

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION ACTIVITY REPORT 2020-2021



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The Irish Football Association's Activity Report 2020-21 was compiled, edited and written by Nigel Tilson. It was designed by Norman Boyd.



PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

Penning my contribution to this annual review of activities within the Irish Football Association gave me a sense of déjà vu.

A year ago I said the Covid pandemic had turned normal life on its head and had wreaked havoc globally.

Sadly, that continues to be the case, and I would urge everyone involved in the game to continue to do everything in their power to thwart the spread of this terrible disease.

Hope is, of course, being provided through the vaccination programme but we must all remain vigilant given the emerging variants of the virus.

I am, however, pleased that the football family is continuing to provide support to isolated and vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

I would also like to applaud the Irish FA staff who have worked tirelessly with the authorities so that football at all levels was able to return to action.

Many leagues and cup competitions across Northern Ireland were cancelled in the 2020-21 season due to the pandemic, including three of the association's annual cup competitions.

We were fortunate to be able to complete the 2019-20 editions of those three competitions - Intermediate Cup, Junior Cup and Harry Cavan Youth Cup - along with the Irish Cup last July. Congratulations to the various winners, who are featured elsewhere in this report.

Unfortunately the Women's Challenge Cup was not staged in 2020 because of the pandemic. The competition is returning this year though with the final due to be staged in September.

The 2020-21 edition of the Irish Cup was completed, albeit in a truncated format. It started in late April and ended on 21 May when Linfield defeated Larne 2-1 in the final, which was staged at Mourneview Park in Lurgan as the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park was not available due to pitch renovations.

Well done to Linfield on their cup triumph and on their NIFL Premiership title success.

On the international front, it would have been great if our senior men's team were preparing for the Euros once again following their first appearance at the tournament in 2016.

However, they just failed to qualify at the final hurdle. Following an excellent success in the Path B play-off semi-finals, via a penalty shootout against Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, they just came up short against Slovakia in the final, losing in extra time.

The qualification campaign for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 began in disappointing fashion with a defeat to Italy in Parma and a home draw against Bulgaria, but I am confident we can bounce back and make our mark in European Qualifying Group C this autumn.

Of course, in contrast to the senior men's team, our senior women's team did qualify for the Euros – and it is a remarkable achievement.

Four excellent victories in their remaining qualifying group matches set them up for a two-legged play-off against Ukraine Women for a place at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in England.

They were massive underdogs going in to the games in late November and early December.

However, against the odds, and with two first class performances, they defeated the Ukrainians away and then at home to deservedly qualify for their first major tournament.

Huge congratulations goes to Kenny Shiels and his backroom team for the way they prepared the team for that six-game run. And, naturally, the players deserve an enormous amount of credit for what they have achieved.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

A 6-0 victory away to Faroe Islands last September began a six-match winning streak which ultimately led to the senior women's team booking a place at UEFA Women's Euro 2022.



We can now look forward to seeing them in action in the FIFA World Cup qualifiers next season ahead of the UEFA Women's Euros in 2022.

While it was disappointing that we were unable to host the UEFA Men's Under-19 European Championship finals last summer due to the pandemic, I am pleased Northern Ireland has been chosen to host the U19 Euros in 2024 instead.



The tournament was due to have been held in Belfast, Ballymena, Lurgan and Portadown from 19 July to 1 August last year. It was then postponed until November before being pushed back to the spring of this year and subsequently cancelled.

This summer's Men's U19 Euros have also been cancelled. They were scheduled to be staged in Romania in late June and early July. Instead Romania will now host the tournament in 2025.

A new qualifying format is set to be introduced in time for the eight-team 2024 final tournament in Northern Ireland. It will feature UEFA Nations League-style groups in a two-season cycle. The 2024 final tournament will also act as qualifiers for the FIFA U20 World Cup in 2025.

Acting US Consul General Bryan Wockley presented a US flag to the association prior to the first senior international between Northern Ireland and USA. The flag, which had previously flown at US Embassies, was flown at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park during the international friendly.

PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

In March I made a special presentation to Northern Ireland captain Steven Davis to mark his record-breaking achievements that month.

I presented Steven with a specially-commissioned crystal football following the home World Cup qualifier against Bulgaria.

The previous week, in Northern Ireland's opening World Cup 2022 European Qualifying Group C qualifier against Italy in Parma, he equalled former England goalkeeper Peter Shilton's British record of 125 caps – a record which had stood since 1990.

His appearance against Bulgaria at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park saw him earn his 126th cap for his country – a new caps record for a male player in the UK.

Apart from being his country's most capped player he is also Northern Ireland's most capped skipper. He has worn the armband 72 times.

Earning 125 international caps was a magnificent achievement by Steven. The association, like it did at his 100-cap milestone, decided to mark it with a special memento.



Steven has demonstrated remarkable consistency over his long international career and, significantly, he started almost every one of the games in which he played.

He now holds the British men's international caps record and we look forward to him adding to his total in the coming months.

Finally, this is my last report as President of the Irish Football Association.

It has been an honour and a privilege to serve the association as President and I would like to thank everyone who has supported me over the past five years, from the Chief Executive, Patrick Nelson, to the board and the council to Irish FA staff and many, many people in the football family across Northern Ireland.

However, I am certainly not bowing out of football, far from it.

In April I was elected to fill the FIFA Vice-President position reserved by world football's governing body for the four UK football associations.

After becoming one of eight FIFA VPs, I fully intend to champion the great work being done in each of UEFA's 55 national associations and to be part of a strong, unified UEFA team at FIFA.

Naturally, I will also continue to champion the association and Northern Ireland at every given opportunity.

I am proud to follow in the footsteps of the late Harry Cavan and Jim Boyce, former Irish FA presidents who also became FIFA vice-presidents.

David J Martin

President
Irish Football Association

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

In opening this report on the 2020-21 football season, I think it is fair to say that it really was a football season like no other.

In football, as in all other walks of life in Northern Ireland as well as all over the planet, the Covid-19 pandemic threw all of our plans up in the air and broke them into a thousand pieces.

From the restrictions on training and playing at various times to the restrictions on spectators attending matches in all except extreme circumstances, life and football was very different from what we know and love.

And yet, due to the tenacity and perseverance of football people, some football did in fact take place in Northern Ireland despite these most trying of circumstances.

The NIFL Danske Bank Premiership completed its normal 38-match season against all the odds, and the Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup was lifted on 21 May after a truncated competition.

Given that Jamie Mulgrew of Linfield lifted both of these trophies, I suspect many Bluemen across the country would say that the season worked out just as they would have expected! Congratulations, of course, go to David Healy and his squad for this achievement.

International football was also replanned and delivered, at least at the level of the senior men's and senior women's national teams.

The senior men's team reins were picked up by Ian Baraclough who started and finished his first UEFA Nations League campaign with draws away and home against Romania but couldn't stop us being relegated to Group C for the next series of this competition.

A fabulous night in Sarajevo was followed by a disappointment in Belfast as we beat Bosnia and Herzegovina to make the UEFA Euro 2020 Path B play-off final only to lose to Slovakia after extra time.

There was no such disappointment around the senior women's team though. Kenny Shiels' squad won their last four qualifiers to set up a play-off against Ukraine, itself uncharted territory.

Goals in Kovalivka from Rachel Furness and Simone Magill and at Seaview from Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell saw off the challenge from the East and booked a coveted slot at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in England.

I believe we were also trending in WWE, the professional wrestling outfit, for a while given the amazing red card challenge on Sarah McFadden near the end of the second leg at Seaview!

To give some idea of the measure of this achievement, there were 16 slots available for the final tournament and 15 of these slots were filled by the top 16 nations in Europe on a ranking basis. Our senior women's team were ranked 27 in Europe, so to get to the Euro finals is some achievement and we all look forward to following their progress in England next summer. I'm sure the GAWA will be there in force!

Of course, the downside of the season is that most other football didn't get played in what I have already noted were unprecedented times.

Although all politicians and health experts would agree on the value generated by sport for society in normal times, the various lockdowns and other restrictions on our civil liberties to help prevent further community transmission of Covid-19 meant that almost all other competitive football fell victim to the pandemic.



The Northern Ireland senior women's team made history when defeating Ukraine in a two-leg UEFA Women's Euro 2022 play-off. It's the first time they have reached a major tournament.





The Northern Ireland senior men's team narrowly missed out on reaching Euro 2020. They lost 2-1 to Slovakia after extra time in the Path B play-off final in Belfast.

This, naturally, caused significant angst among our football stakeholders who wanted nothing more than to get outside, to train and play games, but in the context of the pandemic we all had to make sacrifices, and so the 2020-2021 season will be one where for many leagues and cups there will be a blank space where the winner's name should be.

At the time of writing this report we are still emerging from a long winter/spring lockdown. I would hope that summer will bring us freedom and safety, and that we can all get back to playing the beautiful game without restrictions as the 2021-2022 season rolls around in August.

I will finish this report on the season, however, with high praise for our football family. Despite the tribulations of not being able to train and play throughout the season, for many people the football family stood tall in Northern Ireland in terms of offering its services as a volunteer force.

From medicine delivery to picking up shopping, football people helped Northern Ireland weather and beat the storm of the Covid-19 pandemic.

When our government partners asked for help at the community level to ensure that people who needed it were looked after, football people stood up and were counted.

As we often say, what happens over the white line when a ball is in play is only part of our game. Football brings forward teamwork, camaraderie and friendship, and this last season has shown that in so many ways.

Let's hope next season's report can be more about the game itself and we can celebrate many league and cup wins in the normal fashion!

Patrick Nelson

Chief Executive
Irish Football Association



STADIUM

While football did return to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in 2020-21, following the abrupt end to the 2019-20 season due to Covid-19, it was not the football experience as we know it.

The stadium was set, the pitch was ready but the players faced empty stands as the pandemic continued to disrupt our game.

The first match at the stadium after Covid restrictions came into place in March 2020 was played on 20 July, a behind closed doors friendly between Linfield and Bohemians.

It was followed by further behind closed doors matches, including the Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup semi-finals and final, staged on 27 July and 31 July respectively, and a further Linfield friendly on 15 August against Stoke City.

The Irish Cup final was played in front of a limited number of spectators in line with the Northern Ireland Executive's easing of restrictions.

It was not only the first match at the stadium to host socially distanced spectators during the pandemic, it was the first football game with spectators in the UK since the first lockdown began.

The September international in the UEFA Nations League (UNL) with Norway was played under UEFA behind closed doors protocols, while the Austria UNL game in October saw a limited number of spectators - 600 - permitted to attend under strict protocols.

For the Euro 2020 Path B play-off final between Northern Ireland and Slovakia in November the stadium was able to host 1060 spectators at a time when the rest of the UK was playing matches behind closed doors.

And for the Northern Ireland v Romania UNL match just a few days later another 1060 fans were allowed in the stands under the same protocols.

By December restrictions had changed, which meant the remaining fixtures in 2020-2021 had to be played behind closed doors, including the friendly against USA and the FIFA World Cup qualifier against Bulgaria in March 2021.

The Stadium Team is continuing to adapt the operational plans of the stadium in a phased approach in line with Northern Ireland Executive guidelines, with the safety of staff,

players, community and stakeholders of paramount importance.

In 2020-21 the team also continued to have strong collaboration with partners: Clean Event Services, who deliver the cleaning provision for the stadium; Clive Richardson Limited, who maintain the pitch; Eventsec, the association's stewarding and security partner, and H&J Martin, who maintain the stadium facilities to the highest standard.

Meanwhile, at the time of writing Irish FA Tours, which includes visits to the association's Education and Heritage Centre (EHC), is preparing to kick off again following an easing of Covid-19 restrictions.

The EHC has been closed since March of last year, although Irish FA Tours has been running virtual tours which have proved popular among schools and youth groups.

Earlier this year Heritage Lottery Fund provided a grant of £20,900 to help the association to maintain Irish FA Tours and the EHC.

The grant was part of a £5.5m Heritage Recovery Fund, distributed on behalf of the Department for Communities, aimed at helping the heritage sector recover from the coronavirus pandemic and become more resilient.

The cash injection has helped Irish FA Tours to introduce new health and safety procedures to keep both volunteer tour guides and visitors safe, including hand sanitising stations, new signage and social distancing measures.

It has also enabled Irish FA Tours to add content to its digital archive, focusing particularly on the women's game in Northern Ireland, including a Women's 50-cap Club, team photographs and memorable moments.

And this summer it will be introducing interactive handheld devices at the EHC and on tours which will allow visitors to tap in to additional content, including facts and trivia, match footage and interviews.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

SENIOR MEN'S TEAM

Northern Ireland's senior men's team had an intriguing season as they adapted to life during a pandemic, welcomed a new manager, directed their energies towards reaching the Euros and embarked on a World Cup qualification campaign.



Gavin Whyte's late goal earned 10-man Northern Ireland a hard-fought draw in Romania in September.

A dramatic 12 months effectively began at the end of June 2020 when Ian Baraclough stepped up from the U21s to replace Michael O'Neill as manager of the national team.

Looming large as he took over the hot seat was Bosnia and Herzegovina away in the last four of the Path B play-off route to Euro 2020.

The play-off semi-final, which had previously been postponed from the end of March and then June due to Covid-19, was pencilled in for October but before that the second edition of the UEFA Nations League afforded the former Motherwell, Sligo Rovers and Scunthorpe United boss an opportunity to get to know his players.

His first game in charge was away to Romania in a behind closed doors game in League B Group 1 of the UEFA Nations League.

And Baraclough's team needed every ounce of their renowned fighting spirit to secure a point in Romania's 56,000-capacity National Stadium back in early September. It was Northern Ireland's first ever point in the competition.

