

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM NA MEÁIN, TURASÓIREACHT, EALAÍONA, CULTÚR, SPÓRT AGUS GAELTACHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON MEDIA, TOURISM, ARTS, CULTURE, SPORT AND THE GAELTACHT

Dé Máirt, 27 Aibreán 2021

Tuesday, 27 April 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 6.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 6.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Alan Dillon,	Malcolm Byrne,
Brendan Griffin,	Micheál Carrigy,
Mattie McGrath,	Shane Cassells,
Imelda Munster,	Fintan Warfield.
Johnny Mythen,	
Christopher O'Sullivan.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Chris Andrews.

Teachta / Deputy Niamh Smyth sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have one item of business to address before I call on our witnesses to present to the committee. I take it that the draft minutes of our public and private committee meetings of 20 April are formally agreed and that there are no matters arising from them. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Issues Facing Women in Sport: Discussion

Chairman: This meeting has been convened with the Federation of Irish Sport, the Ladies Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, the Camogie Association and the Gaelic Players Association, GPA, to discuss issues facing women in sport and the progress made following the 20x20 campaign. The witnesses will be joining the meeting remotely via Teams. I welcome Ms Mary O'Connor from the Federation of Irish Sport; Ms Helen O'Rourke of the Ladies Gaelic Football Association; Ms Sinéad McNulty from the Camogie Association; and Ms Gemma Begley of the Gaelic Players Association. This topic and discussion have been eagerly awaited by members and, I am sure, by the public and the witnesses as well. We are delighted to have the witnesses here and I thank them for joining us, though I am sorry it has to be remotely. We love to have people actually present but in the absence of that we are delighted to have the witnesses with us remotely. I thank them for all the trouble and effort they have gone to with their presentations.

I will invite witnesses to make their opening statements, followed by questions from members of the committee. The committee may publish the opening statements on its website following the meeting. I will call first on the Federation of Irish Sport; second, the LGFA; third, the Gaelic Players Association; and finally, the Camogie Association. Opening statements are limited to three minutes per organisation, in order to ensure everybody gets an opportunity to make their statements and that members get the opportunity to ask questions.

Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of a person or entity. If witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in relation to any identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that witnesses comply with any such direction. As our witnesses today are attending remotely from outside the Leinster House campus, they should note that there are some limitations on parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members again of the constitutional requirements that they must be physically present within the confines of Leinster House in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to attend where he or she does not adhere to this constitutional requirement. Any member who attempts to attend from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. I also ask members to please identify themselves when contributing, for the benefit of the Debates Office staff preparing the Official Report, and to mute their microphones when not contributing in order to reduce background noise and feedback. Members should use the appropriate button to indicate a raised

hand when they wish to contribute. I remind everybody joining today's meeting to ensure their mobile phones are in silent mode or, better yet, switched off.

With the housekeeping out of the way, I am delighted to get to most important and substantial part of the meeting, which is the guests who are with us today. They have three minutes each for their presentations. I will remind them when their time is up, in order to give everybody equal opportunity. I call Ms O'Connor to make her opening statement on behalf of the Federation of Irish Sport.

Ms Mary O'Connor: I thank the Chairperson, Deputies and Senators for inviting the Federation of Irish Sport to make a statement and contribute to this round-table discussion on issues facing women in sport and the progress made following the 20x20 campaign. For those who may not be familiar with the work of the federation, we are an independent representative body for 110 sporting organisations across Ireland, including 81 national governing bodies and 29 local sports partnerships.

The very successful 20x20 campaign began in October 2018 and concluded in October 2020. Some 76 members of the federation signed up to the campaign. Over 600 clubs across 45 sports in 32 counties, and, indeed, nine countries, signed up to the 20x20 clubs charter, and 28 out of 30 national universities on the island of Ireland signed the 20x20 third level charter, committing to one or all three of the key metrics, namely, the increase in media coverage, participation, and attendance for women in sport by 20% by the end of 2020.

In the first year of the movement, Nielsen found that participation increased by 13%, attendance at high-level events increased by 17% and media coverage across online and print publications increased by over 50%. However, it is important to note that we were coming from a very low base. In 2018 just 3% of print sports coverage, and 4% online, was dedicated to women's sport. After the first year of the 20x20 campaign, this had increased to 5% and 6% respectively, so there is still a long way to go.

Attendance and participation could not be measured in the second year of the campaign due to the absence of sport during the pandemic, but the cultural shift could be. According to Behaviour & Attitudes, 80% of the total population, and 84% of men, are more aware of women's sport now compared to before the campaign launched in 2018, with 76% saying women's sport is seen as cooler now. Of those aware of 20x20 campaign, 73% said the movement changed their mindset positively towards women in sport, with 68% saying they support girls and women in sport more than before because of the campaign.

In an effort to be succinct, some of the issues facing women in sport in Ireland were highlighted in a 2018 report entitled *We Are Sport*, commissioned by Sport Ireland. It stated that the six core barriers for women in sport were confidence, prioritisation, motivation, education, influencers, and structures. In 2019, Sport Ireland published a women in sport policy to tackle the issues outlined in the aforementioned report under the headings of coaching and officiating, active participation, leadership and governance, and visibility. The progress made since the publication of the 2019 women in sport policy, under the direction of Sport Ireland women in sport lead Nora Stapleton, is outlined in our submission. I am aware that the committee has seen this already so I will not go through the bullet points.

It is worth noting that, as sport and physical activity reopen in a meaningful way as the year progresses, it is envisaged that there will be a phase of uncertainty. Some sports will be more affected than others, such as sports whose natural environment is indoors as well as contact and

team sports outdoors. It is also fair to say there may be additional issues specific to women and girls as the return occurs, and they will need to be addressed as they arise.

Media representation will remain a key issue until there is an equal share of content across all formats of media consumption, including radio, TV, and print and social media channels. However, the ongoing support of State and non-State media outlets for movements such as the 20x20 campaign is significant and can be capitalised on. Initiatives such as Sport Ireland's media training programme will also help to facilitate a pipeline of talented female candidates for media work in these outlets. This is a great example of where initiatives can knit together.

Chairman: I ask Ms O'Connor to conclude. I am sorry to speak across her but we have run over time. We are very curtailed. Back in the day, before the pandemic, we would have had meetings that could go on for hours but we are restricted to two hours tonight. I want to make sure we get to tease out the issues as much as possible.

I thank Ms O'Connor and call Ms O'Rourke from the LGFA.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: Since our foundation in 1974, we have seen unprecedented growth. We are a 32-county, volunteer-led organisation with a global presence in all five continents. We have just surpassed a record 200,000 membership. This rate of growth is exponential. To give an example, our membership in 2007 was just over 132,000, a 32% growth in that short timeframe. The interest and attendance at our showpiece event, the All-Ireland final, has grown year on year. In 2013, the attendance was 25,103, while, in 2019, this attendance had more than doubled setting a record attendance at 56,114. This was the seventh year in a row of an increased attendance. It is testament to our players, mentors and members for all their hard work and effort.

We are extremely grateful to all those who have come before us since 1974 and laid the foundations and groundwork for those of us who have followed. We have set ourselves ambitious targets in our strategic roadmap. We believe there are many opportunities to continue our growth and development with the right supports and resources. Our aim is to provide the opportunity to all girls and women, no matter what their age, location, skill level or ambitions might be, to play football should they want to do so. We ensure programmes like Gaelic4Mothers&Others, Gaelic4Teens and Gaelic4Girls to provide these initial gateways to participation in our sport having an impact on all communities.

With this growth, however, also comes challenges and the 20x20 campaign brought some of these to the forefront for women's sport and united sports across the country. We are fortunate to have TG4 as our sponsor for the past 20 years. Our media coverage on television has increased annually. Like all sports, however, we continue to strive for greater presence in print media. We supported the 20x20 campaign wholeheartedly and we set targets to increase attendances and participation levels.

