



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

IRISH SPORTS MONITOR 2024

SPOTLIGHT ON PARTICIPATION IN SPORT



B&A







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Executive Summary

- » Active participation in sport reached a new high in 2024, with 49% of the adult population actively participating every week. This represents a significant 6 percentage point increase since 2022 and surpasses the pre-pandemic peak of 46% recorded in 2019. This rate equates to approximately 2.09 million people participating in sport on a regular basis – an increase of roughly 330,000 people over 5 years.
- » The most popular activities remain personal exercise (18%) as well as swimming (8%), running (7%) and cycling (5%), with their rank order remaining consistent with previous years.
- » A persistent gender gap of 3 percentage points can be seen, with 50% of men and 47% of women participating.
- » Similarly, a consistent 4 percentage point gap can be seen between those identifying as LGBTQI+ (58%) and those identifying as heterosexual (62%).
- » The average time spent participating in sport increased to 4.1 hours per week, with a notable 5 percentage rise since 2022 to 25% in those playing for more than 5 hours. However, this increase is driven almost entirely by men with the time spent by women almost unchanged over this period.
- » Analysis of seasonality reveals that overall participation peaks in the summer months driven by more casual participation in public places.



Introduction

The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) is a key tool for understanding sports participation trends in people aged 16 years and older in Ireland. It gathers data by surveying individuals about their involvement in sports and physical activities within the past week. For the purposes of the ISM, 'sports participation' encompasses a broad range of physical activities undertaken for exercise, recreation, or organised sport (European Sports Charter, 2021). In addition to sports, the ISM also separately measures recreational walking, as well as active travel, specifically walking and cycling for transport.

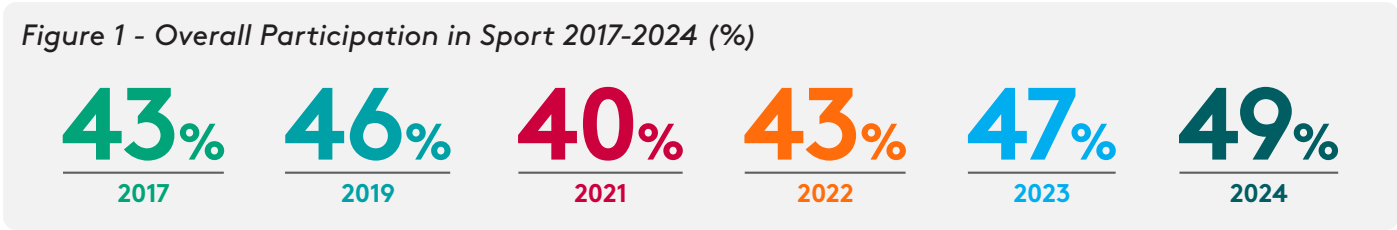
The ISM plays a vital role in tracking Ireland's progress toward achieving the objectives outlined in the National Sports Policy 2018-2027. It is used to monitor high-level goals, such as increasing the overall number of adults who regularly engage in sporting activities and working towards eliminating the gender gap that may exist in sports participation rates.

The ISM 2024 report continues to provide an assessment of sports participation in the period following the major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While previous ISM reports in 2021 and 2022 indicated notable declines in overall sports participation, 2023 saw a return to growth which has been improved upon in 2024, surpassing previous peaks in sports participation.

This report begins by examining overall sports participation in 2024, highlighting the most popular sports and activities, the locations where people participate, and the formats of participation. Where relevant and available, the report will also present comparisons with data from previous ISM reports to provide a comprehensive view of trends over time.

Overall Sports Participation Trends

Regular sports participation in 2024 reached 49%, an increase of 6 percentage points compared to 2022 (43%). Based on CSO population estimates, this means that 2.09 million people participated in sport on a regular basis, an increase of roughly 330,000 people over the past 5 years.

