



**CLUB
FOOTBALL IN
MEATH**

THE REFORM AGENDA

PART I

BACKGROUND

There is a strong and persistent view from amongst the clubs in Meath that our competition structure requires serious reform. Three times at Annual Convention meetings since 2016 the matter has arisen with calls for change but no final agreement on what change might look like. Motions have come, gone, passed and been revoked without any meaningful reform.

There are competing interests and competing principles that have not yet been reconciled. And what is desirable to many has not yet been politically possible for a number of reasons. Whilst, agreement on the finer points has been elusive, no-one doubts club football in Meath needs to change and must improve. To achieve that, some compromises are required

Our games programme should facilitate *'as many as possible, to play as well as possible for as long as possible'*. Instead, retention is limited; standards are slipping and players finish playing relatively early. Weaknesses in the games programme have had a part in the decline in standards.

Nationally, there has been much discontent about intercounty fixtures and their impact on the club game. The intercounty season is *not* something the Meath GAA community can change. Meath clubs *can* reform our club competition. Focusing energy on what *can* be changed, rather than on what *cannot* be changed, will be much more likely to produce positive reform.

No-one claims that having more competitive club structures will revive the fortunes of the senior county team and that is not the purpose of reform, but club reform *might* just help. High quality coaching standards through clubs, schools and county will give young players the tools to play at the top table. A lot of work has been done and continues to be done in the underage ranks at club and county level. There are many green shoots.

However, nothing beats the experience of playing high quality competitive games at adult level. Well coached players with the experience of playing in a more challenging adult club competition programme in high pressure games are much more likely to develop the character required to compete with the best.

Furthermore, with better structures and more entry points to play at higher levels, the net can be spread much deeper and wider to foster and capture talent, for club, region and county. Many more players than play now, could play GAA in Meath with better structures.

Finally, rather than dogmatically insist on the very best but politically unpalatable structures to improve the lot of players, change can only come within the constraints of what is politically possible¹.

¹ Mass Relegation across grades is unlikely to receive enough support to pass a county convention

TESTIMONIALS

“As someone who has treaded wearily over proposed changes over past 2 years with many concerns of differing natures, I would feel that this new and, in my mind, improved proposal has improved on the many pitfall that the last two Proposals fell to. I feel it addresses the mass relegation fears that previous plans had rightly made Clubs feel threatened. It gives an Annual Calendar which is essential to Clubs and Players in the age we live in.

Having Chaired the CCCC for 5 years the main concerns that I have over our competitions have been;

- 1. The worry that should our County teams fare well in Competitions how would a CCCC finish the Club programme.*
- 2. That at times Club Players are over burdened with Games especially Dual Players.*
- 3. Our B Leagues are played in such a random manner that players competing here will and do lose interest. These players can be players of the future and must be valued.*
- 4. The high percentage of walk over in both B League and lower grade Junior Championships have been alarming*

I would feel that it is paramount that a Concrete Annual Fixture Schedule is set up and at present this cannot be achieved within our present Fixture Structure and I urge that this Proposal is studied closely.

Peter O’Halloran, Cathaoirleach Coiste na Mí C.L.G

“This restructuring will allow certainty in fixtures for the club players, while the new divisional competition will allow players from all clubs to play at a higher level.”

Sean Kelly, former Meath Senior player, coach, selector. Current Club coach and Meath GAA Director of Coaching

“I’d endorse all the proposed changes in this document. Having experienced playing in a 4 team group championship, I’d strongly favour that set up over the current system as a means of restoring competitiveness to the early stages of the championship.

the lack of depth and competitiveness in league and championship has been clear in recent times, I think this report helpfully provides some insight into the factors behind this deterioration and provides strong data to support change.

Finally, as somebody who graduated to the reserve team at the end of my club career, I’m delighted that the plight of this player has been acknowledged. I think the suggestions in this area will be welcome by Junior clubs and improve standards in the A league while giving reserve team players a meaningful set of games.”

John Lunney, former Simonstown Senior footballer

“An excellent proposal with a number of benefits. this proposal provides an opportunity for a high level of football for all players regardless of their club status. Reducing the number of senior teams is a step in the right direction to help improving football standards in the county.”

Barry Callaghan, former Meath Senior footballer & selector

“Championship football should have an edge to it which conditions players for the highest standards of performance and excites supporters with its pace, skill and aggression.

The ‘April Championship’ games have never felt or looked like anything other than league games, yet sometimes they have resulted in club players feeling their season was as good as over because of two defeats.

For that reason I fully endorse the moving of Championship football to the end of the summer - it will allow coaches and players to properly prepare for an 8 month playing season, where everyone involved is fully aware that from August onwards only your absolute best will be good enough to reach quarter-finals or avoid relegation.

I believe this one change alone, will improve the standard of preparation and performance throughout the county with multiple benefits to players, supporters, clubs and county squads.”

Mick O’Dowd, former Meath Senior footballer & Manager.

“I agree that the club scene has become a major issue recently and a constant cause of discontent among club players and officials. The constant pressure to keep county managers and club managers satisfied puts huge pressure on players. I think with better scheduling of competitions and games this could be resolved easier with county player becoming more available to their club for matches.

I agree with the idea of holding cup games (Feis/Tailt/CnB) early in the season as almost pre-season competition. This pushes the county league back a number of weeks where the weather conditions are better and the standard of games higher, which is what the club players deserve. Having designated starred games, in which county players can play, is also beneficial to the club and to the players themselves”

Donal Keogan, Meath Senior & Rathkenny Footballer

Issues to Resolve

With some consistency, the following problems with club competition have been highlighted;

- *Club competition schedule is chaotic and unpredictable*
- *Premier championships not of a high enough standard*
- *The population of the county is dispersed differently to the way it was and our structures fail to account for the massive population changes*
- *Quality players outside Senior clubs have little or no chance to play at a high level*
- *Committed players at bigger clubs have an inadequate games programme*
- *Leagues are generally weak, especially lower leagues, and too many games are meaningless*
- *Clubs do not have enough access to their county players*
- *County players are under constant pressure from club and county managers*
- *To complete our competitions on time, we need our county teams to fail*
- *Dual clubs/players have an impossible juggling act*

From the issues raised, six broad themes emerge.

1. Chaotic Fixtures
2. Club versus County
3. Lack of Competitiveness
4. Unfair Competition Structures
5. Dual Clubs/Players
6. Changing Demographics

Organised Chaos

The current championship structures require nine weekends to complete for football and another eight for hurling. The two codes and all championships need to be completed, around the intercounty schedules and preparation. With the number of weekends required in the time available to play, it is not possible for administrators to deliver any certainty for players. Published schedules are very difficult for planners to adhere to because it is almost impossible to do so.

Players, who are, in theory, supposed to be central to the fixture planning process, are in practice incidental. Not because planners are callous, but because the only priority can be to get the unwieldy games programme complete on time. For players, random fixtures at short notice, or even the threat of fixtures, (often when Meath teams unexpectedly win or lose) often intrude on family events. Holidays with partners or family are not possible to plan with certainty in summer. Proper planning of training schedules is virtually impossible for club coaches.

More and more, players who want a balanced life gravitate to other sports or, worse, no sport and away from GAA in Meath.

The amended intercounty calendars are adding to the uncertainty. Meath hurlers have competed in the Leinster Championship proper and the new Joe McDonagh cup², the U21 hurlers and U20 footballers now play through the summer in round robin structures. To make the Super 8 through July will be a recurring goal for Meath and all counties in Division 1 and 2 and will remain so as long as the Super 8 exists. Leinster council have flagged to counties to have county championships complete by the middle of October to meet another central council goal. That goal is to have the All Ireland Club finals complete in a calendar year, further compressing the time available to complete competitions. Inter-county competition structures are likely to see continued interrogation and possibly some changes. Meath cannot wait.

The fact that the number eighteen is indivisible by four adds another month on the football calendar. It means you need nine free weekends with the 3rd place play-off game, rather than six in a sixteen team competition, to complete the Meath championships. The number eighteen was not arrived at by design to give extra championship football to players, but as a concession, after a relegation play off dispute, with damaging long-term repercussions. The decision not to relegate anyone caused fixture congestion problems down the line.

To be fair to the competition control committee (CCC), planners are produced every couple of months. Finalised league fixtures and other fixtures tend to be produced two weeks in advance

² Meath were relegated this year but the ambition to compete annually in the new structures remain

rather than at the start of the year. Unfortunately, they can only be a loose guide because the competitions structures are not possible to properly plan around. Often they are a distance from what actually happens, again because external fixtures and unforeseen events intrude.

