

# Annual Report 2023



Down  
Syndrome  
Ireland



#ShareTheJourney



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# Section One: Welcome

## Presidents Report 2023

2023 was a year that saw many changes in DSI. Following much consultation, communication and listening to each other, a new constitution was approved by over 90% of members in November. This new constitution allows DSI to be a more efficient and proactive organisation and ensures the charity is in a better position to meet increasing regulatory and governance requirements. It especially allows for an increased membership where the person with Down syndrome is at the centre of decision making.

The new enlarged Board identified areas requiring strengthening and the new constitution enables this via independent, skills-based directors who will be recruited to support the work of DSI.

The focus of changes throughout the year was to enhance communication, both between DSI nationally and branches and between branches themselves. We learn with and from each other and the increased unity of purpose can only be beneficial to people with DS, their families and communities.

Work commenced throughout the year on developing bye laws which will support branches and local committees to better manage local services.

While great advances were made, challenges remain especially in the recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists. DSI is working to provide a national support structure to coordinate a more sustainable resolution to this issue. The environment for fund raising remains tight and in order to better support members, DSI will need to pursue new sources of income to sustain and expand activities.

DSI is a vibrant and innovative community throughout the country.

You need only look at each edition of the digest to see the great work that is being done on a continuous basis via cooperation between DSI nationally

and local branches in the areas of education, leisure, employment, lifelong learning etc.

Input from people with Down syndrome is increasing via the continuing work of a National Advisory Council and new initiatives of Regional Advisory Councils.

A great strength of DSI is volunteerism – parents, families, local committees, national board, the public – all offer their time generously. This, coupled with strong national leadership ensures that issues affecting people with DS are addressed at all levels of society.

At the end of 2023, DSI was preparing to bid farewell to Barry Sheridan, CEO and wished him well in his future career. Barry was pivotal in steering DSI toward a more sustainable future through the many reforms he oversaw. His work, supported by staff, Board and branches, places DSI in a stronger position going into 2024.

DSI is fortunate to have a small but highly committed team in National Office who work tirelessly to support branches in their daily activities. It is their commitment, combined with that of branch employees, families, committees and friends that ensures DSI continues to be relevant at local level.

Thank you to everyone who, throughout the year, contributed in any way to making the lives of people with DS better.

Go raibh míle maith agat as ucht do tacaíocht.

Gerard O Carroll



President DSI



## NAC

### The voice of our members

Our National Advisory Council (NAC) and Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) represent the opinions of adults with Down syndrome within our organisation. The Councils comprise of adults with Down syndrome. As an organisation, we need to hear and respond to the voices of people with Down syndrome. Under the new Memo and Arts, the NAC has a more important role. Our first RAC hosted by the Louth-Meath branch for the Northeast region, continued their excellent work throughout 2023. The Midlands RAC got off to a great start in November. This RAC is hosted by the Kildare branch, has members from the Kildare, Laois and Kilkenny ranches. RACs worked towards nominating one or two members to join the NAC in 2024.

"It's great to learn about how a meeting runs with an agenda and minutes," Conor O'Donnell, NAC Treasurer.

"I enjoy speaking at events as part of the NAC which includes the DSI AGM and the NAC AGM. The NAC makes me think more about all of our members with Down syndrome and being their advocate," Sinéad Friel, NAC Chairperson.

"I really enjoy having the opportunity to speak at events on behalf of the NAC. Being on time for the NAC meetings has really helped me with being on time for other things I do," Eric Nolan, NAC member .

"I learned about the structure of the meetings and time management. I feel I can give my opinions on different topics that we discuss at the meetings," Orla Casey, NAC Member.

"I enjoy meeting the other NAC members and new people. The best thing for me in 2023 was working on Easy Read documents," Una Coates, NAC Member.

"I got better at presentations and speaking to the RACs. The best thing for me was inviting guests in, like Minister Simon Coveney," Ross O'Neill, NAC Secretary.



Midlands RAC



Louth Meath RAC



NAC



## Section Two:

### Branch Reports 2023

#### Athlone Branch — 16 members

The main activities in the Athlone branch in 2023 were dancing, gymnastics and basketball. The members had a great year in Dancezone. The sense of fun and camaraderie among the group was very special. They gave a very special performance at the Dancezone Easter show. They also took part in the St. Patrick's Day parade in Moate, which was a great success. There was great excitement later in the year when it was announced that members attending Dancezone were to be featured on Operation Transformation. So, lots of practice in December for the Christmas show and for the RTE filming in January.

The members take part in Rhythmic Gymnastics and have great fun each week as their instructors put them through their paces to develop their skills.

Some of our older members do special Olympics basketball. They took part in a Special Olympics event in Belfast in 2023 and it was a most enjoyable weekend for everyone involved.



#### Carlow Branch — 50 members

In April we had our very first 'Rock your Socks' walk for World Down Syndrome Day.

In August some of our adult members enjoyed a weekend away to Galway.

In September our book club started in Carlow Town Library.

In October our first Inclusive Creative Drama Programme got underway.

In December we had a wonderful day at our Christmas party.

#### Cavan Branch — 28 members

The Cavan branch enjoyed various activities and received kind donations in 2023. The swimming group continued in Cavan Leisure Centre, as did Music Therapy in The Backyard. Members also enjoyed a clay modeling workshop and several sports activities too.

There were lots of celebrations for World Down Syndrome Day, with businesses and schools taking part in Lots of Socks. Specsavers, who employs one of our members, also held a Lots of Socks day. The branch also received kind donations in 2023, including a cheque from The Arva Trotters walking group, who donated a generous €4000.

## Clare Branch — 70 members

2023 marked a very active year for the Clare branch as the committee commenced a programme of events for members.

The programme commenced with weekly Zumba classes for members aged 16+ which is very popular with almost 20 members taking part each Monday. The branch and Ennis Library have established a book club for adult members that meet monthly. Joanne Dawson and Aoife Gaffney hosted a very informative employment workshop in November. The KCP sessions, hosted by Olive Buckeridge commenced and parents are delighted to have had the opportunity to enroll their children. A playgroup for preschoolers and their families met each month which was great fun and also gave parents an opportunity to meet and chat.

