

# REPORT OF THE ARD STIÚRTHÓIR



## INTRODUCTION

*“In the All-Ireland hurling championship, the new order well and truly replaced the old”*

The outstanding achievement in the GAA sporting year was undoubtedly Dublin’s third victory in-a-row in the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship. Only an exceptional team can reach such a consistently high standard, so there can be no question about the merit of Dublin’s victory in 2017. When the stakes were at their highest and the pressure at its greatest, Dublin again proved themselves to be true champions. And yet the margin of final victory in September was as small as it could be, not just in the final score but in the whole ebb and flow of what was an extraordinarily tense final against Mayo. So close was the encounter that it was easy afterwards to imagine scenarios – a chance not missed, a different option taken – in which Mayo would have been All-Ireland champions. There isn’t a county or club in Ireland that doesn’t lament the way a final turned cruelly against them; but can there be a team that comes even close to what Mayo – the team and the entire county – must feel when looking back at finals that slipped agonisingly through their fingers, and, in particular, in 2017 after their marathon ten-game championship odyssey? One, then, salutes a great Dublin team and at the same time feels the sorrow of yet another bitter All-Ireland final defeat for this courageous and talented Mayo team.

Elsewhere in the championship, the most notable achievement was Roscommon’s unexpected – although surely not to them – victory in the Connacht championship, all the more notable for their defeating Galway in Pearse Stadium in the final. Tyrone proved that they are once again the team to beat in Ulster; they proved much too strong for Derry, Donegal and Down in their campaign, and indeed against Armagh

in the All-Ireland quarter-final. All of which made their semi-final defeat to Dublin the more disappointing. The success of the Kerry minor team should not be overlooked; their 2017 All-Ireland victory was their fourth title in-a-row, an exceptional achievement that augurs well for the future of their senior team as it seeks to overcome Dublin’s current superiority.

In the All-Ireland hurling championship, the new order well and truly replaced the old. It was not simply that Kilkenny failed to reach even the Leinster final, but that the two other titans of hurling, Tipperary and Cork, were also toppled in their respective All-Ireland semi-finals. So it was that Galway and Waterford reached the All-Ireland final, and created remarkable excitement in the build-up to the match. Both teams relished reaching the final, not just as the fruit of their campaigns but in their having fallen frustratingly short of their own expectations in previous years. It was ultimately to be Galway’s triumph after a 29-year wait, a popular victory for a team that had shown a mental toughness not always visible in previous finals, and a day made all the more precious by the victory of Galway minors in their final. Waterford’s day will come soon, one feels, which is, however – along with the sympathy the team earned – meagre comfort for a county that has not won an All-Ireland since 1959.

The other winner in the senior hurling championship was hurling itself. A reinvigorated Cork lit up the summer with irresistible performances and victories over Tipperary, Waterford and Clare in Munster, bringing with them the great red throngs of their supporters for three celebratory afternoons in Thurles.





*Dublin captain Stephen Cluxton leads his side during the parade prior to the GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Championship Final between Dublin and Mayo at Croke Park*



In Leinster, it was Wexford that brought the excitement, carried over from their promotion to Division 1A in the spring. Motivated and renewed by Davy Fitzgerald, their great day was the Leinster semi-final defeat of Kilkenny. And the Wexford supporters, too, rallied behind their team in remarkable numbers, culminating in the huge Leinster final attendance. One leaves the 2017 hurling championship in anticipation of what is set up to be a highly competitive 2018 championship. Finally, one salutes Cuala (Dublin), Carrickshock (Kilkenny) and Mayfield (Cork) in hurling, and the footballers of Dr. Crokes (Kerry), Westport (Mayo) and Glenbeigh-Glencar (Kerry) for their victories in the All-Ireland club championships.

Away from the games, 2017 was notable for the holding of two Congresses, but even more so for the decisions taken at these. At the annual February Congress it was agreed to adopt a three-year trial

that will see the senior football championship quarter-finals contested on a round-robin basis and the timing of the championship amended to allow a fairer schedule of matches for club players. At the Special Congress in September it was agreed, among other changes to the hurling championship structures, that the Leinster and Munster Senior Hurling Championships would be played on a round-robin basis.

Two other developments are worthy of mention here. Significant progress has been made towards the building of the new National Handball Centre; planning permission has been achieved and work is about to begin on what will be a state-of-the-art facility for GAA Handball. And the beautiful new Páirc Uí Chaoimh was opened, and received the matches it deserved when the All-Ireland hurling quarter-finals were held there at the end of July.

## CONGRESS

*“Congress is often described – not always fairly – as being unduly conservative, but on this occasion there was clearly an appetite for change”*

Congress 2017, held in Croke Park, debated 56 motions and produced some of the liveliest debate of recent years. Congress is often described – not always fairly – as being unduly conservative but, on this occasion there was clearly an appetite for change. Much of the interest centred on motions to reform the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship, but significant decisions were taken over a broad range of issues.

The debate on the structure of the football championship centred on motions which sought to address some of the deficiencies in the championship’s structure, while at the same time recognising the need to meet the demand from club players for a fairer schedule of games. Time alone will tell whether the motions passed at Congress, and at the Special Congress in September, will realise these objectives, but there are grounds for believing that the revised football championship format will enhance the competition through eight additional competitive matches at provincial venues, contested by the country’s eight best teams.

Congress took the wise decision to introduce the changes on a three-year trial basis, which is a reasonable period in which to assess the value of the new format. In truth, this structure is likely to be a temporary arrangement in that it will allow the Association time to devise a system that will meet the needs of less successful counties. There are compelling arguments in favour of developing a tiered football championship system, as in hurling, but the debate around this issue remains as difficult as ever, notably in resolving the question of how a tiered championship

would be structured. Achieving consensus while preserving the provincial championships will not be easy. There are those who are quick to criticise the provincial championships, but it must be recognised that there is a strong attachment to them throughout the Association. But we must find a way to give all counties the possibility of success in a football championship. It should be noted that in 2018 the All-Ireland hurling championships will consist of five competitions at All-Ireland level. In football, there is only one, a structure that is not sustainable.

Another significant motion passed means that, in future, motions to Congress to remove, amend or temporarily amend/set aside a rule will be carried by a three-fifths (60%) majority of the vote rather than by the previous two-thirds majority. The same arrangement now applies to the amendment of county bye-laws. The passing of these motions makes the process of responding to change a little easier, as was seen at the Special Congress later in the year.

Perhaps the most impassioned debate was on a motion that wasn’t passed. Several counties proposed motions from clubs that would allow players over 16 years (rather than over 17) to be eligible to play at adult level. The key argument of the proposers was that many clubs, especially those in rural areas, are struggling for numbers and find it difficult to field teams when deprived of the services of players who have reached the age of 16. The arguments against the motion focused on the impact on club fixtures of talented U17 players on inter-county minor teams, the danger of burnout and on potential medical issues that





25 February 2017; Delegates assemble before the 2017 GAA Annual Congress at Croke Park.



could arise from young adolescent players competing against fully physically developed adults. The motion was defeated by 59% to 41%. I respect the sincerity of those who argued for a change in the rule, but I believe firmly that Congress made the correct decision. Problems caused by rural depopulation are real and pressing, but addressing one problem by creating another is not a solution. We can never ignore medical advice on the risk of injury, and our Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee has clearly stated that players are not physically ready at 16 to play in adult competitions.

Congress 2017 also passed a motion that prohibits a player, a team, a member of a team management or match official involved in a match from betting on the outcome of any aspect of that match.

While it does nothing to address society's growing problem of gambling addiction, the new rule is nonetheless an important addition to the Official Guide. We are working more closely than ever with the betting industry and now have Memorandums of Understanding with Betfair/Paddy Power and the Irish Bookmakers Association to ensure that we receive information on betting patterns or individual bets that give rise for concern. In this way, we hope to reduce the risk of being confronted with the betting problems that have afflicted other sports.

Our Community and Health department and the National Health and Wellbeing Committee have also devised a gambling awareness presentation that is now available to all interested teams and units, as well as a club gambling policy that can be adopted at grassroots level.

## SPECIAL CONGRESS

*“There is always concern when change of this magnitude is implemented, and there is always an element of the unknown involved...”*

In the Congress debate on changes to the football championship, concern was expressed that the eight additional matches provided for in the new football championship structure (namely, the round-robin group stage that replaces the existing quarter-final format) would draw attention away from and diminish the All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship. The Central Competitions Control Committee (CCCC) was subsequently asked to examine the current structure of the hurling championships and to address two specific questions: (i) did the arrangements for Galway’s participation in the Leinster senior, All-Ireland minor and U21 hurling championships best serve the needs of that county, and of hurling in general? (ii) did the existing structures best serve the needs of Antrim (or any other Ulster county that might qualify for the All-Ireland series) in the minor and U21 hurling championships?

One outcome of their deliberations was a decision to hold a Special Congress (the first since 2009) in Croke Park on 30 September. With regard to the senior hurling championship, CCCC/Central Council proposed that the Leinster and Munster hurling championships be played on a round-robin basis, with each team having two home and two away matches, and with the top three teams in each province proceeding to the All-Ireland series. A tier-2 championship, for the Joe McDonagh Cup, involving teams ranked 11-16, would be initiated, with the winners gaining promotion to the following year’s Liam MacCarthy Cup. At U21 level, CCCC advocated that the championship be organised on a provincial basis in Leinster and Munster, with Galway (and Ulster teams as agreed by Ulster

and Leinster Councils) participating in the Leinster championship. For the minor championship, CCCC proposed the inclusion of Ulster teams in the Leinster championship and the replacement of quarter-finals by a three-team round-robin in which Galway would participate. Several counties submitted their own motions on the structure of the championships but, with some amendments suggested by counties, the core of the CCCC/Central Council proposals were accepted.

The result of the changes enacted by Congress over the past two years is that the inter-county competitions structure and calendar will look very different in 2018. Inter-county minor will now be played at U17 age; U21 football has moved to U20 and will be played, primarily as a development competition, in the summer months; Ulster and Connacht counties have better opportunities to participate competitively in the minor and U21 hurling championships; and, of course, there has been a major restructuring of both the All-Ireland senior hurling and football championships.

There is always concern when change of this magnitude is implemented, and there is always an element of the unknown involved, but it is important to reiterate that the changes in the All-Ireland hurling and football championships are being implemented on an experimental basis. It is not in the best interests of the GAA to go through constant short-term experimentation with our championship formats. So, I hope that, however difficult the process of change may be, the current three-year experiments are simply a step towards what will be agreed long-term



30 September 2017; A general view of the result of Motion 15, relating to Inter-County Players Availability to Clubs, which was passed, during a GAA Special Congress at Croke Park.



solutions to the championship structures. Getting that agreement will require a committed, reflective engagement over the next three years by all the relevant stakeholders.

One final point. At the end of a year of discussions about competition structures, it is hard to understand how the All-Ireland intermediate hurling championship can be allowed to survive. Three counties, Kilkenny,

Wexford and Cork, participated in the 2017 championship, with Cork going directly into the All-Ireland final in which they lost to Kilkenny. Organising an All-Ireland championship with just three teams seriously devalues an All-Ireland medal. Given the competition structures that now exist at inter-county level, an intermediate grade is no longer necessary.

We should not proceed with the competition in 2018.



## FACILITATING CLUB FIXTURES

*“...ring-fencing the month of April for club fixtures is crucial in allowing counties to make a good start to their club programme for the year.”*

The debate on our championship structures brought a renewed focus on the need to provide a better balance in the scheduling of club and inter-county games. It is encouraging that the changes to championship formats to be introduced in 2018 will be accompanied by several important fixtures-related rule changes that were agreed at Congress 2016 and 2017, and at Special Congress. Condensing the senior championships, bringing forward the dates of the All-Ireland finals and making greater use of extra-time and ‘finish on the day’ were some of the changes that recognised the need to meet the demands of the club game. And ring-fencing the month of April for club fixtures is crucial in allowing counties to make a good start to their club programme for the year. We must be determined in our implementation of the motions passed that restrict senior inter-county challenge games to Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, and that do not allow panels to go on ‘training weekends’, or training of longer duration, except in the specified period prior to a senior championship game. We must also ensure that we approach the U-20 football championship as a competition to develop players and not as an end in itself.

It is now possible for most counties to schedule the bulk of their club championships after their inter-county championship season is over and to avoid the elimination of teams from their county championship before the county’s involvement in the senior inter-county championship has ended. By 8 July 2018 there will be only eight teams still playing in the All-Ireland football championship,

and by 29 July we will know the two hurling finalists. There should be no need for counties to eliminate teams from their championships in April or May, as has happened in the past.

It is now up to individual counties to carry out the important work that remains to be done. Counties need to examine the process through which their master fixtures list is created and take a new look at the structure of their club championships. In too many counties the fixtures schedule is unduly influenced by the demands of inter-county managers, with a consequent downgrading of the needs of clubs. In addition, each county needs to sit down with its clubs and examine its championship structure to see that:

- (i) it is compatible with the inter-county fixtures programme;**
- (ii) it is deliverable within the time available;**
- (iii) it allows clubs training time with their inter-county players in advance of club championship games;**
- (iv) it provides as much certainty as possible regarding dates of championship games.**

Counties should not, however, be depending on their club championships to provide players with an adequate programme of matches. We have developed a fixation about judging the strength



of a county's fixtures programme based purely on the number and scheduling of club championship games, as if these were the only games a club played. Championship games should be only one element of a club's adult fixtures programme.

Players should – and usually do – play many more league than championship games. Club players want to play plenty of games; a good league structure will allow that, even without the participation of county players. There is absolutely no reason why adult club players cannot play a weekly league game while the county team is in action. Clubs should accept that, from early May until early July, they probably won't

have the services of their county players for most matches. This, however, cannot be a reason for every other player to remain idle. Play league games! It may mean that counties who link league performance to championship status will have to review that system but club league games must be played in the busy inter-county period of May and June.

The club championships can begin, if necessary, in April, but most matches ought to be played when a county's inter-county season has finished. The commitment of every county to a proper league structure would resolve the complaint that club players are denied an adequate programme of games.

## FIXTURE ANALYSTS

*“Their first task has been to perform a detailed analysis on a county-by-county basis of adult club fixtures in their respective counties...”*

One of the less-heralded changes made at Congress 2016 was the creation of fixture analysts at both county and provincial level, replacing the fixture planners. The process of installing and training the analysts took place throughout 2017.

Their first task has been to perform a detailed analysis on a county-by-county basis of adult club fixtures in their respective counties, with the twin aims of identifying shortcomings in the fixtures calendar and promoting best-practice guidelines in each county.

I believe that this new function will make a significant difference over time by providing evidence-based analysis of fixture programmes in individual counties and by comparing existing programmes with what can be considered general best practice.

