

Sport and Physical Activity Strategy 2020 to 2030 and beyond Pre-consultation survey

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

25th September 2020

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland. Its 60 Full Members represent 190,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further, we would be happy to do so.

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1. What Sector do you represent?

Other (please specify)
Environmental NGO
Northern Ireland Environment Link

2. What are the current issues and opportunities facing sport and physical activity in Northern Ireland?

The coronavirus lockdown which began in March 2020 brought a sudden end to indoor and outdoor gatherings – this included most sporting events and many outdoor activities. Whilst a limited reopening has occurred since then, the lockdown has had a profound effect upon NI society.

The lockdown was initiated to stop the spread of coronavirus on the grounds of public health – but in so doing, it has also had the unfortunate side-effect of restricting the opportunities for physical activity. Whilst recreational walking was able to continue unabated, gyms were closed, parks, forests and nature reserves were closed, public restrooms were closed, sporting events were cancelled, those who had walked or cycled to school or their place of work have had to stay indoors and connect online instead – this has been to the detriment of our physical and mental health on a societal level.

One of the most important challenges that we now face in Northern Ireland is how to reopen in a safe and managed way; and to encourage increased uptake in outdoor exercise for the benefit of our physical health and mental wellbeing.

A recent survey by Outdoor Recreation NI has shown that there has been an increased appreciation of the outdoors as a result of the lockdown. 63% reported going outdoors for exercise every day during lockdown, a much higher proportion than the 28% reported in the Continuous Household Survey. This new strategy is very timely as it will be able to capitalise on increased health consciousness and a renewed appreciation for the outdoors.

Before the outbreak, we were already struggling to address issues and take advantage of opportunities within the outdoor recreation sector. It is clear that coronavirus has simultaneously heightened the need and desire for outdoor recreation (which has exponentially grown and is likely to sustain). Due to site closures and other unexpected costs, those working within the outdoor recreation sector have a reduced resource available to meet demand. Furthermore, as a result of pre-existing deficiencies in infrastructure and services, and relative lack of countryside access, the health opportunities of outdoor recreation are not being fully exploited.

What are the immediate issues and opportunities which require to be addressed?

Forests, parks and greenspace which have successfully re-opened after coronavirus lockdown are experiencing very significant demand and user numbers. Along with the impact of reduced income for some landowners and land managers this is posing an unprecedented challenge in terms of facilitating people availing of the many benefits of outdoor recreation. As outdoor recreation has grown year-on-year, infrastructure and services have struggled to keep pace – even before post lockdown increase in activity.

NIEL welcomes the coronavirus funding that has been provided to date to support NGOs which manage our outdoor sites and this will need to be continued. In addition, government bodies should provide advice and assistance to councils, landowners, NGOs and others with a responsibility for managing outdoor spaces as and when coronavirus guidance and/or restrictions are updated.

As we begin to consider how to “reopen” society, discussions have emerged on the need for a “Green Recovery”, or to “Build Back Better”. The lockdown has allowed us to reflect upon our priorities as a society and we now have an excellent opportunity to rethink how we do things. A recent LucidTalk poll (<https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/b/steppingupnorthernireland/posts/new-poll-shows-strong-public-support-for-a-green-recovery>) has revealed strong public support for a green recovery – 75% have appreciated access to local green spaces since lockdown began. Over 50% of people would now vote for a political party that invests in nature-rich green spaces.

Various jurisdictions which have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic are now pledging funds towards a “Green Recovery”. For example, in England, a £40m fund has been established to support shovel-ready environmental projects. A similar multi-Departmental fund in Northern Ireland could help create opportunities for sport and physical activity, sustainable tourism, help restore nature, mitigate against climate change and help progress other key Executive priorities. NIEL welcomes the Department for Infrastructure’s commitment to £20m for Green and Blue infrastructure in June 2020 and the £2.8m funding for greenways announced on 16th September. These are steps in the right direction, however, more action will be required.

