

# NON-BINARY INCLUSION IN SPORT



Rising to  
the challenge



**NON-BINARY**  
**INCLUSION**  
IN SPORT

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# INTRODUCTION

Sport is a very gendered activity  
where  
female and male categories are heavily  
regulated and enforced.

How can people  
who are not male or female  
be **visible and included** in sport?

How might including people  
with diverse gender identities help  
transform sport for everyone?

The premise of this booklet is not that people who identify as non-binary (neither male nor female) are a problem for sport. Instead, we suggest they highlight important issues that sport, and society more generally, should attend to. We discuss these challenges and identify ways of addressing them. We aim to provide sports organisations and organisers; sports regulators and governing bodies; and members of sporting communities at large, with a resource to help accessibility for non-binary people and people of all genders.

This is not a niche issue. There are more non-binary people than is often realised: it's just that they are forced into male or female categories. In addition, rigid binary gender categorisation affects everyone, in one way or another. Therefore, the initiatives we describe here may benefit many people, not only people who are non-binary, including disabled people; people who experience difficulties with body confidence and shame; and people with religious or cultural privacy requirements.

In this report the acronym LGBTQIA+ is used, and stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. This is an evolving term which attempts to be inclusive of marginalised genders and sexualities, including non-binary people.

This booklet includes:

- ◆ A summary of a research workshop which took place specifically to explore non-binary inclusion in sport;
- ◆ Three case studies showcasing examples of non-binary inclusion, derived from people's lived experiences of organising and participating in sport:
- ◆ Some tips for being a non-binary ally.

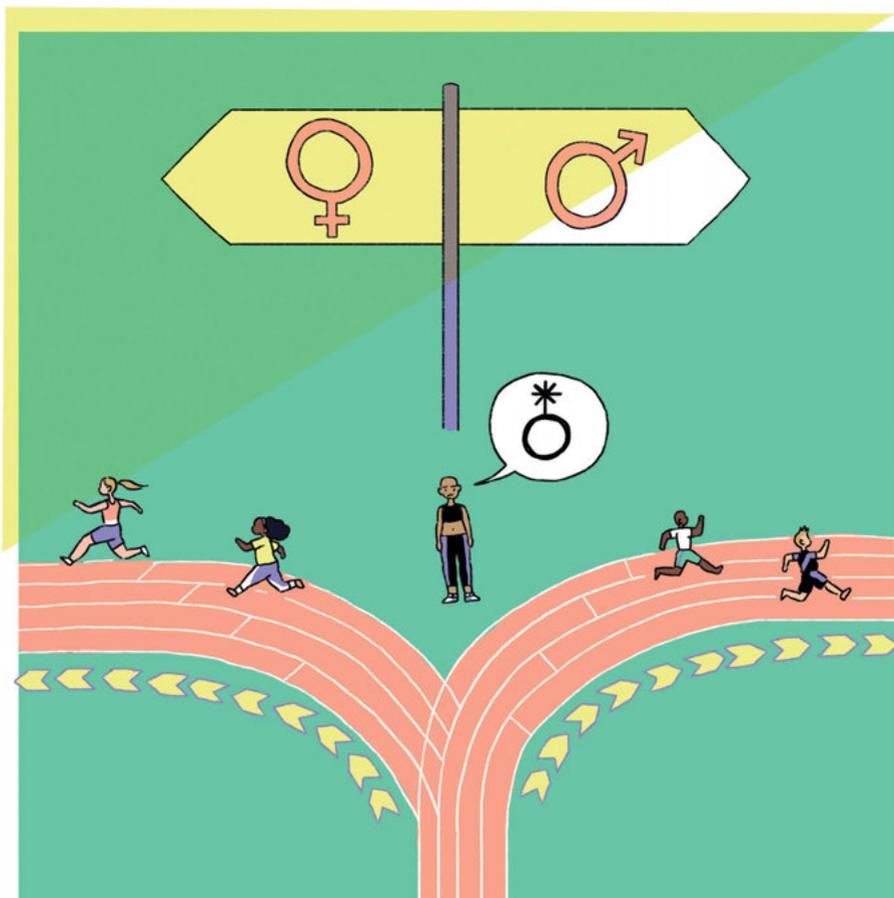
It is based on the '*New' Gender Identities and Sport: Rising to the Challenge* event, hosted by the University of Central Lancashire in Preston in October 2019. This event was funded by a *Wellcome Trust* Small Grant in Humanities and Social Science, held by the Universities of Strathclyde, Central Lancashire and Brighton. It brought together key scholars and activists in the field, for example, Payoshni Mitra, an Athletes' Rights advocate and scholar who challenges the mental and physical harm caused to women by the Differences in Sex Development (DSD) regulations of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and its predecessors.

This report focuses specifically on including people who identify as non-binary.



## **BACKGROUND**

Non-binary gender identities have become increasingly visible in recent years. Indeed, some countries such as New Zealand now legally recognise non-binary gender identity and include this option on legal identity documents like passports. People who do not identify exclusively or consistently within the categories of male or female have existed throughout history and across different cultures and geographical regions, for example the hijra in India, kathoey in Thailand, and two spirit gender identities in Native American communities. There are also European historical examples such as the mollies in 18th century English society and the femminielli in Neapolitan culture. Moreover, non-binary gender pronouns (such as 'they') can also be traced throughout history.



Despite this, most sports remain divided into two, mutually exclusive, or 'binary' categories: female or male. In other words, in order to take part in sports activities, people generally need to attend either women's or men's training sessions, be a member of either the women's or the men's team and compete in either women's or men's sports competitions.

This is so taken for granted that it is rarely questioned. It is the case across various sports, and across different levels of sports participation, from local community sports clubs to regional and national sports teams and international sports competitions. While some children's sports are mixed gender, there is usually a cut-off point after which they have to play in either girls' or boys' teams. The age at which this is enforced varies for different sports.

This has been regularly challenged and, as a result, the age limit has gradually been raised in some sports. Notwithstanding these important developments, there remains pressure for young people to participate in either male or female training sessions, teams and competitions.

Most people feel comfortable participating in either women's or men's sports, because most people's gender identity is either female or male, which means that their sense of their own gender is that they are either women or men. However, there are many people whose gender identity is neither female nor male. This includes individuals whose gender is non-binary, which means that they do not identify exclusively, or consistently, as men or males nor as women or females.

Non-binary can include people who have undergone medical treatments and procedures to change their body to fit their non-binary identity, as well as those who choose not to do this, or are unable to access these. It can also include: people who are androgynous; third gendered; intersex (people born with variations in sex characteristics); and those who have a mixed gender identity, or move between two or more genders, such as people who are gender fluid, or people who have no gender identity (such as people who are agender).

While sport can be empowering and inclusive, the habitual use of unnecessary gendered language and exclusionary spaces can deny people access to sport. For many non-binary people, taking part in sport can be very challenging because most opportunities to participate are divided into binary female and male categories.

When considering how best to include non-binary people within a sports environment, it is essential to bear in mind its intersections with the nine Protected Characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation). It is also important to bear in mind other inequalities which are not covered by the Act but which nevertheless disproportionately affect the LGBTQIA+ community and particularly minorities within this community (for example, long-term mental and physical health problems, low income, difficulty finding supportive or non-discriminatory employment, etc.).



