

Champions of Inclusion



**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR DECISION-MAKERS IN
SPORT TO PROMOTE LGBTQI+
INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS**

Summary

The historical relation between gender and sport created rigid expectations regarding men and women participating in sport. These expectations can make sport a hostile environment for LGBTQI+ people.

While LGBTQI+ sport clubs are often perceived as compensatory for this hostility, a shift towards a complementary approach can be beneficial for creating a more accessible and qualitative sport environment.

Therefore, this policy paper proposes recommendations on how decision-makers from public authorities and mainstream sport organisations can support an accessible sport environment. By taking on a role in stimulating and facilitating collaboration, they create the opportunity for LGBTQI+ athletes to make a positive choice between participating in mainstream sport or in LGBTQI+ sport clubs instead of a choice based on exclusion.



This publication is a result from the Erasmus+ project +PLUS. The acronym stands for 'LGBTQI+ Policy and Leadership in Sport and Society'. The project aimed to enhance the inclusion and participation of LGBTQI+ athletes in European grassroots sport through combatting discrimination, addressing intolerance and establishing an inclusive sport culture where all can participate.

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Glossary

Sport refers to all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.

Gender is a social construct and includes all characteristics, roles and expectations society connects with men, women, masculinity and femininity.

Gender identity is one's own internal sense of their gender whether that is man, woman, neither or both. Gender identity can correlate with a person's assigned sex at birth or can differ from it.

Cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex assigned at birth.

Transgender refers to a person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex assigned at birth.

- **Trans man** is a person whose assigned sex at birth was female but identifies as a man.
- **Trans woman** is a person whose assigned sex at birth was male but identifies as a woman.
- **Non-binary** covers identities that do not fit the traditional man-woman binary.

LGBTQI+ is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer and Intersex people. The 'plus' sign refers to many other forms of identification under the umbrella of sexual orientation and gender.

Heteronormativity refers to the societal belief that heterosexuality is the natural form of sexuality and the assumption that everyone is naturally heterosexual.

Introduction

VALUES BASED SPORT – SPORT AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Sport is widely recognised for its **positive impact** on individuals and broader society. Improved physical and mental wellbeing, community building, reduced health care costs and economic development are some examples of this impact.

Sport its importance is also affirmed in juridical frameworks such as the European Charter on Sport¹ and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights². These frameworks establish sport as a social, educational and cultural activity. Therefore, access to sport is considered to be **a fundamental right**, meaning that everyone, without discrimination of any kind, should be able to participate in and enjoy sport.

It is the responsibility of both public authorities and sport organisations to **create accessible conditions in sport**. Decision-makers on these levels should set conditions and requirements that are necessary for the inclusive development of sport.

¹ Council of Europe. (2022). *Revised European Sports Charter*. Link: <https://rm.coe.int/>

² *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. (1966). Link: <https://www.ohchr.org/>

THE INCLUSION OF LGBTQI+ PEOPLE IN SPORT

Even though this 'sport for all' approach is generally recognised by decision-makers, a Council of Europe review of member states found that **sport is a hostile environment for LGBTQI+ people**³ and discovered a lack of inclusive policy measures as well as collaboration between sport bodies and LGBTQ+ associations.

Part of the explanation can be found in the relation between gender and sport, which developed throughout history and created rigid expectations regarding men and women participating in sport⁴. These expectations reflect the cisgender heteronormative culture of our society which causes LGBTQI+ people to experience hostility, discriminatory language and behaviour and to not always feel safe or welcome^{5,6}.

³ Council of Europe. (2019). *Combating discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in council of Europe member states: A review of the recommendation CM/ Rec(2010)5 of the committee of ministers*. <https://rm.coe.int/>

⁴ Phipps, C. (2021). Thinking beyond the binary: barriers to trans participation in university sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(1)1, 81-96. Link: <https://journals.sagepub.com/>

⁵ Hartmann-Tews, I., Menzel, T., & Braumüller, B. (2022). Experiences of LGBTQ individuals in sport in Europe: the impact of societal, organisational and individual factors. In I. Hartmann-Tews (Ed.) *Sport, Identity and Inclusion in Europe* (pp. 26-41). Routledge. Link: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/>

⁶ Storr, R., Nicholas, L., Robinson, K., & Davies, C. (2021). 'Game to play?': barriers and facilitators to sexuality and gender diverse young people's participation in sport and physical activity, *Sport, Education and Society*. Link: <https://www.tandfonline.com/>

