

A Chairde,

The past year has been one of historic development for the Association in Ulster. It has been aided by the ongoing success of our county teams but primarily by the tremendous effort of the complete GAA family. Pride of place goes once again to Tyrone, who won the All Ireland Senior Football Championship after a marathon campaign of ten games. Along the way they had to withstand serious competition from Armagh who defeated them in the Ulster Final, and who crossed their path again in the All Ireland Semi-Final, in a never to be forgotten game of power, skill and outstanding team play. The All Ireland Final itself was an outstanding affair, where Tyrone demonstrated their undoubted ability in taking Sam Maguire back to the hills of Tyrone for 2005. Armagh won the Ulster Championship also after a marathon effort of six games that saw them overcome the serious challenges of Fermanagh, Donegal, Derry and Tyrone to achieve their success. Armagh along with winning the Ulster Senior Championship also annexed the National League title in April when they won their first senior league title. Armagh proved that they had the skill and determination to succeed. On a magnificent day for Ulster the victory by Monaghan, in taking the Division Two title lifted the momentum of our teams to a new high. Down succeeded in winning the All Ireland title at Minor level, there is little doubt, that had Down Minors and U21's achieved the same level of success, 2005 could well have been one of the most memorable years in the History of the Association in this province. With that said there were many other signs that football continues to thrive at all levels and with the Tyrone Vocational team winning the All Ireland Vocational Title and Our Lady's Castleblayney won the All Ireland B Colleges Championship. St. Ciaran's Ballygawley won the Under 18 All Ireland Vocational Schools title and Letterkenny Institute of Technology won the Trench Cup.

The vibrancy of the Association is at an all time high and we can take great kudos from our current position within the Irish Diaspora. We in Ulster too can extol the successes that are evident every day and these are not simply related to the successes of our teams. We are living in exciting times and the drama and excitement of the past year on and off the playing fields, hopefully, will inspire all of us to advance the cause of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael to newer and higher planes.

Finance

The finances of the Comhairle Uladh were again helped by a very long and well attended Ulster Championship. The increased number of games, allied to the increased cost of running our games programme are also evident but it needs to be stated that we have not increased our admission charges for several years and that the increased income is as a direct result of the public interest and the increased numbers attending at the games.

The income has been significantly improved based on previous years but the expenditure has also increased. The amount of monies disbursed under the Club Development Programme and the Games Development Projects are also substantially increased. Comhairle Uladh is also at an advanced stage of the outworking of the Modernisation Programme and this will require a very significant investment by the Association in the

many facets of this major initiative. The successful conclusion of over seven years effort in procuring funding from public bodies has afforded us the potential of outworking our complete Strategic Plan within the proposed timescales.

During the year major progress was made in resolving funding issues with the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure and also with the Sports Council. Part of this process required the assessment of Comhairle Uladh as to their fitness for purpose. This assessment was carried out by AHL from London and the report gave us conditional accreditation. This was followed by a full economic appraisal carried out by Peter Quinn Consultancy and they were of significant assistance in progressing our bid for resources. We are indebted to Peter Quinn and Barry McGurgan for their work, guidance and assistance in bringing the complete project to fruition.

Comhairle Uladh is indebted to the extended team of workers who give generously of their time to ensure the smooth running of the complete programme. We are also well served by our Cisteoir, Aoghan O Fearghail who has given a tremendous amount of his time in pursuance of the work of Comhairle Uladh and for which we are deeply indebted. We welcome also into this sphere Catherine Donaghy, assisted by Stephen Donnelly who have come amongst us, and who will provide business and human resources management for the Council in the years ahead.

The Public Liability and Property Insurances of the Association continue to provide excellent cover to all our units. It is vital, in these litigious times, that we are protected when claims are made. We all need to have good practice in place to avoid unnecessary claims and potential escalation of costs.

The increased premiums for Public Liability Insurance should mark a clear pathway between claims and costs. The increases would have been higher but for the subvention made by Central Council for which we are grateful but it must be very obvious that further increases are likely unless there is a significant improvement in the amount of claims that pursued against this Association.

The death of Ciaran O Neill, shortly after his retirement as head of the Association's Insurance Section, has saddened us all as he was ever reliable and an ardent supporter of the current Insurance arrangements. He worked diligently for Cumann Lúthchleas Gael and we shall miss his advice, humour and love for our Association, as we carry on he has left us a great legacy in our current Insurance and Players Injury Schemes. May the green sod of Ciaran's beloved Wexford, rest on the mortal remains of a friend and a gentleman.

The Players Injury Scheme has continued to deliver substantial benefits to all our players. Its continued development is good for our Clubs, County Committees and the Association as a whole and it is incumbent on us all to ensure that the standards of support and administration are maintained and where possible, improved. To this end I believe that there is need for provincial involvement in the outworking of this Scheme so that administration, problems and disbursements are monitored to ensure the highest standards are always applicable to this vital area of our Associations affairs. We welcome

Michael Donlon to the head of our Insurance Section and wish him well in his work for Cumann Lúthchleas Gael.

When dealing with the finances this year, it would be remiss of me not to record our sadness at the death during the past year of Gerry Stewart who had been our accountant for many years. He had attended conventions for many years and had been a reliable and trustworthy person who gave advice on the various issues that arose and been closely involved in the preparation of our Accounts for many years. His sudden passing was a shock to us all and we sympathise with his wife, family, colleagues and friends on their sad bereavement.

Games Activity

The level of competition continues to increase and the demands placed on our players are likewise increasing the pressure on them and on the administration of fixtures. The past year has witnessed the utilisation of more dates and particularly Sunday's than ever for Inter County Competitions and this has placed major constraints on County Committees as to their scheduling of games. This has been very obvious in the Hurling programme and there are significant dangers that our club games will either be played in a disjointed fashion or else they may be reduced to fit into the overall schedule. Neither is acceptable. There is an urgent need to reduce the number of dates in the March to November period that are unavailable for Club competition and there is a clear onus to reduce the demands of the Inter County programme.

The introduction of the new arrangements for Hurling, have had a reasonable trial in their first year and there has been favourable comment as to the provision of winnable competitions. However, as stated a year ago there is little to enthuse our hurling supporters, as there appears to be a reduction in the championship fervour that is associated with the game as currently played. I am of the opinion that the move to cup competitions is unlikely to achieve any significant closing of standards and that those playing for the Senior All Ireland title will produce greater standards and heroes. At the same time the gulf in standards shall continue to widen and ultimately hurling will be harder to promote outside of the senior Counties.

Following the evaluation of the new Club Intermediate and Junior Club Championships, it was decided that the football competitions would remain unchanged. However to afford our hurling champions there was a realignment that saw the champions of four Counties play in the Junior Hurling Championship and the champions of two other Counties play Intermediate with Antrim, Derry and down playing Senior. This was a limited success as the competitions were well contested on most occasions but the variation of competition standards still has need of further examination as some teams struggled in our championships but except for the senior, our standards were inferior to the existing national standards at intermediate and junior.

The prospects for a hurling league look brighter at this time and we are optimistic that progress is imminent and we look forward to it engendering the level of competition that

hurling needs to encourage players to improve both their abilities and enjoyment and that it assists in the overall development of hurling in Ulster.

