



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Briefing from Sport NI on the Impact of
the Revised Departmental Budget for
2010-11**

4 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr P J Bradley
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Nick Harkness)
Eamonn McCartan) Sport NI
Dr Shaun Ogle)

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

We will now receive a briefing on the revised budget for 2010-11 from senior Sport NI officials.

I remind members that, at last week's meeting, the Committee was briefed by the Department on the proposed cuts to its 2010-11 budget. I refer members to the draft Hansard report of that briefing for reference.

I invited representatives from Sport to further inform the Committee of the implications of the proposed cuts and the impact that it will have on their work. I hope that members agree that that

was the right thing to do. The Arts Council was also invited, but has advised that it is not in a position to brief the Committee yet as its board is not meeting to discuss the proposed cuts until 10 February.

I welcome Eamonn McCartan, chief executive of Sport NI, and senior representatives Shaun Ogle and Nick Harkness. Good morning. They will talk to us about the revised budget for 2010-11. I will hand over to Eamonn straight away. Perhaps you could reintroduce your team.

Professor Eamonn McCartan (Sport NI):

Good morning, Chairman and Committee members. On my left is Nick Harkness and on my right is Shaun Ogle, who are directors of SNI, so the senior management team of Sport NI is here. I offer an apology from my chairman, Mr Dominic Walsh, who cannot be here because of business commitments. The invitation was, to say the least, a little bit of late notice. We felt that, through due respect to the Committee and for the support that it has given to sport, we would do our best to be here.

We will make a 10-minute presentation, because we hope to have about 20 minutes for questions, which we will try our best to answer. If we cannot answer any question, we undertake to give the Committee an answer within 24 to 48 hours. As with all good presentations, I will take the Committee through it. We will give members a quick introduction of sport in Northern Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland — there is a difference. We will also look at some of the challenges that face us all. I spoke of this Committee's support, and we have tried to work to deliver sport to members' constituencies and communities. When we advocate increased or further funding for sport, as would be expected of us, we do it on your behalf to ensure that your constituencies have access to one of our most major and important cultural activities.

We will have a very quick look at the strategic response to the Government's view of sport, which is 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2009-2019'. This Committee has looked at that strategy and has endorsed it, as have the Executive. We will also look quickly at the likely implications of the revised budget. I say "likely implications" because our council has yet to meet to determine how the cuts will be delivered to your constituents and communities.

We accept fully that cuts are the order of the day. SNI wants to play its part in delivering a

value-for-money, effective and efficient service. We are looking at ourselves to see how we can be more effective and efficient. As the Committee would expect, we are here to lobby on behalf of sport and the contribution that it has made.

We collectively share a view, because this Committee accepted the strategy for sport, as did the Executive. That view promotes a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport that contributes to a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. There are two elements to that: the personal benefits, such as health, social well-being, an increased network of friends, and, above all, the contribution to social cohesion and social capital; and the societal benefits, which concern not only what sport can do for the individual but what it can do for society in its contribution to the gross domestic product, which is about 2.0%, or £446 million per annum, and 13,700 jobs.

We want to point out some of the challenges that face you as elected representatives, and which face schools and communities in your areas. In the schools in your communities, your constituents' children are actually receiving less than 2 hours of physical education a week. I know that many at this table have more expertise in education than I have — some have been principals — and they will know the benefit of physical exercise as a contribution to lifestyle. In Northern Ireland, some major sports grounds that are being used would be closed in the rest of the United Kingdom. Your constituents are being exposed to a lower quality of facilities.

Our sports facilities are decaying, and many of you who have been involved in local government will know that many facilities — whether it is Derry City Football Club's ground or that of Crusaders Football Club — are in a very bad state, much worse than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales, which were funded differently. Our citizens, your constituents and you communities, are being exposed to an unequal provision of facilities.

It is a self-evident truth that, while huge amounts of money have been invested in England, Scotland and Wales, particularly in performance — and the quality of the performance of athletes there has increased — we have lower levels of international performance vis-à-vis the rest of the United Kingdom. For a variety of reasons, your constituents are participating in sport less than they previously were. That is evident when one opens one's eyes in shopping malls, when attending major functions and when we see the rise of obesity and all the factors that are associated with obesity, such as poor health and low self-esteem. Such challenges are not only the responsibility of Sport NI but of the elected representatives of this Committee and the

Executive.

