



## **‘An Inclusive Playing Field’: How can Gaelic games organisations promote the active inclusion of their LGBTQ+ players?**

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## **‘An Inclusive Playing Field’: How can Gaelic Games Organisations Promote the Active Inclusion of Their LGBTQ+ Players?**

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**Abstract** In 2015, the Republic of Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage through a public referendum. It represented a dramatic shift in societal values. At the heart of this country is the highly influential institution of the GAA. Present in every community in the country, the GAA is not just a sporting organisation but rather an institution that represents Irish traditions and values. Yet, this same institution has few major role models its male LGBTQ+ players can look up to. The fact that there are currently no ‘out’ gay or bisexual male players in the intercounty game suggests that a taboo still exists around the presence of such players in the organisation. This research explores the reasons for this and what strategies Gaelic Games organisations could pursue to encourage the open participation of LGBTQ+ players. It considers the degree to which the temporalities of Irish LGBTQ+ progress have become embedded in the GAA. These findings are supplemented with the insights of five individuals who have experience in the GAA’s quest to become a more LGBTQ+ friendly sports organisation. These findings are then collated to produce a theory of change that can help guide the GAA’s welfare and inclusion policy in the years to come.

**Key Words: LGBTQ+, Sport, Gaelic Games, GAA, Allyship**

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## **Introduction**

Ireland has experienced a wave of societal progress over the past decade. Referenda related to the topics of gay marriage and abortion are testament to this. However, many researchers such as Kondakov (2021) feel that LGBTQ+ issues relating to sporting organisations such as the GAA remains a taboo subject. This creates a paradox that is somewhat unwelcome. Irish society could potentially turn into a battleground where traditional and (post)modern ideas compete with each other if the country's cultural evolution fails to integrate its values into the GAA (Free and Ging 2016). There are no examples of any current ‘out’ male intercounty players in the GAA. In a survey conducted by Newstalk (2022), only 10% of male intercounty players reported being aware of a gay or bisexual teammate, compared with 69% of female players. Those statistics alone demonstrate that being a member of the LGBTQ+ community could be quite isolating, particularly for young male players coming to terms with their sexuality.

Gaelic Games are undoubtedly one of the most dominant sporting, and indeed societal, traditions in Ireland. Since the foundation of the state, Gaelic Games have played a crucial role in the establishment of a modern Irish identity, which goes so far as to link it to masculinity (Free and Ging 2016). This link with masculinity, many academics argue, is the reason that the GAA, like most sporting organisations, has struggled to break the ‘taboo’ relating to its LGBTQ+ members. In 2019, the GAA was represented for the first time in the Dublin Pride Parade. ‘Na Gaeil Aeracha’ was established the same year, becoming the Gaelic Games’ first LGBTQ+ focused club. The ‘GAA For All Committee’ was also established that year to work towards the active inclusion of minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community.

This article will focus primarily on determining what policies and strategies the GAA should pursue in order to encourage the open participation of the LGBTQ+ community in their games. There is extensive literature that we can initially draw on to consider the findings of other academics in this field. Such literature will help us to frame the issue in a uniquely Irish context.

From a qualitative perspective, this research article will acknowledge the value of connecting with the lived experiences of the players themselves within the Gaelic Games. The research will consider the insights that players, both past and present, can provide to help inform an appropriate policy/ approach. By focusing part of our research around such qualitative data, the article also highlights the everyday slights that communicate excluding messages to LGBTQ+ members in the organisations based on their identity (Sue 2010).

## **Context**

Gaelic Games are made up of three organisations. The GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association), which is concerned exclusively with men’s football and hurling, The LGFA (Ladies Gaelic Football Association), which is concerned exclusively with women’s football and finally the

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Camogie Association which is concerned exclusively with the female-only sport of Camogie. The GAA was founded in 1884. As an organisation, it represented grassroots Irish nationalism characterised by decolonial values. Since its establishment, the GAA has become rooted in communities across the island of Ireland. The GAA itself played a crucial role in the reconstruction of a postcolonial Irish identity. It was a leading organisation in the ‘remasculinisation’ of Ireland after generations of occupations and famine (Free and Ging 2016). Nash (1996) explains how the GAA was used to reconstruct Irish identity toward the more robust, masculine ideal of the Gael. The discourse relating to the organisation was dominated by themes of masculinity, born out of a nation that for generations had been emasculated (Nash 1996).

