

'Sharing Our Success'

Projects, Events & Ideas
to Help Grow
Branches in Britain



Comhaltas in Britain

'Sharing Our Success'

Guide to help inspire Branches to
fulfil their potential by learning from
the many great projects already
happening across Britain

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Aims of this Guide

Comhaltas has existed in Britain for the past 60 years, and we are delighted to have branches across all areas of the Province, covering all 3 Nations. Although many see Comhaltas as being a 'competitive' organisation due to our biggest event taking the form of a competition, we are much more than that, an inclusive like-minded community of people from every walk of life who share a love of Irish culture.

This document is designed to look at what branches are doing as a whole in order to ensure the continued success of the organisation. There may be some ideas which you have tried in your branch before, or some which you have never considered, but the idea is that we can learn from each other and share our experiences. At the back of this document there is a chart which indicates branches which take part in specific projects so you know who is best to contact for advice.

As with all projects, Comhaltas as an organisation strives to work together at all levels, from Provincial, to Regional, to Branch, and to individual Members. Additional support can be provided from our Meitheal team who include our Project Officers who are available to assist with capacity building within the organisation.

Four main areas of focus have been identified, these are:

Branch Recruitment

Hosting Events

Communication

Fundraising



Branch Recruitment

There are a number of different ways branches can attract new members. One of the easiest ways to do this is to be visible among the local Irish and wider community in your area.

Engaging with Irish Community Groups

This can be done by engaging with different organisations from within the Irish community such as the GAA, Irish Language groups, even Irish bars to see if there are any reciprocal arrangements you can make which will give the branch exposure to the wider Irish community.

Engaging with Advertisers

Sending details of upcoming events, and reports including photographs of events to local newspapers is a very simple way of getting content out to the wider local community. It is also useful to include your contact details and dates/places of regular meeting times in the appropriate community organisations area of local publications to reach the widest possible audience.

Teaching Music in Primary Schools

Many of the larger branches in Britain are linked with School's programmes where either an existing Comhaltas member is a teacher within a school, or another Comhaltas member voluntarily teaches a whistle class in a local Primary School and encourages the children to carry on their tuition at their local branch. The 'Comhaltas In Schools Traditional Irish Music Course' which is available to all branches is a valuable learning aid, designed for these classes.



Hosting Events

One problem branches have come up against in recent years with relation to branch membership is retention. Having looked at all the branches both in Britain and in Ireland, there is one key finding; The branches who retain their members for the longest period, are the branches who consistently host regular events. Here are some of the events which branches are currently undertaking.

Weekly Classes

The most consistent event being held by larger Branches are weekly classes. Some of the larger branches host these on an individual instrument basis, whereas those branches which do not yet have the capacity to do so, host mixed instrument classes. As well as increasing the amount of tuition being given to our members, these weekly classes also help to create a sense of community around the branch amongst groups of parents, and indeed children.

Monthly Sessions

Some branches host a monthly session in addition to their classes. The idea being that it gives the membership an opportunity to bond and also showcase their talents outwith the class environment. These events also provide an opportunity to introduce other elements of Irish culture such as Singing and Story Telling which are not as prevalent within Branches.

Monthly Children's Ceili

Another event which introduces another aspect of Irish culture is hosting a regular Children's Ceili. This also gives the children the opportunity to play the tunes they have already learned at the Branch classes, and learn some Ceili dances at the same time.



Exchange Programmes with Other Branches

One way of retaining teenagers within a Branch is to introduce the social side of Comhaltas through Exchange Programmes with other Branches. In Britain, our more successful branches have been arranging Exchange Weekends with several branches over a long period of time, where a branch arranges a weekend to visit another (either within Britain or Ireland) and they go for a weekend where music, dance and song, as well as social events are programmed. Usually this is followed up with a return visit the following year where previous relationships are cemented.

Creating Junior Bands for the Fleadh (Both Competitive and Non-Competitive)

One area that helps to create a sociable aspect to any Branch is to encourage all the children to take part in Ceili Bands. Often branches will submit one or two Bands which represent the Branch, however, there will be many (perhaps weaker) musicians who missed out on the opportunity. One idea is to create a Competitive Band which complies with the Fleadh rules, and a Non-Competitive band which may have more than 10 musicians involved, perhaps even an adult accompanist to help. The theory being that by giving the less experienced children the opportunity to perform at the Fleadh, they will become stronger musicians, and their parents are likely to become more involved in the Branch and stay as members for longer which will help boost Branch numbers in the long term.



Hosting Events (Continued)

Producing Concerts

One very successful way of giving young ceoltóirí the opportunity to perform is by hosting Concerts. Most branches will host an annual concert where they will showcase the talents of the Branch and this may be supplemented by visiting musicians – sometimes as part of a wider workshop based weekend.

Branch Meetings

As members of Comhaltas, our branches are required to host an Annual General Meeting (AGM) and 3 other 'quarterly' meetings to discuss their own, and wider Comhaltas business. There are many cases of branch members having never attended a branch meeting despite being members for many years. Meetings provide an opportunity for a Branch to discuss events with its wider membership and it is also useful to regularly attract new members on to the committee to share out responsibilities amongst the branch.

Fundraising Events

Several Branches of Comhaltas have started to host specific annual fundraising nights where there is a complete break from usual activities e.g. hosting a 'Race Night' where there are not any performances of music, song and dance which are synonymous with Comhaltas events, but rather the focus is on hosting a sociable evening to raise funds for the branch.



