



Slow Pitch Softball

Development Plan 2022 - 2026

In Memory of Massimo Lepri

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Foreword

When commissioning this process four years ago, I said that the Slow Pitch Development Plan would be one of the most important initiatives for Softball in Ireland over the last 20 years. Since then, so much has happened globally that it feels such a statement was understating the challenges which lay ahead. The Slow Pitch Softball Development Plan, which was approved by the Softball Ireland Board, is the key policy document that sets out the overall strategy for the sustainable development and growth of Slow Pitch Softball in Ireland for the period 2022-2026 and beyond.

Led by Andrew Craven, the Development Working Group, in collaboration with the Softball Ireland Regions, have endeavoured over the past year to prepare the Slow Pitch Development Plan. This strategy works to ensure that Slow Pitch Softball will be at the fore in the post pandemic era, and that as a sport, we are collectively ready to retain and grow membership. Slow Pitch has many of the attributes that can leverage people's desire to reintegrate into society and provide social interaction both in a recreational context and for those who want a more competitive environment – we really are a sport for all!

The overarching objective agreed by the Development Vision Working Group was that *by 2026, Slow Pitch Softball will be a co-ed sport of choice in Ireland providing social, recreational, and high-performance sporting opportunities throughout all provinces and communities*. This core strategy is reflected in the Development Plan Mission Statement and drove the evolution of the plan.

“By 2026, Slow Pitch Softball will be a co-ed sport of choice in Ireland providing social, recreational and high-performance sporting opportunities throughout all provinces and communities. The leadership structures at all levels of the game will entice, engage and grow new lifelong participants, driving Individual and Team Passion.”

The future success of this plan will require every Player, Team and Region to work together with Softball Ireland to build a better sport for existing and future players. To achieve this, Softball Ireland, working with our Regions, will develop and create pathways and courses to ensure that we become an exceptionally governed sport, which in turn will drive “Player Recruitment”, “Player Retention”, “Player Development & Participation” and the development of “Quality Coaches & Umpires”. The final aim of this plan is to underpin the development of our sport through “Access to Facilities & Equipment” and ultimately the development of a **Home for Softball**.

In particular, I would like to thank the members of the Development Plan Working Group, Andrew Craven (Chair), Will Gilpin, Vinny McGrane and Amanda Ní Ghabhann for their time and dedication in developing the plan. I further wish to thank the Development Vision Working Group members: Ruth Brady, Declan Carty, Jay Slevin, Eoin Wood, and our external facilitators Katie Sadleir and Myra McGlynn, for creating the vision and principles that underpin the Plan. Finally, I would like to thank the Softball Ireland Board for its engagement and contribution to the development of the final plan.

The Slow Pitch Development Plan has been created to allow us to sustain and grow the sport collectively at all levels of the game. The Softball Ireland Board would encourage all our members to familiarise themselves with the Plan and actively participate within your Team and Region to help secure and shape the future of **OUR SPORT**.

Colum Lavery

President

Introduction

Softball Ireland (SI) was established in 1989, and in the years following this it has grown into an internationally recognised organisation that represents multiple disciplines of the sport of softball on the island of Ireland. Over the years, dedicated volunteers with a development plan led to a substantial effort to grow the National Coed Slow Pitch and Women's Fast Pitch National teams; the same buy in and shared responsibility approach is needed to grow grassroots slow pitch softball and develop stronger pathways to National team programmes and Women's Fast Pitch. To address this SI commissioned several working groups in 2020 and 2021 to focus on supporting and developing the discipline of slow pitch softball on the island of Ireland; the culmination of which has been the creation of this Slow Pitch Development Plan.

In 2020 the first working group was formed to develop a vision for softball on the island of Ireland. The outcome of this working group, which included representatives from the Ulster and Leinster regions, and Galway, was the **Softball Ireland Slow Pitch Development Vision 2022 – 2026**. Within the development vision is a clear idea of where the SI members want to see the discipline of slow pitch softball by the end of 2026.

Following on from the excellent foundations laid down in 2020, SI formed a second working group in 2021 to develop the vision into a deliverable sports development plan. This smaller group, made up of single representatives from Ulster, Leinster, and Galway, along with a chairperson from the SI Board, has elevated the development vision into this comprehensive **Softball Ireland Slow Pitch Development Plan 2022 – 2026**.

Both the vision and sports development plan encompass six main priority areas, identified by the membership, in which SI can drive forward expansion of the sport in Ireland: governance and leadership; player recruitment; player retention; player development and participation; quality coaches and umpires; and access to facilities and equipment. This document will cover these priorities in detail and outline the areas by which improvements can be made to develop the sport of softball in Ireland.

It is intended that this plan will shift the shared focus of growing slow pitch softball back to the players, clubs and volunteers that make up the majority of SI; and although SI will provide the good governance and guidance required to encourage the sport forward, it will take a collective responsibility from the top down and bottom up to deliver on all aspects of this plan. Not everything will be achievable in year one, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, by 2026 SI is determined to make slow pitch softball the **co-ed sport of choice in Ireland**.

Mission Statement

“By 2026 Slow Pitch Softball will be a co-ed sport of choice in Ireland providing social, recreational and high-performance sporting opportunities throughout all provinces and communities. The leadership structures at all levels of the game will entice, engage and grow new lifelong participants, driving Individual and Team Passion”



