



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

---

**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

---

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

---

**Inquiry into Participation in Sport and  
Physical Activity in Northern Ireland**

11 March 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

---

**COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

---

**Inquiry into Participation in Sport and Physical Activity in  
Northern Ireland**

---

11 March 2010

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)  
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Lord Browne  
Mr Billy Leonard  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Ken Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Geraldine Compton	)	
Mrs Louise Coyle	)	Women's Centres Regional Partnership
Mrs Tiziania O'Hara	)	
Mr Gerry Kelly	)	SkillsActive Northern Ireland
Mrs Siobhan Weir	)	
Mr Philip Faithfull	)	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Mr Jim Rose	)	

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

I welcome the representatives from the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP). I invite

Louise Coyle to introduce her team and outline their various roles in the women's sector.

**Mrs Louise Coyle (Women's Centre Regional Partnership):**

I am the policy officer for the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN), which is one of the four partners in the partnership. Tiziana O'Hara is the WCRP co-ordinator, and Geraldine Compton is the co-ordinator of the Waterside Women's Centre and is here to give you a flavour of what happens in women's centres and how they can benefit from sporting and physical activity. The Committee has received our written submission, and I will provide a wee summary of that after which members can ask questions, which I hope we will be able to answer.

There are four lead regional and subregional women's organisations, and we link 14 front line women's organisations across Northern Ireland. The partnership emerged from the report of the review group on women's organisations providing support and services to disadvantaged areas. The four key lead partners of the partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the Women's Support Network (WSN), NIRWN and the Women's Centre in Derry.

The 14 women's centres are spread across Northern Ireland, with seven in the greater Belfast and Lisburn areas, four in the north-west and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Those centres work together to create an infrastructure that will support community-based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

The WCRP tackles inequality and disadvantage experienced by women and supports community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities. We work for policy change, which is why we sent a submission to the Committee for its inquiry. The women's centres and women's groups have, for many years, considered and implemented solutions that increase women's participation in sport and physical activity. My colleagues and I want to share with the Committee our knowledge and evidence of what works for women.

Women often experience more barriers to participation in public and social life than men do, including in sport and physical activity. The WCRP initiated the women's learning partnership project as a result of the knowledge and experience that the women's centres and women's groups and organisations have gained over the years on how women prefer to engage in physical activity. The women's learning partnership project is currently funded by the Big Lottery Fund,

under the Live and Learn programme. The project is funded for five years and is all about improving physical and mental health in target disadvantaged areas. The project aims to improve the physical and mental health of women, and we have detailed how we deliver that in our written submission. There is a range of sport and physical activity provision, which is important.

The women's learning partnership project deliberately set out to engage with hard-to-reach women. The views of those women helped to shape the nature of the proposal that we made and the development of the partnership, so there was a lot of discussion and research with the people who we wanted to benefit from the project before it was ever designed and funded. We wanted to get those women to participate and to enable them to influence the project's future development through the project monitoring and evaluation that takes place throughout the five years of the project — it is constantly monitored.

There is a prospectus that contains a wealth of provision, from dancercise to the Golden Girl's health club, the Mammy Programme, chair-based activity, line dancing and aquarobics. That range of activities clearly indicates that the WCRP is cognisant of the multiplicity of roles that women have. Older women, mothers and those with mobility issues are all catered for and are, in fact, actively targeted, as you can tell from the names of some of the programmes.

The ethos of the women's centre is to reduce the barriers to women's participation and to provide a holistic and supportive environment. That is the key to what we do. The other courses and activities delivered by the women's centres, such as essential skills, personal self-confidence and self-awareness, are ideally placed to recruit the kind of people whom we want to engage in physical sport and activity, including the marginalised and those least likely to participate in other areas of their lives.

In the research that was carried out before the project began, and through the work that women's organisations do in general, lack of childcare was identified as being the biggest barrier that women face. It has been identified in recent research as the primary barrier to women's engagement. The women's centres delivering the women's learning partnership project provide free on-site childcare for those beneficiaries participating in the project, and, indeed, in many other activities and courses that we offer.

The women's learning partnership project ensures the improvement of the physical and mental

health of local women in Northern Ireland, and in our written submission we have detailed all the ways in which we are doing that.

I refer the Committee to the gender equality strategy, which recognises that treating men and women the same — that is, being gender neutral — is not the solution to eradicating gender inequality. The strategy states that:

“Treating men and women the same will not ensure equal outcomes because of the different experiences of women and men and the different economic and social positions occupied by them.”

It commits the Government to apply gender mainstreaming when implementing the strategy. To tackle gender inequalities effectively we need to address the structures and systems that are the root causes of gender inequality.

Gender mainstreaming challenges decision-makers, like the Committee, to question the assumption that policies and programmes affect everyone in the same way. We in the WCRP argue that women’s experience of participation is different. We thank the Committee for reading our report and for asking us for a submission. We ask you to take account of the multiplicity of roles that women have. For example, the experience of an older disabled woman with caring responsibilities will be different from that of somebody else. Trying to engage in sport and physical activity poses a challenge to that person.

We urge the Committee to take into account the different experiences of women and the barriers that they may face when trying to engage in sport and physical activity. If we have one thing to say to you this morning it is that our experience is that women are not reluctant to engage in sport and physical activity. Our programme is completely oversubscribed. Tiziana has brought some figures that bear that out. Women are not reluctant to participate when the right environment and conditions are created and when every attempt is made to remove the barriers that women face.

**The Chairperson:**

What is the one change in government policy that you believe would have the biggest impact on increasing participation levels among women?

**Mrs Coyle:**

The single biggest change would be policy-makers understanding that equality does not mean

gender neutrality. Women are not reluctant to engage when the right environments exist — quite the reverse. If policy-makers made that change in their thinking, it would make a difference for women.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Thank you very much for your presentation. You mentioned that childcare is one of the biggest barriers to women participating in sport and physical activity. Obviously, the provision of good quality childcare on a wider basis would break that barrier down. What other barriers are preventing women from participating?

**Mrs Coyle:**

There are many barriers. I will pass over to Tiziania who can tell you more about that. Perhaps you can forgive us our shuffling of papers, but we have lots of facts and figures to give to the Committee.

**Mrs Tiziania O'Hara (Women's Centres Regional Partnership):**

We did some interesting research into the barriers to women's participation in sports, and we looked particularly at the barriers that exist for women from disadvantaged communities. We believe that being a woman and coming from a disadvantaged community has a double effect on the way in which one participates in civic life. That research, which is referred to in our submission, is called 'Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation'. It was written by Dr Helen McLaughlin, with the support of the Department for Social Development (DSD), and it was commissioned by the WCRP. It was important for us to articulate the barriers that exist. If the Committee wishes, we can provide members with copies of the research, which members may find very useful.

The research showed that the primary barrier is childcare and that the childcare needs of disadvantaged women need to be addressed in a very specific manner. Childcare must be affordable and accessible; in particular, it must be accessible in the locality in which the activities take place. However, childcare is only one aspect of the caring responsibilities that women in Northern Ireland have, and those caring responsibilities can last a lifetime. When women are young, they may care for their siblings; when they are mothers, they care for their children; and, even in later life, women may care for their elderly parents, a member of their family who is sick or their grandchildren. Therefore, the caring responsibility applies not only to childcare.

