



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Firearms Legislation: Ulster Clay Pigeon
Shooting Association

26 September 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Mr Clifford Barr	Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association
Mr Jeff McCready	Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association

The Chairperson: From the Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association, I welcome Clifford Barr, its chairman, and Jeff McCready, its development director. We will be pleased to hear from you, and I invite Mr Barr to make some comments, after which members will have questions.

Mr Clifford Barr (Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association): We made an initial response to the consultation. That was followed by a letter from the Committee for Justice, which outlined the Department of Justice's proposals. We sent a letter of response on 9 September, which you should have, outlining the issues that we were raising. If you wish, we can go through those. Our main reason for being here is to talk about young shooters and our disadvantages as a sport in producing top-level athletes. I will let Jeff do a run-through of the issues for young shooters.

Mr Jeff McCready (Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association): I forwarded a copy of the briefing material, and hopefully everybody has that. As development director, my two core functions are recruiting the gene pool of shooters at grass-roots level, and ultimately having a pathway managerial responsibility for people who progress through that on their way to representation at either Great Britain or Ireland level at worldwide events.

The briefing paper outlines how the organisation is structured in Northern Ireland and how it goes through Sport NI and the Sports Institute Northern Ireland (SINI). That is in place and is linked into the Sport NI programme for performance focus, which is about the development of elite athletes, supported under the athlete investment programme. It is all about Northern Ireland shooters participating at international level. In our organisation, we have people who have shot at both Great

Britain and Ireland level, which is a matter of personal choice that we support. As to strategic positioning, we are trying to introduce Northern Ireland as a player on the world stage. Our strategic strapline for that developmental process is:

"Professional administration personalised to individual athletes and performance focused".

We are geared towards getting our athletes to as high a level as possible.

The minimum statutory age in Northern Ireland is 16; down South, it is 14; but importantly, in England, Scotland and Wales, there is no minimum age with regard to supervision. We see that as a major handicap. In fairness, that is generally where most leading nations are in the world. With shotguns, we are looking at nations such as Italy, Australia and India, where athletes usually start at a very young age. A new breed of athlete is starting to emerge from the nations that have no baseline, and some of them start to shoot at nine or 10 years of age. We are seriously handicapped because of our minimum age of 16.

The briefing mentions the consequences of age in Northern Ireland and the inability to attract youth to shooting. In the past, generally and historically, it has been restricted to family members and the wider family circle. Our sport is very much about eye/hand coordination, and in many sports in Northern Ireland, people are naturally talented at that. However, because we cannot recruit until 16 years of age, they are not really interested. We cannot speculate and look for talent among other sports. I am a big supporter of young people considering as many sports as possible at an early age, but we are hugely disadvantaged. As I said, it leads to a loss of equity with other nations. Last week, we had one lad who won a gold medal at the Commonwealth championships in the Isle of Man. He has missed out on a junior international career; he is now too old and cannot participate at junior level because he started too late. He has picked up the ball and is running with it as best he can, but he should have had four or five years' solid experience at a worldwide level under his belt at this stage. If he was in GB, he would definitely have been in that position already. It is a major headache for us.

Sports science literature on age is split about early specialisation in specific sports, but writers are all agreed that there is a working hypothesis that, for the opportunity to attain excellence, the earlier that you can get involved in a sport, the better, and the more opportunity that there is, the easier you will progress to becoming an international grade athlete.

The issue is not only about shooting. There are social benefits in reducing the minimum age for shooting, such as life skills for social interaction. I have a 17-year-old who constantly sits on the Xbox at home. Shooting gets him out into the field and allows him to do lots of things. It teaches discipline, particularly on safety. There is an opportunity for young people to become involved in Northern Ireland teams at home internationals. As with most sports these days, shooting equipment is very expensive, and a financial input is expected from the parents or grandparents for the competitions. Last but not least, it teaches respect for the rule of law at an early age. All those matters are as important as the actual shooting material.

In the briefing, I list the competitors who are probably the two highest-profile players on the world shooting circuit. At 16 years of age, Vincent Hancock was a world champion, not at junior level but at senior level. At the ages of 19 and 23, he went on to win two gold medals at the last two Olympic Games. He started shooting at nine or 10 years of age, so that is the proof of the pudding. Jessica Rossi has just turned 21, and she was a full-time world champion at the age of 17. Earlier this week, interestingly, she won the championship again in Peru. However, the best local competitor — if I can say that with respect to Great Britain — is young Amber Hill, who has just turned 16. Earlier this year, aged just 15, she won a World Cup gold medal in Acapulco. At that World Cup, 53% of the medal winners were aged 23 or under and had all been shooting from an early age. So you can see the obvious disadvantage for Northern Ireland.

It is back to the old adage: if you are good enough, you are old enough. Young people these days are getting taller and are much stronger, so setting a minimum age is not necessarily the way to do it. Someone could be physically stronger at 10 years of age than at 12, which is why we think that it is a better idea to reduce the minimum age and take that level away completely. Recent sports literature states that it is much easier for younger athletes to get into the zone at an earlier stage because they have not had life experiences that create elements of fear. We see younger champions in all sports — Rory McIlroy and other people.

