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SPORT IRELAND'S RESEARCH STRATEGY 2021-2027

The story of sport is about challenge, curiosity, belief and potential in life and competition. Sports research condenses these stories into insights that support informed action in policy and practice. The National Sports Policy tasks Sport Ireland with the development of a research strategy, which identifies how, as a sector, we can generate, capture and share insights to better understand the key policy questions around sport and to develop better solutions to the challenges we seek to address. This Strategy has adopted the use of the Council of Europe's Definition of Sport, where in sport means *"all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels"*.

The Sport Ireland Statement of Strategy 2018-2022 sets the vision of *"a world-class sports sector operating to the highest standards of governance and accountability and contributing towards the National Policy objectives for sport."* This research strategy will outline the role of research in supporting Sport Ireland to achieve its organisational objectives. Through this research strategy, the Sport Ireland Research and Innovation Unit will lead, grow, actively share and champion credible research undertaken by Sport Ireland and the Irish sports sector. The term research in this strategy includes evaluation.

This strategy marks Sport Ireland's commitment to support a culture of curiosity and progress underpinned by robust research across the sports sector.



Our research vision is **rich insights, informed actions, for a world-class sporting sector.**



Our research mission is **lead the generation and mobilisation of knowledge.**



Sport Ireland recognises the potential of a connected and collaborative sports research network of National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships, sports clubs, third level institutions, state agencies and enterprise. The Research and Innovation Unit will lead a culture of curiosity working with each of the Sport Ireland internal units and sector partners to develop powerful research questions which progress the story of sport.

In practice, this means that Sport Ireland will meet our sector partners where they are on their research journey, cognisant of their needs, capacity and readiness. We will identify research priorities, advocate for increased research capability and provide support to the sector. We aim to collaborate with the sector to co-create and actively share the benefits of research and insight.

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



February to
March 2021

The staff of the Research and Innovation Unit consulted with over 80 stakeholders, engaging with representatives from the various Sport Ireland Units, National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships, Government Departments, and Government Agencies.

An external consultant (Irish Leisure Consultants) was commissioned to support the strategy development process and provided with anonymised transcriptions of the interviews and the questionnaire responses. A process of thematic analysis was then used to explore strategic themes. To identify the structure, focus and trends of previous Sport Ireland research, the consultants also undertook a desk-top review of historical Sport Ireland research reports and other relevant international sports research reports and strategies.

March 2021



April 2021

Third-Level Institutes submitted 50 responses to an online consultation regarding the development of sports research in Ireland.

From the process of interview, questionnaire and desk-top review, several key themes were identified and these were presented via a series of discussion papers and a subsequent exchange of perspectives with the Research and Innovation Unit staff.

May-July 2021



This strategy is reflective of the National Sports Policy and Sport Ireland Strategy, but is also informed by the National Research Strategy 2021 to 2027, the Irish Research Council Strategic Plan 2020-2024 and the Higher Education Authority 2020 Principles of Good Practice in Research.

SPORT IRELAND RESEARCH AND INNOVATION UNIT

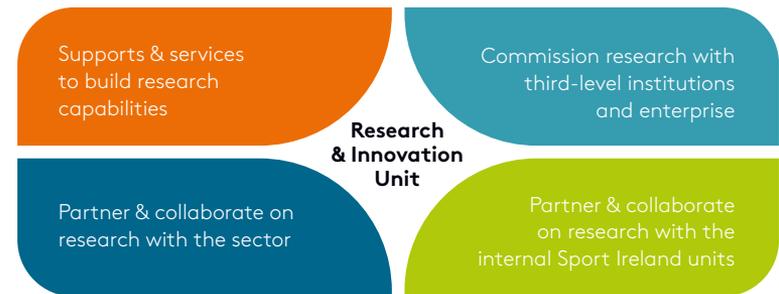
In January 2021, Sport Ireland's Evaluation and Innovation teams (earlier under the Directorate of Sport Ireland Participation) were integrated into the Research Unit to form a new Sport Ireland Research & Innovation Unit. This strategy sets out Sport Ireland's ambition for research and evaluation over the next 6 years.