What are the medium-term issues and opportunities over the next 3 - 5 years, and how are these best addressed?

- Climate Change – opportunity to use strategy to progress Executive’s climate change agenda. Encouraging recreation (walking, cycling etc) as a means of active travel will help reduce emissions from transport – this will have the added benefit of improving air quality.
- Public Health – the cost of the NHS is increasing year-on-year, with the Department of Health accounting for 44% of the NI Executive budget in 2019. By promoting physical outdoor recreation as a preventative medicine

and trialling “green prescriptions” over the coming years, we may be able to reduce the burden placed on the health service.

- Biodiversity – experiencing biodiversity is one of the demonstrable health giving benefits of outdoor recreation. More people accessing the outdoors can give rise to greater appreciation and public awareness of the need to protect biodiversity. Good outdoor recreation services and access infrastructure can protect and enhance biodiversity where unmanaged access is currently contributing to the degradation. A recent review by the RSPB (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/rspb-ni-northern-ireland-biodiversity-strategy-failing-after-years-of-inaction/>) has revealed that the NI Executive has failed to meet 83% of the commitments within the 2015-2020 Biodiversity Strategy and so urgent action is needed.
- Coronavirus – the duration of the pandemic remains a relative unknown as the virus now threatens to persist into 2021. Until the disease is eradicated, we must consider coronavirus in our future plans. Coronavirus has also served to amplify pre-existing issues, as mentioned previously.

What are the longer-term issues and opportunities which require to be addressed during the period of this strategy, i.e., to 2030 and how can these best be addressed?

See above. Many of these issues – climate change, public health, biodiversity decline – are by their very nature “long-term” and will persist beyond the next 3 - 5 years. During the 2025 to 2030 period, progress will need to be consolidated and built upon.

Opportunities:

We welcome that the new strategy “will be cross-Departmental in nature”, “covering all the Departments of the Northern Ireland Executive”. This strategy has the opportunity to identify key areas of shared interest for multiple government departments and set ambitious targets and actions for the coming decade.

As mentioned earlier, the current health consciousness and renewed appreciation for the outdoors will enable the Executive, with the public’s support, to progress and provide funding for a range of actions which will improve opportunities for physical activity and sport in Northern Ireland.

Other “longer-term” issues:

Inadequate urban design in our towns and cities – a lack of pedestrianised areas, lack of green space, a lack of protected, contiguous cycle routes, poor walkability.

Legacy of car dependence – according to the Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (2016-2018), of the 5,868 miles travelled per person per year, 82% of the total distance travelled is by car. 81% of workers arrive to their place of employment by car. Active travel and public transport should be incentivised through a variety of measures – some of these are outlined in our answer to Q4.

3. What benefits or outcomes could result from more people engaging in sport or physical activity over their whole lives?

Outdoor recreation is a lifelong participation sport from ages 1 to 101. Engaging in these types of activity has more multi-layered benefits – health, climate mitigation, biodiversity appreciation, civic pride – than many other forms of physical exercise. Walking and wheeling is also one of the most accessible forms of exercise – it is a low cost activity and is suitable for all ages and abilities. Our natural environment is a common venue for this activity and should be protected and enhanced accordingly.

Regular physical activity is proven to help prevent and treat non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and breast and colon cancer. It also helps to prevent hypertension, overweight and obesity and can improve mental health, quality of life and well-being. In addition to the multiple health benefits of physical activity, societies that are more active can generate additional returns on investment including a reduced use of fossil fuels, cleaner air and less congested, safer roads. (Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030)

According to the Health Survey (NI) 2016/17 only 55% of people in NI met physical exercise requirements. Over a quarter of adults (27%) were classed as obese with a further 36% classed as overweight. Obesity levels have shown an upward trend over the last decade, from the 24% recorded in 2005/06. This has a severe adverse effect on our health service and action is urgently required to help reverse this trend.

