



**An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán**
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Oifig an Ard-Rúnaí
Office of the Secretary General

Ms Sarah O'Farrell,
Clerk to the Committee
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Kildare St
Dublin 2

06 November 2023

Ref: S1454 PAC33

Dear Ms. O'Farrell,

I refer to your letter of 13 October 2023 which requested that the marking scheme for Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) funded projects should include population as a criterion in order to achieve objective resource allocation. I note that the Committee requests the rationale for population not being included in the marking scheme.

This response sets out how population considerations were a key element of the LSSIF decision-making process and that the same considerations will inform any future LSSIF round.

As you will be aware, I recently replied to a request from the Committee (Ref. S1446 PAC 33) relating to the general criteria used to allocate funding under the LSSIF. In this regard, my response highlighted how the National Sports Policy provided for a new LSSIF. The aim of the Fund is to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects. These are projects where the Exchequer investment would be greater than the maximum amount available under the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP). In some cases, these may be projects where the primary objective is to increase active participation in sport. Other cases may feature large-scale venues / stadia where the investment objective is more related to social participation and high performance sport.

Initial Allocations

The first round of the scheme was confined to National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and Local Authorities. New swimming pool projects were also considered. All project proposals were subject to appropriate economic and financial analysis.

In designing the scheme, the Department was conscious of planning frameworks to guide development and investment such as the National Planning Framework (NPF). The NPF's aim is to see "a roughly 50:50 distribution of growth between the Eastern and Midland region, and the Southern and Northern and Western regions, with 75% of the growth to be outside of Dublin and its suburbs."

In relation to these objectives and the first set of allocations under the LSSIF, the vast majority of funding went to areas of significant population and / or areas witnessing continued growth.

In this regard the LSSIF allocations to date by county include the following:

- Dublin €23.6m
- Galway €20.8m
- Cork €13.3m
- Meath €8.2m
- Kildare €4.87m
- Waterford €3.75m
- Limerick €1.9m

This means that almost 90% of the LSSIF funding allocated to date has gone to these counties with the most significant populations.

In relation to the allocation of funding, like the Department's other scheme for developing sport infrastructure (the SCEP), the LSSIF process was demand-led. Ensuring that projects awarded funding were in areas with a certain population would be dependent on receiving suitable high quality applications from across the regions both for Stream 1 (design projects) and Stream 2 (construction projects). As already stated, the first call was confined to local authorities and NGBs. While there were no specific scoring criteria around population, the priority given to a project by the NGB or local authority was a significant consideration. In the case of local authorities, it should be pointed out that many of them did not submit any projects for consideration. In terms of NGB applications, it was felt these bodies were best placed to identify the greatest need in terms of their strategic development plans.

While the finalised allocations provided funding to a variety of sports, swimming was recognised as a priority as it is a sport that enjoys participation at all ages and levels of ability. In this regard, almost 25% of all approved projects have a swimming pool element representing one of the highest level of success for any sport.

Scoring Criteria

While population was not a specific single scoring criteria for the first round of the programme the aim of the LSSIF is to support investment in Sporting Infrastructure that reinforces the principles outlined in the Department's National Sports Policy. In this regard, the original scheme documents made it clear that the projects considered for funding should result in:

- Increasing active participation in sport
- Improving the quality of active participation in sport
- Increasing Social Participation in sport
- Improving the quality of Social Participation in sport
- Improving High Performance in sport
- Increasing Active Participation in sport by people with a disability

The scheme outline also stated that *"In considering investment in infrastructure that meets these aims, priority will be given to projects that:*

- *Can be identified as a priority within a local authority's development plan and strategic vision, demonstrating cross sector collaboration and clearly identified local priorities.*
- *Can be identified as a priority of a NGB in its strategy for the development of active participation, social participation and improvement of high performance in the sport it governs e.g. development centres.*
- *Are multi-functional in nature and cater for a number of sports and other activities.*
- *Provide facilities that are open to the general public.*
- *Meet the needs of a mixed group of clubs and associations.*
- *Prioritise the needs of disadvantaged areas and groups including people with disabilities*

While there was not a specific standalone population criterion, the following scoring criteria indirectly included population as a key factor.