# THE SPECIFIC DETRIMENT PROJECT

In response to campaigns calling for legal recognition of non-binary people, in 2015 the UK Ministry of Justice declared that non-binary people do not face any 'specific detriment' due to their gender identity and therefore do not require specific legal protection. In response, activists in the UK launched a campaign on social media and beyond, where non-binary people shared their experiences of the many specific detriments they do face because of their gender identity. The Scottish Transgender Alliance also conducted a survey of non-binary people's experiences in the UK which demonstrated that non-binary people face many different barriers across different spheres of life. The survey provided initial evidence that sport is one of the contexts in which their specific detriment is particularly experienced.

Building on the initial findings from this survey, in July 2019 two non-binary academic researchers and one non-binary sports activist organised a research workshop in Scotland with the purpose of undertaking an exploratory study to understand more about the specific detriment that non-binary people experience in sport. This Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study was part of a wider research project on gender and sex binaries in sport, and it brought together non-binary athletes and activists, LGBTQIA+ sports activists, and people involved in organising non-binary inclusive sports. The aims were to consider what kinds of challenges and obstacles non-binary people face when they participate in sports, how these challenges and obstacles could be overcome, and how sports organisations and sports facilities could make it easier for non-binary people to take part in sports.

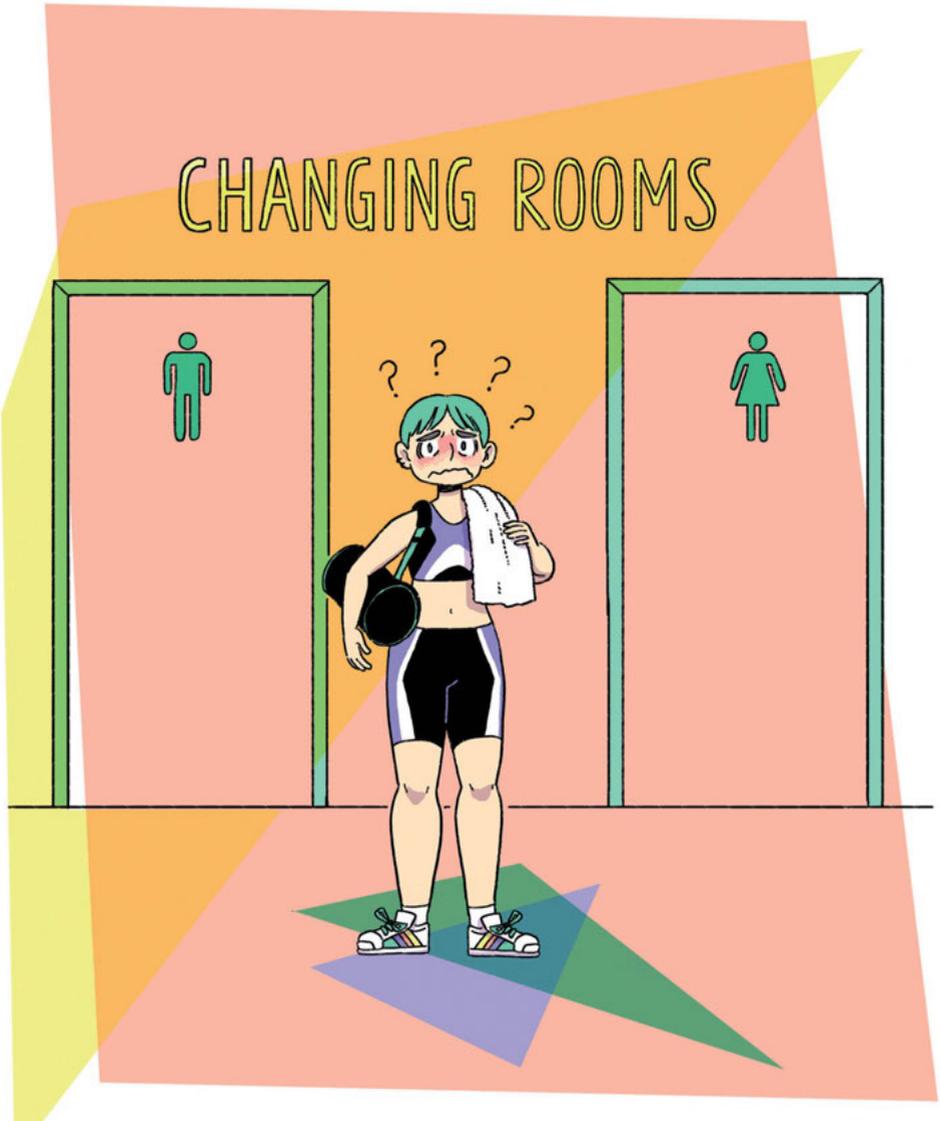
Below, we summarise the conclusions from the study.



## ***WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN SPORTS SPACES?***

Sports spaces and facilities like gyms, indoor and outdoor sports halls, and swimming pools are usually organised in a way that presumes the users of the facilities are either women or men. The clearest example of this is gender-segregated changing rooms, where people must change clothing and shower in either women's or men's changing rooms, with minimal privacy.

Often, toilets are located inside these changing rooms, which means that people need to enter a gender-segregated changing area to go to the toilet. When toilets exist that are separate from the changing rooms, these are usually labelled either female or male, or specifically intended for disabled users.



Sports spaces are also often organised in a way that presumes that women and men engage in different sporting activities. For example, it is often presumed that when women go to the gym, they will do cardio and muscle toning activities, whereas when men go to the gym, they will do weightlifting and muscle building activities. The way in which the gym floor is organised can reinforce these presumptions: many gyms have weightlifting sections that men use more than women, and cardio sections, with smaller weights often placed alongside cardio equipment, that women use more often.

Sports equipment, especially weight training equipment, is often designed and arranged in a way that is best suited for an average male individual, especially when it comes to body size and height. For example, gym equipment such as the leg press or bench press may not allow shorter people – which may include not only non-binary people but also many women and shorter men, among others – to adjust the height low enough to achieve an appropriate range of motion, while equipment like chin-up bars may be positioned too high for shorter individuals to reach.

Many sports facilities, especially swimming pools, are often large open spaces that require people to expose their body. Many gyms also have large wall mirrors that expose the body. Swimming pools may also have clothing restrictions such as rules banning the use of t-shirts and other loose clothing in the water. Significant numbers of people are uncomfortable with exposing their bodies in public places, including people who experience gender dysphoria and also people who may need to cover their bodies for cultural or religious reasons. The body exposure that these spaces require can be a significant barrier, making people unwilling or unable to use sports facilities because of that.

