



LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football



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Introduction

The *LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football* study is the first dedicated quantitative study regarding the climate of LGBTQI+ inclusivity in football settings in the Republic of Ireland. Through the study, we explore the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in football, the inclusivity measures in place, and make recommendations to improve the climate across football in Ireland.

The literature review of this project demonstrates that access to and participation in sport is a human right, one that bolsters individuals' ability to exercise additional rights and cultivates extensive benefits for the individual, their community, and wider society. However, many marginalised communities, including the LGBTQI+ community, continue to face barriers to their participation. The literature reveals that through the implementation of positive and protective factors in football settings, LGBTQI+ people stand to benefit from a sense of belonging, support, and acceptance, positively contributing to their wellbeing. While there have been positive actions and commitments undertaken to make football more inclusive in Ireland, further work is necessary.

At the heart of this research was a desire to understand the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in football in Ireland, and the ways in which participation could be fostered and grown among the community. The study paid particular attention to LGBTQI+ people's experiences of participation, openness, discrimination, and harassment in football, as well as the barriers they encounter and the positive and protective factors promoting participation and a climate of inclusivity in football.

Within the LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football study, the vast majority of respondents who identified as LGBTQI+ people playing football in Ireland are playing on LGBTQI+ specific teams. LGBTQI+ clubs provide participants with a safe space where their identities feel seen, respected, and understood; they facilitate their reengagement with football; they foster camaraderie and belonging, and meaningfully demonstrate the inclusion and acceptance of trans players. The findings of this research show that while there is an increasing climate of inclusivity, this is often being championed by specific clubs, and additional work is needed to bolster inclusivity across football more broadly. 40% of participants felt that football is generally not a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQI+ people; over half (55%) of participants felt that homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia is more common in football than in general society, and 58% of participants believe that football clubs do not do enough to

include LGBTQI+ people. Additionally, homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic remarks are a consistent issue in football spaces and are a significant barrier to LGBTQI+ participation. Participants shared that such instances of harassment made them stop participating in football; made them less likely to come out in football settings and caused damage to their mental health, their confidence, and their self-image. However, participants consistently identified positive and protective factors and facilitators to their participation in football, namely LGBTQI+-specific football clubs; inclusion policies; training and education initiatives, and awareness campaigns. In response to the findings of the research, the report includes a series of recommendations with a view to advancing LGBTQI+ people's participation, acceptance, and inclusion in football in Ireland.

Sport is a hugely significant aspect of many people's lives, including LGBTQI+ people. Participation in sport provides a wide range of benefits; it improves people's physical and mental health, and it fosters social connectedness and community belonging. All of these benefits coalesce around a shared investment, interest and love of a sport. Sport is deeply ingrained in Irish society and culture and must be understood as a meaningful intervention in promoting and safeguarding individuals' wellbeing. The benefits of sport ought to be available to anyone who wishes to engage with it, and when operating from an equitable, inclusive and holistic standpoint, these benefits can serve as a salve to the challenges individuals face in their everyday lives. Sport offers us all a reprieve, an outlet, a community, a safe space, somewhere to be ourselves.

This research has provided much-needed insight into the existing climate of inclusivity in football in Ireland for LGBTQI+ people. It identifies the existing barriers and challenges to bolstering participation, but more importantly, it provides us with tangible solutions, interventions, opportunities for growth and change to make football in Ireland more accepting, inclusive and reflective of the diversity within our communities. I would like to sincerely thank Rethink Ireland for funding this project, Professor Agnes Higgins for her support and Bohemian Football Club for their steadfast commitment to LGBTQI+ inclusion, social justice and community building. Finally, my endless thanks to all participants who gave up their time and shared their experiences as part of this research project.

”

Matty Kennedy

Adjunct Assistant Professor, Trinity College Dublin
November 2025

Foreword

We at Rethink Ireland are delighted to welcome the *LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football Report*. Our organisation backs bold ideas and sustainable solutions to some of Ireland's most pressing social issues, working towards a more just, equal and sustainable Ireland for all. We know that when communities come together to create spaces of belonging, innovation flourishes and change becomes possible.

Our vision for 2030 is an Ireland where everyone believes equality benefits us all. One where minority communities are equipped to speak for themselves and enter powerful decision-making positions. Where government and society actively protect the rights of Ireland's most marginalised communities. This research is a step in that direction, and we are proud to fund it through the HeadStart Fund, a three-year €3 million fund created by Rethink Ireland, the Z Zurich Foundation and the HSE.

Dedicated to increasing mental health supports and improving wellbeing for young people across Ireland, the HeadStart Fund supports 10 innovative projects, including Bohemian Football Club's Pride on the Pitch. Their unique programme establishes a welcoming, inclusive and accepting space for young LGBTQI+ footballers, simultaneously providing mental health resources and opportunity for connection.

Over the past two years, more than 120 young people have participated, engaging in healthy physical activity, building bonds with teammates and building resilience. Pride on the Pitch is a shining example of how football can foster social cohesion and improve wellbeing, strengthening both individuals and communities. We know there is more to come for communities across the country.

The *LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football* research was funded in tandem with Pride on the Pitch to provide critical insights into how football can become a more inclusive and equitable space for all. The study invites us to imagine what Irish football could look like when every person feels valued and celebrated for being simply their own self.

Football holds a unique position in Irish society. It is more than a game - it is a shared language and a cornerstone of community life across Ireland. This research makes it clear that inclusivity in Irish football is not yet universal. For far too many LGBTQI+ people in Ireland, football is not always a place where they can safely and authentically be themselves.

Homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic remarks remain a persistent issue in football settings, often driving players to withdraw from the sport. These experiences don't just harm individuals, they also diminish our clubs, our communities, and the integrity of the game itself. Every time a player feels they must hide who they are, or step away because of discrimination, we all lose.

However, the report also shines a light on hope. It shows us that the LGBTQI+ footballers currently playing on LGBTQI+ specific teams describe these spaces as safe, welcoming, and affirming of their identities. Within these teams, players find a sense of belonging that allows them to re-engage with the sport they love, to build confidence, and to thrive both on and off the pitch.

These groups, like Pride on the Pitch, demonstrate in tangible ways what inclusion looks like in action: camaraderie, respect, and solidarity that extends far beyond football itself. It shows that when football is made truly inclusive, everyone benefits. Participation grows. Player retention improves. Club culture strengthens. Mental health outcomes are enhanced. And the sport becomes a more accurate reflection of the diversity and creativity that define Ireland today.

With these findings, we have a path forward. Inclusion policies, education, and visibility can be powerful protective factors. The recommendations outlined here provide a clear roadmap for progress, one that calls for leadership, collaboration, and courage. They challenge us all - government departments, the FAI, Sport Ireland, community organisations, and clubs - to take decisive, measurable action. I encourage you to take these findings to heart, so together, we can ensure that every pitch, club and game is a place where every player and supporter can truly belong.

I want to extend my congratulations to Trinity College Dublin and the Bohemian Football Club for the publication of this report. It is incredible to see all your work come to fruition. Thank you for championing inclusivity and leading the way.

I also want to say thank you to Z Zurich Foundation and the HSE for their support and partnership on the HeadStart Fund, and consequently, this research. Together, we are proud to support the outcomes and the work it will inspire.

At Rethink Ireland, we know that inclusion is not optional. It is the foundation community is built on, requiring a continuous process of listening, learning and co-creating change. The voices captured in this report are central to that process, and their honesty and courage are what make this research powerful. They remind us that progress begins with visibility, and that true equality requires not only policy but an everyday commitment to respect, understanding, and solidarity.

”

Deirdre Mortell

CEO, Rethink Ireland
November 2025

Preface

Dalymount Park has been host to so many notable occasions in its one hundred and twenty four year history, from Liam Brady's senior debut for Ireland defeating the mighty Soviet Union by three goals to nil in 1974, to Bob Marley's last outdoor concert in the summer of 1980, to the first ever match played in Europe (and victorious too) by the Palestine women's team on 15th May 2024 against the senior women's team of Bohemian FC.

Some moments in history catch the limelight. They steal our attention, captivate us in our search for meaning and identity, and are returned to time and time again, for years or decades or longer to follow.

Other events are quieter, but not necessarily less significant. One of those occurred in 2017, a year after the founding of the LGBTQI+ supporters group GayBohs and the unveiling of its fan flag. At a home League of Ireland game for Bohemian FC, the Pride Flag was first raised at the Tramway End of Dalymount Park. There it has flown for every home game since, now almost a decade on. A sign of solidarity. A gesture of friendship. A welcome.

A lot happened in Ireland, almost ten years ago, to help advance and progress the rights and freedoms available to LGBTQI+ people in our country. Marriage Equality. The Gender Recognition Act. Increased visibility and representation for members of the queer community - in the media, in public discourse, in society more generally.

But the path of liberation is not linear, nor everywhere. It is not true to say that the momentum of progress is always present or that it reaches into each of our lives and experiences most or all of the time. Growing up as an LGBTQI+ player or a supporter, for example, can make football feel like a lonely or unwelcoming place.

And so, that's why, as members of The Bohemian Football Club, we are so grateful and proud that we have been able to commission this first-of-its-kind research study into LGBTQI+ inclusivity in Irish football. Football is for the many, not the few, and in its simplicity and beauty, it has a power that can be harnessed as a force for good.

Bohemian FC stands proudly with LGBTQI+ people in Irish football (and further afield) – players, coaches, supporters, officials, volunteers, employees – in reaffirming their place and their belonging in the sport. May this research study, in conjunction with ongoing and future work by a wide variety of other stakeholders, play some small, but significant, role in the continuing path to make football in Ireland more open, safe, accessible, inclusive and respectful for all. Let the history of our sport not just be about the famous victories or the noisy occasions. The quiet and steady path of change is just as important.

”

Mark Lane, Aaron Matthews¹, Jim McElroy

Bohemian Football Club

November 2025

¹ This is a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the individual.

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♦ Jim McElroy	Bohemian Football Club
♦ Aaron Matthews ²	Bohemian Football Club
♦ Jimmy Dignam	Bohemian Football Club
♦ Mark Lane	Bohemian Football Club
♦ Cameron Molloy Moules	Football Association of Ireland
♦ Ruadhán Ó Críodáin	ShoutOut
♦ Jamie Farrelly	Dublin Devils
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♦ Dr Linda O’Sullivan	Consultation Specialist
♦ Sinead Taylor	Footballer
♦ James Curry	Transgender Equality Network Ireland
♦ Ciarán Murphy	Sport Ireland

We are also indebted to all the organisations and individuals who assisted us with advertising the survey and those who participated in stakeholder workshops informing the recommendations of this study. We would also like to acknowledge the generous support of this research from Trinity College Dublin staff, Professor Agnes Higgins, and Carmel Downes.

We would like to thank Rethink Ireland for their generous support of this research, in particular, Deirdre Moretll, Caroline Madden and Emily O’Flynn.

² This is a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the individual.

Glossary

Asexual or Ace is a term to describe someone who experiences limited or no sexual attraction.

Biphobia is a dislike, fear, or hatred of bisexual people.

Bisexual or Bi is a term used to describe someone who is attracted to more than one gender, for example, both men and women.

Cisgender or Cis refers to someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

Coming out is a process that involves developing an awareness of one’s LGBTQI+ identity, accepting one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, choosing to share the information with others, and building a positive LGBTQI+ identity. It not only involves coming out, but staying out and dealing with the potential challenges that one might encounter as an LGBTQI+ person.

Demi-girl is a term to refer to someone who only partially (not wholly) identifies as a girl or woman, whatever their assigned sex at birth.

Demi-boy is someone who only partially (not wholly) identifies as a boy or man, whatever their assigned sex at birth.

Gay is a term used to describe someone who is attracted to people of the same gender.

Gender expression describes how we show our gender through our clothes, hair, etc.

Gender fluid is one of a number of terms people might use to describe the experience of having a gender that varies. This may vary over time, or in another way, for example, according to different environments / settings.

Gender identity refers to how a person identifies with a gender category. For example, a person may identify as either a man or woman, or in some cases as neither, both or something else.

Gender non-conforming or gender diverse is an umbrella term for the wide variety of gender identities that exist outside of the binary of man or woman and do not conform to traditional gender roles.

Genderqueer is a term used to describe someone who possesses identities that fall outside of the widely accepted gender binary.

Homophobia is a dislike, fear, or hatred of lesbian and gay people.

Internalised homophobia is the homophobia of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person towards their own sexual orientation. It has been described as the conscious or unconscious incorporation of society’s homophobia into the individual. It can be recognised or unrecognised by the individual, but has been found to lead to struggle and tension, sometimes severe, for a person when dealing with their sexual orientation and identity.

Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations that do not fit typical binary notions of male and female bodies, for example, variations in genetic, hormonal, or physical sex characteristics.

LGBT is an acronym for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender’.

LGBTI is an acronym for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex’.

LGBTQI is an acronym for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex’.

LGBTQI+ stands for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex’ with the ‘+’ signifying inclusivity to all sexual and gender identities.

LGBTQI+-specific is a term used to describe services, programmes, groups and activities that are aimed at and cater specifically to LGBTQI+ people.

