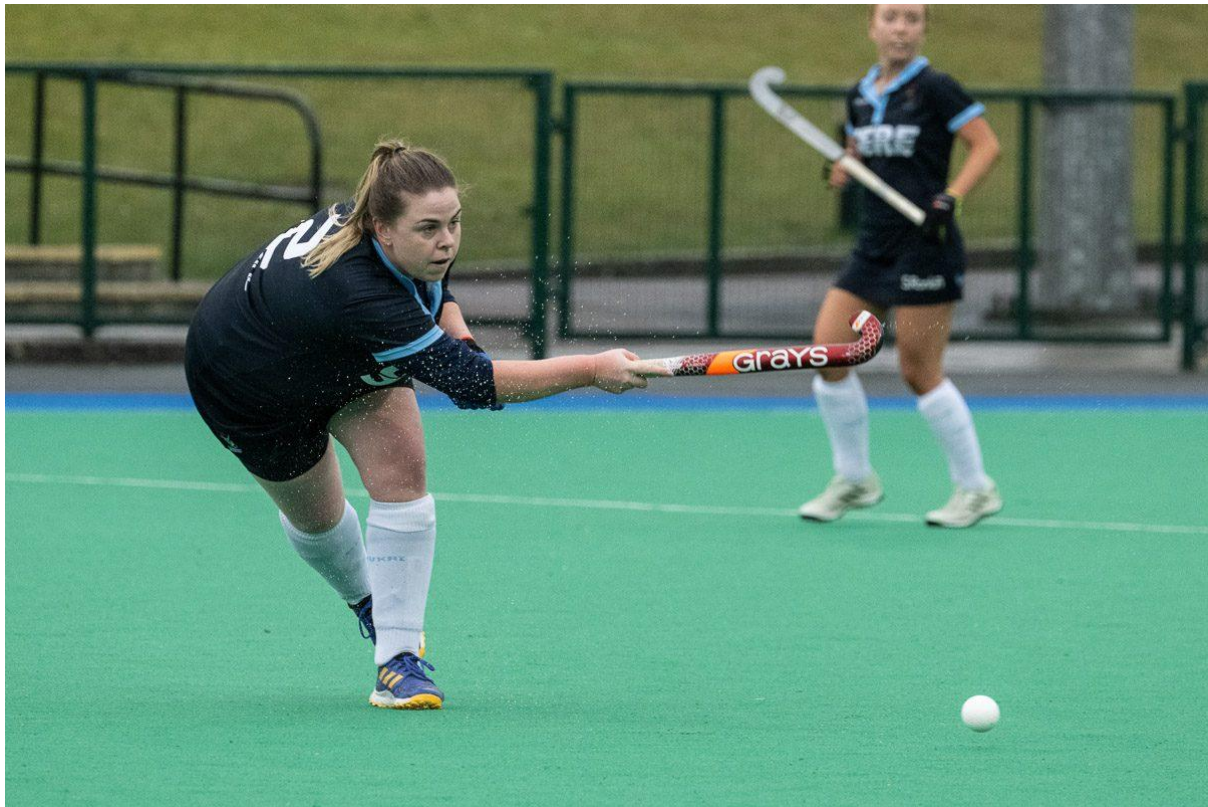


## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster



**Submitted to:**

Marc Scott  
Chief Executive,  
Ulster Hockey,  
Unit 5G, Stirling House,  
Castlereagh Road Business Park,  
478 Castlereagh Road,  
Belfast,  
BT5 6BQ

**Submitted by:**

David Barrett,  
Sport Industry Research Centre  
Sheffield Hallam University  
Sheffield, S10 2BP

Tel: +44 (0)114 225 2298

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Methodology .....	3
Our Approach .....	3
Review of Existing Data .....	3
Participant and Membership Survey .....	4
Qualitative Conversations with Hockey Stakeholders .....	4
Limitations .....	4
Results .....	5
Review of Existing Affiliation Data .....	5
Men's League Entries .....	5
Women's League Entries .....	5
Cup Competition Winners .....	6
Review of Competitive Balance Data .....	8
Competitive balance measures .....	9
Headline results- Men .....	9
Headline results- Women .....	11
Ulster Hockey Survey Results .....	12
The Nature of the Sample .....	12
Current and Future Engagement with Hockey .....	13
Importance and Satisfaction .....	17
Balance of Competitive Hockey .....	19
Competitive Hockey for Hockey Development .....	20
Qualitative Interview Findings .....	22
Competition .....	22
Organisation .....	26
Ways of Working .....	29
Workload .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
In Summary .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Policy Implications .....	32
Next Steps .....	37

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## Introduction

This report presents the findings of research into Hockey, undertaken by the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University. The research was commissioned jointly by Ulster Hockey. The aim was to investigate the current state of play with regard to the structure of competitive hockey in Ulster, and to identify options for improving and refining the competitive environment in support of Ulster Hockey's strategic objectives, as outlined in the 2021-26 strategic plan document ([Inspire - Build - Sustain](#)).

The results presented here are intended to give an indication of the general health of competitive hockey in Ulster, as measured by competition entry data, a survey of participants and volunteers, and qualitative interviews with a cross-section of individuals from across the hockey community. The primary focus of the findings is on the balance between different competitive strands, but connections with other competitive contexts in hockey are made throughout to contextualise the position of the game in Ulster in the broader picture Irish hockey.

It is important to note that although Ulster Hockey has conducted primary research in the past to support its planning and delivery, the survey upon which much of the analysis contained in the report is based is more specific in scope and smaller in scale than previous exercises. It is not possible therefore, to make any direct comparisons with previous research into Hockey or fit the findings into any time series of outputs. Nevertheless, an improved understanding of the views of the hockey community in relation to the competitive environment is both timely and essential to developing plans for continued growth in the months and years ahead.

## Methodology

### Our Approach

The research consists of data collated from three sources:

- An analysis of existing data relating to competition entries provided by Ulster Hockey;
- A survey of participants and members, delivered online between March and June, 2023, and;
- A series of qualitative interviews with Hockey stakeholders.

The research took a sequential approach which used findings from each phase to define the questions asked in the next stage. Thus, the survey questions were designed with reference to the outcome of the data audit, and the qualitative interview questions were based on the results of the online survey.

### Review of Existing Data

The research design included an analysis of data relating to competition entries and outcomes to establish the current state of play with regard to competitive hockey, and place it in its historical context. Ulster Hockey made available records of adult league and cup competitions going back to the 1999-2000 season, though it was quickly apparent that data for women's competitions were not accessible, with the exception of the last two seasons. The situation was complicated by the fact that the provider of league website facilities ([fixtureslive.com](#)) was bought and taken over by another company which did not retain an archive of league data. The decision was taken to proceed with the analysis of the available data, with stakeholders agreeing that the issues facing the men's game were and are more significant and urgent.

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## Participant and Membership Survey

An online survey was designed in conjunction with Ulster Hockey, being influenced by the results of the audit phase as well as conversations with key stakeholders from the governing body. The survey was administered online and advertised by Ulster Hockey during the 2022-23 playing season. A total of 686 participants engaged with the survey, of whom 679 consented to take part in the research.

## Qualitative Conversations with Hockey Stakeholders

Subsequent to the online survey, a series of online interviews took place involving 31 stakeholders from across the hockey community in Ulster and beyond. These consultations took the form of one-to-one conversations for the majority of participants, as well as two focus groups: one for club representatives, and another for members of Ulster Hockey's Youth Ambassador Forum. A third focus group for schools' representatives was planned, but the invited participants chose not to engage with this phase of the consultation. The interview questions were drawn up with reference to the outcome of the survey, and in consultation with Ulster Hockey, with conversations transcribed so that they could be reviewed for content.

## Limitations

The primary limitation of the research was the inability to access a complete and consistent dataset pertaining to women's adult competitive hockey. While the analysis of the data was interesting and informative, it leaves the overall picture incomplete. As the following section makes clear, there are significant issues confronting the men's game which do not appear to be replicated in women's hockey, either in scope or extent. It is not possible to confirm or refute this assertion however, in the absence of valid data.

In contrast, the online survey generated a reasonable sample of almost 700 responses, which allows detailed analysis by gender, age, club type, location, and size. It is also pleasing to note that there were 279 responses from people with a school affiliation, but this must be offset against the lack of engagement from people aged under 25, for whom the findings of this exercise are perhaps most pertinent. The difficulties of consulting with young people are wide-ranging and well-documented, though 174 respondents made clear in their submissions that they were the parent of a child under the age of 16. Nevertheless, the sample of 96 young people limits the extent to which the sample can be said to be truly representative of the playing population.

Finally, the qualitative interviews engaged with a broad range of representatives from the Ulster hockey family, including schoolteachers and principals, coaches, umpires, club administrators, players, and representatives of the provincial and national governing bodies. The outcome was a cross-section of opinion that provided a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues at play, and some constructive suggestions for their resolution. While it would have undoubtedly been useful and informative to engage with more individuals in this way, pressure of time required a compromise to be reached. We are nevertheless confident that the sample of qualitative interviewees is representative of the views of the key stakeholder groups.

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

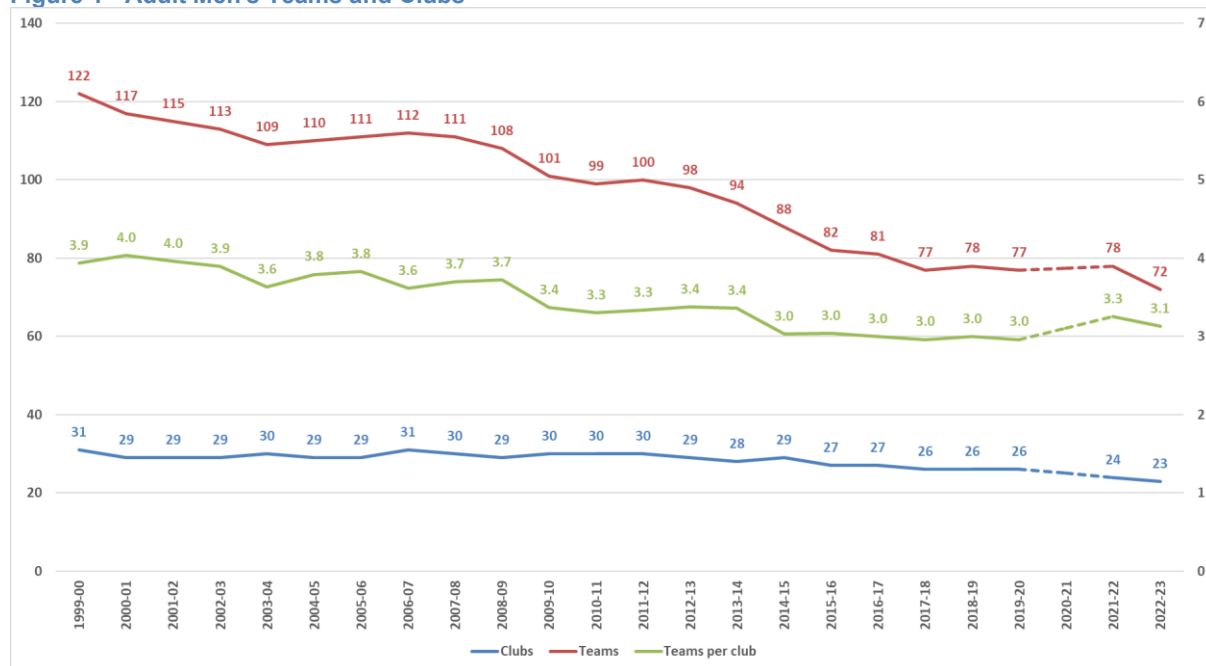
## Results

### Review of Existing Affiliation Data

#### Men's League Entries

Before considering the analysis of competitive balance in hockey in Ulster, it is first necessary to set the scene by exploring the context of the size and scope of the adult game. Figure 1 outlines the number of men's clubs and teams affiliated to Ulster Hockey since the 1999-2000 season, and shows a gradual but steady rate of decline in the number of teams playing league hockey. Over two decades, until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an overall loss of 45 men's teams from 122 to 77 in 2019, a fall of 37%. In the same timeframe, the number of affiliated clubs dropped from 31 to 26 (16% of the total). The average number of teams fielded by each club fell from just under 4 in 1999 to 3 in 2019.

Figure 1 - Adult Men's Teams and Clubs



Early signs of recovery in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic were mildly encouraging, with a slight rise in the number of teams to 78. However, two clubs (Ballymena HC and Down HC) folded in the interim, and were subsequently followed by Ballynahinch HC last year. At the beginning of the 2022-23 season, a further 5 teams had withdrawn from the league. The current position is therefore a total loss of 50 men's adult teams and 8 clubs since the beginning of the new millennium.

Significantly, in every case of withdrawal from competitive hockey in Ulster between 1999 and 2023, the club concerned was fielding no more than 2 teams in the previous season. As many as 9 (39%) of the remaining 23 clubs currently field 1 or teams, highlighting their vulnerability to any loss of playing strength. The rate of attrition among men's adult teams is not confined to smaller clubs. Medium-sized clubs (those with 3 or 4 teams playing league hockey) lost an average of 2 teams over the period in question, while larger clubs (with 5 or more registered teams in 1999) lost 1.75 on average.

