

# GIRLS ACTIVE: NORTHERN IRELAND

## IMPACT REPORT 2017-2018



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# INTRODUCTION

Girls Active was developed as the result of a two-year research project and pilot by the Youth Sport Trust into the motivations and barriers to girls taking part in PE and sport. It aims to tackle the low levels of participation in sport and physical activity in girls by developing a partnership between teachers and girls to understand what makes girls fully engage in PE, sport and physical activity in their school. It creates a network of role models and peer leaders and provides relevant opportunities for all girls, not just the sporty few. Thanks to funding from Sport Northern Ireland and Department for Communities through the 'Active, Fit and Sporty' project and with support from the Sport Development team within Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council it has been delivered in Northern Ireland since 2016-17 and has since been extended into the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area in 2017-18.

Women in Sport have undertaken research on behalf of the Youth Sport Trust to better understand the challenges and successes of Northern Ireland schools undergoing Girls Active training and adopting a Girls Active approach to delivering PE and sport to their female students. This report explores the *impact* of Girls Active on three specific areas; the whole school, girls as leaders and girls as participants, with a focus on attainment, behaviour and wellbeing outcomes. This learning will help to develop and improve the delivery of the programme and four case studies have also been produced to provide best practice guidance to schools.

## REACH OF GIRLS ACTIVE IN NI 2017-18

- 17 schools involved.
- 28 teachers availed of teacher training either through attendance at the teacher training day or attending workshops at the Inspiration Day.
- 129 Girls Leadership and Marketing Squad girls (GLAMS) trained as role models within their own schools.
- The Girls Active Pre-Intervention Report of October 2017 received 1,581 responses from girls in years 7-13 (age 11-18) across 16 schools.
- To date, 2,138 girls (as highlighted through the final summer term reporting) have engaged with the process including the following initiatives:
  - Completing the pre-intervention survey.
  - Consultation by the Girls Active Leaders.
  - Attendance at the Girls Active Inspiration Day.
  - Engaging with new activities in PE designed to engage the least active girls who normally do not participate e.g. glow sports, boxercise, zumba, pilates, girls rugby, girls soccer, Fitness Freddie.
  - Participating in new lunch time and extra-curricular activities designed and delivered by the Girls Active Leaders e.g. bums & tums, circuits, pilates, girls rugby, girls soccer, multi-sports clubs, volleyball.

- Girls Active activity days e.g. Colour Run, Fitness Freddie, Inspiration Day.
- Leading transition projects with feeder primary schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on visits to 2 schools in Northern Ireland – one in Year 1 of Girls Active (High School, ages 11-18) and one in Year 2 (Junior High School, ages 11-14). At each school, the following fieldwork was conducted:

1. Interview with lead teacher
2. Focus group with GLAMS
3. Focus group with participants

Research was conducted in June 2018.

# WHOLE SCHOOL IMPACT

- Figures from the Girls Active Pre-Intervention Report (Nov 2017) show how attitudes towards PE and physical activity change between KS3 and KS4. The proportion of those saying they 'like physical activity' or 'like it a lot' drops from 84% at KS3 to 65% at KS4. Similarly, there is a drop from 82% to 59% in those saying they like taking part in PE. This suggests that there is a particular need for programmes such as Girls Active to help address the drop-off in interest for the KS4 age group.
- Girls were asked how often they had taken part in 60 minutes or more of physical activity that make them feel warmer or their heart beat faster in the past week. 5% said they hadn't done this at all in the past week, 9% mentioned they had done this every day in the past week; most commonly around 1/5 said they had done this on 2 days in the past week and a 1/5 reported doing this on 3 days out of the last 7.
- In response to the question, 'at school, how often do you take part in any sport or physical activity outside PE lessons', 42% of girls said they didn't do anything; this proportion was significantly higher for KS4 pupils (more than half).
- When asked the same question for activities outside school, 18% said they didn't do any, with again, this rising to just over 1/4 of KS4 girls.

## 1. Raising the profile and repositioning PE for girls

**Girls Active promotes the value of girls' PE amongst a wider group which positively impacts staff and girls at the school.**

Both schools report that Girls Active has helped to create more of a 'buzz' around girls' PE, and that girls who might previously have missed PE lessons or not have come to school on PE days, are now more involved and interested in PE/physical activity.

