Women’s Strategic Plan 2015-2018
Pointing the way forward for women’s football
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The development of women’s football has come a long way since we published our first Women’s Development Plan in 2006. Grassroots programmes specifically targeted at girls have been rolled out nationwide, new clubs have been established, player numbers have doubled, Emerging Talent Programmes for girls have been established and we have launched the Women’s National League sponsored by Continental Tyres.

All of this work has yielded dividends at international level where funding and preparation has improved significantly. Our rankings continue to improve at senior level, and at underage level we have enjoyed some very notable successes. Our WU17s reached the European final and went on to the World Cup quarter finals in 2010 and our W19s reached the last four in Europe in 2014. The plan comes at an important time for the future of the game. This year we will be setting out a new FAI strategic plan through to 2020. This 2015 Women’s Development Plan represents a significant strand of that work along with the National Player Development Plan and consultation on the SSE Airtricity League.

“Since 1973, the WFAI has done tremendous work to grow and develop the women’s game. The FAI Women’s Development Plan of 2006 took that relationship further and now, after meetings with the WFAI Executive and Council, the 2015 Women’s Development Plan provides a roadmap for our shared vision for the future. The continued development of women’s football is a major strategic goal for the Association, one that this plan will help us deliver.”

John Delaney
FAI CEO

This latest Development Plan for Women’s Football has taken some time to finalise. I think, however, that the end result justifies the time taken. Considerable efforts were made to get views from all participants in the game and to meet with many of the stakeholders to understand their views and objectives. They have challenged us to produce a plan that will make a difference to all those involved at every level of the game.

We have come a long way since the Ladies Football Association of Ireland was formed in 1973. During that period, we have seen many changes in women’s football both domestically and internationally. The profile of the game is changing, participation numbers are increasing, and there are player pathways in place and career opportunities for players, coaches and administrators alike. This plan represents another step forward in the development of our game. Not alone are commitments being made in relation to growing and developing our game, we can also see through the changes in support and governance arrangements being planned, that women’s football is being embedded in the structures of Irish football in a way we might never have imagined.
“We have reasons to be optimistic about the future”

“We have reasons to be optimistic about the future. The achievements of the last forty years have been fantastic. We are fortunate indeed that the FAI believes in the future of women’s football and has clearly demonstrated its commitment to the development of the game. We are also fortunate to receive support and encouragement from the Irish Sports Council, UEFA and FIFA. However, we would not have achieved anything without the volunteers who supported and organised, the players who persisted and the clubs that struggled to keep going. Your work is not complete - we still need you all - but hopefully through the various programmes in this plan we can help, support and encourage you to even greater achievements in the years ahead. I look forward to that day.”

Niamh O’Donoghue
WFAI Chairperson
The Story Continues

In 2005, the FAI introduced a Women’s Unit within the FAI Technical Department. This provided the association with the opportunity to continue the great work previously done by the WFAI and provide a vision to develop the game like never before.

The first task of the Women’s Unit was to devise a five year Women’s Development Plan. This plan’s focus was the development of the game and came under four main stages:

1: Introduction to Football
2: Club/League Development
3: Emerging Talent
4: International / High Performance
There have been many successes in each of these stages

The Soccer Sisters programme was a key initiative to introducing young girls to the game and led to the development of many new teams around the country. Initially it began as a “Traditional 10 week programme” in communities and has now developed to an important start up programme for clubs. 2009 saw the introduction of the Soccer Sisters Easter Camps, which have continued to increase participation numbers each year. To date over 22,000 girls have participated on the Soccer Sisters Programme.

With the growing interest in football on the increase, more and more clubs began to develop girl’s teams and as a result the natural progression was the development of new Girls and Women’s leagues. In 2006, there were 12,500 females registered to play by 2014, this figure increased to 23,500. We’ve gone from having 16 leagues to 32 leagues, the most notable of which has been the introduction of the Women’s National League.