Physical activity is part of the development of a person. To engage women in physical activity or in any meaningful activity that helps their development, as much help as possible must be provided. That barrier must be lowered completely.

As you can imagine from the location of our women's centres, we work with women from disadvantaged areas. Being part of a disadvantaged community is a disadvantage in itself. However, being a woman in a disadvantaged community creates an added economic disadvantage. Those women belong to households with very limited disposable income and, because many women are not the earner of what little income is brought into the household, there is reluctance on their part to spend that income on themselves. Women prioritise the needs of the family. The Committee must understand that that is why even a small charge may be a barrier for women who are dealing with an already stretched budget. I agree that some leisure centres have reduced their charges to address that issue. However, even a small charge is an issue for the women who come to our centres. That is why the Live and Learn programme, as with most of our courses, is free of charge.

Another barrier is lack of confidence and self-esteem. Women from disadvantaged communities may have personal histories of bad experiences and that may affect their confidence to take up new experiences, such as going for a swim in a new leisure centre. Also, those women experience the historical disadvantage that may have affected community self-esteem and confidence. We need to address that barrier. One reason that our women's centres are so successful is that we take into consideration that lack of confidence and tailor our courses accordingly. When a woman comes to a centre, we cater for her lack of confidence and try to build up her capacity to engage in activities. Our courses meet the real needs of women at the stage at which they are at, and we then develop with them. The skills that those women learn are a by-product of our work. Our main achievement is helping women to increase their confidence, because confident citizens engage better in society.

There are a couple of other problems. I mentioned that a lack of transport is a problem for women who live in rural areas, but it is also a problem for women who live in urban areas, as public transport can be expensive. Another problem is ill-health. When we are considering which activities to offer, we must be mindful of the fact that ill-health can have an impact on the way in which people engage. Historically, ill-health has been prevalent among those from some disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland, perhaps because of the legacy of the conflict, high levels

of stress or high levels of depression. Another problem is the multiplicity of disadvantage. Women from ethnic minorities or those with a disability face more barriers than other women, and we must overcome those to engage with them.

**Mrs Coyle:**

In summary, many women face more than one barrier. For example, some women may experience poverty, a lack of childcare and a lack of mobility, especially if they are older. Therefore, there is sometimes more than one barrier at work.

**Lord Browne:**

You gave an excellent account of the barriers that women face, especially those relating to childcare responsibilities, age and disability. However, do you not agree that many men in today's society have childcare responsibilities and face those same barriers? The excellent programmes that you have developed should also be developed for men.

**Mrs Coyle:**

We are here to represent women's centres. That has been our focus today. When we talk about equality, we are not talking about preferential treatment for women. Rather, we are talking about the need to approach the issue from a different angle. We are certainly not trying to put women above men, because that would bring us back to square one.

**Mr McNarry:**

I wish to pick up on what Mrs O'Hara said. There is a major problem in my constituency of Strangford, which is only down the road. Is it worth considering a programme for women that offers a range of sporting and physical activities as well as childcare provision? In other words, could a programme be developed that joins both options together?

**Mrs Geraldine Compton (Women's Centres Regional Partnership):**

I am the manager of the Waterside Women's Centre in Derry. Our programme is called Fit for Life, and it delivers a range of courses and physical activities while providing childcare at the centre at the same time. The women who participate in the courses come to the centre, drop off their children at the crèche and then go to Lisnagelvin leisure complex, because the centre obviously does not have the necessary facilities. The courses offered include beginners' and improvers' swimming lessons, aquarobics, t'ai chi, yoga and line dancing. The women attend

classes while their children are looked after in the crèche.

**Mr McNarry:**

I am glad to hear that, because that is a key issue. I hope that you are not going to embarrass me now when I ask about the programme: I do not want to join it; I just want to know whether it extends to my constituency of Strangford.

**Mrs O'Hara:**

Yes, I think that it does. I think that Ballybeen Women's Centre is located in the constituency of Strangford.

**Mr McNarry:**

That centre is just about within the boundaries of the Strangford constituency. However, that area will go back to being part of the East Belfast constituency.

**Mrs Coyle:**

We can only share with the Committee what we know about the centres that exist now, and they were set up and funded by DSD. If we have one message for the Committee, it is that this works. Of course, it would be great if we could have centres everywhere.

**Mr McNarry:**

I am clearly hearing that. That is what is interesting to me. I hear what you are saying about the centre in Londonderry. However, I know that there are no such centres outside Ballybeen.

**Mrs O'Hara:**

We want more centres to be opened.

**Mrs Coyle:**

Absolutely; of course we do.

**Mrs O'Hara:**

We have a lot of experience of women's centres. We have been managing them for the past 20 years. Our experience cannot be disregarded.

**Mr McNarry:**

You sound very formidable. I will leave it there. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Leonard:**

As you will appreciate, we must consider how to get the message across to all sectors. However, I am particularly impressed by your work with the disadvantaged and the marginalised. In your experience, what big messages do we need to send out to engage more women in club-related sports and activity and to engage the casual person?

**Mrs Coyle:**

Are you asking how we advertise and try to engage with people?

**Mr Leonard:**

Yes.

**Mrs Compton:**

Our women's centre has 16 or 18 years' experience of working with and engaging with women, particularly those from disadvantaged areas. The Fit for Life programme is totally oversubscribed for physical activities.

**Mr Leonard:**

Is that because it is called Fit for Life or because you have used leaflets to advertise locally at a grass roots level?

**Mrs Compton:**

Yes, we do that. We advertise the courses in all local shops, church bulletins and doctors' surgeries, and we are well-known and well-established in the area in any case. We have offered some physical activities with the minor funding that we have received in the past. However, the five-year funding for the Live and Learn programme has been a tremendous boost, because such long periods of funding were previously unheard of. We knew that the need existed. People had been telling us that during the schemes that we set up with the minor funding, such as learn-to-swim courses and yoga.

The programme started in September. Between September and Christmas, 118 women

enrolled in courses. Since January, 181 women have enrolled, and we are providing 10 different physical activities. That shows the level of interest and proves that we are reaching women who want to engage in such activities. As we said earlier, those women are from disadvantaged areas; they are not the kind of women who normally go to the gym to work out. The women that have enrolled have put their family ahead of their own needs but are now participating in our courses. I am so pleased with how well the programme has taken off.

**Mrs O’Hara:**

I was involved in writing the business plan that secured the funding for the Live and Learn programme from the Big Lottery Fund, and we had a specific engagement strategy across the region. We take a face-to-face and door-to-door approach. We offer coffee mornings and taster sessions and send out leaflets to give women the opportunity to sample what the programme is about. That experience will allow women to build up the confidence to come back to the centres.

**Mr Leonard:**

Will you forward the engagement strategy to the Committee? That issue will arise in the future.

**Mrs O’Hara:**

Yes, we have a comprehensive business plan.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Thanks for the overview that you have given us this morning; your enthusiasm has shone through. Your submission refers to:

“preventing women from relapsing into negative behaviours and attitudes towards their mental and physical health in the post programme period.”

You mentioned that 118 people are enrolled in the programme at Lisnagelvin leisure centre. What contact do you have with local councils throughout Northern Ireland? You obviously use leisure centres, so I wonder whether there is complementarity with what is already in place.

