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PRESS RELEASE

Homophobia must be challenged

“Nine years since the first anti-discrimination law on sexual orientation was introduced in Northern Ireland, homophobic attitudes and discrimination still have a daily impact on the lives of too many gay and lesbian people,” the Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission Michael Wardlow said today.

Mr. Wardlow, speaking on the International Day of Anti-Homophobia, said that the law in Northern Ireland highlights society’s rejection of the prejudice and hostility which leads to discrimination, harassment and physical attacks on people because of their sexual orientation.

“The Equality Commission is determined to ensure that every person can avail of legal protection against such activities. In the past year our legal advice team has received 82 enquiries from people who were concerned about their rights under equality laws outlawing discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. Within those statistics, it is notable that there was a particular increase – more than five times as many - in the number of enquiries received from people subjected to harassment because of their sexual orientation when seeking to access goods and services. We know that such instances of homophobic abuse are generally under-reported and that, unfortunately, the number of complaints we receive does not reflect the actual prevalence of such behaviour.”

“We understand that sensitivities and privacy issues, which often influence people against declaring their sexual orientation at work, in school and in other social contexts, can also inhibit them from raising complaints about discriminatory treatment.” Michael Wardlow said. “The law is in place to protect everyone from homophobic treatment and discrimination and the Equality Commission would like to hear from more lesbian, gay

and bisexual people about their experiences and advise them of their rights and options.”

Notes

- The Equality Commission provides free and confidential advice for anyone who believes they may have been subjected to unlawful discrimination in employment, education or in provision of goods facilities and services and disposal of premises, and may also provide assistance in taking a case before a court or tribunal. The Commission also provides general advice to employers and service providers on the legislation.

- The Equality Commission’s three yearly Equality Awareness Survey has shown high levels of prejudice towards gay and lesbian people. In the last published survey (2008), 35% of people asked if they would mind having a close relative in a relationship with a lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) person said they would, and 23% said they would mind having an LGB person as a work colleague or neighbour.

Asked to indicate their general perceptions of particular groups, 21% expressed negative feelings towards LGB people, which placed them in the second highest category as regards prejudice (Travellers were highest).

- The Equality Commission’s next Equality Awareness Survey will be published in June and will contain up-to date statistics for levels of prejudice on all these issues across a wide range of minority groups.