This context brings us fittingly to the purpose of this research in helping us to understand the role of the GAA in an ever diversifying, progressive Ireland. More specifically, how can the LGBTQ+ community find its place within the GAA, given its traditional, masculine, heteronormative roots? The Republic of Ireland became the first country in the world to vote in favour of marriage equality via a public referendum in 2015. This signalled what academics such as Nolan (2018) described as the increasingly declining influence of conservative Catholic Church teachings in Ireland. The referendum was carried with 62% voting in favour. A strong majority, which demonstrated the greater levels of inclusion in Irish society being afforded to the LGBTQ+ community.

The GAA is a significant area of Irish society which has been influenced by the shift in Irish societal values to a much lesser degree. There are currently no examples of an ‘out’ gay male intercounty GAA player. For context, an intercounty player is one that represents their county in the All-Ireland series. It is the highest possible level a player can play at, and is the level which traditionally affords the most recognition. There are some examples of out gay male players at the local club-level game. This however would not be considered ‘significant’ on the national scale. Club-level games would be played within a county between neighbouring communities. Only particularly skilled and talented players would then be selected to represent their county at intercounty level. For further context, Dónal Óg Cusack, who played at an intercounty level for the Cork hurling team between 1996 and 2013, came out as gay in 2009 in his personal autobiography ‘Come What May’. He remains the only male player in the intercounty game to ever identify as LGBTQ+ openly.

A survey was conducted in 2022 by Newstalk, which examined LGBTQ+ attitudes among intercounty players. 714 players were surveyed from 93% of the country’s intercounty teams. 99% of participants said that they would support a teammate coming out. 69% of female participants said that they were aware of a member of the LGBTQ+ community within their intercounty squad. However, this figure drops to just 10% amongst male players (Newstalk 2022). 50% of players believe a teammate would face discrimination if they came out. However, this figure drops to just 18% amongst the cohort who reported being aware of a teammate who was a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Newstalk 2022). Encouragingly, this perhaps suggests a much more positive experience for ‘out’ players than what was

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expected. Regardless, these findings are quite encouraging and support similar findings by Magrath et al. (2021) and Bush et al. (2012). However, the fact that only 10% of male intercounty players are aware of an LGBTQ+ teammate suggests it is an area that needs attention. It also highlights that there are indeed gay or bisexual male players playing at an intercounty level, and for various reasons, have decided not to disclose this publicly.

## Literature Review

### *Qualitative Studies*

Fortunately, several studies have already been carried out relating to the topic of tolerance for the LGBTQ+ community in sport. Prominent studies include those by Adams et al. (2010) and Magrath et al. (2021). A semi-professional football team in England was the focus of the study conducted by Adams et al. (2010). This study considered how coaches and players constructed and regulated masculinity in organised sport. The authors approached this study conscious of the hegemonic masculine identity that had come to dominate sport up until the early 2000s. The socially rewarded masculine identity required athletes not only to demonstrate heterosexuality, but also to police it in their peers (Adams et al. 2010). Studies by Kimmel (1994) and Pascoe (2005) examined the ways boys and men policed sexuality through discourse. Kimmel’s (1994) study found teammates threatening to expose each other as ‘poofs’, ‘sissies’ and other homosexual epithets. Players who failed to live up to the subscribed notions of masculinity were likely subjected to physical dominance and ridicule (Kimmel 1994).

Adams et al. (2010) considered the role played by coaches in facilitating this masculine, heteronormative environment. Coaches often used discourses that drew on themes such as war, gender and sexuality to motivate their players. One coach was recorded asking players who hadn’t played particularly well if they were ‘poofs’ and that they should ‘grow a pair’ (Adams et al. 2010, p. 280).

