



Stand Up and Be Counted

The announcement of the General Election in Ireland in early 2011 saw thousands of political activists hit the campaign trail, including Rehab centres.

Features

T HROUGHOUT REHAB, a series of question and answer sessions saw candidates of every political hue visiting centres to take part in robust debate with people who avail of National Learning Network and RehabCare services.

Since 2002, a voter education programme has been delivered at election time across Rehab's centres by trained staff. The programme has proven very popular, with participants learning

about the electoral process, the political system, candidates, election issues and the practicalities of voting on Election Day.

The final part of the programme is a question and answer session, which enables people who use Rehab's services to quiz local candidates on a wide range of issues of importance. Questions are invited from the floor and a chairperson ensures that everyone has a chance to speak. Rehab has centres in nearly every constituency and

these sessions give local politicians an opportunity to find out more about the organisation and the service it offers.

This year, the programme has been very successful, with 19 sessions taking place throughout the country and 93 candidates from across the political spectrum in attendance.

The first session took place in Rehab's Kilkenny centre and there was a very strong turnout, with eight candidates of every political persuasion from the

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Pictured right: Candidates speaking at a Questions and Answers Session attended by learners in National Learning Network in Swords.

Pictured left: A Wall of Issues used at a Candidate Questions and Answers Session to illustrate the most important issues to people attending the meeting



constituency. More than 60 people from Rehab's services in Carlow and Kilkenny attended and asked questions across a range of areas, including cuts in Disability Allowance, prescription charges for medical card holders, cuts in minimum wage, transport issues, dental service issues and employment.

Pat McPhillips, Regional Manager, RehabCare thinks the programme is important, “The session was of immense value to everyone who took part. Participants had the opportunity to ask candidates running for election about real issues that are important in their lives. Candidates also had the opportunity to present their electoral manifestos, particularly in relation to issues of importance to the people who use Rehab's services.”

In Dublin North, another highly-successful candidate session took place, with an audience of National Learning Network students from Balbriggan and Swords. Questions focused on topics such as health, job creation, mental health services and social housing while also addressing issues such as the candidates' positions in relation to recent cuts to Disability Allowance and other benefits.

Helen O'Toole, a student in National Learning Network in Swords, found the session very valuable, “We all met in Swords and the candidates came in and each of the classes in the centre had a question to ask. I was selected

to ask a question from my class. The session gave an insight into how elections work and allowed us to talk to candidates on a one-to-one basis, to find out what they are really like and to get their insights about how the election system works.

“We were able to find out where each of the candidates stood on different topics such as social welfare and about what they would do if they were in the next government. I found some of the candidates' responses were much more in line with my position than others. This session really helped me to decide who I might vote for on Election Day.”

For Anthony Weyer Brown, who attends RehabCare's resource centre in Dun Laoghaire, the session was an opportunity to quiz candidates on their position in relation to how business and politics interact. He said, “It was very interesting to hear the views of different parties and independent candidates on the topics that were of interest to us. It was useful in helping us decide who to vote for when it came to Election Day.

“All of the candidates sat in a row and they all had two minutes to answer our questions. We had a loud buzzer that we used when they were coming close to the end of their time. We had to use it a few times!”

Clara McAuliffe, Community Services

Manager with RehabCare in Dun Laoghaire, commented, “The politicians were very receptive and respectful of each other and of keeping to time. The session was just 45 minutes long but some of the candidates offered to stay on afterwards to discuss some individual concerns.

“The session was a very worthwhile exercise that gave service users the opportunity to engage in a very human way with the candidates and have their questions answered and their concerns aired. After the session, some people who had never voted before decided to vote.”

In addition to the voter education programme and candidate sessions, Rehab distributed a list of its key election issues to all candidates running in the election and also posed questions of importance to Rehab and its service users to the main political parties. ■

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