

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



ACTIVITY
REPORT
2022-2023

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The Irish Football Association's Activity Report 2022-23 was compiled, edited and written by Nigel Tilson. It was designed by Norman Boyd.



PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

It is refreshing to see a new name on the Gibson Cup and my congratulations go to Larne FC on their title success in the NIFL Premiership which reflects their progressive approach.

I should also like to congratulate national competition winners in 2022-23: Crusaders (Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup); Crumlin Star (McComb's Coach Travel Intermediate Cup); Dergview Reserves (fonaCAB Craig Stanfield Junior Cup); Glentoran Women (Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup) and Ballinamallard United Youth (Harry Cavan Youth Cup). My thanks goes to the various committees and staff who ensure that those competitions run well.

Growing participation is one of the pillars in our Roadmap for Football strategy. The success of the senior women's team has not only led to an increase in the number of women's teams but has also produced larger attendances at women's internationals and NIFL Women's Premiership games. More importantly a new generation of children are being inspired to take up the game.

The Northern Ireland Football League, of course, also runs the domestic top level men's game – and it is experiencing increases in the number of spectators attending those matches, too.

Both the Bet McLean League Cup final and the Irish FA's Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup final were supported by numbers which improved on the previous year. This greater interest in the game here is reflected also in bigger television audiences.

Internationally I was delighted at the progress made by the senior women's team.

Being in St Mary's Stadium in Southampton when Julie Nelson scored Northern Ireland's first goal at a major women's tournament is the highlight of my presidency to date.

The President congratulates Michael O'Neill on his return to the role of manager of the Northern Ireland senior men's team.



PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION



Having fun at a fan zone in Southampton during the Women's Euros.

The Euros were made even more special by the unique bond between our supporters and the players. It made our fans a firm favourite with everyone, and I enjoyed helping at the fan zone where I had the chance to chat to many of them. Home and abroad our fans of both women's and men's international football are superb.

I continue to try to visit as many places as possible to get an insight into the many different aspects of the game in Northern Ireland. The power of football is impressive.

The Irish FA's role is not just an interventionist one. Its role is to enable volunteers to sustain the delivery of programmes into the future.

Sometimes it is important to bring the Irish FA's diverse range of programmes to bear all at once on one issue.

I was saddened and outraged at the shooting of a senior police officer in Omagh that affected Beragh Swifts and Tummery Athletic. However, the response from the Irish FA in supporting those communities was swift, well executed, diverse and sustained.



The President with graduates of the 2022 Female Football Leadership Programme, which is run by the Irish FA Foundation and sponsored by Electric Ireland.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

The Irish FA's various programmes continue to make lives better in every community.

Small-Sided Games centres and holiday football camps reach out to huge numbers of children. Stay Onside remains a vital cog in the rehabilitation of offenders. Disability teams are becoming more commonplace at clubs rather than being the exception.

Our Female Football Leaders Programme is entering its 10th year – it continues to deliver talented groups of women who are changing football for the better. And it has been such a success that an elite version of the programme has been established.

I was also thrilled to see the enthusiasm of participants at a female-only Level 1 coaching course in Coleraine.

In addition association staff work with refugees on several different schemes, including training coaches, and they play an invaluable part in their integration into communities.

In short the Irish FA aims to promote, foster and develop football for all.

I am a volunteer. I had my interest piqued at a relatively early age and volunteering has provided me with so many opportunities.

Football can provide those opportunities every day for people across Northern Ireland. I have been fortunate to meet many volunteers, to see their work and to celebrate it with them. I never cease to be amazed at their dedication.

We live in a more diverse society and throughout 2022-23 I have seen that variety bring new ideas and a new enthusiasm to football. I encourage each of you to volunteer a little as the sum of those contributions can be transformational.

In the year ahead there is the challenge of bringing capital funding from government into clubs and to help deliver a national training centre. Funding is vital to support our clubs to continue to make the positive contribution to life here which seldom grabs the headlines but makes so many lives better.



Northern Ireland defender Paddy McNair was presented with his 50th cap by the President before the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifier against Finland back in March. The presentation of 50th caps to Paddy, Craig Cathcart, Josh Magennis and Shane Ferguson was delayed due to Covid.

I wish the Powerchair team every success when they make the long journey to Australia for the World Cup in October. Their dedication is inspirational and Patrick Cumiskey's recognition as Disability Footballer of the Year was richly deserved.

The senior men's team benefited from a favourable draw for the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifiers and I am looking forward to the remaining games in the campaign.

More importantly I am looking forward to a year in which the power of football makes life in Northern Ireland even better.

Conrad Kirkwood

President
Irish Football Association

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

As the sun sets on another season of football in Northern Ireland, we can note with some relief that two seasons have now been completed in full since Covid threw all of our plans, in football and in life, up in the air.



At the top of the domestic game the engraver of the famous Gibson Cup has had to learn a new name after Larne took the title of NIFL Danske Bank Premiership champions for the first time in their 134-year history.

Many congratulations are due to everyone at the club, from Kenny Bruce as owner, Gareth Clements the chairman, Tiernan Lynch the manager and, of course, all of the players.

The club's journey over the past five years has been positive for the town, the domestic game and for our country and I'm sure it's not over yet.

Familiarity was the word which came to me as I considered the Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup this season.

Although 126 teams entered the competition back in September, the two gladiators who appeared on cup final day were the same ones as last year, Crusaders and Ballymena United.

Last season's 'tense finale' scriptwriters abandoned us on the day though as Crusaders sailed to a 4-0 victory.

Other domestic competitions will be given their due prominence elsewhere in this document, however I want to highlight in my report the Danske Bank Schools' Cup.

Since we redeveloped the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in the middle of the last decade it has been our ambition to move all of our showpiece finals to the stadium to give players who have made it to the final of their respective competitions a fabulous day out.

This year we managed to achieve this with the first Schools' Cup Final being played at the stadium. Integrated College Dungannon ran out the winners in an excellent game against St Columb's College played in front of 2000 spectators. This level of interest bodes well for future finals.



Paul Heatley celebrates scoring the fourth and final goal in this season's Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup Final.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

In the international sphere, pride of place in this historic season goes to our senior women's team who made their debut at a major final tournament in the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 held in England.

Although we didn't pick up any points in our group games against Norway, Austria and host country England, our squad raised the bar in terms of expectations for women's football and paved the way for young girls to achieve even more in the future.

A special mention goes to Julie Nelson who scored our first ever goal in a final tournament. Like Gareth McAuley, who scored our first goal at a men's Euros as one of the 'Kings of Lyon',

Julie is a centre back from Larne, so it was probably preordained that she would get on the scoresheet!

Senior men's international football over the past year started with a tough quadruple header last June in the UEFA Nations League where we only picked up two points from 12 on offer and as such landed ourselves in a relegation fight.

Four games in June isn't a simple proposition for even the biggest nations but this was necessitated by the decision to move the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 to November and December.

Julie Nelson made history at the Women's Euros by scoring Northern Ireland's first goal at a major women's tournament.



CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

Whilst the World Cup itself was generally agreed to be a success, and the final was one of the best in living memory, the impact on the international calendar was severe and it is hoped that the schedule shift will not happen again in future editions.

The normal October and November international windows were scrapped for the season so we only got to play two games in the autumn, in September, the highlight of which was a last minute winner from Josh Magennis at home to Kosovo which saved us from a UEFA Nations League relegation play-out match.

We changed both senior international managers during the season.

Ian Baraclough left at the end of October and this paved the way for the return of Michael O'Neill in December after three years away.

Michael was signed up on a five-and-a-half year contract and his immediate task was to prepare for the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifiers which began in March.

With a win and a defeat in the opening two games for most of the key teams in our group, the competition itself has tightened to an eight-game set of qualifiers now and it should be an exciting road to Germany.

Kenny Shiels left the association in January after just over three years at the helm of our senior women's team. His replacement should be named in time for the July friendly window in advance of next season's inaugural UEFA Nations League competition for senior women's teams.

During the season Aaron Hughes joined the association in the role of technical director. Aaron brings to this role the professionalism and insistence on high standards he developed during almost 20 years as a top level professional playing in England, Scotland, Australia and India, not forgetting his collection of 112 senior Northern Ireland caps.

Aaron's remit is to bring those standards to bear across the elite performance parts of our business, male and female, from the academies all the way to the senior squads.

This year's U18 Schools' Cup Final between Integrated College Dungannon (winners) and St Columba's College at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park attracted 2000 fans.





He will work across all squads and with all managers/coaches to ensure consistency of message and approach, and together with Head of Elite Development Andy Waterworth sits on our Senior Leadership Team to ensure that football has its place in all conversations as we try to take the association forward with our strategy 'A Roadmap for Football', which was launched in January 2022.

By the time readers study this report at the end of the 2023-2024 season, we will know if Northern Ireland has been named as one of the joint hosts of UEFA Euro 2028.

The hosting decision will be taken at a special sitting of the UEFA Executive Committee in Switzerland this coming October and the 2028 hosts will either be Turkey or the groundbreaking coalition between ourselves, England, Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Bringing a part of the world's third largest sporting tournament to Belfast just 30 years after the signing of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement will be something few people would have dreamed of or considered.

Getting to this point in the project has required tremendous amounts of co-operation with a wide range of partners,

including our fellow football associations, the five governments involved and the Gaelic Athletic Association, and we hope for a positive outcome in October.

Finally, I would like to thank the tens of thousands of stakeholders in our game which make it what it is, namely the most significant sport in our country in terms of players, spectators and volunteers.

Nearly 900 men's teams and over 60 women's teams play in competitive league structures in Northern Ireland and the combined efforts of everyone involved in facilitating, playing in and enjoying these games, plus all of the time and effort involved in the hundreds of teams within youth football, adds huge value to our society.

We have continued to roll out our Social Return on Investment (SROI) calculator to individual clubs this season to show the 'value added' football offers to our society and we will encourage more clubs to access this information next season to understand the size of their economic and social footprint.

Patrick Nelson

Chief Executive
Irish Football Association

STADIUM

The operational side of all events at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park was able to function completely free of Covid protocols during the season.



On the football operations side the stadium hosted nearly 50 matches up to the end of May, including senior men's internationals, UEFA Champions League/Europa League/Europa Conference League qualifiers as well as NIFL Premiership games and all of the association's various cup finals.

The Irish Cup Final was hosted on a Sunday for the first time with a crowd of just under 10,000 attending the showpiece match between Ballymena United and Crusaders, representing an increase of 2000 on the 2022 final between the two teams.

A senior men's UEFA Nations League match against Kosovo was staged in the autumn, while the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifiers began in March with Northern Ireland facing Finland at the National Stadium, which will also host Kazakhstan on 19 June.

A full replacement of the pitch playing surface took place in the immediate aftermath of the Irish Cup decider with work commencing just over an hour after the final whistle.

The works include the laying of a state of

the art carpet and complete reseeded of the pitch which is due to be ready in time for Northern Ireland v Kazakhstan.

Conferences and events continue to grow with the hospitality lounges hosting a wide range of both internal and external events.

External events include regular Department for Communities training sessions, Business in the Community events and use by a number of large established companies.

The BBC filmed several episodes of the Irish League Show at the stadium post Christmas, while the stadium was also used as part of filming for a feature film (Christmas in Notting Hill) that is due to be released next year.

Eventsec moved into offices on the third floor of the East Stand to become another tenant at the stadium.

The Stadium Team continue to concentrate on the maintenance and development of the stadium, with external remedial works taking place during the close season and all stadium signage set to be upgraded this year.



Gavin Whyte in action for Northern Ireland against Kosovo at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in September.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS



Josh Magennis celebrates scoring the winning goal against Kosovo during September's UEFA Nations League group game.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

SENIOR MEN'S TEAM

The Northern Ireland senior men's team struggled in their third UEFA Nations League campaign last summer and in the autumn before embarking on the UEFA Euro 2024 qualification campaign in March 2023.

Northern Ireland, who were top seeds in League C Group 2, faced four UNL fixtures in June 2022 with a slightly depleted squad.

And their first match in the group set the tone for what would be a disappointing campaign. They lost 1-0 at home to second seeds Greece.

Gus Poyet's team grabbed all three points in Belfast in early June thanks to a goal from captain Tasos Bakasetas.

Greece largely bossed the game for 60 minutes before the introduction of experienced

campaigners Kyle Lafferty and Niall McGinn gave Northern Ireland fresh impetus.

However, despite producing some flowing football, they could not break down a resolute Greek defence in the final half-hour.

Game two saw them take on Cyprus in Larnaca where they managed to pick up a point in a 0-0 draw.

Northern Ireland had plenty of possession at the AEK Arena but they lacked a cutting edge on a balmy night.



Niall McGinn on the ball during June's UEFA Nations League game against Greece at the National Football Stadium.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

A few days later they were defeated 3-2 by Kosovo in an entertaining game in Pristina.

Kosovo dominated the match for long spells, however Ian Baraclough's team kept battling away and could arguably have nicked a point in the closing stages.

An 83rd minute goal from Daniel Ballard, when Northern Ireland were 3-1 down, sparked a frantic finale, but the boys in green and white could not pull level at the Stadiumi Fadil Vokrri in the Kosovan capital.

Kosovo's goals were scored by Vedat Muriqi (two, including a penalty) and Zymer Bytyqi, while Shayne Lavery got on the scoresheet as well as Ballard.

From there it was back to Belfast for the final instalment of the gruelling June quadruple header.

And Northern Ireland had to come from behind to draw 2-2 with Cyprus.

