



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Inquiry into Participation in Sport and
Physical Activity in Northern Ireland —
Irish Football Association**

18 March 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Boyd) Irish Football Association
Mr Colin Coates) Crusaders Football Club

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I welcome Michael Boyd and Colin Coates; thanks for coming along. I will hand straight over to Michael, who will introduce himself and his colleague and make an opening statement.

Mr Michael Boyd (Irish Football Association):

Thanks very much. I am head of community relations at the Irish Football Association. With me is Colin Coates, who is the captain of Crusaders Football Club and is a Northern Ireland international player. We are delighted to be here and to have the opportunity to speak to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

Do you want us to move directly to questions, or do you want to give us a summary of your written submission?

Mr M Boyd:

I will give a brief summary. The main groups with lower participation levels in association football in Northern Ireland than the average adult rate are as follows: women; people with disabilities; black and minority ethnic groups; older people, and people from lower socio-economic groups. The Irish Football Association caters for all those groups. We have a women's football department; a disability football department; World United, which is an intercultural football project; and we have a community relations department. We work with older people through Castlereagh Borough Council and our community relations department. With respect to the lower socio-economic groups, we do a lot of work with the Big Issue Street Football League.

I have brought a bag for each Committee member, and it contains a football. Our main message is Football for All; so we thought that each of you should have a football. Each bag also contains a magazine that highlights a lot of the community work in which the IFA is involved and the work that it carries out with different groups.

We identified that the main barriers to inclusion are as follows: access barriers; structural barriers; personal barriers, mostly relating to health issues; attitudinal barriers; lack of knowledge among certain groups; communication problems and language barriers; lack of cultural-diversity awareness; transport issues; lack of support networks; and lack of positive role models. Racism, sexism and sectarianism are also big issues that still face society and impact on sport and lifestyle choices. Sport needs to adapt to different lifestyle choices.

We have been asked to come up with possible solutions to improve the opportunities for people in those different groups to participate. We have come up with a three-step solution. We believe that it will make good economic sense by preventing some of the big issues arising that are costly to clear up. First, we ask that consideration is given to having a cross-departmental subgroup to examine sport's role in supporting community cohesion and social inclusion. That will be a response to the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy that has been circulated to the various Departments. We feel that DCAL can take the lead in that group, which will cover social

development, community safety, health, citizenship, education, leadership, sport, equality and good relations. We believe that having a co-ordinated subgroup will help us to respond to the issues that we face regarding the barriers to inclusion for the various groups.

Secondly, we would like consideration to be given to the commissioning of research on a multi-sports basis to help governing bodies identify and remove existing barriers to inclusion. We feel that such research is lacking, and that it would help all the main sports if it were commissioned.

Thirdly, we would like DCAL to consider seconding a senior civil servant to sports governing bodies in order to support good relations and co-ordinate sport's role in supporting community cohesion and social inclusion. We made a trip to Scotland recently, and this idea came from the Scottish Football Association. In the bags we have given members, there is a briefing page on what happens in Scotland. The main points are as follows: a civil servant has been seconded from Scottish Government to the Scottish FA to co-ordinate the Promoting Citizenship through Football group and to facilitate discussions between football and government on key issues, such as tackling sectarianism, health, community cohesion and positive attitudes.

Last week, we met the civil servant who was seconded. His name is Gavin Gray, and he told us how the programme worked. He is the point of contact in the Scottish FA for every Department that can improve and support the Football for All message in Scotland. That works very well because it is open and transparent and maximises government support. Under the terms of the secondment, the civil servant's wages and travel expenses are paid for by government. The Scottish FA provides accommodation, computer and administrative support. The role's key objectives include: co-ordinating the wider remit of government initiatives through football in a cohesive and constructive manner; promoting healthy living and tackling alcohol and drug misuse; promoting diversionary activities linked to tackling bigotry and promoting healthy living; and, most importantly for me, facilitating the delivery of government key initiatives, and ensuring that those are monitored and reported on against targets and outcomes to ensure policy areas achieve good value for money. We believe that this is an interesting model and that it might work well in Northern Ireland.

The bags that we have given members contain all that information, as well as a football and a magazine highlighting our current work on Football for All. The three steps that the IFA

highlights and would like the Committee to consider are as follows: setting up a cross-departmental subgroup, commissioning research on barriers to inclusion, and considering the idea of a secondment as part of working with governing bodies to promote the Sport for All message. I thank members for giving us the time to convey that message.