Every £1 that is invested in sport provides a return of about £30. Much of that return is delivered by the voluntary effort. We recognise that cuts have to be made, and that there is a public sector issue about expenditure, but we need a strategic approach to the application of those cuts and we need to consider what will provide a high return for the investment. For a relatively small amount of money, compared to that invested in the Department of Education or the Department of Health, we can get a bigger bang for our buck. I will pass over to my colleague Nick Harkness.

Mr Nick Harkness (Sport NI):

Thank you, Eamonn. Eamonn has articulated some of the challenges facing sport in Northern Ireland. Members will be aware that the Executive recently approved the strategy for sport “Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2009-2019”. That strategy expresses the Government’s commitment to a vision of a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport. Working with the Department, and in consultation with the sports sector, we identified three pillars of action: developing participation, performance standards and places for sport — the three Ps. The strategy, which was approved by the Executive, identified that a total expenditure of £369 million was required over the 2008-2011 period. That is not all for Sport Northern Ireland’s budget; rather, it is across district councils, schools, and so on. The late approval of that strategy meant that the joined-up investment did not take place. Budgets that were already too low to deliver the strategy are being cut, and that reduces the ability of us and our partners, including all those other agencies, to achieve the targets.

What is the impact of under-resourcing? There are 26 high-level targets in the strategy that fall under the three pillars of participation, performance and places. Our submission summarises and groups together those targets to give the Committee an idea of some of the areas to which those targets refer. A research framework for participation in sport, which the Committee is particularly interested in, is under way. It relates to participation rates for specific groups that are under-represented. For example, recent research shows that children and young people, people with disabilities and women are under-represented in sporting profiles. The economic impact of sport is also included in the targets.

The targets for performance focus on athlete performing standards, ensuring that governing bodies are fit for purpose and sustainable and performance in the 2014 Commonwealth Games and beyond. Eamonn referred to the targets for places, which include accessible quality and safe places for sport. In light of the new legislation on safety of sports grounds that the Executive approved in recent years, we are aware that there will be downward pressure on spectator numbers at many major sports grounds unless there is a significant investment over coming years. We need to co-ordinate planning legislation to provide for active communities and active travel, and importance is attributed to national parks and opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Professor McCartan:

We run a programme, Awards for Sport, which we opened up to district councils. It involves a small grant of up to approximately £10,000. We received 486 applications from members' constituents, the total value of which was £3.9 million. Under our current provision, we can spend £400,000. Therefore, we have £400,000 to service 486 applications. We need almost £4 million.

I will personalise the applications and highlight projects in members' constituencies. In Strangford, we have put moneys into Strangford Lough Yacht Club, the Countryside Access and Activities Network and the purchase of 18 new boats. In East Belfast, we have invested more than £75,000 in Harland and Wolff Welders Football Club and £87,000 into Knockbreda Parish Football Club. In Foyle, we provided £250,000 of funding for Stewartstown Harps, £37,000 for U3A. We have also given £225,000 to Ballymena GAC. I must tell you, gentlemen, that in Ken Robinson's constituency of East Antrim, we provided £100,000 for Larne Borough Council and £500,000 for Larne Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club.

Not a day passes without members around this table writing to ask me to fund projects. We will not be able to fund those projects to the same level as we could in the past. There is clear evidence of need, and it is clearly articulated in Awards for Sport. That project received 486 applications, the funding for which would cost £4 million. We have £400,000 to spend on it.

The Chairperson:

The Committee has a female member; I need to say that.

Miss McIlveen:

Do not worry.

Professor McCartan:

Did I miss that?

Dr Shaun Ogle (Sport NI):

You said “gentlemen”.

Professor McCartan:

I offer my sincere apologies.

Miss McIlveen:

It is quite all right, I am used to it.

Mr McCartney:

Strangford got plenty of money; she is happy enough.

The Chairperson:

I ask you to conclude the presentation; it has lasted 15 minutes already.