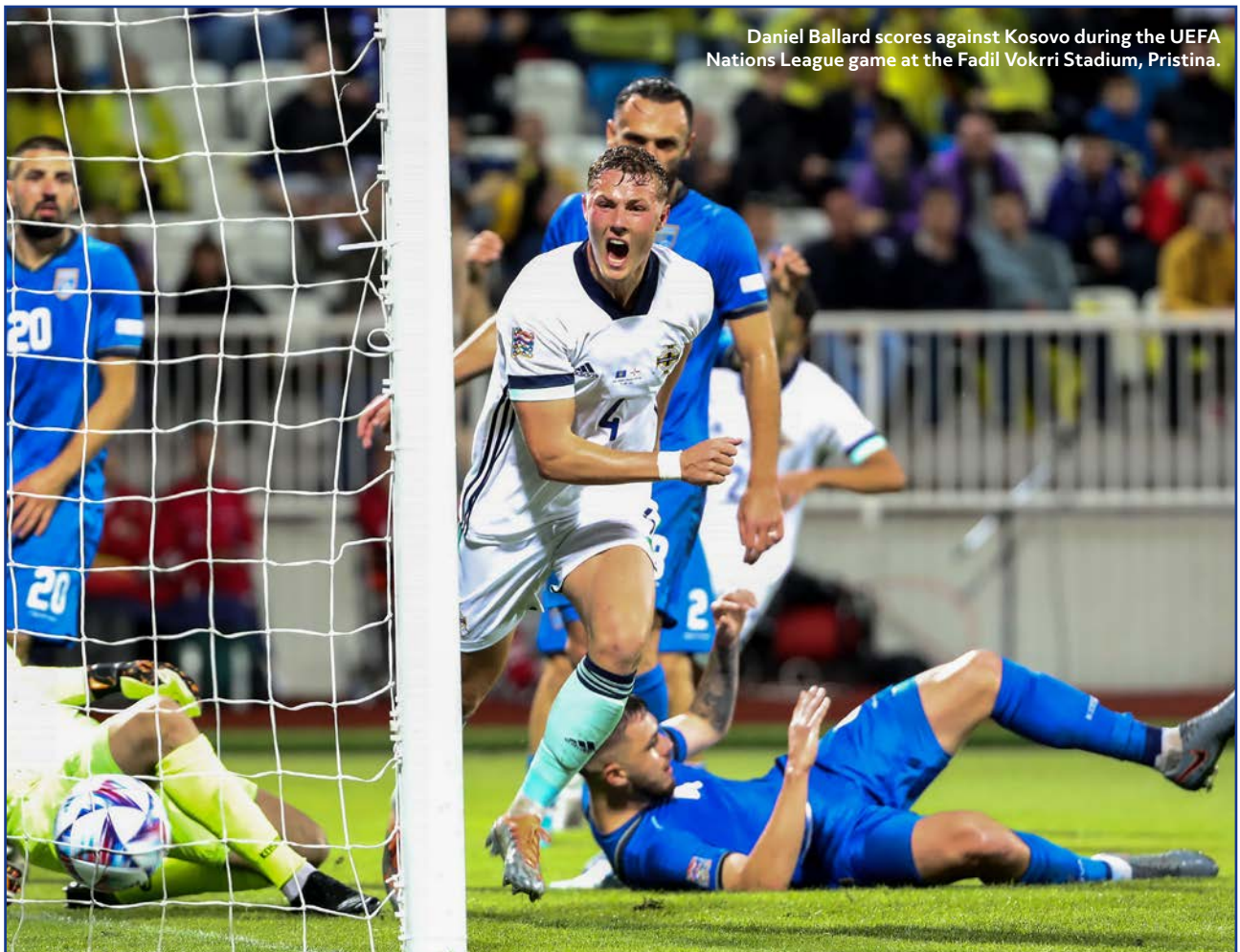
Goals from Paddy McNair and Jonny Evans in the final 20 minutes earned them a point. Andronikos Kakouilli had earlier grabbed a brace for the Cypriots.

The fightback was sparked by a series of substitutions which brought fresh energy to the team. Subs Jordan Thompson and Niall McGinn were particularly influential.

After not winning a game in the two previous editions of the Nations League, the team eventually laid that hoodoo to rest when they defeated Kosovo in game five in C2 in late September.

A superb header from Josh Magennis with 92 minutes on the clock helped to secure a 2-1 victory.

Substitute Gavin Whyte grabbed an equaliser before providing a wonderful assist for the winner.



Daniel Ballard scores against Kosovo during the UEFA Nations League game at the Fadil Vokrri Stadium, Pristina.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS



Michael O'Neill returned as Northern Ireland manager in December.

Kosovo bossed the first half of the League C Group 2 clash at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park and took the lead just before the hour mark thanks to a superb hit from Vedat Muriqi.

But Northern Ireland were much better after the break and worked their socks off to register a first victory in the Nations League after a run of 14 matches without a win in the competition.

The final game of the campaign saw the boys in green and white lose 3-1 to Greece in Athens three days later. It turned out to be Baraclough's final match in charge of the team.

Jonny Evans won his 100th cap at the Georgios Kamaras stadium in the Greek capital, however the home side and table toppers spoiled the experienced Northern Ireland defender's party.

Dimitris Pelkas opened the scoring early in the first half before Shayne Lavery quickly levelled proceedings by tucking home a pinpoint Steven Davis cross.

After the break Greece upped the tempo and scored twice to deservedly take all three points. Giorgos Masouras and Petras Mantalos got the goals.

The defeat meant Northern Ireland finished third in the four-team group on goal difference after the Kosovans hammered Cyprus 5-1 at home to claim second place overall.

Due to the FIFA World Cup being staged in November and December, there were no international matches for the senior men's team in the final three months of the year.

Ian Baraclough left the role of senior men's team international manager in October.

One of his final acts was taking a trip to Frankfurt to attend the draw for the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifiers - Germany are hosting the tournament - in which Northern Ireland were drawn to face Denmark, Finland, Slovenia, Kazakhstan and San Marino in Group H between March and November in 2023.

At the start of December, following Baraclough's departure, Michael O'Neill was appointed as manager of Northern Ireland for a second spell.

O'Neill signed a five-and-a-half-year contract with the association and will work closely with the Irish FA's Technical Director, Aaron Hughes.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Michael said: "I am delighted to be the Northern Ireland senior men's team manager. I am excited to see what can be achieved with this group of players and can't wait to be in front of the Green and White Army at the National Stadium once again."

His first games in charge were UEFA Euro 2024 qualifiers against San Marino and Finland in March.

Dion Charles opened his international account with a brace to ensure O'Neill enjoyed a winning return as Northern Ireland manager with a comfortable 2-0 victory over San Marino in Serravalle.

Charles bagged his first of the night with a razor-sharp finish in the 24th minute before adding a second with a diving back post header 10 minutes into the second half.

Northern Ireland led 1-0 at the break but it could have been more with Paddy McNair and Conor Bradley both forcing saves from Elia Benedettini in the opening period.

After Charles had headed home his second from a Jamal Lewis cross, Conor Washington's

snapshot was deflected narrowly wide, the same player thundering a rising shot narrowly over the bar soon after.

Midfielders Cameron McGeehan and Isaac Price were handed their debuts in the latter stages.

A few days later Northern Ireland fell to their first defeat of the UEFA Euro 2024 campaign as O'Neill's Belfast return ended in frustration.

The Finns, chasing their first points in Group H, secured a first win in 20 years over the boys in green and white thanks to Benjamin Kallman's 28th minute strike.

Northern Ireland enjoyed long spells of possession and had a Dion Charles strike harshly disallowed for handball in the 62nd minute.

Charles, Magennis and Whyte all had decent chances during the match but could not find the net.

At the time of writing O'Neill was preparing his squad for two further qualifiers – away to top seeds Denmark on 16 June and home to Kazakhstan on 19 June.

Dion Charles scored his first international goals in March with two against San Marino.





Jonny Evans won his 100th cap for Northern Ireland in the UEFA Nations League match against Greece in Athens back in September. The defender joined an exclusive club that also features midfield maestro Steven Davis (140 caps to date), legendary keeper Pat Jennings (119 caps) and defensive stalwart Aaron Hughes (112 caps).

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

MEN'S U21s

Northern Ireland's U21s completed their Euro qualifiers with a defeat to Spain and a draw against Lithuania.



Dale Taylor in action for Northern Ireland Under-21s

In early June 2022 they lost 6-0 to the Spanish in a U21 Euro 2023 Group C qualifier at Larne's Inver Park and days later they conceded a late goal to conclude their campaign with a 1-1 draw away to Lithuania in Alytus. Dale Taylor grabbed Northern Ireland's goal in that qualifier.

The draw meant Northern Ireland finished third in Group C on seven points, however that was well adrift of table toppers Spain (24 points) and second-placed Slovakia (15 points).

In September the U21s played two friendlies against Scotland's U21s. In the first game, staged at Belfast's Blanchflower Stadium, they lost 3-1.

Scotland scored twice towards the end of the first half and just before the hour mark to put themselves firmly in the driving seat before Northern Ireland grabbed a consolation through Chris McKee.

In the second encounter, at St Mirren's SMiSA Stadium, they registered a 1-1 draw. Dale Taylor was on target for John Schofield's side.

Schofield left the role of manager of Northern Ireland's Under-21 men's team in January.

He became the U21s boss in July 2021 after previously being a part-time assistant coach with the U21s for over a year.

His replacement is due to be appointed soon.

MEN'S U19s

Gerard Lyttle's U19 side booked their place in the U19 Euro 2023 elite qualifying round after finishing second in Group 13 in the first qualifying round in September.

And, in an historic double, Lyttle also guided the U17s to the elite round of the qualifiers. He took charge of the U19s at the elite stage, while Kris Lindsay and Sean-Paul Murray looked after the U17s.

In stage one of qualifying Northern Ireland drew 2-2 with table toppers Slovenia in game one and then 0-0 with mini tournament hosts Netherlands before registering a 2-0 win over Moldova. They pipped the Dutch to the runners-up spot in the group on goals scored.

The U19s warmed up for that mini tournament by defeating Malta in two friendlies last June. They won the first challenge match 6-0 and the second on a 2-1 scoreline.

The U19 Euro 2023 elite qualifying round was staged in March this year.

Northern Ireland were drawn in Group 1 with hosts France, Romania and Norway.

Lyttle's side were narrowly defeated 1-0 by France in their opening group game. Although the French bossed the first half, Northern Ireland defended superbly and then took the game to the hosts in the second half. Their overall performance arguably merited a point.

Despite being down to 10 men for two-thirds of the match, the U19s performed well against the Romanians in their second group game. It was 1-1 until the 75th minute - Callum Marshall scored for Northern Ireland from the penalty spot - when Romania got their second of the game, and they wrapped it up on 90 minutes.

Marshall was on target twice in their third and final group game, however table toppers Norway proved too strong and ran out 5-2 winners.

MEN'S U17s

Gerard Lyttle's U17 side reached the U17 Euro 2023 elite round despite finishing third in their qualifying round group in October.

They recorded a win against hosts Malta, a defeat to second-placed Scotland and a draw against group winners Czechia (Czech Republic) in the initial round.

Under the competition rules the top two teams in each group in the initial round automatically joined top seeds Netherlands and Spain in the spring 2023 elite round along with the four third-placed teams with the best records against the top two in their section - and third-placed Northern Ireland fell into that category.

The draw against the Czechs in Group 4 counted for an extra point under UEFA rules for development football - and that confirmed their qualification for the elite round.

The elite qualifying round was staged in March this year.

Northern Ireland were drawn in Group 3 with hosts Netherlands, England and Denmark.

The U17s lost their opening group game after conceding a late goal against the Dutch.

They took the lead with a superb effort from Ryan Donnelly, however Netherlands then piled on the pressure and eventually secured all three points, winning the game 2-1.

Two second half goals from Arsenal midfielder Ethan Nwaneri saw the U17s fall to defeat against England in their second game in Group 3.

And in their third and final game they lost out 4-1 to the Danes despite creating plenty of chances during the game. Kieran Morrison got their goal.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



Northern Ireland players celebrate with Lauren Wade after her goal against Belgium at Herman Vanderpoortenstadion in Lier last June.

SENIOR WOMEN'S TEAM

The second half of 2022 was an historic period for the Northern Ireland senior women's team. Not only did they make their first appearance at a major tournament, they also registered a record points haul in a qualification campaign.

With the six-month full-time training programme for Northern Ireland-based players coming to an end, the final warm-up before UEFA Women's Euro 2022 was a friendly against Belgium in June.

Then it was off to England for a big, big adventure – and the small matter of matches against Norway, Austria and the tournament hosts (see separate special section on the Euros).

Shiels' side suffered a 4-1 defeat against the Belgians in their final warm-up match before the Euros.

They played the last 20 minutes of the friendly in Lier with 10 players after goalkeeper Jackie Burns was given her marching orders.

And the game stood at 1-1 until the final 10 minutes when the Red Flames piled on the pressure and scored three late goals.

Captain Tessa Wullaert opened the scoring for Belgium midway through the first half before

Northern Ireland equalised a minute into added time at the end of the first half thanks to a sweet strike from Lauren Wade.

After Burns was red-carded Belgium regained the lead on 82 minutes through substitute Ella Van Kerckhoven. Minutes later it was 3-1 when Wullaert got her second, while Northern Ireland defender Laura Rafferty scored an own goal as the final whistle approached.

