

BANK OF IRELAND CELTIC CHALLENGE REVIEW & RECOMMENDATIONS 2017



National Hurling Development Committee
November 2017

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this evaluation was to collect, analyse and assess feedback about the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge 2017 with a view to improving the competition and informing recommendations for change in 2018.

The main objectives of this evaluation were to:

1. Evaluate the outcomes and impact of the Celtic Challenge against its key goals.
2. Assess the competition structures and scheduling.
3. Review the organisation of the competition including planning inputs, governance structures and communication/promotion.
4. Learn lessons for the future development of the competition in 2018 and beyond.

Furthermore, a key objective was to comparatively assess feedback as part of this evaluation with the information gathered as part of the review process in 2016.

Similar to the previous evaluation in 2016, 5 separate areas of review were identified and the key findings in relation to each area are summarised as follows:

A. Planning

The level of clarity and understanding regarding the ethos and structures of the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge was much greater in 2017 than in 2016 due to increased familiarity with the competition. The Provincial Workshops with management teams were well received and the inclusion of a practical element was very beneficial. However, it was noted that a fifth National Workshop may be required in April to allow late appointees to attend. Planning with the Match Officials requires further attention in 2018.

B. Team Selection & Preparation

The level of buy-in and understanding of the developmental ethos of the competition was very evident in relation to team selection and preparation. The number of players involved with regional/representative Tier 1 teams who were exclusively Club Players increased from 25% in 2016 to 57% in 2017. Over 40% of teams did not commence training for the Celtic Challenge until April or May and the guideline of one training session per week was adhered to by a majority of teams both before and during the competition. For 2018 the issue of Player Eligibility for Tier 1 Counties must be re-examined having regard for anomalies arising in relation to Galway as well as Counties with a low playing population.

C. Competition Structure & Scheduling

The changes introduced on foot of feedback in 2016 were met very positively (i.e. the need for a greater number of days between the end of the Group Stages and the Preliminaries and the need to avoid a mid-week fixture on the last week of school). The new grading/seeding structure was also welcomed – in 2016, 53% had been satisfied with the Grading system while 36% had been dissatisfied with the system; in 2017, 64% of respondents were satisfied with the grading/seeding after the Group Stages while only 9% were dissatisfied. Travel times remain a challenge

D. Promotion & Communication

Promotion & Communication was the area of greatest improvement in 2017. The establishment of dedicated Facebook and Twitter accounts met with a great response from the players, while the appointment of Damian Lawlor as National PR Coordinator was welcomed particularly by the PR & Social Media Coordinators assigned to each team.

However, despite increased coverage online, gaining traction in local media continues to present a challenge.

E. Developmental Ethos

The developmental ethos remains to the forefront of the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge. The provision of regular, meaningful games against varied opposition as part of a clearly defined schedule is the cornerstone of the competition. The impact of the Best & Fairest Award was greatly enhanced by the increased coverage given to this on the website although efforts must be made to ensure better consistency in the application of the Best & Fairest Award and the Pre-Match Talk by Match Officials. The interchange system was also effective – particularly in the Group Stages, however, a small number of young players felt their coaches did not employ the interchange system well and efforts must be redoubled to raise awareness of this at the Provincial Workshops for 2018.



Foreword

The Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge has in its second year evolved into a unique National Hurling Competition. Unique, because all 32 Counties, represented by 47 teams, are provided with the opportunity to play in a competition that guarantees each team at least 6 games. Unique, because of the 6 Tiers into which teams progress based on their results in the Group Stages. Unique, because of the sheer volume of games played in the Celtic Challenge – over 153 games were played by the time the final whistle blew on Saturday 24th June.

Another unique feature of the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge is the focus placed on displaying Respect for the game, the opposition and the match officials. A 'Best & Fairest Award' was presented to a selected player from each team at the end of every game. The match officials presented this award and the nominated players were featured on www.gaa.ie.

This report also shows that the continued inclusion of Tier 1 regional teams adds to the integrity of the competition. Not only did it provide an opportunity for varied opposition but it meant that 570 U.17 players in Tier 1 Counties had the chance to play hurling during a time period that is otherwise bereft of Club Minor fixtures due to State Examinations taking place.

Over 1,400 boys under the age of 17, from every Province and every County, were afforded the opportunity to hurl for their County or represent their region in the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge 2017. The enjoyment which players and coaches derived from the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge 2017, is well captured in this report and their opinions and feedback should be the guiding force for all of us involved in providing games opportunities to young players.

I wish to record the appreciation of the HDC to all the match officials who officiated at the Celtic Challenge games this year. Sincere thanks are also due to Bank of Ireland, O'Neills House of Sport and the Past Hurlers' Association for their wonderful sponsorship and support of the competition in 2017.

Carlow County Board were incredibly generous hosts of the Celtic Challenge Finals in Netwatch Cullen Park on the 24th June. Many thanks to all their officials and volunteers who worked so hard to ensure that the players, coaches, match officials and supporters thoroughly enjoyed the day.

Mar fhocal scoir, I would like to thank the National Coordinator: Caoimhe Ní Néill (Runaí, HDC) as well as the Provincial, Group and Referee Coordinators, who contributed so much to ensure that the ambitious programme of games was run off in such a well-organised manner; Damien Coleman, Michael O'Connor, Thomas Keenan, Adrian Hassett (Connacht); James Devane, Lester Ryan (Leinster); Kevin Kelly, Stephen Donnelly (Ulster); and Joey Carton, David O'Dea, Peter Nash, Kevin Walsh (Munster).

I look forward to seeing the recommendations outlined in this report come to fruition and expect yet another wonderful summer of hurling in the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge 2018.

*Paudie O'Neill
Chairperson,
National Hurling Development Committee.*

Section 1

1.1 The Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge

The Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge is a unique and innovative developmental hurling competition for players aged 16 and 17 years old players, who are not participating in State Examinations. The overall objectives of the BOI Celtic Challenge are as follows:

- To provide a pre-scheduled programme of games;
- To provide a meaningful programme of games;
- To provide each team with a minimum of 6 games;
- To schedule the competition to ensure there is minimum interruption to Club or County fixtures.

In line with the goals and objectives, the growth and development of the BOI Celtic Challenge in 2017 was a resounding success:

- The competition benefitted from the invaluable partnership and support from Bank of Ireland, who have agreed to sponsor the competition for a three-year period;
- The number of Counties participating in the BOI Celtic Challenge increased from 31 to 32 with Fermanagh fielding a team for the first time;
- The number of teams playing in the BOI Celtic Challenge rose from 38 in 2016 to 47 in 2017 with an additional 270 players participating in the competition. Almost 1,400 boys from every Province and every County, were afforded the opportunity to hurl for their County or represent their region in 2017;
- A total of 153 games were played over a 7-week period, which represented an increase from 118 games in 2016 and amounts to the provision of 140 additional games for players of this age-grade when compared with the former All Ireland Hurling Minor B and Minor C Championship in 2015.

All 32 Counties - represented by 47 teams - played in the competition. Most developing hurling Counties entered a County team - although Kildare and Meath were notable as they entered two teams each in an effort to provide more players with games opportunities. Meanwhile, Tier 1 Counties were invited to enter multiple teams, thereby providing players who were not involved with County Minor Panels with representative games opportunities that they would not otherwise receive. In addition to the strict restriction on the use of players on the County Hurling Minor Panel, the HDC also made a recommendation that 25% of the players involved with teams from Tier 1 Counties should be selected from outside existing Development Squad structures. Overall, the number of players from Tier 1 Counties who played in the Celtic Challenge but were not a member of a Development Squad totalled 57% - a testament to the developmentally-focused selection criteria adopted by the management teams.

The provision of a meaningful programme of games is a key priority for the Hurling Development Committee. Through the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge, all teams were guaranteed a minimum of 6 games. This was achieved by structuring the competition on the basis of a regionalised round robin phase of matches in the Group Stages (8 Groups), after which teams were graded on their performance and were then assigned to one of six Divisions for the Preliminaries and the Play-Offs where they competed against teams of a similar level of ability. The winners of the Play-Offs in each Division then progressed to one of six Finals. The Finals provided an incredible conclusion to the competition with 6 thrilling encounters taking place on the 24th June. 5 of the Finals were held in Netwatch Cullen Park, Carlow, while the Corn Tom Hogan between Tyrone and Fermanagh was played in Garvaghy GAA Centre at the request of these Counties. The outcome of the Finals was as follows:

- Corn Tom Hogan: Tyrone 0-14 v Fermanagh 1-10
- Corn Michael Feery: Roscommon 2-15 v Armagh 0-14
- Corn Jerome O'Leary: Limerick South/East 3-18 v Carlow 2-16
- Corn William Robinson: Down 3-11 v Dublin Plunkett 2-11
- Corn John Scott: Antrim 2-17 v North Cork 1-12
- Corn Michael Hogan: South Tipperary 2-11 v Galway Maroon 0-16

1.2 Implementation – Project Pathway

The following is an overview of the project pathway from planning through to deliverables over the course of a 12-month period before, during and after the BOI Celtic Challenge.

