

# Limerick Community of Practice Initiative December 2021

Dr. Wesley O’Brien ([wesley.obrien@ucc.ie](mailto:wesley.obrien@ucc.ie))  
Dr. Tara Coppinger ([Tara.Coppinger@mtu.ie](mailto:Tara.Coppinger@mtu.ie))



SPORT  
IRELAND

ciste na  
gcuntas díomhaoin  
the dormant  
accounts fund



ucc

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire  
University College Cork, Ireland



MTU

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan  
Munster Technological University

## **Limerick Community of Practice Initiative – Programme Evaluation**

### **Report compiled by Dr. Wesley O’Brien and Dr. Tara Coppinger**

#### **Evaluation Acknowledgements:**

The Limerick Community of Practice Initiative is led by the **Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA)** and is funded by the dormant accounts funding through **Sport Ireland**.

#### **Evaluation Introduction and Background**

Most recent research from Bowles and O’Dwyer (2021) acknowledges the work of Wenger et al. (2002) in defining a Community of Practice (CoP) as:

*‘Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.’ (p.4)*

Typically a CoP involves three elements: the domain, the community, and the practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

The inception of the Limerick CoP programme initially commenced as a joint venture between the National LGFA Organisation, the Munster LGFA, the Limerick LGFA, the Limerick Sports Partnership (LSP), and Mary Immaculate College. In terms of local community LGFA involvement, 3 local LGFA clubs initially applied to be part of this programme and were subsequently accepted to participate in the CoP initiative.

It is important to note at this juncture that each of the 3 clubs were asked to identify a specific CoP club co-ordinator, who would serve as the primary contact person with the overall CoP appointed facilitator, in this case field expert and practitioner, Irene Hogan.

The focus of this 2021 Limerick CoP initiative at club level was to simultaneously run these CoPs in each of the 3 LGFA clubs, with monthly meetings arranged targeting the particular needs and wants of individual club members. As part of this specific case study evaluation in Limerick during 2021, consistent online meetings did occur between February and November, with each of the 3 clubs having specific representation and involvement, namely: 1. Oola LGFA Club (n=8 meetings, which included 2 x face-to-face coaching sessions), 2. St Patricks LGFA Club (n=5 meetings) and 3. Fr. Caseys LGFA Club (n=7 meetings).

In terms of these CoPs structures, all monthly meetings and actions were organised through the designated liaison club co-ordinator. From a coach education, coach development and overall club progression perspective, the monthly learnings, notes, slides, feedback and action points were emailed to the designated liaison club co-ordinator after each session.

Additional stakeholder meetings were also held to update the respective partners on the Limerick LGFA CoP progress, and these 3 meetings served as a further point of professional development for the Limerick CoP team. Finally, the overall CoP appointed facilitator arranged supplementary (non-compulsory) professional development opportunities throughout the year by arranging external courses, via the Limerick Local Sports Partnerships and other providers, that were open to all participants and members within the selected three LGFA clubs, free of charge. These professional development opportunities included:

1. Safeguarding one certification (n=20 participants attended)
2. Autism awareness in sport (n=5 participants attended)
3. Disability inclusion training (n=9 participants attended)
4. Coaching children (n=6 participants attended)
5. Coaching girls (teenagers) (n=5 participants attended)
6. Psychosocial workshops x 2 (n=18 participants attended)

The qualitative research surveillance evaluation was undertaken with participating CoP coaches and members individually within each club between October and November of 2021; with William Harmon (National Development Officer, LGFA) as the focus group facilitator, alongside Wesley O’Brien and Tara Coppinger serving as the research co-ordinators. In lieu of the COVID-19 public health pandemic, the primary stakeholder involved in this specific research evaluation was:

- 1. The CoP volunteer coach and/or member from the individual clubs across the 3 sites.**

In the report that follows, **qualitative data** regarding the Limerick CoP participants perspectives at club level will be examined and discussed. A thematic qualitative analysis on the Limerick CoP participants’ ‘voices’ will be presented. The specific mode of data collection comprised of 3 x online zoom **focus group interviews** with respective local volunteer coaches (including the club coordinator) and/or members

from the 3 x Limerick Ladies Gaelic Football (LGF) Clubs. Specifically, the focus groups were used as a strategic means of understanding coaches’ and/or club members engagement within the Limerick CoP programme, their level of knowledge surrounding club development in 2021, and their particular understanding of such a new venture i.e. being part of a formal CoP for the first time. These individual focus groups (ranging from 40 to 60 minutes approximately) were organised and set up via the assigned club co-ordinator.

