

Sport Ireland Athlete Welfare Policy

Introduction

The Sport Ireland High Performance Strategy 2021-2032 will be delivered under the philosophy that our athletes and the people who support them are at the heart of everything we do. As we embark on achieving the objectives of this strategy, Sport Ireland has developed an Athlete Welfare Policy. This policy will ensure that our philosophy and values remain central to our high performance system as we endeavour to achieve greater success.

This policy is considered as a reference point for those operating within the high performance system. It serves to guide athletes and NGBs on best practice in relation to athlete welfare and support. It sets out the standard of experience that an NGB should strive to provide for an athlete that engages in their high performance programme. It also establishes the roles and responsibilities of athletes, NGBs, and Sport Ireland in ensuring the high performance system is working towards a clear set of values.

This policy is reflective of the actions identified under *Pillar 3* of the Sport Ireland High Performance Strategy 2021-2032. To support this policy, NGBs will be expected to develop their own internal documents, which reflect best practice strategies in respect of athlete welfare. As the high performance system continues to evolve, Sport Ireland will review this policy to ensure it aligns with the needs of the system.



Our Principles

We will endeavour to protect the welfare of our athletes. The following principles will shape the work that we do within Ireland's high performance system:

- ❖ The athlete's voice is heard and welcomed by all stakeholders within the high performance system
- ❖ Athletes are empowered to take ownership of their journey in a system that supports them to do so
- ❖ Athletes recognise that they have a responsibility to their sport. Athletes contribute to improving the performance system for themselves and future generations by engaging with those around them in a positive and constructive manner
- ❖ NGBs operate in alignment with their values, which are explicit and specific to their sport. These values are embedded in the everyday work of the NGB's high performance system
- ❖ NGBs have strong processes in place, which seek to maximise the performance potential and experience of the athlete
- ❖ NGBs are led by Performance Directors who are supported and appropriately challenged in their decision making process by the NGB's CEO and High Performance Committee. Performance Directors are ambitious for their sport and supported by a highly skilled team
- ❖ Sport Ireland develops policy that is in step with needs of Ireland's high performance system and informed by international best practice
- ❖ Sport Ireland provides adequate resources and support to NGBs in the delivery of this policy and other strategic documents within high performance
- ❖ Sport Ireland recognises the importance of collaboration amongst individuals and organisations involved in the athlete's life. Sport Ireland facilitates this collaboration and fosters strong partnerships

The Athlete Experience

A fundamental principle of high performance sport in Ireland is that our athletes should experience a positive system that provides holistic support based on their needs throughout their sporting career; and supports them as they transition to the next stage of their lives.

Irish athletes should be empowered to take ownership of their journey and supported by their NGB and other key partners to do so.

The pathway towards achieving our Olympic and Paralympic medal targets should not be at the expense of an athlete's wellbeing. Sport Ireland views positive wellbeing as an enhancer to performance. NGBs have a duty of care to their athletes to ensure they are protected and operating in a safe and healthy environment.

Our System

Ireland's high performance system offers a range of supports to athletes. Athletes benefit from engaging in the Irish system and can expect to improve their performance by doing so. The organisations central to an athlete's programme and the supports they offer include:

National Governing Bodies

As part of a high performance programme, an athlete is provided significant support, including:

- Expert leadership
- World class coaching
- Optimum daily training environment
- Domestic and international competition programmes

Sport Ireland

To achieve sustainable success and support athletes, Sport Ireland provides a range of supports. These supports may benefit the athlete directly or through their NGB. They include:

- High Performance Programme Funding
- Direct athlete funding through the International Carding Scheme
- World class facilities for athletes to train and compete at the Sport Ireland Campus
- Anti-doping education and testing

The Sport Ireland Institute provides a range of services to athletes that are delivered by recognised experts within their respective field. These services are activated through Performance Partnership Agreements between the Sport Ireland Institute and NGBs, and include:

- Sport Medicine
- Nutrition
- Performance Analysis
- Physiology
- Psychology (Performance & Clinical)
- Strength and Conditioning
- Physiotherapy
- Performance Lifeskills

Throughout the Tokyo cycle, Sport Ireland has delivered on a number of initiatives, which have benefitted Irish athletes, including:

- Two-Year Carding Award in 2019 and 2020
- Maternity Policy for the International Carding Scheme
- Athlete Friendly Employers Network
- Increased contact time at the Sport Ireland Institute (weekly breakfast, extended opening hours)
- Increased capacity with the recruitment of additional service providers
- Enhanced collaboration for student athletes with Higher Education Institutions to support their athletic as well as academic progress
- Tokyo Ready Transition Programme
- Transition support for retiring athletes

Partners

Ireland's high performance system benefits from the contribution of numerous organisations through grants, scholarships, high performance and athlete welfare support, specifically the Olympic Federation of Ireland, Paralympics Ireland, Sport Northern Ireland, the Sport Northern Ireland Institute, and Higher Education Institutions.