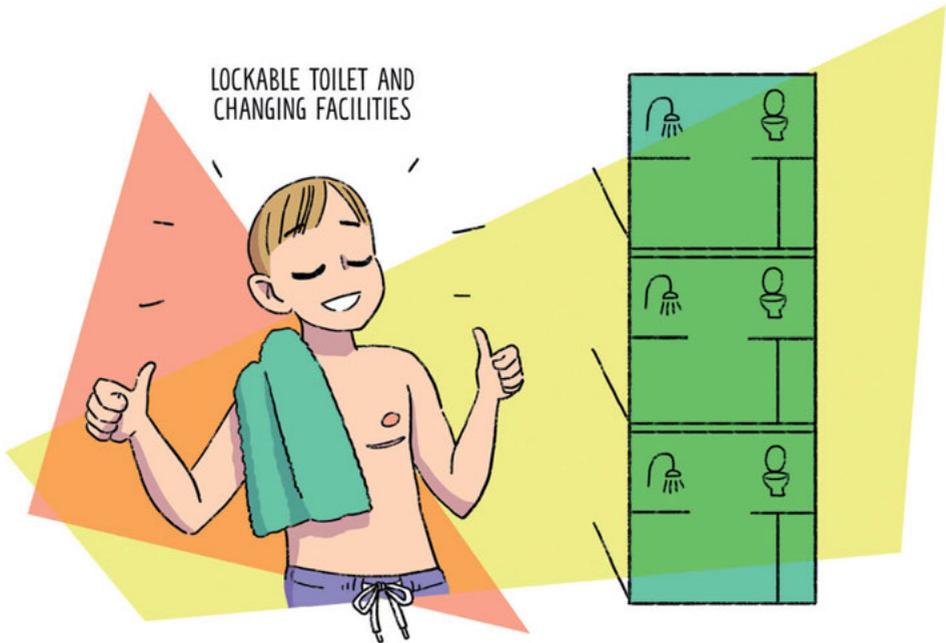


## ***HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES IN SPORTS SPACES?***

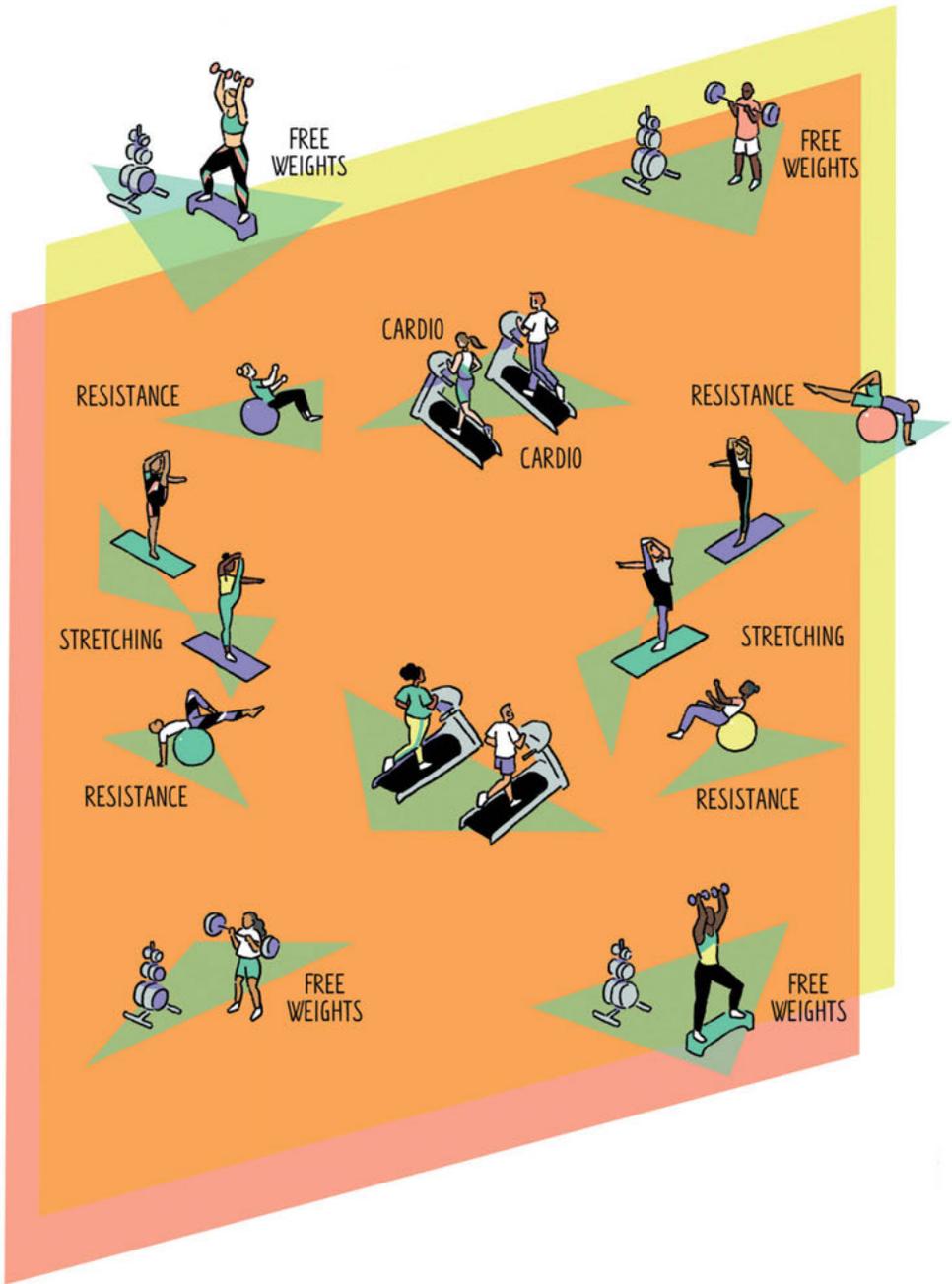
The best way to overcome challenges around sports spaces is to build new spaces that are specifically designed to be accessible for non-binary people. Importantly, making spaces non-binary inclusive is also likely to make them more inclusive of other groups who face barriers to accessing sports spaces, including women and many cultural and religious minorities. Creating fully inclusive spaces is not always possible but that does not mean that improvements cannot be made. The second-best solution is to re-design existing spaces to be more inclusive.

