

## **Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs**

### **Childhood Obesity**

**Sport Ireland Opening Statement, 27 June 2017**

## **INTRODUCTION**

On behalf of Sport Ireland, I would like to thank the Committee for giving us this opportunity to speak with you this morning.

I am joined this morning by my colleague Dr. Una May, Sport Ireland's Director of Participation and Ethics.

## **HEALTH BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA) study<sup>1</sup> of 2010 referenced the considerable international evidence which highlights the benefits of physical activity in children and young people. It identified that physical activity was important to children's current and future health, and adherence to the physical activity guidelines produces a range of direct and indirect benefits.

Physically activity assists in the control of body weight by increasing energy expenditure. This helps teach children and young people how to achieve a healthy 'energy balance', and avoid developing adult obesity. It reduces the risk of developing premature cardiovascular disease, type-2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome and some site specific cancers. Weight bearing physical activity is important in bone formation and remodelling. In addition, physical activity reduces depression and anxiety, enhances mood, self-esteem and quality of life.

Participation in regular physical activity has also been found to have a positive effect on behaviour, attention-span and academic performance.

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<sup>1</sup>

[https://www.sportireland.ie/Research/Childrens\\_Sports\\_Participation\\_and\\_Physical\\_Activity\\_Study/CSPPA\\_Study\\_Report\\_2010/](https://www.sportireland.ie/Research/Childrens_Sports_Participation_and_Physical_Activity_Study/CSPPA_Study_Report_2010/)

Physical inactivity is one of the leading risk factors for poor health and is now identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality and is estimated to be associated with one million deaths per year in the WHO European Region.

The costs and consequences associated with physical inactivity are now becoming more obvious. Estimates of the direct and indirect costs of physical inactivity are alarming.

Sport Ireland and Healthy Ireland have agreed to co-fund a follow up to the Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity study, which will replicate the previous study and will produce updated information on the sport and physical activity habits of our current generation of school-going children. The main report from this study is expected to be published in November 2018.

## **How Active Should Children and Young People Be?**

The National Physical Activity Guidelines<sup>2</sup> recommend that children (aged 2 – 18) should be active every day for 60 minutes at a moderate or higher intensity. The activity should include muscle strengthening, flexibility, and bone strengthening exercises 3 times a week.

## **How Active are Our Children and Young People?**

The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA) Study<sup>3</sup> commissioned by Irish Sports Council<sup>4</sup> and published in 2010.

The study's findings included that:

- 19% of primary and 12% of post-primary school children met the physical activity recommendations and these proportions have not improved since 2004;
- girls were less likely than boys to meet the physical activity recommendations;
- the likelihood of meeting the physical activity recommendations decreased with increasing age; and
- one in four children was unfit, overweight or obese and had elevated blood pressure.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/active\\_guidelines.pdf](https://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/active_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.sportireland.ie/Research/Childrens\\_Sports\\_Participation\\_and\\_Physical\\_Activity\\_Study/CSPPA\\_Study\\_Report\\_2010/](https://www.sportireland.ie/Research/Childrens_Sports_Participation_and_Physical_Activity_Study/CSPPA_Study_Report_2010/)

<sup>4</sup> Since October 2015 Sport Ireland

Importantly, the research found that children who met the physical activity recommendations in the Guidelines of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity daily had the best health profile. The study reinforces the considerable body of international evidence around the health benefits of physical activity.

What really concerns Sport Ireland is the number of school children, at both primary and secondary level, who are not active and not meeting physical activity recommendations.

The CSPPA found that while a high proportion of children were physically active in some capacity, whether through PE classes or after-school sports, they were still not meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines.

There are now more opportunities than ever for children and young people to engage in sport and physical activity. But, while sport plays an important role in getting children active, it alone is not the answer to this issue. Children need to have the opportunity to partake in a physical activity which they enjoy. This is where Sport Ireland feels the role of schools is of paramount importance.

It is our view that regular physical activity, through the delivery of Physical Education classes, is as important part of the school experience as reading, writing and maths. This should start at the very beginning as soon as children engage with the primary school system.

