



RAINBOW CLUB CORK

Good Morning Chair and Committee Members,

My name is Karen O Mahony and I am a mum to 4, two of my sons Sean & Stephen are autistic, I am also the Co founder of Rainbow Club Cork Centre for Autism. I am grateful for this opportunity to come before you today and discuss many issues we see in our lives and the lives of the 1028 families that attend our service weekly. For years families like ours have been treated badly by heavily funded state agencies, left behind without support, put into situations we don't deserve and our children/teens & young adults been discriminated against and neglected in so many ways. This story is not uncommon. I'm sure you have all heard these but the reality is that **this is our life every day**. My sons have been let down by the state by the education system that did not cater for their needs breaking trust with Sean & Stephen leaving them with trauma and Emotional fallout that often was aggressive, that our family has had to endure. The current service for child and adolescent mental health services need to be examined as there are many children/teens like my son Sean on medication not being monitored appropriately.

The black hole we ended up in with no one to get us out led Jon and I to campaign and to set up the Rainbow club so the child and family have support in a holistic, caring and loving manner that they deserve and will thrive in. We provide 21 activities and interventions 6 days a week. We cater for children 2 years up to adults of 23. We provide a place that can help them cope daily, build friendships, reduce anxiety around sensory issues, regulate themselves, accept them for who they are and what they need and to also encourage them on their pathway being by their side along that journey. We provide sibling support, parent training, counselling and support groups. We advocate in schools for families, we support families with housing difficulties, form applications, service provision, hardship and homelessness. Our sports Dept has many different programs all targeting the difficulties that stop and exclude children/teens from mainstream sports daily by building a model that will allow them to learn with no expectation or stress in a activity that is supposed to enhance positive mental health and well being. The computer and gaming program is the future for many and a skill that all children need to know about and learn. The groups are all set up for every child so they can be part of a group enjoying activities, growing in confidence and equipping them with what they need for their adult lives.

We are proud of what we have built and shame on this state for not supporting us with funding we so desperately need to expand further and provide more services to families in Cork City and county. Families are so desperate they travel to us from Limerick, Kilkenny, Waterford, Killarney all because there is nothing there for them. We will replicate, we will get our forever

home because I will not stop until we have Rainbow club Nationally so no one is left behind. I will never give up fighting until this country sees the child and family at the centre.

Rainbow club is a Universal Autism model now 7 years old and thriving in a little corner in Mahon cork filled with laughter, healing and progress everyday. It is a community model that has the family at the heart of it with a strategy that is actually carrying out its goals. Our Organisation including our cafe offer an inclusive environment for all and facilitates jobs to local people & Autistic adults. It is a training cafe that has students from NLN, Larch, Aspect, schools and colleges. It is where Sean the Autistic baker found his love for baking. It is a haven for all buzzing with chatter and acceptance everyday.

Rainbow Club is a beacon of hope, It is showing the way services should be provided, the impact this model has on the families quality of life and the wrap-around support to the Autistic person to thrive and live a fulfilling positive life allowing them to participate and give back themselves.

Autistic people have a right to be included, accepted & supported in life but this is not the case. They are made feel more excluded and rejected everyday in the society we have created and that needs to change. You have that opportunity to listen to all sides of this, Autistic person, advocacy groups, community groups and parents all should be part of discussions and debates for this new policy making sure every voice is heard. People first always should be our goal.

Trying to put support in place is not acceptable anymore. Action is now needed.

Alternative education is another program we want to provide an education with, sensory diet for the child / teen that can't cope with but if the right supports are in place it can provide the wrap-around for the individual a plan and transition back to school all catering for the needs of the person and in a caring nature. Summer provision is also a must without appropriate respite these families need support and consistency throughout the year so we also provide that and without state funding.

Too many schools refuse to do it, or carry it out effectively. Too many children are going without help routine, structure during the summer months & the fall out for them and their families is too high a price to pay.

I am asking you all today 3 things,

A plan and Policy that will provide what Autistic people and their families need.

Supporting Rainbow Club Model and the impact it has and can have on families in Ireland if replicated.

Think of children like my sons Sean & Stephen when making decisions, implementing change and continuing oversight of the policy that will impact their future. You can make the world a better place for them if you hear their voice today.

Thank you all for listening to the voices I represent today.

Karen O Mahony CEO Rainbow Club Cork