Planning for Sports & Recreational Facilities

Elected Members Training Webinar – 23 October 2026

Q&A Sheet

Sport Ireland

Benny Cullen, Director of Research & Innovation

Question	Response
How does Sport Ireland promote more water sports participation in Ireland (not just indoor swimming) such as rowing, sailing and other water-based activities? **How can Government/local authorities assist?**	Sport Ireland, as the development agency for sport, sits at the centre of a wider ecosystem that includes over 60 autonomous National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of Sport and other funded bodies, and 29 Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs). The NGBs and LSPs are the delivery agents of sport in communities across Ireland, leading programmes from grassroots to high performance. The Government, through Sport Ireland invests in the NGBs of Sport to develop these kinds of activities (https://www.sportireland.ie/national-governing-bodies). Sport Ireland also invests in a network of LSPs (https://www.sportireland.ie/participation/local-sports-partnerships) that develop these kinds of

	activities. Demand and provision for these activities will be built into our planning tools in the future.
Gender demographics have to be examined as girls and teenage girls drop out of sports at an alarming rate. **Simply funding more sports infrastructure/ facilities without addressing this issue will have a minimal impact on participation.** **What is Sport Ireland doing to address this?**	Since 2005 the Women in Sport Programme has allocated more than €32m to NGBs of sport, as well as supporting LSPs in their delivery of initiatives targeting women and girls. NGBs and LSPs develop innovative programmes which target the four key pillars outlined in the Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport. The four pillars are: • Active Participation • Leadership & Governance • Coaching & Officiating • Visibility Sport Ireland specifically addresses drop out of sport by teenage girls through the *Her Moves* programme (www.hermoves.ie).
If the future of sports is in urban areas, should we not be thinking of increasing the number of public indoor sports centres?	The planning tools being developed will help understand the demand for and provision of swimming pools and in time with continued resourcing will help to understand provision and demand for sports halls too.

There is need for more public swimming pools, indoor sports such as basketball, volleyball, handball, public gyms. **They occupy less space than soccer/rugby/GAA pitches and attract a wider public. They are also used better throughout all the year. We should look at the example of other European cities.**	
In relation to the 5-15 age bracket and no specific data, who tracks other sports like, Irish dancing and other dance styles, skate parks, etc. **Or will these sports feed into the overall Sport Ireland recognition?**	Sport Ireland tracks participation in all forms of recreational physical activity in 16+ year olds through the Irish Sports Monitor and 10–18-year-olds through the Children's Sports Participation and Physical Activity Study. Activities include dance and skateboarding. Governing bodies of sport must meet the Sport Ireland recognition criteria to apply for funding (https://www.sportireland.ie/national-governing-bodies/ngb-recognition-process).
Are there any thoughts on how the funding and management model should be structured if there is a move to more	Sport Ireland's current statutory function is limited to consultation on County Development Plans and Regional Spatial Economic Strategies. Capital investment in Sport is managed directly by the

community facilities as opposed to clubs/ schools for new facilities?	Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. Management structures are structured at a local level by facility owners.
The relevance of Census Data is meant to guide Government policy to plan for changes in populations. **Is this rich source of data worth anything?**	Yes, Sport Ireland models are built on Census and CSO data.
If 50/60,000 houses are being built annually for the next 5 years - how do we ensure sport amenities are developed in parallel with this if it takes years to plan and develop sport facilities?	Sport Ireland's facility planning tools aim to help address this issue by providing an evidence base for the zoning of lands and resources to sports facilities.
What does Sport Ireland intend on trying to ensure the design is most efficient when facilities are being developed?	Sport Ireland is currently using its resources to support improved planning of sports facilities, which may where appropriate support the development of multi-sport facilities and hubs.

Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) *John Keating, Senior Planner of Planning Research & Communications*	
Question	Response
Given spatial pressures to provide facilities in tandem with housing within existing built-up areas, will the OPR advice note deal with potential for intensification of existing land hungry sports facilities, that typically have a lower patronage? **Facilities that occupy a large land bank may be better suited outside the urban area and be redeveloped to provide multiple higher intensity sports facilities / pitches / running tracks etc in tandem with the delivery of housing.**	The OPR is currently finalising a Scoping Paper, in conjunction with Sport Ireland, on Sport and Recreation Amenity Planning, which it is envisaged will help inform policy development by relevant Government departments. The paper identifies strong opportunities for better alignment between current sports planning practices and the land use planning functions of local authorities. With the input now of Sport Ireland, who are actively building a national evidence base to inform sports facility planning, a more evidence-based approach to land use planning for sports facilities, should help to better inform the types of facilities needed and where they should be located to best serve the needs of growing and emerging communities.

