

REPORT OF THE MINOR REVIEW WORKGROUP



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Minor Review Workgroup was established in January 2014 to review the Association's rules and policies regarding participation in the Minor and related age grades at Club, School and Inter-County levels. The focus of this review has at all times centred on player welfare and the provision of an appropriate games programme for all our young players.

The group has made every attempt to consult with all stakeholders through meetings, forums, focus groups and questionnaires. Members have made a significant effort to identify, in detail, the problems faced, and to consider potential solutions. I thank them most sincerely for their contribution.

The cooperation of County Secretaries and County Committees has been excellent and we wish to thank all County representatives who made submissions, recommendations or gave feedback to suggested proposals.

We wish to thank all players who participated in the Focus Group meeting and who returned survey forms. This information was important in highlighting the extent of the challenges faced. The GPA were very active in supporting this process and were an important source of assistance throughout the review.

We are indebted to the many researchers, who freely shared their findings with the group. We have been impressed with the level of interest in the importance of Gaelic games in an academic context. We received excellent assistance from school teachers in our requests for information. The work of teachers at all levels is invaluable in the promotion of our games.

I wish to commend the proposals and recommendations of the Minor Review Workgroup to the Association.

Micheál Ó Mairtín

Cathaoirleach



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Association is indebted to the volunteers at Club, School and County level that invest so much energy and time in the promotion of our games. Their efforts, in conjunction with policy changes at child and youth level have led to an increase in participation in Gaelic games up to and including the Under 14 age grade. However, our findings indicate that the demands on many of our elite young players are unsustainable, while in contrast some Club players from Under 16 onwards have an inadequate programme of games. It is clear that there is insufficient focus at this level on the long-term playing career potential of a player. There are several contributory factors to this among the most significant being a lack of effective communication focussed on the welfare of players between managers/coaches of the different teams with which a young player is involved.

Since being established in January 2014 to review the Association's rules and policies regarding participation in the Minor and related age grades at Club, School and Inter-County levels, the Minor Review Workgroup has made every effort to consult with all stakeholders through meetings, forums, focus groups and questionnaires.

While our findings raise concerns for players in the 16-21 age bracket, we have focussed our proposals on the Minor age grade and every effort has been made to bring forward reasonable recommendations which put our 17 and 18 year old players first. These recommendations are set out under the headings of:

1. Player Eligibility
2. Scheduling of Competitions
3. Competition Format
4. Player Welfare and Coach Education

The acceptance of these recommendations will involve compromise from all stakeholders who deal with players and recognition by Club and County Committees alike that short-term success must never be achieved at the risk of the long-term development of our underage players.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PLAYER ELIGIBILITY

- Amend Rule 6.16 (T.O. 2014) such that a player must be over 17 to play in adult competition (i.e. over the U-21 grade). **This is to protect the player from physical injury, reduce the risk of burnout and / or overuse and reduce the number of teams for which players are eligible.**
- Amend Rule 6.16 (T.O. 2014) with regard to Inter-County eligibility such that a player who is eligible for Minor should not play at Adult Inter-County level
- Amend Rule 6.16 (T.O. 2014) with regard to Inter-County eligibility such that a player who is eligible for Minor should not play at Under-21 Inter-County level
- Amend Rule 6.21 (T.O. 2014) such that a Minor Inter-County player should not play in Adult Club **league** competitions or Adult Club **challenge games** until finished Inter-County activity. (An Inter-County Minor panelist is defined as a player named in a panel of 24 players on March 1st. This panel may be amended and confirmed to the County Secretary on a monthly basis).
- In order to fully explore the potential for Under 17/19, four Counties (one per Province) should participate in a three-year pilot programme at Club level with amended age grades of Under-13, 15, 17 and 19. **The programme should be supported through Games Development funding and a research project conducted to measure the impact on player welfare and player drop out.**

