



**Special Olympics**  
Ireland

# Women in Sport

ACTION PLAN 2024 - 2027

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# INTRODUCTION

Special Olympics Ireland is very fortunate to have a strong history of female leadership across the organisation. I am aware that in many ways we already have a solid bedrock of female role models within, from the board and staff members to volunteers and coaches who deliver our programme. What will enhance the sporting programme is to match this strong representation in female athlete members. Currently, female athletes make up 36% of our overall membership, a strong position to start from. We want to build an action plan that creates a welcoming and motivating environment within the Special Olympics ecosystem. We plan to increase female participation across all areas from active athletes, coaches to advocacy and leadership positions.

Creating the Women in Sport Action Plan has allowed us to identify key areas of focus and plot a route to success that will benefit not only those with an intellectual disability, but all women who want to be part of the sporting landscape across the island of Ireland.

Karen Coventry  
**Director of Sport**  
*Special Olympics Ireland*







The Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport has been instrumental in helping to shape the work of Sport Ireland under the topic of women in sport. It has also been an excellent tool for National Governing Bodies to guide and encourage them to ensure their sport is accessible and provides opportunities to all. It is on this basis that I welcome the Special Olympics Ireland Women in Sport Action Plan.

Special Olympics Ireland can be proud of their gender balance across a lot of areas, but it shows leadership when you know there is still work to do and develop an action plan that will help improve other areas. I look forward to seeing the positive impact that this plan can have.

Nora Stapleton  
**Director of Strategic National Governing Body  
Programmes & Women in Sport Lead**  
*Sport Ireland*





## Our Values

In line with our strategic plan for 2021 – 2025, the Special Olympics Ireland values are as follows:



### Passion & Pride

Demonstrate and enable the passion and pride in ourselves and others



### Flexibility and Adaptability

Embracing change, being open to a new environment and adapting to new ways



### Equipped for Empowerment

Trusting others in the decisions they make and enabling leadership for everyone



### One Team

Build connections and move forward with the same vision and goals







## The **Mission** of the Women in Sport Action Plan

Provide identical sport training and competition opportunities for females with an intellectual disability. It is also to provide and develop leadership roles for our female athletes and volunteers.



## The **Vision** of the Women in Sport Action Plan

We aim to have equal participation and promotion of females with an intellectual disability and our volunteers through our sports, health and leadership programmes.

“

Special Olympics was founded by a woman who was restless, rebellious, and wouldn't take no for an answer”

Mary Davis

*CEO, Special Olympics*





# BACKGROUND

Since Special Olympics was founded in 1968, it has continued its work on inclusion in accepting all people as equals—regardless of their ability, ethnicity, age, religion, and gender identity. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the founder of Special Olympics, pledged that the organisation would offer people with intellectual disabilities everywhere the chance to play, the chance to compete and the chance to grow no matter their gender.

Special Olympics Ireland has near identical opportunities for both male and female athletes and volunteers. However, the organisation recognises that there are certain areas for women in sports that require continued work to increase female participation.



This Women in Sport Action Plan will showcase the commitment to grow the women in sport community of Special Olympics Ireland. In 2023, the organisation received investment from Sport Ireland to develop this action plan and deliver projects under the four key target areas identified by Sport Ireland. The areas are based on current gaps and future opportunities for women in sport.

## CONTEXT



**Coaching &  
Officiating**



**Active  
Participation**



**Leadership &  
Governance**



**Visibility**

In February 2023, Sport Ireland, with independent consultant support, undertook a review of its Policy on Women in Sport to determine whether the target areas, objectives and actions of the current Policy were still relevant and if necessary, provide recommendations as part of a new revised policy.

The environment in which the Policy operates has changed significantly, outlined herein, and on that basis the review benefited from inputs from key stakeholders within the sport sector.







## Objectives

 Coaching and Officiating	1	Broaden the coaching and officiating base to include more women and girls from grassroots to high performance.
 Active Participation	1	Develop opportunities and support structures which encourages sustained participation in sport by women and girls.
	2	Reduce drop out in physical activity and sport in teenage girls.
 Leadership and Governance	1	Ensure gender balance on boards is recognised as best practice with all sporting bodies aspiring to achieve this.
	2	Increase the number of women in governance and leadership roles.
	3	Ensure the culture within sporting organisations values women's contribution to leadership and governance and sees it as central to the growth and development of their sport.
 Visibility	1	Increase the visibility and profile of women's sport and women in sport.





