

Executive Summary

Powering Sport: Supporting Professional Workforce Development in Irish Sport (2026–2030)

Introduction

Sport in Ireland is powered by people. From the volunteers who sustain grassroots clubs to the professional staff who lead, govern and develop programmes, it is people who enable participation, performance and progress.

Powering Sport: Supporting Professional Workforce Development in Irish Sport (2026-2030) is Ireland's first sector-focused workforce strategy for sport.

It responds directly to the mandate set out in the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 and the Sports Action Plan 2024-2027 which tasks Sport Ireland with supporting the strategic development of the professional sporting workforce within National Governing Bodies (NGBs), Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) and other funded bodies.

This strategy recognises both the scale of contribution already being made and the increasing complexity of the environment in which sport operates. Irish sport has evolved from a predominantly volunteer-led model to one that now includes more than 2,000 paid professionals across funded organisations, supported by hundreds of thousands of volunteers.

Expectations have grown in parallel - encompassing governance, safeguarding, inclusion, high performance, health promotion, digital transformation and international representation.

A strategically planned, well-supported and future-ready workforce is essential if Ireland is to continue increasing participation, delivering excellence, and strengthening sport's contribution to society. This strategy sets out a clear framework to professionalise, support and sustain that workforce between 2026 and 2030.

Rationale for the Strategy

A Growing and More Complex Sector

Since the establishment of the Irish Sports Council (now Sport Ireland) in 1999, Irish sport has undergone significant growth and professionalisation.

Increased government investment following the publication of the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 has accelerated this transformation further.

Many funded bodies, in particular NGBs, now operate with structured leadership teams, specialist staff and multi-million-euro turnovers. Notwithstanding this, there are still a tranche of recognised NGBs operating entirely on a voluntary basis.

The sector therefore spans fully professionalised organisations, hybrid models and volunteer-led bodies - creating uneven capacity and varying workforce maturity levels.

A coherent, proportionate and sector-wide workforce framework is now required to support sustainable growth.

Labour Market Pressures

The strategy has been developed during a period of near full employment in Ireland. With national unemployment rates at approximately 5%, sport is competing with public, private and not-for-profit sectors for talent.

Challenges include:

- Retention pressures and increased operating costs
- Pay and condition differentials between sectors
- Limited long-term workforce planning in some organisations
- Exposure to evolving employment law and tax regulations
- Increasing demand for non-sport related specialist skills including AI, digital transformation and sustainability

Without coordinated intervention, these pressures risk constraining the sector's ability to deliver national policy objectives.

Need for Structured Workforce Planning

Consultation revealed that while operational planning is common, formal long-term workforce planning is not yet embedded across the majority of funded bodies. HR capacity varies significantly, particularly between larger and smaller organisations.

Additionally:

- There is no centralised graduate transition pathway
- Career progression routes are not consistently defined
- Workforce data is fragmented and limited
- Leadership development pathways are under-developed
- Diversity at senior leadership level remains uneven

Addressing these gaps requires structured, strategic and multi-annual action.



Strategy Consultation & Development Process

The strategy was developed through a comprehensive, two-phase consultation and research process led by Sport Ireland and supported by an independent consultant.

Phase One: Research & Evidence Gathering

This phase included:

- Review of national sport policy and strategic documentation
- International literature review, including engagement with workforce leads in Sport England, Sport New Zealand and Sport Northern Ireland
- Review of labour market and economic reports (CSO, ERSI, OECD)
- Issuing of an in-depth survey to funded organisations

Phase Two: Direct Engagement

Phase Two deepened sector and stakeholder engagement with:

- Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
- Sport Ireland Senior Management
- Disability Sport Working Group representatives
- Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Group representatives
- Federation of Irish Sport
- Third-level education sector

In addition, Sport Ireland facilitated

- 20 individual interviews with internal and external stakeholders
- 5 focus groups with NGBs, LSPs and funded bodies
- 6 formal strategy development working group meetings

This process ensured that the strategy is evidence-informed, sector-owned and aligned with both domestic and international best practice.

Key Insights Emerging from Consultation

Eight core insight areas emerged from the research and engagement process:

1. Labour Market Realities

Sport operates within a tight labour market, facing increasing competition for skilled professionals. Rising operating costs and retention pressures are particularly acute for smaller organisations.