2. SCHEDULING OF COMPETITIONS

- Club Minor Competitions should be completed no later than the second weekend in October to facilitate the commencement of Post Primary Schools competitions. The playing of mid-week Inter-County games should facilitate Counties in offering a defined programme of games for Club players.
- Amend Rule 6.43 (T.O. 2014) to read "Post Primary Schools shall have 'first call' on players who are also involved with a team in an Inter-County **Minor or** Under 21 Provincial/All-Ireland Championship, and such players shall be restricted to training with a Post Primary School Team only, during such dual involvement." **Change to rule in bold.** This does not apply to Clubs.
- Rule 6.28 (T.O. 2014) be amended to reflect Senior Post Primary School Competitions commencing no earlier than the second weekend in October with All-Ireland Finals to be played no later than the weekend closest to March 31st.
- Amend Rule 6.28 (T.O. 2014) such that Provincial Minor Gaelic football championships should commence no earlier than the second week in April and no later than May 1st with games played mid-week (where possible) up to Provincial finals.
- Inter-County Minor finals should only be played as a curtain raiser to adult games where this

is in the best interest of player welfare. Provinces/Counties should trial the playing of Minor finals as a stand-alone fixture.

- Amend Rule 3.47 (T.O. 2014) to create a National Underage CCC (on a pilot basis) to monitor and implement cross-Provincial (inter County) fixtures up to and including Minor.

3. COMPETITION FORMAT

CLUB

- Counties to review underage games structures on a three/five year basis reviewing amalgamations with terms of reference provided by the National Games Development Committee.

INTER-COUNTY

- Regional Inter-County leagues should replace the current Provincial Minor leagues in both Hurling and Gaelic football on a three year pilot basis. These games should commence no earlier than the Post Primary schools February mid-term break and should be played mid-week where possible. Groups may be cross-Provincial (while ensuring travel distances are kept to a minimum) but should have a maximum of 8 teams (groups of four) providing a maximum of five games for all teams.
- A limit of three Inter-County Minor Challenge games to be permitted per County team. Regional Leagues are designed to ensure teams get adequate preparation time and opportunities.

FOOTBALL

- Each Provincial Inter-County Minor Championship competition should be run using the same format. This should facilitate a second chance for those defeated in their first game thereby ensuring all Minor teams get two championship games.
- All-Ireland Minor Football Quarter finals should be discontinued from 2016.
- To cater for Counties who have experienced a lack of success at Minor level, a well promoted Under 17 All-Ireland competition should be organised with finals played in Croke Park (where possible).

HURLING

- The Hurling Development Committee should develop proposals regarding All-Ireland Minor competitions and the accommodation of Galway and Antrim in an equitable system which promotes best practice in a developmental context.
- The All-Ireland Minor Hurling B and C competitions should be organised as Under 17 competitions. These competitions should be well promoted with finals played in Croke Park (where possible).

SCHOOLS

- A meeting be convened with Department of Education and Skills to discuss the impact of the Haddington Road agreement on extra-curricular sport.

4. PLAYER WELFARE AND COACH EDUCATION

- Establish a Monitoring System for relevant player groups to track activity and parameters associated with risk of over-training/burnout.
- Appoint a 'Player Welfare Mentor' in each County (proposal for 2015 pilot being prepared by Medical, Scientific & Welfare Committee)
- Extend the 'Player Welfare' Charter to be agreed and signed by Team Managers of Underage Inter-County Teams
- Develop Player Welfare based Education materials and programmes for Players, Coaches & Parents of Players



CONSULTATION PROCESS

- Provincial: A Minor Review forum was held in Ulster and Munster; a specific review group was established in Leinster; a submission from Connacht was received following debate at a Connacht Council meeting.
- County: Submissions were received from almost all Counties either at the initial consultative stage or following the circulation of the Interim report. As well as this a Focus Group was held with County representatives, while a number of County Committees/Executives were met on request.
- An analysis of current Minor Inter-County structures and recent results was conducted.
- Analysis of relevant documentation: 'Mobilising Forces, Modernising Structures & Moving with the Times', 'Report of the Task Force on Player Burnout 2007', 'FRC Report (Part 2)'
- Analysis of relevant research relating to player overuse/burnout.
- A player focus group of 13 recently graduated Inter-County Minor players (aged 17-22) was organised in conjunction with the GPA.
- A discussion forum was held at the All-Ireland Post Primary School AGM
- There were ten meetings of the review group between March and November.
- The group circulated three surveys:
 1. Post Primary Schools Senior Squad Questionnaire; Data was requested on each player, what school 'year' they were in and their date of birth. Responses were collated for 404 players.
 2. Minor Inter-County Squads; Data was requested on each player, their age, team and sport participation, level of activity and player welfare issues such as whether the players were under pressure to participate, whether they participated while injured etc. 300 responses were received from squads in all four Provinces. (See Appendix 1)
 3. GAA Youth Consultation Day; Questionnaires were circulated to attendees with 100 responses received. (See Appendix 1)
- An analysis was conducted on data from the GAA National Injury Database. (See Appendix 2)

