

POLICY BRIEF

INTEGRATION IN GAEELIC GAMES

THE
CAMOGIE
ASSOCIATION



LADIES GAEELIC
FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION



GAEELIC
ATHLETIC
ASSOCIATION



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Executive Summary

Gaelic games, comprised of Gaelic football, hurling/camogie and rounders, represent Ireland's largest community and sporting organisations. Three separate national governing bodies (NGBs) exist for male and female codes of Gaelic football and hurling. As is the case in many sports on the island of Ireland, and worldwide, women are generally less well represented and supported in Gaelic games than their male counterparts across playing, coaching, officiating, leadership, administrative and operational pillars. Achieving gender equality in sport requires systematic reflection, strategic planning and the delivery of change at cultural, structural and individual levels. This must be considered by those involved in Gaelic games as they progress towards the stated target of integration, which is;

ONE ASSOCIATION FOR ALL GAELIC GAMES BUILT ON EQUALITY

The integration of three Gaelic Games organisations is a distinctive challenge. No comparisons can be found in the research literature on such a multi-entity and multi-sport change process. Nor does a best practice model exist on how to deliver gender equality in the integration or merger of separate men's and women's sports bodies. Gaelic games are uniquely positioned to show leadership on gender equality. Most members of the three associations have voted for integration and many have since called for a roadmap and action. This Brief is one step in that direction.

A review of merger research in corporate and public sectors - business, education and sport

A live case study of the formation of Golf Ireland as a new entity from two single-sex organisations, since dissolved

Consideration of the gendered context of integration in Gaelic games

Recommendations for Integration in Gaelic Games

1 PLAN FOR A FULL INTEGRATION PROCESS

- Apply theoretical ideas from feminism to enshrine a clear understanding of gender equality and cultural change to guide the complex process of organisational transformation
- Understand and plan for the phases from pre- to post-merger status and the strategic actions involved in the process from transition through to full integration. This may take up to five years or more.

2 AGREE PRINCIPLES AND VALUES TO GUIDE INTEGRATION

- **EQUALITY:** Establish and embed equality as a pillar of a new organisation, starting with a baseline measurement and time-bound targets across all current and new operational pillars.
- **LEADERSHIP:** Enshrine independent and specialist support to deliver transformative and reflexive leadership throughout the process.
- **STRATEGIC THINKING AND PLANNING:** Identify strategic opportunities for individual, structural and cultural transformation through integration as well as a strategic plan for equality.
- **COMMUNICATION:** Embed clear, consistent three-way communication with all stakeholders throughout the integration process.
- Agree and make visible the **VALUES** of **RESPECT, TRUST** and **COMMITMENT**.

3 PRIORITISE FEMALE REPRESENTATION

- Integrate a time-bound monitored quota approach in the governance structures of operational, administrative and volunteer units of Gaelic Games.

4 DEVELOP A FUNDING MODEL BASED ON EQUITY

- Develop a funding model to deliver equity of investment in Gaelic games at all layers of the organisation.
- Clubs and counties will need dedicated financial support, via additional/new funding streams, and a redistribution of existing resources, to deliver integration.

5 BUILD A NEW ORGANISATION FOR GAELIC GAMES

- Establish a Gaelic Games association with values, systems of work and organisational structures that support male and female members equally across playing, administrative, coaching, leadership and officiating units.

Review of Merger Research

Available research on mergers, totalling 100+ publications on corporate, public sector and sport mergers, was reviewed by the authors (*Liston, Lane, and Meyler, under review*). In general, corporate mergers are common but also regarded as disruptive and costly, and they affect people deeply. They generate mixed benefits for shareholders and strategic and operational goals are often unmet. A subset of research examined the relationship between mergers and gender diversity and found issues regarding a division of labour, the filling of less strategic roles by women and the reliance by them on implicit skills over formal training. Usually voluntary in nature, higher education (HE) mergers were the outcome of external drivers, like government reforms, and increasing regionalisation and competition between institutions. Concerns were raised about the prioritisation of business performance and rationalisation over educational outcomes in these mergers. Not all planned HE mergers happened, and ‘failures’ were attributed to the role of culture, the stakeholders involved and the many competing demands made on HE institutions.

Sporting (NGB) mergers were also driven by the need for enhanced quality and greater productivity but they are a distinctive subset of the research for two reasons. First, NGBs are quasi-public sector entities who control and regulate their sports as they see fit. NGBs govern on the basis of members’ consent through elected officials, many of whom are voluntary. The capacity to understand and deliver gender equality is therefore a function of this social composition. This includes the representation of women, knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the values practiced in each organisation. Second, the critical discriminator between NGBs is single-sex provision. This governance model has a long history tied to heritage, culture, and identity. By and large, NGB mergers were neither perceived to be, or were in practice, a marriage of equals. Most mergers between men’s and women’s entities occurred in the late twentieth century against the backdrop of neo-liberal discourse and practice. In this regard, individual recognition and identity claims were privileged over economic and social justice. Typically, then, women

entered sports merger processes as the weaker NGB – in terms of assets, revenue, power, influence, and membership. Some, such as Australian women’s cricket, were even described as having ‘cap in hand’ (*Stronach and Adair, 2009*) and thus amalgamation with the men’s cricket board was virtually inevitable for survival.

Most NGB mergers involved the absorption of the women’s entity by the men’s counterpart. This was treated as consolidation of the sport within a pre-existing (men’s) organisational template. Usually there was little or no structural reform aside from the formation of an operational axis for women and girls. Some new entities were established – such as Golf New Zealand and Cricket Australia – but these were the exception to the norm. In practice, gendered attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices were reproduced in the merged NGBs and in any new entities. For example, women were underrepresented in managerial and board roles in Cricket Australia and it took another decade before significant changes were made to make the game more gender-inclusive in practice (*Mooney, Hickey, Ollis and Harrison, 2019; Hoskyn, 2019*). In Golf New Zealand, long-held values exerted an influence, even if there was little evidence of these in the early stages of integration (*Shaw and Dickson, 2021*). Knowledge and experience of women’s sports was often discounted and the expertise of longstanding volunteers, administrators, and women’s sports activists was lost. Indeed, female administrators were sometimes forced to relinquish autonomy and control in return for other presumed advantages to be gained through mergers. In addition, fears existed that women’s sports would become peripheral concerns. These were grounded in both a real and perceived loss of identity. In the cases of mergers in Australian and English cricket (*Velija, Ratna and Flintoff, 2014*), and golf in New Zealand, organisational reforms led to a power struggle and a clash of values. These centred on maintenance of the status quo, in which the men’s NGB was presented as a stronger and more viable entity, and the need to deliver real, substantive, and transformative change, in policy, practice and ideology, if women’s sports were to develop. In summary, the rhetoric around

equality in NGB mergers has been shallow.

