

IRELAND



Country Para sport Factsheet

February 2026

"Sport For All: Promoting Inclusion and Combating Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities"

This country factsheet was drafted by ACT LLC in collaboration with the Council of Europe, the European Union and other Sport For All joint project partners.

The data in this factsheet is from the "Sport For All: Promoting Inclusion and Combating Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities", a European Union (EU) and Council of Europe joint project, to create a more inclusive sports culture by addressing the barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities in sport and fostering a safe and welcoming sports environments for all. One of the project goals was to generate a comparable, policy-relevant evidence base on disability inclusion in sport across eight countries and identify how Para sport systems are structured, where systemic constraints recur, and which strengthening priorities emerge.

►► To find more information about the project and other countries involved in the project, as well as a synthesis report and an educational toolkit created to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport settings, have a look at the project website:

www.coe.int/sport/sportforall

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Country Context

Indicator	Data
Population (2022 Census)	5,458,600 (CSO, April 2025 estimate)
Estimated number of persons with disabilities	Approximately 1.1 million (22% of the population; Census 2022)
Persons with disabilities participating in sport	32% of persons with a disability participated in sport in the previous 7 days (Sport Ireland ISM 2024). Note: this figure captures self-reported general sport participation, not exclusively organised Para sport; it may include recreational and informal physical activity.
Paralympic Games 2024 (Paris)	29 athletes (9 men; 20 women); Medals - 6
Paralympic Games 2020 (Tokyo)	27 athletes (13 Men; 14 Women); Medals - 7
Paralympic Games 2016 (Rio)	44 athletes (30 men; 14 women); Medals - 11

Population: CSO Population and Migration Estimates (April 2025). Disability prevalence: Census 2022. The 32% participation rate from the ISM 2024 reflects broad sport participation and may not exclusively represent participation in organised Para sport programmes. Sport Ireland (Spórt Éireann) is the statutory authority established by the Sport Ireland Act 2015. Under Section 8, its responsibilities include developing participation and high-performance sport, anti-doping, coaching, child protection, and the Sport Ireland Campus. Aiming for an active Ireland with lifelong sporting benefits, it operates through 65 autonomous National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and 29 Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs)

System Summary

The summary below highlights the main systemic strengths and constraints shaping Para sport development in Ireland.

Key Strengths

- A national network of 29 Sports Inclusion Disability Officers, embedded within Local Sports Partnerships at county and city level, places inclusion capacity directly at the point of community delivery, widely regarded by stakeholders as a transferable model within the countries reviewed.
- National sport policy establishes explicit participation targets for persons with disabilities, operationalised through multi-year sport action plans with implementation accountability assigned to Sport Ireland.
- The national carding system provides equal access to high-performance training, specialist services, and development support for both Olympic and Paralympic athletes.
- Annual nationally representative participation data disaggregated by disability status and gender allows trend monitoring through the Irish Sport Monitor.
- A diversified funding architecture combines core public grants, Dormant Accounts social inclusion funds, European Social Fund Plus, and infrastructure schemes.

Key Gaps

- Despite a strong policy framework, the disability participation gap has widened slightly in recent years, indicating an implementation challenge in converting policy commitments and local programme availability into consistent participation growth.
- The multiplicity of actors, such as Sport Ireland, Paralympics Ireland, 65 NGBs, 29 LSPs, and disability sport organisations creates coordination complexity, with stakeholders noting occasional role ambiguity and duplication.
- Transport barriers and rural access constraints remain significant, limiting the practical reach of otherwise well-designed programmes.

Legal and Policy Framework

Ireland is a State Party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), signed on 30 March 2007 and ratified on 20 March 2018. Provisions related to participation in sport, as set out in Article 30 of the CRPD, are reflected in national legislation and policy documents governing the sport sector.

The core legal framework governing sport in Ireland is established by the Sport Ireland Act 2015, which created Sport Ireland as the national statutory authority responsible for sport development, participation promotion, coordination across sport bodies, and high-performance sport support. While the Act does not explicitly reference Para sport or persons with disabilities, it establishes the institutional mandate under which policies and programmes promoting inclusive sport participation are developed and implemented.

At policy level, the principal framework guiding sport development is the National Sports Policy 2018-2027, which defines long-term objectives for sport participation, governance, and high-performance sport. The policy recognises participation inequalities across population groups, including persons with disabilities, and establishes national targets aimed at increasing sport participation.