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1 PLAYER ELIGIBILITY

1.1 FINDINGS:

The statistics from the player questionnaires highlight an unsustainable situation for our talented 17 and 18-year-old players. There is excessive focus on short term results to the possible detriment of long-term potential. Many young players are participating in excessive training sessions and matches, usually with numerous teams in multiple competitions. The lack of communication between coaches/managers of these teams is emphasised by 81% of questionnaire respondents stating that they have felt pressurised not to participate with another team.

There is an acceptance among all those consulted that some restrictions should be placed on the number of teams an 'elite' player can play for during any given period. It is therefore necessary that the rules on eligibility be amended to protect these players. It is the strongly held view of our group that the majority of 17-year-olds are not physically mature enough to play at adult level. It is essential that Clubs take a long term player development approach by delaying the introduction of young players into adult teams and actively retaining older players where possible. While appreciative of the argument that some smaller Clubs may see a requirement to play 17 year old players, enforcement of such a rule in 2016 will allow a lead in period to actively retain players during 2015.

An additional benefit to the adoption of this rule is the potential to create Under 17 All-Ireland competitions for less successful Counties which could have a significant impact in helping in the development of these Counties.

Our consultation regarding the various scenarios in relation to Age Grades & Player Eligibility highlight that the majority of stakeholders are not currently in favour of moving Minor to Under 17 or Under 19. While the status quo (Under-18 and Under-21) was favoured, there is an appetite among Counties to trial various scenarios so that an informed decision on age grades may be made in coming years. The issues that exist with the Under 21 grade were highlighted on a number of occasions, most acutely by the Player Focus Group. The Inter-County football competition is played at a busy time in the calendar where players have multiple commitments, while many Counties reported that their Club Under 21 programme is in need of change. A further review of the Under 21 grade is required and the suggested pilot programme should assist in deciding a long term strategy on age grades.

1.2 PROPOSALS TO CONGRESS 2015:

- Amend Rule 6.16 (T.O. 2014) such that a player must be over 17 to play in adult competitions (i.e. over the U-21 grade).
- Amend Rule 6.16 (T.O. 2014) with regard to Inter-County eligibility such that a player who is eligible for Minor should not play at Adult Inter-County level.
- Amend Rule 6.16 (T.O. 2014) with regard to Inter-County eligibility such that a player who is eligible for Minor should not play at Under-21 Inter-County level.
- Amend Rule 6.21 (T.O. 2014) such that a Minor Inter-County player should not play in Adult Club league competitions or challenge games until finished Inter-County activity (An Inter-County Minor panelist is defined as a player named in a panel of 24 players on March 1st. This panel may be amended and confirmed to the County Secretary on a monthly basis).

1.3 POLICY PROPOSAL TO ARD CHOMHAIRLE:

In order to fully explore the potential for Under17/19 (or 20), four Counties (one per Province) should participate in a three-year pilot programme at Club level with amended age grades of Under-13, 15, 17 and 19 (or 20). The programme should be supported through Games Development funding and a research project conducted to measure impact on player welfare and player drop out.

2 SCHEDULING OF COMPETITIONS

2.1 FINDINGS:

The lack of defined windows for Club, school and County leads to a significant overlap of fixtures in autumn (Club/Post-Primary School) and spring (Club/ Post-Primary School/County). This results in a situation where talented young GAA players often play on multiple teams simultaneously, with the associated demands of being expected to train fully with each team and allowing insufficient recovery time. The window for schools competitions currently runs from September to April. It is acknowledged that these months are not always conducive to organising competitions, due to adverse weather conditions; however it would be beneficial for elite players and for the organisation of Club games to condense the time taken to run school competitions. Players who reach the latter stages of Post Primary Schools Provincial/All-Ireland competitions should be allowed to concentrate on school activity (in conjunction with Club games) and should not be required to participate in inter-County activity.