Little is known about the longer-term effects of mergers. In addition, theoretically informed approaches to culture and gender equality have yet to inform merger processes to any significant degree. It is clear from the research that gender equality in sport is ill-defined. Some see equality in terms of equal opportunity: they want girls and women to have access to the same or equivalent opportunities as boys/men, even if this means a potentially lower

number of females involved in the administration and coaching of women's sport. In this line of thought, gender equality in governance is not matched by organisational values and performance. Others start from the position of compensatory equity in which it is argued that the subordinate group – girls/women – should have positive treatment, thereby maximising any benefits to/for them. Yet more, especially in grassroots and youth sport, claim to have gender-neutral ideologies. All of this will be tested in the integration of Gaelic Games.



Gaelic Games Context

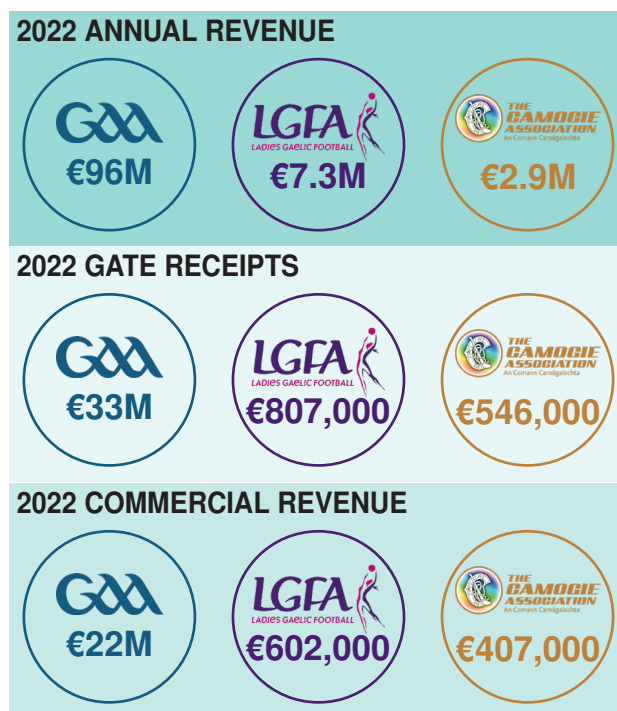
Gaelic games, inclusive of the national sports of Gaelic football, Ladies Gaelic football, Hurling, Camogie, Rounders and Handball, form the largest collection of community and sporting organisations on the island of Ireland, with a reach and role that delivers many health, economic and social benefits (Lane, Murphy, Donohoe and Regan, 2017; Liston 2005, 2014; Horgan et al, 2021). Gaelic games are not just rural and local, but also urban, female and global. They are uniquely stitched into family, community and parish life. One of the enduring perceived differences between modern Ireland and the rest of the world is that many believe – partly because of the cultural attachment to Gaelic games – that the Irish do community differently, if not better (Liston, 2014).

The national governing bodies (NGBs) for the most popular Gaelic games comprise three separate organisations; the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) formed in 1884, the Camogie Association (CA) formed in 1904 and the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA) formed in 1974. There are close to one million members across all three organisations: highest in the GAA with over 590,000 members across 2,050 clubs; at nearly 170,000 in the LGFA across 1,200 clubs and 110,000 in camogie across 578 clubs (GAA, 2023; LGFA, 2017, Camogie, 2020). The majority are playing members with over 100,000 coaches affiliated to Gaelic games as a whole (Horgan et al, 2021).

Figure One presents an overview of the differences in annual revenue across all three organisations (determined from NGB annual reports). The revenue differential shown here impacts on investment in men's and women's Gaelic games, across core business activity for players, coaches and officials, including coaching and games development, as well as on the potential for supplementary initiatives offered by the NGBs themselves e.g., Learn to Lead in the LGFA and the M.N.A programme in the Camogie Association.

In addition, the GAA owns or controls the majority of playing facilities for Gaelic games. Access to these is inconsistent for female members. Over 70% of

Figure One:
Gaelic Games Financial Snapshot



female intercounty players indicated they did not always have access to suitable playing pitches (GPA, 2023).

The **representation** of women on the management committee of the GAA, presently 20%, remains below the 40% quota mandated by the Irish state through Sport Ireland. Given the segregated governance histories of Gaelic Games, this representation is higher at 53% and 65% in the LGFA and CA, respectively (Sport Ireland, 2022). In addition, 20% of the coaching population in Gaelic games is female (Horgan et al, 2021) and females potentially comprise up to 22% of referees in women's Gaelic games (O'Connor et al, 2022). There are very few female referees in men's Gaelic Games.

In terms of **participation**, on average girls start to play Gaelic games one year later than boys, they tend to play less in their own time and at school than boys, and they engage in muscle strengthening less frequently than boys. In addition, boys who play Gaelic games are generally more active than girls,

reflective of national physical activity rates. Overall, females participate less frequently than males in Gaelic games across the lifespan (Horgan and Lane, 2023; Woods et al, 2019).

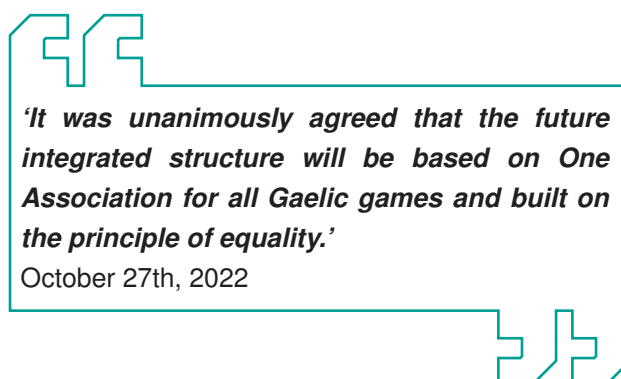
From a **performance** perspective, male and female intercounty players are equally committed to success in their respective sports, in terms of time given, voluntarily, to training and preparation, but they play and train within very different (unequal) support environments. In 2020, the GPA and WGPA merged into one unified representative body for male and female intercounty players to offer equal supports to all players (GPA, 2023). In 2021, government funding for male and female intercounty players was equalised. Male players have greater access to sports science and appropriate medical expertise as well as compensatory expenses for travel and nutrition (Kelly, Banks, McGuinness, and Watson, 2018; WGPA, 2020; GPA, 2023).

All three NGBs profess to hold organisational values, some of which are implicit and common to all. These include inclusion, respect, community and volunteerism. They also share similar governance structures and some club networks. All three have comparable approaches to core business activity in terms of player and coach development (e.g., Gaelic Games Player Pathway, Go Games, Sports Science Framework), and competition structures. The three NGBs have also developed One Club Guidelines (2017), although no data are publicly available to determine the reach, operation and effectiveness of the 'One Club' initiative when it comes to gender equality.

