

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



ACTIVITY REPORT 2021-2022



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The Irish Football Association's Activity Report 2021-22 was compiled, edited and written by Nigel Tilson. It was designed by Norman Boyd.



PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

It has been refreshing to see some normality return to football as the effects of the Covid pandemic subside. Whilst some leagues shortened their programmes and others sought more time to complete their season, football has continued. Inevitably clubs will need a little time to recover but the progress is good.

Congratulations to Linfield on their NIFL Premiership success and congratulations to Crusaders (Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Challenge Cup), Rathfriland Rangers (McComb's Coach Travel Intermediate Cup), Coalisland Athletic (fonaCAB Junior Cup), Glentoran Women (Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup) and Dungannon Swifts (Harry Cavan Youth Cup).

The UEFA Super Cup was a huge success in Belfast and our staff and volunteers played a major part in the event's success. It showcased Belfast, Northern Ireland and our ability to host successfully.

In thinking about activities, it would be too easy to only focus on organised '11 v 11' competitive football. Of course, that is our primary focus - it is great to see the NI Football League and football in general going from strength to strength - but football is so much more.

The Irish FA's quest to promote, foster and develop the game extends well beyond the traditional paradigm.

Football can be a catalyst. Football can prompt new thinking. Football can drive societal change.

It would be impossible to record the activities of the 2021-22 season without highlighting the record attendance for the senior women's team's home Women's World Cup qualifier with England. What a change in perception they have delivered with the prominence of women's football.

The work of the Irish FA Foundation is not headline grabbing but it deserves the kind of headlines that aren't just here today and in the recycling bin tomorrow.

The foundation supports so many programmes which are not only making a huge difference but are also giving people experiences which will be the headlines of their lives.



The President visiting a Small-Sided Games Centre in Lurgan Town Arena.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION



The President meeting the Northern Ireland Cerebral Palsy squad.

In my year as President I have visited as many parts of the game as possible in as many areas in Northern Ireland as I could.

My tenure began in the Mournes with the honour of opening Ballyvea FC's community wellness hub which showed what is possible when community and club work as one.

Since then I have been encouraged that fun camps and small-sided games introduce boys and girls to the game. The Stay Onside programme in prisons and the Ahead of the Game mental health programme have inspired me. Both are models to which other countries aspire. The work to develop women's and girls' football is a priority and is keeping pace with the success of the senior team.

There are so many variants of the game - futsal, small-sided games, walking football and football for people with a disability. On the face of it these could be glibly described as the activities of the association.

An activity is defined as a thing which a group or person does/has done but our programmes are so much more.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said the quality of a life is determined by its activities.

Our activities are an enticing smorgasbord of life-enriching programmes which reach out, drive social change and make people's lives better.

The personal stories and lived experiences of volunteers add a richness to that work. I have been lucky to meet so many of them.

Football is for all and the extent of our activities demonstrates that football is for everyone everywhere.

I am looking forward to supporting Kenny Shiels and the senior women's team at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in England this July.

I am also looking forward to the UEFA Nations League group stages for the senior men's team with our fixtures next month (June). It should be an exciting summer.

Of course, these are not our only national sides. I have been proud to watch the Powerchair team play in competition and to watch the Cerebral Palsy team prepare for their World Cup tournament in Spain. They too are inspirational.

I was delighted to be elected as President of the association and it is a privilege to promote our work at every opportunity.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

The President at a McDonald's Fun Football Festival.



I should like to thank my own club, Abbey Villa, for their unwavering support. I thank the hard-working Irish FA committees, the Irish FA Council and the Irish FA Board for their support.

The Irish FA staff, led by Chief Executive Patrick Nelson, have pulled out all the stops to support me. I cannot speak highly enough of them and their professionalism.

I am lucky to have four former Presidents to call upon for guidance. I should like to thank them for their advice. I am proud to add my name to theirs and to do the best I can for football in all its forms in Northern Ireland.

Conrad Kirkwood

President
Irish Football Association

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

This time last year I opened my comments in this report by noting that Covid had taken our plans in so many walks of life and broken them into a thousand pieces. This year, without I hope tempting fate, we have been able to glue most pieces back together into a sense of normality that perhaps, pre pandemic, we might have taken for granted.



This season, 2021-22, was in many ways a return to what we knew - training, games, spectators, enjoyment, and all the positives in life which football gives us on a daily basis.

Of course, Jamie Mulgrew probably has a note in his diary for the last day of each season which reads "don't forget to pick up the Gibson Cup" as he's now performed this task four seasons in a row.

This time, however, David Healy's Linfield side were pushed right to the final whistle by Cliftonville, who would have taken advantage of any final game slip-ups by the Blues and taken the Danske Bank Premiership back to Solitude.

The Reds had to make do with the Bet McLean League Cup which they won in extra time against Coleraine in a thrilling Sunday final back in March.

And speaking of extra time (Ballymena United fans look away here), Crusaders won a tense Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup Final with almost the last kick of the game, having only equalised deep into injury time in the first place.

So no shortage of thrills at the top end of the domestic game this year, and regardless of who took the main trophies home it was fabulous to be almost back to normality.

Elsewhere in this document the rest of the domestic season will be given full justice but I want to take a moment to acknowledge the Junior Cup at this stage.

First competed for in 1888, the old trophy was showing the ravages of times past including, no doubt, many late night celebrations over its 133-year life.

We made the decision to purchase a new Junior Cup so that the original trophy could take a well earned rest in our Education and Heritage Centre.

Moreover, the board decided to name the new trophy in perpetuity after our late colleague and friend Craig Stanfield who passed away in 2020. A great supporter of junior football himself, Craig's name will now live on for future generations of footballers who will get the honour of lifting this trophy in times to come.

We started this season with a very special event: the UEFA Super Cup, which pitted last season's UEFA Champions League winners Chelsea against Villarreal, who had claimed the UEFA Europa League title.

This was possibly the biggest club match ever played in this country, and the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, the city of Belfast, and indeed the whole of Northern Ireland, shone brightly as the eyes of the football world were on us. Chelsea picked up the trophy by winning 6-5 on penalties after a 1-1 draw in the match.

International football brought us a mixed bag of performances and results during the season. Our senior men held Switzerland and Italy at home, both creditable results, beat Lithuania home and away, but slipped to a disappointing defeat in Bulgaria.





Antonio Rudiger and Jorginho celebrate Chelsea's UEFA Super Cup win at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.



CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

Together with a defeat in Geneva to eventual group winners Switzerland, these results meant we weren't in the final shake-up for FIFA World Cup 2022 which will be held in Qatar this November/December. Instead we need to regroup and get ready to perform in the UEFA Nations League, which begins next month (June).

For the senior women, we have had the dual focus this season of playing FIFA Women's World Cup qualifiers whilst making preparations on and off the field for our first ever appearance at a major finals, which of course comes up in July as we take the field at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in England.

Wins against Latvia and Luxembourg in World Cup qualifiers were followed by a trip to Wembley where we held England for 64 minutes before eventually losing 4-0. Austria were next up at Seaview and only an injury time equaliser saved a point for the visitors and tipped play-off contention in their favour.

An away defeat to Austria in April left us out of contention, but this was followed by a magnificent evening at the National Football Stadium which was sold out for the visit of England. The result on the pitch didn't go our way but over 15,300 supporters had the chance to cheer on our team in a fantastic atmosphere.

Staying with the senior women, we have been operating a full-time training camp at Newforge since January with 22 players training on a daily basis under the eye of Kenny Shiels, as we prepare for our first ever appearance at the UEFA Women's Euros.

This is a significant commitment from all concerned - the association, the players, coaches and support staff alike. We are determined that we will leave nothing to chance in terms of our preparation for the finals and the Newforge camp is a significant contributor to the plan.



In April this year the Northern Ireland senior women's team faced England in a FIFA Women's World Cup qualifier at a packed National Stadium.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

The association's 2022-2027 corporate strategy sets out a range of objectives in seven main areas, including performance, facilities and women's football.



Speaking of Euros, many stakeholders will be aware that the association, together with our colleagues in England, Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, have decided to bid for the hosting rights for UEFA Euro 2028.

Whilst there is a long way to go yet to the final decision, and we have competition in the form of Turkey, we are confident that between us we can put on a tournament which will be one of the greatest sporting events ever held in the UK and Ireland. This will be a five-way hosting collaboration which will inspire every sports lover in our countries and we look forward to playing a full part in the bid and the tournament itself.

On a related point, one strategic disappointment this season was that there has been yet again little or no progress made in bringing the government's sub regional stadia programme to the market in Northern Ireland. Football has now been waiting 11 years for clarity and eventual delivery in this area and we will demand that the new Executive makes better progress on this important infrastructure programme than the last administration.

We all know that football is always more than just the 90 minutes of the game, and this was highlighted during the season when we launched our version of UEFA's Social Return on Investment (SROI) model.

The model seeks to show the value to the country as a whole of the sport we love and, when all of the social, health and economic benefits are added up and taken into account, football generates a value of £470 million per annum to our local economy.

We have run the model data at club level as well and it has been eye opening to see the value that the likes of Crusaders Strikers, Draperstown Celtic, Greenisland and NFC Kesh bring to their own communities through their football and outreach work.

Finally, having a good strategy is a bedrock for any ambitious and successful business, and we are no different. During the season we finished consultations on our new 2022-2027 corporate strategy and launched 'A Roadmap for Football', which sets out a range of objectives for us in seven main areas, including performance, facilities and women's football. This document will guide our development efforts over the next five years as we seek to maintain football's position as the number one sport in Northern Ireland!

Patrick Nelson

Chief Executive

Irish Football Association

STADIUM

The operational side of the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park continued to be restricted at the start of the season due to Covid-19 protocols.

However, the protocols did not hamper preparations for the UEFA Super Cup in August.

It was an achievement, honour and challenge for the association to be awarded the prestigious final between Chelsea and Villarreal.

The challenge element cannot be underestimated and was demonstrated by the months of meticulous preparation involved in transforming the entire stadium and surrounding area in order to deliver all the requirements of hosting an event of such magnitude.

Covid-19 restrictions brought an additional element to the operational planning of the event with special transport and stadium segregation arrangements in place to ensure that 'bubbled' and 'non-bubbled' supporters from both clubs complied with government guidelines.

With a great deal of co-operation and co-ordination by many departments and organisations this operation ran very smoothly, and it was great to see the colourful scenes which the spectators brought to the occasion.

As the season progressed Covid restrictions gradually eased - and attendances and access to facilities have now largely returned to normal.

On the football operations side the stadium hosted 42 matches up to the end of this month (May), ranging from the UEFA Super Cup to NIFL Premiership games and the association's various cup finals.

FIFA World Cup qualifiers were hosted in the autumn with Northern Ireland playing Switzerland, Lithuania and Italy at home. And there was a friendly against Hungary in March.

The senior women's team also played at the National Stadium twice this season – against Latvia and England in Women's World Cup qualifiers. The England game in April attracted a record attendance for a senior women's home fixture.

The Stadium Team continue to strive to maintain and enhance stadium facilities and a substantial investment saw an extensive refurbishment and upgrading of the South Stand hospitality lounges and corporate boxes as well as the toilet and first aid facilities in the North Stand.

A new boardroom and staff catering, plus a recreational area, have been added to the administration facilities in the East Stand and the arrival of another tenant has completed the occupation of all areas of the stadium.

Due to UEFA Nations League matches next month, and Linfield's European commitments in July, it was not possible to carry out a full replacement of the pitch playing surface at the end of the season. However, a raking, reseeding and fertilising procedure was completed in the short time available.



Northern Ireland and England players take to the pitch at the National Football Stadium for their FIFA Women's World Cup qualifier in April.

UEFA SUPER CUP

The Irish Football Association and UEFA staged a “completely fabulous” UEFA Super Cup in August 2021.



Chelsea's Callum Hudson-Odoi with Villarreal's Yereemi Pino during the UEFA Super Cup final at the National Football Stadium.

