



National Learning Network Hosts International Conference

Delegates hear how investment in social services and partnership are key for people with disabilities.

SPEAKERS AT THE RECENT European Platform for Rehabilitation annual conference in Waterford highlighted the importance of protecting the most vulnerable groups in our society, and particularly people with disabilities, from the worst effects of the economic recession.

The conference, hosted by National Learning Network, saw members from 14 European countries come together to address the challenges facing people with disabilities and was

very successful in providing delegates with an opportunity to learn from each other and to share experiences and best practice. Speakers also emphasised the need for greater partnership between disability service providers and for greater flexibility by services in responding to people's changing needs.

In his address to the conference, John Moloney TD, Minister for Equality, Disability and Mental Health, commented on how the Government is working across departments and

agencies to support transition. He highlighted the particular importance of inter-agency co-operation in the provision of services to people with mental health issues. "A comprehensive mental health care system requires that services at all levels – from community support groups, to voluntary groups, to primary care, to specialist mental health services – work in an integrated, co-ordinated fashion for the benefit of all people with mental health difficulties. *A Vision for Change*, the Irish Government's strategy for mental

Pictured left: At the civic reception in Christchurch Cathedral, Waterford, last October to mark the annual conference of the European Platform for Rehabilitation, hosted by National Learning Network, were (left to right) Cllr Davy Daniels, Deputy Mayor of Waterford city, Angela Kerins, Chief Executive, Rehab Group, Marie Kelly, Director of Training and Employment Services, Rehab Group, Jan Spooen, General Secretary of the European Platform for Rehabilitation, and Tom Murrán, Deputy President, Waterford Chamber of Commerce.

Pictured right: Addressing the conference was John Moloney TD, Minister for Equality, Disability and Mental Health.



Like other speakers, she also highlighted the need for organisations working in the disability sector to co-operate more. "We are all keenly aware of the challenges posed by the current economic climate and of the need for all stakeholders to work more closely together," she said. "While funding is important, it does not cost more money for organisations to work better together or to work smarter together."

Delivering the opening address to the conference, Angela Kerins, Rehab's Chief Executive, spoke of the need for services to change according to the requirements of people and of the need to provide a continuum of support. "As service providers, we have a duty to those who use our services to keep championing change in order to progress the position of, and improve the quality of life of, people with disabilities in our society. We can no longer provide all of our services in a fixed location and our services need to be less 9-5 and more flexible to meet the needs of individuals. Our responsibility now also extends beyond simply providing a service to actually ensuring that an individual is prepared for, and succeeds in taking, that step to the next phase of their lives, whatever that might be."

Claire Coffey (age 24), who has used a number of RehabCare services during her education, described her

experiences as a young person with Asperger's syndrome. She revealed that by believing in herself, she has overcome many obstacles.

"I was told that I wouldn't be able to sit my Leaving Certificate. But, I have done that, completed my Degree and am now studying for a Masters Degree. By believing in myself, and speaking up for myself, I have been able to make sure that others listen to me, and so I have been able to achieve what I want and am capable of."

In his remarks, Jan Spooen, General Secretary of the European Platform for Rehabilitation, concluded that, notwithstanding the recession, cutting funding towards people with disabilities should be a last resort. "Disability groups need to continue to impress upon policy-makers and funders the importance of continued investment in social services despite the economic difficulties because stability within social services is very important to overall economic prosperity." He also thanked National Learning Network for its professionalism and enthusiasm in hosting the conference.

The European Platform for Rehabilitation is a network of 28 leading providers of services to people with disabilities in 17 European countries, which aims to share best practice in service delivery and to support continuous professional development. ■

health, is a work in progress. It will be implemented over a seven-to-ten-year period and I am confident that, despite the downturn in the economy, we can continue to build on the progress to date, and realise our vision for mental health services."

Bairbre Nic Aongusa, Director of the Office for Disability and Mental Health, one of the keynote speakers at the conference, commented, "Government can play a very important role, in partnership with stakeholders, in supporting people with disabilities to integrate into their community. However, cultural and attitudinal change is also required across the community to ensure that every member of society is playing a role in facilitating the full participation of people with disabilities, particularly people with mental health difficulties, in all areas of life. As a guiding principle, it is essential that we listen to what people with disabilities themselves say."