

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters - UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities

Remarks by Matt English, CEO, Special Olympics Ireland & Margaret Turley Special Olympics Athlete

Thursday 3rd December 2020

Introduction – Matt English

Thank you so much for the kind invitation to Margaret & I to meet with you today, we are both delighted with the opportunity. Special Olympics Ireland is a highly respected sports & charitable organisation supported by an incredible team of dedicated staff and volunteers.

Our mission is to ensure that every person in Ireland with an intellectual disability has the opportunity, to participate in a high quality sports programme and avail of other developmental activities to ensure that they can better achieve their full potential in life and in society.

Back in 2003 Ireland hosted the Special Olympics World Summer Games for the first ever outside of USA. The legacy of those Games is immense and Ireland is recognised as one if not the strongest Special Olympics programmes in the world.

Today we have

- 294 clubs
- Offering 15 different sports
- To over 8,000 athletes
- Aged between 4 – 84.

I am delighted to now introduce my friend and colleague Margaret Turley. Margaret wears many hats and she is a true inspiration and great advocate. Today Margaret is representing our many athletes and I would like to hand over to Margaret to tell you a little about herself and to talk about the impact of Special Olympics on her life and more recently the impact of Covid and how she is coping.

Margaret Turley Address

Good morning. I am delighted to be here on this UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Sometimes I feel that an Intellectual disability is a hidden disability, it is not always immediately obvious so, as a person with an intellectual disability, I welcome this opportunity to speak.

I was born with B.F.L. syndrome which has given me a mild intellectual disability. I am from Kilkenny and had completed a self-advocacy course in the W.I.T. (Waterford Institute of Technology) before coming to the Trinity Centre in Dublin where I completed a Certificate in Contemporary Living in 2013. I was very homesick my first year in Dublin but was much better in my second year and even won the Margaret McLoughlin prize for student of the year, a pleasant surprise! I have been in Dublin now for the last 10 years.

I have spoken at many conferences and been on national radio trying to give a voice to people with an intellectual disability. I work with Ernst & Young, business partners of Trinity, on a permanent part time basis and am a member of their Ability Network. I have also co lectured 3rd year Trinity Social Work students for 2 hours weekly, a job I really enjoy.

I have participated in 3 Research Projects: the 19 stories of Social Inclusion in Ireland; the Education, Behaviour and Exclusion Research and the experience of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in Ireland during the Covid pandemic. I have completed a Certificate in Research by apprenticeship from Inclusion Ireland for my role in the last research project. I am a great believer in lifelong learning and am presently studying the ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) to improve my computer skills especially in the excel area to help with my work in EY.

I couldn't do all these things without the support of many people:

- firstly, my family, my parents Tomas and Aine, my sister Sorchu and brother Peter.
- Secondly, Trinity who introduced me to EY and set me up with my buddies Colin and Brenda. I am so proud to have attended a 3rd level college just like my sister and brother. I keep in touch with some of my former classmates and often work with them on projects. I still feel very supported by The Centre in Trinity and I keep in touch especially with Marie Devitt.
- Thirdly is Special Olympics Ireland. I am a Special Olympics athlete, I play basketball with Sports Club 15, being 5ft 10 inches is an advantage! We won the second division and then moved up to the first division which is very challenging.

When I first lived in Dublin 15 I had very few friends and no job at that time, it was a new area for me. I was lonely and felt isolated. It was only when I joined Special Olympics that I made friends. We train on Monday evenings and Saturday mornings. There are a lot of social activities parties, cinema, meals out, walks etc. I made a lot of new friends.

I am also a member of the Special Olympics athlete leadership programme, we call ourselves the Hot Fuzz. I am chairperson this year. There are 12 of us in the Club and we each have a mentor to guide us. We hold monthly meetings, setting an agenda, writing up the minutes etc. We learn how to organise a meeting. The jobs rotate on an annual basis. I was communication officer last year. We have annual outings which have included the Croke Park tour, we did 1916 Freedom tour and also visited Kilmainham jail.

