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**Blog article by Paul Oakes, Manager of the Advisory Services Team**

## **Pregnancy and maternity at work**

In 2016, half of the women who responded to an Equality Commission investigation believed that their career opportunities were negatively affected by their pregnancy or maternity leave. One-third said that they had been treated unfairly or disadvantaged for the same reasons.

That was no surprise. Complaints of sex discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy and maternity have - for years – been the single largest category of complaints of sex discrimination made to the Equality Commission. The Commission, over the past years, has been conducting an extensive training programme for employers and trade unions dealing with those issues. We have also developed revised employer guidance in relation to them.

Both the guidance and the training spell out the legally enforceable employment rights which pregnant women and new mothers have, designed to protect their health and safety and that of their expected or new-born baby. We also emphasize the steps that employers need to take to minimise the possibility of finding themselves on the wrong side of a tribunal decision if these rights are not respected.

The measures recommended in the new guidance and training programmes include advice on how to:

1. Develop and implement a policy in respect of pregnancy and maternity.
2. Communicate the employer's commitment to promoting equality for pregnant women and new mothers.
3. Train staff on their rights and responsibilities in relation to this policy.
4. Review other relevant policies to ensure that these rights are respected, for example in respect of recruitment and selection, equal opportunities, harassment, pay and promotion.

5. Monitor the engagement rate of pregnant women and new mothers in respect of promotion and personal development opportunities.
6. Ensure that pregnancy and maternity related absences are handled in a manner consistent with the sex equality legislation.
7. Keep the pregnancy and maternity and other relevant policies under review.

Promoting equality of opportunity for pregnant women and new mothers is not only the right thing to do, it can also be of real benefit to employers. No business can afford to cast aside the skills, knowledge and experience which women have to offer, simply because they have family commitments.

Employers who have taken the time to put policies and procedures in place to ensure they can recruit and retain staff whatever their gender or family circumstances can benefit from a wider labour pool and higher rates of staff satisfaction, productivity and profitability.

It makes sense to be on the right side of the law.

**Further information:**

- Pregnancy and maternity at work: a guide for employers in NI - [online version](#) / [pdf](#)
- [Employer training programme - pregnancy and maternity at work](#)