

# 31 COUNTIES, 38 TEAMS, 118 GAMES, 1,000 PLAYERS



## THE CELTIC CHALLENGE 2016

REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GAA NATIONAL HURLING DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Executive Summary</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Section 1</u>	<u>4</u>
1.1 The Celtic Challenge	
1.2 Implementation – Project Pathway	
<u>Section 2</u>	<u>7</u>
2.1 Review Methodology	
2.2 Participation in the Review	
<u>Section 3</u>	<u>9</u>
3.1 Player Online Evaluations	
3.2 Team Management Online Evaluations	
3.3 Match Official Online Evaluations	
3.4 Review Workshop	
<u>Section 4</u>	<u>26</u>
4.1 Lessons Learned	
4.2 Recommendations	
<u>Section 5</u>	<u>29</u>
5.1 Conclusion	

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall purpose of this evaluation was to assess the extent to which the Celtic Challenge competition contributed to the development of players aged 16 and 17 years old; to examine what factors have proved successful; and to learn lessons for the future development of the competition. The main objectives of this evaluation were to:

1. Evaluate the outcomes and impact of the Celtic Challenge against its key objectives.
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 order to achieve these objectives, 5 separate yet interlinked areas of review were identified and key findings under each are summarised below:

### A. Planning

Overall there were good levels of clarity and understanding regarding the objectives of the Celtic Challenge as well as its organisational structures. Improvement was needed in relation to the new respect initiatives in order to ensure consistent application of same. In future, adopting a more localised approach when engaging with the backroom teams and match officials may further increase the overall level of clarity and understanding i.e. conducting workshops at Provincial rather than National level.

### B. Team Selection and Preparation

There were significant positives in relation to the selection and preparation of teams: almost 25% of players on Tier 1 squads were not current Development Squad players, which attested to the fact that teams expanded their selection beyond the squads – a key aim of the Hurling Development Committee; there was overall compliance with the recommendation that Tier 1 squads do not commence training until March thereby avoiding a clash with school or club fixtures. Furthermore, there was widespread acceptance and satisfaction by players and backroom teams with the recommended ratio of 1 training session to 1 game. Challenges did arise in relation to consistent selection criteria for Tier 1 squads – some squads were better than others at involving players from weaker clubs or players not on Development Squads.

### C. Competition Structure and Scheduling

In general, players and backroom teams were happy with the competition structure and schedule. Issues that arose related to the timing of the Group involving the six counties as well as the need to have a greater number of days between the end of the Group Stages and the Preliminaries. Another issue that must be addressed for 2017 relates to travel distances for the Group Stages. This can be resolved by re-orienting the composition of the groups, including additional teams and granting the Group Coordinators the authority to select a mid-way neutral venue where travel time is prohibitive.

### D. Promotion and Communication

Promotion and Communication appeared to be somewhat hit and miss during the Celtic Challenge with a need to tap into an increased number of social media platforms as well as to target local

media. However, there was satisfaction with the innovative role of PR & Social Media Coordinator and plenty of recommendations to maximise the area of promotions.

#### E. Developmental Ethos

The adherence with and understanding of the developmental ethos was a major strength of the Celtic Challenge. The cornerstone of this ethos was the provision of a meaningful programme of regularly scheduled games with a healthy ratio between training and games. 95% felt that the competition helped players to develop due to the schedule of games as well as the structure i.e. not knock-out, multiple Divisions, opportunity to pick up bonus points etc.

# SECTION 1

## 1.1 THE CELTIC CHALLENGE

The Celtic Challenge is a developmental hurling competition for 16 and 17 year old players who are not participating in State Examinations. The competition ran from 4<sup>th</sup> May to 18<sup>th</sup> June 2016 and over the course of May and June, more than 1,000 players were provided with a 7 week programme of meaningful, pre-scheduled games – with 118 games in total.

The overall objectives of the Celtic Challenge were 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 5 games;
- To schedule the competition to ensure there was minimum interruption to Club or County fixtures.

The packed schedule of games was achieved by structuring the competition on the basis of regionalised round robin group phase of matches in the Group Stages, after which teams were graded on their performance and were then assigned to one of five Divisions for the Preliminaries and the Play-Offs where they competed against teams of a similar level of ability. The top two teams in each Division progressed to the five Divisional Finals, which were played on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> June in Nowlan Park. The Finals provided an action-packed and enjoyable day of hurling for all commencing with a clash between Waterford City and Laois and concluding with South Kilkenny pitted against Offaly.

- Division 5 - Corn Michael Feery: Wicklow (5-13) v Westmeath (1-14)
- Division 4 - Corn Jerome O'Leary: Waterford City (2-14) v Laois (0-14)
- Division 3 - Corn William Robinson: North Wexford (4-13) v Dublin Plunkett (1-15)
- Division 2 - Corn John Scott: South Wexford (4-11) v Kerry (2-15)
- Division 1 - Corn Michael Hogan: Offaly (4-10) v South Kilkenny (3-12)

Aside from a packed programme of matches, the Celtic Challenge also featured a number of new initiatives on trial for the first time in Gaelic games. A feature of the competition was that referees and match officials meet with the teams prior to the game to explain the rules of the competition and address any queries from the players.

The 'Best and Fairest Award' was also trialled. After every match the referee chose one player from each team on the basis of their skill level as well as the respect they showed to the playing rules, match officials and their fellow players.

Two players per team also wore a 'respect' armband, the purpose of which was to streamline communication and information between players and the referee in order to address repeat penalties by a particular player or by the team in general.







An interchange policy was also used throughout the competition instead of permanent substitutes, which ensured every player on a squad could be involved in a game.



An innovative scoring system operated for the Group Stages through which teams were awarded a bonus point for scoring two or more goals, while also awarding a bonus point for a defeated team that lost by a margin of five points or less.

The Celtic Challenge represented a new departure in Hurling. In 2015 a total of 13 games were played as part of the All Ireland Hurling Minor B and Minor C Championship. In contrast, the Celtic Challenge in 2016 has resulted in an increase from 13 games to 118 games with over 1,000 players afforded the opportunity to play hurling at this age grade.

## 1.2 IMPLEMENTATION – PROJECT PATHWAY

The task of delivering 118 games over a 7 week period catering for over 1,000 players on 38 teams required significant preparation and organisation. The following timeline captures the inputs and deliverables over a 10 month period both before and during the Celtic Challenge.

	<p>July - September 2015</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meetings with each County Steering Committee to discuss the proposed Celtic Challenge.</li> <li>• Meetings with CCCC and GDC.</li> <li>• Consultations with personnel in GAA Marketing, Sponsorship and Communications Departments.</li> <li>• Presentations to/ratification by An Coiste Bainistí and Ard Chomhairle of the Celtic Challenge proposals.</li> </ul>
	<p>October – December 2015</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalised fixtures for the Celtic Challenge for inclusion in the Master Fixtures Calendar.</li> <li>• Finalised sponsorship of the Celtic Challenge by O’Neill’s House of Sport.</li> <li>• Coordinated the appointment of Provincial and Group Coordinators for The Celtic Challenge and organised subsequent schedule of meetings/conference calls.</li> <li>• Organised Introductory Workshop in Croke Park for coaches involved with The Celtic Challenge</li> </ul>
	<p>January 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreed sponsorship with the Past Hurlers Association in relation to the purchase of Trophies and Medals.</li> <li>• Finalised promotional graphics with Marketing Department.</li> <li>• Finalised roles/responsibilities of the backroom teams.</li> <li>• Produced the Operations Manual.</li> </ul>
	<p>February 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted 4 Provincial Workshops with members of each backroom team involved in the Celtic Challenge.</li> </ul>
	<p>March 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalised gear design and orders with O’Neills and Azzurri (Waterford).</li> <li>• Circulated Planning Template to all backroom teams to assist with team selection/criteria.</li> <li>• Contracted a freelance journalist to produce weekly round-ups and editorial for programmes.</li> </ul>
	<p>April 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted a dedicated Workshop for Match Officials involved in the Celtic Challenge with the assistance of P. Doherty and B. Smith (Games Administration). Followed up with online resources for Match Officials.</li> <li>• Conducted a dedicated Workshop for the PR &amp; Social Media Coordinators involved with each team. Followed up with online resources for PR &amp; Social Media Coordinators.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalised all fixtures on the servasport system and confirmed feed to gaa.ie.</li> <li>• Launched The Celtic Challenge 2016 in Croke Park with 38 players present representing their respective teams.</li> <li>• Distribution of all gear to players, backroom teams and Match Officials</li> </ul>
	<p>May – June 2016</p> <p>Oversaw the organisation of the Celtic Challenge 2016 - 38 teams and 1,100 players participated in a total of 118 games from 4th May – 18th June.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted weekly Conference Calls with the Provincial and Group Coordinators.</li> <li>• Prepared and circulated weekly promotional materials (posters/digital images/match programmes).</li> <li>• Coordinated the publication of a weekly 'round-up' piece for gaa.ie.</li> <li>• Finalised the seeding/grading for the Preliminaries/Play-Offs.</li> <li>• Finalised the venues for the Preliminaries/Play-Offs and assigned a coordinator to each venue.</li> <li>• Published fixtures through the Servasport system with assistance of B. Smith.</li> <li>• Organised the Celtic Challenge Finals Day in Nowlan Park (June 18<sup>th</sup>) with huge input of Kilkenny County Board.</li> </ul>
	<p>July – August 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination of follow-up/review process with players, backroom team and Match Officials.</li> <li>• Conducted review workshop in Croke Park (24<sup>th</sup> August)</li> </ul>

## SECTION 2

### 2.1 REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The Celtic Challenge competition concluded on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2016. This evaluation was conducted between 23<sup>rd</sup> June and 27<sup>th</sup> August 2016 and included key stakeholder surveys (players, backroom teams, match officials) and a focus group discussion with representatives of management teams as well as number of conference calls with key staff from each Province. Further detail on how these methodologies were implemented is as follows:

#### A. Key Stakeholder Surveys:

Three online surveys were developed and tailored to the following cohorts – 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 to the various cohorts. In total, 132 players, 44 management members and 26 match officials completed the surveys.

