

Updated Report of the Fixtures Calendar Review Task Force

Deireadh Fómhair 2020

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1. Background and Context

Arising from the debate and feedback on specific Fixture Task Force related motions on the floor at Congress 2020 and at the Fixture Calendar Review Workshop, held as part of Congress, it was agreed that the Task Force should revisit outstanding proposals ahead of a Special Congress, which was originally scheduled to take place in September 2020.

Impact of Pandemic

The impact of the Covid Pandemic has had and continues to have a massive effect, as we know, on all aspects of life and specifically led to a pause in these plans. It meant that a uniquely structured GAA season had to be developed and implemented for 2020. This essentially de-coupled and kept separate the timeframes for Club and Inter County competitions, in effect a 'split season'.

In this context and recognizing the positive feedback received from club and inter county players and members generally to the core principles of this 'split season' model, the Uachtarán CLG John Horan re-convened the Task Force in August 2020 and requested it to:

- Specifically, further consider and make recommendations regarding the option of adopting a "Split Season" model for the GAA's Calendar including impact and implications, and
- Prepare a status report on the initial Task Force recommendations and consultation proposals.

The following paragraphs set out the Task Force recommendations and provides an outline of the updated recommendations as well as the planned next steps in this regard.

2. Split Season

The idea of a Split Season scheduling model was considered in depth by the Task Force as part of its original review in 2019. While it was considered to have much merit, it was felt on balance that it was unlikely to gain sufficient support to be adopted. Among the challenges identified in this context were:

- That it would likely lead to a separating of Inter County players entirely from their clubs for over half of the calendar year
- It would require playing the All Ireland Senior Hurling and Football finals earlier in the year than previously and leave over half of the calendar year without any inter-county GAA action.
- It would not necessarily increase the number of weekends where club games could be played free of inter county activity.

However, as mentioned above, the positive experience for clubs of the 'split season' foisted on the GAA during 2020 has meant that this needed to be re-evaluated.

The advantages identified in the original Report were experienced at first hand by Clubs in July, August and September this year, and the reaction has been significantly more favourable among players, clubs, and the membership generally than would have been expected. These included:

- no crossover between the inter-county and club seasons,
- no interruptions due to the County game,
- no ambiguity over player availability, and
- more regularity and certainty in the planning of club fixture programmes

Scheduling Model

For those reasons, it is recommended that the practicalities of a Split Season model be put to Counties as part of the proposed consultation process. Scheduling and other implications of this approach would be clearly set out and feedback sought as widely as possible.

The Task Force gave consideration as to whether the Inter-County or Club Championships should be in the first part of the season in such a model. The strong view was that the Inter County Championships should be played first, with All Ireland Finals in July.

If the Club Championships were played in the first part of the season, county finals would likely have to be played as early as May in order to accommodate the subsequent Provincial and All Ireland Club Championships. Furthermore, non-championship club competitions are unlikely to thrive once Club teams have exited the championship. By playing the inter county season first, there is significant opportunity for league or non-championship club games to be played in late Spring and early summer

Therefore and presuming there is acceptance of the concept of a Split Season in the consultation process, it is recommended that a motion be brought to Annual Congress in February 2021, to take effect in 2022, that the All Ireland Senior Finals shall be completed no later than week 29 of the calendar year.

3. Football Championship Proposals

The Task Force has also considered feedback it received on its original new options for the Senior Football Championships and have recommended minor changes to the original proposals as outlined below.

Football Championship Option 1 – 8 Team Provincial Football Championships

The first football Championship option outlined in the original Calendar Review Task Force Report, envisaged a provincial structure that has as its starting point 8 teams in each province.

The question of how to “re-balance” the Provinces was left open in the original Report. The Task Force are recommending that the two options below are discussed as part of the consultation process:

- Option 1 – Bottom 3 seeded teams in Leinster and bottom 1 from Ulster to move to Connacht/Munster (seedings to be based on finishing Allianz League positions)
- Option 2 – A Preliminary Round is introduced in the Leinster and Ulster Championships
 - Leinster – bottom 6 teams per Allianz League finishing positions play against each other in a preliminary Round of the Leinster Championship - the 3 winners continue in the Leinster Championship; the 3 losers are drawn to Munster (2 teams) and Connacht (1 team)
 - Ulster – bottom 2 teams per Allianz League seedings play off against each other in the preliminary round of the Ulster Championship. The winners continue in the Ulster Championship; the losing team participates in the Round Robin Connacht Championship

