

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION ANNUAL REPORT 2019-2020



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The Irish Football Association's Annual Report 2019-20 was compiled, edited and written by Nigel Tilson. It was designed by Norman Boyd.



PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

By this stage of a season all leagues and cup competitions are normally done and dusted.

However, we are living in unprecedented times. The coronavirus pandemic has turned normal life on its head and has wreaked havoc globally.

Football is not immune from Covid-19, far from it, so everyone involved in the game we love must continue to do everything in their power to thwart the spread of this terrible disease.

I've been heartened by football's response to the pandemic. Clubs across Northern Ireland, at senior, intermediate and junior level, have not been found wanting in helping their respective communities to cope in these difficult times. They have been rolling their sleeves up and helping out with food distribution, medicine deliveries and much more.

And I would also like to thank association staff who have answered the call to provide support to isolated and vulnerable people in their communities.

It now appears unlikely that our 2019-20 domestic season will be completed given the Northern Ireland Executive's five-step plan for easing the Covid-19 lockdown and social distancing rules.

However, as an association we will continue to lobby various organisations so that football at all levels, in particular at senior level, can be sustained going forward.

Four of the association's annual cup competitions – Irish Cup, Intermediate Cup, Junior Cup and Harry Cavan Youth Cup – have been affected by the pandemic. They have all reached either the final or semi-final stage so we would hope to complete them in due course.

It means we have had only one Irish FA competition winner in the past nine months. We have to go all the way back to September when Glentoran Women lifted the Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup. And congratulations to them on their cup success.



Northern Ireland legend Aaron Hughes is presented with a commemorative plate by Irish FA President David Martin as a thank-you for the defender's incredible service in a Northern Ireland shirt.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

On the international front we were all sad to see Michael O'Neill leave his role as senior men's international manager in April.

We have had an incredible journey with Michael over the past eight years or so. The highlight of his tenure was Northern Ireland's appearance at UEFA EURO 2016 in France, however he has left us with many more memorable moments.

In our latest qualification campaign we again challenged strongly in our group - we were in contention up to the last double header - and secured a Euro 2020 play-off semi-final berth against Bosnia and Herzegovina.

That match against the Bosnians and the subsequent Path B final have, of course, been postponed due to the coronavirus outbreak, but I look forward to the games being played at some point in the autumn.

I am also pleased with the progress of our senior women's team under the guidance of Kenny Shiels. We are playing a more effective style of football and there's a good chance we might secure a play-off berth for the next Women's Euro final tournament.

Northern Ireland was, of course, due to host this year's Men's U19 Euro final tournament in July. It's disappointing it has been postponed due to Covid-19, although perhaps an autumn or spring 2020 completion may yet happen.

Looking back on what has been a strange season, for obvious reasons, I unearthed a few personal highlights.

In September it was exciting to report that Belfast had been selected to host the UEFA Super Cup Final in 2021. Mind you, it will be a somewhat nervous wait to see how Northern Ireland exits coronavirus and if the restrictions that prevail going forward will have an impact on our staging of that event.



The President with Pat Jennings and Fran Gavin (FAI) at the launch of the Unite the Union Champions Cup.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION



The President presenting Ashley Hutton with a commemorative cap to mark her 100 appearances for the Northern Ireland senior women's international team.

The following month I was delighted to launch the Unite the Union Champions Cup, a new competition to be contested annually by the champions of Northern Ireland and the champions of the Republic of Ireland. It's yet another collaborative project with our friends and neighbours at the Football Association of Ireland and it sits nicely alongside the Presidents' Cup competition for the Junior Cup winners on both sides of the border.

The inaugural Unite the Union Champions Cup was won by Dundalk, who defeated Linfield 7-1 on aggregate over two legs in November. This season's Presidents' Cup final was staged at Ferney Park in Ballinamallard in September. Enniskillen Rangers faced Tipperary side St Michael's, who lifted the trophy thanks to a 3-0 victory.

Referees play an important role in football. The sport could simply not function without them, so I was pleased to be able to host a special ceremony at the start of this year to give recognition to the growing band of referees here who are now on the FIFA list.

Another highlight for me was chairing the AGM of IFAB, the game's law-making body. It was a pleasure to host FIFA President Gianni Infantino and several other well-known faces from the world of football.

Finally, my wish is that a cure is found for Covid-19 as soon as possible and that the beautiful game recovers after lockdown and continues to thrill billions of people around the globe.

David J Martin

President
Irish Football Association

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

The coronavirus pandemic has changed all of our lives in 2020, and football in Northern Ireland has not been immune to its effects.

A season that was moving towards its exciting climax in a wide range of league and cup competitions throughout the country was brought to a full stop in March as we came to realise the devastating effect of community transmission of the Covid-19 disease.

It is fair to say that this is not the chief executive's report I would have ever expected to write at the end of a football season in Northern Ireland.

In truth, of course, the football season has not yet completed, and may well not complete.

We are currently working with all stakeholders in football, such as clubs, leagues and referees for example, and government departments in the restored Northern Ireland Executive, such as Health and Communities, as well as Sport Northern Ireland and The Executive Office to make sense of when football might safely return.



Irish FA chief executive Patrick Nelson welcomes Arsene Wenger (FIFA Head of Global Football Development) to Belfast. IFAB's annual business meeting was held in the city in December.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

The five-stage plan produced by the Executive in May starts to provide a roadmap and the association together with the other major sports governing bodies are developing plans for returns to both training and play. We will bring football back as soon as we possibly can, however only when we all feel it is safe to do so.

Without football to look after in the short term, the association adopted four main temporary priorities to guide our activities during the current time. Until we can get to the 'new normal' these are: look after our stakeholders; facilitate or provide financial assistance; help Northern Ireland, and fill the current gap with football.

This has involved, among other things, lobbying UEFA to bring forward solidarity funds for NIFL clubs, lobbying the government extensively regarding the cash grants available for businesses in Northern Ireland, liaising with HMRC on behalf of clubs to defer PAYE and VAT, and providing regular information briefings for all clubs on the range of support tools available to them during the pandemic, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

We have also helped to coordinate a considerable amount of club volunteer activity, working with our local councils and the Executive's civil contingencies hub in Belfast. And to ensure we don't forget what we all know and love our social media team in particular have been very active generating new content and also organising reruns of classic matches - who can forget the night against Greece in 2015 or the Kings of Lyon game against Ukraine at UEFA EURO 2016?

Prior to the enforced interruption of our activities, association staff were very busy carrying out our usual wide range of business activities throughout the country.

Our Let Them Play and Regional Grassroots Development Officers work in local communities within all 11 local council areas to bring the enjoyment of football to everyone who wants to play.

Our new UEFA-backed academy at Ulster University helps our budding international stars get ready for their journey into the professional game, while our women's football development team work hard to bring girls into the game and give them performance training opportunities all the way through to the senior international team.

Our Coach Education team upskill aspiring football coaches all the way from their first step on the ladder to the heights of a UEFA Pro Licence.

Our Football Operations, Discipline and Licensing teams oil the wheels of domestic football in Northern Ireland in terms of managing the Comet registration system, organising cup competitions and a variety of international fixtures, ensuring that our leading clubs are fit for purpose and handling the outcomes of those yellow and red cards which are sometimes necessary in a football match!

That's not to mention the activities of referee development, futsal, disability football, club and volunteer development and many other teams.

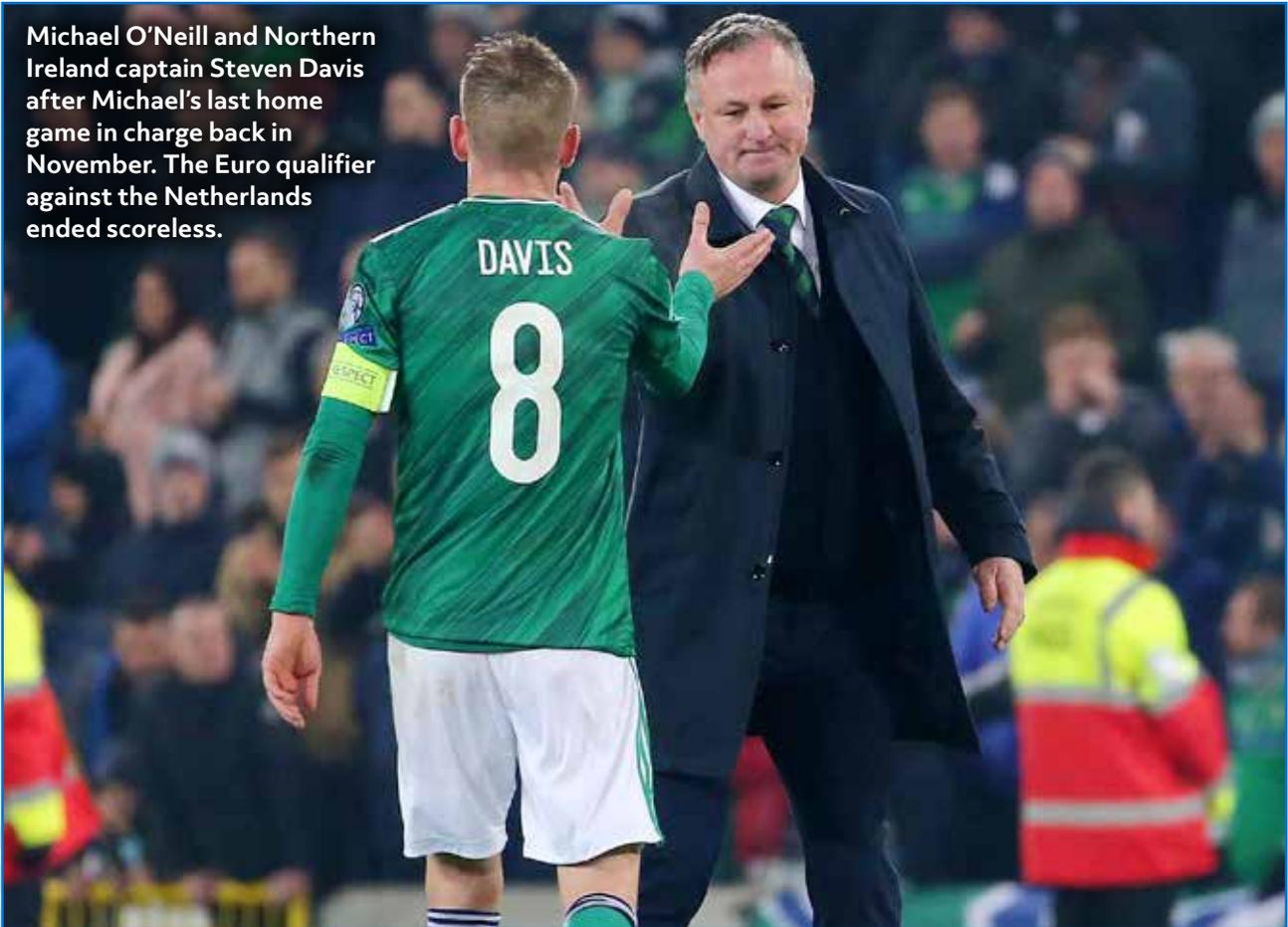
You can read more on all of these developments within the association in this report and I hope you enjoy learning more about the huge breadth of work which is carried out in the name of promoting, fostering and developing football for all in Northern Ireland.

Eight years is a long time in many jobs these days, and especially so in the world of professional football.

During this season we said goodbye after eight long and enjoyable years to Michael O'Neill, our senior men's international manager and Chief Football Officer.

It is hard to do justice to the job Michael performed for us in just a few words, however I think it is fair to say he lifted us as a country and made us believe in our own potential in a way which no-one else had managed for a long time.

Michael O'Neill and Northern Ireland captain Steven Davis after Michael's last home game in charge back in November. The Euro qualifier against the Netherlands ended scoreless.



I was fortunate enough to work closely with Michael over his entire period with the association and saw at first hand how he built new foundations and expectations in every aspect of his role.

Standards, team spirit, personal and team performance, opposition analysis, underage teams, backroom staff - nothing escaped his attention, and everything could be improved.

The outcome, of course, was three tremendous qualification campaigns (one of which is still to be resolved) and those lifetime highlight memories of UEFA EURO 2016 in France.

As well as all of that Michael always had time for everyone, regardless of their role or contribution, and took a genuine interest in their story.

As he said at the post France homecoming at Titanic Belfast, "I want every child, regardless of background, to want to play for Northern Ireland". No-one did more to help make that happen than Michael O'Neill and he will be a hard act to follow.

I would like to finish this report by mentioning that our friend and colleague Craig Stanfield passed away in February at the age of 50.

Craig had been part of the association family for 30 years and was a highly valued member of our team who was held in high regard throughout both Northern Ireland and UEFA football circles.

There is a fuller tribute to Craig elsewhere in this report, however many of us have noted in these recent difficult weeks that we miss his involvement and attention to detail and that he would have been absolutely in his element developing plans to get us all back to normality after the pandemic is over.

Patrick Nelson

Chief Executive
Irish Football Association

STADIUM REPORT

The Irish FA's Stadium Team hosted a couple of high profile matches at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park during the 2019-20 season.



The Euro qualifier against Netherlands in November brought a splash of bright colour to the stadium.

Four days after a warm-up fixture with Luxembourg in early September the German national team, one of the giants of football globally, took to the pitch in Belfast for a Euro 2020 qualifier.

