



Irish Rugby Football Union

Written Submission

To

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

on

Inclusion in Sport

May 2023

Irish Rugby Football Union

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IRFU

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Introduction

A Cathaoirleach,

We thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee regarding inclusion in sport.

Inclusivity is a core value of the IRFU. It is embedded in the 2018-2023 IRFU Strategy through the Spirit of Rugby Charter, which outlines the values of the game and the expected behaviours from our members. The IRFU promotes diversity of opinion and culture throughout the organisation, so that we work together to be a vibrant and respectful organisation. The IRFU's non-player staff include 15 different nationalities, and 35% of our staff are females, reflecting the Diverse and Inclusive environment within which rugby operates.

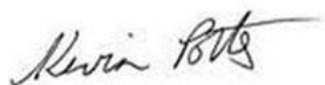
In September 2017 the IRFU launched the *Spirit of Rugby* Programme, designed to encourage the participation of rugby at all levels, in a fair and ethical manner. *Spirit of Rugby* aims to educate clubs and club members to positively influence the club environment and to abide by the *Spirit of Rugby Charter*, ensuring rugby is a sport of choice, transcending barriers and differences, so that members have a life-long involvement in the game. We endeavour to live the Charter by a series of programmes and projects which encourage inclusivity across a range of populations in the club and community game. Included in this submission is a detailed description of these projects with examples of their impact on members and the wider community.

Alongside the publication of the IRFU Strategy in 2018, a plan for 'Women in Rugby' was outlined, including targets for grassroots participation, high performance, and leadership. In the 2018-2019 season the Spirit of Rugby department began a values-based Leadership training programme with a target of 50% female participants and, on International Women's Day 2023, launched a Women in Rugby network.

In 2020 the IRFU created the position of *IRFU Disability & Inclusion Officer*. The focus of their work is the expansion of our rugby offerings for players with a disability and, in recent times, their remit has widened to attract players from the LGBTQI+ community.

In 2023 the IRFU appointed its first Head of Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity to broaden the reach of the projects outlined above and in this submission. The output of all these efforts will endeavour to ensure our clubs, the membership and the Executive Leadership are welcoming and inclusive, so that rugby reflects modern Irish society. Work has begun on embedding ED&I into our forthcoming strategy (2023-2028) and a consultation process is underway as a pre-cursor to a new ED&I Policy so that there is a clear understanding of the needs of the wider rugby community, ensuring we develop as an organisation that is as inclusive and representative as possible.

I hope this submission indicates our commitment to inclusivity and I look forward to engaging further with you on the topic.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Potts', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Potts

Chief Executive Officer

Irish Rugby Football Union

Irish Rugby Football Union Written Submission to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media on Inclusion in Sport

Executive Summary:

1. Inclusivity is a core value of the IRFU outlined in the Spirit of Rugby Charter and embedded in the *IRFU Strategic Plan (2018-2023): Building Success, Together*. Circumstances and societal expectations are ever changing, and this strategy sets out our plan for the game to reflect the changing landscape of sport and society.
2. Increased participation of women is a fundamental aspect of this change. The Women in Rugby Action Plan 2018 articulates the IRFU's aim for rugby to be a sport of truly equal opportunity and access for all, and outlines various initiatives to help rugby achieve this goal.
3. The IRFU, Provincial Branches and our rugby clubs partner with Local Sports Partnerships and external agencies on inclusivity projects, combining resources and expertise for maximum impact. An outline of these projects is contained within this submission.

This submission details our work in the following areas:

- a. Sport and women
- b. Sport and disability
- c. Sport and LGBTQIA+ communities
- d. Sport and ethnic minority
- e. Grassroots sport and socioeconomic diversity
- f. Sport and older people
- g. Intersectionality in sport

(with points d-g combined into one section)

A Sport & Women

The Women in Rugby Action Plan 2018-2023 sets out the aims and objectives of the Union regarding women in the three key areas of Participation, People (coaches & referees) and Leadership, ensuring the Union is a more welcoming and inclusive environment (see Appendix 1). The 2018 target was 20% of female representation on the IRFU's Union Committee; this has since been revised upwards to 40% by the end of 2023. To support the next generation of leaders, a leadership programme has been established with 50% of places targeted for female Leaders. To mark International Women's Day 2023, a 'Women in Rugby' network was launched, providing greater visibility for women in rugby, building confidence and connections, thus allowing female leaders to take their next step in the Union's management process, (see Appendix 2).