Notwithstanding these similarities, there are stark contrasts between the three Gaelic games NGBs in organisational size, resources, scope and influence. Thus, the consolidation of Gaelic games into one new organisation, termed 'integration', is not a merger process of equals. Figure Two overleaf highlights how this idea has been visited in different ways for almost 50 years. This indicates a legacy of inertia around integration, and a mix of action and inaction concerning gender equality in Gaelic games. Specifically, there appears to be a lack of understanding about the limits of a liberal 'add women and stir' approach when it

comes to achieving equality. This is not surprising given the secondary status of women's sports in Ireland for much of the twentieth century.

In the current stage of the integration of Gaelic Games, an Integration Steering Group was formed in 2022 after the resounding approval of motions at the respective congresses of the NGBs. This group is comprised of the three CEOs and three Presidents of the GAA, LGFA and CA, a strategy lead affiliated to the GAA, and an independent chair, Professor Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland. This group has issued three short public statements that outlined a commitment to integration underpinned by equality.

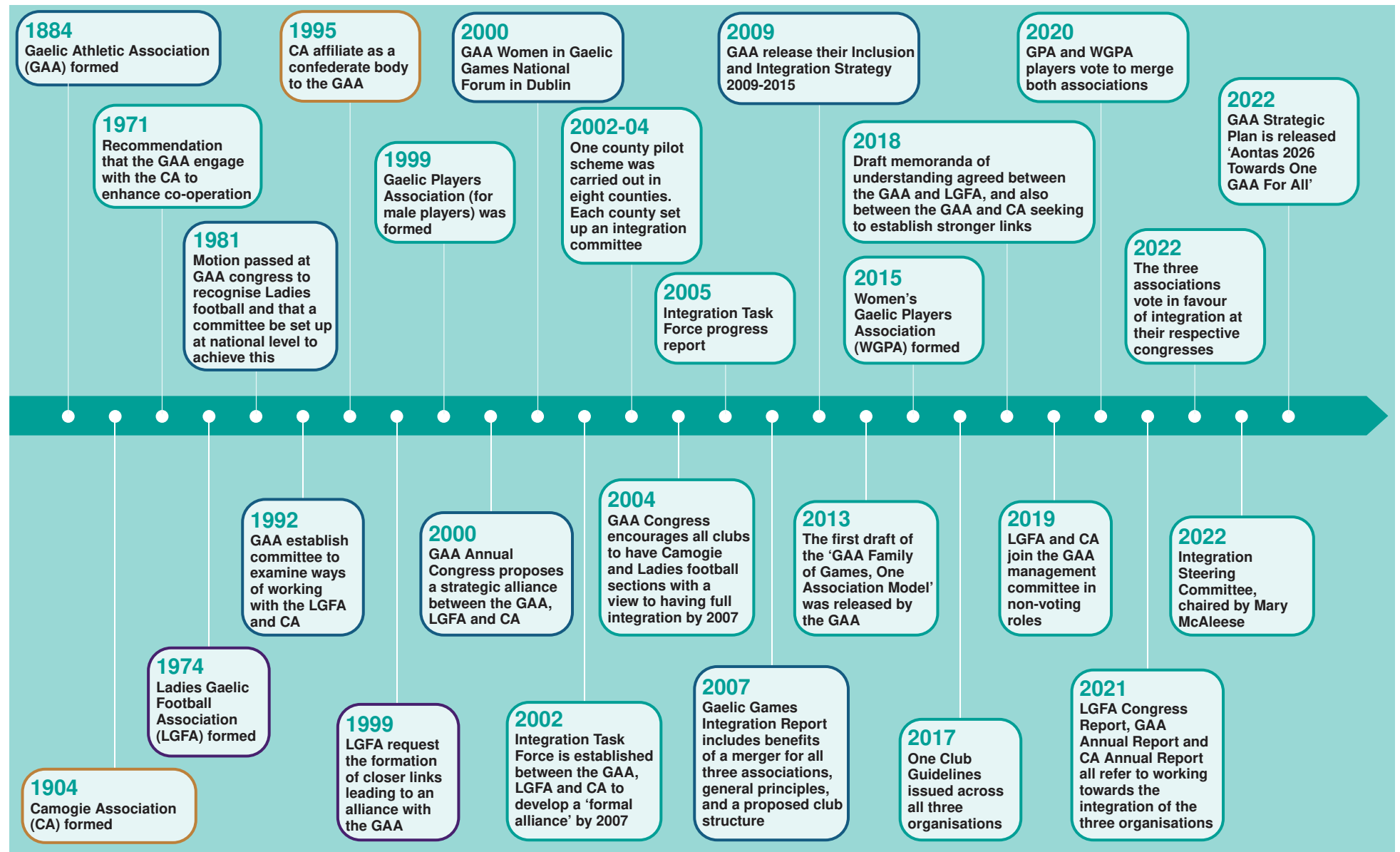


The group has also indicated its intentions to engage with stakeholders and the wider membership. This work is ongoing and some groups have already been invited to present to them. The motives for these invitations appear to be about collecting insights into the views of select stakeholders regarding the practicalities of integration.

In sum, opportunities to make more significant progress towards the delivery of integration in Gaelic games have not been fully grasped to date, owing to context and complexities, an absence of transformative leadership, poor understanding of gender equality both in theory and in practice and, related to this, varying commitment from stakeholders owing to their different status, ideas and expectations.

For Gaelic games, perhaps a recent and relevant 'merger' process involves that of Golf Ireland, a new organisation formed in 2021, from two single-sex organisations since dissolved.

Figure Two:
Gaelic Games Merger Timeline



Golf Ireland

For the purposes of this policy brief, interviews were carried out with four representatives involved in the formation of Golf Ireland, from the Golfing Union of Ireland (GUI) and the Irish Ladies Golf Union (ILGU). These interviews were also informed by the authors' review of the existing research (*Liston, Lane and Meyler, under review*). The integration process that resulted in the formation of Golf Ireland (Figure Three) occurred in three overlapping stages (pre-merger, transition, post-merger) over the last decade. It is important to note that it involved some setbacks and is yet ongoing. Notably, this process involved the formation of a new organisation under new leadership, and was guided by a set of implicit principles to deliver equality for male and female members across all facets of the game: participation, coaching and governance.

GOLF IRELAND TIMELINE

The GUI was established in 1890 to govern men's golf on the island of Ireland. In 1893 the ILGU was formed for women's golf. Perhaps only the GAA can match the longevity of golf clubs at Portmarnock, Limerick, the Island, Lahinch, Athlone, Malahide, Birr, Galway, Bray, Woodenbridge, Carlow, Tramore, Royal Curragh, Royal Belfast and Royal Dublin. Ireland has a proud golfing pedigree. In 2013 the GUI, ILGU and Professional Golf Association (which governs professional golf for men and women in Ireland), created the Confederation of Golf Ireland (CGI) to oversee areas such as equality, education and promotion. Prior to this, each organisation worked autonomously across these areas. Golf club rules, regulations and constitutions limited female members, and male-only clubs existed in Ireland. Female golfers were positioned as the inferior ('other') group in golf clubs in Ireland, and beyond (*Kitching, 2017*).

