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Findings from April 2024 surveys

# Community Pulse

## Northern Ireland

Report made from responses from 45 community groups across Northern Ireland



Throughout the Pulse look out for these symbols which indicate particularly shocking statistics.



# Introduction

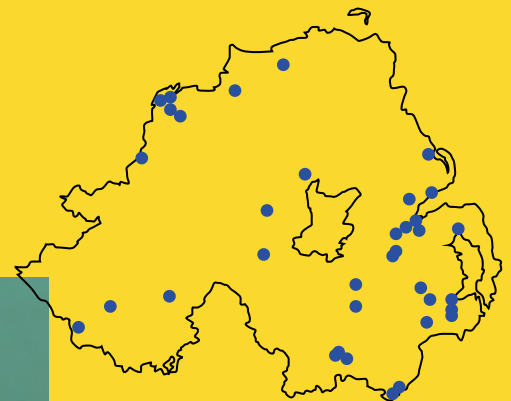
The Community Pulse is a longitudinal study of Spotted members on the sustainability, needs, and ambitions of grassroots groups throughout the UK.

It ensures the voices of small community organisations are heard.  
It aims to:

- Inform others about the issues and opportunities facing community sports groups
- Increase awareness of funding and resources available for such organisations
- Help stakeholders make more informed decisions in relation to grassroots sport in the UK
- Fill an insight gap on behalf of those who aren't 'traditional' sports clubs or who don't work as commercial or leisure providers

This report represents the voices of **45** community group leaders from across Northern Ireland, representing around 15% of Spotted groups in that nation, between **15 – 29 April 2024**.

These groups reach around **3,500** young people across Northern Ireland







# Sported & its network

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Sported is the UK's largest network of community sports groups, supporting over half a million young people to overcome barriers to reach their full potential. Our role is to empower the local heroes running these groups by providing much needed professional expertise, resources, and operational support, free of charge, to help their group survive and young people thrive.

Sported's groups work within complex local contexts, often tackling some of society's biggest challenges.

Around **50%** are located in areas that sit within the **highest three indices of relative deprivation** in the UK, almost **two-thirds are volunteer-led**, and a **third** have an annual turnover of **less than £10,000**.



# Key Findings

Community groups are confident in the short-term of continuing to be able to deliver for their communities, but there’s an indication that they are less sure of survival when looking ahead in the years to come. With funding remaining the most common priority for community groups, supporting groups with more funding, delivered in more flexible and innovative ways that best meet their needs and capacity, is key to ensuring their long-term sustainability.

While groups generally remain confident in their survival, **confidence reduced as they look beyond the short-term:**

**73% are confident in continuing to exist in three years’ time** compared to 93% in six months’ time.

**Funding continues to be the most common priority for community groups,** with 80% of leaders saying it’s a priority for the next six months.




**The most common challenges in accessing funding for community groups include:**

- Limited staff capacity and lack of experience
- Burdensome and complex application processes
- Rigid grant requirements that don’t meet groups’ most pressing needs



**Groups tells us that more innovative ways of delivering funding to the community sport sector include:**

- More direct contact between funders and groups to understand need and capacity
- More flexible funding outcomes (especially in supporting core costs)
- Greater emphasis on partnerships supporting joint bids
- Co-produced grants that include the voice of community groups in their creation

## Mental Health

Sported groups can play an important role in supporting the mental health of young people in underserved communities, especially at a time when mental health issues remain a clear concern for our groups and the communities they serve.

There's growing pressure on the mental wellbeing of those running community groups in Northern Ireland and mental health issues continuing to impact on their participant, but Sported group leaders see the importance of the activities they deliver for their participant's mental health and physical wellbeing.



**93%** Nearly every leader surveyed agreed that **running a community organisation has become more stressful** over the last two years.

**39%** More than a third of respondents said **mental health issues** are a challenge for young people in their communities.







