



Northern Ireland
Executive

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DELIVERING SOCIAL CHANGE

Social Exclusion and Sport in Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

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Overview

- The Social Exclusion and Sport in Northern Ireland (SESNI) research project (July 2012 – December 2014) was conducted by Ulster University in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT), and funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), Equality Directorate Research Branch.

- The project was proposed and designed by Professor Owen Hargie and Dr. Ian Somerville, School of Communication, Ulster University, Jordanstown, in response to the 2011 Research Call of the cross-departmental Equality and Social Need Research Group. Dr. David Mitchell and Jenny Robinson (July 2012 – March 2013) were appointed as Research Associates. The project was overseen by a Steering Group comprising representatives of OFMDFM. The project received ethical approval from the appropriate Ulster University research ethics committee.

- As elaborated below, key findings include:

- 86% of survey respondents believe that sport is a good way to break down barriers between Protestants and Catholics, while 67% believe that sports-based peacebuilding projects are effective;
- 84% believe sports in Northern Ireland (NI) to be more open and inclusive than ten years ago;
- 52% of people do no sport or physical activity at all;
- Participation and interest in soccer, Gaelic games and rugby continue to reflect the

community divide, while a majority of people (57%) believe there is nothing wrong with different sports or teams being for Protestants or Catholics;

- 51% of people agree that segregated schools are a major cause of segregation in sport;
- More people believe that national anthems should remain part of sport in NI (42%) than believe they should be removed (36%);
- Qualitative and quantitative findings reveal that progress has been made by the main sporting organisations in becoming perceived as more inclusive, but much work is still to be done;
- Many women, less well-off people, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay and bisexual people (LGB), and transgender people, continue to face complex barriers to participation in sport and physical activity.

Research objectives

The objectives of the project were as follows:

- To understand the extent, distribution and causes of social exclusion in NI society, particularly in the sporting context.
- To chart current practice in relation to exclusion/inclusion in sport in NI.

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- To assist in the understanding of public perceptions and attitudes in respect of cohesion, sharing and integration in NI.
 - To contribute to the development of the statistical infrastructure on social exclusion in NI and provide specific statistical indicators on sport and social exclusion.
 - To facilitate and inform wider public debate on the issues of sport and social exclusion in NI.
 - To identify key issues to shape future policy development.

Methodology

The project comprised three main phases/outputs:

- A review of relevant international academic and ‘grey’ literature in relation to social inclusion/exclusion and sport, including a survey of sports-based peace and social inclusion projects in NI.
- Qualitative research with a representative sample (n=104) of members of the public across NI. This involved using in-depth semi-structured interviews to gauge respondents’ views regarding their perceptions and experiences of inclusion/exclusion in sport. With the assistance of gatekeeper organisations, this sample included LGB people, transgender individuals, people with disabilities, and members of minority ethnic groups. A Qualitative Report, analysing and synthesising findings, was produced.

- Quantitative research through the inclusion of a SESNI survey module in the 2013 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (n = 1210). The questions were informed by the Literature Review and Qualitative Report, and drawn up in consultation with NILT staff and the project Steering Group. A Quantitative Report, comprising statistical analysis and evaluation, was produced. For the purposes of statistical analysis, ‘don’t know’ responses were excluded and so percentage figures in the SESNI Report differ slightly from those on the NILT website.

Main findings

- *In Northern Ireland there is a widespread public belief in the peacebuilding capacity of sport. A significant majority of the survey sample (86%) believed that sport was a good way to break down barriers between Protestants and Catholics, while 67% believed that sports-based peacebuilding projects were effective in breaking down barriers between the two communities. Of those who had taken part in such a project, the figure for people who believed the projects to be effective was 91%. As a result, 79% of the sample felt that sports-based peacebuilding projects should receive greater funding, with only 6% disagreeing. Strong support for sport as a vehicle for peacebuilding was also found in the qualitative research. Furthermore, 84% believed sports in NI to be more open and inclusive than ten years ago.*

- *Sports-based peacebuilding initiatives have the potential to reach a much wider audience. Analysis of the survey results showed that younger people, males, those in higher level occupations, with higher qualifications, and who took part in sport regularly, were most likely to have taken part in these initiatives.*

- *A large number of people do not participate in sport or physical activity at all.* Over half of the sample (52%) reported doing no sport or physical activity in the last twelve months.