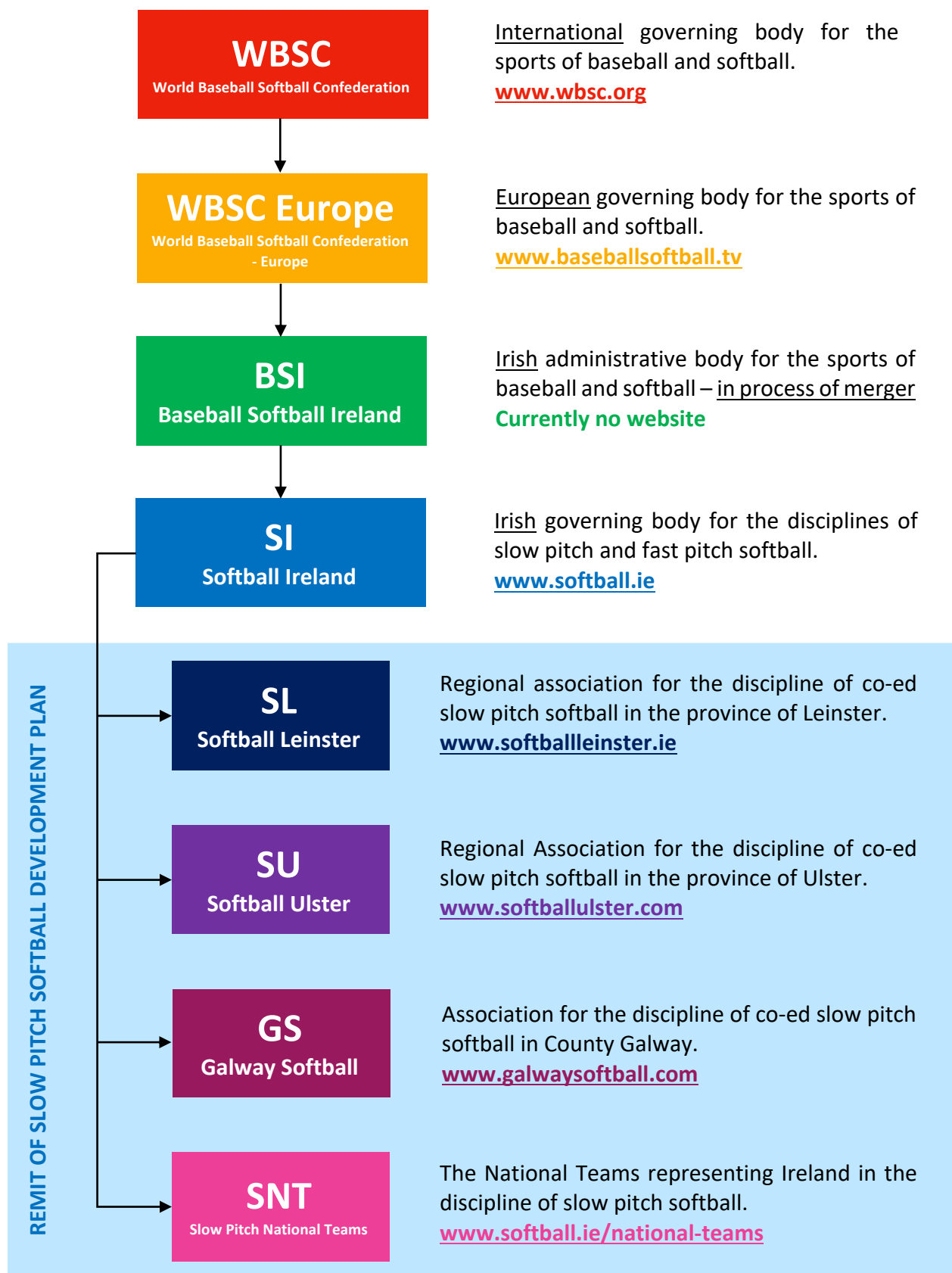
Representatives of the End of Season Tournament in Ulster (2019)

Softball Ireland Slow Pitch Development Vision 2022 – 2026

By 2026 Slow Pitch Softball will be a co-ed sport of choice in Ireland providing social, recreational and high-performance sporting opportunities throughout all provinces and communities. The leadership structures at all levels of the game will entice, engage and grow new lifelong participants, driving Individual and Team Passion.

