

Sport Ireland Maternity Policy for High Performance Athletes

Holding Policy

Updated September 2026

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Sport Ireland is currently reviewing its maternity policy for high performance athletes that was launched in 2020. Whilst this process is ongoing, the current policy remains in effect. However, changes have been made to the document to reflect the current delivery of the policy (highlighted below).

Athletes and NGBs can expect a revised policy by quarter 1 of 2027. In the meantime, if there are any questions arising, please contact, in confidence, Niamh O'Sullivan, Director of High Performance, nosullivan@sportireland.ie.

Introduction

The philosophy of Sport Ireland's High Performance Strategy 2021-2032 is that our athletes and the people who support them are at the heart of everything we do. Sport Ireland places an emphasis on providing comprehensive support to athletes and ensuring that their experience of the system is positive beyond their sporting involvement.

During the development of Sport Ireland's High Performance Strategy, athlete support was highlighted as a key area to advance within the high performance system. The strategy identifies the need to provide supports throughout key points of an athlete's career. Sport Ireland recognises that this includes female athletes who wish to have children and continue to compete in their sport following the birth of their child. Together with the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs), Sport Ireland is committed to providing a safe and inclusive environment for all athletes.

Our Principles

In expressing the following principles, we will aim to develop a more supportive performance system for our female athletes.

- It is understood and accepted that athletes may wish to have a child during their athletic career
- We recognise that the needs of male and female athletes within performance sport can differ
- Performance plans for athletes during and after pregnancy should be tailored and flexible to reflect the differing needs of each athlete

- Athletes should feel supported throughout their pregnancy and facilitated in their return to sport
- Collaboration and communication are central to the functioning of any support programme between the athlete, their NGB, and Sport Ireland

Sport Ireland will demonstrate its commitment to these principles through the International Carding Scheme. In 2020 the International Carding Scheme will see the introduction of a **12-month** guarantee of funding to an athlete who becomes pregnant.

In practice, this commitment will operate in two stages:

Stage 1 → The athlete will continue to receive Carding as normal up until the birth of her child. In line with the notification process outlined in *Conditions 1.3*, the commencement of this stage is considered to begin at the end of the first trimester of pregnancy.

Stage 2 → Following the birth of the athlete's child, she is guaranteed to receive Carding for six consecutive months. This is regardless of the award period i.e. if the six months' overlaps two years.

Conditions

1.1 Sport Ireland is committed to the 12-month guarantee outlined above. Notwithstanding this, it is important to note that athletes in receipt of funding under the International Carding Scheme are not employees of Sport Ireland or their NGB. Athletes should inform themselves of the supports which are available to them through their employer or other agency.

1.2 A commitment of funding by Sport Ireland is provided on the basis that the athlete intends to return to competition at an appropriate time following the birth of her child. Any Carded athlete who does not intend to return to competition following the birth of her child is welcome to engage with their NGB and Sport Ireland to explore supports in their transition.

1.3 To protect the athlete and her unborn child, the athlete should follow a process of notifying the relevant personnel. These are the individuals directly involved in supporting the athlete's performance programme and are considered to be within the athlete's confidentiality net.

The notification process detailed below shall be followed by the athlete at the end of the first trimester, or earlier if she chooses. All personnel identified will respect the athlete's right to confidentiality.

- The athlete shall notify their Performance Director; Personal Coach; and the Sport Ireland Institute Head of Medicine
- The athlete's Performance Director shall notify the Sport Ireland Director of High Performance
- The Sport Ireland Institute Head of Medicine shall notify the relevant Sport Ireland Institute Service Providers

As the athlete sees fit, they may notify any other individuals not identified above who are considered part of their support team.

1.4 **Change:** The athlete, their coach, Performance Director and MDT shall agree an appropriate training and competition programme that would timetable and plot the return of the athlete after childbirth to full competitive level.

1.5 **Change:** Athletes must have their own independent medical advice and care in place in relation to their pregnancy generally. The support services of the Sport Ireland Institute do not replace specialist maternity care and the athlete is responsible for ensuring this is in place in the first instance.

1.6 **Change:** At the end of the six-month period following childbirth, the Performance Director will undertake a review to assess the commitment and progress of the athlete against the agreed targets (evidence of such review to be documented and shared with Sport Ireland). Depending on the outcome of this review, the NGB, in consultation with Sport Ireland, will have discretion to continue or withdraw funding.

1.7 Any decision to continue funding after the six-month period following childbirth will be budget dependent and may extend to the remainder of the Carding year i.e. December 31st. In the instance where funding will cease at the conclusion of the six-month period post-childbirth, notice of this decision to the athlete is expected within two weeks of the Performance Director's review.

Implementation

To support these guidelines, a **policy template** has been developed by the Sport Ireland Women in Sport Programme. NGBs are expected to develop their own sport specific policy which is informed by elements of this template.

The principles and conditions outlined in this document are expected to be adopted by all sports which are part of the International Carding Scheme. NGBs who run their own Carding Scheme (Transition Sports) are expected to adopt the guidelines from 2020 with the development of a sport specific policy expected by 2021. NGBs who do not run their own Carding Scheme (Non-Transition Sports) are expected to complete this policy development process in a reasonable timeframe within the Paris cycle, 2021-2024.

Athletes who are part of the International Carding Scheme in a non-transition sport will be supported to the level outlined in these guidelines provided that both the athlete and NGB demonstrate their adherence to the conditions detailed. Sport Ireland will consider this on a case by case basis.

Sports which are not included on the International Carding Scheme but receive Sport Ireland High Performance Programme Funding are encouraged to consider the *Maternity Guidelines* and its application to their sport. Sport Ireland welcomes engagement where there is an opportunity to advance these guidelines to include female athletes within these NGBs.

NGBs are requested to engage with Sport Ireland in the development of their own maternity policy. Sport Ireland will provide guidance in the development process and monitor its implementation within an NGB.

These guidelines are subject to change as part of Sport Ireland's continued monitoring and review process. Any such change will be communicated to all High Performance NGBs.