➤	<p>July – September 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collated feedback from the online evaluations submitted by players, backroom teams and match officials involved in the Celtic Challenge. • Conducted Review Workshop for the Celtic Challenge on 24th August with 30+ attendees. • Finalised draft of the Celtic Challenge Review and Recommendations. • Met with members of the Sponsorship Department on 31st August to discuss sponsorship opportunities for 2017 – prepared extensive brief and materials. • Met with members of Games Administration on 8th August to discuss recommendations for change in relation to rules/match officials for 2017
➤	<p>October – December 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of Review & Recommendations to An Coiste Bainistí. • Identification of participating teams for 2017. • Finalisation of Fixture Dates and Venues. • Organisation of gear order and requirements via O'Neills. • Finalisation of the Operations Manual. • Schedule of Provincial Workshops for coaches agreed.
➤	<p>January 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalised marketing requirements with Marketing Department. • Organised launch of Group H (six Counties) in Garvaghey. • Finalised trophy and medal requirements with MMI. • Confirmed appointment of Damian Lawlor as the National PR Coordinator and commenced drafting Communications Plan.
➤	<p>February – March 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalised sponsorship with Bank of Ireland. • Sought and received approval of Playing Rules, Respect Initiatives and appointment of Celtic Challenge CCC from Central Council. • Conducted 4 Provincial Workshops with backroom teams – combination of interactive workshop and a coaching practical with Martin Fogarty/Eamon O'Shea: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Munster – Mallow GAA, Feb. 4th (22 attendees) ○ Connacht – Connacht GAA Centre, Feb. 6th (27 attendees) ○ Ulster – Garvaghey Centres, Feb. 11th (24 attendees) ○ Leinster – O'Moore Park, Mar. 11th (28 attendees) • On-going Conference Calls with Group/Provincial Coordinators; • Conducted Conference Call with match officials for Group H; • Finalised venue for Finals with Carlow Co. Board – Dr Cullen Park; • Coordinated the organisation of Group H games.
➤	<p>April 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered National Workshop for the PR & Social Media Coordinators for each team (11th April).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinated the National Launch on 19th April with all teams represented and four Inter-County hurlers present. Delivered Match Officials Workshop (25th April) – issued Operations Manual and gear to all Match Officials. Established GAA Celtic Challenge Twitter Account [221 Tweets and 653 Followers] and Facebook Page [1,315 Facebook Likes – post reach of 28,000+ on the week of the Finals].
➡	<p>May – June 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversight of all games in the Group Stages – 100+ games. Identification of venues and Match Officials for the Preliminaries, Play-Offs and Finals. Meeting with Carlow County Board on 25th May to make arrangements for the Finals Day in Netwatch Cullen Park; Meeting with Provincial/Group Coordinators on 1st June to oversee draws for Preliminary stages; Meetings with E. de Barra and F. Breathnach regarding entertainment for the Finals Day; Organisation of the Finals Day in Netwatch Cullen Park (24th June) including organisation of live streaming, photography, invitations to dignitaries and sponsors, catering, appointment of all Match Officials etc.
➡	<p>July – August 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepared online evaluation surveys and issued to players, coaches and Match Officials (3rd July). Conducted review with Coordinators (4th July). Download and analysis of all online evaluations. Preparation for Review Workshops.



Section 2

2.1 Review Methodology

The Celtic Challenge competition concluded on Saturday 24th June 2017. Online evaluations with key stakeholders (players, management teams and match officials) were conducted between Monday 3rd July and Friday 14th July. A review process with key staff from each Province were also conducted. Further detail on how these methodologies were implemented is as follows:

A. Key Stakeholder Surveys:

Three online surveys were developed and tailored for the following groups – players; management; match officials. The surveys were drafted and mapped against the 5 areas of review: Planning; Team Selection & Preparation; Competition Structure & Scheduling; Communication & Promotion; Developmental Ethos. The links to the surveys were circulated via email, whatsapp, twitter and Facebook. In total, 224 players, 44 members of management teams and 26 match officials completed the surveys.

B. Conference Calls

Throughout the Celtic Challenge a series of 7 weekly conference calls were carried out with key full-time personnel from each Province i.e. Group and Provincial Coordinators. A review was also conducted via conference call on the 4th July.

2.2 Participation in the Review

PLAYERS

A total of 244 Players completed the online survey. This was an increase on 132 Players from 2016 and was largely due to the use of the dedicated @GAACelticChallenge Twitter and Facebook accounts to distribute information regarding the survey. 54% of the respondents were 16 years of age with the remainder all 17 years of age. In total, almost two thirds of the respondents (62%) were 16 years of age with the remainder all 17 years of age. In total 38 teams were represented – an increase from 12 teams in 2016.

MATCH OFFICIALS

A total of 26 Match Officials completed the online survey representing officials in the following roles: Referee; Linesman; Interchange Coordinator; Umpire. Many respondents had more than one role over the course of the competition but 92% of respondents had refereed at least once during the Celtic Challenge. The majority of respondents (48%) had officiated at either 3 or 4 games with 28% officiating at 1 or 2 games and 16% officiating at either 5 or 6 games. A further 8% had officiated at 7 games or more.

MANAGEMENT TEAMS

A total of 44 respondents, representing 23 of the 47 participating teams, completed the online survey for members of the management teams. The respondents had various roles within the management teams – 44% fulfilled the role of Coach; 30% acted in the role of Team Administrator; 23% were Assistant Coaches and a further 12% undertook the role of PR & Social Media Coordinator. 9% identified as the role of 'other' and were primarily full-time Games Development personnel who acted in a liaison role.

KEY PERSONNEL

A number of full-time personnel acted as Group, Provincial and National Coordinators as follows:

Group Coordinator	
Group A and G	Michael O'Connor
Group B	David O'Dea
Group C and D	Lester Ryan
Group E	Peter Nash
Group F	Thomas Keenan
Group H	Kevin Kelly
Provincial Coordinator	
Connacht	Damien Coleman
Leinster	James Devane
Munster	Joe Carton
Ulster	Kevin Kelly
National Coordinator	
Páirc an Chrócaigh	Caoimhe Ní Néill

Prior to the commencement of the Celtic Challenge, personnel were involved in a total of 5 Conference Calls during April/May 2017. During the course of the competition, personnel conducted a total of 7 conference calls on a weekly basis. A final review conference call was conducted in early July 2017. Damian Lawlor was also appointed to act as National PR Coordinator for the duration of the competition.



Section 3

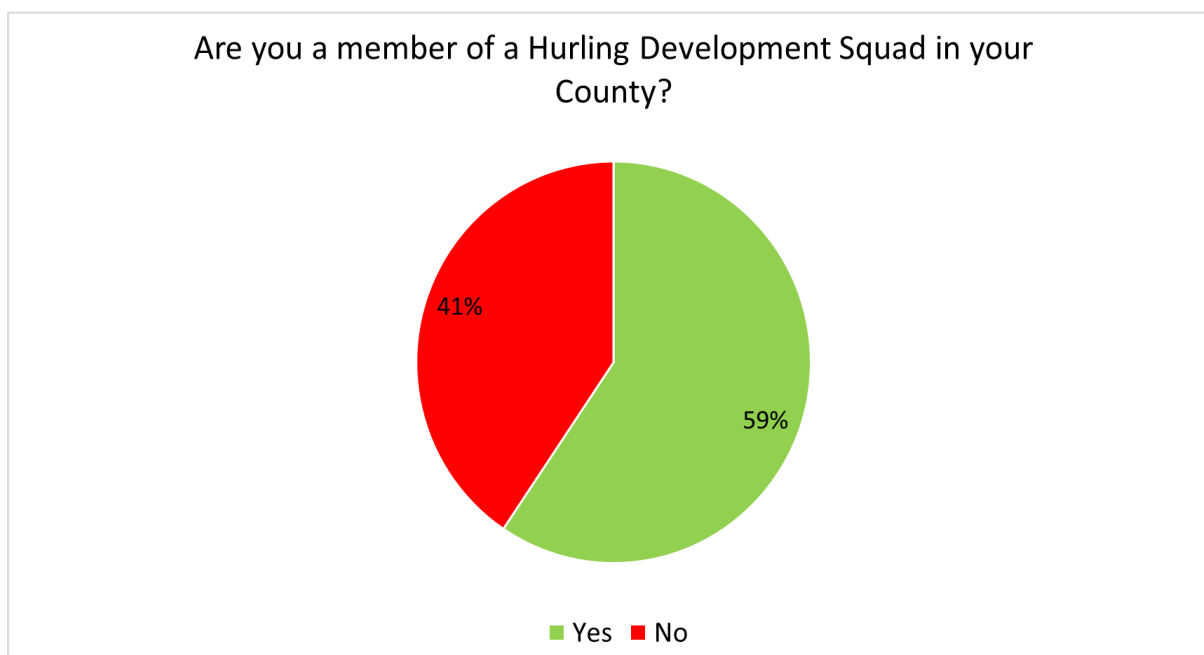
3.1 Player Evaluations

A. TEAM SELECTION AND PREPARATION

A key objective of the BOI Celtic Challenge was to ensure that a developmental approach underpinned the selection and preparation (training) of players. In this regard, arising from the evaluation conducted in 2016, the Hurling Development Committee recommended the following measures:

- For Tier 1 Counties, it was recommended that 25% of the players should not currently be part of Development Squad structures;
- For Tier 1 Counties, it was recommended that team preparation should not start any earlier than March;
- During the course of the competition there should be a 1 to 1 ratio of training to games.

The adherence to these recommendations were assessed through the online survey. In 2017, 41% of players surveyed were not members of a Hurling Development Squad – this represented an increase from 13% in 2016. Furthermore, when respondents from the developing counties were factored out of the analysis 57% of players from Tier 1 Counties¹ were not members of a Hurling Development Squad. This was a significant increase from the percentage in 2016 (22%) and is a very positive testament to the ethos and attitude adopted by management teams when selecting regional teams from Tier 1 Counties.



