



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Inquiry into Participation in Sport and  
Physical Activity in Northern Ireland —  
Ulster Rugby**

18 March 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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Northern Ireland — Ulster Rugby**

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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 Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Raymond McCartney

**Witnesses:**

Mr David Boyd )  
Mr David Humphreys ) Ulster Rugby  
Mr Shane Logan )

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

I formally welcome the Ulster Rugby representatives. The team is headed by the chief executive, Shane Logan. I will hand over to Shane to make an opening statement and to introduce his colleagues and outline their roles.

**Mr Shane Logan (Ulster Rugby):**

I thank the Committee for inviting us. I am the new chief executive of Ulster Rugby. I have been in the post for only six weeks, so forgive my lack of familiarity with the subject. It is probably a good time to meet given that, as the Committee is trying to determine strategy, so am I. I am accompanied by David Humphreys, who is the director of the professional game, and David

Boyd, who runs the domestic game in Ulster.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you. It is over to you to make an opening statement. You have provided a written submission, so you may make a brief statement, following which members will ask questions.

**Mr Logan:**

Given that we are the third group of witnesses today, I will cut to the chase and refrain from going through the written submission part by part. I will outline what we think the answer is rather than engage in a lot of analysis.

Ulster Rugby aims to make Ulster the best rugby region in the world bar none. We want to be better than any region in Ireland — Leinster and Munster have perhaps moved ahead of us recently — in GB and in Europe, which is the stage on which we play. Furthermore, we want to be better than our rivals in the Super 15, namely Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. To do that, we must be excellent at all levels and must double involvement in the game. The Committee's aim to increase participation is exactly what we must do. We must increase participation by at least a factor of two.

About 30,000 people play rugby. That does not include people who play a game of touch rugby, referees or people who are involved occasionally. It refers to people who are registered with us as regular participants and are insured as such. We need to increase that number to around 60,000. As far as we are concerned, and based on what has worked previously, the answer is to set a target to double participation, to make Ulster Rugby accountable, and to provide the funding for us to deliver that.

In the past, we have received good funding and community development funding that has enabled us to bring the goodness of rugby to groups that are not traditionally touched by it, such as girls, areas outside traditional state grammar schools, older people and communities that do not traditionally play rugby. That has worked well. However, it has not all been sustainable. We would like to be set targets by the Assembly to at least double participation and to be held accountable for the long-term sustainability of that. We want joint targets, for which we are responsible; long-term funding for revenue and capital; and long-term accountability for the delivery of a result.

In the document that we have submitted, members can see the breakdown of the current participation levels, including the numbers of schools that are participating. There are questions about how to define participation. We have the same issues as other sports about female participation, transition from under-18 participation to adult participation, and participation among the over-35s. I do not propose to go through those unless members have any questions.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much, Shane. In your submission, you refer to young men, women over 20 and people over 35 having lower levels of participation. What precisely is Ulster Rugby doing, or planning to do, to increase participation among those groups?

**Mr David Boyd (Ulster Rugby):**

We refer to males aged between 16 and 20 to distinguish between adult and non-adult because our biggest single problem is getting the numbers of young people that we have at under-age level to go into the adult game. We have no difficulty, through school and youth rugby, to encourage people to play the game, but there are social and other issues, which we expand on in our submission, that prevent us from converting youth players into adult players and sustaining that progression.

Having looked at the issue, we have concluded that our competitions are probably the best way to achieve that aim. This year, we have specifically identified an under-19 league. We researched the situation and discovered that there was a problem with progression from under-18 rugby to adult rugby because the under-18 rugby was played on a Saturday morning and there was no engagement with the adult population of the clubs. When the under-18 players moved across, they felt that they were not welcome, and they had not transcended that. We have developed a league that will straddle that divide and play its games on a Saturday afternoon. In that way, the players will become part of the club environment and, by the time they move into adult rugby, will know the people with whom they are playing. We are conscious of the figures in our submission and the fact that we have to try to move greater numbers of young people into the adult game.

