



Faster, higher, stronger:
**the economic impact
of sport in Ireland**

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With each Olympics, the world witnesses the power of sport to captivate the public imagination, inspire participation, and drive economic growth. Sport – from international spectacles like the Olympics to local events and clubs – has a long track record of enhancing public health and community cohesion as well as driving economic activity, yet in many countries it remains under-promoted and under-resourced, creating attractive public policy opportunities. In the wake of Ireland’s most successful Olympics ever in 2024, we sought to highlight the pathways by which sport manifests its value to society, as well as the policy levers best able to maximise that value.

Sport for the Economy

The sport dividend

The economic case for investment in sport is a strong one, with sport yielding well-documented positive effects across multiple economic dimensions, including:



Economic value: a 2024 assessment of the impact of sport found that the total value of sport to the Irish economy in 2018 was €3.7bn, a contribution of 1.4% of total gross value added (GVA).¹



Productivity: participation in sport can enhance productivity as a by-product of improved health. Numerous studies have found that regular exercise can significantly reduce mortality and lower disease risk, leading to lower absenteeism rates and extended working lifespans.



Tourism: big-ticket sport spectacles have a proven capacity to raise a country’s profile and boost local and national economies through tourist spending on food, drink, merchandise, and accommodation, as well as the creation of supporting jobs.



Employment: sport is a major employer. The same 2024 impact assessment found that the sport and sport-related goods sectors in Ireland are responsible for around 64,000 full-time equivalent jobs, as well as hundreds of thousands of volunteers.²



Economic Multipliers

Major sporting events are well known for delivering robust returns on investment. Whilst there are inevitable failures, many have demonstrated hefty economic multipliers, with each unit of associated spending generating up to double the amount of additional economic activity. In addition, they frequently act as a spur to infrastructure investment and mass participation, with tangible public health benefits.

Event	Economic impact (€m, per annum)	Infrastructure Component	Opportunity for Ireland
Premier League	9,500	Multiple stadia and training centres.	Stadiums on the island can be used to host matches between top-tier international teams, such as when Chelsea played Villarreal in Windsor Park, Belfast in 2021, enabling infrastructure upgrades around the stadium and improvements to broadcasting technology. The UEFA Euro 2028 tournament will be co-hosted across Ireland and the UK, with ten stadiums hosting matches and benefits to be gained across multiple locations.
Wimbledon	296	Historic infrastructure requiring investment in maintenance.	Ireland can focus on promoting a signature sporting event that encapsulates Irish culture and national identity in the way Wimbledon does for England. Ireland has an opportunity to bring its unique sports, such as Gaelic games, to a broader global audience, creating tourism and international merchandising opportunities.
Monaco Grand Prix	102	Upgrades to roads and maintenance on the track. Temporary urban infrastructure for spectators. \$2bn investment to expand track out into the sea.	Formula 1 demonstrates the power of flagship events with international brand appeal to draw in more significant sponsorship deals, for instance with global tech firms, financial institutions, or luxury brands. Events held at Mondello Park in County Kildare, such as the LZ World Tour and Drift Games, demonstrate the existence of Irish venues that could be promoted more widely.
Six Nations (Scotland)	62	Stadium maintained to international competition standard.	The Six Nations is an excellent opportunity for Ireland to develop its global brand as a dependable and exciting host of major sport events, which it can then use to support its claims to host events beyond the rugby world.
College Football Classic Game	180	Use of existing infrastructure with some temporary adjustments to the pitch	The 2023 College Football Classic game was estimated to boost the Irish economy by €180m with nearly 40,000 attendees from the US and over 3.8 million viewers on NBC. Making this a regular fixture would bring sustainable tourism revenue as well as increasing Ireland's international profile.



€3.7bn
in contributions to the Irish economy



64,000
people employed in Sport Ireland

Sport for Wider Benefits

Not just about the money

Such figures are attractive on their own merits, but capture only a fraction of sport's wider positive externalities. The positive health impacts of broad participation in sport and physical activity have been comprehensively documented and include a substantially reduced risk of a wide range of chronic conditions, including those making the largest demands on Western public health systems, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, obesity, and diabetes. A 2016 study in the UK estimated that a mere 1% reduction in inactivity could save the National Health Service around £1.2 billion annually, by reducing the prevalence of such common diseases.³ More recently, a WHO/OECD study looking at the entire EU concluded that increasing physical activity levels to minimum recommended levels would prevent more than 10,000 premature deaths every year, and return €1.7 in economic benefits for every €1 invested.⁴ Closer to home, Sport Ireland has claimed that almost 100,000 cases of disease were prevented by participation in sport and