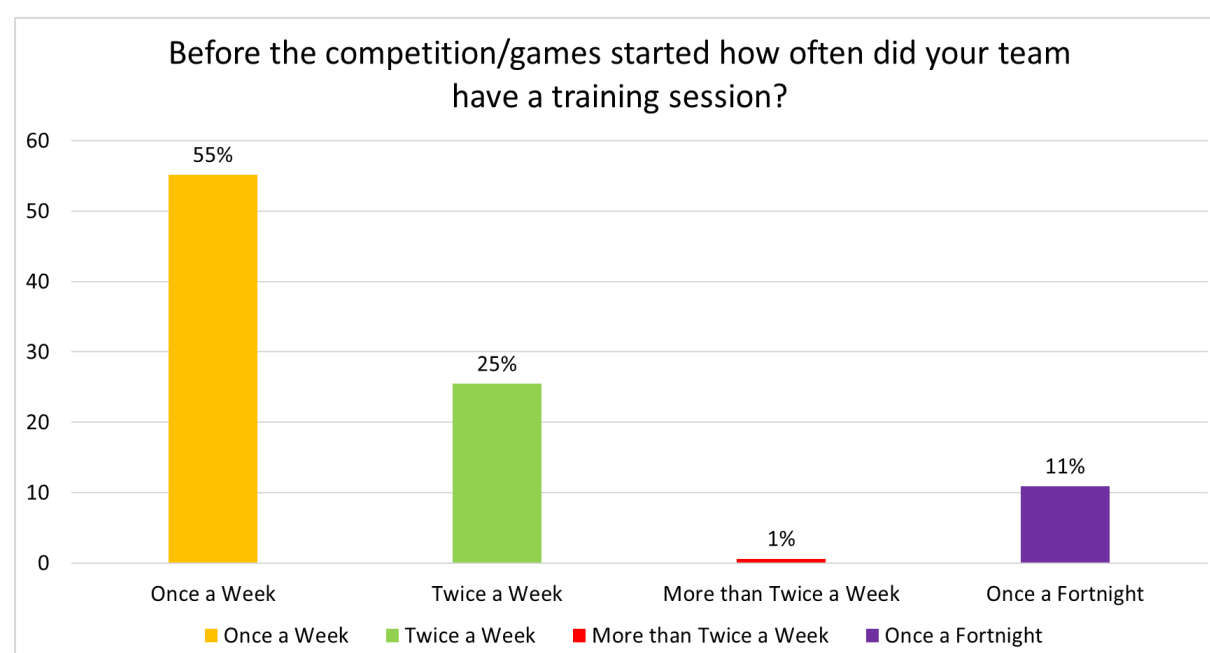
Players were also asked to identify when their team started training for the Celtic Challenge. In general, 19% started training in January, 21% in February, 26% in March and 35% commenced team training in April. When respondents from the developing counties were factored out of the analysis the breakdown was as follows: 10% in January, 13% in February,

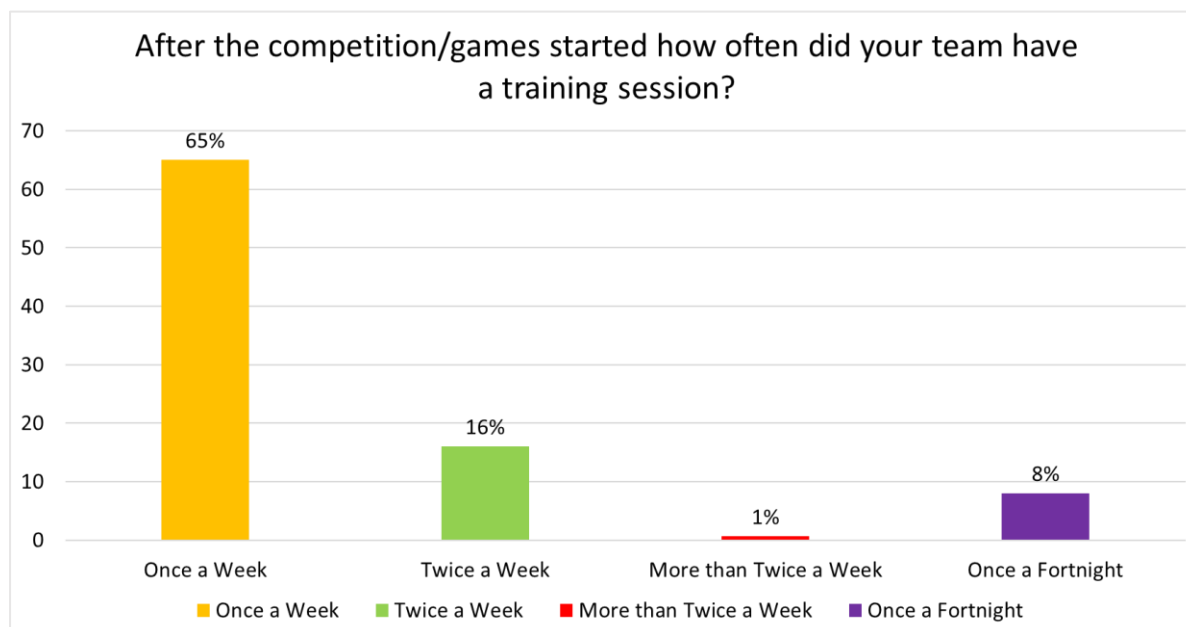
¹ Antrim; Carlow; Clare; Cork; Dublin; Galway; Kilkenny; Laois; Limerick; Offaly; Tipperary; Waterford; Wexford.

25% in March and 52% in April. Antrim were not included in this analysis due to the earlier start of the Group Stages for the six Counties. However, the statistics would suggest that the majority of teams adhered to the recommended timelines for training.



Players were also asked to identify how often they had a training session both before and during the competition. Before the competition 55% of respondents had training once a week. When asked their opinion on whether the amount of training they had done was appropriate, 50% stated that the amount of pre-competition training was 'just right' while 49% felt it was 'too little' and 1% felt it was 'too much'. Once the competition commenced 65% of respondents stated that they had one training session per week and 60% felt that the amount of training they had done was 'just right'.





While the number of teams adhering to the recommendation of one training session or less per week is still high, the 2017 figures do reflect a slight decrease on 2016 figures – in 2016 68% had training once a week prior to the competition and 72% had training once a week during the competition. Therefore, for 2018 there must be a renewed focus on emphasising the recommendation of one training session per week as part of the developmental ethos underpinning the competition.

B. COMPETITION STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULING

Each team participating in the BOI Celtic Challenge 2017 received a minimum of 6 games. 80% of players indicated that the number of games provided was sufficient.

87% also thought that the structure of the BOI Celtic Challenge (i.e. Group Stages, Preliminaries and Play-Offs) worked well, which was an increase from 75% of respondents in 2016. Respondents cited the fact that the structure *‘meant we were playing teams we don’t normally get to play’* and that *‘the group stages were brilliant to prove yourself on the team’*. However, a number of respondents commented that the selection of teams for the Group stages needs to be re-considered to avoid imbalances in the standards of the teams *‘Galway Tribesmen was in too low a group and ended up hammering every other team which was a bit of a waste of time for ourselves and for the other teams’*.

Furthermore, similarly to 2016, it was clear from the feedback that the operation of the Preliminaries and Play-Offs must be clearly communicated to players as some did not understand how the seeding and grading operated and were not aware that the draw for games within Divisions was done on the basis of an open draw.

C. PROMOTION AND COMMUNICATION

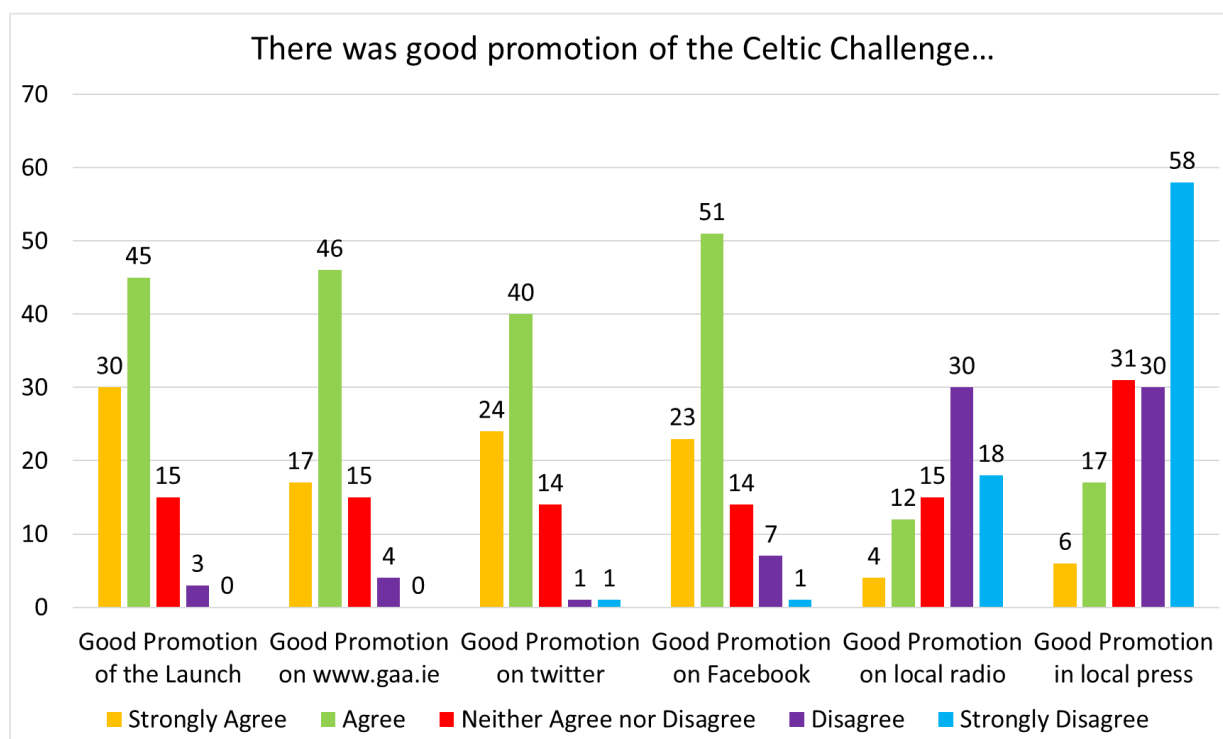
On foot of feedback from 2016, a number of new measures were introduced in 2017 to enhance the promotional profile of the BOI Celtic Challenge including:

- The establishment of bespoke Celtic Challenge accounts on Facebook and Twitter;

- The appointment of a dedicated PR Coordinator to prepare articles for gaa.ie and regional newspapers;
- The introduction of a dedicated page for the 'Best and Fairest Awards' on gaa.ie

Players were asked to indicate whether they thought there was good promotion of the Celtic Challenge in relation to a number of statements:

- 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was good promotion of the Launch of the BOI Celtic Challenge. This represented a decrease of 2% from the feedback in 2016;
- 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was good promotion of the BOI Celtic Challenge on www.gaa.ie. This represented an increase of 18% from the feedback in 2016;
- 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was good promotion of the BOI Celtic Challenge on Twitter. This represented an increase of 33% from the feedback in 2016;
- 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was good promotion of the BOI Celtic Challenge on Facebook. This represented an increase of 52% from the feedback in 2016;
- 16% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was good promotion of the BOI Celtic Challenge on local radio. This represented a decrease of 4% from the feedback in 2016;
- 23% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was good promotion of the BOI Celtic Challenge in local papers. This represented an increase of 3% from the feedback in 2016.