## CREATING NEW SPACES

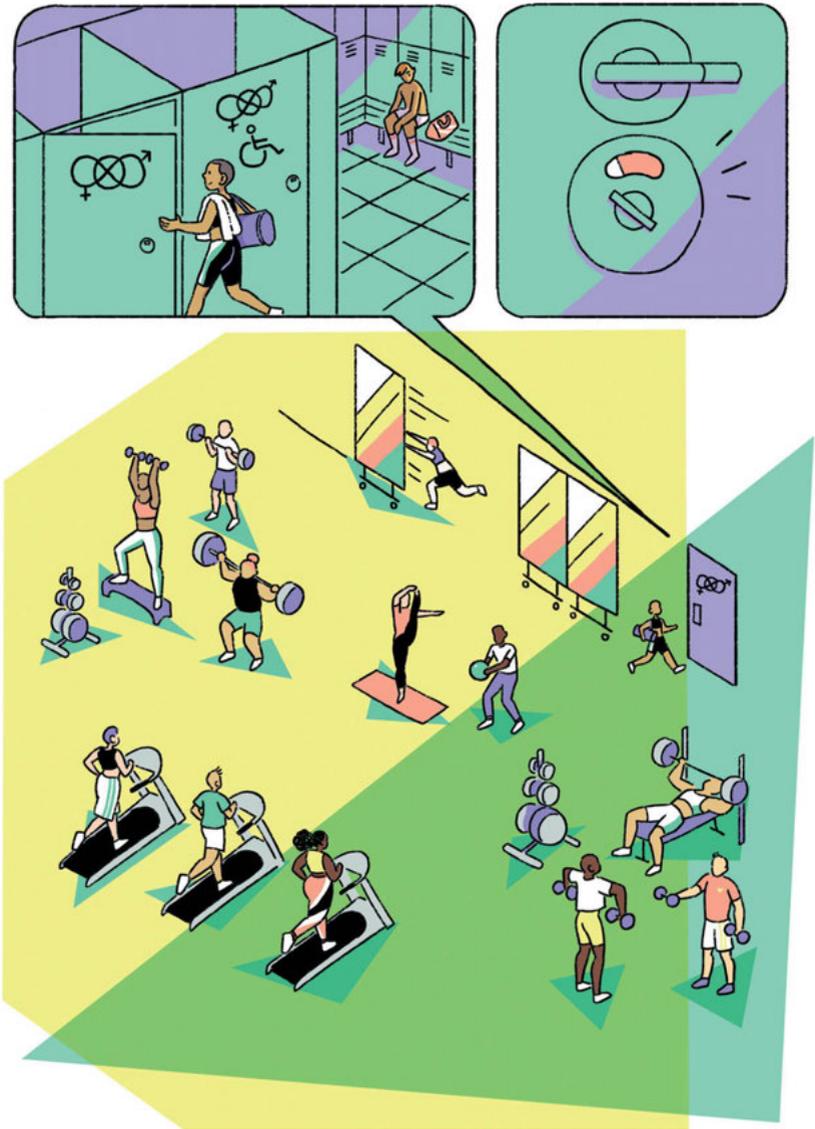
Sports spaces should have gender-neutral single occupancy changing rooms that are accessible to everyone, can be locked for privacy, and have a shower and a toilet incorporated into each room. These rooms could be made accessible for disabled people as well, thus removing the need for separate accessible facilities. In addition to facilitating non-binary and disabled people's inclusion, these changing rooms would enhance the body privacy of all facility users, irrespective of the reasons why privacy may be desired.



Sports facilities should aim to remove gendered presumptions about the kinds of training that women and men do from the organisation of sports facilities and equipment. Firstly, when designing and positioning equipment, the diverse body types and heights that prospective users may have should be considered. Secondly, the gym floor can be arranged into smaller clusters of mixed types of equipment rather than into larger weights and cardio areas, to combat implicit gender divisions in the gym. It is likely that these strategies would make it more comfortable for women to use weights equipment, as many women feel uncomfortable entering spaces dominated by men.



While some gyms now offer women-only training areas to make it easier for women to engage in weight lifting, this solution is a limited one for two reasons: women-only spaces are inaccessible for non-binary people, and also they segregate women out from the general gym space, which can reinforce the feeling of exclusion from the gym space for both non-binary people *and* women.



Instead of fixed wall mirrors, gyms and other sports facilities could provide movable mirrors or curtains, which would make using mirrors voluntary. In addition, gendered clothing restrictions and rules should be abolished from sports spaces in general, and swimming pools in particular. This would make them more accessible for non-binary people as well as other groups such as cultural and religious minorities for whom body visibility can be a barrier to access.

### *REDESIGNING EXISTING SPACES*

If the above solutions cannot be implemented, intermediary strategies could include:

- 1 Converting some gender-segregated changing facilities to include a mix of single-sex and gender-neutral facilities;
- 2 Adding new gender-neutral facilities (and providing clear signage and information about them);
- 3 Removing as many gendered doors as possible from each space;
- 4 Implementing strategies to combat gender-based presumptions about sport and exercise – for example, via education campaigns;
- 5 Making body diversity visible in promotional materials and other resources (including not only gender diversity, but also diverse representations of ability, ethnicity, culture and religion, etc.



## ***WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN SPORTING COMMUNITIES?***

Many sporting communities, including sports clubs, teams and training groups are gender-segregated. This means that to be a member of a sporting community people usually need to choose to enter either a men's or a women's sports group. This is a significant challenge for non-binary people. Moreover, sporting communities are often characterised by gender norms and presumptions about women and men. These can be both explicit and implicit, but they are expressed in the kinds of activities people engage in and the way they talk to each other and about each other.



In men's sporting communities, these norms and presumptions can manifest in gendered behaviours, expressions and slurs like "you throw like a girl", "boys don't cry", and "grow some balls". This includes the so-called 'lad culture' and 'locker room talk', such as sexually loaded banter about women and mockery of gay men, including the presumption that gay men are more feminine than other men. They can also manifest in more subtle gender stereotypes and expectations that may not be put in words, such as the presumption that 'real' men are big and strong, which then implies that men who are smaller and less strong are not real men. Often, these kinds of norms and presumptions are based on derogation of women and femininity, by comparing men to women in a way that presumes women are worse at sport than men. To say, "you throw like a girl", for example, usually means 'you throw badly.'

In women's sporting communities, on the other hand, gender norms and presumptions can manifest through gender policing. In other words, women often evaluate both themselves and each other against norms about what women should look like, especially in gender-segregated spaces like women's changing rooms. For example, if a person with a more masculine appearance enters a women's changing room or other women-only space, this person can experience harassment or even be asked to leave. This can happen not only to non-binary people, but also to trans women and other gender diverse people, such as women with more masculine gender presentations. This is partially because women-only spaces are often considered to be safe spaces where women are protected from sexual harassment and violence from men, but the effect of this can also be, and often is, that non-binary and other gender diverse people can feel uncomfortable, excluded from, and even harassed in these spaces from women themselves.

Binary gender norms, stereotypes and presumptions that characterise many sporting communities can be a barrier, not just for non-binary and other gender diverse people, but for men and women too. For example, they can lower women's self-confidence and create gendered behaviour expectations that many men also find damaging.

## ***HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES IN SPORTING COMMUNITIES?***



The onus of making sporting communities more inclusive of non-binary people should be on the communities themselves. Instead of waiting for non-binary people to show up before their needs are considered, communities should actively create an inclusive environment so that non-binary people feel welcome enough to come along in the first place.

Creating more gender-neutral or mixed teams and training groups could help to mitigate some of the gender norms and presumptions that often characterise both men's and women's sporting communities. This would be particularly easy to do at community and grassroots level sports and would benefit everyone, not just non-binary people.

Even when gender segregated teams and groups exist, communities could offer at least some mixed gender activities and general coaching strategies that do not rely on presumptions about the kinds of training women and men do.

Clubs and organisations should offer a non-binary gender option for membership registration even when individuals must choose either the female or male team, as they are often the only options available. They should then respect the gender that individuals identify with (including the name and gender pronoun that individuals use) even when they play or practise sports in women’s and men’s teams.



Sporting communities could create and circulate community guidelines about what kinds of behaviours are appropriate or unacceptable. They should also offer training about gender-related issues for staff and coaches as well as for community members more generally.