Lesbian is a term used to describe a woman who is attracted to other women. Some non-binary people and other members of the LGBTQI+ community may also identify with this term.

Misgendering is the act of using the wrong pronouns or gendered language when talking to, or about, someone.

Non-binary is one of a number of terms people might use to describe the experience of having a gender that is neither male nor female, both male and female, and/or between, beyond, or unrelated to the binary categories of man and woman. Some people use it as an umbrella term, encompassing a spectrum of experiences.

Pansexual is a term to describe someone whose romantic and/or sexual attraction towards others is not limited by sex assignment, gender identity, or gender expression.

Queer is an umbrella term used to describe people who are not heterosexual and/or are not cisgender. Queer was used as a slur against the LGBTQI+ community for many years and still can be. However, the word has been reclaimed by LGBTQI+ communities, and many now embrace the term as one denoting any gender identity or sexuality that does not fit society’s traditional ideas about gender or sexuality. Queer may also be used to indicate people’s identification with a politically alternative perspective to what some might see as the more assimilationist perspectives of the LGBTQI+ communities.

Questioning is the process of exploring your sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

Sex assigned at birth refers to the designation of a person at birth as male or female based on their anatomy (genitalia and/or reproductive organs) or biology (chromosomes and/or hormones).

Sexual orientation refers to an individual’s sexual and romantic attraction to other people.

Straight or Heterosexual is a term to describe someone who is attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Transgender or Trans is an umbrella term describing a person’s gender identity that does not match their assigned sex at birth. This word is also used as an umbrella term to describe some groups of people who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression.

Transphobia is a dislike, fear, or hatred of people who are transgender or people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the traditional binary categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’.

Literature Review

LGBTQI+ Sport Literature in Ireland: The Landscape

The LGBTQI+ sport literature landscape in Ireland is limited; however, what is available provides some meaningful context for this research. To date, in Ireland, there has never been an empirical exploration of LGBTQI+ people’s experiences in football contexts. In addition, there is a dearth of research exploring LGBTQI+ people’s experiences of participation in other forms of sport in an Irish context. Existing scholarship in Ireland in relation to the LGBTQI+ population’s health and wellbeing, however, highlights the importance of LGBTQI+ inclusive sports clubs in increasing positive health and wellbeing outcomes for LGBTQI+ people (Higgins *et al.*, 2024). In addition to the positive health and wellbeing outcomes for LGBTQ+ people as a result of participation in sport, research also identifies LGBTQI+ sporting groups as fostering social connectedness, support, and mutual reciprocity amongst those engaged (Ceartha *et al.*, 2019). Significantly, this benefit has been largely unrecognised in the health and social policy fields in Ireland, and an investment in such initiatives as LGBTQI+ sporting groups may be increasingly well placed to foster community involvement and address social isolation amongst this marginalised cohort.

Whilst these benefits of sporting groups have been identified, it has also been acknowledged that homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are significant barriers to LGBTQI+ people’s participation in sport (Higgins *et al.*, 2024). This finding is reiterated across LGBTQI+ school climate research conducted by Belong To – LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland (2022; 2019), wherein Physical Education (P.E) and school sport were both cited as fraught aspects of LGBTQ+ students’ school environment and frequently avoided. Related research has highlighted the limitations of individualised responses towards facilitating inclusion for trans young people in P.E and school sports in Ireland (Neary and McBride, 2021). This research demonstrates how the gendered nature of P.E and school sports makes it increasingly challenging for trans students to participate. In addition, this research also highlights how individualised processes of inclusion are often rendered ineffective when they do not aim to attend to the broader issues of exclusion and discrimination experienced by trans young people in relation to P.E and sport participation, but rather reinforce the gendered dynamics of sport (Neary and McBride, 2021). In research undertaken by Kilkenny Recreation & Sports Partnership (KRSP), *Equality in the Field: A literature Review and Mixed Method Study of LGBTQ+ Youth Participation in Sport*, 63% of LGBTQ+ young people aged 13-18 and 47% of LGBTQ+ young people aged 19-24 strongly agreed or agreed that they would like to participate in more sports and physical activity (Kilkenny Recreation & Sports Partnership, 2024). Additionally, 73% of LGBTQ+ young people aged 13-18 and 58% of LGBTQ+ young people aged 19-24 strongly agreed or agreed that they experienced or witnessed discrimination in a sports setting (Kilkenny Recreation & Sports Partnership, 2024). This study found that both cohorts of LGBTQ+ youth identified homophobia as a barrier to their participation and cited inclusive policies and training for coaches and teachers as a meaningful intervention towards increasing LGBTQ+ youth participation in sport.

The *Irish Sports Monitor Report 2021*, carried out annually by Sport Ireland, captured data insights regarding both public opinion about diversity in sport participation and LGBTQI+

people's participation in sport in Ireland (Sport Ireland, 2021). This report found that members of the LGBTI+ community are less likely (21%) to be members of a sports club than heterosexual people (32%), despite being equally likely (both 41%) to play a sport. Additionally, this report noted that 59% of participants agree that sport clubs actively welcome individuals from the LGBTI+ community, and 44% of participants reported having club members/volunteers who are members of the LGBTI+ community. Data published in the most recent *Irish Sports Monitor Report 2024* found that participation among LGBTQ+ people has increased by nine percentage points since 2021, reaching 58%. Despite this progress, the rate remains four percentage points lower than their heterosexual counterparts, who record a 62% participation level. Additionally, this report identified a continued significant disparity in social participation in sport between members of the LGBTQ+ community and cisgender, heterosexual people. Thirty-eight percent of participants in the LGBTQ+ community reported social participation in sport in comparison to 54% among cisgender, heterosexual people. This 16% gap highlights a significant challenge in fostering stronger connections and a greater sense of belonging through sport (Sport Ireland, 2025). Other pieces of public opinion polling highlight the ongoing challenges facing trans people's participation in sport given the *The Being LGBTIQ+ in Ireland* report revealed negative attitudes towards transgender people's participation in sport; with 33% of people agreeing that transgender men should be able to take part in men's sports, while only 21% agreed that transgender women should be allowed to participate in women's sports (Higgins et al., 2024, p. 201).

Reflective of the sparse research in an Irish context, consultations undertaken to inform the development of Sport Ireland's *Policy on Diversity and Inclusion in Sport* (2022) highlighted a range of barriers and challenges for the LGBTI+ community to participation in sport. These include 1) anxiety or fear of experiencing homophobia, prejudice, discrimination, bullying and exclusion, 2) attitudinal barriers, not feeling welcome or included within sport and physical activity settings, 3) lack of representation in sport and physical activity role models, 4) awareness and access to clubs and facilities and 5) preference for non-competitive, individual sport because of low confidence, self-esteem, or perceived lack of ability. The impact of these barriers can be witnessed in the finding contributing to the policy's development that 56% of sports clubs are unaware of any members or volunteers from the LGBTI+ community. Relatedly, Trust Ireland's *Sport As It Should Be: A rights-based approach to inclusion in Irish Sport* (Carney and Carthy, 2023) found that LGBTI+ people in Ireland experience the following barriers to participation in sport: 1) lack of opportunities to contribute to sport policy development; 2) poor diversity at the governance level; 3) lack of provision of LGBTI+ specific clubs; and 4) challenges accessing inclusive facilities. As a means of addressing these barriers, several facilitators to participation were also identified, including the provision of LGBTI+ sports clubs; access to inclusive facilities; the establishment of an LGBTI+ inclusion body or role within Sport Ireland, and explicit trans inclusion guidelines. In order to achieve these facilitators, *Sport As It Should Be* identified the need for dedicated, streamlined funding for LGBTI+ specific inclusion in sport and engagement with international sporting bodies and associations with experience in fostering LGBTI+ inclusion (Carney and Carthy, 2023). As outlined, research in an Irish context regarding LGBTQI+ participation in sport is limited and as acknowledged in Ireland's *National LGBTQI+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028* there is a "need for improved quality of data, including disaggregated data and the need to address gaps in understanding the needs of the LGBTQI+ community, with a particular focus on diversity" specifically in relation to sport (2024a, p. 36).

International LGBTQI+ Sport Literature: Ireland in Context

International research across a variety of sporting contexts evidence that LGBTQI+ people regularly experience discrimination and exclusion in sport (Baiocco et al., 2018; Brackenridge et al., 2007; Cunningham et al., 2014; Demers, 2017; Englefield et al., 2016; GLSEN, 2013; Greenspan et al., 2019; Kokkonen, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kulick et al., 2019; Mumberson, 2014; Smith et al., 2012; Stonewall, 2009, 2012; Symons et al., 2010). The most comprehensive data comes from two international studies (34 countries) with a combined sample of over 12,000 participants. The most recent study (Menzel et al., 2019) was the first to recruit LGBTQ+ participants from all EU countries (N = 5524) and the first to recruit a large international sample of trans participants (16.7% of the overall sample). Menzel et al. (2019) reported that 82% of participants had witnessed homophobic or transphobic language in sport in the last six months, and 90% considered homophobia and transphobia to be a current problem in sport settings. Trans women (46.2%) were the most likely to report that they had been the victim of direct discrimination in the last year. The study by Menzel et al. (2019) replicated many of the findings of earlier research (Denison & Kitchen, 2015) that focused on the sport experiences of LGB people (N = 7000) from six countries (USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, NZ, Australia). From an Irish perspective, out of 501 Irish participants, 43% believed that spectator stands are the most likely setting for homophobia to occur (Denison and Kitchen, 2015). Furthermore, 75% of Irish participants believed that youth sports are not safe and welcoming for LGB youths. The same number reported having witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport. From those respondents, 54% of gay men, 40% of lesbians, and 19% of straight men reported being a victim of homophobia, with homophobic slurs and language being the most prevalent form. What's more, out of those who reported being a victim, 83% of gay men and 89% of lesbians reported experiencing homophobic verbal abuse while participating in or watching sports. Significantly, only 1% of Irish respondents believe that LGB people are 'completely accepted' in sports, while almost 50% believe they are 'not accepted at all' or only 'accepted a little'. The findings of this study resulted in Ireland being ranked fifth out of the six English-speaking countries examined for inclusion and acceptance of LGB people in sport (Denison and Kitchen, 2015). Additionally, a recent secondary analysis of the data from the Denison and Kitchen (2015) study found young LGB participants who came out to their teammates were significantly more likely to report that they had been the target of homophobic abuse than those who were not out (Denison et al., 2020).

In a football context, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that football is becoming more inclusive of LGBTQI+ people (Cleland, 2015; Cleland et al., 2023; Magrath, 2018, 2021; Magrath et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2017; Stonewall, 2023). However, much of this research focused on the attitudes of cisgender, heterosexual populations towards LGBTQI+ participation in football (Dixon et al., 2023; Magrath, 2018; Magrath and Anderson, 2022; Walser et al., 2021) rather than the experiences of LGBTQI+ people participating in football. Thus, despite documented improvements in anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes, many LGBTQI+ individuals still report a lack of a climate of inclusivity in football. In the absence of this climate of inclusivity, LGBTQI+ players are less likely to come out in football settings or feel discouraged from participating in football and continue to face discrimination and harassment (Magrath and Anderson 2022). However, additional literature reveals that the implementation of positive and protective factors in football settings enable LGBTQI+ people to benefit from a sense of belonging,

support, and acceptance which positively contributes to their wellbeing (Callwood and Smith, 2019; Magrath and Scott, 2019).

While attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people are improving in sport settings, particularly amongst young people, a large and diverse body of quantitative and qualitative research has found that LGBTQI+ people continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in sport settings. Taken together, the available quantitative evidence suggests discrimination and barriers to participation continue to be an issue within sports contexts, negatively impacting LGBTQI+ people's mental health and wellbeing (Denison *et al.*, 2021). Meaningfully, the findings by researchers using quantitative methods affirm the findings of those who have examined LGBTQI+ discrimination experienced by LGBTQI+ people in sport from a qualitative perspective (Caudwell, 2011, 2014; Greenspan *et al.*, 2019; Hargie *et al.*, 2017; Melton and Cunningham, 2012; Petty and Trussell, 2018; Sartore-Baldwin, 2012). This is further illustrated by consistency with the findings of researchers who have reviewed and synthesised the available qualitative evidence (Kavoura and Kokkonen, 2020; Landi *et al.*, 2020; Perez-Samaniego *et al.*, 2019).

Access to Sport as a Human Right

While gaps remain in the literature on LGBTQI+ people's experiences in sport nationally and internationally, there have been significant policy developments in recent years aimed at addressing the barriers LGBTQI+ people experience in sport participation in Ireland. It is meaningful in this context to consider the positioning of access to sport as a human right as outlined in several international charters which are applicable to Ireland. Crucially, *The Olympic Charter* asserts that:

The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have access to the practice of sport, without discrimination of any kind in respect of internationally recognised human rights and mandates access without discrimination (IOC, 2025, p.8).

