

***‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 16 June 2015
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI***

The treatment of working mothers

It’s true that ‘All mothers are working mothers’, but what I’m writing about this month is the Commission’s investigation under the Sex Discrimination Order (NI) 1976 into the treatment of pregnant workers and mothers in workplaces across Northern Ireland.

This investigation started at the beginning of this year and we expect that it will provide us with a wider perspective and a greater depth of knowledge of the issues facing women in the workplace today. It is intended both to help women at work and to help employers by getting a clear view of the challenges for organisations and making recommendations for strategies and practices to deal with them.

Women across Northern Ireland have already responded to our investigation and shared their experiences through focus group discussions, interviews and almost 1,000 responses to an online survey.

Now we need to hear from employers, as an important element of the investigation is also to report on examples of good practice by employers, those who provide pregnant women and mothers with equality of opportunity in the workplace.

Initial findings are showing that the most common complaint during pregnancy is redundancy or dismissal, and during maternity leave the most common complaint is lack of communication from the employer and all that entails, for example, missed career opportunities. The most common complaint on returning to work is a change in job role to lesser duties.

But it’s not all bad news. Some women have reported great communication with their employers throughout pregnancy and maternity leave, with health and safety, risk assessments and flexible working on offer, so we know that there is plenty of good practice in this area.

Now we’re asking Northern Ireland employers to tell us about their experiences of managing pregnancy at work, maternity leave and return to work. If you have a point of view or an example of good practice to share, please take 15 minutes to complete our online survey www.equalityni.org/employersurvey. And thank you in advance – we will share our findings in 2016.