

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 6 June 2017
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Accepting and embracing difference in the workplace

We have the privilege of living at a time when, in the main, difference is no longer something to be feared. It has not always been so. This day, 51 years ago, civil rights activist James Meredith, the first black man to brave the colour bar at the University of Mississippi, was shot in the back and legs while on a civil rights march. This happened in my lifetime.

Violence and mistrust has been no stranger to this place we call home - a place where, over some difficult years, there has been conflict and violence in a divided community. Through that time businesses in Northern Ireland, to their credit, made steady progress in building better relations in the workplace. Indeed, for many people, it was sometimes only in the workplace, and through professional and business contacts, that some level of cross-community contact between people was sustained.

Of course, sectarianism still remains a reality in our communities, so each year, as young people enter the workforce and older people retire, we must maintain the mechanisms, the commitment and focus, which have, up to now, helped to counter sectarian division in that sphere.

The same basic principles which have helped challenge sectarianism are also effective in challenging other prejudices. With increasing numbers of people from other countries working here, the Commission has been working with employers facing new issues. Together we are dealing with the realities of an increasingly diverse society and striving to create and maintain a shared society where all are equally welcome.

The Commission has recently been hosting 'Employer Equality Update' conferences throughout Northern Ireland. In a series of well attended events delegates from all sectors of business have learned about key developments in equality law. The laws dealing with all equality issues lay down a clear framework which must be applied and codes of good practice by which businesses can create an environment welcoming to all, customers as well as employees. These are basic standards which can guarantee equality of opportunity and fair treatment; and they are a key element in creating and maintaining a reasonably harmonious environment for people to work and businesses to progress.

Equality, however, should not just be seen as an issue of legal compliance. The legislation should be the foundation on which good practice is developed; and the Commission can assist employers with the development of proactive policies promoting equality of opportunity in their workplaces.

Equality delivers for us all – it comes when we make sure that we offer, as well as receive, fair treatment. It requires us to be open and welcoming to those who are different. Kofi Annan once said “*True tolerance is an active, even assertive quality, based on mutual respect. Its aim must be, not to eliminate differences between human beings, but to embrace and even celebrate them as a source of joy and strength*”. That remains our challenge.

Another ‘Employer Equality Update’ will be held on 21 June at the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre in Craigavon. These events are free and can be booked through the Equality Commission’s website: www.equalityni.org