We want to continue as a leading sporting body. To enable us to do this, we urge all committee members to look at greater funding for women's sport. In 2020, the LGFA generated funds of just over €4.7 million, comprising €4.2 million in self-funding and €485,000 from Sport Ireland funding. In 2007, we were 24% funded by Sport Ireland compared to just 9% in 2020. Despite this, our membership has increased by 32% in the same period. Currently the association, based on existing funding available, operates a small workforce of 14 full-time staff. We operate the inter-county player grant scheme in co-operation with the Camogie Association and the Women's Gaelic Players Association. The targets are team-based and the benefits go to the

teams.

A further area of much debate is access to facilities due to increased playing numbers. There have been improvements in this area with the majority of our county games played in county grounds and further double-header fixtures with GAA games. However, the sports capital grant scheme is realistically out of reach for ourselves. The majority of our units simply would not have the initial funding required to enter these schemes to allow us to develop our own grounds and facilities.

I thank the Chairperson for the invitation to address the committee. I hope from this brief statement it can see the breadth of work completed by our association to promote women's sport and with minimal funding. We fully support objectives of creating an equal playing field financially for players at inter-county level. I must highlight the importance of funding for projects and initiatives supporting the additional 97% of our membership also. They form the basis from which our inter-county players are selected and will greatly benefit from further investment.

Chairman: I thank Ms O'Rourke for her comprehensive presentation. I call on Ms Gemma Begley to make her presentation.

Ms Gemma Begley: The WGPA was set up in 2015 to represent 1,500 female inter-county players across 55 squads. In December 2020, the WGPA joined its male counterparts in the GPA to become one association, which is committed to equality in Gaelic games and will actively work to pursue equal investment, recognition and opportunities for all players.

Last year, the WGPA launched the Levelling the Field report which showed that female inter-county players complete some form of training on almost six days per week; travel on average 80 km to and from their team sessions; 69% pay their own gym fees; 93% do not receive any compensation for travel costs; 85% need flexibility in their work to play inter-county; and 92% take part in club and community-based role model activity. Ultimately, the report showed that female players are committed to their sport but are out of pocket due to it.

Male players show comparable time commitment to training but receive compensation for costs incurred through a GAA-GPA expenses system and Government funding. The Covid-19 pandemic has only heightened the difficulties for female players, who are now required to travel individually to training and games to comply with the Covid guidelines. The 2020 Government grant scheme for female inter-county players allocated €700,000 to inter-county teams while male players received €3 million in individual grants. That is a funding disparity of 77%. On a per player basis, males received an average of €1,282 each, compared to €424 invested for each female.

The majority of female inter-county teams do not own their own pitch and consequently have to pay to use a GAA or public facility. These are direct costs to teams on an annual basis as a result of the organisational structures within our games. This context illustrates some of the main challenges faced by female inter-county players, namely, the individual financial strain, a lack of adequate high performance supports, barriers to accessing facilities. The latter two require Government funding to at least contribute to an improved playing environment for female players. However, the funding gap and experiences of male and female players remains significantly different.

This presents a significant opportunity for the Government to lead the way in creating equal-

ity in sport by making an equitable investment in all inter-county players. Sport Ireland is also committed to a vision for sport where women have an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential. The female scheme acknowledges that female players are high-performance athletes in their sport who require support. Independent evaluation of the female grant scheme showed a hugely positive impact of the scheme. At the same time, it recommended an enhanced and broader allocation of funding to further improve standards.

Closing the funding gap would be due recognition of female inter-county players who are the chief exponents of our indigenous games, as well as local role models who prompt participation in sport. There would be no stronger public message on the role of women in Irish sport than acknowledgment from the State through equitable funding that our female athletes are valued equally.

Chairman: I thank Ms Begley for another insightful presentation. I also thank her for her time and effort for putting it together for our members.

I call Ms McNulty to make her presentation.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: Go raibh míle maith agaibh as ucht an cuireadh go dtí an cruinniú seo inniu. Táim lánsásta an t-ábhar seo a chur chun cinn i dTithe an Oireachtais.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to meet this evening. It is positive to see the issues relating to women's sport being considered by this Oireachtas committee. I welcome the attention and priority that women's sport has been given by the Government over recent years in the national sports policy, the women in sport policy, as well as associated leadership funding and initiatives through Sport Ireland. These are all positive steps in the right direction.

I come with the perspective as CEO of the Camogie Association, the national and international governing body for camogie since 1904. It has 100,000 members across the world. The association wants more people playing camogie more often and in more places in Ireland and internationally. Yet it is more than that. It is about creating a positive experience, providing high-quality coaching, high-standard facilities, high-quality officials and excellent volunteers. All these elements, all of the time, will ensure that girls have a positive camogie experience. If one aspect fails, the risk is that we lose that player perhaps forever.

Chairman: Can I interrupt Ms McNulty very briefly? We are having a technical issue this side. If she turns off her camera and turns it back on again, it might resolve itself. We have her again. She was frozen a few minutes ago.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: Continued investment in women's sport throughout education, in all areas, locations and among all demographics is vital. In camogie, we have demonstrated the impact of investment and focused interventions on women's sport with wonderful progress being made in counties such as Cavan, Kerry and Mayo providing living proof. The costs for a young person starting out in camogie can be €100 to €130. This can be a limiting factor for some parents and many schools and clubs, which has been further complicated by the Covid-19 restrictions.

The key transition stages regarding drop-off in women's sport constitute a predominant issue. Teenage girls fall through the cracks and leave sport at transition stages from primary to secondary school through to third level and into the workforce. We need to extend the lifespan of female sports participation and engagement through the development of more recreational camogie opportunities with coaches and, most importantly, facilities available to support these

additional players and recreational teams. There is a need for early intervention and engagement with girls during primary and second level education to prevent this drop-off.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our association. Without them, there would be no camogie. Recruitment, retention and ongoing support and upskilling of volunteers represent a challenge, particularly as the demands continue to increase. There remains much work to do to eliminate the gender gap in participation and even more so when it comes to volunteering where significant disparities exist.

Women's sport needs to be broadcast and seen. Our athletes train as hard as the men do yet they do not achieve the screen time resulting in reduced investment by sponsors and broadcasters, which, in turn, impacts the sports. Broadcasting of sport has a long way to go to achieve parity. Recent research showed a high of 10.5% coverage of women in sport in March 2021 with the remainder going to their male counterparts. Women's sport needs to be broadcast with high production values and excellent commentating. Irish broadcasters have made huge moves in this regard but more needs to be done.

As a national association, we plan prudently every year to support our members and deliver on our ambitions. Our work is focused and our output for investment is high.

Chairman: Could I ask Ms McNulty to conclude as we have gone over your time? She will have the opportunity to come back in and extrapolate the points she made. Does she wish to make a closing comment?

Ms Sinéad McNulty: Funding is a key issue. As my colleagues have already noted, increased funding for women's sport is vital. The long-term impact of Covid-19 is another important issue. I have produced some recommendations for the committee to consider.

Chairman: I thank Ms O'Connor, Ms O'Rourke, Ms Begley and Ms McNulty. I know their contributions will inspire many questions from our members.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Can I propose that Deputy Munster takes my place?

Chairman: That is no problem.

Deputy Imelda Munster: As the Chairman said, the time available to us is extremely limited, which is very frustrating. The list of actions in Ms McNulty's submission makes for interesting reading. Her idea of a task force on women's sport is not something we should pursue; rather it is something we must pursue in 2021. Can she expand on what the task force should be looking at? Would it be broad enough to include consideration of underage sports and retention, broadcasting and funding proposals such as players' expenses and access to sports capital grants? Would she like the task force to consider these types of issues?

Ms Sinéad McNulty: Yes, all of those matters raised by the Deputy are very relevant. When the committee consults with members of national governing bodies, NGBs, it will probably find more. There is no clear data on the actual spend on women's sport. It is not broken down by NGB. It is very clear for the LGFA and the Camogie Association because they are single-gender sports organisations but we do not have that information in the case of others. Long-term sustainability is key.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Regarding the actions we are taking under the women in sport policy, a lot of really good work has been done but what seems to be missing is systemic sup-

port from Government to bring about the major changes in supporting and promoting women's sport. Does Ms O'Connor agree with that?

