



**BENCHMARKING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SPORT
DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM WITHIN THE GAELIC ATHLETIC
ASSOCIATION: A COUNTY PERSPECTIVE**

by

LIAM SHEEDY

**A project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the
Degree of Master of Science (Sports Coaching and Performance)**


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DECLARATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluating the effectiveness of sports development systems has been a focus for many scholars across the world (Sherry et al. 2016). Previous research clearly indicates that there many factors that need to be considered when assessing the environment within which sport is promoted and developed such as the approach (es) taken to (1) increase levels of sport participation, (2) improve coaching and coach development, (3) identify, and develop talent , (4) achieve high performance targets and (5) provide sport facilities to support participation and performance objectives (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has previously been described as one of the most successful amateur sporting organisations in the world; and the most important socio-cultural movement on the island of Ireland (McManus, 2009) with a network of over 2000 clubs (GAA, 2021). These sports clubs play an integral part of Irish society by providing opportunities for people take part in the sports it offers (i.e., Hurling and Gaelic Football) but more importantly by ‘reaching deep’ into communities and providing people of all ages with the opportunity to be actively involved and engaged in their own communities (Lane et al., 2020). The challenge for all key stakeholders in the GAA, is to ensure that Gaelic games is promoted, developed, and supported (i.e. funded) in an open, fair and equitable manner across the organisation.

In 2021, the GAA responded to calls for a more equitable funding model for the promotion, development and delivery of Gaelic games at provincial and county level (Fogarty, 2021). Previously, funding to units was allocated on the basis of two criteria (1) uniform baseline funding to support GAA personnel and projects, and (2) strategic funding to support the planning and implementation of ‘special projects’ aimed at addressing specific needs. This mirrors what has been called a “significant transformation of the global sports industry whereby many sports organisations adopted a more business-like management approach” (Clune, *et al.*, 2019, p1927). Despite the efforts by the GAA to address needs identified by units, feedback from provinces and counties has challenged previous investment models on the basis that

funding was not distributed on an equitable basis using an open, fair, and transparent process and asked for a new approach to be taken in the future.

In response to the above, the GAA established a Project Steering Group to consider alternative approaches to investing in and supporting the development of Gaelic games. As part of this process, a review was conducted on current policies, systems and practices which impact on sports development success. Traditionally, such reviews have focussed on elite and transnational sport development; however the amateur and volunteer nature of Gaelic games required an adaptation of a widely accepted international model, namely SPLISS (De Bosscher, 2006). Therefore, the aim of this study was to 'develop a benchmarking tool and process for the GAA at National, Provincial and County level to support strategic planning, decision making and investment'.

Using semi-structured focus group interviews with 12 key stakeholders actively involved in the GAA at a National, Provincial and County level, data were generated to inform the development a new 'benchmarking tool and process'

The findings from this study clearly demonstrate that there is a need to (1) develop and implement a 'new investment model' specifically designed to work with (co-creation) and support provinces and counties and provide an strong evidence base for planning and decision making; (2) design a benchmarking tool and associated process for assessing the effectiveness of existing sport development systems at a provincial and county level; and (3) consider the importance of 'vision and strategy', 'culture' and 'retention' as underpinning themes within any final benchmarking tool which is developed.

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GLOSSARY

| | |
|-------------|------------------------------------|
| GAA | Gaelic Athletic Association |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation |
| LGFA | Ladies Gaelic Football Association |
| NGB | National Governing Bodies |
| SCT | Social Cognitive Theory |
| SDT | Self-Determination Theory |
| SI | Sports Ireland |
| TA | Thematic Analysis |

PART A

CURRENT POSITION

INTRODUCTION

Sport development concerns the provision, delivery, and planning of policy and practice of community sport (Mackintosh, 2021). It refers to all aspects of sport, from community to elite sport. As a consequence, sport development research and practice is primarily concerned with understanding the 'sport experience' which is considered by many policy makers, practitioners, and researchers to be a large and potentially complex environment. Almost 15 years ago, several researchers combined their efforts to review the and argued that at least five themes could be used to categorise sport development research. These themes include: (1) Policy, (2) Development through sport, (3) Development of sport, (4) Future patterns of sport delivery, and (5) Marketing in terms of the relationship between professional sport and participation (Shilbury, Sotiriadou & Green, 2008).

Sport Policy Considerations

The first theme, 'policy', is particularly relevant to this study. Previous research in this area has focused on three domains; (a) formulation of sport policies relating to mass participation, elite sport and international comparisons; (b) the influence of political ideologies on sport policy and c) review of effective elite sport policies (Shilbury, Sotiriadou & Green, 2008). There is a growing body of research in relation to sports policy, systems and practices and how it has led to international sporting success in a variety of countries (De Bosscher et al. 2015). However, there a lack of research relating sport policy, systems and practices at a national governing body (NGB) level, particularly organisation which are amateur, and volunteer led.

At the same time, there has been an increase in the level of engagement between government agencies, NGBs, and other sports providers to delivery on both sporting and social outcomes (MacIntosh, 2021), with many governments across the world having recognised the importance of sport-related policy interventions as vehicle to achieve wide ranging objectives such educational attainment, social exclusion/inclusion, health, and social cohesion. In parallel with these policy directions, many governments have also promoted and funded elite sport development system

with limited consideration of the policies, systems and processes required to achieve international sporting success (De Bosscher, 2006, De Bosscher et al., 2015).

Gaelic Athletic Association and Sport Development

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is a volunteer based, amateur organisation, whose sports are native to the island of Ireland. Organisationally, the GAA is subdivided in cascading fashion into the four Provinces and 32 Counties of the island of Ireland. Each County is governed by a County Committee, each Province by a Provincial Council, and nationally by the GAA Central Council. The local unit is the club. Games are played at both an Inter-Club level and at an Inter-County level. At Club level competitions within each of the 32 counties are contested at club senior, intermediate, junior and several underage grades. At Inter-County level games are played for national leagues and All-Ireland championships. Unlike other similar sporting organisations, the championship competitions are the premier competitions (GAA, 2021).

Gaelic sports are an important microcosm of Irish culture and society (Duggan, *et al.*, 2021). The success of the amateur ethos has enabled the GAA to develop a relationship with communities across Ireland. This achievement is due to the interactions between family, club and the parish, and as Keeler and Wright (2013; p11) have stated is “a relationship that cannot be duplicated by any other sporting association in Ireland.”

Though the GAA is an amateur and volunteer led organisation, the size and scale of activities have been supported by the employment of full time and part time games development personnel. Beginning in the early 1980's when the first development officers were appointed, today there is a workforce of more than 700 personnel at National, Provincial and County level operating across several domains (GAA, 2022).

Despite the many reported successes, today, the ultimate challenge for all key stakeholders in the GAA is to ensure that Gaelic games is promoted, developed, and supported (i.e. funded) in an open, fair, and equitable manner across the organisation. For example, in 2021, the GAA responded to calls [through the media] for a more

equitable funding model to support the promotion, development and delivery of Gaelic games at provincial and county level (Fogarty, 2021). Previously, funding to units was allocated based on two criteria; (1) uniform baseline funding to support GAA personnel and projects, and (2) strategic funding to support the planning and implementation of 'special projects' aimed at addressing specific needs. This mirrors what has been called a "significant transformation of the global sports industry whereby many sports organisations adopted a more business-like management approach" (Clune, *et al.*, 2019, p1927). Despite the efforts by the GAA to address needs identified by units, feedback from provinces and counties has challenged previous investment models on the basis that funding was not distributed on an equitable basis using an open, fair, and transparent process and asked for a new approach to be taken in the future.

In response to the above, the GAA established a Project Steering Group to consider alternative approaches to investing in and supporting the development of Gaelic games. As part of this process, a review was conducted on current policies, systems and practices which impact on sports development success. Traditionally, such reviews have focussed on elite and transnational sport development; however the amateur and volunteer nature of Gaelic games required an adaptation of a widely accepted international model, namely SPLISS (De Bosscher, 2006). Therefore, the aim of this study was to 'develop a benchmarking tool and process for the GAA at National, Provincial and County level to support strategic planning, decision making and investment'.

SPLISS: A Sports Development Model to Adapt?

Research to date around sport development systems have primarily concerned high-performance structures (De Bosscher et al., 2006), however sport in Ireland is in the main characterised by amateur and volunteer sports (Sport Ireland, 2019). The Project Steering Group established to support this study considered several sports development models (i.e. Long-Term Athlete Development [LTAD) and Lifelong Involvement in Sport and Physical Activity [LISPA] and FTEM, however these models are conceptual frameworks which describe sports development. A significant framework available to the GAA in relation to implementing and evaluating sport policy,

is the SPLISS model (Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success) which was devised by Veerle De Bosscher and colleagues in 2006.

SPLISS consists of 9 pillars, alongside 96 critical success factors (CSF), which have been recognised as key ingredients of successful elite sport policies at national policy level (Winand, 2010). The SPLISS model (see Figure 1), is founded in the logic model approach, which considers inputs (Pillar 1- Financial Support), processes (e.g., Pillar 4 – Talent Development, Pillar 7 – Coaching Provision and Coach Development), and outputs (medals/success) to evaluate the processes of elite sport policy making (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2006).

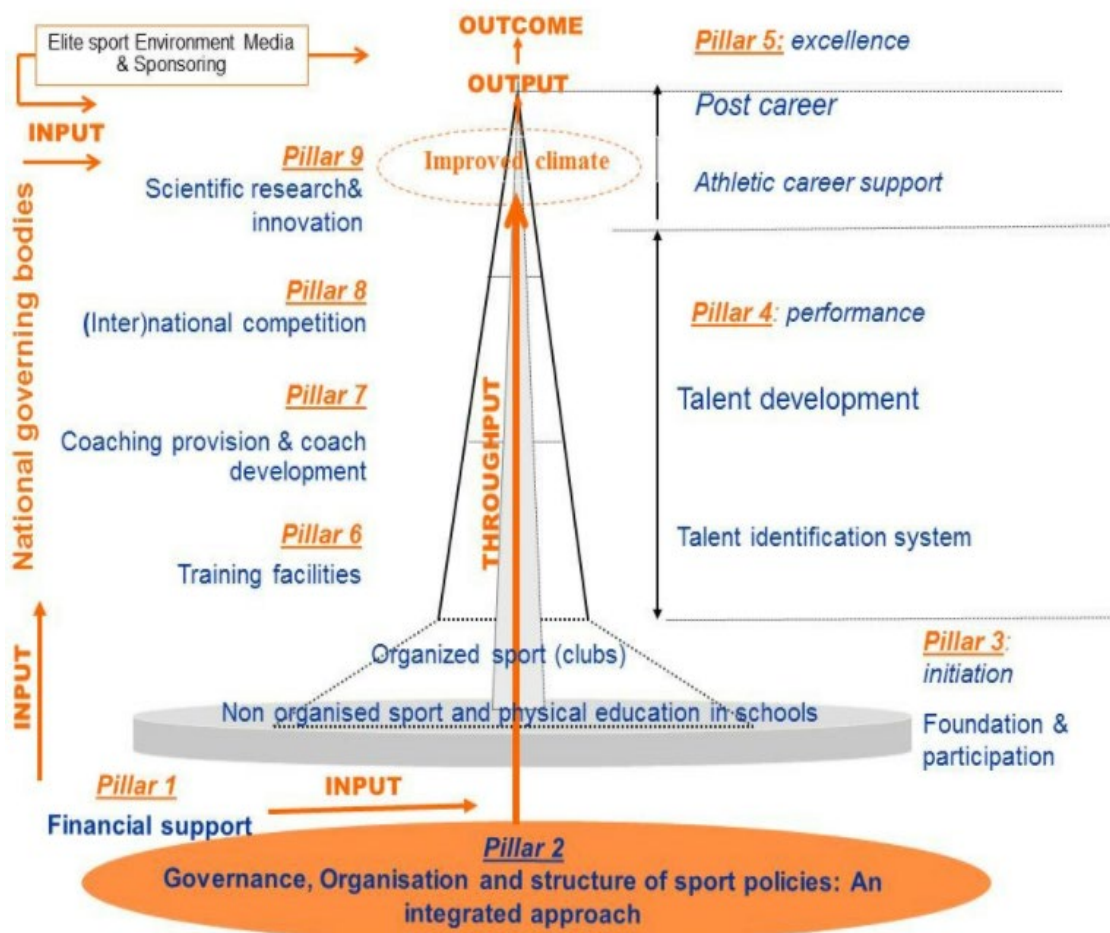


Figure 1 The Key Pillars of SPLISS (De Bosscher et al, 2015, p.42)

Concluding Remarks

The overall aim of this study was to develop a benchmarking tool and process for the GAA at national, provincial, and county level to support strategic planning, decision

making, and investment by a range of key stakeholders involved in the promotion, development and delivery of Gaelic games. To inform this development, the views and opinions of a range of key stakeholders operating at various levels within the GAA were obtained and this allowed the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of:

1. Key pillars that should be considered in the development of a benchmarking process and
2. Key issues and challenges that exist and need to be overcome in the short, medium and longer-term.

The next section will provide the reader with an overview of the relevant literature relating to the GAA and several sports development models.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section aims to provide an overview on the literature surrounding the main constructs of this research project. Pickard (2007, p.25) portrays the objective of a literature review as two-fold, to “*acquaint you with current thinking in your subject area, and to find out about methods and research processes used by other researchers investigating this topic.*” Firstly, current literature relevant to the GAA will be reviewed and discussed, including the GAA approach to the development of Gaelic games. A focus on SPLISS follows, which includes an analysis of the inputs, throughputs, and outputs pillars, as it may act as a scaffold going forward for the GAA.

The GAA: Structure, Vision and Values

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was formed in 1884 to gain ‘home rule’ for Irish Athletics, and largely, to withstand the increasing Anglicization of Irish sport and culture (Mandle, 1987). As the power was beginning to shift towards the Anglo-Irish from the Catholic Irish middle class, this nurtured a desire for a revival of the native Irish games and language (Sheridan, 2016). The GAA is a democratic organisation comprised of: Clubs, County Committees, Provincial Council, Central Council and Annual Congress.

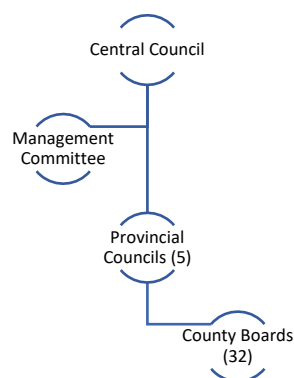


Figure 2: Structure the Gaelic Athletic Association

The GAA is one of the largest sporting organizations in Ireland and remains one of the largest voluntary and community-based organisations in the country (Connolly & Dolan, 2012). The organisation consists of a range of bodies which provide opportunity

to participate in games for both male and female participants (GAA, 2015). There are several full-time professional employees, with a professional Director General and volunteer President. Male participation is the main contributor in the GAA; however, the Camogie Association and the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA) provide the main outlet for female engagement within the organisation (also known as the 'sisters' in the GAA family). Altogether, these bodies amass to over 2,200 clubs and 500,000+ members (GAA, 2015).

The pinnacle of the GAA season takes place every summer, when the inter-county All-Ireland Championships are played in Gaelic football, Hurling and Camogie. These championships attract significant numbers of spectators, and in particular during the latter stages of the championship where the games are showcased in Croke Park.

The GAA has also developed in other countries around the world. Irish emigrants have founded clubs and are now established in the US, Australia, Britain, Europe, Canada, Asia, and other parts of the world (Croke Park, 2019). The Games Development Unit oversees the provision of participation opportunities for players and learning support for coaches and teachers across the levels of the Association and in particular played a leading role in the design, formulation and launch of the new Gaelic Games Player Pathway – this first common pathway agreed across all codes within the Gaelic games family (i.e. GAA, LGFA, Camogie, Handball)

The GAA Player Development Pathway

The GAA Player Development Pathway was launched by the GAA, LGFA, and Camogie Association in 2021 and was the first joint pathway for Gaelic games. The Pathway is founded on the FTEM model (Gulbin et al. 2013) which outlines three main phases: Foundation, Talent, and Elite performance which are further divided into sub-phases. This Player Development Pathway is underpinned by six guiding principles which aim to promote and sustain participation.

