

View from the Chair, Business Newsletter, Tuesday 1 April 2014, Dr. Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

I still vividly remember the day I received a letter confirming that I had been offered my first job. It was 1972, September, and “*the world was my lobster*”, to coin Arthur Daley’s immortal words. Jobs are important on a number of levels. Not only do they provide an income and some financial stability, but having a job is also fundamentally tied into everyone’s sense of wellbeing. Holding down a job is a key factor in personal development and social mobility and no-one should be denied the opportunity to engage in productive and rewarding work.

Times are tough and in the present economic situation means a lot of people are looking for work, a situation which presents problems for all job seekers, but particularly those who face additional barriers, often unseen. It remains the case that less than forty percent of disabled people are in employment, compared with around eighty percent of non-disabled people.

In many cases, this is not because disabled people are unable to work, but rather because they cannot get work. We can all fall into the trap which leads us to assume that because a person is living with a disability, they are somehow less able to contribute to work than their non-disabled counterpart. This stereotype continues to impact on significant numbers in our community, both directly, as around one person in six in Northern Ireland considers themselves to be disabled, and indirectly, as almost two out of every five households contains someone with a life-limiting disability.

Let me be clear, Equality law not only protects disabled people from employment discrimination, but it also requires employers to provide reasonable adjustments to enable them to work; and it allows employers to take positive action measures to both encourage and help prepare disabled people to gain employment.

There are numerous examples of excellent employment practice in Northern Ireland where employers have already taken practical steps which provide an opportunity for someone previously excluded from work. Some use guaranteed interviews for any disabled applicant who meet the essential criteria for vacant posts, while many others showing flexibility around working patterns or accommodating absences for necessary medical treatment. In some cases adjustments include modifying premises or providing specialist equipment which a disabled person can use.

Despite the legislation and good practice, barriers remain for people with disabilities when they are applying for posts, and the Equality Commission continues to advise employers on what

steps they can take to move beyond the reasonable adjustments required by law and develop an employability policy with positive action measures. In short, to move beyond compliance.

To this end, we are working with bodies such as the Department for Employment and Learning, Employers for Disability N I, and the Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment to reach out to key employers; highlight best practice already being implemented; and encourage all employers to develop their own employment initiatives with a focus on disability. Next Wednesday, at a free interactive Conference in Belfast City Hall, we will be sharing the experiences and expertise of a number of large employers and organisations involved in this work. If you want further information or to attend this, go to our website at www.equalityni.org/Making-it-work