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This strategy sets out a clear roadmap to ensure that we recruit, retain and support our referees, whilst providing a clear pathway for their ongoing development. Our referees are an integral part of our game and a crucial resource to our clubs and leagues. The challenges they face at all levels of the game are well known and well documented.

In implementing this strategy, respect for our referees must be at the heart of everything we do. We all have a responsibility to do what we can to change our existing culture which, in turn, will see our players, referees, coaches, parents and supporters continue to enjoy the beautiful game.

As our game continues to grow, this the realisation of the goals of this strategy will hopefully ensure that the needs of our clubs and leagues are met and will also give every referee the opportunity to develop to their full potential.

Noel Mooney
General Manager Football Association of Ireland

This new strategy will provide us with the opportunities to further develop all roles within the refereeing family and allow us to build on the foundations established by previous development plans and by our membership and support of the UEFA Referee Convention.

At a time when all codes of football are experiencing development there is an associated demand for referees. Together with the leagues and other affiliates we have to be innovative and explore new ideas to recruit and retain referees. The Irish Soccer Referees Society has a key role to play in this regard.

Respect is one of the fundamental “values” in football. It includes ‘Respect’ for the game, for players & and coaches; for supporters and also for referees. Respect for referees and their decisions are crucial to the recruitment and retention of referees and this needs to become embedded in the culture of Football in Ireland. Passion about your favorite team is part of the fabric of our game. However, the expression of this cannot result in the abuse, in any form, of the match officials or others.

A core message of this strategy is that refereeing must be recognised as integral to all strands of football and that greater integration and collaboration with leagues whilst maintaining independence has to be fostered.

Gerard Perry
Chairperson National Referee Committee
The Irish Soccer Referees Society believes that this new strategy will provide a clear pathway for referees, while at the same time will ensure that referees will be viewed upon as a necessary resource in the game. The ISRS is an inclusive modern organisation that strives to offer the best protection for our members during this difficult time in our history. The ISRS will continue to offer support and protection to all our member’s, while at the same time we will work in close collaboration with the FAI to ensure every referee has access to the highest level of training and education.

I believe that the beautiful game will be best served by ensuring that every game in the Country is officiated by an officially trained referee. In order for this to happen there needs to be a cultural sea change that will see greater respect afforded to those that choose to take up the whistle. If and when this happens, I am confident that more people will take up refereeing, which can only be good for the footballing family and the game at large.

Paul O’Brien
President Irish Soccer Referees Society
INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) is to promote, foster and develop the game of ‘Association Football’ in Ireland and ‘Refereeing’ is an essential part of this undertaking. The objectives of this strategy align with the FAI’s mission which in turn will facilitate and support the attainment of the agreed goals. Whilst there is an obvious and urgent need for referees to be recruited and retained in order to service the needs of the game, it is equally important that this strategy supports and encourages the continuous development of referees. We have an obligation to ensure that all registered referees are given the opportunity to develop in line with their potential, ability and aspirations.

Following extensive research, data analysis and consultation across all levels of football, the objectives and goals of the strategy are best expressed under the following pillars:

• **Recruit**
• **Support**
• **Retain**
• **Develop**
• **Govern**

Successful implementation of this strategy will rely on a collaborative approach from all stakeholders within the game. Fully implementing the strategy by achieving the outlined objectives will ensure a better experience for our players, whilst simultaneously benefiting our referees and those who work or volunteer tirelessly off the pitch.

In working towards full implementation, the FAI will put in place oversight and consultative measures to monitor progress, ensure targets are met and where appropriate, revise or update objectives.

This strategy document outlines the key objectives, their rationale and timelines for goals to be reached. It is the shared responsibility of all the “football family” to ensure that the game continues to grow. Referees should be fully supported in their role whilst being given opportunities to develop. Referees are responsible for applying and upholding the integrity of the “Laws of the Game” and ensuring that games are played in a manner that respects fairness, diversity and inclusivity. Referees and their decisions must be respected.
INTRODUCTION:

Football is the largest participation sport in the Country and the need to recruit referees has grown in line with the needs of the game. The Association has a responsibility to ensure that each league is provided with the necessary number of referees to meet the demands of continued growth in participation.

Data capture and analysis was carried out on all affiliated grassroots leagues to ascertain:

- the number of active referees affiliated to each league;
- the number of games to be played each week and
- the number of games, on average, postponed each week.