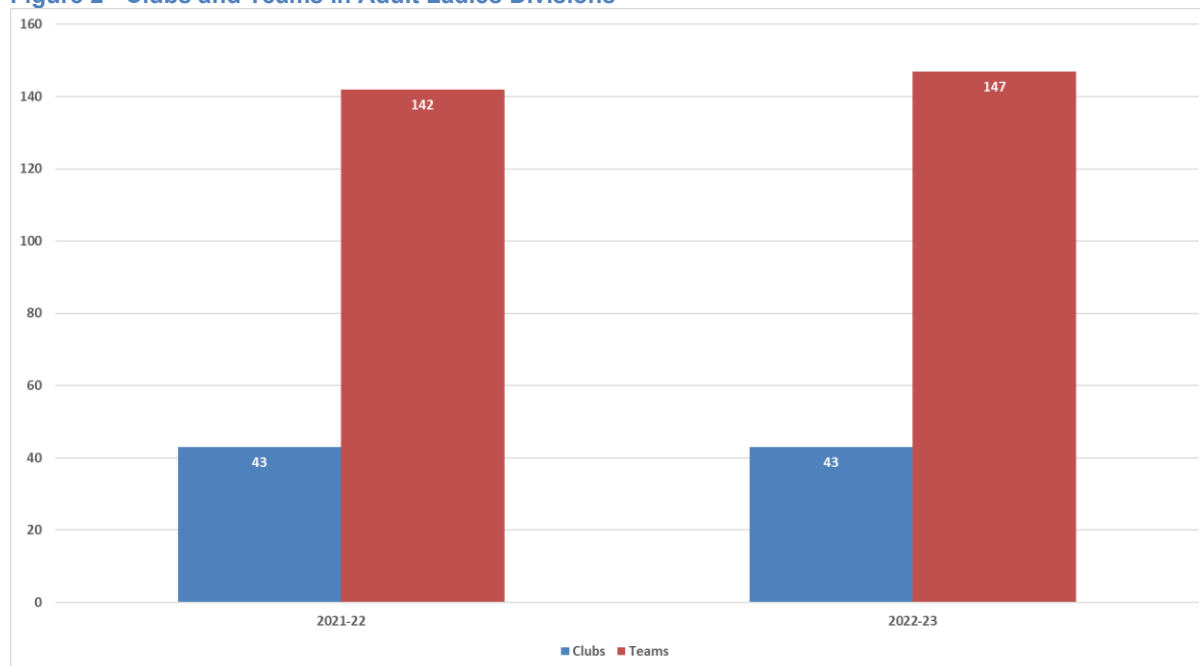
#### Women's League Entries

The apparent decline stands in stark contrast with the state of the women's game, where the number of teams and clubs has exceeded that of the men's league for some time. Figure 2

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

shows the data for the immediate post-pandemic period, and underlines the relative strength of women's adult hockey in Ulster, with 43 affiliated clubs fielding 145 registered teams (an increase of 5 from 2021-22). The average club puts out 3.4 teams each week, while the proportion of smaller clubs (fielding 1 or 2 teams) is lower than in the men's game, at 33%. Importantly, all of the women's clubs affiliated to Ulster Hockey in 2021-22 were present during the 2022-23 season.

Figure 2 - Clubs and Teams in Adult Ladies Divisions



### Cup Competition Winners

The analysis of cup data necessarily takes adopts a different perspective, since the nature of knockout hockey results in the majority of teams playing only one game per competition. It is nevertheless interesting to explore the outcome of the various cup competitions in Ulster in terms of the teams and clubs which have been successful in winning trophies. The results reveal further evidence to underscore the trend of increasing imbalance in adult men's hockey.

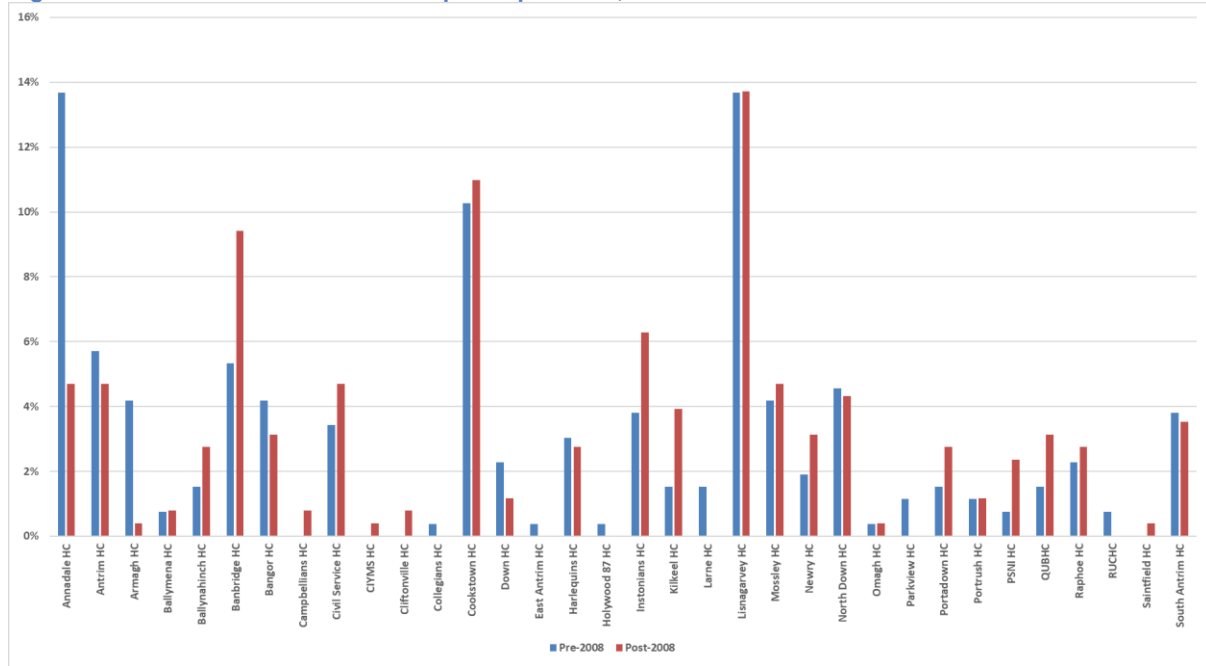
As Figure 3 shows, a significant proportion of victories in the various cup competitions (41% of the total) have been achieved by four clubs (Annadale, Banbridge, Cookstown and Lisnagarvey). Moreover, the graph reveals a notable change over time with Annadale losing their pre-eminent status after 2008, while Banbridge have become increasingly successful in recent years. Conversely, since 2008, 15 clubs have won fewer than 5 trophies in cup competition, including 6 which failed to win any cup competition, though in reality, this total includes 5 clubs which have either folded or merged with another club (thereby highlighting one of the challenges in analysing this dataset).

### Key Points

- The men's league has lost a total of 50 teams between 2008/9 and 2022-23. Over the same period, 8 clubs withdrew from the league entirely.
- Cup results show that success in knockout competitions has been confined to a small number of clubs and schools between 2000 and 2023.

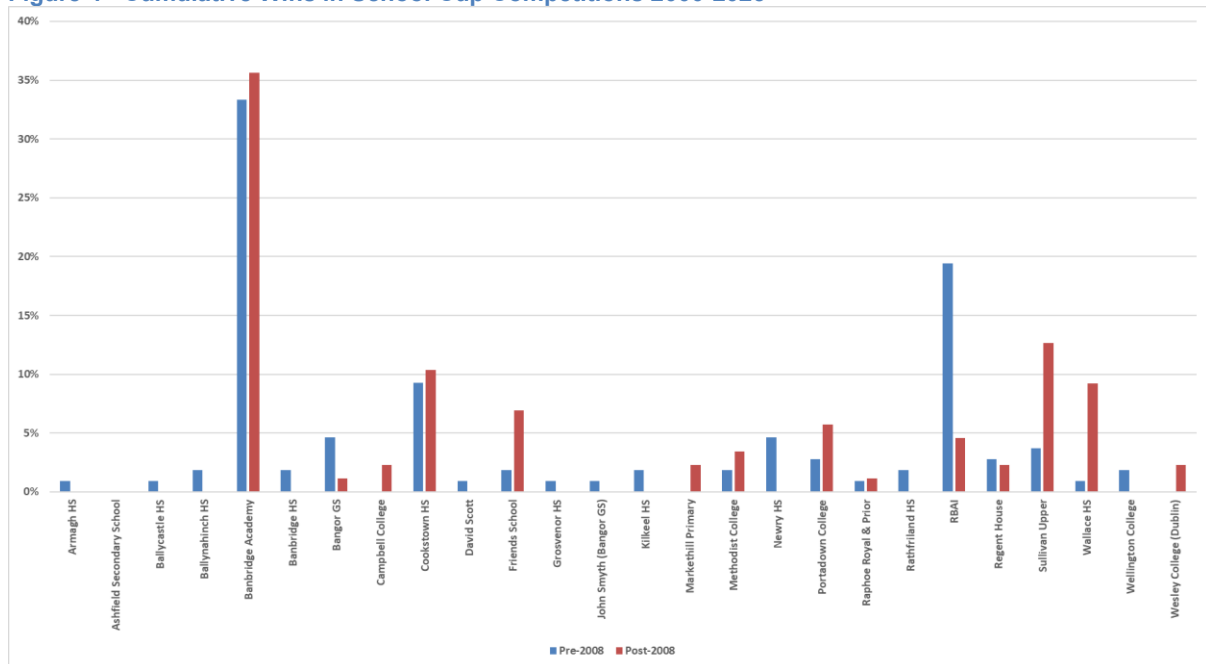
# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

Figure 3 - Cumulative Wins in Club Cup Competitions, 2000-23



The picture of dominance is even more stark at school level (Figure 4), where one institution – Banbridge Academy – accounts for one in three victories in all cup competitions between 2000 and 2023. As with club competitions, some notable shifts have taken place, with RBAI losing their position as challengers to RBAI prior to 2008, while Friends School Lisburn, Sullivan Upper and Wallace High School have achieved more success since then. The most startling statistic is that almost three quarters of all cup competitions have been won by just 6 schools since 2000, and only 5 since 2008.

Figure 4 - Cumulative Wins in School Cup Competitions 2000-2023



It is not possible to explore long-term trends in women’s hockey, due the lack of available data outlined earlier in this report. It is nevertheless possible to propose, at least tentatively, that the women’s game is in better overall health in Ulster, from the perspective of competitive

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

adult hockey. This does not mean however, that there is no scope for improvement, and it is therefore essential to explore not only the nature of the competitions organised by Ulster Hockey, but also the attitudes, motivations and responses of the player, officials and volunteers who support them. It is to the former to which we now turn.

## Review of Competitive Balance Data

The sample time frame for inclusion in the competitive balance analysis is the 12 seasons from 2008-09 to 2019-20. There are a number of caveats to note in the sample:

- All leagues in 2019-20 were curtailed due to Covid-19, and there was no league activity in the 2020-21 season.
- The senior / intermediate league structure has seen three changes since 2015-16
- Three seasons on the Premier League (2017-20) and two seasons of the Intermediate league (2016-17 and 2017-18) saw a league split following one full round of games where the top half of the league split. Points Per Game (PPG) calculations were therefore used to present a more standardised league table.
- Junior league 6 was discontinued from the 2017-18 season onwards.
- Junior league 7 only ran in 2008-09

Figure 5 outlines the nature of the sample in terms of the number of teams in each division, and the number of seasons included in the analysis. The table highlights the frequent adjustments to the league structure, especially in the senior leagues from 2012-13 onwards, characterised by a reduced number of teams in the Intermediate League / Senior League 1 and Senior League 2, and continuous fluctuation in the size of the premier league since 2016-17. Conversely, in the junior divisions, the number of teams was relatively consistent at or around 12 up to 2013-14. From this point onwards however, league sizes have tended towards 10, though number have varied in response to withdrawals and complications caused by promotion and relegation.

**Figure 5 - Number of teams in each Adult Men's Divisions, by season**

SEASON	PREM <i>n</i>	INTER <i>n</i>	SEN 2 <i>n</i>	JUN 1 <i>n</i>	JUN 2 <i>n</i>	JUN 3 <i>n</i>	JUN 4 <i>n</i>	JUN 5 <i>n</i>	JUN 6 <i>n</i>	JUN 7 <i>n</i>
2008-09	8	12	9	12	12	12	12	11	11	9
2009-10	10	10	10	12	12	12	12	12	11	
2010-11	10	10	10	12	12	12	12	11	10	
2011-12	10	10	10	12	12	12	12	10	12	
2012-13	10	10	9	12	12	11	12	10	12	
2013-14	10	10	7	11	12	12	12	10	10	
2014-15	10	10	8	10	10	9	9	9	13	
2015-16	10	8		10	10	10	10	10	10	
2016-17	11	8		10	9	10	10	12	8	
2017-18	14			10	12	14	11	12		
2018-19	13	9		10	12	10	10	10		
2019-20	12	9		10	12	10	8	11		
2020-21										
2021-22	12	8		12	12	10	10	11		
2022-23	10	7		10	10	10	9	12		

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## Competitive balance measures

There are a variety of measurement techniques which can be applied to professional team sports to measure competitive balance. The method used for this research originates from Mitchie and Oughton's (2004) Herfindahl Index of Competitive Balance (HICB), which measures competitive balance within-season and is applicable to measure league concentration in any sport. Where changes to the league structure have been commonplace, as is the case in the Ulster Hockey leagues since 2010, the methodology incorporates a standardised scoring system to ensure consistency. The scoring system used is three points for a win, one point for draws/ties/abandonments and zero for a loss. Bonus points and goal difference calculations are discounted. Points deductions (e.g., for breaches of the rules etc.) have also been disregarded as they are unlikely to have been applied consistently across leagues over the sample timeframe. HICB scores for all seasons in the period under review are calculated using the following formula:

$$HICB = \left( \sum HHI / \left( \frac{1}{n} \right) \right) \times 100$$

HHI is the sum of the squares of the points share for each club contesting a league in a given season and  $n$  is the number of teams in that particular league and season. A perfectly balanced league of any size would generate an index value of 100; the more the index score deviates from 100, the greater the competitive imbalance identified in that league. The lower bound of the HICB is 100 (the value attained in a perfectly balanced league), and the upper bound is responsive to the number of teams in the league. As the number of teams in each league fluctuates over time, the method computes a normalised version of HICB (NHICB) to create a like-for-like time series analysis of competitive balance within a sports league where the number of teams are not consistent over time. The rationale for this adjustment is that the Ulster Hockey Leagues have seen many changes to the number of divisions running, and the number of teams in each division. NHICB is measured using the following formula:

$$NHICB = HICB \times \frac{Max\ HICB(10)}{Max\ HICB(n)}$$

Max HICB(10) is HICB for the most unbalanced distribution of points with 10 clubs (the most observations);

Max HICB( $n$ ) is HICB for the most unbalanced distribution of points with  $n$  clubs.

## Headline results- Men

The following two tables outline the NHICB scores for the ten men's leagues under consideration, split between the top three leagues (Figure 6), and the Junior leagues (Figure 7). There are several points to consider in analysing these data.

First, it is clear that competitive balance in the senior and junior divisions of the men's ulster league has varied considerably over time. In the senior leagues, the HICB score fell below 110 only once during the period (Senior League 1, 2008-9), but exceeded 135 five times. Crucially, each of these instances of high competitive imbalance occurred in the last 7 years, with two occurring in the showpiece competition division of the Premier League.

