



Sport



A Home For Lifelong Volunteering

Joint Internal Evaluation Report
2019-2020



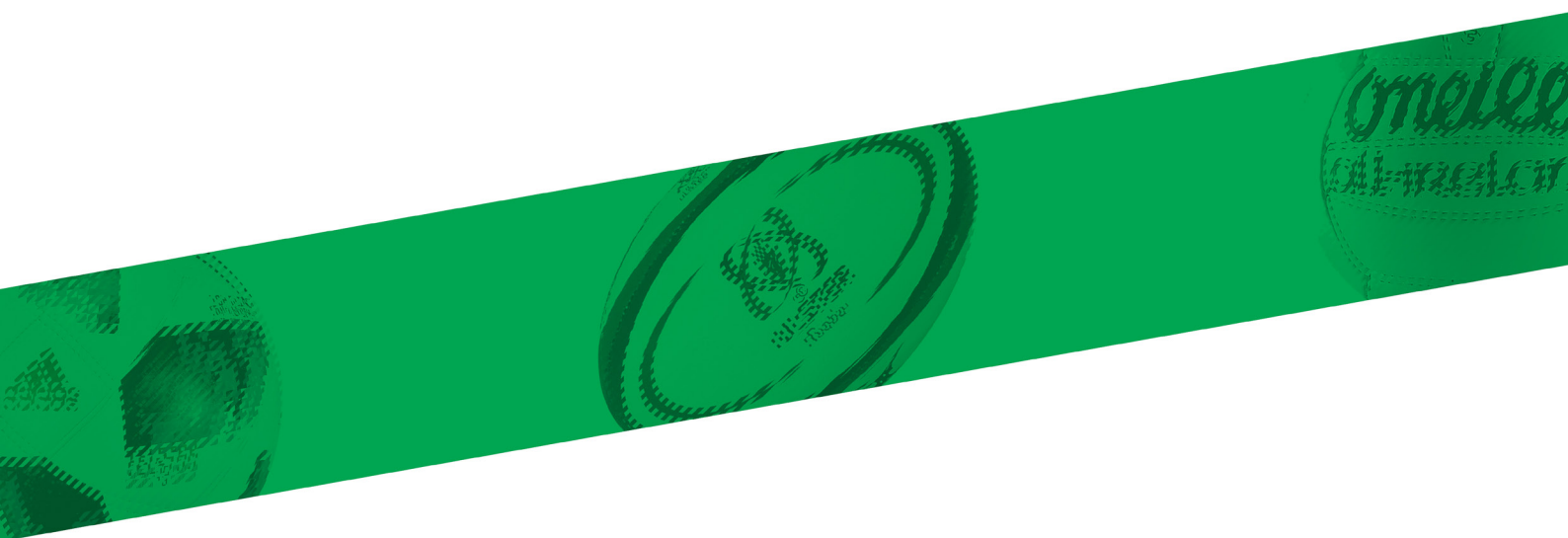
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SECTION 1



Introduction & Background

The Department for Communities, Sport – A Home for Lifelong Volunteering programme began in 2015 and has continually catered for our clubs, communities and volunteers nationwide. The funding which is reviewed annually was extended in 2019 to allow for the delivery of 2019/2020 programme.

Repeating the successes of previous years, the programme achieved all objectives and targets in 2019/20.

The continuous hard work and effort by the project officers from all three sports is a testament to the importance of working in partnership and of how effective this can be, not just in a sporting context but also across the voluntary sector and throughout our communities.

Throughout the 12-month period the programme was supported by project officers from each of the three codes:

Irish FA

Volunteer & Policy Development Officer: Michael Carvill

Club & Community Development Officer: Gavin Nelson

Ulster GAA

Volunteer & Policy Development Officer: Sharon Haughey-Grimley

Ashelene Groogan (1 July 2018 – 30 November 2018),

Sharon Haughey-Grimley (1 December – 31 March 2018)

Club & Community Development Officer: Fionntan O'Dowd

Ulster Rugby

Volunteer & Policy Development Officer: Nicci Wilson

Club & Community Development Officer:

David McKay (31 March - 17 June 2019)

Charlie Farrell (17 June - 31 March 2020)

This internal evaluation sets out to summarise the achievements of Sport – A Home for Lifelong Volunteering against the joint project objectives. It also provides some feedback on the highlights and challenges of delivering the programme

The partners would like to take this opportunity to thank the Department for Communities for their support in delivering the programme. On both an individual basis and as a collective, the partners have been able to deliver a wide programme of activities which have empowered and enriched volunteers, broadened their experiences and expanded their opportunities to contribute towards the development of grassroots sport. It is very much appreciated.