The data collected shows that the number of referees varied from region to region and league to league. The absence of referees has significant impact on the ability of leagues to have their fixtures fulfilled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referee Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referees</td>
<td>1454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Referees</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Referees</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIFA Officials</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee Observers</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

League from Connaught Region
- 25 Referees
- 40 Games
- 0 matches cancelled per week

League from Leinster North Region
- 105 Referees
- 300 Games
- 20 matches cancelled per week

League from Leinster South Region
- 50 Referees
- 56 Games
- 0 matches cancelled per week

League from Munster Region
- 34 Referees
- 120 Games
- 5 matches cancelled per week
Further to this, many leagues require referees to officiate in multiple games each week and even each day in some instances in order to ensure matches are played. According to the UEFA Referee Convention, the desired ratio of one referee for every two teams should be aspired to.

This strategy will endeavour to recruit and provide the required number of referees to allow affiliated leagues at all levels to continue to meet their demands in line with participation growth. Increased co-operation between the association and affiliated leagues will contribute to the recruitment of referees.

**OBJECTIVE:**

Recruit the required number of referees to allow affiliated leagues at all levels to continue to meet their demands in line with participation growth.

**GOALS:**

- League by league data analysis of fixtures, referee numbers, and referee age-profiles and reasons for referees leaving (Q4 2019 and annually thereafter)
- Annual recruitment objectives to be defined and delivered based on league by league data analysis (Q1 2020 and annually thereafter)
- Review of all referee training costs (Q4 2020)
INTRODUCTION:

Referees are an integral part of the game. Refereeing is a difficult and challenging undertaking and it is important that we, as an association, provide support to new and existing referees. Developing and encouraging respect for referees is a fundamental value underpinning this strategy. One of the key measures of our success will be the elimination of assaults on referees and this will require a seismic culture shift that leads to referees being viewed as integral to the development of our game.

While support for all registered referees is necessary it is important, together with our affiliates in the ISRS, that we provide additional support structures specifically to our newly qualified referees to ensure that the referees we recruit are also retained.

Of 126 ‘Referee Beginner Course’ participants who were surveyed between 2018 and 2019, 102 responded which gave us a strong sample size from which we could assess the experience of new referees entering the game.

Since taking the course, 22% of respondents had not taken up refereeing - 39% of those respondents reported never being contacted by a league or appointed to a game.

Of those who took up refereeing, over 50% reported that it took 6 weeks or longer before they refereed their first game.

It is clear from the data that we need to do more to ensure our newly qualified referees are supported and actively recruited and retained by leagues.

In order to achieve this, a specified individual in each league, who may be an existing committee member or new volunteer, should be given the role of Referee Liaison Officer.

**Taken up refereeing since completing the course**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>YES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage

- YES 78%
- NO 22%
OBJECTIVE:
All affiliated grassroots leagues to appoint a Referee Liaison Officer (RLO) to assist with referee recruitment, retention and ‘Respect the Ref’ campaign.

GOALS:
- Defined role description and induction training to be developed for the position of the RLO (Q1 2020)
- Role to be piloted and analysed with minimum of 6 Grassroots Leagues (Q4 2020)
- Development and delivery of “Respect the Ref” campaigns at local, regional and national levels (Q4 2020)
- All affiliated grassroots leagues to have a Referee Liaison Officer in place (Q4 2021)
INTRODUCTION:

With over 50% of our Referee Beginner Course participants stating that it took longer than 6 weeks before they officiated their first game. Another 12.5% of course participants citing that they were never contacted by their assigned league, retention must be viewed as a key priority for all concerned.

More effective and efficient systems must be established to ensure that we retain a much higher proportion of those who undertake our Referee Beginners Course. These new systems should initially focus on maintaining a connection with the Newly Qualified Referee (NQR) whilst also facilitating the development of links to the referees assigned league. The ISRS can again play a key role by both supporting referees and by providing additional educational inputs.

to support each Referee Liaison Officer and their newly recruited referees should be introduced to ensure a smooth transition from course completion to officiating games.

When asked what improvements could be made, respondents repeatedly made calls for a referee ‘buddy system’ and a mentoring programme for newly recruited referees to be made available. Consequently, it is proposed to standardise existing mentoring ‘pilot programmes’ and extend them to leagues across the country. This will be facilitated by training and assigning Elite Panel Referees and experienced Grassroots ISRS members to Newly Qualified Referee (NQR).

Whilst our formal referee education courses and modules will continue to develop, this more informal support mechanism should increase the level of collaboration across all levels of refereeing and help to retain more referees within the game.

