

'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 17 Feb 2017 by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Being Mindful of Mental Ill Health in the Workplace

There is little doubt but that Mental illness is becoming an increasing area of concern for us in the context of a busy, driven, modern society and because of that it has become a significant issue facing employers as well.

Just a few weeks ago, Business in the Community highlighted the fact that almost one third [29%] of people currently working have been diagnosed with some form of mental health condition. Anxiety and stress remains the most common cause of absence in the public sector and the second most common across the workforce as a whole, totaling 30% of all absences. In quantitative terms, given that the average cost of sickness absence in the UK in 2015 was £16 billion, this equates to just under £5 billion per year is due to stress.

A TUC survey in 2016 revealed that stress is the most widespread concern in all regions of the UK. Significantly, it has increased the most here in Northern Ireland where it has risen by 13% to 78% over the two year period from 2014.

The same TUC survey highlighted the fact that 77% of employees have experienced symptoms of poor mental health at some point in their lives and that 62% of employees attributed their symptoms of poor mental health to work, or said that work was a contributing factor. However, only 11% of employees discussed a recent mental health problem with their line manager and 35% of employees did not approach anyone for support the last time they experienced poor mental health. More worryingly, perhaps is the fact that 9% of employees who experienced poor mental health experienced disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. We should all be more open about facing up to the issues and talking about it. Proper management of employee mental health leads to improved attendance, decreased costs, increased productivity and overall - it generally costs less than absence.

The Commission was recently involved in the launch of a voluntary Mental Health Charter. It is not an accreditation, an award or a quality standard – it is a commitment that an organisation will work towards a better understanding of mental health issues and how they impact on individuals and the workforce. If you haven't yet seen it, please look at the Charter and consider joining us and our partners from the mental health sector in de-stigmatizing mental ill health:

- www.equalityni.org/MentalHealthCharter

We are also running a mental health “cafe style” event on 22 March for employers who have signed up to the Charter or intend to do so. Further details are available on our website.