

Event Report

DRATgons' Den - A Knowledge Exchange Event for Early Career Researchers to showcase their Research & Communication Skills to an audience of peers & experts, hosted by the Dementia Research Advisory Team



1. Background

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland (The ASI) is committed to ensuring that the lived experience of dementia is embedded throughout the research process. Central to this commitment is the Dementia Research Advisory Team (DRAT), The ASI's dedicated Patient Public Involvement (PPI) panel and a key element of the organisation's research infrastructure.

Established in 2019, the DRAT comprises people living with dementia, current family carers and former family carers who use their lived experience to shape and strengthen dementia research. The ASI supports the DRAT to contribute across its own research activities while also collaborating with researchers and organisations nationally and internationally. Through these partnerships, the DRAT members help ensure that research is informed by the perspectives of those most affected by dementia.

The DRAT has made a significant contribution to advancing meaningful PPI within dementia research in Ireland. By working alongside researchers throughout the research lifecycle - from developing research questions, contributing to funding applications and reviewing study materials, to advising on dissemination and knowledge exchange - the DRAT has demonstrated the value of co-production in improving the quality, relevance and impact of research.

The ASI's commitment to PPI has a dual focus. Internally, the organisation continues to strengthen the capacity and influence of the DRAT, creating meaningful opportunities for members to shape research and contribute as leaders within the research community. Externally, The ASI works to promote PPI as an essential component of high-quality dementia research by supporting researchers to embed lived experience within their work.

Supporting Early Career Researchers (ECRs) is also a priority within The ASI's research strategy. By creating opportunities for ECRs to engage directly with the DRAT, The ASI helps researchers develop the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to engage in meaningful PPI, while fostering relationships that support more collaborative and impactful dementia research.

2. Introducing DRATgons' Den

Recognising the importance of creating authentic opportunities for dialogue between researchers and people with lived experience of dementia, members of the DRAT developed the concept of DRATgons' Den. This PPI-led knowledge exchange event (inspired by the UK television show Dragons Den) featured a competitive research pitching format. Informed by the principles of co-production and the members' ongoing commitment to the growth of PPI amongst researchers of all levels, the initiative provided ECRs an opportunity to develop and showcase their research communication skills in an engaging, real-world setting all while competing for a €3000 funding prize.

From its inception, DRATgons' Den was a DRAT-led event. Members shaped its purpose, decided the objectives and format, and undertook key roles throughout all stages of the process. Supported by The ASI Research Team, they developed the programme, identified key potential benefits, and secured the resources required to deliver the event. The democratic approach of the members ensured that the priorities and perspectives of people affected by dementia remained at the heart of the initiative, while creating an engaging environment for researchers to develop their PPI knowledge and hone their research communication skills.

DRATgons' Den reflects The ASI's commitment to creating innovative opportunities where lived experience not only informs research but also influences how research is communicated, evaluated and developed. By empowering DRAT members to lead the decision-making process throughout the planning and delivery of the event, DRATgons' Den demonstrates how meaningful PPI can strengthen research culture while fostering mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and Experts by Experience.

2.(i) Event Objectives

- to enhance knowledge exchange by providing a platform for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to engage with people living with dementia, carers, and experienced researchers, supporting meaningful discussions and potential collaboration.
- to promote authentic PPI in research by demonstrating best practices in PPI-led research and events, ensuring public and patient voices continue to inform the future of dementia studies.
- to support ECR development by providing ECRs with opportunities to refine their research communication skills, expand their networks, and gain practical insights from those with lived experience to guide their PPI journey.
- to recognise and reward excellence by offering a €3,000 funding prize to the best research pitch. Additionally, all participants were presented with a certificate and invited to avail of the opportunity to get professional headshots taken free of charge.
- to create a mutual learning opportunity where DRAT members would gain fresh perspectives on emerging research topics and methodologies while being inspired by the next generation of passionate researchers.

3. Call for Abstracts and Review Process

Open to MSc and PhD students in dementia research, applicants were invited to submit a plain language abstract describing their research, its aims, anticipated impact, and how the funding award might influence the progression of their project.

All submissions were anonymised prior to review and independently assessed by members of the DRAT. Reflecting the DRAT's leadership in the event, members were supported to develop the assessment criteria used during the review process, evaluating each abstract across four key areas: clarity, potential impact, feasibility, and innovation. Following this process, six applicants were selected to deliver a ten-minute presentation at the live event.