One significant initial piece of analysis will be available when 2018 county fixture programmes are analysed and compared to those of 2017; we will then begin to see if the changes that are designed to help the playing of club fixtures lead to a better fixtures programme for club players and also whether counties are using the time created in the national calendar in an effective manner and to the benefit of their clubs.





## CALENDAR YEAR

*“Bringing forward the All-Ireland finals now makes a calendar-year schedule a much more realistic option than at any time in the past.”*



The second report of the Football Review Committee, chaired by Eugene McGee, recommended that the All-Ireland Club Championships should be completed within the calendar year. Central Council agreed in principle to that proposal at its August 2014 meeting.

A Work Group chaired by Liam Ó Néill later amplified the arguments in favour of this recommendation. Completing the club championships within a calendar year would:

- (i) allow all counties to field their best teams in the Allianz Leagues;**
- (ii) render winter training unnecessary for clubs that qualify for the semi-finals of the All-Ireland Club Championships;**
- (iii) make it easier to build up and maintain public interest in the club championships due to a more compact fixtures schedule, right up to the All-Ireland Club finals;**
- (iv) allow greater exposure for the concluding stages of the club championships as they would not be competing with the Allianz Leagues;**
- (v) be fairer to provincial club champions when they come to defend their county titles as they would have had a break at the end of the year;**
- (vi) provide a more compact, logical and comprehensible schedule consisting of national leagues, inter-county championships and club championships.**

Bringing forward the All-Ireland finals now makes a calendar-year schedule a much more realistic option than at any time in the past.

The experience and the insights gained from the playing of fixtures in 2018 will also help to inform a debate on any additional steps that need to be taken to play all our competitions within the calendar year. Logic dictates that it is a change that should be made sooner rather than later.

## PLAYING RULES

*“Changes in the playing rules should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary”*

As 2020 is a year divisible by five, counties may bring motions to Congress that year to change the playing rules of our games. That means that, in 2018, we will need to begin to address playing issues that require attention, so that in 2019 we can properly trial experiments before decisions are made by Congress in 2020. Changes in the playing rules should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Of late, more changes have been made in football than in hurling, but, in both codes, they have been to positive effect. The introduction of the mark in football, the penalty in hurling, and a defined advantage rule are good examples of positive changes.

The black card may come under review; it is right that we consider whether there is a better way of achieving the aims that led to its introduction and of consolidating the success it has achieved, namely the increase in the total aggregate scores per game, the reduction in the average number of frees awarded per game, and the virtual elimination of the dangerous body collide and deliberate trip.

Reverting to a yellow card to deal with these offences would suit the cynical player and have a very negative effect on how football is played. Application of the black card rule by referees in 2017 was handled better, although the task of the referee is still being made more difficult by players who exaggerate a personal foul to persuade the referee that a black card offence has been committed.

I believe that, in time, and with better communication of the precise nature of black card offences, application of the rule will be more accurate. We should not seek to replace the current rule unless we have an alternative strategy that will maintain the positive changes that the black card has achieved.

The one aspect of the rule that would benefit from review relates to the relevance and adequacy of the application of the black card in the closing stages of a game when the purpose of the foul is to prevent a score being taken. However, giving in to the outrage of those who argue that we should get rid of the black card – an outrage that pointedly ignores its virtues – without having a valid replacement strategy should not be an option.



## SIZE OF CONGRESS

*“...effective decision-making that is representative of the views of the Association could be achieved with considerably reduced delegations.”*

Congress in February 2017 was attended by 290 delegates. This delegate figure fell to 182 for last September's Special Congress because counties were entitled to only half their annual delegation, plus their Central Council member.

I raised the issue of the size of Congress delegations in previous annual reports, while the issue was also addressed in 2011 by a Work Group under the chairmanship of Liam Ó Néill, of which I was a member.

The view of that Work Group was that effective decision-making that is representative of the views of the Association could be achieved with considerably reduced delegations. I strongly believe that the debates at the Special Congress lost nothing through the reduced delegate numbers; indeed, it seemed to me that about the same number of delegates participated in the Special Congress as at an annual Congress.

I can think of no good reason why this reduced level of representation should not become the norm.





## DISCIPLINARY PROCESS

*“Our system is not perfect and no doubt decisions are made from time to time that people don’t agree with.”*

Fairness to players or other members concerned is at the heart of the GAA’s disciplinary processes. So it is that a member’s case, if advocated to the full, will be reviewed at no less than four separate levels, namely by Central Competitions Control Committee (CCCC), Central Hearings Committee (CHC), Central Appeals Committee (CAC) and Disputes Resolution Authority (DRA). At every stage, the member is entitled to be represented and, in the case of the DRA, to be legally represented. It is a testament to the fairness of the procedure that, since it was introduced, not a single case has been brought to the courts. As the former secretary of the DRA, Jack Anderson, noted in an article last year: ‘As for fairness, there is an argument once the GAA’s disciplinary system is engaged, it is almost too accommodating.’

The CHC, CAC and DRA are each chaired by very experienced lawyers. The current chairs of CHC and CAC, Liam Keane and Matt Shaw (both senior solicitors), have both served as secretary to the DRA for several years and are widely respected experts in the rules of the GAA. The DRA panels are drawn from a pool of volunteers, including solicitors and barristers who, in addition to bringing their professional expertise and independence to the service of the GAA, are also involved in the grassroots activities of the Association.

The current secretary of the DRA is barrister Rory Hanniffy, and his immediate predecessor was Professor Jack Anderson, an expert in sports law and now Professor of Sports Law in Melbourne University. The CCCC is composed of volunteer members whose

only interest is the integrity of our games and the welfare of our players. In 2017, in 74% of cases, the penalty proposed by the CCCC was accepted by the players concerned. The CHC is entirely separate from the CCCC and applies its independent judgement to cases submitted to it.

Over the past four years an average of 34% of cases brought by the CCCC to CHC were decided in favour of the player concerned. An appeal may be made by a player to the CAC where a penalty is imposed by the CHC. Fewer than 17% of decisions imposing a penalty are appealed. Of the 15 appeals in the last four years, only two decisions of the CHC have been overturned by the CAC, which is a further demonstration of the even-handedness of the CHC. In CCCC disciplinary matters, there have been only four requests for arbitration to the DRA in the last four years, one of which was successful and three unsuccessful. I provide this information and these figures because they provide the context for any discussion on the implementation of our disciplinary rules.

Some media commentary about one case in 2017 made baseless claims in relation to the CCCC and CHC, including an allegation that the CCCC was involved in the entrapment of a player. The attacks on the members of the committees concerned with that case were completely without justification. The original case involved a hearing about an allegation of striking with the hand. The player involved was cleared of the charge. Subsequently, an allegation in relation to evidence given at the hearing was made to the CHC.



I do not propose to deal with the detail of that case, which was subsequently determined by the CAC in favour of the player. The truth of the matter is that the members of both CCCC and CHC sought to discharge their responsibilities in accordance with the rules. CCCC brought the original case and the subsequent allegation of false evidence in good faith and based on the facts as they understood them to be.

The suggestion of entrapment is utterly untrue. They applied the procedures in accordance with the Official Guide, and it is evidence of the fairness of the disciplinary process that two decisions of the CHC and the ultimate decision of the CAC favoured the player. An analysis of the cases brought by CCCC for the past four years demonstrate that:

(i) our system of discipline and appeals works fairly;

(ii) the recommendations of CCCC for a proposed penalty are accepted by a very high percentage of players;

(iii) the CHC applies an independence of mind in

overturning a substantial number of cases brought by CCCC;

(iv) the decisions of CHC are widely respected.

This is shown by the fact that there are very few appeals and that those appeals are largely unsuccessful.

Our system is not perfect and no doubt decisions are made from time-to-time that people don't agree with. However, the elaborate range of appeal mechanisms available gives every participant the opportunity to be treated fairly, and the evidence shows that this is indeed what happens. In addition, the Official Guide is reviewed on a regular basis, both on an ongoing general manner to improve it, but also as specific issues arise. This work will continue. We owe a debt of gratitude to the members of the various disciplinary committees. They perform an essential role in encouraging compliance with the rules and in making our games safer and more enjoyable for all.

## DUBLIN



*“While there may well be a mild and humorous northside/southside divide in Dublin... this geographical affiliation comes nowhere near matching the passionate identification of all Dubliners with their team.”*

Once again, an outstanding victory by Dublin in the All-Ireland football championship triggered calls from some commentators for the division of Dublin into two or three separate units. It is only a generation ago that the fear being expressed was that the GAA in our capital city was dying in face of the threat from soccer and rugby. How the mantra has changed ... and how memories are short.

There is no doubt that Dublin enjoys advantages over every other county. It has the largest population and can access greater financial resources through sponsorship.

But resources in terms of finance or population are no guarantee of All-Ireland success, as Dublin discovered between 1983 and 2011 when it won just one All-Ireland senior football title. That was in 1995, with a one-point victory over Tyrone. In achieving their five All-Ireland titles in the past seven years, the margin of victory was a single point in four finals (one after a replay) and a three-point victory over Kerry in 2015. This hardly constitutes evidence of a county steamrolling over all opposition, or proof of the need to divide a county because it is vastly superior to the rest and must be broken up into two or three divisions for inter-county competition.

The history of our games, and of sport in general, tells us that Dublin won't win forever. Apart from that, there are a couple of observations to be made. First, the main reason for Dublin's current success is that they have an outstanding group of players and an exceptional team management.

The county committee, too, must receive credit for the processes and structures they have adopted through which they identify talent, appoint the best personnel to prepare their teams and ensure that they get the best from their resources.

One of the reasons why Dublin footballers generate support is that they give Dubliners a unique opportunity to celebrate their proud Dublin identity. While there may well be a mild and humorous northside/southside divide in Dublin (which, of course, does not include the greater Dublin western suburbs), this geographical affiliation comes nowhere near matching the passionate identification of all Dubliners with their team.

One is led to wonder if the 'divide Dublin' proponents have given any thought to what the GAA would lose if Dublin were to be split. Have they given any thought to what Dubliners would lose? And is the sight of Dublin supporters on Hill 16 not one of the great spectacles in Irish sport? And are we not all looking forward to seeing Dublin supporters in their thousands heading out of the city to follow their team, which the championship format from 2018 will allow?

So, neither on competitiveness grounds, nor on account of the unfairness of depriving Dubliners of the pleasure of expressing their local and historical identity through the GAA (as every other GAA supporter is allowed to do), should we countenance the splitting up of Dublin.

There is all to lose in doing so, and nothing to gain.





## PRESENTATION OF OUR GAMES

*“It is high time that a limit be placed on the number of times the Maor Fóirne can enter the field of play”*

After constant complaints by team managers that it was difficult to convey instructions to players during a game, Central Council approved a regulation that a Maor Fóirne (who must be a selector) could enter the field of play. It was a reasonable response to a legitimate concern. In drafting the regulation, however, it was decided that the Maor Fóirne could go on to the pitch in very precise circumstances, namely when the ball has gone out of play following a score, when there has been a wide, or during a stoppage called by the referee.

The average number of such events during a game is approximately 50. The situation now is that the number of entries on to the pitch has reached truly ridiculous proportions, has become unsightly and, at times deliberately disruptive. According to the regulations, the Maoranna Uisce (two in football and three in hurling) are not permitted to enter the field of play, yet they often do so. Furthermore, when a player goes down with injury, two medics will race on to the pitch to treat him, which often functions as a signal for an infantry charge of the Maor Fóirne and two or three Maoranna Uisce on to the field. It is high time that a limit be placed on the number of times the Maor Fóirne can enter the field of play and that the rule restricting the Maor Uisce from entering the field of play be strictly enforced. Implementation of tighter regulations could be delegated to the fourth official, which would improve presentation of our games and reduce the possibility of interference with play or opposition personnel.

This does not require a change of rule. Proposals for



amendments to regulations are prepared by CCCC and approved by Central Council. It is time to limit the non-stop on-field coaching and tactical adjustments through these continuing incursions on to the field of play.

On a different aspect of games presentation, there is frustration among both media and our supporters at the practice of naming ‘dummy’ teams. It has got to the point that little notice is now taken of announced team lineouts. We had made a little progress by introducing a rule that requires counties participating in inter-county championship games to name the 26 players and to register their 15 starting players and 11 substitutes by not later than 9 a.m. on the Thursday before a weekend game.

This ended the practice of teams introducing players who were not listed in the panel of 26. But changes of status from starting player to substitute and vice versa within the 26 are now the norm and it is not unusual to see two or three alterations in personnel to the starting line-out.

I received one excellent suggestion during the year from the former Laois player Billy Sheehan as to how this problem can be addressed. If a change is made to the starting 15 after the Thursday morning deadline, that change should be made to count as one of the six substitutions that a team may make during the game.

Team managers would think twice before knowingly naming an incorrect starting 15 if it reduced their options for substitution during the game.

## INTERNATIONAL RULES

*“The levels of skill on display from both teams, along with the general competitiveness and the teams’ will to win, made for a very good spectacle and, in Perth, an atmosphere to savour.”*

International Rules returned to Australia with a two-game series in November. This followed two single-test series (in Australia in 2014 and in Ireland in 2015). The Irish squad was hit by withdrawals in the run-up to the games through injuries and club commitments, which deprived the team of some outstanding players from the previous series and from the 2017 All-Ireland championship. Australia, for its part, fielded a team that included many of the best players from the AFL Premiership, such as Patrick Dangerfield, Eddie Betts and the impressive Nathan Fyfe.

The Irish team was further affected by a virus in their training camp in the week leading up to the first test in Adelaide. Yet, despite the contrasting circumstances of the team’s preparations, the matches turned out to be both competitive and entertaining.

Just over 25,000 people attended the Adelaide match and saw an Irish team fight hard in the heat and hold the deficit to just ten points. In the second test in Perth, Ireland - cheered on by a large Irish support among the attendance of nearly 32,000 - moved to an aggregate lead by half time. However, the Australians gradually reeled Ireland in and secured a three-point win, and thus reclaimed the Cormac McAnallen Cup.

The levels of skill on display from both teams, along with the general competitiveness and the teams’ will to win, made for a very good spectacle and, in Perth, an atmosphere to savour. We are due to consult with the AFL over the next few months about the direction of the series in the coming years. I believe that it is worth maintaining the series as it remains a valuable international outlet for our finest Gaelic footballers.

12 November 2017; Manager Joe Kernan, captain Aidan O’Shea and the squad link arms as the National Anthems are played before the Virgin Australia International Rules Series 1st test at the Adelaide Oval in Adelaide, Australia.







## ANTI-DOPING

*“All our players are subject to the Irish anti-doping rules, and the GAA is fully committed to the maintenance of hurling and football as drug-free sports.”*

An example of gratuitous criticism directed at the GAA occurred in May 2017 in newspaper reports that a player had received a suspension for use of a contaminated caffeine tablet 13 months previously.

