

1. **Opening Statement**

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

Wednesday, 21st June 2023

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Aidan Walsh and I am the Chairperson of Sporting Pride.

To begin, I would ask you all to imagine yourself as a teenager, living in rural Ireland, who loves sport but knows you don’t quite fit in. As you grow older, you start questioning yourself and your future - and wondering if sport, which has been a huge part of your life, is really a place where you can feel comfortable being your true self, without the fear of discrimination and prejudice.

In reality, that teenager was me - a boy from Co Mayo, not far from where Deputy Dillion’s home, who was immersed in sport all my life - but I knew I was different - and so I decided to keep the real me to myself for 35 years because I didn’t think I could continue playing sport as a gay man…for me, those two had to be separate.

I look back now and wonder what might have been if that young me was welcomed into sport, how things might have been different if I had been made feel like I belonged and if I was given a safe space to be me.

And that’s why I helped set up Sporting Pride - to show LGBTQ+ people of all ages that they can become healthy and active members of Irish society, via sport, fitness and exercise.

Sporting Pride is a voluntary organisation, which aims to break down barriers and create opportunities for the community to participate in sport through collaboration and partnerships.

In our 6 years of existence, we have collaborated with approximately 30% of NGBs and 20% of LSPs. We work regularly with both Sport Ireland and Sport NI, have 10,000 website visits per year, post weekly on social media and are on target to deliver more than 50 sports events in 2023.

In fact, Sporting Pride is playing a strong part in delivering actions 6.4, 6.5 and 7 under the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021.

Furthermore, the increased focus on minority groups under Sport Ireland’s recent Diversity & Inclusion Policy, means greater demand for our services as we provide staff training, facilitate Open Days and deliver programmes, such as Tri with Pride (triathlon), Ride with Pride (Cycling) and Learn to Swim.

Helping NGBs and LSPs deliver sport to the community is virtually impossible without an organisation like Sporting Pride, as we provide the expertise and communication channels to promote to the relevant target audiences - but this effectively means that a volunteer organisation has been left with the massive responsibly of delivering on LGBTQ+ inclusion in Irish sport - but without any direct funding, HR or admin support.

While there is brilliant work being done in the EDI space by all the groups represented here today and government funding has been critical in implementing many of these programs, there is nothing currently allocated directly to LGBTQ+ in Sport. Why is this the case?

This has to change. If we are serious about improving the mental and physical wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people, then we must fund organisations like Sporting Pride, who are having a positive impact on the ground. Theree is huge demand for the work we do and, for that work to continue, we need direct funding so we asking today for funds in Budget 2023 to be allocated to organisations like us who are focused on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in sport.

According to international research ([Out on the Fields (2015) and OutSport (2019)](https://outonthefields.com/media/)), 50% of participants have been personally targeted in sport and 80% have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport. Based on those statistics alone, it is not surprising that community members are less likely to participate in sport as they may not feel safe or welcome.

Sporting Pride can help change this statistic and one solution is the LGBTQ+ Sport Clubs. Over the past 6 years, Sporting Pride has helped increase the number of clubs in Ireland by more than 100% and we print and distribute 5,000 copies of [this annual leaflet](https://www.dropbox.com/s/drg0nz1qama0bls/2023%20LGBTQ%2B%20Sports%20Clubs%20Leaflet.pdf?dl=0) promoting them. These clubs are safe, welcoming places to play sport, thus building a more active and healthy community.

From my own personal experience, I know that the LGBTQ+ world can be an intimidating and lonely place if you know no one else in it. Sport is a fantastic way to bring people with similar interests and backgrounds together - so these sports clubs should be celebrated for the vital role they play in the inclusion of LGBTQ+ community in Irish sport.

To finish, Sporting Pride are experts in LGBTQ+ Inclusion and we have the passion and desire to drive change in Irish sport. We can help you accomplish the targets set out in the National LGBTQ+ Inclusion Strategy and help Sport Ireland achieve their D&I Policy goals. If we are officially recognised and receive funding and administrative support, we will be able to collaborate with more sports bodies and help achieve our vision for Ireland to be the most inclusive sporting community in the world.

Thank you for your time.