



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill: Northern Ireland
Federation of Clubs

3 December 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradley (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Alex Easton
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Harry Beckinsale	Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs
Mr John Davidson	Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs
Mr Lawrence Shearer	Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I ask for Harry Beckinsale from the Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs (NIFC) to be brought into the spotlight, please. Harry, before you start, the information that we have is that it is only you, as secretary, who is giving the briefing today. The meeting is being recorded by Hansard, so I need you to introduce the people who are with you. Will they be asking questions and speaking to the Committee?

Mr Harry Beckinsale (Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs): Chair, I notified the Committee staff that my colleagues would be attending.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): It is not a problem, Harry. I just need the names of the other people for the record, and can you tell me whether they will be speaking?

Mr Beckinsale: Mr John Davidson, the chairman of the federation.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): You are very welcome as well, John.

Mr Beckinsale: Maura McKay, our solicitor.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Your solicitor is present. That is not normal, but OK. Sorry, can you repeat your solicitor's name?

Mr Beckinsale: It is Maura McKay of Shean Dickson Merrick.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. I see that Maura has come into the audience. That is OK. It is highly unusual for us not to have all the names before a Committee meeting. Harry, you are down to brief us, so I ask you to go ahead and brief the members.

Mr Beckinsale: Chair, I sent the information twice. To complete those here, one more important person is in attendance, and that is our accounting officer, Lawrence Shearer.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to address you today. Very importantly, I want to talk about the omissions from the Bill when it was debated at Second Stage, which we found strange in the light of what is happening. We were of the understanding from the previous Assembly that the 120 late licences were to be reduced to 104, but we notice in this legislation that the figure has not changed from 85. There is that issue and a number of other things. Our solicitor has researched the legislation, and she found several anomalies that she was not quite happy with. We were guided by her as our adviser. I will now hand over to our chairman, and he will highlight some of the issues before our solicitor engages.

Mr John Davidson (Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs): Good morning, Madam Chairperson. Am I right?

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Absolutely. You go ahead.

Mr Davidson: We are asking about areas that have not been considered in the review. I will bring to your attention exactly what and whom we represent. First, there are approximately 550 clubs, of which 95 are sports clubs. There are over 300,000 adult members and their families and friends. The sports that we finance throughout the Province are golf, rugby, hockey, cricket, bowls, GAA, football, tennis, sailing, yachting, snooker, darts, pool and ladies' football. Furthermore, we have academies. Virtually all sports now are accommodating academies for our young boys and girls. If you go at the weekends and on the summer nights, you will see thousands of young boys and girls pursuing different sports. All those academies have to be regulated, and all the coaches must be registered with the local council so as to prevent paedophiles and other people who have a dubious background working there. All the coaches have to be paid by the club. There are possibly up to 400 grounds Province-wide to cover all those sports. The cost of maintaining the grounds, and the pavilions and changing rooms that go with them, is vast.

Sport in Northern Ireland punches way above its weight, as you can see regularly on TV. The latest example of that is our ladies' football team possibly qualifying for the later stages of the Women's Euro 2022 tournament, for which we must all congratulate them.

The clubs have thousands of bar staff, waiter staff, door staff and cleaning staff, and thousands of volunteers are required to maintain our clubs and their sporting ethos Province-wide, at great cost. The running costs of a sports ground and pavilion, including electricity, are in the region of £13,000. Club insurance is £20,000. Waiters' wages are, again, a vast sum. Rates are in the region of £18,500. General repairs and the overall cost to run a club is massive. We are disappointed and shocked that that was not considered when the review was taking place. We were never consulted. We want all those points brought to your attention.

We hear and read a lot about sport tourism. Sport tourism would not exist in Northern Ireland if we did not have the sports clubs to supply all the talented people — boys and girls, men and women — to perform in different sporting leagues and who go on to represent their countries at international level, which we see regularly and of which we are all proud.

The Governments and councils do their best to have health policies. There is no better place in Northern Ireland for getting thousands and thousands of boys and girls, men and women to pursue their sports, and that is sports clubs' health policy.

That is my introduction, Madam Chairman.