The other key features of this proposal are:

- The national football league would retain its current timing and structure. Finishing positions could be used to determine seedings in the Provincial Championships.
- Each provincial championship would consist of 8 teams
 - Each province to have two groups of four teams, who would be seeded from the National league and who would play each other in a round robin system guaranteeing a minimum of three group stage games for all teams.
 - The winner of each group would progress to the relevant Provincial final, the 2nd and 3rd placed teams (16 in total) would progress to the qualifiers,
 - The fourth placed team in each group would participate in a knock-out Tailteann Cup (if they are a Division 3 or 4 team only)
- The structure of the All Ireland Qualifiers would be:
 - Qualifiers Rd 1 – 2nd placed teams v 3rd placed teams (8 games)
 - Qualifiers Rd 2 – Winners of Round 1 drawn against each other
 - Qualifiers Rd 3 – Beaten Provincial Finalists v Rd 2 Winners
 - All Ireland Quarter Finals – Provincial Champions v Rd 3 Winners.

A final change to the original report is that New York would play in the Tailteann Cup under this proposal.

Football Championship Option 2 – League structure for Championship

The second new option for the Football Championships would see the repositioning of the National Football League to the Summer months as a basis for the football Championship while playing Provincial Competitions in the February/March period.

The changes suggested for the All Ireland Championships are:

- The 5th placed team in Division 1 rather than the 4th placed team in Division 2 would qualify for the preliminary All Ireland Quarter Finals (Sam Maguire Cup).
Reasoning: To ensure greater reward for teams who have qualified for Division 1 on merit
- The Tailteann Cup would be expanded to include all Division 3 and 4 teams, with the exception of the top placed teams in Division 3 and 4 (who automatically qualify for the preliminary quarter finals of the Sam Maguire championship)
 - o This requires the addition of preliminary quarter finals in the Tailteann Cup.
Reasoning: To ensure all Division 3 and 4 teams (except the Division winners) get a chance to participate in the Tailteann Cup
- The top team only in Division 3 will be promoted automatically to Division 2 for the following year along with the Tailteann Cup Winners (presuming they are a Division 3 team). If a Division 4 team wins the Tailteann Cup, the 2nd placed team in Division 3 will be the team promoted to Division 2 for the following year.
- The bottom two teams in Division 3 will be relegated (Exception: if one of the bottom two teams wins the Tailteann Cup; in those circumstances, the team that finished 3rd from bottom will be the relegated team)
- The top team in Division 4 will be promoted automatically to Division 3. The 2nd placed team will also be promoted (Exception: if a Division 4 team other than the top two wins the Tailteann Cup, they will be promoted to Division 3 along with the Division 4 winners)
Reasoning: To ensure greater reward for Division 3 or 4 teams in winning the Tailteann Cup

In the Provincial Competitions in February and March, the following changes are suggested:

- Leinster Championship to consist of 1 x Round Robin group of 6, 1 x Round Robin group of 5
- Ulster Championship to consist of 1 x Round Robin group of 5, 1 x Round Robin group of 4
Reasoning: Avoids having to allocate teams to a different province; does not impact on the time needed to play these competitions.

The Tailteann Cup option under this proposal has also been updated:

- To consist of 15 teams (New York and all Division 3 and 4 teams except the Division winners)
- To be played on a knockout basis
- Preliminary Quarter Finals (7 games plus 1 bye), Quarter Finals, Semi Finals and Final
- If a Division 3 team, outside of the two automatically promoted teams, wins the Tailteann Cup they will be promoted to Division 2 for the following year; the team 3rd from bottom in Division 2 would be relegated in such a scenario)

4. Inter County Age Grades

As part of the feedback received, the question of Age Grades at inter county level was raised on a number of occasions.

The Task Force acknowledges that this is a topic of considerable interest in the Association at the moment. In that context, it was felt worthwhile to re-state two of the key points made in the original report:

- The greatest strides the Association has made in a fixtures context in the last number of years have been due to the de-coupling of minor and adult i.e. moving the minor age grade to U17 and not allowing U17's playing in adult competition. This is now Association policy and the Task Force strongly believes this should remain the age grade for Minor
- The Task Force is of the very strong view that there should only be one further inter-county grade between U17 and Senior level. If there is more than one inter-county grade between U17 and Senior it will have serious negative impacts on the availability of players to clubs.