The Unit conducts research to generate meaningful insights across participation, performance and high performance, which inspire new thinking and drive action in the sporting ecosystem in Ireland. We generate knowledge by accurately defining the problems we seek to resolve through measurement, questioning, and learning. Our research aims to listen, understand and empathise with the experiences of people involved with sport and the context within which these experiences occur. Our formative evaluation work underpins our engagement with the sector to generate innovative solutions for identified problems which best meet the needs and readiness of our partners. The unit aims to rapidly prototype solutions in partnership with the sector and uses robust methodologies to pragmatically evaluate new and existing concepts at systems, project and local level.

Research within Sport Ireland is realised through a blend of direct research, partnered research projects, commissioned

research and research delivered through the various internal Sport Ireland Units. Our research programme has made an important contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of sport in Ireland. This knowledge informs the policy agenda, the actions and investments of Government and feeds directly into the delivery of effective sports services by sporting bodies and individuals. While Sport Ireland's research has historically tended to focus on cross-population sports and physical activity participation, this strategy commits to an increased focus on answering pertinent research questions linked to performance and high performance sport.

Internationally, there is increasing recognition of the need to plan, structure and resource sports research so that informed decision making takes place across policy and practice.



RESEARCH AND INNOVATION UNIT

RESEARCH

Define

What is the Problem?
Question, Measure, Learn

EVALUATION

Understand

How do we approach it?
Formative evaluation, theory
of change, logic models

INNOVATION

Innovate

How do we solve it?
Solution generation, ideate
together and embrace diversity



Empathise

Why is it a problem?
Observe, Listen and
Acknowledge

Test

Does it work?
Implement, test and refine

Develop

How do we do it?
Design, experiment and
proto-type in partnership

OUR VALUES

Sport Ireland will pursue these research objectives throughout our organisation and across the sector by being:





BRAVE

in the questions asked, objective in the methods used, and rising to the challenges which can sometimes emerge from the answers discovered.



PROGRESSIVE

open to innovative strategies, new ideas, creative methodologies and embracing new technologies to progress the development of sport in Ireland.



INCLUSIVE

reflecting the diversity of sport, every sport and every participant, of all backgrounds and abilities, from beginner to athlete, and from volunteer to professional deserves the insights which research can offer.



CONNECTED

within Sport Ireland and across the sector. Meaningful collaboration by engaging, listening and revealing perspectives and proactively sharing questions, methods and findings.



HONEST

in our practice, aware of our limitations and ethical in why, what and how we do research.

STRATEGY GOALS

Sport Ireland recognises its research responsibilities as well as the value and potential of insight offered by research to the sports sector. This strategy will realise its vision and mission by delivering on the following five strategic goals.





FOCUS:

agree research priorities for participation, performance and high performance sport



CONNECT:

improve the research connections within Sport Ireland, across the sports sector, the third level sector and the media through purposeful collaboration



GROW:

increase research readiness and capacity across the sector by building capability



MOBILISE:

effectively communicate research insights to inform action



INFLUENCE:

adopt robust and innovative research methods to produce influential results

THIS STRATEGY AIMS TO:

GOAL 1: FOCUSED RESEARCH





Sport Ireland’s strategic responsibilities and corresponding research focus are guided by the National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027. While we have ongoing research commitments and strategic commitments to increase participation and grow high performance, we will also be mindful of the changing worlds in which our sports take place. These changing and sometimes disruptive social and economic contexts, such as economic recessions, societal change and COVID 19, remind us that we must not only deliver consistent and strategic research, we must also be opportune and prescient in the research we undertake. We also know that to deliver on this responsibility, a collaborative engagement with all of the actors in the sports sector is essential.

OBJECTIVE

- ▶ Deliver strategic and relevant research across the three domains of participation, performance and high performance sport.