The study by Magrath et al. (2021) investigated the attitudes towards homosexuality amongst 243 male undergraduate students in the UK. The authors reference a study conducted by Bush et al. (2012), which proposed the idea in a questionnaire of having a gay coach or teammate to 216 male students at a prestigious British university. The results revealed very little homophobia amongst the participants. Homophobia was virtually non-existent among the group by the time they graduated. This led the authors to write that “it is no longer sociologically responsible to generalize all sports, and all men who play them as homophobic. Increasingly, it appears to be the opposite” (Bush et al. 2012, p. 116). The subsequent study by Magrath et al. (2021) sought to build on this research by examining participants’ attitudes towards gay men in general. Attitudinal dispositions of homophobia were found to be minimal amongst first year students in this more recent research. The students’ attitudes only improved as they matured and neared graduation. The authors attribute much of these positive outcomes to the fact that most of these young men were raised in an LGBTQ+ friendly society. The findings also support the central premise of Anderson’s (2010) inclusive masculinity theory

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(IMT), which points to improved attitudes towards homosexuality among young men from a lower socioeconomic status. Finally, Anderson (2010, p. 94) contends that the hegemonic form of masculinity that dominated youth settings throughout the 1980’s and early 1990’s has been replaced by a ‘softer, more inclusive version’.

### *Framing the Research in an Irish Context*

An article by Free and Ging (2016) is one of the few pieces of academic research that directly considers the issue of LGBTQ+ rights within the GAA. Their article considers the significance of Dónal Óg Cusack’s coming out in 2009 and what this signalled for the evolution of Irish society. Free and Ging (2016, p. 219) argue that it represented the coexistence of ‘traditional and (post)modern concepts of gender and sexuality’ in Ireland. We should also note that this happened just twenty years on from the 1980s; a decade where conservative political responses to the AIDS crisis in Ireland and the UK demonised the gay community who were blamed for the spread of the virus (Weeks 1991). The 1980s represented a time where most of society viewed LGBTQ+ behaviour as morally wrong (Magrath et al. 2021). This hostility undoubtedly forced many LGBTQ+ citizens out of team sports and those who remained generally concealed their sexuality (Plummer 2006).

Nolan (2018) similarly attempts to understand the effects of the AIDS epidemic on the evolution of LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland. Ireland in the 1980s was already a country struggling with the issues of divorce and contraceptives. It certainly did not seem to be a country ready to discuss LGBTQ+ rights, and the AIDS epidemic likely worsened such discrimination. The epidemic did however accelerate secular efforts to introduce a sex-education programme to secondary schools. This move was fiercely opposed by the Catholic Church (Nolan 2018). The entrenchment of the Church in education meant that the promotion of sex-ed programmes were blocked by their moral authority. This was in contrast to other Western European countries, many of whom had introduced such programmes in the aftermath of World War II. The Church defined sex outside of marriage as a ‘grave disorder’, masturbation a ‘deviation’ and homosexuality an ‘objective disorder’ (Catholic Truth Society 1983). This undoubtedly had a tremendous influence on the Irish population, of which 85% identified as Roman Catholic at the time. It could also be a significant factor in homosexuality remaining illegal in Ireland until 1993 (McCarthy 2020).

Although not specifically interlinked, many social historians point to the strong relationship between the Catholic Church and the GAA, particularly during the period between the 1930s and the 1980s. Keating and Reynolds (2018) discuss how it was the imperative for the GAA during this period to maintain its status and influence with ‘Fianna Fáil and the Church’, both of whom were woven into the GAA’s power structures. Murphy (2016, p. 154) describes the GAA and the Catholic Church as ‘the guardians of the spirit of the nation’, along with Fianna Fáil and Guinness. The GAA was therefore very unlikely to openly challenge the Church’s position on homosexuality throughout this period.

