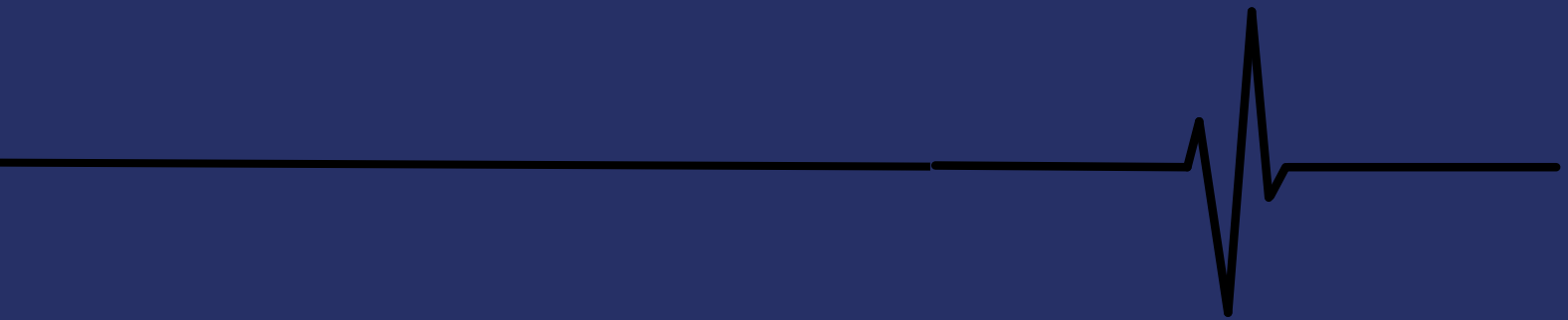


Community Pulse

Tracking the health, hopes, and hurdles of grassroots sport.



Introduction

The Community Pulse is Sported's longitudinal study of community groups across the UK who deliver sport and physical activity for underserved young people and adults. It covers the sustainability, needs, and ambitions of such groups, ensuring the voice of grassroots and smaller community organisations are heard.

It aims to:

- ⇒ Capture and reflect the experiences of our community organisations.
- ⇒ Explore the realities, needs and aspirations of these community organisations.
- ⇒ Provide an authentic, unbiased voice for our community organisations.
- ⇒ Help stakeholders make more informed decisions in relation to grassroots sport in the UK.



This report represents the voices of 24 community group leaders from across Northern Ireland, representing around 6% of the Sported network, between 6-21 October 2025. These groups reach around 4,630 people across Northern Ireland.



About Sported

Sported combats inequality through the UK's largest network of community sports groups, supporting over one million 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.

Our 5,000+ grassroots groups reaching more than 1 million people every year, provide safety, belonging and opportunity where it's needed most. Sported groups work within complex local contexts, often tackling some of society's biggest challenges. Around 50% are in areas that sit within the highest three indices of relative deprivation in the UK, around four-in-ten are volunteer-led, and a third have an annual turnover of less than £10,000.



Key Findings

Empowering groups in the short and long-term

Over the next six months, groups are primarily focused on engaging new participants and recruiting and retaining volunteers, alongside securing funding, planning for the future, retaining participants, and responding to local challenges facing young people. Looking further ahead, securing funding becomes the most common long-term priority, with participant retention and future planning continuing to feature strongly. While confidence in short-term survival remains high, it dips slightly when leaders consider the next three years, pointing to emerging concerns about longer-term sustainability.

	<p>Groups remain confident in their survival in the immediate future, but confidence slightly decreases as they look beyond the next six months: 82% are confident they will continue to exist in six months time, compared with 79% who are confident in continuing to exist in three years' time.</p>
	<p>Engaging new participants and volunteer recruitment/retention (79%) are the most common priorities over the next six months. Over the longer-term funding is the most common priority for groups, with 67% saying it's a priority over the next three years.</p>
<p>Other key strategic priorities over the next six months include:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing funding (67%) • Planning for the future (54%) • retaining participants (54%) • Responding to local challenges faced by young people (54%)



Fighting inactivity



More than three quarters of groups are supporting inactive young people to become more active, with marketing, community partnerships, and structured sessions identified as effective approaches. However, affordability and schoolwork pressures are significant barriers, with over half of groups reporting reduced youth participation due to cost and academic demands. Alongside this, most groups are also engaging inactive adults, where marketing, partnerships, and inclusive provision play a key role in encouraging participation.

71%

Two thirds of groups are getting inactive adults active.

83%

More than three quarters of groups told us they are getting inactive young people active.



The most common approaches that work well in getting young people active include:

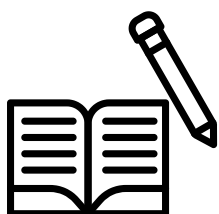
- ✓ Marketing and community reach/partnerships.
- ✓ Structured/regular sessions.



But the cost of activities and school work pressure is limiting young people's participation:



Over half of respondents (58%) say young people at their group disengaged from/reduced participation in sport and physical activity in the last six months because of not being able to afford it.

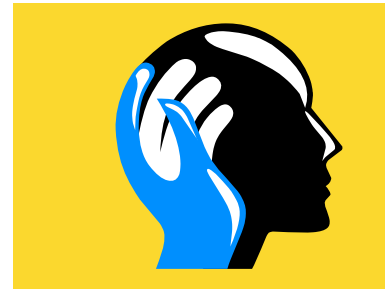


Young people are also struggling with schoolwork pressures, with over half of group leaders (58%) saying this was a factor in young people limiting or stopping participation recently.