Club is Core: The pathway document states that clubs are the core in the GAA organisation. The club merges together communities and are central to player development. The pathway document foresees the club as a positive environment where players and members feel valued.

Player centred: The document includes many developmental outcomes ranging from high participation levels in recreational activities, to becoming an elite intercounty player. The main priority

of the document is that a player will engage from a young age, experience many positive situations, and have a lifetime involvement in the association. Therefore, placing the individual at the centre of the process is critical.

Quality coaching experiences: The role of the coach is seen as a vital cog in the GAA wheel in terms of this framework. The development of the player is heavily relied upon volunteer coaches through a journey of guided discovery and learning (GAA, 2021). Stakeholders, such as coaches, must exhibit a passion and interest for the GAA in order to players to fully develop both as an athlete, and as a person. The success of the pathway document may lie within the quality of these relationships between player, and coach.

Connection: The pathway encourages player development as a shared responsibility between all stakeholders (GAA,2021). Similar to the quality coaching experience, these stakeholders hold the key to communication, relationship-building, and teamwork. Finally, it is stated in the document that it is this philanthropic sense of care from stakeholders that ultimately joins communities to clubs and clubs to people.

Inclusive: Embedded in its culture and ethos, the GAA is for everyone regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or socio-economic status (GAA, 2021). Players must feel a sense of belonging and value within the organisation, which again can be accessed and made available by the stakeholders.

As many as possible, for as long as possible: Early engagement is supported by the document, so to provide children with the fundamental movement skills that will be the foundations of physical health through their life. It is essential that if a child is involved in the GAA at a young age, the retention of their interest is key in order to build on cultural history and improve or preserve participation rates

Figure 3: The Guiding Principles of the Gaelic Games Player Pathway (GAA, 2021, p.6)

The Pathway attempts to provide the GAA, LGFA and the Camogie players with the right support at the right time so that they are individually empowered to engage with the many challenges they will face along their player pathway journey. The guiding principles will also play an important role in this study as these should be discussed and considered when developing a new benchmarking tool and process for investing in and supporting provinces and counties in the short, medium and longer-term.

Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS)

The Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) was established due to the lack of frameworks available to assess the effectiveness of elite sporting policies (De Bosscher, Shilbury, Theeboom, Van Hoecke & De Knop, 2011). SPLISS was developed by implementing a mixed method approach incorporating athletes, coaches, and performance directors as the priority stakeholders in elite sport (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2015). The mixed method nature of the framework included qualitative and quantitative data, which was calculated into a quantitative scoring system, and thus quantitative techniques of measurement are applied to qualitative data (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2015). The qualitative data with the stakeholders consisted of open-ended questions in order to identify factors that contribute to an elite athlete sporting success (De Bosscher, *et al.*, 2016).

SPLISS identified nine sporting pillars (see Figure 4) that are essential for international sporting success (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2006), and portrayed that to develop a nation with medal winning athletes, this entails a holistic and strategic approach via public policy (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2011).

PILLAR 1: FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Countries that invest more in (elite) sport create more opportunities for athletes to achieve success. SPLISS research revealed that “in terms of input-output analysis, the best predictor of output appears to be the absolute amount of funding allocated to elite sport”.

PILLAR 2: GOVERNANCE, STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION:

The amount of resources devoted to elite sport is important, but it is the organisation and structure of sport and its relationship to (a national) society that enables efficient use of these resources to increase the chance of elite sporting success. It is important to have a good national communication system, involve the stakeholders, have a clear distribution and description of roles in the system.

PILLAR 3: SPORT PARTICIPATION

Although the (lacking) relationship between sport for all and elite sport is often debated, most top athletes originate from grass roots participation. A broad base of sport participation is not always a condition for success, but it may deliver a foundation for potential success because it provides a supply of young talent and various training and competition opportunities for this talent to hone their skills. Pillar 3 assesses sport opportunities at school as well as in sports clubs.

PILLAR 4: TALENT IDENTIFICATION (ID) AND DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

Pillar 4 studies the discovery and development of talented athletes. Policy makers need to focus on creating monitoring systems to identify talent characteristics, robust talent detection systems that minimise drop-out, and well organised scouting systems. Many countries have talent development initiatives to support governing bodies in setting up high level training and competition programmes and to support athletes to combine their academic career with a sport career.

PILLAR 5: ATHLETIC AND POST CAREER SUPPORT

Many athletes who have the potential to reach the top, drop out of the system before they achieve true success. We look at the different ways in which governments provide financial support for athletes to meet their living costs and have support programmes to provide access to the services required to realise their potential. Finally, athletes also need to be assisted in preparing for life after sport.

PILLAR 6: TRAINING FACILITIES

Training facilities, infrastructure and equipment are an important success factor in the process of enabling athletes to train in a relevant and high quality sporting environment. A network of high quality national and regional facilities, specifically for elite sport purposes, should be established, enabling a close link with sports medics, sports scientists, innovation and technologies and cooperation with universities.

PILLAR 7: COACHING AND COACH DEVELOPMENT

The quality and quantity of coaches is important at each level of the sport development continuum. Particularly important in Pillar 7 are the quality and organisation of training certification systems, training provisions for coaches and the level of time and resource commitment that (elite) coaches can give to achieve excellence with their athletes.

PILLAR 8: (INTER)NATIONAL COMPETITION

The organisation of international events in the home country has a positive effect on international success. In addition, a well-developed and high-level national competition structure and frequent exposure to sporting competition are necessary factors in athlete development.

PILLAR 9: SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGIES

Pillar 9 examines the extent to which nations take a coordinated approach to the development, organisation and dissemination of scientific research and knowledge, whether they use the latest technologies and develop innovative elite sport projects.

Figure 4 – A Description of the Nine SPLISS Pillars (De Bosscher et al., 2006, p12)

Macro-, meso-, and micro-level (Figure 5) factors determine sporting success, according to SPLISS (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2006). The macro-level consists of factors of social and cultural context in which people live such as population, wealth, and geographical variation (Horvat, 2020). In the macro-level, De Bosscher *et al.*, (2011), point out that organisations will battle for resources against other organisations, in order to receive funding. In the meso-level, policies on coaching development or talent identification are represented as these areas may influence high performance sport in the long-term (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2008) Finally, the micro-level refers to the individual athlete, and their genetic qualities, alongside the athletes surrounding environment such as family and coaches. De Bosscher *et al.*, (2006, 2015) state that at this level, most factors cannot be influenced by policies (such as the physical make up of an athlete), however areas such as training modalities, tactics and support can be influenced by policy (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2006).

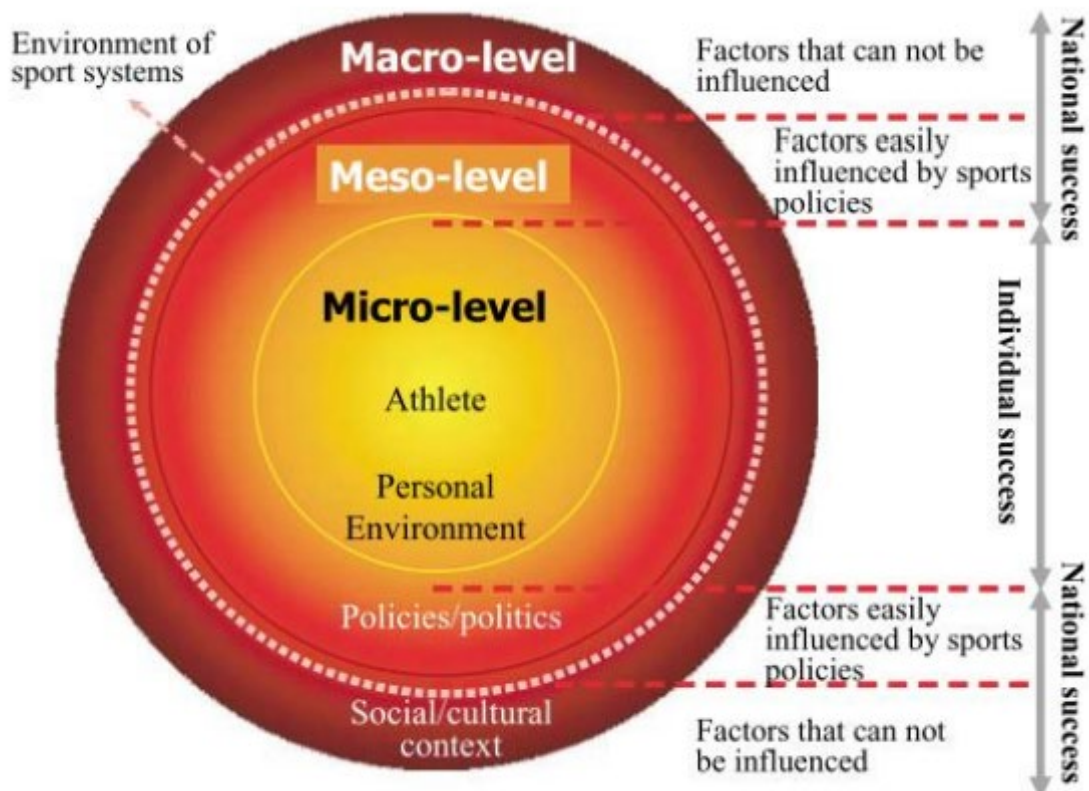


Figure 5 : Marco-Meso-Mirco Levels within SPLISS (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2006)

Research Aims & Objectives

Following a review of the existing literature, the following aims and objectives have been developed for this study. The overall aim of this study is:

'To develop a benchmarking process for GAA counties to support strategic planning and decision making within an amateur/volunteer-based sport'.

In order to address this aim, four research objectives have been developed in consultation with the Project Steering Group:

1. To explore the factors influencing the GAA sports development landscape and engage with all the relevant stakeholders.
2. To identify and understand on how these stakeholders influence these key factors.
3. To develop a benchmarking tool and process for an amateur based sporting organisation.
4. To make recommendations to the GAA and other stakeholders on the implementation of the benchmarking process.

PART B

METHODOLOGY

Project Aim and Rationale

As highlighted previously, the overall aim of this study was to develop a benchmarking process for GAA counties to support strategic planning and decision making within an amateur / volunteer-based sport. This investigation will lead to the development of a benchmarking tool and process which will allow the GAA to invest in and support provinces and counties to ensure Gaelic games continues to grow and prosper. In this section, a description of the research design, data collection methods, population sample, and analysis procedures undertaken will be discussed and clearly identified. Finally, a summary of the data storage and protection procedures that were maintained throughout the investigation will be explained. To address the project aim, the current study sought to address the 4 research objectives (Table 1):

Table 1: An Outline of the Project Objectives.

| | OBJECTIVE | RATIONALE |
|-----|--|---|
| (A) | To explore the factors influencing the GAA sports development landscape and engage with all the relevant stakeholders. | To identify the key factors that have the potential influence and impact to the development of Gaelic Games at all levels. |
| (B) | To identify and understand on how these stakeholders influence these key factors. | To outline how these key factors are understood and addressed by key stakeholders operating at a national, provincial and county level. |
| (C) | To develop a benchmarking tool and process for an amateur based sporting organisation | To create a 'user-friendly' benchmarking framework and toolkit aimed at supporting both planning, decision making and investment at a national, provincial and county level. |
| (D) | To make recommendations to the GAA and other stakeholders on the implementation of the benchmarking process. | To assist the GAA and other key stakeholders to design, develop and implement a robust benchmarking process aimed at promoting, growing and sustaining Gaelic games in the short, medium and longer-term. |

It is important to state that this study is part of a larger, wider research investigation being undertaken by the GAA who are looking to change the way they fund counties. The GAA have supported the design, implementation, data collection, data sharing and analysis for this MSc dissertation (see Appendix B).

Research Design

One of the main outcomes of this research is to find out and understand how the experiences of the stakeholders can be utilised to inform the development of the benchmarking tool and processes. Therefore, qualitative methods for data collection were central to the research design (i.e., focus groups). The use of such qualitative research methods helped to gain an in-depth understanding of people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions (Pathak, *et al.*, 2013).

Research Philosophy

The study explored many subjective issues rather than those which are objective. Due to the social nature of the environment associated with the study, the researcher utilised an interpretivist-constructive paradigm approach, a cross-sectional study design using qualitative methodologies. This approach was deemed appropriate because it allowed the researcher to discover meaning through the exploration of a phenomenon within its context by interacting with the data (Lynch 2017; Sladdin et al. 2018). The researcher subscribed to an interpretivist paradigm, guided by a relativist ontology (incorporating concepts related to social consensus), and a subjective, interactive epistemology.

Population & Sample

Criterion based sampling was used to select participants based on their prior knowledge, role and involvement in the field being studied (Edwards and Skinner 2009). Participants were members of national, provincial, or county committees or employees with at least 2 years' experience to ensure they had a broad understanding and knowledge of the current environment. A selection of 12 GAA administrators operating at a National, Provincial and County level were invited to participate with an aim of completing three focus group interviews. A copy of the interview schedule and number of participants involved can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: An Outline of the Schedule for the Focus Groups.

| FOCUS GROUP COHORT | DATE | NO. OF PARTICIPANTS |
|---------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| National 1 | Tuesday 19 th July 2022 | 5 |
| Provincial 2 | Thursday 21 st July 2022 | 3 |
| County 3 | Wednesday 17 th August 2022 | 4 |
| TOTAL | n=3 | n=12 |

Data Collection

Once ethical approval was received from the Ulster University Research Ethics Committee data collection commenced. Once the relevant population sample was defined a member of the GAA research team emailed the focus group invitation to the n=12 participants (Appendix C). The GAA were responsible for sending out invitations and links for the study (because of GDPR and being the primary owners of the initial data set). Before commencing the focus groups each respondent consented to participate (Appendix D) and were given a Participant Information Sheet to review (Appendix C). This gave each participant the information that they required to familiarise themselves with the overall project aims and objectives, and an opportunity to confirm their agreement to be involved in this phase of the study. From the confirmed responses, all invitees opted in to participate in the study with all 12 meeting the inclusion criterion. Subsequently, (n=3) focus groups were scheduled at a suitable date and time for the (n=12) participants (see Table 2). The technique of using focus groups is a bridging strategy for scientific research and local knowledge (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) therefore this method was selected as it offers a platform for differing paradigms or worldviews about a particular subject topic (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The focus groups were conducted using the GAA's approved communications system, Microsoft Teams. Choosing to conduct focus group interviews gave an 'open forum' for the attendees to speak openly about their thoughts and views of the current funding model. Dilshad & Latif (2013; pg. 191) stated that focus groups "yield shared understanding and several perspectives of a given topic" and they are known to be one of the most valuable tools for collecting qualitative data.

In conducting each focus group, a brief introduction and background summary was conducted which was followed by an ice-breaker question. Focus group were questions linked to the relevant benchmarking pillars being covered in this part of the study (Appendix F). Therefore, the role of research interviewer was to ask the questions in a certain manner so that all participants felt comfortable and relaxed to give their own detailed personal opinions. creating a positive and relaxed place for the group to openly discuss thoughts and opinions. By attempting to set a calm and casual atmosphere it allowed the participants to engage deeply and speak openly and spontaneously about their own experiences. Probing questions helped to uncover reasons and emotions behind what was said (Martin, 2020) and by asking probing questions it encouraged the participants to elaborate and expand upon their opinions against the stated objectives of the study.

Each focus group conversation was recorded, downloaded from the Teams platform, saved securely on a computer in accordance with ISD guidance. The recorded information was not displayed on any public forums or made available to any third parties. After each session, the recordings were re-listened to, then transcribed verbatim by noting exactly what was said on a word document. Each verbatim transcription was analysed in detail at a further date (see Appendix G).

All focus groups ranged between 52 – 62 minutes in duration, with an average time of 56 minutes. The pre-determined questions asked during the interviews focused on the pillars that were recommended to make up the benchmarking process.

Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse focus group transcriptions. Thematic analysis is a common approach in qualitative research. It is a method of examining and recounting themes from across a set of data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.78) state, *“Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data.”* Inductive and deductive analytic methods were used within a six-phase thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as outlined in Table 3.