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Length of time before first game refereed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Longer</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Weeks</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Weeks</td>
<td>13.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>16.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Weeks</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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OBJECTIVE:
Assess and improve the rate of referee retention with a focus on newly recruited referees

GOALS:
• Identification of Elite referees who are coming to the end of their careers and the recruitment of these referees in to support and development roles (Q1 2020 and annually thereafter)
• Referee induction packs to be designed and introduced on all Referee Beginner Courses (Q4 2020)
• Implement a tracking and monitoring system to evaluate, on an annual basis, referee retention rates and reasons for referee’s leaving (Q4 2020)
• League Referee Liaison Officers to act as a point of contact for new referees entering the game and act as a support for existing referees (Q4 2021)
• Existing coaches who act as match supervisors in line with the FAI Player Development Plan to undergo annual online training by (Q1 2022)
• Mentoring and talent identification to take place locally to encourage match facilitators to progress, through our referee beginner courses, into competitive football (Q1 2024)
INTRODUCTION:

The Association’s vision is to enable every person that participates in our game to reach their full potential. Referees should also be afforded the opportunities to develop and progress in line with their potential, ability and aspirations. A coherent pathway reflecting the size and needs of football in Ireland and levels of football throughout the Country is required.

The pathway should allow for development of our referees to serve each level of the game. No two referees are the same and each referee will have different goals, ambitions and development needs. The new pathway will provide referees with a clear understanding of the requirements needed to referee at each level and will give each referee an opportunity to meet their full potential. The pathway will allow referees a degree of control over their own development by providing clear criteria for moving through the categories and opportunities for upskilling at each level whilst meeting the needs of the game. The aim of the strategic plan is to recruit, retain, educate and develop our referees. This pathway will provide a clear, practical and achievable system for attaining these goals.

Referee observers and instructors provide coaching and training respectively for all levels of referee development. The training of observers and instructors needs to be enhanced and developed by ensuring ongoing ‘continuous professional development’ opportunities occur with links, where appropriate, with the National Qualifications Framework.
OBJECTIVE:

Establish a clear and achievable Referee Development Pathway to increase the standard of refereeing and support the recruitment and retention of referees.

GOALS:

• Train all Referee Observers to assist with the transition of all referees to the new Referee Development Pathway (Q1 2020)

• Deliver regional workshops to present and explain the Referee Development Pathway to Fixture Secretaries and Referee Allocators (Q2 2020)

• Align all registered referees to the new Referee Development Pathway (Q3 2020)

• Update existing referee observation report forms and guidelines in line with the new Referee Development Pathway (Q4 2020)

• Phase 1 of categorization; all referees will be categorized based on criteria set out within the pathway (Q3 2021)

• Phase 2 of categorisation; an integral part of the pathway is allowing each referee a degree of control over their own development. A referee will be able to apply to be re-assigned to a new category, providing they meet the criteria as outlined in the guidelines (Q3 2022)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category 5</th>
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<th>Category 3</th>
<th>Category 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referees at this introductory category can officiate:</td>
<td>Referees at this category can officiate:</td>
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<td>Referees at this category can officiate:</td>
<td>Referees at this category can officiate:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lower age levels of underage football</td>
<td>• the lower divisions of junior football</td>
<td>• the games outside of the highest divisions in junior football</td>
<td>• the highest divisions in junior football</td>
<td>• all levels of grassroots football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Small Sided Games</td>
<td>• the lower divisions of youth football</td>
<td>• the highest levels of youth football</td>
<td>• the highest levels of youth football</td>
<td>• Underage National League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the lower divisions of underage football</td>
<td>• the highest levels of youth football</td>
<td>• the highest levels of underage football</td>
<td>• the highest levels of underage football</td>
<td>• Women’s National League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Small Sided Games</td>
<td>Underage National League</td>
<td>• Underage National League</td>
<td>• Women’s National League</td>
<td>• All levels of Colleges and Third Level leagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s National League</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd/3rd/4th divisions of Colleges and Third Level leagues</td>
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**Licence Requirements**

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<td>Attend one annual Seminar Module</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Attend two modules</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Complete one online module</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>Attend one annual Seminar Module</td>
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<td>Attend one regional development programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attend one annual Seminar Module</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEVELOPMENT

This strategy recognises that there are football leagues and groups which require tailored and specific development programmes. All referees should initially complete a referee beginner course before engaging in supplementary courses. The Association will provide this additional training to meet the needs of all affiliates.

FOOTBALL FOR ALL

The FAI fully endorses and actively subscribe to acceptance, inclusivity and diversity and seeks to provide opportunities for everyone to play football. The Association’s ‘Football for All’ (FFA) strategy incorporates a range of programmes where organised football is available for people from a range of disciplines, including those with physical and learning disabilities, those who are visually and hearing impaired and those with social and emotional difficulties. Organised leagues within this framework may require referees who have specific referee training. Throughout the implementation of this strategy an annual assessment of these needs will take place with education and resourcing provided as required.

OBJECTIVE:

Continue to develop policy and practice to meet the needs of FFA programmes and to provide the expertise in the development of greater inclusivity in football in general, within the context of the Laws of the Game (Q1 2021)

WOMEN’S FOOTBALL

The Association has seen phenomenal development in the women’s game. Referee recruitment and retention must grow to service the needs of this development. The Association will continue to provide specific development opportunities for women referees through the grassroots referee education programme. “Women Only” referee beginner courses have also resulted in an increase in the number of women entering the referee family. The Association is committed to fully supporting the recruitment, retention, support and development of our women referees.