Dr Ogle:

I want to put more flesh on what Eamonn and Nick said. In broad terms, we are talking about Northern Ireland catching up and providing an infrastructure at community level, such as that which routinely exists elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

We have talked about performance, places and participation, but it is unfortunate that another three Ps that dominate the conversations at this meeting. One is parity. Why do our athletes and community groups not experience the same opportunities as people do elsewhere in the UK? There is still a huge poverty of aspiration. The peace process has kicked in after 30 years of conflict. Generations growing up now will aspire to stand on an Olympic Games or Commonwealth Games podium, whatever the occasion or whatever the sport. For the first time, younger people here are beginning to believe that they can do that. However, that possibility is being ripped out from underneath them by these cuts. Above all, there is public value. Members

need not take our word for it — we have carried out surveys of people who vote for MLAs. Some 90% of people value sport and everything that it entails, including participation and performance at the highest level or, indeed, at any level. To us, that constitutes a persuasive and long-standing argument for investment.

The cuts will probably result in the loss of funding to 120 local sports community groups and the loss of 24 community posts. People in such posts work in areas with the highest levels of deprivation where there is a great need for people participating to improve their health. Five physical literacy co-ordinator posts are also in jeopardy. Northern Ireland has no specialist sports colleges or any of the other machinery that is routinely on offer to children in the rest of the UK. We lack those very basic ingredients. All we ask is that the aspirations that young people have throughout your communities and constituencies are backed up.

Eamonn mentioned the huge oversubscription to the Awards for Sport project. That now occurs more and more routinely. We must also consider the broader strategic issue. As public expenditure across the board diminishes, whether in Whitehall, Northern Ireland or elsewhere, pressure on lottery funding will increase. We are conscious that the use of that lottery funding will become a substitute for what should be funded by the Exchequer through the Government. The pressures are mounting already. I refer the Committee to an article that in appeared in the 'Financial Times' two weeks ago that highlighted great examples of how people working as lottery distributors, such as ourselves, are coming under severe pressure for funding.

Professor McCartan:

Sport NI recognises the need to adjust funding and to incur cuts in the public sector to meet targets. However, Sport NI is primarily concerned about the disproportionate allocation of funds to sport. The cut in funding to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is £26 million — £20 million in capital and £6 million in revenue — means that sport has undergone an overall cut of 15% in its budget. The impact is greater on revenue. Revenue is about people, and people are about sport. Some £6 million was cut from DCAL's revenue. A cut of £2 million of that £6 million was incurred by Sport NI. Of the remainder, £1.1 million was incurred by arts, while museums and libraries took up the other £2.9 million.

Sport NI stands ready to take its fair proportion of the cuts, but we want to know why they were distributed so disproportionately when one considers the value that sport contributes to

society. We want to examine and explore with the Committee the future of the Sport Matters strategy because, if this is the direction in which we are going, the validity and reliability of that strategy must surely be questioned.

The Chairperson:

Eamonn, I appreciate that you and your colleagues have come before the Committee at short notice and that your agency's council has not met to discuss this issue.

You presentation is strong in that it quantifies several aspects. Can you quantify the detriment that the reduction in funding would have on adult levels of participation?

I attended an information session on the Awards for Sport and saw the levels of public interest in trying to get grants for equipment. You say that that programme will now be rowed back to £400,000. Is that right?

Professor McCartan:

We have £400,000 to deal with 486 applications that amount to £4 million, and I am more than happy to provide the Committee with the relevant evidence.

There is clear evidence from throughout the developed and Western World that adult participation in sport is declining, and that is particularly true in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. Recently, we commissioned the adult sport and physical activity survey (SAPAS), which is a more focused research tool than the continuous household survey. Shaun will talk about that survey.

Dr Ogle:

The survey backs up the perception of a declining participation rate in sport, and it is characterised by the frustration that we probably all share about the fact that the factors that inhibit increased participation in sport are largely not sports related. Huge educational factors are involved, such as where someone is educated and different levels of education. Income is another huge factor that inhibits participation levels. Those broad structural factors have existed for 10 or 12 years. As Eamonn said, we are talking today from a shared platform. Although we argue on behalf of Sport Northern Ireland, as Nick Harkness well knows, we need to work with our partners in health and education to deliver the changes that will enable participation rates in

Northern Ireland to rise and to remain high.

Mr Harkness:

The truth of the matter is that, across the community, disproportionate levels of participation exist between men and women and between people in areas of high social need and those in affluent areas. The people who participate in sport now will probably continue to do so despite the cuts, but we need extraordinary measures to get more women involved and to get into areas of high social need, where there are high levels of ill health and low life expectancy. Much of that relates to physical inactivity, which can largely be provided through sport. Therefore, if we cut budgets, the people who need help most will not get it. The people who can help themselves will continue to participate.