While there was also much balanced commentary on the issue, the first reaction of many was to criticise the GAA for not ‘announcing’ the case when the Association initially became aware of the results of a routine test. We had to endure the suggestion that the GAA was somehow hiding details of the alleged violation, with one TV programme asserting that, but for the newspaper story, the matter would not have become public and suggesting that there may have been other violations that were kept secret.

One journalist used the case to argue that the GAA has ‘always come across as fulfilling its anti-doping duties at the point of a bayonet’ and that the case showed ‘how difficult it is to make any sanction stick in the GAA’. These assertions fed a craving for sensationalism but were also utterly untrue. In this area, the rules of the Association are the Irish anti-doping rules, which were followed meticulously by the GAA. It is policy not to release specific details of any cases until the disciplinary procedures have run their course to ensure due process for players and to avoid misinformed commentary. Indeed, it is to the credit of all parties involved in this case that the information did not become public until the disciplinary process was nearly complete.

In the aftermath of the case the GAA Management Committee took a different view than Sport Ireland on

the issue of the payment of a player’s legal and other expenses by his County Committee. Sport Ireland was of the view that because the GAA, as the national governing body, prosecutes the case and because the GAA Anti-Doping Hearings Committee decides whether a violation of the Irish anti-doping rules has been committed, the payment of a player’s legal expenses by a County Committee creates a conflict of interest. Our view is that our players are amateurs – Gaelic games is their pastime, not their profession.

It would be hugely expensive for a player to defend himself at the GAA Anti-Doping Hearings Committee as he would need legal advice in what is quite a legalistic procedure. If the County Committee were not to pay the player’s legal fees, and if a player, as a consequence, were not to receive legal representation, one might reasonably ask how he could expect to receive a fair hearing. It is a long-standing principle of natural justice that a defendant be accorded a fair hearing, part of which is assured by proper legal representation. It is the view of the Management Committee that an unpaid amateur player is entitled to a full defence and, in instances where the violation is not intentional, his defence merits the support of his County Committee. We have had very constructive discussions with Sport Ireland, with which we have a very positive relationship, on how this issue might be resolved. Some possible solutions have been discussed, without, for the moment, producing an outcome satisfactory to all.

This case highlighted the ongoing task of ensuring that our players are fully educated on every aspect of the





# YOUR BODY YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

## DID YOU KNOW?

### STRICT LIABILITY

Players are solely responsible for any prohibited substance found in their system despite whether there was an intention to cheat or not.

## CONSEQUENCES

anti-doping rules to which they are bound. After an anti-doping finding against a player in 2015, the GAA developed a revised Anti-Doping Education strategy. In November of that year, three GAA and three GPA representatives were trained by Sport Ireland as anti-doping tutors to assist in its implementation.

This was the first time that Sport Ireland had offered national governing bodies the opportunity to train anti-doping tutors. In October 2016, a further nine GAA representatives were trained by Sport Ireland and in 2017 seminars were delivered to 34 senior inter-county panels. By early 2018 each county will have at least one trained anti-doping tutor.

As part of our education programmes, the seminars have been complemented by the regular circulation of anti-doping information and education resources to County Committees, backroom teams, support personnel and to the GPA.

That said, we cannot ignore the statement of the Irish Sport Anti-Doping Appeals Panel in their decision on a case this year that the evidence suggested an inadequate provision of education by a County Committee to an athlete. There is a challenge for every county in that regard. Part of the difficulty arises from

the fluctuating composition of inter-county panels. It is not unusual for a player to join a panel after the competitive year has begun; in such a circumstance, it is all too easy for a player to miss out on the briefings that usually take place in the weeks before the start of the Allianz leagues. This is an issue that must be addressed urgently by the GAA. There is a pressing need to introduce a system whereby a player is prohibited from playing on an inter-county team until he has certification that he has completed an acceptable anti-doping education programme.

Let me again make clear our policy on anti-doping.

All our players are subject to the Irish anti-doping rules, and the GAA is fully committed to the maintenance of hurling and football as drug-free sports. We have signed up to the provisions of the World Anti-Doping Agency, including blood-testing, and we are committed to doing everything we can to ensure that all our players are aware of the dangers to their health, to their playing career and to the integrity of our games of using banned substances.

All of which means that we will continue to promote anti-doping education and to vigorously pursue all potential anti-doping violations.

## CONCUSSION

*“It is important that the GAA continues to provide these learning opportunities to our doctors, physiotherapists and other medical professionals who tend to our teams”*

We were pleased in 2017 to be partners once again with the Bon Secours Health System and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Centre (UPMC) – a worldwide leader in concussion treatment – in hosting another successful Concussion Symposium in Croke Park in October, which followed on from a similar event in 2016. It is important that the GAA continues to provide these learning opportunities to our doctors, physiotherapists and other medical professionals who tend to our teams, very often on a volunteer basis.

Our Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee was also charged with reviewing and updating our concussion guidelines in 2017. This was in the context of a significant growth in medical

knowledge about the injury and followed the most recent international conference on Concussion in Sport, held in Berlin in 2016, which led to the fifth international consensus statement on the matter. The new guidelines were released recently.

They preserve and reiterate the GAA’s previously held motto of ‘if in doubt, sit them out’. They also include significant new information regarding Return to Play and Education Guidelines and how to help players cope while recovering from concussion.

In the coming months, we hope to increase awareness of these matters as we introduce our communications plan and as we continue to work with UPMC on education.



in association with the GAA

## GAELIC PLAYERS' ASSOCIATION

*“...an opportunity to strengthen the formal links between the two bodies, consolidate the services being provided for our players and ensure that the voice of our county players is heard...”*

At the end of 2016 we finalised a protocol with the GPA to cover the three-year period from 2017 to 2019.

The new agreement presented an opportunity to strengthen the formal links between the two bodies, consolidate the services being provided for our players and ensure that the voice of our county players is heard before major decisions affecting the inter-county game are taken.

To that end, several actions were taken in 2017, as provided for in the protocol. Among these:

- **the appointment of Micheál Carrigy (An Longfort) as the GAA's representative on the GPA's Finance Committee. The former Dublin footballer, Colin Moran, was likewise appointed to the GAA's National Financial Management Committee;**
- **the GPA's Matt Hoban joined the Trustees of the GAA's Benevolent Fund to deal with cases where surgical interventions for former inter-county players are being considered. During the year, the Fund dealt with seven such cases;**
- **as provided for in the protocol, the board of Le Chéile (the GAA/GPA Joint Venture commercial engine) was restructured. Dermot O'Reilly (Cill Dara) was appointed Chairman, with Paul O'Brien (An Lú) and Pádraig McBride (Liatroim) joining Peter McKenna, Feargal McGill, Brian Mulvihill and Matt Hoban as members. Its remit is to generate additional finance to help fund player-welfare initiatives;**

- **Dermot Earley, as the newly appointed CEO of the GPA, replaced Dessie Farrell on the Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee; Matt Hoban replaced Aidan Gordon as the GPA's representative on the Insurance and Risk Committee;**

- **the membership of the Joint Review Committee (which oversees the relationship between the two bodies) was also reconstituted. The full membership consists of An tUachtarán, An tArd Stiúrthóir, Feargal McGill, Tom Ryan (GAA) and Dermot Earley, Séamus Hickey, David Collins and Eamon Murphy (GPA). This group meets on a quarterly basis.**

An oversight group under the chairmanship of Ger Ryan (Tiobraid Árann) was also established to monitor the changes provided for in the Players'/Managers' Charter.

This group presented a report to Ard Chomhairle in November, which reviewed the provisions and operation of the Charter and recommended certain changes. Most significant will be the introduction of a new app in 2018 for the claiming of expenses, with the aim of reducing the workload of county officers and providing a more streamlined approach to the claiming of expenses in all counties.

Under the terms of the new arrangements, the GPA now presents its outline budget to Central Council each January and is required to present an end-of-year report outlining, on a programme-by-programme basis, how funding was used in the previous year.





10 December 2017; GPA President David Collins with Cara Jean Sle Summerville during a coaching session and end of season medal presentations at the Singapore Gaelic Lions GAA training session at The Grandstand, Turf Club Rd, Bukit Timah, Singapore.





## PÁIRC UÍ CHAOIMH

*“This development was a massive undertaking for a County Committee; Cork’s officer body and clubs deserve enormous credit for their courage and determination in taking on this project.”*

The new Páirc Uí Chaoimh hosted its first major games on July 22/23, 2017 when Tipperary defeated Clare and Waterford defeated Wexford in the quarter-finals of the All-Ireland senior hurling championship.

The stadium was officially opened on 22 October by Uachtarán Aogán Ó Feargháil. The original stadium had opened in June 1976; the innovations that have influenced stadium design since then are visible in the hugely impressive 2017 version. This development was a massive undertaking for a County Committee; Cork’s officer body and clubs deserve enormous credit for their courage and determination in taking on this project. The easy option would have been to seek to rebuild the stadium on a piecemeal basis, but Cork opted for a total rebuild and the result is a facility that will meet the needs of our supporter base for many years to come.

The new stadium provides an appropriate venue to showcase our games in one of our most active counties and also incorporates excellent training and player-friendly facilities. The conference facilities of the new Páirc Uí Chaoimh will enhance the city’s conference requirements and should generate additional revenue to promote the growth of the Association within the county.

These facilities will also, of course, place additional work on the officers of the County Committee. The management of such a major commercial facility presents a totally new type of challenge and, as we have learned from Croke Park, requires expertise that is not normally expected of GAA units, and, specifically,

23 July 2017; An aerial view of Páirc Uí Chaoimh as the Wexford and Waterford teams walk behind the Artane band during the pre-match parade prior to their GAA Hurling All-Ireland Senior Championship Quarter-Final match.



expertise that is not allowed for within the usual County Committee structure. The cost of constructing the stadium went significantly beyond the original budget and managing the debt will pose a financial challenge for Cork, but I have no doubt that, in time, the effort, foresight and vision of those who brought this major project to completion will be acknowledged and appreciated.





## ESRI

*“...player welfare being central to the protection and growth of our games, and to the preservation of our amateur ethos...”*

The evolution that has taken place in our games over the last decade or so has increased the commitments being demanded of our players, particularly those playing in senior inter-county competitions.

With player welfare being central to the protection and growth of our games, and to the preservation of our amateur ethos, the GAA and the GPA jointly commissioned the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in January 2017 to examine the commitments being demanded of senior inter-county players. In addition, the ESRI is investigating the impact, both positive and negative, that playing at this level has on players' lives and on their involvement with their clubs.

The research began in February and March 2017 with workshops conducted with a cross-section of 2016 senior inter-county players in each of the provinces. The information gathered at these workshops was then used to develop a questionnaire on player welfare, which was administered to all 2016 senior inter-county players between May and August.

The information gathered from this survey work is currently being examined and results from the study will be published in 2018.







## RUGBY WORLD CUP

*“The GAA had strongly supported the IRFU vision to deliver a ‘legendary tournament’ that would capture the imagination of the world.”*

We learned in November that the IRFU bid to host the 2023 Rugby World Cup had lost out to France. It was a major disappointment to the IRFU, which had prepared an outstanding bid that would have delivered significant economic benefits to the country.

The GAA had strongly supported the IRFU vision to deliver a ‘legendary tournament’ that would capture the imagination of the world. All the GAA venues that were included in the bid had the potential to be 2023 match venues. It was clear from the outset that the demands of hosting RWC matches meant that all venues would have needed some essential works (either permanent or temporary), and that there would have had to have been investment in the key areas of pitches, broadcast and media facilities, floodlighting requirements, hospitality provision and tournament administration.

The essential work required had been clearly identified in respect of each venue. I would like to compliment the relevant County Committees for the way in which they co-operated with the IRFU and its consultants and in meeting their requirements for the preparation of the bid.

A decision to hold the 2023 World Cup in Ireland would have provided an excellent opportunity to upgrade several of our stadiums through significant government investment.

That upgrading is a task that remains, but providing the funding to undertake that work will now be that much more difficult.



**RUGBY  
WORLD CUP™**  
HOST CANDIDATE  
2023

## AMATEUR STATUS

*“The rewards on offer are not material; they are the more intangible but selfless ones of contributing to the general good of one’s community.”*

In December 2010, I circulated a paper on the issue of payments to inter-county managers. The reason for writing the paper at that time was to stimulate a long-overdue debate on the issue that would, it was intended, lead to the formulation of a set of policies and procedures that would address the issue of unregulated payments to managers and members of management teams.

The hope was that a policy would emerge that would be consistent with the Association’s amateur ethos, would recognise, in a spirit of fairness, the important contribution of managers to the success of our games, and would help resolve a problem that, if left unresolved, would continue to leave the Association open to the charge of being complicit in a double standard.

The paper acknowledged that the modern-day manager is required to perform an enormously time-consuming role in the preparation and management of county teams. It posed the following question: if we accept that the position of inter-county team manager demands what is close to a full-time commitment to the position, could it not be reasonably argued that the manager should be entitled to certain allowances and conditions to enable him to carry out his function?

It argued that a situation in which some managers are paid, but to which the Association turns a blind eye, was not acceptable, undermined our volunteer spirit and tarnished the reputation of the Association.

The paper considered the objections and difficulties that would arise from any scheme that would formalise some form of recompense for managers

and went on to suggest a possible model for a recompense scheme for managers and ways of dealing with unregulated payments from outside sources.

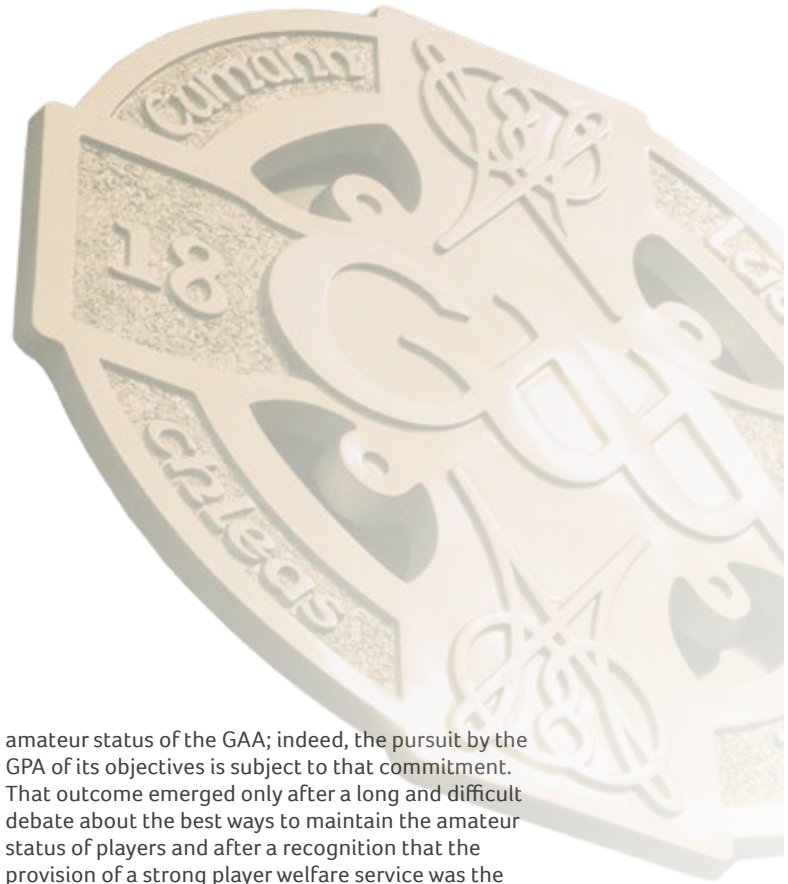
The paper noted, in conclusion, that the GAA had to face the reality that doing nothing about the issue did not constitute a viable policy; it simply avoided the issue.