I am a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council, and we run a variety of schemes to try to encourage participation among the same folk from disadvantaged areas who you try to encourage. I want to be sure that all the ducks are in a row and that we are not competing with each other. By focusing on women and specific areas, are you targeting a different market than a council does through its wider leisure programmes? Do you complement what is already there? Do you

reach a group beyond the group that we reach, or are we tripping over each other? Are we making the best use of time and resources and getting the best possible bang for our buck?

**Mrs Coyle:**

Absolutely. Women tell us that they are not already using those facilities. Women can be intimidated when they go to leisure centres on their own, but women's centres provide a supportive environment. Five or ten people can learn to swim or do yoga together somewhere where there are not people in snazzy Lycra who look like they do not really need to be there. We provide support, and women can hide their cellulite by huddling up together. I will hand over to Geraldine, who deals with councils.

**Mrs Compton:**

I agree entirely with Louise. We also have additional support mechanisms, such as childcare facilities. We have a very good relationship with the staff in Lisnagelvin leisure complex. Tutors are very important, and we have very good female tutors who are tuned into women's needs. They work at a pace that suits the women, and they are very experienced at engaging well with women. Our courses are held at times that suit women. Women lead busy lives, and they have to be finished classes in time to collect their kids from school, and so on. Our aquarobics and learn-to-swim classes, for example, are held around lunchtime, when the swimming pool is quiet. Therefore, the women are not intimidated by fabulous swimmers who are doing 20 lengths while they are struggling to put their toes into the water.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Essentially, Geraldine, you are saying that you reach a different group than we do in the mainstream.

**Mrs Compton:**

Yes.

**Mr K Robinson:**

The core question is: having reached that group, how do you prevent those women relapsing? How do you keep them engaged in physical activity after they have completed one of your courses? Do they progress to become part of the Lycra set? Do they move from the unsure beginners' group to the more competent and confident group?

**Mrs Compton:**

Maybe some of them make that progression, but I do not think so. I do not think that they have that mentality.

**Mr K Robinson:**

How do you prevent them slipping back?

**Mrs Compton:**

We do that by offering a variety of courses that go beyond physical activities. Once people come to the centres and realise the support that they get, they stay with us. However, we do not want to be too prescriptive in what we offer. We want the women to tell us what they want to do.

**Mr K Robinson:**

You have stolen my thunder by answering the question that I was going to ask next, if allowed to do so by the Chairperson. After you have given the women confidence and exposed them to a range of activities, does there come a time when they want to let go of your hand and do something for themselves?

**Mrs Compton:**

We want to encourage women to do that. That is the point of what we are about. We are about empowering women and giving them confidence and self-esteem so that they do not have to rely on us in the long term.

**Mrs Coyle:**

Tiziana deals with all the women's centres, so she has an input into that.

**Mrs O'Hara:**

I have a piece of information in which Mr Robinson may be interested. The Live and Learn project is planned to last for five years, and we have put in place a strong evaluation process for it. We want to measure the impact of our way of working. I suggest that if you keep watching, we will come back to you with some real evidence after five years.

**Mr K Robinson:**

We will watch this space.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you for your contribution. I commend you on the work that you have been doing and that you continue to do. You said that the Big Lottery funding was for five years. Is there any guarantee that, after those five years, further funding will be available? Is sufficient government funding, as distinct from lottery funding, available? You do an enormous amount of work in so many ways. Following on from the question that my Strangford constituency colleague asked, if you had more government funding, would you be able to spread your work to all constituencies, including Strangford, which includes the lower Ards Peninsula?

**Mrs Coyle:**

We would like every woman to have equality of opportunity, no matter what constituency they live in. That is a priority for us, and we are working towards achieving equality. However, the resources to do that are simply not there. The lottery fund does not fund the WCRP; it funds the partnership between sport and physical activity and mental health. That leads on to Mr Robinson's point about the complementarity of what is offered. It is important that people get support for their mental health as well as for their physical health. One leads to another, and they are each part of a circle. As you know, if a person's physical well-being is better, their mental well-being improves. If women make that link, they may not become gym bunnies, but they will know that even going for a walk is good for their mental health.

You asked whether sufficient government funding is available. The answer is no. In general, we feel that there is a lack of government funding for the projects that currently exist, never mind funding to increase women's participation. We are unaware of any long-term strategic funding, although, as Geraldine mentioned, five years of funding is a real luxury in the community and voluntary sector. Such funding lets us have the longitudinal evidence that Tiziana mentioned that five years of a project can allow. We know that it works, and Geraldine has been working on it for years. The fact that the funding and evaluation will last for five years means that, at the end of that period, we can provide evidence that the project works.

**Mrs O'Hara:**

The one Department that has helped us is the Department for Social Development. It has funded

the partnership.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Is there any guarantee that that funding will continue? It is essential. We are all talking about investing in health and in the future, but, if that funding were to come to an end, all your work would be gone.

**Mrs O'Hara:**

There is an argument that there should be cross-departmental help for a structure such as ours. It is an issue not only for sport but for mental health and other areas. Therefore, cross-departmental help would be welcome.

**Mr McNarry:**

I was interested in making my point earlier, because, unfortunately, we have many disadvantaged women in the Strangford constituency. We also have the Lycra set, so there is a combination in the constituency. Given that there is a gap in services in the area that Kieran and I represent, are you open for us to talk to you about that?

**Mrs O'Hara:**

We can organise visits for you to the women's centres. Our partnership represents 13 women's centres, and you are welcome to visit. If you give us a call, we can organise that.

**The Chairperson:**

We have another two presentations today, so I need to conclude this part of the meeting shortly. I am sure that you understand that. I ask you to make your final comment, please.

**Mrs Coyle:**

DSD funds the WCRP, and, as you know, all Departments are cutting funding. It has cut funding for NIRWN, which I work for. That means that I will have less time to spend on policy submissions and other such work.

That is important, because we could be doing all this work and you would not have heard about it if I had not been doing it. Therefore, the issue is also about the structure that supports what is going on. I thank Emma, Chris and Jonathan, who have been getting lots of earache on

the telephone. They are a credit to the Committee for the support that they have given us.

**Mr McNarry:**

Is anybody doing this for men?

**The Chairperson:**

That question has already been asked.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Before you leave, I should say that you might think that only men are here. However, there is one lady on the Committee, but, unfortunately, she had to leave earlier. Therefore, do not go away saying that those men do not know what they are talking about, because there is one lady on the Committee, and she will keep us right.

**Mrs Coyle:**

I compliment you all. You listened very attentively, and you were very kind to us.

**The Chairperson:**

We move now to the written submission from SkillsActive NI. I welcome Siobhan Weir and Gerry Kelly from SkillsActive NI. Good morning. Thanks for coming along. Yours is the second of the three presentations today. I ask you to introduce yourselves and to give a 10-minute statement.

**Mrs Siobhan Weir (SkillsActive Northern Ireland):**

I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for inviting SkillsActive to give evidence to the inquiry. We really appreciate what you are trying to do. Identifying, analysing and trying to come up with solutions for improving participation rates is quite a challenge, but we hope that what we have to say today, as well as the written evidence that we have submitted, will go some way in helping you to reach your goals.

I will begin by introducing Gerry Kelly. Mr Kelly is the chief executive officer of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association, and he is here today in his capacity as a member of the SkillsActive executive committee, and he has responsibility for 34 staff. His main role today is to help to amplify and back up some of the evidence that I will be giving. Gerry is

an example of the great support that SkillsActive receives.