”

This assertion is affirmed additionally in the Council of Europe's *Sport for All Charter* which is a guiding document for governments in designing and implementing legal and policy frameworks for sport. This charter provides that “access to sport for all is considered to be a fundamental right” and that “all human beings have an inalienable right of access to sport in a safe environment...which is essential for their personal development and instrumental in the exercise of the rights to health, education, culture and participation in the life of the community” (Council of Europe, 2021, art 10.). Such commitments to recognising the importance of access to sport for individuals' personal development and their ability to exercise additional human rights are further affirmed by UNESCO's *International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport 2015* (ICPEPAS) which is a rights-based declaration that recognises the importance of sport and the inherent links between sport, human rights and dignity (UNESCO, 2015, art. 1, preamble 1 and 10, art 9.1). This intrinsic relationship between access to safe and equitable participation in sport and human rights is also demonstrated by *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015). Alongside these examples of sport as a human right, the right to participate in sport is explicitly referenced in article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The right to sport is also a part of the right to education found in articles 13 and 14 of ICESCR, article 10 of CEDAW, articles 28 and 29 of CRC, and article 24 of CRPD. Additionally, physical education is considered a core aspect of the right to education by the UN human rights treaty bodies. Taken together, these references demonstrate the long and continuing history of recognising sport not only as a fundamental human right but also as a vehicle for the facilitation of other human rights, namely the right to mental and physical health, dignity, education, expression of cultural life, and work.

Access to Sport: Policy Context in Ireland

In an Irish context, Trust Ireland's *Sport As It Should Be: A rights-based approach to inclusion in Irish Sport* highlights that Ireland has obligations to human rights in and through sport from the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* and the UN human rights treaties. Under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, the responsibility for promoting, protecting, and respecting these rights sits not just with the State apparatus itself but all those engaged in service provision or in receipt of any public funds. Therefore, the State and the sport sector have duties to ensure human rights in and through sport are being implemented. Thus, as seen in recent years, many national policies in sport, physical education, physical activity, health, and inclusion include commitments that relate to human rights in and through sport. As such, Ireland's *National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027* asserts equitable access to sport in its core value of promoting inclusion, which supports the positioning of sport as a fundamental human right: "Sport must be welcoming and inclusive, offering appropriate opportunities for participation and improvement to all" (Government of Ireland, 2018, p.19). In line with this value, Ireland's *National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027* marks a commitment from Sport Ireland to develop initiatives with National Governing Bodies (NGBs), Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs), schools, third-level institutions, Active Disability Ireland (formally CARA Centre), and other relevant parties to address participation in sport among marginalised communities, explicitly naming the LGBTI+ community (2018). This commitment is bolstered by the ambitions of *Sport Ireland's Policy on Diversity and Inclusion in Sport*, which outlines key objectives aimed at fostering more welcoming and inclusive sporting environments and offering greater opportunities for participation and improvement to all. These robust objectives aim to transform sporting culture and participation through communications, access, capacity, and leadership, with the LGBTI+ community acknowledged in the policy as a key cohort for targeting increasing participation. Significantly, the Football Association of Ireland's (FAI's) *Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025* commits to "Provide fun, safe and inclusive environments for our administrators, coaches, fans, players, referees, and volunteers by promoting inclusivity, equality, diversity and fair play, tackling discrimination and abuse" (FAI, 2022, p. 45). This commitment is deepened in the FAI's *Social and Environmental Sustainability Strategy* (2024). Within this strategy, the FAI commit to increasing representative participation and engagement from marginalised communities in Ireland including the LGBTI+ community; establishing an inclusive football ecosystem that guarantees equal rights and opportunities to all active in the sport; target discrimination through robust reporting, and management of discrimination at all levels and ensure barrier free access for all those who wish to play, attend events or work in football (2024). Relatedly, Ireland's *National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028* and its associated action plan include several dedicated actions relating to sport in order "to foster LGBTIQ+ inclusive environments by building capacity across the sport sector and providing initiatives to welcome LGBTIQ+ people into sport at all levels" (Government of Ireland, 2024a, p.17). These dedicated actions include monitoring LGBTIQ+ participation in the annual Irish Sports Monitor; the provision of dedicated funding to sports organisations to support the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people in sport, and to carry out a review of the rollout of LGBTIQ+ friendly policies across National Governing Bodies of Sport following the publication of Sport Ireland's Guidance Document on Transgender and Non-Binary Inclusion in Sport. Responsibility for these actions are shared by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, and Sport Ireland.

In response to these actions in 2024, Sport Ireland published guidance to assist the sport sector

in policy development for transgender and non-binary inclusion in sport (Sport Ireland, 2024). This guidance emerged in response to a fraught national and global conversation regarding the inclusion of trans women and girls in sport which has since deteriorated further. In February 2025, an executive order seeking to prohibit transgender women and girls from participating in girls' and women's sports was signed in the US effecting school sports, collegiate-level sport, and professional athletic associations. In response, 27 states have a law or regulation that prevents transgender girls and women from participating in sports based on their gender identity (Redfield, 2025). Some of these states also extend a ban to transgender boys and men. Several international federations, namely World Rugby (2021), World Aquatics (2022), Union Cycliste Internationale (2023), and World Athletics (2023), have created policies that prohibit transgender women and girls from participating in girls' and women's sports. However, in some countries, local NGBs have policies for domestic competition which are different to their international federation. Alternative policy approaches to the prohibition of participation for trans women and girls include regulations that assess the suppression of testosterone amongst individuals seeking to participate or options to participate via self-determination. Significantly, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) *Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations* asserts that "eligibility criteria should be established and implemented fairly and in a manner that does not systematically exclude athletes from competition based upon their gender identity, physical appearance and/or sex variations" (2021, p.3). This guidance is offered by the IOC to sporting bodies as a framework for setting out eligibility criteria in their sport, urging them to also consider particular ethical, social, cultural, and legal aspects specific to their context.

Of relevance to this research is the lack of recommendations from the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) for the inclusion of trans individuals in football. At the time of writing, both FIFA and UEFA have committed to creating and publishing guidelines related to the participation of trans people in football. However, despite the lack of international federation guidance, in May 2025, the Football Association in England invoked a policy position to ban trans women and girls from women's football in England (English Football Association, 2025) affecting approximately 20-30 players (Kearns and Roan, 2025) in response to the United Kingdom's Supreme Court ruling interpreting the terms "woman" and "sex" under the Equality Act 2010 to refer strictly to biological sex assigned at birth (*Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers*, 2025). It has been demonstrated in a systematic review of a decade of research into trans participation in sport that the research relied upon to evidence these policies prohibiting trans women's inclusion in sport is frequently methodologically flawed (The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) *et al.*, 2022). CCES *et al.* (2022) in this systematic review alert us to methodological challenges in these studies, amounting to significant limitations, including the failure of these studies to recruit participants who are both transgender and athletes, and therefore rely on data from cisgender or sedentary participants. As a result, most studies in this area did not adjust for factors such as height or lean body mass, and most studies on testosterone involve cisgender individuals using performance-enhancing drugs rather than participant samples consisting of trans women. As such, the existing evidence base often equates trans women's experiences of sport participation with cisgender men, as they have been unable to recruit trans women to participate, given the low numbers of trans women who are engaged in sport. This approach to data collection disregards the many differences between transgender and cisgender people - social and cultural differences in access to sport, health, and wellbeing;

and neglects to consider the effects of medical transition on the physique and athletic abilities of trans people. In contrast, methodologically rigorous recent studies have found that trans women have minimal to no performance advantage over cisgender women (Cheung *et al.*, 2024; Hamilton *et al.*, 2024; Hamilton *et al.*, 2021). Robust research in this area is sparse. As outlined, the majority of existing research is of low quality, methodologically flawed, and typically involves only small numbers of people, with few long-term studies. In order for policies to be evidence-based, there is a need for higher-quality, larger, longitudinal studies that are cognisant of the additional socio-cultural factors that determine athletic ability.

In contrast to the focus on discussions about trans women's participation in elite sporting categories, there is a lack of consideration for increasing involvement in community-level sport for this marginalised cohort. When discussing who can participate in sport, it is important to distinguish between elite-level and community sport. While guidelines for trans participation in elite sport may have benefits, the boundary between community and elite sport can be difficult to define and may vary across different sports or disciplines. Although many policies are specific to elite participation, they often have a trickle-down effect on community sport, sometimes unintentionally creating additional barriers to participation. Many existing policies on trans participation neglect to address the material and infrastructural needs of trans individuals at the community level. Significantly, the *Transgender & Intersex Sports Inclusion Policy Guide* published by Transgender Equality Network Ireland (2025) offers sporting clubs and organisations a comprehensive framework to assess the provisions needed to promote trans and intersex inclusion across all levels of sport. The guide highlights the marginalised status of the trans community in Ireland and the low participation rates in sport, not only at an elite level but also within community sports. It provides clear processes to support and encourage trans and intersex participation by urging clubs and national governing bodies to include transphobic bullying in anti-bullying policies, ensure that complaints mechanisms respond to transphobia, and provide LGBTQI+ training for coaches and staff. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of appropriate uniforms, changing facilities, and bathrooms for trans and intersex players. Recognising that many trans individuals may transition while participating in sport, the guide advocates supporting them through their transitions to ensure ongoing participation, including facilitating team changes, updating records, and being mindful of other gendered aspects of the sport. Moreover, it addresses the persistent challenges faced by trans people, particularly trans women, and encourages the facilitation of trans and intersex individuals of all ages to participate in the gender category they identify with. The guide offers a detailed framework for facilitating trans participation without imposing eligibility restrictions beyond those applicable to other players at the national level. It also acknowledges that international federation rules may influence trans participation, stating that while many federations require testosterone testing, it should not be implemented before the federation mandates it and only where other measures such as anti-doping procedures are in place. As a broad recommendation, the guide promotes mixed-gender training and competitions to enhance trans participation. Overall, this guide highlights the material and infrastructural considerations necessary for fostering trans inclusion in sport at all levels while also addressing concerns regarding elite sports. As shown, community sport across disciplines and at the national organisational level in Ireland has made meaningful commitments to inclusion, fostering community and social connections, enabling fitness and fun, and striving to deliver these benefits to everyone. Despite this commitment, many marginalised communities, including LGBTQI+ people, still face significant barriers to participation. These barriers will not

be overcome solely through policies aimed at limiting participation in elite sport but require substantial initiatives to strengthen the climate of inclusivity experienced by the LGBTQI+ community in Ireland.

Participation in physical activity and sport is deeply ingrained in Irish society. The immense benefits of engaging in sports and physical activity go beyond just physical health and extend to mental and social wellbeing. Existing literature nationally and internationally demonstrates that there is limited literature regarding LGBTQI+ people's participation in sport in an Irish context and a complete absence of research exploring their specific experiences in football. However, international literature demonstrates that LGBTQI+ people continue to face barriers to sport participation, including in football contexts. Access to and participation in sport can be understood across the national and international policy contexts as a human right, one that bolsters individuals' ability to exercise additional rights and cultivates extensive benefits for the individual, their community, and wider society. Through the implementation of positive and protective factors in football settings, LGBTQI+ people stand to benefit from a sense of belonging, support, and acceptance, positively contributing to their wellbeing. This research aims to contribute to the existing gaps in an Irish research context regarding LGBTQI+ people's participation in sport broadly, but specifically in football settings. The following section of the report details the methodology of this research.

Methodology

This is the first dedicated quantitative study regarding the climate of LGBTQI+ inclusivity in football settings in Ireland. Football settings in this research refer to participation in soccer at all levels, including supporters, players (professional and non-professional), referees, volunteers, coaches, and staff. The study aims to address this lacuna in Irish research regarding LGBTQI+ people's experiences in football, thus increasing our knowledge of the climate of inclusivity specific to football settings and supporting more informed policy approaches and appropriate provisions, supports, and interventions for LGBTQI+ people in sport.

Aims/objectives

This research aimed to explore the specific experiences of LGBTQI+ people in relation to participation, openness, discrimination and harassment, barriers, and positive/protective factors in football settings. The objectives of this project were:

- Explore the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in football settings, specific to participation, openness, discrimination, and harassment.
- Identify existing barriers preventing the fostering of an LGBTQI+ inclusive climate in football settings.
- Identify positive and protective factors promoting participation and a climate of inclusivity in football settings.
- Produce a series of recommendations based on research findings.

Research design

This research employed an anonymised structured survey design that combined open and closed questions.

Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria specified were any person who identified as LGBTQI+, aged 14+ years, living in the Republic of Ireland, and who is currently participating or had previously participated in football settings.

Design and pilot of survey

The LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football research was designed and conducted in collaboration with Bohemian Football Club. This research employed a structured online survey design that combined 57 open and closed questions. Demographic questions in the online survey relating

to age, country, sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status were used to select participants. Questions were derived from a range of sources, including previously developed and validated questions, tested scales and instruments, while other questions were developed based on existing literature and feedback from stakeholders. The survey was piloted in two focus groups: 1) with LGBTQI+ young people recruited from Belong To – LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland and LGBTQ+ football players recruited from Bohemian Football Club. The survey was also extensively reviewed by the research working group. Changes to the survey were integrated based on the responses of both the research working group and pilot participants prior to data collection.