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**“Coaches not enough – can’t get them trained up quick enough.”**

Mourne Gymnastics Club

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**“Effects of cost-of-living crisis on top of existing rural deprivation.”**

Kingdom Youth Club/An Riocht Camogie

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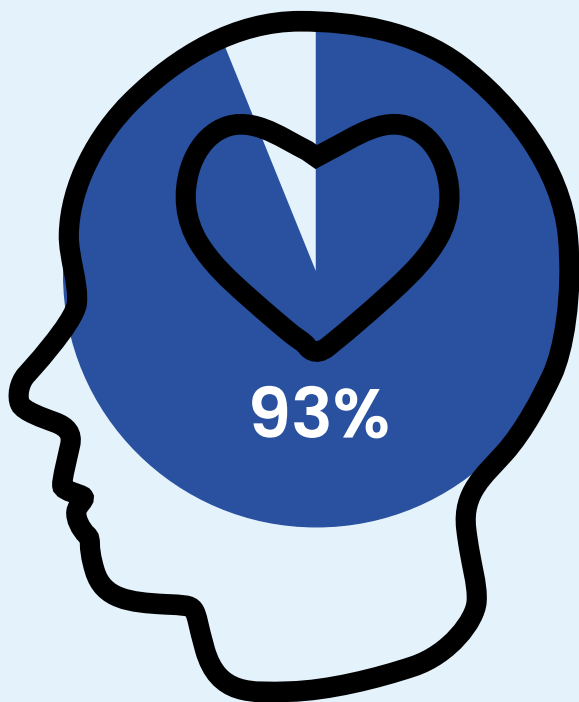


## Reasons for added stress for groups include:

- Dealing with a precarious funding landscape for their groups
- Declining staff levels and the extra burden this can place on those remaining
- Difficulties with access to appropriate facilities, and the strain of governance requirements



## Mental Health



**Community group leaders recognise the benefits of community sport and physical activity in supporting the mental health of their participants:**

Almost every respondent agreed that it had a role to play in preventing mental health issues for young people (93%), with the same proportion saying it has a role in improving young people's mental health (93%).



**Group leaders could reach more young people with mental health issues if they had support around:**

- Upskilling existing staff and volunteers around mental health and/or recruiting more staff for such activities
- Accessing more spaces and facilities to deliver sessions to support these young people.

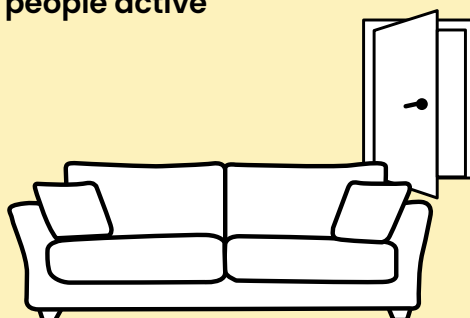


**"The workload only increases. It never reduces and there are more and more hurdles that inevitably put volunteers off. More work and less people to take on roles."**