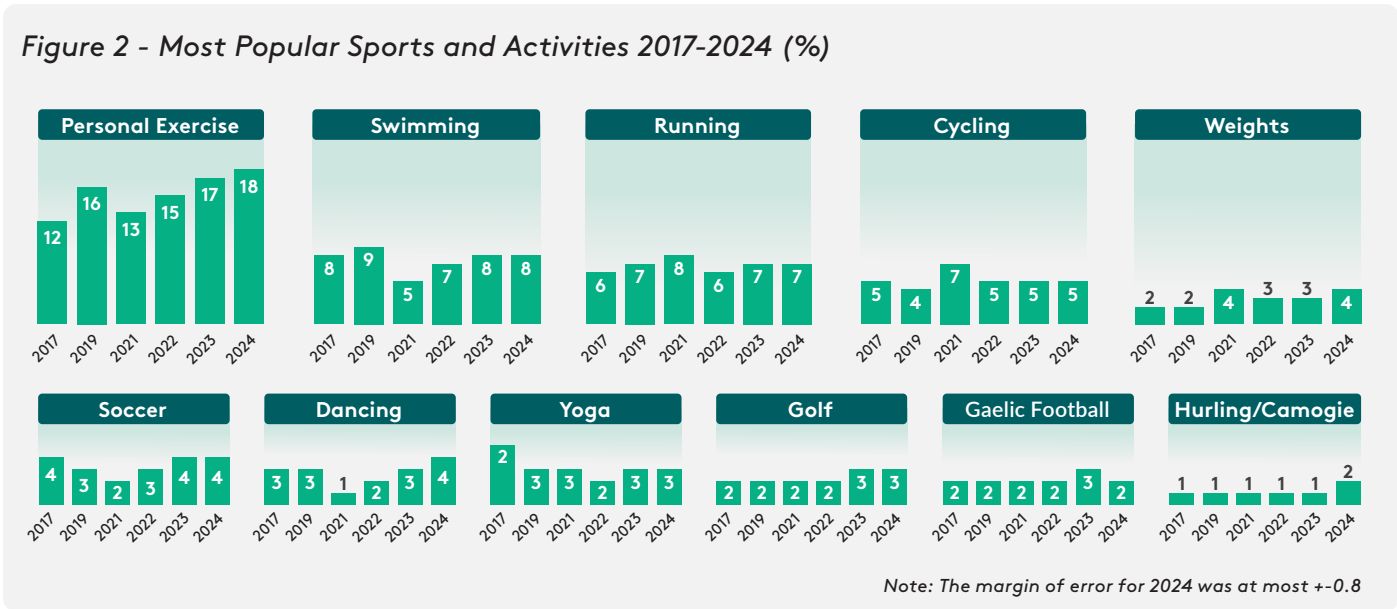


The increase in sports participation since 2022 indicates a positive upward trend, with the 2024 rate exceeding the previous peak recorded in 2023 (47%). Despite the downturn to 40% in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sporting infrastructure and policy have successfully attracted both new and returning participants, increasing overall participation rates by 9 percentage points since 2021. This growth continues the upward trend and is indicative of a positive shift in behaviour when it comes to active sport participation in Ireland.

Popular Sports and Activities

Personal exercise (18%), as well as swimming (8%), running (7%) and cycling (5%) remained the most popular sports in 2024, with their rank order remaining consistent with previous years. Participation rates rose in personal exercise, weights, and dancing compared to 2023, reflecting the overall increase in participation.

The popularity of team sports continues to grow following the removal of pandemic-era restrictions. In 2024, one in six sports participants (17%) reported participation in team sports, an increase of 3 percentage points since 2021 (14%). This is at the same level as in 2019, which due to population growth means there has been a growth in the number of people playing these sports.



Locations for Participation

Gyms and sports centres remain the most common location for sport participation (30%). This is followed by participation in public places (24%), at home (15%), and in sports clubs (14%). Among those who participated in public places, public roads (10%) and parks (7%) were the most common locations.

Table 1 - Location for Sports Participation 2019-2024 (% of Sport Participants)

	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gym/Sports centre	33	15	28	28	30 (± 1.1)
At home	11	32	19	16	15 (± 0.9)
Sports club	17	11	13	13	14 (± 0.9)
Public place (Total)	23	35	23	22	24 (± 1.0)
- Road	-	19	11	10	10 (± 0.7)
- Park/public green	-	6	5	6	7 (± 0.6)
- Beach/seaside	-	5	4	3	4 (± 0.5)
- Footpath	-	4	2	2	2 (± 0.3)
- Public green	-	2	1	1	1 (± 0.2)

Despite being the most common location, the proportion of participation taking place in gyms and sports centres (30%) remains behind 2019 levels (33%). The proportion of participants using sports clubs (14%) has been stable since 2022; however, when population growth is considered, analysis suggests there has been no significant increase or decrease in the absolute number of those using clubs compared since 2019.