The Football Championship

The Ulster Championship was an amazing affair, from beginning to end. We had outstanding games at every stage, and the game between Fermanagh and Armagh at Clones set everything off on a tremendous level of expectancy given the performances of both Counties in 2004. However, on this occasion it was evident that Armagh meant business and provided their supporters with the performance of a team determined to succeed. This was then followed by the Down versus Tyrone game played at Omagh which again was eagerly anticipated. Tyrone made no mistake and won comfortably on a day that saw the ultimate All Ireland Senior and Minor Champions compete against other on the second day of our championship in May. The meeting of Cavan and Antrim at Breffni Park witnessed another exciting encounter where at one stage Cavan seemed to be heading towards a victory but Antrim had other ideas and came back strongly to take the lead but the result was draw and game moved to a replay at Casement Park. However the performance by Cavan at Casement Park indicated that they had still the ingredients of a Championship team which left Antrim to wonder how after such an amazing performance the previous week, they were unable to repeat it before one of the smallest championship attendances for many years.

The meeting between Monaghan, who had won the Division Two National league, with Derry indicated another tremendous contest. Derry, however, performed much better on this occasion took the initiative from early on and carried through for an outstanding victory. The meeting of Donegal and Armagh was played in Clones and this game was another truly magnificent contest between these sides. It was a competitive affair with Donegal looking for long periods to be in the ascendancy but Armagh, true to form rallied and a draw ultimately was the outcome. In the replay, again in Clones, we had another tense encounter, before Armagh advanced to the Ulster Semi-Final.

Tyrone, having overcome Down, now met Cavan, and most pundits were of the opinion that it would be a relatively easy game for Tyrone but this most certainly was not the case, as Cavan played with an outstanding commitment and passion throughout and came very close to achieving a memorable victory. Tyrone managed to survive, and won the replay with a lot to spare. In the second semi final between Derry and Armagh, played in Casement Park, in front of a large crowd, Derry again put up a great performance for three quarters of the game, but Armagh's experience and ability to take key scores ultimately saw them advance to an Ulster Final.

The Ulster Final between Armagh and Tyrone was played in front of over 60,000 people in Croke Park and we were all expecting it to be one of those occasions where the result could go either way, and that is exactly what we got. Right to the end the game was in doubt, and everyone left relatively comfortable that a draw was the right result on a day when over zealous clamping caused annoyance and raised the question as to how welcome we were in the Capital. The replay was another major encounter between these

great teams, and at one stage, the result of this seemed to be heading Tyrone's way but Armagh ultimately gained the initiative and took control of the game and took the victory also. The Anglo Celt Cup was back in the hands of Armagh who had retained the title and played five games along the way. Most people leaving Croke Park that day of the replay felt that both teams would have more than a passing interest in the All Ireland Championship series that they were about to enter. The follow up to this final was a vicious attack on the integrity of both teams and the level of vilification and denigration was offensive to the Association in this province, to the counties and to the players themselves. The players responded in a proper fashion and made their statements on the playing fields.

In the Senior Hurling Championship Down had to start off with a game against London at Casement Park, and this time, London, for the first time in many years, made a major contribution to an excellent game. Down did advance, but only after a very rigorous test by the men from London. Derry then met Down and after another exciting encounter, the match ended in a draw. In the replay it was the Down men who advanced to an Ulster Final. Antrim had played New York previously at Gaelic Park, New York and this game had to go right down to the wire, before Antrim advanced to win through an outstanding affair, where New York probably could have caused the biggest upset in many years, but for a probable loss of discipline by some of their players. This set up another Down v Antrim Final, and despite the best efforts of the Ards men, representing Down, it was Antrim who lifted the Senior Hurling Championship. Antrim also won the Minor and U21 Championships, but the decision of Derry not to field in the last round of the U21's somewhat diminished the winning of this title. The Club championships now with senior, intermediate and junior were well competed for within the province, but our championship standards in hurling seem to fall short of what is required at National level

All Ireland Championship

The All Ireland Qualifier began in mid June and saw an all Ulster clash at Newry between Down and Fermanagh and after a tense contest Down advanced to the next round. There they were joined by Monaghan, who had a comfortable win over London in Clones. Donegal travelled to Aughrim where they had to battle to overcome Wicklow. Antrim were the first team exiting the 2005 championship when they were defeated by a strong Meath team. The draw for Round Two was not kind to Ulster as we had to contest between our teams. The meeting of Down and Derry at Newry was a tremendous contest that saw Derry advance despite a sterling Down Rally. The game between Cavan and Donegal was another close encounter and it was Cavan who won through by the minimum of margins. Monaghan played Wexford at Clones and played with flair and skill to claim a memorable victory.

In Round three the trip for Derry was a long one and they were forced to travel to Castlebar to play Limerick but the distance did not impair their performance and they won comfortably to advance to Round four. Monaghan played Louth at Breffni Park and despite making the most of the running Monaghan won through but had to resist a strong rally from Louth to do so. The meeting of great rivals and neighbours Meath and Cavan

brought a large crowd to Clones. Cavan established control early in the game and won a great victory to allow all three Ulster teams to advance to Round four.

The draw again was less than favourable to Ulster and in an all Ulster clash it was our beaten finalists Tyrone who faced Monaghan in Croke Park and despite a great start by Monaghan it was Tyrone who advanced. The meeting of Laois and Derry served up a very competitive game and despite their best efforts it was the Leinster men who won on this occasion. The meeting of Cavan and Mayo at Hyde Park was a very close contest and both teams had their chances but it was the men from the west who took the most of theirs and won the game.

The competition now was at quarter final stage and the draw paired Tyrone with Dublin and this produced an epic contest that had a nail biting draw and a wonderful replay that saw Tyrone win through with courage, skill and team work. Armagh met Laois in their quarter final and again demonstrated the strength and pace and advanced for another meeting with Tyrone.

The meeting of Armagh and Tyrone on the first Sunday of September was the game of the year as both teams gave it everything they had and the intensity lasted until the very last seconds when Peter Canavan landed the winning point to take Tyrone to the All Ireland Final and left Armagh to rue missed opportunities late in the game. It was a marvellous occasion and one that will be long remembered by those privileged to be there.

Kerry awaited Tyrone in the All Ireland Final and there was much speculation as to the outcome. The meeting of the last two All Ireland Champions left little doubt that reputations were at stake in this match and in an enthralling encounter we witnessed a Tyrone team prove their pedigree. While the contest was there throughout, the sun was shining for Tyrone from the magnificent goal scored by Peter Canavan that kept their County and Ulster in the ascendancy as Tyrone became worthy champions and have clearly stated by their victory that all their work and effort has proven their case against the best in the land in this successful campaign of 2005.

Minor Football Championship

The 2005 Ulster Minor Football Championship was one of the best ever with very high quality of games throughout. It could be stated that five of the best teams at this level were in the province and this was borne out by the games themselves. Armagh after their victories over Fermanagh and Donegal advanced to a semi final meeting with Derry who had won their previous encounter with Monaghan. This game was played in Casement Park as the curtain raiser to senior semi final. It was a remarkable match as it appeared at one stage that Derry had the upper hand but an amazing rally by Armagh saw them advance to the Ulster final. There they met Down, who had a dramatic last minute victory over Tyrone and succeeded after a replay and extra time in both games by winning through by the minimum of margins against an excellent Cavan team who had earlier defeated Antrim.

The final played in Croke Park was another very close encounter and again the result was in doubt until the final whistle where Armagh won a thrilling game against their neighbours Down. Both teams went forward to the quarter finals with optimism but on a day that saw all four provincial champions defeated Armagh lost to Mayo and Down overcame Galway.

