The nature of sport delivery structures: 
Conceptual evidence from home and abroad

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26 March 2013
## Contents

Introduction and context ............................................................................................................. 1

Elite sport ................................................................................................................................... 1

A comparative approach ........................................................................................................ 2

There is strong coordination of all agencies involved in elite sport, with clear task descriptions and no overlap of different tasks ................................................................. 2

There is evidence of long-term planning for elite sport development with the commitment of subsidies for elite sport and professional elite sport development. ........................................ 2

Athletes, coaches and other important key stakeholders are involved in elite sport policy development. .......................................................................................................................... 5

A full-time management staff member in the NSA is responsible for the elite sport development process. ...................................................................................................................... 6

There is an effective communication and punctual decision making structure through all levels of sport agencies; there is an unbroken line-up in communication and information services. ............................................................. 6

Grass roots sport ......................................................................................................................... 7

Summary of the key points ........................................................................................................... 9
Introduction and context
In many nations the promotion and development of sport at grass roots and elite levels is seen as a legitimate area for government intervention. At grass roots level sport is an area in which governments can support an activity that is intrinsically worthwhile, whilst at the same time delivering ‘positive externalities’. These positive externalities include health benefits, increased productivity in the workplace, reduced crime and anti-social behaviour, and increased social capital, amongst other outcomes. In elite sport the immediate output is athletes capable of achieving sporting success at the highest levels as well as externalities such as a sense of national pride and the creation of role models who in turn inspire participation at grass roots level. As a result of sport’s potential to deliver positive outcomes across a number of different agendas simultaneously, the key question for governments seeking to harness the benefits of sport is "what is the optimum structure to achieve the benefits we desire?" We address this question throughout the paper drawing on experience from within the UK and beyond.

Elite sport
An international consortium called SPLISS (Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success) identified nine key sport policy factors to conceptualise the question:

"How should elite sport policies function so that elite athletes can train and perform in optimal circumstances at each stage of their careers, with access to good facilities, surrounded by high quality coaches and medical support?" (De Bosscher et al., 2008, p.23)

In order to make an assessment of the 'elite sports climate' in Northern Ireland, data around the nine SPLISS factors was collected in 2011-2012 to assess the relative position of NI's elite sport policy according to the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in the SPLISS model. The nine 'pillars' are presented below and have been used to compare the elite sport systems across nations.

1. Financial support
2. Integrated approach to policy development
3. Participation in sport
4. Talent identification and development system
5. Athletic and post career support
6. Training facilities
7. Coaching provision and coach development
8. (Inter)national competition
9. Scientific research

This paper concentrates on the findings associated with Pillar 2 in order to benchmark Northern Ireland's sports policy and delivery structures against up to 15 other nations in the SPLISS project. In so doing we compare NI's performance relative to the Critical Success Factors for sporting success and identify areas in which it performs well relative to competing nations. The CSFs for Pillar 2 can be summarised as follows:
I. There is strong coordination of all agencies involved in elite sport, with clear task descriptions and no overlap of different tasks.

II. There is evidence of long-term planning for elite sport development with the commitment of subsidies for elite sport and professional elite sport development.

III. Athletes, coaches and other important key stakeholders are involved in elite sport policy development.

IV. A full-time management staff member in the National Sports Association (Sport NI or equivalent) is responsible for the elite sport development process.

V. Effective communication: there is an unbroken line up through all levels of sport agencies.

VI. There is a structured cooperation and communication strategy with other countries, commercial partners and the media.

A comparative approach

The scores from the SPLISS analysis have been used to compare Northern Ireland’s performance against other nations relative to the CSFs. Bespoke algorithms measure the extent to which nations meet each CSF.

There is strong coordination of all agencies involved in elite sport, with clear task descriptions and no overlap of different tasks

Compared with the other nations in the study, Northern Ireland is placed at the top of the distribution, (see CSF 2.2 below) in relation to the national coordination of financial inputs (sports funding) and activities regionally. There are two drivers of this high score. First, Northern Ireland is a relatively small country and consequently there is no confusion or duplication of responsibilities at lower levels of control than national level such as at local authority level. Second, is the key administrative role played by Sport NI in co-ordinating sport, in what is a complex elite sport structure in the UK and the island of Ireland.

