



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
(Hansard)

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**Stadia Development: Ulster Rugby**

23 June 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mrs Karen McKeivitt  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Shane Logan )  
Mr Cecil Watson ) Ulster Rugby

**The Chairperson:**

Present are Mr Shane Logan, who is chief executive, and Mr Cecil Watson, chair of the redevelopment committee of Ulster Rugby. Thank you both very much for coming. I apologise for keeping you waiting; we have had two lengthy presentations and members were particularly interested in a discussion with Sport NI. Please make a short presentation on the development programme.

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

Specifically in relation to the stadium development?

**The Chairperson:**

That, and generally on what you do as an organisation.

**Mr Logan:**

We might talk about rugby in Ulster to begin with. The Ulster Rugby Football Union is a constituent body of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU). We are a nine-county organisation. There are 27,000 rugby players of all ages in Ulster, located in 55 clubs and about 300 schools. At the top end of the game is the professional senior Ulster team, which plays in two principal competitions: a league competition, soon to become the RaboDirect PRO12 league, formerly known as the Magners League, and the European or Heineken Cup. We were the first Irish province to win the European Cup in 1999, and last year, we qualified for the quarter-finals for the first time in 12 years. A year ago we were ranked — on the club-ranking scale in Europe — twenty-first; we are now ranked seventh and we finished third in the league, having finished third from the bottom in the previous season.

We have a strong ambition to grow the game and it is our objective to take the figure of 27,000 players and, over the next five to ten years, make it 42,000. That is the number which, the research shows, we need to achieve in order to field an international standard team on the pitch. We have strong ambition to grow the game professionally as well. We aim within four to five years to become the lead Irish side and within 10 years to become a top-four European side and build our strength beyond that.

We are located at Ravenhill, which is the subject of the redevelopment, and our professional players train at Newforge, which we are also redeveloping to ensure that we have European best facilities. In relation to the stadium, it is absolutely essential to our growth, both professionally and for the domestic game, that we get that done to the best possible standard as quickly as possible. We need to have a capacity of 18,000 to allow us to participate in the final stages of our two main competitions and also to host tier 2 internationals — the likes of Fiji and Samoa — and therefore to attract the best games and tourism opportunities. Our principal rivals in Ireland and

more broadly across Europe — the leading sides; the top half-dozen — have substantially overtaken us in stadium provision, capacity and modernity.

We are this point with the stadium: with the assistance of Government money, we have redeveloped and completed one side, our corporate side. That was opened two seasons ago, and it has been extremely successful. We built it at a cost of £4.5 million, £1.2 million of which came from Sport Northern Ireland. We want to redevelop the other three sides and take our current capacity of 12,000 up to 18,200. We hold planning permission for two of the three sides, and we submitted planning permission last August for the third side, and a confirmation of increase of top capacity to 18,200. We believe that planning permission, which is an article 31 ministerial decision, will be received shortly. We are not aware of any in-principle impediments. All the statutory consultees and residents have been consulted with, and subject to a number of conditions of planning, we are optimistic that planning permission will come through soon. Bats are the only issue that we are aware of, and we are now on our third bat survey. It is driving us bats. It is the bat roosting season, apparently, and that has another month to run.

Because we have done one of the four sides — and it is probably the most difficult of the four — we have very good practical experience. We know the length of time, the problems and what the ground is like underneath. That gives us a very good indicator of the costs and duration of the build. We are very pleased that the £14.7 million has been announced and agreed. I think, of the three sports — with which we enjoy an excellent relationship — we are probably in the best place to start ahead of the others and complete ahead of the others. If this was the private sector it would be done in 18 months to two years from now. We are trying to have it done in less than three years. We cannot wait while other sides move ahead of us commercially and in crowds. The stadium is an absolutely essential part of being at the top end of the professional game, and therefore generating sufficient funds to invest in the domestic game, in clubs and schools.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. Obviously you have been allocated £14.7 million. Will you require any additional funding on top of that, or will that cover your project?

**Mr Logan:**

We do not yet know. A year ago we got the numbers done by our own quantity surveyors — the ones we used for the first side — and they thought that that number was fair to achieve the 18,000. We are having that number verified by the Central Procurement Directorate's (CPD) surveyors now. We will know that number in a couple of weeks. It is potentially not sufficient, but we do not know.

