

# HOW MANY INDOOR SPORTS CENTRES ARE THERE IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

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## Introduction

1. For anyone who has read our parallel reports on England, Wales and Scotland (E,W&S) it will quickly become obvious that this report is different. We have attempted in the other three reports to document the 'openings', 'closures', 'replacements' and 'refurbishments' of indoor sports centres in the three countries over time and the net provision over a series of 5-year bands.
2. Unfortunately, the data we have available to us for Northern Ireland does not allow us to report the historical provision of indoor sports centres in this way. Whilst we know the opening dates of many centres from other SLLP research and indeed closure dates, and in many cases replacement dates, for other centres this information is not comprehensive enough for any meaningful analysis.
3. What we can present in the remainder of this report is a picture of the current provision, which will enable us eventually to answer a parallel question; how many indoor sports centres are there in the United Kingdom in 2021?
4. As with the E,W&S reports, we accept again that our title is a question for which there is no universally 'right' answer. So this paper can only be an attempt to document the current provision; there can be no definitive attempt mainly, as we explain below, because of matters of definition.
5. The establishment by Sport Northern Ireland of their 'Active Places' database in 2016 has provided us with a useful starting point. However, unlike the other three countries' databases, the Northern Ireland interactive website was set up to provide information to the general public on "where to play sport" and not as a facilities database per se. Over 20 sports can be selected for information on where they are available, but significantly for our purposes there is also a searchable 'sports hall' category.

## Objectives

6. a) To document the current provision of indoor sports centres in Northern Ireland, and to analyse the variance between freestanding Local Authority centres, other freestanding centres, and centres on educational sites;  
  
b) To establish the current level of provision per head of population.

## Defining Indoor Sports Centres

7. The Introduction and Foreword to the SLLP indicates:-

At the heart of developing this story has been the challenge of 'defining' what was originally a new concept, the community indoor sports centre, which has evolved over the 50 or so years. The core definition of a 'community indoor sports centre' for the purposes of 'Harlow to K2 and Beyond' is the one broadly accepted from the early days by the Sports Council and adopted by 'The British

Leisure Centre Guide 1993', published by John S Turner Associates in association with Longman Group UK Limited.

***It is – an indoor centre with a sports hall and some other facilities, which may include a swimming pool, and has significant use by the general public.***

This is the definition which we have used for our current work in Northern Ireland, but we must point out an important difference between the data available to us and the definition used for the E,W&S reports.

8. Whilst we have continued to exclude any facility which does not have a sports hall at all or has a sports hall, but no ancillary facilities (i.e. stand-alone sports halls), we are unable to make the important distinction between those sports halls that meet the English Active Places definition of a 'Main Hall' (i.e. three badminton courts or more) and those that do not, which are classified as Activity Halls elsewhere. Inevitably this means that some facilities are included in our analysis for Northern Ireland which would have been excluded in the other three countries' reports, but we believe this is probably only a small number.
9. As with E,W&S, this definition does, of course, rule out quite a number of significant facilities, particularly freestanding swimming pools and leisure pools, which many would colloquially accept as 'indoor sports centres'.

### **The Advantages and Disadvantages of Using the 'Sport Northern Ireland Active Places' Database**

#### 10. Advantages

- a) the vast majority of the data appears to be very accurate;
- b) it is presented on a consistent basis;
- c) it has comprehensive coverage;
- d) it has been updated every two years since it was established in 2016.

#### 11. Disadvantages

- a) a very small amount of data is clearly wrong. Where we have clear evidence of this, we have amended the dataset;
- b) whilst it gives data for places where it is possible to play squash or handball, go swimming or use a fitness centre or equipped gym, as noted above it also identifies facilities with a sports hall, but not by the size of hall. We have therefore needed to manipulate the data to fit our definition of indoor sports centres;
- c) as with our Scotland data, it is not possible to determine the "access types" used in England and Wales (i.e. Pay as you Play, Sports Club or Registered Membership Use)
- d) the latest update was in 2020, and so we have added more recent centres identified by other SLLP research.

### **Results**

12. In total the full database identifies 1,129 'sports halls', but many are small sports facilities; indeed over 40% are situated on Primary School sites. Our

manipulation of the data to establish those sports halls which are part of an 'indoor sports centre', as we define it, has resulted in only 155 sites.

13. Further investigation of these centres through their websites has found that four of them, all Education sites, are now actually closed and one Local Authority site definitely does not have a sports hall; one new facility has been added to the database, which leaves 151 centres included in the analysis below.

