



11 June 2020

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Respecting the rights of disabled people in the return to work**

As Northern Ireland slowly eases out of lockdown, the Equality Commission highlights that we must ensure that the 'new normal' includes the many disabled people in workplaces across Northern Ireland.

Chief Commissioner Geraldine McGahey says: "The return to work is a big challenge for both employers and employees. In all of this, we must be mindful of the position of workers with disabilities, many of whom were already, before the pandemic, experiencing inequalities in gaining employment and while at work. They face more uncertainty as all employers are considering when and how their employees will return to the workplace."

Whilst some people with disabilities were able to work throughout the lockdown, many could not, and it may still not be safe or possible for many disabled staff to return as soon as their colleagues. As if worrying about Covid-19 is not enough, along with loneliness and isolation, disabled people have a real fear that they will be left behind losing their jobs and independence.

As the Government's furlough schemes starts to taper off, people with disabilities for whom it would not be safe to return to work must be protected.

Shielding or not, disabled people are protected from discrimination in employment under the law. Many disabled people will not be able to return to work without a discussion with their employer about what reasonable adjustments would be needed for safety. The Commission can give advice and guidance on the law to individual employers as they work to get people with disabilities back into their workforces but action is needed at a policy level to support employers to work with disabled employees to retain jobs. The Commission and its partners, notably NI Union for Supported Employment, are working together to that end.

Ms McGahey said: "Many people with disabilities, the same as anyone else, look to their jobs as an important part of their identity as well as their place in society and their financial independence. It's not about chasing people back to work as soon as possible, it's about making it safe for them to shelter when they need to and come back to work when it is safe to do so. As a society, we need to acknowledge their value as part of our economy by respecting their right to work and using the actions available under the law to make work not just possible, but safe and rewarding."