

Tuarascail Bhliantúil 2006

A chairde,

This past year like the last, has been one of continued development for the Association in Ulster. In some ways, in relation to football, 2006 may be regarded by some as a disappointing year given the recent outstanding achievements by our counties on the All Ireland stage. Hurling, however, took pride of place for 2006 at National Level and our Hurling fraternity achieved two significant successes at All Ireland level with firstly, our Ulster champions Antrim winning the Christy Ring Cup and neighbours, Derry for annexing the Nickey Rackard title after a tremendous contest with Donegal in a very exciting final played at Croke Park. A significant success also came for St Patrick's College, Maghera when after many years, having been regarded as outstanding on the football pitch, the college secured an All Ireland B Hurling title which certainly augers well for the future of Hurling in Derry and in the rest of Ulster. In football, Armagh won their third Ulster Senior Championship title in a row after another marathon effort when they overcame serious challenges from Monaghan after a replay, and Fermanagh after a replay before beating Donegal in our third consecutive Ulster final played in Croke Park and attended by over 50,000 spectators. Armagh were later to lose out to Kerry in a titanic All Ireland quarter final when it appeared that every bounce of the ball went against them on that particular day. That defeat of our Provincial winners brings in to focus something which I will mention later in the report, that perhaps the time is right to look at new structures in the football Championship which gives our Provincial winners an equal opportunity to experience defeat in one Championship game before entering the competition again at an appropriate level.

Off the field of play 2006 has been a historic year for the modernisation of gaelic games in Ulster. The Council's continued investment in facilities and in the broad area of coaching and games development continues at a pace which could only be described as both exciting and remarkable. All over the Province we have examples of how far we have come in such a short space of time and considering that we now have close to 50 full time staff employed at Provincial and County level, as well as our facilities programme. Later this year 6 of our main County grounds will be complete with state of the art floodlighting systems. We should be proud of the continued vibrancy of our Association and we should all work together to advance the cause of Cumann Lúthleas Gael during 2007.

Modernisation undoubtedly brings with it the needs for us to change and respond to our external environment. This Association was built on the solid foundation of voluntary efforts and an amateur ethos at Club, County, Provincial and National level. However, conscious of the need to encourage and strengthen our volunteer base, we are now operating, even at County level, with what would be regarded as medium sized business operations and we must embrace the expertise and competencies that Administrators and Coaching and Games Personnel can bring to the Association, to ensure our prosperity in to what looks like a very bright future for the GAA in Ulster.

Finance

The finances of Comhairle Uladh in the year has demonstrated the hard work begun in previous years work and efforts in resolving funding issues with the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure and the Sports Council. The total income amounted to €7,287,947 inclusive of all grants. Our gate income represented 35% of this compared to 70% of the total income in 2005. In 2006 our grant income represents 47% of our total in comparison to only 14% in 2005. It should be pointed out that 2005 was an exceptional year in terms of gate receipts due to hosting an Ulster final attended by over 60,000 supporters and of course an Ulster final replay. In 2006, our championship prices were not increased and our championship gates attracted attendance figures of over 180,000 people. 2006 was also historic in the Dr McKenna cup competition, which saw record numbers attending the games, most notable that semi final between Armagh and Tyrone which was attended by almost 20,000 people. In fact, the competition proved so successful that already in 2007 we have reaped the rewards with a sponsorship and marketing campaign in partnership with new Gaelic games newspaper "Gaelic Life".

Support from Central Council in 2006 assisted us in the development of hurling across the Province with two main areas to highlight the Senior Hurling league and also, support measures were put in place for the formation of new club and school teams across the Province. A major increase in our 2006 income was also generated in commercial partnerships where the main increases can be attributed to media income, programmes and sponsorship. Increase in media income highlights the increased television coverage of our games. The programme income increase arose due to sales increasing and the advertising income from the programmes being boosted; both elements no doubt assisted by the introduction of a new image of our championship programmes. Comhairle Uladh welcomes the addition of new sponsors to our activities during the year and is hopeful that we can maintain and build on these links going forward

With increased income we also had as expected, increased expenditure. The expenditure in 2006 was €4,694,158 and notable increases were a result of the promotion of our extensive Hurling programme in the Province as well as the increased salary costs due to a real increase in staff numbers, from 9 to 47 across the Province.

The major increase in income and expenditure in 2006 was the income received for floodlighting and the expenditure on the same to complete in three counties, and to part completion in a fourth. This expenditure together with our significant investment in the grounds of our clubs throughout the Province amounted to €3,356,615. This capital development in our grounds has been made possible by support from Central Council, Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure and by the prudence of previous Comhairle Uladh administration which kept a healthy reserve policy in place over recent years. We are very grateful to all those bodies for their inputs as we move forward with improved facilities throughout the province which will be enjoyed for many years to come. Our financial performance during 2006 should be regarded as a significant investment in our capital assets which should assist our Counties and our Clubs to source from their own funds the necessary support to continue with our most important priority, the

development of our Games. We thank our business manager Catherine Corrigan, and Stephen Donnelly for their invaluable work in this area

Games Activity

2006 proved to be another demanding programme for footballers and hurlers in Ulster. This past year has demonstrated once more the need to look at the scheduling of games to ensure that there is adequate provision for both Club and County footballers and hurlers. The success of our Senior Football League and Senior Hurling Leagues in 2006 has also demonstrated that there is an appetite in the Province for meaningful competitive activity on a Provincial basis. We should not and must not, in the development of future games programmes, underestimate the need and importance of providing a suitable games programme for our players at grassroots level. There remains the conundrum within our association that our 5% of County Players have too many demands on their time while the majority of our participants at Club level are left with significant inactivity within their counties which is ironically during the summer period, when the conditions are favourable for the playing of our Gaelic Games.

The Football Championship

Once again the Ulster Senior Football Championship proved an intriguing affair. The competition began on the 7th May when the goal hungry Benny Coulter assisted Down to overcome Cavan on a 1-13 to 0-11 scoreline at Casement Park to advance to the quarter final stage. The Ulster Champions of the previous two years, Armagh, began their campaign a week later on the 14th May at Clones when after a see saw battle with Monaghan, the game ended in a draw at 10 points each. In the replay six days later, back in Clones, a rejuvenated Armagh team declared their intentions for the rest of the Championship by powering to a six point victory over Monaghan on a scoreline of 1-13 to 0-10. The following day on the 21st May in Brewster Park Enniskillen, in difficult conditions, Fermanagh out-scored Antrim by 1-09 to 0-09 after the visiting team had a number of chances which they were left to rue as the Erne County progressed to an Ulster semi final spot. In Healy Park, Omagh on the 28th May was the first round game that everyone in the country had anticipated since the draw had been made when All-Ireland Champions Tyrone, hosted their neighbours Derry in front of a full house. Derry set about their intentions in this game with a level of intensity and game plan which amazingly resulted in the All-Ireland Champions failing to score in the first 35 minutes. In the second half Tyrone staged a mini revival, however, a goal from Derry's Enda Muldoon effectively ended Tyrone's interest in the Ulster Championship and it was Derry who progressed to the Ulster Semi final. A week later in the final first round game at Ballybofey, Donegal began their campaign with a narrow victory over Down on a scoreline of 1-12 to 1-11, Donegal's goal a memorable strike from wing forward Rory Kavanagh. In the first semi final at Clones, Armagh took on Fermanagh and most pundits may have been of the opinion that Armagh would be too powerful for the Erne men this time around. However, goals at key times in the game for Fermanagh ensured that Armagh had to fight all the way and in the end, a draw proved a fair result after the efforts of both teams. In the second semi final Derry carried the favourites tag after their impressive win over Tyrone against another of their neighbours Donegal, however, it was the Tir Chonaill men who put on a powerful performance to end Derry's interest in the

competition on a 1-13 to 0-11 scoreline in Clones. One week later on June 25th, the Armagh and Fermanagh replay was played in Clones and Armagh were to make no mistake second time around with an impressive points tally of 16, the highest in the Ulster Championship, where they defeated Fermanagh on a 0-16 to 1-08 scoreline to qualify for their third Ulster final in a row.

