



Football Association of Ireland

Review of Amateur Football

Consultative Paper

September 2008

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and Genesis**



Introduction

The amateur game is the lifeblood of football in Ireland and has a huge role to play in a number of ways. This is where the vast majority of adult footballers play the sport, so it has a big contribution to make towards increasing participation levels. It has also a vital role to play in developing talented players for the professional and international teams, and for retaining players in the sport who have either not quite made it into the professional ranks or have retired from the professional game. At its top levels, it also provides high-level competition for talented players who, for a variety of reasons, opt not to turn professional. It stands to reason, therefore, that if the amateur game is healthy and vibrant, the overall health of football in Ireland will be enhanced.

The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) asked Genesis Consulting to carry out a review of Amateur Football in Ireland and work with them to develop a strategy for the next five years.

The review to date has involved:

- Research into football and other sports in Ireland and in other comparable countries
- Interviews with key stakeholders
- 14 open consultation events throughout the country, which were attended by nearly 450 people
- A link on the FAI website inviting comments, to which 25 people responded
- 4 steering group meetings to review the information gathered, identify the issues to be addressed and to develop the draft strategy for further comment and consultation.

This document represents this “white paper” draft strategy.

Consultation Process - Summary

In the following section, we summarise the most widely expressed views at the consultation events and in the interviews and email responses.

What the people said:

What is going well?

- Many improved facilities, with more capital grants and other investments coming to football
- High levels of participation – football is the most popular team sport in terms of numbers playing
- High media profile for football – good coverage for the sport in the press and on TV and radio, although the focus is more on the professional game in Ireland and abroad than on the amateur game
- Better relationship between FAI Headquarters and the grass roots, with the increased support from paid executives, especially the growing numbers of Regional Development Officers (RDOs), appreciated by many.
- Some examples of good practice in the Leagues were mentioned
- Some, but not all, of the consultation events also welcomed improvements in the standard of play and better coaching.

What is going less well?

Concerns were expressed about:

- Weak set-up of youth football and the loss of players around 15-16 (*This is not confined to football, but is an issue faced by many sports*)
- Over-emphasis on competition rather than skill development for under-age players
- League structures
 - No national plan or structure
 - Too many leagues, with wide variations in standards of play and/or organisation/administration
 - The system for eligibility for seats on the Provincial and Junior Councils encourages leagues to focus on increasing the *numbers* of participating teams, rather than on their *quality*
 - Lack of planned fixture programmes published in advance and consistently adhered to
- Shortage of volunteers to run both leagues and clubs, as a result of which there is an over-dependence on key individuals or small groups
- Clubs
 - Too many small, one-team clubs that are often not sustainable; too few clubs that cater for all ages and both sexes
 - No criteria for the formation of clubs and no controls over their quality
- Variation on quality of facilities
 - Many clubs do not have title to their pitches and therefore lose out in accessing grants
 - The process of applying for grants is complicated, time-consuming and confusing
 - In many areas, there is an over-dependence on publicly owned pitches, which are variable in terms of supply, quality and maintenance
- Poor levels of coaching reported by some
- Referees
 - Shortage of well-qualified referees
 - Rising costs for clubs of referee expenses
- Levels of abuse, both on and off the pitch – standards of player and spectator discipline compared unfavourably with other sports e.g. Rugby Union.

Opinions were divided about:

- Futsal – is it an opportunity to attract more participants, or a threat to the traditional leagues?
- Season – majority of those consulted favoured winter football, but a significant minority were passionately in favour of playing in the summer

Most commonly discussed topics at the Consultation Events:

- Facilities (at 9 out of 14 events)
- Referees (9)
- Funding (8)
- League Structures (8)
- Coaching (7)
- Volunteers (6)
- Youth Football (6)

Where did people want to see action?

In this section we summarise the major areas where people at the consultation events wanted to see action taken.