- *Many people are content with religious division in sport, and do not believe there will be significant change in the religious make-up of some sports.* For instance, 57% of survey respondents felt that there was nothing wrong with different sports or teams being for Protestants or Catholics; responses were similar among Protestants and Catholics, and across age categories. Furthermore, respondents were evenly divided with regard to whether they believed that sports would be more religiously diverse in ten years' time.

- *There is a public perception of the on-going link between religious division within the schools sector and sports segregation.* 51% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that segregated schools are a major cause of segregation in sport, with just over one-fifth (21%) of the sample disagreeing. These figures were similar for Protestants, Catholics and people of no religion. Nearly all interviewees provided examples of this link in their own lives.

- *Sporting colours, emblems and venues continue to be perceived as politico-religious markers.* Interviewees provided rich detail and telling anecdotes to illustrate the 'otherness' of certain sports venues, the manner in which sports emblems or even equipment could identify someone as a member of the out-group, and the related threat/anxiety that this may cause in particular areas.

- *The topic of national anthems in sport is contentious.* Opinion, as gauged by the survey, was closely divided, in that 36% agreed that anthems should not be part of sport in NI while 42% disagreed. Protestants were more attached to anthems than Catholics, with the youngest age category in the study (18-24 years) showing strongest support for anthems.

● *Participation and interest in soccer, rugby and Gaelic games, all continue to be affected by the community divide.* From the interviewee responses, and the results of the survey questions on TV viewing and willingness to attend sports fixtures, it is clear that Gaelic games remain the preserve of Catholics. Rugby and soccer are more mixed overall, although there are divisions within the latter in relation to local and national team support.

● *The GAA remains largely outside of the experience of most Protestants.* Only 1% of Protestants had watched ‘a lot’ of Gaelic football in the last year compared to 31% of Catholics. Similarly, 39% of Protestants said they would attend a match in Casement Park if offered tickets compared to 78% of Catholics.

● *In regard to the GAA’s efforts to be socially inclusive, Protestants believe that it could and should be doing more to make Gaelic sports amenable to their tradition.* Thus, 40% of Protestants agreed that the GAA was taking active steps to welcome all traditions, compared to 72% of Catholics. Qualitative data from the interviews revealed Protestant disapproval of the GAA for its political associations with Irish nationalism, yet at the same time, positive recognition of its community spirit and organisational acumen, and respect for Gaelic sports *per se*.

● *Some Catholics also believe the GAA could and should be doing more to welcome all traditions.* Thus, 28% of Catholics disagreed that the GAA was taking active steps to welcome all traditions, while 78% said they would like to see more Protestants playing Gaelic sports. A number of Catholic interviewees were uncomfortable with the political associations of the GAA.

● *Perceptions of sectarianism surrounding NI soccer persist among some people.* This emerged most clearly in the qualitative data. A number of interviewees regarded soccer as divisive and some had had negative experiences at NI international matches in the past. A small number of survey

respondents reported that sectarianism among fans at Windsor Park would put them off attending.

- *However, Catholics are quite positively disposed towards NI international soccer.* Thus, more Catholics (71%) than Protestants (65%) felt that the Irish Football Association was taking active steps to welcome all traditions. Two-thirds of Catholic respondents said they would like to see more Catholics supporting the NI international team, while only a slightly higher proportion of Protestants (60%) than Catholics (56%) said they would be willing to attend Windsor Park if offered tickets. Many interviewees commented upon the good work done by the Football for All campaign.

- *There is majority public support for an all-Ireland soccer team.* The survey found 54% of respondents in favour of this proposal. In terms of religious background, the majority in favour came from the Catholic community, with 70% supporting such a change compared to 39% of Protestants.