These events are part of an extensive programme which will be expanded to include events for all ages with scheduled events in the pipeline.

We established an administration office in Ennis, staffed part-time from 10am-2pm each day and the committee were delighted to end the year one step closer to purchasing a property in the centre of town to act as the county HQ.

We continued our fundraising efforts and as always had an enjoyable day at The Odd Socks cycle in March and Tour de Munster in August. We are grateful to be the beneficiary of several fundraisers – tractor runs, school days, hair dyes and much more.



## Cork Branch — 446 members

2023 was a busy year for the Cork branch, we had our first Lavender Ladies lunch in September. This was a huge success, and it will continue this year.

In October, we had a Pumpkin Festival at Field of Dreams which was enjoyed by all.

In May the branch held an event called Down Syndrome Cork's Funest Families which was indeed great fun. We had our annual hugely successful Field of Dreams Cycle in June, as well as our Field of Dreams Graduation. Lots of other events and meet-ups took place, coffee mornings, cinema trips, Lámh Training, Numicon training, Cooking with Hugh. There is now a very active youth club who have done amazing things.



## Donegal Branch — 190 members

Down Syndrome Donegal burst back on the social scene in 2023. It was our first World Down Syndrome Day party since the pandemic and over 400 members and family gathered to celebrate the occasion at the Mount Errigal Hotel. The entertainment was super with karaoke, a photobooth, dancing, mini-golf, crafts and even a mocktail bar!

We continued the theme of meeting friends old and new with two enjoyable trips in the summertime. The waterbus was a hit especially during the sing-along as we toured Donegal Bay. Our annual trip to Gartan saw many of our newer members navigating Gartan Lake in kayaks!

Christmas was so exciting with events for all ages. A trip to the Panto in Derry, the VIP unveiling of McElhinney's Department store windows and the Oakfield Park Santa experience to name just a few. There was also dancing with Anne Biddie and a Dine and Cinema trip.

We are so proud of all our members here in Donegal throughout the year for every achievement big and small but we wanted to mention a couple of impressive feats that were in the press. Anna Hennessy and Eoin Rooney represented Ireland in the European Down Syndrome Championships in Italy. Also Daniel O'Reilly, David Crawford and Hughie Sweeney represented Ireland in the first Down Syndrome Futsal competition in the European Championships in Italy. Sean Boyle 'sailor' trained and passed his Bord Iascaigh Mhara training. Well done to all.

We would like to thank all our members, families and communities here in Donegal for the continued support through fundraising and donations.

2023 really was a huge step forward for people here in the Donegal branch for reconnection.



Seeing the person not the syndrome

## Dublin Branch — 350 members

The year 2023 was a remarkable period for our community, filled with a variety of activities and notable events. We held numerous activities that brought members together, starting with our popular bowling sessions, which fostered camaraderie and fun competition with continuous strength and growth.

Our musical theatre programme & hip hop dance classes captivated participants, while art classes allowed members to explore their creative talents in a supportive environment.

Our tennis camp was a hit, offering members a chance to stay active and improve their skills under professional guidance. The “Fun with Numbers” sessions provided an engaging way for members to enjoy maths and puzzles.

Meanwhile, our ballroom dancing classes continued over Zoom. Adult members enjoyed lively social dinners and disco events, adding a vibrant social dimension to our community life.

A major highlight was our branch summer party in Fitzwilliam Square, hosted by the DMR Foundation for all members. The event was a resounding success and will return in 2024.

The annual Whiskey Live event at the RDS was another significant achievement, raising over €56,000 for our branch. We extend our heartfelt thanks to Ally Alpine and the Celtic Whiskey team.

Our members also engaged in individual fundraising efforts, with special recognition for Kevin Stynes, who, at 84, completed his 40th Dublin City Marathon.

## Galway Branch— 190 members

In the Galway branch some activities are fun based, others are targeted, such as literacy, numeracy, art and craft, speech and language and personal development.

The branch has a dedicated centre, located in Claregalway and it is in this venue that many of the projects and activities take place.

See and Learn project, began with securing AIB community fund money (€28,000). Packs were purchased and sorted for distribution to Galway libraries, through 3 phases from toddlers to older children.

- Phase 1: 57 Packs- €5,026
- Phase 2: 76 Packs -€6,796
- Phase 3: 15 Packs- €6,000 approximately

Lots of Socks is a project that runs every October to highlight Down Syndrome Galway and create awareness in the public. This has been a very successful project over many years and fantastic work has been put into this project.

The Numicon project began in 2023 with classes for 4-18 year olds that ran every second week for 4 days at a time. Two teachers run the project. The project also looked to include more teachers to broaden this for more children and to continue this for the foreseeable future. The Numicon kits have been purchased. It is also hoped that teacher training will happen and that schools will continue to progress this work.

### Ongoing activities with DS Galway that the Branch has funded and supported during the year:

- Fun with Food
- Gym classes
- Swimming classes
- Dance Academy from 4 years to Adulthood
- Painting Easter Eggs
- Easter Camp
- Tennis
- SLT & Social group
- Zumba
- Teens movie night
- Teenage disco
- DS awareness month
- Employment open day Dalata Hotel Group
- Mayors Ball
- Halloween party Wildlands
- Santa Christmas Magic in Brigids Garden
- Easter in Brigids Garden

### Projects and Groups that ran in 2023 include:

- Colourstrings
- Babbling Book Club
- Movie Clubs 12-17 & Adults
- Launch event for DS Awareness Month
- Easter Camps
- Baby and Toddler Club
- Club 48
- Speech and Language Sessions
- Sing Along Music Sessions



## Kildare Branch — 253 members

In September, a Kildare delegation met with Simon Harris to discuss Funding for our Adult Education Programs. A huge thanks to members Brian, Danny, and Niamh who gave great informative presentations to Minister Harris on the day.