Club V County

The interests of clubs and the county teams frequently collide. In Meath, the tension is becoming unhealthy.

An underlying resentment is developing in the county towards county teams. In the past, when county teams *have* progressed, games can be postponed at short notice.³ In reality the round of club championship coming up the first championship game often sees cry offs for injuries as the serious business of national competition looms. Different parties are pulling against rather than with each other. That is not uncommon nationally but much less common amongst successful counties.

It might be seen as looking to the past with rose tinted glasses, but it certainly *felt* like sincere support for county teams was more evident in the past.

The fact that the successful completion of our club schedule is dependent on the failure of the county team means interests diverge to an even greater degree and support for county teams further diminishes.

In essence we need our county teams to fail to get our fixtures complete.

Players suffer enormously in such a fractious environment. The pressures that county players come under for allegiance from all quarters are enormous. It is undoubtedly a factor in the number of players that elect to walk away from county football.

Clubs, especially those that contribute many players to county teams, are usually the losers often not having county players available for what can appear to be frivolous reasons. Fault is not a one-way street. Dogmatic club managers can exacerbate tension unnecessarily too.

Whilst the intercounty calendar has undoubtedly squeezed the time available in the first half of the year, *it actually gives much more time and certainty from August on.* Rather than bemoan the changes it would be more productive to adapt to the changes. County management set ups come in for criticism around player availability, often justified, but it would be better for everyone if there was a cohesive diary, with certain dates and availability; and interests aligned.

The county should aspire to qualify for all of the new structures, across codes, and we should plan our fixtures accordingly.

Meath GAA needs everyone behind the county teams.

Well planned club competitions are a part of the solution to the club V county tensions.

Lack of Competitiveness

³ In 2016, part of round two and round three of the SFC, were postponed at 2 weeks' notice for 3 months when the Meath hurlers progressed in the Christy Ring cup. In 2017, SHC championship teams played without players when the footballers progressed in the qualifiers.

A review of the senior championship group league tables demonstrates that the bottom team's points difference has climbed over -60 for the first time in 2016 and 2017, with average losing margins of nearly 13 points for the bottom team. There are too many mismatches.

Improving competitiveness is reasonably easy to achieve. Reducing the number of teams in any competition so that teams of different standards are less likely to play each other always helps to improve competitiveness. The question is how great the reduction should be.

In every sport, at every level, it is about ensuring players of the same standard are more likely to compete in close fought competition. In the inter-county scene, there have been many calls to tighten the intercounty championship competitions into different competitions. The purpose is to avoid mis-matches. The national leagues have long been regarded as the most competitive inter-county competition. The national league is made up of 4 groups of 8 teams which makes it a very competitive and engaging tournament with the outcome of most games uncertain.

Moving the premier competition in the Meath from 18 to 16 teams is not radical.⁴ In fact the move to 16 has become the norm across in almost every county across the country. More evenly matched senior teams will help to reduce the number of one sided games that have become a feature of the competition since moving to 18 teams in the years after the fixture row around the relegation play off in 2009.

The county needs to produce a more challenging and competitive environment for players under their charge. The likelihood of Mismatches must be reduced. Meath has too many senior teams and the county needs to tighten its premier competition by a small amount. A limited cut to numbers in the senior championship may not be radical enough for many but it does help to reduce the likelihood of one sided drubbings.

Another way to improve competition is to reduce the number of games with little or nothing at stake. Teams can lose too many games without consequence; unsurprisingly too many games are inconsequential! Three six team groups with too wide a spread of quality mean too many games do not mean enough; as an example, in early games teams know they can afford to lose and the same is true of latter group games where teams are already qualified. A sixteen team group competition, although not a panacea reduces scope for losses to mean little and thus brings more purpose to more games.

Unfair Competition Structure

The current competition structures are unfair to two significant cohorts; top players in smaller clubs and committed players at senior clubs, who do not make the first team.

Elite Players from junior and intermediate clubs (typically with lower populations) do not have the same opportunities as elite players in high population senior clubs. They may be involved in high quality competition through schools and colleges and/or county underage teams.

However, when they move beyond the underage structures, unless they are the county team, or they transfer, they are unlikely to ever again play football at a grade at which they are capable. This inevitably leads to development issues, retention issues and ends up sapping the potential playing pool of the clubs and the county. Many players become disillusioned. It has led to transfer requests, some out of the county, as players, not unreasonably, want to play and be tested at a level commensurate with their ability. The county needs to provide a games

⁴ Cavan and Longford operate a 12 team championship. Monaghan operate a 10 team, back door championship. That would probably be too radical for Meath but all of those counties punch well above a weight their population suggest they should.

programme that challenges high quality players throughout the whole of their adult career no matter what club they play with. Otherwise clubs and players will suffer.

Grouping all the first teams into one group in the junior championships solved one problem but has created another. It was unfair that non-first teams could line out with much stronger teams in the opening rounds and permanently damage the championship aspirations of contenders. Second teams ended up fielding much weaker teams in latter rounds of the competition and subsequently got knocked out. With the result that leading junior contenders saw their season finish early and unfairly.

However by putting all the non-first teams into one group, it has meant those players who do not make a senior team are locked into a perpetual cycle of playing the same 7 or 8 teams for their whole playing career because they play the same teams in the B league. Non-first team players at big clubs are very poorly served by the current arrangements. Those players are in de facto reserve championship and reserve league, rarely playing first team players. Many of those players are excellent, committed players. Some are former county players. Meath GAA needs to serve them better.

Dual Clubs/Players

While this document is about club football reform, hurling cannot be ignored and hurlers must be considered.

Dual clubs like, Dunboyne, Ratoath, Dunderry, Trim and Longwood, have a difficult task trying to develop both codes within the clubs. That juggling act between football and hurling extends to dual players playing at two different clubs. For example, players who play across codes for Summerhill, Moynalvey and Kiltale. The reality is that frequent squabbles exist within clubs and between clubs because of the uncertainty around scheduling.

It can difficult to play football and hurling at a high level. Some can do it but there is no reason that more players might not be able to give priority to one but also participate in the other sport if the calendar gave more certainty. At the moment it does not. A more certain schedule with designated weekends would allow many more players to play hurling and for hurling to develop in the county. That can only happen if there a fixed schedule and problems with the B leagues are addressed⁵.

Development issues aside, accommodating dual clubs and players in the calendar gives an added headache to fixture planners. A comprehensive plan for football reform cannot ignore the needs of dual clubs and players. The Hurling fraternity have settled on how they wish to run their championship and Leagues. The football plan can successfully work around it and maintain certainty. This report demonstrates that cohesion between the two diaries from each code is indeed possible.

⁵ Dual players frequently opt out of B League fixtures around SHC time. To be fair to the CCC the weeks around SHC are often the only free slots available to play the games

Demographics

As discussed above, the demographics of the county have been transformed from a largely rural population relatively evenly dispersed to a much more heavily populated county with a number of significant urban centres. However, there is more to it than just urbanisation and those formulating GAA policy in Meath must deal with the evolving and somewhat complex demographics.

The 2016 census recorded the population of the county as 194,942. The population centres of the South and East of the county that have grown the most are now effectively commuter towns for Dublin. Navan, Dunboyne, South Drogheda, Ashbourne and Ratoath are all relatively big urban centres and likely to get bigger. For some, being so close to the capital city means there are many more pulls and distractions than there once was for young GAA players in those towns. Many hinterland clubs (around the bigger urban centres) in the South and East are also supported by favourable demographics. GAA in Meath needs to provide a meaningful games programme for young people from those areas or they will drift away from our games.

Figure 1 demonstrates the electoral districts where the majority of the population of the county live. Of the total of 194,942 people, c132,000 or nearly 70% of the population live in the areas highlighted in table 1. There are 22 football clubs in those areas. In 30% of the population, where just over 60,000 people live there are 30 football clubs. So in the urban areas, (which includes very small areas) there is on average a club for every 6000 people. In the 30 smaller football clubs there is a club for every 2000 people. That is the *average* in smaller population areas; some clubs are sustained on much smaller populations than 2000 people.

The burden of providing specialist coaching, facilities and fundraising falls on the heads of very small number of people, usually no more than a handful of families.