Recruitment of participants

To obtain a broad sample of LGBTQI+ individuals aged 14+ in the Republic of Ireland, a number of means were utilised to recruit participants for the survey. In previous studies of the LGBTQI+ population in Ireland, namely, the *Supporting LGBT Lives Study* (Mayock *et al.*, 2009), the *Visible Lives* study (Higgins *et al.*, 2012) the *LGBTIreland Study* (Higgins *et al.*, 2016), *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown* (Belong To, 2020 and 2021) and the *Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland Study* (Higgins *et al.*, 2024) the research teams found success by engaging with and informing local and national social, health, youth and LGBTQI+ organisations of the study. Specific to this research, local and national social, health, youth, and LGBTQI+ organisations alongside football clubs and sporting organisations were also asked to share the survey link through their various social media (Tiktok, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). These football clubs and sporting organisations were contacted directly by the FAI and Bohemian Football Club and sent information on the study. They were asked to post information about the study and link to the survey by email on their mailing lists and share the survey on social media. As well as publicising the study through the networks, websites, and online platforms of Trinity College Dublin and Bohemian Football Club, there were also paid social media adverts of the study on Instagram and Facebook; adverts in regional print and digital media; and interviews with Bohemian Football Club study spokespersons on regional and national radio stations. This multi-pronged approach exhausted all avenues to maximise the number of people that were informed of the study and thus afforded the opportunity to participate.

Data collection

The anonymous online survey was hosted on the Qualtrics Platform (Qualtrics © 2025). Data collection was conducted online, over an eight-week period, from March – May 2025.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences in Trinity College Dublin in March 2025. Parental/guardian consent for participants under the age of 18 was not sought. The rationale and basis for waiving parental consent is undergirded by the fact that the requirement of parental consent runs

the risk of excluding young people from the research, thereby potentially biasing the sample and preventing the climate of inclusivity from being researched appropriately (D’Augelli and Grossman, 2001; Fisher and Mustanski, 2014; Wasilewski, 2024). By waiving parental consent, three additional principles were applied to protect young research participants:

- Securing anonymity: The data collection tool was an anonymous online survey which is deemed ‘minimal risk research’.
- Avoiding coercion: Young people self-selected to participate in this survey; therefore, no pressure or coercion was applied.
- Appropriate survey content: Specific elements of the survey were modified to ensure that its content was appropriate to participants under the age of 18. These questions included the questions on gender identity, intersex status, and sexual orientation.

In addition to these steps, the Participant Information Leaflet was posted on the online survey platform. It outlined information about the study and participants’ rights. The participant information leaflet forewarned participants about potentially distressing questions, thereby enabling them to make a fully informed decision regarding participation. In addition, when completing the online survey, sensitive questions were flagged and participants were given the opportunity to skip the questions if they found them upsetting. The survey closed with a list of support services. The ‘anonymise response’ setting was enabled in the online survey so that participants’ IP addresses and location information were not collected. Participants were advised not to write their names within the survey open-text box responses. All data files were password-protected and stored in accordance with Data Protection legislation. Data were cleaned to ensure that in the presentation of findings, no person, either the participant or another person, could be identified.

Data analysis

All quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS Statistics Version 27 (IBM Corporation, 2025) and reported using descriptive statistics. All qualitative data was entered into QSR NVivo Version 15 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2024) for analysis. Data in each question were thematically analysed using descriptive qualitative analysis through a modified version of Braun and Clarke’s (2021) guidance. From this process, descriptive codes describing chunks of the data were generated. The next step involved comparing and contrasting codes and amalgamating codes into higher order themes. The final step of analysis was performed during the write-up phase to remove any duplication of themes that became evident across questions.

Sample, response rate and limitations

In total, 324 people commenced the survey. Of these, 156 people responded ‘yes’ to all filter questions and all ‘consent to participate’ questions. Further screening resulted in the removal of 7 individuals for not meeting eligibility criteria such as age and/or LGBTQI+ identities, and/or including commentary that did not address the research questions, leaving a sample of 149. Participants who didn’t complete the survey up to the ‘Openness’ (question 19) section were

excluded from the analysis (n=142). Thus, based on LGBTQI+ identity, the total sample was 142 participants.

In international literature, LGBTQI+ community engagement in sport is often significantly minoritised (Hartmann-Tews *et al.*, 2022). Looking at the work of Menzel *et al.* (2019) we can observe that the sample size in this EU study for Ireland was 122 participants, with countries of a similar population size presenting similar sample sizes (Finland: n=147; Slovakia: n=126; Croatia: n=105). Thus, based on consultation and population comparison with similar international research studies on LGBTQI+ engagement in football (Menzel *et al.*, 2019), it was determined that the final sample size of 142 is sufficient to achieve a significant insight into the experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals in football settings in Ireland. However, this study sample is non-randomised and does not claim to be representative, given the unknowability of both the accurate size of the LGBTQI+ community in Ireland and those involved to any degree in football settings in Ireland; as such, the results cannot be generalised to a wider population.

It must be noted that only a small number of participants identified as intersex. While efforts have been made to make intersex people’s experiences visible throughout the study, the small numbers among this group may have resulted in their voices being less visible. The survey was self-completed and hosted online, and this may have precluded participation by people with literacy challenges and those without access to, or familiarity with, technology, especially older people. Finally, the survey did not collect additional demographic information on location, ethnicity, citizen status, socio-economic status, or disability, which precluded opportunities to explore the relationship between participation in football and additional intersecting forms of marginalisation. Follow-up studies should address this existing gap in the literature by including specific questions related to these demographic factors in future pieces of research.

Participant demographics

The focus of this section is on providing a description of the demographic profile of the participants who completed the study, in terms of gender, sexual orientation, intersex status, and age.

Gender identity

A two-step approach to collecting gender identity information was used. Participants were asked 1) how they identified their gender and 2) whether this matched the sex they were assigned at birth. Young people (participants 14-18) were given youth-friendly language for these questions. Over 80% of the sample identified as either a man or a woman (83%). Furthermore, nearly 11% of the sample identified as non-binary and approximately 5% identified that the ways in which they describe their gender were not listed.

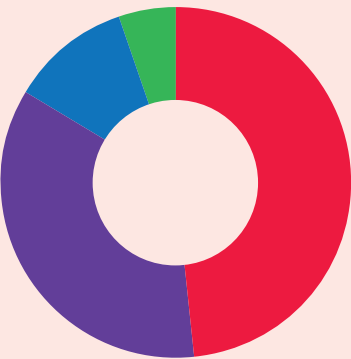


Table 1
Gender Identity (n=142)

♦ Woman	48%	69
♦ Man	36%	51
♦ Non-binary	11%	15
♦ Not listed - please tell us	5%	7

Participants who indicated that their gender identity did not match the sex they were assigned at birth (n=31) were asked if they identified as transgender. Of these, 13% identified as a trans man and 16% identified as a trans woman. Almost half (48%) identified as non-binary and 23% identified as other minoritised gender identities, including genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, trans, questioning, demi-boy and demi-girl.



Table 2
Trans Sample (n=31)

♦ Trans man (FTM, female to male)	13%	4
♦ Trans woman (MTF, male to female)	16%	5
♦ Non-binary	48%	15
♦ Other minoritised gender identities	23%	7

Based on the responses to the gender questions, for the purpose of analysis of the quantitative data, participants were categorised into three groups: cisgenderwomen (45%, n=64), cisgender men (33%, n=47), and trans, non-binary, and other minoritised gender identities (trans) (22%, n=31).

Sexual orientation

The breakdown of the sample by sexual orientation is shown in Table 3. The largest cohort of the sample identified as gay (30%) with over a quarter identifying as lesbian (28%). Furthermore, nearly 20% of the sample identified as bisexual (18%), with 12% of the sample identifying as queer. 11% provided more specific descriptions of their sexual orientation, including pansexual, asexual, demisexual and a refusal of labels.

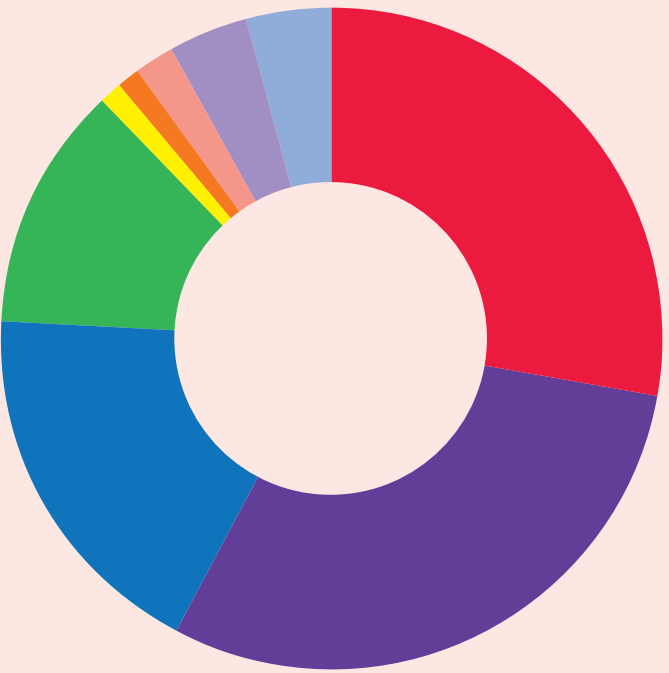


Table 3
Sexual orientation (n=141)

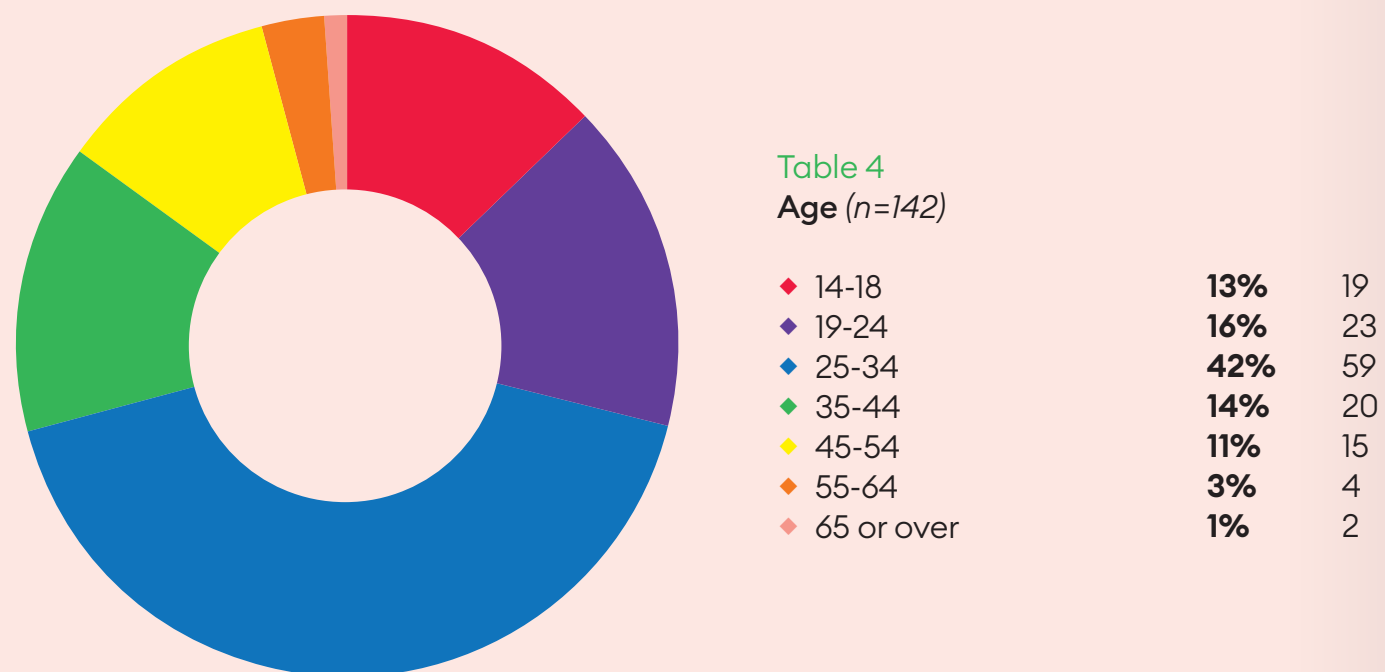
♦ Lesbian	28%	39
♦ Gay	30%	42
♦ Bisexual	18%	25
♦ Queer	12%	17
♦ Heterosexual/straight	1%	2
♦ Asexual	1%	2
♦ Questioning/not sure	2%	3
♦ Pansexual	4%	6
♦ Other - please tell us	4%	5

People with an intersex variation/s

In total, four (3%) participants identified as intersex or as having an intersex variation. Young people (participants 14-18) were given youth-friendly language for this question. There was also 1 participant who preferred not to answer and 4% who indicated that they didn't know what the question was asking of them.

Age

The age spread of participants is presented in Table 4. The mean age range of the sample was 25-34, with 25-34-year-olds also making up the largest proportion of the sample (42%).



The next section of the report discusses the findings of the survey in detail. The findings of the report are divided into five sections: Section 1: Participation, Openness and Support in Football Settings; Section 2: Acceptance and Belonging of LGBTQI+ identities in Football Communities; Section 3: Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Football Settings in Ireland; Section 4: Facilitating Inclusion; Positive and Protective Factors and Section 5: Recommendations.