We can look at strong international models for this. In Denmark, the Folkeskole Act, makes it compulsory for schools to offer an average of 45 minutes of physical activity per school day in primary and lower-secondary education, as well as adding an extra physical education lesson per school week in grade 1.

Similarly in Hungary, daily PE became part of the program of the Government in 2010. Schools must organize 5 daily PE classes per week, each lasting 45 minutes, and to achieve the expected health gains, daily PE must fulfill several health-promoting criteria.

Sport Ireland welcomes as very positive, recent developments in the PE curriculum in the senior cycle. However, we feel that there is more to be done in this area to ensure that PE becomes a core part of the school experience.

It is important that the new initiatives around senior cycle PE are rolled out across the entire school system as a priority to increase the physical activity levels and physical literacy among all children. It is critical that the full implementation of this new curriculum will be sufficiently resourced to ensure the maximum potential for its success.

The role of the parent cannot be overstated. It is important that parents ensure children are kept physically active as part of a balanced lifestyle which also incorporates nutrition. We are well aware of instances where parents will write notes for students to be excused from PE classes; parents need to take responsibility and be aware of the consequences of their children not engaging in physical activity.

Children need to get into good habits from an early age, if this is happening both in the home and school environment then the child's chance of leading a healthy lifestyle increase exponentially.

Evidence from other research including the Growing Up in Ireland National Longitudinal Study of Children and the Healthy Ireland survey indicates a strong socio-economic gradient in obesity levels. These findings emphasise the importance of focussing on individuals from lower socio-economic groups around health behaviours such as physical activity and diet. Sport Ireland for its part has placed particular emphasis on getting these groups active with the support of Dormant Accounts Funding and through the LSP Network and Community Sports Hubs initiative. Increased investment in such initiatives is merited to try to reduce these health inequalities.

## **Tackling Obesity**

The publication of 'A Healthy Weight for Ireland', Healthy Ireland's Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025 which highlights the important role of physical activity is a welcome development in tackling of childhood obesity in Ireland.

Sport Ireland is of the view that the effective interventions on physical activity identified in the Policy and Action Plan, should be delivered.

A fundamental principle of the Local Sports Partnership (LSP) network, an initiative of Sport Ireland, is to remove any barrier that prevents participation in sport. In 2017 Sport Ireland allocated in excess of €6m to the 29 established Local Sports Partnerships which resulted in over 339,615 people participating in 936 locally delivered participation programmes throughout the year.

The LSPs are the most important drivers of an inter-agency approach at a local level, in that they can promote a supportive environment at local level, where physical activity becomes normal as well as continuously explore new models of participation. The LSPs are therefore named as key partners across many of the action areas of the National Physical Activity Plan.

Sport Ireland's Local Sports Partnerships are a key delivery agency to the 2017/2018 Healthy Ireland Fund with a specific focus on local actions to implement the National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland.

### ***Dormant Accounts Fund***

Through the Dormant Accounts Fund, Sport Ireland allocates funding to NGBs and LSPs to support National Physical Activity Plan measures for disadvantaged communities. €2.9 million was allocated to DAF measures in November of last year, with a further €1.5 million announced in December.

### ***NGB Core Funding***

The Dormant Accounts Funding compliments Sport Ireland's support for NGBs and LSPs through annual Core Funding.

In 2018, Sport Ireland will invest €10.8 million in NGBs to develop sustainable and effective structures to facilitate increased numbers of both participants and volunteers across a wide range of sports. The Core Funding for NGBs covers a range of areas, including the running of participation programmes to encourage both adults and children to engage in the sport.

### **Conclusion**

The tackling of obesity across all facets of society is a complex and multi-layered issue; however, it is clear from the evidence that physical activity plays a major role in improving the overall health and well-being of our children.

Results from the CSPPA research have fed into the National Physical Activity Plan around setting of targets for increasing physical activity among children. Sport Ireland is significantly involved in efforts under the National Physical Activity Plan to increase participation in physical activity throughout the population, including among children.

Sport Ireland will continue to work with Government and key stakeholders to provide more opportunities for young people to engage in sport and physical activity.