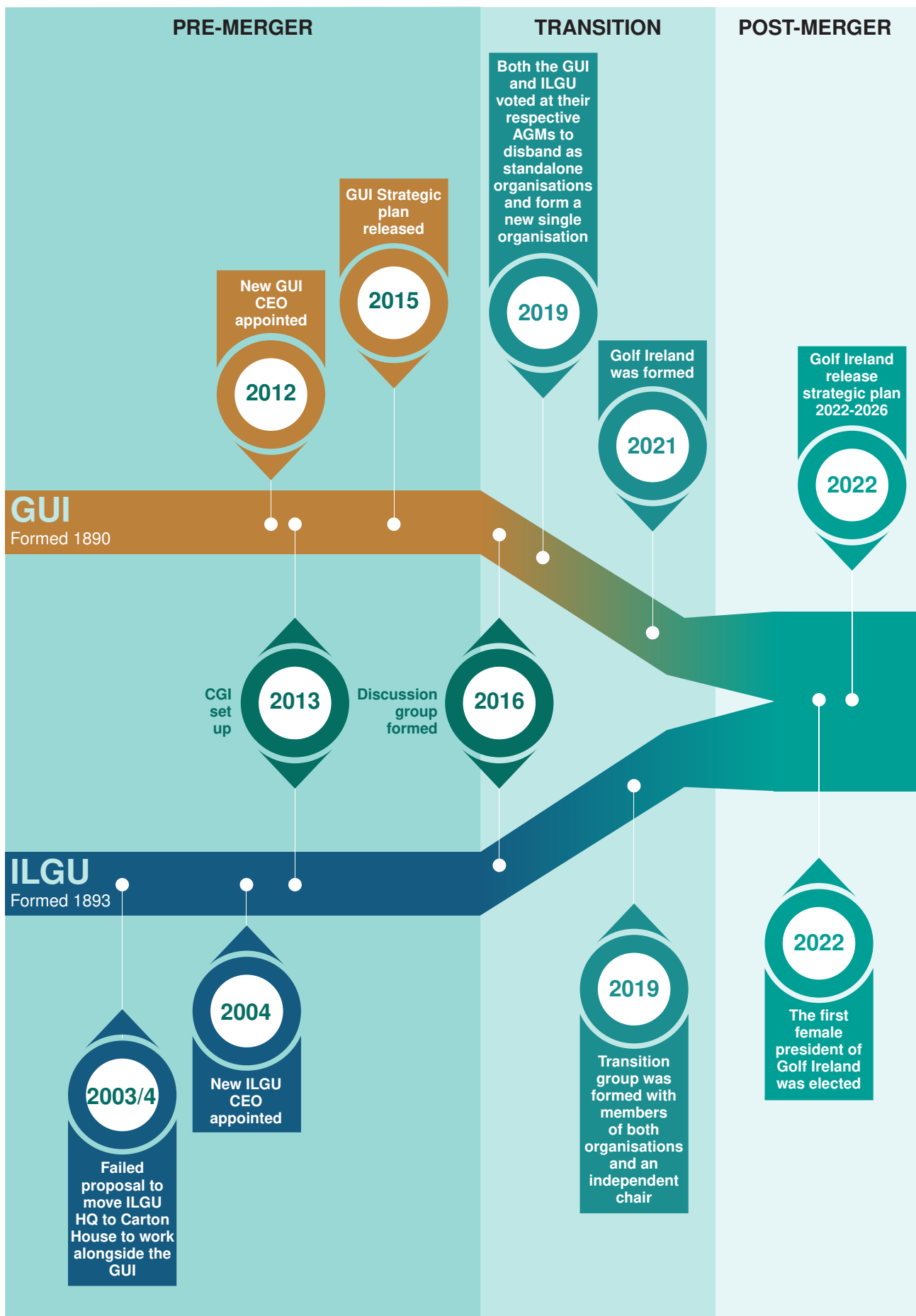
In 2015, formal discussions opened on the formation of a single governing body for golf. Leaders in the GUI and ILGU established a discussion group, chaired by an independent representative. Like the current financial inequities in Gaelic games, there were significant differences in the revenue streams of the two golf organisations, and the (men's) GUI was the larger of the two in terms of membership, power and influence. Over a three-year consultation period involving regular communication with their members, both organisations voted unanimously to form a new sole entity for golf in Ireland at their respective AGMs in 2019. A transition group was subsequently established, comprised of representatives (including

CEOs but not Presidents) from the GUI and ILGU, and an independent chair. This group agreed a structure for the new organisation which would be underpinned by equality and ultimately led to the formation of Golf Ireland. As part of this, Golf Ireland adopted a policy of 30:30:40 representation of females to males on all boards and they elected their first female president, Kay O'Loughlin, in 2022. The Presidency is set to rotate between a male and female representative.

Initiatives to increase female participation are ongoing such as 'Get Into Golf' and 'Chip and Chat', a social game for females. Although equality is a core value of the new organisation, work is still required to increase female participation and representation in the governance of golf. In 2021, Royal Dublin Golf Club was the last club to partially amend its constitution to permit women to apply for membership when there are vacancies.



