

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

Pregnancy, Maternity and Employment in Northern Ireland

Women currently make up approximately 50% of the workforce in Northern Ireland. They are a key component in the success of many businesses and it is in every employer's best interests to consider how they can best accommodate and support the needs of pregnant women and mothers in the workplace, to enable them to participate fully and without disadvantage in employment.

But complaints of sex discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy and maternity remain the single largest category of complaints of sex discrimination made to the Equality Commission - approximately 20% of all sex discrimination complaints.

The Commission has just launched a Formal Investigation under the Sex Discrimination Order (NI) 1976 into the treatment of pregnant workers and mothers in the workplace across Northern Ireland.

Our experience is that employers want to know what the law requires and to ensure they are providing fair treatment and equality of opportunity for all their workers. So we have advice and guidance on the areas of managing pregnancy and maternity at work available on our website or by ringing our Advice and Compliance team on 028 9050 0600. We would encourage all businesses, regardless of size, to engage with us if they have any queries about these issues.

The investigation will explore the experiences of pregnant women and mothers returning to work and identify any barriers to equal treatment. Importantly, it will also report on examples of good practice by employers, those who provide pregnant women and mothers with equality of opportunity in the workplace.

We expect that the Investigation will provide us with a wider perspective and a greater depth of knowledge of the issues facing women in workplace today. This will feed into our help and advice to employers which in turn will be of benefit to those who are pregnant or are returning to work after maternity leave.

The investigation will proceed throughout this year and a full report will be published in 2016. Further details of the Investigation are available on the Commission's website www.equalityni.org