

Opening Remarks by Cian Ó Lionáin, Assistant Secretary

Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media meeting to discuss the elimination of any and all abuse directed toward referees, officials, and players in sport.

- I am joined today by Micheál Ó Conaire, Principal Officer in our Sports Division, and we very much welcome this opportunity to address the Committee on this important matter.
- Firstly, it goes without saying that the Ministers and Department condemn any form of abuse, including online abuse, discrimination or inappropriate behaviour towards anyone involved in sport. Referees, and all other officials, and players, are an integral part of our sporting structure and deserve to be respected for the important role they play in sport.
- Abuse of officials or players at any level is wrong and should not be tolerated. Everybody involved in sport deserves to be treated with respect and should not feel unsafe or threatened while they are officiating or participating at games.
- Of course, this applies not just to sport but to wider society. While sport has played an important role in calling out racist behaviour, for instance, there is still much to do both in sport and in society in general. In that context, the Department of Justice is working as a priority to legislate for hate crime and hate speech, to ensure that Ireland is a safe and secure place for all. This will target offences committed where the victim is targeted because of their association, in the mind of the perpetrator, with a particular identity characteristic, such as sexual orientation or ethnicity.
- The corrosive impacts of personalised abuse of participants in sport is recognised. A very large number of referees and officials, for instance, are volunteers and it is appreciated that without them most sports could not operate as well as they do or, indeed, survive.

- It is important that sporting organisations across all sports provide a safe environment for referees, officials and players and where abuse and threatening behaviour is aimed at them, appropriate action must be taken by the sporting organisations. Each of the youth field sports promotes “Respect” programmes. Where abuse does occur, sporting National Governing Bodies, or NGBs, are asked to use the disciplinary procedures and sanctions that exist within their organisations to ensure that those responsible are held to account.
- Codes of conduct are a vital tool in combatting the scourge of abuse, and they set a standard of behaviour that helps build a club or sport organisation’s culture and make it easier to deal with conduct and behaviour issues as they arise. Sport Ireland helps NGBs in the development of these important Codes.
- The National Sports Policy 2018-2027 promotes inclusion with a focus on addressing social, disability, gender, ethnic and other gradients. The Sports Action Plan that was launched towards the end of 2021 includes a number of actions to address inequalities in these areas. Sport Ireland has also been working hard in this area and has developed a policy on Diversity and Inclusion in sport which will be published in the coming weeks.
- Irish society is increasingly multi-cultural and sport has a vital role to play in terms of social inclusion, integration and equal opportunities. While sport has made significant strides in tackling racism, continued vigilance is required. The Programme for Government is clear on this and states that the Government is committed to adopting “*a zero-tolerance approach to racism in amateur and professional sport*”.
- Sport Ireland has funded various anti-discrimination initiatives from the NGBs and Local Sports Partnerships. The promotion of inclusion and integration through sport is an important feature of national sports policy, which is delivered in particular by considerable investment from the Dormant Accounts Fund to support the development and implementation of inclusive sport policies and programmes.

- Our Ministers and the Department will continue to work on combatting racism and discrimination, in partnership with Sport Ireland, the NGBs and with colleagues across other government departments.
- Online abuse towards those involved in sport is an issue of increasing concern and it reflects developments in wider society and Minister Martin is making considerable progress towards the enactment of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill.
- A very significant recent development in this area was the introduction of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law). Introduced by the Minister for Justice, this has helped to reform and strengthen Irish laws pertaining to criminal harassment, image-based abuse and malicious communications.
- The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill which is currently at Committee Stage in the Seanad will, inter alia, establish a multi-person Coimisiún na Meán, enable the appointment of an Online Safety Commissioner, and provide for the introduction of a regulatory framework for online safety.
- The Commissioner will oversee the regulatory framework, and devise binding online safety codes setting out how regulated online platforms, including social media platforms, will be required to tackle the availability of certain defined categories of harmful online content.
- In particular, based on Coco's Law, online content by which a person distributes or publishes a threatening or grossly offensive communication about another person or sends a threatening or grossly offensive communication to another person will be considered harmful online content.
- The risk-based systemic regulatory approach set out in the Bill will ensure that we are all, across all sectors, exposed to far less harmful online content and an

environment in which online services have to respond to and robustly deal with complaints when they are made.

- The Department will continue to work closely with Sport Ireland, the NGBs and other stakeholders, both in Ireland and overseas, to ensure respect for everyone involved in sport. In that context, it is noteworthy that - under the current EU Work Plan for Sport which runs to June 2024 - there is likely to be a policy debate next year on the topic of ensuring a safe environment in sport. We will strongly support the holding of that debate as the sharing of lessons and experiences, as we are doing here today, is a vital input to the ongoing battle against the scourge of abuse in sport.

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