That was the verdict of Irish FA chief executive Patrick Nelson, who said the event had been delivered “after many years of bid writing, politicking, negotiating, planning and yet more planning”.

In a letter to staff at the association, he said: “We were host to UEFA, we enjoyed the company of Chelsea and Villarreal and we were broadcast live to more than 200 countries.

“I can tell you that UEFA leaders, including Aleksander Čeferin (UEFA President), were delighted with all aspects of the match, from the stadium to the organisation to the hospitality to the football, although admittedly we didn't control the last one!”

And he added: “We showed the world the best of the Irish Football Association, the best of Belfast and the best of Northern Ireland.”

The chief executive said the match between the reigning UEFA Champions League holders and the reigning UEFA Europa League champions at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park - which Chelsea won in a dramatic penalty shoot-out – and everything surrounding it had been “completely fabulous”.

In the email to staff he added: “I can confidently predict that however long any of us work, whichever companies we work for either in days gone by or in the future, the UEFA Super Cup event will be a shining highlight for all of us.

“Well done to everyone. Whether you did a little or a lot you contributed to one of our best days, so thank you.”

Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood told staff the Super Cup was a credit to them all and revealed he had received verbal and written compliments from senior football figures from across Europe.

“They highlighted the very welcoming, friendly and helpful manner shown by our staff and volunteers,” he said.

“Hopefully the attention to detail and hard work will reap further rewards with other high level competitions coming to Northern Ireland in the future,” the President added.

The game between Chelsea and Villarreal was played in front of 13,000 supporters and watched by millions around the world.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS



Shane Ferguson célèbre son but gagnant contre l'Estonie.

SENIOR MEN'S TEAM

The focus in the latter part of 2021 for the Northern Ireland senior men's team was qualification for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

It was a topsy-turvy campaign for Ian Baraclough's team disrupted by Covid and injuries, however there were lots of positives to be found along the way, not least the introduction of a handful of younger players to the senior squad who took it in their stride.

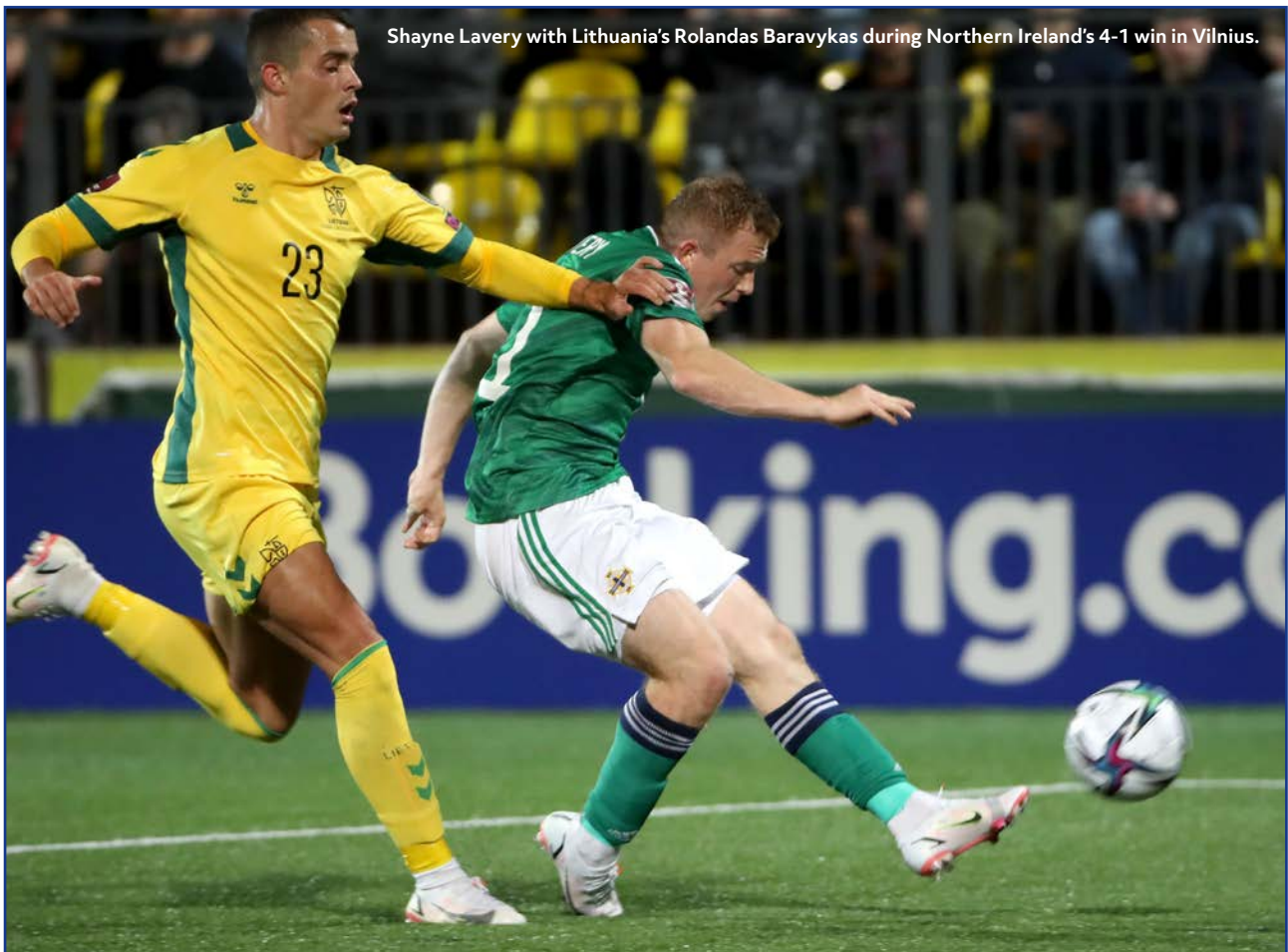
The goal of either automatic qualification or a play-off spot for the World Cup was not reached, however if three 0-0 draws at home had been turned into victories then it could have been a whole different story in European Qualifying Group C where Switzerland eventually topped the table, European champions Italy finished second and Northern Ireland third. Northern Ireland's other opponents in the group were Bulgaria and Lithuania.

After a 2-0 away defeat to the Italians and a 0-0 home draw with the Bulgarians in their opening games in spring 2021, Northern Ireland warmed up for the six remaining qualifiers with two end of season friendlies against Malta (3-0 win) and Euros-bound Ukraine (1-0 defeat).

Bara's boys were determined to get their World Cup qualification campaign back on track when the 2021-22 season began.

A triple header in September included qualifiers away to Lithuania and home to Switzerland plus a friendly against Estonia away.

Northern Ireland powered to a fine 4-1 win against Lithuania in Vilnius thanks to goals from Daniel Ballard, Shayne Lavery, Conor Washington and Paddy McNair.



Shayne Lavery with Lithuania's Rolandas Baravykas during Northern Ireland's 4-1 win in Vilnius.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Days later they prepared for their World Cup qualifier against Switzerland with a solid 1-0 victory over Estonia in a low-key friendly in Tallinn.

The highlight of the game was the winning goal scored by substitute Shane Ferguson, who hammered the ball into the top corner from 30 yards. It was a fine way to mark his 50th appearance for his country.

The final part of the triple header saw Baraclough's side take on Switzerland at the National Football Stadium. The encounter ended goalless. It was a game of few chances in front of almost 16,000 raucous fans.

Bailey Peacock-Farrell produced a superb penalty save to keep the scores level just after the half-hour mark.

But there were very few other clearcut chances for either team, just lots of endeavour and some top class defensive work.

Following the encouraging win against Lithuania, the goalless home draw with Switzerland and the friendly success against Estonia in September, confidence was high going in to the away FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifiers against the Swiss and Bulgaria the following month.

In the first of the two games they lost 2-0 to Switzerland. They produced a dogged performance but Switzerland scored at the end of each half - through Steven Zuber and Christian Fassnacht - to secure the victory in the Stade de Geneve.



INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS



From Geneva the Northern Ireland squad headed to Sofia to face Bulgaria.

Unfortunately they came up short against the Bulgarians and the disappointing 2-1 defeat in the Vasil Levski National Stadium put paid to their slim chances of reaching a World Cup play-off.

As well as taking the lead in the first half Northern Ireland missed some good chances in the opening 45 minutes - and their failure to convert those opportunities ultimately proved costly as the Bulgarians prevailed thanks to two second half goals.

Northern Ireland opened the scoring on 35 minutes. Josh Magennis fired in a low shot which was pushed out by the keeper and Conor Washington nipped in to steer the rebound home. Initially the goal was ruled out for offside, however it stood following a VAR check.

Bulgaria equalised in the 53rd minute through Todor Nedelev and they took the lead on 63 minutes thanks to another strike from Nedelev.

It was a matter of playing for pride and ranking points when the final two qualifiers came around in November.

In the first game Northern Ireland registered a 1-0 win over Lithuania. They produced some flowing football during the 90-plus minutes, however they did not capitalise on their chances.

The only goal came in the 17th minute when McNair's corner was headed into his own net by Lithuania defender Benas Satkus.

Next up was a home encounter against Italy, who needed to win the game to grab an automatic qualification spot for the World Cup finals.

And Northern Ireland finished their World Cup qualification campaign on a high by deservedly holding the European champions to a goalless draw in Belfast.

It was an una grande occasione as Baraclough's boys produced a superb display of grit, skill and spirit to secure third place in European Qualifying Group C.

Italy had the bulk of possession and chances, however Northern Ireland also produced some good opportunities and thoroughly deserved their point.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Other big news regarding the senior men's team came in December when Ian Baraclough, who took over as boss in June 2020 on an initial 18-month contract, put pen to paper on a two-year contract extension.

The deal means he will take charge of the senior men's team for the UEFA Nations League 2022-23 campaign and the qualifiers for UEFA Euro 2024 – and the contract will be extended again if Northern Ireland qualify for the 2024 European Championship finals in Germany.

Next month (June) Northern Ireland will be taking on Greece (home), Cyprus (home and away) and Kosovo (away) in their opening set of games in the third edition of the Nations League.

And they will conclude their campaign with a

home game against Kosovo and an away match against Greece in September.

They warmed up for those games with two friendlies in March and a four-day training camp in England earlier this month (May).

In the first of the games back in the spring late goals from Steven Davis and Gavin Whyte alongside a fine first half strike from Josh Magennis helped Baraclough's side ease to a 3-1 victory against Luxembourg in an international friendly at the Stade de Luxembourg.

And days later they were unlucky to lose out to Hungary by a single goal in a friendly in Belfast. They more than matched their higher ranked opponents and created the better chances in the game. The only goal was scored by Roland Sallai.



Shayne Lavery battles with Luxembourg's Laurent Jans at the Stade de Luxembourg.



Steven Davis and Stuart Dallas after Northern Ireland's hard fought draw with Italy in Belfast.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

MEN'S U21s

Northern Ireland's Under-21 men's team had a mixed season. They put in some great performances in U21 Euro qualifiers but the results did not always reflect how they played.

Two games - and two defeats - against Malta's U21s were a case in point. Both home and away Northern Ireland dominated possession and created numerous chances, however the final scorelines suggested otherwise.

The qualifiers for the 2023 UEFA European Under-21 Championship got under way in the autumn. Northern Ireland were drawn in Qualifying Group C along with top seeds Spain, Russia, Slovakia, Lithuania and Malta.

And they had a new boss at the helm ahead of the qualifiers, with John Schofield replacing Andy Crosby.

Schofield, who had been a part-time assistant coach with the U21s for over a year, joined the U21s set-up permanently from EFL Championship side Peterborough United where he was working with the U23s.

His first game in charge of Northern Ireland's U21s, in early September, ended in disappointment. In sweltering conditions at the Ta'Qali Centenary Stadium in Attard they lost 4-1 to Malta.

They created several chances during the game, however they only had a Paddy Lane goal to show for their efforts.