Professor McCartan:

The strategy for sport identifies a number of sectors in which we will seek to improve participation. We need to increase participation levels in sport for people with disabilities and, bearing in mind the direct correlation between social income and participation, for people who are socially excluded. In addition, we need to increase participation levels by women and young people. As Nick said, those of us who belong to clubs, whether they are golf, sailing, Gaelic football or soccer clubs, will probably continue to go to them. As with their counterparts in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic Ireland, it is the people who live in estates and other socially deprived areas who are unable to gain access to opportunities to participate in sport, and it is those people for whom we will find it difficult to raise percentage participation levels in sport and physical recreation.

Miss McIlveen:

Thank you for coming. Before listening to the previous presentation from departmental officials, my questions might have been different. Nevertheless, we are where we are. As a result of the February monitoring round, £722,000 that was earmarked to carry out motorsport safety work as part of the strategy for sport is being handed back. That safety work should remain a priority, even more so in light of the comments about safety at such events by the senior coroner, John Leckey. Given that motorsport safety is still a priority, work on it should go ahead, but that would further impact on Sport NI's resources and on how it carries out its work. When was the project initiated and when did you realise that the £722,000 would not be spent?

Professor McCartan:

The money was ring-fenced, so it could be used only for two- and four-wheeled motorsport.

Mr Harkness:

We were offered that money in our budget notification letter, the date of which I am not sure. That was ring-fenced, as Eamonn said, solely for two- and four-wheel motorsport. We had not applied for or planned for it. The governing body had no plans in place, and no business case had been made.

The requirements that are imposed on us in the propriety that we apply to such matters meant that the first stage was to work with two- and four-wheel motorsport to pull all the information together. We did not even know the projects that were required. It has now emerged that there were in the region of 44 different projects pulled together. Process is getting in the way, but it is process that we are required and audited against. We are required to shoehorn those 44 different schemes into one business case. That business case has already been submitted to the Department, which is concerned that it does not meet the normal requirements of a business case, as are we.

We are also required to use the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to manage procurement. CPD brings government requirements to the procurement, but that brings a degree of complexity and timescales. If we had wanted to complete the projects properly, we would not have asked for that money in-year. I have told the Committee before that fast-tracked capital projects do not work. Capital projects need a gestation period for planning and planning applications, and there are other complexities.

Safety has to take priority, and we have gone back to the Department about the security of tenure. Normally, for sites that we invest in, we require that the applicant body has security over the site so that there is a guaranteed period in which sport can get the value back from the investment. Many of those sites, for example, the tracks, are owned by multiple landlords. They might go through a forest park or a private lane, so we have had to go back to the Department to tell it that we need to set those protocols aside. Such issues could come before the Public Accounts Committee if they are not handled correctly.

It is frustrating and I am frustrated by it, but these are unusual circumstances. These are ring-

fenced budgets. We would have preferred to state at the start of the year that we would take only £200,000 of that money and use the rest for something else, but that was not in our gift because it was ring-fenced.

Miss McIlveen:

When did you become aware that you were not going to be able to spend the money?

Mr Harkness:

We had taken an optimistic view and tried to work collectively. It was around November or December. About £250,000 of it is equipment related, and we are confident that that equipment can be bought, because that is simply a tendering exercise. CPD has advised that some of the larger capital projects require the appointment of a project manager. A project manager procurement exercise on top of the tendering exercise adds weeks to the timescale. It is not the way that we would want to go about it.

Professor McCartan:

Another issue needs to be taken into account. The development and delivery of fast-track capital projects requires capacity for all concerned; capacity within SNI, DCAL and within two- and four-wheel motorsport. Many of the projects that the two- and four-wheel motorsports were bringing forward were relatively new to their management. They were also on a steep learning curve.

Miss McIlveen:

How many accountants do you have working on business cases in Sport NI?

Mr Harkness:

Three people work in our department looking after economic appraisals. They are not all fully qualified accountants.

Professor McCartan:

We have afforded two- and four-wheel motorsport access to those staff in the preparation of their plans. To complete 44 projects in a short period of time is technically complex, particularly with our landowners' issues over who owns what.

