



The First Assembly

11am - 4.30pm

International Arena, Athlone Institute of Technology,
Dublin Road, Athlone

MARK YOUR PLACE IN HISTORY!

The First Assembly will mark an important moment in time for people with disabilities in Ireland.

Join thousands of people with disabilities, along with their families, friends and communities, in Athlone on Saturday, 13th June to shine a light on human rights and disability, to celebrate our strength, and to create a new drive for change!

What's it all about?

The First Assembly is the beginning of a movement of people with disabilities in Ireland. It's all about coming together to build our voice as a disability community.



We've seen it happen before: one day or even one moment that sets the course of history in a new direction. In 2015, this event will give disability its moment and explore how we can use our rights to make real equality our destination.

On the day, people with disabilities, joined by their families and communities from across the country, will journey together to the state-of-the-art International Arena, right at the heart of the country in Athlone.

This is the first major national gathering of its kind, an enlivening event to explore our rights and to reawaken a collective energy in the disability community. It's bringing people with all types of disabilities, with all different backgrounds and different experiences, to a meeting place of minds and common purpose, building solidarity and a strong new voice.

A key emphasis of the First Assembly- and the initiatives emerging from it - is a celebration of both our diversity and our individual strengths, capacities and opportunities.

It's our day and our space to shape our future. Yes, some of us may come from different backgrounds, live with different disabilities or come across different hurdles in our lives, but, at the core, we are all the same: we are all people whose rights are not being either recognised or realised, and we are the ones who, together, can turn that around.

What's the plan?

Hundreds of people with disabilities – along with their families, friends, colleagues and communities – will make their way from across the country to the state-of-the-art International Arena in Athlone. The journey itself is powerfully symbolic, representing the strength, determination and resilience of the community in meeting together, as one, in the centre of the country, to explore their rights and make a rallying call for change.



The underlying themes of those explorations and that call centre around empowerment of the individual, peer support, collectively understanding our rights and acting on them, and promoting true inclusion for everyone.

So, on the day, we'll celebrate our power and creativity with music, performance and festivity. We'll join together in a colourful parade, collaborating in a shared, lively experience and shaping ourselves as a diverse but united community. We'll connect through song, dance and other uplifting, empowering ceremonial activities.

We'll hear the experiences and insight of human rights activists, who will take us through the history of civil and human rights movements – revealing how we are making a history of our own on the day – and examine the disability rights situation in Ireland today. This gives us the knowledge and impetus to consider where change is needed and – more importantly – how we can begin to effect it.

We'll listen as people and families with disabilities share powerful personal testimonies on how they found their voices and the confidence to lead out on progressive change. These testimonies will inspire all there in an honest and very

relatable way, and demonstrate that everyone has the power and capacity to make the change that they want and believe in happen.

We'll discuss proposals for future actions and initiatives to strengthen the voice of people with disabilities in society, and take the first steps towards acting on them, ensuring that the impact of the First Assembly not only lives on but thrives into the future. We hope that this Assembly marks the first of a trilogy – taking place every second year – to give us an opportunity to create change and later reflect on it.

Why now?

This year marks the anniversaries of two prevailing moments which witnessed the power of community in changing history. Fifty years ago, thousands of African-Americans, led by Martin Luther King, set out from Selma, Alabama to march the 55 mile route to the state's capital, Montgomery, demanding and ultimately securing their voting rights. Equally, in a 1990 event known as the Capitol Crawl, disability activists abandoned their wheelchairs and mobility aids to climb the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington DC in their successful campaign to achieve the passing of the influential Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).



Those journeys – and the people who embarked on them – made history. Now, it's our turn. The First Assembly is the first marker of a new journey towards a better

future for everyone, and, when we're thinking about the future, it's always important to reflect on the past, what we've learned from it, and build on that.

We have an opportunity now to learn from the values, motivation and resilience of those who staked their places at these moments in time and to set them in motion in our own lives today. Through moments like those, we've witnessed how the innovation and commitment of people – including people with disabilities - have spear-headed massively important changes. Every person involved in them was an ordinary person, just like each of us, who recognized a need for change and made the decision to do something about it, and the consequence of those unified decisions was huge. That's exactly the kind of spirit and message that the First Assembly aims to instil.