What are these Centres like?

14. It is of course the case that all of the centres have at least one sports hall, but the ancillary facilities needed to qualify as an indoor sports centre vary between centres. The table below summarises six different categories of provision that we have identified from the data and the numbers in each category. The first category has all of the ancillary facilities listed, but more than half of the centres fall into category four; i.e. a sports hall with only a fitness centre or equipped gym attached to it.

	Categories					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Facilities provided *</b>						
Sports Hall(s)	*	*	*	*	*	*
Swimming Pool(s)	*	*			*	
Fitness centre or equipped gym	*	*	*	*		
Squash or handball court(s)	*		*			*
<b>Total centres in each category</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>

What sort of Centres are they?

15. The data on 'site ownership' allows us to differentiate, as with E,W&S, between Freestanding Local Authority-owned facilities, facilities on Education-owned sites and Freestanding facilities with other forms of ownership, including sports clubs and commercial premises. We have also been able to establish the "type" of Education sites from their websites, differentiating between community schools, independent schools, Further Education, and Higher Education sites.
16. The table below summarises these ownership patterns. In all cases 'Freestanding Local Authority sites' are owned by District Councils; where there are dual-use arrangements between schools and local communities these are all operating on 'Education-owned sites'. These two categories account for over 80% of all indoor sports centres.

Site Ownership	Sub Type	Number of sites	Percentage
<b>Freestanding Local Authority Sites</b>		<b>62</b>	<b>41.1%</b>
<b>Education Sites</b>		<b>62</b>	<b>41.1%</b>
	Community Schools	48	31.8%
	Independent Schools	5	3.3%
	Further Education	5	3.3%
	Higher Education	4	2.6%
<b>Freestanding Other Sites</b>		<b>27</b>	<b>17.9%</b>
	Sports Clubs	14	9.3%
	Commercial	2	1.3%
	Community Groups	8	5.3%
	Private Membership	3	2.0%
<b>All Sites</b>		<b>151</b>	

What are the levels of provision per head of population?

17. To enable a direct comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom as set out in our other reports, we have used the Mid-2019 population estimate for Northern Ireland of 1,893,667. This gives the provision of indoor sports centres per head as one centre for every 12,541 people. But there are variations across the country as the District data in the table below outlines, ranging from a high in Belfast of one centre for every 10,104 people to a low in Lisburn and Castlereagh of one centre for every 16,222 people.

District	Number of Centres	Population	Centres per Head of Population
Antrim and Newtonabbey	14	143,504	10,250
Ards and North Down	10	161,725	16,172
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	17	216,205	12,718
Belfast	34	343,542	10,104
Causeway Coast and Glens	11	144,838	13,167
Derry and Strabane	13	151,284	11,637
Fermanagh and Omagh	9	117,397	13,044
Lisburn and Castlereagh	9	146,002	16,222
Mid and East Antrim	9	139,274	15,475
Mid Ulster	10	148,528	14,853
Newry, Mourne and Down	15	181,368	12,091
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>1,893,667</b>	<b>12,541</b>

18. The national figure for Northern Ireland shows that it has a better level of provision compared to England and Wales, but is not as good as Scotland:
- England: one centre for every 14,970 people;
  - Wales: one centre for every 14,665 people;
  - Scotland: one centre for every 11,825 people.
19. However, Northern Ireland does differ from the other three countries in that the best provided areas are *not* the predominantly rural areas. The mainly urban districts of Belfast, Antrim and Newtonabbey, and Derry and Strabane have the best levels of provision. This reflects, we believe, the policies of the councils in those areas in seeking to provide *parallel levels* of sports provision for their two communities with distinct traditions

### **Conclusion**

20. As with our other reports, we return to the point made in our Introduction that this paper can only be 'an attempt', not a definitive statement, to answer the question of our title. We have pointed out along the way some of the reasons: matters of definition; imperfections, for our purposes, in the Sport Northern Ireland Active Places data; and no doubt a few errors of our own !!
21. It is, of course, unfortunate that we have not been able to identify the trends in provision in Northern Ireland over the past sixty years, some of which we know were developments during different decades to the rest of the United Kingdom. But we must finish by reiterating again that it is best not to get hung up on individual numbers. We believe the current provision in Northern Ireland reflects the progress made over the past 60 years in the provision of indoor sports centres. That development has been nothing short of remarkable.

MF/MT Manchester, November 2021

