

► **Clerk to the Committee**
Disability Matters Committee
Dail Eireann

A Chara

I am Gary Kearney, a self-advocate who works with various organizations and am a member of Headway National Advocacy Group (NAG) group as I am a traumatic brain injury survivor. A non-neurotypical person, due to my brain injuries as well as having ADHD, diagnosed at a neurophysiological assessment.

I have been involved in various campaigns with groups including the Disability Federation of Ireland campaign #MakeWayDay and others. I have spoken in the house at super committee and given advice to politicians of all sides on disability issues. I show fear nor favor.

I am the founder of #PurpleLights which promotes Article 8 of the UNCRPD. Awareness. I work with various semi-state transport companies on disability issues with enormous success. Dublin Bus and Bus Eireann changing their mirror colour to yellow was my first piece of personal advocacy.

I present a Disability Awareness and Inclusion “an Insider View” to An Gara Siochana, as part of their Equality and Inclusion training programme.

I have recently finished producing and presenting, my Craol award winning radio show, Viva Vox “A Disability Show with A Difference” on 103,2 Dublin City FM. I have been interviewed in all forms of MSM and featured on podcasts across the world, speaking on disability issues.

I have no problems speaking to the committee, in fact due to my disabilities, written submissions are extremely difficult for me. This is about my tenth version, possibly more.

DPOs are an essential part of the disability community and of the persons with disabilities being heard. Not being heard but being told by able people created half of our problems. Or worse and it sadly still happens, able people claiming to represent their clients, promoting their company, and their small sector of the overall community to the detriment of others. While totally ignoring their clients, some have fake DPOs which teach the client what to say and what questions to ask. It is embarrassing when it happens at meetings,

However, there are numerous disability support service providers who assist their clients with their DPO's. Nowhere does it say that a DPO cannot be assisted by a service provider. Some of us, like me, could not be an advocate and an activist without the support of Headway Ireland. My Disability Support Service. I am sure that the Rehab/NLN client advocacy DPO's are the same. We lack skills required to deal with officialdom. We also lack funding; the service providers supply us with both.

Headway NAG is one of the oldest in the country as Headway are and always have been client focused. Headway supports me in every way possible to be heard and I make the decisions on what I am advocating, and they facilitate me with the support I request. That to me is the way a DPO should work, within service providers. We are experts on disability inclusion. Headway are the experts on running a support service and administration. They assist me to get my message across. As that is their job. To assist me in every way in my recovery from Brain Injury! It is a standing joke in Headway, that I am the most important person in the building. Because "I" and a client. Client first is the way it has always been in Headway Ireland.

Now I understand other service providers are not as good as Headway. Yet, I have spoken at the CRC/NLN Advocates AGM, and they led the agenda. The recent IWA "Getting Nowhere" campaign is the same. Some people would say they are service orgs campaigns. I disagree. They are the people with disabilities being supported by an organisation to promote their campaign. Getting Nowhere is led by Joan Carty and John Fulham, are they not persons with disabilities!

I use the expression "Educate and Advocate" as a description of what I do. I firmly believe Article 6, is an essential and overlooked article. It is not a hot topic like the Optional Protocol. Yet without art 6 nothing else happens. If it does it will be a fight all the way and will take forever. Art 6 is Awareness, starting with building up relationships through communication and we get things changed willingly, and not by force of law. Most people simply do not understand the issues, we educate them about the issues, and we advocate for the solution. Which are all in the UNCRPD. Which is a guide and supplies to tools to solve the inequalities and discrimination we face daily.

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You do that through your Public Participation Networks, the disability user groups, and I do it through giving PowerPoint presentations to companies and the Gardai on Disability Awareness and Inclusion. I guest on radio shows and am available to the press, who know me by now. If I do not know the answer, I will find somebody that does, and they can talk to them. You contact the local Councilors, Td's, and Senators, as well as the member in charge of the disability brief. You lobby as a person. As I am not funded, I do not fall under the same regulations.

I was an able person for two third of my life, fifteen years ago I became disabled. I was drugged and assaulted and suffered horrific injuries and received palliative care. I am as described in one professor report as "the miracle patient." The odds of recovering to the level of function I have is approximately twelve million to one!

So, I know the differences between the able world and the disabled world and the massive disadvantages we have as opposed to the able community. Education, Housing, Employment, Equality, the list is endless. Access to the Urban Realm and Public Transport, access to Sport, access to almost everything, being honest. It is possible but it is never simple. Active travel is an example of this. Everybody can walk or cycle, it is really that obvious, not everyone can. But we have a minister, his department, the NTA and councils' management country wide saying so. Ableism and it is through ignorance and a lack of education and awareness. We teach that at the ground level, to the shop assistants by chatting to them, to the general public by something as simple and fun as #PurpleLights. Why has everything turned purple, and off we go educating and advocating. They tell their friends and family, and it builds.

I grew up around people with disabilities, in those days they were called, gimps, spastics, touched, away with the fairies, and loads more. Yet they were my friends, my neighbors and they were people. I always treated them as such. Not as lesser or as super crips, but as people.

Now we have all the language but none of the understanding. We have massive advertisements for buildings of paralympic super crips, who inspire everyone. Well, the term super crip should tell you enough. We have to be pitied or hero's for doing what we do and disabled too.

I can hide in plain sight and did for years as I came to terms with this new world I was living in. Now I tell people I am disabled, and then they get the "rabbit in the headlight look" then the "English Tourist Speak" speak slowly and shout! I can no longer work and not volunteer too much due to my invalidity pension and the many complicated rules it has. I ignore them all, except the payment one. I do not receive payment for the things I do. I do not make money out of my community and claim to be all about the people! I just do it instead.

I could do so much more when I was able and nobody would care, now if I have an issue, it is because I am disabled. Or if I want to do something, able no problem, disabled not a chance. I am unusual that I was in both camps and learned the language of both. With ADHD and TBIs, I can be short and to the point and some people do not like that. They like meetings about meetings!

To change things, implement the UNCRPD across the entire government, the councils and the state and semi state companies. While bringing the able business world into line with government and NSAI standards with disability inclusion, awareness, and equality in the standards. Universal design to be taught in schools and colleges.

Stop thinking that tinkering around the edges will work or that throwing loads of money at it willy nilly will work. We saw that with the Celtic Tiger and with Covid.

Listen to the experts in the field of disability, universal design everything, from forms to systems to the urban realm. Have disability access and inclusion from all, from design concept stage and not box ticking at the end.

Educate the disabled youth, to become the architect, or the engineer, or the traffic planner. Support job shares and flexible hours in employment, as well as education.

I would love to come to the committee and have no problems speaking as I have done before in Super Committer before.

Yours

Gary Kearney

Disability Advocate & Activist