80%

of LGBTQI+ individuals
experienced homo and
trans negative language¹

1/3

1 out of 3 LGBTQI+
people remain closeted
in their sport

Only

8%

reported incidents
of discrimination

20%

of LGBTQI+ people refrain
from sport due to their
sexual or gender identity

8/10

8 out of 10 LGBTQI+
clubs/groups believe that
mainstream sport lacks a
welcoming culture²

¹ Menzel, T., Braumüller, B., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2019). The relevance of sexual orientation and gender identity in sport in Europe. Findings from the Outsport survey. Cologne: German Sport University Cologne, Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies. Link: <https://www.outsport-report.de/Relevance-of-SOGI-in-Sport-in-Europe-3.pdf>

² Braumüller, B., Schlunski, T., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2025). *PLUSSS. Research Report on the Story of LGBTQI+ Sport in Europe*. German Sport University Cologne. Link: <https://www.eglsf.info/projects/pluss-project/research-report/>

EFFORTS TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE SPORT ENVIRONMENT

Throughout the years different kinds of initiatives were introduced to transform this hostile sport environment into **a more safe and welcoming environment** for LGBTQI+ people. The examples below illustrate this.

Besides the mentioned **juridical frameworks**, policy measures were put into place to realise a more inclusive sporting environment. The European Commission worked on an 'LGBTIQ Equality Strategy', fostering inclusion and tackling discrimination³. In 2022 the Council of Europe urged member states to get rid of discriminatory policies against LGBTI people⁴.

These policy measures are complemented by practices in the field such as diversity training, Pride activities or tournaments, visibility campaigns and so on. The rationale behind this is that **DEI (diversity, equality and inclusion) initiatives** increase recognition of LGBTQI+ identities and value each individual⁵. Furthermore, these initiatives can be an effective way of putting an organisation's social responsibility into practice⁶ and engage a larger audience of potential members and volunteers.

³ European Commission. (2020). *LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025*. Link: [EUR-Lex - 52020DC0698 - EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eur-lex)

⁴ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. (2022). *Combating rising hate against LGBTI people in Europe*. Link: <https://pace.coe.int/>

⁵ Russen, M., & Dawson, M. (2023). Which should come first? Examining diversity, equity and inclusion. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. Link: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370363325>

⁶ Fleischman, D., Mulcahy, R., English, P., Florence, E., de Villiers Scheepers, R., & Rönningberg, M. (2024). Why is my team wearing rainbow jerseys? Exploring effects of DEI messages on sports fans' responses. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 32(3), 212-222. Link: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/14413582241244841>

THE ROLE OF LGBTQI+ SPORT CLUBS AND GROUPS

Adding to previously mentioned measures and practices is the existence of **LGBTQI+ specific sport clubs and groups**. LGBTQI+ sport organisations play an important role in the **process** of creating a more inclusive sport world.

First of all because they **offer a feeling of belonging and a strong sense of community** for athletes, knowing that they are surrounded by people with similar life experiences¹. Athletes feel less pressure to manage their identity according to society's expectations, improving their wellbeing.

Second, these LGBTQI+ clubs can **support mainstream clubs** in recognizing and tackling the obstacles that are still present in sport.² Things that may seem inconsequential like conversations in the dressing room about partners or children can create stress among LGBTQI+ people. Taking part in these conversations is important for long-term acceptance within the club but they simultaneously demand sharing of one's own relationship status. Not being aware of these obstacles, causes drop-out risk among LGBTQI+ athletes, while hearing these experiences from LGBTQI+ clubs can help mainstream clubs to make such practices more inclusive.

¹ R. Storr & J. Richards. (2024). 'The tennis club is my safe space': assessing the positive impact of playing tennis on LGBTQ+ people in Australia. *Sport, Education and Society*, 29:5, 521-534. Link: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2022.2034144>

² Müller, J., & Böhlke, N. (2022). 'I somehow had the feeling that I did not belong there' – Experiences of Gay and lesbian Recreational Athletes in German Sports Clubs. *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure* (5), 337-357. Link: [s41978-022-00110-0.pdf](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2022.2034144)

BRIDGING GAPS: MAINSTREAM AND LGBTQI+ SPORT ARE COMPLEMENTARY

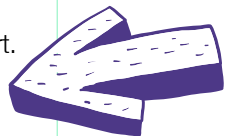
LGBTQI+ sport clubs are often perceived as compensatory for the lack of inclusion and accessibility in mainstream sport. However, a **complementary** approach would make more sense in efforts towards inclusion.