We are conscious of the social issues that affect the participation of young people of that age in all sports. We have also identified the issues that exist in women's rugby. All girls are

introduced to female rugby through a non-contact variation of the game, but only a few of them choose to go on to the full contact version because of the nature of that game. However, there are other variations that they can move into, and we are satisfied that we will be able to run a dual strategy for female rugby, with a contact version and a non-contact version. We are looking at anything that will help to resolve those issues.

**Mr Logan:**

Ulster Rugby has not set out a five-year or 10-year strategy that outlines the numbers that we want to achieve. We are working it out on the hoof, and, as David says, our strategic intervention has taken the form of changes in our competition structure. We have to hold ourselves and the clubs accountable for numbers. The addition of women's seven-a-side rugby as an Olympic sport gives us the chance to have a competition structure that will bring through greater numbers, now that the seven-a-side game is to be an internationally-recognised competition.

**Mr McNarry:**

You are welcome, gentlemen. Congratulations on your appointment, Shane. I wish you all the best. We will do anything that we can to help you. You will need to leave a bag like the one that the IFA left. *[Laughter.]*

Last week, we heard evidence from people who emphasised the necessity of increasing professional coaching in virtually all sports. Do you have an opinion on that? In answering that, will you say what value you put on volunteer coaching?

The research before the Committee indicates that people with disabilities, those living in socially deprived areas and members of ethnic minorities all have lower levels of participation in sport. What is Ulster Rugby doing to address their needs?

**Mr Logan:**

Professional coaching and the value of volunteers are not mutually exclusive; we need both. Rugby is an open game ranging from fully professional to fully amateur, and we need more professional coaches and volunteers and to improve the quality of each. If we are going to be the world's best — Ulster is currently ranked twelfth in Europe — we must improve the quality of coaching throughout the game, because we need the amateur domestic game to produce, on a production line basis, the future provincial and international players.

I have come to Ulster Rugby from running a charity for the blind, and I am acutely aware of the under-representation of both the disabled and the socially deprived. I am also aware of the enormous benefit that sport can bring to people engaged in it and the fact that it can liberate and fulfil potential. I used to run a running club for blind people every Friday afternoon, which was enormously successful even for chronically disabled people in wheelchairs who were simply pushing themselves about or being pushed about. I do not know whether Ulster Rugby currently has a plan for those who are disabled and who are disenfranchised, and I will ask David Boyd to come in on that point. However, if Ulster Rugby does not have such a plan, it will be introducing one because that is part of my roots.

**Mr D Boyd:**

If that question had been asked three or four years ago, we would have said that it would be very difficult to introduce rugby for the disabled because of the nature of the sport. However, we were proven wrong by a group of very enthusiastic parents who put together a team of children with learning difficulties, which is known as the Newforge Tigers. They asked Ulster Rugby to come on board, and we put our staff — staff members who were then employed under the DCAL grant for community rugby — through a specific training programme to deliver rugby for the disabled. That form of rugby has flourished among children with learning difficulties. Ulster Rugby is acutely aware that there are different categories of disability, some of which can be catered for within rugby and others which cannot.

There is a brand of rugby called tag rugby, which is a non-full contact form of the sport in which the nearest that participants come to tackling other participants is pulling a tag around their waists. That form of rugby has proved to be immensely popular. Over the past two years, Ulster Rugby has made a point of bringing the Newforge Tigers and visiting teams from England to Ravenhill to take part in competitions at half-time, and the response from the crowd has been immense. On the first occasion that the Tigers played at Ravenhill, two benefactors approached them immediately after the game and each gave them a cheque for £1,000, because they were so impressed by the enjoyment that was being instilled by the children on the pitch.

Ulster Rugby is now working in six special schools throughout the country to deliver that programme. I have alerted the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) that this is an express train that is coming down the line at us and that we need a national policy in respect of the disabled.

Ulster Rugby is working in that area and will continue to explore every available opportunity.