John Schofield enjoyed his first win as U21s boss when his team defeated Slovakia 1-0 at Mourneview Park in Lurgan a few days later thanks to a penalty from captain Ethan Galbraith.

October was always going to be a tough month for Schofield's charges. They faced away fixtures against Russia and Spain, the two highest ranked teams in the group.

Against Russia they suffered a narrow 1-0 defeat. Danila Prokhin grabbed the only goal of the game as the U21s produced a battling performance in Khimki, just outside Moscow.

Days later Northern Ireland's Under-21s suffered a 3-0 defeat against high-flying Spain.

Schofield's side were under the cosh for long spells in Seville, with keeper Ollie Webber a busy man as the Spanish bombarded the visitors' box. They had 30 goal attempts across the 90-plus minutes.



Northern Ireland U21s captain Ethan Galbraith in action against Slovakia last autumn.



INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Despite the defeats in October, Schofield was in confident mood ahead of the home November fixtures against Lithuania and Malta.

All went according to plan against the Lithuanians at Ballymena Showgrounds where the U21s enjoyed a four-goal victory. Alfie McCalmont found the net twice, once in each half, with the other goals coming from Paul O'Neill and Christopher Conn-Clarke.

However, in their final match of 2021 the U21s suffered a disappointing 2-0 defeat at home to Malta.

Malta rarely threatened during the 90 minutes at Mourneview Park but they conjured up two goals in the second half to claim all the points.

In March this year the U21s were defeated 2-1 by Slovakia U21s in a Euro qualifier in Zilina.

Slovakia took the lead through Matej Trusa in the first half before Northern Ireland drew level thanks to a Carl Johnston close range finish around the hour mark. The hosts' winner was scored in the 86th minute when Jakub Kadak stroked home a penalty.

Also in March the U21s played France U21s in a friendly after the U21s' reverse fixture against Russia was cancelled due to Russia's expulsion from UEFA competitions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The game in Calais ended 5-0 to the French.

Early next month (June) the U21s are due to play Spain at Inver Park in Larne and Lithuania away, which will complete their qualification campaign.

MEN'S U19s/U17s

Northern Ireland U19s registered a 2-1 victory against Kazakhstan U19s in their final game in the qualifying round for U19 Euro 2022 back in October.

Goals from Ciaran McGuckin and Oisín Conaty gave them a deserved win in their third match in the Group 13 four-team mini tournament hosted by Czech Republic.

Although the U19s did not qualify for the elite round of the U19 Euro Slovakia 2022 qualifiers, after losing against Denmark (2-0) and the Czechs (2-0) in their first two matches, it was a fine way to round off the campaign.

In March this year the U19s, who are managed by Gerard Lyttle, began preparations for Euro qualifiers later this year by taking part in an international tournament in Spain: the Football Federations Cup in Albir.

In their first game Northern Ireland defeated Norway 2-1 thanks to goals from Charlie Lindsay and Aaron Wightman. They lost out 2-0 to Belgium in game two but deservedly beat the Czechs 1-0 in their third and final game. The win, which saw Northern Ireland finish second overall in the competition, was secured thanks to a Michael Forbes strike.

Meanwhile, Northern Ireland's Under-17s produced some solid performances in Group 12 of the UEFA U17 Euro 2022 preliminary round, which was hosted by the Irish FA in October/November.

Gerard Lyttle's side lost narrowly to Scotland (3-2) in their opening group match at Lurgan's Mourneview Park. Daithí McCallion and Omari Kellyman were on target for Northern Ireland.

It was 2-0 to Italy in game two at Larne's Inver Park, while the boys in green and white deservedly picked up a point in their final match, drawing 2-2 with Albania at The Oval in Belfast. The goals were scored by Leon Boyd and Kellyman.

The U17s prepared for the tournament with a summer training camp and a friendly against a Dundalk Select which ended 1-1. Kellyman was also on target for Northern Ireland in that game.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



SENIOR WOMEN

After booking a place at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 thanks to their thrilling play-off success against Ukraine earlier in the year, the Northern Ireland senior women's team switched their focus to World Cup qualifiers in the latter part of 2021 and into 2022.



Northern Ireland's Laura Rafferty and Kerry Beattie celebrate after the 4-0 win against Latvia at the National Stadium at Windsor Park in September.

Kenny Shiels' side were placed in FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 European Qualifying Group D along with top seeds England, Austria, North Macedonia, Latvia and Luxembourg.

Northern Ireland eased past Luxembourg in their opening qualifier in September, winning the match at Inver Park in Larne 4-0. Captain Marissa Callaghan, Rachel Furness, Lauren Wade and Emily Wilson were on target.

Days later the senior women's team marked their return to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park with a scintillating performance against Latvia.

They had not played at the stadium for nine years but they looked at home when registering another 4-0 win. Goals from Louise McDaniel, Kirsty McGuinness, Callaghan and Furness (penalty) were enough to secure the victory in front of more than 4000 fans.

At the end of September plans for Northern Ireland Women to train full time in preparation for UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in England were presented to MLAs and Ministers at Stormont.

At a reception event entitled A New Dream representatives from across the political spectrum gathered to pledge their support for the team moving from part-time status to train on a full-time basis.

And in January this year the seven-month programme began, with 22 Northern Ireland-based players training at the non-residential full-time camp based at Newforge Sports Complex in south Belfast. Squad members already playing professionally in England, Scotland or abroad remained with their clubs to train except when selected for games in international windows.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Northern Ireland's two World Cup qualifiers in October were a completely different proposition from the games in September. They faced England, the top seeds in the group, at Wembley and then second seeds Austria at Seaview a few days later.

Northern Ireland battled bravely against England at Wembley. A backs to the wall performance saw them keep the Lionesses at bay for more than an hour, however a hat-trick from substitute Beth Mead and a goal from another substitute, Bethany England, gave the hosts a deserved 4-0 win in front of over 23,000 fans.

Arguably Shiels' team were battling it out with Austria for second place in the group and potentially a series of play-off matches that could lead to qualification for the World Cup finals in Australia and New Zealand in 2023.

In the first of their battles with the Austrians, just days after the visit to Wembley, they produced a superb performance to draw 2-2 in Belfast.

And it could have been even better. Shiels' side were leading 2-1 after 90 minutes but the Austrians scored deep into added time to secure a point in front of 2,350 spectators at Seaview.

Austria went in 1-0 up at the break through a Barbara Dunst strike. However, the home side were full of energy in the second period and deservedly went ahead thanks to cracking goals from Lauren Wade and Demi Vance.

But the visitors piled on the pressure towards the end and grabbed the leveller. Two minutes into added time Austria captain Carina Wenninger launched the ball into the area and substitute Stefanie Enzinger was on hand to head the ball home.

With goal difference potentially being a key factor in the group, Northern Ireland went on a scoring spree in November. In two qualifiers against North Macedonia they notched 20 goals without reply.



Northern Ireland's Rachel Furness celebrates scoring against North Macedonia during the FIFA Women's World Cup qualifier at the FFM Training Centre, Skopje.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Kenny Shiels' side were simply superb as they claimed another three points with an 11-0 victory in Skopje. Four goals from Simone Magill, a hat-trick from Furness and goals from Rebecca McKenna, Wade, Kirsty McGuinness and Rebecca Holloway secured the sensational win.

It was the Northern Ireland senior women's team's biggest ever victory home or away.

They were in cruise control once again when the Macedonians visited Seaview a few days later, rattling nine goals past them in front of 2600 fans in north Belfast.

Kirsty McGuinness grabbed a hat-trick, Furness notched a record-breaking double, Holloway also scored two and Magill and Kerry Beattie were on target as well in the emphatic win.

Furness's brace saw her take her goalscoring tally to 38, a new record for a Northern Ireland player at senior international level. And her exploits for Northern Ireland were recognised in December when the Liverpool Ladies midfielder was named as the 2021 BBC Northern Ireland Sports Personality of the Year.

The new year began with the full-time training programme kicking off and the team playing friendlies at a camp in Spain in February. They defeated Faroe Islands 3-1, drew 2-2 with Switzerland and lost 1-0 to Romania in training matches in Marbella.

The first competitive action of the year saw the senior women play Austria and England in World Cup qualifiers in April.

Shiels' team suffered a disappointing away defeat to Austria Women. They never really got going against the Austrians, who won 3-1 to move three points ahead of them in Group D with three games in the qualifying series to go.

Goals from Austria captain Wenninger, Nicole Billa and Dunst put the home side well on top before substitute Joely Andrews fired home a consolation.

Days later the Northern Ireland team came up short against group leaders England at the National Football Stadium.



Kirsty McGuinness celebrates scoring against Latvia in the World Cup qualifier in Belfast.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Two goals apiece from Lauren Hemp and Georgia Stanway, plus another from Ella Toone, saw Sarina Wiegman's team seal a comfortable 5-0 victory in front of a record crowd of 15,348.

It was backs to the wall for Northern Ireland for much of the 90-plus minutes as England launched attack after attack and cemented top spot.

The result, coupled with Austria's demolition of Latvia the same night, meant Northern Ireland's very slim chance of reaching a World Cup play-off had gone.

This month preparations for the team's first appearance at a major tournament continued.

Before they head to England in July they will play an away friendly against Belgium towards the end of next month (June) and there are also plans for a send-off game in Belfast.

At Women's Euro 2022 they will compete in Group A against Norway on 7 July, Austria on 11 July and England on 15 July. All three games are being staged at the St Mary's Stadium in Southampton.



Northern Ireland's Simone Magill holds off England's Keira Walsh during the FIFA Women's World Cup qualifier at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

WOMEN'S U19 AND WOMEN'S U17

Both the Women's Under-19 and Under-17 teams suffered qualification pain and experienced qualification joy during 2021-22.

Back in the autumn they were relegated from League A following their respective qualifiers, however they both bounced back in further qualifiers this spring to gain promotion back to League A next time around.

At the start of the season a new format was introduced for WU19 and WU17 Euro qualifiers which replaced the old qualifying and elite rounds. The competitions still feature one-venue mini tournaments but now include two leagues (A and B) with promotion and relegation leading to finals.

In October the WU19s faced a tough qualifying group in League A of the WU19 Euro 2022 qualifiers. Their opponents in the Group 5 mini tournament were Switzerland, England and hosts Republic of Ireland.

Alfie Wylie's side, who warmed up for the games with two draws in away friendlies against Wales (2-2 and 1-1), came up against the Swiss in their first game in Limerick and lost 3-1. Cora Chambers got the Northern Ireland goal.

Game two saw them face England. Kathryn Dickson scored for Northern Ireland in the first half. It was 2-1 to England at half-time but after the break a strong England team put another six past Northern Ireland.

In the final game against the Republic they were narrowly beaten by two goals to nil. It meant relegation from League A.

However, last month they performed well in League B and were promoted to League A for the next edition of the WU19 Euros.

In game one in Group 1 – the mini tournament was hosted in Northern Ireland – they drew 1-1 with Malta at Inver Park in Larne. Chambers was on target once again.

They had enough chances to win their opener, however in game two they showed their ruthless streak when they strolled to a thumping five-goal victory over Faroe Islands at Inver. Eve Reilly (two), Dickson, Shona Davis and captain Fi Morgan all found the back of the net.

The final game saw them secure a 1-0 win over Azerbaijan in Larne – Chambers got the goal – and that was enough for the WU19s to top the group on goal difference ahead of Malta.

Back in September Alfie Wylie's WU17s, who had drawn 0-0 twice with Republic of Ireland in warm-up matches in August, competed in League A Group 7 where they lost 3-0 to Spain in their opening fixture before suffering a 4-0 defeat against hosts Serbia. In their final game in the WU17 Euro 2022 qualifiers they managed to score against Iceland but lost the game 3-1. Naomi McLaughlin was on target.

Fast forward to March this year and they performed superbly in League B Group 1.

First up they enjoyed a 2-1 win over Luxembourg. They trailed 1-0 with 10 minutes to go, however goals from Mikayla Wildgoose and Aimee Kerr (penalty) secured maximum points.

