



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill: Gaelic Athletic Association

4 March 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Communities

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: Gaelic Athletic Association

4 March 2021

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
Ms Karen Mullan
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Diarmaid Marsden	Gaelic Athletic Association
Mr Brian McAvoy	Gaelic Athletic Association
Mr Stephen McGeehan	Gaelic Athletic Association

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I welcome Brian McAvoy, Diarmaid Marsden and Stephen McGeehan. Brian, I invite you to make some opening remarks, for which you have up to 10 minutes, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Mr Brian McAvoy (Gaelic Athletic Association): I hope that you can hear me. There seems to be a bit of buffering at the bottom of the screen, so I do not know whether you can see me.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): We cannot see you but we can certainly hear you.

Mr McAvoy: I will proceed on that basis.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): We have glitches every week in the Committee, so this is no shock to us at all.

Mr McAvoy: Thank you, Chairperson, and the Committee for Communities, for providing Ulster GAA with the opportunity to present oral evidence to you on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill as it progresses through the Assembly. I am chief executive officer and provincial secretary of Ulster GAA. I am joined this morning by senior staff members Diarmaid Marsden and Stephen McGeehan.

The GAA is the world's largest amateur sporting, community and cultural organisation. The Ulster Council of the GAA is the provincial council and governing body of the GAA in Ulster. It covers two political jurisdictions, and we oversee the work of nine county committees across those political

jurisdictions, 373 clubs and GAA activity in more than 1,500 schools and colleges. We have some quarter of a million volunteer members, who are actively involved in the GAA at all levels in Ulster.

In the North, we have 261 GAA clubs, of which 80 have a licence to sell alcohol and are registered as a social club. Many of those clubs are also registered with the NI Federation of Clubs, which you heard from a number of weeks ago. It is in those environments that GAA members can enjoy licensed premises responsibly as they discuss recent games and activities. Many of our clubs show major games on televisions and large screens, and that provides an opportunity for members to watch those games in a social setting. We are a community organisation, and our GAA clubs are at the heart of those communities. Having a social club can provide a valuable outlet, particularly to many of our older members; it is a benefit for clubs organising fundraising events; and it can also be a method to generate income through bar sales and various entertainment initiatives. Some of our clubs provide employment opportunities, as they are operated by full-time or part-time bar staff, while others are looked after by volunteer members.

The GAA is acutely aware of its responsibilities around responsible alcohol consumption, and we are aware of the dangers of alcohol addiction and dependency. We are very proactive in addressing the health and well-being of our members. A formal health and well-being structure is in place at national level, provincial level and county level, and each of those units has county health and well-being committees in place. At grassroots club level, there is a Healthy Club programme. Each club is required to have a Healthy Club officer, and the remit of that person is the promotion of key health messages to its members. As well as the health and well-being structures in place, we offer educational advice to youth and adult members and players. Some clubs also use the services of external agencies and statutory bodies to deliver key messages on alcohol and substance abuse to various groups, and all clubs are asked to adopt and adhere to a GAA tobacco, alcohol and drugs policy.

We also place great emphasis on safeguarding children, and we have in place a 'Code of Behaviour: Underage', which outlines best practice in dealing with underage members. That includes the protection of our children not only in all areas of a GAA club and its facilities but beyond that: to and from matches and that sort of thing.

Although the majority of our affiliated clubs do not have a social club — as I said, we have 80 in total across the Province — among those that do, there is general agreement with the proposals in the Bill. GAA clubs want to do things correctly, and the overall feeling is that the measures in the Bill will support their efforts to do just that. Although not all of the measures proposed in the Bill are relevant to our social clubs, many of them are. We would like to highlight a small number of proposals that, in a survey of our clubs, have been broadly welcomed. Those include the authorisation for a sporting club to extend the area of its premises registered to supply alcohol for the purpose of holding a function on occasion, up to six times a year; the increase in the number of late-night openings to two or three nights a week — we probably favour the former; the easing of the current advertising restrictions on clubs; underage functions to be permitted to take place in specified areas of club premises; young people to be permitted to remain on licensed premises at private functions, provided that certain conditions are met; underage prize-giving to be permitted on club premises to allow a juvenile to attend three — it is currently one — of those a year; and young people under 18 to be permitted in the bar area of a sporting club until 11.00 pm during specified months. We feel that that would be particularly beneficial between May and September, which is when the GAA club season is in full swing, and there are games in the evening, particularly on Fridays and Saturdays.