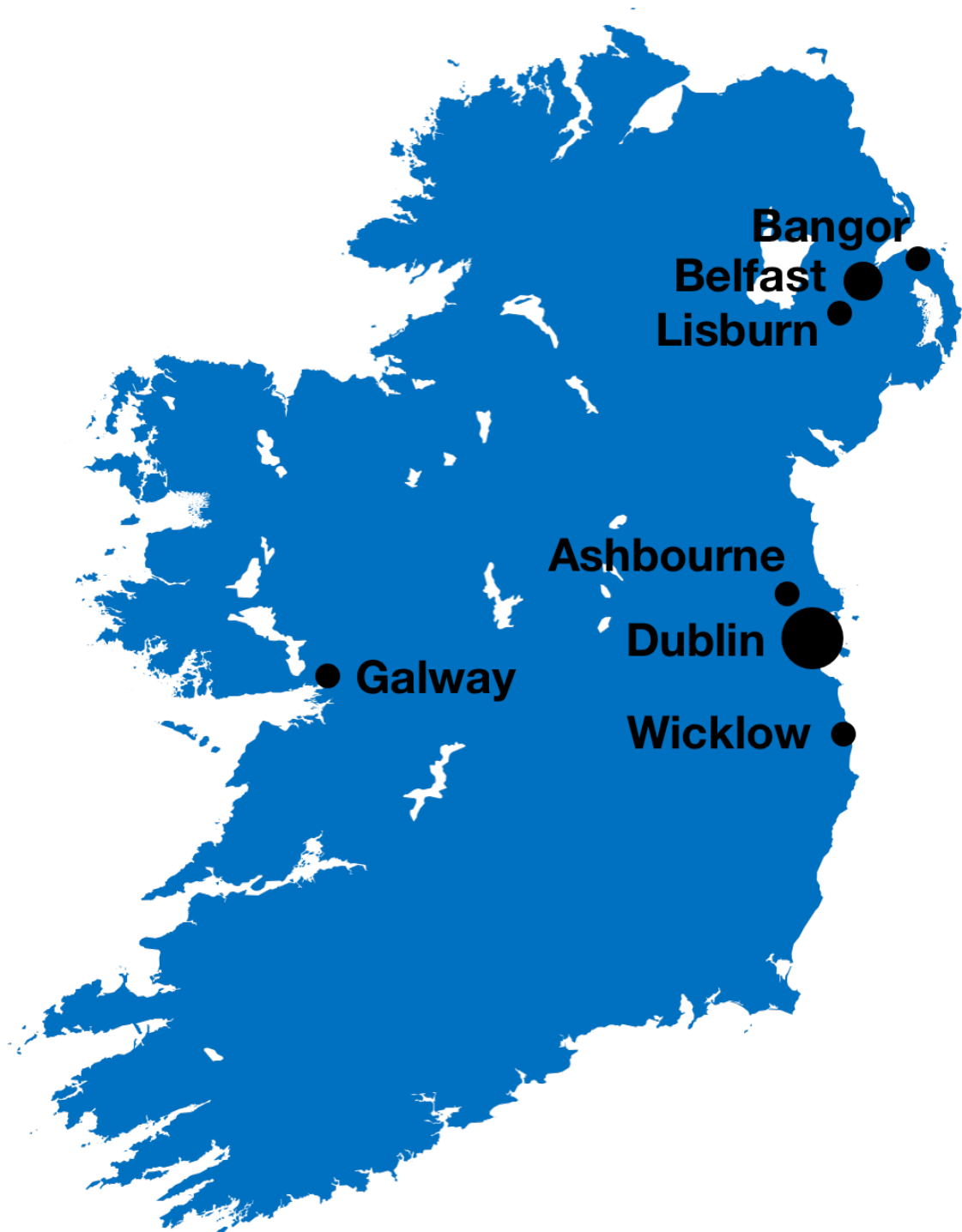
Governance & Leadership	Player Recruitment	Player Retention	Player Development & Participation	Quality Coaches & Umpires	Access to Facilities & Equipment
The Development Plan will be underpinned by exceptional governance and leadership	Players will continuously entice new players via digital and social media platforms and channels	As a sport for life – the softball experience will drive long term involvement on and off the pitch	Player development pathways will provide for both recreational and performance	Certified coaching and umpiring will ensure quality player experiences	Dedicated and shared facilities exist across Ireland enabling the growth to the sport
Key Tasks Actions to be developed and delivered within each work stream to enable the vision to be achieved					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational framework confirmed that outlines roles, accountabilities and KPIs for NGB, regions and clubs in relation to driving this development plan. Appropriate up to date policies and protocols in place to ensure player safety and welfare; and that Softball is aligned with the Sport Ireland Governance Code. Club toolkit developed to provide guidelines on good volunteer administration practices, e.g., how to gain, train and retain volunteers, how to run an effective club. Skills development forums provided for key administrative roles to grow leadership capability, and capacity, and ensure good understanding of quality sports administration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a cooperative network of social media officer positions at a national, regional and club level. Develop a social media plan that drives vibrant, exciting, and interactive social media content via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter with stories aimed at creating good engagement with clubs and players. Establish an incentive scheme to encourage “bring a pal to play” days. e.g., create rewards for players who continuously introduce (and retain) new members Softball Ireland website to drive recruitment with a join now button creating a database of players to be distributed to regions. Creative assets developed for use on all media platforms. Explore new recruitment avenues to increase participation at all levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a ‘Welcome to Softball’ induction toolkit for use by clubs and coaches. Toolkit to provide a checklist to make sure that new players are placed in the best team environment that suits their skills and background experience. Provide clubs with simple guidelines for regular “pulse checks” with players to identify the good, the bad and the potential improvements that can lead to continued involvement. Work proactively with players to create transition pathways into on and off field leadership roles (coaching, umpires, admin) introduce the concept of buddy support system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional centres established to provide regular open training and skill development sessions for players at all levels of the game. A schedule of these to be published and made available to encourage coaching and player development. Strong regional and cross regional domestic leagues established and supported to drive competition pathway. Development pathway established with clear criteria for player progression from active participant to national representative. With a focus on recruitment, together with Baseball Ireland, package and introduce formats of the game to third level institutions with a view to creating an inter-varsity league. Consider the development of modified formats of the game to appeal to different demographics e.g., social corporate leagues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coach and Umpire development pathway clearly outlined with qualifications and experience for progression along this pathway articulated and understood. Potential new coaching and umpire talent identified and supported. Coaches and umpires have access to a regular online and face to face development opportunities. Coach and umpire mentoring programme developed and deployed. Coaching and Umpire recognition programme established (recognition awards and profiling). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete a regional audit of all current and potential softball competition and training facilities identifying gaps in provision/access. This should identify both indoor and outdoor venues. Develop a proactive plan to strategically approach local facility providers to consider a business case for better access and a national home of softball. Look into potential for shared facility/club training venues with other sporting codes. Continue to resource and provide start up equipment kits available to support new clubs/teams.

