

Opening Statement - Minister of State, Jack Chambers, T.D.

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Wednesday, 24 November 2021

Opening remarks

As the committee members will be aware, another committee is dealing with the Gaeltacht element of my responsibilities, so I will be limiting my comments today to matters related to sport.

Our immediate priority will be to safely accommodate sporting events, sporting organisations and high performance athletes, while continuing to take in to account prevailing public health advice at the time.

The Department will continue to prioritise engagement with the sport sector, which over the past number of months has highlighted the significant, adverse impact of COVID-19 at all levels of the Irish sporting landscape.

Sporting Organisations should continue to implement strong protocols with regard to training, competition and other sporting activities. These include initiatives such as the collection of contact tracing data, recommending symptomatic individuals do not participate in or attend sporting activities, the ongoing promotion of good respiratory & hand hygiene and the wearing of face coverings in relevant settings.

As we recover from the current crisis, the Department will be working diligently with stakeholders across the sector to work out ways of meeting our target of 60% of the population participating in sport by 2027 and focussing on areas of gender diversity and inclusion.

We have started work this year on a number of actions which I believe will be of real benefit to sport and we'll be working on delivering others during both next year and in 2023. There are a number of priorities that I would like to briefly emphasise, all of which are broadly connected to the sports participation theme:

Firstly, I want to embed the idea of "sport for all" across all strands of the sports sector, whether at national NGB level or more locally in sports clubs. We have a record €12 million budget from the Dormant Accounts Fund for investment in 2022 where we can focus increased efforts to help those from disadvantaged backgrounds and people with disability.

Secondly, there is a priority need to address low levels of participation amongst our school children. We are planning to intensify our engagement with our colleagues in the Department of Education to identify some practical steps to secure improvements in this area and we'll be meeting them before the end of this month. We are also planning to hold a major, youth-centred stakeholder forum on how to address and rectify the fall-off in participation rates amongst young people, especially young girls in their teens in the New Year.

Thirdly, we'll be working on other priorities such as Winter Initiatives for both 2021 and again in 2022, as well as the development of a National Swimming Strategy and a National Digital Database to provide people with key information on sport and recreational facilities in their localities to help them be more active.

We are also delighted to see Sport Ireland published its new High Performance Strategy 2021-2032, a long term plan for the Irish high performance system over the next three Olympic and Paralympic cycles. This High-Performance Strategy will support and enhance Ireland's position internationally.

Another strand of our work for the future is to enhance the governance capacity of the sector in partnership with the National Governing Bodies and other stakeholders. We will also continue to improve the facilities available for everybody who wants to participate in sport through new rounds of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme and progressing projects under the Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund.

We are providing additional funding of up to €65 million this year in covid-19 funding to support the sector. Allied to the additional current expenditure of €26.3 million already provided to Sport Ireland in Budget 2021, a total of €91.3 million will have been allocated in additional current funding to support the sport sector in 2021.

We are also providing an increased allocation of €96.2 million for Sport Ireland in 2022 which will enable them to continue to support the sector through their various funding programmes.

In recent years Ireland has won bids to host the Ryder Cup in Limerick in 2027, a section of the Uefa EURO 2020 finals, the Women's Rugby World Cup 2017 and the T20 Men's Cricket World Cup 2030. We are engaging with the UK Government to assess the potential to submit a co-hosting bid for the 2030 FIFA World Cup and work is also underway to consider other events. As set out in the Programme for Government, we are currently developing a Major Sports Events policy and strategy and are moving now to the public consultation phase of this process. Major Events have the potential to drive participation in sport, contribute to our ongoing economic growth, drive a sense of national pride and affect

both how we see ourselves as a nation and how we are viewed internationally, trade, tourism, business, community pride and community engagement.

In relation to capital investment in sports projects, the 2022 provision will allow for new grants to be announced under the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme. The latest round closed for applications on the 1st March this year. By this date a record 3,106 applications were received seeking over €200m in funding.; The 'equipment-only' projects were assessed first and grants with a total value of €16.6m were announced on 6 August 2021.

The letter of provisional allocation encouraged all grantees to draw down this funding before year-end if possible and in recent weeks the Department has been prioritising the payments of all existing grants. Ensuring that as many older grants as possible are paid before year-end will maximise the funding available to allocate for the 2020 capital SCEP applications.

In relation to the remaining applications for capital works, assessment work is continuing and every effort is being made to complete it as quickly as possible. Given the record number of applications received however, it is likely to take a further number of weeks to have these assessments complete with final recommended allocations expected shortly afterwards.

In addition, resources have been provided in 2022 to continue to progress the first projects allocated funding last year under the new Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). The priority in the short term is to advance all of the successful projects but as it is now over 18 months since the first allocations were made, and in view of the issues faced by grantees as

a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is timely to review progress on all projects allocated grants. The Department has now consulted with all grantees in this regard.

This review is considering the scope for awarding new grants to projects which missed out under the first set of allocations and the timing of any new call for proposals. It is expected that the review will be completed in the coming weeks.

I wish to reaffirm the government's commitment to developing the Sport Ireland Campus at Blanchardstown. The Government reaffirmed its commitment to the development of the Campus in the National Development Plan 2021-2030 published on 4th October. The 2022 allocation of €9.2m will allow Sport Ireland to complete ongoing projects and progress the planning and design on the National Velodrome and Badminton Centre. Sport Ireland has just completed a new Master Plan which will be the framework for the development of facilities at the Campus over the next 10 to 15 years. We will be bringing the Master Plan to Government shortly for approval.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time and attention, I am happy to take any questions you may have now.

Go raibh maith agaibh.