#### B. Focus Group Discussions

A focus group was convened for August 24<sup>th</sup> 2016.

#### C. 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 6<sup>th</sup> July.

Although all efforts were made to survey/meet with as many relevant respondents as possible during the course of the evaluation, a number of factors made this impractical e.g. summer holidays; failure to follow up with the link to the online survey for players etc.

### 2.2 PARTICIPATION IN THE REVIEW

#### *PLAYERS*

A total of 132 Players completed the online survey. Almost two thirds of the respondents (62%) were 16 years of age with the remainder all 17 years of age. In total 12 teams were represented: Derry; Donegal; Dublin Clarke; Galway City/West; Kildare; South Kilkenny; Leitrim; Mayo; Meath; Sligo; Waterford City; Wicklow.

#### *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 84% of respondents had refereed at least once during the Celtic Challenge. The majority of respondents (46%) had officiated at either 5 or 6 games with 39% officiating at 1 or 2 games and 12% officiating at either 3 or 4 games. One respondent officiated at 7 games.

#### *MANAGEMENT TEAMS*

A total of 44 respondents, representing 19 of the 38 participating teams, completed the online survey for members of the management teams. The respondents had various roles within the management teams – 40% fulfilled the role of Coach; 23% acted in the role of Team Administrator;



23% were Assistant Coaches and a further 14% undertook the role of PR & Social Media Coordinator.

#### *KEY PERSONNEL*

A number of full-time personnel were nominated in late 2015 to fulfil the roles of Group, Provincial and National Coordinators as follows:

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

Prior to the commencement of the Celtic Challenge, personnel were involved in a total of 3 Conference Calls during April/May 2016. 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 July 2016.

#### *REVIEW WORKSHOP*

A total of 24 individuals – representing 16 backroom teams as well as Group and Provincial Coordinators attended the review workshop which was held in Croke Park on Wednesday August 24<sup>th</sup> 2016.

## SECTION 3

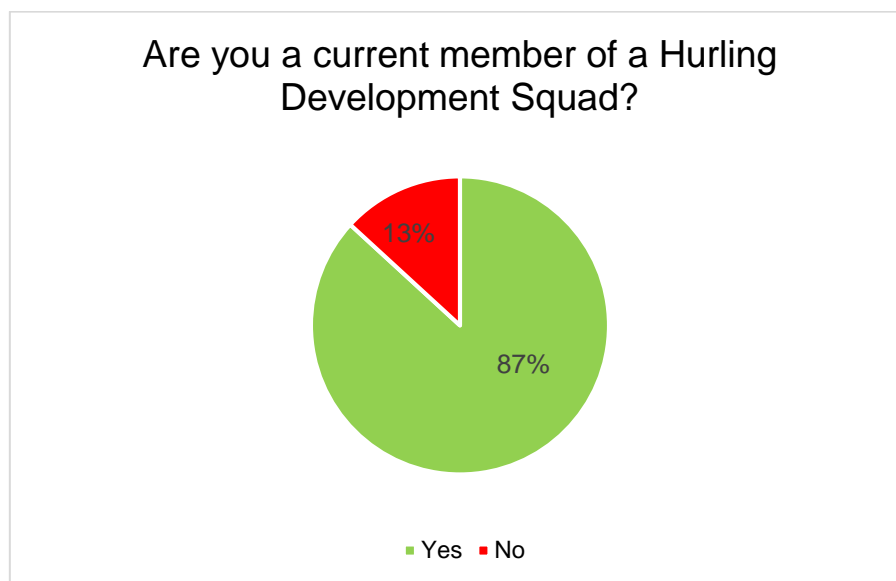
### 3.1 PLAYER EVALUATIONS

#### A. TEAM SELECTION AND PREPARATION

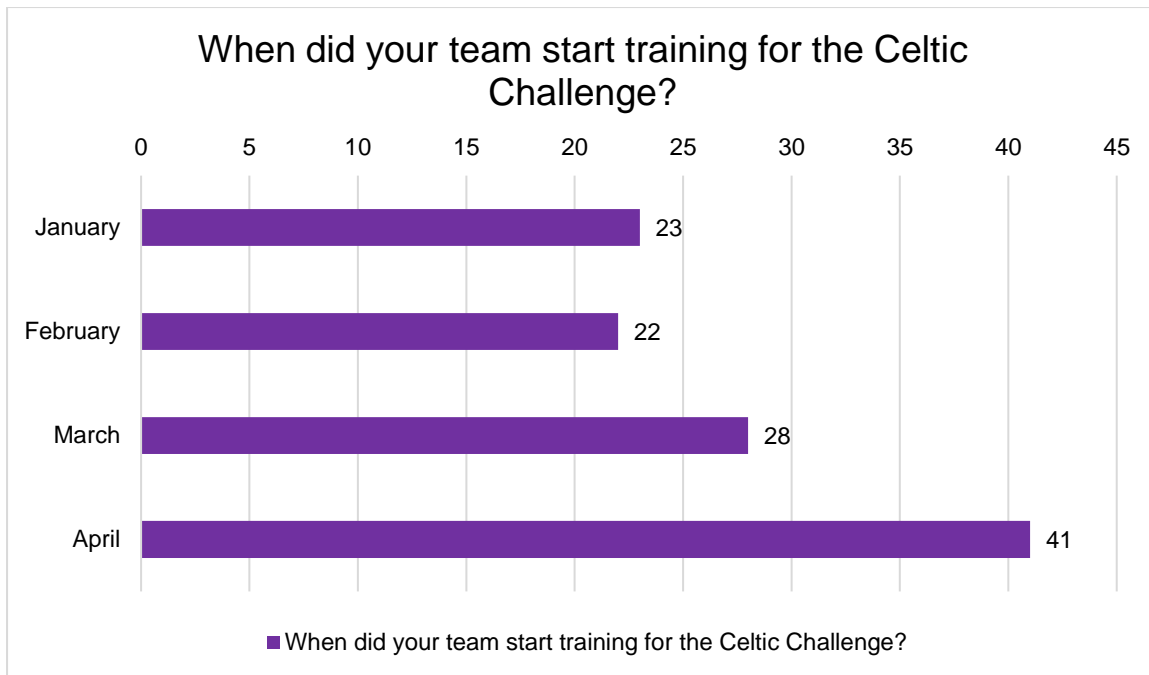
A key objective of the Celtic Challenge was to ensure that a developmental approach underpinned the selection and preparation (training) of players. In this regard the Hurling Development Committee recommended the following measures:

- a) In the context of Tier 1 Counties consideration should be given to selecting players that are not currently part of the Development Squad structures;
- b) In the context of Tier 1 Counties squad preparation should not commence any earlier than March;
- c) During the course of the competition there should be a 1 to 1 ratio of training to games.

The implementation of the above measures were assessed through the online survey. As part of the survey players were asked to indicate whether or not they were a member of a Hurling Development Squad. 87% of all respondents indicated that they were. When respondents from the developing counties were factored out of the analysis the breakdown was as follows: 77% were members of a Development Squad while 22% were not i.e. almost a quarter of players from Tier 1 were not involved at Development Squad level within their County.



Players were asked to identify when their team started training for the Celtic Challenge. In general 23% started training in January, 22% in February, 28% in March and 41% commenced team training in April. When respondents from the developing counties were factored out of the analysis the breakdown was as follows: 3% in January, 23% in February, 23% in March and 51% in April. This would suggest that the majority of teams in the developing counties adhered to the recommended timelines for training.



Players were also asked to identify how often they had a training session per week both before and during the competition and they were asked to indicate whether they considered the amount of training to be appropriate.



68% of respondents stated that their team trained once a week prior to the start of the competition. When asked their opinion on whether the amount of training they had done was appropriate, 62% stated that the amount of pre-competition training was 'just right' while 38% felt it was 'too little'.

During the course of the competition 72% of the respondents confirmed that their team had trained once a week – in line with the recommended ratio of training to games. 12% indicated that they had trained twice a week with 7% training only once a fortnight. Surprisingly, 9% of respondents indicated that they had not had any regular training during the course of the competition.

When asked whether they felt the amount of training the team did once the competition started was appropriate, the overwhelming majority indicated that it was ‘just right’ – 65%. This would suggest that the recommended ratio of 1 training session to 1 game was well-received by the players and should be a clear principle going forward.

