

Rapid Review of Youth Football

This paper is designed to inform discussion on the key aspects of youth football relevant to the development of a youth football framework in Northern Ireland.



By Dr Kyle Ferguson

1.0 Introduction

The Irish FA instigated a review of youth football in Northern Ireland in 2023 with the objective of creating a new plan for youth football.

The aim of the Irish FA review is to inform the development of a youth football framework in Northern Ireland by identifying the influence and impact of football structure, playing formats, rules, benefits and barriers on youth football development in Northern Ireland.

The review has three objectives:

- *To better understand the factors influencing youth football in Northern Ireland inclusive of structures, playing formats, rules, benefits and barriers and collaborations.*
- *To determine the lived experiences and attitudes of coaches, guardians, league administrators, players, former players and club officials related to their involvement in youth football in Northern Ireland*
- *To make recommendations regarding future youth football development in Northern Ireland with particular attention to structures, formats, rules and priorities.*

This rapid review of research will describe and summarise relevant literature, presenting a robust underpinning for consideration in Phase One of the review process, prior to finalising the youth football framework.

Phase One also incorporates a survey across stakeholders which is presented as a separate paper. Outputs from Phase One will be used to inform the development of proposals. Before the youth football framework is finalised, co-design principles should be incorporated to test key concepts and ideas that have been identified in Phase One as part of Phase Two focus groups.

2.0 Rationale for the Youth Review

In 2023, the Irish FA Board identified a need to adapt the current structure of youth football to keep more players in the game (enjoyment) and improve the quality of players (technical development). This led to the Irish FA Foundation launching a review into youth football in October 2023 with the aim of informing the development of a framework to maximise enjoyment and technical development for every child. The key consideration was the need to establish a clear youth football philosophy. A philosophy that everyone would align to, be governed by, and ultimately support to give players the best possible chance to enjoy the game and to develop as footballers.

As a means to underpin the youth football review this paper articulates the key findings from the rapid research review. Presented across seven sections covering the youth review context and process, the findings to date, proposed considerations and the next steps within the process inclusive of implementation and measurement approaches.

1. Introduction
2. Context and Current Structure of youth football in Northern Ireland
3. Methods
4. Research (Children's voice, Purpose and Pathways, Physical literacy, Education, Rules, Formats and Structures, Measurement).
5. Measurement
6. Implementation
7. Summary

3.0 Context

Sport in general and football in particular, has become widely adopted as a mechanism to tackle a range of social, health and economic issues (Ferguson et al., 2023). Nonetheless, youth sport is complex (Dorsch et al., 2022) while the unique social environment of Northern Ireland adds further to the complexity (Ferguson et al., 2022). Thus, understanding of the specific layers of the sporting ecosystem (community sport, grassroots, talent development, performance pathway, physical education,

physical activity, physical literacy) and the contextual environment are vital to creating a needs-based youth football programme in Northern Ireland.

In acknowledging the complex contextual situation in Northern Ireland and the realities which influence youth football in Northern Ireland, there follows a review of findings in relation to purpose, structure and implementation. This leads to a draft outline of potential measurement indicators for the framework, prior to an outline of next steps in the review process.

Sport in Northern Ireland adopts the European Union definition of sport established by the Council of Europe which encompasses:

‘all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels’ (COE, 2001:2).

Sport and physical activity play an important role in government plans to create an active, healthy, resilient, and inclusive society which recognises and values both participation and excellence (Department for Communities, 2022). The rationale based on research which suggests participation in sport and physical activity can improve children’s learning and skills development, contributing to their overall well-being and future prospects (UNICEF 2019). Indeed, UNICEF’s ‘Children’s Rights in Sport Principles’ states that “Sport has the important power to promote children’s sound and well-rounded growth and to convey a wide and active message to the world through its vast influence” (Esson, 2020:7). The Northern Ireland Human Rights Council (NIHRC) promote the positive impact of sport on the individual and the community as a mechanism to empower people to succeed and thrive, informed by the London Declaration on Sport and Human Rights (2018).

The Northern Ireland government Active Living strategy (2022) recognises sport’s powerful role in changing people’s lives for the better. In particular, sports’ potential to achieve outcomes within the programme for government by bringing people together, improving physical and mental health, boosting self-esteem and educational

attainment and creating a sense of belonging (Department for Communities, 2022). To achieve the aim of lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity there is a need to create a safe environment which is welcoming to all and offers more opportunities to participate and have fun (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization 2015). Inclusive of opportunities which allow children and young people to fulfil their potential through participation and performance pathways, supporting transition across the interlinking elements of sport (sporting system, inclusive sport and sport for development and behavioural change). By articulating purpose, agreeing responsibility for defined outcome indicators and coordinating existing structures the effectiveness and efficiency of the interlinking elements of sport can be maximised (Ferguson et al 2022).

The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 placed a duty on local authorities to initiate, facilitate and maintain community planning in their respective areas through localised collaborative approaches - inclusive of sport. This approach has established eleven separate community plans contextualising the needs of each council area. Therefore, any regional youth football framework should refer to these community action plans to identify regional variations and prioritise equitable actions.

3.1 Current Structure

UEFA state that players should be placed at the heart of everything member associations do (UEFA 2024). Involving everyone who wants to play football, irrespective of where, when and how they play. UEFA issued guidelines to help national associations develop and implement flexible, inclusive formats of the game to ensure that children are introduced to football in a positive environment that encourages lifelong participation. These guidelines also document how flexible formats for both younger and older people can influence player retention and participation in later life.

Against this background, the main goal is to make sure that every player has the best experience possible. According to UEFA, football can reach every corner of society; it has the potential to excite and fascinate millions of people, not just across Europe, but around the entire world. As much as UEFA and its member associations are said to be committed to the well-being of everyone involved in football, this requires regular contact with regional associations and grassroots clubs to understand realities on the

ground. The UEFA stated aim is to create and support opportunities for development at a local level to benefit existing and potential new players as well as their clubs and the wider community (UEFA 2024).

