



Comment on the Draft National Sports Facilities Strategy 2012-2016

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1. Overall Comments

1.1 The mission of the ESRI is to provide evidence for policy and, as such, the contribution that the ESRI can make to a draft policy such as the *Draft National Sports Facility Strategy* is primarily to examine whether the proposed strategy is properly informed by available evidence. Thus, this document presents a brief analysis of the way evidence has been used to inform the strategy and makes some related recommendations.

1.2 The extent to which the draft strategy has tried to integrate evidence and consultation into the policymaking process is very welcome. Evidence linking participation in sport to health and social outcomes has grown substantially in recent years and has the capacity to contribute to policy improvements.

1.3 That said, a careful examination of the draft strategy reveals unevenness in the way evidence presently informs the proposed policy. Detailed examples are spelled out below. In addition, some empirical evidence funded by the Department through the Irish Sports Council, which is based on large samples of Irish sports participants and non-participants, is highly relevant and yet has not been duly considered. Taking this evidence properly into account could improve the strategy.

1.4 Most importantly, the draft strategy does not consider the implications of consistent evidence suggesting that in modern Ireland the provision of additional sports facilities is likely to have, at best, a marginal impact on participation. Given the focus of the strategy, this evidence cannot be credibly ignored.

2. Aspects consistent with evidence

2.1 At various points the draft strategy recognises that factors other than facilities are important determinants of participation. This assertion is important and is in line with evidence concerning barriers to participation.^{1,2}

2.2. Repeated emphasis is placed within the draft strategy on the need to extend sporting opportunities to more disadvantaged groups. This aspiration is appropriate given evidence showing that participation in sport in Ireland has a very strong socio-economic gradient – those in lower socio-economic groups are many times less likely to participate in all types of sport.³

2.3 The draft strategy places emphasis on making more efficient use of existing facilities, opening up single-use facilities to other sporting activities, and better sharing of facilities between schools, third-level institutions and communities. These proposals fit well with evidence regarding how individuals make transitions between sporting activities across the life-course and the impact of attending and

leaving educational institutions. In particular, the additional time and opportunities to participate in sport offered by staying on in full-time education has been identified as a key factor in explaining the lower participation rate of adults from lower socio-economic groups. Opening up the facilities enjoyed by more advantaged groups, especially at third-level institutions, to those in less advantaged groups is likely to assist in narrowing the socio-economic sporting gap.

2.4 The requirement that new and redeveloped facilities be accessible to disabled people makes sense in the context of evidence showing that disabled adults are much less likely to participate in sport.⁴

2.5 The emphasis in the draft strategy on catering for increased participation in outdoor pursuits, individual activities and a broader range of sporting activities is backed by evidence showing that in recent decades growth in participation in individual activities has greatly outstripped that in team sports, in particular Gaelic games. The suggestion that a greater share of funding should be allocated to such activities and that priority should be given multi-purpose facilities is therefore in line with this evidence.

2.6 The points made in paragraphs 2.1-2.4 above are reflected in a number of recommendations within the draft strategy. Thus, recommendations 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 13 appear to be informed by and consistent with bodies of evidence. The point made in paragraph 2.5, which is expressed clearly in the body of the draft strategy, could be reflected more in the recommendations.

3. Incorrect or questionable use of evidence

3.1 The evidence linking sport to positive health outcomes is stronger than the evidence linking sport to positive social outcomes. While undoubtedly there is evidence suggesting that sport has positive social outcomes, and some negative ones,⁵ no equivalent evidence exists in the social realm to the now very large volume of consistent findings linking lack of physical activity to chronic disease, including heart disease, various cancers, skeletal health and diabetes.⁶ The strategy should reflect the fact that the link to better health is much more firmly established.

3.2 The claim on page 8 that the key finding of the ESRI report, “Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland”, was that sport has “enormous social benefits” is incorrect. Nowhere does the report make this statement. The report did present new findings on the extent of social participation in sport and did conclude that the social side of sport warranted greater recognition, including from policymakers. Since it was written in 2005, however, greater attention has been given to the social benefits of sport – they now feature in almost all official policy documentation. It is not clear, therefore, that the conclusion still applies.

3.3 The claim on page 8, that the same report recommended that “funding for sport should be shaped with a view to supporting the social as well as the physical benefits of sport in particular by: ... Facilitating attendance at sport events, for example through funding for sports stadiums and club facilities” is a misquote. The report in fact says “...facilitating attendance at sport events (for example, in connection with funding for sports stadiums and club facilities for members).” (Delaney and Fahey, 2005, p. 72). The misquote changes the meaning: the authors did not conclude that

building stadiums and club facilities would support the social benefits of sport, rather they proposed that allocation of funding for such facilities should take account of efforts to facilitate spectators.