2. Investment & Financial Flexibility

Annual funding cycles limit long-term workforce planning. Organisations with diversified income streams demonstrate greater workforce resilience and flexibility.

3. Workforce Planning & HR Capacity

Formal workforce planning remains underdeveloped in many bodies. Smaller NGBs often experience duplication in administration, IT and governance tasks. There is currently no structured support programme to assist volunteer-led organisations transitioning to professional staffing models.

4. Recruitment, Retention & Recognition

Recruitment and retention challenges are linked to:

- Inconsistent pay and working conditions
- Perceived career progression limitations
- Lack of a coordinated national graduate transition pathway or centralised career promotion strategy for sport

5. Data & Evidence Gaps

There is limited centralised data on:

- Workforce demographics
- Pay and conditions
- Staff movement and retention
- Engagement levels

This restricts informed workforce planning.

6. Professionalisation & Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

While many organisations offer CPD, barriers include time, cost and limited digital infrastructure. There is no sector-wide competency framework or centralised Learning Management System (LMS).

Emerging skill demands include:

- Artificial intelligence and digital transformation
- Commercialisation and sponsorship
- Sustainability and green transition
- Leadership and governance capability

7. Workforce Diversity

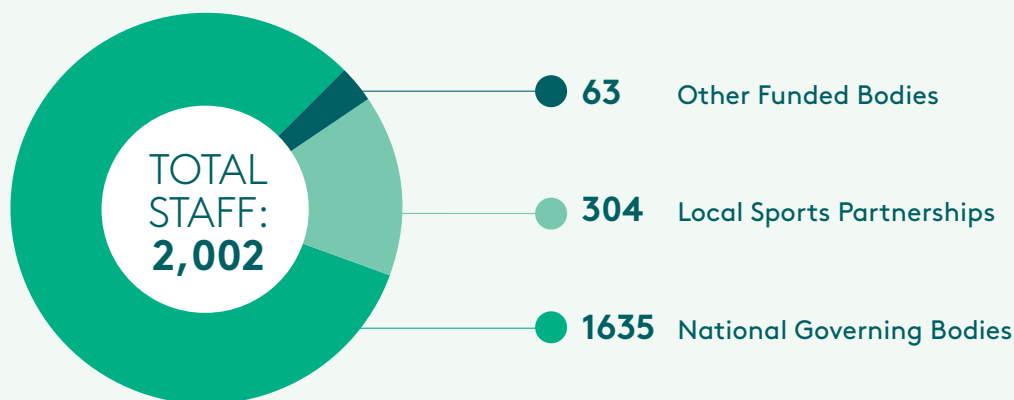
Ireland's population is increasingly diverse. However, workforce representation - particularly at senior level - does not yet fully reflect national demographics. Organisations require structured support in inclusive recruitment and workplace accessibility.

8. International Contribution

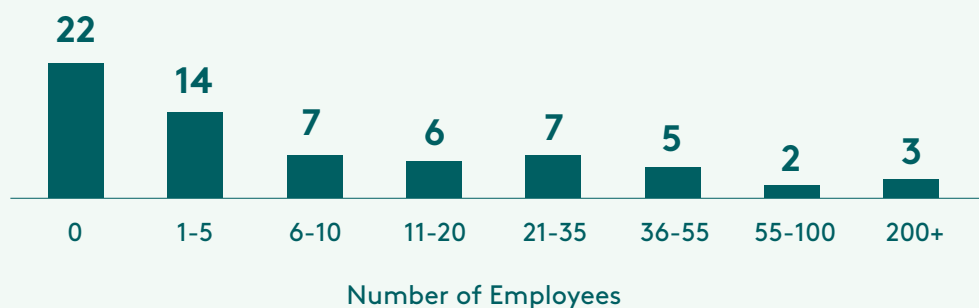
Irish administrators already hold large numbers of positions across international federations. Expanding this presence strengthens Ireland's voice, networks and high-performance outcomes. A structured leadership pipeline could enhance this further.

The Irish Sports Sector in Numbers

Number of staff in Sport Ireland Funded Bodies



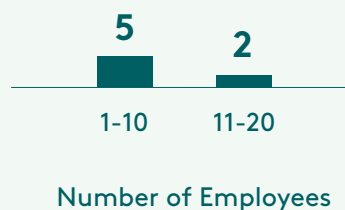
National Governing Bodies of Sport



Local Sports Partnerships



Representative/Other Funded Bodies



* Information based on 2025 core funding applications and other formal reports made by funded bodies.

