

View from the Chair, Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

What the year's casework tells us about discrimination in NI

While looking over the Commission's Review of Legal Services for 2018-19, two things struck me. First, the sheer volume of calls to our discrimination advice line - the highest number of calls we've ever had, with actual numbers in all areas rising by 31% over the past ten years. Secondly, the figures reveal that the majority of alleged discrimination raised with us takes place in the workplace.

When we break down the 4,144 calls from people who believed they had suffered discrimination, 43.5% related to disability discrimination, the most common ground for complaint over recent years. This was followed by 24.5% of calls which were about sex discrimination with 12% linked to religious belief or political opinion.

Last year, around three quarters of all complaints of discrimination made to the Commission were to do with work. The remainder related to lack of access to goods, facilities or services, education or housing. The biggest area of complaints about employment to our advice line was harassment and the work environment.

We looked at it in our recent online workplace poll of employees, the results of which were published in early July. One fifth of all of those workers who responded to us had personally experienced unwanted behaviour at work in the previous 12 months. Of these unwanted behaviours, 27% were on the grounds of sex, 24% were about religion and 20% about politics. One quarter of those responding had witnessed unwanted behaviour at work. Interestingly, only 11% said they would raise the matter through workplace formal procedures and only 12% who would raise the matter formally with external support.

The biggest area of complaints to our advice line about accessing goods, facilities and services related to people who either received a lower standard of service or were disadvantaged while trying to access goods, facilities or services on one of the grounds specified by the law.

One of the reasons we publicise the outcomes of discrimination cases is to remind employers and service providers of the law and their responsibilities under that law. We also take the opportunity to promote our free advice and support to organisations which can help them avoid the trouble, expense, bad feeling and damage to reputation that complaints of discrimination can cause.

We have consistently said that if an employee, client or customer complains about discrimination, you need to have a clear, timely procedure which is fair to all sides. You need to take any complaints of discrimination seriously and ensure your workforce knows you will deal with them properly.

Most people do not want or intend to discriminate. Employers have a key role in ensuring that discrimination does not happen in the first place. You need to have policies in place that are communicated to managers and staff, so that equal opportunities are a part of how your organisation operates both with its staff and your customers.

We can help – there's information on our website, you can ring us on 028 90 500 600 or email us edenquiries@equalityni.org, or sign up for free training. The Review of Legal Services 2018-2019 is also on our website.