Germany had a number of logistics requirements beyond the norm in the run-up to and during the match, not least a double production broadcast which involved creating an additional indoor studio and taking over areas of the stadium normally not utilised for broadcasting facilities.

Sky Sports were the host broadcaster for the UK, while RTL covered the match extensively for the German market. And both broadcasters' pictures were beamed around the world, too. More television cameras were used at the match than for any other game in the whole Euro 2020 qualifying series. Despite the final score the event was a memorable evening for all at the stadium.

In November the stadium hosted the Netherlands national team, one of the heavyweights of European football. The Dutch fans were extremely colourful and a double decker orange fan bus arrived just in time for kick-off after some careful planning.

Northern Ireland's senior men's team know they will play at home if they win the currently postponed Euro 2020 Path B play-off semi-final against Bosnia and Herzegovina.

And preparations were well under way for the scenario of hosting a play-off final at the National Football Stadium at the end of March before the Covid-19 pandemic saw the semi-final match away to the Bosnians put on hold until further notice.

The regular cup finals at the stadium were also curtailed in 2019-20 due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Prior to the suspension of the football calendar in March the stadium hosted just three cup finals with the Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup final in September, the Co Antrim Shield decider in January and the Bet McLean League Cup final in February. The stadium team are looking forward to cup action returning to the pitch when the Northern Ireland Executive deem it safe to do so.

Continued strong collaboration with contractors played a key role in ensuring the delivery of events at the venue.

STADIUM REPORT

Partners include Clive Richardson Limited, who prepare the pitch. Their on-site team faced a difficult winter which saw disease creep in to the surface, however the CRL ground staff worked tirelessly to resolve the issue and maintained a fine playing surface throughout.

Clean Event Services continued to deliver the cleaning provision for the stadium, while stewarding and security partner Eventsec also proved to be extremely effective. And H&J Martin maintained the stadium facilities to the highest standards.

Sodexo provides quality food and beverage services daily at numerous conferences and events throughout the season in the stadium's hospitality suites as well as for those unforgettable match night experiences.

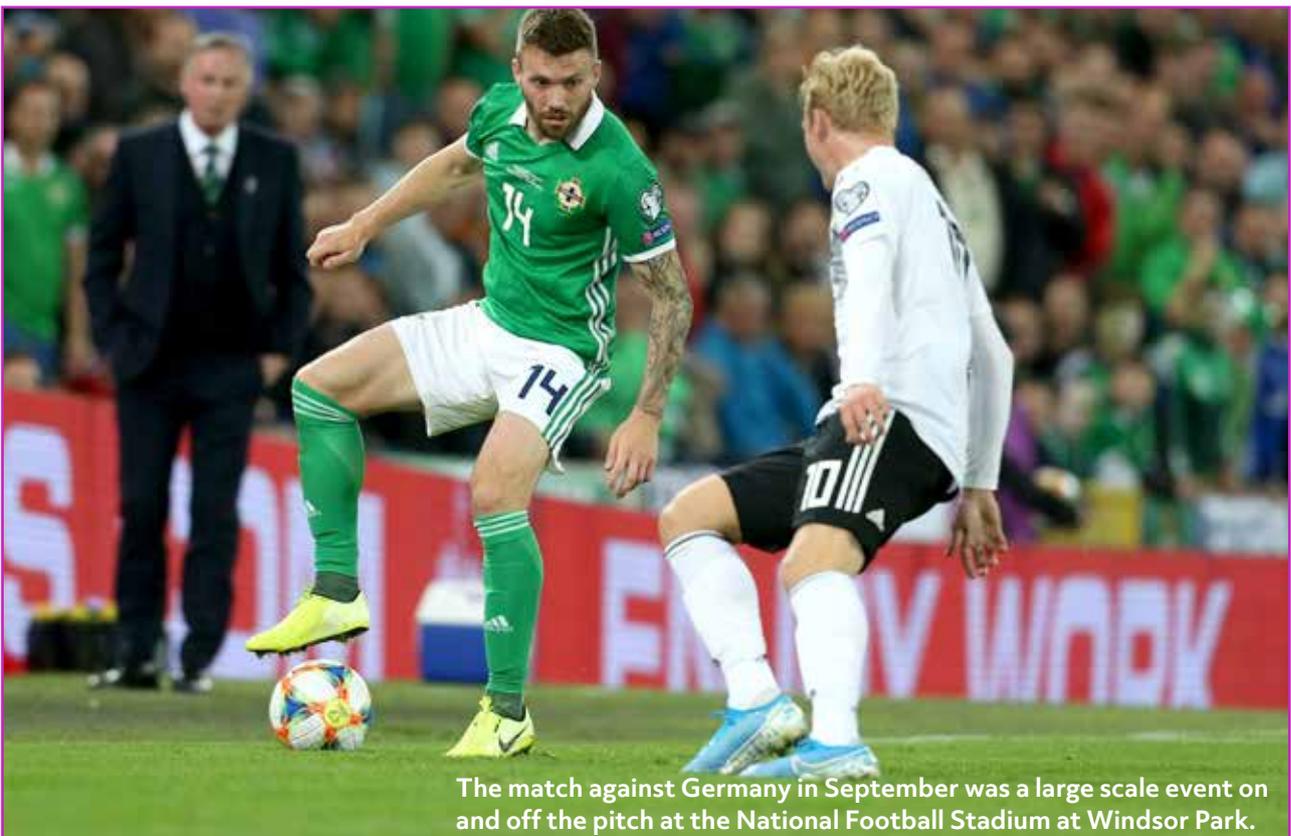
Sodexo's conferencing and events at the stadium on non-matchdays are going from strength to strength and there was a 36% rise in conferencing revenues in 2019.

The Education and Heritage Centre has continued to grow year on year with footfall for 2019 sitting at 9025. It also attracted five-star TripAdvisor reviews, helping the attraction to be ranked second in a list of 219 things to do in Belfast.

Moving in to 2020 a fresh marketing plan was helping the centre hit its projected increased footfall and income targets but unfortunately this early success was halted due to the closure of the stadium in the current pandemic.

The stadium team will continue to actively work on plans for the reopening of the EHC and will be looking at new ways to develop the space to encourage repeat visits once restrictions are lifted.

The team at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park are looking forward to the day when football returns to the pitch, when people can be together again in seats and suites, supporting our team and each other. Until then they are encouraging people to support the NHS and to stay safe.



The match against Germany in September was a large scale event on and off the pitch at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Northern Ireland's senior men's team began the 2019-2020 season firmly focused on reaching the European Championship Finals in the summer of 2020.



Steven Davis on the ball against the Netherlands at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

Automatic qualification was not attained, however the team are still in there challenging for a place at Euro 2020, which has been put back a year due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

UEFA has decided that next summer's final tournament will still be known as UEFA Euro 2020 to honour the event's original vision, including celebrating the 60th anniversary of the European Football Championship.

Following wins home and away against Estonia and Belarus in the first half of 2019, the boys in green and white approached the four remaining Qualifying Group C fixtures with a spring in their step – despite the fact European heavyweights Germany and the Netherlands would be providing the opposition.

At the start of September a 1-0 success at home in a friendly against Luxembourg - thanks to an own goal – was the hors d'oeuvres for the first Group C clash against Germany.



Josh Magennis won his 50th cap in the Euro qualifier against Germany in Frankfurt.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Northern Ireland made the early running at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, with Conor Washington forcing a fine save from German keeper Manuel Neuer, however the visitors eventually prevailed on a 2-0 scoreline with Marcel Halstenberg and the lively Serge Gnabry grabbing the decisive goals.

That defeat was followed by a heartbreaking 3-1 reverse against the Dutch in Rotterdam in October. Northern Ireland produced a dogged defensive performance before Josh Magennis scored the opener with a header on 75 minutes. Ronald Koeman's side drew level on 80 minutes through Memphis Depay before late goals from Luuk de Jong and Depay, both in injury time, gave the Netherlands all three points.

An international challenge match against Czech Republic in Prague days after the Netherlands match provided a boost to morale, Northern Ireland winning the game 3-2. Paddy McNair struck twice with Jonny Evans grabbing the other goal.

Before the final two Euro 2020 qualifiers in November it was confirmed that Michael O'Neill had accepted the manager's job at EFL Championship club Stoke City.

The Irish FA, who had reluctantly agreed to allow Stoke to enter negotiations with Michael, subsequently secured a deal which allowed him to stay in charge of the Northern Ireland senior men's team for the remaining qualifiers and any Euro 2020 play-off matches in March 2020.

The home game against the Dutch was a tight affair. Dutch forward Steven Berghuis clipped the bar before Northern Ireland captain Steven Davis missed a first half penalty, while after the break chances were few and far between.

The scoreless draw confirmed Northern Ireland's hopes of automatic qualification were over, however they went into the final group game against the Germans with a play-offs berth secured.

Craig Cathcart has reached the 50-cap milestone for his country.



Michael Smith celebrates with his Northern Ireland team-mates after scoring his first international goal, in what would turn out to be Michael O'Neill's last game in charge.



An understrength side – they were without key regulars Jonny Evans, Stuart Dallas and Jamal Lewis – took the lead at the Commerzbank Arena in Frankfurt in mid-November but it was the only highlight for Michael O'Neill's side.

That seventh minute wonder strike from Michael Smith merely sparked the Germans into life and they were ruthless and clinical as they ran out 6-1 winners.

The electric Gnabry helped himself to a hat-trick and Leon Goretzka netted a double before Julian Brandt provided the icing on the cake in a match which saw Craig Cathcart and Josh Magennis both reach the 50-cap milestone for their country.

The result in Frankfurt meant Germany topped Group C with 21 points, with the Dutch in second on 19 and Northern Ireland third on 13.

In the play-offs Michael O'Neill's team were due to face Bosnia and Herzegovina away on matchday one in the Path B play-off route on Thursday 26 March, with the winners then

playing at home against the winners of the other Path B semi-final, which paired Slovakia and Republic of Ireland, on Tuesday 31 March.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic the play-off fixtures were postponed until June this year and subsequently until this autumn, with exact dates TBC.

If the senior men's team do eventually make it to the finals next summer Michael O'Neill will not be there to guide them.

O'Neill, who was appointed Northern Ireland boss in December 2011, permanently left his role in mid-April.

The decision was taken after UEFA rescheduled the Euro play-offs until the autumn. Michael felt it was the right time to step aside and would allow a new manager time to build upon recent successes.

And the senior men already know which opposition they will face at Euro 2020 next summer if they navigate their way through the play-offs. The winners of the Path B play-offs will face Spain, Poland and Sweden.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

The Under-21 men's team had mixed fortunes in their series of Euro qualifiers.

The 2021 U21 Euros qualification campaign (Group 8) began in early September with a 0-0 draw against Malta in Ballymena – several chances were spurned during the match – followed by a 1-1 draw away to Finland, a game in which there were opportunities to secure all the points. Lewis Thompson grabbed the goal in that one.

After that came two tough away assignments, the first of them against group favourites Denmark. The Danes proved too strong, although it took a superb goal to win it. Jake Dunwoody had produced a neat equaliser in Aalborg before substitute Jens Odgaard's sensational overhead kick late on sealed the win for Denmark.

Romania secured a 3-0 victory in Voluntari, however once again in that match Northern Ireland created chances and were playing

well until goalkeeper Conor Hazard was harshly shown a red card towards the end of the first half.

In November the U21s created a little bit of history when playing Hungary's U21s in Fermanagh. Ferney Park in Ballinamallard was the venue for the first 'senior level' international played in the county. The game ended 1-1. And Northern Ireland's goal was a bit special, midfielder Alfie McCalmont scoring with a sweet strike from 20 yards.

A few days later Romania were the visitors to Ballymena Showgrounds. The Romanians, who attracted a large following, proved to be difficult opponents. Both sides had chances, however the game finished 0-0.

Their campaign for a place at the finals in Hungary and Slovenia in early summer 2021 is currently on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

They were due to play Ukraine away at the end of March but the game was postponed, while qualifiers this autumn are TBC.

Jake Dunwoody in action for Northern Ireland U21s against Hungary U21s at Ferney Park in Fermanagh.



INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS



Northern Ireland U19s boss Stephen Frail began his preparations for the Men's U19 Euros with a couple of victories in challenge matches against Faroe Islands in September.

In November the U19s lost out 3-0 to Norway and 3-1 to Portugal in a warm-up mini tournament. However, they defeated Germany in their final game through a penalty shoot-out.

Northern Ireland was due to host the eight-team 2020 UEFA European Under-19 Championship finals from 19 July to 1 August, with matches being played in Belfast, Ballymena, Lurgan and Portadown, but it has been postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis. The tournament now looks likely to take place this autumn or next March.

The Men's Under-17s completed their 2020 U17 Euros qualification campaign with a 7-0 win against Luxembourg but they failed to progress to the elite round following defeats to Turkey and Italy in a four-team mini tournament staged in Luxembourg in October. The U17 Euro elite round and final tournament were subsequently cancelled by UEFA due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Northern Ireland's Lewis McCann celebrates after scoring for Northern Ireland U19s against Germany at Mourneview Park in November.

