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Our ref: AQW 8851/22-27

Date: July 2024

Matthew O'Toole MLA
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont

Dear Matthew,

AQW 13023/22-27 – Engagement with Royal County Down Golf Club on the value for money of the Sports Sustainability Fund grant awarded during the pandemic.

You recently submitted an Assembly Written Question AQW 13023/22-27, enquiring about engagement with Royal County Down Golf Club on the value of the Sports Sustainability Fund grant awarded during the pandemic.

As outlined in my response, I have arranged for a copy of the Sports Sustainability Fund Post Project Evaluation report to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Yours sincerely

**Gordon Lyons MLA
Minister for Communities**

Pinnacle Growth Group

Sports Sustainability Fund – Post Project Evaluation

March 2022



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Enabling business growth

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Scope of Evaluation

Pinnacle Growth Group were appointed by Sport NI in January 2022 to undertake a post project evaluation of the Sports Sustainability Fund as part of a wider assessment of the effectiveness of various COVID 19 support programmes which were delivered to support the sporting sector in Northern Ireland throughout the pandemic. The scope of works for the evaluation of the Sports Sustainability Fund included:

Completion of post project evaluation, prioritised for completion by 31st March 2022:

- Audit of Government Funding Database input requirements
- Issuing of stakeholder survey including grant recipients
- Review of survey responses and production of report
- Completion of Outcomes Based Accountability Scorecards
- Completion of Post Project Evaluation reports incorporating lessons learnt

Methodology

In the completion of the requirements of this contract, the following actions were undertaken:

Date(s)	Activity
2 nd February 2022	Project Initiation Meeting
18 th February 2022 16 th March 2022 25 th March 2022	Project Update Meetings with Sport NI
2 nd March 2022 -21 st March 2022	Stakeholder Survey
21 st March 2022 – Wednesday 30 th March 2022	Consultation with Governing Bodies
30 th March 2022	Consultation with Department for Communities Sports Branch
Ongoing throughout duration of contract	Independent Research, Data Gathering and Analysis
31 st March	Submission of Report to Sport NI

In addition to the above activities, regular cadence with Sport NI was maintained throughout the duration of the contract in the form of email updates and phone calls.

Background to the Sports Sustainability Fund

Introduction

The Sports Sustainability Fund was announced in December 2020 by the Minister for Communities, Carál Ní Chuilín. A total of £25m was made available, with the primary purpose of the Fund to “address the economic consequences of the COVID 19 health pandemic affecting the sports sector”.

The Fund would provide financial interventions with the aim of stabilising the sporting sector and helping bodies to withstand the worst impacts of COVID 19, specifically by minimising the financial stress on the sports sector due to income lost as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Key Dates relating to the Sports Sustainability Fund

A timeline of key dates and activities pertaining to the Sports Sustainability Fund is presented below:

Date(s)	Activity
23 rd March 2020	Northern Ireland enters a national lockdown, leading to the cessation of all sporting activities for an undefined period of time.
19 th October 2020	Minister for the Department for Communities meets with Senior Representatives from a broad range of governing bodies to identify concerns and challenges facing the sporting sector
26 th October 2020	Department for Communities Sports Branch commence the drafting of the Business Case for the Sports Sustainability Fund
29 th October 2020	The NI Executive agrees a £15m fund as part of the October Monitoring Round, to be used to support the sports sector
5 th November 2020	Independent Research, Data Gathering and Analysis
11 th November 2020	Submission of Report to Sport NI
13 th November 2020	Original Business Case approved by the Senior Responsible Officer, Deputy Secretary at Department for Communities (incorporating £15m of available funding).
16 th November 2020	Ministerial approval given to first Business Case
3 rd December 2020	Ministerial Announcement of the Sports Sustainability Fund
4 th December 2020	Sports Sustainability Fund is launched

Date(s)	Activity
20 th January 2021	Closing date for Sports Sustainability Fund Applications
21 st January 2021	Revised Business Case approved by the Senior Responsible Officer, Deputy Secretary at Department for Communities (incorporating an additional £10m of available funding).
3 rd March 2021	Successful awards list published on Sport NI website

Strategic Context of the Fund

Introduction

In order to aid the assessment of the effectiveness of the Sports Sustainability Fund, a summary of the policy context in which the Fund was designed and delivered is presented below:

COVID 19 Context

The Sports Sustainability Fund was designed and implemented in the context of the government response to the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic in Northern Ireland.

Given the unique and unanticipated circumstances which unfolded across all aspects of Northern Irish society as a result of the pandemic and its associated restrictions, there was a responsibility on the part of governmental and non-governmental bodies to provide support to sports clubs, associations and organisations to mitigate against the apparent adverse impacts brought about by restrictions and limitations on sporting activities.

As a result, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed a package of measures to mitigate against the negative effects of the pandemic, thereby striving to protect key aspects of Northern Irish economic and recreational life.

The delivery of the Sports Sustainability Fund was aimed at complementing other interventions which were delivered to provide essential relief to sporting organisations during these unprecedented circumstances.

Sport NI Corporate Plan

The Sports Sustainability Fund was delivered in the context of the sentiments expressed in the Sport NI Corporate Plan for 2015-2020, the relevant strategic document for the organisation during the early stages of the pandemic.

The strategic objectives contained within this Corporate Plan included:

- To lead world class sports development at all levels producing more participants and more winners;
- To increase and support the number of people adopting and sustaining a sporting lifestyle;
- To enable more people to develop and reach their sporting goals through a structured environment; and
- To help more Northern Ireland athletes win at the highest level.

The Fund was implemented with the intention of supporting the sporting infrastructure of Northern Ireland was sustained throughout the pandemic, and also to ensure that the capacity remained within both individual sporting organisations and governing bodies to resume sporting activities as soon as it was both safe and legal to do so.

Eligibility Considerations

Sports Governing Bodies and individual sporting organisations were eligible to seek financial support through the Sports Sustainability Fund.

Applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund were only accepted from recognised Sports Governing Bodies who were registered in Northern Ireland.

Applications were only considered from individual sporting organisations who:

- Were based in Northern Ireland;
- Were affiliated to a Governing Body recognised by Sport NI;
- Had submitted an application through their Governing Body.

This approach helped to ensure that the opportunity to apply for financial assistance from the Sports Sustainability Fund was afforded to as many Northern Ireland based sporting organisations as possible, should they be able to provide the required evidence of financial need.

Eligible Expenditure

The purpose of the Sports Sustainability Fund was to support sporting organisations who were with financial hardships. Evidence of this hardship was assessed based on each applicant's respective financial performance between 1st April 2020 and 31st December 2020 and their projected financial performance from January 2021 to March 2021.

The level of funding allocated was then determined on how these figures compared to the financial performance of the previous three years, based on the submission of finalised accounts.

Application Process

The initial assessment and submission of applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund was overseen by the respective Governing Bodies within each sport. It was therefore the Governing Bodies who were responsible for the submission of applications to Sport NI.

This approach marked a change from the administration of previous funding opportunities administered by Sport NI, whereby individual sporting organisations applied directly to Sport NI for funding.

Governing Bodies who were developing an application for funding to support with their own financial hardships were required to submit the following documentation online:

- Application Form (Microsoft Excel spreadsheet);
- Approved annual accounts for the last 3 financial years e.g. 2017, 2018 and 2019;
- Approved management accounts for the period 1st April – 31st December 2020;
- Approved projected figures for 1st January – 31st March 2021; and
- Copy of a bank statement dated within the last 3 months.

Individual sporting organisations were required to submit the following documentation directly to their respective Governing Bodies:

- Application Form (Microsoft Excel spreadsheet);
- Approved annual accounts for the last 3 financial years e.g. 2017, 2018 and 2019;
- Approved management accounts for the period 1st April – 31st December 2020; and
- Approved projected figures for 1st January – 31st March 2021.

The results of a stakeholder survey which sought to assess the difficulty of the application process noted a very positive response from those who received funding, with approximately 85% of respondents noting that the application process was either “Very Straightforward” or “Straightforward”.

Furthermore, consultation with governing bodies noted that the complexity of the application process was not a significantly influential factor which limited further applications to the Fund.

Communications

In order to generate awareness of the Sports Sustainability Fund, a range of communications activity was undertaken both by Sport NI and Governing Bodies.

Sport NI Engagement with Governing Bodies

Sport NI hosted five workshops for the benefit of Governing Bodies so as to answer any questions on the application process. These took place on:

Date(s)	Number of Attendees
11 th November 2020	80
4 th December 2020	76
9 th December 2020	61
6 th January 2021	44
13 th January 2021	14

In addition, an online explanatory video was made available on the Sport NI website.

Moreover, Governing Bodies developed their own communications plans and undertook their own engagement activities so as to encourage applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund from within their own sport, and to support with the timely and compliant submission of applications.

The stakeholder survey which was completed as part of this evaluation noted that the majority of individual sporting organisations who received financial support from the Sports Sustainability Fund were made aware of the opportunity to apply for funding from their respective Governing Body.

Business Case

The Business Case for the Sports Sustainability Fund was developed by the Sports Branch within the Department for Communities, and was commenced in late October 2020.

The development, review and approval of the Business Case followed standard central government approvals procedures, albeit that the timeframes for completion and approval were greatly accelerated when compared to the delivery of funding schemes of a similar size.

The initial Business Case for £15m of funding through the Sports Sustainability Fund was approved by the Deputy Secretary of the Department for Communities in mid-November 2020, before receiving Ministerial approval three days later.

A revision to the business case was approved in January 2021, with the key difference being an additional £10m of funding which could be distributed to support the sector.

The total time from the initial drafting of the Business Case to the Sports Sustainability Fund being launched was just under six weeks.

The completion of this Business Case and subsequent approvals enabled the Sports Sustainability Fund to be launched in early December 2020 and for monies to be distributed to the sporting sector within the 2020/21 financial year.

Objectives of the Sports Sustainability Fund

The objectives of the Sports Sustainability Fund, as outlined in the scheme's Business Case, are presented as follows:

Objective	Target
To minimise the financial stress on the sports sector due to lost income as a result of COVID-19 lockdown and ongoing restrictions so as to sustain the sector.	To provide sports Governing Bodies and entities with sufficient financial support to ensure they remain viable once the pandemic passes.
Enable Governing Bodies and clubs to plan and prepare to increase opportunities for participation in sport, recreation and community use following the end of Covid restrictions.	To provide Governing Bodies and clubs with funds which will contribute to the development of programmes and capacity building after lockdown.

Scheme Outcomes

The key outcomes of the Sports Sustainability Fund, as presented in its Business Case, are outlined below:

- Ensure that, as far as possible, the range of clubs and organisations within the sports sector that currently exists here, survives through the current COVID-19 crisis and is there to support participation in sport and physical activity post the pandemic;
- Provide financial relief to sports Governing Bodies and clubs to ensure they remain viable once the current health crisis passes;
- Provide timely financial intervention to prevent the potential closure of sports clubs and organisations that are at risk due to COVID-19 restrictions;
- Ensure that financial interventions complement rather than duplicate other national and regional support packages;
- Ensure that funding is distributed quickly through a transparent and evidence based process that complies with NICS financial management guidance;
- Deliver a Sustainability Fund scheme that targets financial need, defined as net losses as a direct result of COVID-19 and face significant challenges to cover unavoidable costs with sports organisations experiencing significant reductions

with income, facing ongoing fixed/operational costs and therefore experiencing cash flow difficulties leading to the imminent threat of closure.

Analysis of Business Case Objectives and Outcomes

The objectives and outcomes of the Sports Sustainability Fund were developed based on intelligence and information which had been gathered from representative bodies within the sporting sector in Northern Ireland through a process of direct engagement and consultation.

