

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION ANNUAL REPORT 2018-2019





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The Irish Football Association's
Annual Report 2018-19 was compiled,
edited and written by Nigel Tilson



PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

The depth and breadth of the work we as an association undertake never ceases to amaze me.

Initiatives such as our Ahead of the Game mental health programme and our extensive work with disabled players are just some of the excellent things that we do.

And it was great that we received a Royal seal of approval when the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visited the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, and our headquarters, back in February.

It was an honour and privilege to welcome Prince William and Kate to the home of Northern Ireland football. They seemed genuinely impressed by the association's work, and rightly so.

One of the programmes they learned about was the Stay Onside initiative, which uses sport to divert young people away from criminality and offending.

It was great to see two of our international players, Niall McGinn and Josh Magennis, taking time out back in March to visit HMP Maghaberry to see how the programme is helping prisoners there.

I was also delighted to welcome the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, and his wife Sabina to our HQ in April.

Mr Higgins, an avid football fan, spent a lot of time in our Education and Heritage Centre, a facility we can be proud of.

Of course the Irish President also spent time talking to staff involved in some of our many programmes and hopefully he was impressed by what he heard.

On the pitch, meanwhile, our international teams have had a mixed year.

The football played by our senior men's team in the inaugural UEFA Nations League was encouraging even if we did not get the desired results.

However, we fared much better in our opening two Euro 2020 qualifiers against Estonia and Belarus, and hopefully we can get maximum points again when we face both teams away in June.

Our U21 men's team were desperately unlucky not to at least claim a play-off spot for the U21 Euros. Ian Baraclough and his players must be commended for their efforts. Accumulating 20 points in a qualification campaign is no mean feat.

The U19 men's side narrowly missed out on reaching an elite round in U19 Euros qualifiers. The U17s did manage it, however they found the going tough in an elite round mini tournament staged in the Netherlands.

The senior women's team bounced back following a poor World Cup qualification campaign by performing well at the Gold City Cup tournament in Turkey earlier this year.

And it was also encouraging to see our Women's U19 and U17 sides reach elite rounds in Euro qualifiers.

Development sides at U16 level, both male and female, have also registered encouraging results this season.

Staying on the international front, congratulations to veteran defender Gareth McAuley on being awarded an MBE for services to football in Northern Ireland in the New Year's Honours List.

And Harry Gregg, our legendary keeper from the 1958 World Cup Finals, was appointed OBE to go with the MBE he was awarded in 1995 for services to football.

I would also like to say well done to Sara Booth, who was at Buckingham Palace in December to receive an MBE for services to football. Sara was, of course, a former Northern Ireland captain and worked for the association for many years before transferring to FIFA.

Now, returning to our current international players, congratulations must go to Corry Evans, who earned his 50th cap for Northern Ireland in the UEFA Nations League game against Bosnia & Herzegovina in Sarajevo back in the autumn.

And Julie Nelson, our first female centurion, deserves a hearty round of applause. During this season I was delighted to award Julie with her 100th cap for her country. She has been, and continues to be, a great ambassador for women's football in Northern Ireland.



Corry Evans earned his 50th cap for Northern Ireland in the Nations League game against Bosnia & Herzegovina in Sarajevo.

climacool

And I must also congratulate Marissa Callaghan and Simone Magill on reaching the 50-caps milestone for Northern Ireland.

During 2018-19 I was pleased to see the association's overarching five-year strategy, launched in 2017, being updated and new targets being set.

And I was also delighted to see the association publish a girls' and women's football strategy. I see this new vision as an opportunity for as many girls and women as possible to enjoy football, whether as a player, coach, referee, administrator or volunteer.

Staying in the international arena, I am pleased our relationship with the Football Association of Ireland is getting stronger.

The announcement of our joint bid to host the UEFA U21 European Championships in 2023, plus the introduction of a new cross-border cup competition for the champions of our respective countries, are just two solid examples of us being good neighbours and working together for the good of the game in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

I would like to congratulate the winners of the association's cups at each level of the domestic game.

Crusaders won the 2019 Tennent's Irish Challenge Cup by defeating Ballinamallard United in front of an attendance of just under 6000.

I know it was a grand day out for the followers of Ballinamallard in particular. They were the first team from County Fermanagh to reach an Irish Cup Final and hopefully one day they will get an opportunity to make up for their disappointment at losing the 2019 final.

In the Match Intermediate Cup Final Crumlin Star were the underdogs against Queen's University, however they deservedly won the trophy thanks to a 93rd minute goal.



Irish FA President David Martin with Nadine Kessler, Head of Women's Football at UEFA, and Gail Redmond of the Irish FA Foundation at the launch of the association's new girls' and women's football strategy.



Julie Nelson receives a commemorative cap from Irish FA President David Martin on becoming the first female player from Northern Ireland to earn 100 caps.

Linfield Rangers were impressive against St Oliver Plunkett in the Harry Cavan Youth Cup final. Despite being down to 10 men for a good part of the match they dominated the game, winning 4-1.

Congratulations as well to Glentoran Women, who defeated league champions Linfield Ladies in the 2018 Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup final back in the autumn.

As ever the media have made an immense contribution to the promotion and success of football across Northern Ireland and I take the opportunity of recording the association's gratitude for this.

I would also like to thank the supporters at all levels of the game and particularly those who follow the senior men's international team at home and abroad.

A big thank-you to the sponsors associated with the Irish Football Association for their input during the past 12 months.

Of particular note was the new four-year agreement with McDonald's, who have been ardent supporters of grassroots football for many, many years.

As I said before the depth and breadth of the work we undertake each and every day never ceases to amaze me.

I therefore thank everyone for their efforts, from Chief Executive Patrick Nelson and the staff of the association to the board, the council, all the committees and the many volunteers. They have all made significant contributions to football in Northern Ireland in 2018-19.

David J Martin
President
Irish Football Association



CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

As we reach the first Saturday of May each year and prepare for the Irish Cup Final, together with the Intermediate, Junior and Youth Cup finals, all of which take place over a short period, we get the chance to reflect on another season of football.

We look back on another season of the world's most popular sport in Northern Ireland together with its highs and lows, its excitement and unpredictability. Games won and lost, penalties scored and missed, the occasional yellow or red card and plenty of stories to recount afterwards.

This has been the first season for the new COMET online football administration system which has been purchased by the association to help modernise and streamline the work which needs to be carried out to ensure competitive football throughout Northern Ireland takes place as efficiently as possible.

Almost 100 training sessions were carried out last summer to prepare for COMET implementation, and more than 29,000 footballers have been registered with their clubs on the system so far.

All 3500 senior and intermediate matches have been administered directly via the new system this season and junior match cards will be added from August with more training sessions planned in the coming months.

The women's summer football season, which started recently, will also benefit from COMET with all player registration and match cards being inputted to the system, which considerably simplifies the work needed to run the game.

On the international front the senior men's team had a mixed season. Performances in the new UEFA Nations League were positive but results were less so, meaning we will start the next Nations League in 2020 in Group C.

Having said that, the matches against Austria and Bosnia and Herzegovina proved to be a good test base for Michael to bring on new players ahead of the UEFA Euro 2020 Qualifiers this year. Two wins from two is a good statement of intent ahead of the rest of our fixtures later this year and we are hopeful that we will make it to consecutive EUROS.

The U21s had their best campaign ever and narrowly missed out on a play-off place for this year's UEFA EURO U21 Finals despite finishing second in their group.

By the very nature of this competition Ian Baraclough will start the new season with a partially new group, however many of his experienced players will still be able to contribute and as UEFA have now increased the final tournament to 16 teams we should be in with a good chance this time.

Staying with the U21s, the association announced a joint bid with the FAI to host the 2023 edition of the UEFA EURO U21 tournament and we are hopeful this will bear fruit. The U21 finals tournament is a huge showcase of quality international football and bringing the show to the island of Ireland would be a significant achievement.

Turning to the senior women, our qualification campaign for this year's FIFA Women's World Cup ended in disappointing fashion with defeats to the Republic of Ireland and Slovakia.

One of the best things about football though is that there is always another qualification series or tournament to look forward to, and with Norway, Wales, Belarus and the Faroe Islands as our opponents our senior women really do feel this is their time as they get ready to battle for a place in the next UEFA WEURO Finals tournament which will be held in England.

This has also been an important season off the field as we have worked with squad representatives to ensure that as far as possible the women's squad is set up for success in the future.

Domestic football has continued to flourish this season with another hotly contested race for the Danske Bank Premiership.

In the end Linfield prevailed for the 53rd time in their history, which is a superb achievement, but they were pushed close by Ballymena United who finished second for only the third time in their long and proud history.

Larne stormed through the Bluefin Insurance Championship and will have big ambitions for the top flight, coming on the back of their significant investment in both Inver Park and the team.

The Tennent's Irish Cup Final was also noteworthy in that Ballinamallard United were the first team from outside the top division to feature in this showpiece

game for 43 years; indeed they were the first team from Fermanagh to ever grace this showpiece occasion.

Sadly for the Mighty Ducks they were up against Crusaders, who can lay a good claim to being the team of the decade, in the final, and the famous cup took the short journey to the Shore Road at the end of the day rather than heading west.

After 11 years Department of Education funding finally ceased for the award-winning Curriculum Sports Programme, which meant that both ourselves and the GAA had to pull the curtain down on this long running project which taught teamwork, mobility, balance, ball skills and healthy eating in primary schools.

The country is undoubtedly worse off for the loss of this project, however we have now managed to secure fresh funding from the Department for a school sports programme so we look to the future with confidence.

We have employed 12 Let Them Play Officers to supplement our other coaching and outreach activities and we continue to take forward a huge range of football activities through both the association itself and the IFA Foundation.

Our stadium is fast becoming an iconic venue in Northern Ireland and this season we were delighted to host both Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and the President of Ireland.

Even without these high profile visitors our Education and Heritage Centre (now with the new 'Added Time' feature to explore if you haven't been for a while!) is up at number two on the list of things to do in Belfast on TripAdvisor.

There is never a bad time to be involved in football, and I would like to pay tribute to the thousands of people across Northern Ireland who make it all happen season after season.

The volunteers, board, council and committee members, and of course the staff of the association, all work together to make it possible for everyone who wants to enjoy football - competitive or recreational, men or women, boys or girls, we are all there for you.

I hope you enjoy this annual report and review of the 2018-19 season.

Patrick Nelson
Chief Executive
Irish Football Association



Patrick Nelson announcing the joint IFA/FAI bid to host the 2023 edition of the UEFA EURO U21 tournament

STADIUM REPORT

Stadium accessibility and inclusion has been enhanced during 2018-19, especially for fans with sensory needs.

During the preparations for the Euro 2020 qualifiers it was agreed that the association should provide a designated quiet area within the stadium to accommodate fans who love watching Northern Ireland in action but find the live matchday experience overwhelming due to the heightened noise and crowds.

NIFL kindly agreed to allow the association to transform one of its offices, located in the Grafton Family Stand, into a quiet, calm and safe space for fans with sensory needs to enjoy both watching games and the reactions of the fans.

The space offers an excellent view of the pitch, has access to both toilet and kitchen facilities and, most importantly, is soundproofed. It features soft floor tiles, comfortable seating and LED lighting, while small sensory toys and a selection of art and craft activities have also been provided.

Families using the room can listen to live in-house commentary through a small speaker - and the families retain control of the volume level.

On matchdays a volunteer is on hand to greet families upon arrival, issue accreditation, escort them to the room and remain available throughout the match.

The association worked in partnership with Shirelle Stewart from the NAS (National Autistic Society) who identified families who could make use of the space.

The Agnew family were the first group to trial the quiet room. Their needs were identified in the run-up to the game and their feedback following the match was positive.

Other features in place to help with accessibility and inclusion include ambulant seating and wheelchair areas, available for each home game within the East and South stands, plus a SoccerSight programme which allows fans who are blind or partially sighted to access in-house live commentary of the game. Small audio receivers are issued which are tuned to a dedicated Soccersight broadcast team.

On top of that the large screen in the stadium is utilised to convey both safety and game specific messages in British Sign Language. This allows any deaf or hard of hearing sign language user to have equal access to stadium announcements.

A mobility vehicle is also available for fans to make their way from the Boucher Road into the stadium grounds. It allows those with mobility issues to get through the crowds and into the stadium in a safe and secure manner.

The Irish FA website is utilised to keep fans up to speed on stadium accessibility. And the Ticketing department regularly make fans aware that if they or someone they know wishes to come to a game and maybe require one of the accessibility services then they will try their best to accommodate them.



A quiet room is now up and running at the stadium for fans with sensory needs.

STADIUM REPORT

The Irish FA's Stadium Team hosted a large number of matches at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park during the 2018-19 season, including both domestic and international games.