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

Figure 6 – NHICB Scores: Adult Men’s Premier League and Intermediate/Senior Leagues

Season	Premier League	Intermediate / Senior League 1	Senior league 2
2008-09	124.13	105.59	125.21
2009-10	121.30	127.10	125.90
2010-11	126.61	120.93	122.16
2011-12	117.59	118.83	130.48
2012-13	130.74	124.82	128.18
2013-14	132.90	127.84	125.44
2014-15	134.69	127.16	120.73
2015-16	118.27	129.28	
2016-17	124.91	138.10	
2017-18	139.34		
2018-19	126.18	123.09	
2019-20	139.00	133.80	
2020-21			
2021-22	128.91	137.85	
2022-23	121.72	137.81	
<b>Average</b>	<b>126.84</b>	<b>129.22</b>	<b>125.44</b>

Second, it appears that the junior men’s leagues are broadly competitive, with 9 instances of HICB score below 110, a further 17 between 110 and 115, and none above 135. This does not mean however, that there are no inconsistencies between divisions. It is notable for example, that the average HICB for Junior League 1 is higher than for each of the other divisions in the junior leagues (though this issue is further complicated by the absence of league data from 2021-22).

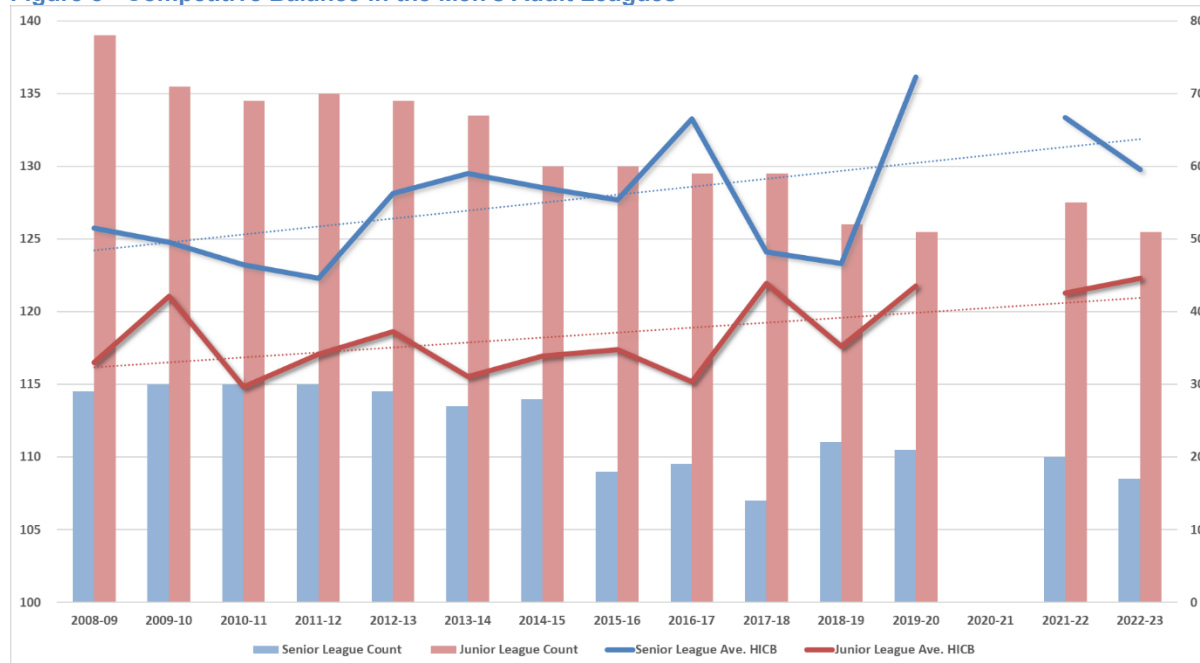
Figure 7 - NHICB Scores: Adult Men’s Junior Leagues

Season	Junior League 1	Junior League 2	Junior League 3	Junior League 4	Junior League 5	Junior League 6	Junior League 7
2008-09	114.78	117.46	114.36	115.73	115.82	105.68	133.48
2009-10	125.29	113.89	129.32	118.44	119.94	123.38	
2010-11	120.76	117.52	112.93	115.49	112.13	112.61	
2011-12	122.85	107.34	120.19	109.78	123.31	121.61	
2012-13	122.70	115.24	114.37	121.09	120.25	121.03	
2013-14	124.04	117.67	114.64	108.93	113.37	116.35	
2014-15	118.46	120.43	113.67	115.45	124.73	112.34	
2015-16	113.75	121.54	109.39	115.99	118.10	116.60	
2016-17	114.51	113.42	120.31	105.06	106.07	123.94	
2017-18	114.38	123.14	109.09	125.47	131.58		
2018-19	118.83	116.52	106.11	116.90	122.68		
2019-20	130.89	115.03	117.44	127.70	117.20		
2020-21							
2021-22		110.57	122.59	120.43	122.09		
2022-23	134.26	110.06	119.82	120.31	117.63		
<b>Average</b>	<b>121.61</b>	<b>116.13</b>	<b>116.53</b>	<b>117.70</b>	<b>118.65</b>	<b>117.50</b>	<b>N/A</b>

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

As Figure 6 shows, there are two overall trends which appear to be interacting to affect the nature of competitive men's hockey in Ulster, namely; a reduction in the number of teams entered into the Ulster Leagues, and; an increase in the competitive imbalance of those leagues. This applies to both the senior and junior divisions, though as Figure 8 makes clear, the latter have remained more competitive throughout the period in question,

**Figure 8 - Competitive Balance in the Men's Adult Leagues**



### Headline results- Women

Any analysis of the situation in the women's game is limited by the absence of historical league tables, the reasons for which have been outlined earlier in this report. Nevertheless, data from the past two seasons give a good indication of the current state of the women's leagues, and underline the apparent growth in participation which contrasts with the evident decline of the men's leagues. For example, Figure 9 makes clear that divisions across the Ulster senior and junior leagues are relatively consistent in size, with 10 teams per division. In total, there are twice as many women's teams than men's registered in the Ulster Hockey League.

There are exceptions however, at either end of the league ladder. In the senior leagues there was a reduction in the size of the premier league from 12 to 10 teams between 2021-22 and 2022-23. Conversely, in the lowest divisions of the junior leagues, 6 new teams were entered in the most recent league season. This apparent growth masks the fact that three teams entered in 2021-22 withdrew before or during the season, notwithstanding the fact that two subsequently re-entered in 2022-23.

**Figure 9 - Adult Women's Divisions: Teams**

Season	Senior Leagues				Junior Leagues									
	PREM	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9A	9B/10
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
2021-22	12	10	10	9	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	9
2022-23	10	11	10	9	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	12	13

There is, nevertheless, evidence to suggest that the women's league is in a stable, if not robust state in terms of the number of clubs and teams competing, i.e., the extent of competitive

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

hockey. Analysis of the competitive balance of those leagues suggests that the quality of competition is reasonably consistent, both from season to season, and from division to division. One junior division achieved an NHICB score of less than 110 in 2021-22, with another scoring between 110 and 115 in 2022-23. There were two instances of scores above 135 in 2022-23, one senior and one junior.

Figure 10 - NHICB Scores: Adult Women's Senior Leagues

Season	PREM	1	2	3
2021-22	119.56	125.87	116.97	131.92
2022-23	131.14	124.29	124.77	137.94

It would be unwise however to attempt to draw any significant conclusions from the analysis of two years of data. This only serves to emphasise the absence of information relating to women's league hockey in Ulster, which hampers the monitoring and evaluation of the state of the competition. Indeed, it is apparent from the league data used in the curtailed analysis presented here that some results have not been recorded. It is unclear whether this is a reporting error, or because the games were not played.

Figure 11 - NHICB Scores: Adult Women's Junior Leagues

Season	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	9	10
2021-22	130.31	120.26	109.37	118.17	123.84	116.44	120.05	124.27	131.38	121.07
2022-23	133.08	126.13	129.32	112.25	128.77	122.82	125.23	130.58	137.98	126.53

### Key Points

- The competitive balance of the men's leagues fluctuates quite considerably from season to season, with an overall increase in the NHICB scores of the senior and junior leagues over time.
- The 'least competitive' men's leagues are the Premier League, and the Intermediate league / Senior Leagues, with NHICB scores in excess of 125.
- By contrast, the junior men's leagues are 'more competitive' with all leagues apart from Junior League 1 recording NHICB scores below 120.
- The women's league is effectively twice as large as the men's in terms of the number of affiliated clubs and teams entered.
- There is some evidence of continued growth in the women's league in the last two seasons.
- It is not possible to draw any firm conclusions regarding competitiveness in the women's league, due to the absence of data from seasons prior to 2021-22.

### Ulster Hockey Survey Results

Having established the existence of the patterns, an exploration of the results from the survey of participants and volunteers now presents an opportunity to consider the causes of these trends. The results of the survey of participants, volunteers and supporters distributed by Ulster Hockey during the 2022-23 season are presented below. They show the scope and extent of competitive activity in Ulster, and the different perspectives on the future of hockey in the province and beyond.

#### The Nature of the Sample

Figure 12 outlines the nature of the sample from the online survey. There are several features of note. First, the balance between male and female respondents is quite even, which is

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

interesting given the relative size of the league hockey structures in Ulster. Second, half of all the responses came from clubs in Antrim and Down (but outside Belfast), with a further 20% from the remaining counties west of the Bann. Third, just over a quarter of the respondents were members of clubs currently playing in the EYHL, while just over 40% came from individuals with a connection to one of Ulster's schools.

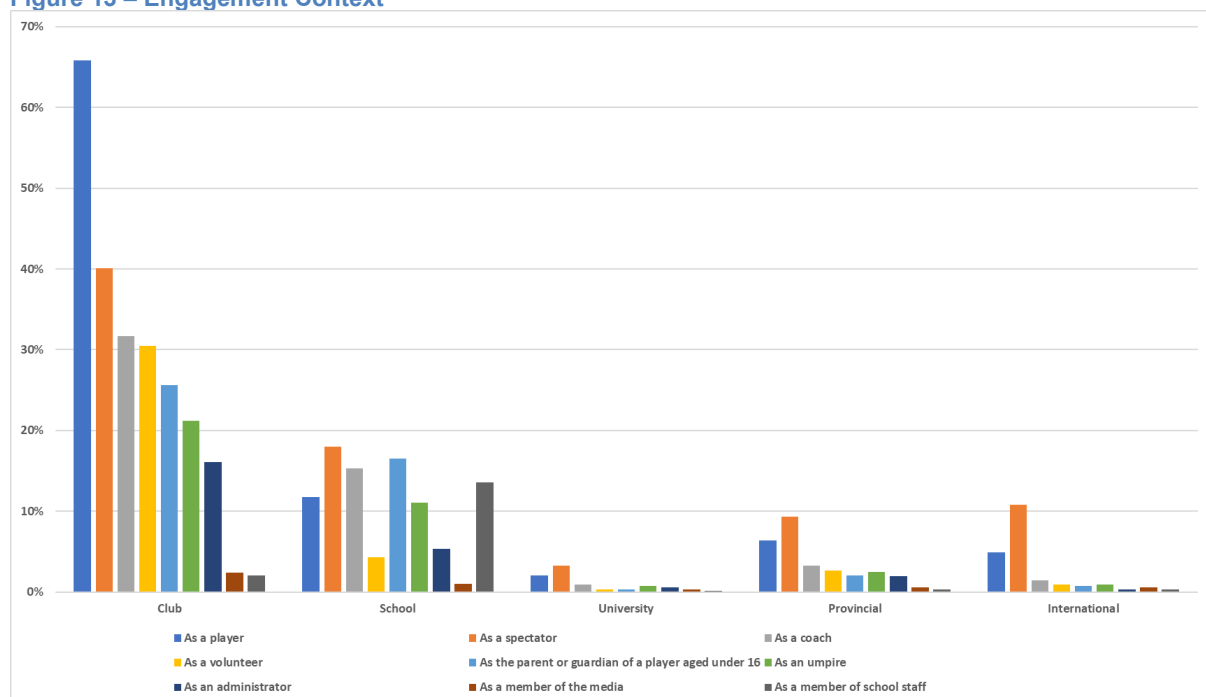
Figure 12 - Online Survey Sample

Category		n	%	Category		n	%
Gender	Male	276	41%	Club Affiliation	EYHL	134	20%
	Female	289	43%		EYHL 2	39	6%
	Not stated	114	17%		Ulster League	456	67%
			Unaffiliated		50	8%	
Age Group	Under 25	96	14%	School Affiliation	Yes	279	41%
	25-40	136	20%		No	400	59%
	40+	219	32%	Club Size	Small	75	11%
	Not stated	228	34%		Medium	194	29%
Club Location	Belfast	153	23%		Large	260	38%
	Antrim and Down	342	50%		Very Large	100	15%
	Rest of Ulster	134	20%		Not stated	125	7%
	Not stated	50	7%				

### Current and Future Engagement with Hockey

Before exploring the views of the Ulster hockey community in relation to the competitive structure of the game in Ulster, it is important to understand the context of their engagement. Figure 13 details all of the ways in which survey respondents currently engage with hockey and makes clear that the majority engage in all aspects of hockey through the club environment. More specifically, 66% currently play at one of Ulster's clubs, while 32% coach and a further 30% volunteer in club hockey. Just over a quarter of those who responded said that they were a parent of a child aged under 16 who plays club hockey and 21% were club umpires.