Participation at home (15%) and in public places (24%) has declined since the peaks seen in 2021 (32% and 35%, respectively), likely due to participants returning to reopened sports facilities. However, a higher proportion of participants still exercised at home in 2024 than in 2019 (11%).

Formats of Sports Participation

Sports participants continued to most commonly engage in activities on their own (46%), though a growing preference for social environments is evident. While participation on one’s own remains the most popular format, it is 3 percentage points higher than in 2019 (43%).

Participation in organised training (31%) has increased in recent years, though it remains 3 percentage points lower than in 2019 (34%). Within this, in-person training (29%) has shown consistent growth since it was first measured in 2021 (16%), while remote training has declined to 2%. In 2024, the proportion of people taking part in organised competitions was 6%, a similar level to that seen in 2019. The return to pre-pandemic levels of competitive sport is encouraging and builds a stable platform for future growth.

Table 2 - Format of Sports Participation 2019-2024 (% of Sports Participants)

	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
On own	43	56	49	45	46 (± 1.2)
Casually with friends/family	25	25	24	26	25 (± 1.1)
Organised training (total)	34	22	29	31	31 (± 1.2)
- In person	-	16	26	29	29 (± 1.1)
- Remote	-	6	3	2	2 (± 0.3)
Organised competition	7	3	5	7	6 (± 0.6)
Some other way	1	1	2	-	1 (± 0.2)

Percentages sum to greater than 100% as participants may have played sport in multiple contexts over the previous 7 days (e.g. training and match).

Engagement: Frequency, Duration, and Intensity

The average frequency of sports participation remained unchanged since 2022, at 2.6 times per week. However, sports participants spent an average of 4.1 hours per week participating in sport, marking an increase from 2022 (3.7 hours) and 2023 (3.9 hours).

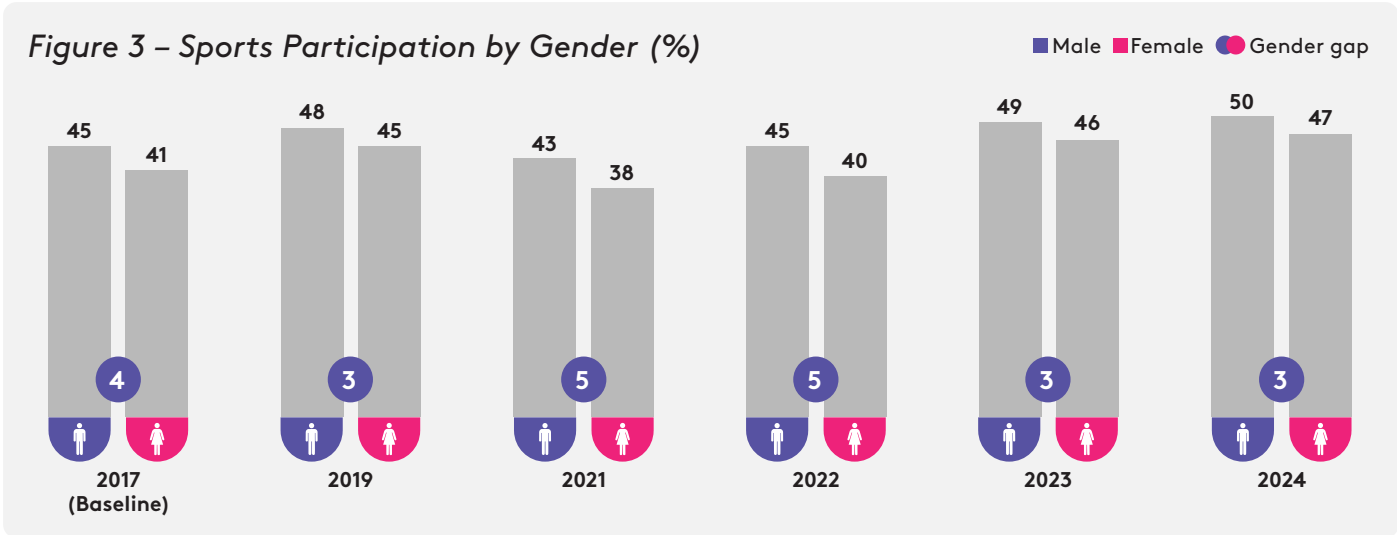
This increase is driven by a growing proportion of participants engaging in more intensive activity. The proportion of participants who played sport for between 5 to 8 hours (16%) increased by 3 percentage points since 2022, and those who participated for more than 8 hours (10%) increased by 2 percentage points. These trends indicate a growing shift towards more intensive engagement among active individuals.