Our First KW ETB Latch On class continued into Year 2 in the Kildare Wicklow ETB this year with students graduating in June 2024. In Summer of 2023 our tutors, many who have 12 years experience working with our Adults in the Kildare Branch, began employment with KW ETB and September 2023 saw the commencement of our New 4 year pilot programme 'Living It Up'. This is a fantastic collaboration between KW ETB, Kildare DSI and DSI – we currently have 3 Lifeskills + Horticulture Classes and 1 Lifeskills + Technology Class. The latter class is based out of Pfizer Newbridge, another first for our branch. Students raised money for Irish Cancer Society by selling daffodils in Pfizer's canteen. We hope to grow and develop program offerings through KW ETB down through the years. Many thanks to everyone who made this happen.

SLT Therapy moved to a new location in Allenwood. 57 members avail of this and we are in process of recruiting another Speech and Language Therapist.

Our Early Development Therapy Classes moved to Allenwood. We have 12 babies aged 0-3 years attending on Thursday mornings and 8 toddlers aged 3-6 years attending on Friday Mornings. We would like to thank Kathryn Heneghan for her 20+ years of dedication to our babies, some of whom are now adults themselves and the parents never forget the support they received at these classes in the early days.

We held Summer Creative sessions with our members aged 10 and up, directed by Kasia. Kildare members met artists from all over the world and were introduced to different forms of dance, music, instruments and how to be 'in the moment'. This continued in September and our members named it 'Purple Door' – a Creative and Performing Arts Group. 25 members meet weekly.

Our New Parents Day was held on 22nd April 2023. 12 new families attended. A huge thanks to all speakers and contributors on the day.

Pottery started back this year for our adults with a new teacher. We would like to thank Tony Bird for his many long years of support to our members.

New Midlands Regional Advisory Council – We have four Kildare members, Kim, Eva, Niamh, Paul. Meetings take place in Co. Kildare once a month.

CSR – We enjoyed welcoming teams from AMD and HP Enterprises for some Corporate Social Responsibility days in our An Garrai Beag horticulture sites.

## Kerry Branch — 230 members

Adult members took part in a work readiness programme this year in the Munster Technological University's Culinary Arts department. They perfected their skills in the kitchen to enable them to thrive in the working world. It was a huge success, and members celebrated their graduation in July.

In March, the branch hosted a huge event with Stars in their Eyes. It brought adults with Down syndrome, their families and friends together, to take to the stage to showcase their wonderful talents and abilities in the Listowel Arms Hotel.

In April, we saw the reopening of the hugely popular Deenagh Lodge Tea Room where adult members gain training and employment. The Down Syndrome Ireland charity shop in Tralee also opened its doors in July.

Throughout the summer, there were summer camps and a Picnic in the Park fundraiser for the branch. The Tour de Munster was a huge success in Kerry again this year.

There was an EGM in October where a number of new volunteers and committee members joined the team. There were lots of events over Christmas including a visit to Santa's Grotto.



## Laois Branch — 44 members

In January, the Louth branch's gym club was back with a night of bowling in Rock n Bowl. It continued with various activities throughout the year. The group also attended the annual Panto in the Dunamaise Theatre Portlaoise.

In March, the branch raised funds by selling pots of sham-rock around the county. March was a busy month as there was also lots of celebrating for World Down Syndrome Day. It kicked off with a party in Kelly Lou Cakes where there was cupcakes, facepainting, fun and dancing, and even a radio broadcast from Midlands 103.

In April, there was an Employment Open Day in the Maldron Hotel Portlaoise where Aoife Gaffney, Head of Employment was on hand to offer advice on practical skills to adult members, parents, carers, key workers, and local companies and businesses who wish to employ members.

The branch continued to host a monthly playgroup for the younger members. Laois members joined with Kilkenny and Kildare members to create a Regional Advisory Council which features 9 adults. The year wrapped with a Christmas party and lots of celebrations to mark a brilliant and busy 12 months.



## Limerick Branch — 120 members

Another busy year in the Limerick Branch for 2023. Such was the rise in demand for therapies we can now offer physiotherapy to our members since 2023.

Our Parent & Toddler Group continues to thrive with monthly get-togethers for fun, coffee and chats.

Drumming has been hugely successful in both our adult and youth club groups.

Adult Education continues to grow with 13 now enrolled.

The support our neighbours show to all our members and their families is wonderful. This year our neighbourhood butcher Tom invited our adult members to a Be A Butcher Workshop for the day. Irish Comedian and TV Star Pat Shortt came along to join in the fun and spent some time getting to know some of our members.

## Kilkenny Branch — 45 members

Several activities took place in the Kilkenny branch in 2023. There were dance classes for primary school aged children and a second class for teenagers. There was also drama classes for two groups; the younger kids and teenagers.

There was swimming classes, with one-to-one lessons too. There were get-togethers too, including a pumpkin festival, a family Christmas party, and friendship group activities.



## Leitrim Branch — 40 members

2023 was full of fun and excitement for the Leitrim branch. Here is a snapshot:

Our Friendship Club offers a safe space for our members and their siblings to hangout once a month.

For National Bike Week our branch joined forces with the Leitrim Sports Partnership and had our '99 reasons to cycle' in Ballinamore, with an ice-cream cone waiting for us at the finish line.

Our branch loves yoga. This year we explored the joys of aerial yoga in Soul Space in Carrick on Shannon and we had our yoga retreat in The Old Rectory County House in Fenagh.

We were lucky to receive many donations, and to gain from fundraising events throughout 2023. We are extremely grateful for it all. Donations and fundraising ensure our members have fun and exciting activities to look forward to. Thank you to everyone for your contribution.

## Louth Meath Branch — 280 members

The Louth Meath branch provides support and information to families with a family member with Down syndrome in Counties Louth and Meath.

We manage an Early Intervention Home Teacher Programme for preschool children aged 1 to 6. This consists of Early Intervention Home Teachers visiting the home of the child with Down syndrome for one to two hours every fortnight throughout the school year (approximately 20 visits per year).

LM ETB and Down Syndrome Ireland through our branch have developed 2 Latch On courses in Navan & Dundalk which started in September 2023. The Louth Meath Branch was happy to liaise closely with Navan LM ETB and seven adult members of our branch and Dundalk LM ETB where two members enrolled.