The current delivery structure of youth football in Northern Ireland involves multiple stakeholders governed in various aspects by the Irish FA, the Northern Ireland Youth Football Association (NIYFA) and the Northern Ireland Schools Football Association (NISFA).

The NIYFA affiliated regional leagues include:

- Brendan Keogh Youth League
- Carnbane Youth League
- Derry & District Youth League
- Downpatrick Youth League
- Harry Gregg Youth League
- Lisburn Invitational League
- Mid Ulster Youth League
- National League
- South Belfast Youth League
- N Down & Ards Youth Football & Futsal League
- ABC Grassroots Programme
- Foyle Games Development Centre

Other unaffiliated providers include:

- Irish FA Small Sided Games Centres (6)
- Fonacab Development League

4.0 Methods: Rapid Review

A comprehensive rapid review of research and international approaches to youth football development was conducted to facilitate the critical application of findings which will be used to inform Phase Two of the youth football review. The purpose of the rapid review was to describe and summarise the literature, presenting a robust means of balancing the rigour required with speed. The unbiased investigation of

approaches to youth football is essential not only to achieve the review aim but also to maintain the integrity of the study.

There is no one commonly accepted or validated methodology for rapid reviews, thus allowing for flexibility in approach, for this research the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute (OHRI) 8 step methodology was applied:

1. Conduct a needs assessment
2. Develop and refine the research questions
3. Develop proposal and seek approval
4. Conduct a literature search
5. Screen and select studies based on pre-agreed criteria
6. Complete a narrative synthesis of included studies
7. Produce a report
8. Follow up with end users.

The review sets out to discover international approaches and regional considerations to better understand the factors influencing youth football in Northern Ireland inclusive of structures, playing formats, rules, benefits and barriers and collaborations. This will be achieved by answering 4 questions:

1. What are the contexts of youth football strategies?
2. What are the processes used to develop youth football strategies?
3. What is the evidence base for the development of youth football strategies?
4. What are the core components and constructs of youth football for consideration?

5.0 Rapid Review Findings

This section summarises the rapid research review findings. Firstly, the children’s voice findings outline the common attitudes and beliefs of children and young people towards sport and physical activity, as a means to demonstrate why children and young people take part (and continue to take part) in sport and physical activity. This includes identification of the barriers to participation, lived experiences, as well as influencing and supporting factors. There follows a discussion on defining the purpose of and pathways across youth football. This leads to a review of physical literacy and its integration in sports development models, prior to a review of educational needs for both parents and coaches. Finally, an outline of issues related to rules, formats and structures within youth football is presented.

5.1 Current Situation

Due to current registration protocols, we are unable to ascertain figures for players outside of affiliated leagues which use the Comet registration system. These figures are estimated to be in the region of 15,000 – 20,000.

The comet system at the Irish FA is used for the registration of players in football clubs across Northern Ireland. Figure One provides a summary of the player registrations at clubs across Northern Ireland. It should be noted that not all clubs or leagues at the youngest age group use the system.

Figure One Comet Player Registrations

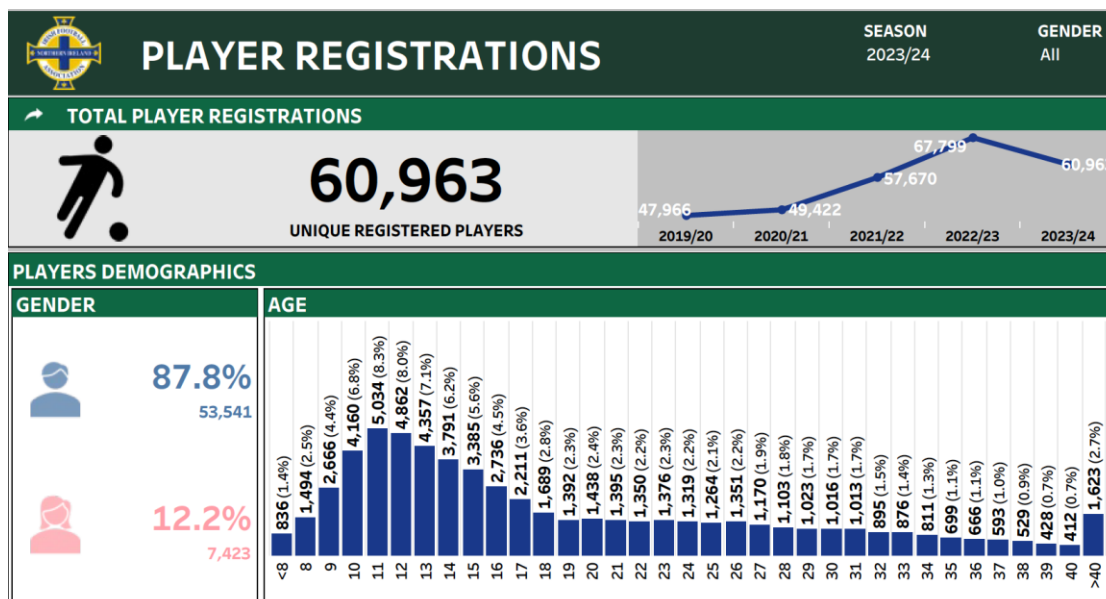


Figure One demonstrates a gradual increase in participation up to age 11 followed by a gradual drop off. This is consistent with research around the higher dropout rate coinciding with transition from primary to secondary school (Connelly 2020, McFlynn 2023). Figure One also demonstrates an annual increase in participation figures between 2019 and 2023 prior to a reduction in 2023/24. Figure Two indicates that this drop off is primarily within the adult level. With increased participation for both girls (180%) and boys (69%) in junior football year on year between 2019 and 2024. Further investigation may consider regional variations in the registration data to map regional elite player progression, as well as facilities and coach influence on registration and participation.