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Familiarisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated reading of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and making notes to heighten the understanding of the data. |
| Generation of Initial Themes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating a set of initial themes and linking them to elements of the data set. • Highlighting key meaningful areas to explore in detail. |
| Identification of Themes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). • Analysing each code for comparisons and similarities led to the identification of themes and sub-themes. • Constructing an initial thematic map and framework for the overall research project |
| Reviewing Identified Themes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing themes into a structure in relation to the research question. |
| Refining Themes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refining, defining, and naming of each theme and sub-theme to give clear working patterns and definitions. • Define and refine meant identifying the 'essence' of what each theme was about (Braun & Clarke, 2006). |
| Report Write Up | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The final phase of the data analysis was the writing up of the report which is found in Part C |

Table 3: Six Phase Thematic Analysis Process (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Methodological Rigour

In order to ensure effective qualitative research practices, the eight criteria as proposed by Tracy (2010) (worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence) contributed to the rigour in this study. As the study was undertaken with the support of the GAA, who identified it as an area that might provide the organisation with additional information on development practices, it was considered to be a *worthy topic*. The inclusion of participants from all stages of the review process ensured that the study met the criteria for *rich rigor*. *Sincerity* was a key element throughout the research process whereby the researcher endeavoured to remain unbiased during the interviews so as not to influence the nature of the responses received. Additionally, the recruitment of multiple stakeholders, gaining their experiences ensured that a *credible* research

design was used. It is hoped that the nature of the findings will shine a light on the reality of sport development practices within the GAA, and such findings may *resonate* with the reader through their past or current experiences. This study may also help inform sport development practices generally and future organisational policies and structures specifically, thus the study *significantly contributes* to current literature and applied practice. Appropriate *ethical* procedures were followed at all times. Finally, it was intended that this study would achieve *meaningful coherence*, connecting each stage of the research process to accomplish the intended outcomes.

In the final section, overall findings from the focus group interviews are discussed in the context of the themes and sub-themes that were discovered during the data analysis process. This will lead to recommendations for the finalisation of a benchmarking tool and process that will ensure a detailed but consistent approach to how Gaelic games is funded within all counties.

PART C

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

The primary aim of the current study was to develop a benchmarking tool and process for GAA counties to support strategic planning and decision making within an amateur, volunteer based sport.

This section will now reflect on the findings from the focus group interviews with reference relevant academic literature and the overall research aim and objectives (outlined in Section A: Current Situation). Themes and sub-themes will be highlighted using relevant quotes and a detailed discussion of these results will then follow. The concluding part of this section summarise the key findings and discuss the implications for future research and practice.

Summary of Study Results

Following an in-depth analysis of the data, 3 key themes and 15 sub-themes were identified. These themes and sub-themes are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4 displays the final key themes identified and the relevant associated sub-themes.

| THEMES | SUB-THEMES |
|---------------------|---|
| Retention | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-1. Post Primary schools-2. Administrators and Coaches-3. Post Minor-4. Games Programme-5. Urban / Rural |
| Culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-6. All Inclusive-7. Community Centric-8. Fun Environment-9. Giving to others-10. Sharing best practices |
| Vision and Strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-11. Strategic Plan at Club level-12. Marketing and Fundraising-13. Monitoring and Evaluation-14. Self Sufficient and Self Sustainable-15. Coaching from within clubs |

The three themes were then displayed within a thematic map in the form of a data tree flowchart (Figure 6). A flowchart is a diagrammatic representation that illustrates a

sequence of operations (Lynch, 2021) that gives visual clarity and instant understanding of processes and structures. This data tree clearly outlines and illustrates the relationships and connections between the themes and the sub-themes.

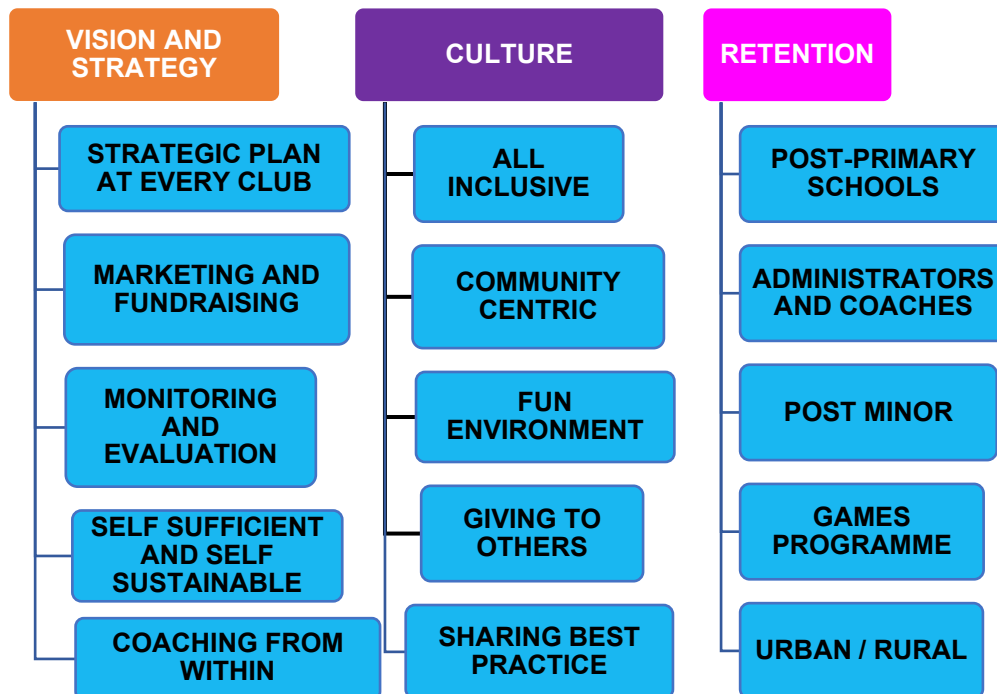


Figure 6: Data Tree Flowchart Displaying Themes and Sub-themes Extracted from Data Set.

Analysis of Results

As detailed at the start of Part B, the objectives of this study were (a) to explore the factors influencing the GAA sports development landscape and engage with all the relevant stakeholders, (b) to identify and understand on how these stakeholders influence these key factors, (c) to develop a benchmarking tool and process for an amateur based sporting organisation and (d) to make recommendations to the GAA and other stakeholders on the implementation of the benchmarking process. Therefore, this next section begins to gain a deeper understanding and insights from the focus groups under the themes and sub themes. While presented here as separate constructs, it is accepted that there may be significant interrelationship between themes/sub-themes.

1. VISION AND STRATEGY

Vision and Strategy is the first that will be discussed. There is a strategic plan in place at National level which will direction and guide the association over the next five years (GAA, 2021). It poses the question of how beneficial it would be to have a plan in place across all counties and clubs which is complementary of the document and ensures that clubs and counties rise by lifting each other. This element has 5 sub-themes (see Figure 7):

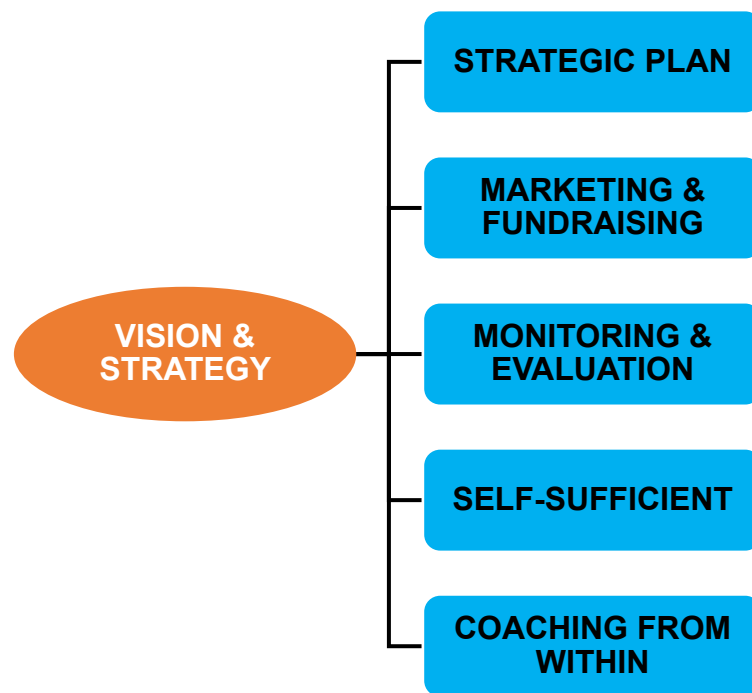


Figure 7: The ‘Vision & Strategy’ Theme & Sub-themes

1.1 Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan relates to the journey of travel to ensure the club and counties continue to thrive, understanding the challenges they may face in the coming years. There is a need to ensure the plan is in place and the people are committed to all aspects of the plan. We have seen examples in clubs like Cuala who have really embraced their Strategic Plan and they are certainly reaping the rewards across both codes on the back of it. The participants highlighted the importance of alignment to the overall strategic plan while building your own version locally:

“We have a rationale; we have a logic and I think we have a lot of us and there’s been a lot of participation in producing the strategic plan. So I think whatever we do it must be aligned to our objectives in the strategic plan.” (P1)

A central pillar within those strategic plans are the significant importance of coaching and games development. Good coaching supported by a strong games programme were viewed as being central to its overall success:

“And the big thing for me is kind of the vision for coaching and games development. You know where we see this part of the association in 5 years’ time or 10 years’ time.” (P4)

Strategic planning aims to define a direction for the sports organisation, outlining the key outputs and outcomes to be achieved over a given time period. There is evidence that strategic planning has been embraced in some locations and one strong advantage of introducing a ‘new investment model’ is to support this level of planning across units with the intention of using it as tool for (1) understanding challenges, (2) setting strategic goal and priorities, and (3) obtaining ‘buy in’ from key stakeholders [e.g., members, clubs, schools, volunteers, partners, funders etc.].

1.2 Marketing and Fundraising

Marketing and Fundraising is associated with clubs and counties being able to raise funds to ensure the running of the club. Finance and Governance has improved greatly over the last number of years but there was a view that more guidance around the marketing and fundraising strategy should be provided centrally to the counties:

“The one that strikes me as missing is the whole area of marketing and fundraising and all that which is actually very important. So while you are getting money maybe for this you also need to better generate your own money and that is under finance.” (P10)

Traditionally, it has been a competence of clubs and counties to develop their own plans to support the financial plan to run the clubs’ activities, however a need to get more inputs from both Provincial and National level rather than doing it in isolation was discussed:

“With marketing at the moment everybody’s going off on their own. There needs to be a massive resource supplied to counties to develop their own marketing areas because they are very vulnerable unless they are fundraising and just leaving it up to the county to do a house draw that’s not good enough at all.” (P10)

The Association overall has provided facilities right across the country from their flagship stadium in Croke Park right down to the pitches, dressing rooms and wall balls sprinkled right across the country. The strong view is if this is to be maintained it needs greater support and a more collaborative approach.

1.3 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation relates to the importance of sharing information that is available centrally and locally around key metrics and then tracking and evaluating these numbers to ensure the actions and inputs are delivering the required outputs. There is great work being done at national level in trying to get mastery of the detail around the key metrics that deliver success which is far more beneficial than just looking at the outputs. There are many in process measures that would really help focus the counties and going after the actions that will make the difference going forward because the sense is that they are not sure on progress:

“And they’re not clear (the counties) on how they are doing. So, I think the assessment and evaluation for them is going to be critical. When you can go to counties with concrete and tangible statistics or whatever you know and see the progress, the participation rates, the dropout rates, the recruitment rates. How are you sustaining and retaining people. I think it’s going to be a great benefit to the counties.” (P1)

Equally, there is significant work in getting this data together, sharing it with clubs, counties, and provinces and monitoring progress to ensure the critical measures to determine the success of the club is moving at the right pace in the right direction:

“If we get our systems right, if we get to consistently gather the data through our workforce from the clubs annually, I think we will be in a much better position to define what participation and there might be many different categories of participation” (P5)

“We have the data, and we are doing a hell of a job of pulling it all together. We need to validate that, and I think when we get out to counties with the data that we have, I think we’ll blow some of their minds away” (P5)

One specific aspect that needs to be tracked as part of the overall monitoring is the club coach. Coaching and especially good quality coaching is seen as the critical enabler to retaining players and growing participation. The view is that this information needs to be monitored closely:

“So, I think gauging the level of active qualified and active coaches within the clubs and within the counties is definitely a sort of a metric that we need to go after.” (P3)

1.4 Self-sufficient and self-sustainable

Self-sufficiency and self-sustainability are key elements to how the Association looks to ensure that clubs are set up to run all aspects of their activity within their own resources and facilities. Having more clubs can take control of their own future provides for the overall health and longevity of Gaelic Games into the future. The GAA has a proud tradition and history; however, participants identified the changing demographics and other challenges across society:

“The very big one for me and I think its expressed nationally is that my Vision for the GAA is that every unit within the GAA would be self-sufficient and self-sustainable.” (P1)

“And what would better support, better upskilling, better developments look like to help the clubs, the club coaching officers, the coaches to be self-sufficient and sustainable.” (P3)

The importance of enabling clubs to look after themselves to ensure they have the facilities to cater for all teams, the coaches to prepare their teams and teach the skills, the participation levels to make up their teams overseen by strong people in administration to run the club to a standard they can all be proud of was a clear outcome from the data.

1.5 Coaching from Within

Coaching from within is related to self-sufficiency but there has been a shift in recent years around coaches from other clubs managing and getting involved with teams and being remunerated for their work. This was originally part of the inter county scene, but it is now widespread across all counties in both codes. This leads to large costs in team preparation and has the potential to spiral out of control:

“One of the issues I think we have, and I think it’s probably everyone has it, is this mercenary coach who goes around and he’s actually basically generating an income from coaching 3 clubs a week.” (P10)

The ambition for the Association is that clubs would build their own coaches internally and they would support the club teams and very much line up with the volunteer as coach model:

“Certainly the model that the lads have been trying to promote over the years and we still want to promote is clubs having their own coaches and strengthening in particular the volunteer coach model.” (P6)

“We have developed a cottage industry outside for coach development for coaches who now suddenly if they’ve become quite good, they’ll just go down the road to the neighbouring club and get paid to do the job.” (P7)

This outside support of teams originally surfaced in the inter county game with managers and coaches moving across counties. It has now become somewhat the new normal in most clubs within counties and clubs are left to make their own decisions in this regard currently. The views from participants was a move back to where clubs in the main could build their coaching from within and support themselves would be a better model and links to being self-sufficient and self-sustainable.

2. CULTURE

The term 'Culture' characterises values, attitudes, and beliefs towards sport. In a GAA context, culture is related to the environment that exists in clubs and counties. This is closely linked to the leadership at all levels. This element had 5 sub-themes (see Figure 8):

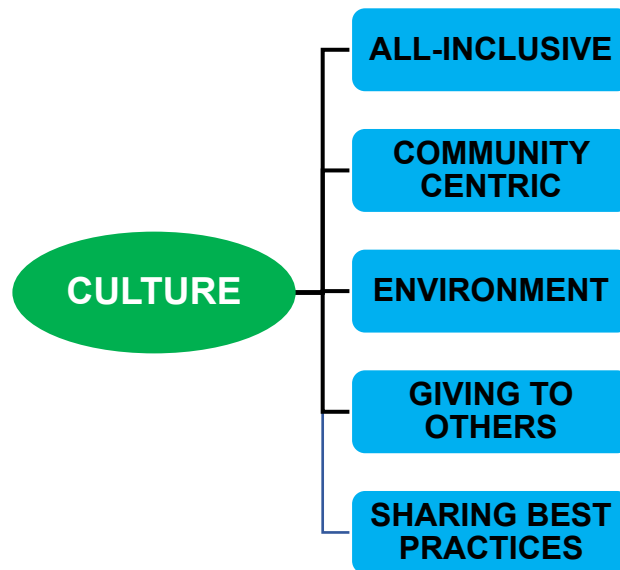


Figure 8: The 'Culture' Theme & Sub-themes

2.1 All-Inclusive

All-Inclusive relates to the importance of connecting people from all different backgrounds to the overall ethos of the club. The challenge facing the GAA is how it attracts and retains people and makes them feel a part of it and play an active and engaged role in its growth and success in the short, medium and longer-term. This was highlighted as a real opportunity for increasing levels of engaged and involvement in Gaelic games:

“The new Irish is the trick and how do you get the new Irish because there’s a lot of them willing to come on board. How do you get the people who are coming up there and wanted to get involved and how do you get a pathway into the club because they feel outside the group.” (P9)

“I think there’s a body of work needed around that as well in terms of trying to develop something around that to make it more inclusive and to make it more attractive for people who mightn’t necessarily have a GAA background but would like to become involved in some capacity.” (P8)

“There’s also clubs that are driving both codes, I think that’s important, and we shouldn’t dismiss then the one club model where you know that’s what we’re about, goes back to our values as well. Everybody’s working together and I think culturally they’re the things we need to be considering too.” (P5)

Self-Determination Theory represents a broad framework for studying motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The concept of relatedness speaks to the need of the individual to experience connection, belonging and attachment to others. In identifying these issues participants highlighted the importance of creating an all-inclusive culture in clubs which makes it easy for people to take part in planned activities. However, there will need to be a clear vision and strategy if clubs are seen to be fully inclusive by the wider community.