Sporting communities should increase non-binary representation, and diverse representation in general, in organisational roles, resources and promotional materials. To challenge broader gender norms and presumptions, community sports organisations could publish open letters or responses to combat discrimination on their websites, thus showing their support for equal access to sports. Taking these actions could not only help make sport more inclusive for non-binary people, but also for trans people, and women and men who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

Finally, sporting communities can look to, and build on, examples provided by existing initiatives and alternative sports that explicitly aim to promote inclusion and mitigate gender norms in sport. These include the three case studies on inclusive practice described in this booklet.

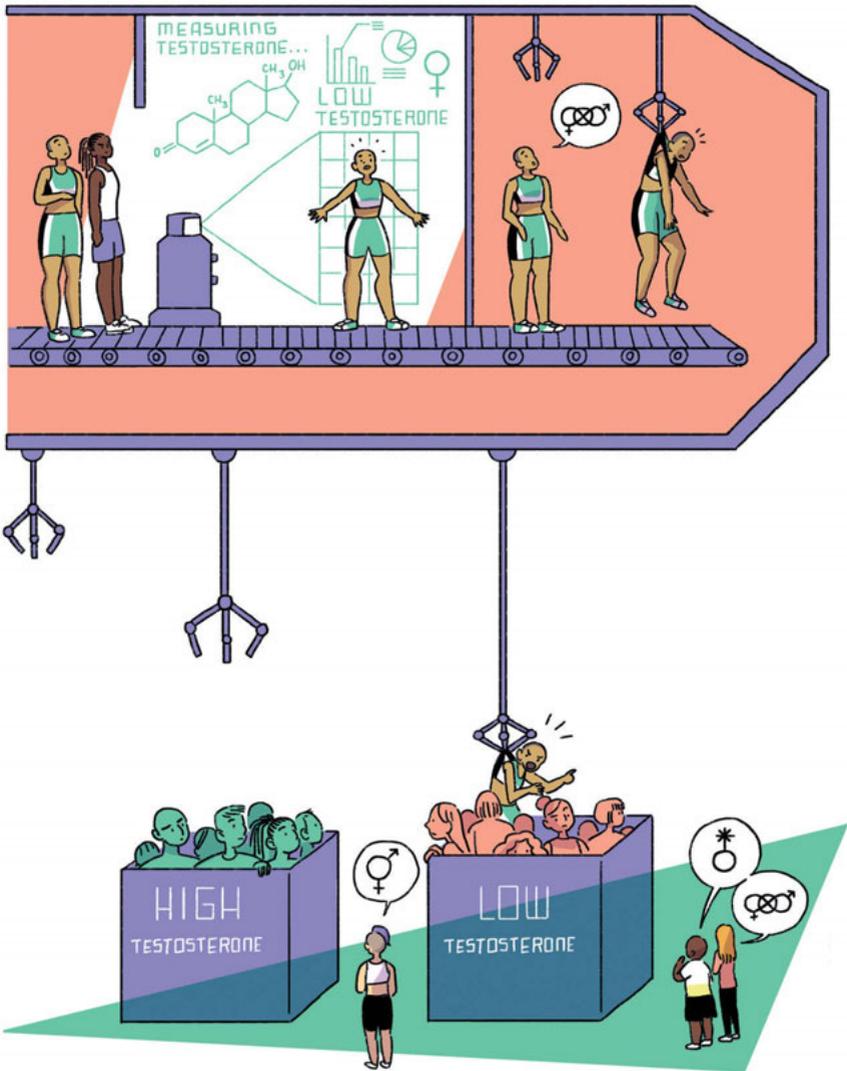


## ***WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN SPORTS COMPETITIONS?***

Most opportunities to take part in sports competitions are restricted to female or male categories. This means that to compete, non-binary people must almost always choose one or the other, or not compete at all. Higher levels of sports competitions, such as national and international competitions, usually have strict eligibility rules that are somewhat different for athletes competing in the female and male categories.

Firstly, almost all athletes competing at high level competitions must comply with anti-doping regulations, which require that athletes cannot administer some substances into their body, because these substances are performance enhancing.

One such substance is testosterone. Testosterone is often considered to be a male hormone, and men generally have more testosterone than women in their bodies, even though nearly all women also have some testosterone. Athletes in general are not allowed to administer more testosterone into their bodies beyond the amount that their bodies produce on their own, except in special cases where a male athlete has a medical condition that requires him to do so. This is called 'therapeutic exemption', and it only applies to male athletes whose bodies produce less testosterone than most men's.



Secondly, in many sports, there are additional rules about testosterone that only apply to athletes who compete in the female category. These rules place limits on how much testosterone an athlete competing in women's sports can have, even if this testosterone is produced by the body itself. There have been some high-profile cases featuring this in recent years: for example, Caster Semenya, whose body produces higher levels of testosterone than is the norm for most women, had to undergo treatment to reduce her testosterone levels.

There are many problems with these testosterone rules. Firstly, the amount of testosterone that people have – whether they are men, women or non-binary – varies from individual to individual. Secondly, many non-binary people undergo medical treatment, which is called ‘gender affirming medical care’, to change their body in ways that better reflect their sense of their own gender.

Sometimes this can include administering more testosterone into the body. Because of the many different rules about testosterone in sports, it can be very difficult for non-binary people to compete, even when they are willing to compete in either the female or male category. The rules are not only very complicated and confusing, but they also mean that to compete in sports, non-binary athletes may be required to disclose to their coaches and competition organisers sensitive and private medical information.

These issues can also impact on non-binary people’s willingness to compete at lower level sports competitions, because anticipating scrutiny around testosterone can influence the choice to stop competing before reaching higher levels, or limit motivation to compete in the first place.



## ***HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES IN SPORTING COMPETITIONS?***

Ideally, mixed or gender-neutral teams could be developed in those sports where this is possible. Apart from that, two strategies could be used to make existing competitions more inclusive of non-binary people. However, both strategies come with further challenges of their own.

### ***INTRODUCING A NON-BINARY GENDER CATEGORY***

A third, non-binary gender category could be introduced into sports competitions, to enable non-binary athletes to compete in their own gender category. Some sports organisations, such as Scottish Athletics, which is the governing body of athletics in Scotland, have already taken up this approach. This is also the approach taken by *Edinburgh Fronrunners* (see Case Study 1). However, just adding a non-binary category does not actually address the issue of gender segregation in sports, and it does not alter the different eligibility rules that currently apply to female and male sports categories. The effect can be that people who do not meet the testosterone rules for women’s and men’s sports, could be placed into the non-binary category, even if they do not identify as such.

This could mean that some people (in this case, some women and men) may be forced to compete in a gender category they do not identify with, even though avoiding this is the whole reason for the existence of the non-binary category in the first place.

### *MOVING BEYOND GENDER CATEGORIES TO RECONSIDER SPORTS COMPETITIONS*

Instead of introducing a new category, sports organisers could start to organise competitions in a new way. Instead of presuming that all competitions are either for women or men, what would happen to sport if we started from the presumption of non-binary inclusion? This is the approach taken by *Limitless* (see Case Study 2).

