



Walking Football Strategy 2026–2029

Prepared by: **Walking Football National Development Committee**





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1. Introduction

This Strategy, developed by the Walking Football National Development Committee, outlines a vision for the growth of Walking Football in Ireland. The Strategy has a strong emphasis on encouraging recreational participation among older adult groups. However, it also reflects stakeholder research conducted by Age & Opportunity in 2024 which highlighted the emergence of recreational and competitive forms of the game, “both of which should be considered in the development of strategy and implementation plans”.

2. Background

What Is Walking Football?

Walking Football is a non-contact adapted version of association football, designed especially for older adults, though it is inclusive of all. Featuring simplified, standardised rules and a focus on safety, it has gained popularity post-covid as a meaningful physical activity, particularly among older men.

The Walking Football National Development Committee: Origins and Composition

In 2021, Age & Opportunity delivered a five-week Walking Football initiative, introducing the game to older men in Men's Sheds groups and football clubs with the support of Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). Building on its success, Age & Opportunity formed a Steering Group in June 2024 to assess the sport's development potential in Ireland against a background of growing demand. The Group included representatives from Age & Opportunity, Sport Ireland, Football Association of Ireland (FAI), Healthy Ireland (HI) and the Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA) and was chaired by an Age & Opportunity Board member.

During 2024, the Group met four times, facilitated research into participant experiences, consulted stakeholders, and reviewed international governance models. Following this work and based on its own deliberations, the Group resolved to continue its work to grow and develop the sport, to review its terms of reference and to expand its composition to include additional key stakeholders. As a result, a newly expanded Walking Football National Development Committee emerged, comprising representatives from the original group along with new members who have been involved at the grassroots level of the sport.

The Terms of Reference for the Committee, agreed in May 2025, included a commitment to prioritising the development of a Strategy.

This Strategy is an attempt to create a structured and sustainable approach to Walking Football that promotes participation, improves health outcomes, fosters community engagement, and supports prolonged involvement in the sport. The Strategy outlines strategic objectives, key focus areas, actions, stakeholder roles, challenges and an approach to monitoring implementation.

The Rationale for a Walking Football Strategy

Though still in its early stages in Ireland, Walking Football has seen significant growth in demand from older people. The sport offers substantial benefits to participants and is increasingly popular among a demographic expected to increase significantly in coming years. Therefore, a strategic approach to developing the sport can significantly advance national aims around health, wellbeing and community development. Key considerations in the development of the Strategy are the benefits to older adults, future demographic trends, the public policy context and the main challenges that have been identified by stakeholders to successful delivery. These are explored below.

Benefits of Walking Football for Older Adults

Walking Football, a modified version of traditional football, is designed to be played at a slower pace, making it accessible and enjoyable for older adults. It offers a range of physical, mental and social benefits¹.

- **Physical Health:** As a physical activity, Walking Football helps improve cardiovascular health, muscle strength, and flexibility. It provides a low-impact form of exercise that reduces the risk of injuries while promoting overall fitness.
- **Mental Health:** Engaging in physical activity like Walking Football can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. It can also enhance cognitive function and provide a sense of accomplishment and purpose.
- **Social Wellbeing:** Walking Football fosters social interaction and community engagement. It helps combat loneliness and isolation by providing opportunities for older adults to connect with others and build friendships.

¹ The benefits are highlighted in The Age UK Walking Football qualitative evaluation conducted by the Sport Industry Research Group (SIRG) at Sheffield Hallam University - https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/evaluation-reports/walking_football_evaluation_executive_summary_november_2023.pdf

Demographic Changes in Ireland

Ireland's population is ageing rapidly. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO)², the number of people aged 50+ will grow from 1.71 million (33% of the total population) in 2022 to 2.62 million (43%) in 2041. For those aged 65 and over, the corresponding change is from 0.78 million (15%) to 1.36 million (22%). This shift underscores the importance of providing activities that promote healthy ageing and enhance quality of life for older adults.