The findings from player focus group and questionnaires lead us to definitively conclude that a number of Counties do not adhere to Rule 6.43 (T.O. 2014) restricting Inter-County Minor teams to commence training from February 1st. The commencement of some provincial Minor leagues so soon after this date was highlighted as a point of concern while the activity of "Under 17 Development Squads" in late autumn requires further review to ensure it is aligned to Central Council policy. The realignment of Minor leagues to be organised on a regional basis and commencing in late February should relieve some overlap of competitions along with absolute enforcement of the date of February 1st as the date for commencement of collective training. Permitting trials and internal challenge games from January 1st for those not involved with Post Primary School teams removes any excuse of inadequate preparation time for Minor County teams, while offering Counties where the schools programme is not comprehensive increased flexibility.

The creation of a window for Club Minor activity is paramount and moving Inter-County games to mid-week (where possible) is an immediate requirement, as well as introducing alterations to streamline competition formats. The tradition of playing Minor games as curtain raisers should be reviewed at both Club and inter-County level and we would encourage Provinces to trial stand-alone mid-week fixtures for a provincial Minor final in one code. Players at the GAA/GPA Focus Group expressed a preference for this approach rather than participating in a curtain raiser at 12 o'clock.

Leaving Certificate/A Level examinations are a crucial period in a young person's life. While research shows participation in sport during an exam year can be beneficial, it is incumbent on all those involved to ensure that participation in Gaelic games does not impact on exam results. While our group have made no formal recommendation in this regard, it should be expected that common sense prevails in the lead up to examinations and that players are not pressurised to participate in training or games.

2.2 PROPOSALS TO CONGRESS 2015:

- Rule 6.43 (T.O. 2014) be amended to read "Post Primary Schools shall have 'first call' on players who are also involved with a team in an Inter-County Minor or Under 21 Provincial/ All-Ireland Championship, and such players shall be restricted to training with a Post Primary School Team only, during such dual involvement."
*This does not apply to Clubs.
- Rule 6.28 (T.O. 2014) be amended to reflect Senior Post Primary School Competitions commencing no earlier than the second weekend in October with All-Ireland Finals to be played no later than the weekend closest to March 31st.
- Amend Rule 6.28 (T.O. 2014) such that (on a 3 Year pilot basis) Provincial Minor Gaelic football Championships should commence no earlier than the second week in April and no later than May 1st with games played mid-week (where possible) up to Provincial finals.
- Amend Rule 3.47 (T.O. 2014) to create a National Underage CCC (on a pilot basis) to monitor and implement cross-Provincial (Inter-County) fixtures up to and including Minor.

2.3 POLICY PROPOSALS TO ARD CHOMHAIRLE (TO BE IMPLEMENTED ON A 3 YEAR TRIAL BASIS):

INTER-COUNTY:

- Minor finals should only be played as a curtain raiser to adult games where this is in the best interest of player welfare. Provinces/Counties should trial the playing of Minor finals as a stand-alone fixture.
- Regional leagues should replace the current Provincial leagues in both Hurling and Gaelic football (See Section 3).

CLUB:

- Club Minor Competitions should be completed no later than the second weekend in October to facilitate the commencement of Post Primary Schools competitions. The playing of mid-week Inter-County games should facilitate Counties in offering a defined programme of games for Club players.

3 FORMAT OF COMPETITIONS

3.1 FINDINGS:

CLUB:

It is encouraging that some Counties have already commenced the process of reviewing internal competitions for youth players, as a response to drop off rates and/or other local factors. In a general context, there is a requirement for activity at youth level to be underpinned by a more developmental ethos. The traditional Club "championship" model being offered as the only type of competition for Club Minor players is a source of concern. This leads to a situation where Club fixtures are planned around other competitions and can often be rearranged at short notice.

It is envisaged that the adoption of the proposals in Section 2.2 will facilitate Counties in the organisation of a well-planned programme of games while youth games centres, non-exam leagues and other formats of competitions which have been piloted in some Counties could be replicated nationwide. The creation of cross-County competitions for Clubs at juvenile and Minor level should be encouraged where it does not place an additional burden on elite players or clash with school activity.