2.2 Community Centric

Community Centric is linking the work being carried by thousands of GAA clubs to promote and develop Gaelic games across island of Ireland, UK and beyond. When the club is operating to a high standard it becomes a hub for community activity and it epitomises everything good in the GAA. Walkways to fundraising activities to social gatherings are all part and parcel of the community centric club and makes a real difference in so many people’s lives. The importance of having strong values and community links was highlighted with passion by the participants:

“It’s about values. You look at the clubs that have strong embedded values. So, honesty and integrity and trust, belief in themselves. You can kind of pick out the rural clubs who really band together and pull together and they drive on win, lose or draw. That’s a great example of what it means and what the association means.” (P7)

“The GAA at its best was probably seen during Covid particularly down here when a lot of community initiatives etc were led by the GAA. In other words the whole social side of the GAA and the GAA attracting volunteers to do social jobs has certainly waned in the last 2 or 3 years. The successful GAA clubs in the next 10 years are going to be as successful in the social side of things as on the field.” (P12)

The importance of being at the 'centre' of the community is a key strength and it is important to note that this is one of the guiding principles included within the new Gaelic Games Player Pathway (GAA, 2021). While there is still a lack of knowledge of the social processes that occur in sports clubs there is evidence that those clubs who put the individual at the centre of the community and pay attention to their needs and interests and retain participants through their sporting lives (Lindgren et al., 2017). Covid has taken its toll on many communities over the last two years or more, and the view of the participants was that strong community-based clubs and/or projects are important. . The role of the volunteer (e.g., coach, administrator, official) is central to this and requires ongoing focus within any new investment model developed.

2.3 Environment

Environment refers to the social connectedness and conditions created within the club (Lindgren et al., 2017). Elements such as friends and fellowship, emotional support and security, as well as more tangible characteristics such as costs and facilities, have been shown to enhance such connectedness and conditions. Leadership, strategy, and people (e.g., players, administrators and coaches) are all key factors in creating optimum environments. The importance of this theme was clearly expressed by focus group participants:

“If you take Patricks one from Crokes I would say they were probably the leaders in terms of coaches. I look at Peters club in Milltown, I see how they have embraced the new demographic population. Liams club Austin Stacks are probably one of those clubs that lead in terms of the social events.” (P11)

It was very evident those clubs with strong environments stood out. Participants identified that the challenge was to develop this type of environment across all clubs.

“If you get the culture right in the club and you're there. Any organisation that has a strong culture has a huge opportunity of being successful. And the people that don't it eats up your club. If you don't have your culture right it eats your club up.” (P7)

2.4 Giving to others

Giving to others relates to the behaviours shown by people over many years where they give willingly of their time and energy to the club and everything to do with the club. The GAA is completely reliant on the volunteer ethos that has always existed and this is something that is admired by many others sporting organisations across on the island of Ireland, UK and beyond (Connelly, 2015). . The gift of giving needs to remain at the heart of the club and evident in the people that continue this rich tradition which has stood the association so well over the years. The participants stressed the importance of continuing to volunteer [i.e. give back] of their club and community:

“My era has come from a period where we gave to the game. This is about what you give to yourself and how you develop yourself, and how you develop the community and what you give to the community and what you get out of it, out of giving. This is a hobby that we all participate in, and we love it. I just think that bit of culture needs to be revisited you know.” (P1)

Clubs all across the country did an incredible job in their communities during covid and the importance of building on the “Covid Spirit” and continuing to give to communities was viewed as being important:

“The clubs that are the best in keeping volunteers are the ones that have managed to continue in the Covid spirit, if you want to call it that. I can name them but they’re there, the Slaughtneils and many others in our own place.” (P12)

There are clubs who have built a culture of giving both in the club and the community which has them excelling both on and off the pitch. It sets them up to be successful in all aspects on and off the pitch. The opportunity is to multiply this impact across all clubs going forward.

2.5 Sharing Best Practice

Sharing best practice relates to the opportunity to recognise and learn from the practice of others. The Association has many examples of successful practice that can be highlighted and used to shape the work of others.. For example, there are several successful urban (e.g., Kilmacud Crokes, Dublin) and rural (Slaughneil, Derry) clubs that could be reviewed/evaluated to identify ingredients of success and this knowledge could be documented and shared with others:

“I know we’re trying to maybe look at best practices and replicating that is a good idea but also it’s how can you influence change. There’s an awful lot of counties who literally 50 years on are doing exactly the same thing. It’s almost the definition of madness.” (P7)

“But I think clubs at times don’t realise what’s available to them in terms of supports and all of that and things like club development programmes, club planning coach development, all of that is very important.” (P6)

“But again like everything else, can you do the best practice across, can you replicate certain things that are, that would be good in certain counties that you could move to other counties. I think there needs to be a sharing of information.” (P7)

Participant feedback would suggest that there is scope to make better use of the supports available through National and Provincial councils that could enhance the club-based environments and deliver measurable improvements.

3. RETENTION

The 'Retention' theme came through very strong in all of the focus groups. In total, five sub themes were noted. This theme refers to the ongoing challenge of retaining players from child to youth and youth to adult levels and it is clear that no one has consistently delivered in this area. Equally, participants discussed the challenge of recruiting and retaining people in administration roles as the roles are getting more demanding which is making it a challenge to get people to volunteer. The impact of the reduction in population in rural communities is also becoming a real challenge and counties are going to have to rethink how to get optimum retention across urban and rural areas.

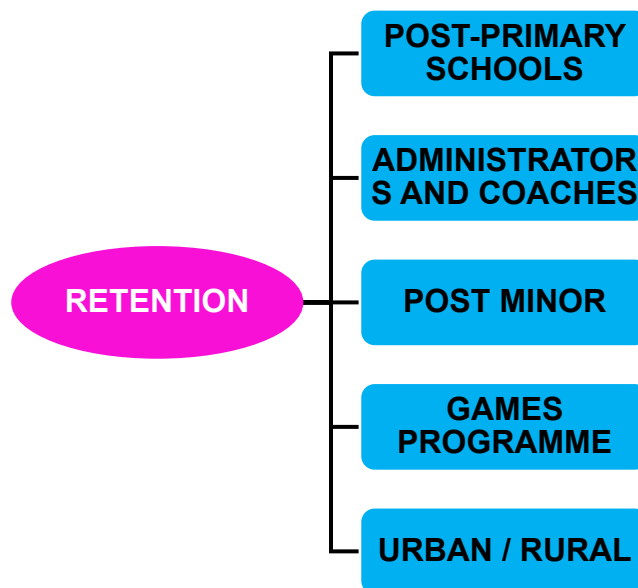


Figure 9: The 'Retention' Theme & Sub-themes

3.1 Post-Primary Schools

Post-Primary schools remain a significant challenge in relation to retaining Gaelic Games players into adult competitions and keeping them engaged in Gaelic games. Responses indicated that participants were aware that retention within post-primary schools was a major concern, as reflected by several participants:

“A huge participation blackspot is post-primary schools. You go into second level and if you don't make the Flannans first team you don't play hurling for the next five years you know and you're hoping that somebody picks you up inside the club and plays you.” (P7)

“I think the key for us is to focus on retention and try and transition as many players from child to youth and then youth to adult.” (P5)

It was interesting to note that participants felt that the recruitment below the teenage years was a positive part of the player pathway, supplemented by an adequate games programme.

“There is a huge games programme up until probably 11 years of age. After that the funnel gets a little bit narrower. So you know for us have we got an influential part in terms of being able to guide counties around youth age grade programmes looking at their numbers coming out of go games and going into the teenage years. And if we have what are we able to influence. Ultimately, we all want to be moving in the same direction and ultimately we all want to be hanging on to our players and retaining them in the system.” (P4)

Participants reported that players who moved into the second level system were now being exposed to a more competitive environment than they had previously encountered, and that this new environment wasn't as conducive to larger playing numbers:

“It's very much the local school here in Tralee the CBS you could have 100 to 130 boys in school playing first year blitzes organised by Kerry Coaching and games and then once they get into Munster competitions and second year most schools are going down to one team.” (P11)

Research undertaken by Green (2005) notes that sport programmes or other opportunities to participate does not guarantee that a player will continue in their sport. The player must find value in their participation, such as 'exhilaration', 'social interaction', 'skill development' and 'team affiliation and fitness' as key motivators for participation (Cox, 2002). Less significant are external rewards, such as winning trophies or prizes (Green, 2005).

3.2 Administrators and Coaches

Administrators and Coaches are critical parts of the system if Gaelic Games are to continue to prosper in all counties. When the participants spoke about areas where the game was doing well and prospering the areas that came up more often than not

was very good people running the clubs administratively, and really good coaches who are developing players at all grades. The success of the model relies heavily on the volunteer ethos that exists in taking up these roles and the will from volunteers to improve their performance.

“I think coach development plays a huge part in the that the good coaches with the right environment with the right behaviours will drive that principled approach around trying to retain as many players as possible and bring them through the system.” (P5)

“Wouldn't it be great if we were able to decide per year or per annum, per 6 months how many coaches we recruited, how many we trained and in time how many we retained. I just think that would be a very valuable exercise and as a long-term project we can track our progress.” (P1)

This view is supported by a range of researchers who suggest that volunteers carry out essential roles in sport organisations ranging from coaching local sport teams to serving on boards of directors for NGBs with a substantial body of research focused on individual-level factors for sport volunteers including motivations, antecedents, benefits, recruitment and retention (Legg & Karner, 2021). However, there was a sense that it is getting harder to fill these positions in numerous sporting organisations/clubs across the counties:

“But we are also very poor at retaining anybody. There's very little acknowledgement and respect shown. It might be hidden but very rarely in the GAA are you ever thanked for doing a good job.” (P7)

“Like the only fear for me there and this is something that is always recurring is if you look at any club you're very dependent on maybe a dozen people like it's a very narrow base. I think a lot of these clubs are very dependent on a small cohort of people and I notice as secretary that the amount of turnover of officers you know, particularly chair and secretaries is actually high, whereas before it was very stable.” (P10)

The reason for leaving coaching positions can be described as voluntary or involuntary, and personal or organisational (Cuskelly and Auld, 2000; Scatling and Lackey, 2005). For example, Coleman (2002) reported that the need to satisfy family and other commitments, the excessive time demands, poor administration (or lack of administrative support), or lack of remuneration contributed to the withdrawal of coaches. Further, O'Connor and Bennie (2006) describe how non-sporting influences were often stronger factors in coaches dropping out of sport. This finding was strongly

supported by the 2021 Coaching and Coach Education in Gaelic Games Research which revealed that coaches committed significant time to their coaching and that when considering their future coaching intentions it was primarily time constraints, family and work that were identified as limiting factors (GAA, 2021).

3.3 Post Minor

Post Minor relates to the players who have moved from the under 17 age grade and are now eligible to play at an U20, Junior, Intermediate and Senior level within their county. Some clubs depending on playing numbers might have teams in all four grades while others may have two or more. The GAA remains challenged in ensuring they have an adequate number and schedule of games for these players. Recent changes in the age grade categories introduced by the GAA in 2017 were seen as positive development for retention in the youth age groups:

“I do believe the U17 detaching from the adult game, like that was so obvious like you know because that was a disaster for minors, for u18’s like they were playing a game one week, and they couldn’t play them for another four weeks because their adult game had them tied up.” (P10)

“From 17 up to maybe 21, maybe the less formal the thing is the better. You need the clubs, and you give them enough room to manage it themselves. In other words you create a competition that’s flexible enough that there’s room for everyone you know, and the key then is the buy in from the club. So you had your 18-year-old your 19-year-olds but you also maybe 35-year-old to make up the numbers” (P10)

Recent evidence has revealed that participation in formal sport development programmes decreases as people get older (age) and by gender (Sport Ireland, 2019; Eimi et al., 2013). As a consequence, a ‘call to action’ has been made to develop strategies for the retention of sport participants aged 15+ (Eime et al. 2015).

3.4 Games Programme

The Games Programme operated within a county was spoken about across all the focus groups and there is a real sense the GAA are making great strides in this area

and the club player is getting access to more games. The recent introduction of a split season between Club and Inter County participation is bringing certainty to the fixtures calendar and the straight knockout format that would have existed previously has eroded in all counties. The challenge is to ensure that players across both codes and in all counties are getting ample games which encourages them to stay involved and enjoy their season, as described by several participants:

“And then key to that for me is then the games programme within the club that is satisfying the needs of all age groups from underage right up to adult.” (P2)

“The first thing I would prioritize is games. And I think that’s the first thing that we need to do an audit on in every county. But I think that to me would be a huge bonus if our coaching officer in our counties, our coaching officer in the clubs had a crystal-clear picture of the games programme in their region, in their vicinity in their county.” (P1)

“That guy might have played a total of four county league games and his games window might have been from Mid-February to Mid-April. Now that its fully decoupled all those guys are getting a huge games programme, like I think an average guy from a poor performing team will still end up with 14 games this year which is fantastic.” (P11)

Opportunities to participate in sport would appear to be one of the key factors that would lead to maintained participation in sport. While organisational changes in recent years have been described by the participants as important in this regard, feedback suggests that there remain outstanding areas of change in this regard.

3.5 Urban-Rural

Urban-Rural is the final sub theme linked to retention, and it relates to the shift we are seeing from rural areas where historically there was a strong GAA ethos, to urban areas where recruitment and retention are already challenged due to the sheer volume of people. The encouraging thing is that there have been pockets of brilliance in both rural and urban clubs but there is a journey to travel to deliver consistency in approach and outcomes, as discussed:

“So we have huge centres of population and very few people want to take the bull by the horns and say let’s create new clubs, let’s create new models, let’s amalgamate where we have to in the rural areas, because that’s thorny.” (P7)

“How do we support, and you know, new clubs and even new grounds in big urban areas like that. We’ll have to look at how we can support some of those things taking off the ground because in the big open areas one of the problems they have is access to facilities.” (P6)

While studies have found that individual factors such as age, education, and household income are essential in explaining sport participation (e.g. Hovemann & Wicker, 2009; Scheerder et al., 2005), the impact of the urban/rural divide has largely been absent from the literature. Data from the Netherlands indicated higher rates of weekly sport participation in rural areas than in urban areas, contradicting EU wide research pointing to, that points to lower sporting activity levels for rural than for urban subjects (Van Tuyckom, 2011). This suggests that it is not simply a rural/urban divide and that the influence of both personal factors (e.g., age) and location (e.g., facilities) might be involved. In the context of the GAA, it appears that the participants were most concerned with the impact of rural depopulation on rural clubs. Equally, those participants concerned with urbanisation spoke of the difficulty of developing new clubs in such areas, suggesting that a newer model of sport participation in Gaelic games might be investigated in urban areas.

DISCUSSION

The views and opinions that were generated using the three focus group interviews highlighted that there was a significant appetite for transformational change at all levels within the Association. There is an appreciation that there is some good practice across many clubs and counties, but there is an opportunity to share and learn from this. The following sections will address the four project objectives:

(A) To explore the factors influencing the GAA sports development landscape and engage with the relevant stakeholders.

