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# Changing Places Ireland

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**Opening Statement to the  
Joint Committee on Disability Matters  
for the Public Meeting  
'From accessibility to Universal Design'**

**14<sup>th</sup> October 2021**

## **We are Changing Places Ireland**

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Hello, My name is Karen Smith I am a representative from the Changing Places Committee Ireland, and I am a woman with a physical disability. I am deeply committed to advocating for myself and others who have a disability. Today I hope to raise awareness of the importance of changing places facilities and how it meets a basic need, and right, for a person with disabilities to be included in every aspect of society.

First, I would like to give you a brief background to the committee. Almost 10 years ago, in 2012 a young disability advocate Ailis Healy, supported by her mother Ann Healy, set up a Facebook page to highlight the lack of appropriate changing facilities in Ireland after becoming aware of the Changing Places lobbying movement that was taking place in the UK and realising this could provide a solution to allow her equal access to everyday activities.

Ann Healy is one of the founders of Changing Places Ireland Working Group. From the first meeting in November 2014 this group focused on introducing Changing Places Toilet Facilities to public places such as shopping centres, libraries, and sporting arenas across the country. Changing Places Ireland now consists of people with a disability, parents, and organisations working in the disability space including the Disability Federation of Ireland, the Central Remedial Clinic, the Irish Wheelchair Association, Enable Ireland, Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Ireland, InterAct (TCD) and Inclusion Ireland.

They have worked tirelessly and there are now 17 Changing Places Toilet Facilities in the country. But sadly, this is a poor reflection on Ireland as England have over 1,600 Changing Places Facilities and new legislation will make Changing Places Toilets mandatory there in new public buildings from 2021.

## **A Changing Place is What we are campaigning for**

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Changing Places Toilet Facilities are designed to provide access to localities and enhance the dignity, health, safety, and comfort of someone who may need extra support and additional equipment during personal care tasks. Changing Places Toilet Facilities also offer added safety and support features for assistants.

When I became involved with the Changing Places committee, I had been an activist for this cause for some time. I had done many radio interviews raising awareness and I presented at a National Sharing Day for the HSE on the importance of these facilities. I have dreams and aspirations. Having a disability does mean that these aspirations are less important than anyone else listening here today. I would like to meet a partner, go to the cinema, go to a night club with my friends, meet up with my family members and their children in restaurants, plan a weekend away. I would like to do ordinary things in ordinary places.

Without access to facilities like changing places I am excluded from living a full and equal life as a valued citizen. As a woman in my own right, I want to maximise my own independence and be included into my local community.

The world has experienced restrictions for the past two years due to Covid-19. People found it very difficult, and their mental health suffered. I and others like me have lived with restrictions all our lives. I have not had the opportunity to access my local school for my education, I was excluded from further education and society in general due to lack of accessible facilities and the basic one is to use a toilet. The government needs to recognise the importance of access for people with disabilities and give support to legislation and funding. The Irish Government should now follow the example of England and change Irish building regulations to make such toilets mandatory in certain public buildings.

**CPI is campaigning to change Part M of the Building Regulations to make Changing Places Toilet Facilities mandatory in buildings open to the public.**

Currently I am involved in a Government working group that involves the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and other stake holders. This group was established in December 2020, to examine the provision of a changing places toilet in certain buildings.

It was been a wonderful experience so far. I have been included at every step of the process and I feel that Paul Mc Dermot from the Department of Housing has been respectful and inclusive of people with disabilities and he

values our opinions. Following a lot of consultation and meetings which I participated in, the working group has now recommended the types and sizes of buildings where a changing places toilet should be required, along with the technical requirements (equipment, room size and layout) of a changing places toilet.

The proposals of the working group will require changes to the Building Regulations 1997 to 2021 and to Technical Guidance Document M – Access and Use. This process has been inclusive from the beginning and our voices have been heard.

Draft documents from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have been finalised. A focused group of people with disabilities and I have been consulted about the easy read document before it goes to public consultation. It is almost ready for public consultation.

This progress is very welcome; we are delighted that the voice of people with disability is part of this process, and we continue to advocate for this essential change in the year ahead.

## **To Conclude**

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The aim of our campaign is to promote the inclusion of people through providing Changing Places Toilet Facilities nationwide in places accessed by the public. Thousands of people need Changing Places Toilet Facilities to go

about their daily lives undertaking the day-to-day activities that many people take for granted.

Without Changing Places Toilet Facilities available throughout the country people with disabilities like myself are denied a basic human right and continue to be excluded from everyday life.

**Thank you.**