They were down to 10 men for more than 50 minutes - after Josh Magennis was sent off in the 38th minute for a second bookable offence - but still managed to find a way to earn a 1-1 draw.

Gavin Whyte popped up with an equaliser late in the tie after several Romanian attacks had been repelled. Goalkeeper Bailey Peacock-Farrell was the hero of the match with a string of great saves, while centre back Daniel Ballard had a fine debut.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Next up in September was a Nations League tie at home against Norway. It was a game to forget.

The Norwegians scored for fun to spoil Baraclough's first home game in charge – and to spoil things for Steven Davis as he won his 119th cap for his country, equalling legendary goalkeeper Pat Jennings' long-standing caps record.

Norway dominated the behind closed doors encounter, with strikers Erling Braut Haaland and Alexander Sorloth scoring two apiece in a 5-1 win for the Norwegians.

Paddy McNair scored early on to level things after Mohamed Elyounoussi had opened the scoring, but after that the visitors were in complete control.

The heavy defeat to Norway was not ideal preparation for the Euro 2020 Path B play-off semi-final against Bosnia and Herzegovina in October. However, it was quickly forgotten as Northern Ireland secured a famous victory in Sarajevo.

Baraclough's boys triumphed with a 4-3 penalty shoot-out win after the game ended 1-1 after extra time at the Grbavica Stadium.

Liam Boyce, who along with fellow substitute Conor Washington entered the fray with just minutes to go in extra time, scored the all-important spot kick which secured Northern Ireland's place in the play-off final in Belfast in November.

Northern Ireland were very much the underdogs going in to the Sarajevo showdown but they gave as good as they got in a rugged encounter in front of 1800 Bosnian fans at the 13,000-capacity venue.

Steven Davis, as expected, broke Jennings' caps record for Northern Ireland. And the players he leads ensured he had a night to remember when earning his 120th cap.

Bosnia took the lead on 13 minutes through Rade Krunic and both sides had opportunities before Niall McGinn popped up with the equaliser on 53 minutes. A Jonny Evans free-kick was flicked on by Magennis and McGinn nicked the ball off Branimir Cipcetic before it then hit off a Bosnian defender. The ball fell nicely into his path and he coolly tucked it past the keeper. It was a sweet finish.

Niall McGinn scores against Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo.





Northern Ireland players celebrate after defeating Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Euro 2020 Path B play-off semi-final.

The game then went to extra time, which failed to produce a goal. So it was on to penalties.

Miralem Pjanic scored the first penalty for Bosnia before Stuart Dallas hammered his spot kick into the back of the net. Then Haris Hajradinovic had his penalty saved by Peacock-Farrell before substitute Kyle Lafferty scored.

Next up was Edin Visca who smashed his spot kick off the top of the bar before George Saville skied his penalty.

Dino Hotic then slotted his penalty home before Washington scored. Legendary Bosnia striker Edin Dzeko made it 3-3 on penalties but Boyce blasted his spot kick past Bosnian keeper Ibrahim Sehic to ensure the shoot-out victory.

The team were still buzzing when they took the field at home to Austria for a Nations League fixture just a few days later.

Austria dominated the game in the first half and probably did enough in that period to merit a narrow 1-0 victory.

With five changes from the eleven that started against the Bosnians in Sarajevo, the boys in green and white struggled to make an impact in front of 600 members of the Green

and White Army, who were allowed in to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park after Covid restrictions were eased slightly.

Austria took the lead on 42 minutes. David Alaba and Martin Hinteregger exchanged passes down the left and the centre back's pinpoint cross found Michael Gregoritsch who neatly nodded it past Michael McGovern from six yards as he rose between Jonny Evans and Jamal Lewis.

Northern Ireland created a few decent chances after the break, although the Austrian defence held firm.

Baraclough's charges were unlucky to lose out to Norway in a UEFA Nations League encounter in Oslo three days later.

An own goal by Stuart Dallas separated the teams in a tight encounter at the Ullevaal Stadium. It was watched by 200 fans at the 27,000-capacity venue.

Baraclough made 10 changes from the side that had lined out against Austria as he went in search of a first win in League B Group 1.

The home side made the breakthrough in the 66th minute thanks to the OG. Martin Odegaard fired in a corner and substitute Dallas was unlucky to inadvertently steer the ball past Northern Ireland stopper Trevor Carson and into the net.



INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

Steven Davis came on to win his 122nd cap after 84 minutes and was quickly on the ball, however Northern Ireland could not force an equaliser in the Norwegian capital.

The goal of reaching consecutive European Championship finals was all-consuming for the Northern Ireland senior men's team towards the end of 2020.

At the start of November it was time for the UEFA Euro 2020 Path B Play-Off Final against Slovakia, who had beaten Republic of Ireland 4-2 on penalties in the other Path B last four game the previous month as Northern Ireland were defeating Bosnia and Herzegovina via penalties.

An extra time strike from substitute Michal Duris was enough to secure a 2-1 victory for the Slovaks in Belfast as they booked their place at the European Championship finals in the summer of 2021.

In front of just over 1000 fans the home team created 10 chances to Slovakia's six during the 120-plus minutes but they could not quite find the cutting edge in front of goal.

The visitors took the lead on 16 minutes when George Saville misdirected a header and Juraj Kucka latched on to the ball before striding forward and finding the net with a low drive.

The equaliser came in the 87th minute. Paddy McNair's running power took him to the byeline and his cutback was turned into his own net by Slovakia defender Milan Skriniar.

The game entered extra time and looked to be heading for penalties before Slovakia edged ahead on 110 minutes. A long ball hit Jonny Evans' buttock and substitute Duris picked up the loose ball before slipping past Evans and netting with a crisp low shot. It proved to be the winner.

Not surprisingly, the players were crestfallen at missing out on another Euros following their exploits at Euro 2016 in France, however they did not have too much time to dwell on the

disappointment as two UEFA Nations League games still had to be played to complete their 2020 fixtures schedule.

The penultimate game of the series saw them take on Austria in Vienna. And they conceded two late goals to narrowly lose out 2-1 at the Ernst Happel Stadion.

They took the lead through substitute Josh Magennis, however goals from Austrian subs Louis Schaub and Adrian Grbic late on prevented them from claiming what would have been a deserved point.

Northern Ireland, showing eight changes from the side that started against Slovakia in the Euro 2020 play-off final in Belfast, competed well throughout.

Ali McCann had an excellent debut in the middle of the park and along with Michael Smith, McNair and captain Stuart Dallas he provided a solid shield for the back line. Steven Davis entered the fray late on to win his 124th cap for his country.

It was an encouraging performance from Northern Ireland and it was followed by another one at home to Romania a few days later.

Despite going into the game in the knowledge they had been relegated from League B the team, showing five changes from the Austria match, played well before inviting pressure towards the end of the tie.

Northern Ireland led through a Liam Boyce goal, scored early in the second half, but conceded late on, leaving the final score at one apiece.

In December the draw for the European qualifiers for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 was made with Northern Ireland drawn to face Italy, Switzerland, Bulgaria and Lithuania.

Game one of eight in European Qualifying Group C for the boys in green and white saw them face the Italians, the group's top seeds, in Parma in March – and they lost 2-0.



Stuart Dallas battles with Domenico Berardi during the World Cup qualifier against Italy in March.

The four-times world champions, with their attacking verve and slick passing, did the damage in the first half with clinical finishes from Domenico Berardi and Ciro Immobile.

However, it was not all one-way traffic as Northern Ireland had their chances in the second half at the Stadio Ennio Tardini.

Steven Davis, who equalled Peter Shilton's British international caps record of 125 on the night, was more influential in the second half with some neat, incisive passing.

Davis let fly in the 83rd minute, although his strike was comfortably dealt with by Italian keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma. And towards the end the Northern Ireland captain produced a neat reverse pass to the onrushing McNair who blasted over the top.

Sandwiched in between that game and their second WCQ was a challenge match against United States of America in Belfast.

Goals from strikers Giovanni Reyna and Christian Pulisic (penalty) secured a 2-1 victory for the visitors, with Northern Ireland pulling one back late on thanks to a superb strike from substitute Niall McGinn.

The game was the first meeting between the two countries at senior international level and it was a pretty lively encounter.

Baraclough's boys aimed to bounce back in their second World Cup 2022 qualifier - against fourth seeds Bulgaria - but the game at the National Football Stadium ended scoreless.

Northern Ireland enjoyed the bulk of the possession in the Group C encounter and created enough opportunities in the 90 minutes to grab all three points but could not find a way past Bulgarian keeper Daniel Naumov.

Stuart Dallas hit the woodwork and Gavin Whyte forced an excellent save out of Naumov as the boys in green and white largely controlled proceedings.

And keeper Bailey Peacock-Farrell, who had been a spectator for much of the game, produced a marvellous stop towards the end to keep the scoreline at 0-0.

Fittingly it was Northern Ireland captain Steven Davis, breaking the all-time British caps record with his 126th appearance for his country, who had the first effort on goal in the qualifier, however his shot was off target.

At the time of writing the Northern Ireland team were looking forward to two end of season challenge matches ahead of the six remaining Group C qualifiers this autumn. First up was a friendly against Malta in Austria followed by a trip to Dnipro to face Euro-bound Ukraine.

UNDER-21s

When Ian Baraclough moved on from Northern Ireland's U21s during the summer of 2020 to take over the senior team, his former U21s assistant Andy Crosby was handed the task of steering the side through their remaining U21 Euro 2021 qualifiers.



Ethan Galbraith in action during Northern Ireland's U21 Euro qualifier against Denmark in September.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

At the time Crosby took the reins they had three points under their belts from five qualifiers, having managed three draws and suffered defeats away to Denmark U21s and Romania U21s. They added a further six points from Crosby's five games in charge – and arguably should have added more.

In September the U21s registered their first win in U21 Euro 2021 qualifying with a deserved 2-0 win away to Malta – a year after drawing 0-0 with the Maltese at home.

Crosby tasted victory in his first game at the helm thanks to goals from Linfield defender Ross Larkin and Derry City striker David Parkhouse in the behind-closed-doors match at the Centenary Stadium in Ta' Qali.

Next up for the U21s was a home game in September against high-flying Denmark, who would go on to top Group 8 and reach the latter stages of the competition.

Northern Ireland had lost 2-1 to the Danes the previous autumn and they found them to be tough opponents once again, however they competed well at Ballymena Showgrounds.

A second half penalty from Andreas Olsen, who plays for Bologna in Serie A, was enough to seal a 1-0 victory for the Danes.

In October they had two further home games, with Ballymena Showgrounds once again the venue.

In the first game they took on Finland, whom they had held to a 1-1 draw in September 2019, and it was a game they should arguably have won.

The same could be said of the reverse fixture. The U21s looked to be cruising at one stage but the Finns ran out 3-2 winners.

Northern Ireland were without regular forwards David Parkhouse and Shayne Lavery due to injury but Paul O'Neill picked up the baton of being the main striker with aplomb.

The boys in green and white, who were also without midfielder Ethan Galbraith, were the superior team in the first half, however the Finns had the better of it after the break and produced

some good finishes to secure the win in the behind closed doors U21 Euro 2021 qualifier.

O'Neill opened the scoring on 23 minutes, while Northern Ireland created several chances before the Finns equalised just before the break, Timo Stavitski shaking off his marker and slotting the ball past keeper Conor Hazard.

O'Neill notched his second of the game in the 59th minute and minutes later substitute Lee Bonis shot wide before the Finns levelled the scores through Mikael Soisalo.

The Finns grabbed the winner when Soisalo found Naatan Skytta and he slammed the ball past Hazard.



Paul O'Neill celebrates after scoring against Finland in October.

INTERNATIONAL MEN'S TEAMS

By contrast the U21s sparkled in Ballymena a few days later when they came up against Ukraine. A superb overhead kick from Paul O'Neill fired them to a fine 1-0 victory.

Andy Crosby's team were the underdogs going in to the qualifier at the Showgrounds, however they more than matched the Ukrainians and deserved the win.

U19s AND U17s

Both the Northern Ireland U19s and U17s did not play a competitive match during the season due to the Covid pandemic.

The U19s were due to play in qualifiers in Sweden in March - they had been postponed from November - but the games and subsequent play-offs were scrapped after UEFA cancelled this summer's U19 Euros, which were due to be staged in Romania, due to Covid-19 and its effects on the staging of competitions.

Last October the U17s were set to play Republic of Ireland, Slovakia and Estonia in a qualifying round for the U17 Euros this summer, however both the mini tournament, a further group stage and the finals in Cyprus were scrapped by UEFA.

However, both sides did get a new manager during the season with Gerard Lyttle replacing Stephen Frail as U19s and U17s boss in February.

Lyttle stepped up from the Irish FA JD Academy in collaboration with UEFA, based at Ulster University's Jordanstown campus, where he was head coach. He was also previously in charge of Northern Ireland's U16 team.

The former Cliftonville and Sligo Rovers boss said he was "very excited" at being given the opportunity to manage Northern Ireland's U19s and U17s.

And Lyttle has chosen a strong backroom team. Prolific Irish League striker Andy Waterworth is his assistant manager, while legendary Northern Ireland centre back Gareth McAuley is a coach and another Northern Ireland legend, goalkeeper Roy Carroll, is the goalkeeping coach for both teams.

O'Neill produced his piece of magic on 61 minutes when he latched on to a Ciaran Brown punt towards the six-yard area.

Northern Ireland's U21 Euro 2021 qualification campaign ended with a defeat against Ukraine in the reverse fixture in November.