“The athletes are running out the door when they hear the word Special Olympics and they’re running eagerly into the sports hall because they know they’re going to see their friends.”

**Coach Louise**



# SPECIAL OLYMPICS IRELAND **WOMEN IN SPORT** LANDSCAPE



**36%**  
Female Athletes



**59%**  
Female Coaches



**79%**  
Female Staff



**62%**  
Female Sport Officials



**54%**  
Female



**46%**  
Male



**58%**  
Female SOI Board Members

# CONSULTATIONS



## Athletes

The Board of Directors established an Athlete Voices Group as a mechanism to enable athlete input and engagement. This group consists of 10 athletes, two from each region who were selected after an inclusive recruitment drive.

The objective is to empower athletes by providing them with a more representative voice and offering a more substantial role in decision-making processes. This group maintains a gender ratio of 50% females.

The Athlete Voice group ensured that the Women in Sport Action Plan was a priority on the agenda during one of their recent meetings, offering key feedback that has influenced each of the pillars of the Action Plan.



Operation Transformation

"I applied for Operation Transformation because I wanted to prove that having a disability would not hold me back from anything and to inspire others to make healthy lifestyles choices!"

Una Coates | Athlete

In March 2023 during Women in Sport Week, Special Olympics Ireland ran **HealthFest**, an event for female athletes invited to participate in three workshops; cooking, five Ways to Wellbeing and Breast Cancer Awareness.

20 active female athletes attended the event and completed a survey to get feedback from our female athletes on not only the event, but on other programmes and initiatives Special Olympics Ireland could provide under sports and health. Key findings from the surveys will inform actions under the Active Participation and Leadership & Governance target areas.

Healthfest was made possible with the collaboration of partners Mental Health Ireland and Breast Cancer Ireland, who were involved in female-led workshops.





"I found the education programme interesting and very useful for athletes - and for everyone. My own family has dealt with breast cancer, and I think this programme is very important so we can understand the signs and deal with breast cancer if it appears."

**Deirdre Walsh | Athlete**





“Stronger Minds, Happier Lives will help athletes to help each other. That’s why I became a Health Messenger, and it’s great that mental health is being supported because looking after your thoughts and feelings is just as important as looking after your body”

Deirdre Nevin | Athlete





## Coaches

To begin the development of our Women in Sport Action Plan, it was important to hear from our key female stakeholders. In September 2023, this process began with an online survey shared with the target of current and former female coaches across all 15 sports as well as our Young Athletes programme and the Motor Activities Training Programme.

**A total of 112 current and former female coaches responded to the online survey.**

This gave an understanding of the current situation and relationship females have with sport and coaching in Special Olympics Ireland. It also gave the coaches an opportunity to express any barriers or challenges they have faced.



## Staff

A survey was distributed to all staff members across the organisation, leveraging their valuable expertise and insights spanning various domains such as sports, health, leadership and governance.

Numerous suggestions were made regarding educational programmes aimed at highlighting the importance of physical activity for females, along with the recommendations for the subsequent delivery of such programmes at local level.

The survey results recommended that clubs promote female coaches and athletes by sharing their stories, thus increasing visibility and recognition.

Lastly, there was a call for greater emphasis on female role models across various facets, including athletes, coaches and volunteers to inspire and motivate participation and engagement among females.

## KEY THEMES FROM SURVEYS AND CONSULTATIONS



### Coaching and Officiating

- ✓ Volunteer shortages
- ✓ Willingness to upskill
- ✓ Coaching courses and workshops designed for athletes
- ✓ Coaching courses more accessible
- ✓ Female-only courses and workshops
- ✓ Events for Women only (Women in Sport Forum/ Networking day)
- ✓ Mentorship Programme
- ✓ Female recognition awards



### Active Participation

- ✓ Come & Try days for females not in the programme
- ✓ Use NGB resources in our favour (Basketball and Football 4 all)
- ✓ Develop female team sports
- ✓ Target popular sports to increase numbers and create additions to programmes
- ✓ Getting schools involved by presenting and hosting talks with SOI Female athletes
- ✓ Funding for female coaches to upskill
- ✓ Female coaches and officials from NGBs at talks/workshops
- ✓ Target 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> level education institutions into local Special Olympics Clubs



