



Swim Ireland

Louth County Council

16 December 2020

To Whom it May Concern

This submission has been prepared by Swim Ireland, in response to the public notice seeking submissions on the Draft Development Plan for Louth. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discourse, and inform the breadth of activity, sustainability, and delivery of the Development Plan from the view of a National Governing Body (NGB) of Sport.

#### OVERVIEW OF SWIM IRELAND

Swim Ireland is the National Governing Body (NGB) for Swimming, Water Polo, Diving and Synchronised Swimming across the 32 counties of Ireland, recognised as such by the Department of Sport through Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. Swim Ireland is also recognised at World level by [FINA](#), and at European level by [LEN](#). With a membership of over 19,000 we have a network of 163 Clubs across every county in Ireland. Our remit as a Governing Body is to increase participation, run the competitive aspect of our sport and to provide a framework for regulation. One of our key strategic goals, outlined in our Strategic Plan 2017-2021 is simply to 'Get Ireland Swimming'.

Policy Objective SC 3 in the Draft Development Plan references supporting the objectives of public health policy including Healthy Ireland and the National Physical Activity Plan. Sport NGBs, working with Local Sports Partnerships are the delivery agents for such policy and in particular National Sports Policy and the National Physical Activity Plan. We feel that as a leading NGB we are well placed to contribute to this draft development plan and should be viewed as a major stakeholder in the process.

#### SUBMISSION ON LOUTH COUNTY COUNCIL DRAFT DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Swimming is an integral part of Irish society, its impact reaching beyond the sport itself. The Healthy Ireland (HI) Obesity Policy and Action Plan takes an evidence-based approach to tackling obesity and there is a strong body of research supporting the importance of swimming as a life-long activity.

We note that there is no reference to swimming or the provision of swimming pools in the Draft Plan and would suggest that consideration be made to its inclusion for reasons that we will set out within this submission. We further advocate for a partnership approach between the local authority, private sector pools, swimming and water polo clubs and Swim Ireland.

We make reference to Goal 4 of the **Healthy Ireland for Louth Plan** which is to “*Increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life*”.



Taking an evidence-based approach, research consistently points to the importance of swimming. The National Physical Activity Plan, published in 2016, includes an action to develop **Get Ireland Swimming**, Cycling and Running initiatives. Furthermore, National Sports Policy (NSP), published in 2017, called for the prioritisation of swimming, cycling, and running, referencing that **these sports have the greatest potential for generating higher levels of active participation over the full life course** a fact that we believe warrants consideration in any development plan. Swimming is also a fundamental life skill.

We note that Policy Objective SC20 is “*to support and facilitate the provision, improvement and expansion of sports and recreational activities*”. We would ask that consideration be given to the provision of public swimming pools and would suggest that the **Development Plan would include a commitment to review swimming pool provision within the county and invest in the development of infrastructure (indoor and outdoor) to cater for the demand of a growing population**. There is evidence to suggest that swimming and water polo are not well catered for currently in Louth and population growth will exacerbate the problem. We are concerned that, whilst cycling and running are, rightly, referenced within the Plan there is no mention of swimming. We understand that swimming is less readily catered than cycling and running, however we suggest that given the importance placed on the sport within the National Physical Activity Plan and National Sports Policy, it warrants special mention.

As referenced above, the fundamental life skill should also be considered. Water Safety Ireland statistics show that there are an average of 120 drownings in Ireland every year and the main pursuits that account for those tragedies are bathing, boating, walking and fishing.



**The most effective lifebuoy is an ability to swim.**

## NATIONAL SWIMMING STRATEGY

You may be aware that National Sports Policy calls for the development of a **National Swimming Strategy** and commits to a timeline whereby the strategy will be developed within the lifetime of this Development Plan. The development of the Strategy may well provide some of the answers to whether there is adequate provision in the Region. Without the data, industry information and a strategic approach, it is difficult to answer, but we would suggest that swimming does need to be specifically called out in the plan.

Outside of the safety and health considerations swimming is consistently shown to be the second most popular sport behind personal exercise.



Irish Sports Monitor 2019 shows that participation in swimming is 9% amongst adults and remains the second most popular participation sport behind personal exercise. This equates to almost **300,000** people

45	Develop a physical activity for health culture in Ireland through the development of new Get Ireland Running, Get Ireland Cycling, Get Ireland Swimming initiatives	SI	Athletics Ireland, Cycling Ireland, DTIS, HSE, Ireland Active, IAS, LSPS, Swim Ireland	2020
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swimming regularly. The lack of reference in the plan to a sport that is so popular is a missed opportunity. Swimming forms a critical part of the sports and fitness industry in Ireland which employs 9,500 people across the country. The Regional Strategic Economic Strategy highlights the importance of the physical and social environment and its impact on the physical and mental health and well-being of people. The Louth Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) commits to providing environments and conditions that support healthy, self-directed activity.