'Give It A Try' is a participation programme targeting underage girls, aged between 8-14 years, in the community, providing them an opportunity to learn the game in a safe and fun environment. This programme introduced 2,193 girls to 86 rugby clubs, with a 40% transfer rate from this cohort becoming club members. This initiative has grown the game substantially over the last 3-years at both minis and youth level from 2,500 to 4,863, with one participant successfully going on to represent Ireland, (see Appendix 3).

Other projects include a female only Referees Development Day, which outlines the physical and technical demands of the role. Our Referees Tutor Course aimed at upskilling female tutors, increasing visibility of female tutors who deliver courses and workshops, resulting in combatting the barriers of being "the only female in the room", which is a factor reported by women as a reason for them not taking up officiating roles.

A 2022 external review of our Women in Rugby Action Plan outlines further areas for development, including current risks experienced across all sports, such as sexism, racism and verbal abuse and recommends steps to mitigate such risks. In 2023, a Head of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion was appointed

by the IRFU, a new ED&I Policy is to be developed with an updated Women in Rugby plan will be embedded in the organisation's new strategy 2023.

B Sport and Disability

To support the development of inclusive rugby and promote opportunities for people with a disability to access the game, the IRFU aims to integrate these players into existing rugby clubs. We have also partnered with disability organisations in providing rugby to players with a disability. A framework developed in 2018, set out our aims in this area:

- To support participants with a physical, sensory or learning disability to achieve their potential through the game of rugby in a safe and inclusive manner
- To understand the needs of various disability groups and to identify issues that may affect those with disabilities who wish to access the game
- To provide coaches and referees with disability specific information and training
- To include principles of inclusion within coaching and club development practices resulting in more people gaining access to the game

44 clubs offer tag rugby for players with intellectual disabilities with a further 4 more in development. There are 6 mixed ability teams offering contact rugby in a mixed setting of players with/without a disability. In conjunction with Vision Sport Ireland, we have established a team for players with vision impairment. The IRFU is currently providing rugby activities to over 1,000 players with a disability across 4 provinces, but this figure does not include schools who also are assisted to deliver programmes to pupils with a disability. Further expansion is planned, particularly in volunteer development so that individuals with a disability can find roles in a club outside of playing.

To support the development of clubs and volunteers, specific training has been developed, including work with external agencies such Cara, Lámh and As I Am. A coaching conference was held in the Sports Campus in May 2022 for coaches and volunteers. This resulted in the IRFU collaborating with speech therapists

to produce 'Communication Boards' and 'Coaching Cards' to support volunteers in delivering more inclusive sessions, (see Appendix 6). To date, 672 volunteers have undertaken rugby specific disability inclusion training.

The impact on players, coaches and the wider community is reflected in some of the testimonials recorded at various IRFU events (see Appendix 5). Players describe the positive impact on their physical health as well as enhanced social inclusion within their local community. In addition, coaches outlined how these athletes remained within the game, becoming part of the rugby community, with parents positively relaying the role rugby has played in the social development of their child(ren).

C Sport and LGBTQIA+ Communities

We believe Rugby is a sport for all irrespective of sexuality, and we aim to facilitate a role for all participants within our clubs. Understanding that members of the LGBTQIA+ community have lower rates of participation in physical activity, the IRFU tag programme is open to all as an introduction to play rugby in a safe and welcoming environment. Specific clubs have formed using tag rugby to encourage participation by the LGBTQIA+ community, such as Emerald Warriors (Dublin), Cork Hellhounds and the Belfast Aslans, with other clubs in development. Emerald Warriors has expanded their offering to cater for both tag and contact rugby with many members participate in Leinster leagues.

It is our intention that all clubs become inclusive spaces. Irrespective of one's sexual orientation, an individual can join and participate in their local club.

A training module has been developed to enable committees and volunteers to make their existing clubs more open and inclusive. Between October 2022 and April 2023, 584 volunteers have completed the Diversity & Inclusion training module and work is being done by the IRFU Disability & Inclusion Officer to

produce a set of guidelines for clubs to promote safe and inclusive rugby. The impact of such work was captured during a video feature in Pride week June 2022, (see Appendix 6)

D, E, F & G Sport and ethnic minority, socioeconomic diversity, older people, and intersectionality

Keeping rugby at the forefront of communities across the island of Ireland is a stated objective of the IRFU, ensuring our clubs are a vibrant part of the local community where rugby can become a sport of choice for all. The 'Spirit of Rugby Charter' outlines that everyone has a right to learn, play and administer the game, irrespective of differences in age, orientation, socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds. However, we recognise that many factors can make it difficult for some to access rugby and we have taken steps to combat some of these issues. One Example is the Aldi Play Rugby programme that offers an introduction to rugby at primary school level with free equipment and coaching resources so that children have the chance to play and learn the game.

