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Joint Committee on
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Dear Ms Smyth,

I am writing to you with reference to your request for a submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters that was dated March 6th, 2022.

Paralympics Ireland are pleased to have been asked to make a submission to the Joint Commission on Disability Matters and want to congratulate the joint committee on their engagement with the disability sporting sector.

This submission will concentrate of the following areas:

1. We will introduce Paralympics Ireland and Para Sport.
2. We will discuss the area of Sport and Disability.
3. We will make recommendations based on the experiences of our membership.

Your sincerely

Stephen McNamara

CEO, Paralympics Ireland.

Paralympics Ireland

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

Paralympics Ireland is the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) for Ireland recognised by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), and is responsible for preparing and managing Team Ireland at the Paralympic Games that are held every four years in parallel with the Olympic Games. The Games are next due to take place in Paris in August and September 2024. The membership of Paralympics Ireland is comprised of 20 National Governing Bodies (NGB's) including a combination of disability specific multi-sport organisations and sport specific organisations.

Team Ireland most recently competed at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games that had been delayed by one year due to the global pandemic. Team Ireland delivered a total of seven Paralympic medals from the games including four gold medals, two silver medals and one bronze medal. Ireland were represented by 29 athletes at the Games including two 'pilots' who compete alongside our Para Cyclists. Team Ireland competed in seven sports by a team that was gender balanced, contained athletes with diverse impairments and represented communities from right across the island and our Irish diaspora.

Team Ireland have competed at every Paralympic Games since the first event in Rome in 1960. We have delivered a total of 300 medals from the Paralympic Games including 74 Gold medals, 69 Silver medals and 96 bronze medals.

Paralympics Ireland is also the National Governing Body for Para Swimming and Para Athletics with the responsibility to develop athletes with the ability to compete at the highest level internationally at European Championships, World Championships and at the Paralympic Games.

Irish Paralympians are amongst the most successful and most recognisable sports people in the country. They are role models for the disability community and speak as representatives of a community that are under-represented in the broader Irish society.

Sport and Disability

People with a disability face additional challenges in their everyday lives when compared to those that don't have a disability. Those challenges can include access to sporting opportunities, qualified coaches that are comfortable with disability, transport, accessibility and many others. Sports persons with disability can often be dependent on family members, coaches, club members and guide dogs when it comes to availing of sporting opportunities.

Transportation

These challenges can be exacerbated based on the geography of where a person lives or works. Persons with disability, in many cases, have limited ability to be independent when it comes to transport. Those with vision or certain physical impairments can often be totally

dependent on public transport as they are unable to access self sufficient means of transport. This is especially true in rural areas where the public transport links are not as plentiful as in the urban areas. For Paralympians, and especially prospective Paralympians, this can make the difference between participating in sport at the highest level and never progressing beyond participation sport despite the presence of obvious talent.

For example, an individual that depends on the use of a wheelchair for mobility must book their place on a train at least 24 hours prior their planned departure and only three stations nationwide provide staffed information points which act as gathering points for persons with a disability. Furthermore, access to a train is further limited as the size of an individual's wheelchair must be within 700mm in width, 1200mm in length and 1435mm in height to allow access to rail transport. Whilst we acknowledge the restrictions are based on the space available within a carriage, they still present a barrier to transportation regardless.

Travel by bus is also limited for those with disabilities and particularly for wheelchair users. As just one wheelchair space available on services run by Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and AirCoach, it means that should more than one wheelchair user seek to use the service at a time others will be left behind because of those space restrictions.

We know that athletes with disabilities seeking to travel internationally for competition also face barriers. In particular, Para-Sport Teams or squads often have to travel over different flights or ferries. This is because there are often limits on the number of wheelchair users on a ferry or flight.

When Paralympics Ireland hosted the World Para Swimming Allianz European Championships in Dublin in 2018 one of the most challenging aspects of the event was the transportation infrastructure available. As over 400 athletes with varying impairments arrived in Dublin and needed accessible transportation it placed huge strain on the public transport system which could not cater for those numbers. As such, private transportation solutions had to be secured to provide a dedicated service adding significant cost to the overall event. One of the findings from hosting the event was that Dublin, as it currently stands, is not suitable to hosting a large disability sporting event without the use of private transportation solutions.

Training Environments

Barriers to participation at the highest level are not just physical in their nature. There are also barriers that are in place but intangible. For athletes with paralympic potential to flourish there needs to be a stable and nurturing training environment in place at their training centres. Athletes with disability and access needs can be seen as providing additional challenges for already overburdened coaches and infrastructure. They require additional attention, and their coaching environments may need to be adapted.

Paralympics Ireland have identified that para-athletes improve their performance at a faster rate when they are able to train with their able-bodied peers. However, the reality can be that, because their performance may not be the same as their peers, disabled athletes are often marginalised, train separately or they may be asked to train with fellow disability groups. Whilst it is most important for disabled people to have access to training facilities and

the ability to play with fellow disability sports people, when it comes to performance this will impact on their development and potential to reach a higher level.

Venue accessibility and suitability for disability inclusiveness must be a key consideration when permissions are provided for infrastructural developments or redevelopments and retrofitting. Access and egress points for those with a disability must be amongst the foremost considerations for all developments. Simple considerations like the width of doorways, use and inclusion of elevators, ramps and automatic entry points are vital to allow for inclusion of those with additional accessibility requirements.

There was a recent example of an event on Spike Island where Paralympian, Kay McShane, was having her career commemorated with an exhibition on the island. However, wheelchair users, as Kay was herself, could not attend due to a lack of accessible access at the dock, the only point of access to the event. Having Kay and her achievements celebrated is a laudable activity and should be acknowledged as such, a simple oversight has had a regrettable impact on the event and could easily have been avoided.