The Ulster final between Armagh and Donegal was played in front of 50,000 people in Croke Park and we were treated to a very interesting tactical battle between two exceptionally well prepared teams. In the end it took a stunning goal from Armagh's midfield veteran Paul McGrane to separate the teams and Armagh lifted the Anglo Celt trophy for the third year in a row following a 1-09 to 0-09 victory. For the second year in a row, Armagh had retained their title having played five games along the way. Congratulations to the Armagh team for their great achievement of three titles in a row set against the demands of the modern championship.

All-Ireland Football Championship

The All-Ireland Football Championship for Ulster representatives began with the involvement of Tyrone, Monaghan, Antrim and Down on June 17th. Monaghan outclassed Wicklow on a scoreline of 2-19 to 3-06 at Clones, while in Navan in a sensational game, an injury depleted Tyrone team battled exceptionally bravely to secure a 2-16 apiece draw with Louth after extra time which proved to be one of the most memorable games of the competition. Antrim were defeated by Clare by a single point at Casement Park to end their involvement in the competition while Down travelled to Sligo and after a disappointing performance ran out 1-07 to 0-04 losers. One week later Tyrone dusted themselves off to defeat Louth by eight points in their replay in Omagh and on the same day Cavan lost out in a high scoring game to Kildare by five points in Newbridge. At Celtic Park, Derry on July 1st the Oak leaf County produced a high scoring display which saw them defeat visitors Kildare by nine points. In the next round of qualifiers Fermanagh were too strong for Clare in Ennis, coming out on top with a five point victory while All Ireland Champions, Tyrone's interest ended at the same stage bowing out to Laois on a 0-09 to 0-06 victory for the home side. Fermanagh continued Ulster's interests in the qualifiers with an impressive 2-12 to 0-11 win over Wexford at Brewster Park while on the same day Derry had travelled to Longford where the Oak leaf County were defeated by a single point after a titanic struggle with the home team. In terms of Ulster's interest in the All-Ireland qualifiers it was left on July 30th, for Fermanagh and Donegal to fight it out for a quarter final place in the competition at Brewster Park. Donegal proved victorious on a 0-11 to 0-08 victory to recover from their Ulster Final defeat and secure a place alongside champions Armagh, in the All-Ireland quarter finals. The draw saw Armagh take on Kerry at Croke Park on the 5th August in a repeat of their 2002 All-Ireland final meeting. Armagh started impressively and at times showed glimpses of a team that was capable of going on to greater things, however, Kerry did irreparable damage in scoring three goals to run out somewhat flattering winners by eight points after an exciting game. Later that day in Croke Park, Donegal were most unlucky to lose by a single point to Munster champions Cork and did have several chances with which, had they have taken, could very well have seen them qualifying for an All-Ireland semi final.

The defeat of Armagh and Donegal at the quarter final stage left a very bizarre situation where no Ulster County was involved in the semi finals of the All-Ireland Football Championships. In the semi finals that were to come, Kerry overcame rivals Cork to qualify for the final while Mayo defeated Dublin after a sensational comeback to qualify for the All Ireland final. In a very disappointing and one sided All-Ireland football final, Kerry ran out facile winners over Mayo to secure another All-Ireland football title for the Kingdom. Many pundits reflecting on Kerry's transition during the year did point to a level of physical conditioning and intensity that was similar to previous winners from Armagh and Tyrone. Even the purists in the Kingdom would recognise that this approach and the arrival of star full forward Kieran Donaghy were key ingredients on securing the Sam Maguire cup.

Minor Football Championship

The 2006 Ulster Minor Football Championship provided a number of quality games during the summer. Cavan defeated Down in the preliminary round by three points at Casement Park. Armagh who many people regarded as potential winners, edged out Monaghan by a point at Clones while Antrim defeated Fermanagh in Brewster Park by a single point to secure a memorable victory for them and also signal the emergence of a skilful team who would go on to defeat Armagh in the Ulster semi final and qualify for the Ulster Final. Donegal began their campaign with a victory over a fancied Cavan side at Brewster Park and went on to defeat Tyrone in the semi final following Tyrone's victory over Derry at Healy Park, Omagh. The Ulster Minor Football final featured Donegal as a curtain raiser for their Senior team and the heralded arrival of Antrim minors as potential champions. Donegal however, had not read the script and after a powerful performance secured a 2-09 to 1-05 victory at Croke Park to claim the Ulster Minor title. Donegal Minors went on to defeat Offaly after extra time in the All-Ireland Minor Championship, however, they were then to lose out to Kerry by six points in Croke Park in mid August. By virtue of their Provincial finalist appearance, Antrim also played in the All-Ireland Minor football Championship and after a very exciting game played in Clones, they were edged out by Meath on a 1-17 to 2-10 score line after extra time.

Under 21 Football Championship

The Championship was played over a period of five weeks which no doubt assisted with the availability of players during a window of opportunity for the counties. In the early rounds Armagh defeated Cavan in Breffni Park while Derry and Antrim recorded victories over Monaghan and Fermanagh respectively. Armagh then progressed to meet rivals Down in Crossmaglen and secured a place in the Ulster semi final by virtue of a five point win. Tyrone defeated Donegal on a scoreline of 0-10 to 0-06 to qualify for a semi final meeting with Antrim who they edged out after a two point victory at Omagh. In the other semi final after extra time at Crossmaglen, Derry beat Armagh by two points to set up a mouth watering final between Tyrone and Derry. The final itself was a very exciting affair at Ballybofey with Tyrone edging out their neighbours Derry on a score line of 0-12 to 1-07 in a very entertaining game. In the All-Ireland semi final Tyrone went on to meet Mayo in Cavan and in a see saw battle that included extra time, the

Connacht men defeated Tyrone by a single point to go on to qualify for the All-Ireland Final.

Club Football Championship

Since the last Comhairle Uladh Convention, Ulster Champions St. Gall's of Antrim participated in the All-Ireland Senior Club Football Final in Croke Park and after a brave performance against Galway champions Salthill/ Knocknacarra they were defeated by a single point 0-07 to 0-06 to end their dream of All-Ireland glory. In the Intermediate Football Club Championships Final also played in Croke Park, Inniskeen from Monaghan were worthy winners when they beat Caherlistrane on a scoreline of 2-10 to 1-11.

Another Monaghan team, namely Monaghan Harps in the Junior Football Club Championship, narrowly lost out to Kerry Champions Ardfert in their All-Ireland Football Semi Final after extra time.