Figure Three:
Golf Ireland Timeline

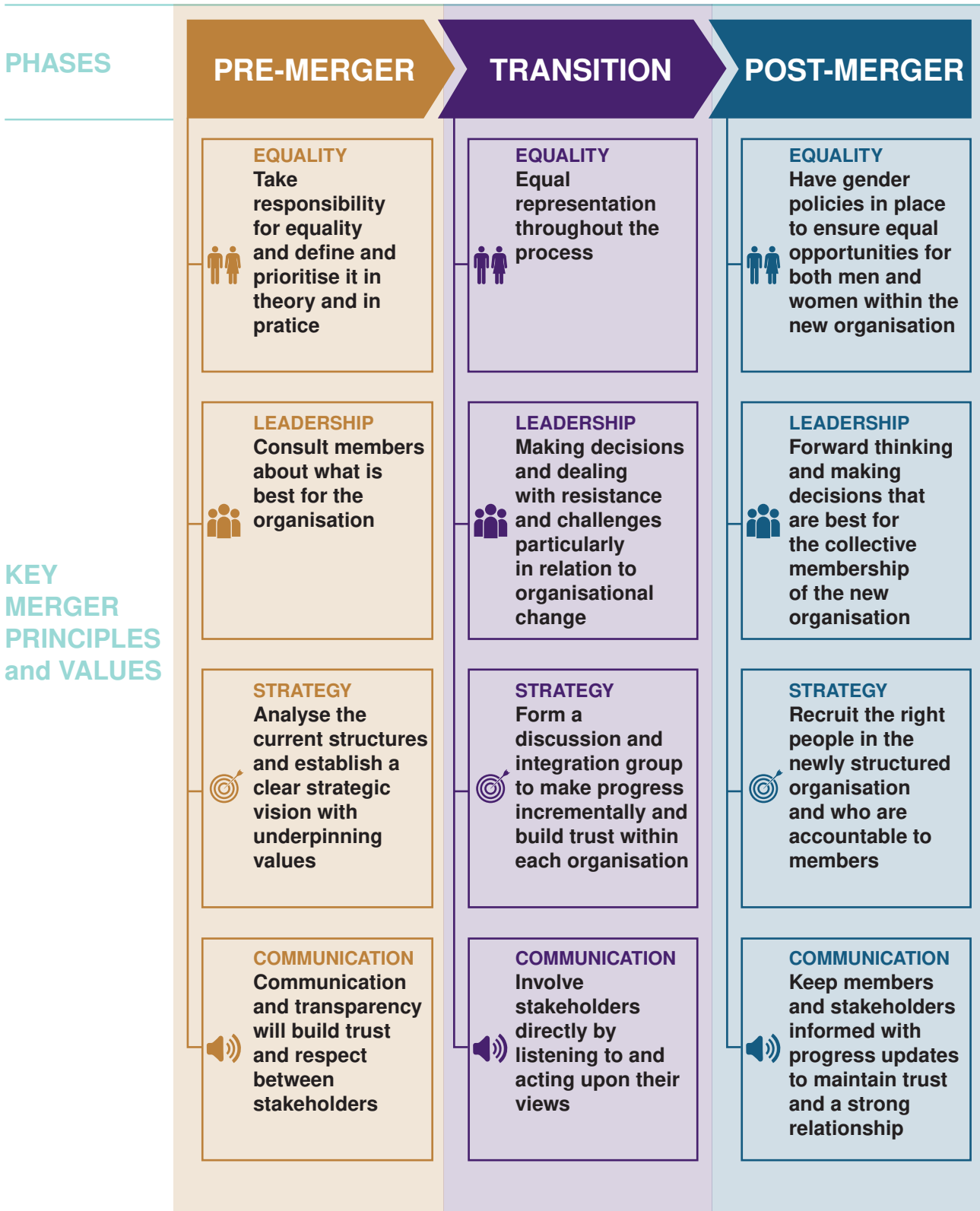


PRINCIPLES

Interviews with stakeholders involved in the formation of Golf Ireland revealed the existence of four principles that guided the three main phases of the integration

process. These were equality, leadership, strategy and communication (Figure Four).

Figure Four:
Golf Ireland Process



EQUALITY

Equality was not a priority for the GUI, given its core responsibility was men's golf, and the ILGU governed women's golf. Therefore, issues related to equality in golf fell into the gaps between both organisations:

'When it came to things like sustainability, equality and development of the game, there was no single entity responsible for it. So something could come across the GUI's desk, and the board might consider it and say "look, that's not really what we're about".'

Interviewee 1

Subsequently, equality became a core value from the pre-merger phase through to post-merger. The GUI and ILGU recognised that a culture of equality was required, where both boys/men and girls/women could play and lead the game of golf together.

'You know, when we looked at what our core values were, equality was one of those now.'

Interviewee 2

'It should be the case within every sport that whether you're male or female, boy or girl, 10 years of age ... everyone has an equal opportunity, regardless (of gender).'

Interviewee 1

Similarly, both the discussion and transition groups in golf recognised that equality had to be a core value in a new, single organisation for golf;

'My primary motivation behind getting involved in the project was to put that right. So that it could never be an excuse to say, "Hey, equality's not our business, we're responsible for men, or equality is not our business, we're responsible for women".'

Interviewee 1

The discussion group also demonstrated some awareness of the inequalities in representation of women in sport (see, for example, Acosta and Carpenter, 2012; Smith and Wrynn, 2013; Liston, 2022; Sport Ireland, 2022) and they were keen to address this within the new structures of Golf Ireland.

'[Research] shows that you need at least a third of any minority in a group for them to have an ability to influence decision-making. The single token woman is either turned into a shrew trying to get her point across or she just does not bother ... because it's always ignored anyhow.'

Interviewee 3

It was agreed that the new golf organisation would follow a 30/30/40 rule, comprising at least 30% female and 30% male representation on all boards, and 40% 'other' or open. Having women on boards debunks gender leadership stereotypes that men are 'naturally' more qualified (e.g., Knoppers, Spaaij and Claringbould, 2021), especially in the context of male dominated sports (Sotiriadou and De Haan, 2019). In addition, gender diversity on boards is linked with positive commercial outcomes (Hakovirta, Denuwara, Bharathi, Topping and Eloranta, 2020) and better corporate performance (Boulouta, 2013).

‘When you have more women on boards and decision-making entities they make better decisions, and the organisations are more profitable or whatever is their currency.’

Interviewee 3

The process of integration in golf in Ireland is ongoing in the post-merger phase and cultural change is underway, including how women are viewed within the sport.

‘The culture of golf clubs in Ireland in the 70s and 80s was one where women were deemed to be associate members, which meant they were not members. And so the annual general meeting of the golf club would take place without women at all and the men could make any decision they wanted in relation to women. Men had priority on weekends and women found it very difficult to get out on the weekends. That’s still not sorted but it’s improving. It’s going in that direction.’

Interviewee 4

LEADERSHIP

Reflecting on the Golf Ireland integration process, all four interviewees highlighted the importance of sustained strong leadership within organisations from the pre-merger phase right through to post-merger. Likewise, research has also emphasised the impact of leadership in organisational change (e.g., Kavanagh and Ashkanasy, 2006). Mergers can vary in size and complexity, as we see in the case of Gaelic Games, and the process of achieving gender equality is therefore not bound by an absolute time frame. However, leadership capability has a positive role to play (e.g., Van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003;

Steigenberger, 2017). This was exemplified in golf in Ireland.

It was evident from the interviews that leaders put members’ interests first. They were willing to support major transformation in the governance and operational structures of a new organisation to achieve this, thus displaying significant transformational leadership skills and styles.

‘Good leadership is critical, particularly from the chair and CEO. That’s where you have to get those two people right.’

Interviewee 2

‘You can learn technical knowledge but having ... good people managers is very, very important ... Both organisations have longstanding staff members who have been there for years and years who want to look to the past rather than look into the future and they don’t necessarily have the skills that you want in your new organisation.’

Interviewee 3

‘You have committed leadership on both sides, and you have to have the stronger body willing to give more than the weaker body.’