*"The participation rate has increased. I very rarely have notes now from girls trying to get out of PE."  
(Teacher)*

*"A pupil has stopped bringing notes all the time and therefore has increased her participation. She now enjoys most activities because she had self-confidence issues and a negative attitude towards PE but the fitness week and glow-sports delivered by EBA coaches from LCCC Council has brought her out of her shell because she enjoyed it and no one made comments. Therefore, this has carried her forwards and made her attitude switch towards a more positive attitude and enthusiasm for sport."  
(Teacher)*

*"There's a lot more choice in PE now which I love. You can pick what to do."  
(Participant)*

*"I look forward to PE now. I know I'm going to have a laugh with my mates."  
(Participant)*

PE teachers also feel that participation in Girls Active means their department is increasingly recognised by the rest of the school as engaged, innovative and as having a broad impact on pupils' education and development of life skills.

*"It's raised the profile of sport in the school and as a department it sets us apart as engaged."  
(Teacher)*

Steps which have contributed to this more positive positioning and profile for girls' PE include:

- Introduction of new sports into curriculum PE lessons such as tag rugby, boxercise and Zumba. Although limited in terms of number of lessons and the school years that have benefited from this, it has helped to make PE feel more 'modern', as well as offering more individual/lifestyle-oriented activities compared to 'traditional' curriculum sports such as hockey, netball and volleyball.

*"Offering some of those more lifestyle activities has allowed the girls to try different things and actually they find it's not that bad... We've had a number of Year 10s and 11s enrol at the gym as a result." (Teacher)*

- Special events such as a 'Girls Active Fitness Week' have meant that the whole school is aware of the programme and these events help to position girls' PE as playing an important role in school life and help contribute towards the development of key life skills within the girls such as building self-confidence and resilience.

*"I feel like we've made a lot of people happier, it [Fitness Week] made a real buzz around the school." (GLAM)*

- Outside instructors have come in to school to run special sessions such as Zumba, glow sports, table tennis or fitness sessions. Girls tend to enjoy these, as they can have a different, more relaxed connection with them, compared to with the PE staff. It also helps to build links between local sports clubs, national governing bodies for sport and local councils and provides girls with a pathway from school sport to the community so they can develop lifelong participation in sport and physical activity. Excellent support has been received from EBA coaches from ABC Council and LCCC Council in the delivery of these activities and this support has been well received by teachers and the girls alike.

*"Bringing people in like Fitness Freddie gives good vibes and makes it more enjoyable." (Participant)*

- Offering extra-curricular activities that are not just about practice for school teams but which are open to anyone who wants to come along and participate. These activities are aimed at those girls who would not normally engage with the traditional extra-curricular offering and they tend to be less competitive and more inclusive in nature.

*"A pupil who attends no extra-curricular and doesn't enjoy PE attended Badminton club and loved it. She excelled in this activity and joined an outside of school badminton club also." (Teacher)*

### **Girls Active enhances the perception of the school amongst prospective pupils and parents**

Teachers are also pleased that Girls Active has helped to increase positive perceptions of the school among prospective parents and pupils. Competition between schools is keenly felt, and particularly so in Northern Ireland where families can opt into a grammar school system. Parents are often interested in understanding PE provision and sporting success in the schools they are considering, and schools are able to provide positive stories about girls' PE as a result of Girls Active.

*“Hopefully it will help to boost the numbers of people choosing to come to this school. There’s so much competition and you do find on open nights that parents are interested in what sports there are, and clubs and what competitions the school plays in.” (Teacher)*

- Transition day event with feeder primary schools. This has helped to showcase the school’s commitment to girls’ PE and to establish early positive attitudes towards physical activity with the new intake of girls and their parents.

## 2. Improved staff engagement in PE and physical activity

### Girls Active reaches beyond the PE department and gives staff across the school opportunities to be involved

At both schools there has been evidence of impact on the involvement of the wider staff body in PE and in Girls Active. Senior staff have been supportive and both schools have successfully run activities which have drawn in a wider group of staff; these have included a Staff Activity Profiles Noticeboard, where staff talk about the physical activity they do outside school, as well as staff/student walks at lunchtime and a staff volleyball match.

*“It’s given pupils the chance to speak to teachers on a personal level, ask them ‘what do you do outside school?’ and it means the staff can get involved in what the GLAMS are doing.” (Teacher)*

#### What has worked well?

- The volleyball match was particularly successful, with a wide range of staff with differing body somatotypes and fitness levels taking part. Staff enjoyed coming together to engage in some friendly competition and seemed to welcome the opportunity to engage with pupils in a different way; staff are apparently keen to run a similar event again in the future.
- The staff/student walks have also continued beyond their initial introductory period, with staff appreciating both the physical activity and the opportunity to mix with students.
- During the course of the Girls Active Fitness Week at one school, male and female PE teachers each spent some time teaching the other sex. The girls felt this was very positive as it allowed them to get to know the male PE teachers and to feel more confident around the staff body as a whole. Boys at the school were also taught by the female teachers, helping to challenge some existing gender stereotypes around sport and physical activity.