In 2006, the Senior Club Football Championship once again proved to be a very high quality and exciting competition. In the preliminary round, Crossmaglen travelled to Ballybofey and beat Donegal champions Gaoth Dobhair, while after a replay Monaghan champions Clontibret overcame Antrim champions Cargin, to secure their place in a semi final. A meeting of Tyrone champions Errigal Ciaran and Fermanagh champions Enniskillen Gaels saw the Tyrone men run out one point winners in Omagh. In a much anticipated game in Maghera, Derry champions Ballinderry humbled visitors and Down champions Mayobridge, with a facile 14 point victory. To complete the first round fixtures Armagh champions Crossmaglen saw off the challenge of Cavan Champions Mullahoran with a 9 point victory to qualify for another Ulster semi final. Errigal Ciaran and Ballinderry fought out an exciting and intense draw at Casement Park before Ballinderry proved victorious in a fascinating replay which saw the Derry men emerge victorious on a scoreline of 1-15 to 3-07. In the other semi final, Crossmaglen edged out Monaghan champions Clontibret on a 1-09 to 0-11 scoreline setting up a final with the Derry champions, Ballinderry. On the 3rd December in Casement Park, in extremely difficult conditions, Crossmaglen powered their way to a 0-05 to 0-03 victory over the Shamrocks to secure the Seamus McFerran cup, once again for the South Armagh side. The Intermediate Football Championship at the time of writing remains unfinished due to the disgraceful scenes at Casement Park on the 19th November 2006 between Ballymacnab and Stewartstown. Unfortunately, Derry champions Coleraine are left to await the outcome of GAA disciplinary and DRA processes before the final stages of this competition can be contemplated by the Council.

In the Junior Championship, Greencastle of Tyrone defeated Ardoyne to qualify for a semi final where they overcame Drumhowan who had previously beat An Port Mór, who had earlier accounted for Swanlinbar in the first round. Naomh Brid defeated Bredagh in their semi final and qualified to play Greencastle in the Junior Football final at Casement Park. The final was a superb advertisement for junior football in Ulster and Greencastle ran out late winners with a one point victory over Naomh Brid to claim the Junior football title.

Senior Hurling Championship

In the Senior Hurling Championship Antrim were faced with a tricky assignment against London in Ruislip. London provided an excellent test but were unable to defeat the

reigning Ulster Champions, who ran out winners by 5 points. Antrim then faced Down in the semi-final where they surprisingly eased through to the Ulster final. Derry travelled to Gaelic Park to play New York, where they were shocked by the home side, who won through to their first Ulster Final. The meeting of Antrim and New York in the Final was thrown into doubt when New York requested that the final be played in the Bronx. After months of negotiation and the agreement of both teams and Comhairle Uladh, history was made when for the first time ever the final was played at the end of October in Canton, Boston. Antrim retained their title with a 9 point winning margin.

All Ireland Hurling Championship

Despite being Ulster Champions, Antrim had not qualified for the McCarthy Cup and were drawn in Division 2A of the Christy Ring Cup along with Down, Roscommon, Meath and London. Down got revenge over Antrim in the group stages but in a huge shock, were then beaten by Carlow at the semi-final stage. Antrim recovered well and eventually ran out comfortable winners of the competition. Antrim will be promoted to compete in the All Ireland Senior Hurling Championship for the Liam McCarthy Cup in 2007.

All other Ulster Counties played in the Nicky Rackard Cup with Derry, who had been relegated from the Christy Ring Cup in 2005, being paired against Donegal in an all Ulster Final in Croke Park. Despite their best endeavours Donegal had to give best to a Derry team who had a point to prove after their exit from the Ulster Championship at the hands of New York. Derry won on a 5-15 to 1-11 score line and have now qualified to compete in the Christy Ring Cup in 2007.

Under 21 Hurling Championship

Only 2 Ulster Counties competed in the Under 21 Championship. Antrim defeated Down in an excellent final on a scoreline of 2-15 to 3-11, and therefore, progressed to the All Ireland Semi-Final where yet again a poor performance by an Ulster team did little to advance hurling in the province. Tipperary ran out easy winners in a one sided game.

Minor Hurling Championship

While the Ulster Minor Hurling Championship was disappointing there was a glimmer of hope that at last an Ulster County would compete on the All Ireland stage. A superb Antrim team steamrolled through the Ulster Championship beating Down in the Semi-Final and Derry in the Final.

In the All Ireland Quarter Final, Antrim were drawn against reigning Champions Galway. This was the draw that Antrim had hoped to avoid but having run Limerick close in 2005 Antrim were not to be brushed aside. In a terrific game the Glensmen did their County and their Province proud and for long periods totally outplayed their opposition before going down to a late goal. Unlike teams in the other provinces, Antrim were not afforded a second opportunity in the competition and were therefore knocked out. Tipperary were beaten in the Munster Final yet went on to become the eventual winners of the All Ireland Title. Ulster hurling deserves a fairer crack and this is an issue that needs to be addressed in future years.

All Ireland Club Championships

The Club Hurling Championships saw Ballygalget drawn against Newtownshandrum, the 2004 winners, at Portlaoise. The Munster Champions were hot favourites but Ballygalget hadn't read the script and they put up a terrific performance only to lose by a single point to a late rally from the Cork men.

The All Ireland Intermediate and Junior Championships brought about a treble for Cork clubs over Ulster clubs as Balinhassig recorded a 10 point victory over Oisin's Glenariffe and Fr O'Neill's defeated Castleblayney.

Hurling Development

There has been significant progress on the Hurling front arising from the Modernisation Programme and the work of Coiste Iomána. Every County within the Province employed a Hurling Development Manager with responsibility for the development of new initiatives within each County and to date, there has been significant work in increasing participation through development programmes in primary and post primary schools. This has been supported through an investment in Hurling equipment for new clubs and schools, who have commenced Hurling development for the first time. Throughout the year, eleven Hurling clubs have been set up either as new stand alone Hurling clubs or as Hurling sections within existing Football Clubs. Hurling Development Managers have backed up this investment with development programmes aimed at ensuring the expansion of Hurling through the provision of links between clubs and local schools. Coiste Iomána has also continued to support our colleges, vocational schools and third level colleges through the supply of hurling equipment.

Work with development squads has continued to progress and through a new initiative a number of experienced coaches throughout the Province delivered coaching sessions, in the 6 'weaker' Hurling Counties, over a 6 week period in the run up to the Youth Games. This programme was extended to the selection of an elite Hurling squad who attended a 3 day summer camp where they were exposed to quality coaching and sports science inputs. After the summer camp, an Ulster squad was selected to play against Antrim, Derry and Down in an Ulster Under 16 competition. At the end a 30 strong Ulster squad travelled to Inverness in Scotland to play against the Scottish Under 18 Club Champions, Lovet, and the Scottish Under 17 National team. This highly successful project saw Ulster win against the Scottish team and lose against Lovet who proved to be too strong given the 2 year age gap between the teams. A new partnership has been formed and it is planned to invite the Scottish team to Ulster to play our young squads in future years.

The long awaited Ulster Senior Club Hurling league was launched and was a great success despite a number of our Counties not giving it the level of support that this area of development for our National Game deserves. The League will be significantly bigger in 2007 and it is essential that all Counties ensure that they provide windows within their fixtures programme to ensure that the competition can be run out on the dates set out. The inaugural League involved 53 teams in 3 Divisions and the winners were:
Division One – Loughgiel Shamrocks (Antrim);
Division Two – Castleblayney (Monaghan);
Division Three – Bredagh (Down).

Such was the success of this vital development initiative that 67 teams have registered for the 2007 League which will be run off in 5 Divisions, with two sections in each Division.

The Ulster Minor Hurling League was once again organised but seemed to lack the support of the clubs throughout the Province. The scheduling of fixtures in the autumn clashed with the fixtures programme of the Ulster Colleges and indeed brought a level of criticism of Coiste Iomána in contributing to the burnout of our young players. The overall fixtures programme will need to be co-ordinated in future years to ensure that young players are not faced with excessive training and competition programmes throughout the year. There will also need to be an examination of the requirements being placed on our young hurlers to ensure that they get a balanced programme that guarantees them an acceptable games involvement while at the same time affording them the opportunity to have the necessary coaching to allow them to develop individually in skill and enjoyment.

