



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Capital Grants for Grass-Roots Clubs

3 December 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Nick Harkness)	
Mr Ciarán McGurk)	Sport Northern Ireland
Ms Tracey Smyth)	

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I welcome the senior officials from Sport NI: Nick Harkness, the director of participation and facilities; Tracey Smyth, the capital finance manager; and Ciarán McGurk, the Places for Sport programme manager. You are very welcome. I invite you to brief the Committee.

Mr Nick Harkness (Sport Northern Ireland):

Thank you, Chairman. We have circulated a presentation, which I will talk through and to which

I will add some more detail, and then give you the opportunity to ask questions. We have been invited to comment on an overview of Sport NI's historic capital funding to grass-roots sports clubs, to update the Committee on funding programmes, and to provide an analysis of planned budgets for capital investment in grass-roots sports facilities in the future. I will begin by considering past programmes.

Initially, all Sport NI's capital funding came from lottery funds until quite a few years ago, certainly since my time there. The advantage of lottery funding is that once it has been awarded it is held in the National Lottery distribution fund balance until the distributing body can spend it through third-party organisations. Once applicants have been awarded money, the relevant capacity can be created and a project can be brought to readiness so that the organisation is ready to spend.

The disadvantage is that sometimes it sits in abeyance until the process has been completed; however, it allows us to work with the neediest communities, which may be challenged in their ability to spend capital moneys quickly. That covers issues such as planning approval and security of tenure that do not necessarily need to be in place at the time of making an award; however, they must be in place at the time of spending an award.

In the history of Sport NI's capital investments through lottery awards, from 1995 to 2007, there were more than 700 awards, amounting to £66.7 million, with an average award amounting to some £94,000. More recently, the Places for Sport programme in 2008-09 distributed £6.3 million to 25 awards.

Mr McCarthy:

Should that not be £3.6 million?

Mr Harkness:

Yes, sorry; it should be £3.6 million; I read it wrong. The Places for Sport programme in 2009-2010 distributed roughly £7.9 million to some 44 awards. Both programmes are now closed to new applications.

Most of the projects in the 2008-09 programme are either complete or almost complete. All the projects in the 2009-2010 programme have commenced on site and are due for completion in

2010; the budget will be fully expended on those projects. Both programmes were funded through reallocations of departmental capital budgets that became available in-year and which were offered to Sport NI. Therein lies the source of the programme's character.

The timescales for in-year allocations were extremely tight. Nevertheless, we are confident that the process created an opportunity for much-needed financial investment to be made in local playing facilities. In fairness to applicants, the tight timescales meant that they did not have much time to do preparatory work, obtain approval for plans and secure partnership funding. The required costs had to be incurred at risk, because we had no guarantee. The programmes were always oversubscribed, given the budgets available, so there were winners and losers. Applicants were required to meet strict eligibility criteria such as already having in place planning approval and security of tenure. Security of tenure is the entitlement to, or ownership of, the site of the capital facility in which we were to invest.

Sport NI had little time to build capacity and grow the organisations that intended to apply; we had also put plans in place for a third Places for Sport programme. With the agreement of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, we had warmed up the market to some extent. For example, I made a presentation to chief leisure officers to advise them of the likelihood of a third round of funding, as the Department had anticipated further underspend. However, those underspends did not become available, and the programme was not launched.

Another of our historic capital investment programmes was the soccer strategy. You will recall the former Minister's decision to invest almost £8 million in soccer; £4.4 million was set aside for capital projects, and that money was awarded to 22 clubs during 2008-09. Of those 22 clubs' projects, 20 are due to be completed by March 2010 and the other two by December 2010. The money funded mainly playing and changing facilities and minor ground improvements. Other capital budgets were made available to the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union. Those organisations chose to prioritise spending on things other than grass-roots investment; therefore, I will not cover those investments in any detail in my presentation.