The new boss has staged training camps for both teams ahead of their return to competitive action this autumn.

The U19s are due to face Czech Republic, Denmark and Kazakhstan (Group 13) in a four-team mini tournament in the qualifying round for the next U19 Euros. The games are scheduled to be played from 6-12 October in the Czech Republic.

The top two in 13 qualifying groups plus the third-placed team with the best record against the leading pair in their section progress to join top seeds Portugal in the elite round, which is due to be played in spring 2022.

Slovakia, who will be hosting the UEFA U19 European Championship finals in the summer of 2022, qualify directly for the final tournament as hosts.

In the UEFA Under-17 Euros preliminary round the boys in green and white will face Italy, Scotland and Albania (Group 12). And Northern Ireland will be hosting the mini tournament from 27 October to 2 November.

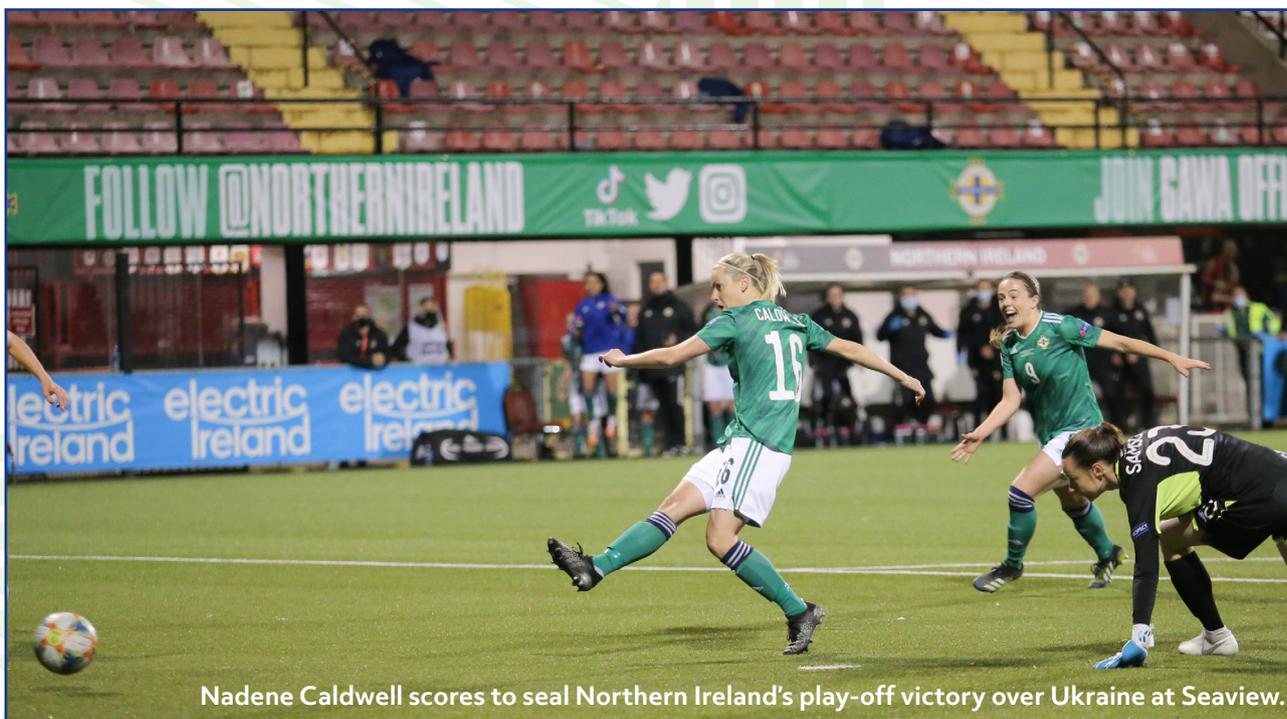
The top two teams in 13 qualifying groups will join top seeds Netherlands and Spain in the spring 2022 elite round along with the four third-placed teams with the best records against the top two in their section.

Israel, who will be hosting the UEFA U17 European Championship finals in May 2022, qualify directly for the final tournament.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

SENIOR WOMEN'S TEAM

The Northern Ireland senior women's team had an historic - and fantastic - season as they qualified for a major tournament for the first time in their short history.



Nadene Caldwell scores to seal Northern Ireland's play-off victory over Ukraine at Seaview.

A two-leg play-off success against Ukraine Women in March saw Kenny Shiels' side book their place at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 in England.

Shiels introduced a more expansive style of play when he took over as senior women's team manager in May 2019 and it eventually paid dividends.

Northern Ireland were well placed to make waves in their Women's Euro qualifying group at the start of 2020 – and they did that with aplomb to earn a play-off place. And then they completed the job in style in March.

They began 2020 sitting on two points in Qualifying Group C following two draws against Wales, and two defeats to top seeds Norway, in their opening set of qualifiers the previous year.

But by the end of 2020 they had secured a further 12 points in the group to keep their Euros dream very much alive.

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 led to the postponement of the spring/summer qualifiers until the autumn.

And in April the UEFA Executive Committee confirmed the UEFA Women's Euro 2021 final tournament, which had also been postponed, would be played in England from 6 to 31 July 2022 instead.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Going in to the final four qualifiers of the campaign the girls in green and white knew that four wins would guarantee a play-off, but it appeared to be a tall order given that the team had only won one competitive fixture for five years.

The 2-2 away draw and 0-0 home draw against Wales in 2019 meant Northern Ireland would have a better head-to-head record - thanks to those away goals - if the two countries were neck and neck going in to the final group fixtures.

Step one for Northern Ireland was the away qualifier against Faroe Islands, which went ahead as scheduled in mid-September.

And the senior women lived up to their favourites tag as they comfortably ran out 6-0 winners in Torshavn.

It was a fourth seeds (NIR) v fifth seeds (FRO) clash in Group C. Lauren Wade and Simone Magill both helped themselves to doubles, while Rachel Furness and Kirsty McGuinness also got on the scoresheet.

The senior players, who had followed a strict training regime delivered remotely by Shiels and his staff throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, were well prepared for the game – and they were three up within half an hour as they dominated proceedings.

Furness, who had earlier hit the woodwork, opened the scoring with a left foot thunderbolt on 19 minutes.

Then striker Magill doubled the lead with a tidy finish just five minutes later. Winger Wade hit the woodwork with a rasping drive and Magill was on hand to steer in the rebound.

Shortly after that Wade got in on the act, cutting in from the right to smash the ball into the bottom corner, making it 3-0 to Northern Ireland in the 27th minute.

The prolific Kirsty McGuinness, playing her first match for Northern Ireland in over two years, added the fourth 11 minutes later with another neat effort.

Northern Ireland extended their lead on 56 minutes through Wade and Magill grabbed her second of the game, and Northern Ireland's sixth, on 90 minutes.

Like McGuinness and Nadene Caldwell, Caragh Milligan returned to the fold for the Faroes game after a lengthy sojourn, while fellow substitute Joely Andrews made her senior debut.

The senior women then made it back-to-back wins thanks to a 1-0 victory away to Belarus in October.

Shiels' side had to play the majority of the match with 10 players after keeper Jackie Burns saw red - but her dismissal was followed by a moment of magic from Furness who netted the only goal of the game to claim a precious three points in Minsk.

Furness's goal – a bullet header – arrived three minutes before the break and could not have come at a better time for Northern Ireland who had to readjust on 27 minutes when Burns received her marching orders for a foul on Anastasija-Grazyna Shcherbachenia.

On came replacement stopper Becky Flaherty with goal threat Kirsty McGuinness making way and it looked like it could have been a long night for the girls in white. But up stepped Furness who rose above the home defence to head home Demi Vance's pinpoint corner.

Northern Ireland secured a Women's Euro 2022 play-off with two excellent home victories – against Belarus and Faroe Islands.

Following their away wins against the Faroes and Belarus in September and October respectively, a 3-2 victory over Belarus at Seaview in late November was the penultimate step towards a play-off, while the glory game against the Faroese arrived just days later.

Northern Ireland had to dig deep at times against Belarus in Belfast but goals from Kirsty McGuinness and player of the match Furness (penalty) plus an own goal by the Belarus keeper were enough to secure the victory.

Shiels' side came flying out of the blocks and opened the scoring after just two minutes when Kirsty McGuinness rifled the ball home. It was a superb finish.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

In the 16th minute Belarus grabbed an equaliser courtesy of Anastasija-Grazyna Shcherbachenia.

The girls in green and white took the lead again in the 61st minute via the penalty spot. Furness was hauled down as Demi Vance delivered a free-kick into the area and the ref quickly pointed to the spot. Furness dusted herself down before stepping up to coolly blast the penalty into the corner of the net.

Belarus levelled on 67 minutes when Shcherbachenia slotted home her second of the night.

McGuinness grabbed the winner just three minutes later. She advanced down the left before unleashing a fierce drive which rebounded off the post but hit Vaskabovich's back and flew into the net to make it 3-2.

The Euros dream was kept on course in December thanks to a superb victory over Faroe Islands.

Despite an early setback Shiels' side dominated the game at Seaview and ran out comfortable winners on a 5-1 scoreline. Sisters

Kirsty and Caitlin McGuinness both got on the scoresheet along with Chloe McCarron, while Furness grabbed a double.

The historic win meant Northern Ireland were guaranteed a play-off for a place at UEFA Women's Euro 2022 after finishing second in Group C, pipping the Welsh thanks to their head-to-record against them.

The Faroese took the lead on four minutes through Jensa Torolvsdottir, however Northern Ireland were level within two minutes. McCarron floated the ball towards goal and it was punched away by the Faroes keeper but Furness was on hand to bravely head the loose ball home.

Shiels' charges took the lead through a sublime Kirsty McGuinness strike. The striker collected a Wade pass close to the edge of the area before cutting inside and curling the ball superbly into the top corner.

Their third goal was another absolute peach. On 55 minutes Wade jinked inside down the right and slipped the ball to McCarron just outside the area. The midfielder took a touch and then unleashed an unstoppable strike into the top corner.



Rachel Furness punches the air after the first of her two goals against Faroe Islands in Belfast.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

History was made when Caitlin McGuinness came on as a substitute in the 64th minute, replacing Emily Wilson. Caitlin and older sibling Kirsty became the first pair of sisters to feature for the Northern Ireland senior women's team in the same match.

Northern Ireland got their fourth in the 77th minute. A McCarron delivery from a corner was headed on by Julie Nelson and Caitlin McGuinness nipped in to sweep the ball into the net.

Goal number five came in the 87th minute. Kirsty McGuinness pinged a corner to the back post where Furness arrived right on cue to clip the ball home from close range off the knee of a Faroes defender for her second of the night. It was her 31st goal for Northern Ireland.

Shiels' charges warmed up for the two-legged play-off against Ukraine with a behind closed doors friendly against England Women at St George's Park in February.

Northern Ireland, missing a handful of players due to injuries and work commitments, found it difficult to cope with England's attacking threat as they were stretched and pulled all over the pitch at the Staffordshire complex.

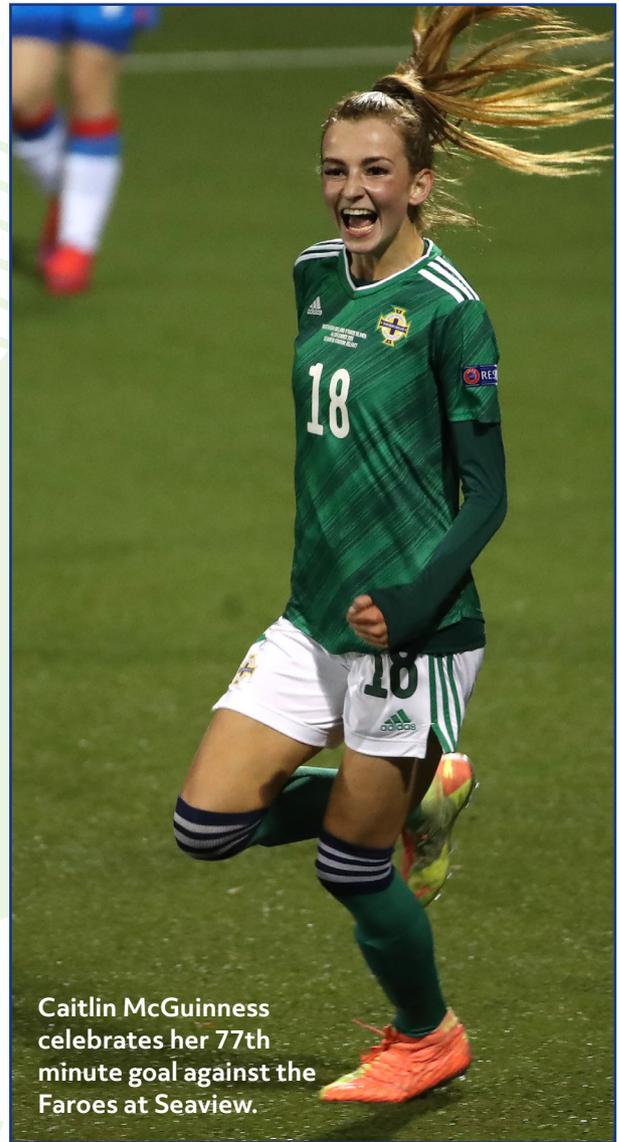
Experienced striker Ellen White bagged a hat-trick as the Lionesses ran out 6-0 winners in blustery conditions at the FA's national training centre.

Wing-back Lucy Bronze, FIFA's world player of the year in 2020, also got on the scoresheet along with winger Rachel Daly and debutant Ella Toone.