Figure Two player registration by Gender and Age






		REGISTRATION				
PLAYERS		LEVEL				All
		2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
		47,966	49,422 ▲3%	57,670 ▲17%	67,799 ▲18%	60,963 ▼10%
	Male	45,458 95%	46,719 95% ▲3%	53,158 92% ▲14%	60,801 90% ▲14%	53,541 88% ▼12%
	Female	2,508 5%	2,703 5% ▲8%	4,512 8% ▲67%	6,998 10% ▲55%	7,423 12% ▲6%
	Juniors	14,893 31%	17,175 35% ▲15%	23,190 40% ▲35%	29,617 44% ▲28%	30,585 50% ▲3%
	Adults	33,073 69%	32,247 65% ▼2%	34,480 60% ▲7%	38,182 56% ▲11%	30,378 50% ▼20%
	Male					
	Juniors	13,640 30%	15,732 34% ▲15%	20,638 39% ▲31%	25,246 42% ▲22%	25,456 48% ▲1%
	Adults	31,818 70%	30,987 66% ▼3%	32,520 61% ▲5%	35,555 58% ▲9%	28,085 52% ▼21%
	Female					
	Juniors	1,253 50%	1,443 53% ▲15%	2,552 57% ▲77%	4,371 62% ▲71%	5,129 69% ▲17%
	Adults	1,255 50%	1,260 47% ▲0%	1,960 43% ▲56%	2,627 38% ▲34%	2,294 31% ▼13%

Figure Three Referees, Officials and Coaches










REFEREES				
		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
		2,284	2,523	879
	Male	2,219 97%	2,455 97%	862 98%
	Female	65 3%	70 3%	17 2%
OFFICIALS				
		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
		1,010	1,078	1,105
	Male	962 95%	1,021 95%	1,044 94%
	Female	48 5%	57 5%	61 6%
COACHES & STAFF				
		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
		6,425	8,731	9,225
	Male	6,189 96%	8,347 96%	8,778 95%
	Female	236 4%	384 4%	447 5%

Figure Three demonstrates a substantial drop in the number of referees registered on the comet system between 2021 and 2024, while the number of officials has remained consistent, there has been a substantial increase in the number of coaches. The implications of falling referee numbers should be considered when making decisions on youth football formats and the allocation of referees.

Overall, the limited availability of data with regards participation in youth football restricts measurement and exploration of the current situation in youth football.

The youth football plan should consider how to:

- *Generate further objective data with regards mapping participation, performance, facilities, clubs and schools.*
- *Adopt formats which account for pressures on referees.*

5.2 Children and Young People's Voice

The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 sets out how government in Northern Ireland propose to improve the well-being of children and young people. The document notes that children and young people are experts in their own lives and wellbeing. Therefore, decision makers must consider and take into account the views of children and young people in all matters affecting them and provide appropriate opportunities for children and young people to be heard. Although, there has been progress in developing structures to mainstream children's voices in decision-making processes more work is required (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Northern Ireland).

The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA) study details the most important reasons motivating children and young people to participate in sport across Northern Ireland. The most common reasons are "to keep fit", "something to do", "the influence of parents" and "the influence of friends" (McFlynn 2023).

Research suggests that to address the sport and physical activity needs of children and young people, activities should take account of the developmental differences in age to balance fun experience, with pathway engagements and social opportunities (McCarthy et al 2008). Offering activities which are fun is fundamental to promote children and young people's positive engagement with sport and physical activity to both take part and continue to participate (Bailey et al., 2013, Carlin et al 2019). Children and young people are more likely to meaningfully participate in activity that is specific to their interests and needs (Murray 2019). The use of Youth Advisory Groups has demonstrated positive outcomes with regards to engagement in both delivery and measurement (Gallagher et al., 2024). By offering opportunities to help shape the activities, children and young people become more engaged (Ferguson et al 2018, Corr and Murtagh 2020).

Making friends and taking part in activities with friends (Bailey et al., 2013, Carlin et al 2015, Ferguson et al 2018, Carlin et al 2019) were also identified as positive influencing factors on children and young people's engagement with sport and physical activity. The social supporting role of family, role models and coaches were reported as key in motivating children and young people to take part or continue to participate in sport and physical activity. In particular, because of engagement, approachability and logistics (Bailey et al., 2013, Carlin et al., 2015).

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *Reinforcing the need to educate coaches, guardians/parents and peers to maximise their supporting role;*
- *Activities which take account of the developmental differences in age to balance fun experience, with pathway engagements and social opportunities.*

5.3 Barriers

Although the CSPPA study found football was the most popular community sport/activity for boys in 2022 in both primary (52%) and post-primary schools (36%) across Northern Ireland. The figure for girls was much lower for primary (23%) and post primary school (17%). The decrease between primary and post primary school should also be noted. It is this age band where transition occurs between primary school and post primary school that dropout rates for children and young people is at its highest (Connelly et al., 2020).

