

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 17 Nov 2015
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

20 years of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 What's changed for businesses?

It's just over 20 years since the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) first made it unlawful to discriminate against people because they were disabled. That Act, and the various parts of it rolled out over the following decade, changed things: not just for people with disabilities, but also for employers and business people whose attitudes and practices towards their disabled employees and customers were challenged.

Significant numbers of disabled people benefit from these protections, as N Ireland is amongst the UK regions with the highest incidence of disability with 25% adults and 5% children classified disabled. In fact, a total of 40% of all registered households contain at least one disabled person. Research shows that people living with disabilities face enduring issues accessing employment. It remains a sobering fact that disabled people make up 34% of the total figure of those classed as economically inactive in Northern Ireland and less than 40% are in employment. In fact the employment rate for people without disabilities is more than twice that of persons with disabilities. In terms of readiness for work, almost 34% have no qualifications compared with the N Ireland average of 12%, while only 18% have higher level qualifications compared with 34% of all others.

One way in which the DDA has assisted people living with disabilities from the business point of view is the "reasonable adjustment" duty, something still unique amongst other anti-discrimination laws. This duty applies not only in employment, but also in access to everyday goods and services such as shops, cafes, banks, cinemas and places of worship. This is an active duty, requiring employers, shops, local authorities and schools to take positive steps to remove any barriers which might prevent disabled people working in their business or accessing their services.

Despite the improvements which the law has made, too many disabled people still suffer exclusion and discrimination, in both employment and when trying to shop and access services. This past year, as in previous years, the Equality Commission received more calls from people who believe they have experienced disability discrimination than

about any other type of discrimination - around 40% of all enquiries. Of those calls, typically around 74% relate to employment.

The Commission can provide advice, training and information to all employers on how to comply with the law and ensure that disabled people get a fair chance in recruitment and promotion, and fair treatment while they are at work. We also an online business resource - Every Customer Counts - to help business owners understand and take reasonable steps to make their services available and welcoming for disabled customers.

What is often most important is to avoid making instant assumptions about people with disabilities. Disability need not be a barrier to work or to participation in the daily routines of shopping or recreation or accessing services. If that requires some adjustments on the part of the businesses concerned, it makes sense to make those changes. That is not just good business and the decent thing to do – it's also the law. If you'd like to know more, visit our website www.equalityni.org or phone 028 9089 0888 for free and confidential advice.