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This context is important to understand the overall evolution of LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland. Perhaps more noteworthy, as McWilliams (2018) suggests, is the pace at which Catholic Church teachings became less influential in Irish society, leading to the 2015 Marriage Equality referendum. As Nolan (2018) suggests, the relationship between the GAA and the Catholic Church for such a significant period should be considered when attempting to understand perhaps why the organisation ‘lags’ behind the rest of Irish society when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusion.

There are other pieces of literature produced in recent years that can also help us understand the progress of LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland. For example, Kondakov (2021) questions the progressiveness of ‘Queer Ireland’ for a number of reasons. Kondakov (2021) highlights how the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland in 1993 is often heralded as a success of the strong civil society, while many historical accounts fail to give account for the substantial pressure being placed on the Irish state by European institutions at the time. Kondakov (2021) also points to the lack of appropriate hate crime legislation in Ireland as a reason as to why reported incidences of homophobia appear much lower than they are in reality. This research causes those who read it to give pause and consider how far Ireland really has come in eliminating, or at least reducing, incidences of homophobia. Neary and Rasmussen (2020) also produced a fascinating study which offers an account of the lag time between marriage equality being introduced and progress being felt by LGBTQ+ people on a daily basis. They do this through analysing the entanglements of sexual progress and childhood innocence in Irish primary schools. One child, on hearing that a classmate’s aunt was marrying a woman, described the aunt as ‘mad’. One parent was quoted as saying that she felt the ‘Yes’ side came across ‘very pushy’ during the campaign and that she felt the ‘No’ side was almost silenced (Neary and Rasmussen 2020). This study reminded its audience in a very distinct way that 37.9% of the electorate did vote against marriage equality in 2015 and social progress should not be taken ‘as a given’.

## **Methodology**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework for this research is concerned primarily with the Theory of Change. The Theory of Change is a comprehensive description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It does this by first identifying long-term goals and then working back to identify all the conditions that must be in place for this goal to be achieved (Smith 2010). In the context of this research, an inclusive and open GAA where LGBTQ+ players can freely identify without fear of prejudice is the long-term goal. The specific conditions that must be in place for this to be achieved is therefore the focus of this research. What is uncovered through the interviews is then summarised in my Gaelic Games Theory of Change table included at the end of this article.

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### ***Data Collection***

The findings are drawn from the five semi-structured interviews undertaken as part of this research, considering the two components of personal experience within the GAA and the appropriate policies the organisation now needs to pursue to create a more open and tolerant environment for its LGBTQ+ players.

Each participant was selected due to their own unique background and experience with the issue of LGBTQ+ involvement in the GAA. I became aware of each of the participants’ work through their own advocacy in the media on the issue of diversity within Gaelic Games, with a particular focus on the LGBTQ+ community.

The interviewees each bring their own unique perspective to this conversation. Aisling Maher is a current Dublin Camogie player and passionate LGBTQ+ advocate. Gemma Begley was recently announced as the Gaelic Players’ Association’s (GPA) first ever Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officer. Cathal O’Sullivan conducted a similar study to this last year, considering the lived experiences of gay GAA players. He also has experienced coming out to his own club, Portlaoise, a few years ago. Emma Loo is the Vice-Chair of Na Gaeil Aeracha, Gaelic Games’ first explicitly LGBTQ+ inclusive team. She also completed a study two years ago examining the theme of LGBTQ+ inclusion in sports media. Brian Fennell recently appeared in an article for *Off The Ball* discussing his own positive experience of being an out GAA player with his club, Arklow Geraldines Ballymoney.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis of this research began with the audio recordings of the interviews. The method of thematic content analysis was then used to organise the discussions. In the context of this research, thematic content analysis is used to organise the content of the interviews into individual categories, allowing for the identification of common themes and messages across all participants (Vaismoradi et al. 2013).

### ***Ethical Considerations***

It is acknowledged that the nature of this research may be a sensitive issue in some cases to research participants. Participants were aware of their right to anonymity and their right to refuse participation at any stage if they wished. It was also ensured that any information collected during the research study was stored in a way that protected the research participant’s anonymity, if that was their wish. However, each participant consented to being named in the research.

