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PRESS RELEASE

Settlement in Sex Discrimination Case by Limavady Council Worker

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has paid a Limavady woman £25,000, without admission of liability, in settlement of a case she brought alleging sex discrimination.

Sharon Douglas, who was assisted by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, had been the only female employed in the Technical Services section of the Council's Environmental Services department. Based in the Limavady Depot as a yard/storeperson, she alleged that she was discriminated against in the allocation of overtime and training facilities and that she was subjected to harassment. Ms. Douglas resigned from her employment in May 2018.

"Other employees in the yard – all men – were allowed to put themselves forward for overtime on Saturdays and public holidays," Sharon Douglas said, "but when I asked to be considered in the same way, I was refused. The reasons given made no sense to me. I was told it was because I hadn't been trained on some of the machines but, when I asked for training, that was also refused."

"I complained about my treatment and said I thought it was sex discrimination, but that was responded to with abusive language. At another time, I was asked to go to a different site when inspectors were visiting, to clean the kitchen and the toilets, which was not my job. I was told that the toilets 'needed a woman's touch'."

Sharon took a grievance which, after several meetings, was rejected. In the course of this investigation her colleagues were asked if they would be 'OK' working alongside her in another amenity site and it was reported that they would not be. The reason given was a fear of the position a man might be in 'if she accuses me of something up in that yard'.

"The whole thing affected me badly and I was off work with stress," Sharon Douglas said. "When I raised the issue directly, and flagged up my concern that this was sex discrimination, the first response I got was rude and dismissive. Later, when I complained through the Council's grievance procedures, I was very dissatisfied with the length of the process and the way it was handled. I was deeply hurt and upset, both by my initial treatment and the way my complaints were dealt with."

Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, said: "This is a case in which a woman, in a minority of one in an otherwise male workforce, feels she was excluded from benefits and advantages which were available to her male colleagues, such as training and access to overtime. She was only asking to be

given the same opportunities as the men working alongside her, but the responses she got worsened, rather than helped, her situation. Asking her colleagues whether they would be 'OK' working alongside her was unlikely to have been asked about a male employee and, of course, saying that cleaning the toilets 'needed a woman's touch' was a direct and inappropriate reference to her gender."

"The Council has agreed, in this settlement, to meet with the Commission and review its policies, practices and procedures to ensure that they comply in all respects with its obligations. Employers must make sure, not only that they have such policies in place, but that all their staff are fully aware of the importance the employer places on implementing them. The Council has agreed to consider all reasonable recommendations the Commission may make regarding any amendments to policies and also regarding the training of staff," Michael Wardlow concluded.

Notes to editors: The £25,000 paid to Sharon Douglas was made up of £10,000 to compensate her for the injury to her feelings and a further £15,000 in respect of her loss of earnings to the date of the settlement and any future loss of salary incurred by her resignation.