition, sometimes staff are uncomfortable dealing with people with a disability and many disabled people have said they are put off revisiting shops because they felt "invisible" - ignored by staff who instead addressed their companions or carers.

'Every Customer Counts' starts in November with an information session for local business people, a chance to listen, learn and ask questions. The Commission has also drawn up guidance to support them make sure their services are as accessible as

possible. These are available online to download at www.equalityni.org/everycustomercounts

This month Belfast saw its first Disability Pride event, and it is important that this growing awareness of the rights of disabled people is translated into facts on the ground. People need to see a real change in their experiences when shopping or accessing services in their own community.

It is worth remembering the importance of catering for all potential customers. Bill Gates said “There is only one boss – the customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the Chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.”