**Mr Gerry Kelly (SkillsActive Northern Ireland):**

Members will probably know that the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association is based in the Stormont estate, and I know that Lord Browne has attended our various cricket events over the past couple of years. We have about 34 staff, and I am in the unique position of not only managing the sports association but of being a coach. I am involved with clubs in Carryduff and with various other teams. As Siobhan said, I am here to support her and to amplify some of the views that she will give.

**Mrs S Weir:**

I shall take this opportunity to explain briefly what SkillsActive is all about, and I will then expand on some of the five recommendations that we submitted. I look forward to getting some questions and answers and to getting some discussion going, because I appreciate that what we are trying to deliver is quite complex. The workforce is an issue, and it is the key to SkillsActive. That is what we are all about. We are there to help upskill and qualify the active leisure workforce, which is wide ranging. We represent people who work in sport and recreation, health and fitness, play work, outdoors, caravan parks and almost anywhere where there is activity. Our mission is to have a workforce with more people who are better qualified and better skilled. Our vision is to deliver a workforce for the nation's well-being and to get people active, which is the key.

Our area of expertise is in raising workplace standards. We approve qualifications for the workforce, we write the national occupational standards that give people their competencies and skills and we help to upskill and professionalise the workforce. We also match training supply to demand and we increase sector investment in our people. In a nutshell, that is what SkillsActive is about. However, the Committee should keep in mind that the key word is "workforce".

We represent a diverse and exciting sector that ranges from multi-million pound sports clubs to self-employed personal trainers. In between those two are family run leisure clubs, caravan parks and play schemes. That is our workforce. Regardless of the size of the workforce, the one thing that the groups have in common is that they can all have an impact on improving participation rates.

That is an important, if sweeping, statement. Therefore, to support it, I have four or five recommendations to make that the Committee may be interested in. The first centres on the need to ensure that whatever solutions the Committee finally decides to support, it should be mindful that the workforce will underpin the delivery of any new initiatives or incentives. The Committee may ask why we need a competent and qualified workforce. Apart from the obvious reasons, it is really important to understand that it is the workforce that takes people step by step through the participation journey. For example, a community sports development officer helps to engage participants and has to use certain skills to encourage them to be more active. That is not a skill that is easily acquired. Therefore, a real difference could be made to participation if more people in roles similar to that had the required skills sets. I am sure that some members have had negative experiences of being involved in sport, but we are trying to make those experiences less likely by qualifying our workforce.

I spoke just yesterday to Gary Mallon, who is a third-level development officer with the GAA. He explained that the GAA is now trying to make sport fun and to emphasise that it not all about winning. The very fact that children and people are participating is important. That is a new approach, because, traditionally, coaching was all about the podium and winning. Now, however, teams are being developed to be more inclusive, and the trend is more towards that kind of participation.

There are questions on how we can access the rich resource of those who we have and how we can structure things so that people can give to their full capacity. One solution is the promotion of workforce development planning. Research that we carried out shows that very few sports organisations, or even large leisure clubs, have workforce development plans. However, evidence from England shows that the development of a workforce development plan can help to increase participation rates. Therefore, it is important to have such a plan. At the moment, they are on the edge of a whole new workforce that is having to address participation rates.

With Sport Matters, which is the new sports strategy, the workforce needs to have some kind of structure in place so that it feels that it is part of a profession and that proper career routes are open to it. That recently approved strategy has the target that states that by 2017, at least 900 qualified coaches should be accredited. It aims to modernise at least 30 governing bodies of sport and to appoint 40 club support workers. The strategy includes a target for the training, deployment and management of a network of 300 community sports coaches. Many people will

need a lot of support, and one of the ways of providing that is by establishing really good workforce development plans that give them a real structure to work towards, making them feel part of a profession.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

It is not only about the technical qualifications. As I am sure you will know, Barry, people can be taught technical skills for Gaelic games, but coaches also need the softer skills, including communication and interpersonal skills and the ability to get young people to respect and to work as part of a team. Those are the skills that we are missing out on. Siobhan is talking about developing the structure to use those soft skills as a currency so that someone who is involved as a coach in cricket, for example, could also be involved in GAA or football. That is an important element of what we are suggesting.

**The Chairperson:**

What single big change to government policy that might make the difference in increasing participation in sport and physical activity would you recommend?

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

The issue must be considered holistically. I am sure that Sport NI has talked to you about facilities, and I am developing £2.5 million of facilities on the Stormont estate. Hopefully, those facilities will increase participation levels by 100,000 this year alone. You will probably be aware that we are putting in nine third-generation soccer pitches and two hockey pitches. Facilities and sports development are part of the solution, as is ensuring that our people know exactly what they are doing from a technical point of view in our long-term athlete development programme.

The other part of the solution is to ensure that our coaches are well qualified in softer skills. Many of you have been involved in sport, and you will know how to kick a ball, how to do a toe-tap or how to hit a cricket ball. It is important that recognition be given to the ability to communicate with people, to be part of a team and to teach people about respect. In this day and age, it is also important that we talk about our competencies and skills. Those should be recognised as a currency so that someone's competencies and skills can travel, regardless of whether they are involved in Gaelic football, soccer or cricket. That can help to develop a long-term solution for coaches.

Having been involved in sport for over 20 years as a practitioner and an administrator, I know that a certain stigma is attached to sport. Therefore, we have to get a value attached to it. Parents often ring me to say that they wanted their son to become a doctor, but he really wants to get involved in sport and they ask me what I think about that. I have to sell the benefits to them of a young person going to college to do a sports degree. We need to try to develop the recognition of sport in the longer term and to start to get that wonderful industry elevated to the point where it is recognised as something that people want to be part of.

We are not proposing a short-term solution or a sticking plaster. We want a long-term cultural shift. In the 20 years that I have been involved in sport, we have tried to increase participation. Many governing bodies are working on the technical side to get people involved. They are getting people involved in what is known as the “Go Games”, in Kwik Cricket and so on. All that is good and will contribute, but we need to kit out the coaches and volunteers with the right skills to be able to deliver.

**Mr McNarry:**

You are both very welcome. Your presentation was very interesting. We heard this morning from the Women’s Centres for Regional Partnership. That, along with the other evidence that we have gathered, confirmed that there is a lower rate of physical activity and participation in sport in economically disadvantaged areas and among women, the disabled and the over 60s. What professional specialities do coaches require to work with people in those categories?

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

Coaches have to be able to make sport pleasurable and to get people involved in activity. To go back to our side of the work, which is about skills, we have to coach the coaches and make sure that they are able to adapt their styles.

**Mr McNarry:**

Let me interrupt you. I was asking what professional skills the coaches have and what skills they are required to have.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

Primarily, they need to have the necessary technical ability and to comply with health and safety

requirements. They also need to have a range of softer skills to help them communicate and engage with people.

**Mr McNarry:**

Do they have those skills?

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

No, they do not.

**Mrs S Weir:**

Some of them do. We have national occupational standards for working with inactive populations so that people can gain the required tangible skills. Those are the standards and competencies that coaches need to have, and they are woven into training and qualifications. If we are talking about policy change, we need to make better use of those occupational standards, because they are a rich resource. The occupational standards give coaches the required scientific knowledge, technical ability and confidence to give information and advice to people who are trying to get more active.