2023 saw seven members entering the world of paid employment, sourced through Down Syndrome Ireland's Employment programme and family support. Hospitality and retail are the main areas of employment, and it is a huge achievement for the members. The support of the branch's employment officer has been paramount in ensuring the success of the employment, offering support to both the member and the employer.

The Regional Advisory Council is an independent self-advocacy group for adults with Down syndrome. The 14-member council continued to meet in person and online.

There were courses and workshops during the year including sibling workshops, Fun with Numbers and Numicon workshops. We also run a See & Lean Kit Library

Funding scheme provides financial support to families to cover therapies, and sports/recreational activities that will benefit members with Down syndrome.

**Adult & Teen Activities:** We ran numerous activities during the year both social, educational, and sporting including Speech & Drama/Social Skills Club, Saturday Club, Book Club, Aqua Boot Camps, Fun with Fitness and Smart and Assistive Technology Training SATT.

We ran many social events during the year including Discos Our Family Funday & BBQ was held in September with a large crowd of our members enjoying the get-together. We also hosted Christmas Parties for Adults as well as our Children's Christmas party where all the children got to meet Santa.

## Louth Meath Branch cont'd.

The Warrior Wolves are our branch's own multi-sport team. Warrior Wolves have been participating, both recreational and competitive, in three sports – Athletics, Futsal and Artistic Swimming.

In September, the Down Syndrome National team competed in the SUDS Open European Championship for athletes with Down syndrome in Padova, Italy. 15 athletes participated in 3 sports, representing 6 Down Syndrome Ireland branches. Our Louth Meath branch had 8 of our members in the team, a fantastic achievement! The team did their parents, communities and Down Syndrome Ireland branches proud.

We continue to have our Regional Resource officer service and Branch administration. Our Regional Resource Officer Mike Egan provides vital support and a point of contact for new parents as well as families who need help and support at the local level at every life stage.



## Longford Westmeath Branch —

### 90 members

A new book club was set up at the beginning of 2023 for adult members of the branch. The book club takes place in Edgeworthstown Library where the members read and discuss books that they like. Adult members also started an art course at the beginning of the year, creating brilliant sculptures over a number of weeks.

The branch's biggest fundraising event of the year returned. The 63km challenge asked participants to walk, run or cycle to raise funds during the month of March. There was lots of excitement for World Down Syndrome Day with members, friends and families getting colourful for Lots of Socks.

There lots of activities for all ages including summer camps, events and fundraisers. The branch closed out the year by having their Christmas party at the Annebrook House Hotel, which included a DJ, dancing, and even a visit from Santa!

## Mayo Branch — 151 members

Down Syndrome Ireland Mayo Branch had a very busy & exciting 2023.

Two members, Sean Sammon & Breege Walsh, competed in the Special Olympics World Games in Berlin. Sean won a gold & silver medal for Table Tennis & Breege won gold in Kayaking. Caitlin Malone also won gold and silver in competitions for Karate. Great celebrations were had.

School grants of €200 to members starting school were given.

New relationship with SLT & OT therapies were made. All 3 therapists started in the fourth quarter of 2023 and subs offered to families for such therapies. Continuation of our Regional Centre is ongoing and opening in 2024.

We had a presentation day with Joanne & Sinead from Down Syndrome Ireland National office on the employment programme. Many businesses in Mayo had come forward with the potential of offering employment.

Our over 18's group had a number of trips, one of which was to Liverpool to the musical *Calendar Girls*. Drama therapy, arts & crafts and salsa classes continued. They also performed in a nativity play with a twist at Christmas.

Our baby & toddler group met each week and this group was very popular. Monthly get togethers also took place in Funster play centre. Swimming lessons continued from 4 – 21 years across Mayo and we also expanded the lessons with a new class in Westport so now we offering a north, east & west mayo swimming lessons.

There was continued support to all families in the branch along with providing information and advocacy when needed.



## Offaly Branch — 58 members

We kicked off 2023 in style with a photography workshop for our Adult members, hosted and facilitated by the PPAI Photographer of The Year for 2021 & 2022, James Crombie. James took 6 of our adult members under his wing and guided them through a week-long workshop, learning the fundamentals of Photography, a field trip and a professional photo shoot. The project ended with an exhibition of the group's work in The Tullamore Court Hotel, marking World Down Syndrome Day.

In September we decided to exploit our efforts in photography with an exhibition entitled "Through Our Eyes" at the Esker Arts Centre in Tullamore for Culture Night. It gave us the opportunity to show members of the public what the world is like through the eyes of a person with Down Syndrome. The exhibition was an amazing success.

During 2023, we were very aware that 2024 was going to be a milestone for Offaly Down Syndrome Association as we would be celebrating our Ruby Anniversary. Founded in 1984 by a small handful of parents, Offaly Down Syndrome has grown in size over the last 39 years with a membership of almost 50 families, so we wanted to plan something big for 2024. With it, the idea of the Offaly Down Syndrome Association Calendar for 2024 came about. Each month would show a group of our members in different areas of County Offaly. The photoshoot happened during June and July, with the calendars launched from September onwards. This was a brilliant achievement for our members, and also brought a huge amount of exposure to the association.



## Roscommon Branch — 45 members

2023 was a year of both joy and sadness for Roscommon branch.

As ever our local community made us all feel cherished and appreciated as a group. This was reflected in the invites and support for so many of our activities during the year. Our annual Christmas party was hosted by Gleeson's Restaurant and Guesthouse (with a very special visit from Santa Claus). World Down Syndrome Day was marked by an invite to Roscommon County Council building for a very enjoyable celebration. We had fun, and scares in Kilbride Community Centre for Halloween. Roscommon Gardai hosted us and Roscommon Special Olympics is now an annual soccer match and meetup. Our members were welcomed to activities like swimming and bowling along with Roscommon Special Olympics and Sports Partnership. Our local GAA club have continued their "All-Stars" inclusive team. It is brilliant to be surrounded by such community support.

As a branch we continued our programme of activities and workshops from therapies to dance to art to cookery to employment. Summer saw our dance troupes participate in National Finals coached by Trish Carney, summer camps of all sorts including a cookery camp with Margaret's Cookery School.

