



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill: Food NI

11 February 2021

and to have a whole experience with food and drink. We need a Bill that will afford sensible consumption and sales at local quality food-and-drink events, because Northern Ireland is building its reputation as a quality food-and-drink region.

Finally, Food NI works with producers and restaurants. We inspect restaurants using our Taste of Ulster scheme, and we visit about 200 of them a year. One of the criteria for being a Taste of Ulster member is using local drinks. To be honest, finding a range of local drinks is a rarity. That applies to soft drinks as much as alcoholic drinks. We find that, even if the chef knows about them and wants to stock them, they are frequently offered incentives such as free stock of replacement produce by multiples. I know that that is outside the Committee's remit, but I have been listening to the sessions, and I fear that a rivalry is emerging between the pubs and producers and taprooms. There is another player in this, and that is the economic driver of the multiples.

In conclusion, please can we change these laws so that they are fit for the current and the future environment? Thank you for the opportunity to present.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you, Michele. If you do not mind, I will start from where you left off. We have heard from a vast mixture of people in the industry from various parts of the industry, and there does appear to be a little bit of friction between the local producers and the large breweries. You said in your paper that they are anti-competitive. Do you think that there is somewhere in this Bill where we can look at that issue and put something in there just to make it more of an open competition and to give those small breweries the chance to be able to be part of that larger selling product?

Ms Shirlow: I think that there is. If they could have the opportunity, first, to raise awareness through sampling and tours on site, that would be a massive help. That would raise awareness. The one thing that I do not see much of is upselling, and that is partly about awareness and partly about accessibility. As I said, people in Northern Ireland food and drink are very inventive and very creative. They have produced not just alcohol but tonic waters and soft drinks to a high standard. You will find that there is resistance not from the pubs but from the suppliers to the pubs to letting those in. I would like to see a common ground that would bring people together, and I think that it would be good to avoid that rivalry. I do not think that all pubs will want to stock those products, because they are very expensive, premium products. However, the top end of the market should be encouraged at this stage to include them.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): What about our supermarkets? One of the supermarkets that I go to does a great, fantastic range of craft beers and craft ciders, but you will maybe find only two or three that are Northern Ireland-based. The rest are from the remainder of the United Kingdom, and it is really disappointing that the large multinational supermarkets are not supporting the local economy here. Is there anything on that front that we could fit in somewhere and look at?

Ms Shirlow: I agree with you. The problem with the pandemic is that the supermarkets are rationalising ranges, which will make it more difficult for local producers of ciders, beers and spirits to get in. We have seen a really interesting growth in home delivery and people going into box schemes that include local meat and vegetable produce. At the minute, they cannot include alcohol, and, if the producers had a producer's licence that allowed them to sell, you could quite sensibly piggyback on those schemes. I do think that, in retail, as you will have seen with Amazon and the likes, there will be more home deliveries and more signing up for a high-quality ready meal delivered to your house, prepared by a chef locally.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I have seen that. Many restaurants have diversified over the past months and provided meals in that way. This weekend is a perfect example as it is Valentine's weekend and many restaurants will be delivering meals to many homes. If it was in their restaurants, they would be doing wine pairing or whatever else with those meals, so why should they not be able to do the same when they deliver? I absolutely agree with that, and it brings up something else that we need to look at in the Bill, if we can.

I do not know whether you heard the witness session last week with Copeland Distillery and the issues that it had when it came to occasional licences. It said that there were major differences depending on which police district or even council area you were in as to whether you receive that occasional licence. I want to talk a little more about that. Additionally, any time there is a festival, even one held by the council in my area, the council has to ask the local pub if it can use its licence to run a festival or event in the local town or village. I would like to go into both those issues in a bit more detail, and

how we could make it easier in the Bill for such events to obtain occasional licences in a way that is uniform and across the board irrespective of whether you live in Belfast, Bangor or Banbridge.

Ms Shirlow: I concur that there is, unfortunately, that variation by district, which is why it might be sensible to have somebody looking after that who has a Northern Ireland-wide reach. Sorry for the pun, but we find a different appetite even in councils for high-quality food-and-drink events. Some councils are very bought into it; others not so much. The good thing about it is that it is rural, so you will find that quite a lot of rural councils will be more amenable to running a good, high-quality event.

I do not think that the occasional licence system is working, and the evidence that I gave you is a fair reflection of that. There should be a producer licence whereby everybody has the ability to market up to a certain level. Certainly, it would have to be controlled. They would have to undertake the training and to abide by the law, and that would have to be checked every year.