Slow Pitch Governance Structure



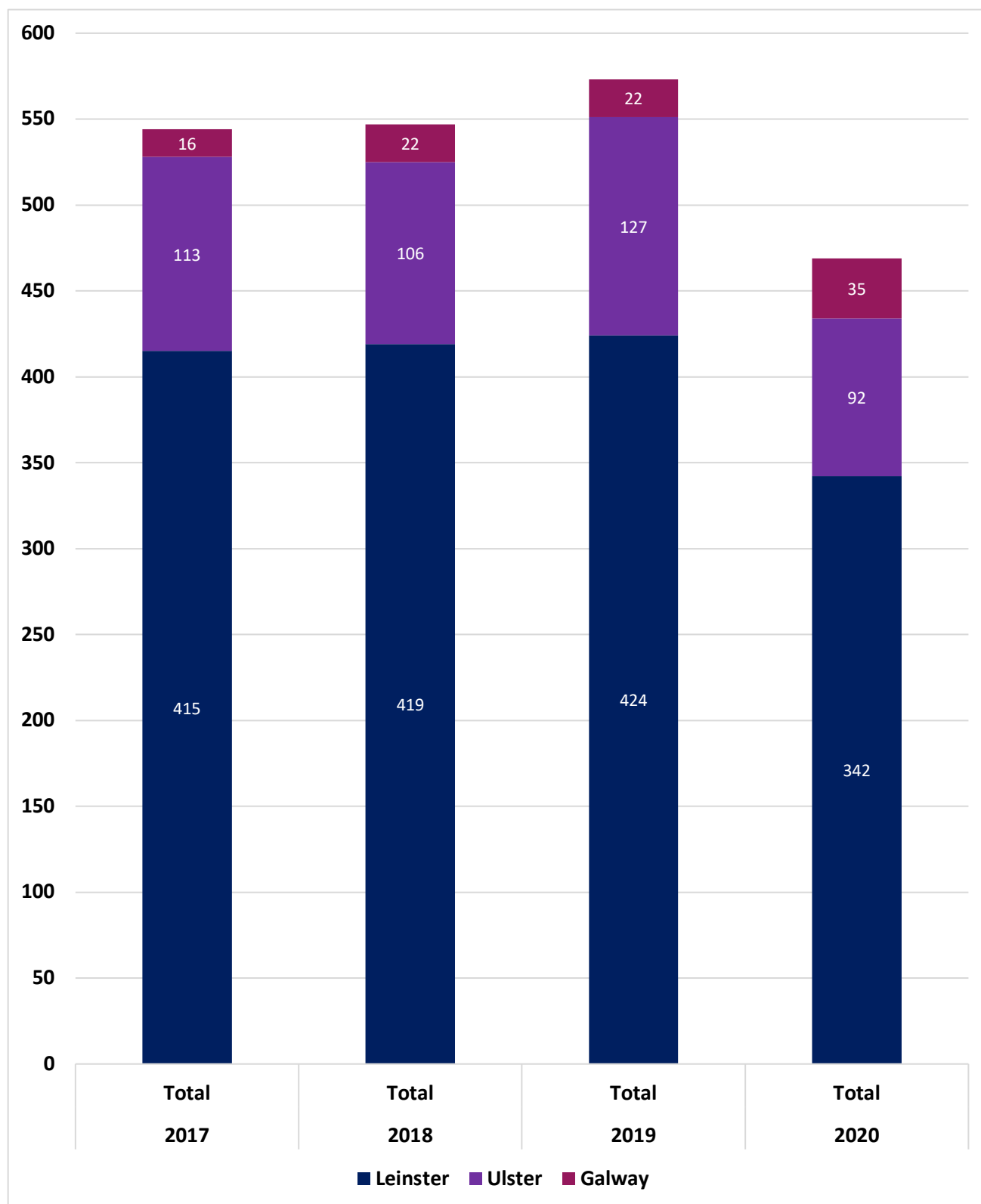
Club Locations

Slow pitch softball clubs in Ireland are currently located in seven main locations (Ashbourne, Bangor, Belfast, Dublin, Galway, Lisburn, and Wicklow) and participate in three separate co-ed slow pitch leagues (Galway, Leinster, and Ulster Leagues). The map below shows the current geographical locations of our co-ed slow pitch clubs and the vast opportunity for geographical expansion across the island of Ireland.

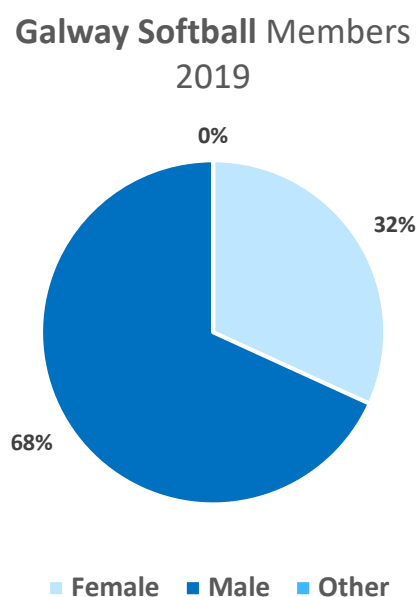
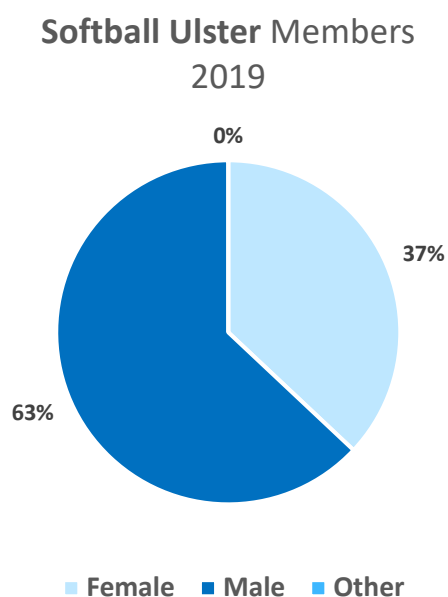
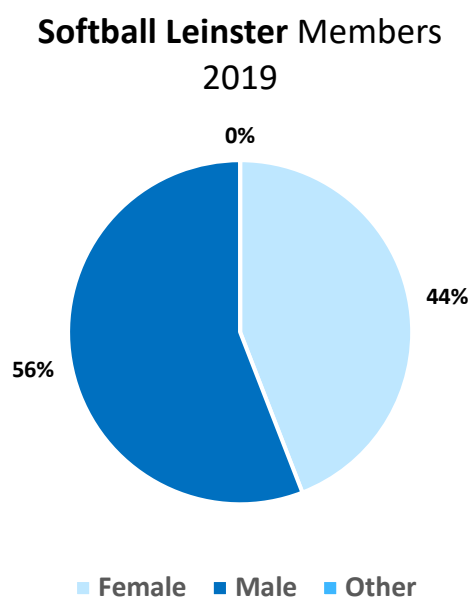
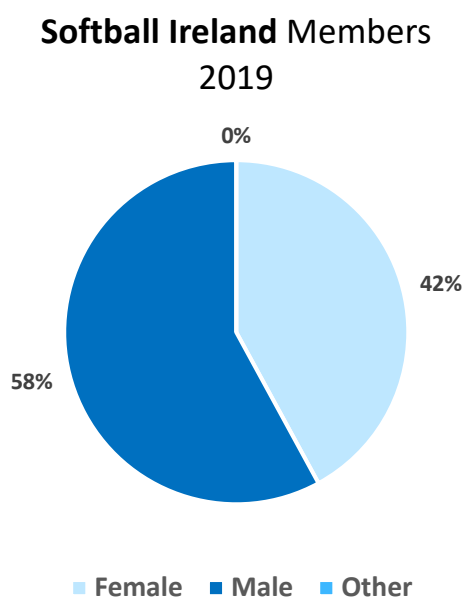


Membership

Softball Ireland Membership 2017 - 2020



Softball Ireland Membership by Gender 2019



* Please note: the 2019 data has been used as this was the last regular season of softball pre-COVID.

Comments on Softball Ireland Membership Data

The data in the above two charts is not clean enough to provide definitive conclusions, however, we can consider the following when we make our assessment of it:

- The gender breakdown shows that the co-ed quotas are just about being met nationally but are lower than needed in some regions. This suggests that females could be playing on multiple teams.
- Membership numbers remain steady with only a slight increase in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and caused a small decrease in overall membership, except for Galway where the membership continued to grow. This suggests that current recruitment methods are only able to replace the members that have fail to return year-on-year, rather than providing a general growth for the sport.

Recommendations that we would make from 2022 onwards, regarding membership data, would be:

- Collect and analyse a full set of data, to include gender identity, age, general geographical location, and status as a new or existing member. This data can then be used by Softball Ireland to plan targeted events to improve gender balance, the introduction of younger members and geographical expansion across the island of Ireland.
- Softball Ireland, the Regions and Clubs should present their anonymised membership data as a part of a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) document at their annual general meetings (AGMs). These KPI documents can be used to track progress in the delivery of this development plan, and to identify problem areas for improvement or development in the upcoming season(s).