However, memories of 2023 will be forever tinged with the sadness of losing our treasured member Kate Molly Collum. Kate's family and friends marked her memory with a Summer Camp and a fund raising 10k run. We cherish the memories of Kate and remind all to be aware of the dangers of sepsis.



## Monaghan Branch — 16 members

In 2023 the group had several activities and fundraisers. Members in the branch started swimming lessons in Monaghan Swimming Club.

The branch also celebrated World Down Syndrome Day and Lots of Socks in 2023. Many schools got involved to raise awareness and fun for the branch.

Doohamlet Childcare held a Rock Your Socks party for world Down Syndrome day to celebrate wee Callagh, who is a very lucky girl to have such a great community around her. St Louis Secondary School Carrickmacross gave a kind donation to the branch and raise awareness on Rock Your Socks Day.

Staff and pupils of Our Lady's Secondary School Castleblayney held a Lots of Socks day which resulted in a generous donation to our local branch of €380.

## Sligo Branch — 12 members

Sligo sailed the high waters during the summer of 2023. Seventy people hopped aboard the Rose of Innisfree where they set off from Yeats Country in Sligo, on the beautiful Lough Gill, to Parkes Castle where they toured the grounds. Sligo branch co-ordinator, Róna Rochford, spoke how the outing showcased great camaraderie amongst its members and connected all families.

Our inclusive surf programme was offered to our members, thanks to generous funding from Sligo Credit Union. Twelve members took part in mainstream surf camps on the coast in Strandhill, with the support of a 1:1 instructor.

Sligo and Roscommon Gaelic Masters played the annual charity game for Down syndrome in mild conditions at Connolly Park, Collooney, Sligo. Some great football played with excellent points scoring over the 60 minutes. Both teams used their full benches to inject some fresh legs. Roscommon came out on top at the final whistle. The heartwarming support of many families and members from both branches in attendance epitomised the day. Sligo player and former chairman of the Sligo Branch, Nigel Clancy, spoke about the importance of promoting inclusion, diversity and equity, not only for people with Down syndrome but for all people with disabilities. Roll on next year; Sligo is hoping to win back the bragging rights.



## Tipperary Branch — 56 members

In 2023 the branch continued to provide support and information to individuals, families and professionals, involved in the lives of our members with Down Syndrome in the Tipperary area. This is done through therapies, programmes and activities which enhance their educational, personal and social development enabling them to reach their full potential.

### MEITHEAL Progress Project

A new progressive programme started in September 2023 and will continue in 2024. 17 members and their families expressed an interest in partaking in Meitheal Progress in early September. Intensive brainstorming took place and all were contacted individually to ascertain their specific needs and interests. 13 members are now taking part in the pilot and 2 members who expressed an interest are already in employment/work experience. Currently 3 Job Ready/Pre-Employment Programmes running across three locations in the County.

### PART-TIME EDUCATION PROGRAMME:

- Maths-focus on teaching functional skills in numbers, time, money
- Reading
- Writing
- Fine and Gross Motor Skills, Social Skills and Play Skills

### YOUTH CLUB/YOUTH WORK:

A Youth Club for members aged 16+ ran for an hour and a half on Saturdays. This started in May 2023. There was also a Hang Out Space organised and a Cookery programme. The Youth Club involved activities such as Art and Crafts, Sports and additional Cookery classes. A highlight of the club was the Jack and Jill social fundraiser held on July 1st which some members of the club attended.

### The following key activities also took place:

Sarah's Cycle, The Tour De Munster, Jingle Your Jumper, Social Media Growth – Reached 3.6k followers on Facebook and over 1k followers on Instagram, Comprehensive photos backing up key projects, Parent link established, Cruinniú na nÓg, Springhouse Therapy, World Down Syndrome Week, Santa Grotto at Meitheal 21.

A special thanks to **everyone who worked** with and supported the committee.

### Key activities/achievements within the Tipperary Branch:

- Delivering individual Speech and Language sessions
- Delivering of Group SLT sessions
- School Visits
- Home visits
- Training teachers
- Attendance at conferences
- Student Training
- Attendance at Meetings
- Radio interviews
- First Aid Training
- JASPER Research with UCC
- Supervision of staff
- Starting a Pen-pal Project
- Emotions group to be rolled out
- Setting up screening for monitoring language skill decline in adults.
- SLT Summer Camps
- Gross and Fine Motor Skills Group
- Time and Money group
- Halloween SLT Group
- Exploring Emotions Group
- Christmas SLT Groups
- Adult Lunch
- School Visits
- Direct Therapy in the Clinic
- Individual and Peer speech and language therapy and individual reading and language intervention therapy.
- Culture Night
- Christmas Party/Christmas SLT Camps

## Waterford South Kilkenny

### Branch — 143 members

In November the branch completed 6-week Ready Steady Pedal Programme at the Regional Sports Centre. As well as having lots of fun there were many new skills learned over the six weeks.

In October there was Waterford Fly Fishing hosted by The Carriganvantry Cup to raise funds for the branch.

There was fitness classes in Precision Health and Fitness club for the members to mark Down Syndrome Awareness month. The youngest members enjoyed juniors club and sensory play throughout the year. The Sunny South Easy Cycle in May was a huge success again this year.



## Wexford Branch — 78 members

The Wexford branch had a very active 2023.

In early February our adult members and their parents/carers met for a delicious meal in the Talbot Hotel in Wexford.

At Easter we held an Easter Egg hunt in the National Heritage Park which was attended by mainly the pre-school and primary school children.

In May 2023 we were guests of Wexford Marathon Club at their marathon and the kids and parents did a mini marathon themselves.

We held our biggest fundraiser ever in August in Cahore, called The Great Beach Walk, and hope after the success of this it will become an annual event. Many of our members enjoyed it as a day out, and it was supported by The Strand Bar, and by many members of the public.

In late November, we had a big Christmas party for all members in the Ferrycarrig Hotel and were entertained by some of our teenagers showing off their ballroom dancing skills.