The involvement and support of these organisations enhances the experience of Irish athletes. They are essential in activating the principles of this policy, especially during periods where they are the lead body for athletes and teams, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Sport Ireland recognises their contribution to the system and is committed to advancing its relationship with each.

High Performance Programmes & People

The health of our high performance system is reflected in the experiences of our people. This includes athletes, performance directors, coaches, service providers, administrators, and parents/guardians of minors

High performance programmes operate in unique environments. These programmes can be challenging and intense for all involved. **The pressures associated with a performance programme does not give permission or justify negative behaviour or poor conduct by anyone.**

It is reasonable to expect that every member of a performance programme will uphold the following standards:

- All individuals will treat each other fairly, with dignity and respect.
- NGBs value diversity and differences.
- NGBs foster a culture that is fair and inclusive, where people feel able to raise complains, and provide feedback, without fear of reprisal.
- Acts of discrimination on certain grounds are prohibited by law. All individuals are cognisant that the Equal Status Acts provide protection against discrimination on certain grounds
- All individuals are offered equality of opportunity, and advancement on the basis of ability, qualifications, knowledge and skills.

Guidelines for Dealing with Issues

This policy does not address issues that are considered to be a matter for An Garda Síochána or another authority body. Individuals are advised to report to the relevant body on these issues.

The high-pressure environment of performance sport can mean that the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are narrow. It may not always be readily apparent when a boundary has been crossed. As a guide, the distinction between what is acceptable and what is not by members of performance programmes is described below:

Coaching/Leading for Performance is:	Bullying is:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consensual - discussed and agreed between athlete and coach/Performance Director• Planned and evidence based with agreed performance objectives and outcomes• Seeking to improve performance in a manner that is ethical and fair. A desire to win and win in the right way	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not consensual – No discussion or agreement occurs between the athlete and coach/Performance Director• Lacks any performance objectives and outcomes• Ongoing and deliberate misuse of power that intends to cause physical and/or psychological harm

In the instance where a concern or issue arises for an athlete, a clear line of communication must function with those who have the responsibility and capacity to address the matter.

Chief Executives, Performance Directors and Head Coaches are required to exercise leadership and guidance. Athletes may only raise an issue once and/or informally due to a perceived fear of consequences; their concerns should always be acknowledged and addressed.

In most situations, informal processes can solve the issue and, in many cases, improve relationships. The following steps are recommended:



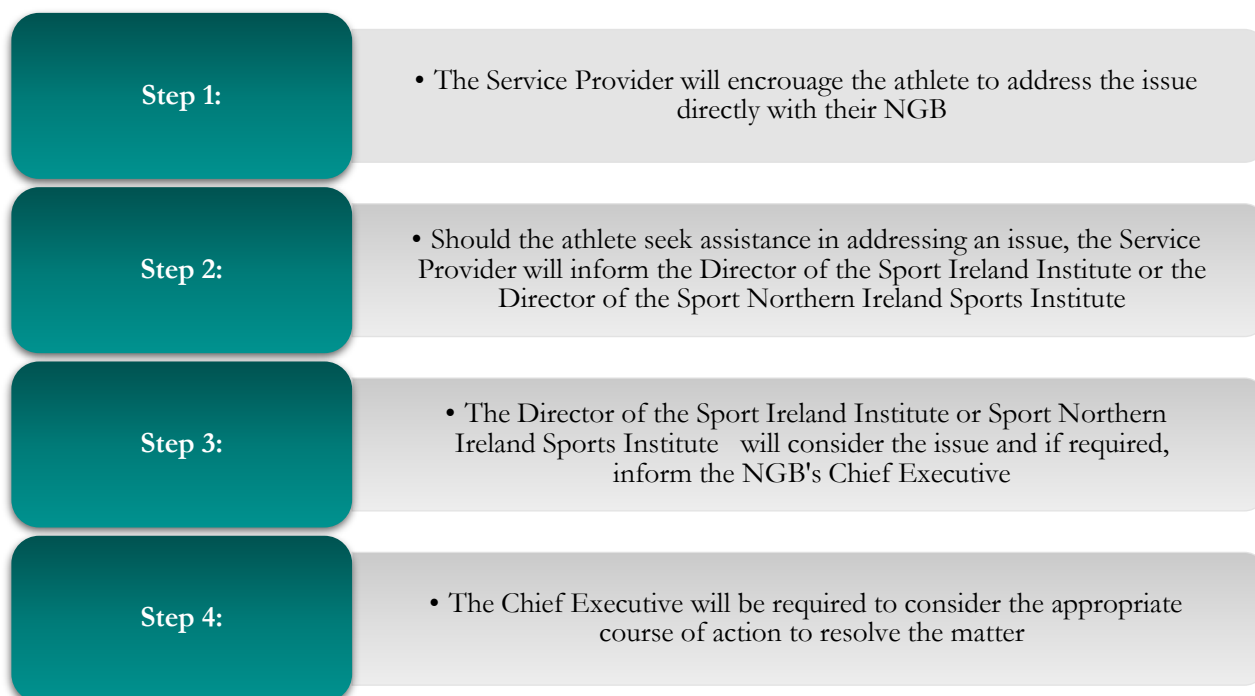
Issues which are considered more serious such as bullying or harassment will require a more formalised approach. At all times the safety and wellbeing of an athlete must be protected. NGBs are required to operate effective procedures for dealing with serious issues. These policies and procedures include:

