



EYHL Review Group

Recommendation Document

By **Iain Kelly (Chair)**

1st May 2021

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1. EYHL Review Group Recommendation

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to put forward a recommendation for EYHL competitions for Season 2021/2022 onward.

In response to representations made to the HI Board, particularly in regard to a full EYHL 2, the Chair, Eric Brady, tasked Brian Caruth, Chair of HI Competitions Committee to bring together a working group to undertake a review of the EYHL.

The review was to encompass both EYHL 1 and EYHL 2.

The review group did not receive a written term of reference and therefore proceeded with the following remit:

“Undertake a review of the format of EY Hockey Leagues, incorporating input from stakeholders at all levels, with stakeholders having a meaningful mechanism to input into the process and that their input is listened to and considered by the review group.”

Given the effect of the corona virus on season 2020/2021 and the “Hockey Ireland EYHL & Schools Competitions Update 5th Feb 2021”, which stated “*The EY Hockey Leagues will return next season in September 2021 inclusive of all teams as for season 2020/21*” – the view is that the recommendation contained in this paper should be delayed until season 2022/23 and for season 2021/22 the EYHL format in place for season 2020/21 should be played with clubs having the knowledge of what is to come in season 2022/23.

1.2. Group

The group was comprised of:

- Iain Kelly – Ulster Competitions Committee / HI Director (Nominated as Review Group Chair at first meeting.)
- Fintan O Flynn – Connacht Competitions Committee;
- David Mc Nerney – Leinster Competitions Committee;
- Malcolm Coombes – Munster Competitions Committee
- Brian Caruth – EYHL WG;
- Victor Shaw – EYHL WG;
- John Bell – EYHL WG;
- Jerome Pels – HI CEO;
- Linda Monaghan – HI;
- Christine Reid – IHUA;
- Mark Tumilty – HP;

1.3. Process

1.3.1. Meetings

The group corresponded by email in addition to Zoom meetings held on the following dates. (Linda Monaghan recorded minutes of the Zoom meetings, which were circulated to the group.)

- 10th December 2020
- 12th February 2021 - an email update of the position was issued by the Review Group Chair.
- 1st March 2021*
- 19th April 2021

* Following the meeting on 1st March 2021 additional feed back was sought from stakeholders on 3 points:

- Structure of EYHL 2
- Promotion/Relegation between EYHL 1 & EYHL 2
- Player migration

1.4. Principles

We discussed and agreed as a group the following principles for which we would seek inputs and from which we would ultimately conclude our recommendation.

Number	Description
1	Is current IHL 1 & 2 fit for purpose?
2	IHL 1 continue as it is / or reduce to 8 or increase to 12?
3	Costs
4	Communication / PR / Marketing
5	Umpires
6	Full IHL2 / Split Leagues / Or Even IHL
7	Player Migration / Player Welfare
8	Interpros instead of IHL
9	Can a club have more than 1 team in IHL
10	Other issues & Suggestions

1.5. Inputs

1.5.1 Stakeholders Identified

At its first meeting, the group identified stakeholders to be approached to seek their inputs to the review.

The stakeholders identified and the reason for their inclusion in the process were:

- **Clubs & Players** - from those currently involved in EYHL to those in lower provincial leagues who have ambitions to play EYHL or have an interest in EYHL. Both those currently involved and not yet involved – all clubs to be given an opportunity to put forward their opinion.
- **Provinces** - as EYHL 2 can have big impact on provincial leagues particularly for the smaller provinces.
- **Sponsors** - mainly EY who are in contract to sponsor for another 2 years.
- **Umpires** - as midweek matches and double weekends could be difficult to provide sufficient umpires to cover. At present it is not always possible for umpires to be appointed to all EYHL matches. The costs to HI of providing umpires to EYHL fixtures was also identified as being an important consideration.
- **Technical tables and officers** - similar issues to umpires, it may not be possible to cover all matches in an unchanged format. Covid19 had impacted on the provision of technical tables at the start of the 2020/21 season.
- **Hockey Ireland Office** – already working at nearly full capacity.
- **General audience** – including press coverage.
- **HP / National Coaches** – impact on training and planning, including JAG coaches.
- **Calendar** – international calendar as Europeans are now World Cup qualifiers, Olympics etc.

1.5.2 Provincial Forums

To reach out to all clubs and other interested parties, provincial forums were arranged to give clubs and their players the opportunity to input to the review.