Implementation of the policy is operationalised through periodic action plans, most recently the Sports Action Plan 2024-2027, which defines priority measures for sport participation and inclusion. Within this framework, disability sport is defined broadly to include both organised Para sport and wider physical activity participation among persons with disabilities.

Sport Ireland has further articulated its approach through the Disability Inclusion in Sport: Statement of Commitment and Action (2024), which sets out sector-wide commitments aimed at increasing accessibility and participation opportunities for persons with disabilities. The Statement assigns Sport Ireland a leadership role in coordinating disability inclusion efforts across the sport system.

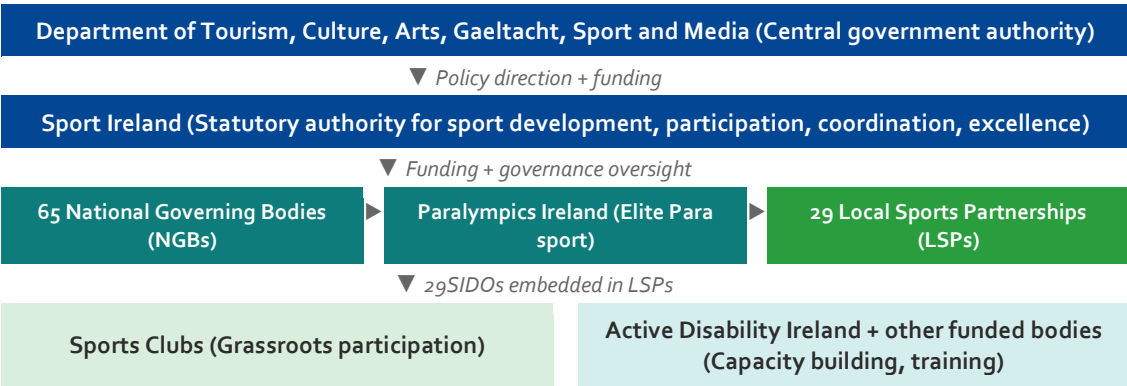
Within the broader disability rights framework, the Disability Act 2005 (as amended) establishes obligations for public bodies to ensure accessibility of public services, facilities, and information. Although the Act does not specifically regulate sport participation, its provisions apply to publicly funded sport infrastructure and services.

Ireland's National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 further promotes participation of persons with disabilities in community life, including sport and physical activity, as part of a wider framework aimed at advancing equal participation and independent living.

In addition, the Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport (2023) establishes national objectives aimed at improving gender equality in sport participation, leadership, coaching, and visibility. While the policy recognises intersectional barriers affecting women and girls, it does not include specific measures focused exclusively on women with disabilities within the Para sport system.

Para sport System Overview

Governance Structure



Responsibility for national sport policy in Ireland lies with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, which defines policy priorities for sport development and allocates public funding to the national sport system.

Implementation of sport policy is carried out by Sport Ireland, the statutory authority responsible for coordinating sport participation programmes, overseeing governance standards across publicly funded sport bodies, and supporting both community sport development and high-performance sport. Sport Ireland therefore functions as the central coordinating and funding body within the national sport system.

Sport Ireland works with 65 National Governing Bodies (NGBs) responsible for the organisation and development of individual sports in Ireland. Within this framework, Para sport is primarily delivered through mainstream sport federations, where NGBs administer both able-bodied and para-disciplines of their respective sports. NGBs organise competitions, develop athlete pathways, train coaches and officials, and coordinate sport participation through affiliated clubs.

Paralympics Ireland serves as the national Paralympic committee and is responsible for Ireland's representation within the international Paralympic movement. Its primary functions include coordinating Ireland's participation in Paralympic competitions and supporting the preparation of athletes competing at elite level. While Paralympics Ireland oversees the high-performance dimension of Para sport, athlete development and programme delivery within individual sport disciplines remain the responsibility of the respective National Governing Bodies.

At the community level, sport participation is delivered primarily through sports clubs affiliated with National Governing Bodies, which provide local training environments and participation opportunities. Clubs therefore constitute the principal entry point into organised sport participation.

Grassroots participation is further supported through 29 Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) operating at county and city level. LSPs promote community sport participation and coordinate local sport initiatives, particularly targeting groups that face participation barriers, including persons with disabilities.