The playing of the All Ireland Semi Final involving any Ulster team outside of Croke Park was a very irksome decision and the justification for this is unacceptable. Our minor teams appear to be treated differently because we chose to play our provincial final in Croke Park. Down met Offaly at Navan and won comfortably while Mayo qualified out of their semi final clash with Kerry at Croke Park. In the final in Croke Park, Down won the Markam Cup and the All Ireland title demonstrating great teamwork and skill and were deserving of their success.

Under 21 Football Championship

This Championship was played over a compact period and this enhanced the competition significantly. It began with the meeting of Tyrone and Antrim that saw Tyrone advance to a quarter final meeting with Down. Down won the game deservedly on the day and travelled to Enniskillen to meet Fermanagh. The Ernesiders had a well merited win over a fancied Derry side. In the semi final Down won through in a very exciting game. Cavan emerged from the other half of the draw with wins over Monaghan in the Quarter Final and Armagh in the Semi Final after the Orchard County had won a close contest with Donegal. The final itself was an enthralling affair that went to a draw and extra time. At the end Down won the title in a magnificent game where both teams contributed to a memorable day.

In the All Ireland Semi Final Down met Dublin at Navan and at the end of another great game it was the Mournemen that advanced. In the final Down and Galway met in Mullingar and after an epic contest that saw ten goals scored it was the men from Connaught who deservedly won the championship.

Club Football Championship The Club football championships continue to provide our Clubs at all grades with high profile competitions

that are growing in stature every year. The Club Senior Football Championship started in Omagh with the meeting of Carrickmore and Teemore and it was Carrickmore who advanced to a further meeting with St Galls. This time it was the Antrim team that won and they moved to a semi final clash with Mayobridge who had defeated a good Glenties side in a very close game.

The other side of the draw saw old adversaries Crossmaglen and Bellaghy meet in the quarter final and before a large crowd it was the Derry men that won on this occasion. The other quarter final was postponed due to the unplayable nature of the pitch and was refixed for Enniskillen. In this game it was Cavan Gaels that advanced despite the best efforts of Latton.

Both semi finals were well contested before St Gall's won their encounter with Mayobridge and Bellaghy defeated Cavan Gaels. The Final was played in Omagh and it was a game of drama and excitement before the Antrim champions brought the McFerran Cup back to the County for the first time in twenty two years.

The Intermediate Championship was also very well contested that saw Glenswilly emerge from Downpatrick, Aghaloo, Claudy and Gort na Mona. Inniskeen reached the final from victories over Cuchulainn's, and Ederney who had defeated Granemore after a replay. In the final it was heartbreak for Glenswilly, who appeared to be set for a win but a late goal at the end saw Inniskeen win the Intermediate Championship for 2005.

In the Junior Championship Monaghan Harps defeated Redhills to advance to meet Killyman, who themselves had won their contest with Steelstown after they had defeated Dundrum. Clonmore reached an Ulster final after victories over Convoy and Coa who had defeated St. Malachy's Belfast. The final was a great occasion for all involved and Monaghan Harps were worthy champions of the Junior football title in Ulster.

Senior Hurling Championship

In the Senior Hurling Championship Down had to start off with a game against London at Casement Park, and this time, London, for the first time in many years, made a major contribution to an excellent game. Down did advance, but only after a very rigorous test by the men from London. Derry then met Down and after another exciting encounter, the match ended in a draw. In the replay it was the Down men who advanced to an Ulster Final. Antrim had played New York previously at Gaelic Park and won comfortably but this time it was New York that took this game right down to the wire, before Antrim advanced to win through a very competitive affair, where New York came close to causing the biggest upset in many years, but for a loss of discipline by some of their players this may have occurred. The meeting of Down and Antrim in the Final was another competitive affair and despite the best efforts of the Ards men, representing Down, it was Antrim who lifted the Senior Hurling Championship once again.

All Ireland Hurling Championship

Antrim after their success in Ulster found themselves in new All Ireland Hurling Qualifier. This saw them face the challenge of Limerick, Galway and Laois as they attempted to reach the All Ireland Quarter Finals. They failed in a competition that seemed to lack the true championship intensity and at the end entered a relegation battle with Dublin, Laois and Offaly. Despite their best endeavours Antrim found themselves relegated from the All Ireland Qualifiers.

The Christy Ring Cup followed on immediately to the Ulster championship and Derry and Down found themselves together in Section 2A along with Westmeath and Roscommon. Down performed well and qualified for the semi final but Derry had to face relegation to the Rackard Cup after an indifferent campaign.

Down on the other hand had a semi final victory over Carlow that gave them the opportunity of playing the final in Croke Park. The game was exciting and there was little between the teams but in a premature ending it was Westmeath that won the inaugural Christy Ring and Down were left to rue their missed opportunity.

The remaining counties participated in the Nicky Rackard Cup and like the other qualifier and cup games there did not appear to be the competitiveness normally associated with hurling championships. At the end it was Donegal, Tyrone, Louth and London that competed at the semi final stage and it was London who won their first Rackard Cup, but given their performance in the Ulster Senior Championship there was little surprise in that.

Under 21 Hurling Championship

Antrim won the U21 Championship at the start of a two year cycle. The arrangements were designed to ensure that the winning team from the first game would play in the final game of the competition. Having defeated Down, Antrim were scheduled to meet Derry but the game was not played. The consequence was that what should have been a fitting finale for Championship did not happen and Antrim gained the Championship in the most unacceptable of circumstances that had nothing to do with them. They progressed to the All Ireland semi final against Kilkenny and again the difference in competitive standards did little to advance the game of Hurling in Ulster.

Minor Hurling Championship

The Minor Hurling championship began with the semi final meeting between Derry and Down at Casement Park. Derry proved much too strong and won comfortably. In the final against a well coached Antrim team, Derry comprehensively beaten but as the championship progressed their performance became quite respectable.

In the All Ireland Quarter Final it was expected that the meeting of Antrim and Limerick would go its predictable way but the Glensmen had other ideas. Demonstrating skill and passion they took control and led for most of the game before a cruel goal at the very end saw Limerick win by the minimum of margins. This performance was a substantial boost for the game in this province as it demonstrated that with proper preparation and effort our best players are a match for anyone. What we need is much more of the effort that Antrim deployed in 2005 with their Minor team.

All Ireland Club Championships

The Club Hurling Championships saw all our Intermediate and Junior teams face into a quarter final contest with the champions of Britain. In Senior hurling O'Donnovan Rossa faced James Stephens at Parnell Park and although Rossa gave a good account of themselves it was of little comfort that their opponents won the All Ireland title. In the Intermediate Hurling, Carey Faugh's travelled to London to face the Senior Champions

of Britain and after a great contest it was Robert Emmetts of London that advanced to the semi final.

In the Junior Hurling Quarter Final Shane O Neill's, Glenarm travelled to Britain to meet Mitchels of London and it was a great day for Glenarm as they had a magnificent victory. In the All Ireland semi final against Galmoy of Kilkenny the variation in standards came into play but despite losing this was an amazing achievement for the Antrim Club.

The senior football semi final was played at Parnell Park where Crossmaglen met Portlaoise. In a very well contested game the missed chances by the Armagh team cost them very dear as they were defeated by the minimum of margins.

Pomeroy Oliver Plunkett's played their first game in the All Ireland Championship series in Manchester where they defeated St. Peters very comfortably. Their next game was against Wolfe Tones of Meath and after a good contest they found themselves in the All Ireland Final where their opponents were Carberry Rangers from Cork. In this game played in Portlaoise Pomeroy tried their best but in the end had to concede victory to the Munster men.