SECTION 2



Programme Objectives

Form effective partnerships between sporting bodies to provide co-ordinated infrastructure support for volunteering

<p>Steering Panel Meetings Partnership steering panel meetings – minutes and action points recorded</p>	<p>Target partially achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first steering panel took place on the 27 June 2019 at the Kingspan Stadium • A second was scheduled to take place at the end of March but due to the Covid 19 situation it had to be postponed
<p>Strategic Plan Strategic plan with agreed rationale and outcomes</p>	<p>Target achieved Two strategic planning meetings held with Sport Uniting Communities involvement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 October 2019 at the National Football Stadium and the 12 March 2020 at the Crowne Plaza, Belfast
<p>Action Plan Agreed action plan which commits partners to work together to deliver actions against agreed priorities and within agreed timescales</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport – A Home for Lifelong Volunteering action plan developed and agreed at steering panel on 27 June 2019
<p>Progress Reporting There is an agreed monitoring framework for the design and collection of data and progress reporting</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two six-month progress reports were submitted to DfC on Tuesday 29 October 2019 and Friday 27th March 2020
<p>Evaluation and Review There is an agreed evaluation framework to inform the collection, collation and analysis of evidence about programme impact evidence of learning</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This report constitutes the evaluation report • Format was agreed at DfC at the first steering group meeting on 27 June 2019 • Two progress reports delivered internally at board level within each code • Monitoring framework agreed with DfC (scorecard) at first steering panel meeting on 27 June 2019



Clubs have enhanced capacity of to recruit, manage and retain volunteers

<p>Volunteer Charter Partners review/update the Volunteer Charter on an annual basis reflecting best practice, and disseminate to clubs through sign-up to charter</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Charter was updated on 27 June 2019 • 86 clubs signed up to Volunteer Charter
<p>ClubMark Accreditation Partners maintain, regularly review and update accredited quality standards for volunteering in clubs</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retained status as accrediting scheme by Sport NI
<p>ClubMark Accreditation Clubs are supported through the ClubMark process by programme staff</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 clubs accredited
<p>Lifeline Volunteering Training Programme Key club personnel are provided with the skills to recruit, manage and retain volunteers through a lifelong volunteering training programme</p>	<p>Target achieved The partnership delivered three bespoke workshops on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 November 2019 Kingspan Stadium • 7 November 2019 Dungannon Swifts FC • 11 November 2019 O'Donovan Rossa, Magherafelt <p>In total 65 clubs attended.</p>
<p>Club Case-Studies Partners document learning and good practice and share in a variety of formats and media</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each code prepared a case-study of a club they have supported through a number of development programmes. These were shared on each code's social media channels in 2019/2020

Increased opportunities for volunteering

Partners to provide volunteering opportunities (including underrepresented groups)

<p>Schools roadshows 120 schools roadshows participants at three events by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three schools roadshows delivered in 2019 with 137 participants attending
<p>Club placements 60 club placements facilitated by end of March 2020.</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 117 club placements were facilitated
<p>Governing body placements 300 governing body placements facilitated by end of March 2020.</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 317 governing body placements facilitated
<p>Inter-organisational placements 15 inter-organisational placements facilitated by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 placements were facilitated
<p>Youth forums 60 partner youth forum participants (two forums per code) by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 July 2019 / 1 December 2019: GAA youth forum (52 young volunteers) • 17 November 2019 / 16 February 2020: Ulster Rugby youth forum (10 young volunteers) • 18 February 2020 / 2 March 2020 - Irish FA youth forum (22 young volunteers) <p>84 young volunteers engaged</p>
<p>Joint youth forum 24 volunteers to attend joint youth forum by end of March 2020. (Target of 40% total participants through underrepresented groups)</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Multi-Sport Youth Forum was held ahead of National League Game Dublin v Tyrone In Healy Park Omagh 29th February 2020 <p>24 young volunteers engaged</p>
<p>Respect charter 48 clubs to sign up to joint Inclusion charter by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 54 clubs signed up to the Respect Charter