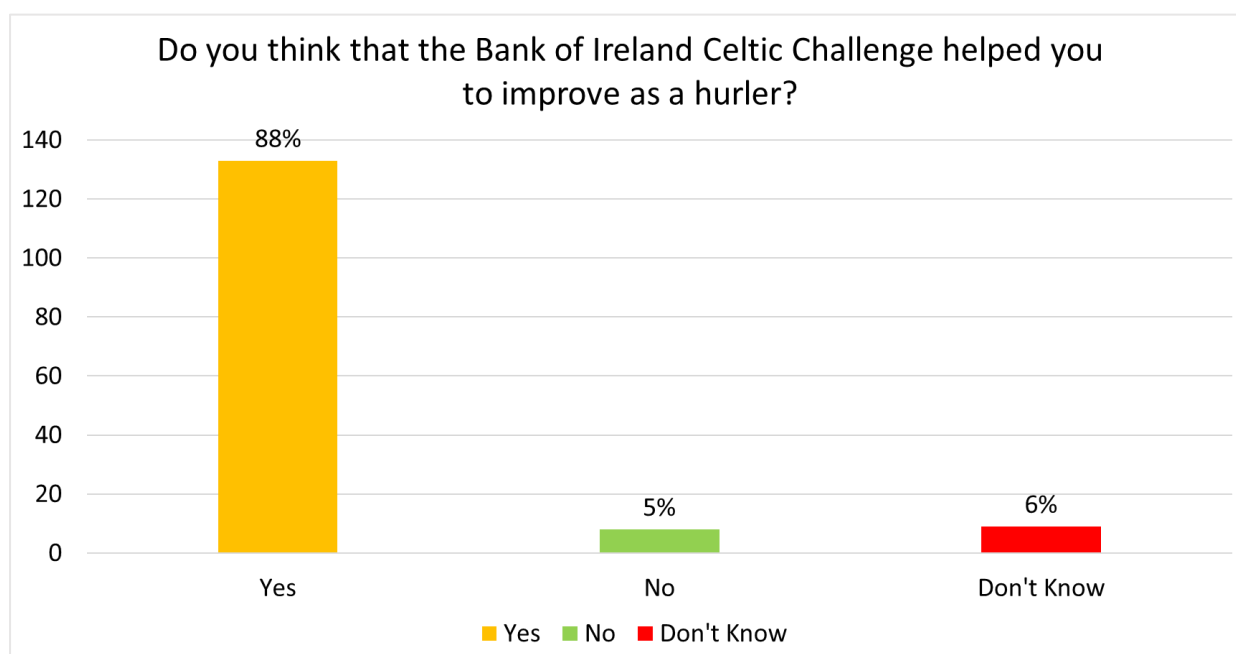
In general, 31% of respondents indicated that www.gaa.ie was the source that they used the most when looking for information about the BOI Celtic Challenge while 26% of respondents

looked first to the GAA Celtic Challenge Facebook Page and 24% relying on the GAA Celtic Challenge Twitter account as the most used source. The other sources that were used when looking for information were as follows: Facebook - general (8%); Twitter - general (7%); Local Radio (5%) and Local Newspapers (1%). The statistics reveal the digital bias of young players and their reliance on online and social media sources for information about the BOI Celtic Challenge.

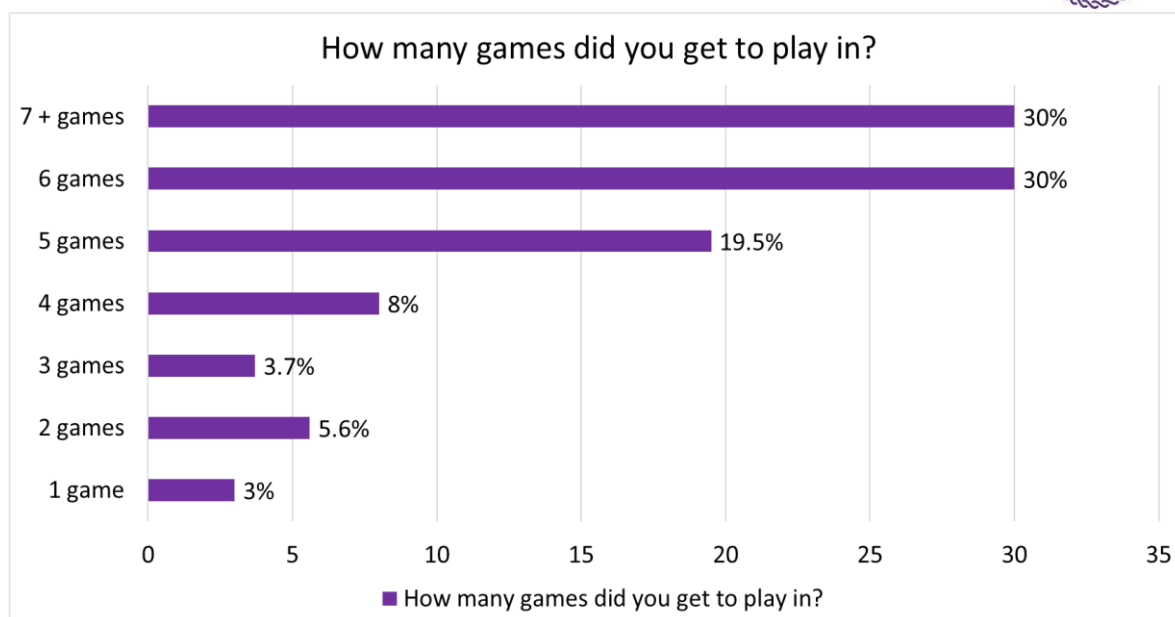
In terms of recommendations to improve promotion of the BOI Celtic Challenge in 2018 players strongly suggested that a television advert should be produced for the competition. Furthermore, the players emphasised the need for greater promotion at local level by providing poster to Clubs or having adverts in the local/regional newspapers. While the 2017 Finals were streamed online players once again suggested that some of the Finals should be televised and also strongly recommended a television advert to promote the competition.

D. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS

Players were asked to assess whether the Celtic Challenge had helped them to improve as a hurler. 88% of respondents stated that the BOI Celtic Challenge had helped them to improve as a hurler.



As part of the evaluation respondents were also asked to indicate the number of games that they personally participated in. 79.5% of respondents played in 5 games or more over the course of the 7 weeks. A further 69% thought that the Interchange system worked well however, a small number of respondents indicated that their coach did not employ the interchange system well and one respondent stated that he only received 20 minutes of game time over 7 games.



Finally, players were asked to give their personal comments on the Celtic Challenge by identifying their favourite and least favourite aspect of the competition.

Through the comments provided it was possible to establish some commonality across the responses. Some of the most frequently cited 'favourite' aspects included:

- Playing hurling matches on a regular basis = 25%
- Playing against different teams than they would normal play against = 14%
- The way they were treated – getting to keep the gear and having food after games = 14%
- Improving as a hurler and good coaching = 14%
- Having fun and making new friends = 11%
- Representing their county = 9%
- Winning = 7%
- The way the competition was organised including new rules/initiatives = 4%
- Reaching a Final = 3%

Comments in support of their favourite aspects included:

"It changed my opinion of hurling. I wouldn't be a great hurler and I was thinking of giving it up at the start of this year but Fermanagh were struggling for numbers so I came out and now I am mad for it."

"Playing against teams I wouldn't normally get to play against and playing in facilities like Abbottstown and Cullen Park was also very good."

"Representing your county was one of the best feelings I have ever experienced and is the reason I want to make the next step to the county team."

"To be a part of something bigger than the club and to train with best from other clubs."

“The professionalism of the setup and playing in a real All-Ireland competition.”

“The great training and mentoring and advice we were given.”

“Getting to the Finals Day in Carlow – even though we lost it was a great experience.”

“Regular matches and plenty of game time. Relaxed atmosphere as well compared to club/school teams.”

“Representing my County and showing that even with a small amount of Clubs there is good hurling here.”

12% of respondents declined to identify a ‘least favourite’ element but some of the most frequently cited ‘least favourite’ aspects included:

- Travel time = 15%
- Losing = 15%
- Not getting enough game time = 13%
- Mismatches between teams in Group Stages = 10%
- Poor Team Selection by Management = 5%
- That the team disbanded after the competition = 5%
- Unfair and unclear Grading/Seeding system = 4%
- Not playing in quality venues i.e. county grounds = 3%
- Poor Management = 3%
- Poor Match Officials = 3%
- Poor appointment of Match Officials i.e. not neutral = 2%
- Gaps between Group Stages and Preliminaries for Group H = 2%
- Too much training = 1%
- Not enough training = 1%
- Not playing the Corn Tom Hogan Final in Carlow = 1%

Comments provided in support of this included:

“My least favourite thing was that it started so quick and ended so quickly - after the All Ireland final we just went separate roads and we're will we go from now in developing me as player because the Celtic challenge would drive you to improve and practice every night a bit more than you normally would”.

