

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 21 Nov 2017
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Is Fair Employment legislation still needed? Or is it just 'red tape'?

Discrimination on the grounds of religious and political opinion still exists, as last month's Fair Employment Tribunal case against a plumbing supply company demonstrated. The company was found to have discriminated against, harassed and victimised a former employee on the grounds of her religious belief or political opinion. As a result, Helen Scott, the employee, was awarded £20,736 compensation.

This judgement shows that there is a consequence for failure to protect employees' rights, not only in terms of finance but, perhaps more significantly, in potential damage to reputation.

To put things into context, although problems of discrimination and inequality of this type do persist, overall employment practices are much better than they were in the past. There is no doubt that the changes have brought benefit to significant numbers of people who might previously have been excluded from whole sectors of industry and higher levels of responsibility. These include people who have faced barriers, not only on grounds of their religion or race, but also because of their age or sexual orientation, or because they were women or were living with a disability.

Thoughtful, inclusive changes in workplace practice bring benefits to the businesses who enact them by broadening access to people with a wider variety of skills, experience and creativity, and by breaking down old habits and cultures based on 'the way we always did it here' and introducing better, more productive processes.

Equality laws have often provided the impetus to making the change to a more inclusive workplace. Legislation has helped by encouraging a harmonious and fair environment for everyone to work in. These changes have gone a long way to making Northern Ireland a world leader in legislation and practices promoting and protecting equality of opportunity.

I recently spoke at the launch of a new Joint Declaration of Protection (for Dignity at Work and Inclusive Working Environment), an initiative developed by the NI Employment Relations Roundtable, which is made up of all employer organisations and trade unions in Northern Ireland, and jointly endorsed by the Commission and the Labour Relations Agency.

The Joint Declaration of Protection states that everyone has a right to equality of opportunity in employment and the right to work in a harmonious and inclusive environment and atmosphere in which all workers are encouraged to apply their diverse talents and in which no worker feels under threat or experiences intimidation.

A model workplace policy accompanies the Declaration and lists actions which all employers and trade unions are encouraged to adopt. It's available on our website and on the LRA site.

Discrimination is still an issue which needs to be addressed. It is vital that all employers remain engaged with the processes by which they make sure their workplaces are good and harmonious, as well as ensuring they meet their legal obligations. Good and harmonious workplaces employing a diverse workforce are the most productive businesses we have.

See our website, phone or email us for practical guidance on the promotion of equality of opportunity and the elimination of unlawful discrimination.