INTER COUNTY:

In Gaelic football there are significant differences between the Provincial structures leading into the All-Ireland Minor series. While a "second chance" is offered in Munster and Leinster, no such facility is offered in Connacht and Ulster. Furthermore, an analysis of results in recent years highlight the challenges faced by a number of Counties in achieving any success at this level. There is a requirement for a well promoted subsidiary competition offering these Counties an opportunity to achieve success at national level.

In hurling, the Provincial system in both Munster and Leinster also offer a "second chance" to participating Counties but there exists an anomaly as Galway and Antrim are not afforded a "second chance". There is an immediate requirement for an additional review of Minor hurling competitions, involving all stakeholders, with a view to ensuring best practise in a developmental context and to ensure equity for all teams. Commencing an All-Ireland competition with the Munster and Leinster finalists, Galway and Antrim in two groups of three is just one alternative, while the merits of a combined Ulster team (excluding Antrim) should be explored as part of this process.

The Minor B Hurling championships are beset by timing problems. Many of the participating Counties also take part in their Provincial Championship, often being eliminated prior to the break for exams. There are subsequent difficulties in regrouping the teams for the Minor-B competitions, which typically take place in late July/August.

Changing the lower age eligibility for adult competitions from 16 to 17 creates an opportunity to organise an Under 17 All-Ireland competition for developing Counties while avoiding fixture clashes with adult competitions. In a hurling context, replacing the current B and C competitions with a well organised Under 17 competition could re-energise the competitions. In football, a sixteen team Under 17 competition, commencing after the early rounds of Minor Provincial Championships would create a platform for less successful Counties to achieve meaningful success. The creation of a National Underage CCC, as proposed in section 2.2,



would help in creating defined windows for these competitions and regional leagues while also monitoring the activity of Talent Academies and Development Squads. This committee would be responsible for the monitoring of the scheduling recommendations contained in this report.

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS COMPETITIONS:

The 2013/14 academic year was the first season where fully integrated All-Ireland Post Primary Schools competitions took place. The new structure encourages each individual school to promote Gaelic games within their establishment. With four grades in Senior Football and three grades in Senior Hurling at All-Ireland level, a larger number of schools have a realistic chance of winning a Provincial title at their level and progressing onto All-Ireland success. Some Provinces also run competitions at additional grades to accommodate smaller schools; this should be encouraged across all Provinces. The integration of both sectors has also seen better competition structures at provincial level with more teams involved at each grade.

With amalgamated teams only prevented from competing at All-Ireland level, Provinces have the authority to allow amalgamations at provincial level in the interest of the development of Gaelic games on a case by case basis, with the oversight of the All-Ireland committee. This is something that should be closely monitored to ensure that these teams do not increase the workload of already heavily burdened players.

It is important to emphasise that the Association is indebted to the schools and teachers who continue to actively promote Gaelic Games in an environment of growing demands on teachers within the education sector. County Committees should endeavour to recognise schools and teachers at every opportunity while representation on behalf of teachers at national level should continue.

3.2 POLICY PROPOSALS TO ARD CHOMHAIRLE (TO BE IMPLEMENTED ON A THREE YEAR PILOT BASIS):

CLUB:

- Counties to review underage games structures on a three/five year basis reviewing amalgamations with terms of reference provided by the National Games Development Committee.

INTER-COUNTY:

- Regional Inter-County leagues should replace the current Provincial leagues in both Hurling and Gaelic football on a three year pilot basis (See Section 3). These games should commence no earlier than the Post Primary Schools February mid-term break and should be played mid-week where possible. Groups may be cross-Provincial (while ensuring travel distances are kept to a minimum) but should have a maximum of 8 teams (groups of four) providing a maximum of five games for all teams.
- A limit of three Inter-County Minor Challenge games to be permitted per County team. Regional Leagues are designed to ensure teams get adequate preparation time.

FOOTBALL:

- Without the format of competitions being standardised inequalities will remain. Therefore each Provincial Minor championship competition should be run using the same format. This

should facilitate a second chance for those defeated in their first game thereby ensuring all Minor teams get two championship games.