3.4 The claims made in the draft strategy that participation in sport is linked to reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour are greatly exaggerated in comparison with evidence. International studies find only mixed evidence for such effects. While there have been some reports that particular participation programmes have been associated with reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour in the vicinity of the programme, during specific periods, there is also evidence that the impact tends not to be sustained and that in some cases the crime or anti-social behaviour merely shifts to nearby areas.⁷

3.5 On page 27 it is asserted that research carried out by the ESRI has shown that the key stage in an individual's desire to participate in sport throughout their life is during the school age years. The report cited does not state or conclude this and nor is there evidence to support the claim. In fact, what evidence there is suggests otherwise. International studies and ESRI research find a surprisingly low correlation between participation as a child and as an adult.⁸

3.5 The section on the relationship between facilities and increasing participation on page 18 is not based on proper evidence. The one citation supplied (Minton, 2007) is an opinion piece in a magazine written by a director of a British company that supplies market data to firms that build sports facilities. This section, which is vital to the logic of investment in facilities in pursuit of the Department's policy aims, ought to review peer-reviewed scientific research on the factors linked to participation in sport (see below). Its conclusions would need to be revised.

4. Missing Evidence

4.1 There is a substantial body of research on why people do and do not participate in sport which is mostly neglected in the draft strategy. This evidence needs to be considered and could be used to substantially improve the strategy.

4.2. The problem of missing evidence is compounded by the consultation methodology, which focused on people and organisations *already connected with sport*. To increase participation in sport, information relating to those who are *not already connected with sport* is vital. This means making use of large nationally representative samples and studying why the majority of Irish people do not participate. Three separate surveys undertaken in the last ten years (Survey of Sport and Physical Exercise, 2003; QNHS Module, 2006; Irish Sports Monitor, 2007, 2008) have asked large representative samples (c. 3,000, 40,000 and 10,000) of Irish adults why they do and do not participate in sport.

4.3 A consistent pattern emerges. Approximately 1% of non-participants state that lack of facilities is the reason they do not participate. Instead, lack of time, motivation, health and fitness problems dominate the reasons for non-participation.⁹ It is important that the implications of these findings are taken account of in the draft strategy, given the direct relevance to the issue of investment in facilities in support of increased participation. Most people who do not participate find it hard to fit participation around their busy lives or do not perceive opportunities to engage in activities of which

they feel capable. To obtain its goal of increased participation, therefore, the strategy needs to address these barriers more directly.

4.4 The Irish Sports Monitor in 2008 additionally asked those who had taken up a sport whether they had any difficulty finding facilities to participate. Over 95% stated either that no search was needed, or that they found facilities easily.

4.5 International evidence on the impact of various policy interventions on raising participation suggests that successful policies involve programmes with strong communication and outreach to people who are presently non-participants.¹⁰ This is particularly important for policy aiming to improve social inclusion, since disadvantaged people are less likely to have friends and contacts already involved in sport. At present, the draft strategy refers only to the need to “underpin” capital investments with “a commitment by applicants to provide ongoing funding for programming and coaching” (p. 42). No reference to this “commitment” appears in the recommendations and no mechanism for ensuring delivery is described. Since the international research suggests that good communication with non-participants is the common factor in successful attempts to raise participation, this evidence warrants more attention in the recommendations and the strategy as a whole.

4.6 The evidence clearly shows that improving health is the dominant reason why adults participate in sport.¹¹ Thus, the motivations of individual participants match other evidence in support of the benefits of sport cited above showing that, while social benefits matter, health benefits are the larger factor.

4.7 More recent cohorts of adults play more sport, i.e. individuals now in their 20s play more sport than those now in their 50s did when they were in their 20s.¹² This suggests that the demand for sporting opportunities will grow, as younger adults are likely to continue to be more active as they age. The finding has strong implications for the type of activities that need to be invested in for the future, because middle-aged and older adults are very unlikely to play team sports and much more likely to pursue individual sports and outdoor activities.

4.8 Evidence suggests that young adulthood is a key period for determining whether individuals continue to participate as they get older, especially for those in lower socio-economic groups. At present, the draft strategy does not recognise this fact and nor do the recommendations take it into account. A large proportion of people who participate in team sports as children drop out as teenagers and young adults and do not take up other activities once they leave education and join the workforce.