The progress of Stewartstown was similar in that they played Heston Gaels in the Quarter final that they overcame very comfortably before they had a much tougher encounter against Ratoath of Meath. They reached the All Ireland in Portlaoise. Their opponents were Finuge from Kerry. Stewartstown gave everything in the game but the overall difference in standards was obvious and the Kerry Junior champions added the All Ireland Championship to their list of successes in 2005.

Referees

The position of our Association in respect of refereeing needs a re – examination as the level of requirements continues to increase on our referees while there appears to be little happening to indicate that the levels of support are there. In Ulster there has been introductory work on the areas that need attention but we can not do all that is needed without it becoming part of a National plan.

The work carried out, to date, by our Referees Committee assisted by Eugene Young and others demonstrates the likely direction and measures required, but it is vital that the referee is comfortable in the knowledge that he is valued and supported. The issue of appointments also needs to be examined as there is little point in getting referees to the necessary standards if they do not get the appointments to match. This is particularly so in hurling were Ulster referees have received little encouragement in recent years.

Our Referees Committee continues under the Chairmanship of Pól O Dubhrosa, ably assisted Liam MacNiallais, Runai and the members of the Committee. They have been innovative and supportive in their work with our referees. We all need to see the referee as the embodiment of our respect for our games, Rules and Association and not to allow the development of a blame culture were we must attribute failure to someone else and on

too many occasions that appears to be the referee. We are indebted to our referees for their time, commitment and involvement in the delivery of our games programme.

We also record our thanks and appreciation to the Referees Committee for its excellent work in delivering a progressive approach to the whole concept of refereeing. We also acknowledge the continued work of the County Referees Administrators, Assessors and Tutors to whom we are also indebted and who continue to do outstanding work for our Association.

Inter Provincial Championship

The Interprovincial Championships have had their epitaphs written for some time but going by the quality of games played the 2005 competition they may be somewhat premature. The meeting of our Hurling team with Munster at Casement Park witnessed a gigantic effort from our players and apart from a period midway through the second half we more than held our own against a very good Munster team. We did not win but the performance helped restore some pride in the cause of Ulster hurling.

In the football semi final we again played Munster, this time at Crossmaglen and in an excellent game Ulster finished strongly to win the match final which was arbitrarily fixed under the floodlights in Parnell Park in Dublin. The match was a tremendous advertisement for the Inter Provincial Championship with both teams giving of their best. It went to extra time and at the end there was very little between the teams but the victory went to Leinster who are deserving champions for the year.

Hurling Development

There have been several matters that have directly impacted on hurling development. There is a significant element in respect of hurling in the Modernisation Programme, the outworking of the Hurling Development Committee projects and our own continued work at developing the game in line with the Hurling Strategy.

The work with development squads has continued and gauged by the impact of a coordinated approach as demonstrated by the Antrim minor squad this has potential in improving the overall standard of hurling. To really succeed we must expand the game to a wider involvement and our Hurling Committee are working diligently to encourage new Clubs and Schools to participate. The set up costs are high and we are attempting to assist in the provision of essential equipment were Coiste Iomana are convinced that a viable club could be created. We are also eager to assist our Schools & Colleges in the promotion of hurling and there are support measures being drawn up for this vital sphere of games development.

The need for an Ulster League has been previously advocated and some pilot competitions have been organised successfully. The potential for this taking a significant step forward is now high and it is imperative that we all work to enable games activity to take place in a managed and planned fashion. All hurlers should be able to look forward

to a level of competition and a frequency of games that provides adequate involvement in our National Game.

The new competitions at County level have provided a substantially increased programme for our County players. At this stage it is too early to evaluate if the game is advanced by the new arrangements but there certainly has been a decline in the dates available for Club competitions. The reduction in the National League programme should assist to some degree but dates in March and April are of little value if there is little scope for games in May, June, July and August. All our players need to be facilitated and we need to ensure that quality is at least as important as quantity.

The Minor and Adult Leagues organised in 2005 were satisfactory but there is a need to properly establish the adult leagues on a clear schedule of dates. The minor situation needs a detailed examination as the sufficiency of games is problematic in some Counties and there is little doubt that good work up to fourteen can be annulled by the lack of games for players in the fifteen to eighteen age groups.

The funding for hurling within the ambit of the Hurling Development Committee and provided by the Irish Government is a welcome initiative and if properly and strategically deployed should ensure the development of hurling. This should also make participation more enjoyable for everyone involved, creating a positive profile for the greatest field game of all.

Coiste Iomana organised a very successful Feile in Ballycastle. This has become an annual event and the contribution of the Clubs across the nine Counties has been very good. There is an involvement and enjoyment that allows our hurling enthusiasts to come together in the uniquely hurling environment that has and hopefully will remain a vital part of Feile Uladh. Our thanks are due to the McQuillan's Club and to the Feile Committee for all of their involvement in this most exciting and important competition. The overall involvement of Coiste Iomana is also a vital ingredient in the planning and procuring the necessary support for such an event.

The Minor Hurling C and Under 16 B and C championships are organised by Coiste Iomana and they provide an opportunity for this vitally important group of players to participate in Inter County Competitions. These were efficiently organised and Armagh won the Minor C Championship in Ulster and All Ireland level. Donegal performed in winning the Ulster Under 16 C title. In the Under 16 B, Antrim won the Ulster section.

The Minor Hurling League has again provided activity for our County Minor squads and it has been decided that these competitions will come under control Coiste Riarachain na gCluichí so that they are given similar status to that of the Minor Football League. Antrim and Donegal won Division 1 and Division 2 respectively.

Coiste Iomana continues to provide a focus for hurling at all levels throughout Ulster. It has always had the development of the game at the centre of its activities. It is well served by the members of the Coiste and they in turn are representative of the hurling

Clubs in the nine Counties. During the past year we have appointed a new Hurling Development Officer in the person of Frankie Quinn who has contributed significantly to the hurling matters since taking up employment with the Ulster Council. Tomas O Dalaigh has been an effective voice for hurling at all levels of the GAA and he has been constructive and courageous in pursuing matters pertinent to hurling.

During the early part of 2005 it became apparent that due to his health condition that Seamus McGrattan could not continue in his role as Hurling Development Officer and we had to reluctantly agree that he would vacate the position. He has been an exemplary advocate for hurling all his life and we have benefited greatly from his total commitment to the cause of hurling. Throughout his twenty nine years direct involvement with Comhairle Uladh he has been an excellent administrator, mentor and servant of the Association and his knowledge of hurling people and hurling have been hugely beneficial to Coiste Iomana and this Council. We are deeply indebted to Seamus for all that he has done for us over the years. We are happy that he will continue to administer Coiste Iomana and shall retain his contact with Comhairle Uladh.

Education Sector

Education is defined as the imparting and acquiring of knowledge and begins a process of learning for everyone. We are indebted to the schools and teachers who impart our games and cultural heritage to those passing through the education process. The Association at one time stated that it was incumbent to educate each succeeding generation of the reasons why the GAA was founded and the circumstances that prevailed at the time. The vital work that the education sector delivers to society and their part in the work of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael is no less important.

In our games development programme we see the role of education as critical in its outworking and we need to assist and value the work that is carried out by the Schools and Colleges. Our Clubs are a focal point for our communities and we need to see that the schools are communities in their own right. They are not required to do anything for us as of right but there is an onus on all at whatever level to support the schools, the teachers, and the pupils, if we wish to integrate the work of our Association with that of the Schools. It is a big challenge but with vigour and support education can in partnership with our Clubs and County Committees assist in delivering the education curriculum with our games and cultural matters as an integral part.

