

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Ulster University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism (24)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Informing the Development, Implementation and Evaluation of the Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2019 - 2025		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012 - 2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Gavin Breslin	Senior Lecturer in Psychology	2007 - present
Tandy J Haughey	Senior Lecturer in Sport Coaching and Development	2005 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Between 2014 and 2019, Ulster University research has been instrumental in the development, implementation and evaluation of Northern Ireland's (NI) first policy on mental health in sport. The Department for Communities <i>Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2019-2025</i> has produced significant impacts relating to mental health promotion, programming and awareness at all levels of sport in NI from grassroots to elite. Ulster research has also informed mental health guidance for athletes during COVID-19 from the British Psychological Society.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Led by Breslin, Ulster researchers in collaboration with international centres of excellence and members of the sports policy community on the island of Ireland, have shown that sports participation can be used as a vehicle for promoting mental health. Since 2012, this research has encompassed systematic literature reviews, cross-sectional surveys, controlled trials and public consultations, all of which have produced a firm evidence base to guide policy making as well as mental health promotion, programming and awareness across all levels of the NI sports sector.</p> <p>In 2012, Breslin was funded by the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland to examine crucial research questions regarding the psychological relationship between perceived control over mental health, and help-seeking behaviour (<b>R1</b>). Results from a NI-wide survey (1013 adults – 46% male, 54% female, aged 16-65 from a range of NI social class groupings – ABC1, C2 and DE) revealed low levels of mental health understanding and a perception of limited control over mental health compared with physical health. This illustrated an urgent need for enhanced mental health awareness and self-management. Between 2015-2017, Breslin led a series of mental health psychoeducation interventions (with governing bodies of sport, mental health charities, youth through to professional athletes, coaches, parents and club volunteers), funded by Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) and the Public Health Agency for Northern Ireland (PHA), first to understand the barriers to mental health support and mental ill-health stigma, and second to raise mental health awareness among sports participants (<b>R2, R3</b>). These studies produced a strong evidence base on how best to increase knowledge and understanding of mental health in sport and encourage help-seeking behaviour. The evidence subsequently informed Breslin's advice to Northern Ireland's Mental Health and Wellbeing in and Through Sport Steering Group to incorporate research into national mental health awareness programme content, design and evaluation.</p>		

In 2016, Breslin (**R4**) undertook a global systematic review of published experimental studies, funded by SNI, to determine the most effective interventions that improve mental health knowledge and help-seeking among sports coaches, athletes and officials. This work demonstrated an inconsistent approach in methodology and study design. Importantly, the review highlighted the need for research consensus in designing and reporting mental health interventions in sport.

To understand the approach in NI to supporting mental health in sport, Breslin undertook a national review of mental health awareness programmes (**R6**). Both the global (**R4**) and national review (**R6**) were endorsed by the Board of Trustees in SNI in 2017, then key recommendations from the research were used to develop policy interventions in this field. Breslin's research recommended: a need for a Northern Ireland policy on well-being in sport; investment in evidence-based mental health programmes; the appointment of a mental health and well-being officer in sports clubs; and the integration of existing well-being programmes into sports clubs nationally (**R6**).

These recommendations were subject to further research via public consultation to identify whether a policy Action Plan was required. Breslin led the data collection, design and analysis of the public consultation in April and May 2017 with policy makers, mental health charities, mental health professionals, athletes, coaches, governing bodies of sport, academics, athletes, coaches, officials, sporting public and those with lived experience of mental ill-health. All recommendations from the research were supported and the *Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2019-2025* was developed (**C1**) citing Breslin's research (**R1, R2, R4, R6**). Importantly, the Action Plan signified a shift in opinion, and commitment by a government department to support mental health in sport and resource this support for the long term (**R6, C2**).

Building on this research (**R4**), Breslin and colleagues at Ulster worked with international collaborating partners to produce the first 'International consensus statement on the psychosocial and policy-related approaches to mental health awareness programmes in sport' (**R5**). Replete with policy and practice recommendations, the statement cites the Action Plan as an example of good practice. Breslin's contribution included coordination of the development of the statement.

**3. References to the research** Outputs can be provided by Ulster University on request.

**R1.** Breslin, G. & McCay, N. (2012). Perceived control over physical and mental well-being: The effects of gender, age and social class. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 18(1) 38-45. doi.org/10.1177/1359105312438600.

**R2.** Breslin, G., Haughey, T., Donnelly, P., Kearney, C., & Prentice, G. (2017). Promoting Mental Health Awareness in Sport Clubs. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 16(2), 55-62, doi.org/10.1108/JPMH-08-2016-0040.

**R3.** Breslin, G., Haughey, T., O'Brien, W., Caulfield, L., Robertson, A., & Lawlor, M. (2018). Increasing athlete knowledge of mental health and intentions to seek help: The State of Mind Ireland (SOMI) Pilot Program. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 12(1), 39-56. doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.2016-0039.