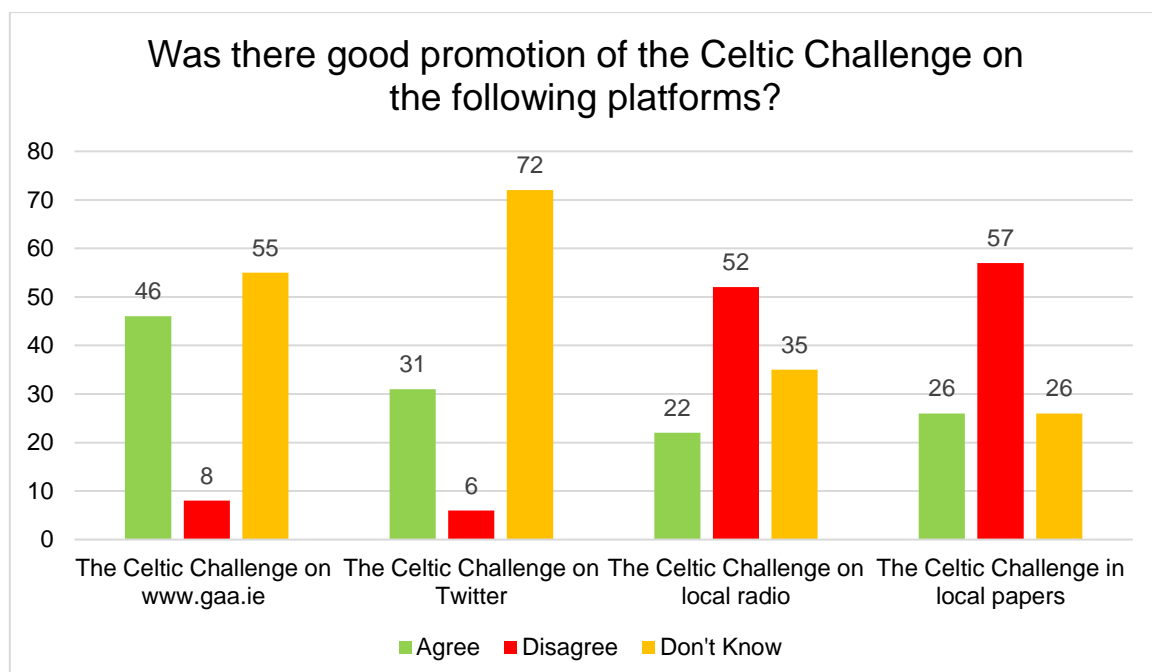
### B. COMPETITION STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULING

The innovative competition structure of the Celtic Challenge was a complete departure from the norm for many of the players involved. In particular, in the past players from former Minor B & C counties had often to contend with the stark reality of having one inter-county game per year. Therefore, the fact that the Celtic Challenge provided each team with a minimum of 5 games was a ground-breaking change.

84% of players indicated that the number of games provided in the Celtic Challenge was sufficient. 75% also thought the structure of the Celtic Challenge (i.e. Group Stages, Preliminaries and Play-Offs) worked well. 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. Furthermore, from feedback it was clear that the operation of the Preliminaries and Play-Offs must be clearly communicated to players as some did not understand how a team that they had beaten in the Group stages could then be seeded into a higher Division for the Preliminaries and Play-Offs. Finally, a number of players suggested that teams that lost their Preliminary game should be entered into a shield competition.

### C. PROMOTION AND COMMUNICATION

Players were asked to indicate whether they thought there was good promotion of the Celtic Challenge across a number of platforms.



In general, 46% of respondents indicated that [www.gaa.ie](http://www.gaa.ie) was the source that they used the most when looking for information about the Celtic Challenge with 77% agreeing that there was good promotion of the Launch of the Celtic Challenge. The other sources that were used when looking

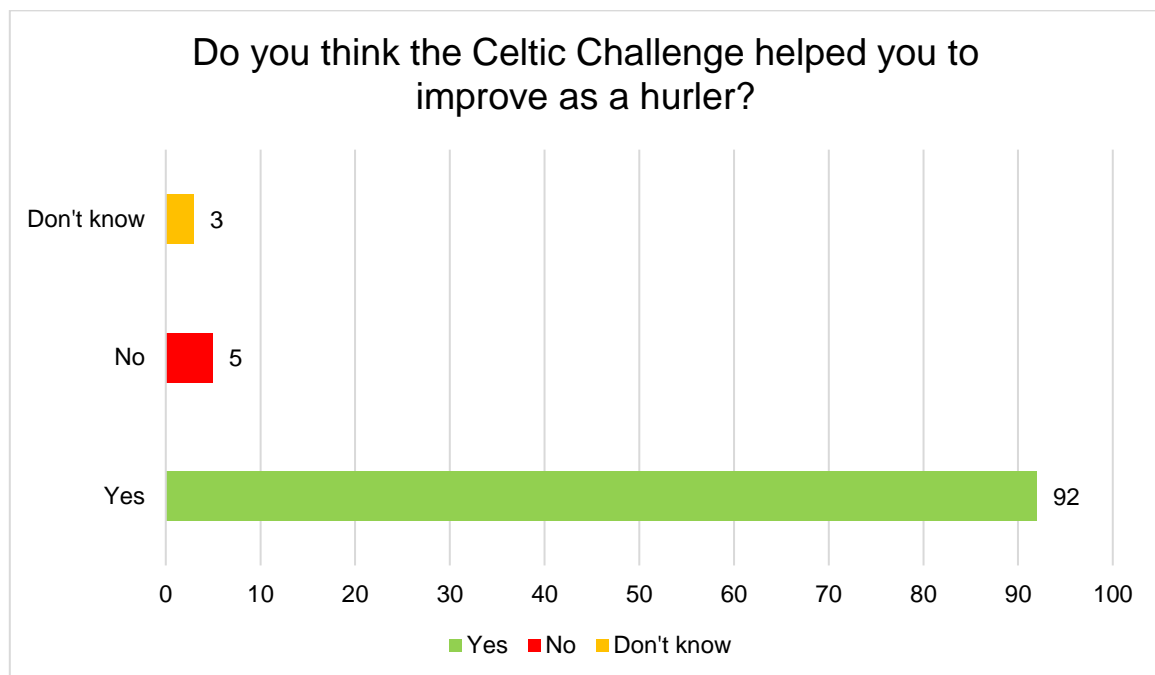
for information were as follows: Social Media (36%); Posters in the locality (10%); Local Radio (5%) and Local Newspapers (4%).

In terms of recommendations to improve promotion of the Celtic Challenge players suggested the following:

- Using an increased number of dedicated social media platforms – 27% of respondents referenced the need for a Celtic Challenge Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts.
- Maximising promotion at local level – 18% of respondents referenced the need for increase promotion at local level through radio, newspapers and clubs (posters/websites).
- Providing video highlights and/or clips of games on television – 7% of respondents suggest that games and/or highlights of games should be showed on television e.g. Sunday Game.
- 4% of respondents also recommended that accessibility of information available on [www.gaa.ie](http://www.gaa.ie) be improved.

#### D. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS

Players were asked to assess whether the Celtic Challenge had helped them to improve as a hurler.



The following comments were also provided in support of the positive responses:

- *“We had the opportunity of playing lots of good inter county teams which rapidly improved my skills”*
- *“This competition let lads like us from Sligo get a feel of what playing in real tough games are like”*
- *“I felt that it did help me to improve a lot in hurling. Because I was with Dublin Clarke, which was U.16s, we were playing a year up against U.17s, so it was hard to match other players in physicality and speed and we loved it.”*

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 regular competitive matches = 23%
- Playing against different teams than they would normal play against = 23%
- Having fun and making new friends = 13%
- Improving as a player = 11%
- The gear provided = 10%
- Representing their county = 7%
- The way the competition was organised including new rules/initiatives = 5%
- Playing in quality venues i.e. county grounds = 5%
- Winning = 3%

Some of the most frequently cited 'least favourite' aspects included:

- Travel time = 25%
- Mismatches between teams = 20%
- Losing = 18%
- Not getting enough game time as a sub/injured = 9%
- The bonus points system = 6%
- Having matches mid-week = 5%
- Lack of commitment/support by the backroom team and/or County Board = 5%
- Not playing in quality venues i.e. county grounds = 3%
- Lack of clarity on final standings after the competition = 3%
- Respect Armbands = 3%
- Play-Offs having no meaning if their team lost in the preliminaries = 3%

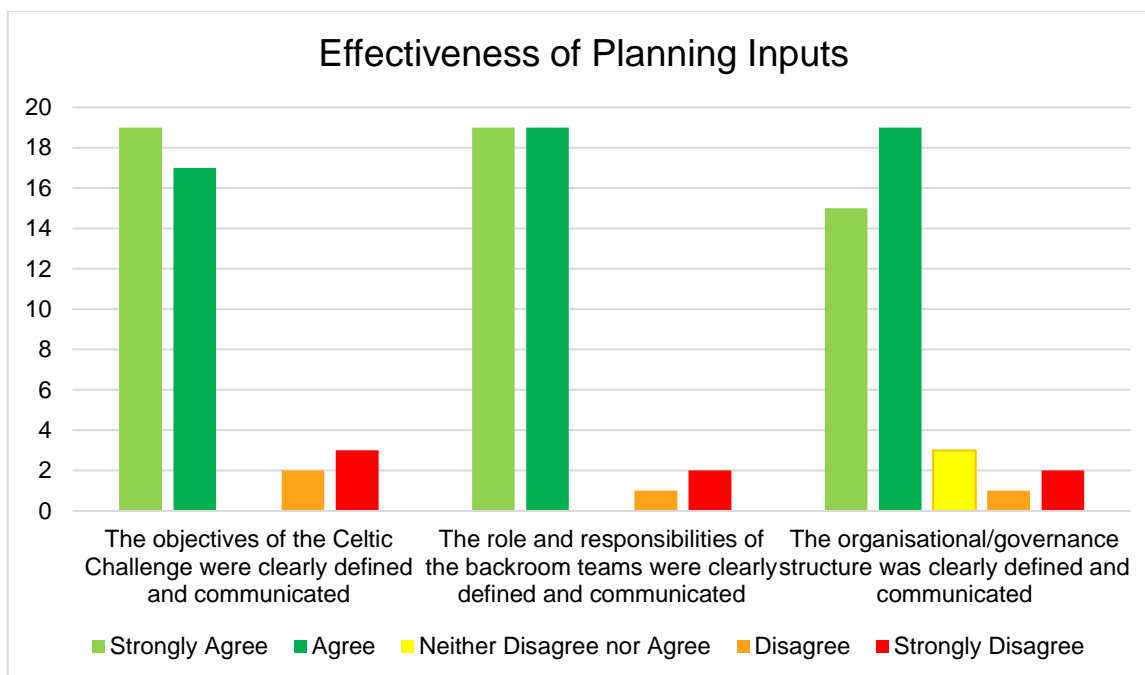
## 3.2 TEAM MANAGEMENT EVALUATIONS

### A. PLANNING

56% were appointed to their position between October and December 2015. A further 32% of respondents were appointed in either January or February while the remainder took up position in March or April 2016. The responses to the survey suggest that a significant majority were approached to fill their position by the Games Development Manager in their County (43%) or by another member of the backroom team (15%).

