

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 6 Dec 2016  
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

### **Pregnancy/Maternity in the Workplace Investigation**

The Last week the Equality Commission reported on the results of its investigation into the employment experiences of pregnant workers and mothers in Northern Ireland. It found that, although about half the 906 women surveyed believed their employer had been supportive, both during their pregnancy and on their return to work, almost half thought that their careers had been negatively affected by their pregnancy or maternity leave; and that they were expected to accept that there was a choice to be made between parenthood and a rewarding career path.

The positive view about good practice did not come as a surprise to the Commission because we know, from the extensive work we do with employers on equality issues, that many employers make every effort to help pregnant women with any issues which arise while they remain at work. We are also aware that many have effective, family friendly policies in place for mothers on their return to work after pregnancy or maternity leave.

What is disconcerting is that the experiences of over a third of the women respondents who shared their stories about unfair treatment and perceived disadvantage they suffered either because of their pregnancy or the use of maternity leave. They spoke of the effect this had on them both financially and in relation to their status and promotion prospects at work; as well as the impacts on their health. Simply stated, forty years after the introduction of sex discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland, this is unacceptable.

It is primarily because pregnancy and maternity issues have consistently been the most common basis of sex discrimination complaints received by the Commission that we conducted the Investigation. We hope that the recommendations we made will help change the situation for future generations.

To put these into practice we will be working with a range of partners. This will ensure that employers have access to 'best practice' guidance, including up to date knowledge of relevant legislation, how to manage the impact of employee absence, and other

issues relating to maternity leave. We have published new wide ranging and accessible guidance on our website for those employing pregnant women and mothers.

For employers, it is important to communicate with pregnant employees, and maintain reasonable contact with them during maternity leave, to better understand their needs and expectations. It is also essential to provide a supportive environment for mothers returning to work, including accessible flexible, family friendly, policies and practices.

The Commission will continue to work with all employers, large and small, to encourage action which would make Northern Ireland workplaces fairer for, and more supportive of, pregnant employees and new mothers. We will continue to highlight to all employers the economic benefits of utilising and retaining the skills and experience of pregnant workers and new mothers. "Expecting Equality - the report of the Commission's investigation into Pregnancy and Maternity in the workplace and the revised Guidance can be read on the Commission's website at [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)