



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the Economy:
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

11 June 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy

Witnesses:

Ms Sinéad McCartan Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

The Chairperson: Sinéad, I am sorry for keeping you waiting. The last session ran over time, and we have been running over time all day. Unfortunately, you come last, so you have suffered most, probably.

I welcome Sinéad McCartan who is the head of sports branch at DCAL. You are very welcome, Sinéad. I ask you to make a short presentation and then leave yourself open for some questions.

Ms Sinéad McCartan (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Firstly, I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for providing me with the opportunity to come here today to talk about cycling, at a time when the sport is riding on the crest of a wave, following the success of the Giro d'Italia. This is a really exciting time for cycling. The Giro was a fantastic event and has really brought the benefits of cycling to the front of everybody's mind, not just those who have been committed to the sport throughout the years.

I would also like to take this opportunity to apologise to the Committee that, due to a family bereavement, I was unable to attend the inquiry hearing on 28 May. I understand that Nick Harkness and John News from Sport NI were in attendance on that day and provided details of Sport NI's work to develop the sport of cycling.

I would like to take a minute to recap on some of the issues that they mentioned. Nick outlined the evidence base for cycling, particularly in respect of how walking and cycling — also referred to as "active travel"— contribute to improved health and well-being, the economy and the environment. John went on to outline some of the recent interventions that Sport NI has made to secure a cycling participation legacy from the Giro d'Italia Big Start.

I am here in my capacity as head of sport for DCAL to provide you with information on the sporting benefits of cycling, emanating from the Sport Matters strategy. I would like to begin by detailing the policy context, and then I will outline some of the recent DCAL initiatives.

I will deal with the policy context first. Cycling, as a leisure or performance sport, can be enjoyed and accessed by all ages and abilities. It can bring important health, social, environmental and economic benefits to all our local communities, and it is important that we promote cycling as a lifestyle choice. The 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009 - 2019' identifies 26 high-level targets and sets the key strategic priorities for sport and physical recreation over 10 years. Using that framework, government made commitments to:

"promote the value, importance and priority of sport and physical recreation; secure the commitment of, and partnership working across, relevant Government Departments ... in realising the vision for sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland; ... promote increased participation in sport and physical recreation among under-represented groups".

While Sport Matters is published by DCAL and Sport NI, its ownership extends within and across government, with each of the other 10 Departments having contributed to the development of the strategy. Government has worked closely with and through Sport NI to deliver on the above commitments. The Department is taking forward a mid-term review of Sport Matters, which will consider how we have been doing against these commitments. The high-level targets set out in Sport Matters are structured to reflect the needs of sport and physical recreation at the time of the publication of the report and the anticipated needs at that time. The targets were clearly linked to three main pillars of the strategy: performance, places and participation. Taking each of those pillars in turn, I can give examples of the strategic work that is ongoing to support them.

On performance, Cycling Ireland, with support from Sport NI, recently developed a high performance strategy review document that sets out Cycling Ireland's vision and performance targets up to 2017. On the basis of this document, Sport NI has been able to allocate funding to Cycling Ireland under its performance focus programme, which will support athletes as they aim to excel within their chosen sport.

On places, Sport NI is currently taking steps to develop a sports facilities strategy, which will include consideration of cycling facilities. The strategy will seek input from other partners, including the new district councils, and will define existing sports facility provision, identify what is needed, enable investment to be prioritised, and provide the rationale for additional resources. The completion of this strategy is expected by the end of April 2015.

On the final pillar, participation, Sport NI works closely with the governing body for the sport of cycling to help increase participation in the sport and promote opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to get involved. A recent example is the legacy work taken forward through the success of the Giro d'Italia Big Start, which I know that John News referred to at your last meeting with him. Sport NI has also carried out and commissioned a range of research to inform the strategic decisions in relation to the development and promotion of cycling within the North of Ireland. I know that the Department provided you with some of that research in its letter to you.

Sport has a significant role to play in health and health policies. So, in addition to the three pillars of performance, places and participation, Sport Matters has encouraged a determined focus on the significant contribution that sport delivers to the health of the community. Through its headline objective of delivering a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport, the strategy seeks to enable participants of all ages and social backgrounds to become participants in one or more of the wide variety of sports played here and, as a consequence, to derive personal health benefits for their physical and mental well-being.