A. Leagues:

- The topics discussed and votes cast indicated that there is an appetite for stronger leadership and control from the FAI, although this was not universal. At the least, the FAI should encourage good practice in running the leagues, e.g. fixed or limited terms of office and greater succession planning
- Many expressed a desire for standardised rules, consistently enforced, across the country
- Some argued that there should be fewer, stronger leagues, so that resources (human and financial) could be more effectively deployed and perhaps administrative support (such as paid administrators) could be offered

B. Clubs:

- Clubs were looking for financial and advisory support and some at least advocated some sort of accreditation scheme that would encourage improvements in organisation, management, player welfare, coaching and refereeing
- Arguments were put forward in favour of stronger rules/criteria for the formation of clubs, to foster sustainability
- Some argued in favour of schemes for increasing the number of volunteers, including more formal recognition of their contribution

C. Facilities:

- There were frequent demands for support and advice to be made more readily available to clubs to help them access government grants and other sources of funding
- Some argued in favour of community or league grounds with shared facilities, including all-weather facilities and floodlights
- Attendees at some meetings, especially in urban areas, argued that greater pressure should be brought to bear on local authorities to provide better facilities

D. Communication:

- Better use should be made of information technology, including email, website links and text messaging, in order to improve – and ease – communication at all levels
- It became clear that many people at the grass roots of the sport were unaware of the programmes, advice and other support offered by the FAI, so imaginative ways should be considered to bridge this communication gap
- There were several calls for greater partnership working, with different sections of the game working more closely together

E. Coaching and Refereeing:

- There were calls made for courses to be made more affordable and readily accessible to volunteers, combined with more flexible opportunities for continued professional development
- Refereeing should become more transparent and accountable
- Efforts should be made to tackle the problem of abuse, which was damaging the image of the game and deterring people from becoming/staying involved, both as players and especially as referees and officials

F. Youth:

- Raise the profile of youth competitions
- Review the competition structure for the under-12s (*not strictly within the remit of this strategy, but noted nonetheless*)
- Embrace women's football, one of the fastest growing team sports in the world

Having reviewed the feedback from the consultation events, the Steering Group agreed that a number of issues needed to be considered and addressed.

The big issues to be addressed:

1. Football is the number one team game in the country but it doesn't look like it
2. The focus has been on quantity, rather than sustained quality
3. There is a real challenge to keep people involved and engaged in the game, as players and as volunteers
4. There are too many variations in how the game is run at national level
5. There is a need to raise standards – of play, of refereeing and coaching, of leadership, management and organisation at league and club level
6. There is a need for clearer leadership and direction
7. There is a requirement to adapt the game to reflect social trends e.g. increased level of small sided football, evening/midweek football etc.
8. Communication and overall promotion of the game must be improved

Discussions then took place with the Steering Group about what people in the game wanted to see happening in the future. These built on the feedback from the interviews and the consultation meetings and email responses, as well as taking cognisance of football and other sports in comparable countries.

Vision for the future - in ten years' time we want to see that....

- Football is acknowledged as the number one team game in Ireland, with footballers throughout the country identifying with a successful national team and feeling part of the "Beautiful Game"
- There is a national network of quality leagues that are well led, well managed and well resourced
- All players have the opportunity to play in structured competitions that are appropriate to their abilities, ambitions and needs
- There is a national network of sustainable, community clubs that are well led, well managed and well resourced
- Football facilities, whether publicly or privately owned or shared, are of good quality, including well maintained grass pitches, artificial pitches, floodlights and changing rooms
- There are opportunities for all - men and women; able-bodied and those with disabilities; native Irish and those who have come to live in Ireland - to become and stay involved in football in whatever way they desire, whether as players, club or league officials, coaches, administrators, referees or supporters.
- All sections of the sport are working collaboratively to develop the game they love, with a consistent, cohesive approach to all areas of the game

Long-term targets:

Specifically we have set a range of ambitious targets to work towards. These include:

- 70,000 players by 2015 (Note: The current number is 56,000)
- 5% of clubs have obtained club accreditation status
- All teams have qualified coaches
- Quality FAI programmes rolled out in all areas
- Culture of partnership and collaboration throughout the Amateur game
- National database providing accurate information on the state and health of the game
- 80% of stakeholders agree that the FAI has improved grassroots football
- 1,400 active referees retained and an additional 1,400 new referees recruited
- €30m+ invested in facilities (directly or indirectly)
- On and off field behaviour improved significantly, as measured by the number of yellow and red cards and surveying of referees, coaches and players.