Public Policy Context

The Strategy for developing Walking Football in Ireland aligns with several key national policies and initiatives aimed at promoting physical activity, health, and wellbeing among older adults:

- **National Sports Policy:** Aims to increase participation in sports and physical activities across all age groups, with an emphasis on accessibility and inclusion.
- **National Physical Activity Plan:** Promotes community-based physical activity programmes to reduce sedentary lifestyles.
- **National Physical Activity Framework 2024 – 2040:** Aims to make Ireland have the most physically active population in Europe, across all age groups and all sectors of society.
- **Healthy Ireland:** A national framework for improving health and well-being which supports physical activity, mental health, and social inclusion initiatives.
- **National Positive Ageing Strategy:** Focuses on enabling older adults to be active, healthy and socially engaged.

Embedding Walking Football into these national policies and frameworks fosters a supportive environment for older adults to stay active, healthy, and socially connected.



² <https://data.cso.ie/>

Key Challenges

The Age & Opportunity research referenced earlier has identified several key challenges for the sport's development:

- Ensuring health and safety is prioritised.
- Providing opportunities for women, people with disabilities, or those recovering from illness.
- Supporting existing participants and clubs for sustainability.
- Training and knowledge transfer for players, coaches and referees.
- Maintaining a standardised approach to session delivery, referee development and blitzes.
- Establishing an integrated approach to communications with stakeholders.
- Recruiting volunteers for refereeing, coaching and club administration.
- Promoting collaboration between key stakeholders with clear responsibilities.

Actions within the Strategy are designed to address these challenges.

3. Vision

To establish Walking Football as a widely recognised, accessible, inclusive and safe sport throughout Ireland especially for men aged over 50 and women aged over 40.

4. Strategic Objectives

1. **Increase Participation:** Grow the number of Walking Football participants, aiming for greater gender balance and diversity in the participant base.
2. **Enhance Awareness:** Boost awareness of Walking Football's benefits among the public and institutions.
3. **Organise and Support Infrastructure:** Enhance coaching resources and ensure the availability of accessible facilities and equipment.
4. **Safety and Standards:** Uphold safety and high standards in all aspects of the sport's development.
5. **Strengthen Partnerships:** Strengthen collaborations with relevant stakeholders in sport, health, policy, and the community sector.
6. **Ensure Sustainability:** Secure sustainable governance, funding and support structures.

5. Key Focus Areas and Actions

A. *Development*

- Partner with sports clubs, community groups, Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA), Local Authorities and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) to develop Walking Football initiatives. These initiatives should seek to pick up on the success of previous ones involving Age & Opportunity, FAI, Men's Sheds and the LSPs which were recognised in research³ as established pathways for most participants.
- Provide starter packs (balls, bibs, cones) and basic rules to new groups.
- Deliver open days and "come and try" sessions with incentives.
- Develop initiatives to encourage greater involvement by women in Walking Football e.g. by highlighting the importance of creating women-only and mixed teams and training coaches to be sensitive to gender issues.
- Provide opportunities and supports to those who wish to become involved in coaching and refereeing.
- Encourage the development of Walking Football as part of existing football clubs which already have the facilities, networks, insurance arrangements, etc. in place.
- Increase capacity around the delivery of Walking Football through the establishment of a panel of local Walking Football leaders.

B. *Coaching, Facilitation, Referee Training and Standards*

- Develop a code of conduct and ethical guidelines to ensure fair play, inclusivity, and respect among all participants.
- Promote a standard set of FAI and Age & Opportunity rules around the playing of Walking Football.
- Deliver a standardised approach to the delivery of Walking Football sessions for first timers.
- Produce guidelines and support for those wishing to set up Walking Football groups.
- Produce and disseminate best practice health and safety guidelines for Walking Football groups.

³ "A Totally Different Ballgame" 2024 Report by Age & Opportunity <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/A-Totally-Different-Ball-Game-2024.pdf>

C. *Health and Wellbeing Integration*

- Partner with the HSE and General Practitioners (GPs) to promote participation in Walking Football. Examine the scope for Walking Football being used as a social prescription in the case of individuals recovering from illness or with special needs (impairment and rehabilitation).
- Expand research evidence around the physical and mental health benefits of participation in Walking Football.
- Integrate Walking Football into active ageing initiatives and wellness programs.
- Examine the scope for rolling out the “Walking Football as Medicine” initiative among individuals living with a chronic condition.
- Advocate for the provision of mobile Automated External Defibrillator (AED) units and training in all groups.

