



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

TOOLKIT AND SOLUTIONS

PART
B

Methods and guidelines to assist sports leaders in achieving gender equality on their Boards and Committees

#WomenInSportIRE



Introduction

In 2019, Sport Ireland published its first Policy on Women in Sport, which expresses the organisation's commitment to women in sport. It builds on the significant work that has already been undertaken in this area and provides a blueprint for Sport Ireland's future work.

The Women in Sport policy has four key pillars – Coaching & Officiating, Active Participation, Visibility and Leadership and Governance.

Sport Ireland is committed to increasing women's sustained involvement in sport as coaches, volunteers, club members, athletes, advocates, leaders, and participants from grassroots to the podium. Within the pillar of Leadership and Governance, the objectives are to:

- Progress towards greater gender balance in Board membership of funded bodies
- Provide a pathway for women aspiring to become leaders of funded bodies

Over the course of the next few years, Sport Ireland seeks to identify and put in place the training and supports needed by different organisations to assist with the Governance Code adoption process.

In order to ensure gender diversity on Boards is emphasised within these supports, Sport Ireland sought to develop a resource that can be utilised by sports leaders in order to provide guidance on the recruitment and retention of women on Boards.

A process of research and consultation with the sector took place in autumn of 2020 including 33 in-depth interviews with internal and external stakeholders in the broad sporting community. This was followed by participation from 398 members of the leadership of Irish sport in an online survey, as well as seven follow up focus groups with 62 respondents. The Business Case and Context outlines the findings from this work, combined with international research, and explains the rationale and business case for gender balanced Boards – please see the Business Case and Context document (Part A to this Part B).

This Toolkit and Solutions document (Part B) is for use by NGBs and LSPs to support them in building more gender balanced Boards. The toolkit is to be used as a guide to put in place a gender diversity plan at Board level. This toolkit outlines what are the top 10 things to create an inclusive environment at Board level, and how to implement them. This toolkit is designed as a useful aid to support organisations at various stages on the journey to gender diversity at Board level.

Please read the Business Case for the details of any research referred to in this Toolkit.



Why start with Boards and Committees?

The National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) recognised by Sport Ireland are at the centre of Irish sport. They are key delivery agencies to achieve the strategic and operational goals of Sport Ireland. The work of NGBs and LSPs feeds into and complements the strategic priorities identified in both the National Sports Policy and the Sport Ireland strategy. With their member clubs and affiliates, NGBs organise and administer most of the organised sport in Ireland; they train and deploy coaches; they organise representative level sport; and they provide sporting opportunities and pathways leading from local sport to national and international competition. The LSPs is a network of 29 units across the country who undertake a wide range of actions with the aim of increasing sport and physical activity participation levels in their local communities.

Sport Ireland supports NGBs and LSPs in their development of sport and physical activity opportunities, and servicing the needs of their members and communities. One of the main priorities of Sport Ireland is to strengthen and develop the capabilities of NGBs and LSPs in Ireland. Sport Ireland particularly supports good governance at the highest levels within the NGBs and LSPs.

The term 'Board' is generally used to refer to the highest executive committee within a sport, or in the case of LSPs, the membership body governing the LSP. To govern well, Boards need to draw on diverse perspectives and generate a variety of alternative viewpoints. The common goal of the Board should be a shared commitment to achieving the very best outcomes for the sport or region. If everyone has a similar background, then it becomes hard to take decisions in the best interests of the development of the sport or region, and to explore new ideas. It makes sense to commit to getting Board composition right and that may mean increasing the diversity of the Board, including ensuring more women are Board members. This does not mean a 'ladies representative' at Board level, there only to represent 'women's issues', but a balanced Board comprised of women and men who equally champion all involvement in the sport.

Research from Ireland and around the world shows that there needs to be a minimum critical mass of around 30 per cent representation of either gender on a Board – below that the experience can be isolating, or the underrepresented group/gender remains a 'special interest' group.

Becoming a sport that is genuinely inclusive must start with balancing the Board. It is symbolically powerful and signals positive intent.

What are the Benefits?