**Mr Logan:**

Rugby will be a fully inclusive sport here. Ulster Rugby will have a plan for it and will cause it to happen by having deliverable targets. Having come from that background, I am fully committed to the benefits that it brings not just to those with a disability and those who are deprived but to those who would consider themselves to be in the mainstream. We must pull both together.

**Mr McNarry:**

You said that Ulster is twelfth in Europe at the moment. I do not know where it sits in the world rankings. You also said that you have a goal of being the world's best, and I am not going to ask you when you hope to achieve that.

**Mr Logan:**

In eight to 10 years.

**Mr McNarry:**

That is fantastic.

**Mr Logan:**

And Europe's best before that.

**Mr McNarry:**

That really is brilliant. In working towards that goal, do you see all the aspirations involved and embraced in that rubbing off down the line in all the other things that you want to attain? In other words, not just having Ulster as the world's best rugby team but being the world's best at presentation, in tag rugby, etc.

**Mr Logan:**

Yes, totally.

**Mr McNarry:**

Is all of that encompassed in the brand?

**Mr Logan:**

Yes, we have to be as one. We cannot have one part of the game thriving without the whole game thriving. We believe in rugby; we believe that it brings discipline and goodness. It has transcended the conflict here because of the way that the structure allows for an Ulster game and an all-Ireland game. It appeals to all segments of society. For us to be the world's best and for people to come from around the world to see what we are doing, we have to be excellent on every front, including the commercial front. We have to appeal to disadvantaged groups and people with disabilities and to the communities and schools in which rugby has not been played before. We have to be excellent in relating to and working with other sports to pull the whole of Northern Ireland up. We are ambitious across the whole range, because the body will only be strong together. It will not be two thirds strong or half strong.

**Mr McNarry:**

That is good enough for me. Thank you.

**Lord Browne:**

With regard to increasing participation, do you think that the balance is currently correct in the distribution of funding between the elite and the community sides of the sport?

**Mr Logan:**

Do you mean public funding or commercial and private funding?

**Lord Browne:**

Will you talk about public funding first?

**Mr Logan:**

I do not know whether the balance is correct, but the funding for the amateur game is much greater than that for the professional game. If, as we hope, we get the stadium sorted out and move quickly, that may be redressed. We do not yet have a plan in place to show how we will get to being the world's best. When we produce that plan and look at the funding that is required to achieve that goal, I will be able to give a better answer.

**Mr D Boyd:**

My perception is that the funding that goes to the professional game from the public sector is largely for facilities. The funding that comes into the domestic end is revenue funding, which supports staff who are involved in the development of the game. Both are equally important; without one we cannot have the other.

**Mr David Humphreys (Ulster Rugby):**

When I started playing for Ulster, I would never have seen people wearing Ulster shirts or playing with a rugby ball in the street. Based around Ulster's limited success in the late 1990s and Ireland's success in the past decade, children can now be seen playing rugby everywhere. Achieving the level of participation that we are talking about is linked to that success, and the professional game has to drive that by providing a profile of rugby that people want to play and to support. It must provide role models for young kids to come through.

**Lord Browne:**

In the past, rugby was probably seen as an elite sport. I went to a school at which I was not allowed to play soccer. Are you breaking down that perception?

**Mr Humphreys:**

In my view, there is no question but that that is the case. People from a wide variety of sports will come to watch rugby on a Friday night at Ravenhill. We talked with the GAA representatives before the meeting, and they have noticed that a lot of their supporters have been coming to our games. The influence of the professional game is lessening the perception of rugby as an elite sport.

**Mr D Boyd:**

There are 32 traditional grammar schools in Ulster of the type to which Lord Browne referred. We have 120 affiliated schools, and we are working in many more outside that affiliation. Around eight years ago, the balance was the other way around. There is now a huge demand in the non-traditional area.

