

The Start Here Programme:

The Disability Rugby Officer at Ulster Rugby

“ In this role, I can make a difference for those kids and those adults... Rugby is that type of sport that they say we're this one big community - club for all. And I really want to drive that message forward. ”

- Shel Laffin, Disability Rugby Officer



60% Increase in Disability Rugby Engagement since the Start Here Post

This case study explores the notable success Ulster Rugby (UR) has had in creating positive impact through the Start Here programme. This study is based on interviews with **Shel Laffin**, who is the current Disability Rugby Officer, and with **Ally Skelding**, who was originally in the post but who has since been promoted to manager.

Start Here Programme

The Start Here programme is a part of the Department for Communities COVID Recovery Employment and Skills Initiative. It was set out to aid recovery, resilience, and sustainability within the VCSE and Sports sector, through attracting new talent to the field and upskilling existing employees. Start Here has provided 100 VCSE and sports organisations funding for a new, entry-level post for a 3-year period. The Rank Foundation is administering the programme and delivering additional development and networking opportunities for the postholders and their organisations throughout the years.

Ulster Rugby applied to the programme to appoint a Disability Rugby Officer. **This has made Ulster the only province on the Island of Ireland to have their own specific Disability Rugby Officer (DRO).**

Disability Rugby Officer Role

Before the DRO post, there already were several Disability and Tag Rugby teams within Ulster Rugby. However, disability specified support was mostly delivered by the Disability and Inclusion Officer at Irish Rugby Football Union, as Ulster Rugby didn't have a role focused on the area specifically. They saw that there was a need for somebody to lead on the work internally, as it's a huge growth area.

Focuses of the Disability Rugby Officer

- Increasing the number of Tag and Mixed Ability Rugby teams.
- Collaborating with the Disability Advisory Group to ensure practices are fit for purpose.
- Educating staff and coaches.
- Building collaboration beyond Ulster Rugby, such as with schools.
- Promoting Disability Rugby in general.

Outcomes so far

New Teams and Support

There is more capacity to provide support for Disability Rugby according to the needs of the clubs, whereas in the past clubs were often trying to find Disability Coaching education on their own.

There are **4 new Disability Tag Teams in place, and a new Mixed Ability Team in the works**. Overall, there has been a **60% increase in participation in Disability Rugby**. The impact the role has had is wide-reaching, bringing to the centre disabled people, and people with additional needs and special educational needs (SEN) – those who often are not afforded priority in sport.

Postholders

Ally Skelding started as the Disability Rugby Officer in September 2022. Ally had recently joined Ulster Rugby for a temporary post before the DRO role came up, which aligned with her experience of working with people with SEN and disabled people during her teaching career.

This new position didn't last long. The DRO role gave Ally the necessary experience on the field to apply for the Rugby Participation Lead role in March 2023. As the Rugby Participation Lead, Ally now manages six participation officers, including Shel in her old role.

Having been in the post before Shel, Ally has an appreciation for what growing and supporting Disability Rugby requires. Through supporting Shel, Ally has continued to improve the work.

Shel Laffin started as the DRO in June 2023.

“She has been a real force of nature with the post and she has made such a huge difference in the short time that she's been in it. **”**
- Ally



Shel has built her skillset for this role for a long time. She had played rugby most of her life, and a few years ago she began building herself up to have a career in rugby. Shel was the Participation Officer for the Women and Girls' team at Ulster Rugby for two seasons before the DRO role, during which she qualified for the World Rugby Educator Award.

Shel explains that having disabled family members has been a driving force in taking up the opportunity to work in Disability Rugby. **She knows how many barriers disabled people and people with additional needs face, and she is motivated to change that:** “Rugby is that type of sport that they say we're this one big community – a club for all. And I really want to drive that message forward”.

The DRO role has allowed Shel to use her unique skillset and values in creating positive change in Ulster Rugby and the community. Taking on this role feels like a long time coming for Shel, and her work making a real difference has been incredibly rewarding for her.

Lessons From Their Success

These are some lessons we can draw from the success of the DRO role in creating positive change for the community and Ulster Rugby.

Three-year Funding Makes All The Difference

Ally explains, that often with one-year funding, it's harder to get the most out of the individual's potential and devotion in any role, as people have to start looking ahead very quickly to ensure the continuation of the role or to find future employment. The Start Here programme's three-year funding has been key to creating real impact, and it has enabled implementing changes on an organisational level.

Longer funding has helped with setting long-term goals, such as their initiative to broaden collaboration with schools, where it has turned out teachers need more support and time to take on Tag Rugby than expected. It has also given them more time to plan ahead, with **a strategy in place to keep Shel in the role beyond the Start Here programme, which comes to an end for them in September 2025**.



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Spreading the Responsibility – Organisational Change

The Start Here programme was designed for organisations to bring in a new role that would contribute to an area they want to develop. Both Ally and Shel note, that as important as it is to have a designated person supporting disability inclusion in rugby, to create substantial change the area needs to be brought into focus within the organisation overall.

Before the role, Ally says that there wasn't enough awareness about the needs of disabled people within the organisation, so people didn't intuitively give consideration to those needs as a part of their roles. According to Shel, **changing the culture really comes down to educating everyone in the area, and it seems this is something that has been driven forward massively within Ulster Rugby through the DRO post**. Alongside the increase in coaching and education, the area is consistently featured in staff meetings throughout the year, as well as annual reviews, which has encouraged an internal culture where people are aware of their role in supporting the work:

“There's just more of a spotlight on it than there was before – I think that's been a real success” Ally says.



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Relationship Building

The Rank Foundation works in communities across the UK to encourage leaders, develop entrepreneurial mindsets and form strong networks that improve life. The development opportunities Rank has delivered as a part of Start Here are reflective of Rank's ethos of investing in and nurturing talent within the community sector. A big focus of the approach is supporting people and organisations in building impactful relationships. Ally and Shel's ability to effectively build trust and cooperative relationships across and beyond the field of rugby, has been a big component of their success.

Building relationships with coaches and teams on the ground has been central to growing Disability Rugby and in identifying gaps in education and resources. Implementing sustainable change has involved bringing in input from people who have been coaching and working within rugby for a long time: **“those are the guys, that have been on the ground for so long - so we can have those conversations and allow them to take a bit of ownership - to be brought into the fact, that we actually want their opinions on things”**, Ally says.

A big contributor to the rapid growth in Disability Rugby is that Shel had already built a unique network within the clubs, before taking on the role. Getting clubs to expand their disability activities was a lot easier with people who trusted Shel and who knew how much she cares about the work: **“I had three of those clubs in place before I even officially started the job, because as soon as I knew I was getting the job, I was already on the calls going - ‘Right, we now have the opportunity, I'm going to be leading this section in Ulster Rugby, are you willing to take this chance?’”** Through these links, they confirmed three more clubs to take on disability rugby.

The training and networking components of the Start Here programme have also supported the DRO work. Shel notes that **“It's nice to actually see people from other areas like the volunteer sector and all those different places - I think is actually really key and important so that we try and learn from each other and share that information.”** Shel took on an opportunity to present on her work at the Start Here Conference in October 2023, where she said she also got valuable ideas for comms and marketing from talking to people working outside of sport.

Looking Ahead

There is still over a year left of the Start Here Programme, and Ulster Rugby is working to confirm funding for Shel to continue in her role beyond the end of the programme. A lot has been achieved, but Shel is committed to increasing disability rugby engagement further:

“I want to try and make it that at least by the end of my lifespan every club within Ulster Rugby has either a Disability Tag Team or a Mixed Ability Team, and it will get to the stage where clubs will not have a choice because they'll see how important it is.”

-Shel