The benefits of women on Boards include:

- Improved decision making outcomes
- Better representation of society
- Better representation of the organisation to the outside world
- Better financial returns
- Better Board accountability
- Improved corporate governance
- Making the organisation better equipped for the future

Becoming a sport that is genuinely inclusive must start with balancing the Board. It is symbolically powerful, signals positive intent and delivers better outcomes.



What is the Best Practice Framework?

The following information explores three areas containing 10 steps that can be worked on in order to have more gender equitable Boards. Based on research conducted internationally and within Ireland, summarized in the Business Case document, a Best Practice Framework has been developed. This framework is designed to provide examples and suggested actions that organisations may implement to help create or maintain gender equal Boards.

The best practice framework involves 10 steps, as follows:



The Framework in detail

What are the key steps on the journey? It is a journey and will take some time. Sport Ireland acknowledge that the whole area can seem overwhelming. It can be enough to look at simple areas where a difference can be made, such as under the three categories of tactical, structural and cultural. Please refer back to the Business Case (Part A) for the rationale behind these ten steps.

These are the ten steps explained:



TACTICAL

1

Practicalities

TACTICAL

Practical details around Board involvement can often be barriers to the greater involvement of women. There are a number of logistical practices that ideally need to be in place to help facilitate a broader representation of people on the Board.

Actions to undertake:

- Look at the timing of meetings to ensure they are not prohibiting involvement (e.g. day of week/time of the day/during school holidays, etc.)
- Look at the duration of meetings (maximum 2 hours) and ensure that the meetings are always completed in a timely fashion.
- Look at the location of meetings and the convenience of that location (and ensure that there is always an online attendance option easily facilitated)
- Ensure that the schedule of dates is set out for the full year in advance

A broader set of criteria for Board membership to attract non-traditional candidates to the roles is a key step in recruitment to the Board. Moving to a skillset based Board is desirable, and may take a few years – as this happens Board members will likely be recruited from outside the membership of the sport. This is important to help broaden the decision making and capacity of the Board. There is also likely the possibility to have more control around gender with the independent and skillset based positions.

Actions to undertake:

- The nominations process is critical. The Board needs to look at the composition of the nominations committee, and also ensure that the nominations committee is aware of gender diversity plans.

- The Board should examine who is being recruited to the Board and how they are being recruited and seek to balance the skillsets as well as the gender balance.

- Ensure that anything that could restrict recruitment is removed - this could include too narrow a specification for the role, or an insistence that the role is filled from within the membership of the organisation.

- In the case of a representative Board, when getting a new representative onto the Board, they should ask for both a female and male representative to be nominated, and then choose amongst those nominees, according to the gender balance requirements.

- The Board should allow a sufficiently long time horizon for succession planning and ensure that skillset balance is requested when new roles are being filled.

- The Board should ask is the person being asked to commit to too much e.g. Board and a Committee. In this case it may be too much commitment and seeking their commitment to just one of those positions would be enough.

CASE STUDY: TACTICAL CHANGE

DONEGAL SPORTS PARTNERSHIP



- When seeking nominations to the Board of Directors, Donegal Sports Partnership since its establishment in 2001 asks each nominating agency to put forward two nominees - a male and a female to be considered for selection.
- Selection is made based on several parameters, a mix of experience, skills, gender and empathy with participation sport and the work of the DSP.
- This rule has resulted in a better balanced Board and a better understanding of gender diversity in sport among Directors and across the organisation as a whole.
- There have been periods over the lifetime of the DSP when the gender balance is more swayed towards male than female for several reasons.
- The current make up of the Board of Directors is eight male and four female with two of the executive positions Chairperson and Treasurer being held by Female Directors.

3

Training & Retention

TACTICAL

Induction of all new Board members is essential to help them understand their role and responsibilities. Induction should include awareness of the values, aims and processes of the organisation, Board effectiveness training, as well as practical information. There should be ongoing CPD for all Board members, e.g. training provided by Sport Ireland or arranged through other sources.