Mr Beckinsale: Our solicitor is out of the country at the moment, and she has just confirmed to me that the signal is not sufficient for her to connect. I have her submission in front of me, however, and she has asked me to confirm that you have received it.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): We have received a submission, Harry.

Mr Beckinsale: Right.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I have it in front of me. I assume that that is where it has come from. If she sent it through, that is what we have. It talks about different accounting regulations, the hours for use of clubs by minors, and police rights of entry. It talks about various things. Is that what she is talking about, Harry?

Mr Beckinsale: That is right. What she is asking, Chair, is for the rationale behind the difference in the legislation applied to clubs and that applied to the rest of the hospitality industry. There does not seem to be a good reason for it, since we have moved forward substantially from the early years. That, and a number of other things, is what she is referring to. For instance, the submission states:

"The Licensing (NI) Order 1996 currently allows public houses, restaurants and hotels to open to 1.00am (midnight on Sundays) on 365 days per year. The current Bill under consideration will permit them to open even later (until 2.00am) on 104 days per year, and until 1.00 am in the remaining 261 days".

As has been particularly highlighted during the pandemic, because of their signing-in requirement, registered clubs are more able to track and trace. You are therefore left to wonder exactly why the legislation is so unbalanced. That is why she has asked for the rationale behind that, since we are in the 21st century now, and clubs are more able to self-regulate than the rest of the hospitality industry.

She moves on to look at PSNI rights of entry. We do not object in any way to the PSNI having right of entry, provided that it is always in the pursuance of crime. That applies to other facets of the hospitality industry and other business sectors, where the police cannot just walk in off the street for no reason and ask to speak to committee men, see books etc. We think that it is greatly unfair that it does not apply to registered clubs. The issue has raised its head recently during the pandemic. We do not wish to be seen to be criticising the PSNI, but there have been certain instances where an officer was able to go in and start to interpret the legislation. In their present form, of course, the regulations pertaining to clubs enable the PSNI to do that. There have been isolated instances where an officer has gone in and questioned what constituted a main meal, when, that morning, the club in question had phoned the council to confirm what did. When the police walked in, however, they did not agree with it.

There have been other instances where a substantial number of officers have visited a premises to tell members that they could not sit for a certain length of time after having a meal and that a certain amount had to be charged for a meal. Both of those things are completely erroneous. Those were probably isolated incidents, but legislation in place allows the PSNI to walk into club premises and do that. That is not the case for other sectors. That is where we are at with that.

The chair quite rightly underlined the importance of clubs to sport. We do not have the support structure here, however, because the population does not allow for it. The social aspect of a registered club therefore provides the finance to support the sport. Most clubs in Northern Ireland are affiliated to one sport or another. The clubs also bring people together, breaking down religious barriers. A prime example of that is my 11-year-old granddaughter. Her friend, who is also 11, is from Newry and plays Gaelic games. They are both playing for Linfield, are part of the Irish Football Association (IFA) advanced programme at Jordanstown and have been signed to the Arsenal academy. That all came about from youth football, which was financed by the registered club sector.

In 2000, the late Professor Saunders, when he was chair of the then Sports Council for Northern Ireland, confirmed from an independent Sports Council survey that registered clubs contributed £500,000 a day to sport in Northern Ireland. At the time, the sector contributed around £4 million a year to charitable and good causes and around £25 million to help underpin sport. Those statistics were taken from a 70% return and were provided to us by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). All those things add up to show the contribution that registered clubs make to the social fabric of Northern Ireland. Those things have to be taken into consideration.

Is our accountant on the line? He appears not to be. Are you there, Lawrence?

Mr Lawrence Shearer (Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs): I am here, yes.

Mr Beckinsale: Lawrence will make a contribution about the unfairness of the accounts regulations, which are greatly imbalanced, given the size of respective clubs.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Harry, just before he comes in, I have to confirm for the record that he is Lawrence Shearer, who is the organisation's accountant.

