

NATIONAL REPORT



AUTHOR OF THE REPORT:
Professor Richard Parrish



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

1. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPORT SYSTEM/ARCHITECTURE

Sport in Ireland is primarily organised by the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) which are independent and autonomous organisations. NGBs organise, promote and facilitate opportunities for participation in sport and physical activity in both recreational and competitive forms. They train and deploy coaches, officials and administrators, organise representative level sport, provide opportunities and pathways leading from local sports to national and international competition, deliver critical national sports programmes in areas such as the safeguarding of children in sport, and organise and host international sporting events. They are the delivery agents for the rollout of many essential programmes and are at the forefront in the Government's policy and practice in sport and physical activity.

Ireland operates a recognition system for NGBs. This is operated by Sport Ireland, the national statutory agency for the development of sport established in 2015. Sport Ireland has the mandate to develop sport in Ireland. Its main other functions relate to participation in sport, high performance sport, anti-doping, coaching and the development of the Sport Ireland National Sports Campus. There are 66 recognised NGBs currently in Ireland. A significant number of these operate as all-Island bodies, that is they oversee sporting activities both in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The Local Sports Partnerships (LSP) network is tasked with increasing participation levels in sport and physical activity, especially among those sectors of society that are currently underrepresented in sport. A key priority of the LSPs is to continue to support a sustainable level of development within the local sport infrastructure, through support to clubs, groups, coaches and volunteers. LSPs receive government funding to carry out their activities.

Within the government, sport falls under the remit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (D/TCAGSM). In 2018, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport published the National Sports Policy 2018-2027. Sport Ireland plays a central role in operationalising the national policy. In previous years, the national sport strategies were developed by the predecessor to Sport Ireland, the Irish Sports Council.

2. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THERE A SPORT DIPLOMACY STRATEGY?

For a country with a small population of approximately 5 million, Ireland has a disproportionately large global footprint. Many millions of people born in Ireland have emigrated and this diaspora of over 70 million has played an important role promoting Ireland overseas. To advance its interests overseas, the government adopted 'Global Ireland – Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025'.

In a wide-ranging document covering a number of diplomatic actions, Global Ireland highlights sport as a means through which Irish identity can be expressed on the international stage and how the competitiveness of Irish athletes and sports teams can widen Ireland's global footprint. However, standing alone, Global Ireland falls short of being considered a sport diplomacy strategy, rather an acknowledgment that sport has a role to play in Ireland's wider public diplomacy.

Sport is highlighted in other government initiatives including a Diaspora Strategy (currently 2020-2025), an Emigrant Support Programme (ESP), in 'Global Ireland: Ireland's Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean to 2025' and in 'Global Ireland: A Strategy for the Nordic Region'. Despite the obvious interest in sport diplomacy "there is no formalised national SD strategy in Ireland at present" (national expert). Sport is also mentioned in a number of bilateral government strategies, including those with France, Germany, Wales and Scotland.

It is also the case that sport diplomacy does not explicitly feature in the National Sports Policy 2018-2027. However, the terrain covered by that policy, and in the above-stated documents, touches upon a number of areas of relevance to sport diplomacy:

- *National branding and elite performance*: The National Sports Policy places an emphasis on high performance sport with the aim of increasing the number of Irish athletes and players winning medals at major international championships. Elite level performance is frequently connected to national branding. The website of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media acknowledges that the development of high performance in Irish sports enhances "our sense of national achievement, and the image of Ireland overseas."
- *National branding and the Irish diaspora*: Due to widespread emigration, large Irish communities can be found across the world. Article 2 of the Constitution of Ireland recognises that the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage. From that principle, the government recognises that these communities play an important part in promoting Ireland abroad. In recognition of this, the government has in place a Minister of State for Overseas Development and Diaspora. It has adopted a Diaspora Strategy (currently 2020-2025) and funds actions through the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP). The role of traditional sports, such as those regulated by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), is highlighted in these documents and the National Sports Policy. The funding partnership between the GAA and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has resulted in the funding of the GAA Games Development Officers Programme in Britain and the US and a Global Games Development Fund for the rest of the world.
- *National branding, economic growth and major events*: In the first half of 2022, the Minister of State for Sport launched a public consultation on the development of a new Major International Sports Events Policy. The Minister commented that "Ireland and the government is ambitious about hosting Major International Sports Events in Ireland. These events have the potential to drive participation in sport, contribute to trade, tourism, community pride, community engagement, regional development and economic growth. These events can also drive national pride and affect both how we see ourselves as a nation and how we are viewed internationally".¹ The consultation exercise signals the government's intention to adopt a more strategic approach to the bidding for major events. At ref.6.6 in the government's Sports Action Plan 2021-2023, the government committed to "develop a policy on the hosting of international sports events that will align the efforts of state bodies, national governing bodies, local authorities and all other relevant stakeholders, to ensure Ireland can compete with the best in the world when bidding for major events."²
- *Peace and reconciliation*: The National Sports Policy also highlights the 'all island' nature of sport on the Island of Ireland. This approach sees sport as a vehicle for peace and reconciliation between communities and also as an opportunity to develop new all-island

¹Accessed at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/50b4b-public-consultation-on-the-hosting-of-major-international-sports-events-launched/>

²See Sports Action Plan 2021-2023, accessed at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/93232-sports-action-plan-2021-2023/>

competitions at elite and recreational levels and as an opportunity to make joint North/South bids in the future for international tournaments.³ To facilitate this approach, Sport Ireland works closely with its partner agency in Northern Ireland, Sport Northern Ireland.

3. WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT OF SPORT DIPLOMACY GOVERNANCE AND WHO ARE THE MAIN ACTORS?

From the above discussion, it is evident that Ireland practices sport diplomacy, but there is no formal sport diplomacy strategy in place. Consequently, there is no centralised sport diplomacy coordinating body, but sport diplomacy actors do interact on a more ad hoc and flexible basis. According to one national expert, the current structure is “decentralised” but in relation to certain specific events, such as the recent Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, “structures are put in place to help coordinate messaging and promote Irish interests.”

As explained above, sport falls within the remit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. That department operates a number of grant programmes for sport and sets national sports policy, however its role in sport diplomacy appears limited as sport diplomacy was not explicitly mentioned in that national policy.

Of more significance in terms of sport diplomacy is the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs as it funds a Diaspora Strategy (currently 2020-2025) and funds actions through the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP).

Sport Ireland is the national sports council tasked with the development of sport in Ireland. Its remit is determined by the National Sports Policy and as that policy does not explicitly discuss sport diplomacy, this area does not feature prominently in its work.

The GAA, supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, plays an important role in Irish sport diplomacy. The GAA now has over 400 clubs outside Ireland and it runs the GAA World Games.

Politicians do occasionally attend sporting events and it is common for the government to publish messages of support for Irish athletes and teams on the government website. Diplomats are generally engaged on an ad-hoc basis, especially to support the attendance of Irish athletes and travelling fans abroad at major international competitions. The level of engagement can be variable, depending on the nature of the event and the assistance sought by the relevant NGB or athletes concerned. For major events, such as the 2020 Tokyo Games, public diplomacy actions may have taken place under the auspices of local embassy officials.

According to a national expert, local authorities do not play a role in sport diplomacy, although on a local basis some activity may take place, such as through urban area twinning or similar local initiatives. A national expert expressed the view that the media only focuses on sport diplomacy issues when connected to the sporting success of an Irish athlete or team and that the private sector plays a very limited role in sport diplomacy. It seems that athletes play a limited role in formal sport diplomacy activities, beyond promoting Ireland through sporting success. No formal training is provided to athletes, who become informal natural ambassadors if they are successful.

³The ‘all island’ approach is also highlighted in the Sports Action Plan 2021-2023, accessed at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/93232-sports-action-plan-2021-2023/>

4. TOOLS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

There is no dedicated national budget for sport diplomacy, although as explained above, the government (Department of Foreign Affairs) resources sport diplomacy initiatives through the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP). Since its inception in 2004, the Emigrant Support Programme has assisted over 530 organisations in over 36 countries with grants totalling over €200 million, although not all are sports initiatives. Grants have ranged from small amounts for grass-roots groups to major allocations awarded to voluntary and community organisations operating on a large scale. Less formally, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media funds elite performance.

On the specific questions concerning the tools of sport diplomacy, the national experts consider that Dublin is relatively proactive in terms of diplomatic and political efforts to attract mega-events. However, other activities such as the Organisation of trade missions or Increased media coverage and international broadcasting remain relatively non-mobilised.

Concerning relations with less developed countries, here again, few initiatives are implemented, whether it be mentoring, exchange programmes or sport fellowship schemes and grants. Nevertheless, a national expert explained that “collaboration is ad hoc, but Bohemians football club, for example, regularly engage with Chernobyl children in providing summer experiences in Ireland.”

In terms of identifying the most important sport diplomacy activities in Ireland, it seems that although there is no formalised sport diplomacy strategy, the Irish government currently uses sport to enhance the Irish brand abroad. This is facilitated by the presence of large Irish communities abroad. Consequently, Irish sport diplomacy is viewed through a diaspora lens. One national expert stated that sport is used “to promote Ireland as a partner and destination for tourism and investment, and as a way of engaging with diaspora communities.” Recently, the government has also turned its attention to developing a major events policy (see above).

One national expert wanted to highlight the importance of the relationship between the DFA and the GAA. One of the most significant ways in which the DFA engages in sport is through support for initiatives involving Gaelic Games. The Global Games Development Fund provides funding to support the promotion of Gaelic games abroad, and has funded 450 projects since its initiation in 2013. The Fund aims to support the Irish Diaspora and strengthen Irish networks and Irish identity internationally. As well as offering a source of community and identity for our diaspora, Gaelic games abroad possess a public diplomacy dimension by offering platforms for representations of Irish culture and heritage.