This meant that the majority of backroom teams had a significant 'bedding-in' period and an opportunity to attend the National and Provincial Planning Workshops (Armagh, Ballyhaunis, Portlaoise and Thurles). A quarter of respondents attended the initial National Workshop, whereas 51% of respondents attended a Provincial Workshop. This would suggest that a localised approach is more effective in attracting attendance at preparatory workshops. However, while some respondents did not attend either the National or a Provincial Workshop, 95% of respondents did receive a copy of the Operations Manual.

In terms of planning inputs, recommendations for future improvement included providing more notice of Workshops and supplementing same with an online course or workshop for those who could not attend the face-to-face workshop. However, in general the responses would suggest that the planning inputs were effective in terms of clearly defining and communicating objectives, roles, and structures.



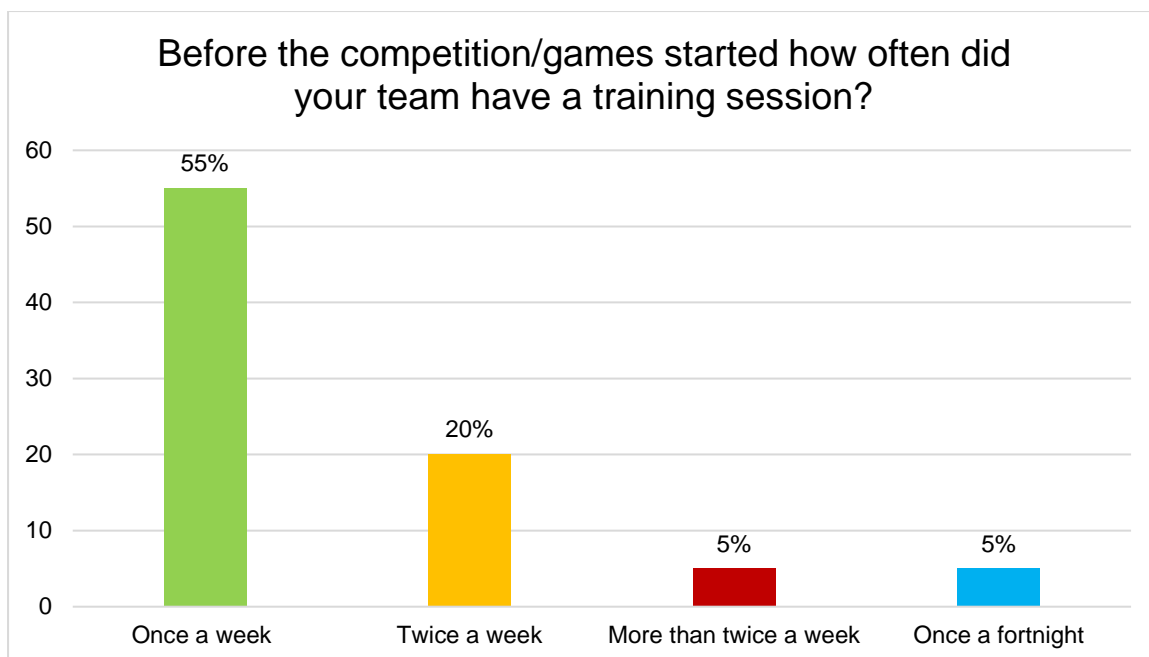
#### *B. TEAM SELECTION AND PREPARATION*

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 backroom 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 backroom team officials as the players only represented 12 teams while the backroom officials represented 19 teams so there is not always a direct correlation.

The vast majority of respondents indicated that their team started training in either March (30%) or April (35%) while the remaining respondents noted training commenced in January (20%) or February (15%). Interestingly, when respondents from the developing counties were factored out of the analysis the breakdown was as follows: January (0%); February (20%); March (27%); April (53%). This suggests that the recommendation that squads from Tier 1 should not commence training before March was implemented by 80% of those teams.

Respondents were asked to identify how often they had a training session per week both before and during the competition and they were asked to indicate whether they considered the amount of training to be appropriate.



55% of respondents stated that their team trained once a week prior to the start of the competition. Another 15% stated that the Celtic Challenge squad was combined with the County Minor panel for training purposes and therefore would train whenever the Minor panel did. When asked their opinion on whether the amount of training they had done was appropriate, 67% stated that the amount of pre-competition training was 'just right' while 30% felt it was 'too little' and 3% felt it was 'too much'.

During the course of the competition 77% of the respondents confirmed that their team had trained once a week – in line with the recommended ratio of training to games. 7% indicated that they had trained twice a week with 10% training once a fortnight. 6% indicated that training was not possible due to other training commitments on the players.

When asked whether they felt the amount of training the team did once the competition started was appropriate, 80% indicated that it was 'just right'.

Respondents were also afforded the opportunity to make general observations regarding the training undertaken before and during the Celtic Challenge and it became evident from the responses that training and preparation for the teams from Group G (primarily drawn from the six counties) proved problematic due to the gap for exams between the Group Stages and the Preliminaries. Some respondents felt that one training session a week did not allow for adequate development of the players. However, in general, most respondents were accepting of the ratio of 1 to 1 with many putting forward positive suggestions e.g. that a high profile player/coach might take an initial one or two training sessions with a squad from a developing county in order to boost attendance as well as providing practical mentoring for the coaches.

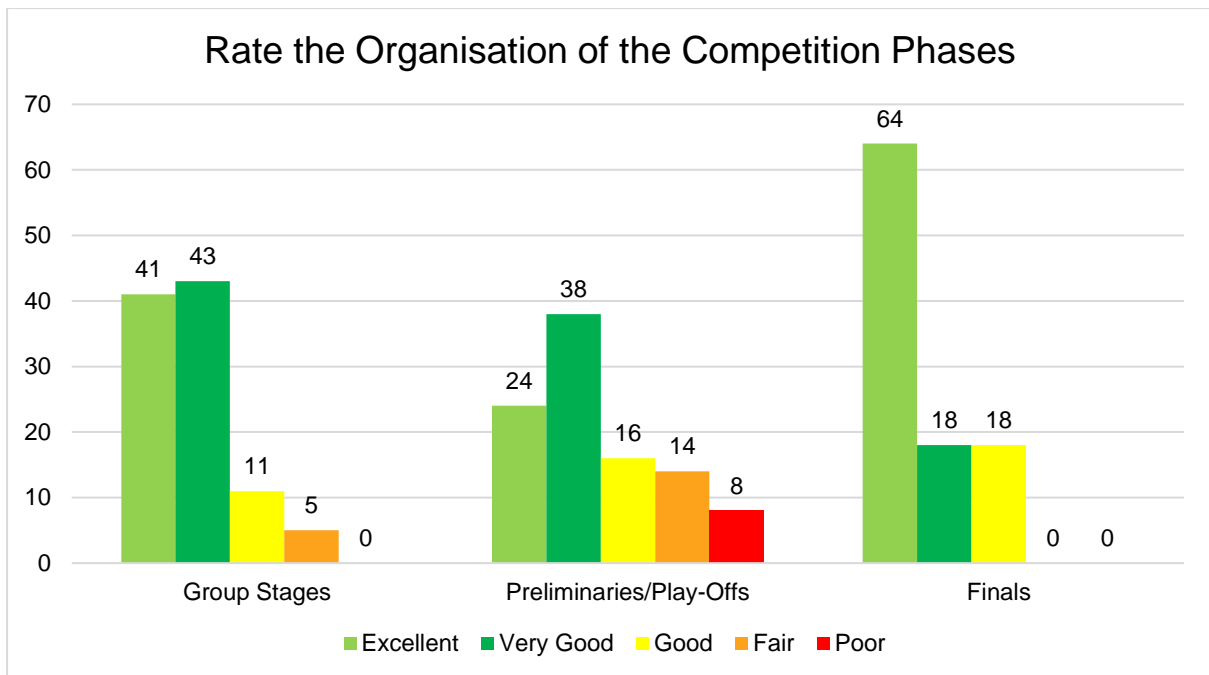
### *C. COMPETITION STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULING*

The Celtic Challenge was structured on the basis of Group Stages, Preliminaries, Play-Offs and Finals. This structure is novel within the GAA and allowed for each team to participate in a minimum of 6 games over the course of the competition.

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



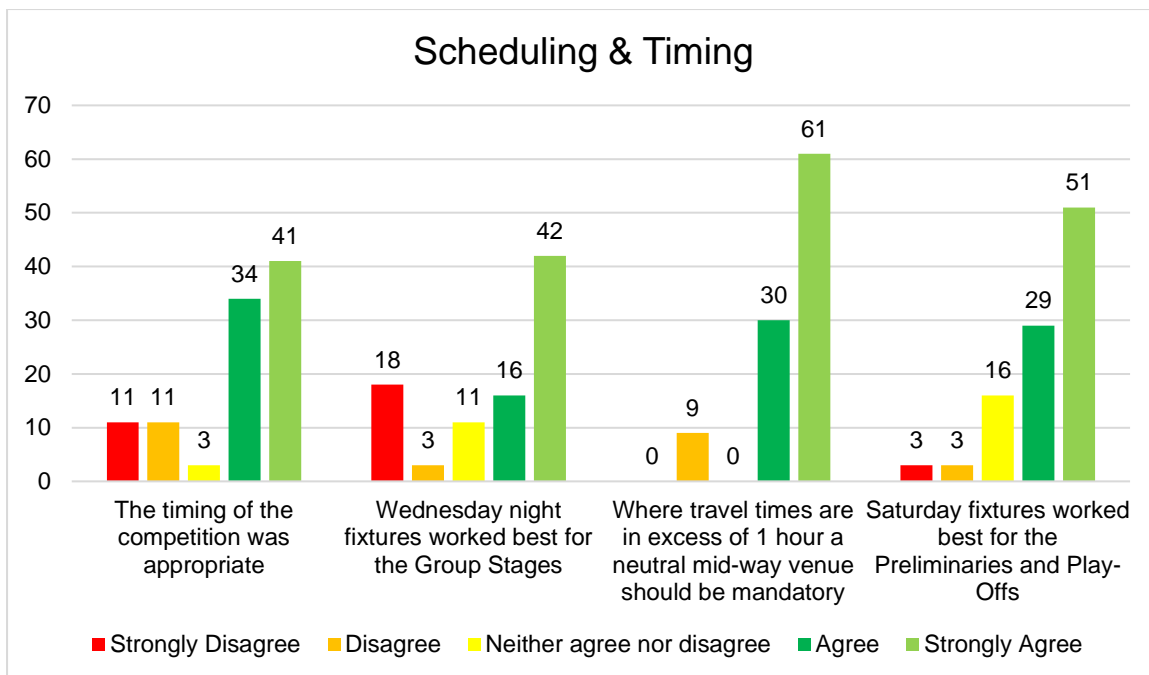
competition. The following were the ratings given for the organisation of each phase of the Celtic Challenge:



Some of the suggested improvements for the Group Stages included having increased support from the County Board by allowing access to County games. Furthermore, while the home and away venues were well-received generally, a number of respondents highlighted the need to allow for neutral, mid-way venues where travel time is prohibitive.