ACTIONS

We will conduct research within these three domains when the research can deliver on the following outcomes:

1. **National Perspectives:** Monitor the rates and types of participation and engagement in sport and physical activity in Ireland to inform policy and resourcing decisions.
2. **Local Impacts:** Support sport specific research that brings actionable insights to grass-roots sports development.
3. **Engagement:** Identify how sport can be made meaningful to more people, especially those with traditionally low engagement rates.
4. **Strong Pathways:** Understand the options, attitudes and supports which sustain participation, overcome barriers or grow performance in sport and physical activity across the life stages.
5. **Innovation in sport:** Identify the trends, adaptations, digital transformation and fresh thinking which have the potential to positively shift attitudes or actions.
6. **Evaluation:** Evaluate the return on investment in sport and physical activity, what works, for whom and under what conditions, identifying and communicating the critical success factors of effective approaches to sports development.
7. **Governance:** Study the organisational governance and ethical principles which underpin positive sporting experiences at any level in every role.

A background image of rowers in a boat, overlaid with a teal color filter. The rowers are holding oars, and the water is visible in the foreground. The text 'GOAL 2: PURPOSEFUL COLLABORATION' is written in white, bold, uppercase letters in the upper left quadrant. A large white outline of the number '2' is positioned in the lower right quadrant. In the bottom left corner, there is a page number '16' and the text 'Sport Ireland's Research Strategy'.

GOAL 2: PURPOSEFUL COLLABORATION

2



Sport Ireland will establish purposeful collaborations between research, policy and practice that can generate insights to shift our shared understanding, shape our solutions and improve our actions.

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Strengthen our national and international research partnerships with NGBs, LSPs, Government Departments and Agencies, third-level institutes, and enterprise.
- ▶ Improve research connections across the sport and physical activity sector to enhance links between insights and practice.

ACTIONS

8. Lead and support national and international research networking opportunities, such as the Irish Physical Activity Research Collaboration (I-PARC), so that there is greater awareness and coordination of our shared research priorities, methods, actions and findings.
9. Establish a small number of national and international strategic working groups and communities of practice to support the progress of collaborative research.
10. Host, support, attend and present at national and international research events, workshops, seminars, and conferences.
11. Engage with enterprise-related research funding opportunities in partnership with third-level institutes
12. Pilot and evaluate a partnerships research fund to support applied research projects between sports bodies and academia.

GOAL 3: COLLECTIVE CAPABILITY



3

Sport Ireland will build on the capabilities of the sector in order to support funded bodies in generating and using research insights for the progress of sport. The business units within Sport Ireland have distinct responsibilities and research priorities but benefit from a shared research culture. Similarly, the wider sports sector benefits from research and insight, although with differing research priorities and levels of readiness.

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Operate as a sector resource to cultivate best practices in sports research.
- ▶ Grow a culture of undertaking and engaging with research in the Irish sports sector.
- ▶ Build capability to deliver high-quality research by committing to learning and upskilling.



ACTIONS

13. Actively engage and support the research plans of the Sport Ireland business units and the sports sector.
14. Work with the sector to coordinate a range of knowledge sharing workshops, tool kits and training supports to grow research capabilities.
15. Provide evaluation training resources, templates and workshops for sports bodies to encourage the use of consistent validated methods in the evaluation of projects and programmes.
16. Monitor, adopt and share emergent 'trends' and skill-sets within the field of sports research.
17. Develop data and graph literacy across the sector through a range of online resources, toolkits and workshops.

GOAL 4: APPLIED KNOWLEDGE





We will improve the ‘last mile’ connections between research and its application to practice. With the sector we will identify where and how knowledge can be mobilised so that the right insight and actions are better connected with the appropriate audience, in the right format, at the right time and from the right source.

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Actively translate Sport Ireland’s research into meaningful insights to inform and drive action.
- ▶ Prioritise the effective communication of Sport Ireland insights to increase awareness amongst the target audiences.