Partners recruit and retain volunteers

Different motivations for volunteering acknowledged and addressed

<p>GoldMark log books distributed 300 GoldMark log-books distributed to volunteers by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 334 log-books distributed
<p>GoldMark mentoring 120 volunteers mentored in the Goldmark Programme by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 302 volunteers mentored
<p>Engagement programmes 16 engagement programmes for volunteer recruitment by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 engagement programmes have been implemented
<p>Volunteers showcased 45 volunteer showcase opportunities to be evidenced by the end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 56 volunteer opportunities showcased
<p>Volunteer case-studies Three Volunteer Case Studies to be promoted on partner social media with a record of public interactions (hits, likes, shares, retweets etc) by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved Case-studies were created on the following volunteers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jack Hampton, Randalstown RFC • Jordan Wray, Irish FA Young Volunteer of the Year • Caelan McAvoy, Kilcoo GAC Down.

Improved support of volunteer support needs

<p>Bespoke induction programme 180 volunteers availing of a bespoke induction programme by end of March 2020.</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 513 volunteers have attended bespoke induction programmes
<p>Mentoring scheme 100 volunteers engaged in mentoring scheme by the end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 123 volunteers mentored
<p>Lifelong volunteer training programme Lifelong Volunteer Training programme featuring no fewer than 12 events with 300 club volunteers attending by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 events have been hosted with 495 volunteers trained
<p>Multi-sport volunteering forum One multi-sport volunteering forum hosted by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-sport volunteering forum was held on 5 February 2020 at the Kingspan Stadium. 60 volunteers attended
<p>E-learning 30 e-learning opportunities made available to volunteers by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32 e-learning opportunities were made available

Improved support of volunteer support needs

<p>Infographics Two Infographics of high-line delivery developed and shared across all social media channels twice per year by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two infographics shared, at board level, steering group presentation and throughout the three codes internal committees
<p>Inclusion in annual report Information to be included in annual reports of all three partners at year end</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each partner reported on the findings of the steering panel and progress reports at their respective end of year reports/AGMs
<p>Governing body volunteer recognition event 30 volunteers invited to governing body volunteer recognition event by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 46 volunteers invited to each code's recognition event
<p>GoldMark Awards One GoldMark Awards ceremony hosted by end of March 2020</p>	<p>Target achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The GoldMark Awards ceremony took place on 11 March 2020 in Crowne Plaza Hotel, Shaws Bridge

HOW MUCH DID WE DO?

Programme events hosted: **30**

- Joint: **9**
- Individual: **45**

228 sports clubs involved in programme (100 unique clubs) *Target 215*

2138 volunteers engaged (1547 unique volunteers) *Target 1790*

513 volunteers recruited *Target 200*

203 Volunteers recognised/rewarded for their contribution to the programme (120 unique volunteers) *Target 150*

20 Clubs engaged in management programme/club mark scheme *Target 20*

54 Clubs signed up to Respect Charter *Target 48*

86 Clubs signed up to Volunteer Charter *Target 72*

HOW WELL DID WE DO IT?

180% of programme events hosted against target

106% of sports clubs involved in programme activity against target

119% of volunteers engaged against target

257% of new volunteers recruited against target

135% of volunteers recognised against programme target

100% of clubs completing management programme/club mark scheme

113% of clubs signed up to the Respect Charter against target

119% of clubs signed up to Volunteer Charter against target

97% of volunteers engaged who recorded satisfaction as 3+ out of 5 (*Target 80%*)

97% of volunteers engaged who recorded programme relevance (*Target 80%*)

96% of volunteers engaged who recorded the programmes as helpful (*Target 80%*)

IS ANYONE BETTER OFF?

