



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill:
Local Government (Licensing and
Night-time Economy) Briefing

20 October 2016

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Michelle Gildernew (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Steven Agnew
Mrs Naomi Long
Ms Nichola Mallon
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Mr Patrick Cunningham	Belfast City Council
Alderman Arnold Hatch	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Ms Karen Smyth	Northern Ireland Local Government Association

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): We have with us Alderman Arnold Hatch and Patrick Cunningham. Karen Smyth is still with us. You are all very welcome.

Alderman Arnold Hatch (Northern Ireland Local Government Association): I know the Branry very well, but I did not know that the nightlife was so exciting. *[Laughter.]* I visit it regularly.

First, thank you very much. I am speaking as vice president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). Thank you for the opportunity to present some information to you as far as local councils are concerned. As you know, we already cover many aspects of life at local level. You have already heard from my colleagues who work in the field of community safety on the particular concerns that the Bill raises, but councils also have a responsibility for economic development and entertainment licensing.

I will look at the local government position in a wider context for a moment. All our councils, through the development of their first community plans, are now exploring how to achieve a healthy balance between the priorities that are emerging locally and fostering a sustainable approach to economic, social and environmental well-being. We have been given much greater responsibility for local economic development through the recent reform of local government, and I know that our councils are keen to promote and encourage their local businesses, particularly those that are materially involved in delivering services attractive to tourists, such as the hospitality industry. As Michael said earlier, there are problems with rural pubs, in that they cannot compete with the supermarkets, given the fact that alcohol is half the price of water. Councils are also actively working to ensure local high streets are lively focal points for the local community and visitors during the day and at night, providing shops, restaurants and services that are necessary to maintain thriving population centres. We are aware that, to maximise the use of property in mixed-use local high streets, some property will be

given over to housing, whether through a living-over-the-shops initiative or a stand-alone apartment development. In the previous presentations, my colleagues outlined some of the issues that may arise as a result of the juxtaposition of residential property and longer licensing hours. I will again highlight the point that, in the region's overarching licensing legislation, we must ensure that provision is made to allow local flexibility, with the PSNI, councils, the hospitality industry and residents working together to achieve locally appropriate solutions.

NILGA views this Bill as an opportunity to enhance the offer provided through the night-time economy and to begin to make inroads into the damaging carry-out and preloading culture that pervades our society. We are aware of the sensitivity surrounding some aspects of the Bill and wish the Committee well in its deliberations and eventual decision-making. I will now pass over to my colleague Patrick Cunningham, who will explore the technical issues arising from the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): Thanks, Arnold.

Mr Patrick Cunningham (Belfast City Council): Thank you, everyone. Personally and on behalf of Belfast City Council and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), I offer sincere thanks and appreciation for the Committee having me here to provide it with our take on the Bill.

First, we welcome the Bill and commend the Minister for introducing it. It is long overdue. There is no doubt that there is a great need to modernise liquor licensing legislation to reflect the needs of the market and to underpin the ambitious plans to grow the tourism and hospitality sectors. The council is very keen to develop a good, strong and vibrant night-time economy but, equally, one that is safe. The Bill undoubtedly impacts on several issues that are for the council, such as health, antisocial behaviour, employment and tourism in conjunction with the night-time economy.

To help raise awareness about the Bill and in support of it, we have been in communication with a range of people from the industry, including licensees, governing bodies and NILGA, to make sure that everybody gets the opportunity to provide a timely response. You may recall that we were very instrumental in the review of entertainment licensing legislation, and we have written to the Minister recently to request an update on that. We see this as being inextricably linked to some aspects of that and would welcome it coming forward on the back of this.

They key areas for us are the proposed Easter hours, the additional hours, the alignment of entertainment licensing with liquor licensing and the extension of the drinking-up time. One of the key things to come out of my discussions with our elected members is that we are keen to see councils empowered to deal with both disciplines. We all know that there is very much a common ground in both those disciplines as to how they could be better managed. Some areas are more suitable than others, and councils are better placed to determine who is licensed and to what extent, what the terms and conditions of those licences should be and so forth. We are obviously aware of the negative impact that alcohol can have on communities and the impact that it might have on hospitals and the court process, to mention a couple. There is therefore a careful balance to be struck. It is about having a vibrant economy but, as I said earlier, having that safety aspect to it as well.

