



INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
2020

Submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters –
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1.0 Introduction

On behalf of WALK, I would like to thank the chairperson and the members of the Joint committee on Disability Matters for the opportunity to present today on key issues that people in WALK experience on a day to day basis that impede them from living a full and equal life as an Irish citizen.

WALK is a progressive section 39 organisation and we have been supporting people with intellectual disabilities and autism for over 50 years. We have no institutional legacies. All of our supports are community based. In Dublin we provide residential, respite, social inclusion, day, outreach, education, training, supported transition and pre-employment programmes. We support people into and in employment through the Supported Employment model and we also operate a very successful Social Enterprise café and garden shop called the Green Kitchen in Dublin 12 providing opportunities for people with disabilities to access the world of work.

In county Louth, we have developed, piloted and delivered the innovative PEER Programme (Providing Equal Employment Routes), which supports students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to transition from Special School to mainstream further education, training, and employment. The services and supports that WALK provides are rights-based and founded on the principles of inclusion, empowerment, choice, dignity, respect, participation, and contribution. They are rooted in the belief that all people have the right to live self-determined lives within an equal and inclusive society.

2.0 Opportunity

Every day is important, but this day, the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities, is particularly very close to my heart and the hearts of people in WALK, and so I am delighted to be spending a small part of my morning with a very influential committee that can make a real difference in the lives of people with disabilities, who quite simply want to be afforded the opportunity to have a good life.

As we commemorate this day it is important for each of us to reflect and identify if our beliefs, values, and attitudes support or restrict the lives of people with disabilities. We must ensure that we use an ability and emancipatory lens to view the changes, not only in law, policies, and programmes, but also in the attitudes that are required to promote, protect, and ensure that full and equal enjoyment of all rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities are respected and upheld. Nothing less can be deemed acceptable.

I have worked within this sector for thirty years and I often despair when people with disabilities share their experiences of exclusion and frustration and loneliness with me. I also equally rejoice when people share their success stories with me of getting jobs, making new friends, going to college, or quite simply going to a shop or using public transport for the first time on their own. We all have a responsibility and a role to play in influencing positive change in order to create a society that is truly inclusive.

In my engagement with the committee today I am going to focus on employment and education for people with intellectual disability. Common to both these themes is a lack of strategic inclusion and limited cross-departmental and agency collaboration. The organizational politics, and cultural challenges that limit effective and efficient collaboration required to accomplish the objectives of disability policy, have resulted in inaction, and have extreme consequences for people with disabilities.

3.0 Employment

UNCRPD Article 27 – Employment

States recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities

Ireland has a [Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities](#) since 2015, which sets out a ten-year cross-Government approach to ensuring that those, who are able to, and want to work are supported and enabled to do so. We are now halfway through this strategy and there is yet to be any agreement to implement Strategic Priority **Action 5.1** between the Departments of Social Protection, Education and Health.

Action 5.1 of the CES states “to work together to develop an effective co-ordinated policy approach and draw up an implementation plan based on that approach, to assist individuals, including those who require a high level of support, to obtain and retain employment.”

What I know from working on the ground is that precious opportunities and life experiences are being lost from this inaction. Therefore, WALK have been instrumental in developing their own collaborations.

For example, the OWL Programme that operates in Leinster House is a partnership between the House of the Oireachtas, WALK and KARE. The steering group is comprised of the Public Appointments Service, The City of Dublin Education and Training Board and a range of Government Departments and agencies who facilitate the programmes learning objectives. The OWL Programme is a building block that supports people with intellectual disability to experience the world of work in a busy but supported work environment. The OWL programme has in turn supported DPER and the Public Appointments Service to re-evaluate their “alternative recruitment strategy” to include, consideration of special competitions for people with intellectual disabilities that will support the government’s part 5 target to increase the number of persons with disabilities in our civil & public services to 6% by 2024.

WALK runs a similar programme to this with Tallaght University Hospital, supported by the Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board. Collaborative partnerships are excellent examples of how the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities can work in practice to deliver real and meaningful change. The significant experience of voluntary disability service providers such as WALK in the area of Supported Employment should be harnessed and utilised for replicating these extremely effective programmes in both the public and private sector throughout the country.

WALK’s extensive experience in the provision of employment supports to people with disabilities has highlighted the importance of a career for people not just in terms of an increase in income but also in developing friendships, learning new skills, becoming more confident and increasing independence, empowerment and self-determination.

Therefore, the *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities* should be implemented in full to address the lack of joined up services and seamless supports currently presenting systemic barriers to people with disabilities gaining and maintaining employment.

In the coming months when the government is addressing the high levels of unemployment as a consequence of Covid-19 the needs of individuals with disabilities who have experienced job losses must also remain an area of high priority. Nobody should be left behind.

4.0 Education

UNCPRD Article 24 – Education

States recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 (EPSEN) states that ‘people with disabilities shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education, to assist children with disabilities to leave school with the skills necessary to

participate, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives.'

However, there is no provision for career guidance in our Special Schools or comprehensive transition planning for our young citizens with Special Educational needs that begins early enough to have a meaningful and positive influence on a young person's life choices and decisions.

- Why are we not proactively supporting young citizens who aspire to have a job, follow a career, and live as independently as possible?
- Will we always see our young citizens with "special" educational needs, or will we finally change the culture to see them as just having "additional" educational needs, requiring reasonable accommodations?
- How can full access on an equal basis for students with intellectual disabilities to attend third level education be supported?

WALK have a supported education programme with TU Dublin Tallaght campus which supports people with intellectual disabilities to take courses of their choice. Just to highlight a simple example, we supported one individual who for every four hours of work he did in a classroom setting he needed to spend at least another eight hours' study to understand the content. WALK's relationship with TU Dublin meant that we were able to find innovative solutions within the rigours of a complex third level education system to support this person and others to complete their degree programme and to receive appropriate educational merit. There is a need to increase and maintain enrolment and the democratic value of equal access to third level education so that college campuses will continually expand to include more diverse student populations.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic is a public health emergency — but we know it is far more. It is an economic crisis. A social crisis. And a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis. The social isolation, the exclusion, the unemployment, our loss of freedom, a loss of control and power over our everyday comings and goings, the inability to form new friendships because we are in effect confined to our homes is what the world is currently experiencing. In many cases the above impact of a pandemic is similar to what some people with intellectual disability face every day of their lives.

Looking ahead, we need to "build back better" by putting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the core of our work. A human rights lens ensures that we are all in this together and that no one gets left behind. Strengthening social rights bolsters resilience for the long haul. Together, with persons with disabilities as agents of change, we can build an inclusive, accessible, and sustainable world.

Thank you.