



Evaluation of  
**Girls Active Programme**  
2003-2005 Report



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## Abbreviations

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>DSP:</b>          | Donegal Sports Partnership                      |
| <b>Girls Active:</b> | The Girls Active Programme                      |
| <b>HSE West:</b>     | Health Service Executive West                   |
| <b>ISC:</b>          | Irish Sports Council                            |
| <b>LSPs:</b>         | Local Sports Partnerships                       |
| <b>NWHB:</b>         | North Western Health Board                      |
| <b>PE class:</b>     | Physical Education class                        |
| <b>SPHE:</b>         | Social, Personal and Health Education Programme |
| <b>SSRP:</b>         | Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership          |
| <b>YSW:</b>          | Youth Sport West                                |

# Executive Summary

GirlsActive is a physical activity programme targeting teenage girls in schools in the northwest region of Ireland. It is a joint initiative between the Health Service Executive West, Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership, Donegal Sports Partnership and Youth Sport West. The programme is designed to increase the number of teenage girls involved in long-term regular physical activity through developing more supportive environments in schools. During the first two phases of the programme, 2003/4 and 2004/5, a total of 19 schools participated with 239 girls taking part in the initial year and 330 in the following year. Characteristics of the programme include consulting with participating girls, providing non-traditional and non-competitive activities such as Tai Chi or dancing on an extra-curricular basis, utilising instructors external to the school and explicitly linking Girls Active to the Social, Personal and Health Education Programme.

This report presents an evaluation of the first two years of the programme based on a questionnaire survey of participating girls and on in depth case studies of three participating schools. Sixty percent of participating girls from 18 out of the 19 schools taking part in the second phase of the programme responded to the questionnaire. For the case studies, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the principal and the Girls Active co-ordinator in each of the three schools. In addition, focus group discussions were carried out in each school with a group of girls who had participated during 2004/5.

The findings indicate that the Girls Active programme has increased the number of girls taking part in physical activity. It has achieved this by targeting the programme at non-sporty girls who otherwise take part in little physical activity and also by encouraging participating girls to increase their activity levels outside of the programme itself. The evidence presented suggests that Girls Active has raised the total physical activity levels of participants, especially those who were initially least active, and has increased participation rates in school PE.

Most of those who took part in the programme were in senior cycle although this varied a lot across schools. The girls enjoyed the physical activities undertaken and especially valued the health and fun aspects of being involved. They identified the main barriers to further participation as a lack of time and of available facilities. In general, they expressed a high level of satisfaction with the operation of the programme especially in relation to the organisation of the sessions, the involvement of the school co-ordinators and the quality of the tutors. While the vast majority of girls had a say in choosing the activities for Girls Active, a minority contributed to organising the sessions due to the logistics involved.

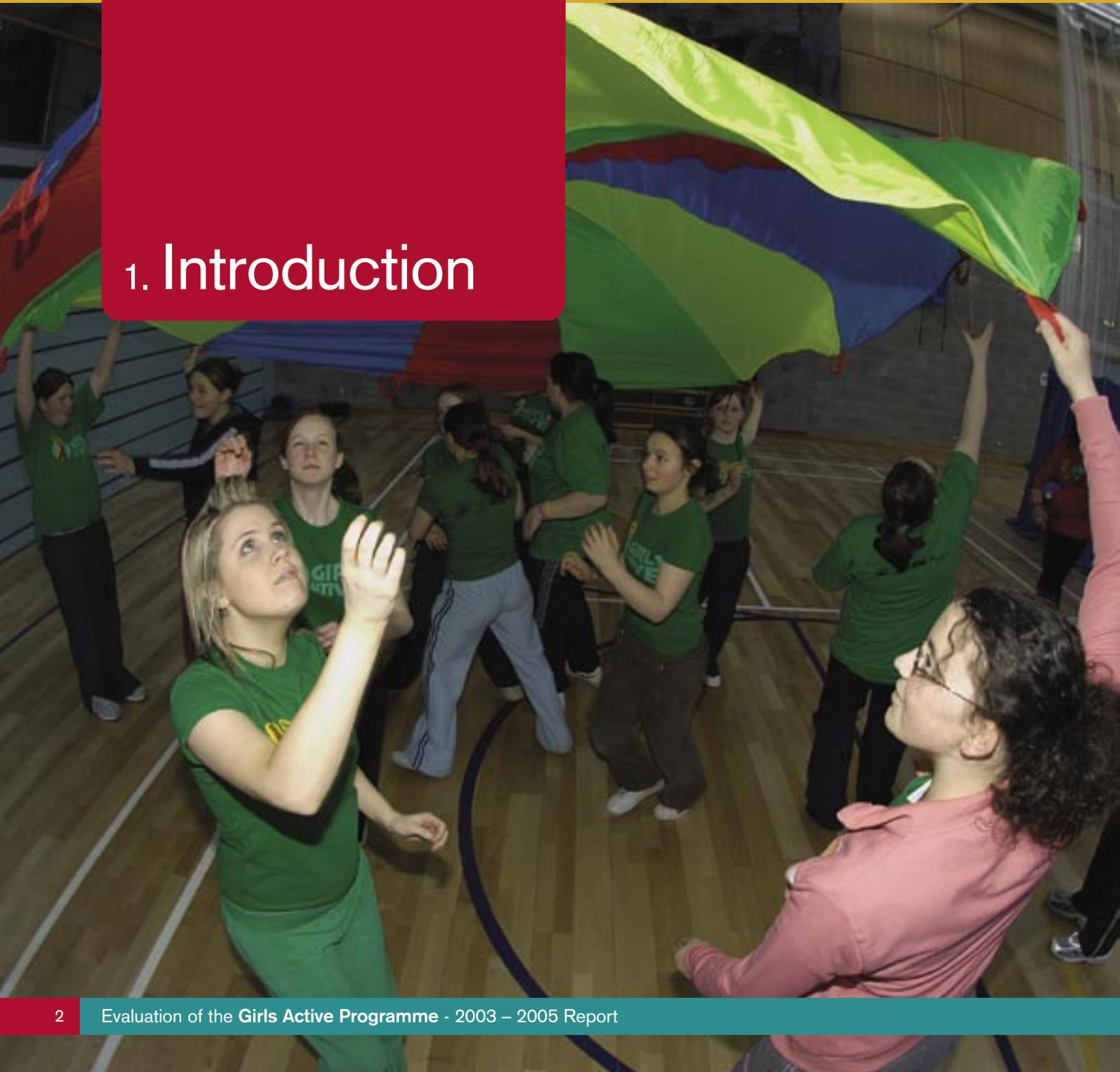
Not all participants had a timetabled SPHE class running parallel with Girls Active, but of those who did two-thirds discussed physical activity during the course of the class. There was also some evidence that school personnel are aware of the links between Girls Active and other programmes such as the Healthy Schools Project.

Some problems arose with regard to the difficulty of scheduling the Girls Active session at a suitable time. Lunch appears to be the best time but can restrict the length of time available for activity sessions.

It is recommended that the Girls Active programme be incorporated into the development of school policies that are inclusive of participation in physical activities by all students. ■■



# 1. Introduction



# Introduction

Girls Active is a physical activity programme targeting teenage girls in schools in the northwest region of Ireland<sup>1</sup>. This report is an evaluation of the first two years of the programme. Its purpose is to provide feedback to the support organisations on the extent to which Girls Active has achieved its aims and objectives. In addition, the report provides information that may be useful to those who are interested in developing physical activities for teenage girls. It will also assist future policy development for physical activity in schools.

Section 1 of the report provides information on the background and origins of the Girls Active programme. Section 2 presents more detailed data on the implementation and characteristics of the programme. Section 3 describes the methodology utilised in the evaluation. The findings are outlined in Section 4 and discussed in Section 5. The recommendations arising from the findings are presented in Section 6.

## 1.1 Context

Research in Ireland and other countries indicates that girls and women are underrepresented at many levels of sport. Females of all ages participate in sport and recreational activity less than boys and men do, are relatively absent from media portrayals of sporting achievements and are poorly represented at decision-making levels<sup>2</sup>.

Not only are teenage girls less physically active than boys, many of them engage in very little physical activity. A recent Irish study reported that over one-fifth of secondary school girls engage in non-PE (Physical Education) sports on less than one day per week, twice as many as boys<sup>3</sup>. As habits in relation to physical activity are developed at an early stage and tend to be reproduced throughout later life, it is not surprising to find that adult women also engage in sport to a lesser extent than men. Recently published figures in an Irish context indicate that 25% of women participate in sport regularly compared to 41% of men<sup>4</sup>. This relative inactivity has negative consequences for the lifelong

health of girls and women. The benefits of regular physical activity include a feeling of wellbeing and a reduced risk of obesity, heart disease, some cancers, osteoporosis and depression<sup>5,6</sup>.

Girls Active is a joint initiative between the Health Service Executive West (HSE West, formerly the North Western Health Board), Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership (SSRP), Donegal Sports Partnership (DSP) and Youth Sport West (YSW). The programme aims to increase the number of teenage girls involved in long-term regular physical activity through developing more supportive environments in schools. Girls Active commenced in 2003.

## 1.2 Background

The Girls Active Programme was developed in response to numerous strategic initiatives in the areas of health and sport. The publication of The National Health Promotion Strategy 2000-2005<sup>7</sup>, the National Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes and Nutrition<sup>8</sup> and the National Cardiovascular Strategy<sup>9</sup> were central in this regard. Both the National Health Promotion Strategy and the National Cardiovascular Strategy target teenage girls as a priority group for the promotion of healthy lifestyle choices. The former highlights the need to “identify models of good practice which encourage young people, especially young girls, to participate in physical activity”. The Strategy also identifies schools as appropriate settings for the implementation of health education programmes by presenting the concept of the “health promoting school” as a place that is “constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working”<sup>10</sup>.

Under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness the Irish Sports Council (ISC) set up the first Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) in 2001. These were initiated to create a national structure to coordinate and promote the development of sport at local level particularly in disadvantaged areas. In recognition of the growing awareness of the

# Introduction

exclusion of women from sporting activities, the ISC includes girls and women among groups to be targeted by LSPs in their efforts to promote local sports participation. This is reflected in the strategic plans and related objectives set out by both the Donegal Sports Partnership and Sligo Sport and Recreational Partnership. Other publications such as the 'Women in Sport'<sup>11</sup> report are instrumental in keeping the issue of women and physical activity on the agenda of LSPs.

In 2000 the Health Promotion Department of the then North Western Health Board (NWHB) supported schools in organising yoga for girls as a response to the low participation rates of girls in physical activity. Subsequently, in 2001/2 the Health Promotion Department conducted a consultation with teenage girls on physical activity. The consultation findings informed the development of the model for the Girls Active programme and were published in the booklet, 'Consultations with Teenage Girls on Being and Getting Active'<sup>12</sup>.

During the course of the consultation girls attributed the main reasons for their non-participation in physical activity to:

- The limited choice of extra-curricular activities offered to teenage girls in schools
- Their preference for girl-only activities
- The lack of non-competitive activities
- Their perception that less value is given to girls' sports in schools
- The lack of available facilities for girls
- Their perception that there is a lack of media coverage of girls' and women's sports.

The girls also identified many potential benefits of physical activity:

- Feeling healthier and being healthier
- Feeling good
- Having a sense of achievement
- Weight management
- Having fun and enjoyment
- Meeting and making friends
- Having more energy
- Having more concentration.

On foot of its findings, the consultative report included the following recommendations:

- The promotion of non-traditional forms of physical activity within the school setting targeting those not participating in extra-curricular programmes
- The provision of training and support for teachers and principals
- The commitment of resources to long-term initiatives based on the expressed needs of girls themselves
- The involvement of the NWHB and LSPs in the provision of supports
- Links with the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Programme of the Dept. of Education and Science.

The model for Girls Active was successfully piloted for a school-term in partnership with Moville Community School in 2003. The full programme, with the NWHB as lead agency, supported by the ISC and included in the strategic plans of the LSPs in Donegal and Sligo, was then offered to ten schools in the region and implemented widely in the 2003/4 school year. ■

1 The Girls Active Programme is widely recognised by the abbreviation, Girls Active.

2 Houses of the Oireachtas (2004) Women in Sport. Dublin: Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Report No. 5.

3 Fahey T, Delaney L & Gannon B (2005) School Children and Sport in Ireland. Dublin: Economic Social & Research Institute.

4 Fahey T, R Layte & B Gannon (2004) Sports Participation and Health Among Adults in Ireland. Dublin: ESRI.

5 U.S Dept of Health and Human Services (1996) Physical Activity and Health. Atlanta, GA: A Report of the Surgeon General.

6 He

Taskforce on Obesity.