Coiste Iomána once again organised a highly successful Feile, which was hosted by Ruairi Og, Cushendall who celebrated their Centenary Year during 2006. This annual event is the high point for many clubs throughout Ulster and will hopefully remain as a vital part of the Hurling calendar in Ulster. Our thanks are due to the Ruairi Og club who were excellent hosts for Feile Uladh 2006.

The Ulster Minor Hurling league was also a success and provided our County sides with an opportunity to, in some cases play inter county competition, and in other cases to further develop players who would not otherwise get the opportunity to play on County squads. Antrim won the Division One League and the Down Academy were the Division Two Winners.

The Under 21 B, Minor Hurling C and Under 16 B and C Championships are organised by Coiste Iomána and provide an opportunity for many players to compete in intercounty competition. The competitions were efficiently organised and produced the following winners:

Under 21 B – Monaghan;

Minor Hurling C – Tyrone;

Under 16 B –Derry;

Under 16 C – Armagh:

Indeed, congratulations must go to Armagh who went on to defeat Roscommon to win the All Ireland Under 16 C title.

Coiste Iomána continue to do sterling work in the development of Hurling at all levels in Ulster. It is well served by the members of the Coiste, who are representative of the Hurling fraternity throughout the Province. The Coiste has been led for the past three years by Tomás Ó Dalaigh who has shown tremendous leadership qualities. His tenure as An Cathaorleach Coiste Iomána has come to an end and the Hurling community of Ulster is greatly indebted to him for his tireless, and at times fearless, work in the development of Hurling in Ulster. We also acknowledge the immense contributions of

Jimmy Darragh and Frankie Quinn in supporting the work of developing hurling in our own province.

Referees

The position of refereeing in the Province is certainly healthy in some regards and in some other areas requires some attention. At National level in Football, Ulster has a large representation of referees at the highest level. In Hurling the numbers are not so high however, I am confident that work will be done in the future to address this. During the year a number of our referees officiated at All-Ireland finals, namely Brian Crowe at senior level, Joe McQuillan at U-21 level and Pdraig Hughes in the All-Ireland Minor football final replay. All of them performed very well and represented their counties and Ulster with distinction. However, we are concerned at the lack of appointment of some of our referees and the failure entirely, of any appointment at senior hurling championship level outside of Ulster casts a significant doubt of the benefit of the current centralised appointment system. It needs serious review.

The work being carried out by our Referees Committee assisted by our coaching and games personnel, is taking refereeing in Ulster forward on an innovative and progressive path. The development of the Referee's Academy in Ulster has sent out a clear message to referees that we recognise their importance in the provision of our games programme and in having our games played in accordance with the Rules. We are prepared to invest in their preparation to ensure that their development can continue in parallel with the advances being made in the training and development of our players.

It is encouraging that Counties are now beginning to implement our 'Young Whistlers' programme as this is the most obvious way to recruit young referees to take an interest at officiating in our games. Without referees the playing of Gaelic games becomes impossible, and we wish not to arrive at a position where we are unable to provide official referees at youth level which is the very platform from which we should be ensuring that our future referees are being provided with experience.

Our Referees Committee under the excellent Chairmanship of Pól Ó Dubhrosa and assisted by Liam MacNailis Rúnaí, and the other members of the Committee have adopted a very pro active approach to the management, administration and development of referees in the Province. Our Association needs to recognise and support the work by such committees and ensure that our rules and our regulations provide our referees with appropriate authority and training that will allow them to go about their business with the minimum of confusion for them and for players.

In relation to facilities for referees, counties and clubs should always bear in mind the need to provide adequate dressing room provision for our referees and officials. We once again record our appreciation to the referees committee and the work of the referees administrators, assessors and tutors to whom we are deeply indebted and who continue to do outstanding work for our Association.

Inter Provincial Championship

The Inter Provincial Championships for 2006 in Hurling and Football both ended in defeats against Leinster opposition. The Hurlers were defeated by a strong Leinster team under floodlights at Parnell Park, Dublin while our footballers met the same fate in Breffni Park in the official opening of the new floodlight venue in October. There is no

doubt that the Inter Provincial Championships require a level of marketing and promotion and perhaps, a consideration of the time of year in which they are to be played. It is not ideal that many players involved in the football Inter Provincial competition had conflicting demands placed upon them on the same day as an Inter Provincial semi final when they were involved in trials for the International Rules series. At a time when we are all conscious on the issue of player burnout, it is simply unacceptable for the best players in the country to be put under such pressure at Provincial and National level at a time when their already lengthy season should be coming to a conclusion.

Education

Education is becoming increasingly important as a sector encompassing a number of critical areas of operation of Council business. With the large number of full and part time coaches who are accessing schools during and after curriculum time it is important that we are able to develop strategic links with education authorities to ensure that what we are doing is complementary and as importantly, is consistent across the nine counties in Ulster. We need to ensure that the work undertaken by our games officers is being backed up by support offered to our clubs. This is particularly important for those clubs who may have traditionally not had the infrastructure or personnel in place. Our games development programmes within counties need to support clubs and ensure that they are playing their part in the long term player development pathway that we have all signed up to. The work of Cumann na mBunscol as a body who oversees the work in our primary schools needs to continue and be developed in the coming years. The Council's Fun to Fame programme has set a bench mark that all people working with our youth should refer to, and we should ensure that the GAA are not replacing the provision of physical education within the school curriculum. Instead, we should ensure that while we do provide a coaching and games development service, that we are not there to replace the P.E. lesson, we are there to add value and additionality to the overall development of the young people who wish to play our games.

The work of our Vocational schools committee and Colleges Council continue to provide meaningful and structured competition for our secondary school players. This is required as an integral part of sustaining those peoples interest in Gaelic games. There is evidence that the age group that both of these committees service, is the most likely drop out period for young people in sport. It is therefore, a credit to those personnel involved in the committees that one of the great strengths of Gaelic games in our Province remains the excellent work being done in this area.

Grounds

The development of our facilities during 2006 was once again a significant focus of our operations during the year. At Club and County level our units continue to build for the future and ensure that they can provide adequate facilities for their members. In some cases clubs are developing third and fourth pitches in order to keep pace with the continued growth of their membership and in particular to assist with the provision of facilities for ladies in the development of camogie and ladies Gaelic football. Our clubs deserve credit for the first class facilities that they have provided which are anchors in their community and which have made an outstanding impact on the development of Gaelic games in their areas. Financial investment in facilities and grounds development

continues to be a priority for the Association at all levels. As part of our Strategic Plan going forward to 2010, the Ulster Council has a facilities plan in place, which will assist our counties and our clubs when seeking to secure government support for their various development projects.

2006 was a significant year in the fact that the safety in sports grounds legislation for the six counties was enacted in April. This legalisation will place responsibilities on our Council and our County Committees to ensure that our facilities are fit for purpose and that we can secure safety certificates to enable us to continue with the provision of our games in these venues. The application of the new legislation will place onerous duties on us all and we shall be required to work arrangements which have been developed and approved in association with the local authority with responsibility for the area. The Ulster Council has been and continues to be involved with the development of this process and the Council will provide all of the necessary support to our counties through the work of Stephen McGeehan and Liam Nelis to ensure that we are competent in this important area.