D. *Competitions, Blitzes and Social Events*

- Encourage the use of age categories for all blitzes.
- Organise a programme of regional Walking Football blitzes that combine sport and social activities.
- Support events which give participants the option to play competitively as well as expanding their social connections. Such events could include an annual festival, leagues, a national cup and international fixtures.
- Encourage clubs to offer mixed-gender and inclusive options around blitzes.

E. *Marketing and Communications*

- Develop a coordinated campaign to promote the sport using traditional and digital media.
- Develop an integrated approach to handle queries around Walking Football along with a single repository of information.
- Use case studies and ambassador stories to highlight the benefits of Walking Football.
- Collaborate with local radio, newspapers, and TV to promote success stories.
- Develop and disseminate widely an annual calendar of Walking Football events.
- Prepare a sponsorship pack.

F. *Governance, Funding and Sustainability*

- Secure ongoing funding from relevant national agencies including Sport Ireland, Healthy Ireland and the FAI for ongoing activities. Examine scope for attracting funding support from other sources including the European Union (EU) and commercial sources.
- Engage with key stakeholders to create a collaborative governance structure that supports the growth of Walking Football. Involve players, coaches, and volunteers in decision-making processes to ensure that the governance framework reflects the needs and interests of all stakeholders.
- Work towards a “one stop shop” approach to the development of the sport in recognition of the finding from the research mentioned earlier that the development of Walking Football in England, Scotland and Wales has been hampered by the fragmented approach to governance and development.
- Allocate resources for training and development programs for coaches, referees, and administrators to ensure high standards of governance.
- Establish connections with Walking Football organisations in Northern Ireland with the aim of securing cross-border funding.
- Adapt the development of Walking Football in response to international developments particularly those arising from any Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) initiatives. UEFA has developed a toolkit which provides useful material for coaches and volunteers.
- Capitalise on any promotional and funding opportunities for Walking Football associated with the EURO 2028 Football Championships to be co-hosted by Ireland.



6. Key Milestones (2026–2029)

WHEN	MILESTONE
Mid 2026	Finalise and launch Strategy
2026	Establish a database of existing Walking Football groups
2026	Expand programmes into new counties and train new referees
2026	Establish a permanent governing structure for Walking Football
End 2026	Reach 1,000 participants ⁴
2027	Host a national festival of Walking Football
2027	Establish partnerships with all LSPs
End 2027	Have Walking Football teams in all 26 counties
End 2029	Walking Football recognised in new National Physical Activity Plan
End 2029	Reach 5,000 participants nationwide



⁴ In 2024, research commissioned by Age & Opportunity estimated that there were at least 50 groups / teams, and 500 individuals involved in Walking Football in Ireland on a weekly basis.

7. Monitoring, Evaluation and Oversight

Effective governance will require mechanisms to monitor, evaluate and review implementation. This will include annual assessments of stakeholder roles, evaluation of progress towards objectives, and actions such as:

- Establish a central registration system to track participation and growth.
- Gathering feedback via surveys and community consultations.
- Setting and reviewing KPIs such as number of clubs, players, coaches and events.

8. Conclusion

The Strategy responds to the growing popularity of Walking Football among older adults in Ireland. Its success will ensure that the sport contributes to positive ageing experiences for participants and supports national policy objectives around sport, physical activity and health. Achieving its aims will require strong governance, secure funding, strong partnerships, and a commitment to addressing the challenges which have been identified in its preparation.

The National Walking Football Development Committee comprises representative of Age & Opportunity, Football Association of Ireland, Healthy Ireland, Sport Ireland, Irish Men’s Sheds Association, Republic of Ireland Walking Football Association and representatives from grassroots level in the sport in Ireland.



Contact

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Healthy Ireland:

gov.ie/en/healthy-ireland/campaigns/healthy-ireland



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