MICHAEL O'NEILL

A FAREWELL

Appointed December 2011

Departed April 2020

First game as boss

29 February 2012 v Norway (home)

Friendly

Final game as manager

19 November 2019 v Germany (away)

Euro 2020 Qualifier

Number of games in charge – and win percentage

| P | W | D | L | F | A | Win |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| 72 | 26 | 18 | 28 | 75 | 83 | 36% |

Best win (in terms of goals scored)

8 October 2016 v San Marino (home) – World Cup Qualifier – **won 4-0**

11 November 2016 v Azerbaijan (home) – World Cup Qualifier – **won 4-0**

Highlights

14 August 2013 v Russia (h) – World Cup Qualifier – **won 1-0** (first win in charge)

14 October 2014 v Greece (a) – Euro 2016 Qualifier – **won 2-0** (first time Northern Ireland ever won their first three qualifiers in EC or WC)

8 October 2015 v Greece (h) – Euro 2016 Qualifier – **won 3-1** (qualified for Euro 2016 Finals)

16 June 2016 v Ukraine (n) Euro 2016 – **won 2-0** (first ever win at European Championship Finals)

8 October 2016 v San Marino (h) – World Cup Qualifier – **won 4-0** (joint biggest win as manager; game marked the official opening of revamped National Football Stadium at Windsor Park)

11 November 2016 v Azerbaijan (h) – World Cup Qualifier – **won 4-0** (joint biggest win as manager)

The players give the boss the bumps at the Euro 2016 homecoming event staged at Titanic Belfast.

Between April 2017 and September 2018 Northern Ireland never dropped out of the top 30 in the FIFA World Rankings. Their highest position under Michael O'Neill was 20th in September 2017.

Northern Ireland's 2-1 victory over Finland in March 2015 was the start of a 12-match unbeaten run under Michael which only ended in June 2016 when they lost their opening Euro 2016 group game to Poland in Nice.

Between 11 November 2016 and 1 September 2017 Northern Ireland set a record of winning five successive qualifying matches for the first time - and all without conceding a goal.



Although he was appointed in December 2011, Michael's official press conference announcing his arrival was staged in January 2012.



With David Healy following a World Cup qualifier against Azerbaijan.



Shaking hands with Bert Vogts following a World Cup qualifier in Azerbaijan which ended in defeat for the boys in green and white.



Celebrating with the players following the away win over Greece which arguably set the tone for the Euro 2016 qualification campaign.



Josh Magennis runs to the boss after scoring in the 3-1 victory against Greece which secured Northern Ireland's place at Euro 2016.



Preparing for the Euro 2016 game against Ukraine in Lyon.



Lining up before the start of Northern Ireland's first ever game at a European Championship Finals. Poland won the match in Nice 1-0.



Michael congratulates Conor Washington on his performance against the Ukrainians.



The team produced some fine performances during the 2018 World Cup qualifiers.



Walking off the pitch in Basel dejected following the narrow defeat to Switzerland in the World Cup play-offs.



Michael signed a contract extension at the beginning of 2018.



Crossing swords with Martin O'Neill at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin. The friendly against the Republic of Ireland ended 0-0.



Getting a bird's eye view of Panama City during the short tour to Central America which included games against Panama and Costa Rica.



In the dugout at the Borisov Arena where he masterminded a 1-0 win against Belarus in the Euro 2020 qualifiers.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



Northern Ireland's senior women secured two draws against Wales in Euro qualifiers this season.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

The Northern Ireland senior women's team are still well placed to make waves in their Women's Euro 2021 qualifying group.

Kenny Shiels has introduced a more expansive style of play since taking over as senior women's manager last May.

His team were heavily defeated in Shiels' first competitive match in charge - by top seeds Norway (6-0) in their opening UEFA Women's Euro 2021 qualifier back in August - but they stuck to their guns and days later produced a great performance in Wales to earn a 2-2 draw.

Striker Simone Magill opened the scoring against the Welsh with a header, while defender Ashley Hutton headed in a last-minute equaliser.

Another 6-0 defeat to Norway followed in November, however they again deservedly earned a draw against Wales, second seeds in Qualifying Group C, a few days later.

And that 0-0 draw in Belfast set them up nicely for this year's qualifiers home and away against Belarus and Faroe Islands.

The away match against Belarus in Group C was scheduled for 14 April with the return fixture in Belfast on 5 June. Northern Ireland were also due to face Faroe Islands at home on 9 June before heading to the Faroes for their final group game on 18 September.

However, the coronavirus pandemic has led to the postponement of those qualifiers until further notice.

And in April the UEFA Executive Committee confirmed the UEFA Women's Euro 2021 final tournament, which had also been postponed, will now be played in England from 6 to 31 July 2022 instead. It is planned to use the same venues that were originally proposed to host the event.



The senior women's team performed well at the Pinatar Cup in Spain earlier this year.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



Sarah McFadden in the thick of the action at the Pinatar Cup tournament.

The winners of Northern Ireland's qualifying group - Norway are almost out of sight in that respect - will automatically qualify for the next Women's European Championship finals with the second-placed team set for a play-off. And Shiels believes a play-off spot is achievable.

If his team manage to win their remaining fixtures and group leaders Norway defeat the currently second-placed Welsh home and away then a play-off spot is a distinct possibility, however the pragmatic manager will no doubt be keen to take it one game at a time.

In March the senior women competed at the Pinatar Cup in Spain – and the squad's performances once again showed they are making steady progress.

They lost to Iceland (1-0), Ukraine (4-0) and Scotland (2-1), countries who are all ranked much higher than Northern Ireland, but the boss was happy with the level of performance at the tournament.

"We went toe to toe with Scotland, who beat us 2-1, and they're quite a bit ahead of us in terms of their development programmes, and we were the better team against Iceland, who are ranked 18th in the world," he pointed out.

Meanwhile, the senior women's team now have a second centurion in their ranks. In 2018 Julie Nelson became the first female player in Northern Ireland to earn 100 caps and in 2019 her defensive partner Ashley Hutton also reached the 100-cap milestone.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS



Northern Ireland senior women's team manager Kenny Shiels presented Marissa Callaghan (50 caps), Ashley Hutton (100 caps) and Simone Magill (50 caps) with commemorative Irish FA caps for reaching their respective milestones.

Ashley earned her 100th cap in Wales and was subsequently presented with a UEFA medal at the home game against the Welsh.

And during the trip to Spain in March Kenny Shiels presented the defender with a commemorative cap from the Irish Football Association to mark her reaching the 100 caps milestone for her country and he also made presentations to Simone Magill and Marissa Callaghan who have both reached the 50-cap mark.

Northern Ireland's Under-19 women's team reached the 2020 WU19 Euros elite round after defeating Wales and Moldova in a qualifying round held in Northern Ireland, although they lost to Norway in the mini tournament.

Their opening match in the four-team tournament back in October was against the Welsh and a goal from midfielder Jessica Rea was the difference between the two teams in a hard-

fought contest at Shamrock Park in Portadown.

The Showgrounds in Ballymena was the venue for game two – against Moldova. Northern Ireland hit six without reply. Alexandra Collighan opened the scoring before Caitlin McGuinness doubled the lead. Then it was Beth Smyth's turn to get on the scoresheet before Rebecca McKenna, captain Kelsie Burrows and Toni-Leigh Finnegan weighed in with the remaining goals.

Norway, who had already hammered both Moldova (8-0) and Wales (11-0), proved to be a much tougher proposition and game three at Seaview ended 7-0 to the Norwegians.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

The elite round was due to be played in April with the finals in July, however they were both cancelled by UEFA due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Northern Ireland Women's U17s failed to make it beyond the 2020 UEFA European Women's Under-17 Championship qualifying round stage back in October. They lost 4-1 to hosts Scotland and 4-0 against eventual group winners Italy before completing the four-team mini tournament in Edinburgh with a 1-1 draw against Montenegro.

Both the WU19s and WU17s were also in action in Turkey back in March.

The WU19s played as a senior team in the annual Gold City Women's Cup staged in Alanya. As Northern Ireland B they lost 2-0 to

Kenya (ranked 135th in the world), 4-0 against Ghana (ranked 60th) and 5-0 to Chile (ranked 36th), however manager Alfie Wylie felt the games were an invaluable experience as it gave the players an insight into the standards required at the top level.

The WU17s played up an age level at the WU19 Mediterranean Pearls tournament, which was also held at the Gold City Sports Complex in Alanya on Turkey's southern coast.

After narrowly losing 2-1 to Belarus WU19s in their opening match they drew 2-2 against Slovakia's WU19s and then lost out in a penalty shootout against Bulgaria after the match ended goalless after extra-time.



Northern Ireland's Rebecca McKenna in action for the WU19s against Wales in a Euro qualifier at Portadown's Shamrock Park.

KIT LAUNCHES

The Irish FA, in conjunction with adidas Football and retail partner JD, launched two new kits during the 2019-2020 season.



A new home kit was introduced in November and first worn by the senior women's team in their Women's Euro 2021 home qualifier against Wales.

The jersey takes its inspiration from the iconic shirt design Northern Ireland wore in the 1980s, featuring diagonal line details, according to adidas.

It said when creating the jersey the adidas art and sketch teams looked to this iconic past and worked to revamp it using a strong combination of various shades of green and broad-brush strokes to add dynamism.

A new away kit was launched at the start of March. The away shirt, featuring Aeroready Technology, is mainly white with a navy blue collar and trim as well as clear mint sleeve trim, while the away shorts are navy blue with clear mint trim.

Adidas said the "pastel haze" kit features contemporary colours to "challenge the convention of modern football".



ELITE PERFORMANCE – BOYS

Elite player development in Northern Ireland moved up several gears in 2019-2020 with the creation of the country's first full-time residential academy for young footballers.



At the official launch of the UEFA Academy in Northern Ireland were Jim Magilton, Olivier Doglia (UEFA), Irish FA President David Martin, Amanda Castray (Ulster University) and Michael O'Neill.

The academy, based at Ulster University's Jordanstown campus, was launched in September.

Fully endorsed by UEFA, it is operated by the Irish Football Association in conjunction with the university.

Northern Ireland is one of three countries - Finland and Israel are the others - which are being supported by UEFA to implement academies over the 2019-2023 period.

Ulster University said the creation of the academy reflected its commitment to being a leader in performance sports and developing world class sporting facilities.

The Irish FA-UEFA Elite Youth Academy operates under the directorship of Jim Magilton, the Irish FA's Elite Performance

Director, who insists it will be transformational for the development of elite players at school years 11 and 12 (U15 and U16).

He said the academy will play a crucial role in the preparation of young players for life in professional football. There will be an intake of up to 20 elite footballers from each age group per school year up to 2023.

Jim explained: "The ultimate aim is to produce players for Northern Ireland's senior men's team. The academy will help to nurture talented players who are well-educated young scholars ready for a life in professional football academies. And we want to ensure these players will be ready for international football and ready to achieve their full potential."

ELITE PERFORMANCE – BOYS



The JD Club NI U15 squad who competed in a UEFA development tournament last summer.

Olivier Doglia, Senior Football Development Manager at UEFA, will be supporting the Northern Ireland academy over the next four years.

He explained the main objective of the UEFA academy project is to produce better players, compose the right mixture of sporting, school and life skills education, and to ensure quality development and technical programmes.

He said this was in line with UEFA's mission statement, which puts a clear emphasis on the development of football throughout Europe – including giving constant impetus to the coaching and fostering of young footballers.

Amanda Castray, Director of Campus Life at Ulster University, said: "At Ulster University we

are passionate about performance sport and helping young people fulfil their potential. We are delighted to welcome this programme to our Jordanstown campus and the opportunity it brings for young footballers to realise their sporting ambitions while also being supported in their personal and educational development."

Meanwhile, JD Club NI U15s took part in a UEFA development tournament in Wales last August.

After defeating Malta 3-2 and losing to the host nation by the same scoreline, the boys in green and white were expected to get the better of Cyprus. They dominated the game for long periods but lost the match by two goals to one.

ELITE PERFORMANCE – BOYS

In September JD Club NI's U14s finished 15th overall at the Madrid Cup following some fine performances.

The 32-team annual international tournament, staged at Alcobendas in the Spanish capital, features the youth sides of leading European clubs as well as teams from around the world.

And FC Barcelona's U14s were among the opponents for the boys from the Irish FA's elite development programme as they improved on the previous year's showing when a Club NI U14 team finished 17th overall.

In the group stages JD Club NI U14s defeated the U14 side from La Liga outfit Getafe 2-0 in their opening fixture before drawing 1-1 with Austrians Flyeralarm Admira.

Their final group match saw them take on the eventual tournament winners, Swedish outfit Brommapojkarna. They lost out 3-1 but played well.

In fact JD Club NI were the only team in the tournament to score against Brommapojkarna.

Northern Ireland finished second in the group, which earned them a last 16 tie against FC Barcelona.

JD Club NI created two or three good chances early on against the Spanish giants but did not take them. Barca then scored just before half-time and after the break they piled on the pressure to eventually run out 4-0 winners.

In subsequent games to determine their overall position the boys lost 2-0 to the U14s team from Japanese J League side Kawasaki Frontale and then 1-0 to Swiss outfit Lugano. In their final game, however, they defeated Latvians BFC Daugavpils to finish 15th overall.

Unfortunately, due to the coronavirus pandemic, JD Club NI trips to various tournaments during Easter this year were cancelled.



Charlie Allen, seen here in action for Northern Ireland U16 Schoolboys against Australia U16 Schoolboys last year, was among the first intake at the UEFA Academy based at UUJ.

ELITE PERFORMANCE – GIRLS

The Irish FA's Girls' Regional Excellence Programme continues to offer coaching sessions at four regional centres – in Belfast (for counties Down and Armagh), Newtownabbey (Co Antrim), Cookstown (Tyrone/Fermanagh) and Limavady (Co Londonderry).