The proposed Multi Sport Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site remains a possibility. As has been stated in previous reports, the issue of the GAA involvement in the potential stadium is an Association matter as well as impacting on the Ulster Council. Our position remains that we are one of the three main sports who are “in Principle” signed up to the development and the use of the stadium should it become a reality. Some criticism has been levelled from some quarters at our Council for agreeing to be involved in the venture; however one must ask from what position is that criticism being levelled at us. Socially, economically and practically the Association must embrace the changing political climate in the North and as a result we continue to reserve the right to play our part in developing a new understanding and that we can repeat our community building programme in such a manner as to provide leadership as we create and develop shared space. Recently the design consultants HOK have been appointed to take forward the master plan for the venue and the Minister responsible David Hanson has stressed that under the conditions affordability, sustainability, and value for money that the Government is committed to making the stadium become a reality. The Association at National level with the support from Ulster has appointed two of our leading administrators to take their places on the design and stadium management committees which will be driving forward the Associations ideals and our requirements if the stadium is to become a reality and future Gaelic games fixtures are to be provided for, at the venue.

Provincial Council

2006 has been another exceptional year for the development of Comhairle Uladh. We enjoyed unprecedented development in terms of the structure, staff and strategic development of the Council. After many years of planning and negotiations with governments, the Council has now in place a competent staffing structure that will assist our voluntary input at provincial and county level and provide us with a modernised organisation at the forefront of sport in Ulster. We have seen in 2006 much support offered to our voluntary personnel who have given so much time and energy for the Association over many years and we are now able to assist them with the necessary support to carry out their duties as elected officers at Provincial and County board level.

Our Strategic Plan 'Beir Bua Nua', which takes us from 2006 to 2010 saw its first year of operation and the progress made against the targets sets have been extraordinary to say the least. The ongoing health and safety improvements at our county grounds and the now visible introduction of floodlighting will ensure that later this year in 2007, the Council will be able to call upon eight floodlit facilities that are available for the playing of our games.

During the year Comhairle Uladh through our Spatial and Strategic Planning Committee furiously resisted the Draft Planning Statement 14, which applied within the six counties by the Minister for Regional development and which potential will have serious consequences for rural GAA clubs in the future. The Comhairle Uladh is not opposed to sensible and sustainable planning policy for rural communities however, we do need to reserve the right to defend the members of our Association who reside in rural areas and to which this legislation is already disadvantaging. We will continue to lobby the various Government agencies and we thank in particular, the support given to us from Dermot Ahern through his Department of Foreign Affairs which we hope will see common sense prevail, leading to the draconian planning policy being abolished by the new executive arrangements which we hope will come into place in the six counties.

When one considers how far we have come so quickly, we are deeply indebted to all of the key people involved in the delivery of these projects. 2006 also saw us take up an offer from the Cookstown District Council to place a number of our coaching staff at their successful Mid-Ulster Sports Arena. This arrangement has been working very well to complement our coaching and CPD programme and the partnership is mutually beneficial for the GAA and the local authority itself. In fact, looking forward to the reorganising of public administration in the north there will be the opportunity for us to develop similar strategic links for the benefit of our games in the Province. Our twinning programme with Britain and Canada has continued in the areas of Code of Ethics and Coaching and Games Development, and it is important that Comhairle Uladh continue to assist and lead those overseas committees, and assist them with the use of our resources to be the best that they can be. Our numerous sub committees and workgroups continue to carry out very worthwhile and important work in a variety of operational and development areas. We are, as always, deeply grateful for those who gave so sparingly of their time for the interests of the Association in Ulster. The Chairmen of the committees are all committed and have done so much to ensure that they are delivering the objectives and outcomes set out for them to take forward the work of our Council. We acknowledge also the work of our Council members who represent their counties with distinction at Council level and are always willing to support the strategic and operational directions of Comhairle Uladh in the knowledge that we all work in the best interests of the GAA. Their efforts, support and input to our business is critically important to ensuring that we retain a holistic approach to the development and delivery of Gaelic games in our province.

Miceál Ó Grianian has served his final year in his three year term as Uachtaran, Comhairle Uladh CLG. Miceál has been an outstanding servant to the Association in Cavan, Ulster and at National level over a long and distinguished career in our administrative structure. He has demonstrated a complete and unstinting dedication to Cumann Luthchleas Gael. During his time Miceál has served on numerous committees and also as vice president of the GAA as a member of Coiste Bainisti Naisunta. Miceál

of course has a long and outstanding involvement going back to his service as a club secretary in Drumalee at the age of 14, and through the ranks playing and refereeing at the highest level provincially and All-Ireland. Miceál will forever be remembered as a man of his word and his commitment to our Association particularly his steering of our Council through its most progressive era since our formation in 1903. He may very well be fondly remembered in Armagh as a president who presented the Anglo Celt on each of the three Ulster Football finals under his watch at Croke Park. I would like to personally commend Miceál for all his work, help and his assistance in working through the many and complex issues that now form the work of Comhairle Uladh. I would also wish to thank Miceál's wife Carmel for her support of our president over the past three years. She too has given many hours and support to our Council and we wish her and the Greenan family the very best for the future.

Tómas Ó Dalaigh, our Vice-Chairman, has again worked superbly for our Association in Ulster and has made in particular a very significant contribution to the work of Coiste Iomana and to the development of Hurling in general over this past year. Tom has worked closely with his committee, the full time staff in Ulster and in the Counties to ensure that Hurling has fully benefited from the various projects established and has saw hurling make great strides during 2006. He has also been a very respected, and from our point of view, an important member of the Central Games Administration Committee. Our Cisteoir Aogan O Fearghail, has performed his duties as Cisteoir with the minimum of fuss and as always was very supportive in the running of our games in the various Ulster Council run competitions. In relation to the area of ICT we remain indebted to the support that he has given to that and the marketing aspects of the councils affairs.

Martin McAviney as our OCP, also completed another busy year for the Council as he represented us in our dealings with the media, and always ensured that our press releases and general information was readily available for the ever increasing profile being promoted by media personnel. We are indebted to him for his work in ensuring that our good days are profiled and the bad days are durable due in no small measure to Martin's standing in the media.

We would wish to place on record our sincere gratitude to all of our full time staff under the direction of Eugene Young (Director of Coaching), Stephen McGeehan (Operations Manager), Catherine Corrigan (Business Manager), Jimmy Darragh (Hurling Development Manager) and Terence McWilliams (Football Games Manager) and their team for their commitment and energy and the significant contributions that their work has made to Cumman Lutchleas Gael in Ulster during 2006. I also wish to acknowledge and thank my personal secretary, Geraldine McKavanagh, for her outstanding commitment and support to the Council. Geraldine provides a professional and pleasant service to all who require assistance from the Comhairle Uladh office.

Coaching and Games Development

2006 was another busy and challenging year for all those involved in the continued development of our coaching and games development programmes. In many ways the year was focused on the settling in of new full time staff at Provincial and County level and the challenge in ensuring that volunteers and full time officials could work together to move our games forward as set out in our strategic plan.

The Council now has in place, ten core coaching and games development officers under the direction of Dr Eugene Young and their work programmes are supported by coaching and business support from Bernie McGlinchey and Damian Kelly in the Comhairle Uladh office. In recent weeks the full time Ladies Football Development Manager and the Camogie Development manager have been appointed by their governing bodies and they will work closely with the Ulster Council staff to deliver programmes within their codes. Integration at provincial level will ensure that these new personnel are included in our wider coaching and games development strategies to ensure that young boys and girls who are interested in Gaelic games will be given every opportunity to progress through the player development pathway and that their coaches male or female will have access to our now extensive coaching and CPD programme.

At National level in relation to coaching policy, we continue to be somewhat frustrated by the lack of progress in the evolution of coaching levels. Ulster has led the way in the provision of Foundation, Level 1, and more recently Level 2. Coach education is exactly that and we as an organisation, need to remind ourselves that with proper programmes and support measures we can develop and assist all who participate in our games to enable them to be the best they can. We could pilot a level 3 programme here and now but we feel in some way that National policy in this area is not taking account of the advanced stage of our Province in the area of coaching games development.