Sport NI has no capital programmes open for grass-roots sports clubs at present, but we recently opened our Awards for Sport programme, which can make up to £10,000 available for revenue or small capital projects. The presentation does not cover that in detail either, because its

focus is capital investments. Sport NI's other grass-roots programme is the Building Sport programme, which was the pre-runner to Places for Sport and is mostly funded through lottery grants. That programme has also closed, but some of its significant projects are still in various stages of development; indeed, our budgets show that £9.5 million will be available over the next five years. That money will not be invested in new projects, because it has been indicatively allocated to historic applications. The £9.5 million will be used to complete the Building Sport programme over the next five years.

Based on indicative spend profiles, the next opportunity for significant capital investment in grass-roots clubs will be in 2013-14, although that is subject to further budget allocations, comprehensive spending review (CSR) periods, and so on. If the next opportunity does come in 2013-14, we will launch the open capital investment programme in 2011-12 to allow for the preparatory work and capacity-building that is required to support schemes in the neediest communities.

I move now to our indicative capital-spend profile for the coming years. We have provided you with indicative budgets, and those have been discussed with DCAL in the context of the funding that is anticipated over the next five years. However, as is the case with all public bodies, those indicative budgets are subject to budgetary pressures and CSR decisions. The budgets have been set in light of the Minister's priorities, about which the Department has notified us. They include the stadia safety programme; the elite facilities programme; investment in two- and four-wheel motor sports, urgent works improvements to Windsor Park; and the major stadia development, which has an indicative budget of £110 million.

The style of expenditure of that £110 million is not detailed in the budgets. The following budgets highlight how we will indicatively spend that £110 million based on those projections over the next five years. Although the sums in the next CSR period are within indicative totals outlined in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), they do not reflect the indicative profiles, and we have some work to do with the Department. We need to know the Department's timeline for projects, as some large schemes take several years; therefore we need to do more work with the Department on profiling those budgets.

The budgets for the next CSR period show a need for £10.7 million, £18.2 million and £17.9 million. However, those figures differ from the indicative budget profiles in ISNI, and we have

already started discussions with the Department to determine how our need for profiles matches the pressures in its other capital programmes. Moreover, we have spoken to the Department about the possibility of making the £9.5 million that is earmarked for 2013-14 available earlier in the cycle. However, that depends on the other pressures on the Department's capital budgets. Those discussions have not yet concluded.

As I said, 2013-14 is the first anticipated opportunity for a further Places for Sport, and discussions are ongoing with the Department about opportunities to re-profile that. However, based on the targets and aspirations in the draft strategy for sport, the feedback that we received from recipient bodies and the feedback that the Committee has received from the governing bodies, we anticipate that future programmes will prioritise multi-sports and multi-club projects, and create big hubs for sport in which a range of clubs and/or sports can participate. Furthermore, projects on the school estate, or close to it, will be prioritised for shared use by community and school projects. Those are our aspirations

Sport Northern Ireland, in developing plans for future capital investments, is already working with the chief leisure officers of local authorities. We are encouraging local authorities, in the 11 new structures, to develop locally based facilities strategies for the future. We cannot control local authorities, but the chief leisure officers seem to support a more strategic approach to facility investment, through which local authorities take our facilities data and research on shortages in Northern Ireland, reflect their local community needs and aspirations, and produce a local facilities strategy that identifies key priorities in each region. I hope that Sport NI and local authorities will use those documents to prioritise relative investments and our combined investments.

I will outline the gestation period of capital projects. It normally takes a minimum of two years to develop large projects from the concept and application stage to commencement on site and a further one year for completion. Therefore, the timeline from concept to completion is a minimum of three years.

In conclusion, Sport Northern Ireland notes that the governing bodies' responses are in line with our thinking. Sport Northern Ireland hopes to address the concerns that have been expressed. In an ideal world, our capital programmes would have longer lead-in times, longer notification periods for capital budgets, and we would have an opportunity to work and build

capacity with governing bodies, clubs and other applicants so that projects were at a higher state of readiness. We want to fund larger, more strategic projects that have local relevance and which have been prioritised in consultation with communities. We have started work with local authorities to develop that approach.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation, Nick. You said that you had engaged in “warming the market” on Places for Sport for 2010-11 and that you had spoken to local authority leisure officers. I accept what you said about 2013-14; however, if funding due to slippage in other areas were to be reallocated internally by the Department, as happened in the previous two years, could the Places for Sport programme be back on track earlier?

