

Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts,  
Sport and Media

30<sup>th</sup> of March 2023

Statement on Cara Sport Inclusion Ireland and  
our work to supporting increased awareness,  
access and opportunities for people with  
disabilities to participate in sport and physical  
activity in Ireland.

Niamh Daffy, CEO Cara-Sport Inclusion Ireland



Everyone, no matter their background or circumstances, should have the opportunity to participate in physical activity and sport. For people with disabilities, however, it can be considerably more difficult to take part.

Sport and physical activity has the power to have a profound impact on people's lives. Physical activity provides people with the opportunity to enjoy improved health and wellbeing as well as, crucially, providing social networks in which we can feel connected within our community.

Research has highlighted that people with a disability in Ireland are far less likely to be active than those without a disability with a difference of 27% vs 49% engaging in some form of physical activity (ISM, 2021 q3). It is important that we work collectively across many sectors to reduce the gradient in sport and physical activity participation so that people with disabilities have greater opportunities and choice.

Cara Sport Inclusion Ireland (Cara) is a national not-for-profit pan-disability organisation working with a range of organisations to ensure people with disabilities have equal access to, and awareness of participation opportunities in sport and physical activity. Our organisation aligns with and supports the objectives of the National Sports Policy, the National Physical Activity Plan, Healthy Irelands Framework and the National Disability Inclusion Strategy. Our vision is to create an Ireland where people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity.

As a national organisation we are committed to providing a platform to open discussion spaces for people with disabilities to convey their living experience of participation in sport and physical activity. As an insights led organisation, this living experience guides us in our work and in understanding how we can have the greatest impact to enhancing and supporting quality physical activity opportunities.

In 2022, we committed to engaging with people with disabilities in the co-design of a new 10-year vision and strategy for our organisation. We connected with over 200 people with disabilities across 27 counties in Ireland. This consultation provided us with a greater understanding of the living experience of people with disabilities specific to leading an active and healthy lifestyle; the challenges commonly encountered and the supports that are required to create equal opportunities. The insights gained from this process has led to the development of a new co designed strategy for our organisation.

We are confident that by following the lead of people with disabilities throughout our strategy, we can have the greatest impact on enhancing active lifestyle opportunities for people with disabilities. We also believe that in engaging with the sectors beyond sport such as education, health and community, we can collectively tackle the gradient that exists in sport and physical activity.

Research conducted by Sport Ireland through the Children's Sport Participation & Physical Activity Study (CSPPA) in 2018 highlighted that children with disabilities are far less likely to be active when compared with their peers. There is a need to better understand the experiences as shared by youths with disabilities. Cara with the support of Sport Ireland, and holding the value of 'nothing about us without us' has commenced an insights project which will engage with youths with disabilities to open discussion spaces to share experiences, challenges and needs to achieving equal participation opportunities. The findings from this research will be valuable to guiding national policy and programmes for children with disabilities.

This ongoing insights work is built on a strong foundation of engagement with people with disabilities. In December 2019, in partnership with Sport Ireland, Cara launched Ireland's first-ever Sports Inclusion Disability Charter, developed through collaboration and in consultation with people with disabilities. The Sport Inclusion Disability Charter sets out 5 principles which people with disabilities have identified as key to ensuring organisations adopt an inclusive approach to their programmes and sport offerings. Over 1700 organisations have signed the Charter pledging their commitment to providing people with disabilities with increased opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity.

Providing support and guidance across the sports sector has been a key priority for Cara over the past 15 years. We continue to work very closely with the network of Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) and their Sports Inclusion Disabilities Officers providing support, resources, inclusive training and the coordination of national initiatives. Central to this work is Cara's Xcessible Programme which provides a three staged resourced pathway for LSPs to adopt an overall inclusive culture across their organisation. Currently 5 Local Sports Partnerships are at the bronze stage of the Xcessible Programme with 1 having achieved silver. An additional 19 are currently working towards completing the bronze stage.

