

SPORT NORTHERN IRELAND

Systems Partners Investment

PERFORMANCE POLICY

Core proposition: Sport NI will invest where its contribution can address an evidenced performance gap and materially improve the likelihood of a Northern Ireland athlete progressing through the Performance Pathway towards senior international competition and delivering at the highest levels of their sport.

Document status	Policy owner	Review cycle
Revised draft August 2026	Sport Northern Ireland	Annual monitoring; full review every three years

1. Purpose and policy context

Sport Northern Ireland (Sport NI) uses public resources to strengthen performance sport in Northern Ireland. As these resources are finite, they must be focused where Sport NI can make a distinctive, measurable contribution while building equitable and inclusive systems.

Most athletes from Northern Ireland who reach senior international level progress through Ireland and/or Great Britain high-performance systems, while also accessing Commonwealth Games, Olympic, Paralympic and professional sport opportunities where appropriate. Their senior programmes are ordinarily led and funded by the relevant National Governing Body (NGB) and national performance agency, including UK Sport or Sport Ireland. Sport NI therefore does not need to fund every part of an athlete's journey. Its principal role is to identify and address decisive gaps, particularly within the Development stage and at key transition points into Senior National Programme / High Performance environments.

A smaller number of sports represent Northern Ireland directly in senior international competition. In those sports, Sport NI may have a broader system role, proportionate to the sport's performance potential, the responsibilities of other bodies and the resources available.

Policy purpose: To provide a transparent framework for deciding where, why, how and for how long Sport NI will invest in athletes, people, systems and performance environments to support international sporting outcomes.

2. Scope

This policy applies to Sport NI investment and services directed primarily towards the Northern Ireland Performance Pathway and international sport, including support for:

- recognised NGB performance pathways and the clubs or environments that deliver them;
- named athletes and defined athlete cohorts with evidence to deliver results over multiple cycles;
- coaches and other people whose development is essential to develop healthy athletes who can deliver results over multiple cycles;
- sports science, sports medicine and other specialist performance services;
- sports and athletes representing Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, or Ireland at senior international level, and

para sport pathways and disability-specific performance support requirements that enable athletes with disabilities to progress and compete at the highest levels of international competition. Activity below the Emerging Talent stage, including broad participation, club, school, grassroots or introductory talent activity without credible progression criteria, falls outside this policy. Such activity may be considered through other Sport NI policies or investment streams.

3. Strategic intent and outcomes

3.1 Primary outcome

More Northern Ireland athletes make sustained transitions into appropriate Senior National Programme / High Performance environments.

3.2 Supporting outcomes

- recognised Development environments produce athletes of the required quality at key transition points;
- performance pathways are accessible and inclusive, with athletes from diverse backgrounds and athletes with disabilities able to access appropriate opportunities, support and progression routes throughout the performance system;
- athletes can access high-quality, safe and appropriate training environments;
- critical coaches and performance staff have the capability required by the pathway;
- Sport NI, NGBs and national performance agencies have clear and complementary responsibilities;
- investment is focused, additional, equitable and demonstrably value for money; and
- Northern Ireland athletes contribute over time to senior international selections, finals, medals and other agreed performance outcomes.

4. Policy areas

4.1 Senior national level

Sports representing Northern Ireland

Where a sport represents Northern Ireland in senior international competition (outside of the Commonwealth Games) and Sport NI has a primary or substantial system responsibility, Sport NI may provide proportionate senior-level support. The level of support will reflect performance potential, the quality of the sport's plan, the responsibilities of other bodies, demonstrated need and affordability.

Support may include NGB investment, targeted athlete assistance, coach or official development, governance and integrity support, and allocated or charged performance services.

Commonwealth Games

Where a sport represents Northern Ireland at the Commonwealth Games, Sport NI may provide proportionate senior-level support targeting preparation for, and competition at the Commonwealth Games. The level of support will reflect performance potential, the quality of the sport's plan, the responsibilities of other bodies, demonstrated need and affordability.

