

View from the Chair article published in The News Letter, 18 January 2022 by Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission

Every Customer Counts

'Every Customer Counts' is an important and daily mantra for many working in our business community. It is even more profound in current times given the ongoing challenges of the past two years.

For us in the Equality Commission, 'Every Customer Counts' is the title of our initiative to help businesses and service providers ensure their services are accessible for their disabled customers and clients.

One in five people in Northern Ireland live with a disability, this equates to around 400,000 people. Approximately 40% of households here include someone with a disability.

I would be very surprised if any business owner or trader would ever think it acceptable to be disrespectful, dismissive or to discriminate against any disabled person and certainly not those who are trying to access their services or spend money in their business. But unfortunately it continues to happen, even though it's often unintentional.

Every year the Commission receives calls from disabled people who believe they have experienced discrimination as they try to access goods, facilities and services. Last year 47.21% of all enquiries received by the Commission, related to disability discrimination and of these just under 24% were calls from disabled people trying to access goods, facilities and services.

Disabled people have considerable spending power. Research has shown that disabled people spend approximately £249billion a year in the UK economy. So not only is it wrong and unlawful to treat disabled customers less favourably because of their disability, it's bad for your reputation and may hit your business's finances.

Surely it makes good business sense to welcome all customers or clients, and ensure they all have a good experience. Customers who have experienced good customer service are more likely to return to your business and purchase more goods and services. They are more likely to leave positive reviews and tell their close contacts about the service they received or the product they bought. This can often lead to both new and loyal customers.

Designed for businesses and organisations across Northern Ireland, our [‘Every Customer Counts’ initiative](#) offers a range of online resources to help businesses and traders make their business more accessible for disabled people. It helps businesses to consider physical access needs but also access for those with less visible disabilities like autism, mental ill health or hearing loss.

In addition to these useful and practical online resources, the Commission is hosting a series of four webinars as part of our Every Customer Counts work starting on 27 January 2022.

The first session will examine the benefits of ensuring your business is accessible to disabled people and will demonstrate how businesses can go about achieving this. The second session will explore the law around accessible service provision, particularly regarding disabled people, and will include some recent examples from the Courts.

The third webinar will be delivered in partnership with Assistance Dogs UK and will look at some scenarios involving Assistance Dogs and the rights of their companion. The final session will be delivered in partnership with Mencap and will explore common barriers faced by customers and clients with a learning disability and how these can be addressed, often using simple solutions.

All of our webinars are free, and are scheduled to last approximately 40minutes. We want to encourage businesses to attend all four webinars as they will provide a useful journey, from awareness of the common issues affecting disabled customers, right through to practical action that will help businesses to boost their customer base.

The current economic climate remains difficult enough for many businesses. We hope these webinars will help businesses across Northern Ireland make their business more accessible for their disabled customers and clients. To sign up today visit our webpage www.equalityni.org/training