Throughout the year we had many activities such as aerial fitness, mornings in a soft play centre for the smaller children, ballroom dancing lessons for older children and teens, and some members participated in horseriding and surfing. Some members also took part in a drumming workshop!



## Wicklow Branch — 76 members

In 2023, the branch celebrated World Down Syndrome day in March by heading to Avondale Tree Walk, a beautiful scenic trail in Wicklow.

In May, the branch held a Special Needs Trust planning workshop, it was an informative event to help parents and guardians plan their children's future. Over the summer, they held an Ice Cream party which included a BBQ, music, games, and of course, sweet treats.

The branch went all out for Halloween, throwing a party in The Martello in Bray, where members got creative with their fancy dress, and enjoyed treats and lots of dancing. The branch also celebrated Christmas by heading to the Treasure Island pantomime in the Helix in Dublin.

# Compliance, Governance and Organisational Structure

The governance focus of the year was the approval of a new Memorandum and Articles, the constitution for the organisation. There were regional meetings with branch committees, online meetings, feedback from branches and individual members and a day in Dublin where branch representatives came together to discuss the proposed amendments to the M & A. This was facilitated by Governance expert Bob Semple and our Charity Expert Partner, Alice Murphy from MHC. There were debates and questions asked.

This culminated in the new M & A being adopted with 91.7 % of the votes at the national AGM in Athlone. The new M & A introduced a number of key changes to the management structure of the organisation and the rights of members. The key ones being:

Two voting members per family as opposed to one vote per ten members in each branch.

Voting members can include the person with Down syndrome, close family members and guardians and also family members of a person with Down syndrome who had died.

The board of directors can now include 4 independent board directors and 7 directors who can be close family members which provides a greater pool of people to be a director on the board.

The appointment of the first person with Down syndrome to the board indicated the organisation's desire to make sure people with Down syndrome have a voice at all levels of the organisation.

E-mails can now be used for notification and the guidelines for how branches will be managed will be dealt with in the branch byelaws. The Board met with branch chairs prior to the end of the year to discuss the byelaws and sought input from members of areas of importance in the byelaws. These will be discussed further in 2024 and ultimately adopted by the Board.

# Section 3: National Office Review 2023

They will be a working document to adapt to situations that arise in branches and also in governance and the Board is keen for input and feedback on this working document.

The new M & A also provided provision for collaboration groups which is an opportunity to pool knowledge, contacts and experience to see if progress can be made for people with Down syndrome in a number of key areas. How these groups will be created will be based on feedback received from members, branches and the executive about areas where there would be a benefit for collaboration.

A branch, board and employee handbook will be worked on in 2024. Thirteen new policies were adopted in 2023 that will form the basis of these handbooks.

In 2024 the Board will centralise membership within the organisation and a Data Protection review will take place following the survey of branches in 2023.



# Adult Education

2023 was a remarkable year for the Adult Education Department of Down Syndrome Ireland as the numbers of adults with Down syndrome we supported increased in both Adult Education Centres and Colleges of Further Education and Training (FET). This was made possible due to our continued collaboration with Education Training Boards (ETBs) nationally. DSI has successfully collaborated with ETBs on new, bespoke accredited programmes for adults with Down syndrome, ranging from literacy to horticulture, sustainability to work preparation. Over the coming years, DSI will grow its suite of tailor-made programmes, which will provide increased opportunities for our members to study in their locality.

## The Skills Academy

2023 also saw the creation of the Skills Academy. This was a joint initiative between the Adult Education Department and Employment Department at our National Office in Ballymount. The focus of the Skills Academy is to train our members with the essential practical skills needed to secure and sustain suitable employment. The Skills Academy is a successful collaboration between DSI and the DDLETB (Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB). This initiative will be replicated and available nationally.



2023 brought the work of the DSI Adult Education Department to prominence. We received special mentions from President Michael D. Higgins and the then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris TD. This affirmation was in celebration of the excellent work of our members and their families, advocating for greater accessibility for people with Down syndrome in Further and Higher Education.

As we look towards 2024, we will continue to build on the incredible work of our member and their families in reshaping the educational landscape to allow greater parity of access and opportunity for people with Down syndrome to reach their full potential.

# Adult Education

## NAC and RACs

Our National Advisory Council (NAC) and Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) represent adults with Down syndrome. The Councils comprise adults with Down syndrome. As an organisation, we want to hear and respond to the voices of people with Down syndrome.

The NAC had an excellent year. The members felt they played a significant role in the direction Down Syndrome Ireland took. They are looking forward to welcoming RAC representatives to join the NAC in the coming year.

Along with our first RAC hosted by the Louth-Meath Branch for the Northeast region, the Midlands RAC got off to a fantastic start. The Kildare Branch hosted the first meeting with Kildare, Laois and Kilkenny members.

DSI is looking forward to working with branches over the coming year to set up more RACs. DSI is looking forward to working with branches over the coming year to set up more RACs.



## Career Guidance

In 2023, we launched a new career guidance initiative in collaboration with ETBs. This initiative addresses the gap in career guidance provision. It enables adults with Down syndrome to explore education and training options available to them. DSI provided training to LCETB (Limerick Clare ETB) Career Guidance staff. This initiative will be extended to more ETBs in the coming year.

## Book Clubs

One of our 2023 success stories was the development of our Book Club Initiative. Members in nine different book clubs met monthly in libraries across the country. Book clubs are not only an excellent way to maintain literacy skills, they are a wonderful way to meet friends and be part of the community. Monica O’Gorman in our Mullingar All Stars Book Clubs spoke for a lot of members when she told us “I love meeting my friends and talking about the books we read.”



# Employment

## Employment Team

Down Syndrome Kerry employed Joe Burkett to work as Employment Support Specialist in the Kerry area. Joe joins Aoife Gaffney & Joanne Dawson (National Office), Margaret Greaney (Down Syndrome Cork) & Gemma McMahon (Louth/Meath branch).

## Funding

We applied for and were successful in securing “Workability: Inclusive Pathways to Employment” funding through the European Social Fund (ESF) & the Department of Social Protection. This fund is managed through Pobal. We are greatly appreciative of the support of this fund and from Pobal, which will enable us to continue the work of our National Employment Programme.