As an extension of the Department's commitment to delivering the strategy by 2019 along with many other partners, DCAL has provided many of the key strands of the strategy's input to several of the key Executive strategic priorities on health. The immediate effect of this approach is to connect the positive benefits of sport to matters such as mental health, suicide awareness and prevention, learning disability, life transitions for those with mental or physical disability, CPR and defibrillation provision, and concussion awareness and management to name but a few examples.

On the actions that underpin this approach, listing the range of activity would more than exhaust the available time. However, I will give a flavour of the initiatives being pursued by DCAL. We are delivering, through Sport NI, suicide prevention training as a professional development priority for all accredited sports coaches and mental health and well-being through a sport pilot programme that is engaged with five of the governing bodies of sport. We are encouraging organisations in the culture, arts and leisure sector to support public information campaigns promoting physical, mental and

emotional well-being and, with the Public Health Agency, delivered the mental health and well-being in sport programme.

I will move on to some of the recent DCAL initiatives. DCAL recognises that sport is an important vehicle that can help to promote equality and target poverty and social exclusion. Cycling can play an important role in this regard. An aspect of the World Police and Fire Games legacy is the support that DCAL has provided to local cycling clubs in the Shankill and Colin areas of Belfast for the provision of a children's cycle training and participation programme. With funding of just £10,000, VC Glendale has bought bicycles and equipment for the local children to use and has trained coaches and volunteers to run a cycling programme in the area. The next step is rolling out the programme to eight primary schools in the area, with 600 children already having indicated that they will take part. This project is already demonstrating how, with the commitment and buy-in from local communities, a small amount of money in the right place can generate big successes.

I have no doubt that the legacy benefits of sporting events such as the Giro and the World Police and Fire Games will be evident in the years to come. We will all have a role to play to ensure that these benefits are realised. Cycling can be affordable for all, and it is vital that both local communities and clubs can experience the benefits that it can bring.

The Chairperson: Sinéad, thank you very much indeed.

In your corporate plan for 2013-14, there is £25 million for capital investment in sport. How much of that went towards cycling?

Ms McCartan: How much of that went to cycling?

The Chairperson: You might not have that figure with you.

Ms McCartan: I do not have that information to hand.

The Chairperson: I assume that you could give us that information.

Ms McCartan: I can do; yes.

The Chairperson: The Committee Clerk will write to you in relation to that.

In relation to the Sheffield Hallam University report that is attached to your report, we have heard from a number of organisations and individuals, including the managing director of Chain Reaction Cycles, which is a fantastic local company. Members were very impressed by that company, which started with two people in a little bicycle shop in Ballynure and now employs over 800 people. They are saying that the development of cycling as a sport would have very positive economic benefits for Northern Ireland. Why are we not hearing that message from DCAL?

Ms McCartan: DCAL has primary responsibility for developing the sport of cycling. There is a range of benefits that we acknowledge through our Sport Matters strategy. The economic benefit of cycling is one of the many benefits that will be reflected in the strategy. That is not a message that we would avoid. We would happily promote that message.

The Chairperson: Sorry; I am having a bit of difficulty hearing. They have obviously got the wine now, and their voices are going up. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that Hansard are having a bit of a problem as well.

Anyway, in relation to the economy, we heard from DOE earlier. I must say that I was a bit miffed at some of the evidence that we heard about the country park end of it. You will be aware that downhill cycling, which now happens at Rostrevor, Castletwellan etc, is becoming a major activity sport. In some of the evidence that we have had over this past number of weeks, there have been conversations about the possibility of getting a leg of the downhill events at the Mountain Bike World Cup. Are you aware of that? What conversations have there been in DCAL in relation to that?

Ms McCartan: What I can tell you about what we do for mountain biking is that the development of mountain biking as a leisure activity features as a key activity in the outdoor recreation action plan. There are accompanying benefits to local communities in health, social inclusion, cohesion and

economic development. Mountain biking as a sport is covered under provisions in the Sport Matters NI strategy for sport and physical recreation. Outdoor recreation activity, including mountain biking, has the potential for many health benefits and participative recreation in the natural environment.

The action plan that underpins our new strategy highlights the importance of making the outdoors accessible to everyone and the opportunities that there are to participate not only in rural areas but in urban fringes. The plan shows how it can help deliver the targets in Sport Matters to increase levels of participation. The delivery of the aims of these strategies is dependent on cooperative partnership between a range of Departments that support the strategies, local government, arm's-length bodies, and sports and leisure governing bodies that have a central role in delivery.

