

Report to Wexford PPN on my attendance at the Trinity College Dublin Symposium on, Disability; Political Representation and Activism

I represented the Wexford Public Participation Network at the Trinity College Dublin School of Education Symposium, Disability: Political Representation and Activism took place on the 18th May 2018. The event brought together disability activists, political leaders, and international academics to discuss the participation of people with disabilities in public and political life in Ireland. It initiated the discussion on the barriers to the representation of people with disabilities in all aspects of active citizenship in Irish society, their rights, accessibility. and activism. a

Wexford's disability advocates were strongly represented at the event with contributions being made by former TD Sean Connick, Amy Hassett a current UCD student from Rosslare and Vivian Rath, symposium organiser and TCD PhD researcher.

The keynote address by Professor Mark Priestley, University of Leeds, focused on the barriers to engagement in political and public life by people with disabilities across the EU. The research highlighted four key challenges to the full participation of people with disabilities: (a) legal barriers; (b) awareness-raising; (c) making political participation more accessible; (d) expanding participation opportunities in public life. Professor Priestley noted there has been a growing awareness of disability rights in European countries, most recently in Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This includes a commitment to political participation rights, but urgent action is needed by government, by the political parties and by election authorities to make this a reality

The In-conversation piece with MEP Marian Harkin shone the spotlight on the EU's role in promoting an environment which is inclusive for all through the EU Accessibility Act. Through a public interview with Joe Little, RTE correspondent, it was highlighted that there is a need to make civic life more inclusive for people with disabilities.

Presentations of ongoing projects and research, focused on the innovative practice taking place across Ireland to support disability activism through promoting self-advocacy and voice. Presenters from Down Syndrome Ireland, National University of Ireland Galway, The National Platform of Self Advocates, Trinity College Dublin Centre for Deaf Studies delivered examples of best practice.

The panel discussion on people with disabilities participation in elected and leadership positions, was devoted to the voice of people with disabilities. It allowed current leaders and activists to reveal their insights and observations on the positive aspects of civic engagement; the barriers to engaging; and what they considered are the steps that need to be taken to support people with disabilities to fully participate in public and political life.

It was noted that people with disabilities have restricted access to social participation in Irish society including public and political representation (Gannon & Nolan, 2005). Despite 13% of the population being identified as having a disability, there is notable absence of people with disabilities in decision making positions across Irish society including the Oireachtas.

The recently ratified UNCRPD, Article 29, obliges States Parties to ensure equal rights for people with disabilities to participate in public and political life, including: engagement

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in non-governmental organisations and associations; joining political parties; free and accessible voting procedures, facilities and materials; standing for election and holding public office at all levels. A vision for the future should be one in which people with disabilities play a full and equal part in leadership and active citizenship in Irish society, and the Oireachtas is truly representative of the diversity of the population.

This was an excellent event at which I had the opportunity to meet PPN representatives from across the country. I learned how the voice of people with disabilities is being represented through linkage groups on their local PPN and I have identified ways in which Wexford PPN can work to support greater consultation with people with disabilities.