

Breda Crehan-Roche traces the history of Ability West from 1962 through to the present day.

The genesis of Ability West (formerly known as The Galway County Association for Mentally Handicapped Children) occurred in 1961, when a parent Sean Keane wrote two letters to the local *Connacht Tribune* looking for support from interested people to set up services in Galway for children with mental handicap. Although he received no replies or offers of support, unknown to him at the time people had begun to take an interest. Senator Sean Brosnahan, a founding member of the National Association for the Mentally Handicapped of Ireland (NAMHI) and General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), contacted the Galway INTO branch seeking their help. Mick Rafferty and Michéal McSweeney, then Chairman and Secretary of the Galway INTO branch, convened a meeting and a temporary committee was established, comprising teachers, clergy and doctors. In November 1962, a public meeting was held to form an Association, and in the following May a general meeting was held, their work was noted discussed and a new committee was elected (Kevin O'Rourke was elected Chairman and Marie O'Sullivan, Secretary). This committee started with funding of £20 and one of their first tasks was to find suitable accommodation for a school. They also carried out a community audit to identify the numbers and needs of children with mental handicap. In those early days they were very busy fundraising, and they secured grants from Galway County Council and the Department of Education. In January 1964 St Joseph's School opened in a temporary building in Galway City, with 12 children on the roll. At that time the government did not provide funding for transport and a rota of volunteer drivers transported the children to and from school. During the late 1960s many voluntary associations were formed in parishes throughout County Galway.

In the early 1970s, the first fundraising Mental Handicap Week was organised; it was a great success, and the event still continues today. The



Association became a limited company known as the Galway County Association for Mentally Handicapped Children. The Board of Directors elected in July 1972 were Tom Garvey, Chairman, Peadar Burns, Vice Chairman, Michael Sugrue, Treasurer, and Bosco McDermott, Hon. Secretary. Other members were Joan McNicholl, Simon Kelly, Sean Kelly, Brother Damien Nolan, Daiden O'Eocha, Kathleen Duggan, Chris Conneally and Des O'Rourke. The first Secretary, Michael Kennedy, was appointed in October 1973. He secured £30,000 from the Department of Health, which was a major boost for the organisation.

By the mid 1970s, the organisation had established five main services: St Joseph's School for children with a moderate mental handicap, Snipe Avenue Day Services for children with moderate/severe mental handicap, a Training Centre for children leaving school, a five-day residential hostel for children attending school, and a hostel for short-term care for children with severe mental handicap. By the mid to late 1970s, Child Training Centres were also established in Portumna, Tuam, Glenamaddy and Carraroe.

In 1978, the Association opened a crisis and relief hostel (Blackrock House) in the city for young adults, and in Tuam an occupational therapy unit opened. Michael Kennedy, the first Secretary left the Association at that time, and Tadhg Nagle was appointed as Director of Services. With the increase in services throughout the county came the need for employing additional staff; two residential services were also opened in Galway City. In 1978 the Association had 34 voluntary branches. Funding from the Western Health Board amounted to £114,700.

Chairpersons 1960s–1970s: Kevin O'Rourke, 1962-68; Michael O'Sullivan 1968-1969; Fr James Fitzsimons 1969-1970; Fr Michael Keane 1970-1971; Tom Garvey 1971-1974; Peadar Burns 1974-1980.

1980s

Despite the recession of the 1980s, the organisation continued to develop further services. Tadhg Nagle was replaced by Arthur Browne, who continued as Director of Services for a further five years. A hostel for young adults was established in Tuam and a day service in Kilkerrin. In 1982 a Child Education & Development Centre was established in Ballinasloe. Other services established during the 1980s were Ballyglunin horticulture project and Team Products employment centre in Tuam. Annual expenditure in 1984 was £1.6 million, with funding from the Western Health Board of £1.3 million, and a large deficit of £300,000.

In 1985 Home Sharing was introduced, Arthur Browne left the organisation and Peadar Burns became acting Director of Services. Other developments were two group homes in the city and a hostel in Tuam. By 1987 over 300 children and adults were receiving services from the organisation. Tom Hogan was appointed Chief Executive. Three more group homes were established between the Galway City and Tuam, and a Day Training Centre in the City. The annual expenditure exceeded £2.1 million.

In 1988 a new employment centre (Firefly Viswear) was set up in the city, and in 1989 Chris Conneally retired after serving as Principal of St Joseph's School for many years.

Chairpersons 1980s: Tom Garvey 1980-1982, Eoghan O'Sullivan 1982-1984, Peadar Burns 1984-1990.