7 Department of Health (2000).

8 SLÁN (1999).

9 Department of Health (1999).

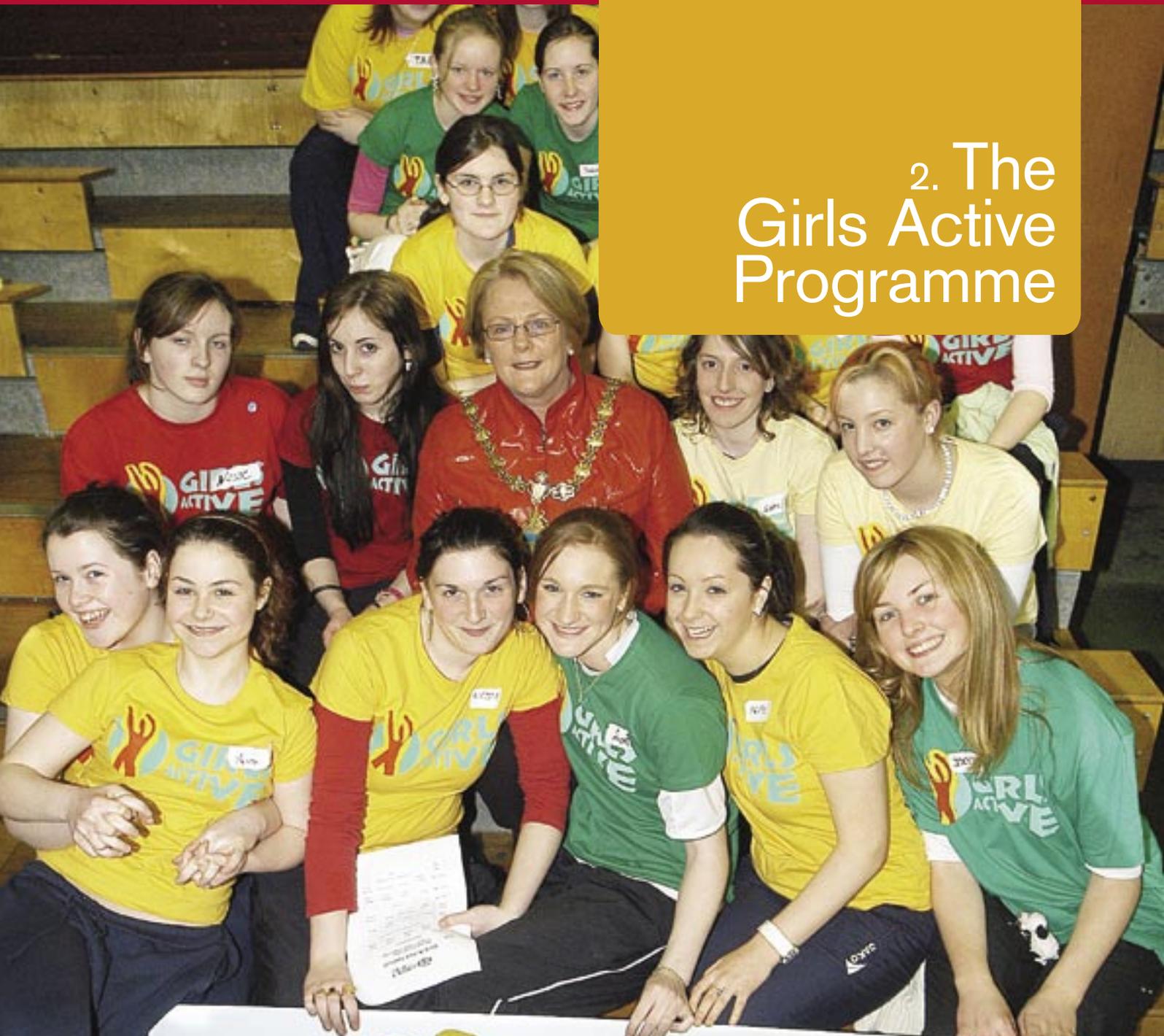
10 Department of Health (2000) National Health Promotion Strategy.

11 Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (2004).

12 NWHB (2004).



## 2. The Girls Active Programme



# The Girls Active Programme

## 2.1 Overview

The aim of the Girls Active programme is: **“To increase the number of teenage girls involved in long-term regular physical activity through developing more supportive environments for teenage girls’ physical activity”**

The objectives of the programme are:

- To increase the number of opportunities available to teenage girls to participate in physical activities in the region.
- To increase the number of girls participating in extra-curricular activities.
- To raise awareness of the issues for teenage girls in participating in physical activity.

The Girls Active programme started in the school year 2003/4 (Phase One). Eleven schools and 239 girls from counties Leitrim, Donegal and Sligo agreed to participate and each school supported one group of girls in the programme. The programme expanded in the second year (2004/5, Phase Two) to incorporate 19 schools and over 330 girls. One school operated two Girls Active groups in that year. A total of 19 schools and 342 girls took part in the third phase of Girls Active (2005/6).

Schools are invited to take part in the programme each year and participation by schools and girls is on a voluntary basis.

Each year, a set of Girls Active activities takes place in every participating school. Three different activities are provided for five 1-hour sessions making a total of 15 physical activity sessions spread throughout the year. In addition, day-long Activity Festivals are held on an annual basis for all the local participating schools to attend (two in Sligo/Leitrim and two in Donegal). This provides a taster of many different activities for the girls and allows them to meet and share experiences with participants from other schools. During Phase One, leadership training for some of the participating girls also took place.

A steering group consisting of representatives from the programme support agencies has been

established. This includes HSE West Health Promotion Department, SSRP, DSP, and YSW (a project with a remit to develop sport for young people on a cross-border basis). The steering group co-ordinates and manages the overall project. Two members of the group – one based in Sligo/Leitrim and one in Donegal - have responsibility for liaising directly with the participating schools. They visit each school during the year to provide support and monitor activities and are available to the schools by phone for advice, encouragement and information. On school visits they meet with participating girls, the Girls Active co-ordinator (see below) and the school principal in order to keep in touch with the operation of the programme on the ground.

In each participating school an appointed co-ordinating teacher takes responsibility for recruiting and organising the participating girls, supervises the activities undertaken and liaises with the steering group. Early in every school year, the co-ordinators attend an in-service day where the previous year's work is evaluated, arising issues discussed, and plans are developed for the coming year.

The initiative is funded by the Health Service Executive and by SSRP and DSP through the Irish Sports Council. Additional support is provided by YSW/ Sligo Vocational Educational Committee, individual schools and by the SPHE programme of the Department of Education and Science.

## 2.2 Main Characteristics

Based on the findings from the consultative report (described in Section 1.2) a number of criteria were laid down for the operation of the Girls Active programme in schools. By and large, these criteria have since been maintained as standard characteristics for the programme:

- Target girls in 2nd year and above that are not currently involved in physical activity.
- Favour non-traditional and non-competitive activities, e.g. aerobics, martial arts, dance, swimming, and so on.
- Involve girls in organising the activities based

# The Girls Active Programme

on their needs through facilitating meetings with them.

- Link with the SPHE programme - girls offered the Girls Active programme must have a timetabled SPHE class. Include a section on 'Being Active' with participating girls in their SPHE classes.
- Organise activities outside of normal PE and curriculum time.
- Release the co-ordinating teacher to attend training and to recruit girls into the programme.
- Deliver the programme throughout the school year (a minimum of 3 activities over a total of 15 weeks).
- Co-ordinating teacher and a number of the girls meet with the project support personnel to feed back on the programme through school support visits.
- Inform parents of their daughter's participation in the programme.
- Make a financial contribution to the programme that is consistent with school policy regarding participation in school sport and recreation.
- Be willing to sustain the programme given a positive response by the girls.
- Be open to providing yearly information on participation rates, feedback from the girls on their experience and feedback from principals.

Schools are selected for participation on the Girls Active programme based on the following criteria:

- The rationale provided is consistent with the principles of the programme.
- There is a geographical spread.
- There is evidence of commitment to the SPHE programme.

Participating schools are awarded funding to cover the cost of an outside instructor/ tutor, training for a staff member in a particular activity and equipment required for delivery of the activity<sup>13</sup>. Programme support agencies also agreed to provide:

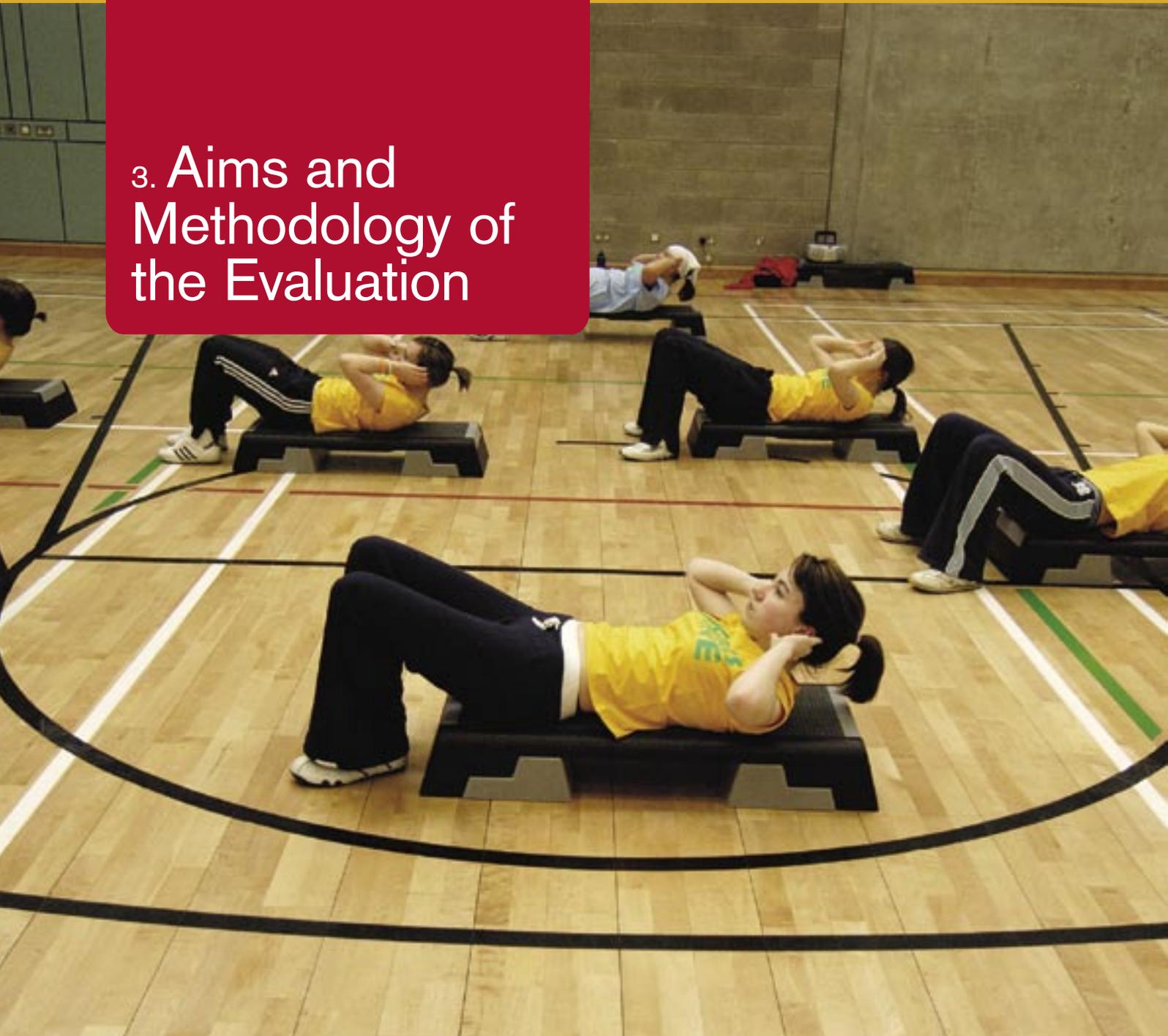
- Training for the co-ordinator of the programme.
- Ongoing support, information and networking opportunities.
- School visits and phone backup from support personnel each year.
- A review of the initiative and feedback to participating schools (principals are provided with an update on the programme at the yearly principals' SPHE meeting).

Full details on the implementation of the programme during its first two phases are provided in Appendix A. ■■

<sup>13</sup> The grant to date has been €750 for the first year and €500 for subsequent years.



### 3. Aims and Methodology of the Evaluation



# Aims and Methodology of the Evaluation

## 3.1 Aims

Girls Active is the first programme of its kind in the country and provides a possible template for further roll-out on a national basis. At the end of its second year in operation, therefore, it was considered timely to review the implementation, achievements, lessons, sustainability and future potential of the Girls Active programme.

The evaluative study utilises various criteria for reviewing the operation of Girls Active together with the impacts and challenges that have arisen during the course of its implementation, as follows:

An examination of the achievements of the programme set against its originally stated aims and objectives. Key indicators for measuring the actual outcomes of the programme are:

- Numbers of schools and girls participating in the programme over successive years.
- Levels of awareness of the benefits of physical activity among the participating girls.
- Levels of physical activity undertaken by the girls subsequent to involvement in Girls Active.
- Extent of recognition within schools for non-traditional recreational sporting activities.
- Attitudes to, and experiences of, the programme by all stakeholders, including its challenges and lessons.