*“It humanised them. It wasn’t just ‘do this, do that’. We had a bit more interaction and it broke down the barriers.” (Participant)*

#### Continue to build on this success

That said, both schools would like to see the programme have a broader reach across the wider school community.

- The lead teachers feel that the onus of responsibility for the programme continues to fall on them and that they face a challenge to actively involve other teachers in the programme.

*“It’s a big area for us to address. The other staff still aren’t really getting involved. It’s something to really think about for next year. I’d love more staff to be involved in what the GLAMs are doing and coming to me with ideas.” (Teacher)*

- Some girls also report a reluctance from teachers when they need to come out of lessons for Girls Active activities, which suggests the value of the programme is not yet embraced by all staff.

*“There’s a balance between doing sport and taking time out of class. Because it’s not their thing, teachers are sometimes a bit grumpy when we go to do things.” (GLAM)*

### 3. Developing partnerships with local councils and community clubs

Schools have worked hard at building links with the local councils who are partners in this project, including ABC Council and LCCC Council and with local sports clubs or coaches, as well as national governing bodies, such as Ulster Rugby, Ulster Hockey, Table Tennis Ulster. Thanks to these links, the schools have been able to broaden the activities and programmes they can offer to girls, including using local council EBA coaches to deliver Glow in the Dark sessions, and working with Ulster Rugby players to offer girls’ rugby sessions/mini-tournaments. Working with Disability Sport Northern Ireland, Year 12 girls at one school took part in a ‘My Sport, My Story’ workshop, helping them to understand the life of a local Boccia athlete, and allowing them to try out various disability sports.

As the schools move forward, they are keen to develop these partnerships as they welcome the opportunities they provide to vary the activities offered to girls; the schools are particularly appreciative of the support and input offered by their respective local councils. Schools are also aware of the value of establishing links with local clubs, in order to help channel girls’ interests towards activities outside school. There are some examples of this already having happened to a limited extent.

- Fitness Week provided an opportunity for the girls to try different kinds of physical activity, including some more lifestyle/individual based activities. This resulted in a handful of girls being motivated to enrol at the gym with a friend or their mum. This is beneficial to the aims of both the provider and the schools, to widen participation amongst girls.
- As a further example, two girls had already joined a girls’ rugby club outside of school, and the introduction of rugby for girls in PE helped them further develop their skills and confidence in participating.
- One school provided information to girls about clubs available outside school via a noticeboard.



## Learnings and recommendations

- Involving staff beyond the PE department in Girls Active can be challenging and may take time but is essential to the success and sustainability of the programme and to ensure that GLAMS and other girls feel supported in participating. Where held, staff-oriented events seem to have been successful and have had a lasting impact. Building awareness of Girls Active throughout the staff body and creating more opportunities for staff to contribute and feel part of the programme are important elements in the success of Girls Active. Staff engagement and participation is a progressive process that should be incorporated into the long-term aims of any Girls Active programme, in addition to engaging girls.
- Introducing new sports into PE lessons is a step-by-step process; the impact tends to build gradually, often affecting only 1 or 2 year groups at the outset. Consideration and planning as to how this kind of progress can be introduced across the school to affect all girls, and particularly those in KS4 who tend to have higher drop-out rates, is important. Schools should be encouraged as they build on their links with sport/community clubs and organisations, including local councils, given that these appear to offer good opportunities to facilitate activities that can sustain girls' interest and participation throughout their school life.
- It is worth noting that a number of the activities which have been developed by schools as part of Girls Active have, out of necessity, also involved boys participating. Teachers can seem unsure whether this is appropriate or even 'accepted' as part of the programme. Clarifying this, and even building this into the programme may be appropriate – perhaps by looking at the impact of Girls Active on challenging boys' views of girls' participation in sports and physical activity.
- Transition events are a successful tool that schools can use to showcase their Girls Active work. Such events raise the profile of the school and reinforce the school's commitment to girls' sport amongst prospective pupils, parents, other schools and the wider community. Internally, transition events help to gain much needed engagement from staff and reinforce the value of PE/sport within the wider school.