In relation to the Preliminaries/Play-Offs many commented that due to the short turn-around the facilities that were chosen were not of the requisite quality in certain circumstance. Furthermore, the turn-around between the last Group Stages (Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup>) and the Preliminaries (Saturday 4<sup>th</sup>) meant that many managers noted evidence of player fatigue.

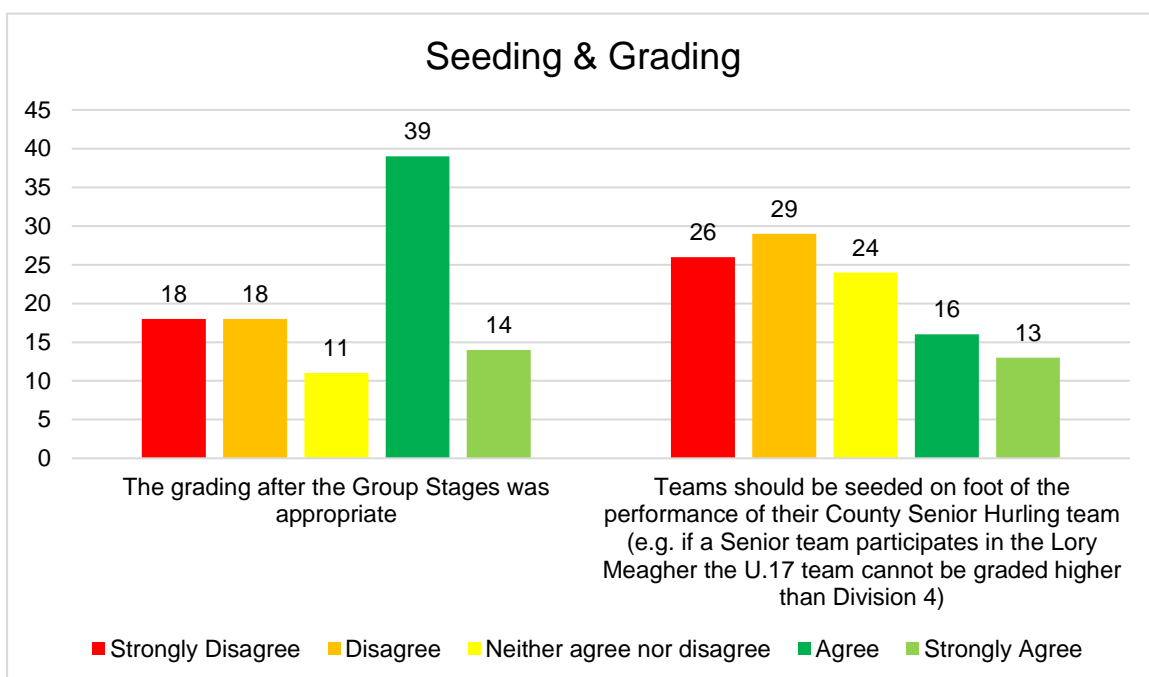
Based upon feedback gleaned throughout the competition the backroom team officials were asked to respond to a number of statements about the structure of the competition with a particular focus on the scheduling and grading of the competition.



In terms of the timing of the competition the majority of respondents were happy that it is played at an appropriate time of the year. There is a clear problem arising in relation to the six counties as exams take place in May and June for the U.17 age group. Further consideration must be given to how teams from these counties can be accommodated.

While the Wednesday night fixtures appear to have been well received by the majority of respondents, it was suggested that the final game of the Group Stages be moved to a Saturday as that week is particularly busy with school tours (4<sup>th</sup> years) and/or in-school exams (5<sup>th</sup> years).

It is recommended that, based upon the feedback, the Group Coordinator should have the authority to identify a mid-way neutral venue where travel times are prohibitive.



50% of respondents felt that the grading after the Group Stages was appropriate while 36% disagreed. Furthermore, the majority of respondents felt that teams should not be seeded on foot of the performance of their County Senior Hurling team. The comments by respondents provided a further insight into their rationale:

*“The whole idea of this competition is to give weaker counties a chance of playing stronger counties be it part of the county in our own case even though it was painful when Kerry beat us in the semi-final to see the reaction at the final whistle of the Kerry players, management and fans was brilliant they couldn't believe they had beaten Tipperary so don't change it because that's the only way these counties will improve.”*

*“If you are seeded in accordance with your senior team you might never get the opportunity to play tier one teams.”*

*“This would not be a fair system in my opinion, we lost to Offaly by 1 point and they went on to win the division 1 but the best team we played in my opinion was Kildare who would give most teams a great game. It would be unfair to limit the developing counties to a division!”*

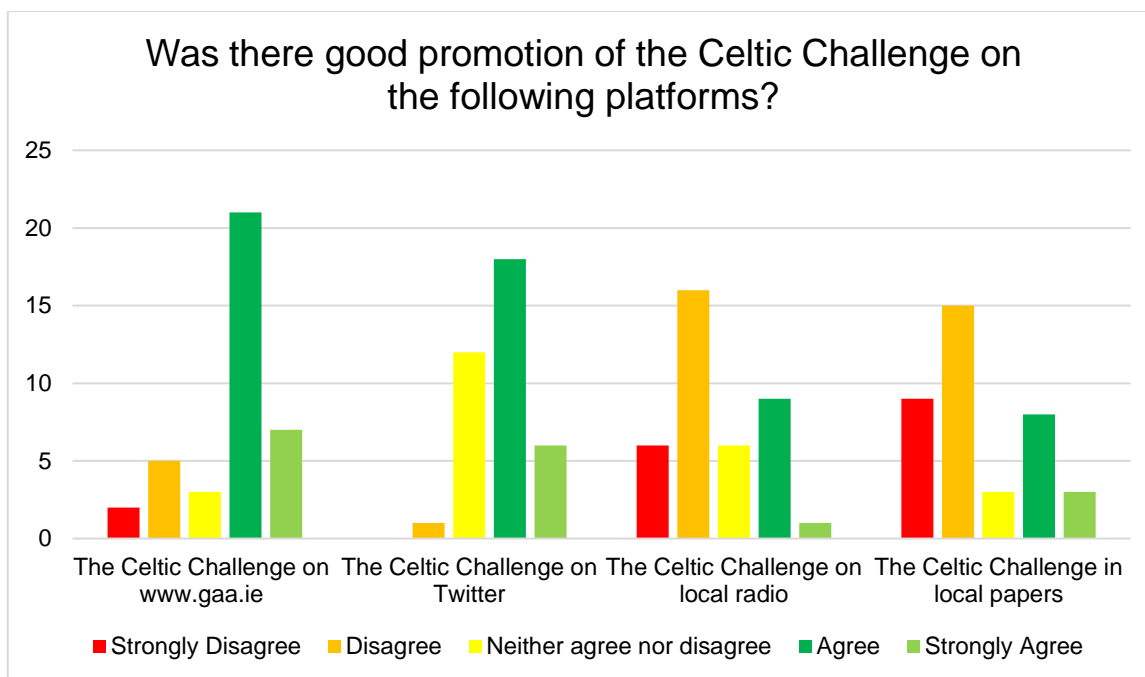
One of the alternative suggestions was to consider creating a shield competition for those teams that lose their preliminaries in order to ensure that they have an opportunity to finish the competition with a meaningful game.

#### *D. PROMOTION AND COMMUNICATION*

14% of the respondents surveyed held the role of PR & Social Media Coordinator as part of the backroom team. This role was developed specifically for the Celtic Challenge and provided a departure from the norm. The PR & Social Media Coordinator was responsible for liaising with the National Coordinator to produce agreed/required communications inputs for the team e.g. drafting player profiles; action shots of training/games; match reports; social media inputs regarding scores/results. The rationale underpinning the introduction of this role was that more exposure and promotion could be achieved by having a dedicated person at grassroots level to maximise publicity. In total, over 25 teams had a PR & Social Media Coordinator and considered the role to be beneficial.

Each backroom 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), physical posters and a booklet with a series of hints and tips for contacting local media as well as writing match reports. 62% of respondents found the materials and weekly updates to be ‘very useful’ while 20% considered them ‘somewhat useful’ and 15% considered them ‘not very useful’. Suggestions for additional resources included capturing some short video footage and providing a series of 20 second promotional videos.

In the context of the overall promotion of the Celtic Challenge, respondents were asked to assess the promotion that took place across the various platforms as well as to rate the sources of information about the Celtic Challenge that they used during the competition.



