

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 20 November 2018, Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Executive, Equality Commission NI**

**Good and harmonious relationships in the workplace**

It has been calculated that most people spend about a third of their life at work. I know, I know, many of you reading this will say that, in your case, it seems like a lot more - and that you can think of others for whom ‘being at work’ is not the same as working. But the fact is that the workplace is a large part of most of our lives. The atmosphere and the relationships we experience there will affect our sense of our own place in the world, our self-respect and, dare I suggest, our happiness.

When things go wrong individual staff and their colleagues will suffer, and the business will be affected. So it is hardly surprising that quite a lot of the Equality Commission’s work involves issues around equality of opportunity and good and harmonious relationships in the workplace.

Over the next few months, the Commission will be gathering evidence from employers and employees to help us understand how we can best help employers promote a welcoming and inclusive workplace where all their employees are treated with dignity and respect. We want to get the perspectives of business owners and managers, and of the people who work for them, about how they have experienced issues around equality and good relations in their own working lives.

Of course, where there is prejudice in society, it is difficult to prevent it having an impact on the workplace. We have had many years’ experience in Northern Ireland of tackling this threat, due to the divisions in our community. Employers, through that time, made steady progress in creating structures and a climate which built and maintained good relations in the workplace through many difficult years of conflict.

In the Twenty-first century our society has changed and the issues which can arise as difficulties in the workplace have changed also. When we assessed key inequalities in employment in Northern Ireland earlier this year, we found that prejudice in our society, in many forms, is persistent and that it can seep into the workplace environment through conscious and unconscious biases.

We have also identified key factors that can help us head off those problems and help promote a good and harmonious working environment. Key themes are the importance of effective leadership and management in shaping a culture which values equality and diversity. Making sure that equality is at the heart of an organisation’s policies and procedures, and of how they are implemented, is an essential starting point.

We are now seeking views from all involved in the workplace, to update and flesh out the reality of their experiences of equality issues at work, and for their perception of what barriers exist to a more harmonious working environment. That will help us in

the extensive work we carry on year in year out – giving advice and running training sessions, highlighting legal responsibilities and good practice, and engaging with all employers to create a working environment, welcoming to all, in our increasingly diverse society.

### **Further information**

- [Promoting a good and harmonious working environment - a guide for employers - \(pdf\)](#)