# GIRLS AS LEADERS (GLAMS)

- A total of 129 Girls Active Leaders have been supported during 2017-18 through the programme.
- 55 girls were developed as Girls Active Leaders through participation at the Girls Active Inspiration Day.
- The Girls Active Pre-Intervention Report (Nov 2017) reveals a large disparity between those girls who would like to be coaches/leaders inside or outside school (44% of girls say they'd like to be a coach and 46% a leader) and those who actually are coaches or leaders (10% say they are a coach and 16% a leader). This suggests there is a considerable unmet demand for leadership and coaching opportunities within schools which is beginning to be addressed by the Girls Active programme.

## 1. Improved attitudes to physical activity and confidence to be a role model

### Girls Active encourages empathy and leadership qualities

The GLAMS at both schools take seriously their position as role-models to the rest of the school. It is clear they have developed an understanding of why some girls don't participate in sport and have actively tried to encourage them (e.g. by running alongside slower girls in cross-country, picking more mixed teams in PE lessons or passing the ball more to other girls in hockey). They recognise they have a role to play in promoting the benefits of physical activity: they talk to other girls about what difference sport can make and why it's important for your health and body image/self-esteem.

*"It's opened my eyes and made us realise that there are lots of girls who feel insecure about doing sport. We're so fortunate that we're confident, so now we try to help them a bit more. We explain why they should do it and hopefully they see us doing it and see us confident and enjoying it." (GLAM)*

*"They've [the GLAMS] shown really good leadership in PE, encouraging others." (Teacher)*

### Girls Active improves own personal perceptions of and engagement in physical activity

Some GLAMS have themselves been on a journey from being less 'sporty', to becoming considerably more positive about the benefits of physical activity. They feel it's useful to be able to talk about this experience with other girls at school, and they see themselves as active examples of what can happen when you put yourself forward to try something different. They recognise that it's important to offer a range of activities to allow everyone to find the physical activity that suits them, and they like to set a positive example when they try new sports and activities, demonstrating that you don't have to be good at something to enjoy it or participate in it, the important thing is to try it.

*"You realise you can influence someone to make better choices... You want them to try new things because having the confidence to try sport means you'll feel confident doing other things too." (GLAM)*

*“I’m not very good at volleyball so that’s helped me when I’ve been encouraging other girls to try it.” (GLAM)*

## **2. Building stronger relationships with teachers**

### **Girls Active supports their transition to adulthood and growing maturity**

Through their involvement in the range of Girls Active activities and speaking to and working with staff, the GLAMS have built their confidence in interacting with adults; they have enjoyed discovering sports that they love, in common with their teachers.

*“When the teachers told their sports stories, you could find the sports you did in common with them.” (GLAM)*

GLAMS also have a greater appreciation of PE teachers’ experiences and the challenges they face in engaging girls in PE; this further supports their sense of responsibility as role-models and in encouraging their peers to participate.

## **3. Improved social wellbeing and connections to peers**

### **Girls Active enhances tolerance and understanding of others and their differences**

At both schools GLAMS report a more open-minded attitude to their peers and how they might view physical activity. Their experience as GLAMS has helped them to realise that many girls feel insecure about their physical appearance and as a result, are reluctant to take part in sport. GLAMS are now more supportive of, and understanding towards, these girls in PE lessons and extra-curricular activities.

*“You realise not everyone’s the same but if you do a range of activities then you give everyone the chance to find what they like.” (GLAM)*

*“The GLAMS have understood that some girls don’t enjoy sports and they haven’t been nasty about it, but they’ve thought about what they can do to help.” (Teacher)*

### **Girls Active creates opportunities to make new friends**

GLAMS themselves recognise the value of new friendships and appreciate the opportunity to extend their networks – both with the other GLAMS in their schools, but also with peers who they might otherwise have assumed they have little in common with.

*“Some of us are moving on to new schools now and because we’ve mixed and mingled with other girls, we’ve got wider friendship groups.” (GLAM)*

## 4. School life: improved mental wellbeing and confidence

### Girls Active promotes confidence to speak out

There is little doubt that, for both sets of GLAMS, the experience has made a very positive difference to the girls' confidence and self-belief, with the following factors/impacts particularly noted:

- Sharing their ideas with other GLAMS in their school and also at the Girls Active inspiration day with other schools, and then seeing their ideas come to fruition has boosted their self-assurance; *"We realised our ideas were good."*
- Pride in the impact that their words and actions have had on other girls.
- Discovering the value of their own voice and opinions and not being afraid to put their ideas forward.

GLAMS report that their increased confidence means they are happier to speak up in class, as well as to take risks and put themselves forward in the sports/teams that they participate in. For those girls who are moving on from their school, they are more confident about their next steps, and have a greater depth of resilience and self-belief to draw on.