Volunteer

No of programme participants who have achieved GoldMark accreditation: **144**

No of volunteers reporting that they have developed skills through the programme: **854**

No of volunteers reporting an increase in confidence having engaged in the programme: **601**

No of volunteers reporting that they feel more valued as a result of the programme: **518**

No of volunteers reporting that the programme has had a positive impact on their well-being: **90**

Club

No of clubs having achieved Clubmark status: **20**

No of clubs reporting that they are in a better position to recruit and retain volunteers: **105**

No of clubs reporting an increased awareness of the benefits of diversity in their organisation: **65**

No of clubs reporting an improved link with their community : **144**

No of Clubs reporting an increased awareness of the importance of promoting opportunities for volunteering: **105**



20

ClubmarkNI
accreditations



86

Clubs signed up to
joint Volunteering
Charter



54

Clubs signed
up to joint
Inclusion Charter



117

Volunteer Club
placements



317

Governing Body
placements



123

Volunteers engaged
in programme
Mentoring

SECTION 3



Programme Highlights

Schools Roadshows

Between September and November, the joint sports partnership delivered three multi-sport schools roadshows. The Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby delivered workshops to pupils at St Louise's Comprehensive College Belfast, St Pius X College Magherafelt and Royal School, Armagh.

Over 100 pupils aged 14-17 benefited from the sessions, all of which were greatly received by the respective schools.

The theme of the roadshows was based around young people's safety, wellbeing and on tackling addiction. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service opened with a strong message around safety on the road and the implications of reckless driving.

Oisín McConville, former Armagh GAA footballer, reflected on his addiction to gambling and spoke of the signs that young people should be aware of.

The PSNI concluded the roadshow with an informative presentation highlighting the hard-hitting One Punch Can Kill workshop with case studies on victims and on the impact their deaths have on families and communities.

Joanna McConway, Department of Communities said, "I am pleased to see that this programme is tackling some of the difficult issues in society. Volunteering is an example of good citizenship and hearing first hand of real life experiences is invaluable learning for young people as they embark on the journey to adulthood."





Multi-Sport Youth Forum

The Joint Youth Forum took place on 29 February 2020. Ulster GAA in partnership with the Irish FA and Ulster Rugby invited 24 young volunteers from each of the sporting codes to participate in our multi-sport youth forum in Silverbirch Hotel, Omagh.

We tried to make this youth forum as interactive as possible. The group was made up of young adults from ages 16-24. The session started with icebreakers to help the participants feel more comfortable and to encourage the different codes to mix together.

The participants were then split into groups, each of which had representation from the three sports. They were asked to participate in interactive tasks and for their views on volunteering in sport. Each group was asked to draw their typical rugby player, footballer and GAA player and it was interesting to see the stereotypes associated with sport. The groups took some time to discuss the drawings and to reflect on their initial perceptions.

The groups discussed issues around volunteering opportunities for young people in sport and explored what young people felt were the barriers to getting involved as a volunteer and what they felt were the benefits of being involved in sport. They then had to present to the other groups a sales pitch on why you should volunteer. The presentations were excellent.

After the forum participants were offered the opportunity to volunteer at Healy Park and give out programmes prior to the Tyrone v Dublin All-Ireland game in the National League. All volunteers were given tickets to watch the game which was live on TV. They were also invited onto the pitch at half time to meet and have photograph's taken with Sean Cavanagh, an Ex Tyrone, Ulster & Ireland Player who is currently a TV pundit on RTE'S Sunday Game.

Joanna McConway, Department of Communities said, "I am pleased to see that this programme is tackling some of the difficult issues in society. Volunteering is an example of good citizenship and hearing first hand of real life experiences is invaluable learning for young people as they embark on the journey to adulthood."



