

Submission of the Olympic Federation of Ireland
to the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

30 March 2023

Cathaoirleach, Committee members, elected representatives,

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to contribute to your discussion. I enclose a response on behalf of our Board and staff.

Introduction

The last time the Olympic Federation of Ireland, or Olympic Council as it was then, provided input to this Committee, it was in a very different place. It was in 2017 and the impact of Rio 2016 was still very much in the here and now.

I am happy to say, before I address the topic, that since then, we have made very significant and transformational changes with general root and branch governance overhaul, a new strategy with the athletes and their needs at the centre of what we do, a performance support partnership agreement with Sport Ireland Institute, an incredibly productive Athletes' Commission, a vibrant schools educational programme, and a strong global and national sponsorship portfolio which allows us to enhance our support for athletes and member sports. Generally we are playing an active and important role within Irish Sport, in cooperation with, but having a different role to Sport Ireland and our member National Sporting bodies, as the representative for Olympic Sports and values in Ireland.

Whilst we remain a not for profit organisation (approximately 80% of our funding comes from private sources) our revenues have increased 80%, and our staff numbers, led by our Chief Executive, have grown almost fourfold during that time.

Aligned to this we have taken a leadership role across a large number of areas nationally and internationally to assist our sports and for the good of our athletes, with a Winter Sports Strategy, a Gender Equality Strategy, an Athletes' Commission Strategy and a soon to be launched Sustainability Strategy.

Sport and Women

As you may know Olympic Sports play a vital role in this area. Our teams are gender balanced and provide a huge number of exceptional role models for women and importantly, young girls, everywhere. From hockey, swimming, gymnastics, rugby 7s, golf, athletics, modern pentathlon, sailing, boxing, rowing and a huge number of other sports, we have exceptional female athletes and role models at the heart of Team Ireland who represent us on the global stage.

As the first ever female President of the Olympic Federation of Ireland, it is very important to me that this unrivalled gender balance in Team Ireland translates into our Board, our staff, and our Committees.

In 2020, the organisation, with a large amount of male support and male leadership too, was successful in applying constitutional change to bring about a minimum gender balance of 40% on our Board and Committees.

The same year, our National Olympic Committee was the sole proposer, and successfully brought about the same 40% gender balance changes at European level within our EOC confederation, the European Olympic Committees.

I am also pleased to say that many of our 42 member sports have followed suit in applying these changes to their own boards and administrative structures.

In my own role, I have also been privileged to serve as Chair of the EOC Gender Equality Commission and have sat on the world Gender Equality Commissions at IOC and ANOC level and have enjoyed immensely being able to lead and contribute in this vital area.

In 2022, the OFI established a Gender Equality Commission, chaired by Board member Lochlann Walsh, with Former RTÉ deputy head of sport Cliona O'Leary, world champion boxer Bernard Dunne, football coach Lisa Fallon, founder of Sport for Business, Rob Hartnett, and former army Lieutenant Deirdre Carbery as members. The main focus areas for the Commission are to review the factors leading to a lack of female coaches in elite sport - we are about to embark on a study on the barriers in this area, to be followed with an educational campaign for our sports.

Another important area for the OFI Gender Equality Commission is the portrayal of women in sport, and this is an area where are putting together a third level research project with media departments across multiple institutions about the visibility of women within sports media.

We are also one of eight European National Olympic Committees engaged in the EU Erasmus + Gender Equality in Leadership project since 2022. Having completed an analysis of our member sport structures, we will be producing a National Action plan in October this year.

Lastly, in 2020 and 2021, I was a privileged to be a member of the EU High Level Group for Gender Equality, which was chaired by Mariya Gabriel, the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. This group produced an excellent [Strategic Road map](#), which the EU called on member states to fund and support. At its launch I was asked to address all of the EU Sports Ministers on this topic during the EU presidency in France. Within each pillar, there are specific recommendations for member states that are well worth your consideration if you have not already seen them.

Sport and Disability

While this is not an area that is directly within the remit of the OFI, there are a number of areas where disability forms an important part of our activities.

Our Dare to Believe Primary and Secondary Schools Programme which we started in 2019 promotes both the Olympic and Paralympic values and includes both Olympic and Paralympic ambassadors as role models who are trained by us and go into schools nationally to tell their story. Most recently, we had very positive engagement with a deaf school who availed of this programme using one of our top Olympic athletes to talk and engage with the students with the assistance of a sign language expert.

More broadly, the relationship between the Olympic Federation of Ireland and Paralympics Ireland is very close with information sharing and cooperation across a wide range of areas as happens at global level. We are also due to have headquarters in the same building under the Sport Ireland Campus masterplan development.