Findings

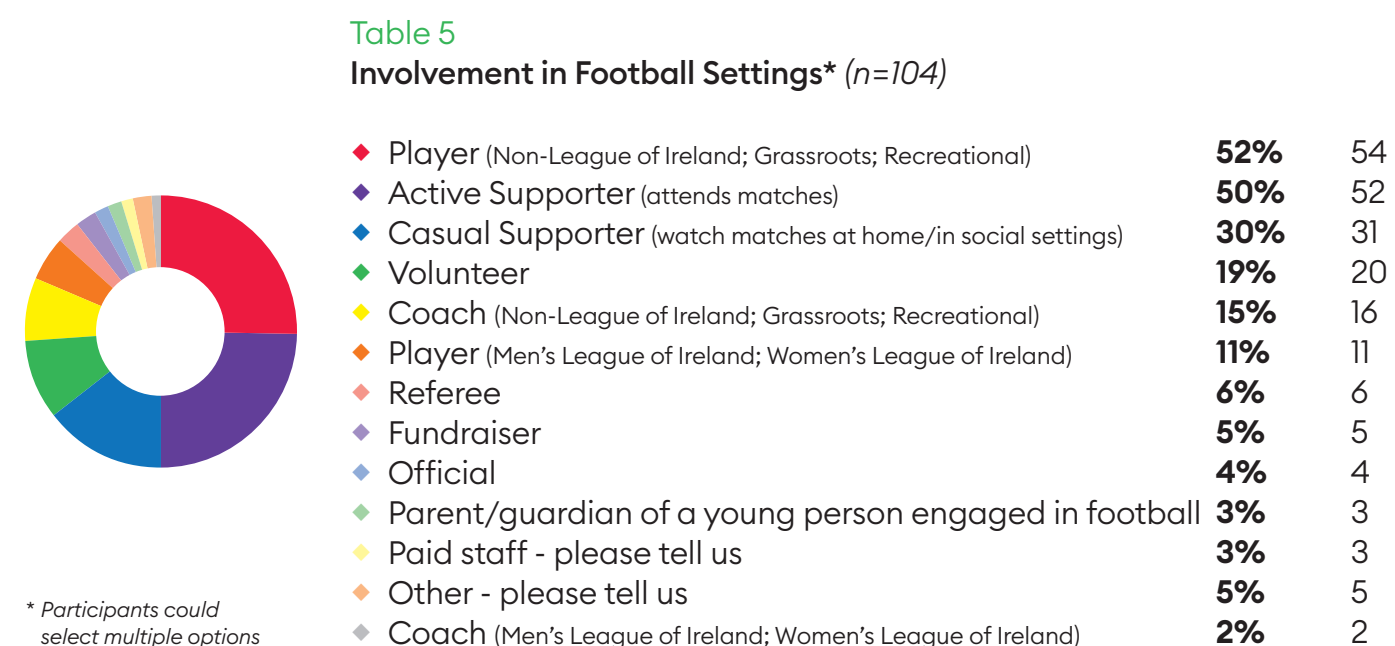
Section 1:

Participation, Openness and Support in Football Settings

Nature of Involvement in Football Settings

Participants were asked to select the ways in which they are involved in football settings in Ireland; these findings are presented in Table 5. Over half of participants (52%) described themselves as players (Non-League of Ireland; Grassroots; Recreational), and half described themselves as active supporters. Additional forms of participation were significantly represented by the number of participants who described themselves as casual supporters (30%), volunteers (19%), and coaches across both the professional league (2%) and recreational football (15%). Notably, 11% of participants describe themselves as players in either the Men's League of Ireland or the Women's League of Ireland.

During data analysis, specifically of the qualitative data, it became apparent that the vast majority of participants who responded to the study participated in football through LGBTQI+ specific sports clubs. This highlights the importance of these clubs in facilitating LGBTQI+ participation in football; however, it also alerts us to a potential underrepresentation of LGBTQI+ people in mainstream clubs. Findings should be read with this context in mind, given that LGBTQI+ specific clubs are more likely to be cognisant of the needs of LGBTQI+ people and more likely to foster a climate of inclusivity for individuals. Further qualitative research is necessary to discern the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in mainstream football clubs.



Openness of LGBTQI+ identities

Participants were asked a series of questions relating to their openness in football settings in relation to their sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status. These findings are presented in Tables 6 and 7 related to sexual orientation and gender identity, respectively.

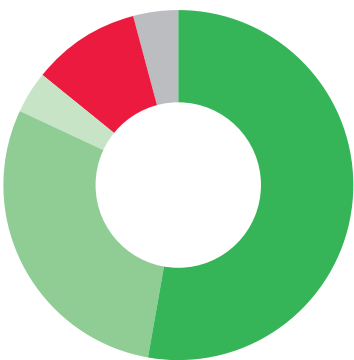


Table 6
Openness regarding sexual orientation (n=104)

◆ Yes, to everyone	53%	55
◆ Yes, to some people	29%	30
◆ Yes, to one or two people	5%	5
◆ No	9%	10
◆ Prefer not to say	4%	4

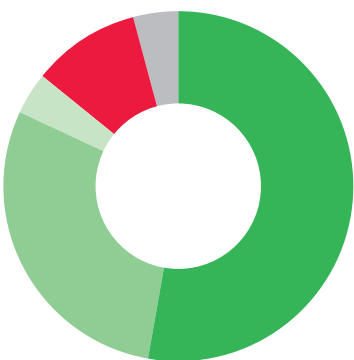


Table 7
Openness regarding gender identity (n=16)

◆ Yes, to everyone	43%	7
◆ Yes, to some people	13%	2
◆ Yes, to one or two people	13%	2
◆ No	25%	4
◆ Prefer not to say	6%	1

Significantly, 87% of participants were out to at least one person in football settings regarding their sexuality with 53% sharing that they were out to everyone. Trans participants were marginally less likely to be out to everyone with 69% of participants sharing that they were out to at least one person, alongside 25% communicating that they were not open in football settings regarding their gender identity. None of the intersex participants were out/open regarding their intersex status in football settings.

Supportiveness of Football Clubs in relation to LGBTQI+ identities

Participants who shared that they were open to any degree in football settings were asked to describe their experiences of support from within their football clubs. Participants who were open regarding their sexual orientation communicated a strong climate of support in football settings. 74% of participants reported feeling very or somewhat supported in relation to their sexual orientation. The climate of support is significantly lower for trans participants with 43%

feeling very or somewhat supported in relation to their gender identity. Meaningfully across supportiveness of sexual orientation, only 4% felt somewhat or very unsupported and 7% of participants felt somewhat or very unsupported in relation to their gender identity. Half of trans participants felt neutral regarding the support they received towards their gender identity, alongside 22% of participants in relation to their sexual orientation. These findings can be contextualised in relation to high participation rates among participants on LGBTQI+ specific teams, wherein support for sexual orientation and gender identity is an intrinsic aspect of these clubs.

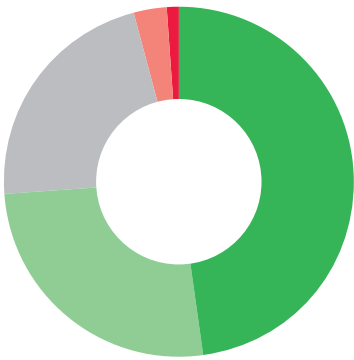


Table 8
Supportiveness regarding sexual orientation (n=89)

◆ Very supportive	48%	42
◆ Somewhat Supportive	26%	23
◆ Neutral	22%	20
◆ Somewhat Unsupportive	3%	3
◆ Very Unsupportive	1%	1

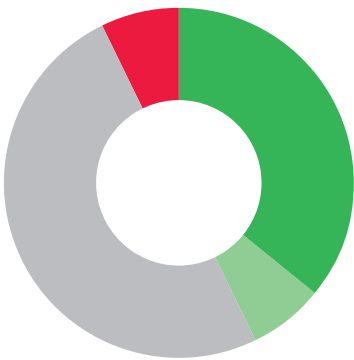


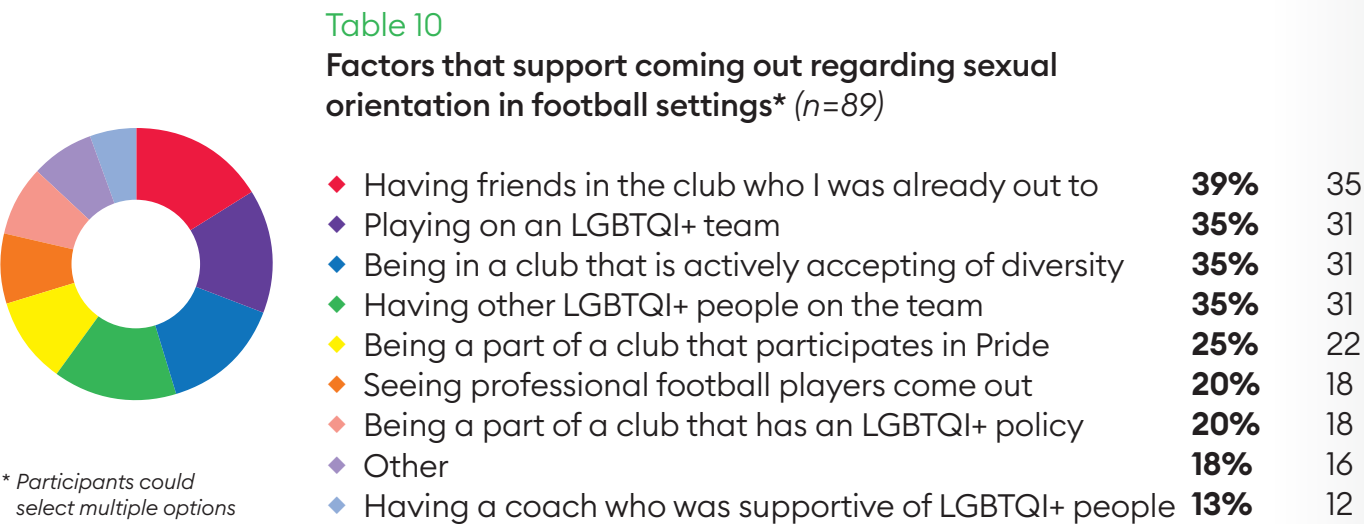
Table 9
Supportiveness regarding gender identity (n=14)

◆ Very supportive	36%	5
◆ Somewhat Supportive	7%	1
◆ Neutral	50%	7
◆ Somewhat Unsupportive		
◆ Very Unsupportive	7%	1

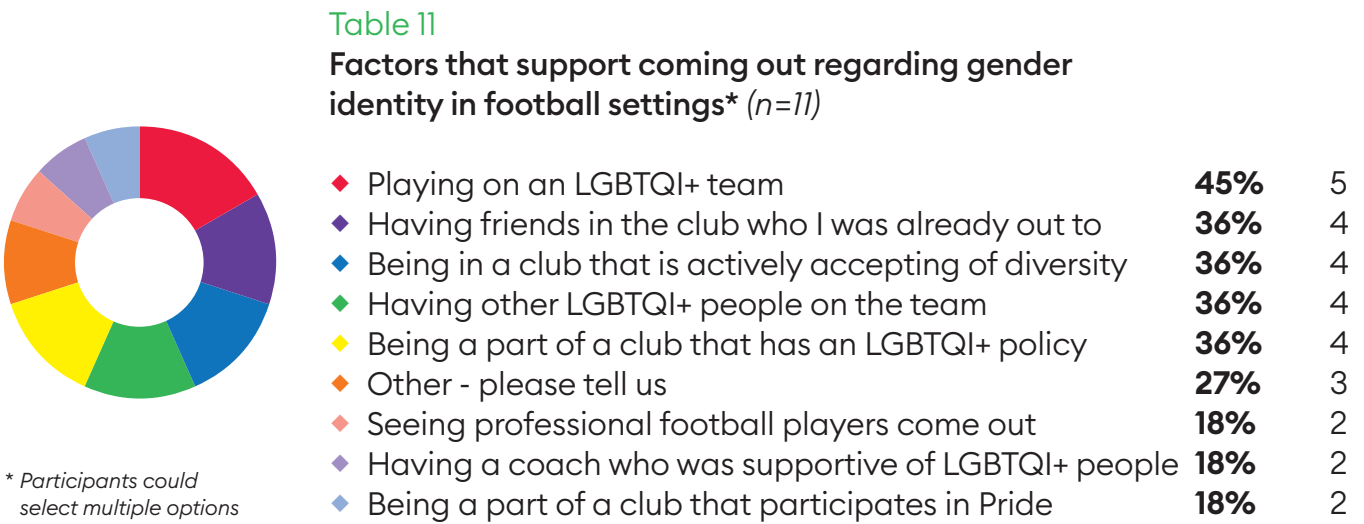
Supportive Factors enabling openness of LGBTQI+ identities in football settings

Participants who shared that they were open to any degree in football settings were asked to identify what factors supported their openness/coming out in football settings. For many participants having friends on a team that they were already out to regarding their sexual orientation proved to be the most dominant factor that supports coming out in football settings. This alerts us to the ongoing importance of peer support amongst players and the role teammates play in fostering a climate of LGBTQI+ inclusivity. Other dominant factors include playing on an LGBTQI+ team; participating in a club that is accepting of diversity and playing alongside other LGBTQI+ people. In addition to the factors outlined above, participants shared that being out in other aspects of their life gave them the confidence to come out in football settings, while others experienced women’s football as generally more supportive of LGBTQI+ identities, facilitating openness around their sexual orientation. Significantly, a number of

additional responses demonstrated that for a partial number of participants, they did not feel the need to discuss their sexual orientation with team members, citing the matter as private and unrelated to their participation in football.



