

***Come together,
work together,
grow together.***



County Squads Programme

Developing the next generation of athletes.



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Introduction

Athletics Ireland recognises the need to support our developing athletes across all events throughout the country.

Currently, the provincial squads cater for athletes at a regional level, however this may be limited to clubs and counties who have the resources to attend these squads. AAI (Athletic Association of Ireland) has identified county squads as an important programme which can have a positive impact in helping our athletes develop, grow, and enjoy the sport of athletics.

Developing a county squad programme for athletics involves several key components to ensure the holistic growth of our athletes. This handbook will provide a structured outline on how county boards and their associated

clubs can develop and customize their own programmes based on the specific needs and resources of the county. This is a general template which offers advice, and adjustments may be necessary based on the unique characteristics of the region and the athletes involved.



County Squad Programme

From previous experience, current research and examination of successful structures, Athletics Ireland have identified the following options and recommendations for the creation of county squad programmes. Appoint a squad manager as the first step in this process. This individual will be responsible for the management of the county squad and should select a group of coaches who will be responsible for coaching specific events at each squad session.

Alternative methods may include selecting a committee which may include, but is not limited to:

Format 2: County squad committee

If sufficient volunteers are available, a committee can be formed. This will ensure the workload is distributed. Positions include:

- County squad chairperson
- Treasurer
- Facilities review person.
- Child safety and risk assessment person
- Coach liaison officer.
- Athlete liaison officer
- County Squads PRO

Initial needs assessment

To develop a successful county squad programme, an initial needs assessment should be completed.

The key objectives of the county squads include preparing athletes for the next stage of their development pathway – club competition and possible regional squad participation. It would be advised to focus on a performance county squad initially (U15-U18 age groups). County squads can develop their own additional individual goals for the programme.

The following outlines key steps in the needs assessment process:

- Assess the current position of athletics in the county.
- Identify potential coaches and facilities to enable a fully functional squad programme.
- Understand and identify any strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Clear, measurable goals and selection criteria:

AAI's key goal for county squads is to develop athletes mentally, physically, and socially so they are in a position to progress to the provincial squad set up. Clear standards should be in place to identify and invite athletes. The following is a suggested standard:

- **Clear standards** – U 15-U18 performance athletes (achieved a placing of top 3 at county championships). These athletes should be tracking towards provincial squads and competition.

Each county can also establish county specific short-term and long-term goals for the county athletics squad programme- this will guide the squad offerings and coaching standards. Some counties may wish to include a development squad. The following would be advised:

- **Development squad** – U13-U15. No criteria required. Encourage a multi discipline approach for long term athlete development.

Coach selection and development:

The squad manager should identify potential coaches for each event. It is recommended to have 2-3 coaches across all events to balance workload and further develop coaches in this area. Once coaches are contacted, a finalised list should be drawn up and all coaches should receive formal induction / training via meetings / zoom calls prior to the squads. The details of these meetings should include, but is not limited to:

- Provide an overview of the squads (dates, times, athletes developmental level, location, requirements from the coach).
- Provide continuous training and development opportunities for coaches (AAI coach education, workshops, coach resources).
- Provide a checklist of resources which details the coaching points to be covered at each squad day.

Athlete Development:

It is important to identify the key areas of athlete development. Each county will have their own specific requirements and it is important to adjust the squad offering to cater for the athlete's needs. The following resources / coaching points would be advised but is not limited to:

- Structured training program based on the long-term athlete development model will be implemented by all coaches.
- Focus on fundamental skills, fitness, and mental resilience.
- Provide access to educational resources, including nutrition, injury prevention, recovery via the AAI YouTube channel and other AAI resources.

Competition Calendar:

It is vital to examine the competition calendar when selecting squad dates. Clashes with county, provincial and national championships will result in low numbers in attendance at squad days. Squads can also be planned around upcoming competitions which will provide athletes with an opportunity to gain further experience and develop their competition skills. Some events (e.g. endurance) many require separate squad sessions, depending on the time of the season.

Scheduling of County Squads

County squads should be scheduled in advance of provincial squads to allow athletes attend both if necessary. Provincial squads run from September – January each year, with some alterations for specific event groups. Below is a suggested timeline for scheduling county squad fixtures:

County squad sessions:

May- August.

County squad sessions can be used to both prepare athletes for the provincial squads while also complimenting the competition outdoor season by bringing athletes and coaches together.

Endurance county squads

April-June

County squad sessions can be used to both prepare athletes for the provincial squads while also complimenting the competition outdoor season by bringing athletes and coaches together. Due to cross country season beginning in September / October, earlier squad sessions may be necessary.

Facility selection:

Several factors will lead to the selection of facilities to host county squad sessions. These include but are not limited to:

- Centralised location which provides access to all.
- Can cater for all events (throws, jumps etc).
- Has sufficient equipment.
- Indoor facilities may be required at specific time of the season.
- Area to host coach's lunch / break.
- Ensure that facilities meet the required standards for training.

Parent and Club Involvement:

Successful squad programmes are a direct result of collaboration and dedicated support networks. Ensuring club and parental involvement in the squad programmes can aid in developing athletes. County squads should be viewed as an opportunity for coaches to network, collaborate and learn from each other. Likewise, athletes and parents should view this as an opportunity to create new communities and build a strong network. Some action points to consider include:

- Establish excellent communication channels with parents and all clubs through highlighting the positive outcomes from county squad programmes.
- Encourage parental support and club coaches' involvement in athlete development through observation and networking.

Partnerships and Sponsorships:

All programmes require support, and initiatives which

promote youth development in sport are favoured by organisations seeking partnerships. Reaching out to the local community and educational institutions can provide opportunities for sponsorship / partnerships. This will be an excellent addition to county squads and attract more potential athletes.

PRO activities:

Using social media will be a highly effective means of communication. This will ensure all messages reach the target market (developing athletes) and can also aid in developing collaborations / partnerships.

Monitoring, review, and Evaluation:

- Implement a system for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the programme- utilise feedback


It is important to note that county squads should be...

**SCALABLE
ADAPTABLE
MANAGEABLE
RESOURCE LIGHT
CLEAR SELECTION
CRITERIA**

forms to gain insights.

- Conduct reviews and collect data / feedback from all parties (coaches, athletes, clubs, parents). This will aid in making informed adjustments to the program.

Potential Smaller Scale Models/Alternatives:

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- A. County Throws Performance Squad/Group
 - B. County Jumps Performance Squad/Group
 - C. County Sprints/Hurdles Performance Squad/Group
 - D. County Distance/XC/Walks Performance Squad/
Group

Once a county squad programme is set up, it is particularly important to review and update the program based on feedback and evolving circumstances. For continued success of all parties, the athletes, commitment of all involved and a focus on the well-rounded development of athletes should be the key factor in the decisions making process. Athletics Ireland believes that with the values of integrity, honesty and respect from all involved, the county squad programme will be a vessel for the creation of a community of practice, leading to progress and development for all.