Miss McIlveen:

What was the timescale that you were given? When was the project initiated?

Mr Harkness:

It was in our budget notification letter; I do not know the date of that, but it would have been at the start of the financial year. It is my understanding that we were notified of an element of it, but I do not know the date of that letter.

Miss McIlveen:

Could you find out the date of the letter?

Mr Harkness:

Yes.

Lord Browne:

Like all Committee members, I recognise the importance of sport to the well-being of the population. In your presentation, you referred to the difficult economic times that we live in and recognised that cuts will have to be made. Will those cuts have any impact on the staffing and the administration of your organisation? Have you looked at any cost efficiencies that you could make in your administration? Have you carried out a review into that?

Professor McCartan:

SNI is conducting a review. We are always looking for ways and means to deliver the services that are required of us more effectively and more efficiently. For example, we are looking at the use of consultants, their cost and whether we could do the job better ourselves. Everybody knows that we bring in the consultants and tell them the story, they then write up a report and we check their spelling. I am being frivolous, but there are things that we can do better ourselves. There are also things that the public sector can do better itself.

We are looking at our staffing levels to see whether we can reduce them to make us more effective and more efficient without having a negative impact. As a managerial team, we are, and have been, looking at those issues in anticipation of the cuts.

Lord Browne:

I am concerned about the elite facilities programme. I know that the delay was due to the judicial review by Belfast City Council. However, the delays were also caused by a review on the handling of stage 2 applications. I am concerned about the implications of those delays for the 50 metre pool in north Down. With the 2012 Olympics approaching, are you confident that that facility will be ready in time?

Professor McCartan:

We are confident that the 50 metre pool will be built according to its timetable, which estimates completion in spring 2012.

Mr Harkness:

For the record, the judicial review is being handled by FGS McClure Watters.

The legal funding agreement for the pool is in its final stages, and we expect that there will be an expenditure of close to £400,000 in this financial year towards the development costs to date. We expect that to go on-site within months. The project is on target at the minute.

Sport NI made decisions on the second competition in November. Obviously, that was delayed because of the appeals and challenges, and we have notified the Department of the recommendations. Those recommendations are with the Department at present so that it can make a decision on how we should proceed with the second competition.

Lord Browne:

I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council.

The Chairperson:

I commend your lack of parochialism; it was very generous of you to reach into north Down.
[Laughter.]

Mr McCartney:

My first question is about participation. Nick, you said that when the money is not invested it is obvious who suffers the most. Where does the responsibility lie for ensuring that there is more participation in sport at school? Obviously, multiple Departments are responsible, but do

individual schools have the autonomy to take decisions on the issue?

Mr Harkness:

The Government have a target in England for children to do five hours of PE or extra curricular sport each week. We have done some research looking into how much sport is undertaken by children in schools in Northern Ireland, which shows that around 17% of primary schools provide only two hours each week. The figure for secondary schools escapes me, but it is in the presentation. The percentages for primary school and secondary school are significantly low.

The Department of Education has advised us that it does not set time constraints for any curriculum subject be that French, English or mathematics. Therefore, it is not in a position to set a time constraint for PE, which disappoints us. We would love to see a minimum time imposed, but that is the Department's position on the issue. Much comes down to the level of priority afforded to extra curricular physical activity by boards of governors and principals. The board does not set stipulated time constraints.

The Chairperson:

The figures state that that will result in the loss of five physical literacy co-ordinator posts.

Mr McCartney:

Certain schools in Derry have a great tradition of sporting excellence. As a result, they have better physical education departments, and children have a greater desire to be part of that. Some schools do not see physical education as important, because they will never win the trophy that everyone aspires to win; therefore, they put their efforts into other areas. How is that gap bridged?

Professor McCartan:

Winning the trophy is important. However, participation in sport and physical recreation by the whole school is of greater importance. The Department, therefore, as I understand it, recommends the time allocated to participation in physical education. However, implementation of that recommendation is at the schools' discretion. You will find, therefore, that some principals have a personal fondness for sport and physical education and recreation, and know the benefits for health and social, physical and emotional well-being of a lifestyle that has a major element of physical activity. Ken, as a former principal, will know that. That may extend to

intramural competitive sports. Schools that have a great intramural programme can also be successful in delivering sport and physical recreation.