Conclusion

Powering Sport represents a step change in how Ireland supports its professional sporting workforce. It acknowledges that volunteers remain the backbone of Irish sport, but that a skilled, supported and strategically developed professional workforce is essential to sustain and amplify their contribution.

This strategy is not about centralising development; it is about enabling capacity. It respects the autonomy and diversity of funded bodies while providing proportionate supports, structured pathways and strategic coordination.

By investing in people, better planning, clearer career pathways, enhanced professional recognition, improved diversity, and stronger leadership development - Ireland can ensure that its sporting workforce is resilient, inclusive and equipped for the challenges and opportunities of the coming years.



Implementation Plan 2026–2030

LEGEND

DCCS - Department of Culture, Communications and Sport

SI ADU - Sport Ireland Antidoping & Ethics Unit

SI Coaching - Sport Ireland Coaching Unit

SI Comms - Sport Ireland Communication, Corporate Affairs & Marketing Unit

SI D&I - Sport Ireland Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

SI Disability - Sport Ireland Disability Sport

SI Governance - Sport Ireland Governance, Risk, Compliance & Strategy Unit

SI HP - Sport Ireland High Performance Unit

SI Innovation - Sport Ireland Research, Evaluation & Innovation Unit

SI NGB - Sport Ireland National Governing Bodies of Sport Unit

SI ODC - Sport Ireland Organisational Development & Change Unit

SI Participation - Sport Ireland Participation Unit

SI Research - Sport Ireland Research, Evaluation & Innovation Unit

SI WIS - Sport Ireland Women in Sport

Strategic Pillar	Objective	Action	Lead(s)
Investment & Resources	Enable strategic workforce planning through sustainable investment	· Implement multi-annual 'Core' investment for NGBs and LSPs to enable strategic workforce planning and development.	DCCS SI NGB/ Participation
	Support organisational flexibility through income diversification	· Continue to explore and encourage initiatives that enable funded bodies to develop diverse income streams, thereby enhancing financial stability and increasing flexibility in recruitment and retention.	SI ODC SI NGB SI Comms
Workforce Planning & HR Processes	Establish formal workforce planning across funded bodies	· Provide tailored support, resources and best practices to develop and enhance formal workforce planning. · Facilitate skills audits and learning needs assessments.	SI ODC
	Strengthen HR functions within funded bodies	· Offer specialised support to build HR capacity in funded bodies. · Expand access to expert HR advice and tools. · Continue developing the central HR resource hub to support funded bodies. · Provide guidance to boards and executive teams of funded bodies on their legal responsibilities and best practices as employers.	SI ODC
	Support organisational transition from volunteer-based to professional staffing models	· Design and implement a phased and targeted support programme to guide identified organisations through the transition process.	SI ODC SI NGB SI Governance

Strategic Pillar	Objective	Action	Lead(s)
Recruitment, Retention & Recognition	Build a sustainable talent pipeline into the sport sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop structured graduate transition programmes that integrate sport and non-sport graduates into the workforce through mentorship, training, and placement opportunities. · Develop sector-wide campaigns to promote careers in sport and raise awareness of opportunities within funded organisations. · Provide a centralised careers portal to streamline career information and improve access to talent across the sector. 	SI ODC SI NGB SI Governance
	Enhance the attractiveness and visibility of careers in sport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Promote the non-remuneration benefits of working in sport, including contributions to public health, social cohesion, and community development. · Provide organisations with toolkits and resources to strengthen employer branding, staff engagement, and workplace wellbeing. · Encourage flexible and innovative employment models such as job-sharing, remote work, and shared service roles to attract and retain skilled professionals. 	SI ODC SI NGB SI Participation SI Comms
	Support inclusive workforce participation and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Continue to implement tailored leadership development initiatives (i.e. targeting females/males/all who influence governance, structures and processes) to increase the representation of women in senior decision-making roles across funded bodies. · Provide information, guidance and resources to the sector on maternity/paternity/parental supports. These may include scalable baseline standards and policy templates to support a consistent, fair, and inclusive approach across funded bodies, proportionate to their size and resources. · Develop targeted programmes and resources to support women and other identified groups returning to the workforce after career breaks. · Offer guidance and support for implementing recognition, engagement, and wellbeing initiatives that value the contributions of the professional workforce. · Promote inclusive hiring practices and career development pathways that reflect the diversity of the communities served by the sport sector. 	SI ODC SI WIS SI D&I SI Disability
Insights & Data	Strengthen workforce planning and competitiveness through sector-wide data and insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Commission comprehensive workforce studies to establish benchmarks and inform strategic planning and staff forecasting. · Develop data-driven recommendations to support workforce development across funded organisations. · Commission research into the current pay and conditions across the sector. 	SI ODC SI Research

