

Opening Statement for the Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters

Date: April 2024

About Inclusion Ireland

Established in 1961, Inclusion Ireland is a national, rights-based advocacy organisation that works to promote the rights of people with an intellectual disability.

We work towards the full inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities by supporting people to have their voices heard and advocating for rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The vision of Inclusion Ireland is that of people with an intellectual disability living and participating in the community with equal rights as citizens, to live the life of their choice to their fullest potential. Inclusion Ireland's work is underpinned by the values of Respect, Inclusion, Equality, Voice and Choice.

Opening Statement

Good morning, thank you for inviting me to speak here today.

My name is Paul Alford and I work for Inclusion Ireland.

Today, you asked me to talk about rights and how they can be supported.

I lived in an institution for 32.5 years, where I was told what do all the time and people thought I would not be able to live on my own.

When I started working at Inclusion Ireland, I couldn't read or write because I left school very young as they thought I couldn't learn anything.

I asked work for a course and went to the adult learning centre.

By getting support I can now read, use computers and online banking.

My doctor knows how to explain things to me about my health in a way I understand.

I have also learned how to keep my house tidy, cook and fix problems.

The reason I tell people my story is so others can learn about their rights and how you can change your life if you speak up.

People do not see us having a life after school, being able to learn things, to get a job or go to college. This needs to change.

People should have the same hopes for disabled people as they do for everyone else. With the right support, we can have a good life.

Respecting our rights has to start early when we are children.

People should be able to go to their local school with their siblings, friends and neighbours.

This wasn't the case when I was a child and sadly it's still not the case today.

Many children don't go to school with their brothers and sisters and have to go to a school far away from their home.

Nearly 90% of teachers in a recent survey by Inclusion Ireland said that some children should not be in their local schools.

Only 14% of children said they were enjoying school.

We also need to be seen as experts in our own lives and be listened to by families, professionals, government, media and all other people.

Too often, we are not invited to events and group discussions. And when we are, it is not accessible, and we find it hard to take part. Information is not given to us in ways we understand.

Some people have higher support needs. For example, people who are non-speaking will need someone who knows them well to support them and these might be non-disabled people, like a support worker or family member.

If we don't accept this, we are excluding them and treating them unfairly.

The supporter is as important as any other reasonable accommodation.

We need to be listened to, be given the support we need to participate and work together to remove the barriers. All voices matter!

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