**Mr Cecil Watson (Ulster Rugby):**

Yes, potentially it is not, but we will have to see the outcome of the deliberations that are taking place at the moment with CPD.

**Mr Logan:**

A year ago it was. I think it is a very important point that the longer we have to wait before we start, in all probability the more the cost will be. Now is an excellent time to build. Builders, constructors and designers are desperate for work.

**Mr Watson:**

That costing process is close to conclusion now, so we will know that in a short space of time.

**Mr Logan:**

We will know in a week or two.

**The Chairperson:**

In relation to the timescales that you have indicated, will the project take a phased approach? Will you do one stand at a time?

**Mr Logan:**

That is a good question. The plan is to do two ends, at which there is no stand, towards the end of next year, and we can start work on those during the season. Those will take eight months. Then, in May 2013, we plan to knock down the main stand, and it will take about a year to build another, so there will be an overlap of around four or five months in the activity, the overall timescale being about 16 months from start to finish.

**Mr Watson:**

But during that period, the number of spectators can be maintained at the current level.

**Mr Logan:**

Correct. We need to maintain a level of 12,000 for our competitions and to give us the required level of commercial income. It will operate as a live site.

**Mr Watson:**

We had a live site previously, when we built the first stand.

**Mr Swann:**

Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentations. After the development is completed, do you envisage any other commercial revenue streams from it?

**Mr Logan:**

The stadium itself will give us the ability to generate substantially more ticket revenue. There is potentially the opportunity for copying Lansdowne Road, which became the Aviva Stadium, with the potential for naming rights. There is the potential for copying best practice in Germany in the Bundesliga, in which half a dozen grounds have food and drink brought to people in their seats, and therefore an increased profitability per head.

As for using the stadium for other purposes, Ravenhill remains the home of amateur rugby. We play 50 or 60 games a year, of which only 15 are professional, so we must keep that in mind. A putative planning condition would be that the stadium could be used for three non-rugby events a year, which is consistent with Thomond Park in Munster and the Aviva Stadium in Dublin. We have to provide our spectators with the best possible facilities and make the best commercial return that we can.

**Mr Watson:**

There is the potential for us to drive up our revenue considerably once the stadium is in place, but we have no great intention to drive it up by hosting other events, if you like. We are conscious of

the neighbourhood — we exist in a fairly built-up area.

**Mr Logan:**

We have an increasingly good relationship with our neighbours, and we want to build on that. We certainly do not want to be hosting weddings, parties or any such events.

**Mr Hilditch:**

What about church services?

**Mr Logan:**

Possibly.

**Mr Hilditch:**

They can be very successful.

**Mr Watson:**

Yes.

**Mr Logan:**

That is possible.

**Mr D Bradley:**

What is your assessment of the subregional facilities available for rugby?

**Mr Logan:**

Do you mean for clubs?

**Mr D Bradley:**

Yes.

**Mr Logan:**

They are mixed at best. We have a big job to do to catch up, particularly with the GAA, which,

fair play to it, has done an excellent job over the past 15 years. We were not good at achieving the level of grants that the GAA and, to a fair extent, soccer achieved. I would say that the subregional facilities are pretty mixed and range from very poor to quite good.

**Mr Watson:**

There was a period when we did pretty well in that field, but that expired a long time ago. We now need to regenerate that.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Is one of your priorities to address that problem in the future?

**Mr Watson:**

Definitely; in tandem with growing [*Inaudible.*] which is also a high priority.

**Mr Logan:**

We need to grow all parts of the game. You are absolutely right.

**Mr Hilditch:**

A couple of my questions have been asked, but I want to return to the comment about government procurement rules probably holding back many sports to a fair degree. You made the valid comment that, had it been the private sector, you would have been years ahead at this stage. Procurement has become difficult, and the Committee should look at that in the future, because the procedure, even for low-level grants, is becoming overly cumbersome.

You referred to the professional and amateur side of rugby. Is Ulster now a professional club side?

