



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill: Drumbo Park Ltd

19 November 2020

that puts us at a huge competitive disadvantage with the many bars, restaurants and other venues in the greater Belfast area that we are trying to compete for custom with, and we feel, given the way things are going with the Bill, that this competitive disadvantage will actually get worse if those establishments are allowed to open until 2.00 am as proposed. We are not looking to remain open until 2.00 am, but we are asking that we are allowed the flexibility to open until 1.00 am on Fridays and Saturdays so that we can compete on as fair a level as possible. Without the flexibility that that would give us, we fear for the future of the stadium and the wider greyhound industry. Allowing us to open up until 1.00 am would be consistent with the entertainment licence that we have from the council.

We note that the Bill is proposing to equalise alcohol licences and entertainment licences, so that would help our case. For us to open on Friday and Saturday nights until 1.00 am, we propose that places of public entertainment and outdoor stadiums like ourselves be included in article 45 of the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. At present, article 45 allows certain licensed premises to open to 1.00 am 20 times a year, with the consent of local PSNI. Obviously, that consent mechanism allows the police to protect the local area for local residents and stuff like that. The proposal is to increase this to 85 times a year, but it would be sensible for it to be 104 times a year. That would allow us to cover for the Friday and Saturday night trading. Increasing the number of nights to 104, and including places of public entertainment and outdoor stadiums within article 45, would allow us to stay open and trade until 1.00 am on Friday and Saturday nights and compete fairly. Basically, that is the crux of our argument in relation to the Bill.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. Is that you finished with that part, John?

Mr Connor: Yes. It is indeed.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): John, you are very welcome. I was on the previous Committee when we had the previous owners of Drumbo in, and I remember how grossly unfair the licensing laws were on Drumbo. The Committee's will, and the will of many, would have been that a lot of this would have been changed to support Drumbo. I have been to Drumbo, albeit it was a little while ago. I know exactly where you are and that you are not in the middle of a high street or a town centre, so there are no antisocial behaviour issues. Everything can be under one roof, and I like the idea that you can go for dinner and entertainment and it is all under one roof. It has lots and lots of plus points. I absolutely get where you are coming from and the whole issue around entertainments and being given a fair footing and a fair chance to promote what you have. Is Drumbo now the only dog racing track in Northern Ireland?

Mr Connor: There is ourselves and the Brandywell. The Brandywell went under recent redevelopment by the Derry City and Strabane District Council. The facilities up there are basically just a track for racing. There are no amenities with regard to a stadium, food and beverage offering or anything like that. Really, we are the hub; we are the premier venue in Northern Ireland. The whole industry centres around us.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): There is a big following. That cannot go unnoticed; there is a big following in Northern Ireland for this sport. We have to do whatever we can to help sustain that business and help it grow. I certainly will, in any way that I can, try to fit your proposals in and bring them to the Department to see how your proposals can fit in with the Bill.

I will ask members if they have any other comments or questions. Kellie, I know you will have something.

Ms Armstrong: As always. John, is there anyone else in Northern Ireland in the same position as yourselves? Down Royal is just getting a stadium licence. Who else does this affect other than yourselves?

Mr Connor: I am unaware of who it affects. It only became evident to me having taken over the business a year or so ago. The previous owners tried to explain the issues and problems to me, but I was more to do with the greyhound side of it. Now that I am a part-owner of the business, I have a more holistic view of how it operates. I have listened to the bookings team having to explain to people coming for a night out that, at 11.00 pm, your evening is over and you have to go home. It just puts us at a massive disadvantage, and it is hard enough to get bookings. The amount of customers that we lose as a result of having to tell them that their night is cut short is the main reason why we are coming here and asking the Committee to look at an amendment.

Ms Armstrong: What is your current category of licence?

Mr Connor: Our current category of licence is a place of public entertainment.

Ms Armstrong: There are bound to be others.

Mr Connor: Sorry; a 5(1)(h), I think, is the actual licence that we have.

Ms Armstrong: OK. I was trying to find out what all the different licences are, and my eyes started to cross. OK, so it is a place of public entertainment. That is aligned with your entertainment licence, which runs on to 1.00 am, but you have to close the bar at 11.00 pm. That is the flip side of what it actually says in the legislation, which states that the entertainment stops with the bar licence. Your licence goes to 11.00 pm, but your entertainment can go on to 1.00 am.

Mr Connor: Yes. Even if we put a little bit of post-race music on, currently we have to stop at 11.00 pm. Essentially, for us in the real world, we are living with the COVID restrictions on a permanent basis, and that seems grossly unfair.

Ms Armstrong: Like the Chair, I have been to your place, probably more times than I would like to admit. Quite a few friends of mine have had birthday parties there. There is a family-friendly atmosphere. It counters what we are trying to do to balance out the licensing requirements to be fairer across the whole industry. To be honest, I am in support of you guys having the same options under article 45, as you mentioned.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): You really are put at a disadvantage. I was there on a Christmas work night out. The way that it is at the minute, you can only hold those at weekends. There is no other time at which you can have that type of function. It certainly is a real disadvantage. We need to explore that much further. Robin, do you want to come in?

Mr Newton: Yes. I just have a simple question.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Now, Robin, have you been there?

Mr Newton: No, Chair. I have to confess that I have not been there, and, to be honest, I have no intention of being there. I just wanted to clarify something with Mr Connor. This has nothing to do with my particular feelings on the matter, but can you confirm whether you are speaking on behalf of the greyhound industry or only on behalf of Drumbo Park?

Mr Connor: I think that I am speaking on behalf of the entire industry in Northern Ireland. The industry in the North is not funded in the same way as it is in GB or in the Republic of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, the industry received Government backing to the tune of, I think, €19.2 million this year. In the UK, the industry benefits from the bookmaker levy that helps to support it over there. We are sort of stuck in the middle. Really, it is the commercial operations of the stadium that help to maintain the industry in Northern Ireland. The stadium needs to thrive, and it needs everything possible to help the industry to grow and to keep the local guys here. There are 450 active owners currently in Northern Ireland. If Drumbo Park is not allowed to compete on a level playing field with the likes of Dundalk Stadium and Shelbourne Park in Dublin, those guys will be forced to travel very long distances or leave the industry. I think that it is imperative that Drumbo Park does well to help local owners and trainers and people who derive a livelihood from greyhound racing to prosper.

Mr Newton: Is there is a representative greyhound racing body or association of some sort?

Mr Connor: We are ruled and regulated by the Irish Coursing Club, so we run under its rules. It is based in Clonmel, County Tipperary. It is a historical thing going back to the Control of Greyhounds etc. Act (Northern Ireland) 1950. We are aligned with all its rules and regulations on welfare, and all our racing protocols are aligned with those of Greyhound Racing Ireland.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, John. I will not take too long. Like you, Chair, I was on the Social Development Committee a number of years back when the issue of the anomalies, irregularities or inconsistencies around the situation at Drumbo Park was brought to our attention. I was sympathetic

to the situation then, and I remain sympathetic now. I just wanted to let John know that. We should certainly consider that going forward.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. Thank you, Mark. Nobody else had indicated that they want to ask any further questions. John, thank you, and thank you for your paper evidence as well. It certainly will go towards our evidence-gathering for the Licensing and Registration of Clubs Bill. You have heard today that there is certainly support for you and what you represent. We need to highlight the fact again that everyone needs to be on a fair footing, and that certainly has not been the case for you. Thanks a lot, John, for being here rather early, which meant that you had to listen to everything else that the Committee was doing, and for giving your briefing today.

Mr Connor: Thank you very much. Thank you for your time.