

# **System Partners Investment - Athlete Award Programme (2026–2027)**

## **Information & Guidance Document**

Applications must be submitted by the Governing Body to  
Sport NI

by 1pm Monday 30th March 2026

*The Athlete Award is open to athletes in Olympic/Paralympic  
and Commonwealth sports only.*

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## 1. Background

The **Athlete Award (AA) Programme** focuses on enabling Northern Ireland athletes to compete and succeed at the highest level. By providing targeted financial support for essential living and sporting costs, the AA programme helps athletes fully engage in training and competition and prepare for the demands of high-performance sport.

## 2. Athlete Award Programme

The Athlete Award programme provides targeted financial support at critical points in an athlete's performance pathway. It is designed to turn strategic ambition into tangible support for athletes with the potential to achieve success on the world stage:

- **Focused Investment in Sporting Potential** - Athletes identified as having the capability to compete at Olympic, Paralympic, and Commonwealth Games will receive targeted financial support to help them progress through high-performance pathways.
- **Removing Barriers to Performance** - Awards contribute to essential living and sporting costs, enabling athletes to dedicate time and energy to training, recovery, and competition preparation without the distraction of financial constraints. By reducing financial pressure and aligning resources with strategic priorities, the programme helps athletes focus on performing at their best when it counts.
- **Driving Strategic Outcomes** - Every award contributes to Sport NI's vision of "Our athletes among the best in the world", reinforcing Northern Ireland's presence on the global sporting stage.

The award is not intended as long-term funding but as a short-term intervention to help athletes progress at key stages of their sporting journey. It is not designed to cover training or competition costs for athletes whose sports already receive Programme funding. Sports not in receipt of Sport NI's System Partners Investment – National Governing Bodies programme may demonstrate need where an Athlete Award could contribute to essential costs.

Applicants must demonstrate:

- Significant commitment to high-performance sport
- Operating within a recognised performance pathway and have demonstrated the potential to compete at senior international level or have been recognised as having the potential to progress through the performance system.
- That their circumstances have changed/or need to change substantially to allow adequate preparation for competition or integration into a National High Performance Programme targeting success in major international events.

For the 2026–27 programme, awards will be allocated according to the following priority order:

1. Commonwealth Games 2026 – Athletes who can deliver medal-contending performances at the Commonwealth Games.
2. Olympic and Paralympic Pathway (Los Angeles 2028) – Athletes demonstrating clear progression towards Olympic or Paralympic qualification for 2028.
3. Long-Term Development (Commonwealth Games 2030, Youth Commonwealth Games 2027, Brisbane 2032 and beyond) – Subject to available budget and evidence of performance potential, athletes targeting these events may also be supported, particularly where results indicate readiness to transition onto National Programmes.

Three levels of financial support are available, allocated according to an athlete's position within the performance pathway:

1. £9,000 per annum
2. £5,000 per annum
3. Up to £2,500 per annum

A key measure of success for the Athlete Award programme will be the number of athletes progressing into National Programmes and onto funding streams such as Sport Ireland's International Carding Scheme and UK Sport's Athlete Personal Award (APA).

### 3. Application Process

There are two entry points to the athlete award programme:

- **Annual Stage:** Governing Bodies submit nominations to Sport NI in **March 2026**
- **Mid-Year Review:** Governing Bodies that do not apply at the annual stage may submit new nominations in **September 2026**, subject to budget availability.

Awards granted at the mid-year stage will be pro-rata, i.e., 50% of the full-year award level. Any funding already allocated to the athlete during the first half of the year will be considered. Nominations should be submitted to: [performancesport@sportni.net](mailto:performancesport@sportni.net)

### 4. Eligibility

Athletes must meet one the following eligibility criteria:

- born in Northern Ireland; or
- born of a parent (or adoptive parent) born in Northern Ireland; or
- eligible to compete for NI, GB & NI or Ireland in the targeted competition.

#### 4.1 Funding Restrictions and Exceptions

Athletes may not be eligible if they are currently in receipt of:

- UK Sport Athlete Personal Award (APA) – Level C or above, or

- Sport Ireland Carding – International level or above.