The Chairperson:

Thanks. I have a question for each of you. The first is for Michael. What single major change — sea change — in government thinking or policy would have the biggest impact on increasing the level of participation in sport and physical activity?

Colin, as someone who has personally achieved highly in sport, what attracted you to sport in your younger days, at primary school or whatever? Was that interest well-fostered and well-nurtured at school? Alternatively, do you come from a sporting background? Will you tell the Committee something about your personal journey in sport?

Mr M Boyd:

Health and community cohesion are the two big issues with regard to Government policy. Currently, football relies on a lot of grants to sustain its Football for All policy, with respect to child protection, women's football, football for people with disabilities, grass-roots and primary school coaches. Approximately half of our staff are in the community promoting those messages.

Sustainability and getting the right messages across are issues for our organisation. We have revisited our strategy, and the key message and the key mission statement from football is Football for All and the value that that gives to communities. We believe that we can be a great partner in reaching into the heart of the community, right to the hard-to-reach groups of people who suffer from mental and other health issues. Football touches every street in Northern Ireland. Therefore, if health were prioritised, and if a structure were created to support Departments in working with football on the issues, we could improve communities and provide them with more value. An approach based on health and community cohesion would be a big help for us.

Mr Colin Coates (Crusaders FC):

Like most young guys, my football origins were in the street where I lived. I am from Sydenham in east Belfast. Most of the guys were out playing football and I just kind of tagged along and

played. I have always been quite lucky as a footballer in always landing on my feet. A lot of other guys with whom I played might look back and say they were better than me but not as lucky. A lot of talent falls by the wayside because teenagers get involved in other things such as alcohol or drugs. I was lucky in that I never got involved in those things and was able to stay away from them. If there were groups that were able to help young guys in sport to stay away from those things, more of them might go on to play at a higher level.

The Chairperson:

You are recovering from injury at the minute; is that right?

Mr Coates:

Yes; I will see the doctor tonight.

The Chairperson:

I imagine that some of your luck is down to hard work. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCartney:

Did you play at every level, Colin? Did you start in primary school?

Mr Coates:

I played football in primary school. I went to Grosvenor Grammar School, where not much football was played. Football is generally a bit different from rugby. It is more club-based whereas rugby is more school-based. I went to a local football club and, when I was 15, I was given the choice to play for either Glentoran or Crusaders. I am glad that I chose Crusaders, because many of the guys who chose Glentoran ended up on the scrap heap. When I went to Crusaders, I was lucky that the team was poor at that time. Therefore, I was able to progress quickly, and I played for the first team when I was 17.

Mr M Boyd:

Colin is a modest guy. He is part of our Football for All advisory panel, and he represents the players' opinions on our community relations strategy. Colin did some work on lower socio-economic groups as part of his dissertation for his degree at Stranmillis. Therefore, he brings a lot of knowledge and experience to our Football for All campaign.

Mr McNarry:

All the experts from the Committee around this table know about modesty; you are welcome to the brigade, Colin. *[Laughter.]* Michael, you are very welcome, too. As someone from east Belfast, I must say that it is always great to see more wise men who originate from that area do well. Well done; I am proud of you.

Your submission lists areas for possible improvement and offers some solutions. The Committee is glad that you have brought those matters to its attention. Does the IFA have a target or a strategy for increasing levels of participation?

Mr M Boyd:

Yes; we are reviewing our strategy, and the new mission statement will be Football for All. We are developing operating plans for grass-roots football to encourage mass participation. Our coaching department and community relations department will set targets in that plan. International level is the other big strand of our strategy. We are keen to ensure that everybody has a sense of belonging to the international team. That notion marries with our grass-roots strategy of ensuring that football is available to everybody. Therefore, international, domestic and grass-roots football are big parts of the new strategy. Given that Football for All will be the mission, we will, as part of the operating plans, set targets to increase participation among women, people with disabilities, people from black and minority ethnic groups, older people, and people from lower socio-economic groups.

Mr McNarry:

Colin, what are your thoughts on the fact that local matches are now being shown on TV? Have people said that they have seen you on TV? Is that having an impact?

Mr Coates:

Yes. The deal with Sky Sports has been fantastic for Irish League football and for football in Northern Ireland as a whole. It is crucial that the coverage continues. There has been talk of international matches returning to terrestrial TV; that would affect the Irish League in a bad way. The Sky Sports deal shows the league in a good light and highlights some of the talent. The media in general — BBC and so on — give a lot of negative coverage of the Irish League, such as the brawls, and so on. Sky Sports has been a big positive for football in Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you very much for coming along this morning. My question is rather convoluted. Colin, you made a couple of good points, and I totally agree with your comment on the negative local media coverage of football. The fact that local football is receiving wider, more positive coverage is a very good sign for the future. Football here is, quite often, castigated and deemed to be of a very low quality. However, one can watch games from across the border on Sky. Although those teams will not set the world on fire either, the impression is that they are much better than ours.