Closer to home and to the present as well, it's just as important to remember that next year will offer a time of great engagement and debate on the state of our nation as we approach general elections and observe the 1916 commemorations. We have to be ready, as a community, for that and we have to take the lead in raising and progressing the issues that are important to us. The First Assembly is an important chance to begin that process and to mark our cards for the future.

Why is this important?

The future rests on each of us playing a role in ensuring that people with disabilities enjoy access to the full set of rights that they are entitled to, and, to do that, we have to, as a movement, think of disability as a human rights issue. By coming together, we can build a better future that respects, involves and includes everyone equally.

The stronger our community, the louder the call for change can be and the greater impact that we can make. The First Assembly gives us an opportunity to begin building our identity as a collective community – seeing past the different disabilities

we live with or the different organisations we work with to create one equal, determined and connected group and one loud, confident voice.

Understanding human rights

It's also a significant chance to explore our understanding of human rights and equality, noting the subtle differences between the two and considering ways in which we can



act on them to establish a fairer society. The First Assembly gives us that chance, inviting human rights activists and advocates to investigate these areas in open, creative ways and, in this way, build our connections with wider human rights and equality groups in order to identify ways we can work together in the future.

It's crucial to see disability through a human rights prism so that it can be addressed fairly as a societal issue. Seeing disability in this way enables us to understand how people with disabilities are disempowered as a result of being excluded in society. There are issues that we can all think about and act on in our lives that the day will explore.

For example, we all need to be aware of the barriers – both physical and cultural – that exist and are accepted in communities, and which can prevent us from participating fully in society. We've seen the statistics which show the challenges we face in terms of education, employment and more - for example, those revealing that only 21% of disabled people aged 15 or over in Ireland are in employment, compared to 50% of the general population of the same age – but how often are they put down to our disabilities, rather than to those barriers?

We need to demonstrate – not only to others but to ourselves as well - that people with disabilities can be and, more importantly, are strong, active members of society with rich life experiences and valued rights, who should enjoy the same opportunities as everyone else.

Human rights can play out in a practical way that effect change for us. Our right to vote, for example, is powerful in giving us the leverage we need. By using your vote, you are using your voice, and saying that you demand change and equality. There are almost 600,000 people in Ireland with a disability. If we come together, register to vote and go to the ballot boxes when we are called to, that will be one very loud voice.

That's just one small example; there are endless ways that we can use our human rights in liberating, effective ways. The First Assembly will enable us to explore them and consider how we can take steps ourselves to use them.

Changing attitudes

The future also involves changing attitudes and perceptions of disability, both within the disability movement and beyond it. People with disabilities can no longer be seen or allow ourselves to be seen as an isolated, vulnerable group; by changing the language and images around disability, we can empower ourselves as active members of society with equal opportunities and valued rights. By coming together at the First Assembly, we can begin this journey of empowerment, both as individuals and as a community.

Describing ourselves in a certain way allows both us and other people to dilute our rights and to define ourselves by our disability alone, rather than recognising the full, vibrant people we are. We're past mainstreaming; people with disabilities live at the hearts of families, communities and society. Not only are we here now, but, in the early days, we were the innovators. Today, we are the experts. We are no longer accepting ourselves as "vulnerable": if we are "vulnerable" for living and succeeding in a challenging environment, what are others?

Language like this bears an impact on everyone in how we are perceived and treated in society, and it's up to us to break that cycle. We are not people who "lost" our medical cards, for example: those cards were taken from us, it was not our choosing or our fault. We do not need to be "protected"; what we ask for is support. We do

not need to be “integrated”; we should be “included”. We are not “service users”; we access the supports that we are entitled to. We are not “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to wheelchairs”. We shouldn’t be “inspiring” just because we live with a disability. Do not describe us as a “Down syndrome boy” or “Cerebral palsy girl”: see the person first, not the disability.