Figure 13 – Engagement Context



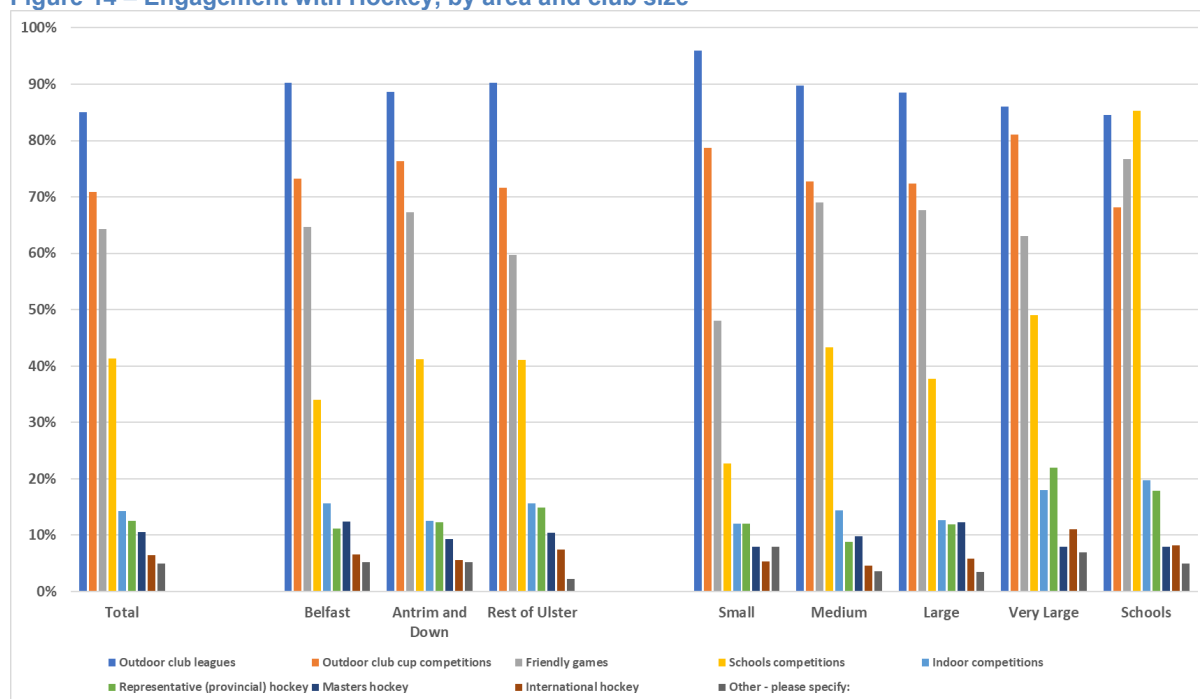
## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

There is a marked contrast between the extent of engagement in the club environment and the equivalent in educational or representative settings. While 12% of the respondents to the survey were current players in school teams, they were exceeded in numerical terms by the number of people who support school hockey. For example, 16% of respondents were parents of a child playing hockey in school, with a further 18% supporting from the sidelines as spectators. Interestingly, 15% of respondents had a coaching role in school, and 14% were members of staff.

In all other contexts, there were fewer participants, volunteers and officials present in the survey sample, though it is encouraging to note that there were over 50 responses from players at engaged in representative hockey (at provincial or international level). Nevertheless, for most people who engage with representative hockey, their involvement extends only as far as support in terms of spectating.

The setting in which people participate in hockey is reflected in the competitions in which they take part. As many as 85% of survey respondents played in or supported outdoor club leagues, and 71% engaged with outdoor club cup competitions while 64% took part in friendly games. Significantly, 41% were involved with school competitions, while a much smaller proportion of respondents involvement in all other forms of hockey, including indoor (14%), provincial (13%), masters (11%) and international (65%).

Figure 14 – Engagement with Hockey, by area and club size



It is notable that, as Figure 14 shows, there is very little geographic variation in terms of involvement in different forms of competition, though there was slightly less engagement in outdoor cup competitions or friendly games in the rest of Ulster compared with Belfast, Antrim and Down. Of more note is the apparent lack of involvement in school hockey from members of smaller clubs, with only 23% of respondents having engaged in this way over the past 12 months. Conversely, among people with a school affiliation 85% were involved in school competitions, but the same proportion of those individuals was also involved in outdoor club competitions in the last year.

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

Figure 15 – Engagement with Hockey, by Gender, Age and Club Type

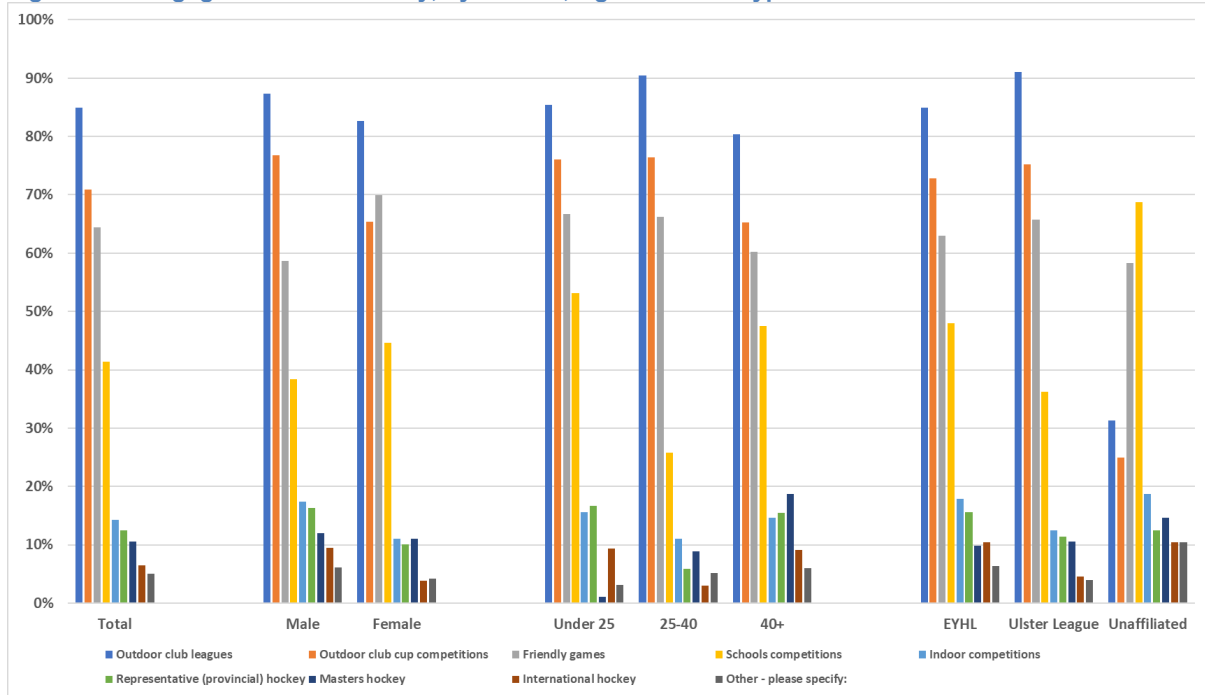
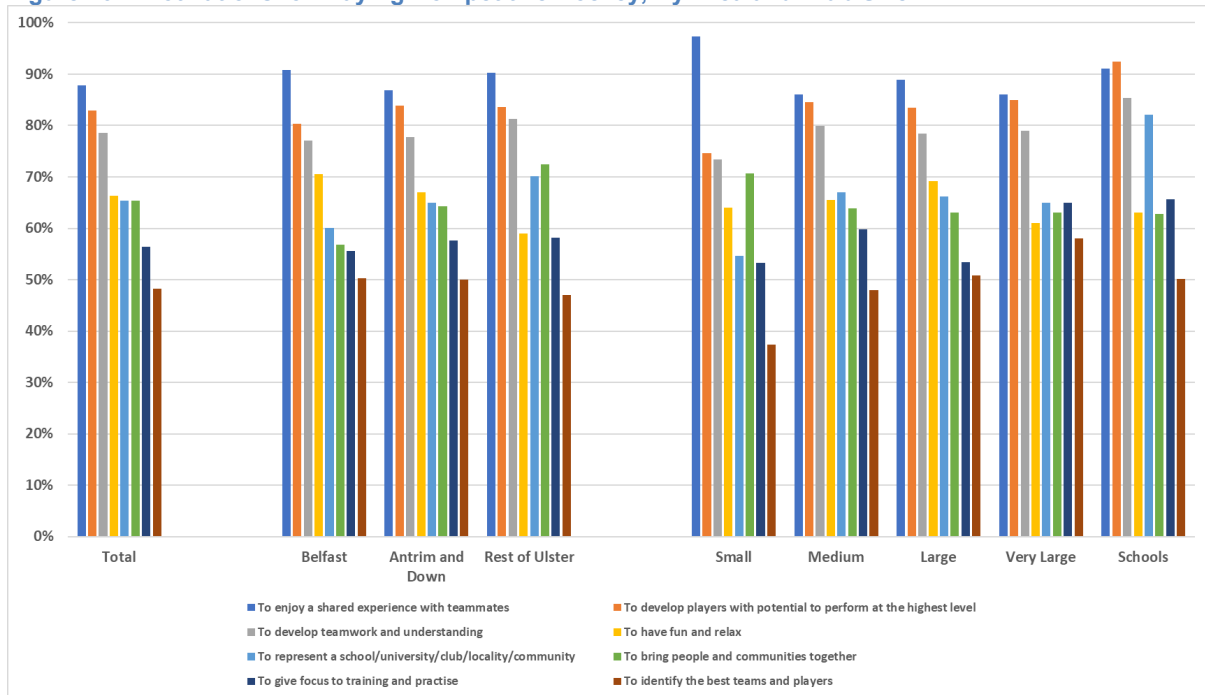


Figure 15 shows that there are subtle variations in the rates of involvement by gender, age, and club type. The proportion of women involved in friendly games (70%) was higher than that of male respondents (59%), while engagement with cup competitions was lower, at 65% compared with 77% among men. Unsurprisingly, a higher proportion of respondents aged under 25 reported involvement with schools competitions, with more than half (53%) engaging in this way, compared with only 26% of those aged 25 to 40. Equally unsurprising is the fact that involvement in masters hockey was highest among those aged 40 and above, though this group was also heavily involved in school competitions (most likely as coaches and officials).

Figure 16 – Motivations for Playing Competitive Hockey, By Area and Club Size



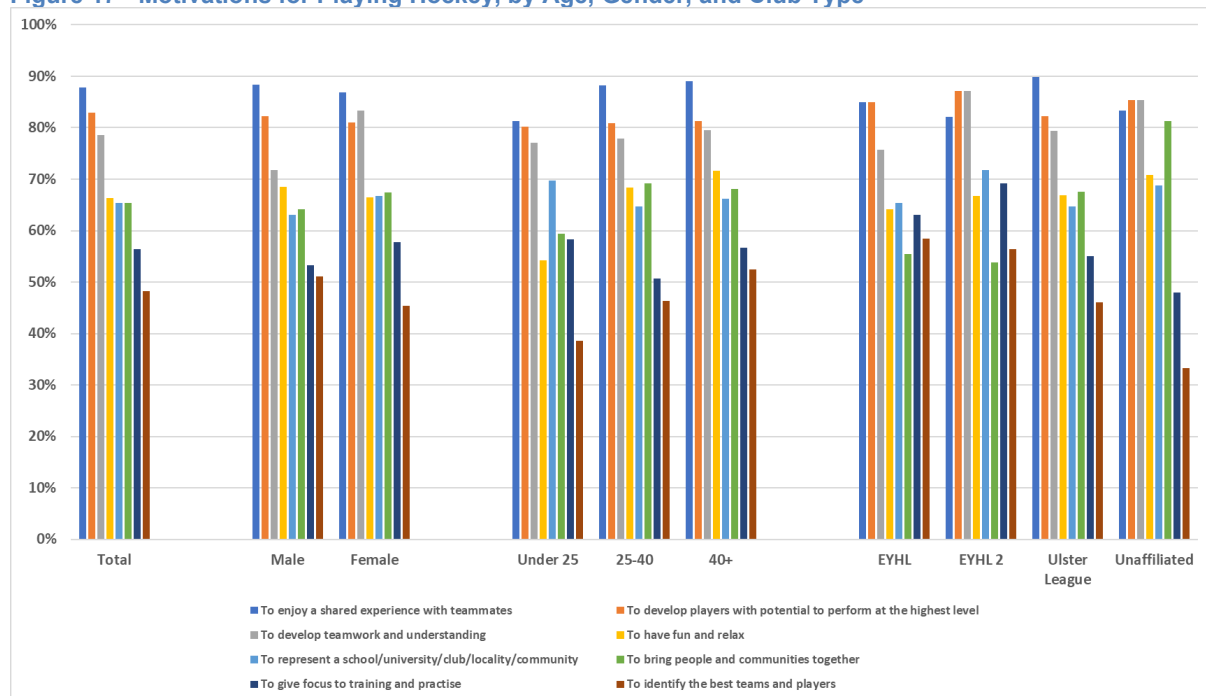
## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

The survey results reveal a consensus among respondents around the purpose of competitive hockey. The primary motivation for participating in competitive hockey in Ulster is ‘to enjoy a shared experience with teammates’ (88%), followed by ‘developing players with potential to perform at the highest level’ (83%), and ‘developing teamwork and understanding (79%)’. Other considerations include having fun and relaxing (66%) and representing a school, club, or community (65%). It is also notable that 65% of respondents felt that competitive hockey served to ‘bring people and communities together’. Interestingly, only 48% of respondents believed that competition should be used to ‘identify the best teams and players’, the implication being that this is a function of coaching and talent identification rather than playing.

Motivations vary from person to person however, and Figures 16 and 17 reveal subtle differences in the importance that different groups attach to playing competitive hockey. For example, it is notable that respondents from the Rest of Ulster place greater emphasis on representing their club, community, or school (70%) and on bringing people and communities together (72%), than those from Belfast, Antrim and Down.

Similarly, members of smaller clubs were almost unanimous (97%) in agreeing on the importance of enjoying a shared experience with teammates, but placed less emphasis than most groups on developing players to perform at the highest level (though the figure was still high at (75%). In contrast, it is notable that older respondents (53%) give more credence to the idea that competitive hockey is a means of identifying the best teams and players than their younger counterparts, and the same is also true of members of EYHL clubs (58%).