Are there any good international examples of evidenced based sports infrastructure provision?	Sport Ireland, in their presentation, referenced work being undertaken by Sport England, which may be useful to look at regarding their Facilities Planning Model (https://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport/facilities-planning-model). In addition, London Sport has undertaken significant work with Planning for London's Active Future (https://londonsport.org/focus-area/planning-for-londons-active-future/).

Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) *Dr Peter Horgan, Strategy, Insights & Innovation Manager*	
Question	Response
Is the Department of Education engaged re dual school sports facilities? **Do we have any best practice examples in this regard?**	We haven't engaged directly with the Department of Education on this issue to date, although we have had discussions with representative bodies within the education sector about the potential for greater community use of school sporting facilities. The greater use of school sporting facilities is an important element of the approach we are advocating. As we are aware, schools represent a very substantial investment in community infrastructure, and there is an opportunity to maximise the sporting and social return on that investment by facilitating access outside school hours – as indeed, many schools access GAA facilities during school/term time. There has already been some movement on this. In 2024, the Department of Education encouraged greater community access to school buildings and sporting facilities. Importantly, income generated through community use does not reduce a school's ordinary Department funding.

	We are conscious, however, that this is not simply a matter of asking schools to open their gates. Questions around insurance, maintenance, supervision, safeguarding, access and additional operating costs all need to be addressed. There are good examples of shared-use arrangements. What we would like to see is a more systematic approach, particularly where new schools are being developed in areas experiencing substantial population growth. Our view is that schools, local authorities and sporting organisations should be involved at the planning stage, rather than trying to retrofit community access arrangements after facilities have been constructed. The Department's procedures provide a policy basis for this approach, although school patrons and management authorities retain important approval and operational responsibilities. There are some examples locally of schools and sporting organisations sharing facilities. The Leinster Leader reported on one such proposal in Naas: https://www.leinsterleader.ie/news/naas/schools-eu124m-sports-project-plan-7131511

	Equally, I've had some discussions with Carrigtwohill GAA club in Cork and their sharing of facilities with the local primary and post primary schools. So, what we're advocating is a collaboration between educational institutions and sporting organisations towards providing facilities that suit the school and community need.
I note that Dr Horgan identified the unlocking of schools' sporting facilities as a means of addressing the sporting needs of the GAA. **How will this be achieved?**	I think the important distinction is between having a policy that encourages community access and having the practical arrangements that make such access possible. The first already exists to a considerable extent. The Department of Education's guidance supports community use of school facilities. The challenge is translating that policy into consistent, workable arrangements on the ground. I would see this happening through three complementary approaches. Firstly, we need to identify where school sporting facilities have spare capacity and where there is unmet demand from clubs and local communities. Our demographic and facilities analysis (and that of Sport Ireland as mentioned by Benny Cullen on the webinar) can help establish where these opportunities exist.

	Secondly, we need practical agreements between schools, sporting organisations and, where appropriate, local authorities. These should address access, operating costs, insurance, maintenance, and security. Thirdly, for newly planned schools, we should look at community use from the outset. That means considering pitch dimensions, lighting, separate access arrangements and the potential for municipal or multi-sport management. Ultimately, the objective should be to make shared use straightforward for schools, rather than leaving individual principals and boards of management to resolve all the practical and financial difficulties themselves.
Is there any interface between sports provision and biodiversity e.g. brent geese re grass versus artificial?	Absolutely, and this is an increasingly important consideration in how we plan, develop, and manage sporting facilities. The GAA has already been doing considerable work in this area through our Green Club Programme, led by Jimmy Darcy, which supports clubs in adopting more environmentally sustainable practices, including biodiversity protection, energy efficiency, water conservation and sustainable travel.