In the end, unhappily, that is exactly what we did – we avoided the issue, and that remained the policy. The debate on the paper was a brief one, if, in fact, it could even be called a debate at all. I recall a meeting of county officers in Croke Park to consider the report. Overwhelming support was declared for maintaining our rules on amateurism, but even more obvious was a lack of enthusiasm for any attempt to implement the proposals made in the paper. The initiative simply failed.

So, what is the situation now, seven years on, and where does the Association stand? It needs to be very firmly stated again that not all managers are being paid. Many county-team and club-team managers are not being rewarded financially (beyond, that is, the legitimate expenses they receive for carrying out their function).

The most significant development since 2010, in my view, is that an increasing number of irregular payments are now being made at club level. Such payments strike at the heart of the origins and relevance of the Association’s amateur and volunteer ethos.

People give their time to their club because, in so



doing, they know that they are giving time to their community. One need only look at the extraordinary efforts that volunteers make to keep their clubs vibrant and their facilities upgraded.

I believe that many members of clubs are uneasy about the practice of paying managers and coaches outside of legitimate expenses, yet no one seems able to stop the practice. One idea floated is that counties and clubs should be allowed to avail of the services of members only from within their own county or from within their own club. It is a proposal with obvious merits, but which also raises concerns.

Many clubs and counties have benefited, without breaching our amateur-status rules, from the expertise of outside coaches who enjoy coaching/ managing but for whom the pathway to the main positions in their own club or county is blocked. We must be clear on the issue here: it is not about availing of the services of 'outsiders'; it is solely about making payments in breach of our amateur-status ethos.

Where do we go from here? Over the past 15 years we have been carrying on a debate about how we should recognise the contribution of our inter-county players to our games, but without giving way to some who advocate a 'pay-to-play' policy. The arrangements for the funding of the GPA are now fully in the public domain and have been widely debated.

The Recognition Protocol 2017-2019 between the GAA and GPA sets out clear requirements in relation to the provision of funding for player welfare and governance. Some do not like the funding arrangement, but the reality is that the GPA is committed to the maintenance and protection of the

amateur status of the GAA; indeed, the pursuit by the GPA of its objectives is subject to that commitment. That outcome emerged only after a long and difficult debate about the best ways to maintain the amateur status of players and after a recognition that the provision of a strong player welfare service was the key to retaining our amateur status. We need a similar debate on what our amateur status means in terms of payments to managers and coaches.

The Management Committee is looking at ways of strengthening the rule on amateur status, but I doubt if a change of rule on its own will make much difference. GAA rules that are difficult to monitor, or that confront comfortable ways of doing things, tend to be ignored. The great difficulty we face is that we are challenging deeply embedded attitudes that inform our behaviour, and that are therefore difficult to change. But we need to find a way to instigate the debate we avoided in 2010.

It may be bruising and may take time, but it will provide an opportunity to begin to change the existing payments culture and to come to a position consistent with our declared values.

I wrote in 2010 that the choice facing the Association was a simple one: either we do nothing in the certain knowledge that nothing will change and that in five or ten years we would still be lamenting the damage to our ethos and values – or we decide that it would be irresolute and defeatist not to confront directly a practice that we proclaim to be a blemish on the Association.

The choice is the same one now, and the need to address it even greater.

## GOVERNANCE

*“...a comprehensive document setting out the important elements of good governance, the standards we expect and how these are to be achieved.”*

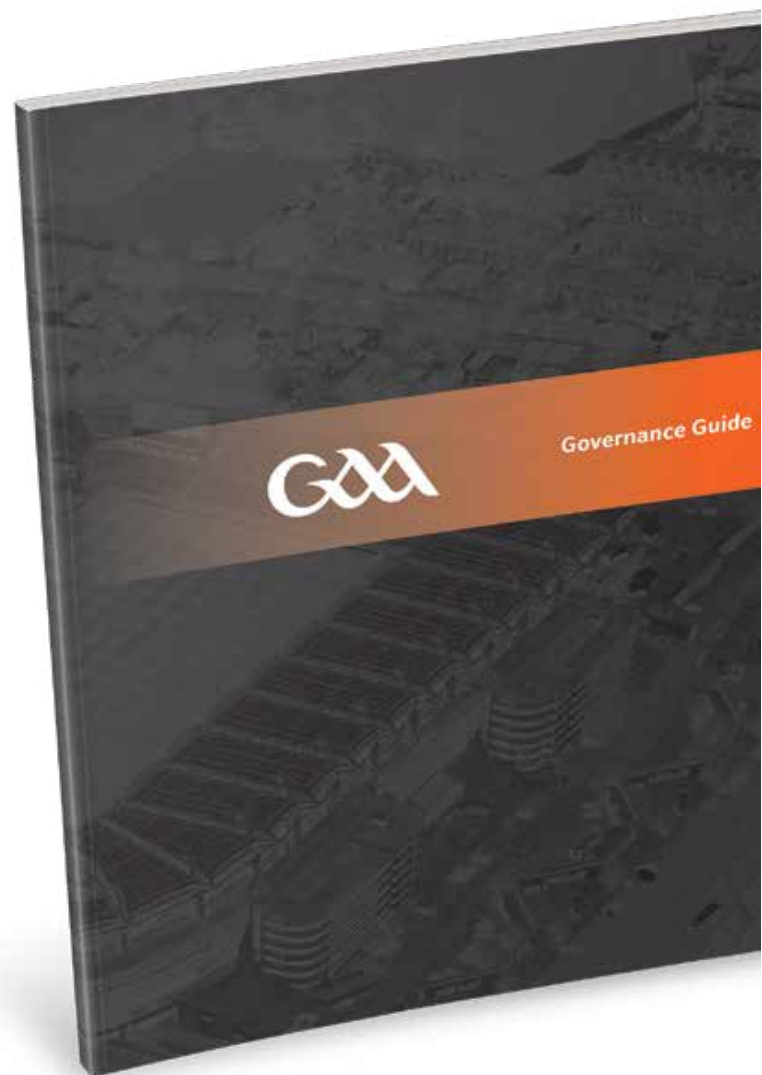
It is important to acknowledge that most of our units are well managed and observe good practice. This is not something that we can ever take for granted, of course, and continuous improvement is always something our units should seek to achieve. For this reason, the Association, guided by the National Audit and Risk Committee, has worked hard during the past year to make governance a priority.

During the year we published and launched our new Governance Guide. This is a comprehensive document setting out the important elements of good governance, the standards we expect and how these are to be achieved.

To promote both the guide and the topic, we undertook a programme of governance-awareness workshops throughout the country. Officers in every County Committee have participated in the programme. We intend to broaden our scope next year to include clubs.

The Association has also signed up to the voluntary code of best practice for community and sports organisations as promoted by Sport Ireland.

This means that our progress in promoting good governance will be externally monitored and our standards measured against other Irish sporting bodies.







## GAMES DEVELOPMENT

*“2017 was another year of hectic activity from a Games Development perspective.”*

Building on ground-breaking recruitment initiatives such as the Go Games, 2017 was another year of hectic activity from a Games Development perspective. There were record participation levels in the Kellogg’s Cúl Camps of 142,467 children (up 20% on 2016), which makes the camps, on a per capita basis, one of the bigger child promotions in the world of sport.

Participation figures were also positive in the hurling and football Féile tournaments. 288 boys’/girls’ teams attended the national hurling/camogie Féile and 256 boys’/girls’ teams attended the football event. When regional Féiles are considered, total participation for 2017 was 17,832, which represents a 70% increase on the 2013 figure.

The Celtic Challenge (U17 hurling) marked the first occasion when hurling teams from all 32 counties participated in the same competition at national level. A total of 150 games were completed across six divisions and a very successful finals day was hosted at Netwatch Cullen Park in Carlow.

A new participation activity, ‘Fun & Run’, was launched in September. This is a form of rounders that can be adapted to the needs of hurlers, footballers and handballers. The evidence to date is that the game will play an influential part in spanning the able-bodied/disabled divide and that it has real potential in terms of catering for multi-ethnic and cross-generational groups.



An initiative – known as the 5 Star Centre – was launched by way of reinvigorating activity within primary schools and ensuring that work within this sector continues to be central to the Association’s activities. The principle that underpins this initiative is that all children are provided with a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per week through the medium of Gaelic games. The key features – Have-Ball, Fun & Run, Camán & Play, Catch & Kick, Go Games & the Go Games Skill Challenges – have been configured to meet needs that are set out in the Irish Primary School curriculum. If there is a good response to this initiative – and the evidence to date from pilot areas has been extremely positive – the 5 Star Centre could have a transformative impact on activity levels and could be used to provide a quality introduction to Gaelic games.

Super Games can be defined as informal games opportunities for youth players who are not being adequately catered for within the formal network. The nature and number of playing opportunities in Super Games continued to grow in 2017. In fact, they are now a vital part of the ‘Future Leader/TY Programme’, which has also gone from strength-to-strength in the past year with support from the Professional Development Service for Teachers section in the Department of Education and Skills and the All-Ireland Post-Primary Schools Council. Current indications are that there could be up to 300 post-primary schools involved in 2018. This shows what can be achieved through a partnership approach.

## GAMES DEVELOPMENT (continued)

*“...games development is one of the most important elements of GAA activities”*

The response to a Pilot Award 2 Coaching Course, which was introduced during the year, was most encouraging, as was the emphasis on ensuring that all coaches know the capacities they are trying to develop and that they understand why core values are the key to the development process.

### **Games Development Review**

It is stating the obvious to claim that games development is one of the most important elements of GAA activities. This is the area through which we first engage with young people and where we begin the long endeavour of developing their interest and participation in our games. The future success of the GAA depends on our ability to attract young people to our games, to have them continue to play as they move through adolescence and adulthood, and then, later, to have them involved as volunteers.

Games development also represents a very significant ongoing financial investment by the GAA in our funding of the infrastructure, expertise and activities necessary to ensure that our games remain attractive and relevant to Irish society. Games development permeates every layer and unit of the GAA, from Croke Park outwards to the provinces, counties, clubs and schools; it must also address a wide range of age groups, areas of expertise and personal, societal and cultural factors that influence the involvement of Irish people in our Association.

It can easily be appreciated, then, that the GAA games

development endeavour is a dynamic and complex one – dynamic because our Western societies are changing so quickly and because of the variety of factors that influence participation in our games, and complex because of the sheer variety of people (participants and volunteers), geographical locations, educational institutions, GAA units and areas of expertise that it must consider if it is to function successfully and optimally.

Clearly, the structures that govern the organisation of games development activities determine its success. It is for this reason that the GAA believed that it was time to conduct a thorough review of the functioning of games development activities and engaged Gary Keegan, the former Director of the Irish Institute of Sport, to undertake the review.

Gary’s background in amateur sports has earned him the reputation as a leading theorist and innovator in the field. His knowledge of sports organisation, strategy, performance, talent development, coach education and sports science is extensive and of critical relevance to the GAA. The research that Gary carried out for this review was wide-ranging and thorough. He presented research-based findings that will serve to improve current practices and structures and to more sharply define policy aims. His recommendations, when implemented, will ensure that our games development activities evolve to meet the needs of the GAA in the years to come.



## COMMUNICATIONS

*“In the past number of years the GAA centrally has learned not only to embrace the digital world but has grown to reach a certain level of maturity in this area.”*

More than 160 matches were shown on television in Ireland in 2017, thanks to our partners RTÉ, TG4, Sky Sports, BBC and eir Sport. The standard of production and presentation values was again improved across the board and live GAA TV coverage continues to attract strong audience figures.

Yet again, the two All-Ireland senior finals attracted massive audiences – football peaked at 1.3 million viewers and hurling at 1.1 million. Domestic live streams of our games continue to show significant growth, an indication of the way many will view our games in the years ahead. RTÉ Radio covered a wide array of games throughout the year, through both live commentary and reporting, and captured the GAA community’s attention on Morning Ireland during regular Monday morning qualifier-round draws. For the fourth consecutive championship season GAAGO offered GAA members more than 125 live games on any connected device world-wide (matches were viewed in 162 different countries).

One of the decisions we made in the allocation of broadcast assets in 2016 was to retain ownership of short-form match-clip rights. Utilising these 20/30-second clips on our own platforms had been discussed in recent years, but was delayed until we felt that we had the appropriate channels and marketing resources to properly exploit the content. GAANOW, our new online video-content platform, was launched in May to service our members’ demands to see

match-action highlights (within a few minutes of the play taking place on the field) on any connected smart device, anytime, anywhere in the world, and free of charge.

This match-day half-time and full-time content, which is supported midweek by nostalgic archive footage and other preview/review features, has seen huge surges in interest and in our online exposure across GAA.ie, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The service will expand from its initial six-month trial – which achieved more than 20 million video views – to a 12-month ‘always on’ format in 2018. This broader offering of in-game clips across more than 100 match days, as well as our intention to take the 2017 very successful GAANOW Live Facebook magazine shows to a larger audience, is both challenging and exciting.

Presenting the best snippets of our games on channels on which the next generation of GAA players, volunteers, officers and administrators focus so much of their attention is crucial. This direct-to-fan model is becoming more and more common in international sports broadcasting practice and the GAA is the leader in much of this development in the Irish sporting context.

In the past number of years, the GAA centrally has learned not only to embrace the digital world but has grown to reach a certain level of maturity in this area.





Our social media channels have a strong following, and what we offer on each has been strategically aligned with the audience.

While there is always more to learn, our knowledge of how digital and social communications work best for the GAA has greatly expanded. We want to impart this knowledge to our wider community of provinces, counties and clubs.

Websites remain the most important communications platform for the Association at all levels.

As we can't control the changes that social media channels may introduce, it is important that we have a digital channel that we own and fully control. This year we entered into a partnership with Omagh-based Lairdesign to support a strong website template for counties and provinces that will provide a high-standard and consistent appearance and function, with a multitude of benefits for those who adopt it.