**Mr McNarry:**

Are you saying that, without people who have those skills, the opportunities for the proposed increase in adult participation in sport and physical recreation may not be achieved? Does that point to a current shortage of well-qualified coaches in Northern Ireland? I am only repeating what you told me. Can you stack that up?

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

I can give you examples. With the new pitches on the Stormont estate, we have a sports development person and a marketing communication person going round the wider community, particularly to socially deprived areas, to promote the use of the facilities. We are making it financially attractive for people to use the facilities. That is important, but a particular type of person is needed to give that information. We have been able to coach people and adapt their communication styles so that they can sell the facilities and encourage people to use them.

**Mr McNarry:**

I understand that style comes into it. However, if I were conducting a job interview, I would need

to see the person's professional qualifications. Your pitch is about professional qualifications, and I am asking whether a lack of them will prevent us progressing as quickly and as far as we want to.

**Mrs S Weir:**

Of the coaches that we managed to contact as part of our research, about 47% had qualifications below NVQ level 2. That in itself is an issue. As Gerry was saying, we have to ensure that we weave skills in with qualifications. Qualifications are all well and good, but they are not if they do not teach the necessary competencies and softer skills. Our mission is to make sure that the occupational standards are met.

**Mr McNarry:**

I am with you on that, but I see a gap. How can you tell me that more coaches who are better trained will lead to greater participation? You are telling me that the way to increase participation is to get more coaches. Where is the evidence that more coaches will lead to increased participation? In your closing remarks, you mentioned the targets for 900 coaches and 40 club support workers. Who will pay for that?

**Mrs S Weir:**

It is a complex situation, because coaches are paid for in different ways, such as by governing bodies and by Sport Northern Ireland through DCAL.

**Mr McNarry:**

I am sorry; I did not mean to ask who will pay for it. I meant to ask where we will find the money to pay for that.

**Mrs S Weir:**

Training coaches is our area of expertise. A lot of the training happens in further and higher education institutions. That is where people get NVQs and formal qualifications.

**Mr McNarry:**

Those people go on to get jobs and are qualified to a certain standard. I think that you called them well-qualified coaches. You are making a pitch that more and better coaches will lead to greater participation. I want to buy in to that idea and agree to it. However, I need your help to

produce the evidence. I also need you to tell me where we will get the money to give people a working wage after they have qualified.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

In a practical sense, I have been involved with Carryduff Colts. We started five or six years ago with about 40 people. We now have about 300 kids, and, as a consequence, we have increased our coach base, which involves people like me who are in full-time employment but coach part time. However, we are qualified and go through all the necessary checks and processes.

The Civil Service club down the road has increased participation levels of young people and adults by well over 100% because coaches have been employed. Most of those coaches are not fully paid full-time coaches; they are part-time coaches who come from the organisation. We train them, coach them to coach and equip them with the necessary skills. There is no question that that makes a significant difference. I will produce statistics for the Committee that highlight that point. As I said, I am involved with clubs in Carryduff, not only the football club but the Gaelic club, and I know that Members will find that participation in many clubs has increased as a result of coaches being brought in. There is no doubt about that.

**Mrs S Weir:**

At the end of the day, we need people to increase participation. We have our facilities, but we cannot open them without enough people. We need to encourage people and to provide a structured sporting experience for them. The more people that are involved, the greater the participation. To me, it is a given.

**Mr McNarry:**

Do we have the money to do this? I know a little club in Comber that attracts hundreds of kids every weekend. All the coaches are voluntary. The club is run completely voluntarily, and it does not pay like other amateur clubs. The parents trust that club with their children. I am anxious that somebody may tell that club to close because the volunteers do not have certain qualifications and that people with those skills must be employed there. That club may also be told that if they can produce and pay their coaches, that is fine. However, for us to argue with you, which I, personally, want to do, I need to know that services such as the one that I have experience of in Comber will not be tossed aside.

**The Chairperson:**

I will group the next two questions from Kieran and Ken.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you very much for your presentation. Siobhan, you mentioned the workforce development plan, and the research shows that very few sporting organisations in Northern Ireland have one. Will you give an example of any organisation in NI that has used such a plan? Can you outline its benefits?

**Mr K Robinson:**

My question perhaps goes slightly off on a tangent. Many people enjoy physical activity for the sake of it. They do not need a coach to exercise, to walk or to swim. Would it not be better to spend money on enhanced facilities or on the creation of more parks, walkways and cycle paths rather than specifically on coaches?

**Mrs S Weir:**

I will answer the question about workforce development. Most sports governing bodies have coaching development plans, but they might not have an all-encompassing workforce development plan for everybody who works in their organisation. I am talking about the secretaries, the committee members and the people who wash the kits. A holistic workforce development plan can help to develop those people and to get the most out of them. We have found that workforce development plans are the solution and that, because they are based on national occupational standards that give people knowledge and an understanding of their role, they really benefit the clubs. That is part of the reason.

**Mr McCarthy:**

You are trying to encourage the workforce as a whole to get involved.

**Mrs S Weir:**

Yes. It is not just down to coaches; volunteers and anybody who has any input or interaction should be part of development. It should not just involve the full-time, paid people.

**The Chairperson:**

The Dromore captain in Tyrone described that as those who wore the jersey, those who washed

the jersey and those who watched the jersey.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

There is a school of thought that people will participate in sport at any rate. To get maximum enjoyment out of sport one needs to have a bit of an understanding of what it is about. It is not just about achievement; it is about recreation. There is another aspect to it, which is safety. It is about participating safely and making sure that you get the best out of that participation.

I have been involved in sport for many years as a runner, a triathlete and a footballer, and I have always taken part in activities in company; it has not always been about competition. Now, at a young 45 years of age, I trek around the Stormont Estate every morning, and I do it with company. It is nice to do it with company, because it gives more satisfaction and is more sustainable. At the moment, you are considering how we can get people involved in activity and improve participation levels, not through a quick fix but through a long-term solution and a cultural shift. If we are going to do that, it should be about giving people the best opportunity.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Thank you for that reply, Gerry. Your enthusiasm for the scheme comes across. I was a teacher in a former life, and we talked about competencies and skills in teaching. What was at the back of my mind was that when that came in the door, flair, enthusiasm, enjoyment and commitment went out the window to a large extent. I see Dominic nodding; he was there before the mast like me. I look at teachers today, and I see that they are dragooned; they have to have this and that, and they have to go through this, that and the other course.

Last Sunday, I took a cross-community group of 50 to 60 people out walking on the new cycle path that I am involved with. I saw kids lifting up things and asking what they were, and unqualified people were telling them that it is such-and-such a plant or a dog, a rabbit or whatever it happened to be. There was engagement and enthusiasm on both sides, both to learn and to get involved and pass on knowledge. I am just a wee bit concerned about what is happening. Although a level of skill is needed and people need to know what they are doing, please do not dragoon them like that so that they lose that enthusiasm, because that is lifelong.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

I totally appreciate that, Ken; I know exactly where you are coming from. I hope that I have not

misrepresented the competencies and skills. I do a bit of sports psychology, so, from my point of view, the other aspect is the guy at school who we all remember as being the last to be picked to play football because he was the worst player. We are still living with the legacy of that now. People tell me that they do not really like sport because, when they were 10 years of age, nobody picked them, and, as a result, they no longer get involved in sport. There is a particular way of doing things. As coaches, we have a responsibility to engage with young people and adults to bring them in and make sure that they get involved, not just today, but over the next 20 or 30 years. I accept your point, Ken.

