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## **Mental Health at Work**

We all need to be more open about facing up to issues around mental health and talking about them. Mental ill-health in the workplace is an issue of growing concern and employers cannot afford to shy away from dealing with any difficulties which arise. Disabling mental health conditions are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act and employers and service providers have the same responsibilities to people with mental ill health as to those with more physical – and visible – disabilities.

This is important to many people in Northern Ireland. A 2016 report by the Mental Health Foundation found that one in five people here will experience mental health problems at some stage in their life. And that has an impact on business as well as on the individuals and their families. The report calculated a cost of £26 billion per year for UK businesses, based on estimates of 10% due to replacing staff, 30% for sick absence and 60% as a result of reduced productivity. Prevention and early intervention could greatly reduce these impacts.

The Equality Commission's own research, our Equality Awareness survey in 2011, has shown that prejudice against people with mental health issues is worryingly prevalent. One person in four indicated that they would mind having someone with mental ill-health as a work colleague. That is a larger negative response than was expressed about working with people with other forms of disability.

Proper arrangements for managing an employee's mental health issues should be part of every employer's commitment to equality of opportunity in their workplace. Pro-active management can help businesses make reasonable adjustments for people by looking



at cultural issues in organisations and recognising mental health as a major issue that has to be tackled. Adopting best practice measures can improve attendance and increase productivity. It generally costs less than absence - and the difficulties and claims that a case alleging discrimination on this ground could bring.

The Equality Commission has recently co-operated with leading mental health charities in Northern Ireland, including Action Mental Health, Change Your Mind Campaign, Disability Action, Foundation for Mental Health, Inspire and Mind Wise, to launch a voluntary Mental Health Charter. It is a commitment by businesses and organisations to work towards a better understanding of mental health issues and to better understand how these impact on individuals and the workforce. The Charter identifies voluntary commitments and action points to improve mental well-being in the workplace.

Stigma and perceptions about mental ill health often create barriers to implementing reasonable adjustments in practice. Businesses signing up to the Charter commit to the creation of an open and inclusive workplace culture which displays respect for people with mental ill-health. This includes promoting equality of opportunity in recruitment and selection and taking positive steps to make all their services accessible to people with mental ill-health.

Encouraging businesses to sign up to the Charter is only the first step for the Commission and our partners. As a next step we assist businesses put in place effective policies and procedures to manage mental health issues – and to ensure their staff are aware of how best to engage with colleagues and services users with mental ill health.

Signing up to the Mental Health Charter and implementing its policy recommendations will help employers put in place practices and procedures which will enable them to stay on the right side of the law.

Join us and our partners from the mental health sector in de-stigmatizing mental ill health: [www.equalityni.org/MentalHealthCharter](http://www.equalityni.org/MentalHealthCharter)