The proposed merger of the second level Bodies is still unresolved. Our Vocational Schools Committee and our Colleges Council are very happy to remain as heretofore. Others have decided differently and the new arrangements appear to fall short of what Second Level bodies are requiring. They need to retain the operational independence so that they can accommodate two different Education systems in different jurisdictions while at the same time trying to deal with up to nine different Education Bodies. It is a small wonder that our Schools and Colleges are opposed to structures that do not reflect the operational field that they operate in. The matters need to be re-examined so that what

is required administratively does not interfere with the operational workings of two very efficient Bodies that have served Ulster and the Association very well indeed.

Cumann na mBunscoil are a body that oversees the work of our Primary Schools and as such perform a vital function in games promotion and development. The outworking of our Fun to Fame Programme has initially targeted the Primary Schools and we have enabled many teachers to utilise the various resources that we have provided. This is laudable work but it is not the responsibility of the schools to do the work of our Clubs. We need to ensure that we provide fundamentals and Go games at Club level and that we link with the school or schools within the Clubs area to ensure that the teachers are supported in respect of the excellent work that they do.

Handball

In the games programme, Handball can be easily overlooked but the performance of teams and individuals in Ulster are progressing rapidly. The achievement of Paul Brady in winning the World Championship gives some indication of the quality of players this province is producing. Indeed, given the spread and standards of Handball it has progressed to where it should be considered for the Olympic Games. However, the games are played at all levels from Internationals to Club and Schools and it can and should be offered to our members as a truly wonderful game.

This progress has not been achieved without effort and we are grateful to the Handball Council for their continued work in developing one of our National Games to the current level of success. Jim McGovern represents Handball on the Ulster Council and is very reliable advocate for Handball and we record our thanks to him for his work for Cumann Lúthchleas Gael.

Grounds

Development of facilities for the participation in our games continued at unprecedented level in 2005 and this is borne out by the grants allocated to the Clubs in support of their work. The indications are that this will continue for some considerable time to come, as Clubs come under greater pressure as the joint growth areas of the ladies and men's games require the facilities to allow coaching and games to be held. The work undertaken by the Clubs is referred to in recent reports as social capital but our clubs are to be congratulated in their vibrancy and the community spirit that exemplify the outstanding contribution made by them to enhancing community development throughout the Country.

The arrival of the Legislation for Safety at Sports Grounds has and will place an onerous task on our Association and on our County Committees. It is important that we have the required lead in time to allow for the familiarisation with aspects of this legislation and the impact for the organising of games and related matters. We responded to the original consultation and to the draft legislation and would thank the Department of Culture and Arts Bill Team for their consideration of the issues raised by us. We are indebted to

Michael Horgan and Peter Harte for their involvement in the process and their very considerable advice in relation to the responses in the Consultation and Drafting of the legislation.

The proposed Multi Sport Stadium is still on the agenda and is still only a proposal. The matter while directly impacting on Ulster also has impact on the Association. Much has been stated about the involvement of the Association in this project. From the first time it was mooted until now our position is that if a stadium is being built from public funds then our Association reserves the right to play our games in the proposed stadium.

It became apparent that the GAA as a whole needed to consider matters arising from the appraisals already carried out. Coiste Bainisti Naisunta to the decision that the Association would 'in principle' be involved should the stadium become reality. There are many outstanding issues to be resolved before any further decision can be made, but it needs to be stated that our Association have been involved and responded to each stage of the appraisal process to date and as a result of the decision taken Nationally last autumn, a sub committee has been appointed to examine any future proposals and to refer them to both Comhairle Uladh and ultimately to Ard Comhairle for decision.

Provincial Council

The past year has been an exceptional one for this province with all the successes on the playing field, one could be forgiven to think that this was where our focus lay, but given that we have had a long struggle to achieve recognition for the work that we as an organisation do and the necessary funding that is required to modernise and to put our games on a sound basis for the future.

This came to fruition in the past year. It has seen a tremendous commitment by a lot of people to ensure that everything that we would wish to put in place in this part of the programme has been addressed. At the time of going to print all of the interviewing for posts has been concluded and almost all of the personnel have been appointed under this modernisation programme. This part has now been concluded, and I am satisfied that this will give a stable and long term support to the voluntary people who have given so much time and energy for this Association over many years. We cannot continue to have this organisation place further and more complex responsibility on the individual, without putting in place the necessary administrative support.

The advent of our Strategic Plan from 2006 to 2011, has also given the complete operational work of Comhairle Uladh the opportunity to plan continuously for the future, while at the same time meeting the delivery requirements at each stage of what is needed to meet the best interests of the GAA. The ongoing work at our main County Grounds has benefited significantly from the revamped Stadia Safety Programme and the work as approved under that scheme should witness a very substantial increase in capacity and or comfort at the four grounds involved. The introduction of Floodlighting at the Main County Grounds is also underway and by the end of 2006 it is intended that six of our

grounds will be fully operational and this should have very significant benefits for both Club and County fixtures.

The advent of twinning has improved the overall development of our Association abroad. We are working closely with Britain and Canada and there has been a very positive development in the relationships between the three bodies. It is an additional responsibility placed on Comhairle Uladh but I believe that it is imperative that we assist and augment our overseas committees as the Association develops abroad.

We have provided Coach and Tutor Training in Canada and our Fun to Fame Fundamentals has been a huge asset to the schools in Ontario where football is a curricular sport. We have assisted Britain with Coach training and the Child Awareness work that is need under their similar legislation. We have also assisted the promotion of hurling with the provision of equipment and opportunity to participate in some of our competitions.

It is a challenge for these units abroad but the linkage to a Provincial Council in Ireland ensures them that they are not isolated or removed from the development work in Ireland carried out by the GAA.

The various sub Committees continue to carry out vital work and set the policies and parameters for the staff to carry through. We are deeply grateful for all that give so sparingly of their time for the interests of the Association in Ulster. The Chairmen of Committees are all dedicated to achieving the objectives set out and they have been a tremendous asset to this Council.

The members of the Council represent the views of the Counties fairly and consistently and are cognisant of the responsibility that they carry to ensure that the corporate decisions represent the best for the interests of the GAA. We acknowledge the work that they do and thank them for their time, efforts and support.

Miceal O Grianain as our President has continued to lead from the front and has given enormously of his time for the benefit of the Association as a whole and particularly here in Ulster. He has demonstrated a complete dedication and commitment to Cumann Lúthchleas Gael. I would like to thank Miceal for all his work, his help and his assistance in working through the many issues that form the work of Comhairle Uladh. Tomas O Dalaigh, our Vice President has also worked diligently for the Association and has been readily available to assist Comhairle Uladh on a wide range of matters. He has made a significant contribution of time and energy that he so generously gives to Cumann Lúthchleas and with special reference his work as Cathaoirleach of Coiste Iomana and to hurling in general.

Our Treasurer, Aogan O Fearghail has also given greatly of his services both as Cisteoir and at the organising and running of games for which we are indebted to him. He continues to play an important part of our IT arrangements and has played an important role in the marketing aspects of the Councils affairs.

Mairtin Mac Aibhne as our OCP, has also made a significant contribution to the work of the Council and has operated as our link with the various media operations that are very much part of the day to day workings of Comhairle Uladh. I would acknowledge the help and assistance given by Martin on an ongoing basis and particularly for his work in the new accreditation scheme for media personnel.