In game two they had a more comfortable win, putting three past Faroe Islands without reply. Sophie Gargan, Wildgoose and Emily Reid were on target.

And in their final game they defeated hosts Israel 2-0 thanks to goals from Rachel McIntyre and Sarah Tweedie, gaining promotion to League A for qualifying round one of the 2022-23 edition of the competition.

ACADEMY AND NATIONAL PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME

The Irish Football Association's pathway for young elite players in Northern Ireland changed direction during the 2021-22 season.

JD Club NI, the elite performance programme which helped the Irish FA to successfully nurture several players who have gone on to join professional clubs, evolved into a new programme.



Students from the JD Academy limber up at the JD Academy Way National Showcase Event staged at the National Stadium.

Club NI ran for six seasons from 2014 and saw boys from U12 to U16 level compete in international tournaments and attend weekly training sessions as well as residential.

The elite youth pathway for boys' performance has now evolved and includes the National Performance Programme and the Irish FA Academy in collaboration with UEFA based at Ulster University's Jordanstown campus. And both the NPP and the academy are sponsored by JD.

The elite youth player programme and pathway has been refreshed to best identify and develop emerging talent across Northern Ireland.

The JD Academy remains as the flagship programme at the heart of the player pathway.

The first year of the academy project, in 2019-20, saw 20 boys develop their football and life skills, while the following year 29 attended.

The intake for 2021-22 was 35 students.

Study time for all students focuses on developing the technical, tactical and physiological aspects of their game in an environment intended to challenge and support them in their goal of becoming professional footballers. Within the academy curriculum players are monitored through an individual development programme.

On the new-look Irish FA pathway for elite young players the JD-sponsored National Performance Programme feeds in to the academy.

NPP involves the recruitment of 60 players from across Northern Ireland at U14 level and the best of those players will be invited to attend the JD Academy.

The NPP revolves around three national centres: Mid-Ulster (based at Annagh United FC, Portadown); North-West (Coleraine FC, Coleraine Showgrounds) and Belfast (Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association, Stormont).

Players attending the three national centres are selected through a team of Talent ID coaches and through communications with heads of club academies and club coaches.

The aim is to monitor each selected player over a period of time using an individual development plan. The players deemed best equipped for professional football are then offered scholarships to the full-time JD Academy, which is focused on developing emerging talent at school years 11 and 12 (U15 and U16). Its main objective is to produce better players through a mixture of sporting, school and life skills education.

A new development within the JD National Performance Programme has been the creation of a DNA, Coaching Curriculum and Game Model document.

Andy Waterworth, the head of the academy, explained: "The DNA has been a nice piece of work as it has allowed us to reflect on and explore what a Northern Ireland player should be like. It will evolve over time but it gives us a framework as coaches to work within.

"Likewise we have a game model that looks at how our underage national teams will play. Through it players and coaches can easily identify with Northern Ireland's style of play. Ultimately we use this as a learning tool for players so they can understand the game.

"Whilst we understand results and qualifying for competitions is a significant part of our performance objectives, we also understand that our main focus is to develop footballers for the next stage, whether that be U17 international and eventually senior international level or moving on to full-time professional football."

Last month (April) the association and JD teamed up to host an event at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park with players from the Irish FA JD Academy.

The JD Academy Way National Showcase Event highlighted the academy and the association's youth player development pathways to becoming a professional footballer. Guests included coaches and representatives of senior clubs in Northern Ireland.

Plans are currently in the pipeline to introduce a similar elite pathway for girls across Northern Ireland.

GIRLS' REGIONAL EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

The Irish FA Girls' Regional Excellence Programme, sponsored by Electric Ireland, continued to be intensive in 2021-22.

To pave the way for another year of the programme, summer sessions were held at Ulster University Jordanstown, Newforge (Belfast), Mid Ulster Sports Arena (Cookstown), Holy Cross College in Strabane and Enniskillen Forum.

The focus was obviously football, but other topics covered included fitness, wellbeing and nutrition.

The sessions were well attended with more than 200 girls participating. Not only did regular players from the pathway attend but also several new faces were given the opportunity to show how good they were.

Members of the senior international squad called in to sessions to outline how their preparations for World Cup qualifiers were coming on and to let the girls know they had also come through the pathway, highlighting the opportunity that those on the programme were getting.

September saw the programme restart with sessions being held at four regional centres – Newforge (for counties Down and Armagh), UUJ (Co Antrim), MUSA (Tyrone/Fermanagh) and Holy Cross College (Co Londonderry).

Each centre is focused on creating an environment which supports the preparation of players to enter Northern Ireland's youth international squads, and they each accommodate players aged 10 to 15. More than 200 players are engaged in the regional programme.

As part of the 2021-22 programme, development squads at 2007 and 2008 were selected from the four regions. The players in those squads attended twice a week for extra sessions which included strength and conditioning plus gymnastics.

The programme of learning puts the girls at the centre of the coaching system, with the

coaches on hand to ensure all the girls benefit from their attendance.

Games days, featuring inter-region matches, were held for the 2009 age group. Education continued with players and parents attending Gamecare workshops where the focus was on gambling awareness for young female athletes. In December the players received the first of two reports giving them feedback on their progress to date.

The programme resumed in January with all the squads following a curriculum set by the lead coaches. During the month trials took place for a new intake - 2010s - with over 100 players attending.

At the end of that month the 2008 and WU15 development squads travelled to Dublin to play FAI Schools teams. This was followed in February with the WU15 squad playing another two games in preparation for the Bob Docherty Tournament - at Larne against Scotland and at Midgley Park in Belfast against the Republic of Ireland.

February also saw the appointment of a Welfare Officer for Elite Girls, Elaine Roden, and a new chaplain for the programme, Caragh Hamilton (Glentoran Women and Northern Ireland).

This year's Bob Docherty Tournament for WU15 international teams was hosted by England and staged at Newcastle University. Prior to their first competitive games the Northern Ireland WU15 team attended a weekend residential at Corrs Corner and UUJ.

At the competition itself Northern Ireland defeated England B and were narrowly beaten by the Republic. They also lost against England A.

During April and this month (May) Serena Barr delivered nutritional workshops and presentations to all four regions. These were well received by all who attended.



INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION BOARD (IFAB)

Despite the ravages of the Covid pandemic the Irish Football Association, as it has done since 1886, continued to play a significant role in the shaping of the game through the International Football Association Board.

After a period with many alterations to the laws of the game the current position is to allow a period of consolidation, however some matters continue to exercise the IFAB.

VAR

The development and implementation of VAR (Video Assistant Referee) has now shifted from IFAB to FIFA.

The FIFA Technology Department continues to develop a VAR Light solution using a minimum of four cameras.

The Irish FA would be keen to become part of the experimentation into this, however the costs in respect of hardware, software and personnel remain prohibitive at the moment. FIFA are also proposing a VAR Assist idea which would reduce the requirements significantly but further testing is needed to see if this is a viable option.

SUBSTITUTIONS

The temporary increase to the number of allowed substitutes has now been confirmed as a permanent option with competition organisers able to decide how many substitutes up to five may be utilised in any given competition with a restriction of three separate substitution occasions.

Alongside this the concussion substitute experiments continue, but data is hard to achieve as these incidents, although dangerous and potentially life threatening, are thankfully few and far between.

OFFSIDE

FIFA are staging experiments into slight alterations to the offside law to give the benefit to attackers. These experiments were due to happen in 2020 and 2021 but have not commenced until 2022.

DUTCH PROPOSALS

The KNVB (Dutch FA) staged a youth competition in July 2021 which had a number of dramatic law changes such as kick-ins rather than throw-ins, unlimited substitutions, self-pass at free-kicks, sin bins for yellow cards and effective playing time.

All of these ideas have been suggested at some time in the past and the IFAB remains open to considering any proposal for the betterment of the game.

However, the current football product remains the world's most popular sport and whilst there may be some tweaks to ensure its sustainability there is no appetite for drastic alterations which might destructively change the game we all love.

These ideas have not found favour with the advisory panels and it is unlikely that further authorised experiments will be planned in these areas.

DOMESTIC – MEN'S FOOTBALL

Crusaders won this season's Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup thanks to a last gasp goal from substitute Jonny McMurray deep into extra time.



Crusaders celebrate winning the Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup.

DOMESTIC – MEN'S FOOTBALL

The game, staged earlier this month (May), was an absorbing contest as Ballymena boss David Jeffrey and Crusaders manager Stephen Baxter, two of the most successful managers in the history of Irish League football, tried to outfox each other.

Away from the Irish FA's premier cup competition, Linfield won the Irish League top flight crown for a record 56th time in 2021-22.

David Healy's side pipped Cliftonville by a single point to secure the Gibson Cup for the fourth year in a row.

Linfield held on to their NIFL Danske Bank Premiership title following a final day home two-goal victory over Coleraine. Cliftonville also won on the last day of the campaign, 2-1 away to Glentoran, but it was not enough to land them the league title.

The winners of the other two main senior trophies on offer this season were Larne and Cliftonville.

Larne retained the County Antrim Shield thanks to a 1-0 win over Linfield at Seaview. Tomas Cosgrove scored the only goal of the game.

The Reds produced a thrilling comeback to defeat Coleraine in the Bet McLean League Cup decider at the National Stadium.

The Reds came from 2-0 down to force extra time before beating the Bannside 4-3. On the scoresheet for Cliftonville were Joe Gormley and Paul O'Neill, who both netted a brace. Matthew Shevlin, Steven Lowry and Curtis Allen scored for Coleraine.

It was the first major football final to be played on a Sunday in Northern Ireland - and over 11,000 fans were in attendance.

Meanwhile, Rathfriland Rangers won the Intermediate Cup for the first time in their history at the National Football Stadium last month.

The men from the foothills of the Mourne scored two sumptuous second half goals to defeat Armagh City in an entertaining McComb's Coach Travel Intermediate Cup decider enjoyed by 995 spectators.

Captain Ross Black and attacking midfielder Ruairi Fitzpatrick were on target for the Amateur League Premier Division side in the 2-0 victory.

Shea Campbell's NIFL Premier Intermediate charges pushed the Whites right to the end, but Rathfriland's success was a fitting way to mark the club's 60th anniversary.

Rathfriland Rangers (in white) step out on to the National Football Stadium turf before going on to lift the Intermediate Cup for the first time in their history thanks to a 2-0 win over Armagh City.





Mid-Ulster Division One side Coalisland Athletic deservedly secured the fonaCAB Irish Junior Cup with a 4-1 win over Bangor Young Men in the final at the National Football Stadium earlier this month.

Captain Gary Coney lifted the trophy aloft along with his team-mates after they swept their NAFL Division 2B opponents aside with some bright, energetic and slick football.

Two goals from Patrick John (PJ) Lavery, a blaster from the lively Daryl Magee and a Sean Corr penalty saw the Tyrone team win the Junior Cup for the first time in their history.

Prior to the game the Irish FA announced that the Irish FA Junior Cup trophy had been renamed as the Craig Stanfield Junior Cup to recognise the considerable achievements of the Irish FA's late Football Operations Manager.

Stanfield, who passed away suddenly in February 2020, spent 30 years at the association.

His career saw him involved in roles right across the organisation's landscape, spanning the elite and domestic game. It also included a period as secretary of Northern Ireland's Premier League when it was operated by the Irish FA.

Also this month Dungannon Swifts lifted the Harry Cavan Youth Cup for the first time in their history after a deserved 3-1 win over Glenavon at the National Football Stadium.

The U18 sides from the two NIFL Premiership clubs gave it their all in the all-Mid Ulster affair but a penalty from Swifts captain Oran O'Kane and goals from striker Kenny Ximenes and wing back Vicky Saldanha enabled Chris McCann's side to secure the silverware.

Right at the death Glenavon's Harry Lynch arrived at the back post to score with a powerful header but it was merely a consolation for the team from Co Armagh.

DOMESTIC – WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Glentoran Women won Northern Ireland's premier cup competition for senior women's teams for a record ninth time back in the autumn.