Within the LSP structure, approximately 29 Sports Inclusion Disability Officers (SIDOs) work locally with clubs, schools, community organisations, disability organisations, and governing bodies to facilitate inclusive sport opportunities. SIDOs act as operational connectors linking national participation policies with local sport delivery.

Ireland's Para sport system also includes disability-focused organisations such as Active Disability Ireland, a national organisation that provides training, education, and practical inclusion tools for sport organisations and clubs. Through capacity-building activities, these organisations support the wider sport system in developing inclusive sport environments.

Overall, Para sport governance in Ireland is integrated within the mainstream sport system. Strategic direction and public financing are provided through the Department and Sport Ireland, while National Governing Bodies manage sport-specific development, Paralympics Ireland coordinates international representation and elite preparation, and Local Sports Partnerships together with sports clubs provide participation opportunities at community level.

Funding Mechanisms and Distribution



Public funding for sport in Ireland originates primarily from the national state budget, allocated by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. These resources are transferred to Sport Ireland, which acts as the national funding and development agency responsible for distributing funding across the sport sector. Sport Ireland allocates financial resources to National Governing Bodies (NGBs), Paralympics Ireland, Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs), and other funded sport organisations responsible for programme delivery. Through this structure, Sport Ireland provides both operational funding for sport organisations and targeted

resources for participation programmes, athlete development initiatives, and high-performance sport preparation. Beyond Sport Ireland, public investment is channeled through schools, universities, and local authorities, which fund infrastructure and programs. Collectively, these budgets, including Department of Education and local recreation spending exceed Sport Ireland's total allocation. Additionally, state agencies like the OPW, Coillte, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service are essential in providing accessible sporting pathways for persons with disabilities.

Three principal funding streams support Para sport-related activities within this framework:

- The first stream consists of core annual funding allocated by Sport Ireland to National Governing Bodies, Paralympics Ireland, Local Sports Partnerships, and disability sport organisations. These allocations support the implementation of organisational strategic plans, including participation initiatives, athlete development programmes, coach education, staffing, and administrative functions. Para sport initiatives are typically integrated within these broader sport development programmes managed by NGBs. Special Olympics receives the largest core public grant of any Irish sporting organisation outside of the three major national governing bodies (the Gaelic Athletic Association, Irish Rugby Football Union and Football Association of Ireland).
- The second stream is the Dormant Accounts Fund, administered through Sport Ireland. These resources originate from inactive personal bank accounts and are redirected by the state to social inclusion programmes. Within the sport sector, this supports targeted initiatives aimed at increasing participation among underrepresented groups, including persons with disabilities. Funding is distributed through competitive project calls and typically supports participation programmes, training activities, equipment provision, and accessibility improvements.
- The third stream consists of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programmes, which provide multi-year project-based funding supporting inclusion and participation initiatives in sport. These programmes complement national funding and are typically used to support structured participation programmes aimed at improving access to sport for persons with disabilities.

In addition, capital grant schemes provide investment in sports infrastructure, including the development of accessible sport facilities and specialised sport equipment. These grants are allocated through competitive funding mechanisms and are accessible to sport organisations, National Governing Bodies, and community clubs. Community sports clubs generally access funding indirectly through National Governing Bodies, infrastructure grants, or Local Sports Partnership initiatives, and many rely on volunteer contributions and local fundraising to sustain activities.

Para sport financing in Ireland is characterised by a multi-stream public funding architecture coordinated by Sport Ireland, where national government funding is distributed through multiple institutional channels to support participation programmes, athlete development, and sport system infrastructure.

Coordination Mechanisms

Coordination among stakeholders involved in Para sport development in Ireland is integrated within the broader governance framework of the national sport system and is primarily facilitated through Sport Ireland, which acts as the central coordinating body responsible for strategic planning, funding distribution, and governance oversight across the sport sector.

At the national level, coordination among sport organisations and disability inclusion actors is supported through the Disability Sports Group (DSG). The DSG brings together disability sport organisations, National Governing Bodies, and relevant stakeholders to support policy alignment, information exchange, and coordination of disability inclusion initiatives across the sport system. Through this platform, participating organisations share programme information, discuss operational challenges, and contribute to the development of sector-wide inclusion measures.