OBJECTIVE:

Increase the provision of specific development opportunities for women referees and provide referee beginner courses tailored to the needs of the women’s game throughout the country (Q2 2020)
TALENTS PROGRAMME

The current talents programme (School of Excellence) has served the Association well over the past number of years producing a large cohort of professional and highly developed referees who have gone on to referee at the top levels of grassroots, elite and international football. The new talents programme will continue to nurture, support and encourage referees with the potential, ability and ambition to become better referees. The Association through this strategy will review the current model with a view to expanding the talents programme on a regional and or development basis.

OBJECTIVE:

Expand the talents programme to all levels of football to ensure the development needs of all leagues are met (Q1 2021)

ELITE REFEREEING

The needs of the professional game in terms of referees is ever more demanding and subject to even deeper levels of scrutiny than ever before. The development of referees on the elite panel needs to be continuous and fluid and should reflect the demands placed upon it. Along with the Premier and First Divisions, the popularity of women’s football in conjunction with increased activity at national under age level illustrates there is now even greater demand placed upon refereeing resources. Consequently, the expansion of the elite panel, with defined career pathways is necessary and of vital importance.

Career pathways will be further developed for the elite panel of referees. Cohorts of referees will be identified from both existing elite referees and potential elite referees to for appropriate development and progression to meet existing and future needs. It is envisaged that mentoring, training needs analysis, course design and continuous professional development will be employed to keep abreast of latest developments within refereeing for the professional level.

OBJECTIVE:

Develop referees to service the needs of the professional leagues (Q4 2020)

FUTSAL

The emerging development of Futsal at Primary, Post Primary, grassroots and third levels also creates a demand for appropriately trained referees. To meet this need future Futsal referees will receive introductory refereeing training with additional Futsal specific referee training. This conforms to the methodology employed for other codes of football.

OBJECTIVE:

Review the training course content for Futsal Refereeing with a view to providing modular approaches to upskilling existing referees (Q1 2021)
INTRODUCTION:

The FAI rules confer on the National Referees Committee (NRC) responsibility to govern and manage refereeing for all levels of the game under the Association’s remit.

The NRC, in turn, gives Regional and Elite Referee Committees operational responsibility to deliver the objectives of the FAI Referee Policy and Strategy. These structures have served the Association well. However, with the expansion of mainstream football, the developments in the women’s and national underage games, together with developments in Football for All, Futsal and other emerging strands there is a need to review the effectiveness of current structures.

If appropriate, alternative structures should be recommended to the FAI Board. Such a review will occur in the context of the UEFA Referee Convention – of which the Association is a member – and sets clear parameters on how Refereeing within Member Associations should operate and be governed.

OBJECTIVES:

Ensure good governance practices, in line with UEFA Referee Convention and FAI rules, are implemented at all levels of the game.

GOALS:

• Review of National Committee structures, roles and responsibilities (Q4 2020)

• Reviewing all current policies in relation to refereeing with a view to ensuring that they are ‘fit for purpose’ in the context of the new strategy (Q4 2020 and annually thereafter)

• Review of Regional Committee structures, roles and responsibilities (Q4 2020)

• Re-structure of regions and regional committees (if required) (Q1 2021)

• Review volunteer management processes to ensure roles are being performed (Q1 2021)

• Terms of office for National Committee members reviewed (Q1 2021)

• Implementation of education and continuous development training for committee members (Q1 2021)

• Developing succession plans for all key operational roles (Q1 2021)

• Information gathering from each region to ensure future challenges and demands are met annually.
INTRODUCTION:

Achieving the objectives set out in the strategy will require all stakeholders to work in a collaborative manner. As the strategy is implemented, recruitment, retention and development targets should be adapted appropriately to service the needs of the game in all regions as we continue to grow participation.

Regular consultation and assessment of progress on each of the objectives of this strategy will take place in an open and transparent manner.

Our existing National and Regional Committees, together with the ISRS and the new Referee Liaison Officer system will play pivotal roles in this. In order to ensure implementation progress is adequately monitored and reported, the following goals are identified:

GOALS:

• Agree terms of reference for a ‘Referee Strategy Implementation Group’ which will report to the National Referee Committee (Q1 2020)

• Establish the ‘Implementation Group’ with a clear annual work plan (Q1 2020)

• Bi-annual review of the effectiveness of the Implementation Group (ongoing from Q2 2020)

• Provision of progress reports from the National Referee Committee to the FAI Board and Football Management Committee (Quarterly from Q2 2020)
REFEREE

Strategic Plan 2020 - 2025

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