The Emerging Talent programme (ETP) was an important development for elite players. It began with Winter Training Programmes which took place at regional venues around the country. This afforded talented players between ages of 12-16 years an opportunity to train together over a 10 week period. As participation numbers and leagues increased, there was a need to develop the ETP further. The introduction of the League centres and Regional Emerging Talent Centre’s was vital to the success at National level. Each league was given the opportunity to run a League Centre at U12, 14, 16, 18 again allowing the best players in each league to train together on a regular basis. From this the Elite players were selected to train in Regional Emerging Talent Centres. The Gaynor Cup also developed over the same period. It progressed from a provincial tournament to an Inter-league competition at U14 and U16.

In 2008 the Women’s Senior Team qualified for the Euro 2009 Finals play off, losing a two legged play off to Iceland. The under 19 women’s team consistently qualified for the elite phase of UEFA Qualification. The under 17 women’s team was introduced in 2007 and qualified for the four team finals in 2010 beating previous winners Germany 1-0 in the semi-final, and won a silver medal after losing the final to Spain on penalties. The reward for a silver medal was a place in the Under 17 Women’s World Cup in Trinidad & Tobago. Group wins over Ghana, Canada and a draw with Brazil brought a quarter final meeting with Japan and exit from the tournament following a 2-1 loss.

2014 saw our Women’s U19’s qualify for the European finals defeating England, Sweden and Spain before losing out to Holland in the semi-finals. Meanwhile the Senior Women’s team, despite not qualifying for the Women’s World Cup in Canada, had many notable performances and results.

Over the past number of years there have been ongoing discussions, meetings, surveys and workshops to analyse the best course of action to take the female game to the next level.

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Areas of focus for Women’s Football Development

The main areas to focus on for women’s football development in Ireland are:

1. Grassroots
2. Education
3. High Performance
4. Promotion, marketing and communication
5. Organisation and infrastructure
These five areas will be the focus in the coming years for developing women’s football when measuring success and sustainability in the implementation of programmes and projects. The areas will be subdivided into key performance indicators, helping us to track our achievements and evaluate women’s football development.
1. Grassroots

Grassroots programmes are vital to engage and retain girls and women in the sport as players, coaches, referees, administrators and volunteers. We want to give everyone the opportunity to play in a fun and safe environment. Starting with unstructured casual soccer locally, moving into schools, communities, clubs and third level institutions. We aim to provide new opportunities for girls to play locally for fun, fitness and social enjoyment. Specifically we aim to develop current successful programmes such as soccer sisters, county & city council programmes, HSE Community Games, intercultural programmes and summer soccer schools.

FAI Soccer Sisters has been the biggest grassroots programme for developing girl’s participation, while enabling clubs and leagues to develop. Since 2006 over 22,000 girls have taken part in the programme.

The FAI Schools programme has also continued to increase year on year, Primary School Futsal for third and fourth class, Primary 5’s for fourth, fifth and sixth classes and Futsal for Post Primary First years also.

Our main aim is to continue to grow participation through all aspects of the game, giving equal opportunity for females to participate in the game whether as players, coaches, referees, administrators or volunteers.
Indicators for Grassroots Programmes

1. FAI Development Officers with dedicated time for girls and women’s grassroots projects and programmes will build the platform to expand the new and current initiatives.
2. Recruitment programmes such as soccer sisters are established in clubs and schools.
3. Grassroots programmes established at local level to encourage more girls to play.
4. Festivals and recruitment activities organised on a regular basis throughout the year such as the FIFA Live Your Goals campaign.

Key Actions

★ Set targets for FAI Development Officers and work with clubs, leagues and other stakeholders.
★ Expand “Soccer Sisters” to a wider audience with new school and club links.
★ New club Academy development programme established in Clubs with DO assistance.
★ Expand the FIFA Live Your Goals Festivals each year.
★ Work with the HSE to develop the established Community Games programmes.
★ Develop new programmes that targets 16-22 year age group (Small Sided Games Leagues, Futsal, School Transition Year, Third Level Institutions).
★ Develop new recreational programmes targeting social inclusion and adults.
★ Develop national campaign for creating awareness of volunteer recruitment.
2. Education

The development of female coaches, referees, administrators and volunteers is needed to support the growth and sustainability of women’s football. The women that are involved as coaches, referees and administrators provide role models and motivation for girls and women to become involved themselves and stay in football programmes.