Mainstream sport clubs may lack the in-depth attention to social safety and belonging that LGBTQI+ clubs tend to prioritise. Events or short-term projects for example, might lack impact in the long run. Moreover, there is **no guarantee that these initiatives will provide an appropriate solution** to the challenges experienced by LGBTQI+ people.

Nonetheless, they are often better resourced in terms of infrastructure, visibility and organisational support than LGBTQI+ sport clubs, who face certain challenges when organising community specific activities.

While a compensatory approach upholds the risk of continued exclusion, a complementary approach can bridge the **strengths of resource availability on the one hand and strong social cohesion on the other**. This can be mutually beneficial for creating a more accessible and qualitative sport environment and eventually, offer LGBTQI+ people a positive choice between mainstream or community sport.

That's why this paper offers some concrete recommendations towards decision-makers in public authorities and sport regulating organisations to take on their role as facilitators of collaboration.



Recommendations for a more inclusive sport environment

The +PLUSS project¹ revealed several **challenges** for clubs or groups trying to create a safe(r) sporting environment for LGBTQI+ athletes. Those challenges are²

- a lack of access to appropriate sport facilities;
- a hostile social environment and a lack of acceptance by mainstream sport organisations;
- little financial and human resources as well as public funding.

With the recommendations below, the +PLUSS project hopes to inspire decision-makers in the sport movement and public authorities to take on concrete actions and contribute to a more inclusive and welcoming sport environment.

¹ Read more about the project: [+PLUSS PROJECT – EGLSF.info](https://www.eglsf.info/projects/pluss-project/)

² Braumüller, B., Schlunski, T., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2025). PLUSS, Research Report on the Story of LGBTQI+ Sport in Europe. German Sport University Cologne. Link: <https://www.eglsf.info/projects/pluss-project/research-report/>

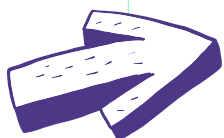


1. GUARANTEE EQUAL ACCESS TO PUBLIC FUNDING AND FACILITIES

LGBTQI+ sport clubs can be excluded from some important activities, such as applying for grants or renting facilities. This violates the **non-discrimination approach** set by earlier mentioned juridical frameworks. Public authorities can especially play an important role in changing this.

ACTION

Ensure LGBTQI+ clubs have equal access to sport venues, grants, and subsidies by implementing explicit non-discrimination clauses.



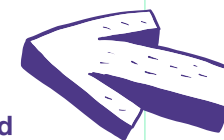
2. DEVELOP AND FACILITATE GOOD GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS WITH ATTENTION TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

With the current compensatory approach towards inclusion, **exclusion persists**. Not every athlete feels like going to, or has the option to go to, community based activities, but at the same time it is possible that they experience hostility in mainstream sport as well. Therefore, it is important for mainstream sport clubs to continue **working on a welcoming culture** themselves.

The power of good governance as well as taking on your social responsibility lies in building a positive culture, making people feel connected and committed to the organisation.

ACTION

Develop – or facilitate in the case of public authorities – policies regarding social inclusion, anti-discrimination and positive bystander behaviour working on the welcoming environment within sport.



Need help working on good governance regarding inclusion and diversity?
Check out the [SIGGS Self-Evaluation tool](#).

3. IMPROVE THE CULTURE OF INCLUSION WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION

The possibility exists that not everyone within your organisation supports the idea of change or creating a more accessible and welcoming sport environment for LGBTQI+ people. This **lack of support** can be for different reasons; they could fail to understand the benefits or feel as if something is unfair.

However, they are essential when it comes to implementing new ideas and practices. That's why **'change champions'** could be helpful here¹. These members can advocate for change and be an example or source of support for others. This way, they can shift the culture from within in a subtle manner. Some crucial elements for 'change champions' to keep in mind:

- They share the same vision as the organisation and support the change in a way that they can persevere;
- They should be well informed about the change: what are goals, necessary changes, advantages, milestones, key stakeholders and so on;
- They need people and teamwork skills, being genuinely interested in others and getting them together while keeping them motivated.

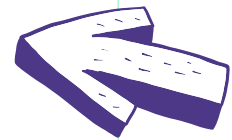
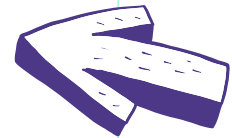
¹ Warrick, D. D. (2009). Developing Organization Change Champions. OD practitioner, 41(1). Link: <https://thefrontoft-hejersey.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/building-change-champions.pdf>

ACTION 1

Train some members, coaches or volunteers on inclusion topics and areas to improve in sport, using the expertise of LGBTQI+ or other external partners.

