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20 May 2022,

Dear Ms. O'Donovan

Thank you for your letter of April 29th requesting a submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters on 'Participation of people with disabilities in political, cultural, community and public life.

Please see below our reply on behalf of Paralympics Ireland.

Paralympics Ireland are pleased to have been asked to make a submission to the Joint Committee and want to compliment the committee on their work to date and on their engagement within the disability sporting sector.

This submission will concentrate on the following areas:

1. We will introduce Paralympics Ireland and Para Sport
2. Discuss the effectiveness of our disability role models
3. Highlight our experiences of hosting major disability events
4. Introduce the global #Wethe15 campaign

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CEO Paralympics Ireland

Submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters on 'Participation of people with disabilities in political, cultural, community and public life'

Introduction to Paralympics Ireland

Paralympics Ireland is the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) for Ireland, recognised by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), and is responsible for preparing and managing the Irish Team at the Paralympic Games which are held every four years in parallel with the Olympic Games. The membership is comprised of 20 National Governing Bodies (NGB's) including a combination of disability specific multi sport organisations and sport specific organisations.

Team Ireland have delivered 233 medals at the Paralympic Games including 70 gold medals, 67 silver medals and 95 bronze medals. A team of 29 athletes represented Ireland at the recent Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games representing seven sports and containing athletes with diverse impairments from right across the island of Ireland and across multiple socio-economic demographics.

The team delivered seven Paralympic Medals from Tokyo 2020 with those successes coming in the velodrome, on the road, in the swimming pool and in the athletics arena. Team Ireland also delivered huge success in terms of the visibility of disability in broader Irish society through their appearances in the media, online and across social media.

As the organisation tasked with delivering those medals at the Paralympic Games it is important to understand that we are at the high performance end of the sports system in Ireland. Everything that the organisation does is with the aim of delivering performances at the highest level at the Paralympic Games. The outcomes however are not merely medals, as these include the positive impact on each individual athlete, families, support teams, communities, local to national, the disability community and Irish society.

Provision of Role Models for Disability Community

London 2012 proved to be a landmark moment for Paralympic Sport as those games raised the level of promotion and recognition of Paralympic sport to the same level as their Olympic counterparts, and it has continued to grow and develop since. It is a pinnacle event for sport and a platform that captures the attention of the world every four years.

Team Ireland has been at the forefront of that growth with athletes like Ellen Keane, Jason Smyth, Catherine Walsh, Eoghan Clifford, Katie-George Dunlevy and Mark Rowan amongst others taking their place as being amongst the most successful and recognisable athletes in this country.

Stories of success, perseverance and ability have helped to raise awareness amongst the Irish public for disability sport and have helped to normalise disability amongst sport and mainstream media.

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games saw over 1.2 million people watch the Irish athletes compete for Paralympic glory on RTE as part of their live coverage. That coverage was presented by a person with a disability and included expert analysis from persons with disabilities.

The Irish athletes featured heavily across all media and social media with over 6,000,000 'hits' on the Paralympics Ireland official Facebook channel alone for Games related material. These successes continued across all social media channels owned by Paralympics Ireland and were replicated through those of our partners and sponsors to amplify the reach.

The paralympic athletes that reach high performance levels are conscious of their position as positive role models, particularly for others with a disability. Paralympics Ireland is uniquely placed to provide role models for persons with disability and, through use of those role models, and in conjunction with media like RTE, we can help to further normalise the appearances of persons with a disability on media and subsequently across broader Irish society.

Our athletes show that disability is no barrier to high performance on an international setting and they are an example to young people with a disability, or those with a newly acquired disability, that they too can achieve their goals. Paralympic sport is vital as we, as a society, continue to battle against inequalities and break down the barriers that make people with a disability amongst the least active of all demographics as evidenced in the most recent Irish Sports Monitor.

Hosting Major Disability Events

In 2018 Paralympics Ireland hosted its first ever major international Para sporting event when the World Para Swimming Allianz European Championships took place at the Sport Ireland National Aquatic Centre in Dublin. The event welcomed over 600 athletes from across Europe come to Dublin to compete for European medals in front of large Irish crowds. This event was a great success that was broadcast on TG4 in Ireland and on major television networks across Europe.

The European swimming championships left a legacy that helped to prepare current athletes to compete at the Paralympic Games and inspire the future generation to begin their sporting journeys.

However, there were also a number of learnings from the event that highlight the difficulties with hosting major events involving large numbers of people with additional accessibility requirements in this country.

Transport was perhaps the greatest challenge that presented itself as it became apparent that public transport was not sufficiently accessible for use by large numbers of wheelchair users. This issue was overcome through hiring a private transport company but even this was difficult because of a lack of suitable private carriers.

Accessibility within the venue itself also provided a challenge as it was discovered that the venue could not accommodate the width of two wheelchairs in hallways and corridors. Again, local solutions were found that involved erection of temporary corridors and the introduction of a one-way system within the venue.

Sport has the power to change society as we have seen time and time again over the years. Hosting of major international events can help to raise social issues and prompt their solving as we have seen in the past with the Women's World Cup and the Special Olympics World Games. However, one must question how ready our country is to capitalise on future opportunities for disability sport given the challenges presented in areas such as those highlighted above.

We The 15

In August of last year the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) launched their #Wethe15 campaign and were supported by Paralympics Ireland (ref [Click here](#))

The campaign is a global human rights movement for the 15% or 1.2 billion people worldwide that have a disability. The campaign aims to end discrimination towards persons with disabilities and act as a global movement publicly campaigning for disability visibility, accessibility and inclusion.

The IPC are joined in the campaign by Special Olympics, Invictus Games Foundation, and the International Committee of Sport for the Deaf (Deaflympics) and all four organisations aim to harness the power of their global sporting events to raise awareness and understanding of issues facing persons with disabilities around the globe.

The campaign also advocates for a decade of action and is actively supported by organisations like UNESCO, UN Human Rights, the International Disability Alliance and many others. To mark the launch of the campaign hundreds of global landmarks were lit up in purple (the international colour of disability) on the eve of the Paralympic Games.

This campaign highlights the synergy and effectiveness of partnership between sport and social institutions when they come together as part of a planned, resourced and unified campaign to effect positive social change. Paralympics Ireland would certainly be willing to explore potential opportunities to work with other interested stakeholders and asking our role models to amplify any such national campaign.

Conclusion

Paralympics Ireland develop some of the best known and most effective role models for the Irish disability community. Through our core purpose of competing for and winning medals at the Paralympic Games we provide a unique showcase for disability sport and disability in general to the Irish public. Although we have seen the benefit of hosting major disability sporting events in our country we have also seen the challenges that come with that and the example of the access challenges people with disabilities have to face.

We are keen to continue to grow the profile of our athletes and to advocate for persons with a disability in tandem with our sporting aims. Should similar future discussions take place then Paralympics Ireland would enjoy the opportunity of contributing and possibly emulating some of the success of the #Wethe15 campaign.

Thank you for your attention, we look forward to the feedback of the committee.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

Miriam Malone

CEO Paralympics Ireland