



People with disabilities get political

LORNA SIGGINS

People with learning difficulties are being given the skills to make informed political choices in elections

WHEN EU Commissioner Charlie McCreevy sparked a row last year for asserting that he didn't think any "sane, sensible person would be spending this weekend or next weekend" reading the Lisbon Treaty, he could have used a better choice of words – but he may have spoken for far more people than he realised.

Politicians in many jurisdictions and constituencies often make false assumptions about voters. A new European campaign due to be initiated here by Down Syndrome Ireland (DSI) aims to address this.

The *My Opinions, My Vote* campaign aims to give people with learning disabilities the knowledge and skills to form their own opinions and make informed political choices in elections, including the forthcoming European plebiscite.

As part of the project, the group has also become the lead organisation in Europe in translating the political manifestoes of all European parties into more digestible format.

Gráinne Murphy, independence officer with DSI, was the person charged with tackling that challenge. "We've manifestoes from five of the eight European political parties done so far, and the one thing that struck us is that we could find nothing relating to living with

disability in any of the actual texts.

"All of the parties have committed to publishing the easy-to-read format on their websites, and the very fact that this initiative is taking place in this way may alert them all to this fact," she says.

"It may also highlight the issue – as in the importance of recognising the rights and concerns of those living with disability – to politicians at national and local level," she points out.

The campaign wasn't initiated specifically to target public representatives on disability issues, she explains. "While we would like politicians to be aware, the focus is on encouraging people with a learning disability to exercise their vote at every level.

"In most, but not all, countries, this right is guaranteed, but the opportunity to do so is made very difficult at a practical level. The reality is that these citizens have not been acknowledged as a group."

An estimated 0.1 per cent of Europeans have a learning disability at a time when life expectancy has increased considerably, the new campaign says. While self-advocacy is now a widespread approach, the campaign says that people with learning disabilities don't tend to engage in political participation as electors, thereby not exercising their right to vote – although there are instances where families will encourage participation.

Access is an issue, however, and Murphy isn't just talking about physical access to poll-

ing booths. "There's the issue of manifestoes, as mentioned. We have also learned of many instances where a person with a disability opens their front door to a politician or party worker, and the canvasser more or less ignores them and asks to speak to their parent."

Recognising this, Dr Paola Vulterini, who is associated with a Down syndrome group in Italy, discussed the issue with her counterparts in several EU member states.

Among those supporting her proposal for a specific campaign was Pat Clarke, former president and long-time activist with DSI. He is also a board member of the European Coalition on Community Living and is chairman of the 10th World Down Syndrome Congress which is to be held in Dublin this August.

The first campaign planning meeting was held in Malta last year, and the project now involves Ireland, through DSI, Italy, Hungary, Spain, Malta and Denmark. Murphy expects that a number of other organisations in other states will get involved as it gains momentum. Funding has been provided in part by the European Commission, with the balance being taken up by the relevant national organisations.

A website has been established, brochures and posters are being printed, and training programmes are being organised for 120 selected participants with disability from all over Europe. Some 20 of these are Irish, and have been nominated by DSI to take part in a training programme on political issues, which is being run in Galway and Dublin.

The 20 Irish candidates range in age from 18 to 37 years, and hail from counties across the State. "The idea is that they can test the training programme and it can then be rolled out far more widely," Murphy explains.

Several MEPs have already promised support, with Fine Gael MEP Mairead McGuinness

participating in a recent DSI group visit to the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Fianna Fáil MEP Brian Crowley and Fine Gael MEP Colm Burke have also been in touch. As part of the campaign's plan, it intends to disseminate the results of its work through setting up a European centre for the exercising of political rights by people with learning disabilities.

■ For more information on the *My Opinion, My Vote* campaign, see the website myopinionmyvote.eu

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