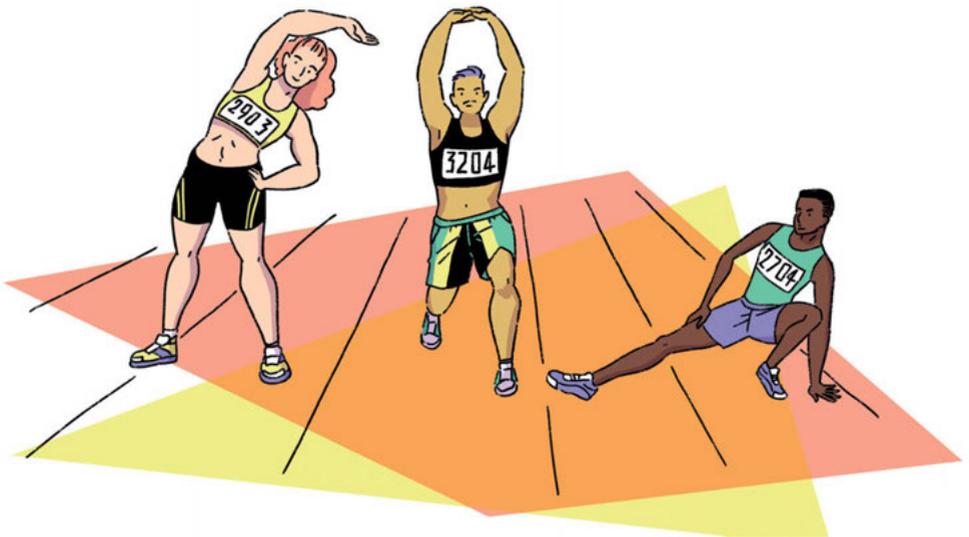
For example, most sports competitions are focused on physical performance in determining what a successful performance looks like: the winner is the one who runs fastest, throws furthest or lifts the most weight. A key reason for gender-segregated sports competitions is the presumption that if women and men compete together, women will not succeed, let alone win, partly because of biology but also due to inequality of access and opportunity. This is why many people believe it is still important to have separate competitions for women.

However, if we start from the presumption of non-binary inclusion, we would start from the presumption that athletes have diverse kinds of bodies – some may be physically faster and stronger than others, but they are all diverse in different ways. One way forward is to move away from focusing exclusively on physical performance and celebrate other attributes and skills to determine success (such as teamwork). This would, of course, require us to reconsider what sports competitions are, and should be, about in the first place – for example, celebrating exceptional characteristics and performances, and valuing qualities such as determination, sociability and pleasure.

## CASE STUDY 1

### ***Edinburgh Frontrunners: an LGBTQIA+ running club***

*Edinburgh Frontrunners* (EFR) is a running club for LGBTQIA+ people and friends. It is an all-abilities club including regular Learn to Run programmes and a walking group. EFR was founded in October 2013, following the general model of the global Frontrunners movement (an initiative to support LGBTQIA+ runners). It has since become a leader in diversity and equality activism, helping pioneer the introduction of the non-binary category in athletics.





## ***GENDER EQUALITY***

Most sports, including LGBTQIA+ sports, have a history of being male-dominated. Therefore, the first step towards achieving equality is to challenge this imbalance. A key step in making the club welcoming to women was the election of their first woman president, Debbie Aitken, for years 2 and 3 of the club's existence. Aitken introduced the Learn to Run programme and worked successfully to attract women members.

EFR is affiliated with JogScotland, the grass roots wing of ScottishAthletics, who are dedicated to getting as many people running as possible, regardless of ability or previous running experience. Its membership is approximately two thirds women, which, alongside regular Learn to Run programmes, helped signpost EFR as a safe space for women and reduced barriers to their participation. This helped EFR achieve female/male gender parity in early 2015.



## ***NON-BINARY VISIBILITY AND GENDER DIVERSITY***

EFR's next president from 2016-2019, Al Hopkins, is non-binary. They took over at a time of growing non-binary visibility in wider society and a handful of moves to recognise non-binary people in sport. Successive changes were made to EFR's membership forms to give an open field for recording gender within the club, and explicitly included non-binary people from 2016. Gender neutral changing and showering options were made available at both leisure centres the club used. In October 2016 the Jedburgh Three Peaks Ultramarathon and Running Festival opened their race entries to include a non-binary category. At this stage the category was not officially recognised, but it encouraged EFR to push for nonbinary inclusion in racing events.



## **MEETING WITH SCOTTISHATHLETICS AND PRIDE RUN 2017**

EFR met with representatives from JogScotland where Hopkins raised the need for additional membership options that included non-binary people. They already had a handful of non-binary members who were forced to sign up to JogScotland as male or female (for insurance purposes) that misrepresented them. JogScotland took this on board and in March 2017 EFR was invited, with LEAP Sports Scotland and Glasgow FrontRunners, to meet with Scottish Athletics to discuss non-binary inclusion.

At this meeting, Hopkins announced that preparations for their inaugural 5K Pride Run were well underway with a non-binary category. This was expected to be a fun run due to the lack of official support for the category. ScottishAthletics responded by inviting EFR to apply for a race licence for a non-binary category. In the meantime, ScottishAthletics implemented an intermediate rule change. As a result, in June 2017 Edinburgh Pride Run became the first licensed race in the UK with a non-binary category.



## **EDINBURGH PRIDE RUNS**

Many Frontrunners clubs around the world host an annual race, and each club has a different approach to distance, ability level and accessibility. When EFR hosted a race in 2017 they decided to prioritise accessibility and inclusion.

They chose a flat, smooth-surfaced 5K course in the Meadows, a large public park in Edinburgh, to include wheelchair entrants, and a member who uses a racerunner. They decided to fly as many different pride flags as they could acquire to showcase the many minority sexualities and gender identities that are frequently overlooked by the wider LGBTQIA+ community and mainstream society. They also had female, male and non-binary categories, regardless of whether these were supported by governing bodies or not.

In the meantime, ScottishAthletics lobbied UK Athletics to secure a partial rule change for running at UK level (excluding trail racing) in April 2018. In 2018, the Edinburgh Pride run was the first in the UK to have outright non-binary competition for the podium. By 2019 they had 180 entrants in total (including 11 non-binary people). The park was filled with a riot of colourful flags and a huge rainbow arch, and the race was followed with a ceilidh, providing attendees with a full evening's exercise and entertainment.

By April 2019 the non-binary category became a mandatory licence condition for all ScottishAthletics Championship events. This has put the existence of non-binary people firmly on entry forms for hundreds of events across Scotland and, to a lesser extent, in the rest of the UK.





## **EDINBURGH FRONTRUNNERS' RECOMMENDED STEPS FOR INCLUSION**

- 1 Recognise diverse gender identities within sports clubs through developing membership that includes diverse gender options;
- 2 Provide gender-neutral changing facilities where available, and detailed information of all facilities easily found in clubs and on websites;
- 3 Recognise and reinforce diverse identities in general club language, and encourage non-gendered language where possible (including gender-neutral pronouns, like they/them instead of he/she);
- 4 Discourage gender stereotyping and assumptions of sporting abilities and interests based on gender;
- 5 Share pronouns (he/she/they, etc.) to highlight the existence of gender variety and diversity;
- 6 Don't assume people's gender based on their appearance or name;
- 7 Explicitly welcome minority gender and sexualities in club literature (for example, publicity saying 'all genders' welcome, rather than just 'men and women');
- 8 Include minority flags on flyers, promotions and club banners (for example, trans, intersex, non-binary, genderfluid, etc.);
- 9 Sign up to the Scottish LGBT Sports Charter to emphasise accountability to high standards and outside bodies;
- 10 Advocate to governing bodies for rule changes to foster non-binary inclusion to governing bodies.