By the end of 2018 all four provinces will have transferred onto this website template and a growing number of counties will have followed suit.

## MARKETING AND SPONSORSHIP

*“Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research revealed a very positive response to the new campaigns”*

In 2017, we ran an integrated 12-month GAA marketing campaign across TV, radio, print, out-of-home and digital media. This was a major seven-figure investment aimed at retaining a strong presence among current, lapsed and future members.

We continued the very successful ‘Be There All the Way’ tagline throughout the year and supported it with three new competition-specific campaigns – ‘Step Up’ (Allianz leagues), ‘True Colours’ (AIB Club Championships) and ‘In Us All’ (senior championships). Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research revealed a very positive response to the new campaigns, particularly among the ‘occasional’ and ‘non-attender’ cohorts, a positive finding in our efforts to increase our overall supporter numbers.

The Association also launched its grma rewards programme to thank and reward loyal supporters; the grma database will also help greatly with communication in the longer term.

The GAA enjoyed a strong year in 2017 in terms of sponsorship, renewing several contracts and attracting new sponsors for existing and new competitions. Bord Gáis Energy and Littlewoods Ireland replaced Etihad Airways and Liberty Insurance as sponsors of the All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship.

AIB was nominated for five European sponsorship awards for their campaigns on behalf of the inter-

county and club championships, and Ericsson signed up to become the GAA’s first technology partner.

PwC came on board as the new sponsor of the GAA/GPA All-Stars, while other new sponsorship agreements saw EirGrid sponsor the Irish team for the International Rules series and Bank of Ireland become sponsors of the Celtic Challenge.

We are indebted to and value the support of all our sponsors. We believe that the number of renewals and new sponsorships completed in 2017 confirm that our partnerships work for both the GAA and our partners.



## CROKE PARK STADIUM

*“...a continuous programme to maintain the stadium at the highest standards of Europe’s top stadiums.”*



The total match-day attendances in the stadium in 2017 was 1.16 million. Seventy-three games were played on the pitch, and the stadium also hosted two concerts (Coldplay and U2), 15 days of Go Games and four days of Cumann na mBunscol finals.

Despite the heavy programme, the pitch came through well. Pitch renovation during the playing season needs great care and attention, so the decision to purchase a farm to grow our own turf is a wise one and significantly reduces the risks of partial pitch replacement after concerts.

We must congratulate our pitch management team, led by Stuart Wilson, for the continuing high standard of their work. His staff is also responsible for the preparation and maintenance of pitches at the National Games Development Centre at Abbotstown. Over 22,000 players used the facility between April and October, so it is a tribute to the pitch management team that the quality of the pitches is always of the highest standard.

Croke Park again maintained a 0%-to-landfill performance in 2018 and retained all its sustainability accreditation. The stadium was shortlisted for several facilities’ management awards and won the ‘Excellence in Sustainability’ award at the Facilities Management Awards in Dublin in April last. The stadium and its Meetings and Events business continued to deliver a strong dividend to the Association, with a €7.5 million

contribution in 2017. Capital expenditure will continue to be high, reflecting the age of the structure and the need to have a continuous programme to maintain the stadium at the highest standards of Europe’s top stadiums.

The GAA Museum attracted 156,000 visitors in 2017, 35% of whom came from overseas. The ‘Imreoir to Bainisteoir’ exhibition was launched, which featured personalities who have achieved All-Ireland senior championship success as both player and manager, including Páidí Ó Sé, Brian Cody, Kevin Heffernan and Ann Downey. Four more players were inducted into the Hall of Fame – Jack O’Shea and Matt Connor in football, and Pádraig Horan and Frank Cummins in hurling.

A new ‘Friends of the Museum’ membership programme was introduced to support the museum in its mission to preserve and promote our games and to identify and preserve documents and artefacts that record the values, culture and history of the GAA and the individuals who have contributed to the Association. The Museum Summer School featured a strong list of speakers, including national and international experts discussing diverse topics under the theme of Sport and Politics.

The keynote speaker was Dr Harry Edwards, former Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, who presented on Sport and Racial segregation in America.

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

*“Appropriate use of IT systems and solutions is a vital component of the Association’s activities at every level.”*

Technology, and the use of technology within a GAA context, becomes more important every year. Appropriate use of IT systems and solutions is a vital component of the Association’s activities at every level.

In recent years significant investment has been made to procure, implement and support systems that enable the smooth administration of the Association in an efficient and compliant manner. Further resources were invested in 2017 to ensure that GAA units are appropriately supported by technology and that the wider Association is receiving an appropriate return on the investments made in IT. Some of the key initiatives undertaken in 2017 are outlined below.

### **IT Strategy**

The role of IT in the GAA was outlined in the recently published GAA IT Strategy. This document describes how the core principles of the Association will continue to be supported by the technologies available and highlights the additional developments planned to further the overall goals of the Association.

Fundamental to the strategy is the need to appropriately support volunteers in the functioning of their individual roles, making administration more efficient and reducing the amount of time and money that clubs, counties and provinces spend on administration. Equally important is the need to ensure that IT systems are intuitive, simple to use, secure, reliable and compliant with relevant legislation. The ways in which these requirements are met are outlined in the document. An increased focus is placed on exploiting

systems to enable the concept of a ‘Digital Club’, making possible increased levels of analytics and management information (reports).

The specific initiatives required to meet the objectives of the overall strategy, and associated timelines, are also outlined. The IT Strategy is available to download from the GAA.ie website, or by contacting the GAA IT Department via email [itsupport@gaa.ie](mailto:itsupport@gaa.ie)

### **Data Protection**

There are significant changes to Data Protection legislation coming into effect in 2018 that will have an impact on how the GAA at all levels engages with its members. It is important that every GAA club, and indeed every member, is aware of how these changes in the law will affect the ways in which members’ personal information can be collected and used for GAA purposes.

A lot of work has been completed to date and further work is planned for 2018 to ensure that GAA units comply with the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation. This work has focused on three broad areas, namely technology, processes and people:

#### **1. Technology**

It will be impossible to deliver compliance without the use of technology. Secure, accurate and access-controlled systems to capture, process, maintain and delete information are critical. Significant upgrades and improvements in the functionality of centrally





managed GAA IT Systems are required to comply with GDPR. These changes are being introduced on a phased basis during the first five months of 2018. Areas being enhanced include the central GAA membership database (Servasport), OneDrive (for paper forms), the grma database (to manage consent to contact) and the Garda Vetting system.

## 2. Processes

Significant work is required to develop, implement and monitor processes that can ensure compliance with the requirements of GDPR.

Guidance on how to implement these processes has been provided to all GAA clubs, county committees and provincial councils, and includes advice on how to manage paper documentation containing personal data. Compliant processes that are required include Membership, Subject Access Requests, Processing Activity Records and Breach Notification.

The legislation requires that compliance can be proven; implementing appropriate processes is critical to proving that a club is compliant.

The requirement to have Data Protection expertise available to clubs has been identified and a Data Protection Officer is being appointed to address any queries raised.

## 3. People

The most important factor in delivering GDPR compliance

is the behaviour of the people who will be capturing and processing the personal data of our members.

To ensure that GAA volunteers and employees are aware of what is entailed, a comprehensive awareness campaign has been undertaken with the overall aim of ensuring that every GAA member is aware of their rights as individuals under the new legislation and their responsibilities if they manage personal data.

In-depth guidance and training, including documentation, seminars and on-line training, have been provided, and will continue to be made available to support volunteers and to ensure that they are equipped to comply with GDPR.

### GAA Membership App

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## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (continued)

*“The provision of adequate IT infrastructure is critical to match-day operations in key stadiums.”*

### **grma**

A national GAA membership card and rewards programme known as grma (Go Raibh Maith Agat) was launched in January 2017 and provides a practical mechanism for the GAA to thank GAA members and supporters for participating in GAA activities.

GAA club members who register for the scheme receive a personalised GAA membership card and access to an online account where they can avail of rewards and special offers in exchange for points earned for GAA-related activities, such as buying tickets for matches.

Over 10,000 people have registered to date and have received rewards including footballs, sliotars, jerseys, match tickets, vouchers and special offers.

### **County Grounds**

The provision of adequate IT infrastructure is critical to match-day operations in key stadiums.

Supporting key services, such as ticket scanning, health and safety systems (e.g. public address, CCTV) and press/media facilities, are especially important. A review of existing facilities and investment in additional infrastructure has been ongoing for several years, and further progress was made in this regard in 2017.

Key stadiums, including O’Moore Park, O’Connor

Park, Walsh Park, Wexford Park, Pearse Stadium, MacHale Park, Healy Park, Breffni Park, The Athletic Grounds, Páirc Esler and Hyde Park have been assessed and recommendations made to the Infrastructure Committee regarding suggested investments.

### **E-vetting**

Recent changes in legislation governing child protection have made it mandatory for all individuals who interact with children or vulnerable persons to be vetted by An Garda Síochána.

This legislation applies to GAA coaches; all GAA coaches are legally obliged to be vetted before they take up roles in their clubs that involve working with children.

The GAA’s National Children’s Office is responsible for ensuring that this occurs and has deployed an e-vetting system to achieve this. It enables the existing Office 365 infrastructure to manage the relevant information, documents and workflows. In 2017 this functionality has also been made available to the LGFA and Camogie Associations, and arrangements have been made to ensure that vetting processes are shared between all three organisations.

### **Online Expenses**

A system has been developed to assist with the management of expenses for inter-county players.



This is provided through an online form where players can submit claims and supporting receipts for mileage, allowable expenses and nutritional allowances.

The claims are verified by a member of the team management, approved by the county committee and paid through existing mechanisms in a transparent and measurable manner. The potential to expand the system to cater for other expense claims is being evaluated.

#### **Office 365 training and Officer Development Programme**

With the assistance of the Club Officer Development Programme, a process to provide specific training on the use of IT systems and, in particular, Office 365, has been implemented. IT Tutors have been trained, and they provide classroom training to volunteers as part of the overall Officer Development Programme. The range of IT training provided in this manner will be expanded in 2018.

#### **Internet Connectivity**

Croke Park is connected to the outside world using eir's high-speed Next Generation Network (NGN).

This connection was upgraded in 2017 (having previously been upgraded in 2015) to ensure that the speed of internet connection is sufficient to meet the stadium's current and projected future needs.

The firewall, used to protect the Croke Park Network from external threats, was also upgraded in 2017.

#### **Mobile Phone Network – DAS Project**

A significant project is currently underway to upgrade the mobile phone network in Croke Park through the implementation of a Distributed Antennae System (DAS). When completed in early 2018 Croke Park will have adequate mobile phone coverage (3G and 4G) for full-capacity matches.

#### **Gaelic Games Television Archive**

An ongoing collaboration between the GAA Museum and the Broadcast Authority of Ireland, known as the Gaelic Games Television Archive, is nearing completion and will be ready in the middle of 2018.

It has resulted in the digitisation of 500 inter-county games from a variety of analogue formats to digital files. These games, from 1961 onward, have been catalogued to best international archival standards. Edited highlights of the All-Ireland finals are currently being created and will be available to view on the GAA's website. Full games will be available on request.

Several other projects were also realised in 2017, including upgrades to the Finance System used by county committees (Microsoft Dynamics), the Meetings and Events booking system used in Croke Park, and the tills systems used in the GAA Museum and concession units.

## GAA HANDBALL

*“...there is a great sense of excitement as work finally begins on the building of the new National Handball and Community Centre...”*

2017 was a year of progress for GAA Handball. Participation levels and attendances continued to rise, and there is a great sense of excitement as work finally begins on the building of the new National Handball and Community Centre and the renewal of the Sackville Avenue area of Ballybough.

Once completed, the centre will provide a state-of-the-art home for GAA Handball. With a new strategic plan for handball due in 2018, these are exciting times for the sport.

In March, Armagh's Charlie Shanks captured his first Open Singles title at the All-Ireland 40x20 finals in Kingscourt, having suffered defeat in four previous finals, while Cork's Catriona Casey defeated Limerick's Martina McMahon to capture her third Ladies title. Catriona went on to win the 60x30 Senior Singles final for a fifth time in Croke Park in September, while Robbie McCarthy became a six-time champion and first winner of the Ducksey Walsh Cup.

The One Wall Nationals in Breaffy House in Castlebar in July was another special occasion – over 400 players competed over the three days. This version of the game continues to be the biggest growth area for GAA Handball. It is a simple and cost-effective way to introduce members to handball and is an excellent addition to any school or GAA club facility.

I would encourage GAA clubs to embrace the game.



**Details of how to install a One Wall are available on [www.gaahandball.ie](http://www.gaahandball.ie).**

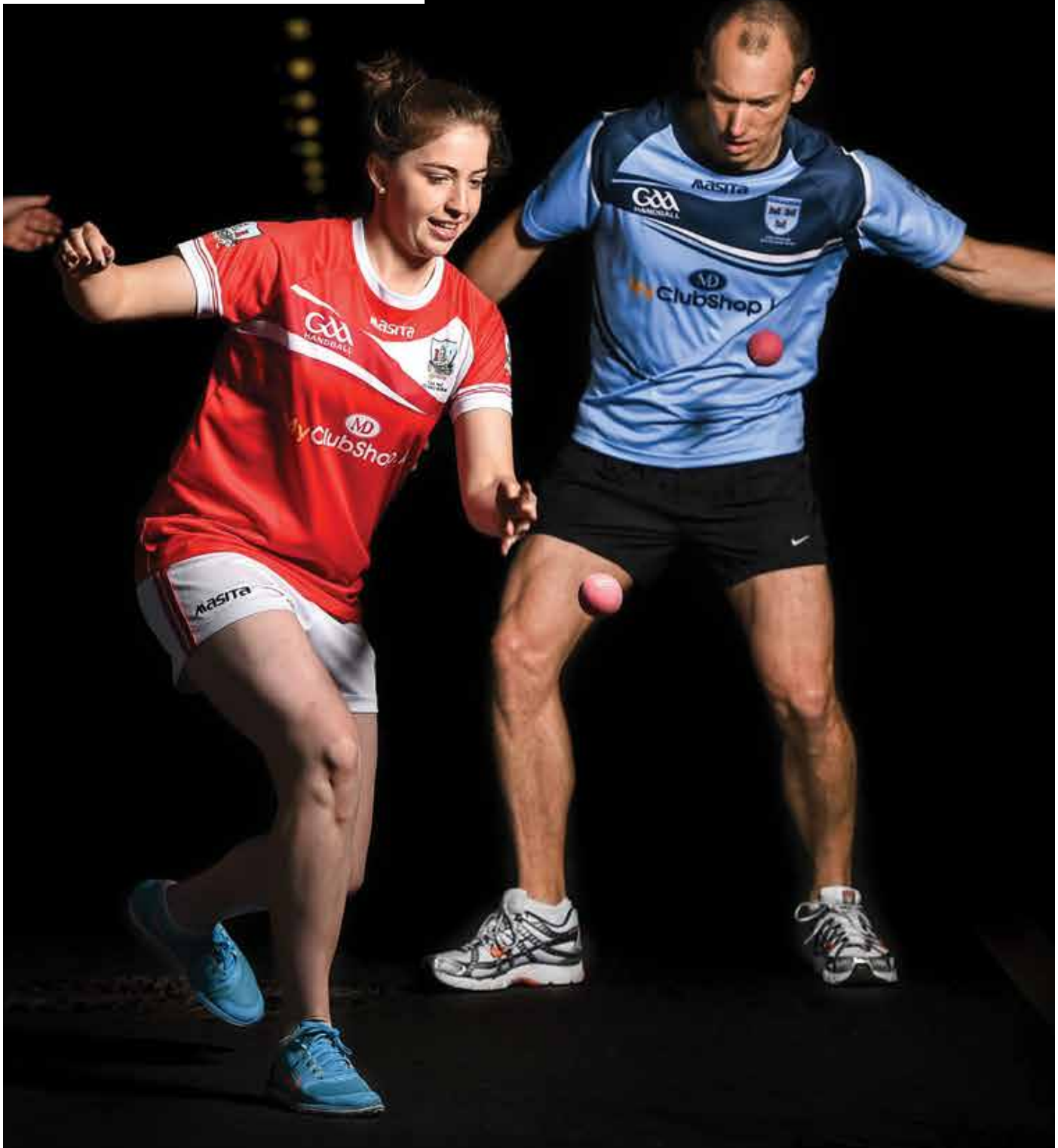
GAA Handball appointed a workgroup to examine the current GAA Handball fixtures programme and has recommended changes to provide a better, more balanced programme of national fixtures. I encourage delegates to Handball's Congress to embrace these changes which, in my opinion, will serve the game well.

