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PRESS RELEASE

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

“Today we celebrate International Day of Persons with Disabilities. One in five people here live with a disability. This is a very diverse group of people who are an important part of our society, they are also our family, our friends, our neighbours and colleagues”, said Anne McKernan, Director of Legal Services, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

“Yet a quarter of a century after the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act, we get more calls about potential complaints of disability discrimination than any other type. To date this year, 46% of calls to our legal advice line were about potential disability discrimination.

“The majority of enquiries we normally receive from people with a disability relate to reasonable adjustments and these can be quite diverse depending on the nature of the person’s disability. In employment, some people will require physical adjustments to their workstations, while others will require adjustments to their terms and conditions of employment, such as later starting times or fixed shifts. People seeking to access services may require sign language interpreters, suitable toilet facilities, or extra time and alternative formats when sitting exams.

“However, due to the impact of the pandemic we have received other types of enquiries from disabled people. It is important that everyone is aware that the anti-discrimination laws in Northern Ireland continue to apply in these times just as they did before the pandemic impacted on all our lives.

“Just over a quarter of all calls received by the advice line this year are COVID-related, and just over half (51%) of those were disability discrimination complaints – of these, 71% are employment-related and 23% are about access to services.

“Issues raised included people who believed that they were unfairly selected for redundancy and employees who were shielding who feel under pressure to return to work where they believe it is unsafe for them to do so. We have also heard from people who have been refused access to services despite being exempted from the requirement to wear a face covering because of their disability.

“Employers and service providers must consider their responsibilities under the law and use the reasonable adjustment duty which can allow disabled people equal access to employment and services. It is important that everyone operates within the law and that those with a disability know their equality rights.

“On this International Day of Persons with Disabilities – let us refocus and consider what we can do to improve the lives and experiences of those with a disability. It would be great if next year the figures were different”, concluded Ms McKernan.