Ms Mary O'Connor: Sport Ireland appointed a women in sport lead in 2019 and invested €3 million in 2019 and 2020 in women in sport projects so work is being done. It has also appointed a women in sport committee so work is being done and the support has been forthcoming.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The LGFA has experienced great success and growth in recent years, more so than many other women's sporting organisations. What were the main reasons for that? Was it work at grassroots level, broadcasting coverage by TG4, support from high-profile sponsors or something else? I am asking this in terms of good practice and how it could be replicated somewhere else.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: It is a combination. We are not yet 50 years in existence so we were able to look back at the other associations, learn and see how we could do things differently. The main growth came just over 20 years ago when TG4 came on board as a sponsor. It was the visibility of our sport. We always believed we had a good product but that if we could get that product into households, parents would see it was a great sport for girls and schools and teachers would see it was a very suitable sport to play within schools where they could have large numbers playing. We believed that to sustain a national profile and at inter-county level, we needed solid foundations at grassroots level with underage sport. In recent years, we have been very lucky with fantastic sponsors such as Lidl that have had money to invest in marketing campaigns that made our sport very visible. It has a lot to do with members and volunteers we have had over the years.

Deputy Imelda Munster: How much time do I have left?

Chairman: Thirty seconds.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I agree 100% with everything said by Ms Begley. It is scandalous that women at this level are not receiving similar levels of funding to their male counterparts and it is an issue that must be addressed. I propose that the committee write to the Department recommending that the Department carries out a full review of funding for women's sport and establish a task force to examine the wider issues of women's sport. I hope the Chairman or someone else seconds that proposal.

Chairman: That is a great suggestion. All the members and witnesses present will agree with that. We will see that this letter goes to the Department containing those requests.

Senator Shane Cassells: I welcome the witnesses. Growth in women's sport has been exponential. I remember going to ladies' All-Ireland finals in the early 1990s when only the Hogan Stand was open and only 10,000 people might attend those games. We now have record crowds in excess of 56,000. To put it in context, it was the second biggest attendance for a ladies sporting event in the world that year, with only the FIFA World Cup being bigger. That did not happen by chance. It happened because of people, such as Ms Helen O'Rourke. I dealt with Ms O'Rourke in my days as a journalist with GAA magazines such as *Gaelsport* and *HighBall*. I know the work that has gone in over many decades. I praise Ms O'Rourke, Ms McNulty and all associated with the work that has gone into that.

I have three questions. I will pose them and then get the answers. My questions are first to Ms O'Rourke, in terms of assets, second, to Ms O'Connor and Ms Begley, in terms of financial

support, and, third, to Ms McNulty, in terms of the visibility.

On the assets, I note that the growth of the women's game over the past number of decades has been considerable. Ms O'Rourke touched on it in her presentation in terms of assets. On trying to resolve that, is it a case of us looking at a merger between the Ladies' Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, the Camogie Association and the GAA to eventually resolve that broader issue of assets and making sure there is equal access to the assets across the country? The distinct identity of the LGA and the Camogie Association have provided a different edge and have allowed the associations to grow because the advertising campaigns have been far edgier. The commercial partnerships have been far better as well. I am not advocating for it but I am asking the question.

Second, on resources, and this question is to Ms O'Connor and Ms Begley, the figures set out, in terms of the disparity, with €1,363 for a male inter-county player and €424 for a female one, are disgraceful. What steps are being taken on a timeframe for trying to achieve parity?

In terms of broadcasting and visibility, and this question is to Ms McNulty who touched on it in her presentation, I pay tribute to TG4 which has been a ground-breaker in giving that visibility. One of the greatest programmes on television at present is "Laochra Gael". Two of TG4's recent programmes on which they touched were on my mind coming here this evening. The first was its programme on Brieghe Corkery, a former team mate of Ms O'Connor. People such as Ms Corkery and Ms O'Connor have been ambassadors for the game, in both camogie and ladies' football. By highlighting these achievements, they are acting as ambassadors and drawing more people to the game. The second focused on Johnny Pilkington, one of the legends of Offaly hurling. At the end of that programme, Mr. Pilkington was bucking a ball around with this daughter, Kate, and talking about dropping her down to training that evening, realising there was only one person there to train a squad of more than 20. He eventually chipped in and he has been there ever since. We need legends of the game, such as Mr. Pilkington, out front and driving this promotion and coaching as well. I would be interested in Ms McNulty's views on that.

Finally, before I let the respondents answer my questions, I want to praise my own team, Meath, and Mr. Eamon Murray on their success last year. It will be great to see playing senior football next year and taking on the Dubs.

Chairman: Would Senator Cassells like anyone in particular to respond?

Senator Shane Cassells: I had one question for each. In the two minutes I have left, I have questions addressed to Ms O'Rourke, Ms O'Connor and Ms McNulty on assets, finance and broadcasting, respectively.

Chairman: In that order, ladies, away you go.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: I thank Senator Cassells for his kind words. In relation to the assets, we have worked closely with the GAA in recent years. We are all very aware that we have something unique in our sport and are very conscious of being in a position to develop it. I suppose where we are coming from with working to a closer alignment is having it work organically because we all have one chance at this. We have one chance of having one association. It will have to work. We are working on a way of getting there organically, with initiatives. Much of our development with young people is done together. We recently announced a player pathway for all codes, male and female, across that.

When I talk about assets, if one looks at the growth in our game and growth in camogie in recent years, there is the same number of GAA pitches around the country. In many of the small parishes, there is still the one field but the numbers have multiplied due to the number of girls and women playing sport there. We are expecting everybody to fit into the same number of pitches and it is not feasible. It does not work.

On the relationship we have with the GAA, we are all GAA members. We are all part of a club. We have our own club and we have our own facilities, but with the continued growth that we expect over the coming years, more facilities are required for the Gaelic games family.

Chairman: Do I see Ms O'Connor offering?

Ms Mary O'Connor: Will Senator Cassells clarify the question regarding finance?

Deputy Shane Cassells: On the timeframe Ms O'Connor sees, there is perhaps a €1,000 difference per head in terms of the grants available per inter-county player. I seek a timeframe for trying to bridge that gap and making sure we get parity across the board.

Ms Mary O'Connor: The Women's Gaelic Players Association, WGPA, was formed and has its vision and its mission. It is immediate. One is looking for a quick turnaround on this. Inter-county players are as committed now as they will be next year. The sooner the better. In regard to the task force, there is a review of this. Any inter-county ladies footballer or camogie player who is giving her time to play for her county needs to be recompensed. We need to look at the historical inequity as well if one is to try to get equality for our players.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Maybe Ms McNulty would reply on the broadcasting.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: It is a little like what Ms O'Rourke mentioned in respect of the facilities. There are only so many weekend hours available to broadcast games and it is a challenge for our broadcast partners to schedule games. That does not impact on our print media and on other alternative media. It is about trying to make sure there is parity. Some 10%, as a peak, is fairly low, considering in 2004 research was done by former Deputy, Jimmy Deenihan, on this in a previous joint committee.

We need to look at having female sport broadcast at peak times, at free-to-air broadcasting and at other mechanisms of broadcasting women's sport so that our athletes can be role models for the young people who are watching television. We want to get them out playing the sport but the reality is they engage with social media, television and print media, and we need those role models to be visible to people.

An additional challenge for our camogie players, of course, is that they are behind helmets during their games and they are a little less recognisable walking down the street than some of our other colleagues. There is a need for investment and perhaps some positive discrimination in terms of peak times for television coverage of women's sport. That may not be a popular recommendation but it is one that needs to be looked at.

We work closely with our partners in the LGFA and in the GAA to get screen time, where possible, with our broadcast partners in RTÉ but it is not always possible. It is a very competitive market for those peak screen hours on television.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I thank Ms McNulty.

Chairman: I thank Senator Cassells for all those questions and his long statement. I call

Deputy Griffin.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I am going to switch with Deputy Griffin.

Chairman: That is fine, Deputy Dillon.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank our guests who have joined us this evening. It is fair to say from their opening statements that the 20x20 campaign has probably done more in the past two years than what possibly would have been achieved over the past 20 year. It has certainly increased awareness in Ireland and internationally about the value and importance of women's participation in sport.