Hosting Workshops

Although Branch classes provide a very useful opportunity to learn, it is also particularly useful to supplement these classes with holding Workshops in instruments which you feel may need a boost, or to take advantage of having any professional musicians passing through the local area who may be keen to pass on their talents. This is often successful when arranged in co-operation with other local Branches to maximise attendance and improve the standard across the board.

Social Events

As much as Comhaltas is an organisation dedicated to the promotion of Irish culture, many of our Branches host events which are purely social based. These events are very successful at creating a wider sense of community within a Branch. For the Branches that do host these events regularly, it appears that the sense of community created assists in membership retention.



Communication

As with any organisation, Communication within Comhaltas is key to success. Regularly information from Comhaltas headquarters in Dublin, or indeed from the Provincial Council here in Britain is sent to 'the membership' through the Branches and in most cases, Branch members are never given the information.

We are often faced with situations where we need to get information out to our members, directly, and quickly (such as finding out at short notice that the venue for an event has had to be changed due to an emergency) and we need to be equipped to pass the relevant information on to our members.

Online Mailing List

There are many Data Protection issues with sending out messages to the wider membership where each member can see the contact addresses of everyone else who received the message. This is simply not legal and must not be done by any Branch. Instead, branch Secretaries and Public Relation Officers (PRO's) should use online Mailing List services such as Mailchimp which allow messages to be sent confidentially and securely.

Online Social Media Presence

One tool which has become more widely used in recent years is Social Media. By using Social Media, Branches can provide a very high percentage of their membership with information in a relatively short space of time, however, by using Social Media, any information posted online is in the public domain so a great deal of responsibility in terms of the content and language used is crucial. Most Branches of Comhaltas in Britain now have a Facebook page and many have a twitter account.



Branch Website

A Branch Website is a perfect location for you to publish all information on relevant events within the Branch, and to host some archival material you may have. Branch Websites are known to help with recruitment to Branches by making them more visible and accessible.

Branch Newsletters

Most of our branches produce a monthly newsletter which is sent out to the membership online via a service such as Mailchimp and is often printed out and handed to members who are not online at events. Many branches also send a copy of their newsletter to local press and public figures to keep them informed of any relevant information and upcoming events.

Engaging with Local Press

It is vital that we document events that take place and indeed to document our successes through recognition in Local Media by submitting reports and photographs. As well as helping to raise the Branch profile in the wider community, it also helps with Recruitment as it makes the branch more visible to potential new members.



Fundraising

There is a document available on the Provincial Website which outlines the process and many of the ways that branches can raise funds to facilitate specific projects. There are also many things that a branch can do in-house to raise more money to allow for the smoother running all year round. The following is a list of current fundraising techniques within our branches across Britain:

Tea & Tuck Shop

Several of our Branches are known to bring in several thousand pounds each year simply by having tea & Coffee, and a tuck shop selling crisps and juice at their weekly classes.

Hosting Specific Events

Many of our Branches use their events (see the list under the heading of 'Hosting Events') to raise funds. By doing so, you are also increasing Branch activities!

Additional Membership Fees

Some branches in Britain charge an additional membership fee which is in addition to Comhaltas membership. This may be taken on an annual, or quarterly basis and has been known to significantly increase branch funds.

Race Night

Several Branches in Britain hold an annual 'Race Night' which is a purely social and fundraising event designed to try and raise as much money for the Branch as possible. These events often attract many non-members who may be related to or be friends of Branch members and they attend for the social aspect.



Dinner Dance

As well as hosting Branch Ceili, some of our larger Branches also host an annual Dinner Ceili with the emphasis being on Fundraising. It is not unknown for these events to raise several thousand pounds. These events often appeal to the wider Irish community with local businesses sponsoring and attending the event.

Comhaltas Big Draw

In recent years, Comhaltas have held a raffle across its entire membership. Tickets for the draw are fairly expensive (in 2017 the draw was £. per ticket, however the first prize was €5,000) The draw is particularly attractive to Branches as they are entitled to keep a large percentage of the ticket cost (in 2017 this was £. per ticket)



What activities are happening in

Branch \ Activity		Hosts Weekly Classes	Host a Regular Session – Number is per year	Host a Regular Ceili – Number is per year	Host Regular Workshops – Number is per year	Host Branch Concerts – Number is per year	Host Exchange Projects with other Branches	Teach music in local Primary Schools	Have an Active Facebook Page/Group	Have an active Branch Website	Produce a Newsletter – Number of issues per year	Hold Specific Fundraising Events
Scottish Region												
Irish Minstrels		✓	✗	2	2	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	12	✓
Johnny Doherty		✓	4	4	1	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	4	✓
St. James the Great		✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
St. Patricks		✓	12	3	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	✓
Northern Region												
Ashton in Makerfield		✓	12	1	✗	1	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Bolton		✗	12	1	✗	1	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Leeds		✓	12	✗	1	1	✓	✗	✓	✓	2	✓
Liverpool		✓	✗	✗	5	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Middlesbrough		✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
St. Wilfrid's		✓	12	4	✗	2	✓	✓	✓	✗	6	✓
Tara O'Carolan		✓	4	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Tyneside		✓	12	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗

branches in Britain?

Midlands Region											
Amaingin the Gael	✓	12	✗	✗	1	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
Birmingham											
Cambridge	✓	4	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Coventry	✓	12	2	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Leamington Spa	✓	6	2	✗	✗	1	✗	✗	✗	✗	
Leicester	✓	12	4	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	4
Leagrave	✓	4	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
Nottingham	✓	10	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
London & Southern Region											
East London	✗	11	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗		✗	✗	✓
Hastings	✓	✓									✓
North London	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	
St. Albans	✓	4	✗	✗	2	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
West London	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	

*All Information correct at time of publication and was provided by branch secretaries directly

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