

‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 27 March 2018 by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Interactions at work can greatly diminish prejudices

Attitudes we hold about other people and groups tend to inform how we behave towards those groups and it is for that reason that the Commission periodically carries out surveys on the attitudes of individuals in Northern Ireland.

Over the years, these surveys have traditionally asked people whether they “would mind” if they had people from particular groups as a work colleague, a neighbour, or an in-law and so it is possible to track any changes in attitudes over time. Perhaps surprisingly our most recent survey showed that negative attitudes towards other groups, on all three fronts, had decreased since the previous survey in 2011. In particular, our recent survey revealed that the most positive movement in attitude was found in the prospect of having someone of another group as work colleague.

This finding caused me to reflect on why this might be the case. Many of us will be all too aware of times past when many aspects of our society were divided along sectarian lines. Since the 1970s, however, legislation and positive action by many employers ensured that, however imperfectly, the workplace increasingly became a safe place for people from different backgrounds to meet and work together. This environment allowed work colleagues to take small steps in developing cross-community contact and new personal relationships with people who were different from them. This situation has greatly improved over the past couple of decades and now people from all walks of life are commonly meeting and engaging with one another within the workplace on a regular basis. It is now normal.

Such interactions and contact between people from different groups can greatly diminish the growth of prejudices such as sectarianism, racism or homophobia - attitudes which can flourish when people from different backgrounds are seen or encountered as anonymous “others”. It is when people have the opportunity to look beyond negative stereotypes and meet the human being beyond, that relationships improve.

Earlier this month, in the Black Box in Belfast, I had the privilege of hearing the views of a diverse and very well informed group of people, who offered a variety of views on what equality means to them in Northern Ireland today. What was interesting to me was the number of speakers who referenced the importance of regular contact between people of different groups in encouraging a more positive attitudes towards others who were perceived as “different”.

Our survey on equality attitudes has shown that the majority of people responding think that equality is as important, or more important, to them as it was 12 months

earlier. The lesson we must take on board is that the more our society is a shared space, the more frequently people have the opportunity to engage with people different from themselves, the more likely we are to improve relationships and reduce prejudice across all aspects of our community.