“Each squad member was not given an equal opportunity to play. Only players that were in previous county squad were used all the time”.

“In Wexford we did A and B teams and Wexford Gold was B. We got hammered in all our games. If it had of been north and south, it'd have been more balanced and more chance of not getting bet”.

“Not having at least one of the matches in our county grounds”.

"We (Galway Tribesmen) played Offaly in our quarter final and when we played them it was in Birr, an Offaly venue and an Offaly referee was referring the game. This was very unprofessional on the side of the organisers of the competition. I feel we would have won that game had Offaly not had the home crowd behind them. I also felt that had our team been challenged in the group stages by better teams we would have improved sufficiently to beat Offaly. Offaly played competitive games all through the tournament and that gave them a slight edge over us".

"The squad of players are dispersed now and I no longer meet the boys".



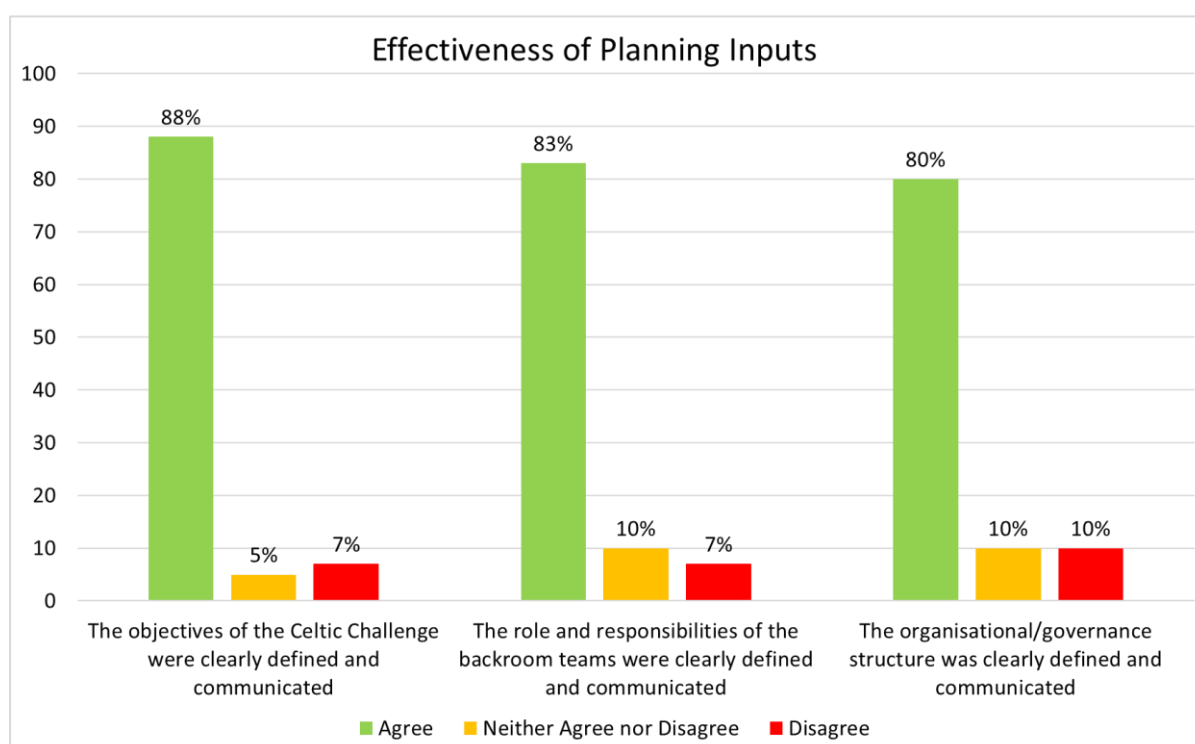
3.2 Team Management Evaluations

A. PLANNING

In the first year of the competition (2016), 56% of management team members were appointed to their position between October and December 2015. In contrast, for the 2017 competition only 23% were appointed between October and December 2016 with the majority appointed between January and March (56%). The difference may be attributable to an increased familiarity with the competition and its structure – 38% of management team members had also been involved in 2016 – but may also have been due to potential uncertainty due to the existence of the U.17 Special Hurling Tournament. Regardless of the factors, the timing of appointments would suggest that the Provincial Planning Workshops should be held slightly later in the year going forward.

As it was, 48% of respondents attended the Provincial Planning Workshops that were held in: Mallow GAA Centre (28.01.17) Connacht GAA Centre (06.02.17); Garvaghey GAA Centre (11.02.17); Laois GAA Centre of Excellence (11.03.17). However, there is a case to be made for holding a subsequent National Workshops for all those who were not yet appointed at the time of the Provincial Workshops.

Aside from the Provincial Workshops, 83% did receive a copy of the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge Operations Manual. This is a slight decrease on 2016 figures and while the number is still positive there is merit in looking at how information contained in the Operations Manual (e.g. player eligibility, grading/seeding) could be communicated in a more visual or succinct manner.



B. TEAM SELECTION & PREPARATION

Similar to the survey conducted with the players, the online survey of the backroom teams provided the HDC with an opportunity to assess the effective application of the developmental measures instituted by the Committee (i.e. considering inclusion of non-Development Squad players in Tier 1 Counties; not commencing preparation before March in Tier 1 Counties; a ratio of 1 to 1 training to games)

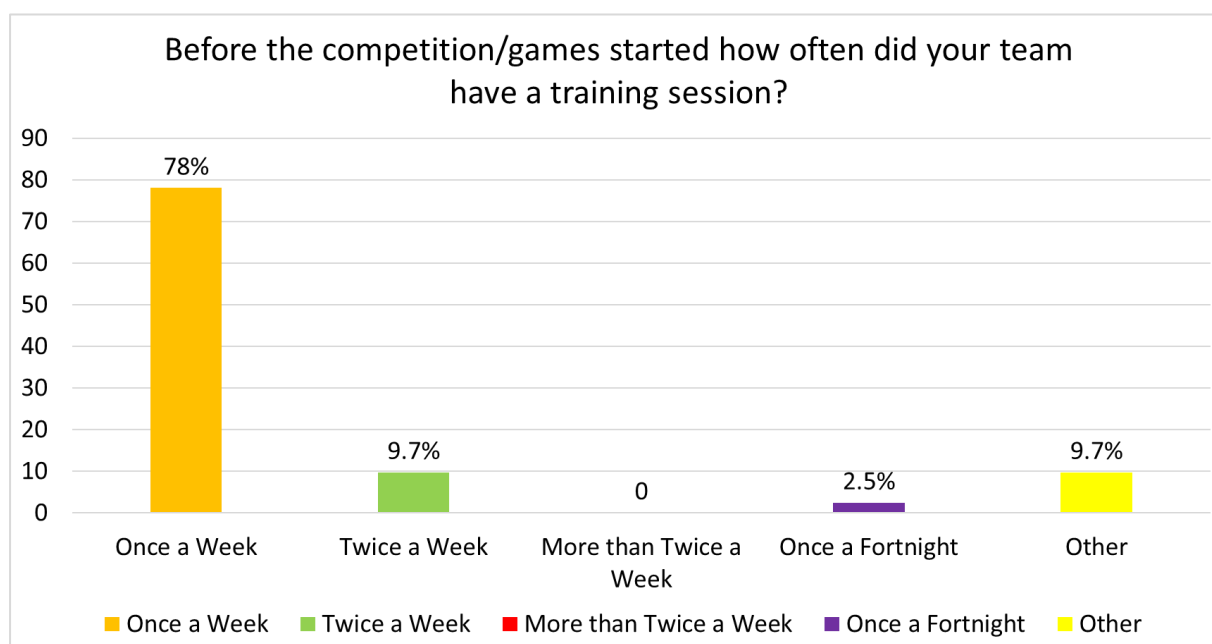
On this basis, the management teams were asked the same questions as the players around the commencement of training and the quantity of training. However, it must be noted that it is not advised to comparatively analyse the response of the players with those of the management team members as the players 38 teams while the management team members represented 23 teams so there is not always a direct correlation.

The majority of respondents indicated that their team started training in April (35%) while the remaining respondents noted training commenced in January (19%), February (21%), March (26%) or May (8%).

When respondents from the developing counties were factored out of the analysis the breakdown was as follows: January (0%); February (6% – a decrease of 14% from 2016); March (19% – a decrease of 7% from 2016); April (56% - an increase of 3% from 2016) while a further 19% of teams did not start training until May i.e. until the competition commenced. This suggests that the recommendation that squads from Tier 1 should not commence training before March was implemented by the vast majority of those teams.

78% of respondents confirmed that their teams trained once a week prior to the start of the competition. 10% indicated that their teams trained twice a week with no teams training more than twice a week. 2.5% stated that their teams trained once a fortnight while a further 10% indicated that their teams trained less frequently than once a fortnight.

Overall, this was an improvement on the feedback received in 2016. The number of teams training once a week increased from 55% to 78% and the number of teams training more than twice a week decreased from 5% to 0%.



Once the competition started 68% trained once a week and 3% trained once a fortnight. Based upon the responses received from management team members no teams trained twice a week or more. A further 29% held training sporadically or not at all based upon the needs/demands on the players.

Respondents were also afforded the opportunity to make general observations regarding the training undertaken before and during the Celtic Challenge. The recommendation of one training session per game met with very positive feedback:

“Players seemed enthused by the one session per match model”.

“The needs of different teams vary so it is hard to have 1 size fits all but I like the philosophy of 1 training to 1 match”.