Total Population 2016 (Electoral Districts)	Clubs in each electoral district	
Navan & Hinterland	28,081	2
St. Mary's (Includes Mornington/S Drogheda)	11,967	2
Donaghmore	11,826	1
Ratoath	11,079	1
Julianstown	10,139	
Dunboyne	10,072	2
Trim Area	8,793	1
Dunshaughlin	5,840	1
Duleek	5,554	1
Stamullen	5,001	1
Kells & Hinterland	4,654	2
Innfield,	4,347	1
Kilbrew (Curraha/Part Ashbourne)	3,642	1
Athboy	2,585	1
Oldcastle	2,301	1
Ballivor Area	2,227	1
Kentstown	2,145	1
Castlerickard (Longwood)	2,119	1

Figure 1: Top Population Centres Meath with number of Football clubs in each. (The CSO use electoral areas to gather population data and not Church parishes that GAA clubs use for their catchment areas)

Drilling down deeper reveals that 83,164 people live in the Navan, South Drogheda and South East Meath area (Dunboyne/Ratoath/Ashbourne). So c43% of the population resides in less than 5% of the geographical area. There are only 8 clubs in those areas; around a club for every 10,000 people. That number of people per club gives preferential scale to build out facilities and coaching structures. So those clubs are drawing from much bigger populations than before and smaller clubs are drawing from smaller populations than before.

Only one conclusion can be drawn, the difference in output between the bigger clubs and the smaller population clubs will become more pronounced.

Further analysis of the demographics reveals that the population is much younger in the developing areas so those population trends are going to accelerate not reverse as less employment is found in agriculture-based employment and more in urban areas.

An analysis of the maps reveals the South of the county, from Batterstown to Ballinabrackey, has relatively few urban centres outside Trim. The South has fewer clubs but often draws from significant populations because they cover large geographical areas. There are also many more hurlers and dual players in the South.

In Meath, North of a line from Athboy to Slane, there are lots of clubs, drawn from smaller populations. The CSO reveals these populations are ageing and the areas from which clubs pull are often very small geographically. There are only two centres with populations over 2000 people, Oldcastle and Kells.

The North and far West of the county is facing demographic challenges that cannot be ignored.

The needs of the urban clubs are different to rural clubs. Within more rural areas, the needs of the South are different to the needs of the North. There are many issues to reconcile.

The simple solution is for new clubs to form in rapidly urbanising and younger areas and for clubs in rural and ageing areas to amalgamate. There have been many successful examples of amalgamations working very well. Some of those new clubs have become the most successful in the county⁶. There have been less examples of spin off from clubs in Meath, for population reasons but in Dublin there are many⁷. There may be merit to do one or other in select cases but it would be unwise to discount the tradition and import that each club has in their area.

Whilst natural coming together in the years to come are to be encouraged, any forced amalgamations or spin offs would not succeed. Where possible it is up to Coiste Na Mí to provide competitions that provides competitive games for everyone according to their standard and for clubs to remain intact.

The important point to make is that the current mix of clubs and the games programme are a function of the demographics of a very different county and not the county we have today.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the leagues.

The B Leagues are suitable for clubs where there are more than enough adult players for one league team but not quite enough for two. The B leagues were a neat solution to a past dispersion of population across the county of Meath to ensure lots of players got a game, playing some first team games and a balance of B League games.

The even dispersion of people across the county has been replaced by concentration of people. With the result that the B leagues are no longer fit for purpose, pointedly for those clubs who

⁶ Blackhall Gaels and Na Fianna are examples of very successful amalgamations.

⁷ Castleknock St Thomas and Ballymun Kickhams are spin off clubs from St Brigid's and Na Fianna.

need to provide games for committed or willing players who want to play football on the same terms as everyone else. With the population changes in the county, urban centres like Navan, Dunboyne, South Drogheda, and Ratoath have had massive issues retaining players, including lots of talented and committed players. Traditional clubs in football heartlands like Skryne and Summerhill face the same problem. Thousands of young players into whom the clubs have invested years of hard work have disappeared from the Meath GAA club scene. Some fall off is inevitable but the extent of the fall off is alarming. Unfortunately, their number includes many county underage players who could not break into their club senior team and drifted away.

Part of the problem is the games programme for those players. The B leagues are unattractive. They are lower priority games for planners and clubs. Players quickly sense that. Games are fixed at unsuitable times and a significant amount are cancelled every year. Complete mismatches are frequent with cricket score results that help neither the winning or losing team. Dual players refuse to play around championship time. There are usually one or two teams that fold every year. Simply put players are not buying in.

The problem of an unattractive games programme for those players is compounded by the second teams being cordoned into separate groups in the Junior championships. So the same players now play each other all the time, never facing first team opposition. Ironically this happens at the same time as the lower divisions of the A leagues have a significant deficit in quality.

The maps below illustrate the spread of clubs across the county with higher population areas highlighted.

Figure 2 shows the very even distribution of clubs across the county. The massive population shifts have had very little impact on the dispersal of clubs.

However, when the clubs are broken down by senior, intermediate and junior, the larger population centres have the bulk of the senior clubs. Rural clubs with large hinterlands and sustainably large populations also feature.

There are more intermediate clubs the further north you travel into Meath and the Junior clubs are predominantly dotted along the periphery of the county, where populations are lower and older, especially the West.

People can make their own judgement but the evidence suggests, the trend of clubs moving up the grades is likely to continue to follow the population movements.

That leaves football in Meath with a problem that is getting worse. Very talented footballers in clubs where there is no outlet to play at the highest level begin to wither. Their development is stalled by starving them from competing. Many will have starred on county underage teams but after 20 years of age, unless they make the county senior team may never play a game of football at the grade they are capable for the rest of their careers. That is desperately unfair.

It is unfair to ask a young person not to fulfil their potential. Many have decided to move clubs, or indeed counties, because they have no outlet to grow and develop. Meath GAA has been remiss and needs to provide a meaningful platform for those disenfranchised players to showcase their talents and test themselves at a higher level. It is not good enough to say it is too hard to organise or 'they have to get on with it'. The individuals and the county deserve better.