We also attend the Special Olympics workshops which are held at their offices. We learn about healthy eating, toastmasters (giving speeches) Tai Chi, photography, writing c/v's, interview preparation, social media etc. I am doing my Silver award. There are 3 awards you can do, Bronze, Silver and Gold. We have tasks to complete in order to achieve these awards, we might have to help fundraise, make a poster, write an article etc. There is a booklet we have to complete for each award. The tasks get harder.

This year a lot has been done over Zoom. Coaching and keep fit sessions have been done with zoom plus the Special Olympics workshops.

I returned to Kilkenny during lockdown as my mother felt I would have more room and it was a safer environment for me. I was able to set up a spare room into my gym room and use the dining room as my office. I really missed my friends as I have only seen 1 friend in person since last March. I am also a bit anxious about returning as it will have been such a long time. I will probably need some support until I get back into my old routine. Sometimes I wonder will that day ever come!

Through Special Olympics I have met and dined with people from the United States; Health Promotions guests came from the Special Olympics office in America with Mary Davis to the Dublin office. When we dined out the restaurant actually made me a special desert of fresh fruit salad. I have a keen interest in healthy eating and getting fit and keeping fit.

Through Special Olympics I participated in the Summer School project about Inclusive Physical Education in Secondary Schools. This was held in the Trinity Centre and in Munich Germany in 2019. I presented at the Winter school project this year and was invited to be on the judging panel of the project which was held over zoom.

As Special Olympics is so supportive not only to me but to a lot of people with I.D. (Intellectual Disability) I like to fundraise for them. I have done their polar plunge in December in the 40 foot and Sandycove - freezin for a reason!! This year, I participated in their 5 Iconic walks campaign and raised 609 euro. I made a poster for their collection day. My buddy Colin suggested I make a pitch to EY. The Ability network ended up doing a collection virtually. We raised 1500 euro and EY have matched it to make 3000 euro. I also participated in the Special Olympics annual collection campaign. I was in their video having gone to a film studio in Kilcoole, Wicklow. My first time ever on a film set. It was an

amazing unforgettable experience and I got great photographs taken which was in one of our national papers.

Special Olympics was started by Eunice Shriver a sister of President Kennedy. She started Special Olympics because she saw how unjustly and unfairly people with intellectual disabilities were being treated. We have come a long way in 50 years but we can do better as the Special Olympics fundraising slogan said this year “We can’t stop now”.

I believe that people with I.D. have a lot to offer society and I would like to thank you for inviting me here today. I think it’s a step in the right direction. Thank you.

Matt English – continued overview of Special Olympics with focus on 2020 achievements & challenges

Our Club is the hub – all 294 of them

Our clubs are supported by 1,000’s of inspirational volunteers. Our clubs are the engine of the organisation and they run our Sport, Health & Well-being and Athlete Leadership programmes at grass-roots level. Many of the clubs re-opened in September following extensive re-training & preparation as a result of Covid, only to be closed down again mid-October. It has been very difficult for most of our athletes to comprehend. The majority of our athletes need routine. Club closures are more difficult to explain when our athletes see lots of people under 18 years of age being allowed to train in organised sport outside.

Together at Home

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on the way Special Olympics Ireland could deliver sport and health programmes. This also highlighted the importance of how to stay connected with our most important stakeholder – our athletes. The **Together At Home** programme was designed to support athletes at home with information and resources to stay healthy and connected during these challenging times. The programme ran online over 10 weeks, with daily posts covering the four main topic areas:

- Sport & Fitness
- Health Promotion
- Strong Minds
- Young Athletes™

It was so important to continue to support our athletes as other services and supports in their lives changed dramatically. One of the underlining aims of the programme was to add some routine and structure back to athletes' daily lives. As an organisation, Special Olympics Ireland knows only too well the challenges of isolation and disconnection that athletes face. A significant number of athletes do not have online access. An information pack was compiled with information on the four pillars outlined earlier. The pack was posted to every athlete on our database, to ensure they felt as connected to Special Olympics Ireland as possible. Hopefully it has helped them keep both physically and mentally active at home.

