

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

**Business must not be blind to disability law**

*“Every contact we have with a customer influences whether or not they’ll come back. We have to be great every time or we’ll lose them.”*

I thought of this quote from Kevin Stirtz last week, when the Commission were publicizing the [settlement of a case](#) in which a blind guide dog user was turned away from a restaurant because the staff were not aware of the law governing assistance dogs. The restaurant has ended up paying compensation and liaising with the Commission on how it can in future comply with the law.

Disability discrimination is the form of discrimination reported to the Commission most often - 39% of all legal enquiries last year.

The Disability Discrimination Act is there to ensure that employers and service providers, as far as possible, allow people with disabilities equal access to goods and services in the same way as people without disabilities.

We know that small businesses have limited resources and we offer practical advice to help them to comply with the law.

The good news is, adjusting your business so that it is welcoming to people with visual impairments can be a very low cost exercise – well-lit, clear signage, checking that entrance mats are flush so that customers don’t trip, and sticking safety markings to glass doors so that people don’t bump into them will help all customers, including those with limited vision.

Blind and partially sighted people have particular needs as customers and service users. Many of the things that you as a service provider can do cost nothing, such as finding a suitable table with room for the guide dog to sit underneath, reading the menu or making suggestions for a blind diner; or just offering to help.

The Commission has an online guide dealing with the [law on assistance dogs for](#)

[service providers](#) (*pdf*) and our staff will help you develop your policies and train your staff. Advice, support and guidance are just a phone call away.

We are also piloting an initiative in Newtownards: [Every Customer Counts](#). This aims to persuade local businesses to review and improve their accessibility to people with all sorts of disabilities, including visual impairment. The online audit, action and promotion tools are open to everyone to use.

Further information for service providers is available on our [website](#) or phone the Advice and Compliance team on 028 90 500 600.