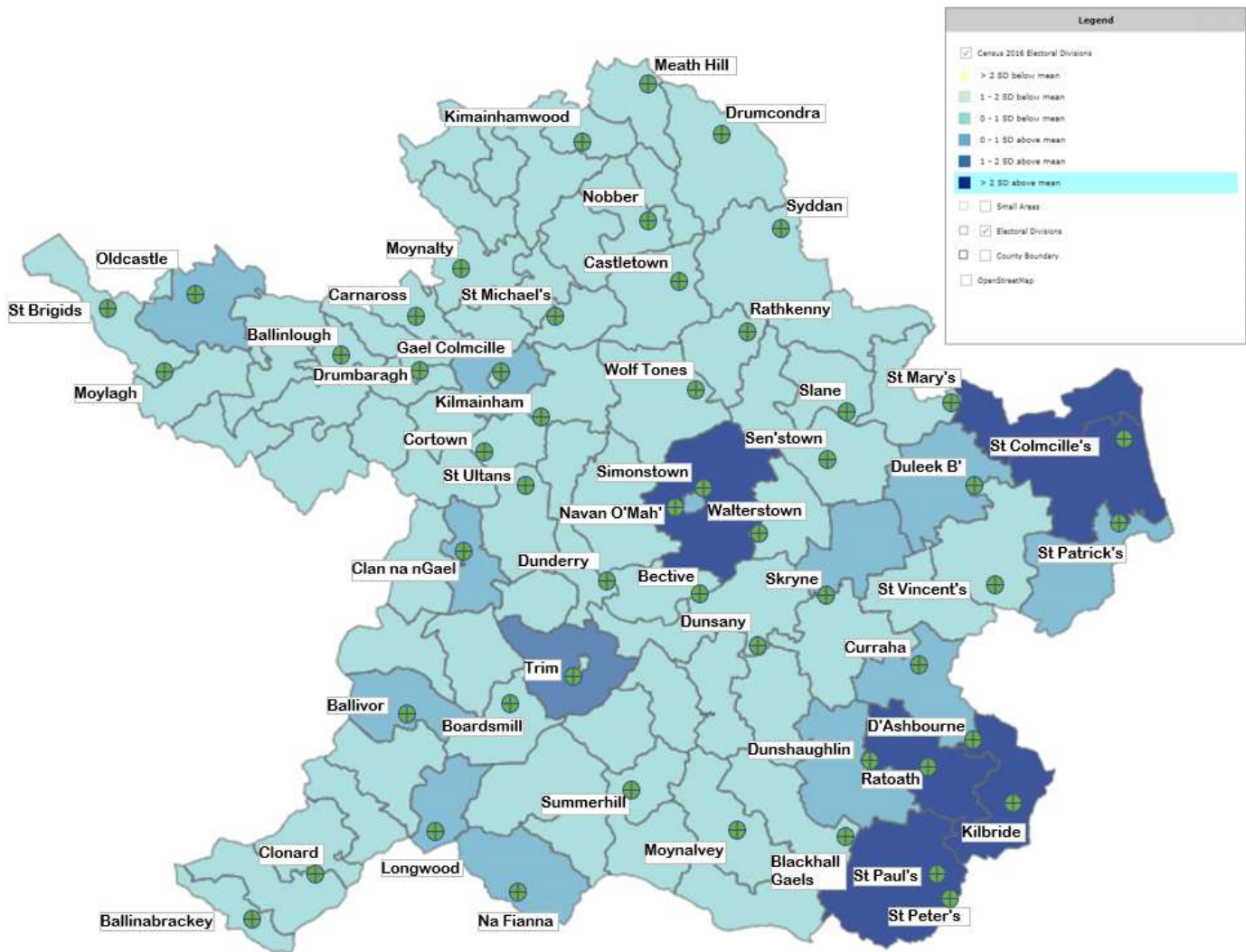


Figure 2: All football clubs in Meath (Shaded areas, electoral areas with population centres significantly larger than average ⁸ (Dark Blue 2 STD))

⁸ The areas are not church parishes which the GAA uses to establish catchment areas. For example, Bective and Walerstown both draw from the Navan hinterland area but their parish (catchment areas) straddles inside and outside the Navan hinterland electoral areas.