The Cúl camps which were run across the country during 2006 was another clear indication of the fact that sometimes National programmes may not best serve the needs of our Province and our Counties. As a result of signing up to last years Summer camp programmes the Ulster Council and our Counties experienced a slight reduction in the number of children who attended camps throughout Ulster. We, in the whole games development area, have been greatly served under the excellent chairmanship of Nollaig MacCumhaill who has taken on strategic and development areas of coaching supported by our full time coaching staff to a level that has been unprecedented. We wish to ensure that our modernisation programme around the area of coach education continues to lead the way within the Association and that, in particular, through our experience and qualified staff that Hurling development can be assisted to ensure that we have a wider participation base at club and school level that will lead to improved performances for our Clubs and Counties in the years to come. One of the most innovative developments during the year would have been the provision of mobile coaching support for Hurling that has allowed us to provide support services for personnel involved in the Youth Games.

We held our 4th Annual Coaching conference in the Slieve Donard hotel in Newcastle and provided undoubtedly an array of experienced and highly respected speakers for our programmes over the weekend. We believe it is time to review the coaching conference as the attendance this year would suggest that some counties did not take up their allocation of places, or alternatively that the people who did attend may not have been entirely the correct audience that we wish to deliver our message to. There are plans in place to host, in the near future, a Club Development Conference for all of Ulster which will allow the focus of the coaching conference to return to the areas of coaching which are of greatest interest to our Clubs, Counties and the personnel involved.

In the area of special projects, staff employed by Comhairle Uladh have been progressing the implementation of such during 2006 and significant progress has been made in areas of Club Development (Cumman Maith), the integration of ladies Gaelic Football and Camogie, development of health and wellness programmes, the integration of foreign nationals through the top towns competition, work with the criminal justice agency and the young offenders, special needs and disability development work, diversity challenge and the provision of animated drills and CD ROM's for the use of our coaches.

The work with the Sports Institute squads continues to provide access services for 20 young players under the watch of Rodger Keenan at the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland. We maintain that the recruitment for the players at the institute should be on a nine county basis as that is the dynamic upon which the Council operates and also that only those players who are most committed and most likely to make use of the services provided should be able to access the facility in place. We do intend to monitor the facilities development programme in place at the institute to ensure that adequate provision is put in place for the inclusion of Gaelic games at the venue. It is important that the Capital programme complements the fact that we are included as a core sport within the facilities and that there is the correct mix of facilities to suit the needs of Gaelic footballers and Hurlers in the years to come.

We wish to thank Nollaig MacCumahaill for his diligent efforts and the committee for all of their work in working with our staff to take these programmes forward.

Gaeilge agus Oidreactha

This committee continues to fulfil an integral part in the cultural and Irish affairs of Comhairle Uladh. During 2006 the annual Ulster Council course in the Downings was tinged with sadness due to the death of Seamás de Faoite in the spring. The course was renamed the Seamás de Faoite Memorial course at its opening ceremony on Monday 17th July. The Course was attended by Uachtaran Comhairle Uladh Miceal O Grianan and Nioclás O Braonain, Uachtaran Cumann Lutchleas Gael who heralded the new course, as inaugural guest speaker. The committee continues to develop all aspects of our identity and assists our Counties to work with Clubs in promoting a living and expanding heritage Tomás Ó Cuilinn continues to give sound leadership to the committee and has provided direction and purpose in this vital area. He was assisted in these duties by Nollaig Mac Cumhaill who acted as Runai to the Coiste and provided sound support to all of the outworking of the committee. There are plans in place to work with a number of organisations during the incoming year including Comhairle na Gaelscoileachta and Foras Na Gaeilge and other organisations with which we believe the GAA can play a leading role in a strategic alliance to ensure that these vitally important areas of our language and culture are carried forward into the future. We also wish to ensure that we make an input into the proposed legislation and funding which may be available for the development of the Irish language in the six counties. We thank Tom and all of his committee for their work on our behalf, in this vital area for us all, as we seek to preserve our greatest heritage.

Culture and Scor

Scor and Scor na nOg competitions continue to promote a sense of cultural identity. The people involved with Scor and Scor na nOg maintain a level of commitment and

dedication to do great work for these competitions and should be commended for doing so. However, as an Association we should be promoting Scor with a greater effort, in order to advance the levels of interest and participation within this cultural side of our heritage.

We also acknowledge the work of Coiste Scor in their organising and running of the Scor events. We sincerely thank the competitors, adjudicators, host Clubs and the members of the Scor committee guided by Willie Turner and Rosena Jordan.

Code of Ethics and Good Practice

Over the past twelve months Comhairle Uladh commenced a process which allowed us to ensure that people working with children and young people in the Association could be checked in accordance with the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults. The approach taken to date has been to check that all fulltime staff working within Comhairle Uladh, as well as full time staff within the Counties, has been checked as a matter of priority as part of our modernisation process. The opportunity was then given to our Counties to check persons who were working at summer camps. Schools coaches were also checked as were officers and staff of Comhairle Uladh. External tutors used by Comhairle Uladh to assist in the delivery of our coaching programme have also been through the process. The challenge now lies in advancing out this service throughout the Association, to ensure that all children and all of the constituent units of our Association are protected. This will be staged by commencing with those people who have already had their child protection training since April 2005. The intention will be to ensure that all people working with children and young people within our clubs are all properly checked to ensure that Comhairle Uladh has preformed a duty to care to safe guard the children within our Association structure. To support this area of work the Council appointed a Child Officer at Provincial level as well as an alcohol and drugs prevention officer to assist the committee with its policy and programmes. This area of operation has again provided great progress over the past year. This undoubtedly and challenging areas of our operation. Our committee, tutors and coaches have all worked together to ensure the training and understanding are being developed for the betterment of our services to children and to ensure that we keep ourselves within the recognised codes of practice legislation. We should not be afraid to embrace this area of our responsibilities because we have already demonstrated that we as an Association have been pro active in putting in place the strategy and structure necessary. We are very thankful to the work of Martin McAviney and Michael Hasson who have taken this critical area from a non existent position to one where we are now compliant with the requirements of the various legal requirements, and has placed the Association in an advantageous position as we broaden our involvement at youth and education levels. More recently Catherine Corrigan, as Child Officer, has made a very considerable input to the development of the checking processes and systems required to meet our targets within the prescribed timescales. We also thank the representatives on the Committee from the Counties who are doing so much to spread the word that we must take cognisance of our responsibilities to ensure a duty of care of all children and vulnerable adults who are or potentially might be involved in the playing of Gaelic games or our associate programmes or pastimes in Cumann Luthchleas Gael.

Association Matters

This year proved another very positive one for the Association. Our role and standing in Irish society has never been as strong as it is now. In terms of our contribution to the lives of people involved, we continue to lead the way as a sporting organisation. In Ulster we have proceeded along the path of strategic planning and at Provincial, County and Club level our units are already seeing the benefits of this approach. At National level, we have not made such progress and we collectively need to come together to produce a minimum five year strategy for the Association as a whole. This should not prove difficult as we believe the sense of such a plan already exists in the SRC report of 2002. The Association should revisit and build upon the Enhancing Community Report with the view of having a Strategic Plan for all aspects of our Association's affairs at National level and one that will ensure that the idealism of Cumann Luthchleas Gael is aligned with the challenges and opportunities of a modern and revitalised Ireland and our diaspora. There is a danger that if we do not set the agenda that someone else will. Since the early 1990's we have made tremendous progress on the development of our physical infrastructures all over the County. Our National Stadium in Croke Park is a statement of our great strength as an amateur organisation in an era of increasing professionalism in sport.