However, there were some fine individual performances within the Northern Ireland team, especially from young defender Abbie Magee.

Afterwards Shiels said the game had shown his team what they needed to do to step up to the next level.

The following month the draw was made for three UEFA Women's Euro 2022 play-offs and Northern Ireland were paired with Ukraine Women.



Caitlin McGuinness celebrates her 77th minute goal against the Faroes at Seaview.

And they produced a gritty, resilient and skilful display to defeat Ukraine in the first instalment of the play-off in early April.

Goals from Furness and Magill were enough to secure a famous victory at the Kolos Stadium in Kovalivka.

Participating in their first ever play-off for a major tournament, Northern Ireland started brightly and Furness pounced after just five minutes to put them one up.

Ukraine holding midfielder Tamila Khimich played a poor pass forward and the attacking midfielder nipped in to steer the ball past Ukraine keeper Iryna Sanina. The ball hit the keeper's foot on the way into the net but Furness rightly claimed the goal.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Ukraine equalised on 22 minutes when their captain and star player Darya Apanashchenko flicked a header past Northern Ireland keeper Burns into the bottom corner.

The Northern Ireland defence stood firm as the home side pushed forward, with veterans Ashley Hutton, Julie Nelson and Sarah McFadden working tirelessly alongside wing backs Rebecca Holloway and Rebecca McKenna.

On 57 minutes Northern Ireland took the lead again when Magill got on the end of a McFadden flick-on, forced her way past her marker and neatly clipped the ball high into the net from 10 yards. It was a lovely finish.

Ten minutes later Burns pushed away a free-kick from Apanashchenko before a last ditch tackle from Hutton snuffed out a Ukraine attack.

It was backs to the wall in the closing stages, however the girls in green and white held their nerve and held on for a deserved 2-1 victory.

In the second leg at Seaview just days later Northern Ireland Women booked their place at the Euros next year with a gutsy 2-0 victory - to secure a 4-1 aggregate win.

Despite being without the talismanic Furness, who broke her tibia in the first leg, and seven other injured players who would have arguably been in the squad at the very least, Kenny Shiels' side produced another excellent performance.

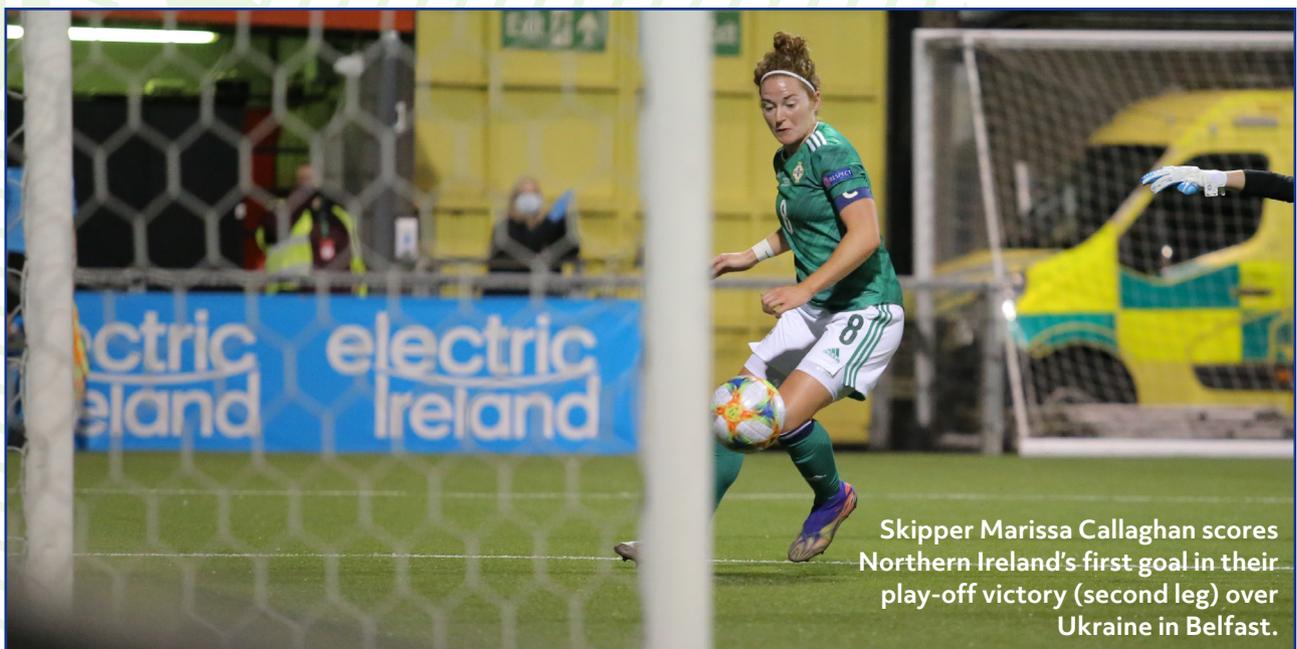
They were defensively sound throughout and classy goals from captain Marissa Callaghan, who replaced the injured Furness in the number 10 role, and substitute Nadene Caldwell were enough to seal the historic success.

Both sides created chances in the opening 20 minutes. Midway through the half Ukraine delivered a series of crosses into the penalty area which were headed clear by Nelson, while Northern Ireland striker Magill fired in a low drive from an angle which was collected at the near post by Ukrainian keeper Kateryna Samson.

Towards the end of the half the visitors pushed forward and the home defence had to dig deep to keep them out. There were some timely blocks and interventions, with the experienced trio of Nelson, Hutton and McFadden in the thick of it flanked by Rebecca Holloway and Rebecca McKenna.

Northern Ireland took the lead on 55 minutes when Nelson floated a free-kick into the box towards Callaghan and the skipper flicked the ball past the advancing keeper before slipping it into the net from an extremely tight angle. It was a lovely piece of skill.

The visitors continued to press but both Nelson and Hutton, using all their experience to great effect, were imperious at the back.



Skipper Marissa Callaghan scores Northern Ireland's first goal in their play-off victory (second leg) over Ukraine in Belfast.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S TEAMS

Down the other end McFadden produced a superb challenge to thwart a Ukraine attack, while Ovdychuk fired a shot over the top.

In the 87th minute Ukraine were reduced to 10 players when Natiya Pantsulaya was shown a straight red for blocking off McFadden as she was running towards the Ukrainian area.

As the game entered six minutes of added time Northern Ireland substitute Sam Kelly produced a lovely piece of skill to force a corner and then she scooped a shot wide from distance.

Right at the death Caldwell sealed the win for Northern Ireland. Magill nicked the ball off a Ukraine defender and nudged it to the midfielder, who cleverly rounded the keeper and stroked the ball home.

The draw for next year's Euros in England will be staged in October.

Before then, however, the senior women will be in action in FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 qualifiers.

In the draw for those qualifiers Shiels' side were placed in Qualifying Group D along with

top seeds England, Austria, North Macedonia, Latvia and Luxembourg.

Like Northern Ireland, both England, as hosts, and second seeds Austria have qualified for next year's UEFA Women's Euro 2022.

Northern Ireland's opening encounter in Qualifying Group D will be a home game against Luxembourg on 17 September, followed by another home match against Latvia on 21 September.

Only the winners of the nine European qualifying groups are guaranteed a place at FIFA Women's World Cup 2023, which is being held in Australia and New Zealand, while three other slots will be available via play-offs.

The group runners-up will take part in UEFA play-offs in October 2022 for two remaining direct tickets, which will be awarded to the two top performing play-off winners. The third best play-off winner will be entered into inter-confederation play-offs.

At the time of writing the senior women's team were beginning their preparations for those qualifiers with a training camp and a friendly against Scotland in Belfast.

WU19S AND WU17S

Alfie Wylie's Under-19 side started preparations for Women's U19 Euro qualifiers this autumn with a training camp in April and they are due to have a second one in June.

Former Northern Ireland captain Aaron Hughes, who is the Irish FA's new Elite Football Development Consultant, joined Wylie and his backroom team, including Noel Mitchell and Lynn Carroll, at the five-day camp.

A new format has been introduced for WU19 and WU17 Euro qualifiers this year which replaces the old qualifying and elite rounds.

The competition still features one-venue mini tournaments but now includes two leagues (A and B) with promotion and relegation leading to the 2022 finals.

Northern Ireland's WU19s have been drawn in Group A5 with Switzerland, England and Republic of Ireland, with the games taking place in October.

And the WU17s have been drawn in Group A7 along with Spain, Serbia and Iceland. The mini tournament is set to take place from 24-30 September at Serbia's National Sports Centre in Belgrade.

Both competitions return after the 2019-20 and 2020-21 editions were cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Czech Republic will host the WU19 finals next year, while the WU17 finals will be in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Like the WU19s, the WU17s did not play a competitive match during the 2020-21 season due to the pandemic, however they have participated in training camps and training sessions.

IRISH FA ACADEMY AND CLUB NI

The season proved to a challenging period for the association's elite youth player development team and was ever-changing as a result of Covid-19 as well as changes to key staff.

In December Jim Magilton moved on from the Irish FA after seven and a half years in his role as Elite Performance Director.

During his time Jim helped the association to take major steps in both identifying and preparing young talent for a future in the professional game.

He masterminded the successful JD Club NI elite player development programme and the opening of the Irish FA JD Academy in collaboration with UEFA at Ulster University's Jordanstown campus.

In February Gerard Lyttle also moved from his role as U16s and Academy Head Coach to take up the position as Northern Ireland U19s and U17s manager.

In May former Northern Ireland international Aaron Hughes joined the association as the Elite Football Development Consultant and he will be working to help appoint a new head of academy.

Due to Covid-19 Club NI activity could not take place and the entire elite youth games programme had to be cancelled.

Players in the Club NI system were provided with a home development programme. It was aimed at helping the young players to maintain their development as best as possible during unprecedented times.

On a more positive note the 2020-2021 season began with partner JD extending its elite youth sponsorship.

It meant a rebrand for the academy to the Irish FA JD Academy in collaboration with UEFA.

A relaunch was staged early in October and marked with a visit from Northern Ireland senior men's team manager Ian Baraclough,

who made a squad announcement from the academy (the panel for the UEFA Euro 2020 Path B play-off semi-final against Bosnia and Herzegovina) and held a Q&A session with the young players.

The staff at the academy continued to operate it as best as possible in line with Covid-19 restrictions to support the young players in maintaining their schooling, football development and spirit.

During lockdown periods they monitored players' development through the provision of a home strength and conditioning programme and with online education and lifeskills workshops.

And during the lockdowns guest speakers joined the online workshops, including Ian Baraclough and Olivier Doglia, Senior Football Development Expert at UEFA.

The staff also worked with Ulster University to develop a co-produced Keeping Your Head in the Game document to support young players in dealing with Covid-19.

Meanwhile, 2020-2021, while challenging, has highlighted the importance of the Irish FA's elite youth structures.

The team are starting to see the results of all the hard work and effort put in over the years come to fruition with several Club NI players moving through the ranks to U17s, U19s, U21s and now into the senior men's international set-up.





Ian Baraclough visited the Irish FA JD Academy in collaboration with UEFA to make a squad announcement and to take part in a Q&A with students.

GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S ELITE

The Irish FA's Girls' Regional Excellence Programme continues to offer coaching sessions at four regional centres.

The centres are located at Newforge (for Co Down and Armagh), Ulster University Jordanstown (Co Antrim), MUSA in Cookstown (Tyrone/Fermanagh) and Holy Cross School in Strabane (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 pandemic thanks to online guidance provided by coaches and other experts.

The online sessions covered a range of topics, including skills, strength and conditioning, advice about education, emotional wellbeing, nutrition, and featured talks from international senior men's and senior women's team players. They also looked at parents' role in their daughters' development plus there were fun quizzes for the whole family.

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 and in between Covid-19 lockdowns 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 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.

This support has also been given to the girls in the regional excellence programme at all ages through an app which provides information on sessions as well as monitoring what the girls are doing.

To maintain their technical skills the girls have been using the Top Tekkers app to follow technical exercises which are demonstrated and explained. These are issued in a monthly curriculum of sessions to follow.

In recent months, as restrictions have eased, outdoor training has resumed with the U19s also being able to take part in a five-day camp to work together as a full squad for the first time in over a year.

Preparations with the U17s and U19s are in place as they look forward to UEFA qualifying tournaments where they are both ranked in the A League of the top countries in Europe, reflecting the outstanding work put in by both players and staff in recent years.



INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION BOARD (IFAB)

After a year in which the Irish FA hosted The International Football Association Board's AGM, which was the last international event held in Northern Ireland before the onset of the Covid pandemic, IFAB moved all its activities online for 2020-21.

There has been a 10-year period of intensive changes and alterations to the Laws of the Game which commenced with the introduction of Goal line Technology, and has consolidated in the development and introduction of VAR (video assistant referee), which has had a profound effect on the top levels of the game.

2020-21 saw a time of consolidation at IFAB, which is made up of the four UK football associations and FIFA. There were few changes introduced for 2021.

In May IFAB members agreed to extend the temporary amendment to Law 3 - The Players, which affords competition organisers the option of allowing teams to use up to five substitutes per match, for all top-level competitions scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2022.

The decision followed a global analysis of the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on football, as well as representations from several key stakeholders from across the football community.

Introduced in May 2020, the temporary amendment is aimed at supporting player welfare, in particular where schedules have been disrupted, often leading to competitions being played in a condensed period.