Support may include NGB investment, investment in Commonwealth Games Northern Ireland, targeted athlete assistance, coach or official development, governance and integrity support, and allocated or charged performance services.

This support is unlikely to be provided for all four-years of a Commonwealth Games cycle.

Athletes within UK or Ireland senior systems

For most sports, the senior NGB and national performance agency hold primary responsibility for international competition and athlete development. Sport NI will therefore provide only limited and additional support at this stage.

- transition support addressing a defined adaptation to training location, environment, education, employment or lifestyle;
- athlete-specific assistance where a material performance benefit and clear funding gap are evidenced; and
- allocated specialist services in exceptional, prioritised cases or charged services where capacity permits.

Support for recently transitioned athletes will normally be approved for no more than two years, with at least annual review. A longer period requires exceptional approval supported by evidence that continued Sport NI involvement remains additional and decisive.

4.2 Development

Development is Sport NI's principal investment focus within the Performance Pathway. Sport NI will support structured, selective environments capable of producing athletes who can progress towards Senior National Programme / High Performance environments and senior international competition.

Resources will normally increase as athletes approach a meaningful transition, but decisions will reflect the characteristics and timescales of each sport. Earlier-stage investment must demonstrate a credible relationship between current support, later athlete quality and the transition destination.

Support may include athlete-specific assistance, NGB programme investment, coach and workforce development, performance-environment improvement, governance and integrity support, and allocated or charged specialist services.

Sport NI will determine whether individual athlete or NGB investment provides the better combination of impact, efficiency, assurance and athlete experience. Individual awards will not be used merely to substitute for a weak or under-resourced pathway system.

4.3 People and performance environments

Investment in coaches, officials or specialist staff must be connected to an identified athlete or pathway need and are important contributions towards developing a sustainable performance system. Support will specify the capability to be developed, how it will improve the environment and how the benefit will be retained or shared.

Sports science and medicine services will be allocated according to athlete need, likely performance impact, pathway priority, available capacity and the provision of other responsible bodies. Charged access may be offered where it does not displace priority work and is consistent with Sport NI operating arrangements.

4.4 Partnerships and collaboration

Sport NI will seek and maintain effective working arrangements with relevant NGBs, UK Sport, Sport Ireland, the other UK sports councils, Commonwealth Games Northern Ireland, the Mary Peters Trust, universities, local authorities and other appropriate partners.

Partnership activity under this policy must contribute to one or more of: shared pathway planning; clear division of responsibility; coordinated athlete support; data and insight; co-investment; access to facilities or expertise; workforce development; or avoidance of duplication. Formal agreements will be used where the scale, duration or sensitivity of the arrangement requires them.

5. Investment principles

The following investment principles will be applied across the policy areas identified in Section 5.

Principle	Application
Targeted contribution	Sport NI will fund the intervention or period where it can make the greatest additional difference to achieve greatest impact.
No avoidable duplication	The responsibilities and available provision of the NGB, national performance agency and other partners will be established before Sport NI commits resources.
Proportionate and evidence-led	The scale and form of support will reflect athlete potential, pathway quality, likely impact, financial need and value for money.
Athlete-centred and ethical	Progression will not be pursued at the expense of athlete welfare, safeguarding, integrity, education or longer-term development.
Equitable opportunity	Decisions will recognise barriers to progression while maintaining credible performance standards.
Learning and adaptation	Evidence from monitoring, athlete experience and external practice will inform decisions.

6. Athlete welfare, equality and integrity

6.1 Athlete-centred practice

Sport NI and funded organisations will support performance ambition alongside physical and mental health, safeguarding, education, employment, identity and longer-term development. Athletes will receive clear information about selection, support, review and exit decisions and will have appropriate opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting them.

6.2 Equality of opportunity

Investment decisions will be based on credible performance potential and expected impact. Sport NI will also identify and respond to material barriers that can prevent athletes from demonstrating or realising that potential, including barriers associated with disability, sex, socioeconomic circumstances, geography or community background. Monitoring will test whether ostensibly neutral processes create unjustified disparities.

