

Rehab Group

Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters:

Discussing the role of disabled persons organisations and self-advocacy in providing equal opportunities under UNCRPD implementation.

Friday, 15th March 2024.

Question: Are you a DPO or a Self-Advocate? Please provide as much detail as you can on why you are considered a DPO or Self Advocate.

Rehab Group is Ireland's largest disability service provider. This year, we are celebrating 75 years of supporting people with disabilities to live the lives of their choosing, to play an active and meaningful role in their communities through the provision of high quality, flexible and sustainable services. We support more than 12,800 people through our care services (RehabCare), our learning, training and education services (National Learning Network) and through employment training and opportunities (Rehab Enterprises). We encourage advocacy at all levels in Rehab Group: from one-to-one conversations to acting at local level to national, headline-grabbing campaigns.

Rehab Group's Five-Year Strategic Plan 'Delivering Our Future', aims to develop a robust and independent advocacy structure within the organisation. Our first key strategic priority is to "amplify the voices of the people who use our services" by firstly putting in place a disability representative system to influence planning, governance, and service delivery and secondly working to ensure that public policy decisions will address the needs, rights, and entitlements of people with disabilities as a result of Rehab Group advocating at local and national levels.

Rehab Group encourages advocacy through structures internally, supported by an advocacy team with 5 dedicated Advocacy Officers based regionally. In local centres, Local Advocacy Committees are elected and supported at local level. LACs are elected by the people who use these local services. These LAC's talk to the staff and management of their centre about the things that are important to them and work together to improve the service. This ensures that the voices of people using Rehab Group's services are heard at every level of the organisation.

We also have a National Advocacy Committee, which is made up of 22 elected representatives from the people who use the services of RehabCare and students of the National Learning Network. They come together to discuss issues that affect them, both within the services and outside the organisation. The committee works with the Regional Advocacy Officers and

Managers to provide feedback on concerns, needs, or queries highlighted to the committee from those in local services. Representatives from the National Advocacy Committee address the Group's Board of Directors and Senior Leadership Team on an ongoing basis and communicate matters of importance to them.

Each year, we hold a National Advocacy Conference that is attended by over 200 people, people who use our services and Rehab staff. It is the largest disability advocacy event in Ireland. Members of the National Advocacy Committee make presentations on the work that they have been doing and all participants have the opportunity to highlight issues that are important to them.

Question: What do you think is the role of DPOs, and self-advocacy is under the UNCRPD?

As Ireland's largest service provider for people with disabilities, we take our role under the UNCRPD very seriously. It is our duty to ensure that the rights of people who use our services, are respected and that their voices are amplified in decision making processes, both within our organisation and on a national level.

Areas we have identified as important in the support and sustainment self-advocacy within the services include developing skills such as the ability to reflect on a situation, critical thinking, education, motivation. Building a person's self-confidence and self-belief are equally valuable and equally important when looking to develop an open and inclusive culture. Encouraging a dialogue where we can challenge one another in a healthy way is essential. Where this process is successful the individual is truly at the heart of the decision and in control of the services they need. Having an open and inclusive service where the person is central to the decisions taken and whose voice is central in the process is the mark of success in delivering services.

Under Article 4.3 of the Convention people with disabilities and Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) must be consulted on policy and legislation to implement the Convention. However, the consultation process with Government on a range of policy issues impacting on people with disabilities has been less than satisfactory. Short consultation periods followed by extensions is not a satisfactory way for disability organisations/service providers to consult with their membership or service users.

What do you think is important to be on the agenda for an event like this?

This meeting should primarily be concerned with the effective implementation of the UNCRPD, an assessment of the positive developments that have taken place and the barriers that still exist. The agenda of this meeting should be focused on the rights of people with disabilities to live independent lives of their choosing within their community and how we can act together to ensure that these rights are respected.

This meeting should provide an opportunity to listen to people with lived experience of disability on the issues that they see as important and how they think those issues should be resolved. How improvements can be made in government consultation processes should be a priority for discussion at this event. It is important that the committee hear the perspectives of people with disabilities and their Carers, support staff and families. The recent

Constitutional Referendum on Care highlighted widespread concern that the Disability Sector has long been expressing about the Government's obligation to vindicate the rights of people with disabilities under the UNCRPD. This meeting will undoubtedly be an opportunity to discuss those concerns and advise on possible courses of collaborative action.

What ways are available to you to provide your feedback and participate in bringing about change in relation to human rights in your local area?

Our effective and robust advocacy structures with Rehab (as outlined above), are the main way that the people who use our services and we as a whole organisation, can provide and listen to feedback. The people who use our services are our most effective advocates, and our role as an organisation is to give voice to their concerns.

The principles of co-production are embedded across our service development and delivery, ensuring that policy and services are developed in collaboration with the people who use our services.

Through our internal advocacy structures, we make sure that the people who use our services are supported to lobby their local authorities, councillors and TDs to make the changes they want to see in their communities. We also carry out focus groups with the people who use our services through our advocacy structures to advocate on policy issues at national level.

Voter Education is another mechanism through which we can support the people who use our services to bring about change. We welcome the emphasis placed by Electoral Commission on improving access to the electoral process for people with disabilities and look forward to collaborating with them on issues for people with disabilities.