Following their Euros adventure Northern Ireland focused on completing their FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 qualification campaign.

Defeats against Austria away and England at home in April had dashed their slim chance of reaching this year's final tournament in Australia and New Zealand.

However, Shiels and his players were determined to end the campaign on a positive note.



Caragh Hamilton goes past Latvia's Olga Sevcova during their Women's World Cup Qualifier in September.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

And Northern Ireland got back to winning ways with a narrow 2-1 victory over Luxembourg in a qualifier in early September.

Second half goals from Sarah McFadden and Rebecca McKenna were enough to secure all three points.

The win meant Northern Ireland finished third behind England and Austria in European Group D in the qualifiers for the global tournament.

The result also meant Northern Ireland tasted victory again after their six defeats in a row against top tier teams in the run-up to and at UEFA Women's Euro 2022.

Four days later Northern Ireland had to come from behind to secure a 3-1 win against Latvia in their final World Cup qualifier.

Amazingly all three of Northern Ireland's goals were scored by the opposition. Latvia keeper Enija-Anna Vaivode notched two of them, while the other was netted by defender Arta Luize Lubina.

The victory meant Kenny Shiels' side created

history. It brought their points tally to 19 – a record haul for a qualification campaign involving the senior women's team.

His team rounded off the year with a fine 1-0 victory over Italy in a friendly at a packed Seaview in mid-November.

Centre back Sarah McFadden, winning her 95th cap, scored the only goal of the game.

Northern Ireland were more than up for the challenge against the Italians, who were ranked 14th in the world at the time compared to Northern Ireland in 49th .

Kenny Shiels left his role as manager of the Northern Ireland senior women's team at the end of January this year.

Shiels, who was appointed by the association in 2019, guided the senior women's team to a first ever major tournament.

Following his departure he said he had enjoyed his time as senior women's team manager immensely.



Ellie Mason takes a shot in the Women's World Cup Qualifier against Latvia at the Skola Stadium, Jurmala.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



Caitlin McGuinness celebrates after Northern Ireland defeated Italy 1-0 in their friendly at Seaview, Belfast in November.

He said he had worked hard with the players to raise their expectations and change their style of play so that Northern Ireland were a team to be reckoned with.

The senior women's team's first action of 2023 saw them take on Wales in a friendly international in April.

Andy Waterworth, Head of Elite Player Development at the association, acted as the interim manager of the team following the departure of Kenny Shiels.

Former senior international players Aaron Hughes and Roy Carroll were also involved. Hughes was the interim senior coach, while Carroll was the interim goalkeeping coach.

Northern Ireland lost to Wales in the international challenge match played at the Cardiff City Stadium.

Wales bossed the game for long spells and eventually ran out 4-1 winners in front of just over 6800 spectators, including a small band of GAWA.

Lauren Wade scored an excellent goal in the second half for Northern Ireland, who looked nervy in the first half but improved after the break.

Northern Ireland are due to play Scotland in a friendly next month (July) ahead of their campaign in the new UEFA Women's Nations League which is scheduled to get under way in September.

Their opponents in League B Group 1 will be Republic of Ireland, Hungary and Albania.

WOMEN'S U19s

In April Northern Ireland's Women's Under-19 team gained promotion to League A for stage one of the WU19 Euro 2024 qualifiers.

They booked their slot in the top tier for the next set of qualifiers after winning their group in stage two of the WU19 Euro 2023 qualifiers.

Their three matches in League B Group 3 were all staged at Seaview Stadium in Belfast. They faced Latvia, Cyprus and Kosovo in the four-team mini tournament hosted by the Irish Football Association. The other games in the group were played at Solitude in Belfast.

In their opening match they swept Latvia WU19s aside by five goals to nil before suffering a disappointing 2-1 defeat against Cyprus.

In their third game they came from behind to defeat Kosovo 3-1 - and it meant they finished top of the UEFA European

Championship qualifying group on goal difference from the Kosovans.

Back in October the WU19s found the going tough when they competed in League A Group 5 in stage one of the qualifiers for UEFA WU19 Euro 2023.

France laid siege to the Northern Ireland goal as they turned on the power - the French won 5-1 - on matchday one, while in their second match the WU19s lost narrowly to Republic of Ireland (1-0).

They were relegated to League B for stage two of the qualifiers when they lost 8-0 against mini tournament hosts Poland.

WOMEN'S U17s

The WU17s were promoted to League A for the WU17 Euro competition in 2024 after defeating Turkiye (Turkey) in a winner-takes-all game at the end of March.

The qualifier, staged at Manavgat in Antalya Province, saw Northern Ireland earn a 2-0 victory with second half goals from Mia Moore and Rachel McIntyre.

The WU17s had been expecting to face both the Turks and Armenia in League B Group 5 (stage two of WU17 Euro 2023 qualifying), however Armenia withdrew from the competition.

In stage one of the Euro 2023 qualifiers they competed in League A Group 3 against Republic of Ireland, Finland and Austria. The four-team mini tournament was hosted in Belfast by the Irish FA.

Matchday one saw the WU17s take on the Finns, who proved too strong for them and ran out 2-0 winners at Seaview.

In their second game they took on Austria, who were even stronger than Finland and secured all three points at Solitude thanks to three second half goals.

On the third matchday the WU17s lost narrowly to the Republic at Seaview on a 1-0 scoreline.

The previous month Northern Ireland also suffered a 1-0 loss to Belgium's WU17s in a friendly staged at Solitude.

The Women's U16 development team, meanwhile, won two games and lost one at a UEFA development tournament in March. They lost narrowly to hosts Bulgaria before easing past both North Macedonia and Montenegro.





THE GREAT EUROS ADVENTURE



Northern Ireland captain Marissa Callaghan leads the team out to face England in their Women's Euros fixture at Southampton's St Mary's Stadium.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Northern Ireland switched their focus firmly on to UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in the summer of 2022 after competing in World Cup qualifiers in the spring – and they thoroughly enjoyed their first major tournament.

Norway, Austria and eventual champions England all proved too strong for the senior women's team as they made their bow at a Euros, however it left the players wanting more.

In the first of their three group games at the Euros last July - all three matches were played at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton - Norway showed their class against Kenny Shiels' side.

The Norwegians produced plenty of slick attacking play as they notched up a 4-1 victory in the Group A encounter in warm and balmy conditions.

Defender/midfielder Sarah McFadden captained her country in the historic game.



Julie Nelson scored an historic goal against Norway in the 2022 Women's Euros.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

McFadden, who had led the team against Norway home and away in the qualifiers for the tournament, was given the armband because there were concerns that Marissa Callaghan, the squad captain, had not sufficiently recovered from a foot injury to take her place in the starting line-up. Callaghan did enter the fray, however, for the second half.

Norway opened the scoring on 10 minutes through Julie Blakstad and they doubled their lead just three minutes later when Frida Maanum clipped the ball home.

On 31 minutes player of the match Caroline Graham Hansen blasted a spot kick past Northern Ireland keeper Jackie Burns to make it 3-0.

Shiels' side pulled one back just after the break when a Demi Vance delivery from a corner caused confusion in the Norway box and Rachel Furness eventually swept the ball to the back post where Julie Nelson was lurking to nod the ball home - and make history by becoming the first Northern Ireland senior women's international to score at a major tournament.

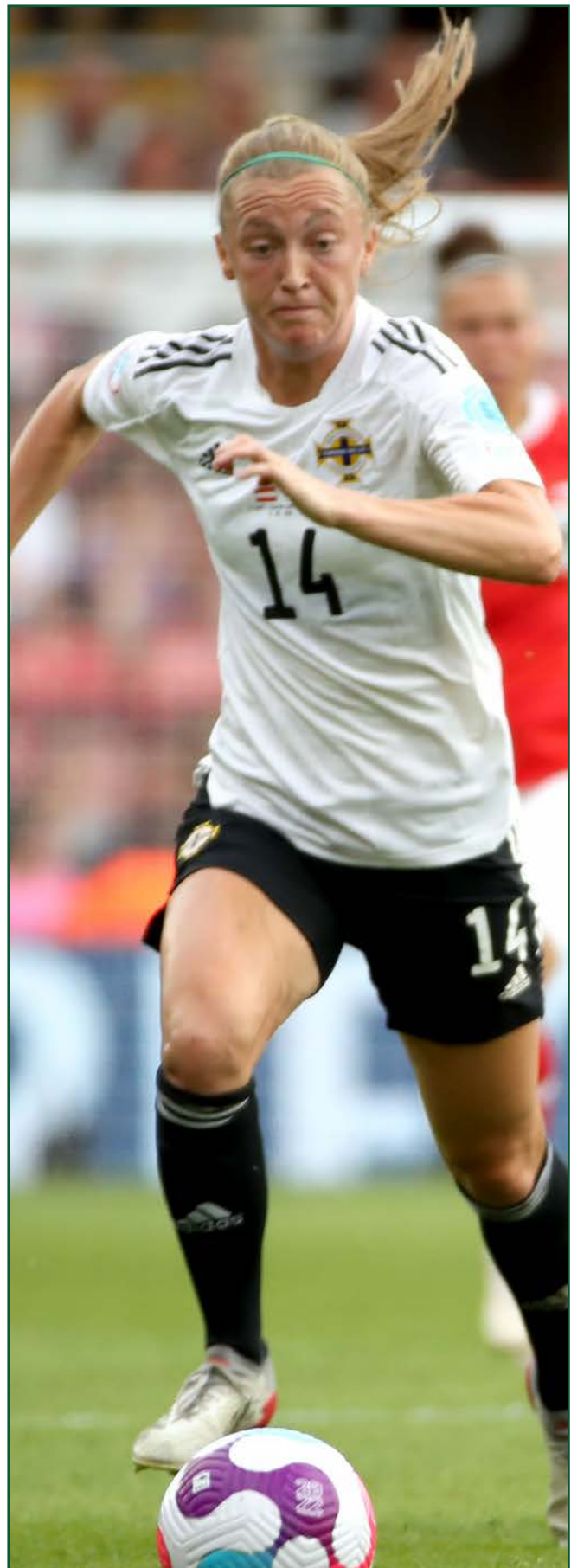
Norway scored their fourth on 54 minutes via a sublime free-kick from Guro Reiten.

In the 78th minute Northern Ireland lost striker Simone Magill through injury. It was later confirmed she had damaged the anterior cruciate ligament in her left knee, which meant she could play no further part in the tournament.

On netting Northern Ireland's goal Nelson, at the age of 37 years and 33 days, became the oldest scorer at a Euros; she broke a record which had been held by Italy legend Patrizia Panico since 2009.

Northern Ireland were narrowly defeated 2-0 by Austria in their second group game at UEFA Women's Euro 2022.

They worked tirelessly at St Mary's, however they could not find a reply to Austria, who scored in the first half before sealing the win late on.



Lauren Wade in action against Austria at the Women's Euros in July.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

The defeat meant Northern Ireland could not qualify from the group even if they won their final group fixture.

Jackie Burns made a couple of saves as the Austrians began brightly in sweltering conditions. The temperature gauge was at 35c pitchside just before kick-off.

Austria took the lead on 19 minutes. Midfielder Sarah Puntigam drove in a free-kick which took a deflection off Nelson in the two-man wall and was tucked home by alert Austrian defender Katharina Schiechl from four yards.

The Austrians enjoyed plenty of possession and Burns had to be on her toes to keep them out during the remainder of the first half. It was pretty even after the break. Lauren Wade shot over the top, while a Furness header cleared the bar.

Substitute Katharina Naschenweng made sure of all three points for Austria when she added a second two minutes from time, clinically drilling the ball across goal past Burns into the bottom corner.



Northern Ireland's Kirsty McGuinness takes on England's Millie Bright at the Women's Euros.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



Northern Ireland enjoyed fantastic support from the Green and White Army in Southampton.

Northern Ireland's involvement in their first major tournament ended with a defeat at the hands of UEFA Women's Euro 2022 hosts and eventual winners England.

Shiels' side worked their socks off in the game, however the Lionesses were in no mood to take their foot off the gas in pursuit of topping the group - and they triumphed thanks to some excellent finishes.

Burns and the Northern Ireland back line repelled several attacks before Northern Ireland's defence was breached on 40 minutes. A Lauren Hemp shot was blocked, however the ball dropped outside the area for Fran Kirby to side foot it into the top corner beyond the reach of Burns. It was a lovely finish.

England doubled their lead moments before the break. A corner was not properly cleared and the ball fell to Hemp whose low strike flew into the bottom corner.

Sarina Wiegman's side added a third three minutes after the interval through substitute Alessia Russo, who extended England's advantage further just four minutes later with a superb finish.

There was further pain for Northern Ireland on 76 minutes when Kelsie Burrows turned the ball into her own net as she stuck a leg out to try to stop a Beth Mead cross. The ball looped over Burns and dropped into the net.

Shiels' charges could rightly hold their heads high afterwards. They put in a gutsy performance against a world class team.

They also enjoyed quite a party with the Green and White Army at the end of the encounter.

After the match veteran defender Ashley Hutton announced her retirement from international football. She said playing at the Euros was a fitting way to bring the curtain down. Ashley earned 115 caps for her country across almost two decades.

Northern Ireland players celebrate with supporters following the team's final match at the Women's Euros.



IRISH FA JD ACADEMY

The Irish FA's elite youth pathway for boys' performance, which includes the Irish FA Academy in collaboration with UEFA based at Ulster University's Jordanstown campus and the National Performance Programme, is continuing to flourish.