CSF 2.2. There is national coordination of activities and financial inputs at the regional level (vertical)

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Globally the current vogue is to shift sport policy away from government because the planning horizons for success in elite sport do not necessarily sit well alongside the planning horizons available to governments; this point is developed below.

There is evidence of long-term planning for elite sport development with the commitment of subsidies for elite sport and professional elite sport development.

It is particularly important that long-term policy plans (4-8 years) are developed for elite sport and communicated in public, regularly evaluated and supported financially. The system in Northern Ireland is rated at the top of the distribution for this CSF compared with the other SPLISS nations as there are clearly articulated planning horizons in place in NI. In other words the current system in NI for this CSF is seen as being world class and superior to the systems used in successful sporting nations such as Australia, France and Korea.
The fact that these planning horizons are managed by a non-departmental public body (Sport NI) is a particular strength in that an 'arm's length' agency will be less affected by a change in government where priorities might change with changes in political persuasion. This structural approach is seen globally as being more desirable for elite sport than if the system was being administered solely by a department within government. For example, planning horizons at 'Podium level' may last anything up to four years, at 'Development level' some eight years and at 'Potential level' up to 12 years; none of which necessarily fit conveniently with the typical lifespan of central and devolved governments.

**CSF 2.4.** Long-term policy plans are developed (at least on a 4-8 year period) specifically for elite sport and are communicated in public, regularly evaluated and supported with financial resourcing.

An arm's length agency such as Sport NI has specific-sector expertise to call upon beyond that which might be expected of ministers or civil servants. Consequently an agency with these specialist skills is better equipped to respond quickly and meaningfully to the changes in the dynamic environment of global sport.

The approach to elite sport development in NI, incorporating a non-departmental public body (Sport NI), is a structure adopted across the UK Home Nations (See Figure 1a). Beyond the UK, a broadly similar system is apparent in the case of both Japan and Singapore. Moreover, Figure 1b illustrates that arm's length bodies also operate in other countries.

In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), Bloso acts as the link between government and the other organisations involved in elite (and grass roots) sport, whereas in Italy this role is performed by the National Olympic Committee (NOC). In the Netherlands, the responsibility for elite sport is funnelled through the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) as well as the NOC / National Sport Federation (NSF) which all serve as arm's length agencies.

The Chinese system is broadly in line with the Netherlands. Collectively, the existence of arm's length agencies is an increasingly common aspect of elite sport development models both in the UK and internationally.

By contrast, Poland is an example of a nation that does not have an arm's length body and its model is described as being “interventionist, centralised and bureaucratic”.1 It is perhaps no coincidence that Poland’s performance in recent Summer Olympic Games has declined consistently since 1992, particularly in terms of the relative quality of the medals won, but also, to a lesser extent, the total medal count, as shown in Figure 2.

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Figure 1a: The sport structure in the UK including Northern Ireland

Figure 1b: Exemplar elite sport structures from around the world
According to athletes and coaches, the elite sport system is evaluated on a regular basis using consultation with key stakeholders (athletes, coaches and Performance Directors) prior to and post policy decisions being made. Sport NI is central to this process which highlights the proximity that Sport NI requires with those likely to be most affected by the policy decisions it is involved in making.

The feedback derived through SPLISS suggests that the current system in NI is proficient in, and recognises the significance of, consultations with sports specialists and participants in shaping elite sport policy. Indeed, according to feedback from elite performers and their support teams, the system in Northern Ireland features towards the top of the distribution in relation to the notion that athletes and coaches are regularly consulted about their specific needs. Of all the CSFs in Pillar 2, this consultation CSF is the most highly correlated with sporting success. Sport NI's ability and willingness to consult regularly on the policy decisions it makes is key to being able to respond in a timely manner in the fast changing world of elite sport. It is unlikely that a government department would have the experience and knowledge of elite sport systems globally to even ask the right questions.

**CSF 2.9(b). Policy of the NSA is regularly evaluated with athletes, coaches, performance directors who are formally invited to be involved in the evaluation process PRIOR and AFTER the policy takes place**

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**CSF 2.11(b). Athletes and coaches are regularly consulted about their specific needs**

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A full-time management staff member in the NSA is responsible for the elite sport development process.