Prior to the season getting under way the pitch surface was re-laid in June 2018. The new construction, which is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, has a carpet base interwoven with green fibre strands - covering approximately 7% of the playing surface - alongside grass. And it has been installed to the highest possible international standards.

The Stadium Team successfully hosted a world title fight featuring Belfast boxer and huge Northern Ireland fan Carl Frampton in August 2018. The event showcased the stadium as the multi-purpose venue it is, with the ability to host more than football.

The first international football fixtures of the season were staged in September when Northern Ireland's senior men took on Bosnia and Herzegovina in the UEFA Nations League and Israel in a friendly. And later in the autumn we welcomed Austria to the stadium.

It has been a year of change in terms of personnel within the Stadium Team so building on relationships with contractors, who play a key role in running and maintaining the venue, has been paramount.

These partners include CRL, who prepare the pitch, and CE World, who clean the stadium. Eventsec steward events and manage stadium security, while Sodexo provide quality food and beverage services and host events in the hospitality areas throughout the year - and H&J Martin maintain the building to the highest standard.

The National Football Stadium hosted Royal visitors at the end of February this year when the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge arrived as part of a two-day tour to Northern Ireland. The Stadium Team worked alongside the IFA Foundation to deliver the visit which took a significant level of planning to ensure all arrangements for the Royal couple were in place.

International football returned in March with back to back Euro 2020 qualifiers. Estonia and Belarus were the visitors.

In April the stadium hosted a celebrity charity football match in aid of Nacoa and the IFA Foundation. More than 6000 fans watched as Calum Best's team went up against EastEnders

actor Jake Wood's side. Stars of screen and sport took to the pitch for the 'My Tribute' game.

Also in April there was another significant visitor to the stadium when the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, was welcomed to the IFA's HQ. The President and his wife Sabina spent time in the Education and Heritage Centre housed within the stadium and learned about the programmes which the association delivers in promoting, fostering and developing football for all.

The usual end of season domestic finals brought the 2018-19 season to a close with pitch renovations scheduled for the end of May 2019.

Meanwhile, the stadium's Education and Heritage Centre (opened in March 2017) enjoyed a positive second year of operation. The centre attracted more than 8500 visitors in 2018 and is currently ranked the second best thing to do in Belfast (out of 199 attractions) by TripAdvisor.

During the year the Irish FA was pleased to offer all campaign card holders a free tour of the stadium through a partnership with Galgorm Resort and Spa.

A new three-year strategy (2019-2022) has just been developed which will help establish the EHC as a nationally recognised visitor attraction.



Boxers Paddy Barnes, Tyson Fury and Carl Frampton visited the stadium to promote Frampton's world title fight at the venue last summer.



The Irish Football Association welcomed a Duke, a Duchess and a President to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in February and April 2019.

At the end of February the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (William and Kate) visited the Irish FA's HQ, while in April the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, and his wife Sabrina paid the association a visit.

William and Kate learned about the Irish FA Foundation's award-winning initiatives during their trip to the stadium.

They joined in with kids involved in the Electric Ireland Shooting Stars programme, which promotes football participation for girls aged between four and seven, and the McDonald's Fun Football programme which is aimed at encouraging kids of all ages to play the game for the first time.

As well as the association's work with children, Prince William and the Duchess were told about the Irish FA's Stay Onside initiative which uses sport to divert young people away from criminality and offending.

And they met some of the Irish FA staff and volunteers involved in the Ahead of the Game mental health programme. They heard how the UEFA-funded scheme is helping to support clubs and volunteers when dealing with mental health issues with a focus on challenging the stigma and preventative measures.

In addition William and Kate toured the Irish FA's Education and Heritage Centre, which tells the story of Northern Ireland football using a variety of media and interactive displays.

The Royal couple also met Jason Browning, a member of the Northern Ireland Powerchair team, and spent time with graduates of the foundation's Female Football Leadership programme.

They were welcomed to the National Football Stadium by Irish FA President David Martin, Irish FA Chief Executive Patrick Nelson and Northern Ireland manager Michael O'Neill.

The Irish President and his wife Sabina also spent time in the Education and Heritage Centre during their visit to the stadium in April and learned about the programmes which the association delivers in promoting, fostering and developing football for all.

Mr Higgins was welcomed to the stadium by Irish FA President David Martin, Irish FA Chairman Gerry Mallon and Irish FA Chief Executive Patrick Nelson.

First stop on the President's visit was the Education and Heritage Centre, which tells the story of how football developed on the island of Ireland and within Northern Ireland.

Michael Boyd, the Irish FA's Director of Football Development, then introduced the President and his wife to Irish FA personnel involved in cross-community and peace-building work.

Mr Higgins met staff from the association and other sporting bodies delivering Sport Uniting Communities, a project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme.

SUC, which is run by the Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby with the Football Association of Ireland acting as an official project partner, uses the reach of each sport to create meaningful contact between people from different communities and aims to improve attitudes, respect, inclusion and tolerance.

In addition the Irish President learned about Anti-Sectarianism and Show Racism The Red Card workshops delivered by the Irish FA in football clubs and schools as well as the association's involvement with Street Soccer, which provides football opportunities for disadvantaged groups including the homeless.

And Irish FA staff also highlighted the association's new strategy for girls' and women's football in Northern Ireland, which has the overarching aim of getting more girls and women to enjoy football, whether as a player, coach, referee, administrator or volunteer.

After signing the visitors' book, the President and Sabina went pitchside to watch players from the Cliftonville and Linfield Under-9 girls' teams in action. As he looked on he was told about the association's many coaching programmes for players of all ages and abilities.



The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (William and Kate) take part in a kickabout with schoolchildren during their visit to the Irish FA's HQ.





INTERNATIONAL SENIOR MEN'S TEAM

Michael O'Neill believes he now has the personnel to play a more expansive style of football and that was seen during the bulk of the matches in 2018-19.

Last June the Northern Ireland manager selected a young squad to tour Central America to take on two countries who were bound for the World Cup in Russia. The team drew against Panama (0-0) before losing 3-0 to Costa Rica.

It was a tour that gave experience to young players and fulfilled the Northern Ireland manager's ambition of broadening his panel ahead of Euro 2020 qualifying. Bailey Peacock-Farrell, Conor Hazard, Jordan Thompson and Shayne Lavery all got game time.

The team ultimately had a disappointing UEFA Nations League campaign, although it was a case of performances not tallying with results.

Northern Ireland dominated Bosnia & Herzegovina at home in their inaugural Nations League game in September but ended up losing the game. They created more than 20 chances but only had a consolation Will Grigg goal to cheer about as the Bosnians, with goals from Haris Duljevic and Elvis Saric, edged it 2-1.

The following month, away to Austria and the Bosnians in League B Group 3, Northern Ireland again created plenty of chances but the ball just would not go in. They hit the post four times in two matches. Marko Arnautovic scored the only goal of the game in Vienna, while Edin Dzeko popped up with a brace in Sarajevo.

In November, back at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, Corry Evans scored against Austria to make it 1-1 but Northern Ireland endured more heartache as the visitors scored a winner deep in added time through a stunning effort from Valentino Lazaro. Xaver Schlager opened the scoring for the visitors.

However, the autumn international fixtures also saw Michael O'Neill's side cruise past Israel 3-0 in a September friendly thanks to goals from Steven Davis, Stuart Dallas and Gavin Whyte, who scored with his first touch of the ball after coming on as a sub in what was his first senior appearance.

The expansive game was evident once again in November when the boys in green and white dominated the Republic of Ireland in a goalless draw at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin.

Despite relegation from the second tier the Nations League helped to introduce several young players to competitive international football, most notably Jamal Lewis, Bailey Peacock-Farrell and Gavin Whyte, while the Central America tour was also





important for bleeding youngsters, and they all undoubtedly helped to bolster Michael O'Neill's pool of players ahead of the Euro 2020 qualifiers.

The draw for those qualifiers, held in Dublin in December 2018, was not particularly kind to Northern Ireland.

They ended up in what many in the media have called the group of death - Qualifying Group C – alongside European heavyweights Germany and the Netherlands as well as Estonia and Belarus.

However, the fixture list, in many people's eyes, was a little kinder, giving the boys in green and white an opportunity to put points on the board early with home games against Estonia and Belarus, followed by away fixtures in both countries.

Naturally, the focus for the manager, his backroom team and the senior men's squad in 2019 will be reaching the European Championship finals in 2020.

Northern Ireland already have six points under their belts following solid home wins against Estonia and Belarus in March.

A repeat of those victories away to both of those countries in June would set them up nicely for the four 'big' games this autumn against the Germans (home and away) and the Dutch (home and away).

Northern Ireland got off to a solid start in their Euro 2020 qualifying campaign with a 2-0 victory over Estonia in Belfast.

Second half goals from Niall McGinn – his first at the National Stadium – and Steven Davis were enough to bag all three points in the first match of the campaign.

Despite being without regulars Corry Evans (injured) and Oliver Norwood (missing due to personal reasons) as well as striker Will Grigg (injured) the team quickly gelled.

Northern Ireland's new expansive, high intensity brand of football was deployed again against the Estonians but in the first half it failed to live up to

expectations. Things moved up a gear in the second period, however, and there was more of an attacking edge, which ultimately paid off.

Niall McGinn fired wide early on before the lively Jordan Jones dragged an effort wide of the post. And later in the first half Paddy McNair missed a gilt-edged opportunity when his downward header from four yards went over the bar.

McGinn put Northern Ireland ahead on 56 minutes. Jones crossed to Kyle Lafferty and he laid the ball back for McGinn inside the area - and the winger smashed it home from 15 yards.

Bailey Peacock-Farrell produced an excellent stop not long after McGinn's goal. Estonia striker Henri Anier raced through on goal but the Northern Ireland keeper bolted off his line and spread himself well to snuff out the danger.

In the 75th minute Northern Ireland doubled their lead. Estonia skipper Karol Mets went in high on George Saville inside the penalty area and the referee had no hesitation in pointing to the spot. And up stepped captain Davis to smash the penalty down the middle of the goal past Estonia keeper Sergei Lepmets.

A fine team goal helped Northern Ireland to secure a 2-1 home win over Belarus in the second game of the Euro 2020 qualifying campaign.

Michael O'Neill opted to go with the same eleven that started the match against Estonia 72 hours earlier – and they did not disappoint.

But it was substitute Josh Maginness who scored the decisive goal on 87 minutes to ensure maximum points from the first two qualifiers.





Craig Cathcart played a long ball out of defence to Maginness who brought it under control before evading a couple of Belarusian defenders and slipping the ball to Stuart Dallas, who in turn fed Paddy McNair and his low cross from the right was neatly turned into the net by Maginness to send the fans in the National Stadium into raptures.

Northern Ireland dominated the game in the opening 30 minutes, and both McNair and Kyle Lafferty had decent efforts.

And they deservedly took the lead on the half-hour mark through a move which was undoubtedly plotted on the training ground. Jordan Jones tapped a corner to Niall McGinn who whipped the ball into the area where Steven Davis back-headed it on to an unmarked Jonny Evans and his header whizzed past keeper Andrei Kilmovich into the corner of the net.

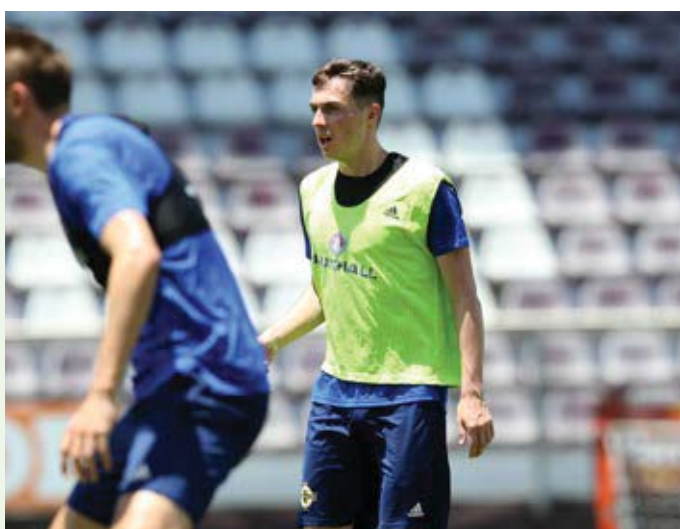
The visitors, however, were level within three minutes. Aleksandr Hleb fed fellow midfielder Igor Stasevich and his speculative effort from 22 yards deflected off Dallas, looped over the head of Northern Ireland keeper Bailey Peacock-Farrell and dropped into the net.

Up until that point the boys in green and white had dominated possession and they quickly took a grip on the game once more.