- *Rugby in NI is overwhelmingly regarded as inclusive and unifying.* TV coverage of Ireland rugby matches attracted equal levels of Protestant and Catholic interest (although Ulster rugby matches attracted a slightly higher proportion of Protestant viewers). A total of 83% of survey respondents believed that Ulster Rugby was taking active steps to welcome all traditions, including almost equal proportions of Protestants and Catholics. Ulster Rugby's ground was also regarded as the most inclusive of the three stadium sports; regarding willingness to attend a rugby match at Ravenhill, 69% of Catholics said they would attend if offered tickets, and 66% of Protestants.

- *Sport plays a comparatively minor role in the lives of women.* The present study confirms existing research to show that women watch less sport on TV, experience a lower level of enjoyment of sport at school, and participate in sport less than men; men were twice as likely as women to report

doing ‘a lot’ of sport or physical activity in the last year. Many interviewees recognised that females face specific barriers to participation. Of the survey respondents who reported that lack of single sex sports/leisure provision, body image, and lack of childcare were barriers to their participation, an overwhelming majority were women. Furthermore, 59% of the survey sample believed that boys’ sports are seen as more important than girls’ sports in schools, while 53% thought that more TV coverage of female sport would increase female participation.

- *However, many people believe that women do not face sports exclusion.* For instance, although 46% of women agreed that they are second class citizens in NI sport, 32% of women disagreed. Regarding whether responsibility for a young family prevented women from participating in sport or exercise, 42% of the overall sample agreed but 40% disagreed. Some interviewees, both male and female, believed that the disparity in levels of participation, greater number of male than female sports clubs, and the different levels of media coverage of male and female sports, were simply a result of men and women having differing interests.

- *Older people are not widely perceived to face significant exclusion from sport.* Just 16% of survey respondents believed that sport and leisure facilities were not welcoming for older people. Most interviewees thought that age-appropriate sport/exercise opportunities existed for those older people who were willing to take advantage of them.

- *Nevertheless older people participate less in sport than younger people and are less likely to attend sporting venues.* This was evident from the survey findings regarding participation levels and willingness to attend the three main sports stadia. Interviewees noted that it may be particularly challenging to interest older people in sport and exercise if they have not been active earlier in life.

- *People in the lowest socio-economic groups participate in sport least and are less likely to take part in a sports-based peacebuilding initiative than those in higher socio-economic groups.* This was demonstrated by the survey analysis which showed that people in higher-level occupational classifications were 1.8 times more likely to have taken part than those in the lower-level occupations, and people with A-level qualifications and above were 1.7 times more likely to have taken part than those with GCSEs and below. The interviews showed that cost was perceived to be a barrier to participation although it was felt that this was changing. Just 18% of survey respondents mentioned that cost had been a barrier to them in playing sport at some point in their lives, and many of these were people of ‘higher’ socio-economic status. The availability of affordable sporting opportunities was widely recognised by interviewees. It may be factors other than cost *per se*, such as cultural habits and attitudes, which account for the disparity in participation levels between socio-economic groups.

- *Many people believe that sports provision for people with disabilities is inadequate.* Nearly half of respondents (49%) agreed that sports for people with disabilities were not taken seriously in NI. However, many interviewees were simply unaware of what sports provision existed for people with disabilities. Interviewees with disabilities attested to the importance of dedicated disability sports workers and the ongoing reality of access problems at sports venues.

- *Many LGB people face significant obstacles to engaging in sport and leisure.* Testimony from LGB interviewees confirmed existing research regarding the gendered nature of certain team sports and how this can create a culture which is conducive to homophobia. Moreover, LGB interviewees reported that open plan changing rooms and showers were intimidating places, in part because they afforded no privacy and in part because they lent themselves to bullying. Almost one in five (19%) of the survey respondents said they would feel uncomfortable using a changing room at the same time as a gay or lesbian person.

- *Different opinions on LGB inclusion in sport exist among the wider public.* For instance, 58% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a gay or lesbian person would be welcome to join and play for most sports clubs in NI while 18% disagreed. Among interviewees, some perceived that the position of LGB people was improving, while others thought that NI continued to be a ‘cold house’ for LGB people. However, few interviewees had encountered openly gay sports people or had even thought much about the subject, while nearly one in four (24%) survey respondents neither agreed nor disagreed regarding the question of whether a gay or lesbian person would be welcome to join and play for most sports clubs in NI.