Representatives at the all-female participation event in Leinster (2021)

Priorities

In consultation with the Slow Pitch Development Working Group (2020), Softball Ireland have identified six priority areas for the development of the discipline of Slow Pitch Softball on the island of Ireland. These areas, as laid down by the Development Vision, are outlined below.



Governance and Leadership

Key Task Item	How Will We Achieve the Key Task Item?	By Who?	By When?
Operational framework confirmed that outlines roles, accountabilities and KPIs for NGB, regions and clubs in relation to driving this development plan.	Update the SI constitution outlining the roles of SI and the regions, including the membership of these organisations.	SI	2022
	Develop an organisational chart for an all-Ireland softball organisation (SI President to grassroots coach) including future goals.	Dev. WG	2022
	Create a template club toolkit including data collection methods for tracking KPIs and assessing the needs of each club.	SI Dev. WG	2022
	Update the regional constitutions to reflect and distinguish roles and responsibilities from the SI constitution	Regions	2023
	Update all governance documents at SI level with template documents for the regions and clubs to adapt / adopt. These should use the Sport Ireland / Sport NI annual audit as guidance.	SI	Annually
Appropriate up to date policies and protocols in place to ensure player safety and welfare; and that Softball is aligned with the Sport Ireland Governance Code.	Review all SI policies and guidelines and make these available to the regions, clubs and membership. These will be in line with Sport Ireland and Sport NI best practice to support Sport Ireland and Sport NI membership application(s).	SI	2023
	Ensure the following policies and guidelines are in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding • Anti-Doping • Health & Safety • Diversity, Equity & Inclusion • Complaints & Disciplinary • National Team Selection & Management • COVID-19 Return to Play 	SI	2023
Club toolkit developed to provide guidelines on good volunteer administration practices, e.g., how to gain, train and retain volunteers, how to run an effective club.	Update guidance and develop templates for use by clubs, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming a softball club • Club constitution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Bylaws, GDPR, Safeguarding • Organising and running a committee • Effective meetings • Succession planning • Fundraising • Recruitment & retention • Communication • Finance management • Data collection • AGM & EGM • Complaints and disciplinary • Uniform policy 	SI Regions	2023

Key Task Item	How Will We Achieve the Key Task Item?	By Who?	By When?
Skills development forums provided for key administrative roles to grow leadership capability, and capacity, and ensure good understanding of quality sports administration.	Develop SI led forums for peer opportunities to exchange best practice, foster support networks and open discussion channels.	SI Regions	2022
	Utilise existing relationships e.g. Federation of Irish Sport, NI Sports Forum to access training at all levels.	SI Regions	2022
	Foster new links to source further training and support opportunities at all levels e.g. Volunteer Ireland, Volunteer Now.	SI Regions	2023
	Introduce online forums with role specific breakouts including speakers from other NGBs / organisations with professional experience.	SI Regions	2023

Player Recruitment

Key Task Item	How	Who	When
Establish a cooperative network of social media officer positions at a national, regional and club level.	Media Officers to be appointed at all levels	Everyone	2022
	Establish regional Media Working Groups to coordinate campaigns, share best practice and share resources	SI Regions	2022
Develop a social media plan that drives vibrant, exciting, and interactive social media content via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter with stories aimed at creating good engagement with clubs and players	Improve promotion of the sport of softball through paid advertising via both traditional and social media platforms.	SI Regions	2022
	Support teams in developing their social media presence and content e.g. through new equipment, software and resources.	SI / Regions Media WG	2022
	Write a comprehensive social media policy that can be adopted by the regions and clubs.	SI Media WG	2023
Establish an incentive scheme to encourage “bring a pal to play” days. e.g., create rewards for players who continuously introduce (and retain) new members	Develop reward schemes for players who contribute towards recruitment.	Clubs	2023
	Develop a regional recruitment award for the team that has recruited the most new players in a season.	Regions	2023
Softball Ireland website to drive recruitment with a join now button creating a database of players to be distributed to regions.	Increase visibility for individual teams on the SI website.	SI	2022
	Links on SI website to team social media platforms & representative contact details e.g. team email.	SI	2022
	Establish regional Recruitment Working Groups to advise SI and regions on team recruitment needs.	SI Regions	2022
Creative assets developed for use on all media platforms	Media working group to share best practice for content design with SI, regions and clubs.	Media WG	2023
Explore new recruitment avenues to increase participation at all levels.	Develop targeted initiatives to improve gender balance across the sport.	SI / Regions	2022
	Develop partnerships with winter sports for off-season participation.	SI / Regions	2022
	Reach out to minority community groups to promote softball as an inclusive sport.	SI / Regions	2022
	Run open days in tertiary level educational institutions to recruit younger players and encourage intervarsity league reformation.	SI Regions	2023
	Run open days for public and private employers e.g. healthcare, or large international businesses to encourage recruitment and corporate league development.	SI Regions	2023

Player Retention

Key Task Item	How Will We Achieve the Key Task Item?	By Who?	By When?
Develop a 'Welcome to Softball' induction toolkit for use by clubs and coaches. Toolkit to provide a checklist to make sure that new players are placed in the best team environment that suits their skills and background experience.	Develop a new player questionnaire to appropriately place them in the correct team environment for their skill-set.	SI	2022
	Develop a guide on how to start a softball team.	SI	2023
	Develop an introduction to softball training pack.	SI	2023
	Develop a basic softball skills training pack.	SI Coach. WG	2023
	Develop multi-stream (basic, intermediate, advanced) softball skills courses to cater for both new and returning players.	SI	2024
Provide clubs with simple guidelines for regular "pulse checks" with players to identify the good, the bad and the potential improvements that can lead to continued involvement	Develop pre and post season surveys to be regularly distributed to check player welfare and satisfaction.	SI Regions	2022
	Develop regular mid-season topical surveys to inform SI and the regions on policy development.	SI Regions	2022
	Develop an off-season fitness & wellbeing programme to improve overall involvement.	Regions	2022
Work proactively with players to create transition pathways into on and off field leadership roles (coaching, umpires, admin) introduce the concept of buddy support system.	Improved communication of on and off field development opportunities to the membership.	SI Regions	2022
	Develop a cohort of coaches, umpires and scorers who are willing to be a 'buddy' support to members who are in the process of learning a new skill.	Regions C&U WGs	2022
	Increased opportunities for players to develop coaching, umpiring or scoring qualifications, including funding avenues to achieve these.	SI Regions	2023
	Introduce 'fun days' to allow members new to coaching, umpiring or scoring to practice their skills in a relaxed and supportive environment.	SI Regions	2023
	Provide teams with admin support (e.g. policy templates) to promote more members taking on administration roles within their clubs and regions.	SI	2023