They continued to create chances in the second period but were thwarted by a resolute Belarusian defence.

Magennis then sent an already boisterous crowd wild when he neatly slotted in the winner three minutes from the end of normal time.

However, there was still time for some late drama, Peacock-Farrell producing a fine stop to deny Pavel Nekhaychik from close range.





Shayne Lavery tussles for possession during the U21 match against Slovakia back in October.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S U21

Northern Ireland's Under-21s, under the guidance of Ian Baraclough, had a remarkable 2018, especially towards the end of the year.

They chalked up a famous win away in Spain and amassed 20 points in their qualifying group for the U21 Euros 2019, narrowly missing out on a play-off place for the 2019 finals.

Going in to 2018 with three wins, a draw and one defeat under their belts, the U21s lost 5-3 to Spain in Portadown and drew 0-0 with Iceland at Coleraine Showgrounds in the early part of the year.

Those results undoubtedly dented their qualification hopes, however the best was yet to come.

In September Baraclough's boys produced a memorable performance against the Spanish in Albacete, winning the game 2-1.

With just four minutes on the clock striker Shayne Lavery picked a Spanish defender's pocket close to the half-way line and dribbled up the pitch before neatly slotting the ball into the Spanish net.

Then, in the eighth minute, Paul Smyth made a superb run into the Spanish box where he twisted and turned before being brought down by Guerrero Martin for a penalty. On his record appearance skipper Luke Donnelly - he was making his 22nd start for the U21s - stepped up and tucked the ball home. It was his fifth goal for the U21s.

Despite intense Spanish pressure, including a penalty that was superbly saved by Conor Hazard and a Rafa Mir goal, they never really looked like relinquishing their lead.

Another great away win was just around the corner - a 1-0 victory in Iceland in October. Daniel Ballard popped up with the winner in the 89th minute.

The final game of the campaign was against Slovakia at home. And there was still an outside chance of a play-off at that stage.

They pulled out all the stops once again and registered a 1-0 win thanks to another penalty from captain Luke Donnelly, however a play-off did not materialise as other results did not go their way.

The qualifying campaign was a superb effort from all involved, and especially from Ian Baraclough, who added the icing to the U21 cake in October when he signed a new two-year contract with the Irish Football Association.

In March this year the U21s took part in a training camp at Estepona on Spain's Costa Del Sol. As part of the camp two friendly internationals were arranged - against Bulgaria and Mexico - and Northern Ireland registered two fine victories.

A Shayne Lavery goal was enough to give Northern Ireland's Under-21s a 1-0 win against Bulgaria at Marbella Football Centre.

Striker Lavery grabbed his goal in the 18th minute of the match.

And days later Lavery scored for the second game in succession to secure a fine 2-1 victory for the U21s against Mexico's U22s at the Estadio Municipal de Marbella.

Mexico took the lead on 18 minutes when Pablo Lopez steered the ball past Northern Ireland keeper Declan Dunne.

However, Baraclough's side levelled on 55 minutes when Chris Gallagher set up striker David Parkhouse and he rifled the ball home.

The Mexicans were rattled by the goal and on 71 minutes they were reduced to 10 men.

Lavery, who came off the subs bench, then pounced in the 87th minute to give Northern Ireland the win. Cameron Palmer slipped the ball through to the striker and he produced a neat curler which nestled in the back of the net.



Goalmouth action from the Northern Ireland v Slovakia U21 Euros qualifier which was played at the National Football Stadium.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S U19 AND U17

The Men's U19 and U17 squads, both managed by Stephen Frail, had mixed fortunes during 2018-19.

The U19s were pipped by Poland on goal difference in a qualifying tournament - it was staged in Northern Ireland back in the autumn - for the U19 2019 Euros.

They defeated Kazakhstan 3-2 thanks to goals from Harry Robinson, Caoimhin McConnell and Alfie McCalmont.

However, they lost out to Serbia (3-1) and drew with Poland (0-0) in the group, and the Poles and Serbs progressed to the elite round. Cameron Palmer scored the U19s' goal against the Serbs.

The U17s made it through to the elite round of the 2019 U17 Euro qualifiers after some great performances in a mini qualifying tournament in Turkey in the autumn.

After narrowly losing their first game – they were defeated 1-0 by eventual group winners Slovakia – Northern Ireland held the host nation to a 1-1 draw. Ben Wylie scored on 33 minutes to cancel out Muhammet Akpmar's opener for the Turks.

And the U17s sealed second spot in the group on goal difference after Slovakia defeated Turkey 3-0 and Frail's team smashed six past San Marino without reply, with striker Wylie grabbing a hat-trick. In that game Darragh Burns scored two penalties, while striker Dale Taylor grabbed the other goal.

They warmed up for the elite mini tournament with games against Greece's U17s, however they lost 3-1 to the Greeks in Dungannon and then 1-0 in Portadown.

The U17s subsequently found the going tough in the mini tournament staged in the Netherlands. The Dutch defeated them 5-0 in the first game in Den Haag (The Hague).

Game two saw them take on Czech Republic and they lost 2-0, however they managed a scoreless draw against Israel in their third and final game.

In April a U16 development squad performed well at a tournament in Bulgaria.

Stephen Frail was in charge of the side that won two and narrowly lost one to the host nation - on penalties - in a development tournament run by UEFA in Sliven.

Two goals from striker Ross McCausland and one from attacking midfielder Dale Taylor saw the U16s defeat Luxembourg 3-1, while Charlie Allen and McCausland scored in a 2-1 win against Wales.

The third game was a winner-takes-all scenario against a physically strong Bulgarian side. Both teams went into the match with two victories under their belts.

Northern Ireland took the lead in the first half when Taylor netted. The Bulgarians equalised 10 minutes into the second half, however after that Frail's side controlled the game and created numerous chances.

It was all square at full-time though and a penalty shoot-out was staged to decide the overall winners, and the hosts triumphed 5-4 on penalties.

Most of the players in the development squad now look likely to feature for the Northern Ireland U17s in Euro qualifiers this autumn – and beforehand in the Nordic Cup, which is being staged in Denmark in August.



Northern Ireland U17 player MacKenzie O'Neill battles for the ball in a challenge match against Greece's U17s.



Midfielder Ethan Galbraith in a tussle during the U19 Euros qualifier against Serbia.



Northern Ireland captain
Marissa Callaghan earned her
50th cap this year.



INTERNATIONAL SENIOR WOMEN'S TEAM

Northern Ireland's Senior Women had a difficult year during 2018, although there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel after a promising start to 2019.

Alfie Wylie's side struggled against both superior and weaker opposition in Women's World Cup France 2019 qualifiers but the games did help to introduce a raft of younger players to the senior set-up.

The Netherlands, the European champions, visited Northern Ireland last June – and produced a master class in Portadown. They strolled to a 5-0 victory.

Next up for the senior women was a World Cup qualifier against the Republic of Ireland last August. The Republic proved too strong for Wylie's team

at the Tallaght Stadium in Dublin and they won the game by four goals to nil.

Northern Ireland's World Cup campaign – they finished fourth in their group after being seeded fifth – drew to a close with a game against Slovakia at Shamrock Park back in September.

Alfie Wylie's side had registered a 3-1 victory in the reverse fixture (Nov 2017) but the Slovaks got the better of them in Portadown, winning 1-0.



Rachel Furness was in fine form during the Alanya Gold City Cup tournament in Turkey.



The senior women's squad celebrate Julie Nelson becoming Northern Ireland's first female centurion.

The game against Slovakia was a special occasion for defender Julie Nelson, who won her 100th cap and became Northern Ireland's first female centurion.

The return of experienced campaigners Sarah McFadden and Demi Vance helped to bolster the squad in 2018, while the introduction of a crop of talented younger players into the senior panel should help to make the team more competitive going forward.

Young goalkeeper Lauren Perry and midfielder Megan Bell both looked at home in senior circles, while Emily Wilson, Louise McDaniel, Emma McMaster and Rebecca McKenna are also good prospects.

Strong performances in the 2019 Alanya Gold City Cup have helped to boost the squad ahead of UEFA Women's Euro 2021 qualifiers later this year. They registered three wins in four games at the tournament in Turkey at the end of February/early March.

Northern Ireland finished third overall after defeating Jordan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Their only defeat came in the group stages against eventual overall winners France B.

Experienced striker Rachel Furness scored a hat-trick in a 6-0 win over Jordan in Northern Ireland's first group game in Turkey.

Both captain Marissa Callaghan and striker Simone Magill were winning their 50th caps for the senior women's team against the Jordanians – and they had a day to remember.

Goals from attacker Magill, Furness and veteran defender Ashley Hutton put them in the driving seat in the opening 45 minutes.

After the break the predatory instincts of Furness were to the fore as she grabbed two more goals to complete her hat-trick, while midfielder Kerry Montgomery also got on the scoresheet.

Game two in Turkey was a much tougher affair. Furness netted once more, however Northern Ireland suffered a 3-1 defeat to France B despite competing well.

In their third match Furness was at it again, scoring a sumptuous volley in a 4-0 victory over Kazakhstan which secured a place in the third/fourth place play-off match. The other scorers were Demi Vance (two) and Simone Magill.



Simone Magill, seen here in action against Slovakia, now has more than 50 caps under her belt for the girls in green and white.

The bronze medal game against Uzbekistan saw Alfie Wylie field the most experienced team he has ever put out – with more than 530 caps between them – and they largely controlled proceedings as they notched up a 2-1 win.

However, the senior women's manager also gave youth a chance during the tournament. Linfield Ladies striker Rebecca McKenna (18), for example, played in every game.

Wylie's side scored after just two minutes in the play-off against the Uzbeks. Rachel Newborough supplied a cross from the right which was powerfully headed home by midfielder McFadden.

In the 10th minute Furness was on the scoresheet once again. She made it 2-0 with another fine effort, drilling the ball home from 22 yards.

Uzbekistan reduced the deficit on 66 minutes when they scored direct from a corner.

Hutton limped off in the 73rd minute and was replaced by Freya Holdaway – and she was immediately in the thick of it.

In the closing stages the Uzbeks put the Northern Ireland back four under extreme pressure and they hit the woodwork on 83 minutes.

Wylie's side had to dig in to see out the game, but they managed it and secured third place overall in the process.

The performances in Turkey provided a great lift for the senior women's squad ahead of the European qualifiers, which get under way in August with a tie against Norway. They will also face Wales, Belarus and Faroe Islands in Group C of the qualifiers.

Alfie Wylie has now stepped down as manager of the senior women's team. His successor is Kenny Shiels.

Alfie Wylie has moved to a new position as Head of Women's Elite Performance with the association.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S U19 AND U17

The Women's U19 and U17 teams both reached elite rounds of European qualifiers during the season.

The WU19s, under the guidance of Alfie Wylie, progressed from a qualifying round staged in Northern Ireland, while the WU17s, managed by Alison Nicholl, secured an elite round berth at a mini qualifying tournament in Greece.

Last July the U19s were invited to take part in a friendly tournament in England. They drew 1-1 with the Republic of Ireland - Rebecca Mc Kenna scored - and then won a penalty shootout to decide the winners.

In their next game Megan Bell scored in a 1-1 draw with England. Again the game was decided on penalties and Northern Ireland triumphed to win the overall tournament.

The matches in England were followed by two friendly games against Hungary. The U19s drew one of the games 2-2 and won the other 2-0.

These were the last games before Northern Ireland hosted the UEFA WU19 Euros qualifying round in the autumn.

Northern Ireland defeated Estonia 7-1, with goals from Alexandra Collighan (two), Kaia Deane, Megan Bell, Kelsie Burrows, Louise McDaniel and Kaitlyn Canavan, before drawing 0-0 with Kosovo. They also lost heavily to Germany (7-0) but the four points gained in the group ensured that they qualified for the elite round in April 2019.

At the elite round tournament, hosted by Norway, the U19s found the going tough. They lost 2-1 to the Norwegians, with Collighan scoring, before going down 3-1 to Denmark. McDaniel was the scorer.

In their final game McDaniel and Collighan got on the scoresheet again, however they were defeated 4-2 by Ukraine.

Alison Nicholl's U17s were also in action last August prior to European competition. They played two friendly games against Estonia away, winning 2-0 and 2-1.

These were the final preparation games prior to a UEFA WU17 Euros qualifying round in Greece in October.

At the mini tournament back in the autumn Northern Ireland lost 3-1 to Greece (Caitlyn McGuinness) and then hammered Kazakhstan 5-0 thanks to a hat-trick from Toni Leigh Finnegan and further goals from Brecklyn Monteith and Sophie Megaw. And they also managed a 1-1 draw against top seeds Switzerland. Caitlyn McGuinness got the goal.