This first objective was to understand the key factors influencing the sports development landscape by seeking the inputs from people across all levels of the Association. The inputs from the 3 focus groups were clear and concise. The participants recognised the value and impact of collective efforts to promote and develop Gaelic games at all levels; however they also acknowledged the fact transformational change is required within the Association in order to create an effective sports development system (De Bosscher et al., 2015). From the data analysed, two key points are noteworthy (1) there is a lack of consistency around the values, behaviours, attitudes of people tasked with developing Gaelic games and this is something that needs to be addressed; (2) (the GAA's current investment (i.e., funding) model, which uses two criteria (a) uniform baseline funding to support GAA personnel and projects, and (b) strategic funding to support the planning and implementation of 'special projects' , is not considered to be 'fit for purpose' and that a new investment model is required to take into account the 'specific needs' identified by units (Clunes, et al., 2015). It was also recommended that funding awarded to provinces and counties using the new investment model should be allocated using an open, fair, and transparent process.

(B) To identify and understand how these stakeholders influence these key factors.

Participants (n=12) involved in the planned focus group interviews were heavily involved with the GAA and had significant knowledge and experience of promoting and developing Gaelic games as influencers and decision makers operating at a National, Provincial and County level. From the data analysed, two key points are noteworthy (1) a co-design approach should be taken by the GAA to ensure that key stakeholders are fully engaged and involved in the benchmarking process. This is viewed as central, not only to the development of a provincial or county strategic plan but also to its resourcing and implementation, and (2) a *360-degree* view should be taken when creating and consulting on the development of a strategic plan. Again, this is viewed as an important aspect of the strategic planning process as it will enable all key stakeholders (e.g, GAA, County Boards, Provincial Councils, Commercial Sponsors etc.) the opportunity to fully assess and address the priorities and needs identified.

(C) To develop a benchmarking process for an amateur based sport.

The third objective was to commence the work on developing a benchmarking process that would be unique to the GAA. Having reviewed several models, it was decided that the “Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Success” (SPLISS) (De Bosscher, et al. 2006) would be the foundational model. The original SPLISS model was composed of 9 pillars. Based on the data generated and the feedback from the participants, it was decided to make some adjustments to the model, to ensure that it would be adaptable for the Gaelic games context. In doing so, it was decided to merge some pillars (as outlined in Table 5 below):

Table 5: Comparison of SPLISS versus GAA Pillars

| <i>SPLISS MODEL</i> | <i>ADAPTED MODEL FOR GAELIC GAMES</i> |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Financial Support | Governance and Financial support |
| Governance and Organisational Support | Participation |
| Participation | Talent Development |
| Talent Development | Elite Performance |
| Post Career and Athletic Career Support | Facilities and Infrastructure |
| Training Facilities | Volunteer Development |
| Coaching and Coach Development | Games Programme |
| (Inter)National Competition | |
| Research and Innovation | |

In making these recommendations, it is recognised that the identification of the critical success factors sub-ordinate to each pillar is key. Ensuring that the benchmarking tool and process was bespoke to Gaelic games – though evidence informed - was considered to be important to the participants.

(D) To make recommendations to the GAA and other stakeholders on the implementation of the benchmarking process.

The final objective was to make recommendations to the GAA and other stakeholders on the implementation of a new benchmarking process that could be used into the future. Participants displayed a sense of anticipation on the impact such a model could have on the growth and development of Gaelic games. There was a strong view in favour of change. The opportunity to engage directly with stakeholders was emphasised, with participants discussing the need to ‘bring everyone on the journey’. Thus, it is recommended that the benchmarking process be completed with by a dedicated team of personnel at National, Provincial, and County level. This will both ensure consistency of approach and also that the ‘voice’ of the key stakeholders is heard.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

There were many positives to be taken from the project, it is important to look at ways in which the research could be improved on, and lessons learned going forward which I have included below:

- **Research Design** – This study was conducted using a cross sectional focus group approach. While this approach provided valuable information and allowed an opportunity for participants to discuss the topics of interest, a longitudinal rather than cross sectional approach, involving multiple interviews or focus groups might have elicited further insights. Equally, employing other data generation methodologies, such as participation observation for example, might have allowed researchers to gather further information on the sport development processes and policies in place within Gaelic games, which would have formed the basis of further discussion.
- **Technology** – The use of virtual or conferencing technology to support focus group interviews has been discussed previously in the research (e.g., Tunnery and Pocknee, 2005). Relying on technology in data collection may be fraught with difficulty, and in one focus group internet connection issues impacted the MS Teams online connection. For example, one participant had to drop off and reconnect. Face-to-face, rather than virtual focus groups removes such technical challenges. Equally, poor signal quality at times for some participants resulted in them having to have their camera off for part of the session, impacting on their contributions. Such issues reflect the ‘messy’ reality of conducting research
- **Sampling** – Purposive sampling methods were employed in this study. The outcome of this was that 12 participants in this study were recruited, all of whom were in administrative roles within the GAA. The homogeneity of the sample is acknowledged, however, recruiting from a wider pool of participants might have provided additional inputs to this study.

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Research in the sport development domain is increasing, and the ability to engage directly with sport development practitioners was a significant positive factor in this

study. Beyond addressing some of the limitations discussed above, further research in this area is warranted.

1. From Theory to Practice

While this research aimed to develop a benchmarking tool and process for Gaelic games, further research aimed at the implementation of such tools is recommended. Such research would highlight the impact of conducting a benchmarking process on sport developers, their practices, attitudes, and emotions experienced.

2. Alternative Contexts

While Gaelic games is a significant sporting organisation within Ireland, there is merit in expanding research into the effectiveness of sport development systems in other sporting contexts. As outlined in Section A, much research has been conducted in professional or high-performance sport. Additional focus on amateur sport is both justified and needed.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the implications for practice, The policy recommendations are identified below:

1. Strengthen the “Heartbeat” of every community: The GAA has played a central role in sport development since its formation in 1884 *The reality is that the simplicity of life has changed* dramatically over the years and young people are faced with much more challenging environments than what people were exposed to previously. The importance of being the central hub and heartbeat of communities was never as important. There is an opportunity to create a seismic shift in terms of retaining people at all ages both on and off the pitch but especially from youth to adult. There is no better place to learn valuable life skills and be part of something greater than yourself that in your local GAA club. Skill or success is not linked to your background and dedication plus hard work will always come to the top. Life choices are positively influenced, and the training environment keeps you focussed on the right things and behaviours lessening the risk of poor behaviours and damaging decisions in the long

term. This can have a massive impact on our youth and on our country, so we have a duty of care to the next generation to grab this and made meaningful gains in the retain of our people from youth to adult as players, coaches or administrators.

2. **Sharing of best practices:** While this research has focussed on the development of a benchmarking tool and process in Gaelic games, there are possibilities for the sharing of best practice, in terms of the tool and process themselves, but also utilising GAA units as case studies both within and without the GAA. Such lessons can be shared to the relevant stakeholders / counties for reapplication. By implementing a consistent and detailed approach towards the assessment of sport development across all counties, there will be in turn improved performance under each of the pillars.

3. **Shared with other sports:** There are significant opportunities for other sporting bodies in Ireland that arise from this research. Ensuring the health of sport NGB's will provide a firm footing for the continued development of sport participation, talent, and elite programmes. The continued growth and development of all sports provides additional opportunities for sports participation across the lifespan. The opportunity for the island of Ireland to remove any silo approach and put our youth at the centre of the discussion with the sports they decide to play all around them to choose the one they love and enjoy.

IMPACT ON THE RESEARCHER

While conducting research can be both challenging and time consuming, this research process has been an excellent experience in terms of my own personal development. Having the opportunity to contribute to a process that can make an impact to Gaelic Games and the people within the GAA in the years to come has been very rewarding. The implementation of a process that supports clubs and counties to continue to flourish long into the future will require change and leadership. This tool provides the structure and the funding model that may follow will ensure that the criticism of previous models will be both heard and impactful. The GAA has played a significant

part in a changing world over the last 138 years and there is an opportunity to maintain that proud history and tradition into the future.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research project aimed to develop a benchmarking tool and process for the assessment of sport development, using the Gaelic Athletic Association as the context. While many sport development frameworks exist, the previous focus on high performance and professional sports resulted in a gap in the literature towards amateur and volunteer sport. The data generated in this study provided an opportunity to adapt existing models in a context specific manner. As a result, the GAA has access to a benchmarking tool and process which can be used to assess the development of Gaelic games at County level.

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APPENDICES

- Appendix A: The Gaelic Games Player Pathway
- Appendix B: Support Letter from the GAA
- Appendix C : Participant Information Sheet
- Appendix D : Sample Consent Form
- Appendix E: Semi-structured interview questions
- Appendix F: Focus Group Questions
- Appendix G: Example Copy of a Focus Group Transcript

APPENDIX A

GAELIC GAMES PLAYER PATHWAY

FOUNDATION
PARTICIPATION
& ACTIVE
LIFESTYLE



**ELITE / HIGH
PERFORMANCE**
ACHIEVING
EXCELLENCE

**TALENT
DEVELOPING
POTENTIAL**



GAA
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Baile Átha Cliath 3
Guthán +353 1 836 3222
Faics +353 1 836 5075
www.gaa.ie

GAA
Croke Park
Dublin 3
Telephone +353 1 836 3222
Fax +353 1 836 5075
www.a.ie



Appendix B – Letter of Support from the GAA

7th June 2022

Re: Benchmarking the Effectiveness of the Sport Development System within the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA): A County Perspective

To whom it may concern,

On behalf of the GAA, I am writing to confirm our support for the research being undertaken by Liam Sheedy as part of the MSc Sports Coaching & Performance programme.

I believe that the work that Liam will undertake in developing and piloting a benchmarking system for amateur, volunteer led sport will prove extremely important to sport in Ireland, and further afield.

If you have any further questions regarding any of the information as contained, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at peter.horgan@gaa.ie.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Peter Horgan'. The signature is written in a cursive style.

Peter Horgan
GAA Strategy, Insights, and Innovation Manager

Appendix C - Participant Information Sheet



Study title:

BENCHMARKING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SPORT DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM WITHIN THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION: A COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

You are being invited to take part in a postgraduate research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you understand what the research is for and what you will be asked to do. Please read the following information and do not hesitate to ask any questions about anything that might not be clear to you. Make sure that you are happy before you decide what to do. Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study will provide a thorough exploration surrounding benchmarking in sport development systems, alongside the investigation of the development of the GAA landscape following the publishing of the new Gaelic Games Player Pathway (GAA, 2021) document. This study will also provide the GAA with a customised benchmarking model that can be assessed and reviewed annually.

The key outcome of this investigation is to develop positive action recommendations of how and what benchmarking process can be established and utilised in the GAA. This study will aim to answer the following research questions:

- Why are you involved in the promotion, development, and delivery of Gaelic games?
- In your opinion, what is the current Gaelic games development landscape like at a national, provincial, and county level?
- What does success look like for you in relation to the promotion, development and delivery of Gaelic games at a national, provincial and county level?
- What do you believe are the key factors that should be considered by relevant stakeholders when looking to promote, develop and deliver of Gaelic games at a national, provincial, and county level?
- What major challenges or obstacles do you believe need to be addressed relevant stakeholders to effectively promote, develop, and deliver Gaelic games at a national, provincial, and county level?
- What do you believe could be done to improve the Gaelic games development landscape at a national, provincial, and county level?

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen for this study as you have replied to the emails and correspondence for recruiting participants. You have been chosen for this study because you satisfy the admission criteria in terms of your gender and your role in the development, promotion and delivery of Gaelic Games.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep. You will also be asked to sign a consent form. If you choose to take part, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without giving a reason.

What do I have to do?

As a participant in this study, you will be required to take part in a Focus Group with the research student undertaking the project. This will take place online or face to face depending on availability, at a time and date convenient to you in order to complete a semi structured focus group interview. You will be asked a series of questions about the subject matter of this project. This will last between 30-60 mins approximately and the interview will be recorded to ensure there is an accurate account of your views. Once completed, that is your final involvement in the project. If there is any difficulty with the transcript of the interview, or clarification on your comments is required, the researcher (student) may contact you via email to clarify the issue.

Risks and/or disadvantages?

There are no risks or disadvantages associated with participation in this research beyond those in everyday life.

If, during the course of the interview you experience emotional upset and feel that you would benefit from follow-up support from a specialist service, we recommend you contact your local GP.

Interviews will take place according to the Ulster University Standard Operating Procedures for minimising COVID transmission whilst conducting face-to-face research in the community. The following mitigations will be applied.

Where the organisation or premises being visited has its own risk assessment in place, this will always be followed.

Researchers will contact participants in advance of meetings to confirm arrangements around COVID mitigations and guidance (mask wearing; COVID status; ventilation requirements for meeting venue). Visits will be conducted only if the participant is in agreement with all mitigations.

Researchers will not undertake any research appointments if they or participants display, any COVID-related symptoms (a fever, a new continuous cough, a loss of smell or taste and other identified potential symptoms) or have been identified as a close contact of a positive person and are required to self-isolate. If you are experiencing any COVID symptoms, please inform the student researcher prior to the meeting.

Researchers will, when possible, travel to/from the meeting site directly home; Where possible, researchers will avoid congregating in common areas; If entering common areas is essential, social distancing (>2m) will be maintained and face coverings worn. Researchers have been strongly encouraged to download THE STOPCOVIDNI APP at <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/stopcovid-ni-contact-tracing-app>

Participants will be informed how long the data collection will take, the required social distancing where possible, and that face coverings in enclosed offices will be worn at all times during the visit. They will also minimise time taken to conduct the interview.

Where a visit must take place indoors, windows should be open, and spaces kept ventilated throughout the visit if possible. Interviews should occur in a large space if possible, and if possible sitting side by side instead of facing the participant and maintain social distance.

Hand sanitiser will be used by researchers before and after each visit and researchers will be encouraged to make use of the testing programmes on campus available on a regular basis to help manage the spread of infection.

Where focus groups are used, size should be kept to the minimum and large; well ventilated spaces which permit social distancing and managed access, and egress should be used; contact with surfaces should be minimised; the researcher will make hand sanitiser available.

Are there any possible benefits in taking part?

By taking part in this study, you are potentially helping researchers identify the optimum benchmarking process in how we grow our Gaelic games and also it will help contribute strongly to the future development of programmes within each county.

What if new information becomes available?

If new information becomes available during the course of the study, you will be kept informed, and any options or requests/requirements will be fully explained. New information could result in termination of the study, withdrawal of certain participants and/or modification of the study.

What happens when the study ends?

Once the study has ended, you will no longer be required as a participant. If you have any questions or queries regarding the study once it is completed, or if you are interested in finding out the outcome of the study then do not hesitate to ask the researchers involved.

What if something goes wrong?

Although very unlikely, in the event that something goes wrong Ulster University has in place procedures for reporting, investigating, recording and handling adverse events. Participant complaints will be taken seriously and should be made to the Chief Investigator who will take the appropriate course of action.

How will my data be treated and will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All data collected will be treated with the strictest of confidence, according to the principles outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR; 2018). Specifically, data will be securely stored on a password-protected/encrypted device or computer and only the named

researchers will have access to this information. The anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research will be respected. Only necessary/relevant personal information on participants will be kept and this will be held in the strictest of confidence. Anonymous codes will be used to protect the identity of participants, with all identifiable features removed.

General information may be made available upon any Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, in accordance with FOI legislation.

If for any reason interviews have to be conducted online, the research team will follow Ulster University's guidance for conducting online live interviews detailed next.

During online live interviews, participants will be encouraged to be as discreet as possible, not to name others in conversation and to impart as little as possible of a personal, confidential or sensitive nature. A copy of the recorded conversation will be made and saved to a secure place in accordance with guidance from Ulster's Information Services, such as the University's designated cloud storage. The original recording will then be deleted. Only those online technologies that permit recording and permanent server deletion will be used (Zoom). If other mobile applications (such as WhatsApp, offering end-to-end encryption) are used to facilitate online interviews, a separate standalone recording device will be required to make the recording. This file will also be permanently deleted once transferred onto the protected cloud storage server.

