



ANNEX B

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Our ref: AQW 20569/22-27

Date: 3 February 2025

Sian Mulholland MLA
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw,
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Sian

**AQW 20569/22-27 – STEPS BEING TAKEN TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY
IN SPORTS OFFICIATING, INCLUDING SPECIFIC INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE
AND SUPPORT WOMEN TO PURSUE CAREERS AS REFEREES.**

You recently submitted an Assembly Written Question AQW 20569/22-27, asking that I detail any steps being taken to promote gender equality in sports officiating, including specific initiatives to encourage and support women to pursue careers as referees, following the recent achievement of the first female referee officiating a NIFL Premiership match.

I have arranged for this information to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Yours sincerely

**Gordon Lyons MLA
Minister for Communities**

Steps being taken to promote gender equality in sports officiating, including specific initiatives to encourage and support women to pursue careers as referees as per AQW 20569/22-27.

Actions taken by Sport NI

I have sought the requested information from the Chief Executive, who has advised me of the following information:

“Rise Female Leadership

The Sport NI - Rise Female Leadership programme to 19 women (2 of whom are officials) from 13 sports. They have successfully completed the first phase of the programme, and they are currently receiving personalised mentoring to prepare them to make lasting impacts in the sports sector. Rise is empowering the next generation of female leaders in sport, providing tailored support for female coaches, officials, and administrators across the Derry, Strabane, Causeway Coast, and Mid Ulster areas. Rise aims to close the gap of underrepresentation by enhancing leadership skills, diversity and inclusion.

Participants have gained tools to thrive in leadership roles, drive change, and make a lasting impact in their sports while learning from each other’s experiences. Rise has also created a supportive network within the sporting community for these women which will last long after the programme ends.

Through participation in Rise, we will leave behind a community of empowered women equipped to lead and a legacy that promises to inspire future generations. With stronger representation of women in coaching, leadership, and officiating roles.

People Plan

Sport NI is currently developing a People Plan that will look to achieve a vision of an active, skilled and supported workforce, which is representative of the population, and has the capacity and capability to meet the demands of the sporting system in Northern

Ireland. While this is still in development it is planned to focus on the following seven support areas:

- People in Community Sport*
- People in Club Sport*
- People in Officiating*
- People in Performance*
- People in Outdoors*
- People in Infrastructure*
- People Partners*

The plan will identify problems to be addressed and proposed actions which will support the development of the system. This includes the underrepresentation of people including women across the populations of officials, coaches, and sports administrators. This plan will become a live working document in 2025-26.

Sport NI People Development team are implementing the following interventions to support official development in NI. A number of elements within these interventions are linked specifically to the concept of gender equality officiating. Interventions include:

- NI Officials Forum (Sports Development practitioners who are responsible for official learning, management and logistics): this forum supports sports development officers from our governing bodies to better support, develop and deploy their officials (including gender balance context).*
- Digital learning for officials: SNI have developed a digital learning course called Positive Mental Health for Officials. Many of the images and references within this course speak specifically to females in officiating*
- Rise female leadership programme: SNI have facilitated the RISE female leadership programmes for coaches, sports administrators and officials in local sport. This programme raised the profile of female stakeholders in sport including officials.*
- Future developments: SNI will be hosting media coverage on officials in the last week of February. This will highlight specific focus on female officials with the*

intention of raising the profile of females in officiating and provide a platform for female officials to be seen as role models, hence encouraging others to follow the path.

Women in Sport Engagement and Delivery Plan

More generally, Sport NI has developed a Women in Sport ‘Engagement and Delivery’ Plan to identify gaps in female involvement in sport and take steps to address this. The plan has identified four pillars to set objectives against – Leadership, Participation, Visibility & Advocacy and Sporting Foundation. One of the Leadership objectives areas is “Support towards female workforce development i.e. coaches, officials and volunteers to broaden the base.” Baselines have been established through an EDI survey of the NI sports sector and the imbalance in women’s participation in sport and physical activity presented at an EDI Sports Development network event in October 2024.

Women in Sport campaign: Be Seen, Be Heard, Belong

*The Delivery Plan includes a campaign - **Be Seen, Be Heard, Belong** – launching on 3 March 2025 and scheduled to run for an initial 3 year period to demonstrate Sport NI’s continuous commitment to this area of work.*

The integrated comms campaign will include PR, advertising, digital and social media and stakeholder engagement.

Aims of the Campaign

- 1. To celebrate women in sport and to encourage women and girls to be seen, to be heard and to belong in sport.*
- 2. To encourage women and girls, men and boys, sports, clubs and others to sign up to join the Be Seen, Be Heard, Belong movement.*

To inspire women and girls not currently involved in sport to find their place, whether that is on the pitch, on the sideline or in the boardroom.”

For any future queries relating to operational matters, you may wish to contact Sport NI directly. Making direct contact with Sport NI will ensure that you receive the information in the shortest possible timeframe and make best use of public resources.