

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 30 Jan 2018
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Mind Your Health

For many people the response they receive when they raise any mental health issues with their colleagues or managers can make an enormous difference to how they feel about themselves and their work. For this reason, every organisation needs to consider how they can encourage their staff to be open about any mental health issues. They also need to ensure that any concerns which are raised are dealt with sensitively and effectively.

Too often people who are living with a poor mental health feel stigmatised and, more often than not, don't talk about their condition for a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which is a lack of public awareness of the condition. The irony is that mental ill-health is the most common cause of absence in the public sector and the second most common across the workforce as a whole. It is something that will impact personally on one in four of the population.

Too often our views are formed by the extremes of media reporting and so it is important to know that mental health covers everything from signs of stress to conditions such as depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Everyone who experiences mental ill health will have a different experience of it, and are likely to have their own way of coping.

This month the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service signed up to the Mental Health Charter. By so doing, he joined with some of Northern Ireland's major employers in making a commitment to support staff who are experiencing mental ill-health. In all, over 60 employers have signed to date, including businesses such as Allstate NI, NIE Networks Ltd, and Allen & Overy.

This is a voluntary charter involving the Equality Commission, Action Mental Health, Disability Action, Mindwise, the Mental Health Foundation and Inspire (formerly NIAMH). It aims to assist employers to put mental health at the centre of staff welfare and become part of staff culture. The fact is, no-one can effectively tackle mental ill-health within their workplace unless they and their employees are prepared to talk to each other about it.

There are some practical steps employers can take in this area such as early consideration of what reasonable adjustments could be agreed with staff in order to best support them through times of mental ill health. It is vital that such support is discussed and agreed with the staff colleagues involved as steps taken will be specific to each individual's circumstances.

Other simple steps such as making adjustments to help someone stay at work, or to help someone coming back to work after a sickness absence, can be of great benefit for the employee. It will also cause much less upheaval, and be less expensive, for a business, than an employee leaving and having to be replaced.

At the centre there should be an organisational culture, built on clear values, which people know will be acted upon.

This needs strong and courageous leadership to create a workplace which encourages open discussion. This can help both staff and business and defuse difficulties before they develop into serious problems.

It might be a difficult first step to take but the journey will benefit all staff.

If you are interested in learning more see our website or phone or email us for practical guidance.

- Further information is available on the Equality Commission's website:
www.equalityni.org/MentalHealthCharter