Interviewee 4

Both the discussion and transition groups had independent leadership and specialist expertise, who were not tied to the pre-existing golf organisations and thus were able to offer space and perspective that intra-organisational leadership did not always have.

'If we had a non-independent chair, or a chair who was from one of the branches or whatever, it would have proven very, very difficult to get the proposal over the line.'

Interviewee 1

'XXX was brilliant on this. XXX was the [independent] facilitator. We said, "okay, we're going to dream. If you were starting off golf today, in 2016, what is the organisation that you would put in place?" It was a new governing body. We were going to respect the past in terms of traditions and values and take the best of the past, but we were going to leave the hang-ups behind.'

Interviewee 2

New leadership was appointed in Golf Ireland. This was important in reducing uncertainty and building trust in the post-merger phase (see, also, Byun, Leopkey, and Ellis, 2022).

STRATEGY

All four interviewees involved in the integration of golf in Ireland referenced the importance of strategy throughout each phase: from governance changes at pre-merger stage to building structures for, and dealing with, gendered relations in the new organisation during post-merger (Kihl, Shaw and Schull, 2013). Epstein (2005) reported on six determining factors for merger success, including: due diligence, strategic vision and fit, merger structure, pre-merger planning, external factors, and post-merger integration. Research has also indicated that a strategic vision should articulate a rationale for any merger, centred around long-term benefits rather than short-term improvements (Liston, Lane and Meyler, under review).

At the beginning of the formal integration process in golf, the GUI and the ILGU critically examined their governing and voting structures. Subsequently,

the GUI changed their voting structure to ensure a greater voice for clubs. In turn, the organisation became more grassroots- and member-oriented and the influence of provincial units was curbed.

'One governance specialist that we dealt with described the GUI as four tails wagging one dog, which obviously, we wanted to avoid. So, we changed the governance structure to have club members vote on any important topic. That was done before we ever established the discussion group.'

Interviewee 1

Strategic thinking allowed the discussion group to gather momentum in small incremental steps. Buy-in was then achieved from the two organisations in that they became more accepting of, and willing to, actively support and participate in the process.

'So you got agreement on the things that you could get agreement on, the things that made an awful lot of sense. The further down the road you got and the more progress that you made, you were really building a very solid foundation, such that by the time that you came to tackle the big issues, you weren't going to waste the progress that you had made.'

Interviewee 2

During the transition phase, strategic planning was also vital, particularly in terms of sociocultural integration (e.g., Graebner, Heimeriks, Huy, and Vaara, 2017), ensuring/electing people with transformational leadership capacity and maintaining a focus on the values and attitudes of volunteers and members (e.g., Stahl et al, 2013).

'You have to invest time and training, particularly in the area of culture and unconscious bias.'

Interviewee 2

COMMUNICATION

Transparent communication with all stakeholders is an integral part of the defusion of inter-organisational politics in integration and merger processes (Kihl et al, 2013). It can also ensure that values, such as trust and respect, are upheld (Byun et al, 2022). Inevitably, people try to persuade or even force others to accept their viewpoint. Kavanagh and Ashkanasy's (2006) longitudinal study of a merger between three large multi-site public sector organisations noted that communication between organisational members, at all levels, from management and among peers, should be a major priority. This was carefully considered by those involved in the golf process;

'[Communication], you can never, ever do enough, It's always going to be an endless vital task. Having a communication strategy with a very clear positioning in open, transparent conversations and information. What are your communication channels currently? If it's all top trickle down, you've got to manage that. And a lot of your resistance then is likely to be in your leadership structures'
Interviewee 3

If action is dictated towards, and directed at, members and stakeholders from the top down, without being openly agreed, based on consensus and buy-in from those involved in middle and ground levels, this will likely have negative consequences. Accordingly, members both perceive and feel a lack of 'fairness' and being undervalued (e.g., Byun et al, 2002, Graebner et al, 2017, Kavanagh and Ashkanasy, 2006). In Golf Ireland, the discussion group provided regular detailed updates to clubs and their members and they remained open to members' views throughout the process. Representatives of the discussion group also attended meetings with clubs in the four provinces, and they reached out particularly to those who appeared disgruntled. This imbued members with a sense of autonomy and affiliation to the new organisation;

'[Focus groups] can be a hugely time intensive exercise but it is the only way of hearing what people think, getting their contributions ... and hearing their fears. Looking at them and watching to see where their eyes lit up and where they were really concerned.'
Interviewee 3

Likewise, the Korean Sport merger between elite and mass sports organisations (Byun et al, 2022) proposed a 'bottom up' approach to mitigate sociocultural integration challenges.



Recommendations for Gaelic Games

The five recommendations below are informed by the findings of a review of published literature on mergers in corporate and public sectors (business, education and sport) (Liston, Meyler and Lane, under review), empirical insights from the case study of Golf Ireland and critical consideration of the cultural context of Gaelic Games. These recommendations are proposed in a constructive spirit and to support meaningful progress on the delivery of gender quality and full integration within Gaelic games.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: PLAN FOR THE FULL INTEGRATION PROCESS

The overall merger process can be organised into three interlinked and overlapping phases. These should be underpinned by principles and values, and have key actions, all of which should be theoretically-informed and evidence based, i.e., drawing on the published research, relevant case studies including Golf Ireland, and the cultural specificity of the Gaelic Games context (Figure One). Mergers begin with a planning or pre-merger phase. In the case of golf in Ireland, this phase was completed when the ILGU and GUI voted to create a new organisation and their own dissolution. At this stage, transition commences and a new merged/integrated organisation is launched within a specific timeframe. In the post-merger period, the new organisation evolves and develops its' culture, systems and structures. Full integration may take five years or more.

The process by which a modern, fit-for-purpose sporting organisation is created, and that is flexible enough to address societal needs, cannot have a finite end point. It will always need to adapt because gender relations are always ongoing, especially in any new organisation based on formerly single-sex structures and practices. Therefore, strategic intent is needed over a sustained period of time, especially by leaders who are equipped to deal with challenges and barriers to change (e.g., Velija et al, 2014; Byun et al, 2022). It is also important that, from the outset, planning for integration in Gaelic Games is underpinned by feminist ideas on equality as well as theoretical insights into gender diversity. Planning should also incorporate the totality of the process (Kihl and Schull, 2011; Shaw and Dickson, 2021; Byun et al, 2022) and be based on knowledge that the delivery of full integration will take time. Actions should be time-bound, accountable and prioritised around core business.