Certain respondents also highlighted the developmental approach they adopted to training:

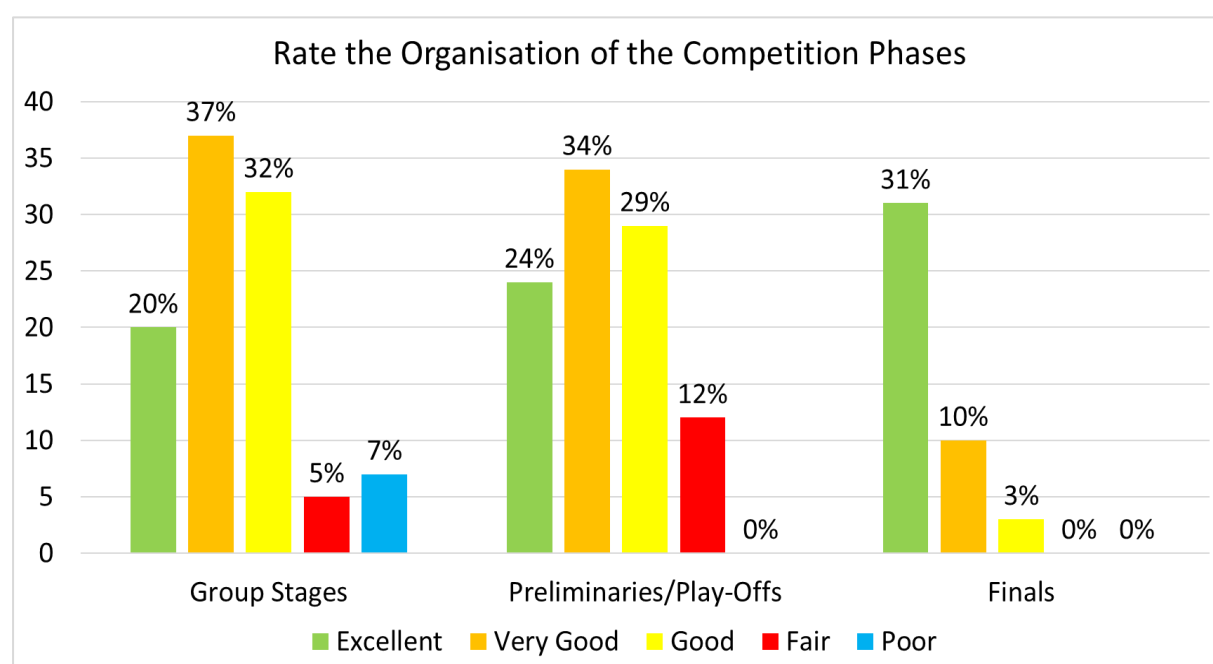
“Training was focused on player development, team structure, game plan, important of rest and diet, so all in all really good for player development”.

“The players’ skill-sets, understanding of the game and commitment improved significantly as the competition progressed”.

The feedback highlighted the potential for the development of a set of player-centred resources – bespoke to the BOI Celtic Challenge - that could be adopted/adapted by management teams during their preparation and training.

C. COMPETITION STRUCTURE & SCHEDULING

Respondents were asked to provide feedback in relation to the structure of the competition by rating the organisation of the various phases and providing their thoughts on the scheduling of the competition. The following were the ratings given for the organisation of each phase of the BOI Celtic Challenge²:



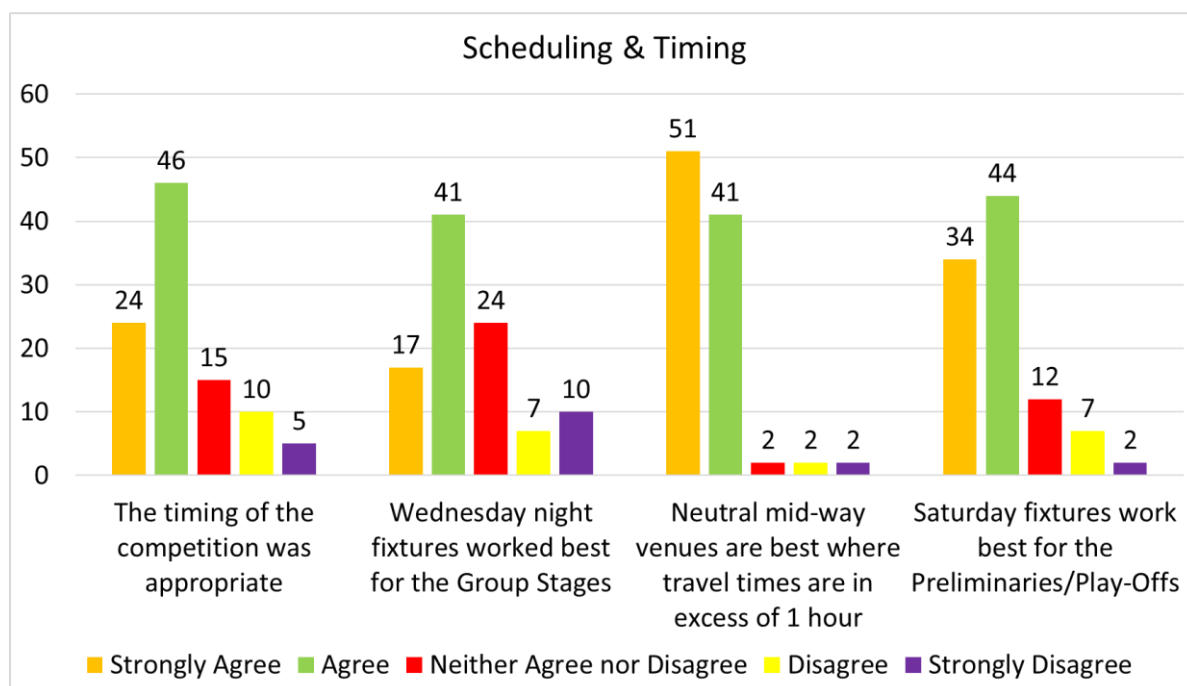
Similar to feedback received in 2016, it was suggested that the Group Stages could be improved by having more games in County Grounds. The need for parity in terms of travel was highlighted i.e. certain teams having to travel for more than 50% of their game while others in the same Group had games at home.

Overall, management teams were satisfied with the organisation of the Preliminaries and Play-Offs. The lack of Programmes for games was highlighted as an issue for Group Stages and

² 56% of respondents did not attend the Finals and therefore gave no comment on the organisation of the Finals.

Preliminaries/Play-Offs, this however is the responsibility of each team's PR & Social Media Coordinator and templates/resources are provided in support of this.

56% of respondents did not attend the Finals and had no comment on the organisation. However, those that did attend were very positive about the choice of venue and the operation on the day. The scheduling of six Finals in one day is a matter that will have to be considered for 2018 and it may be necessary to consider an overnight stay for the teams participating at the start of the day.



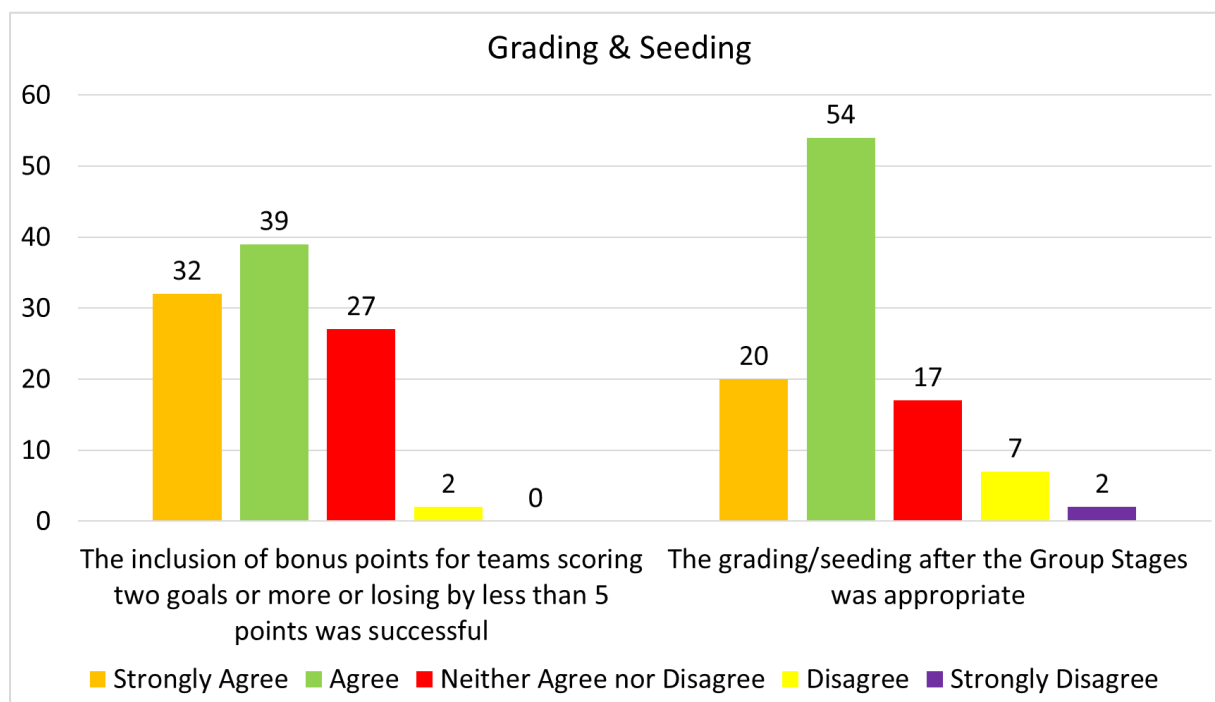
The majority of respondents were happy that the competition is played at an appropriate time of the year (70%). The scheduling gap between the conclusion of Group H games (April) and the Preliminaries was cited as an issue for teams in the six Counties but unfortunately is unavoidable due to the exam structures and timetable in the six Counties.

A decision was made on foot of feedback from 2016 to move one of the Group Stage fixtures to a Saturday in order to avoid a clash with the last week of school and associated school tours and in-school exams that take place during this week. This move was welcomed and allowed for increased flexibility in terms of travel times.

Overall respondents were satisfied with the operation of the bonus points system. Some noted that the bonus points were not included on the automated tables published on www.gaa.ie. This functionality remains unavailable on the website and another means of publicising/relaying the bonus points must be examined for 2018.

