

PHYSICAL LITERACY – DEFINITIONS AND DELIVERY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Brian Delaney, Sports Council for Northern Ireland, Belfast

Context

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI) has adopted the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model as a tool against which to reference developing and proposed programmes. The model offers a coherent and robust framework and it is possible to locate and measure existing and emerging programmes within it. Of particular relevance is the development of Physical Literacy (PL) between the ages of six and twelve. It is at this stage that the development of knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills can result in lasting patterns of activity in young people and, in the current climate of sporting uncertainty, health concerns and educational expansion, the establishment of a sound and consistent approach to PL is vital.

The SCNI, as the region's lead agency for strategic sports development, is working to create a shared understanding of PL amongst the key stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

Project/Partners

Public administration in Northern Ireland is based on ten government departments currently controlled by Westminster-appointed Secretaries of State, in the absence of a devolved Northern Ireland Assembly. Local government is exercised by twenty-six district councils and education, separately, by five Education and Library Boards, whose geographical boundaries coincide with groups of neighbouring district councils. However, there are limited strategic and operational links between these two types of institution. Clearly, the effective development of PL has important implications for both education and local government alongside the integrated work of relevant governing bodies of sport.

The SCNI seeks to clarify, consolidate and integrate the work of these key partner organisations .

Results

The work currently being undertaken on PL by the SCNI is predicated on defining agreed roles and responsibilities within each of the sectors described above. The current focus of the project is around defining PL, identifying its main location for delivery as the primary school and consulting widely. The results of the consultation process indicate broad consensus with the SCNI's view that PL is critical to the development of appropriate knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills and that primary schools are the main site for delivery. There are, however, significant resource issues in primary schools, in terms of initial teacher education, on-going support in the form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), time allocated to PE, facilities and equipment, etc.

The developing role of Sports Development Units in district councils has allowed them to offer useful multi-skills programmes, instigated by the SCNI and they have been identified as a realistic complementary delivery mechanism.

Discussion/implications

The development of sound PL principles has the capacity to establish firm foundations for lifelong physical activity, whether in the form of recreation or performance sport. Indeed, without an adequate early learning experience, significant barriers to further learning and participation can develop. The physical setting for the development of PL skills is broadly agreed to be the primary school, with additional opportunities being offered by district councils. Some concerns are developing regarding the involvement of governing bodies of sport, many of which are developing "FUNDamentals" packs. The potential conflict between a sport-specific resource and a generic movement skills philosophy is cast into higher relief when local governing bodies are becoming more effective in their outreach programmes.

Developing a shared understanding and establishing agreed boundaries are critical to a coherent PL programme and the SCNI is working with partner organisations to dispel misunderstandings and to establish agreement. In addition, efforts are being made to address the resourcing issues common to all relevant sectors.

Contact: briandelaney@sportni.net