Player Development and Participation

Key Task Item	How Will We Achieve the Key Task Item?	By Who?	By When?
Regional centres established to provide regular open training and skill development sessions for players at all levels of the game. A schedule of these to be published and made available to encourage coaching and player development.	Introduce regular training to support the development of coaches. This could be centrally organised or on location with teams around the island of Ireland.	SI Coach. WG	2022
	Provide dedicated funding for the development of coaches.	SI	2022
	Appoint a Softball Ireland lead coach to oversee coaching and training standards.	SI	2024
	Develop a working group for the development of coaching.	SI	2022
	Introduce centralised pre-season training opportunities to set the standard and cut training costs to players.	Regions	2023
	Introduce skills training open days for players new to the sport.	Clubs	2022
Strong regional and cross regional domestic leagues established and supported to drive competition pathway.	Develop a working group to coordinate competitions between SI, regions & clubs to avoid tournament and league game clashes.	SI Comps. WG	2022
	Stronger promotion of SI and regional tournaments e.g. IOST / team blitzes	SI & Regions	2022
	Implement an all-Ireland tournament hosted across the regions.	SI	2022
Development pathway established with clear criteria for player progression from active participant to national representative.	Increase transparency on the make-up, recruitment, funding and activities of the national teams.	SI	2022
	Develop an organisational chart, including title specifications, for SI.	SI	2022
	Develop an organisational chart, including title specifications, for the regions.	Regions	2022
	Increased advertising of the roles and opportunities within SI.	SI	2022
With a focus on recruitment, together with Baseball Ireland, package and introduce formats of the game to third level institutions with a view to creating an inter-varsity league.	Create an intervarsity development working group tasked with creating a roadmap to the introduction of an intervarsity league.	SI	2023
	Develop a university rookie programme e.g. a four week coaching schedule with basics covered followed by a university-only event for those taking part to attend.	Regions Interv. WG	2023
	Contact local colleges to support the development of college teams. Teams can initially compete in regional leagues until the introduction of an intervarsity league.	Regions Interv. WG	2023
Consider the development of modified formats of the game to appeal to different demographics e.g., social corporate leagues.	Trial new variations of softball (e.g. social 7's) at IOST with late Friday games aimed at improving the social networking of players and generating feedback on potential new formats of the game.	SI	2022
	Explore the expansion of indoor softball tournaments into an indoor league.	SI	2022

Quality Coaches and Umpires

Key Task Item	How Will We Achieve the Key Task Item?	By Who?	By When?
Coach and Umpire development pathway clearly outlined with qualifications and experience for progression along this pathway articulated and understood.	Create clear coach and umpire development pathways, including legislative and NGB requirements.	Umpire WG Coach WG	2022
	Outline criteria for movement between levels including qualifications and experience required.	Ump WG Coach WG	2022
	Develop working groups to learn from other sporting federations and softball counterparts internationally.	Umpire WG Coach WG	2022
	Develop an introductory umpire course using a blended learning approach.	SI	2023
	Develop and introduce multi-level coaching courses.	SI	2023
	Offer coaching and umpire open days for development, peer learning and discussion, and speakers with experience in the field.	SI Regions	2023
Potential new coaching and umpire talent identified and supported.	Active encouragement and recruitment with proper supports for safe learning and advancement.	SI Regions	2022
	Survey clubs for willing coaches and umpires.	SI / Regions	2022
	Formalise the current coaching and umpiring pathways to increase interest.	SI	2023
Coaches and umpires have access to a regular online and face to face development opportunities.	Develop coach and umpire 'hubs' on the SI website where umpires or coaches can access online material readily and in their own time.	SI	2022
	Introduce regular online opportunities for coaches and umpires to share developments and analyse case studies for CPD opportunities.	SI	2023
Coach and umpire mentoring programme developed and deployed.	Introduce regular courses to support coach and umpire development.	SI	2022
	New coaches and umpires to be assigned an experienced coach or umpire to guide them through their first year. The person receiving the support should then be encouraged to become a mentor to keep the pool of mentors growing.	Umpire WG Coach WG	2022
Coaching and Umpire recognition programme established (recognition awards and profiling).	Run regular social media and website campaigns with umpire profiles and interviews, highlighting their valued contribution to the sport.	SI / Regions Media WG	2022
	Appoint a panel to award coaches and umpires annually and present these at IOST.	SI	2022

Access to Facilities and Equipment

Key Task Item	How Will We Achieve the Key Task Item?	By Who?	By When?
Complete a regional audit of all current and potential softball competition and training facilities identifying gaps in provision/access. This should identify both indoor and outdoor venues.	Create and circulate a survey to each club detailing their current playing field and what possible alternatives are available to them. Analyse, generate and share a report on the findings to SI, regions and clubs. Specific questions should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Field size Suitability for softball Cost of hire Availability for softball use 	Facil. WG Regions	2022
	Create and circulate a survey to each club detailing their current equipment. Analyse, generate and share a report on the findings to SI, regions and clubs.	Regions	2022
Develop a proactive plan to strategically approach local facility providers to consider a business case for better access and a national home of softball.	Promote local city and county council funding opportunities to the regions and clubs.	SI	2022
	Start a development fund to be used to purchase land for a softball diamond.	SI	2022
	Identify and purchase land for development into a softball diamond.	SI	2025+
Look into potential for shared facility/club training venues with other sporting codes.	Identify other sports who would work in partnership with softball clubs to improve access to dedicated sports venues from local councils.	BSI Regions Clubs	2024
	Review local sports venues for the possibility of converting these to multiuse fields and propose to ground owner.	BSI Regions Clubs	2025
	Petition local councils for dedicated sports venues for softball, keeping in mind funds must be made available at SI, regional or club level for their upkeep.	BSI Regions Clubs	2025
Continue to resource and provide start up equipment kits available to support new clubs/teams.	Provide dedicated funding for starter and development kits.	SI	2022
	Identify unused or older equipment across the clubs and regions that could be made available to new clubs in order to facilitate recruitment and training in the first weeks of being set up.	SI Regions	2022
	Prioritise the sharing of starter and development kits to areas of the country with little or no access to softball.	SI	2022
	Each club should aim to self-fund a new starter kit for the benefit of developing and expanding into multi-team clubs.	Clubs	2023

Risk Analysis

Softball Ireland is aware that factors may exist that could benefit or hinder the delivery of this Sports Development Plan. To identify these factors and consider them in its implementation of the plan, Softball Ireland have completed a SWOT Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. The outcomes of this analysis are outlined below.