Those are our main observations on the Bill. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to discuss the issues.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Brian, thank you very much for that. I have a few questions. I am interested in your alcohol, drugs and tobacco policy. In one of the Committee's earlier briefing sessions, Sinéad mentioned advertising in GAA grounds. Will you go into a wee bit more detail and give us more information on that?

Mr McAvoy: Absolutely, Chair. I will broaden it out. As I said in the presentation, the GAA has a very responsible approach to advertising, not only at grounds but on playing gear. For example, we do not allow an alcohol company, public house or off-licence to advertise on an underage jersey. We do not allow any alcohol sponsorship for underage teams. We have been phasing out alcohol advertising in grounds over the last number of years. Yes, you will see the advertising of a local pub and that sort of thing. However, as an organisation, we do not promote that by actively seeking the sponsorship of grounds by alcohol companies. One very good example is our national competitions. You will recall

that a well-known drinks company, Guinness, was the title sponsor of the All-Ireland Hurling Championship from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. Between 2005 and 2013, it was part of a tripartite multi-sponsor model. From 2013, Guinness has not been part of any sponsorship. Nationally, the GAA does not have any drinks company sponsoring any of its competitions.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you for answering that, Brian. You should be commended for your work on that. In several witness sessions, we have heard from those on the public health side about advertising. Advertising does not fall within this Bill, but it is good that such a large sporting organisation across Ireland is taking the issue very seriously. That is encouraging. You mentioned underage teams. Do some over-18 teams still have alcohol advertising on their jerseys? Are you looking to phase that out as well?

Mr McAvoy: You might see a local bar or restaurant but that has been virtually phased out. We do not have it. It is not common. I am not aware of any county or club that currently has an alcohol company sponsor on its jersey. We no longer actively seek that.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): That is good. Well done.

What impact would the relaxation of advertising restrictions in clause 31 have on your clubs?

Mr McAvoy: Diarmaid and Stephen might want to come in on the back of this. Our specific rationale for welcoming this proposed relaxation relates to our community-based ethos. The vast majority of the functions in GAA social clubs, whether they are table quizzes, fashion shows or whatever, are for a charitable purpose. A relaxation of the current restrictions, which do not allow those to be advertised, would be extremely beneficial to the charitable functions that the GAA community up and down the country supports. That is our primary motivation in welcoming the relaxation proposed in the Bill. Diarmaid, do you want to come in on this?

Mr Diarmaid Marsden (Gaelic Athletic Association): I just want to agree with some of what Brian said. It is really about maximising any event that a club may run, utilising their club premises to do so. Some events are for club fundraising, some are purely for a charitable purpose and some are a mix of the two. It is about getting the most exposure for those. A relaxation of that restriction would be welcome in that regard.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you for those answers, Brian and Diarmaid.

Mr Durkan: Thanks to Brian, Diarmaid and Stephen for the presentation. I jotted down a couple of questions before you started, lads, but you answered them as you went along. The Chair came in on advertising, which I have a particular interest in.

I commend you on your presentation and your organisation's promotion of healthy lifestyles. I am particularly interested in the practice of each club. It filters down from the centre, and, ultimately, each club has a Healthy Club officer. Will you outline how that works in practical terms and how those officers engage with club members? I do not expect every club to be doing that to the same standard. Is there best practice that you can point clubs towards?

Mr McAvoy: This is Diarmaid's specialist area. Do you want to come in first, Diarmaid? I will come back if anything needs to be added.

Mr Marsden: Thanks for the question. Our structures enable us to get really good messages out to a massive number of members and young people through our national health and well-being committee, our provincial health and well-being committee, our nine county committees and, then, at a local level. The most important thing is that, as you said, it is now a requirement for each club to have a Healthy Club officer. Each club has its own remit to promote good health messages in whatever way it sees fit and with whatever resources it has at its disposal. The guidance comes from those structures. I could give examples of clubs that bring in external agencies and secure funding to deliver those messages to a group of young people. I have seen evidence, particularly in these times when we cannot meet up, of Zoom calls to young people to talk about gambling, alcohol and drug awareness, and other things that are so important. External agencies and statutory bodies recognise the reach that we have to do that. Our Healthy Club officers' remit covers not just young people but the entire membership. I have seen examples of older people being brought in and events being run for them during the week to keep them engaged and to address social isolation.