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

Around 240 players are engaged in the regional programme and they have been continuing to work hard during the Covid-19 crisis thanks to online guidance provided by coaches and other experts. The online sessions largely focus on skills, strength and conditioning and players' wellbeing.

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

Players at the centres 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 Women's U19 international squads followed by the pinnacle of the Northern Ireland senior women's squad.

Players on the pathway are encouraged to play club football at U13, U15 and U17 level and then move on to U19, NIFL and NIWFA leagues and university leagues.

The Irish FA has also worked with Ulster University to establish a Girls' Performance Academy with a view to providing encouragement to players in the U19 and senior squads to stay in Northern Ireland and progress their academic studies. There are currently 12 players registered in the programme.

Before the Covid-19 lockdown players at the various elite development stages took part in sessions featuring technical, tactical, strength and conditioning, fitness testing plus gymnastics elements.

The Covid-19 crisis has curtailed girls' and women's teams' involvement in various tournaments, however Alfie Wylie, the Irish FA's Head of Elite Performance, and his support team are keeping the players on their toes through online exercise programmes and challenges.

During the coronavirus pandemic the U17s and U19s, for example, have been receiving workouts focusing on acceleration as well as pace and power and the players are also following individual programmes.

Wylie, meanwhile, has recruited a team of non-football experts to provide further advice and guidance to players involved in the Women's U19 and U17 international squads, girls' development squads and the Regional Excellence Centres.

Among those providing support are a former rugby international (Gary Longwell), a current ladies hockey international (Serena Barr), a champion sailor (Chris Penney) and a former international gymnast (Clare Taylor), and they all work alongside Alfie and his experienced team of football coaches.



WU19 player Beth Smyth on the attack against Scotland.

INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION BOARD

As an original member of IFAB since 1886 the Irish Football Association continues to play a leading role in the organisation and in the implementation of the laws of the game.

The association played host to IFAB's Annual Business Meeting in December, in Belfast, and the Annual General Meeting, which was held at the Culloden Estate and Spa near Holywood at the end of February. This was the last international football event held in Northern Ireland prior to the Covid-19 crisis.

The AGM, chaired by Irish FA President David Martin, was attended by FIFA President Gianni Infantino, who was also pleased to oblige when invited to make the semi-final draw for the Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup.

Joining him were Arsene Wenger (FIFA Head of Global Football Development) and Pierluigi Collina (Chair of FIFA Referees Committee) and delegates from Canada, Japan and Egypt as well as the four British associations.

It may have been expected that after several changes to the Laws of the Game in recent times - including a major rewrite in 2017 - this year might have seen a period of consolidation.

This was not the case, however, as the AGM dealt at length with important issues such as player concussion and the possible introduction of temporary concussion substitutes as well as VAR (video assistant referees) and its current and future implementation.

It also looked at potential developments which might allow smaller national associations such as the IFA to introduce VAR, the issue of improving VAR communication in stadiums and another reclarification of handball.

Last year's alterations, which included the introduction of red and yellow cards for team officials, changes to substitution procedures and to the taking of goal kicks and the limitation of attacking players in defensive walls at free kicks, were positively reviewed and assessed. There was also debate on the IFAB structure and budget.

Gianni Infantino paid tribute to the IFA for its hosting of the meeting and to David Martin on his chairing of it.

Subsequent to the meeting and in light of the coronavirus pandemic, which has resulted in the almost total cessation of football across the globe, IFAB has agreed to a temporary increase in allowable substitutes to five (subject to agreement from each national association).

This measure is aimed at assisting teams which have been out of training for a long period in the management of their players once football restarts.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino (centre) watched an Irish Cup quarter-final tie at the Oval during his visit to Northern Ireland for the IFAB AGM.



DOMESTIC FOOTBALL MEN'S

The domestic football season in Northern Ireland, like most facets of life here, has been turned upside down by the coronavirus epidemic.

The country's leagues and cup competitions were carrying on as normal before lockdown stopped everything in its tracks.

The only Irish FA competition to be concluded since last July was the Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup, which was won by Glentoran Women.

The Irish Cup, sponsored by Sadler's Peaky Blinder Lager, had reached the semi-final stage by the time lockdown kicked in.

The last four matches saw Ballymena United and Coleraine paired together and Belfast rivals Cliftonville and Glentoran in the other half of the draw. The games were due to be played at the end of March but were postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis. The cup final, scheduled for early May, was also postponed.

An interested spectator at Glentoran's 2-1 win over Crusaders at the quarter-final stage was FIFA President Gianni Infantino, who was at the Culloden Estate and Spa in Holywood at the end of February for IFAB's annual meeting. He later helped Irish FA President David Martin to make the draw for the Irish Cup semi-finals.

The McComb's Coach Travel Intermediate Cup had also reached the last four stage before lockdown. Making it to the semi-finals were Dollingstown, Belfast Celtic, Newington and St James' Swifts. They all won quarter-final ties in early March.

The fonaCAB Irish Junior Cup had also reached the last four stage by early March. Holders Enniskillen Rangers, going for three in a row, made it safely through to the semi-finals along with another Fermanagh side, NFC Kesh, plus Bessbrook United and Willowbank.

Institute's U18s and Cliftonville Strollers had both reached the final of this season's Harry Cavan Youth Cup, sponsored by Dale Farm Protein Milk, by the time the virus pandemic had turned life on its head.

Reigning league champions Linfield may have exited the Irish Cup early this season – the Blues were defeated by Championship side Queen's University in a huge fifth round shock - but they were in pole position in the Danske Bank Premiership prior to lockdown in March.

Up to that point it had been an exciting title race. Coleraine were in second place four points behind with Crusaders and Cliftonville 10 points adrift of the Blues. At the time of publication the league and Irish FA cup competitions were still on hold.

Coleraine already have a trophy under their belts this season. They came from behind to defeat Crusaders in the NIFL League Cup decider in February. Former Bannside player Jamie McGonigle opened the scoring at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park but goals from Stephen Lowry (pen) and James McLaughlin secured the trophy for Coleraine.

The previous month Cliftonville won the Co Antrim Shield after producing a stunning comeback in the final. They were trailing Ballymena United 1-0 - Leroy Millar scored for the Sky Blues - deep into injury time at the NFS before goals in the 96th and 97th minutes turned the game on its head. Thomas Maguire converted from close range to draw the Reds level and then Ryan Curran conjured up the winner.



DOMESTIC FOOTBALL WOMEN'S

Glentoran Women secured a cup treble when they defeated Linfield Ladies in the 2019 Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup final in

It was a scrappy game at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park and a goal from Emma McMaster, playing only her fourth game for the Glens after moving from Cliftonville, proved decisive.

The gritty 1-0 victory helped the Glens to claim their third trophy of the 2019 season and retain the cup they won by defeating the Blues in the 2018 decider. The Glens also won the League Cup and County Antrim Cup in 2019.

The only goal of the match came after five minutes. Glens midfielder Demi Vance drifted past a couple of defenders and unleashed a fine 30-yard shot which was parried and pushed up in the air by Linfield keeper Lauren Perry – but Glens midfielder McMaster pounced to bundle the ball into the net.

Later in the same month Linfield Ladies claimed the Danske Bank Women's Premiership title – for the fourth successive season. They pipped Sion Swifts Ladies to the title on goal difference.

The Blues needed to win at Derry City by seven goals or more in their final game. And they did so with a bit to spare, running out 10-0 winners at the Ryan McBride Brandywell Stadium.

Linfield Ladies captain Kirsty McGuinness hit the net five times to bring her tally for the league season up to 32 goals in 21 matches.

The Blues' goal blitz in Derry-Londonderry meant Sion missed out on their first ever top flight title by just four goals.

The 2020 Danske Bank Women's Premiership campaign was due to start in mid-April but has been put on hold due to the Covid-19 crisis.

It will be the fifth season the Women's Premiership has been operated under the stewardship of the Northern Ireland Football League.

This year six clubs are due to compete to be crowned champions. Last season's bottom club Comber Rec Ladies have been relegated to the NIWFA Championship with no new club promoted for the 2020 season.

The teams in the top tier are scheduled to play each other home and away twice over the course of a 20-game league campaign.

The Premiership is due to finish on 30 September, however at the time of publication a start date for the competition was still under discussion. And that was also the case for this season's Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup competition.

In the second tier, the NIWFA Championship, Lurgan Town Ladies ruled the roost in 2019, finishing top 11 points ahead of nearest rivals Lisburn Ladies, while St James' Swifts were champions in the third tier (NIWFA Division One).

For 2020 NIWFA had attracted eight new teams and a total of 45 teams were due to compete across six divisions. However, the leagues have been suspended until further notice due to the virus pandemic.



electric
Ireland

WOMEN'S CHALLENGE CUP



Glentoran Women celebrate their Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup success in 2019.

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.

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

Nine UEFA licences, one UEFA Women's Champions League licence, 12 Premiership licences, seven Promotion licences and 19 Championship licences were awarded for season 2020-21 during the most recent licensing cycle which concluded in April.

Of note was the achievement of Linfield (Ladies) FC in being the first women's team in Northern Ireland to achieve the required licence for participation in the UEFA Women's Champions League following its mandatory introduction for the 2020-21 UEFA competition season.

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

Originally based on the internationally recognised quality management system ISO 9001:2000, the UEFA Club Licensing Quality Standard was devised to ensure consistency in the assessment principles and methods followed by all licensors, and to this end the annual UEFA/SGS audit was successfully completed in August 2019 without any non-conformities identified.

In addition the UEFA Club Financial Control Body (CFCB) Investigatory Chamber selected the Irish Football Association for a compliance audit regarding the list of licensing decisions communicated to the UEFA Administration in May 2019.

As defined in the UEFA Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play Regulations, the aim of such compliance audits is "to ensure that the licensor, as well as the licence applicant/licensee, have fulfilled their obligations as defined in these regulations and that the licence was correctly awarded at the time of the final decision of the licensor".

In this respect independent auditors assess the licensing documentation submitted by affiliated clubs and prepare a compliance report for the attention of the CFCB Investigatory Chamber.

This audit took place in October with the Final Report submitted by Deloitte to the CFCB the following month. It confirmed that "no major findings were identified during this compliance assessment".



Linfield Ladies are the first women's team in Northern Ireland to achieve the new licence for participation in the UEFA Women's Champions League.

REFEREEING

Refereeing activity in 2019-20 continued to be built around the four pillars of recruitment, development, education and retention.

At the start of last year the association set a minimum target of recruiting and retaining 550 referees by the end of 2019 - to ensure that every open age game in Northern Ireland is refereed by a registered official. And the objective was achieved.

The association's referee development officer is continuing to co-ordinate and organise all recruitment activity and also delivers other valuable outreach activity.

New referee recruits are being offered lifetime learning and development opportunities with the support of the four divisional referee associations, while the national development squad, made up of 25 male and female officials, has been meeting regularly.

Officials, mentors, coaches, instructors and referee observers continue to focus on a common goal of improving the quality of the association's local and international referees.

Irish FA referees chosen to wear the FIFA international badge in 2020 received recognition from the association.

Irish FA President David Martin, who is also chairman of the association's Referees Committee, acknowledged the referees' success at a special ceremony.

Malcolm Moffatt was the guest of honour at the event. Malcolm, who served as a FIFA referee between 1975 and 1986 and officiated at the 1982 World Cup in Spain, presented each official with their 2020 badge.

Gareth Eakin was presented with a trophy to acknowledge that 2020 represented his 14th year as an international assistant referee. Mr Martin said he had given outstanding service to international football.

The President insisted all the officials on the FIFA list in 2020 were ambassadors for not only the association but also Northern Ireland, adding that each of them was a role model for referees at all levels of the game across the country.

New to the list of Irish FA FIFA male referees this year is Jamie Robinson. He joins Keith Kennedy, Ian McNabb and Tim Marshall on the list.

Louise Thompson is the Irish FA's new female referee on the FIFA list, while Victoria Finlay has become a FIFA assistant referee.

Ryan Kelsey and Andrew Nethery are new to the FIFA list of male assistant referees for 2020. They join Stephen Donaldson, Gareth Eakin, David Anderson, Paul Robinson, Stephen Bell and Georgios Argyropoulos on the list.

FIFA officials are eligible to take charge of international, Champions League and Europa League fixtures.

The Irish FA referees who were chosen to wear the FIFA international badge in 2020 with Irish FA President David Martin.



COACH EDUCATION

The months from May to August are an extremely busy time for the Irish FA's Coach Education department, and the traditional annual period for the national coaching courses followed the trend of previous years in 2019, showing a continued rise in numbers participating.

The association welcomed coaches from 37 different countries and the coach education team were particularly pleased with the participation levels of coaches from within Northern Ireland. During this period the team delivered all the main UEFA coaching awards as well as a number of specific Irish FA awards.

Following research from within the department, and recommendations from UEFA, the team decided to refresh and update pedagogy to really challenge the modern coach.

Underpinning the major tactical trends in today's game, candidate coaches are now challenged even more on the tactical side of the game via coaching scenarios while still given the opportunity to develop their own philosophy of how the game should be played.

In addition Coach Ed has been developing a new online education platform, which will be available this summer, giving the online learning site a new look.

The team members have also been working to launch a new suite of grassroots courses.

The new Grassroots Introduction to Coaching course will be offered as a complete e-learning module. The National Coaching Certificate (replacing the Level 1) will be launched, and there will be a new UEFA C Diploma available as part of the UEFA provision. And the provision for goalkeeping qualifications is being reviewed.