**Mrs S Weir:**

We cannot stifle that innovation and that kind of informal interaction with qualifications. In the past, there has been a stigma attached to qualifications. However, skills are now delivered in a much more interactive way, and people are developing skills. We still want people to be competent, even if they do not have formal qualifications. We must ensure sure that we get the balance right: we need a qualified, competent workforce, but we must also be sensitive to the fact that a lot of those people are volunteers and do not want too much bureaucracy. We have fast-tracked NVQs and all sorts of other solutions to address that very problem, because the people in our workforce are the last people who want to sit behind a desk in that kind of environment.

**Mr K Robinson:**

You do not want to frighten people away.

**Mrs S Weir:**

I agree.

**Mr K Robinson:**

If people are made to go on a course that they are not up for attending, they simply will not go, and, consequently, a talent will be lost.

**Mrs S Weir:**

The whole point of SkillsActive is to ensure that that does not happen.

**Mr McNarry:**

Ken, you have not asked the witnesses anything about people who wear Lycra.

**Mr K Robinson:**

The previous set of witnesses spoke about gym bunnies. Does SkillsActive also cater for them?  
That was just a passing thought.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

You must have seen me on the estate this morning in my Lycra jogging bottoms.

**The Chairperson:**

I appeal for calm at this juncture.

Dominic and Billy's questions will be grouped together, and Wallace will ask the final question.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Good afternoon. Last week, representatives from the British Medical Association told the Committee that less than one fifth of people who are prescribed exercise at the gym to improve their health continue to participate. That is a big drop-out rate. You spoke about coaches having hard skills and soft skills. What can SkillsActive do to ensure that coaches have not only the technical expertise to explain how various machines work and how various exercises should be done, but the skills to encourage continued participation?

**Mr Leonard:**

David made a point about the volunteers at his club in Comber, and I wish to refer to my GAA club in Coleraine. There are a tremendous number of people at that club who coach all ages. Those coaches have done a brilliant job and continue to do so. Are you saying that we should encourage volunteers to seek qualifications through local part-time courses, or are you saying that qualified community trainers and coaches should dovetail with volunteers at the local clubs, such as GAA and soccer clubs? How is SkillsActive pitching that to community clubs?

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

Sport is losing people and coaches. It is a generally accepted rule of thumb that parents who volunteer as coaches view their role as a job and will move away from coaching and participating in sport once their kids grow up. We want to encourage people to keep participating in sport and

to get more involved in it. We help them to get technical qualifications, but they do not recognise the softer skills in the national occupational standards.

There is a range of coaches in Carryduff who have brilliant technical ability. However, some of them are also fantastic at motivating young people and giving them confidence. Some of the kids who play for us have Asperger's syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and when they are told how well they are doing they grow in confidence. We need to capture that and use it as currency. Earlier, David mentioned the example of an interview. Individuals being interviewed for a coaching position at a cricket club will want to tell the panel that, as well as having good cricketing qualifications and being able to show people how to bat a ball, they can motivate and inspire people and be a good team worker.

**Mr Leonard:**

I do not disagree with one word that you are saying. However, should coaches such as those in the GAA club in Coleraine or in David's club in Comber be encouraged to obtain further qualifications or should they be encouraged to dovetail with community-based coaches who are employed by the local council?

**Mrs S Weir:**

It depends on the individual and who he or she aspires to be. Some coaches are comfortable with doing what they are doing at the moment. However, some of them may wish to move to the next stage and become a professional coach. We are trying to put in place progression routes to allow that to happen, if they so choose. That is what it is all about — choice. If coaches wish to keep volunteering on Saturday afternoons and to keep their continuing professional development skills up to date, that is fine. However, if they wish to opt for a progression route, that should be made available to them.

You asked whether coaches should dovetail with other coaches in the community, and I again refer to the national occupational standards. The beauty of those standards is that they enable people to bolt on a set of skills to their qualifications. For example, if a coach who is very technically qualified wants to interact more at a community level to encourage participation, it is not very complex for that person to obtain the necessary skills set through those standards. We are trying to put across the message that coaches can be whatever they need to be in a given situation if they bolt on those skill sets. It is also about flexibility.

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

It is also about ensuring that the skill sets are common to working in the community at a voluntary level and to working in a full-time capacity at a cricket club, a rugby club or a GAA club.

**Mrs S Weir:**

To answer Mr Bradley's question, continued participation is an issue. If you are qualified to a certain level, you learn a competency in that you learn how to motivate people. You learn about the different stages of change that a person goes through, from being unsure about whether they are interested in sport right up to catching them when they look as though they are contemplating giving up. A really good exercise professional will be given the skills to look at what will motivate an individual to stay on. The register of exercise professionals, which we established in the UK, is an example of how we have used the process to give personal instructors the skills set to motivate people and ensure that they stay involved in sport.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Gyms nowadays are full of technical machines. Everybody in the gym is on a solitary pathway, and there is very little interaction. You mentioned that sport is much more enjoyable as a group activity. Therefore, would it not be more beneficial to change the concept of the gym and perhaps go back to the type of gyms that we had in schools, with people doing circuits in a group rather than plodding along their solitary pathway on individual machines?

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

A number of gyms are going back to that. We have a gym in the Pavilion complex, and you are all welcome to come down and use it. It is simple: it is about pain or pleasure, and our job as coaches and motivators is to try to make it more pleasurable than painful. People often attend gyms because they have heart problems or they are part of the GP referral scheme. In a sense, they are trying to move away from something rather than move towards something. It gets them to the same place, but we need to make the process pleasurable. The skill for coaches and personal development trainers is to try to communicate what is good about participating in sport as opposed to what is bad about not participating in it. It gets you to the same place, but it is the motivation that is important.

We mentioned the occupational standards, which are about ensuring that we give the coaches those necessary skills. You are absolutely right, Billy; it is about ensuring that we have a generic picture of the skills, which includes the technical bits and the softer bits. We need to get those together and start to make coaches for the future and not just for today.

**Lord Browne:**

We must recognise that there are excellent facilities in the Civil Service Sports Association; perhaps the Committee should pay a visit to those facilities. I have taken part in cricket and bowling there.

You said that you are in favour of developing a coaching register, regulating the profession and making it more professional. Would there not be a danger that such a register would put voluntary amateur coaches off contributing to their clubs?

**Mrs S Weir:**

That is a very good point. We have to be sensitive to that issue, because clubs do not want to end up losing very valuable volunteers. If they get a whiff of anything to do with bureaucracy, they will run a mile, and where would we be then?

**The Chairperson:**

It would be a good thing if they were to run a mile. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Gerry Kelly:**

I believe that you are running a mile shortly.

**The Chairperson:**

That is right.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Do amateur organisations have their own coaching and training programmes? Most people who are involved in coaching soccer, Gaelic football or cricket are already trained to a reasonably high level.

**Mrs S Weir:**

I was just going to say that. They are used to a certain amount of compliance, and they know that they have to keep up with certain standards. It is a matter of looking at whether there is any mileage in having a larger registration or licensing scheme. I appreciate that we need to be sensitive. I suggest that before a full recommendation is made along those lines, a feasibility study should be carried out to assess on the advantages and disadvantages of such a scheme.