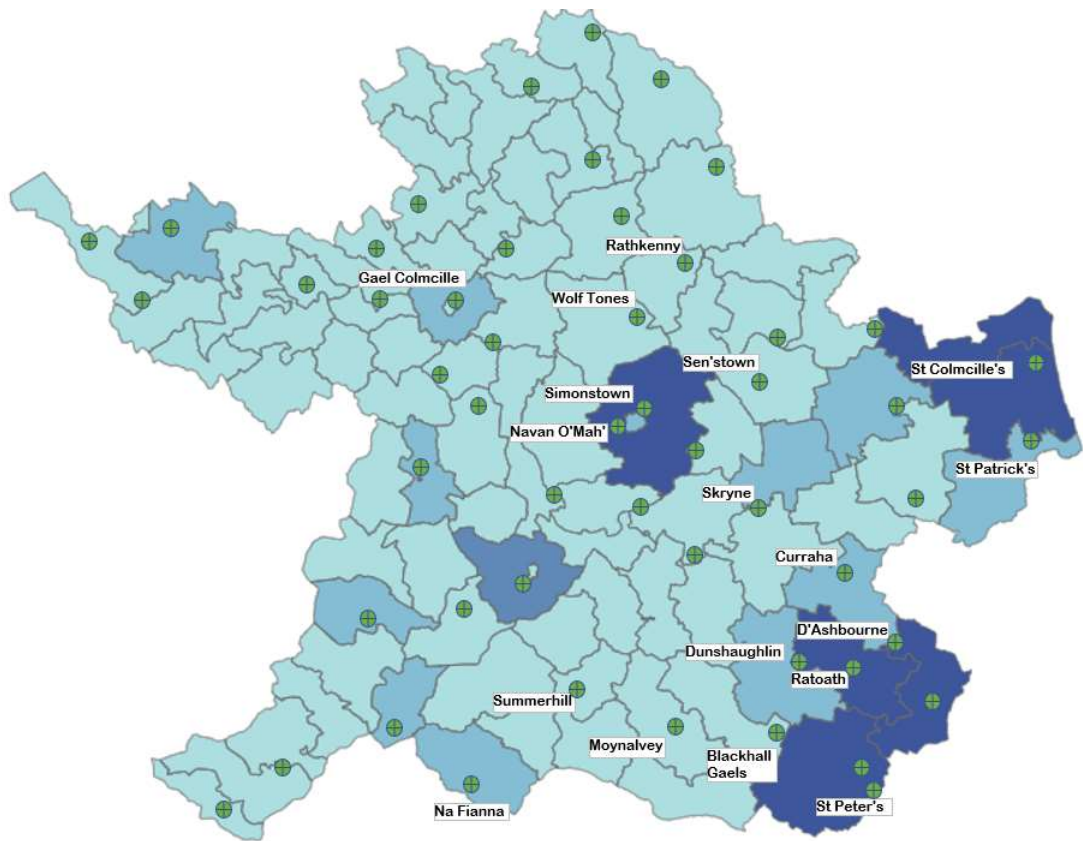


Figure 3: Senior clubs in Meath

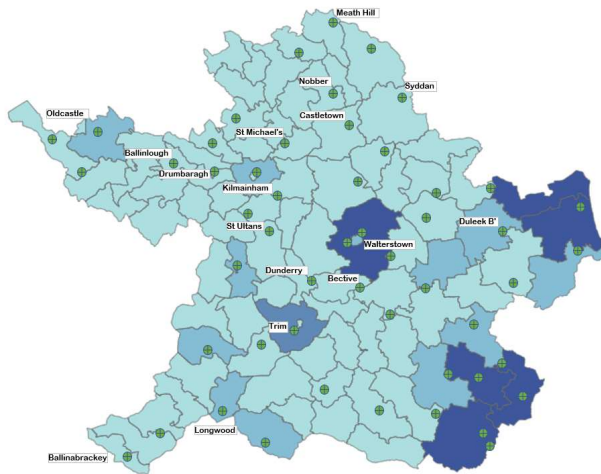


Figure 4: Intermediate clubs in Meath

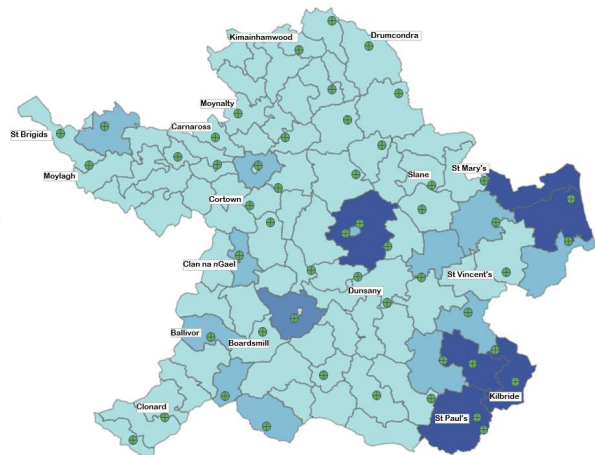


Figure 5: Junior clubs in Meath

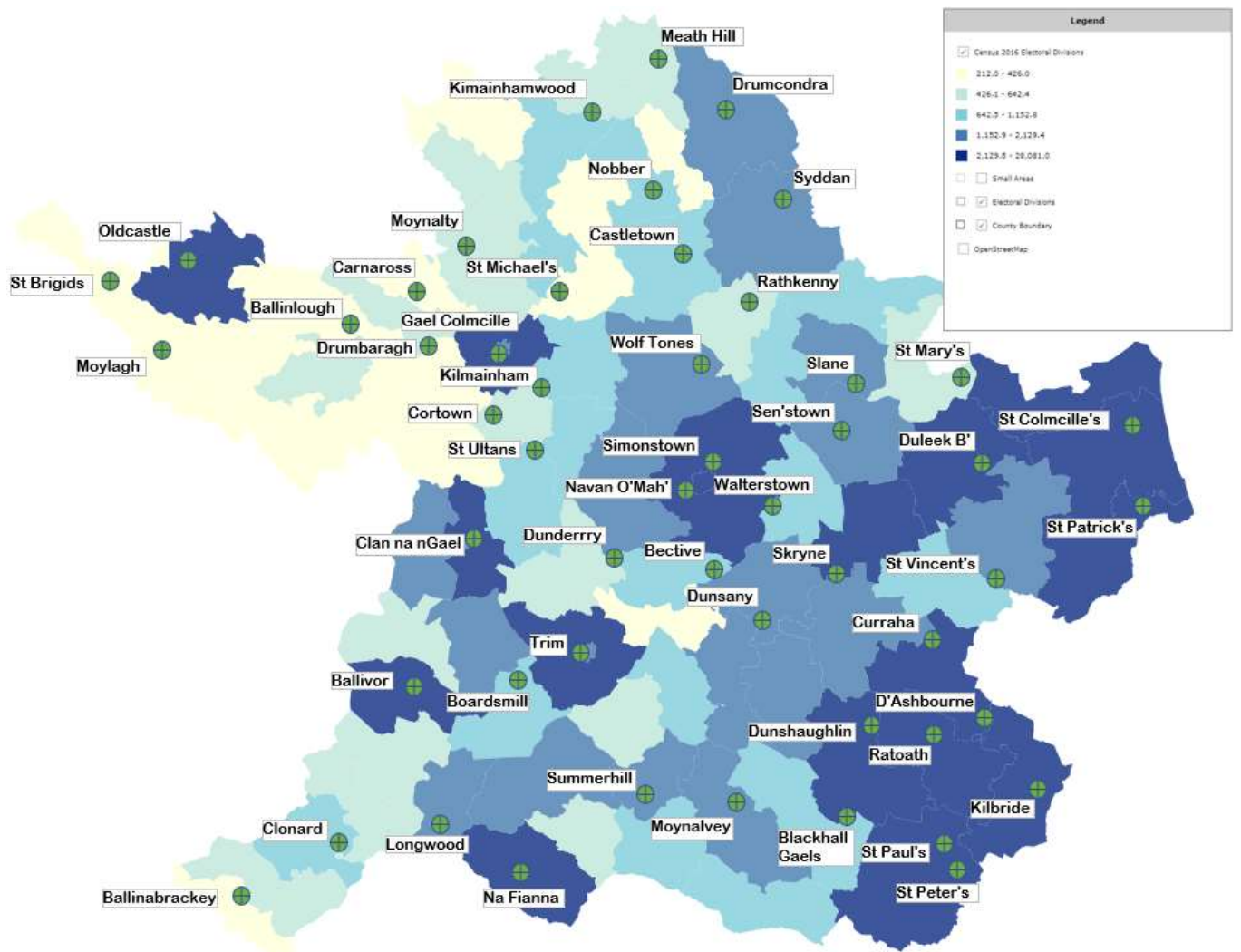


Figure 6: All football clubs in Meath with shaded areas populations distributed according to legend insert

PART II

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Fixed Calendar with down periods

(2) Split championships into first team and reserve championship

- *16 team senior championship*
- *20 team intermediate championship* (first team only)
- *16 team junior championship* (first team only)
- *Reserve Championship*

(3) District championship (Junior and Intermediate combinations)

(4) Open the A leagues to second teams

(5) Previous Championship used to seed championship groups

(6) Starred League Games (County players available)

(7) Cup competitions become Pre-Season Competitions

2020	January				February				March				April					
Sat/Sun	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	1st 2nd	8th 9th	15th 16th	22nd 23rd	29th 1st	7th 8th	14th 15th	21st 22nd	28th 29th	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	
Week #	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13	Week 14	Week 15	Week 16	Week 17	
Senior Football				Feis Cup 1	Feis Cup 2		Feis Cup 3		Feis Cup SF	League 1		League 2		League 3	League 4, 5 & 6			
Reserve										B League		B League		B League	BLX 3			
IC Football	O'Byrne C	O'Byrne C			NFL R1	NFL R2	NFL R3		NFL R4	NFL R5	NFL R6	NFL R7		League F				
Sat/Sun	May				June				July				August					
Week #	2nd 3rd	9th 10th	16th 17th	23rd 24th	30th 31st	6th 7th	13th 14th	20th 21st	27th 28th	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	1st 2nd	8th 9th	15th 16th	22nd 23rd	29th 30th
Senior Football				League 7 (Mon)	League 8 (Mon)	League 9 (Mon)	League 10 (Mon)	League 11 (Mon)	League 12 (Mon)	League 13				SFC 1			SFC 2	
Reserve				RFC 1 (Fri)	RFC 2 (Fri)-BL (Wed)	RFC 3 (Fri)		B League (Wed)	RFC 4 (Fri)	B League (Wed X 2)				RFC 5 (Fri)			RFC 6 (Fri)	
IC Football	Mid May to End June LFC/AI Qualifiers					U20 Round Robin Football June/July			Super 8s end July					AI SF				AIF
Sat/Sun	September				October				November				December					
Week #	5th 6th	12th 13th	19th 20th	26th 27th	3rd 4th	10th 11th	17th 18th	24th 25th	31st 1st	7th 8th	14th 15th	21st 22nd	28th 29th	5th 6th	12th 13th	19th 20th	26th 27th	
Senior Football	SFC 3		League F	OF/RPO	SFC SF		SFC Final		League Final	Feis Cup F	U21 QF (W)	U21 SF	U21 F					
Reserve	RFC 7 (Fri)			RFC SF/RPO	RFC Finals	RFC Finals(Sat)												

Figure 8: Senior Clubs Only (First team & Reserve Team)

2020	January				February				March				April					
Sat/Sun	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	1st 2nd	8th 9th	15th 16th	22nd 23rd	29th 1st	7th 8th	14th 15th	21st 22nd	28th 29th	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	
Week #	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13	Week 14	Week 15	Week 16	Week 17	
Inter & Jun (F)				Tailt' & CnB	Tailt' & CnB 2	Tailt' & CnB 3		Cup SF	League 1		League 2		League 3	League 4, 5 & 7				
IC Football	O'Byrne C	O'Byrne C			NFL R1	NFL R2	NFL R3		NFL R4	NFL R5	NFL R6	NFL R7		League F				
Sat/Sun	May				June				July				August					
Week #	2nd 3rd	9th 10th	16th 17th	23rd 24th	30th 31st	6th 7th	13th 14th	20th 21st	27th 28th	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	1st 2nd	8th 9th	15th 16th	22nd 23rd	29th 30th
Inter & Jun (F)				League 7 (Mon)	League 8 (Mon)	League 9 (Mon)	League 10	Back Match	League 11 (Mon)	League 12	Back Match	L 13/Finals		JFC/JFC 1			JFC/JFC 2	
IC Football	Mid May to End June LFC/AI Qualifiers					U20 Round Robin Football June/July			Super 8s end July					AI SF				AIF
Sat/Sun	September				October				November				December					
Week #	5th 6th	12th 13th	19th 20th	26th 27th	3rd 4th	10th 11th	17th 18th	24th 25th	31st 1st	7th 8th	14th 15th	21st 22nd	28th 29th	5th 6th	12th 13th	19th 20th	26th 27th	
Inter & Jun (F)	JFC/JFC 3	JFC P/L	JFC/JFC C	JFC/JFC SF	L Finals	JFC/JFC F	Reg 1 (Sat)	Reg 2 (Sat)	Reg 1 (Sat)	Reg SF	Reg F							

Figure 9: Intermediate & Junior Clubs Only (Includes Regional Championship)

2020	January				February				March				April					
Sat/Sun	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	1st 2nd	8th 9th	15th 16th	22nd 23rd	29th 1st	7th 8th	14th 15th	21st 22nd	28th 29th	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	
Week #	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13	Week 14	Week 15	Week 16	Week 17	
Club Hurling					League 1		League 2			League 3		League 4		League 5		League 6		
IC Hurling	Walsh Cup	Walsh Cup			NHI R1	NHI R2	NHI R3		NHL R4	NHL R5	NHL R6	NHL R7		League F				
Sat/Sun	May				June				July				August					
Week #	2nd 3rd	9th 10th	16th 17th	23rd 24th	30th 31st	6th 7th	13th 14th	20th 21st	27th 28th	4th 5th	11th 12th	18th 19th	25th 26th	1st 2nd	8th 9th	15th 16th	22nd 23rd	29th 30th
Club Hurling			Davis Cup	Davis Cup (Wed after)		HC 1		HC 2			HC 3		HC 4		HC 5		HC OF	
IC Hurling	Round Robin to the end of May												Special U 20 HC					
Sat/Sun	September				October				November				December					
Week #	5th 6th	12th 13th	19th 20th	26th 27th	3rd 4th	10th 11th	17th 18th	24th 25th	31st 1st	7th 8th	14th 15th	21st 22nd	28th 29th	5th 6th	12th 13th	19th 20th	26th 27th	
Club Hurling		HC SF	Davis Cup F		HC F	HC F	League Final	U21 QF	U21 SF	U21 Final								

Games					County Player Availability		
(extra possible games in brackets)					Minimum if Meath don't Qualify Super 8 & League Final		
Max extra game in brackets	League	Cup	Championship	Total Min	Total Max	(Knock Out Games)	
Senior Player	13 (2)	3 (2)	4 (2)	20	26	12	15
Intermediate Player	13 (2)	3 (2)	4 (3)	20	27	11 (5)	16
Junior Player	13 (2)	3 (2)	4 (2)	20	26	6 (6)	17
Regional	0	0	3 (2)	3	5	7 (7)	14
Reserve Player (A League)	13 (2)		7 (3)	20	25	5	5
Reserve Player (B League)	8 (1)		7 (3)	15	19	N/A	N/A
Hurler	7 (1)	1 (3)	6 (3)	13	17	N/A	N/A

Figure 10: Hurling Competition (No Change to existing structures)

Fixed Calendar with ‘Down’ Periods

A fixed calendar with set dates for games, especially championship games and ‘down’ periods would be a nirvana for players. It would allow a much more balanced existence for players who wish to commit to GAA but also enjoy other things including family in their life.