Meeting/interview information will not be displayed on public fora or web pages but sent direct to participants and best practice security features available in these platforms will be followed (e.g., <https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/privacy-and-security.html>).

A privacy notice/statement indicating that recording is about to commence and request for any objections from participants will be included at the start of each interview as well as oral confirmation from you that you are happy to proceed.

Privacy notice and sponsor compliance with GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018

Ulster University is the sponsor or managing organisation for this study and we will use information gathered from you and/or your records in order to carry it out. We will act as the data controller, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly, as stipulated in GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Ulster University will keep identifiable information about you for 6 months after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how we look after your information at:

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/about/governance/compliance/gdpr>

As a university we use personal identifying information to conduct research to review and improve people's health, wellbeing and care, the services they use and our understanding of the world in which we live. As a publicly funded organisation, we have to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personal identifying information from people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a study, we will use your data to conduct the research and analyse the information and findings.

We need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate and therefore your rights to access, change or move your information are limited. You should note that if you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal identifying information possible.

Health, care and other human research should serve the public interest, which means that we have to demonstrate that our research serves the interests of society as a whole. We do this by following University and appropriate UK policies and codes of practice. The only people in the University who will have access to your personal identifying information will be those who need to contact you for the study or to carry out audits of the research.

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter. If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are processing your personal data in a way that is not lawful you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Our Data Protection Officer is Clare Jamison; you can contact her at c.jamison@ulster.ac.uk. The research participant privacy notice can be found at: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/about/governance/compliance/gdpr/privacy>

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be used as part of a postgraduate research project. They may lead to further research in the area and/or publication in scientific journals and presentation at conferences. All data will be held for six months after study completion in accordance with the Research Governance Steering Committee.

Who is organising and funding the research?

Ulster University is organising this study.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by the Ethics Filter Committee of the Sport and Exercise Sciences Research Institute, Ulster University. You can contact the University Research Governance section for further details if you wish.

Contact Details:

Chief Investigator – Dr Paul Donnelly

Ulster University, Jordanstown
Email – P.Donnelly@ulster.ac.uk

Student Investigator – Liam Sheedy
Email – SHEEDY-L@ulster.ac.uk

APPENDIX D – CONSENT FORM



Title of Project:

**BENCHMARKING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SPORT DEVELOPMENT
SYSTEM WITHIN THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION: A COUNTY
PERSPECTIVE**

Name of Chief Investigator: Dr. Paul Donnelly

Name of Investigator: Liam Sheedy

Please initial /Tick

• I confirm that I have been given and have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised []

• I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way []

• I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law) and I give permission for the researchers to hold relevant personal data []

• I agree to take part in the above study []

Participant signature: _____ Date:

Investigator's signature: _____ Date:

Appendix E – Semi-Structured Interview Questions



Welcome and thank you for agreeing to be involved in this focus group interview. My name is Liam Sheedy, and I am a MSc student in Ulster University, Jordanstown. In conjunction with the G.A.A I am undertaking a research project on the subject topic of 'Benchmarking the effectiveness of the sport development system within the Gaelic Athletic Association: A county perspective'. What will follow will be a number of questions which will help the research team gain a better understanding of your personal perspective and opinions about the topic. Please feel free to stop me at any time to ask for clarification on any of the proposed questions.

- 1) Why are you involved in the promotion, development, and delivery of Gaelic games?
- 2) In your opinion, what is the current Gaelic games development landscape like at a national, provincial, and county level?
- 3) What does success look like for you in relation to the promotion, development and delivery of Gaelic games at a national, provincial and county level?
- 4) What do you believe are the key factors that should be considered by relevant stakeholders when looking to promote, develop and deliver of Gaelic games at a national, provincial, and county level?
- 5) What major challenges or obstacles do you believe need to be addressed relevant stakeholders to effectively promote, develop, and deliver Gaelic games at a national, provincial, and county level?
- 6) What do you believe could be done to improve the Gaelic games development landscape at a national, provincial, and county level?

Thank you for taking the time to be involved in this discussion today.

Appendix F - Focus Group Interview Questions



INTRODUCTION

Good evening everyone, and thanks to you all for coming onto the call. My name is Liam Sheedy, and I'll be facilitating this session tonight.

As you know the GAA is currently in the process of designing a new investment model to support counties to create an effective sporting system. This information will be used to inform planning and decision making over the next few years.

There are some colleagues from the research group on the call tonight, and their job is to help me with this session, and to listen to the responses.

Tonight, we're talking to key administrators/officials that are involved at County level. The one thing that all of you have in common is that you are all involved with your county, and we want to hear your opinion on the important issues facing counties that are focussed on developing Gaelic games.

Over the next 60 minutes or so we'll work through some of the questions that have come up following detailed conversations with key stakeholders over the last three months. Everyone is encouraged to give your opinion. The session will be recorded so that we can be accurate in what you say, but nothing will be attributed to anyone here. It is completely anonymous. We'll transcribe the text of what is said, and then we'll delete the recording. So, you can be free to be as honest as you can be. If you have an opinion, please feel completely free to express it.

Before we start, please be aware that you are free to leave your camera on, or to turn it off. If you don't know how to turn it off, please ask me. If you leave it on, obviously people can see what is behind you.

If anyone has any other questions on the focus group, or what we propose to do this evening, please feel free to ask me now.

Thanks.

INTRODUCTION (BY THE FACILITATOR)

The format for the next 60 minutes or so is that I'll ask a question, and any of you can respond, you can add to what someone else has said or if your opinion is different, you can disagree. There are no right or wrong answers. If you have never experienced something, or if it doesn't apply to you, please say so. I might ask some follow up questions based on some of the responses that you give. It's a very informal session, and I hope that you feel completely comfortable to speak on your coaching experiences.

OK, I'm going to start the recording now.

QUESTIONS

Icebreaker: To get things started, tell us a bit about yourself, your role and an early GAA memory.

| Question | Probe/Notes |
|--|--|
| What do you see as the key components for the development of Gaelic games? | Can you give a top 3? |
| Some international evidence exists from other sports through the SPLISS model. | PILLAR 1: FINANCIAL SUPPORT PILLAR 2: GOVERNANCE, STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION: PILLAR 3: SPORT PARTICIPATION PILLAR 4: TALENT IDENTIFICATION (ID) AND DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM PILLAR 5: ATHLETIC AND POST CAREER SUPPORT PILLAR 6: TRAINING FACILITIES PILLAR 7: COACHING AND COACH DEVELOPMENT PILLAR 8: (INTER)NATIONAL COMPETITION PILLAR 9: SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGIES |
| If we were to look specifically at some of those points, how important do you consider participation to the development of Gaelic games? | How does this apply in the Club and Primary School setting? What are the key components of participation? Are there particular participation schemes that should be considered? |
| How important do you consider talent identification and development to the development of Gaelic games? | How does this apply in the County, Club and Post Primary School setting? |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <p>What are the key components of talent identification and development?</p> <p>Are there particular programmes that should be considered?</p> |
| How important do you consider the elite phase to the development of Gaelic games? | <p>How does this apply in the County, Club and 3rd level setting?</p> <p>What are the key components of this elite phase?</p> <p>Are there particular programmes that should be considered?</p> |
| How important do you consider coach development to the development of Gaelic games? | <p>How does this apply in the County, Club and educational setting?</p> <p>What are the key components of coach development?</p> <p>Are there particular programmes that should be considered?</p> |
| How important do you consider the games programme to the development of Gaelic games? | <p>How does this apply in the County, Club and educational setting?</p> <p>What are the key components of coach development?</p> <p>Are there particular programmes that should be considered?</p> |
| How important do you consider the governance, organisation, and structure within a County to the development of Gaelic games? | <p>How does this apply in the County, Club and educational setting?</p> <p>What are the key components of coach development?</p> <p>Are there particular programmes that should be considered?</p> |
| What about the Gaelic games culture within a County? How is it possible to describe this, or better understand it? | |
| Are there things that we have not discussed that should be included here? | |

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ok, that is the end of our session. Turn off the recording.

I want to thank you all sincerely for helping with this study. I really think that there is a very significant piece of work being done here that will help us to provide programmes for our players and coaches for the next number of years.

We are working very hard on getting the findings and report from this part of the study out in October 2022. If you have any comments or questions on this part of the study or any other part, you can email me directly and I'll come back to you [Provide an email address].

Again, thanks for taking part, and I hope that you all stay safe and well.

APPENDIX G

County Focus Group 3 – Wed 17th August

Liam Sheedy

It is really important that we get the views at county level and so in terms of the questions, there's no right or wrong answers here. It's really just if you can give us the answers that you feel is relevant to the topic that we're discussing just to allow us to get some insights, because we want to build something that is really valuable and worthwhile here. As I said, there's a lot of people on this call that have significant experience in this area. So, we're really keen to get to get the views on what we've been working on. We are working to try and find the benchmarking process that works best, we've been looking at international standards and what's carried out and we've referenced SPLISS, which is a model that's used in the broader sporting arena throughout the world. So, we're trying to see how we might be able to find our own version of SPLISS for the GAA. In the SPLISS model there was nine pillars whereas in this model we're looking from a GAA perspective, we were looking at seven pillars. Peter you might share the screen just with those seven pillars and give the lads a view of what we're looking at in terms of how we would benchmark your county and every county under each of these headings. So as Peter is putting it up there, the first pillar was governance and financial support. We all know the importance of good governance and making sure we're financially sound. The second pillar was participation and getting as many kids playing and retaining as many people as possible in our games and in our in our administration roles. The third pillar was talent development, and it is important to keep bringing the best of the talent through so that the participation is at the bottom of the triangle and then you have the talent development, and the elite performers are up at the top of the triangle. Elite performance is pillar number 4 obviously a lot of people will go from that talent development pool into the elite performance pool. The fifth pillar there was facilities and infrastructure and we made significant gains over the last number of years in terms of our facilities and infrastructures right across the counties and obviously you've got your own fantastic centre of excellence there in Kerry to prove that. The sixth pillar was volunteer development, and you know we don't have an association or an organization if we don't have volunteers and we continue to develop and grow volunteers at all levels within clubs and counties. And finally for pillar seven what we looked at was the games programme so they were seven pillars that we came on that we felt would be really important that when we look at each on a county-by-county basis, that we would look under each of those pillars and see how each county is doing under those pillars. And obviously that would have a positive impact then the better you were doing, the more that Peter and the team could support in terms of getting central funding to support the work that's going on in those areas. I'm not so sure I I can't see it on my screen. Is it up on screen, Peter?

0:4:5.420 --> 0:4:7.900

Peter Horgan

I logged out and logged back in again its up on the screen now.

0:4:10.520 --> 0:4:37.830

Liam Sheedy

So you can see the seven pillars are there going from governance and finance right across to the games program at the end. So initially I wouldn't mind discussing and I wouldn't mind your thoughts on what you feel about, is there any of those that really resonate strong with you or any particular favourites that you'd have, any of you feel that shouldn't be there or is there any you feel that we're missing any comments on those seven that we spoke about?

0:4:39.630 --> 0:5:9.300

Liam Lynch

Sorry, Liam here Liam, could I just ask one question sort of going back to the very start and maybe I missed the first minute of this, but in terms of we'll say the actual benchmarking process, right? So how does it work and maybe Peter can answer this, how does it work specifically, but more how does it work in terms of us getting funding there afterwards? Is it that we provide a benchmark for ourselves here and then we have to increase and improve on that as we go along. How is this working from our viewpoint going forward is what I'm asking.

0:5:18.30 --> 0:5:40.880

Peter Horgan

Yeah, that's no problem, Liam. That's fair. It's a very fair question and to be honest, maybe that clarity hadn't been there previously when it was discussed at Central Council in various places like that. So, there's no harm in the question at all. The intention is that each county would do the benchmarking process themselves as an internal process, supported by us in Croke Park and people at provincial level. And so essentially those seven pillars that Liam mentioned there, you know under each pillar there's various success factors or criteria for each one. Part of the process we're trying to do now is trying to refine both the pillars and the Success Factors beneath them. And then so within Kerry, with the support of provincial and national level, you would benchmark yourself against each of those things and then you would identify what are our priorities, what do we want to improve. So ideally what you might say is that for example of those seven, just throw it out there say, well, participation is good, talent development could be better or elite is fine. A coach to coach development could be better, facilities are fine, fixtures are fine just to make that argument and then Kerry would put together their own plan based on those priorities that you've identified and the funding then that would go with that then would be identified. So the plan is that the funding would be would be guaranteed for you know, say X number of years whatever X is 2,3,4 or 5 years whatever that is. And that you would develop a plan to map and measure or to meet that timeframe. So, if we said funding was agreed for four years then you would agree a four-year plan towards trying to improve whatever it is that you think needs to be improved. And the key thing about this is that what makes it different from previous instead of everybody getting the same funding for the same projects and everybody essentially doing the same thing. It would be a case of, well, no, in my county we're stronger one and two where we could be better on three and four. So, we're going to put a focus on three and four and we're going to put the funding towards that. So, the output of that then is the Kerry plan could be very different from Cork's one or Waterford's one or Galway's or Mayo's or any other county you want to mention. It becomes very bespoke to the individual county and not a one-size-fits-all or not a one sort of single model. We're also looking at trying to embed a lot of information and evidence into this, so it becomes an evidence-based planning rather than just a sort of a more generic one-size-fits-all planning process. And so, to go along with the benchmarking we're developing various sort of information systems that will provide access to each county of their own information. So, information that's on things like foireann for example, information that's on the number of coaches or coaching courses that are held in a particular county. Any of the systems that we have, we're developing information processes then to allow each county to understand what's there from their own information and like when you were asking them specifically maybe what the process, what we're sort of envisaging right now is that in a in a few weeks' time myself and maybe some colleagues in Croke Park will go down and meet with yourselves and other people in the county to work through this process, identifying all of these things that we hopefully are trying to clarify

today and then to give you guys some space and time to complete the benchmarking process inside the county with the support of provincial and national personnel, and then at the end of that benchmarking process to identify the priorities and put together a sort of a business case for the funding that's to be received.

And so is that broadly clear?

0:9:23.740 --> 0:9:24.150

Liam Lynch

Yeah.

0:9:26.770 --> 0:9:57.340

Liam Lynch

Last question in terms of go back to Shane Flanagan's proposed funding right for coach and coaching development, I mean, there was my understanding as there was a chunk of this was going to be divided out among counties and then there was going to be the remaining funding 3,000,000 or whatever it may be was going to come in on the benchmarking element is all of that funding going to come in on benchmarking. Is the whole lot going to be benchmark going forward or is there a certain amount the majority that we're going to get anyway on a pro rata basis and then the benchmarking comes in on the smaller amount if you get what I'm saying.

0:9:59.610 --> 0:10:21.840

Peter Horgan

I get what you're saying again I think there's a bit of a confusion over some as well. So what would have happened there, Shane and a finance team would have looked at what was the most equitable way of parcelling out the funding. So whereas before as I said, it was every county got X amount for the same thing regardless of their shape or size of the county. What they would have done then they would put together a sort of a formula based on the number of clubs, number of participants, number of members, all that sort of stuff. So that each county then was going is going to be getting an amount that's based on the specifics of Gaelic games in that county. So a county like Kerry with a lot of participation, big numbers of teams and players and so on might get a lot more funding than a smaller county that has fewer players and teams and members and so on. But it would all be based on that information and that funding then will be guaranteed over, you know, three or four years and that number of years is to be decided. So if for arguments sake, Kerry were to get and I just use the round number for to make the maths easy. If Kerry were allocated 500000 per year under that funding model for four years we'll be saying that we're going to guarantee a 2,000,000 investment in Kerry over the next four years. And essentially the business plan that you would develop then will be looking at well how can we best spend that money to meet the priority needs that we have in the county that we identified through the benchmarking process.

0:11:42.940 --> 0:11:43.660

Peter Horgan

Is that OK?

0:11:44.330 --> 0:11:44.710

Liam Lynch

Yeah.

0:11:46.720 --> 0:11:48.330

Chairperson Kerry

Just a question there Peter.