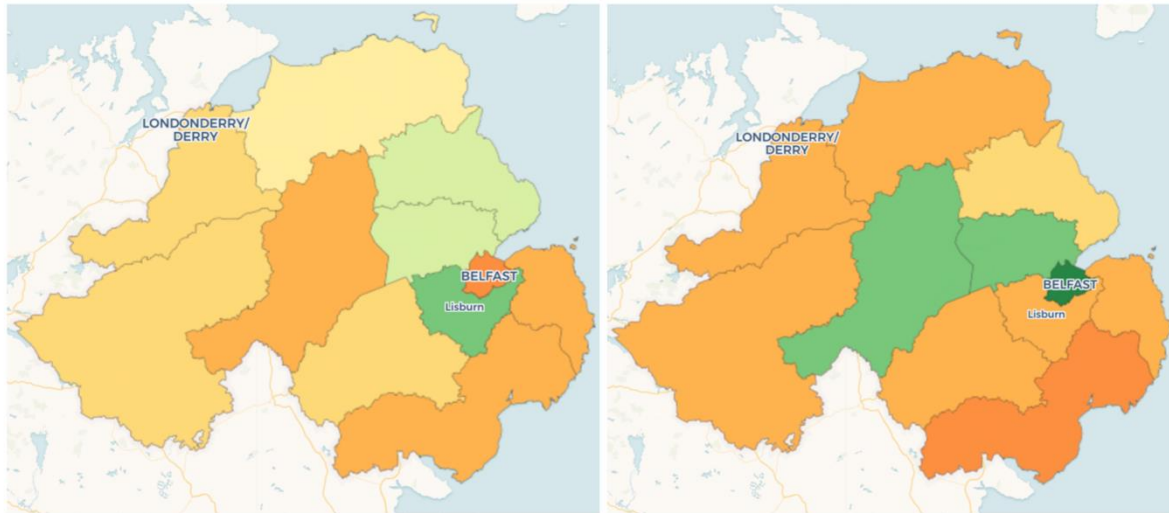
Dropping out of sport is common during school years (McFlynn et al., 2023) with time, other commitments, access, costs and loss of interest suggested by children and young people as frequent barriers restricting participation in sport and physical activity (Belton et al 2014, Carlin et al 2015, McFlynn et al., 2023).

Finding a suitable club can be a barrier to joining a club. A scoping study carried out by Irving (2019) highlighted the difficulties facing parents and guardians who wish to find a sports club for their children. This included the lack of a central database as a first point of contact, as well as limited club descriptors providing information on level, venue, culture and expectations.

With particular, reference to resources the Department for Culture, Media and Sport commissioned a grassroots facility needs analysis across the UK in 2022. The study found eight of the eleven council areas to have a deficit in supply. Figure Four provides a regional picture of the supply and demand for pitches across Northern Ireland.

Figure Four: Pitch supply and demand across Northern Ireland

(Grass provision left, Artificial provision right)



(DCMS 2020:33)

In Figure Four, green indicates sufficient supply to meet demand, while the darker the orange colour the greater the deficit in supply. Overall, Figure Four demonstrates regional inequity of both grass and artificial pitches. The right image in particular, indicating greater need for artificial pitches in the southeast region. The report suggests the total deficit in pitch capacity equates to 31 artificial pitches and approximately 97 grass pitches across Northern Ireland. The research did however, point to additional capacity within the education sector which is currently not available for community use. Indeed, when compared to Scotland and Wales, the current availability of school sports pitches for community use in Northern Ireland was thought to be more than 30% less. It should be noted that authors of the DCMS report highlighted the need for assumptions to be made in calculations due to the lack of data across Northern Ireland which may actually equate to substantially less availability of community access to sports provision within the education sector (DCMS 2022).

It should be considered that the environment in which sport participation takes place contributes to the participation rates of children and young people in sport and physical activity.

A further barrier identified by children and young people for dropping out of sport and physical activity or indeed not taking part in the first place was a lack of confidence in their skill or fundamental movement competence (Bailey et al., 2013, Sport NI 2019, Corr and Murtagh 2020). Early development activity in sport should therefore include both technical skill and fundamental movement activities based on the principles of physical literacy. These issues (confidence in technical skill and physical competence) are magnified when competition is introduced, often leading to reduced enjoyment and higher levels of drop out (Belton et al., 2014, Sport Northern Ireland, 2016). In this instance all children are different, they have different needs, desires and physical capabilities (Ferguson 2023). Thus, sport and physical activity programmes should consider how best balance competition with personal development, future potential, improvement and effort (Lundval 2015). Systems need to reflect that not everyone will want to compete at a performance level and thus promote fun aspects of football while promoting social engagement. Nevertheless, for those that do wish to progress to performance activity, balanced opportunities should be provided which expose players to appropriate performance activities.

Although previously mentioned as a supporting factor, social acceptance can also act as barriers to participation (Carlin et al 2019), reinforcing the need for a variety of approaches to suit the individual rather than a one size fits all model. It should be considered that the current structure of youth football in Northern Ireland potentially breaks friendships groups from school years groups as teams play in year of birth age groups. Negative relationships with friends and/or coaches have also been acknowledged by children and young people as reasons for dropping out of sport and physical activity (Carlin et al., 2019).

It is recommended that 'regular dialogue is held with children and young people to create an environment where it is easy for them to discuss and report issues that affect their rights' (Esson 2020:12).

The issues outlined in this section require a collaborative effort from all sectors to create a supportive environment for sport and physical activity to promote equal access to resources and opportunities (McFlynn et al., 2023).

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *The creation of a community of practice for children and young people to provide a voice to help shape the design of youth football.*
- *The introduction - in parallel – of age-related activities which balance fun sporting experiences and facilitated competition which promotes long term outcomes over winning.*
- *Ensuring equity through inclusivity and accessibility.*
- *Creating a central club finder database.*
- *Promoting opportunities for personal development.*
- *Creating environments which offer differentiated levels of challenge while promoting fun and social interactions.*
- *Ensuring a clear reporting system is in place to address issues of concern.*
- *The establishment of collaborations with other stakeholders.*
- *Offering differing levels of challenge to support children and young people progress.*
- *The facilitation of collaborative practice between player, coach and parent.*
- *Offering variety and choice of opportunities and activities to young people.*
- *The promotion of a strategy and charter related to positive social support (peers, coaches, parents).*

5.4 Purpose and System

The Sport Northern Ireland Corporate plan (2021) refers to the desire for the power of sport to be recognised and valued by all. By recognising the contribution of sport and valuing the role of sport to achieve multiple outcomes, the perception of sport and investment in sport may be greatly improved.

The Department for the Communities (2020) household survey identified that 99% of adults in Northern Ireland who had participated in sport over the last year cited they had experienced benefits as a result of participating in sport, ranging from keep fit (75%), improved physical health (73%), improved mental health (64%), enjoyment (56%), improved self-feelings (44%) and weight loss (39%).