*"It's ok to have your own voice and opinions. It's important to speak out and believe in what you're saying." (GLAM)*

*"In your own sport now, you're more confident to help the team, to speak up about what you think should happen." (GLAM)*

One of the lead teachers describes a girl in Year 12 who became a GLAM, despite not believing she was particularly good at sport. As a result of her participation and seeing her ideas come to fruition she has come out of her shell and is now participating more fully across all aspects of her school life.

### Girls Active establishes a better 'work/life' balance

- All the GLAMS have welcomed the opportunity to be involved in an exciting, important school project that is quite separate to their academic work and which offers a positive space away from exam/lesson pressures. This has helped to reduce stress around school life for some.

*"It's a break from exams, something to look forward to about coming in to school... it makes you less stressed, so you sleep easier." (GLAM)*

*"When you're out there playing sport, it calms you down, you don't think about your exams, you just focus on the game." (GLAM)*

## 5. Improved life skills

Across both schools, the GLAMS have driven organisation of activities, helping them develop important skills around time management and organisation. They have also developed leadership skills through organising other pupils, liaising with teachers and setting a good example to younger girls. At the school

which held a transition event, the GLAMS helped to support and encourage younger, primary school, pupils and worked with the primary school teachers to ensure a successful event.

*“We’ve had to be quite independent, organising stuff and showing younger ones around.” (GLAM)*

*“We were quite nervous about the primary schools coming in, but by the end we were chatting away to them.” (GLAM)*

Both groups of GLAMS have also gained from working together in a group – building skills in negotiating and working with others and learning the value of when and how to compromise for a common goal.

*“Working in a group, with 6 of us, can be quite challenging. Having to work with others.” (GLAM)*

## Learnings and recommendations

Teachers have followed different ideas and strategies for recruiting their GLAMS. This seems appropriate, given different school contexts and the various demands and expectations that teachers need to meet. Nevertheless, given that the impact of Girls Active on GLAMS is so markedly positive, it would be beneficial to share ideas for how different GLAMS groups work, how and when girls can be recruited, and how the impact of being a GLAM can be maximised across the cohort of girls in a school. In particular;

- Suggestions around how the GLAMS group can be refreshed and integrated each year, with new girls brought in, or a different way of working explored, would be useful.
- How the GLAMS ‘effect’ might be extended; ideas include ‘micro-GLAMS’ groups in each school year or a representative in each class.
- Encouraging the GLAMS to reflect on their experience and what they have learnt is clearly very useful for them personally, as well as for the teachers and the school. Consider formalising the process, so that GLAMs can record their achievements and reflect on their own growth and development. Schools could also use this to highlight the value of Girls Active and its influence on girls and the wider school.

# GIRLS AS PARTICIPANTS

- To date, 2,138 girls have engaged with the Girls Active process through a variety of initiatives (see Reach of Girls Active programme – page 5).
- In the Girls Active Pre-Intervention Report (Nov 2017), girls were asked about their motivations to take part in PE, sport and physical activity at school. Overall, the most popular reasons chosen were 'to have fun' (61%), 'to be healthy' (58%) and 'to feel good' (45%), but the reasons chosen differed for the groups of Less Active and More Active girls. The top 3 reasons chosen by Less Active girls were: 'to have fun', 'to spend time with my friends' and 'to be healthy', with 'to feel good' and 'to look good' also figuring quite high. In contrast, More Active girls chose 'to have fun', 'to be healthy' and 'to try new sports and activities', with 'to develop a new skill' and 'to feel good' coming forward as their 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> reasons.
- Turning to barriers to participation, the 3 most commonly chosen barriers to taking part in sport, physical activity or PE at school were 'I am not confident', 'I don't like other people watching me' and 'I'm not good at it'. It is worth noting that all these barriers increased in importance between KS3 and KS4, while the More Active are less likely to identify barriers than the Less Active.
- In terms of barriers to participation outside school, 'I don't have time because of my school work' and 'I am not confident' were the two most important barriers. Lack of time was particularly significant at KS4 and for the Less Active girls, suggesting that they don't see physical activity as a priority within their daily lives.
- Finally, levels of agreement with a series of statements, indicate that while 84% say they understand the importance of an active lifestyle, only 56% say that physical activity is an important part of their daily life, with this dropping to 46% saying that the skills they learn in PE are relevant to their day to day life. Once more, the drop-off for the Less Active is particularly marked (25% saying that physical activity is an important part of their daily life, and 27% saying the skills learned in PE are relevant).