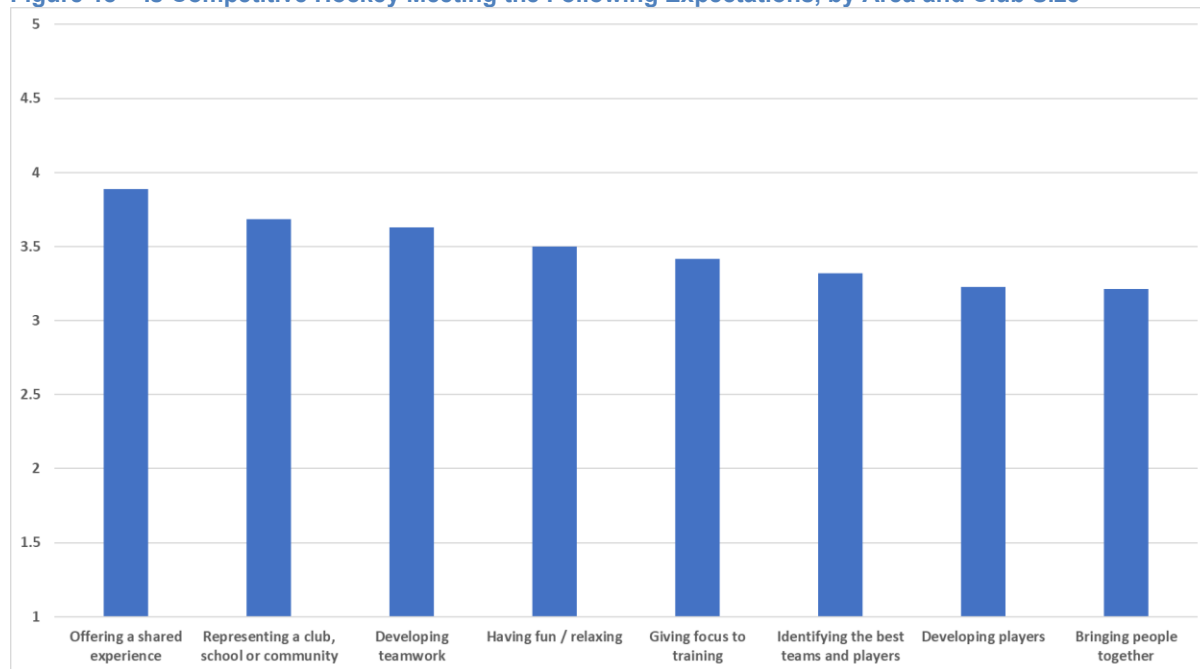
Figure 17 - Motivations for Playing Hockey, by Age, Gender, and Club Type



The reasons for continuing to engage with competitive hockey are therefore essentially clear, with a balance between intrinsic motivations (enjoyment, shared experience, relaxation) extrinsic (player and team development), and an ability to project a sense of community. The survey results suggest that the current structure of competitive hockey in Ulster is possibly struggling to meet these expectations. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the range of objectives discussed above were being met, with scores ranging from 1 (‘not at all’) to 5 (‘to a significant extent’), the data being presented in Figure 18 (below).

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

Figure 18 – Is Competitive Hockey Meeting the Following Expectations, by Area and Club Size



The graph shows that scores for each of the objectives fell between 3 ('to some extent') and 4 ('to a reasonable extent'). In short survey participants did not feel that any of the objectives were being met to a significant extent. More significantly, there was no significant variation by age, gender, geography, or affiliation, suggesting that there was a broad consensus across the hockey community that there is room for improvement in the structure of competitive hockey in Ulster.

## Key Points

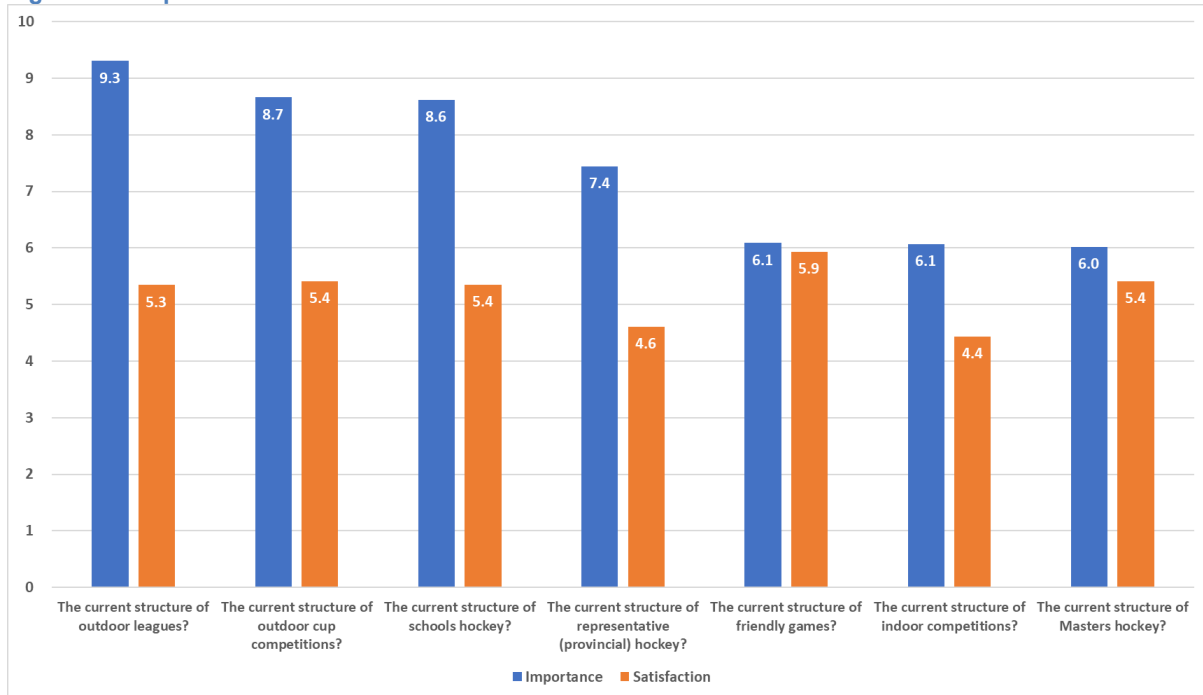
- **Club hockey is the predominant competitive environment, with two out of three respondents playing at one of Ulster's clubs, while 32% coach and 30% volunteer.**
- **There is significant crossover between school and club, with 12% of respondents playing in school, 16% parents of a school age player and 18% spectating at school fixtures.**
- **There is general consensus in terms of motivations for participating in hockey, which include enjoyment, shared experience, player development and bringing people together. These motivations vary according to age, geography, and competitive level.**
- **Levels of satisfaction with the current structure of competitive hockey fall some way short of expectations.**

## Importance and Satisfaction

The apparent popularity of the various competitions which come under the aegis of Ulster Hockey is predictable to an extent. These are after all the main outlets for meaningful participation in the sport, and for many players the school or club which they represent forms part of their hockey identity. Survey respondents were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with competitive hockey in the province on a scale from 0 ('not at all satisfied') to 10 ('completely satisfied'), compared with the level of importance they attached to each strand. The results are shown in Figure 19 (below).

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

Figure 19 - Importance versus Satisfaction



The graph makes clear that participants in the survey place identify outdoor club leagues as the most important strand of competitive hockey in Ulster (9.3/10), followed closely by outdoor cup competitions (8.7/10) and schools hockey (8.6/10). Representative hockey is rated next most important (7.4/10, while respondents are more neutral in relation to the importance of friendly games, indoor competitions and masters hockey. This is perhaps inevitable, given that with the exception of friendly games, each caters to a different niche in the hockey 'market' (e.g. elite players for provincial hockey, or older players in the case of masters).

Nevertheless, the scores evident in Figure 19 suggest that there is a gap between the importance of the competitions, and participants' satisfaction with them. Scores for each competitive strand are in the neutral range between 4/10 and 6/10. As the most important competition identified in the survey, it is notable that the outdoor club leagues only achieve a satisfaction score of 5.3/10, with ratings for cup and schools hockey only marginally higher. The highest satisfaction score is for friendly games, but given the relatively low importance of this strand, this is less noteworthy than it might appear. Crucially, satisfaction with representative (4.6/10) and indoor hockey (4.4/10) are in negative territory (i.e. below a neutral value). In short, it would appear from the survey stakeholder that expectations of meaningful competition which achieves stated objectives are not currently being met.

## Key Points

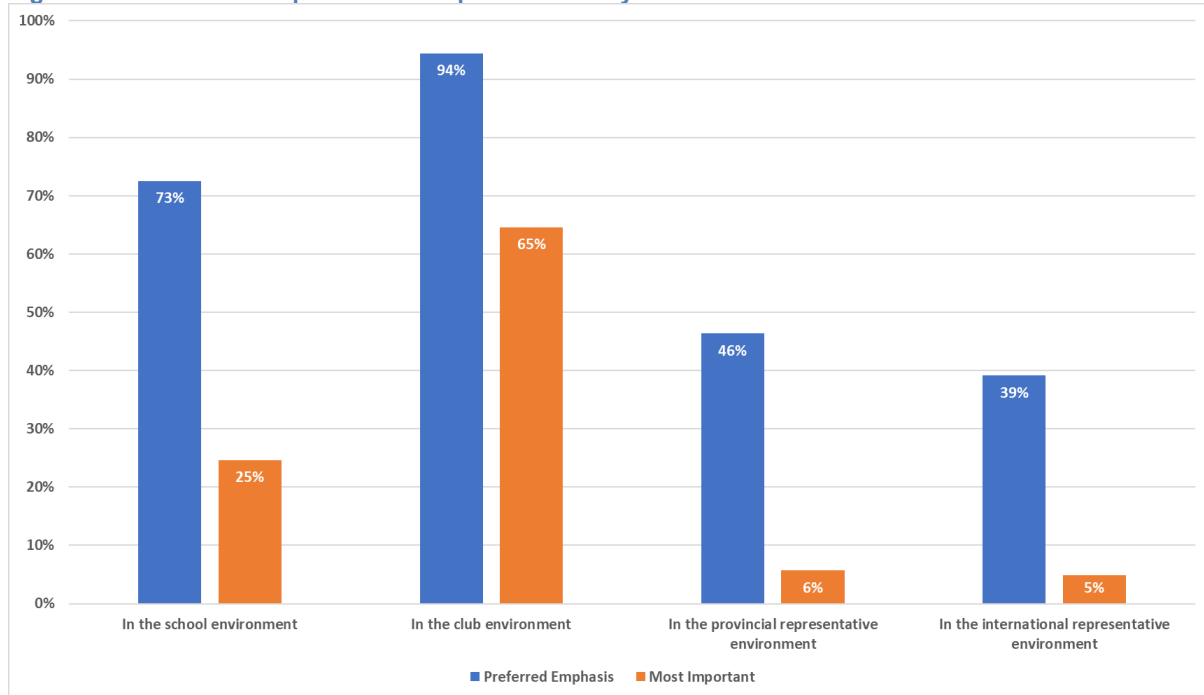
- **Outdoor league and cup competitions are considered the most important elements of the competitive structure of hockey in Ulster, with schools hockey deemed equally important.**
- **Survey respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the provision of competitive hockey, suggesting that there is something of an expectation gap.**
- **Satisfaction levels were highest for friendly games and masters hockey, and lowest for provincial and indoor hockey.**

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

## Balance of Competitive Hockey

Irrespective of satisfaction with the current structure of competitive hockey in Ulster, it is important to understand where the hockey community feels the balance between different environments should be struck. Figure 20 provides the answer to that question, highlighting the preferred emphasis on club competitions among the majority of survey respondents, with 94% identifying it as an important competitive environment, and 65% naming it as the most important of all.

Figure 20 – Preferred Emphasis of Competitive Hockey



Interestingly, while 73% of participants in the survey identified school hockey as an important competitive environment, only 25% thought that it was the most important, though this figure rose to 40% among those with no club affiliation, and 36% for respondents with a connection to an Ulster school. Nevertheless, even among those involved in some way with school hockey, the data indicate an apparent acceptance that the club environment should have primacy, with more than half of respondents (56%) identifying club hockey as the most important setting.

Figure 20 also confirms that while a significant proportion of survey respondents acknowledge the importance of provincial and international hockey, only a small proportion felt that either ought to have precedence over club or schools hockey. As the ensuing analysis will show however, there is clear recognition that representative hockey serves a different purpose to the game in schools and clubs.

## Key Points

- The majority of survey respondents feel that the club environment is where competitive hockey should be focussed.
- There is support for competitive schools hockey, but only one in four felt that it was the most important competitive environment.

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

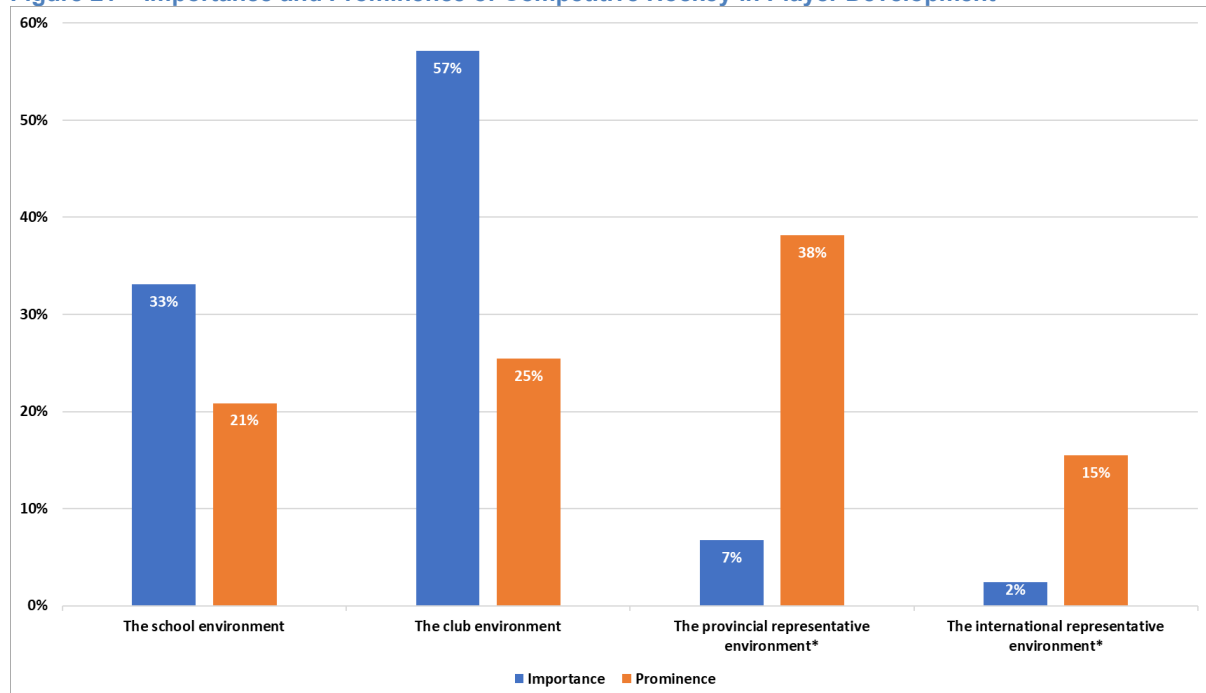
## Competitive Hockey for Hockey Development

Survey respondents were asked to consider the importance of the four main competitive environments in relation to three of the key development objectives, of Ulster Hockey, namely:

- Player development;
- Increasing participation, and;
- Promoting the game.