	There are important relationships between sporting infrastructure and biodiversity. As outlined in the question, natural grass playing fields can provide valuable habitats and feeding areas for wildlife, including protected species such as Brent geese, particularly in parts of Dublin. At the same time, we recognise that artificial playing surfaces and floodlighting can substantially increase the capacity of existing facilities, particularly in urban areas where access to additional land is limited. The challenge is to balance these sometimes-competing objectives. There is no single solution that will be appropriate everywhere, and decisions need to be informed by local environmental conditions, ecological assessments, and sporting demand. There is already substantial collaboration with local authorities on the Green Club Programme. If you wish to be put in touch with Jimmy, please let me know.
School facilities rarely have a requirement for lights however the majority of clubs require lighting for evening training.	This is a very reasonable concern, and we certainly wouldn't expect schools to bear the additional capital and operating costs associated with

How can schools be expected to fund the cost of lights that they have no use for? **How can that be supported?**	facilities that are primarily required for community sporting use. The recent announcement of the 2026 Community Sport Facilities Fund provides a welcome opportunity to address some of these challenges. The revised fund specifically encourages greater collaboration between schools and sporting organisations, recognising the potential to maximise the use of existing infrastructure. Importantly, the fund supports improvements such as floodlighting, artificial playing surfaces and other sporting infrastructure. There is also the introduction of a new funding tier for larger, shared facilities, which creates further opportunities for collaboration between sporting bodies and local authorities. We see considerable potential for schools, clubs, and local authorities to work together to identify facilities that could accommodate additional community sporting activity, with the associated capital costs supported through appropriate funding partnerships. This is particularly relevant in areas experiencing significant population growth, where access to

	land for new sporting facilities is increasingly constrained. Ultimately, we should be looking at how public investment in educational and sporting infrastructure can deliver the greatest possible benefit for local communities, particularly where the demand for facilities is greatest.
Many municipal pitches are very substandard for Gaelic games, particularly in terms of size and lack of ball catcher nets. Many pitches designated for Gaelic games are only fit for U12s due to their limited size. **Is the GAA working with local authorities to upgrade existing pitches for use by all ages?** **Existing pitches are all that can be provided in dense urban areas and they must be improved for increased usage, through synthetic surfacing, floodlighting and upgrade to minimum dimensions.**	I think this question identifies one of the most significant opportunities for improvement, particularly in larger urban areas. One of the messages we have been emphasising through the demographics work is that we must make better use of the sporting infrastructure that already exists. In many urban communities, securing sufficient land for entirely new pitches is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive. That means upgrading existing facilities may offer the most realistic and immediate opportunity to increase sporting capacity. However, we need to distinguish between a pitch being designated for Gaelic games and its actual suitability for Gaelic games.

	As the question rightly identifies, we know that some municipal pitches have dimensions that limit their use to younger age groups, while others lack appropriate ball-stop netting, floodlighting, drainage, or ancillary facilities. This suggests that there is an opportunity for the GAA and local authorities to undertake a more systematic assessment of existing municipal pitches, identifying their actual capacity, suitability for different age groups, and potential for improvement. Some facilities may be capable of being upgraded to accommodate adult games. Others may be better suited to juvenile games or training. And some sites may have physical limitations that cannot reasonably be overcome. We also know that clubs tend to be quite resilient and understanding that some facilities are applicable for some age groups/cohorts. In practice, this often means that Go Games (at 9 or 10 for example) will take place on one pitch, while older teenage or adult training or games takes place in other facilities. This can prove difficult for clubs (or parents ferrying children between different facilities, but it is nonetheless the reality for many clubs in urban areas).

	I think that the GAA would very much welcome opportunities to work with councils on identifying where relatively targeted investments could unlock substantially more sporting capacity.

Kildare County Council (KCC) *David Jordan, Senior Executive Planner of Forward Planning, Heritage and Nature*	
Question	Response
Is participation factored into strategic planning when carrying out audits of existing facilities?	The issue of rural GAA and soccer clubs being unable to field teams has not emerged as a significant concern in Kildare. This is likely reflective of the county's location within the Greater Dublin Area: part of Kildare lies within the Metropolitan Area, while most of the county falls within the area described by the Regional, Spatial and Economic Strategy as the 'Core Area'. Indeed, due to Kildare's proximity to substantial development pressures emanating from the Dublin Region, the vast majority of the county has been designated in the County Development Plan as being under 'Strong Urban Influence'. Overall, the level of population of the county grew strongly over the last intercensal period between 2016 and 2022. While growth was particularly pronounced in many of the main urban centres, it was widespread, with 79 of Kildare's 89 Electoral Divisions recording population growth.