Figure 7 illustrated how the club and county calendar would work in 2020 under the suggested reforms. Figure 8,9 and 10 breaks down by each type of player and club. They also demonstrate the minimum games that would be played, along with minimum county availability under each scenario; for example, Meath getting to a league final and/or qualifying for Super 8.

Down periods

Down periods could extend from November to January, around the bank holiday in June and a week during the builders’ holidays in August⁹.

League games could be fixed for Monday night in the summer, allowing weekends free and giving non-starting county players further opportunity to play for their clubs.

Most importantly all fixtures would have fixed weekends. Championship dates would be set at the start of the season and be guaranteed unless Meath reached an All-Ireland Football Final. League games would be fixed months in advance and could only be changed to within 7 days of the original fixture. A change would also reduce the likelihood of having a county player available for starred games.

Managers can begin to plan long-term more effectively, developing players and managing load/intensity with more precision, all of which would help improve standards.

Finally, a fixed calendar would give dual players a more certain schedule with designated hurling weekends.

Splitting the Intercounty & Club Championship Season

Splitting the intercounty season and club championship seasons is a recommendation of the report.

A constant tension underlines the relationship between, the two strands of Coiste na Mí, the club and county team. Adopting a calendar that defuses rather than stirs tension is the most sensible approach.

The tension could be alleviated by starting the club championship at the start of August rather than attempting to squeeze rounds in to the busy April period. The new inter-county schedule, although subject to a lot of criticism, does give more space to the club and certainty to club players from August on. It is possible to set in stone an August championship start.

It has been argued that such an approach will encourage students to leave during the summer.¹⁰ That argument does not hold water. As it stands, players, especially county players leave in large

⁹ Removing the league play offs would allow a free week in August. Whilst league play offs are a good suggestion to encourage competitiveness, starred league games and July league fixtures should mean the league will be much stronger.

¹⁰ New rules mean players can return 30 days after the transfer has been executed rather than 60 so it is much easier for players to return to play for their clubs in championship

numbers under the current arrangement. The new rule whereby any players named on a county senior panel cannot play in the US has accelerated movement across the Atlantic rather than stemmed the flow. With an escalated July league programme and guaranteed start in August, the club programme in Meath would begin in earnest in the height of summer. Players thinking about heading off to the US and coming back at the start of September would be disappointed because a lot more of the key club period will take place in the summer months with the fixed calendar.

Although there is dissatisfaction when key players leave for the summer, in the long run it is a healthy experience for young men to go and live independently, often for the first time. Even though a consolidated programme might reduce the viability of playing in the US for the summer, in the long run clubs should embrace their players enjoying such a life experience.

The most important consequence of splitting the club and county seasons is that the two parts, club and county begin to work effectively together rather than pulling apart. Each can complement the other. Whilst each championship would reside in different parts of the calendar the other competitions would dovetail more smoothly. Players, both club and county players, would benefit enormously.

Championships

The proposal suggests a traditional four groups of four in the senior championship, seeded from the previous year's quarter finalists, with the top two in each group qualifying for quarter finals and the bottom two going in to a relegation play off.

The intermediate championship would be five groups of four, with the top of each group qualifying for quarter finals along with the second in group A. Second Place in each of the other groups would go into preliminary quarter finals. The same process would exist in reverse, with the bottom of each group going into a relegation play off along with third place in group A. Third place in the other groups would go into a preliminary relegation play off. The previous year's group winners would be seeded, along with the relegated senior team. (If a group winner goes up to senior)

In the junior competition, there would be sixteen teams, with four groups of four. The previous year's quarter finalists would be seeded one and two, with the relegated intermediate team. The two bottom teams in each group would be entered into the quarter finals of a junior plate.

Across the country, counties are now converging on a number of 16 or even 20¹¹ for their championships because with that number, competitions can run smoothly. Dublin, Mayo, Kildare, Kerry have all arrived at 16 teams, group or back door, after amending their senior championship structure in recent years.

The reason that the proposal suggests 20 rather than 16 in the intermediate championship is an acknowledgment of the vociferous opposition from the intermediate ranks to a significant relegation programme. Without intermediate club support reform may not be possible. It means no extra relegation from intermediate championship. Many will argue that will not help standards in the intermediate grade. However, there will be two stronger clubs in the grade and the better players will have an outlet at regional level.

The proposal suggests an exclusively first team championship across grades.¹² As illustrated previously, second teams in the junior championships, have now been segregated into their own

¹¹ Galway have 20 teams in their championship (Although proposals are afoot to move to 16 team senior championship)

¹² This is now the case in Dublin, Kildare Donegal and Derry amongst others.

groups in any case. To move to a separate championship is very little change in practical terms. No second team has won the junior championship in nearly 40 years. A second team winning the championship would be less popular than a first team winning the same championship, and in truth the energy of every club is to ensure their first team competes in the first instance.

A separate reserve championship would ease the underlying concerns of junior clubs that bigger clubs will reverse the segregated junior groups. A reserve football championship (RFC) can proceed on regular championship weekends but continue uninterrupted because there will be no county players. The top levels of the RFC would be intermediate standard football so standards would be high. Tight groups of eight would ensure plenty of championship football and competitive games.

The top four teams in each division go forward to semi-finals and the bottom two are relegated. No team can have two teams in the same division and in the event of the tables producing that outcome, the next team down would be promoted in lieu.¹³ The fact that the reserve teams would compete for their own championship trophy on the same weekends that the first teams would ensure the sense of a championship weekend would remain¹⁴.

There is universal support for a district championship involving the best junior and intermediate players. Such a competition gives every player in the county an outlet to compete at the highest level no matter where they come from. If executed well, it is the single most important reform in this report.

The proposal suggests eight regional teams to compete week on week in two groups of four, with the top two qualifying for semi-finals. The final would take place two weeks after the semi final. The senior league Final or Feis Cup final could provide the curtain raiser. The final of the regional championship could be a day with big crowds and a sense of occasion akin to the senior championship final.

Figure 11 illustrates possible amalgamations that would ultimately be decided by clubs with guidance from the CCC and Meath Coaching and Games



Figure 11: Proposed Regional Amalgamations

¹³ A club could win two divisions and the second RFC team would not be promoted.

¹⁴ There are proposals to be less rigid for eligibility for a RFC because no first teams are impacted. For example, a sub that comes on in a SFC game might not be able to play another minute of championship football for the year.

To ensure the standard remains high, it should happen at the end of the year after the junior and intermediate championship are complete when county managers are on high alert for players who are demonstrating quality under pressure and against equally talented opposition. It also ensures all county players are available to the districts. Playing the competition in the summer or earlier would not allow county players to play and would diminish a district championship.

With careful management and the provided the proposals are passed in full there is ample time to get it played and also play the U21 championship. (See Figure 7)

Furthermore, the regional structures may lend themselves to more focused coaching from Meath coaching and games for committed underage players across clubs in the eight regions.