This raises the question of whether the next grade up from U17 at inter county level should be U19 or U20. It is the view of the Task Force that a separate group is assigned to examine the question of U19 or U20 and make strong evidence based recommendations for the Association that achieve a balance between the Developmental imperatives on the one hand, and the suitability of each in terms of the national fixtures calendar on the other.

5. Status of remainder of Original Proposals

The final element of this report relates to providing an update on the status of the other Recommendations and the consultation proposals.

The Task Force is recommending that the following proposals, be discussed and feedback sought as part of the proposed consultation process with Counties in the coming months leading to a final decision in December 2020 as to how to proceed in terms of seeking agreement by Annual Congress/Central Council/the Central Competitions Control Committee as appropriate:

- 1) [Original Recommendation 13]
County Senior and Intermediate Championships to consist of a maximum of 16 teams – suggested there be a two-year lead in before this takes effect (**motion to Congress**)
Reasoning: To allow for efficient and timely completion of county club championships
- 2) [Original Recommendation 12]
Galway club champions participate in one of the other three provincial Senior club Hurling Championships (**Central Council decision**)
Reasoning: Currently there is no Connacht Club Championship; for competition purposes, Galway champions should be accommodated in one of the other provincial championships, as currently in Senior and U20 inter county.
- 3) [Original Recommendation 21]
All Ireland semi-finals for U20 Hurling Championship should be discontinued (**motion to Congress**)
Reasoning: Back door for just the beaten provincial finalists is not serving any great purpose; removing it allows the competition to be completed in a more timely fashion, therefore creating more time for club activity.
- 4) [Original Recommendation 20]
U20 Hurling Eligibility (Liam Mac Carthy Counties) to be restricted to those who have not played in the Senior Hurling Championship (**motion to Congress**)
Reasoning: To ensure there is unambiguous priority for players that are involved on both panels
- 5) [Original Recommendations 18 & 23]
New competition structures for U20 Football and Hurling to be drawn up by the Central Competitions Control Committee for the consideration of Central Council (**potential motion to Congress from Central Council**)
Reasoning: To examine the viability of an open draw championship in U20 football and hurling and to ascertain if these competitions can be completed in a more time efficient manner.
- 6) [Original Recommendation 17]

U20 Football Eligibility to be restricted to players who have not played in the Allianz Football league in that year **(motion to Congress)**

Reasoning: To ensure there is unambiguous priority for players that are involved on both panels

7) [Original Recommendation 9]

3rd Level Dates - General Rule to state that the Sigerson Cup must be completed on or before the 7th Sunday of the year; Fitzgibbon Cup to be completed on or before the 8th Sunday of the year **(motion to Congress)**

Reasoning: To minimise crossover for players in these competitions who are also involved with inter county teams at this time of year.

Certain of the Task Force's original proposals may change dependent on whether a Split Season is introduced or not. These include:

8) [Original Recommendation 4]

No inter county challenge games in April **(not relevant if split season put in place)**

9) [Original Recommendation 22]

U20 Hurling - All-Ireland Finals to be completed no later than the 31st Sunday of the year **(scheduling matter for the C.C.C depending on season structure)**

10) [Original Recommendation 24]

No collective training or games at U20 Hurling level pre-April 1st **(matter for Central Council and will depend on season structure)**

11) [Original Recommendation 16]

U20 Football - Rule to state that U20 football championship be played in February/March **(recommended that this change to "Completed no later than Week 18" if a Split Season is introduced)**

12) [Original Recommendation 19]

No collective training or games at U20 football level pre-Dec 1st **(recommend this changed to January 1st if a Split Season is introduced)**

Based on feedback received from discussions directly with Counties, at Central Council, at the Congress Workshop on Fixtures, and from the floor of Congress itself, the following proposals are being updated:

13) [Original Recommendation 5]

Club Fixtures programme to be submitted by Counties to the Provincial Council annually by the end of December.

Updated Proposal: Club Fixture Programme to be submitted by Counties to the Provincial Council annually by the end of January

Reasoning for updated proposal: Timeframe too tight for planning if end of December; no club competitions commence until after the end of January in any case.

14) [Original Recommendation 7]

Retain provincial pre-season competitions; no collective intercounty training before Dec 1st of the previous year.

Updated Proposal: No collective intercounty training or games before January 1st. Allianz Leagues to be the first inter county competitions annually.