With a view to creating opportunities for all applicants, those not selected for an oral presentation were invited to attend the event and present their research through academic posters displayed throughout the day. The poster exhibition provided an additional opportunity for ECRs to discuss their work with DRAT members and other attendees during dedicated networking sessions, further supporting knowledge exchange and meaningful engagement.

4. Event Proceedings

Crafted by the members of the Dementia Research Advisory Team, DRATgons' Den was a unique event which emphasized the importance of PPI in dementia research while providing a platform for

ECRs to enhance their communication skills and build connections. The event took place in the beautiful and inspiring environs of the Ohana Floor, Salesforce Tower Dublin. Proceedings throughout the day were MC'd by DRAT member, Tony McIntyre. Dr Avril Kennan, CEO of Health Research Charities Ireland, delivered the event's keynote address reflecting on the importance of PPI in strengthening health research in Ireland and her experience as a researcher. She emphasised the crucial role ECRs play when embedding authentic PPI from the outset of their careers and encouraged them to enjoy the meaningful and often unexpected connections they will make along the way.



4.(i) Pitch Sessions and Judging

The format of the initiative split the presentations across two “pitch sessions,” one in the morning and another after lunch. Each of the six presenters was provided a “pitch guide” in advance of the event to support the structure and delivery of their 10 minute presentation to the DRATgons’ and attendees. They were also encouraged to highlight on what they would spend the €3000 funding should they win; these included potentially hosting PPI workshops, developing life story booklets and even purchasing engineered DNA sequences. The ECRs were then afforded a further ten minutes to engage in an interactive Q&A, with a five-minute break between each presentation to allow DRAT members make notes on their score sheets. These were collected and collated by The ASI Research Team. The chosen ECR presenters represented a variety of experience in dementia research as detailed in the table below:

Presenter	Institution	Presentation Title
Anupa Sara Paulose	University College Dublin	Investigating the Role of Microglia, the Brain Immune Cells, in Sex Differences

		Seen in Alzheimer's Disease
Ruth Maher	SouthEast Technological University	Exploring Knowledge and Attitudes of Undergraduate Irish Nursing Students Towards Persons Living with Dementia and Developing Recommendations to inform a future Educational Intervention
Debby Gregg	University of Galway	A Narrative Exploration of Spirituality for People Living with Dementia in Ireland
Alyssa Rychtarik	University College Dublin	Supporting sexual expression and preventing sexual harm in nursing homes: An examination of the understanding, approaches and educational needs of staff working with people living with dementia in Catalonia and Ireland
Qiuxia Li	University of Galway	Carer Circles Online: Co-Designing and Testing Peer-Led Support for Dementia Carers
Nina Zumbrunn	Dublin City University	The potential of multisensory integration to act as an early marker of dementia



From top left: Sara Anupa Paulose, Debby Gregg, Ruth Maher, Qiuxia Li, Nina Zumbrunn, Alyssa Rychtarik

4.(ii) The DRATgons

In advance of the event, members of the DRAT volunteered to take on the role of DRATgons for the event. These DRATgons were positioned centrally throughout the day and were joined by a representative from The ASI. Head of Research, Advocacy and Communications Cormac Cahill participated in the morning session while ASI CEO Andy Heffernan took part in the afternoon. In addition to the DRATgons' scoring, DRAT members in the audience also scored each presentation, ensuring that the final outcome reflected the collective perspectives of the members of the DRAT. Each vote carried equal weight, reinforcing the democratic approach of the members.



4.iii Scoring

Reflecting the DRAT's leadership role in the event, members worked collaboratively with The ASI Research Team to develop the assessment score sheet and determine the four criteria against which each presentation would be evaluated:

Criterion	Description
Clarity	The presenter used plain language throughout their presentation.
Potential Impact	This research will make an impact and be relevant to the lives of people living with dementia and / or family carers.
Innovation	Does this project create new knowledge or adopt an innovative approach in dementia research?
Feasibility	Has the Researcher clearly explained how the €3,000 funding prize will be used?