This information gathering, which included meetings between representatives of the sporting sector and the Minister for Communities, had outlined the stark financial circumstances which sporting organisations were facing in light of the ongoing uncertainties related to the COVID 19 pandemic and the associated restrictions in sports participation and competition at all levels of competition.

It is through the receipt of this information from the sector that the need to support sporting organisations who were facing potential closure, as well as undertaking interventions to support organisations in returning to sport following the end of the pandemic were identified as priorities.

The Business Case for the Scheme was developed and approved in a uniquely accelerated manner, and it would not be considered normal practice for government expenditure of £25m to be conducted in such a short time frame under 'business as usual' conditions.

The timeframes involved in the design and development of the Sports Sustainability Fund highlight the unforeseen and unprecedented circumstances which engulfed the Northern Ireland sporting sector.

Although some key information was obtained from sporting bodies directly which informed the development of the Business Case and eventual Scheme Design, it was later acknowledged a very limited amount of quantitative information was held by governmental bodies, sporting bodies or even individual sporting organisations as to the actual economic impact of their activities. The lack of this information made estimating the financial needs of the sector during the COVID 19 pandemic exceptionally difficult to accurately forecast.

Fund Design

With cognisance of the Business Case objectives of addressing the immediate financial needs of sporting organisations in Northern Ireland, the Sports Sustainability Fund was designed with the purpose of "dealing with the economic consequences of the health pandemic, providing the intervention needed to prevent the sports sector being unduly impacted by the disruption".

The level of funding to be awarded to any given applicant would be based on financial need, determined by comparing financial performance during the pandemic with financial performance over the previous three accounting years.

Critique of Business Case and Fund Design

Following the assessment of applications and the awarding of monies, the Sports Sustainability Fund attracted some high profile media attention in relation to the levels of funding being awarded to some individual sporting organisations.

The Business Case, approvals process and also the Fund's design and administration were scrutinised and reported on by the Public Accounts Committee in February 2021 and also the Northern Ireland Audit Office, whose summary report was published in June 2021.

A summary of the scrutiny undertaken by the Public Accounts Committee described the approach to administration of monies through the Sports Sustainability Fund as 'flawed' in that it "awarded public funds to clubs and organisations that ensured that they achieved the same profits as they had in previous years".¹

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report highlighted that the Sports Sustainability Fund did not take into account the reserves of applicant organisations, nor did it seek to impose a maximum award to any individual organisation.

The scrutiny of the Sports Sustainability Fund from the perspective of its Business Case and design is well documented, and whilst it is important to recognise these developments in a Post Project Evaluation, further comment on these matters is considered out of scope for this report.

Model for Fund Delivery

The management and administration of the Sports Sustainability Fund was overseen by both Sport NI and the Department for Communities, with the roles and responsibilities of each organisation set out as follows:

- The development of the Business Case was overseen by the Sports Branch within the Department for Communities.
- The process by which expenditure was approved was also overseen by the Department for Communities.
- The assessment and approval of applications was overseen by Sport NI within the Performance Governance Team. At times of high demand, additional resource was sourced from elsewhere in Sport NI.
- A Programme Board was established, and was responsible for approving all expenditure awards less than £0.5m.

¹ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/news-and-media/press-releases/session-2021-2022/committee-finds-sports-sustainability-fund-of-23-million-did-not-adhere-to-best-practice/#:~:text=Chairman%20of%20the%20Committee%2C%20William,or%20with%20much%20less%20funding.%E2%80%9D>

- Applications whose value was in excess of £0.5m required approval from the Sport NI Chief Executive Officer.

Dialogue between Sport NI and the Sports Branch of the Department for Communities took place on an almost daily basis.

Consultation with representatives of both Sport NI and the Department for Communities highlighted that working relations between the two organisations could not have been better throughout the delivery of the Sports Sustainability Fund, and that this was facilitated by regular, informal communications.

Evaluation of the Impact of the Sports Sustainability Fund

Introduction

A primary focus of this evaluation is to assess the overall impact of the funding awarded to sporting organisations in Northern Ireland through the Sports Sustainability Fund.

This impact assessment has been conducted taking into consideration the following factors:

- Overall impact of funding;
- Support provided by Governing Bodies or Sport NI;
- Impact on sporting organisations in the event that funding was not provided;
- Effectiveness of communications in relation to the Sports Sustainability Fund; and
- Rationale behind the levels of applications from within each sport.

The following section of this report will present the findings of research and consultation carried out which assesses the overall impact of the Sports Sustainability Fund, and will present:

- Key Statistics relating to applications of the fund and successful awards;
- Results of a stakeholder survey which sought the views of successful applicants; and
- Results of direct consultation carried out with governing bodies.

Key Statistics pertaining to the Fund

The key statistics in relation to uptake and to the Sports Sustainability Fund are presented as follows:

- 37 Sports Governing Bodies applied to the fund
- 35 Governing Bodies were awarded funding
- 21 Governing Bodies were successful in applying for funding to support their own financial needs
- 454 individual sporting organisations were successful in applying for funding (although not all awards were availed of).

