

## Rehab Group Submission to the Electoral Commission

### Education and Public Engagement Strategy

#### Introduction

With two Referenda and three elections, 2024 was a very busy electoral year. Rehab Group made a concerted effort to encourage the people who use our services to make sure that they used their voices to raise the issues of importance to them and use their democratic right to vote.

The Electoral Commission spoke at our National Advocacy Conference in March. Following on from that Rehab Group developed a voter education programme educating and rolled out a series of workshops to our National Learning Network and RehabCare services across the country. The contents of the workshops were tailored so that they would highlight themes of self-advocacy for people with disabilities and finding solutions to challenges that people in our services face when going through the registration and voting process. Overall, we ran 14 sessions in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Kilkenny, Portlaoise, Castlebar and Dundalk. The average number of participants in each workshop is 15-20. We also held three webinars in conjunction with the Electoral Commission.

In preparation for this submission Rehab carried out a staff survey and a survey and focus groups amongst our service users, getting feedback from more than 200 people. While certain initiatives have been implemented by the Electoral Commission to support people voting, feedback from our service users and staff highlights that many aspects of voter information and engagement could be improved.

This submission outlines the key thoughts and opinions expressed by Rehab Group service users and staff regarding the current efforts to promote voter participation in Ireland, focusing on accessibility, clarity of information, and overall engagement.

#### 1. Accessibility of Information


One of the most commonly mentioned concerns was the lack of accessible information. For some, the information sent out regarding voter registration was clear and helpful:

*It is great that that Commission provided an easy read booklet, it might have been helpful that a short video/cartoon was produced with a voter going into a voting centre and booth and registering.*

But for others, it was difficult to understand especially in the run up to the election.

*I don't understand what the elections are about*

It was mentioned that the advertisements were not very clear. They did not explain what the elections were about or how to vote step by step.



Some of the students felt that because they were from a rural area, they did not receive much canvassing or information about the candidates or election

The students said that they got information about registering to vote and where their polling station was from their families and friends. They also received information through social media, posters and leaflets through the post

*They didn't make it clear enough what's going on for the European Elections.*

*They are not clear enough.*

*The wording of referendums needs to be explained better*

*It's difficult to understand information in debates between candidates*

*The wording of referendums needs to be explained better*

One of the service users mentioned getting confused on whether to write numbers or tick a box on the ballot as it is different for referendums and elections.

This is an issue that both staff and service users have witnessed:

*There is very little easy-to-read information available for people with disabilities to gather the information to make informed decisions about candidates.*

*I believe that candidates are not very visible in all forms of understanding to people with disabilities- there generally is only a leaflet in the door with very little other communication,*

*I do not think the system reflects the needs of people with disabilities voting in Ireland.*


*Good marketing prior to the General election on all media but not sure if it is effective enough to reach out to people with disabilities. Perhaps simpler language or a simplified education programme aimed at the disability section would be better.*

This confusion and lack of clear information is exacerbated by the quick run-in to the polling day. It makes it more difficult and stressful to find clear and relatable information.

*The run up to the election was very fast. It didn't give much time for the public to get to know who they should vote for.*

Several individuals noted that the format of the materials could be improved. Specifically, there was a call for "easy read" versions of the information to be made available. This would be especially beneficial for those with reading difficulties or people with intellectual disabilities.

*The information that was sent out could have been written in a better format. There was no easy read information, I didn't understand it.*



*More easy read information to encourage people to vote*

*Make the information accessible, easy read, braille etc.*

The information provided in the elections and the polling stations themselves also need addressing:

*They need to have ballot paper in braille they didn't have it previously a civil servant would have wrote down my preferred choice but is this fair and the reason is if the person wants to put down who they want and I won't know, - this was my only option - now this is the reason I dont vote. I feel my independence is taken away.*

*The ballot paper needs to be more organised. I would like it to be divided in the parties. I would like the pictures to be bigger. Have more pages instead of having one very big page.*

*When you're visually impaired, you need the voting cards and ballot paper in braille.*

## **2. Signage and Access to Polling Stations**

Some respondents noted that there was insufficient signage directing people to polling stations, which could create confusion, especially for new voters or those unfamiliar with the area. Better signage could improve the ease with which people find their polling stations, thus reducing barriers to participation.