All in all, that is my pitch. As a graduate in public policy, I understand the checks and balances that are required in making legislation, and we have some suggestions. We suggest that the age of a

firearm certificate holder be increased from 18, as the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 states, to 25. That allows for more maturity. A supervisor should have five years' relevant experience, whereas the initial draft suggested three years. We are looking for stronger safeguards. We do not seek to change any legal precedents such as someone having a firearm certificate at 16 years of age. We want athletes to benefit, but we do not want to weaken existing safeguards. In fact, we want the opposite: to strengthen safeguards. There is an excellent safety record in target shooting sports, they are very range-focused, there are controlled conditions and rules, and we have qualified coaches to look after them and to make sure that their development goes ahead on a structured basis.

The Chairperson: OK. Clifford, are there any other comments, or are you happy to take questions?

Mr Barr: We also have a few questions about the things that we listed.

We know that the Department of Justice has suggested that 12 is an appropriate age for a young shooter. As you know, we do not believe that there is a necessity for an age, but if that were proposed and put through, it would give us a big advantage to what we currently have. However, it is unclear whether the Department will lower the age for granting a certificate or will simply lower the age to allow people to participate. We believe that the latter would be the sensible approach and that there is no real need to start issuing certificates to 12-year-olds or 13-year-olds. There is a need to allow us to take them to shooting ranges and to train them under supervision with registered firearms that belong to their coaches, parents or whoever. The one point that we would like to clear up is: what is the DOJ's suggestion?

The Chairperson: If we need to find clarity for you, we will certainly do that with the Department. However, I am not in a position to clarify that for you.

Mr Barr: OK. The proposed fee was the only other point from the Department's response to the Justice Committee. Ideally, we would not like the fee to rise to £121. The Department of Justice claims that there is no evidence that that will reduce the number of firearms holders. We question where it got that evidence. Certainly, among our membership and those who are not that active, that fee may reduce participation. The net worry after that comes because it is a full cost recovery. If there are fewer certificate holders, will the cost start to ratchet up? However, we are certainly not opposed to an increase as long as there is a system in place that means that it can be monitored going forward.

That was really it from us. We will now answer any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for that. The Assembly voted on the age issue and put into legislation that it should be 10. However, the Minister has not actually brought the regulations forward to implement that. So, the Assembly has expressed its will, but the Minister has not moved and is trying to hold out.

This all goes into the pot of fees and age, and, meanwhile, you are caught in the middle trying to make people competitive in a sport that the rest of the world is moving on with because they can train the athletes at a much younger age. I think that that is a very unfortunate position for your organisation and for those who actually want to train as athletes in this sport. They are clearly being disadvantaged. I think that there is a need for a resolution to be found as soon as possible. The fee issue should not be used as a bargaining chip for whether age will be addressed. That should be done on its own merits.

To clarify, you indicated that you do not believe that it is necessary to have a minimum age at all. However, the counterbalance to that is the age at which you would be regarded as being old enough to supervise and the length of time that you have held a certificate. What would be the relevant experience? You said that someone should hold a certificate for five years. What would the threshold be that would deem someone as having the requisite experience?

Mr McCready: For our organisation, the relevant experience would be that they have held the certificate and have perhaps been a member of our organisation and participated at competition level. To me, that would be very appropriate and relevant experience.

We are very focused on clay target shooting as opposed to what happens out in the field. Again, the difference is that we impose very controlled conditions. Indeed, if someone were operating poorly or had bad safety management, you can rest assured that some of their other competitors would tell them about it.

So, I think that there are also consequences for the person who provides the supervision. He or she is not going to want to put their certificate in jeopardy, so you will get appropriate supervision. Basically, that is what we are talking about. Someone needs to be a member of our association for five years or have had five years relevant experience through work or something like that. That is the type of thing that we are talking about.

Mr Barr: At the end of the five years, the person will have also renewed their certificate, so there will be a check and balance on that individual. Certificates are granted initially for a five-year period, so the person who will do the supervision will have had a certificate for five years' experience and will have gone through an application to renew, so a number of checks will have been done on them.

It is very difficult to say that there should be a certificate or a certain test that they have to pass to say that they are valid as a supervisor. I think that that would get you into areas that could be very hard to control. However, the fact that they have had a certificate for five years and have bothered to renew it means that they have been participating in the sport and have an interest in it.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much indeed. To clarify your last point, are you talking about relevant experience of fewer than five years at a clay pigeon shoot as part of a bona fide clay pigeon shooting club? You are not talking about five years' experience as a member of a clay pigeon shooting club.

Mr McCready: I think that it is all part and parcel of the same thing. It is five years' relevant experience with a firearm, so I am saying that five years' membership of the Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association would be an example of five years' relevant experience.

Mr McGlone: I do not want to put a big head on you, but a number of your members with five years' experience would be superb shots or — this may be a better way of putting it — may be superbly experienced in shooting. I hope that they would. Reasonable experience as a member of a clay pigeon shooting club rather than five years' experience could be a wee bit inhibitory in bringing some young lad or young girl on. Someone who has been shooting could come into a clay pigeon shooting club and take a very active interest in it, proving themselves to be a very good shot, and establish themselves within a very short space of time. They could be very active and be out doing a bit of shooting maybe a couple or three times a week.

