



LEINSTER GAA HURLING CHAMPIONSHIP REVIEW WORKGROUP REPORT

FINAL RECOMMENDATION

FÁILTE ÓN GCATHAOIRLEACH

Is cúis áthais dúinn an tuarascáil seo ar Athbhreithniú Chraobhchomórtas Iománaíochta Laighean a chur i láthair. Is deis thábhachtach í seo machnamh a dhéanamh ar struchtúr ár gcomórtas, ar fhorbairt na hiománaíochta ar fud an chúige agus ar na deiseanna atá ann chun ár gcraobhchomórtais a neartú don toadhcháí.

It is always important as an organisation that we take the time to review our competitions and ask ourselves whether improvements can or should be made. Our games continue to evolve, and our structures need to be capable of evolving with them. This review was undertaken with that approach in mind, as we have a responsibility to ensure our Championship structures continue to serve the development of hurling across the province.

We are conscious that we have a responsibility to all of the counties competing in our Championships. Our role is not simply to protect the interests of those counties currently competing at the highest level, but to provide a structure where every county has a genuine opportunity to develop, progress and compete on its own merits. The review therefore considers how we can maintain the competitiveness and jeopardy that makes Championship hurling meaningful, while allowing counties to find the appropriate level for their performance from year to year. This principle is reflected throughout the Workgroup's recommendation.

I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to Nickey Brennan and all members of the Hurling Championship Review Workgroup for the time, expertise and commitment they have given to this process.



Nickey's standing within the GAA, his extensive experience across all levels of the Association and his involvement at the forefront of a number of important innovations made him an ideal person to chair this review. The process has involved consultation with counties and the GPA, engagement with Leinster's Coaching and Games Development personnel and National Games Administration, as well as detailed consideration of alternative structures and the wider fixture calendar.

Ultimately, this is not about change for the sake of change. It is about ensuring that our competitions remain meaningful and competitive, while creating a system where a county's position is determined by its performance rather than by a fixed designation. We want to provide clear opportunities for progression, while maintaining the standards, intensity and jeopardy that make the Leinster Championship important to players, counties and supporters. I hope this report does that and provides a useful tool around these discussions and to the continued development of hurling across Leinster.

Máirtín Ó Broin
Cathaoirleach Comhairle Laighean

INTRODUCTION



Leinster GAA established the Hurling Championship Review Workgroup to undertake a comprehensive review of the Leinster Senior Hurling Championship (currently catering to Counties outside Leinster) and its relationship with the Joe McDonagh Cup and the wider All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship.

The review was undertaken against the backdrop of an evolving hurling landscape and a desire to ensure that the provincial championship continues to provide meaningful, competitive and attractive championship hurling, while also providing appropriate opportunities and pathways for counties seeking to develop and compete at the highest level.

Central to the Workgroup's considerations was the need to balance two objectives which do not always naturally align: **maintaining the competitiveness and prestige of the Leinster Senior Hurling Championship, while providing a structure in which counties can progress and compete at a level appropriate to their performance in any given year.**

The Workgroup was also conscious from the outset that any proposed structure must be capable of operating within the wider national games programme. Accordingly, proposals were assessed not only on their competitive merits, but also on their ability to operate within the existing **Master Fixture Calendar footprint**, including the relationship with the Joe McDonagh Cup and subsequent All-Ireland series.

TERMS OF REFERENCE



The Workgroup was tasked with reviewing the current structure of the *Leinster Senior Hurling Championship* and examining its relationship with the *Joe McDonagh Cup* and *All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship*.

In undertaking the review, the Workgroup sought to:

- Maintain and enhance meaningful competition, competitive balance and championship jeopardy.
- Ensure championship structures support player and county development.
- Provide credible pathways through which counties can progress.
- Examine how competition structures can increase participation, attendance, visibility and engagement.
- Consider fixture scheduling and player welfare.
- Protect the prestige, intensity and unique character of championship hurling.
- Create an environment in which a broader range of counties can realistically aspire to compete successfully at the highest level.

The review therefore extended beyond consideration of the Leinster Senior Championship in isolation and considered its interaction with the wider hurling championship pathway.