Distribution of Applications/Funding by Sport

A summary of the total applications and awards made through the Sports Sustainability Fund is presented below:

Governing Body	Governing Body Awarded Funding?	Total Successful Club Awards	Total Amount Applied for	Total Amount Awarded
2 & 4 Wheels Motorsport Steering Group	-	9	£227,245	£227,268
American Football Ireland	-	1	£4,027	£9,652
Archery NI	Yes	0	£2,797	£2,797
Association Irish Indoor Bowls	Yes	2	£45,706	£43,540
Athletics NI	Yes	6	£225,631	£225,631
Basketball NI	Yes	3	£71,681	£51,015
British Gymnastics	Yes	14	£588,192	£340,091
British Sub Aqua Club	-	1	£2,000	0
Canoe Association NI	-	3	£3,421	£3,421
Cricket Ireland	-	23	£325,687	£330,119
Cycling Ireland	-	2	£400,000	£14,518
Golf Ireland	-	29	£5,135,733	£4,208,286
Horse Sport Ireland	-	5	£45,426	£28,288
Ice Hockey UK	-	2	£407,565	£407,565
IRFU Ulster Branch	-	27	£2,225,693	£2,235,530
Irish Amateur Rowing Union (Ulster Branch)	Yes	2	£16,602	£12,376
Irish Athletic Boxing Association	Yes	7	£37,871	£62,417
Irish Bowling Association	Yes	4	£49,605	£49,593
Irish Football Association	Yes	77	£6,563,311	£6,555,593
Irish Indoor Bowling Association	Yes	0	£28,824	£13,470
National Coarse Fishing Federation Ireland	-	1	£991	£994
National Ice Skating Association UK	-	1	£3,376	£1,802
Netball NI	Yes	0	£34,892	£34,892
NI Billiards & Snooker Association	Yes	0	£1,343	£1,343

Governing Body	Governing Body Awarded Funding?	Total Successful Club Awards	Total Amount Applied for	Total Amount Awarded
NI Judo Federation	Yes	0	£30,499	£31,075
NI Karate Board	Yes	3	£6,928	£5,533
NI Tenpin Bowling Association	Yes	0	£2,966	£2,966
NI Volleyball	Yes	2	£14,666	£8,913
Royal Yachting Association NI	-	7	£189,186	£174,343
Swim Ulster	-	17	£244,173	£244,173
Table Tennis Ulster	-	0	£0	0
Triathlon Ireland	Yes	2	£91,362	£89,707
Ulster Angling Federation	-	4	£36,293	£33,282
Ulster Branch Badminton Union of Ireland (UBBUI)	Yes	1	£27,381	£27,381
Ulster Branch Tennis Ireland	-	4	£37,605	£446
Ulster Council GAA	Yes	180	£7,374,153	£7,380,382
Ulster Hockey Union	-	15	£339,328	£151,399
Total	21	454	£24,842,159	£23,009,802

Uptake of the Fund

A key element of the consultation process was to seek the feedback from beneficiaries of Sports Sustainability Fund assistance, but also to determine the nature of any barriers which existed which prevented some sporting organisations from participating in the Sports Sustainability Fund.

Key information obtained from consultation highlighted several reasons which prevented a stronger uptake of applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund:

- In some instances, the timeframes involved for Governing Bodies to effectively communicate with the full range of clubs under their jurisdiction may have had a limiting factor on the number of applications.
- The financial management processes of some individual sporting organisations did not facilitate them having the means of providing the required level of financial information for assessment.
- A successful application from a particular sporting organisation was dependent on the ability of certain volunteers to collect and verify the required information and submit it in the correct format. Therefore, if the volunteers of a particular sporting organisation did not have the means or confidence to participate in this process, no application would have been submitted.

- A culture of applying for financial assistance for sporting development from government and/or grant making bodies is more absent within certain sporting disciplines.
- The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic varied between sporting organisations and also between sports. In many cases, applications were not submitted by sporting organisations as there was no evidence of financial hardship. This was largely the case for sporting organisations whose main financial outlays were associated with delivering sporting activities and participating in competitions. Therefore, when these activities ceased during times of lockdown, these associated expenditures were subsequently no longer required.

Some of the key factors which contributed to some individual sporting organisations' inability to apply for financial assistance from the Sports Sustainability Fund highlight the presence of deficits within the sporting sector in terms of financial management and record keeping, capacity of volunteers and also awareness of the requirements of grant funding processes and procedures.

Stakeholder Survey

Introduction

A survey was drafted and launched on Wednesday 2nd March. This was issued to all successful applicants through Sport NI Corporate Communications.

The initial closing date was Monday 14th March, however this was extended to 21st March in order to maximise the overall response rate.

The survey posed the following questions in order to obtain a fuller understanding of the impact and effectiveness of the monies distributed through the Sports Sustainability Fund:

Number	Question
Impact of the Sports Sustainability Fund	
1	Did the Sports Sustainability Fund provide a sufficient level of financial support so that your organisation could continue operating during the COVID 19 pandemic? (Please provide further comment on your answer)
2	Did the Programme provide a sufficient level of financial support to enable your organisation to resume its pre-pandemic levels of activity once restrictions were eased? (Please provide further comment on your answer)
3	What did the funding that you received enable your organisation to do, that would not have been possible if funding had not been in place?

Number	Question
4	What would have been the consequences if this funding had not had been in place?
Application Process and Support Received	
5	How straightforward did you find the application form and financial template? (Please provide further comment on your answer)
For Governing Bodies only:	
6	How would you rate the support received from Sport NI during the application process?
7	Throughout the duration of the Programme, please rate the communication from Sport NI in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of Communications • Frequency of Communications
For individual sporting organisations only	
8	How would you rate the support received from your Governing Body during the application process?
9	Throughout the duration of the Programme, please rate the communication from your Governing Body in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of Communications • Frequency of Communications
Communications and Other Funding Availed of	
10	How did you hear about the Sports Sustainability Fund?
11	Please outline which other financial supports your organisation availed of during the COVID 19 pandemic:

Survey Results

A total of 122 responses were received to the stakeholder questionnaire during the window in which the survey was open – this accounted for 26.9% of the total potential responses. This was the final number of responses following a verification exercise undertaken in order to ensure accuracy and legitimacy of data which led to the removal of duplicate responses and responses from organisations who had not received financial assistance from the Sport Sustainability Fund.