0:11:51.200 --> 0:11:54.310

Chairperson Kerry

Have you any thoughts what's going to happen when the ladies joining? It was muted at last convention and there was a kind of a feeling in the next five or six years that it will be coming on board with us like and with them comes a lot of problems in the situation. Like, they'll be looking for fields and different parts. I mean at the moment we're up to our tonsils with what we have like. But is there any plan of that coming on board with this benchmarking, is there any? Are we planning for the future with this?

0:12:30.180 --> 0:12:37.670

Peter Horgan

Broadly, yes, but specifically within this, what we're saying is that it's only for GAA at the moment. But I suppose the way it's being built is it can scale out to incorporate ladies, footballer camogie or whatever included in that. Now you ask the question of is there and as far as I'm aware that the strategic plan identifies that this is an action that we want to happen within 6 years or seven years as you said or whatever time frame that looks like how that is achieved at the moment, I don't know. And as you said there are obvious sort of challenges around that and I suppose within especially within games development games administration, maybe it's where the rubber hits the road there because you're dealing with you know massive numbers of fixtures and you're dealing with coaches and you're dealing with teams and players and all that sort of stuff, whereas other areas like you know communications and marketing and so on might be is a different type of integration required there. So as far as I'm aware Tom and Larry are engaged with Camogie, ladies Gaelic football and what that might look like, but beyond that, I'm not aware of what it might look like. I don't think anything has come out of that.

0:13:44.520 --> 0:13:56.510

Liam Sheedy

This is just linked to the male playing population right now, the benchmark and it's just based on our current status and standing as how we support the way we sit and operate right now is that ok?

0:13:57.40 --> 0:13:58.280

Chairperson Kerry

That's perfect.

0:13:58.150 --> 0:14:7.530

Liam Sheedy

Yeah. So just bring it back into the seven pillars. Any thoughts on the seven pillars, any one of them stick out any one of them that you feel, or do we think we're missing anything?

0:14:8.740 --> 0:14:29.620

Secretary Kerry

The one that I don't want that strikes me as missing is the whole area of marketing and fundraising and all that, which is actually a very important. So while you're getting money maybe for this you also need to better generate your own money and this is under finance.

But I think that's more to do with governance and finances and that's more to do with control. It just strikes me as being a I mean unusual that is not there. You know, the whole marketing side of it.

0:14:40.10 --> 0:15:10.50

Liam Sheedy

This is very much related to central funding. So in addition to what you be getting centrally there, would you know there's an expectation obviously that there's a really good fundraising structure and a mechanism in place. I saw Pat there and was watching him, was it last Thursday Pat draw the winning ticket. I thought I might come out for the house there in Killarney. I think that there's a lot of work that's going on that that's sort of very much driven on a county by county basis. So that's that probably sits in more in the county and this is just linked to the central funding.

0:15:15.930 --> 0:15:38.820

Secretary Kerry

With marketing at the moment, everybody's going off on their own. So you go and do a house draw and somebody does something else but in my opinion that's not good enough at all. There needs to be a massive resource supplied to counties to develop their own marketing areas because they are very vulnerable unless they are fundraising and just leaving it up to county to do a house draw that's not good enough at all. Them days are gone I think.

0:15:52.820 --> 0:16:5.290

Liam Sheedy

OK, we'll take that one away and as you said, we have governance and finance in there. If we need to be a little bit more specific, but we'll take that point away, yeah, 100%.

0:16:6.120 --> 0:16:8.410

Liam Sheedy

Anyone else on what you feel is missing?

0:16:16.20 --> 0:16:28.790

Liam Lynch

They probably cover most of it. I would agree with Peter very much in terms of the whole commercial, commercial planning etc and brand development and all of that, that has to be in there. But outside of that, I think most of it is there from my viewpoint on here.

0:16:29.450 --> 0:16:52.730

Liam Sheedy

We might get in to some of the specifics so and I want to come back to participation 1st. How important is it and where do we feel it's at? What do you feel are the key components of participation? Obviously we've got the primary school you know and the importance of the club school link. But is there anything that you feel in particular we should be looking at in relation to participation?

0:16:54.610 --> 0:17:4.380

Coaching Officer Kerry

Liam I will come in there, Joe Costello the coaching officer. I'm on year one in my term, so I'm still relatively new, but look we're picking up information every day as we develop in the role and the three main areas are covered. Some challenges that will face us down the line is

our integration of our non-national communities and in terms of that how we target it. We feel that in relation to schools and we have some schools where we get fantastic buy in and from other schools, not so much. I think the Croke Park Agreement has put paid to a lot of the volunteerism coming from the staff with the teaching staff in schools. So that is an area of concern I think from a club perspective you know we've a fairly significant amount of clubs in Kerry and they all have various different challenges from demographics and so on so forth. But I think the club school link is something that we've tried to develop here, and some clubs have succeeded well and it's mainly at primary school level. So clubs linking with their local primary schools and that's been relatively successful in a couple of areas. But I just feel that the key thing is the development of the posts, to develop the link with the post primary schools and just increase that a lot more because obviously kids in post primary school ages, kids attending schools at post primary are the key dropout ages of our games.

0:18:38.420 --> 0:18:40.70

Liam Sheedy

Perfect. Thanks Joe.

0:18:42.610 --> 0:19:11.800

Chairperson Kerry

We've met with a lot of the teaching bodies down here in Kerry and the big problem that comes out is actually the Croke Park agreement and it's a major problem for teachers and when you look at a teacher, when we say when the kid comes up to us at a Saturday morning or Sunday morning, we have them for so many hours of the week. A teacher meets that person for so many hours per day, and it's very important that if we're going to get participation going to continue, we need to help the post primary and the primary teachers. They're the main face of the business on a regular basis. And one of the big problems that are coming up is the Croke Park agreement that's the big problem with the teachers and some of the principles in the secondary schools, if they're not from the county, and they might have no interest in in Gaelic games down here you might not get into the schools and that's another problem. And so is there some kind of a natural way that that Gaelic games could be put on the agenda for post primary school because it's becoming an issue definitely in three schools in North Kerry at the moment and the problem is that if we start losing the schools we start losing areas. Because there was a time every teacher in Kerry had a GAA link and they might have been from the county and that's all they thought there was no other sports shown and it's a big problem.

0:20:27.690 --> 0:20:42.190

Liam Sheedy

Peter is right. Was anything discussed centrally just around that particular topic because obviously you know it was a big win for us in terms of you know getting teachers out with kids has anything ever been looked at national level on that.

0:20:41.980 --> 0:21:12.290

Peter Horgan

Yeah, it's been, it's been looked at a few times, Liam and I suppose the big complaint is that teachers who coached teams or took teams were never able to use those, that commitment towards their Croke Park hours. So they were having to come in and do planning and you know all that sort of stuff, which was fine, you know, coming in at eight in the morning for a staff meeting or whatever for an hour which counts to your Croke Park hour. But taking a

team after school was never allowed count, and there was never any wriggle room from government on it to be honest.

0:21:14.870 --> 0:21:19.60

Chairperson Kerry

Yeah, Munster Rugby have targeted schools in East Kerry about playing Rugby and are offering them tickets to the Munster matches if they start developing rugby in the primary schools around East Kerry. So I mean we can only go so far yeah. And that came to us over the last couple of weeks by a couple of teachers who were on holidays and brought it to my attention.

0:21:46.250 --> 0:22:16.130

Liam Sheedy

So the big one is obviously keeping that the club school link trying to make sure we build participation in all the schools, but it is getting a little bit more challenging and Croke Park hours isn't helping and obviously the post primary piece just any thoughts in the post primary piece where you've gone from maybe where it's one club to numerous clubs. Is that proving a challenge or Joe what are you sensing in the first year Joe in terms of that piece where you know it's not club specific anymore, there could be a handful of clubs or more involved?

0:22:16.550 --> 0:22:46.620

Coaching Officer Kerry

Yeah look when young boys in particular are moving up and they're moving into post primary schools, that's exactly it. They're moving into, I suppose larger schools and bigger urban areas, and they're competing with lads from different clubs and generally in the early years of post-primary, there's a good games program ran generally by our GDA's here, it's very much streamlined pretty much after the first year you're into your Munster competitions. And I just know for example in Kerry anyway, it's very much the local school here in Tralee the CBS you could have 100 to 130 boys in school playing first year blitzes organised by Kerry coaching and games and then once they get into Munster competitions and 2nd year most schools are going down to one team and it goes back to Patrick's point about the Croke Park hours, there also seems to be a bit of a grey area around outside volunteers coming in as coaches in schools. A lot of schools put an awful lot of resistance towards that, not sure is it Garda vetting or not, I don't know. Schools seem to get their backs up whether that's an internal issue or not. So there's a big problem around it to be honest with you. Croke Park is highlighted one and that that's huge. And to add to what Patrick said, he is 100% right. There are three schools in North Kerry that we are struggling to get any activity through our GDA's to come up with games programs and it's no coincidence then that that we have an issue up there in terms of participation numbers.

0:24:2.600 --> 0:24:12.320

Liam Lynch

Even just to add to that, Liam, I mean it's. I'm sitting inside in Tralee here. You know, we have the largest primary school and the largest secondary school in Munster or close to it. Mount Hawk and effectively football / hurling is probably 4th in the agenda, no fault of ours or the GDA's by the way 4th, 5th or 6th in the agenda if they had it. My own kids are in the Irish school the Gael-Colaiste here and there is absolutely no training in the school and I even went back, picking up on John's point, got a group of parents to come in and say, well, all garda vetted and everything else, all qualified coaches' level one or level 2 whatever else and

the school didn't want to know about any help. So it's fairly prevalent and if it's us, it must be everywhere else.

0:24:50.920 --> 0:25:7.170

Coaching Officer Kerry

Just add to what Liam was saying there Liam, the schools that seem to be thriving are the ones that have tradition. The CBS in Tralee, St Brendan's in Killarney and the next tier would be the ones where, you know they would be some teachers in there that are coaching at a very good high level, for example Scoil Ui Conall down in Cahersiveen, you know, Jack done very well with them for a couple of years. They dropped back. They are now coming back into the equation again. But again, it's because that there's they just happen to be three or four teachers that are involved in our coaching system at Inter County level that are driving it forward. It's those other schools, those periphery schools where our GDA's are really struggling. So I think the Croke Park hours is a much bigger issue and I concur fully with Patrick. I think it's something that we need to drive at the national level. I think the clubs are doing a super job at the very younger ages. Most clubs in Kerry now have a sort of an Academy if you want to call it from under fives up, the clubs are doing a sterling job there. They're getting good numbers, good participation. I think we commented our games programme is pretty solid. It's just a post primary schools, that's where Patrick alluded to it already. That's where kids will develop a lot more as footballers or hurlers in schools than they will once or twice a week with the clubs.

0:26:22.730 --> 0:26:43.120

Liam Sheedy

Yeah perfect that's great. I might just move on then to talent ID and the development at that area. Where do we feel or is there any particular programs you want to talk to us about, how your talent development and talent identification programs are running in Kerry and what you feel is working really well or anything that you feel needs improving. Any thoughts?

0:26:44.720 --> 0:27:13.530

Coaching Officer Kerry

OK so in relation to, we'll say our development squad, we start them at under 14 generally what happens is we break the county down into number of basically sub areas or regions or districts, they all the same as the under 15 County Championship. Liam help me here with a figure I would say somewhere in the region of about 10 to 12. So for example you have three district which would have three clubs, my own district, the same, Brendan's Kerry has two districts. I would have four or five, so you'd have about 10 or 12 districts. They are broken up. They play in challenge games and generally our U14 squads would be chosen from them. In football we have two squads generally and north and the South from U14, U15, and U16, in hurling we just have one at the moment. So we'd trial them there and as well as that our coaches, then our development squad coaches would constantly be attending club games just maybe picking up guys that either didn't attend trials or just didn't perform or had injuries and you know there would be a flow of guys in and out generally what we're trying to do is build it in a pyramid basis with our U14's. I think we had the bones of about 75 to 80 players this year across the county and obviously our objective is to narrow it down as we go up. So fourteens, fifteens and sixteens in North and South in football and we have single teams at Hurling.

0:28:17.200 --> 0:28:24.910

Liam Sheedy

Very good. Anyone else any thoughts and we're happy with how the development squad process and overall area is working.

0:28:31.370 --> 0:28:33.480

Chairperson Kerry

I suppose Liam, if you're looking at hurling right the pool, the players we have in hurling is small. If you look at Limerick and you know when they were improved in hurling. There they brought in coaches from all the Munster counties to go into their development squads, we wouldn't have that finance to develop the hurling in the same ways we can do in the football because we have a limited pool of people who will be in that, there might be something that you might look at for Kerry down the road that if there was, that if we could get to cherry pick two or three people outside of the county that the Munster Council or Croke park might help it might bring Hurling on within the county. The football pathway I think will handle ourselves, I think we'll be okay.

0:29:23.680 --> 0:29:36.60

Liam Sheedy

That that probably rolls nicely Patrick into the next point, which is around the coach development and the importance of suppose of having as you point out there, you know really good coaches in around your club setting and your county setting. You're mentioning one program that should be considered there in relation to hurling in terms of maybe some outside expertise coming in. Any thoughts in terms of the overall coach development peace in its totality in the county. Obviously it's that key volunteer pillar it's coach development.

0:29:58.290 --> 0:30:8.650

Secretary Kerry

One of the issues I think we have, and I think it's probably everyone has it, is this mercenary coach who goes around and he's actually basically generating an income from coaching 3 clubs a week. And we have put our thoughts on this a few times. We made a few efforts to see how we can do it you know. And one of the ideas we had come up with a couple of years ago, I was trying to make some kind of an incentive there for a club to develop their own coach and for that coach then the payback was that he or she would mainly, they would come back and coach up that club team you know. We tried but we never got anywhere and we always got the feeling that nobody was really listening to us, you know, in the sense that maybe provincial or national level, that's not giving out it's just an observation. In other words, we thought it was a great idea, but we never seemed to gain ground on it, you know, and we still feel that there's an awful waste of money going on like, with given fellas money to coach teams and his own club doesn't want to know about him, you know. And we certainly would be interested in if that could be brought a step more step further, you know, but we don't know. Our own idea was to create an incentive for the club, in other words, if you if you give us the player or the coach to develop and progress that guy the deal is that he goes back to you then like for three years or something or some like that, you know, but we'd be certainly interested if there was any, if he had come across any thoughts on that on that aspect or we are on our own I don't know.

0:31:38.640 --> 0:31:39.530

Liam Sheedy

Peter, any thoughts?

0:31:42.40 --> 0:31:45.330

Peter Horgan

No, you're not on your own Peter. I think there's lots of different things that that can be done. I think you have to look at it both from a carrot and a stick perspective and I remember making a proposal before that every club team had to be coached by someone who was a member of the club. Now as you know as a non-playing member you can sort of be more flexible in their membership, for example but at least if there's a guy coming from the outside, he had to be a member of the club because lots of these guys are not. We were making one other proposal that every member of the management team had to be a member of the association, which again at the moment they don't have to be and they actually state nowhere that you have to be a member of the association to coach or manage any team. So, they were two sort of stick proposals that were having the carrot actually suggest their own coach around the coach development and all that sort of stuff. I don't know has it caught on to the extent that it should have either. I think there's more of a culture that we have to change that way, but again, how we go about doing that is long term sort of approach. It's interesting that as you say, lots of clubs would prefer not to appoint the guys in their own club and prefer to appoint the guy from some other club and I know it's a cultural thing and it's hard to say that there are better ideas out there but then I think for the purposes of this I certainly think that we need to take the feedback on board that. Two things maybe so far. First of all the weaker code and the weaker county needs to be looked at and also that from a coach development perspective, how do we incentivize either clubs or coaches to progress themselves and accept that can be difficult but it's a very necessary job to do. I think part of this process is grasping those difficult nettles. I think for a long time we've not grasped them, we've ploughed ahead and sort of sailed on without them. It's been busy enough to get on with doing that without having to grasp those nettles.

0:34:12.670 --> 0:34:30.190

Liam Sheedy

Good and to give me your perspective in terms of the actual coach development if I walked into Kerry and I'm finished playing and I want to get involved as a coach are you happy with the programs that we're running for to allow the growth of your coaches because ultimately you want to try and grow your own in hurling and football over time.