For trans participants, playing on an LGBTQI+ team emerged as the most predominant supportive factor in facilitating outness/openness regarding their gender identity in football settings. Similar to findings in relation to supportive factors facilitating openness/outness regarding sexual orientation, trans participants cited playing on an LGBTQI+ team; participating in a club that is accepting of diversity, and playing alongside other LGBTQI+ people as significant factors. Meaningfully, many trans respondents identified LGBTQI+ policies as a supportive factor in facilitating their openness/outness in football settings. This affirms ongoing findings in literature and practice wherein sporting policies that address the specific needs of LGBTQI+ people, in particular trans people, are a powerful means of changing sporting culture and fostering climates of openness, acceptance and inclusivity. Other factors communicated by participants included medical transition as that which instilled them with confidence and a grounded sense of themselves, bolstering their desire to share this element of themselves with others. Relatedly, others felt they did not have a choice in being out regarding their gender identity, given their gender presentation automatically led people to question or assume their trans identity, which often felt fraught for participants, depending on the response from teammates and others in football settings.



Positive experiences of openness of LGBTQI+ identities in football settings

Participants who were open regarding their LGBTQI+ identities in football settings were asked via open text question what positive experiences they have had while being out and open.

Connection and friendship

For many participants their most positive experiences were contextualised by increased connection through “meeting new people” and making “lifelong friends through football”. In response participants shared that this connection made them felt “less lonely” and allowed them to stop censoring themselves or worrying that “someone may get the wrong impression”, ultimately “getting to enjoy a lovely game and banter about dates and such has been freeing.”

Experiencing equality

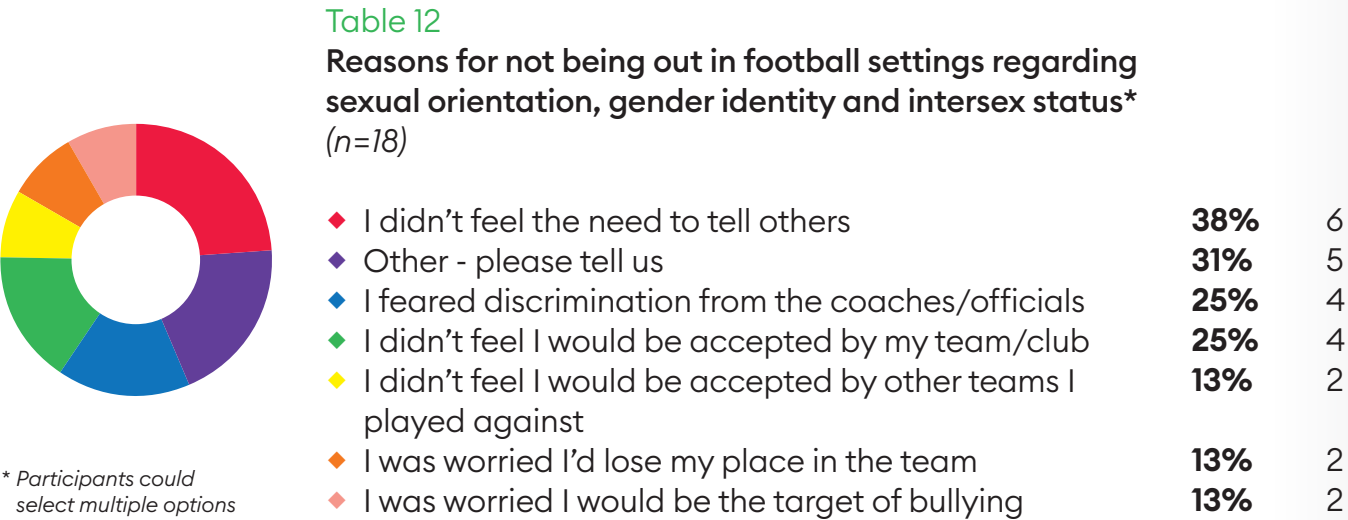
Additionally, many participants felt that being out and open in football settings facilitated their experiences of equality, wherein they were being “treated like anybody else” and had the opportunity to feel “welcome and included in an LGBTQI+ positive environment”.

Supportive clubs

Finally, participation in supportive clubs namely Bohemian Football Club and LGBTQI+ clubs, encouraged participants to attend games and get more involved, creating opportunities for participants to have a “new social life that changed [their] world.” This has created a sense of community among participants where they felt they have “skin in the game and look forward to continuing as a fan.”

Barriers preventing openness of LGBTQI+ identities in football settings

In response to the previous openness regarding LGBTQI+ identities in football settings questions, 10% of participants said they were not open with anyone regarding their sexual orientation, 24% said they were not open with anyone regarding their gender identity and none of the intersex participants were open regarding their intersex status. These participants, based on their responses to this question, were asked what barriers they encountered to being open regarding their LGBTQI+ identities in football settings. Their responses are collectively represented in Table 12.



Significantly, many participants when given the opportunity to share why they were not out in football settings, shared that they did not feel the need to discuss their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status with team members citing the matter as private and unrelated to their participation in football. However, this rationale was followed significantly by fears of discrimination and a lack of acceptance from coaches and officials; teammates and broader club. Additional factors contributing to participants not being out in football settings regarding their sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status included a fear of verbal abuse, specifically anti-LGBTQI+ chants from supporters. A number of participants also shared that they were still coming to terms with their identities and as such, were waiting before sharing this aspect of themselves with others.

Disengagement from football settings

Relatedly, responses to this section of the survey reveal significant levels of disengagement from football settings from 38% of the sample. Individuals who clarified that they were no longer involved in football settings were asked a follow-up question regarding why they were not engaged in football. Their responses are presented thematically below.

Physical and mental health

For a number of participants both their physical and mental health emerged as barriers to their ongoing participation in football. For some participants, these challenges to participation in relation to their health were further contextualised by commentary that their age effected their mobility and ability to continue to play football as well as sustained injury. Others shared that their experiences of pregnancy and child-rearing placed constraints on their physical ability to continue to participate as well as the time they had to do so following the birth of their child. Participants also shared that challenges with their mental health affected their confidence and their ability to maintain participation in the sport.

Since becoming unwell with mental health challenges, I never found my confidence again and didn't feel that connection with teammates or the game anymore. I also struggle with my weight and that affects my confidence.

My physical health got too bad, I don't have the confidence to [participate] as much as I would love to go back.

Discrimination

For some participants, a climate of discrimination both within their teams and within broader football and sport culture resulted in their disengagement. This was specific to homophobic incidents and verbal harassment as well as an increasing hostility towards trans players, specifically trans women in sport.

I left coaching because there was little room for me as a female coach. I left my team over homophobic teammates.

”

Because of the discrimination of trans women in sport. I am losing my love of the game.

”

Gendered teams

A number of trans participants shared that the gendered element of football presented a significant barrier to their participation and resulted in their disengagement. For a number of trans individuals, this meant that following their transition, they did not continue playing football despite a number of participants citing a love for the game and a long history of involvement. In this context, former trans players felt a hesitancy around joining men's or women's teams due to an anxiety regarding how their transness would be received by the team and how they would navigate gendered changing facilities. Additionally, trans participants in many instances, specifically non-binary participants, felt that their only opportunity to play was reliant on LGBTQI+ football teams that are not gendered. However, access to these LGBTQI+ football teams, as noted by participants, is heavily contingent on locality, often only available in larger cities, and they have limited opportunities to play matches given the inherently gendered structure of other teams.

Fear of joining a gendered team, I previously played soccer for 20+ years on a women's team but when I transitioned I found it difficult to be comfortable playing with this side of the gendered teams. I also volunteered and played with an LGBTQI+ non-gendered team but our options were limited to play vs other teams as everything is done in binary gender. I am nervous about joining an exclusively men's team as don't know how being trans will be perceived, or how I would navigate a changing room environment.

”

There are no places for non-binary folks to play. There was a kick around by a queer group but there wasn't enough even for a 5-a-side let alone play other teams. It didn't seem worth the effort it took to get there with it being on the far side of a city in rush hour traffic.

”

Other factors named by participants effecting their participation included time constraints namely that the times and locations of football trainings no longer suited their schedule in relation to work and other commitments. While others pursued sports other than football including tennis, rugby and swimming.

The next section of the findings discusses the experiences of participants in relation to acceptance, connection and belonging in football communities and culture in Ireland.

Section 2:
Acceptance and Belonging of LGBTQI+ Identities in Football Communities

LGBTQI+-friendliness of club

Participants were asked a number of questions related to their experiences of acceptance and belonging as LGBTQI+ people in football communities. These communities include individual clubs and the broader football community and culture in Ireland. A significant finding is that 60% of participants felt that their football club was very LGBTQI+-friendly. When broken down by gender identity differences in these experiences of friendliness become apparent, with 44% of cisgender men feeling their football club is very friendly, while 68% of cisgender women felt their club was very friendly. Meaningfully, 71% of trans participants said their club was very friendly, though it is important to note that the majority of trans participants played on an LGBTQI+ specific club.

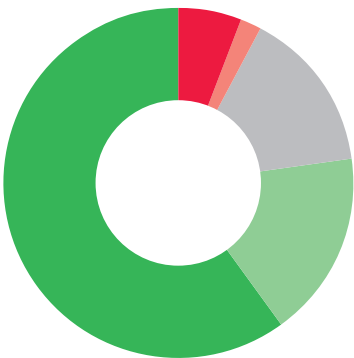


Table 13
LGBTQI+ friendliness of club (n=96)

Not at all friendly	6%	6
Not very friendly	2%	2
Neutral	15%	14
Somewhat friendly	17%	16
Very friendly	60%	58

LGBTQI+ belonging in football clubs

When asked if they experienced belonging in their club, 54% of participants shared that they felt they belonged completely. When looking at these findings by gender identity and sexual orientation, differences in experience emerge, with 42% of cisgender gay men feeling they belonged completely in their club, alongside 60% of cisgender lesbian women and 53% of trans people feeling they belonged completely.

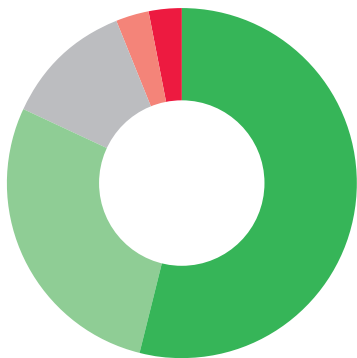


Table 14
As an LGBTQI+ person, do you feel that you belong(ed) in your football club? (n=95)

Yes, completely	54%	51
Yes, generally	28%	27
Somewhat	12%	11
No, not really	3%	3
No, not at all	3%	3

LGBTQI+ acceptance in football communities and culture

On a broader scale in relation to the overall football community and culture in Ireland, over half (52%) of participants felt the football community in Ireland is somewhat and very accepting of LGBTQI+ people, though this is contrasted with 31% of participants feeling not very accepted or not accepted at all. When broken down by sexuality, cisgender lesbian women were the most likely to feel that the football community is accepting of LGBTQI+ people. 43% of cisgender lesbian women felt the football community is very accepting, and 29% felt it is somewhat accepting. This is heavily contrasted to 48% of cisgender gay men feeling that the football community is not very accepting.

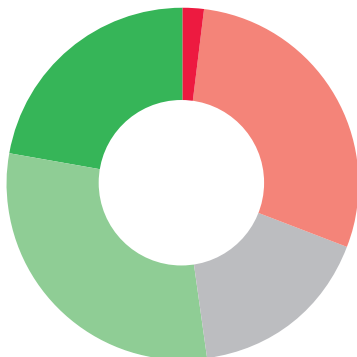


Table 15
How accepting football community in Ireland is of LGBTQI+ people (n=100)

Not at all accepting	2%	2
Not very accepting	29%	29
Neutral	17%	17
Somewhat accepting	30%	30
Very accepting	22%	22

To access participants' perspectives on their sense of connection to football communities, participants were asked to rate (strongly agree to strongly disagree) six statements regarding belonging, inclusion, and representation (Table 16). 52% of participants felt welcome at football matches as an LGBTQI+ person. Though this finding is heavily contrasted with 40% of participants feeling that football settings are generally not a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQI+ people, and 55% of participants feeling that homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia is more common in football settings than in general society. Additionally, gay men and trans people were more likely than lesbian women to feel as though football settings are generally not a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQI+ people. These findings are further contextualised by the fact that 58% of participants believe that football clubs do not do enough to include LGBTQI+ people.