Advancement Competitions

Our competition schedule was severely disrupted in 2020. Last March, we had just launched the 2020 Ireland Winter Games in Stormont. 185 athletes were very much looking forward to their chance to compete and perhaps qualify to compete at the World Winter Games in Kazan, Russia. Just a week before the games we had to cancel, due to Covid. They were rescheduled to this December. Athletes started to train at their clubs again in September only for them to be closed again in October (lock-down) and the December Winter Games needed to be deferred once more.

Negative Impact on Fundraising

With COVID-19 restrictions, key fundraising events had to be cancelled or re-invented to digital or virtual formats.

Cancelled events: Collection Day, Dublin Marathons, Golf Events, Polar Plunges, Cops n Donuts

Re-invented and new events:

- New digital challenge - **100k steps**
- New digital challenge – **Abs for Athletes**
- 5 Peaks was delivered virtually as '**Iconic Walks**'
- **Cops and Donuts** was cancelled and a new **LETR** run around the perimeter of Ireland was organised
- Collection Day was transformed from a one-day on street collection to a month-long campaign focusing on digital and text donations named **#CantStopNow**.

The Marketing team worked with Good Brains for Good Brands and Red Rage Productions to create **#CantStopNow**. The agencies worked **pro bono** to create a national advertising campaign to support digital and text donations. [CantStopNow Video](#)

There is an over dependence on raising funds through cash. During Covid we have moved hugely to a cashless-society. The general public and particularly those with a propensity to donate need to be

educated on the importance of donating digitally. They need to learn to have more confidence going forward and this needs a national approach.

First Virtual Athlete Leadership Forum – October 2020

If we want the world to be more inclusive, our Special Olympics athletes must contribute in ways beyond the sports field. Athletes must lead the way, educating the world about their potential and driving Special Olympics forward through their insights and contributions.

We need to Increase opportunities for people like Margaret, with an ID so she and others may assume meaningful leadership roles, where they can showcase their skills and change the attitudes of those around them, both inside and outside Special Olympics.

Our Athlete Leadership programme helps athletes to build on their confidence and self-esteem and encourages them to contribute to the organisation in a wider context.

Our first **Virtual Athlete Leadership Forum** took place on 17th October;

- 107 athlete leaders
- From 52 clubs all over Ireland
- Four separate workshops:
 - Better Money Habits - with Bank of America
 - Tai Chi- with Sparkle.ie and Tai Chi Your Way
 - Mock Interviews
 - Round Table/Screen Discussions

It was a resounding success and our five Regions will roll-out a similar forum in their regions.

New Young Athletes™ programme

The Young Athletes™ programme is a play programme for children age 4-12 years. It develops key fundamental movement skills and instils healthy habits in children with intellectual disabilities. It also offers their parents an insight into the support network that can be gained from joining a Special Olympics Club.

Number of Young Athletes Active in 2019 287

Number of new Young Athletes in 2019 118

Number of new Young Athlete Clubs in 2019 25

We are very excited about this relatively new programme and will look to develop a strong pathway for young children with ID to progress to juvenile sport onto lifelong participation as adults.

2025 Strategy

We are coming to the end of our 2020 Strategy and currently developing a new 2025 Strategy. We have embraced and coped well with many of the changes forced on us by Covid. We will offer blended opportunities for our athletes going forward, including both digital and physical activities. Covid resilience funding provided during 2020 was critical and included TWSS & EWSS schemes and a resilience grant through Sport Ireland. For many disability and charitable organisations like Special Olympics who depend hugely on the generosity of the general public, fundraising in the traditional way will be severely hampered and we would hope that during 2021 some form of transitional Covid funding will continue to be provided during 2021.

Athlete's Oath

I would like to end with our Special Olympics Athlete's Oath which has an important message for everyone.

"Let me win, but if I cannot win, Let me be brave in the attempt"