## **Findings**

### ***Personal Experiences of the GAA/ LGFA/ Camogie Association***

***‘You’re not just coming out to your team, you’re coming out to your community’***

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The GAA is arguably one of the most unique sporting organisations in the world because of its community-based nature, and the fact that it is an amateur sport. Having its roots in local communities across the country is a key factor to consider when trying to align progressive values with the organisation’s decolonial origins. During our interview, Brian raised the point that coming out to a GAA team is arguably very different than coming out to a rugby team, or any other sports team for that matter. The interlinking of the game with its local community means that the knowledge of a club member coming out would likely extend beyond the confines of the team. This is a significant factor for any player to consider, especially if they don’t want to be seen as ‘different’ from the people they’ve grown up with.

You simply don’t just come out to your team, you come out to the community. It’s fair to say the GAA is the backbone to many communities in Ireland, especially rural Ireland. It’s almost like a religion. This can make coming out daunting. The team might react well, but people in the wider community mightn’t react well.

Emma builds on this point by claiming that this very nature of the GAA has meant that much of the LGBTQ+ progress within the organisation that has been made so far has come from grassroots activism. Progress has been quite rapid when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusion in Irish society in recent years. When it comes to the GAA, LGFA or Camogie Association, grassroots activism will likely be a prime source of progress in years to come.

It starts at grassroots... It has to come from a low level and a high level at the same time. So the likes of bringing education to coaches and people across the board. It’s a slow process definitely, but it’s getting there.

### ***‘Dressing Room Culture’***

I was eager to understand why some of the interviewees felt there was such a gap between the women’s and men’s game when it came to the levels of openness to the LGBTQ+ community. Camogie and Ladies’ Football have far more LGBTQ+ role models, while a significant 69% of female players are aware of a gay or bisexual teammate, compared with just 10% for males (Newstalk 2022). Aisling believes that toxic masculinity has a role to play in this and maintains that many dressing rooms still pressurise players into filling the role of the ‘alpha-male’ without deviation (Adams et al. 2010). The common, and mostly unconscious, use of homophobic slurs such as ‘faggot’ would also surely make LGBTQ+ players who have not yet disclosed their sexuality feel unwelcome.

If you’re a young guy or a young girl in a dressing room and people are using the word ‘faggot’ or whatever it is, it’s only the person who’s sensitive who’s going to take that on board. So everybody else who’s straight or has never questioned their sexuality is probably never going to hear it but the one person that it will impact is the person who’s already a little bit uncomfortable being there or are already a little unsure of whether or not they’re welcome in that environment.

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Cathal also expressed a view that the women’s game could be considered a more tolerant space for the LGBTQ+ community. The findings by Newstalk (2022) do suggest this. Cathal believes a lot of this could be traced to the fact that there are many LGBTQ+ role models in the women’s game (such as Aisling Maher and Valerie Mulcahy), but the same cannot be said for the men’s game. Reflecting on this, he also believes this may contribute to an environment of fear or uncertainty for a male player considering coming out, given how unprecedented it would be.

The likes of Valerie Mulcahy are role models for young women coming out in the sport. [For young men] It’s probably a fear thing, it’s vulnerability.

### ***“It’s a Generation Thing”***

One thing that is quite striking about two of the world’s few ‘out’ professional soccer players is their age. Joshua Cavallo was just 21 when he came out in 2022, while Blackpool’s Jake Daniels was only 17. Sports organisations are increasingly becoming more welcoming environments for the LGBTQ+ community. This phenomenon, in large part, appears to be thanks to the emergence of a new, tolerant generation (Magrath et al. 2021). This sentiment was shared by many of the interviewees. Cathal, who is only 23 (and was considerably younger when he first came out to his teammates) believes the society in which the current generation of players (born from the mid-1990s onwards) were raised has played a huge role. He also believes the first current-day male intercounty player to come out will probably be in their early twenties.