Mr Beckinsale: That is right, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Before I bring you in, Lawrence, I will just say that there are many things that do not fall under the scope of the Bill and are not what we are here to discuss as part of our evidence gathering. Last week, we had a session with the Department on the very issue of accounts. I do not know whether you managed to listen to that briefing from the Department. I cannot remember whether it was subordinate legislation that it was bringing through. It was something, anyway. The issues around accounting, especially for smaller clubs, had been highlighted to me, as had the amount of pressure that such issues put those clubs under, so I asked the Department a few weeks ago to take the issue away and come back to give us a briefing. The Department has assured me that the new regulations that will be coming in, which are nothing to do with this Bill at all, are there to support the smaller clubs. I will have that information from our briefing last week shared with you, if that is helpful.

I just wanted to say that before you start, Lawrence. Go ahead, if there are any comments you want to make.

Mr Shearer: Thank you, Chair. I was asked, as the Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs' accountant, to clarify the current situation. I welcome and look forward to any revisions that might take place.

Currently, NI clubs, regardless of size or complexity, are governed by an extremely rigid framework in the Registration of Clubs (Accounts) Regulations 1997, which, believe it or not, became operational some 23 years ago. All clubs' financial statements are subject to a statutory audit and must be presented in a strict pro forma, regardless of whether an income or expenditure category is relevant to the individual club. No distinction is allowed to be made, regardless of the size of the club's income and/or net assets. To promote much-needed revision of those regulations, I will give you an analogy. In the UK company legislation sector, a micro-entity company is a company with sales of £632,000 or less, while a small company is regarded as one that has sales of up to £10.2 million per annum, or a balance sheet total of £5 million.

The clubs fall into a regulated sector. A similar sector is that of NI charities. In section 65 of the Charities Act (NI) 2008, a charity is regarded as being small if its income falls below £500,000 and regarded as large if it falls between £500,000 and £1 million.

We are requesting that consideration be given to the regulations being updated and made fit for purpose and that some of the onerous red tape in the body of the regulations be removed. Committee people involved with the club, who are in most cases volunteers, are asked to comply with all those very onerous regulations. We ask that consideration be given to removing the need for a statutory audit for clubs of certain sizes. If a statutory audit is still required for bigger clubs, we ask that the regulations on paperwork etc be relaxed.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you for that, Lawrence. There is a wee bit of feedback coming through, but I do not know from which microphone feed.

Lawrence, I will get that information that we got last week in Committee and have it forwarded to you. If you find that it is not going to be helpful or does not go far enough, or whatever the case may be, will you contact the Committee directly on that issue?

Mr Shearer: Yes. Certainly.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you for that.

We will now go into a question-and-answer session. Let me start by saying that I absolutely get that clubs, especially sports clubs but clubs in general, are a vital part of many communities in Northern Ireland. I understand your reasoning when you say that clubs should be put on the same footing as bars when it comes to many of the issues in the Bill. I want to ask you about a particular issue, however. It is to do with minors on club premises and the dates around that. Can you give us a bit more explanation as to why you want a longer period for that?

Mr Beckinsale: Funnily enough, one of the first people to raise that with me was Roger Bell of Carrickfergus Cricket Club. I noticed, just last night, that he has been elected president of the Northern Cricket Union. He said to me that the period of months during which clubs are permitted to have extended hours is too short. He said that his club requires May to September, as opposed to June until the end of August. The entire spectrum of sports probably requires much longer than a couple of months to enable academies to train. With my local club, I know that two months is not sufficient time for clubs to run their academies for the young people from local schools who are engaging in cricket and so on. I am quite sure that other sports, such as GAA games and soccer, are similarly affected. Of course, that is added to by the pandemic. Extending the months would certainly be more desirable, and that same message will likely come from other sporting bodies. It is vital that the months be extended to facilitate the academies. It is widely recognised that sport is so important, and Northern Ireland punches well above its weight in all facets of sport. Perhaps you would like to add something to that, John.

Mr Davidson: I endorse what you have said. Around the coastline of Northern Ireland, you see the yacht and sailing clubs. When you go around, for example, the golf clubs, particularly in the summer months and at night-time, you see hundreds, if not thousands, of young boys and girls out pursuing their sport and getting coached to attain a high degree of perfection. Hopefully, they will represent the club and their particular sport, go on to achieve higher accolades and perhaps represent their country. There is therefore no doubt that the two or three months for which extended hours have been allocated, during what we look on as being the summer months, is a bit derisory. We think that the hours should probably be extended from April until September.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): John, thank you for that. I will move on to asking you something else. I understand your rationale, and extending the time period has been brought up before in the Committee.

