

View from the Chair article, Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI, published in the Business Newsletter, 25 November 2014.

Workforce diversity has made a valuable contribution

One of the greatest changes in Northern Ireland over the past two decades has been the fact that significant numbers of people have come here to work and, in doing so, have made a valuable contribution to our economy and our social, civic and cultural life.

Employers and business people now have people from many different European nationalities and from Asia, Africa and South America as employees; and as customers and clients.

The Equality Commission has been working with employers over many years, firstly on the basic legal requirement that people working for them are not subjected to discrimination or harassment; and also on measures they can take to ensure that all their employees, whatever their nationality or ethnic background, know they are welcomed and valued. That can involve employers taking steps to ensure that they help address any difficulties or vulnerabilities that staff may experience because of, for example, language issues or unfamiliarity with the law or public services in Northern Ireland.

We have been building on the feedback we get from business people to improve and tailor our training and advice sessions to meet the needs of businesses. In a racially diverse workforce some general employment relations issues can have a different dimension which needs special consideration. Workers who are pregnant, for example, can be unfamiliar with accessing local services, or may want to be back with their family at home for a birth. Not all employers are familiar with how to access and give appropriate consideration to qualifications from other education systems. In some instances employers have had to deal with differences within their workforce between different racial groups.

We have recently instituted a programme of training in which a group of employers return for a series of meetings over a six month period. That has been proving very productive and has helped all the participants work through issues which matter to them with Commission staff and their business colleagues.

The Commission is a resource available to all employers and our advice and guidance services are free and confidential. The Commission can be contacted through our website at www.equalityni.org or at 028 90500600.