Criterion 2: Likelihood of improving the quality of active participation in Sport for all users.

Applicants were invited to demonstrate how the project would increase the quality of active participation and provide information as to how this would be achieved. Increasing participation and factoring in the population size was a key indicator when assessing this criterion.

Criterion 4: Likelihood of improving the quantity and quality of social participation in sport. NGBs rely on social participation to promulgate their sports and raise finances. While it is not as valuable as increasing active participation it is a core principle set out in the National Sports Policy to increase facilities for social participation. Population was a key indicator when assessing the quantity and quality of increased social participation.

Criterion 8 – Level of socio-economic disadvantage in the area.

In the scoring matrix, 'Criteria 8 – Level of socio-economic disadvantage in the area' addressed criteria for disadvantaged areas. In addition, the scoring system stated that 'An appropriate score will be awarded under Criteria 8 to cater for the fact that facilities, which may not be located in a disadvantaged area, may be serving disadvantaged areas. In essence marks were awarded for projects based on the Pobal Index score for the location of the proposed facility with more disadvantaged areas receiving higher marks. Again general population was relevant as projects serving bigger numbers of likely users were more likely to be able to demonstrate their adherence to this criterion.

Criterion 9 – Technical Merits of the project.

For Stream 1 applicants, a feasibility report was required as part of the application process. Applicants were encouraged to put forward the case and include a short description of the project and description of the activities it would facilitate and to highlight the existing facilities or lack thereof. In addition, the applicant was encouraged to provide a description of the "problem that the investment will solve; the consequences of not making the investment; and the project's objectives". The feasibility study enabled the applicant to identify market feasibility which included projected demand and usage. Again, population was a key indicator in this instance.

For Stream 2 applicants, an economic appraisal was required as part of the application process. The type of economic appraisal required was based on the size of the project and ranged from a simple assessment to a Multi-Criteria Analysis. The economic appraisal gave the applicant the opportunity to not only identify the cost benefits of the project but also highlight the socio-economic benefits of the project. Population was a key indicator in this instance.

All of the above criteria directly or indirectly take account of population.

Review of the LSSIF

It is important to emphasise that the LSSIF is a relatively new scheme with only one call for proposals to date. The first LSSIF allocations were announced just prior to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic obviously gave rise to significant financial challenges for all grantees with many of them having to reprioritise their own expenditure plans due to reductions in their income streams. In more recent times, the high level of construction inflation has also presented considerable challenges for grantees.

In view of these issues, it was considered timely to review progress on all projects allocated grants and meetings with all grantees have taken place. The Review is expected to be finalised soon and any issues identified will be addressed as part of the terms and conditions of the next call. The concerns raised by the Committee around the population issue have been noted in this context. With regard to the timing of any new call for proposals, there is ongoing engagement with the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in relation to the funding required to underpin any new round.

National Swimming Strategy

Work on the Strategy's development is nearing completion and it is hoped to have it published before the end of 2023. Future policy on the funding of swimming pools including under the LSSIF will, of course, reflect the recommendations contained in the Swimming Strategy.

National Digital Database

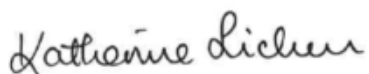
The National Digital Database of Sport and Recreation Amenities has just been launched. It is a major project involving the integration of multiple datasets from a wide variety of stakeholders that will, inter alia, increase our understanding of gaps or shortfalls in Ireland's sporting infrastructure. This will provide an invaluable input into future investment decisions to ensure that public money goes where it is most needed and delivers the best results in terms of sports participation.

Conclusion

While population was not a specific criterion under the scoring system for the first set of LSSIF allocations, it was factored in to the decision making process and that the majority of funding did go to areas of significant population. I can assure you that the views of the Committee will be considered in respect to any future rounds of the LSSIF scheme. Finally, as outlined above, the new National Digital Database of Sport and Recreation Amenities and the National Swimming Strategy will be invaluable tools when deciding on future investment priorities and will assist this Department in directing funding to where it delivers the biggest impact.

Should you require anything further please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Katherine Licken
Secretary General