## CASE STUDY 2

### ***Limitless: an all-gender-inclusive strength competition***

*Limitless* is a competition based on a sport usually referred to as Strongman (or Strongwoman). We refer to it as ‘strength athletics’. This is an all-gender inclusive alternative to the binary-gendered names by which the sport is usually known.

Strength athletics test competitors’ physical capacity in several different ways. Events vary between competitions, but typically combine static tests of strength, with events such as the deadlift and overhead press, with more dynamic tests of strength, which combine strength, power, speed and endurance – for example, events such as the farmer’s walk and the vehicle pull.

*Limitless* is currently held once a year at Grindhouse Strength and Conditioning Facility, in Burton-Upon-Trent, Staffordshire, UK. Anyone can take part, regardless of their gender and/or sex. It adopts the traditional format of a strength athletics competition, including four to six events, such as those described above. Instead of having ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ categories for competitors, there are three ability-based categories: Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 which increase in difficulty.

In Level 1, competitors are required to lift the lightest weights, getting heavier for Level 2, and in Level 3 competitors are required to lift the heaviest weights. Anyone of any gender can enter any of the levels. Each competitor simply enters the category that best suits their ability level, based on the prescribed weights. Entry level is self-selected, which is a standard entry procedure across most novice and intermediate level strength athletics competitions.



## *THE STORY BEHIND LIMITLESS*

Han Newman had been competing in strongwoman competitions for three to four years before they came out as non-binary. Although there were no rules in place that would have necessarily stopped them continuing to compete in strongwoman events, Han began to feel increasingly uncomfortable with being prescribed a female label in order to compete. Therefore, they decided to distance themselves from strongwoman, and women's sport more generally. However, this meant they struggled to find spaces to compete that felt right, having to choose between men's and women's categories, neither of which felt like a good fit. After chatting with their coach – Tim Latter, Head Coach and Owner of Grindhouse – they decided to host a competition that would be inclusive to anyone, regardless of their gender. *Limitless* was the result.

## THE INAUGURAL *LIMITLESS* 1.0

The first *Limitless* competition in April 2018 consisted of four events:

- 1 Sandbag run for 20 metres;
- 2 Axle bar ground to overhead for repetitions in one minute;
- 3 Keg run into farmer's walk for 20 metres each way;
- 4 Atlas stones loaded to a platform.

For each event the weights increased from Level 1 through to Level 3; for example, sandbags Level 1 - 50kg; Level - 2 75kg; Level 3 - 100kg.

The inaugural *Limitless* competition was small. There were just eight competitors in total: four in Level 1; four in Level 2; none in Level 3. These eight competitors included two non-binary people (one being Han), one genderfluid person, three women and two men.

Interviews conducted with competitors after the first competition illustrated the supportive atmosphere of the event. This is something the strength athletics community prides itself on.

“ You see like strong people competitions on TV and they're like lugging trucks and cannon balls around... I'm like “argh I can't do that!” But it completely flipped once you're in it... Expectations were completely different to reality... it was good fun and I think also it was kinda a little bit empowering... the whole way it was set up was really interesting. The communal spirit. Although it's a solo sport it doesn't feel like a solo sport. ”

*(Non-binary competitor who won the Level 1 category of the competition.  
This was their first time competing in a strength-based competition.)*

“ The atmosphere was amazing. Everybody was very supportive, everybody was just happy to be there. They didn't care how much you lifted, it didn't matter how small you are, how big you are, everyone was gonna cheer you on the same amount. I think it worked... I think everyone was happy with the weights they pulled. I think it was definitely very good. ”

*(Genderfluid competitor who competed in the Level 1 category. This was their first time competing in a strength-based competition.)*

## LIMITLESS 2.0

The second *Limitless* was held on 29th September 2019. Numbers increased from eight competitors at the first *Limitless*, to thirty-three. This time there was a solid number of competitors in each of the three categories. Openly, an LGBTQIA+ news outlet published an article and a short video clip about the event. This was picked up on a global scale and was covered by a newspaper in Shanghai.

By running this competition, the organisers hope to challenge the binary model that most sports still use to organise competitions, and experiment with other possible ways to categorise sports. These could be adopted in more situations in the future. It is important to acknowledge that strength athletics is particularly suited to an ability-based model and is relatively objective – i.e. you can either lift a weight or you can't. Other sports may have different challenges – ability may be more subjective, or other factors could be taken into consideration.

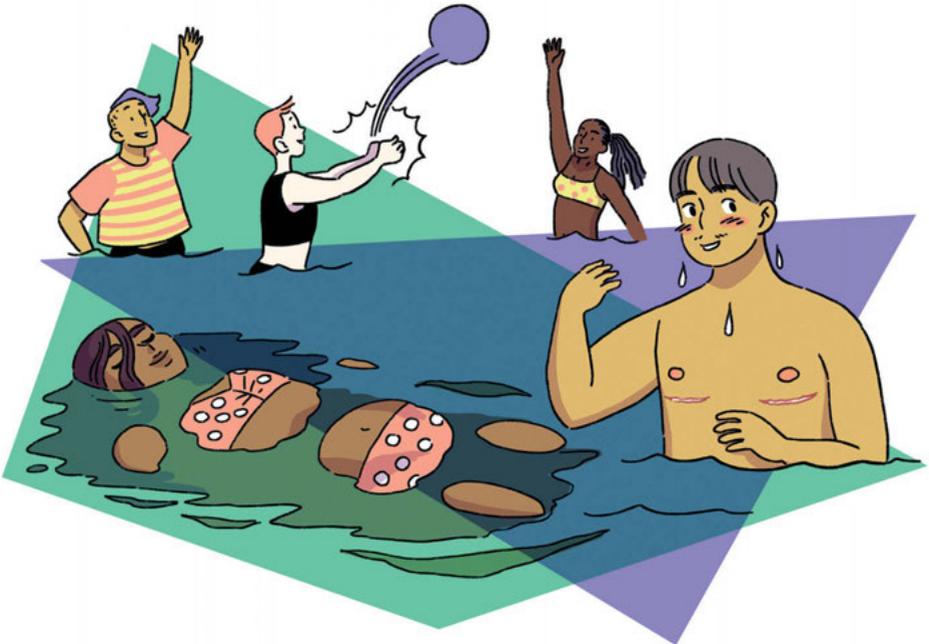
Whether or not the ability-based model we have adopted proves to be transferable beyond this setting, *Limitless* provides a space for marginalised athletes and individuals who may have limited opportunities to compete in other settings. This is enough reason to continue running the competition and the organisers look forward to seeing it progress in the future.

More information about *Limitless* can be found via the Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/newmansportpsychology](https://www.facebook.com/newmansportpsychology).

## CASE STUDY 3

### *Communi-T: Bournemouth University Safe Swim Project*

Trans-specific sports groups can provide positive opportunities for non-binary people to participate in their chosen sport or physical activity. For example, a local trans swimming group in Bournemouth enabled a safe space for non-binary swimmers. Funding from various sources enabled a group to hire the BHLive swimming pool facility at Pelhams in Bournemouth for one hour each month for over a year for a regular swimming session for trans people.



