

Women in Sport

Engagement and Delivery Plan: 2024-2026

This plan is to influence the sector to actively promote 'Women in Sport' over the course of two years to March 2026. The Engagement & Delivery Plan will be further developed by and led by the Sports, Culture & Integrity Team, and will be actioned by programmes and staff across the organisation.

Background – Strategic Context:

Sport NI's Corporate Plan 2021-26 'The Power of Sport' targets sustained participation in sport and activity generally, and specifically from under-represented groups, contributing to improving physical activity in communities.

While, prior to the pandemic, we were seeing improvements in terms of the percentage of people who were participating in sport and physical activity, (The NI Continuous Household Survey 2020-21 notes a 3% rise in overall sports participation numbers to 59%), barriers clearly still exist for many in our society. Challenges remain for people with a disability, women and girls, older people, carers, ethnically diverse communities and those from the LGBTQ+ community. Whilst we have seen an increase in the support for, and the profile of, women in sport and those with a disability, there is much still to do which we aim to address through this corporate plan. Consequently, the participation rates for these groups remain significantly below the general population rates for participation in sport and physical activity.

In terms of scale and its impact on society, it is fair to say that one particular demographic stands out. The under-representation of women and girls has long been recognised as one of the most significant problems within sport.

Current Context:

In Northern Ireland, Women's participation in sport is significantly lower than men. In 2021/22, The Continuous Household Survey recorded that 48% of adults had participated in sport at least once within the last year (excluding walking), while 40% had participated in sport over the last 4 weeks. Females were less likely to have taken part in sport at least once within the last year than males (40% and 55% respectively). Similarly, when looking at participation rates over the previous four weeks, just under over a third of females (34%) stated that they had taken part in sport compared to nearly half of all males (47%). Males (42%) were more likely to do 30 minutes of physical activity on five or more days per week than females (33%). Females (27%) were more likely to have no days of doing 30 minutes of physical activity than males (22%).

Girls are not meeting their physical activity guidelines. Fewer primary school girls (16%) participate in physical activity than boys (25%). Post-primary the gap widens to girls at 10% compared with boys (22%). A higher proportion of primary school boys (74%) than females (71%) reported participating in community sport at least once per week. Among post primary pupils, males (73%) were more likely to participate in sport outside of school than females (70%). A higher proportion of primary school boys (93%) than girls (91%) reported participating in school sport at least once per week. Among post primary pupils, males (82%) were more likely to participate in sport at school than females (72%).

The gap widens as children get older. In the Kids Life & Times Survey and Young People's Life & Times Surveys 2023, fewer than one in ten 16-year-olds and just under one in three P7 children met the goal of being physically active for at least 60 minutes each day. This represented no change since 2015 in respect of children and young people's level of activity overall. Female 16-year-olds remain the group with by far the lowest level of physical activity. Whilst at age 10/11, there is virtually no gender difference between females and males in that respect, at 16, young men are much more physically active than young women.

From the baselines established in April 2023 as part of the 'Sport Systems Investment – Governing Bodies', 32.9% of coaches are females, 43.2% of volunteers are females and 28.9% of officials are females. Research consistently identifies that the percentage representation of women within the coaching workforce reduces as the level of the pathway increases, and this is mirrored by higher levels of female drop-off within coach education as the levels of qualification progress.

For this plan to be effective, Sport NI will need to work closely with relevant external groups and communities, as well as internally across teams and investment strands, to identify potential solutions. The plan is intended to support the wider sports sector to understand and recognise the issues and collectively bring about change.

Action Plan Pillar	Action Plan Objective	Action Plan Activity
Leadership	1. Women in Leadership Targets to deliver equitable representation for sports to achieve through current investment.	A. Establish a baseline for women in leadership roles.
		B. Determine reasonable targets and timeframes.
		C. Establish investment resources, partners and programmes required to deliver desired changes.
		D. Measure progress at appropriate intervals.
	2. Support towards female workforce development i.e. coaches, officials and volunteers to broaden the base.	A. Baseline levels in sporting workforce.
		B. Engage with sports to increase the awareness of imbalance.
		C. Ensure investment is focussed on creating opportunities for female development.
		D. Monitor impact highlighting strong progress amongst particular sports.
Visibility & Advocacy	3. Research that tracks trends re levels of participation, and underlying factors re women participation.	A. Map research ecosystem - Share insights and research on regular basis with Sport NI commentary.
		B. Engage with sector to understand their research/insight needs.
		C. Commission research that closes knowledge gaps.
		D. Monitor awareness of gender gap in sport.
	4. Campaign to increase the visibility of Women and Girls in sport and inspire Women and Girls to find their sport.	A. Establish network of partners for advocacy campaign.
		B. Develop visual and messaging assets and structure of campaign.
		C. Develop visual and messaging assets via multi-channel campaign.
		D. Measure the impact of campaign at the completion of each phase.

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Participation	5. Ring fenced investment for Women in Sport initiatives for new and additional innovative female programmes for clubs to promote and support.	A. Build and share understanding of barriers and motivators, and previous interventions.
		B. Engage with peers and partners to shape investment.
		C. Deliver ring fenced investment for women and girls in sport.
		D. Track impact, share best practice and innovations.
	6. Focus on sporting offerings including provision and club culture.	A. Build and share understanding of barriers and motivators.
		B. Provide toolkit to review provision and club culture and resources to enhance the female experience in sport.
		C. Collate info on interventions by sports/clubs - showcase best practice.
		D. Track club membership data.
Sporting Foundation	7. Investment in infrastructure to support greater female participation e.g. changing facilities.	A. Understand current infrastructure (Built, natural and equipment) across sport friction points for Women & Girls.
		B. Develop design principles that are reflective of female priorities.
		C. Require all Sport NI Capital investments to be cross referenced against progressive design principles and require fair and equitable access between men and women of any such facilities.
		D. Build and share understanding of how to make infrastructure more reflective of female needs.
	8. Partnership with Education and Sports to promote health and wellbeing alongside sport and physical activity in young girls especially teenagers.	A. Engage with Education and other stakeholders to build awareness of the gap and its impact into later life.
		B. Create coalition of partners.
		C. Deliver interventions via training, campaigns, investment initiatives.
		D. Track progress through regular research.