Setting the purpose and clearly articulating priority outcomes for youth football is complex. Sport is experienced in different ways by different people (Bloyce and Smith 2010, Coulter 2007) therefore, a one size fits all approach will not work (Ferguson et al 2018). With regards to youth sport, the challenge for governing bodies is to simultaneously facilitate the achievement of performance, participation, and personal development (Côté and Hancock 2016) through defined pathways. Prior to structuring the youth football environment in Northern Ireland clarity is needed with regards to the purpose and priority outcomes which will inform the subsequent design of the system (pathways and activities). By clarifying why an organisation does what it does, those directly and indirectly involved can better understand what needs to be done and how (Sinek 2011). This clarity should then be embedded and aligned across all elements of the system through education, governance, and culture.

Youth football must place the child at the centre of the system in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), by adopting a child centred approach which explicitly recognises children and young people as rights-holders (Esson, 2020). Nevertheless, concerns have been raised regarding how the football environment can expose children and young people to emotional, physical, and financial abuse. The United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGPs) detail the role and responsibility which clubs have in respecting human rights. Esson et al., (2020) provides guidance for clubs informed through the core principles of Non-discrimination (article 2); Best interest of the child (article 3); Right to life survival and development (article 6); and right to be heard (article 12). Practically, three themes are presented moving beyond keeping children safe to empowering children through protecting, realising, and promoting their rights. At a governance level this should include the development and operationalisation of a children's rights policy, which provides clear guidance for clubs on 'roles and responsibilities, processes, and lines of communication aligned to relevant legislation (Esson et al 2020) inclusive of the player, the coach and the parent.

More broadly, the target outcome of youth football programmes will influence the design of the system. Programmes may be designed to prioritise 1. Talent development and performance pathways with early specialisation. This has been shown to yield improved results at the elite level but also comes with concerns related

to enjoyment, drop out and player welfare. 2. Physical activity and early diversification in participation to promote healthy lifestyles and support children and young people to achieve their physical activity guidelines in a fun environment or 3. Personal development which uses sport as a tool to support children and young people's development promoting life skills and values (Ericsson *et al.* 1993, Balyi and Hamilton 2004, Cote *et al.* 2011, Côté and Abernethy 2012, Bridge and Toms 2013, Ferguson *et al.* 2018, Sweeney *et al.* 2021). Thought should be given to the implications of each structure and the overall targeted outcomes to establish a clearly defined purpose.

At the elite level, football academies categorise their pathways into phases. For example, in England the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) introduced by the Premier League consists of three categories; Foundation Phase (U5-U11), Youth Development Phase (U12-U16) and Professional Development Phase (U17-U21). This is based upon Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) differentiation of age related structured priorities to meet the needs of the age groups. Consisting of sampling years (6–12 years old), specializing years (13–15 years old) and investment years (16 years and above). The sampling years aim to promote fun and enjoyment while offering the opportunity to sample a range of activities and sports. The transition to the specialising years should then involve the participant focusing on a smaller number of sports and the investment years is characterised by focus primarily on one sport in a competitive environment (Fraser-Thomas and Côté 2009). Although, the specialisation phase has been identified as vital to successfully transition players to full time careers in football (Curran 2015), it is also the age range which demonstrates the highest level of dropout (Connelly *et al.*, 2020). Consideration should be given to facilitating transition across the phases of the youth football system.

Premature professionalisation of youth sport is detrimental to the development of children and young people (Sweeney *et al.* 2021). The debate in simplistic terms could be seen as balancing deliberate practice - perceived as vital for performance improvements yet, considered less enjoyable and off putting - with other play based fun activities (Côte and Hancock 2016). Further research highlights how 'football can force unnecessary stress upon players within the foundation and youth development phases, both internally through pressure to succeed and externally from parents and support networks' (Cooper 2020:429). By specialising in one sport at a

developmentally inappropriate age through deliberate practice, the short-term benefits observed in terms of improved skill can be negated by the longer-term physical, psychological, and social disadvantages (Côté 2004, Bailey et al 2013). Rather, when children take part in a variety of sports, with focus on intrinsic motivation, deliberate play naturally happens (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003); engagement in deliberate play during the sampling years as a means to transition within the sporting system may be said to promote children's motivation and continued participation in sport (Bailey et al 2013).

Youth football administrators must be aware of barriers faced by children and young people and understand how to address these barriers which impede progression through the football system (Raya-Castellano et al 2015). This requires an ability to balance the needs of both players and coaches within an appropriate environment that best prepares youth football players for future progression (McCarthy 2010).

Collaborative working to define and align transitions between and across the participation and performance pathways should focus on engagement opportunities rather than specialisation (Sweeney et al 2021). In doing so, selection / deselection and specialisation concerns should be avoided with the priority to expose players and coaches to a range of diverse activities (Till and Baker, 2020) and future pathways.

Youth sport programmes should include a balance across early diversification, motor skill deliberate play and fun activities thus, developing intrinsic motivation, competitive spirit and lifelong participation. In doing so, engagement with youth sport can build a foundation for elite performance (if desired), participation and/or personal development (Côté and Handcock 2014).

Youth sport requires collaborative actions across a number of stakeholders (Ferguson et al 2018, Yi et al., 2020, Pouyandekia and Memari 2022, Sport Ireland 2022, Ferguson et al 2023) regardless of whether the outcome targets are related to participation, performance or personal development. When we consider the performance transition points, research suggests that talent systems within the system should have long term aims and methods; should promote coherent messages and support; should emphasise appropriate development (rather than early success) and should concentrate on individualised and ongoing development through integrated, holistic and systematic development (Martindale et al., 2007). The starting point for which is the development of a shared philosophy which articulates and promotes collaboration between relevant stakeholders (Mathorne et al 2021).