Mr Harkness:

The closer one gets and the longer the clock ticks, the less time there is to react. We are mindful of the enormous sports facility requirements in Northern Ireland, and that is why we reacted so quickly to the previous two last-minute funding opportunities for such investment. We are already working with the Department to bring forward the 2013-14 programme to either 2011-12 or 2012-13, depending on the Department’s capability.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you for the whirlwind tour of Sport Northern Ireland. Your presentation was spot on.

You said that tight timescales for the Places for Sport programme meant that the clubs with the greatest capacity got the funding. What help is available to smaller clubs to break into the funding market? We are all aware that in other aspects of community work the big boys and the cute boys know exactly which buttons to hit and that genuine projects can be left sitting without knowing where the start line is.

Mr Harkness:

We were conscious of that problem between the two phases, so we did work with the sporting organisations’ governing bodies. Given that we simply do not have the capacity to work with more than 6,000 sports clubs, we did outreach work with the governing bodies to advise them about the skills, competencies and plans that needed to be in place to take advantage of funding. In turn, some of those organisations ran seminars and training sessions.

We have in-house skills to identify schemes that will make a big difference to communities, and, having identified such schemes, we also have support skills to enable them to create structures and build capacity. However, time is the key issue. Once submitted, an application took six weeks to process from start to finish. Subsequently, our assessment was squeezed into four to six weeks and, for the first round of applications, the construction time was only 13 weeks, which is an enormously tight schedule for any capital scheme. Therefore time and the early notification of capital budgets are vital.

Mr K Robinson:

My absent colleague Mr McNarry muttered in my ear as he was leaving that he wanted me to ask this question: will the soccer strategy playing facilities capital programme be repeated? I hope that I got the name of the programme right. It is supposed to be for the benefit of junior clubs.

Mr Harkness:

You got the terminology right, but, as far as I know, providing £8 million for soccer was a political decision based on a future search activity. I do not know whether that process will be undertaken again. However, of the business cases that were developed, although some money was set aside for other sports, £4.4 million was set aside for soccer, which chose to spend its money on delivering grass-roots club application opportunities. However, I know of no other such funding plans for soccer.

Mr K Robinson:

If I got the question wrong, I am sure that Mr McNarry will restate it when he returns.

Mr McCartney:

The lottery made 708 awards, and there were 69 applications to the Places for Sport programme. Is there any provision for repeat funding?

Mr Harkness:

Yes. In all our capital programmes, in line with the draft Strategy for Sport 2008-2018, we ask applicants to propose what they will do more of and better. For example, how many more participants, male and female, and coaches will they attract or how many increased performances will they achieve? Those are key performance indicators. We do not continue investing until we

can measure outcomes. Therefore, many of our capital programmes have a 12-month close-out period. If a capital award has been made, we need to see that something good is being done with it. We need to see some return for government against our strategy.

After that period, and in consideration of some good returns on those targets, there is an opportunity to reapply for another scheme. Clubs are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by having had a previous funding opportunity. However, we are required to find out how well they have done with their first lot of money.

Mr McCartney:

Is the monitoring process rigorous enough to identify that?

Mr Harkness:

Yes, absolutely. Key performance indicators have been set against every project, and our project officers monitor and receive updates on each of them. At times, they also go out and visit them. In fact, the two officers who are with me today were supporting one of our previous applicants earlier this week because it had been struggling to deliver.

Mr McCartney:

Between programmes, do you draw a map to look for gaps? Do well-organised clubs or organisations have a better understanding of the application process and of what is required from them in respect of administrative backup? Do you draw a map to identify areas that, statistically, should have had a grant awarded but from which no application was submitted, so that you can assist them in the future?

Mr Harkness:

Are you talking about a map of a geographic area or a sporting area?

Mr McCartney:

I am talking about either.

Mr Harkness:

We have had both of those. For example, Larne had been underrepresented in lottery applications, and we had identified that as a black spot. We did outreach work in the community and organised roadshows, to which we invited local clubs and the local authority, because they have a key role in building capacity in local community organisations. We told them about the requirements, what will they will face and what they will have to do to compete favourably for the money available. That work is being done, and it is also being done through governing bodies. We have identified variances in the level of applications for various governing bodies, so we have gone through their associations and, as I said, we run workshops and encourage them to do outreach work.

