



Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements
(Amendment) Bill: Irish Football Association

7 December 2021

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 Stephen Dunne
Mr Mark Durkan
Ms Ciara Ferguson
Mr Paul Frew
Ms Aine Murphy
Miss Aisling Reilly

Witnesses:

Mr Sean Murphy	Irish Football Association
Mr Patrick Nelson	Irish Football Association

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong): Good morning to Patrick Neeson and Sean Murphy from the Irish Football Association, who are appearing via StarLeaf. I can give you five to 10 minutes for opening remarks, and then we will go on to questions. Thank you.

Mr Patrick Nelson (Irish Football Association): Thank you, Chair. I will start our remarks on behalf of the IFA. I will make a small point of clarification: it is Patrick Nelson, not Neeson. I am not related to the famous Ballymena actor, although sometimes it would be good if I were.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong): Apologies, Patrick.

Mr Nelson: Chair, you have put us under pressure by saying what a good presentation that was from our friends in the GAA in the previous session, so I know that Brian will be basking in that glory. We will do what we can from our perspective.

By way of introduction, I am chief executive of the Irish Football Association, and Sean is chief operating officer. We have both been around for a while: Sean for three and a half years, and I have been here for 12 and a half years now. The Irish FA is the governing body for football in Northern Ireland. Our mission is to foster and develop football for everyone across the country, and our vision, which is hopefully more exciting, is to be a world-class, progressive organisation that inspires every child to be part of the Northern Ireland football family and to wear their green shirt with pride.

Financially, one of our objectives is to raise as many funds as we can through the assets and rights that we hold or promote, and we budget to spend that money each year to develop football in myriad

ways throughout Northern Ireland on the international stage and domestically at the grassroots as well. Probably like the GAA, our member clubs are, in effect, our shareholders, so we do not have any dividends to pay out to anybody, and we reinvest all the money that we raise. We have a charity arm, the Irish FA Foundation, which is a really significant provider of education, health and social inclusion work in Northern Ireland. I do not know if you saw it, but, last week, in conjunction with UEFA, we launched our social return on investment numbers, which indicate that, when you add up all the economic, social and health benefits of all football participation in Northern Ireland, the value of those benefits to our country is £470 million a year. I know that we are not here to talk about that today, Chair, but I think that we should come back and do so, because it is a very good story about the benefits of sport and football in particular. That is maybe for another day.

I will give you a quick overview of our work in relation to gambling. We do not currently have a gambling partner as an association. We have declined recent overtures from such companies. We are not actively looking to focus on that at this point. We have, however, sold advertising minutes on our LED boards around the grounds at senior men's games to betting companies across Europe. Often, when we sell LED-board pitch minutes, we are not really targeting the local populace; we are targeting the people who live in Italy, Sweden, Lithuania or wherever the away team is from. We have sold some LED-board pitch minutes to betting companies.

As Diarmaid said in relation to the GAA, we work with GamCare, which is, we think, the UK's leading provider of advice for those who have been harmed by gambling. It has provided awareness training to our staff, and we have offered free training to our clubs as well. We have extended the gambling module of training to projects like the Stay Onside programme and the Connect programme, which are some of the major outreach projects that we run in our foundation. We also have a bespoke mental health programme, which we call Ahead of the Game. It is offered to all grassroots clubs and includes a specific section on gambling. That is led by our former Northern Ireland international footballer, Keith Gillespie, who, of course, has suffered at times in the past in this area. He is a very good person to speak up on that issue.

I will cover a couple of key points from our submission, and then I will hand back to the Committee. A bit like Brian said about the GAA, we are not qualified to give views on everything in the Bill. The GAA touched on clause 9, "Rules for societies' lotteries". We would welcome the removal of the £1 limit on ballots and the other restrictions as a real boost for clubs that need to raise funds post pandemic. A lot of opportunities for club funding have fallen away since the pandemic, and many businesses cannot afford to support clubs in the way that they would have done in the past. Ballots are important sources of potential funding, particularly for small clubs.

Secondly, we very much welcome the recognition of cheating as a criminal offence. We do a lot of work with our integrity team to monitor betting patterns on games in Northern Ireland. We also work with UEFA, which has a very strong integrity team, to identify difficult betting patterns and to take action when we see data in that area. We think that it is important that cheating be introduced as a criminal offence in the Bill.