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *Adopting and implementing a child centred approach that empowers children and young people by protecting, realising, and promoting their rights.*
- *Adopting categories of development as a framework to determine appropriate coaching environments for each phase.*
- *Consideration of how to balance early diversification, motor skill deliberate play and fun activities in the design of all activities across youth football to promote lifelong involvement.*
- *Establishing a charter for parents, coaches, volunteers and players for their involvement in youth football.*
- *Exploring opportunities to integrate education which provides coaches and parents with knowledge and understanding of the use of age-related motor skill deliberate play and fun activities.*
- *Promoting opportunities for collaborative working between and across the participation and performance pathways with focus on engagement and opportunities.*
- *Providing coaches with the knowledge and understanding to adopt developmentally appropriate approaches.*
- *Defining, clarifying, and promoting the purpose and aims of the youth football system in Northern Ireland.*
- *Exposing players and coaches to a range of diverse activities and future pathways while avoiding early selection and deselection in youth football programmes.*
- *Agreeing a shared philosophy for talent development.*
- *Mapping the youth football system to better understand pathways and transition points inclusive of partners within and external to football.*
- *Building partnership approaches with key stakeholders which place the child at the centre.*

5.41 Athlete Development Models

Numerous athletic development models have emerged globally to guide youth sports development: Long Term Athlete Development (Balyi 2001), the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007), the Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence Abbott et al, 2007, Model of Talent Development in Physical Education (Bailey and Morley, 2006), Holistic Athlete Career Development (Wyllieman and Lavallee (2004)

As literature has expanded in this area it is more commonly accepted that these models acknowledge the physiological factors related to growth and maturation over early athlete specialisation (Harre, 1982; Bloom 1985, Balyi and Hamilton, 2004). Nevertheless, no singular model has been identified as the gold standard for youth athlete development, a consequence of the lack of empirical data to support these models (Varghese et al., 2022).

5.5 Physical Literacy

The concept of physical literacy underpins several athlete development models and country sports development policies (Canada, Australia, England, Ireland and Northern Ireland). Physical literacy refers to the lifelong journey individuals undertake to engage in and maintain physically active lifestyles (Belton et al., 2022). Northern Ireland government strategy has identified physical literacy as having a role to play in building active populations (Children and Young People strategy 2020). The Active Living Strategy (2022) positions physical literacy as a fundamental element of sports development and achieving lifelong involvement in sport. As a result, physical literacy should be a core element of any sport related youth plan in Northern Ireland. The Lifelong Involvement in Sport and Physical Activity (LISPA) model established in 2009 acted as a conceptual framework for sports development planning. Since then, Northern Ireland have joined a growing number of international nations by launching a national physical literacy statement. By defining physical literacy in context to support its implementation.

‘Physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding that enables a person to value and participate in physical activity throughout life’ (Sport Ireland 2022:1).

The All-Island Physical Literacy Statement (Sport Ireland 2022:1) notes that physical literacy is key to learning as well as personal growth and enjoyment derived through the development of three interconnected learning domains: 1. Cognitive (thinking); 2. Affective (Feeling): and 3. Physical (doing), which empower and enable all children to fulfil their potential. A person who is developing their physical literacy will be motivated, confident and physically competent when moving and they will know and understand movement. These skills are the foundation to lifelong involvement in any sport and should be incorporate at the core of youth sport plans in Northern Ireland.

As physical literacy develops the whole person, all three domains are essential, interdependent and equally important, therefore each one must be developed (Sport Ireland 2022:1). Incorporating physical literacy requires focus on the individual, activity and environment. The principles underpinning physical literacy involve its contribution to the holistic development of the person, inclusivity, and accessibility to all. Further recognition that one size does not fit all, and that each person is different and will follow a unique lifelong journey (Ferguson 2019). As such physical literacy develops through positive movement experiences in a variety of settings and environments and is a shared responsibility, which is influenced by positive social support. Ultimately, physical literacy flourishes in cultures that value and promote physical activity (Sport Ireland 2022:2).

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *Taking a player centred approach, which acknowledges each player is a unique individual.*
- *Focused physical literacy-based training for coaches.*
- *The promotion of parental understanding of physical literacy.*
- *Promoting the thinking, feeling and doing aspects of football through physical, technical and social skills with a focus on physical literacy.*
- *Understanding the implications and features of existing athlete development models to define a contextual model to best meet the needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland.*
- *Developing cultures that value and promote physical activity.*
-

5.6 Physical Activity

The world health organisation' stated guidance is that children and young people should participate in an average of 60 min/day of moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity across the week to gain health benefits (World health organisation 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) Global action plan on physical activity 2018–2030 (World Health Organisation 2019) saw all 194 WHO Member States agree a target of a 15% relative reduction in physical inactivity globally by 2030. Physical inactivity is the 4th leading risk factor for mortality, those people who are insufficiently physically active have a 20% to 30% increased risk of all-cause mortality (WHO 2012).

The physical activity levels of Children in Northern Ireland (NI) are amongst the lowest levels in the United Kingdom. In particular, females are less likely to achieve PA guidelines, as are children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Connelly et al., 2020). Football clubs offer an opportunity for children and young people to achieve the physical activity guidelines however, data related to levels of physical activity for children and young people in NI is limited (Connelly et al 2020).

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *Promote the physical activity benefits of sport to parents, coaches and players.*
- *Explore ways to generate validated data related to physical activity levels in youth football in Northern Ireland.*

5.7 Education

The social supporting role of family and coaches have been identified as key in motivating children and young people to take part or continue to participate in sport and physical activity (Carlin et al 2015). Nevertheless, negative relationships with family or coaches can lead to drop out (Carlin et al., 2019). Thus, providing coaches and parents/guardians with the appropriate knowledge and understanding of how to best support children and young people to enjoy sport and physical activity and fulfil their potential is vital (Burke et al., 2023) as part of a triad relationship.