Actions to undertake:

- Do you have introduction letters for your Board members and an induction training? If not, Sport Ireland can provide a template for you to use

- The induction letter and training will include the following:
 - Description of Boards, committees and structures
 - Names and contact details of peer Board members
 - Supports for Board members
 - Skill development opportunities
 - Copy of the constitution and strategic plan
 - Information about expenses and honorariums –with equal opportunities for all
 - Forward calendar of meetings and timings
 - Buddy/mentoring opportunities
 - A request for feedback on the induction process

- Provide commitment to ongoing training, support and development of Board members, including:
 - bespoke leadership programmes
 - Arena (Sport Ireland programmes)
 - unconscious bias training

Gender neutral mentoring (not limited to women mentoring women) is essential in developing a new cadre of female leaders. This involves the need for role models and real models at all levels – at senior level but also at the stepping stone roles en route. Seeking to build up female leadership throughout the sport is desirable and should be put in place at the same time as building diversity at Board level. If the sport waits until female leaders have been developed through the organisation it risks waiting too long – this should happen as well as changes at Board level.

Actions to undertake:

- Look at developing a mentorship programme within your own sport, where developing female leaders are linked with more senior mentors of either gender – this can be developed on a formal or informal basis.
-
- Speak to Sport Ireland about mentorship programmes for females in sport and options available on existing courses across sport.
-
- Speak to Sport Ireland about your successes or setbacks in this area. Support may be available, e.g. through Sport Ireland staff or mentors from across other sports, and your learnings in this area could be useful for all of the sector.
-
- Seek to highlight the female leadership and administrative role models within your own sport. NGBs and LSPs can highlight female role models in their own sport through promoting their Board/committee, profiling role models on the organisation website, etc.
-

STRUCTURAL



5

Constitution

STRUCTURAL

The Constitution of a sport (and Board and committee structure outlined in it) may date from 30+ years ago when sport nationally was fully volunteer run – nowadays sports are more like businesses, with underlying health goals etc. and need to hold themselves to account in a more contemporary way. Setting term limits is crucial to ensuring vacancies at Board level, as well as letting people know that the position is vacant, and supporting women into the role or inviting women to apply.

Actions to undertake:

- Look at whether your Constitution need to be contemporised. Does the wording of your Constitution allow for recruitment outside the sports membership (including skillset based Boards and greater diversity in the make-up of the Board)? If not, a review of the Constitution may be required to support the move to greater gender diversity.
- The Constitution review should also identify any restrictive rules in the Constitution that might create obstacles to attracting and appointing women.
- The Board should question whether terms are limited to a set number of years. Where not meeting gender diversity targets, Boards should limit terms until gender balance achieved (e.g. setting terms of maximum 2 or 3 years).

CASE STUDY: STRUCTURAL CHANGE OLYMPIC FEDERATION OF IRELAND

- New leadership – new Chair and new CEO in 2017/18.
- The OFI leadership and Board had an ambition to exceed the target set by the International Olympic Committee of 30% minimum of each gender and sought to reach 40% minimum of each gender on the Board.
- Review of the constitution as part of an overhaul to modernise included this ambition and was passed by the members.
- Members nominate a candidate to the Board and if the 40% minimum of either gender will not be achieved mechanisms to make this happen will be put in place – if necessary appointing a person with a lower number of votes if this will create the balance required.
- At end 2020 the OFI achieved a fully gender balanced Board, with 50/50 representation of either gender.
- Further information about this process is available at <https://olympics.ie/about/governance/constitution/>



6

Policies

STRUCTURAL

Ideally organisations will have a written gender diversity policy, shared throughout the organisation, which would include targets around gender diversity.

Actions to undertake:

- Write a gender diversity and equality policy. If you don't have one, Sport Ireland can provide a template for you to use.
-

7

Pathways

STRUCTURAL

Gender balance should be reflected at all levels of the sport, not just at Board level. Ideally NGBs/LSPs should put in place progression pathways to accelerate females (or other underrepresented groups) into leadership positions. It doesn't work to have only one female Board member, or that the female Board member is the 'champion' for the women's part of the sport. This becomes contrived quickly and doesn't work as a method for promoting gender diversity. It is important also to prepare for the future and create a healthy pipeline of women candidates to draw from in the future.