The draw against the Swiss ensured Northern Ireland would qualify for the elite round as one of the best third-placed teams.

In January, as part of their preparations for the elite round, the WU17s travelled to Tenerife where they played Gran Canaria, losing 2-0, and Slovakia, whom they defeated 2-1 thanks to goals from Joely Andrews and Caitlyn McGuinness.

At the elite round mini tournament, staged in Portugal, they found the going tough, however. They lost 5-0 to France and 6-0 to Portugal before facing Czech Republic.

The WU17s played some slick attacking football and created plenty of chances against the Czechs, who had also been beaten by the French and the Portuguese in the group, however they could only find the net once and lost the game 2-1. Caitlyn McGuinness was again on the scoresheet.

Meanwhile, in April this year, Northern Ireland's Women's U16 development team secured a victory over Wales in a four-team UEFA tournament in Slovenia.

After a scoreless draw in a match in which clear-cut chances were at a premium, Noel Mitchell's girls won 7-6 on penalties against their Welsh counterparts in Gornja Radgona. The win followed a narrow defeat - on penalties - against the hosts and a defeat to Sweden.



Alexandra Collighan grabbed two goals for Northern Ireland's WU19s as they hammered Estonia last autumn.





The Girls' Regional Excellence Programme is designed to help girls become an international player like Billie Simpson, who was named international player of 2018 by the Northern Ireland Football Writers.

GIRLS' REGIONAL EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

The Girls' Regional Excellence Programme continued on through 2018-19 with coaching sessions at four regional centres across Northern Ireland.

During last summer sessions were put on during the day at a number of venues, with sessions replicating the technical, tactical, strength and conditioning plus gymnastics elements of the regular evening sessions for those who attend the programme at Ulster University Jordanstown.

The summer contained a number of firsts in what was a very busy two months.

In July the 2004 and 2006 squads entered the Foyle Cup for the first time. This was a great week of football with both squads playing in the boys section against boys' teams a year younger.

The 2004 side recorded some great results and got to the semi-finals of the Plate competition, losing only two games all week.

And the 2006s got to the final of their Plate competition and won it. They only lost one game all week.

It was a fantastic achievement for both squads and there were a lot of very proud parents supporting the girls during the week of the tournament.

The following week two squads, 2003 and 2005, played one-off games in the SuperCupNI against boys' teams again a year younger. One of the games ended in defeat and the other a draw.

Both of these competition experiences will benefit the girls greatly as they continue to develop.

The highlight of the summer was the 2003 squad representing Northern Ireland and UEFA at the CONCACAF U15 Games in Florida.

Games against Puerto Rico, Mexico and Haiti set Northern Ireland up for a sixth place finish after beating Panama.

Again it was an unbelievable experience for the squad and staff with so much being learned about international travel as a squad, playing in a different timezone and in humid conditions, the importance of recovery and rest and the different styles of play.

After the excitement of the summer the programme continued through from September until the start of December with a range of presentations and workshops attended by parents, coaches and players. Fitness testing for the older squads, games against boys' squads and inter-regional games were all in the mix. And there were masterclasses for coaches including a session on scanning/awareness vision.

Resuming in January 2019 the numbers increased to a record 250 girls registered across the 2004 to 2008 age bands.

Again there were presentations and induction evenings for parents and players with a focus on nutrition and player profiling.

There were games against Manchester United Foundation in Manchester for the 2004 and 2005 squads and against Republic of Ireland and Scotland for the U15 Bob Docherty squad.

In April the U15 development squad travelled to Spain to take part in the Bob Docherty tournament, beating Gibraltar and drawing with Wales and Scotland but winning both on penalty shootouts. They returned home undefeated.

The Regional Excellence Programme continues to be the strong foundation on which all future international squads are developed. With the girls now getting a minimum of 1.5 hours for 32 weeks and a maximum of 5.5 hours for 94 sessions there is a clear pathway for future internationals.

ELITE PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME CLUB NI

The Elite Performance Programme - Club NI - entered its fifth season in 2018-19 and is continuing to offer a pathway for the next generation of senior Northern Ireland internationals.

The programme focuses on the physical, technical, tactical and psychological/social development of young players.

Coaches delivered numerous sessions along with residential and international games to players in the programme to both develop and nurture them.

Last July a total of 17 players from the JD-sponsored Club NI started with professional clubs, highlighting the positive impact of Club NI on the performance pathway.

In September the Irish FA welcomed its second intake at its Performance School at Integrated College Dungannon. The programme enables Club NI to deliver player development and educational pathways to better support talented young Northern Ireland players as they strive to reach their potential.

Club NI continues to deliver a busy games programme at all age groups, helping to ensure

young players are being exposed to and challenged at the highest level through regular participation in elite youth tournaments, academy visits to clubs in Britain and international games.

Among the tournaments attended each season is the Madrid Football Cup. Staged at Alcobendas in the Spanish capital, it features the youth sides of leading European clubs as well as teams from around the world, including national teams.

In the 2018 edition back in September Club NI's U14s finished 19th overall out of 32 sides, winning four and drawing one of their seven games.

Striker Callum Marshall was on fire during the tournament – so much so that he was top scorer overall with eight goals.

The U14 team's victories were secured against Chelsea, Madrid side Alcobendas Levitt, St Joseph's Boys from Dublin and Flyeralarm Admira from Austria.



JD Club NI U14 player Zach Cowan in action against US Youth Soccer organisation's Olympic Development Programme team.



Callum Marshall was on fire at this season's U14 Madrid Cup tournament. He was top scorer overall with eight goals.

In October JD Club NI's Under-15s registered an impressive win against Celtic's U15 academy team in Scotland.

Although the final score was 2-1 to the Northern Ireland boys, Declan Devine's side controlled the game from start to finish. Oisín Gallagher and Callum Marshall were on target for Club NI at Celtic's training complex at Lennoxton.

At the start of 2019 players from JD Club NI's 2003 (U16) and 2004 (U15) age groups travelled to Spain for warm weather training.

The trip to Oliva Nova in Valencia was organised as part of Erasmus, the EU's programme for education, training, youth and sport.

On home soil at the start of April JD Club NI sides had mixed fortunes in challenge games against teams from the US Youth Soccer organisation's Olympic Development Programme.

The U14s registered a fine 1-0 win against the Americans, while the U13s team, facing players a year older, lost out 7-3.

The same month JD Club NI's 2004 squad finished an impressive sixth overall out of 24 teams at this year's Rotterdam Cup (U15 section).

Along the way the U15 side from Northern Ireland had some memorable results in the annual Sport

Chain-sponsored competition in the Netherlands – and finished higher up the rankings than some well-known club sides from Europe and beyond.

They registered victories against Canadian team Excellence Soccer Academie, Finnish outfit Kapylan Pallo, Belgium's Club Brugge, Danes Brøndby and Americans Crossfire Premier. They suffered narrow defeats to the academy sides from German Bundesliga club Hoffenheim and Dutch top flight team AZ Alkmaar.

Also in April JD Club NI's 2005 players produced some excellent results at the annual West Ham United U14 Football Cup.

The Under-14 team notched up three fine victories in their five games in the tournament staged at West Ham's academy in Romford. They also had a draw and suffered one defeat. They scored 12 goals overall, with striker Ethan Sousa averaging a goal per game.

They actually drew with eventual tournament winners West Ham United in their opening game. Their wins came against Swedish outfit IFK Stocksund, Total Soccer Cayman (Cayman Islands) and Danish side Fremad Amager. Their only defeat, a narrow one, came against Cardiff City's academy team.

THE INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION BOARD (IFAB)

Following a period in which technology has taken centre stage, 2018-19 was largely a time of consolidation for the International Football Association Board, in which the Irish FA continues to play a leading role.

In recent years IFAB has overseen the adoption of goal-line technology and the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) scheme along with a major rewriting of the laws of the game.

VAR remains a focus for development with an increasing number of associations indicating their interest in having its introduction.

Some 40 associations worldwide are using the system which proved successful at the 2018 World Cup Finals in Russia. All must follow a schedule of training and technological requirements, and a rigorous protocol of its use.

FIFA are aware that many associations throughout the world will struggle to meet the infrastructural requirements and testing is ongoing to see if a smaller installation of cameras might provide

the same level of assurance to allow VAR to be introduced more widely.

Law changes in 2018-19 focused on the speeding up of the game with a new dropped ball protocol, a revised clarification on hand ball and team officials receiving red and yellow cards in the technical area.

In addition there were new laws on goal kicks being able to be taken to a colleague without leaving the penalty area and players who are being substituted being able to leave the pitch at the closest point.

This speeding up of the game and the attack on wasted time is an intrinsic part of IFAB's Play Fair campaign and in future years other aspects of the game will come under similar scrutiny.

The IFA will host the 134th annual general meeting of the IFAB in Belfast in February 2019.



The Irish FA plays an active role in IFAB, which creates and implements the rules for football across the world.

DOMESTIC FOOTBALL

IRISH CUP

This season's Irish Cup Final was a classic David v Goliath clash with the small village team from the country up against the big boys from the city.

Fermanagh's Ballinamallard United of the Championship took on Belfast's Crusaders of the Premiership in front of around 6000 fans at the National Football Stadium.

Ballinamallard had picked up a couple of Danske Bank Premiership scalps on their way to the decider – Dungannon Swifts in the last eight and Warrenpoint Town in the semi-finals.

Crusaders had a much tougher journey to get there. In the fifth round they swept aside Glentoran and in the sixth round they edged past Linfield, who would go on to depose the Crues as league champions, winning the title for a record 53rd time.

It did not get any easier for Crusaders in the quarter-finals. They faced high flying Ballymena United, who would eventually finish second in the Premiership. However, the Crues bossed the game to reach the semi-finals.

In the last four Crusaders were drawn to meet top flight opposition once again in the shape of the then cup holders Coleraine, but the north Belfast outfit prevailed once more.

The cup romantics were hoping Ballinamallard, under the guidance of canny boss Harry McConkey, could become the first side outside the top division to lift the trophy since Carrick Rangers famously defeated Linfield in 1976.

But it was not to be. Stephen Baxter's side, following an indifferent league campaign, were fully focused on the job at hand and registered a comfortable 3-0 victory against the Fermanagh boys.

Crusaders, arguably the team of the decade in Northern Ireland, settled any nerves with a goal after just six minutes. Jordan Owens scored with a looping header.

Ballinamallard, with captain and former Crues player Richard Clarke trying his best to pull the strings, enjoyed periods of possession but never really got to grips with the physicality of the Crues.

The game was pretty much settled just after the break when Philip Lowry pounced to make it 2-0 and substitute Ross Clarke added the gloss with a fine finish just before the hour mark.



Crusaders proved too strong for Championship team Ballinamallard United in the 2019 Tennent's Irish Cup Final.



Crumlin Star sealed a treble by winning the Match Intermediate Cup.



Ethan Wynne of Linfield Rangers in action during the Harry Cavan Youth Cup decider.



Northern Ireland defeated Macedonia in a UEFA Regions' Cup qualifier staged at the National Football Stadium.

DOMESTIC FOOTBALL

Linfield deservedly won the Danske Bank Premiership crown in 2018-19.

David Healy's side performed consistently well throughout the campaign even though Ballymena United snapped at their heels for a considerable period of time. The Blues finished on 85 points from 38 games, while David Jeffrey's Ballymena amassed an impressive 78 points.

David Healy won the manager of the year gong at the Northern Ireland Football Awards, while Linfield centre back Jimmy Callacher was named player of the year at the awards run by the Northern Ireland Football Writers Association.

Prolific Linfield striker Andy Waterworth helped himself to 29 goals during the season, with 17 of them coming in the league. He shared this season's golden boot with Joe Gormley of Cliftonville.

And Linfield can now look forward to competing for a new trophy this autumn – the Unite the Union Champions Cup.

Sponsored by the trade union Unite, the Irish FA/ Football Association of Ireland

competition will see the winners of the Danske Bank Premiership take on the winners of the SSE Airtricity League in a two-legged final.

Linfield, the current Danske Bank Premiership champions, will not know who their opponents will be in the inaugural competition until the SSE Airtricity League concludes in October.

Unite have signed a three-year deal to sponsor the cross-border cup with €50,000 set to go to the winners, €25,000 for the runners-up and a further €25,000 ring-fenced for community-based projects in the competing teams' local areas.

Larne strolled to the Championship title in 2018-19 and many observers are expecting them to ruffle a few feathers in the top flight next season.

Queen's University gained promotion to the NIFL Bluefin Sport Championship after securing the Bluefin Sport Premier Intermediate title.

But they could not land a double when they appeared in the Match Intermediate Cup Final against Crumlin Star, the Amateur League Premier Division champions.