*Funding may be considered in exceptional circumstances where additional living cost support would deliver clear performance benefits. A detailed rationale must be provided for consideration by Sport NI.*

Sport NI recognises that some athletes may have additional financial need, including:

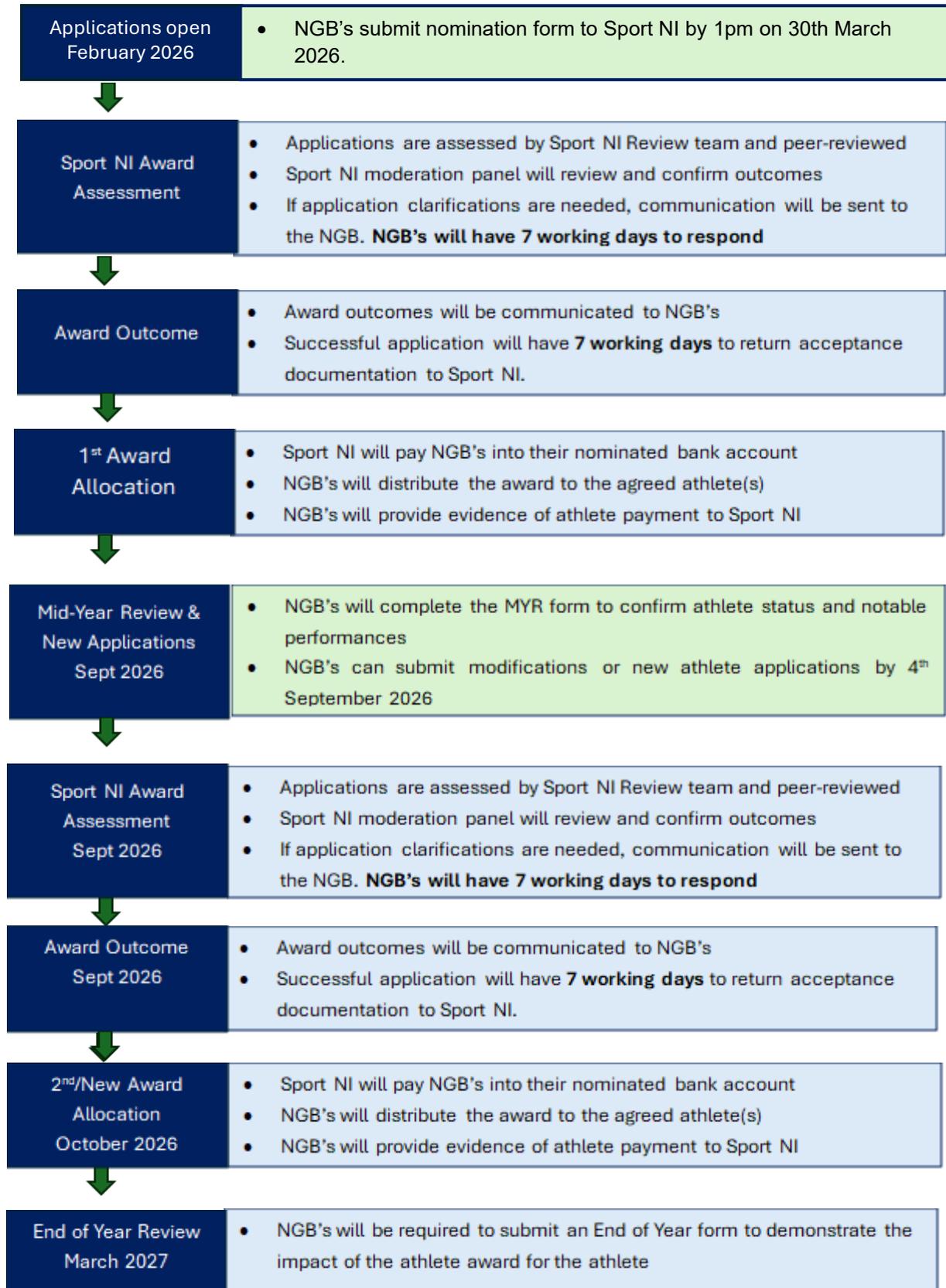
- Athletes on UK Sport APA Levels D & E or Sport Ireland pool funding, particularly where travel to mainland UK or the Republic of Ireland is required for national training.
- Para-athletes on UK Sport APA or Irish Carding, due to higher costs associated with training and competition.

### **Responsibility and Verification**

It is the responsibility of the governing body to ensure all athletes meet the eligibility requirements. Sport NI reserves the right to contact applicant organisations to confirm eligibility.

## 5. Process and Timeline

The process and timelines are provided to give clarity on the steps involved in the process and as a guide to help manage expectations on award allocation.



Please note that timelines and review points are indicative and may be subject to change.

Governing Bodies that do not submit nominations during the annual stage (March) may submit new nominations at the mid-year review (September). These will be considered subject to budget availability within the programme. Nominations should be submitted using the Athlete Award Nomination template to [performancesport@sportni.net](mailto:performancesport@sportni.net).

