**Submission to the Department of Communities – Disability Action Plan**

Tuesday 12th October 2020

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**My background:** I am a lecturer in sport management at Ulster University and my work is viewed as ‘key’ to the academic area on sport and inclusive spaces for people with disabilities (NATCen/Sports Ground Safety Authority, 2020). My brief submission below relates to Action Measures 2 and 5, two areas that relate to my specialist area of expertise.

I offer these comments respectfully and with the assurance that I can provide further evidence if required.

**Action Measure 2: To continue the promotion of disability inclusion and the improvement of life experiences, health and well-being of people living with physical, sensory and learning disabilities through participation in sport and physical activities through Sport.**

The focus on participation in sport percentages is a common yet flawed performance metric for increasing participation. The issue in part lies with the action measure. The issue is that participation is viewed as only playing sport. By adopting this approach, we are marginalizing people with disabilities into the realm of service users only – albeit participants in sport. A body of research suggests that people with disabilities can be involved in a full range of activities in sport and physical activity that go above and beyond playing participation. The sport industry worldwide has few opportunities for the employment of people with disabilities and yet there are substantial opportunities if we expand out thinking. Sport requires spectators, officials, administrators as well as participants who can operate on either a volunteer or paid capacity.

Young people with disabilities need to see more than just athletes with disabilities, they need those who work in sport to represent them also.

My recommendation would be to encourage organizations working in sport to audit the percentage of people with disabilities who work – either voluntarily or in paid roles – in delivering sport (any role that does not include playing). Once a baseline is established from this audit then the focus on point 5 below becomes relevant.

**Target: The percentage of people with disabilities participating in sport and recreation (to encourage at least a 6% increase against the 2011 baseline of 23%. Sport Matters 2009-2019)**

On the existing target, a 6% increase in 13 years is a questionable goal. There is a need for more detailed baseline information and this can be gathered. We also need to assure that the monitoring system cannot include the notion of the ‘double count’, i.e. one person with a disability is not counted twice when recorded against the two different sports they are playing in. If relevant, and to assure this, the number of participants in SEN schools should not be able to be used for individual organizational data on participation. All participants should be outside formal primary and secondary school systems which again will inflate numbers.

**Action Measure 5: To encourage greater participation in volunteering by people with disability**

This is a worthy action measure and one this submission strongly supports. I also argue that particular reference should be made for sport in Northern Ireland. The governing bodies of sport and the sport & leisure facilities across this region can be a focal point for this action.

The governing bodies of sport in Northern Ireland have a track record for being innovative, responsive and for bringing communities together. Linking grassroots funding for sport to targets for participation, spectatorship, officialdom, volunteering, and employment will be a way to address the crisis of representation that exists within disability sport – sport is for more than playing.

Sport & leisure centres across Northern Ireland help facilitate many sporting opportunities for people with disabilities – and the Hub System sponsored by Progressive Society and Disability Sport NI is an example of world-class best practice but more work needs to go into allowing people with disabilities to volunteer to coach, administer and officiate these and other sporting programmes.

These initiatives can support Action Measure 1 and provide pathways into employment within sport.

**Target: Continued development of the volunteering website and database which will provide improved access to volunteering opportunities and better information about the needs of volunteers with disabilities. (Continuous Household Survey report that the proportion of adults with a disability who volunteered in 2018/19 was 23%)**

Accessibility should be seen as more than the creation of a website and database, these alone will not encourage volunteer uptake as they do very little to overcome the social-cultural, economic and technological issues that many people experience. For a start you need access to the database – this will be online and therefore excluding people with little or no internet access. This access is also linked to economic issues also, volunteering is largely done by those with a passion for their area, hence those looking for volunteers need to tap into those passions. Finally, volunteering aligns with economic status, as many people with disabilities experience lower incomes due to the lack of availability of employment opportunities this creates a further barrier that a database will not address. A mechanism to assist those on unemployment and disability benefit to allocate some time each week for volunteering opportunities may alleviate this barrier, to an extent.