In consultation with people living in direct provision, transport and access to information were highlighted as barriers to joining local rugby clubs. To combat this, we undertook a pilot project where transport was provided through local organisations and information was provided in several languages, to reduce the barriers for young players from these communities to access the game. In addition, the IRFU is currently translating some key information documents into Russian, Romanian and Polish so that parents and players can obtain key information about the sport and to make it easier for them to understand how to get involved in their local rugby club .

The IRFU encourages clubs to become the hub in the local community, where everyone can engage in all club activities. Based on Sport Ireland's 'Get Ireland Walking' initiative , some clubs opened their doors to the local community providing a safe walking space that is traffic free. This has seen people from the local area, use the club for physical activity, some having never visited a rugby facility before. This form of physical activity is encouraged to improve mental well-being and assist with social engagement. This has facilitated new people in the community to meet socially with others of different nationalities, and it has

helped members and past members of clubs broaden their social network within their community. In addition, some clubs have welcomed people with a disability to use the walking programme as an introduction to the game, (see Appendix 8).

Other programmes such as 'Walking Rugby' has been used by clubs to encourage physical activity, and to motivate retired/ members of the community to engage or re-engage with the local club. This also helps in preventing social isolation as well promoting positive mental wellbeing.

Intersectionality runs through the various IRFU programmes. While some programmes target specific participants, the approach of the IRFU is to drive Respect and sporting values in all aspects of rugby. We believe that a member is a person first, with a right to participate in a safe and fun manner.

The IRFU recognise that some participants may present with one or more disadvantages, e.g. a person living in direct provision who is also a member of the LGBTQIA+ community). However, participants are entitled to access the local rugby club and learn to enjoy the game, irrespective of their socio-demographics. The aim of the 'Diversity and Inclusion' training for clubs and volunteers, is to raise awareness of any characteristics and bias that may exist. Encouraging an understanding of inequalities, so that they can make the game more accessible and open for all.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of the IRFU programmes highlighted in this submission is to encourage a culture within clubs, where all participants demonstrate our values, including inclusivity through actions on and off the pitch.

Working with our clubs, across the Provinces and in partnership with other organisations that have specific expertise in these areas. the IRFU intends to continually learn and change to adapt to societal need .

The IRFU will continue to provide guidance and support to the clubs to enable an inclusive environment to pervade across our membership. Every participant needs to know that they will be offered a positive experience through rugby and that starts with the welcome at the gate.

Sport is about enjoyment and fun and the rugby programmes which the IRFU offer reflect this ethos. Some people will be drawn to the on-field elements of the game while others may see off field offerings as their way to get involved in rugby. Therefore, it is important we offer choice, so we align with the participants' needs. The IRFU continues to offer support and guidance on growing and developing clubs throughout the country.

Appendices:

- 1 Women in Rugby Action Plan: [https://d19fc3vd0jo3m.cloudfront.net/irfu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/28163925/Women_In_Rugby_2018 - 2023.pdf](https://d19fc3vd0jo3m.cloudfront.net/irfu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/28163925/Women_In_Rugby_2018_-_2023.pdf).
- 2 Women in Rugby network, <https://www.irishrugby.ie/video/women-in-rugby-network-launched-to-mark-international-womens-day/>
- 3 From Give it Try to International Rugby, <https://www.irishrugby.ie/playing-the-game/women/give-it-a-try/girls-youth-rugby/>
- 4 Overview of IRFU programme for 'Players with a Disability', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7Jl21R8nfM>
- 5 Impact of rugby within the disability <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl1pH3S3BPI&t=9s> - and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8tXgJahxns>
- 6 Inclusive Communication Board, <https://www.irishrugby.ie/2022/12/05/rugby-communications-boards-to-help-clubs-provide-for-people-with-additional-needs/>
- 7 Sport and LGBTQIA+ communities, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPHtGvrgMtE>
- 8 Walking initiative - <https://www.irishrugby.ie/2022/10/10/irfu-walking-initiative-for-clubs-to-mark-world-mental-health-day/>