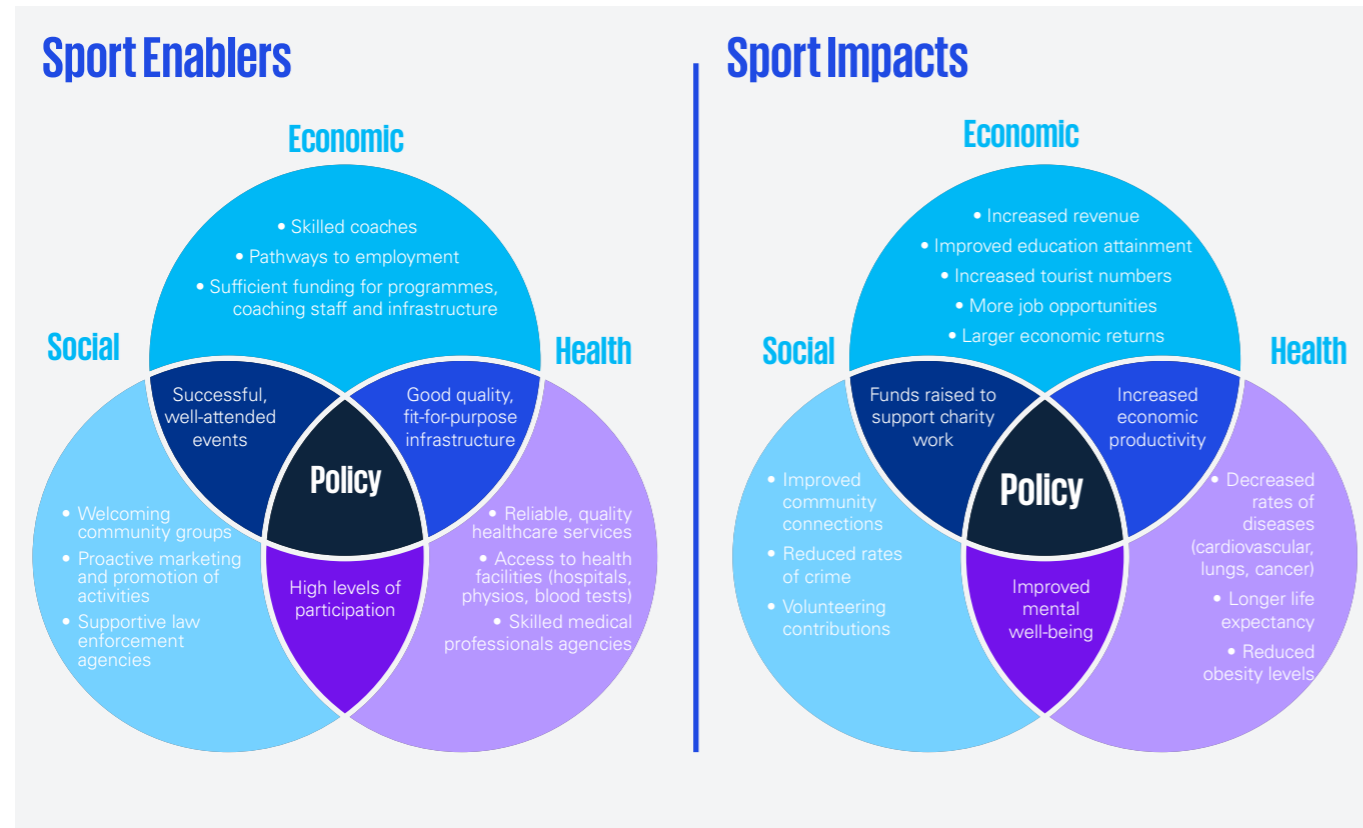
exercise in 2019.⁵ Studies elsewhere have demonstrated that regular exercise can add anything from three to seven years of life expectancy,⁶ while participants in popular mass sporting events like Parkrun and Tough Mudder have spoken compellingly about their mental health benefits.^{7,8}

Just as tangibly, sport has amply demonstrated its ability to foster community cohesion through enhanced social integration and networking, to provide pathways to social purpose and integration, and even to reduce crime.⁹ Many sporting events, such as the Dublin Marathon¹⁰ which raises €9m per year, play a major role in charity fundraising, as well as acting as a funnel into volunteerism and a conduit to local environmentalism. Major sporting events often act as a catalyst for local development and regeneration with long-term uplift effects, as demonstrated by the 2012 London Olympics' transformative impact on Stratford.