Your submission identifies some of the main barriers that prevent groups from participating and says that DCAL should commission research to help the governing bodies identify and remove those barriers. Do you agree that the IFA, as the governing body that already receives public funding, should be taking that initiative and should be trying to increase participation rates?

Mr M Boyd:

Yes. We are developing our first research operating plan, and we are proactively trying to source funding to commission that research. We do take responsibility for that. Our suggestion is that it is carried out on a multi-sports basis. Sometimes, the perception is that football is the only sport with problems when it comes to participation. However, it would be healthier if research were carried out on a multi-sports basis, as there are parallel issues in different sports concerning identity, sense of belonging, and inclusion.

Democratic Dialogue, the institute for conflict research, is evaluating our community relations activity, and we are awaiting those findings. We want to move to be in a research-led organisation, so that we can actively monitor and set new challenges for the IFA to be more inclusive. However, as part of the wider political process, it should be done on a multi-sports basis, and we would like to see DCAL and Sport NI take the lead on that.

Mr K Robinson:

Would it be a fruitful exercise if you were to engage the media, so that they could see from the grass roots up the amount of effort that is put into sport and how positive it can be, particularly with regard to soccer? That might redress the media impression of what goes on in the game.

Mr M Boyd:

We have a Football for All advisory panel, which includes members of the Community Relations Council, supporters, players, Sport NI and community relations consultants, and that issue came up at our last advisory panel meeting. We will be meeting with editors and sports journalists to talk through what we are trying to achieve and what our motivation is. That has been identified as a problem. In the past, we have not challenged certain negative stories and sections of the media on what they were reporting. We will try to identify people with whom we can work in the future to address that issue.

Mr K Robinson:

I have watched the body language of some commentators and presenters when certain sports are coming up, and there is a buzz that it is something that cannot be missed and that people must know all about it. However, there appears to be a downside when they talk about soccer. For example, focus is on managers who are struggling to get enough players on the field and have to go down further through the leagues to fill the spaces on the international team.

Colin, you mentioned the fact that you started playing football in the street — as most of us did — and I presume that you then joined the primary school team. You then went on to second-level education, and you said that football was not really played at the school. I wonder how many of us faced that situation over the years. I thought that that was a thing of the past. I thought that there was absolute choice at whatever type of second-level school pupils went to, and that they could choose the game that they wished to play and that those would be equally valued. Surely, you are not telling me that the situation that I faced 50 years ago still exists.

Mr Coates:

When I was a first-year student at Grosvenor Grammar School, I played rugby during the week and football on Saturdays, which meant that I could play both sports. I played rugby and enjoyed it; it was a good game. In second year I was told that I would have to give up football and play rugby. I said that I did not want to do that, as I wanted to play football. The teacher at that time gave me a bit of a hard time about it and said that I would not be able to become involved in any other clubs in the school if I did not play rugby. My dad got on the phone and sorted it out, but it was not a nice thing to have to cope with at the time. Again, it is another barrier, and school should not be a barrier. However, it goes on, and it put me off a few different things in school.

Mr K Robinson:

Do you think that there is a leakage of potential? Are good, brilliant, or even outstanding soccer players being lost to the game because they come up against some of the barriers that you have described?

Mr Coates:

Yes. At the same time, those involved in rugby would argue that they could lose potential rugby players. That argument was used in Grosvenor Grammar School. There were a lot of guys in my situation. We had a rugby B team that played during the week and it was almost as good as the A team, since there were so many guys who were good athletically but they missed out on playing rugby because they wanted to play football. The issue needs to be looked at, because I did not enjoy the situation.

Mr M Boyd:

I am 10 years older —

Mr K Robinson:

I was just going to tell Michael that that was a barrier to sport. Is that situation being addressed?

Mr M Boyd:

Funnily enough, I also went to Grosvenor Grammar School. I am 10 years older than Colin, and I was also blackmailed; I was told that if I did not play rugby, I would not be able to play for the football team. That has been happening for a long time.

The Chairperson:

I am sure that your former teachers are keen to be associated with your success. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Coates:

I bumped into the same teacher not so long ago, and he asked me for a Northern Ireland shirt to put on the wall in school.

Mr K Robinson:

He has seen the light.