The full-time JD-sponsored residential academy for young footballers is focused on developing emerging talent at school years 11 and 12 (U15 and U16) and its main objective is to produce better players through a mixture of sporting, school and life skills education.

The latest cohort of graduates (all aged 16) includes 11 players who are taking up professional contracts in England/Wales this summer, while players staying at home will sign for NIFL Premiership clubs.

Highlights across 2022-23 included an Under-15/Under-16 team from the academy taking on Australia's U16s/U17s in a friendly. The academy side lost the game, staged at Blanchflower Stadium, however it provided them with invaluable international experience against strong opposition.

A group from the academy travelled to Belgium in spring 2023, with players and coaches taking part in an exchange programme with Belgian top flight club Oud-Heverlee (OH) Leuven to sample different cultures and games/coaching.

The JD Academy squad played training matches against OH Leuven as well as Royale Union Saint-Gilloise and Lommel SK.

Academy players engaged in 14 non-footballing workshops based on education around issues such as social media, gambling, sexual abuse and abusive relationships.

A new elite physiotherapist has been appointed to work on prehab/rehab and growth and maturation with selected elite players. And a new player care and education officer has been employed to work with players and parents/guardians as well as schools within the programme.

The JD-sponsored National Performance Programme involves the recruitment of 60 players from across Northern Ireland at U14 level and the best of those players are invited to attend the JD Academy.

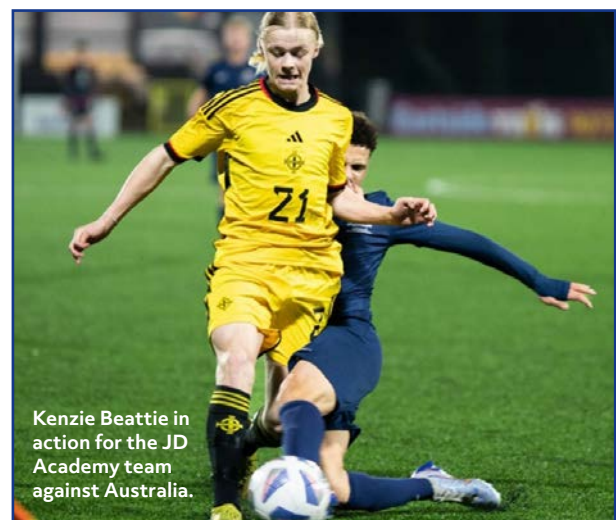
The NPP revolves around three national centres: Mid-Ulster (based at Annagh United FC, Portadown); North-West (Coleraine FC, Coleraine Showgrounds) and Belfast (Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association, Stormont). And an additional NPP centre is to be set up in Fermanagh.

Each existing centre organised matches every five weeks in 2022-23 to monitor players' progress.

U14/U15 national teams played in UEFA development tournaments in Poland and Slovenia with games against other European nations and South Africa.

The U14s won the inaugural Den Bosch International Tournament in the Netherlands at the end of May after producing six fine victories in the group and knockout stages.

Several players who are part of the NPP/academy were included in the Northern Ireland U16 Schoolboys' team who competed in the Victory Shield in Waterford back in the autumn. They defeated Wales, drew with eventual champions Republic of Ireland and lost to Scotland. The U16 team also played games against Poland, Estonia and Finland.



Kenzie Beattie in action for the JD Academy team against Australia.

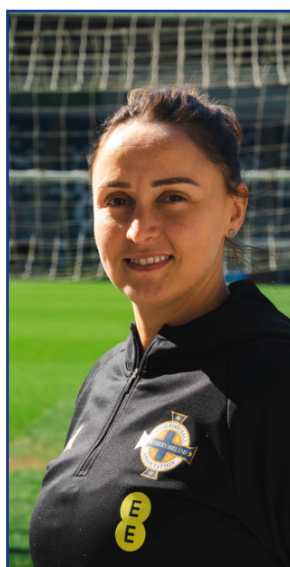
GIRLS' REGIONAL EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

The Irish FA Girls' Regional Excellence programme, sponsored by Electric Ireland, continued its normal activity in 2022 across four regional centres.

The centres were located at Newforge (for counties Down and Armagh), Ulster University Jordanstown (Co Antrim), MUSA in Cookstown (Tyrone/Fermanagh) and Holy Cross College in Strabane (Co Londonderry). The programme delivered in each venue continued to focus on providing football development opportunities for talented players and creating an environment to support the preparation of players to enter Northern Ireland's youth international squads.

More than 200 players aged 10 to 15 were engaged in the regional programme and were provided with on-pitch football skills development opportunities as well as information sessions across a range of topics, including strength and conditioning, advice about education, emotional wellbeing and nutrition.

Among the highlights of the programme for the players were talks from Northern Ireland senior women's team players.



Gail Redmond (left) and Danielle McDowell Tuffey have taken up new roles within the girls' elite pathway.

The four regional centres have been an integral part of the Irish FA's Girls' and Women's Performance Player Pathway.

Players can progress to age-specific development squads (from the age of 11) and then to U15 and U16 development squads.

The next step after that is the Women's U17 and U19 international squads followed by the pinnacle of the Northern Ireland senior women's squad.

The excellence programme was paused in December 2022 to allow for a restructure within the girls' talent identification and elite pathway programmes.

The restructure has seen the creation of two new roles: a full-time Girls' Elite Academy Manager that will oversee a new programme for regional talent ID as well as lead on the U15 and U16 girls' development squads, and a full-time Women's U17 and U19 Team Manager that will lead the U17 and U19 girls' pathway squads in UEFA competitions.

Gail Redmond has taken on the WU17/WU19 role, while Danielle McDowell Tuffey is the Girls' Elite Academy Manager.

Later in 2023 new girls' talent ID programmes will begin across several regional venues in Northern Ireland.

The programme will involve regional talent identification opportunities for players aged 11-14 as well as an enhanced girls' academy programme focused on those aged 15 and 16.

The academy programme is backed by UEFA and will support players to develop their football alongside their education. It is an exciting development for the girls' elite pathway and one that will provide greater opportunities for young girls in Northern Ireland to progress with their football.

INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION BOARD (IFAB)

Formed in 1886 by the four British football associations to provide a co-ordinated set of rules for the growing game of association football, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) continues to be the world rule-making body for the game and, just as since 1886, the Irish FA continues to play a significant role in this important body.

As has been the case in recent years, in 2022-23 IFAB business centred on two main areas: VAR and concussion substitutes.

FIFA has now outlined plans to expand the current VAR format to enable associations and leagues from smaller countries to experience the benefits of VAR through a VAR Light initiative which is currently being experimented with.

This allows for the VAR (video assistant referee) to operate with a minimum of four cameras.

While it cannot replicate the angles and vision of the likes of the system used in the English Premiership, where multiple cameras are available to the VAR, VAR Light's strategically placed cameras allow vision of key areas within and around the penalty area.

FIFA hopes that this initiative will be successful and open up the use of VAR to more national associations.

For those associations where even four cameras are not available, another possibility may be Video Assistance, which is also being developed as a low cost, low technology solution.

Work on these initiatives continues. FIFA has also agreed as an experiment that conversations between referee and VAR may be made available to broadcasters in limited situations. This will be closely monitored to understand its appeal and any possible pitfalls.

The concussion substitute experiment has now been running for over a year.

However, as concussion is thankfully a rare occurrence, gathering data for the experiment has been slow and this continues to be the case.

Pressure from some associations and professional leagues to introduce a parallel experiment with a focus on temporary concussion substitutes has been rejected as FIFA believes that this would complicate the original experiment.

Medical experts would suggest that if any player is being tested for concussion the safest option is to withdraw them totally from the match to prevent a possible reoccurrence.

It is pleasing to note that the FIFA medical team is led by Irish FA alumni Dr Andy Massey, the former team doctor for the Northern Ireland senior men's team.

Meanwhile, Arsène Wenger, FIFA's Head of International Development, continues to champion a change in the offside law and an experiment which was delayed because of Covid-19 is now due to commence in a German youth league.

Finally, the official term for a penalty shootout - 'the taking of kicks from the penalty mark' - has been changed to reflect modern usage and will now be known simply as 'penalties'. It's a sad day for the pedants among us here in the land of William McCrum, the originator of the penalty kick!

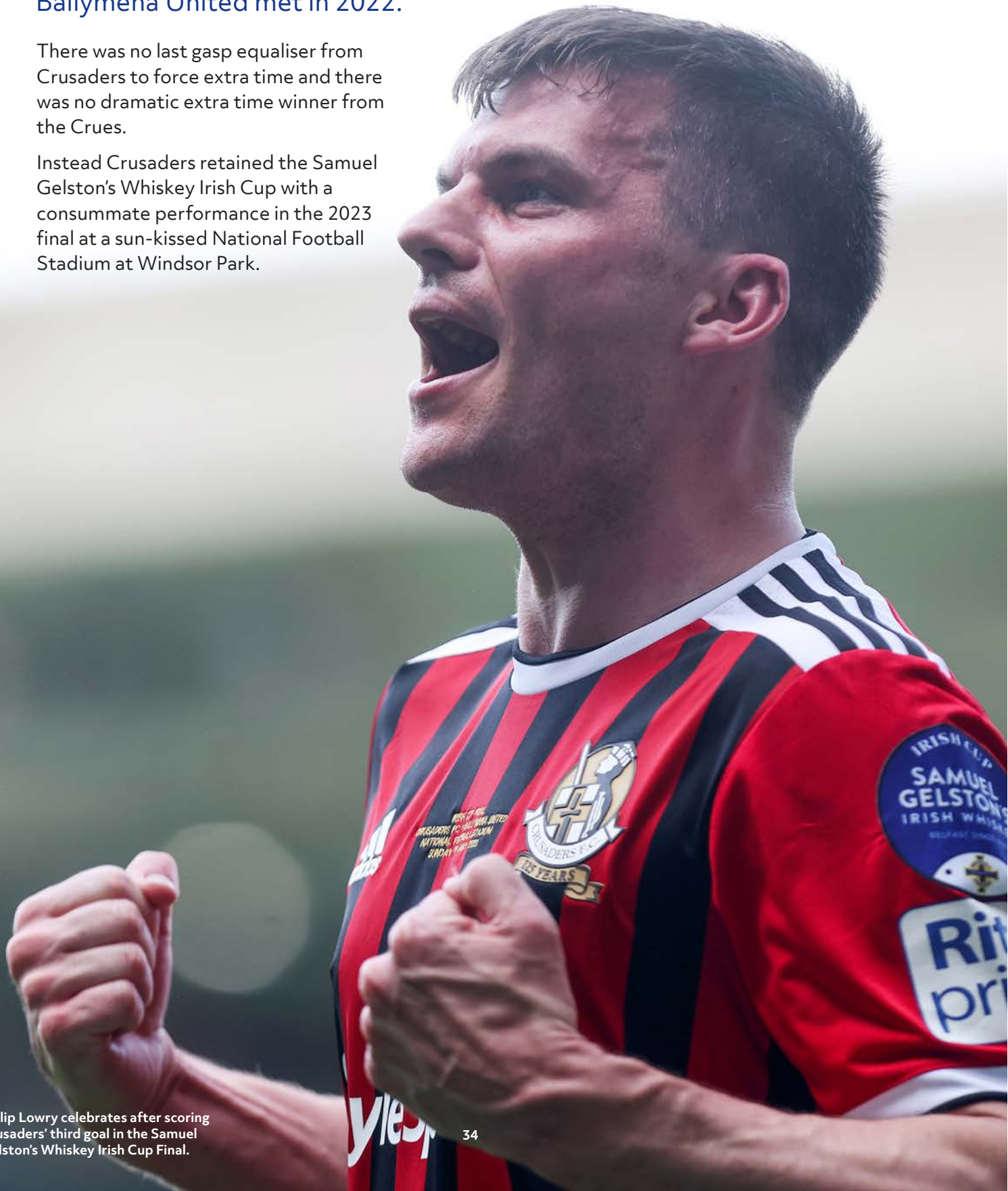
Words by William Campbell

DOMESTIC FOOTBALL – MEN'S COMPETITIONS

This season's Irish Cup Final was a repeat of last year's decider, however there was no repeat of the drama that unfolded when Crusaders and Ballymena United met in 2022.

There was no last gasp equaliser from Crusaders to force extra time and there was no dramatic extra time winner from the Crues.

Instead Crusaders retained the Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup with a consummate performance in the 2023 final at a sun-kissed National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.



Philip Lowry celebrates after scoring Crusaders' third goal in the Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup Final.

DOMESTIC – MEN'S FOOTBALL

Stephen Baxter's side strolled to a 4-0 win in front of 9,688 fans. Goals from Ross Clarke, Adam Lecky, captain Philip Lowry and the evergreen Paul Heatley sealed the impressive victory for the team from north Belfast.

David Jeffrey's charges conceded after just 11 minutes in the May encounter and that was a big blow to their confidence.

Crusaders fielded a team packed full of experienced operators and they never looked like losing their grip on the trophy after Clarke's opener.

Away from Northern Ireland's premier cup competition, Larne secured their first Irish League title in their 134-year history, wresting the crown away from perennial champions Linfield.

During their 38 league matches in 2022-23 they won 25, drew eight and lost just five. That gave them a points total of 83, six more than Linfield, their nearest challengers.

Tiernan Lynch's team were out of sight long before their final game of the season, which they lost 3-0 against Coleraine. That was one of their heaviest defeats during a term in which they scored 64 goals and conceded only 22.