This ambitious vision represents a significant step on from the current situation, so the strategy must determine the major strategic priorities and big initiatives that will be needed to achieve it. If change and improvement are indeed desired, innovative action must be taken to address the issues and move towards the "ideal" outlined above.

Strategic priorities to deliver this vision

The fifth study¹ conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in conjunction with the Irish Sports Council, April 2008, contains some interesting conclusions and recommendations that have a significant bearing on planning for football in the years to come.

- *Although Irish adults are engaging in more sport and exercise than previously, this tends to be in individual sports and activities, rather than team sports*
- *Soccer, basketball and rugby have been the most successful teams sports, with Gaelic Games declining in relative terms*
- *The fall-off in sporting activity in late teens and early adulthood is almost entirely due to people dropping out from team sports*
- *The ESRI report recommends a shift in government policy to reflect changing patterns of participation*
 - *Current policy, it says, has too great an emphasis on traditional team sports*
 - *Current policy relies too heavily on provision of facilities, when evidence suggests that reliance on facilities is unlikely to yield best returns. If public money is to be spent on facilities, the projects chosen must reflect current and potential future levels of use*
 - *Policy should channel a larger share of funding to new and growing sporting enterprises*

These findings and recommendations represent both an opportunity and a threat to football. On the one hand, football can demonstrate that it is a popular and growing sport, engaging large numbers of young people and adults, so is worthy of government support. On the other hand, if government policy is going to shift its focus to the promotion and support of individual sports and activities, as the ESRI report recommends, football will have to work strategically and collaboratively to argue its case for government investment, particularly with regard to facilities. This places an increased emphasis on collaboration and co-operation and a more strategic approach to development and investment throughout the game.

¹ Sporting Lives: An Analysis of a Lifetime of Irish Sport published by the ESRI, 2008

The 6 Strategic Priorities ...

1. Grow the game
2. Make football fun!
3. Invest in facilities
4. Competitions for all
5. Create culture of collaboration and communication
6. Raise organisational standards

Draft for Consultation

1. Growing the game

Building on the mission of the 2004 FAI Technical Development Plan to create “more players, better players”, the underlying principle of this strategy for the amateur game is to grow the game in every way

- Growing the number of participants by attracting – and retaining – players, administrators and spectators. For example, our aim is to increase the number of adults playing football (11-a-side, Futsal or other short-sided games) by 25% in the next five years, double the number of women playing football in the same period and increase participation in ‘minority’ groupings (e.g. disability and non Irish nationals) by 100%
- Growing capacity – in terms of human resources, finance, skills
- Growing facilities – pitches, changing rooms, clubhouses
- Growing the culture of collaboration rather than fragmentation

The priorities outlined below seek to deliver this growth, focusing on the sport itself and on the leadership and skills required to support the players and ensure that all who are involved enjoy the experience.

2. Football is fun! An enjoyable experience

Players are the heart and soul of the game, so it is important that it provides a positive experience that is enjoyable. We would suggest that for amateur football in Ireland really to be the “Beautiful Game”, certain criteria are needed. These are:

- Good facilities – sufficient numbers of good pitches, as many as possible with floodlights, that are well-maintained and accompanied by quality changing facilities
- Good, well-qualified coaches
- Good, well-qualified referees, who can ensure that the game is played safely and with high standards of player and spectator behaviour
- Well-structured competitions that cater for all standards of player, from the recreational to the elite
- Some sort of social interaction, at least with team-mates and preferably also with the opposition
- Increased emphasis on small-sided games incorporated into the amateur game appropriately.

