

Gaelic Athletic Association



Inclusion in Sport

Submission to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

OPENING STATEMENT

When the GAA launched its new manifesto “Where We All Belong” in 2019, we considered it a statement of intent and a call to action. It is not a platitude and it’s by no means a fait accompli. It exists as a reminder of the GAA’s values of inclusivity and community identity and of the standards that we wish to live by.

The Association is considered by many to be a cornerstone of Irish society. If we are to truly deserve that esteem, then we must reflect a modern Ireland. As evidenced in the 2022 Census, the face of our communities and our national profile is changing, with migrant populations adding ever-increasingly to the rich tapestry of Irish life.

Thus, it is too in the GAA. In recent years we have been proud to see players from diverse ethnic backgrounds take centre stage on leading senior inter-county teams like Leitrim hurlers, Westmeath footballers, Wexford footballers, and Mayo footballers, to name but a few.

The successes, and the challenges of inclusivity, are to be found away from the spotlight too. As well as ensuring that as many people as possible from diverse backgrounds can experience and enjoy Gaelic Games, inclusivity in the GAA also means ensuring that our games are accessible to those who have additional needs. We promote this under the banner of “GAA for All”. We have developed adapted games to cater for our members who in previous generations would not have been able to access football or hurling, and all of the benefits that can bring.

This programme has been enthusiastically embraced in clubs around the country who now offer our “All Star” programme. This involves playing and game experiences for persons across a broad spectrum of intellectual and physical disabilities. This means meaningful participation, connection, and community. Make no mistake, however, for our Wheelchair hurlers pulling on their provincial jersey is no less an honour than it is for their Liam McCarthy or Sam Maguire

counterparts. These athletes compete to win, with the same passion and the same skill. And that All Ireland medal means just as much to the winners.

The GAA's recently developed Player Pathway reflects a broad and inclusive approach to participation in Gaelic Games. It determines the parameters for learning and participation for all players as they progress from juvenile "Go Games" to adult competition and beyond. We set out to cater for players of all abilities, including provision for those with additional needs. We also strive to promote social games to cater for adults who have aged beyond formal competition, or dropped out of sport altogether since their youth, or perhaps are completely new entrants to the family of Gaelic games.

Much of our work, and most of our impact, is at local community level, and is undertaken by our most valuable resource – our community volunteers.

And so, it is with inclusion. One recent and very evident manifestation of this occurred during the pandemic. By May 2020, almost 20,000 GAA volunteers were delivering essential goods and supports to almost 35,000 older people forced to physically isolate due to the threat of Covid-19. Experts such as Prof Rose Anne Kenny, lead researcher in TILDA, Trinity College's longitudinal study of ageing in Ireland, explained that the social cohesion provided as part of this 'reaching out' was every bit as health enhancing as the food they received.

We have witnessed similar responses by our clubs to ensure that our visitors fleeing the war in Ukraine are warmly welcomed into their new communities.

To maximise the GAA's contribution to the Irish social capital and cohesion, the Irish Life GAA Healthy Club Programme was pioneered in 2013. From a pilot involving 16 clubs, it now engages 450 clubs across the Association and really brings our ethos to life.

As I mentioned at the outset, our manifesto represents a call to action. We want the GAA to be somewhere that "We All Belong". A lot more needs to be done in Irish society to remove the barriers that prevent those from minority population groups – such as the LGBTQ+ and Traveller Communities, those with disabilities, and refugees – from engaging fully in Irish life.

We believe that sport in general, and the GAA in particular can be a catalyst and an entry point for such people, and we want to play our part in making that happen. Be assured that the GAA is committed to this cause. It will also deliver a better, broader, stronger and more vibrant GAA in the years to come. A GAA that fully reflects modern Irish life will be better equipped to ensure our continued contribution to it.

I am grateful to the committee for the opportunity to present our thinking to you, and I look forward to learning from yourselves and from our colleagues in the other sporting organisations both today and into the future as we promote inclusion in sport together.