



ACCESS

Achieving Circularity in Cities through
Environmental Sustainability of Sports

GAA GREEN CLUB PROGRAMME

Look mom, I got an award!



The GAA Green Club Programme was established to support Gaelic Games clubs on the island of Ireland in managing their operations, grounds, and games more sustainably. The Green Club Programme has been developed with support from and in accordance with the objectives of the Irish Government's National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is implemented in partnership with local authorities across Ireland, with Programme actions designed to support the targets of Ireland's Climate Action Plan.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

The Green Club programme was designed around the five environmental themes of Energy, Waste, Water, Biodiversity and Travel & Transport with the aim of supporting clubs to engage in sustainability actions and in raising awareness among their members and in their communities.

Consultation with clubs, in person and via survey, in the very early days of the project indicated that two of the main barriers to club sustainability engagement were a lack of knowledge and a lack of time – Gaelic Games are volunteer-run, and the over-burdening and over-extension of volunteers is an issue of concern at both local and national level for the GAA. Therefore, a primary driver of the Green Club Programme was to develop both a structure and content that would make it simpler and more time-efficient for clubs and volunteers to identify and implement sustainability actions, that would facilitate peer-learning, that would be designed for the sporting and community context of Gaelic Games clubs and that would promote cyclical rather than one-off engagement.

A Green Club Steering Group was established to manage the development of the Programme, which was composed of GAA staff members, club volunteers, local government representatives and members of Ireland's leading expert bodies across the Programme areas of Energy, Waste, Water, Biodiversity and Transport. In the pilot phase of the Programme, which ran for 18 months from January 2021, the Steering Group worked with an initial cohort of 40 clubs – through webinars, workshops, site visits and one-to-one engagements – to establish in more detail the needs of clubs, their recurring challenges and their greatest impacts as well as to initiate pilot projects and initiatives from which the Programme could learn and from which it could develop case studies for wider dissemination.

The outcomes of the first phase of the Programme led to the development of a Green Club Toolkit and of a formal club engagement structure, formed around seven key milestones including the establishment of a green team, the implementation of an action plan and the adoption and communication of a Green Club charter. The Green Club Toolkit was launched in December 2023 and contains practical guidance, templates, checklists and case studies across the five Programme areas – designed especially for the club context and with the needs of volunteers in mind. The Toolkit is published online at <https://gaa.ie/greenclub> and is available to all clubs in an open access format while through the formal programme the 200 clubs enrolled in Phase 2 avail of specialised webinars, workshops and access to local authority advice. In return, these clubs taking part in the formal Green Club programmes document and report on their actions and experiences to facilitate the monitoring, evaluation and further development of the programme.

CHALLENGE

The GAA Green Club Programme was developed in response to a demand from Gaelic Games clubs for leadership and guidance in identifying and implementing impactful sustainability actions. The impetus came both from clubs who had already developed their own environmental and sustainability projects and were looking for opportunities to share their experiences and learnings through the GAA club network and from clubs seeking to get involved in sustainability action but unsure of how or where to start.

As the GAA began to develop plans for a sustainability programme to respond to this club demand, the Association was nominated by Ireland's Department of Environment, Climate and Communications as a national Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) champion. Through the SDG Champions Programme the GAA formed a partnership with local government and consequently developed an expert network of sustainability agencies and bodies to contribute to the content and activities of the Green Club Programme.

While the Green Club Programme is the GAA's first national sustainability programme, it builds upon the experiences and learnings of earlier GAA initiatives. The structure and administration of the Green Club programme has been strongly influenced by the GAA's Healthy Club Project, which was established to support the holistic health and well-being of GAA members and their communities, and which has steadily expanded its reach and its activities since it was launched in 2013.

RESULTS

The number of clubs enrolled in the Green Club Programme has increased from 40 in Phase 1 to 200 in Phase 2 and each of these clubs is undertaking at least two sustainability actions. These actions are being recorded through the Green Club portal. The portal has been developed for Phase 2 and was not in operation for the pilot phase; however, individual club learnings from the pilot phase were captured in case studies which have been published in our open-access toolkit.

The most significant result of the pilot phase was the development of the Green Club Toolkit, which was based not only on the expert input of the programme's national partners but also on the experiences and feedback of the initial cohort of 40 pilot clubs. The Toolkit now forms the basis of both the formal, monitored club programme and the GAA's national sustainability awareness campaigns.

The pilot phase of the programme and the planning period that preceded it resulted in the formation of a formal collaboration structure between the GAA, local authorities and expert bodies in the areas of Energy, Waste, Water, Biodiversity and Travel & Transport. This formal collaboration is crucial not only to the maintenance and development of the club-based programme but is also supporting the GAA in regional and national sustainability impact assessment and strategic planning.

The objective of the current (Phase 2) and of future phases of the programme is to gather a greater amount of quantitative data from clubs – e.g., on energy and resource use, on emissions, on land use and on number of club and community members engaged in actions and events – and to use this data to inform future actions and policy, to measure change and to set targets at regional and national level.



LESSONS LEARNT

Protecting the well-being of volunteers and respecting their time and engagement is central to the success and sustainability of any grassroots club project. The Green Club project team has worked with clubs and partners to strike a balance between centralised coordination and local ownership of project actions, in order to reduce the burden on club volunteers as much as possible while realistically reflecting resource restrictions at central level. Early learnings from this approach were (i) that it was crucial to have club representatives involved at all levels and stages of programme planning and design and (ii) that longer-term awareness, commitment and impact is likely to result from empowering club-level ownership and confidence through support for clear and simple early engagement rather than through central over-prescription of actions or approaches.

The pilot phase of the Green Club programme was very much a learning phase – open minds and flexible structures were essential in ensuring that the findings that would influence the future structure and content of the Programme and Toolkit were not predetermined but could emerge honestly from club and programme team experiences. The programme team also took the space during and after the pilot phase to assess what worked and what didn't and from this developed a Toolkit and structure for Phase 2 that reflected the learnings of the pilot phase.

One challenge of the early programme phases has been in data gathering, including in determining what information, and what level of information, can be most usefully gathered from clubs without over-burdening club volunteers and in identifying, gathering, and using data from a limited number of clubs to usefully extrapolate to the national level.

REPLICABILITY POTENTIAL

The Green Club Toolkit was developed especially for the context of volunteer-led Gaelic Games clubs on the island of Ireland, where most clubs own and/or manage their own grounds and facilities. However, the principles that underpin and the actions included in the Green Club Toolkit were developed to reflect national and international standards and best practice and are therefore applicable and adaptable to a wide range of sports and community contexts. Indeed, the Toolkit has already been held up as a standard for sports club climate and sustainability engagement across the island of Ireland.

While the Toolkit has been designed for club-led action – and includes not only suggested actions along with relevant guidelines and templates but also a structure for management and engagement at club level – any sports sustainability programme will work best when club engagement is supported by resourcing and structure at national, federation and/or regional level. This ensures that volunteer time is respected, and positive impact is maximised by best practice guidance being issued and updated centrally and by having links to expert supports, guidance and funding opportunities communicated efficiently to clubs. Having central management of a programme also facilitates better monitoring and measurement and leads to more effective planning and also encourages strategic decision-making at central level than can have impact at scale at local level.



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The **ACCESS project** is one of the latest European projects which explores and challenges environmental sustainability and environmental management in sports. Co-funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme, ACCESS is looking at narrowing the gaps between the current environmental performances of sport organisations, their strategies, and practices on one side and strategies and targets of their respective cities or regions with the overall objective – making these sport organisations a reference point for sustainability in sports in their countries and turning them into replicators of solutions for achieving it.



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