I appreciate that women players across all sports put in an equal, if not greater, effort in their chosen sports to ensure that they perform to the best of their abilities and I would second Deputy Munster's proposal on setting up a task force to address the inequality that is present in terms of how men are perceived. I speak as someone who comes from an inter-county background and worked with the Gaelic Players' Association, GPA, for more than 15 years. We need to change the language in terms of how women are treated and respected.

I have some generic questions. The Ladies' Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, mentioned issues around access to sporting grounds for training and matches. I would like to get an understanding from Ms O'Rourke of the difficulties of the LGFA in accessing capital grants and what plans the association has to resolve this.

In terms of the foundations or the building blocks to ensure there is equality of opportunity for women at elite, club or participation level, what would be the required funding structures to support women in sport? Each organisation in its opening statement referenced funding streams. If there are any recommendations, I would very much welcome them.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: Talking about the sports capital grants, if we were to go about it as an association by ourselves, we would not have the finances to back up what is required. We currently support clubs and counties in a position to access this funding. We support them in the statements because in recent years everybody is working to access or improve facilities at a local level, taking into account that young girls and women are playing this sport. We support those applications.

Some counties in the past number of months have invested in or are planning in investing in their own facilities, which really is not possible for the majority of our counties and us as an association. Our support must lie with the current structures that are in place.

Deputy Alan Dillon: With a membership of more than 200,000, would the organisation be in a position to support major capital projects or is it something it has looked to address?

Ms Helen O'Rourke: No. As an association, we would not be in the financial position to support that with the resources we take in. Everything we take in as an association goes back out in the operation. We also administer an injury fund as an association to ensure every player, no matter what age, is covered in the event of injuries. We have a very strong and good injury fund that is part of the investment with players. Our finance system is membership-led and whatever we take at the gate for all-Ireland finals, for example, goes back to the running of the association for the coming year. Our membership stream finances the association.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Ms O'Rourke. What are the funding structures for the other

associations?

Ms Mary O'Connor: There is core funding for national governing bodies of sport and local sport partnerships. There is also women in sport funding that has come on stream since 2019. There are 41 organisations that received funding for women in sport projects. Ideally, we would like to see an increase in funding and budget for the women in sport policy to be developed and the number of bodies receiving specific women in sport funding to be increased.

It is very important that there should be an understanding that core funding goes to the whole organisation but there is specific women in sport funding. That pot of €3 million must be substantially increased if we are to meet the requirements of women and girls playing sport in this country.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Ms O'Connor.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: Echoing Ms O'Rourke's comments, we are the same. Our annual turnover would not facilitate investment in facilities in the same way as the sports capital element does. For example, in an average year pre-Covid, we had approximately €2.5 million in revenue. Looking at putting floodlights on a pitch, we would be looking at approximately €500,000 for a good quality installation. Even for us to underwrite developments that units are seeking year on year, it would be really challenging.

An unequal investment in women's sport will be required over the next number of years to bring it to level it needs to be at. Women members across the different sports codes in the country have invested in their club membership and facilities development over the years. The facilities are not yet there to match the needs of the growth in women's sport that we are now seeing. We require unequal investment so as to provide facilities and ensure our core funding. Ms O'Connor referred to specific investment in project-based funding, including that of women in sport. There is also the motivate, nurture, aspire, MNA, programme, that may have helped Mr. Pilkington in coaching his young daughter. We can certainly pass on the details to him about that.

Ms Gemma Begley: The Deputy asked about the structure of the inter-county grant scheme funding. We have requested an increase, a portion of which we would like to see going to player travel expenses. It was flagged as a direct cost to players and it is something we would like to see incorporated into the future structure of funding.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the witnesses for their contribution. I have a question for Ms O'Connor. Much of the focus has been on GAA so far but will she share a case study or example of one of the other governing bodies that have successfully increased the participation of women in sport and any specific lessons that could be drawn across all the sporting codes from that?

We will shortly consider the online safety and media regulation Bill. The witnesses spoke earlier about the drop in participation of young women, particularly those in their late teens and going to college. I would like to hear a little of the discussion around the extent to which the witnesses feel body shaming and the impact of social media on young women is a factor. It is about ensuring they can continue to take part so what measures could be taken and what concerns should we raise with social media companies in this regard?

Ms Mary O'Connor: From the perspective of the Federation of Irish Sport, we are not funders so I am not privy to the information sought by the Senator. I can give an example from

the local sports partnerships. There are 29 of them in the country and in 2020 they had over 109,000 girls and 64,000 women participating in sports programmes led by the local sports partnerships. It is the type of impact that funding can have when local sports partnerships are resourced to deliver progress for girls and women in sport.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am keen to have somebody speak to the impact of social media on female participation. There is a certainly a concern around girls in their late teens dropping off because of social media pressure.

Ms Gemma Begley: I am happy to come in on that. There was one good example from ladies football recently when Ms Vikki Wall spoke very candidly about her experience. It was great to see that leadership, which was very refreshing. It was a great message to send out to young girls to stand up and say everybody is welcome. It was a really good challenge for all of us, including those watching the games or online, and it reminds us to be respectful because there is a person behind the online presence.

More could be done and there is much social activism by athletes across the world. It is very popular. We would love to see this problem being tackled and players continuing to take a lead on it. The Senator is correct that much more work could be done on it.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: I thank the Senator for the question. There is much work to be done and there has been much discussion, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, of building the resilience of young people. I know from my experience at third level that there is an impact on young men as well as young women.

The camogie organisation has invested in a dedicated player welfare and inclusion co-ordinator who is doing specific work on body image, including with Bodywhys. The Healthy Ireland concept has a cross-departmental approach with education, health and sport working together to deliver particular programmes. What would be worth looking at, similar to the Healthy Ireland initiative, is an interdepartmental or cross-departmental approach with education, health and sport working together to deliver on particular programmes. That is worth investigating and investing resources in because such a collaborative approach would yield wisdom from three different Departments with three different lenses which would be useful in terms of pulling information and programmes together. Investment should be made specifically to help young people to overcome difficulties.

On the issue of regulation, we could have another full committee meeting on that topic.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: The impact of social media on young people's participation in sport is so important but the witness is correct to point out that it is not just about young women. That said, it is an issue we need to address.

Chairman: Senator Carrigy is next.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the witnesses to the meeting. I am the Fine Gael spokesperson on sport in Seanad Éireann. I have been very heavily involved in the GAA at a local, county and national level for many years. In terms of sport overall, having been a local authority member I am very supportive of the local sports partnerships. They are an excellent model on the ground and provide the right channel through which to funnel funding to increase participation levels. Do the witnesses have statistics on the male versus female participation levels across all sports? Reference was made earlier to the lack of media promotion of camogie and ladies' sports in general and in that context it would be prudent for the federation, on behalf

of all sports, to make a submission to the Future of Media Commission, which is looking at all forms of media. I suggest that the witnesses make a submission to the commission on the lack of promotion of women's sport in the media.

I am delighted that the GPA and the WPGA have amalgamated. I sat on the board of the GPA for two years on behalf of the GAA. It is an excellent representative body and I am delighted that it is working so well. However, it is unacceptable that ladies travelling the same highways and byways, going to training and putting in the same effort are not being recompensed. This must be addressed immediately.

On the question of assets and sporting facilities, I am a strong believer in the one club model. That is the way forward, to be quite honest. It makes sense that we all use one facility and pool our resources to maximise the benefits for all. I would not like to see a situation where there is a pitch somewhere that is just for ladies GAA. A pitch should be a pitch for all and we must work together. I would love to see a situation where all of the organisations are under a single umbrella, which is the GAA family. We should have one GAA that represents all players of all GAA sports. Do the witnesses see that happening within the next three to five years? I feel very strongly about this and would love to see it happening. Where do the witnesses see things going over the next three to five years?

Ms Helen O'Rourke: We have made great strides in recent years. We work very closely with the GAA. Often there is a perception out there that we live in little individual bubbles and do not communicate but everything that we do every day, as associations, is linked in to the GAA. The one club idea is an example of how well that has worked in recent years. That concept is being promoted throughout the country and we are trying to build it up more.