Strategic Pillar	Objective	Action	Lead(s)
Professionalisation, Skills Development & CPD	Establish clear competency frameworks and career pathways across the sport sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop sector-wide competency frameworks that define role expectations, progression routes, and succession planning needs from entry-level to senior leadership positions. 	SI ODC SI NGB
	Deliver tailored and future-focused CPD programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design and deliver CPD programmes aligned with competency frameworks, prioritising adaptable skills through coaching, mentoring, and leadership development initiatives. Undertake regular high level learning needs analysis to identify emerging skill gaps, adapt to strategic shifts, and support continuous development within the sector. 	SI ODC
	Enable scalable and accessible sector learning through a centralised LMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in the implementation of a centralised LMS offering flexible, on-demand training in technical, management, and leadership skills. 	SI ODC SI Coaching SI ADU
	Build commercial and strategic capabilities within the workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide training and resources in key commercial areas such as sponsorship, marketing, and business development to support organisational sustainability and growth. 	SI ODC SI NGB SI Comms
	Equip the workforce for digital transformation and sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide training and resources in the areas of innovation, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and sustainability. 	SI ODC SI Innovation
	Foster peer learning through communities of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand and support communities of practice that enable knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving, and continuous learning among current and emerging leaders. 	All SI Business Units
	Strengthen professional development through strategic partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish partnerships with professional bodies and accreditation organisations to enhance career pathways, attract skilled professionals, and support sector-wide standards. 	SI ODC SI NGB SI Innovation
	Align training provision with sector needs through education partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with third-level institutions and training providers to access expert-led programmes and ensure training is tailored to current and emerging skill demands in the sport sector. This may include aligning formal qualifications with the National Framework of Qualifications, where appropriate, to further raise the profile and recognition of sport education. 	SI ODC SI NGB SI Coaching SI Innovation

Strategic Pillar	Objective	Action	Lead(s)
Workforce Diversity	Foster an inclusive and equitable workforce culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Deliver sector-wide training programmes on disability awareness, diversity and inclusion, and women in sport to build inclusive workplace cultures and improve understanding of diverse needs. · Provide training and resources to support inclusive recruitment practices, enabling organisations to diversify their talent pools. · Promote awareness of accessibility needs by offering training and guidance on inclusive workspaces and alternative employment models for individuals with disabilities or chronic conditions. 	SI ODC SI WIS SI Disability SI D&I SI NGB SI Participation
	Expand access and pathways into the sport workforce for underrepresented groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop partnerships with outreach programmes, educational institutions, and relevant agencies to engage underrepresented communities and create entry points into the sport workforce. · Establish targeted pipeline programmes to facilitate entry and early career development in sport. · Provide ongoing support and development opportunities for individuals entering through pipeline programmes to progress into leadership and decision-making roles. 	SI ODC SI WIS SI Disability SI D&I SI NGB SI Participation
	Recognise and retain a diverse workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Support initiatives that celebrate the contributions of diverse employees and promote their retention and career progression within the sector. 	SI ODC SI WIS SI Disability SI D&I SI NGB SI Participation SI Comms
International Contribution	Identify pathways and establish strategic relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Establishing a deeper understanding of the various pathways for Irish sports bodies to engage with international federations, including secondments and exchanges. · Build relationships with international bodies and collaborate with government and diplomatic channels to support representation efforts. · Advocate for Irish inclusion in decision-making forums and committees. 	SI HP SI NGB SI ODC SI Comms
	Develop leadership pipeline and capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Provide leadership training, development and mentoring opportunities for identified high-potential sector employees to support a pipeline of administrators who could take on international leadership roles. · Encourage individuals within Irish sporting bodies to apply for roles or attend key networking events within European and international federations. 	SI HP SI NGB SI ODC SI Comms