

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 15 March 2015
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First rule of selling: make it easy for everyone to buy

It is a given that businesses spend significant money trying to attract people to buy their services and products. Many use methods such as shop signage and window displays; ads in newspapers, on TV and radio; and creating a presence online. Given the need to increase business turnover, why would any business want to risk turning away 20% of their potential customer base?

This is a serious question. We know that no sensible business person sets out to drive customers away - but if their business is inaccessible to people with disabilities, that is just what they are doing, as 75% of disabled people state that they have walked away from a potential purchase because of access problems. This is a significant loss of income given that approximately 40% of households in Northern Ireland contain at least 1 disabled person and that 25% of adults and 5% of children are classified as disabled.

Last Saturday was the second UK-wide annual Disabled Access Day – a day when disabled people, their friends and families were encouraged to visit somewhere they haven't been before. Such a focus is still needed, because disabled people still encounter many barriers as they simply attempt to carry out straightforward, everyday activities, such as shopping, accessing professional services, going for a cup of coffee or a having night out.

Last week, the Equality Commission hosted an event for business people and trade associations in Belfast as part of our "Every Customer Counts" campaign which supports and encourages businesses to look at how accessible their premises and services are for someone with a disability. Businesses and organisations shared their experiences of making their services more welcoming and accessible to all their customers and service users.

Disabled people have the right to enjoy access to the same events, facilities and activities as everyone else. Sometimes small changes to working patterns, to the way information is presented, and to premises, can make a significant impact. Probably the biggest difference of all is evident in businesses which have trained their staff to provide the best possible accessible services to people with different types of disability.

A core element in disability legislation is the requirement that businesses should make reasonable adjustments to provide disabled people with the same level of access, dignity and choice as others when accessing their services.

The Equality Commission can advise service providers and all business people on how to provide equal and full access for every customer.