From a national point of view, we have made super strides in the past three years in particular and I would envisage greater links being forged in the GAA family over the next three to five years. I see us all being tied together more closely as a Gaelic games family but in a format that will help everybody so that we are all able to promote and develop our own games at the level required. If one looks at the size of the associations, all three are very large. To pull everybody together would require a huge amount of work in terms of things like changes to playing rules, dealing with female versus male players and so on. We are currently working on a format whereby we can be one body but also be very cognisant of differences and where the female associations can be developed to the same level as the male association. That is what we are working on. As I said previously, we are all GAA members and are all part of the GAA family. We want to see a more united and stronger Gaelic games family in the coming years and within three to five years I can see greater unity developing.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: I thank Senator Carrigy for his question. As Ms O'Rourke has outlined, for the last three years we have had a memorandum of understanding with the GAA and that has seen progression and development in leaps and bounds. It may not have been visible until 2021 because Covid delayed a lot of the launches of joint projects last year. We have been working on a joint coaching initiative and a player pathway coaching framework, for example, at a national level. Work is ongoing at both club and national level, including with the one club initiative. We are not suggesting that there is a specific need but that there is a need for more facilities to accommodate the increased number of female players. The GAA was established with male members and had X number of facilities. We have seen huge growth in the ladies' games and we need additional facilities to cope with that growth. If it happens under the one club model, that is absolutely perfect but again, there are issues around managing time, equity of access and so on. We also have situations where clubs are not joined up.

There will be huge progression over the next few years in the Gaelic games family. I welcome the suggestions that will come from our members around areas they think we can do more on. We launched our national development plan last year and got great insights from our members on ways to work more closely together with the GAA and we are continuing to do so. Our relationship with the LGFA has never been stronger. We have been able to iron out lots of issues and things that were happening ten or 15 years ago are not happening now because of that increased engagement. That is benefiting all of our members at all levels across the associations and we will continue with that engagement. There is a really positive attitude to collaboration across the Gaelic games family.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank all of our witnesses for joining us and for their very informative contributions. They have spoken very eloquently about the importance of the visibility of their sports, particularly on television. I am a League of Ireland fan and for years we have been without coverage of games. This year it struck me that with the launch of the streaming app, what I was really looking forward to was access to the club and the team I support and being able to watch them live when they are playing in Ballybofey or Derry. Are the witnesses content that enough is happening to make games available to the hardcore fans who really want to be there, as well as in terms of providing access to the more high-profile games about which they have spoken so eloquently?

There has been a lot of talk about centres of excellence. I refer to places like the Garvaghey Centre in Tyrone and the centres in Derry and Clare which have also been in the news. Not mentioning any centre specifically, are the witnesses satisfied that women are getting equal access to those centres of excellence?

Today the GAA launched its strategic plan for 2021 to 2026 but there was only one woman on the steering group involved in the production of that plan. There is only one woman involved in that steering group. Are the witnesses concerned that the issues that have been raised today may not be given priority in terms of that review?

Those are my three questions, if any of the witnesses wishes to respond.

Ms Mary O'Connor: I might come in on the streaming issue.

The pandemic last year expedited the use of streaming for games. Now that there is such powerful equipment, such as handheld devices like phones, people are becoming increasingly innovative around streaming. That can only auger well for female sport. What struck me, when the pandemic hit first and there was no live sport, was that when sports shows were trying to fill the void and were going back to archive footage, there were very few female sport archives into which they could delve, beyond footage of the likes of Sonia O'Sullivan and Katie Taylor.

The pandemic has shown that we can be very innovative. The streaming of sport is becoming more common. That is going to help the visibility of women's sport at a local as well as national level. That type of work should be supported. Last year, the Federation of Irish Sport took on the opportunity to showcase sport, working with national and governing bodies around specific events and games to highlight what could be done with live streaming. We need to see more of that. We will certainly be leading on that in supporting organisations in the live streaming of both male and female sport.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: To start with the last question on the GAA strategic plan steering group, there is consistent consultation between camogie and the LGFA and the GAA through

our own operations. Both Ms O'Rourke and I also sit on the GAA's Coiste Bainistí, so we are present at the most senior table of the GAA's organising committee. As far as the strategic planning goes, we have been invited to participate and I have already had the opportunity to participate in one of the sessions guiding the strategic plan. Therefore, there are definitely many opportunities for us to participate there. While it is disappointing that there is only one woman involved, it is not necessarily a symbol of who will be consulted as the process goes through.

In terms of streaming, the Camogie Association started streaming around two years ago now. Last year, thanks to the Covid-19 resilience funding that we received, we were able to stream all, bar one, of our championship fixtures. That was down to the additional funding that we received from Government, which we were able to allocate to streaming. Because people were not going to be attending games, we had no income from gates. That came from Government support instead. We have allocated an amount of money for streaming this year, but it will cover approximately half of the fixtures to be played in our fixture schedule. It is like any of these things - now that we have done it, our members expect it and we want to provide it all of the time, but it does require resources.

On the centre of excellence, I will defer to Ms Begley and her colleagues, who I know have been doing some research on that. Perhaps she will want to comment on that issue.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: Ms McNulty has covered the fact that we are engaged with the GAA in its strategic plan for the coming years.

On streaming, we covered all of our games last year. Much of that was due to the fact that we received additional funding. In respect of this year, we have plans for the coming league season and what is to be done, which will be announced shortly.

In relation to some of the queries that we receive in respect of the centres of excellence, in many counties there is fantastic access. Of course, there is a cost. For facilities like that, none of us expects to get something for nothing. We expect to contribute towards that. In relation to that, all of the centres for excellent would have got capital grants. In areas where the female players do not have that access, there is an onus on Government, that has awarded the capital grants, to follow up on the applications for female access to ensure that the access is there. Overall, there is good co-operation in most of the centres of excellence.

Ms Gemma Begley: It is one area that is particularly relevant to the female inter-county players. While there is a one-club model option available at club level, there is no similar framework or template available for a one-county model. I think it was in the last GAA strategic plan. Perhaps it will be revisited. It is pertinent to the Senator's third point around the new strategic plan. It would be a welcome priority if that option was available to further co-operation and collaboration at county board level.

In the experience of the female teams, there are teams that do not have consistent and fair access. There are times when female players are used in fundraising campaigns, as alluded to by Ms O'Rourke in respect of capital grant applications. There are times when females feel hard done by and it is an issue that warrants a closer focus and mechanisms for providing fair and equal access to female county players on a consistent basis.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: There are many questions that have been asked that I would have asked. One of the questions I want to ask is the following. Can the witnesses provide an update on the feasibility assessment of the integration of the three organisations, and did the witnesses

have any input into it?

I coached both ladies football and camogie. The one-club model is fine, but it is as Ms Begley said a moment ago. I remember us having to go out to train after nine in the evening, fitting ourselves in or having to go out early in the morning. If it was raining, they would not allow us to train because the male footballers and hurlers wanted to train then. There is an issue with access. I believe that Armagh is the only county in which the ladies gaelic football team has its own grounds. That definitely is an issue, and always has been.

It was always a bugbear of mine that the ladies are only regarded as associate members of the GAA, which means that in most clubs they do not have a vote, for example, in the AGMs and the election of the chairman, which is very important. It is something which should definitely be pursued. I never agreed with it. It has always been an example of inequality.

Following on from the 20x20 campaign, which seemed to be so successful, is there anything similar planned? Something like that would work. Obviously, the coverage in the media is disappointing. We have a national broadcaster in RTÉ. Do the witnesses think it should show more women's sport?

Ms Helen O'Rourke: There is currently a huge amount of work going on looking at the whole integration issue. We have made great strides in that. There will be more to be seen on that in the coming months and years.

In relation to membership and the one-club model, I would say that most of our members are also full members of the GAA. While I am a member of my local ladies club, I am a full member of the GAA with voting rights. We encourage ladies to become full members rather than associate members.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: On the feasibility assessment, it was supposed to be published this year. Could I get an update on that?