**R4.** Breslin, G., Shannon, S., Haughey, T., Donnelly, P., & Leavey, G. (2017). A systematic review of interventions to increase awareness of mental health and well-being in athletes, coaches and officials. *Systematic Reviews*, 6(1), 177. doi: 10.1186/s13643-017-0568-6.

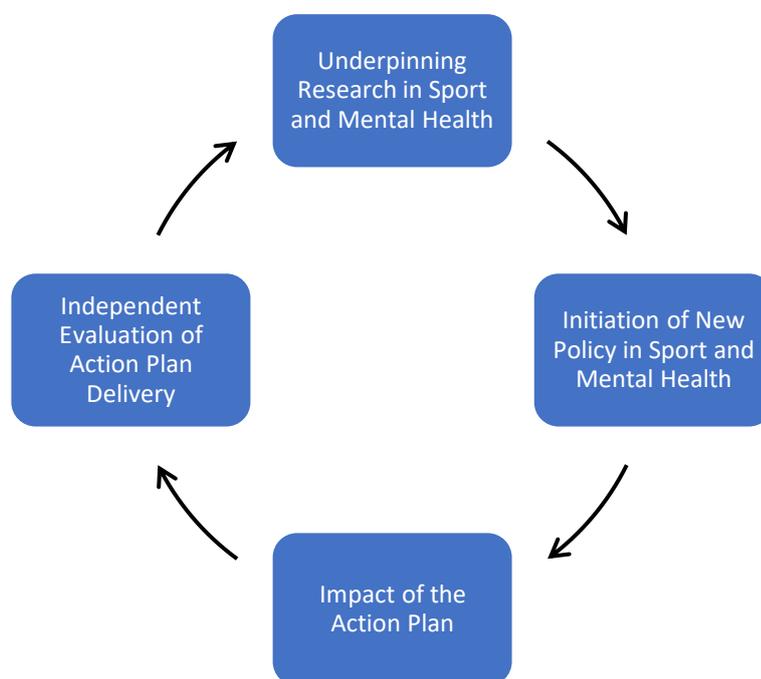
**R5.** Breslin, G., Smith, A., Donohue, B., Donnelly, P., Shannon, S., Haughey, T., Vella, S., Swann, C., Cotterill, S., Macintyre, T., Rogers, T., & Leavey, G. (2019). International consensus statement on the psychosocial and policy-related approaches to mental health awareness programmes in sport. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*. 5:e000585.

**R6.** Breslin, G., Shannon, S., Haughey, T., Donnelly, P., & Leavey, G. (2017). *Mental Health and Wellbeing Interventions in Sport: A Review and Recommendations*. Sport Northern Ireland.

Research articles **R1-5** are published in high-quality international peer-reviewed journals. Research article **R6** was reviewed by the Mental Health and Wellbeing in and Through Sport Steering Group and approved by the Sport Northern Ireland Board which oversees strategy and policy in NI.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Between 2014 and 2019, Ulster University research has significantly impacted this emerging but critical policy field across all levels of sport by being instrumental to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of Northern Ireland's first policy for mental health in sport and the delivery of evidence-based interventions, as depicted in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Initiation of a New Six-Year Wellbeing in Sport Policy Action Plan**

Research articles (**R1, R2, R4, R6**) significantly informed the development and implementation of the *Well-being in Sport Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2019-2025* (**C1**). Breslin was commissioned by SNI to co-author the Action Plan and take a leadership role in its development, public consultation and launch, and the research informed subsequent independent impact evaluation. The impact of Breslin's research in this regard is evidenced in testimonials provided by the NI government Department for Communities (**C2**), SNI (**C3**), and the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (**C4**) (also **C5, C6** and **C8**). The Action Plan is the first of its kind internationally and has the following vision:

*"That everyone involved in sport is aware of the importance of looking after their mental health, and that of others, leading to a healthier lifestyle and positive wellbeing"* (**C1**).

The vision is achieved through four policy themes: i) Engage, Promote and Support; ii) Capacity and Capability; iii) Identify and Inspire; and iv) Invest and Implement (**C1**). The four themes have 15 actions and 31-time bound delivery outputs (**C1**).

The initial impact from the Action Plan is a six-year government department policy ensuring that there is consistency and a commitment to a proactive approach to the delivery of mental health support in sport. A key outcome from the Action Plan has been to negate the 'stop-start' approach adopted to support mental health in sport in the past. Furthermore, substantial resource has been put in place to support the 31-time bound delivery outputs including: the appointment of a full time Well-being in Sport Coordinator who oversees the delivery of the Action Plan; human resource from SNI and the PHA to support training; finance for programme development; and yearly evaluation.