The breakdown of respondents per sporting discipline is presented below:

Sport	Total Responses	Total Possible Responses	Response Rate %
Governing Bodies	7	21	33.3
Athletics	1	8	12.5
Badminton	1	1	100
Bowling (Indoor)	4	6	66.7
Boxing	2	7	28.6
Canoeing	2	3	66.7
Coarse Fishing	1	4	25
Cricket	8	23	34.8
Gaelic Athletics	48	180	26.7
Golf	4	29	13.8
Gymnastics	5	14	35.7
Hockey	2	17	11.8
Motor Racing	2	9	22.2
Rowing	1	2	50
Rugby	5	27	18.5
Sailing	2	7	28.6
Association Football	22	78	28.2
Swimming	5	18	27.8
Total	122	474[^]	25.7
Total (Excl governing bodies)	115	453[^]	25.4

* no responses were received from six sports who received funding.

[^]Although one sporting organisation associated with the British Sub Aqua Club applied for funding, no award was made.

Overall Impact of the Funding

Of the 115 responses received from individual sporting organisations, 105 (91.3%) stated that the funding awarded through the Sports Sustainability Fund provided a sufficient level of financial support to enable their sporting organisation to continue to operate during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Survey participants were afforded the opportunity to provide additional commentary in relation to the level of support which they received from the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The overarching themes contained within the comments provided were positive, and noted that the financial support secured from the Fund was vital in helping sporting organisations cover essential costs that could not be avoided during the COVID 19

pandemic. This relief was particularly welcomed considering that almost all fundraising, sponsorship and event related income had dried up.

Several respondents noted that the funding was vital in helping their sporting organisation avoid closure.

Of the minority of respondents who stated that the level of support was not sufficient, several provided reasons as to why this was the case. It was mentioned that there was a requirement to seek financial support from other sources in order to meet their identified financial hardships, and that other sources of grant funding were availed of in order to help keep their sporting organisation viable throughout the pandemic.

Return to Sport following the Easing of Restrictions

The survey also posed the question as to whether or not the funding helped sporting organisations to resume its pre-pandemic levels of activity once restrictions were eased and once sporting activities were permitted to resume.

98 respondents (85.2%) stated that the funding did enable pre-pandemic levels of sporting activity to resume.

Of those who responded negatively to this question, most cited ongoing financial losses as a reason as a limiting factor.

Respondents from sporting organisations who participate in indoor sports also noted that prolonged restrictions had contributed to limitations being placed on their ability to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Complexity of Application Process

Respondents were posed with a question which sought to gain feedback on the complexity of the application process pertaining to the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The responses received were as follows:

- Very Straightforward (28 respondents, 24.3%)
- Straightforward (71 respondents, 61.7%)
- Indifferent (4 respondents, 3.5%)
- Complicated (11 respondents, 9.6%)
- Very Complicated (1 respondent, 0.9%)

Whilst the majority of respondents did not note that the application process was particularly difficult, there were multiple references made in relation to the time required in order to gather the required information and to complete the required financial templates compliantly. Six respondents also highlighted that they had engaged their organisational accountant in order to ensure that the application had been completed correctly.

The responses provided to this question indicate that the sporting organisations who were in receipt of funding from the Sports Sustainability Fund had a good level of awareness of their organisation's financial management processes and were either able to collate the required information in a compliant, albeit time consuming way. The responses also highlighted that several successful sporting organisations sought specialist assistance in order to address identified

Quality of Support Provided

The framework for applications and allocating funding through the Sports Sustainability Fund meant that sporting organisations would liaise with their respective Governing Bodies in relation to matters pertaining to the Fund. The responses to this question are summarised as follows:

- 65 respondents (56.5%) noted that the support provided from their governing body was "Very Helpful"
- 42 respondents (36.5%) noted that the support provided was "helpful"
- 8 respondents (7%) noted that the support provided was "indifferent"

No respondents remarked negatively in relation to this question.

The responses provided to this survey reflect well on the way Governing Bodies fulfilled their responsibilities in terms of providing support to sporting organisations completing applications.

Communications relating to the Scheme

The responsibility for communicating awareness of the Sports Sustainability Fund also lay with the respective Governing Bodies.

62 respondents (53.9%) stated that the quality of communications received from their governing body was "Very Good", whereas 49 respondents (42.6%) spoke equally as highly of the frequency of communications received.

Also positively, 43 respondents (37.4%) stated that they received "Good" quality of communications in relation to the Fund, and 56 respondents (48.7%) noted the same of the frequency of communications.

Uses of Funding

The survey sought to obtain more specific information as to how sporting organisations who were successful in receiving funding used their awards. Importantly, the question focused on what activities sporting organisations were able to undertake that would not have been possible without support from the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The most common responses to this question noted that financial assistance from the Sports Sustainability Fund was used to cover essential, unavoidable costs that sporting organisations were required to be met during the lockdown.

The support also ensured that essential maintenance was able to be carried out on premises and facilities, and that this went some lengths in ensuring that sporting activities were able to continue once restrictions were eased. Furthermore, several responses also indicated that the support was used to help make facilities compliant with health and safety guidelines so as to facilitate a safe return to sport for all participants.

Some particularly positive comments noted that the support received enabled outreach activities to be conducted to support the wider community throughout the pandemic. Moreover, it was highlighted by one organisation that the funding enabled an ambitious capacity building project to proceed following the pandemic that would have otherwise been shelved as a result of the financial losses made.

Impact of COVID in the absence of the Sports Sustainability Fund

This question sought to establish the impacts that would have been felt by the sporting sector in the event that the Sports Sustainability Fund had not been implemented.

The overwhelming majority of responses highlighted particularly unfavourable responses to this scenario being posed, with the long term viability of organisations regularly called into question and the prospect of closure cited regularly.

Moreover, respondents also noted the detrimental wider impact that the absence of financial support would have had on the wider community, as sporting premises and facilities which would have been regularly availed of by other third sector organisations would no longer have the same opportunities afforded to them.

Overall, the responses to this question highlight the exceptionally difficult and potentially disastrous scenarios that would have been faced by sporting organisations in the event that Sports Sustainability Funding had not been made available to them.