We must for future years ensure that we do not lose sight of who we are, and the reasons that the Association was formed. There is a need to support all of our units in every corner of Ireland and abroad to be the best that they can be and provide them with the necessary education and support to take forward all of our aims and ideals in a positive manner.

The issue of indiscipline on our playing pitches became evident once more during the year. We cannot accept and will not accept such examples of violence, and disrespect for our rules, not to mention abuse of our officials. Our games at many levels are now very high profile and administrators, County Officers, Team Managers, Players and Referees should always bear that in mind. We all need to examine our attitude to all of our affairs and to decide if want to continue with a mutual respect approach, or do we become a prescriptive Association where everything must be predetermined and rigorously enforced with its' contingent negativities. We must decide now how we must proceed from this point onwards.

Our new disciplinary procedures are now in place and being considered in our Counties and no one should be in any doubt that disciplinary authorities will not shirk their responsibilities to deal with all cases in a firm, but fair manner. The need is there to have the Rulebook Task Force complete its work so as to ensure that we have a consistent and complete Rulebook. Once this is achieved then the monitoring to require deficiencies to be identified becomes critical and hopefully, we shall not to rewrite our legislation to such an extent again. We record our thanks to those who worked so diligently to achieve the various outcomes to date.

In last years report I referred to Comhairle Uladh's concerns on the operation and management of the D.R.A. in respect of some of our personal experiences. One year on we would remain concerned at how the Authority deals with respondents in an almost discriminatory fashion and that there would appear a "perception of bias" tenet

introduced that taken to its' logical conclusion would mean that no one within our Association could conceivably be immune from such a challenge. We are concerned at the laissez - faire approach being adopted by the Disputes Resolution Authority and their contemptible treatment of Comhairle Uladh during the past year. We now need an urgent and complete review of D.R.A.'s operations and this is needed to ensure that all rights are given equal and proper respect. We would also point out that we believe the unitary and unchallengeable powers afforded to the Secretary of the Disputes Resolution Authority are a cause for serious concern and a mechanism must be found, short of a Judicial Review, to ensure the interests of the individual are balanced against the interests of the Association. Access for interim decisions must have tighter constraints imposed to ensure that the disciplinary and appeals system are not circumvented by the short route to the DRA.

In terms of future football and hurling championship structures we fundamentally believe that the Provincial championships must be allowed to continue. The football competition particularly in Ulster sets our Province apart. We do however, need to address the trend of supporters attending only the latter stages of the All-Ireland competitions. We would welcome the introduction of new ideas for the qualifier system and most especially a better deal for our Provincial champions. We have engaged in preliminary discussions of a new proposal for the All-Ireland football qualifier competition, and these proposals may be taken forward to Annual Congress in April. I would suggest that the Provincial Champions should have the opportunity of the clear route to the All Ireland Semi Finals and this can be best achieved by having the Provincial Champions play each other with the winners advancing to the All Ireland Semi Finals and with the defeated provincial Champions getting a second chance against two teams emerging from the Qualifier Series. I believe that this will ensure a more appropriate and consistently competitive championship in football. I also believe that we need have a radical look at the National league to assist our Counties and the Association in the development of elements of support and marketing that are not helped by the current arrangements. The Special Congress took the first step and we need to ensure that what emerges is strategic and not the lowest common denominator. The apparent agreement on the Hurling competition structures are to be welcomed and I believe that an agreed programme for five years is achievable and more importantly desirable.

The International rules series quite rightly came in for criticism due to the disgraceful scenes we witnessed during the year. The review of the continuation of the series was a sensible resolution, however, if the series is to have any future, we along with the AFL must deal with the measures which need to be put in place to ensure the safety of the players and to extend the disciplinary actions applying to perpetrators must apply within our codes, otherwise there is no future for the series and rightly so.

The Association should also consider in terms of an international dimension, marketing our "Gaelic Games and Cultural" product as an International activity in its own right. The doubters may say that the market is not yet there in other countries. However, just because there is some marketing and development work to be done, we should not simply make excuses for doing nothing. Our television audiences for the All-Ireland finals

demonstrates our global attraction and we should do more to provide an outlet for their interest in our games.

The need for the Association to produce a marketing strategy has never been greater to form part of the Strategic Plan. Indeed, the Strategic Plan itself would be a marketing tool for the Association and the work in building and enhancing community development to a wider audience. Any strategy and marketing plan must articulate policies and projects for directing our revenues to the promotion, development and fostering of the people's passion for Gaelic games and our Association. We have the necessary expertise to confidently go about this particular exercise with courage, conviction and community support.

The new Celtic Tiger throughout Ireland is rightly viewed as a threat to the involvement of our people in the workings of the Association. The increasing value of land and the diminishing recreational space are also counter to our position to being at the heart of the Community. We are witnessing the hugely increased value of the properties owned by our Clubs and County Committees. While this has benefit to the Association and the units involved it also has the danger of turning our community centred Clubs into commercial enterprises. We, as an organisation, must examine the current trend and be certain the necessary controls are in place to deal with a cash rich as distinct from a property rich Association

We acknowledge work carried out by Central Council, Sub-Committees and various Taskforces. We sincerely thank the various members from this Province, who have assisted in 2006 to move the Association forward.

We recognise the progressive direction already taken on by Nioclás O Braonáin Uachtaran CLG in his first year and the leadership shown by him. We pay tribute to the ticket office staff for their help and guidance on Ulster occasions in Croke Park and elsewhere. We acknowledge the assistance of Liam O Maolmhichil Ard Stiurthoir, Danny Lynch, Dermot Power and Therasa Rehill for all their help and support. We again were grateful for the use of the stadium for the Ulster football final but unfortunately due to the changes invoked by the Special Congress the future use of our National Stadium has effectively been removed from us. We thank Peter McKenna and his staff for the excellent support they provided to us when we used the facilities in our wonderful Croke Park.

The work of many people from Ulster is deployed on National Committees and we acknowledge their substantial input. I would like to put on record our appreciation to those from our Province who chaired committees or task forces.

I would also like to put on record the excellent contribution made by outgoing Chairmen, Secretaries and other County Board Officers in Ulster Counties during 2006.

The Sports Council have again provided useful guidance to our units in the further development of our games and in particular, we thank Eamonn McCartan, Chief Executive and Professor Eric Saunders, Chairman for their support during another hectic year. It would be remiss not to acknowledge the improving relationship with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure due to the courteous dealings with Edgar Jardine, Ciaran Mee and Jackie Palmer.

I would conclude by congratulating our three Vodafone Football All Stars for 2006, namely Barry Owens, Fear Manach, Karl Lacey, Dun na nGall and Ronan Clarke, Ard

Mhacha for their achievements during the season and through them all the players that brighten and enrich our days, weeks and years.

IT and Marketing

The Association continues to embrace ICT functions as an integral part of our modernisation programme. We need to work much faster to implement our membership information software to enable us to respond to the ever increasing external demands on us to demonstrate value for money in the expenditure of public money. We are well served by our IT Committee and they continue to provide sound advice to Comhairle Uladh.

We once again thank Aogan O Fearghail, Gerard Bradley and the Committee for their vital work. We also acknowledge our staff member responsible for ICT Damian Kelly who has brought us further forward in 2006. The introduction of an Electronic Newsletter and the continued development of our Website are matters of particular note.