Dr Ogle:

The infrastructure in Northern Ireland is very traditional. There is no reason why we cannot share in the innovations of elsewhere. Therefore, rather than viewing the sport solely in the context of one school with one school population, talented children can, for example, be taken out of those schools and educated in special sports schools. Such schools could concentrate on a range of sports rather than just the traditional fare. That would give young people a wonderful opportunity to transfer between sports. That happens routinely elsewhere.

The question was asked about where the responsibility lies. A lot of it lies with the Department's outlook and what it wants to do with the schools estate, and with ourselves in convincing and persuading, which we have been doing for years. Look at the gaps that exist in Northern Ireland and the opportunities that are lacking for your constituents and the young people in your communities. That is not for the want or will on our part to make that happen.

Professor McCartan:

Sustained participation in sport and physical activity requires a major input by the school. However, there are two other elements. Children live in a community, and school is only a part of their lives. Therefore, local authority provision needs to ensure that what they do in school is complemented by what they do in local authority facilities and in the voluntary sector through soccer, rugby and Gaelic clubs.

We ran Youth Sport for a number of years. That brought together activities in the school and provided students with a place to play sport through a club in the community with facilities that were provided by the local authority. That triangle of facilities is more likely to deliver sustained participation, because children play sport not only in school but have somewhere to play it after school. We also advocated for one public sector sporting estate, to which the Bain report refers.

We have local authority and education and library board provision. On occasion, therefore, there is duplication and scarcity. In the west of the city, where I grew up, one school has four grass pitches, a running track, a dust pitch, a swimming pool and two handball courts, and is closed over Christmas and Easter, throughout the summer and at weekends, and closes at 4.30

pm.

We advocate the construction of public estates, where schools and communities can come together through local provision. Resources are scarce, and, as Ken will know, there are management issues too. The two responses that are often made to such proposals are that the school cannot be used because of insurance concerns and because it is inconvenient for the caretaker.

The Chairperson:

I will move to Ken and then P J.

Mr K Robinson:

I feared that you would come to me when the caretaker was mentioned; I know my place.

[Laughter.]

Eamonn, as always, you have given a very bullish submission; for the benefit of Hansard, I said “bullish”. You came straight to the point without any waffle, and I like that. You have set out your stall very clearly.

In your response to Raymond, you answered the question that I was going to ask about participation, particularly at primary school level. I think that there is a problem with the profile of primary school staff. I have posed it in questions for written answer many times, but I do not know whether I am allowed to say it: why do we not have enough male role models in primary schools, particularly in the areas that you highlighted? People who are young, who have plenty of energy and who children can look up to can help to drive forward the physical education programme at that level.

Youth clubs, the Boys’ Brigade, the Boy Scouts and all the other organisations in the Province have a role in taking children to another level and introducing them to intermediate sport. You also mentioned the role of local government. I declare an interest as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council, and I am delighted to say that we have worked with our local education and library board. However, it is a challenge to sort out the practical issues concerning pitches, such as when they can be used, who can use them, insurance, and so on.

What worries me, Eamonn, and perhaps you can give an indication on this —

The Chairperson:

Ken, perhaps you could phrase your question in the context of the revised budget. The discussion has become very general.

Mr K Robinson:

Given that resources will be so tight, how can we get all the agencies together? What do we need to do to bring them all together and get maximum bang for our buck? Elite facilities, local government facilities and school facilities are all sitting, yet good folk like you have to fight for less than £500,000 to allow more than 400 clubs and organisations to try to do something. How do we pull all that together?

Professor McCartan:

The primary way in which we can pull all that together is through the Sport Matters strategy. Under Dr Shaun Ogle, Sport Northern Ireland was the first organisation to create a strategy for sport in the United Kingdom. The strategy requires input from everyone; we are just one piece of the jigsaw. The Department of Education, education and library boards, local councils, district councils and other statutory bodies must all play a part in it.

It is not for me to outline the strategic planning process to you, but what happens is that everyone comes into a group and agrees to the vision and says that the plans are great. However, we must convert that willingness and support into action. The representatives of Belfast City Council, Newry and Mourne District Council, the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Southern Education and Library Board or wherever have to incorporate the vision into their business planning model or corporate plan. There is an old-fashioned Belfast saying about people putting their money where their mouth is.