Mr McCartney:

Was the Larne model successful?

Mr Ciarán McGurk (Sport Northern Ireland):

Funnily enough, Larne was under-represented in all forms of lottery funding, not just sports. Therefore, there were probably bigger issues, involving a lack of capacity among all the community groups in the area.

Looking at geographic areas, we conducted research across the existing 26 local councils to find out how many sports pitches and sports halls there are in places such as Larne, Derry or Omagh, as well as whether those places have a shortage of such facilities. That research covers all the main types of sporting facilities.

Mr Harkness:

An important piece of work that we are doing is encouraging local authorities to use our numeric-based information. For example, Newtownabbey is 20 pitches short. However, it may be that people in Newtownabbey have a particular sporting interest that does not require pitches. The methodology that we applied across Northern Ireland is called the six-acre standard, which sets out how much open space and how many playing facilities, such as tennis courts, there should be for every 1,000 people. We have applied that across Northern Ireland.

For example, people in Fermanagh might be more interested in water sports than in pitch-based sports. Therefore, we are encouraging local authorities to take the numeric information that we have provided and use it to provide what the local inhabitants want. However, that may well produce a strategy that is slightly different from the numeric information that we have.

Mr McCartney:

Is Awards for Sport a similar programme to Awards for All but for the fact that it offers a smaller grant?

Mr Harkness:

Yes.

Mr McCartney:

Are you going to focus your attention on that, to deal with organisations missing out because of the higher level of administration that is required?

Mr Harkness:

Awards for All is a lottery cross-distributor, and some of the distributors decided, for whatever reason, that they wanted to go their own way and run their own small grants programme. We decided that, strategically, it was an important opportunity to run a small grants programme so we adopted much the same style and developed Awards for Sport.

It is a light touch programme that grants maximum awards of £10,000, so it will not produce big facilities. Our facility analysis will not be relevant to those sorts of awards. However, the award is designed to give organisations the first taste of a grant application, including the conditions and public sector investment that are involved and the standards of accountability that we require. It is not the most strategic or targeted programme; rather, it is designed to help low-capacity groups get that first taste of public sector investment.

Mr K Robinson:

I am sure that Nick does want to go down in history as the person who described Larne as a black

spot. *[Laughter.]* As a representative for that area, I certainly do not agree with that description.

Mr Harkness:

I meant that it is a black spot in a financial sense.

Mr K Robinson:

Kieran elaborated on the point that we, in east Ulster, have been reticent in coming forward, and I think that Larne epitomised that. We also saw that happen with Cairncastle. Sometimes communities try to be self-sufficient and do not realise that the world is changing and there are opportunities. I am glad that Sport Northern Ireland has been able to help such communities maximise those opportunities.

Mr Harkness:

That has been quite successful. In fact, one of our biggest current investment projects is in that area; it is at The Cliff, and that project is nearing completion.

Mr T Clarke:

Can you share with the Committee the information that you hold with regard to councils?

Mr Harkness:

Do you mean information about the spread of awards?

Mr T Clarke:

No, I mean information about need.

Mr Harkness:

Yes, I can. All local authorities have that information. The document is called 'Bridging the Gap' and it identifies need across a range of six or eight areas. That is only the first stage; we have not yet looked at smaller sports such as boxing. We have looked at sports with higher volumes of participation such as swimming, sports that require pitches, athletics and tennis.

Mr T Clarke:

Is it possible to share that information with the Committee? I am a local councillor, and I am asking because people in the leisure departments of councils sometimes have their own ambitions and want to advance a particular sport, such as athletics, when the community may want to see more soccer pitches. Those of us who are elected could use the information to make a better case that the right sports are not being pushed in the right areas.

Mr Harkness:

I will get copies of that document to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

I commend Sport NI for its very well organised seminar held Omagh yesterday evening, which was well attended. There were similar events in Coleraine and other places.