Media

Our profile now dictates that the media are interested in our affairs both on and off the field of play. We are most unhappy about a recent trend on several occasions newspapers and TV stations have sensationally linked peoples personal business with the GAA, when the item had no relevance to our Association or the person concerned, involvement with Cumann Luthchleas Gael. We do dispute the right of a free press to accurately report a newsworthy story but we are prepared to be denigrated by this type of unfair, unwarranted and improper journalism. We are considering, with our legal advisers making a complaint to bodies responsible for ethics within the written and visual media to demonstrate our abhorrence of this unacceptable type of journalism. We wonder what sponsors of County and Club teams think when the front page of newspapers carry their logos in detailing incidents which are unlikely to credit their particular business and no direct relevance to the GAA.

On a more positive note the television interest in our championship in football was unprecedented in 2006 with seven games broadcasted live.

We hope that a resolution of the issue of digital rights will enable in the future all those who wish to promote our games to do so on a level playing field.

At the time of writing our Dr McKenna Cup is having fixtures televised live on TG4 and we sincerely hope that our attractiveness to the media continues and that our games continue to thrive as a result.

We compliment and thank all those organisations on their coverage of our games and our Public Relations Officer, Martin McAviney for his vital role in working with them.

Modernisation Programme

Our enthusiastic and capable staff under the direction of Dr Eugene Young, Director of Coaching, Stephen McGeehan, Operations Manager, Catherine Corrigan, Business Manager, and Jimmy Darragh, Hurling Manager have taken the operations of the Council to a new level during 2006.

Comhairle Uladh has made significant progress in:

- Administration and Corporate Governance;

- Coaching and Games Development;
- Hurling;
- Facilities development and floodlighting.

Beir Bua Nua 2006-2010 continues to provide the critical path from which all our work is focused on delivering on the aims and objectives of the plan. At this time after only one year of our strategy we are 50% ahead of anticipated progress in most areas. This statistic is a credit to all those involved and we will through our Coiste Forbatha, ensure that all areas of operation are being progressed again at regular intervals during 2007. In our counties most if not all, of the initial teething difficulties have been ironed out and voluntary and professional staff are now working well together for the development of Gaelic games in the County.

Floodlighting

During 2006 three of our main county grounds namely, Casement Park, Belfast, Healy Park, Omagh, and Breffni Park, Cavan were fitted with state of the art floodlights. Work is almost complete at Brewster Park, Enniskillen, while in Parc Esler, Newry and MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey, floodlights will be installed by the summer of 2007. Plans are already in place for phase three of our floodlighting plan which will see the Athletic Grounds, Armagh and Celtic Park, Derry with their floodlights installed in late 2007.

I wish to acknowledge the significant work of our operations Manager Stephen McGeehan and Facilities Officer Liam Nelis for their contribution to this process. We also acknowledge the excellent work of Barretts Electrical Ltd and Musco Lighting Ireland at the Respective Grounds.

Development of County Grounds

Important Health and Safety work has commenced, or is about to commence, at a number of our main county grounds. This work includes the installation of electronic turnstiles, the building of Control Rooms, elimination of uneven surfaces, improved access to our grounds; improved facilities for disabled spectators, improved facilities for disabled spectators, improved medical and stewards' facilities and public toilet accommodation; modern communication systems, CCTV and drug testing facilities. The Health & Safety work is part funded by the Sports Council Northern Ireland, Central and Ulster Councils and by County Boards themselves. Some Counties have taken the opportunity at this stage to improve team areas, administrative areas, media facilities and referee accommodation. The overall aim of such developments is to improve the health and safety aspects at our grounds and also the comfort of our spectators, officials and players. The cost of this work is between £5.5m and £6m. This development will also help our county grounds meet the requirements of recent licensing legislation for major sports grounds in Northern Ireland.

Work is also ongoing on the improvement of playing surfaces in Pairs Esler, Newry and Brewster Park, Enniskillen. This type of pitch works will become increasingly important as the use of floodlights is sure to place additional pressures on our natural turf pitches. During the year there were suggestions that at least one of our county boards wished to proceed with major re-development proposals at their main county grounds. Any county

board planning to take forward such proposals should be mindful of the need to develop the appropriate 'Master Plans; Business Cases and Economic Appraisals' which will be required before the Association at Central or Provincial level, not to mention Government could consider supporting at whatever level.

Acknowledgements

I personally would wish to thank all of the units throughout Ulster for their understanding and forbearance during my recent and continuing illness. The effectiveness of my fellow Officers, the staff in Ceannaras Uladh have meant that my absence has effectively not been missed. I am particularly indebted to Miceal O Grianain, for absorbing part of my work in addition to his own hectic schedule. I am indebted to Catherine Corrigan for dealing with the preparation of our Accounts for today's Convention and dealing with ongoing issues as they arise. Eugene Young and Jimmy Darragh have dealt with Coaching and Hurling issues for which I am indebted. A friend in need is a friend indeed and I am forever grateful to Stephen McGeehan who dealt with much of my external work and ensured that Comhairle Uladh had their input which required Stephen to absorb a great deal of responsibility. Finally, I am fortunate to have someone of the calibre of Geraldine McKavanagh to take care of my affairs in my absence. Geraldine is a remarkable person who has with courtesy and respect represented my position in all matters. I am very thankful to her and the remaining staff for their continued work in my absence.

Uachtarán

Today we come to the end of the Presidency of Miceál O Grianain. He has led from the front with courage and conviction. He has been a most willing worker and has represented Comhairle Uladh wherever required with distinction. No one ever had any doubt as to where he stood on the issues of the time and he accurately reflected the views of Ulster as he saw them. We indebted to Miceal, for his energy, dedication and commitment to the GAA throughout his three years at the helm of this province. I know also that he has accumulated many friends and has earned the respect of opponents during his three years as Uachtarán Comhairle Uladh. We record our thanks to Miceál for all his work and know that the future will see him fully active in our Association. Tomas O Dalaigh has reached the pinnacle of administration in Ulster and deserves his election to this position. He has a great family background in the Association and especially so from his late father Hugh. He will take the lead today and I know that he will take us forward along the route until tomorrow and it shall be a bright new day. Congratulations to Tomas and the Daly family on this richly deserved honour.

Comhbhrón

The past year saw many great stalwarts of our Association pass to their eternal reward and among them were Players, Referees, Administrators, Supporters and extensions to the wider GAA family circle as a whole. We particularly call to mind Andy O Brien and Jarlath Carey who made major contributions to the GAA in Ulster. We extend our sympathy to all who were bereaved and hope that they find solace and comfort from the fact that the GAA family also remember fondly the input and involvement of all of our deceased members. The sacrifice of the mass will be offered for all deceased members of

our Association at St Mary's, Bellaghy, on the morning of convention at 11 a.m. It is hoped that all delegates can attend as a mark of respect for all our deceased members.

Conclusion

Comhairle Uladh remains in a strong position as a leading Provincial Council and as a recognised Governing Body of Sport in the six counties. We have already articulated our vision for the future of Gaelic Games in the Ulster and on the island of Ireland. In recent weeks, significant moves are afoot which may restore devolved administration to the north. We must place our organisation in a position where we can play a key role in the delivering of bright new days to the benefit of our members in particular, and Irish society in general. We want equally to reach out to communities that have tended traditionally not to involve themselves in our games. We in turn, need recognition for the work that we do and our proven ability to build stable and enduring communities. In Ulster we have always been proud of and have valued our GAA unity of purpose. Comhairle Uladh can continue to develop and support a GAA across the nine counties that is strong, successful and above all meaningful to all our people. A big task lies ahead of us but we look forward to your help on delivering on it. Remember that is not all about winning but that it has more to do with idealism, commitment and a sense of place.

Is mise le meas
Dónall Ó Murchú
Rúnaí, Comhairle Uladh CLG