Important information for Mid-Year Applications:

- Awards granted at the mid-year stage will be pro-rata, i.e., 50% of the full-year award level.
- Any funding already allocated to the athlete during the first half of the year will be taken into account when determining the amount available
- Any funding already allocated to the athlete during the mid-year point will be taken into account when determining the number of years on the award.

## 6. Athlete Nominations

Nominations must be submitted by the National Governing Body (NGB) using the 'Athlete Award Nomination' Form (available via Sport NI website).

Nominations will normally be made by the National Governing Body that is in receipt of 'System Partners Investment 2026 - 2027'. It is expected that the Performance Lead will make the nominations, and the athletes are identifiable on the sport's Performance Pathway. Sports not in receipt of 'System Partners Investment 2026-2027' investment may have athletes that are still eligible for Athlete Award investment and should provide the appropriate rationale for nomination.

### 6.1 Completing the Nomination Form

You are required to complete 3 sections:

1. Nomination Summary
2. Athlete Application Details
3. Application Statement

When completing the 'Athlete Application Details' section, please ensure in this section you provide:

- **Priority of Award Ranking** – Rank athletes based on need for investment to enhance performance. This priority will be used if demand exceeds available funds.
- **Current Athlete Status & Funding Level** - Provide athlete status within National Performance Programmes and any funding received from National Sports Councils, scholarships etc.
- **Current Value of Funding Received** - Please detail how much income the athlete is currently in receipt of or N/A.
- **Requested Level of Award** – Indicate the award level requested. Use criterion below.

- **Previous Track Record**– Please provide notable performance results in the past 2 years. In line with the approaches of UK Sport and Sport Ireland, athlete results and placings will be assessed with consideration of the competition standard and overall event quality.
- **2026 Season Targets** – Please provide targeted results and key performance indicators.
- **Major Target Competition** – Indicate the major competition (e.g., 2026 Commonwealth Games, LA 2028, or 2030 Major Competitions & Beyond including 2030 Commonwealth Games, 2032 Brisbane Olympics/Paralympics etc.
- **Impact of Award** – Demonstrate how the award will support athletes to “achieve success and excel in Olympics, Paralympics and Commonwealth Games.”

When nominating athletes please ensure that the nominated athlete(s):

- Show an intention to change circumstances to improve performance **or** evidence that such changes have occurred.

Examples include:

- Training and competition commitments significantly reduce ability to meet daily living costs.
- Relocation costs to access appropriate facilities or expertise.
- The financial burden of the sport is prohibiting the athlete from participating.



When selecting the 'Requested award level', please note that award levels are based on the athletes' position within the performance system:

Award Amount	Position within the Performance System	Description
£9,000	Senior Programme / Transitioning to Senior Programme	<p>Athletes operating at, or progressing into, senior level performance environments and meeting the standards expected within Senior National Programmes level.</p> <p>These athletes typically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform consistently within high performance senior environments.</li> <li>• Have demonstrated strong competitive capability at U23 and senior international level.</li> <li>• Are targeting the upcoming major Olympic/Paralympic Games cycle and are expected to be fully aligned with senior programme standards within 1–2 years.</li> </ul>
£5,000	Developmental Athletes	<p>Athletes progressing well along the recognised performance pathway and who are expected to transition onto the Senior National Programme within the next 2–4 years.</p> <p>These athletes typically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show clear upward trajectory within pathway structures.</li> <li>• Are building readiness for major Games cycles 2–4 years ahead.</li> <li>• Have demonstrated strong potential at international Junior and U23 level major competitions and/or immediate Senior international level.</li> </ul>
Up to £2,500	Emerging NI Talent Athletes	<p>Athletes on a recognised performance pathway programme and who are in the early stages of the performance pathway.</p> <p>These athletes typically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are beginning to acquire the training and performance behaviours needed for future U23 and senior international competitiveness.</li> <li>• Have demonstrated strong potential at regional or national level and are beginning to progress towards higher level competition.</li> </ul>



To ensure consistency and appropriate use of award levels across all sports, *nominating bodies must provide clear performance justification for each athlete*. While award descriptions outline the expected stage of the performance pathway, each nomination must demonstrate, performance placings or rankings benchmarked against standards set by UK Sport or Sport Ireland for pathway progression.