THE COMMITTEE



Nickey Brennan (Chairperson)

Kilkenny

Michael Reynolds

Runaí Leinster GAA

William Maher

National Head of Hurling

Colm Nolan

Kildare

Diarmuid O'Keeffe

Wexford

Eamon Jackman

Laois

Brian Carroll

Offaly

John Haughney

Servicing Officer

EVIDENCE & HISTORICAL ANALYSIS



*The Workgroup was careful, however, not to interpret the evidence as demonstrating that counties should be prevented from progressing to the highest level. Rather, it highlighted the importance of finding a **competition structure capable of accommodating differences in performance** while maintaining a genuine pathway for counties demonstrating the capacity to progress.*

The Workgroup reviewed competition results across Senior, U20 and Minor level, alongside other available indicators of the relative competitive position of counties.

Particular consideration was given to the performance of counties occupying the lower positions within the existing six-team Leinster Senior Hurling Championship.

The current round-robin structure was introduced following Special Congress in 2017. Since 2018, excluding the Covid-affected 2020 and 2021 seasons, only two of the relegated teams have finished with more than zero championship points — **Westmeath in 2023 and Carlow in 2024.** The average scoring differential of the relegated team across that period has been **-68 points.**

The Workgroup also considered the performances of counties that have competed in the Joe McDonagh Cup during this period. Historical analysis indicates a significant and persistent competitive gap when these counties have encountered the established top-tier Leinster counties, in both Championship and National League competitions.

REVIEW PROCESS & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Consultation

Counties and the Gaelic Players Association were formally invited to make submissions to the Workgroup outlining:

- Their observations on the existing Leinster Championship structure.
- Issues or challenges they believed should be addressed.
- Alternative championship formats or structures they wished the Workgroup to consider.

The submissions received formed an important part of the review process. Rather than beginning with a predetermined competition model, the Workgroup considered a range of structures arising through the consultation process.

REVIEW PROCESS & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Internal Review

The Workgroup also engaged internally with Leinster GAA's Coaching and Games Development personnel, with particular consideration given to the longer-term development of hurling, player pathways and the differing stages of development across counties.

This was important in ensuring that the review was not based exclusively on current senior inter-county results, but also considered the wider environment required to sustain competitive senior hurling.

REVIEW PROCESS & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



National Games Admin

Engagement also took place with the National Games Administration Department in Croke Park.

This engagement provided an important national perspective, particularly in relation to:

- Competition integrity and competitive balance.
- The appropriate number of championship games.
- Player welfare and recovery periods.
- Promotion and relegation.
- The relationship between Leinster and the Joe McDonagh Cup.
- The relationship with the Munster Championship and All-Ireland series.
- The practical operation of proposals within the Master Fixture Calendar.

A particularly important principle arising from this engagement was that the Leinster Championship cannot be considered in isolation. Changes to one tier have consequences for other competitions and for the scheduling of the wider All-Ireland series.

DEVELOPMENT VERSUS COMPETITION INTEGRITY



One of the central issues considered throughout the review was the balance between development opportunity and competition integrity.

The six-team Leinster Championship has provided counties emerging from the Joe McDonagh Cup with regular exposure to established Liam McCarthy-level opposition. That opportunity has an important developmental value.

However, the historical results also demonstrate that the transition between the levels can produce significant competitive disparities.

The Workgroup therefore considered whether the championship structure could better achieve both objectives:

“Provide counties with a genuine pathway to the highest level, while increasing the likelihood that teams are competing against opposition of a comparable standard at each stage of the championship.”

The intention is not to create fixed classifications of counties. Instead, the preferred structure should allow performance to determine a county's competitive level from year to year, with clear routes both upwards and downwards.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE RECOMMENDED STRUCTURE

A number of potential championship models were considered and workshopped by the Workgroup.

Each presented advantages and disadvantages. These were considered against the objectives established through the Terms of Reference rather than assessing individual formats in isolation.

The principal criteria included:

- Competitive balance.
- Meaningful games and championship jeopardy.
- Opportunity for progression.
- Appropriate number of games.
- Player welfare.
- Relationship between Leinster and Joe McDonagh competitions.
- Simplicity and public understanding.
- Fixture-calendar compatibility.
- Maintaining the prestige of the Leinster Senior Hurling Championship.
- Long-term development of hurling.

Through this process, the Workgroup sought to take the strongest elements of the various approaches considered and develop a structure capable of balancing these competing requirements.