*The students said that they got information about registering to vote and where their polling station was from their families and friends*

*More signage of where the polling stations were located would be helpful.*


In general, our respondents felt that the polling stations themselves were accessible and that the staff were helpful. However, given the issues surrounding disabilities some felt it would be more inclusive to make voting available to those who can't travel to their polling station:

*I was in hospital for the general election, I couldn't vote. I should have been able to vote.*

## **3. Relevance and Incentives to Vote**

Many younger individuals expressed a sense of disconnect from the electoral process. One person shared that, as a young person, they felt that elections didn't relate to them and saw no real incentive to vote. Some individuals mentioned that their families told them they did not need to vote, which further reinforced this sense of indifference towards electoral participation.

*And I feel like a lot of people have just given up when it comes to politics in Ireland and I feel like if we approach it in a fun way like we did with the mock elections and*



*stuff, I feel like we approach it in a fun way and make people aware of that. You know, it's not so hard.*

*The younger generations just aren't encouraged to get to actually get involved in and participate in the process of voting to the degree that's, you know, they really should be.*

*Maybe people don't vote because they think councillors don't listen don't listen to our vote*

*I don't think people realise how important it is to vote.*

This is an issue witnessed by our staff on a daily basis as service users feel disheartened by the issues they face:

*Many young students find it very hard to get their allowances like the Disability Allowance. This makes it really hard to encourage young people to vote as they already have a negative impression of social welfare and entitlements. All the issues that face young people like housing, job opportunities, dental appointments, transport, cost of living, mental health make it difficult to explain to students that their voice matters when voting.*

One staff member suggested the best way to highlight the relevance of voting was to engage with voters and clearly explain how their vote matters:

*Where are benefits coming from? How are Govt etc supporting you? Who is funding the service you are engaged in. Starting point to an understanding of how the process of voting relates to the students themselves. Help them to actually get to feel the benefit of having an efficient govt in place*


#### **4. Voter Education and Engagement**

There was a strong call for better education and engagement with voters. A participant suggested that there should be a central place where individuals can ask questions and access unbiased information about political candidates and parties.

*Early education in schools about voting. Even though you don't vote until you are 18 years there need to be ongoing discussions on the importance of voting in your country. Class meetings in secondary school to experience giving their voice.*

*A community type of day for maybe opening their centres to the community to give some sort of talk on politics in Ireland and your right to vote and how your vote matters and your vote is your voice.*

*I know we have advertisements to vote, and I know each individual party do their own kind of advertising. But if we had it in a more kind of neutral zone, like if they're aiming at younger people or if they're aiming for people with disabilities to vote and*



*they want to get those numbers up, have an advertisement with someone with a visible disability.*

Many people expressed a desire to know more about what their local TDs have done in recent years and what policies different parties have supported. Having a dedicated space for such information would help voters make informed decisions.

*There should be some official, some sort of scheme where people can go, and they can actually ask questions about. I want to know what my local TDs have done in the last couple of years. I want to know what the parties have done in the last couple of years. People you know, some sort of office building somewhere for people to educate themselves and so some unbiased.*

The lack of clear, comprehensive voter education materials is another area for improvement. Many respondents felt that the available information was either too overwhelming or too vague, making it difficult for people to understand the importance of their vote. Simplifying and breaking down the process would go a long way in increasing voter engagement.

Our staff highlighted the need to engage with voters where they feel most comfortable:

*In the NLN and other education facilities, it might be helpful to have a yearly session on voting for everyone, giving people a chance to check the register etc.*

*Have the electoral information and applications easily available to those who would like to register to vote via mail, a lot of people live rural and do not like the idea of going to a busy voting centre with bright lights, high booths and people talking at them*


Many service users referenced the benefits of a Voter Education Programme they attended through their Rehab Group services. They suggested making similar programmes available to the general public too.

*And I feel like a lot of people have just given up when it comes to politics in Ireland and I feel like if we approach it in a fun way like we did with the mock elections and stuff, I feel like we approach it in a fun way and make people aware of that. You know, it's not so hard.*

*The service users also preferred face to face interactions over just leaflets for information about voting.*

*Maybe counties specifically where there isn't high high voting and they can get volunteers together to go around and and actually educate people, or even for those with like disabilities, maybe they could set up some sort of hub.*

*A more inclusive and wider range of workshops and other and other such initiatives. You know, focus groups and you know other things of that sort of description. I really think that will go a very a very long way in terms in terms of you know including*



A recurring theme throughout the responses was a sense of disillusionment with Irish politics. Several individuals indicated that they felt their vote would not bring about any significant change, and this has led to a general apathy towards voting. One person remarked that Irish politics was often seen as a "joke," with some believing that nothing would ever change regardless of who was in power. This perception poses a serious challenge to voter turnout and underscores the need for efforts that make voting more meaningful and impactful for the electorate.