Communications in Relation to the Fund

In order to assess the effectiveness of the communications in relation to the Sports Sustainability Fund, respondents were asked to provide feedback as to how they were initially made aware of the Fund. Exactly one hundred respondents provided insights through this question, and are summarised below:

- 69 (69%) of respondents noted that they were made aware of the Sports Sustainability Fund via communications from their Governing Body
- 17 (17%) of respondents noted that they were made aware of the Sports Sustainability Fund via Sport NI

- 6 (6%) of respondents noted that they were made aware of the Sports Sustainability Fund via Social Media
- 5 (5%) of respondents noted that they were made aware of the Sports Sustainability Fund via their Own Research
- 3 (3%) of respondents noted that they were made aware of the Sports Sustainability Fund via Word of Mouth

A conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this survey is the importance of effective communications between sporting organisations and their respective Governing Bodies, and that failure on the part of Governing Bodies to generate awareness of the Sports Sustainability Fund could have had a limiting impact on the overall number of applications to the Fund.

Additional Funding Secured

The concluding question of the stakeholder survey requested that organisations provide details of what other financial support they were able to avail of in order to mitigate against the negative impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic. A total of 75 organisations noted that they had successfully availed of additional support from the following schemes:

- Government Furlough Scheme (32 respondents, 27.8% of all 115 respondents)
- Local Government/Council support scheme for sporting organisations (31 respondents, 26.9%)
- Retail, Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism Grants (5 respondents, 4.3%)
- Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (4 respondents, 3.5%)
- Business Support Grant Scheme (3 respondents, 2.6%)

Analysis of these results demonstrates that sporting organisations who received financial support from the Sports Sustainability Fund were proactive in seeking financial assistance wherever it could be obtained.

It also demonstrates the level of financial assistance that was required to support the sports sector during the pandemic, whilst also highlighting the levels of employment associated with sporting activities as well as providing an insight into the wider economic impact of the sector.

Summary of Survey Results

Overall, the responses received across all strands of the survey indicate that the Sports Sustainability Fund had a significantly positive impact for those allocated funding in enabling them to meet ongoing, unavoidable costs during the COVID 19 pandemic.

The sentiment is also that the support received from Governing Bodies was welcomed by those who received funding, and that of the quality and frequency of communications in relation to the application process.

Consultation with Governing Bodies

In order to establish a holistic perspective of the overall impact of the Sports Sustainability Fund, a series of one-to-one interviews were arranged with a representative sample of Governing Bodies who had participated in the process of administering financial support to sporting organisations through the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The bodies consulted included:

- Those who received large amounts of financial support (GAA, Rugby, Soccer, Golf)
- Those who received little or no financial support (Judo, Tennis)
- Those who received significantly less financial support than initially requested (Irish Indoor Bowling Association, Cycling, Hockey)
- Those who received more financial support than initially requested (Boxing, Cricket)

In total, eleven governing bodies participated in this direct consultation exercise, and the feedback obtained was used to complement the responses received from the Governing Bodies who had submitted a response to the stakeholder survey.

The summary of the key themes which emerged throughout consultation are as follows:

Scheme Design

There was widespread recognition that the Sports Sustainability Fund was designed in unusually hastily circumstances, owing to the immediate need for financial support to be provided to the sector in order to assist with the ongoing impacts that restrictions associated with the COVID 19 pandemic were having for sporting organisations.

Despite this acknowledgement, some governing bodies noted that the haste with which the Fund was brought about resulted in certain aspects of the funding criteria and application could be interpreted as being left open to potential exploitation. It was also noted that, on hindsight, the affording of longer timeframes in which to develop and design the Fund would have enabled a more robust consultation process to have been undertaken and for some issues in relation to the implementation of the Fund to be highlighted and addressed.

In particular, it was noted that the design of the application form and financial templates did not take into consideration some accounting peculiarities (e.g. One off payments) which augmented the financial performance of sporting organisations over a three year period. It can be said that this contributed to a perception within some sports that the funding available was distributed somewhat inequitably.

Participation in the Fund

The responses from those consulted were mixed in terms of the level of uptake of the Sports Sustainability Fund when compared to optimum or anticipated levels.

Several Governing Bodies noted that, owing to external factors such as capacity of volunteers, familiarity with grant application and claim processes and also the financial management processes of sporting organisations, there were some who could and should have applied for financial assistance from the Sports Sustainability Fund but were limited in their own ability to do so. It should be stressed that the feedback in this regard pertained to the capacity of sporting organisations themselves and was not reflective of an overly complex application process.

Return to Sport

Nearly all of the Governing Bodies consulted reflected positively of the fact that sporting activity has entirely returned to pre-pandemic levels, and that the funding received through the Sports Sustainability Fund was a significant contributing factor in enabling this to happen.

Representatives of indoor sports, contact sports and also those with a higher percentage of elderly participants noted that there were additional challenges in restoring pre-COVID levels of sporting participation compared to other sporting activities, but that they were hopeful of a full return to 'business as usual' later in 2022.

Support from Sport NI

A consistent theme emerging from across the majority of Governing Bodies consulted was that the support from Sport NI was very helpful, and that queries relating to applications were nearly always addressed in a timely manner.

This sentiment was also expressed in terms of the quality and frequency of communications which Sport NI issued to Governing Bodies throughout the duration of the Fund.

An analysis of this feedback reflects positively on the team at Sport NI in co-ordinating a service which was able to address, at times, high volumes of queries and provide essential support to the sporting sector at a time of critical importance.

Model for Delivery

A key aspect of this Post Project Evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the model utilised to assess and administer Sports Sustainability Fund monies, namely the process whereby applications from individual sporting organisations were collated and submitted by Governing Bodies.

The rationale behind the implementation of this approach was to ensure that a high volume of applications could be processed within the required timeframes and within the resourcing capabilities of Sport NI.

