

Speech by President McAleese delivered at the Launch of the Cheshire Ireland Charter of Rights at Croke Park Conference Centre on Tuesday 03 October 2005

Is mór an pléisiúir dom bheith anseo i bhur measc ar an ócáid speisialta, ócáid stairiúil seo. Go raibh míle maith agaibh as ucht bhur bhfáilte chaoin.

Good morning, everybody.

I am delighted to join you for the launch of the Charter of Rights for Cheshire Ireland. My thanks to Mark Blake-Knox for his kind invitation to be part of this very special day when the Cheshire Foundation, with its distinguished record of service to people with disabilities, sets out an exciting agenda for the future.

Today, in launching your Charter of Rights, you are setting out, unambiguously, what a person with a disability can expect from Cheshire Ireland. We welcome the Charter as a response to the challenge of developing new, ever more effective and imaginative methods of supporting people with disabilities as they search out the deepest personal fulfilment in life. Cheshire Ireland had a wealth of experience to draw on when this Charter was being discussed and developed. It had a long-established role as champion of the disabled and of their right to the fullest expression of their dignity and their potential. That experience is underpinned by a respect for the uniqueness of each human being and it is very heartening to see the emphasis the Charter places on collaboration with each person with a disability in devising the action plan best suited to their needs, ambitions and circumstances.

More than 300 people throughout Ireland experience the loving care and companionship at the heart of this organisation. They experience it every day. It is central to their well-being, their comfort and their enjoyment of life. Cheshire's services are delivered by staff, volunteers sponsors, fundraisers - a veritable army of caring men and women who are determined that our society will include everyone.

It is reassuring to see that, through your work, Leonard Cheshire's vision of a society which recognises the rights of people with disabilities to exercise choice and independence is becoming ever more real, ever more mainstreamed. The Charter carries forward that vision and the vision, too, of the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. It brings Ireland closer to being the fully inclusive society we aspire to, a place where the talents of all are encouraged to blossom, where the talents and contribution of none are wasted. We have learnt from bitter experience that if we marginalize, we cause awesome loss to the individual and to the nation.

The Charter of Rights does not itself directly address physical disabilities but it will have a major part to play in supporting people with disabilities emotionally, spiritually and intellectually as they make the choices central to living a full and contented life. It is an important part of Cheshire Ireland's philosophy of removing, as far as is absolutely possible, the boundaries to the full expression of the human spirit which physical disability can too easily be allowed to impose.

My sincerest thanks go to you on behalf of those who you have helped and continue to help, those lives you have touched and enhanced. What you do, and the way in which you do it, has become a model of human interaction and mutual support - a model of what it is to be, and what it takes to be, a community rather than a random collection of disconnected strangers.

I wish you well with this important work in the future and to all who live with, work with, or support Cheshire Ireland, in one way or another, I hope the future will indeed be even better.

Go raibh maith agaibh.