

## Nicolas visit to Poland

Nicola Smith, Co-National Director:  
Learning Disabilities was asked to speak at  
a conference called 'Citizen's Rights for All!'  
held in Poland by an organisation called  
Inclusion Europe.



<http://www.inclusion-europe.org>

Click here for a copy of the conference programme

[http://www.inclusion-europe.org/documents/2007\\_EN\\_sum\\_prog.pdf](http://www.inclusion-europe.org/documents/2007_EN_sum_prog.pdf)



Inclusion Europe are committed to improving the  
human rights of people with learning disabilities and  
their families throughout Europe.

The main themes this year were:

- support in decision-making
- legal representation
- full citizenship
- legal protection and
- withdrawal of legal capacity.

***Here is Nicola's diary from her visit to the conference in  
Poland:***

**Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

I got up very early and was very excited to be going to Poland to speak at the Europe in Action 2007 Conference. My supporter Mike and I travelled by train and then coach to get to Heathrow for the flight to Warsaw, the capital of Poland, in the afternoon,



When we arrived in Warsaw we went straight to the International Hotel to check in. My room was on floor 24. The view from the room was lovely; it was a view all over Warsaw.

That night we had dinner in the hotel. I was so tired I had an early night to be fresh for the following morning.

### Thursday 10th May 2007

During breakfast the following morning there was a lady playing the harp. A nice soothing way to start the day, and it made me feel really calm and ready to go to the conference.



The conference was held at the Marriott Hotel, and there were delegates from all over Europe there. Five delegates came from England.



The first session was an open session telling us where the presenters came from and what work they do.

We were able to understand everything by using headphones with interpreters speaking into them.

After this we had a session about human rights and what is happening in Poland about people with learning disabilities.

In other parts of Europe the phrases 'intellectual disability' and 'mentally handicapped' are used. This was a surprise for me because we don't use those phrases here in England anymore.



We had lunch and met with David Towell from the Centre for Inclusive Futures and Patryk Ostrowski a Polish self advocate who was speaking about his life in Poland at the same session as me.

After lunch we went back into the conference and worked on the subjects from the Programme.

I gave my presentation at the end of the first afternoon after Patrik. There is a copy of this on the Office of the National Director: Learning Disabilities website - <http://nationaldirectorld.org.uk/dynamic/ond18.jsp>.

I was nervous at the beginning of the presentation and there was a mixture of people from all over Europe, so I had to slow my speech down and stop regularly so that the interpreters could keep up with me.

My presentation was about my life as a self-advocate in England, and about the decisions I have been able to make about my life that have put me in control and how much better my life is now.

I told the conference about how I got my independence after a long time living in places that I didn't like, and how I learned about my rights as a learning disabled person.

I also described how I got my job as Co-National Director: Learning Disabilities and the support I get to help me to do the job. I am the only Government appointed National Director who has direct experience related to the job.

I wanted the audience to see how people with learning disabilities are making progress in England and having a say in important decisions which affect them, and how this can make a real difference to the lives of people with learning disabilities.

I talked about Government policy in England, and about how far we have come.

The Valuing People White Paper has helped self advocates in England to think about their lives and to express their views more confidently.

It has also forced policy makers and professionals to listen more to people with learning disabilities and to respect their rights.

Of course, we still have a long way to go.

My message to the self advocates at the conference was that by working together you can begin to make change happen.



At the end of my presentation David Towell who was facilitating the session thanked me. After this we heard some more stories about people's lives from all over Europe.

It had been such a lively and interesting session and everyone enjoyed it so much that instead of finishing earlier, many of the delegates came back into the room to carry on with the discussion.



Late in the afternoon I went back to the hotel to get ready for the concert and official reception.

The concert included lots of people with learning disabilities and their parents who took part in the percussion section of the orchestra.

Everyone enjoyed it very much.

I was very tired after such a busy day, and I had an early night and missed the reception.

Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2007



We managed to fit in some sightseeing around Warsaw until about 11 a.m. then we went back to the hotel to join the conference.



We heard about a couple who live in Poland.

They live in an institution for people with learning disabilities. They wanted to get married but because they lived in an institution they were forced to go through the Polish courts to get permission to marry because they had no rights in the system.

They were told they had to go to Sunday School and church every week for two years before they could marry.

They have done this and are now married but they still have no rights, and whatever they do is still decided by the Court system.



When I heard about this I was really upset for them and I thought back about how England used to be before people with learning disabilities had any rights, and we had to live in institutions too.

Also, I felt very humble to think that we have the right to get married and have our own homes, which people in Russia, Poland and many other European countries can't do. I know there are lots of things wrong with the system in England but at least we can speak for ourselves without having to go through a legal system.

After lunch another Nicola Smith from Enable a group from Scotland told us about the rules around capacity in Scotland. Two members of Enable told us about their advocacy group.

When we got back to our hotel at the end of the day we went up to the very top floor to have some tea and could see all over the city, the views were fantastic.



The official banquet was on the Friday night. It was held in a small restaurant which was very old and dated back before the revolution. There was a lady there wearing Polish national dress, and I had my photo taken with her.



We headed back to the hotel to pack to come home the following day.

I thought that going to this conference was very useful. It showed me that people can deal with whatever life throws at them. I also got to see how people with learning disabilities from different countries live and are treated.

This visit was very interesting because I have learned that people with learning disabilities in other countries have different rights from people with learning disabilities in England.

They even have different ways of describing people with learning disabilities and use words that might be offensive here.

Other countries have very different cultures, we must remember this and understand that this is important to take this into account when we work with these people.

The main things I brought back from the conference were that:

- We need to work very hard to make sure that everyone understands the needs of people with learning disabilities. Even with language barriers, we are all the same!
- We need to work together to make sure that we have the same rights as everyone else.
- We need to work with governments from other countries to make sure that people with learning disabilities get equality.
- We have to understand the culture is important, and that different countries have very different cultures.

The conference agreed on a "Resolution" saying what Inclusion Europe want for people with learning disabilities.

Click here to go to an easy read version of the Resolution

<http://www.inclusion-europe.org/documents/EiA07-Resolution%20ETR.pdf>