Provincial forums were held on:

- Munster – 14th January 2021 (EYHL clubs) & 19th January 2021 (non-EYHL clubs)
- Leinster – 19th January 2021
- Ulster – 20th January 2021
- Connacht – 20th January 2021

1.5.3 Other stakeholder consultations

The other identified stakeholders were approached by members of the Review Group and their inputs sought.

- Meeting with HI HP team 26th January 2021.
- Email response from Linda Ingram / Technical Officials - 29th January 2021.
- JP met with sponsors and sought their input.
- EYHL Working Group submissions sought.
- BC & JP consulted with HI Marketing & Communications team.
- CR liaised with IHUA colleagues.

1.6. Recommendation

Based on the stakeholder responses, we discussed and agreed as a group the following recommendation for EYHL Leagues.

1.6.1. EYHL 1

Our recommendation for the league competitions are as follows:

Recommendations	Comments
EYHL 1 to remain as a full league competition comprising of 10 teams	<p>We considered the options of reducing the number of teams in the leagues to 8 teams and increasing the number to 12 teams. Having considered the stakeholder inputs, the group felt that maintaining the 10 team league structure was the best option. There is evidence of an increasing gap in the standard of teams competing in EYHL 1 & EYHL 2 as well as a difference in the standard of the teams at the top of the EYHL 1 leagues compared to those at the bottom. Increasing to 12 teams could exacerbate this difference and dilute the standard of the leagues. It would also result in additional costs for both the competing clubs and HI. Reducing the number to 8 would be likely to lead to an increase in the “yo-yo effect” whereby teams being promoted to EYHL1 would find it more difficult to maintain a position in EYHL 1 due the difference in standard. Additionally an 8 team league could increase the possibility of only 2 provinces being represented.</p>
Change Promotion/Relegation between EYHL 1 & EYHL 2 to “2 up / 2 down”.	<p>We considered maintaining the status quo i.e. the 9th placed EYHL 1 team playing off against the team finishing in 2nd place in the EYHL 2 playoffs however felt that a 2 up / 2 down structure would be an improved option. This will lead to increased competition in both leagues as the 9th placed team in EYHL 1 does not have the “safety net” of a playoff whilst rewarding consistency for EYHL 2 teams, as results across the season will be recognised compared to the current playoff situation, when teams can be affected by injuries, player availability due to exams/other sport commitments etc. (Given the dates by which playoffs have to be played this can have a significant impact.)</p>
Reduce EYHL squads to 16 players.	<p>We agreed this would be preferable as it is mainly home teams that name a squad of 18. Teams that travel rarely have the ability to name a squad of 18. In addition, reducing squads to 16 means more players get to play more hockey as “fringe” players would be selected for 2nd XIs, rather than being in an 18 player squad and play a minimal part in an EYHL match.</p>
Change from top 4 to top 6 to go through to EY1 Champions Trophy Finals -1 st & 2 nd placed teams progressing straight to Semi-Finals with 3 rd ,4 th ,5 th & 6 th playing in Quarter-Finals, with winners progressing to Semi-Finals.	<p>Provides extended competition with more teams offered opportunity to compete for European spot and keeps competition going for more clubs until the end of the season. Possibility of QF and SF fixtures being played at neutral venues to bring high level matches to more areas in Ireland, thus meeting sponsors preference as well as possibly reducing travel costs.</p>

1.6.2. EYHL 2

Our recommendation for the league competitions are as follows:

Recommendations	Comments
<p>EYHL 2 to be a 10 team competition (both men's and women's), played in 2 groups of 5 teams, in parallel with provincial leagues.</p> <p>(Note – this would take effect from 2022/23 season as structure for 2021/22 season is as per abandoned 2020/21 season.)</p>	<p>The structure of EYHL 2 is the point that raised the greatest level of debate. Leinster is undoubtedly in a position whereby its constituent clubs could partake in a full EYHL 2 league structure while still retaining a top provincial league with a competitive high standard however the group concluded that this is not the case in the majority of the other top provincial leagues. The loss of teams from the top leagues in other provinces would severely dilute the standard of those leagues and potentially reduce participation. We considered other options – 8 team/10 team/12 team EYHL 2 and a “hybrid league structure” whereby after the first round of provincial league matches, the highest ranked teams from each provincial league qualified (subject to the provincial quota for each province) for EYHL 2. The qualifiers would leave their provincial leagues at that stage to compete in an EYHL 2 which would then commence.</p> <p>This structure was not considered suitable as it could effectively conclude provincial league hockey in smaller provinces and thus severely limit the number of competitive fixtures for non EYHL 2 teams when the teams that had qualified took up their places in EYHL 2.</p> <p>We also considered a “geographic conference” structure but felt that despite cost savings for participating clubs, that structure could potentially dilute the All-Ireland aspect sought by the clubs and sponsor.</p> <p>We acknowledge that the proposed structure imposes a significant number of matches for teams from larger provincial leagues but felt that this was an issue for provinces to resolve and noted that Ulster is already planning to reduce its top leagues from 12 to 10 teams.</p> <p>The availability of a sufficient number of umpires/technical officials to meet the requirements of both EYHL 1 and a full EYHL 2 was also a factor considered.</p>
<p>10 team leagues to be determined in line with EYHL 1 recommendation, i.e. the winner of each group to progress to a Semi-Final with the 2nd & 3rd place teams in each section to play off in Quarter-Finals.</p>	<p>Maintains continuity with EYHL 1. Opportunity to take competitions to new venues (QF & SF stage).</p>
<p>Existing provincial protection in women's EYHL 2 to remain in place.</p> <p>Men's EYHL 2 to consist of 3 teams from Leinster, Munster & Ulster, with 10th place determined by a play-off between 4th placed finishers in Leinster & Ulster. Play-off to be completed at end of season, so that qualified teams for following season are confirmed.</p>	<p>Ensures as far as possible an All-Ireland competition and reduces possibility of one or two provinces dominating.</p>