The Northern Ireland system performs well against the CSF: full-time management staff in the NSA are responsible for the specific purpose of the development and support of elite coaches, elite athletes and other areas such as sport science, marketing and communication, which is another particularly important indicator of success. Northern Ireland is ranked towards the top of the distribution on this CSF.

It is also moderately important that governing bodies receive information and support on different aspects of elite sports development (beyond financial support) from the agency responsible for elite sport. This, allied with the previous point, confirms that the elite sport system in Northern Ireland, recognises the importance of being outward looking in order to take on board the best of elite sport practices globally. Specialists in place doing a specialist job in a fast changing and globally competitive environment is not normally a role for, or strength of, government departments.

An elite sport system which has the resources and inclination to be outward looking and capable of learning from global best practice makes perfect sense considering that elite sport by its very nature involves striving to become the best in the world not just the best in Northern Ireland. Elite sport is a competitive, fast changing business where the 'bar' is constantly being raised as athletes, teams and support networks strive for continuous improvement. The people who are most likely to survive in such a cut throat environment are those with recent experience at the 'sharp end' of elite sport delivery; notably Performance Directors and elite coaches for whom there exists a global market for talent. Such experienced personnel are vital to the success of any elite sport system and because of the global market in which they operate they are not easily and effectively replaced without significant expenditure. The processes involved in recruitment and the associated costs do not sit well in government departments in which the process is often perceived to be of comparable value to the product. This contrasts starkly with elite sport systems where effectiveness is judged solely by the product, that is, sporting outcomes.

There is an effective communication and punctual decision making structure through all levels of sport agencies; there is an unbroken line-up in communication and information services.

Northern Ireland performs well relative to two moderately important factors for international success which include: there is a board within the national sport organisation that is composed of professionals who make decisions on elite sport, with small management committees so that quick decisions can be made, and athletes and coaches are well informed about national policies, support services and other aspects of the system. For these two factors NI is towards the top of the distribution of the SPLISS nations.
The nature of sport delivery structures: Conceptual evidence from home and abroad

**CSF 2.15.** There is a board within the NSA that is composed of professionals who make decisions on elite sport, with relatively small management committees so that quick decisions can be made

Once again these two findings emphasise how important Sport NI is to the dissemination of information in order to respond quickly to the ever changing elite sports environment. The specialists who work within Sport NI have experience at the sporting 'coal face' and are better equipped than a government department to respond to change as required. This is particularly the case for an 'arm's length' agency outside government as it is less likely to be subject to the same degree of bureaucratic processes.

**Grass roots sport**

The sport system in NI is not solely concerned with elite sport. In the UK we are unique in that each of the four home nation sport councils are formally recognised as distributors of National Lottery funding at grass roots, as well as at elite sport level. The Lottery is arguably now the major funder of sport at national level.

In most nations that use Lotteries to fund sport and other cultural activities there is a distinct arm’s length relationship between those who generate the funds (Lottery companies), those who decide policy on how such funds should be used (governments), and those who make the decisions as to which specific projects or causes should receive funding (distributors, such as Sport NI). The closer the distribution of Lottery funding gets to government the greater the potential for the allocation of Lottery funding to be a substitute for, rather than additional to, Exchequer funding. In other words the lines around the distribution of the two types of funding could become blurred and governments subject themselves to the potential accusations of taking expenditure for sport ‘off balance sheet’ and funding ‘pet’ projects.

In future, if sport’s governance was to be brought closer to government there is the risk that Lottery funding could be subject to a degree of political influence that would be viewed as being undesirable. Currently, there is legislation in place that prevents governments across the UK from being lottery distributors for precisely this reason.

Whilst the full-time staff at Sport NI (and Sports Institute NI) perform a SPLISS recommended function in developing and supporting elite athletes and coaches; the agency takes a more holistic view to sport and recognises the significance of working to develop sport at grass roots level; i.e. it has a remit to grow the talent pool by increasing and encouraging participation. In order to do so, Sport NI conducts sport development work through governing bodies for sport. These bodies have a benign monopoly over their own sports which is a potentially uncomfortable situation for governments should they fund these monopolies directly.
To keep monopolies on top of their game and to prevent them from becoming complacent there needs to be systems of sanction and reward. This has been well demonstrated at UK level following London 2012 and the agreement of funding for the 2016 Rio cycle. Sports that performed well have been rewarded (e.g. cycling and rowing) whereas those which have under achieved have had their funding reduced. In terms of grass roots funding, Sport England has rewarded those sports which have increased participation (athletics and cycling) and punished those where participation has fallen (swimming). This type of decision making is difficult at the best of times but is best done through an arm's length body to prevent the accusation of government interference. It is for these types of circumstances that many governments choose not to deal directly with monopolies such as governing bodies.