Figure Five:
Proposed Integration Process for Gaelic Games

MERGER PHASE	KEY ACTIONS	PRINCIPLES	UNDERPINNING VALUES
Pre-Merger/Planning	Steering group; stakeholder engagement; self-assessment in terms of values, structures, systems (context); development of a strategy/plan for whole merger process	Equality	Respect
Transition	Transition structure; transition leadership; develop synergies/relationships; launch new initiatives; continue to meet the needs of members	Leadership Communication	Trust
Post-Merger	Official changes; new leadership; restructuring of work, new identity; assimilation of activity	Strategic Thinking	Commitment

RECOMMENDATION TWO: AGREE PRINCIPLES AND VALUES TO GUIDE INTEGRATION

EQUALITY

In general, women are underrepresented in all elements of sport: leadership, participation, coaching, and officiating (*Leabateer, Clarke, Roberts, and Macmahon, 2023*). As noted above, a similar picture exists in the Gaelic Games context currently. The published research on NGB mergers worldwide (*Liston, Lane and Meyler, under review*) also highlights a common feature between them. Whether intentionally, through the merger of single sex sports or, unintentionally by virtue of the growing interconnectedness of men's and women's sports today, all NGB mergers were gendered in one way or another. This manifested itself in different ways. For example, men's sports organisations were presented/understood as stronger and there were low expectations for women's sports, both by sportsmen with more traditional attitudes but also by those women who had come to accept their secondary status. Women also perceived themselves to be in a weaker position in merger processes. This meant that they engaged in self-censorship and self-exclusion from critical discussions, the result being that they felt they compromised their values more to make gains in other areas. Women were more likely not to fulfil newly created organisational roles post-merger. In some cases, men feared a loss of resources and their primary status post-merger (*Kihl et al, 2013; Velija et al, 2014; Shaw and Dickson, 2021*).

The lived experience of a merger is marked by gendered behaviours, even when the intention was there to guard against these. In this scenario, the new or merged organisation meets the needs of men more than women, generally speaking (*Shaw and Dickson, 2021; Nicholson, 2022*). In the Irish golf case study, tangible commitments to equality are in place, but the new organisation is yet very young and in the post-merger period. It will be important then that accountability about equality is built into any new Gaelic Games association, via ongoing self-reflection and time-bound targets to establish and embed gender equality in each operational pillar.

LEADERSHIP

Legitimate, reflexive and new leadership are important factors in merger success and the presence of co-leaders from pre-existing organisations can often cause confusion (*Kihl et al, 2013; Steigenberger, 2017; Byun, 2022*). Specifically, new leadership is important in relation to the cultural re-engineering required in a new organisation. This was evident in Golf Ireland where the ambition and vision was to create an organisation whose culture and structure were underpinned by equality. Of note in Irish golf was the focus on independent and specialist input into, and support for, the discussion and transition groups. GUI and ILGU Presidents were not members of the discussion group. Instead, they maintained open communication channels and thereby were seen to have attained an impartial role with their respective boards and organisations. With the exception of the Chair, the Gaelic Games Integration Steering Group is represented solely by high-level leadership with vested interests. Membership of this group should be widened to ensure a greater degree of independence and impartiality, and to permit specialist support for, and input into, the delivery of transformative and reflexive leadership.

STRATEGIC THINKING AND PLANNING

Discrete actions by organisations are often indicative of a lack of trust in, and commitment to, the merger or integration process (*Shaw and Dickson, 2021*). The three Gaelic games NGBs have embarked on shared initiatives, particularly around coaching and leadership. At the same time, each organisation continues to develop these independently of each other. It is timely to consider the ongoing need for, and indeed perhaps to limit, these individual activities and to reflect on any duplicate activities currently in place. This should form part of a strategic plan to deliver equality, and that will identify and leverage opportunities for real change in terms of individual, structural and cultural transformation (*Velija et al, 2014; Shaw and Dickson, 2021; Byun et al, 2022*).

COMMUNICATION

Stakeholder engagement and an inclusive participatory approach are important considerations in mergers and integration, along with the engagement and support of employees/members of all organisations (Houlihan and Green, 2009; Kihl and Schull, 2011, Steigenberger, 2017; Byun et al, 2022). Communication was recognised by stakeholders in the Golf Ireland case as potentially critical to success. It also helps to mitigate against the sense of uncertainty and nervousness that inevitably arises in a change situation (Kihl and Schull, 2011). Currently, the Gaelic Games Integration Steering Group has issued three general communications across all three organisations. These include updates on the integration process as well as an address from the Chair (McAleese) to the latest annual congress events, one year on from their respective votes on integration. The Steering Group is also said to

be engaged in a listening process and intends to undertake wider research. Both will be essential to ensure that the process is informed by the needs of grassroots members, and that national leadership deliver on equality by making strategic choices and taking responsibility for challenging decisions. The integration process therefore requires clear, consistent and open three-way communication.

Respect, trust, and commitment have been elicited as underpinning values in Golf Ireland. These can be agreed and, importantly, made visible in the Gaelic Games integration process. The unique context of integration in Gaelic games requires respect for the history, legacy and current workings of each organisation, trust in the membership and leadership to prioritise the collective over the individual in Gaelic games, and commitment to deliver integration and the stated goal of one association built on equality.



RECOMMENDATION THREE: PRIORITISE FEMALE REPRESENTATION

The roles of women in post-merger organisations have been insecure and sometimes ambiguous. Some were even marginalised in the context of working in new, (yet) male oriented post-merger organisations (*Stronbach and Adair, 2009; Velija et al, 2014; Risberg and Gottlieb, 2019; Shaw and Dickson, 2021*). *Ryan and Dickson (2018)* also noted that advocates for sport and sporting organisations can often fiercely defend both as a gender-neutral space and a supposed haven of meritocracy. This renders gender invisible in discourse about sport, it misidentifies the problem and leads to the ongoing exclusion of women. This is particularly relevant in single-sex sport mergers where inter-relatedness between organisations is often high and rationalisation, such as the minimisation of duplicate roles, affects women disproportionately. This was precisely the case in Australian cricket where what transpired was more of a takeover than a merger. This was despite good intentions ahead of the proposed amalgamation. In (the new) Cricket Australia

women were neither fully empowered nor engaged. Because the women's cricket organisation was not equally represented within Cricket Australia, power imbalances were retained in the new organisational structures and daily discourses remained highly gendered (*Stronbach and Adair, 2009*). Low post-merger representation of women was also apparent in UK cricket (*Velija et al, 2014*). This contrasted with New Zealand Golf where women were assured of representation on the board of the new organisation but still they remained fearful of their lack of influence in the post-merger organisation (*Shaw and Dickson, 2021*). In British (*Nicholson, 2022*) and also Irish golf, a quota approach was taken to the question of women's representation, and Golf Ireland adopted a 30:30:40 model to safeguard their representation on all boards/committees, at national and local levels. It is important that a time-bound and monitored approach is taken to quotas in the governance structures of a new Gaelic Games Association, in operational, administrative and volunteer units.