Strategic coordination across the sport sector is further supported through the Sports Leadership Group (SLG), which brings together senior representatives from key sport institutions. The SLG provides a forum for aligning policy priorities and supporting coordination during policy development and implementation phases.

At the local level, operational coordination of inclusive sport participation is carried out through the Sports Inclusion Disability Officer (SIDO) network, embedded within Local Sports Partnerships. SIDOs act as operational connectors linking community sport programmes, sports clubs, schools, disability organisations, and National Governing Bodies. Through this structure, national sport participation policies are translated into locally delivered programmes aimed at increasing participation among persons with disabilities.

Within the elite sport environment, Paralympics Ireland is responsible for coordinating Ireland's participation in international Paralympic competitions and overseeing preparation of the national Paralympic team. Athlete development and programme delivery within individual sports are managed by the respective National Governing Bodies, which collaborate with Paralympics Ireland on athlete preparation and international competition participation.

Although these mechanisms provide structured platforms for coordination, the presence of multiple organisations operating at national and local levels requires continuous collaboration and information exchange among stakeholders. Coordination therefore relies on regular engagement through sector forums, programme partnerships, and collaborative planning processes linking Sport Ireland, National Governing Bodies, Paralympics Ireland, Local Sports Partnerships, and disability sport organisations.

Data Collection

Participation in sport and physical activity in Ireland is monitored primarily through Sport Ireland's Irish Sport Monitor (ISM), a national survey instrument collecting regular data on sport participation among adults aged 16 and over.

The ISM provides national statistics on sport participation, including participation among persons with disabilities and gender differences in sport engagement. According to ISM 2024, 32% of persons with disabilities reported participating in sport in the previous seven days.

However, this indicator measures self-reported participation in sport and physical activity rather than participation specifically in organised Para sport programmes. The survey therefore provides an overview of general sport engagement but does not allow for precise measurement of participation in structured Para sport activities or federation-based sport pathways.

In addition, the ISM relies on survey responses rather than administrative sport registration data, which limits the availability of detailed statistics on athlete development pathways, club participation, or discipline-specific engagement in Para sport. ISM measures frequency, duration, intensity, location and context of active participation. It also measures club membership, volunteering and sport spectating. Finally, flexi modules are run to measure NGB membership.

Ireland publishes disability-disaggregated sport participation data through the ISM programme. The Sport Ireland Insights Portal provides intersectional analysis of disability against gender, county (region), age group, and from 2025 onwards disability type. More detailed administrative information on Para sport participation is held by National Governing Bodies, Paralympics Ireland, and Sport Ireland programme records, but these data are maintained across multiple institutional sources and are not consolidated within a single national monitoring framework.

As a result, while Ireland benefits from a well-developed national sport participation survey system, comprehensive statistics on organised Para sport participation disaggregated by disability type, gender, region, or age group are not systematically published, which may limit the ability to track participation trends and assess programme outcomes across the Para sport sector.

Participation Pathway



⚠ Transition Gap: Comprehensive policy framework does not consistently translate into increased participation outcomes. Key challenge lies in effective implementation rather than policy presence.

Entry

Entry into Para sport typically occurs through community sport clubs affiliated with National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnership participation programmes, and initiatives delivered through the Sports Inclusion Disability Officer (SIDO) network. SIDOs work with schools, community organisations, disability groups, and sport clubs to connect persons with disabilities with available participation opportunities. Additional entry points include rehabilitation centres and outreach activities organised by sport organisations, which promote sport participation and identify potential athletes.

Development

Athlete development takes place primarily within sport-specific National Governing Body programmes. NGBs organise competitions, training programmes, and coach education while supporting athlete progression through club and regional competition structures. Development opportunities therefore depend largely on the organisational capacity and programme structures established within individual sports.

Elite Preparation

Athletes progressing to the highest competitive level enter the high-performance pathway coordinated by National Governing Bodies of sport and Paralympics Ireland, which is responsible for preparing and managing Ireland's participation in Paralympic Games and international competitions. Athletes meeting performance criteria may receive carded athlete status, providing financial assistance and access to national high-performance training support. Rather than one-off medal bonuses, athletes receive ongoing support through grant schemes and high-performance training programmes.

Transition Gap

Ireland has adopted a comprehensive policy and institutional framework promoting sport participation among persons with disabilities. However, stakeholders report that policy commitments do not always translate into measurable participation growth at community level, indicating challenges in programme implementation and outreach.