3. Facilities

Facilities are to a great extent the foundations of the game. At present, while there have been considerable improvements and a significant increase in investment in facilities, there is still variable provision across the country, both in terms of quantity and quality. The growth of the game is dependant on further investment in facilities throughout the country. This investment must be in a co-ordinated and planned manner to have maximum impact on the strength of the game. This strategic priority underpins most of the others and must go hand in hand with them.

4. Competitions catering for all

A separate but complementary review of competitions is currently taking place and this strategic priority must be developed in conjunction with that. Without pre-empting its conclusions, this strategy should include a priority that ensures that there are structured competition programmes that cater for all ages, all standards, all aspirations (recreational and elite), and both sexes. Consideration should be given to developing meaningful adult competitions for the elite amateur player, including national competitions culminating in finals at the New Stadium on Lansdowne Road and the development of the existing amateur international programme. Equally, there is a need to embrace the small-sided game and incorporate it into the Amateur game as this presents significant opportunities for growth in participation levels.

5. Creating a culture of collaboration and two-way communication

At present, there is limited collaboration or cooperation between different sections of the amateur game and relationships can often be fractious. There is no national structure, with semi-autonomous leagues often operating to different local rules. There are too many small, unsustainable clubs and too few clubs that offer playing opportunities to all ages, abilities and both sexes. Pathways of progression are unclear for all but the elite and potentially elite, who are increasingly well served by the Emerging Talent programme, as a result of which many players are lost to the game as they grow out of the Schoolboy Leagues. Opportunities to grow the participation base and retain players in the game are lost as a result of this fragmentation. One strategic priority should therefore be to move towards a "Culture of Collaboration", through:

- Further developing **Football Development Partnerships**, involving FAI officials, the League, Local Authorities, schools, professional and semi-professional clubs, so that football in the local area can be developed in a planned and collaborative way and communication improved between the different local stakeholders. Through the Partnerships, issues of common interest can be discussed and resolved and local strategic plans agreed.
- Considering the development of a **national structure of regional or county all-encompassing Leagues**, where and as appropriate, catering for all sections of the amateur game, from under-age to schoolboy to youth to adult, and for all standards of play – and both sexes. This should be done in tandem with the review of under-age football that is planned and is not intended to pre-empt the conclusions and findings of that review
- Encouraging the further development of **larger, community-style clubs**, catering for all ages, standards and forms of play and for both sexes. These would help to address the problem of loss of players and would mean that resources (human, financial and material, e.g. equipment) could be pooled and wastage caused by duplication reduced. Stronger clubs will lead to a stronger game across the country.
- Increasing the emphasis on the delivery of FAI programmes (e.g. coach education, volunteer education) in partnership with the leagues in order to fully utilise the increased resource base available (in terms of courses, programmes and development officers) within the FAI.

6. Raising organisational standards

At present, there are 35 leagues spread across the 26 counties, catering for approximately 56,000 adult players in approximately 1,700 teams. This represents an average of only 1,600 players per league and points to a considerable amount of duplication in terms of human and financial resources, at a time when both are in diminishing supply. To run a league, large or small, requires a minimum amount of organisational resource and there are strong arguments in favour of fewer, larger, better resourced and better managed leagues in the future:

- Greater resources in terms of membership subscriptions would enable leagues to invest in IT infrastructure, which in turn would improve administrative efficiency and communication with clubs and players
- A larger league would be in a much stronger position to attract external commercial sponsorship
- A larger league linked to the Football Development Partnership network, would be in a better position to plan strategically, to tap into FAI Development Officer resources and to put forward strong and convincing arguments for Government grants
- A strong, well-managed League could provide the leadership for club development in its area and encourage the growth of vibrant community clubs catering for players of all ages and both sexes.

At present, standards of leadership and administration in leagues and clubs are very variable, with some excellent examples of good practice, but with others all too often over-dependent on key individuals who operate time-consuming manual systems of administration and communication. If amateur football is to continue to grow and to retain participants in an increasingly competitive market, and to achieve the profile it desires, it must improve the quality of leadership, management and administration at Partnership, League and Club levels.

The UEFA Grass Roots Charter should be used as a guide to assist in engaging the development work within the amateur game through the clubs.