	Regarding participation trends, our experience of undertaking Social Infrastructure Audits (SIAs) in Kildare indicates that most sports facilities in settlements across the county are under pressure, with a chronic shortage of playing pitches in particular. While increased female participation may be contributing to demand, in Kildare this is likely to reflect a combination of factors, including rapid population growth in settlements and the county's young demographic profile (the second youngest county in Ireland in Census 2022). Whilst it is agreed that participation is a very important factor in determining open space needs, the purpose of the SIA is to establish a clear, evidence-based assessment of a settlement's requirements at a strategic level across the open space hierarchy, rather than prescribe the precise number / type of sports pitches required. In this regard, the SIA is intended to inform the wider preparation of the settlement plan, where those requirements can then be translated into the identification of more specific needs through engagement with key stakeholders, including the KCC Parks and Open Space section and Kildare Sports Partnership.

Did Kildare County Council buy the Sallins lands in 2016 and did that cost come from their capital budget?	The purchase of the Sallins Amenity Lands in 2016 was funded under the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF).
Is there an interface between sports provision and biodiversity e.g. brent geese re grass versus artificial?	KCC SIAs or Settlement Plans don't go into specific detail about requirements for grass or artificial pitches unless it's referencing a facility that has extant permission (i.e. a Part 8 scheme). While it is noted that proposed astro turf facilities may have environmental implications, particularly within or adjacent to European sites, potential concerns are dealt with by the KCC development management section either as part of the pre-planning process or on foot of any planning application received. There can be instances of conflict between the delivery of appropriate sports infrastructure and the protection of green and blue infrastructure (GBI) networks. Our settlement plans seek to deal with this by incorporating green and blue infrastructure maps (based on habitat assessments) identifying such GBI and by providing supporting objectives to protect such features. On the general issue of biodiversity protection within sports facilities, Kildare is currently experiencing significant pressures on biodiversity /

	habitats in and around a number of sports grounds across the county. These pressures arise primarily from improvement / expansion works (in many cases from grant aid), with the potential for unintended habitat loss or degradation. In response to this the Nature and Heritage Unit, within the Forward Planning Section, is rolling out a workshop for local sports clubs. The purpose of the workshop is to give clubs clear, practical guidance on the types of works that require planning permission and, importantly, to promote best practice in protecting, enhancing and integrating biodiversity as facilities are maintained, improved or expanded.
I notice a number of Large-scale Residential Developments (LRDs) are omitting community facilities from their developments. They cite housing crisis as the primary issue and forget that developing communities need more than just housing. **How can Planning officers force them into delivering the adequate community facilities?**	The provision of appropriate levels of social infrastructure within new development schemes is an issue that KCC has been seeking to prioritise over the past number of years. Whilst the housing crisis is real and acute in the county, it is considered that in 30 years' time the residents may not remember the chronic nature of this issue, but they will be very aware of the provision of social infrastructure (or indeed, lack thereof) and how it affects their community's wellbeing. Therefore, we take the position in Kildare that our role is to plan for the long-term development of

Some developments have a tokenistic approach providing bare minimum community facilities - not really functional or practical for communities. **What is a more effective approach for demanding that residential and community development be delivered in tandem?**	sustainable communities which is about more than the delivery of housing as important as this may be. To this end, we have sought over the past several years to underpin our local area plans / settlement plans with evidence-based data such as the SIA, which identifies overarching existing and future requirements. This is supported in the plans by site-specific objectives. Large-scale new residential zoned lands are also generally accompanied by respective design briefs and urban design framework diagrams which identify specific social infrastructure requirements (past examples include open space provision, greenways, local parks, multi-use games areas, community buildings, playgrounds, and childcare facilities). These requirements are also set out in the Implementation and Infrastructure Delivery Schedule of the plan. This approach, which combines evidence-led assessment with site-specific, urban design-led requirements, also seeks to ensure that the quantum of social infrastructure required has regard to the overall size of the land bank in question. It is an approach that is currently

	working in Kildare and is being successfully implemented in towns across the county.