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## **SPORTS CLUBS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A 'STATE OF PLAY' REVIEW**

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All authors:

Paul Donnelly (corresp), Simon Shibli, Simon Toole

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### **BACKGROUND**

Northern Ireland is one of four home nations that constitute the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The economy of Northern Ireland is heavily dependent on the public sector for employment and it has some of the highest levels of unemployment in the UK. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Northern Ireland is emerging from a 30 year conflict known as the troubles into a vibrant service sector lead economy with considerable tourism and inward investment. Sport Northern Ireland (Sport NI) is the leading public body for sport development in the region and enjoys the status of being a National Lottery funds distributor. Since the launch of the National Lottery in 1994, Sport Northern Ireland has benefited from approximately £9.3m per year for sport. This has been used to develop and enhance Northern Ireland's sporting infrastructure including financial investment in sport clubs. Like the rest of the UK and Ireland, sport clubs are integral part of community life and provide the majority of opportunities for people to take part in organised sport.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research was conducted between July 2009 and August 2010 by Ipsos MORI on behalf of Sport Northern Ireland. A representative sample of 4,653 adults completed the survey. Information was collected on physical activity levels across four life domains (home, work, active transportation and sport), and several health and wellness variables. This includes data relating to membership levels in a variety of different types of sport clubs and settings including those in the commercial sector; the public sector; and the voluntary sector including traditional NGB affiliated clubs as well as community, charitable and church based clubs. Frequency tests, t-tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to interrogate the data and investigate significant differences and relationships, with binary regression

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analyses then used to explore the influence of socio-demographic and health and wellness variables.

## RESULTS

The SAPAS survey revealed that 23 % of adults in Northern Ireland are members of a club in which they can participate in sport or physical activities that 73 % of club members participate in moderate or vigorous intensity activities on at least one day per week. Among those who are members of at least one club, 20 % are members of more than one club. Club membership is below average for women, people with disabilities, older people and people in lower social classes. These findings reinforce the inequalities which are already known about in sports participation generally in the UK (Shibli et al., 1999). SAPAS findings also suggest that club membership seems to go 'hand in hand' with a healthy lifestyle. Interestingly, there is no significant difference in club membership levels amongst the two dominant religious groups (Roman Catholics and Protestants) but the types of club to which they belong are different.

## DISCUSSION

There is an emerging change in the nature of sport clubs in Northern Ireland. Whilst the majority of clubs are either sports specific or multi-sport clubs, these are not the only club formats in which people consume sport. There is for example considerable evidence of a vibrant private sector providing health and fitness type activities within a club environment, particularly for those who take part in sport for health reasons and particularly amongst women. There is some evidence of traditional sport clubs in Northern Ireland responding to these changing patterns of demand by offering wider opportunities such as the use of gym type equipment to people who are not necessarily playing members of the club's principal sport.

Sport club membership reflects what people choose to do in their leisure time with their discretionary income. As such clubs are self-help groups in which the primary motivations are to keep fit and enjoyment. This poses an interesting challenge for government and agencies such as Sport NI who have aspirations to use clubs as vehicles for social change linked to funding. Whilst there is a minority of clubs that will sign up for this funding and have the capacity to deliver wider social objectives, this is slightly at odds with the primary motivations as to why people choose to join such sport clubs.

It is perhaps no surprise that sport clubs reflect and in some cases amplify the inequalities that are found in sport generally throughout the UK and Ireland. Sport club members are for example even more likely to be male, abled bodied, relatively young and reasonably affluent compared with the population as a whole. Delivering on social objectives invariably means addressing inequalities experienced by less well-off people and this may well be alien territory and indeed a distraction for the members of traditional sport clubs. There is however some mileage in persuading clubs to embrace wider social objectives as club membership is linked positively with healthier lifestyles such as higher physical activity levels, lower levels of smoking, better healthy eating habits, and higher levels of self-reported health and happiness.

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