4.9 The strategy needs to build in appropriate checks and balances to ensure that funding is granted on the basis of proper, independent criteria. There is clear evidence, published in an international peer-reviewed journal, that shows how past allocations of the Sports Capital Programme (SCP) were distorted by other priorities.¹³

5. Analytic issues

5.1 There is some recognition in the draft strategy of the trade-off to be made between investment in elite competitive sport and in community and recreational sport. This issue was raised in consultation and the recommendation is made to split the SCP along these lines. This is a crucial part of the strategy, yet no guidance is given as to what proportion of the funding should be given to each type of investment and why. The balance of evidence in favour of health benefits is relevant here, as it implies that the largest returns from investing public money in sport are achieved where policy manages to increase mass participation.

5.2 The suggestion that the SCP should continue to operate on an applications basis favours organisations that are already flourishing, and hence able to put together stronger applications, and organisations whose members contain educated professionals, who are better able to negotiate the application process. Offering assistance to applicants without such advantages (recommendation 19) may lessen this problem, but won't eliminate it. There is thus an argument for allocating at least some of the SCP funding via a method that is designed specifically to assist nascent or small organisations and that is more favourable for those in lower socio-economic groups.

5.3 While the draft strategy recommends making better use of existing facilities, opening up single-use facilities to other sporting activities, and better sharing of facilities between schools, third-level institutions and communities (2.3 above), it could say something about the policy mechanism that will be employed to deliver these outcomes. How will these outcomes be "promoted" (recommendations 8 and 9)?

6. Suggestions for improvements informed by evidence

6.1. At present, while there are some aspects of the draft strategy that are consistent with the available evidence, and associated recommendations that are backed by evidence, there are a number of areas where evidence has been used unsoundly or ignored. Consequently, with greater attention to some of the available published research, the credibility of the strategy and the policy design could be improved.

6.2. In particular, because little weight has been given to evidence that suggests a weak link between facilities and raising participation and to evidence that points to the need for communication with non-participants, the strategy could more directly address factors that evidence suggests will most likely determine its success. This aspect of the strategy could, therefore, be greatly strengthened.

6.3 The implication of this evidence is that improvements in the human and social capital surrounding sport are likely to increase participation more than improvements in physical capital. Since the Government is already committed to spending more on the SCP, the strategy could do more to ensure that funding goes beyond bricks, mortar, AstroTurf etc., to support ongoing programmes aimed at increasing participation. Is there scope for greater involvement of Local Sports Partnerships in the implementation of commitments to use new or improved facilities to attract new participants, especially from disadvantaged groups, or in the opening up of facilities up to new activities? Can such involvement be made a condition of funding?

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- ¹ Fahey, T., Layte, R. and Gannon, B. (2004). Sports Participation and Health Among Adults in Ireland. Dublin: Irish Sports Council/ESRI.
- ² Lunn, P. (2007). Fair Play? Sport and Social Disadvantage in Ireland, Dublin: Irish Sports Council/ESRI.
- ³ Lunn (2007), note 2.
- ⁴ Fahey et al. (2004), note 1.
- ⁵ Delaney, L. and Fahey, T. (2005). Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland. Dublin: Irish Sports Council/ESRI, in particular the discussion of benefits and costs in Chapter 1; Fahey et al. (2004), note 1, especially Chapter 5 on the association between sport and drinking alcohol, which has both negative social and health outcomes.
- ⁶ Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis has been produced by the Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee (2008). Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee Report, 2008. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ⁷ Useful reviews have been conducted by Coalter, F., Allison, M. and Taylor, J. (2000). The Role of Sport in Regenerating Deprived Areas, Edinburgh: The Scottish Executive Central Research Unit; Collins, M., Henry, I., Houlihan, B. and Buller, J. (1999). Sport and Social Exclusion, Report for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, London, UK.
- ⁸ See Telama, R., Xiaolin, Y., Jorma, V., Ilkka, V.Ä., Olli, W., & Olli, R. (2005). Physical activity from childhood to adulthood: A 21-year tracking study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 28(3), 267-273; Lunn, P. (2010). The sports and exercise life-course: a survival analysis of recall data from Ireland. *Social Science & Medicine*, 70, 711-719.
- ⁹ Fahey et al. (2004), note 1; Central Statistics Office (2007). Quarterly National Household Survey: Sport and physical exercise, Cork: CSO.
- ¹⁰ For discussion and references see Lunn (2007), note 2, but in particular: Task Force on Community Preventative Services (2001). Increasing Physical Activity, US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 50.
- ¹¹ CSO (2007), note 9.
- ¹² Lunn, P. and Layte, R. (2009). *Sporting lives: An analysis of a lifetime of Irish sport*. Dublin: Irish Sports Council/ESRI.
- ¹³ Considine, J., Coffey, S. and Kiely, D. (2008). Irish sports capital funding: A public choice perspective. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 4, 150-169.