In particular, we very much welcome the use of the potential levy in order to directly fund projects that are related to gambling addiction. Of course, we very much support the education programmes that would be funded by a levy, but we would recommend that consideration also be given to funding activity-related sports projects through the levy, such as, potentially, coaching courses, five-a-side or fun football opportunities. We think that those are great diversionary tactics around football.

In summary, we welcome the ability for clubs to increase their fundraising, particularly as our industry traverses out of COVID, just like other industries. We welcome the recognition of cheating as a criminal offence. We believe that the levy is important but could be better used by being funnelled towards facilities and activities as well as education. We may not have put this in our submission, but we support the view that was postulated by Brian McAvoy from the GAA that there should be a specific regulator for gambling to enforce the law in Northern Ireland, rather than piling more pressure on the PSNI.

That is our opening statement. I am happy to hand back to you, Chair, to see whether there are any questions for Sean or me.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong): Thank you very much, Patrick. That was another excellent presentation. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Frew: You have to say that, Chair.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong): I have to say that. Patrick, you mentioned that your submission states that you welcome the use of the levy to fund projects directly that are related to gambling addiction, but the submission also states that funding should be extended to other sports and physical activity. Do you have any ideas about what that might entail, or what the levy could do? Do you think that the levy should be statutory?

Mr Nelson: It would be important to make the levy statutory if at all possible. Sean will, perhaps, add a little bit to that. One of the projects that we currently carry out in our foundation, Stay Onside, aims to keep people out of the criminal justice system or, when they are in the criminal justice system, aims to show them ways out of it. Sometimes, gambling heads people in that direction. Our Connect programme brings people together from across communities in individual locales in Northern Ireland. In particular, we have done a lot of work with that programme in south Belfast.

Through our Ahead of the Game mental health programme, we have identified people with gambling issues. Whether it is Connect, Ahead of the Game or Stay Onside, with those programmes, it is often the physical activity that really gets people excited about being part of the projects. You can give them a branded T-shirt, you can bring them together for conversations and shared learning, but, quite often, it is the physical activity, with a football on a five-a-side pitch that gets people to break down the issues that they have had. We recommend that, if there can be a levy in this area, some of it be funnelled towards physical activity rather than classroom education.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong): Thank you very much. I will bring in other members at this stage.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Patrick, for your presentation. I concur with you on the £470 million; football having that value is positive. I welcome your recent announcement on the ticket price review. Along with colleagues, I spoke to you about that some months ago. It is good news.

Thank you for your submission. It is very interesting and has a lot of similarities with the GAA presentation. The Ahead of the Game campaign, with ex-players and so on, is vital. You probably heard me mention the rise of online gambling earlier. You can be a player at a top club here or a youth or child playing grassroots football and be equally impacted by gambling. That highlights its importance.

My question is about the link-up with the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL) that administers the leagues. I would like to know a wee bit more about your engagement with it on working to address gambling.

Mr Nelson: Thank you for that, Stephen. I will give a brief answer, and maybe Sean can add something. Thank you for the comment on the ticket price review. As you know, we spoke to you and other local representatives about that. We spent a long time talking to the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs. We think that we are now in a place that enables us to go forward quite well.

The Northern Ireland Football League runs the biggest or, rather, the most senior league in Northern Ireland. It is not the biggest league; the Northern Amateur Football League (NAFL) is bigger, with 92 clubs. We have a relationship with all our leagues, and we encourage leagues and clubs to take up the gambling training that we are able to access through GamCare in the first instance. We have a strong relationship with NIFL on that, but we also have a relationship with the other leagues. Sean, I do not know whether there is anything that you could add to that on the outreach to clubs and gambling training.

Mr Sean Murphy (Irish Football Association): Yes, Patrick. Good morning, everyone. We have a national security and integrity officer. Core parts of his role are ensuring that senior and NIFL clubs are provided with education about gambling and monitoring. Patrick mentioned that UEFA is keen to ensure that there is consistency in the approaches to monitoring and education and that there are no irregular gambling patterns across its member nations. The national security and integrity officer works closely with NIFL on that.

NIFL has a partnership with Sporting Chance. That charity provides education for players in NIFL's academy, education and workshops for the senior players and a counselling and referral service for any problems linked to gambling or addiction. In summary, we work closely with NIFL. We continue to

ensure that we keep up to date with other programmes across Europe, and we ensure that Northern Ireland receives its fair share of the support that is required.

