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Disability Votes Count in Europe



By Grace Campbell

Shane Byrne is a young man in his 20's who comes from Tullow, Co. Carlow. On Friday 5 June Shane will be deciding what candidate he will vote for to represent the East constituency in the European Parliament in Brussels.

Like a lot of young men, Shane has a large number of hobbies including reading books, horse riding, using computers and going to drama lessons. Unlike a lot of young men, Shane was born with Down syndrome.

Speaking to Ryan Tubridy on his radio show last week, Shane spoke about how people without Down syndrome view those who do. "Other people think they don't have a right to vote in the upcoming local and European elections," said Shane. "Voting gives me the right as a citizen to voice my opinion."

Down Syndrome Ireland has provided people like Shane with a training programme, called "My Opinion, My Voice." This programme gives people with disabilities the necessary skills and knowledge to make an informed choice in the upcoming elections.

According to Shane "It doesn't matter who you are, once you're over the age of 18 you're allowed to vote in the local and European elections."

"My Opinion, My Vote" is a project that intends to empower people with learning disabilities through becoming actively involved as a citizen and participate in political elections. Other countries that implement the project for their citizens are Italy, Denmark, Spain, Hungary and Malta.

According to the project's website there are "0.1% of European citizens present with a learning disability." It states that "The life expectancy for this group has increased considerably; therefore the urgency in addressing issues surrounding citizen's rights has become increasingly more apparent."

The objective of the project is to encourage people with learning disabilities to form an opinion and vote at local, national and European elections and referenda,

like other European citizens.

The website dedicates a full section to the European elections, including easy-to-read manifestos of European Parliamentary groups and a breakdown of the European groups that sitting Irish MEP's are a part of.

Shane spoke to Ryan Tubridy in the hope that it will encourage other young people with Down syndrome to use their vote. "If you have a disability use your voice, get it out there," said Shane.

Shane's determination and positive attitude will no doubt be responsible for other young people with or without Down syndrome or a learning disability to exercise their vote when polling day arrives on 5 June.

<http://www.myopinionmyvote.eu/>