Interorganisational Placements

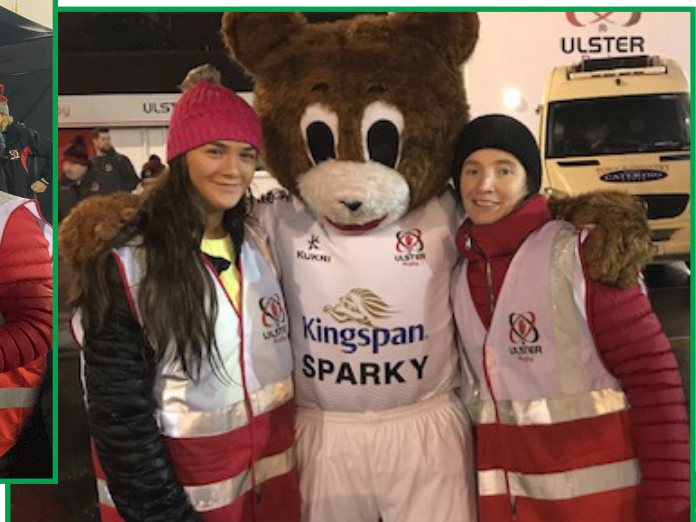
This year the programme provided multiple interorganisational opportunities for volunteers. Across the three sports 26 volunteers helped out at the following sporting events:

- Ulster v Clermont Heineken Champions Cup round two match - 22/11/2019
- Ulster v Harlequins Heineken Champions Cup round three match - 07/12/2019
- Ulster v Bath Heineken Champions Cup round six match - 18/01/2020
- Tyrone v Dublin Championship match 29/02/2020

The volunteers had an opportunity to learn more about different sports, develop new skills, work with young children, work with people who have a learning disability and network with volunteers from different parts of the community. The events also provided them with the chance to learn more about event management and working with others.

“We all had a ball and felt very welcomed. The Fanzone at Kingspan Stadium is an excellent setup and we really enjoyed helping out and meeting new people.”

When asked, our volunteers told us that their opinions had definitely changed regarding sports they hadn't previously experienced and they were delighted to be given an opportunity to volunteer at these events. They enjoyed meeting people from different parts of the community and from different backgrounds, and getting the opportunity to watch a live sporting event they may not previously have had the opportunity to attend.



Participant feedback:

“Definitely a great opportunity for older and younger volunteers to experience different sports and show people that there are volunteering opportunities in sport for anyone who wants to get involved. Thanks for the opportunity and we would definitely be interested in volunteering at future events.”



Multi-Sport Lifelong Volunteering

In November 2019, three State of Readiness workshops were held to provide clubs and volunteers with information on how to prepare more effectively for any future funding opportunities. Each code hosted an event at one of their facilities.

The first workshop was held at the Kingspan Stadium on 5 November 2019, the second at Dungannon Swifts Football Club on the 7 November, and the final event took place at O'Donovan Rossa GAA Club, Magherafelt on 11 November. More than 80 people attended the three events, with more than 60 clubs from across Antrim, Armagh, Derry, Down, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Tyrone represented.

The workshops were facilitated by Gavin Nelson (Irish FA Club & Community Development Officer), Fionntán O'Dowd (Ulster GAA Club & Community Development Officer) and Matthew Holmes (Ulster Rugby Club Services Officer). The theme of state of readiness was chosen to help educate clubs on the importance of good governance and to plan ahead for any funding opportunities, so that the clubs would be in the best possible position should any relevant funding become available.

A full evaluation report can be found in Appendix 2.



GoldMark Awards 2020

The GoldMark Awards highlight the huge volunteering effort across the three sports among young people aged 14-24 and was jointly organised by Ulster GAA, the Irish FA Foundation and Ulster Rugby.



The young people heard first-hand from three sports stars about their experiences of volunteering and the impact volunteers made on their sporting careers: David Jeffrey, Ballymena United manager, Connor McCann, Antrim GAA Hurling captain and Alan O'Connor, Ulster Rugby and Ireland player.

The packed audience at the Crowne Plaza Hotel also heard from Caelan McEvoy of Kilcoo GAA who gave a powerful overview of his experience volunteering in sport when his playing career was cruelly cut short due to a severe illness. More than 100 young people were presented with a GoldMark Millennium Volunteers Award for 50, 100 and 200 hours of volunteering.