**Mr Logan:**

We have 48 professional players. We have 33 senior players, and the others are in our academy or on development contracts. Of those 48, only five are allowed to be non-Irish qualified, so we are overwhelmingly an Ulster side made up of local players with Ulster accents. We have five overseas players. The Ulster squad is overwhelmingly drawn from players in clubs and schools.



Organisationally, unlike many other professional clubs, the Ulster branch and the branch structure, and beyond that the IRFU, have sovereignty over us. The professional team and the professional squad are not separate from the rest of rugby in Ulster. We are one Ulster.

**Mr Hilditch:**

I know that there are underage teams, but are there any amateur top teams?

**Mr Watson:**

An amateur international side plays only a couple of times a year, and an all-Ireland league is played at domestic amateur level.

**Mr Logan:**

We have quite a few amateur players, several of whom played for Ulster last year. Our second XV — the Ravens — frequently has 20 amateur players.

**Mr Hilditch:**

That is what I was getting at.

**Mr Logan:**

We played something like 65 players last year between the senior side and our second side, the Ravens. With only 48 professionals, quite a few amateurs played at different times.

**Mr Hilditch:**

The idea behind getting the governing bodies before the Committee was to find out what the state of readiness was. I have been very impressed by the delegation today.

**Mr Ó hOisín:**

Thanks, gentlemen, for coming along. Probably the most successful rugby club in my neck of the woods is City of Derry. A few years ago, they made a judicious move to an excellent facility at the Judges Road site, which has been borne out by the number of teams they field and the amount of participation. I am cognisant of the difficulties that the GAA had with neighbours and adjoining properties during the redevelopment of Croke Park. Did you ever consider a different

site, on which a newbuild might have avoided many of the issues?

**Mr Logan:**

I have been with Ulster Rugby for only 16 months. However, back when the Maze was on the agenda, we would, along with the GAA and with reservations, have accepted a move to the Maze. I do not think that anywhere other than Ravenhill has been considered since.

**Mr Watson:**

No, Ravenhill is the only place. It has been the home of Ulster rugby since 1920. Capacity was an issue at one stage, but we moved on and were able to build the capacity to a level that we now feel is totally acceptable to take us forward. I do not think that we would want to move now.

**Mr Logan:**

Our relationship with residents is important. We work with, and invite to regular meetings, 500 to 550 households. We have come to an agreement with all of them, bar six or eight, and we will continue to work to be excellent neighbours to absolutely everybody. We are not perfect, but we are trying really hard.

We have done much to reach a stage in planning, with traffic plans and different loading of entrances to the stadium, which satisfies our neighbours. We are keen to work further with them. We would like traffic to be excluded from within a five-minute walking radius of the stadium. On many issues, we try to work on the same side.

**Mr Watson:**

We also schedule regular meetings with residents throughout the year, and our intention is to continue with that.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Given the increased capacity, have you any means to provide additional parking spaces in the area?

**Mr Logan:**

Yes, we have a huge plan for park-and-ride, which has been pretty arduous to put in place. There were some tough negotiations with the planning unit and Roads Service, but I think that we are there.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Where would the pick-up point be?

**Mr Logan:**

We have an escalating plan depending on the number of tickets sold. Typically, we will not have 18,000 spectators; if we are going well, it is more like 8,000. Our average last year was 8,600. An attendance of 18,000 would be for only our top-end games. I think that there are 10 sites, ranging from Cairnshill, Belfast Metropolitan College and Ormeau Park. Aquinas Grammar School, with which we have a very good relationship, will be a centre for park-and-ride. It will be a shuttle site, where buses will come in, drop people off and go back out.

**Mr Watson:**

The transport impact was an important part of our planning submission. We brought in professionals to look at it for us. Roads Service raised a number of issues, but I think that we have now addressed all those satisfactorily.

**Mr Logan:**

We learned a lot from Thomond Park, Croke Park and the Aviva Stadium. We consulted each of them to learn lessons on traffic, neighbours and a whole range of other things.

**The Chairperson:**

Thanks very much. It is useful for the Committee to know that you are in such good health and moving forward with your project. We wish you well with that. Again, I apologise for having kept you waiting.

**Mr Logan:**

Thank you very much.

