

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 23 June 2020 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Childcare – an issue for everyone

There has been much public discussion in recent days about the urgent need for the Government to step up support for child care providers and families with working parents. Why does this matter so much, and why is it an equality issue that should concern employers?

Employers are keen to get back to business and are calling employees back into work, but there are real problems for some families about how it can be managed. School closures, part time school attendance and lack of childcare have a direct effect on employee availability.

Real life issues reported to our discrimination advice line in recent weeks include people with children who cannot go to school and who are not eligible for the limited childcare that is currently available, and thus cannot make themselves available for work. They are raising concerns of potential sex discrimination. While many parents may want to get back to work, they cannot be in two places at once.

Availability of childcare is greatly reduced, with more than nine in 10 nurseries and day-care providers in Northern Ireland shut since late March. The sector has reported long-term sustainability and viability issues that could mean some providers will never re-open. And for those who do re-open, social distancing measures will have to be observed, limiting numbers.

It's clear that we need some short term solutions to help get people back to work now and open up the economy, and that we also need longer term solutions that free up parents for work by making suitable childcare available when it is needed.

Recent welcome actions by Government during the pandemic have included rates relief for childcare providers and an announcement that all parents will be able to avail of childcare from July 1. Registered childminders will be able to look after children from four families from June 29, rising to children from five families in August.

The issue of childcare is best tackled together with your employees. Some of the options open to employers to get people back to work quickly include talking to employees about working from home, possible flexible working arrangements, possibly remaining on furlough after 1 July or taking paid holiday leave or unpaid leave, although this is not an option that will appeal to many hard-pressed families. Any of these options will help you and your employee find a way forward in the struggle to balance employment, schooling, home schooling and childcare requirements.

It's in the longer term interests of business and the economy, as well as families and children, for Northern Ireland to have a full and properly resourced childcare strategy and action plan and for the widest possible availability of affordable, accessible, good quality and flexible childcare.

The Commission has been calling for the Executive to step up to the mark with solutions to the present childcare situation to help employers and working parents to balance the demands of bringing up a family with delivering their best at work.