A 15-game unbeaten run between the start of January and the middle of April gave them an unassailable lead. The run included 11 wins and four draws.

A 2-0 victory over Crusaders in mid-April saw Larne crowned champions for the first time.

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

Larne won the County Antrim Shield for the third year on the trot thanks to a penalty shoot-out victory over Linfield at Seaview. The game ended 0-0 before Larne won the penalty competition 4-2.

And Linfield lifted the Bet McLean NIFL League Cup after goals from Joel Cooper and Chris Shields were enough to secure a 2-0 win in the final at the National Football Stadium.

This season's winners of the NIFL Championship were Loughgall, while Bangor won the NIFL Premier Intermediate crown.

Crumlin Star were triumphant in the McComb's Coach Travel Intermediate Cup final but they were made to battle all the way by St Oliver Plunkett.



Crumlin Star lifted the Intermediate Cup in April.

DOMESTIC – MEN’S FOOTBALL



Ivan Sproule scored twice to help Dergview Reserves beat Harryville Homers in the fonaCAB Craig Stanfield Junior Cup Final.

The north Belfast side eventually edged past their west Belfast opponents in front of just over 2,300 spectators at the National Football Stadium, winning the decider by three goals to two.

Star appeared to be cruising after going two up, however Plunkett showed great determination and desire to draw level before a second goal from man of the match Stephen Smyth was enough to get Star over the line.

Former Northern Ireland international Ivan Sproule rolled back the years as he helped Dergview Reserves to taste fonaCAB Craig Stanfield Junior Cup glory.

The 42-year-old winger scored twice as the Fermanagh and Western Division One side defeated Harryville Homers 4-1 in the final at the National Football Stadium.

Ballinamallard United Under-18s lifted the Harry Cavan Youth Cup by defeating Cliftonville Strollers in the decider at the National Football Stadium.

The Mallards won a penalty shootout 3-1 after the game ended goalless following 90-plus minutes and 20-plus minutes of extra time.

Goalkeeper Nathan Hunter was the hero for the Fermanagh side. He saved two penalties in the shootout and was excellent throughout the match.



Nathan Hunter was Ballinamallard's hero in their 3-1 penalty shootout victory over Cliftonville in the Harry Cavan Youth Cup final.

DOMESTIC FOOTBALL WOMEN'S COMPETITIONS

Cliftonville Ladies became NIFL Danske Bank Women's Premiership champions for the first time in 2022.

There was an intense battle for supremacy between the Reds and Glentoran Women throughout the season.

However, Cliftonville wrestled the trophy away from the Glens after winning 15 games and losing just twice all season. The Glens won 13 of their games, drew three and lost one.

On the last day of the season Caragh Hamilton scored an added time winner for the Glens against the Reds at Solitude for a 2-1 victory, however Cliftonville had already created history by then and long-serving captain Megan Moran was on hand to lift the Premiership trophy on home soil.

In the current season, which began in April, the Reds and the Glens were once again the early frontrunners in the title race.

Although the Glens missed out on the league crown in 2022, they did get their hands on a couple of pieces of silverware.

Glentoran defeated Crusaders Strikers 3-1 in the County Antrim Cup final, while the Electric Ireland Challenge Cup was also won by Glentoran Women for a fourth consecutive year.

They defeated Sion Swifts Ladies 2-1 in the Challenge Cup decider at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.



DOMESTIC – WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

A somewhat tentative opening to the final saw both sides sound each other out.

As play progressed Glentoran began to assert themselves more and fired a warning shot on 23 minutes when Kerry Beattie volleyed just wide of the target from a Jessica Foy set piece.

That proved to be a sign of things to come when, five minutes later, Foy opened the scoring with a superbly executed free-kick into the top corner from just outside the area.

Then, barely five minutes after that, Sarah Tweedie showed great vision to spot a Joely Andrews run and delivered the perfect ball for the Northern Ireland international to unleash a shot beyond Jennifer Currie from around 12 yards out.

But Sion didn't let their heads drop and might have pulled one back on 40 minutes when Aimee Neal flicked a backwards header just over the top from Kerry Brown's corner.

And they came even closer in first half stoppage time when Cora Chambers and Caoirse Doherty combined for the latter to send her effort just the wrong side of the upright after keeper Ashleigh McKinnon had committed herself.

Glentoran looked to add to their tally after the break, coming close on the hour after Foy threaded Hamilton through but Currie did well to snuff out the danger.

Hamilton then came even closer with a rasping effort from outside the area that hit the crossbar.

Andrews and Beattie both had efforts for the Glens before Sion upped the tempo in the closing stages, and they were unlucky on 84 minutes when Naomi McLaughlin's drive from the edge of the area was tipped on to the bar.

Then, with two minutes remaining, the Co Tyrone side set up a grandstand finish after McLaughlin clipped the ball forward for substitute Tara O'Connor-Farren to control and send a brilliant finish past the Glentoran keeper.

However, it wasn't enough to spark a late leveller as Glentoran held on to lift the trophy.

Meanwhile, in the NIWFA (Northern Ireland Women's Football Association) leagues, Larne Women were triumphant in the Championship, which earned them promotion to the Premiership for 2023.

Ballymena United Women, who were runners-up in the Championship, also gained promotion to the expanded top flight, which now features 10 teams from across Northern Ireland.

The other NIWFA title winners were:
Division 1 - Lisburn Rangers Ladies; Division 2 - Camlough Rovers Ladies; Division 3 - Ballymoney United Ladies; Division 4 - Craigavon City Ladies; Division 5A - Lisbellaw United Ladies; Division 5B - Draperstown Celtic Diamonds.

Glentoran Women retained the Electric Ireland Irish FA Women's Challenge Cup with a 2-1 victory over Sion Swifts in the final.



CLUB LICENSING

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

A new (sixth) criterion has been implemented for UEFA and NIFL Premiership licences: Football Social Responsibility.

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

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

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

Just as clubs are required to fulfil minimum criteria, the Irish Football Association's Club Licensing Unit must also comply with minimum requirements for operating the club licensing system.

Originally based on the internationally recognised quality management system ISO 9001:2000, the UEFA Club Licensing Quality Standard was devised to ensure consistency in the assessment principles and methods followed by all licensors, and to this end the annual UEFA/SGS audit of the Irish FA Club Licensing Unit's activities was successfully completed in September 2022 without any non-conformities identified.

The most recent licensing cycle concluded in April 2023 to award licences for incoming season 2023-24, with 41 clubs awarded a licence including NIFL Women's Premiership clubs who engaged in a 'soft' licensing cycle for 2023 season with six clubs being granted a licence.

The expansion and development once again highlights the continued impact, growth and importance of the club licensing system in Northern Ireland.

FACILITIES FUNDING

Last September a second tranche of funding was made available to clubs across Northern Ireland through the DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) Grassroots Facilities Investment Fund.

In 2021-22 Northern Ireland received £700,000 of the funding, which is being provided by Central Government as part of a £205 million investment into football facilities across the UK to level up access to quality sport provision.

The second funding pot of £700,000 was made available in 2022-23 to improve and refurbish facilities in Northern Ireland, creating a better grassroots football infrastructure foundation.

The fund aimed to improve the quality of community facilities, bring people together to enjoy playing sport in their local area, regenerate communities and enhance social cohesion.

Across 2021-22 and 2022-23 the Irish FA/DCMS Grassroots Facilities Investment Fund supported 54 small capital projects, improving grassroots facilities throughout Northern Ireland.

A third tranche of funding was made available via the Grassroots Facilities Investment Fund in April/May 2023.

A total of £2 million of capital funding has been secured for 2023-24, with a further £3.59 million of capital funding to be delivered in 2024-25. The minimum award available is £100,000, with a maximum award of up to £400,000.

Funding will be directed towards large capital projects primarily focusing on the installation of quality natural grass pitches, certified artificial grass pitches (AGPs) or Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs).

REFEREEING

There was a consistent level of effective referee performances in Northern Ireland during 2022-23, according to Trevor Moutray, the Irish FA's Head of Refereeing.

In particular Moutray praised the consistency produced during the critical run-ins for the various league titles, European play-off games, the Bet McLean League Cup Final and the four national cup competitions run by the association.

He noted the four national finals were exciting games, played in front of excellent crowds, with no-one mentioning the match officials.

He said that is the way officials like it as the game is not about them but the players, coaches, managers and supporters.

Moutray also acknowledged mistakes and errors of judgement will always be made by match officials and remain part of the game. However, he believes that through ongoing training and development, supplemented by the introduction of new technology, preventable errors will be further reduced.

He explained that during the 2022-23 season every NIFL Premiership game was recorded and the footage was made accessible quickly to the relevant match officials together with specific video clips which highlighted critical decisions in each game.

Moutray said the ability for match officials to quickly access video evidence of what went well, and also what could have been done better, is critical to support continuous improvement.

In line with other national associations of the same size, scale and status as the Irish FA, investigative work is progressing to identify the logistical, technical, financial and personnel issues associated with the development and introduction of a scalable VAR solution that would meet FIFA standards and also the needs of the domestic game in Northern Ireland.

Similar to last term, the 2022-23 season has been a positive one when it comes to referee recruitment.

However, the current cost of living crisis has meant that many grassroots officials in particular have had to prioritise extra work shifts on any given match day, which has resulted in a modest shortfall in available referees on any given match day.

It is hoped the recent launch of a recruitment campaign for season 2023-24 will bring forward more officials to help fill any gaps.

The current unacceptable levels of abuse and dissent aimed at match officials, through various methods, does make some individuals think twice about a career in refereeing though.

The reasons for dissent and abuse are often multi-layered and complex to unpick, but an Irish FA Referee Respect campaign, which is currently being designed and will be implemented in due course, will seek to position the role and importance of every match official at the centre of every game.

As the season drew to a close two referees from Northern Ireland were chosen to officiate at UEFA U17 Euro 2023 in Hungary.

Jamie Robinson was among eight referees from across Europe appointed by UEFA to take charge of matches at the 16-team tournament.

And assistant referee Adam Jeffrey was chosen by the Irish FA to go to Hungary. Eight of 12 ARs were appointed by the referees' national associations, while the others were chosen by UEFA, which also appointed four fourth officials.

Moutray said for the Irish FA to get officials appointed for a UEFA final tournament was a great achievement.



COACH EDUCATION

It has been a season of significant developments within the Coach Education department.

The department has created a new pathway for goalkeeping coaches as well as one for coaches working within the youth game.

Former Northern Ireland international keeper Alan Mannus has been appointed as Goalkeeping Coach Educator and the department has developed and launched the association's first ever goalkeeping coach education pathway.

The pathway is aimed at improving goalkeeping coaching from grassroots through to the senior amateur and professional game.

The department's new coach education pathway for those working within youth football is up and running, too. UEFA has already endorsed an Elite Youth B Diploma course, with a UEFA Grassroots course and Elite Youth A Diploma to be ratified later this year.

In addition the Coach Ed team have successfully developed a Coach Educator qualification which UEFA has endorsed.

This qualification will enable the department to certify coach educators with a UEFA diploma which acknowledges their level of experience and expertise.

And it also provides the department with a framework to ensure it continues to develop coach educators to the highest of standards.

During the season just over 1200 people studied for the Grassroots Introduction to Coaching online course, while a total of 1150 undertook National Coaching Certificate courses.

Five UEFA C Diploma courses were held at Queen's University Sport, Annagh (Portadown), Irvinestown, Seaview (Belfast) and Coleraine, attracting 156 participants.

And two UEFA B Diploma courses were run for 80 people, while 30 began their UEFA A Diploma. And this month (June 2023) a total of 60 coaches are due to be in Belfast to complete their UEFA A Licence, which they began last year.

The Irish FA's UEFA Pro diploma course for 2023 and 2024 began in April. The Coach Ed team allocated 20 places on the course, which runs every two years.

Among the students are former Northern Ireland defensive stalwarts Aaron Hughes and Gareth McAuley plus former internationals Lee Camp, Alex Bruce and Michael Gault.

Other well-known names on the course include Joey Barton, the ex-Manchester City, Newcastle United and QPR midfielder who is now manager of Bristol Rovers, and former Manchester United, Aston Villa and Norway defender Ronny Johnsen.

Andy Impey, who played for Leicester City and QPR and who is now a coach at QPR, is among the students, too, along with former Newcastle United and Everton midfielder Steve Watson.

The group also features ex-Manchester City and Newcastle midfielder Antoine Sibierski, Livingston boss David Martindale and Rangers first team coach Harry Watling.

Former Northern Ireland international and Crusaders Strikers player Danielle McDowell Tuffey, who is the Irish FA's Girls' Elite Youth Academy Manager, is studying for the Pro diploma as well along with Conall Murtagh, Liverpool's fitness coach.

FOUNDATION - OVERVIEW

In the second half of 2022 the last of the 'on hold' Irish FA Foundation programmes returned, with many exceeding pre-pandemic participation levels. The appetite to play football was seen throughout Northern Ireland as activity levels increased across the country.

With approximately 50 different programmes run annually by the Foundation, there were over 180,000 opportunities of engagement in 2022-23.

This engagement through flexible football formats varied from Small-Sided Games (6-12 years) to the amateur game and walking football (+60 years). Our multi-sport programmes also grew and developed.

Established partnerships with Ulster Rugby, Ulster GAA and Belfast Giants all continued to provide a unique opportunity to use sport to engage with the community.

Building on the legacy of the Northern Ireland senior women's team's involvement in Euro 2022, now more than ever young girls and boys are interested in playing football.