## 1. Increased participation in, and improved attitudes towards, physical activity

### Girls Active successfully attracts inactive girls and those who are not currently engaging in school sport

One school has been particularly successful in engaging girls who don't normally participate in school sports through extra-curricular clubs; for example, badminton has allowed some girls who are not team sports players to find a sport that they enjoy and are good at; rugby and football both hold appeal for girls who are not involved in the school's traditional team sports, in these more inclusive sessions they know that it doesn't matter whether they're 'good' or not, it's about having fun.

*"Doing this [rugby] is fun. You're not being judged on how good you are, and you don't have to be the best at it. It's not like the sports that you're carrying on from primary where some girls are already really good." (Participant)*

*“We’ve helped more girls to do PE. Before some weren’t bringing their kit in, but now nearly all take part.” (GLAM)*

Girls themselves report that their interest in PE and extra-curricular activities has increased over the year; they have greater confidence in their abilities and so are more willing to take part.

*“Between Year 8 and Year 10 PE has become a lot more fun. It’s got harder, but in a good way.” (Participant)*

Girls have also been encouraged by seeing teachers participate in physical activity. The staff volleyball match made a great impression on pupils, inspiring a wide range of girls to believe that ‘anyone’ can take part in sport. Noticeboards profiling staff participation in physical activity are also successful in demonstrating that a wide cross-section of teachers (not just PE staff) are active outside of school, whatever their age.

### **Girls Active successfully promotes sport and physical activity as fun and enjoyable**

By organising special events and innovative activities, such as colour runs, glow in the dark sports, zumba and Fitness Freddie sessions, or by offering different sports within the curriculum such as girls’ rugby/football or boxercise, girls who might not previously have enjoyed ‘traditional’ sports have been encouraged to participate in physical activity and have come to see PE as more interesting and fun. The hierarchy of more able and less able girls, which emerges around traditional sports, tends to break down, at least to some extent, when they participate in activities that are new to them all. Everyone is on an equal footing and as the less ‘sporty’ girls feel their ability is not being judged in the same way, they are often more liberated to simply enjoy it.

*“At primary school we didn’t do much in PE that was new... but this really encourages you, it’s helped me as if there’s something new every day to try and it doesn’t matter if it’s a boys’ or a girls’ sport.” (Participant)*

Building a more positive atmosphere around PE helps to create a virtuous circle. It allows girls, who might otherwise feel inhibited from expressing their enjoyment of PE, to be more forthright in talking about it and in participating and the whole cohort of girls then benefits. Girls in Year 10 at one school talked about their PE lessons becoming more interesting this year as they are learning more skills but also because their relationship with the PE teachers has strengthened and become more positive.

*“I’m more confident in PE lessons now because I’ve got to know the PE teachers a bit better.” (Participant)*

*“Some people completely despise PE and I will be on their case to do PE now.” (Participant)*

A participant in the extra-curricular rugby club also reported that, prior to playing at school, she had joined a rugby club outside school; she had been embarrassed about talking about this at school, because it is not traditionally seen as a ‘sport for girls’, but once the extra-curricular club started she felt more confident talking about her participation.

## 2. Building stronger relationships with teachers

### Girls Active has contributed to improved teacher-pupil relationships leading to better behaviour in lessons

There has been a noted improvement in pupil relationships with teachers at one school as a result of the Fitness Activity Week and particularly because of the staff volleyball match and the lunchtime walks. Both activities helped pupils to see a different side to their teachers, opening up conversations and creating a better atmosphere in many lessons, leading to improved behaviour.

*“The staff volleyball match was so much fun. The teachers were so competitive, and some of them you wouldn’t expect to be sporty. It means we have a better relationship with them, they don’t seem so boring.” (Participant)*

The girls themselves report how much they enjoyed speaking to their teachers in a relaxed atmosphere on the lunchtime walks. They feel more confident with different teachers as a result and are happier to take an active part in a range of lessons.

## 3. Improved social wellbeing and connections to peers

### Girls Active promotes wider and more diverse friendship groups

At both schools, girls recognise that participating in Girls Active activities has given them the opportunity to mix with other girls (e.g. girls in different classes/years/academic streams). It enables them to build new friendship networks and helps them develop life-skills around teamwork, communication and the ability to get on with anyone.

*“When they play sport they’re in mixed attainment groups, so they’re with girls that they wouldn’t normally be friends with or have a connection with, it pushes them out of their comfort zone.” (Teacher)*

The girls have appreciated the opportunity to get to know their peers in a different environment outside the classroom, and to share with each other an activity that they love doing. Girls who are leaving to move on to their next school highly value these new networks in particular.

