

Northern Ireland / Winter 2024-25

The Pulse

Issues facing grassroots sport and the communities and young people it serves

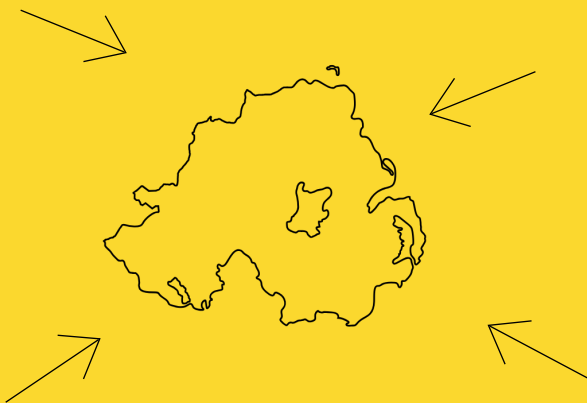


Introduction

The Spotted x Ring Pulse is a bi-annual research report into the community sport sector right across the UK, based on surveying groups and organisations at a grassroots level who deliver physical activity for young people. It explores the needs, challenges and sustainability of these clubs, highlighting the issues they face and informing decisions by ensuring their voices 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 **39** community group leaders from across the Northern Ireland, representing around 13% of Spotted groups, between **11 – 28 November 2024**. These groups reach around 4,000 young people across the Northern Ireland.





About Sported




As the UK's largest grassroots sports charity, Sported resources groups in communities across the country, supporting around a million young people each year to overcome barriers to reach their full potential. The groups which Sported supports are deeply rooted within their communities and led by highly committed, passionate local people who often give up their time voluntarily to run initiatives that help young people to succeed. However, grassroots groups are often under-funded and under-resourced. As a charity, our role is to champion and 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 thrive.

Sported's groups work within complex local contexts, often tackling some of society's biggest challenges. Around 51% 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

Empowering groups in the long-term

Community groups are confident of continuing to deliver for their communities in the upcoming six months, but their confidence in long term survival over the next few years is lower. With securing funding and planning for the future common priorities for community groups, continuing to support them with access to funding and capacity-building resources is critical in developing their resilience and ensuring their ongoing effectiveness and sustainability.

	<p>Groups remain confident in their survival in the immediate future, but confidence decreases as they look beyond the next six months: 71% are confident in continuing to exist in three years’ time compared with 97% in six months’ time.</p>
	<p>Securing funding remains the most common priority for community groups, with 77% of leaders saying it’s a priority for the next six months.</p>
<p>Other key strategic priorities over the next six months include:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning for the future (74%) • engaging new participants (67%) • retaining participants (64%) • and volunteer recruitment/retention (56%) 



Supporting physical and mental health for young people

Community groups are vital in helping young people from under-served communities to get active, delivering both physical and broader wellbeing benefits for their participants. However, mental health remains an issue for young people within our groups' local areas, and challenges around the cost of activities and young people's ability to get to activities are causing some young people to disengage from sport and physical activity. It's therefore critical to support and empower community groups as they deliver accessible activities for young people and bring such positive outcomes for their wellbeing.





79%

More than three quarters of groups told us they **help get inactive young people active.**



Beside the physical benefits of sport and physical activity, group leaders see young people benefiting from

	Improved mental health		Increased sense of belonging
	Improved confidence and self-esteem		Reduced loneliness and isolation
	Reduced stress and anxiety		Increased resilience

through taking part at community groups.



Mental Health

But **mental health remains a significant issue within communities**, with 41% of respondents telling us it is a challenge for young people in their local area (making it the most reported issue by group leaders).

And young people face barriers in accessing the activities that can have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing:

- Nearly half of respondents (46%) said **schoolwork pressure** caused young people to disengage from/reduce participation in sport and physical activity in the last six months.
- A similar proportion (44%) said **being unable to get to activities** was a factor in reduced activity rates for young people.
- A third (36%) told us **not being able to afford activities** caused young people to limit or stop participation in sport and physical activity.





Gives focus and enjoyment to fill voids created without alternative activities for young people.

– Drumaness Mills Football Club Youth



They are taking part in activities as a group which helps them emotionally in that they feel part of something or a sense of belonging. Even those who may not be deemed 'sporty' can play a number of other roles which helps their sense of belonging.

– Con Magees GAC, Glenravel



It encourages social interaction within the community: young people benefit through what is probably their first introduction to volunteering.