Ms Helen O'Rourke: Could the Deputy explain what in particular he means?

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Yes. I was referring to a feasibility assessment on the integration of the three organisations that was supposed to be carried out between 2020 and 2021.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: What has been worked on is that we have each had a memorandum, and it is to bring it to the next level. Because of the way 2020 turned out, we have not had the opportunity to press that as quickly as we could, but it is being worked on currently.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: RTÉ is one of our broadcast partners and it has made a significant commitment to increasing the amount of women's sport that it shows and also the female commentators that it engages on its various sports programmes, as we have seen in recent years. All of the broadcasters have opportunities to increase their broadcasting.

With regard to the review, to which Ms O'Rourke referred, what is under way at the moment is a review of the inter-county funding scheme for female inter-county players, and a comparison with the male players. That is under way and we are awaiting results.

On the issue of one club, my understanding is that, once they join the club, the majority of people would be full members if it is one club. Where there is a separate camogie club and GAA club, there may be different membership options available, so perhaps there is a disparity in the make-up of different clubs across the country.

With regard to the 20x20 campaign, at the closing of the campaign, we knew it had encouraged clubs, units and individuals to continue to make pledges and continue to commit to the ethos and ideals behind the 20x20 campaign. We would all have loved to reach our full potential in delivering on those in 2020 but it will come.

Ms Mary O'Connor: I thank members for their comments around the 20x20 campaign. It was a huge success and what it did is that, for the first time in the history of women's sport in Ireland, it unified everybody into coming together. Large organisations and smaller, niche and emerging organisations were all part of the one piece of infrastructure in this country, and it was a huge success. At the moment, we are not looking at another campaign but we realise it was a real success, and that is a credit to the founders of the campaign, Heather Thornton and Sarah Colgan. We are considering trying to maximise the position of women in sport around a different type of campaign.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the witnesses for their contributions and thank my colleagues for some very insightful questions. On sports capital, we talked about high performance but I would like to get feedback on the local level and see whether licence agreements are working, and whether, when a club signs up with a ladies team as part of its application through a licence agreement, there is fair play subsequently. Perhaps the witnesses could come back to me on that side of things.

Leading on from that, in regard to sports capital, do the witnesses think a land purchase grant for ladies teams and ladies sports should be considered in future rounds of the sports capital programme, rather than just development grants? Would initial purchase grants for land help clubs that cannot find a partner and cannot be part of an established club in terms of capital?

I want to ask about the sports monitor. Over the years, we have seen that the figures in regard to women's participation are improving, which is positive, although there is a long way to go. As we head into the middle of 2021, do the witnesses feel that the targets set out in the national sports policy need to be reviewed and need to be more ambitious?

The issue of the rescue package secured last summer was touched on. I was in the Department at the time and would not have envisaged then where we would be now, heading into May 2021. How much more do the witnesses think is needed and do they feel further investment from the State is required at this time, especially due to Covid?

Ms Mary O'Connor: I thank the Deputy. With regard to the sports monitor, in terms of the participation rates and what is outlined in the national sports policy, obviously, all indicators are that active participation is on the rise. However, we are in the middle of a pandemic when people cannot go about their normal business, so people have readjusted and instead of having a work-life balance, they are having a life-work balance. What I would like to see is some type of campaign to stimulate that behaviour in a sustainable way beyond Covid. I am sure that when we get back into normal life, people will get caught up. We need to try to ensure that those who are active now and who were not active before can be enticed to stay active by either going to formal exercise and being a member of a club, or by being active on their own or in small groups, with supports from those like the local sports partnerships.

In terms of further investment, the federation is currently carrying out a Covid-19 impact survey with all of our members. When that survey has been collated, interpreted and shared with the committee, it will make for interesting reading. It is important to point out that we are four months into the year for our sports organisations and they have not been able to generate

income in the way they normally would. We will be working with the Department officials around a second resilience fund. It will be needed but, as we all know, when we invest in sport and physical activity in this country, we do get a return on that investment, which will be very important going forward.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: As Ms O'Connor noted, the move to individual sport and recreational activity has been strong, and that has been the pattern for a long time. Much of the dropout from team sport happens in teenage years and females move into individual sport. On the impact of Covid-19 on team sport, it is going to be years before we see the impact of that on underage players and whether underage players are going to return to the sport. With equipment-based sport and stick-based sport, there is the question of the impact of the loss of a year's playing time and whether the loss of skill level is going to be detrimental to the sport. Additional effort is required to ensure people return to team sport. A significant impact and effort is required in the development of recreational team sport. We need that sense that when people are retired from sport, finish their college career and are in the workforce, they can actually go back and do recreational sport. We have seen it take off with tag rugby, softball and games like that. We should invest in recreational forms of Gaelic games. It does come back a little bit to facilities and whether people are going to prioritise a championship game for an adult or juvenile team against a recreational activity. That is part of the ongoing challenge but it is going to need investment.

From a resilience funding point of view, we had no games last year at county level for club championships or at national level. Again, there have been four months without games activity this year and no sign of dates for when we will be allowed to welcome people back to watch our matches in person. There is a huge need for resilience funding. Last year, the funding for the inter-county championships ensured that those games happened and that series happened. This year, we are trying to run all of our competitions, from leagues through to championships, and support will be required.

Ms Gemma Begley: As Ms McNulty touched on and I alluded to in the opening statement, players are now expected to travel individually to training and to away games, so they might be driving to Dublin or Galway individually on match day. Support has been proposed within our overall Government grant but there is no confirmation on that yet for 2021. If a short-term subsidy or support was available, it would be a priority and most welcome to help the running of the games for the season ahead

Ms Helen O'Rourke: The funding we received last year was very important, as other speakers have alluded to. When we received it last year we were ready for the championship and we were able to pay travel expenses for the players. This is a challenge that we as associations must look at over the coming years. When one talks of equality and equity of investment from Government to our inter-county players, the associations must also look at that. I am aware that the ladies football and camogie do not have the same commercial power that the GAA has to invest in the GPA so that is going to be a challenge for our associations over the coming years.

On the facilities, given that we are looking at moving closer to the GAA and moving closer as one organisation with all the codes involved, I believe the way to go is to look at the facilities for all within that so it is not separating the women's games out to facilities on their own. This would only put a divide between us while we are trying to come closer together at this point.

I also fear for the participation of our youth and teenage players who have missed out on a year. Last year, with more people working at home and more people who had been working

in Dublin moving back to their homes around the country, we actually saw an increase in adult membership. What will happen the youngsters, however, who have missed out on so much? It is important to get them and the teenagers back into enjoying the game again.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Griffin for those questions and our guests for their answers. Deputy O'Sullivan is on the line now.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I apologise if my line dropped out just before my speaking slot previously. I thank all the witnesses for their contributions, which were very informative. There were lots of positives and other things that we should not be proud of. The significant disparity in funding is simply not good enough in this day and age. We need to change this and address the disparity from a policy point of view.

I want to speak to the really exciting growth in women's sport and increased attendances. As a spectacle, it is excellent and it holds its own. I have tuned in to many of the women's camogie and GAA matches and it is incredibly entertaining. The skill level is through the roof. Being from Cork, we have relied on the ladies' teams for success over the past couple of years. I have certainly been very much tuned in to it as a spectacle more so over recent years.

I have a question for Ms O'Connor, or any of our witnesses who wish to take it. What can be learned from other codes? We have seen in athletics that two of Ireland's biggest success stories are Sonia O'Sullivan and Phil Healy. Ms Healy has been making incredible inroads recently with personal best after personal best. It appears to be very much equal footing for male and female in the athletics. I am not sure if that has always been the way but it certainly is the case since I have been watching sport. I wonder if this is because it is an Olympic event and an international sport? What we can learn from tennis, for example? This is a sport that comes from a place where there was significant disparity between male and female participants but is now almost reaching the stage of parity. It is not perfect yet but Serena Williams is just as well-known as Roger Federer. While I am not sure how well paid Ms Williams is, there is almost parity of recognition there. Winter sports is another good example. In winter sports such as alpine, cross country or biathlon skiing there is almost equal parity in TV coverage, crowd attendance and participation. Have studies been done into how that was achieved and why this is the case? Is there something we in Ireland can learn from that?