Actions to undertake:

- The Board should examine how to make the pathway to Board membership female friendly. Sports can put in place progression pathways to demonstrate and develop quicker routes to leadership roles. This could include, for example, looking at mentorship programmes for (lower level) committees, from which suitable females could be fast-tracked and expedited to Board committees or Boards.
 - In the case of LSPs, and where individuals can be members of an LSP, seek to get more women members, who could then be trained up potentially for Board roles.
 - Take actions to prepare for the future and commit to achieving goals, including agreeing a date by which gender diversity will be achieved in your sport/organisation and working towards that.
 - Examine the composition of other committees and what work can be done to make the committees more gender balanced. Gender balance should be an objective of all levels of governance, e.g. regional, provincial, club committees.
-

Ideally an organisation will be open and transparent when it comes to its targets, policies and practices around women in the sport or organisation.

Actions to undertake:

- NGBs and LSPs should set out their measures and plan to get to the target goal of gender diversity, and share those plans as widely as possible (the policy around gender diversity should be shared on the website, for example).

- The principle of gender diversity should be incorporated as fully as possible across communications to all Board members and as widely as possible within the sport – if the sport or organisation has a communications officer, he/she should be briefed on this.

- The organisation should report annually on its progress against its targets in this area - this should be done formally and openly within the Annual Report to the membership and reported on at the AGM.

CASE STUDY: STRUCTURAL CHANGE
TRIATHLON IRELAND



- In 2018 Triathlon Ireland decided to move towards achieving greater balance on their Board to better serve their sport, based on clear evidence that a gender balanced Board performs better.
- Following a 12 month thorough consultation process, members voted in the required Constitution changes at the 2019 AGM, by overwhelming majority.
- They were moving towards a skill based Board and included the ambition of reaching 3:3:3 (3 male, 3 female, 3 either) on their Board of nine people.
- Gender balanced Boards and committees are embedded at the sports Continental and World Federations, so there was a simple template to follow.
- The Board made up of 8:1 with two vacancies arising when they decided to cast the net widely and advertise for two females to be appointed to the Board with particular skills.
- Advertising for the roles made it clear that the two highest polling female candidates would be appointed.
- This was a “blunt instrument” approach - but built on a number of years investment in Women in Sport Leadership development and networks, which combined has balanced the Board as it set out to do.



Culture is very important. The creation of an inviting culture is critical to ensure sustained change. The culture at Board level should be satisfying and membership of the Board an enjoyable experience. Men are champions of gender diversity too and are critical in this culture development. A cultural shift comes about as a result of taking deliberate actions. Values are an essential component of culture in terms of defining behaviour. The strategic plan of the organisation needs to identify and define the values of the organisation, as well as what concrete actions will be taken to deliver those values. The culture needs to be consistent everywhere, and the CEO needs to ensure that at an operational level it is being permeated throughout the organisation e.g. at coaching, grassroots, development etc. It needs to be part of the overall ethos of the organisation, with the workforce, volunteers and females feeling accepted and valued.

Actions to undertake:

- The Board should consider devoting additional and regular time to cultural issues, including on the topic of inclusivity of women in your sport. The Board should formally dedicate a certain amount of time to understanding both the desired culture and the culture that exists in practice, and influencing the culture of inclusivity in your sport

- Is inclusivity a core value and how is the organisation embedding that value in their work and decision making? Given that the main way that the Board can influence culture is by setting the right tone from the top, the Board should reflect on the message and tone it sets with regard to the culture of inclusivity. The Board could proactively consider developing a Board Culture Statement to assist with this process. This statement commits to defined priority behaviours throughout the organisation, that match the values in the strategic plan.

- The Board should be clear about the desired culture of inclusion expected across the wider organisation. The Board should then take steps to ensure management embody the proper tone at the top and foster a culture of inclusion.

- The Board should satisfy itself that culture and strategy are aligned.

- The Board should review the frequency and quality of assurance it receives related to its culture of inclusivity, and consider if increased frequency is needed.