**Mr Logan:**

We want the public sector to view funding as an investment, not as a subsidy. We jointly require a return on that investment, because it is the only way that we will get sustainability. Funding

should not simply be to subsidise our activity; it should be to gain improvement and results on long-term participation. I will be critical and say that that has not happened sufficiently. Every pound that the Assembly invests must gain a return, and we must be aligned to that return. The investment cannot be to subvent us; it must be for us to move forward.

**Mr McCartney:**

Thank you for the presentation. David said that he noticed more people playing with rugby balls in areas where that had not been seen in the past. Is the idea of having development officers in non-affiliated schools to turn those schools into affiliated schools?

**Mr D Boyd:**

Absolutely, and, as I said, that swing has come. The sector in which participation is really growing is primary schools. Until perhaps two years ago, we did not have an affiliation brand for primary schools. Having the primary schools on board is linked to the overall insurance cover that we provide in respect of the sport. The interest shown at primary school level, particularly through the tag brand, has really grown. Most certainly, at the moment, demand exceeds our capability to deliver.

**Mr McCartney:**

At the time that rugby went professional, there was a fear that it would become a very professional game, as it has done, and that there would be a fall-off in participation. However, that fall-off does not seem to have materialised. The opposite seems to be the case, with more people interested in playing and watching rugby.

**Mr Humphreys:**

There is no question about that. From my point of view, we have to look 10 years down the line to get to where Shane wants us to be. If we are to achieve that, we have to widen the base from which we select. The restrictions that are placed on us by the IRFU mean that we cannot just go out and sign 21 international players from around the world. At any one time, we are allowed to have only five non-Irish qualified rugby players representing Ulster. Therefore, to be able to fill those spaces with good quality international players from here, we have to go into communities and schools from which we have never attracted players before. I went to a primary school coaching session at which there was a rugby school, a football school and a GAA school. As a result of the skills that are coached at GAA schools, its players were the best at all three sports.

We recognise that and we know that the future of rugby in Ulster is based around getting people from every area involved.

**Mr McCartney:**

There are approximately 18,000 registered under-18s, and then there is a drop-off. Is that number a result of the work that you have done and have you noticed a drop-off when people leave school?

**Mr D Boyd:**

The drop-off is because of the issues that we have identified, including the demands that are placed on young people. Young people, who would have been included in our figures while at school, come out of a regimented school system and have to be self-motivated to attend training on a Tuesday night as opposed to doing it as part of the school curriculum. That is only one issue. The fact is that all sports are suffering at that age group because more people in that age group have to get part-time jobs to sustain their lifestyle and so on. It is a common factor and one that we are trying to address by accommodating young people and making them welcome in our clubs to make life a bit easier for them.

**Mr Logan:**

We need to improve the quality of what is on offer in the clubs, and we have a lot of work to do with clubs to raise standards of facilities, inclusion, aspiration and results.

**Mr McCartney:**

David, there has been debate over the number 10 shirt in the Ireland team for as long as I can remember. Is it Sexton or O’Gara for the next match? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Humphreys:**

I think that you will see Sexton in that position for a long time to come.

**The Chairperson:**

I was going to ask about Ian Humphreys’s beard, but I will not now. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Humphreys:**

Barry, I used to ask him about it every day.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you very much for your presentation, and congratulations, Shane, on your appointment. I wish you every success, and I hope that your ambitions for Ulster rugby come true in the next eight to 10 years. I look forward to that.

What would be the one change in government policy that you think would have the biggest impact on increasing participation in recreational sport?

**Mr Logan:**

Funding that is linked to result — aligned results. For the sake of argument, if there are 30,000 participants in rugby, a contract would say that for x amount of money we would deliver 60,000 participants. That would be one simple plan with clear accountability that, to be blunt, should not be delivered through the councils or through programmes with hit-and-miss outcomes. Alignment of targets, accountability for targets, and sufficient money to generate those targets would have a big impact.

**Mr McCarthy:**

That is very interesting.

**Mr McCartney:**

You are advocating that that should be led by the sporting body rather than by the councils.