An assessment of inputs into the programme and of its implementation on the ground can be achieved by analysing its structures and by obtaining feedback from all stakeholders.

## 3.2 Methodology

A variety of methods has been employed to gather data for the present review, primarily including a questionnaire survey of participating girls and case studies of three participating schools.

### 3.2.1 Questionnaire Survey

For simplicity and coherence, the survey targeted those girls still at school who participated during Phase Two, 2004/5<sup>14</sup>. It was designed to explore the experience of participating girls – their expectations of the programme, their experience of it in terms of its implementation in their school and their attitudes to how it might have impacted on them personally. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions and took approximately 20 minutes to complete (the full questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix B). To a large extent the questions were pre-coded and asked the informant to choose one or more from a set of pre-selected answers. Girls Active support personnel administered the questionnaire to all the girls still in school who had participated in 2004/5 (apart from one school who were unavailable at the time of the survey).

Basic quantitative analyses were carried out on the resulting data using the SPSS statistical package to produce descriptive statistics, appropriate measures of central tendency and some statistical tests of significance such as the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test designed to compare the distributions of two different variables.

### 3.2.2 Case Studies

Three schools were selected as case studies for more in depth investigation of the programme from the perspective of the participating school. They were undertaken following a preliminary analysis of the findings from the questionnaires in order to generate qualitative and explanatory data on the themes emerging from the questionnaire survey. The selected schools were chosen on the basis that they agreed to be involved, were located in each of the three counties and represented a cross-section of participating schools in terms of size, length of involvement and relative success with the programme.

Focus groups and interviews were the main data-gathering tools employed. With parental approval, a group of 10-12 girls who had participated on Girls Active during Phase Two were presented with a series of questions by the researcher in

# Aims and Methodology of the Evaluation

each of the three schools. They were given time to respond to each question as a group or individually. A note-taker was present and an audio recording made of the proceedings. In addition, separate semi-structured interviews were held with the co-ordinating teacher and with the school principal in each school. These interviews addressed a wide range of issues concerning the experience of Girls Active in the school since it became involved.

The focus groups and interviews took no longer than 20 minutes each and the latter were also recorded on disc. The lists of questions for focus groups and interviews are reproduced in Appendix C.

School visits to collect data for the case studies were conducted in late January 2006. Later, all focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed for interpretation and analysis.

### 3.2.3 Other Instruments

The researcher attended an in-service day for co-ordinators organised by the programme support agencies during October 2005 and also studied all available project documentation. These provided additional insight and back-up for the main themes emerging from the findings of the primary research instruments.

One-on-one consultations were carried out with representatives from the programme support agencies primarily to collect views and information with regard to the implementation of the programme and its wider impacts. ■

<sup>14</sup> Many girls joined the programme when the survey took place.



## 4. Findings



# Findings

## 4.1 Questionnaire

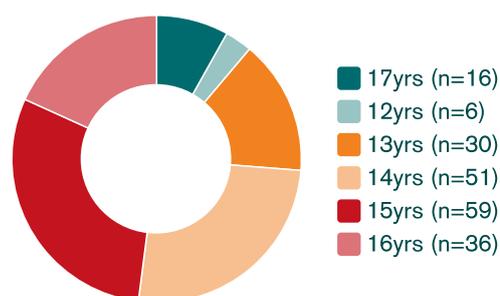
A total of 198 girls who participated on Girls Active during the school year of 2004-5 returned completed questionnaires. These came from 18 out of the 19 schools that took part in that year and represented approximately 60% of the total number of girls involved.

While limited to Phase Two, the survey gathered data from a wide range of schools and a considerable proportion of the girls who participated. It is suggested, therefore, that the survey findings reflect a representative cross-section of the perceptions of girls on their experience of the Girls Active programme during that year, especially when considered in conjunction with the findings from the focus group discussions (Section 4.2)

### 4.1.1 Age & Class Group

Respondents varied in age from 12yrs to 17yrs when they participated on Girls Active during 2004/5. The average age was 14.7yrs (Fig. 1).

Fig.1 - Age of Respondents



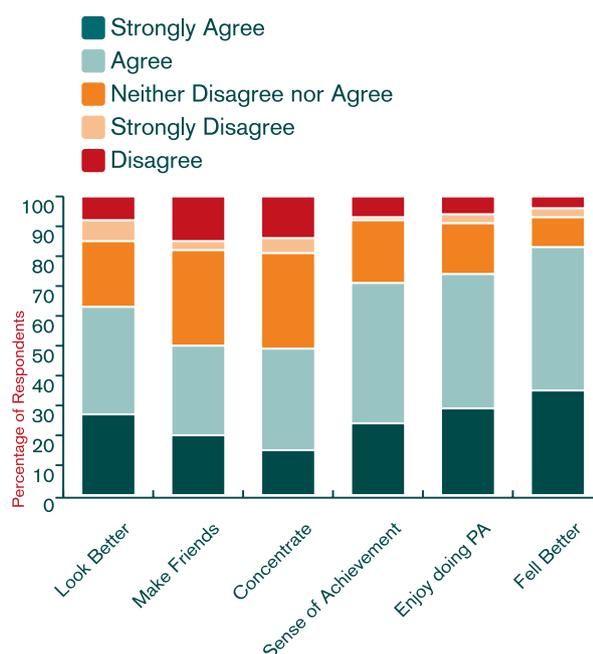
Every class group from 1st year to 6th year were represented in the sample<sup>15</sup>. The most common class group taking part were 4th years (transition years, 30% of the total), 2nd years (27%) and 5th years (23%). More than half of participants, therefore, were in senior cycle when they took part in Girls Active.

### 4.1.2 Awareness Of Benefits Of Physical Activity

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements relating to the

potential benefits of being active. Their responses are provided in Fig. 2 and indicate that the vast majority of girls are aware of at least some of the benefits of physical activity.

Fig.2 - Benefits of Physical Activity (PA= Physical Activity)



Over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that physical activity helps them to feel better and over 70% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoy physical activity and that it gives them a feeling of achievement. A majority (64%) also agreed or strongly agreed that physical activity helps them to look better. A smaller but still notable proportion of respondents (about 50%) agreed or strongly agreed that physical activity helps them to make friends and to concentrate better.

### 4.1.3 Social Personal & Health Education Programme

Of the 78% of respondents who had a timetabled SPHE class<sup>16</sup> more than two-thirds (68%) reported that physical activity was discussed during the class.

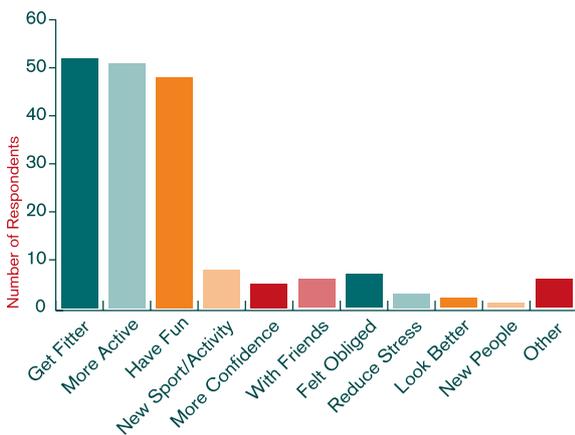
### 4.1.4 Motivation To Participate

When asked to identify the MAIN reason why they participated in Girls Active, the majority of girls

# Findings

(81%) selected either 'to get fitter', 'to be more active' or 'to have fun'. The remainder of the girls identified a variety of other reasons for becoming involved (Fig.3).

Fig.3 - Main Motivation for Participation in Girls Active



When provided with the option of listing ALL the reasons that they took part in the programme, most girls again highlighted the motivation to get fitter, to be active and to have fun. However, in this instance, a large number also identified two further reasons for their involvement, i.e. the opportunity to learn a new sport or activity (71%) and to be with friends (61%). These latter two motivations, therefore, appear to be significant as secondary reasons for becoming involved in Girls Active.

#### 4.1.5 Input Into Planning Of Activities

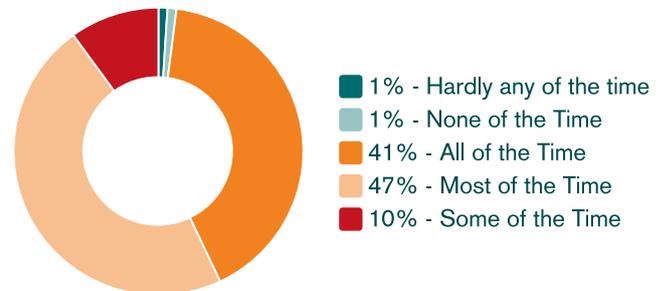
The girls had a high degree of input into deciding what type of activities were undertaken in Phase Two as more than 8 out of 10 indicated that they had a say in this regard (86%). The girls were less involved in organising the activities, i.e. contacting the instructor and making arrangements with regard to payment and facilities. A little over a third reported having a say in this respect (38%).

#### 4.1.6 Levels Of Participation

The vast majority of girls (88%) stated that they took part in Girls Active activities either most or all of the time (Fig. 4).

More than half (55%) of those girls who participated in Girls Active during Phase Two were no longer

Fig.4 - Levels of Participation in Girls Active

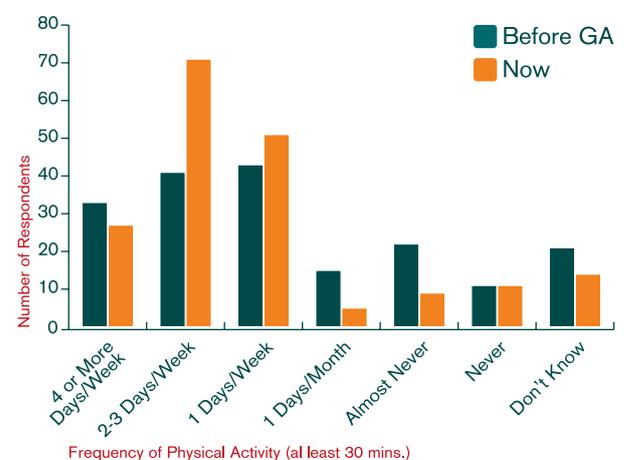


involved in Phase Three<sup>17</sup>. Taking this as an average turnover figure, then approximately 650 different girls may have taken part in the first three phases of Girls Active (2003-6).

#### 4.1.7 Impact On Overall Physical Activity Levels

Girls were asked to estimate their activity levels before and after participating in Girls Active. This was achieved by asking respondents to indicate the frequency at which they played sport, cycled or walked briskly for at least 30 minutes both before they started Girls Active and afterwards (not including PE class and activity in Girls Active itself)<sup>18</sup>. The results are presented in Fig. 5 and

Fig.5 - Levels of Physical Activity Before and After Girls Active (outside of PE and Girls Active Itself. GA + Girls Active)



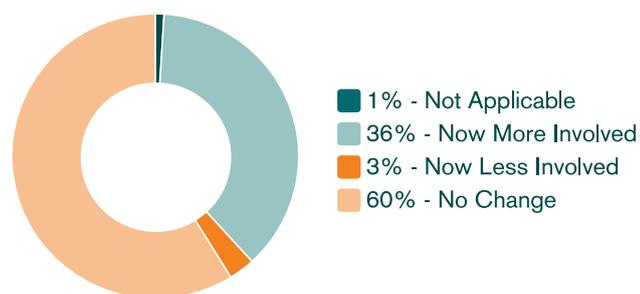
suggest that physical activity levels are higher after than they were before Girls Active. This appears to be the case particularly for those girls who stated

# Findings

that they seldom participated in physical activity before, i.e. those who used to be active for less than one day a week were most likely to increase their activity levels following participation in the initiative. The proportion of girls in this category dropped from 39% before involvement in Girls Active to 23% afterwards. The median value for physical activity levels before starting Girls Active is one day/ week and the median for afterwards is 2-3 days/ week<sup>19</sup>.

The girls indicated that Girls Active has been influential in any change in activity levels - more than half (54%) stated that the amount of physical activity they undertake now has been changed to some extent by their participation in Girls Active (note that this physical activity is additional to Girls Active itself). In addition, over a third of girls (36%) specifically indicated that they are now more involved in PE class as a result of participation in Girls Active (Fig. 6).

Fig.6 - Impact of Girls Active on Participation in PE Class



When asked to identify the barriers to taking up physical activity outside of Girls Active, the most common response was 'no time' (45%). The next most cited obstacles were 'no facilities available' (20%), 'not interested' (20%) and 'no friends involved' (18%).

## 4.1.8 Overall Experience

Girls were presented with a number of factors associated with Girls Active and asked to rate each on a scale from 'very important' to 'not important'. The majority considered that getting exercise and having fun were the two most important factors – the median value for both was 'very important'.

A large secondary group of factors had a median score of 'important' - learning a new sport or skill, physical activity without competition, participation of friends, time to change clothes, no people watching, and meeting new people - while the remaining factors were considered by many to be 'neither important nor unimportant' - the fact that the activities did not involve physical contact, that there were no boys present, and that Girls Active interfered with exams (details in Appendix D).