We go off to college, NUIG or UL, you meet loads of people in the queer community. I think it’s definitely a generational thing because we know, we’re aware of queer people. We’re more self-aware that they’re around us. It comes back to educating that older cohort.

On the topic of age, Aisling also made an interesting point in that many older gay players in their late twenties and early thirties may have already stepped away from the game because of the casual homophobia experienced during their playing careers (Plummer 2006). Statistically, that would mean this age cohort may be less represented than younger players who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. She reflects on conversations with some of her friends who are involved in male intercounty teams around the topic of potentially having a gay or bisexual teammate. In their reflections, they admitted that the atmosphere of the team would rarely, if ever, have been a welcoming environment for a gay player.

[Her friends reflecting] If somebody came out now in our team setup, just looking back on what our dressing room has been like for the last ten years, I’d feel really oppressed. That’d be incredible that they managed to stick around through that type of thing. If I was gay, I don’t think I would’ve been able for that or I don’t think that would’ve felt like a safe environment for me.

Aisling also stressed that this wouldn’t have been done out of any malice or bad intent on the players’ behalf. It simply reflected the lack of education that existed in these types of environments at that time.

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If you call them up on it being like hey don’t be saying that man, I guarantee you 9 times out of 10 they’ll be like ‘oh no no, Jesus I didn’t mean it like that’.

## **Policies for an Inclusive Future**

### ***The Role of Education***

In attempting to create more open and tolerant environments, sporting organisations often consider what role workshops and basic education can play. Cathal maintains that workshops such as these would play a key role in fostering a more inclusive environment. It would help start a conversation while also training coaches, players and supporters alike in how to support a gay or bisexual club member. Reflecting on his own experience of coming out to his teammates, Cathal recalls how he was forthcoming in answering any questions his teammates may have had. The education he was subsequently able to provide helped to make his club, Portlaoise, a strong ally of the LGBTQ+ community.

I was happy enough to talk about it [his sexuality]. A lot of people mightn’t be, and that’s OK too. But if the right regiment is in place for people to come out and the education is there amongst coaches and players to use the right language or to approach the situation in the right way, then I think we can start moving forward and becoming a more inclusive organisation across the board. The interlinking of role models and education is key.

Aisling similarly echoed the sentiment that education is key. She feels it may be more beneficial to have consistent reminders to club members of the types of values they’re striving for, as opposed to sitting members down one weekend a year and talking about the issue of inclusion at length.

Maybe just a talk, maybe just a 20-minute piece that’s added on to those coaching workshops. I think if we can start to integrate coaches, managers and players, kids at a young age, then hopefully we can have more and more generations where nothing else is accepted and that’s just the standard and what they expect to see.

When it comes to education, Emma believes there is significant potential for the GAA to partner up with organisations such as BeLonG To or LGBT Ireland to help roll out educational resources and workshops.

The LGFA do training courses in how to be a PRO or how to be a chairperson. I could see in a year’s time, ‘How to be an LGBTQ+ Ally’. Simple as that. There are the likes of LGBT Ireland, TENI or BeLonG To who do these workshops all the time. That could be brought into the sporting world. I don’t see why it couldn’t be.

### ***A Need for Role Models and Allyship***

The predominant theme emerging from each of the interviews relates to the importance of not just education, but that there are role models for younger players to follow. As mentioned, the survey conducted by Newstalk found that 99% of intercounty players would support a teammate coming out. Aisling believes this presents a unique opportunity for the GAA to

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realise the role intercounty players can play in promoting inclusivity and tolerance in their respective clubs, particularly if homophobic language has unconsciously been regularly used.

If you have the high-profile county stars coming back in (to their clubs) and saying ‘don’t be saying that man’, ‘are you thinking about what you’re saying there?’ or ‘why not use this word instead?’ or whatever kind of small thing it is, I would say the person who’s responsible or the person who said it is going to go ‘Oh Jesus I didn’t mean that, I didn’t mean that at all’.