- All-Ireland Minor Football Quarter finals should be discontinued from 2016.
- To cater for Counties who have experienced a lack of success at Minor level, a well promoted Under 17 All-Ireland competition should be organised with finals played in Croke Park where possible.

HURLING:

- The Hurling Development Committee should develop proposals regarding All-Ireland Minor competitions and the accommodation of Galway and Antrim in an equitable system which promotes best practice in a developmental context.
- The All-Ireland Minor Hurling B and C competitions should be organised as Under 17 competitions. These competitions should be well promoted with finals played in Croke Park where possible. **Proposals for Under 17 competitions are based on the amendment of Rule 6.16 such that a player must be over 17 to play in adult competitions.**

SCHOOLS:

- A meeting should be convened with the Department of Education & Skills to discuss the impact of the Haddington Road agreement on extra-curricular sport.

4 PLAYER WELFARE & COACH EDUCATION

4.1 FINDINGS:

- There is a need for players to have an independent advocate with whom they can discuss issues and who will resolve conflicting demands on the player's time, energy and focus.
- There is insufficient education of players, coaches and others on the importance of rest and recovery. The GAA has developed a world class Coach Education framework and there is a requirement for a greater engagement by youth coaches. The enforcement of current Central Council policy regarding Coach Education qualifications for all Underage County teams/squads would be of significant benefit to ensuring a more player centred approach to coaching.

4.2 POLICY PROPOSALS TO ARD CHOMHAIRLE

- Establish a Monitoring System (Smartabase) for relevant Player groups to track activity and parameters associated with risk of over-training/burnout
- Appoint a 'Player Welfare Mentor' in each County (proposal for 2015 pilot being prepared by Medical, Scientific & Welfare Committee)
- Extend the 'Player Welfare' Charter to be agreed and signed by Team Managers of Underage Inter-County Teams
- Develop Player Welfare based Education materials and programmes for Players, Coaches & Parents of Players

APPENDIX 1 - QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

A) INTER-COUNTY MINOR PLAYER SURVEY

Data was requested on each player, their age, team and sport participation, level of activity and player welfare issues such as whether the players were under pressure to participate, whether they participated while injured etc. 300 responses were received from squads in all four Provinces.

Findings:

- 24% of respondents are active on a daily basis i.e. every day - often more than once a day.
- A further 27.3% are active a minimum of 6 days per week
- 81% of respondents reported to being placed under pressure by managers/coaches not to participate with another unit of the Association
- 62% of players have played games while carrying an injury while 42% have reported experiencing chronic fatigue sometimes or often
- 35% reported a desire for less training sessions with travel to and from training being highlighted as a particular burden

B) GAA YOUTH CONSULTATION DAY

Questionnaires were circulated to attendees at a GAA Youth Consultation Day with over 100 responses received.

Sample Feedback:

- 'Young players shouldn't be made play with older teams - it will cause burnout'
- 'Shouldn't be made play with older teams, could cause injury and puts a lot of pressure on players'
- 'Each player should have a restriction on how many times they can train in a week based on their age and the type of training being done'
- 'More time needs to be dedicated to player recovery after matches and training'
- '(Have a) recommended amount of training and games'
- 'Organise Club championship and County championship [having] regard to player health and well-being'



APPENDIX 2 – INJURY SURVEILLANCE (2006 – 2013)

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

- Two out of every three players on a team will get injured in one season
- Chronic injuries accounted for 8.5% (Football), 6.6% (Hurling) of all injuries
- Overuse injuries accounted for 12.1% (Football) and 6.6% (Hurling) of all injuries
- *It is recognised that chronic and overuse injuries by their nature are often under-reported
- Over 1/3 players will have multiple injuries
- Up to 1/4 of injuries will be a recurrence of an old injury
- Over half of injuries will occur during a match whilst over 1/3 will be sustained during training [55.2%:21.2%]
- Lower limb injuries are the most prevalent type of injuries (Football - 76.3%, Hurling – 69%)
- Lower limb injuries also have the biggest impact on time lost from play
- Concussion accounts for less than 1% of all injuries
- Percentage of injuries due to non-contact mechanisms illustrates importance of injury prevention programmes such as the 'GAA 15'