A goal from substitute Paul Prigent deep into added time in the second half was enough for Star to take the trophy to north Belfast.

Queen's were favourites going into the final at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park but Crumlin Star prevailed after stifling their opponents and playing some slick football.

In winning the Irish Football Association Intermediate Challenge Cup the north Belfast side completed a treble. This season they also won the NAFL Premier Division crown for the third year in a row along with the Border Cup.

Linfield Rangers lifted the Irish FA's Harry Cavan Youth Cup for the 20th time in their history thanks to a resounding 4-1 victory over St Oliver Plunkett.

The young Blues controlled the youth cup decider at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park from start to finish – despite playing with only 10 men for more than half the game.

Linfield, the NIFL U18 league champions, and Plunkett, the U18 National League title winners this season, both started brightly, however once head coach Ryan Prentice's Linfield side had scored twice by the half-hour mark there was only going to be one winner.

At the time of going to press, the fonaCAB Junior Cup final was due to be contested between two Fermanagh & Western Division One sides – cup holders Enniskillen Rangers from Fermanagh and Tummery Athletic from Tyrone.

On the Junior international front this season Northern Ireland, represented by the Eastern Region, finished third in Group 1 of the UEFA Regions' Cup intermediate round.

In a mini tournament staged in Northern Ireland back in the autumn the boys in green and white narrowly lost to Russia and Portugal and won against Macedonia.

In their game against Braga, representing Portugal, Harry McConkey's side deservedly took the lead through a great header from Jordan Gibson. However, Braga turned it around thanks to a well struck free-kick and a penalty. Despite late pressure from the home side at Dungannon's Stangmore Park the Portuguese hung on for a 2-1 win.

Game two, against Amateurs FYR Macedonia, was played at the National Football Stadium and a sweet finish from Dylan Wilson was enough to ease McConkey's side to a 1-0 victory.

Chayka, representing Russia's South Region, were the opponents in Northern Ireland's third and final game. Northern Ireland largely controlled the game at Mourneview Park, however the Russians won the match 2-1. Adam Gray got Northern Ireland's goal.

DOMESTIC FOOTBALL CLUB LICENSING AND FACILITIES

The club licensing process continues to set out defined quality standards and procedures by which clubs are assessed for continual improvement against sporting, infrastructure, personnel and administrative, legal and financial criteria.

The success and acknowledgement of the benefits of club licensing continues to spread across the world, with the system also being implemented in UEFA's sister confederations and their member associations as well as other sports such as basketball and rugby.

In order to participate in both UEFA and domestic club competitions it is not enough to qualify on sporting merit alone, with one of the admission criteria in the competition regulations being that a club must also have been issued with a licence.

Eight UEFA licences, 12 Premiership licences, six Promotion licences and 16 Championship licences were awarded for season 2019-20.

Just as clubs are required to fulfil minimum criteria the Irish Football Association's Club Licensing and Facilities Unit must also comply with minimum

requirements for operating the club licensing system.

Originally based on the internationally recognised quality management system ISO 9001:2000, the UEFA Club Licensing Quality Standard was devised to ensure consistency in the assessment principles and methods followed by all licensors, and to this end the annual UEFA/SGS audit was successfully completed in August 2018 without any non-conformities identified.

The most recent licensing cycle concluded in April 2019 to award licences for incoming season 2019-20. A total of 28 clubs were awarded a licence, once again highlighting the continued impact and importance of the club licensing system in Northern Ireland.



Clubs need a licence to operate in the Danske Bank Premiership.



A new brand campaign, the Green and White, was rolled out across Northern Ireland in the build-up to the Euro 2020 qualifiers against Estonia and Belarus. It helped highlight the games as well as making heroes out of the fans.



Trevor Moutray, seen here officiating in 2010, is the IFA's Head of Refereeing. He joined the association last June.

REFEREEING

The focus for refereeing activity in 2018-19 has been built around four pillars: Recruitment, Development, Education and Retention.

There has been a planned move away from an on-line recruitment process back to a classroom-based process. Classroom-based tuition has proven to be the best way forward.

An additional 50 referees have been recruited and are now regularly refereeing adult football. The association requires a minimum of 550 referees to ensure that every open age game is refereed by a registered official. On current projections this objective will be achieved by the end of 2019.

The recruitment and development of officials, particularly at grassroots level, has been enhanced by the appointment of a full-time referee development officer.

In addition to co-ordinating and organising all recruitment activity, the postholder is involved in other valuable outreach activity which the association does, such as delivering a referee module to college students involved in a broader sports BTEC qualification. This is a great example of the referee department working with other Irish FA colleagues to broaden the reach and influence of the IFA.

It is essential new referee recruits are offered lifetime learning and development opportunities. This is where the four divisional referee associations have a key role to play.

A National Grassroots Instructor has been appointed to help develop the training materials and learning that will be delivered by grassroots instructors in the four associations. This approach is essential to ensure consistent and clear messages are cascaded to every referee. It is a proven way of improving the quality of decision making of all officials.

A national development squad of 25 male and female officials has been established, and this panel will stay together until the end of 2020.

Another key objective is to increase the number of female officials. The current small panel of active female officials performed very well this season, evidenced by the fact that the 2018 Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup final was officiated by a

full female team of four, while this season female officials have been appointed to the finals of the Intermediate, Junior and Youth cups.

In a break with tradition the annual referees residential training event was replaced with more monthly training and development nights with the key objective of implementing the most effective ways of continuing to improve the quality of elite officials. Elite officials were also provided with Polar heart rate watches to enhance and support the work of the association's national fitness coach.

It was another busy year, with officials, mentors, coaches, instructors and referee observers all working with a common goal of improving the quality of the association's local and international referees.

Last June the association welcomed a new Head of Refereeing. Trevor Moutray joined the IFA from the Northern Ireland Civil Service where he had reached Senior Principal level.



The 2018 Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup final was officiated by a team of female referees.



GRASSROOTS PROGRAMMES

The McDonald's Grassroots Football Programme continues to thrive – and was boosted by the announcement last August that the restaurant chain has extended its sponsorship of grassroots football across the four home nations by a further four years until 2022.

The McDonald's Small-Sided Games programme continues to grow and establish the benchmark for developmental games for boys and girls aged 6-11. Last year the number of small-sided games venues across Northern Ireland grew to 64 with increased participation among girls.

In November the McDonald's Grassroots Football Awards evening returned to Belfast City Hall. A record number of 320 nominations across six categories again highlighted the tremendous efforts of volunteers who continue to provide football opportunities and quality coaching.

Six regional McDonald's Community Football Days were staged throughout the summer and helped to promote grassroots football across Northern Ireland – and one of the days was dedicated to girls' football.

Showcase events took place at Carrickfergus and Maiden City (Derry-Londonderry). Both were very successful with more than 1000 young players, coaches and parents in attendance.

Pilot McDonald's Fun Football sessions took place across Northern Ireland in October and November. Fun Football will engage and signpost young potential footballers to local clubs to help boost participation. Around 33% of the participants in the pilot sessions were girls.

Other grassroots programmes included Back in the Game Festivals which attracted 643 players to 12 venues in 2018.

Building upon the previous year's success, registered clubs worked closely with Regional Grassroots Development Officers to host their own regional festivals for older players.

Many groups were proactive in growing the numbers of veteran players and offering various health incentives.

Last year's annual IFA Football Camps saw nearly 8000 young players taking part at 132 venues across the country over the Easter, Summer and Halloween periods.

The camps are open to children aged 5-13 and are part of the association's ongoing Let Them Play youth strategy which aims to double youth football participation rates in Northern Ireland by 2025.

The football camps are hugely important as the association seeks to grow the game across the country and find the next generation of professional Northern Ireland footballers.

Last year's summer camp leaflets were translated into Chinese, Irish and Polish to encourage participation in communities not traditionally involved in the programme.

2018 saw the introduction of new NIFL U16 and U18 Development Leagues.

Each week every member of the Youth Development Co-ordinators team observed a game from these leagues in order to monitor the quality of venues, pitches, coaching and playing. Talent ID is recorded and reported to Jim Magilton, Head of Elite Player Development.

Three development days were held in 2018, two for boys and one for girls. Since November 2018 YDCs have been meeting with club officials to monitor and evaluate the latest Irish FA Domestic Licence – Youth Development Programme.

YDCs will provide the Irish FA with an assessment of the clubs' youth development programmes by observing the clubs at training, on match days and by monitoring their administration.

DOMESTIC COMET IMPLEMENTATION

One of the main objectives of the association's five-year strategy Promoting, Fostering and Developing Football For All (2017-2022) is to organise to serve the football family better. And another is to reinvigorate the everyday game.

A key deliverable of both objectives is to provide an IT system to assist with many of the facets of football administration and therefore make the role of football administrators and secretaries at clubs easier.

The IFA Board decided early in 2018 that it would invest in a new Football Management System and agreed terms with Croatian company Analyticom to provide their Comet system for football administration in Northern Ireland.

A small but dedicated implementation team with an efficient mix of IT and football administration expertise were mobilised to roll out the system to the local game.

A comprehensive training programme was delivered during the summer and early autumn of 2018 and resulted in all Year 1 implementation objectives being achieved.

This included online player registration for all senior, intermediate and junior football players in Northern Ireland.

In addition competition management was introduced into both the senior and intermediate game. It includes online match card submission, automated disciplinary cases and full visibility for all clubs of key data and statistics.

To date the implementation team have arranged more than 120 training workshops and at the time of going to press there were 2342 system users, including clubs, referees, league and divisional association officials and IFA staff.

The number of users will increase further in the coming season with training already under way to facilitate the junior game's participation in competition management for season 2019-20.

Some interesting statistics for season 2018-19 extracted from the Comet system are: 32,717 confirmed player registrations; 4667 matches administered via Comet; 11,955 disciplinary cases managed via Comet; 39,140 match events recorded - 12,940 goals scored (including 839 penalties), 10,871 yellow cards, 476 red cards and 14,853 substitutions.

The Comet system also provides countless reports to retrieve various statistics and can be utilised tactically by club staff to monitor information both on their own club and opposition clubs.

It is interesting to note that goalkeepers Chris Johns (Coleraine) and Sam Johnston (Ards) played every minute in all matches within the Danske Bank Premiership with Joe Gormley (Cliftonville) the busiest of the outfield players.

Gormley spent 3559 minutes on the pitch in Danske Bank Premiership matches (including Europa League play-offs). He scored 23 goals throughout the campaign, chipping in with another six goals in other competitions, including two in the County Antrim Senior Shield and four in the NIFL League Cup.

The Reds striker shared the golden boot in 2018-19 – it's awarded by the Northern Ireland Football Writers – with Linfield striker Andy Waterworth. Both scored 29 goals in total.



Coleraine keeper Chris Johns was a busy man in 2018-19.



DISABILITY FOOTBALL SPECIAL EDUCATION

The number of free coaching sessions delivered in Special Education schools was affected by the loss of funding support for the Irish FA Foundation's primary school coaches.

Staff, however, still delivered in 10 schools and brought pupils from Mitchell House School and Fleming Fulton School together for a fun festival day.

Five National Cup competitions for various ages and abilities took place throughout the year involving 40-plus schools and support units and involving more than 1000 pupils.

National Winners were: FA Cup Under-15 SLD Schools - Sandleford, Coleraine; FA Cup Over-15 SLD Schools - Sandleford, Coleraine; Primary MLD Schools - Harberton, Belfast; Yrs 8-10 MLD Schools - Killard House, Donaghadee; Yrs 11+ MLD Schools - Beechlawn, Hillsborough.



USEL signed a partnership deal to support the Irish FA Foundation's Disability League.

DISABILITY FOOTBALL ACTIVITIES

The IFA continues to support the creation of disability sections in mainstream clubs as part of the ongoing inclusive club project.

Over the past year new disability sections have been created at St James' Swifts, Dungoyne, Trojans, Greenisland and Lurgan Celtic.

The association also worked with disability and/or charitable organisations to create regular structured football programmes. This was successful with NOW, Mencap, Orchardville and Inspire NI Youth.

These nine new groups across Northern Ireland are providing weekly participation opportunities to more than 150 players with a disability.

More than 50 teams from all over the UK and Ireland participated in the 2018 George Best Community Cup, the annual five-a-side competition for adults with a disability which is staged at the Billy Neill complex in Dundonald.

It was the fourth year of a five-year sponsorship package secured through the George Best Foundation, issued through the Mary Peters Trust.

There were four ability bands (divisions) in the competition and the winners were: Premiership - Grove Athletic (Belfast); Championship - Skem Men Aces (England); League 1 - Oatby & Wigston (England); League 2 - Wrexham (Wales).