While it is important to include and retain female coaches and referees in the women’s game, it is also important to continue the learning process from the men’s game as well as gain support from male counterparts. Therefore, a strong network of male and female coaches and referees should be established, which will bring benefits to all levels of girls and women’s football development.

Other football associations have managed to develop a strong base of coaches and referees and have found it easier to succeed in the development of the game. Transferring expertise and constantly updating football knowledge is crucial for development.
Indicators for education

1. Number of coaches dedicated to women’s football: The higher the number of club coaches dedicated to the female game, the more beneficial the effect on women’s football development, as they will concentrate solely on women’s football, inspire women and girls to play, and have specific expertise in the development of our game.

2. Number of female referees and the number of overall referees in women’s football. Expertise in refereeing effects fair play and the quality of competitions. Both are important elements in the acceptance of and support for the game.

3. Organisation of courses and seminars in a way that reflects the differences between men’s and women’s football and are ‘family friendly’ to increase opportunities to attend.

4. Develop the FAI Coaches Association to improve knowledge on women’s football. Expand the database to include information about upcoming courses, specific women’s needs and ideas on how to develop girls and women to improve knowledge and best practice.

5. Increased numbers of volunteers to allow for the expansion and demand as the game grows.

Key Actions

1. Coaches working in the elite game offered reserved places on our licenced courses, with funding opportunities explored and maximised.

2. Specific women’s football education opportunities offered for coaches (eg FIFA / UEFA Education Courses, CPD, UEFA Study Groups etc).

3. Mentoring opportunities exploited to improve coaches working with female teams.

4. Women’s football referee courses and/or seminars offered each year.

5. Databases for coaches and referees updated by end 2015.

6. FAI Coaches Association developed to include significantly more information on women’s football and female specific education by end of 2016.

7. Volunteer workshops available to clubs targeting the female game by end 2016.

8. Continue to develop coaches, referee’s and administrators through education, workshops and mentoring.
3. High Performance

Competitions and Players

The main aim of High Performance is to ensure players’ progression and increase the level players are able to compete at national and international competitions. Our Senior Team are ranked 32nd in the FIFA Women’s Rankings having reached a high of 27th in 2009. For the 2015 FIFA World Cup Draw we were ranked at 20th in Europe, our aim is to establish ourselves in the top 20. The Under 19s reached the UEFA Finals for the first time in 2014, topping their group and losing in the semi-final. Our aim is to qualify for the U19 finals at least every two years.

Peamount United reached the UEFA Champions League last 32 in 2011 and Raheny United reached the same round in 2014. It is our aim that we have our WNL winners, as a minimum, reaching this round every year.

The Women’s National League was launched in 2011 with assistance from UEFA. Six clubs were chosen to start this historic league; Castlebar Celtic Women’s FC, Cork Women’s FC, Peamount United, Raheny United, Shamrock Rovers and Wexford Youths Women’s FC. In 2012 DLR Waves FC (now UCD Waves) became the seventh club with Galway Women’s FC joining for the 2013-14 season. In 2015, Kilkenny United WFC joined the league for the start of the 2015-16 season.

We will work with the clubs to develop the league and provide assistance to help them to produce higher standards and better players. The WNL is an important indicator for women’s football, since its inception more senior International players are playing with Irish clubs than in the previous 10 years. We must now provide a programme for these players to develop as elite athletes to allow them to train like full time athletes.

In our emerging talent programme we will complete a comprehensive review to improve our league academies and create an appropriate regional pathway for girls identified as potential elite underage players.

