

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 15 February 2022 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Help us improve equality in the workplace for everyone

How do you feel about equality for everyone in your workplace? Not your job?

You as an employer have a unique opportunity to change people's lives for the better. Work is a vital component of many people's lives – and it isn't about just making a living, but working in a job where they know their contribution is valued and they are treated with dignity and respect. Who would not want to be an employer of a loyal, committed workers? Who doesn't realise that talented people always have options and will choose a workplace that gives them more than just pay?

We're asking employers who care about equality at work, and about making workplaces inclusive, welcoming and respectful, to read the draft proposals in our forthcoming corporate plan for promoting equal access to work and equal opportunities for everyone at work. This is a real opportunity to feed into our work and tell us what would help you as an employer working towards these goals.

We know from responses to the consultation on our corporate plan, as well as from our day to day work, that there is still inequality and discrimination at work for some people, and we've made eradicating inequality in the workplace one of the five priorities in our forthcoming corporate plan.

Our corporate plan is written for three years, but as we all know, a plan has to be flexible and ours changed dramatically, as did many others, in March 2020 with the first lockdown. We are now approaching the end of that plan and mapping out how we can work to shape equality in Northern Ireland over the next three years.

The areas we're looking at include seeking improvements in workplace equality and working environments for disabled people, women, and people from Black and minority ethnic communities. Even the light of recent political developments, we plan to work with key partners to shape Government strategies and promote improved public policy on employment and actions on employability. We will be seeking employers' views on what legal and policy changes would help them with the nuts and bolts of implementing equality at work.

The pandemic ruptured the world of work for many people. The uncertainty and anxiety that many people felt when their working lives changed was reflected in the proportion of calls to our discrimination advice line that were about discrimination in employment or at work. The area that most people were concerned about was discrimination in their employment.

Almost a quarter of the calls to the discrimination advice line in the 2020-21 business year were COVID-related (23.6%). The majority of these concerned disability discrimination (57.7%) and, of these, roughly two thirds related to employment. Sex discrimination enquiries made up the next largest group of COVID-related enquiries (29.8%). Almost all of these were employment related (96.8%).

All of this means that we felt it is important to work in the next three years to increase awareness of inequalities in employment in the context of COVID-19 amongst key decision-takers and opinion formers and to secure support for change and improvements in employer practices to support and retain disabled people, women and BME people in the workplace.

We also plan to promote awareness of employee rights and employer responsibilities and strategically challenge discriminatory practices in recruitment, employment and harassment.

Finally, within Fair Employment monitoring, we intend keeping patterns and trends under review and raising awareness of trends.

We would be really interested to hear employers' views and urge you to have a read of the draft plan – it's very short! – and to complete our survey, also very short.