On the issue of late nights, Harry mentioned earlier that he did not feel that the number of late nights is enough. I know that many clubs do a heck of a lot of fundraising work and hold regular events. Harry, I know that you mentioned it earlier, but what do you think that the number should be?

Mr Davidson: We are requesting three late bars a week. We requested 104 way back in 2000. That may have been relevant in 2000, but we are now in 2020. There is no doubt that whatever regulatory changes are made to licensing laws are going to be put in place for the next 15 or 20 years. Although we made the case in 2000 — in fact, this probably goes back as far as 1966 — we feel that in order to maintain the sporting base that we have iterated on the record here, and at length, having three late bars takes into consideration the charity fundraising that takes place in clubs. When you consider the late nights for the likes of snooker, darts, pool and indoor bowls — on winter nights, bowls takes place inside — we feel that an 11.00 pm closure is minimal. Clubs are getting into disputes over the present 11.00 pm closing regime. When we look at the what is being considered in the legislation, it is stark when it comes to what we are requesting. You could even say that it is a bit embarrassing when you compare what we are requesting with what is being considered for other sections of the hospitality trade. When you consider what it stands for, being something from which all communities benefit, I just cannot see the rationale behind why the Department has allocated not one minute or one hour to the club sector.

Mr Beckinsale: I can give you some evidence of that. In a former life as a musician, I spent the latter days of my long career in music playing in social clubs. I also have a heavy connection with the charity sector. This is unquestionable. I can confirm that Paul Sweeney, when he was the regional manager of Macmillan here, was able to confirm to me in an unsolicited comment that the majority of his target each year for Macmillan was raised through the network of registered clubs. He admitted that to me quite openly.

Not only that, but I played at several events that were run specifically to support various organisations, be it Fleming Fulton School, Mitchell House School or Marie Curie. All those charities benefited greatly, so much so that, each year, the federation was nominated at the NICVA awards. It got to the point at which we suggested that NICVA stop nominating us and afford the recognition to the sector members of our association. What I have said is unquestionable. The amount of money raised was confirmed in that survey in 2000. Although it may have been impacted on by the financial crisis of 2008 and the current pandemic, I am quite sure that the amount of money raised is still valuable and appreciable. That is one important reason behind the need for an extension to opening hours.

I emphasise that this is not a campaign to increase the availability of alcohol: far from it. There is much more attached to a registered club than that. It is not just a bar, because it provides much more. We recognise that bar managers or hotel owners will run their business commercially. That is exactly what they are there for. If I managed or owned a bar or a hotel, I would be doing exactly the same. As I said, there is much more attached to a registered club. It has been recognised since their inception that they are an extension of a man's home. Many of them were established in the days when homes were not of sufficient size to have a snooker table etc. They were attached to factories. They enabled the working man to have an activity outside of work. He did not necessarily have to go to a bar. Instead, he could go to his members' club.

I add that clubs are very wide in their range. There are all kinds of clubs, whether it be a Reform Club, a golf club or a working man's club. The legislation is all-embracing. We think that the disparity between the treatment of the sector against that of the overall hospitality sector is very unfair.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. Thanks, Harry. A couple of members want to ask a question.

Mr Newton: I welcome Harry, John and Lawrence to the meeting and thank them for coming along. May I spend a few minutes talking to Lawrence about the accounting regulations? I am conscious that we received just a few paragraphs about them from you, Lawrence. The Chair has already indicated that she will send information on to you. The line was not great while you were speaking. Will you outline exactly what you think would meet the requirements of the clubs and, at the same time, meet the taxation and accounting regulations requirements?

