



June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

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

**Re: LGBTQ+ inclusion and visibility in football.**

## 1. Introduction

This submission is intended to inform members of the Committee of the homophobia facing LGBTQ+ football players and supporters and the lack of action from Ireland's footballing authorities in developing LGBTQ+ inclusion and visibility policies. The submission then offers a number of solutions to improve LGBTQ+ people's participation in football and highlights to positive work done by the Dublin Devils FC and our partners Bohemians FC.

## 2. Issues impacting LGBTQ+ inclusion and visibility in football.

### Dublin Devils FC players face homophobic abuse at matches.

In one season of playing competitive 11 a side football, Dublin Devils faced a number of incidents of homophobic abuse. Most notably, a member of an opposing team came to our sideline and shouting "You faggots, you fucking faggots". Our players have heard similar slurs during games as well as intimidation and threats of violence. The league does the best it can in dealing with complaints, but these incidents occur where there are no independent witnesses and in the absence of specific LGBTQ anti-discrimination policies from the FAI and the leagues, the club is not confident that our complaints will see any action taken. Our players try to ignore and overcome this abuse, but no player should be forced to stoically accept abuse and threats in order to play a game of football.

### In an era of reform, the FAI have left LGBTQ+ people behind.

In the last 18 months, the FAI have been driving a period of reform beginning with the [launch of the FAI Strategy 2022-2025](#) and the [recent FAI Facility Investment Vision and Strategy](#). The vision of the FAI Strategy 2022-2025 is to use "football to inspire the nation and connect communities". Yet the strategy does not make a single mention of LGBTQ supporters, players or referees. This is despite the Dublin Devils and Sporting Pride making approaches to the FAI and presenting a clear plan and vision for football to become an inclusive place for LGBTQ people. The FAI's Facility Investment Strategy calls for a considerable increase in government funding to the FAI. The FAI want the organisation to be seen in a new light, to implement comprehensive reforms and radically increase its Government funding. It is unacceptable that the FAI have not had the foresight to include LGBTQ+ people in this. This is indicative of how the footballing establishment see LGBTQ+ people as a community who are not interested or involved in football. Dublin Devils are calling for the FAI to commit to developing an LGBTQ+ inclusion strategy before any they receive any increases in Government funding.

### LGBTQ+ young people leave football entirely.

The hyper masculine culture of football, combined with a lack of LGBTQ awareness, visibility and inclusion policies and training, make football a hostile place for LGBTQ young people. A common experience for Dublin Devils players is that they are active footballers from a young age and as they approach their mid to late teens and become aware of their sexuality, they choose to leave football because its culture does not support players in coming out of the closet. What's more common is



that LGBTQ+ or questioning young people do not participate in football at all or stop playing very quickly because of its earned reputation for not being welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. We are losing large cohorts of potential football supporters because of this. This is not to say that people involved in grassroots football are hostile to LGBTQ+ people, in fact, for the overwhelming majority it's the opposite. Grassroot volunteers are dedicated people who appreciate what football can do for mental health and community. The problem is they lack the tools to create a truly welcoming environment for LGBTQ young people. Grassroots football volunteers need access to training and educational resources. They need leadership from the top of the game, through an FAI LGBTQ+ inclusion strategy. I am confident that with these tools, grassroots football can become a more welcoming and inclusive place.

## Homophobic abuse in stadiums.

Dublin Devils players and LGBTQ+ supporters report repeated incidents of hearing homophobic abuse directed at League of Ireland players. There are no reporting structures in place so it is difficult to quantify the levels of abuse. These incidents are better reported in England, where LGBTQ+ supporters groups describe 2023 as the worst start of the year, amid surges of homophobic incidents at professional games in England. As League of Ireland attendance increases, we need zero tolerance of homophobic abuse in stadiums.

## LGBTQ+ people face exclusion in elite football.

Although outside the remit of this Committee, it is important to recognise the challenges LGBTQ+ football supporters face within elite football in order to understand why we must take action where we can on LGBTQ inclusion. There is a worrying trend towards countries with anti-LGBTQ+ laws (typically coupled with myriads of other human rights abuses) hosting major tournaments, as happened with World Cup 2022 and buying elite football clubs as happened with Newcastle United, Manchester City and Paris St. Germain. We often hear reports of homophobic abuse at Premier League football stadiums. Elite footballers are discouraged from coming out because they fear abuse from the stand and the frenzied tabloid coverage that accompanies reports of LGBTQ+ footballers. Without LGBTQ+ professional footballers, LGBTQ+ young people lack role models and are less likely to participate. This contributes to a vicious circle of LGBTQ+ exclusion in football.

## 2. Measure to support LGBTQ+ inclusion in football

1. The FAI to develop an LGBTQ+ inclusion strategy.
2. Access to LGBTQ+ awareness training for coaches and referees.
3. FAI participation in LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusion campaigns eg. Pride parade, Football v Homophobia, Rainbow Laces.
4. LGBTQ+ inclusion campaign for supporters
5. Zero tolerance for homophobic bullying and abuse in grassroots football and in stadiums.
6. Greater outreach from League of Ireland clubs to LGBTQ+ supporters and community groups.
7. Greater research of LGBTQ+ people's experience in football.
8. Ringfenced funding to develop LGBTQ+ participation in football.

## 3. About Dublin Devils FC.

With over 100 active members, the Dublin Devils FC are Ireland's largest LGBTQ+ inclusive football team. Founded in 2005, we play competitive 11 a side football in the United Church Football League and offer 3 social football sessions each week to ensure players of all ages, ability, sexuality and gender identity have a safe play to play football. Part of the Dublin Devils mission statement is to promote the participation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in football and to advocate for change



within Ireland's footballing authorities and sporting policymakers. The Dublin Devils are active in the media, appearing on the [RTE 6.01 News](#), [Drivetime](#), [VM Tonight Show](#), [Q102](#) among others and writing pieces for [RTE.ie](#) and [the Sun](#).

## Dublin Devils partnership with Bohemians FC

In May 2023, [the Dublin Devils established a partnership with Bohemians FC](#). The partnership builds on the strong work done by Bohemians in providing LGBTQ+ awareness training for their youth coaches and being the first LOI club to take part in the Dublin Pride Parade in 2022. The partnership includes a joint commitment to tackle homophobia and transphobia and to lobby the FAI to develop an LGBTQ awareness strategy. This partnership should serve as an example for other League of Ireland clubs as an example of the sort of engagement with the LGBTQ+ community that is possible and the policies that clubs can implement to support LGBTQ+ fans and players.

## 4. Conclusion

The intention of this submission was to highlight the poor state that LGBTQ+ football players and supporters face within football. Players and supporters still face homophobic abuse and threats of violence. LGBTQ+ people have, in effect, been ignored by the FAI. With some notable exceptions, the same is true of professional League of Ireland clubs. At a grassroots level, clubs do not have the resources or access to provide LGBTQ+ awareness training for their coaches. In the past two decades, the situation for LGBTQ+ people in Irish society has improved considerably. This improvement has not taken place within football. As elected representatives and members of this Committee, you are uniquely placed to raise awareness of the homophobia and lack of inclusion within football. I hope you use this weeks session to do so and given that football has highest participation level of any sport in Ireland, you might consider devoting a Committee session to LGBTQ+ participation in football.

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