Where sports use development frameworks (e.g., technical, tactical, physical, or skill based criteria), these may be submitted in place of competition metrics, provided they:

- Map clearly onto expected progression towards senior international level;
- Show measurable indicators (e.g., skill acquisition milestones, physical performance testing, technical proficiency scores);
- Are consistent with the standards applied for athlete selection within that sport's performance pathway.

Sport NI may require further detail about each athlete or their circumstances on receipt of the nominations.

**Note:** *This award is not a salary replacement scheme*. Sports should assess athlete income (e.g., sponsorship, prize money, scholarships) before determining need.

Sport NI may share details of athletes applying for Athlete Awards with UK Sport and Sport Ireland to confirm other support and ensure alignment.

## 6.2 Progression and Review

- Athletes receiving awards for three consecutive years will be reviewed for progression.
- Where progression is not evident, exceptional circumstances must be provided.
- The award is intended as a stepping stone to higher funding levels (e.g., UK Sport APA or Sport Ireland Carding).
- If an athlete remains at the same award level beyond three years, clear targets for the next period must be outlined.

## 6.3 Team Sports

Team sports should complete the 'Athlete Award Nominations' form, prioritising players in reference to performance standards and financial need. Sport NI will be in contact to discuss the need. Team sport nominations should clearly identify each athlete within the team and the level of award being requested for each athlete. Full names and amount being requested for each athlete in the squad should be detailed clearly.

Whilst the standards listed in the sections above are designed to relate to both individuals and teams, Sport NI acknowledges that it may not be appropriate to provide all members of a team with the same level AA. Other factors such as commitment to team training, regular selection to a team and performance at milestones or other significant events, may also be used as a determining factor in



the AA offered. It is also worthy to note that funding is not guaranteed and will depend on a number of factors including current performance standard, performance targets, affordability and partnership funding to which the sport has access.

## 7. Review and Reporting

Information will be gathered from Governing Bodies / Athletes to understand the impact of investment on performance across the relevant period. This, in addition to end of year reporting mechanisms, will enable the production of a report to highlight the impact of the Athlete Awards investment.

Sports are required to provide up to date information on each athlete's performance and personal living circumstances and should notify Sport NI if these change during the award year. Prior to the release of the second payment, the sport would be required to demonstrate that the nominated athlete(s) is (are) still operating within their system.

If an athlete/team is noted for a Mid-Year review, the NGB is required to re-submit at the mid-year stage demonstrating performance progression or qualification.

Following each of the two Sport NI payments, it is the responsibility of the governing body to ensure that the amount paid to the governing body has been paid in full to the agreed recipient(s). Sport NI will require a bank statement/report to evidence that the award has been transferred to the athletes. If any bank fees are incurred in the onward payment to the athlete, these will be borne by the Governing Body.

Failure to submit all necessary information may result in a delay in making a decision and impact on the outcome of your application.

Sport NI will reserve the right to return applications deemed as 'incomplete' or 'inaccurate.'

## 8. Award Conditions

### 8.1. The Award

The offer of Award is made for the period 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027.

The Award shall be paid by BACS directly into the Governing Body's bank account in two 6 monthly instalments, the first in April and second in September\*.

The Governing Body must then transfer the individual athlete awards to the nominated athletes as per the Letter of Offer within **two weeks** of receiving the award from Sport Northern Ireland.

*\*A written agreement will be made with those sports receiving a Team Sport 'pot' as to how the Athlete Award will be split, and when it will be paid to the sport and athletes. The letter of offer will clearly identify the athletes that are to receive an award and how much they should receive from the Governing Body once the amount is paid out by Sport NI; sports must pay the athletes the amounts as indicated on the letter of offer. Sports must submit a bank statement/report after each payment, evidencing that the named athlete has received the appropriate amount as indicated in this letter.*

Sports are required to maintain information on each athlete's performance and personal living circumstances and should notify Sport NI should this change during the award year. The Governing Body shall, for the Term of the Agreement, notify Sport Northern Ireland in writing if any of the following occur:

- changes in the personal circumstances of the Athlete which may directly or indirectly affect the Award, including without limitation, a change in income;
- if the Athlete ceases, for any reason whatsoever, to be a full and participating member of the Governing Body's Plan; and
- if due to sickness, injury, other incapacity or any other change in personal circumstances the Athlete is unable to participate fully in the plan.

Should any of these circumstances occur please contact the Sport NI performance team [performancesport@sportni.net](mailto:performancesport@sportni.net) as soon as possible, so that appropriate action can be taken to manage the award and its payments.

Sports must submit a bank statement/report after each payment, evidencing that the named athlete has received the appropriate amount as indicated in this letter.