## 4.1.9 Operation

Girls were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with several aspects of the operation of the programme. Most (more than two-thirds) indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the type, number and length of sessions, with costs and with instructors. More than half were also satisfied with the facilities provided and with the arrangements for transport home. All of these aspects of Girls Active registered a median score of 'satisfied' (details in Appendix E).

## 4.1.10 Supports

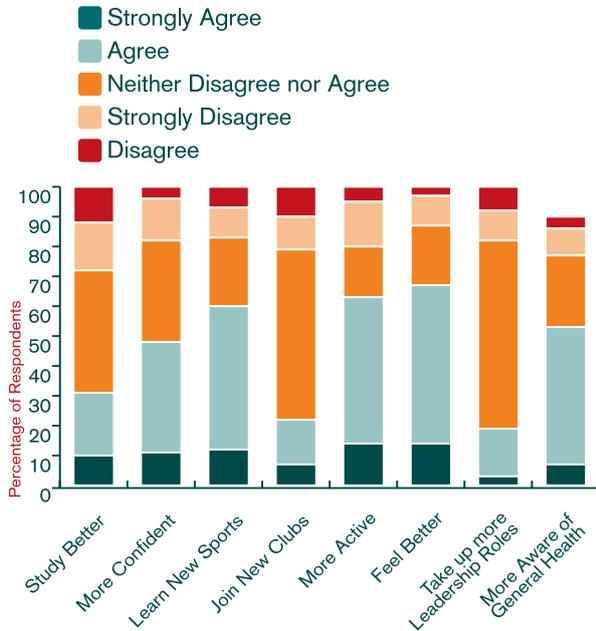
In response to a query regarding available support, the vast majority of respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the co-ordinating teacher (81% of girls registering 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'). Girls were generally also satisfied with the support from other Girls Active participants, other students in the school, and from their families. Satisfaction was most muted in relation to support from principals which 35% of girls rated as neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory (details in Appendix E).

## 4.1.11 Impacts

Girls were asked to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements about the possible impacts of Girls Active. Most agreed or strongly agreed that they feel better (68%), are more active (64%), have learned new sports (61%) and are more aware of general health (64%) as a result of their involvement in the programme (all had a median value of 'agree', Fig. 7). While there was some indication from respondents that they feel more confident having participated in Girls Active

# Findings

Fig.7 - General Impacts of Girls Active

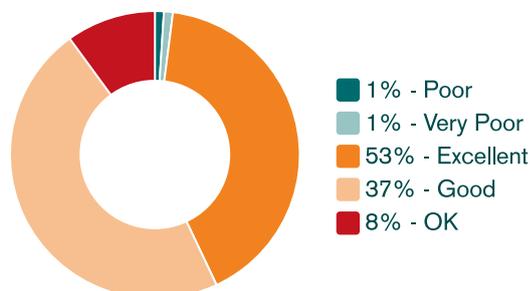


(48% agreed or strongly agreed) there was none in relation to studying better or to taking on more leadership roles (all had a median value of 'neither disagree nor agree').

### 4.1.12 Overall Satisfaction Levels

More than half the girls rated their satisfaction with Girls Active as 'excellent' and another third rated it as 'good', making a total of 90% who gave a positive overall rating to the programme (Fig. 8).

Fig.8 - Overall Satisfaction Levels with Girls Active



At the end of the questionnaire respondents were asked to list three words to describe what Girls Active meant to them. In response, many very positive words were included, such as 'worthwhile', 'cool', 'brilliant' and 'excellent', while negative comments were extremely scarce. It was possible

to group the words under five main headings:

- The vast majority of girls (85%) provided words relating to 'fun', 'enjoyment', having a 'laugh' and the 'craic'.
- A high proportion (49%) utilised words referring to getting 'exercise' and getting 'fit', being 'active', 'energetic' and 'healthy'.
- The third most frequent reference was to the 'exciting', 'new', 'different', 'challenging' and 'stimulating' experience of Girls Active (25% of respondents).
- Smaller but notable proportions also referred to the social aspects of the programme ('friends', 'new people', 'inclusive', 14%) and to the feel-good factor generated ('confidence', 'feeling good', 'feeling happy', 'self-esteem', 12%).

## 4.2 Case Studies

Three participating schools, one each from counties Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal, were selected as case studies and visited by the researcher in January 2006. All of the schools are co-educational, located in rural towns and of reasonable size in terms of student numbers (374-440 pupils).

In each case separate interviews were carried out with the co-ordinating teacher and principal and focus group discussions were held with some of the students who participated in Girls Active during the 2004/5 school year. A total of 33 girls took part in the focus groups (10 from school A, 11 from school B and 12 from school C).

### 4.2.1 School A

*"I always say, 'Enjoy yourselves', not, 'Be good'"*  
(Co-ordinator)

**Background.** School A first participated in Girls Active in Phase Two (2004/5) and continued to take part in Phase Three (2005/6). The principal stated that he "jumped at the idea" since school management had "always tried to involve non-sporty students in physical activity", but this had hitherto proved to be a difficult task. The co-ordinating

# Findings

teacher appointed for the initiative was also the SPHE co-ordinator and felt “happy to take it on” as she recognised that there was a link between both programmes. Also, she commented that she was physically unfit herself and so the participating girls were likely to feel that she would have more of an understanding of the non-sporty psyche. She described the principal as being “100% behind the programme”.

All 20 of the 3rd years (Junior Cert year, 14-15yr olds) that were not involved in sport either inside or outside of school were recruited onto the programme and attendance was made compulsory<sup>20</sup>. This particular class group was chosen to participate because younger students “will be involved anyway”, and the principal hoped that participation by this year class might encourage them to continue to be physically active through the senior cycle. Sessions were held in the school gym during lunchtime and the activities undertaken were aerobics, tai chi and yoga. The girls were not charged a fee to take part in Girls Active. Instead, additional costs were paid from an ‘activity fee’ that each school student pays annually to cover the costs of buses and other extra-curricular expenses.

The school also participated in the programme in Phase Three (2005/6). Sessions were again held at lunchtime, the activities changed slightly to aerobics, circuit training and dance and non-sporty 2nd years were permitted to join in with the then current 3rd years. The girls who participated in 2004/5 were no longer permitted to be involved.

**Attitudes to physical activity.** The girls in School A expressed an alienation from the traditional concept of sport and compared it unfavourably to Girls Active activities:

*“Aerobics is more of a hobby or a pastime. You feel better after you do it. Sport is about winning, this is an exercise”*

*“There were no captains or teams or games away that would put pressure on you [in Girls Active] ... that would have put me off it”*

*“[Girls Active] was different to what everyone else does [for sport]. It wasn’t the normal routine of sport”*

The school principal was aware that many young people felt like this:

*“Competition puts [some] kids off. Girls Active [activities] aren’t competitive”*

**Timing of activities.** One Girls Active activity took place before Christmas and two after Christmas. The co-ordinator expressed concerns about sessions running up to exams late in the year. All of the activities were organised during lunchtime with some time off the class beforehand to allow girls time to have lunch<sup>21</sup>. The girls in this school said that the fact that they were not rushed was one of the best things about Girls Active for them.

*“We had the last class off so we could go up town and have lunch at our ease”*

However, in Phase Three this position changed and the girls then had to do the activity within lunch break as regular time off class caused complications for other teachers. The co-ordinator highlighted the lack of available time as one of the disadvantages of the programme since “lunch hour is only 50min. and is not long enough, the girls have to eat on the run”. She also commented that there would be less girls taking part if sessions were switched to after school time due to the fact that they have to catch buses home.

**Attendance at sessions.** Attendance at the sessions was generally good, not surprising given that Girls Active sessions were made compulsory for the participating girls. However, the principal stated that “there were no sick notes”, and the girls indicated why this was so:

*“It was mandatory for us but it was good. It was fun and we enjoyed it”*

However, one girl indicated that some flexibility was allowed in terms of attendance:

# Findings

*"Some didn't go that often but I went because I liked it"*

**Benefits and impacts.** The girls, co-ordinator and principal all referred to the many benefits of the Girls Active initiative. The girls themselves focused on the opportunities that the programme provided for fun (see quotes above) and for getting fitter and feeling better:

*"This [Girls Active activity] was an exercise. It made you feel better, healthier, more upbeat"*

*"I felt pride in myself having done some kind of sport instead of having done nothing"*

Girls also referred to the novelty of the activities and of feeling a sense of belonging:

*"It was something new. Everybody else does basketball but I did tai chi. It was fun"*

*"You always feel involved, you're always taking part"*

Many highlighted the fact that they now would wish to undertake more exercise as a result of their involvement in Girls Active – if more facilities were available:

*"It's a pity we don't have something to go to at lunch [now], we're not allowed [take part this year]"*

*"I loved aerobics, it was the best of the lot ... I would have done it outside of school but there were no classes on ... I'd do it definitely. I looked for some [classes]"*

Both the girls and the co-ordinator reported that other girls expressed interest in joining the group, although they also received some "slagging" from other students:

*"Many girls are very anxious to be in the group ... the boys are even half-curious" (Co-ordinator)*

*"People looking in through [gym] windows put us off. I felt uncomfortable. That always happens in the gym anyway, it would put you off" (Girl)*

The co-ordinator described how the girls became enthusiastic for the programme through developing a group identity even though some may have been unhappy about their weight or were previously a bit socially isolated. She stated that:

*"The girls feel special, they are the 'Girls Active group'. Everyone in the group is the same, they don't have to be good [at sport]"*

The principal also referred to the social benefits of the programme for the participating girls, along with the fact that they were now more physically active. In this school, girls were allowed the "treat" of being permitted to stay in their tracksuits on the day of the Girls Active session and were also presented with Girls Active t-shirts and certificates on school prize-giving day at the end of the year. In this way they had their own identity and stood out from the student body.

Overall, the principal was very enthusiastic about the programme, *"It's been a great success"*.

**Strengths and Weaknesses.** The principal described the strengths of the programme as lying in the benefits to the girls taking part, i.e. the fact that the girls were doing physical activity, their greater confidence with regard to same, their increased openness to new ideas and their improved relationships with others. He saw no weaknesses in the programme. The co-ordinator listed as strengths the range of activities available, the quality of the support provided by the steering group including the provision of the database of instructors and the financial assistance. She cited the limitations on the length of Girls Active sessions imposed by their extra-curricular nature and the difficulty in locating instructors as weaknesses of the programme.

**Links with other school programmes.** The Girls Active co-ordinator is also the SPHE co-ordinator in the school and she acknowledged that there is a link between her work on both programmes. The girls reported that physical activity was discussed in SPHE class during the year. The principal

# Findings

mentioned that the school organises a healthy eating programme and in his observations linked this with the school's commitment to Girls Active.

**Support from the steering group.** Both the principal and co-ordinator were appreciative of the support from the steering group. The principal stated that this support was vital for both the school and the co-ordinator, and the latter mentioned the training day and the constant contact with support personnel in a positive light:

*"I feel they're there when you need them, and they don't interfere at the same time"*

**The future.** To improve the programme and attract more participants the girls suggested that an expansion of the initiative to bring in more class groups and greater choices regarding the variety of activities and whether or not to participate would be appropriate. Some also expressed a wish for the programme to be broadened to include interested boys and 'sporty' girls.

*"I'm not bothered if boys are allowed to do it. We could share the fun with the class and talk about it afterwards" (Girl)*

Both staff members also referred to the possibility of broadening out the programme to include a "Boys Active", although the principal acknowledged that this would require funding that is not presently available. However, both were quite determined that the Girls Active programme will continue at the school with or without ongoing support from outside. The principal is committed to providing discretionary funding for this if that becomes necessary. The co-ordinator reinforced this assertion with her comments:

*"It's [Girls Active] here to stay. The principal is 100% behind this – we'll find the money"*

## 4.2.2 School B

**Background.** School B first participated in Girls Active in 2004/5 (Phase Two) and continued to take part in Phase Three (2005/6). The school had

developed links with the Health Service Executive (HSE) through its Healthy Schools Programme and considered that Girls Active would work well with it. The school has a sporting tradition where games are organised for lunchtime. The principal observed that girls did not have the same interest as boys and that "for those who don't like football there was nothing else apart from PE". In view of this, she felt that Girls Active might encourage more girls to take up physical activity, especially senior girls:

*"The juniors are very into sport anyway ... girls drop off games after junior cert, Girls Active is a good way of hooking them in again"*

The appointed co-ordinator had trained some girls in basketball but had more of an interest in non-sport physical activity (she was not the PE teacher in the school). She described the principal as being very supportive of the programme.

Any fifth year student (15-17yr old) who was not involved in sport outside of school and who wished to do so was permitted to participate. Fifth year was selected partly because it had high numbers and the co-ordinator could be confident of recruiting 20 girls from it and partly because of an awareness that senior girls tend to drop out of games after Junior Cert. In the event, 20 girls took part in the first two activities (aerobics and modern dance) and 15 in the third (gym & swim).