Strengths

- Large membership base (in comparison to other minority sports e.g., Baseball)
- Co-educational
- A sport for all the family e.g., couples, siblings, parents, and children etc.
- Strong social element to the sport – attracts casual players
- Caters to all ages (16+) and abilities
- Cross-community, inclusive, unaffiliated, and apolitical sport
- Summer sport – attracts individuals from winter sports in their off-season
- Can be easily played on any open grass space
- Opportunity for players to represent Ireland at international tournaments
- Members' willingness to support new players and teams
- Motivated volunteers at national, regional and club level e.g., SI Board, SL/SU/GS Councils
- Low cost when compared to other sports

Weaknesses

- Lack of awareness of the correlation between good governance and growth
- Lack of standardised governance at club level
- Lack of recognition from Sport Ireland and Sport NI – reduced funding opportunities
- Lack of national advertising program to generate awareness and recruitment
- Lack of buy-in from players, teams, and clubs
- Perception that softball is only a social sport, therefore do not need professional practices
- Poor inter-region communication between Leinster and Ulster – regions not always sharing their expertise and successes with each other
- Galway teams not affiliated with a regional association, hindering growth and development.
- Lack of suitable facilities i.e., dedicated softball diamond
- Proximity of teams to Dublin and Belfast – lack of a geographical spread of teams
- Reliance on high numbers of foreign-born players – may only play in Ireland for a short time
- Poor public knowledge of softball as a sporting option in Ireland
- Procurement of equipment can be challenging and cost-prohibitive
- No youth stream to promote the sport and encourage players into recreational leagues

Opportunities

- Expansion into other disciplines of the sport e.g., indoor, social seven's etc.
- Gain interest from players in other sports e.g., rounders
- COVID-19 recovery – a socially distanced sport with a strong social element will be attractive to many people who have been inactive and isolating during the covid-19 pandemic.
- Recognition by Sport Ireland and Sport NI – increased funding opportunities
- Access to training and development through existing networks e.g., BSUK, NI Sports Forum
- Collaboration with baseball through Baseball Softball Ireland (BSI) e.g., youth streams, shared governance etc.
- Attracting foreign-born players who can bring their knowledge and skills to Irish softball
- Significant collective knowledge and skills among the membership that could be shared across the island of Ireland e.g., social media, advertising, web design, business etc.

Threats

- COVID-19 – ongoing social distancing, self-isolation, and competition for facilities
- Disinterest from the membership on developing robust governance structures
- Disinterest from the membership in joining volunteer roles across SI, regions, and clubs
- Competition with other bat and ball sports for the recruitment of players.
- Competition with other sports for facilities e.g., football, rugby, GAA, rounders etc.
- Priority always given by local councils to other sports e.g., football, rugby, GAA etc.
- No designated 'home' for softball i.e., no national or regional softball diamonds
- Existing softball community aging – lack of younger players joining the membership



Participants of the Inaugural Galway Softball League (2021)

Summary

In creating this Slow Pitch Development Plan, Softball Ireland are committing to ensuring that structures are in place for people to participate in all formats of Softball and that they have regular opportunities to develop their skills. Softball Ireland, with the support of the regions and clubs in Ireland, will implement this plan to ensure suitable pathways are in place for everyone to participate at their chosen level. This plan recognises that partnerships are necessary to provide appropriate opportunities for all. Softball Ireland will continue to foster these relationships and forge new relationships as we continue to grow OUR sport.

This strategy is built on a collaborative approach and will require the active participation of the National Governing Body, the Regions and the Clubs if we are to be successful. Each action under the six Key Priorities outlines the role of the above stakeholders and highlights the interdependencies of the stakeholders. It will be down to each individual if we are to reach our mission:

“By 2026 Slow Pitch Softball will be a co-ed sport of choice in Ireland providing social, recreational and high-performance sporting opportunities throughout all provinces and communities. The leadership structures at all levels of the game will entice, engage and grow new lifelong participants, driving Individual and Team Passion”

It will not be without barriers; as broken down by the risk analysis undertaken above, but on balance the strengths and opportunities appear to outweigh the weaknesses and threats, many of which can be tackled with: a collaborative approach between SI, regions, clubs and members; innovative approaches to deal with pre-existing and newly identified barriers to development; earlier identification of significant shifts in the makeup of the membership; and open, transparent communication between the above stakeholders.

Some may feel that this plan is ambitious and is too formal for a “recreational” sport, but Softball is multi-faceted, hence it’s attraction to such a wide demographic. Sport is rapidly moving into a more professional culture, with legislative requirements and a demand for better structures, which requires planning, organisation, and good governance. People, rightly, expect quality and input for their money and this plan is designed to achieve that.

The six strategic priorities are designed to create further opportunity to participate in softball, maximise our sporting success, improve player and official development and elevate sports management standards towards good governance. The softball membership is passionate and hardworking, and with a clear plan and common goal we can share our enthusiasm and grow the membership of a sport we love for its fun and diversity

This is a living document and will be reviewed and adapted as necessary throughout the five year cycle.

