

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 9 May 2017
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Businesses should anticipate the needs of disabled customers

It is obvious that no business owner would like to think that they or their staff would ever be disrespectful of a disabled person, or discriminate against them. Yet every year the Commission’s legal team receives between 200 and 300 complaints of discrimination from people who face problems trying to access goods, facilities or services – just because of their disability.

The fact is that, here in Northern Ireland, we have amongst the highest incidence of disability in the UK with 37% of all NI households affected. That totals about 375,000 people - a large potential market which any business should consider.

The most obvious examples of disablement involve physical access. You only have to push a pram round high street shops to appreciate some of the daily barriers faced by wheelchair users. This is a “visible disability” – what about the less visible disabilities – autism, hearing loss, mental ill health? How can you ensure that your business and staff are competent in dealing with people facing such a diverse range of challenges – not to mention their families, carers and, crucially, their needs?

Good service need not be expensive – indeed experience has shown that many simple things can be done to improve accessibility with little or no extra cost. For example, if you have signs, just ensure they are of a size and at a level to make them meaningful. Consider using a bigger type size in menus and leaflets. Make sure your doorway is uncluttered and that doormats lie flat. Have safety markings on glass doors so that people with limited vision don’t walk into them. Keep a note pad and pen handy so that people with hearing impairment can tell you what they require. Ensure furniture in waiting areas allows space for a wheelchair user to pull up alongside a seated companion.

Training staff to think about how they deal with a disabled customer is crucial. Many of the problems raised by complainants come from impatient attitudes by staff or a lack of flexibility in business practices.

The law requires businesses to anticipate the needs of disabled customers. This creates an opportunity for you to be imaginative and creative to ensure no-one is excluded from accessing your services. Remember, to claim that something has

“always been done that way” does not absolve you from considering how to better meet the needs of disabled people.

The Equality Commission’s ‘Every Customer Counts’ initiative is an online set of resources to help businesses. Three first steps are to audit access to your business; to develop a customer service policy that includes disabled people; and then to take action which will improve disabled people’s experience of your service.

At its heart, the case for access for people with disabilities is a human rights matter. The law’s primary purpose is to ensure that people with disabilities get full access to services and to employment. Its purpose is to make a difference – to individuals, their families and their communities. Approached sensibly, it can make a difference for business as well.

- Further information is available on the Equality Commission’s website: www.equalityni.org/EveryCustomerCounts