FIFA is continuing with the worldwide development of VAR with the latest proposals being the creation of a VAR Light project which would bring the benefits of VAR to associations, like the Irish FA, which has matches covered by small numbers of cameras, rather than the extensive TV coverage of the likes of the UEFA Champions League or the English Premier League.

The Irish FA has offered to assist FIFA in these developments and a working group has been set up to consider the logistics and practicalities of such a step.

Arsene Wenger, who is FIFA's Head of Global Football Development, is also leading on trials into potential changes in the offside law, which has under VAR seen the benefit of the doubt switch from attacker to defender.

The Irish Football Association is looking forward to the outcomes of these trials and playing its part, as it always has done, in the consideration of any proposals and their impact on the worldwide game.

In December, following consultation with key stakeholders and recommendations from the Concussion Expert Group (CEG) and its Football and Technical Advisory Panels (FAP-TAP), IFAB approved extensive trials with additional permanent substitutions for actual or suspected concussion.

IFAB also agreed on the implementation of protocols that will be the basis for the trials. The members agreed that, in the event of an actual or suspected concussion, the player in question should be permanently removed from the match to protect their welfare, but the player's team should not suffer a numerical disadvantage.

DOMESTIC – MEN'S FOOTBALL

Covid-19 continued to have a significant impact on men's domestic football in Northern Ireland in 2020-21.

At the start of 2020 the country's leagues and cup competitions were carrying on as normal before lockdown stopped everything in its tracks. Titles were eventually awarded in most leagues based on mathematical formulas.

The Irish Cup, sponsored by Sadler's Peaky Blinder Lager, had reached the last four when it was postponed until further notice.

That was in March, however the semi-finals were eventually played in late July at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

Ballymena United booked their place in the final after winning a dramatic penalty shoot-out 3-1 against Coleraine after the semi-final ended 1-1 after 120 minutes-plus.

And Glentoran reached the decider after an even more dramatic penalty shoot-out.

The Glens won 7-6 on penalties to edge past Cliftonville at the National Stadium after the two teams were locked at 1-1 after 120 minutes-plus in what was a pulsating game at times.

The final was staged just a few days later. A goal from Robbie McDaid deep into added time helped Glentoran edge past Ballymena United to win the Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup.

The game looked to be heading for penalties when the striker popped up with six minutes to go to seal a 2-1 victory for the Glens.

The cup final, played in front of 500 spectators, was the first competitive senior level football match in the UK with fans in attendance since the first UK-wide Covid lockdown began in March 2020.

Glentoran lifted the Irish Cup in 2020. The final was pushed back to July due to Covid restrictions.



DOMESTIC – MEN'S FOOTBALL

Remarkably the Irish FA's three other cup competitions were also completed last July.

Dollingstown defeated Newington 2-0 to win the McComb's Coach Travel Intermediate Cup - the final was played at Annagh United's ground in Portadown - and Willowbank edged past Enniskillen Rangers at Portadown's Shamrock Park via a penalty shoot-out to lift the fonaCAB Irish Junior Cup.

And at Mill Meadow in Castledawson, Cliftonville Strollers defeated Institute U18s 5-1 in the final to win the Harry Cavan Youth Cup sponsored by Dale Farm Protein Milk.

Sadly all three competitions had to be cancelled in the 2020-21 season due to Covid restrictions.

However, the Irish Cup did go ahead (after being awarded elite status) albeit in a truncated format, with all rounds played over a month-long period.

All Premiership and Championship clubs were invited to enter along with some intermediate teams, and 26 teams in total took their place in round one, which kicked off at the end of April.

To make the final, Linfield convincingly swept past last season's runners-up Ballymena United in the last four on a 3-0 scoreline, with Loughgall, Dungannon Swifts and Annagh United all falling by the wayside in earlier rounds.

Larne reached the decider after receiving a bye in the opening round and accounting for Dollingstown and Carrick Rangers before defeating Crusaders on penalties in the semi-finals.

Crusaders took the lead in the last four game through Philip Lowry before Ronan Hale levelled the scores.

With no extra time in this year's competition it was straight to penalties to settle the tie.

Crues keeper Jonny Tuffey was cautioned and then dismissed during the shoot-out for repeatedly straying off his line but, when the dust settled, it took a sudden death strike from John Herron coupled with Gary Thompson smashing his kick against the frame of the goal to settle the shootout 6-5 in Larne's favour.

Like the two-semi-finals, which were played behind closed doors, the final was staged at Mourneview Park in Lurgan, however 1000 spectators were allowed in under strict conditions, including having to take Covid tests.

First half goals from Shayne Lavery and Joel Cooper helped Linfield defeat Larne 2-1 in the showpiece match. It was the 44th time the Blues have lifted the trophy.



Linfield secured a league and cup double in 2020-21.

DOMESTIC – MEN'S FOOTBALL

Larne, who scored a consolation late on through captain Jeff Hughes, were pushed back by Linfield from the start and were not allowed to play their usual fluid football.

Lavery and Cooper constantly tormented the Larne defence and got their just rewards for some scintillating attacking. They were ably assisted by Cameron Palmer and Linfield skipper Jamie Mulgrew.

Meanwhile, league cancellations - at various levels of the game - were also the norm during 2020-21 due to Covid restrictions.

Only the NIFL Premiership was awarded elite status by the Northern Ireland Executive and games were allowed to be played behind closed doors, although the start of the season was delayed by a couple of months.

The teams in the Premiership produced some cracking matches and there was an exciting title race.

However, Linfield eventually managed to secure their world record equalling 55th title, and third title in a row, with a game to spare.

The double winners will now take their place in UEFA Champions League qualifiers next season, while Coleraine, who finished runners-up, will be competing in UEFA Europa League qualifiers. And by finishing third Glentoran qualified for the new Europa Conference League.

The only other piece of silverware presented during the season was the Co Antrim Shield in December where Larne claimed a 4-3 penalty shootout win over Glentoran after the game finished 0-0. It was Larne's first senior trophy success in 33 years.

The NIFL League Cup was not held this season due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

On the European front in 2020-21, Linfield took part in the preliminary round of the Champions League, which took the form of a mini tournament played behind closed doors in Switzerland.

They won their first match 2-0 against Tre Fiori of San Marino to reach the final where they were awarded a 3-0 win by UEFA after their Kosovan opponents FC Drita were required to quarantine after two of their players tested positive for Covid-19.



Action from the 2021 Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup Final between Larne and Linfield.

The Blues came unstuck at the next UCL stage, the first qualifying round, losing 1-0 to top Polish side Legia Warsaw.

They then switched to Europa League qualifiers (Qualifying Round 2) where they were narrowly beaten 1-0 by Maltese champions Floriana.

Coleraine also had a good European run, defeating La Fiorita (San Marino) 1-0 in the preliminary round of the Europa League and producing an incredible result against Slovenian side NK Maribor - they have reached both the Champions League and Europa League group stages in recent times - in the first qualifying round (1-1, 5-4 on pens).

They exited the competition after losing to Scottish Premiership team Motherwell in the second qualifying round (2-2, 3-0 pens).

Motherwell had previously defeated Glentoran 5-1 in the first qualifying round of the Europa League. The Glens beat Faroese outfit HB Torshavn 1-0 in the preliminary round.

DOMESTIC – WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Women's domestic football was severely impacted by Covid-19 in the 2020 season.

The Danske Bank Women's Premiership was to have started in April last year but due to lockdown was pushed back to an August kick-off.

And when the season did eventually begin it operated under a shortened schedule, with each of the six competing teams playing each other home and away to determine the winners of the title.

Glentoran Women won their first league crown since 2014 and their eighth overall, pipping Belfast rivals Linfield Ladies by three points at the summit. The Glens won eight, drew one and lost just once on their way to the championship triumph.

The Glens were crowned champions in December and at that stage the Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup was still up and running.

However, in February the Irish Football Association's Women's Challenge Cup Committee, with the agreement of participating clubs, decided to cancel the 2020 edition of the Challenge Cup.

The decision came after the quarter-finals and semi-finals, plus some residual Round 3 matches, had been postponed in both December and January due to Covid-19 restrictions.

On a more positive note the Premiership has been fully restored in 2021. Games in the top flight started at the end of April and the six participating clubs will play each other four times this year.

Cliftonville Ladies, who strengthened their squad in the close season with the addition of Northern Ireland internationals and sisters Kirsty and Caitlin McGuinness plus Northern Ireland winger Louise McDaniel, were the early pacesetters.

The 2021 Electric Ireland Women's Challenge Cup, meanwhile, was due to get under way with a preliminary round at the start of June, with round one to follow at the end of June and further rounds in the coming months, culminating with the final in early autumn.

The Northern Ireland Women's Football Association's (NIWFA) leagues were decimated last year due to Covid-19. They were also due to start last April but were subsequently postponed until August.

A truncated schedule of fixtures was drawn up, and several games were played, however due to ongoing restrictions and a further suspension of matches the NIWFA Committee met in early November and decided to end the season early.

There is light at the end of the tunnel though. NIWFA's leagues are now back and bigger than ever – with an entire division of new teams in 2021.

Although teams only started training in April, due to Covid restrictions, NIWFA leagues got under way at the end of May with 49 teams playing in six divisions (including the division of new teams).



Glentoran Women celebrate their NIFL Women's Premiership success in 2020.

CLUB LICENSING AND FACILITIES

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

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

The 2020-21 licensing cycle, which concluded in April 2021, saw a record number of licences, 55 in total, awarded by the Irish FA Licensing Committee.

Eleven UEFA licences, one UEFA Women's Champions League licence, 12 Premiership licences, eight Promotion licences and 23 Championship licences were awarded for season 2021-22.

For the first time ever, every club in the NIFL Premiership, Championship and Premier Intermediate League obtained a licence as part of a now mandatory process for teams in those leagues, while a record number of Premiership clubs obtained the necessary UEFA Licence to play in UEFA club competitions if sportingly qualified.

The record number of licences granted is evidence of the continued expansion and success of the licensing process and stands in contrast to the first season of club licensing in 2004 when only four licences were awarded to enable clubs to compete in UEFA club competitions.

UEFA club licences were granted to Ballymena United, Cliftonville, Coleraine, Crusaders, Dungannon Swifts, Glenavon, Glentoran, Larne, Linfield, Portadown and Warrenpoint Town.

And a UEFA Women's Champions League licence was secured by reigning NIFL Women's Premiership champions Glentoran Women for the first time.

Ballymena United, Carrick Rangers, Cliftonville, Coleraine, Crusaders, Dungannon Swifts, Glenavon, Glentoran, Larne, Linfield, Portadown and Warrenpoint Town all received Premiership club licences.

Promotion club licences were granted to the following clubs: Ards (Bangor Fuels Arena, Bangor), Ballinamallard United, Ballyclare Comrades, Dergview (Ferney Park, Ballinamallard), Institute (Ryan McBride Brandywell Stadium, Derry-Londonderry), Harland & Wolff Welders (Dixon Park, Ballyclare), Loughgall (Stangmore Park, Dungannon), Newry City.

In addition Championship club licences were secured by Annagh United, Ards (Bangor Fuels Arena), Armagh City, Ballinamallard United, Ballyclare Comrades, Banbridge Town, Bangor, Dergview, Dollingstown, Dundela, H&W Welders, Institute (Ryan McBride Brandywell Stadium), Knockbreda, Limavady United, Lisburn Distillery, Loughgall, Moyola Park, Newington (Solitude, Belfast), Newry City, Portstewart, PSNI (The Dub, Upper Malone, Belfast), Queen's University and Tobermore United FC (Mill Meadow, Castledawson).

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 September 2020 without any non-conformities identified.



REFEREEING

The 2020-21 season did not start until October 2020 and concluded with key matches in the Danske Bank Premiership and Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup being played in a very exciting and exhilarating few days towards the end of May.

The season was two months shorter than any 'normal' season. Two matches a week took its toll on the players, managers and coaching staff at NIFL Premiership clubs - and it also took its toll on match officials.

But unlike clubs, who were able to regularly freshen up their playing squads, the same panel of elite match officials were used week in, week out.

Trevor Moutray, the Irish FA's Head of Refereeing, said he was proud of the resilience and determination which all match officials constantly displayed in such testing times.

Covid-19 also meant that match officials were unable to hold their usual monthly fitness and educational meetings, which added to the sense of isolation as these monthly meetings were a way of catching up with colleagues, sharing knowledge and information and generally preparing for the matches and challenges which lay ahead.

However, to help bridge this information and training gap a series of webinars were rapidly designed and delivered – one per week over an 11-week period.

Each webinar touched on not only the technical aspects of refereeing but focused on other

key areas, such as diet, psychology, injury prevention and player insight. Each webinar was recorded and has now been stored as an e-library source of information which any current or future referee can easily access to refresh their knowledge.

Referee recruitment was initially hit hard by the pandemic, however an online referee recruitment course was quickly developed and launched, which meant that future referees could still learn the laws of the game from the safety of their own homes.

Meanwhile, Italian sportswear maker Macron is now supplying playing and leisure wear for Irish FA match officials after the association signed a four-year deal with the Bologna-based company.

Under the agreement - it was cemented in March - Macron kits will be worn by officials in NIFL's three leagues, including the Danske Bank Premiership, as well as those officiating in Northern Ireland's intermediate leagues.

Macron gear will also be worn by attendees at the Irish FA Referee Academy and those involved in various male and female refereeing development groups.



The match officials who took charge of this year's Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup Final were wearing new Macron kits. The Italian sportswear maker is now supplying playing and leisure wear for Irish FA match officials.

COACH EDUCATION

The 2020-21 period proved to be challenging for the Coach Education department as a consequence of the Covid pandemic and the restrictions imposed by government, leading to reduced interpersonal contact and extremely limited opportunities to run sporting events involving large numbers of participants.