The new-look courses will aim to provide grassroots coaches with the tools to make an impact on player development and are intended to provide inspiration to coaches themselves to adopt an attitude of "reflective and lifelong learning" which will enable them to continually develop as a coach.

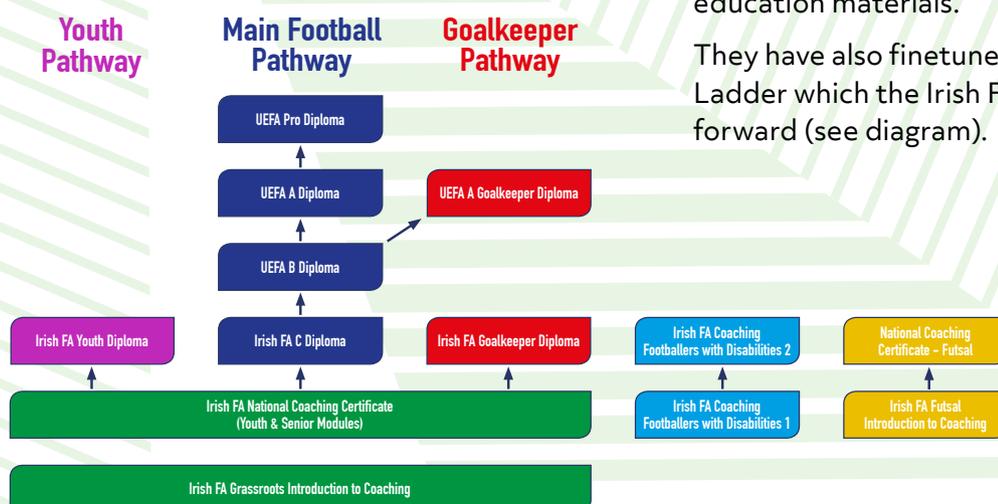
The coaching ladder is designed to offer coaches the opportunity to develop their education by following the options both vertically and horizontally, selecting from the range of UEFA and Irish FA awards.

All courses are currently suspended until further notice due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

And because of a lack of pitch activity in recent months the Coach Ed team have been heavily involved in developing new course content as well as refreshing pedagogy and adding content to the Irish FA suite of coach education materials.

They have also finetuned a new Education Ladder which the Irish FA will use moving forward (see diagram).

EDUCATION LADDER



COVID-19 RESPONSE SPECIAL REPORT

IN THE FRONT LINE

Northern Ireland defender Julie Nelson applauded a raft of current and former female international players working for the NHS and other essential services in the front line during the coronavirus crisis.

Crusaders Strikers player Nelson, who was the first woman in Northern Ireland to win 100 caps for her country, said her team-mates and former team-mates had shown “remarkable bravery” in the face of the pandemic.

“I think what they are doing is incredibly brave. While the rest of us are working at home and staying at home in a bid to stop the virus spreading, they are out there putting their lives at risk to help others. They are true gladiators,” she said.

Among the current internationals working for the National Health Service is Nadene Caldwell, who has won more than 50 caps for her country.

Nadene, who also captains Northern Ireland’s international women’s futsal team and plays for Glentoran Women, works at Belfast City Hospital.

Also delivering essential services in the frontline are Julie Nelson’s centre back partner for Northern Ireland, fellow centurion Ashley Hutton (Linfield Ladies), and international striker Alison Smyth (Linfield Ladies), whose long term aim is to get back in the green and white shirt following an horrific injury.

Former Northern Ireland internationals stepping up to the plate include Lisa Armour (Crusaders Strikers), who is a nurse at the Royal, while Hayley O’Donnell (Linfield Ladies) and Kendra McMullan (career cut short last year through injury) are both working for the NHS in the west of Northern Ireland.

Also operating in hospitals in the west of the country is former international Chloe McGlade (Sion Swifts Ladies), who is a radiographer, while Makayla Mulholland (Glentoran Women) is a trainee nurse with the NHS on the North Coast.



Nadene Caldwell has swapped her boots for PPE during the Covid-19 crisis.

And former Northern Ireland captain Dr Aine Macdonald, sister of Northern Ireland goalkeeper Michael McGovern, is helping to save lives with the NHS in Scotland.

Members of the international women’s futsal team are also helping to tackle the pandemic.

Defender Erin Hennity (Comber Rec Ladies) works at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald and her Northern Ireland team-mate Hannah Firth, who operates in midfield for Ballymena United All Stars, is on the front line at the Royal Hospitals in Belfast, while midfielder Louise McFrederick (Linfield Ladies) is providing essential services.

Also among those providing essential services are tough tackling defender Megan Weatherall (Cliftonville Ladies), who is driving buses for Translink out of their Lurgan depot, and Shannon Dunne, Derry City Women captain, who is working full-time for Tesco in Derry-Londonderry.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Glentoran Women defender Sam Kelly, who has also featured in the Northern Ireland senior women's football team squad, has put her university studies on hold for now - she is part of the Irish FA/UU Women's Football Academy - to work in the Skea Eggs factory in her home county of Tyrone.

Beth McKay, who plays for Northern Ireland and Spartans FC in Edinburgh, is currently working extra shifts at Aldi in Edinburgh, while Siobhan Bell, captain of St James' Swifts Ladies, works in Pets at Home on Belfast's Boucher Road and is helping to keep people's pets fed and healthy.

MESSAGES AND PRAISE

Then Northern Ireland manager Michael O'Neill, senior women's team manager Kenny Shiels, Northern Ireland senior men's team captain Steven Davis, senior women's team captain Marissa Callaghan and senior men's team doctor David White all encouraged people to stay safe during lockdown through a series of open letters or social media/video messages.

And the association joined forces with Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby to encourage people to stay at home during the pandemic.

The Irish FA also praised local clubs and volunteers supporting the vulnerable during the Covid-19 crisis.

"Through our grassroots networks we are aware of more than 50 football clubs

across the country actively delivering food or medicine to the most vulnerable in our society," said Michael Boyd, the Irish FA's Director of Football Development.

Various coaches from across the association, as well as international players and elite development players, also produced videos to help people remain active during the crisis.

WATER DONATION

A consignment of water earmarked for Northern Ireland's international football teams was diverted to the fight against Covid-19 instead.

iPRO, the official hydration partner of the Irish Football Association, delivered more than 10,000 bottles of water to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in March for use by Northern Ireland's men's and women's international teams.

But with international football postponed until further notice the association and iPRO decided the water should instead go to workers operating on the frontline in the fight against coronavirus.

The water was donated to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in April for use in the NHS Nightingale Centre in Belfast as well as across a range of other locations in the Belfast area, including care homes.

Sean Murphy, chief operating officer at the Irish Football Association, said: "Football is rightly taking a back seat during the coronavirus pandemic and we felt this was a good way to make use of the water originally destined for our international teams.

"Everyone has to do their bit in the ongoing battle against this deadly virus, however frontline healthcare workers are in the eye of the storm and we hope this, in a small way, will help bolster their efforts."

He also thanked iPRO for their support in making the donation and logistics partner TR Logistics for arranging the transport of the water from the stadium to the donation centre.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Kerri McAuley from the Belfast Trust Covid-19 Donations Team accepts the donation from the Irish FA and iPRO. Stephen Bogle (left) and David Currie from the Irish FA, with help from TR Logistics, delivered the 10,000 bottles of water.



FOOD DISTRIBUTION

The Irish FA Foundation has provided support to the community during the Covid-19 crisis.

Its outreach activity included teaming up with community group Greater Village Regeneration Trust to distribute food parcels to vulnerable and isolated people living in the area surrounding the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

The Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs also supported the distribution of food from the trust's Fit For Life Centre just off Belfast's Donegall Road.

Chris Wright, the foundation's Community Relations Officer, explained: "GVRT are a long-standing partner of the Irish FA Foundation and a central figure to supporting both the physical and mental wellbeing of the community surrounding the National Football Stadium.

"Having liaised with the trust since the pandemic began, we have aimed to support their excellent community outreach programmes as much as possible.



Representatives from the Irish FA Foundation, Greater Village Regeneration Trust and the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs team up to distribute food parcels to vulnerable and isolated people living in the area surrounding the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.



COVID-19 RESPONSE

"From supporting their street bingo and other activities to the food drop, we are pleased to assist in every way possible during this challenging time for all.

"To see the appreciation within the community, along with the amazing good spirits being maintained, was great. It was a pleasure to assist alongside partners not only from GVRT but also Gary McAllister from AONISC."

Irish FA Foundation staff members Michael Boyd and Norman Boyd along with Gary McAllister from the Amalgamation also provided a helping hand to volunteer and Northern Ireland fan Connor Ferguson at Connswater Community Centre.

A dedicated team there are delivering more than 1000 meals every week to the elderly and isolated right across the east of the city.

"It was impressive to see what they're doing to serve the community and to help them prepare/deliver food to elderly residents in East Belfast. The volunteers are in the centre from 8 o'clock in the morning preparing the food and it is a real team effort," said Michael Boyd, the Irish FA's Director of Football Development.

The meals programme is delivered by Connswater Community Centre and East Belfast ACT Initiative.



Irish FA Foundation staff help out at Connswater Community Centre.

A WEE FOOTBALL CHAT

The Irish Football Association launched a campaign aimed at tackling social isolation during the coronavirus crisis.

The 'A Wee Football Chat' initiative pairs socially isolated people with volunteers so they can chat about football over the phone.

The campaign is an extension of the popular tours provided at the Irish FA Education and Heritage Centre at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

Norrie Clarke from the association explained: "We know how important football is in Northern Ireland and we understand that some of our football family are now facing social isolation.

"We believe a simple chat about football with one of our volunteers could make someone's day. We promise positive conversation full of football memories, the sharing of experiences and discussion about favourite moments, players and goals.

"Our Education and Heritage Centre tour guides have talked football to thousands during our centre

and stadium tours and are here and ready to carry on those chats via the telephone and to spread the joy of football."

Among those who made calls to isolated people were some special guests. They included former internationals Jim Magilton and Gerry Armstrong, current internationals Niall McGinn and Michael McGovern and U21s boss Ian Baraclough.

Ken Breakey, a volunteer who has been making calls, pointed out: "The people I spoke to really enjoyed the chat and I enjoyed reminiscing with them. Billy (82) saw us qualify for the 1958 World Cup, while another Billy (74) enjoyed going to the Euros in 2016. And a chap called Eddie (75) went to school with George Best and played football with him at Cregagh playing fields."

FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

FOOTBALL COMMUNITY HUBS

The Irish FA Foundation was aiming to officially roll out 12 new Football Community Hubs across Northern Ireland in the first half of this year.

However, only two launches took place before the virus pandemic put the remainder on hold.

The hubs - two in Belfast and 10 in the council areas outside Belfast - have been created to provide a greater focus on club and volunteer development and on boosting participation levels in line with the Irish FA's Let Them Play youth football strategy.

Each hub is designed to deliver a football for all service to the community using football as a hook for health, education, crime prevention, good relations and employability.

A Regional Grassroots Development Officer, a Let Them Play Officer, Football For All support staff and a UEFA Grassroots Volunteer will be based in each of the 12 centres.

The first hub launch was staged at the Football Community Hub covering the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area. The venue was the Lough Moss Centre in Carryduff where the hub is based.

The second hub to be officially launched was the centre covering the Causeway Coasts and Glens area. It's located at Ballysally Community Centre in Coleraine.

Both launches were held in early March. The other 10 launches will be completed in due course.

Michael Boyd, Director of Football Development, Irish FA Foundation, explained: "Our strength lies in the ability of our staff and volunteers to serve the needs of the community through the universal language of football. Our approach is to work with the councils and our community partners to help create healthier citizens and communities.

"It's all about providing a better service, supporting stronger inclusive clubs and creating more partnerships on the ground in the various council areas, and I thank the councils for their ongoing support."



The official rollout of 12 new Irish FA Foundation Football Community Hubs across Northern Ireland began with the launch of the hub covering the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area. The hub is based at the Lough Moss Centre in Carryduff where kids enjoyed a coaching session as part of the launch.

PROGRAMMES

SMALL-SIDED GAMES

2019 was another record participation year for small-sided games in Northern Ireland as numbers reached new highs both in girls' involvement and registered teams.

Together with indoor winter futsal centres the number of children taking part in 2019 exceeded 19,000 – and participation numbers continued to grow in early 2020 before the lockdown.

McDonald's Small-Sided Games Development Centres provide children with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skills and creativity.

Irish FA Foundation staff now manage more than 50 venues across the country, delivering Small-Sided Games Development Centres for more than 14,000 children between the ages of four and 13.

The number of girls-only small-sided games centres has increased, too. Belfast has 12 U9 teams and 14 U11 teams, while Lisburn and Castlereagh has four U9 teams and seven U11 teams.

And in February this year girls-only centres were launched in the Antrim and Newtownabbey and the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon council areas.



FUN FOOTBALL

The foundation's highly successful partnership with McDonald's Football UK is continuing across various programmes, including Fun Football, which is aimed at kids who are new to the game.

In 2019 the foundation delivered Fun Football sessions across 23 venues and introduced almost 500 children to football.

Six regional Fun Football Festivals took place across Northern Ireland. Almost 5000 children

along with mums, dads and families tried inflatable football challenges and took part in fun football coaching sessions.

Activities have been curtailed in recent months due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

FOOTBALL CAMPS

2019 saw a record number of children taking part in Irish FA Football Camps.