Finally, 2018 will see a Team Ireland contingent travel to Minnesota to compete in the 2018 World Handball Championships with high hopes for Irish success.





*Reigning ladies single champion Catriona Casey, Cork, with reigning Senior Men's Champion Robbie McCarthy, Westmeath.*



## RELATIONSHIP WITH CAMOGIE AND LADIES FOOTBALL

*“...detailed discussions have taken place with both the LGFA and the Camogie Association to try to agree arrangements for integration at national level”*

The GAA, Ladies Gaelic Football Association and the Camogie Association each have their own governance and traditions. All three organisations work in a co-operative fashion to promote the playing of Gaelic games. Notwithstanding their separate formal identities, the de facto integration of GAA, Ladies Gaelic football and Camogie is happening on a widespread basis around the country.

Each of the associations recognises the benefits of a One Club approach in promoting the playing of Gaelic games at both juvenile and adult levels. Adopting a One Club approach allows clubs to cater for the whole family in an integrated fashion.

This approach is working successfully in many clubs and, pending any formal integration, the associations are committed to encouraging the implementation of this model. It was for this reason that they agreed guidelines in June 2017 to provide all clubs with a

framework in which to operate on a One Club basis. The guidelines are not mandatory and do not seek to be all-encompassing, but they are a useful tool for clubs that wish to enter a One Club structure in a spirit of goodwill.

Since the publication of the One Club guidelines in June, detailed discussions have taken place with both the LGFA and the Camogie Association to try to agree arrangements for integration at national level between the two organisations and the GAA. A draft ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ has been prepared with both the Camogie Association and the LGFA to establish a national arrangement, whereby common national-level functions will be jointly administered with the GAA through unified planning and blended resources. Each Memorandum also recognises that unique national-level functions/activities will continue to be administered distinctively by the Camogie Association and LGFA.





10 September 2017; Davina Tobin of Kilkenny in action against Amy O'Connor of Cork during the Liberty Insurance All-Ireland Senior Camogie Final match between Cork and Kilkenny at Croke Park.





## COMMUNITY AND HEALTH

*“Over the past twelve months, almost 500 Healthy Clubs Officers received training provided by tutors from our County Health and Wellbeing Committees.”*

### **The Healthy Club Project**

The efforts by clubs and counties to make GAA communities healthier gathered pace in 2017. Our Community and Health department continues to develop its partnerships with Healthy Ireland, the HSE, the National Office for Suicide Prevention and the Public Health Agency to ensure that evidence-based policies, partnerships and programmes are designed to support the wellbeing of our members.

A milestone was reached in November last when 58 clubs, including at least one in each county, were awarded official recognition as Ireland’s first ‘Healthy Clubs’. The Minister for Health Promotion, Catherine Byrne praised the GAA and recipient clubs for their leadership in a time of unparalleled health challenges in Ireland.

The clubs’ 18-month journey saw their project teams develop action plans that responded to identified health needs among their membership and their communities. Areas of focus included emotional wellbeing, physical activity for non-playing members, healthy eating, smoke-free clubs, gambling, drug, and alcohol education, and community engagement and development, with the latter focusing especially on inclusion and engaging older members of our communities.

One of the motivations in hosting four provincial Healthy Club roadshows last spring was to gauge the interest of clubs not yet participating in the project. 550 delegates from 290 clubs attended to hear case studies

that outlined the achievements of the Healthy Clubs. The impressive attendance augurs well for increased engagement as the programme expands. Phase 3, to be launched in early 2018, will target 150 clubs, while Phase 4, intended to begin in early 2020, will see the project open to all interested clubs. The Healthy Club project, now recognised at European level through the Sports Clubs for Health Project as a flagship model for the provision of health promotion in a sports-club setting, could not have achieved such an accelerated growth and influence without the outstanding support from Irish Life through our three-year Corporate Social Responsibility partnership.

The influence of the Healthy Clubs project has spread throughout the Association and has led to a change of designation of the role of the Club Health and Wellbeing Officer – the role is now captured under the name of Healthy Club Officer. This removes the perceived responsibility for health from falling on the shoulders of one individual, and places it on the entire club. It is everyone’s responsibility to contribute to the ethos of a Healthy Club – from the executive, coaches and players through to every member.

Over the past 12 months, almost 500 Healthy Clubs Officers received training provided by tutors from our County Health and Wellbeing Committees, preparing these officers for entry to the Healthy Club Project. All clubs should strive to earn the right to fly the Healthy Club flag, emulating the achievement of the 58 that have already earned the right to do so.





23 November 2015; Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Gael  
Aogán Ó Fearghail speaking during the  
Dermot Earley Youth Leadership Initiative.



## COMMUNITY AND HEALTH (continued)



### Critical Incident Response

On the back of the launch of the GAA's Critical Incident resource in 2015, the Community and Health department in Croke Park receives requests for assistance in approximately 50 critical incidents each year.

Every incident is unique and requires its own response. In 2017 a two-hour training module was developed to support county executives in responding appropriately in the event of their being contacted by a club experiencing a critical incident. The training was designed in consultation with the HSE, National Office for Suicide Prevention, the PHA, the Defence Forces and with counties and clubs that have experienced incidents in the recent past.

Our best work during such incidents is often underestimated, for example in the opening of the clubhouse to the community as a familiar place to gather, or providing the reassuring normality of play and social gatherings in times of loss. By doing so we are providing a service to the community. But we are not a service provider. Our duty of care towards those in need of professional help lies in helping them to connect with the appropriate service provider.

To date, almost 20 counties have adopted their critical-incident response plans; these counties, with the support of their County Health and Wellbeing Committees, will now support clubs in adopting their plans. I recommend that all units take the time to prepare a plan. Such proactive steps are appreciated and vital when the unexpected happens.

### The Dermot Earley Youth Leadership Initiative

In the space of four years the Dermot Earley Youth Leadership Initiative has grown from 60 to 400 GAA participants, from over 200 clubs.

Between September and October programmes were successfully launched in nine counties (Galway, Roscommon, Mayo, Donegal, Monaghan, Antrim, Dublin, Offaly and Kildare), with 166 GAA members aged 15 to 18 years (both male and female) having the opportunity to develop key leadership and life skills through a partnership with National University Galway and Foróige.

The skills that the participants develop along the way – including decision-making, resilience, communication, leadership, team-building, critical thinking and presentation skills – will stand them in good stead both as athletes and as future leaders within the GAA and their communities.

Those who complete all three modules can graduate from NUIG with a Foundation Certificate in Youth Leadership and Community Action. The workshops are facilitated by trained GAA and Foróige tutors who have received a Diploma in Training and Education from NUIG.

With the blessing of the Earley family, the DEYLI Steering Committee is actively seeking an appropriate commercial partner that can help make this exceptional initiative available to young leaders of the future in all 32 counties.



### The Social Initiative

The GAA Social Initiative experienced a real revival in 2017, with an impressive increase in the number of clubs and counties engaging with their older members in meaningful, fulfilling ways. A €500 grant, provided through Irish Life's Healthy Club CSR partnership, enabled county Health and Wellbeing Committees to organise a subsidised trip to the GAA Museum. Almost 500 older members, from Antrim, Meath, Limerick and Roscommon among others, have benefited from the memorable outing in 2017. Other counties, such as Donegal and Mayo, arranged special gatherings for older members at national league matches or on county-final day. Clubs such as Rosemount in Westmeath, the Spa Club in Kerry, Ballindeereen in Galway and Clonduff in Down have made the Social Initiative a key part of their community identity.

If we are to live up to our mission of offering life-long engagement, we must be mindful of becoming age-friendly in everything we do. As Ireland prepares for an increasingly elderly population, in line with most European countries, such efforts will become increasingly important. While it is, in itself, the right thing to do – the GAA, after all, has grown through the efforts and support of our past generations – it is also the case that the wisdom and experience of older people will benefit and enhance our Association.

### Health and Wellbeing Structures

All of our counties have in place Health and Wellbeing committees that support the work described above, and that also assist in the delivery of safeTALK (suicide alertness

training) to our members. I mentioned last year how the many female volunteers have been to the fore of this movement and are bringing with them a welcome gender balance to the Association, along with fresh new thinking and impetus. This continues apace.

The initiative of an annual health-themed All-Ireland semi-final hosted in Croke Park continues. 2017 witnessed an innovative partnership with the HSE QUIT team to promote a message of support to smokers who are seeking to stop smoking. Inspired by the thirty-plus Healthy Clubs that became smoke-free as part of their journey, Croke Park went smoke-free to mark the occasion. Surveys carried out with our patrons on the day suggest an overwhelming majority in favour of that move becoming permanent, which is something we will look at in 2018. We also launched a very exciting and successful partnership with the RNLI in 2017 to support their Respect the Water campaign, and to help them in their efforts to reduce the number of drownings in Ireland. We are both volunteer-driven organisations, and in many communities the leaders in the local GAA club are the coxswains, helmsmen or PRO for their local RNLI station, which explains why, I believe, that the partnership was received with such widespread enthusiasm.

There is one big difference between us, however: when GAA players put on their gear, they play a match; when the RNLI crew gear up, they are saving lives while putting their own at risk. We are delighted to support their efforts as best we can and I hope the partnership expands at grassroots level which will be to the benefit of, in particular, our coastal clubs.



## NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLAN

*“...as we come to the end of the lifespan of the current plan, it is apparent that we have set a high standard for ourselves and have demonstrated a commitment to realise the plan’s objectives.”*

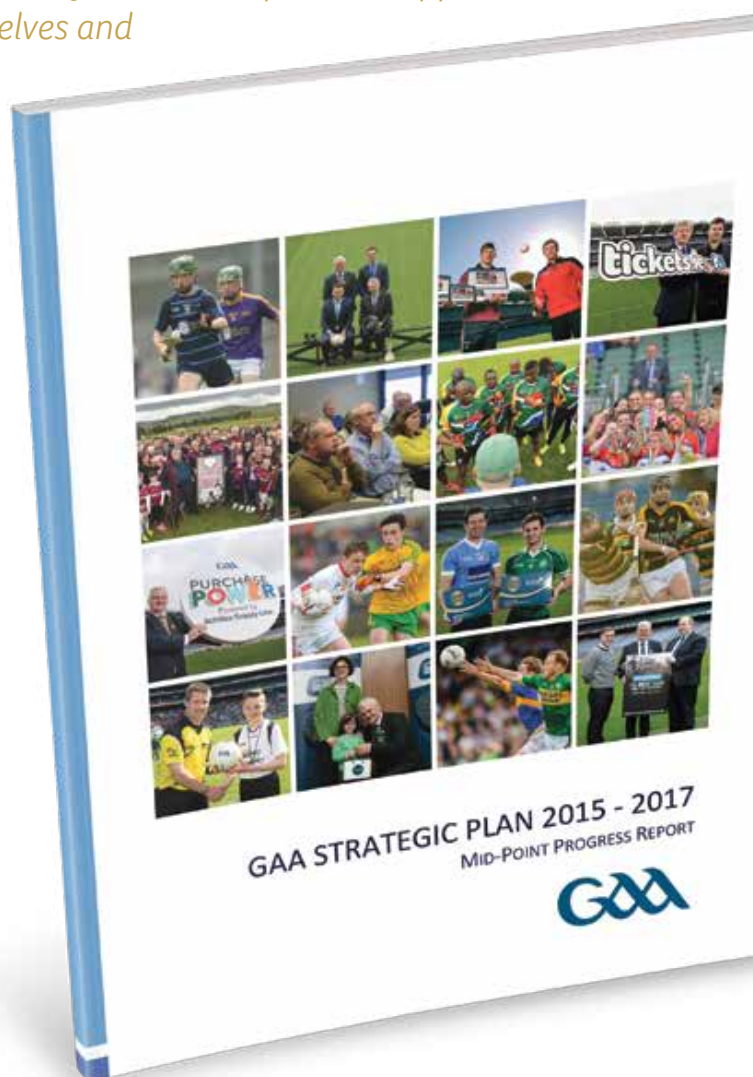
The Association continued to make strong progress towards the goals set out in the GAA Strategic Plan 2015–2017.

The monitoring of progress according to the criteria defined in the plan has been undertaken on a systematic basis by an Implementation Committee chaired by the Uachtarán. Achievements have been made in all six priority action areas of games, volunteer support, governance, finance and commercial, communications and cooperation within the Gaelic games family.

A small number of projects have been delayed, and some proved to be impractical; however, as we come to the end of the lifespan of the current plan, it is apparent that we have set a high standard for ourselves and have demonstrated a commitment to realise the plan’s objectives. This is evidenced by the Mid-Point Review published in November 2016 and will be reflected also when the Full-Time Evaluation is released shortly.

That said, much remains to be done. To that end, work has begun on the formulation of the next Strategic Plan, which will seek to give a direction and set priorities for the Association from April 2018 through to the end of 2020.