- Bullying and harassment policy
- Whistleblowing policy
- Disciplinary processes
- Mediation

Service Providers

In respect of service providers, NGBs will engage with those employed by the Sport Ireland Institute or Sport Northern Ireland in a respectful and appropriate manner. The relationship between an NGB and service provider should be mutually beneficial. Service providers are not expected to mediate on issues between an athlete and NGB.

The nature of the relationship between an athlete and service provider can be one of trust and openness. Notwithstanding this, in a situation where the service provider has been informed of a serious issue, duty of care rules apply. This will not affect the athlete's right to confidentiality. Sport Ireland recommends the following steps:



Sport Ireland recognises the authority and accountability level of the NGB's Chief Executive. As such, it considers the holder of this position as the appropriate individual to address issues arising. Sport Ireland encourages NGBs to resolve these issues internally. Independent support will be provided, such as mediation, should the NGB seek additional assistance.

In the instance where an NGB fails to evidence meaningful efforts to resolve a serious issue, Sport Ireland will move to ensure the athlete is protected. This may result in the suspension of services and/or funding to the NGB.

NGB Roles & Responsibilities

NGBs are the central delivery body for performance sport in Ireland. As such, they have the critical role in managing athletes within their programme. Where an athlete is under 18 years of age, the NGB must ensure they meet their child safeguarding and child protection responsibilities in line with requirements under policy/legislation and through the application of best practice procedures.

There are a number of aspects to a high performance programme that, when executed correctly, contribute to a positive athlete experience. A high-functioning NGB is one that operates robust and transparent processes and procedures; and communicates these effectively to athletes and coaches.

Sport Ireland identifies the following as critical components to ensuring athlete welfare:

❖ *Inductions*

All members of a performance programme require an induction from their NGB. It should not be assumed that athletes and staff understand how a performance programme operates. An athlete and staff induction is viewed as a process where individuals can learn and adapt to the norms and expectations of the NGB. By the NGB communicating their vision and values, athletes and staff can further understand the shared objectives and their contribution to achieving these. The induction process also builds the foundation for important relationships within the programme.

Inductions are not exclusive to junior athletes and should occur at all stages of the performance pathway. Inductions should be tailored to suit the age and maturity of the athletes recognising that some athletes first enter the performance programme at senior level.

❖ *Athlete handbook*

Athlete handbooks assist in educating athletes of the rules and expectations of the performance programme. Developing an athlete handbook demonstrates to athletes that there are consistent policies for everyone, and that the same rules and guidelines apply across the programme. Athlete handbooks can help promote a positive, productive, and safe performance environment, mitigating bad behaviour or negative conduct.

The contents of an athlete handbook may range from kit entitlements to disciplinary procedures and should be included as a detailed appendix for clarity. The handbook offers clarity to all and acts as a source of protection to both the athlete and NGB.

❖ *Selection Processes*

NGBs are expected to have robust and clear selection policies in operation. The development of selection policies are to be led by the Performance Director. Selection policies should be approved at the various governance levels of the NGB before publication. Selection policies will be specific to a sport given the differing nature of each such as time/score based, judged, or combat sport.

Selection policies should be circulated throughout the sport's community at the beginning of a season, ideally through the NGB's website, or at a time that provides the athlete and coach an opportunity to understand the standards to be achieved.

Any changes to a selection policy should be communicated in a timely manner by an appointed member of the performance team.

Whilst discretion in selection is a normal feature of a selection policy, NGBs should ensure that these decisions are validated/supported by their High Performance Committee or other delegated authority.