5. SPORT DIPLOMACY’S FUTURE

Although Irish sport diplomacy “is in its infancy, and is not currently a major area of focus” as defined by a national expert, it is apparent that Ireland is beginning to recognise the value of sport diplomacy and it possesses the tools, such as a large Irish diaspora, to advance its interests on the world stage. However, the focus on the diaspora dimension can be quite limiting and strategic thinking could widen the scope of Irish sport diplomacy, for example to include a new focus on major events, a focus on trade and tourism opportunities and more of a focus on how sport can contribute to and be integrated into wider public diplomacy initiatives.

Reflection on the need for greater strategic thinking has begun. In October 2021, the Irish Embassy in Tokyo produced the paper, ‘DFA Sports Diplomacy: Enhancing Ireland’s Global Impact in and Through Sport’. The aim of the document was to research and analyse how the impact of Ireland’s

global footprint can be enhanced in and through sport. In seeking to advance more strategic thinking in the area of Irish sport diplomacy, the document claims that this can be effectively achieved through two interlinked and mutually reinforcing channels:

- *The use of sport as a tool for achieving Irish foreign policy goals:* sport and sporting events, both abroad and in Ireland, regularly generate organic opportunities for public diplomacy and the strengthening of bilateral political, economic, and people-to-people links. Sport is also increasingly regarded as an innovative driver and platform for policy and change, particularly in its contribution to the 2030 Agenda in areas such as human rights, gender equality, and social inclusion. Engagement in sport can therefore link across high-level DFA goals, offering opportunities to extend influence and promote values, contributing, in particular, to the achievement of Goal 4 of the DFA Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 (to advance Ireland's prosperity by extending our influence and promoting our interests internationally).
- *The international success and reputation of Irish sports:* Ireland's international profile and high level of achievement across a diverse range of sports is a major asset and provides platforms for projecting Ireland's influence and interests. A coherent 'Team Ireland' vision to support Ireland's sporting interests internationally can therefore strengthen the ability of sport to create spaces for the achievement of Ireland's high-level international goals. DFA can play a key role in this by working closely with Irish sports stakeholders to support international operations on the ground for athletes and teams, strengthen international sports governance, and assist in the bidding for and hosting of major events in Ireland.

A national expert expressed the view that a main weakness of sport diplomacy activities in Ireland is the absence of coordination. This view was echoed in the Embassy paper which stated that "there would be significant shared benefits to a more coordinated Irish Government approach to sport internationally." More strategic thinking connecting Irish sport diplomacy to wider Irish public diplomacy activities would also be mutually reinforcing.

In terms of coordination, it seems that relations between key actors would benefit from being strengthened so as to facilitate a more strategic approach to sport diplomacy in the future. In particular, closer coordination between the DFA, D/TCAGSM, Sport Ireland, NGBs and civil society actors within Ireland and abroad is recommended. It also seems that closer coordination between the DFA and its network of almost 100 diplomatic missions could be enhanced. The document made the overarching recommendation to "embed and resource an organisational structure in DFA to support coordination and coherence of the Government's international engagement in sports." The document highlighted that enhanced coordination could assist in advancing four key policy goals:

- the objectives of the Irish Government and Irish sports-governing bodies in international sports events, bidding, administration and governance;
- the promotion of political, trade, investment and tourism goals through sports and sporting events;
- the projection of our values in and through sports, including the promotion of human rights, gender equality, social inclusion and improved health outcomes;
- the strengthening of diaspora communities and people-to-people connections abroad through sports, including educational and cultural relations links.

On the question of the EU developing its own sport diplomacy strategy, one national expert identified two potential disadvantages: (1) loss of or reduction in clarity of unique national identity and (2) a focus on mainstream sports alone. Three advantages were identified (1) a clear and

dedicated policy (2) pooling of resources (3) reduces political aspect of funding coming from a specific national source.

A second national expert claimed that should the EU develop its own sport diplomacy strategy, this “would allow Member States to speak with one voice on issues that are of serious concerns to European sport. Matters such as anti-doping, integrity in sports and human rights are frequent subjects at European Union level, and promoting these interests with a collective voice could help advance their cause throughout the world.”

In terms of national good practices, a national expert stated: “I think certain soccer clubs have a very positive and progressive view of international connections that can be made. Bohemians, for example, are a small club by international standards but have long engaged with refugees, certain disadvantaged groups, etc. and made it part of their identity. The way the GAA attempts to engage with the diaspora and keep them connected to Ireland is also extremely positive and often gains positive coverage.”

6. INTERVIEWS:

- **James Hendicott**, freelance journalist.
- Members of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

UCLouvain



UNIVERSITÀ
CATTOLICA
del SACRO CUORE

ISCA
International Sport and
Culture Association



SOAS
University of London



uc3m | Universidad
Carlos III
de Madrid

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
ALMED
NUEVA ESCUELA DE NEGOCIOS,
COMUNICACIÓN E ESPECTÁCULO



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union