Irish FA Vice-President Crawford Wilson pointed out: "Through Department for Communities funding the Irish FA Foundation, Ulster Rugby and Ulster GAA are able to work together to increase participation in volunteering – promoting and recognising our volunteers and also developing their skills and knowledge. We also appreciate the ongoing support of Volunteer Now, supported by the Education Authority, in this work. Through this programme the spotlight shines on the positive contribution of young people to clubs and their wider communities."



Jamie Greer of Volunteer Now added: “Sport provides some of the best quality volunteering opportunities for young people allowing them to give back within their own communities, develop essential skills and have a positive experience all at the same time. Volunteers inspire each new generation to get involved and keep that sport alive. It’s fantastic to see the recognition growing over the years and we commend the support provided by each of the governing bodies.”



SECTION 4

Challenges

The programme in its entirety was a success. However, as expected there have been several challenges that have impacted the delivery of the programme.



Running Costs

Naturally due to the success of the programme, as it develops so do the events. An example of this is the GoldMark Awards ceremony that was held at the Crowne Plaza, Belfast. We welcomed close to 250 guests. We were very keen to promote the programme so we invested in lighting and specific backdrops that allowed us to reward our volunteers in style. Also pivotal to the event were the guest speakers and our MC, Thomas Niblock. The sports believe that investing in these events raises the profile of the programme and makes the volunteers feel valued and rewarded for their dedication within their clubs.

Each partner recognises the excellent value for money presented by the agreement with DfC. However, increased financial constraints internally within each governing body have meant greater scrutiny on all expenditure.

Long term job security

The project officers work extremely hard on a year-to-year basis. In relation to long-term job security, a short-term funding period presents a challenge in terms of planning for long-term impact. Although the programme is evaluated continuously throughout and at the end of each funding period, the true potential of the programme and the partnership is being somewhat thwarted by a lack of opportunity to plan longer-term. While some clubs and volunteers will continue to need support on the more basic elements of club and volunteer development, those who have been engaging in the programme for several years are now seeking support on more advanced projects. The short-term nature of the programme does not allow our work to progress the level of support requested by many clubs and volunteers.

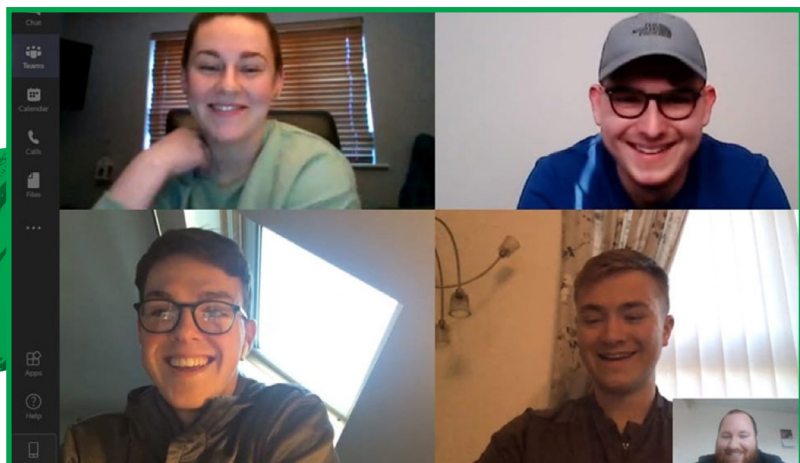


Volunteer availability

As with any programme that deals primarily with volunteers there are occasions when it can be challenging to get the correct support to volunteers in a way which best suits them. Volunteers generally are only available on weekday evenings and at weekends. Subsequently this is when the majority of programme delivery takes place. However, volunteers by their nature are busy and often have other time commitments at these peak times. This is par for the course, so programme staff have developed resources and support material that volunteers can access at a time which suits them

Online learning

As we are now aware of the impact of the Covid-19 situation worldwide, the programme highlights the increased need for more online support and the investment in innovative technology to help with delivery targets. Therefore, presentations via Zoom and Microsoft Teams will be essential and the need for travelling or face-to-face presentations will lessen. This is something the programme will need to evaluate and perhaps changes will be required moving forward to maximise outcomes for the project.