In tandem with selection policies, NGBs are expected to operate appeal mechanisms, specifically for major events such as European and World Championships. Athletes and coaches should have a clear understanding of how they can pursue an appeal with their NGB. Athletes should feel supported through this process.

❖ *Athlete agreements*

In line with an athlete handbook, NGBs are required to issue individual athlete agreements to each member of their performance programme. These agreements specify the performance programme expectations; the costs associated with membership to the programme; and the calendar of competitions and training camps.

It is reasonable to expect athletes to contribute to the performance programme either financially or through public engagements. Sport Ireland advises that there is clarity on the purpose of any financial contribution by an athlete and that the NGB ensures this contribution is maintained to a minimum level.

As was identified in the development process of the Sport Ireland High Performance Strategy, it is important that NGBs also outline the benefit that athletes will receive as a result of signing an athlete agreement. For example, athletes will benefit from full coaching support, access to facilities, service provision, and funding under the International Carding Scheme.

❖ *Athlete Voice*

A two-way communication channel between an athlete and NGB is critical. Sport Ireland places a strong emphasis on conducting debriefs at the conclusion major events/training camps/sessions, etc.

Further to this, a continuous feedback loop between all involved in the performance programme is necessary.

Athletes need multiple mechanisms within their programme to raise issues and be heard on matters that affect them. Documented processes to raise issues or provide feedback informally/formally is required.

The induction process, which helps an athlete identify who's who within the performance programme and their area of responsibility, strengthens the athlete's voice and the quality of feedback they can provide.

A number of performance programmes have appointed athlete representatives. These individuals communicate on behalf of the athlete group to the leadership of the performance programme. Sport Ireland recognises the value of this model.

Sport Ireland Responsibilities

High performance sport is a priority for Sport Ireland. As an investor of public funding, Sport Ireland must maintain oversight of NGBs in receipt of high performance funding. Through the completion of the various quadrennial reviews and self-assessment processes, Sport Ireland seeks to improve the work of NGBs in high performance sport.

❖ *Culture Checks*

As the system continues to evolve, Culture Checks will be introduced into performance programmes. Any NGBs in receipt of Performance Funding may be required to participate in a Culture Check. In recognising that governance and culture are interlinked, Sport Ireland will place an emphasis on examining the *how* and *why* an NGB delivers on its functions.

Culture Checks will occur regularly and will involve all individuals associated with the NGB's performance programme. Sport Ireland will oversee the Culture Check process which will be conducted by an independent body/individual. Culture Checks will be conducted through a combination of surveys, interviews, and on-site visits. Where possible, anonymity will be a feature of this process to protect the athletes and draw valuable input. Any NGB that participates in a Culture Check will receive formal feedback, which will support their efforts to improve the programme.

❖ *Transition support to retiring athletes*

The Athlete Career Development Programme helps athletes to develop their planning capability in order to ensure that their athlete career blends with an appropriate and flexible form of part time employment. This helps athletes to positively switch off and recover from their training and competition whilst ensuring that they can make a smooth transition into full time employment after their sports career. Planning is a critical skill for every athlete as they overcome predictable and non-predictable changes in their athlete career.

Sport Ireland encourages discussion between athletes and NGBs to identify what the next phase in their journey might look like and what supports are needed. Sport Ireland is open to considering the supports required and will work in consultation with the athlete and Performance Director. Athletes should not avoid

notifying their NGB because of concerns that funding under the International Carding Scheme will cease immediately. Sport Ireland is committed to supporting athletes as best as possible, whilst maintaining the integrity of the Scheme. Sport Ireland will endeavour to accommodate individualised transition plans. These plans will be developed in a collaborative approach between the athlete, NGB and Sport Ireland.

Activating policy

To activate this policy, Sport Ireland will adopt a partnership approach with NGBs. NGBs will be asked to reflect on their status in relation to the responsibilities and processes outlined in this policy. Sport Ireland welcomes feedback from NGBs on the practicalities of this policy and what supports they require to ensure implementation.

To support the NGB's reflection, the processes set out in this policy are as follows:

- ❖ Internal investigation processes
- ❖ Disciplinary processes
- ❖ Mediation
- ❖ Inductions
- ❖ Athlete handbook
- ❖ Selection Processes
- ❖ Athlete agreements
- ❖ Athlete Voice
- ❖ Culture Checks
- ❖ Transition Support

Sport Ireland will provide NGBs with templates, workshops, and one-to-one meetings to develop the processes outlined.

The High Performance Unit will assume responsibility for overseeing the successful implementation of this policy. The High Performance Unit will support NGBs to ensure they have the skills and capacity to manage the welfare of their athletes.
