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NI Agriculture department settles disability case for £50,000

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has settled a case with a hearing-impaired man for £50,000 without admission of liability.

The case concerned Christopher Morrow, who worked through an agency as a park ranger at Crawfordsburn Country Park, but when DAERA decided to make the post permanent Mr Morrow had extreme difficulties throughout the recruitment process and ultimately did not get the job.

When he applied, Christopher indicated on his application that he had hearing loss and asked if it would be possible to have the questions in writing during the interview. DAERA refused, despite written requests to both his manager and HR.

Mr Morrow also stated that the interview was conducted in a large, high-ceilinged room with the panel members seated behind a screen around 15-20 feet away. Christopher had to ask repeatedly for questions to be asked again and ultimately ran out of time.

The Disability Discrimination Act, which still applies in Northern Ireland, makes it clear that employers must make reasonable adjustments for disabled people – including during the recruitment process. Mary Kitson, from the Equality Commission – which supported Christopher’s case said “What is reasonable may be different in every case – the law says employers must take such steps as are reasonable to remove any physical or procedural barriers which the disabled person may face when seeking work. The primary aim of the duty is to enable a disabled person to obtain, remain in or return to work.”

Mr Morrow added “I tried on several occasions to make DAERA aware of my disability and requested some simple adjustments at interview that would have really helped me in the recruitment process. I was very disappointed indeed that I missed out on the opportunity for a permanent position in a job I really enjoyed.”

As part of the settlement, DAERA and the Department of Finance, which is responsible for personnel matters in the NI Civil Service, has agreed to engage with ECNI to review its policies and ensure that they comply with equality law.