The Shooting Stars and UEFA Disney Playmakers programmes are once again our primary offer for girls. There was also an increase in the number of teams participating in girls-only Small-Sided Games sections.

Last June the Foundation officially launched its 2022-2025 Schools' Strategy, a strategy which confirms the commitment to increasing opportunities for boys and girls to play football in schools.

To meet the demand, in primary schools there were additional festivals, while in post-primary schools new competitions provided more opportunities to play football across all school years.

The education and employability team continue to expand their scope, working with new schools, colleges, clubs and universities.

Several graduates of our education/employability programmes have progressed into casual coaching positions with the Foundation and some have gone on to study for a BSc Hons Football Coaching and Business Management degree.

Co-designed by Ulster University and the Irish FA, the degree programme offers a pathway for experienced coaches, current players and those aspiring to progress within the football industry. The first cohort graduated last June and were

recognised at a celebration event at the National Football Stadium.

September marked the launch of a new People and Clubs online platform. The platform now provides online learning material to volunteers and supports clubs through the club accreditation process.

Together with partners the Irish FA Foundation has focused particular effort on ensuring that there is a safe, inclusive and accessible opportunity for every person in Northern Ireland to enjoy football.

Our community relations work has developed considerably. The Foundation works with groups of refugees, ethnic minority groups, LGBTQIA+ and many others.

Aligned with our many partners, our impact within these groups and communities has never been greater, with 2022-23 proving to be the highest engagement level we have on record.

Another major highlight came through the Fresh Start Through Sport programme, which was recognised by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster for its positive impact in society. This programme focuses on working with at risk youth.

The 2022-23 period has been a fantastic one for the Foundation with many new landmarks and achievements. Thank you to all our partners, funders and stakeholders, all of whom have been critical in allowing the Irish FA Foundation to run and develop programmes to offer football for all.

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 2022). It is available on the Irish FA website.

James Thompson

Director of Foundation Development
Irish FA Foundation



McDONALD'S PROGRAMMES

McDonald's Small-Sided Games (SSG) centres continue to attract thousands of young players across Northern Ireland.

At the end of 2022 the total number of players directly involved in McDonald's SSG centres was 11,313, consisting of 9864 boys and 1449 girls. The centres are co-ordinated by 101 regular volunteers.

Participation numbers post pandemic have been boosted by a shift in focus to a direct club development and assistance position by the Irish FA Foundation's Regional Grassroots Development Officers and the People and Clubs development officer.

Interaction with clubs has included information sharing, club visits and a series of innovative online webinars and workshops.

Girls' participation in SSG centres has increased dramatically, undoubtedly boosted by the Northern Ireland senior women's team's appearance at a first major tournament, last summer's Women's Euros in England.

Fun Football, a McDonald's flagship project, is also performing well across Northern Ireland.

The latest tranche of the programme, launched at the end of last season, is set to deliver more than 10.5 million hours of Fun Football over a four-year period in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, making it the largest grassroots participation programme in the UK.

The aim is to provide over one million children aged 5 to 11 with the opportunity to enjoy free football coaching over the 48-month period.

In Northern Ireland sessions now include provision for disability football, while sessions are also being run for kids from ethnic minorities.

The first of the new centres were delivered with a new delivery partner, MSCNI, in the autumn. A total of 746 children took part, including 142 girls, across 39 centres. Ten further Fun Football centres are running this month (June 2023).



11,313 children had participated in McDonald's Small-Sided Games Centres by the end of 2022.

McDONALD'S IRISH FA GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL AWARDS

The annual McDonald's Irish FA Grassroots Football Awards, which celebrated 22 years in Northern Ireland in 2022, recognise the unbelievable 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 2022 awards ceremony, hosted at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park for the first time back in September, featured a raft of high profile ambassadors, including World Cup winner Sir Geoff Hurst, Northern Ireland great Pat Jennings and Julie Nelson, the first Northern Ireland senior women's team player to win 100 caps.

Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood congratulated the winners and said he was thrilled to welcome them to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park. He said: "Our mission at the Irish FA is to promote, foster and develop football for all in Northern Ireland, and the work that these volunteers do year in, year out is nothing short of incredible."

Almost 600 entries were received from across Northern Ireland - across eight awards categories.

The 2022 winners in each category were:

- **McDonald's Lurgan** – Football Restaurant of the Year
- **St Malachy's Old Boys Youth (Belfast)** – Football for All Award
- **Omagh Futsal Club** – Futsal Award
- **Charlie Rush (Castle Juniors, Bangor)** – Young Volunteer of the Year
- **Malcolm Hanna (Dromara Village, Co Down)** – Volunteer of the Year
- **Chris Finlay (Ballymacash Rangers, Lisburn)** – Wes Gregg Coach of the Year
- **Lisburn Rangers Ladies** – Club of the Year
- **Gerry Doherty (Foyle Harps, Derry-Londonderry)** – People's Award for Outstanding Contribution to Grassroots



McDonald's Awards winners with the Irish FA's Malcolm Roberts at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

AMATEUR GAME DEVELOPMENT

The role of Amateur Football Game Developer within the Irish FA Foundation is focused on advancing amateur football by engaging and communicating with all stakeholders across the game.

During 2022-23 the Game Developer continued to work within all aspects of the amateur game across Northern Ireland.

A number of programmes were ongoing throughout the season along with pilot programmes being developed and refined to meet the needs of the amateur game.

Following a successful pilot in 2021 a Summer Festival again took place at the Jordanstown campus of Ulster University last summer and is now embedded as a regular event in the pre-season calendar.

The event partnered with Kingsbridge Private Hospital to pilot health checks for players from the eight participating teams along with spectators. Using the same format engagement has commenced with several leagues and clubs to roll health checks out on a wider scale.

An alumni membership programme pilot, aimed at retaining members within clubs, continued with more than 1400 members from two well established clubs taking part. A review of the pilot is under way to enable the development of a standardised model for further rollout.

A pilot recreational programme, targeted at NHS staff, is seeking to provide opportunities for recreational participation in football.

The programme is continuing to develop and has established a base at Colin Glen in Belfast as part of the Stadium Community Benefits Initiative.

To date the programme has had over 200 players participating and has provided opportunities for students from Belfast Metropolitan College to gain experience in events organisation. The programme was shortlisted for Project of the Year at the Sport NI SportMaker Awards 2022.

A voluntary club insurance scheme has been well received by clubs across Northern Ireland.

The pilot centralised procurement of £10 million public liability insurance resulted in lower premiums for amateur clubs and leagues.

Following a successful pilot in 2021 within the futsal and Carnbane leagues, the pilot was extended in 2022-23 across 14 leagues, with

191 clubs, leagues or regional associations participating.

Learnings from the pilot are under review with the possibility of a wider rollout across all amateur football in Northern Ireland.

A voluntary individual player insurance scheme has provided a similar centralised procurement of insurance related to personal accident insurance for amateur players.

Following a successful pilot in 2021 for player personal accident insurance in the futsal leagues, the pilot was extended to amateur leagues. So far 6168 players, including 236 youth players, have joined the programme, which has provided financial support to several players following injury whilst playing football.

A National Coaching Certificate for Adult Players has been developed to improve the standard of coaching within the adult amateur game. Three pilots have been successfully run and coaching resources developed through Global Coach. More than 80 candidates enrolled on the coaching courses and positive feedback from the pilots will allow refinement for rollout in Northern Ireland across 2023.

To meet the needs of referees in the amateur game considerable work has been done with the Irish FA's refereeing department to address the issue of referee development.

Five free refereeing courses have been run across Northern Ireland, including a women-only course.

And partnerships have been developed with external stakeholders to address the issue of a lack of referees, with plans in place to look at ex-player and youth referee recruitment along with a referee respect campaign.

In terms of partnership work and club development, to support the development of clubs a Minimum Operating Standard online resource was created and then launched in late 2022.

It has proven to be popular; to date it has been successfully adopted by 98 clubs across Northern Ireland in 2023.

Review is ongoing and findings from this will assist

SPORTS INSPIRE AWARDS

The Sports Inspire Awards were launched just over two years ago to celebrate the positive impact of volunteering.

The awards are 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.

And they recognise young volunteers aged between 16 and 24 from each of the three sports for 50, 100 or 200 hours of volunteering at their clubs.

The second Sports Inspire Awards ceremony, where clubs have the opportunity to show their appreciation for those volunteers who have helped develop and grow their club at the grassroots level, was staged at Belfast City Hall in March 2023.

During the event Ellie Scott from Lisburn Rangers highlighted the opportunities for young women volunteering in sport and playing sport.

As a goalkeeping coach Ellie has helped many young players develop their skills and has shown how young people can inspire their peers.

James Donaghy from John Mitchel's Gaelic Athletic Club, based in Claudy, Co Londonderry, spoke of his volunteering achievements assisting with coaching to develop young players.

Rachel Armstrong from Clogher Valley Rugby Club highlighted that playing sport was not always an option for young people but that should not put off non-players from getting involved in sport in some way.

The event was attended by Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood, Ulster GAA President Ciaran McLaughlin and Greg Irwin, chair of the rugby committee at Ulster Rugby.

Through Sport - A Home for Lifelong Volunteering DfC supports the three sports governing bodies by funding two full-time posts in each organisation.

Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood, Ulster GAA President Ciaran McLaughlin and Greg Irwin, chair of the rugby committee at Ulster Rugby, join volunteers from the three sports at the 2023 Sports Inspire Awards.



GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

The Northern Ireland senior women's team's appearance at the Euros last summer has helped to boost participation numbers in girls' and women's football.

During 2022-23 the number of girls-only Small-Sided Games (SSG) centres expanded from five to seven.

The centres are thriving and have seen a huge increase in the number of registered teams over the past few years - and 2022-23 was significant as 80 new teams entered the two new centres.

Just over 200 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. This is a 66% increase on the 2021-22 season (121 teams).

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.

The Irish FA Foundation also piloted single age bands in the Antrim and Newtownabbey programme as well as in the Belfast centre. The introduction of single age bands led to an increase in the number of teams in Antrim and Newtownabbey, from 37 up to 53, while Belfast has amalgamated with Lisburn and Castlereagh City and has also enjoyed a slight increase in the number of participating teams.

One SSG centre that stands out is Fermanagh and Omagh. The number of teams has increased from 17 last season to 41.

The Electric Ireland Shooting Stars programme, which gives young girls aged four to 11 an introduction to football, was delivered by Irish FA Foundation staff through schools' festivals. In 2022-23 they staged 60 festivals which were attended by 7523 participants.

The programme creates a clear pathway for young females from school to community. With 15 centres across the country, delivering to 1007 participants during 2022-23, the aim is to make sure every girl in Northern Ireland has the opportunity to be part of the programme.

UEFA Playmakers, the programme which introduces girls aged five to eight to football through movement, play and the magic of Disney storytelling, attracted 966 new participants in 2022-23.

The sessions were delivered across 28 new schools close to a Shooting Stars centre, helping to encourage girls to enter the Foundation's girls' and women's player pathway.

During the year the Foundation trained up 14 new Playmaker deliverers to help with the rollout of the programme in schools. The Foundation believes both Playmakers and Shooting Stars have a direct impact on the number of teams playing in girls-only Small-Sided Games centres.

Meanwhile, 20 women from 13 different clubs across Northern Ireland graduated from the Female Football Leadership Programme at the end of 2022.

They were presented with their graduation certificates by Irish FA President Conrad Kirkwood at a special ceremony.

The event featured a panel discussion with Northern Ireland senior women's team captain Marissa Callaghan and defender Julie Nelson who highlighted the importance of developing and equipping women for leadership positions within football.

Both Marissa and Julie subsequently joined four other women on an Irish FA/Electric Ireland Elite Female Leadership Programme.

Part of the Game Changers movement and developed in response to the Irish FA's five-year strategy to grow the women's game at all levels, the programme was a seven-month course based on the latest neuroscience, positive psychology and peak performance research.

The others on the programme were Northern Ireland Women's U17/U19 manager Gail Redmond and Northern Ireland Women's Football Association trio Patricia McCullough, Elaine Junk and Colette Young.

DISABILITY FOOTBALL

The coaching programme continues to develop in special educational needs (SEN) settings across Northern Ireland.

Free coaching blocks remain popular, with 23 schools receiving 18 hours of coaching each during 2022-23, with more than 500 pupils benefitting thanks to the support and delivery of the Irish FA Foundation's Let Them Play Officers.

The Foundation continues to support the creation of disability sections in mainstream clubs as part of the Inclusive Clubs project.

In 2022 disability sections were created at Cliftonville and Ballymena United. Support was also given to Orchardville (Belfast) and Destined (Londonderry) who both now operate football teams for those with a learning disability.

The Foundation is also currently working with Dungannon Swifts, Cookstown Youth and Moyola Park to address the lack of opportunity in the Mid Ulster region. It is hoped all three clubs will have disability provision by the end of 2023. Dungannon Swifts and Moyola Park are already running pilot programmes.

There are currently 59 clubs across Northern Ireland providing regular participation opportunities for those with a disability – and the Foundation continues to run several competitions for the clubs.

During the season 28 teams competed in the Irish FA Foundation Senior Disability League across five ability bands. More than 80 games were played per monthly session between October 2022 and May 2023.

The winners of each section were: Premiership – Linfield; Championship – Glentoran B; League 1 – Antrim and Newtownabbey DFC; League 2 – CSP; Conference – Hillsborough Boys DFC.

The Irish FA Foundation Junior Disability League saw 18 clubs competing in two age categories, 7-10 and 11-14. And there were two divisions in the 11-14 age band to suit ability levels.