On the most part, the governing bodies consulted were appreciative of the opportunity to have an involvement in the administration and assessment process, however some constructive feedback was provided in relation to how this approach might be improved if it were to be utilised in the delivery of funding to the sporting sector in the future.

Consultation indicated that whilst governing bodies welcomed the process whereby their responses to the design of the Fund were provided, several felt that the timeframes involved meant that feedback could not be properly integrated into the Fund's eventual design and rollout. It should be stressed however that this was not a significant factor in determining how any given Governing Body embraced the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The majority of Governing Bodies also welcomed the oversight that this model afforded them in terms of being able to acknowledge which of their respective sporting organisations were developing applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund. This transparency enabled additional communication and engagement efforts to be undertaken where applications to the Fund were lower than anticipated, and also helped some Governing Bodies to fulfil their representative roles more effectively.

There was some frustration expressed at the level of resource that was required to be expended by a minority of Governing Bodies in supporting the processing of applications, however it was also acknowledged that the cessation of sporting activities meant that certain staffing roles could be temporarily repurposed so as to support with these identified additional levels of administration.

Overall, the roles allocated to Governing Bodies in the management and administration of the Sports Sustainability Fund was well received, with scope for this approach to be refined and to become more effective in the delivery of future funding with less stringent time pressures.

Overall Impact

All Governing Bodies noted that the Sports Sustainability Fund had a very positive impact on the sporting sector in Northern Ireland and the funding was instrumental in helping those sporting organisations who were successful in overcoming identified financial hardships caused by the unique and unprecedented circumstances brought about by the COVID 19 pandemic.

It was acknowledged that with the benefit of hindsight, improvements could have been made to both the design and delivery of the Fund. However, there was a cognisance that the timeframes which were afforded to Sport NI in developing the Fund were exceptionally tight.

This consultation exercise highlighted the positive and proactive role played by Sport NI in generating awareness of the Fund and supporting in the development of applications.

The approach used whereby Governing Bodies had augmented responsibilities was generally welcomed, with consultation highlighting a consistent desire for a similar approach to be adopted in the delivery of future funding where the timescales for delivery would enable a more meaningful approach to co-design to be implemented.

Conclusions

Introduction

Following the completion of all research and consultation activities, a series of evidence based conclusions have been drawn in relation to the Sports Sustainability Fund. These conclusions have been developed along the following themes:

- Context of the Fund and Strategic Rationale;
- Assessment of the Fund against Business Case Objectives;
- Effectiveness of the Approach used to administer funding;
- Support provided by Governing Bodies and/or Sport NI;
- Impact on sporting organisations in the event that funding was not provided;
- Rationale behind the levels of applications from within each sport; and

A summary of the impact of the Sports Sustainability has also been presented in terms of the development of an Outcomes Based Scorecard.

Context of the Scheme

From the research and analysis undertaken, it is evident that the Sports Sustainability Fund was designed, developed and delivered in circumstances that were unparalleled when compared to any previous funding scheme or programme that had stood to support and develop the sporting sector in Northern Ireland.

It is widely acknowledged that the Fund was delivered at a time of great financial need within the sporting sector as a whole, and when sporting organisations were facing some exceptionally difficult challenges in meeting ongoing costs, and were faced with the prospects of long term financial difficulties or even closure.

The Fund however did align with the strategic priorities of Sport NI in that it stood to support and sustain the sporting infrastructure of Northern Ireland throughout the pandemic, and also to ensure that the capacity remained within both individual sporting organisations and Governing Bodies to resume sporting activities as soon as it was both safe and legal to do so.

Assessment of Fund against Business Case Objectives

The objectives of the Business Case for the Sports Sustainability Fund were:

- To minimise the financial stress on the sports sector due to lost income as a result of the COVID 19 lockdown and ongoing restrictions so as to sustain the sector; and
- To enable Governing Bodies and Clubs to plan and prepare to increase opportunities for participation in sport, recreation and community use following the end of COVID restrictions.

The feedback obtained through the operation of the Stakeholder Survey noted that those organisations who were in receipt of financial assistance from the Sports Sustainability Fund had financial stresses significantly reduced, and it can be said from the analysis of qualitative responses that the financial assistance received was pivotal in minimising the risk of closure for a range of individual sporting organisations.

Although in the case of some sports, extenuating circumstances continue to prevail, Consultation with several Governing Bodies has indicated that the funding provided to both themselves and to sporting organisations has enabled a smoother return to sport and for the focus of many organisations to be on resuming sporting activities rather than seeking the financial resources with which to do so.

Effectiveness of Model for Assessing Applications

The implementation of the Sports Sustainability Fund gave an enhanced role to Governing Bodies in administering and assessing applications on behalf of their respective Sporting Organisations.

The sentiments behind this approach were largely welcomed by Governing Bodies, although consultation has illustrated aspects of this model which could be improved upon if it were to be utilised in the delivery of future funding programmes to support the sports sector.

Support provided by Governing Bodies and/or Sport NI

Summarising the feedback offered in relation to the support provided by both Sport NI and Governing Bodies in relation to the Sports Sustainability Fund, the conclusion can be drawn that the quality and frequency of communications surrounding activities related to applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund was of a generally high standard. Whilst each Governing Body adopted their own approach to engagement within the short window in which applications could be submitted, there was a healthy attendance across the five online workshops organised and delivered by Sport NI in relation to the Fund and first-hand support was made available by Sport NI staff to advise on the application process whenever required.

Sectoral impact in the absence of the Sports Sustainability Fund

A very strong theme which emerged from the consultation and engagement activities was that, although there were perceived imperfections with the Sports Sustainability Fund, the Fund did provide essential relief to the sporting sector at a time of great uncertainty and financial difficulty.

In the absence of this funding, the long term viability of many organisations would have been called into question and the sector could easily have been faced with prospect of organisational closures and the cessation of some sporting activities on a permanent basis.