Table 3 - Time Spent Participating in Sport per Week (% of Sports Participants)

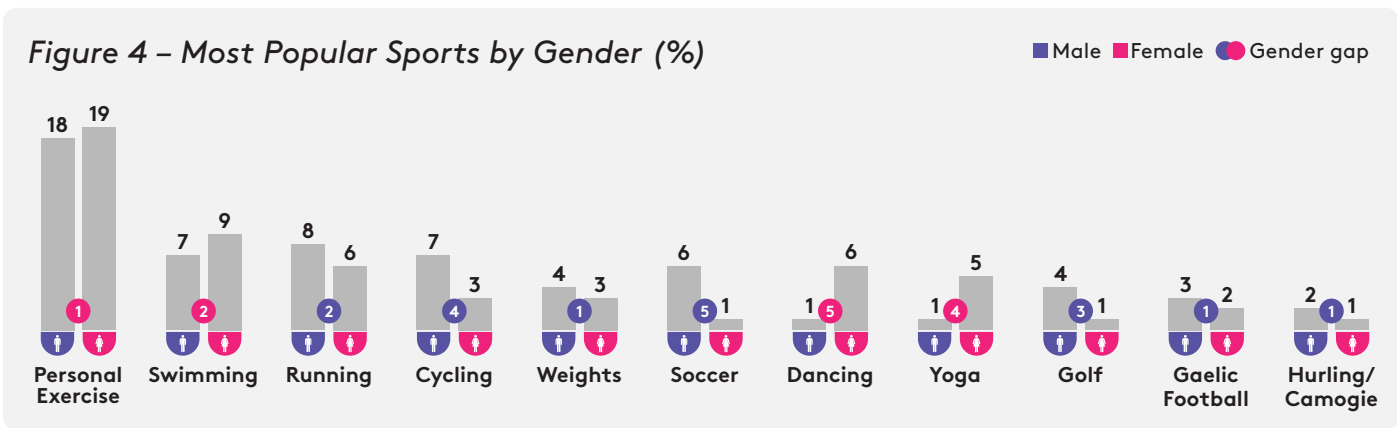
	2022 (Hours)	2023 (Hours)	2024 (Hours)
Up to 30 minutes	5	4	4
31 to 60 minutes	15	13	14
Between 1 to 1.5 hours	10	9	9
Between 1.5 to 2 hours	12	12	12
Between 2 to 3 hours	17	17	15
Between 3 to 5 hours	19	20	19
Between 5 to 8 hours	13	15	16
More than 8 hours	8	8	10

The Gender Gap in Sports Participation

Sports participation among both men and women continued to reach new highs in 2024, with rates of 50% and 47% respectively. However, the gender gap in sports participation remained at 3 percentage points, mirroring the level observed in 2023.



Personal exercise, swimming, and running were the top three sports for both genders. Although some differences exist between the genders with 7% of men cycling regularly (compared to 3% of women), and 6% of women participating in dancing (compared to 1% of men).



Participation in team sports like soccer remains significantly higher for men (6%) than for women (1%). Nearly two in five men (39%) participated in sport at a vigorous level of intensity, compared to over one-third of women (36%), an increase for both groups since 2022.

Also notable are differences in the length of time spent playing sport. Men who play sport do so for longer each week, playing for an average of 5 hours each week, compared to 3.2 hours for women. This is likely reflective of the types of sports played, with men more likely to engage in time-intensive activities such as golf.

This gap has widened since 2022, with men playing sport for 38 minutes longer each week on average, compared to only an additional 6 minutes for women.

The LGBTQI+ Gap in Sports Participation¹

LGBTQI+ sports participation has grown by 9 percentage points since 2021, from 49% to 58%. However, a consistent 4 percent gap remains in 2024 compared to heterosexual participants (62%).

The nature of participation also differs between both groups, with LGBTQI+ individuals more likely to engage in personal exercise (28%) and dancing (9%), but less likely to participate in running (7%) as well as certain team sports (soccer: 3%, Gaelic football: 1%, and hurling/camogie: 1%). Overall, 7% of LGBTQI+ individuals play a team sport, compared with 16% of those identifying as heterosexual. Both groups show equal levels of participation in sports typically played on an individual basis, with 55% in both cases playing these types of sport.