We still have to go through more phases of the sports strategy. The trick is for us to insist that the people who come to the strategic planning days, and who agreed that participation should be increased through leisure centres, education and library boards, the joint provision of playing facilities or the joint provision of posts, should set related targets in their corporate plans and business plans. We will make real progress only if we embed the plans in, and place responsibility on, those organisations.

Mr Harkness:

I will give you an example of joined-up work that has been done recently. Members may have heard of our Activ8 programme, which takes place in primary schools. It uses sport as a tool to deliver the whole curriculum: science, mathematics, English, and so on. The programme is the central point, and all sorts of experiments are conducted and set against eight guiding principles of being physically active. Activ8 was awarded the London 2010 Inspire mark. At a recent event in London, it was set up as one of the key programmes that is delivering the Olympic message.

Initially, our message was only about physical activity, but, more recently, we became aware that the Food Standards Agency was about to go into primary schools and preach healthy eating. It was going to spend its resources on a new communications route, and, after starting negotiations with the Food Standards Agency a few weeks ago, we launched the Activ8 Eatwell campaign, which is a partnership with Sport Northern Ireland and the Food Standards Agency. Those bodies were able to bring £50,000 to that programme, and the messages of promoting physical activity and of eating well are delivered through the one programme. Teachers have to understand only one lesson plan rather than two.

That is an example of how each body had a little bit of resource and generated resources from the other. Without that sort of catalyst, the resource will be lost. That shows the impact that the cuts are likely to have. For example, we would love to put a physical literacy co-ordinator for primary schools in each of the five education and library board areas to guide teachers through the principles of developing physical literacy and the building blocks of physical activity rather than simply specialising in sport at such a young age.

The Chairperson:

Are those co-ordinators currently in place?

Mr Harkness:

Three are in place, but funding for them came from time bound awards. The two other boards did not apply. We would love to have physical literacy co-ordinators in each of the five board areas who become the catalyst for training teachers to work with young people in primary schools.

Mr K Robinson:

Who funded those posts?

Mr Harkness:

I do not know the exact percentage that was funded by Sport NI, but we funded the vast majority of the costs that are associated with those posts.

The Chairperson:

Can you write to the Committee with that information?

Mr Harkness:

Yes, I will.

Mr McCartney:

Have any surveys been carried out on how children view physical education and physical activity at school?

Mr Harkness:

I do not know of any attitudinal surveys that have been carried out among young people, but Sport NI carried out a light-touch postal survey of primary schools, and from that we understand that only 17% of primary schools provide two hours of physical activity a week.

Dr Ogle:

We carried out an attitudinal survey in the dim and distant past, and I will send the Committee a reference to that survey. It was on the enjoyment of sport in school and what it does for young people. We intended to repeat the survey, but, as ever, cuts meant that we did not. It was published widely, and we will send the material to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

If you send the information through the Committee staff, we can all benefit from it.

Mr P J Bradley:

I had a page of questions to ask, but Ken's and Raymond's questions covered most of that. Thank you for your presentation, which brought home the reality of what the revised budget will

mean. You touched on education, health and, naturally, finance. Does enough departmental activity take place on sport and the financing of sport? Are enough people talking about the necessity to fund sport? Last week, an announcement was made of £150 million in lottery funding from now to 2015. Is the timing of that announcement unhelpful?

The Chairperson:

I ask that you group P J's question with Kieran's.

Mr McCarthy:

I apologise for being late. The representatives from Sport NI inspire me, and I have confidence in Sport NI's work. Eamonn talked about the facilities that are lying there and not being used. Joined-up government is the way forward on such issues, especially in times of cuts.

Professor McCartan:

There is scope for more joined-up government among Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, and DCAL through Sport NI. A tremendous benefit and a tremendous multiplier effect would result if the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure were to join up to ensure the delivery of each Department's public service agreements, which in our case is to ensure the delivery of increased participation.

We share common objectives, and empirical evidence shows that people who participate regularly in sport, physical activity and physical recreation enjoy the benefits of better health. Empirical evidence shows that people who enjoy regular participation are less obese than people who do not. There is empirical evidence to show that those who participate in a structured way in sport, physical activity and physical recreation can make positive contributions to their society, whether that be in their primary or secondary schools.