Barriers to Participation

Through consultation with a diverse range of Governing Bodies, it was determined that the some notable barriers which limited some sporting organisations from making successful applications to the Sports Sustainability Fund included:

- Limited financial management capabilities and lack of quality financial reporting and accounting procedures meant that some organisations did not have the required financial information in place with which to make an application.
- The confidence and capacity of volunteers of some sporting organisations in collecting and verifying the required financial information limited the ability of some sporting organisations to make a successful application.
- A culture of applying for financial assistance for sporting development from government and/or grant making bodies is more absent within certain sporting disciplines.
- The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic varied between sporting organisations and also between sports. In many cases, applications were not submitted by sporting organisations as there was no evidence of financial hardship.

Outcomes Based Scorecard

The following Outcomes Based Scorecard highlights the overall impact of the Sports Sustainability Fund.

What did we do?	How well did we do?	Is anyone better off?
<p>£23m of funding provided to support the Sector</p> <p>37 governing bodies who applied for funding</p> <p>5 online workshops delivered to support Governing Bodies with developing applications</p>	<p>35 Governing Bodies who successfully received funding</p> <p>21 Governing Bodies who received a successful funding award</p> <p>453 sporting organisations who successfully received funding</p> <p>92.0% of budget spent²</p> <p>99 sporting organisations (85% of participating organisations) who stated that the application process was "Very straightforward" or "Straightforward".</p> <p>7 governing bodies (100% of participating bodies) who stated that the support received from Sport NI was "very helpful" in responses provided to a stakeholder survey</p> <p>5 governing bodies (71.4%%) who stated that the frequency of communications</p>	<p>12 governing bodies (93.3%) who stated through consultation that the financial report received was sufficient in allowing their organisation to continue operating during the pandemic</p> <p>14 governing bodies (93.3%) who stated through consultation that the funding enabled their organisation to continue its pre-pandemic levels of activity once restrictions were eased</p> <p>105 participating sporting organisations (91.3%) who stated that the financial report received was sufficient in allowing their organisation to continue operating during the pandemic</p> <p>98 participating sporting organisations (85.2%) who stated that the funding enabled their organisation to continue its pre-pandemic levels of activity once restrictions were eased</p>

² Awards of £23,009,802 made from a total possible budget of £25m

What did we do?	How well did we do?	Is anyone better off?
	<p>from Sport NI was "very good" in a stakeholder survey</p> <p>5 governing bodies (71.4%) who stated that the quality of communications from Sport NI was "very good" in a stakeholder survey</p>	

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the impact of the Sports Sustainability Fund, a series of recommendations have been developed for consideration in the development of future programmes whose purpose will be to support and develop the Northern Ireland sporting sector.

Recommendation 1 – Implementing Learning from the Experience of the Sports Sustainability Fund

The Sports Sustainability Fund was designed and delivered in unique circumstances, with decision making organisations having little to no modelling or credible data which would assess the impact of a global pandemic causing the cessation of sporting activities or elite sporting activities being conducted in the absence of spectators, and allow an evidence based response to be developed.

However, implementing such a scheme in such challenging circumstances has afforded both Sport NI and the Department for Communities to develop organisational experience that each organisation would not have exposure to in the past.

The approach taken to the development of the Sports Sustainability Fund and the key learnings based on the scrutiny applied to the Scheme from the Public Accounts Committee and the Northern Ireland Audit Office should therefore (if required to do so) be used as a benchmark through which to inform the design and decision making related to future programmes of support.

This process should also involve the accurate and effective recording of all activities pertaining to the development and implementation of the Sports Sustainability Fund, thereby enhancing their corporate memory of each organisation so that future members of staff may have access to an inimitable example of a funding programme delivered in such unique circumstances.

Recommendation 2 – Co-Design of Funding

The approach used in the implementation of the Sports Sustainability Fund was welcomed by Governing Bodies, and ensured that Sport NI were supported in the processing of applications for financial assistance within a tight time period. However, in the development of future programmes where time and resourcing requirements allow, more comprehensively exploring the concept of co-designing support programmes in closer collaboration with Governing Bodies could enable more effective support to be delivered that is tailored to the needs of specific sporting sectors.

Recommendation 3 – Capacity Building

One of the key identified barriers which limited further applications to be made to the Sports Sustainability Fund from within certain sporting sectors was that the financial management processes of individual sporting organisations did not meet the required standards in order to facilitate an application.

Moreover, it was identified through consultation that a limited capacity of sporting organisations in understanding the requirements and processes of applying for grant based financial assistance was a contributing factor in the decisions of some sporting organisations not to proceed with applications to the Fund.

These factors are indicative of a need for increased programming, training and upskilling of sporting organisations in relation to effective and prudent financial management of sporting organisations.

Addressing this identified capacity deficit could lead to the development of more confident and capable sporting organisations in the long term.

Recommendation 4 – Transparency

One of the notable features of the Sports Sustainability Fund was the transparency and openness of the Fund, including the publication of Bids and Award Lists on the Sport NI website.

Consultation with key stakeholders who were involved in the design and delivery of the Fund reflected that, with the benefit of hindsight, greater transparency in relation to the rationale behind key decisions made in relation to the Sports Sustainability Fund would have increased the understanding of the decision making processes, particularly when such processes were being scrutinised in the public domain by independent and political bodies.

There is therefore the opportunity to embed clearer documentation and recording processes into the decision making process pertaining to future funding programmes so that the rationale behind decision making processes is unambiguous.

Recommendation 5 – Additional Research to be Undertaken

A key learning from the Sports Sustainability Fund is the distinct lack of credible modelling or data which highlights the financial requirements of individual sporting organisations and the sporting sector as a whole in Northern Ireland.

In order to ensure address this identified deficit and to generate a greater awareness and enhanced evidence base of the financial contribution of sporting organisations to Northern Ireland society, it is recommended that additional pieces of social and economic research are commissioned which seek to clarify these important considerations in greater detail.

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