### Leadership and Governance

- ✓ Female athletes doing small interviews after big events, to share their experiences
- ✓ Mentorship/Buddy system for 3<sup>rd</sup> level students and athletes or coaches and athletes
- ✓ Leadership programmes for athletes where coaches nominate athletes



### Visibility

- ✓ Increasing social media activity at both Special Olympics Ireland and club level focusing on females
- ✓ Highlighting a variety of different athletes in promotions and posts
- ✓ Linking with other groups and organisations to promote visibility of women in sport
- ✓ Continuous visibility from female athletes and role models on social media pages





## TARGET AREAS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Following the consultation process undertaken in 2023 with our stakeholders, Special Olympics Ireland identified key objectives and actions in the four key areas Sport Ireland identified as current gaps and future opportunities.

The target areas are as follows:

1  Coaching and Officiating

2  Active Participation

3  Leadership and Governance

4  Visibility

The following will outline the agreed objectives and actions for Special Olympics Ireland's updated Women in Sport action plan.



# Coaching and Officiating

Objectives	Actions
1 Increase the number of qualified female coaches.	✓ Deliver coaching courses, workshops and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities to new and current coaches.
2 Support five coaches to complete a mentorship programme.	✓ Link with National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) to create a pathway onto a mentorship programme.
3 Increase the number of qualified female officials.	✓ Deliver coaching courses, workshops and Continuous Professional Development (CPDs) to new and current officials.



“This programme has made such a difference to a lot of athletes and families in our area!”

**Coach Deborah**



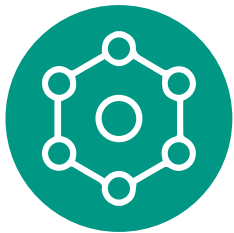


## Active Participation

"We have become part of a new 'family' which is a great support and source of advice and encouragement."

**Mother of a Young Athlete**

Objectives	Actions
1 Provide identical opportunities for female athletes across sports programmes.	✓ Develop a pathway for a female football programme.
2 Increase the number of female Young Athletes.	✓ Create and develop the 'Coaching Young Athletes' Course, to attract a wider audience.
3 Reduce the dropout rate of girls.	✓ Deliver a Coaching Teenage Girls course to equip coaches with the tools they need to help prevent drop out rates amongst this cohort of athletes.
4 Increase female participation at Ireland Summer/Winter Games.	✓ Increase team sports offerings to females.



# Leadership and Governance



Objectives	Actions
1 Elevate opportunities for female athletes across the Athlete Leadership programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Increase the number of females in the programme so there is a greater number to put forward to leadership roles.</li><li>✓ Promote proactive male allyship by engaging male leaders to actively encourage females to step forward for leadership roles.</li></ul>
2 Increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Use current male leaders to proactively spotlight females to step forward into key roles such as coaches, officials, club administrators, competition teams.</li><li>✓ Broaden the potential talent pool for women in these roles by leveraging the current talent pool of volunteers.</li><li>✓ Identify where females are on the coaching ladder and implement solutions to encourage continuation, eg. complete level 1 and above coaching qualifications.</li></ul>





Objectives	Actions
<div>3</div> <b>Increase Youth Involvement</b>	<div>✓</div> Target 3rd level education for future youth coaches. <div>✓</div> Target transition year programmes. <div>✓</div> Target corporates involvement for Corporate Social Responsibility days.
<div>4</div> <b>Maintain Board ratio at minimum 40% female positions</b>	<div>✓</div> Encourage the Special Olympics Ireland Board of Directors to implement annual succession planning to cultivate a pipeline of female successors.



# Visibility

Objectives	Actions
1 Increase visibility of female participation in Special Olympics Ireland activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ 50% of digital and print media to be designed and orientated around female athletes, coaches, and volunteers.</li><li>✓ Promote visibility of female leadership figures including Athlete Voices, Health Messengers, Fitness Captains, and Board Members.</li></ul>
2 Grow female interest in Special Olympics offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Tailored messaging and design to capture female audience eg. new Young Athletes design concept.</li><li>✓ Targeted content promoting the experience of women in sport within Special Olympics Ireland.</li></ul>







Special Olympics Ireland does extraordinary work to elevate athletes with intellectual disabilities. In thinking about leadership in sport and in business more generally, better outcomes come from teams that are made up of diverse voices. I look forward to continuing to support Special Olympics Ireland in my capacity as a board member, a female leader and an athletic supporter.”

Anne Kiely  
**Board member**



***Special Olympics***  
***Ireland***

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