Figure 5 – Sports Participation by LGBTQI+ v. Heterosexual - 2019-2024 (%)

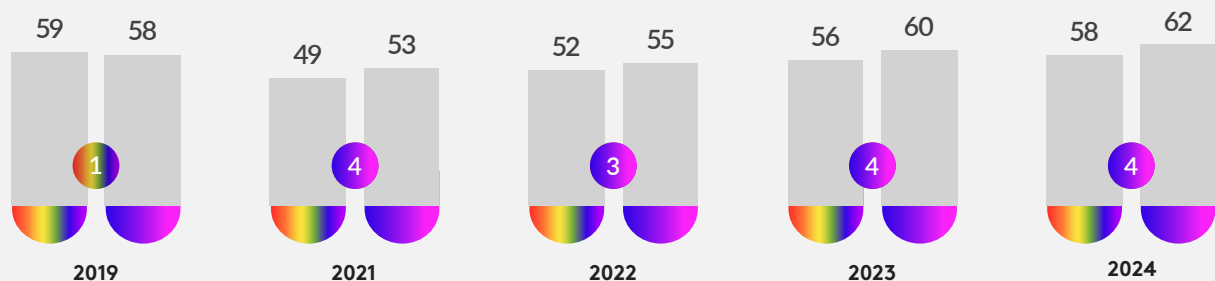
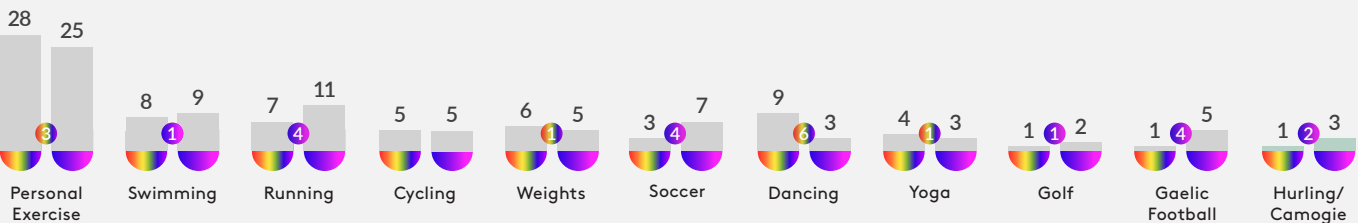
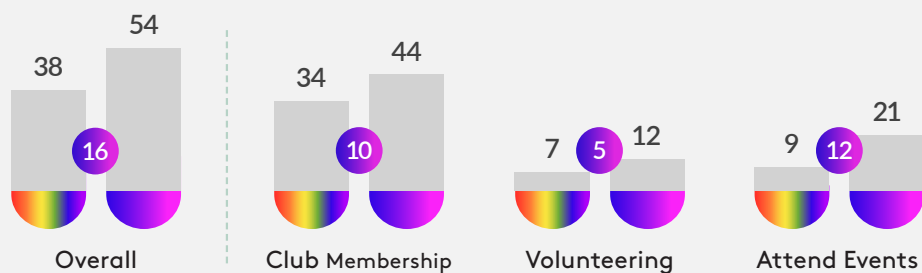


Figure 6 – Most Popular Sports by LGBTQI+ v. Heterosexual - 2024 (%)



In terms of social participation, a more significant 16 percent gap exists in overall social participation (LGBTQI+: 38%, Heterosexual: 54%). The rates of club membership (34% and 44% respectively), volunteering (7% and 12% respectively) and event attendance (9% and 21% respectively) are all lower among LGBTQI+ respondents, suggesting reduced social integration and challenges in broader inclusion in sport settings.

Figure 7 – Social Participation by LGBTQI+ v. Heterosexual - 2024 (%)



¹ For the purposes of this analysis, only those aged under 45 were included.

The Impact of Seasonality on Participation

Analysis of participation across 2024 reveals distinct seasonal patterns. Overall participation peaked in summer and autumn (50% and 51%, respectively) and was lowest in winter and spring (46% and 47%, respectively).