Paralympic Pathway: Participation to High Performance

Paralympics Ireland wants to have a valuable and positive impact on the lives of the Irish disability community. We provide role models that show the incredible talent and achievement possessed by those with disabilities. Those athletes inspire the next generation of Paralympians and raise the profile of the disability community nationally and locally. We are aligned with the International Paralympic Committees vision to “make for an inclusive world through Para Sport”.

We understand that for a Paralympian to flourish they must be nurtured and have access to a trained and disability aware support network, coaching, accessible facilities, inclusive clubs and transport infrastructure that they need. This begins at local level, and regardless of geography, continues at national level and progresses to international level.

Paralympics Ireland are a voice for change, and we will actively seek to positively disrupt the current narrative around disability sport. We are proactively collaborating with our fellow disability sport organisations under the umbrella of the Disability Sport Group. This group also includes representatives from CARA, Special Olympics, Vision Sports Ireland, Irish Wheelchair Association, Deaf Sports Ireland and Local Sports Partnerships. We actively cooperate on an operational level to maximise the impact of our events and activities. On a strategic level, we are seeking to advance the opportunities for people with disabilities in sport and physical activity.

Recommendations

Paralympics Ireland makes the following recommendations to help persons with a disability to gain access to sporting opportunities and to reach the highest level that their ability and desire allow:

- 1. Create a Disability Sport Unit in Sport Ireland.*

To ensure the voice of people with disabilities are to the fore in policy making, funding, implementation planning and activation strategies. To improve alignment and coherence across Sport Ireland and National Sports policies and implementation of such. Outside of high performance, there is often an underrepresentation of images and case studies of people with disabilities across policies and platforms.

2. *Take a holistic approach to funding schemes.*

Consider how different funding schemes can cross check on applicants and projects. From liaising with our affiliated National Governing Bodies we often hear of NGB clubs receiving funding for adaptive equipment from one funding scheme but not receive funding for accessible toilets and changing rooms from another. This often means, at best, inclusive sport initiatives are delayed until another round of funding opens, or at worst abandoned.

3. *Open up opportunities in funding initiatives to cover both Olympic and Paralympic sport.*

Many funding initiatives are limited to one application per NGB. We ask that this limitation is removed or amended to consider applications from both Olympic and Para Sport programmes. For example, we have had the case where one of our member NGBs didn't apply for research funding for a high performance Para Sport programme because there was an application prioritised for the Olympic discipline. The progress of para sport is being impacted because NGBs have to make choices - often favouring the Olympic disciplines.

4. *Incentivise retrofitting for accessible infrastructure.*

Accessible facilities are a significant barrier for NGB clubs opening up their sport to people with disabilities; Water sports or clubs that use older facilities in particular. The impact is that athletes cannot take up those sports even if geographically accessible; or there are significant challenges to prolonged participation due to lack of toilet and changing facilities. For example we know of a water sport club that, although it has an accessible toilet, it is based in the female changing room. Meaning that when a male athlete needs to use the facilities, the female changing room needs to be cleared.

5. *Provide for additional Transport and Personal Assistant allowances.*

Provision for additional allowances for sport competition and training. We know that many of the competitions and training opportunities for sport take place at weekends and outside of the normal '9 to 5' window. This impacts the opportunities for people with disabilities to access public transport. As such, they are compelled to use private transport. For example, due to training facilities being inaccessible due to lack of public transport athletes typically must take taxis which becomes unsustainable over time.

For those athletes with high support needs, they often have to cover the travel and accommodation expenses of their Personal Assistant. This is not typically covered in

regular camp/competition funding. Additionally, we are aware that in sports like Boccia, which is for people with high support needs, transport and additional personal assistance overtime is a significant barrier to recruitment and participation.

6. *Professional coaching workforce for Para Sport in NGBs and Clubs.*

We are actively working with Sport Ireland High Performance Unit on this, and we would champion an acceleration in the provision of professional coaching places for Para Sport. We would also recommend that NGBs and other sports organisations can actively recruit for both Olympic and Para sport coaches without having to make singular decisions on this – due to the constraints of funding schemes. We believe that the growth of para sport and the sustainability of our high-performance para sport system depends on a professional and highly skilled coaching workforce. We also need to better understand how to entice former Paralympians and other disability sport athletes into the coaching workforce.

7. *Coach education to include disability sport specific education and training.*

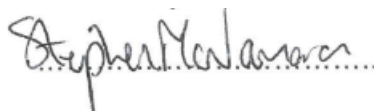
We would advocate that all NGB coach education programmes are compelled to cover, at least, a module on disability sport on their introductory and Level 1 stages. Education and training are a significant tool in changing the culture of an organisation to become more inclusive, and in raising the awareness of how to support people with disabilities access sport and physical activity opportunities. We know from conversations with our member NGBs that increasing the confidence of Olympic discipline coaches to work with a person with a disability, has a significant part to play in recruiting more coaches to Para Sport.

8. *Visibility.*

We call for recommendations contained in the recent Future of Media Commission report to be implemented in relation to bringing more diversity and inclusion to the sports broadcast and covered in media. We call for Future of Media Commission recommendations 7-9 *Develop a Strategic Plan for Sports Broadcasting and Promotion* and Recommendation 7-10 *Diversity and Inclusion strategy for sports reporting and broadcasting* to ensure that Para sport receives coverage more than just every four years, when the games are covered.

Paralympics Ireland remains committed to promoting diversity and inclusion through the achievement of our high-performance sport organisations. We are a voice for positive change in society and in the disability sports sector. We are available for further consultation on any of the points that have been raised and to further contribute to the work of the committee.

Yours in Sport,



Stephen McNamara
CEO, Paralympics Ireland.