*"We didn't need encouragement to get involved, we volunteered because it sounded good ... we choose the activities" (Girl)*

The local leisure centre assisted the co-ordinator in locating instructors for the first two activities and she consequently decided to utilise the centre itself for the third activity. One instructor came at lunchtime but neither of the other two was available at that time and so these activities had to take place after school. The girls were asked to contribute one euro per week to supplement the fees of the instructors.

# Findings

School B also participated in the programme in Phase Three (2005/6). Some of those girls who participated in Phase Two were involved again the following year but most chose not to do so because they were doing the Leaving Cert at that stage.

**Attitudes to physical activity.** As in school A, the girls commented on their dislike of competitive sports, football in particular, which they associated with boys in joint PE classes.

*"I would prefer if there were no boys, they are too competitive. They're always playing football and will not pass the ball".*

There was also a perception that girls might be less well catered for in terms of sports than boys.

*"When we were juniors in school we did sports at lunchtime. That was dropped when we went into Transition Year and only football was available. There were no basketball or camogie teams"*

The principal referred to an additional factor – an increasing self-consciousness about the body – that may contribute to the reduction of senior girls participating in sport:

*"As girls get older they get more conscious about their figure, and changing clothes, and running..."*

**Timing of activities.** In school B some activities were organised during lunchtime and some in the evening after class, depending on when facilities/tutors were available. The girls commented on the advantage of having more time for the activity in the evening, but that arranging transport home was a problem for them. Some had to leave early to catch a bus, for instance. The teacher commented that attendance was better at the lunchtime sessions even though the girls had only 10 minutes to have their food. She described the job of locating instructors for lunchtime as one of the biggest challenges for her as the co-ordinator of the programme.

The first activity was organised before Christmas,

and the second two took place later in the school year.

**Attendance at sessions.** Attendance was good overall particularly at the lunchtime session. Both members of staff referred to the enthusiasm of the girls for Girls Active sessions and the principal attributed this partly to the commitment of the co-ordinator.

**Benefits and Impacts.** Again the girls emphasised the fun and exercise elements of Girl Active activities, including the Activity Fest.

*"You get to have a bit of craic doing it. It's not serious but yet you're benefiting from it doing exercise"*

They also referred to the 'newness' and 'difference' of the type of activities undertaken, and expressed a desire to continue taking exercise "but there is very little available in the area".

*"After doing Girls Active you find you want to keep exercising like going for walks or swimming during the summer"*

*"It's not like we weren't influenced by Girls Active. A lot of us kept going to the gym for the summer but then the gym closed"*

The co-ordinator stated that some girls had decided to take up PE class again, and the principal also noted that the girls had developed a greater interest in physical activity as a result of the Girls Active initiative:

*"[Girls Active] has raised awareness among the senior girls about the importance of physical activity. I would see them walking on the beach after school"*

As in school A, Girls Active created a positive impression in the wider student body as both the girls and the co-ordinator noted that other girls expressed interest in joining the programme. Not all reaction was welcome, however, as in the early stages other students annoyed them by watching Girls Active activity through the gym windows.

# Findings

The principal noted that one of the benefits of the Girls Active programme is that it supports the Healthy Schools initiative in which the school is also involved.

In general, the principal thought highly of the Girls Active programme, “Girls Active is absolutely fantastic”.

**Strengths and Weaknesses.** The principal listed the financial assistance provided and the commitment of the co-ordinator as the main strengths of the programme. The co-ordinator identified the quality of the instructors, the Activity Fest and the enthusiasm of the girls.

With regard to weaknesses, the principal mentioned the limitations on the numbers that can be involved, “I would want to broaden it out to more girls”, and the co-ordinator referred to the low level of funds available for instructors, “We had to collect a euro a week from the girls to supplement the fee”.

Other challenges that were mentioned included the difficulty of trying to get the girls themselves to organise the activities (the co-ordinator attributed this to a lack of time to tutor the girls in organisational skills) and dependence on outside facilities over which the school has no control (the leisure centre being used by the school closed down for renovation leaving the girls without a facility that they had become accustomed to using).

**Links with other programmes.** The school participates in the Healthy Schools Programme organised by the HSE. The principal recognised that promoting physical activity among the students through Girls Active worked well in tandem with this allied programme, “It [Girls Active] supports the Healthy Schools initiative”. While Girls Active participants can take part in Healthy Schools activities as individuals, there is limited evidence from the interviews of any active inter-linking between the two programmes, apart from a once-off co-ordinated day at the local leisure centre. However, the principal expects that the school will continue with both initiatives.

*“We expect in our planning for extra-curricular activities and in the Healthy Schools Programme that we would continue, as the physical health of students is important to us”*

She also considered that in order to increase physical activity levels for participating girls beyond the Girls Active programme itself it would be necessary to develop a cross-curricular framework centred on links between SPHE and Girls Active, “SPHE is about issues of self-esteem and their own bodies”.

**Support from the steering group.** Both school staff expressed appreciation of the support provided. The co-ordinator particularly mentioned the provision of the database and the ready availability of someone at the end of a phone.

**The Future.** The girls in school B suggested having more variety of activities, more Activity Fests and starting on the programme earlier in their school lives. They exhibited an appreciation of the importance of starting good habits early with regard to physical activity.

*“Start with the younger years. They have more time, and will make it routine and therefore will keep it up through [later] years”*

*“Start earlier. Do one activity for five weeks and do it every year. Then you would get good at it and carry it on outside school”*

School staff also agreed with the desirability of the programme being broadened out – both in terms of the number of girls and the number of class groups involved, and also with regard to the incorporation of other elements of the school curriculum and various school programmes designed to promote healthy lifestyles and improved self-esteem. Mentioned in relation to these were SPHE, PE, English, Media Studies, Biology, Home Economics and the Healthy Schools initiative. It was recognised that this inevitably means getting more staff involved.

# Findings

*"Health does come into the SPHE programme so it would support Girls Active. But there is a need to highlight it [Girls Active] more among staff, and to [link] Girls Active with Biology, Home Economics, and so on ... Girls Active would have to be integrated as part of the PE programme eventually to make it part of the school programme. Then Girls Active would become a 'whole school' project'" (Principal)*

*"The whole area of women in sport needs to be developed. It's a very male-dominated sector. The image of the perfect woman out there is not a woman who plays sport, it's a woman who is 'beautiful'. Until that's addressed ... English and Media Studies need to be integrated [into Girls Active]" (Co-ordinator)*

The principal commented that Girls Active has raised awareness in her school, and her expectation was that something like Girls Active would be included in planning for the extra-curricular and Healthy Schools Programme in the school, but was accompanied by the concern that "... schools can only do so much". She intends that the school will take on and continue with a similar programme to Girls Active when the current scheme ends. The co-ordinator took up the theme of the continuation of the programme with a reference to the voluntary contribution of teachers:

*"I could see it [Girls Active ] being maintained [in the school], but it depends on me or other teachers [being] volunteers and not getting paid"*

## 4.2.3 School C

**Background.** School C took part in the first phase of Girls Active in 2003/4 and also participated in Phases Two and Three (2004/5 and 2005/6). The PE teacher was interested in the programme as she had noticed that "fewer girls were getting involved in sport and PE"<sup>22</sup>. Prior to Girls Active, she had organised 'girls only' days in the gym to encourage girls to participate in physical activities. The principal also observed that senior girls in particular were "opting out" and might respond better to girl-only activities.

*"The aim was to get girls involved in physical activity, and to enjoy it"*

The PE teacher subsequently became the co-ordinator of the programme in the school.

In the first year of Girls Active at the school 2nd years were recruited onto the programme as "they were poor in PE" (co-ordinator). In subsequent years the same class year has participated but senior girls were also permitted to join in. Since numbers were relatively low, any girl from these years who wished to do so was allowed to participate so the activities in this instance were not confined to 'non-sporty' girls.

In 2004/5 eighteen 15-17yr old girls took part in the programme and the activities undertaken were dance, yoga and aerobics. All sessions took place on the premises in the evenings after school.

**Attitudes to physical activity.** The girls expressed some dissatisfaction with arrangements for sports in the school where boys' choices have tended to predominate (there are twice as many boys as girls attending the school).

*"Sports in school are competitive sports like football. Girls Active is non-competitive - for the girls".*

**Timing of activities.** Girls Active activities were transferred from lunchtime to after-school hours in 2004/5 due to a contraction in the length of lunchtime that made it no longer feasible to run Girls Active activities during that period. The girls said that lunch hour was rushed but that difficulties in arranging lifts home in the evening prevented them from attending Girls Active on occasions. The co-ordinating teacher elaborated on the problems of running activities after school time:

*"Last week one girl's parent couldn't come and that meant that three other girls who were travelling with her couldn't come either"*

She also mentioned that some of the girls had to be elsewhere in the evenings, e.g. babysitting younger

# Findings

siblings or attending meetings of the Student Council. In addition, some of the students felt that they need the time in the evening to study if they are doing exams. Both teacher and girls referred to the fact that members of the football team can get time off class at lunchtime for matches and there is a perceived sense of unfairness in this regard amongst the girls:

*“People who do football get a class off to go to matches so I don’t see why we don’t”*

However, the co-ordinator acknowledged that the programme is intended to be an extra-curricular one. She also considered lunchtime to be the best time for Girls Active ideally as she felt that far more girls would attend Girls Active activities then if there was sufficient time available. She described this difficulty in fitting in Girls Active activity into the school timetable as one of the main challenges of the programme.

**Attendance at sessions.** Both staff members related that the numbers attending the sessions tended to drop off over the year, “Girls expressed an interest but the reality was different” (principal). The co-ordinator felt that the main contributory factor in the decline in attendance was the difficulty for the girls in arranging lifts home after the evening sessions, “Attendance dropped off then to 6 or 7 sometimes”. The girls expressed a desire to attend more sessions but that “sometimes there was a problem with lifts”.

**Benefits and Impacts.** As in the other schools, the girls highlighted the “craic”, the newness and difference of the activities, and the opportunity to get exercise, “Everybody likes it”. The principal reinforced this impression:

*“I got feedback from the girls that they enjoyed it. They wanted more girls to become involved because they were afraid it would be dropped [as numbers were low]”*

One girl remarked that she enjoyed doing things with friends who were not in her class – made possible

as girls across a number of class years are involved in Girls Active here. None claimed that they were more physically active outside of Girls Active but one did comment that she was now more aware of how unfit she was when she started. Again, many emphasised the lack of clubs or facilities in their area as a barrier to ongoing activity.

*“There are not many clubs in the area to join”*

The co-ordinator noted that two or three of the girls had taken up some of the Girls Active activities outside of school, and also that “you can see the quieter girls becoming more sociable”. She also remarked that Girls Active provided good PR for the school especially due to recent publicity in relation to teenage girls and physical inactivity, a point reiterated by her principal who reported that parents of incoming 1st years are informed about the programme.

*“Girls Active is a draw for parents, they can see we’re trying for the kids” (Co-ordinator)*

She also recounted how she now allows senior girls to choose their own activity in PE class each week rather than insisting that they join with the boys for football and attributed this to her experience of the Girls Active programme.

**Strengths and weaknesses.** The principal outlined the strengths of the programme as the provision of funding, the use of outside instructors and the flexibility to devise the programme to suit the needs of the girls. The co-ordinator identified the ready availability of support from the steering group and the provision of in-service days. She described as weaknesses the difficulty in getting coaches at times that suit the girls and the problem of having to arrange the sessions for after school hours when less girls turn up.

**Links with other school programmes.** Senior girls in the school do not participate in the SPHE programme, but girls did in earlier years and reported that issues around physical activity were not addressed during the course. The co-ordinator

# Findings

remarked that it was up to the individual SPHE teacher to decide their topics for the course and that she didn't feel in a position to tell them how to do their job. Her principal acknowledged that there is no existing policy in the school to create a deliberate tie-in between Girls Active and SPHE, "...but it could be looked at".

The co-ordinator reported that there is a Healthy Eating programme in the school and an organised '100 mile' club that has encouraged some non-sporty girls to take up walking with their mothers at home. There are no direct links with the Girls Active programme but some of the girls participating on Girls Active have completed the 100 miles of walking and received their certificates on school prize-giving day.

**Support from the steering group.** Both staff members expressed satisfaction with the support provided, but the co-ordinator mentioned that the database easily gets out of date.

**The future.** As in the other two schools, the girls felt that there should be more sessions and that more students, particularly younger girls, should be permitted to take part. They felt that Girls Active should be more actively promoted in the school as many of the students knew nothing about it.

*"The principal and girls taking part should go around the classes and tell others what it's about"*

It was also suggested that if sessions have to be held after school hours then transport home needed to be provided. The girls appeared to be unaware of the Activity Fests since a suggestion was made that a weekend of activities with other schools would be attractive<sup>23</sup>.

The principal also recognised that the link with SPHE needed to be expanded to improve the Girls Active programme and that this would necessitate enlarging the team involved. She suggested that the programme be promoted more directly by the support organisations in the schools by giving talks and so on.