1990s

In the 1990s new group homes were opened in Tuam and Galway City. Plans were agreed for a new school in the city. 1992 saw the introduction of the volunteer programme which recruited, trained and supported volunteers. At that time 47 branches were operating throughout Galway City and County and over £100,000 was raised annually by the branches through collections and fundraising. In October 1994 the then Minister for Education Niamh Breathnach officially opened St Joseph's School at what was a very historic and emotional day full of pride for the founders—much had been achieved from 1964 when the school opened in a temporary building with 12 children on the roll to the opening of the new school. By 1998 funding from the Western Health Board was £5.5 million. Additional group homes were established in Galway City, along with additional day places throughout the county.

Chairpersons 1990s: Peadar Burns 1990-1991, Tom Garvey 1991-1993, Annie Nolan 1993-1997, Ann Donovan 1997-2000.

2000 onwards

Additional resources made available in the 2000 budget enabled the provision of further day places through the county. During 2001 capital projects were undertaken in Glenamaddy, Tuam and Carraroe. By 2002 funding from the Western Health Board was over €13 million and this was augmented by funds raised from the branches for the same year (€131,867). In 2003 the Association's site at Snipe Avenue was redeveloped and the new facilities included a refurbished training centre, an adult day service and a group home.

In 2005, the HSE was established as a single national health service; Tom Hogan retired as Chief Executive after eighteen years, to be replaced by Breda Crehan-Roche. At an EGM the same year, the term 'mental handicap' was replaced by 'intellectual disability' in the memorandum and articles of the company. Increased adult services were provided in Portumna and formal discussions commenced with the Department of Education and Science in relation to educational and teacher provision at the five child education and development Centres. Advocacy groups were established through the county and training was provided for all involved. In 2006 the Board approved a five-year

strategic plan 2006-2010. That same year day and residential places were increased, and funding provided by the Department of Education and Science enabled the appointment of five teachers. A purpose-built group home in Tuam was completed and commissioned and funding enabled the organisation to make improvements and to refurbish many of the older centres, and to provide new buses and much needed equipment. In 2007, the company name was changed to Ability West. A new children's residential service was opened in Ballinasloe, work commenced on a new day centre in Tuam, and an adult day service commenced in Glenamaddy. In 2008, further funding provided additional day, residential and respite services throughout the city and county, semi-independent apartments in Tuam, and an active ageing programme in Galway. AIB Better Ireland funding afforded the introduction of the 'Best Buddies Programme' (founded by Anthony Kennedy-Shriver to provide opportunities for one-to-one friendships between secondary students and people with intellectual disability) and a disability awareness programme for secondary schools called 'So Can I' was developed by Ability West. Minister of Education and Science Mary Hanafin approved three new special schools under the patronage of Ability West.

In June 2008 a commemorative ceremony was organised to honour founding members and to acknowledge the work of past and present chairpersons. Two purpose-built respite centres for adults and children were made possible through the Dormant Accounts Flagship funding and both were commissioned in 2009. Also in 2008, a purpose built adult day and resource centre was opened in Tuam.

2008 saw the beginning of the economic downturn and the commencement of funding cuts, in 2009 Ability West responded to demand by reviewing its services and by restructuring, with the result that additional day and residential services were made possible within existing resources and some funding from the HSE provided day and training places for school leavers and one residential place. Fundraising enabled the commencement of a day resource centre and adult respite centre in Mountbellew.

2010 saw further funding cuts, however, with the assistance of staff and families, all frontline services were maintained, and some development

funding was found for school leavers and for additional respite places. An EGM in December approved new Memorandum and Articles of Association to replace those from the 1970s. The Board approved the Strategic Plan 2011-2013; Genio funding enabled us to pilot family networks, and other developments included the establishment of a day resource and adult respite centre in Mountbellew, and the establishment of a Service Users Council, Human Right Committee and an Ethics in Research Committee. At the AGM in May 2010 the Board of Directors honoured two special people with Honorary Memberships—Peadar Burns and Chris Conneally. Their honorary membership was in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the development of services and supports to people with intellectual disability. HSE funding in 2010 was €21 million, and branch fundraising was €62,657. 2011 has been a difficult and challenging year, however all frontline services have been maintained and by working in partnership with service users, their families and staff, the organisation has been able to maintain the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of person-centred services.

Chairpersons 2000 to date: Ann Donovan 2000-2002, Marie O'Dowd 2002-2005, Páraic Lawless 2005 to date.

As it approaches 50 years of service provision, from humble beginnings in 1962 (with funding of £20), Ability West has grown from strength to strength, with current funding in excess of €20 million. The association provides provide high-quality services and supports to over 490 children and adults with intellectual disability, in 56 centres located in eleven areas throughout Galway City and county. Services include day, residential, respite, rehabilitative training, supported employment, active ageing, community supports and multidisciplinary supports. Ability West acknowledges its founding members, the many Chairpersons and Board members, branch members and volunteers who have given so generously of their time and for their courage and determination to make a difference. There is no doubt that the future ahead will be demanding, however, Ability West will continue to meet the many challenges ahead with determination and courage and never lose sight of the reason for its existence—to provide services and supports to people with an intellectual disability and their families. FL