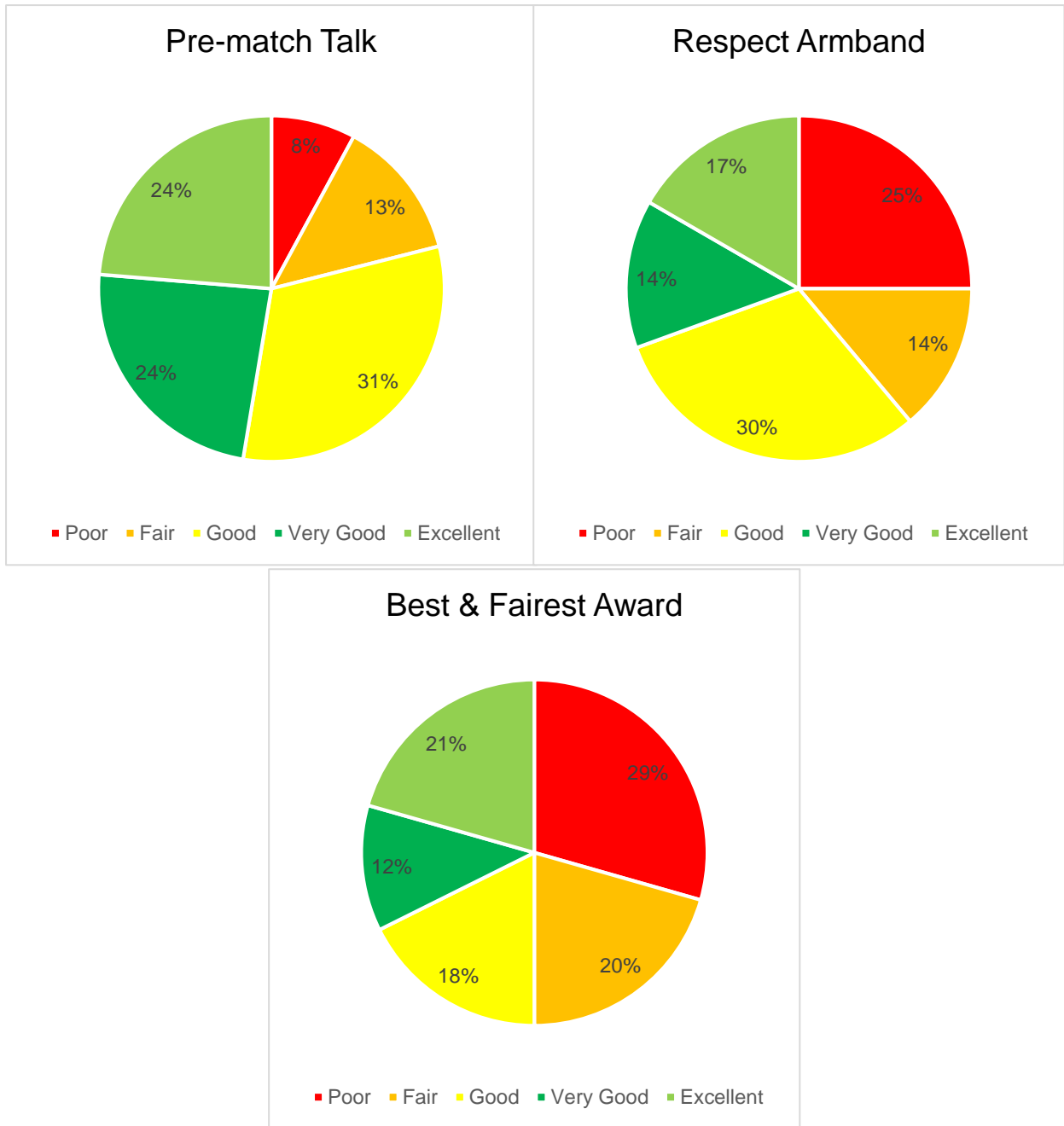
The GAA website, social media and the posters provided by national level were the sources most used by the backroom teams when seeking information about the competition. Local radio and local print media were the least used. The results reveal that there is a requirement to focus on putting measures in place to encourage exposure at local grassroots level via radio and print media. Furthermore, while it is evident that the backroom teams were satisfied with the promotion via online platforms (e.g. gaa.ie and twitter) this contrasts strongly with the feedback via the player evaluations. Therefore, more effective communication to the players regarding the online platforms must be considered for the future. Finally, one of the major criticisms in the context of promotion was that no promotional materials were in place when Group G commenced their game in April. This can be remedied going forward.

Respondents were asked to suggest any measures to improve the promotion of the Celtic Challenge in the future. The use of press releases to inform local media was cited as was the need to get television coverage or exposure. Furthermore, the concept of having high-profile players as Ambassadors for the competition was also mooted.

#### *E. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS*

Backroom team members were also asked to give their insights into the developmental aspects of the competition ranging from the respect initiatives introduced to the opportunity provided by the Celtic Challenge to develop players.

In the context of the new respect initiatives introduced through the competition, backroom teams were asked to rate the implementation of the various respect initiatives. Overall, the respondents were positive about the initiatives, however they cited a lack of consistency in terms of the application in these measures. The consistent implementation of these initiatives must be a key focus going forward.



Respondents were asked to indicate whether they felt that the Celtic Challenge had helped both the players and coaches to develop and improve. In relation to the players 95% felt that the competition had helped the participants to improve as hurlers. The provision of a series of competitive games over an extended period weeks was cited as the main reason for the improvement:

*“Getting hammered by Waterford City was probably the most beneficial game of their lives! They learned more from that than 10 trainings. When else would we have gotten the opportunity to play Deise lads? It also developed players who were not good enough for county minor, fringe players hugely benefited” [Donegal Backroom Team Member]*

*“In our case out of the 30 players involved probably 20 of them would have never got the chance to wear a county jersey or be part of a county team and they all will be better players for the experience they got out of this competition.” [Tipperary South Backroom Team Member]*

*“Fantastic opportunity for players of this age to play meaningful games over an extended period as opposed to a weekend tournament with 3 or 4 games crammed together. The defined time period gives players a fair opportunity to overcome nerves etc. associated with 1 or 2 games and lets them develop in their own time” [Kilkenny South Backroom Team Member]*

In relation to their own development as coaches 93% felt that the Celtic Challenge provided them with an opportunity to improve as a coach.

*“(The) Quick succession of games and allows mentors to learn from previous games with games coming week after week!”*

*“From my own experience I learned something new on match days and training sessions be it from our own management team or other management teams.”*

*“Again we were pitted against better prepared backroom teams where some coaches had a lot more experience which made you have to think and sometimes react much faster.”*

Members of the backroom teams were also asked to identify the aspects of the 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:

- Playing competitive and meaningful matches = 19%
- Clear schedule of regular games/fixtures adhered to = 19%
- Developmental ethos = 12%
- Playing against different teams than they would normally play against = 9%
- Interchange and the use of all players on the panel = 9%
- Well-planned and organised = 9%
- Respect initiatives and the quality of Match Officials = 7%
- Player eligibility – particularly non-exam = 5%
- Timing of the competition = 3%
- Ratio of training to games = 3%
- Gear for Players = 3%
- Bonus point system = 2%
- Playing in quality venues = 2%

Some of the aspects cited as requiring improvement included:

- Grading after the Group Stages should be re-examined = 20%
- The composition of the Groups should be changed = 17%
- A requirement for better promotion at local level and by the GAA = 11%
- Match Officials must be more consistent in applying the respect initiatives and the Rules = 11%
- The gap between the final game of the Group Stages and the Preliminaries should be longer = 8%
- Midweek games do not always suit during = 8%
- The selection process for stronger teams must be better regulated = 5%

- Venues should be the County Grounds or of similar standard = 5%
- Venue for the Final should be Croke Park = 3%
- Neutral mid-way venues should be examined where travel is too prohibitive = 3%
- Not all teams played their full panels = 3%

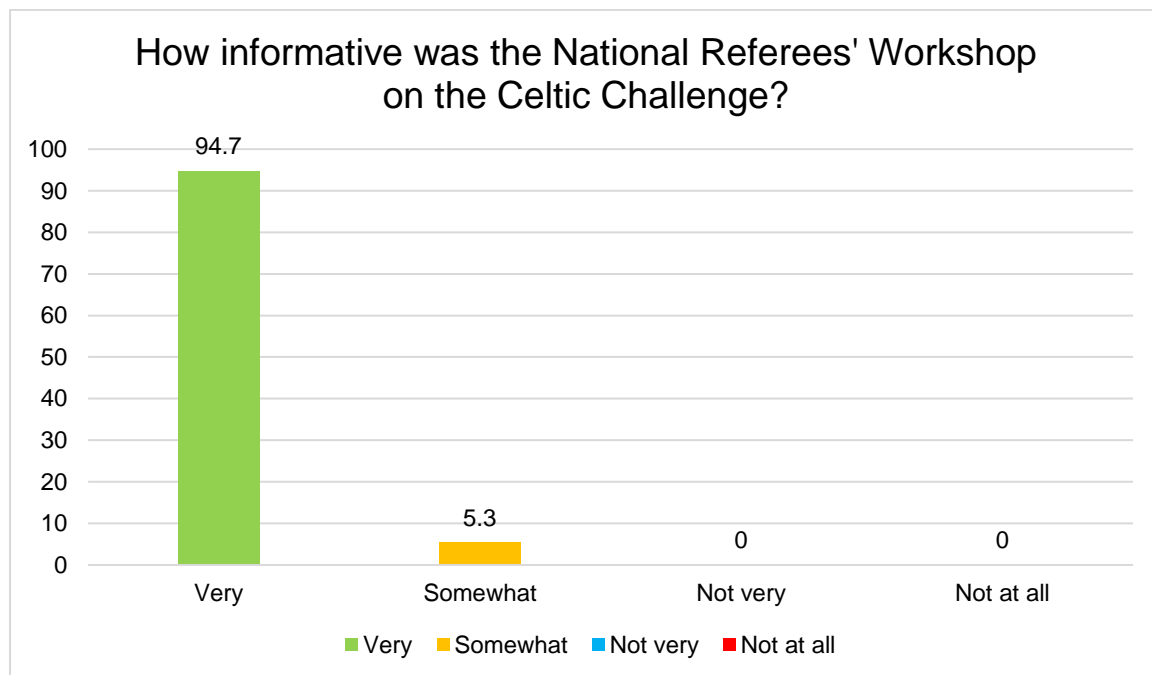
### 3.3 MATCH OFFICIAL EVALUATIONS

#### A. PREPARATION

Engagement with Match Officials during the preparatory and planning stages of the Celtic Challenge was crucial to creating cohesion and understanding, particularly in the context of the introduction of interchange rather than substitution as well as the new respect initiatives.