The overall health and well-being of our membership is so important. Sporting performance and alcohol definitely do not mix. I know that the young age group get that information in school, but we do our best, at club level and for elite players at county level, to say that alcohol or drugs and sport just do not mix. We also try to steer away from using alcohol when celebrating a victory. We are not permitted to have alcohol in cups or anything like that any more. We take it very seriously. I reiterate the point that organisations see the reach that we have to get that message out right across the board and on a large scale to boys and girls and young men and young women. For example, although we have not done this in the last while, we had an initiative for young people who were moving to university. The Drink, Drugs and Sausage Rolls programme was an initiative aimed at freshers who were leaving home for the first time. It provided awareness of how to look after themselves nutritionally and the dangers of drug and alcohol dependency or going mad on alcohol when they sever ties with the parental home. We take these things seriously and try to promote them in as broad a range of ways as possible.

Mr Durkan: That will have become a lot more challenging — this will not be exclusive to the GAA — over the past year. Given that you do not have the same structure of young people reporting to training a couple of times a week, it is more difficult to keep track of and keep a lid on this type of activity. You will have more experience of this than I do, but it is particularly difficult when young ones start to hit 16, 17 and 18. Unless they are in a reasonably successful team, they tend to drift. I do not know whether you have the formula yet — you could bottle such a formula — for keeping that interest, because, as you say, participation in sport, be it Gaelic football, hurling, camogie, soccer, rugby or cricket, is not really conducive to drinking. It is about trying to keep the young ones involved, and that is the tricky bit.

I have one other point. I do not think that you touched on this. You will have seen that the Bill would enable the Department to vary permitted hours for an event that it deems a "major event". We have taken evidence on how major events should be defined. I did not really want to go down the Casement route today, but, sadly, it seems that we are still a wee bit away from having major events at Casement, and, hopefully, we can get there as soon as possible. Do you guys have any views on how a major event should be designated with regard to your sports?

Mr McAvoy: Thanks for the question, Mark. The 2016 legislation addressed that to some extent. Stephen, given your work on Casement, you are probably best placed to go into the minutiae of major events. Are you happy to come in on that?

Mr Stephen McGeehan (Gaelic Athletic Association): I am happy to do so, Brian. It is a good question from Mark. Brian referred to the Justice Act from some time ago, and that was an era when we and our colleagues in the IFA and Ulster Rugby were setting out — in our case, for the first time; in their case, thankfully, for the only time — plans to develop major regional facilities for the Windsor Park development and Kingspan/Ravenhill. The availability of alcohol and the environment at major sporting events have always been ancillary to what we do. We have seen that work very successfully at Ravenhill and Windsor, and we are hopeful that, not too far into the future, these arrangements can apply at a new Casement Park.

From an events point of view, the Irish Open was hosted in Portrush, and Belfast hosted the MTV music awards, and there is a reference in the draft Bill to major events. It is very encouraging that the Department is taking a proactive attitude to identifying that major sporting events and other events are not just about what happens on the green, on the pitch or in the arena; they stretch much further than that. Colleagues and members of the Committee may remember when the GAA was proactively involved in the Irish Rugby bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup, and, in recent days, we have heard about the joint bids from the Governments and the home country football associations for the FIFA World Cup in 2030. Of course, those events do not happen just in the stadia. They happen in city centres and towns, which become very much part of them. We saw it with the Tall Ships. These are major events. We want to attract events of that size and significance to Northern Ireland. I note from your document that the Department proposes the Scottish model, which makes a determination on the basis of the national significance of the event. The GAA would support a responsible approach in that fashion, Mark.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Stephen. That is grand. *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Is that you finished, Mark?

Mr Durkan: Sorry, Chair. *[Inaudible]* a wee bit. That is fine. Thank you, lads.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Brian, Diarmaid and Stephen. The Chair has already mentioned advertising restrictions, as has Mark, so I will not mention those.

Thank you very much for the work that the whole GAA has done during COVID. I live in Ballygalget, and, as you can appreciate, it is a very tight-knit community. Were it not for the phone calls to my dad to talk about his hurling days, I would have had to put up with him, so thank you very much.