This is not being critical — it is just the way in which it is — but we feel that the police are using the legislation as a means to manage the night-time economy, and I will make some points on that as I go forward. One of the key things to say is that Suzanne, our chief executive, is very much in support of Belfast City Council helping you to develop the Bill and others. We are more than willing to help with resources, research or anything like that. We just want you to be aware of that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): Thank you, Patrick.

Mr Cunningham: I will whizz through some of the main points. We recognise the significance of and sensitivities in and around Easter for many people, but there is frustration in the tourism and the licensing industries that licensed premises are effectively closing at a time when tourists are more like to want to be there or have the impression that they can be there, because that is the case in the countries that they have come from. Therefore, their expectations need to be met.

In addition to the restricted opening hours, there is no retail activity on Easter Sunday, for example. That, combined with proposals at the minute, causes us concern that it will be another thing that would deter people from wanting to come to Northern Ireland. It could deter people from having a desire to come at all, as it would create a negative impression of our country.

We consider the proposed changes to be too restrictive and suggest that consideration be given to continuing the standard hours across all periods, irrespective of Easter and throughout the rest of the calendar. I guess that goes with the point about empowering councils to determine the areas and hours and how those are managed and licensed accordingly, or at least to provide an alternative whereby arguably the two most important days of the Easter period are still being respected. I know that the Bill offers 1.00 am on the Thursday night, but maybe that could be done on the Saturday night as well so that you are meeting somewhere in the middle and offering something else.

Regarding the drinking-up time, it is obviously a temporary suggestion in the Bill. We argue that it should be a permanent suggestion, because it may lead to confusion. When it starts and then stops, there will no doubt be a period when it will overlap, and that will just lead to confusion. Entertainment would have to cease by 1.30 am and not the 2.00 am temporary arrangement that would be in place at that time, apart from the 12 days that are being proposed.

We believe that the extension of the drinking-up time has a series of benefits. We mentioned earlier about the dispersal of patrons and exodus of patrons from premises over a period. When they are in a given area, that can be staggered. The Bill gives more scope for that. For the likes of taxis, as you mentioned, you have 60 minutes to coordinate rather than 30 minutes, meaning that there is less of an impact for everybody. You are preventing unnecessary confrontation, which can happen. Nobody likes to be told to drink up or else leave the glass behind.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): Taking it off you is worse than being told to drink it.

Mr Cunningham: You could put that in the Bill. Undoubtedly, it is a difficult and delicate matter to deal with.

On the other side of things, the Bill raises the possibility of binge drinking. You are assimilating what is happening at present over a 60-minute period. People may wish to get more drink and drink up within that given time, which would not be a good thing and would not be encouraged. However, the research that we have looked at suggests different, believe it or not. It would be that the offer is there but that there is perhaps less of an opportunity, a need or a want to get more drink. Detailed assessment by everybody would also be required to get any sort of feedback and information back to help you take the Bill forward.

On additional hours, the Bill proposes that a licensee operating to 1.00 am can apply to the court to sell alcohol until 2.00 am on 12 occasions. There is also provision for premises operating until 11.00 pm to apply to the police for authorisation to operate until 1.00 am, albeit on 85 days of the year. The proposed amendments concerning the additional hours prohibit sealed containers, which would affect the carry-out facility. Belfast City Council considers flexibility in opening hours to be important, from a tourism and night-time economy perspective, and welcomes the ability to apply for additional hours. However, the changes do not go far enough. There could be more. I refer back to what I said about empowering local councils to determine what would be appropriate for a given area. We are not saying that all areas of Belfast, or of certain other towns and cities in Northern Ireland, should be given a blanket closing time of 2.00 am or 3.00 am. That would be done only after proper consideration and consultation with the relevant people that it would be determined where and who should be granted that availability. With that, we are very keen on the 102 extensions being right across. One hour, twice a week, would be a moderate increase and would link to the staggered closing for drinking-up times. Moreover, that in itself will possibly take people out of the home environment, which is arguably an issue. These are not my personal thoughts but those of the council, but a lot of stuff happens in the home that probably goes unnoticed until people end up in hospital or court. There is that aspect to be considered. Again, we are very keen to see local councils empowered to manage that.