Mr Shearer: Yes. In a similar area to the club sector, which is a regulated sector, is the Northern Ireland charity sector. In the charity sector, there are descriptions and definitions of what is regarded as a small charity, a medium-sized charity and a large charity. Charities are subject to statutory audit, but not all charities are. The need for a statutory audit is directly dictated by the size of the charity's income in any one year. Specifically, a charity in Northern Ireland is regarded as being a large charity if it has income in excess of £500,000 a year. If it does, it is subject to a full statutory audit. That could be an outline framework in which to look at revising the Registration of Clubs (Accounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997. At present, the regulations make no distinction whatsoever in respect of the size and complexity of clubs.

Mr Newton: OK. So your thinking is that really it should be limited to the organisation's turnover, as opposed to its membership or any other factors?

Mr Shearer: Yes. In reality, the size of the club's membership usually correlates with the size of its turnover. Obviously, it is reasonable that the more members a club has, the higher its sales/turnover/income levels. So, yes, the size of the club's membership could be included.

Mr Newton: In your opinion, if this matter is not addressed in the new legislation, what will be the implications for clubs? Harry or John has already made reference to sailing clubs, football clubs and so on. What will be the implications for them?

Mr Shearer: The regulations are very prescriptive and onerous. Most clubs throughout Northern Ireland have committees that are led by volunteer members of the club. A lot of membership and volunteers are put off becoming people of responsibility within the club because of the onerousness of complying with the regulations. They have the perception and fear that, somehow, they could be held responsible if they were not compliant with the current regulations. The implications for a club would be that it might find it hard to appoint members to the committee to, on a voluntary basis, run the day-to-day organisation of the club and take responsibility for proper recognition and reporting of its income and expenditure.

Mr Newton: Lawrence, I presume that, as it stands, the committee member who signs the club's accounts is held legally responsible. Is that the case?

Mr Shearer: I will refer you to John, the chairman of the federation, but in my opinion, yes, they are legally responsible for the income and expenditure. They are responsible legally to the main body of the club's membership for the assets and liabilities that the club accrues. It is very onerous that the committee person, who is also a member, feels that they have a responsibility to the law and to the membership of the club in question.

Mr Newton: OK.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you. We have terrible feedback from someone's feed again there. You mentioned article 40. I am just trying to find it in the Bill.

Mr Newton: Chair, as you are looking for that, can we ask Lawrence to send in a more detailed submission than what we have?

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Yes, that would be helpful. I am trying to find where in the Bill it relates to article 40, but that is OK. Lawrence, if you could send that in, that would be good.

Mr Shearer: OK.

Mr Davidson: Chairperson, can I make a comment in respect of *[Inaudible]*—?

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Yes, go ahead; absolutely.

Mr Davidson: Away back in 2000, we solicited the good offices of Deloitte and Touche, one of the United Kingdom's major accountancy bodies. It put a paper together, which we submitted to the then Committee. I would like to read a couple of wee extracts from that:

"We have, since the publication of the first draft in 1996, closely followed the development and fashioning of the regulations and have, together with many professional firms, challenged many of the provisions on the basis of their unnecessarily onerous, impractical, costly and discriminatory nature — a conclusion which was wholly influenced by our extensive knowledge and experience of clubs and the club industry as a whole.

The regulations that came into force in September 1997 do not reflect many of the earlier suggestions and recommendations made by this firm, but the fact remains that no other companies or businesses in Northern Ireland are subject to such wide-ranging and far-reaching statutory constraints. The requirements for every voucher, receipt, report etc prepared by the club to carry the name and signature of the preparer is already imposing a significant burden, the benefit of which has yet to be revealed or identified by the Department."

This is the main part:

"This is certainly not a requirement of even the most rigorous control system for any regulated bodies such as banks and other financial institutions."

That is damning, and, in my opinion, it gives the true impression that the present accounts regulations are very draconian and very onerous in their make-up. Unless you had the 12 disciples on a committee, you would find it very hard to comply 100%.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, gentlemen. All I would say is be careful what you wish for. Having worked for 20 years in the community and voluntary sector and under the Charity Commission's requirements, I know that that does not always mean that you do not have to produce audited accounts. Often, your funders will require you to provide them, regardless of whether or not Companies House or the Charity Commission requires them. Every single director and trustee of a charity is individually legally responsible for that organisation, so the grass is not always greener on the charity side.