They deservedly lifted the Irish FA Women's Challenge Cup sponsored by Electric Ireland after defeating Crusaders Strikers 2-0 in the final - thanks to goals from player of the match Joely Andrews and Lauren Wade.

The decider, staged at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in October, saw the Glens create the bulk of the chances in the match and they produced plenty of slick football.

On 22 minutes they took the lead thanks to a well worked goal. Captain Jessica Foy crossed to striker Kerry Beattie and she laid the ball back to Andrews 16 yards out and the midfielder planted it past Crues keeper Maddy Harvey-Clifford into the bottom corner of the net.

Glentoran grabbed their second with minutes remaining. Midfielder Nadene Caldwell jinked her way past a couple of defenders and crossed for Wade to flick the ball past Harvey-Clifford from six yards.

Although the final was not staged in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, the Glens also won the trophy in 2018 and 2019, effectively making it three in a row in 2021.

And it was a treble-winning season for the Glens last year. They also tasted success in both the league and the Co Antrim Cup.

They secured consecutive titles in the NIFL Danske Bank Women's Premiership, however they were pushed all the way by Cliftonville Ladies. The east Belfast side edged out their cross-city rivals by a narrow three-point margin.

Player of the match Joely Andrews celebrates with her Glentoran Women team-mates after scoring in the Challenge Cup decider.



DOMESTIC – WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

The 2021 Women's Premiership also enjoyed the highest recorded league attendance of 425 fans at Cliftonville Ladies v Glentoran Women on 4 August; this was a 44% improvement on the previous record of 295 (Linfield Ladies v Sion Swifts Ladies, August 2019).

BBC Sport NI supported the Women's Premiership with highlights of all matches and player interviews shared on the BBC Sport NI website and social media channels throughout the season.

Just a handful of days before the EI Women's Challenge Cup decider, the Glens won the Toalsbet.com Co Antrim Women's Challenge Cup 4-3 on penalties – also against Crusaders Strikers.

They went ahead early on at Seaview through Kerry Beattie but Crusaders responded well and came close to winning the game in normal time.

Julie Nelson equalised in the second half and Meghan Ingram gave Strikers the advantage, only for Casey Howe to dramatically level the scores in stoppage time.

In the shoot-out Ashleigh McKinnon saved two spot kicks for the Glens before Beattie converted the decisive penalty.

Meanwhile, in this year's NIFL Danske Bank Women's Premiership, which got under way last month, Cliftonville were the early pacesetters with the Glens breathing down their necks.

The various NIWFA leagues were competitive in 2021, too.

Lisburn Ladies secured the title and promotion to the Premiership after an impressive campaign in the Championship. And Mid-Ulster Ladies also secured promotion to the top flight.

The NIWFA 2021 Electric Ireland league winners were:

Championship – **Lisburn Ladies**

Division 1 – **Larne Ladies**

Division 2 – **Lisburn Rangers Ladies**

Division 3 – **Camlough Rovers Ladies**

Division 4 – **Ballymoney United Ladies**

Division 5 – **Strabane Athletic Ladies**

And Lisburn Rangers Ladies were the 2021 PwC Super Cup winners.



Glentoran Women won the treble in 2021, including the Irish FA Women's Challenge Cup sponsored by Electric Ireland.

CLUB LICENSING AND FACILITIES

CLUB LICENSING

The Irish FA's 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.

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.

The 2021-22 licensing cycle, which concluded in April 2022, saw 55 licences in total awarded by the Irish FA Licensing Committee.

UEFA club licences were granted to Ballymena United, Cliftonville, Coleraine, Crusaders,

Dungannon Swifts, Glenavon, Glentoran, Larne, Linfield, Portadown and Warrenpoint Town, while the UEFA Women's Champions League licence was again secured by NIFL Women's Premiership champions Glentoran Women.

Eleven UEFA licences, one UEFA Women's Champions League licence, 12 Premiership licences, eight Promotion licences and 23 Championship licences were awarded for season 2022-23.

FACILITIES

In the 2021-22 financial year 26 grassroots projects throughout Northern Ireland benefited from £700,000 of DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) Grassroots Football Facilities funding. It was the first tranche of funding provided by Central Government as part of a £230 million investment into football facilities across the UK to level up access to quality sport provision.

The £700k capital grants funding package, delivered by the Irish FA, was implemented to help create a better grassroots football infrastructure foundation throughout Northern Ireland, improve the quality of community facilities, bring people together to enjoy playing sport in their local area, regenerate communities and enhance social cohesion.

The Grassroots Football Facilities Fund supported small capital works projects with an emphasis on increasing participation

in sport, increasing multi-sport facilities, directing a percentage of investment to areas of deprivation and delivering improved access to sports facilities for women, girls and other under-represented groups.

A range of projects were funded, including upgrades to pitches and changing rooms, seated stands, pathways/standing areas, bespoke equipment and storage facilities.

REFEREEING

Unlike the 2020-21 season, which started two months late due to Covid-19, it was back to business as usual for match officials at the start of the 2021-22 season.

Trevor Moutray, the Irish FA's Head of Refereeing, praised the consistent level of effective referee performances during an action-packed season in the NIFL Danske Bank Premiership.

He noted that the performances produced during the closing stages of the title race in particular meant that the back pages of Northern Ireland's newspapers were exclusively focused on the excitement of the battle for the Gibson Cup.

Moutray said he was equally pleased with how well the Bet McLean League Cup Final, the Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup Final and the NIFL European play-off games were officiated.

The association's Head of Refereeing acknowledged that more help and practical support was essential to ensure that match officials continue to improve on and to consistently maintain the good standards recently achieved.

More investment will be made in technology and new training and development approaches during the 2022-23 season to help support match officials.

The shadow of Covid-19 was always lurking in the background during the season and Moutray thanked all match officials for their continued resilience and determination to continue to officiate, often in challenging circumstances.

The 2021-22 season was an excellent period for referee recruitment, and with the recent publication of recruitment/training events for 2022-23, which includes a female only course, the expectation is that this upward trend will continue.

With severe Covid-19 restrictions now a fading memory, the hope for the forthcoming season is that match officials will continue to earn the respect and understanding for what every match official is: a vital component to every game of football played under the Irish FA's jurisdiction.



Victoria Finlay entered the history books earlier this month (May) when she became the first female referee from Northern Ireland to take part in a UEFA final tournament. The assistant referee from Co Tyrone was chosen to officiate at the Women's U17 Euro finals held in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

COACH EDUCATION

During the season the Coach Education team developed a new Coaching Pathway to include a suite of youth goalkeeping and fitness for football courses that will help develop and upskill specialist coaches within these areas.

In addition to the new courses the team have adjusted methodology, pedagogy and andragogy across all courses to align with those of the senior and youth international teams.

The 2021-22 Pro Diploma Group are currently undergoing their final educational block. Eight Irish League/senior amateur coaches are among the students along with some high profile former international players and coaches from across the world.

Former Northern Ireland international Chris Brunt and several other ex-Premier League stars are among them, including Luis Garcia (ex-Liverpool), Clint Hill and Richard Dunne (both ex-QPR), Paul Robinson (ex-Leeds United) and Steven Pienaar (ex-Everton).

The Coach Education team have introduced a UEFA B Goalkeeping Diploma for the first time.

To date they have completed three blocks of the course, which is being observed by UEFA with the aim of having it ratified and delivered annually.

The team have also just commenced the delivery of this year's UEFA A and B courses with online workshops delivered by Coach Education staff and external specialists.

Also this season they have been delivering a UEFA C Diploma across Northern Ireland. More than 70 coaches are taking part in 2022.

And the team delivered Northern Ireland's first ever female-only UEFA C Diploma course, with 20 coaches taking part including past and present international players.

The suite of courses on offer has expanded with a UEFA B Diploma goalkeeper course, the new UEFA C Diploma course and new Irish FA youth awards developed to allow coaches to extend their knowledge and skills in specialist areas.

And in conjunction with the JD Academy the team hosted a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) event at the National Stadium.

Tutor training is part of the mix, too. Development days have been held for coaches from the international youth teams along with JD Academy coaches and Talent ID staff.

In addition members of the team hosted a development week with JD Academy staff in Spain where the group visited La Liga clubs and academies. And training sessions, both online and face to face, have been run with Irish FA Foundation staff who deliver Grassroots Coach Education courses.

The Coach Education department has been engaged in developing a new Coach Education Learning Platform. The platform has enhanced the team's ability to educate coaches not just locally but across the world. Other Irish FA departments have also benefitted from the platform as they can engage and educate those involved within their programmes.

The Coach Education department has undergone a restructure this season. Sean-Paul Murray is now the Head of Department. He has been joined by Tommy Johnson, who has responsibility for the UEFA A course, and Michael Carvill (UEFA B course). Also now part of the team is Kevin Doherty, who is looking after Grassroots Coach Education.

The administration team includes Lorna Stewart (UEFA A, B and Pro) and Karen Chambers (Grassroots Coach Education). Nigel Best, the previous head of department, has taken up a role as Senior Coach Education Consultant until December 2022.

FOUNDATION - OVERVIEW

The Irish FA Foundation charity continued to work directly with thousands of people across Northern Ireland in 2021-22, promoting football for all and helping players, clubs and volunteers at grassroots level across the country to develop.

Staff continued to work with dozens of primary schools each week, providing specialist resources to help teachers, parents and children stay fit and active.

And the foundation also worked with hundreds of pupils in post-primary schools across Northern Ireland on a weekly basis, helping them with education and employability programmes.

Club and volunteer development saw strong engagement, with hundreds of clubs registering for webinars, while mentoring support was also offered. And there were several initiatives to help develop the amateur game.

The development of girls' and women's football continued apace, buoyed by the success of the senior international women's team.

Sporting Uniting Communities, a collaboration between the Irish FA, Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association and Ulster Rugby, engaged with 5300 participants across various programmes in 2021, its final year.

The legacy of the successful four-year project is that in the coming years, under the PEACE Plus project, the sporting bodies are aiming to continue to work collaboratively to bring people together using the unifying power of sport.

With support from partners the foundation continued to deliver lots of football programmes, including Small-Sided Games and Fun Football sessions as well as futsal. And disability football enjoyed plenty of expansion despite being hampered by Covid for most of 2021.

Ahead of the Game, the foundation's mental health programme for football clubs, performed strongly, while Fresh Start Through Sport, which works with young males and females aged 16-24 in Fresh Start areas across Northern Ireland who are at risk from paramilitarism and or organised crime, was also well received.

The foundation's outreach work also saw Stay Onside, the programme which uses football as a positive pathway to impact on the lives of those at risk of offending and creating safer communities in partnership with football, delivered across all prison establishments and in the community among young people and young adults at risk of offending.

HMP Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood College hosted programmes, while community programmes were run in Antrim, Ballyclare and Dungannon.

The Irish FA Foundation also has a new leader following the departure of Michael Boyd. Last month James Thompson took on the role of Director of Foundation Development at the Irish Football Association. Thompson has returned to Northern Ireland after spending almost a decade working and studying in Canada.

In the following pages you will find a snapshot of the work of the Irish FA Foundation on the ground in Northern Ireland.

For a more in-depth look at the Foundation's activities please view the Foundation Trustees' Report (for 2021). It is available on the Irish FA website.



McDONALD'S PROGRAMMES

Despite a break in the delivery of the programme due to the pandemic, the Irish FA Foundation doubled its efforts to both engage young people to play football and to meet its contractual obligations to the partnership with McDonald's.



Fun Football provides four one-hour sessions to introduce girls and boys (aged 5-8) to football in a safe and fun environment - in the hope of signposting the young players to local clubs.

Forty centres were co-ordinated across Northern Ireland in 2021 and successfully introduced 219 girls and 593 boys to football. The activity represented 3,248 contact hours.

And Fun Football centres welcomed a further 284 new footballers across 13 venues between March and May this year.

The aim for June and July is to increase the upper age limit of young players from eight to 11 years.