We are concerned about the removal of the carry-out facility at drinking-up time. That may have a negative effect. It could encourage people to leave the premises early to consume in the home. That may be fine, but we are finding that there is evidence to suggest that it is an issue. In reality, the cost of a bottle of wine to take home, or another form of carry-out from a licensed premises, is considerably more than one from an off-licence or a supermarket, for example. If you leave earlier in the night, you are more likely to bring more home with you to consume at home before you go to bed or retire for the night, whereas, if you are encouraged to stay later in a licensed and controlled environment, you are either not going to take anything home or, if you do, you will use it the next morning — the next day, I mean. *[Laughter.]* I am not talking from personal experience.

Mrs Long: Anything you want to share, Michelle?

Mr Cunningham: You are more likely to have that, for example, on a Saturday night or with your Sunday dinner. That is what we are finding to be the case.

We are gravely concerned about the alignment of liquor and entertainment licensing, and we were quite vocal about that when the review of the entertainment licensing legislation was done. We view it as being an unfair approach. The vast majority of licensed premises are good and responsible, and we argue that they should be at our behest and other councils' behest. We should look at putting proper measures in place and at being more creative about what can be done in some shape or form and what cannot be done. There is a bit of that. Effectively, if drinking-up time were extended, you would be talking about 1.00 am on Sunday and 2.00 am for the rest of the week. There would then be entertainment allowed until 3.00 am 12 times in the calendar, depending. We are concerned that the police are using the legislation as a means of managing the night-time economy, and there are better ways of doing that. I am repeating myself again, but if the local council had the autonomy and responsibility, it could manage that better and as it saw fit.

We are not perfect in Belfast, but we try to listen to all sides and reach a consensus on the best way forward for everybody. We operate a licensed premises group, which I chair. It is used to discuss problem premises, problem areas and issues such as alcohol on buses. We discuss and wash, if you like, the issues at the group to see what we might do collectively. The group is made up of the council, the police, the Fire and Rescue Service, and those who deal with community safety, environmental health and noise issues. Sometimes HMRC is on the group, as well as other parties, as and when we need to bring them in. I like to think that we deal with a lot of issues there before they go any further. Some of that is around developing action plans for certain areas, and those may require the consensus of a number of premises in areas or one in particular, but it is for the greater good. The group resolves a lot of issues before they get to, for example, our licensing committee.

The proposals provide the police with some comfort, and we are very keen to support them, but in the right way. I want to say that that is really important to us, as we see them as an ally. We want people to come to Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland, but, at the same time, people need to feel safe in the process of doing so. We think that that can be achieved without taking a draconian approach. If the police have a difficulty with enforcement, I suggest that they have a look at other forms of legislation. We are very much in favour of supporting their lack of resource, but, unfortunately, that lack of resource is right across all divides at the moment. It is about working smarter, more collaboratively and more collectively, and that can be done. The proposal will form part of the review of entertainment licensing legislation, and that will be echoed in the next review. We are firmly opposed to the alignment of the licences.

We welcome the proposal on underage functions, particularly for hotels and arguably responsible premises that are more akin to the type of controlled environment in which such events could take place, provided that strict controls are in place. That could be done around a specific event management plan for the particular event or as part of the terms and conditions of an entertainment licence: "When a normal activity is taking place the following are applicable. When it is an underage event, the following are more applicable".

We think that we all know this, but we do not want adults mixing with underage persons. Obviously, it is different at family events, and I will come to that, but this gives a degree of flexibility. There are a lot of issues around formals, and we are just coming into the formal season. The council believes that we are losing out, because, owing to the infrastructure that is in place in Northern Ireland, you can quickly go over the border from all directions, and there are a lot of people doing so, to have formals. All the hotels and other licensed premises are losing out on the income that would be there. They could, as I say, arguably put in place measures to manage formals as well as their counterparts in the South.

We also find that formals happen earlier in the day and so finish earlier, around 9.00pm. What happens after that is anybody's guess at times, and therein lies another danger. Sometimes pupils go on to licensed premises, which is fine in one way, as long as they have the proper identification and the means to gain entry, but sometimes they go on to parties that they have organised themselves in other premises that, truth be told, none of us knows about. It is that uncontrolled environment that we need to be careful about. We are keen to encourage underage functions. We also suggest that the element and definition of family events be carefully worked out: what that should be and needs to be. Arguably, at a family event, the family want all family members to be there. That is very much a part of such an event, and it is morally right for that to be the case. The other side of that is that, if you have a wedding and your children have to be brought to their bedroom, arguably, the liquor licence for the premises is empowered, but children are still there. They are still on the premises, albeit in a different environment. That needs refinement and a bit more creative thinking. The key thing is the

safeguarding of underage children attending these events and measures to protect their well-being. Other things that can be put in place include a proper level of stewarding; child protection officers, with a ratio appropriate to the numbers likely to attend; and ticketing the event — even if a charge is not being imposed, it does not mean that you cannot have tickets. There should also be appropriate first-aid and cool-down facilities on the premises so that events can be managed.