From a player development perspective, the survey results show a clear contrast between the perceived importance of the school and club environments, and the apparent prominence given to the representative game at provincial and international level (Figure 21). More than half of all respondents pinpointed clubs as being the most important environment for player development (57%), followed by schools (33%). However, 38% felt that provincial hockey was given more prominence in the regard, compared with 25% who identified clubs and 21% for schools. While most people in the Ulster hockey community feel that player development *should* happen in clubs and schools, the perception appears to be that more is being done, or being done more effectively within the representative hockey environment.

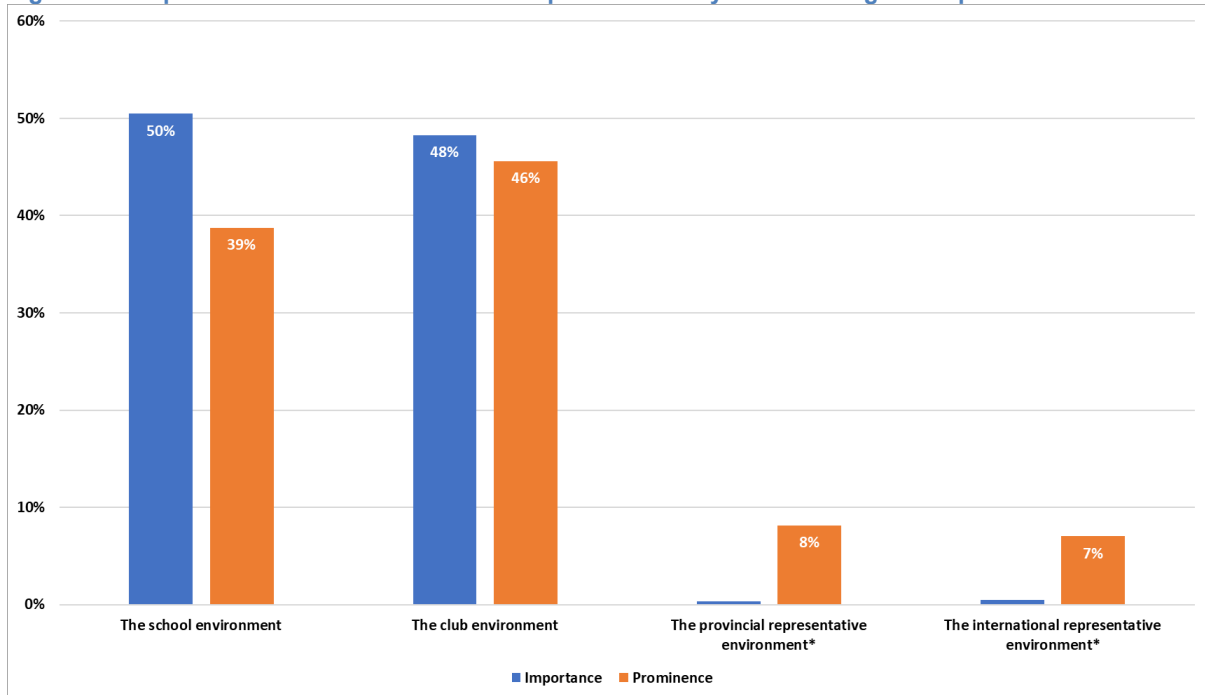
Figure 21 – Importance and Prominence of Competitive Hockey in Player Development



A different picture emerges in relation to increasing participation, which is the primary function of any governing body of sport (Figure 22). In this regard, it is schools (50%) which are perceived as being marginally more important than clubs (48%), to the complete exclusion of representative hockey (<1%). Nevertheless, the survey respondents suggested the club hockey (46%) is in fact given more prominence than the school setting (39%), with a further 15% identifying representative hockey as being prominent in this respect. These results suggest a closer alignment between the ideal and the actual situation, though the recognition of the role representative hockey in increasing participation speaks to the ability of international hockey in particular to promote the game more generally. It is to this aspect of competitive hockey that the analysis now turns.

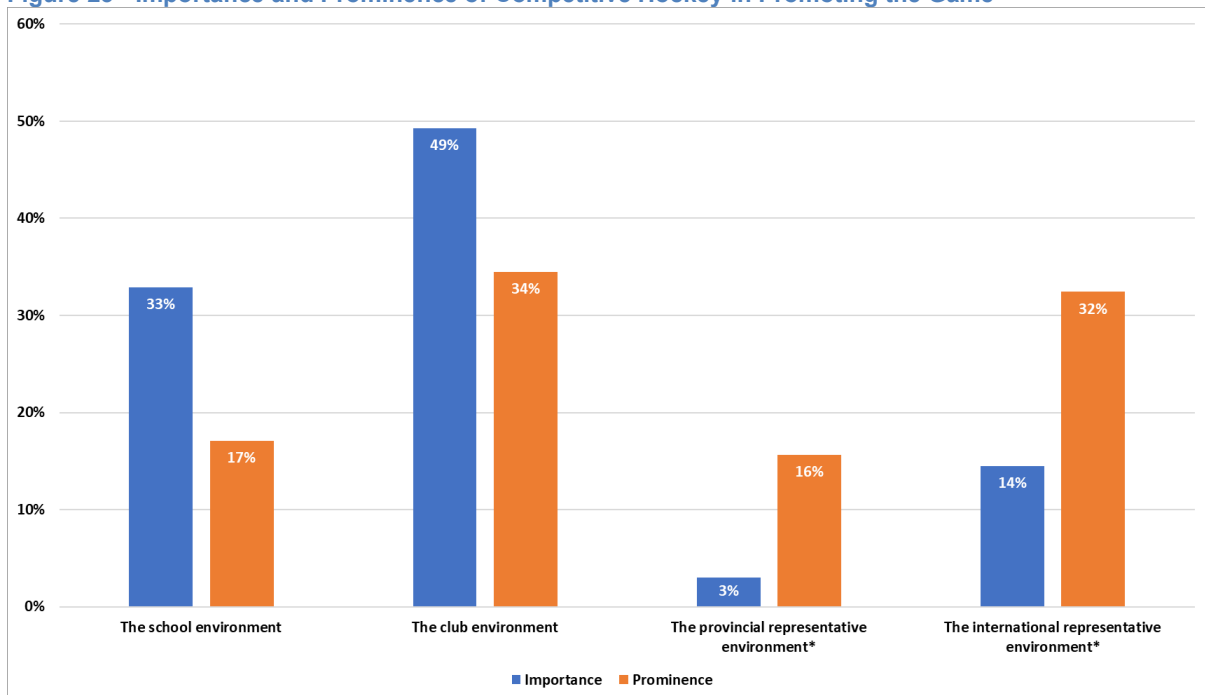
# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

Figure 22 - Importance and Prominence of Competitive Hockey in Increasing Participation



The third strategic objective in which competitive hockey may be considered to have a significant role is the promotion of the game. Once again, the majority of the Ulster Hockey community feel that clubs (49%) and schools (33%) have the most important part to play, while 14% identify international hockey as the effective shop window for the sport (Figure 23). The perception of prominence is nevertheless at odds with the importance of each competitive environment. While just over a third of respondents feel that club hockey is given the most prominence in terms of promoting the game, almost the same proportion (32%) identified international hockey, with the remainder split equally between school and provincial hockey.

Figure 23 - Importance and Prominence of Competitive Hockey in Promoting the Game



# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

In reality, each has a role to play, but the ability of the international game (and the individuals who play it) to generate positive media coverage for the sport may explain these results. This does not mean that school and club hockey cannot be used as a vehicle to promote the game of hockey. It is perhaps a recognition however, that the additional prestige associated with international hockey has an ability to cut through to the consciousness of those who are not closely involved in the sport.

## Key Points

- **Ulster's clubs are thought to be the most important environment in terms of player development, but provincial hockey is seen as having more prominence in this regard.**
- **Conversely, schools hockey is considered to be (marginally) pre-eminent in terms of increasing participation, but clubs have greater prominence.**
- **Promoting the game is primarily the role of clubs, but international hockey has equal prominence.**

## Qualitative Interview Findings

Following on from the collection and analysis of the membership survey data, a selection of individuals were selected for remote interview. The intention of this phase of the research was to develop a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the impact of the structure of competitive hockey on players, volunteers and administrators, and to identify ways in which it might be refined and improved. In total, 32 people were interviewed, providing a cross-section of the hockey community, which was broadly representative of the key stakeholder groups. The interviewees, many of whom held multiple roles, included:

- 15 current and active players, including 5 members of the UH Youth Forum;
- 9 active coaches, including 2 high-performance and 3 talent development coaches;
- 8 volunteers, including 5 active members of Ulster Hockey committees and 3 competition administrators;
- 3 Ulster Hockey employees and 3 members of staff at Hockey Ireland, and;
- 5 representatives of schools hockey, including 3 current and active teachers.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with content analysed to determine the main themes emerging from the conversations. These are now explored in some detail, along with the implications for Ulster Hockey specifically, and for the broader hockey community in Ulster and beyond.

## Changing Patterns of Participation

### *Reflections on the state of play*

The principal issues highlighted by the analysis of competition data and by the online survey were reflected clearly in the individual and focus group interviews. Stakeholders are acutely aware of the trends in participation which have led to a decline in the number of men's teams at the same time as the women's game has grown steadily. The primary role of Ulster Hockey, in the view of locally-based stakeholders, is to reverse this decline by increasing the total number of participants and volunteers, and retaining them in the sport beyond the end of their education.

Some stakeholders, particularly those who play or volunteer for smaller clubs lower down the league pyramid, worry that talented athletes are gravitating towards their biggest and best

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

performing competitors. As a club's player pool shrinks, availability and selection become increasingly precarious, which adds to the pressure on volunteers and may eventually set in motion an irreversible downward spiral, leading to clubs folding. The net effect is the disappearance of club activity from parts of Ulster which previously had a strong tradition of club hockey. Remaining clubs are therefore forced to travel longer distances in order to find and fulfil fixtures, making it harder to persuade players and umpires to give up their time on a Saturday, and so the spiral continues.

There are similar concerns in relation to the school environment, in the sense that boy's hockey is believed to be in decline, while the girl's game is in a much healthier position. School hockey in general is under pressure both from academic considerations and from a gradual decline in the number of PE teachers who are able to coach hockey. However, boys' hockey in particular, is facing increasing competition from football and rugby union, which offer a potentially lucrative and attractive pathway for the most talented athletes (and with which hockey struggles to contend). Many volunteer stakeholders believe that girls are also becoming increasingly attracted to other sports as approaches to PE delivery have adapted to reflect wider societal changes in sport and physical activity.

There was unanimous agreement among the stakeholders interviewed for this study, that the impetus for addressing the weaknesses of the competitive structure is first and foremost the welfare of young players. School age players who are involved in senior hockey are being asked to train and play too often, with the result that burnout is commonplace. There are several aspects to this, ranging from injury as a result of physical overload to the mental health impacts of stress and fatigue. At the upper end of the talent pathway, coaches and volunteers are concerned that Ulster's players are unable to sustain the level of performance required to force their way into international squads at age group and senior level, because they are not able to build sufficient strength and conditioning and (perhaps more importantly) rest and recovery into their training schedules.

## Key Points

- **Stakeholders recognise and understand the issues outlined by both the analysis of competition data and the online survey.**
- **There is broad agreement that the men's game has declined in terms of overall participation, while the women's game is in a healthier state.**
- **There is a strong desire to protect young players from the stresses and strains brought about by overplaying.**

## Competition

### *School / Club Conflict*

The intention of the review from the outset was to identify issues with the structure of competitive hockey in Ulster. One thing was abundantly clear from the majority of the interview conversations, however. The single most important issue in the minds of the hockey community is the ongoing tension between club and interprovincial competitions, and the delivery of hockey in schools. This manifests itself in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, the fulfilment of league and cup fixtures, almost exclusively on Saturday afternoons, results in a dilemma for school age players, who feel obliged to meet the conflicting demands of school and club. For many players, the only way to resolve this dilemma is to play for both, often on the same day. Thus, a morning fixture for the school might be followed almost immediately by a club fixture in the afternoon. Not only is this

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

exhausting for the players, but there are significant logistical complexities in meeting these conflicting demands extends, not least in terms of travel between venues.

The issue is particularly acute for those young people who are involved in representative hockey, either with Ulster or in some case with the national age group squads. These players may be expected to train and play with as many as three teams in any given week, as well as meeting commitments to strength and conditioning programmes. Expectations on players are considerable, even for players who are not members of provincial squads. For example, a player at a club entered in the EY Hockey League may have to travel to Dublin for league fixtures up to five times a season as well as turning out for their school.

Weekly limits on the amount of hockey played by individual athletes were introduced several years ago, with the aim of protecting participants from the negative impacts of overplaying and overtraining (primarily fatigue, injury and stress). Some stakeholders believe that these limits are frequently ignored however, both by coaches keen to select their strongest team, and by the players themselves. In many cases, this is because players fail to understand the link between overplaying and injury, or because of a mistaken belief that they are uniquely immune to such issues.

The coaches, umpires and volunteers who support these players are presented with a similar quandary. Coaches are especially exposed in the respect, since many (but by no means all) are teachers by profession, and are expected by their employers to field the best available teams for school fixtures, in the knowledge that their pupils may also be called upon by their clubs later the same day. It is equally apparent that many teachers who deliver hockey in schools during work hours are also club coaches, volunteering on weekday evenings and weekends. Similarly, match officials and administrators often have multiple roles, and conflicting demands are often made on their time, to the extent that some people are deterred from further involvement or progression. The net effect is a negative perception of volunteering, primarily because of the commitment of time involved. This is thought by some to be one reason why the recruitment, retention and development coaches, umpires and other volunteers who support the game is becoming increasingly hard to sustain.

### *Selection 'Threats'*

The physical and emotional welfare of individual players must take precedence over the needs and desires of schools, clubs or any other entity to triumph in any given fixture of competition. Nevertheless, they serve to underscore the tension between school, club and representative hockey, and the occasionally excessive demands placed upon individuals who participate in them.

Ultimately, the decision on how many games an individual should ought to rest with the player. In conversation with stakeholders however, it was clear that there is considerable pressure on some school-age players to prioritise one competitive environment over another. At its most extreme, this pressure can take the form of a veiled threat, with players being told that prioritising club over school, *or vice versa*, might jeopardise their continued involvement with the 'injured' party. If true, examples such as those highlighted above are clearly unacceptable, and have no place in the modern game of hockey. It should be noted however, that it was not possible to corroborate these claims within the scope of this research.