Nevertheless, the association's Coach Education department modified its programme of courses to ensure that it could continue offering education through other means of delivery, such as Zoom.

Consequently sections of UEFA Pro and A Diploma courses were successfully delivered via Zoom, with sizeable numbers of participants engaged. This involved considerable organisation and co-operation between Irish FA Coach Education staff, guest presenters and course participants.

When government restrictions were lifted sufficiently to allow gatherings, members of the Coach Education team were able to run a number of courses, for example in August, at which pitch coaching was permitted. The team were pleased that numbers remained high for all courses, from Grassroots up to higher level UEFA awards.

A benefit of the circumstances the team found themselves in is that they have now redesigned how they deliver some courses going forward, having found the use of Zoom presentations to be an effective way to deliver some theoretical content alongside the normal course and pitch delivery.

The Coach Education department has also been engaged in developing a new Coach Education Learning Platform, which is now active.

In addition the team in the department have been adding to its suite of courses, with a UEFA B Diploma Goalkeeper course commencing this summer, a new UEFA C Diploma course in its final stages of ratification with UEFA and new Irish FA Youth awards being developed to allow coaches to extend their knowledge and skills in specialist areas.

Moving towards summer, when the department usually runs an intensive period of course delivery, the team have flexible plans in train to ensure they can continue to deliver if government restrictions still apply or they can revert to the more traditional programme involving actual contact with coaches, both on the pitch and in the classroom.

The team are also planning for the delivery of Grassroots awards regionally to ensure a constant supply of trained coaches are actively engaged in supporting the game at all levels across Northern Ireland.



Nigel Best, the Irish FA's Coach Education Manager, takes a course.

THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

While many members of staff across the Irish FA continued to undertake voluntary work in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the association agreed to distribute FIFA funding to men's and women's clubs across Northern Ireland affected by coronavirus.

The money, from FIFA's Covid-19 Relief Funding programme, was aimed at helping clubs meet some of the costs associated with the impact of the virus.

The funding was rolled out in tranches, beginning in September.

Items related to addressing issues arising from the pandemic and combating the spread of Covid-19, including eligible expenditure incurred after the Irish FA suspension of football in March 2020, was eligible for support under the funding scheme.

This included financial support for clubs in adapting and maintaining their facilities to help mitigate the possibility of spreading Covid-19, including promoting good hygiene, keeping facilities and equipment clean, maintaining social distancing and avoiding congestion.

It also covered vital work in preparing and maintaining pitches (for a return to competition football) which may not have had their usual close-season maintenance due to budgetary constraints or contractor availability.

The funding was further aimed at meeting some ongoing costs, including utility bills, insurances, affiliation fees, facility hire and enhanced cleaning requirements.

Among those receiving financial support were NIFL Premiership, Championship and Premier Intermediate clubs and sides in intermediate leagues across Northern Ireland affiliated to the association as well as NIFL Women's Premiership and Northern Ireland Women's Football Association (NIWFA) clubs.

In December nearly 300 Junior clubs across Northern Ireland received equipment packs from the Irish FA through the FIFA programme.

The packs, put together by sports products maker Precision, featured match balls, training

balls, folding goalposts, training bibs, cones, agility hoops, speed ladders and medical kits among other items.

They were distributed to 286 men's clubs from the following Junior level leagues in Northern Ireland: Down Area Winter, Ballymena and Provincial, North West Junior, Ballymena Saturday Morning, Mid Ulster, Newcastle and District, Belfast and District, Coleraine and District, Fermanagh and Western, Carnbane, Northern Amateur and South Antrim.

In September Northern Ireland senior men's team manager Ian Baraclough urged everyone across the country to continue the fight against Covid-19.

He issued an appeal amid reports that more and more people were becoming complacent when following government and health service guidelines on how to stop coronavirus.

During the same month the association delivered four Covid-19-related webinars to stakeholders across the game in Northern Ireland - in a bid to further reinforce the need for protocols in the association's 'A Return to the Everyday Game' to be followed by clubs and players.

'A Return to the Everyday Game' was first published last summer. The document outlined protocols and guidance on how clubs, leagues and everyone connected to them could return to playing the beautiful game safely and responsibly. It was regularly updated throughout the 2020-21 season to reflect latest government guidelines.

In November the association announced that all NIFL men's and women's clubs would receive a share of £450,000 of financial support via a partnership with The National Lottery.

THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

It was aimed at providing vital support to clubs as they were either forced to play without fans or not able to play football at all due to Covid-19 restrictions.

The money was distributed by the Irish FA to clubs, ensuring their continued survival.

In January the association and Northern Ireland Football League announced the rollout of Covid-19 tests for Danske Bank Premiership clubs.

Provision of the Covid-19 test kits to clubs was sourced and funded in a joint venture by NIFL and the association to ensure a safe return to play for all match participants.

During the season the Irish FA regularly issued statements outlining the need for clubs, players, coaches, match officials, league officials, volunteers, parents, carers and facility providers to adhere to guidance outlined by the Northern Ireland Executive.

In February the Irish FA Foundation's work during the Covid-19 pandemic was praised by both the Community Relations Council and CO3, the membership organisation for leaders in the third sector.

They applauded staff for continuing to deliver several initiatives despite many constraints linked to the coronavirus crisis.

CO3 also recognised the Stay Onside programme, which is aimed at diverting young people away from criminal behaviour.

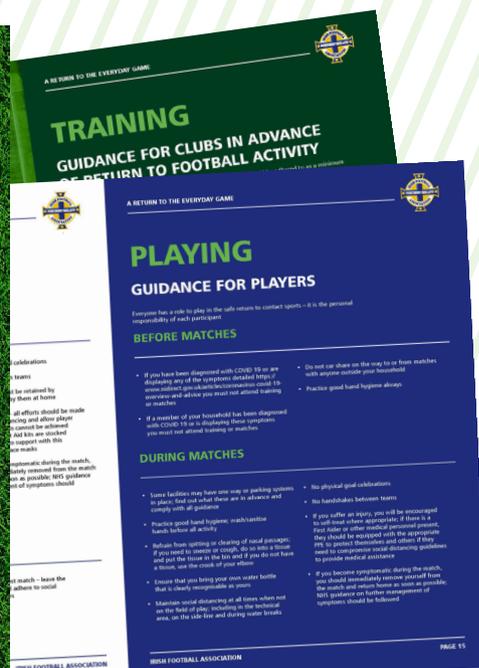
During 2020-21 work continued with around 100 primary schools a week providing specialist resources to help teachers, parents and children stay fit and active.

It also worked with around 500 pupils in post primary schools across Northern Ireland on a weekly basis helping them with education and employability programmes.

Club and volunteer staff engaged with 180 grassroots clubs and 300 volunteers on a regular basis, providing webinars and mentoring support.

And each week staff worked directly with more than 1000 people across Northern Ireland via Zoom and webinars promoting football for all, positive mental health, education and capacity building.

There was also praise by CRC and CO3 for continuing to deliver community relations, crime prevention, female and youth leadership programmes, coaching courses, refereeing courses, volunteer development, mentoring, player development and football administration courses on a regular basis.



The association published and updated 'A Return to the Everyday Game' during the season. It provided protocols and guidance on how clubs, leagues and everyone connected to them could return to playing football safely and responsibly.



IRISH FA FOUNDATION – GRASSROOTS

McDONALD'S PROGRAMMES

Due to Covid restrictions the Irish FA Foundation Grassroots department was severely hampered in its delivery of McDonald's Small-Sided Games (SSG), its largest voluntary participatory programme.

Despite extensive planning and mobilisation of resources at various times, the SSG programme was put on hold for over a year before starting again in May.

Prior to last year's lockdown SSG centres regularly attracted up to 9000 participants, clocking up tens of thousands of participatory hours, and the foundation's Regional Grassroots Development Officers are confident it will reach those heights again.

McDonald's relaunched its popular Fun Football Centres in May as Covid-19 restrictions began to ease.

The centres, running in three phases until September, are being delivered across Northern Ireland.

Delivered in partnership with the Irish FA Foundation, they provide children with the opportunity to try football for the first time and are aimed at kids aged between five and eight.

Through the McDonald's Fun Football programme more than 75,000 children from across Northern Ireland will benefit from 250,000 hours of coaching, games and fun by 2022.



Launching the McDonald's Fun Football Centres are Northern Ireland senior women's team captain Marissa Callaghan, McDonald's franchisee John McCollum and Aaron Hughes, the Irish FA's Elite Football Development Consultant.

McDONALD'S IRISH FA GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL AWARDS

The winners of the McDonald's Irish FA Grassroots Football Awards for 2020 were announced at a virtual awards ceremony in February.

Due to Covid-19 the 2020 awards gala was postponed and was streamed online instead to showcase those who have dedicated hours of their time for the good of grassroots football in Northern Ireland.

Hosted by radio personality Pete Snodden, the ceremony featured interviews with Northern Ireland manager Ian Baraclough and McDonald's ambassadors Pat Jennings and Casey Stoney, then head coach of Manchester United Women. Attendees of the virtual event also heard messages of support from First Minister Arlene Foster and Sports Minister Deirdre Hargey.

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

The 2020 winners in each category were:

- David Walker (Franchisee) and Cookstown McDonald's – Fun Football Restaurant of the Year
- Paul McCallion and Ryan Lagan (Draperstown Celtic FC) – Inclusivity Project of the Year
- Aaron Peden (Glenavon FC) – Young Volunteer of the Year
- CJ and Emily Jones (Afrimeripean Futsal Club) – Futsal Project of the Year
- John Haveron (Albert Foundry FC) – Volunteer of the Year
- Draperstown Celtic FC – Club of the Year
- Rachael Rodgers (Mid Ulster Ladies FC) – Wes Gregg Coach of the Year
- Billy O'Flaherty (Carniny Amateur & Youth FC) – People's Award

McDonald's Fun Football ambassador Pat Jennings insisted the awards provide a great opportunity to celebrate the fantastic work that takes place at all levels of the grassroots game in Northern Ireland.

He said: "Congratulations to all of our regional and national award nominees, and in particular the winners, who all work tirelessly in the background of their clubs to keep the local grassroots game alive.

"Each year when the awards come around I am humbled by the dedication, passion and enthusiasm of our grassroots volunteers, but none more so than in 2020, which was an extremely challenging year for us all."



Billy O'Flaherty and David Healy, the Linfield manager and former Northern Ireland international who is also a McDonald's ambassador, helped to promote the McDonald's Irish FA Grassroots Football Awards – and Billy won the People's Award.

AMATEUR GAME IN FOCUS

The Irish FA Foundation launched a strategy document in May which is aimed at expanding and improving football at amateur level across Northern Ireland.

The Amateur Football Games Development Research and Plan Ahead document highlights areas for development over the coming years.

It also features the results of an extensive survey and questionnaire which were widely circulated among Northern Ireland's amateur football clubs in a bid to get a complete picture of the amateur game in the country.

Using the association's extensive database, the study provided an overview of the clubs, including their set-ups and community links, their needs and where they see development opportunities.

Dean Holmes, the Irish FA Foundation's Amateur Football Game Developer, explained: "The plan is aimed at players, coaches, committee members and volunteers involved in amateur football, aged from eight to 80, who have a vested interest in football locally and nationally and are interested in its development.

"We also want to reach out to people who have played the game, have family who have played or people who have a football team in their area and have a vested interest in the game's development.

"The document shows the association's commitment to the amateur game. We want to increase participation levels and the quality of the game at amateur level."

In the document the Irish FA Foundation reveals it is aiming to increase recreational opportunities for play and will be actively encouraging people to continue to play a role within their clubs.

A bespoke qualification for the amateur game is being developed by the foundation. It is aiming to roll out the National Coaching Certificate Amateur in the coming months.



Irish FA Foundation chairman Jim Shaw with the Amateur Football Games Development Research and Plan Ahead document.

Irish FA Foundation chairman Jim Shaw pointed out the amateur game, in terms of teams and players, is the largest element of affiliated football within the Irish FA.

He said: "There are amateur clubs in every geographical area in Northern Ireland and they provide for local players to play the game for enjoyment and for many to develop to senior players in Northern Ireland, while others end up as professionals in England and Scotland and become senior international players.

"It is appropriate that the amateur game in Northern Ireland should be offered development support to enable it to retain its key position within the football pyramid here."

UEFA GRASSROOTS AWARDS

A club founder from Co Armagh and a club from Co Antrim received special certificates from UEFA in May during presentations delayed due to the Covid pandemic.

Brian Sloan of Brookvale FC and Greenisland FC were both named as winners in UEFA's annual Grassroots Awards back in November.

However, they only received their award certificates six months later via the Irish FA Foundation after the spread of Covid-19 disrupted presentations throughout Europe.

Brian was a silver prize winner in the 'Best Grassroots Leader' category, while Greenisland FC won a bronze award in the 'Best Grassroots Club' section.

More than 50 countries nominated their best volunteers and community clubs for the UEFA Grassroots Awards 2020.

Brian Sloan (72) was recognised by UEFA's Executive Committee for his remarkable work with Brookvale.

In the early 1980s he and his friend Alan Black set up the cross-community club in the Bessbrook area and it's still going strong.

Brian continues to be heavily involved. His sons also followed in his footsteps and now coach Brookvale teams, while his grandchildren play for the club.

He was presented with his award at Newry's Jennings Park, named after legendary Northern Ireland goalkeeper Pat Jennings, who is heavily involved in promoting grassroots football through his work as a football ambassador with McDonald's.