What benefits could result from more people engaging in sport or physical activity from within your target group

As mentioned earlier, Outdoor Recreation NI and RSPB NI have reported increased engagement with and appreciation for the natural environment in response to the coronavirus lockdown. NIEL would be keen to see continued high levels of engagement with the natural environment – this strategy could help maintain this momentum as we begin to recover from Covid-19.

Traditionally the environment has been viewed as the sole responsibility of DAERA, NIEA and formerly, the Department for the Environment. However, the environment underpins everything that we do – this should be recognised in all Executive strategies. As well as supporting physical exercise, a healthy, well-managed environment provides us with food and water, promotes tourism, attracts inward investment, supports biodiversity, mitigates flood and wildfire risks and is a source of learning and inspiration for our children. This strategy holds the potential to align common objectives between multiple Departments and unlock the potential for co-ordinated funding for access to the natural environment that both protects and magnifies these benefits.

How could these benefits or outcomes be best realised?

Given the intended cross-Departmental nature of this strategy, it should be funded and supported by multiple agencies/departments – this is a key strength for this strategy.

Outdoor Recreation NI have a wealth of case studies and best practice examples which can be tapped into to help maximise the benefits of outdoor recreation for people and nature.

The Department for Communities (DfC) should seek to collaborate with other Departments – the Department of Health, Department for Infrastructure and Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in particular. DfC should also seek to work closely with the 11 district councils, Sport NI, Outdoor Recreation, NI Protected Areas Network and other NGOs with an interest in sport and physical activity.

Cross-departmental co-operation will be key to achieving significant change in Northern Ireland. As physical and mental health are of cross-cutting importance, increasing physical activity across all age groups will help the Executive to achieve multiple PfG goals simultaneously.

4. What are the main barriers (e.g. physical, practical, cultural, personal) to increased participation in sport or physical activity for people over their whole lives?

The reasons why someone may not choose to engage in physical activity or sport may vary significantly from person-to-person and are likely to change over the course of life. Barriers may include:

- Urban and rural barriers – urban areas are largely dominated by motor vehicles and walkability is very poor in some areas. Many country roads are without footpaths, lack of public transport options to access green space
- A lack of green space within easy walking distance – this is a particular obstacle for non-drivers and those living in the countryside.
- Concerns regarding safety – anti-social behaviour, poor air quality, high density traffic, lack of traffic calming measures or crossings, poor lighting, trails in a state of disrepair
- Lack of facilities – e.g. off-road paths, upland trails, way marked ways, cycle trails, public parks, public restrooms, changing rooms, lack of site maintenance, poor litter control
- Accessibility – lack of car parking and public transport (particularly in upland areas, the Mourne and Causeway Coast), narrow or steep paths, lack of erosion control, paths in poor condition, lack of ramps or dropped kerbs for wheelchair users, poorly designed gates e.g. U-chicane gates or anti-motor vehicle/anti-cattle gates which restrict access to cyclists, pushchairs and wheelchair users
- Local greenspace may be privately owned, limited public rights of way in NI

- Deprivation – people who live in the most deprived areas are less likely to spend time outdoors
- Poor physical or mental health – those who would most benefit from physical exercise are often far less likely to engage in this activity due to chronic illnesses and conditions which limit mobility

How could these be best addressed?

Many of the below recommendations are within the responsibility of Sport NI and Department for Communities, however, as a “cross-Departmental strategy”, commitments from a number of Departments will be required to achieve positive change.