What should be done – the big initiatives

This strategy is concerned with the overall development of the adult amateur game in Ireland. As such, it must both reflect the overall FAI strategy for football in Ireland, and act as a guide for plans being finalised and implemented for specific aspects of the game, e.g. referee development, coaching development, the development of the women's game, competitions review, facilities development and volunteer recruitment and training. In particular, it can help to inform the new Technical Development Plan, with specific reference to the amateur game.

The three key areas of the 2004 Technical Development Plan were:

- Quality of player experience
- Quality of the workforce
- Sustainable infrastructure

The initiatives outlined below develop these themes, with particular focus on the amateur game.

1. The Football Experience

1.1. Facilities development (see Initiative 2)

1.2. Behaviour on the pitch

The issue of poor player behaviour is one that concerns many football authorities and certainly many of those involved in the amateur game in Ireland. Whilst only the international federations (FIFA and UEFA) can change the laws of the game, efforts should be made to explore what latitude is available to national associations to determine the rules under which local competitions may be played. Consideration should be given to adopting some more innovative solutions to addressing the problems of discipline and behaviour on the pitch and to piloting these on a competition-specific basis.

These rules are dependent on consistent enforcement and are therefore linked with the initiative concerning referees (1.3). A wide-ranging debate on this pressing issue could form part of the National Conference (see 4.2). We also suggest that any such pilot schemes should be introduced in a rolling programme, starting with the Premier divisions of the Leagues

1.2.1. As part of this initiative, the FAI should develop a clear Code of Conduct, which Leagues should be encouraged to implement consistently and with rigour. The FAI should launch and lead campaigns promoting positive behaviour, e.g. "Don't Cross the Line" or "Respect", perhaps starting with Youth Football

1.2.2. Leagues should consider appointing an "Ambassador for Good Behaviour", to promote the FAI campaigns at club level and encourage all teams to "raise their game" in this area

1.3. Improved quality of refereeing

A comprehensive Referee Development Plan for the period 2007 – 2011 has just been published. In this plan, referees in Schoolboy, Junior and Intermediate leagues are obliged to attend referee society and league referee meetings, and one seminar in the third year of their licence period. We suggest the introduction of regular refereeing seminars, including practical workshops, as part of the league structure, attended by both referees and coaches, to raise and maintain consistently high standards. The rationale behind such seminars is to improve communication between referees and coaches about the interpretation of the laws of the game. Badged referees must attend at least 75% of these seminars or lose their badge.

In addition, pre-season meetings (similar to the seminars on mutual understanding that have to happen as part of Club Licensing for National League clubs) should be

held, initially on a pilot basis, between coaches, managers and referees to communicate key messages regarding referee policy and approach for the coming season and to provide a positive forum for communication in the lead up to each season. Other creative mechanisms for communicating between these groups should be explored in order to improve the channels of communication.

1.4. Competitions that cater for all

This initiative must be worked out in detail in conjunction with the findings of the Competition Review, but we suggest certain criteria should be included:

- Planned fixture lists, to which all participating teams must adhere, with clear, consistently applied rules for allowable cancellations, across all leagues
- Clear pyramid structure from the lowest levels of football to the top of the game in amateur ranks
- Structured season (see 1.8)
- Elite amateur competition culminating in a finals weekend at the New Stadium on Lansdowne Road. This could be combined with the finals of an inter-league competition, to create an annual “Festival of Football” in the national stadium
- Continuation and development of the amateur international programme for the elite players
- Development of Futsal programmes as part of the competition calendar across the country for the amateur game with a specified Futsal season for all leagues built into the playing calendar.

1.5. Embrace Futsal / small-sided games

Futsal or other small-sided games provide a significant growth opportunity for the game. This should not be seen as a threat to the traditional 11-a-side game but rather complementary and a positive factor in driving increased participation levels. The amateur game should embrace this and develop initiatives to encourage greater involvement within the leagues and clubs in the smaller form of the game, both on a competitive and social basis. The rapid growth of Tag Rugby shows the opportunity that exists to generate increased participation levels, especially in women's participation. Collaborative links and positive support to organisations involved in running small sided game schemes should be created.