We will review our underage competitions to help us produce better players, specifically looking at our National Cups and Gaynor Competitions.
Indicators for competitions and player development

1. Working within the parameters set out in the FAI National Development Plan

2. Established leagues and organised competitions for women’s football for all age groups.
   - The WNL and WFAI National Cups (Junior, Intermediate and Senior) support elite women’s football. Increased levels of competition to accelerate the development of players to elite levels and improve retention domestically.
   - The WFAI Gaynor tournaments provide a way to identify talented players for underage national teams; develop a new u12 competition to help identify players at a younger age.
   - WFAI National Cup age-group competitions are important to drive play development at an earlier age (U12, U14, and U16) and to have higher standards of play at each level.

3. One of the main challenges is retention of female players between the age of 12 and 16. This is a very crucial period for young players and we should continue to establish competitive opportunities to motivate them to stay playing. Currently we have approximately 23,527 registered players (17,520 underage and 6,007 adult). A high number of players registered indicates that we are able to attract female players through good organisation, education, programmes and other activities, however we must ensure that we continue to adapt to European and Worldwide trends to allow us to increase these numbers.

4. Women’s National Team: rankings improved, competing against higher ranked nations on a regular basis. Home based player’s part of an elite player programme, with weekly coaching sessions and individual programmes.

5. Underage International Teams: Qualify for UEFA Finals regularly, set up an U23 Squad, and compete U23 Squad to give experience to players not quite ready for senior level.

Key Actions

1. Set a preferred competition structure to be implemented by end 2016
2. Develop the WNL from 2015-2018 to improve all aspects including improved marketing programmes, a social media programme, sustainable clubs, youth teams, increased commercial activities and higher club licencing criteria
3. Develop links between WNL Clubs and Colleges/Universities to improve players through fitness, access to facilities, scholarship schemes, rehabilitation and education
4. Develop all WFAI Cups with an increase of 10% per annum
5. Develop the Emerging Talent Programme in 2015
6. WNT qualify for 2017 UEFA Finals Play Offs
7. U19 Women’s team qualify for two UEFA Finals tournament between 2015-2018
8. U17 Women’s team qualify for one UEFA Finals tournament between 2015-2018
9. Top eight placing in the FISU World University Games in 2015 & 2017
10. Work with the Colleges/Universities and the Institute of Sport to deliver sports science, nutrition, strength & conditioning support, scholarship schemes, rehabilitation and lifestyle management services
4. Promotion, marketing and communication

Marketing, promotion and attracting investment to women’s football are vital to assist the growth and development. Building awareness and changing the perception of women’s football in society is one of the challenges the game still faces today. It is therefore crucial for us to develop and nurture strong media relationships and consistent communication messages to maximise opportunities for increased exposure of women’s football.

There have been great strides made in the promotion, marketing and communication of the women’s game over the past number of years, particularly in neighbouring countries such as England and Scotland. In the previous women’s plan it was outlined that the internet was a key tool and the FAI website would be a powerful source of information in an instant.

With the provision of accurate, consistent and instant information, the aim was to build a platform to support our game, while maintaining and improving relationships with the media. While improvements were made, there were some areas that lacked progression. Television coverage had been limited up to 2013, the success of Women’s U17’s in 2010 at the European Finals and World Cup increased awareness. Playing the WFAI Cup Final in the Aviva Stadium in 2013 and 2014 and the live TV coverage of both games has been a fantastic development for Irish based players.

We have had increased coverage of the game, primarily as a direct result of the hard work done by individuals locally. The success of our Women’s U17’s in 2010, Women’s U19’s in 2014, the introduction of the Women’s National league (WNL), the WNL clubs in UEFA Champions League and the Women’s National team have led to a change in attitudes to the women’s game. However, there is still so much more that can be improved upon.

Technologies are fast developing in an era when people have access to information in an instance, thanks largely to the development of Social Media. We have increased coverage on our Twitter and Facebook pages in the last year and will increase this further over the next few years.
In order to maximise the opportunity to develop and support the growth of women’s football in the country, we aim to establish promotional campaigns and activities, allocating resources and staff.