ACTIONS

18. Develop a sports research repository structure and content in collaboration with the sector.
19. Generate and promote research insight case studies, easy to consume reports, infographics, toolkits and videos to encourage the use of research within the sector.
20. Make Sport Ireland’s data more open and research findings more visible for their various audiences using a range of channels.
21. Develop a communications plan for the strategic dissemination of all Sport Ireland commissioned research reports, tailored to relevant audiences.
22. Track research insights, their applications and their impacts across the sector.

GOAL 5: RESEARCH EXCELLENCE





For research and insight to be valued by the various organisations and individuals in the sector, it must be trustworthy. Sport Ireland will continue to generate modern, ethical and reliable research, partner with others who do likewise and support those who wish to operate to these standards.

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Ensure that ethical practices are followed in all of the research we undertake, commission or partner on.
- ▶ Encourage the use of data in various forms, employing data analytics and visualisation as key tools for making evidence-informed decisions.
- ▶ Be open to innovation and the integration of multiple methods, novel research approaches, practice-informed research and making use of diverse data sources and agents.

ACTIONS

- 23. Promote high standards of ethical research and employ international best practice for choosing valid and feasible methodologies.
- 24. Generate publicly shared guidelines on research best practice including guidelines for data gathering, data analysis, market research and action-based research.
- 25. Explore the optimum use of the data which exists within Sport Ireland and the sports sector to best inform decision making.
- 26. Promote the growth in practice-based research and activities.

RESOURCING

Sport Ireland will deliver on the commitments and actions laid out within this strategy by assigning resources to two core areas - people and investment.



PEOPLE

This strategy will be implemented by the Research & Innovation Unit of Sport Ireland in partnership with Sport Ireland business units, LSPs, NGBs, clubs, Government Departments and agencies, third-level institutes and enterprise. The Research & Participation Committee of the Sport Ireland Board will act as a leadership group, overseeing the implementation of this strategy including the delivery of a mid-term strategy review.



INVESTMENT

Sport Ireland will continue to invest in the strategic development of research over the coming years to deliver on the Vision and Mission of this 6-year strategy.

Glossary of abbreviations and acronyms used in the action table

TCAGSM	Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
D-ED	Department of Education
D-H	Department of Health
HSE	Health Service Executive
CVS	Community & Voluntary Sector
SI-R&I	Sport Ireland Research & Innovation Unit
SI-P	Sport Ireland Participation Unit
SI-NGB	Sport Ireland National Governing Body Unit
SI-C	Sport Ireland Communication Unit
SI-CG	Sport Ireland Coaching Unit
SI-E	Sport Ireland Ethics Unit
SI-G	Sport Ireland Governance and Compliance
SI-HP	Sport Ireland High Performance Unit
SII	Sport Ireland Institute

ACTION TABLE



GOAL 1: FOCUSED RESEARCH				
No.	Action	Lead	Delivery Partners	Timelines
1	National Perspectives: Monitor the rates and types of participation and engagement in sport and physical activity in Ireland to inform policy and resourcing decisions.	SI - R&I Unit	DTCAGSM, D-ED, D-H, HSE, Enterprise , Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
2	Local Impacts: Support sport specific research that brings actionable insights to grass-roots sports development.	SI - R&I Unit	NGBs, LSPs, SI-P, SI-NGB, SI-CG, SI-E, Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
3	Engagement: Identify how sport can be made meaningful to more people, especially those with traditionally low engagement rates.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-P, SI-NGB, SI-E, SI-C, SI-CG, CVS, Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
4	Strong Pathways: Understand the options, attitudes and supports which sustain participation, overcome barriers or grow performance in sport and physical activity across the life stages.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-P, SI-NGB, SI-HP, SI-CG, SII, Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
5	Innovation in sport: Identify the trends, adaptations, digital transformation and fresh thinking which have the potential to positively shift attitudes or actions.	SI - R&I Unit	Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes, NGBs, LSPs	2021-2027
6	Evaluation: Evaluate the return on investment in sport and physical activity, what works, for whom and under what conditions, identifying and communicating the critical success factors of effective approaches to sports development.	SI - R&I Unit	DTCAGSM, D-H, HSE, Sport Ireland business units, Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes, LSPs, NGBs	2021-2027
7	Governance: Study the organisational governance and ethical principles which underpin positive sporting experiences at any level in every role.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-G, SI-E, SI-NGB, SI-P, NGBs, LSPs, Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027