Many of these benefits will overlap, of course. Improvements in productivity are often a by-product of improved health and will go on to contribute to higher economic returns; improved community cohesion contributes not only to mental health but crime reduction. But the scale of their impact can be proactively maximised through strategy: clear policy

direction, government support and targeted funding can all broaden participation. A strategic approach will therefore consider a matrix of enablers across economic, health, and social dimensions, allocating resources according to a robust analysis of expected return on investment – including externalities such as health and social benefits.



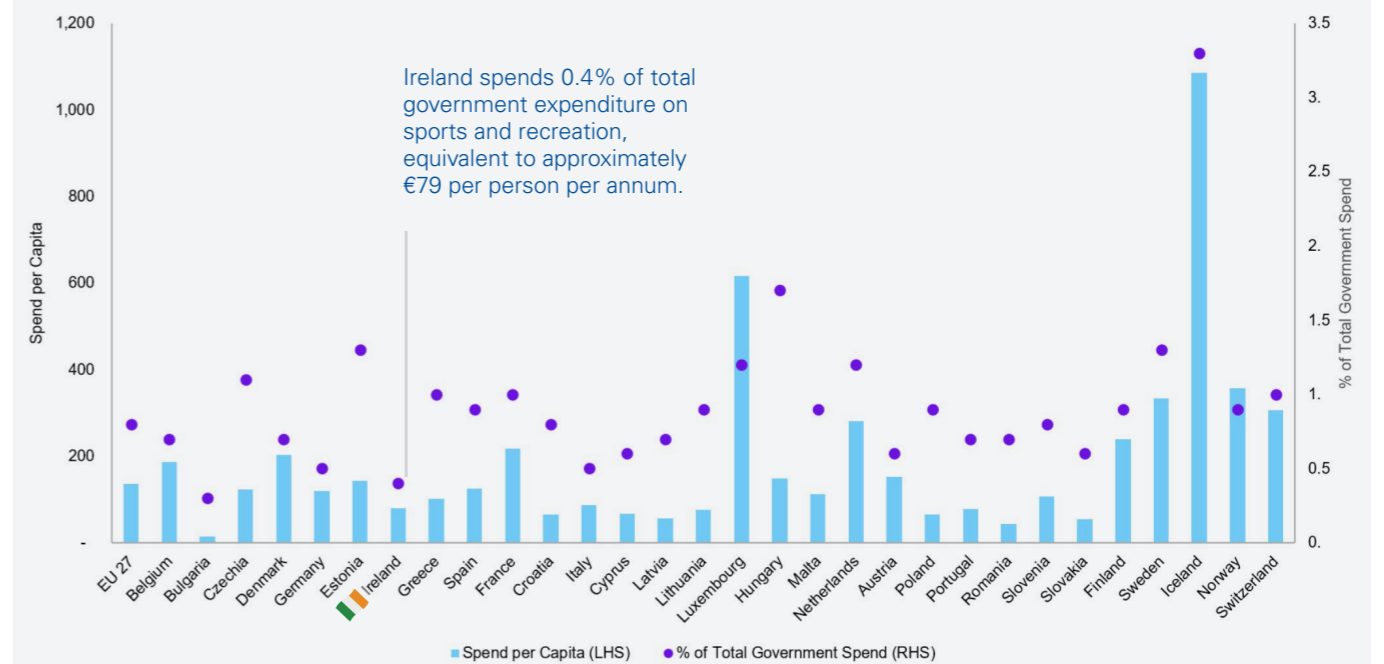
Sport as an Investment

Ireland today: more viewing than doing

Whilst around 60% of the Irish population regularly watches sport – reflecting the nation’s strong interest in Gaelic games, rugby, horse racing, and football – this interest does not always extend to participation. Indeed, surveys suggest that only around 46% of adults in Ireland regularly participate in sports or physical activities¹¹, contrasting with participation rates of over 60% in the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and the UK.¹² Recent campaigns such as 20x20 have improved

participation rates, particularly among women and girls, but Ireland still has a gap to close with peer European countries. Not coincidentally, perhaps, Ireland spends less public money than other EU countries on sports and recreation: 0.4% of total government expenditure vs an EU average of 0.8%, and this spending is concentrated heavily in Gaelic games, rugby, and soccer. Per capita spending is also lower, with Ireland close to the bottom of the European league table:

Government Expenditure on Sport and Recreation in the EU, 2022



Source: Statistics | Eurostat (europa.eu) spending and Statistics | Eurostat (europa.eu) population

Prevention of

100,000

cases of disease from participation in sport and exercise in Ireland in 2019

Regular exercise can add from

3 to 7 years

to life expectancy

Recognising this, the Irish government has sought to adopt a more strategic approach, establishing Sport Ireland in 2015 and announcing the National Sports Policy in 2018, under which major projects such as Ireland’s first-ever velodrome and badminton centre of excellence have been greenlit.¹³ Through the National Sports Policy, the Government is committed to doubling its annual funding for sport, from €112 million in 2018 to €220 million in 2027. Nonetheless, a substantial opportunity remains for Ireland to reap the benefits of increased participation in sport.