While most sports do not see distinct seasonal variation, some differences can be observed in the ways in which sports are played. In the summer there is an uplift in the proportion (28%) playing sport casually with friends and family, compared to 22% participating in sport in this way during the spring. In contrast, there is a decline in in-person training during the summer months (25%), compared to 30% or 31% during the other seasons.

Related to this, there is also a slight uplift in sports being played in public places during the summer months according for 25% of activities during this time. These are likely reflective of broader changes in behaviours during the summer months, and that many organised team sports may not be taking place during this time.

Table 4 - Seasonal¹ Participation by Selected Sports (%)

	Spring (Mar-May)	Summer (Jun-Aug)	Autumn (Sept-Nov)	Winter (Dec-Feb)	Total
Personal exercise	17	19	18	18	18
Swimming	7	10	8	7	8
Running	7	7	7	8	7
Cycling	4	6	5	4	5
Weights	4	4	4	3	4
Soccer	3	3	4	4	4
Dancing	3	3	4	4	4
Yoga	3	2	3	3	3
Golf	3	3	3	2	3
Gaelic Football	2	3	2	2	2
Hurling/Camogie	1	2	2	1	2

¹ For analysis purposes, the seasons align with those defined by Met Eireann <https://www.met.ie/meteorological-spring-begins-wednesday-1st-march-2023>. Winter refers to the winter months during 2024 (i.e. January 2024, February 2024 and December 2024)

Table 5 - Location for Sports Participation 2024 – Seasonal (%)

	Spring (Mar-May)	Summer (Jun-Aug)	Autumn (Sept-Nov)	Winter (Dec-Feb)	Total
Gym/Sports	31	30	28	31	30
At home	17	14	15	14	15
Sports club	14	14	14	15	14
Public place	21	25	22	23	24
- Road	9	11	10	10	10
- Park/public	7	7	6	7	7
- Beach/seaside	3	5	4	3	4
- Footpath	2	2	2	3	2
- Public green	1	1	1	1	1

Table 6 - Format of Sports Participation 2024 – Seasonal (%)

	Spring (Mar-May)	Summer (Jun-Aug)	Autumn (Sept-Nov)	Winter (Dec-Feb)	Total
On own	46	46	45	44	46
Casually with friends/family	22	28	26	25	25
Organised training (total)	14	14	14	15	31
- In person	29	25	30	31	29
- Remote	2	2	3	2	2
Organised competition	6	7	6	5	6
Some other way	1	1	1	1	1

Policy Implications

The findings from the 2024 Irish Sports Monitor present a number of policy implications, highlighting both significant opportunities to build on recent growth and persistent challenges that require focused intervention.

- » The most significant opportunity lies in capitalising on the current momentum. With participation at an all-time high, there is a clear appetite for sport and physical activity. Policy should now focus on retention, ensuring that the hundreds of thousands of new and returning participants remain engaged for the long term. This could involve promoting the growing intensity of engagement and supporting pathways from casual participation to more structured sport.
- » A primary challenge is the need to address the enduring participation gaps across key demographics. The 3-percentage point gender gap remains static despite overall growth in sports participation. This suggests that broad, universal policies may not be sufficient. A continued focus is required on targeted initiatives designed to remove barriers and increase engagement specifically for women. This goes beyond simply increasing the numbers of women that play sport but also seeking to eliminate the difference in the time spent playing sport.
- » A similar challenge exists in respect of those identifying at LGBTQI+. A consistent 4-percentage point gap when compared to those identifying as heterosexual requires continued focus, with particular efforts needed to address the difference in participation in team sports.
- » Furthermore, the data reveals a fundamental shift in where people participate. While facility-based participation is recovering, they have not returned to pre-pandemic levels in proportionate terms, and at-home participation remains elevated. This presents a challenge to traditional models but also an opportunity. Policy should support a hybrid approach, ensuring the sustainability of clubs and leisure centres while also providing resources and encouragement for the growing number of people who favour individual, flexible, and home-based activities.
- » Finally, the clear seasonal trends in activity choice offer a key insight for strategic promotion. Targeted campaigns that align with these preferences—promoting indoor activities like yoga and weights during winter months, and outdoor sports like cycling and swimming in the summer—could help smooth out the small seasonal dips in overall participation and maintain engagement year-round.

By addressing these challenges and capitalising on these opportunities, it is possible to build on the current positive trends, foster a more inclusive and resilient sporting landscape, and solidify the role of sport in the lives of even more people across Ireland.

References

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