Contacts

Softball Ireland

President: president@softball.ie
Secretary: secretary@softball.ie
Treasurer: treasurer@softball.ie
Webmaster: webmaster@softball.ie
Development: development@softball.ie
Tournaments: tournaments@softball.ie

Softball Leinster

Chairperson: chair@softballleinster.ie
Secretary: secretary@softballleinster.ie
Treasurer: treasurer@softballleinster.ie
Chief Umpire: umpires@softballleinster.ie
Competitions Officer: competitions@softballleinster.ie
Development Officer: development@softballleinster.ie

Softball Ulster

Chairperson: chair@softballulster.com
Vice Chair: vicechair@softballulster.com
Secretary: secretary@softballulster.com
Treasurer: treasurer@softballulster.com
Chief Umpire: chiefumpire@softballulster.com
Media Officer: media@softballulster.com
Competitions Officer: competitions@softballulster.com

Galway Softball

Chairperson: chairperson@galwaysoftball.com
Secretary: secretary@galwaysoftball.com
Treasurer: treasurer@galwaysoftball.com
Public Relations Officer: pro@galwaysoftball.com

Further Information

For further information on Softball Ireland visit: www.softball.ie

For further information on Softball Leinster visit: www.softballleinster.ie

For further information on Softball Ulster visit: www.softballulster.com

For further information on Galway Softball visit: www.galwaysoftball.com

Appendix 1: Contributors

Slow Pitch Development Plan Working Group 2021

Andrew Craven (Chair)	Softball Ulster Chairperson / Ulster Representative to SI Board
Will Gilpin	Softball Ulster Secretary
Vinny McGrane	Softball Galway Chairperson
Amanda Ní Ghabhann	Softball Leinster Secretary / Leinster Representative to SI Board

Slow Pitch Development Vision Working Group 2020

Ruth Brady	Softball Leinster Member - Dodder
Declan Carty	Softball Ireland Ordinary Board Member
Andrew Craven	Softball Ireland Ordinary Board Member
Wil Gilpin	Softball Ulster Secretary
Colum Lavery	Softball Ireland President
Myra McGlynn	Co-Facilitator
Amanda Ní Ghabhann	Softball Leinster Representative to Softball Ireland Board
Katie Sadleir (Chair)	Facilitator
Jay Slevin	Softball Ulster Member – Belfast Sliders
Eoin Wood	Softball Galway Member – Galway Tribes

Appendix 2: Working Group Recommendations

The Softball Ireland Development Working Group (2021) has recommended the following committees and working groups be created (or continued) from 2022 onwards. These groups will be responsible for the delivery of specific Key Task Actions as included in this document.

Slow Pitch Development Plan Implementation Committee

The Slow Pitch Development Plan Implementation Committee will be tasked with implementing the Key Actions included within this Slow Pitch Development Plan until its completion in 2026.

Competitions Working Group

The Competitions Working Group will develop a plan and put structures in place to coordinate competitions at all levels in Ireland as well as standardising the approach to planning and organising competitions.

Intervarsity Working Group

The Intervarsity Working Group will develop a roadmap to bring us to an intervarsity league. This will include the training and development of teams in third level institutions as well as a temporary inclusion of these teams at regional games until a specific intervarsity league is created.

Coaches Working Group

The Coaches Working Group will create a standardised method of delivering coaching across the island of Ireland at all levels. This will be achieved through the introduction of a skills training pack as well as train the coach sessions to increase the level of coaching. The group will also look at ways to recruit and retain more coaches.

Umpires Working Group

The Umpires Working Group will create a standardised method of delivering umpire training across the island of Ireland at all levels. This will be achieved through the introduction of a training pack as well as train the umpire. The group will also look at ways to recruit and retain more umpires.

Social Media Working Group

The Social Media Working Group will create a standard plan for how each team, club and region should advertise through social media to increase recruitment and participation. The group will create a social media policy to ensure Softball is being promoted at all levels.

Recruitment Working Group

The Recruitment Working Group will consider the barriers to participating in slow pitch softball and look for opportunities to engage new members; primarily addressing the low numbers of female participants and developing strategies and engagement opportunities to increase visibility and grow the slow pitch membership.

Facilities Working Group

The Facilities Working Group will audit the current playing fields in use by slow pitch softball clubs and report back to SI on the fields available for use, suitability for softball and any alternatives that may be available to clubs. This group will also begin preliminary investigation into the suitability of locations for a national home for softball in Ireland.

Appendix 3: Supporting Documents

The Softball Ireland Development Working Group (2021) have created the following documents to support the delivery of this plan:

1. NGB Supplementary Document
2. NGB Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Spreadsheet
3. Regional Association Supplementary Document
4. Regional Association Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Supplement
5. Club Supplementary Document
6. Club Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Document

All documents will be distributed at the time of publishing of this plan and will be made available on the Softball Ireland website (www.softball.ie).

Key Performance Indicator	KPI Measure	KPI Target			2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
		R	A	G					
Player Retention & Growth									
Players	Total no. players registered in Region	<120	120-150	≥150					
^ Total Number <u>Female</u> Players	Total no. female players registered in Region								
^ Percentage <u>Female</u> Players	% all players who are female	<40%	40-45%	≥45%					
^ Total Number <u>Male</u> Players	Total no. male players registered in Region								
^ Percentage <u>Male</u> Players	% all players who are male	>60%	55-60%	≤55%					
^ Total Number <u>Other Gender</u> Players	Total no. other gender player registered in Region								
^ Percentage <u>Other Gender</u> Players	% all players who are other gender	0	>0-5%	≥5%					
Player Retention	% players retained	<90%	80-90%	≥90%					
^ <u>Female</u> Player Retention	% female players retained	<90%	80-90%	≥90%					
^ <u>Male</u> Player Retention	% male players retained	<90%	80-90%	≥90%					
^ <u>Other Gender</u> Player Retention	% other gender players retained	<90%	80-90%	≥90%					
New Players	% new players (total)	<5%	5-10%	≥10%					
^ New <u>Female</u> Players	% new players who are female	<40%	40-50%	≥50%					
^ New <u>Male</u> Players	% new players who are male	<40%	40-50%	≥50%					
^ New <u>Other Gender</u> Player	% players who are other gender	0	0-5%	≥5%					
Net Player Growth	% change no. players from preceding year	<0%	0-10%	≥10%					
Club Health									
Teams (Total)	Total no. teams in club	0	1	≥2					
Forfeits	Total no. league forfeits	≥2	1	0					
Organising Committee	% Organising committee positions filled	<80%	80-90%	≥90%					
Development Opportunities									
Number of Coaches	Total no. coaches in the club	0	1	≥2					
Number of Umpires	Average no. umpires per team	0	1	≥2					
Number of Scorers	Average no. scorers per team	0	1	≥2					
Financial Health									
Unrestricted Financial Reserves	Total unrestricted reserves in bank account	<£250	£250-500	>£500					
Annual Surplus / Deficit	Total surplus or deficit in yearly finances	Deficit	0	Surplus					
Fundline / Grants Obtained	Total funding & grants obtained	0	£0-£500	>£500					

Example Club Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Document (2021)