### 8.2. Acknowledgement of Award

The governing body must ensure that athletes benefitting from the Award are aware of their source of funding from Sport Northern Ireland and that the athlete co-operates with publicity or promotion acknowledging the Award.

### **8.3. Accuracy of Information**

The Government's financial directions to Sport NI require us to obtain from award applicants' whatever information may be necessary to safeguard funds, and to carry out random validation checks. Therefore, you should take care to ensure that the details you provide are correct.

### **8.4. Suspected Fraud**

Applicants are advised that any materially misleading statements (whether deliberate or accidental) given at any stage during the application process or award period, could render the application invalid, the applicant invalid and the applicant liable to return any money already paid out on the programme.

Any allegations of fraud will be investigated and cases of suspected fraud referred to the PSNI. This includes falsification of information, inappropriate use of funds and misinformation at the application stage.

Information on applications is stored on computers and, in accordance with the Data Protection Act, such information is confidential. Any approach be it direct or indirect by an applicant, its officers, servants, contractors, personal or professional representatives or advisors made to members or officers of Sport NI, which, in the view of Sport NI or their advisors, constitutes an attempt in any way to influence the outcome of an application will, at the absolute discretion of Sport NI, render the application ineligible for further consideration.

### **8.5. Data Protection Act 2018 & UK GDPR**

Sport NI will use the information you give us on the application form during assessment and for the life of any grant we award you to administer and analyse grants and for our own research. Information will be kept for seven years after the programme closure.

Sport NI may give copies of this information to individuals and organisations we consult when assessing applications, when monitoring grants and evaluating the way our funding programmes work and the effect they have. These organizations may include accountants, external evaluators and other organisations or groups. Sport NI may also share information with other distributors, government departments, national anti-doping organisations, organisations who provided matched funding and other organisations and individuals with a legitimate interest in applications and grants, or for the prevention or detection of fraud.

Sport NI might use the data you provide for our own research. Sport NI recognise the need to maintain the confidentiality of groups and their details will not be made public in any way, except as required by law.

### **8.6. Freedom of Information**

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives members of the public the right to request any information that we hold. This includes information received from third parties, such as, although not limited to, grant applicants/recipients, grant holders, contractors and people making a complaint. If information is requested under the Freedom of Information Act Sport NI will release it, subject to exemptions, although Sport NI may consult with you first. If you think that information you are providing may be exempt from release if requested, you should let Sport NI know when you apply.

Applicants should note that in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, information regarding both successful and unsuccessful applications may be made available to the public via the World Wide Web and a variety of publications. This information will include, amongst other things:

- the applicant's name
- the list of athletes/teams
- the amount of funding applied for
- a summary of the application
- the amount awarded, if any
- monitoring information; and
- the duration of the award.

### **8.7. Declaration**

We will take this form as confirmation that you understand our obligations under the Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR that now applies in the UK as a result of Brexit, as well as and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and that you accept that we will not be liable for any loss or damage to you pursuant to our fulfilment of our obligations under the relevant law.

### **8.8. Unsuccessful Applications**

Where an application is unsuccessful, Sport NI will issue a letter confirming its decision. Feedback will be available upon request.

Sport NI's Review Procedure is only relevant to decisions concerning applications for funding of £30,001 or more. Details of Sport NI's Review Procedure are available at <http://www.sportni.net/about/Procedures>.

## 8.9. SPORT NI'S DISCLAIMERS

**Please read carefully.**

**A condition of the application to Sport NI for funding is that the applicant has read, understood and accepted the following:**

1. Sport NI policies on funding are subject to change from time to time, including variations required to comply with directions on the distribution of funds. Sport NI reserves the right to amend, supplement and/or discontinue at its absolute discretion, for whatever reason, any or all of the policies, criteria and application procedures set out in its publications.
2. All applications are made entirely at the applicant's sole risk and Sport NI shall not be liable to any applicant or any other party in respect of loss, damage or costs of any nature arising directly or indirectly from:
  - the application or the subject matter of the application or any part thereof; and/or
  - the rejection for any reason of any application or any matter arising therefrom; and/or
  - any delay in processing any application howsoever arising.
3. All decisions regarding applications are at the sole discretion of Sport NI.
4. Sport NI has used its best endeavours to provide clear and helpful guidance for potential applicants to the Athlete Award. Sport NI, its servants and agents shall not, however, at any time in any circumstances be held responsible or liable in relation to any matter whatsoever or whosoever arising in connection with the development, planning, operation, and/or administration of individual projects.