## Employment Days

We held Employment Days in:

- Galway
- Laois
- Carlow
- Donegal
- Mayo



## 2023 JOB STATISTICS

92

NO OF PAID  
JOBS

20

NO OF WORK  
EXPERIENCE

80

NO OF EMPLOYERS  
ENGAGED WITH

55

NO OF EMPLOYERS  
PROVIDING  
EMPLOYMENT

30

NO ENGAGED  
IN TRAINING  
PROGRAMMES

120

NO ENGAGED IN  
PRE-EMPLOYMENT  
& PRE-INTERVIEW  
TRAINING

# Employment

The aim of our Employment Days is to inform adults with Down syndrome, their families, support workers & employers about our National Employment Programme. As part of the day, our Employment & Adult Education Departments talk about our programmes & work to date. We give feedback from those out at work and some of our members with Down syndrome speak about their jobs too. We like to invite potential employers along to the day too, to spread awareness. We also run taster workshops for adults with Down syndrome, to learn and trial some skills for work. These days are a fantastic opportunity to meet with families, exchange ideas & for our team to learn about job seekers and their interests too.

## European Down Syndrome Association

We have been working with the European Down Syndrome Association as part of their Valuable Network. We are the 8th country to join the network, giving Down Syndrome Ireland exclusive access to a hospitality training programme for adults with Down syndrome, which we hope to roll out in 2024.



## Lidl Ireland

We were delighted to partner with Lidl Ireland (Mullingar region). Lidl employed 3 adults with Down syndrome in Lucan, Cellbridge & Drumcondra as Customer Service Assistants. We are excited to grow this partnership with Lidl over time, creating new employment opportunities nationwide.

## Dalata

We have been working with Dalata Hotel Group for the past few years & 2023 saw the beginning of our Hospitality Training Programme. 6 students completed their training and work placement across Cork, Dublin, Galway, Wexford & Limerick hotels. They learned lots of skills throughout the Food & Beverage departments in their hotels.

## Charity Shop Employment Pilot

We continued our Charity Shop Retail & Employment Training Programme in 2023 with more members training in our Finglas & Templeogue shops. Geoff Curley did 6 months training in Templeogue, and upon completion progressed into paid employment in Specsavers. We will continue to build and expand on this programme over time.

## Grafton Barber

We completed our third cycle of Barber Training with the Grafton Barber. 6 students completed training in the Grafton Barber Academy on Grafton Street and work experience in their local Grafton Barber salon across Ireland. To date 18 students have completed the training nationwide. We will continue to grow this partnership throughout the years.

## Specsavers

11 positions created in Specsavers stores in 2022, increased to 31 in 2023.

**NOW  
HIRING**

# Primary and Post Primary Education

Providing the best possible educational experience for our members continued to be the main focus throughout 2023. Training, assistance and advice for schools and families were priorities as children progressed through the various stages at primary and post primary, or special school. Best practice was continually researched to ensure the information provided was the most up-to-date available.

## Training

43 trainings & school supports were facilitated at all levels- primary, post primary & third level (post graduate)

## Webinars

22 webinars & seminars have been facilitated over 2023

We had a great attendance at all events. The online training webinars will continue in 2024,

## Assistance & Advice

There were in excess of 3,800 emails and 200 telephone communications with parents, schools, other professionals, organisations and branches throughout the year

## Research Forum

Our project on the Issue of Reduced School Hours was presented at the Down Syndrome Education International Research Forum. I also contributed to the research presentation on school placements with Nicola Hart

## Conference

The NCSE Research conference was attended virtually in November. The theme of the 2023 conference was Universal Design for Learning

## Representation at Meetings

A number of meetings were attended over the course of the year with groups and organisations, including meetings with Ministers & Department of Education officials, NCSE officials, Children's Rights Alliance, Ombudsman, Tusla, DS (International), DES Special Education Forum, NDA and various other advocacy groups & organisations.

## Surveys

The following survey was conducted to ascertain member's opinions:

- School Placement
- Reduced School Hours
- Transitions Survey
- Education Survey
- Webinar Feedback Surveys x 4



## Submission

Submissions were made to government bodies & organisations highlighting our concerns in relation to:

- EPSEN
- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child -Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland

## Publications

- Education related Research Report compiled on:
  - ⇒ Reduced School Hours
  - ⇒ School Placements
- Website Publications:
  - ⇒ Behaviour Management Information Booklet
  - ⇒ Social Skill Development – Primary
  - ⇒ Social Skill Development – Post Primary

## Fundraising

With the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic receding, 2023 saw a return to more regular fundraising and retail conditions for Down Syndrome Ireland and our network of charity shops.

As ever, World Down Syndrome Day provided a touchstone for our fundraising efforts in 2023. Tie-in promotional campaigns alongside partners such as MACE, iNua Collection, Zurich, Fidelis Insurance, Hays, UPS, and many others added to the success of the day's events.

In addition, our Lots of Socks campaign proved as popular as ever on World Down Syndrome Day, with strong take-up among corporates and a notable increase in the number of schools taking part, often in honour of a fellow pupil with Down syndrome. We also enjoyed the support of Dunnes Stores for World Down Syndrome Day, in a joint fundraising campaign which also included the Down Syndrome Centre.

Down Syndrome Ireland was once again fortunate to be named a featured charity for the Woodie's Heroes campaign, with ambassador Pippa Rafferty and mum Lisa featuring across national broadcast media. Huge contingents of members turned out for the cheque presentations at Woodie's stores throughout the country, in a joyous celebration of the campaign and of the generosity of Woodie's colleagues.

In September, we said a fond farewell to long-standing Head of Fundraising Mark O'Doherty, who signed off by leading a group of intrepid fundraisers on the latest instalment of the Camino4DSI, before moving on to pastures new.

John Ryan McLaughlin took the reins as Head of Fundraising late in the year, with Lauren McCarthy joining as Fundraising Manager. The new team hit the ground running with a successful relaunch of our Christmas Jumper appeal, and plans for the revival of our much-loved Ice Cream Fundays and Purple Run campaigns in 2024.



