

## *Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media Opening Statement*

I thank the Cathaoirleach and the members of the Joint Committee, for this opportunity to speak about Inclusion in Sport.

Increasing the level of participation in sport and physical activity across the whole population is a fundamental aim of the Government's National Sports Policy 2018-2027 and is a priority for Ministers Martin and Byrne, and the Department.

In pursuit of that objective, we are committed to a *Sport for All* approach aimed at ensuring that all persons have the opportunity to partake equally in sport and physical activity, regardless of gender, age, social-economic status, disability, or membership of minority groups such as the LGBTI+ community, the Traveller community or other ethnic minorities.

The Dormant Accounts Fund sports programme is the primary funding stream deployed exclusively to promote increased sports participation amongst disadvantaged communities and people with a disability. This programme provides financial supports to a wide range of locally inspired community projects undertaken by local sports clubs, associations and other interested parties generally, under the active guidance of the 29 Local Sports Partnerships around the country.

In relation to the development and improvement of sports facilities, funding is provided by the Department under the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme and the Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund. In considering funding applications, both schemes prioritise projects that increase active sport participation by persons and groups that may be under-represented in terms of participation in sport including women, persons with disability, ethnic minorities and those from disadvantaged areas. These priorities are built into the marking scheme for assessment of applications. Increasing funding for sports infrastructure, to provide more facilities that will encourage people from all communities, abilities and backgrounds to get active and to get into sport, is a key long-term consideration and is something on which Minister Martin and Minister Byrne are engaging with the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform .

Encouraging and promoting greater participation in sport by women and girls is a core priority and our aim is to eliminate the gender participation gap in sport entirely by 2027. To this end, many National Governing Bodies are delivering *Women in Sport* and Dormant Accounts Funded Programmes, which actively target segments of the population that were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including females.

The current Sports Action Plan sets a specific target for all NGBs to achieve a minimum of 40% gender representation balance on their boards by the end of this year. It is a priority to enable women to take more leadership positions in sport and the 40% target reflects this prioritisation. The Ministers have been clear that failure to achieve this target will have serious funding implications for NGBs. The NGBs are taking this matter seriously and it was heartening to note the recent decision by the GAA, for instance, to adjust its structures to achieve the 40% target on its management committee.

People are now living longer and, as our older population continues to increase, we must recognise the challenges, but also the opportunities, that this demographic shift presents for participation in sport. The potential for sport participation to affect positive development across the lifespan is now widely recognised and, in that regard, we will continue to support initiatives and programmes aimed at increasing participation among older people.

Last year, Sport Ireland launched its first Diversity and Inclusion Policy in Sport which will underpin our collective efforts to ensure that everyone feels welcome and included in sport in Ireland.

Inclusion means to value people's differences, make them feel welcome, respected and that they belong. It is imperative that we increase understanding of the benefits of a diverse and inclusive sport sector. The greater the diversity of those involved in all aspects of sport – participation, membership, volunteering, supporting, attending events, management and administration – the better all of those areas will be as they will be more representative of the broader population.

Racism has been a problem in sport and in wider society for many years and remains a barrier to inclusion. Its existence in Ireland is by no means unique and other countries are facing similar challenges as we seek to confront it and to do everything that we can to eliminate it. Neither is it confined to just a few sports, it can occur in all sports and in all settings.

A number of recent incidents have highlighted the need for strong diversity awareness within all sports bodies, and indeed across society. The Department is committed to a zero-tolerance approach to racism and to ensuring that sport is as inclusive and welcoming as possible for everyone in our communities. While sport generally facilitates great diversity and interaction between cultures and backgrounds, we must remain vigilant in this regard.

In response to several high-profile incidents of various forms of abuse in recent years, a new National Code of Conduct template for sporting organisations was launched by Minister Byrne in August. The template sets out a set of guidelines and principles that promotes the behaviour and conduct expected from our athletes, coaches, parents/guardians, supporters, referees/officials, and club members.

Ministers Martin and Byrne consider it a must for all sporting organisations to use the National Code of Conduct template as an opportunity to review their existing policies and procedures for handling code breaches and to adopt and implement a rigorous system which ensures we have a safe and respectful environment for all involved in Irish sport.

Through the implementation of the Diversity and Inclusion Policy, we aim to see more people from diverse communities, including ethnic minorities, participating and engaging in lifelong sport and physical activity. This work will also assist us in participating constructively with our colleagues in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, in the planned implementation process for the National Action Plan Against Racism.

It is imperative that we demonstrate that there is simply no place for violence and racism in sport.

In conclusion, inclusion in sport is a core element of Government policy, reflected in a wide range of initiatives being implemented by the Department, Sport Ireland, NGBs and other stakeholders and I look forward to discussing these in more detail with you all.

Thank you.