She stated that a reduction in funding would lead to a greater dependence on teachers acting as replacement instructors on a voluntary basis. The co-ordinator thought that there would be less variety in activities offered if funding for the programme was withdrawn, but went on to suggest that if that happened she would definitely establish something like a walking club for the girls as that would be cost-free and easy to accomplish. ■

15 Contrary

able girls was very small.

16 SPHE is not compulsory for senior cycle although it is timetabled in some schools.

17 In some schools Girls Active was offered to a different class group in succeeding years so that girls did not have the opportunity to participate for more than one year.

18 No

therefore, likely to have a wide margin of error.

19 While these differences are statistically significant (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $p < 0.001$ ), they are not conclusive and must be treated with caution (see previous footnote).

20 Note: one of the stated principles of Girls Active is that participation by girls should be on a voluntary basis only.

21 Note: Girls Active activities are officially timetabled as extra-curricular and are intended to be arranged outside of regular class times.

22 Note: Girls Active is designed as an additional option rather than an alternative to PE class.

23 Note: in that year, the Activity Fest coincided with other important activities in School C that the girls were obliged to attend.



## 6. Discussion



# Discussion

The evidence presented in this report is gathered from a wide array of schools, participants and stakeholders involved in the Girls Active programme. Sixty per cent of girls from 18 out of 19 schools that participated in 2004/5 returned questionnaires on their personal experiences of Girls Active, and a further 33 girls plus six school staff from three different schools provided more detailed information on the operation of the programme. Together with other data (documentation, steering group and co-ordinating teachers' in-service day), these sources contribute to building a three-dimensional picture of the programme as it has evolved over the years and collectively point to a path towards its future development.

The present section collates and interprets the data and findings outlined in earlier sections. These are discussed in relation to: a) aims and objectives of the Girls Active programme, b) characteristics and implementation of the programme, c) impacts of the programme, and d) concluding remarks.

## 5.1 Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the Girls Active programme are outlined in Section 2.1. **These focus on encouraging more teenage girls to become involved in physical activity on a long-term basis by increasing their awareness of the benefits of physical activity and by developing more supportive environments.**

The Girls Active programme was designed and implemented in response to the findings that emerged from the consultation with teenage girls in the region during 2002/3, and with reference to similar developments elsewhere especially in the UK, Australia and Canada. The main elements recommended in the consultation document and incorporated into Girls Active include the provision of non-traditional sporting forms such as dance and yoga along with the characteristics of being girls-only, non-competitive and consultative in relation to the needs of the participating girls. A link with the Social Personal & Health Education (SPHE)

programme was embedded in Girls Active in order to ensure that participating girls would have the opportunity of exploring issues relating to teenage girls and physical activity.

From the findings outlined in Section 4 the following points can be made in relation to the original aims and objectives of the programme:

- The number of schools and the number of girls participating in Girls Active has increased each year since its inception. By now, a broad range of schools across the region have taken up the programme and up to 650 different girls have taken part in it over the three operational phases to date.
- It is clear that the vast majority of those Girls Active participants contributing to the present research have greatly enjoyed the programme and feel they have benefited from it.
- Most girls completed the programme of activities and many of those who are no longer participating regret that this is so.
- The available evidence suggests that participation in Girls Active, even for one year, is likely to have encouraged girls to take up more physical activity outside of the programme whether by increasing extra-curricular activity, showing more interest in PE class and in joining local clubs or by undertaking more informal activities like walking.
- In the present study the girls expressed an awareness of the benefits of physical activity for themselves - primarily relating to health and fun - and also articulated their dislike of traditional competitive sports.
- Participating girls feel excluded from traditional sports and appreciate the valuing of alternative kinds of physical activity that are more attractive to them such as dance, yoga and so on. In addition, by observing the overwhelmingly positive response from (often) previously non-sporty girls, school staff appear to be increasingly aware that traditional sports do not cater for all students' needs in relation to physical activity and that with appropriate supports many more students, particularly girls but also including non-sporty boys, are capable of taking up and

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enjoying more physical activity.

- Generally, the girls were satisfied with the way in which the programme was implemented in their schools.

The programme has, therefore, created opportunities for a large number of girls to undertake physical activity in a supportive school environment. Whether their involvement in physical activity will be a long-term one is too early to say at this stage, but their increased awareness of the issues relating to physical activity will improve the likelihood of it being so.

## 5.2 Characteristics and Implementation

The main characteristics of the operation of the programme are outlined in Section 2. The findings in Section 4 provide detailed information on the implementation of the programme in individual settings and on the responses of girls and other stakeholders. In general, it is apparent from the available data that Girls Active has been successfully implemented in many schools in the region and has generated a very positive response from stakeholders. At the same time, the roll out of the programme has presented challenges and further opportunities for all involved.

### 5.2.1 General

From all the findings it appears that the characteristics of the programme that appealed most to the participants were the fun and exercise elements. Girls also responded strongly to the 'novelty' of the activities and the presence of friends. In addition, four out of ten felt that the fact that activities were girl-only was another plus for the programme.

These, and other characteristics such as the absence of competition, time to change clothes and meeting new people, were built into the programme primarily in response to the earlier consultation with girls, so it is not surprising that participants responded to them in a positive light.

They are also linked to many of the reasons that participants were disenchanted with traditional sports in the first place.

School staff also responded positively to the programme. Both principals and co-ordinators commented on the general enthusiasm of the participants for Girls Active and on how it seemed to have influenced them in a positive manner, both in relation to their overall demeanour and in relation to their interest in pursuing opportunities for increased physical activity.

Overall, the programme has been successful in terms of its implementation in schools. It is clear that most girls maintained their level of participation throughout the year and were satisfied with the sessions, the instructors and the support provided within the schools. A positive general satisfaction rating of 90% from participating girls via the questionnaire speaks for itself in this regard. Clearly, the fact that girls had an input into deciding what type of activities were undertaken in the programme paid dividends.

Similarly, co-ordinating teachers and principals generally expressed satisfaction with the support provided by the steering group whether through funding, instructors' database, ready accessibility by phone and teachers' in-service training. In addition, the Activity Fest was mentioned as a valuable opportunity for girls to broaden their experiences of the programme.

### 5.2.2 Strengths

Staff in the case study schools identified the strengths of the programme as follows:

- Design of the initiative that incorporates external instructors and a flexibility of approach in response to the needs of the girls,
- Financial assistance provided, and
- Quality of staff involved – commitment of co-ordinators, expertise of instructors, support from the steering group.

One of the clear strengths of the programme is that it has been developed and rolled out in consultation

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with girls. As a result, it is directly responsive to their needs and values their role as advisors as well as participants.

Without initial financial support the schools were less likely to have undertaken the programme in the first instance, but now that the benefits are more visible all three case study schools were prepared to consider maintaining the programme independently at some level.

As with the girls, the responses from staff in relation to the personnel involved in the programme were positive – school staff felt the steering group provided accessible and relevant support through the in-service day, instructors' database, visits to schools and availability by phone. Principals appreciated the (voluntary) work of co-ordinators and co-ordinators felt that principals were supportive of the programme.

### 5.2.3 Challenges

The challenges for the programme were highlighted by girls and by school personnel as follows:

- a) Timing of sessions,
- b) Arrangements for instructors,
- c) Involvement of girls in organising activities,
- d) Limitations on numbers involved.

Some Girls Active sessions occur at lunchtime and some after school and it appears that both schedules have associated problems. Lunch is no more than an hour long and commonly utilised for extra-curricular activities. For Girls Active, it can be difficult to acquire instructors at lunchtime and sessions may be necessarily curtailed. On the other hand, some girls find it more difficult to attend evening sessions especially if they live a distance from the school and rely on buses to get home.

While the Girls Active programme is intended to be additional to the formal curriculum, within the context of a 'whole school' environment all extra-curricular activity is viewed as an important part of a student's development and indeed as 'co-curricular' to the main programme of teaching undertaken by schools. In the 'whole school',

therefore, lunchbreak becomes an equally important part of the student's day and adequate provision will be seen as important for all such activities. Programmes such as Girls Active are, therefore, more likely to prosper in the 'whole school' context.

Instructors' fees arose as an issue for school staff and for support agencies. In some cases it appears that the fee has to be supplemented by a charge on the participating girls or on the school itself, especially in cases where costly activities such as horse-riding are undertaken. Charges did not arise as an issue for girls either in the questionnaire or focus groups. Sourcing of tutors is also an ongoing difficulty for some schools. The establishment of the database and the sharing of contacts between co-ordinators has alleviated the problem to some extent. It is, however, important, that the database is comprehensive and updated regularly.

A distinctive characteristic of Girls Active is that the girls are actively involved in choosing and organising the activities. In practice, however, the former appears to work better than the latter as over 80% felt they had an input into selecting the type of activities undertaken whereas only just over a third claimed that they have a say in organising the programme. In Phase One, two girls from each participating school underwent leadership training to enable them to contribute to organising the programme in their school. However, in itself this created a sense of inequality within the group and in the following years a handbook for girls was developed and distributed to participating groups instead. Teachers commented that with time pressures and other logistics it can be hard to get the girls involved. This aspect of the programme merits further investigation.

Despite the fact that the principle of voluntary participation is built into Girls Active, one of the case study schools reported that it was made mandatory for the participating group to attend Girls Active activities. This was counterbalanced to some extent by the 'treats' provided for the girls during the year that helped to create a group

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identity and valued their activities. In the event, the girls were very enthusiastic about the programme although they recommended that it not be made mandatory for others.

In the case studies the issue of the limitations on numbers and the benefits of extending the programme arose numerous times. This, in itself, can be seen as a reflection on the perceived benefits of the programme for participants and the needs that are still unmet. The financial implications of such an extension were not considered.

Many participating schools have chosen to organise Girls Active for a different group of girls each year – the questionnaire data suggested that there was a turnover of more than half from Phase Two to Phase Three. There was also no clearly dominant year class involved although most participants were in the senior cycle. It is apparent that school management adapt the programme to suit their own circumstances although the issue of whether it is best to work with the same group over a number of years or to distribute the experience of the programme to as many as possible is uncertain from the present study. Clearly, with unlimited resources, the ideal scenario would be to provide a Girls Active programme for all interested girls not involved in physical activity across all year classes.

## 5.2.5 Linkages with Other School Programmes

With regard to the sustainability of Girls Active long-term, most comments from staff relate to forming linkages with other ongoing programmes such as PE, Youth Sport West, the Healthy Schools Programme, SPHE and so on. This would inevitably entail involving more staff in networking around the planning of the various programmes. To be most effective, this would necessitate staff training and a time commitment for which allowances have to be made. It becomes even more difficult when participating girls are coming from more than one class even though this in itself may be welcomed by the girls or be necessary in schools with smaller numbers of students (it is reported by steering

group members that the Girls Active programme may be most effective in smaller schools where all the girls are involved across years and a group bonding effect is generated).

One of the criteria of the Girls Active programme is that it be linked within schools to the ongoing SPHE programme whereby girls offered Girls Active are required to have timetabled SPHE classes that includes a section on physical activity. The Girls Active support organisations encourage schools to fulfil this requirement by providing information on Girls Active to school principals at their yearly SPHE meeting. In reality, this commitment can be quite difficult to fulfil especially where the Girls Active co-ordinator is not the SPHE teacher in the school. The fact is that SPHE is not compulsory for senior cycle and many of the older participants do not attend SPHE classes. Even when participants do have timetabled SPHE not all address the issue of physical activity. However, more than two-thirds do so and the case studies reveal a high awareness among school staff and students of the essential linkages involved.

There are obvious potential links between Girls Active activities and the PE programme in schools and the experience from Girls Active could be usefully incorporated into the further development of school physical activity policy or school PE policy. The national PE syllabus is currently in the process of evolving into a more broad-based programme that recognises the value of non-sporty physical activity and in this situation the PE teacher has the potential to be a key support in the embedding of Girls Active as a regular extra-curricular activity in schools.

## 5.2.6 Linkages Outside the School

The findings suggest that Girls Active may be successful in creating a pathway to participation by girls in physical activity both inside and outside of the school curriculum. Indeed, the success and perhaps the sustainability of Girls Active may partly depend on the generation of links with outside facilities and clubs. One of the case study schools had utilised a local leisure centre and others have

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linked with local facilities such as riding clubs. The development of relationships such as these makes it easier to locate instructors and has the added attraction for girls of being located outside the school grounds. It may also help to counter the perception of girls that there are no suitable facilities for physical activity available to them outside of school.

## 5.3 Impacts

### 5.3.1 Participating Girls

In the questionnaire, most girls identified a number of beneficial effects that participation in the programme has had on them personally such as feeling better, being more active, learning new activities and being more aware of general health. A large proportion of girls also identified other positive impacts such as feeling more confident, studying better and joining new clubs. In addition, there are indications from the questionnaire data that participation in the programme has led to a response from the girls in relation to their participation in other physical activities outside of Girls Active such as showing more interest in school PE classes or in taking up other sports/ activities.