Members of *Communi-T* recalled their previous experiences of visiting swimming pools, which had caused them many difficulties, especially in relation to using changing rooms and being in the pool. They often felt intimidated and feared they would be excluded from going to public pools simply because they were trans and/or non-binary. Most members had stopped going to swimming pools once they came out or started gender transitioning.

During the project, members of *Communi-T* were asked to write about or draw their feelings, before and after being in the pool. Before the sessions, common feelings included: anxious, nervous, stressed, self-conscious, dysphoria, awkward, worried and excited. Many felt liberated after the sessions, feeling: happy, content, relaxed, confident, healthy, body confident, refreshed, peaceful, energised and motivated to do more exercise.

“ I nearly did it as a sport when I was younger and then I came out and didn't swim again. I tried it one time. I was wearing a waterproof tank top designed for a pool. A lifeguard came over and said: 'why are you wearing that in the pool?' I actually just outed myself: 'I'm transgender, this is the only way I can swim'... I wasn't expecting to get pulled aside. I decided it wasn't a safe space. Now, it's a really nice way for me to swim [with the group]. ”

“ When I went for the first time, I didn't care who saw my scars and I wasn't ashamed... being able to jump in the water – it's just freedom. I love it. ”

“ It was amazing to swim and be around others like me. It made me happy. ”

“ It's all about having a safe space, knowing that no-one is there to judge us, that we're not going to get stared at. ”

(Quotes from participants)

An evaluation of the project suggested that the swimming sessions benefited participants' health and well-being. It also increased members' confidence such that some people from the group went on to swim at public pools during public hours after attending *Communi-T*.



# HOW TO BE A NON-BINARY ALLY IN YOUR SPORT OR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



## **1 AMEND THE GENDERED STRUCTURE OF TEAMS**

Does your team or activity need to be male/female gendered? Are the reasons for this good enough to really justify it? Can you alter the wording of your teams or activities to be more inclusive of non-binary people? For example, where there are men's and women's teams, you could say 'People who play for the Men's Team' and 'People who play for the Women's Team'. This subtle distinction opens up binary teams to be more inclusive of non-binary and other gender-diverse people.



## **2 UNDERSTAND THAT EVERYONE EXPERIENCES GENDER DIFFERENTLY**

There is no one right way to identify as male or female. Femininity and masculinity can mean different things for different people. There is no one right way to identify as non-binary either. Remember that everyone experiences gender differently. Like other identities under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, non-binary is also an umbrella term with different identities, meaning different things for different people.



## **3 THINK ABOUT YOUR USE OF LANGUAGE**

How many times have you shouted phrases of encouragement within a game such as "Come on, lads!" or "Come on, girls!"? How many times have you used the phrase "Man on!" to warn a teammate of another player being on their back? Could you rephrase these to make them gender-neutral? Maybe try using the following instead: "Come on, team!", "Come on, everyone!" or "One on!" or even just "On!".



#### **4 VISIBILITY IS KEY**

It is a common misconception that non-binary people don't exist within sport so making their presence visible can be important. There are a variety of ways you can do this. For example, taking part in Stonewall's Rainbow Laces Campaign, including flags of the different LGBTQIA+ community on your websites and social media pages, or encouraging people to include their chosen pronouns when introducing them to team mates (non-binary people often use the pronouns they/them, rather than she/he).

#### **5 DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK**

It's important not to assume someone's gender identity, especially by how they look, or the names they use. Don't be afraid to ask what pronouns someone uses if you're not sure. Then people have the choice to tell you more about how they identify. However, people don't have to tell you their gender identity, so it's important to respect their decision and their privacy.



## **6 IT'S OK TO MAKE MISTAKES**

Mistakes happen. You may feel guilty about making a mistake – for example, accidentally using the wrong pronouns for someone. Make sure you don't let this hang over your head or draw unnecessary attention to it. The best steps to take are to acknowledge it happened, say sorry, learn from it and move on with your conversation or activity. This experience will often make you more conscious of getting it right next time. If the person is annoyed at your mistake, assure them that you are trying your best. Don't worry, it will become second nature to you in time.



## **7 BE WILLING TO LEARN**

When non-binary people come out, they are often met with a confused or uninformed reaction. As a friend and/or ally you might feel pleased that they confided in you. However, you might not fully understand what they mean. Everyone expresses their gender identity in different ways, so don't be afraid to learn what being non-binary means to them.



## **8 YOUR SUPPORT WILL BE INVALUABLE**

Coming out can be a difficult experience for all LGBTQIA+ people. It can be especially difficult for non-binary people. People don't just come out once, they have to do it repeatedly with each new environment or person they meet. If a teammate comes out to you, it's often because they trust you and they want to be authentic with you. Aside from supporting your non-binary teammate or friend when coming out, you can also support them by celebrating their sporting achievements. Sport is a very gendered space, but despite this they have chosen to come out and take part, which takes a lot of determination and bravery. Listen to their perspectives on issues that may affect them in your sport, as well as issues affecting other aspects of their lives too.



## **9 DON'T FORGET THE WHOLE PERSON**

They might be the only openly non-binary person on your team or even the only non-binary person you know in your life. That doesn't mean they should be just known as the 'non-binary person on my sports team'. Being non-binary is only one part of their identity.

## **10 BEING A NON-BINARY ALLY IS REWARDING**

Offering support and getting to know people better is rewarding in itself. You might even make some new friends. Standing up, supporting and being there for non-binary people helps challenge everyday experiences of transphobia and discrimination. This is essential to create an accessible and inclusive environment for everyone involved in sport, physical activity and exercise.

## CONCLUSION

All the contributors to this report believe that trying to fit everyone into two distinct categories based on sex and/or gender is a system that doesn't really work. It prioritises certain physical bodies and identities, whilst demonising others that don't fit these categories. Moreover, it does not reflect the full variation in human existence. We hope this report has offered some suggestions for ways that sports bodies and communities can include non-binary people. In the future we hope sport will continue to evolve to be more fully inclusive of different genders, as well as other human diversities. This may lead to a social revolution, breaking down gender-based prejudices and barriers which harm us all. Ultimately, this should benefit all genders.





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## FURTHER RESOURCES

The Scottish Trans Alliance has produced reports on:

- ◆ Non-binary people's experiences in the UK;
- ◆ Non-binary people's experiences of using UK gender identity clinics;
- ◆ Including non-binary people: guidance for service providers and employers.

These are available at: <https://www.scottishtrans.org/non-binary>



### BOOKS

*A Quick and Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns.*

A. Bongiovanni. Oni Press. 2018

*They/Them/Their: A Guide to Nonbinary and Genderqueer Identities.*

E. Young. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2019

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S. Hines. Thames & Hudson. 2018

*Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders.*

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M-J. Barker and J. Scheele. Icon Books Ltd. 2019

*Non-Binary Lives: An Anthology of Intersecting Identities.*

J. Twist, B. Vincent, M-J. Barker and K. Gupta. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2020

*What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He and She.*

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# NOTES



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