The McDonald's Small-Sided Games programme also delivered an increased opportunity approach as games were additionally scheduled in mid-week along with fixtures on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

A total of 70 venues hosted the no-recorded scores and no-league table format of games aimed at improving football abilities and

coaching skills for 1240 teams across Northern Ireland. Across the year 2174 girls aged 5-12 and 10,522 boys aged 5-12 enjoyed a safe, developmental and fun environment to enhance their sporting and health activities.

McDonald's recently celebrated the huge milestone of providing five million hours of free Fun Football to children in the UK a year ahead of its end-of-2022 goal, before vowing to offer 1.5 million more hours in 2022.

In Northern Ireland specifically more than 75,000 children have benefitted from 250,000 hours of coaching, games and fun.

2021 also marked the 30th anniversary of McDonald's in Northern Ireland, and to mark this significant milestone '30 Clubs for 30 Years' were recognised for the major impact that they have had on their local communities – be that on the lives of young people through Fun Football or through wider community initiatives.

McDONALD'S IRISH FA GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL AWARDS

The winners of the McDonald's Irish FA Grassroots Football Awards for 2021 were revealed in November at an awards ceremony in Belfast.

Hosted by Cool FM's Pete Snodden, the ceremony featured a raft of interviews with well-known footballing personalities, including Northern Ireland senior men's team manager Ian Baraclough and McDonald's Fun Football Ambassadors Pat Jennings and Casey Stoney.

Attendees at the event also heard messages of support from Junior Minister Gary Middleton MLA on behalf of the First Minister of Northern Ireland, while Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood and Irish FA chief executive Patrick Nelson both praised grassroots volunteers for their sterling work in developing football across Northern Ireland.

The annual McDonald's Irish FA Grassroots Football Awards, which celebrated 21 years in Northern Ireland in 2021, recognise the work and commitment of football clubs and volunteers who give up their time and make a long-lasting impact on young people and communities across Northern Ireland.

The 2021 winners in each category were:

- McDonald's Enniskillen – Football Restaurant of the Year
- Patricia McCullough (Ards Rangers, Co Down) – Football For All Award
- Ryleigh McComb (Valley Rangers, Co Down) – Young Volunteer of the Year
- Jahswill Emmanuel (Multi-Ethnic Sports & Culture, Belfast) – Volunteer of the Year
- Tristar Boys' FC (Derry-Londonderry) – Club of the Year
- Mark Emerson (Ballinamallard United, Co Fermanagh) – Wes Gregg Coach of the Year
- Hilbert Willis (Loughgall, Co Armagh) – People's Award for Outstanding Contribution to Grassroots Football



AMATEUR GAME

The Amateur Football Game Developer is continuing to work within all aspects of the amateur game across Northern Ireland in the UEFA Hattrick-funded role.

Communication continues with external stakeholders across leagues, councils and universities as well as with internal stakeholders.

Funding was successfully acquired from the Stadium Community Benefits Initiative (SCBI) to run a series of programmes and training specifically for the amateur game. Topics covered included unconscious bias, equality in sport, development planning, fundraising and sponsorship.

A course was staged in a bid to attract new referees to the amateur game by using futsal as an entry level to officiating. It attracted 16 participants.

There was also an NHS recreational programme where the developer linked in with Colin Glen Trust and Belfast Met to create recreational opportunities for NHS staff linked to local leagues. The programme was a big success with more than 150 taking part over two months, and funding has been successfully acquired to continue this from September.

Through SCBI internationally acclaimed author and speaker Professor Damian Hughes ran an online webinar entitled 'Building success in local sport'. It is currently available on the Irish FA's YouTube channel.

Leading on from successful pilots, a recreational programme and summer festival are set to run again this year and will become annual events linked to Ulster University. Further pilot programmes are planned for the year ahead.

The pilot alumni membership and retention programme is still running successfully with approximately 1400 taking part via two well established clubs and their communities. The programme is working well with the clubs personalising the scheme. They have added more than 20 localised incentives to ensure club and community buy-in to the programme.

Following continued investigation into the current provision and requirements within the amateur leagues structure, plus dialogue with other home nations/other sports, a pilot club registration programme including insurance scheme was successfully launched in futsal and the Carnbane leagues, providing £10 million public liability insurance at a fraction of the cost paid currently.

Feedback has been very positive and plans are in place to roll this out in a voluntary capacity for leagues for the 2022-23 season with full implementation for 2023-24.

Further work has also taken place into the provision of individual fit for purpose insurance to look after and support players at all levels of the amateur game.

After considerable research into the current provision, suppliers, other sports and other home nations, the 'shinty model' has been adopted and piloted within futsal where all players pay a registration fee and receive fit for purpose high quality, compulsory individual insurance cover, including total temporary disability payment, for £10 per player per year.

Partnerships have also been developed to ensure improved functionality of the Comet system to allow effective programme rollout and delivery to support players and reduce dropout.

A National Coaching Certificate specifically for the amateur game has been successfully devised and is awaiting rollout.

The minimum operating standard and the People and Clubs criteria for clubs across the amateur game has been successfully reviewed via consultation with stakeholders. The aspiration is to enhance the experience for all clubs and players at all levels.

VOLUNTEERING CELEBRATED

The inaugural Sports Inspire Awards ceremony took place at Belfast's Crowne Plaza Hotel in March this year - to recognise and celebrate the positive impact of volunteering.

The event was part of the Department for Communities programme Sport - A Home for Lifelong Volunteering, which is run by the Irish FA Foundation in conjunction with Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby.

Compered by the BBC's Thomas Niblock, in front of an audience of 200 people, the ceremony paid tribute to young volunteers - all aged between 16 and 24 - from each of the three sports who were commended for 50, 100 and 200 hours of volunteering at their clubs.

Keynote speakers included Irish FA Board member Cheryl Lamont CBE, Diarmaid Marsden (Ulster GAA) and Eliza Downey (Ulster Rugby), who reflected on their own volunteering stories and the valuable contribution that volunteering has made to their lives, followed by a panel session involving Stevie Watson (Irish FA), Aimee Hughes (Ulster GAA) and Emily Millar (Ulster Rugby).

Earlier this month DfC agreed a two-year funding extension for Sport - A Home for Lifelong Volunteering, which supports the three sports governing bodies by funding two full-time posts in each organisation.

The programme helps to improve club and volunteering infrastructures through the sports governing bodies working together on a series of programmes.

In addition to the Sports Inspire Awards these include inter-organisational volunteering opportunities, separate and joint youth forums, schools roadshows, joint webinars on relevant club and volunteer development topics and development of policies such as a Volunteer Charter and an Inclusion Charter.

Through the programme DfC provides funding for each sport for a Club and Community Development Officer and a Volunteer Development and Policy Officer.

Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood, Ulster GAA President Oliver Galligan and Ulster Rugby President Gary Leslie helped to launch the Sports Inspire Awards.



GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Girls' and women's football is growing at an incredible rate, undoubtedly buoyed by the success of the Northern Ireland senior women's team.

More than 1800 young girls across Northern Ireland were introduced to football during 2021-22 through the Playmakers programme from UEFA and Disney.

Using Disney's world famous storytelling and inspired by research showing the positive role of storytelling in helping children take up sport, Playmakers aims to increase the number of girls taking part in physical activity and to kickstart a lifelong love of football.

The Irish FA Foundation has been rolling out the programme to kids aged five to eight – primary one to primary four (Year 1 to Year 4) - across Northern Ireland since April 2021.

The foundation commenced year two of the programme with the recruitment and training of an additional 14 Playmaker deliverers, from club coaches to teachers and casual coaches working within the Irish FA Foundation.

The Electric Ireland Shooting Stars programme also continued to grow. With an additional age group, the foundation now provides opportunities for girls aged 4-11 to fall in love with football.

More than 30 school festivals were delivered to nearly 3000 young girls getting their first taste of Shooting Stars in 2021-22.



Around 400 participants took part in the 24-week programme at 15 centres across Northern Ireland.

The Shooting Stars experience was also enhanced for participants by having senior international players coaching and visiting the centres, which in turn generated great support for the players at international matches from the young fan base.

The foundation currently operates five girls-only Small-Sided Games (SSG) centres.

The centres are thriving and have seen a huge increase in the number of registered teams over the past few years. There has been a 75% increase in the number of teams over the past three years.

Over 120 girls' teams are now playing in the Belfast City, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough, Lisburn and Castlereagh City, Derry City and Strabane District and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon District council areas. And that figure does not include clubs and teams playing in mixed programmes in Northern Ireland's 11 council areas.

The plan each year is to strengthen the existing centres and expand to introduce girls-only centres in more areas, making football easily accessible for clubs.

In just three years the number of teams has grown from 69 in four girls-only centres to 121 in five centres.

There are now 227 girls' teams overall in mixed and girls-only programmes – and 2224 players. Some 53% of girls-only teams play in the five girls-only Small-Sided Games centres

Coaching courses where only women and girls take part are also proving to be more and more popular. Female-only National Coaching Certificate (NCC) courses attracted more than 100 participants in 2021-22.

DISABILITY FOOTBALL

There were lots of highlights within disability football in Northern Ireland in 2021-22.

These included the launch of an Irish FA Foundation Disability League for teams with players between the ages of seven and 14. The teams were split into two age bands (7-10 and 11-14) and 15 teams participated in the first season.

Six more clubs/groups are now providing regular participation opportunities for those with a disability across Northern Ireland. They are St Malachy's OB, Armagh City, Lisburn Distillery, Wellington Rec, Hanwood Centre and Antrim/Newtownabbey Disability FC.

In November a blitz organised as part of the Irish FA Powerchair Football Development League proved to be a big hit with the participants.

Eighteen players from the Trailblazers (Belfast), Lightning (Lisburn) and Devenish Warriors (Fermanagh) PFCs took part in the event. The players were split into four teams and a round-robin tournament saw six games taking place.

Earlier this month Northern Ireland's Cerebral Palsy team took part in the CP Football World Cup organised by the International Federation of CP Football (IFCPF).

Alan Crooks' team found the going tough in Spain and finished 15th overall. In the group stages they were defeated by eventual winners Ukraine as well as Argentina (8th overall) and the host nation (10th overall).

At the start of this year it was announced that the Northern Ireland Powerchair Football team will have to wait a further year to compete at the Federation Internationale de Powerchair Football Association (FIPFA) World Cup finals.

The 10-team tournament will be held in Australia in October 2023 rather than this autumn. It was the second postponement of the latest Powerchair World Cup finals. They were originally due to be held in Sydney in 2021 but had to be pushed back due to the Covid pandemic.

In April Northern Ireland's Powerchair Development Squad produced some fine performances on their way to finishing runners-up in the European Powerchair Football Association Home Nations Cup.

Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex in Newtownards was the venue for the international tournament in which Northern Ireland faced England, Scotland and Republic of Ireland.

The young Northern Ireland team were defeated by a classy England side 4-0 in the final, however in the group stages they defeated Scotland 3-1 and drew 1-1 with the Republic as well as losing 3-0 to the eventual winners.

Earlier this month the senior squad took part in the European Powerchair Football Association Home Nations Invitational Tournament.

In their first competitive outing since qualifying for the World Cup - at the European Championships in Finland in 2019 - they finished third overall in the tournament, which was also staged at the Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex.

In the group stages they narrowly lost 2-1 to both Scotland and the Republic, and 3-1 against eventual winners England, however they defeated the Scots 2-0 in the third/fourth place play-off.



The Northern Ireland Powerchair team with coach Michael Hilland and Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood.

COACHING IN SCHOOLS

The Department of Education-funded Schools Sports Programme – it is run by the Irish FA Foundation and Ulster GAA – was almost back up to full speed for the 2021-22 school year.



After being hampered by Covid during the previous school year, the programme had a 92% delivery rate from September until December. And in the first five months of 2022 it was running at 90%.