Northern Ireland faces a unique sporting challenge in its recognition of and support for ‘culturally significant’ sports. Interest for some of these sports is a function of political and religious divides. There is a strong incentive for governments to maintain an objective stance on culturally significant sports by keeping decisions about revenue and capital expenditure as well as operating policies and governance at arm’s length.

Stimulating sport participation at grass roots level is about increasing the demand for sport in what is an increasingly competitive market for leisure time and the leisure pound. There are five determinants of demand, namely: the price of participation; people’s income levels; the price and availability of substitutes; consumers’ tastes and preferences; and, supply.

In practice an increase in demand necessitates agencies trying to alter people’s tastes and preferences to value sport more than they value the other activities they currently engage in. In effect, successful sports development requires competing head on with the private sector for people’s time and money. This is best achieved via sports specialists rather than the generalists within government departments for two key reasons.

First, sport specialists will be closer to the consumer and more innovative and responsive to their needs than governments. Second, the private sector will not react kindly to what it perceives as being government interference in the market (unfair subsidies and other favourable treatment of chosen bodies). Sports bodies such as Sport NI and the bodies it funds need to be: outward looking; speedy in their decision making; nimble and able to change direction quickly in order to respond positively to market trends.

An ‘arm’s length’ agency (such as Sport NI) is likely to be able to harness new approaches to delivery by examining trends and using innovation and creativity (such as social media platforms) which a government department is less likely to be able to achieve in a timely manner. There will also be failures as an integral part of the creativity process. It is always better for governments that any failures occur at arm’s length and do not cause a direct embarrassment to central government.
Summary of the key points

This paper has considered the nature of sport delivery structures in order to place the approach adopted in Northern Ireland in context. SPLISS Pillar 2 has been used to gauge Northern Ireland's delivery system against other nations in relation to CSFs and we have used our own knowledge of mass participation systems to develop the analysis. The key points from both parts of this analysis are summarised below.

- Northern Ireland is the top performing nation in relation to national coordination of financial inputs (sports funding) and activities in the regions (CSF 2.2.) due to the key role played by the specialists at Sport NI in a relatively small country.
- Northern Ireland ranks top of all the SPLISS nations in relation to the clearly articulated long-term planning horizons for elite sport, which consistent with SPLISS best practice, are managed by an arm's length non-departmental public body.
- An arm's length body such as Sport NI has specific-sector expertise to call upon beyond that which might be expected of ministers or civil servants. These bodies are able to respond quickly and meaningfully to the fast changing elite sport environment.
- Northern Ireland is one of the top performing nations in relation to its athlete-centred approach to elite sport policy development, whereby it and other key stakeholders, are regularly consulted before and after policy decisions are made.
- The elite sport development system in Northern Ireland has specialist staff in key roles who are outward looking and strive to be the best by utilising current best practice from around the world.
- Northern Ireland is among the top three nations in relation to the specialists and professionals who are able to make timely decisions and who keep athletes and coaches continually updated.
- The approach to elite sport development in which SNI plays a major part would not necessarily fit well within a government department. Non-specialists and associated bureaucracy would make decision making cumbersome.
- Sport NI also has a responsibility to increase participation in sport and this is best achieved by changing consumers’ tastes and preferences. This is unlikely to be a role that government would want to fill or indeed could fulfil due to the non-specialist nature of its staff.
- It is not permitted by legislation in the UK for government departments to be directly involved in the distribution of Lottery funding which would otherwise blur the lines between this and Exchequer funding. Furthermore, sensitivities around policy and funding for 'culturally significant' sports in Northern Ireland are best dealt with by an arm's length body rather than by government directly.
- Creativity, innovation and occasional failure are day to day hazards of running sport development systems. To be the best in international sport and to win customers from other activities requires a degree of risk taking. These types of risks and challenges do not sit comfortably with governments and are best kept at arm's length.