Only 46% of adults in Ireland regularly participate in sports or physical activities

Ireland spends **0.4%** of total govt expenditure on sport, and recreation, half the EU average

Levers for Change

Letting the games begin: how to make sport a growth engine in Ireland

Participation in sport is a product of a wide range of cultural and physical factors, many of which policy makers are able to influence. Countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and Finland have proven the potential for strategic governance to widen access and tempt more people into sport and fitness, setting themselves up for healthier futures. Some of the primary levers include:



Facilities: the upper limits of sports participation are determined by the available infrastructure. Ireland has recently committed significant funds to expanding available facilities, including €250m for sports capital and equipment (e.g. pitches, floodlighting, courts and multi-use games areas, hurling walls, gyms, etc.) and €120m for larger-scale sports infrastructure projects (e.g. venues and stadia). However, less direct measures, like requiring new developments to include spaces for physical activity, can further institutionalise the promotion of sports and physical activity.



Coaching and training: a robust coaching and training infrastructure is crucial for developing talent, increasing participation, and ensuring long-term engagement in sport.



Governance: high-quality governance and transparency are critical, not only to fundraising but to ensuring proper targeting of available funds to maximise returns.



Active support: government can reduce the cost of participation in sport and exercise through direct and indirect subsidy, e.g. through corporate wellness programmes, bike-to-work schemes, and targeted tax breaks.



School programmes: integrating sport and activity into school curricula and after-school programmes ensures that children develop a habit of participating in sport from a young age, building habits that often sustain into adulthood. Current curriculum guidelines only require primary schools to deliver 60 minutes of physical education per week, and post primary schools to deliver 120 minutes.¹⁴



Major events: successfully bidding for and hosting major events is a proven way to raise the profile of host regions or countries, attract tourists, and develop infrastructure for future sports tourism.



Case study: Finland



In the space of a few decades, Finland successfully transitioned its population from widespread inactivity to being one of the most active in the world. Today, some 90 percent of Finns reportedly exercise at least twice a week¹⁵, and the number of men dying from cardiovascular heart disease has dropped by around 80% since the 1970s. Together with dietary changes and smoking reduction, these developments have granted Finnish men and women around six or seven years longer life expectancy over this timeframe. This transformation took place not by accident, but by design – specifically, the design of a radical government-sponsored campaign to target cardiovascular mortality, a key pillar of which was to get Finns moving.

Over the course of decades, the medical practitioners involved pursued a highly varied range of interventions aimed at mass social change, including: mass meetings, media campaigns, reality-TV-style cholesterol reduction competitions; new swimming pools, sports pitches, and snow parks, plus new buses and other incentives to get people to these facilities. Hundreds of local schemes were created across the country to tempt people into cycling, Nordic walking, cross-country skiing and ball games, all of which were partially or even fully subsidised to maximise accessibility. New cycle and walking paths were created to encourage people to build activity into their daily lives, and these networks were kept appropriately lit and well maintained. GPs were even given licence to prescribe physical activity to patients, a move estimated to have made many patients many times more active.

Moves of this kind have been implemented elsewhere successfully, and demonstrate a clear pathway for Ireland to increase participation in sport and activity. Recent years have seen Ireland adopt similar measures, e.g. building and extending its greenways to promote cycling and walking, announcing new National Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines, and extending the ever-popular 'Ireland's Fittest Family' reality TV show. However, there is still a long way to go; according to the Irish Health and Safety Executive, only 23% of primary and 12% of post primary students were meeting recommended physical activity guidelines in 2022, and less than half of Irish adults (46%) were meeting the recommended physical activity guidelines in 2019.¹⁶



A sound investment

From a societal perspective, sport is a powerful benefit multiplier whose impacts can be measured across numerous social, health, and economic metrics. Capturing and measuring these effects opens up the way for greater investment in and prioritisation of sports facilities, coaches, and trainers, and helps policymakers understand the

significant positive externalities of sport participation. Governments that recognise this externality through targeted funding, infrastructure investment, and other supportive policies stand to improve more than their Olympic medal tally.

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Sources for Economic Multipliers Table

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