### ***The Impact of the Action Plan***

The time bound actions are set out in the Action Plan (C1), and a summary of community impact of the underpinning research and Action Plan to date is as follows:

- Two charities, Action Mental Health (AMH) and Sporting Chance (SC), have delivered mental health awareness, gambling and addiction workshops (92 workshops, C9) across NI with more planned in each year of the Action Plan.
- A well-being in sport online interactive hub, informed by the underpinning research, has been made available to all sports and club members in NI. The service includes mental health awareness programme resources, self-help programmes and digital intervention tools. The online hub was launched in April 2020 supporting the sporting community during the COVID-19 pandemic. 404 new users and 2,576 interactions are recorded (December 2020; C9).
- Mental health 'train the trainer' programmes have been provided to governing bodies of sport. A number of outcomes from the Action Plan have been achieved through the delivery of mental health awareness interventions with SportED in Northern Ireland (C5).
- All NI sports clubs can avail of a Sport Census, a quantitative monitor of wellbeing to monitor safeguarding, equality, diversity, inclusion, mental health support, safety, injury, transition, educational opportunities and club member views.
- Five Wellbeing Ambassadors (elite athletes from NI) have been appointed to promote mental health messages through social media videos, workshops and online engagement events.

Four case studies are detailed in the Action Plan which highlight its immediate impact in mental health awareness programming (C1. Note: aligned to the pressing need for community support in sport and mental health, SNI and the PHA actioned the programmes in the absence of a NI Executive; as such a number of case studies were generated before the official launch of the Action Plan). These programmes, informed by Ulster University research, involved a number of prominent sports governing bodies and charitable organisations working in the field of mental health. Participant testimonials indicated: "*The Action Plan was useful by recognising the importance of promoting evidence-based mental health programmes*" (Case Study 1); and that it "*has made us increasingly aware of the benefit of delivering mental health awareness programmes to sporting organisations and has given us the incentive to begin developing and piloting such programmes*" (Case Study 4, C1).

Testimonials by SportED (C5), the Northern Ireland Sports Forum (C6), and Swim Ireland (C8) evidence how the research has impacted their strategic planning and implementation of mental health awareness in sports clubs across the island of Ireland.

**C8:** "*In 2017 I developed a mental health and well-being policy for young people in our sport, 'Getting Our Heads Together'; this was a practical application of theory for our clubs and athletes. This was first published as an additional standalone policy in 2018, updated in 2019 where it is now included in our entire Swim Ireland Safeguarding Policies 2019... Your latest papers on supporting young athletes and their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic have been extremely valuable in informing messages to grassroots volunteers. I have been able to issue evidence-based practice advice for our volunteers in our clubs with such information.*"

*“The impact of the pandemic and the toll on young people’s mental health and well-being for their future selves through lack of sport is, as yet, immeasurable. I reverted to our mental health and well-being policy to support those directly involved with young people; and indeed, this has been a valuable resource in extreme cases where young people have taken their own lives, such is the reality of what we are now facing. The development of the Sport NI Action Plan for Mental Health and Wellbeing, and the review of mental health interventions has enabled direct support, consistent across our clubs.”*

### **Independent Evaluation of Action Plan Delivery**

An independent evaluation (C9) of pilot programme delivery under the first year of the Action Plan (C1) (April to December 2019), involving interviews and surveys with service providers and workshop participants, demonstrated that 92 mental health and addiction awareness workshops were delivered, engaging 2,394 participants, where 97% of attendees confirmed that the content was excellent, with 93% improving their awareness of mental health issues. Online video messages from the five Mental Health Ambassadors were viewed approximately **300,000 times** (C9).

### **Informing Athlete Mental Health Advice During COVID-19**

Research at Ulster (R4, R5) has also informed mental health guidance for athletes during COVID-19 from the UK’s learned society for psychology, the British Psychological Society (C7). This guidance set out three priority areas to support athletes: 1. Mental health and dealing with uncertainty; 2. Maintaining social connections; 3. Motivation and goal setting. Specifically, the guidance encourages athletes to focus on controlling a period of disruption and maintaining a sense of perspective during a global pandemic.

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**C1:** Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2019-2025

**C2:** Testimonial from Senior Strategic and Policy Development Manager, Department for Communities

**C3:** Testimonials from Sport Northern Ireland’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Co-ordinator and Policy, Planning and Research Manager

**C4:** Testimonial from Senior Consultant, the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children

**C5:** Testimonial from National Manager, SportED

**C6:** Testimonial from Executive Manager, Northern Ireland Sports Forum

**C7:** British Psychological Society Guidance for Athletes’ Wellbeing During COVID-19

**C8:** Testimonial from Head of Safeguarding, Ethics and Youth Development, Swim Ireland

**C9:** An Independent Evaluation of the Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan Pilot Programme: Sport NI Summary and associated email from Mental Health and Wellbeing Officer, Sport NI