Ballynahinch Olympic FC



**73% of groups told us they get inactive young people active**

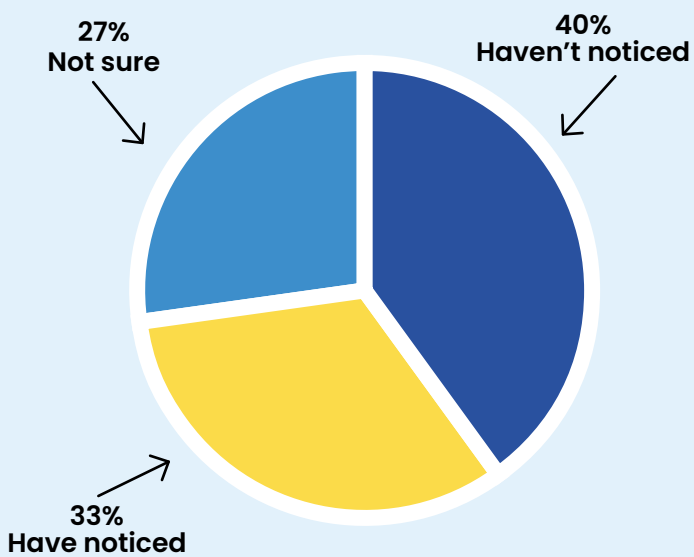




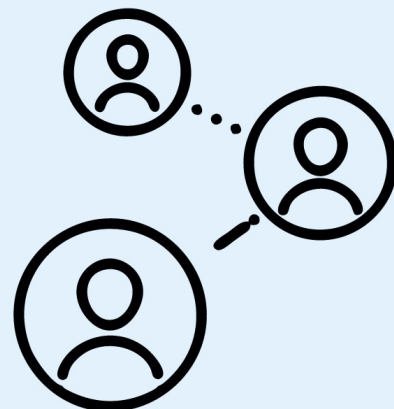
Many community groups are closely connected within their local neighbourhoods, but there are opportunities to work with these groups to expand support tailored to their local needs. We also know our groups are looking for even more ways to build partnerships with similar organisations in their area to continue delivering for their communities – not least in generating funding and engaging more young people from their local area.



Group leaders say that **place-based working isn't an approach they've noticed in their community (40%)** compared to those that have (33%).

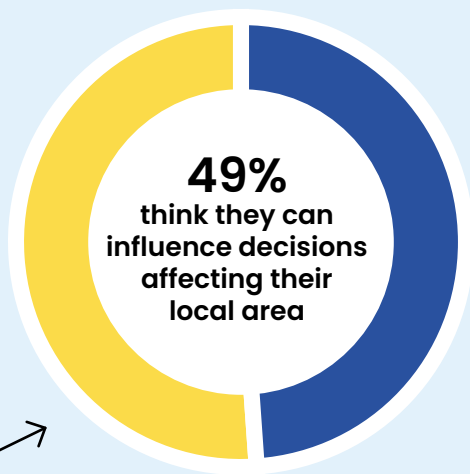


The most **common reason why groups have connected with other community organisations in their area** is to share facilities, with more than half of groups reporting this connection (60%).





## Area & Community



51% say they can't



Group leaders are split on whether **they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area**: 51% disagree that they can do so, with 49% saying then can.

### Groups are least likely to have connected with others in their area to engage in:

- Peer-to-peer support (13%)
- Share equipment (20%)
- Share learning (22%)

While a quarter told us they've worked on joint funding bids with other groups (24%), **more than half said they want to do this in the future (58%)**.





## Lack of Representation

Nearly three-quarters of groups said the **lack of representation of minoritised groups** within sport impacts on young people from their community taking part (to a great extent or somewhat).

71%



“We offer an access to sport and physical activity to a broad and diverse range of young people - situated in an area of great deprivation. But we don't just leave it there. We offer wraparound support for their mental health and also education/employability programmes so that they can aspire for more and reach their full potential.”

McDonald Centre / Crusaders  
in the Community





## Elite Sports



Groups were split on whether big sports events in the UK increase enquiries, membership, or engagement for their group from young people: 39% said they do, with 39% saying they don't.

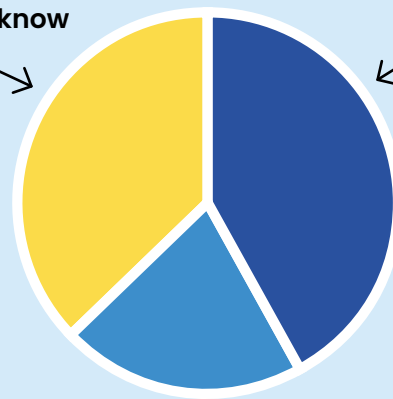
The most common reason groups cited as a reason why young people at their group who want to progress in elite sport aren't able to do so was the cost of participation (73%). More than half of respondents pointed to a lack of satisfactory facilities (60%).



Community groups are generally optimistic about the focus on elite sport, such as the Olympics, Paralympics, and other major sporting events, impacting positively in community sport. However there are challenges in supporting young people in underserved communities to achieve their potential in elite sport, including around the cost to do so and a lack of satisfactory facilities.

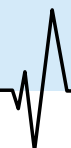
Nearly half of groups (42%) agree (strongly agree or agree) that the investment made into success at Olympics and Paralympics impacts positively on grassroots sport. 21% of respondents disagreed.

37% Didn't know



42% Agree or strongly agree

21% Disagree or strongly disagree







## Cost-of-Living Pressures



“The challenges they [young people] face are finding affordable housing, succeeding at university and finding employment/juggling part-time employment alongside a degree.”

Queens Handball

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“Cost-of-living is the biggest challenge for young people and general people in our community.”