- *Participation in sport and exercise is extremely difficult for transgender people.* Transgender interviewees described how before, during and after transition, they struggle to find a place in a sports world (changing facilities, teams and competition categories) that is characterised by male-female segregation. Furthermore, the lack of public understanding of transgender people means that any activity in public is fraught with difficulty. The absence of sporting and leisure opportunities can have a detrimental impact on the physical and social wellbeing of transgender people, who are already suffering anxiety and stress as a result of their gender dysphoria. The survey showed that 22% of respondents said they would be uncomfortable sharing a changing room with a transgender person.

- *Ethnic minorities are not widely perceived to face serious sports exclusion, though some respondents felt that the impression that there is racism in certain parts of NI may dissuade ethnic minority participation.* Just 15% of survey respondents thought that a person from an ethnic minority group would not be welcome to join and play for most sports clubs in NI, and 7% did not wish their children’s or grandchildren’s sport team to be coached by someone from an ethnic minority group. There was clear public support (71%) for more funding for cross-ethnic sports projects. Indeed, some ethnic minority interviewees believed strongly in the power of sport to help

integrate minorities and improve relations with ‘local’ people.

- *Ethnic minority experiences of sport in NI are diverse.* Several interviewees had positive experience of sport, but common too were experiences of racism, both in sporting contexts and elsewhere. Participants from ethnic minorities stated that they found the sectarian divide daunting to navigate, again, both in relation to sport and in other areas. The fact that the sports preferences of people from NI and from other countries could be incompatible, with sports played by migrants unavailable in NI, was highlighted, as was the language barrier.

Key issues

From the findings of our research, a number of key issues regarding exclusion and peacebuilding arise for government, media and society, schools, sports bodies, and those responsible for sports facilities.

- *While recent progress has been made in resolving remaining conflict legacy issues and disputes over cultural expression, politicians must continue to prioritise these matters.* Such a commitment is outlined in OFMDFM’s good relations strategy, *Together: Building a United Community* (OFMDFM, 2013), as well as the Stormont House Agreement, December 2014. Making sports more inclusive requires social changes far beyond the power of sporting organisations, including the removal of murals, flags and other territorial markers, greater sharing in education, housing and social life, and a wider acceptance of differing political identities.
- *The strong public support for sport as a vehicle for peacebuilding, and personal and social development, should continue to inform the direction of government policy and funding in this area.*

Specifically, the present research should give added impetus to the focus on sport as a peacebuilding tool contained in *Together: Building a United Community*. Targeted funding is required for initiatives which capture the range of socio-economic groups, rectifying the current imbalance in which people of higher occupational status and educational attainment are most likely to have participated in a sport and reconciliation initiative.

- *Action at school level is crucial to the task of breaking down sectarian barriers in sport.* Integrated and shared education and expanding the range of sports on offer in schools would help to loosen the extant strong ties between school, religious community background and sport, and would buttress the shared community agenda contained in *Together: Building a United Community* and the Stormont House Agreement.

- *The GAA should continue, increase, and effectively communicate its inclusivity measures aimed at encouraging people from all traditions and backgrounds to play and watch Gaelic games.* Protestants and many Catholics still have reservations about the political associations of the GAA. However, the positive light in which many Protestants view both the GAA's values and sports should encourage the organisation in its outreach efforts to that community. The GAA should also invest in proactively taking steps to rectify the current perceptions, of both Protestants and Catholics, that it is an organisation exclusively for Catholics and nationalists.

- *The community relations work by the IFA through its Football for All campaign, as highlighted by respondents in this study, should be continued and extended.* Most people recognise that considerable improvements have been made in recent years regarding NI international soccer and inclusivity, although some people still retain negative views of the sport. To encourage full participation and involvement by all sections of the community, the *Football for All* initiative should continue with its successful campaign work.