– Killyleagh Coastal Rowing Club

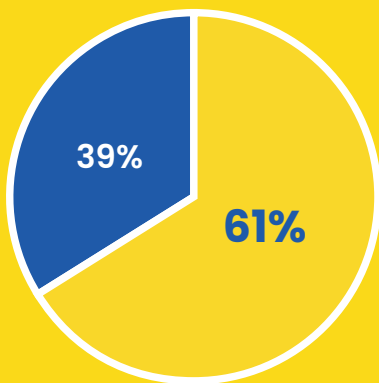


Empowering communities

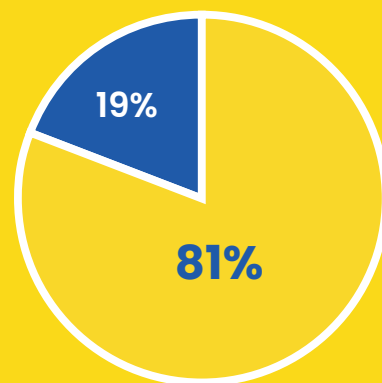


Empowering communities

Groups are connected and part of decision-making within their communities but feel that their communities are missing out on investment in sport and physical activity given the positive and long-lasting impact it has for local areas. Community group leaders are keen to encourage Northern Ireland's government to support more investment into community sport and physical activity, ensuring the benefits are accessible for all young people regardless of background and circumstances.



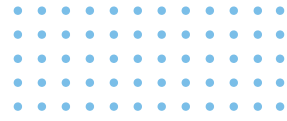
Nearly two-thirds of respondents agree (definitely or tend to) that **they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area** (61%). 39% disagree that they can do so.



The majority of groups (81%) say **there isn't enough government investment into grassroots sport to back its impact at community level**. The remaining respondents (19%) weren't sure, with no group agreeing there is enough investment.



Empowering communities



Asked what they'd like to raise with Northern Ireland's Sports Minister, groups mentioned:

- increasing funding for grassroots and community sport
- creating a more equitable funding model with more focus on community groups and their needs (as well as a wider variety of activities and sports)
- the affordability and accessibility of venues and facilities
- looking at the broader and longer-term benefits of activities for young people in their communities
- supporting volunteers who run community groups and deliver for their communities
- considering extra support for rural areas



What people want to ask the Nations Sport Ministers

"Please provide more and affordable facilities for grassroots sports and activities."

"Be braver and back sports as a longer-term avenue for young people to feel a belonging."

"Develop and fund policy and strategy that links sport to other than winning medals."



Impact of climate change



Community groups are seeing the impact of climate change on their activities, with flooded and waterlogged pitches and venues, adverse weather, and excessive heat impacting on activities in the last six months.

The most common issues are around **flooded or waterlogged venues/pitches**, adverse weather affecting participation and activities, and **excessive heat** (for both outdoor and indoor activities in the summer).

A quarter of respondents (24%) said their group's activities were impacted by climate change in the past six months.



76% said they weren't.



Hear how climate change affects our members



Our MUGA surface is constantly flooding due to rain and now freezing due to low temperatures.

– Nettlefield Multi-Sports



Our activities are primarily outdoors and pitches have been unplayable later in the year than we might have expected. We have also had to cancel or curtail activities due to extreme heat which has not happened before (in living memory anyway).

– Con Magees GAC, Glenravel



Flooding and storms cancelled training and games.

– Ballymoor FC



Venues and facilities

Safe, secure and good quality venues and spaces are vital for groups to deliver for young people in their communities. However, groups face challenges around the availability of facilities and spaces, as well as the costs of running, owning, and maintaining such venues. Supporting groups with these challenges, especially in developing financially sustainable spaces, will help ensure they can continue to support young people within their communities over the long term.



51%

Half of respondents told us that told us that **maintenance and upkeep** is a significant challenge facing their group.

38%

Affordability for those renting

38%

Running costs for those owning

38%

Availability of facilities

38%

Public liability costs (insurance)

were also reported as significant challenges by nearly a third of respondents.

Groups are most interested in support around:



57%

capital project planning
for their facilities and venues,



32%

with a third of respondents looking
for support around **moving from
renting to owning**



32%

**facility management
and maintenance**



32%

**financial sustainability
and revenue generation**



32%

**and/or making their space more
environmentally sustainable**





Our response

Our Spring 2024 edition of Pulse allowed us to:

- Understand the current needs, issues and jeopardy surrounding grassroots sport and its impact in our communities – and how Sported best supports that.
- Engage every parliamentarian across the UK, as well as key parts of local and national government, 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.
- Deepen our connections in the Statutory sector, among devolved government, regional agencies and other charities in order to highlight the effective and revenue-efficient role that community-focused 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 members and allowing their voices to be heard.
- To open doors for new or extended conversations with corporate partners, illustrating the difference they can make by supporting the sport for development sector and the areas of involvement open to them.





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