With the assistance of Patrick Doherty and Bernard Smith (Games Administration Department), a National Referees' Workshop about the Celtic Challenge was held in Croke Park in April 2016. At the workshop, attendees participated in a presentation about the Celtic Challenge as well as an information pack containing the Operations Manual.

In total 79% of respondents attended the National Referees' Workshop. 95% of those who attended considered the workshop to be very informative. Those who did not attend the workshop were either unavailable (40%), had not received notice (40%) or were given inadequate notice (20%).



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. 80% of respondents noted that the Operations Manual was 'very useful', while 74% of respondents found the online material 'very useful'.

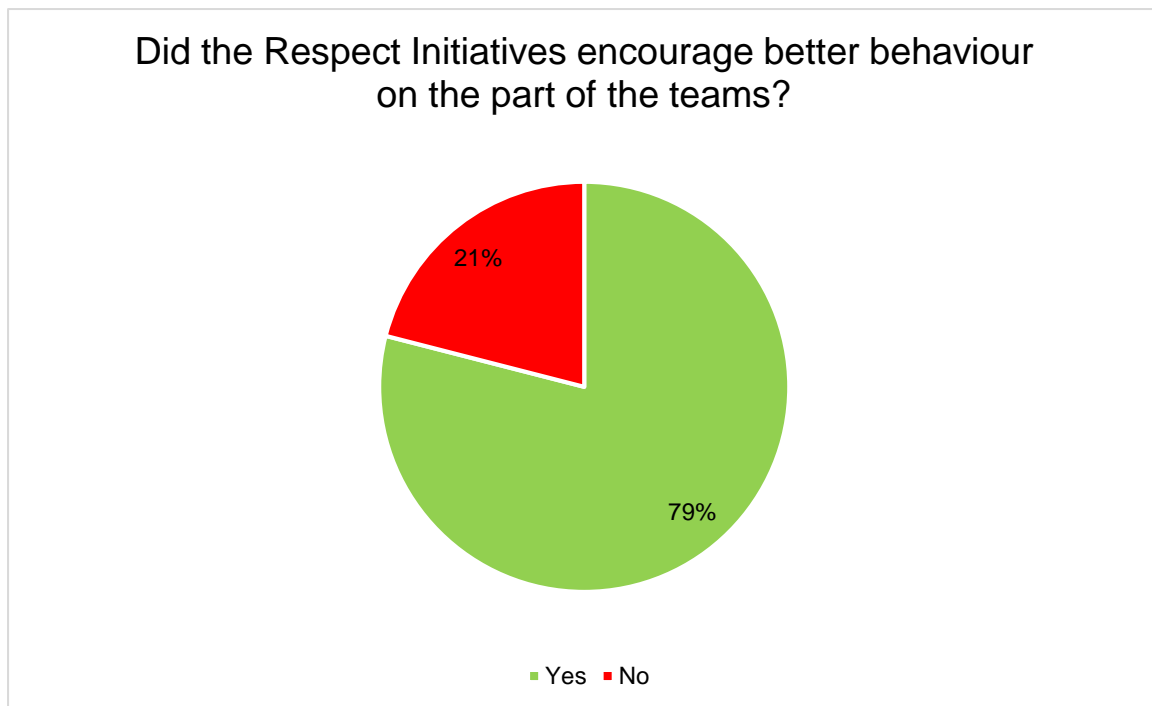
In the context of planning inputs for future Celtic Challenge competitions suggested recommendations included holding meetings at Provincial level rather than exclusively at National level so that umpires, linesmen and Interchange Coordinators could also attend.

## B. COMPETITION STRUCTURE

A crucial aspect of the structure of the Celtic Challenge was the introduction of Interchange as well as a variety of Respect Initiatives including the following:

- A pre-match talk by Match Officials with both teams outlining the rules of interchange as well as expected behaviour by players;
- Two players per team wore a Respect Armband. These players were the primary communicators with the Referee where any queries arose;
- After the match the Referees and his Officials were required to appoint one player per team to receive 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.

Match Officials were asked to assess whether the Respect Initiatives implemented as part of the Celtic Challenge encouraged better behaviour on the part of teams – 79% of respondents responded in the affirmative.



Match Officials were afforded the opportunity to rank the Respect Initiatives in order of effectiveness. The pre-match talk was ranked as the most effective measure while the Respect Armband was reported as the least effective measure. Match Officials noted that the major benefit of the initiatives was that they afforded the Referee the opportunity to establish a relationship with players prior to, during and after the match. They noted that speaking to the players served to dispel many misconceptions and the 'Best & Fairest Award' reinforced the concept of reward for respect not just skill, however, Match Officials recommended that measures be taken to increase awareness of the Award prior to the competition. Many of the respondents recommended that the Respect Armbands should be re-examined going forward as it contradicted the purpose of the initial relationship-building exercise with all players via the pre-match talk.

As part of the survey respondents were provided with an opportunity to submit suggestions regarding other strategies or initiatives that could be undertaken to foster respect. One of the clear trends apparent from the feedback was that measures must be taken to ensure that not only are



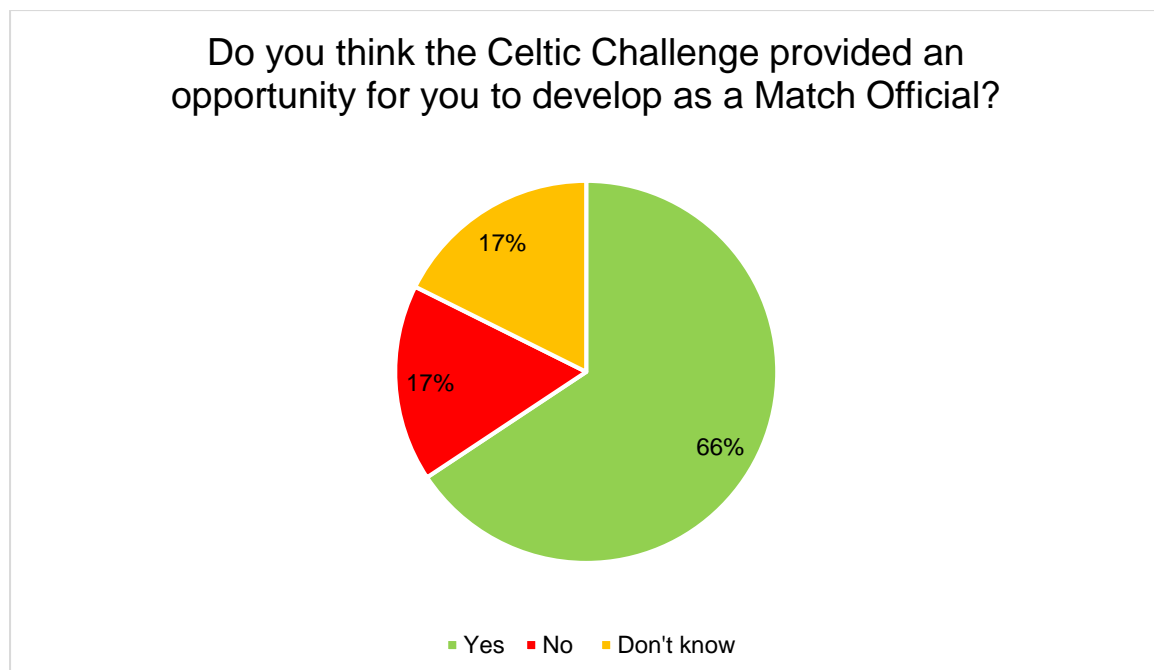
the players awarded for showing respect or censured for failing to do so, but rather, that mentors and adults involved with the teams should also be further encouraged to show respect.

### C. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS

As neutral observers the Match Officials were in an important position to assess the development of teams over the course of the competition, particularly as 46% of respondents had officiated at 5 or more games. In this context 100% of respondents indicated that the Celtic Challenge provided an opportunity for the players to develop as hurlers, with one respondent observing that: *'the regular programme of games was fantastic for them... [the team from] my own county also benefitted hugely from it. Funnily enough, players & mentors were far more relaxed in this competition, it [was] because it wasn't a win at all costs. That again, hurling won out because it was different & actually FUN!'*

20% of respondents did not know whether the Celtic Challenge had helped coaches to develop in their role but 80% indicated that it had, one Match Official observed *'My own club had a young coach involved with our county team and he will have taken lots back to the club as a result of this. Every game I officiated I thought the officials were very impressive and prepared their teams well for the game!'*

The provision of a regular schedule of pre-planned games through the Celtic Challenge also afforded Match Officials the opportunity to develop in their roles as well. One respondent commented: *"Definitely, I took massive enjoyment from refereeing in this competition. It was a huge honour to get the chance to take charge of games at a standard which would not often been seen in my own county. I must say also that I found it much easier to ref these games as all the players and teams went out to play hurling. Games were clean and fairly contested and even one sided games seemed to be enjoyed by the players. My umpires also benefited greatly from the experience of a regular sequence of games at inter county level and have developed significantly over the period as a team".*



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

- Giving increased profile to the 'Best & Fairest Award' both at the game and on gaa.ie;
- Holding the Finals in Croke Park;
- Inviting more regional teams to participate;
- Improved communication when appointing Match Officials – assign them a schedule before the competition;
- Improved grading after the Group Stages;
- Removing the Respect Armband and trialing a Sin Bin.