Greenisland Football Club's members mainly come from the town itself and the Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey areas. Their clubhouse and 3G pitch, which was opened in 2019 with support from Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and Sport NI, act as a community hub.

The club's alumni include current Northern Ireland internationals Jonny and Corry Evans, Craig Cathcart and Michael Smith and BT,

which sponsors the Northern Ireland senior men's team, featured the former players and the club in a promo video last year.

Greenisland offer senior and junior football and have around 400 players and 100 volunteers, providing playing opportunities for male, female and disability groups. They run programmes for children from the age of five upwards.

Their youth teams take part in various leagues, while their seniors play in the Northern Amateur League, and in 2019 they launched Greenisland Bears FC for boys and girls aged 7 to 12 with a learning and/or physical disability.

UEFA Grassroots Awards are presented annually in recognition of exceptional work in grassroots football.

A spokesperson for European football's governing body said: "Football is built on the grassroots, which are kept alive by thousands of volunteers, projects and clubs across Europe. Our awards are designed to recognise, celebrate and promote this inspirational work."

Both Brookvale and Greenisland also received 100 footballs apiece from UEFA as part of the awards – to support their grassroots activities.



Brian Sloan with his UEFA Grassroots Award certificate.

COACHING IN SCHOOLS

Coaches from the Irish FA Foundation and Ulster GAA delivered the Curriculum Sports Programme, funded by the Department of Education, during the school year. In total 7200 physical education sessions were delivered to 24,000 pupils across Northern Ireland.

The programme is co-designed with schools and utilises physical education sessions to support learning with other curricular areas such as numeracy, literacy, the world around us and PDMU (personal development and mutual understanding).

The coaches from both sports organisations provided mentoring and support for principals and teachers, consistent with the Department of Education Learning Leaders strategy, in order to build the capacity of primary school teachers to deliver PE.

During a turbulent year, which saw schools closed for long periods due to Covid, the foundation's Let Them Play Officers (LTPO) provided 24 video resources featuring games for pupils to play at home as well as 24 cross-curricular activities that promoted young people's mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic.

In 2020 a research project was commissioned to quantify the programme's benefits. A key conclusion from the research was that the LTPOs, their expertise, manner with the children and their ability to enthuse 'less active' children and the teaching staff is an integral component of the success of the programme.

In partnership with Safefood, the foundation has also been delivering a six-week programme in schools to encourage children to make healthier choices in terms of their physical activity and nutrition. During the school year it was delivered to 300 KS2 pupils and included a festival day for 12 schools throughout Northern Ireland.

Each week pupils learned a new message through lessons with a focus on six topic areas: hydration, sleep, physical activity, screen time, portion sizes and balanced diets.

In addition LTPOs delivered the Move and Learn Programme, a national school-based education programme for children aged between nine and 10 developed by Ferrero UK.

By combining six weeks of practical sporting sessions with classroom sessions, the programme encourages physical activity, promotes nutritional education and builds awareness of the importance of a balanced diet and active lifestyle. The officers delivered the programme to 900 pupils across the country.

The Joy of Moving Festivals complement the Move and Learn Programme. Taking place in the summer term, the festivals will involve 1150 pupils from 15 schools.

They help develop each child in areas such as physical fitness, motor (bodily) co-ordination, creativity and life skills.

During lockdown the officers remotely engaged pupils from 25 schools through the Joy of Moving Winter games, a six-week resource pack with physical activity games and activities pupils could use at home to stay active.

During 2020-21 Let Them Play Officers also assisted with the delivery of Shooting Stars and the new UEFA Playmakers programme inspired by Disney - and they took over Irish FA holiday football camp planning and delivery.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

The Irish FA Foundation's Education and Employability programme was delivered during the 2020-2021 academic year – with a difference.

The restrictions put in place due to Covid-19 meant the programme had to be changed and adapted.

When possible courses were delivered face to face with students but for the most part they were delivered online through Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This provided its challenges but allowed delivery of courses to continue.

In 2020-2021 the programme was undertaken by 307 students in 11 different schools.

All of the students were upskilled in a number of areas, completing Irish FA education courses and workshops, including National Coaching Certificate, Grassroots Introduction Award, Futsal Level 1 Award, Coaching Disabled Footballers Award, Referee Award, mental health workshops, event management workshops and Everybody's Game workshops.

A partnership with Ashfield Boys' High School in east Belfast, the foundation's first development school, continued as planned with education officers delivering courses and workshops as well as continuing their delivery of Level 3 BTEC in Sport modules with Year 13 and Year 14 students.

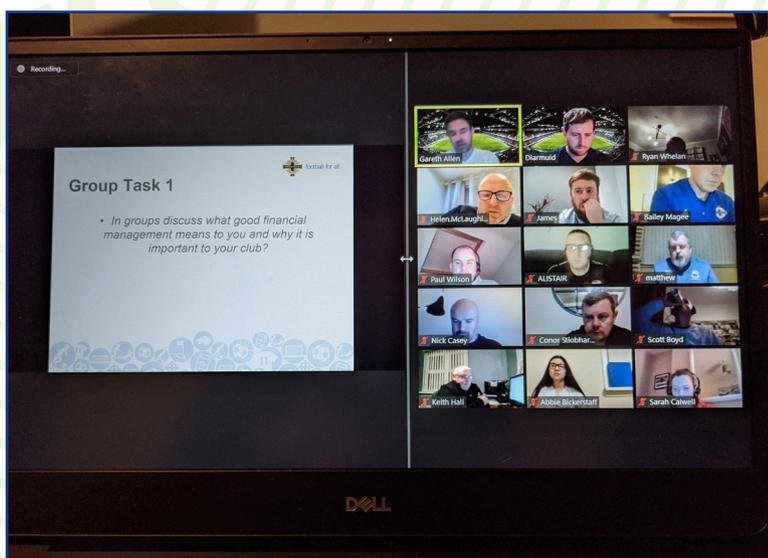
In addition to the Education and Employability programme in schools, the education officers ran a Club OCN (Open College Network) Level 2 in Football Administration - over three online sessions with 40 coaches at 22 different clubs. It was the biggest OCN course delivered to date.

An employability and youth leadership programme was also staged over several months in partnership with Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council and Armagh City FC. The programme provided 40 young people with the opportunity to gain additional qualifications and skills.

Since the easing of restrictions in May, the education officers have been able to catch up on and complete outstanding practical sessions.

They are also in the process of developing new courses to be delivered during the next academic year with a specific focus on game and player analysis.

They will be implementing the courses by working with some Irish FA partners and sponsors such as Ulster University to provide the students with a course on match analysis through Performa Sports and a separate course on performance analysis through STATSports.



Education officers delivered courses both online (mainly) and face to face during 2020-21, including a Club OCN (Open College Network) Level 2 in Football Administration course.

CLUB AND VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

VOLUNTEERING

The Sport – A Home for Lifelong Volunteering programme, which is backed by the Department for Communities, continues to excel in its aim of supporting clubs and volunteers.

Due to the pandemic the officers involved adapted their delivery to online where they ran a series of webinars, focusing on funding and club planning, which were attended by more than 350 volunteers.

Meanwhile, the Irish FA's Volunteer Development Officer began liaising with UEFA in November in relation to introducing a volunteer development programme for the UEFA Super Cup in 2021.

More than 1400 people applied and 400 were shortlisted for 265 volunteer roles.

PEOPLE AND CLUBS ACCREDITATION

During the season a total of 21 clubs were supported by Irish FA staff to achieve their People and Clubs Accreditation.

GRASSROOTS LEADERS

The UEFA Grassroots Leaders programme developed further with an increase in members.

The Irish FA now has 25 volunteers recruited who support their local area in partnership with Regional Grassroots Development Officers.

During the first lockdown the leaders participated in a variety of informative e-workshops, including coach education, mental health and opportunities to showcase their volunteer pathway.

AHEAD OF THE GAME

The Ahead of the Game programme, sponsored by City Auction Group, adapted to online delivery during the pandemic with more than 250 volunteers from 40 different clubs taking part in workshops.

In November a video case study for the programme, featuring Irish FA Grassroots Leader Kenny Greenhill, was chosen by UEFA for sharing on its channels for World Volunteer Day.

Last June the four home football associations along with leagues and other members of the football family in the UK signed a major declaration to promote mental health.

The joint declaration is a commitment to make mental health a key priority at all levels of the game, as a lasting legacy of the Heads Up campaign.

The Irish FA's support for the initiative, alongside The FA in England, the Scottish FA and the Football Association of Wales, is being seen as an extension of Ahead of the Game, the association's mental health programme for football clubs at all levels across Northern Ireland.

YOUNG LEADERS PROGRAMME

In March the foundation launched its first ever Young Leaders Programme.

The programme, supported by UEFA Grow, aims to provide a voice for young people in football and support the development of young leaders.

It will also help the foundation to gain more insight into what young people want from the game. Participants, aged 18 to 24, receive a variety of continuous professional development opportunities covering football-related topics provided by Irish FA staff and external stakeholders.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In the grip of a global pandemic Irish FA Foundation good relations programmes continued and indeed prospered.

Through a new programme called Connect, the foundation's community relations work reached far and wide across Northern Ireland, bringing participants from various backgrounds together through digital platforms to enjoy a good relations football education course.

Connect was first piloted with a group of young men from south Belfast, ranging in age, religious background and ethnicity. It offered various good relations modules, including anti-sectarianism, racism awareness, mental health and disability training alongside a virtual tour of the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

The programme was finetuned and soon picked up momentum and was delivered to 347 participants from various groups, from football academies to homeless hostels, youth groups and schools to an all-female group. And Connect continues to grow.

The pandemic also prompted the digital delivery of an anti-sectarianism workshop, Common Ground, with 12 workshops delivered to 197 participants.

The association's anti-racism course was rebranded to become Everybody's Game (racism awareness and equality course).

It was delivered to 1489 participants across 53 workshops.

As part of the association's response to Covid-19, those working in community relations delivered food packs alongside Greater Village Regeneration Trust in south Belfast.

The food packs were initially handed out in summer, while the distribution also included winter isolation packs along with Christmas dinners. These activities were funded through Stadium Community Benefits Initiative (SCBI).

GVRT's community outreach work was also supported through the provision of prizes for its street bingo programme over the summer months, while South Belfast Youth League's Christmas Appeal was supported through the donation of a large gift of kit.

A community relations webinar featuring former Northern Ireland international Jim Magilton, then Elite Performance Director with the Irish FA, and Northern Ireland senior women's team captain Marissa Callaghan was staged last summer.

And, in November, a webinar was organised to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the introduction of the association's Football For All strategy. It featured a large panel of guests who have played their part in the success of FFA, and it was hosted by FFA ambassador and TV/radio presenter Colin Murray.

In February a new planning group for Football and Social Responsibility was launched. It meets bi-monthly and is currently developing a new FSR strategy for the association.

In March, as part of SCBI, those working in community relations successfully ran an online conference called Sport in the Community 21. It offered support and information to clubs in response to the pandemic with a focus on a safe return to sport. It also covered coaching and included a discussion on mental health.

This summer the community relations team are launching a Football and Positive Pathways programme aimed at the veterans community.



PEACE WORK



Sport Uniting Communities



The Sport Uniting Communities programme, which is run by the Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby, continued to deliver on several fronts despite the Covid pandemic.

The Sport Uniting Communities programme, which is run by the Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby, continued to deliver on several fronts despite the Covid pandemic.

Since 2018, when the programme started, SUC has engaged with 15,054 people and 250 clubs from across the three sporting codes, 121 of which were football clubs.

The project uses the reach of each sport to create meaningful, purposeful and sustained contact between people from different communities and aims to improve attitudes, respect, inclusion and tolerance through a multitude of activities, such as Sport for Peace Days, Game of Three Halves, stadium visits, BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) programmes, volunteer development programmes and volunteer recognition schemes.

During the third year of the project (2020) activities were impacted due to the Covid-19 pandemic with all practical activity and face to face contact between participants unable to take place for the vast majority of the period and on in to 2021.

However, project staff were able to develop and implement new and imaginative ways of delivering Sport Uniting Communities activities.

These included developing - in conjunction with Irish FA Tours/Education and Heritage Centre - an online workshop and tour of the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park.

There was also a skills challenge video competition for clubs to 'have a go'

plus delivery of online youth leadership qualifications.

Online workshops and webinars on volunteer development and good relations also proved to be both effective and popular.

These activities along with practical delivery of the programme when restrictions allowed meant that in 2020 the Sport Uniting Communities programme delivered meaningful activity and had engagement with 3497 participants from a broad spectrum of communities throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

Project staff had sustained engagement with 45 clubs from across the three sporting codes with 15 of these being football clubs.

Also among the SUC activities over the past year was an online workshop on the theme of recruiting, retaining and rewarding volunteers, which was staged in May.

Through the workshop SUC also provided information about the GoldMark scheme, which rewards young volunteers for their work in the community.

More than 25 clubs from across Northern Ireland took part in the online session, sharing best practice.

Community sports development officers from the Irish FA, Ulster GAA and Ulster Rugby led the workshop, and building relationships across the three sports was at the forefront of the discussions.

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



SCHOOLS' FOOTBALL

Like most sports around Northern Ireland, schools' football was decimated by the Covid pandemic in 2020-21.

Competitions may not have been organised at various age levels in schools - for both boys and girls - but the Schools Team at the Irish FA Foundation still engaged with schools.

Coach education programmes were organised by the team in March and April and they proved to be very popular.

And the Schools Team have been using innovative initiatives to engage young people in football throughout the pandemic.