Six key themes emerged from the focus group data that were pertinent to the long-term investment of the Limerick CoP programme, from both a coach and club development perspective at a local community level. These themes were:

- 1. Theme 1: The Development of a Vision, Structure and Pathway at Local Club Level.**
- 2. Theme 2: Synergy - The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts.**
- 3. Theme 3: Club Development – Progress Seen in the Context of Years Not Minutes.**
- 4. Theme 4: Active Role Modelling – The Power of the Outside Facilitator’s Voice.**
- 5. Theme 5: Opportunity for Collaboration with Fellow Coaches.**
- 6. Theme 6: Delivery and Timing.**

## **Thematic Analysis Focus Groups**

The following pages provide a descriptive overview and a brief synopsis of the emergent themes from the focus group data with the Limerick CoP club coaches and/or members, following their completion and engagement with this CoP initiative in 2021. The italicised quotes provide meaningful data, which have informed the club coaches and/or members in their development and understanding of CoPs. This text is based on a thematic analysis of the qualitative data, following separate initial analysis by both researchers, and then via agreed final themes.

### **Theme 1: The Development of a Vision, Structure and Pathway at Local Club Level**

This was a dominant theme that was consistently addressed by the club coaches and/or members across the three focus groups. Participants recurrently reported that their understanding of club level LGFA structures moved towards a position of having an identified ‘club/coaching philosophy’ and a ‘sustainable structure and/or vision long-term’. For example, one coach cited *‘One of the questions at the start was about what our philosophy is and we didn’t have one, so it was good to think about what we want and what is our objective. This was very positive and is reflected in the club now in how we are coaching in the club and our sessions’*. This viewpoint was again echoed by other participants in the focus groups:

*“Gave us a chance to take kind of a step back and find a new perspective and no one gives us that opportunity to do that, it was really really good.”*

*“I thought it gave us a structure, you know, gave us a focus and gave us some leadership.”*

It was very encouraging as part of this Limerick CoP initiative that the coaches and/or club members realised that such LGFA CoPs lead to collaborative and sustainable thinking at club level, long-term. Participants frequently reported their long-term thinking as a result of their participation within this initiative, with one such quote being particularly striking

*‘Got us all thinking of the club long term. You know how often you're just trying to jump from year to year and get the AGM done and dusted and get a few in to do the job. You know, let it go after the next year and so forth so I think it was good.*

*Looking more long term proper structures.’*

This emergent theme of developing structure and pathway at local club level was consistently viewed through the lens of having an identified club vision, neatly summarised by two participants, who identified the importance:

*‘... great structures in place for us. We are after seeing a big benefit out of the club itself. It opened our eyes to where the club was and where it's going to...’*

*‘You could decide what was important to you that you want to work on as a group’*

These long-term visions, structures and pathways at local club LGFA level were clearly related to the Limerick CoP initiatives, which are evident in the rich qualitative data above.

## **Theme 2: Synergy - The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts**

The realisation from the focus group participants that the club is a collective ‘synergy’ as opposed to a group of individuals was a key pillar associated within this Limerick CoP initiative. It was notable that coaches and club members clearly identified with the CoP purpose and related to the messages of ‘*Everyone can gain from it*’ and that there is ‘*Benefit in it for everyone*’. Many of the focus group participants spoke about the human resources available to them at club level, and that these benefits were only truly realised upon completion of the Limerick CoP.

*“We have such good coaches and people were so interested in developing the club and was good with giving them an opportunity to say what direction they wanted it to go in or what support they needed.”*

*“Has to be directed by members if you want to get change, can’t be dictated to or people will switch off and there will be no response from the club. We wanted to improve and develop as members of the club.”*

When this theme was probed a little further, participants higher thinking and appreciation of the club CoP being a collective was consistently cited, with quotes such as:

*“All coaches got benefit out of it and it was great to have a parent from the more admin side being involved in it and she had no GAA experience other than just being a parent. She brought positive things to the sessions too.”*

*“Could see benefit for everyone even at the practical days when some of the exercises were for the older age groups we could see how we could adapt this for the nursery age group, everyone can learn something, when we had our discussions.”*

These viewpoint of club synergies (i.e. The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts) were clearly related to the Limerick CoP initiative, and were again cutting-edge emergent findings from the qualitative data above.

