

> Different but **All** the Same

A new pilot programme aims to increase awareness and understanding of equality and diversity.

I S IT ILLEGAL TO DISCRIMINATE? Do I stereotype people? Do I treat people differently because of their age, religion, race or sexual orientation? These were just some of the many questions asked during a new pilot programme in Equality and Diversity Awareness, which was run at RehabCare's resource centre in Ballyfermot recently.

The programme brought together service users who attend RehabCare's Ballyfermot centre and aimed to increase awareness and understanding of diversity amongst the participants and the people they interact with. The sessions were facilitated by James Rickard, Rehab Group's Diversity Officer, and Donna Hughes, Programme Facilitator at RehabCare in Ballyfermot.

In total, 12 participants took part in the six-week programme, discussing a wide range of issues including diversity, the Equality Act, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. Everyone was invited to consider each topic and talk openly about their thoughts and opinions.

Felim McKinney, who participated in the programme, said he found it very interesting and enjoyed the opportunity to discuss certain topics that he wouldn't usually have had a chance to explore. "The programme made me more aware of people's backgrounds. I will not pre-judge them and I now interact much better with people," he said.

Another participant, Patricia Farrell, agreed with Felim, saying she learned a lot more about discrimination and stereotyping by attending the sessions and now believes that everyone should be treated equally, in line with the Equality Act, no matter what



Pictured (left to right): Participants in the Equality and Diversity pilot programme in RehabCare, with James Rickard, Diversity Officer, Rehab Group and Donna Hughes, Programme Facilitator at RehabCare Ballyfermot.

their race, sexual orientation or disability.

During the programme, everyday scenarios were used to illustrate how prejudice can be destructive and where discrimination can occur, as well as how to embrace differences between people.

Brendan Brady, a programme participant, said, "I won't treat people from other countries differently any more. I will not form opinions on foreign people before I get to know them first."

Donna Hughes, Programme Facilitator, said, "It was great to see the service users develop knowledge with regard to equality and diversity awareness. Many of

them have already formed set opinions. Now they are able to look at things from a different perspective and form new opinions. I have really seen a difference in opinion; they are a lot more open to new people and trying to understand them better."

The programme overall was deemed an outstanding success by all involved. Participant Patsy Dunne even recommended that the programme should be delivered in other RehabCare centres and also in local secondary schools. He said, "Young people need to be aware of people with different abilities and have respect for everyone in the community, whilst treating people equally." ■