What is appropriate for one sector may not be appropriate for another. For example, the motivation behind joining the register of exercise professionals is to get employment, but, with a coaching register for volunteers, and so on, that would not necessarily be the motivation. You are quite right: we need to be sensitive about how we take that to the next step.

**The Chairperson:**

We must conclude because NILGA is due to give evidence. Thank you, Siobhan and Gerry. Siobhan, would you like to make a final comment?

**Mrs S Weir:**

If you do not mind, Chairman, I want to return to the first question, which was about policy. Key terms that you have heard include “workforce development planning” and “national occupational standards”. In order to make more use of those rich resources, which are currently underused, we want there to be policy changes by which sporting organisations and the general active leisure sector can make better use of them, and through which those standards and workforce development planning can be embedded into structures in a more managed, cohesive way.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much.

OK, members. We will move on to our third witness session this afternoon, which is with NILGA.

Good afternoon, gentlemen. I welcome Mr Jim Rose, who is the director of leisure services at Lisburn City Council, and Mr Philip Faithfull, who is the chief executive of Strabane District Council. They represent NILGA. I ask the two gentlemen to introduce themselves and to make an opening statement.

**Mr Jim Rose (Northern Ireland Local Government Association):**

As you said, Chairman, I am Jim Rose, director of leisure services at Lisburn City Council. I am accompanied by Philip Faithfull, and we are here to represent the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). If it is satisfactory, I am happy to read our evidence, after which we will take questions.

As I am sure members are aware, NILGA is the representative body for district councils, and it promotes local authorities' interests. We are pleased to be able to give evidence to the inquiry on participation in sport and physical recreation.

**The Chairperson:**

Jim, I suggest that you do not read out your entire presentation. Members have had the opportunity to read it. In the interests of time, if you want to proceed straight to questions, there would be nothing wrong with that.

**Mr Rose:**

That is fine.

**The Chairperson:**

OK. We shall do that instead. That will allow for good, thorough engagement. Thanks for that.

**Mr Leonard:**

Many of us who have been councillors, or are councillors at present, will be familiar with the set-up. The Committee has heard from many different sectors. Ultimately, work will end up being dove-tailed.

For instance, this morning, representatives from the Women's Centres Regional Partnership told us that they are reaching a sector that local councils are not. That is good. However, under the new set-ups in the review of public administration (RPA), how will councils' direct work and indirect work through connections with many other bodies be maximised to increase participation?

How do you see your future role? Will it grow? If so, will it grow exponentially or

gradually? There is always the question of economics. However, if I take a broad sweep with that question, I am sure that other Committee members will ask about more specific matters.

**Mr Rose:**

I anticipate that NILGA's role will grow, although I am not sure whether that growth will be exponential. In the general context of an ageing population, problems with obesity and wider health issues, participation in sport and physical recreation become increasingly important, both to address and ameliorate some of those issues and to try to prevent them.

The community planning function presents an opportunity to co-ordinate the approach to participation in sport, to link with the local health sector and to involve the social and voluntary community sectors. Most councils already have sports development plans, which are based on consultation. It may be that the consultation needs to be slightly wider and more reflective of a broader stakeholder interest. Most councils will also involve local sports advisory groups in their plans. It is probably fair to say that, historically, those advisory groups have been drawn from sports clubs and specific interest groups. There may be some merit in trying to widen that involvement to include other stakeholder groups. That is an indication of the type of approach that could be taken.

**Mr Leonard:**

Wider participation is key and, therefore, sports clubs should be involved. Beyond the Committee's inquiry, members will know from local experience that there is a definite need for wider participation.

**Lord Browne:**

In your submission, you state that research needs to be carried out on the pricing of local authority facilities and on whether cost is a barrier for some people. Why are local authorities not able to do that research themselves? In total, how much would it cost ratepayers to prepare, research, create and implement your proposals, and how long would it take to pay for them?

**Mr Rose:**

I am conscious that some authorities in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast, have done specific work in that area. For example, local authority sports facilities take bookings from a variety of sports clubs. Therefore, there may be merit in looking at offering a pricing advantage

to those sports clubs with structures and approaches that address some of the target segments and the hard-to-reach groups that research indicates are not using the facilities to the same extent as others. That research needs to be done and can be done locally. Indeed, it is already being done by a number of authorities. Lessons can be learned from England, where that approach is more widely used. That could be of benefit in addressing some issues around encouraging participation. For example, we could ensure that sports clubs address the needs of women in their terms of reference. We could ensure that they are quality accredited, that coaches are properly qualified and that there are development pathways for coaches so that those issues can be addressed.

**Mr Philip Faithfull (Northern Ireland Local Government Association):**

As we move forward with the RPA, it is becoming obvious that there is a variation in pricing structures in leisure centres. What is right for Omagh is probably different from what is right for Fermanagh. The bigger picture of bringing that together will be important and, therefore, we need to think outside the box. A lot of research is currently being undertaken on membership of fitness suites in England, where reduced pricing over a one-year or one-month period has increased participation and the income that those facilities generate. It used to cost £25 or £30 a month to use a fitness suite. However, in England, that has been reduced dramatically to perhaps £15 or £16. That has helped in the drive to increase participation, and, as Jim said, it has an effect on obesity levels.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you very much for your presentation. In your submission, you state that participation in sporting activity must be treated as a priority by central government and must be reflected in the policies of Departments and agencies. Can you give us an example of where that is not happening at present? Where are the gaps?

**Mr Faithfull:**

In many ways, I am biased, because I sit on the Sports Council's facilities panel and also on the Northern Ireland 2012 Leadership Group. Many of us attended recent meetings with the Sports Council. The budget has been cut dramatically — by £2.5 million this year. If we continue to reduce the effectiveness of Sports Council and Sport NI funding, that will definitely have an effect on local capital expenditure, particularly for clubs and local councils. I warn the Committee that that is starting to have an effect and will do so in the future.

**The Chairperson:**

Is your understanding of £2.5 million of cuts to the sports budget correct?

**Mr Faithfull:**

That is what I have been told, and that is what Sport NI has said.

**The Chairperson:**

The Committee is having difficulty working out the level of cuts, and we are continuing to probe that matter. That is why I asked.

**Mr Rose:**

The question of linking departmental strategies is related to that issue. There is still a tendency to operate in relative silos and to not adopt a cross-sectoral approach across the board. For example, health and transport can both have an impact on physical or recreational opportunities. In placing an emphasis on sport and physical recreation, there is scope to examine linkages between Departments.

**Mr McCarthy:**

You mentioned the pricing differences in council areas. In my council area, I have been suggesting concessions for senior citizens. I have come up against a blockage in that we cannot do that because it is contrary to equality legislation. How come you can do it and I cannot?

**Mr Faithfull:**

I can speak only for Strabane District Council, which offers free use of its facilities, such as swimming pools, to senior citizens. We must do a lot of work to rationalise the situation, but it is fairly simple work. It is not difficult to find out what the 26 councils are doing across the board, and I am sure that the chief leisure officers' association (CLOA) has done that or has worked out pricing structures. However, some type of social intervention in that pricing structure would be helpful.

**Mr McCarthy:**

You said that it increases participation in that section of the community.

**Mr Faithfull:**

It does; no question about it.