*“When you play sport together you get to know more about a person and you think they might actually be a good person to be friends with. And you’re doing something you love doing, together.” (Participant)*

## 4. Improved behaviour and attainment

### Girls Active leads to better classroom behaviour

The improvement in pupil-teacher relationships has impacted on classroom behaviour with the lead teacher reporting that productive learning time has increased as pupils are more willing and ready to participate and there is a reduction in the time spent on dealing with poor behaviour.



*“The children have had a chance to have a conversation with their teachers about something other than just that subject. I think the atmosphere in the classrooms has improved, they can concentrate on learning now, rather than discipline and behaviour.” (Teacher)*

### **Girls Active leads to more confidence in the classroom**

The participants themselves report that their confidence in the classroom has been improved by participating in sports activities that they enjoy, have an aptitude for, and which therefore boost their sense of self-esteem. They are more willing to put themselves forward in a classroom situation, because of their experiences in the sports hall or on the playing field. Seeing themselves improving and developing skills through hard work demonstrates to these girls the value of perseverance and encourages them to believe they can make changes and improvements in other aspects of their life, including their schoolwork.

*“It’s brought out a competitive side that I didn’t know I had.” (Participant)*

*“I know I’m good at something, so it just makes me feel better about coming to school, even if I’m finding the work hard.” (Participant)*

### **Girls Active participants report better concentration and energy levels**

The girls have also noticed the positive difference that a session of physical activity (e.g. extra-curricular clubs in the morning before school or after lunch) makes to their concentration and energy levels throughout the rest of the day.

*“It gets us ready for our next classes, gets your brain working... I’m content to go to class because I’ve had a nice morning.” (Participant)*

*“If you do sport during the lunchtime then it boosts you, helps get you through to the end of the day.” (Participant)*

## **5. Improved mental wellbeing and confidence**

### **Girls Active allows girls to experience a competitive sport without feeling pressured to be ‘good’**

Girls who have had the opportunity to participate in rugby and football as a result of Girls Active have particularly welcomed engaging in sports that are traditionally seen as ‘for boys’. This has increased their confidence and although the clubs are not run on a competitive basis, taking part in sports where everyone is on an equal footing (compared to some of the more traditional clubs/sport teams), has encouraged them to express their competitiveness in a ‘safe’ environment.

*“Girls rugby is just different, not a lot of girls do it and it’s good to give people an equal chance to do things... It makes you feel more confident to be doing something that is typically for boys.” (Participant)*

### **Girls Active participants report increased self-esteem and ability to cope with life**

The clubs have helped to alleviate pressure on some girls, by giving them positive reasons to come to school and opportunities to participate in something which they enjoy and are good at. Participation in

some of the activities has generated a sense of pride and girls report that this has improved their self-esteem and helped them deal with problems they may be facing elsewhere in their school life – socially or academically.

*“Going to the club after school means you don’t worry so much about your academics. It gives you another reason for coming to school.” (Participant)*

*“You feel good about yourself, it helps you get through the school day, especially if things are hard.” (Participant)*

Girls themselves acknowledge how participation in physical activity helps in reducing stress by giving them time/space away from problems with friends or academic work, and some have sought to continue this outside the school environment by joining community sports clubs to further help in managing anxiety.

*“I’ve joined a netball club outside school and it’s really helped me stop worrying about things.” (Participant)*

### **Girls Active participants report a willingness to try new things**

As a result of participating in a range of different activities that they may not have tried before, the girls report that they are now more prepared to try other new things and to believe that it’s always good to give something a go.

*“You might try something like the high jump and find that you’re not that bad. It’s good to try something new and see what else you can do... Everyone should take the opportunity” (Participant)*

*“Confidence to try a sport means you’re more confident to try other things too.” (GLAM)*

## **6. Improved life-skills**

Participation in regular extra-curricular clubs demands commitment and the girls have come to understand the responsibility they have to their team mates and teachers, and the value of organising their time so that they can attend the club each week.