### **Theme 3: Club Development – Progress Seen in the Context of Years Not**

#### **Minutes.**

During this focus group data collection exercise with the club coaches and/or members, it was observed upon completion of the Limerick CoP that LGF club development must be seen in the context of years (over time) and not in a matter of minutes. Interestingly, as the programme advanced, focus group participants identified the following:

*“We came up with things we can do now, and it doesn’t matter if we don’t get it done this year, or next year or if it takes a few years we have a starting point.”*

Furthermore, these consistent viewpoints of LGF club development being viewed in the long-term with the assistance of motivated and energetic club stakeholders was reinforced throughout the discussions on other occasions:

*“Ready now especially after last meeting we set ourselves up for that, people want to continue it, to keep lines of communication open, meeting up and decide what needs to be done as a group, we have a plan and people are enthusiastic...”*

*“No finish, you open up new stuff and bring something better every year, every club has a weak point that they can work on.”*

The importance of maintaining LGF club drive over time and in the years to follow was frequently echoed through participant voices when stating ‘*we have a momentum now, so we have to keep it going*’ or ‘*Impetus to keep going after the last session*’. While participants understood the long term commitments required in developing one’s local LGF club, there were refreshing references from focus group participants in terms of contributing volunteers and leadership oversight. Two participants critically reflected on the leadership and volunteer pillars needed to advance club development:

*“Who is going to lead it for us, will it become something different around development or that we will need a leader within the group to keep momentum going.”*

*“... get volunteers involved that we would never have thought of getting in, people without any involvement in the club...”*



These LGF club development viewpoints from the Limerick CoP participants were refreshing insights from volunteer club coaches and members, and the qualitative data above clearly highlight how club development was seen in the context of progress over time i.e. Progress Seen in the Context of Years Not Minutes.

#### **Theme 4: Active Role Modelling – The Power of the Outside Facilitator’s Voice**

One of the strongest themes to emerge within this Limerick CoP evaluation has been the significant contribution of the *external facilitator*. Across many of the different club focus group discussions, there was a consistently favourable response from the participants in terms of the external facilitator’s role:

*“Beneficial to have outside person mediating the session, kept structure and kept it going and didn’t lose time...”*

*“Had to be someone external to begin with someone knowledgeable in the area, my own experience of clubs is that there can be a lot of politics and someone in house might not get the same appreciation...”*

From a club development perspective, the focus group discussions from participants clearly shed a positive light on the leadership and organisational attributes of the external facilitator, specifically their ability to maintain club focus and seek solution-based outcomes:

*“... I think the fact that somebody external from the club, it definitely kept us on the straight line. I think if it was led by members, we would have waffled off a lot from different directions and got caught up, whereas she brings you back to the point...”*

*“... it was excellent, and she was still guiding us, she was letting it up to us in terms of getting us to where we wanted to go.”*

While there very notable characteristics from the external facilitator in terms of upskilling LGF club coaches and members within these Limerick CoPs, the participants never lost sight of the *‘bottom-up approaches’* needed to sustain such club and coaching level progress. Specifically, the external facilitator was a sounding board and advisor to these CoPs only, and this realisation was consistently expressed by many of the focus group participants; *“...it was excellent and she was still guiding us... she was letting it up to us, getting us to where we wanted to go”*.

It was very evident upon completion of the Limerick CoP initiative that the external facilitator served as an active role model for the club members and coaches. The external facilitator guided club level discussions, and it was very encouraging that

these sessions were not dominated by the ‘outside voice’ – the smooth facilitation of bottom up thinking for the participants ensured that this CoP initiative in Limerick thrived and prospered.

### **Theme 5: Opportunity for Collaboration with Fellow Coaches**

A fifth theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was the chance for coaches to interact, some for the first time, with other coaches at the club. This was reflected on by numerous focus group participants:

*“We are all separate and this was a way of coming together”;*

*“..liked opportunity to have coaching discussions with other people that we don’t normally get to have”.*

This coming together required the Limerick CoP participants to work together on tasks and allowed those who may have been new to the club to get to know others;

*“I am only in for a year but I didn’t know who was who in the club so people that join it will get to know more people”.*

One group member went as far as saying that this was the component they enjoyed the most about the CoP;

*“...what I enjoyed the most actually was getting to know each of the members that are actually involved in the club...”*

The bringing together of these coaches supported deeper discussion *“...was kind of an avenue for having conversations you wouldn’t normally have...”* and comradery; *“...so you know everybody’s in the same boat’* whilst maintaining confidentiality, *“...safe and secure way of having discussions on topics”.*

The fact that the discussion empowered them to gain confidence in their voice, *“as a new member I had silly questions....I was never embarrassed to ask questions important to me”* could, ultimately, enable them to maintain or increase their involvement and capacity in the club in the future.