SECTION 5



Conclusions

Sport – A Home for Lifelong Volunteering continues to excel in its aim of supporting clubs and volunteers. Across many areas the partners have outperformed against the very ambitious targets that made up the 2019-2020 programme. This challenge is welcome and has resulted in the partnership once again successfully working collaboratively.



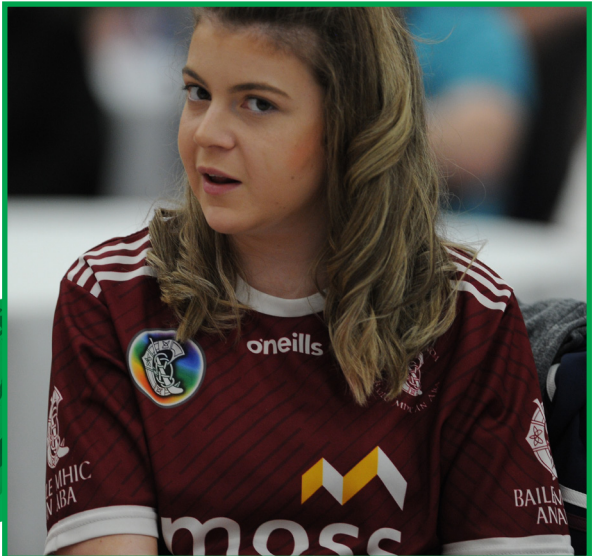
The spectrum of support demanded from clubs is growing, with clubs and volunteers who have been engaging for some time now seeking higher-level support. There also remains a need to provide more basic level support to clubs and volunteers who are new on their journey. Credit must go to the programme staff who have developed multiple delivery formats enabling them to appeal to a wide range of clubs and volunteers.

The development of online content is one area the programme hopes to progress further. The programme continues to attract and engage with volunteers from a wide demographic. This was not always the case. The number of female volunteers has increased while the average age of volunteers engaging has decreased. This is largely due to the success of the GoldMark programme and subsequent youth forums. A huge positive of the programme is the repeat engagement of clubs and volunteers across a number of programmes.



Although sport is the core business of our clubs, increasingly the programme has adapted to reflect the needs of clubs outside of sport itself. Health and wellbeing, social inclusion and lifestyle are just some of the areas in which clubs are taking an interest, the need for funding guidance and basic volunteer recruitment is always evident.

The success of the programme is reliant on the engagement from our clubs and volunteers and their feedback allows the staff to design the programmes to tailor their needs. The example shown by the partnership of the Irish Football Association, Ulster Rugby and Ulster GAA working together serves to remind people that we are stronger working together and the big issues facing our communities are the same across the board. It is the strong desire of the partnership that Sport – A Home for Lifelong Volunteering can continue to be a good example of collaboration and community development for many years to come.



Volunteer Story

Sarah Heron – Ulster Rugby Volunteer

Currently I am in my final year of university studying Leisure and Events Management. Personally, when growing up I was never really a sporty person. The only sport I ever played was hockey, however rugby was one sport I loved to watch, although I never imagined I would eventually play the sport, let alone become a coach.

Before beginning my degree I wanted to be a nurse and had no interest in ever being involved in the sports industry. After being unsuccessful in getting on to a nursing course I decided to apply for something different. Even when starting my degree my focus was on the events side, but it wasn't long before this changed.

My first two years at university were turned upside down when I took ill, and it was after being sick that I wanted to regain a sense of normality through a social element as well as gaining some experience. This is something that rugby has given me.

I contacted several sporting organisations regarding voluntary opportunities, and it was after contacting Nicci from Ulster Rugby that my journey as a rugby volunteer began. Out of all the people and organisations I met with Nicci was the most helpful and highly motivated in getting me involved as a volunteer. It was only a matter of weeks before I was involved on match nights, something that really influenced my decision. Ulster see their volunteers as a key part of their organisation.