As part of the 2016 evaluation, 53% had been satisfied with the Grading system while 36% had been dissatisfied with the system that had operated. Based upon the feedback received, an additional seeding element was introduced – after teams were graded they were then seeded so that teams from Counties that participate in the Lory Meagher or Nicky Rackard Tournament in Senior County Hurling were not seeded higher than Division 4 i.e. could not be graded in the top 24 teams. As part of the 2017 review 64% of respondents were satisfied with the grading/seeding after the Group Stages while only 9% were dissatisfied. Issues that arose can be addressed by better communicating the Grading process in 2018 – for instance it was

not understood that the Preliminaries were decided on foot of an open draw having regard for geographical factors.



D. PROMOTION & COMMUNICATION

Of the respondents surveyed a total of 12% held the role of PR & Social Media Coordinator and were responsible for liaising with the National Coordinator and the dedicated National PR Coordinator to produce agreed/required communications inputs for the team e.g. produce match programme; prepare match reports; social media inputs regarding scores/results; action shots. In total, over 22 teams had a PR & Social Media Coordinator and considered the role to be beneficial.

A dedicated Workshop was held for the PR & Social Media Coordinators in advance of the competition and each management team was provided with promotional materials to promote the competition including templates for match programmes, digital imagery (updated with new information on a match by match basis each week) and a booklet with a series of hints and tips for contacting local media as well as writing match reports. 54% of respondents found the materials and weekly updates to be 'very useful' while 35% considered them 'somewhat useful' and 11% considered them 'not very useful'.

Further to feedback gathered through the 2016 evaluation, dedicated Celtic Challenge accounts were set up on Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, a number of freelance photographers were employed to capture photos from games played in the Group Stages, Preliminaries and Play-Offs and not just the Finals. These measures proved to be very beneficial with 78% of respondents confirming that there was good promotion of the competition on Twitter and 54% of respondents stating that there was good promotion of the competition on Facebook. Furthermore, for management teams, the GAA Celtic Challenge Twitter account became the second most accessed source of information about the competition (32%) behind the GAA website (56%).

While respondents noted a significant improvement in the promotion of the competition from 2016, a number of suggestions were made to enhance promotion going forward particularly at local level (radio/papers)

E. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS

100% of respondents felt that the BOI Celtic Challenge provided an opportunity for the players to develop as hurlers with the programme of regular games cited as the main factor behind this:

“A very worthwhile programme where regular games are provided without the over the top preparations, it is important that this is maintained”.

“Absolutely - a massive positive step forward for Armagh. What did we have in its place... 1 or 2 Ulster Minor Championship matches and maybe 1 All-Ireland B game”.

“It really is all about development and all the players we had developed and really enjoyed playing at a higher level, it's an excellent competition”.

“Weekly games gave players a chance to improve and get regular games which is what players crave the most”.

“It provided exposure to top counties on a 'fairer' basis e.g. Antrim hurling population v Cork North as opposed to Antrim v Cork”.

“Players felt important - coming from a 'Football' County our Hurlers don't always get recognition”.

Furthermore, 86% of the respondents thought that the BOI Celtic Challenge provided an opportunity for coaches to develop their skill-set:

“I felt the specific time-frame allowed coaches to give the necessary commitment to the squad. Coaches had an opportunity to work with a developing player while the number of games played allowed the coach to learn about his players and set goals target for next coaching session”.

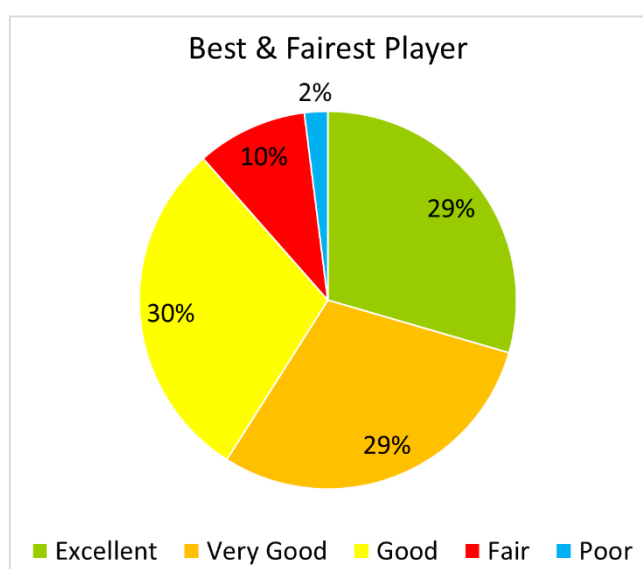
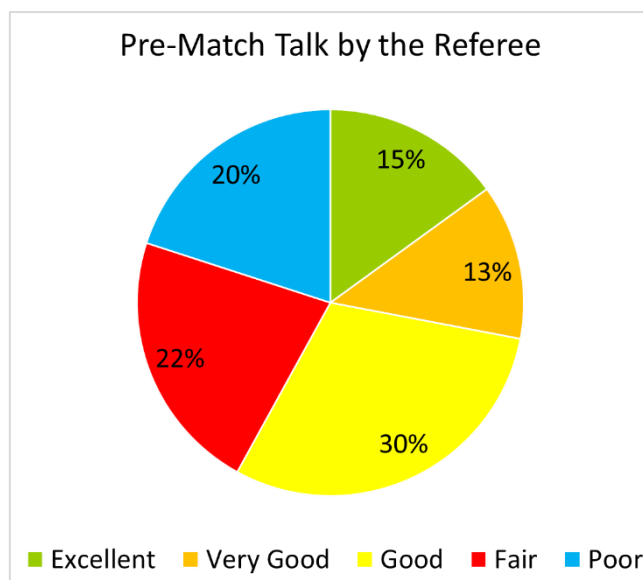
“Some great games and experience of coming up against other management teams and meeting other mentors from other countries”.

“Yes, having to prepare teams in a short period and to move quickly from game to game required a bit of planning and forward thinking for coaches. Also ensuring all players got meaningful games”.

The management team members were also requested to give their feedback on the various Respect Initiatives implemented as part of the competition. 89% of respondents felt that the Interchange system worked well 59% of respondents stated that the management team made an average of 4 to 6 substitutions per match while 27% made 7 to 9 substitutions per match and 5% made over 10 substitutions per match. This broadly corresponds with the feedback from the players. However, it was suggested that the ethos of the Interchange system would have to be re-emphasised on an annual basis to ensure full buy-in and that a system for allowing the more fluid introduction of substitutions should be looked at in conjunction with the Match Officials i.e. less paperwork on the side-line.

Two of the other Respect Initiatives that continued from 2016 were the Pre-Match talk by the Referee as well as the Best & Fairest Player. In relation to the latter a specific medal was

introduced for this and provided to each team management for presentation by the Referee at the end of the match.



Overall, satisfaction with the Pre-Match Talk by the Referee decreased in 2017 when compared with 2016 as 42% of respondents considered its application to be either 'Fair' or 'Poor'. Respondents noted that 'most refs didn't give the pre-match talk' and while the idea was welcomed 'it needs to be implemented properly'. The level of inconsistency around the pre-match talk must be addressed with Match Officials going forward.

The feedback in relation to the Best & Fairest Award was much more positive and the inclusion of a physical award (the medal) was welcomed. However, inconsistency in terms of Match Officials' application of the initiative was highlighted again – some referees were unaware of the initiative. Furthermore, some teams were not provided with a set of awards by the personnel within the County. Better communication and education around these initiatives will be required in 2018.

Members of the backroom teams were also asked to identify the aspects of the BOI Celtic Challenge that they felt worked best and the aspects that require improvement going forward. Through the comments provided it was possible to establish some commonality across the responses. Some of the most frequently cited 'best' aspects included:

- The provision of regular games that were pre-scheduled and meaningful = 21%
- The opportunity for Player Development and for players to have a representative opportunity that they might not otherwise have = 14%
- The levels of promotion around the competition and the overall promotion of Hurling = 13%
- The chance to play against different opposition than normal on an All-Ireland basis = 11%
- The structure of the competition including Group Stages and grading/seeding for Preliminaries, Play-Offs and Finals = 8%
- The way the players were treated so well in terms of gear, promotion and initiatives such as the Best & Fairest Awards = 7%
- The quality of organisation around the competition = 6%
- The timing of the competition = 6%
- The ratio of training to games = 6%
- The use of the Interchange system = 5%
- The opportunity for Coach Development = 2%

Some of the aspects cited as requiring improvement included:

- Promotion at local/County level = 19%
- Consistency by Match Officials in applying Respect Initiatives/Appointment of full team of Officials for games = 16%
- Imbalanced teams in the Group Stages = 13%
- Timing (clash with Féile na nGael) = 11%
- Communication by personnel = 8%
- Quality of Venues = 5%
- Organisation of challenge games for Group H = 5%
- Travel = 5%
- Timing of Workshops = 3%
- Inaccessibility of gaa.ie = 3%

3.3 Match Official Evaluations

A. PREPARATION

Match Officials play a crucial role in the Celtic Challenge and engagement with Match Officials during the preparatory and planning stages of the Celtic Challenge is crucial to creating cohesion and understanding, particularly in the context respect initiatives that are exclusive to this competition.

Last year, one of the issues arising from feedback was that the Workshops for Match Officials took place after the Group Stages involving teams from the six Counties had already taken place. To redress this situation in 2017 a Conference Call for Match Officials involved in officiating Group H (six Counties) games was held in early March and a National Workshop was subsequently held in April in Abbottstown. In total, 12 Referees participated in the Conference Call while a further 33 attended the National Workshop.

Of those who participated in the online evaluation, 46% attended the National Workshop with 73% describing it as 'very' informative. The number of referees that attended the National Workshop decreased from 2016 but this may be due to the fact that 70% of Match Officials had been involved previously in the competition. Those who did not attend were primarily unavailable (83%) although a further 8% advised that they had not been informed of the Workshop and 8% received inadequate notice.