St James Swifts FC

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“With the aftermath of covid, the cost-of-living crisis, and coupled to that a huge deficit in funding due to the lack of a functioning Stormont times have never been harder.”

Ardmore Cricket Club

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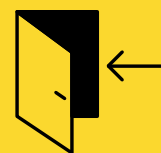


Cost-of-living increases continue to be detrimental to the lives of young people in underserved communities, reducing their ability to participate in sport and physical activity.



**Immediate financial hardship**, including the effects of cost-of-living pressures, continues to be the most reported challenge for young people: more than a third of group leaders (39%) told us it's impacting on young people.

Around half (52%) of respondents said **young people at their group disengaged from/reduced participation in sport and physical activity because of cost-of-living pressures** in the last six months.



## Empowering Young People

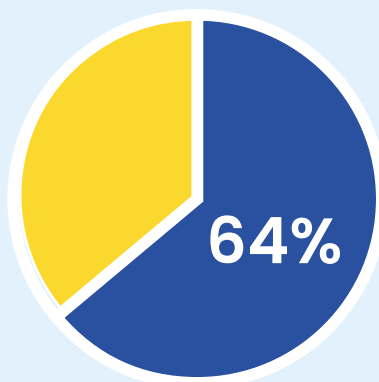


Our groups are vital in empowering young people in their communities to shape the opportunities available to them in sport and physical activity, but they need extra support to elevate the voice of even more young people this way – for example, through additional staff and volunteer capacity, external facilitators and train-the-trainer coaching for their young people, and good practice guides and resources.



**“We include everyone of all abilities and backgrounds, our focus is development not winning.”**

Ballymoor FC



**Two thirds of groups (64%) involve young people in shaping what the group delivers.**



**“Our facility is volunteer run by local people. Our young people know we are going to be open for them 100% of the time.”**

Nettlefield Multi-Sports





## Empowering Young People



## What Are Groups Looking For?

Groups are looking for additional support in increasing young people's role in shaping delivery through extra staff and volunteers, external facilitators, good practice guides and training resources, help around building partnerships in their local areas, and in marketing to engage new participants.

## Conclusion

## Why Are Community Groups So Great?

Supporting community groups in this way would help them do what they do best, creating incredible opportunities to take part in sport and physical activity for underserved communities across Northern Ireland, building young people's physical and mental wellbeing through a model of working that includes:

- Being inclusive and accessible for all, across all ages, abilities, and backgrounds
- Providing safe spaces where young people can socialise with their peers
- Being driven by the needs of young people in communities, empowering their voice to shape what groups deliver
- A focus on sport and physical activity but also mentoring and personal support
- Having staff and volunteers that understand their communities and are representative of them



# Our Response

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## Each edition of the Ring / Sported Pulse allows us to:

- Understand the current needs, issues and jeopardy surrounding community sport to allow us to better define Sported's offer to our members. In 2023-2024, we distributed £1.63m in grants thanks to funders including Barclays, Sport England, P&G, CVC and Vodafone.
- Engage every parliamentarian across the UK, as well as key agencies, and advocate on behalf of our groups, highlighting the huge collective impact they make on their communities and on young people in tandem with calls for further support and engagement from all branches of government. This includes illustrating the stark impacts of cost-of-living increases, maintaining the traction gained in our ['Keep the Doors Open'](#) campaign.
- Deepen our connections in the Statutory sector, among devolved governments, regional agencies and other charities in order to highlight the effective and revenue-efficient role that community organisations can play in delivering local solutions to local problems through channels of activity which reach audiences who are either hard to reach or simply over-looked.
- To engage the national and regional media to amplify the issues at stake surrounding grassroots sport and young people, spotlighting the research and, significantly, telling the powerful stories of our community groups and allowing their voice to be heard.
- To open doors for new or extended conversations with the business sector, illustrating how communities and the lives of young people can be transformed through investment driven by corporate social responsibility and sponsorship.



[Additional context: On average, groups completing Pulse in Northern Ireland are engaging around 80 young people, with nearly half (44%) based in areas of high relative deprivation (IMD 1-3). More than three quarters (86%) are entirely volunteer-led and a third (31%) have an annual turnover of less than £10,000]