

## **View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 15 September 2020 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

### **As we strive for recovery, can we ensure that no one gets left behind?**

The furlough scheme comes to an end on 31 October. Well over 200,000 workers in Northern Ireland have been furloughed and with the end of that Government support, fears about redundancy and job losses are evident in the calls we have received to our discrimination advice line.

Employers too, in the midst of re-shaping and sometimes re-sizing their businesses, have been ringing us about very similar issues. The most visited employer pages of our website last quarter were for advice on redundancy during maternity leave, on avoiding discrimination against women with caring responsibilities in the return to the workplace and on furlough.

Complaints and enquiries from employees about disability discrimination accounted for more than half of the calls to the advice line. Many employees with disabilities have contacted us because they fear they are being selected for redundancy and their disability related sick leave is being taken into account. We have also heard from disabled employees who were shielding being pressured to return to work where they believe it is unsafe to do so and deaf and hearing impaired people experiencing communication barriers because of face coverings, both in the workplace and in accessing services.

Over 30% of COVID-19 related queries raised sex discrimination issues, the most common of which was women selected for redundancy where selection has been influenced by pregnancy, maternity leave or where women were selected in male-dominated non-traditional areas of employment. Other issues include employees feeling pressured to return to work or change their working pattern where there is no childcare available to them and women furloughed whose 80% pay was based on the previous year's pay, which had been significantly reduced due to maternity leave.

We've also had a number of age discrimination queries relating to selection for redundancy of older employees and, conversely, being refused redundancy and pressured to retire instead.

We know these are difficult times for both employers and employees but it must be remembered that the anti-discrimination laws apply in these times as they did before the pandemic impacted on all our lives.

Even before COVID-19, disabled people and women in particular faced very real barriers to finding and keeping a job. As jobs become scarcer and, in the rush to get the country back on an even keel, we need to ensure that we stay focused on the building blocks for an inclusive recovery, such as employment schemes to get

people with disabilities into work and the much-needed Childcare Strategy, so that no-one gets left behind.

The Commission's advice lines are open for both employers and employees and we can provide free and confidential advice on your particular circumstances and on the specific issues you may be facing. We have produced employer advice notes on all these COVID-related issues and many more. All our COVID-19 related information is on one page: [www.equalityni.org/Covid19](http://www.equalityni.org/Covid19)