When first becoming a volunteer last March my sole aim was to get event experience and therefore I signed up to help with the half-time minis (mini rugby matches). Through this role I have met some incredible people and made some great friends.



I also signed up for the GoldMark programme when I started. I feel GoldMark is a fantastic programme. It means you are getting something back from your volunteering as GoldMark is a recognised achievement when applying for jobs.

After volunteering on match nights I got a real bug for rugby and wanted to gain even more experience. As a result I began emailing several rugby clubs looking for volunteering opportunities. Lurgan Rugby Club was one of many clubs I emailed and it was after meeting with the volunteer co-ordinator at the club last April that I jumped onboard. The club has been extremely welcoming from day one and I soon began coaching the minis section of P1/2/3s.

Through coaching, and when speaking with one of the coaches who also sat on the club's committee, I was informed they were looking for a new PRO for the club. This is something I was extremely interested in as not only was it linked to my degree but I felt it would help with future employment in the industry. Everything moved quickly and last May I was voted into the position of PRO at the club's AGM, resulting in me also becoming a rugby committee member.

This was only the start of my journey as a volunteer within rugby, however. Nicci was extremely good in sending through the various opportunities arising at Ulster Rugby outside of the match nights volunteering.

As a result I volunteered at the Ulster Rugby Easter camps and also at the Maxol Schools Festival held at the Kingspan, making my love of rugby grow even more, but at that stage I was still adamant that I would not be playing the game myself.

That all changed last summer when I began to play tag rugby with Lurgan and that really got me hooked on getting more involved in the sport. After being asked to help at the summer camps I decided that this would be a good opportunity to develop my coaching skills - and it allowed me to complete my 200 hours for the GoldMark Award.

It is nice to be recognised for your volunteering, and through the GoldMark you get recognised for your contribution.

That was still not the end of the journey. After speaking with Ulster Rugby staff at the camps they encouraged me to do my coaching badges and as a result I completed both my stage one and stage two over the summer.

After completing these the bug got even greater as I began to realise how much of a social element there was to the sport as well as the benefits it can have for your health. Another female coach at one of the camps talked me into going to Malone Rugby Club for their Give it a Try session. I was sceptical at the start as I didn't think I was cut out to be a rugby player, but I went along anyway. And it's safe to say that it wasn't long before I was hooked.

In the end I decided to go along to Queen's Rugby Club for their pre-season training after speaking with one of the coaches. The thing I loved most about Queen's was how welcoming the girls were, as well as the fact the club caters for all levels of ability. I never thought I would love playing the game as much as I do.

Rugby really is more than just a game. I love the sport and the game has taught me so many life skills, such as the importance of team.

It is like a family. After playing the sport my confidence in my ability to coach rugby grew immensely and as a result I began to help coach the older age groups at Lurgan. I have recently become involved in the newly formed U16s team and the U14s girls' team. For me being able to coach allows me to give something back - and to be able to help new players develop in the game is something I find very rewarding.

Rugby truly has become a part of my life. I began this journey just looking for experience, but it has done a lot more for me than I could have imagined. By volunteering with Ulster Rugby and Lurgan Rugby Club I have seen my confidence develop and my mental health improve incredibly. As with rugby, both on and off the field I have become a stronger person and I feel this is because of the team element. Rugby is like a family, with everyone having each other's back and their best interests at heart.

For me the journey is not over. I have recently become a member of the Ulster Rugby Youth Forum, which aims to improve the game of rugby through the eyes of youth around Ulster. This has given me opportunities for cross-community work with Ulster GAA and the Irish FA and has allowed me to take up the position of PRO for the forum. Volunteering really does provide endless opportunities, for which I'll be forever grateful, and there is the possibility that I will sit on the IRFU Youth Council in Dublin.

For me the programme that Ulster provides opens several doors. Whether you are looking for experience, want to give back to the community or just for a social element, the opportunities are there. I am thankful that I took a step out of my comfort zone as in the space of a year I am doing things I never would have imagined. If someone had told me a year ago that in a year's time I would be playing and coaching rugby I would have laughed. Overall rugby has done a lot for me and I'm excited to see what the future holds as I continue to volunteer.



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