

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Communities

UPDATE ON PROGRESS TO DELIVER THE SUB-REGIONAL STADIA PROGRAMME

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Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): I wish to update Members on progress to deliver the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme.

I am pleased to advise members that I have approved a Strategic Outline Case for this Programme. This paves the way for the disbursement of the already allocated capital budget of £36.2m and sets out an evidenced case for a longer-term vision and the investment required to achieve it.

This is the first key stage in the delivery of this Programme, which will deliver funding to modernise performance club grounds, grassroots facilities and help create a National Training Centre for football.

This is the first time a Minister has approved a policy framework and way forward for this Programme. The next step will be to consider Programme and Project level business cases to underpin final expenditure decisions for the Programme. I expect work to continue at pace and for the first awards to be confirmed by the end of this financial year.

FOOTBALL

Football is one of our biggest local sports.

- A massive 360,000 people passed through the turnstiles for Irish League Premiership matches in 2023.
- Support for our National Team remains strong and continues to inspire young footballers, especially our woman's team.
- Attendance is on the up across the board.
- And the women's game is going from strength to strength.

The game and sector provide £470m of social and economic benefits to all of our citizens every year. It influences our international standing. It drives vital inward investment, tourism and our economic growth.

The World Health organisation reports that "physical activity is the single most useful thing that individuals can do to maintain their health, function and quality of life"^[1].

The current constraints on our health budget, and the pressures on our health system are unprecedented.

Football is a vital tool in our arsenal for tackling our health crisis, as well as driving much needed economic prosperity and delivering community spaces and places which we can be proud of.

STATE OF CURRENT FACILITIES AND PROVISION

The facilities we currently have available to play top level football in Northern Ireland are, in many cases, embarrassingly dilapidated and at risk of falling below minimum safety standards. We should

^[1] <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>

have sanitary conditions in our premiership grounds. Female referees should not have to change in their cars and drive home to shower.

We have far too few pitches to accommodate the huge numbers of players of all ages who play at grassroots level, including the 25,000 young people who regularly play for a youth team. Our youth teams should have enough decent pitches to accommodate every child who wants to play and train, and to inspire the next generation of healthy, active, athletes.

Most modern sporting nations have a National Training Centre for football, yet Northern Ireland currently lacks such a facility.

We are a place with a bright future – on and off the pitch. Our facilities should reflect that.

EXECUTIVE COMMITMENT

The Sub-Regional Programme was first conceived in 2011 to address this widely recognised need for investment in our facilities. The Programme has flagship status as an Executive commitment.

That commitment has not been delivered, leaving facilities to fall further behind. Local football has also changed significantly since then, having come on leaps and bounds in terms of the women's game, youth academies and clubs' role in their community. Other factors also have a bearing on how we must now approach a Programme of major construction work – including the need to take account of the latest building standards, sustainability, best practice disability provision and social enterprise opportunities, to name a few.

The Strategic Outline Case which I have approved takes account of the work done in previous years, as well as more up to date requirements and a comprehensive and evidenced assessment of need for investment in local football.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

To signal that formal approval has been given for the Programme at Strategic level and to better reflect its agreed purpose, I have decided to change the Programme's name to "The Northern Ireland Football Fund" (TNIFF).

This Programme was always expected to include a number of strands and the Northern Ireland Football Fund will reflect this.

The Fund will allow clubs at all levels to apply for capital awards to take forward infrastructure projects, with a recognition that Performance club grounds are the first priority. Performance clubs are defined as senior men's and women's teams whose home ground is located in Northern Ireland.

The Fund will also support Grassroots projects, to address the significant deficit in provision at this level.

And finally, it will support the creation of a National Training Centre for football which everyone can be proud of and adds value to football at all levels including the National Teams.

PERFORMANCE CLUB GROUNDS

The Programme will be delivered in phases, prioritising need and using a fair and transparent, open competition approach, to assess individual project needs and proposals. This approach aims to maximise value for money for the public purse, manage affordability and market capacity, as well as maximise benefits for football and the wider community.

All funding will be disbursed on the basis of demonstrating need to determine the priority order for the delivery of projects.

It will make the first awards to the clubs' who are most in need of investment, and who can deliver the greatest benefits, and then continue to provide support for clubs through projects in a prioritised order and in a sustainable way.

I have weighed up the option to disburse the existing capital budget of £36.2m equally among a large number of clubs at all levels which are in need of support. However, this would result in such small awards for each recipient as to make no demonstrable difference and jeopardise value for public funding. Therefore, I have ruled out this option as a possible delivery approach.

I am committing to beginning the process of delivering a longer term programme of investment for our performance level football facilities. I will be asking for additional funding to make it happen and do it properly. In parallel, I will be asking governing bodies and leaders within the football sector to work together to ensure that all clubs benefit from the outset through sharing grounds while facilities are under construction and sharing learning and best practice with the clubs whose projects will be supported in later phases of the Programme.

GRASSROOTS

Alongside investment to our performance clubs, I have also approved a plan to roll out investment to grassroots football. This will be done in parallel to undertaking a comprehensive assessment of need in partnership with the Irish FA, to quantify the huge deficit of pitch provision at grassroots level.

Because we already know this deficit exists, I want to roll out the first funding awards to grassroots clubs in the next 12 months, beginning a longer-term programme of strategic investment at that level too. I expect central government, working in partnership with local councils and clubs themselves to fully deliver the necessary number of projects to meet current and future needs.

NATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE

As I have mentioned, the third strand of the Programme will be the creation of a National Training Centre for football.

This facility will be designed primarily to host elite training for our National teams, including the National men's, women's and youth teams. But it will do more than that. It will be a flagship project to deliver an inspiring facility to motivate the next generation, host training for people involved at all levels of football on cutting edge ideas and provide the local community with access to a new facility and all the benefits that brings.

Work in this area is well advanced with a strategic location identified and plans in development to realise a flagship facility for Northern Ireland.

PARTNERSHIP FUNDING

Clubs, councils, governing bodies and other partners will be required to make financial contributions in the form of match funding to all strands of the Programme.

Clubs will also be required to clearly demonstrate how their proposals will secure a sustainable future for the financial operation of their club.

AMBITIOUS, TRANSFORMATIONAL

This is a long term, strategic Programme, which aims to deliver transformational change. It will be ambitious. Projects will deliver better than minimum standards, for example high standards of disability access and high-quality spectator experiences. We will make our local football facilities innovative, sustainable and comparable to the quality of facilities that fans have seen and enjoyed in other countries across the world.

I have set the ball rolling on a Programme of investment which will deliver modern football facilities, which Northern Ireland can be proud of for many years to come.

The Strategic Outline Case sets out costed need for football facilities of at least £200million at today's prices. I will continue to make the case for additional funding to be allocated to this important, long-term investment in football facilities.

There is more than enough public funding available to make a decisive and ambitious start. I believe that once the first projects are in train, their impact and importance will speak for themselves and that will help attract other funding and funders to provide the necessary match funding and long-term investment in our local clubs.

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT AND NEXT STEPS

I will publicly announce that I have approved the way forward for The Northern Ireland Football Fund at an event with performance clubs on Wednesday 22 May 2024. I will follow this announcement with separate events focusing on the way forward at Grassroots level and for creation of a National Training Centre soon.

I will continue to keep members apprised of progress and my officials will be happy to provide information as required, including through oral and written briefing to the Committee for Communities.

I am determined to get on with the job and deliver for people in Northern Ireland. I have set out an ambitious programme of work which will change the face of spaces and places in every corner of Northern Ireland and provide a bright future for one of our most important sports, harnessing the huge potential that football has to deliver important benefits for us all.