Miss McIlveen:

I taught at Grosvenor, and I had nothing to do with this. *[Laughter.]*

Thank you for coming. Colin, I am glad to see that you are recovering. We were at a council meeting the night that your dad had to rush away, and we felt guilty about keeping him there.

I will ask the gender question. How many women participate in football? Do you have any figures on that?

Mr M Boyd:

I do not have an exact figure handy, but the number has increased dramatically, which is down to the good work of the association's women's football department. We did not have a women's football development officer 10 years ago, but we now have four staff working in the women's football department. There were only 12 senior teams 10 years ago, and now there are more than 40.

Interestingly, the biggest area of growth has been in primary schools, much of which has been down to the soccer role models courses that the women's department runs. In those courses, senior players from the international side go into primary schools and coach children. The courses are not just about football; there are positive health messages about staying involved in football, and there is a role-model aspect, hence the name. Women's participation has probably been our fastest area of growth over the past 10 years.

Miss McIlveen:

Is that growth due to specific targets set by the IFA?

Mr M Boyd:

To be honest, it is down to the initiative show by Sarah Booth, Alfie Wylie and the women's football department, who have set targets and developed a specific strategy for the women's game. There was some negative stereotyping about women's football, and the soccer role models course was designed specifically to address that.

The course happens in both primary and secondary schools and has started to address that issue early on. The role models course does not only emphasise playing opportunities and

pathways, it also puts across the positive health messages about staying involved and relays how staying involved in education has empowered the players on the senior team.

Women's participation has been an area of massive growth. I can get the figures for you; I just do not have them handy at the moment.

Miss McIlveen:

It is interesting that you say that you have increased participation. In your presentation, you cite a number of barriers, including the timing of events, poor facilities and lack of crèche facilities. Are you trying to address those issues?

Mr M Boyd:

The women's football development officers are very bright and have developed a Futsal programme. Futsal is an adapted game of five-a-side football, which is massive across the rest of the world and is technique and fun-based. The women's department have developed a Futsal programme, which runs at times that suit young women. That project was piloted in the Shankill, and there was a massive response, so it is being rolled out across Northern Ireland. The women's department is leading the way in the development of Futsal. Futsal was identified because it suited women's lifestyles. That is an example of a project that has been very successful.

Lord Browne:

I represent East Belfast, and I am delighted that it continues to produce players of international standard such as Colin.

Mr McNarry:

You would not think that there is an election coming up. *[Laughter.]*

Lord Browne:

I am delighted that Crusaders has been very successful over the past number of seasons, because that provides competition for other teams, some of whom I support.

In your presentation, you referred to a recommendation that DCAL should look into the possibility of seconding senior civil servants to governing bodies of sporting organisations, such as yours, to support the mainstreaming of good relations and co-ordinate the role that you can

play in the community cohesion and social inclusion policy. You referred to the Scottish model. Do you think that that could be successful here? What are the chances of that happening here? Do civil servants have the necessary expertise to play a role?

Mr M Boyd:

I believe so. As football has developed, the IFA has delivered many messages on health and community cohesion. Traditionally, football has not been very good at lobbying or building up partnerships with government, and the step you have described would be very healthy for football and government, as the targets set in the IFA's strategy cut across many different Departments. Football could support many of the main government messages on health, community cohesion and social inclusion, and could be a very good partner. It would be a win-win situation; it would co-ordinate football's efforts a little better; and, from the point of view of the IFA, would help challenge the negative perceptions of football. I said to Colin on the way to today's meeting that the IFA is undertaking a great deal of good work at a grass-roots level, which the wider public do not really know about. If someone from government were seconded to the IFA, that person could tie-in with the different projects that the IFA is involved in. It would also help with sustainability and a more strategic co-ordination, which, in turn, would also help the community.

The IFA's new strategy is about the value it can provide to the community, and if that partnership could be established more could be achieved. The position the IFA wants to reach as an organisation cannot be reached without the support of the Committee, DCAL and Sport NI. It is about developing partnerships in a meaningful, open and transparent way to benefit the entire community.

Lord Browne:

I attended one of the IFA's primary school events, which was an excellent way of ensuring that children participate in sport and stay healthy at a later stage in life.

Mr M Boyd:

The IFA recently met with Matt Baggott and discussed the journey the PSNI has undertaken, midnight street soccer, a value-based culture and the health messages that could be sent out. The PSNI is very keen to partner with the IFA on different initiatives regarding community safety and policing, but the IFA feels it has more to give and that more partnerships could be developed to benefit football and the wider community.