The winners of each section were: 7-10 – Glentoran; 11-14 Premiership – Linfield; 11-14 Championship – Lisburn Distillery.

The George Best Community Cup attracted 53 teams from across the UK and Ireland. The annual five-a-side competition for adults with a

disability was once again staged at the Billy Neill complex in Dundonald at the end of June 2022.

There were four ability bands (divisions) in the competition. The winners were: Premiership – Linfield; Championship – Eaton Socon (Cambridgeshire); League 1 – Glentoran; League 2 – Hillsborough Boys.

The Junior Cerebral Palsy development squad continues to grow with more than 20 players registered and they enjoyed competing in the Junior Disability League this season.

Meanwhile, Trailblazers Powerchair Football Club (Belfast) won the AIPF Powerchair League that involves clubs from across the island of Ireland. Lightning PFC (Lisburn) finished in seventh place.

Northern Ireland's Powerchair team finished in third place at the 2023 Home Nations Invitational Tournament.

The event formed part of the team's ongoing preparations for the FIPFA Powerchair World Cup in Australia this October.

Northern Ireland drew 1-1 with hosts Republic of Ireland, 0-0 with Scotland and lost 2-0 to England before defeating the Scots 1-0 in the third place play-off.

Coach education remains an important supporting structure in this area of football development.

During 2022-23 six IFA Level 1 Coaching Disabled Footballers courses were delivered to 100-plus coaches.

A two-hour disability awareness module was also delivered as part of the Connect and Stay Onside programmes to nine groups, attracting over 100 participants.

The Castlereagh Glentoran Supporters' Club Ulster Disability Footballer of the Year 2023 award was won by Belfast Trailblazers Powerchair player, and Northern Ireland's top goalscorer in international powerchair football, Patrick Cumiskey.

Patrick had a great season as Trailblazers won the AIPF league and cup double. And Patrick also won the AIPF player of the season award.



COACHING IN SCHOOLS

The Schools Sports Programme, funded by the Department of Education, is a sports coaching programme for primary schools in Northern Ireland.



It is delivered by the Irish FA Foundation's Let Them Play Officers and Ulster GAA coaches and is aimed at pupils aged 7-11. The programme is designed to provide specialist expertise to support delivery of the Key Stage 2 PE curriculum – and it ran in approximately 100 primary schools across Northern Ireland in 2022-23.

On a weekly basis Let Them Play Officers deliver 240 sessions during curriculum time in the areas of athletics, dance, games and gymnastics with the aim of raising confidence, resilience, self-esteem and motivation of all pupils.

The Sports Programme helps introduce children to new sports and skills and aims to develop a lifelong love of sport. It is an exciting opportunity for schools to strengthen and deepen the delivery of the PE curriculum with support provided to teachers and school leaders. During 2022-23 the sessions were attended by 11,534 pupils (5840 boys and 5694 girls).

Also, 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.

The sessions focused on increased sleep, hydration, child-sized portions, healthy food choices, 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. The programme was delivered to 1503 pupils during 2022-23 (761 boys and 742 girls).

In addition PE sessions focusing on topics such as bullying, healthy lifestyle choices and resilience were provided specifically during relevant awareness weeks. Themed sessions were held in November for Anti-Bullying Week and in February 2023 for Children's Mental Health Week.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

The Irish FA Foundation’s Education and Employability Programme has been expanding and progressively changing over time.

Across Northern Ireland 36 educational institutions have participated in different aspects of the programme.

Many students received learning opportunities during 2022-23, with 681 students between the ages of 14 and 18 and more than 30 teachers upskilling themselves.

The students who participated also had the chance to gain experience by working on holiday camps and many other Foundation activities.

They worked in the council areas of North Down and Ards, Belfast, Causeway Coast and Glens plus Antrim and Newtownabbey.

The Education Team welcomed several new schools to the programme during 2022-23, while new courses and projects were also created.

The Foundation is aiming to offer more possibilities to young people throughout

Northern Ireland thanks to plans to collaborate with several new schools, starting in September 2023.

It also continues to work with and deliver Open College Network courses and in 2022-23 it delivered three Street Soccer National Coaching Certificate courses across the country, helping several individuals to embark on coaching journeys.

Meanwhile, as a result of its affiliation with Ulster University Jordanstown and the part-time degree programme in Football Coaching and Business Management, the Foundation was able to formalise its placement programme involving students from the university.

It was agreed that third year students from the degree programme would join the Irish FA for a six to eight month internship in a variety of disciplines.



Coleraine was the location for one of three Street Soccer National Coaching Certificate courses that were delivered in 2022/23.

CLUB AND VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

The People and Clubs programme has continued to receive recognition from Sport NI through financial support.

It was funded by the Club Environment Transition Programme in 2022-23 and it looked at building on and implementing initiatives that were set out in the People and Clubs Development Plan (2019).

Online webinars were delivered in areas such as secretary training, treasurer training, being a parent in a football club, maximising people in clubs and engaging female participation within clubs.

The webinars were free of charge for clubs and across 10 topics there were more than 200 participants.

The big event during the year came in September with the launch of the People and Clubs online platform.

More than 50 clubs representing all 11 district council areas in Northern Ireland were welcomed to the National Football Stadium to hear about the new online platform available to them.

The platform currently hosts an accreditation portal, a library of club templates, a link to six free e-learning modules and a library of media resources, which include podcasts, videos and webinar recordings. The platform, which will evolve and develop over time, has boosted the Foundation's digital support for clubs.

The six e-learning modules have been a real success. The modules include club development planning, attracting and retaining volunteers, supporting club members, chairperson training, developing club culture and positive engagement with parents at clubs.

Since their launch alongside the other elements of the online platform in September there have been around 850 enrolments across the six free courses.

People and Clubs accreditation has also been refined following consultations with clubs, leagues and relevant stakeholders.

This refinement has made the accreditation more attractive and achievable for clubs and puts them in a greater position of readiness for safety, development and funding opportunities. Currently more than 60 clubs across Northern Ireland are working through the accreditation process.

Volunteers are an integral part of events and activities run by the association and the foundation.

Large scale events rely heavily on the input of volunteers, while international match nights would not run without them.

With more and more events being staged post the Covid pandemic, the team of volunteers has grown.

There are now more opportunities to volunteer at international games and at Irish Cup semi-finals and finals (men's and women's).

At the beginning of 2023 there was a recruitment drive to make more people around the country aware of the opportunities to volunteer at the Foundation/Irish FA. It highlighted the wide range of bespoke opportunities for volunteers to engage in both football-related and community-based activities.

The Foundation is also looking to develop a new online platform which will host all volunteers, making it easier for them to find out about volunteering opportunities across the foundation/association. This platform, due to be launched later this year, will also ensure volunteers are recognised for their volunteering efforts.

Also later this year a further recruitment drive will begin to attract volunteers for the Men's Under-19 European Championships being hosted by the association in 2024.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Irish FA Foundation staff continued to deliver positive community relations work through the reach of the Foundation and the power of football.

The Connect programme offers good relations and educational modules to increase diversity and mutual understanding through football. Working with delivery partners, it is often bespoke to the needs of participating groups in order to have the most impact.

Connect, which also offers pathways into the game via volunteering, refereeing and coaching qualifications, continued to grow in 2022-23. Programmes were run for various groups, from young people to refugees.

Common Ground, the Foundation's anti-sectarianism course supporting good relations within sport, was delivered to numerous clubs and communities as part of the Connect programme.

And the Foundation's racism awareness and equality course, Everybody's Game, was also made widely available across Northern Ireland in 2022-23.

It was run in youth settings, schools, clubs, programmes for refugees and as part of the Connect programme.

Everybody's Game workshops are continually evolving to reflect contemporary issues surrounding football.

The UEFA Football and Refugees programme has allowed the Foundation to directly help refugees and asylum seekers within Northern Ireland.

Foundation staff have been running weekly sessions to accommodate as many groups as possible. Sessions were hosted at four different venues. Several refugees also took part in other Foundation programmes.

As part of a focus on integration, tickets to international matches as well as stadium tours were provided.

The Foundation also ran tournaments, while participants directly benefitted from a staff kit donation project.

In addition a Refugee National Coaching Certificate (NCC) and Connect programme for male and female refugees was delivered. And participants were signposted to volunteer opportunities within the Foundation and clubs.

During 2022-23, in partnership with Andy Allen Veterans Support NI, the Foundation supported a number of projects and programmes for veterans.

One of the highlights was a Family Fun Day staged at Ardnaval Outdoor Activity Centre back in August.

A range of coach education opportunities were provided, from National Coaching Certificate courses up to UEFA A courses.

Families of veterans have been key to the partnership. Stadium tours as well as seasonal camps have been organised by veterans and their families with support from Foundation and Irish FA staff.

Stadium Community Outreach

In partnership with community groups, the Foundation continued to provide opportunities and activities for residents who live near the stadium.

During the Christmas period there was a festive ball for young people. And for seniors in the area a tea dance was held at the National Football Stadium with entertainment and a Christmas dinner.

Prior to international games those living close to the stadium were invited to fan zones.

The Foundation also ran seasonal camps for kids as part of its engagement work with the Irish FA's neighbours.



FRESH START THROUGH SPORT/STAY ONSIDE

The Fresh Start Through Sport programme was successfully delivered by the Irish FA Foundation in 2022-23.

The initiative focuses on young males and females aged 16-24 in Fresh Start areas across Northern Ireland who are at risk from paramilitarism and/or organised crime.

Ulster University provided a positive evaluation of the programme, which is supported by Department for Communities, Department of Justice (Ending the Harm) and PSNI.

It is delivered by the Foundation in partnership with Ulster Rugby, Ulster GAA and the Belfast Giants.

During 2022-23 the programme was delivered to 100 young people in east Belfast, Ards, Lurgan and Derry-Londonderry.

The inclusion of an ambassador programme and OCN (Open College Network) qualification in sport and volunteering enhanced the already successful programme.

Along with Ulster University, the Foundation also made a presentation to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster on how sport can be used to tackle paramilitarism.

The Irish FA Foundation's innovative Stay Onside programme, which is run in partnership with PSNI and Northern Ireland Prison Service, was delivered across all prison establishments in Northern Ireland and in the community to young people and young adults at risk of offending.

During 2022-23 Hydebank Wood College in south Belfast facilitated the delivery of the first female-only programme for inmates, and it proved to be a big success.

HMP Maghaberry and HMP Magilligan had several courses delivered, with HMP Maghaberry seeing both integrated and separated prisoners complete the programme.

Ulster University has been involved in designing the delivery of the modules, which have focused on a range of topics linked to the sociology of football.

Stay Onside community programmes continue to expand, with a wide range of programmes planned for delivery.

These programmes will help communities tackle anti-social behaviour, create safer communities and help young people into playing, coaching, refereeing and/or volunteering.

The success of both Fresh Start Through Sport and Stay Onside led to the United Nations funding the delivery of a new project which focuses on young people at risk of violent extremism.

The Foundation and the Belfast Giants delivered four programmes - in Coleraine, north Belfast, Carrickfergus and Newry - to more than 80 young people and adults. In May representatives from the United Nations attended an evaluation and celebration event at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

The project was one of 10 chosen for delivery throughout the world - and endorsed the excellent work the Foundation is doing in this area.

There was a particular focus on female and ethnic minorities engagement.

As part of the initiative one of the programme ambassadors attended an event in Qatar prior to the start of FIFA World Cup 2022. She shared her story and inspired other young people.

A new Erasmus+ FAIRER Project is also under way. The Foundation has joined the Romanian FA, Maltese FA and the Latvian FA in delivering a three-year programme to tackle radicalisation both in stadiums and the community. Reggia University in Italy will evaluate the programme.

Partners within Northern Ireland include PSNI, Department for Communities, Department of Justice, NIFL, Larne FC, Glentoran FC, Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs and Ulster University.

SCHOOLS' FOOTBALL

The Irish FA Foundation was once again heavily involved in helping to organise football and futsal competitions for boys' and girls' teams from post-primary schools and primary schools across the country.

St Columb's College from Derry-Londonderry were the winners of the Translink Schools' Gold Cup for the third year running in 2022-2023, narrowly pipping Belfast school St Malachy's College to the overall title.

The annual competition involves eight post-primary schools in Northern Ireland who have been awarded the Gold Schools Quality Mark accreditation by the Foundation – and matches are played at U13, U15 and U17 levels with points earned in group games and at a finals day, which in 2023 was staged at Ballymena Showgrounds.

Integrated College Dungannon lifted the U18 Danske Bank Schools' Cup for the first time in their history thanks to a deserved 2-1 win over holders St Columb's College in the final at the end of March.

Attackers Liam Corr and Kenny Ximenes were both on target for ICD, who largely bossed the match at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

In the Electric Ireland Schools' Cup competitions for girls' teams there was a new competition for Year 8 teams. It was won by Kilkeel High School, who edged past north Belfast's Blessed Trinity College in the decider.

In the Junior Cup final (U14) Glengormley's Edmund Rice College defeated Newbridge Integrated College (Banbridge), while Holy Cross College Strabane beat Kilkeel High in the Senior Cup (U18) decider.

Ten schools from across Northern Ireland took part in the Danske Bank Girls' 11-a-side finals at the Valley Leisure Centre in Newtownabbey. Parkhall Integrated (Antrim) were victorious in the final after impressing in the group stages. Rathmore Grammar (Finaghy) were the beaten finalists.