## **Theme 6: Delivery and Timing**

The final theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was the mode of delivery and the timing with which the Limerick CoP took place. Group members expressed different preferences. Some really liked having the online Zoom sessions:

*“At the start only for it being on Zoom, we wouldn’t have anyone and that is not due to COVID-19, as people wouldn’t come to the club for a meeting”.*

They felt that Zoom *“spared a lot of time”* and the breakout rooms enabled all participants to contribute and initiate discussion:

*“Breakout rooms allowed to have positive ideas.”*

Others found issues with the technology difficult *“..my internet was not good so I got stressed”* and noted the challenges of family life when attending meetings online at home:

*“...hard at home with children but if we are gone to a meeting we are gone”.*

A few coaches would have welcomed more in person interaction:

*“..would have liked more face-to-face, would be more beneficial”*

*“Face-to-face is so much better...”*

That being said, the same and other participants went on to acknowledge the ease of Zoom:

*“..but being online was so easy being at home to do it, especially when there were so many of the meetings, going out can sometimes be harder”.*

Ultimately, a blended *“bit of both”* approach may well be the way forward as participants acknowledged that it was, *“harder to get people to commit face-to-face”*. One coach recognised the needs of participants changed as the CoP progressed too

and *“liked the mix of the two...as people wanted more theory or practice at different times,”* which a blended approach could support.

As with mode of delivery, different preferences were expressed in relation to the timing of the CoP. Two coaches would have preferred it in the *‘off season’* so that they *“had the time to participate”* and digest the content; whereas another would *“like it over the course of a season, start to end...we could plan ahead for next season”*. The majority, however, wanted it to be completed towards the end of the off season:

*“Maybe start in October/November and you have it completed in January/February”.*

*“...I just find that now you are at the end of the football season, when we are going to be doing no football again until March”.*

The length of the course was also a matter of much debate. Many felt that the Limerick CoP was a *“big commitment”*, but acknowledged that they needed a lot of meetings at the beginning as it *“..was all new stuff”* and *“we needed that much time to explore the topics in depth”*. It is worth noting, however, that based on feedback from one coach, the number of meetings could be reduced once a CoP was up and running, *“...we wouldn’t need to meet as often”*.

One coach suggested *“4 meetings a year”*, whereas another would prefer a more concise delivery approach, *“maybe four consecutive weeks rather than four consecutive months”*. Ultimately, just like the content of the CoP, its length needs to be decided upon by the club, in conjunction with the facilitator. Perhaps a second iteration of the initiative, running at a different time of the year, might yield more insight as to the most appropriate time to deliver a CoP. Considering the participants were so positive about the content covered and how it sets them/the club up for continued progression, the timing should not be too much of a deterrent for new clubs considering participation in a CoP.

### **Recommendations to clubs and the LGFA for running future CoPs**

- Clubs need to have a flexible and growth mindset, alongside a positive attitude towards the CoP aims and objectives.
- Clubs need to ringfence their time for the CoP at the commencement of year, irrespective of the number of CoP sessions delivered. It is evident from the data above that the initial commitment from clubs to the CoP paves the way for future success and long-term club development.
- An external facilitator is strongly recommended for the establishment of all new CoP’s, until such time that a handover to club personnel is feasible. While the external facilitator had an academic and practitioner background in LGF in this CoP, volunteer coaches and members at club level do not need to be inundated with peer-reviewed literature. The active thinking required within the CoP meetings, alongside some ‘homework’ tasks, is more than sufficient to ensure participant compliance.
- Continue to capture participants’ attention through cutting-edge visual aids e.g. poster to see how the CoP may benefit the club, and as a way of attracting other clubs into the initiative.
- It is important that the Limerick CoP sessions are concise, and it would be helpful from the commencement of the programme that participants are made aware of the number of sessions and time requirements involved.
- These LGF club CoP initiatives provide an open platform for clubs to change their structures, policies and practices – again, this message needs consistent reinforcement from the outset.
- The external facilitator needs to be a guiding mentor and not an imposing dictator. Otherwise, coaches and club members will not retain the information that is beyond their comfort zone.
- It is important that the club CoP encourages all members and levels of experiences to attend these sessions. Through this, the CoP will get involvement from all levels of the club, which drives sustainable practice long term.
- It appears that the suggested timeline of 3 to 6 months works best for future LGF club-based CoP initiatives.

### **Take-Home Final Messages from the Limerick CoP Evaluation**

1. The professional development and the careful selection of the external facilitator is an essential pillar within the LGF CoP framework.
2. The LGF club-level CoP rollout cannot be a one size fits all approach – the club’s environment, setting, culture and demographic profile are just a few of the contextual factors to consider.
3. A step back approach for the facilitation of the Limerick CoP in Year 2 is required.
4. From a transparency perspective, it is very important that all participating LGF CoP clubs are provided with all necessary information in advance of the programme’s commencement – participants need to know what is involved beforehand, alongside the provision of information surrounding the local club benefits.