

## LOCAL AUTHORITIES AS PARTNERS IN SPORT – THE IRISH EXPERIENCE

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### INTRODUCTION

The role of Irish local authorities in relation to sport is outlined in Section 67 of the Local Government Act (2001). This section gives local authorities a mandate to

*‘...engage in such activities or do such things (including the incurring of expenditure) as it considers necessary or desirable to promote the interests of the local community in relation to...*

*general recreational and leisure activities and (2) sports games and similar activities”*

(Government of Ireland 2001:62)

Despite this articulated role, reports indicate a varied and disparate approach to sports development by Irish local authorities (Department of Education 1997, Fitzpatrick Associates (2002) Sugrue (2004). This reflects the findings of a number of international authors (Eady 1993, Smith 1997)

When the Irish Sports Council sought to establish a mechanism for the development of sport at local level the absence of a clear lead agency resulted in the establishment of eight Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) on a pilot basis in 2001. Another four were established in 2002. The ISC view these partnerships as *‘the best mechanism for delivering recreational sport to the greatest amount of people, to make real the philosophy known as ‘sport for all”* (Irish Sports Council 2000:13). There are currently nineteen such partnerships with plans to have national coverage by the end of 2007. Partners are drawn from the health, community, education, justice, sport, youth and local authority/local government sectors.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the contribution of local authorities to the local sports partnership initiative from the perspective of the coordinators of the partnerships. The coordinators are full time managers of the partnerships.

### METHODS

Using purposive sampling a survey was issued to the coordinators of the twelve partnerships which were three or more years in existence. The purpose of the survey was to assess the level of support from Local Authorities and to explore developments undertaken by Local Authorities in terms of sports policy, provision and/or practice since the establishment of the Local Sports Partnership structure.

A follow up focus group session was then conducted with four of the coordinators. This process supplemented the information gathered in the survey and allowed for deeper exploration of trends identified at the first stage of the research.

### RESULTS

The survey received a 92% (N=11) response rate. Overall it emerged that local authorities are positively disposed to the LSP initiative. Furthermore the new partnership structure has led to the leveraging of additional resources for local sport development from the local government sector.

Irish local authorities conform heavily to the traditional role of facility provider with 90.9% owning/managing facilities. While only three reported having a dedicated sports department and a similar number employ a sports

development officer (SDO), further discussion revealed that two of these SDO positions were created after the establishment of the partnership. Furthermore, while not directly employing a SDO, two other local authorities are contributing to the employment of SDOs by the partnership itself and another local authority is funding the employment of a regional trails coordinator. Four of the respondents report an increase in consultation by the local authority with the LSP on zoning/spatial planning matters. All partnerships reported an increase in local authority spending in sport since 2001, with seven specifically reporting an increase in local authority contributions to local sports clubs

## **DISCUSSION**

None of the LSPs have formal evaluation measures in place to assess the contribution of any of the partners. This is an aspect of their operations that will require future attention. The focus group identified the following strengths of local authority involvement in the partnership

facility provision and

networks with other agencies and political power brokers.

However, the lack of clarity in relation to the roles of partners and the absence of formal heads of agreement means that progress is heavily dependent on the commitment of key personnel in the local authority and some LSPs reported significant changes in levels of support in instances where changes of personnel occurred. Hence the current situation results in the partnership having a relationship with individuals rather than organizations. This could prove unsustainable once the novelty of the partnerships subsides and the possible resulting under management (Thibault 2004) presents significant strategic challenges.

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