**Mr Leonard:**

I just want to mention Coleraine Borough Council at this point.

**Mr McCarthy:**

I am delighted to hear it.

**The Chairperson:**

Kieran, you are at the younger end of the spectrum, so do not being getting carried away about older people's entitlements.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Have we finished the advertising section?

Good afternoon, gentlemen. Your submission mentions the GP referral scheme, through which people are given a ticket, as it were, for their local leisure centre. Last week, the Committee heard from the British Medical Association that research shows that only one in every 17 people sticks to the gym programme. Why might that be? Have the personnel who are employed in local leisure centres — I hold my hand up as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council — not been trained or coached or do they not have the motivation skills to keep on board folk who have health problems? Last night, I noted that, in my own council, we have only six or eight participants because we do not have the in-house strength to take on any more. Six or eight people from a population of 80,000 is a very small amount. Given the drop-out rate, is pursuing that approach worthwhile?

**Mr Rose:**

From the information that I have seen, the drop-out rate tends to be very inconsistent. I know of one GP referral scheme in Lisburn that tends to achieve a 50% transfer into some form of membership. It highlights the need for our approach to be much smarter and more targeted in how we endeavour to engage with adults, particularly those who have historically ceased to participate in physical recreation or sport, and encourage them to use leisure facilities.

There are staffing issues in regard to training and shift patterns. One conclusion that has been reached from our experience is that the user wants to see a familiar face regularly. That person almost becomes their buddy while they are exercising, and councils must be a bit more flexible and consider their approach to those issues in order to achieve the most effective response from the scheme.

**Mr Faithfull:**

There has to be a softer response for people going into leisure centres. Nobody who is overweight wants to go in and see the people who are exceptionally fit.

**Mr K Robinson:**

A previous witness referred to those people as “gym bunnies”.

**Mr Faithfull:**

My wife runs marathons, so it is difficult for me to go into a fitness suite.

**Mr McNarry:**

You would look good in Lycra, Philip.

**Mr Faithfull:**

I know. For the past 30 years, we have been fighting to encourage people who are not involved in exercise to get involved. The GP referral scheme works very well. I think that you mentioned the involvement of staff. They are critical. The GP referral scheme works if you have the right staff who are motivated to take it forward. However, it will not work if you do not have the right staff, if there is apathy among the staff or if they are untrained. It is a matter of forcing that through. Returning to my original point, we need to think outside the box in how we relate to unfit people who are going into the stainless steel gyms of the future.

**Mr K Robinson:**

When a person goes on the scheme, they either stick to the course or do not keep with it afterwards. How do you identify, or do you identify, the end product at council level? Can you say that some have gone through the scheme successfully and that some have disappeared into the ether? Is any record kept?

**Mr Rose:**

One clear way of knowing is to ask whether the person makes their membership formal once the scheme has finished. However, sometimes the scheme might run just for the gym and may not include the wider leisure facilities, so the person may come back for a recreational swim but will not be picked up as continuing to participate. There are benefits to councils' employing wider leisure card schemes. That way, at least they obtain some information on whether the person concerned comes back.

**Mr McNarry:**

I will begin with an observation. In the recent winter Olympics, coaching was identified as a failure, and that is now the case with the Davis Cup. Although I hope that they will prove different, I am not sure that the Olympic Games will bring the medals tally that we are looking for. In the round, what has gone wrong with coaching? Coaches, who are the so-called professionals, are given enormous amounts of money, but they are failing.

You recommend that financial assistance be channelled to those sports clubs that achieve quality club standards, as they are more likely to have good development pathways that address quality issues and coach development. Is that an encouragement in one form, or is it an indictment of clubs that do not have that standard? If standards are going to be set, what is being done to ensure that more clubs are working toward achieving them?

**Mr Rose:**

I will answer the last question first. There has to be room to accept that clubs will have different levels of capability and capacity. Our experience is that a club does not have to be big to be well organised. The clubs that generate the volunteers to become administrators rather than just coaches are those that have good governance over their finances, and they have coaching structures and child protection policies as well as junior sections that feed into their adult participation. Some may have female sections. A lot of local authorities offer assistance to those clubs to improve the capacity of their administrators and the parents who are involved. The local authorities also advise the administrators on child protection policies so that the parent who turns up with the child or young adult feels that there is somebody who is interested and who they can relate to. Often, that brings people back to the club.

This is interesting, and we recently produced a piece of research on which we have been

working for a number of years. We looked at sampling schoolchildren in years 9, 10 and 11. A number of kids in year 9 were members of sports clubs and stayed with them until they were in year 11. Tracking such involvement is useful.

Clubs are being offered support. Clearly, they face substantial bureaucracy in their processes, such as with child protection and so on. Although such bureaucracy is essential, but on some occasions, it can put people off.

**Mr McNarry:**

I am picking up on that only because you identified a criterion, namely “quality club standards”. My concern is that an assessment could be made, but, for reasons that are unknown to me, a club that is rated highly in its local community does not achieve that standard. Is that detrimental to the club?

**Mr Rose:**

There are levels of assessment, including gold standards and below. Therefore, clubs have an opportunity to progress through the levels, to stick at whatever level is appropriate, or to stay at the level at which they feel that they are capable of operating. Certainly, our experience is that clubs that have participated have found that to be a useful approach.

**Mr McNarry:**

Is that still a recommendation, in that case?

**Mr Faithfull:**

I would like to respond. As the Chairman knows, I have been involved in quality management for the past 25 years. We have gone through the process with leisure centres with Quest accreditation and so on. The Kitemark scheme for sports clubs is not a big stick with which to beat them, it is a potential achievement.

On a daily basis, councils come across clubs that apply for grant aid. Whenever you go through the required checklist, you often find that quite a few clubs do not even have bank accounts or nominated child protection officers. The aim is not to beat them with a big stick but to try to bring them along so that they can reach acceptable organisational standards.

To return to your original question on coaching, quite a few of us have been to clubs where it was always the voluntary coach who brought the young kids on. Throughout the years, the school system has changed in many ways. After-school provision of Gaelic games, rugby or soccer between 4.00 pm and 6.00 pm does not perhaps happen on a voluntary basis to the same extent as it did previously. As far as I am concerned, that has had a massive effect on coaching.

The quality of current coaching is strong, and it is highly accredited. Requirements for a coach are exactly the same as for a club. Perhaps, however, coaching in the voluntary sector is not as strong as it was previously.

**Mr McNarry:**

In your recommendations, you talk about promoting opportunities that the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics will hopefully present. I reiterate the point that that depends on the standard of coaching. If that standard falls down, the nation will be critical. Achieving a mass influx of people who will participate in sport as a result of others' success will depend greatly on coaching. People will not say that that is a good idea, even though we came last.

**Mr Faithfull:**

The 2012 Olympics needs at least 70,000 volunteers, even to get the thing off the ground.

**Mr McNarry:**

I know that.

**Mr Faithfull:**

To compete in the 2012 Olympics, individual athletes will have to have been selected already for the games so that they can arrange their coaching programmes. The quality of coaching is fairly strong, but the market of top-quality coaches and, I have to say, top-quality athletes is limited. We have two years to get it right.

**The Chairperson:**

I thank Jim Rose and Philip Faithfull for coming along and giving us a presentation today. The session will help our deliberations on the inquiry into participation in sport. Thanks very much.