We welcome the restrictions on alcohol advertisements in supermarkets, particularly given the unfortunate societal problems that we have at the moment. Advertising is intrinsic to that. We welcome advertising promotions being restricted from view in places and environments where children are likely to be present, particularly supermarkets.

We welcome the proposals for the restrictions on the delivery of alcohol, making it an offence for a licensee, or a member of staff, who admits to the home delivery of alcohol to any persons under the age of 18. It also makes it an offence for under-18s knowingly to accept a home delivery containing alcohol.

We welcome the code of practice, but some of you might be aware that we introduced elements of that into Hospitality Ulster's current code of practice as a condition of an entertainment licence. A breach of that was, effectively, a breach of an entertainment licence. However, in reality, whilst it is welcomed, it is not made an offence; it is really a matter of goodwill. It has no teeth, so a failure to comply with the code will render the provision almost meaningless. I believe that, if we are to do this, let us attach more impact and make it more meaningful. It is important to do that rather than trying to enforce the code through the prism of entertainment licensing. I wanted to mention that because it is really important. We reiterate that it is for the police to enforce the liquor side of it, and we will do the entertainment side. We will be as creative as we possibly can when dealing with both aspects. Those are our thoughts on that.

The provisions for registered clubs mean that sporting clubs will now be able to apply, on six occasions a year, to extend the area of their premises that can supply alcohol. It allows sporting clubs to take advantage and maximise events at their club. We are very much in support of that. We have 90 registered clubs in Belfast and work very closely with them, as we do with a lot of agencies like that. We are very supportive of them where we can be. Arguably, they lose out on a lot of things. At the end of the day, it is all voluntary, and they operate on a shoestring. We try to throw a lot of weight behind their initiatives, and we are very much in support of this for events such as captain's day at golf clubs — not just golf clubs, but clubs per se. During the summer months, clubs may wish to have a barbecue or something different, and extending the liquor licence into that given space provides a different environment. It means that clubs can offer their members and any guests attending a particular event something different. We also support young people being permitted to remain in the bar area of a registered club until 11.00 pm during summer months. The only thing is that, although this is Northern Ireland, the summer months are more than just the standard June, July and August. A lot of the clubs, particularly soccer clubs and the like, operate 365 days a year. We are not saying that they should be able to extend their licensed area on 365 days, but a bit more flexibility and understanding would be helpful. A lot of ceremonies and competitions are not confined to the summer months. We also need to be mindful of that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): Do you have many more pages to go through, Patrick? I am keeping an eye on the time.

Mr Cunningham: No. I apologise for that.

I want to make additional comments on what is not mentioned in the Bill. We touched on the buses. We and our members are very much in support of microbreweries and the artisan events in Belfast. One such event has just finished, and there is an agreement for that to return to Belfast for the next few years. It came from Birmingham, and we looked at that. The Birmingham event was very profitable. One problem is that there are different laws there on how liquor licensing is managed for off-licences and off-sales. Unfortunately, in Belfast, whilst the event was well received and well attended, people were not able to leave with any produce, which is unfortunate. We are missing out on that. I have not looked at the comments on the event, and there might not be anything on this, but, if you were to trawl the comments, you might find that the feedback on that element was negative. It is good to have the event, but people are not afforded the opportunity of taking some of that good bespoke produce home with them.

In order for craft breweries to have events in Belfast, they have to ask a licensed premises to apply for an occasional liquor licence. There have been a few events this year in Belfast. We are saying that they should be afforded the same facility to apply for that occasional licence.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): I think that we are certainly in favour of that last point. People might get only to try the produce. Coole Swan, for example, is a chocolate liqueur that I tried at some of those shows. The distribution is not great, so you cannot buy it just anywhere.

Mr Cunningham: It is exclusive.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): It is, and you need to be able to buy it. Presumably, you want the Balmoral show and other events being incorporated. For smaller outfits, it may be their only chance to sell their product. I think that there is consensus in the Committee on that point.