**Mr Logan:**

Yes. The councils have many roles, not just sport. Our exclusive reason for being is Ulster rugby, and it is the same with the other sports. We are focused on that and on nothing else, whereas councils exist to do a whole stack of stuff.

**The Chairperson:**

Are there any accredited schemes for rugby clubs that drive up participation? In the context of the GAA, there is a scheme called club maith, and to achieve that accreditation a club must drive up participation, increase the number of volunteers and make better use of its facilities. Is there any scope for developing that or is it something that the GAA has learned from you?

**Mr Logan:**

I have met with Danny Murphy and the GAA and also with soccer representatives. The GAA is five to eight years ahead of us. The GAA and, indeed, rugby clubs in Leinster and Munster do a lot of good work, and we need to get to their level. The answer to your question is that there is scope, and we have started work in that regard.

**Mr McNarry:**

In what ways are you working to increase family involvement? We talk to mothers and women generally who want to get interested in sport. Mothers have a problem in that they have children to look after and — I do not want to sound sexist — other roles that are different from those of men. Some women are active in sport at a young age but then drift away from it after they get married or have children. Other sports seem to be intent on involving the whole family unit and bringing together the children, the mother, the granny and so on. Do you do that? Do you need to broaden your horizons? Do the clubs have the facilities for that, or do they require the necessary facilities? Are there specialised coaching, organisation and skills courses for the family?

**Mr Logan:**

You are absolutely right. We need to ensure that we have the right offering that will be attractive to all the principal groupings. We will not attract the whole family if we rely on our traditional offering for younger people and, in particular, young males. Broad-based involvement and broad-based support is essential to our growth. We probably do not have that offering, and we certainly do not have the necessary facilities. I am making it sound as though the situation is all doom and gloom. However, an awful lot of good work is being done as regards club accreditation and broadening what we offer.

**Mr D Boyd:**

Our first point of contact with the family group is when parents bring their children to mini rugby. We are conscious of trying to get people involved, and we encourage our clubs to have welcome packs and so on. There was an old tradition that clubs got mothers on board to become members of their catering committees. Obviously that tradition has gone, and we have learned from it. A growing number of females now use their administrative talents to become club secretaries and so on.

Total family involvement is slightly more difficult, but we are conscious of the need to bring in some of those mothers to participate in the women's game. There are various brands of the game, and they can be brought in at the non-competitive, fun level. That process is in its infancy, and, although women's involvement in rugby is not growing dramatically, it is growing steadily year on year. We are trying to get women involved in coaching, and there is absolutely no bar to them doing that. Indeed, we would like more involvement from women, and, if we can overcome that difficulty, we will start to accelerate the process.

**Mr McNarry:**

You should keep pushing on the matter. At Committee, we have noticed a trend in women voicing the fact that they want to become involved.

**Mr D Boyd:**

Absolutely. Barry asked about accreditation. The old sports council abandoned its clubmark scheme six or seven years ago. However, in consultation with the council, we formed our own club recognition scheme. It was supported by a DCAL grant to encourage involvement. In the five years that the scheme has been running, 47 of our 55 clubs have attained at least the bronze level — there are bronze, silver and gold levels — and various degrees beyond that.

**The Chairperson:**

Is participation one of the qualifying indicators?

**Mr D Boyd:**

Very much so. It is not as relevant at the bronze level, which ensures that clubs comply with the law and child welfare legislation. Participation becomes a factor at the silver and gold levels. That is rolling further now. In recognition of the scheme's success, the IRFU is about to launch a Q mark that will build on our lead and expand the scheme to all four provinces. Moreover, Sport NI has recently relaunched the clubmark scheme, so we will work in parallel with it, too.

**The Chairperson:**

If there are no further questions, I will offer Shane the opportunity to make a final comment.

**Mr Logan:**

Thank you very much for giving us a hearing. We are keen to engage. We can only be the

world's best if we are fully aligned to and fully engaged with the Committee. We need public money to be spent on the stadium and on the sport. We have common goals, and we are accountable for their delivery.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much Shane, David and David.