At the minute, they cannot even get to market, and we saw that at the Balmoral show. At Balmoral, we have a large food-and-drink pavilion. It is not about selling alcohol to just the people who walk through the door; it is about selling alcohol to buyers from GB and ROI who we bring in with Invest NI. Over the past five years, we would have had an opportunity to showcase a huge number of high-quality alcohol producers, but they could not participate because they cannot sell. They cannot even give anything away.

Maybe you can get an occasional licence to serve alcohol over the counter, but, for those events, it is a bit like going to a wine tasting. You taste a range of wines but, really, what you would like is a box of wine delivered to your door or, if you are an American tourist, you would like to go home with some cider for somebody or to have some ciders delivered to your home. At the minute, all that is prevented.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): The issue is that I could go to a wine tasting at my local wine merchant and then order, but I cannot go to a tasting in my local brewery, distillery or cidery. We are allowing that to happen in wine tasting, for example, which is bottles of wine from all parts of the world, yet we cannot do it for our home-grown talent and expertise, and it is very unfair. Absolutely.

I will leave my questions for the moment and will move to members.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Michele. I have heard you being spoken very highly of in certain circles, and, in particular, at my local Comber Farmers' Market and by Deborah Girvan down there. Thank you very much for your work in promoting local produce.

We all know that, across the world, Northern Ireland is associated with particular food brands. We have Bushmills, Tayto crisps and Fivemiletown cheese. There are so many of them. The one thing that is particular to all of those brands, as you highlighted, is localism and the unique points that come from that. It will come as no surprise that I would like to see the further development of our local producers.

I want to ask you about a really interesting point that you raised. I am thinking in particular of things like the Comber Farmers' Market. You talked about an occasional licence that could be applied for by an organisation, as opposed to having to use a pub or hotel's occasional licence — I am sure that they have plenty of demands on those occasional licences. I am keen to find out how, from your experience, that might work. At the moment, we know that someone can apply to use a pub or hotel's occasional licence, if the pub or hotel is happy with that. They can do that because the pub or hotel has a licence. How would that work in the future? It seems like quite an exciting concept that would open up opportunities for farmers' markets or food festivals that are run by local communities across Northern Ireland.

Ms Shirlow: To be honest, I am probably an expert on the food but not on the licensing.

Let us be very clear: it is about promoting local; it is not about bringing in a range of other alcohol. Let us take the Comber Farmers' Market, for example. The Comber early potato is a product of geographical indication. We have another product of geographical indication: the Armagh Bramley apple. We have a world-class cluster of cider producers in Northern Ireland, and our cider producers make cider from apple juice. That might seem a bit obvious but, in fact, a lot of cider is made from flavoured sugar.

I would love to see societies or organisations such as Comber Farmers' Market applying for a producer's licence that allowed them to showcase producers from Northern Ireland and the region. You would be proud to bring visitors to show such an event. My gauge of an event is whether I would be proud to bring a food writer to it. Could I lift the phone to somebody in England and say, "You must come here to see this fantastic produce."? At the minute, I am stymied. Yes, I can take, and have taken, food writers to Comber Farmers' Market, and they have been highly impressed. However, they just do not understand why they cannot buy a bottle of beer from Bullhouse or somewhere up the road. To them, it is just unfathomable. If we could work out something like that, it would be a real step forward. Localism and sustainability will keep on growing.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Michele. I get it completely. As a result of something as successful as the Comber Farmers' Market, other markets have appeared. The ability for local producers to sell their products means that all our bakers and bread makers can go to these markets, but our drink producers are limited in what they can do. I absolutely get that. From your organisation's point of view, does that limitation mean that our local produce has a better market outside Northern Ireland than here?

Ms Shirlow: Yes. We have taken 30 food and drink producers to Borough Market in London. They were able to apply for a producer's licence in GB that allowed them to sell gins, beers and ciders. That was right in the centre of Southwark in London, but I cannot do that in Comber, which is down the road. You have to build your home market. I spent a lot of time in economic development, and you really need your home market to be your stronghold and the foundation for export. It is unfair to ask producers to try to build just an export market. Part of the reason why I am so passionate about this food is that, when I worked with Invest NI, I got the chance to travel. When you travel to other cultures, they want to show you their food and drink. We did not do that 12 years ago. We now have something to be so proud of and to showcase to the world. As I said, we won an award for being the world's best food destination, and we could easily do it again.

Ms Armstrong: That is fantastic, Michele. I do not have any other questions for you. That was the main point that I wanted to tease out with you. Thank you so much, and thank you for your work locally with all our wonderful producers.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Michele, for coming in. That was a very good presentation. It was good to hear your perspective, and you gave a very good, broad overview. You have experience of events, and I was wondering about your organisation of the Year of Food and Drink 2016. How might your organisation of that year of events have differed had the licensing scheme that you propose been in place?