I want to go back to the legislation on liquor licensing. You talked about the amount of time that minors can be on licensed premises. John, I appreciate that you said that a lot of young people — I am going to play devil's advocate here, because we have to consider the legislation and any amendments to it — go along to different sports clubs for training and so on, but I do not see how that links in with licensed premises. They will certainly be on the grounds, but how are those young people then linked to the licensed premises? Surely they will be out on the sports grounds. If the officials come back to us and say, "But this has nothing to do with the sport itself", I know that you can turn round and say, "But snooker and darts are played within the building". However, I am just thinking about the licensed premises. Children should absolutely be able to train, so give us an answer that we can give to the officials to say why it is important that that be changed.

Mr Beckinsale: Thank you for inviting me to reply to that. Let us take, for instance, golf or football. I was engaged with Ballyclare Comrades at one time and developed the youth football team there. When there was a prize-giving, I had to hold it in my own home, because the legislation did not afford me the availability of the club rooms. That is how ridiculous it is. That is an extreme situation.

I will give you another example. There was a scrambling event for young people at Downpatrick Cricket Club that was sponsored by the PSNI. However, the night of the prize-giving, the local PSNI went in and told the club that it had to shut, because young people should not be on the premises, despite the event being sponsored by it. This is not about young people have accessing to alcohol. It is about young people being allowed to avail themselves of a sports club's premises in the company of an adult, a parent or a coach. It is not about their having access to bar facilities. It is about their having access to the changing rooms and being able to come into the club premises and wait until the adult or the coach is leaving.

Again, I can give you another example. One winter's night, I had to leave young people standing outside the club rooms in Ballyclare, unable to come in. I was to drive them home, but they could not come into the club rooms. I mean, how ridiculous is that? We are all sensible people. In my childhood, I was quite used to going across in the evening with my parents. You were able to see good practice where it was not all about people taking excess alcohol. We need to take the attachment to alcohol out of it. It is not about that. It is about sport. It is about a facility. We do not need to refer to alcohol all the time or put a sporting club and alcohol together. It is not about that. It is about the availability of sports club premises for young people to use — in, I will add, the company of an adult, a coach or a parent. That is what it is about.

Mr Davidson: I endorse completely what Harry said. Other events take place inside clubs — anniversaries, deaths, births, weddings and birthdays — forby trying to raise funds for the community at large. On a lot of those occasions, it is important that members and their families and children all be in attendance. It does not take place every night and day, but it is only right that sports clubs and clubs should have that facility.

Ms Armstrong: I was looking at the legislation, and obviously it has underage functions. A sports club can hold an underage function. The proposal is that under-18s can be at an underage function as long as all the taps and stuff are turned off so that they cannot access alcohol. However, as you just mentioned, John, private functions —. This melts my head completely. A private function can be a birthday party; you are absolutely right. However, the Bill states at clause 28 that a main meal has to be provided. I do not know what birthday party comprises the provision of a main meal. That could be a Tip Top and a packet of crisps. I just wonder why, for private functions, it constantly refers to meals. Is that realistic when it comes to some of the private functions that you have in your clubs?

Mr Davidson: I am not aware of that part of the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1996; I am genuinely not.

Ms Armstrong: No, this is about liquor licensing.

Mr Davidson: We do not have a liquor licence. We have a registration. Are you looking at the bars legislation? Sports clubs are allowed children on their site up to 9.00 pm. The restrictions that you mention do not exist in the Clubs Order.

Ms Armstrong: This is part of the new draft legislation.

Mr Davidson: No, the new draft legislation is just going to be enhanced, allowing children to be on sports premises in the company of adults, parents or coaches, as long as they are not standing or sitting at the bar. That is the clubs registration. As far as I am aware, it is going from 8.00 pm or 9.00 pm up to 10.00 pm. That is for sports clubs. We are aware that, for the first time ever, bars will not be allowed to have families and children on bar premises. However, that is liquor licensing. We do not come under liquor licensing. We come under the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

Ms Armstrong: Well, this is proposing young persons being prohibited from bars, and it mentions the provision of a meal. I just want to check with you whether, under that new proposed legislation — the private functions one — the meal element fits in with the type of private functions that you have in your clubs.

