

***View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; Tuesday 18 December 2018
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI***

Employment initiatives can have real impact for people with disabilities

Last week I was privileged to join with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in celebrating the graduation of 10 young men - all members of their workforce - who had successfully completed a 14 week OCN/Belfast Met approved programme, operating through the Trust's remarkable Positive Action Employability Programme.

The Trust has co-worked this initiative with partners in the community and voluntary sector to provide an employability programme for people with learning disabilities, offering 10 trainees the opportunity to take part in a programme which will lead to permanent posts in its patient client support services. This means that a group of people, who are too often excluded or simply overlooked, were able to earn a visible and valued position within the workforce.

The Trust employs 22,000 people and has a workforce with specialist skills who give essential assistance to many of those in greatest need within our community. So, it is right that it prioritises, within its own ranks, the values of inclusivity and diversity.

Initiatives such as this move beyond simple compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act. It is an example of a proactive, positive action by which an employer can make a real impact for the better in the lives of people in our community who suffer so many disadvantages. Apart from the direct benefit to the people employed, it can bring to the wider public an appreciation of the skills and capacities of people with learning disability.

For people with disabilities, as with all the equality grounds, it is important, not just to challenge discrimination when it occurs, but to work for change in the underlying attitudes which fuel it. In addition to people with learning disabilities, Equality Commission's surveys have repeatedly shown that more negative attitudes towards people with mental ill-health than towards people with other kinds of disabilities.

Yet this is an issue which affects people throughout our community. Mental illness has been identified as one of the major causes of ill health and disability in Northern Ireland, affecting 1 in 4 people. Business in the Community recently indicated that almost one third [29%] of people currently working have been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

The Equality Commission, with a range partners, launched the Mental Health Charter for employers a year ago. This is a voluntary commitment made by the employer and is a very important step for any employer to take. A large percentage of employees who said they had experienced poor mental health attributed this to work, or said that work was a contributing factor. Not surprisingly, the Trust was an early signatory.

In tackling difficult issues like this, clear and supportive leadership is key. It is important that the message of inclusion and support permeates the fabric of the organisation. Employers, under the Charter, make a commitment to work to create an open and inclusive workplace that supports staff in maintaining good mental health, and to ensure that help is available for those staff who are experiencing poor mental health by providing the right support at the right time.