

BARRIERS AND BEST PRACTICES – GUIDEBOOK TO INCLUSIVE CHEERLEADING

ERASMUS + SPORT PROJECT 2019-2021 “IDENTIFICATION OF
BARRIERS AND BEST PRACTICES IN INCLUSIVE CHEERLEADING”



Foreword

This guidebook to Inclusive Cheerleading is the product of the Erasmus + Sport funded project “Identification of Barriers and Best Practices in Inclusive Cheerleading”. There were five partners in the project: Finnish Cheerleading Federation (project coordinator) from Finland, Cheer Sport Ireland (partner) from Ireland, Funky Team ry (partner) from Finland, ParaCheer International CIO (partner) from England and Slovenian Cheerleading Association, CZS (partner) from Slovenia. There was also one unofficial partner: the cheerleading club Golden Spirit from Finland. This guidebook basically summarises the issues that we have identified during the project, the issues that we want to share with the readers.

Below you can find Cambridge Dictionary’s definition of the term Inclusion. That definition illustrates well what we as the project group wanted to achieve. During the project we learned that there are multiple terms in use in disability sport and sometimes it is easy to get lost in translation. It is important to recognise that language changes over the time and a word that might have been socially acceptable 10 years ago, may not be suitable today. It is important to acknowledge that the terminology has important role in explaining issues within the disability sport. However, our intentions and actions are the things that make a difference. Inclusion can be perceived as an attitude, the way of perceiving the world.

“The idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage”

Cambridge Dictionary 2021

I want sincerely to thank the whole project group. I believe that I am saying this on behalf of everyone: we learned a lot from each other. We also achieved a lot together. I am very proud of us all.

In this publication you can find the barriers and best practices what we discovered during the project. I do not think that there is one truth. Barriers are often very individual and so should be best practices also. The most important thing is to ask and do.

In Helsinki 28th of December 2021
Heidi Borg
Project Coordinator



Content of the guidebook

The barriers that have been identified here are based on the following information:

- interviews with athletes and their parents, and coaches
- several encounters with specialists who were kind enough to share their expertise with us
- own experiences of the project group (involve an athlete with the disability and three coaches coaching inclusive cheerleading teams)

In the first part of the guidebook, you can find identified barriers and suggested best practices to overcome these barriers. The barriers and the best practices have been divided into two groups: 1) concerning athletes and 2) concerning a service provider.

The second part of the guidebook contains some ideas for the national cheerleading federations of how to support local inclusive service provision in their countries.

The third part of the guidebook summaries findings according to the partner countries. Each partner has written this part individually and the content varies from describing a personal growth to the specific policies.



Barriers to participation and best practices to overcome these barriers – athletes

Barriers for athlete’s participation	Best practices to overcome the barrier
<p>Lack of information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to find information about the opportunities. There is no one channel to go and find information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make clear on your website and social media that you are inclusive. • National Cheerleading Federations can connect with regional/national disability sport governing bodies and inform them about the local opportunities and other possible inclusive actions. • National Cheerleading Federation can publish a centralized list of the inclusive cheerleading service providers run by the Federation.
<p>Difficulties with a training facility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Far distance. • Unsuitable set up. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ bad lighting ○ bad selection/use of colors ○ space with too much distraction ○ space without proper elevator ○ space without a cheer mat ○ space without a proper coaching equipment • Bad planning with time slots. There is less time for actual practice if the team is required to place mats and so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise or facilitate group transport • Pay attention when selecting a training facility. Use the check list on the left-hand side to create suitable environment for training. • Add a floor plan of the facility to your website. • Do venue accessibility report • Discuss with a person responsible for allocation of the time slots. Try to get time after another team, so that you have all equipment ready



Barriers for athlete's participation	Best practices to overcome the barrier
<p>Lack of events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no events to participate. There are multiple possibilities for teams without any disabled athletes, but very little or none for teams with disabled athletes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be fully inclusive and make sure that your competition halls are accessible. Give the teams opportunity to perform during competitions or include paracheer and special olympics divisions to your competition. • Try to organise other events also, which are suitable for teams with disabled athletes. People with impairments in cheerleading need to feel that they are treated the same as others. It is just as important to them as it is for other athletes, to wear uniforms, use pom poms and do other things that are essential part of the sport.



Barriers to start inclusive cheerleading and best practices to overcome these barriers – Service providers (sport clubs or other private service providers)

Barriers to start inclusive cheerleading teams – experienced by the service providers	Best practices to overcome the barrier
<p>Fear of unknown</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport clubs or other private service providers are afraid of starting a new team because they think that they do not have enough knowledge. • Coaches need especially information of how to interact with a person with a disability. They want education, which gives them tools for everyday work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get acquainted with organisations, which are responsible for parasports in your country. They often provide some education courses related to the topic. • There is online material available. However, remember to look at the source with critical eye. Talk with your peer coaches around the world, your federation, and the organisations who support disability inclusive cheerleading. • Concentrate on the abilities instead of disabilities. Often you get practical information from the parents of an athlete. Also talk with the athlete: what feels comfortable and what not. Get to know the athlete. Show unconditional appreciation and acceptance of the athlete. • Remember to teach everything in a progressive manner. • Invest in communication. Communication needs to be clear and simple.