Mr Frew: Thanks very much for your presentation. I have a question on cheating. The very small article in the 1985 Order is being replaced with the more thorough and complete new clause 12. We are creating an offence that is much more in-depth than the old cheating offence. Schedule 18 to the 1985 Order states, in relation to article 169, that, on indictment, there will be:

"A fine or imprisonment for 2 years or both"

and, on summary conviction:

"The statutory maximum or imprisonment for 6 months or both".

You welcome the new clause 12, as does the GAA, but do you think that the tariffs or penalties for the offence are appropriate?

Mr S Murphy: I will take that, Patrick. I am not sure that it is for us, a football association, to opine on the length of sentences or tariffs for that offence. I repeat what Patrick said: we absolutely welcome the fact that the offence is now recognised as a criminal offence. Thankfully, it does not occur as much in Northern Ireland, but it is a challenge for the national associations and governing bodies in countries throughout Europe and, indeed, the world to ensure that cheating and match-fixing are identified, monitored and eradicated. This clause supports that. I am not sure that it is up to the association to opine, other than to say that we welcome the recognition of the offence as a criminal offence.

Mr Frew: If I recall correctly, the article on cheating in the 1985 Order is more about being the banker or facilitating. To me, it reads as though it is about the bookmaker who has organised something at or outside a venue to do with a match or matches. In clause 12, it is much more than that. I will not ask you to specify a tariff, but should there be very varying penalties? Should the penalty for someone who runs a book and changes the course of a match differ from the penalty for someone who takes part in a match and tries to influence the game in a certain way in order to win through gambling?

Mr S Murphy: It depends on the level of involvement of each participant. I am sure that a judge is much better placed than I am to make that call. Having reviewed the legislation, we welcome the fact that it is much more in-depth than previous legislation. It recognises that participants in a game can change the outcome of the game and that others can benefit. Largely speaking, all people who knowingly benefit from the offence should be held accountable. It should therefore be eradicated across those levels. As I said, it depends on the level of engagement in whatever offence takes place.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, fellas, for your presentation. Apologies for being late. I want to follow up on a question that Stephen raised with the GAA delegation on the admirable step that it took in moving away from the sponsorship of teams, events, competitions and stadia by betting companies. While that is admirable, I appreciate that, as the delegation admitted, it might have been easier for them to do that than it would be for you, given that sponsorship arrangements with betting companies were not prevalent. I asked my next question during your previous visit to the Committee. I do not know whether it was to you, Patrick. The IFA was in to discuss something else when I raised the issue. How important is sponsorship revenue to your organisation and the teams in it? What proportion of that revenue comes from betting companies?

Mr Nelson: Mark, thank you for the question. I have been in front of the Committee several times over the past few years, so we may well have touched on it. Our clubs are largely small clubs and community clubs, and they raise their own funds. Some are at the top level in the Northern Ireland Football League, and we are able, as an association, to support them a little with funding. Most of our clubs start the year with nothing in the bank. They raise money, spend all that money and probably finish with not very much in the bank.

Sponsorship, normally at a local level, is very important to all our clubs, and, at this point, we do not feel that it would be right to preclude clubs, if they so wish, from having a small sponsorship relationship with gambling companies. Some clubs do, but many do not. As I said, we do not have a betting partner, but we understand that betting has been part of sport probably since sport started and, generally, always will be, and it is much better to have a well-regulated industry than to try to drive betting underground and out of sight. We do not wish to outlaw all betting sponsorships. We do not

want to close that potential opportunity for some of our clubs. The IFA, as an association, is not actively progressing that. In fact, as I mentioned, we are doing a lot of educational work with people who suffer harm from gambling, and we invest a fair amount of time and effort in that.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Patrick. When I made the point previously, I stated that I thought that it would be premature to go down the route of advertising prohibition, given that the precarious financial situation of so many clubs across your organisation will have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The Minister and the Department, however, told us that further gambling legislation will come in the next mandate. I would be surprised if there were not an attempt at that point, be it from the Department or private Members, to include in that legislation something about the relationship between gambling companies and sport. You might want to prepare for that.

Mr Nelson: Mark, thank you for that. As always, we take the view that it is the people like you on the hill who legislate and it is our job to comply with it as and when it comes out, so, yes, we will prepare, and we will manage our way through that as and when.

Mr Durkan: It is people like you who help us to make good legislation. It is worth stating that. We are on the hill, but we are not in any sort of tower.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong): No one else has indicated that they want to ask a question, so I thank you again, Patrick and Sean, for your written presentation and for your update today. For now, thank you so much.

Mr Nelson: Thank you, Chair. Again, it has been a pleasure to speak to the Committee.