All Match Officials received a copy of the Celtic Challenge Operations Manual. In addition to this, an online resource folder – accessible by all Match Officials via dropbox – was created and contained soft copies of Referees Reports, Expense Forms, a list of contact details, the Interchange Coordinators Log and the Operations Manual. 78% of respondents noted that the Operations Manual was 'very useful', while 83% of respondents found the online material 'very useful'.

One of the major trends identified through the online evaluations was the lack of clarity and transparency around the appointment of Match Officials i.e. who had responsibility for appointments at each stage of the competition (Group Stages, Preliminaries, Play-Offs and Finals). Furthermore, Referees from certain areas noted that Match Officials on the National Hurling Support Panel were not given priority in terms of appointment. In this regard, there is a need to build in further transparency around appointments for 2018 and to ensure that Match Officials involved with the National Hurling Support Panel are given priority for games.

B. COMPETITION STRUCTURE

The Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge contains a number of Respect Initiatives that are unique to the competition and Match Officials have a key role in ensuring the effectiveness of these initiatives:

- A pre-match talk is held by Match Officials with both teams outlining the rules of interchange as well as expected behaviour by players;
- Interchange is regulated by the Linesman with a maximum of 10 substitutions per team in each half of the match;
- After the match the Referees and his Officials are required to identify and present one player per team with the 'Best & Fairest Award' on foot of the two players' skill level as well as the respect they showed to the playing rules, match officials and their fellow players.

As noted by both Players and Coaches there were inconsistencies in the application and understanding of these initiatives by some Match Officials and this is an area that requires further attention going forward. However, generally Match Officials who participated in the online survey were quite positive about the initiatives – 88% of respondents felt that the respect initiative encouraged better behaviour on the part of the teams. Respondents cited that the Pre-Match Talk and the Best & Fairest Award both provided opportunities to improve communication between the Officials and the Players:

“It was very important that both teams got a view on what you expected from them and what they could expect from you as a team of officials as no two referees ref the same”.

“As a result (of the Pre-Match talk) players were asking you questions during the game rather than challenging you”.

“Being able to introduce your team and yourself before the game always helps in my opinion - it is nice to be called by your name by Players and Mentors”.

However, respondents noted that it was important to be adaptable in terms of the Pre-Match talk – *“As the competition went through the rounds I found that the players got fed up with listening to referees, so after round three rather than talk with the players I gave them the opportunity to ask us any questions that they thought would benefit them during the game.”*

In relation to recommendations for the future the idea of team handshakes as the start of the game as well the role of a sin-bin was noted. Furthermore, a number of respondents cited the importance of having similar initiatives that encourage respect from the management teams and not just the players:

“I think that team officials need to set better examples for the team from the side-lines... constantly barracking the referee from the side-lines means that players think that they have a licence to do the same”.

“These are young adolescents that have the fantastic opportunity and exposure to inter county hurling. I really do believe the players are shining in this new-found thrill of wearing their county colours. However, I still believe that a minority of coaches have, for whatever reason, a long way to go in understanding the ethos of this competition. I do feel that they may interpret the Celtic Challenge as a means of progressing their egos & not that of their players’ wellbeing”.

Finally, an observation made by one respondent and also noted by some of the competition organisers was the poor behaviour by some sets of supporters – *“On one occasion supporters were “booing” at the final whistle. I never experienced this behaviour from “supporters” before. We expect respect from players & officials but there is still an underlying issue with parents, relatives, friends, supporters of players. One goes against the other”.* Going forward, consideration must be given to how the developmental ethos and spirit of the competition can be communicated and promoted beyond players, team management and match officials – most specifically the role of the National PR Coordinator in this regard.

C. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS

The majority of Match Officials that participated in the online evaluation had officiated at 3 or more games during the competition (72%) and were therefore in a good position to assess the development of the players over the course of the competition. The majority of respondents felt that the BOI Celtic Challenge had provided the players with an opportunity to develop as hurlers and it was commented by one official involved in both 2016 and 2017 that the ‘standards were improved this year’. 25% of respondents declined to comment on whether the competition provided coaches with an opportunity to develop but 62% felt that it did.

In terms of their own development as Match Officials, 70% of respondents believed that the competition assisted them to grow in their role. However, once again it was clear from the feedback that the appointment of referees must be more rigorously monitored and planned so that appointments are appropriate and timely. Apart from the referee the role of other Match Officials (e.g. linesmen and umpires) should also be given more attention to ensure a more cohesive approach:

“In Munster this year the referee had to appoint his team of standby referee and linesman, even though it was not always easy to get lads midweek I found that having lads that you have worked with before was a huge help. The previous year linesmen would arrive just on throw-in time which was a distraction and not knowing who was helping before the game didn't help, The coordinators could work more closely in conjunction with the ref to facilitate this, the text message system is working well and could be improved to let the ref know beforehand who is with him on any given evening, I helped a few times in the Connaught area this year but the ref didn't know until I arrived that it was me”.

When asked whether they had any suggestions to improve the competition going forward some of the recommendations included:

- Improved communication when appointing Match Officials – assign them a schedule before the competition;
- Introduction of measures to encourage better behaviour by management teams/supporters;
- Enhanced focus on Referee Development – better use of the National Hurling Support Panel and the possibility of using Referee Advisors for feedback.



Section 4

4.1 Lessons Learned in 2017

The success of the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge lies in the provision of regular, competitive games against varied opposition as part of a clearly defined schedule. However, this success will only be maintained if the organisers of the competition continue to adopt a flexible and agile approach to the competition structures.

While the developmental ethos of the competition is sacrosanct, it was never intended that the competition structures established in 2016 would be kept the same ad infinitum so it is fitting that the changes introduced in 2017 – on foot of feedback from 2016 – enhanced and improved the competition overall. Therefore, the main lesson arising from 2017 is to keep adapting, changing and adjusting the structures competition to ensure it is fit for purpose and meets the needs of the players, coaches and match officials.

4.2 Recommendations for 2018

The following are the recommendations for change under each of the areas of review.

A. PLANNING – RECOMMENDATIONS

- A1: Maintain guideline that Backroom Teams to be appointed by start of December 2017.
- A2: Schedule of Provincial Workshops to be circulated at the start of December 2017. Provincial Workshops to take place in late January/early February. One National Workshop to be held in April.
- A3: Engagement with Referees at the National Referees Seminar in early 2018. Provincial Workshops to be held for Match Officials to include umpires, interchange coordinators etc.
- A4: Online Workshops for Backroom Teams and Match Officials to be developed.
- A5: Match Official – schedule to be confirmed for entirety of Group Stages in advance. Appointments to be approved by National level for all stages of the competition.
- A6: Conducting a specific workshop for Match Officials involved in the Group Stages involving teams from the Six Counties.

B. TEAM SELECTION & PREPARATION – RECOMMENDATIONS

- B1: Review Player Eligibility clause vis-à-vis Tier 1 Counties involved in the Minor A Hurling Championship to ensure transparency and clarity.
- B2: Maintain guideline that a recommended 25% of panels from Tier 1 Counties should not be on a Development Squad i.e. exclusively Club players.
- B3: Counties to submit proposals for panel selection to Steering Committee for review at the start of 2018 in order to ensure weaker clubs and non-traditional areas in Tier 1 Counties are adequately represented.
- B4: Maintain guideline that teams from Tier 1 Counties should not start preparation until the end of March.
- B5: Maintain and reinforce guideline of 1:1 training to games.

C. COMPETITION STRUCTURE & SCHEDULING – RECOMMENDATIONS

- C1: Maintain the number of Counties competing in the Bank of Ireland Celtic Challenge but to allow for a decrease in the number of teams from Tier 1 Counties.
- C2: Maintain the number of Groups at 8 but to potentially decrease the number of teams per Group from 6 to 5 – bar the 6 Counties Group.

- C3: Maintain the same seeding system as applied in 2017 i.e. after the Group Stages, teams from Counties that participated in the Lory Meagher or Nicky Rackard Tournament in Senior County Hurling in 2017 will not be seeded higher than Division 4 i.e. cannot be graded in the top 24 teams.
- C4: Maintain the same seeding system for teams from the Six Counties as applied in 2017.
- C5: Introduce a 'back-door' mechanism for a select number of Counties that are participating in the Leinster Minor 'A' Hurling Championship. The 8 teams that do not reach the Leinster Minor 'A' Hurling Semi-Finals will be afforded the opportunity to participate in a specific Division of the Celtic Challenge. The 8 teams will compete in Preliminaries (Quarter-Finals) and Play-Offs (Semi-Finals) with two teams contesting a Final in conjunction with the rest of the Celtic Challenge Finals.

D. PROMOTION & COMMUNICATION

- D1: Build upon the strong relationship developed with Bank of Ireland and O'Neill's as sponsors through collaborating closely on additional promotional/communication opportunities for 2018;
- D2: Continue the role of dedicated National PR Coordinator in 2018;
- D3: Explore the possibility of establishing additional social media channels for the promotion of the competition – in particular, Instagram;
- D4: Appoint a team of freelance photographers to cover a set number of games during the Group Stages as well as the latter stages of the competition;
- D5: Explore the possibility of a television advert and/or digital advert to promote the competition;
- D6: Target a minimum of 6 regional newspapers across the 4 Provinces with a view to securing agreement around coverage of the competition and/or a process for providing these papers with up-to-date, relevant match reports and 'human interest' angles;
- D7: Better communication of the grading/seeding system to players as well as increased communication regarding bonus points.

E. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS

- E1: Increased engagement with Match Officials to ensure the consistent application of the Best & Fairest Award and the Pre-Match Talk – possibly through an online course/instructional video.
- E2: Enhance awareness around the Interchange System as part of the Provincial Workshops.

*Caoimhe Ní Néill
National Coordinator/Runaí HDC*