

Platform

Push needed to get Special Olympics back



Karen Coventry

is director of sport with Special Olympics Ireland. A former international gymnast, she lives in Dublin with her partner and 12-year-old twins

I've been with Special Olympics Ireland for 19 years and when I joined, straight away, I knew there was something magic about the organisation.

From the athletes to their families and the volunteers, the link is incredible and anyone involved feels very privileged to see the change it can make in

people's lives.

In Special Olympics, everything stopped in March 2020. All the clubs were closed and we were all sent home.

So we're now working on plans for next year on qualifying events for the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Berlin in June

2023. The Winter Games in Kazan, Russia have been postponed a year to January 2023. That was another big hit for the athletes.

A lot of those qualifying events would have begun in the last 18 months. Our athletes often have huge challenges anyway, but this was completely different. We didn't know how to keep them all going.

From April to June 2020, we ran the Together at Home campaign, with activities live every day online and on Saturdays a Young Athletes™ session, when a lot of the athletes would have attended their Special Olympics clubs.

The club volunteers who would have worked with the athletes pre-Covid were fantastic in making this a huge success.

We sent out a summer activity pack to every athlete at home and included a survey.

The athletes told us that they were lonely and they missed their friends and their clubs. This was where Together as Virtual Clubs was born. We asked clubs to set up a Zoom on the day they would have met in person and get their athletes on to it and ask them how they were and to do some sport/physical activity.

That was huge for people, and not everyone knew how to use Zoom, so our development officers supported them to set up.

It gave us all a bit of a boost, really, to know that the athletes were getting some of the activity and some of the social impact that they really missed.

We couldn't go out and shake buckets to fund-raise, but we ran the Can't Stop Now appeal online and that kept people aware that Special Olympics needed everyone's support to keep going.

We joined with Special Olympics Switzerland for a virtual Special Olympics event

and have built connections with Special Olympics Great Britain in the last 18 months.

We've run Health Promotion courses, Strong Minds, Athlete Leadership and other events online that are much more accessible to run that way.

Our athletes and their families might not have the time or ability to travel to an event or a training course, but they can get online.

We will continue some things as a hybrid model.

For example, the safeguarding programme for volunteers is now online, which makes it much easier for people to join up and get involved. Over 700 volunteers have undertaken this course in 2021 alone.

Bringing existing and new volunteers into Special Olympics is crucial now as clubs reopen.

We're involved in the Sport

Ireland 'Let's Get Back' campaign. The message is: 'Let's Get Back. It's Time.' It's a great slogan. We have to look forwards.

We're putting a big push behind getting the volunteers who ensure Special Olympics clubs can get going again.

There is an issue around people not feeling ready to go back and volunteer, or they've just been away from it and at home for so long that they're out of the habit.

I'd say to people who have volunteered before to please come back, and to anyone who has ever thought of volunteering, then go for it and we'll give you all the training.

It's all online and there's no travelling to training sessions. It couldn't be easier, and you'll never regret it.

I've never met anyone who regretted getting involved with Special Olympics. ●

In conversation with Sarah Caden

READ

***The Mitten Tree* by Candace Christiansen, is a story for children about how doing something for others can benefit everyone. An elderly woman knits mittens for a boy who has none and leaves them on a tree for him to find. A game develops, which everyone discovers they enjoy.**

LISTEN

The *Sporting Witness* podcast from the BBC has an episode from 2014 which tells of the very first Special Olympics in 1968, with the

accounts of an athlete and a Chicago schooteacher who helped organise the event. It's most easily found through BBC Sounds.

TAKE ACTION

There are many ways to become a volunteer with Special Olympics Ireland. They are keen to recruit club volunteers, who are vital to reopening activities and keeping them open, but you can also volunteer to help with events and admin. See specialolympics.ie