

## **View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 20 December 2022 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

### **What has equality law reform to do with business?**

At our recent conference on the need to reform our equality laws in Northern Ireland, we included a session 'The View from the Workplace', we wanted to hear directly from employers and business.

Our speakers in our View from the Workplace section in the conference, told us clearly why their businesses invest time and resource to prioritise embedding a culture of equality and inclusion.

While acknowledging the business benefits of doing so, they also highlighted how the benefits extend further, and positively impact on their people, their suppliers, their stakeholders and the communities in which they live and work.

Their message was clear, no business can afford not to embrace and integrate equality, diversity and inclusion into their workplace. Regardless of the size of business whether large, medium or small, employers must be invested in diversity and inclusion. They will reap the benefits of integrating diversity and inclusion across their wider business model including significantly boosting their company's brand and reputation and presenting it as a desirable place to work.

They recommended that all businesses would benefit from doing the same thing whilst recognising that they were in a fortunate position to be able to put resource and focus to promoting equality and inclusion in their workplaces and that other businesses may find it more difficult to find the resource. They recommended that those who don't have internal resources should call on the advice and information provided by the Equality Commission.

Those speaking and attending the conference recognised that equality law reform had the potential to make employers' roles easier by simplifying and consolidating our equality laws.

We also heard the trade union perspective in the session, highlighting support for single equality legislation and reminding us that it is vital that workers' equality rights here do not fall further behind those in Great Britain.

Currently, in Northern Ireland we have diverged from equality law in Great Britain since the introduction of the Equality Act 2010. This divergence can be particularly challenging for businesses who have staff and offices in Great Britain as well as Northern Ireland with different equality laws and regulations to navigate.

But do we aspire to have a carbon-copy of Great Britain's Equality Act 2010?

No. We must consider Northern Ireland's own particular set of circumstances. For example, fair employment legislation, which is unique to Northern Ireland, has brought real positive change to our workplaces and we must preserve its provisions going forward.

A Single Equality Act would offer the most effective means of strengthening and maintaining protections against discrimination in Northern Ireland. Such legislation would improve consistency, understanding and efficiency - saving time and costs for individuals from all equality groups, as well as employers, service providers, advisory services, and those interacting with equality legislation more generally.

And we know from speakers at our conference that a decade on from the introduction of the Equality Act 2010 there are things they would do differently if tasked with it again.

I think we can use the Equality Act 2010 as a starting point to design our own single piece of equality legislation. By doing this, we can adopt its best parts and improve and build on these to reflect the context of equality in Northern Ireland.

Ultimately by opting for a harmonised and simplified Single Equality Act employers would benefit, they would find it much easier to navigate the equality laws that they must operate within.

It is crucial for Northern Ireland that businesses flourish. Reforming our equality laws is a priority for us. We have an opportunity here to strengthen and harmonise our equality laws while ensuring we preserve those equality laws which are unique to our circumstances in Northern Ireland that have ultimately benefitted us all.

The Equality Commission is working now for improved and better laws to help employers and employees, but we're also here to help employers navigate through the current regulations, not just to comply with the law, but to be the positive best that they can be in terms of promoting equality and diversity in their businesses.

ENDS