RECOMMENDED STRUCTURE



The Workgroup recommends the introduction of an integrated competition structure involving eight teams across two Leinster Championship groups, alongside a four-team Joe McDonagh group.

- The proposed format creates two groups of four within the Leinster Championship.
- The top two teams in Group A progress directly to the Leinster Semi-Finals.
- Bottom two teams in Group A and top two in Group B contest Leinster Quarter-Finals.

Importantly, the structure provides movement between the competition levels based on performance. The four Leinster Semi-Finalists form Group A in the subsequent season; the losing Quarter-Finalists and Joe McDonagh finalists form Group B; and the remaining teams, together with the Christy Ring champions, form the Joe McDonagh group.

Should New York win the Christy Ring Cup they would enter the Joe McDonagh at a Quarter Final stage, playing the bottom of Group B, with winner advancing to Joe McDonagh Semi Final.

RECOMMENDED STRUCTURE



GROUP A

Team 1
Team 2
Team 3
Team 4

GROUP B

Team 5
Team 6
Team 7
Team 8

JOE MCDONAGH GROUP

Team (1)
Team (2)
Team (3)
Team (4)

Quarter Finals:

Team 3 v Team 6

Team 4 v Team 5

Semi Finals:

Team 1 v Quarter Final Winner

Team 2 v Quarter Final Winner

Leinster Final:

Semi Final Winner v

Semi Final Winner

All Ireland Qualifier:

Semi Final Loser v

Semi Final Loser

Joe McDonagh Quarter Final:

Team 8 v New York

**Only takes place if New York win Christy Ring*

Joe McDonagh Semi Finals:

Team 8/New York v Team (1)

Team 7 v Team (2)

Joe McDonagh Relegation Final:

Team (3) v Team (4)

Joe McDonagh Final

Semi Final Winner v

Semi Final Winner

Groupings for the following year are decided thus;

- Semi Finalists = Group A
- Losing Quarter Finalists + Joe McDonagh Finalists = Group B
- Remaining Teams + Christy Ring Champions = Joe McDonagh Group C

RATIONALE FOR THE RECOMMENDATION



COMPETITIVE BALANCE

Increasing the number of games between counties operating at a broadly comparable level.

PROGRESSION BASED ON PERFORMANCE

No county is permanently categorised as either a "*developing*" or "*top-tier*" county. Results determine where counties compete.

CHAMPIONSHIP JEOPARDY

Finishing position each year has consequences not simply for the current season but for a county's position within the following year's structure.

A MEANINGFUL PATHWAY

Strong performance at Joe McDonagh level provides access to the Leinster Championship, while performance within Leinster determines progression towards its latter stages.

PRACTICAL DELIVERABILITY

The structure operates within the proposed 2027 national fixture footprint rather than requiring additional championship weekends.

CONCLUSION



The Workgroup's recommendation represents the outcome of a process involving county consultation, internal Leinster GAA review, engagement with National Games Administration, historical competition analysis, consideration of alternative formats and detailed fixture modelling. No championship structure can entirely eliminate differences in playing strength between counties. The objective of the review has therefore been to develop a structure which can respond to those differences through competition itself.

The proposed structure seeks to create more competitive and meaningful championship games while retaining a clear pathway through which counties can progress. Crucially, movement between levels is determined by performance rather than fixed designation, allowing counties to find their appropriate competitive level in a given season while maintaining the opportunity to advance.

Within the recommended structure, there is potential for counties to have one home, one away and one neutral fixture during the Round Robin Series. There is also potential for a break week within the group stage, either between Round 2 and Round 3 or prior to the Quarter-Finals. These scheduling details can be considered and determined by the Leinster CCC at a later stage.

The Workgroup also recognises that competition structures alone cannot address the longer-term challenges facing developing counties. The Workgroup therefore recommends that a further review of the structures and supports in place within developing hurling counties be undertaken, with a particular focus on identifying measures that can help counties sustain and build their playing base and compete successfully at a higher level over time. It is envisaged that this work could be progressed through the Hurling Development Committee (HDC) and would complement the proposed changes to the championship structure.

The Workgroup believes that this approach provides a basis for strengthening the Leinster Senior Hurling Championship, maintaining the importance of the Joe McDonagh Cup and supporting the longer-term development of competitive inter-county hurling across Leinster.