We would wish to place on record our sincere gratitude to Kathleen and Teresa Mc Dermott, who left the employment of the Council in 2005. Unfortunately, neither of them were able to join us on our office re-location to Armagh, to expand the operations of Ulster GAA. We regret having lost two very committed staff members and in particular, Kathleen, who was with us since 1976. On behalf of the Council, I extend to them our best wishes for the future, and acknowledge their significant contributions to Cumann Lúthchleas Gael in Ulster.

Coaching and Games Development

The work of our Coaching and Games Development Committee has continued to grow at enormous pace. We have made major advances in the complete coaching structure and this has rejuvenated the role and functions of our coaches at Club and County level. We are recognised as having set an acceptable standard for progressive coaching. The organising of coaching courses, seminars and conferences has assisted greatly in the education process required by modern day demands on our players and teams. This work is the key element to the development of the games and increasing the enjoyment of those taking part. The games development element of our Modernisation Programme should enhance the availability and standards of coaching across the complete spectrum of our games and consequently this should ensure that the numbers taking part and the skill levels attained by everyone involved should be substantially improved.

The appointment of key personnel in the development of hurling and football in the counties, the universities, the regions and the integration work with Ladies GAA and Camogie are part of a major investment in our games. In the past we have worked diligently to promote and developed games but at times the lack of support or resources caused us to fall short of the objectives. We want and need this work to continue and the additional work emanating from the Modernisation Programme, should support and augment the whole sphere of games development.

The work with the SINI squads, development squads and schools of excellence continues to provide long term athlete development and we utilise both our own staff and voluntary coaches to deliver the programme that form part of the development of our players.

The work at Coach Development has also continued to enthuse everyone involved and the uptake of our courses has been tremendous. The concept of a one off qualification for life is now inadequate as there is an insatiable interest in new techniques, athlete development and sport sciences. We attempt to adopt, imitate and improve and this appears to be what our coaches require. The only area that is causing difficulties at present has been the delay in agreeing a level three syllabus. It should have in place

several years ago but it has not yet appeared. It may be necessary for our Coaching and Games Development Committee to examine and plan to move things forward.

The Coaching and Games Development Committee continues to provide direction and foresight in this critical area of our Associations affairs. They ably led by Nollaig MacCumhaill who has taken on the planning and operational matters to a new level. We are deeply indebted to Nollaig for his enthusiasm and dedicated service to the games development field. Seamus McGrattan also works diligently in support of the Committee and we thank him for his efforts on our behalf.

Gaeilge agus Oidhreacht

This Committee continues to play a significant part of the affairs of Comhairle Uladh. The Course organised each year in the Downings has provided the idealism of our Association in full for those attending. All aspects of our identity are promoted and it invigorates people to work through the Clubs and Counties in promoting a living and expanding heritage. Our Language and Culture evolved from our history, lives in the present and with effort expand within the Irish Diaspora in the future. This Coiste also provides guidance on policy matters that arise and shall have a larger function in the near future as it evaluates the proposed legislation for our language in the six counties.

Tomas O Cuilinn has given great leadership to this Committee and has provided direction and purpose to this vital area of the work of Comhairle Uladh. The dedication, vision and hard work of Seamus de Faoite continues at a tremendous pace and we are deeply indebted to him for his work particularly the organising of na Cursai Gaeilge each year and annually we record that each year na Cursai is bigger, better and more rewarding than the previous one. We thank Tomas, Seamus and the Coiste for their work on our behalf.

Culture and Scor

Scor and Scor na nOg competitions have continued at similar levels as in previous years and the commitment of those involved is enthusiastic and undiminished. However, there is little doubt that despite the best efforts of the willing workers the impact of these competitions is not making the required impression at all levels. I believe that there is need for a complete review involving all our clubs regardless to their involvement in Scor and Scor na nOg with the view of having in place a structure that ensures that this important area of our Associations affairs is nurtured, promoted and enhanced. We need to recommit ourselves to this area of our Associations work.

We acknowledge the work of Coiste Scor in ensuring the organising of the programmes for Scor and Scor na nOg. We are grateful to those who help in the running of the events, the adjudicators and the host Clubs. We pay tribute to Willie Turner who has been an effective voice for Scor and who has provided the leadership along with Rosena Jordan that is important in maintaining Scor as an intricate part of our Associations affairs.

Ethic and Good Practice

This area of operation has made great strides during the past five years. The requirement for ethics in sport had never been a problem, but the training and legal requirements have placed significant responsibilities on all our constituent units and this particularly so in relation to the Child Order and the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults legislation. These could have created problems for us but for the child centred policies of the Association and effective controls carried out by our Clubs. The training and the understanding of these complex issues has been effectively dealt with by our training programmes and the outworking of Code of Ethics amongst our Coaches and for this we are grateful to Facilitators and the Code of Ethics Committee. There is need for more administrators to be trained within the Clubs and the help of our County committees is needed to effectively deal with this area of requirement.

The need for record of our coaches in Schools to be checked is also a legal requirement and this will be advanced during the coming months. Like other elements of the Code of Ethics, it should not unduly worry any of our units and it should allow us to continue our vital work in the educational establishments safe in the knowledge that we meet the standards required to work and operate within the schools systems. The work relating to the checking will be carried out by an independent body with whom Comhairle Uladh are registered. The management of this critical element of our work will involve the Code of Ethics Committee, Martin McAviney, Michael Hasson and Catherine Donaghy. Catherine will administer the documentation and she will advise on the necessary processes to deliver the requirements of the checking process and also the need to maintain a proper system to ensure that all of this work is completed within defined timescales.

This Committee has already demonstrated tremendous work in this area and we are confident that they have set ethical standards and these have been willingly accepted by our Clubs and Coaches. They have also assisted the Council in Britain with their training and record keeping. We are indebted them for all of this. We again thank Martin McAviney and Michael Hasson for the outstanding work that they have done and continue to do on our behalf. Our thanks are also due to Geraldine McKavanagh and Bernie McGlinchey for their assistance in this vital work.

Association Matters

The Association has enjoyed another splendid year on the games field. The standing of our Association has never been higher nor has respect for it diminished. However, it is not as united as it was and discontent at several decisions has continued to bedevil relationships. The Association is a democratic one and the wishes of our membership have to be respected but aspects of the decision on Rial 42 have left part of our Association disillusioned by the Congress decision and latterly by the decision of Ard Comhairle. Ulster has from the foundation of the GAA been a united entity but as a consequence of the outcomes of recent decisions we have been divided by our Association on several matters.

The introduction of two National Committees to replace the old GAC was a welcome development but the establishment of the Central Disciplinary Committee without a representative of Comhairle Uladh is unacceptable given that part of their brief is our Senior Championships. The introduction of the Disputes Resolution Authority was also a welcome movement and in the long term will assist the correct application of our Rules. However, there is concern that the current arrangements are tending to have review of every decision and appeal and this serves no ones interests, but I believe that the DRA is fundamentally a sound concept and should be given time to settle in and for the Association to benefit from the decisions that provide case law relating directly to our Rules and their application.

The general operation and decision making function of the DRA is very good and shall in due course make the operational function of the various administrative and disciplinary decision making bodies more correct and their decisions more defensible. It is important that we recognise that this body has dealt with many difficult, complex and protracted issues and on most occasions have advanced clear opinion on the operation of our Rules. Ultimately, this should lead to the establishment of our own 'case law' that would greatly assist the future development of our Rules and the interpretation applying within them. Where there has been a fall down in the process, it has more to do with the case as presented by the respondent as to any overt deficiency in the operation of the DRA.