Aisling also proposed the idea that there needs to be more straight male allies in the game as opposed to just waiting for, and putting pressure on, a male intercounty player to come out. Every county has its own stars who could be hugely influential allies.

I would question why we can’t have straight male high-profile players occupying that space, just verbalising and articulating the fact that they’re supportive and they’re allies and that if anybody on their team was to come out that they would be supportive of them and be welcoming of them.

Brian similarly echoed this sentiment by arguing that having a prominent out male intercounty star is not something we can push or force. There is no guarantee that this will happen in the next ten years.

It’s not something that we as a community can push to happen. That’s not how it works. We can’t just wait and rely on someone to do it. We’re just going to have to get people who are not necessarily part of the community to publicly support inclusion.

Gemma also reflected on a working group discussion that was hosted by the GPA (Gaelic Players Association) as part of Pride events last year in Dublin. The group discussed how to increase LGBTQ+ representation in Gaelic Games. Gemma claimed the predominant consensus from the group was that the issue is a ‘straight players’ problem. She personally felt that there is strong allyship already within the male players’ game and the task now is to simply make this more apparent.

There’s a perception there [teammates wouldn’t be supportive], that maybe doesn’t match the reality. They’re the ones [straight players] that need to change the culture, change the inclusiveness, change the language and the messaging used.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Perhaps the most striking theme that this research identified is that the degree to which Gaelic Games is embedded in communities across Ireland presents the GAA with a unique opportunity. In their assessment, Hansen et al. (2022) proposes that the lack of a global consensus on LGBTQ+ rights is playing a role in discouraging global sporting organisations from adequately addressing the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion. By comparison, Gaelic Games is not a world-renowned sport and does not have to cater for the cultural differences of a global audience. In addition, research findings of Magrath et al. (2021) and Bush et al. (2012) point to emerging generations of young sports people in countries such as Ireland who are

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dramatically more LGBTQ+ inclusive than the generations that went before them. The belief therefore that team sports are hostile environments for LGBTQ+ players is wholly antiquated (Bush et al. 2012). This reflects Aisling’s point in that casual homophobic comments are usually mistakenly made rather than heartfelt.