We need to turn language around so that it empowers us and recognises us as the individual and valuable people that we are. That change needs to come from us, and it’s a crucial step in shaping the equal and inclusive future we are building. It’s a step we can set out on at the First Assembly.

Why should I be there?

The First Assembly will empower us to not only explore our understanding of our rights and to recognize them as our own, but to forge the solidarity and motivation to actually accomplish them.

We’ll witness the power of community and embrace new creative moments together, celebrating our strengths and capacity, and creating a culture of inquiry and empowerment. We promise colour, music, performance, collaboration and festivity. And we promise that this is the first step in a new, equal and inclusive future for us all.

So, come join the Assembly in a spirit of openness and generosity towards yourself and others; enjoy the opportunity to be creative in an exciting new space; and, remember, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

First Assembly Programme

- 11.00 am** **Arrival**
Registration, refreshments, entertainment and more in the Food Court at Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT).
- 12.00 pm** **Parade**
All attending parade to the International Arena in the AIT campus.
- 12.30 pm** **What do we mean by human rights?**
Critical perspectives from human rights and disability activists and advocates.
- 1.10 pm** **Entertainment**
- 1.20 pm** **Whose life is it anyway?**
Personal testimonies from people and families with disabilities.
- 1.50 pm** **How do you feel?**
A reflection and creative invitation.
- 2.00 pm** **Lunch and creative assignment**
- 3.15 pm** **Bringing it all together**
Ceremonial activity.
- 3.30 pm** **Discussion**
A select panel and respondents deliberate on the main themes of the day, with a performance interlude.
- 4.10 pm** **Future Propositions**
Finding ways we can act to progress our rights as people with disabilities into the future.
- 4.30 pm** **Finale and Event Close**

Practical Information

How do I register?

Registration is free, and remains open until 5pm on Friday, 5th June 2015.

It takes just two minutes to book your place: just complete the registration form at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/first-assembly-tickets-16432952403> and your ticket will be emailed straight to you.

Alternatively, you can visit the Áiseanna Tacaíochta (ÁT) website – www.theatnetwork.com – and click into the *First Assembly* page under *News and Events* on the main menu bar. You'll find a ticket form at the bottom of that page: once you choose the number of tickets you'd like to book and hit the 'Register' button, you'll be taken to a new page where you can enter your details and secure your free spot.

If you would like some further support with registering your place, just call Orlaith Grehan in ÁT on 086 183 1502 or email orlaith@theatnetwork.com with any questions or requests that you have.

A hot lunch will be available at the event on the day, at an average cost of €8 per person.

How do I get there?

The First Assembly is taking place in the International Arena in Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) between 11am and 4.30pm on the day. AIT is based on the Dublin Road in Athlone, County Westmeath.

Athlone sits on the M6 motorway. A map to the AIT campus, which lies on the east side of the town, is available at <https://goo.gl/maps/sh53L>.

Athlone town can be reached by bus and rail. Bus Éireann operates a number of routes through the town, which can be found at

<http://www.buseireann.ie/inner.php?id=249#Athlone>. Irish Rail services between Dublin and Galway, Dublin and Westport, and Dublin and Ballina also stop in the town; more information and timetables can be accessed at <http://www.irishrail.ie/travel-information/athlone>.

AIT is approximately a ten-minute drive from the bus and train stations in Athlone. If you would like to arrange a taxi service between the AIT campus and either station, a list of taxi companies in the area is available at <http://www.athlone.ie/getting-around>, while wheelchair accessible taxis in the area can be contacted and booked by visiting www.wheelchairtaxi.ie.

Free parking is available in the AIT campus throughout the day of the event, with room for private cars and buses.

If you require more information about getting to the AIT campus, you can call the college on 090 646 8000 or, alternatively, the town's Tourist Office on 090 649 4630.

Who do I contact?

If you have any questions or would like any more information about the First Assembly, just get in touch with Orlaith Grehan with us here in ÁT. You can reach her on 086 183 1502 or by emailing orlaith@theatnetwork.com.

More information is also available on our website – www.theatnetwork.com – where you'll also find links to our Facebook and Twitter pages which have regular updates.

Áiseanna Tacaíochta

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