GOAL 2: PURPOSEFUL COLLABORATION

No.	Action	Lead	Delivery Partners	Timelines
8	Lead national and international research networking opportunities, such as the Irish Physical Activity Research Collaboration (I-PARC), so that there is greater awareness and coordination of our shared research priorities, methods, actions and findings.	SI - R&I Unit	DTCAGSM, D-ED, D-H, HSE, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
9	Establish a small number of national and international strategic working groups and communities of practice to support the progress of collaborative research.	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland Business Units, NGBs, LSPs, Third-Level Institutes, Enterprise	2021-2027
10	Host, support, attend and present at national and international research events, workshops, seminars, and conferences.	SI - R&I Unit	Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
11	Engage with enterprise-related research opportunities in partnership with third-level institutes.	SI - R&I Unit,	Third-Level Institutes, Enterprise	2021-2027
12	Pilot and evaluate a partnerships research fund to support applied research projects between sports bodies and academia.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-P, SI-NGB, NGBs, LSPs, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2023



GOAL 3: COLLECTIVE CAPABILITY

No.	Action	Lead	Delivery Partners	Timelines
13	Provide research advice and supports to Sport Ireland business units and the sports sector.	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland business units, NGBs, LSPs	2021-2027
14	Work with the sector to coordinate a range of knowledge sharing workshops, tool kits and training supports to grow research capabilities.	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland business units, NGBs, LSPs	2021-2027
15	Provide evaluation training resources, templates and workshops for sports bodies to encourage the use of consistent validated methods in the evaluation of projects and programmes.	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland business units, NGBs, LSPs	2021-2027
16	Monitor, adopt and share emergent 'trends' and skill-sets within the field of sports research.	SI - R&I Unit	Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027
17	Develop data and graph literacy across the sector through a range of online resources, toolkits and workshops.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-P, SI-NGB, NGBs, LSPs, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2024



GOAL 4: APPLIED KNOWLEDGE

No.	Action	Lead	Delivery Partners	Timelines
18	Develop a sports research repository structure and content in collaboration with the sector.	SI - R&I Unit	NGBs, LSPs	2022-2025
19	Generate and promote research insight case studies, easy to consume reports, infographics, toolkits and videos to encourage the use of research within the sector.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-C	2021-2027
20	Make Sport Ireland's data and research findings more visible for their various audiences using a range of channels.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-C	2021-2027
21	Develop a communications plan for the strategic dissemination of all Sport Ireland commissioned research reports, tailored to relevant audiences.	SI - R&I Unit	SI-C; SI-P, SI-NGB, SI-CG, SI-E	2022-2023
22	Track research insights, their applications and their impacts across the sector.	SI - R&I Unit	Enterprise, Third-Level Institutes	2021-2027



GOAL 5: RESEARCH EXCELLENCE

No.	Action	Lead	Delivery Partners	Timelines
23	Promote high standards of ethical research and employ International best practice for choosing valid and feasible methodologies.	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland business units, NGBs, LSPs	2021-2027
24	Generate publicly shared guidelines on research best practice including guidelines for data gathering, data analysis, market research and action-based research	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland business units, Third-Level Institutes, Enterprise	2021-2027
25	Explore the optimum use of the data which exists within Sport Ireland and the sports sector to best inform decision making.	SI - R&I Unit	Sport Ireland business units	2021-2027
26	Promote the growth in practice-based research and activities.	SI - R&I Unit	NGBs, LSPs SI-P, SI-NGB,	2021-2027





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