Mr Harkness:

We have held six or eight of those events around Northern Ireland in the past two weeks.

Mr K Robinson:

I am a bit concerned that all roads seem to lead to Omagh, despite the Chairperson constantly telling us that there are no roads west of the Bann.

The Chairperson:

We are a very sporty outfit.

Lord Browne:

As part of the soccer strategy, some £8 million was allocated for capital projects. You said that some 22 clubs will have spent that money by December 2010. Where has the rest of the money been allocated and will it be spent soon?

Mr Harkness:

Most of the other investment has taken place. There was investment in governance,

administration, youth development and playing facilities. Some money also went into ground improvements to facilitate the UEFA European Under-19 Championship. My understanding is that that is the final part of the investment.

Lord Browne:

So, the whole £8 million will be spent?

Mr Harkness:

Yes, it will.

Lord Browne:

I was pleased to hear that you evaluate your expenditure and you have key targets. I am a bit concerned about the long-term benefits of the investment in sport. For example, although the Northern Ireland football team has had a few notable successes recently, it has not reached the heights of the 1980s when it qualified for the World Cup twice. In field and track athletics, we have not achieved a gold medal since Mary Peters won one in 1972. How do you evaluate expenditure to determine whether it is achieving worthwhile results?

Mr Harkness:

Today's discussion today focused on grass roots sport and developing participation. There is another department in Sport NI that looks after performance aspects, but I do not work there. That department's work included an £8 million investment in facilities for the sports institute at the University of Ulster. I understand that the Committee held a meeting there. Each year, roughly £1.5 million has been invested in the institute and around 100 athletes go through it, and it is starting to see major success. One just has to look at Ulster rugby, cricket and Gaelic teams to see that. A lot of the athletes who are enjoying success have had exposure to the institute. However, it is said that an athlete is required to undertake 12,000 hours of training to produce a gold medal, so it is a slow-cook process.

The Chairperson:

There is a focus on some sports more than others. For example, there is a lot of concentration on boxing.

Mr Harkness:

That is correct.

The Chairperson:

With the way that you framed your question, Wallace, I could nearly see Billy Hamilton going down the right wing and crossing for Gerry Armstrong to apply the finish. *[Laughter.]*

Miss McIlveen:

Have you done any work on, or research into, groups that are unwilling to accept lottery money?

Mr Harkness:

We held some discussions with the Boys' Brigade, which had shown some reluctance to accept lottery money, but my understanding is that that organisation then decided that it was acceptable. I have not had such approaches from other organisations.

Miss McIlveen:

The Boys' Brigade has contacted me and expressed a reluctance to approach Sport NI.

Mr Harkness:

Historically, that was more of a problem because our capital budgets were only from the lottery. However, in recent years, we have been attracting moneys from the Exchequer. We are developing a system of budget management whereby we align a funding stream with a project only at the award stage. That depends on what budgets are available and on whether it is likely to be a fast or slow delivery scheme, depending on its capacity. The fact that we now have a mix of income streams for our capital programmes makes it much easier to accommodate an organisation that is reluctant to accept lottery moneys. That is easier to manage with the current investment stream.

Miss McIlveen:

I realise that the purpose of the presentation was to discuss capital funding programme, but do

you have any non-capital programmes available to grass roots groups?

Mr Harkness:

Yes, absolutely. One of our flagship schemes is the Active Communities programme, and we are investing £13.5 million across the 11 new district council structures. That revenue investment will be through the district councils and will mostly be in coaches and leaders at community level. Some of those coaches and leaders may be based in governing bodies, some may be council employees and some may be club employees.

The 11 consortia are currently submitting coaching and leadership implementation plans (CLIPS). After the CLIPS are submitted they are assessed by Sport NI. From the draft strategy for sport we have taken participation targets — women’s participation, disabled participation and so on — and we have done an analysis of each geographic area and what its contribution to those targets will be. Those become the targets for the CLIP.

We have created an allocation methodology for distributing the £13.5 million to each of the 11 consortia. Each consortia will be given an indicative award of a certain amount of money and will have to tell us what it would do with that money to deliver on the key performance indicators. That is being very well received among officials and local authorities and we already have three or four CLIPS under assessment. We hope to be investing in the first employees by 1 April.

