

**Oireachtas Committee Hearing on Autism Policy,
April 25th, 2023.
Thriving Autistic Opening Statement**

Good morning.

I would like to sincerely thank the Chairperson, Deputies and Senators for the invitation to speak here today.

My name is Tara O'Donnell-Killen and I am the Founder and CEO of Thriving Autistic.

I am joined today by our Co-Director, and Assistant Psychologist, Jessica K. Doyle.

Thriving Autistic is a unique organisation. We are the world's first multi-disciplinary non-profit comprised entirely of Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent psychologists, occupational therapists, psychotherapists, counsellors and coaches.

Many of us are also parents of Autistic children. Many of us also hold multiple marginalised identities.

This gives us a unique perspective into the lived experience and support needs of Autistic people.

Our mission at Thriving Autistic is to empower and promote the human rights of Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people through a transformative shift away from the traditional medical and charity models, towards a human rights-based approach.

Over the past three years, we have supported over 10,000 Autistic adults, through our range of programs and services, which include:

- Post-Identification Support Services
- Facilitated Peer Support Meetups
- Return to Education Programmes
- Disability Advocacy Services
- Workplace Advocacy Services
- Workplace Wellbeing Programmes
- Neurodivergent-Affirmative Parenting Services

We are also actively working to foster structural transformation in the field of mental health and neurodiversity. Our contributions thus far include:

- Co-authoring The Adult Autism Assessment Handbook published by Jessica Kingsley
- Participating in the Irish Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists Steering Committee to develop CPD training
- Serving on the Psychological Association of Ireland Steering Committee to establish standards for adult assessment and support
- Lecturing to Clinical and Educational Psychologist doctoral trainees at UCD, Trinity College, and the University of Limerick among others
- Conducting numerous Neurodivergent-Affirmative Trainings for a range of HSE disability and CAMHS teams.
- Providing training and consultations for organizations such as Bord Gais, Facebook (Meta), UK Universities Mental Health Network, and Stanford University, USA.
- Creating various online resources, such as a healthcare passport and a workplace accessibility guide
- Engaging in research projects focused on neurodivergent well-being, both independently and collaboratively
- Attending and presenting research on neuro-affirmative parenting at the International Society of Autism Research (INSAR) Stockholm next month, as well as participating in other relevant conferences
- Continuously evaluating and adapting the effectiveness of our initiatives and trainings, refining our approach based on feedback and emerging needs in the field

We envision a world where:

- Autistic and neurodivergent individuals of all races, genders, and backgrounds are recognized, respected, and valued for their inherent worth and unique perspectives.
- Autistic people's communication styles, developmental trajectories, and individual definitions of a "good life" are understood, appreciated, and supported.
- Varying support needs are acknowledged, met, and adapted to, recognizing that some individuals may excel in certain aspects of life while requiring assistance in others.
- Accessibility is proactively incorporated into all aspects of our future society, recognizing diverse needs and fostering an inclusive environment without the individual needing to request accommodations.
- Our future society moves away from the medical and charity models, embracing the social model and a neurodiversity-affirming human rights framework that empowers Autistic and neurodivergent individuals to lead fulfilling lives on their own terms.

We call on the committee to continue this visionary tradition by embracing a human rights-based approach to supporting our Autistic citizens. From the perspective of wellbeing for Autistic adults, we propose the state take the following actions:

- Investing in Autistic-led, neurodivergent-affirmative, human-rights based training for all public sector services.
- Supporting the development of a neurodivergent-affirmative model of assessment and post-identification support that extends throughout an individual's life.
- Co-designing a disability benefits system which reduces the barriers and eliminates the dehumanisation experienced by neurodivergent adults seeking access to support.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring this information to your attention today. I look forward to discussing some of these areas in greater depth.

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PROMOTING THE
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