The Chairperson:

Does the IFA have any specific partnerships with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

Mr M Boyd:

The IFA has been speaking to that Department through its child protection unit, but that was more of a getting-to-know-you exercise than an establishment of a specific structured partnership.

Mr McCarthy:

I thank the witnesses for their presentation, and I congratulate the IFA on the work it has been doing. Michael, you mentioned the issue of grants earlier. Do you think that the balance in the distribution of funding between elite and community sport is correct to increase participation in sport and physical activity?

Mr M Boyd:

That is an interesting question. The majority of the work the IFA carries out is in the area of mass participation. I do not have the figures at hand on the breakdown of funding across the two different areas, but it would be interesting to examine them.

Moving forward, there will be more investment by the IFA in the community. We have approximately 30 primary school coaches who teach the fundamentals of the sport in the community and put out healthy messages. We also have 16 grass-roots development officers who are based in the councils throughout Northern Ireland. Those officers are out and about in the community doing work with all sorts of community groups, many of which we have mentioned today. There is a significant investment in that area.

However, my main area of concern is the sustainability of funding. The IFA currently relies on two- or three-years grants, which have allowed it to build up trust with communities and to put programmes in place, and it is worrying that that work may suffer if funding were to be withdrawn. The IFA wants to work in partnership with government on a sustainable basis to have a maximum impact in the community. It wants to help the likes of Crusaders FC with its excellent community programmes, get into the heart of the communities, reach those groups that are harder to reach and establish a sustainable 10-year strategy rather than the current two-or

three-year plans.

Mr McCarthy:

Should more funding be directed towards the community rather than the elite sports?

Mr M Boyd:

If it can secure more funding, there is willingness on the part of the IFA to put investment into the community, because it is a win-win situation for the IFA and the communities it works in. If there are more structured opportunities, the IFA will have more players to select for the league, and there will be more of a sense of belonging and more people will want to play for us.

The IFA's mission statement is about using the message of Football for All for mass participation, but it is also concerned with the pursuit of excellence. Both the community and the elite sides are given equal priority.

Mr McCartney:

Again I thank Michael and Colin for their presentation to the Committee. Prior to the meeting, I said that I saw Colin being interviewed with Stephen Baxter. His footballing skills are excellent, but his diplomatic skills are even better. *[Laughter.]*

I have an observation on which Michael and Colin may wish to comment. It is about the role that governing bodies play in changing people's attitudes. My fear is that if that role were led by a Department, or something less than the governing body, the impact would be minimised. If some of the best initiatives, such as "Show Racism the Red Card" had been led by a government agency, they would not have had the same impact.

Schemes that change peoples' attitudes to physical activity, such as the midnight soccer initiative, which I have seen in my city, have a better chance of success if a Derry City footballer turns up to promote it, rather than government agencies, well-intentioned as they are. When the local club attaches itself to an initiative, young people are automatically attracted to it. What role do you feel that the governing bodies should play?

Mr M Boyd:

It has to be a partnership approach. Much of what you have said is correct. The IFA and the

clubs have to take ownership of their community initiatives, but a partnership approach is needed with government Departments to create sustainable plans. We have nothing to hide in our motivations to engage with the community.

The guy in Scotland is on secondment as a member of the Scottish FA for the two years. He is the point of reference so that government can liaise with the appropriate people in football to make the best use of the available funding on all of the initiatives that are coming through government, including in health and in cohesion. An open partnership such as that can only benefit local clubs.

We are developing clubs as community beacons and trying to help Irish league clubs to develop community business plans. That process could be aided greatly if we had a link with government through one specific point of contact that could liaise across Departments to support the clubs-as-community-beacons programme. From that point of view, it seems much more strategic for partnership work to have someone on secondment to help with such initiatives.

Having someone at the heart of the IFA who would see what we are trying to achieve strategically and being able to feed that back would also help with communication and would benefit the communities and the clubs that we are trying to support. I understand what you mean. I think that it would not dilute the ownership; it would strengthen it, because more resources and funding would be coming in to support the right projects. The important thing is that we support the right projects and the right people. The IFA can identify those people and groups, but we need government support to plan in the longer term and to invest in the leadership that exists in the community.

Mr McCartney:

It would be a sense of giving the governing body the freedom to do what it feels it has to do, rather than being curtailed by government strategies.

Mr M Boyd:

Yes. It would have to be managed well, but we are open to the idea. I agree that it would have to be managed on the basis of an equal partnership.

The Chairperson:

I thank Michael and Colin for an excellent presentation.

Mr M Boyd:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee today.