RECOMMENDATION FOUR: DEVELOP A FUNDING MODEL BASED ON EQUITY

In NGB mergers worldwide, and in Ireland, financial contexts were highly skewed across male and female organisations. In Australian, English and Welsh cricket for instance, women's organisations were experiencing financial challenges including a real risk of collapse. In Australia, concerns were expressed about the 'cost' of women in a new organisation (*Stronbach and Adair, 2009; Velija et al, 2014*). At the same time, however, there was an overarching acceptance that the women's game was a long-term strategic investment opportunity that would accrue benefits for cricket, around sponsorship and membership. This would position cricket as the most popular sport in Australia. In New Zealand Golf, there were also financial concerns for both (single sex) organisations. A seemingly straightforward process of budget assimilation was beset with gendered issues (*Shaw and Dickson, 2021*). In Canadian sport, a focus on structural change only (i.e., how

two merging organisations would work) to the neglect of systems (including financial management), and clarity on agreed values led to breakdown and lack of coherence in decision-making. Ultimately, there was tension and confusion and a lack of foresight about the need for a bigger budget for a bigger Canadian organisation (*Stevens, 2006*). In the Gaelic Games context, national leadership is required to manage the financial concerns and implications of integration given the significantly different budget and asset profiles across the men's and women's organisations. It is important that strategic plans deliver long-term equity of investment for male and female members at all levels. In turn, clubs and counties will need dedicated financial support, via additional/new funding streams inclusive of Government support, and a redistribution of existing resources.



RECOMMENDATION FIVE: BUILD A NEW ORGANISATION FOR GAELIC GAMES

In reforms of UK Sport, the goal was to modernise sport considering the widespread societal change that has taken place there. In this, the existence of single-sex organisations was regarded as outdated. Top-down change emanated from UK Sport and was directed at NGBs. This forced merger approach led to a heavily gendered process and little change in the representation of women in sport (*Nicholson, 2022*). In Canada, the operational processes of one organisation became the status quo in the new organisation, and this led to considerable tension post-merger, primarily due to the lack of shared values and systems planning. In addition, there were distinct silos within the new Canadian organisation where integration occurred mainly at upper levels of management (*Stevens, 2006*). In Australian cricket, an advisory board was set up for women's cricket to inform debate around a merger with the men's organisation. A women's cricket reference group was established within the new Cricket Australia to advise on the women's game. However, there was minimal representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles in Cricket Australia too (*Stronbach and Adair, 2009*). Elsewhere, in the merged England and Wales Cricket Board, improvements were visible in elite women's cricket in the post-merger phase. Insufficient resources were allocated to ensure gender equality at grassroots level however. Women were subjected to exclusionary power, i.e., left to manage the women's game which continued to be perceived as inferior (*Velija et al, 2014*). Sexism and gendered behaviours prevailed in New Zealand Golf and in UK Sport reforms because national level changes had

neither empowered women nor instigated action at local level (*Nicholson, 2022*).

More often than not, mergers have maintained rather than challenged the status quo. NGBs have generally remained male-oriented post-merger, and gender equality has been peripheral to concerns around fixtures, rules and so on. Much of the merger literature espouses the virtue of establishing new organisations with new leadership, culture, identity and systems across all levels and for all sports participants (*Kihl et al, 2013; Byun et al, 2022; Nicholson, 2022*). A merger or integration of two or more single-sex sports organisations is an opportunity to change the culture and structures of sport and to bring about equal opportunities for women in sport (*Leabeater et al, 2023*), in terms of participation, representation and financial investment. The Gaelic Games family has a seminal opportunity to build a new association that exceeds an organisation which is the simple sum of its individual parts. More gains can be made together, collectively, than apart. This transformation into a new organisation potentially represents the most significant development for national indigenous games since their inception. A new Gaelic Games organisation can have values, systems of work and organisational structures that support male and female members equally, across playing, administrative, coaching, leadership and officiating units. In time, this new association will surpass the reputations of each of the three independent associations and become the focal point for Gaelic Games in Irish life.



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Research Team

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Conor Meyler is a PhD researcher at TUS Midlands in the Department of Sport and Health Science. Conor's research interests are in Sport, Leadership and Gender, and his PhD research will build a pathway towards integration in Gaelic Games. A qualified teacher, Conor is a graduate of St Mary's University College Belfast and University College Dublin where he studied Teaching with Physical Education and completed an MA in Education. Conor represented both universities in the Sigerson Cup, captaining St Mary's to the title in 2017. Conor is currently involved in a coaching role with St Mary's having worked with both the men's and women's senior teams, taking the ladies footballers to an All-Ireland final in 2022. Conor is a member of the Tyrone GAA senior football team, currently in his 9th season which has brought him success at Ulster and All-Ireland level as well as a PWC All-Star. Conor plays his club football with Omagh St Enda's in Tyrone where he has had county and provincial success at underage and senior level while also working an underage coach. A member of the SHE Research Group at TUS, Conor hopes to bring greater awareness to some of the inequalities that exist in female sport and help close the gender data gap.



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Dr Aoife Lane is Head of Department of Sport and Health Sciences in Technological University of the Shannon (Athlone Campus). Aoife is a native of Ballinaderreen in Galway, and having played for many years, is now helping to develop a 'One Club' model for hurling and camogie in her club. Aoife is Chair of the Gaelic Games Sports Science Working Group who have developed a framework for sports science for all stages of the player pathway, inclusive of male and female players. Founder of the Women's Gaelic Players Association (WGPA), Aoife was influential in the merger of the WGPA and its male counterpart, the Gaelic Players Association (GPA). Aoife is lead of the SHE Research Group, which aims to bridge the gender data gap in sport, health and exercise science research. Aoife supervises PhD projects on participation in sport and physical activity, the role of sporting role models in promoting sport, supporting the female athlete and on equality and leadership in sport, the latter involving Conor's PhD.



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Dr Katie Liston is a Senior Lecturer and Researcher at the School of Sport, Ulster University. She is a graduate of University College Dublin and also worked at the University of Chester, where she coached the university ladies' Gaelic football team to success. Katie was a member of the LGFA's Leadership Forum and is a multiple All-Star and All-Ireland medal winner with Kerry LGFA. She also competed at international level in athletics, soccer and rugby. Katie was co-author of the 2004 Joint Oireachtas Report on Women in Sport and she completed her doctoral thesis in 2005, which was the first to examine the experiences of elite sportswomen in Ireland. Since then, she has worked extensively on women in sport, conducting research on media coverage of women's sport, the representation of women in sports governance, national identity and sport, and pain and injury. Katie is co-editor of the award-winning Cengage collection, *The Business and Culture of Sports: Society, Politics, Economy, Environment*, and a regular contributor to print and radio media outlets. Katie is also a member of SHE Research Group at TUS, and she is co-supervisor of Conor's doctoral research.