0:34:30.680 --> 0:34:58.640

Coaching Officer Kerry

Yeah. So just I was just going to come to that, Liam, basically what in Kerry, if you think about it, the majority of coaches or parents, so they're bringing down their kid and the main guy is the dad and he's coming down to his club and he's coaching his young lad for this team and he's coming through. So there's a lot of things that we've done right as an organization, we've got our safeguarding linked with our introduction to Gaelic games. So we've got a lot of the real important issues correct. I feel that and I don't think it's all the GAA fault from my six or seven months in the role. I think the Sports Council has a lot to do with it over the red tape around the coaching awards. I think a lot of them are probably too long. They're asked, they're probably at the wrong time of the year. They're very off putting for a guy who's done his basic introduction to Gaelic games to move on to the next level. I think that should be the first area that we should look at incentivizing. How can we make them more coach friendly in terms of the length of time that they take and the time of the year. The second thing is I generally find the coaches in Kerry get a huge amount of knowledge out of workshops and I know we don't grade them per se. They're not part of a huge amount of the awards, the coaching award badges, but I think workshops are quite good. So you know a lot

of our GDA's would run workshops at the start of the year and they would get in coaches from our Inter County teams to work on various different plays particularly when guys are coaching kids up through GO games and they're coming into underage thirteens and fourteens. You know that's when you're working on a lot more detail. So I just think how could we incentivize them? And I think if you're getting the dad coach up to that level and then I think you can see him potentially progress on to be senior coaches and if we're seeing that clear coach pathway then I think we will start to eliminate the mercenaries as Peter called them and he's dead right we have plenty of them in Kerry as I'm sure they are all over the country. But that would be the one thing what we've done in Kerry, we started last year, we did a coaching and performance module. Now it was very much aimed at I suppose our hiring coaches which we have in our intercounty system. We did it in conjunction with UL, with Ian Sherwin we had picked 15 basically of our best coaches. We wanted to restrict it first initially to football. We're going to involve hurling coaches this year and all of them found it very rewarding. Now that's at a sort of an elite level. But we feel that this is how Kerry want to invest in our coaching. So you know we've 15 through last year this year we're looking for 12 to 15 and some of them might be club coaches now that we're looking into to get. So we've a program there, but I just feel that that middle section, the guy that's come through the go games with his son how do we how can we improve the coaching awards they are how can we incentivize that group to continue on to continue their coaching into Senior teams

0:37:47.160 --> 0:37:52.540

Liam Sheedy

Yeah. Great. Excellent, Joe and some really good insights there. I think that we can that we can build on and build out. Now we might now move onto the games program and just in terms of what we mentioned earlier on are we happy. It sounds like just there's a lot going on at youth and obviously there's a really strong games program at senior level. But just that period then from 16 to 21, is there enough going on there to keep I suppose that seems to be the retention bottleneck that we face and trying to retain players throughout that period when they're going into third level college. What's your own thoughts on the on the games program and would like to kick it off there for us?

0:38:26.280 --> 0:38:37.170

Secretary Kerry

I think well, Kerry would have a strong games program, OK, very strong. I do believe the under 17 detaching that from the adult game like that was that was so obvious like you know because that was a disaster for minor for under eighteens like they're playing a game one week and they couldn't play them for another four weeks because there adult club had them tied up like how it went on for so long is mind boggling. Now that we've separated that it has almost freed up a whole bunch of activity there for under seventeens, which is fantastic. And I think we won't see the benefits of that I'd say for another four or five years because so suddenly these guys are there we have a county minor final in Austin Stacks park here next Monday night we had the semi-finals last Monday night and it didn't matter that we'd have senior club championship fixtures program as well the same weekend, because suddenly these young fellers are freed up to play. It just shows you sometimes it doesn't have to be complicated solution that there are some very simple solutions that can free up people. We're certainly very excited about that. I'd say that whole release of activity at under 17 level and I'm not sure what's going on with the under 18. This move back to under 18 and under 19 I'd be slightly worried. I know they're talking about intercounty only I would never want to see that combative club activity like where you know an 18 year old holds up or a 17 year old holds up an adult game like that would be disaster. On the overall fixtures programming,

Kerry certainly in football like it's very strong, huge activity and we are a bit ruthless in the sense of, you know, at adult level. We try to have our hurling championship finished now and we're focusing on football. You know, that's to free up the dual player. We think that's the right thing, even though I think Wexford and Waterford have kind of gone the same way.

0:40:40.250 --> 0:40:44.930

Liam Sheedy

Wexford have anyway and I think Waterford have as well. Wexford definitely have and their hurling finished last weekend.

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Secretary Kerry

So that's just on the general fixtures part. Joe, you were involved with the minors. You were looking after the minor competition, so maybe you might want to come in there, Joe.

0:40:58.310 --> 0:41:27.580

Coaching Officer Kerry

Yeah, for the minor fixtures, what we started with was in terms of football, we started at the start of the year with the minor county league. So we generally started them the last week of February, early March and I found it difficult, but I can only imagine when they under eighteens were under Peter's remit and they were affecting adult fixtures as well. That must have been a disaster. But the main area of concern or the main issues that I came across this year was the fact that the knock on of covid put a delay on post primary games so impacted the real good guys. What we want to do with our county competitions is we've sort of a rule in Kerry that we want our Intercounty players playing our county competitions. So we've 3 county competitions, we've County League, we have a county championship which is a mixture of stronger clubs and districts. And then this year we have an inaugural club championship, but we want our Inter County minors playing those games. So in February and March, because post primary games were being pushed out outside of their window, we had guys there, I remember one particular guy from Patrick's club in Doctor Crokes. He was out morning, noon and night. So that's just a bit of tightening up that we'll do or that we'd hope Munster Post primary will do. So once we get those windows right, otherwise very happy with it and like just give an example in the previous years as Peter alluded to about under eighteens. The real good guys in the club that were playing senior they were fine they had loads of football. It was the average minor or the guy that hadn't physically developed. He was completely starved. He'd play a couple of county league games if he wasn't good enough to get on his district, that guy might have played a total of four games and his games window might have been from mid-February to Mid-April. Now that it's fully decoupled all those guys are getting a huge games program like I think an average guy from a poor performing team will still end up with 14 games this year, which is fantastic. As Peter said we'll hopefully see the development and that they continue on to play in their adult and something that you know that we worked on this year from over minors was just that cohort of 18 nineteen 20 year old guys that couldn't break on to their senior club team. Peter and Terence a colleague of ours came up with a very good developmental league. It was basically a league for those guys that couldn't break onto their senior team. We didn't put any stipulations on clubs to call it an age grade. But the vast majority of them did use it under our encouragement they used it for those 18, 19, 20 and 21 year old guys. And I think Peter, it's safe to say that it was a very good success. We did have concerns over maybe games being called off and so on so forth. But it went well.

0:43:56.950 --> 0:44:2.70

Secretary Kerry

I know you're interested in what's going on with beyond the minor and just following on Joe's point there a couple of years ago we went for the Under 19. We said we would do an U19 and it was an absolute disaster. We actually had more walk overs than games so there was no point in flogging a dead horse, and I was watching. I know it came up with Munster secretaries there and you know, you'd be looking at other counties and I know Cork as far as I know, I think they were taking that on this year, this under 19 competition. And I was reading the examiner there lately where there was some issues like you know it was brought up by the county board meeting. They were obviously facing the same problems as we did in the sense you just can't get players because they're tied up with their adult club especially now with the compressed season like you're very squeezed so yeah so that idea came up sometimes with under 18 from 17 up to maybe 21 maybe the less formal the thing is maybe the better. You need the clubs and you give them enough room to manage it themselves. In other words, you create a competition that's flexible enough that there's room for everyone you know. And the key, then of course, is the buy in from the club. You don't want this crazy manager like who wants to win the god damn thing so you've got to communicate really more to the club trainer than the player and usually if most clubs buy into it, they'll almost force the crazy guy to buy into it you know what I mean. They're kind of set the tone and it has worked very well. Yeah, it has worked very well and it's almost, make it easy for everyone without its formal stuff. Or well, you must be over this, you know, must be under that, you know, must be free to do this it actually takes away all that. So you had you're 18 year old, you're 19 year olds but you also maybe 35 year old to make up the numbers, you know? And so we were very happy with that. That was only a matter of really almost falling onto it, we tried one thing it failed and we tried this thing, so that's the lesson from Kerry on that one anyway.

0:46:9.830 --> 0:46:39.800

Coaching Officer Kerry

Just quickly Liam in relation to hurling. Look it is difficult because obviously we have generally a small population playing hurling and you know probably maybe 30 or 40% of them or dual players. But our GDA's we have two GDA's in hurling and I must admit they're fantastic. They're constantly thinking outside the box. I know our North Kerry GDA who looks after, I suppose the hurling stronghold in Kerry is constantly doing crossover competitions with West Limerick. Limerick have been very good like that so we've always been thinking outside the box and our simple goal is just to provide additional games for those guys. Is our hurling games program rock solid no. But when you consider our playing base and our percentage of dual players, it's nothing to be sniffed at either you know and I'm talking specifically now at underage.

0:47:9.620 --> 0:47:40.450

Liam Sheedy

Yeah. OK, good. That's really good. Great to get your insights today or just in terms of the gaelic games but it sounds like there's loads going right and there is areas to work on which you'd expect in any county. Look I am conscious of your time but the one thing that we've talked a little bit about on the other calls is where we feel there's a really good culture within a club or within a group and I suppose we've asked it on the other calls you know just understanding the culture of GAA and the importance of the culture and why we do what we do. Is there any club that would stick out or anywhere that we feel who are doing it really well in relation to our games culture or how you might describe it or what you feel is the magic sauce in those clubs. Slaughtneil come up a little bit about the club that seems to be

culturally doing something really good and special up there, just really bringing the GAA to the centre of the community and anything you'd feel that you could tap into or where you feel it's really good when you look in your own county.

0:48:16.120 --> 0:48:26.270

Secretary Kerry

I'd say we'd have a lot of good clubs, like really good clubs. You know, there's a very high standard of community involvement and commitment, you know. I'd find it hard to even pick one out, but there's a lot of good ones. Like the only fear there and this is something that is always recurring is if you look at any club you're very dependent on maybe a dozen people like it's a very narrow base now maybe Slaughtneil might be exceptional there I wouldn't know. But that's the one thing I would say while in Kerry, I would say we've a lot of good clubs. I think a lot of those clubs are very dependent on a small cohort of people and I notice as secretary that the amount of turnover of officers, you know, particularly chair and secretaries is actually high, whereas before it was very stable but now it's very much changing. Now maybe Slaughtneil might be different in that they might have a broader base of volunteer I'm not sure.

0:49:34.400 --> 0:50:1.690

Liam Sheedy

I suppose building on that then Peter, would you see retention of people at all levels, especially in the administration as something that you know can be a challenge because as you said, if the dynamic of the club is set by the people that are at the helm and you've got a really good core 10 or dozen people, suppose we can't manage to retain those people and they're going out at a much quicker frequency, that's probably a big risk that we need to watch in terms of maintaining that culture in every club.

0:50:2.20 --> 0:50:11.500

Secretary Kerry

Without a shadow of a doubt and if we're asking anyone why there the role is too much. Like one secretary said to me, she said cut back about 90%, If you cut back on the emails by 90%, she said. I'd be happy. You know there's emails about everything and most people can say they can kind of separate out important ones from the nonsense, but some people can get genuinely overwhelmed, maybe no less and no different from the coaching, the actual responsibility that's been placed on officers, you know with child welfare and all that insurance and all that it's definitely too much. Now what I would suggest there, and I can you feel strongly about this. I think the provincial councils are underutilized, they're powerful bodies a lot of people think they have no role at all to play for. In my mind, they're missing the most obvious one which is, they should be the resource for the counties and for the clubs. They should be taking off as much as that as possible so they should, and I know in fairness the Munster Council they would be very into that. But I think that should be accelerated big time.

0:51:25.140 --> 0:51:28.950

Liam Sheedy

OK, great really good insights.

0:51:30.350 --> 0:51:35.370

Liam Sheedy

Pat, any thoughts in terms of where you feel the culture is really strong in any of any of the clubs that you're in and around.

0:51:44.450 --> 0:52:14.440

Chairperson Kerry

I think Peter got it all in one there, it's basically that you'll see clubs come there for a period of time and to be left 10, 15 or 20 core people. But the people that are coming behind them are not coming as often and every club will get a flurry in this county for so long. And what normally happens is people go back they recharge the batteries then come in again the question is how do you get people involved within the association where you are not flogging them to death like Peter said. And if you were given one job and ask him to do that job once I do it for that year without giving him two or three jobs on top of it, I think we'll have a better retention. But the question is some towns have more people involved and in smaller areas they haven't got as many. And so they have to double team or triple team jobs. And when teams do come down here in Kerry, they come with families where three or four or five or six families are the big backbones of these teams and it comes in and all those people get involved. But overall I think like Peter said, I think we have plenty of great clubs down here and we've a lot of good people involved in the clubs. The question is how do you get the new Irish involved in this would you get to know people. How did you get the people who are coming up there and wanted to get involved and how do you get a pathway into the club because they feel outside of the group. And the question is and like Peter said is how do like how do the Munster council help as a board as or as a body. They have games program but there's more that they could answer or put into the development and that could even be in with the coaching development where those things could kind of help the clubs more and more. It's The new Irish is the trick and how do you get the new Irish because there's a lot of them willing to come on board.

0:53:45.620 --> 0:53:48.110

Liam Sheedy

OK. Perfect. Liam, I think you're trying to come in there as well maybe.

0:53:49.10 --> 0:53:52.520

Liam Lynch

Well, can you hear me sorry. I would just add very briefly to that I think the GAA effectively I wouldn't say is in danger of missing a trick, but the GAA at its best was probably seen during COVID particularly down here when a lot of the community initiatives etcetera, etcetera were led by the GAA. In other words, the whole social side of the GAA and the GAA's attracting volunteers to do social jobs that has certainly waned in the last two or three years. The last two years post COVID and I would be very concerned, particularly when it comes to new Irish when it comes to a whole range and myriad of stuff that we have to do going forward that a lot of that volunteerism which was brilliant for two years isn't there anymore. And the GAA has let that drift. So I think that needs to come centrally. So when you're saying are there clubs that do it, the clubs that are the best in keeping volunteers are the ones that have managed to continue on the COVID spirit, if you want to call it that, I can name them, but they're there. The Slaughtneils and many others in our own place but that's beginning to drift as well. And as Peter says, we're being drowned those guys who have come in are being drowned in red tape so I would think in a sentence, the successful GAA clubs in the next 10 years are going to be the ones that are going to be as successful in the social side of things as on the field.

0:55:18.30 --> 0:55:20.960

Liam Sheedy

Perfect thanks Liam Joe any comment you want to add?

0:55:21.540 --> 0:55:49.310

Coaching Officer Kerry

No. Everything that the lads have said, you know, I was going to, I was laughing there because I was thinking, what would it be the clubs that stood out in my mind and probably the three lads clubs. So, if you take Patrick's one from Crokes, I would say that they were probably the leaders in terms of coaches. Their coaching philosophy now obviously we all know Pat is heavily involved there. But you know, there was times there when they didn't have a strong minor team, but they still elected to go with minor County Championship. It was based on player development. I look at Peter's club in Milltown, I see how they've embraced the new demographic population. They may not be non-nationals, but it's a large area and they have almost like a separate coaching playing side of the club and then they have very good facilities and maybe administration side of the club. It looks good. Liam's club Austin Stacks are probably one of those clubs that lead in terms of the social events but as Peter said there's a whole host of clubs around the country that are very good. And but then there are clubs that are struggling through demographics and through volunteers and just being swamped, as Peter said. I developed a very good relationship with the lady who assumed the role of Secretary of the club down in South Kerry and I texted her the last day about a minor and six months later she couldn't hack it. She left you know so there the challenges. They are the challenges that we face.

Liam Sheedy

That's great folks and I just want to say a massive thanks to all of you for your time and insights today. We now have the views from National, Provincial and County representatives so we will be back to you as we start to build out the model.