Table 16
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=98)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

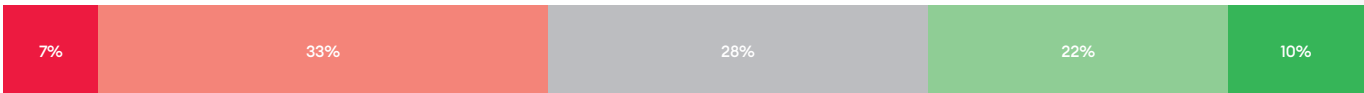
I feel welcome at football matches as an LGBTQI+ person



I don't feel included in football communities as an LGBTQI+ person



I think football settings are generally a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQI+ people



I feel football clubs do enough to include LGBTQI+ people



I feel homophobia, biphobia and transphobia is more common in football settings than in general society



I feel isolated and separate from other football fans because of my identity



Additionally, 57% of participants feel that LGBTQI+ identities are not visible in local football communities in Ireland, with 48% feeling they are not visible in national football communities and 52% feeling they are not visible in media relating to football communities in Ireland. These findings are illustrative of a tension within football settings regarding LGBTQI+ inclusivity wherein an element of acceptance is present but is lacking material actualisation given the ongoing beliefs of participants regarding safety, support and visibility.

Table 17
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=98)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

I feel LGBTQI+ identities are visible in local football communities in Ireland



I feel LGBTQI+ identities are visible in national football communities in Ireland



I feel LGBTQI+ identities are visible in media of football communities in Ireland



These findings in relation to connection and belonging highlight that meaningful experiences of acceptance are being fostered at club level. However, substantial work remains to be done in order to equalise experiences of acceptance and belonging at a national and cultural level in football settings as the findings of this study reveal that a climate of inclusivity is more readily accessible to lesbian women and within LGBTQI+ football clubs.

Challenges to acceptance and belonging of LGBTQI+ identities in football culture and communities

In order to deepen understandings of how acceptance could be bolstered, participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences of challenges to connection and belonging in football communities as an LGBTQI+ person. Their responses are presented thematically below.

Verbal Harassment

Many participants shared that harassment served as a significant barrier to connection and belonging in football settings. This harassment was predominantly described as homophobic by participants taking shape as verbal abuse from players and supporters. In light of this, participants highlighted the paradox present in football culture emerging in Ireland, wherein individual clubs are cited by participants as committing to LGBTQI+ inclusivity but face challenges in changing the normalised culture around the use of homophobic slurs in football.

● *The club that I support is a vocal supporter of LGBTQI+ rights, but I still feel alienated when I hear homophobic slurs on the terraces.* ”

● *I think Bohemian FC do a great job of being inclusive but unfortunately, a chunk of the cis heterosexual men in the crowd make it clear who isn't welcome. For years, I've heard MANY slurs get thrown around during games. I honestly don't know how they can combat that.* ”

● *I believe that a lot of people who use homophobic language are not actually homophobic, but the use of homophobic language is rampant, and it can be an intimidating space. More needs to be done on a grassroots level to stop the use of homophobic and transphobic language by players. This needs to come from influential people in the clubs.* ”

Intersections of Community

Significantly, a number of participants highlighted an assumption both within the football community in Ireland and the LGBTQI+ community that LGBTQI+ people are not interested in football, erecting a barrier to connection, community building and belonging between these two cohorts.

● *I would also say there is an underlying assumption within the LGBTQI+ community that LGBTQI+ people are not interested in football.* ”

● *There is an underlying assumption that LGBTQI+ people are not interested in football. I've found straight people are generally bemused when I say I support and play football.* ”

Gender Mediating Experiences of Connection and Belonging

A number of participants also highlighted the ways in which gender mediates the experiences of connection and belonging in football settings differently for LGBTQI+ men and women. Amongst participants, there is a clear belief that LGBTQI+ women are more visible and readily accepted in football settings in contrast to the experiences of LGBTQI+ men.

● *I think there is a big difference between being a queer woman who follows the women's teams versus a queer man at the men's games. While I feel very included at matches and have ideals to look up to the same can't be said for men and that's where things need to change.* ”

● *Huge divide and difference between acceptance of LGBTQI+ women and LGBTQI+ men. My answers would be very different if I was a queer man and I know that for a fact from the queer men in my immediate life.* ”

The next section of the findings discusses the experiences of participants in relation to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in football settings in Ireland.

Section 3:
Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Football Settings
in Ireland

Witnessing homophobic, biphobic and transphobic remarks

When asked about hearing homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic remarks, 39% of participants heard such remarks in the last 12 months, with 26% hearing them frequently. In response to such remarks being said, 60% of participants said football staff have never intervened, and 68% said that fellow players have never intervened.



Table 18
Have you witnessed homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks being used within your football club in the last 12 months? (n=89)

◆ Yes	39%	35
◆ No	61%	54



Table 19
If yes, how often do you hear homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks being used within your football club? (n=35)

◆ Frequently	26%	9
◆ Often	23%	8
◆ Sometimes	31%	11
◆ Rarely	20%	7
◆ Never		

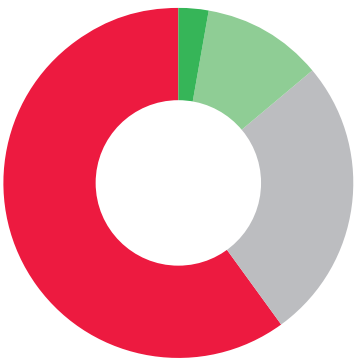


Table 20
When you hear homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks how often has a staff person intervened or done something about it? (n=35)

◆ Always	3%	1
◆ Most of the time	11%	4
◆ Some of the time	26%	9
◆ Never	60%	21



Table 21
When you hear homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks how often has another player intervened or done something about it? (n=35)

◆ Always	-	-
◆ Most of the time	14%	5
◆ Some of the time	17%	6
◆ Never	69%	24

Experiencing homophobic, biphobic and transphobic remarks

When asked about homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks being directed at them personally, 20% of participants shared that this was something they experienced in the last 12 months.

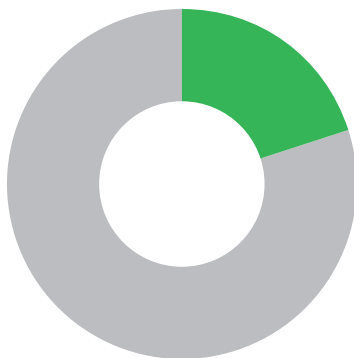


Table 22
Have you experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks being directed at you within your football club in the last 12 months? (n=90)

◆ Yes	20%	18
◆ No	80%	72

For the majority of these participants, this took place while they were playing football. 50% of those who experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks being directed at them were gay cisgender men, with 33% being lesbian cisgender women and 17% being trans people. Significantly, the majority of these remarks came from supporters at 44% followed by opposition players at 28%.

Addressing homophobic, biphobic and transphobic remarks



Table 23
Did you report the homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks? (n=18)

◆ Yes	44%	8
◆ No	56%	10



Table 24
Who was the report made to? (n=8)

◆ Referee	38%	3
◆ Steward		
◆ League/Association	50%	4
◆ Club/Board of Club		
◆ Coach/Manager		
◆ Gardaí	12%	1
◆ Other - please tell us		



Table 25
Do you feel satisfied with the response you got when you reported the homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks? (n=8)

◆ Yes, completely satisfied	-	-
◆ Somewhat satisfied	12%	1
◆ No, not at all satisfied	88%	7

Over half (56%) of participants did not make a report based on the incident, and those who did reported the incident to the referee, the league/association or the Gardaí. Unfortunately, 88% of participants who experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks being directed at them and who made a report were not at all satisfied with the response they received. These findings alert us to the ongoing prevalence of homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks in football settings, largely from supporters and opposition players, with very low rates of reporting and unsatisfactory responses to such reporting.

Location of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia

Table 26
Thinking of all football settings where homophobia, biphobia and transphobia could occur, where do you think it occurs most often?

Rank	
1	Spectator stands amongst fans at matches (n=40)
2	In social settings watching matches e.g. pub (n=33)
3	Physical education classes in school (n=32)
4	Organised extra-curricular school sports (n=25)
5	Community based sporting clubs (n=29)
6	Kickabouts/5-a-side/Power League (n=33)
7	On Social Media (n=29)
8	Professional sporting environments amongst players (n=43)
9	Other - please tell us (n=87)

Significantly, the finding that homophobic, biphobic or transphobic remarks come predominantly from supporters is further affirmed by participants ranking spectator stands amongst fans at matches and in social settings watching matches, e.g pub, as the spaces in which homophobia, biphobia and transphobia occur most often in football settings. Other football location-based settings in which participants felt homophobia, biphobia and transphobia were most likely to occur included physical education classes in school and organised extra-curricular school sports. Of note, participants felt that kickabouts/5-a-side/ power league, social media and professional sporting environments amongst players were amongst the least likely locations in which homophobia, biphobia and transphobia occur.

Harassment in football settings

While looking at experiences of harassment, overall, the majority of participants never experienced any of the specific examples provided of harassment in football settings. However, across time, 13% of participants had been threatened to be ‘outed’ as LGBTQI+; 14% felt excluded in club activities; 36% had experienced verbal harassment; 19% experienced online hate, and 12% experienced physical violence across time. Additionally, specific to trans participants, 42% of trans participants experienced purposeful misgendering across time in football settings.

Table 27
Have any of the following happened to you in the last six months in football settings? (n=94)

- ◆ Within the last month
- ◆ Between a month and six months ago
- ◆ Between six months and a year ago
- ◆ More than a year ago
- ◆ Never

Been threatened by another person to ‘out’ you as LGBTQI+



Excluded you from club activities



Verbally hurt you because you are LGBTQI+ (e.g. made fun of you, insulted you)



Wrote hurtful things about you on social media because you are LGBTQI+ (e.g. X, Facebook or Instagram)



Punched, hit, or physically attacked you because you are LGBTQI+



Purposely used the wrong name/pronoun when talking about you



Participants who shared that any of these examples of harassment had happened to them across time, were asked what the impact of these experiences was. Their responses are presented below.

The majority of participants said that experiencing these forms of harassment were a significant influencing factor in their decision to disengage from football. Participants shared that such instances of harassment made them stop participating in football; made them less likely to come out in football settings, and caused damage to their mental health, their confidence and their self-image.

Made me less likely to come out to the football world. Extremely damaging to my mental health and self-image.

Honestly, at this point, it is just exhausting and disheartening. It feels like no matter how much I love my club and try to be a part, I'm never going to be enough for the lads - and I know I shouldn't take the opinions of people who don't have my best interests at heart to heart, but it still guts me from time to time.

I left football and didn't return to playing until I started playing with an LGBTQI+ team years later. I still feel such bitterness and anger thinking that coaches let a young man go through what I went through. All I can hope is that I'd never let someone else go through it.

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia within survey responses

It must be noted that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia emerged in the responses in some questions within the report. These responses most often referenced a dismissal of LGBTQI+ inclusion initiatives, misgendering of trans women and an insistence on the refusal of trans people’s participation in sporting categories that match their gender identities. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are not only biases and forms of discrimination that are enacted on LGBTQI+ people but often operate internally to the community. As a result, LGBTQI+ community members often must grapple with the effects of internalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and the potential of discrimination from their anticipated peers. This becomes significantly more fraught for members of the trans community who often experience compounded forms of marginalisation in comparison to their cisgender peers. Thus, actions undertaken to address homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in football settings must be cognisant of these dynamics and develop responses to ensure the safety, inclusion and acceptance of all members of the community.

The next section of the findings discusses participants’ experiences of positive and protective factors in football settings in Ireland and opportunities to facilitate inclusion.

Section 4:
Facilitating inclusion; positive and protective factors

LGBTQI+ clubs

A key positive factor facilitating inclusion and participation for participants was the existence of LGBTQI+ clubs, as 62% of participants felt there is a need for them.



Table 28
Do you think there is a need for
LGBTQI+-specific football clubs? (n=101)

◆ Yes	62%	63
◆ No	38%	38

Safe spaces

For many participants, LGBTQI+ clubs provided them with a safe space where they felt their identities would be seen, respected, and understood. LGBTQI+ clubs operate as spaces where participants can ‘play the beautiful game’ without fear in a ‘warm and accepting safe space’. This was held in tension with the fact that many participants wished there was no need for specific LGBTQI+ clubs but acknowledged that in the current football cultural climate, they are a necessary intervention to facilitate participation for the LGBTQI+ community.

- LGBTQI+ clubs provide space for those who may feel unwelcome/uncomfortable at standard clubs; particularly given the recent rise in transphobic rhetoric.
- I don't think there SHOULD be a need, but there is. Because people can be so cruel and heartless. Young people who are figuring their identities out need a place where they can continue to play the beautiful game. And grown players should be able to play the game they love without fear of scrutiny. LGBTQI+ clubs provide a space to do just that.
- Some LGBTQI+ people will more readily gravitate towards what they would perceive as a more warm and accepting safe space. Especially perhaps if they were not actively involved in football beforehand.

Reengagement with football

Relatedly, many participants felt that LGBTQI+ clubs acted as an important means of reengaging LGBTQI+ people in football, providing LGBTQI+ people with an opportunity to return to a much loved sporting community alongside ‘like-minded people who love the game’ with shared lived experiences.

- Too many LGBTQI+ people drop out of sports after coming out, so it's a very safe space for them to re-enter sports, it's a good way for people to join the community at large, and it's a great third space in the community.
- It helps LGBTQI+ people get back involved in sports and gives them a place where they can be confident in themselves while playing the sport they enjoy.
- Just being able to play football again. A group of like-minded people who love the game and have become friends on and off the pitch without the fear of the harm, both physical and mental, that coming out had brought before.