Miss McIlveen:

Is there no ability for a club to apply to you on its own merit?

Mr Harkness:

A club cannot apply on its own merit, but, depending on the sport, it may have an opportunity to take advantage of there being leaders or coaches employed through a CLIP that has been submitted by a local authority. Leaders and coaches will be employed and part of their aim will be to support local sports organisations.

The Chairperson:

Finally, Kieran has a question.

Mr McCarthy:

My question may have been answered. There are no programmes for grass roots sports clubs. Such clubs, certainly in rural areas, may feel disadvantaged. You mentioned the Awards for Sport programme, which offers a maximum grant of £10,000. There is a problem around how grass roots groups in country areas can get in touch with Sport NI to apply for the grant that they may be entitled to.

Mr Harkness:

As the Chairman said, over the last two weeks we ran six or eight seminars across Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy:

Were you in the Ards area? Were you in Comber or Ballygowan?

Mr Harkness:

I do not have the exact details with me. However, I know that seminars were held throughout Northern Ireland. If, on analysis, you feel that there is a need for a seminar in another area, we are quite happy to hold one. The seminars were very well attended and were advertised in all the local press. Many local clubs had the opportunity to pick up on those.

Mr McCarthy:

Was that done through the local councils?

Mr Harkness:

The local councils were informed of all the seminars.

The Chairperson:

The local sports development officer on the council should have been promoting that.

Mr McCarthy:

I serve on the Ards Borough Council sports development committee and I was not made aware of any seminar in our neck of the woods.

Miss McIlveen:

That is not to say that there was no seminar.

Mr Harkness:

I will look into that.

Mr McCarthy:

It would be an excellent opportunity for people in the country, at grass roots level, to get their hands on some cash.

The Chairperson:

Finally, Francie will ask a question.

Mr Brolly:

You already said “finally”.

The Chairperson:

I did; like a newsreader.

Mr Brolly:

I think that Barry is anticipating my retirement. I have two questions.

The Chairperson:

I might call on you to resign before your retire.

Mr Brolly:

There are lots of different programmes with lots of different names and that can get confusing. What, specifically, does Building Sport do that, say, Places for Sport does not?

Mr Harkness:

Building Sport was originally designed as a lottery investment programme. It had higher funding limits. We have made investments through it of over £1 million. When the late notification budgets came through — that is not to criticise anyone; it was an opportunity to take advantage of funding that was there — we had to design the programme differently to enable it to deliver some investments. Therefore, we reduced the funding threshold to £240,000 because if it were above that, it would have go to a full business case and to DCAL economists and DPF for approval, and that would have slowed the whole process. Therefore, it was designed to achieve the same thing but with smaller award levels.

Mr McGurk:

It is rebranded as Places for Sport to tie in with the new strategies. It does the same sort of thing: pitches, third-generation pitches, sports halls and so on.

Mr Brolly:

I see that in year three you intend to spend over £8.5 million on elite facilities. We have just had a meeting with departmental officials who said that it the Department is seeking permission to move that £8.5 million across to museums and other elements of DCAL.

Perhaps that is confidential information that I should not be telling you.

Mr Harkness:

Tracey, as finance manager, may have a better insight into that.

The Chairperson:

I will ask the Committee Clerk to clarify that, in case your interpretation was slightly wrong. It may have been.

Mr Brolly:

We were told that the Department was asking permission to move £8.5 million from elite facilities to museums and other areas. Is that right?

The Chairperson:

In this financial year.

Mr Harkness:

As you know, there has been a legal challenge to an elite facilities application, and that has slowed the process. We are partly out of that, but undoubtedly the slowing of the process means that there is in-year money that will not be spent on that programme. That could relate to that.

Mr Brolly:

The worst news is that, when I asked the departmental official whether that money would come back to elite facilities if the delay ran past 2010 and into 2011, she said that there was no guarantee that it would because we would then be into a different Administration.

Mr Harkness:

We would also be in a different CSR period, and there are no guarantees. I appreciate that.

The Chairperson:

I thank the Sport NI team for coming to the Committee.