I want to ask you about the last comment in the document that you provided to us.

"Young people under 18 to be permitted in bar area of sporting club premises until 11pm during specified months."

I had reservations about this, and I brought it up a few times in different witness sessions. As you know, the season lasts for much longer than the summer months. This applies not just to GAA clubs but across many of the clubs and different sporting networks that have bars in their premises. There will be awards nights and times when young people are deliberately in premises, perhaps with older members of the community. We have Christmas time and different events like that that come up.

You say that you would like young people to be on premises up to 11.00 pm to coincide with the main GAA club playing season. Many of your premises are embedded in communities, as certainly is the case with Ballygalget, Ballycran and Portaferry in my area. The draft legislation includes a proposal to allow, once a year, people to be in a bar for a certain time outside whatever the defined period is. Is that enough to be workable to maintain that community connection? It is not just you, of course; it could be rugby, football, golf or anything at all. Are we being too restrictive? Do you think that the current proposal is too restrictive or is it enough?

Mr McAvoy: Thanks, Kellie. That is a very good question. We thought about this, and we surveyed our clubs. The key in this is that, being a family organisation, families go to clubs together. The reason why we have highlighted the summer months is that there are games on Friday, Saturday or Sunday evening, and people attend as a family. Families will not come to watch a training session. We felt that an extension was appropriate because families will be at games, and parents may want to go in for a drink after the match. Those games probably will not finish until 9.15 pm or 9.30 pm, particularly during the months of May and June, so we welcome the extension to 11.00 pm. Our primary focus is on the family being there for a game, rather than nothing happening and bringing them there on a different night or for a particular occasion. That is why we focused on the summer months.

Ms Armstrong: What about the award ceremonies that happen outside that period? Locally, to keep young people interested and engaged throughout the whole year, there may well be other events, not necessarily events for youngsters at primary school that finish as late as 11.00 pm but events for young ones that allow them to be there until 9.30 pm or 10.00 pm. What are your thoughts on that? Should we keep the proposal as it is or look for more times during the year when that could be applied for?

Mr McAvoy: We welcome the opportunity for juveniles to be allowed to be there on three occasions in a year. Coming from a rural club like Ballygalget, you will know that a young person could be playing on the under-13 team and the under-15 team. Of course, at juvenile-specific functions, the bar would not be open. Let us be very clear about that. If there is a different function, an award night or a club dinner, there may be occasion for a juvenile to be there. It would not be common, to be honest. At most functions, juveniles do not tend to be present. There are occasions when they are, but they might be covered under some of the other bits of the legislation, such as late opening or whatever. Our key point is that, where a bar is open on any occasion, any juvenile on the premises must be accompanied by an adult and properly supervised at all times. That is our overriding concern. Moreover, the bar should not be open in any part of the premises where a juvenile event is going on. Absolutely not.

Ms Armstrong: Grand. The main issue at this stage, then, is that the summer months should be from the start of May to the end of September. You are saying that that would help, because, at the minute, it is too restrictive.

Mr McAvoy: Yes. The reason is that it coincides with evening games. Not every club has floodlights. You are not going to have evening games all year round, but games are played in the evenings during the summer months. That is why we put forward those months. It is restrictive at the minute, yes.

Ms Armstrong: Advertising has already been dealt with, and that was my main issue. I know, from my local experience, that the club house is more than just a bar. It is where you can access toilets and, obviously, the changing rooms. Children are about it, and they are used to meeting up with the community there. It is very much a community space, and alcohol is not the main priority there.

Mr McAvoy: In fairness to you, Ballygalget is one club in a rural area that you could point to as an example. The bar, as you say, is well run. The new hub that it opened a year or two ago is excellent. It is a model GAA club in that respect.

Ms Armstrong: Ah, do not talk to me about it. Every time I go past it, I think that I should be on the walking track, because it is floodlit, and that makes me think, "Kellie, get out on it". Thank you very much, folks. I am sure that I will speak to you at the sports forum soon. That is very useful. Thank you.

Mr McAvoy: Thanks, Kellie.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): No other members have raised their hand to ask any further questions. Thank you, Brian, Diarmaid and Stephen, for taking the time today to brief the Committee and for letting us know what you as an organisation are doing when it comes to alcohol and looking after our young people. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Mr McAvoy: Thank you very much.