Ms Mallon: Patrick, you have already answered my question; it was about licensed premises in streets. A number of issues have come up in Belfast. I take reassurance from the fact that we are saying that there would be local application and action plans. You could have an overarching picture but locally tailored solutions that balance the need for residents to have peace of mind with people being able to make their business work.

Mr Agnew: This goes back to entertainment licensing. I understand the police's frustration. If they find a problem with a premises — I suspect that I know a couple of the establishments that they are talking about — where alcohol is being sold after hours because of the entertainment licence, it sounds like they have to put a lot of resource into enforcement, even though the result is fairly minimal. If I am selling alcohol for two hours extra on a Friday or Saturday night, I get a one-week suspension. Patrick, you made the point that you do not want a link — certainly not an alignment — between entertainment licensing and liquor, but, if somewhere is prosecuted for selling alcohol after hours, how does the council react to that when giving out its entertainment licences? Does it ignore it, or does it say, "Well, we should take that on board"?

Mr Cunningham: It would not necessarily take it into consideration because they are two separate entities. The reaction might relate to the character of a licensee being a mitigating circumstance. If there were a problem premises, we would like to think that, through the likes of the licensed premises group, or even through complaints and whatnot and our relationship with the police, we could resolve the matter. Truth be told, we have done that. We would like there to be local accountability through empowering the councils to deal with that. If they are aware of one aspect, it will be linked to the other. The two would work very neatly together. That is what our elected members are really looking for: to have the ability to determine one over the other.

Mr Agnew: If a premises is, effectively, using its entertainment licence as a permit to sell alcohol, a council would not see that as a reason to say, "We will not let you have entertainment beyond drinking-up time".

Mr Cunningham: They would be allowed to sell alcohol only during the permitted hours of the entertainment. They should not be breaching that, and we are very much against that. They should not be allowed to do it at all. A licensed premises is just that: it is meant to be licensed and operated responsibly, and that applies across both disciplines. We are very much in favour of that type of alignment, but not doing it —

Mr Agnew: I wonder whether we can, potentially, find some alternative to aligning the two licences that means much stricter application: if you breach the alcohol licence by selling after hours when providing entertainment, you could be severely penalised across the board, including the potential of losing your entertainment licence, or at least having severe restrictions put on it.

Mr Cunningham: That is what the members are looking for so that they would then have control over both and be able to determine one over the other. It is fair to say that councils are unlikely to grant an entertainment licence alone. If they have been given the autonomy and authority to deal with both disciplines, they are unlikely to grant one over the other. They will take a balanced view. I will not go into the detail, but, as part of the review of entertainment licensing, we suggested the alignment of the five-year period so that they could renew the entertainment licence at the same time as the liquor licence, and, by virtue of that, the two would be considered in tandem, and any breach within those periods would be considered by the council.

Mr F McCann: I do not know whether, at this stage, any of us who were councillors have to declare an interest in how we progress. We are listening to a presentation from local government. I do not know —

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): We had expressions of interest at the beginning of the mandate, so I think that we are content. Most of you who are still here, including Nichola, have been Belfast councillors, have you not?

Mrs Long: Yes, a long time ago.

Mr F McCann: I just wanted that verified.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): OK. Thanks, Fra.

Mr F McCann: Thank you, folks, for the presentation. It was certainly very interesting and very extensive on the whole issue. We need to have a future debate on whether the Assembly or the Minister should look at licensing laws and how it is done. Local government may be better placed to deal with that because it does so regularly.

I want to pick up on one of the points that Stephen talked about. Cancelling an entertainment licence can be difficult. Sometimes, much to my annoyance when I was in local government, there was a process whereby mediation ruled the day, rather than an outright ban. On most occasions, mediation worked because premises were put on notice to listen to the complaints of residents. The only note of caution that I sound is that this needs to be teased out in discussions with local government on the control of licensing laws. Some councils might be very progressive in how they deal with it; others might end up being more restrictive in how they roll it out, which, rather than looking towards the future, would be a step backwards. We need to be fairly careful about how that is done. We are always interested in how we can advance the night-time economy and tourism and open things up for people to come in.

A big lot of this hinges on the Easter period, certainly from what you say. Other witnesses talked about restrictive opening hours. You spoke about Easter Thursday and Saturday, but how far would you go? It is about the whole Easter period. In Belfast city centre and in Belfast in general, I have seen tourists who found this very difficult, and it might shape their opinion on coming back. How far would you go?