A total of 154 Nutty Krust-sponsored camps took place over Easter, summer and Halloween with the total number of participants up nearly 10% on the previous record of 7,693, which was set in 2016 when Northern Ireland qualified for the European Championship Finals in France:

Easter 2019: 33 camps - **1953 boys 296 girls**

Summer 2019: 90 camps - **4103 boys 534 girls**

Halloween 2019: 31 camps - **1355 boys 206 girls**

Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, no camps have been held to date this year.

BACK IN THE GAME

In 2019 the Irish FA Foundation Back in the Game programme gave more than 460 people over the age of 45 a pathway back to playing or volunteering in the local game.

AHEAD OF THE GAME

The Irish FA Foundation's mental health programme for football clubs, Ahead of the Game, is continuing to thrive.

The course aims to support clubs and volunteers when dealing with mental health issues, challenging the stigma around mental health, promoting positive mental health and preventative measures.

It was developed in partnership with TAMHI (Tackling Awareness Of Mental Health Issues), Inspire and Train 2B Smart Soccer. As part of the programme the Irish FA Foundation and Sports Chaplaincy UK are working in partnership to support mental health throughout Northern Ireland.

In 2019 the foundation delivered 24 Ahead of the Game workshops across Northern Ireland

with 98 clubs attending, while in February and early March three Ahead of the Game workshops were delivered to coaches and volunteers at Crumlin United, Lurgan Town and Aquinas football clubs.

Many more workshops are scheduled, however these are currently on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since lockdown clubs have been encouraged to access information about Ahead of the Game online.

During this year's Mental Health Awareness Week in May the foundation staged an Ahead of the Game webinar.

STAY ONSIDE

The foundation's Stay Onside initiative, which is aimed at diverting young people away from criminal behaviour, is set for further expansion.

Through the programme foundation staff deliver a range of football-related activities with the support of the Department of Justice, PSNI, Northern Ireland Prison Service, Probation Board, Youth Justice Agency and various community groups and charities.

It was initially rolled out in Northern Ireland's custodial centres, however community versions of the scheme have also been successfully delivered.

All versions of Stay Onside are presently on hold in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Plans are in the pipeline for the continued delivery of Stay Onside in Hydebank Wood College, HMP Maghaberry and HMP Magilligan when it is appropriate and safe to do so, while new community programmes have also been commissioned.

Stay Onside enables participants to gain a coaching qualification and improve their communication and presentation skills, and it offers literacy support and mental and physical wellbeing awareness, too. Among the other activities on the programme is a racism awareness and equality course.

The prisons have a 90% completion rate with 115 people gaining qualifications in 2019.

Eight of the participants since 2018 have found employment. The majority of these participants used Stay Onside in their application and credited the programme with giving them the skills to find employment. A further 32 continued in education and training following the course.



DISABILITY FOOTBALL

The Irish FA Foundation is delivering on the Irish FA Disability Football Plan.

By the end of last year 5,000 people with a disability were playing football in its programmes.

There was also success on the international stage. A young Northern Ireland Cerebral Palsy squad competed at an International Federation of CP Football (IFCPF) seven-a-side development tournament in Barcelona back in June – and finished runners-up. They were up against the likes of Brazil, Germany, Denmark and Scotland in Spain.

Coaching sessions for the Northern Ireland Learning Disability team, the current Home Nations champions, and the Northern Ireland Powerchair team, who qualified for the 2021 World Cup Finals at a tournament in Finland in the early part of 2019, are also staged regularly.

Back in July more than 360 games were played in the 2019 George Best Community Cup, the huge annual celebration of disability football, across four ability bands.

The tournament, staged at the Billy Neill complex in Dundonald over two days, attracted more than 600 players from 72 disability football clubs throughout the UK and Ireland.

Games were played across 12 pitches in the four ability bands and the action was fast and furious throughout.

North Belfast side Grove Athletic were the only team from Northern Ireland to take home one of the main trophies after triumphing in the Ability Level 1 decider.

The 2019 George Best Community Cup was also a real goal fest with more than 500 goals on finals day alone.

The annual five-a-side tournament for clubs catering for players with a disability is run by the Irish Football Association Foundation and supported by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, Cash for Kids and The George Best Foundation through the Mary Peters Trust.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this year's George Best Community Cup has been cancelled.

Participants at the medal presentation ceremony at the 2019 George Best Community Cup.



DISABILITY FOOTBALL

The foundation's various disability football programmes, detailed in the table below, run from participation to representation opportunities.

| Programme | Frequency | Details | Participation Numbers |
|--|--|--|-----------------------|
| Schools Coaching (special education) PSC, Schools Officers | Weekly 1 hr sessions per school (minimum 6 sessions) | 18 Schools | 570 |
| Schools Competitions | Annual | Primary x 2 Secondary Moderate x 3 Secondary Severe x 1 | 730 |
| Clubs | Weekly | 50 clubs in Northern Ireland catering for various disabilities | 1150 |
| Clubs 5-a-side League | Monthly | National Leagues 24 teams | 216 |
| Special Olympics 7-a-side League | Monthly | 8 clubs | 129 |
| George Best Community Cup | Annual | 72 teams | 576 |
| Jordan's Wish Junior Cup | Annual | Club Cup Competition. Ages 7-14 | 90 |
| Under 19 Learning Disability | Fortnightly | National Squad | 18 |
| Cerebral Palsy | Fortnightly | National Squads Junior & Senior | 40 |
| Visual Impairment | Weekly | 2 clubs: Lisburn & Londonderry Junior & Senior Sections | 32 |
| Powerchair Football Clubs | Weekly | 4 clubs: Belfast, Lisburn, Enniskillen and Dungannon | 37 |
| Powerchair Football International | Fortnightly | Belfast | 12 |
| Frame Football | Weekly | 2 clubs – Belfast & Coleraine | 20 |
| Amputee Football | Fortnightly | Belfast | 10 |
| Coach Education | | 6 x Irish FA Level 1 Coaching Disabled Footballers Award | 144 |
| | | Coach Education with USEL | 9 |
| Walking Football | Weekly | 14 groups across NI | 250 |
| Walking Football ABI | Monthly | 4 groups in NI | 40 |
| | | Total | 4073 |



FUTSAL

MEN'S FUTSAL

Northern Ireland's international men's futsal team found the going tough in UEFA Futsal Euro 2022 qualifying.

They took part in a four-team preliminary round mini tournament in Lithuania in February and suffered three defeats.

In game one – the tournament was staged in Jonava - Hungary proved too strong for Jonathan Michael's side and won the match 7-2.

Northern Ireland then took on the hosts, Lithuania, and found themselves under the cosh again.

Despite creating several more opportunities than they did against the Hungarians, they lost out by five goals to one.

In their final match in the mini tournament they faced Turkey, who also lost their opening two games in the group. The match was action-packed as both teams went for it, Turkey eventually winning on a 4-2 scoreline.

As in the game against Lithuania, Northern Ireland created plenty of chances but could not convert enough of them to claim a victory.

Northern Ireland prepared for the Euro qualifiers with matches against Gibraltar in Newry in January. They registered an emphatic win and a narrow defeat against the Gibraltarians.

In December they took part in the Home Nations Championship at St George's Park in England.

They narrowly lost out to eventual winners England (6-4) and suffered a heavy defeat against Wales (9-3) before rounding off the tournament with a fine win over Scotland. Michael's men fought back from 3-1 down to win 5-3.

Northern Ireland men's futsal team captain Adam Barr celebrates hitting the back of the net.

The men's domestic futsal league, sponsored by Cathedral Eye Clinic and run by the Irish FA Foundation, is currently suspended due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Four teams are still in contention for the title in the 10-team Northern Ireland Futsal League. Omagh are in pole position, closely followed by Rosario, Sparta Belfast and Belfast United.

And three of those teams are also still in the hunt for the Cathedral Eye Clinic Futsal Cup. Belfast United and Rosario were due to meet at the end of March in the quarter-finals, however the competition has been suspended until further notice.

In the other last eight ties Omagh will face Gullion Hounds, United LT Futsal Club will be taking on Afrimeripean and World United have an encounter with Belfast Iberians.

The Irish FA Foundation is hoping to complete both competitions when it is safe to do so.



WOMEN'S FUTSAL

Northern Ireland's international women's futsal team were due to play Euro qualifiers in mid-May, however the coronavirus outbreak means the matches have been postponed until further notice.

They were set to take on hosts Lithuania, Slovakia and Serbia in a preliminary qualifying round for Women's Futsal Euro 2021 with the winners making it through to the main qualifying round where four teams will advance to knockout finals next year.

Back in January the women's team registered a double success against Gibraltar at Newry Leisure Centre. It was the squad's first games since April 2019.

They won the first of the two friendlies 5-1 and followed that up with a 4-0 success.

Cliftonville Ladies are Northern Ireland's senior women's futsal champions for 2019-20.

They were crowned at the end of February following a thrilling finale to this season's Northern Ireland Women's Futsal League.

In the league decider, staged at Shankill Leisure Centre in Belfast, they edged past Sparta Belfast on a 6-5 scoreline.

This season's league, also sponsored by Cathedral Eye Clinic and run by the Irish FA Foundation, featured 24 teams from across Northern Ireland, including teams representing clubs in the NIFL Women's Premiership, the NIWFA Championship and NIWFA's four other tiers.



The Northern Ireland senior women's team registered two wins over Gibraltar earlier this year.

SCHOOLS' FUTSAL

Teams from around Northern Ireland picked up silverware at the 2019 Irish FA Schools' Futsal Finals, which were staged in November.

Tandragee Junior High from Co Armagh, Ballyclare Secondary from Co Antrim, Belfast's Boys' Model and Co Down's Bangor Academy all tasted glory at the finals.

More than 2000 pupils and 200 teams took part in futsal in schools across Northern Ireland in 2019 with the winners of 12 regional tournaments competing at a national tournament.

Antrim Forum was the venue for the finals for post primary boys' and girls' Year 9 (Under-13) and Year 11 (U15) teams.

In the girls' competition Tandragee JHS defeated Abbey Community College

(Newtownabbey) on penalties in the Year 9 decider, while Ballyclare Secondary School were victorious against St Cecilia's (Derry-Londonderry) in the Year 11 final.

The boys' tournament was very competitive with Boys' Model retaining the Year 11 trophy after defeating St Columb's College (Derry-Londonderry) in the decider and Bangor Academy defeating Boys' Model in the Year 9 competition final.

Unfortunately, due to the virus pandemic, all other schools' competitions in 2019-20 were cancelled, including futsal tournaments involving primary schools across Northern Ireland.

COACHING IN SCHOOLS

The Irish FA Foundation continues to deliver coaching sessions for children in primary schools across Northern Ireland.

The programmes assist in the physical development of schoolchildren and provide much-needed opportunities to develop social skills.

The Department of Education (NI) funded Sports Programme has been delivered in 48 schools in the 2019-2020 academic year.

On average 228 sessions were delivered to 5,583 children each week. And coaches engaged with more than 220 teachers to ensure sessions were linked to other curricular areas throughout the academic year.

The programme was scheduled to be delivered to a further 50 schools between April and June but due to the Covid-19 outbreak and temporary school closures this could not occur in its traditional form.

Instead support has been provided to around 100 schools who have received access to online resources to supplement at-home learning.

A further 50 schools will receive the Sports Programme between September and December this year, subject to government guidelines.

In partnership with the Education Authority coaches completed the pilot year of a new Shared Education programme alongside Ulster GAA: Shared Future and Shared Goals. Coaches worked with 24 teachers and schools, and with 623 participants, each week.

They helped children build an awareness of the importance of a healthy diet and active lifestyle as well as to develop resilience and mental toughness through practical games and classroom-based activities.

In addition Irish FA Foundation coaches provided 17 after school programmes, delivering football specific lessons to 348 children.



EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

The Education and Employability programme entered its third year in September 2019.

Since the beginning of the programme there has been significant growth in the number of schools, colleges and pupils involved. It was delivered in 15 post primary schools for the academic year 2019-2020.

Through taking part in Education and Employability workshops, coach education and gaining industry experience 42 female and 244 male students attained qualifications and were upskilled.

And 20 teachers were also upskilled via the programme, completing various coaching qualifications, including the Level 1 badge.

The students were given the opportunity to gain industry experience by coaching in primary schools throughout Northern Ireland. Thirty primary schools were involved in coaching and tournament days.

In total 952 male and 600 female students got involved in the programme.

WORK EXPERIENCE

The Irish FA Foundation's work experience programme has gone from strength to strength.

In 2019 a total of 95 students completed work experience with placements ranging from one week to one year.

In 2020 a total of 12 students had completed work experience before the programme had to be suspended due to Covid-19.

Since 2016, as part of the Let Them Play strategy, the foundation's placement initiative has provided excellent opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland.

Students are given the opportunity to shadow Regional Grassroots Development Officers and Let Them Play Officers and assist in the work of the Football

Unfortunately several primary school coaching days arranged between March and June this year had to be cancelled due to the virus pandemic, however the foundation's education officers were still able to complete most of the courses for the 2019-2020 academic year in participating schools.

Meanwhile, Ashfield Boys' High School in east Belfast became the foundation's first development school where education officers delivered modules of the Level 3 BTEC in Sport in addition to the existing Education and Employability programme. Discussions will continue to take place to create additional development schools in the future.

Despite the current unprecedented circumstances the education officers are continuing to work with Ashfield and are delivering classroom sessions remotely, marking assignments and providing feedback. They are in regular contact with the students, teachers and the school.