- *Ulster Rugby should extend the inclusivity of the sport in NI by encouraging greater involvement of players and supporters from Catholic and working-class Protestant communities.*

Communication efforts devoted to targeting these audiences should be developed to build on the current success, wherein the Ulster rugby team is widely seen as a good example of the unifying potential of sport.

- *In relation to the contentious issue of flags and anthems in sport, some form of negotiated, synchronised change is required between sports that can command the support of the political parties and the wider public. Changes to the use of flags and anthems in soccer, rugby or Gaelic games would be controversial, difficult and indeed unlikely. This suggests that in order for sport to be ‘de-politicised’, change must occur to create a community which promotes mutual respect and understanding, is strengthened by its diversity and where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced. This is stated as a key priority for the NI Executive in *Together: Building a United Community*.*

- *The GAA, IFA and Ulster Rugby should enhance their communications to the general public about their contribution to peace-building and reconciliation work in NI. The sports should capitalise on strong public goodwill towards sport as a way of breaking down barriers and maximise the impact of their co-operation and joint cross-community outreach work through more effective public relations and advertising campaigns.*

- *The media must take account of how the extent and content of their sports coverage may contribute to the exclusion of women and girls from sport. Given the paucity of media coverage of female sports, and the stereotypical way in which female athletes are often portrayed, women and girls are denied female sports role models and encouraged to view sport as a male domain. Females should be encouraged to perceive sport and exercise as an integral part of their lives.*

- *Schools should ensure that they prioritise girls' sport as much as boys'. In addition they should have more shared involvement between girls and boys in sport from an early age, and address the gender expectations (around body image and what activities are and are not appropriate for girls) which may deter girls from involvement sport. While findings show that younger people have more positive views of school sports, schools may nonetheless need to consider the range of sports on offer and whether limited choice may be turning girls off sport.*

- *Schools should be aware of how early sports experiences can determine whether or not people continue to participate later in life. Thus, it is imperative that young people's experiences of sport in school are positive. Sports teachers must be vigilant to ensure that sports do not provide opportunities for bullying – of various kinds – and should organise and coach sports in a way that ensures respect for self and others.*

- *Sports facilities should monitor the gender balance of users. If facilities are, or become, male dominated, there may be a case for creating or extending separate sessions for men and women.*

- *Facilities should consider the feasibility of providing childcare on site or extending and enhancing such provision. This would open up sport and physical exercise opportunities for many people, both men and women.*

- *Negative attitudes towards LGB and transgender people must continually be challenged at all levels of society. Considering their specific exclusion from sport, as identified in this research, LGB and transgender people must be made much more visible in publicly funded sports, health and wellbeing social marketing and advertising campaigns.*

- *Sports provision for people with disabilities should be enhanced to encourage maximum*

participation. This includes sporting facilities and venues, where accessibility for spectators with disabilities continues to be problematic.

- *Targeted communications by sports facilities and organisers – of sporting opportunities and their benefits – are especially important in relation to older people and people with disabilities.* Efforts to engage older people and people with disabilities must take into account that those who have not habitually been active may be particularly unreceptive.

- *In the refurbishment or construction of new facilities, authorities should consider the impact of changing room design on the participation of particular groups.* Communal changing rooms present barriers to many people, in particular, transgender people. Sports facilities with individual changing cubicles should clearly communicate in their publicity the availability of this provision to encourage use and decrease anxiety.

- *Negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities must continually be challenged at all levels of society.* Major sports bodies and local authorities should continue current inclusivity initiatives (e.g. Unite Against Hate) to encourage participation of ethnic minority groups.

In conclusion, our findings identify what people in NI view as the barriers to, and the benefits of, sports participation, and how the sectarian divide, gender, age, socio-economic status, disability, sexuality and ethnicity, can impact on social inclusion through sport. Our data contribute to the development of statistical infrastructure on social exclusion in NI, providing statistical benchmarks that can help chart the evolution of attitudes in respect to sport and social exclusion in the future. The data also assist in the understanding of public perceptions and attitudes in relation to cohesion, sharing and integration in Northern Irish society, and highlight how sport presents both challenges and opportunities in NI's ongoing path away from the violence and division of the 'Troubles'.