1.6.3. Other suggestions & recommendations

Our additional recommendations for the EYHL competitions are as follows:

Recommendations / Considerations	Comments
<p>Player migration / welfare. No requirement for HI Rules in this regard.</p>	<p>It was acknowledged that player migration to EYHL clubs is a strong possibility, which can be to the detriment of clubs that strive to reach that level.</p> <p>HP coaches should be informed that they should not direct players, particularly JAGs that it is essential to play at that level as a precursor to maintaining positions on development pathways. It is acknowledged that a HP coach giving advice can form part of any informed decision-making process for JAG players and their parents.</p> <p>All provincial representatives agreed that player migration/transfers should fall under the remit of provincial rules.</p>
<p>Value to sponsor / hockey press coverage.</p>	<p>All participating clubs have an obligation to provide value to the sponsor. Rules are in place in this regard however some clubs are better than others at providing information to press etc.</p> <p>The group felt that collaboration between the HI Marketing & Communications team, the EY Working Group, the HI office and the clubs could significantly increase exposure and thus value for the sponsor.</p> <p>Clubs to be made aware of sponsors needs e.g. access to players for PR / Publicity / Hockey Workshops / Venue branding / working with local branches of EY to create awareness.</p>
<p>HP Coaching communication with club coaches.</p>	<p>HI HP Coaches to work with clubs to improve the overall standard and what way HP coaches are looking for in a playing style at national level.</p>
<p>Further review to be undertaken at end of 2022/23 season.</p>	<p>This will coincide with the expiry of the present EY sponsorship deal. The costs involved for clubs to compete in EYHLs is significant as are the running costs to HI, particularly around umpiring expenses. At the end of 2022/23 season there should be a clearer line of sight as to whether the sponsor is willing to continue the partnership or a new sponsor has been found. A lack of sponsorship could lead to umpiring costs for EYHL/IHL fixtures being passed on to clubs and this could potentially shape the clubs' thoughts on whether to continue participating in EYHL/IHLs.</p> <p>The proposed review can also consider the progress in umpire development and if, at that stage, there is a sufficient number of umpires qualified at the level required to cover all fixtures.</p> <p>The position of all provincial leagues should be considered to see if the issues identified in this review preventing a full EYHL/IHL 2 have been resolved.</p>
<p>Inter-Provincial Tournaments should be restricted to JAG level.</p>	<p>Given the playing schedule already involved in participating in EYHL, the group felt that senior interprovincial tournaments could not be beneficial. Preparation time for squads would be insufficient to make such tournaments worthwhile.</p> <p>The calendar is already busy enough, so the scheduling of a senior interprovincial tournament in any form would be challenging.</p> <p>EYHL (and provincial leagues) provide sufficient opportunity for HP coaches to view players based in Ireland.</p>

Can a club have more than one team in EYHL.	The group was unanimous in agreeing that this was not a viable suggestion. It could potentially lead to increased level of player migration and significantly damage the grassroots of hockey in Ireland.
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1.7. Chair's Statement

I believe the process the EY Review Group has followed has been robust in that: -

- we have documented stakeholder responses and taken minutes of each meeting.
- we have a group with wide range of views from across the Hockey Ireland family.
- we considered several options before concluding our recommendations.

Finally, as chair I would like to offer my thanks to the members of the group for their time and input to this review.