1.6. Women's Football

In conjunction with the Women's Development Plan, we suggest that specific targets should be set for the development of the women's game, which is a rapidly growing sport in other countries and has considerable scope for future growth in Ireland. The aim should be to double participation levels in the next five years. This will be established through the introduction, for example, of specific programmes/initiatives encouraging increased take up of the game by women

- Establishment of women's leagues (11-a-side & Futsal)
- Encouragement of club structures that include women's sections (as part of the club accreditation scheme)
- Strengthening the pathway between schools and the elite level
- Constant review of the playing structure of the women's game e.g. should they play smaller sided games more, summer football, size 4 ball for adult teams etc?

1.7. Masters Football

Create an organised structure for Masters (Over 35s?) football including the establishment of Master's leagues playing both 11-a-side and Futsal / small-sided games.

1.8. Structured Season

At present, the amateur playing season varies from one league to the next, from one part of the country to the next and from one age group and sex to the next. This creates confusion and makes smooth pathways of progression difficult to achieve. In addition, large numbers of matches are subjected to cancellation due to pitches' being deemed unplayable. To address these problems, consideration should be given to working towards a structured season, which is uniform across the country and caters for all levels of play and both sexes, culminating in a "Festival of Football" to be played at the end of the season at the New Stadium on Lansdowne Road. Various options for a more structured season could be considered. For example, four new options that could be considered are:

Option 1: All league football played from September to the end of April, with a short break of perhaps 4 weeks from mid-December to mid-January and the finals weekend taking place in May.

Option 2: All league football played from beginning of March to November, with a 3-4 week break in July to accommodate holidays. This would mean that the finals weekend would take place in November.

Option 3: League football played from September to December and from February to May on grass pitches, with a closed mid-winter break (of 6 weeks) with supplementary small-sided/Futsal leagues played indoors or on suitable artificial pitches during the worst winter months of January-February. Again a finals weekend will be in May for the leagues.

Option 4: League football played from September to December, and from March to May on grass pitches, with an extended closed mid-winter break (of 12 weeks) with supplementary small-sided/Futsal leagues played indoors or on suitable artificial pitches during the worst winter months of December – February. Again, the finals weekend would be in May.

1.9. Awards Event

Hold an Awards Dinner at the end of the League season, which honours all winning teams throughout Ireland and recognises the work of volunteer administrators and others. Outstanding coaches and referees could also be recognised at this Awards Dinner, which could be planned around the National Conference (see 4.2) and moved around the country

2. Facilities

2.1. A national football facilities audit should be carried out on a regional basis, in conjunction with the local authorities, to establish:

- Current provision, in terms of both quantity and quality
- Demand – current and projected

From this audit, national and regional facilities strategies can be developed to plan strategically construction, upgrading, maintenance priorities, including the provision of all-weather pitches, floodlights and changing facilities. Armed with this evidence and plan, the FAI could thus exert greater influence on central and local government to provide the range of competitive and training facilities, including clubhouses and changing rooms, that is needed for the game to grow

2.2. The Club Infrastructure Development Programme will continue to prioritise major projects around Regional Centres. There will be at least 4 major Regional Centres across the country. This regional structure will be supported by a County Centre approach, which will ensure there is at least one FAI County Centre in each county across the country (26-30 County Centres in total). These centres will act as a hub for development. The option exists to have a coach and/or development officers attached to each centre. There will be usage agreements in place to allow for the roll-out of FAI programmes and they will act as a resource base for leagues to use for development purposes. The outline specification for a County Centre would include:

- Full size all weather pitch(es)
- Grass pitches
- Learning centre
- Medical room
- Changing rooms
- Referees room
- Other facilities (e.g. office space, meeting rooms)

2.3. These centres would provide a key base for the work of the growing cadre of development officers across the country

2.4. FAI investment will be partnered with the Government to allow more rapid progress in the development of the infrastructure outlined above. Provided appropriate usage and licence agreements are in place, then joint FAI/Government investment in facilities will provide considerable benefit to the amateur and schoolboy game

2.5. The project (Project In-form²) currently piloting the club and facility audit tools in Mayo will provide a critical resource in terms of information on facilities and development priorities. This should be extended throughout the country and provide the basis for gathering information across the country on all aspects of the game from participation figures, facilities information, club and league data etc.