4.(iv) Networking and Poster Session

The networking session enabled attendees to continue conversations initiated during the presentations. Researchers whose abstracts had not been selected for an oral presentation showcased their work through digital academic posters, creating additional opportunities for discussion with DRAT members, other ECRs, established academics, and representatives from national PPI organisations. This ensured that all applicants were able to contribute to the day's knowledge exchange.



4.(v) Awarding the Funding Prize

Nina Zumbrumm (DCU) was awarded the €3,000 funding prize for her presentation “The Potential of Multisensory Integration as a Marker of Dementia,” with Anupa Sara Paulose (UCD) coming in second, earning a €500 Conference and Travel bursary.



5. Impact and feedback

Following the event, each presenter received a Certificate of Recognition acknowledging their participation in DRATgons' Den 2025, together with a professional headshot to support their future academic and professional profile. Presenters also received anonymised feedback compiled from the DRAT members' assessment score sheets, providing constructive observations on the clarity, impact, innovation and feasibility of their research pitches. This personalised feedback formed an important element of the event, supporting participants' continued development in research communication and meaningful PPI.

Following the event, all attendees were invited to complete an online evaluation form. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their overall experience and identify aspects of the event that had worked well, together with suggestions for future development. Collecting feedback formed an important component of DRATgons' Den, ensuring that the perspectives of attendees continue to shape the design and delivery of future knowledge exchange events.

Attendees praised the event as *"perfectly organised"* and highlighted the *"interesting exchange and comfortable atmosphere"* it fostered. Participants valued witnessing researchers' pitches as both a learning experience and an enjoyable opportunity to engage directly with emerging research. Many commented on the innovative format, which placed lived experience at the centre of decision-making, challenging researchers to refine their communication and ensuring that public input genuinely shaped project development. Attendees noted the high standard of presentations, the

breadth of research topics covered, and the constructive, insightful feedback provided by DRATgons, experiences which “give hope” and illustrate the meaningful impact such events can have on both researchers and public contributors.

What was most valuable or enjoyable about DRATgons’ Den?

- *I loved getting an experience that heavily involved research and PPI individuals as well. The location was perfect and it was great to get to know everyone.*
- *The fresh approach, making lived experience the decisions makers, forcing presentations to refine their communication*
- *Hearing the varying ways the researchers told their stories and hearing the questions and positive constructive criticism from the lived-experience panel. Gives me hope!*

What was their biggest takeaway from the event?

- *HOPE in the future of our early-career researchers to truly hear and integrate the perspectives of lived experience*
- *That PPI is slowly but surely becoming more integrated into lab-based studies*

6. Conclusion

DRATgons' Den marked an important milestone in The ASI's commitment to authentic PPI in dementia research. The event brought together a diverse community of people living with dementia, family carers, ECRs, PPI representatives, experienced researchers and members of the wider research community, creating a collaborative forum for knowledge exchange and mutual learning.

Through an innovative research pitching format, ECRs presented their work to the Dementia Research Advisory Team (DRAT) and attendees, receiving constructive feedback from a lived experience perspective while engaging in meaningful dialogue with the wider audience. The event challenged researchers to communicate their work in accessible language, reflect on its potential impact, and consider how meaningful PPI can strengthen research throughout the research process.

By empowering DRAT members to curate the event across design, delivery and decision-making, DRATgons' Den demonstrated the value of genuine co-production, highlighting the invaluable contribution that Experts by Experience bring to dementia research. The success of the inaugural event provides a strong foundation for future knowledge exchange initiatives, ensuring that lived experience continues to inform and inspire dementia research in Ireland.

“There is so much passionate work ongoing in the field which left me feeling inspired and hopeful for the future.”

DRATgons’ Den attendee

A highlight video from the event is available [HERE](#).

Acknowledgments

Congratulations to all the Early Career Researchers who took part - their creativity, passion, and communication skills were very inspiring. We would like to thank the Health Research Board for funding this event through the HRB Conference and Event Sponsorship Scheme 2025. Additionally, our gratitude is extended to the wonderful team at Salesforce Tower Dublin for allowing us to use their beautiful Ohana Floor as the inspiring venue for the day and for providing assistance before and throughout the event. A sincere thank you to our keynote speaker Dr. Avril Kennan for her invaluable insights and support, our MC Mr. Tony McIntyre and a final thank you to all our speakers and attendees on the day.

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