## Communications

2023 saw the Communications Department expand in numbers and in function, becoming a Communication and Advocacy Department. A new Digital Communications Officer was brought on board in February, with Turlough Kelly and Gina Grant taking over the functions of, respectively, Advocacy Manager and Branch Advocacy Co-Ordinator later in the year.

Across 2023, the Communications department continued to highlight the incredible and inspirational achievements of our members, while also foregrounding the gaps and deficiencies in state provision that continue to negatively affect our members and their families.

Throughout the year, a wide range of our members' stories made the leap into national print, broadcast and digital media outlets. A highlight of the year was the huge groundswell of public support around World Down Syndrome Day, given enormous prominence by the Irish men's rugby team, who trained in our colourful socks ahead of a famous victory over England.

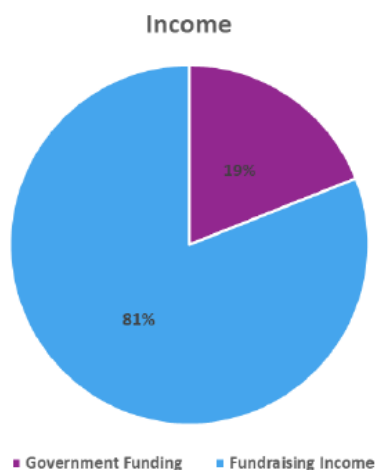
2023 was a strong year for Down Syndrome Ireland's presence online, with 70,000 readers accessing the Digest across 2023, and open rates reaching 59%, an increase of 28% over 2022. Total social media reach for the year, across all platforms, was 257,458 users, with Facebook reach up 125% and Twitter/X reach spiking by 443%.

The Department also played a major role in the consultations and communication around the development of the new Memorandum & Articles of Association, approved at AGM in November 2023.



# Finance and Accounts

Down Syndrome Ireland continues to generate the vast majority of its income via fundraising activities and partnerships, with less than a fifth of total income received from state funding sources in 2023. Full audited accounts are available on our website, Downsyrndrome.ie.



# Research

- Early years project with UCC, evaluating the outcomes of an online language programme delivered through music targeting vocabulary development in children aged approximately 1-3 years.
- Co-research project together with adults with Down syndrome looking at meaningful reading.
- Internal research with members looking at factors influencing parental choice regarding educational setting.
- Developed and delivered SLT thread for education webinars for parents and professionals.
- Worked with Comms department to develop easy read materials regarding changes to memo and arts and AGM.
- Developed training on accessible writing for National Office staff.
- Completed a professional diploma in Intermediary Studies at UL (largely in my own time), to support access to justice for people with communication difficulties.
- Provided support and information to members and branches on request
- Provided a prompt and considered response to researchers who approached DSI, ensuring that any time we ask people with Down syndrome or their families to participate in research, the research meets ethical standards, and is focused on areas which will make a difference.

# Human Resources

Since 2023, we have welcomed over 75 new and re-turning additions to our nationwide team. With a team of over 120 people, our organisation is growing which is a testament to the work being done nationwide by our teams and committees across the country but our growth needs to be sustainable. In order for us to continue to grow sustainably, we've introduced new systems and programmes which have been highlighted below but our work in HR is nowhere near finished. We have a lot more work to do before the end of this year as well as into the future but we're laying the groundwork and are delighted to see all of the new additions and positions to our branches and national office.

What's new?

Our team now have access to a 24/7/365 Employee Assistance Programme which offers free and confidential counselling to not just them but also their partners and children over the age of 16 still living at home.

The EAP can help with a wide variety of problems. Their fully qualified team of counselors and experts are highly experienced in personal and work related issues and can support anyone suffering with issues including, but not limited to:

- Depression, anxiety, stress
- Grief and bereavement
- Addictions
- Relationship and marital problems
- Work stress and work-life balance issues
- Workplace conflict and communication
- Life transitions such as career progression or retirement

In addition to the counselling, there are a range of other services available to our team such as:

- Legal assistance
- Financial assistance
- Consumer assistance
- Career guidance
- Life coaching
- Online fitness tutorials
- Nutritional information and recipes

## Systems

In November 2023 we introduced Alkimii, our employee app which helps us better manage our time and attendance which has reduced our payroll administration by several days per month.

Employee onboarding – with alkimii, we can onboard employees faster and issue contracts, handbooks and any other important documents to the new employee directly via the system. This not only makes it a better experience for the new employee, it removes several hours of administration as well as being more environmentally friendly as we are removing the need to print physical documents, making us more environmentally sustainable. These documents are also more accessible to employees as they can be accessed direct via the employees own profile.

Holidays: previously, holidays were tracked and recorded locally on paper. Alkimii now accrues annual leave based on contracted/working hours as well as give employees better clarity on what their holiday balance is to date and through the app, employees can request their time off simply with notifications received once their request has been reviewed.



# Human Resources

**Communication:** we have 26 locations with currently over 120 employees spread across a lot of these locations. The app allows employees to communicate and connect with colleagues in different locations for support, engagement and collaboration in a GDPR compliant manner.

**Engagement:** As well as the chat feature, the app allows information to be shared to all employees via the newsfeed to ensure we are kept up to date with things that are happening across the organisation.

**Surveys:** We will be using Alkimii to send out surveys next year to gather information from everyone that will help us gather feedback on a host of things such as employee satisfaction, events, suggestions and ideas. This can also be done anonymously based on the nature of the survey.

## Occupop

We have also introduced an Applicant Tracking System, Occupop, which will allow us to better manage, fine tune and report on our recruitment. Occupop allows us to manage all of our job vacancies in the one location. Candidates are kept up to date about their application via automated emails which can be quickly sent and a hiring flow allows all of the hiring team to see how the recruitment process is moving with clear and transparent functions.

The system will also allow us to be reporting on our recruitment to highlight where we are having the most success in attracting our candidates as well as the reasons and stages where candidates are being regretted from the process.

Occupop is empowering the hiring managers with better clarity on the quality of their applicants as well as improving the overall