Barriers to start inclusive cheerleading teams – experienced by the service providers	Best practices to overcome the barrier
<p>Difficulties with finding a proper facility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsuitable facility. Bad lighting, bad selection/use of colours, space with too much distraction, space without proper elevator, space without cheer mat, space without proper coaching equipment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact an access auditor. • Use online resources to understand access regulations in your area. • Keep floor spaces clear, ensure that lighting is appropriate, widen doorways and install ramps if necessary. Ramps should be minimum 1:8 ratio. • Download the venue access check list from ParaCheer International’s website.
<p>Difficulties to connect with disabled community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unless you know some people with disability, it is very difficult to find correct channels for marketing the team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use internet searches. • Contact your local authority and ask if they can help with advertisement. • Try to find Facebook groups and internet forums that are popular among people with disabilities. • Contact organisations responsible for parasport in your country. You can also contact other disability organisations. • Advertise in your local health centres and community spaces. • Just start with one athlete and the rest will come.



How can the national cheerleading federations support local inclusive cheerleading provision?

1. Educate yourself through trustworthy providers

Here are some pointers which can help you start your journey:

- Understanding the terminology:
 - International Paralympic Committee's website – Classification
 - Special Olympics' website – Get involved, Become a Special Olympics Athlete
 - International Cheer Union's website – ICU divisions
 - ParaCheer International's website
 - Have a look at your National Paralympic Committee's website
- Finding out national policies:
 - Usually, a national governing body has gathered information on the webpage
 - Try to type words "disability" and "accessibility" in your language on your web search engine.
 - Have a look at your National Paralympic Committee' website. They may have gathered all necessary information there.
- Coaching education:
 - Once again, you probably find some information on your National Paralympic Committee's website.
 - If you are interested in a specific disability, try to find their organization in your country. They often have useful tips on their website and may even offer educational courses as well.
 - Discuss with other national sports federations in your country. Do they have some educational courses that could be adapted to cheerleading?
 - Discuss with other national cheerleading federations and find out their practices.



2. Appropriate policies

Does your federation have a good governance guideline or other safety regulations? Do these take account how to protect all athletes and especially more vulnerable athletes? Below you can find some questions that may help you to build your own good governance/safety regulations. Also take a look at “Ireland- barriers and best practices” part of this guidebook (page 15). There you can find example of their Ethics and Welfare Policies.

- How complaints are handled – what is the ongoing process? Is there a full reporting and accountability structure? Is there an investigation? If so who by?
- Do the athletes know their Safety officer, and can they contact them directly with confidence that they will be heard?
- Who is checking the coaches’ implementation of the safety rules e.g., no 1 adult alone with an athlete at any time? etc?
- Is there a social media/privacy policy and is it being enforced?
- Are these policies being reviewed and updated on a regular and agreed basis by the Board of Control? Who is responsible for this?

3. Facilitate/support education possibly through existing providers

Organise or facilitate coaches’ education. One of the barriers found in this project was fear of unknown. Help clubs and coaches to overcome this fear.

4. Provide events / facilitate divisions

Are the cheerleading events accessible in your country? Do you have guidelines for the event producers regarding accessibility of a sport facility? Does your federation promote inclusiveness? Are there inclusive divisions in your country?

Think about these above questions and get started with a plan how to make cheerleading events more inclusive in your country.

5. Advertise

If there are local clubs offering inclusive cheerleading, advertise them on your website and social media channels. Write about your own projects regarding to inclusive cheerleading. Show to others that your organization work toward improvements in inclusiveness.



England – barriers and best practices

Main Policies

In England, there are 2 Legal Acts that govern disability rights.

These include:

- The European Convention on Human Rights
- The Equality Act 2010

In addition, there are a number of interconnected and independent sports bodies that represent and/or support disabled people who create best practice guidelines as they pertain to their activity.

The main overarching laws and policies state:

- You must not be discriminated against because:
 - You have a disability
 - Someone thinks you have a disability (discrimination by perception)
 - You are connected to someone with a disability (discrimination by association)
- It is important to note however that it is not unlawful discrimination to treat disabled people more favourably than non-disabled people.
- Employers and organisations have a responsibility to ensure that disabled people can access jobs, education and other services as easily as non-disabled people, known as a duty to make adjustments.
- A failure to make reasonable adjustments is considered as discrimination, for example, a shop with a step at the door not providing a ramp would be classed as discrimination.