Eight clubs fielded teams in the inaugural Junior Cup competition, supported by Jordan's Gift, held at The Pavilion, Stormont.

Newtownabbey Kickers Disability FC won the 7-10 age group and Lisburn Rovers Visual Impairment Club won the 11-14 title.

Belfast Deaf United participated in Division Two of the Down Area Winter League during 2018-19 but struggled to perform consistently.

A restructuring of the management of this programme will hopefully re-establish them as a force in local football.

The Northern Ireland Cerebral Palsy team finished in seventh place at the 2018 European Championships, held in Zeist, Holland. Their best performance at the tournament was a fine 2-1 victory over Denmark.

Northern Ireland's CP team remain 13th in the world rankings and will compete in a development tournament in Barcelona in June 2019.

Belfast Trailblazers Powerchair Football Club

finished in third place in the AIPF Powerchair League that involves clubs from across the island of Ireland. And Lightning PFC from Lisburn finished in fifth place in their first season in the top flight.

There are now four Powerchair football clubs in operation in Northern Ireland. The Trailblazers and Lightning are joined by Hot Wheels (Dungannon) and Devenish Warriors (Enniskillen).

In terms of visual impairment football, Lisburn Rovers continue to operate on a weekly basis at the Leisureplex in Lisburn. During 2018-19 the association has also supported the creation of a new visual impairment group at Trojans Football Club in Derry-Londonderry.

The Northern Ireland U19 Learning Disability Squad have won the 2019 Home Nations Championships in Newport, Wales. The young squad performed exceptionally well, winning each game, not conceding a goal and beating host nation Wales 4-0 in an exciting final.

Coach education remains an important supporting structure in this area of football development. In 2018-19 seven IFA Level 1 Coaching Disabled Footballers Awards were delivered to 100-plus coaches, while one IFA Level 2 Coaching Disabled Footballers Award was also delivered in this period to 14 coaches.

Neil Ardis from Valley Rangers Youth in Kilkeel won the McDonald's Inclusive Award as part of the 2018 McDonald's Irish FA Grassroots Football Awards.

In conjunction with Autism Support Kilkeel, Neil set up a weekly autism coaching programme for the local community.

The Castlereagh Glentoran Supporters' Club's 2018 Ulster Disability Footballer of the Year award was won by Northern Ireland Cerebral Palsy player Charlie Fogarty MBE.

Charlie has made a remarkable recovery from a life-threatening car accident and has been an inspiration to thousands of young players across the UK with his motivational talk 'Anything Is Possible'.

He was recognised for his work in this area by being awarded an MBE in the Queen's Honours List in 2018.



GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL IN SCHOOLS

In the 2018-19 academic year the Primary Schools Curriculum Sports Programme was delivered in 141 primary schools with 13,178 pupils and more than 750 teachers benefiting from the initiative.

However, due to budget reductions and a lack of an Executive at Stormont the programme, which was funded by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) for more than 10 years, was discontinued in January 2019.

The Irish FA Foundation carried out a redundancy process with all 24 staff in the Primary School Coaches team while at the same time conducting a recruitment exercise to employ 12 new Let Them Play Officers from that team.

The new Let Them Play Officers were appointed in February 2019 and operate in Northern Ireland's 11 council areas, with two based in Belfast. Their recruitment is a further development in the Irish FA Foundation's objective to put strategic systems in place which will develop young players, whatever their background, gender or ability level, and nurture them to reach their full potential.

The officers will focus on delivering physical education sessions during curriculum and after school time to both primary and post primary school pupils. In addition the officers will support the delivery of school festivals, taster sessions, competitions and assist schools in the completion of the Irish FA's Schools Quality Mark.

The Irish FA Foundation has continued to communicate with DENI since the conclusion of the Curriculum Sports Programme in January.

The foundation was pleased to gain confirmation in April 2019 that the Department would commit to support a new Sports Programme initiative within curriculum time which will be delivered to Key Stage 2 pupils across Northern Ireland.

The Let Them Play Officers began delivering this project after the Easter holidays and will commit three and a half days of their week to this exciting new programme.

During the academic year the Football for All Schools Programme team provided opportunities for primary and post primary children to participate

in competition-based programmes which provide much-needed opportunities to develop social skills.

The Irish FA Foundation catered for over 20,000 pupils, delivering more than 30 programmes and tournaments for schools, including several competitions for girls.

This year's girls' post primary seven-a-side football competition attracted entries from 48 schools and 70 teams, with 1400 participants, and it was staged at Mallusk Playing Fields. The competition catered for pupils in years eight to 11 with the aim of promoting women's football and women's clubs. The Year 8-9 winners were Holy Cross College (Strabane), while the Year 10-11 winners were Assumption Grammar (Ballynahinch).

St Cecilia's College lifted the Electric Ireland Junior Schools' Cup. The Derry-Londonderry school proved too strong for Holy Cross College in the decider at Moyola Park in Castledawson.

Mercy College turned on the power to win the Electric Ireland Senior Schools' Cup for the second year in a row. The north Belfast school scored four times as they swept aside Holy Cross College in the final.

Danske Bank sponsored five regional 11-a-side tournaments for U15 girls. A record 31 schools attended the successful regional competitions with 510 participants involved.

More than 5400 players participated in 10 competitions in the Northern Ireland Schools' Cup competitions for boys' teams.

The biggest competition this year was the Northern Ireland U14 Cup with 70 schools entering. The final was held at the Brandywell between St Columb's College of Derry-Londonderry and Holy Cross College Strabane, with St Columb's lifting the trophy.

The 2018-19 academic year also saw the introduction of the Translink Schools' Gold Cup, which involved the eight post-primary schools who



have been awarded the Gold Schools Quality Mark accreditation by the Irish FA Foundation. The Schools Quality Mark helps schools to put structures in place to develop football.

The new competition involved schools playing each other across three age groups (U13, U15 and U17).

Schools were ranked by their performances over all age groups and east Belfast school Our Lady and St Patrick's College Knock came out on top.

The National Post Primary School Futsal Finals were held in Belfast's Shankill Leisure Centre in November.

Over 30 teams qualified for the finals via five regional competitions for girls and four competitions for boys. In total 124 schools and more than 1000 players took part.

Boys' Model Belfast and St Cecilia's College from Derry both showed their futsal pedigree by being crowned champions at both Year 9 and Year 11.

Meanwhile, the Schools Quality Mark accreditation programme - it aims to revamp schools' football, improve structures and further build capacity for football in schools - was delivered by Irish FA staff in 34 schools during 2018-19.

Northern Ireland captain Steven Davis and Northern Ireland midfielder Stuart Dallas helped to launch the Translink Schools' Gold Cup. Our Lady and St Patrick's College were the inaugural winners of the trophy.





DOMESTIC FOOTBALL

WOMEN'S CLUB FOOTBALL

Girls' and women's football has continued to flourish right across Northern Ireland.

In the domestic game at senior level Linfield Ladies made it three league titles in a row by winning the 2018 Danske Bank Women's Premiership.

And they also secured a league and cup double when they lifted the League Cup. However, they were defeated by Glentoran Women in the Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup final.

Northern Ireland international Kirsty McGuinness (Linfield Ladies) was NIFL top goalscorer, while another international, Cliftonville Ladies defender Billie Simpson, was voted player of the year by the Football Writers of Northern Ireland.

Comber Ladies earned promotion to the top flight after winning the NIWFA Championship in 2018, and the other NIWFA league winners were Glenavy-based Crewe United Ladies (North 1), Larne Ladies (North 2), Downpatrick Ladies (South 1) and Lisburn-based Ballymacash Women (South 2).

The roll of honour at the 2018 NIWFA Awards was as follows: Championship Player of the Year - Rebekah Reynolds (Ballymena United Allstars), Championship top goalscorer - Shelley Stothers (East Belfast Ladies); North 1 Player of the Year - Paula Masterson (Crewe United Ladies), North 1 top scorer: Grainne McLaughlin (Crewe United Ladies); South 1 Player of the Year - Cathy Kelly (Belfast Celtic Ladies), South 1 top scorer: Kyla Trainor (Downpatrick Ladies).

Also: North 2 Player of the Year - Shelley James (Larne Ladies), North 2 top scorer - Kerry McKeown (Chimney Corner Ladies); South 2 Player of the Year - Mandy Timmons (Belfast Swifts), South 2 top scorer - Chloe Glover (Ballymacash Young Ladies); Under-19 Player of the Year - Casey Howe (Linfield Swifts), U19 top scorer - Casey Howe (Linfield Swifts).

This is the third year of youth leagues for teams at U13, U15 and U17 level and the new structures within the girls' and women's domestic game are going from strength to strength.

In the South Belfast Youth League the U13 title was won by Glentoran, while Ballymoney United were victorious at U15 level and Linfield topped the U17 league.

In the ABC Southern League the U13 Premier crown went to Craigavon, the U13 Championship title was

won by Sunnyside and Killen Rangers triumphed at U15 level.

And in the Causeway Coast and Glens area the U13 league was won by Coleraine.

Since its launch in 2013 the Female Football Leaders Programme has been a great success with more than 60 graduates to date.

The latest graduates are Paige Floyd, Karen Moore, Anna Daly, Stacey Hepburn, Clare McGuinness, Carmel Fyfe, Sarah Winslow, Patricia Lavery, Mairead Kearney, Lyndsey Booth, Rebecca Culbertson, Jennifer Taylor and Julie Corbett.

The guest speaker at a presentation event for the programme was former Northern Ireland captain Sara Booth, who was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List last June for services to women's football.

Sara, who represented Northern Ireland for 15 years as a player, was Tournament Director for the UEFA Women's Under-19 Championship staged in Northern Ireland in August 2017.

Prior to that role she worked as the Irish FA Women's Domestic Football Manager for just over a decade. And she is now Head of Women's Football Competitions at world football's governing body FIFA.

The Club Mentoring programme in partnership with Belfast City Council is in its third year and has had an impressive impact on the female game. The positive hands-on approach of the 20-plus mentors on the ground working alongside club coaches is helping to develop players on and off the pitch to their full potential.

The Club Mentoring programme was highlighted at a Building Momentum mentoring workshop which was part of a series of events staged in conjunction with Ulster Rugby, GAA and Female Sports Forum. It was open to all sports and aimed to enhance the capability and sustainability of women's clubs.

The Building Momentum workshop highlighted the successful Irish FA mentoring programme by profiling mentor interviews and through group discussions focusing on development plans for clubs. The Irish FA mentoring programme is working with 22 women's and girls' football clubs across Northern Ireland.



Linfield Ladies made it three league titles in a row by winning the 2018 Danske Bank Women's Premiership.

A fun-filled skills programme for girls aged four to seven was launched by the Irish FA Foundation during 2018-19.

Sponsored by Electric Ireland, Shooting Stars is aimed at getting young girls across the country to fall in love with football.

Participation centres have been created where girls can take part in sessions run by qualified coaches in a safe and friendly environment.

The programme aims to help girls learn through play as they make new friends while developing the fundamentals for football.

To date sessions have been held in 12 locations: Antrim, Bangor, south Belfast, north Belfast, Craigavon, Derry-Londonderry, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Dungiven, Enniskillen, Lisburn and Newry.

The aim is to have a minimum of one centre in each of Northern Ireland's 11 council areas by September 2019 in line with the new IFA Hubs and to expand the age range from 4-7 to 4-11.

This year saw the Irish FA launch a new strategy for girls' and women's football in Northern Ireland.

One of the key aims of 'Growing The Game – Maximising Impact 2019-2024' is to double the

number of registered female players from 1600 to 3200 over the next five years.

The focus at grassroots level will be on supporting and empowering clubs and volunteers involved in the girls' and women's game.

The chief guest at the strategy launch, Nadine Kessler, Head of Women's Football at UEFA and a former FIFA World Player of the Year who has three Women's Champions League winners' medals, said she fully backed the plan and praised the commitment from the Irish FA to developing girls' and women's football.

One of the highlights at the launch was a Q&A with actor Tara Lynne O'Neill (Derry Girls) and Joely Andrews (Northern Ireland U17 international) which showed how far girls' and women's football has come since the last strategy and the positive impact that football can have on young female players.

Other elements in the strategy include increasing performance levels among Northern Ireland's elite players, growing the number of small-sided games centres for girls' teams, expanding youth leagues and encouraging more girls to get involved in the game from a younger age.

GRASSROOTS CLUB AND VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

In terms of club development the Club and Community Development Officer and Volunteer Development and Policy Officer have been conducting a large research project into how the association can best serve clubs and volunteers across the country.

The project has included holding public consultations, meeting league administrators, interviews with other stakeholders and surveys. And the information gathered is being analysed and used to create a new club and volunteer development plan.

