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PRESS RELEASE

Sexual Harassment case settled for £35,000

A woman who took a sexual harassment case against her employer, Telefonica UK Limited, has settled her case for £35,000, paid without admission of liability. Natasha McCullough, from Belfast, was supported in her case by the Equality Commission.

Ms McCullough worked as a sales advisor in an O2 Store in Belfast. In the proceedings she alleged that she endured sexual harassment by her line manager lasting some months, from January 2016 to August 2016, which caused her great distress.

It was also alleged in the proceedings that Ms. McCullough's complaint was not properly handled. She went on sick leave and has since resigned.

In settling the case, Telefonica UK Ltd apologised to Ms McCullough for any injury to feelings, distress and upset caused by reason of the matters giving rise to her claims. The company affirmed its commitment to equality of opportunity and undertook to liaise with the Equality Commission within three months to review its equal opportunities policies, practices and procedures to ensure they are fully compliant with national and European equality law and will implement any reasonable recommendations the Commission may make. It agreed to provide equality training to all staff including managers, to include their obligations and responsibilities under the Sex Discrimination Order 1976.

"This entire episode ended up being a serious source of stress for me," said Ms McCullough. "I had a lot of painful and unsightly physical symptoms of stress, breathing difficulties and, eventually, panic attacks and I felt frightened, powerless and vulnerable. I felt that I was being isolated because I had complained about the behaviour."

Dr Evelyn Collins CBE, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission, said: "This case should remind all employers how important it is to ensure, not just that they have appropriate policies in place, but also that their policies are actually being implemented. Managers should be alert to unacceptable behaviour and take appropriate action to stop it.

"When complaints of sexual harassment are made, employers must ensure that they are dealt with promptly, seriously and confidentially and in accordance with the internal grievance procedure, treating employees with fairness, dignity and respect.

“The company has agreed in the settlement to meet with the Equality Commission and review its equal opportunities policies, practices and procedures and to implement any reasonable recommendations the Commission may make,” Dr Collins said. “It is an important outcome of the resolution of cases like these that lessons are learned. Every employer should have effective policies in place, not just to deal with such situations when they arise, but to ensure that they have taken all reasonable steps to prevent them occurring in the first place.”