The evidence from the case studies reinforces these findings and builds on them by suggesting that a group bond develops among girls participating on the programme, that the fun element is central to the experience and that the programme provides an opportunity for girls to get to know others from different classes and to develop their relationships with the co-ordinating teachers. Discussion in the focus groups revealed that the girls had quite a high awareness of the issues pertaining to teenage girls and physical activity - in one case, for instance, they suggested that younger more active girls should be facilitated to join Girls Active so that they would maintain good activity habits that might persist through later years. It is unclear to what extent this awareness is a direct result of their participation on the programme, but it is possible that the issue may have been addressed in the linked SPHE class.

The girls identified certain barriers to their participation in further physical activity - not having the time (questionnaire) and not having access to facilities or clubs (case studies). The former may suggest that girls place a relatively low priority on physical activity and/or that significant demands are made on girls' spare time from home duties, long journeys to/from school, other activities and so on. The lack of facilities reflects the fact that many of the girls live in rural areas where recreational clubs may not be accessible and may not provide the kind of facilities or activities that are attractive to them.

### 5.3.2 Participating Schools

The experience of the case studies suggest that, having successfully implemented Girls Active over a number of years, the programme is becoming embedded in participating schools and managements are intent on maintaining it in the long term even without the back-up of the support organisations.

The case studies also give an indication of the extent of some wider effects of Girls Active in the participating schools. Despite some initial 'slagging' from other students it appears that the programme has a positive association generally within the student body of participating schools and many non-participating girls have expressed interest in joining it. Initiatives such as presenting Girls Active girls with certificates at the end-of-year prize-giving day or allowing them to wear their sports kit for the day of Girls Active activity helps to promote the attractiveness of the programme for other girls and to heighten its visibility within schools.

All three of the principals that were interviewed linked the programme to other ongoing in-school initiatives such as Healthy Eating or Healthy Schools programmes. Both principals and co-ordinators exhibited a good understanding of the issues for teenage girls in relation to physical activity, although to what extent this level of understanding is a product of participating in Girls Active or a contributory factor towards the schools' participation in the first instance is difficult to say.

# Discussion

One co-ordinator who is also a PE teacher revealed that she has modified her practice of PE teaching to some extent as a direct result of her experience of the programme. In another school, participation in Girls Active is utilised by staff as a selling point to the parents of potential students.

There is one school, not a case study school, that has been running two Girls Active groups for the past two years reflecting a strong belief by management in the value of the programme for its students. This school has subsequently also undertaken to develop other programmes to get students physically active such as a walking programme. In addition, some non-involved schools have asked to join the programme.

### 5.3.3 Wider Impacts

There is evidence that the programme has already achieved some broader impacts on the area of women in sport generally. One of the support agencies to the project, Donegal Sports Partnership, has used the experience of Girls Active to develop an initiative with women from the Travelling Community where the target group was actively involved in choosing activities and determining the circumstances of its roll-out. Another support agency, Sligo Sport & Recreation Partnership, recently organised a 'Women in Sport' conference in collaboration with HSE West, where girls involved in Girls Active made contributions to the discussion and from which it is anticipated that a plan of action will be developed to promote and value women's participation in sport in the region.

## 5.4 Concluding Remarks

Most of the girls participating in Girls Active had previously not been active in sports either inside or outside school. They put forward many reasons for this in the present study and most of those relate to a feeling of being excluded from such activities rather than negative feelings towards physical activity itself. They felt excluded because they were girls, because they were not 'good' at sport, because they did not like the limited range of sporting activity available to them, or because they

did not like certain aspects of traditional competitive sport such as the pressure to win. When given an opportunity through Girls Active to choose other kinds of physical activities, however, it is notable that these 'non-sporty' girls responded very positively through their attendance and their enthusiasm for the programme. The girls felt motivated by a desire to get fitter, to be more active and to have fun – common reasons why anyone might get involved in sport. It appears that what was missing for these girls previously was a supportive environment and accessible appropriate activities. As with the Traveller women mentioned above, it is likely that the lessons from the Girls Active experience may usefully be applied to raise the physical activity levels of other groups such as non-sporty boys.

As has already been stated, the long term sustainability of individual programmes such as Girls Active may be dependent on the development of the concept of the 'whole school' environment where extra-curricular activity is viewed as co-curricular to the main programme of teaching undertaken by schools. The 'whole school' approach also facilitates the formation of linkages across various school programmes such as Girls Active and SPHE that will build synergies and maintain them as central to the physical, emotional and intellectual development of all young people in school. ■



## 6. Recommendations



# Recommendations

## 6.1 Girls Active Management (HSE West, DSP, SSRP)

1. Continue to support schools in implementing the Girls Active programme. In the process, maintain its core principles especially those that are important to girls.

2. Encourage participating schools to mainstream the programme by incorporating it into the school's general sports policies and programmes.

3. The programme can be further enhanced by the following:

- Continue to develop and enhance the partnership between the support agencies in order to sustain Girls Active so that it will become an integral part of every school's physical activity programme.
- Strengthen the link between SPHE and Girls Active – provide materials on the link in co-ordinator training and school visits; provide support and materials to SPHE teachers; emphasise the commitment of schools in relation to the terms and conditions of the programme.
- Facilitate and support the Girls Active programme to include sports clubs and other local facility providers.
- Acknowledge the work of Girls Active co-ordinators and continue to support them through training, school visits and the development of materials.
- Continue to promote and publicise the programme within each county so that participation by schools is recognised and valued.
- Pilot the development of a physical activity policy with a small number of schools. Such a policy would clearly differentiate between physical education, sport and recreational physical activity. The policy would emphasise the importance of developing opportunities

for all students in a range of programmes and events. It would be particularly sensitive to the needs of girls but would also examine the issue of provision of activities for boys. The development of such a policy would ideally involve the SPHE team in the school, the PE teacher and the Girls Active steering group.

## 6.2 Girls Active Schools

4. Develop a culture that values participation by girls in a wide range of physical activities. This includes the development of a written school policy that, by recognising physical activities that are parallel to sporting achievements, is inclusive of participation for all.

5. Continue to implement Girls Active as part of the school physical activity programme.

6. Provide a supportive environment for teachers in their roles as Girls Active co-ordinators.

7. Link with the local community to provide access to a wide range of sporting and recreational activities and facilities. Develop a database of existing facilities, clubs and activities available in the local community.

8. Continue to involve girls in the selection, organisation and promotion of extra-curricular activities and activities in PE classes. Focus on individual as well as team activities.

9. Promote Girls Active at all levels and every opportunity within the home, school and community environments.

## 6.3 Other Recommendations

10. That the Department of Education and Science strengthens PE in schools through supporting extra-curricular school activities as important elements of the 'whole school' approach.

11. That all agencies involved in Girls Active continue to fund Girls Active and all other programmes that promote the participation of girls in physical activities. ■

# Appendices

## A: Implementation of Girls Active Programme 2003/4 & 2004/5

### Phase One (2003/4):

- Eleven schools participated (6 Donegal, 4 Sligo, 1 Leitrim).
- Two hundred and thirty-nine girls participated.
- Co-ordinating Teachers attended in-service training early in the year, and review session later in the year.
- Visits to schools by representatives of support agencies.
- Twenty-four girls attended residential 'Leadership Training' (2 days).
- 'Girls Active' programme name and logo established, the logo created by the girls themselves during leadership training.
- Girls Active video produced.
- Eight new participating schools recruited for 2004/2005 - 4 in Donegal, 2 in Leitrim, and 2 in Sligo.

The attendance records revealed a very high participation rate in most schools. The most popular physical activities chosen by the girls were yoga, dance, kickboxing and kick aerobics, tai chi and self-defence. Two schools chose swimming as an option. These are individual, non-competitive, recreational-type activities that can be practised as part of a group or individually.

Questionnaires together with individual and group discussion were used to gather feedback from participating girls and co-ordinating teachers by programme staff. The girls highlighted the following as benefits of Girls Active for them – their involvement in selecting and organising activities, better fitness and self-image, social aspect, and more confidence.

Discussion with co-ordinators focused on:

- Co-ordinators' opinions on teenage girls participating in physical activity - the influence of peer pressure, the lack of confidence and competence, fear of failure, need for enjoyment and immediate benefit, lack of opportunity and

choice regarding sport and recreation.

- Benefits of Girls Active - ownership by the girls, non-competitive physical activities valued, higher subsequent levels of participation in PE, increased confidence.
- Advice from the co-ordinators regarding the future management and implementation of the programme – development of a database (types of activities available, instructor contact information, advice on appropriate fees); provision of information for instructors and parents on the rationale and principles of the programme; funding for the provision of transport home from after-school activities; extension of support for co-ordinator within the school; and encouragement for the girls to continue with the activities themselves in following years.

### Phase Two (2004/5):

- Nineteen schools participated, 20 Girls Active groups (10 Donegal, 6 Sligo, 3 Leitrim).
- Approximately 330 girls participated.
- Co-ordinating Teachers attended in-service training early in the year, and review session later in the year.
- Visits to schools by representatives of support agencies.
- Development of two databases of information on suitable instructors (one for Sligo/Leitrim, one for Donegal).
- One-day Activity Fests held in Sligo and Letterkenny.

All school stakeholders – girls, co-ordinators, principals - were asked to review Girls Active at the end of the 2004/5 year. Again, everyone was very positive about the programme. The participating girls identified the following benefits of the programme for them - becoming more physically active after completing the programme and being more confident generally. They particularly enjoyed doing dance, self-defence, gym, yoga, basketball and kickboxing. They enjoyed the fact that these activities were non-competitive, had variety, were not pressurised, and had a feeling of fun.

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Principals highlighted the apparent enjoyment that the girls got from the programme and their greater awareness around the benefits of physical activity. Co-ordinators emphasised the following as the main benefits of the programme - that it is for non-sporty girls and that the girls are now more active, more confident and more socially interactive. Regarding challenges, co-ordinators focused on the difficulty in finding suitable instructors and in timetabling the activities at either lunchtime or after school. Co-ordinators also highlighted the importance of the Activity Fests as opportunities for the girls to meet each other and to have 'taster' sessions of new activities. Among the main recommendations made towards improving Girls Active were the following:

- Continue the programme.
- Continue the back-up support for schools.
- Develop the instructor database on an ongoing basis – update regularly, regionalise more, provide early in year, raise payment levels.
- Develop programme content – Mother and daughter exercise sessions, 'taster' sessions at beginning of year, two Activity Fests per year.
- Develop programme implementation – begin earlier in the school year and finish earlier, and involve the girls more in organising activities.
- Produce an invoice template for use by all schools.
- Increase promotion of the programmes in the local media.
- Lobby the Department of Education and Science for sub-funding of co-ordinators involved.
- Broaden the programme to include non-sporty boys. ■■

# Appendices

## B: Questionnaire for Participating Girls

### A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What is your current age?

12yrs      13yrs      14yrs      15yrs      16yrs      17yrs      18yrs

2. What is your current class year?

1styr      2ndyr      3rdyr      Transition yr      5thyr      6thyr

3. Which of the following applies to you in relation to the last school year, 2004-5?  
(Please tick one box only)

- Physical activity was discussed in SPHE class
- Physical activity was not discussed in SPHE class
- I had no timetabled SPHE class

4. Below are general statements about the possible benefits of exercise/ physical activity for you. Please draw a circle around a number on each line to show how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

|   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| Makes me feel better                    | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| Is an activity I enjoy doing            | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| Makes me feel I have achieved something | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| Helps me to concentrate                 | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| Helps me make friends                   | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| Helps me look better                    | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |

### B. WHAT YOU DID IN GIRLS ACTIVE

5. a) Why did you become involved in Girls Active? (Tick all that apply to you)

- |                    |       |                                   |       |
|--------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| To have fun        | _____ | To become more active             | _____ |
| To reduce stress   | _____ | To meet new people                | _____ |
| To look better     | _____ | To learn new sport/ activity      | _____ |
| To get fitter      | _____ | To become more confident          | _____ |
| To be with friends | _____ | To oblige teacher/ friend/ family | _____ |

Other (Details?) \_\_\_\_\_

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b) Which of those that you ticked above is the MOST important reason that you became involved in Girls Active? (Name one reason only)

---

6. Did you have a say in Girls Active?

a) In selecting the type of activities undertaken:                      Yes                      No

b) In organising the activities:    Yes                      No

If yes to either, in what way did you have a say? \_\_\_\_\_

---

7. How often did you participate in Girls Active in the last school year (2004-5)?

All of the time                                      Most of the time                                      Some of the time  
Hardly any of the time                              None of the time

Please describe the reasons for your level of participation \_\_\_\_\_

---

8. a) Are you still involved in Girls Active?                                      Yes                      No

b) If you are no longer involved in Girls Active, why not? (Tick all that apply to you)

|   |       |                   |       |               |       |
|---|-------|-------------------|-------|---------------|-------|
| Doing exams                               | _____ | Not permitted     | _____ | Cannot afford | _____ |
| Not interested                            | _____ | Physically unable | _____ | No time       | _____ |
| Part-time job                             | _____ | No transport      | _____ |               |       |
| Developed other sport/ activity interests | _____ |                   |       |               |       |
| Developed other non-sport interests       | _____ |                   |       |               |       |
| Other                                     |       | (Details?)        | _____ |               |       |

c) Which of those that you ticked above is the MOST important reason for your not being involved in Girls Active now? (Name one reason only)