On the growth of Irish women's sport and Irish women's rugby, my sister played for Ireland in the Rugby World Cup in Edmonton, Canada, in 2006. It was a very proud moment. Since then, women's rugby has gone from strength to strength. I am not sure if that is because she left the team, but they have had huge success. I just wanted to give a plug to her while I was talking about it.

Ms Mary O'Connor: I thank the Deputy. He made a very good point. These are also individual sports, but if one considers the Gaelic games family, the ladies football game is in its infancy. It is not even 50 years old yet, whereas its male counterpart is significantly older. There is learning and sharing of knowledge, but the one thing we should not get mixed up in is comparing ourselves to other sports, or comparing sports with sports. There are different ingredients that make them up. Sport in Ireland is growing exponentially among females. It is important that they see the opportunity to participate as equal to men. That starts not even in primary school, it starts at preschool. The national sports policy also points in that direction. We have a lot to take on board but there is a lot of sharing of knowledge by the NGBs and we are working together. Athletics have been working with ladies Gaelic football to develop physical literary skills. We are in a good place and it can only get better.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: As Ms O'Connor said, I do not believe it is good at times to be comparing to others and especially to the individual sports. We are doing a lot right in Ireland. Let us consider Australia, which is a sports mad nation, and the role that ladies Gaelic football has in the development of the Southern Football League, SFL there in recent years. Players we have brought up from youth to develop their skills are now playing a major role over there. Australia is looking at how we got to the level that we are in this country. Their teams are basically where we were 30 years ago. They want to develop the coverage, numbers and network of clubs we have. There has been a sharing, especially this year, of a number of our players who have gone to Australia. They are able to play there and to develop the game over there and come back here. The same has happened in rugby in recent years, when one considers the number of players who have come through Gaelic games and who then go on to rugby and so on. There is a lot of sharing going on and a lot of development within the associations. We have done a lot and achieved a lot in a number of years.

Ms Gemma Begley: On the point about putting all players or participants on an equal platform, this was one of the reasons the GPA and the WGPA fully integrated. The new structure of the organisation and the governance structure is about representing all players equally. We feel there is a piece in the visibility area so that male and female players are represented equally. Everything that we do now is pushing the agenda for male and female players as well. I hope it sends a very strong message out and will continue to lead in that visibility piece. Some research was done in the UK, where the Women's Sport Trust projected that the women's sports industry would grow to £1 billion by 2030. Key to that was the visibility piece. Projecting all players equally on an equal platform is, we feel, a very worthwhile contribution to that.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: In terms of the sports mentioned by Deputy O'Sullivan, the male and female competitions tend to be scheduled at the same time and coverage is joint equal. There is a piece around that. When we consider what has happened internationally with Title IX in the US where there was forced investment in women's sports and the same amount has to be put into women's sports as male sports when it comes to education at a sporting college or publicly funded education, that changed how sports appears and is funded in the US.

With the Gaelic games family, the work that has been put in at a voluntary level has to be acknowledged, and that is what, over 120 years, and longer for the men's game, has brought the depth and breadth of club interaction and the value of our sports in our local communities across every village in the country, whether it is a camogie stronghold or a football stronghold. The power of Gaelic games is there due to the voluntary status, the amateur status of the game and the contribution of everybody over the years. Camogie and hurling have earned us UNESCO status, which is remarkable and we do not celebrate it enough.

Where we have seen shifts, for example, in tennis, they have come when they have balanced up the prize funds. We still do not have it in golf and other games, but where the prize funds that are available are the same and the competition is deemed to be of equal value, then you are getting a higher perception of the value of the sport for broadcasters and de facto for everybody else who is watching as well.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I thank the witnesses for their interesting presentations. The questions and answers that followed have been interesting and enlightening.

I have personally benefited hugely from the LGFA and the Camogie Association because I have two young daughters and they have gone through the system, including the Cumann na mBunscoil competition in schools. They played for Ballinteer St John's GAA club and attended

Coláiste Íosagáin where they participated in the camogie schools finals, which was great. They were part of the Dublin camogie development squad and they were part of the Dublin minors for a short period. Now, they are in Holland where Mary Gavin is looking after them in Den Haag GAA club. Any investment in camogie or any sport is fantastic and is repaid fivefold.

I noticed that as my daughters progressed with their sports only two of their mentors were female and one of their female mentors joined the football club, which was great. However, all the rest of the mentors were men. I am not disparaging anything because everyone was great to my children, including Mr. Paul Beecher and Mr. Pat Martin who, sadly, passed away not too long ago. When I watch games I see very few women mentors. Have the organisations present looked at attracting more women mentors? I ask because when one cannot see it then one cannot be it.

I think Ms Begley mentioned the disparity in the funding of men's and women's games. Everybody has said that the disparity is completely unacceptable. Ms McNulty, in her presentation, called for the establishment of a task force and I agree. I also believe that we must prioritise an increase in funding for ladies' sports, particularly for the LGFA and the Camogie Association.

As Deputy Mythen alluded to, I remember the times when women would be pushed off their pitch when the men arrived. The men also get a choice of times and dates while the girls had to play on a Friday night, for example. We must change the unfairness and inequality and there is quite a while to go.

In terms of mentoring, have the organisations considered ways to increase the number of women mentors for ladies' teams? I thank the witnesses for their patience.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: The LGFA is very conscious of the lack of female mentors and female referees and we have very much looked into it in recent years. We ran a very successful leadership programme that included mentoring and officiating at games and bringing young women through that. In many ways it is a confidence thing. Now, as inter-county players and club players retire, we are looking at ways to make it easier for them to get involved, give them the skill sets and education to get involved with teams, and have the confidence to coach teams across all levels. I think it goes right down to the underage levels and if it could start there.

When we looked at this a few years ago, one of the initiatives we started was Gaelic football for mothers and others. We found we had a lot of women who just brought the kids to the gate of a club and left because they did not grow up with ladies' football and knew nothing about the sport. It was not for them at the time so they felt they knew nothing about it. By starting that scheme, it gave them the skills. It is all recreational football. What they do now is they get involved with their local clubs and helping out with the teams there, and through that we get others too.

We also have programmes to bring inter-country players through to the next level where there is mentoring. We have noticed we have had good success at school level and club level with that in recent years. We also see now the odd county manager or county trainer coming through. It is happening and it will be a process but it is also to build that confidence and the education part that goes with it for these women.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: I thank the Deputy for his question. It is great to hear about his daughters' involvement through the ages, and I hope they are still getting involved over in Den

Haag. Mary Gavin will look after them well over there.

Similar to Helen, we recognise it is an issue. As mentioned in the Irish Sports Monitor study, there is a huge gap in volunteering and participation. The gap is much larger even in volunteering than in participation for women than it is for men. The type of programme we have created to try to bridge that gap is something called the MNA programme, so it is motivate, nurture and aspire, where we educate parents and young people to play together first, then we teach the parents some of the basic coaching skills, and then we train them up as full-on coaches. We assign them a mentor within a club so they can learn, develop and build confidence in the skill of coaching and, it is hoped, stay involved in the club.

That is funded by Sport Ireland. It has been a hugely successful and popular project with more than 150 clubs participating. It is through dedicated and focused initiatives like that that we can make the changes that need to happen. We receive a grant of €20,000 per year to run that programme. To scale it up and have people run and co-ordinate it, it would need a little bit more help and more people on the ground to deliver it. The overall issue is one we want to tackle and are committed to tackling in our new national development plan.

Ms Mary O'Connor: Under the Women in Sport policy, Sport Ireland has just released a Women in Sport coaching research report. Nearly 2,500 female coaches completed the survey. A total of 86% of them felt there was a lack of a female coaching network, so Sport Ireland is now going to work on that. It is very important to look not just at the foundation level. There is a glut of female coaches at young levels but there is a distinct lack of elite female coaches at the higher levels and from a high performance point of view for both international and national teams. I know Sport Ireland has just set up a women in coaching working group with plans for an elite female coaching network. That is very important. We need to have elite female coaches training our elite teams, both male and female. That is a good piece of work that is going on at the moment.