Reasoning for updated proposal: To ensure a more meaningful closed season and appropriate “down time” for inter county players

15) [Original Recommendation 10]

2nd Level Dates - Post-Primary A and B Finals in football should be completed by the last weekend in January and in hurling by the weekend after St Patrick’s Day annually.

Updated Proposal: All post primary schools finals to be completed no later than the weekend immediately after St Patrick’s Day annually.

Reasoning for updated proposal: To ensure the vast majority of 2nd level games are completed before inter county underage activity commences

16) [Original Recommendation 11]

Post Primary C and D competitions to be played to Provincial Final only

Updated Proposal: Play to All Ireland final but must be completed no later than the weekend immediately after St Patrick’s Day annually

Reasoning for updated proposal: To allow for All Ireland finals at these grades and to ensure the vast majority of 2nd level games are completed before inter county underage activity commences.

17) [Original Recommendation 28]

Junior Football – All-Ireland Junior Football Championship to be discontinued

Updated Proposal: Provincial Junior Championships in Ireland to be discontinued. A new All Ireland Junior Football Championship to be played annually. The Semi-Finals will consist of the British Junior Champions and Runners-Up, Kilkenny and New York (U.S born players only). The All Ireland Semi Finals and finals will be played over a single weekend in Ireland annually, with the semi-finals taking place on a Friday and the All Ireland Final on the Sunday.

Reasoning for updated proposal: To ensure an All Ireland competition for the named teams above.

18) New York (Senior Football Championship) - In the original report, the issue of New York’s participation in any new football championship structure was left open.

Updated Proposal: If there is no change to the current provincial football championship structures, New York will continue to be facilitated in the Connacht Championship and subsequently in the Tailteann Cup annually. If either of the proposed new Football Championship structures are implemented, New York will be facilitated in the Tailteann Cup annually

Reasoning for updated proposal: To ensure New York have more meaningful participation in inter county competitions.

19) [Original Recommendation 15]

Introduce Semi-Finals in all groups of Divisions 2 and 3 of the National Hurling Leagues

Updated Proposal: Top team in each Division qualifies directly for the final in each group; 2nd and 3rd placed teams play in a semi-final against each other. (to be progressed by the C.C.C.C)

Reasoning for updated proposal: To reduce the risk of later rounds in Division 2 and 3 becoming meaningless

A number of other proposals drawn up by the Task Force are currently being actively pursued by relevant Committees. These include:

20) [Original Recommendation 25]

Minor (U17) to be tiered developmental Competitions and be decoupled from Senior All-Ireland Semi Finals and Finals (being progressed by Development C.C.C.C)

21) [Original Recommendation 30]

Align the start of the Connacht Senior Football Championship with the start dates for the rest of the provincial championships (This is relevant only if the current provincial football championship structures are retained – Connacht Council to progress in that case)

22) [Original Recommendation 31]

Play the Senior All-Ireland Hurling and Football Finals on consecutive weekends (scheduling matter for C.C.C.C and Central Council)

6. Next Steps

In setting out next steps and proposals the Task Force is cognisant that public health restrictions and measures could impact on timing and implementation schedules. However, it felt that there is nonetheless merit in setting these out.

1. *Consultation and feedback:* The Calendar Review Task Force proposes that a number of online seminars be organized to which County Representatives would be invited. These will take place in November 2020.

The seminars will be consultative in nature and their guiding purpose should be:

- To provide further information on the Football Championship proposals contained in the original report
- To outline the reasons for bringing forward the various proposals outlined in this document
- To stimulate further discussion on the merits of a Split Season scheduling model and to outline the scheduling implications of this for Counties and Clubs
- To elicit feedback from GAA members

An Information Webinar for Clubs will also be delivered.

2. *Proposals for consideration:* Following the consultation process, final recommendations will be made to Central Council in December on which proposals should be progressed at Congress 2021 or elsewhere within the Association

The members of the Calendar Review Task Force are:

Eddie Sullivan (Chairman)
 Michael Martin (Wexford)
 Kevin O'Donovan (Cork)
 Stephen Barker (Derry)
 John Costello (Dublin)
 John Prenty (Mayo)
 Ronan Sheehan (Down)
 Michael Hyland (Galway)
 Seamus Woods (Tyrone)
 Conor O Donoghue (Meath)
 Feargal Mc Gill (Secretary)