A multi-component consultation programme has been devised to inform the formulation of the next plan; a



mix of online, written and face-to-face methods will give an opportunity to our members, as well as to other stakeholders, to shape the future of the Association. I will continue to work closely with the Uachtarán-tofa and the Steering Group on this plan until I complete my term at the end of March.





## COUNTY AND CLUB PLANNING

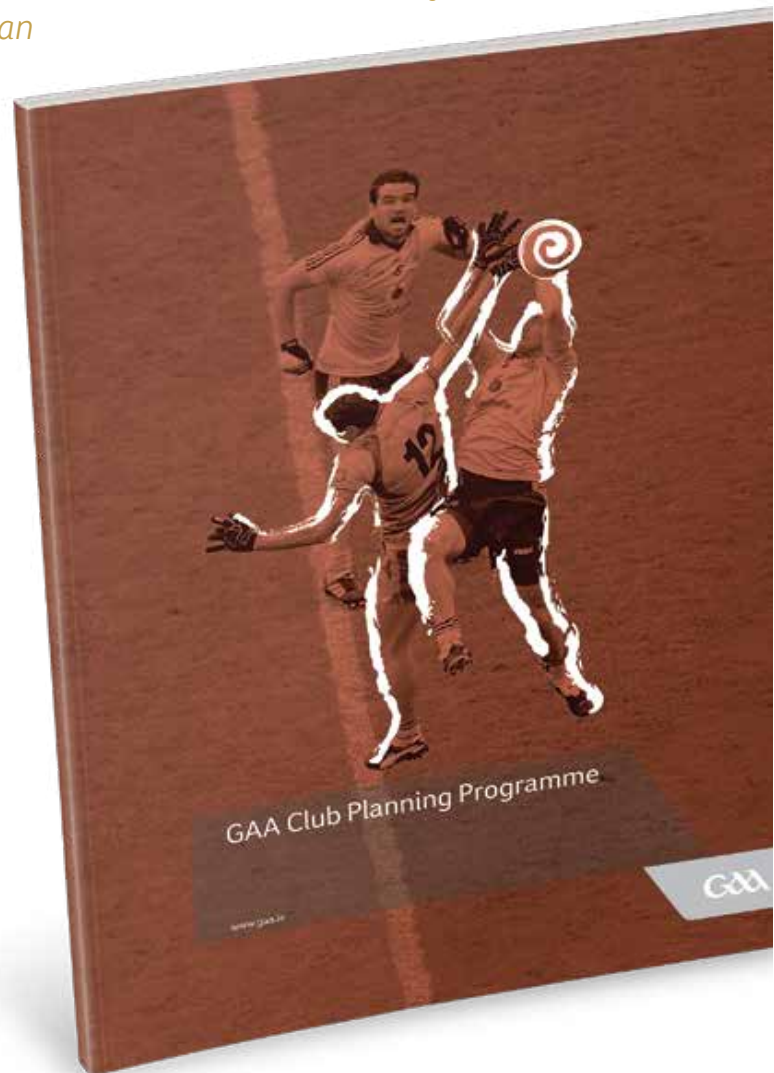
*“This group is working with the provincial councils and two counties from each province to develop a Strategic Plan before Easter 2018 and to implement it thereafter.”*

In 2015 the Association took the view that counties had enough experienced people involved with the creation and implementation of Strategic Plans to develop them as they deemed necessary.

While several counties have shown the initiative to do so, some counties find this a daunting task. To address this issue, the Association set up a County Planning Group in 2017, chaired by Ciarán McLaughlin (Former Chairperson of Tyrone GAA and current Treasurer of the Ulster Council). This group is working with the Provincial Councils and two counties from each province to develop a Strategic Plan before Easter 2018 and to implement it thereafter.

The GAA Club Planning Programme is the Association's support service for strategic planning, providing essential support for leaders, working within our clubs, and seeking to improve clubs through planning. The Club Planning Programme was revamped in 2017 with up-to-date resources, and new supports are now in place. Club-planning facilitators play a critical role in guiding clubs through the programme and providing direct feedback on the experience to county, provincial and national levels. Fifty facilitators were selected and received the first stage of their training in October and they are currently working with 30 clubs to test the new programme.

The minimum target for 2018 is to assist 100 clubs to develop and implement a Strategic Plan to cover a three-year period.



## OFFICER DEVELOPMENT

*“...the National Officer Development Committee seamlessly provided key information regarding the roles and responsibilities of officers, and developed their leadership, communication and IT skills.”*

A wide range of officer development programmes were successfully provided in 2017, offering high-quality development opportunities to the principal officers at club and county levels. Thanks to the support of provincial councils, county committees, clubs and our team of 50 Leadership Associates, the National Officer Development Committee seamlessly provided key information regarding the roles and responsibilities of officers, and developed their leadership, communication and IT skills.

At club level, 1,698 different officers from 24 counties participated in the Club Leadership Development Programme last year. Many of these officers engaged in more than one leadership module. In total, 140 modules were provided in areas such as specific-officer roles and responsibilities, communication skills, games development, player welfare, the use of IT packages and running a successful club AGM.

Officer feedback has been solicited for 2018 and new modules will be offered in the areas of volunteer recruitment and club governance this year.

At county level, two new initiatives were introduced in 2017. The first was the pilot of a bespoke mentoring programme with county chairpersons, which gave six chairpersons the opportunity to meet on a one-to-one basis as required with a trained mentor. A preliminary review of the programme's

effectiveness has produced a hugely positive response from both chairpersons and mentors. A full evaluation will take place before deciding on extending the programme for 2018.

The second new initiative for county officers was the series of Governance Awareness Workshops that were delivered on a provincial basis in conjunction with the National Audit Committee, which devised the Association's Governance Guide. Approximately 100 county officers participated in the workshops, and they have committed to implementing actions in their counties to bring improvement in the areas set out in the guide.

In addition, our county officers continue to participate in the annual County Officer Development Conference, which was attended by 200 officers last January.

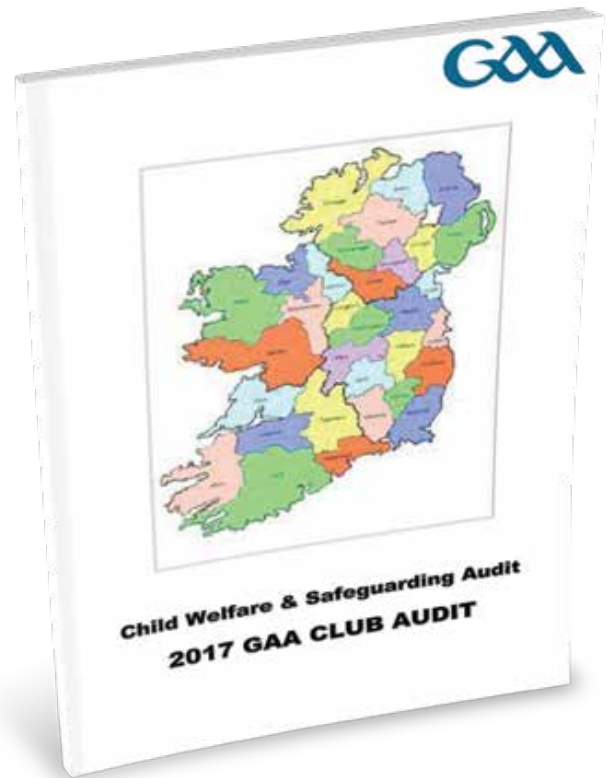
This conference provides officers with an excellent forum to (i) receive information relating to their roles, (ii) interact with new and incumbent officers in relevant workshops, (iii) network with officers and full-time staff and (iv) ask questions regarding the latest initiatives being provided for clubs and counties.

The conference will take place again in 2018 with 15 workshops and 30 different facilitators in place to help officers carry out their roles with greater confidence and competence.



## CHILD SAFEGUARDING AND PROTECTION

*“...the overall level of compliance proved most encouraging.”*



### Child Safeguarding Audit

A primary objective of the National Child Welfare and Protection Committee (NCWPC) in 2017 was to organise the GAA's first club and county child welfare and safeguarding audit, arising from the acknowledgement that it was not possible to accurately identify how various safeguarding initiatives had been implemented.

It undertook an online audit to capture this information. Children's Officers from 1,038 clubs from all counties responded, which enabled us to gauge how the GAA child safeguarding agenda has progressed in recent years and how compliant our clubs and counties are with our codes and with mandatory statutory requirements.

The feedback proved invaluable. While some gaps in provision of services and in compliance with GAA and statutory requirements emerged, the overall level of compliance proved most encouraging. We identified that 99% of the responding clubs have a Club Children's Officer, 77% of whom have attended their mandatory training workshop, and that 85% of clubs have appointed a Designated Liaison Person.

The national GAA audit response, along with a county-by-county equivalent, may be accessed at <http://www.gaa.ie/the-gaa/child-welfare-and-protection/welfare-audit>.

### Implementing the Children First Act

While the Children First Act does not apply to the Six Counties, its requirements will apply to all GAA clubs, counties and membership throughout the island of Ireland as part of our own GAA good practice guidance. All units will be required to carry out a safeguarding risk assessment, following which they shall be permitted (and obliged) to display a Child Safeguarding Statement. The National Children's Office shall oversee this process during 2018.

The introduction of the Act provides an opportunity to replace our current Code of Best Practice in Youth Sport with an enhanced Code of Behaviour (Underage), while the Guidelines on Dealing with Allegations of Abuse will be amended in accordance with the Act and re-printed as one document for all Gaelic games associations.

A key stipulation in the Children First Guidance is that all coaches working with children and young people must complete the vetting process and attend child safeguarding training prior to undertaking any coaching activity in the GAA. Deviation from these directives shall be deemed a breach of legislation by both the individual coach and the relevant unit. In addition to these statutory requirements, the Code of Behaviour (Underage) requires that all coaches of underage teams possess a relevant coaching qualification. It will be the role of Children's Officers to maintain a register of all such compliance by club coaches.

## CHILD SAFEGUARDING AND PROTECTION

(continued)

*“The completion of the Designated Person Training Programme in 2017 was the final element of the suite of child-safeguarding training options that have been developed in recent years.”*

### **Child Welfare and Safeguarding Seminars and Training.**

Two Child Welfare and Safeguarding Information seminars took place in 2017 to discuss a range of topics relevant to child safeguarding matters.

Issues discussed included the data protection implications following the introduction of General Data Protection Regulations in May 2018; the work of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau; a review of online vetting for Gaelic games associations; the outcomes of the national child welfare and safeguarding audit; input from the Department of Transport Tourism and Sport on Children First; and integration of children with autism into Gaelic games (presented by Autism NI).

The completion of the Designated Person Training Programme in 2017 was the final element of the suite of child-safeguarding training options that have been developed in recent years.

These programmes, delivered as joint initiatives by the Gaelic games associations, include the initial Child Safeguarding Programme (Safeguarding 1) for coaches, the Club Children’s Officer programme (Safeguarding 2) and the new Designated Liaison Person Programme (DLP Safeguarding 3). The GAA also delivers the GAA Tackling Bullying Workshop, which has proved to be a most successful intervention.

These training initiatives are delivered by 70 of our volunteer Child Safeguarding Tutors who have undergone specific training to achieve the required level of expertise.

Lee Keegan’s Kellogg’s GAA Cul Camps surprise visit to Leitrim.







## INJURY FUND

*“The GAA Risk and Insurance Committee intends to work with the providers to negotiate further benefits to our registered members.”*

In January 2017, we initiated a dedicated Injury Fund management role to allow for better central management and oversight of the Injury Fund.

Claims loading/discount was incorporated into team registration in 2017, whereby a discount or loading is applied to annual total team subscriptions, depending on clubs' prior three-years claims experience.

Units who draw more from the fund than they contribute pay a loading of either 10%, 50% or 100%; units who pay more into the fund than they draw in benefits obtain a 10% discount on total subscriptions.

Over two-thirds of clubs realised a saving, and the net result was a re-balancing of the fund, whereby those who claim more, pay more. In conjunction with this change, the U21 team rate was reduced from €450 to €200, as the team fee was previously highlighted as a barrier to participation.

These changes will remain in place for 2018. A Preferred Medical Providers Initiative was launched on 1 October 2017. A significant number of hospitals have agreed to work with the GAA on this initiative, which will result in savings of 5-10% on playing-injury treatment costs incurred by registered playing members.

The GAA Risk and Insurance Committee intends to work with the providers to negotiate further benefits to our registered members.

### **Property Insurance**

Weather incidents, notably storm and flood events, continued to be our principal source of exposure for our properties in 2017.

Storm and flood events accounted for €1.6m in claims costs and were the sole contributory factor in the property-insurance rate increase at renewal.



## LIABILITY FUND

*“Our properties provide a valuable community resource, but it is vital that we take responsibility for the management and control of access...”*



The number and cost of personal injury claims taken against GAA units continued to increase in 2017. Annual claims costs to GAA insurers now exceed €3m per annum; if claims continue to rise, the continued provision of the central placement will be unsustainable. Annual renewal with our existing insurers proved to be difficult. Ultimately, we were unable to secure agreement on pricing and cover terms, and the placement moved to a new insurer from 1 November 2017.

A major difficulty is that many clubs continue to demonstrate a lack of control and fail to maintain a minimum paper trail with respect to the use of their properties for GAA and non-GAA activities. Too many are failing to uphold the legal duties of care owed to all users of their property. In particular, third-party use of GAA property remains a major issue. Our properties provide a valuable community resource, but it is vital that we take responsibility for the management and control of access to properties if that wider use by our communities is to continue.

## SCÓR

*“... the increase in participation is expected to be maintained.”*



An Coiste Náisiúnta Scór this year held the finals of Scór na nÓg and Scór Sinsir in the Belfast Waterfront.

A scriptwriting course directed by experienced facilitators from the theatre sector was also organised at Croke Park to assist clubs participating in Scór. Increasing the degree of participation in Scór has been a priority of An Coiste, and the four provinces now have a strategy to achieve this.

Data for 2015-16 and 2016-17, compiled in Cúige Uladh and Cúige Chonnachta, show that the number of clubs participating increased by 16% in Scór na nÓg and by 7% in Scór Sinsir, while the number of entrants in the competitions increased by 14% in Scór na nÓg and 4% in Scór Sinsir. Figures for 2017-18 are not yet available, but the increase in participation is expected to be maintained.

### Coiste na Gaeilge

Tá Fondúireacht Sheosaimh Mhic Dhonncha ar cheann de na rudaí is tábhachtaí a sheol Cumann Lúthchleas Gael le fada agus iad ag tacú le spreagadh agus cothú na Gaeilge. Sa bhliain 2017, chláraigh 90 club nua leis an bhFondúireacht – an méid is mó is féidir a láimhseáil tríd an gcóras atá ann faoi láthair.