## **5. The Role of Family and Community**

As a result of the limited accessible information available to people, for many, family was the primary source of information and support regarding voting. It is clear that, for some people, family members play an essential role in guiding them through the process. However, relying solely on family support may not be an effective or inclusive method of educating voters, particularly for those without access to such support networks. Therefore, a more structured and comprehensive approach to voter education is necessary.

*The students said that they got information about registering to vote and where their polling station was from their families and friends*

*My family said I didn't have to vote. I stayed at home with my granny.*

*A lot of the group said that most of the information and support around voting came from family.*

*My parents told me who to vote for because I didn't know.*

## **6. On a Positive Note**


While there is a lot to improve upon and this submission has highlighted where the work needs to be done some of our staff are pleased to see some improvements and encouraging signs.

*Our Advocacy Officer organised for Voter Education Training Programme to be delivered to students in our service; very informative and useful. Also, clear explanation of how to check voting register and how to register to vote. Super helpful.*

The benefits of this are wide ranging but the following examples sum it up:

*Two students voted from our service. This was a great achievement. These students were visible in the community hence support the value they have to contribute to society*

*Yes, I went and voted in the two elections, and beforehand I visited the online websites that had been suggested. This was great as I knew exactly what to do when I went into the voting centre and I had researched the candidates, so I knew who to*



*vote for when I went in. I honestly knew nothing about voting before this voting education course and I have to say I felt confident and informed after this course.*

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the current efforts to encourage voter participation in Ireland appear to be inadequate. Several areas require improvement, particularly in terms of accessibility, clarity, and engagement. The following recommendations are made based on the feedback received:

### **1. Make Information More Accessible:**

- Ensure that voting materials are available in Easy Read formats, Braille, and other accessible languages to cater to a diverse population.
- Provide step-by-step guides, both online and in print, detailing how to register to vote and how to cast a vote. This can be particularly helpful for those unfamiliar with the process.

### **2. Target Younger People:**

- Schools and colleges should be a key focus for voter education. Incorporating voting lessons into secondary school curricula can help young people understand the importance of voting and how the system works. Workshops, mock elections, and visits from politicians can also engage students and make them feel like their voice matters.
- Creating advertisements and educational campaigns featuring younger candidates or individuals with disabilities can make politics feel more relatable. Young people are more likely to engage when they see candidates they can identify with, including those from diverse backgrounds.

### **3. Increase Face-to-Face Interactions:**

- Many individuals prefer personal interactions over just leaflets and ads. Organizing community events, voter education days, or workshops where people can meet local politicians and learn about the candidates directly could be highly effective.
- Voter education sessions, like role-playing the voting process, have been successful in engaging people and making them feel empowered to vote. These could be expanded and offered throughout the country.



#### **4. Clarify and Simplify the Process:**

- The language used in advertisements and on the ballot paper should be simple and clear. Many service users noted confusion over the wording of referendums and the voting process itself, particularly when it comes to ticking boxes or writing numbers.
- More information about candidates' platforms and what they stand for would help voters make informed choices. Sending out biographies of candidates and explaining their policies clearly could provide greater transparency.

#### **5. Make Voting More Inclusive:**

- Increase the accessibility of polling stations for people with disabilities. This includes ensuring that polling stations are physically accessible and providing Braille voting materials.
- The option for people with disabilities to vote through an app or mail-in ballots should be improved. The process for voting by mail, especially for people with disabilities, should be more flexible and accessible.

#### **6. Community Support and Education:**

- Local community centres could offer support in the form of voter information sessions, where people can ask questions and receive guidance on how to vote.
- Volunteers and community leaders could play an important role in educating people, especially in rural or underserved areas where information may be lacking.

#### **7. Engage on Social Media and Media Outlets:**

- YouTube videos with a "how-to" explainer on how to vote.
- Campaigns should also highlight the consequences and benefits of voting or not voting, demonstrating how elections directly affect people's lives, such as on issues like housing, healthcare, and the cost of living.

#### **8. Early Education and Ongoing Discussion:**

- Continuous conversations about the importance of voting should start early, even in primary and secondary schools. It's crucial to instill the message that voting is not only a right but a responsibility. Creating ongoing discussions around politics and voter engagement can encourage young people to be more involved and motivated to vote when they are eligible.

By addressing accessibility, simplifying the voting process, and actively engaging with younger and disabled voters, Ireland can increase voter turnout and ensure that everyone feels their voice is heard and valued.