Camaraderie & belonging

Importantly LGBTQI+ specific clubs foster a sense of trust, belonging and friendship among many of the participants. These clubs provide LGBTQI+ people with a space to be open, accepted and in community with individuals who share their lived experience building an environment of support and inclusivity based on their LGBTQI+ identities and crucially their love of football.

- *Comradery and knowing there is a collective shared respect for each other, rather than possibly being the butt of someone's jokes.*
- *LGBTQI+ clubs bring lots of LGBTQI+ people back to sports they have left. Queers support and shared lived experience is also an important element of forming friendships and the connections with other community members can be impactful.*
- *People need spaces to feel fully safe and welcomed and be able to engage with their community. Especially if they are new to an area or their identity/sexuality. Being around people like you and who understand your experiences does wonders for mental health and personal acceptance, even if it's something never explicitly talked about there. It's just existing with each other.*

”

Trans inclusivity

Significantly many participants felt that LGBTQI+ specific clubs were important in facilitating trans inclusion in response to current anti-trans policies and rhetoric in sport. In this sense, LGBTQI+ specific clubs become crucial in ensuring trans people have a means of accessing football spaces that will accept them and enable them to play in line with their gender identity. Such comments from participants further reiterate the need for trans inclusive policies and practices across football settings in Ireland in order to bolster trans participation in football beyond LGBTQI+ specific clubs alone.

- *Some people feel more comfortable playing with people in the community after having bad experiences with homophobia within their past clubs. I also think it's very important to have football clubs for transgender people to allow them to take part in the sport and identify however they're comfortable.*

- *There is no policy in the FAI for trans athletes to take part or even anything said in order to protect them. I miss playing football competitively at a proper club/league level; however, I feel like I can't, as most clubs either won't accept or will make it awkward/uncomfortable to play there.*

”

Benefits of increased LGBTQI+ inclusivity

Participants were asked via the open text box responses what they believe the positive benefits of increased LGBTQI+ inclusivity in football would be. Their responses are presented thematically below.

Player retention

The most overt benefit named by participants was that increased LGBTQI+ inclusivity would facilitate player retention, wider participation, a more diverse cohort of players and further opportunities for improvement and progression amongst players.

- *More players, more coaches, more referees, more club members, more volunteers, greater diversity of thinking.*
- *Wider participation. Attract more talent. More backgrounds makes the team stronger.*
- *I think people generally would then find that football is friendlier, that attendance at matches is a more positive experience. Over time, there would have to be benefits in having new talent engage in and remain in football.*
- *Better atmosphere and opportunities for players to reach their potential.*
- *More diversity brings more talented players.*

”

Increased revenue

Participants also meaningfully acknowledge that the fostering of LGBTQI+ inclusivity would increase revenue across football settings in Ireland through the growth of football fanbases.

- *Would help grow the game to a wider audience. Not to mention the revenue for clubs.*
- *Despite what's happening in the world, diversity is really important and good. This is a chance for football clubs to increase the fan base and revenues through merchandising, etc. and sport is a healthy outlet and I think having more gay people attend can only be a good thing.*
- *More fans filling the stands! Football in Ireland shouldn't shy away from reflecting the diversity of our society.*
- *More players, more clubs, more divisions. Surely that would mean more money dedicated to the game and the development of grassroots football should be able to gain a lot of traction.*
- *They'd make more money cause the fan base is bigger. Increase the pool of talent.*

”

Positive mental health outcomes

Participants meaningfully acknowledged that increased LGBTQI+ inclusivity would enable positive mental health outcomes for members of the community through their participation in the sport and access to community.

- *It would encourage local club support and it would greatly reduce social isolation and hopefully create some positive mental health impacts.*
- *More people would be involved but I also think mental health would improve, especially on the men's side.*
- *Improved mental health and well-being.*

”

Positive representation

Participants' qualitative comments also identified the importance of LGBTQI+ inclusivity in promoting positive LGBTQI+ representation, creating meaningful role models for young LGBTQI+ young people, and encouraging more LGBTQI+ people to engage in the sport and come out.

- *More LGBTQI role models for young football players/ fans.*
- *LGBTQI+ people would be more likely to get involved if they could see people like them out in the game.*
- *I think there would be more fans and players and staff. It would make it easier for those involved who are LGBTQI+ to come out.*

”

Safer environment

Finally, many participants felt that an increase in LGBTQI+ inclusivity in football would address homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the culture, reducing concerns around safety for many in the community.

- *It would feel safer and more welcoming. There would be less of a 'lad' culture, especially at a professional level, which is what little kids look up to and learn from.*
- *Clubs would feel safer and matches if we addressed homophobia among teammates and in the club atmosphere.*

”

Increasing welcomeness, inclusivity and participation

Participants were asked to identify what actions they felt could be taken to make football more inclusive of LGBTQI+ people. These findings are presented below in conversation with the associated open text box question and Table 29. When participants were asked what actions they felt could be taken to make football more inclusive of LGBTQI+ people 81% of participants felt that “National football organisations adopting and promoting clear anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusion policies for professional and grassroots/recreational players” would increase the climate of inclusivity in the sport. Participants in their qualitative responses were empathic that these policies need to be created in collaboration with the FAI, Sport Ireland and the Department of Sport and needed to be present within every club at a professional and grassroots leagues/organisation level. Significantly, many participants stressed that any LGBTQI+ related policies need to be actively trans inclusive observing consideration towards pronoun use, changing facilities, opportunities for participation for non-binary people and clear guidelines on the inclusion of trans players at all levels.

- *LGBTQI+ inclusivity/equity policies at every club, and at the FAI.*
- *Robust inclusion policies from Dep. of Sport, Sports Ireland, FAI, and associated grassroots leagues/organisation.*
- *The FAI has policies in place to protect LGBTQI+ members.*
- *Trans inclusion policies that think about pronouns, changing facilities, having non-gendered teams for non-binary people and letting people play with the teams that match their gender identity.*

”

This finding is meaningfully complimented by 77% of participants feeling that “Stadium and sporting officials adopting a zero-tolerance policy for anti-LGBTQI+ humour, chants and slurs” would improve LGBTQI+ participation, welcoming and belonging in football.

- *Clubs need to take a no exception rule, any homophobia or transphobia, any breach and it's a ban.*
- *Zero tolerance policies that are actually implemented, and have supporting mechanisms for reporting and dealing with incidents.*

”

Simultaneously, 67% of participants felt that coaches, volunteers and players should receive anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusion training across the country. Significantly, the qualitative responses recognised a specific need for coaches to be trained in order to address biases and actively transform the climate of inclusivity across football settings.

- *Coaches being trained, and actively tackling homophobia at all levels. Saying it is inclusive is not enough, real action is needed.*
- *Coaches were more educated so to be unbiased.*
- *LGBTQI+ champion training etc. to meet with and understand the needs of the people who play their sport.*

”

Relatedly within qualitative responses, a number of participants advocated for the importance of diversity officers in clubs or the designation of a specific individual tasked with ensuring the address of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia in a club setting.

A dedicated diversity officer at clubs to constantly maintain awareness and safety.

A person you can go to and trust if there is ever an issue.

”

Table 29
What do you think could be done to make football more inclusive of LGBTQI+ people?*
(n=100)

National football organisations adopting and promoting clear anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusion policies for professional and grassroots/recreational players	81%	81
Educating young people in secondary school on anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusivity	81%	81
Stadium and sporting officials adopting a zero-tolerance policy for anti-LGBTQI+ humour, chants and slurs	77%	77
Educating young people in primary school on anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusivity	70%	70
Delivering anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusion training to coaches, volunteers and players across the country	67%	67
Encouraging and supporting professional football players to come out	60%	60
Developing major public education campaigns featuring sporting stars shown in stadiums and in the media	60%	60
Encouraging and supporting professional football players to come out	43%	43
Facilitate mixed gendered training and competition	38%	38

* Participants could select multiple options

Another highly iterated action by participants was the education of young people in primary and secondary school on anti-discrimination and LGBTQI+ inclusivity. With 81% of participants advocating for this education in secondary school and 70% advocating this education at a primary level.

Participants also felt that positive representation would improve the climate of inclusivity for LGBTQI+ people in football settings. 60% of participants felt that “Encouraging and supporting professional football players to come out” and “Developing major public education campaigns featuring sporting stars shown in stadiums and in the media” would be meaningful actions in increasing the participation of LGBTQI+ people in football and fostering a more accepting sporting environment. Qualitative commentary from participants encouraged symbolic actions by clubs in order to demonstrate their commitment to LGBTQI+ inclusivity, namely the use of a “flag / twibbon / symbol to show the club is openly and proudly welcoming of our community” or flying the “the pride flag in soccer pitches during pride.” These suggestions make clear the ongoing importance of allyship in achieving LGBTQI+ inclusivity in football, with many participants feeling strongly that “More clubs involved in Pride” and the “FAI in Pride” would be demonstratively meaningful acts of allyship and solidarity.

Summary

Within the *LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football* research, the vast majority of respondents who identified as LGBTQI+ people playing football in Ireland are playing on LGBTQI+ specific teams. LGBTQI+ clubs provide participants with a safe space where their identities feel seen, respected and understood; they facilitate their reengagement with football; they foster camaraderie and belonging and meaningfully demonstrate the inclusion and acceptance of trans players. The findings of this research show that while there is an increasing climate of inclusivity, this is often being championed by specific clubs and additional work is needed to bolster inclusivity across football settings in Ireland. Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic remarks are a consistent issue in football spaces and are a significant barrier to LGBTQI+ participation in football. Significantly, participants who experienced harassment in football settings said these experiences were an influencing factor in their decision to disengage from football. Participants shared that such instances of harassment made them stop participating in football; made them less likely to come out in football settings and caused damage to their mental health, their confidence and their self-image. However, participants consistently identified positive and protective factors and facilitators to their participation in football namely LGBTQI+ inclusion policies; training and education initiatives and awareness campaigns. Meaningfully, participants felt that increased LGBTQI+ inclusivity in football would lead to player retention; wider participation; a more diverse cohort of players and further opportunities for improvement and progression amongst players. They also named that fostering LGBTQI+ inclusivity would increase revenue across football settings in Ireland through the growth of football fanbases. Additionally, participants acknowledged that increased LGBTQI+ inclusivity would lead to positive mental health outcomes for LGBTQI+ community members, create positive representation of diversity in football in Ireland and foster a safer environment for many marginalised communities.

Section 5: Recommendations

The LGBTQI+ Inclusivity in Irish Football study indicates that many LGBTQI+ people in football settings in Ireland feel welcome, accepted, and included in football clubs largely due to their participation in LGBTQI+ specific clubs. However, many members of the LGBTQI+ community continue to face barriers to participation, which, as demonstrated from the findings of this research, is stratified by both sexual orientation and gender identity. Based on the study's findings, participants' feedback and key stakeholder input, the following recommendations are made to government departments, bodies under their aegis, and state agencies with a view to advancing LGBTQI+ people's participation, acceptance, and inclusion in football settings in Ireland.

Policy

In line with the commitments of the organisation's *Social and Environmental Sustainability Strategy* (2024), the FAI should develop an LGBTQI+ Inclusion and Participation Policy through a community co-production approach, including key stakeholders at all levels of engagement in football settings in Ireland, with the ambition of achieving a minimum representation and participation rate reflective of the LGBTQI+ community in Ireland.

In line with the commitments of the organisation's *Social and Environmental Sustainability Strategy* (2024), the FAI should implement a zero-tolerance approach to anti-LGBTQI+ language and discrimination embedded with robust and rigorous reporting mechanisms – such as the *Kick It Out platform*³ - and models of redress for anti-LGBTQI+ language and discrimination across football settings.

Participation

In line with the commitments of the *National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028*, the Department of Sport and Sport Ireland should work to capture the size, composition and diversity of LGBTQI+ communities participating in sport in Ireland through the annual Irish Sports Monitor and commit to ensuring representative participation and engagement from the LGBTQI+ population in Ireland in the lifecycle of the next National Sports Policy.

In line with the commitments of the *National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027*, the Department of Sport, in collaboration with the Department of Rural and Community Development, should increase funding to LGBTQI+ specific sports clubs, including football clubs, across the country.

Training

In line with the commitments of the organisation's *Policy on Diversity and Inclusion in Sport*, Sport Ireland and NGBs should build capacity amongst players, coaches, referees, and volunteers through standardised training in the area of LGBTQI+ inclusive and affirmative approaches to sport participation.

Education

In line with the commitments of the organisation's *Social and Environmental Sustainability Strategy* (2024), the FAI should roll out a national awareness campaign, developed through a community co-production approach, to address the use of anti-LGBTQI+ language in football settings.

Research

In line with the commitments of the *National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028*, the Department of Sport and Sport Ireland should dedicate funding to follow-up qualitative and quantitative research projects that explore LGBTQI+ participation in sport specifically in relation to the impact of intersecting forms of marginalisation on participation and a comparison between LGBTQI+ people's participation in LGBTQI+ specific sports clubs and participation in mainstream clubs.

³ See www.kickitout.org for further information.

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