In a partnership with Belfast City Council's Everybody Active programme, the team enabled 200 girls from Bloomfield Collegiate, Aquinas, Belfast Royal Academy, Our Lady and St Patrick's College Knock, St Louise's Comprehensive, Mercy College and St Colm's Twinbrook to complete the Grassroots Introduction to Coaching Award as the first step on to the coaching ladder.

In addition 30 students from St Louise's, Our Lady and St Patrick's and the NIFL Academy completed the National Coaching Certificate.

And 199 girls from Cranmore, Donegall Road and Our Lady's primary schools in Belfast were engaged and inspired through the Irish FA virtual stadium tour, which gave them a glimpse of the history of the association and information about Northern Ireland's current international players.

In May the Irish FA Foundation, in partnership with Translink, provided eight 'golden' post primary schools with the opportunity to attend football masterclasses.

The eight schools were the first in Northern Ireland to achieve the Gold School Quality Mark award from the Irish FA for the structures and processes they have in place for schools' football.

In previous years they competed for the coveted Translink Gold Schools' Cup, however with normal schools' football matches unable to be played during the school year due to Covid-19 the masterclasses gave pupils a much-needed return to the pitch instead.

The masterclass sessions saw Irish FA staff provide resources and coaching sessions to improve and enhance football quality in anticipation of the return of the Gold Cup in the next school year.

The eight participating post primary schools were: Bangor Academy, St Columb's College (Derry-Londonderry), Boys' Model School (Belfast), Laurelhill Community College (Lisburn), St Malachy's College (Belfast), Our Lady and St Patrick's College Knock (Belfast), Ashfield Boys (Belfast) and Holy Cross College (Strabane).



Launching the Irish FA-Translink masterclasses were Translink's Hilton Parr, masterclass participants Travis Little and Curtis Phillips and Irish FA Foundation's Ian Stewart.

COMMERCIAL

Given the ongoing global pandemic 2020-21 proved to be challenging for the Sales and Marketing team but despite the circumstances they welcomed several high profile partners to a wide range of programmes across the association.

The first of these was Nationwide who came onboard to support the Irish FA Foundation's Back in the Game programme.

This was closely followed by Newry-based firm STATSports, who as well as providing analysis for the senior teams now feature throughout the coach education framework, providing both educators and coaches with best practice sports analysis learning.

Long term partner JD Sports became the title partner of the Irish FA JD Academy in collaboration with UEFA, based at Ulster University Jordanstown, to support the young players' ongoing development. And there was also a successful link-up with Camelot to provide much needed support for clubs across Northern Ireland.

As 2021 kicked off the association welcomed Weetabix as official cereal partner with on-pack promotions planned for the next two years, giving fans the chance to win a range of prizes from shirts and stadium tours as well as money can't buy experiences.

And to help with extensive plans to safely welcome fans back to the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park, Aktivora became the Irish FA's official hand sanitiser partner.

The ticketing team successfully launched a new membership programme, GAWA Official, allowing members to 'Get Access When Available' to tickets for fixtures and events in the 2021-22 campaign.

By joining, members also get access to exclusive content and competitions plus a whole range of benefits and discounts from partners as well as quarterly magazines for junior members.

Over the past year members of the Sales and Marketing team have also concentrated their efforts on renewing and expanding official licences.

This has seen the renewal of FOCO's licence for a new range of collectibles and novelties, Source Labs for casual wear and the latest editions of Konami's Pro Evolution Soccer (PES) and EA Sports' FIFA.

In addition a wide range of products have been introduced through new partnerships with Urban Pup (dog clothing range), BawBags (branded underwear), Titleist (golf balls), Affinity (smart watch bands), Snugzy (plush figures) and Nostalgia (retro shirt inspired mobile covers and mugs).

Moving into the second half of 2021, the team are excited to be working on launch plans for two new clothing and accessories lines, with a wide range of products due out later this year.

While the team have got to grips with working virtually they have continued to work successfully with partners such as BT, JD, McDonald's, adidas, Electric Ireland and many more.

They have helped to activate partners' campaigns across the senior men's and women's teams, with partners being recognised for their work when picking up numerous awards across Europe.

With restrictions starting to lift, the team have a strong pipeline of commercial activity and experiential marketing plans in place for the next year.

COMMUNICATIONS

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

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

During 2020-21 the team continued to create compelling content that told the story of football here.

Social media is key to driving positive messaging for the Irish FA and to developing a sense of pride in the national teams. The channels are already a vital touchpoint for the association but they have become even more important during Covid, helping to inform, educate and entertain football fans across Northern Ireland.

The digital content team's output throughout the past 12 months was again best in class despite the restrictions and limitations the pandemic has brought.

In 2020 audiences grew across each of the association's nine social media platforms. On the Irish FA and Northern Ireland National Teams platforms there is now a combined audience of more than half a million.

Instagram grew by 61% in 2020, while emerging platform TikTok has rocketed from zero to 49,000 to date. Other established channels like Facebook and Twitter continue to grow and serve their respective audiences.

In mid-2020 the decision was taken to add extra digital content resource to the senior women's team and it paid dividends.

Their winning streak last year enabled the content team to build the profiles of the players and to grow their fame.

The 20th anniversary of Football For All was highlighted on the association's social media channels this season.

Coverage culminated in the behind-the-scenes documentary 'A New Dream' as they qualified for UEFA Women's Euro 2022. And a short form clip from the women's coverage became the most viewed piece of video content on record.

On the senior men's team front the story of the appointment of new manager Ian Baraclough was told, every game was covered, plus highlights including record-breaking skipper Steven Davis who not only broke Pat Jennings' caps record for Northern Ireland but went on to become the most-capped UK international of all time.

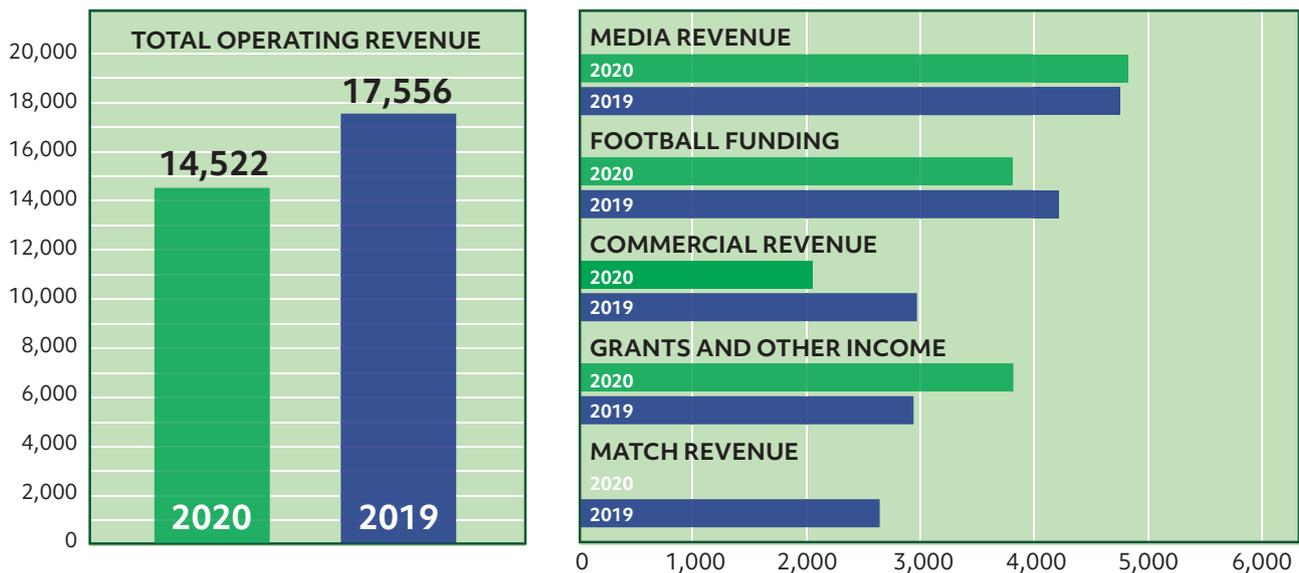
On the domestic competition front the Irish Cup was covered in depth as it was completed last July - it was delayed due to Covid - and this season's condensed Sadler's Peaky Blinder Irish Cup saw a string of videos produced covering Knockbreda, Carrick Rangers, the semi-finals and the final which was won by Linfield. The competition was also covered across social media and via the Irish FA website.



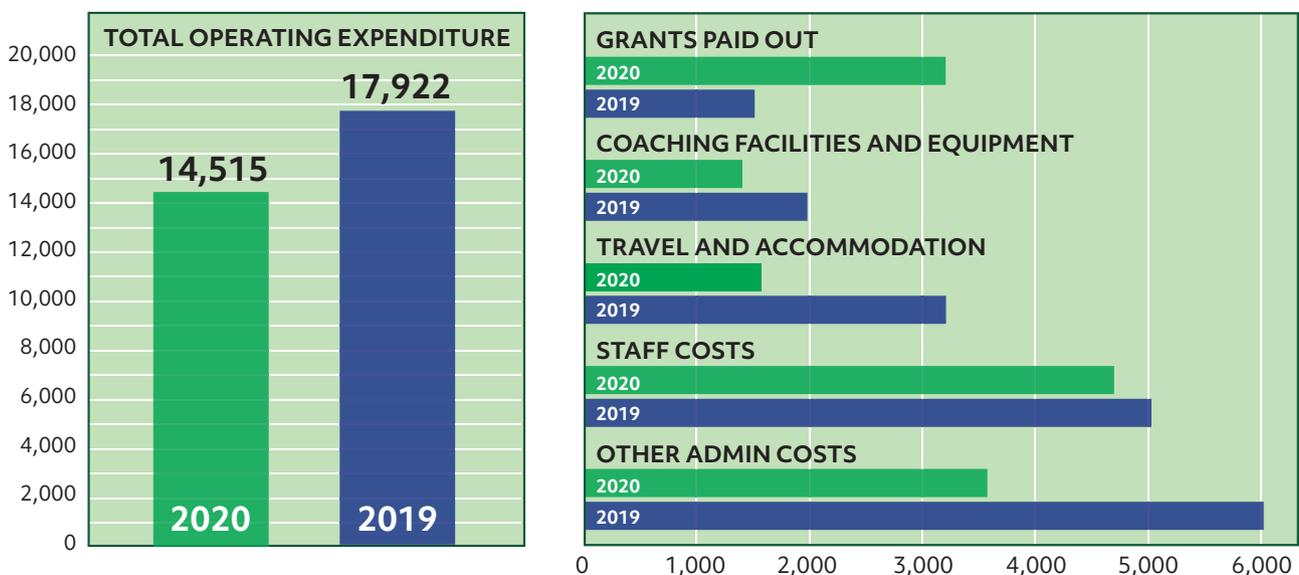
FINANCE

For the year ended 31 December 2020 the Irish FA had total revenue of £14.5m and total expenditure of £14.5m.

The main categories of revenue are analysed as follows:



The main categories of expenditure are analysed as follows:



The Irish FA recorded a trading profit of £8k for the year ended 31 December 2020 versus a trading loss of £366k for the year ended 31 December 2019. The result of foreign exchange movements and investment valuations was an increase of £100k in 2020 while it was an increase of £814k in 2019.

The final net result for financial year 2020 was a profit of £121k compared to a profit of £378k for the previous year.

Cash balances at 31 December 2020 totalled £5.0m (2019: £5.1m).

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 2020

	2020 £'000	2019 £'000
Total revenue	14,522	17,556
Cost of sales	(10,839)	(12,429)
Gross profit	3,683	5,127
Net administrative expenses	(3,675)	(5,493)
Trading profit /(loss)	8	(366)
Other gains/(losses) - net	100	814
Operating profit/(loss)	108	448
Income from other fixed asset investments	1	12
Interest (payable)/receivable and similar income	(11)	(9)
Profit/(Loss) before taxation	97	451
Tax on profit/(loss)	24	(73)
Profit/(Loss) for the financial year	121	(378)
Total comprehensive income/(expense) for the year	121	(378)

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 2020

	2020	2019
	£'000	£'000
Fixed assets		
Intangible assets	161	201
Tangible assets	33,513	34,695
Investments	4,835	4,589
	38,509	39,485
Current assets		
Inventory	13	14
Debtors	4,684	3,953
Cash at bank and in hand	4,958	5,173
	9,655	9,140
amounts falling due within one year	(11,805)	(12,021)
Net current liabilities	(2,150)	(2,881)
Total assets less current liabilities	36,359	36,604
amounts falling due after more than one year	(25,538)	(25,856)
Provisions for liabilities	(490)	(539)
Net assets	10,331	10,209
Reserves		
Investment revaluation reserve	3,204	2,959
Profit and loss account	7,127	7,250
Total reserves	10,331	10,209

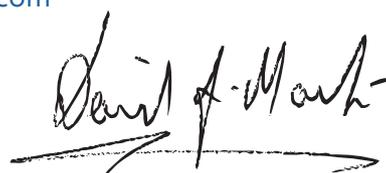
The financial statements of each entity comprising the Irish FA activities have been independently audited by Martin Cowie (Senior Statutory Auditor) for and on behalf of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and an unqualified audit opinion has been issued for all entities.

Copies of the full auditor's report for each entity are available as part of their Annual Report and Financial Statements which can be viewed at www.irishfa.com



Stephen Martin (Chairperson)

Date: 22 April 2021



David Martin (President)

Date: 22 April 2021



Irish Football Association

National Football Stadium at Windsor Park
Donegall Avenue, Belfast BT12 5LW, Northern Ireland

Tel: +44 (0) 28 9066 9458 Email: info@irishfa.com

www.irishfa.com

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