Rehab is part of a broad coalition of disability organisations, through our membership of the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, the National Disability Services Association, Disability Federation of Ireland, the Oireachtas Disability Group and the European Platform for Rehabilitation. We also work closely with other Civil Society organisations such as The Wheel and Coalition 2030. These partnerships allow us coordinate on campaigns on a national and international level. The sharing of ideas and resources with the wider voluntary sector and civil society is a vital tool to bring about meaningful change.

What are the key issues that you believe are affecting your human rights and having equal opportunities like everyone else in your local area?

Unfortunately, there are many issues that affect the rights of the people who use our services and many barriers to equal opportunities and inclusion.

- Article 19 of the UNCRPD underpins the right of people with disabilities to housing and access to support to enable them to live independently in the community. While the National Housing Strategy for Disabled People (2022 – 2027) trumpeted a new vision

for housing for Disabled People it is not clear if the funding for implementation of that strategy must match its ambition.

- The people who use our services report significant issues with managing day-to-day living independently with the limited number of PA hours they receive, with some effectively confined to their homes.
- Our adult service users report being unable to survive independently without financial support from family, being dependent on food banks to meet food bills or being unable to cope with exceptionally high energy costs. The Government's Cost of Disability Report published in December 2021 indicates that being disabled costs a person between €9,000 and €13,000 extra per year. Rising inflation has led to significant increases in the cost of living since 2021.
- Article 24 of UNCRPD highlights the need for disability inclusive educational options for all. There has been no substantive reform of provision of training for persons with disability since 2001. Since then, population needs have changed, young adults with disability are now presenting with higher levels of communication and interaction needs, cognition and learning difficulties, social, emotional and mental health difficulties and sensory and physical needs, often on a concurrent basis. At present post second level provision for students with disability is insufficient to meet all needs, is fragmented, geographically disparate and hard to access. Priority must be given to students of all ages with disabilities within the FET ecosystem which is developing apace.
- Article 27 of UNCRPD recognises the rights of PWD to work on an equal basis with others. Yet significant obstacles remain in developing pathways to employment. Ireland has the lowest employment rate of people with disabilities and the highest disability employment gap across the EU and OECD countries.
- The people who use our services have identified the lack of suitable, accessible public transport as a significant problem that hinders their independence. Accessibility is a precondition for an inclusive society and must be a part of all aspects of planning and development. Inaccessible public transport, public buildings/amenities, outdoor spaces etc. are a huge barrier to an inclusive society.

What are the solutions that you believe would help make things better and that Government should be supporting?

Ireland's failure to ratify the Optional Protocol continues to present a major barrier for people with disabilities in being able to vindicate their rights and effect the change that is required. The establishment of an individual complaints' mechanism to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is crucial for holding the state accountable when it fails to uphold the rights enshrined under the Convention. The recent Inter-Departmental working group formed to accelerate the ratification of the optional protocol is welcome but lacking in specifics at this point in time. The government needs to commit to a date to ratify the Optional Protocol before the next general election. This would be a very important step in facilitating

ways that people with disabilities and their supporters and carers can bring about change in relation to human rights.

Rehab joins the call that the Department of the Taoiseach should have overall responsibility for UNCRPD oversight and implementation. This is the best way to ensure all Government departments are held accountable for delivery. The Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform must be fully engaged in the National Disability Strategy planning process from the outset to ensure adequate funding across the lifetime of the strategy. Government ministers should be required to report annually on their department's progress in delivering UNCRPD to the relevant Oireachtas Committees and both Houses of Oireachtas. Action is needed to mobilise cross sectoral actors and establish mechanisms to produce rights-based public policy and truly embed the rights of people with disabilities in Irish society. All Government policies and strategies should be disability proofed against the UNCRPD.

A whole of Government/cross-departmental approach is pivotal to putting in place the supports required depending on individual need - including personal assistance hours, residential support, transportation, housing adaptations, and tenancy sustainment supports. Immediate recognition and redress of the cost of disability is imperative if the rights of disabled individuals are to be upheld.

The principles of co-production and co-design must be embedded in the National Disability Strategy. It should combine attempts to draw on wider policy with the insights from people with lived experience of disability. A truly co-produced disability strategy needs to be overarching in improving outcomes for and with disabled people through design and delivery to evaluation phases.

Local Authorities need to be held to account on their disability strategies. They must ensure full accessibility to the physical environment, transportation, services, information and communications, including ICTs, and other facilities and services open to or provided to the public, in both urban and rural areas.

The Irish Human Rights Commission point out that under Article 31 of the CRPD, Ireland must collect appropriate statistical data relating to people with disabilities. Without this data, it is impossible to understand where progresses being made and where we are regressing. In the words of the IHREC "there is such a dearth of disaggregated data at the moment that it makes the exercise of disability-proofing public policy akin to building a house on a giant trampoline." The CSO must be resourced to collect relevant, disaggregated, and timely data which would inform future policy development.

Would you like to be considered to attend this event in person or would you like to attend this event online?

In person would be preferable.

Would you like to speak at this event?

We would like to put forward people who use our services and a staff representative, all of whom have lived experience of disability and who have proven to be effective advocates for people with disabilities.

Further information on proposed speakers will be provided on request.

Emer Costello,
Head of Campaigns

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