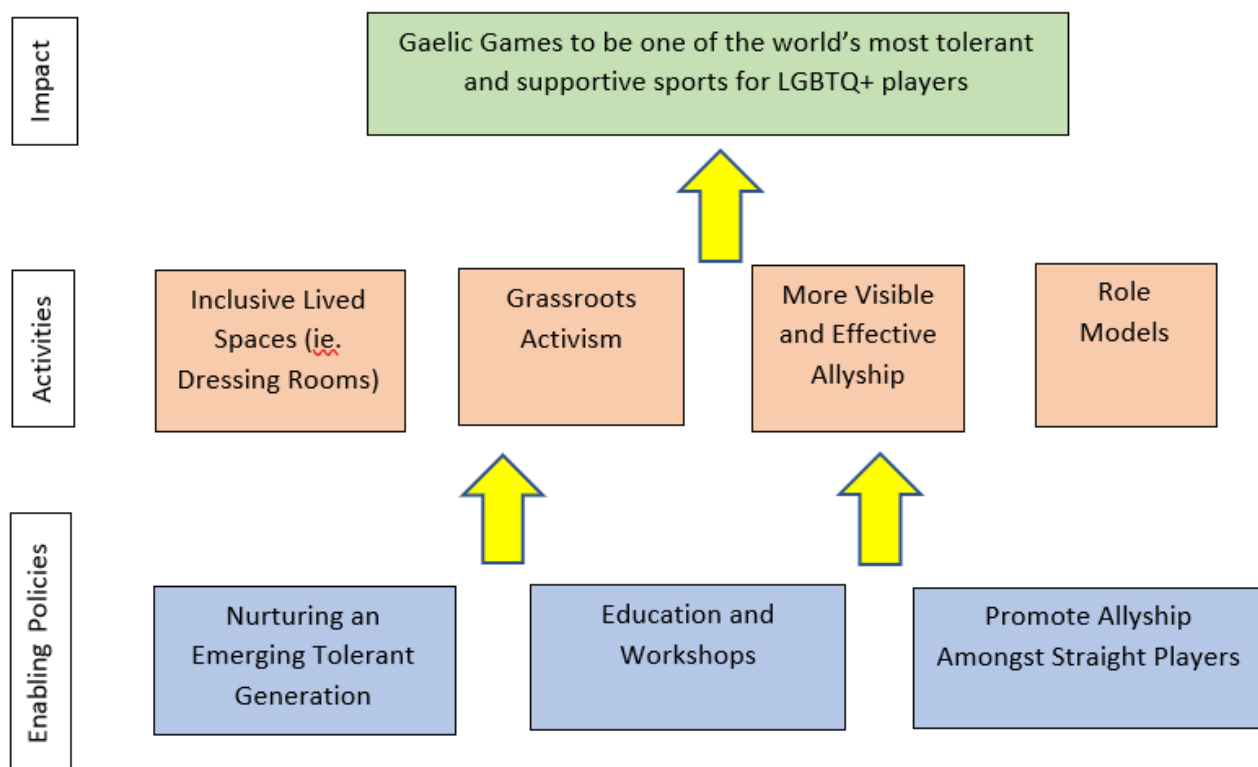
It stands to reason that a consensus existed amongst the interviewees that progress does not lie in large-scale marketing campaigns (although welcome), but in grassroots activism. Gaelic Games thrive in local communities. As Lawley (2019) argues, engagement needs to occur in the lived spaces (such as dressing rooms) where LGBTQ+ players may on occasion be inadvertently made to feel unwelcome. As noted by Murphy (2016) and Healy et al. (2015), it was grassroots activism promoted by regional Yes Equality groups that ultimately led to a ‘Yes’ campaign victory in the 2015 marriage equality referendum. It is that type of grassroots activism that the interviewees have now called for in Gaelic Games. The Theory of Change that is emerging here is reflecting the lessons learned from the marriage equality referendum campaign. When Brian said, *‘You’re not just coming out to your team, you’re coming out to your community’*, he hinted at the unique opportunity Gaelic Games has in meaningfully tackling homophobia and LGBTQ+ inclusion in communities across Ireland. The need for education and the subsequent benefits of educational workshops is a topic that could now be considered. Ideally this type of education should supplement mainstream coaching workshops and should not be treated as a standalone issue. Gemma helped to identify a key area where this can begin. Young players who are starting out in intercounty squads for the first time are required to undertake a personal development workshop to qualify for the GPA’s sporting grant. It is Gemma’s ambition that from 2024, a diversity and inclusion module will be included as part of this training. This would be a significant step towards producing a generation of intercounty players committed to the principles of tolerance and inclusion.

As a final observation, the interviewees predominantly presented an optimistic view of the direction Gaelic Games is heading in with regards to LGBTQ+ inclusion. As a sport, Gaelic Games reflects many of the cultures and traditions that make up Irish society. The findings by the GPA and *Newstalk* suggest that support for the LGBTQ+ community amongst the game’s top players is almost unanimous. Allyship is quite clearly presented. Policy now needs to utilise this allyship to make the organisation the best version it can be. Education and allyship presents the best path forward without placing the burden for progress back on the LGBTQ+ community. As Gemma concluded, the ambition of the GPA now is to truly create an environment where each player feels they can bring their whole selves to the field.

The collection of these findings can therefore help us to produce our Gaelic Games Theory of Change. The need for Gaelic Games to become a sport where the LGBTQ+ community can openly participate and thrive in is the aim. That includes proactive allyship, inclusive lived spaces (such as dressing rooms), role models and grassroots activism. To achieve this, allyship needs to be promoted among straight players who are part of an increasingly tolerant emerging generation.

‘An Inclusive Playing Field’: How can Gaelic Games Organisations Promote the Active Inclusion of Their LGBTQ+ Players?

## An Overview of the Gaelic Games Theory of Change



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