

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 25 Aug 2015  
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

**Why diverse workforces present business opportunities**

We have an increasingly diverse community. The 2011 census shows that ethnic minority groups total 33,000 people or just under 2% of the population - more than twice as many as was the case a decade previously. In addition, the Census records 35,000 people from the “A8” countries which joined the EU in 2004, where there were only 700 ten years earlier. One opportunity to experience first-hand just what such a diverse community feels like is to attend Belfast’s annual Mela festival which takes place this Sunday at Botanic Gardens. It is a unique event, combining music, dance, food, fashion and cuisine from around the world, with an opportunity to celebrate the joy and vibrancy of the many diverse cultures which now form an essential part of society in Northern Ireland.

The event has grown steadily since its genesis in 2007 to becoming our largest multi-cultural festival with over 20,000 people attending last year’s event. The festival has become a major tourist attraction with people coming from across the UK and Ireland to watch and take part, providing a welcome boost to our local tourism industry.

Businesses, including those in the tourism and hospitality sector, 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.

With businesses in Northern Ireland increasingly looking to global markets and seeking to improve trade links around the world, diversity in our workplaces can be a bonus. There is compelling evidence to suggest that diverse workforces have a competitive advantage when compared to those with very little diversity. Research indicates that socially diverse groups (that is, those with a diversity of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation) are more innovative than homogenous groups.

We also know that more diversity adds value to a workforce in other ways including increasing productivity, building more effective synergy in teams, retaining talent, increasing market reach through additional language skills and wider social contacts. Greater diversity in workforces can also help widen the customer base.

It may seem obvious that a group of people with diverse individual expertise would be better at solving complex problems than a homogenous group, but it is less obvious that social diversity should work in the same way, yet this is what the research confirms.

Sustained contact with individuals who are different than us encourages us to anticipate alternative viewpoints and challenges the way we think.

Diversity is therefore something we should continue to value in Northern Ireland, not just as an essential part of our society, but in the opportunities it can present for our local businesses.

In addition, by providing a welcoming working environment for people who come here from all over the world, employers are making a vital contribution to combating racial prejudice in wider society.