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PRESS RELEASE

## **Gay People Have Equal Right to Equal Treatment**

The Equality Commission congratulates Belfast Pride on its 20<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. Chief Commissioner Bob Collins commented, "When Belfast's first "Pride" parade was held twenty years ago people who were lesbian, gay or bisexual had no legal protection against discrimination in any sphere of their life. It was only in 2003 that equality legislation was introduced to protect them from unfair treatment at work, in training and in further education and not until 2006 that this was extended to the provision of goods, facilities and services."

"The law now requires that gay, lesbian and bisexual people are afforded the equality of treatment, and the respect, due to every human being. We cannot claim to respect people's dignity while tolerating discrimination against them and it is through the implementation of these laws that we can demonstrate our determination, as a society, to reject prejudice, hostility and unfair treatment of people simply on grounds of their sexual orientation."

"Some of the typical problems faced by gay, lesbian and bisexual people in their everyday lives are clearly illustrated by the legal cases we supported last year. As with other groups protected by the equality legislation, many of the cases that came up were brought by people who claimed they were subject to unfair treatment or harassment at work.

One case involved a young lesbian woman working as a trainee grounds person, who claimed that she was subject to foul and offensive language, was the butt of sexually explicit jokes and was hit with the bucket of a tractor. That case was settled, with the employer paying £10,000, apologising to the claimant and agreeing to liaise with the Commission over its policies, practices and procedures.

Another young lesbian woman, working in retail, came to the Commission when she was victimised after complaining to her management about bad language, offensive remarks and a hurtful practical joke carried out in public. That case was also settled, the employer paid £5,000 to the claimant, apologised to her and agreed to liaise with the Commission over its policies, practices and procedures.

A gay man whose manager told him, in front of other staff, to 'tone down his gayness' raised a grievance with his employer. Subsequently, when he rather than the manager was moved, he felt that he had been penalised. The company concerned paid the man £6,000 without admission of liability.

A gay man who complained to police about incidents of homophobic abuse outside his rented accommodation was subsequently given notice to quit by his landlord. In a settlement of the case the landlord apologised and paid him £3,500.

"Cases like these show that no-one has to put up with insulting or hurtful behaviour because of their sexual orientation, in work or in access to services." Bob Collins said. "I want to take the opportunity afforded by this week of Pride events to remind lesbian, gay and bisexual people that they have the right to challenge unfair treatment and that they can confidently assert their rights at work and in society. People who feel they have been discriminated against on the grounds of their sexuality can contact our enquiry line on 028 90 890 890 for free and confidential advice."

**ENDS**

*Notes to editors:*

### **1. The Law**

*The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2003 (the SO Regs 03) make it unlawful for employers and others to discriminate on grounds of sexual orientation in the areas of employment, vocational training and further and higher education.*

*The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2006 (the SO Regs 06) extend the protection against discrimination to the provision of goods, facilities and services, the management and disposal of land or premises and the provision of education in schools.*

### **2. Equality Commission legal statistics**

*In the year ended 31 March 2010, the Equality Commission had 42 enquiries about sexual orientation discrimination, about 1.3% of all enquiries that year. Of these, almost 60% were to do with the workplace.*