Belfast school Holy Child PS and Waringstown PS from Co Down were the overall winners in the National Primary Schools Futsal Finals.

Holy Child defeated Ebrington Primary in the final to secure the boys' trophy, while Waringstown won the decider against Bush Primary to lift the girls' trophy. The finals were played at Belfast's Shankill Leisure Centre in March.

The post-primary national futsal finals for boys' and girls' teams were held in Shankill LC in November. The competitions, which featured a series of regional heats, attracted 230 teams and 2500 participants.

In the boys' section Bangor Academy defeated Belfast Boys' Model in the Year 9 final, while in the Year 11 decider Shimna Integrated College (Newcastle) were victorious against Belfast's Lagan College.

In the girls' section Belfast's Blessed Trinity defeated Assumption (Ballynahinch) in the Year 9 final, while Edmund Rice College defeated Ballyclare Secondary to claim the Year 11 crown.

Northern Ireland's further education colleges also took part in a national futsal competition.

Four regional qualifiers were staged in Newry, Coleraine, Omagh and Belfast, with 20 teams competing. The top two teams in the regionals progressed to the national finals at Shankill LC where the overall winners were South West College Enniskillen. Football Management were runners-up.

There was also an inaugural competition for girls' teams. Attracting eight teams, it was staged at Omagh Leisure Centre. The winners were Northern Regional College Coleraine, with Belfast Met the runners-up.



COMMERCIAL

With responsibilities across a wide range of activities, from partnerships, ticketing, hospitality and stadium tours to merchandise, fan experience and conferencing and events, the 2022-23 period was both productive and successful for the Irish FA's sales and marketing team.

Kicking off with Northern Ireland's appearance at UEFA Women's Euro 2022, a campaign to promote the senior women's team's involvement in the finals was launched along with new bespoke kits.

Fan zones were successfully run home and away, while all activity was supported through the delivery of multiple national advertising campaigns alongside partners.

And the sales and marketing team were delighted to see this work recognised when winning the Excellence in Marketing Award at this year's Belfast Telegraph Business Awards.

Working with partners in adidas and JD, the team helped to launch a new range of training wear along with three new kits based on Northern Ireland's land and sea.

The home shirt, worn by both men's and women's teams, was based on the country's landscape, while the men's away shirt was inspired by the Harland and Wolff cranes in Belfast and the women's away kit was inspired by the iconic Giant's Causeway.

From a commercial standpoint the team were delighted to secure several new partnerships and renewals.

The highlight of these was the welcome introduction of M&S Food as part of a multi-year partnership which aims to use the power of football to help families make healthier eating choices as part of an 'Eat Well, Play Well' campaign. In addition M&S Food became the title partner to the Irish FA Foundation's football camps.

Electric Ireland renewed the successful Game Changers partnership for a further two years while helping to launch the Electric Ireland Elite Female Leadership Programme, which recently concluded with a trip to UEFA HQ for the participants.

The team were also pleased to welcome Cathedral Eye Clinic and Isuzu as associate partners to the Samuel Gelston's Whiskey Irish Cup in multi-year deals.

Irish FA Tours received a four-star visitor attraction award from Tourism NI and was recognised by Trip Advisor with the Travelers Choice Award.

The team successfully launched NFS Events, the association's new conferencing and events business, with a sold-out business breakfast event at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park featuring Northern Ireland manager Michael O'Neill.

The lounges at the stadium played host to multiple business events throughout 2022-23 and the team are looking forward to seeing the business develop and grow across the coming years.

With several exciting new partnerships and activations in the pipeline, the sales and marketing team are optimistic for the year ahead as they continue to meet the targets set out in the association's five-year strategy.

COMMUNICATIONS

The 2022-23 season proved to be a busy period for the Irish FA's communications team, from providing engaging digital and website content to producing publications, media relations and stakeholder relations.

The 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.

UEFA Women's Euro 2022 set the tone. An array of engaging content was produced, including a special Euros show, while several press conferences were staged at the senior women's team's training/media centre at the Stoneham Lane Football Complex in Hampshire.

Written press, from Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and across Europe, were accommodated at the press conferences, while broadcast media captured footage of training and conducted interviews on-site. UEFA press conferences and post match interviews at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton were part of the mix, too.

Documentaries were produced by the team to capture the senior women's team's journey to/at the Euros and a book charting their journey was published.

On the senior men's team front every game of the UEFA Nations League campaign was extensively covered along with the return of manager Michael O'Neill in December and the Euro 2024 qualifiers in March.

More compelling content than ever before was created to help tell the story of football in Northern Ireland.

This involved video production, editing, graphic design, penning editorial and managing growing social media platforms (association and national teams) as well as keeping the Irish FA website – it enjoyed a record-breaking year (2.86 million page views) – fresh and dynamic.

Social media channels are vital touchpoints in a digital first society and numbers have grown across the association's nine platforms (Irish FA and Northern Ireland teams). There is now a total audience of over 711,000 (up 51,000 year-on-year).

TikTok is firmly established as the biggest standalone social audience, up 20% to 154,000

followers. Northern Ireland's YouTube channel had its best year for growth with a 29% increase, while Instagram was up by 8%. Other established channels, Facebook and Twitter, continue to grow steadily.

In October the digital content team fought off stiff competition to win three top awards, recognising excellence in their social media output. The team scooped the In-House Team of the Year, Most Innovative Use of Social Media and Best Overall Use of Social Media gongs at the Northern Ireland Social Media Awards.

A focus on live streaming continued, covering U21 games, development age international matches and all Irish FA-run domestic cup finals with the exception of the Irish Cup (BBC). The team also began streaming selected senior men's team press conferences. This activity helped to boost YouTube audience numbers.

In-depth coverage of the Irish Cup was provided across the Irish FA's growing social media channels, culminating in Crusaders' win over Ballymena United. The team also reported the results of every Irish FA-run domestic cup game as well as delivering match reports and photos.

Support for the sales and marketing department continued, with the team delivering on several content streams to support the association's sponsors and partners. This included set-piece videos, editorial, photography and content for e-mail marketing. The joint work was recognised with an excellence in marketing award at the Belfast Telegraph Business Awards.

The communications team has also supported the Irish FA Foundation by promoting all aspects of its work. A digital communications officer was recruited in October to help further highlight the Foundation's many activities.

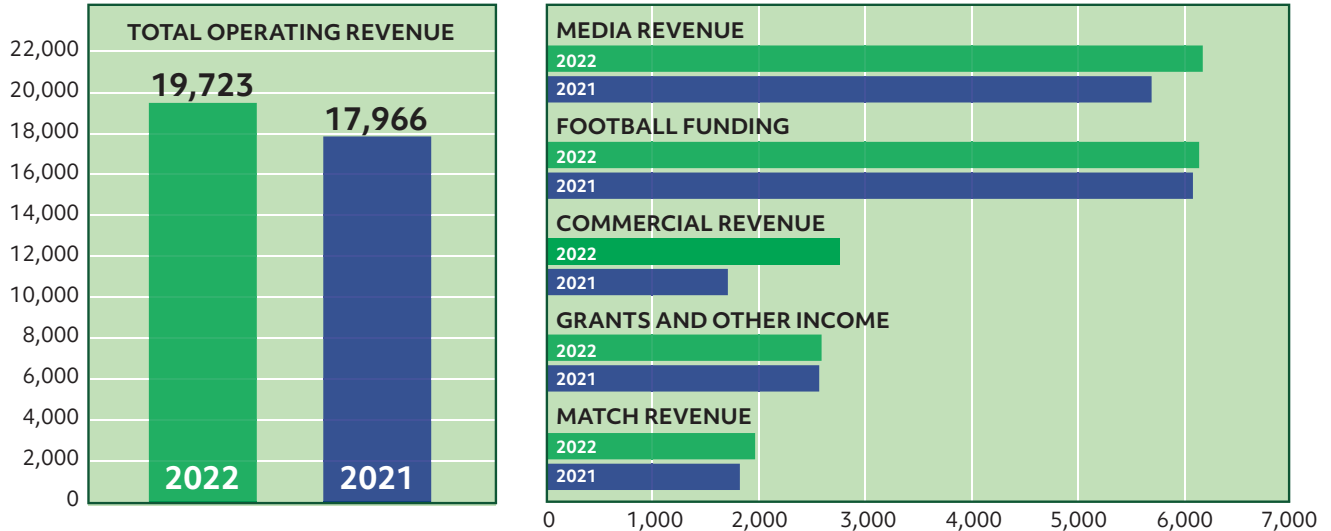
Stakeholder relations (public affairs) were high on the agenda during 2022-23, especially in seeking political support within Northern Ireland for the UK and Ireland Euro 2028 bid.



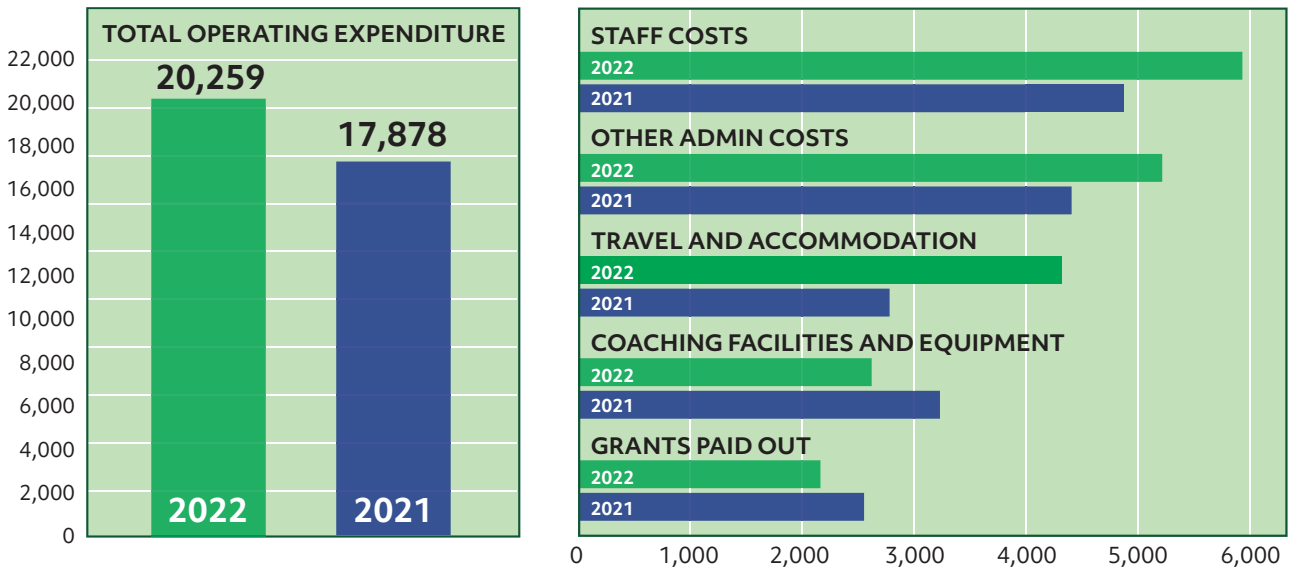
FINANCE

For the year ended 31 December 2022 the Irish FA had total revenue of £19.7m (2021: £18m) and total expenditure of £20.3m (2021: £17.9m).

The main categories of revenue are analysed as follows:



The main categories of expenditure are analysed as follows:



During the year to December 2022 the economic environment had a significant impact upon the Association's ability to deliver against its core objectives whilst maintaining a breakeven financial position. Cost pressures driven by inflation contributed towards a trading deficit of £536k across the Association (2021: profit £88k).

In addition to the trading deficit, loss before taxation was impacted during the year by fluctuations in foreign currency and a reduction in value of investments resulting in a further deficit of £1,161k (2021: increase £523k). This further deficit is split between fluctuations in foreign currency resulting in both realised and unrealised losses of £562k and a reduction in investments held of £599k.

The final net result after taxation for financial year 2022 was a deficit of £1,361k (2021: profit £257k).

FINANCE

Statement of total comprehensive income for all Irish FA activities for the year ended 31 December 2022

	2022 £'000	2021 £'000
Total revenue	19,723	17,966
Cost of sales	(16,047)	(14,605)
Gross profit	3,676	3,361
Net administrative expenses	(4,212)	(3,273)
Trading profit /(loss)	(536)	88
Other gains/(losses) - net	(1,161)	523
Operating profit/(loss)	(1,697)	611
Income from other fixed asset investments	0	2
Interest (payable)/receivable and similar income	0	(6)
Profit/(Loss) before taxation	(1,697)	607
Tax on profit/(loss)	336	(350)
Profit/(Loss) for the financial year	(1,361)	257
Total comprehensive income/(expense) for the year	(1,361)	257

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 2022

	2022	2021
	£'000	£'000
Fixed assets		
Intangible assets	84	169
Tangible assets	32,747	33,685
Investments	4,720	5,319
Debtors: Amounts falling due after more than one year	1,680	1,980
	39,231	41,153
Current assets		
Inventory	24	13
Debtors	3,925	6,170
Cash at bank and in hand	6,792	7,250
	10,741	13,433
amounts falling due within one year	(12,579)	(15,120)
Net current liabilities	(1,838)	(1,687)
Total assets less current liabilities	37,393	39,466
amounts falling due after more than one year	(27,661)	(28,038)
Provisions for liabilities	(505)	(840)
Net assets	9,227	10,588
Reserves		
Investment revaluation reserve	3,090	3,689
Profit and loss account	6,137	6,899
Total reserves	9,227	10,588

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





Irish Football Association

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

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