Mr Beckinsale: It depends on what is categorised as being a main meal. In days past, we have heard the ridiculous news about a Scotch egg. It is down to what one interprets as being a main meal. During the pandemic, the PSNI has said that a burger and chips do not constitute a main meal, yet, when one of our members phoned Belfast City Council that morning, the council confirmed to him that a burger and chips did constitute a main meal. It is just ridiculous. It is down to what one interprets as being a main meal.

What you have to recognise is that, whilst it may be desirable to have an event at a hotel, not everyone can afford that. Someone who is fortunate enough to be a member of a private members' club could have a family event there, because he is a member of that club, and find it much more affordable. It should not really be down to that. I find it all very strange that they are trying to control a sector that contributes so much to society, I really do.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Just —.

Mr Davidson: I am still at a loose end here. I still cannot see where you are coming from, because I do not read that in the Clubs Order, which I do not have to hand, though I wish I had. But the Clubs Order —.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): John, this is the new legislation that will be coming in for clubs and bars. We are looking at the legislation. This will be you as well; it will cover you as well. That is where Kellie is coming from.

Ms Armstrong: This is the new draft legislation that the solicitor had sent in the information about. Some of the clauses in that are not the same as the existing legislation; they propose new things. The other thing, to be honest — and you mentioned it before — is that young people are prohibited from bars. What they are saying is that, between 1 June and 31 August — and you have rightly said in the paper that you submitted to us that you would prefer that time period to be extended. I am just thinking that you guys cover an awful lot of sporting clubs across the whole area. When we are thinking about that, have you any idea of the percentage of sporting clubs which do not hold their awards ceremonies in the summertime — those that hold things in the autumn? Do you have an idea of the percentages?

Mr Davidson: Not really, probably —. To be honest with you, no.

Mr Beckinsale: I could not confirm that number, no. The sports are very big, as you will be aware.

The other thing that you have to realise with respect to clubs is that each member of a club is actually an owner of the club. If he wants to have an event in that club, of which he is already an owner, it is very hard to deny him. Why should he not be able to do that? Once again, we are focusing far too much on alcohol. This is not about alcohol. I can go to a club, but I drink very little. I am a social drinker, very occasionally. It is not about that. That agenda tends to give clubs and, in many cases, public houses a very bad press. We need to steer away from that and look at what the registered clubs sector is contributing to society, whether it be in support of —. I can give you an example. I have a paper sitting in front of me. One of your members, Robin Newton, will be aware of my connection to Fleming Fulton School, going back many years. I have an old paper here: the first edition of a newsletter I produced back in 1995, called 'The Early Years'. It is coincidentally on my desk because I was at another meeting. I can show you in there that an outdoor sports field was required for the disabled children to be able to train before they went off to the Olympics. I was very humbled by that sports ground being named after me, but that is by the by. It was financed by the network of clubs, who put up the finance to put that sports field there. The Duchess of Gloucester came over to open it, and recognition was afforded to the clubs sector which networked the finance to put it there.

Similarly, they needed a family room for parents to meet teachers. The Showbiz Charity Club, which ran all its charitable events in social clubs, provided the money to start that family room and get it completed. Likewise, down in Shimna valley in Newcastle, the Cancer Fund for Children required a new kitchen. The Showbiz Charity Club contributed, I believe, £20,000 to that. All that money was raised in the network of clubs. So we need to steer away from the emphasis on alcohol and look at the contribution that the clubs make to the social fabric of Northern Ireland.

Ms Armstrong: I absolutely agree with you there. John, you mentioned that you had not been consulted on this liquor licensing —.

Mr Davidson: What I have in front of me here says:

"Clause 28 Private functions

Clause 28 amends Article 32 of the Clubs Order (young persons prohibited from bars) to introduce new paragraph (3A) to correspond to those provisions set out in Clause 12 of the Bill and will allow young people to remain in the bar area of a registered club, provided certain conditions" —

so, to remain in the bar area while their parents or adult custodians are in the vicinity of them. It does say:

"Clause 29 Young people prohibited from bars

Clause 29 amends Article 32 of the Clubs Order (young persons prohibited from bars). It extends the last time that young people under 18 years of age may be in the bar area of sporting club premises from 10.00pm to 11.00pm during the summer months (1 June to 31 August)."

