

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 13 Sept 2016
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Recognising challenges faced by disabled people in employment

It is a fact of life that while some statistics are given significant public attention, others appear not to merit even a polite mention. This truism was reinforced to me just last week when the mid-year population estimates for N Ireland were published. We learned that our population is aging and is now rounded up to 1.9 million. What was perhaps made less clear is the fact that more than 1 in 6 working age people in Northern Ireland live with a disabling condition. Starker still is the fact that while almost 4 in every 5 people without a disability are employed, only 1 person in 3 living with a disability find themselves in that position. Remember that this statistic represents thousands of people who face daily economic hardship, isolation and lost opportunities. What lies behind this statistic, however, is less clear.

We know from recent Citizens Advice Bureau research that people with fluctuating or hidden disabilities are less likely to receive the support they need to find and keep a job and so, in any given year, disabled people are twice as likely to fall out of work as non-disabled people. We know many face cultural stereotypes about their abilities.

It is accepted that this situation has a huge impact on their financial security, their own lives and that of their families. It constitutes a serious 'employability gap' between disabled and non-disabled people and sets a massive task for the Government and for employers to help get disabled jobseekers into work.

We claim to be building a united community, so getting this problem addressed is very important issue for us as a society. We know that no one wants a Northern Ireland where disabled people feel locked out of jobs and facing poverty and isolation. Holding down a job ensures our independence and when this is made a reality for all of us, then our society will be more diverse and fairer, and employers have a crucial role to play in furthering this end.

Most large employers are already aware of their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act and are clear that they must not discriminate against people on grounds of their disability. They also know that they are also required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to prevent disabled people being placed at a disadvantage.

While physical changes may assist in making workplaces more accessible, the most important challenge remains for us to change our old established ways of thinking by to recognising the range of challenges that our disabled colleagues face. Most obvious adjustments relate to modifying premises or providing specialist equipment which a disabled person can use. More

subtle adjustments, however, such as being flexible about medical appointments or working hours can be a huge help to someone with a disability.

Please check our website for training in both the basics of the DDA for employers and in the 'Reasonable Steps' defence or for free downloadable policies you can tailor to your business. Follow us on Linked In for other news and for details of our free employer/HR events on closing the employability gap coming up this winter.