Coaches, volunteers, officials, parents and children should also be provided with training on how to identify risks to children's rights and to how to report concerns (Esson 2020).

5.71 Parent / Guardian

Parental involvement is vital to support children and young people's engagement in sport and physical activity (Harwood, Knight, et al., 2019). Parents can positively influence children and young people's experiences and help them fulfil their potential when they support their children properly (Burke et al., 2023). Parents help children and young people to interpret their experiences acting as a role model for participation (Knight and Holt 2014). Nevertheless, there are a minority of parents whose negative behaviour (Burke et al., 2021) – whether intended or not – causes negative consequence associated with increased anxiety, reduced confidence, player drop out and negative parent-child relationships (Bois et al., 2009, Holt 2009). Burke et al., (2023) suggest the need for educational resources and programmes for parents to facilitate their support for children's involvement in youth sport. Previously, specific education initiatives have been successfully implemented to support parental engagement at sporting activities, resulting in positive parent-child interactions and improved experiences of sport for both parents' and children and young people (Webb et al., 2023).

5.72 Coach

Coaches play a vital role in setting the culture (Breslin et al. 2018) and establishing behaviours which influence the development of their players (Peets 2020). In considering that the vast majority of sports coaches in Northern Ireland are volunteers (Sport NI 2019), it is important to support and recognise their position. People are more likely to join a club and stay with this club if they are encouraged and supported by enthusiastic coaches in a safe and fun environment (Sport NI 2019). 'Coaches are responsible for creating developmentally appropriate learning environments that ensure children maintain active sports participation' (Bailey et al., 2013:56). Therefore, it is vital coaches have the knowledge and understanding of the behaviours and activities needed to meet the needs of children and young people.

Approximately 23% of coaches in clubs in Northern Ireland do not hold a recognised qualification (Sport NI 2019). However, research suggests that coaches prefer to learn

mostly through interacting with other coaches and a dedicated mentors (Cushion et al., 2006) in context, whereby the coach educators come to the coaches environment to support their learning (Bailey et al., 2013).

Children and young people have suggested they enjoy having a choice of activity as well as activities which they have to work things out with minimal input from the coach (Strean 2009). Previous research highlighted the importance of skill confidence and physical competence (Bailey et al., 2013, Corr and Murtagh 2020) in retaining children and young people in sport and physical activity. Similarly, as players progress their ability to see and process information and adjust their choice of action to the situation (Jordet, 2005) is dependent on decision making. At a specific level, perception and decision making are two attributes which are demonstrated by high-skilled football players prior to the execution of technical skills (Roca and Ford 2020, Roca et al., 2013). The inclusion of decision-making activity whereby, players are given ownership of their own learning has enabled children and young people to become more self-aware and thus develop their footballing skills and confidence (Mageau and Vallerand's 2003). Building on the concept of teaching Games for Understanding as an alternative to traditional, technique-led approaches (Bunker and Thorpe 1986).

Coaching sessions aimed at players aged 12 – 16 across Europe focus on different aspects of play. 'Players from Portugal and Spain spend more time in active decision-making activities compared to English and German players, whereas English players spent more time in unopposed technical-based drills and German players in improving fitness aspects of the game without the ball' (Roca and Ford 2020:263). Each area of focus is aligned to a clear strategic development and education plan. Regardless of the focus of training those responsible for education in football should offer flexible access (Breslin et al 2019) to suit the needs of the target group.

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *Supporting coaches to build confidence to deliver player development activities inclusive of social development, behaviours, physical literacy, deliberate football play and fun.*
- *The promotion of understanding with regards to age related coach behaviours through education.*
- *Promoting parental and coach understanding of the power of sport and physical activity.*
- *Supporting the incorporation of decision making into coaching in context.*
- *Promoting the importance of the player, coach, parent triad.*
- *Offering flexible access to education.*

5.8 Governance (Rules, Formats, Structures).

The adaptation of rules, formats and structures of youth football is intended to alter the sport to meet the needs of youth players as a means to aid player development (technical and tactical) (Garcia et al., 2020). Differing formats have been proposed to reduce the impact of age-related changes, generating increased participation and exposure to more age-appropriate actions (Lapresa et al 2010, Kirk and MacPhail 2002). Offering a variety of formats and creative rules can be beneficial for children and young people to learn, enhance skill acquisition and decision-making (Davids et al., 2013), improve game flow (Harrison et al 2017) and reduce incidents of heading at a younger age (Emery et al., 2017).

Castelão, et al., (2014) compared the tactical behaviour and performance between players in 3v3 and 5v5 small-sided games (SSGs) based on a sample of Under-11 youth players. During 3v3 games players performed considerably more technical actions linked to the principles of penetration and delay, while in the 5v5 games more tactical actions linked to offensive unity and balance were demonstrated. Further pilot football programmes have explored the influence of adopting the number of players (8v8 and 4v4) alongside the number of goals (two and four goals) on performance and perception when played by academy under 9 players (Fenoglio 2003). Findings suggested that the 4v4 based games on average resulted in an increase in the number of passes (135%), scoring attempts (260%), goals scored (500%), 1v1 opportunities (225%) and the number of attempted dribbles (280%). Qualitative feedback from this

same study on the use of 4v4 in contrast to 8v8 from coaches and observers identified 80% positive response to the adaptation, with 75% of players preferring the 4v4 rather than the 8v8 format. The 4v4 format was found to offer greater challenge related to shooting, dribbling and 1v1 situations, potentially at the expense of tactical and physical competitiveness. The 8v8 was found to replicate the physical and tactical elements of the 11v11 game. Both formats challenged players in different ways alternating between technical and skills development (4v4) and tactical and physical development (8v8) (Fenoglio 2003).

A further study by Garcia et al., (2020) modified the rules and reduced both pitch size and player numbers. The results demonstrated an increased number and variability in the technical–tactical actions, as well as an improved continuity in the game. It was suggested the adopted rules, format and structure improved the players (u12) and teams collective development.