So, during the time that is allocated for a young person to be allowed onsite — we have not seen this yet — you are now saying that they have to be provided with a meal. For example, last night Glentoran were playing Larne in the County Antrim Shield. A lot of supporters went in cars or hired buses. Afterwards, they came back to their club to pick up their car or gather with their children in the clubhouse to talk of the night's events. That is happening throughout the province during the winter and summer months. I am not aware of any regulations that tell us that there has to be a meal supplied. This is completely new to us.

Ms Armstrong: This is new legislation that is being consulted on. It would be useful if your organisation added its voice to the consultation that the Committee is doing. We have heard from you today, but it might be worthwhile for you to look at the draft legislation that has been produced and to look at those types of private functions to see how that will work for you. The Committee has circulated that online, and it is available on the Assembly website, Facebook and social media channels. It would be useful for us, because we are scrutinising this in order to make sure that the new legislation is going to work for you and for everyone.

Mr Davidson: Yes, indeed.

Ms Armstrong: It would be good to get your feedback if you could respond to the consultation, please.

Mr Beckinsale: It is very valuable that you have highlighted that and brought it to our attention, but yet again, we have to steer away from alcohol. We have been to several meetings, and I referred earlier to a meeting at Downpatrick Cricket Club where the PSNI attended. The big concern at that time was the blue bag problem: kids with blue bags going into parks and causing antisocial behaviour. Surely, if there is concern about that, it is better to set a good example and for young people to witness alcohol being taken in a controlled environment, rather than looking upon it as a mystery that they pursue with a blue bag, hiding in a park somewhere. That has to be taken on board. As a parent and a grandparent, I would much prefer for my children to see good practice, rather than to try to pursue a mystery and to see what it is all about and learn bad practice.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you for that, Harry. That is the reason why we have you in today. We want to ask you those questions, so I am glad that Kellie brought that to your notice, because that will cause significant difficulties for clubs. That is why we have the consultation and why we need responses to the consultation around the difficulties, so it was good that that was highlighted.

Alex wanted to come in to ask a question. Kellie, were you finished?

Ms Armstrong: Yes.

Mr Easton: Thank you for your presentation. I will be very quick with my question. You mentioned the hours of use for clubs by minors and extending it from the summer months to April through October. What is the rationale for that period of extension?

Mr Davidson: I will come in on that. If you go around the coastline of Northern Ireland, you will see all the yacht, sailing and boat clubs. The young boys and girls are out in their hundreds, if not thousands, in the summer months. If you go to all the academies in the GAA, football, cricket and golf, etc, right down the line, again, you will see all these young boys and girls pursuing their sport under the auspices and guidance of coaches. When their sport and recreation finishes, it is natural and logical that they should be able to come into their club rooms, probably into the changing rooms to change out of their sports gear and then to be in the company of their parents or an adult coach. That is the way it has always been. I am surprised that there are now going to be changes that will make it more difficult for that to happen. I remember when Rory McIlroy was only a boy at primary school. You could see him bouncing a golf ball off his club, and that was taking place inside his club room at Hollywood. Similar things are happening all over the Province in sports clubs.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you for that. No other member has asked a question. Let me just say again to Lawrence that it would be helpful if you could send in some further information on the accounting issues. You said that you wanted a relaxation of article 40 of the Clubs Order to be included in the Bill. If you can just back that up, so that that issue is included in the Bill, that will help. That makes sense, and I can see the reasons behind it.

I thank Harry and John for coming in and briefing us. If there is anything further, you can write to us. This Bill is intended to amend the Clubs Order, so what is in the Bill is how you, as members of the federation and members of clubs, will govern how you run those clubs in the future. All that will be contained in the new Bill. Thank you very much for your time today. We appreciate it.

Mr Davidson: Thank you.

Mr Beckinsale: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you all.