- Increasing the total area of publicly accessible greenspace and greenways - this should be measured by council area to identify where provision is needed and where existing networks and green spaces can be connected (e.g. the Connswater Community Greenway and Comber Greenway)
- Many of the built heritage sites that Historic Environment Division own and/or have statutory responsibility for protecting are in countryside locations. Improved access infrastructure at these sites can deliver upon a wide range of benefits
- Improve cycling safety by investing in joined-up urban cycling networks, protected cycle lanes and secure cycle parking provision
- Development of fit for purpose green and blue infrastructure
- Secure funding arrangements for organisations leading on outdoor recreation in NI
- Increased funding for outdoor recreation education in schools
- Make outdoor learning and recreation part of the national curriculum
- Promotion of physical exercise as a preventative medicine – often referred to as “green prescriptions”
- Incentivise active travel through support to Cycle to Work schemes
- Introduce 20mph zones at all NI schools to further encourage cycling and walking to and from school
- Improved accessibility on public trails and green space
- Fit for purpose legislation governing access to the countryside in NI

Can you identify best practice in tackling such barriers?

- The World Health Organisation – the WHO has a broad range of case studies, reports, recommendations (for example, WHO’s [“draft global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030”](#))
- The UN Sustainable Development Goals – particularly SDG3
- The National Health Service and Dept of Health – health data could be used to identify trends, connections between lack of physical activity and ill-health, estimated financial cost of physical inactivity, help identify which areas of NI are worst affected by ill-health. Consider opportunities for introducing green prescriptions – see NHS Forest (<https://nhsforest.org>)

- Outdoor Recreation NI / NI Outdoor Recreation Forum
- Great Britain National Parks
- National Trails Network and Greenways in Republic of Ireland
- Forestry Commission in Great Britain and Coillte in Republic of Ireland
- Learning from other jurisdictions with a strong culture of physical activity, cycling, walking – e.g. The Netherlands, Scandanavia

Have new practices and opportunities arisen from the Covid-19 Pandemic and how can these best be built on for the future?

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, people want (and need) to go out and engage in physical exercise whilst maintaining social distance – this is best achieved through outdoor recreation.

According to recent research by Outdoor Recreation NI, there has been a “dramatic increase” in recreational walking. Nearly half (47%) of respondents spent more free time outdoors during lockdown than they did at the same time of year in 2019. 63% reported going outdoors for exercise every day during lockdown, a much higher proportion than the 28% reported in the annual household survey (CHS 2017/18). This is a very positive trend and should be further encouraged by action and expenditure from the NI Executive – see answer to Q4b.

**5. What priorities should be set in relation to increasing whole life engagement in sport and physical activity over the period 2020-30?
priorities**

- Strategic NI-wide assessment of outdoor recreation infrastructure and coordinated programme to address legacy of under investment
- Strategic review of NI-wide management arrangements for outdoor recreation
- As above, fit for purpose legislation governing access to the countryside in NI
- Increased support for outdoor recreation education in schools to foster interest in physical activity and sports at an early age – this will help to instil life-long engagement
- Incentivise active travel through a broad range of measures – improve and extend network of cycle lanes and greenways, create publicly accessible green space in urban and rural areas, prioritising areas of need
- Effectively communicate the importance of sport and physical exercise in improving physical and mental health

What actions could be implemented in support of your suggested priorities?

See answer to Q4b.

Collaboration between the Department for Communities, SportNI, Historic Environment Division and other government departments and agencies will be crucial to the success of this strategy.

6. Are the existing structures for the delivery of an effective cross-departmental sports and physical activity strategy for Northern Ireland appropriate to the current challenges? Please comment.

We are not aware of any existing inter-departmental structures. Any such structures should be publicised – activities and recommendations should be accessible online with the opportunity for input from NGOs and other interested sectors or bodies.

- As mentioned previously, we would support a closer working arrangement between government departments and local councils to deliver upon shared objectives.
- The NI Outdoor Recreation Forum (NORF)
- NIEL and the Northern Ireland Protected Areas Network (NIPAN) have a role in bringing together land owners / managers.

What, if any, changes would deliver better outcomes for the overall strategy?

Greater investment in active travel, environmental education, leisure facilities, provision of green space, forest schools etc. This could be done on a collaborative basis between DAERA, the Department of Health, and the Department for Infrastructure (active travel).