We continue to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) in their journey to fostering an inclusive culture within their organisations. We have supported NGBs in the delivery of inclusive training workshops to their Board, staff and volunteers as well providing guidance around inclusive programme design and implementation. The Xcessible programme has proved to be extremely effective for engaging with NGBs, with 5 currently at the bronze stage, 1 at silver and a further 10 working on attaining their bronze award.

The Xcessible programme aims to change culture across all sports organisations leading to greater opportunities for people with disabilities to participate, spectate, coach, volunteer and work within the sports sector.

In November 2022, Cara with Sport Ireland launched the Xcessible Club Toolkit with the aim of empowering clubs to positively and meaningfully provide opportunities for people with disabilities to take part in sport and physical activity. The toolkit was been developed to support clubs in three stages of their journey towards creating a fully inclusive club for people with disabilities through developing, embedding and sustaining an inclusive environment built on the framework of the Sports Inclusion Disability Charter. Since its launch at the end of last year, we have seen a staggering level of interest with 713 downloads across 28 counties and 40 different sports/activities. We will continue to promote the toolkit to enable even more clubs to begin their journey towards being more inclusive.

Building capacity within the sport sector is central to providing more inclusive, high quality physical activity opportunities for people with disabilities. Cara is proud of our national training and education framework comprised of a suite of inclusive workshops and resources to support organisations across sport, outdoors, fitness and education. Our workshops are facilitated by a dynamic team of 35 tutors across the country. In 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a move to a virtual platform, which meant a total redevelopment of our resources and the retraining of our tutor support network to facilitate online delivery. This method of delivery proved highly successful due to the convenience it offered participants and tutors alike. As such, we have continued to offer our training primarily through a virtual platform to great success having delivered 261 workshops engaging over 8000 participants.

In addition, later this year we will further expand our training offerings in the form of a Learning Management System (LMS) online platform which will automate several of the processes and enable us to engage more people in their inclusive learning and development journey.

Cara recognise that by connecting with organisations outside of the sports sector, we have an opportunity to increase our reach and enable more people with disabilities to lead active and healthy lifestyles. In collaboration with the Health Service Executive (HSE), we have designed and launched the Active Healthy Me programme, a health and wellbeing programme delivered directly to people with disabilities in adult day service locations across Ireland. The programme has proved to be extremely popular since its launch at the end of 2022 with over 300 services registered to deliver the programme within their service.

More than ever people are participating in outdoor recreation activities and the last number of years we have seen a rapid growth of the sector. The health benefits to spending time outdoors are immense and support our social, mental and physical health. People with disabilities have the right to participate in and reap the many benefits of outdoor recreational activity that our country has to offer

In 2021, in partnership with Sport Ireland Outdoors, Cara appointed Irelands first Inclusive Outdoor Recreation Coordinator with the aim of increasing awareness, access and opportunities to outdoor recreational environments and activities for people with disabilities. As part of our National Go All Out Week in 2022, we championed 147 outdoor activity providers to provide opportunities for people with disabilities. Within the coming year, we aim to deliver our Inclusive Adventure Training and Inclusive Design for Outdoor Recreation workshop to outdoor activity providers and local authorities throughout Ireland.

Over the past year, we have been delighted to support the Department of Sport, Sports Leadership Group, the Sports Capital Programme inclusion criteria and development of the National Swimming Strategy. In addition, we provided guidance and expertise to the Department of Community, Rural Development in the development of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy for Ireland and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme.

In April this year, Cara will launch its new 10-year vision and initial 5-year strategy which will set out our ambitions as we strive to create an Ireland where people with disabilities have equal opportunities be active. We look forward to continuing our work which has been central to our organisation over the last several years, as well as beginning ambitious new projects which we believe will have a significant impact to enhancing greater opportunities for people with disabilities. As we launch a new strategy, we remain committed to ensuring people with disabilities continue to guide our work and future direction.

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