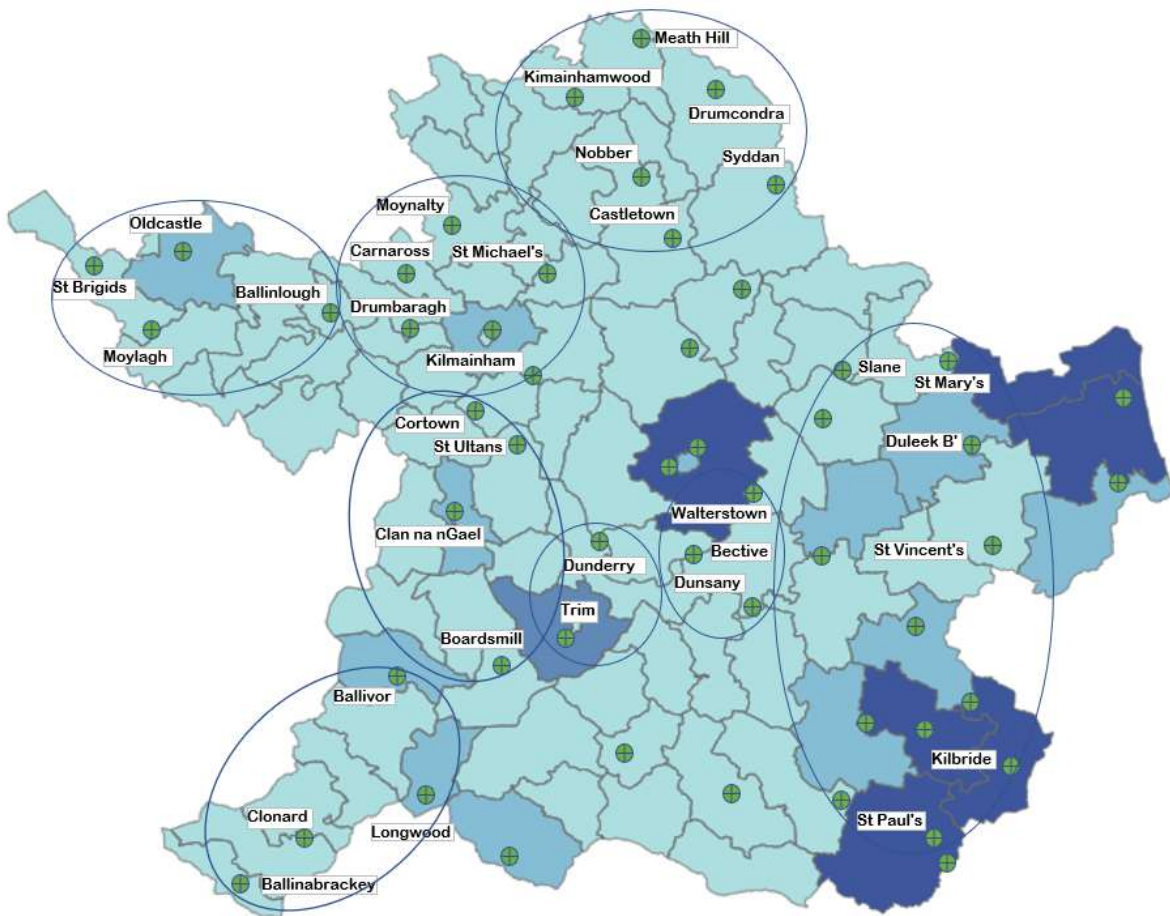


Figure 12: Map of Proposed Regional Amalgamations

The proposals guarantee every senior club gets three group championship games and one knock out championship game. Every intermediate club is guaranteed three group championship games and one knock out championship game, with more for most clubs. Every junior club gets four championship games (and a chance to win either one of two trophies). This ensures Meath continues to guarantee the most championship games of any county.

Cup Competitions

The Cup competitions have become somewhat of an orphan within the calendar. In recent years, Meath GAA has found it difficult to find a permanent home or purpose for the cups. Cup competitions are used successfully in other counties like Cavan and Meath need to use the cups better.

The cups could serve a useful function as a pre-season group based competition, before the start of the A leagues. (See Figure 7) The cups would allow clubs to bring through young players, gain conditioning and test tactics. There would be a separate unseeded draw, with sixteen senior teams in the Feis Cup, twenty intermediate teams in the Corn na Boinne, and sixteen junior teams in the Tailteann cup. There would be four groups of four, five groups of four and four groups of four. The competition would begin in January with the top team in each group through to semi-final stage. In the Corn na Boinne, the top team in each group would qualify, with a play off between the 4th and 5th best qualifiers to qualify for semi-finals.

The competition would complete to final stage before the league starts in the Spring. (See figure 7). The finals could be played at a designated weekend in September or preferably as a curtain raiser to the District Championship Final.

Championship Seeding

Seeding the championship groups according to the previous year's results is suggested to further help competitiveness in championship. The previous year's quarter finalist winners would be drawn as number one seeds, with the quarter final runners' up seeded two for both the intermediate and senior championships. The relegated senior club would be seeded in the intermediate championship.

Seeding would help to avoid unfair groupings where a cluster of very strong teams are drawn in the same group. Seeding is best practice to ensure fairness in competitions across sports.

Starred League Games

The report proposes the month of April be designated for four starred league games¹⁵ where county players must be released by the county management to play.¹⁶

They could continue to train with the county teams but would be automatically released to the club for all games for the month. This would give the players an opportunity to put their hands up and show form, improve by playing competitive games but ensure they are guaranteed to play many more games for their club.

No county training could take place whilst games are on. Clubs that sought re-fixtures would have to do so without county men, thus allowing county preparations to continue as scheduled. The proposal means more games for county players with their clubs, rather than endless

¹⁶ Tyrone use April to play starred league games and gauge form for the county panel.

training. This would dramatically improve the lot of county panellists who have played few national league games.

There is some nuance required to make the proposal work. If either county team gets to a league final, one starred game would become non-starred for whichever group, footballers or hurlers get to the final.

So starred league games along with championship would guarantee *all* senior county players are available for;

- A minimum of seven games for their club (currently five)
- A minimum of eight games if Meath reach a league final
- A minimum of twelve games if Meath do not reach the Super 8
- Many more for any teams that progress in the competitions.

In practice, the players, especially panellists will be released for more games. In truth, it may not be fair to county players to play much more than that for the club, given they play up to 20 more games a year for the county across competitions and friendlies.

With more competitive leagues, the league play offs would not be an imperative. They were a good idea to help improve competitiveness but with much more county availability, removing the play offs would allow another weekend to be freed up to execute down periods in August in all football competitions.

Promotion from B League to A League

Allowing teams from the top of the B League be promoted to the A leagues would help to address the retention problems that clubs with bigger populations clubs face.

The A leagues offer a far more attractive programme and would help to address some of the concerns first teams have about providing meaningful competition to their players.

There is some concern that some teams might be too strong for the division they end up. It is proposed that B League Division 1 be formulated to comprise clubs with 3 or more league teams in 2019. (Those that enter B league Division 1 in 2019 should be interested in putting a second team in the A Leagues in 2020). B League Division 1 would slot between Division 3 and 4. There would be promotion and relegation between the divisions. From 2020 there would be Division 3, 4A and 4B. In due course the CCC could reformulate the divisions to ensure they continue to run smoothly.¹⁷

This single act would help to relieve the massive drop off that is occurring in the bigger clubs. If senior clubs are serious about retention they would seize the opportunity that providing.

Many more players would be retained. Many more very competent players would be playing in the A leagues.¹

Players from Junior and intermediate clubs would have exposure to competing against better players. Any player worth their salt in the lower divisions would enjoy the new challenge at the new set of experiences playing at the bigger senior club grounds. Standards would undoubtedly improve all around.

Whilst the thoughts of organising two groups of A league players might be daunting for some senior clubs, the novelty of new fixtures and new local derbies would bring a freshness and new cut to the leagues outside Division 1 and 2.¹⁸

Clubs will find retain more young players, attract back players and encourage dual players with a meaningful fixed games programme at set times that lends itself to a balanced lifestyle.

¹⁷ There have been calls to replace the B Leagues with between 8 and 10 divisions combining the A and B leagues with immediate effect. This proposal suggests allowing a more gradual integration of the A leagues and B Leagues.

¹⁸ No club could have two teams in the same division.

Conclusions

The potential is enormous and there is a palpable desire to see our clubs succeed and for standards to improve. With some compromises, the county can produce an outstanding competitive environment to allow all of our players to thrive.

The individual proposals set out are not radical. In fact the proposed structures are largely a localised version of best practice drawn from the most successful GAA counties. The structures have a well-worn path and have been proven to work.

Nor are the proposals perfect. But perfect is the enemy of good. Seeking perfection will doom reform to failure. Based on recent year's well publicised failures at attempts at reform and the authors of the report's multiple interactions with the body politic of GAA in the county, the proposals are what may be politically possible. There is little point in presenting reform that will be shot down and cannot garner a coalition of support.