How can individual sports bodies and organisations contribute to a more effective strategy e.g. through changes in the governance and organisation of sport at the local level?

We do not have any specific recommendations at this time.

7. Are there opportunities for greater cooperation within and between sports and physical activity organisations (and other partners) to achieve better outcomes for participants, volunteers, supporters and communities?

We do not have any specific recommendations at this time.

What are the barriers to such greater cooperation and how can they be overcome?

A lack of communication between sectors and government Departments. A forum or network for the promotion of outdoor recreation activity in Northern Ireland could help foster connections and encourage co-operative action. Although note above there are some pre-existing structures to support this work e.g. NORF.

8. What are the existing and possible linkages between a sports and physical activity strategy and the wider policies of the Northern Ireland Executive and in particular, Government Departments' or Public Bodies' responsibilities and priorities? (Note you should respond to this question from your Department's, Public Body or organisation's own perspective).

The Sport and Physical Activity strategy could link in with a number of key government strategies:

- Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland (2020)
- New Decade, New Approach (2020)
- Children & Young People's Strategy (2019)
- Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21 (2016)
- Exercise, Explore, Enjoy - A Strategic Plan for Greenways (2016)
- The Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland (2015)
- The 11 District Council Community Plans
- Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland (2015)
- Making Life Better – A Whole System Strategic Framework for Public Health (2014)
- Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy (2011)
- Rural Development Strategies

How can these linkages be articulated and demonstrated more clearly and turned into outcome-based targets and objectives?

The Programme for Government should act as the overarching document which identifies the key priorities from each Executive strategy and should list a series of measurable, ambitious and time-bound targets and objectives.

9. How can sport and physical activity contribute to shaping places, supporting communities and improving outcomes across NI in ways which better meet social, community, economic and environmental objectives?

The natural environment is a common venue for sport and physical exercise and is a neutral space which can be used for the benefit of all, regardless of age, gender, religious, political or racial background.

Our outdoor spaces - parks, forests, rivers, hills and beaches are considered to be shared spaces which belong to everyone. These spaces are used on a daily basis for recreation, tourism, exercise, events and social gatherings. Our natural environment is something which we all have in common, and through engaging with the outdoors we can foster civic pride and responsibility. Also, by connecting to local landscapes and in turn natural, built and cultural heritage, fosters a sense of place and local esteem.

10. How can local authorities and/or Community Planning Partnerships across Northern Ireland contribute to innovation in the delivery of sport and physical activity at the local level?

We would welcome community-led action to assist in the identification of areas in need of development. Community groups are often best placed to identify areas of opportunity within their neighbourhoods.

By bringing together local authorities – NI's district councils have a statutory authority for outdoor access and are best placed to work with land owners and land managers.

What are the opportunities that could be opened up and could you point to some innovative best practice in overcoming any of these barriers?

We do not have any specific recommendations at this time.

11. Are there opportunities for greater cooperation within and between the sports and physical activity sector and Schools, FE colleges, Universities or Youth Based Organisations to achieve better outcomes for young people? Please comment.

We would support greater engagement between the outdoor recreation, sports and physical activity sectors and schools, youth based organisations etc to help instil life-long engagement in outdoor recreation, physical activity and sports.

What are the barriers to such greater cooperation and how can they be overcome?

See above.

12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

This pre-consultation survey was not accessible via <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations>, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/consultations> or via <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk>. We did not receive any notice of this survey via e-mail or by letter. The link we were provided (only 2 weeks ago) (<https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/dfc-analytical-services-unit/636090f8>) cannot be accessed through normal navigation of the DfC website or the NI Direct website.

As a result, we have not had sufficient time to compose our response or adequately engage with our membership on this topic. It is also fair to assume that other stakeholders will have experienced the same difficulties.

We would be grateful if the subsequent consultation on this strategy could be advertised more effectively to ensure input from NIEL and other key stakeholders.