Ms Gemma Begley: I will comment on what we would do to support players to get back involved. First, it is an awful commitment to your inter-county playing career. It is probably natural to step back for a couple of years anyway. We have already outlined the commitment required in terms of work flexibility and the number of training sessions per week and things like that. There is, therefore, probably a natural lull for the female inter-county players.

In terms of some of the things we do, the Jim Madden GPA leadership programme is there to help develop those skills within the females and males together. It is a joint programme. We also have good partnerships with the likes of Setanta College in training players up with sport science disciplines, in particular, to get them involved, it is hoped, through back-room teams and into coaching pathways within the sport to bring them back in.

As I said, there would be a slight understanding of accessible ways to get female former players back involved supporting teams in a way that is doable for them when their life stages have nearly moved on at that point. It would be good to see more work and growth in that as well as mentoring opportunities, as I said, with a lesser time commitment. It will be very welcome.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Can I ask Ms O'Connor for a copy of that report? It sounds like an important piece of work.

Ms Mary O'Connor: Absolutely, that is no problem.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Andrews for joining us today. It has come to my contribution. I thank the witnesses very much and most sincerely for their presentations. I hope they feel they have got plenty of time to expand on the points made in their presentations. I have a couple of questions with which I would like to begin.

First, I was very struck by Ms O'Rourke's opening statement in which she stated that in 2007, she received 24% funding by Sport Ireland compared with just 9% in 2020 despite membership having risen by 32% in the same period. Will she expand upon that? Will she provide us with any sort of information on any engagement she has had with Sport Ireland on core funding and what response she has received? Will she expand upon that point to give us an insight on why that is? It seems a very surprising that their funding would drop.

Again, I thank Ms McNulty for acknowledging Cavan's win of the Nancy Murray Cup and, of course, their premiere final in 2020, and her acknowledgement of our star, Róisín O'Keeffe, from Lacken Camogie Club. I believe the county camogie and ladies' football teams are still waiting on championship dates while the men's have already been set. Will Ms McNulty comment on or give us any insight into that? Also, are the minor championship girls going to get their opportunity to play this year? I believe that will be the case for the boys.

I really want to make the observation that one thing I have not heard mentioned today is the local sports partnerships within our local authorities. I know, particularly in counties Cavan and Monaghan, they have been wonderful in terms of initiatives and encouraging and engaging the participation of women of all ages in sport, from the recreational to perhaps the more competitive. I acknowledge the work of both local authorities and the local sports partnership. I believe they are working with Sport Ireland - somebody might like to comment on this - in terms of promoting women in sports through what I believe is called the Her Sport initiative. Perhaps the witnesses know something about that on which they can expand.

I certainly agree with Ms O'Connor's comment that a life-work campaign rather than a work-life campaign makes far more sense and creates more balance in our lives. A campaign like that would have huge benefits, not just for women's participation but also for mental health. Coming out of Covid-19, it is something we should seriously consider. I congratulate Ms O'Connor on leading the charge in the 20x20 campaign. Can she give us any bullet points on that or have any main lessons been learned on that? She might like to make some comments on those.

We are coming near the end of the presentations today. In terms of Ms Begley's organisation, are there any final comments or observations she would like to make? That is my line of questioning. I will begin with Ms O'Rourke if that is okay.

Ms Helen O'Rourke: In my opening statement, I mentioned our membership figures in 2007. Between 2007 and 2020, there was a 32% increase. When we started off as an association in 1974, there were no grants available initially for how we were going to build the association and get the finance required to run the initiative and run the game.

It was, therefore, basically built on a compulsory membership structure, which we have every year, including a compulsory injury fund structure. That 32% increase we would have seen would have brought a big difference to our association financially over the years, whereas the Sport Ireland funding has remained static. In those years as well, the country went through a recession where funding for sport was stalled and it was quite limited. We would always be knocking on the door of Sport Ireland seeking to increase our core grant, which has been in-

creased gradually in recent years. It is still not to the level of the participation rates we have as an association, however.

With regard to the championships, we are currently working on dates. What we have been working on, however, is the previous Government announcement on the opening of the adult inter-county teams going back training and getting prepared for national leagues. It is, therefore, getting confirmation we are moving to the next step but there is work going on. We hope that within the next two weeks, we will have that structure and get the announcement we can proceed with championships, etc., over the coming months. That is being worked on behind the scenes with the counties and the opportunity available to play them this year, it being a unique year.

Last year when the pandemic hit, we had to make decisions on the minors. We took the decision that underage competitions had to be stalled. Some of them had gone as far as provincial level in the schools, but as regards national level, everything was done with safety first and it will be the same again this year. If there is an opportunity, and there is permission for our underage teams to go back to inter-county football, of course, we will be looking at running the minor league this coming year.

Ms Sinéad McNulty: Similar to Ms O'Rourke, we are waiting on Government guidance. We are all anxiously anticipating the announcements that are due on Thursday evening as regards any development in a return to sport for adults and the permission to run further competitions. So far, we have been given recommendations and guidance to plan for national leagues and put those structures and dates in place, which we have done. We have contingency plans in place depending on the recommendations that come from Government over the coming weeks.

The biggest challenge we have, and again it is one I ask the committee to consider how this might run into the future, is operating as a 32-county organisation. We operate in two different jurisdictions and, right now, the Government guidance and public health guidance in both jurisdictions is dramatically different, which causes difficulties for our members. In Ulster, for example, we have three counties that are actually not in Northern Ireland. When Northern Ireland makes changes to competition regulations or participation regulations, it will change and impact the wider province. That is definitely a challenge.

Our ambition is to run as many, if not all, competitions that would normally be scheduled in a year. That was our ambition at the start of the year. We sent out a draft fixtures schedule in December. Obviously, the fact that it is now 27 April and we have not managed to have any competitions yet, although we look forward to starting our Littlewoods national league on 15 May, will limit what we can do. We are guided by what age groups and cohorts can come back to training and in what way, what competitions we are permitted to allow, when inter-county travel will be permitted and where Gaelic games are seen on the performance pathway. At club level, we have recreational teams and at inter-county level, our teams are elite. Yet, according to the national sports policy, we are slightly between the lines there. Therefore, we rely on Government direction on that.

We have great relationships with several local sports partnerships and other organisations. We work with the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, on wheelchair camogie. Our liaison with local sports partnerships is particularly strong in Waterford at the moment. I made contact with all the sports partnerships before Christmas and I look forward to establishing new initiatives with them over the coming months and years. I thank the Chairman for that recommendation.

Chairman: I thank Ms McNulty.

I ask Ms O'Connor to answer my question on the 20x20 campaign.

Ms Mary O'Connor: I think it just proves that campaigns work. We need to do the research, formulate the campaign, utilise the information received, target the groups and use what is at our disposal, including the media. We established media partnerships that worked. When we were targeting, we used human sentiment. I think we were able to unify a large force behind us and that is why the campaign was a success. I would be very happy to follow up with the Chairman on the life-work balance idea I have.

Chairman: Does Ms Begley have any final comments?

Ms Gemma Begley: The Chairman asked about the organisation. It has been great since we integrated. Since December it has been really positive. The interaction with the male players has been brilliant. Obviously, equality is a core pillar of the new organisation. Collectively we are here today calling for equitable funding as one of the outputs. We feel it is a worthwhile investment in the female players. The games need to be the best product they can be to give the players the best chance to be the best players they can be. The growth of the games, the increase in participation and increased coverage represent a sound investment for the future of our games and a worthwhile recognition of the top exponents of our national games.

Chairman: We have reached the conclusion of our meeting. I thank all the contributors today. We have all got a real insight into the issues, challenges and successes of the various organisations and the work they are doing. I thank them most sincerely for being with us at this hour of the evening. I thank my colleagues for sticking with it. I also thank Deputy Andrews for joining us today.

At our next meeting, we will be joined by representatives of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the Data Protection Commission to discuss online safety and media regulations.

The joint committee adjourned at 7.24 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 5 May 2021.