Subsequently the more marketing, promotion and sponsorship that is done for women’s football, the more likely it is that the correct messages will go out to potential and existing players, families, government agencies, sponsors, media and new audiences.

**Indicators for promotion, marketing and communication**

1. Continuous promotion programmes: How many football events take place each year? How are the events advertised? What is the interaction with current sponsors? What potential is there for sponsorship?
2. A consistent plan of activities throughout each year including ad hoc activities, football events, festivals and campaigns, such as FIFA Live Your Goals, will help to increase awareness about the game and participation both on and off the pitch.
3. Dedicated marketing and communications FAI Staff personnel: current staff members with specific responsibility for marketing/communication and promotional campaigns will enhance media relations.
4. Sustainable sponsorship programmes and partnerships for women’s football.

**Key Actions**

1. An improved FAI website with more women’s football information in 2015.
2. Dedicated social media sites promoting women’s football activities (Twitter/Facebook/YouTube/Vimeo etc.) in 2015.
3. Live TV coverage and livestreaming of Women’s National Team games by end 2015.
4. Current FAI Staff in communications and marketing departments with increased responsibility for women’s football.
5. Engage new key sponsors dedicated to the women’s game.
6. Develop the FIFA Live Your Goals ambassador’s programme.
7. Develop a marketing plan with UEFA by end 2016.
5. Organisation & Infrastructure

A strong infrastructure is a key element in the development of women’s football. The FAI had four dedicated women’s regional development officers from 2007 to 2010 and had significant gains in the development of women’s football in Ireland. Since 2011 the FAI have focused the attention on its network of Development Officers (DO’s) to ensure that increased time is dedicated to women’s football.

The organisation of, and infrastructure available to women’s football in Ireland, needs to improve to establish a platform for sustainable development.

Indicators for organisation and infrastructure

1. Establishment of a new FAI women’s football committee. The development of women’s football will be given a high priority and will have strong links to the FAI Board of Management. The members of this committee will be made up of people who have been involved in the game as administrators, players and coaches who will represent football within their regions. This committee will determine the policies and strategies of women’s football.

2. New regional structure developed to allow football to develop further locally and nationally. In each region a committee will be established to govern football within that area.

3. Existence of an FAI women’s football department with dedicated staff who focus on women’s football; including management, administration and technical development.

4. DO’s will continue to promote women’s football and gain support from key individuals within the regional structure. The DO’s will be set new targets to boost participation and assist with player development.

5. Availability of facilities. Without the necessary facilities, e.g. football pitches and equipment, it is difficult to develop women’s football. The regional committee’s will be required to plan and liaise with stakeholders to allow for fair and equitable access to facilities in clubs, local authorities, third level institutions and leagues for females who wish to participate.

Key Actions

1. Develop a new and improved FAI women’s football department by end 2015, including the appointment of a full time administrative officer.

2. Evaluate current structure.

3. Establish regional structure.

4. Set up a Women’s Football Committee.
Questions Answered

During the many opportunities clubs, leagues, coaches, administrators, volunteers and players got to voice their opinions about our new women’s strategic plan, these were the over-riding thoughts.

- More Blitzes for leagues
- Grassroots - Expand FIFA Live Your Goals and Festivals of Football each year

- More structured competition for leagues at regional levels
- Organisation & Infrastructure - Introduction of regional competitions

- Increase numbers of younger players playing (U6,8,10)
- Grassroots – Expand Soccer Sisters Programme to target younger age group in; Develop club Academy programme

- Increased promotion of the game
- Promotion, Marketing & Communications Engage activation with key sponsors; Develop FIFA Live Your Goals Ambassador Programme

- More volunteers
- Grassroots - National Campaign to create more awareness; Workshops to educate clubs on Volunteer recruitment
For more information on any of the programmes within the Women's Strategic Plan, please send an email to women@fai.ie

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