It would be suggested that there is an urgent need to have a correlation between the working of the DRA and Ard Comhairle given that both bodies have a function in interpreting Rules and recognising the specific function given to Ard Comhairle under Rial 83 T.O. 2003. Given that legal opinion is that interpretations given by Ard Comhairle have standing under this Rule and the implications for the Association in ensuring that such interpretations are encompassed in Rule, it would also be suggested that a small Workgroup of Ard Comhairle should be established as a matter of urgency to examine each decision of the DRA, and to advise Ard Comhairle of the implications and where appropriate to confirm the interpretation and also where required advise of the need to amend Rule.

The International Rules Series in Australia saw the return of the elements that nearly derailed the initial involvement with the Australian Football League. What was witnessed in 2005 was unacceptable and cannot be repeated. When the ongoing inducement of our young players by the AFL to play in Australia continues, we must take stock.

We were promised six years ago that there would be a full review before any long term arrangements would be entered into with the AFL and this is now seriously overdue. We must be satisfied, before we have any extension of our involvement with the AFL that our Associations best interests are served and if this is any doubt then we must abandon any future involvement at the earliest opportunity. We acknowledge the role of Peter McGrath as Manager of the Ireland team, who along with his backup team, including Micky Linden, Gene Duffy and Dominic McCaughey for their efforts on behalf of the Association and the team.

The need for a Marketing Strategy is evident as we have great games, a sense of identity, a sense of community and an Irish Diaspora around the world that is substantially bigger than the current population of this island. I agree with Micky Harte, in that we should develop our Association on a world wide basis. Handball has demonstrated the way and we should seek to emulate its progress.

We acknowledge the work carried out by the Central Council, it's Sub Committees and the various Task Forces established. We pay tribute to the various members from this province, who have given generously of their time and talents to move the Association forward. We may not always agree with everything that emanates from these deliberations but when decisions are taken it is incumbent that the democratic wish prevails. We acknowledge the work of the leadership of our Association and thank them for their time and commitment. We pay tribute to the ticket office staff for their help and guidance on our Ulster occasions in Croke Park. We acknowledge the assistance of Liam O Maolmhichil, Ard Stiurthoir, Danny Lynch and Teresa Rehill for their help and support.

We again were grateful for the use of the Stadium for our Ulster final and replay. The facilities are truly excellent and we thank Peter McKenna and his staff for their help and cooperation in making the myriad of requirements for our Championship finals so simple on our occasions there. The only downside was the over indulgence in the clamping of vehicles and the treatment of our Under 16 Development Squads Coaches was a disgrace. The return of the fees was small compensation for what occurred.

The work of many people from Ulster is deployed on National Committees and we acknowledge their substantial input into the affairs of the Association. I would like to place on record our gratitude to those from this province that chaired Committees or Task Forces, namely, Pauric Duffy, Coaching and Games Development, Jarlath Burns, Coiste Gaelige, Scor agus Cultur, Gene Duffy, Overseas Work Group, Oliver Galligan, Code of Ethics Workgroup, and all the other representatives from this province for their work.

The Sports Councils have provided useful guidance to our units for the proper development of games and facilities. They provide considerable expertise to the benefit of sport and we thank them for their work that assists our Association in many areas of our work. We thank Eamon McCartan, Chief Executive of the Sports Council and Eric Saunders, Chairman of the Sports Council for their courtesy, advice and assistance during a hectic and exciting year. We also thank Paul Johnston, our Liaison Officer with the Sports Council, for his assistance on many occasions throughout 2005.

The Vodafone All Stars Awards were dominated by Tyrone who received eight in total and this was augmented by three for Armagh giving an overall total of eleven to Ulster. The selection of Stephen O'Neill as Player of the Year was well merited as was the award of Young Player of the Year to Aaron Kernan.

Ulster role of honour was: Right Full Back - Ryan McMenamin (Tyrone) : Left Full Back - Andy Mallon (Armagh) : Centre Half Back - Conor Gormley (Tyrone) : Left Half Back - Philip Jordan (Tyrone) : Midfield - Sean Cavanagh (Tyrone) : Midfield - Paul McGrane (Armagh) : Right Half Forward - Brian Dooher (Tyrone)
Centre Half Forward - Peter Canavan (Tyrone) : Left Half Forward - Eoin Mulligan (Tyrone) : Full Forward - Stephen O'Neill (Tyrone) and Left Full Forward - Steven McDonnell (Armagh). We congratulate these fine players on their achievements on and off the field.

IT and Marketing

Information Technology is making strides towards a more user friendly operation of many of our vital functions as an Association. The outworking of the new Central Database and the accessibility of our Clubs, Counties and this Council to the stored data should reduce the amount of mundane recording of facts and statistics. There is a training programme in process at present that should empower and enable our units and members to be active participants in the networking of information that will prove a useful resource in the months and years ahead.

We are well served by our IT Committee and they continue to provide an excellent advisory service to Comhairle Uladh. They have assisted in the acquiring of the necessary Computers that will assist our staff and the three managers in each county by providing the material required by the Council and external agencies by electronic means. This is a vital component in the overall governance required as part of the Modernisation Programme.

This Committee also provides the Marketing of aspects of our Councils work for which we are grateful. We are indebted to Aogan O Fearghail, Gerard Bradley and the members of the Committee for their work, understanding and support as we become engrossed in the new technologies. This has been augmented by Damian Kelly who has been a tremendous asset in the development of our Website and the utilisation of it for the distribution of resources from Comhairle Uladh.

Media

The role and power of the media was evident on many occasions within and without of our Association. We may not always like what is stated, spoken or written but provided it is accurate and fair then we can accept it. However, during the past year the denigration and vilification of our players were neither fair nor accurate. The onslaught on one player in particular during last summer fell far short of acceptable comment and we are also entitled to say so.

The finalised arrangements for television coverage of our games has left Ulster with reduced outlets and the current arrangements need to be revisited.

The curtailment of the BBC in showing live games and highlights was an imposition theme. The issue is digital rights and this needs to be examined in the context of the arrangements that are advancing every day. We pay tribute to the fortitude of the BBC for covering our games and hope that matters impacting on them can be resolved. There is something wrong when people in parts of Ulster who cannot watch an All Ireland final with an Ulster team involved.

The situation regarding UTV is very unsatisfactory. They may have contributed to their own difficulties to some degree but they are an active broadcaster who need to be given cover of our games on news and magazine programmes that they are currently excluded any access to. We compliment TG4 on their coverage of our games and their magazine and archival material is superb.

Modernisation Programme

The past year has proved to be a very significant and in fact historical year off the field for the Ulster Council. After a few years which included many meetings, volumes of correspondence, and the possibility of a high profile Court Case, the Government finally conceded that this Association would not accept anything less than parity of esteem and equitable treatment in relation to distribution of resources in line with other sporting organisations in the six Counties. Much credit must go to our Iar-Cathoirleach, John O Reilly who lead our delegations in the early stages of the discussions and more recently to Miceal Greenan who steadfastly advanced our case and will now oversee the investment of significant resources in our Association in his term of office.