### 3.4 REVIEW WORKSHOP

A Review Workshop was conducted in Croke Park on August 24<sup>th</sup> 2016. All members of the backroom teams as well as the Group and Provincial Coordinators were invited to attend. A total of 24 individuals attended representing 16 Counties. Representatives from Ulster Council and Connacht Council were also present.

The purpose of the workshop was to review proposals for change arising from the online evaluations as well as to further discuss some of the substantive issues including: the timing of Group G (six Counties Group); the Composition of the Groups; Grading & Seeding after the Group Stages; Panel Selection for Tier 1 Counties. The workshop was structured to allow for group discussions leading to both written and verbal feedback.

The following is a summary of the recommendations made in respect of the substantive issues:

1. Timing of Group G (Six Counties Group)
  - To continue to play Group G games in March/April
  - To consider playing two games per day (30 minute blitz games) in a centralised venue in order to alleviate travel times.
  - To have two teams from Antrim and two from Down.
  - To facilitate an Ulster Challenge Games day in Abbottstown after the conclusion of Ulster Group but before the commencement of the Group Stages for the remaining teams.
2. Composition of the Groups
  - To increase the number of teams to 48 by ensuring that Tier 1 Counties have a minimum of two teams i.e. Tipperary, Kilkenny, Waterford, Offaly etc.
  - To invite Westmeath and Meath to enter a second development team.
  - To add a third development team from Galway.
  - To include Limerick South/East.
3. Grading & Seeding after the Group Stages
  - To introduce a point for a loss (avoid teams receiving no points).
  - To ensure that teams from Counties that participate in the Lory Meagher or Nicky Rackard Tournament in Senior County Hurling (and Cavan) will not be seeded higher than Division 3 i.e. cannot be graded in the top 16 teams.
4. Panel Selection
  - To make a recommendation that 25% of the players on squads from Tier 1 Counties are not members of development squads.
  - To make recommendation that Tier 1 Counties put mechanisms in place (trials etc.) to involve players from weaker clubs.

## SECTION 4

### 4.1 LESSON LEARNING

The first year of the Celtic Challenge competition proved to be very successful. However, there were also significant opportunities for lesson learning in order to improve the competition for 2017 and beyond.

The major lesson arising from the Celtic Challenge seems an obvious one: players and coaches alike want regular competitive games, which are played in accordance with a clear schedule without fixture changes. Furthermore, the players and backroom teams also enjoyed the opportunity to play against different teams than they would normally play against.

The importance of valuing players and backroom teams was also evident – this means that the competition must be well-planned and organised and that those involved must feel recognised e.g. receiving gear, having the opportunity to play in County grounds etc.

The ability of players to adapt to new rules and initiatives was apparent and the use of interchange in particular was very successful.

In terms of lessons for the future, it is apparent that the composition of the Groups must be re-examined to minimise travel times and avoid mismatches where possible. Furthermore, as the competition is based upon the concept of meaningful games, it is important to re-examine how the Play-Offs can be made more meaningful if a team loses their Preliminary matches.

### 4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2017

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

#### *A. PLANNING - RECOMMENDATIONS*

- A1: Backroom Teams to be appointed by start of December 2016.
- A2: Schedule of Provincial Workshops to be circulated at the start of December 2016. Provincial Workshops to take place in late January/early February.
- A3: Engagement with Referees at the National Referees Seminar in early 2017. 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.

#### *B. TEAM SELECTION AND PREPARATION - RECOMMENDATIONS*

- B1: That a recommended 25% of panels from Tier 1 Counties should not be on a Development Squad.
- B2: Counties to submit proposals for panel selection to Steering Committee for review at the start of 2017 in order to ensure weaker clubs and non-traditional areas in Tier 1 Counties are adequately represented.
- B3: Maintain guideline that teams from Tier 1 Counties should not start preparation until March.
- B4: Maintain guideline of 1:1 training to games.

#### *C. COMPETITION STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULING - RECOMMENDATIONS*

- C1: The number of teams participating shall increase to 48. The number of Groups participating shall increase to 8:

**48 teams**

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
North Clare	Clare South/East	Westmeath	Carlow
Offaly	West Cork	Dublin 1	South Kilkenny
North Tipperary	Kerry	Kildare	North Wexford
Laois	Limerick City	Dublin 2	Wicklow
Galway 1	West Limerick	Meath	Dublin 3
Galway 2	North Cork	North Kilkenny	South Wexford
Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Waterford City/East	Cavan	Mayo	Armagh
South Tipperary	Leitrim	Roscommon	Derry
South Kilkenny	Longford	Galway 3	Down
Cork City	Louth	Donegal	Antrim
West Waterford	Monaghan	Sligo	Fermanagh
Limerick South/East	Meath 2	Kildare 2	Tyrone

- C2: The number of Divisions for the latter stages of the competition will be increased to 6.
- C3: A seeding system for teams in Groups A - G will be introduced. After the Group Stages, teams from Counties that participate in the Lory Meagher or Nicky Rackard Tournament in Senior County Hurling will not be seeded higher than Division 3 i.e. cannot be graded in the top 16 teams. Cavan will also be seeded on this basis. This will impact upon 6 teams in total i.e. Cavan, Louth, Longford, Leitrim, Monaghan, Sligo, They will be moved down the rankings in a manner commensurate with their grading after the Group Stages.
- C4: A separate seeding system for teams in Group H will be introduced. After the Group Stages the team graded number 1 in Group H will enter Division 1, the team graded number 2 in Group H will enter Division 2, the team graded number 3 will enter Division 3 and so on so forth with the bottom two teams in Group H entering Division 6.
- C5: The timing of the Group Stages of Group H in the Celtic Challenge will be adjusted to run on a series of consecutive Sundays during March and April concluding no later than Sunday April 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- C6: The timing of the Celtic Challenge will be adjusted to allow for one extra week of games but will still be completed before the end of the Leaving Certificate.

Dates	2016	2017 (proposed)
Group Stages	Wed. 4 <sup>th</sup> May	Wed. 3 <sup>rd</sup> May

	Wed. 11 <sup>th</sup> May Wed. 18 <sup>th</sup> May Wed. 25 <sup>th</sup> May Wed. 1 <sup>st</sup> June	Wed. 10 <sup>th</sup> May Wed. 17 <sup>th</sup> May Sat. 27 <sup>th</sup> May* Wed. 31 <sup>st</sup> May
Preliminaries	Sat. 4 <sup>th</sup> June	Sat. 10 <sup>th</sup> June
Play-Offs	Sat. 11 <sup>th</sup> June	Sat. 17 <sup>th</sup> June
Finals	Sat. 18 <sup>th</sup> June	Sat. 24 <sup>th</sup> June

\* To avoid clash with in-house exams during final week of school.

- C7: The Group Coordinator will be authorised to identify neutral mid-way venue where travel time is prohibitive (over 75 minutes).

#### *D. PROMOTION AND COMMUNICATION*

- D1: To establish bespoke Celtic Challenge accounts across an increased number of social media platforms e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.
- D2: To prepare and implement a strategy for maximising coverage at local level.
- D3: To increased visibility on gaa.ie through the addition of human interest pieces and a dedicated page for the 'Best and Fairest Awards'.
- D4: To identify a cohort of Ambassadors (current/former Inter-County players) to increase the promotional profile of the Celtic Challenge.

#### *E. DEVELOPMENTAL ETHOS*

- E1: To develop an online workshop for all Match Officials to upskill them in relation to the respect initiatives in order to ensure consistent application.
- E2: To discontinue the Respect Armbands.

## SECTION 5

### 5.1 CONCLUSION

This report represents the conclusion of the Celtic Challenge for 2016 but sets the tone and tenor for plans to grow the Celtic Challenge into 2017 and beyond. It contains a number of important proposals, which are firmly rooted in the feedback received from the people who matter the most - the players, backroom teams and match officials.

The Celtic Challenge was the selected flagship project of the Hurling Development Committee for 2016 and the overall objective was the provision of a meaningful programme of games. It is fair to say that this objective was achieved with great success. It was a phenomenal achievement to see 118 games played in the Celtic Challenge involving 38 teams from 31 Counties. The games spanned the four Provinces and were played throughout the length and breadth of the country. Truly an All-Ireland competition.

The fact that over 1,000 boys were afforded the opportunity to hurl for their county or represent their region in The Celtic Challenge reflects the participatory and developmental nature of the competition. These players, along with their team administrators, coaches, PR & Social Media coordinators and parents, embraced the opportunity provided by their participation in The Celtic Challenge to contribute to an innovative and imaginative hurling initiative.

Many thanks to the Provincial and Group Coordinators for their trojan work in running off such an ambitious programme of games. Referees, linesmen and interchange officials also played a major role in the success of The Celtic Challenge and the assistance of Patrick Doherty and Bernard Smith in Croke Park as well as Adrian Hassett, Stephen Donnelly and Kevin Walsh at Provincial level was much appreciated. The HDC was particularly delighted that the 'Respect' elements of The Celtic Challenge were so well received.

The sponsorship by O'Neills of the attractive playing gear greatly added to the image of the competition. The assistance of Azzurri with the Waterford City team was also appreciated. The Past Hurlers' Association were also very generous in their support of The Celtic Challenge through the purchase of the beautiful trophies and medallions. Finally, the Hurling Development Committee was indebted to Kilkenny County Board for making Nowlan Park available for the Finals – the efforts of their officers and volunteers as well as the quality of the venue was a fitting conclusion to the competition.

The future is promising for the Celtic Challenge and all those involved will continue to strive to ensure that the high standards that were set in 2016 are met and exceeded going forward.

*Paudie O'Neill*  
*Chairperson, National Hurling Development Committee*  
*September 2016*