ACTION 2

Establish open and accessible channels for feedback and concerns, contributing to the quality of your work. Listening and applying the feedback helps with monitoring and evaluating your process/progress.



TIPS FOR DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

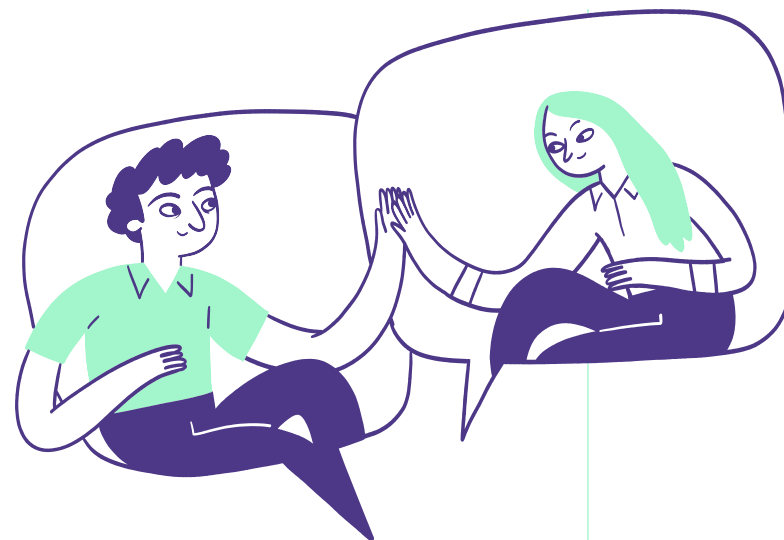
- It's not political; inclusion means acting on the diversity that is present in today's society, it offers you potential new members, volunteers and a more future proof organisation.
- Keep it broad; start with topics like (mental) health, anti-discrimination, respect or anti-bullying.
- Communication is key; try to discover which ideas or values are behind this resistance.

4. DEVELOP OR SUPPORT COLLABORATION WITH LGBTQI+ CLUBS

By **fostering collaboration** between LGBTQI+ sport clubs and mainstream sport it is possible to create a sport environment where LGBTQI+ athletes have a positive choice between participating in mainstream sport or in LGBTQI+ sport clubs and the drop-out risk is mitigated.

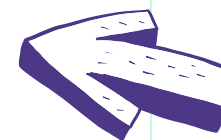
A partnership can offer a lot of **possibilities** for the collaborating organisations as well. For example, it could make organising events easier, because of the shared tasks and costs. Or LGBTQI+ sport clubs could be helpful partners in developing the social policies within your organisation. You could use and complement each other's experience and knowledge, finding creative solutions. You could apply for sport grants together. And so on.

There are numerous ways to strengthen the collaboration between mainstream and LGBTQI+ sport clubs. The best ways to do so often also depend on your own experience, resources and development. Actions can be scaled up or down, depending on your situation.



ACTION

Ask yourself what challenges you face and set up mutually beneficial collaborations that give you the support you need.



SOME TIPS ON PARTNERSHIPS

- **Make it sustainable:** set goals and evaluate during check-ins.
- **Select a lead person:** always keep in touch with each other.
- Make sure the **partnership** is **co-created** and **co-led**, based on the needs of both partners.

Successful partnership to get inspired



Out For The Win, an LGBTQI+ sport organisation in Belgium, started a collaboration with a local gymnastics club about improving the positive atmosphere within the club. For this, they introduced a “sportsmanship code”, heavily inspired on creating a safe(r) space.

The code was about **respect, open communication, working together** and so on. Once ready, the club hung it everywhere, slightly changed depending on the target group (gymnasts, supporters, parents, ...).

Following the introduction of this code

- trainers **report** that it is easier to address topics such as bullying;
- the contact persons for integrity are more **comfortable** in their role;
- the club attracted more **diverse members**;
- the project was recognised and celebrated by the gymnastics federation, **opening doors** for future conversations.



A board member is now responsible for the follow-up of this project and further integrating it in the club.

Conclusion



Whilst short-term and one-off initiatives can be excellent ways to raise awareness or to create a moment of engagement, they don't necessarily create sustained long term impacts, and they do not shift cultures.

Creating an accessible and welcoming sports environment takes time. It is **a process of shared responsibility** in which **decision-makers** in public authorities and sport regulating bodies can take on an **active role** by **facilitating and strengthening the collaborations between** mainstream and LGBTQI+ **sport clubs**.



Colophon

CHAMPIONS OF INCLUSION

Key recommendations for decision-makers to promote
LGBTQI+ inclusive sport environments

2025

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Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions
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Co-funded by
the European Union