Interestingly, young players appear to be less concerned than their peers by the prospect of overplaying. The consensus among the youth ambassadors interviewed for this research was that the emphasis of competitive hockey should be on fun and enjoyment as a team, rather

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

than winning or individual progression. They were also keen to stress that individuals should be able to decide for themselves how to develop as players.

Interestingly, youth ambassadors are somewhat critical of the timing and process of transition from age group hockey to senior club level. The difference in strength and conditioning between school age athletes and seasoned club players can be concerning, if not alarming to young players. Similarly there are concerns that the level of expectation placed on young players is unrealistic, both in terms of commitment to training and playing several times a week, and prioritising hockey ahead of other commitments. Coaches who are involved in the talent pathway were keen to stress however, that the players of school age often lack the maturity and emotional intelligence to be able to make decisions of this nature without support and guidance, and this is not always readily available.

In this context, the role of parents as advocates for their children is often overlooked or downplayed by sports administrators. As the people who most frequently encourage, support and often transport young players, they are among those best placed to monitor their well-being. They also have a role in advising them of and protecting them from some of the pressures that inevitably arise from juggling participation with education and other interests. A more significant role for parents in player development therefore merits further consideration.

### *School Competition*

Schools hockey has a long and storied tradition in Ulster, and there is little doubt of the general desire on the part of those involved in the game to see it continue. Indeed, several stakeholders were quite forceful in stating their opposition to any attempt to interfere with this traditional model of delivery. One argument advanced by a number of interviewees is that the opportunity to represent a school is time-limited. In contrast, participants may choose to join and play for a club at any age and for as long as they wish. While this overlooks the significant drop-off in participation when players leave school, it is no less true that young players are keen to get the most out of their participation in school hockey.

The irony of the situation, however, is that much of the hockey that is played in Ulster's schools is organised outside of a formal competitive structure. While school teams engage in prestigious cup competitions on Wednesday afternoons, many of the fixtures that are played on Saturday mornings are 'friendly' matches that are not part of any league in that they are arranged informally between the participating schools.

### *Beyond the 1<sup>st</sup> XI*

Senior fixtures constitute something of a shop window for schools hockey in Ulster. The success of recent cup finals as spectator events is testament to the underlying level of interest in the game, and the prestige associated with the competitions themselves. This is not wholly representative of schools hockey however, and there is a considerable number of players who will never represent their school 1<sup>st</sup> XI. As students progress through school, some will understandably choose to prioritise their education, while others may decide to pursue other interests, including other sports. The challenge for the organisers of school hockey is therefore to retain the largest possible pool of players. This requires meaningful competitive opportunities within the constraints of a school system in which coaching resources and facilities are finite resources.

### **Key Points**

- **School-club relationships**
- **Selection threats**

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

- **School competition**
- **Beyond the 1<sup>st</sup> XI**

## Organisation

The planning of fixtures in Ulster's league and cup competitions is a significant undertaking, requiring input from a broad and diverse range of stakeholders. There was a consensus among interviewees that the organisation of the structure should allow players, teams and clubs to find the appropriate level of competition quickly, naturally, and without the need for intervention by the governing body.

For the most part, the aims and objectives of the various Hockey stakeholders in Ulster overlap quite neatly. Issues arise however, when aims and objectives diverge or conflict, and this often relates to players being expected to play in more than one competition. As the previous section elaborated, this can apply to demands within clubs, and conflicts between clubs, schools and representative teams.

### *The Hockey Calendar*

The scheduling of fixtures relates both to timing within the calendar year, and to timing in the context of the pitch slots available at weekends. Regarding the former, there are clear pinch points in the current structure which generate, and to an extent exacerbate, fixture congestion at certain points of the season. For example, several interviewees referred to the scheduling of league games in December and January, when fixtures are vulnerable to cancellation, either because of adverse weather conditions or because of poor availability in the run up to Christmas.

The knock-on effect of these cancellations is that games are rescheduled for February and March, which creates congestion at precisely the point of the season when most competitions come to a natural conclusion. This is problematic for several reasons, not least the additional demands placed on players, umpires and volunteers to organise and fulfil multiple fixtures in a compressed timescale. This additional pressure is compounded by the possibility that any fixtures which are not played out (and therefore result in a walkover) may have a material effect on the outcome of the competition of which they are a part.

While Ulster Hockey has significant autonomy regarding the scheduling of fixtures in its own competitions, there is nevertheless a clear need to consider the interaction between the Ulster's leagues and cups, and those of Hockey Ireland (and for a small number of clubs, those organised by the European Hockey Federation). Furthermore, Hockey Ireland must be cognisant of the global hockey calendar for international teams at senior and age group levels, in which competitions are held at fixed points of the year.

The spectre of the Hockey Ireland League looms large over the planning of Ulster League fixtures for all clubs, but especially for those in the Premier Division. This is largely because the All-Ireland competition has undergone a number of changes in timing structure and format, particularly for teams in the lower division of the Hockey Ireland League. Continuous tinkering with competition results in uncertainty for clubs and volunteers, and there was support for the idea of agreeing a settled format which would make fixtures more predictable in terms of scheduling.

Most significantly however, a number of coaches and administrators pointed to examples from other hockey playing nations (including *inter alia*, England, Scotland and the Netherlands), of centralised calendars, in which time is scheduled in blocks for each level of hockey, from international, through adult senior and masters, to age group level. In the case of England

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

Hockey, the calendar specifies which activity should be prioritised in any given week, with the aim of reducing conflicting demands on players by avoiding scheduling clashes.

The idea of introducing a similar calendar in Irish Hockey was well-received by coaches in particular, who foresaw an immediate benefit in reducing demands on young players. Such an arrangement would need to be agreed at All-Ireland level, and would require significant negotiation. Nevertheless, the English example offers a useful template for the Hockey community to consider, the specific idiosyncrasies of Irish Hockey notwithstanding.

### *Matchday Scheduling*

The provision of school hockey at weekends imposes a significant constraint on the timing of club matches. Many school facilities, upon which clubs are dependent for training and fixtures, are unavailable on Saturday mornings because they are in use for school games (most of which are 'friendly' in nature, rather than competitive in the literal sense). Thus, league and cup fixtures cannot be scheduled earlier in the day, placing a limit on pitch capacity across Ulster. This gives an organisational advantage to clubs which own their playing facilities.

Furthermore, the provision of Saturday fixtures contrasts markedly with the organisation of schools hockey on the rest of the island of Ireland, where games are only played on weekdays. Volunteering resources (in particular match officials) and facilities (especially those on school sites) are therefore available without restriction allowing games to be scheduled with greater flexibility in terms of start times.

### *The Hockey Hierarchy*

As the survey results have made clear, one of the primary motivations for organising competitive hockey is to support the progression of athletes along a talent pathway. There is much good practice evident in the coaching and development of talented young players. Nevertheless, there is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that the demands placed on some of the most gifted players are excessive.

The issue is not with the structure or composition of the pathway *per se*. Rather, it is with the expectations placed on young players who progress to senior club and representative level to continue to support teams at a lower level of the hierarchy. Some stakeholders see this as a natural expression of loyalty to schools or clubs which nurture and develop talent.

Others note that the players themselves are keen to maintain links with teammates and coaches.

Schools in particular are keen to showcase players who have achieved representative honours.

This collective pride notwithstanding, many coaches have misgivings that players at the upper end of the talent pathway might be expected to train and play so frequently, and at a level which does not support their technical or physical development.

One solution to this conundrum is that once as players progress to higher levels of the pathway, they should not be required to participate at a lower level of the hockey hierarchy, unless they choose to do so, or there is a compelling reason for them to play. Not only does this reduce the workload on individual players, but it also opens up selection opportunities for other squad players.

### *Gameday*

The system used to monitor individuals' individual participation and track fixtures and results is gaining a comma an online game management system which mirrors those of other hockey

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

governing bodies. As with all changes to procedure, the system has taken time to bed in, but generally functions well. Nevertheless it was criticised by a number of stakeholders for lacking some of the functionality associated with his predecessor. The most obvious example of this is the apparent inability to publish results to the Ulster hockey website. Consequently, many people use other websites (including the Ulster Hockey Umpires website and social media) as their source of timely and accurate fixtures information. This generates the curious situation in which hockey participants access their information through umpires rather than through the governing body.

While these criticisms may be justified, they may be attributed more accurately to the inconsistent application of the technology across different competitions at various levels. Gameday has not yet been rolled out across all competitions, though this is believed to be in progress over the current and future seasons. There is therefore a significant data gap in relation to monitoring of the participation and performance of individuals and teams across Ulster.

This has repercussions in several senses. First, it is not currently possible to track movement of players systematically along the talent and performance pathway. Clubs, schools, and representative teams may have their own systems for monitoring the number of games played by an individual, but until the use of Gameday becomes routine for all hockey competitions, there is the possibility that some participation may go 'unseen'. More significantly perhaps, this means that there is no objective way to identify whether or not a player has reached the weekly upper limit for the amount of engagement in hockey. The limit is therefore effectively unenforceable.

Second, Ulster Hockey is not able to effectively monitor team selections across all levels of the game. This provides a window of opportunity for clubs to 'rig' or 'load' selection when a team requires specific match outcome (most frequently to win promotion or avoid relegation). Rules precluding this practice already exist, but can only be applied after the fact. In other words, the current system of monitoring only comes into effect if a selection is queried (usually by the opposing team), and has no deterrent effect.

The final, and possibly the most serious, consequence of this data gap is that sanctions imposed by disciplinary committees are harder to enforce. For example, if a player receives a red card, they will automatically be suspended from all hockey activity for a period of 16 days, which may be extended depending on the severity of the offence. As the situation stands, while Gameday would flag and prevent their selection for any team playing in the Ulster Premier League. This would not be the case for a fixture in an Ulster Junior League game however, and any individual or team exploiting this loophole would undermine the entire disciplinary process.

The incentives to complete the rollout of Gameday across all levels of hockey in Ulster could not be clearer. The system exists to support administrators of the game, and should make the organisation of fixtures more efficient by eliminating paperwork. More importantly however, the full exploitation of the system would lead to improved communication of fixtures information, both before and after matchday. The added value to the sport would lie in the ability to monitor trends in overall participation at all levels of hockey, as well as developing a better understanding of the different ways in which players engage with the game.

### Key Points

- **Hockey Calendar**

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

- **Matchday Scheduling**
- **Hockey Hierarchy**
- **Gameday**

## Ways of Working

### *Interaction between UH and HI;*

The relationship between Ulster hockey and the national governing body has, according to most stakeholders been characterised at bearish stages by degree of tension. There is a strong perception among some that Hockey Ireland's aims and objectives have not always matched those of Ulster hockey and that the organisation has been increasingly Dublin-centric in recent years. The current composition of the EY Hockey League should therefore give pause for thought, with roughly half of the teams in the league based in Ulster in the 2023 season. Similarly, it is evident that Ulster Hockey people figure prominently on Hockey Ireland boards and committees. Nevertheless, the perception remains that decisions taken by Hockey Ireland are often in conflict with the aims and objectives of Ulster Hockey.

To a certain extent, these tensions are inevitable. Planning and decision-making for a national governing body will always have to account for the views of a range of stakeholders, who will not always see things the same way, and may have conflicting agendas. The most notable example of this is the complete absence of Saturday morning schools hockey in Munster Leinster, which was highlighted by several senior coaches, which influences the scheduling competitive fixtures in senior league and cup competitions.

It is also notable that there has been significant turnover of senior staff at Hockey Ireland, which has affected the working relationship between the two organisations. More recently, an improved working relationship has developed which is built on a shared consensus that change is necessary. There is a strong belief from stakeholders in Ulster that the national governing body is now more open to conversations about how to improve the planning and delivery of competitive hockey, and willing to consider proposals for improvements which are pragmatic and evidence-led.

### *Communication*

All bureaucracies are accused of failing to communicate decisions from time to time. Ulster Hockey is no exception to that rule, and the organisation was criticised by several stakeholders at club level in particular for failing to engage with volunteers and administrators in the past. Even so, the level of engagement in this consultation process underlines the desire on the part of all stakeholders to achieve a positive outcome for hockey in Ulster and beyond. By taking the lead on addressing the issues facing the organisation of competitive hockey through a consultative approach, stakeholders should be reassured that Ulster Hockey is acting in their interests.

The most significant consequence of previous shortcomings in communication is the perception, whether founded on evidence or not, that Ulster Hockey's decision making takes place in isolation from the rest of the hockey community. Club and school stakeholders alike voiced the opinion that failures of communication on the part of the governing body have led to a degree of suspicion and mistrust.

### *Collaboration*

The only certain remedy to the loss of trust and confidence outlined above is a genuine long-term commitment by all stakeholders to working in partnership. There were repeated and striking references during the stakeholder interviews to the need for 'a collaborative approach',

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

with an agreed objective of reducing the extent of overplaying. While opinions may differ as to how best to achieve this aim, and who should lead on the issue, there is an abundant and reassuring collective resolve on the part of all stakeholders to bring this about.

The most pressing need for collaboration is in relation to fixture scheduling, more specifically the scope and extent of hockey played on school hockey provision. Although some coaches, officials and administrators may have their misgivings, schools hockey is part of the fabric of hockey in Ulster. There is no majority of opinion in favour of bringing Saturday morning matches to an end either now, or in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, the planning and organisation of schools fixtures takes place independently of club hockey in Ulster, with separate committees for both (though in practice, there is some crossover in terms of personnel), while inter-provincial championships and other All-Ireland competitions are planned and delivered by Hockey Ireland. Stakeholders are keen to see a more integrated approach to scheduling of all matches which requires each branch to take account of the other. Opinions differ as to whether Ulster Hockey or Hockey Ireland should have primacy in this regard however.

At the local level (i.e. within Ulster) collaborative working must mean that the views of schools which provide fixtures on Saturday mornings are sought and included. In this context, it is all the more striking that so few schools chose to engage directly with the consultation process. This suggests that there is some way to go in re-establishing the necessary level of trust.

### *Trying New Things*

There are always valid arguments to be made for maintaining the *status quo*, but they should not preclude the exploration of new ideas or delivery models. One accusation levelled at the process of decision making in relation to competitive hockey in Ulster is that the desire to maintain tradition stifles innovation. Again however, the evidence fails to substantiate that claim in many respects, with the EY hockey league and experimentation with inter-pro formats suggesting a willingness to try new things on the part of the sport's governing bodies. Nonetheless, the organisation of club fixtures is based on a widely-held belief that the season should run from late September to March, and that league fixtures should be played on Saturday afternoons.