Mr Cunningham: We would look at standardising the hours right across the board, irrespective of the Easter period. Our members are keen on that. The halfway house is Thursday, but maybe we could look at the Saturday at least. The general feeling is for standard hours on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, allowing tourists to avail themselves of the opportunity to attend premises, but in a measured, competent way; not a blanket provision for everybody. That element and how it would be managed probably has to be teased out.

Mr F McCann: That is interesting. You are speaking mainly about Belfast. Maybe NILGA has done general research into other attitudes to licensing. Can you provide us with that research?

Mr Cunningham: We have discussions with our counterparts across the Province and with some of our counterparts in Scotland and the like. I am happy to share that information and research; no problem whatsoever. We would be glad to help you to develop this. I hope that this is not the end but the start of taking this forward. I am happy to be used as and when required.

Mr F McCann: Earlier, Christopher asked about what happens in other places. My concern, especially when we talked to the police, was that they may be fairly restrictive in where their research is carried out when it comes to some of the more difficult places. It does not give a general picture of how our licensing laws operate, so your research may help us.

The question of partnership came up in our discussions with the police, and it may also have been raised with you. When councils are looking at licensing laws, they look across the board at the registration of clubs. Is there a good working relationship with all the statutory partners, including the police? When the police came in, I said that, if I closed my eyes when listening to them, it was like going back 25 years ago. They do not seem to have moved on that far. It is all about how much the financial and resource cost will be rather than how we move forward.

Mr Cunningham: There is a very good working relationship with our colleagues in the police. Like any relationship, there are ups and downs. Some of the suggestions put forward might not sit with what Belfast City Council would consider appropriate, but it is a case of working with them and putting in place the requirements and measures that satisfy their concerns, along with those of the local area and community. This goes back to what I was saying about the hours of operation. I want to stress that it should not be a blanket provision right across Belfast; it should be only for certain areas that meet the criteria and where it is appropriate for that licence to operate. We would work closely with the police on that and try to resolve any issue collectively. We would look at whether we could put a police resource into that. We would be part of and privy to that decision, so we would know what they were planning, and vice versa. Whether that is the right way or the wrong way, that is the way we always work closely with them.

Ms K Smyth: There are three issues now: the discussion has grown since Fra started talking. Members will have been provided with copies of NILGA's programme for local government, in which we look at how to have a strategic conversation about taking on further functions in councils. I encourage the Committee, as the Committee with responsibility for local government, to make sure that that is done in a strategic way and not in a piecemeal fashion. We have been getting bits and pieces from different Departments, but not necessarily the funding to go with them. It is about looking at the approach to new burdens and having a strategic approach to the transfer of functions. If that involves liquor licensing, that is another thing to add to the list.

In recent months, NILGA has been working with the Policing Board to look at the regional relationship between local government and the police in relation to policing and community safety partnerships and how we work together. Those discussions are ongoing. Our president at the moment, Councillor Sean McPeake, has been very active in the discussions and could give you some information on that. Unfortunately, I am not privy to the current position.

The NILGA executive committee will meet on 28 October, and I know that a number of councils are taking the call for evidence on the Bill to their committees. That should address Mr Agnew's query about the specifics for Easter and other licensing hours that we have not really been able to give a firm position on. I will take our draft call for evidence response to the meeting next Friday, and my vice president, Alderman Hatch, will be able to brief the other members on all the issues. Hopefully, we can come back to you with a firmer position after that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): That would be very helpful. We really appreciate the offer of additional resources and research. We are keen that we do this right. We decided today that we will extend Committee Stage, so we look forward to any further information that you will have after the meeting on 28 October to help us in our deliberations.

One of you made the point at the beginning of your presentation — I think that it was Michael — that you can buy alcohol all day on Good Friday in a supermarket or in an off-licence. We want to be very respectful of the fact that Easter is a religious holiday, but we also need to be grown-up enough to know that people who come here might not have an awful lot of religion and that some people here are agnostic or whatever. It is welcome that you made the point about standardisation at Easter, and the Committee will have to discuss what it will do with amendments and all the rest of it. It is useful to have your point of view on that. Thank you very much for coming along, and we look forward to further information.

Ms K Smyth: Chair, if you need NILGA to come back at any stage to the Committee, we will be happy to do that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Gildernew): That would be very helpful. Thanks a million.