Bronnadh boinn ar 40 club ag deireadh an tséasúir as feabhas a gcuid iarrachtaí an teanga a chur chun cinn. Tá dhá fhíseán foilsithe ag Glór na nGael ina mínítear do na clubanna conas tabhairt faoi phleanáil teanga.

Láinseáileadh 4 fhíseán eile ag tús na bliana seo ina léiríonn ceathrar de na himreoirí is fearr atá againn a dtacaíocht don teanga agus a tábhacht – Michael Murphy (Dún na nGall), Cillian O’Connor (Maigh Eo), Tadhg de Búrca (Port Láirge) agus Liam Rushe (Áth Cliath).

Le linn 2017 tháinig méadú ar an líon Gaeilge a bhíonn le feiceáil ar mheáin shóisialta nua an chumainn agus i gcláracha na gcluichí.

Tá Coiste na Gaeilge freisin tar éis ceartú a dhéanamh ar dhearmaid a bhí ar leagan Gaeilge ainmneacha na gclubanna sna 32 contae.

Le linn na bliana freisin reachtáil siad Cúrsa Traenála i Scileanna na gCluichí Gaelacha trí Ghaeilge agus beidh Cumann Lúthchleas Gael ag tacú go láidir le Bliain na Gaeilge 2018 as seo go deireadh na bliana seo atá ag teacht.





6 May 2017: The J.K. Brakens, Co Tipperary, team of Yvonne Meehan, Máiread Delaney, Nicole Joyce, Katherine Meehan, Éamonn Stamp, Eóin Hamill, Martin Lee and Eóin Bourke competing in the 'Rice Seit' event in the All-Ireland Scór Sinsear Finals at The Waterfront Theatre, Belfast.



# SCÓR

## CRABOIN NA hÉIREANN



## AOGÁN Ó FEARGHAIL

*“Aogán’s splendid oratorical skills were ideally suited to the role of Uachtarán and are one of the reasons for his success as ambassador for the Association.”*

Aogán Ó Fearghail’s term as Uachtarán ends at this year’s Congress. Aogán can look back with great pride on his contribution to the Association over the past three years. He has been more than equal to the demands faced by a GAA President. His skilful chairing of meetings of Central Council and Management Committee, along with his friendly and positive demeanour, encouraged members to participate, and facilitated constructive debate. These same qualities contributed significantly to his success in steering significant changes through several Congresses during his term of office.

Aogán’s splendid oratorical skills were ideally suited to the role of Uachtarán and are one of the reasons for his success as ambassador for the Association. In that role, he performed with distinction in every arena, he was exceptionally energetic, travelling extensively at home and abroad in support of our volunteers. His genuine interest in people, his love of the Irish language and his thorough knowledge of Irish history were manifested

to great effect as he represented the Association. From the outset of his presidency Aogán outlined his understanding of the differing roles and functions of Uachtarán and Ard-Stiúrthóir.

That understanding stimulated our excellent working relationship as we cooperated fully on every initiative. As was the case with the other Presidents with whom I have worked, I relied heavily on Aogán for advice, and I took heart from knowing that I always enjoyed his full support. I have no doubt that he will be a valuable advisor to John Horan too, as he spends his final year on the Management Committee and Central Council.

Aogán has enjoyed great support as President from his wife Frances, sons Aogán Óg and Cónall and daughters Cliona and Niamh. I know that, as a family, they will continue to contribute greatly to the GAA through their club Drumgoon.

We wish them all well.



## JOHN HORAN

*“John knows well the challenges facing the GAA at every level and has demonstrated that he has the vision and qualities necessary to ensure that the Association progresses during his term of office.”*



John Horan will succeed Aogán Ó Fearghail as Uachtarán at the end of Congress 2018. He will be the 39th President of the GAA and the first Dublin-born President since Daniel McCarthy filled the role from 1921 to 1924. Dr JJ Stewart represented Dublin when he held the office from 1958 to 1961, but he was born in Clare.

John is principal of St Vincent’s CBS (secondary school) in Glasnevin, a school with a strong GAA tradition that counts Dessie Farrell, Jason Sherlock and Jonny Cooper among its past pupils. He is also the third school principal in-a-row to fill the position of Uachtarán. A member of the Na Fianna club, John gravitated easily into coaching when his own playing career ended and was a selector and then manager of Dublin minor football teams in the early 2000s.

As an administrator, he made his mark at post-primary schools’ level and later as Chairman of the

Leinster Games Development Committee. He greatly broadened his experience when serving as Chairman of the Leinster Council from 2014 to 2016 and as a member of An Coiste Bainistíochta in the past four years. In addition to his work as a GAA volunteer John is also a former National Vice-Chairman of the Irish Red Cross.

John knows well the challenges facing the GAA at every level and has demonstrated that he has the vision and qualities necessary to ensure that the Association progresses during his term of office. He goes into the role as Uachtarán strengthened by an emphatic first-count win in last February’s election and by the goodwill of the wider GAA membership. The role of Uachtarán is testing, but it should also be fulfilling.

I hope that it will be so for John, and that the next three years will also be enjoyable for him, his wife Paula and their sons Jack and Liam.

## COMHBHRÓN

**Déanaim comhbhrón leis na clanna a chaill duine I rith na bliana. I measc na daoine a chailleamar do bhí:****Maigh Eo:** Willie Casey.**Sligeach:** Walter Kivlehan.**Liatroim:** Fr. Tom Colreavy, Joe Flynn.**Ros Comáin:** Donie Shine Sr.**Tiobraid Árann:** Mick Roche, Mickey (The Rattler) Byrne, Michael Maher, Liam Devaney.**Port Láirge:** Jimmy Power.**Ciarraí:** Vincent Linnane.**Corcaigh:** Antóin Ó Mathúna, Willie John Daly.**Ceatharlach:** Michael Whelan, Peter Walker, Paudie Doyle.**Laois:** Dinny Cahill, Tim Kernan, Michael Walsh, Louis Harkin, Joe Dempsey.**An Lú:** Jim Lennon, Brendan Reilly, Fintan Goss, Jimmy McDonnell.**Cill Dara:** Mick Fogarty.**An Mhí:** Brendan Ryan, Jimmy Walsh.**An Iarmhí:** Donal Devine, Ray Bradley, Mick Bolger.**Loch Garman:** Paddy Wickham.**An Longfort:** John Smith, Seán O'Rourke.**Uibh Fhailí:** Brother Sylvester.**Ard Mhacha:** Jim Kirk.**Doire:** Roddy Gribbin, Dermot Devlin, Tommy Doherty.**Fear Manach:** Hugh McCabe.**Tír Eoghain:** Paddy Devlin, Anthony Connolly, Tom Donnelly, Brian McLernon, Dominic Earley, Pat D'Arcy.**An Dún:** Leo Murphy.**Aontroim:** Seamus Gallagher.**Dún na nGall:** Pat Shovelin, Danny Cullen.**Muineacháin:** Liam Stiratt.





## BUÍOCHAS

*“I would like, in particular, to thank the people with whom I have worked on a daily basis in Croke Park. In countless ways, they made my job easier. It has been a huge honour to lead this team and I am proud of the work they have done.”*

I am privileged to have had the opportunity to serve as Ard Stiúirthóir for the past ten years.

I would like to record my sincere gratitude to those whose support I have received in that time.

I want to express my thanks to the four GAA Presidents with whom I have worked – Nickey Brennan, Christy Cooney, Liam Ó Néill and Aogán Ó Feargháil; to past and present members of An Coiste Bainistíochta, Ard Chomhairle, and members of national committees; and to officials, volunteers and staff at provincial, county and club levels for their constant assistance and encouragement.

I would like, in particular, to thank the people with whom I have worked on a daily basis in Croke Park. In countless ways, they made my job easier. It has been a huge honour to lead this team and I am proud of the work they have done.

I appreciate their loyalty, courtesy, professionalism and friendship, and I know that I will miss them when I leave at the end of March.

Journalism today is a challenging profession. The internet and social media have dramatically altered the media landscape and traditional means of disseminating news; the changing nature of GAA coverage reflects that.



I wish to offer my sincere thanks to the journalists in newspapers, television and radio who cover our games. The coverage by traditional and new media is extensive and often dissenting (as it should be), but the journalists who write about the GAA do so with a genuine passion for our games. No one epitomised these high standards better than the late Jimmy Magee, who passed away last September. He is fondly remembered and greatly missed.

## CONCLUSION

*“A good deal of what the GAA does and a good deal of the time we spend and of the initiatives we undertake is a consequence of the higher standards that society demands of its public bodies.”*

History teaches us that many epochs have considered theirs to be the time when things were changing more quickly than ever before. But one wonders if there has ever been a time when tradition - and culture-changing advances occurred at the furious pace that they do today.

New technologies arrive at a tempo we can barely keep up with, leaving governments, organisations and individuals with the feeling that they are no longer leading things but simply trying to catch up with them.

We sense this most in communications, where the extraordinary expansion in methods of communication allows anyone who so desires to become a public commentator, analyst, critic, pundit.

One effect of this is the greater degree of scrutiny to which public organisations are exposed, which in turn has led to an unrelenting pressure on them to meet higher standards of competence, governance, ethics and good practice.

A good deal of what the GAA does and a good deal of the time we spend and of the initiatives we undertake is a consequence of the higher standards that society demands of its public bodies. This is all to the good.

Yet it does have significant implications for the operation of the Association at all levels. It is important that our members understand this, as it may well

explain what may seem to some or many of them to be an increasing and unnecessary bureaucracy imposed on them from Croke Park.

An obvious example of this is the obligation on the GAA to comply with the laws of the land. One thinks of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or the vetting requirements where child protection is concerned. Complying with such legislation substantially increases the workload on our volunteers, and particularly at club level where the burden is likely to fall on fewer people.

Another example of an external expectation we must meet (but which is also an internal obligation we wish to place on ourselves) is that of good governance, in other words, ensuring that our affairs, at all levels of the Association, are well and efficiently managed. Hence our new Governance Guide for our officers, but hence, too, more work for these officers.

And these new external pressures are in addition to the already considerable demands on volunteers inherent in the day-to-day task of running a club, such as the permanent effort they make to raise funds, both to meet the club's running costs (repairs and maintenance, insurance, payments to the injury scheme) and to develop the club's facilities.

The concern here is that this increasing workload will deter volunteers (if it is not already doing so)



and precisely at a time when, for the reasons just outlined, we need more volunteers. We can be greatly encouraged by the motivation clearly visible in GAA units, for example to improve their facilities, but we must be aware that there is only so much we can ask or expect of our volunteers.

Elsewhere, we can never escape the constant pressure in the area of finances. The purists like to ignore such vulgar considerations (convinced, for example, that the GAA has piles of money to throw around, or that, for example, it should not try to get a fair price for its broadcast rights). But the GAA has to meet the financial challenge of, among many other things, improving provincial, county and club grounds and facilities.

A successful Rugby World Cup bid would have provided funding to improve several major grounds, including Fitzgerald Stadium, Killarney and Pearse Stadium, Galway. But this was not to be.

So, the task for Central Council remains as exacting as ever: to find the funds to keep our stadiums and grounds infrastructure in a modern and attractive condition, an essential requirement in the marketing of our games as we seek to increase match-attendance levels, to encourage people to attend matches and not simply watch them on television.

Other ongoing issues that I find myself mentioning

in every recent Annual Report have not gone away. I will only note them here as they are so familiar to us by now: rural depopulation and decline, and the parallel trend of urban growth; improvement of match officiating; the retention of young players; the strengthening of our presence in schools.

Our approach to dealing with these issues will be outlined in the Association's new strategic plan, to cover the years 2018-2020, which is currently in preparation.

2017 brought to the forefront a problem that we could not have envisaged a relatively short time ago: we still cannot be certain that there will not be a hard Brexit, an outcome that would make life so much more difficult for our players and supporters.

The GAA is a 32-county organisation; the return to a hard border would be problematic, and particularly onerous for the GAA community in Ulster.

On another front, we will need to continue to invest in IT. The technology area can often seem to be a double-edged sword.

We marvel at and benefit from what technology allows us to do, yet at the back of our minds is the thought that, because so much more can now be done, so much more must be done. But a primary goal of the IT investment in the GAA is to make life easier for and

## CONCLUSION

### (continued)

*“When I think of the GAA, and of my life in it, I end up thinking of people, and of people working together.”*

protect our volunteers in the roles they carry out, by reducing the amount of time and money they spend on administration. The IT dimension of our activities reminds us that the world around us demands that we be modern and that the GAA be in tune with the expectations of the society and culture within which it operates.

All the above, itemised as they are here, may seem to reduce our daily efforts to a painful graft of problem solving. But all it takes to dissolve this false idea is to think for an instant about what we know the experience of our work in the GAA to be truly about, and why we carry on undeterred.

Problems are many, yes, and must be tackled, but these are all part of the task we willingly undertake to make the GAA better, and to make it better where the GAA makes its most telling contribution, namely in our local communities.

The Healthy Club project is an inspiring example of this. This initiative is not about winning matches and titles, but about addressing the health and wellbeing of the wider community; it is not about learning how to shoot with the outside of the foot or to score from a sideline cut, but is all about emotional wellbeing, physical activity for non-playing members, healthy eating, smoke-free clubs, gambling, drug, and alcohol education, and community engagement and development.

GAA clubs grow out of communities; it is right that clubs close the circle and come back to look after their communities.

It has never been easier to blank out one's immediate physical surroundings. For some, reality isn't as enticing and awe-inspiring as virtual reality.

Others prefer to communicate with their mobile device rather than with people. Tweets replace discussion, Facebook replaces conversation.

We have all probably had the experience of looking around us to see the four or five people in our immediate vicinity staring into a screen, oblivious to the real world of people and things around them.

In important ways, new technologies cater to and incentivise the individual rather than the community experience. Added to this threat to community is the decline of Irish rural communities created by our economic policies and structures, which bring new jobs mostly to large urban areas.

The devastation – the word is not too strong – caused to small Irish towns and villages by our economic model seems, unhappily, to be considered an acceptable price to pay in the pursuit of greater national goals.

So where, then, does that leave the notion of





community, and rural Irish communities in particular? Rural Ireland is learning that the help it needs is unlikely to come from outside.

But the localist, community and environmental movements have shown that the best terrain on which to fight back is right where you live.

There is where you can make a difference, there is where your contribution truly counts.

And in making that contribution, you are doing so with your neighbours and friends in the common

goal of making your local area a better place in which to live. When I think of the GAA, and of my life in it, I end up thinking of people, and of people working together.

The GAA is nothing if not a means of bringing individuals together to function better as a community.

Has it ever been more important than now to do so? Is this not a valuable contribution to make?

And is this not why we are all in the GAA?

Ard Stiurthóir: Páraic Ó Dufaigh

*Páraic Ó Dufaigh*