2.6. Although a resource centre already exists within the FAI to guide and support those seeking funding for facility construction or development, our consultation revealed that many of the clubs were unaware of its services or lacked the knowledge even to get started effectively in the process of obtaining grants. To address this, we suggest specific measures, e.g.

- On-line step-by-step guide outlining the required process, procedure, criteria that acts as an education pack and set of guidance notes for grass roots clubs

² Project In-form – Integrated Network of Football Organisation Resources Management

- The appointment of Club Development Officers, with the remit to provide specialist Development Officer support for applications that fit the facilities strategy and to support clubs through the Club Accreditation Scheme (3.2). They would also direct clubs to the range of services already provided by the FAI, e.g. Grounds maintenance courses, fundraising advice, volunteer recruitment and training advice etc.

3. Culture of Collaboration

3.1. A steering group is already set up to plan, oversee and assess the effectiveness of pilot Football Partnerships, involving all relevant stakeholders, e.g. FAI officials, Leagues (including schoolboys and women), Local Authorities, schools, semi-professional and professional clubs and community clubs as they develop. In line with the plans of the revised Technical Development Plan, 2007-2011, we would advocate the speedy implementation of a network of such partnerships across the country. The role of these partnerships should be to plan strategically the development of football in their area, in line with the overall national strategy and to foster the culture of collaboration, which is key to the growth and future health of the sport. Through focused strategic planning for the development of the game as a whole in their area, waste and duplication of effort can be avoided and resources attracted and allocated where they would deliver the greatest results. This collaborative and strategic approach will become ever more important if Government policy changes in line with the ESRI recommendations (contained within the Sporting Lives: An Analysis of a Lifetime of Irish Sport report).

3.2. We recommend the development of a club accreditation scheme, to encourage clubs to develop, grow and become stronger and more effective. An example of such a club accreditation scheme is Sport England's Clubmark, which assesses clubs in 4 areas:

- Playing Programme
- Sports Equity and Ethics
- Club Management
- Duty of Care and Child Protection

Accredited clubs would be expected to have qualified coaches and referees at an agreed ratio to numbers of players and teams, as well as other criteria to be determined and agreed. Development Officer assistance (see 2.6) should be offered to support clubs in their bid to achieve accreditation and the achievement of at least the standard accreditation could be made mandatory for participation in the leagues, starting with premier division clubs. Participation in FAI programmes will be incorporated into the club accreditation programme. Any club holding standard club accreditation would be entitled to participate in a national FAI-sponsored insurance scheme and clubs holding the higher (e.g. gold) accreditation would be given priority in grant awards. A sponsor should be sought to support this club accreditation scheme.

3.3. Consideration, in conjunction with the Schoolboy Review, should be given to setting up a Playing Commission to drive and oversee the implementation of the accepted recommendations of the two reviews (Amateur and Schoolboy). This would be a commission, rather than a committee, appointed to sit until the review recommendations are up and running. It should consist of enthusiastic volunteers and paid officials of the FAI, working collaboratively to address the problem of retaining players in the game and to providing clear pathways for all players, irrespective of ability or sex, to continue to play football at their chosen level. This Commission, as part of its work, should consider the rationalisation of the leagues with a view to developing a national network of all-encompassing leagues, working to a uniform template and consistent set of rules.

