

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; Tuesday 3 March 2020 by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Working together towards a fairer and more shared society

This will be my last “View from the Chair” as I finished my term as Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission at the end of February. I have written dozens of views over my eight years in post, covering a wide range of issues, many of which relate to historical, and in many cases, enduring inequalities in this place I call home. While laws alone rarely change attitudes, they serve to be visible evidence of how we would like our society to function as well as providing some opportunities for redress for those who are victims of discriminatory acts.

When I started at the Commission we received 3,300 enquiries and applications per year from people who believed they had suffered as a result of discrimination. Last year the figure was over 4,100 - an increase of about 25%. Despite many years of equality legislation, over 40% of last year’s calls related to disability discrimination, followed by sex discrimination at 25% and religious/political discrimination at around 12%.

The increased numbers of potential discrimination cases should be measured against some good news elsewhere. This month we published our 29th Fair Employment Monitoring report covering over half a million employees. The adjusted breakdown of community composition was [50.7%] Protestant and 49.3% Catholic, a dramatic increase from the first report we published in 1990 when the community composition of the monitored workforce was [65.1%] Protestant and [34.9%] Catholic. When compared to labour availability data in 1990, this represented a shortfall of around 4 percentage points in the Catholic share of the workforce.

As a September 2019 Assembly research report commented “While it is impossible to run ‘what if’ scenarios, such as ‘what if there had been no employment legislation?’ it seems unlikely, however, that progress would have been so rapid if there had been no legislation”.

However, given the changes that have taken place in our community composition over the past two decades, the Commission would like to see more data collected and has called for the extension of monitoring requirements to include nationality and ethnic origin to ensure the continued usefulness of the information in measuring fair participation in the workforce.

Educational under-attainment has been another continued source of concern for the Commission. Last month, I had the privilege to take part in an excellent community

event where we looked at a dual capacity approach to family and community engagement in education. This provided a great opportunity for many key practitioners to come together with the Commission to share good practice in how schools and communities can work better together to ensure that children and young people can achieve their potential while at school.

Equality is a societal issue and there is no doubt that we can deliver better outcomes when we work together towards a fairer and more shared society. The Equality Commission is committed to that end and I would like to thank all you employers and service providers who share this journey with us.