CASE STUDY: CULTURAL CHANGE

GOLF IRELAND



- In 2020 the coming together of the Irish Ladies Golf Union and the Golf Union of Ireland created Golf Ireland.
- A discussion group of four men and four women with an independent Chair created the overall proposal for the newly formed organisation.
- The Board of Golf Ireland will have a minimum of four of each gender on a Board of 13 Directors. (i.e. 4 male:4 female: 5 either gender).
- The role of President and President Elect will rotate between men and women
- Regional Directors from the four provinces will include at least one man and one woman and the remaining two provinces can be of either gender.
- The six nominated directors will include a minimum of two women and two men with the remaining two being of either gender.
- Creating a culture that is equal and inclusive is a critical part of the new organisation with a strong emphasis on imagery and language.
- Clear language around the need for gender diversity is used in advertising roles.
- For example:
 - Please note Golf Ireland is an inclusive organisation which supports and promotes equality and diversity and all applications will be assessed on this basis.



The CEO-Chair relationship is critical and it is crucial they are both supportive of gender diversity. The role of the Chair in particular is vital in driving the gender diversity message – the Chair sets the tone at meetings and needs to ensure inclusivity. The Chair needs to drive the gender balance message, otherwise ordinary Board members won't see it as a big priority. The tone set from the whole Board is crucial in contributing to, monitoring and assessing culture.

Actions to undertake:

- Has a public statement from the top come out? This statement should show and build buy-in to the benefits of diversity at Board level and the value of diverse group making decisions.

- The Toolkit should be incorporated into all training to Board members, chairs and senior staff.

- Start a conversation about your current Board representation and discuss the case for change. Think about the competency and skillsets required and discuss this together. Consider also the role of the Board in measuring and monitoring cultural progress.

CASE STUDY: CULTURAL CHANGE
PARALYMPICS IRELAND



- Paralympics Ireland has a history of diversity at Board level representing multiple sports as well as co-opted members recruited for their skills.
- There is a culture of openness across the organisation including diversity among athletes, coaches, support teams and leadership.
- At Board level they create a culture and environment of inclusion, transparency and aligned purpose.
- Board positions are advertised widely - recruiting for specific skill sets, experience and gender balance.
- All advertisements include the wording Paralympics Ireland is an equal opportunities organisation and all applications will be treated in confidence.

Common challenges

COMMON CHALLENGES

ACTIONS AND RESPONSES

“There are not enough qualified women interested”

- Expand criteria to include those outside the sport who bring valuable expertise
- Include outsiders who will bring a fresh perspective and help bring new audiences
- Previous Board experience is not always necessary for Board membership.
- Expand the search area to draw in new leaders by advertising roles more broadly, not just communicating within the network of your sport

“Our membership is dominated by one gender so it makes sense for our Board to be the same”

- Diverse Boards bring new perspectives beyond gender.
- The broader sport community includes family members of athletes who are decision makers and supporters of their family member’s sporting activities - creating a cohort of those interested in the success of your sport from both genders.

“We have a representative structure so it will stay this way until women work up through the ranks”

- Look at the pathways to see how entry points can be made for those with necessary skills but who may have the long service history.
- Look at those in other supporting roles in your sport - volunteers, club committees - these are often made up of skilled females who are not included in decision-making and have not yet been invited to do so.

“We have no current vacancies but if we did I would look for women”

- Prepare the pipeline now as it takes time to broaden out and build a network of those interested in a role.



“It’s hard to get anyone to volunteer - never mind being limited to finding women”

- Examine what is challenging about being involved in running the sport – long meetings, loose role definitions and expanding responsibilities, politics, - these tend to be issues that detract from anyone wanting to volunteer and addressing these issues will help attract more high quality volunteers and help the Board function better.
- Board meetings on Zoom have proven to be possible and may offer opportunities for more efficient use of time into the future.

“At a certain stage in life women don’t have the time or ambition to be involved”

- Prioritising important things is necessary for everyone and if this role is important and can be done efficiently (as above) there is no reason to believe it will not attract highly qualified women of any life stage.
- Research in New Zealand shows there is a misconception that there are not enough qualified women to take on Board roles or that women don’t want to be on Boards. It shows that women start their careers with as much ambition as men—or more, and having children does not make women less ambitious. The same research also said that ambition is influenced by organisational culture

“The responsibility of being a Board member puts women off”

- The level of responsibility is a challenge for all volunteers. In all cases understanding the role and having clear responsibilities makes this more appealing and manageable for all.



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

www.sportireland.ie
[@sportireland](https://twitter.com/sportireland)

#WomenInSportIRE