Development team as well as marketing, communications and elite development.

Types of placements include:

Shadowing - Secondary students can shadow foundation staff for up to two weeks to gain an insight into the day to day tasks involved in delivering football;

Short projects - College and Masters students work with foundation staff over a few months, marrying college learning and Irish FA strategy to deliver small projects;

Year-long projects - the foundation offers a variety of year-long placement opportunities for third level students completing their placement year as part of degree courses. These are offered across several departments of the association.



CLUB AND VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

The Irish FA Foundation launched a new programme for clubs and volunteers across Northern Ireland during 2019.

The People and Clubs programme was created following a large and wide-ranging research project that consulted with clubs and volunteers, volunteer organisations, universities, other football associations, councils and more.

It is designed to support clubs to provide the best possible experience for players and volunteers alike.

The initiative for clubs by clubs includes a portal for clubs to complete club accreditation and access downloadable resources, case studies, workshops, club education materials and various other programmes.

Focusing on club development, club operations and volunteer development, it is aimed at supporting the hundreds of clubs and more than 7000 volunteers who contribute to football in Northern Ireland.

To date 130 clubs have signed up for People and Clubs accreditation, with more than 40 signing up via the Irish FA website since the coronavirus lockdown in March.

The Irish FA Foundation has recruited a team of more than 20 Grassroots Leaders to assist clubs and help with the accreditation process. They also provide support via workshops and mentoring.

And the Grassroots Leaders receive specific training and get support with their personal development. The leaders have taken part in several webinars and training via Microsoft Teams during lockdown.

In addition the foundation has launched a Grassroots Volunteer Development Programme to support volunteers via the 12 new Football Community Hubs across Northern Ireland.

Officers will train the volunteers and provide support, enabling them to deliver bespoke training to club volunteers and to provide clubs with opportunities to engage in Irish FA workshops.

The volunteers recruited will be pivotal in improving links with schools, communities and clubs in each council area. Up to 20 volunteers have already been recruited.

It has also been another productive season for the Sport - A Home for Lifelong Volunteering programme.

The Department for Communities-backed programme, which is run in conjunction with Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby, attracted a record number of clubs and volunteers in 2019 and is continuing to grow.

And young sports volunteers took centre stage at the GoldMark Awards ceremony in Belfast at the start of March.

The event highlighted the huge volunteering effort across the three sports among young people aged 14-24. More than 100 young people were presented with a GoldMark Millennium Volunteers Award for 50, 100 and 200 hours of volunteering.

Other events staged this year include a Multi-Sport Forum at Belfast's Kingspan Stadium which provided participants with information on marketing, funding and volunteer recruitment.

The three sports bodies also hosted a volunteering forum in Omagh which focused on the benefits of volunteering.

At the end of April a Funding Webinar was staged. Hosted by the Irish FA Foundation, it attracted 123 participants, including 45 people representing 38 football clubs.

At the beginning of April, meanwhile, the foundation launched a new Young Leaders Programme. Supported by UEFA GROW, it aims to provide a voice for young people in football and support the development of young leaders.

The Irish FA Foundation has also joined with the Volunteer Now organisation to launch a new online platform for managing volunteers. To date the foundation has welcomed 312 volunteers to the platform and further training is planned.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS/ PEACE WORK

The Irish FA's new Community Relations Officer has been in post since last June with the aim of bolstering community relations in the environs of Irish FA HQ and right across Northern Ireland.

In July and August community fun days were staged at Olympia Leisure Centre and Nubia Street close to the National Football Stadium. A fun day was also staged at Halloween on Nubia Street, while support was provided for a Halloween camp in Sandy Row. And at Christmas more than 100 youth players from clubs located close to the stadium were treated to a Christmas Ball.

Six fan zones were successfully delivered in Belfast during the season (three senior men's internationals, two senior women's internationals and at the Women's Challenge Cup Final). More than 2000 fans enjoyed the fan zone activities.

A total of 38 Show Racism the Red Card workshops - now rebranded as Everybody's Game workshops - have been delivered since last July with 765 attendees from academies, clubs, youth/community groups and schools.

In partnership with TIDES the new CRO has developed an anti-sectarianism workshop entitled Show Me The Way. The project challenges attendees' perception of differences and highlights similarities, along with showcasing the development of the GAWA and work against sectarianism at international games level. The workshop was first delivered in March this year and further rollout is planned.

Two Inclusive Clubs conferences were staged, in Portadown and Derry-Londonderry, with 109 attendees enjoying informative events describing what an inclusive club looks like and what the Irish FA Foundation can offer clubs.

A Shared Education programme was staged at Olympia Leisure Centre. Focusing on schools local to the NFS, it brought together Donegall Road Primary and St Malachy's PS pupils from years two and seven. Strong relationships were built across seven weeks, culminating with more than 100 pupils attending the NFS for a free tour.

The CRO hosted more than 90 members of the public at the stadium as part of the 4 Corners Festival. Attendees enjoyed an evening with the chairmen of the Belfast clubs in the NIFL Premiership, discussing the challenges of religion in sport.

The new officer has also delivered workshops and activities in both Maghaberry and Hydebank continuously as part of the Stay Onside programme and backed the Community Relations Council's annual Good Relations Week with video support from Northern Ireland defender Craig Cathcart.

Other projects include working with the Rio Ferdinand Foundation and the Tackling Paramilitarism steering group and developing a new Community Relations strategy for the Irish FA. Securing funding is also part of his remit (£35k for current financial year).

During the Covid-19 lockdown the CRO delivered an Everybody's Game online workshop to the Bytes Project youth group to bolster their support in delivering a tournament later this year in association with KickOff@3.



PEACE IV

Year two of Sport Uniting Communities was hugely successful with more than 6000 participants engaged across the various programmes, including Game of Three Halves, Club Development Sport for Peace Days, Volunteer Development Programme and Getting to Know the Irish FA stadium tours.

In November the PEACE IV-funded project, which involves the Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby, held its annual GoldMark Event to celebrate young volunteers in sport at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Belfast, with over 100 attendees.

The GoldMark certificates were presented by Jane Gribbin from Volunteer Now to volunteers from 45 clubs that engaged in the Volunteer Development Programme in 2019.

In December the project's BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) participation programme was held at Belfast's Grosvenor Recreation Centre in conjunction with World United FC. Within this programme, which lasted for six weeks, 32 members of the BAME community were involved in coaching and education sessions with the aim of providing them with new experiences and to further help them integrate within their respective communities.

This year a number of Inclusive Clubs workshops have taken place. These included a workshop for players involved in the Irish FA's Player Development Programme held at the Melvin Sports Complex, Strabane.

A total of 33 participants from 11 local clubs attended the workshop. The workshop focused around Football for All and Show Racism the Red Card and culminated in a futsal coaching session.

The project's Community Sports Development Officers have also held two volunteer development events at Foyle Arena in Derry-Londonderry and Omagh Sports Complex. Sixteen sports clubs took part, including representatives from Ballinamallard United, Sion Swifts, Ardstraw and Beragh Swifts football clubs.

The events consisted of the delivery of five workshops looking at volunteer development.

Feedback from clubs was very positive and clubs are keen to work together to run events in the local community to bring people from different backgrounds together.

In addition the Community Sports Development Officers have been delivering a number of Game of Three Halves across Northern Ireland, Getting to Know the IFA stadium tours and a Youth Leadership Programme in Aquinas Grammar School in Belfast.



More than 100 young volunteers attended the GoldMark Awards ceremony at Belfast's Crowne Plaza Hotel back in November.

SCHOOLS' FOOTBALL

INTERNATIONAL

This year's Centenary Shield competition was cancelled due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Northern Ireland's U18 Schoolboys team were aiming to retain the trophy and had started their campaign brightly after earning a point away from home against a strong Scotland side and defeating Wales 1-0 at home in early March.

However, governing body SAFIB (Schools Association Football International Board) subsequently decided to cancel the competition "with the best interests of all involved at heart".

Northern Ireland's U18 Schoolboys, however, did pick up silverware this year.

As part of their 2020 Centenary Shield preparations they retained the Lynne Nicholson Trophy in February with a convincing 3-0 victory over Jersey in St Helier.

Team captain Trai Hume, who was part of the victorious 2019 Shield squad, netted a double, while James Teelan also got on the scoresheet at the Springfield Stadium.

The win over Jersey followed a 2-0 victory against Australia's U18 Schoolboys in Belfast in January.



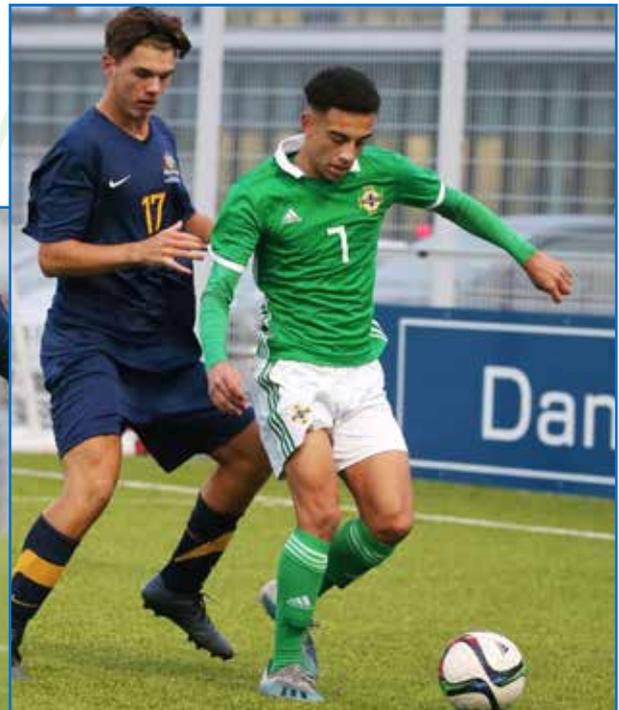
SAFIB is still aiming to stage the annual Victory Shield competition later this year. The aim is to play all the games at Pinatar in Spain in the first week of October.

In the 2019 competition back in the autumn Northern Ireland's U16 Schoolboys failed to retain the trophy they had won the previous year.

In their opening game at Colliers Park in Wrexham the boys in green and white drew 1-1 with Wales.

Game two was another tight affair. This time Scotland were the opposition and the game ended scoreless.

The U16 Schoolboys were still in with a shout of sharing the trophy as they entered their final match against the Republic of Ireland. They came up short, however, as they could only manage a 1-1 draw with their southern counterparts.



Northern Ireland's U18 Schoolboys in action against Australia back in January.

SCHOOLS' FOOTBALL

DOMESTIC

St Columb's College from Derry-Londonderry won this season's Translink Schools' Gold Cup.

They ruled the roost after winning two of the three deciders played on the annual Finals Day in the competition.

The Irish FA Foundation competition, sponsored by transport company Translink, involves the eight post-primary schools in Northern Ireland who have been awarded the Gold Schools Quality Mark accreditation, which recognises schools who put structures in place to develop football.

The participating schools faced each other across three age groups (U13, U15, U17) from the start of the school year.

In the competition points are awarded to schools for their league positions, and the school with the most points is the overall winner of the Translink Schools' Gold Cup and achieves 'Top Football Performance School' status in Northern Ireland.

St Columb's were convincing overall winners this year as they won both the U15 and U13 cups.

The Derry-Londonderry school defeated Belfast's Boys' Model 3-0 in the U15 Cup final and Lisburn's Laurelhill Community College 4-0 in the U13 Cup decider on Finals Day, which was staged at Allen Park in Antrim in early March.



The main competition for St Columb's were North-West rivals Holy Cross Strabane who defeated east Belfast school Ashfield Boys' High in the U13 and Bangor Academy in the U15 third/fourth placement matches.

However, Holy Cross lost out in the final of the U17 Cup to east Belfast school Our Lady and St Patrick's Knock.

The Translink Schools' Gold Cup standings for 2019-20 were: 1 St Columb's College, 2 Holy Cross Strabane, 3 Our Lady and St Patrick's Knock, 4 Ashfield Boys' High, 5 Boys' Model, 6 Laurelhill Community College, 7 St Malachy's College (Belfast), 8 Bangor Academy.

The Irish FA Foundation's Schools team hosted the annual mixed nine-a-side competition at Mallusk Playing Fields in November.

The unique year nine competition saw single sex schools, such as Belfast Boys' and Girls' Model, De La Salle and St Genevieve's (both Belfast) and Bangor Grammar and St Louise's (Belfast), combining to play together.

The competition saw more than 360 pupils playing in 24 teams with the winners of each group advancing to the semi-finals stage.

The final between De La Salle and St Genevieve's and Banbridge High proved too close to call. Neither team scored in normal time so it was down to penalties with De La Salle missing their first two and Banbridge converting to win the trophy.

Unfortunately, due to the virus pandemic, all other schools' competitions in 2019-20 were cancelled, including the Danske Bank U18 Schools' Cup Final in March and the other NISFA Schools' Cup Finals (U12 to U18) as well as the Electric Ireland Junior Cup and Senior Cup competitions for girls' teams.

St Columb's College won this season's overall Translink Schools' Gold Cup as well as the U13 and U15 trophies.

COMMERCIAL

The Irish FA's Commercial and Marketing team have had a productive 12 months, securing several new partnerships and sponsorships.

The biggest deal was a multi-year partnership with communications giants BT, who have become the lead partner of all the men's, boys' and disability international teams in Northern Ireland. The sponsorship package means the BT logo will appear on Northern Ireland training kits until 2024.