Let Them Play Officers supported teachers in four out of the five areas of the PE curriculum - athletics, dance, games and gymnastics - and delivered 220 classes per week in 50 schools to 5825 pupils (2898 boys, 2927 girls) from September until the mid-term break in February.

The figures from mid-February until now (end of May) were 240 classes per week in 51 schools to 5639 pupils (2837 boys, 2802 girls).

In partnership with Safefood, the Irish FA's safe and healthy eating partner, LTPOs delivered healthy know-how for active kids sessions to pupils who participate in the Sports Programme.

A total of 204 sessions based around the importance of a healthy lifestyle were delivered in 2021-22.

They focused on increased sleep, hydration, child-sized portions, healthy food choice, limiting screen time and minimising intake of high fat/sugar/salt foods. Safefood content has become part of the core messages within all Sports Programme sessions.

In addition PE sessions focusing on topics such as anti-bullying, healthy lifestyle choices and resilience were provided specifically during relevant awareness weeks.

Themed sessions were held in October leading up to World Mental Health Day (220 sessions), in November for Anti-Bullying Week (220), and this month for Mental Health Awareness Week (240 sessions).

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

The academic year 2021-22 was another good year for the Education and Employability Programme. Two new staff members were added in September, which has helped to develop and grow the programme.

The programme was delivered in 22 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational settings, throughout the country, including Ashfield Boys' High (Belfast), Belfast Met, Northern Regional College, Belfast Boys' Model, Larne High School, St Malachy's Grammar (Belfast), Ulster University Magee (Derry-Londonderry) and De La Salle College (Belfast).

A total of 522 students participated in an element of the programme, with 158 students taking part in the full programme from September until this month (May). There were also 23 teachers upskilled as part of the programme.

As with most years the aim is to provide students with real life opportunities to gain valuable experience to go along with qualifications.

During Halloween 2021 and Easter 2022 more than 20 students worked on Irish FA football camps in different parts of the country - and they came from several different schools. The aim is to build on this going in to this summer.

Boys' Model and NRC Ballymena ran festival days for primary schools with support from the Irish FA Foundation. They were staged to give young players an opportunity to play and the young student coaches a chance to gain more experience.

The programme continued for a fifth year in some key schools and colleges, including Ashfield Boys' High, Larne High, NRC and Belfast Met.

Delivery of the programme began in some schools for the first time and there have been productive meetings to further develop the programme in more new schools during the remainder of 2022.

The foundation continues to work with Open College Network and deliver its courses. It delivered an OCN in Football Administration to more than 30 participants working in clubs throughout Northern Ireland.

PLACEMENT PROGRAMME

Due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19 the placement programme was running below capacity.

Opportunities for young people were limited throughout the year, although staff were still able to offer students some opportunities.

The ongoing placement programme with Ulster University Jordanstown got up and running, with 13 students out working in different departments within the foundation. And year-long university placements are due to start in September.



More than 500 students and over 20 teachers (seen here taking a first aid course) benefitted from the Education and Employability Programme

CLUB AND VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

The People and Clubs programme received financial support from Sport NI's Governing Body Support Programme (GBSP) in 2021-22 to look at implementing initiatives that were set out in the People and Clubs Development Plan in 2019.



Since April this year the financial support has been coming from Sport NI's Governing Body Transition Programme (GBTP).

Using data from the development plan, and taking the impact of the Covid pandemic into consideration, the need for development in the following areas was identified: options to learn more around club and people development through online modules; opportunities to engage with various media resources, such as videos, webinars, and podcasts; access to a range of best practice templates for policies and procedures within clubs; enhancement of the People and Clubs accreditation – making it even more relevant for clubs across Northern Ireland.

The People and Clubs programme has been delivering on a Digital Transformation Project. The foundation, with funding provided through Sport NI in March 2021, aims to support clubs via improved and relevant online resources.

The online platform currently being developed will include e-learning modules, an accreditation portal, videos, podcasts, club templates and webinar recordings.

It aims to be a 'one stop shop' for all of the resources needed by needed for club volunteers, governance support and development.

Nine People and Clubs webinars have already taken place. They covered positive engagement with parents, developing club culture, chairperson training, recruiting and retaining club volunteers, unconscious bias, inclusion activities, maximising the people in your club, equality in sport and coaching behaviours in female football participation.

Various guest speakers delivered the sessions - and more than 300 clubs registered for the webinars.

Since Sport NI's ClubMark ceased in March 2021, the People and Clubs accreditation has been refined to a one-level award, making it more achievable, attractive and relevant to clubs. It is available via the online portal. A total of 26 clubs have achieved the accreditation to date.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Irish FA Foundation's community relations work reached all corners of Northern Ireland in 2021-22.

The foundation's racism awareness and equality module, Everybody's Game, was more popular than ever, reaching clubs, communities, schools and academies as well as prisons as a module within the Stay Onside programme. A total of 91 workshops were held in 2021, attracting 2276 participants. To date this year 26 workshops have been held.

Common Ground, the foundation's anti-sectarianism delivery, supporting good relations within sport and highlighting both the challenges and improvements within football and communities, was also well received. During 2021 a total of 41 workshops were staged, with 934 participants. To date this year 14 workshops have been held.

The Connect programme expanded, too. It offers good relations and educational modules to increase diversity and mutual understanding through football, and it also offers positive pathways into the game via volunteering, refereeing and coaching qualifications.

Twelve programmes were staged in 2021, attracting 389 participants, while this year five programmes have been delivered so far.

A central part of the build-up to UEFA Super Cup 2021 - it was staged at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in August - was the UEFA Super Cup Trophy Tour.

The foundation's Community Relations Officer led a team of volunteers who toured the country with the official UEFA Super Cup trophy to promote the game between the winners of the previous season's UEFA Champions League (Chelsea) and UEFA Europa League (Villarreal).

On the day prior to the UEFA Super Cup clash, the foundation partnered with UEFA Foundation, Rio Ferdinand Foundation and BT Sport to stage the first ever Hope Cup.

Players aged between 14 and 16 from across Northern Ireland were selected through their participation in Irish FA Foundation and Rio Ferdinand Foundation programmes to play in the Hope Cup match at Belfast's Seaview Stadium.

Run as part of BT's ongoing Hope United campaign, which aims to combat online hate, it featured players of many different nationalities, religions and cultures, and the game itself focused on unity and inclusivity.

It was recorded by BT Sport for broadcast and shown prior to the UEFA Super Cup live coverage.

The Hope Cup will now be an annual event with more activation with partners to come.

Also in 2021-22, through UEFA funding, the foundation reached out to the refugee and migrant community within Northern Ireland to offer upskilling opportunities and education.

The programme has empowered communities within Belfast, Craigavon and Omagh, bringing together refugees to participate in regular football training. In addition participants can learn new skills through coaching courses and refereeing courses - and even sessions covering DIY and healthy eating.

Pathways to employment are being offered through the Community Relations Ambassadors Programme.

Participants who have excelled within programmes such as Connect have been subsequently trained to deliver educational modules and upskilled to coach squads of players.

As part of a 30-month project called Sport Together the foundation is now working with various groups across Europe to develop learning and opportunities for under-represented groups in post conflict regions.

And in partnership with Andy Allen Veterans Support NI, the foundation has offered a programme to veterans supporting pathways into playing, coaching, refereeing and educational modules, supporting veterans from Derry-Londonderry, Belfast, Lisburn and Craigavon.

In addition the foundation continued to support residents who live close to the National Football Stadium through various projects, including an artwork initiative, putting on a Christmas dinner for 60 pensioners and funding a youth ball.



SPORT UNITING COMMUNITIES



Sport Uniting Communities



The Sport Uniting Communities project was a collaboration between the Irish Football Association, Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association and Ulster Rugby which aimed to promote peace and reconciliation.

In 2021, its final year, Sport Uniting Communities engaged with 5300 participants across various programmes.

In September the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visited City of Derry Rugby Club to see SUC in action.

The project had an opportunity to showcase how sport can be used to promote meaningful, purposeful and sustained contact between individuals from different backgrounds – particularly across the religious divide.

The Royal couple watched young people taking part in some of the activities on offer through Sport Uniting Communities and even had a go themselves.

2021 was the fourth and final year of the project. Over those four years it reached 20,500 people with some key outputs.

These included:

- Utilised the Game of 3 Halves initiative (where young people got to try football, rugby and Gaelic games) across the region with 3673 young people taking part.
- Established a Volunteer Development Programme for 337 volunteers.
- An Engagement and Participation Programme with the ethnically diverse attracted 102 participants.
- Delivered a Youth Leadership Programme to 216 young people.
- Staged 35 Club Development Sport for Peace Days.
- Organised 20 'Have a Go' Days (where young people got to try football, rugby and Gaelic games).

Sport Uniting Communities was supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

In the coming years, under the PEACE Plus project, the Irish Football Association, Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association and Ulster Rugby are aiming to continue to work collaboratively to bring people together using the unifying power of sport.



The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visited City of Derry Rugby Club to see Sporting Uniting Communities in action – and they also took part in a training session.



SCHOOLS' FOOTBALL

Schools' football competitions returned this year with more than 10,000 boys and girls participating in primary, post primary and further education competitions.

The highlights of the 2021-22 school year were the Danske Bank Schools' Cup Final, in which St Columb's College were electric, the Electric Ireland cup finals for girls' teams and the Translink Schools' Gold Cup.

A new Further Education U20 Cup competition was also introduced with the final being held at Inver Park in Larne.

Off the pitch the Irish FA's School Quality Mark is now a major part of schools' football with more than 100 schools achieving the accreditation.

Recently Lagan College in Belfast and King's Park Primary in Lurgan became only the 12th and 13th schools in Northern Ireland respectively to achieve the association's Gold School Quality Mark.

The Northern Ireland Schools' FA hosted its National Primary Schools Finals (7-a-side) earlier this month with regional winners from across Northern Ireland competing in small, medium, large and girls categories.

In the small schools section Sunnylands Primary School from Carrickfergus defeated St John's Primary School (Coleraine) on penalties, while St Matthew's (Belfast) were back to back winners of the medium schools trophy thanks to a 1-0 win over Moyallon Primary School from Co Armagh.

The large schools section saw Co Down's Kilkeel Primary School defeat St Paul's (Belfast) 3-0 and in the girls' final Lurgan's King's Park overcame Co Armagh rivals Orchard County from Annaghmore, near Portadown.



SCHOOLS COMPETITIONS 2021-22

Primary Schools Cups winners:

Small Schools - Sunnylands; Medium Schools - St Matthew's; Large Schools - Kilkeel; Girls' Teams - King's Park.

Post Primary Finals:

U12 Cup - St Malachy's College (Belfast) 3-1 Lurgan Junior High; U14 Cup - St Malachy's 1-1 St Columb's College (Derry-Londonderry) - St Malachy's won on penalties; U15 Small Schools - Castledearg High School 5-3 St Patrick's (Dungiven); U16 - Omagh CBGS 1-1 Boys' Model (Belfast) - Omagh CBGS won on penalties; U16 Plate - Rathmore Grammar School (Dunmurry) 6-1 Laurelhill Community College (Lisburn); U18 Danske Bank Schools' Cup - St Columb's College 5-1 St Louis Grammar (Ballymena); U18 Plate - St Mary's CBGS (Belfast) 1-0 Portadown College.

Translink Schools' Gold Cup:

Overall winners - St Columb's College; U13 winners - Boys' Model; U15 winners - St Columb's College; U17 winners - St Columb's College.

Electric Ireland Girls' Junior Cup winners: Dominican College (Belfast).

Electric Ireland Girls' Senior Cup winners: Holy Cross College (Strabane).

Danske Bank Girls' 11-a-side Cup winners: Dominican College.

Further Education Futsal Cup winners: NIFL Academy (Hanwood).

Further Education U20 Cup winners: Northern Regional College (Coleraine).

St Columb's College celebrate their success in the Danske Bank Schools' Cup final.

COMMERCIAL

With responsibility across a wide range of activities, from partnerships, ticketing and hospitality to stadium tours, merchandise and fan experience, the past year has been both productive and successful for the association's Sales and Marketing Team.