Key Findings

Facts:

- 28% of disabled people see their social and community lives as challenging.
- 1 in 6 deaths are linked to inactivity in the wider population.
- Disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive as non-disabled people.

Getting Support:

- There are a number of disability sport organisations in the UK who can be contacted for support and/or to find new athletes.
- There are a number of funds available for disability inclusive activities but as Cheerleading is not yet recognised as a Sport in England, teams are passed onto other non-relevant grant bodies making it harder to secure funding.
- Some teams keep in regular communication with ParaCheer International for further development.
- Some teams have purchased a ParaCheer training manual which has been helpful to develop skills
- Most teams recruit from word of mouth and have started from one athlete and grown it from there.



Barriers:

- Some coaches are fearful of coaching disabled athletes and have actively turned disabled athletes away
- Event providers are tentative to allow divisions for fear around increased costs (often a worry with insurance), risk and other challenges.
- Scoresheets aren't always relevant/haven't been adapted in England for inclusive cheerleading divisions.
- There is a lack of understanding on how to adapt stunts
- Training and competition venues are often not accessible
- 3 big barriers we have identified include:
 - Coaches Education – supporting them to overcome the fears they have and breaking through any misconceptions they have around disabled people.
 - Access to the disabled community (building a team) – organisations in the UK are not very aware of the sport and coaches struggle to know where to go to find athletes.
 - Initial funding including access costs – as Cheerleading is not a recognised sport in the UK, there are limited funding options in order to start the team and make a venue accessible.

Solutions

- We need to provide coaches with educational resources
- We need to help connect teams with the disability community.
- We need to help connect teams to funding organisations that have funded similar projects.

Conclusion

England has a **good grounding** in legislation to support disabled participation in sport and physical activity, but still **some way to go** before full implementation of that legislation and full inclusion of disabled participants.

We have many teams currently offering **inclusive activities**, as the birthplace of ParaCheer/Adaptive Abilities divisions we had a head start in this. However, there are **hundreds of teams** out there who still don't support disabled athletes to participate so we have a long way to go before we are **fully inclusive**.

Our Federation are **supporting** this transition toward more inclusive cheerleading as best they can given the current **restrictions** and capacity they are working within.



Finland – barriers and best practices

Main policies identified in the policy review

There are international agreements, such as United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and European Union’s European Accessibility Act, that govern disability rights. In addition to these, there are at least seven different national policies, which are guiding the service provision for people with disability. Most of these policies are in national level, but one, the Local Governance Act, clearly specifies that each municipality must have own council for people with disability. The purpose of this council is to ensure that the people with disability are heard when it comes to planning, preparing, and evaluating the services that are essential to their daily lives (health, well-being, environment, transportation, participation, and housing).

The Finnish Paralympic Committee has the strongest role in Finland when it comes to disability sports. Paralympic Committee plans, executes and develops sports and physical activity for physically and intellectually disabled people, visually impaired people, and transplant recipients. Paralympic Committee offers educational courses for coaches, offers knowledge that helps to develop accessibility in sports facilities, coordinates the processes of integration and inclusion, and provide professional expertise in field of disability sports for athletes, professional and students both nationally and locally.

In addition to Finnish Paralympic Committee, the Finnish Sport Organisation for people with hearing impairment and at least four other Finnish disability organisations are offering sports activities for their members and their target group.

Key finding regarding barriers to participation and solutions to these barriers in Finland

Barriers to participation

Lack of information regarding to possibilities

Solutions to these barriers

Cities and municipalities have often gathered information about the sport opportunities for people with disabilities on their website. For example, in Helsinki, there is Easy Sport Erityiset.

The Finnish Paralympic Committee has also “löydä oma seura” – service, where you can browse by selecting different options such as a specific sport or specifying a disability.



Difficulties with the facilities

The Finnish Paralympic Committee has plenty of information about accessibility on their website (<https://www.paralympia.fi/palvelut/esteettomyys>).

Talk with other clubs who are already offering inclusive cheerleading. They can give you excellent pointers.

Fear of unknown

For example, the Finnish Paralympic Committee and Sport Institute Pajulahti together provide online education course for coaches. (<https://www.paralympia.fi/palvelut/koulutus/verkkokoulutus>)

Marketing

Contact the Finnish Paralympic Committee and your local sport authority. Try to find Facebook groups and internet forums that are popular among people with disabilities.

Lack of events

Discuss with your national cheerleading federation about the opportunities. Be active and be involved in the Federation's development work.

Conclusion

Overall, inclusive cheerleading teams provide wide range of useful things to the athletes and the coaches. In addition to learning new skills and get health improving exercise, the athletes have been reported to have developed their life skills also. In the interview with the athlete's parent, she pointed out that the athlete had improved her skill to functions as a part of a group and improved both her ability to listen and wait for her own turn. The coaches reported in their interviews that they are especially excited to see when an athlete surpass oneself.