Our 42 member sports do a huge amount of good work in this area at grassroots and participation level and we are always keen to engage and support, most recently when our Chef de Mission for Paris 2024, addressed the Irish World Transplant games team before departure this year.

Sport and LGBTQIA+ Communities

Within Olympic elite sport, our athletes are a true reflection of the diversity and inclusion of modern Ireland and that is one of our great strengths. Many of our athletes and leaders are role models in the LGBTQIA+ communities and more broadly in general society they play a very important role in visibility and as advocates for equality and change. Our athletes and leaders have spoken on many occasions at events about their journey, and insights about that journey through their own sexuality.

Internationally, sport is trying to find a fair and managed path to recognise the rights of transgender athletes, while ensuring fairness and safety in elite competition. It is not an easy topic but each sport at global level is having to analyse and deliberate on these issues – I serve on the Bureau of the World Governing Body for Aquatics and we are having to consider these topics at present. The Olympic movement has provided a ten point framework for global sports bodies to rely on when they are making these often complex considerations.

Sport and the ethnic minority

The Olympic movement is based on equality, respect, friendship and excellence, and these values are reflected in how the OFI operates. Representing a wide range of communities, Olympic sport engages with athletes from many different backgrounds which is hugely important as a banner for diversity and social inclusion.

Boxing is the most successful Olympic sport, and it is also a sport that is represented proudly by members of the travelling community. Francis Barrett (from Galway, and a member of the travelling community) was the flagbearer at the 1996 Olympic Games for Team Ireland, and John Joe Nevin won a silver medal in the 2012 London Olympics.

Team Ireland has a strong relationship with the Sanctuary Runners, a running group that engages with members of the community who live in direct provision, and who are refugees

from their countries. Many of Ireland's best known Olympians have trained with and support running groups through Sanctuary Runners.

To celebrate the theme 'Let's Move for Peace' for Olympic Day last year, Team Ireland ran a series of interviews with some of Ireland's athletes who have inspirational stories, such as Hiko Tinoso, whose journey took him from an Ethiopian prison to Irish National Champion. Efrem Gidey was also highlighted, the young athlete fled Eritrea in 2016, and in 2019 won a bronze medal for Ireland at the European U20 Championships.

Sport and older people

Olympic sport in terms of competition is a sport for elite athletes, so the inclusion of older people within sport is mainly within areas off the field of play, such as team support, officials, Olympians past and present, and fans.

Our member sports do a huge amount of good work in this area through masters competitions, get active initiatives and slower paced formats of their normal activities. Some of our member federations are very well placed to engage older members of our society for longer due to the nature of the sport and I am very happy to say that is particularly the case in my own sport, swimming.

As an organisation we are also very mindful of the adage, once an Olympian, always an Olympian. Events such as the EOC Athletes Forum which we hosted in 2019 included a presentation from Ronnie Delany to a group of Olympians from 1964 to 2016. Through the Irish Olympians Association and the Athletes' Commission we remain in close contact with our Olympians past and present and look forward to some very exciting reunion events in our centenary year, next year in 2024.

Our Athletes' Commission has recently introduced a mentoring programme for our young athletes and our panel of mentors includes Olympians from 1988 through to 2020. Our annual Make a Difference Golf Day which fundraises for the next generation engages with Olympians old and young, with the inaugural event including Olympians from 1964 through to 2020.

Intersectionality and sport

The Olympic Federation of Ireland is very vocal on its zero tolerance to discrimination on the basis of anyone's identity or background across a wide range of areas, many already

highlighted herein, and through its schools Olympic Values education programme to help to educate and inform the next generation.

In 2021 the OFI launched its campaign Don't Scroll By, which was a national statement around its zero tolerance for discrimination, specifically referencing online hate speech.

As part of the campaign the OFI joined the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR) and regularly amplifies and supports their messages.

The OFI has been vocal and supportive of the government hate crime legislation.

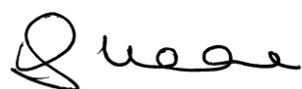
As part of the Don't Scroll By campaign, the OFI developed an education model for schools highlighting the importance of inclusivity and having a zero tolerance to racism, hate speech, trolling, discrimination and micro-aggressions of all types.

There was a significant awareness element to the campaign, with a video produced, a guidelines booklet that was shared with member federations and their clubs, and a media outreach day with Emer O'Neill, Leon Reid and David Gillick speaking about the topic in a campaign that captured media headlines across both sport and current affairs pages.

Conclusion

On behalf of the OFI Board and Staff, I thank the members of the Committee for their questions and considerations. We also thank you for your wider support of Irish sport and remain more than willing to address the Committee or to assist with replies should you have any further comments or observations.

Yours in sport,



Sarah Keane

President, Olympic Federation of Ireland

ENDS