Much progress has been made, and DCAL welcomes opportunities to engage with other bodies to realise the optimum return for investments made in mountain bike trails for competitors and leisure participants. We recognise the need to demonstrate value for money in making sports investments in this sector. The public purse and the local economy benefit from very specific activities, such as mountain biking, through marketing the North of Ireland as a tourist destination, which, in turn, boosts the local economy through the promotion of outdoor recreation to out-of-state visitors and encouraging greater spend and economic activity. To answer your specific question about our involvement in the event —

The Chairperson: We do not have an event at the minute. My understanding of the Mountain Bike World Cup, although I do not know a terrible lot about it, is that it is downhill mountain biking, similar to the Giro, only for that particular sport, and various legs of it are held in countries throughout the world. I understand that there is a very real opportunity that one leg of that event could be brought to Northern Ireland. Have there been any discussions in the Department, and, if not, will the Department be proactive in trying to encourage that to happen?

Ms McCartan: The Department would certainly support the event coming to Northern Ireland. The management of events is a DETI responsibility, and we would absolutely engage with DETI to try to ensure that we promote the sport of cycling through the delivery of that event.

The Chairperson: I assume that you had conversations with DETI and the Tourist Board about the Giro, in which I know that you were very proactively involved. Here is another opportunity to be proactively involved. I am suggesting that we get out of our silos, join up and work together to try to get this major world event. On a number of occasions, we have proved that we can provide some of the best opportunities for high-class world events to come here, and the expertise, planning and all the rest of it is already there. There is an opportunity there. I am only mentioning it; I am not trying to put you in a spot, Sinéad. My understanding of it is that there is a fantastic opportunity.

Mrs Hale: My question is on the back of the Chair's question about mountain biking. A few months back, a world-class event involving downhill mountain biking was held in Kilbroney with over 10,000 competitors. The major sponsor was Red Bull. Was the Department aware of that or involved in it in any shape or form?

Ms McCartan: No.

Mrs Hale: It was not involved in marketing it worldwide.

Ms McCartan: No.

Mrs Hale: Was the Department even aware of it?

Ms McCartan: The function for events and the development of sport emanating from events will be through DETI and Sport NI. At a strategic level, we will prepare the strategy that will allow for the legacy support from those events to develop the cycling through the Sport Matters strategy, but we would not have been involved in opportunities to do that. It would have been Sport NI, in conjunction with DETI.

Mrs Hale: It just seems a shame that such an event has already taken place in Kilbroney, and we seem to have missed the boat and the opportunity, because nobody was even aware that Red Bull, worldwide television companies and competitors from all over the world were here in Kilbroney. Most of Northern Ireland — well, the Departments — did not know that they were here.

Mr McCarthy: In the first paragraph of your letter to the Committee, you seem to shift the responsibility away from yourself to Sport NI. Where does cycling sit as a priority in your Department, given that you said in the first paragraph:

"Sport NI, an arm's length body of DCAL, is responsible for the development of sport in the north of Ireland"?

Ms McCartan: I am not too sure that I understand the —

Mr McCarthy: Well, you have passed the responsibility over to Sport NI, which is an arm's-length body of DCAL, as I understand it.

Ms McCartan: Yes. That is correct.

Mr McCarthy: Where does your Department see cycling as a priority?

Ms McCartan: The Department has delegated responsibility for the development of sport to Sport NI. The policy aspects rest with the Department. Through the Sport Matters policy, we prepared the way for the development of all sports, for which Sport NI is the delivery agent. We do not prioritise sport. We rely on Sport NI to develop sport, and, through the facilities strategy and the Sport Matters strategy, we will look at the needs of each sport to address those.

Mr McCarthy: Your answer is a bit disappointing. Surely, the Department should have some say in what is a priority and what is not. We would like to see cycling as a priority and your Department pushing it in that direction.

The Chairperson: Declan, do you want to say anything?

Mr McAleer: No.

The Chairperson: OK, Sinéad, that has been very helpful for the inquiry. I appreciate your evidence to the Committee. Thank you. We have quite a bit of paperwork as well, which will all be included in the eventual outcome. I think that there were one or two questions. The Clerk will write to you with those, and we would appreciate it if you could provide us with some answers. Thank you.