This insistence on following the traditional model fails to recognise that patterns of participation in all sports have changed over time, and some players are looking for more flexibility in when they play, and how often. Accordingly, some clubs have experimented with the staging of league and cup games on weekday evenings, though this is often in response to fixture congestion late in the season. To date, only a small proportion of fixtures have been moved away from Saturday afternoons, but one additional benefit highlighted by club administrators is the ability to promote games as spectator events in which the whole club can take part.

Masters hockey is another area of the game which has remained underdeveloped in the eyes of many older players, especially in comparison with other hockey jurisdictions. There is no significant masters scene at club level in Ulster, and those with experience of masters hockey elsewhere (in the UK and elsewhere in Europe) believe that this is a missed opportunity to maintain links with senior players who would otherwise be lost to the game upon retirement.

### **Key Points**

- **UH-HI Interaction**
- **Communication**

## **A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster**

---

- **Collaboration**
- **Trying New Things**

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## Policy Implications

### Principles

The overarching aim of this review is to ensure that the competitive structure provided by Ulster Hockey supports the strategic aims of the organisation, namely, to promote the game to the widest possible audience (Inspire), develop players to their full potential (Build) and provide meaningful participation opportunities for anyone who wishes to play (Sustain).

It is important to recognise at the outset the high level of engagement from stakeholders at all levels of the game, and the general atmosphere of positivity in which discussions took place. The hockey community wants the game to grow, though opinions may differ on the best route to achieving that aim. All conversations took place in strict confidence, and the discussions were refreshingly frank and honest, generating valuable insight and understanding of the current position and proposals for the way ahead.

There is broad agreement across the Ulster Hockey community that the most important issues facing the game in the province relate to the retention of players as they transition from school to club, and beyond. The evidence of the quantitative phase of the research suggests that the men's game is in decline in terms of both the number of teams and clubs, and the competitive balance of the adult league and cup competitions, while the women's game is in a much healthier position. Conversations with stakeholders from across the game reveal a tension between the demands of school, club, and (for a smaller group of players) representative hockey which places unsustainable pressure on the very young people that the sport needs to retain for the game to grow and develop.

Clearly, doing nothing is not an option, and this report in itself represents Ulster Hockey's recognition of these conflicting demands. However, before moving on to the options available to the game in Ulster, it is first necessary to establish the principles on which the recommendations for action in the short, medium, and long term, have been based.

- The first of these is that the competitive structure should ensure fairness. This extends both to the planning and delivery of league and cup competitions, and to the consistent and equitable application of competition rules. Clubs, teams, and players should know what to expect from a competition, make an informed decision about their participation, and be able to raise concerns without prejudice.
- Second, Ulster Hockey's aim in reviewing the structure of competitive hockey must be to prioritise the welfare of the individual player, even when this conflicts with the desires of others. Participants should never feel pressured into choosing between school, club, or representative teams.
- Third, it is necessary to emphasise that Ulster Hockey does not operate in isolation, but as a constituent body of Hockey Ireland, itself a member of the European Hockey Federation (EHF) and Fédération Internationale de Hockey (FIH), and as a partner of the many clubs and educational establishments at all levels. Decisions taken by other organisations are beyond the control of Ulster Hockey, even when they have a direct or indirect impact on the organisation's operations. Equally, it is important to recognise that changes to Ulster Hockey's competitive structure cannot be made without impact on partner organisations.

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

- Finally, the majority view of those who took part in the consultation was that the hockey community should be prepared to experiment, i.e., to try different approaches to competitive hockey, on the understanding that any such decisions would be monitored continuously and reviewed if found to fall short of expectations. Consultees were keen to preserve many traditional elements of the competitive structure, but prepared at the same time to consider new ways of working which might be more efficient, or deliver improved balance.

### Options

The most significant pressure point in terms of player retention appears to be the transition from junior to senior (i.e., adult) hockey. At the age of 16, young players are considered adults in the club sphere, and the switch is often an uncomfortable one. Many advocates of schools hockey in particular were keen to highlight the additional physical demands of senior hockey, as well as the psychological effect of going from playing with a group of friends and peers to competing against older, stronger, and more experienced players.

Ulster Hockey's strategy document includes a proposal to introduce an under-18 club competition to smooth the way from junior to senior hockey, but it is clear from the stakeholder interviews that there is little if any support for this option. Equally, there is no support from club officials of raising the age at which players become eligible to play senior hockey, primarily because of the negative impact on availability for senior league and cup fixtures.

The timing of the hockey season is a legacy of traditional arrangements for access to grass pitches which were often co-located with cricket facilities. The advent of all-weather surfaces has not only changed the nature of the game of hockey, but also the way in which fixtures are planned. Fewer pitches are required, but games are played sequentially (one after the other), lengthening the playing day for multi-team clubs, and increasing the time commitment for volunteers who support participation (particularly match officials).

Nevertheless, all-weather pitches have made fixture planning more predictable in the sense that fewer games are called off because of adverse conditions. There is still an issue however, regarding the scheduling of outdoor fixtures in December and January, with more frequent postponements resulting in fixture congestion in February and March. This is precisely when most outdoor competitions are reaching their climax, and stakeholders stated that some teams were put at a competitive disadvantage by having to play multiple rescheduled games in a compressed period of time.

These fixture logjams result from rules which require competitions to be completed by a fixed point in time. This is believed to result from the need to schedule the following season's fixtures, but this is thought by many to be an arbitrary, if not artificial barrier. One suggestion, put forward by a number of stakeholders, is to lengthen the competitive season, beginning earlier (in late August/early September), and finishing later (in April/May). Stakeholders identified several immediate and tangible benefits from such a move.

First, by avoiding the scheduling of fixtures in December and January, the number of cancellations (caused by bad weather) would be reduced, resulting in a lower likelihood of fixture congestion at the most critical point of the season. Second, in so doing, the window of opportunity for indoor hockey, with all of the attendant benefits of skills development, would be opened up. Third, by avoiding the immediate pre- and post-Christmas period, clubs may notice an improvement in availability over the course of the season.

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## **Recommendation 1:**

**Ulster Hockey should consider extending the playing season so that competitive fixtures begin earlier in September and run through to April, with a break in the outdoor season during December and January, opening up opportunities for increased provision of indoor hockey.**

While a longer season would reduce the pressure on schools and clubs at specific points of the season, it may also be pertinent to consider limiting the number of fixtures played by teams and individuals. As the analysis of the league data has shown, 10-team leagues appear to provide a more balanced competitive outlet. Furthermore, from the players' perspective, 18 league fixtures plus cup competitions gives an average of around 20 competitive club games per season.

The question to be answered is whether or not this constitutes a reasonable amount of hockey in return for affiliation to a club. Players involved with representative squads should expect to train and play more frequently, but Ulster and Ireland squad members should be able to make an informed choice about the extent of their involvement in club or school hockey. This is only possible if schedules are fixed in advance, and communicated clearly to clubs, coaches, and players.

Another idea for which support crystallised during the stakeholder interviews was that of a co-ordinated and structured hockey calendar. Under such a system, training and playing dates for Ulster Hockey representative squads and competitions would be fixed to specific points in the hockey season to support the co-ordinated planning of fixtures by all parties. For example, inter-provincial competitions, which have been something of a moveable feast in recent years, would take place at the same time every year, with specific weekends allocated to games in each age-group. Training for provincial squads could then be aligned with competition dates, allowing the coaches and players involved to determine an appropriate schedule of skills development, strength and conditioning, etc.

The example of inter-provincial competition nevertheless underlines one of the most significant stumbling blocks, which currently prevents the introduction of a structured calendar: the need to co-ordinate with other interested parties. Put simply, it would be impossible for Ulster Hockey to attempt to develop a structured calendar in isolation from Hockey Ireland, or indeed from other organisations which support the delivery of hockey in Ulster, such as the umpires' association, affiliated clubs, or schools. It must be a collaborative effort, with the consent of all involved, though the potential benefits for all partners should act as a significant incentive.

There is a particular desire from stakeholders to resolve once and for all the scheduling of the EY Hockey League. Club administrators, coaches, players, and umpires all expressed the view that the introduction of the EYHL had been positive for hockey in Ireland, but that the operation of the league had generated issues of scheduling, availability, player fatigue and attrition which remain to be addressed satisfactorily. While all national governing bodies must take their lead from the European and global federations which set the agenda of international hockey, the case for a more collaborative and collegiate approach to fixture scheduling is unarguable. Successful examples in other hockey playing nations provide a template for Ulster Hockey and Hockey Ireland to consider and potentially adopt. England Hockey's centralised calendar, which has been in operation for over 15 years, is integral to its system of player development, and represents a useful model in this respect.

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## **Recommendation 2:**

**Ulster Hockey, in collaboration with all stakeholders in the game, should develop a structured fixture calendar which establishes fixed periods in the season for training and competitive league and cup hockey at school, club and inter-provincial level.**

This leads neatly onto the next issue, which is the interaction between the hierarchy of competitive hockey opportunities, and the pathway for talented players (and coaches). Throughout the discussions with stakeholders, there was an implicit acceptance that the 'natural' route of transition began with schools, and progressed via clubs to representative hockey. As the data from the survey proves, each environment has a slightly different role to play in increasing participation, developing players, and promoting the game. Each has articulate advocates who make a strong case for the preservation of the *status quo* as it affects their sector, but almost all are agreed that the present demands on players and coaches are unsustainable, particularly for those transitioning to senior hockey and involved with representative squads.

At the highest level, when players achieve selection for senior international hockey with Ireland, they are able to effectively opt-out of club hockey commitments. This allows them to maintain levels of physical fitness and conditioning appropriate to international performance levels, and reduces the likelihood of injury which might otherwise impair development. This is not standard practice however at age group level, arrangements for specific individuals notwithstanding. Moreover, while a system has been introduced to limit the number of 'units' of hockey which an individual might undertake per week, in practice, it is prohibitively difficult to enforce. Many coaches and club administrators believe that the limits are routinely ignored when availability is poor.

A player in Ulster's under-18 squad may therefore find themselves selected for school, club, and province and be expected to train or play with each in the space of a week. Further, stakeholders reported several instances of individuals being told that failure to play in specific fixtures would adversely affect their selection chances for either their school or their club (though it has not been possible to corroborate these allegations). Such a situation would be entirely unacceptable in any sport, and should not be tolerated at any level of hockey. The current situation fails to recognise the value of players as assets to Ulster Hockey (and Hockey Ireland), and places undue pressure on individuals who often lack the experience and maturity to resist invitations to 'help out' their club or school.

It is therefore incumbent upon all those who are interested in developing the game of hockey in Ulster to agree how the talent pathway should interact with the hierarchy of competitive opportunities. Stakeholder opinion on who should ultimately lead this process was split equally between Ulster Hockey and Hockey Ireland. Nevertheless, Ulster Hockey has a leadership role in this regard, and would demonstrate positive intent to everyone in the game by taking the initiative without delay.

## **Recommendation 3:**

**Ulster Hockey, in collaboration with all stakeholders in the game, should develop, implement, and support an effective athlete-focussed hierarchy of competitive hockey, which emphasises individual choice and provides a safe and informed environment in which players can make informed decisions on the amount and level of their involvement in the sport.**

## A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

One reason why Ulster Hockey's policies on limiting participation for young players are so hard to enforce, is the lack of accurate and timely selection data. The Gameday system exists to record match cards and team sheet data from league and cup fixtures, but its application is not universal at all levels, and many stakeholders believe that the system is open to abuse. Examples include clubs fielding 'loaded' teams to achieve promotion or avoid relegation, and players with adverse disciplinary findings evading suspension. Again, it is not possible to corroborate these claims, but even the perception that the match data recording system is inadequate is potentially a damaging one.

Extending the implementation of Gameday to all levels of the game, and enhancing the range of data entered on it would therefore seem a logical response to the issues of data quantity and quality. Any such move would inevitably disrupt existing processes and procedures, but the potential long-term gains clearly outweigh the short-term inconvenience of rolling the system out beyond the uppermost level of the game. This is also significant additional value in being able to track the number and types of games played by individual participants, to better understand the way that players engage across a typical season. Ulster Hockey could potentially use this information to tailor the competitive offer to match the reality of how and when people want to play.

The main incentive for full implementation of electronic match information, is to ensure that accurate records of league and cup competitions are collected, maintained, and archived. Any assessment of changes to the structure of competitive hockey in Ulster is dependent on accurate and timely data which permits review in real time (i.e., during the course of a season) as well as in retrospect. An extended and enhanced Gameday system would enable Ulster Hockey to track individual player movements, enforce disciplinary suspensions, and in the long-term, monitor the competitive balance of the leagues.

### **Recommendation 4:**

**Ulster Hockey should extend the implementation of the Gameday fixture administration system to all levels of the game in Ulster, with the intention of increasing the quantity and improving the quality of data which can be used to monitor the progress of players along the talent pathway and evaluate the effectiveness of the competitive structure of the game.**

# A Review of Competitive Hockey in Ulster

---

## Next Steps

The findings presented in this report represent the breadth and depth of opinions on the competitive structure of hockey in Ulster. Fundamentally, everyone who engaged with the process agreed that some changes will be necessary if the hockey family is to continue to retain and develop players who will go on to fulfil their potential, at any level of the sport. There is disagreement as to how this might be achieved however, depending on the perspective of those involved. The challenge remains to identify and pursue the options around which a coalition of consensus might form.

It is equally clear that Ulster Hockey cannot resolve these issues in isolation. Interactions between provincial and national level competitions, between schools and clubs and between coaches and players all require careful negotiation to avoid conflicts of interest. It is incumbent upon all interested parties to agree a way forward that provides the optimum structure for all concerned, but the guiding principle must be to prioritise the needs of participants. The current situation, in which fixture schedules lack predictability from year to year, limits the ability of players, coaches, clubs and umpires to make informed and independent decisions about when and where they participate.

Participants in the consultation repeatedly expressed the view that Ulster Hockey should take the lead in resolving the competitive structure of the game. It is important to recognise however, that many of the complexities which arise are beyond the sole control of the provincial governing body. Decisions on the planning and delivery of the EY Hockey League are made by Hockey Ireland, while Saturday morning school fixtures are arranged independently by the institutions themselves. Fundamentally, the recommendations outlined above can only work if all interested parties agree to work in true partnership, recognising the practical and political considerations of operating in a complex and occasionally conflicting sporting environment.

*Sport Industry Research Centre  
September, 2023*