After closed stadiums throughout the pandemic the members of the team were delighted to see fans returning to the stands in their numbers throughout 2021-22 across both the men's and women's international game, with sold out fixtures across the board.

This year they successfully launched a nine-match campaign package for the upcoming UEFA Nations League fixtures and qualifiers for Euro 2024 while also selling out the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park for the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 qualifier against England.

They were proud to support partners to activate a range of successful campaigns, including BT's Hope United, Electric Ireland's Game Changers and McDonald's Fun Football to name just a few.

With the McDonald's partnership now in its 20th year, the team were delighted to announce a new four-year partnership which will help to bring the award-winning Fun Football programme to more kids than ever before by removing the barriers to participation and ensuring every child, regardless of their gender, disability, ability or background, can try football for the first time.

Both Staffline and fonaCAB renewed their partnerships for the Family Stand and Junior Cups respectively while also becoming official partners to the senior women's team.

Onecom were announced as the naming rights partner to the Pat Jennings Lounge in the stadium, while last month (April) EE became the new title partner for the senior women's team, with EE's logo appearing on the team's training kit.

As part of the partnership EE also announced it would be supporting the creation of 200 bursaries for women across Northern Ireland to complete their National Coaching Certificate over the next two years.

To help improve the customer journey for those booking on to Irish FA Foundation programmes, the team partnered with local start-up Pitchbooking.com to create a bespoke booking platform. They also announced Safefood as the association's new healthy eating partner with teaching tools being rolled out across Foundation programmes in schools across the country.

With preparations well under way for Northern Ireland's debut in the UEFA Women's Euros this summer, the team successfully launched the first Northern Ireland kit designed solely for the senior women's team. Created using recycled materials, and made with Parley Ocean Plastic, it provided a fantastic opportunity to showcase the association's strategic focus on sustainability.

The Sales and Marketing Team also continued to focus efforts on renewing and expanding official licences to meet consumer demand and launched a new range of headwear through New Era, brought back some retro shirts through Score Draw that were fans' favourites and expanded the range of novelty items with Foco and Turnstile.

With a number of exciting new partnerships and activations coming soon, the team are optimistic for the year ahead and confident in supporting the association's new five-year corporate strategy.

COMMUNICATIONS

The communications team is responsible for enhancing and protecting the reputation of the Irish Football Association and it does this by delivering a broad portfolio of work, from providing engaging digital and website content and event management to producing publications and media relations.

The team tells the story of the work done across the Irish FA to promote, foster and develop football for all in Northern Ireland.

In 2021-22 it did this by delivering several workstreams, including video production, editing, graphic design, editorial, managing growing social media platforms for the association and national teams as well as keeping the Irish FA website fresh and dynamic. Media relations, public relations and the production of publications were part of the mix, too.

Social media channels are a vital communications touchpoint and numbers have grown across the association's nine platforms (Irish FA and Northern Ireland teams) with an audience of more than 660,000.

Instagram has grown by 15% and TikTok more than doubled from 49,792 to 129,000 followers. Other established channels like Facebook and Twitter are growing steadily. The latter recently broke the 100,000-mark for the Northern Ireland team.

When it comes to international teams, enhanced coverage of the senior women's team continues to pay off with more positive online engagement than ever. Following on from well received in-depth coverage of the UEFA Women's Euro play-off success, the communications team extended their coverage of the team during FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 qualifiers, home and away.

On the senior men's team front, the 2021 summer tour received extensive coverage as well as subsequent FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying games, including the memorable night when European champions Italy were held to a 0-0 draw in Belfast. The comms team then picked things up again in March with the two friendlies against Luxembourg and Hungary.

During the year the communications team also acted as an 'on the road' bureau for media unable to travel to away games due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Over the past 12 months output has included a new focus on live streaming. The association screened development age international games, senior women's friendlies and all Irish FA-run cup finals with the exception of the Irish Cup (BBC). The live coverage helped boost YouTube audience numbers with Northern Ireland's YT channel netting a 54% increase in subscribers.

On the domestic competition front in-depth coverage of the Irish Cup was provided across the Irish FA's growing social media channels. Members of the comms team also reported the results of every domestic cup game as well as delivering match reports and photos.

The UEFA Super Cup was a night to remember and a break from the norm for the Irish FA's social channels. Chelsea and Villarreal's showdown helped boost key metrics like post reach, likes and video views. The team delivered content across video, editorial, graphics and social to help mark what was a special occasion for the Irish FA and Northern Ireland.

Support for the sales and marketing department has increased significantly. There was delivery on several content streams to support the association's sponsors and partners including set-piece videos, editorial, photography and content for email marketing.

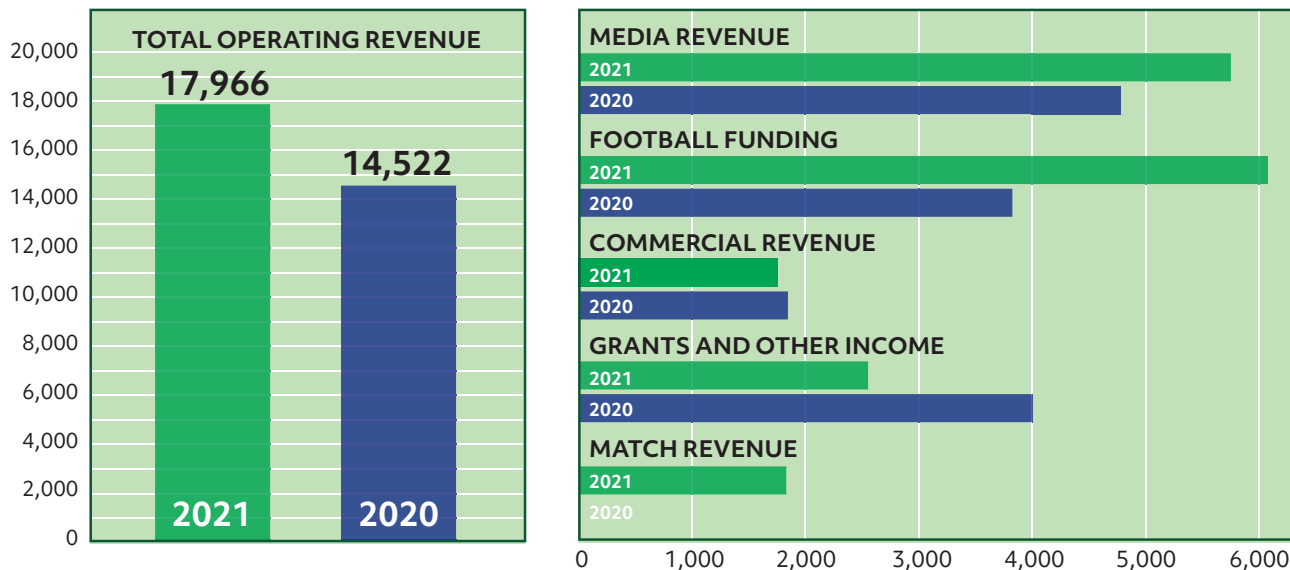
The comms team also supported the work of the Foundation by promoting all aspects of its work, including Stay Onside, Ahead of the Game, Futsal, Shooting Stars, Holiday Camps, Safeguarding and much, much more.



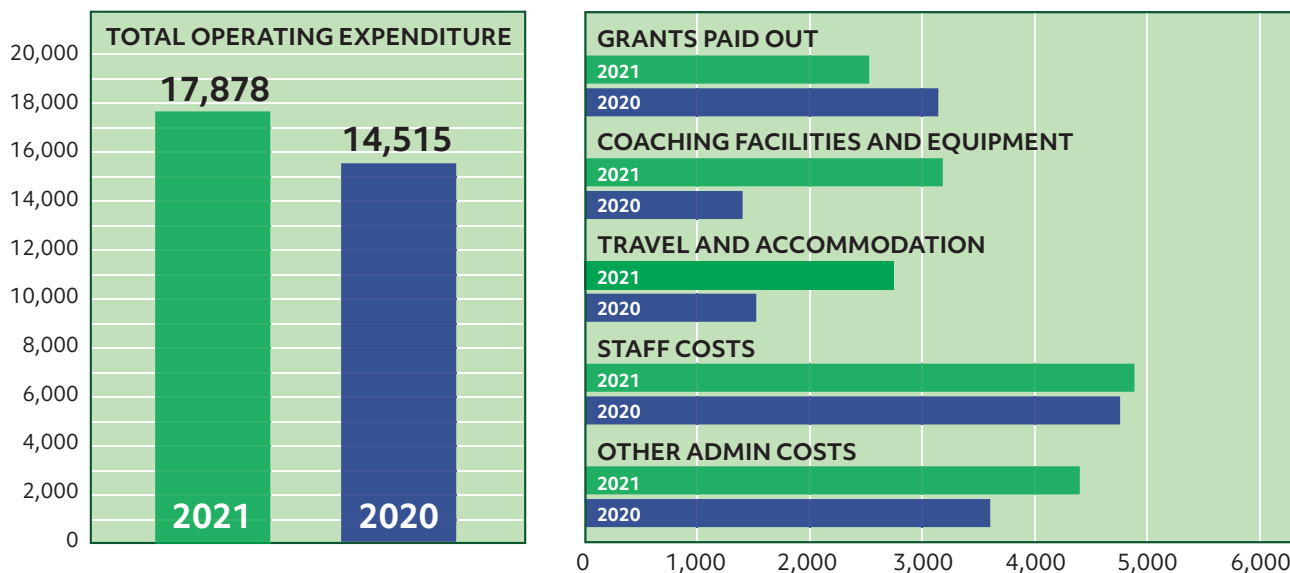
FINANCE

For the year ended 31 December 2021 the Irish FA had total revenue of £18.0m and total expenditure of £17.9m.

The main categories of revenue are analysed as follows:



The main categories of expenditure are analysed as follows:



The Irish FA recorded a trading profit of £88k for the year ended 31 December 2021 versus a trading profit of £8k for the year ended 31 December 2020. The result of foreign exchange movements and investment valuations was an increase of £523k in 2021 while it was an increase of £100k in 2020.

The final net result for financial year 2021 was a profit of £257k compared to a profit of £121k for the previous year.

Cash balances at 31 December 2021 totalled £7.3m (2020: £5.0m).

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



FINANCE

Statement of total comprehensive income for all Irish FA activities

for the year ended 31 December 2021

	2021 £'000	2020 £'000
Total revenue	17,966	14,522
Cost of sales	(14,605)	(10,839)
Gross profit	3,361	3,683
Net administrative expenses	(3,273)	(3,675)
Trading profit	88	8
Other gains - net	523	100
Operating profit	611	108
Income from other fixed asset investments	2	1
Interest (payable)/receivable and similar income	(6)	(11)
Profit before taxation	607	97
Tax on profit	(350)	24
Profit for the financial year	257	121
Total comprehensive income for the year	257	121

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.



FINANCE

Consolidated balance sheet for all Irish FA activities

at 31 December 2021

	2021 £'000	2020 £'000
Fixed assets		
Intangible assets	169	161
Tangible assets	33,685	33,513
Investments	5,319	4,835
	39,173	38,509
Current assets		
Inventory	13	13
Debtors	6,170	4,684
Cash at bank and in hand	7,250	4,958
	13,433	9,655
amounts falling due within one year	(13,140)	(11,805)
Net current liabilities	293	(2,150)
Total assets less current liabilities	39,466	36,359
amounts falling due after more than one year	(28,038)	(25,538)
Provisions for liabilities	(840)	(490)
Net assets	10,588	10,331
Reserves		
Investment revaluation reserve	3,689	3,204
Profit and loss account	6,899	7,127
Total reserves	10,588	10,331

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 which can be viewed at www.irishfa.com



Stephen Martin (Chairperson)

Date: 21 April 2022



Conrad Kirkwood (President)

Date: 21 April 2022

BELFAST 2021



Irish Football Association

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