We are not the only people who think of that. The Department of Health in Scotland thinks of that also. It made a contribution of many millions of pounds to the Scottish Sports Council and asked it to achieve some of the Department's health objectives. One of those is achieved through increased participation in sport, physical recreation and physical activity, and the tackling of obesity and diabetes. We have evidence of elsewhere in the United Kingdom when Departments

have come together and funded an outside agency to achieve their objectives. That is possible in respect of education and health.

Education uses what is known as the green book to build its facilities. As far as I am aware, we are still building dust pitches, which are a nightmare for kids to play on because they scrape their knees and legs. SNI is quite willing to enter into partnership with the Department of Education to build facilities that will meet the needs not only of schools but of communities. It goes back to the point that Kieran made earlier. There are tremendous opportunities for joint work involving the Department of Education, the Department of Health and us. There are also opportunities on other fronts. For example, Loughborough University has a technical centre for sport. The University of Ulster is considering creating a sporting campus that looks at science and various industrial applications and developments for sport. We could also work quite easily with the Department for Employment and Learning on that issue.

Dr Ogle:

We share the frustrations that most members have talked about: it goes back to the execution gap. Everybody will say that sharing facilities is motherhood and apple pie, but what prevents that from happening? That is crucial. We are a smallish non-departmental public body up against huge conglomerates in the Departments, so what is the trick? How can we be helped, and how can we help, to make it happen in reality? Everybody says that it is a great thing, but not a lot of it happens.

Mr Harkness:

I saw an article that referred mainly to a previous Big Lottery Fund programme called 'New Opportunities for PE and Sport'. A lot of the time, the article was spent focusing on the facility and good work that the programme did. However, the programme that was launched was not a capital fund at all and was not specific to sport. For example, some of the programmes are concerned with relieving the damage of alcohol abuse to families, and so on. The way in which those launches are reported is unfortunate. I do not dispute that they are worthy causes, but it was very unlikely that the consultation document would make a significant impact on sport.

The Chairperson:

Thanks very much, Eamonn, Nick and Shaun for coming along.

Professor McCartan:

On behalf of the council and its chairperson, Dominic Walsh, I thank members. I ask members to consider supporting us, because there is a closing date for responses to DFP. I think that it is 26 February. Members will not need me to remind them that these are draft proposals. I know that there are a lot of good cases floating about, but we hope that this Committee, as individuals and as a collective, will put forward as best they can the case for sport and the proportionate cut in SNI's funding.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. Members, we have a deadline of tomorrow for the Committee's submission to the Finance and Personnel Committee's report on the proposed cuts. That is what is guiding us and that is why we had Sport NI before us today.

We may want to write to Sport NI to seek clarification on the Awards for Sport programme. Does that come from the 2010-11 budget? Or, am I mistaken in thinking that it fell within the 2009-2010 budget? I will be seeking clarification on that.

The Committee Clerk has drafted a response in which she has highlighted the Committee's concerns with the Department's public consultation process, and she has made the point that the DCAL budget should not be seen as a soft touch. Based on what we have heard today, do members wish to add anything to the response?

Mr K Robinson:

The issue is central to the well-being of our whole community. It would be useful to squeeze in an extra paragraph to make a strong point. The cuts to Sport NI's budget will have a significant impact across the spectrum, but particularly in deprived areas. I had a couple of points to make, but you stopped me mid flow, Chairperson. Where are our fast food outlets located? They are located in areas where the uptake of physical activity is low. The schools that suffer the cuts in staffing are those to which people do not want to apply, because there is no long-term career prospect. There is a multitude of issues involved.

I do not know whether we can get Sport NI a great deal more funding, but if it is trying to bring all those agencies together, and if it needs a little bit more funding, we should highlight the fact that there is no point in approximately 500 agencies applying for share of £500,000; it is

hardly worth filling in the form. We have had experience of those situations.

I do not know how we will frame it; perhaps, the Committee Clerk could do it in her usual way. An extra paragraph pushing that case would be useful, because it cuts through the guff.

The Chairperson:

Catherine, are you satisfied that you are sufficiently informed to draft a response to the Finance Committee?

The Committee Clerk:

Yes, really the Committee wants to highlight the area of sport.

The Chairperson:

Yes.