

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 12 April 2015
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Poverty is a condition that makes everyone in society worse off

A recent report from Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted the fact that more than 1 in 5 of N Ireland residents are living in poverty. The level of working age poverty is 20% but perhaps most significantly, over 100,000 or 25% of all children are in poverty. Although poverty is not a “protected characteristic” under our Equality legislation, there is clear evidence of a link between those living in poverty and their experience of key inequalities such as health, education and employment. The reality of living with poverty is, as someone recently observed, like “being punished for a crime I didn’t commit”.

In a supporting manifesto, JRF highlight ways in which we might address the growing problem of poverty in this place we call home. They include amongst their recommendations, the need to address educational underachievement and develop a diverse labour market.

Access to employment is essential in helping people out of poverty. A job is crucial for everyone’s economic and social wellbeing and is one of the key routes to social mobility and inclusion. Economic inactivity leads to people being marginalized and cut off from the social, political and economic life of their community. That is why fairness and equality in employment are matters of fundamental importance.

Job creation and the elimination of poverty, of course, raise economic and political issues beyond the reach of equality legislation. It is likely, in the next few weeks, that we will hear plenty of discussion about how they might be delivered. There are also some practical issues, however, which raise issues of equality and have a direct impact on the ability of people to find work and improve their lives.

The provision of affordable childcare remains a crucial factor preventing women being able to find suitable work, or maintain steady employment which has an inevitable impact on income and children. Unsurprisingly, this situation impacts most severely on people who already face financial and social difficulties.

As the Equality Commission’s recent draft statement on Key Inequalities in Education

highlighted, many children in Northern Ireland continue to experience persistent educational inequalities on a number of equality grounds including disability, gender, religion and race. These inequalities impact directly upon young people's employment prospects and their progression to further and higher education.

Gandhi once remarked that "poverty is the worst form of violence". We need to do our bit to subvert the inequalities which come as a consequence of that violence.

How? Finding a job can unlock a person's sense of belonging and spark a new appreciation of esteem. The business community, working with Government and with the Equality Commission, can play an important role in helping people get into work and out of poverty. As a society, we need to ensure that every individual has the opportunity and the support they need to become as economically independent as possible regardless of race, religion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation.