

**Sport Ireland Submission to Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local
Government on “Ireland 2040 Our Plan Issues and Choices”**

1. Introduction

Sport Ireland has prepared this paper in response to the invitation from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to submit comments on its “Ireland 2040 Our Plan Issues and Choices” document. Ireland 2040 is intended to provide a framework for development and investment over the next 20 years.

2. About Sport Ireland

Sport Ireland was established in October 2015 under legislation merging the functions previously undertaken by Irish Sports Council, National Sports Campus Development Authority, Irish Institute of Sport and Coaching Ireland. We are responsible for a range of functions around the promotion and development of sport in Ireland at all levels. Of particular relevance in the context of the National Planning Framework (NPF) is our function to develop strategies for increasing participation in sport¹ and to coordinate their implementation by all relevant bodies.

3. Overarching Comments

We welcome the Minister’s vision for the NPF around “improved living standards, a desire for people to live in safe, vibrant communities and to experience life-long health and well-being.” We believe that this vision should be at the heart of the NPF and we believe that participation in sport and physical activity has a key role to play in its achievement; by enhancing the health, well-being and quality of life of the population; by facilitating local and national economic vibrancy; by contributing to social capital through volunteering, membership and attendance at sporting events; and by fostering environmental sustainability through the efficient and effective use of sports and physical activity facilities and resources. We believe that the creation of an “active society” should be part of the overarching ambition of the NPF.

Section 1.1.2 of the document identifies that the NPF will be used to frame the development of other public policy areas such as housing, jobs, transport, education, health, environment, energy and communications. Consistent with our view on the creation of an “active society” we believe that physical activity (including sport) should feature as a policy area worthy of mention in this regard given its national significance, strategic importance and spatial / place-based focus. We believe that the NPF should align strongly with the published National Physical Activity Plan and the soon-to-be-published National Sports Policy Framework in this regard.

¹ Here sport means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or regular participation, aim at — (a) expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, and (b) forming social relationships;

We welcome the fact that the document highlights (Section 2.1.6) that there will be an increased emphasis on health and well-being, including more active lifestyles and a focus on mental health, especially as people live longer. We also welcome the belief that moving away from the Business as Usual approach will support the fostering of an improved quality of life for all and help to tackle the considerable issues of social disadvantage by ensuring that healthy-living options are available within communities through easy access to sports and recreation facilities, amenities and green spaces as well as walking and cycling facilities that encourage these activities for recreational and functional purposes.

In the context of efforts to encourage a more physically active population across the life course, our research has pointed to the considerable challenges that exist around social, age and disability gradients in participation and around the “worrying trends in drop-off points in participation by children and young people”. Given the societal benefits which arise from participation in sport and physical activity (See next section) these challenges are of sufficient strategic and national importance to merit the concerted long-term planning efforts of the entire public policy system if we are to be successful in addressing them. While we welcome the document’s general commitment to supporting access and opportunity for people with disabilities in this regard, we believe that more detailed consideration needs to be given to addressing this and the other challenges around developing an “active society”.

4. The Contribution of Sport and Physical Activity

The contribution of sport and physical activity to Irish society occurs in a variety of ways. They benefit the health, well-being and quality of life of individuals and communities and support the development of social capital. Sport is also a generator of significant economic activity. Here we briefly look at each of these areas.

Sport, Physical Activity and Health

Regular physical activity reduces the risk of many chronic conditions, including coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, obesity, mental health problems and musculoskeletal conditions. For example the US Expert Advisory Committee² which helped draw up the US National Physical Activity Guidelines in 2008 concluded that “Our review documents very strong scientific evidence that physically active people have higher levels of health-related fitness, a lower risk of developing a number of disabling medical conditions, and lower rates of various chronic diseases than people who are inactive”.

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<https://health.gov/paguidelines/report/pdf/committeereport.pdf>

A major review published in *The Lancet*³ in 2012 found that physical inactivity was responsible for 14.2% of all-cause mortality in Ireland. Using CSO mortality data from 2014⁴, this suggests that almost 4,000 of all deaths in that year were as a result of Irish people not engaging in enough physical activity to benefit their health. Participation in physical activity and sport has also been shown to be effective for reducing depression, anxiety, psychological distress and emotional disturbance and for enhancing the wellbeing and happiness of individuals.⁵

While we do not have detailed data in Ireland, on the basis of international research physical inactivity has been estimated to cost each of the WHO Region's countries about €150-300 per citizen per year. In a worst case scenario this could imply a cost in Ireland of approximately €1.5 billion per year⁶ - which is completely unsustainable.

Beyond the direct physical and mental health benefits associated with active and social participation in sport, in recent years many sports clubs have gone much further than their "core" business by broadening develop initiatives focussing on other behaviours that impact on their members' health and well-being. The GAA "Healthy Clubs"⁷ initiative is a particularly good example of a development in this regard. It aims to help GAA clubs explore how they can support the holistic health of their members and the communities they serve. The healthy club model, which is based on best national and international practice, aims to embed a healthy philosophy in a club around behaviours such as gambling, alcohol, drugs and eating while integrating health into the day-to-day club activities in a sustainable way. If this was to be replicated across the approximate 12,000 sports clubs that exist in Ireland the contribution to the nation's health and well-being would be immeasurable.

Economic Contribution of Sport

Sport contributes to economic growth through ticket sales, sports tourism, subscriptions, the cost of playing, the purchase of equipment and merchandise and the economic value of time given by volunteers. The 2010 report on the Assessment of the Economic Impact of Sport in Ireland⁸ found that:

- Irish households spent the equivalent of 2% of the overall value of consumer spending on sport and sport-related goods;

³ [http://thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS01406736\(12\)61031-9/abstract](http://thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS01406736(12)61031-9/abstract)
⁴ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-vsyst/vitalstatisticsyearlysummary2014/>
⁵ https://www.sportengland.org/media/3146/psychological_health_and_wellbeing_-_summary.pdf
⁶ <http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Get-Ireland-Active-the-National-Physical-Activity-Plan.pdf>
⁷ <http://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/healthy-club/>
⁸ http://www.sportireland.ie/Research/Economic_Impact_of_Sport_2010_/Indecon.pdf

- Sport-related spending contributed €1.8 billion or 1.4% of economy-wide value added or GDP;
- Sport and sport-related activities supported over 38,000 full-time equivalent jobs, equivalent to over 2% of the overall level of employment in Ireland; and
- Sport-related volunteering activity was estimated to have an economic value of between €322 million and €582 million annually.

While these figures related to 2008, they highlight the significant contribution made by sport to the Irish economy. A 2012 study commissioned by the European Commission⁹ found that sport contributed €2.4 billion to the Irish economy while supporting over 40,000 jobs.

Social Role of Sport

While the research evidence is less strong than in respect of other areas, sport does have a role in getting people involved and invested in their community through membership, volunteering, active participation and attendance at sporting events, whether in the community or at large-scale sporting events. For example, Delaney and Keaney¹⁰ used a variety of data sources to illustrate substantial correlations between measures of social capital and measures of sports participation in the UK and the EU. Sport can also teach participants important life-skills such as teamwork, discipline and leadership which can educate children and enhance employability. For example research from Sheffield Hallam University¹¹ found that graduates who participated in sport in university earned almost £6,000 more per annum than their non-sporting counterparts. Sport can help to integrate new communities by bringing people of all backgrounds together in an inclusive atmosphere. Sport can also play an important role in tackling some of the social challenges faced by society, including social exclusion and anti-social behaviour¹².

5. The challenges in developing a more active society

While our research^{13,14} has shown that some strides have been made in increasing the levels of participation in sport and leisure time physical activity over the last couple of decades, significant challenges remain. While participation in sport and leisure time activity has been on the increase, participation in broader physical activity through work, travel and domestic life has been in

⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/library/studies/study-contribution-sports-economic-growth-final-rpt.pdf>

¹⁰ Delaney, L and Keaney, E (2005) Sport and Social Capital in the United Kingdom: Statistical Evidence from National and International Survey Data. Institute for Public Policy Research. London. Commissioned by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport

¹¹ <http://www4.shu.ac.uk/mediacentre/video-graduates-who-earn-more-play-more>

¹² http://www.sportengland.org/media/3608/crime_reduction_and_community_safety_-_summary.pdf

¹³ http://www.sportireland.ie/Research/Sporting_Lives_An_Analysis_of_a_Lifetime_of_Irish_2008/_Sporting_Lives.pdf

¹⁴ http://www.sportireland.ie/Research/The_Irish_Sports_Monitor/The_Irish_Sports_Monitor_2011/ISM-2011.pdf

decline¹⁵ with the result that overall only ONE IN THREE Irish adults are sufficiently active to benefit their health according to the 2014 – 2015 Healthy Ireland Survey¹⁶. Furthermore, levels of inactivity are not equally distributed throughout our society with large gradients existing by gender, age, socio-economic status and disability.

Given the societal benefits we have already seen arising from participation in sport and physical activity, we believe that these challenges are of sufficient strategic and national importance to merit the concerted long-term planning effort of the entire public policy system if we are to be successful in addressing them. Evidence from other countries like Finland and the Netherlands shows that for a real and lasting change, physical activity needs to be embedded into every-day life. So, moving our country to a point where being physically active is a norm will take a large-scale and sustained effort by the whole of Government, its agencies, the private and community sectors and broader society. A long-term multi-sectoral approach which seeks to address the personal, community, cultural and environmental factors impacting on people's decisions around sport and physical activity is essential.

Health has been recognised by the World Health Organisation as one of the key factors in urban design and development challenges¹⁷ of the 21st Century. The WHO has identified health-based progress indicators including injuries, obesity and physical activity as a universal “pulse” against which a city's health can be measured. A WHO report¹⁸ on urban green space and health concludes that “a city of well-connected, attractive green spaces that offer safe opportunities for urban residents for active mobility and sports as well as for stress recovery, recreation and social contact is likely to be more resilient to extreme environmental events...such a city is also likely to have healthier citizens, reducing demands on health services, and contributing to a stronger economy.”

So, for our long-term planning to be successful requires the active engagement of those involved in promoting health and well-being as well as the development of the requisite health and well-being indicators against which to track progress.

The Bangkok Declaration on Physical Activity for Global Health and Sustainable Development¹⁹ adopted by the 6th International Congress on Physical Activity and Public Health in November 2016 by delegates from 72 countries noted the key role that reducing physical inactivity had to

¹⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22694051>

¹⁶ <http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Healthy-Ireland-Survey-2015-Summary-of-Findings.pdf>

¹⁷ http://www.who.int/sustainable-development/news-events/health_newurbanagenda/en/

¹⁸ http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/321971/Urban-green-spaces-and-health-review-evidence.pdf?ua=1

¹⁹ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/559a3ff1e4b0b0193b9d9862/t/5843cdfbe3df28eae5f43c10/1480838663699/BKK_Declaration+FINAL+Dec2.pdf

play in contributing to global strategies around combating childhood obesity (an issue referenced in the NPF), developing a new urban health agenda, mobilizing sustainable transport for development), and the WHO global action plan on dementia. The Declaration emphasised that actions to provide supportive environments that reduce physical inactivity provide co-benefits, can significantly reduce health care costs, increase economic productivity and provide effective return on investments in sectors such as transport and tourism. It highlighted that the drivers of inactivity were linked to societal and environmental changes including technology, globalisation and urbanisation, which were transforming how people live, work, travel and play and increasing sedentary behaviours. The Declaration acknowledged that efforts to decrease inactivity had been insufficient to date and agreed that there was an urgent need to strengthen and scale the development, prioritisation, financing and implementation of evidence-informed national plans to enable all countries to achieve the WHO global target for reducing physical inactivity for children and adults by 10% by 2025.

The Declaration highlighted that development, implementation and monitoring of urban and transport planning policies that required city and regional designs to provide equitable access to safe, affordable infrastructures for walking and cycling, as well as public open spaces and recreational facilities could contribute to achieving sustainable transport systems for all, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization, reduce the environmental impact of cities and achieve universal access to green and public spaces.

These sorts of actions and approaches require the type of sustained commitment that can be given voice to and followed through in the NPF.

4. What we propose

At the highest level, we believe that the creation of an “active society” needs to form part of the overarching ambition of the NPF. It also needs to align clearly and strongly with the National Physical Activity Plan (which itself is a subset of the Healthy Ireland framework) and the soon-to-be-developed National Sports Policy Framework. We also believe that the following specific actions should help to underscore the importance of creating an “active society” as part of the NPF.

Develop a “Green” Infrastructure

The document notes (3.2.1) that the built environment is an important determinant of health through various issues including green open spaces. Public Health England²⁰ has recognised that access to open and green space through parks, gardens, tree-lined streets, etc. is important for

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/366113/Evidence_layout_23_Oct.pdf

“quality of life and for the sustainability of towns and cities”. Access to green space helps alleviate stress and depression, and aids longevity even adjusting for social class, employment and smoking. The World Health Organisation²¹ in its review of evidence around urban green spaces and health concluded that parks, playgrounds and residential greenery promoted mental and physical health and reduced mortality and morbidity in urban residents by providing psychological relaxation and stress alleviation, stimulating social cohesion, supporting physical activity and reducing exposure to air pollutants, noise and excessive heat. The report also suggests the use of a proximity-based indicator of accessibility of green spaces with examples of its applications in a number of European cities and a detailed analysis tool for this purpose. Consideration should be given to the adoption of the indicator and tool kit in the context of the NPF.

The development of a green infrastructure should also be helpful in addressing some of the gradients referred to earlier. There is increasing evidence showing that green space may be “equigenic”²² i.e. that the health benefits linked with access to green spaces may be strongest among the lowest socioeconomic groups, including minority ethnic groups. The quality of urban green space and its proper maintenance may also be important factors in encouraging older people to be active²³, a particularly important concern given the decline in physical activity with age and the “greying” of our population.

Sport Ireland has worked hard over the years with a range of stakeholders to deliver opportunities to increase participation in sport and recreational physical activity in the outdoors including the development of a sustainable national trails infrastructure. The national network of trails is an important natural resource which provides many individuals with the opportunity to be physically active as well as garnering the mental health benefits associated with being in the great outdoors. Sport Ireland believes that the development of a sustainable and comprehensive national trails infrastructure should be part of our long-term planning efforts in order to enhance the delivery of greater opportunities for participation in sport and recreational physical activities in the outdoors.

In considering how the wider natural and built environment help make being active in sport and physical activity the easy choice, the NPF needs to take into account the type of activities to which adults are increasingly gravitating towards such as running, cycling, outdoor adventure pursuits (land and water-based), and recreational walking.

Amplify the features of the Built Environment that would encourage an “active society”

²¹ http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/321971/Urban-green-spaces-and-health-review-evidence.pdf?ua=1

²² http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_451168_en.pdf

²³ <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1068/b36024>

There is quite a large body of evidence particularly from international sources around the features of the built environment which help to promote more physical activity throughout the population. Public Health England pointed to these features in its “Everybody Active Every Day – the Evidence”²⁴ document such as location, density and mix of land use, street layout and connectivity, physical access to public services, safety and security, open and green spaces, air quality and noise, accessibility of sport and community facilities, and transport. Long term planning in the NPF which seeks to facilitate an “active society” should take on board the insights gathered from this accumulated evidence-base.

Consider children and young people

The NPF needs to make more explicit reference to how it proposes to advance the health, well-being and quality of life of children and young people. Given that it is intended to be a 20 year planning document it seems remiss that there are only two explicit references to children and young people within the current “Issues and Choices” document, and one of those is only to cite the fact that one in four children in Ireland is either overweight or obese.

However, it does raise (in Section 3) a key question directed at our youngest generations, namely “Are we prepared to make changes now so that ‘a healthier places’ legacy can be handed over to the next generation of Ireland’s citizens?” The answer clearly must be a resounding YES.

If we are to do that we must begin by investing in our youngest children to ensure that they are given the necessary skills to enable them to be physically active across the life course. In the context of the NPF there are important roles for schools and public places / spaces in this regard. Our schools are essential in helping our children acquire the necessary skills (“physical literacy”²⁵ as part of the PE curriculum to underpin their participation in physical activity over the life course. While part of the recipe for ensuring success here rests on the development of a sufficient number of competent and confident PE teachers, there is also a need to significantly improve the stock and quality of facilities available to schools for this purpose. Sport Ireland research²⁶ has previously found that significant numbers of primary and post-primary schools did not have access to a multi-purpose hall either on-site or off-site. This varying availability of such school facilities exacerbates the social gradients around being active which represent a considerable challenge to developing an “active society”. While middle-class schools might be able to alleviate

²⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/366113/Evidence_layout_23_Oct.pdf

²⁵ ...the development of fundamental movement skills and fundamental sport skills that permits a child to move confidently and with control, in a wide range of physical activity, rhythmic (dance) and sport situations. Physical literacy also includes the ability to “read” what is going on around them in an activity setting and react appropriately to those events” (Canadian Sport for Life Framework).

²⁶ https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/CCLSP_Study_Report1.pdf

their facility distress somewhat through fund raising or voluntary contributions, this particular option is unlikely to be available to schools in disadvantaged areas. If we are to be serious about developing a more physically active population attending to such basic deficits is a minimum requirement.

Outside of the school it is also important that there are sufficient public play facilities available to provide quality play opportunities for children thereby improving their health and quality of life as was recommended in “Ready! Steady! Play! A National Play Policy”²⁷

Recognise Ireland’s Changing Population Profile

Ireland 2040 acknowledges that Ireland faces into a future of a significantly ageing and probably more ethnically and culturally diverse population with even greater regional variations than currently exist²⁸. It highlights that population ageing will continue to be one of the significant trends of the 21st Century. Given the current situation where activity levels decline with age and among ethnic minorities, this will have important implications for any planning efforts aimed at encouraging a more active population as is the case with the NPF. Planning efforts will need to be tailored and customised to optimise the chances of encouraging traditionally “low active” groups to increase their levels of physical activity.

Include Local Sports Partnerships in Local Planning Process

The LSPs were established as a clear policy mechanism to engage with the ‘hard-to-reach’ groups who face barriers in terms of their participation in sport and physical activity. The evidence suggests that, even with their limited resources, the LSPs have been quite successful in creating opportunities in sport and physical activity for many people who would not otherwise enjoy the benefits of being physically active. They are already well established within local government structures; operate within a strong cross-sectoral partnership ethos essential in any efforts to increase participation; have established relationships with a broad range of community-based stakeholders which can be built on with the necessary resources in place; and they have plenty of experience of what works (and as important what doesn’t) in their efforts to increase participation in sport among the hard-to-reach groups. In the context of the document’s commitment to the creation of more sustainable communities actively involved in shaping their own environment, we believe that the LSPs are well-positioned to be at the heart of any efforts to increase participation in sport and physical activity under the new policy framework. Strengthening their roles by formally designating them as having a role in the local planning processes would help to achieve that aim.

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https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/NCOPPlayPolicy_eng.pdf

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<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/rpp/regionalpopulationprojections2016-2031/>