Mental Health

Mental health is the most significant challenge facing both young people and adults, alongside issues such as youth violence and crime, lack of opportunities, financial hardship, low activity levels, and limited access to safe spaces, reflecting the complex and overlapping pressures within communities. Over half of group leaders have been approached by young people with mental health concerns in the past year, underlining the increasing role community groups play in supporting wellbeing. Leaders identify coach training and dedicated funding for mental health initiatives as critical to improving support.



Mental health is the most reported challenge that young people (83%) and adults (88%) are facing in their community at this time.

57%

Over half of leaders said they had been approached by young people with mental health concerns in the last 12 months.





To be able to support young people better with their mental health, group leaders say they need:

63%	Training specifically for coaches
63%	Funding for mental health initiatives
54%	Workshops or toolkits for young people
54%	Awareness training for parents/carers



The most commonly reported issues affecting participation and engagement were:

Women and girls

Disabled People

Ethnically Diverse Communities

LGBTQ+

54%

Lack of confidence from individuals to participate

35%

Financial barriers/cost to participate

54%

Financial barriers/cost to participate

33%

Lack of confidence from individuals to participate

Across different groups, leaders highlight a range of barriers that limit participation in sport and physical activity. Below highlights other commonly reported issues for these participants include:

Women & Girls	Cost Competing demands
Disabled People	Lack of confidence to participate
Ethnically Diverse Communities	Lack of confidence to participate Communication barriers Lack of role models/representation
LGBTQ+	Financial barriers/cost to participation

Opportunities for getting young people active

Group leaders see strong opportunities to engage young people over the next year through diversifying activities, improving facilities, and securing funding.



Group leaders reflected on what opportunities they see for engaging young people in sport and physical activity in the next 12 months:



Diversifying activities



We see potential in engaging more children and young people with disabilities across our club. We also need to look at how we can support young people in becoming the next generation of leaders. We also need to take a serious look at how we can entice young people who have left our club to re-engage again. (Con Magees Glenravel - Northern Ireland)



We hope to have a lit pathway around the perimeter of our pitch and a 4g training pitch. (Drumaness Mills FC - Northern Ireland)



Enhancing Facilities



Access to relevant funding so that we can offer low cost options to members living in areas of social and financial deprivation. (Peninsula Stable Minds CIC - Northern Ireland)



Funding




Supporting groups to succeed in these opportunities

More funding

Better access to facilities

To capitalise on these opportunities, groups emphasise the need for increased funding, better facilities, and stronger partnerships. Funding is most often needed for venue hire, coaching fees, and core costs. However, many groups struggle with limited capacity for grant writing and intense competition for resources.

More funding is vital for groups to support with:

	Coach and instructor fees (46%)
	Volunteer training or development (38%)
	Inclusion initiatives for underrepresented groups (38%)

Northern Ireland Opportunities

There is strong appetite among group leaders to use sport as a tool for community relations, with the majority expressing interest in delivering sport-themed community relations programmes and most already engaging participants from diverse religious backgrounds.



80%

of leaders are interested in delivering a sport-themed community relations programme



90%

of groups have participants from different religious backgrounds



Why this matters to our young people and groups






"We provided a programme over 12 months for young boys who although only in their early teens were under threat from paramilitaries due to anti social behaviour. We have a report to show the change in this group with evidence input from parents, social services and community police. The young people didn't have to leave their area which was a big plus."

"This year our many young people from a Roma background came and settled in our local community. Not knowing any safe space we engaged with their families and now they are regular attendees at our football session. New friendships have been made and their lives have been enhanced."

"Our club has recently re-introduced disability sessions and this has been a raging success."

We asked group leaders what they'd like to raise with Northern Ireland's Sports Minister, they mentioned:

-  Infrastructure and sustainability, including facility cost and availability.
-  An inclusive vision of sport and physical activity, not limited to a small selection of activities.
-  Supporting sport and physical activity in schools.



Our response

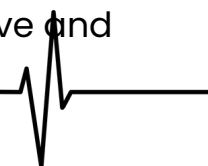


The responses to this year's Pulse give us a clear picture in Northern Ireland: community sport is playing a vital role in bringing people together, but it is operating under financial pressure and facing growing social challenges such as poor mental health.

While groups remain confident in their short-term future, concerns about long-term sustainability are increasing. Funding uncertainty, volunteer capacity pressures and rising affordability barriers are limiting participation for many young people and underrepresented groups. Pulse responses also highlight a strong appetite among group leaders to use sport as a tool for community relations, with many already engaging participants from different religious backgrounds and expressing interest in delivering sport-themed community relations programmes. In response, we will prioritise engagement with Sport NI, government departments and All Party Group discussions to advocate for increased investment in sport for development, including greater access to multi-year funding and a stronger focus on directing funding to areas of greatest need. Alongside this, Sported sponsored the 'Sport for Good' award category at this year's CRC Good Relations Awards to showcase and celebrate the positive impact that sport is having in bringing communities together.

Inclusion will remain a central focus. We will deliver the Engage Her women and girls training and grants programme to 30 groups across Northern Ireland and, in partnership with Sport NI, distribute the International Women's Day small grant programme supporting 41 groups to deliver additional activities for women and girls. We will also launch a three-year disability inclusion project, funded by the Peter Harrison Foundation, aimed at increasing participation and accessibility.

Ultimately, our response is focused on ensuring community sport in Northern Ireland can continue to bring people together while widening access for those who face the greatest barriers. By advocating for more sustainable funding, strengthening the capacity of grassroots groups and delivering targeted inclusion programmes, we aim to support communities so that more people can access safe, inclusive and affordable opportunities to take part in sport.



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