Project Team

The Ulster Council have benefited from an energetic and enthusiastic team to assist in delivering our Strategic Plan. Eugene Young and our new Project Manager Stephen McGeehan began to develop the outline Modernisation Plan that was submitted to Government in the early part of 2005 for their initial consideration and based on previous papers. The main focus of the plan was to address three critical areas for the Association in Ulster going forward, which were agreed as follows:

- Governance
- Coaching and Games Development
- Facilities Development including Floodlighting

In March 2005 an outline package was presented to our nine County Board Chairmen which highlighted the aspirations of the Council to invest in excess of €11m of Government, Croke Park and Ulster Council resources in the Association in Ulster and to seek their approval. The package effectively offered each County an additional three full time managers in the areas of administration, hurling and football development as well as an offer to provide 'state of the art' floodlighting at each of the main County Grounds. The total package would be provided by Comhairle Uladh at a cost per County of approximately €900,000 and we were seeking a partnership contribution of just €100,000

from each County over the 3 year period. The initial response was understandably positive in most Counties yet apprehensive in others. However, all Counties signed up to the package and the Ulster Council was given the authority of the Counties to proceed with negotiations with the Government

Government Requirements

In order to proceed with our investment plans we had much work to do and the public requirement dictates that strategy, structures and development plans must be underpinned by the accountability, policies and procedures and evidence of need and demonstrate a 'fit for purpose' capability. The focus of the Council then moved to the specific tasks needed to deliver the complete project.

Development of a new strategy – Beir Bua Nua 2006-2010

Once again facilitated by the ever willing Mark Conway the Council through our Development Committee and supported by Stephen McGeehan were tasked to complete the drafting of our second strategic plan which identifies the key priorities for us moving forward and sets the strategic context of all the work we will do over the next 5 years.

Review by External Auditors

An external audit firm from London (AHL Limited) were dispatched by Government to review the operation of the Council on a range of fronts such as organisational strategy, effectiveness, structure, legal status, finances, and human resources. Key officers were interviewed, documents were reviewed and commented on, and a final report was produced and recommendations made for the future. The rationale for this was that Government can only invest resources in organisations which are deemed 'fit for purpose'.

The Council came through the process and assurances were provided to Government that Comhairle Uladh was at a state of readiness to justify the expenditure of public money. One of the main recommendations was in relation to the appointment of a Business Manager to assist with the management of Council resources and Catherine Donaghy has since been appointed to the role and has already demonstrated in a short time that she will be a major asset to the Council in implementing the recommendations in the AHL Report ,and in the financial management of our resources.

Economic Appraisal

Due to the significant levels of money involved in the Modernisation Programme the Council was then required to undertake a full 'Green Book' economic appraisal to detail the work to be done, associated costs, economic impact and most importantly sustainability and evaluation considerations. Peter Quinn Consultancy was contracted to work with our team to deliver this comprehensive piece of work which would be the final piece in the jig saw to unlock Government money.

We should place on record our sincere appreciation to Peter himself but in particular Barry McGurgan (Managing Director) who was the main driving force in delivering our appraisal and subsequently enabling us to accept an offer letter from the Sports Council for the first year (2005/6) of some £1.25m sterling to get the modernisation programme of the ground.

Progress to Date

At the time of writing the progress made in relation to the Modernisation Programme, includes:

Appointment of new staff

Eight of the ten core Ulster Council posts have been appointed and all staff will be in place by the 1 st March 2006.

All nine County Boards have appointed their full time County Administration Manager and in relation to the Hurling and Football Posts 16 of the 18 posts have been filled, with Tyrone and Donegal in the process of completing the appointment of their hurling managers.

There is an Appendix in this report which details the organisational structure and roles of the key staff appointed in 2005.

Floodlighting Project

Work has commenced at the three sites prioritised for the erection of floodlighting and the Contractors are working to a defined timescale that should see completion of this phase by April 2006. Musco Lighting an Internationally recognised Sports Lighting Provider based in Cork are undertaking the work in Casement Park Belfast and Breffni Park Cavan. The lux level of the lighting in Casement Park at a maintained 1400 lux will be the highest quality level of floodlighting at any sports venue in Ireland when completed.

Barrett's Electrical Ltd, a local Company in Omagh were awarded the contract for Healy Park and are working diligently to complete the works at the venue by April 2006 and have proved that given the opportunity local Ulster based firms are capable of taking on such significant projects.

We are currently finalising a deal with a supplier of generators to power the floodlights which will see a main generating system and a back up generator at each venue in the case of a failure of a machine at one of our fixtures. From an event control and health and safety point of view this is of paramount importance. In relation to fixtures planning the Council and Counties in these venues can look forward to new options for 2006 and also if the Lights prove attractive to our supporters, increased attendances, revenues and a completely new social element to our games in the province.

Plans are already in place to begin the next phase of our floodlighting programme in April and also to work with a pitch contractor to put in place a refurbishment programme of our pitches to allow maximum use to be made of floodlighting once in place.

Stadia Safety Programme

The Council was delighted with the Sports Council's decision to award some £2.55m of resources towards four of our main County Grounds for essential work on spectator facilities and addressing health and safety issues in the venues in 2006 as a follow up to the Safe Sports Grounds Programmes. We congratulate those people in the Armagh, Down, Fermanagh and Tyrone County Boards on their hard work and commitment in satisfying the ever increasing demands of the Sports Council and wish each of them well in the delivery of their projects.

In particular it is great to see after many years work by people like Seamus King, that the Athletic Grounds in Armagh can now seriously develop Phase 1 of their facilities plan. In a venue in which our Championship has not been present for over ten years now we look forward to the day when we might see the current Ulster football champions play on their home ground.

Moving On

Much has been done already and there is still much more to for the benefit of our Association in Ulster. This year began and ended with tremendous work and efforts by many people associated with our modernisation programme. Our gratitude should go to the driving forces behind these developments such as, Dr Eugene Young, Stephen McGeehan, Catherine Donaghy, Liam Nelis and the supporting role of our office staff Geraldine McKavanagh, Stephen Donnelly, Bernie McGlinchey and Damian Kelly.

We also recognise the support given by Paul Johnston of the Sports Council who has worked hand in glove with us over the last 12 months and in particular his involvement on the recruitment and selection panels for the various posts for which he was greatly appreciated. At the Conference as part of the education programme relating to this undertaking, Peter Quinn in his Keynote address stated the follow:

Albert Einstein once said: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results!"

We are doing many different things today to grow and develop our Association and we are becoming increasingly confident of our role in the sporting and cultural society in which we operate.

Our new executive administrative structure working with and in support of the vital core amateur ethos and established volunteer/ voluntary base should deliver the necessary impetus to this exciting project. We will make great strides if we all continue to work together as team, confident in our Association, supportive of our colleagues and

motivated by the aims and ideals of an Association that was radical at its birth and will continue to develop if we are radical in our vision of this Country and this Association.

Comhbhrón

The past year saw many great stalwarts of the Association pass to their eternal reward and numbered among them were players, referees, administrators, supporters and extensions to the wider GAA family as a whole. Two great players who had played and won All Ireland Championships, Pat Rice of Down and Tony Tighe of Cavan died during the year and will be sadly missed by their families, friends and those lucky enough to have seen them. We also saw the demise of Sally McNamee, wife of the late Paddy McNamee, Iar Uachtarán at the great age of 101. We sympathise with their families, friends, Counties and Clubs on their loss and hope that they find comfort and peace.

The Sacrifice of the Mass will be offered for all the deceased members of our Association at St. Matthews Church, Garvaghey, Omagh (beside Kelly's Inn), on the morning of Convention at 11.00 a.m. It is hoped that all delegates can attend as a mark of respect for all our deceased members.

Conclusion

The leadership of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, over fifty years ago said that it was incumbent on each succeeding generation of our Association to educate our members of the reasons for the founding of the organisation and the circumstances that existed at the time. This needs to be repeated continuously so that it is clearly understood that we are in favour of our aims and ideals and that we work positively for them at all times.

Is mise, le meas,

Donall O Murchu, Runai