Key Challenges

Despite the presence of an established institutional framework and sustained public investment, several structural and operational challenges continue to affect the development of Para sport participation in Ireland.

Implementation gap between policy commitments and participation outcomes

- Ireland has adopted a comprehensive policy framework promoting sport participation among persons with disabilities. However, participation outcomes have not increased at the pace expected, indicating challenges in translating policy commitments into measurable participation growth at community level.
- While participation among persons with disabilities remains stable in national surveys, the disability participation gap has widened slightly in recent years.

Governance and coordination complexity

- The Para sport system involves multiple actors, including Sport Ireland, National Governing Bodies, Paralympics Ireland, Local Sports Partnerships, and disability sport organisations. While coordination mechanisms exist, stakeholders report that the multiplicity of actors and overlapping mandates can sometimes lead to unclear roles or duplication of activities.

Participation barriers

- Transport remains a significant barrier, particularly in rural areas where reaching sport facilities and training locations may require long travel distances.
- Access to sport opportunities also varies geographically, as the availability and capacity of community sport clubs differ between regions.

Institutional capacity constraints

- Some coaches and sport personnel report limited confidence or training in working with persons with disabilities, indicating a need for additional education and professional development focused on inclusive coaching practices.
- Financial barriers may also affect participation at early development stages, when athletes and families often cover travel, training, or equipment costs before accessing structured high-performance support.

Inclusion and representation gaps

- Participation of women with disabilities remains limited within organised Para sport structures. While gender equality policies exist within the sport sector, specific measures addressing the intersection of gender and disability are not consistently integrated within sport programmes.
- Representation of persons with disabilities within leadership and decision-making roles across sport organisations remains limited, reducing the influence of lived experience in programme design and governance.

Visibility and recognition

- Paralympic sport receives lower public visibility and commercial exposure compared with Olympic sport, which may affect sponsorship opportunities, media coverage, and broader public awareness of Para sport achievements.

Opportunities

Several institutional and policy features provide opportunities to strengthen the development of Para sport participation in Ireland.

- The Sports Inclusion Disability Officer (SIDO) network provides an established national-to-local coordination structure connecting community sport programmes, clubs, schools, and disability organisations. Continued investment in this network creates opportunities to expand inclusive participation at local level.
- Active Disability Ireland's national mandate to provide training, education, and inclusion support positions the organisation as a potential capacity-building hub for clubs, coaches, and sport organisations implementing inclusive programmes.

- The upcoming conclusion of the National Sports Policy 2018–2027 cycle provides an opportunity to integrate more explicit disability-specific participation targets and implementation measures in the next national sport strategy.
- Ireland’s diversified funding structure, combining national sport funding, Dormant Accounts social inclusion programmes, European Social Fund Plus initiatives, and infrastructure grants, provides multiple channels through which targeted participation programmes for persons with disabilities can be expanded.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1.

Sport Ireland, in cooperation with Paralympics Ireland, National Governing Bodies, and Local Sports Partnerships:

establish a clearer coordination framework defining roles, responsibilities, and decision-making mechanisms for Para sport development across national and local levels.

Recommendation 2.

Sport Ireland in cooperation with Paralympics Ireland, National Governing Bodies, and Local Sports Partnerships:

develop a structured national Para sport participation pathway clarifying progression from community-level participation through development programmes to elite preparation within the high-performance system.

Recommendation 3.

Sport Ireland, together with Active Disability Ireland and National Governing Bodies:

expand targeted coach education and professional development programmes focusing on inclusive coaching practices and disability-specific training.

Recommendation 4.

Sport Ireland with support of Local Authorities, Department of Education, Health Services Executive (HSE). Cooperation and alignment of Coimisiún na Meán sports strategy with Sport Ireland’s visibility pillar:

improve transparency of Para sport financing by clearly mapping funding flows between national programmes, National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships, and community sport initiatives.

Recommendation 5.

Local Sports Partnerships:

expand community-level Para sport opportunities by strengthening partnerships with schools, disability organisations, and local sport clubs, particularly in regions where participation opportunities remain limited.

Recommendation 6.

Sport Ireland and National Governing Bodies:

strengthen the collection and analytical use of participation data on persons with disabilities, including gender-disaggregated indicators, to support monitoring of participation trends and evidence-based policy planning.

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