The research will also contribute towards the development of club workshops and the creation of a new club accreditation.

Both the Club and Volunteer Plan and the club accreditation scheme will be launched later this year.

The workshops for clubs are set to be delivered via the new strategic hubs, online videos, webinars and podcasts.

On the volunteer development front the Grassroots Leaders Programme is a new project to strategically develop volunteers in the new Let Them Play Hubs.

The 12 Hubs which are being introduced across Northern Ireland in 2019 and into 2020 aim to

provide Northern Ireland's 11 councils - there are two hubs in Belfast - and communities with a more integrated approach to developing football on a local basis.

The VDPO will train the volunteers and provide support so they can deliver bespoke training to club volunteers and provide clubs with opportunities to engage in Irish FA workshops. The volunteers recruited will be pivotal in improving links with schools, communities and clubs in each council area. Currently there are 18 volunteers recruited and the process is continuing.

The role will include delivering, in conjunction with Irish FA staff, football development programmes, including the Ahead of the Game mental health and wellbeing programme which was launched last autumn.

The leaders will also assist in the recruitment of a team of volunteers to develop football within each area and support clubs in managing and motivating their own volunteers, including recruiting, retaining and rewarding.



Ahead of the Game has been launched to support clubs and volunteers when dealing with mental health issues

And they will assist the local Regional Grassroots Development Officers and Irish FA to deliver a range of workshops to benefit the clubs and local community.

The Irish FA Volunteer Team is still continuing to grow and offering specific volunteer opportunities has helped encourage more people to join the team.

In 2018-19 the volunteers assisted at all the international games, undertaking tasks such as helping with ticketing, VIP area, fanzone and assisting with the Education and Heritage Centre. The volunteers also enhanced their own skillset through a diversity training programme in association with the Irish Football Association.

When the Irish FA Foundation launched Ahead of the Game, the mental health programme for clubs, it also published an accompanying guide.

As part of the Irish FA's commitment to tackling mental health, the guide aims to support clubs and volunteers when dealing with mental health issues with a focus on challenging the stigma and preventative measures.

The programme is part of the UEFA HatTrick funding for football and social responsibility and was developed in partnership with the TAMHI (Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues), Train 2B Smart Soccer, Inspire and Change Your Mind charities.

It was rolled out to 100 clubs through a pilot programme and will be rolled out even further in the coming months with a minimum of three Ahead of the Game courses delivered in each council area by the end of 2019.

As part of the project the Irish Football Association will be working in partnership with Sports Chaplaincy UK, which will be providing sports chaplaincy services across Northern Ireland via the 12 regional Irish FA Foundation Hubs.

The Department for Communities: A Home for Lifelong Volunteering project delivered a variety of workshops for clubs and volunteers in conjunction with GAA and Ulster Rugby in 2018.

People attended workshops across the country on club promotion, inclusive clubs, multi-sport forums and schools roadshows.

In March the annual Goldmark awards ceremony was held at the Wellington Park Hotel in Belfast. More than 100 young people who participate in Volunteer Now's Goldmark Programme received reward and recognition for their contribution for 50 hours, 100 hours and 200 hours of volunteering within their sports clubs.

Also in March it was announced that the programme is being extended for another year.

The Club Education and Development Working Group has met six times over the past 12 months.

The aim of the group is to improve all aspects of club administration and development to help clubs to flourish both on and off the field.

The group was heavily involved in the creation of the club and volunteer consultations that have been delivered across the country. Going forward it will be integral in the creation of new club and volunteer workshops and resources.



The Ahead of the Game initiative was discussed by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge during their visit to the Irish FA's HQ earlier this year.

GRASSROOTS FUTSAL

The Irish FA continues to meet the futsal objectives presented in the association's Let Them Play youth football strategy and the Game Changer futsal strategy. The association is determined to change the historical indoor football game and replace it with a culture of futsal.

At a domestic level the game continues to grow with established leagues and cup competitions for both male and female senior players.

Women's domestic champions East Belfast defeated Linfield Ladies in a thrilling final game at Shankill Leisure Centre. The men's Northern Ireland Futsal League champions Belfast United represent Northern Ireland in the UEFA Futsal Champions League in Germany in August 2018. The squad were competing in their second Champions League campaign. They performed admirably and were unlucky not to record their first win in the competition.

At a performance level Northern Ireland now has an established senior male and female international programme. The men's side have competed in more than 20 international games to date and embarked on their first World Cup qualifying campaign in early 2019.

During the season the men's side recorded wins against Scotland, Malta and Wales. Northern Ireland also hosted the third instalment of the Home Nations Championship at Newry Leisure Centre in December 2018. The squad recorded a 2-0 victory against Wales and were unlucky in their final game against England. The squad are now looking forward to a fourth Home Nations Championship in England in December and European qualifiers in January 2020.

The women's international side were established in late 2017 and competed in European qualifiers



Keith Gibson, manager of the Northern Ireland women's futsal team, talks tactics with his players.

in the summer of 2018. Northern Ireland were delighted to host the competition and welcomed the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium to Newry. The women's team performed incredibly well against strong opposition. They did not secure any points, however they subsequently recorded two victories against Gibraltar in March. Friendlies will be organised in early 2020 with the focus on Euro qualifiers in May.

The game continues to be extremely popular within the education sector. The Irish FA Foundation has created competitions at primary, post primary, college and university level.

More than 2,500 participants (both male and female) have engaged with these programmes and the numbers continue to rise year on year. The standard of games also continued to improve as more players become familiar with the game and develop their tactical awareness.

Further grassroots programmes have been established within the association's Small Sided Games programme with over 2,000 youth footballers receiving a Futsal Games Programme during the winter period of their season.

Demand for futsal coach education remains strong with over 700 coaches achieving their Futsal Introductory Award and over 1050 completing the Futsal Level One Award to date. Referee education continues to be essential in order to meet the demands of the domestic and grassroots game.

Plans are under way to establish a new futsal referee mentoring programme and enhanced education programme for the 2019-2020 season.

To date four referees have officiated in international futsal competition and the plan is to increase this number in the new season.

The Irish FA is convinced that futsal is playing an instrumental role in developing our football talent and is providing a viable option for those who believe they are less suited to football.

With over 10,000 people involved in futsal programmes and over 50,000 viewing Northern Ireland futsal matches online, the popularity and demand of this indoor sport continues to grow at a fast rate.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The four-year Sport Uniting Communities programme has now entered its second year – in 2019 – and is making great strides towards achieving its goals.

SUC, funded by the PEACE IV Programme, is a collaboration project between the Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby, using sport to promote meaningful, purposeful and sustained contact between individuals from different backgrounds, particularly across the religious divide, resulting in a change in perception and relationships.

The programme aims to develop clubs and volunteers from all three codes through a variety of capacity building and participation programmes. Throughout 2018 the project completed its first year of delivery working with 45 clubs and engaging more than 4000 people.

The Game of 3 Halves is one of the flagship initiatives within the programme. It offers participants the opportunity to try football, rugby and Gaelic football.

The events are mainly attended by young people aged eight to 24 who come from a variety of social, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The GO3H has been successfully delivered to more than 800 participants at 18 events across Ulster, including Monaghan, Donegal, Ederney, Newry, Belfast, Strabane and Derry-Londonderry.

The BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) Engagement and Participation Programme was delivered at the LORAG facility in South Belfast and involved 32 participants from the Syrian refugee community.

A key aim of this programme is to facilitate local GAA, football and rugby clubs in supporting Extern in its quest to better integrate the participants into society.

Club Educational Visits allowed volunteers from clubs in each of the three sports to visit Croke Park, Kingspan Stadium and the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

Nine tours have been hosted to date involving a total of 58 volunteers representing 23 clubs. Feedback on the tours has been extremely positive as 100% of those surveyed said the programme had improved their attitudes towards people from different backgrounds.

Sport Uniting Communities has a major focus on developing young volunteers which was evident during the project's first awards ceremony at Titanic Belfast in November.

More than 100 volunteers aged 14 to 24 from 45 participating football, GAA and rugby clubs across

Northern Ireland as well as Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan were recognised for their contributions to their respective sports.

As part of SUC the young volunteers participate in the Volunteer Now Goldmark initiative, which has three sets of awards for volunteering: 50 hours, 100 hours and 200 hours. The 200-hour accolade is an award of excellence.

At the ceremony in Belfast certificates were handed out to those who have clocked up the hours within their chosen sport. And certificates were also presented to participants on the youth leadership programme which is part of SUC.



Young volunteers on the SUC project with their Volunteer Now Goldmark certificates.

In February and March this year Volunteer Development Days were staged with representatives from 45 clubs.

The events were held in Belfast's Olympia Leisure Centre, Banbridge Leisure Centre, Dungannon Swifts Football Club, UU Sports Centre Coleraine and the Bawnacre centre in Irvinestown.

The development days were interactive sessions bringing together representatives of clubs from all three codes to build relations, share knowledge and gain the tools to develop and sustain their clubs.

It was the first part of a year-long involvement in the PEACE IV Programme. More club-based events and activities will be held throughout the year.

NORTHERN IRELAND BOYS' FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

NIBFA celebrates its 43rd year in 2019 and the association has sustained the record high levels of membership for this current season with 1440 teams affiliating.

This represents approximately 24,000 players across the nine affiliated leagues. Participation in the NIBFA Knock Out Cup and Plate competitions of 500 teams also maintained the interest in those competitions across Northern Ireland.

Subway, which is NIBFA's main sponsor, has renewed its agreement to sponsor the NIBFA Cup for a further three years.

For age groups from U11 to U17 the NIBFA knockout competitions serve as the boys' football equivalent of the FA Cup. The 2018-19 finals were held at Ulidia Playing Fields in Belfast on Bank Holiday Monday 6 May.

The results were: U11 Plate - Linfield 5-3 Dungannon United Youth; U11 Cup - Glentoran 5-1 Coleraine Academy; U12 Plate - Glentoran 4-0 Windmill Stars; U12 Cup - Linfield 3-1 St Oliver Plunkett; U13 Cup - Dungannon United Youth 3-1 Cliftonville.

Also: U14 Cup - Linfield 3-0 Bertie Peacock Youth (Coleraine); U15 Cup - Dungannon United Youth 1-0 Linfield; U16 Cup - Newcastle 3-0 Windmill Stars; U17 Cup - Willowbank 2-1 Banbridge Town Juniors.

Full details and all this season's results can be found at www.nibfa.org.

Other competitions and events organised throughout the season included the following: Mallusk Games Festival 2018 (43rd annual tournament) which attracted more than 1300 players; NIBFA affiliated leagues; Inter-League qualifying tournament at U13 and U15 level; Subway Island of Ireland Inter-League Cup for U13 and U15 teams; Celtic Cup Inter-League tournament between NIBFA, Scotland's YFA, the Welsh FA and ROI North Dublin Schoolboys League.

The seventh annual DB Champions Cup, which features the NIBFA National League champions against their counterparts from the Republic of Ireland, has been a successful addition to the football calendar. It was played over the Christmas period.

The results were: U13 - St Kevin's Boys 4-1 Glentoran; U14 - St Kevin's Boys 3-1 Dungannon United Youth; U15 - Glentoran 4-0 St Kevin's Boy's

SuperCupNI and the O'Neill's Foyle Cup, held annually in July, are a valuable addition to our sporting calendar and provide our clubs with new and challenging opposition from various parts of the world. Details can be found on the respective websites www.supercupni.com and www.foylecup.com.



Belfast side St Oliver Plunkett won the NIBFA U16 Premier League this season.





NORTHERN IRELAND SCHOOLS' FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

The Northern Ireland U18 and U16 Schoolboys international sides had a glittering season.

The U18s won the Centenary Shield, while the U16s were victorious in the Victory Shield.

Frankie Wilson's U18 Schoolboys team lifted the Centenary Shield following a hard-fought 3-1 victory against Republic of Ireland Schoolboys in Belfast last month.

The result meant Northern Ireland finished their campaign for the Schools Association Football International Board (SAFIB) Centenary Shield with three wins (against ROI, Wales and Scotland) and a draw (v England).

Two goals from striker Callum Ferris and another from attacking midfielder Andrew Whiteside were enough to see off a lively Republic side at Queen's University Belfast's Dub complex.

Northern Ireland geared up for the competition with a 1-1 draw against Australia's U19 Schoolboys side and a 1-0 win and a 1-1 draw against a Jersey Select team made up of U18 and U21 players.

Wilson's team began their Centenary Shield campaign with a 1-0 win against Scotland at Seaview in early March and followed that up with a 1-0 success against Wales in Aberystwyth. Game three saw them draw 0-0 with England in Redditch.