*“They don’t want to let the team down, they realise they have a responsibility.” (Teacher)*

## Learning and recommendations

- Transition events are clearly a fantastic opportunity for GLAMS to develop and for the school to promote its PE provision and build links with primary schools. Importantly, they also help to engage younger girls in sport/physical activity at a crucial tipping point when drop off can occur: the transition between primary and high school. Such events help to establish positive early attitudes to sport/physical activity but the key is to develop a long-term programme of events/activities that mature *with* girls during their school life. This is important for preventing girls, who are most susceptible to the negative impacts of growing self-consciousness and awkwardness around physical activity, from disengaging from sport/physical activity altogether. The impact of Girls Active on girls around the ages of 12-14 is noteworthy and this may be the most beneficial target for activities in the short-term.
- Sustaining the impact of Girls Active activities is key. Where schools have held one-off special events, these have been most successful when ongoing activities have arisen out of them e.g. new sports introduced into the curriculum, or a smaller reprise of the special event later in the term. Schools should be encouraged to think about how to sustain the long-term impact of any activities they do and to ensure that not all the focus is put into a single one-off event.
- At its best Girls Active leads to a shift in the PE curriculum, broadening the activities that are offered, demonstrating the range of activities that can lead to increased physical activity and ensuring a widespread impact on girls across the school in terms of a number of health and wellbeing outcomes. It may be helpful to remind schools that this is the objective they should be building towards – even if this is not possible in the first year or two of the programme.

## CONCLUSION

Girls Active has made a significant difference to girls' sport at the two schools visited. Gender boundaries around sports played and levels of participation in Northern Ireland remain quite traditional but Girls Active is helping to tackle some of these perceptions and break down some of the barriers that exist to make sport more accessible and inclusive for all girls.

Girls Active has raised the profile of and repositioned PE for girls as a valuable activity within schools, which positively impacts upon staff and girls, by introducing a range of new sports into the PE curriculum, offering more inclusive extra-curricular activities and running special sport/fitness events. In addition, transition events have helped to enhance external perceptions of the school amongst prospective pupils and parents and also ease girls transition from primary to secondary school. Staff engagement in PE and physical activity has improved beyond the PE department giving other staff opportunities to be involved in the programme, though this requires further support and development. Girls Active has also encouraged schools to develop links with external providers such as local councils, national governing bodies, sport clubs and coaches who have supported the schools to offer a more diverse and inclusive range of activities and programmes to better engage girls in sport and physical activity.

Girls Active has had a positive impact on participating girls, as well as GLAMS. For GLAMS, the programme provides development opportunities for girls to become effective leaders within their schools. The GLAMs role encourages girls to have empathy and understanding for others and improves their own personal perceptions of and engagement with, physical activity. Being a GLAM enables girls to build

stronger relationships and connections with their teachers and peers, thereby helping them to be more confident and influential in their role. GLAMS have an increased sense of wellbeing, as the role helps them to make new friends, improves their confidence in their ability to share ideas and speak out, as well as giving them a better school 'work/life' balance and teaching them valuable life skills.

Similarly, Girls Active participants have benefitted much from the programme. The wide variety of activities, events and extra-curricular clubs has attracted the hard to reach, inactive girls who were not engaging with any school sport previously. Girls Active successfully promotes sport and physical activity as a fun and enjoyable experience. Girls Active has come to play an important role in supporting confidence and resilience among pupils, with girls having improved attitudes towards physical activity as they feel able to experience sport without feeling pressured to be good at it. It has also enhanced teacher-pupil relationships leading to improved confidence and behaviour in lessons. Girls' social and mental wellbeing has improved, as the programme promotes wider and more diverse friendship groups, girls report having better concentration and energy levels as a result of being more active and an enhanced sense of self-esteem and ability to cope with life.

As schools continue to build on the success of the first two years of Girls Active in Northern Ireland, some suggestions and recommendations are put forward.

### **Recommendations for Youth Sport Trust**

- Encourage lead teachers to continue to build awareness of Girls Active throughout the staff body. They would welcome further support in understanding how to create more opportunities for staff to contribute and feel part of the programme.
- Manage expectations and remind schools that the changes brought by Girls Active tend to happen step-by-step (or often Key Stage by Key Stage). Schools need to plan for how they can ensure that Girls Active impacts pupils throughout the school as they develop their participation in the programme.
- Boys are frequently also impacted by Girls Active activities. It would be worth clarifying that this is acceptable and reminding teachers that it is also valuable to challenge boys' stereotypical views of girls' participation in physical activity.
- Continue to help schools and teachers share ideas and learning around how they have recruited their GLAMS and why, and how they have worked effectively with their GLAMS. This may also involve discussion of how the beneficial impact of being a GLAM can be maximised across the cohort of girls in a school.
- There are opportunities to formalise the process of GLAMS so that GLAMs can record their achievements and reflect on their own growth and development. Schools could also use this to highlight the value of Girls Active and its influence on girls and the wider school.
- Encourage schools to think about the long-term impact of any activities they do, and how special events or activities can be incorporated as part of a sustainable programme of change.