Political reform is the art of what is possible not necessarily what we would all want if we could begin on a blank page. We cannot. Everyone wants slightly different things. Give and take is required.

Nor is cherry picking possible. Nearly all of the proposals depend on another proposal to either get sufficient political support, or, to fit into a watertight schedule. So, to say '*I want that but not that*' will scupper any chance of reform.

The package is a carefully crafted bundle of compromises with something for everyone.

The proposals will help to:

Expand the numbers who play with a well organised schedule where players are able to compete at a level appropriate to their ability and time constraints;

Develop our players through the whole of their career by offering a more challenging and certain playing schedule;

Retain many more players by expanding the games programme and offering multiple entry points to play our games.

“As many as possible
As well as possible
As long as possible”

The county is at one in the desire to see our young people get every opportunity that we can provide to improve, to challenge them-selves and to enjoy big days representing their community; to play our games well, to play them often and to play them to the highest possible standards.

After three failed attempts, the county is at a crossroads. We risk drifting away from the leading pack, perhaps even falling off the back of the chasing pack.

Worse we risk GAA drifting into irrelevance for young people in our county.

We have a duty to act.

We have a duty to act now.

CALL TO ACTION!!

If you agree that change is required and you agree that the proposals attached, with the compromises required, will help to improve club football for players and mentors across the county, please ensure your club supports reform by contacting your chairman or secretary.

To get reform, club executives will need to ***mandate their county board representative to vote in favour at the annual convention.***

Urge your club to back reform.

Support club players in Meath

ISSUES EACH RECOMMENDATION ADDRESSES

(1) Fixed Calendar with down periods

Addresses - Chaotic Fixtures; Club versus County, Dual Clubs/Players

(2) Split championships into first team and reserve championship

- 16 team senior championship
- 20 team intermediate championship (first team only)
- 16 team junior championship (first team only)
- Reserve Championship

Addresses - Chaotic Fixtures, Lack of Competitiveness, Unfair Competition Structures

(3) District championship (Junior and Intermediate combinations)

Addresses - Lack of Competitiveness; Unfair Competition Structures, Changing Demographics

(4) Open the A leagues to second teams

Addresses - Lack of Competitiveness; Unfair Competition Structures, Changing Demographics

(5) Previous championship used to seed championship groups

Addresses - Lack of Competitiveness, Unfair Competition Structures

(6) Starred League Games (County players available)

Addresses - Club versus County, Lack of Competitiveness

(7) Cup competitions become Pre-Season Competitions

Addresses - Chaotic Fixtures

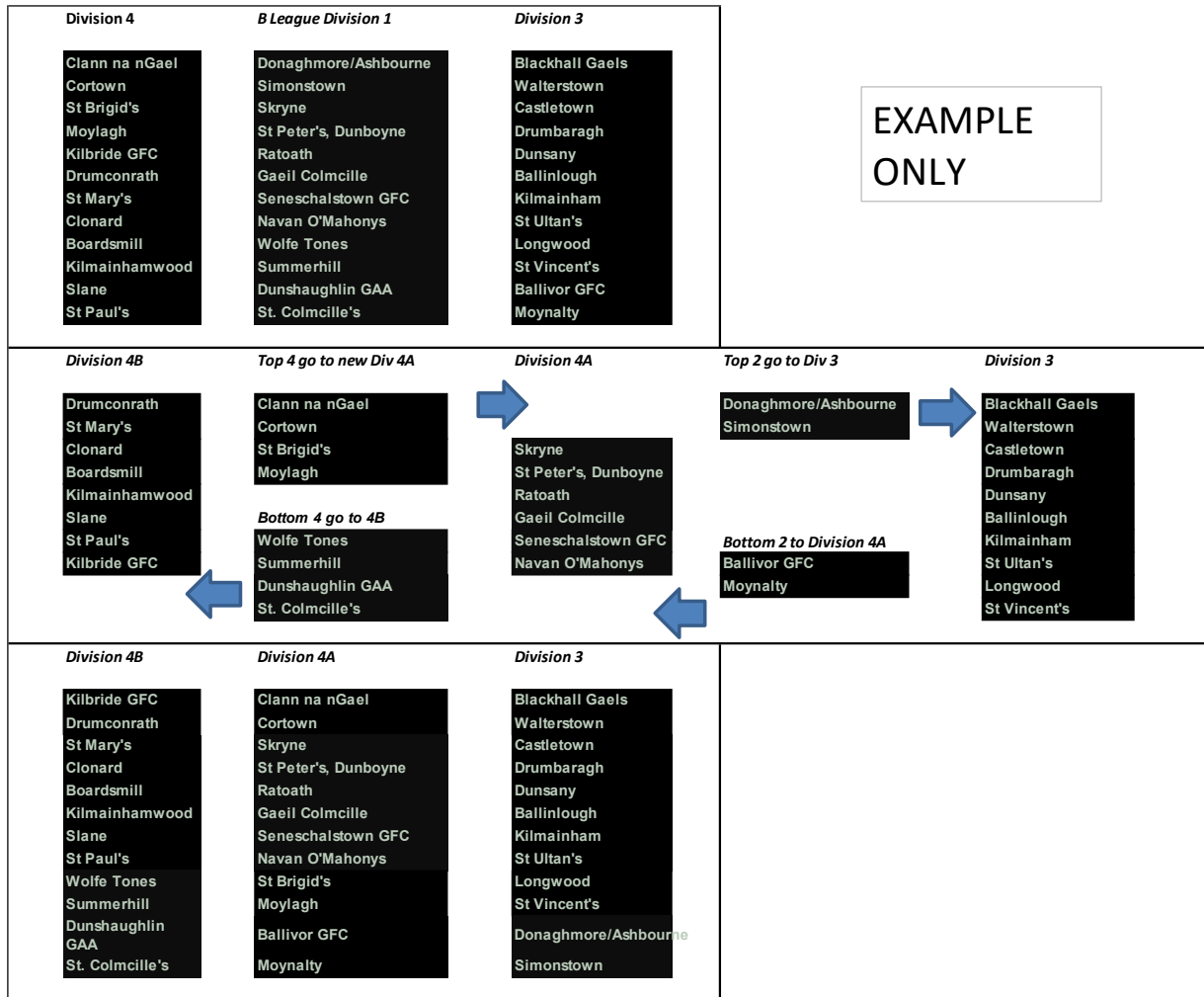


Figure 13: Example of how B league teams could be integrated

ⁱ **League Availability**

Where a club has teams competing in more than one division of the A Leagues a panel of 15 currently registered players must be submitted to the CCC before the first team plays in the league on a deadline date as requested by the Competitions Control Committee. (If no panel is submitted the 15 starters of the first league game will be deemed to be named along with any county players on the current county football panel and any player that were named on the senior inter-county panel the previous year)

No player on such panel shall be eligible to play on another team in the same division or in a lower division. Penalty – Team – loss of match to opponents on objection. Player – 4 weeks suspension.

A player may not play in any lower league A league or B League division if he has played in more than six games for the club's highest league division team in the same season. – Team – Loss of match to opponents on objection. Player – 4 weeks suspension.

Where a club has one team in the A Leagues and a second team in the B Leagues, if the clubs' second team is in Division 1 or 2 or the B League, a panel of 15 currently registered players must be submitted to the CCC, 10 currently registered players for all other B League divisions.

Where a club has two teams competing in the A Leagues and a team or teams in the B Leagues, along with the panel of 15 currently registered players submitted under regulation above, the club must submit a further 15 currently registered players per A league and 15 further currently registered players per team in B League Division 1 or 2 and or 10 currently registered players for all other B League divisions.

Under exceptional circumstances, long term injury etc, the CCC will consider written requests for names players to be re-graded to a lower grade

Reserve Championship

Where a club has a second team competing in the reserve championship a panel of 18 currently registered players must be submitted to the CCC before the first reserve championship game on a deadline date as requested by the Competitions Control Committee. That list shall contain the names of at least ten players who played a part in their club's final first team championship game (to include relegation play offs.) of the previous year and should include all players that were named on senior inter-county football panel the previous year. (No player shall be permitted to drop two grades that their club plays without express written consent from the CCC. The CCC shall also entertain written requests about the ten championship players from the previous year if the club can prove enough players are permanently retired or injured)