Back in November Northern Ireland's U16 Schoolboys won the Victory Shield for only the second time in the competition's 73-year history.

The Schoolboys side registered two wins and a draw to lift the trophy in County Kerry.

The Victory Shield was presented to SAFIB in 1947 to mark, as suggested by its title, victory by the Allies in World War II - and has been played for continuously since then.

England have not entered for the past few years, so Northern Ireland's U16s faced Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland in the 2018 tournament staged in Tralee.

Northern Ireland defeated the Republic 3-1 in their first game thanks to goals from Ross McCausland, Ciaran McGuckin and Sean Stewart.

In game two Northern Ireland had to dig deep against Scotland after getting a player sent off. A

superb strike from Euan Williams was enough to secure a 1-1 draw.

In their third and final game the boys in green and white defeated Wales 3-1 to clinch the shield. Orrin McLaughlin, Vicky Saldanha and Euan Williams (penalty) scored the goals that created history for Declan Boyle's team.

Current Northern Ireland captain Steven Davis was part of the history-making Schoolboys squad that won the trophy for the first time in 2000-01. He and the other senior players congratulated the current squad ahead of the UEFA Nations League game against Austria in November.

Away from the NISFA-backed international sides, Pdraig Slane inspired north Belfast school St Malachy's College to a 3-1 win over 10-man De La Salle in this year's Danske Bank NISFA U18 Schools' Cup final.

Slane weighed in with a goal and an assist as his team scored twice in extra-time to secure the trophy at Seaview.

Our Lady and St Patrick's College Knock won the Belfast Schools' Cup, defeating Belfast Boys' Model 5-4 on penalties after the scores were level at 1-1 in the decider.

The 2019 Schools' Cups roll of honour also included Regent House (Newtownards) who won the Youth U18 Plate, while Glengormley's Edmund Rice College won the Senior U16 Cup and St Mary's (Magherafelt) the Senior U16 Plate.

The Small Schools Cup (U15) went to St Colman's (Ballynahinch), the Intermediate U14 Cup to St Columb's College of Derry-Londonderry and the Intermediate U14 Plate to Integrated College Dungannon.

The Small Schools Cup (U13) was won by St Colm's Draperstown, while St Columb's College lifted the Minor U12 Cup. The Minor U12 Plate was secured by Edmund Rice College.



Callum Ferris scored twice for the U18 Schoolboys in the match against the Republic of Ireland.



COMMUNICATIONS

In the rapidly changing digital world in which the Irish FA operates, dynamic and agile communication has never been more important.

In 2018 the communications team worked to highlight the Irish FA's overall vision to promote, foster and develop football for all.

They used social, digital and traditional media channels to further the mission of bringing our communities together through football, encouraged every young boy and girl in Northern Ireland to dream of wearing the green shirt and used football to boost the image of Northern Ireland on the world stage.

With our senior men's international side the communications team developed new and innovative ways of telling the story of Northern Ireland.

They created an 'Uncut' series which followed Michael O'Neill and his players behind the scenes in their UEFA Nations League and UEFA EURO 2020 qualifying campaign. This was well received by fans and resulted in more than 120,000 views on YouTube.

The communications team also launched a podcast series featuring interviews with current and former players. This helped transform our digital offering and has meant that the Irish FA has an excellent product in the emerging market of long-form audio content.

In addition to the digital content Communications along with Ticketing created and deployed a far-reaching new brand position for the men's side focusing on supporters.

The Green and White campaign was rolled out across Northern Ireland in the build-up to the UEFA EURO 2020 qualifiers against Estonia and Belarus and helped highlight the games as well as making heroes out of the fans.

The team have also produced engaging content around our senior women's international side and the U21s. They covered matches and told the story of players in Northern Ireland or further afield. A particular highlight was Julie Nelson's 100th cap for Northern Ireland when Communications commissioned a special tribute feature with teammates and coaches.

The remit and scope of Communications is significant. Other projects that the team worked on this year included the development of the launch event for the joint bid between the Irish FA and the FAI for the U21 Euros in 2023.

They also formulated the communications for the visits to the stadium of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and the President of Ireland.

The team also boosted awareness of the Irish FA Foundation and facilitated player visits to the children's cancer ward in Dublin and HMP Maghaberry.

They worked with the local community on improving communications with residents and wrote publications such as this annual report as well as more than a dozen programmes and Irish FA updates. They grew the fame of the Tennent's Irish Cup and developed content that went behind the scenes with competing clubs.

The results have been positive. The Irish FA's social media audience is now just over 425,000 people – the biggest of any sport in Northern Ireland.

In the final quarter of 2018 there were year-on-year increases in web users (+3.3%), Facebook fans (+1%), Instagram followers (+13.3%) and YouTube subscribers (+3%). We know through UEFA research that 80% of people who are engaged in our social media have a positive view of the association, therefore such increases are important and will continue to be in the long term.

Going forward the team hope to create more content that tells the story of football in Northern Ireland, which showcases the remarkable work of our Foundation, which highlights that our stadium is a modern, safe and inclusive space and which helps promote, foster and deliver football for all.

COMMERCIAL

The commercial/marketing team have had a busy year, securing plenty of partnership/sponsorship deals.

The biggest tie-up saw McDonald's renew their grassroots football sponsorship for another four years.

Boots became the official health and wellbeing partner for women's football, while betting firm Toals came onboard as official betting partner. Charles Hurst Renault are the association's new car partner and Irwin's Bakery have returned as the title sponsor of our football camps.

On top of that Galgorm Resort & Spa have signed a two-year deal to be an official partner of the Education & Heritage Centre and City Auctions are now title sponsor of the Ahead of the Game mental health programme.

In addition USEL became partners for the Disability League, while Translink are title sponsors of the new Schools' Gold Cup competition.

Other deals included Loudmouth Media signing up as the Irish FA's official digital partner, while Karcher and Hormann Doors have invested in significant pitchside signage and hospitality deals for two years.

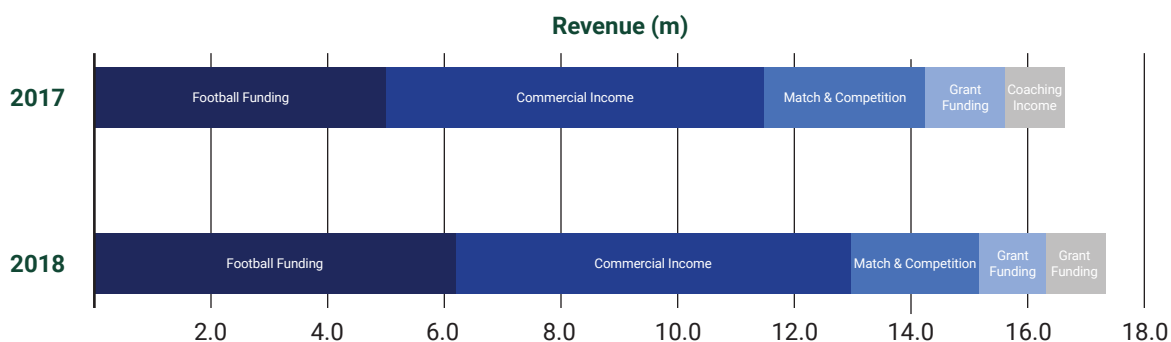
And Grafton Recruitment are now the sponsor of the Family Stand in the stadium as well as the big screen.

FINANCE

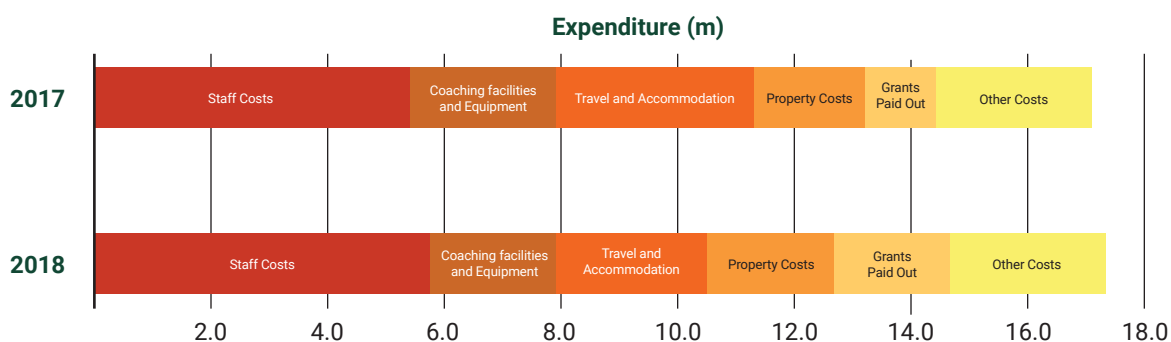


For the year ended 31 December 2018 the Irish FA had total revenue of £17.4m (2017: £16.6m) and total expenditure of £17.4m (2017: £17.1m).

The main categories of revenue and expenditure are analysed as follows:



Income from football funding increased in 2018 because UEFA youth solidarity funding distributed to clubs rose to €1.3m from €0.4m received in 2017.



Grants paid out in 2018 increased because of the rise in UEFA youth solidarity funding distributed to clubs

Other salient points:

The Irish FA achieved a trading profit of £44k for the year ended 31 December 2018 versus a trading loss of £453k for the year ended 31 December 2017.

In addition, the result of foreign exchange fluctuations and investment valuations was negative £344k in 2018 (2017: positive £274k). These movements are caused by volatility in world markets.

Cash balances at 31 December 2018 totalled £4.1m (2017: £5.3m). The reduction is due mainly to the timing of football funding receipts from UEFA.

The external auditors, PwC, have issued an unqualified audit report to all the IFA companies, raising no material areas of concern.



Consolidated statement of total comprehensive income for all Irish FA activities

for the year ended 31 December 2018

| | 2018 £'000 | 2017 £'000 |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| Total revenue | 17,412 | 16,639 |
| Cost of sales | (12,258) | (12,554) |
| Gross profit | 5,154 | 4,085 |
| Net administrative expenses | (5,110) | (4,538) |
| Trading profit | 44 | (453) |
| Other (losses)/gains - net | (344) | 274 |
| Operating (loss)/profit | (300) | (179) |
| Income from other fixed asset investments | 10 | 6 |
| Interest (payable)/receivable and similar income | (37) | 2 |
| (Loss)/Profit before taxation | (327) | (171) |
| Tax on (loss)/profit | (45) | (96) |
| (Loss)/Profit for the financial year | (372) | (267) |
| Total comprehensive (expense)/income for the year | (372) | (267) |

This consolidated statement of total comprehensive income includes results for the following entities:

Irish Football Association Limited

Registered number: R0000327

IFA Stadium Development Company Limited

Registered number: NI608630

Irish FA Foundation Limited

Registered number: NI642595

Annual reports and financial statements for each of these entities are available on the Irish FA website

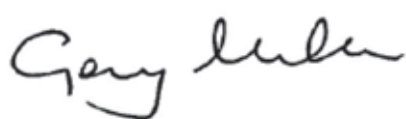
Consolidated balance sheet for all Irish FA activities

for the year ended 31 December 2018

| | 2018 £'000 | 2017 £'000 |
|--|-----------------|---------------|
| Fixed assets | | |
| Intangible assets | 167 | — |
| Tangible assets | 35,830 | 36,743 |
| Investments | 3,981 | 4,239 |
| | 39,978 | 40,982 |
| Current assets | | |
| Debtors | 3,180 | 3,582 |
| Cash at bank and in hand | 4,112 | 5,318 |
| | 7,292 | 8,900 |
| Creditors: amounts falling due within one year | (9,792) | (10,352) |
| Net current liabilities | (2,500) | (1,452) |
| Total assets less current liabilities | 37,478 | 39,530 |
| Creditors: amounts falling due after more than one year | (27,181) | (28,907) |
| Provisions for liabilities | (466) | (421) |
| Net assets | 9,831 | 10,202 |
| Reserves | | |
| Other profit and loss account | 2,350 | 2,608 |
| Profit and loss account | 7,481 | 7,594 |
| Total reserves | 9,831 | 10,202 |

The financial statements of each entity comprising the Irish FA activities have been independently audited by Martin Cowie (Senior Statutory Auditor) for and on behalf of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and an unqualified audit opinion has been issued for all entities.

Copies of the full auditor's report for each entity are available as part of their annual report and financial statements.





Gerry Mallon Chairperson
25 April 2019



David Martin President
25 April 2019



Irish Football Association
National Football Stadium at Windsor Park
Donegall Avenue, Belfast BT12 5LW, Northern Ireland
Tel: +44 (0) 28 9066 9458
Email: info@irishfa.com
www.irishfa.com

 OfficialIrishFA
 @OfficialIrishFA