Ms Shirlow: It would have fully included the drinks element. We worked with Tourism NI, the then Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Invest NI, and we themed each month: for example, we had a month dedicated to dairy and a month dedicated to beef. However, in effect, we lost out because 10% to 15% of the producers were not able to participate fully. My paper says that I would love to see a "Year of Sustainable Food and Drink". Northern Ireland has the reputation for high-quality food and drink, but we need to get a reputation for sustainable food and drink. If we were to do it again, there would be an awful lot more experiences related to distilleries, cideries and breweries. Someone on the panel mentioned pairing foods with local drinks. I can remember some of the food writers who came to Northern Ireland being shocked that we were serving Prosecco. In fact, I think that I was resoundingly told off for doing so. I was told that, in future, if we were going to have a celebratory meal, we should pair each course with a local drink. In effect, the drink producers did not get a chance to participate fully.

Mr Durkan: Yes. That would be a nice meal. *[Laughter.]* You referred to potential friction emerging between local producers and pub owners — sorry, it was remiss of me to not declare an interest earlier in that respect. In my view, and, I am sure, the view of others, there are huge opportunities through collaboration and closer cooperation. Do you detect any appetite for that? We have heard from a couple of individual and independent bars that have established relationships and are reaping the dividends of doing so. Could we or an organisation like yours play a part in bringing those sectors together and helping them to realise the potential that is there through working together?

Ms Shirlow: When there is change, there will always be friction, and change is occurring in the market. I am very sympathetic to the challenges that the hospitality sector has faced. It has been horrendous. In our experience, not all pubs want to stock high-quality beers and ciders; maybe the top 25% have an interest. In our experience, you get only so far with that. You get some collaboration

going, and then something happens: for example, a supplier comes in and says, "If you take that product out, we will help you with this one". That happens with soft drinks as well, not just alcohol. For instance, we had done a lot of work with a soft-drink company and had some local hoteliers supporting it and putting its product on their tables and in their chillers. Then, a multinational came in and said, "I will give you an equivalent product free of charge". We have also had the experience of a large multinational that is sponsoring an event saying to us, "You cannot have any local produce for sale at the event". It seems completely ridiculous to have a multinational saying that a very small cider company from Armagh cannot sell its products. In many ways, the products are not even comparable.

I have to laugh: earlier, I was listening to the descriptions of the beer festival. I remember, at the beer festival in Belfast, watching the long row of bearded, middle-aged men in Moses sandals queueing up to buy beer. Sorry, Mark.

Mr Durkan: I am not wearing sandals. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Shirlow: You are not wearing sandals.

Someone said that the festival would be like a library. That is what they wanted to do, and that is what they were doing. They wanted to sample weird concoctions: beers made with beetroot, coffee grounds and all sorts of stuff.

Mr Durkan: Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder.

Ms Shirlow: Absolutely. They should be allowed to do it. I would love to try to work with companies. If we were coming up to another yearly event, I would certainly love to go to the big companies and say, "Look, let us see whether there is a way in which we can do this together", but legislation needs to change as well.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Michele. Thanks a million.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you, Mark. Karen is waiting to come in. I give members their final warning: if you want to ask a question, let me know.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Michele. It was really interesting listening to you. I enjoyed that description. Unfortunately, we are edging our way into the middle-aged category, even though we do not want to think about it.

As I say, it was really interesting to hear common-sense suggestions and solutions for local produce. It has opened my eyes. I was not aware of all that previously. The Chair touched on a really good point about on-site consumption. The only question that I want to ask, and you may have answered it already, is about the different views among local brewers who have taprooms. Would on-site consumption and sales be about selling only their own products, or should they be allowed to include other products as well?

Ms Shirlow: They should be allowed to sell their own products. I do not think that they would even have the motivation to sell other products. I can see a situation where they might pair with another brewery once or twice a year for an event. It is a major drawback for them not to be able to sell their own products. As I said, I just do not think that they would have the motivation to sell other alcoholic products. They have pride and belief in their product, and they want to tell you the story about why they have invested their time, where they get their ingredients from and why their beer is different. It is much more of a tasting experience. I am sure that there are ways in which legislation could remove that parameter, but I do not think that they would have the motivation.

Ms Mullan: Thank you for that, Michele.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Nobody has indicated that they want to ask any further questions. Michele, a very big thank you for being part of our evidence gathering on the Bill. You have raised some really good issues. We certainly want to try our very best to support the members whom you represent as we go forward with the Bill. If there is anything else that you want to say in finishing, feel free. If not, we will say cheerio.

Ms Shirlow: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I really appreciate it. I am happy to help at any time. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thanks, Michele. Bye-bye.

Ms Shirlow: Bye-bye.