2019 also saw the introduction of a new pouring rights partner in Sadler's Peaky Blinder. As well as becoming the main sponsor for the Irish Cup the brand became the new official beer of the Northern Ireland senior men's and women's football teams and Sadler's have exciting plans to launch a new GAWA-branded beer in 2020.

Other deals included the introduction of SafeFood as the official partner to the Irish FA Primary Schools After Schools Programme, iPRO as the official hydration partner, Traction Finance as the official mobility partner, Dale Farm Protein Milk as the new sponsor of the Harry Cavan Youth Cup and Cathedral Eye Clinic as official eye and health laser partner as well as the official partner to the Northern Ireland international men's and women's futsal teams and the NI Futsal Leagues.

Post the introduction of Grafton Recruitment as the sponsor of the Family Stand and big screen in the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, Onecom became the sponsor of the West Stand.

As 2020 kicked off the association welcomed back Travel Solutions as official Northern Ireland Supporters' Travel Partner and as an official patron to the Education and Heritage Centre. New patrons in 2020 also included H&J Martin and A&L Goodbody.

The commercial team have continued to work successfully with other partners across the private sector, including adidas, McDonald's, JD Sports, Electric Ireland, Boots, Karcher, Hormann and Ginsters as well as several successful locally-based firms such as Charles Hurst Renault, Irwin's Bakery, Translink, McComb's and Toals Bookmakers.



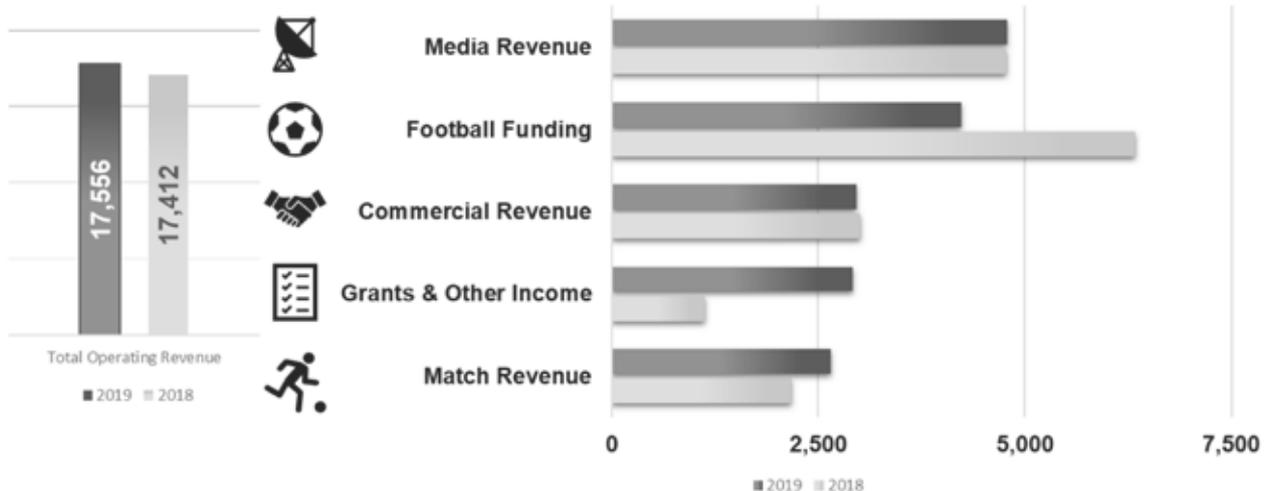
BT are now the main sponsor of Northern Ireland's senior men's international team.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the current pandemic, it is reassuring to note the team continue to have a strong pipeline of potential activity with several deals already signed. These will be announced when football resumes.

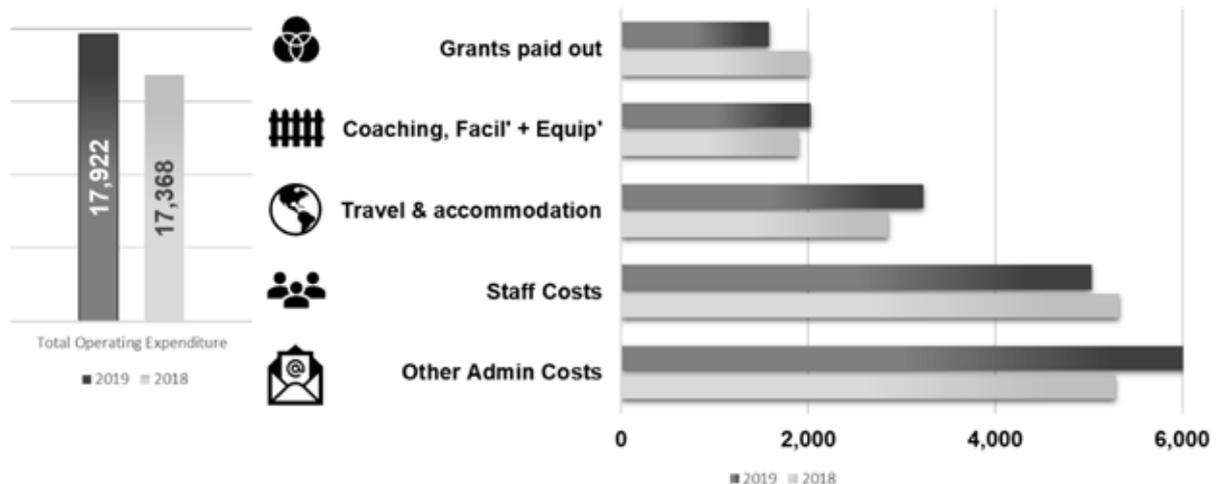
FINANCE

For the year ended 31 December 2019 the Irish FA had total revenue of £17.5m and total expenditure of £17.9m.

The main categories of revenue are analysed as follows:



The main categories of expenditure are analysed as follows:



The Irish FA recorded a trading loss of £366k for the year ended 31 December 2019 versus a modest trading profit of £44k for the year ended 31 December 2018, however the result of foreign exchange movements and investment valuations was an increase of £814k in 2019 while it was a decrease of £344k in 2018.

The final net result for financial year 2019 was a profit of £378k compared to a loss of £372k for the previous year.

Cash balances at 31 December 2019 totalled £5.1m (2018: £4.1m).

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

FINANCE

Statement of total comprehensive income for all Irish FA activities for the year ended 31 December 2019

| | 2019 £'000 | 2018 £'000 |
|--|-----------------|---------------|
| Total revenue | 17,556 | 17,412 |
| Cost of sales | (12,429) | (12,258) |
| Gross profit | 5,127 | 5,154 |
| Net administrative expenses | (5,493) | (5,110) |
| Trading (loss)/profit | (366) | 44 |
| Other gains/(losses) - net | 814 | (344) |
| Operating profit/(loss) | 448 | (300) |
| Income from other fixed asset investments | 12 | 10 |
| Interest (payable)/receivable and similar income | (9) | (37) |
| Profit/(Loss) before taxation | 451 | (327) |
| Tax on profit/(loss) | (73) | (45) |
| Profit/(Loss) for the financial year | 378 | (372) |
| Total comprehensive income/(expense) for the year | 378 | (372) |

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 2019

| | 2019 | 2018 |
|--|----------|----------|
| | £'000 | £'000 |
| Fixed assets | | |
| Intangible assets | 201 | 167 |
| Tangible assets | 34,695 | 35,830 |
| Investments | 4,589 | 3,981 |
| | 39,485 | 39,978 |
| Current assets | | |
| Inventory | 14 | - |
| Debtors | 3,953 | 3,180 |
| Cash at bank and in hand | 5,173 | 4,112 |
| | 9,140 | 7,292 |
| amounts falling due within one year | (12,021) | (9,792) |
| Net current liabilities | (2,881) | (2,500) |
| Total assets less current liabilities | 36,604 | 37,478 |
| amounts falling due after more than one year | (25,856) | (27,181) |
| Provisions for liabilities | (539) | (466) |
| Net assets | 10,209 | 9,831 |
| Reserves | | |
| Investment revaluation reserve | 2,959 | 2,350 |
| Profit and loss account | 7,250 | 7,481 |
| Total reserves | 10,209 | 9,831 |

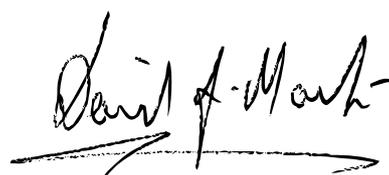
The financial statements of each entity comprising the Irish FA activities have been independently audited by Martin Cowie (Senior Statutory Auditor) for and on behalf of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and an unqualified audit opinion has been issued for all entities.

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



Gerry Mallon (Chairperson)

Date: 23 April 2020



David Martin (President)

Date: 23 April 2020

COMMUNICATIONS

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

The agile and dynamic team acts as a support and service arm to other departments in the organisation, telling the story of the work done by those departments to support the Irish FA's overall vision to promote, foster and develop football for all in Northern Ireland.

During 2019-20 the team created a plethora of compelling content that told the story of football here. It showcased the work of the Irish FA Foundation and the organisation as a whole, highlighted the stadium as a modern, safe and inclusive space and helped to grow the fame of the country's elite players.

Social media is a vital touchpoint for the association to build engagement with fans and those who participate in football at any level all year round. It's key to driving positive messaging for the Irish FA and to developing a sense of pride in the national teams.

The digital team's output was recognised as the best in the country after the Irish FA was awarded the gong for Best Overall Use of Social Media at the 2019 Northern Ireland Social Media Awards, which were held in September.

In 2019 audiences grew across the association's seven social media platforms. The Irish FA had a total of 462,000 followers across the board by the end of the calendar year. At the time of publication that figure stood at 475,000.

The Irish FA website also continued to attract more page views, up 10% year on year to 2.8 million views.

The ongoing Northern Ireland Uncut production, which is a behind-the-scenes look at the senior men's international team's camps, continues to go from strength to strength with 175,000 views to date.

Digital coverage of the senior women's team was also expanded with bespoke features, every game covered and profiles of emerging and established talent.

The Northern Ireland Podcast series featuring interviews with current and former players continued to help transform the digital offering and has meant the Irish FA has an excellent product in the emerging market of long-form audio content.

On the domestic competition front Irish Cup Uncut (a behind-the-scenes look at a team in each round) continued to be well received and all Irish FA competition deciders at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park were covered.

In recent weeks members of the digital team have been producing significant content during the coronavirus pandemic.

They have adjusted well to lockdown and let their creative juices flow, including producing the innovative Staying In Zoom video call series with senior men/senior women international players. It is hosted by popular DJ and Northern Ireland fan Pete Snodden.

The team have also had a focus on retrospective content, running famous Northern Ireland games in full on the NI National Team channel. And viewing figures have been impressive.



CRAIG STANFIELD – A TRIBUTE

Craig Stanfield, the match manager for Northern Ireland's home international games, passed away suddenly in February 2020.

A familiar figure in Northern Ireland football circles, Craig (50) was the Football Operations Manager at the Irish Football Association.

He worked for the Irish FA for 30 years. He first joined the association in an administrative role in 1990 and was heavily involved in the domestic game for many years, including a period as secretary of Northern Ireland's Premier League when it was operated by the Irish FA.

Craig managed the association's four annual cup competitions, discipline, player registration and also found time to be the team administrator for men's U17 and U19 teams taking part in UEFA competitions.

He was tournament director for the 2005 UEFA U19 Final Tournament, which was staged in Northern Ireland. His knowledge, experience, personality, professionalism and leadership were key to the event's success.

Shortly after that tournament he took up a new position as Head of Competition Services within the IFA. This involved heading up a new structure and format for the Premiership, Championship and Championship 2 leagues when they were under the umbrella of the association. This was in addition to him still heading up cup competitions, discipline and player registrations.

When the Northern Ireland Football League was formed to run the top three domestic leagues in 2013 Craig moved to the position of Football Operations Manager with the association.

Following UEFA training he became match manager for all of Northern Ireland's home matches in 2014 – and he was also match manager for the association's various annual domestic cup finals, including the Irish Cup Final.

He was heavily involved in the redevelopment works at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, which were completed in autumn 2016. He managed to create quality UEFA-compliant facilities on site during construction works as the Belfast stadium hosted UEFA Euro 2016 qualifiers.

Craig was then in charge of logistics for the Northern Ireland team when they competed at Euro 2016 in France. He organised accommodation for the squad and support staff along with the media centre and training facilities for Michael O'Neill's squad at Saint-Georges-de-Reneins. His work was roundly praised by the manager and players.



A year later he undertook the role of operations manager at the UEFA Women's U19 Euros when they were staged in Northern Ireland. He provided support for match managers at the tournament, looked after match venue and training pitches, co-ordinated equipment, organised IT provision and much more.

More recently he led the introduction of a new player registration system in Northern Ireland. Along with an implementation team he trained clubs, leagues and referees on how to use the Comet system.

And the Irish FA winning the hosting rights to the UEFA Super Cup 2021 was in no small part down to the quality of the bid put together by Craig and his team.

Prior to his untimely death he became a UEFA venue director, an appointment he was incredibly proud of.

Craig is survived by his wife Karalyn and their three children, Kyle, Holly and Matthew.

The Lisburn man is sorely missed by his many friends in the association, at UEFA and in the football family across Northern Ireland.

Irish FA chief executive Patrick Nelson said Craig had made "an enormous contribution" to football in Northern Ireland, adding that he had been a vital part of the IFA family for 30 years.



Irish Football Association

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