People with disability in cheerleading need to feel that they are as same as others. It is just as important to them as it is for other athletes, to wear uniforms, use pom poms and do other things that are essential part of the sport.

Even though, the clubs in Finland are offering inclusive cheerleading to an increasing extent, there are still some issues to improve. These include for example more inclusive events, dialogue between the Federation and the member clubs about the adapted abilities divisions and their rules and more visible marketing of the inclusive opportunities.



Ireland – barriers and best practices

Paracheer as being a new sport introduced into our country has implemented fundamental best practises. These are based on the current sport of Ethics and Welfare plus what has been learned from the Erasmus Project.

1. The seminars shone a light on all the various types of influences not only including the following coaches, athletes, funding, culture, and protection and safety of all involved.

With the Erasmus project - my eyes were open to what each country has to learn from each other. While some countries are fully interactive with the Paracheer community and have a history of coaching and ongoing expansion, other countries are just starting to understand the value of this.

Ireland has started its implementation of Paracheer with the incorporation of the national bodies of sport, representing those with disabilities who have a direct link to our service.

We are filtering down to those who are working within structured settings and introducing the sport of cheer and performance cheer also.

New Coaches of the sport **are in need of confidence to coach** – the implementation of various types of methods and indeed imagination is already part of what they coach this is just an extension of that and it seems a stumbling block for some. **Education is the key and that is why the seminars are so important to learn from the experience of the speakers - ask questions and move forward.**

The athletes are cautious about becoming involved as this is a new sport - some of their carers are also, so this has to be a culture of inclusivity and a show of **unconditional appreciation and acceptance of the athlete.**

Funding is not always required - depending on the direct or indirect requirements of coaching the sport safely. Infrastructure, for example would be an important issue etc. Protection and safety of all concerned has to be the leading factor when coaching all sports- Rules and regulations are set and reviewed to ensure that this is implemented continually.

2. Athletes within the sport are individual which reflects their ability to participate within the sport to the best of their ability.

All abilities are welcome to participate - this is what we want to have within our country. The athlete is an individual and may want the sport for a social outlet or they may want to take this further and become competitive to a regional, national, or international standard. Their coach or committee will have this set at the start of the season and follow through for showcases or competitions. At this point the athlete can then remain at that level or be encouraged to compete at a higher level. The coach has a responsibility to ensure that athlete is being guided in the best direction to enhance their experience.



- Physical and intellectual abilities allow the sport to be coached in a diverse, varied and structured way - also non structured within the coaching realm as the implementation of coaching methods are at times specially adapted to coach the athletes.

The seminars have all shown us the varied ways in which coaching is as diverse as its athletes who attend. Imagination mixed with various types of skills and drills all lead to the same intent - to hit the skill safely. **This is why there is no one and set rule book in the coaching of Paracheer skills – creativity is the key to making drills and allowing the athlete to progress along the difficulty scale is both challenging and rewarding.** What works for one athlete may not work for another. **Adapt and overcome** - this can be a cumulative effort of the coach and athlete.

- Some are more vulnerable than others and this leads to extreme safety and welfare concerns for all involved within the sport.

Ethics and Welfare are paramount for the protection and safety of our athletes' coaches, and all involved in the delivering of our sport. The Governing Body sets the Policies which must be adopted by the coaches and those supporting the athlete.

- How the policies which underpin these are vital to the success of the sport.

The school or club, Board of Control of Paracheer has to adopt the Governing Body Ethics and Welfare policies. Within Cheer Sport Ireland each club are regulated to have in place

- 3 levels of Safety Officers
- Interview process, probation time with full review of all staff.
- Data protection officer
- Garda Vetting from age 16 up for all who are mixing with younger athletes
- First Aid for all coaches
- Correct Insurance cover
- Template of policies and procedures
- Basic qualified coaches for a new club

- Those who implement these policies regulate, sustain, and enforce them.

Its obvious from the seminars that the main focus needs to be on the welfare of the athlete. Although this is a fair comment, without the support, implementation and checking that the policies are being enforced by a third party this comment is hollow. How athletes are being coached is a coaching issue (as stated above in No 3) supporting this in the background is the safety of the athletes as follows

- How complaints are handled – what is the ongoing process? Has it a full reporting and accountability structure? Is there an investigation? If so who?
- **Full understanding of the athlete ability and what is best for them in training**
- Confidentiality and understanding of the athlete.



- Do the athletes know their Safety officer, and can they contact them directly with confidence that they will be heard?
- Who is checking the coaches implementation of the safety rules e.g. no 1 adult alone with an athlete at any time .? etc ?
- Is there a social media/privacy policy and is it being enforced?
- Are these policies being reviewed and updated on a regular and agreed basis by the Board of Control? Who is responsible for this?

Slovenia – barriers and best practices

Will be added