**Swimming pool provision needs specific attention.**

## OPEN WATER

Reference is made in Section 4.7 of the Draft Plan to outdoor recreational spaces and facilities as being essential for the health and well-being of people living in County Louth. Swimming is a readily accessible sport in the context of coastal recreation. It is a gateway sport for many other aquatic activities and Open Water Swimming is open to all, regardless of social or economic status. Over the course of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we have seen an explosion of popularity for Open Water Swimming. Swim Ireland considers that the Development Plan should consider what specific supports can be put in place to encourage participation in Open Water Swimming in Louth.

The popularity in Open Water Swimming is evidenced internationally and most recently in a comprehensive study undertaken by Swim England (The Value of Swimming, 2019) which showed that 7.5 million people are swimming outdoors regularly. Extrapolating this data to an Irish context would mean that over 200,000 people in Ireland are swimming outdoors and underlines the importance of the sport as a recreational activity to Irish coastal communities and points to an untapped tourism potential.

The Open Water Swimming season in Ireland runs from 1 June to 15 September each year. A lot of Open Water Swimming takes place casually or in loose social groups. As an NGB we see our role, in respect of these groups, is to provide opportunities for participation and to advocate on behalf of the communities of swimmers to ensure that the environmental standards are such that they can swim safely.



Club based Open Water Swimming under the remit of Swim Ireland has been growing exponentially in recent years. In 2019 there were 32 races on the Leinster calendar alone with one of the Blue-Ribbon events, the Dun Laoghaire Harbour Swim, attracting just over 500 adult swimmers and 105 children. Leinster Open Sea Clubs received over 9,000 entries for races over the course of 2019, highlighting evidence of the popularity of Open Water Swimming. We also see this evidenced in other sports such as Triathlon whose membership has grown to 19,000 in 2019.

We would suggest that there is much untapped potential in Louth and the pristine coastline referenced could be developed by the addition of facilities such as changing huts, buoys etc at a very low cost allowing the area to be seen as a tourist destination for Open Water swimmers, domestic and international.

In conclusion we underline our commitment to working with Louth LSP and Louth County Council in any way that we can, and hope that we will see consideration of the provision of infrastructure that supports the development of the aquatics in Louth as a matter of priority for the following reasons:

- Swimming is a key life-skill of fundamental importance for an island nation
- There is a wealth of research pointing to the specific health benefits of swimming and it is one of the only sports that is truly suited to life-long participation.
- Research tells us that of all sporting activities, **swimming is best able to retain and attract participants over the life course.**
- Swimming is the second most popular activity taken up as a child and still participated in as an adult
- It is the most popular sporting activity take up as an adult
- Of the popular children's sporting activities swimming suffers the least drop off in participation during the volatile early adult years (18 – 22) – (Irish Sports Monitor 2015)
- Swimming is the most popular sport across the 'challenging areas of gender, age and disability gradients'
- Central Statistics Office forecasts suggest that the population of 65+ year olds will account for over 16% of the total population by 2026 compared to the current 13%. Our ageing population demographic suggests that we should prioritise sports that will best facilitate physical activity among older adults.
- Research in Ireland and internationally consistently points to the popularity of swimming. Swimming is not just one of the most popular sports for adults in Ireland (9% of adults aged 16+ participated at least once a week equivalent to almost **300,000** adults regularly swimming), it is the most popular activity among **older** adults, an attribute that is particularly important given Ireland's ageing demography already referenced above.



Swim Ireland

- A myriad of unique health benefits are associated with swimming including significantly reduced risk for all-cause mortality (28%) and cardio vascular disease (41%).
- As a low load bearing sporting activity swimming has particular appeal for individuals who are overweight or have a long-term illness / disability who might otherwise not engage in any sport or physical activity.
- For the vast majority of swimmers, it is the only sporting activity (apart from recreational walking) which they undertake. This is particularly so in the case of **women** (a particular target of sports policy). In 2015, 5.6% of the 8.6% of women who swam did not take part in any other sporting activity. This means that, for over 1 in 20 women swimming represents their only regular means of engaging in some health enhancing physical activity (excluding recreational walking). ISM 2015. **It is also one of the few sports whereby the participation by women is as high if not higher than men.**
- Amongst adults with severely limited disability, a greater proportion of them take part in swimming than in all team sports combined and that there is **no significant difference in participation rates in swimming between those with no disability and those with a disability**
- Swimming forms a critical part of the €230m sports and fitness industry in Ireland which employs 9,500 people across the country

Kind Regards

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Mary McMorrow