Data from a range of studies demonstrates age related modification to the rules, format and structure of football can result in improved technical and tactical actions as well as increased enjoyment (Fenoglio 2003, Lapresa et al., 2020, Garcia et al., 2020). However, the low number of experimental studies makes it difficult to assess the influence of the modifications to football rules, format and structure over a sustained period towards long term outcomes. Therefore, further pilot testing is recommended to better understand the long-term outcomes of such modifications.

The youth football plan should define measurable objectives related to:

- *Assessing the influence and impact of introducing modified rules, formats and structures across youth football in Northern Ireland.*
- *Offering a variety of activities to promote children and young people's experiences.*

6.0 Measurement

Youth football in Northern Ireland is comprised of multiple stakeholders and thus requires a clear and consistent multi-stakeholder approach.

Sporting programmes should have clearly defined long term outcomes – using commonly accepted language – which articulates purpose and responsibilities. One

which builds on existing structures to support transitions (Ferguson et al., 2023). Agreeing common indicators for measuring contribution to specific outcome targets can be used as a mechanism to mobilise stakeholders and build lasting partnerships rather than see strategy neglected (Morgan et al. 2021). To realise the contribution of existing actions and the value of any new action plan, agreement should be reached on an appropriate evidence model to establish a baseline from which to measure change (Ferguson et al., 2023). The implementation of outcomes focused measurement has become more prevalent in recent years with many western governments adopting the approach. The approach based on a logic model of inputs, intervention, outputs (efficiency), outcomes (effectiveness) and impact.

Outcomes based accountability (OBA) is the measurement model developed by Friedman (2005) and adopted by the public sector in Northern Ireland for measuring efficiency, effectiveness and impact. Therefore, any measurement model in Northern Ireland should consider OBA. The model consists of two-tiers of indicators and outcomes used to understand and recognise the combined impact across the population and the contribution of each stakeholder at an organisational performance level.

The population tier commences with an initial needs analysis to promote understanding of the issues and establish defined roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders at a micro, meso and macro level. This collaborative needs analysis collects and shares data to form agreement on the definition of the issues and the desired outcomes (Ferguson et al., 2023) to demonstrate the need for change from the status quo. The process attempts to maximise the contribution of all stakeholders by creating shared ownership for the conclusions. This in turn, should lead to agreement on the indicators upon which progress will be measured. This process offering a solution to concerns raised regarding a lack of theoretical and practical acumen in the design of sports related policy which generates outcome indicators that lack validity and reliability (Adams and Harris 2014, Ferguson et al., 2023).

Historical trends and relevant statistics are then used to establish a picture to understand what influences outputs and outcomes (the '*story behind the baseline*'). This approach in turn informs the creation of detailed action plans (Friedman 2015, Ferguson et al., 2023). This approach has informed the planning of both phase one and phase two of this youth football review.

The second tier of OBA addresses individual organisations performance contribution, by distinguishing between quality and quantity using three measures – how much did we do? (efficiency), how well did we do it? (effectiveness) and is anyone better off? (impact) (Freedman 2005, Ferguson et al., 2022).

The youth football plan should consider:

- *Creating a measurement model to determine the impact of proposed actions as part of the youth review.*
- *Explore existing data to define baselines.*
- *Undertaking a mapping exercise of the youth football landscape to better understand needs, gaps, resources and function.*

7.0 Implementation

Strategy implementation is a complicated process requiring policy-makers understand and address context-related perspectives (Donaldson 2012). Well-formulated strategy will not automatically lead to success without effective implementation (Hill et al., 2017). Therefore, once the plan is agreed it is important to consider implications across six strategic processes related to 1. Operational planning (preparation and piloting), 2. Resource allocation (finances, time, data and competences), 3. Communication (top-down and bottom-up), 4. People (recruitment and training), 5. Monitoring (Formal, informal, top-down and bottom-up), 6. External Partners (Support) (Okumus, 2001).

Youth sport in Northern Ireland is reliant on partnerships, each with differing priorities while operating in a variety of context, increasing the potential for sport strategies to be interpreted and implemented in differing ways (Ferguson et al., 2023). Thus, following implementation it is important to identify potential discrepancies between strategy objectives and how these were operationalised by stakeholders (Spaaij et al., 2014) by reviewing early implementation across all stakeholders (O’Gorman 2011). By adopting an agreed measurement model, refinements can be made to the plan based on understanding success, sharing good practice and identification of unintended consequences.

At a practical level consideration should be given to options for implementation as discussion points:

- Pilot the proposed actions at a suitable subgrouping over an extended period and measure the change from current delivery.
- Pilot the proposed actions across a number of sub groupings over a defined period and measure the change from current delivery.
- Issue guidance for the implementation of the proposed actions across all sub groups.
- Regulate the compulsory implementation of the proposed actions with sanctions for non-compliance.
- Regulate the compulsory implementation of the proposed actions with support offered to ensure compliance.
- A mix of any of the points made above in the form of a staggered approach which account for strategy, contextual and operational factors.

The youth football plan should:

- *Agree an implementation process in consultation with stakeholders.*
- *Consider how to best to review the implementation of proposed actions across all stakeholders.*

8.0 Summary

This paper sets out the key findings from the rapid review of research relevant to youth football. Seven themes were identified: *Young Peoples Voice; Barriers; Purpose and System; Physical Literacy; Education; Governance: Rules, Formats and Structures; Measurement; and Implementation*. Associated recommendations have been presented for consideration aligned to each theme. This paper is designed to provide academic underpinning to inform future actions related to the development of the youth football framework in Northern Ireland. Therefore, this paper should be read in conjunction with the Irish FA youth football survey results to understand the contextual relevance of the themes raised.

Once agreement has been reached on appropriate actions, a representative sample of stakeholders should be provided with opportunities to reflect on the proposals and feedback provided to finalise the proposal through focus groups.

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