- 3.4. Stronger links should be established between the amateur clubs and local schools to the mutual benefit of both. For example, there may be opportunities for clubs to access school facilities for playing and training, the clubs could provide coaching resources to the school etc. The creation of links to local schools should be built into any club accreditation programme.
- 3.5. Similarly, there should be positive links created between the clubs and local *eircom* League of Ireland clubs. The clubs should work closely with the Club Promotion Officers (CPOs) within the *eircom* League of Ireland clubs to establish links and to develop initiatives to reinforce the links between them
- 3.6. Efforts should be made to explore further opportunities for clubs to benefit from links to second and third level education programmes to provide resources for the clubs. For example, clubs always need volunteers and the courses may provide vital resource in the form of project work, work placement programmes, transition year student schemes. The clubs should develop relationships with local secondary schools to identify possible initiatives. Third level courses such as journalism, sports science, leisure management etc. would be obvious targets for clubs to develop such schemes.

Draft for Consultation

4. Raising organisational standards

- 4.1. Develop a League accreditation scheme, along the lines of the club accreditation scheme, to raise standards of leadership and administration in the leagues and to ensure that all available improvements are made in communication and organisation.

Criteria for such a scheme would have to be worked out in detail, but should include:

- Formation of a small management board, to provide the strategic leadership and oversee the administration of the league
- The use of modern methods of administration and communication, including email and a website
- A planned fixture list, published before the start of the season, with clearly defined criteria for cancellation, consistently applied
- Fixed terms of office for all office-bearers and a planned programme of recruitment, training and management of successors.

Once a league has achieved this accreditation, it will be entitled to receive paid administrative support. An accredited league will also be in a stronger position to attract government grants and commercial sponsorship.

- 4.2. Hold an annual national conference for the amateur game, where expertise, best practice and innovative ideas may be shared through a programme of presentations, seminars and workshops on topics such as:
- Volunteer recruitment and training
 - Coach development
 - Referee development
 - Player pathways
 - Behaviour

This could be combined with the Annual Awards Dinner described in 1.5

- 4.3. Work to acquire a national sponsor for the amateur game, e.g. Umbro
- 4.4. The club accreditation scheme described in 3.2 would also contribute to the overall aim of raising organisational standards
- 4.5. The planned Client Relationship Management (CRM) solution, "Project In-form" should be rolled out across the country to support all those involved in the administration of the game and to provide a baseline of information on the club game including participation levels, number of teams, facilities, volunteer base, etc.

The CRM solution will:

- facilitate communication between all stakeholders involved in football
- provide a safe and secure means of collecting and storing data, and
- support administrators working to promote, foster and develop the game.

Used properly, Project Inform will free up valuable volunteer time by automating many processes and making the role of volunteer administrators much easier and less time consuming.

It is also critical for the ongoing development of the game to have a reliable base of information about the state of the game at any point in time. Once the base line has been agreed, priorities for development and support can be identified and progress against aims and targets measured.

- 4.6. The recruitment and retention of both retirees and women administrators should be targeted and encouraged to raise the numbers of volunteers involved in the running of the game.
- 4.7. The Provincial Associations will play a critical leadership role in helping to deliver on the range of recommendations and changes proposed within this strategy. In particular, they should play a strong role in implementing the organisational standards and culture of collaboration changes including the introduction of league and club accreditation schemes, the effectiveness of the annual national conference, the roll-out of Project In-form, the roll out of the Football Development Partnerships model and creation of fewer, stronger leagues and clubs amongst others.

5. Communication

The consultation meetings highlighted the problems of establishing and maintaining good channels of communication between the grass roots of the game and the Headquarters of the FAI, despite many existing efforts such as the new AGM format and the website. In particular, it was obvious that many of the people at club and league level were unaware of the wide range of services and support that were available to them from the paid FAI staff. In the course of this paper, we have made a number of suggestions that seek, amongst other objectives, to address this issue, e.g.

- Football Development Partnerships
- Club Development Officers
- Annual National Conference
- Annual Awards Dinner

In addition, the role of the Provincial Associations should be reviewed with a view to enhancing their importance, specifically, as a two-way conduit for communication between the grass roots and FAI Headquarters. Also other innovative mechanisms for communications should be explored, especially in utilising technology, for example the creation of football specific online social networks with a focus on the amateur game.