6.3 Governance, safeguarding and integrity

Compliance with Sport NI's applicable governance, safeguarding, anti-doping, financial-management, complaints and integrity standards is a condition of funding. Assurance requirements will be proportionate to the organisation and investment. Serious or persistent non-compliance may lead to conditions, an improvement plan, suspension, reduction, recovery or withdrawal of support, subject to due process and athlete-impact considerations.

Funded organisations must maintain safe reporting and escalation routes for athletes and staff, protect people who raise concerns in good faith and cooperate with relevant investigations.

6.4 Athlete information

Named-athlete information will be collected and shared only where necessary for selection, support, assurance and evaluation. Sport NI and partners will establish appropriate lawful bases, transparency information, access controls, retention periods and data-sharing arrangements. Data will be reported in aggregated form wherever individual identification is unnecessary.

7. Implementation, review and renewal

Sport NI will implement this policy through published investment guidance, sport agreements, funding conditions, and service-allocation arrangements.

Processes and outcomes will be reviewed annually. The full policy will be reviewed every three years, or earlier where there is a material change in government policy, resources, national performance structures, legal duties or the international sporting environment.

Monitoring and learning opportunities will be implemented to ensure visibility of progress against targets and to enable sharing with internal and external stakeholders.

Changes to investment priorities will be communicated as early as practicable. Transition arrangements will balance responsible use of public funds with contractual commitments, athlete welfare and the ability of funded organisations to plan.

Appendix A: Performance pathway investment framework

Sport-specific pathway agreements may use their own technical stage names while mapping them to the Sport NI Performance Pathway stages of Senior National Programme / High Performance, Development and Emerging Talent.

Pathway position	Characteristics	Normal policy position	Potential intervention
Senior National Programme / High Performance	Athlete is operating within, or progressing towards, senior high-performance environments and meeting the standards required for senior national programmes, professional performance environments or equivalent systems.	Out of scope / exceptional	Charged specialist services where capacity permits; exceptional targeted help only.
Recently transitioned	Athlete has entered a Senior National Programme / High Performance environment but faces a defined temporary gap.	Priority where decisive	Time-limited athlete or NGB support; allocated or charged services.
Development: transition-ready	Athlete is close to the standards and decision point for senior programme entry.	Highest priority	Athlete or NGB investment; allocated services.
Development: progressing	Athlete is in an age- and stage-appropriate selective programme and on track.	Priority / conditional	NGB-led support, targeted services and workforce development.
Emerging Talent	Athlete is in the early phases of a recognised performance pathway and is developing the technical, tactical, physical and behavioural foundations required for long-term progression.	Conditional	Primarily system and coach development; tightly justified cohort support.

Appendix B: Glossary

Term	Meaning for this policy
Additionality	The difference Sport NI support is expected to make beyond what would occur through existing NGB, National Sports Council or other provision.
Performance Pathway	The deliberate pursuit of performance improvement through a structured approach, system, and/or series of stages, with the purpose of leading an athlete or team towards senior international competition.
Senior National Stage / High Performance	A recognised Senior National Programme / High Performance environment operated or endorsed by the relevant National Governing Body, UK Sport, Sport Ireland, a professional performance system or an equivalent senior high-performance structure.
Development Stage	Athletes progressing within a recognised performance pathway and moving towards Senior National Programme / High Performance environments. They demonstrate the potential, commitment and capability required to progress towards senior international performance.
Emerging Talent Stage	Athletes in the early phases of progressing within a recognised performance pathway who and are beginning to demonstrate the behaviours, abilities and potential required for future progression within the performance system.
Evidenced pathway gap	A clearly defined barrier or missing provision that constrains athlete progression and is not reasonably available from another responsible body.
Sustained transition	Entry to, and retention within, a Senior National Programme / High Performance environment for at least six months or one complete competitive season, unless an approved sport-specific definition is more appropriate.
Transitioning athlete	An athlete approaching entry to, or in the early period following entry to, a Senior National Programme / High Performance environment.
Time-limited support	Support approved for a defined period, with review points and an explicit continuation, tapering or exit decision.