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## C. WHAT YOU THOUGHT OF GIRLS ACTIVE

9. How important were each of the following factors in your overall experience of Girls Active to date?  
(Please tick one box on each line)

|                             | Very Important           | Important                | Neither Important nor Unimportant | Not Important            |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Fun atmosphere              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No competition              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not physical contact sports | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Friends participated        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Time to change clothes      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No boys                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No people watching          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Got exercise                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Learned new sport/ skill    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Met new people              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Interference with exams     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> |

10. How often did you participate in physical activity/ sport BEFORE you got involved in Girls Active i.e. played sport, cycled, walked briskly for at least 30 minutes? (Do not include your school PE class)

|                         |                   |                |
|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 4 or more days per week | 2-3 days per week | 1 day per week |
| 1-3 days per month      | Almost never      | Never          |
| Don't know              |                   |                |

11. Apart from Girls Active, how often do you NOW participate in physical activity/ sport i.e. play sport, cycle, walk briskly for at least 30 minutes? (Do not include your school PE class)

|                         |                   |                |
|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 4 or more days per week | 2-3 days per week | 1 day per week |
| 1-3 days per month      | Almost never      | Never          |
| Don't know              |                   |                |

12. Has the amount of sport/ physical activity you undertake NOW (outside of Girls Active) been changed by your participation in Girls Active? (Tick one box only)

|            |               |
|------------|---------------|
| Yes, a lot | Yes, a little |
| No         | Don't know    |

If your physical activity levels have been affected by Girls Active, please describe in what way:

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13. If you haven't taken up any additional sport/ physical activity outside of Girls Active, why is this so? (Tick any boxes that apply)

|                     |       |                             |       |
|---------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Not interested      | _____ | No facilities available     | _____ |
| No time             | _____ | No friends involved         | _____ |
| Too costly          | _____ | No clubs/ classes available | _____ |
| Nobody has asked me | _____ |                             |       |
| Other               |       | (Details?)                  | _____ |

14. Has your involvement in Girls Active affected your participation in school PE class?

(Tick one box only)

Now more involved       Now less involved       No change

15. Below are statements about the possible effects of Girls Active on you. Please draw a circle around a number on each line to show how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

|                                   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| I am more aware of general health | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I take up more leadership roles   | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I feel better generally           | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I am more active generally        | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I join new clubs                  | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I learn new sports                | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I am more confident               | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |
| I study better                    | 1                 | 2        | 3                          | 4     | 5              |

16. Please draw a circle around a number on each line to show how you feel about the following aspects of Girls Active:

|   | Very Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |
|---|-------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Type of activities provided   | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Numbers of sessions provided  | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Length of sessions provided   | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Facilities provided for activities  | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Support from other participants on Girls Active                                     | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Support from other students   | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Support from co-ordinating teacher  | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Support from school principal   | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Support from family members   | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Cost of activities  | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Skills of instructor  | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |
| Transport home afterwards (circle only if activities took place after school hours) | 1                 | 2            | 3                                  | 4         | 5              |

# Appendices

17. Overall how do you rate your satisfaction with the Girls Active programme? (Tick one box only)

Excellent

Good

Ok

Poor

Very poor

18. Please list THREE words to describe what Girls Active has meant to you?

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**THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE...**

# Appendices

## c: Case Studies Protocols

### FOCUS GROUPS – QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS:

#### SPECIFICS

Did you all take part in Girls Active last year?  
What activities did you do?  
When did you do them – lunch or after school? (time? transport?)  
Where did you do them – in school or elsewhere? Why?

#### INVOLVEMENT

Why did you become involved?  
Why did you stay involved/ drop out?  
What did/ didn't you like about Girls Active?

#### BENEFITS & IMPACTS

What are the best things about Girls Active for you? [3 subgroups]  
Were there any bad things about Girls Active, any disadvantages to being involved?  
Did Girls Active affect your participation in other activities – PE, extra-curricular sports, other clubs, other activities? How?

#### IMPROVING GIRLS ACTIVE

How could Girls Active be improved for you in the school?  
What might need to be changed or added to Girls Active to help you become more active outside of the programme itself?  
What would encourage more girls to become involved in Girls Active?

### QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS:

#### SPECIFICS

What is the size of the school?  
Is it mixed or single-sex?  
When did the school start on Girls Active programme? How? Why?  
What years have been involved? Why?  
What activities have been undertaken? Why?

#### INVOLVEMENT

Why did your school become involved in Girls Active programme?

#### BENEFITS/ IMPACTS

What were the benefits to the girls involved and to the school in general?  
Were there any disadvantages to the girls involved and to the school in general?  
Can/ has this programme influence how physical activity in general is organized in your school?  
Explain. (Non-competitive, Having a say, Girls v boys)  
What were the strengths of the programme?  
What were the weaknesses of the programme?

# Appendices

## IMPROVING THE PROGRAMME

Is there anything that could be done differently in the school to improve the Girls Active programme?  
What could be done differently by support agencies?  
What might need to be changed/ or added to the programme to help increase participation in PA outside the Girls Active sessions?

## PROJECT STRUCTURES /SUPPORTS

What were the most important elements of support that enabled your school to implement Girls Active?  
What elements of support were missing or would enhanced the programme?

## SUSTAINING THE PROGRAMME

If there were no further funding for your school for Girls Active programme in another years time would any aspects of the programme continue?  
What would need to happen so this programme could become part of your school extra curricular programme like some other sports?

## QUESTIONS FOR CO-ORDINATING TEACHERS:

### SPECIFICS

What is the size of the school?  
Is it mixed or single-sex?  
When did the school start on Girls Active programme? How? Why?  
What years have been involved? Why?  
What activities have been undertaken? Why?

### INVOLVEMENT

Why did you become involved as the co-ordinator of Girls Active in your school?  
What were the positives for you as co-ordinator of the programme?  
What were the drawbacks of being involved as a co-ordinator?

### BENEFITS/ IMPACTS

What were the benefits to the girls involved and to the school in general?  
Were there any disadvantages to the girls involved and to the school in general?  
Can/ has this programme influence how physical activity in general is organized in your school?  
Explain. (Non competitive, Having a say, Girls v boys)  
What were the strengths of the programme?  
What were the weaknesses of the programme?

## IMPROVING THE PROGRAMME

Is there anything that could be done differently in the school to improve the programme?  
What could be done differently by support agencies?  
What might need to be changed/ or added to the programme to help increase participation in PA outside the Girls Active sessions?

# Appendices

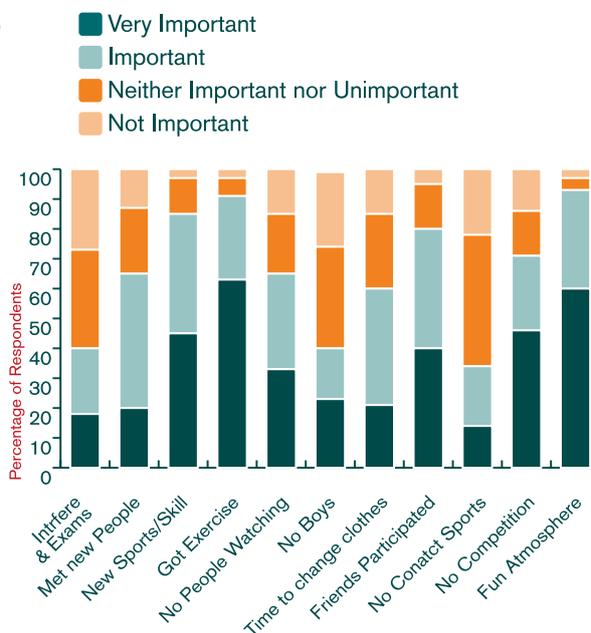
## PROJECT STRUCTURES /SUPPORTS

What were the most important elements of the support received by you as a co-ordinator?  
Where do you require further support?

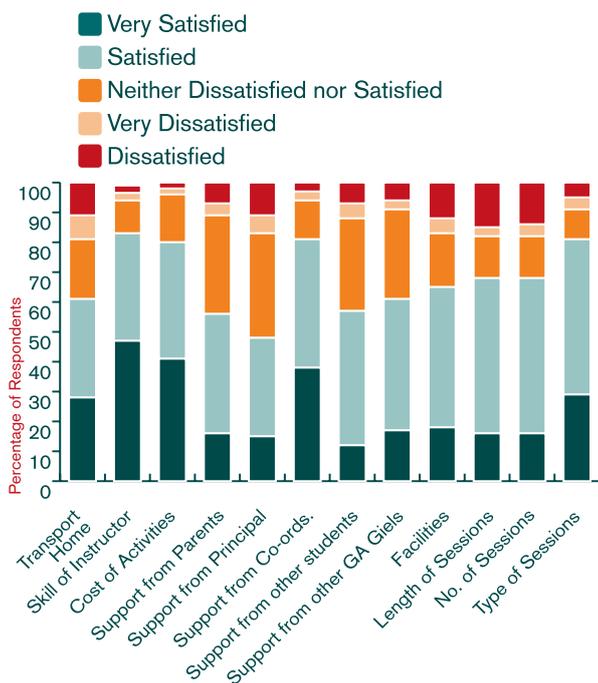
## SUSTAINING THE PROGRAMME

If there were no further funding for your school for this programme in another years time would any aspects of the programme continue?  
What would need to happen so this programme could become part of your school extra curricular programme like some other sports?

## D: Overall Experience of Girls Active



## E: Satisfaction Levels with Operation of Girls Active and with Available Supports



## F. In-Service Day for Co-ordinating Teachers, October 2005

Further information relating to the operation of the Girls Active programme was obtained from the co-ordinating teachers in-service day in October 2005.

At the meeting teachers itemised what had worked well/ not so well during Phase Two and what issues arose during the year for the schools. These lists are reproduced below.

### What worked well:

- Girls made friends across different class years
- Girls more confident
- Activity Fest is a great motivator
- Better rapport between girls and teachers
- Some girls joined clubs outside of school
- Great continuity of numbers and participation levels from year to year
- In some schools the numbers of girls participating increased after the first activity
- Longer sessions worked better i.e. 2hr sessions rather than 1hr
- Quality of tutors/ instructors
- Good range of activities
- Charging of a small fee for participation

### What did not work so well:

- Rate of pay for instructors too low
- Girls as organisers – reluctance, not reliable
- Transport home for after-school sessions
- Availability of premises for lunchtime sessions
- Issue of travel for instructors
- Lunchtime too short for sessions
- Finding available instructors
- Lack of time to meet with girls

### Issues arising:

- Length of sessions
- Charging girls
- Timing of Activity Fest
- Availability of instructors
- Lunchtime vs. evening
- Safety

# Appendices

## List of schools

### Phase I

Letterkenny Vocational School, Co Donegal  
Crana College, Buncrana, Co Donegal  
Vocational School, Stranorlar, Co Donegal  
Magh Ene College, Bundoran, Co Donegal  
Carrick-on-Shannon Community School, Co Leitrim  
St Clare's Comprehensive, Manorhamilton, Co Leitrim  
Jesus & Mary Secondary School, Enniscrone, Co Sligo  
Grange Vocational School, Co Sligo

### Phase II

Ballinode College, Sligo  
St Mary's College, Ballisodare, Co Sligo  
Mercy College, Sligo  
Corran College, Ballymote, Co Sligo  
Deele College, Raphoe, Co Donegal  
Colaiste Cholmcille, Ballyshannon, Co Donegal  
Mulroy College, Milford, Co Donegal  
Glenties Comprehensive College, Co Donegal  
Moville Community College, Moville, Co Donegal  
Gairmscoil Chu Uladh, Ballinamore, Co Donegal  
Lough Allen College, Drumkeerin, Co Leitrim

## Acknowledgements

### Working Group (Up to 2006)

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Ms Maire McCallion    | Health Promotion Department, HSE West  |
| Ms Deirdre Lavin      | Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership |
| Mr Shane Hayes        | Youth Sport West                       |
| Mr Billy White        | Department of Education                |
| Ms Deirdre O'Toole    | Donegal Sports Partnership             |
| Ms Martina Sandilands | Letterkenny Institute of Technology    |
| Mr Michael McGeehin   | Donegal Sports Partnership             |
| Ms Patricia McCaffrey | Girls Active co-ordinator              |
| Mr Eamon Ryan         | Moville Community College              |

### New Members

|                    |                                       |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Mr Myles Sweeney   | Donegal Sports Partnership            |
| Ms Olive Morrissey | Health Promotion Department, HSE West |
| Ms Thérèse Laverty | Health Promotion Department, HSE West |
| Ms Esther Mooney   | Girls Active co-ordinator             |

### Thanks Also To;

All the schools and the girls who participated in this evaluation and who have supported the Girls Active programme since its initiation.

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