Mr Barr: To be fair, we would not argue with your point. It has been well made. On the other hand, you could have somebody who has had a certificate for two or three years but does not have a lot of experience.

Mr McGlone: Perhaps I should clarify what I mean. You are saying that the individual should have relevant experience with a clay pigeon shooting club or hold a firearms certificate for an appropriate weapon — obviously, a shotgun — for a period of at least five years. That is where you are taking it. In other words, you could have someone who has held a firearms certificate for a shotgun for fewer than five years but who has been a very active member of a clay pigeon shooting club for two, three or four years. He or she would have much more experience in shooting clays than anyone who has held a certificate for five years. That is my point.

Mr Barr: That is correct. We still recommend that our members have a firearms certificate for five years, particularly if they are taking out juniors.

Mr McGlone: OK.

Mr McCready: Mr McGlone, I think that it is a trade-off in trying to make it as responsible as possible. To us, the five years was a much more appropriate figure. You have to draw your stick somewhere, and the five years was our way of saying that we will benefit this way but that it will strengthen it the other way by providing the checks and balances that are needed.

Mr McGlone: I understand somebody having a permit for five years, whether they are a member of a clay pigeon shooting club or not. However, I just wanted to clarify where you were coming from and whether you were putting in the qualification that the person should have been a member of a clay pigeon shooting club for five years.

Mr Barr: We would still say that it should be five years.

Mr McGlone: OK. I picked up your point about what the Department said about there being no evidence to support the increase in the firearms fee. I find the level at which they are pinning that a bit ludicrous. If you are trying to encourage people to come in, whether they come in with a state-of-the-art Brooke or Perazzi or whatever or a lower level of gun, you do not want to inhibit them from joining the sport and you do not want people to think that it is an exclusive sport. In my opinion, the fee is far too high. There is no evidence to support the increase, but if they have not tried it, how are they going to have the evidence?

Mr Barr: That was one of the questions that we raised in our letters. We wrote that, without questioning firearms holders across the spectrum, surely evidence would become available only on the implementation of such an increase. Our question was whether DOJ had carried out any survey to ascertain its stated lack of evidence. We have not seen it carrying that out, so it is making an assumption. We find it hard to believe that an increase to £121 would not see a marked decrease in firearms certificates and, therefore, a decrease in revenue.

Mr McGlone: That is grand, Chair. Perhaps I could make one point. This has nothing to do with you, because the banding is already in place for the one-on/one-off transactions for shotguns. Can we establish where the banding of certain levels of firearms is with the Department at present? It seems to have got lost in the midst of something somewhere. I saw some correspondence today that stated that the Department had not quite arrived at agreement on the banding, even though it already has existing banding. A couple of new calibres of weapons have come in. I think that they are a 1.77 Hornet and a 204 or something like that. Other than that, it is a matter of putting them into their various brackets. So, I simply cannot understand why that work has not been completed when there is already a handbook that the police have worked from previously. Can we get the Department's position on that clarified, please?

The Chairperson: We can do that. Yes.

Mr McGlone: Thank you.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much. I am actually working off the written submission rather than the slides, so I hope that I do not confuse you. You say that the supervisor should be 25 years old and have five years' experience. The Department says that they should be 21 years old with three years' experience. Why are you saying 25 and five years?

Mr McCready: We are just saying that it is a wee bit more of a safeguard. Where reducing the age is concerned, the older person will have a more mature attitude. On balance, that is where it will sit, because that person will be a wee bit older and more experienced. So, I think that it is a natural trade-off: if you are lowering on one side, you are increasing on the other to get a wee bit more responsibility.

Mr Barr: A lot of other clay target associations work on having 25 as the required age, so that is an accepted position.

Mr McCartney: My other point — the Chair mentioned this — is that the Committee and the Assembly in general has 10 as the minimum age. This is just an observation: of the six people you listed, I think that only one was under 10 years of age. This is just a presentational thing, but if you have that sort of thing where there is no minimum age, you will have the screaming headline saying, "Three-year-old goes clay pigeon shooting". I think that a minimum age of 10 is a more presentable thing for us to take through than no minimum age, which is the case as at present. That is just an observation.

Mr McCready: It would certainly be a huge advancement on what there is at present.

Mr Elliott: Thanks very much for the presentation. Realistically, at what age do the majority of young people start shooting and clay pigeon shooting in particular?

Mr Barr: Do you mean the age at which we would want them to start?

Mr Elliott: Yes; the age at which you would want them to start. Do you have any examples from other regions, such as mainland GB?

Mr Barr: As Jeff highlighted, young Amber Hill, who is having a lot of success at present, started at nine years of age. It comes down to the individual's physical build. At nine years of age, some people are, physically and size-wise, able to hold and operate a shotgun. Others may be 10, 11 or 12 years old. The decision about the best age for them to start would be taken by the coach or parent. Certainly, we reckon that if you are going to reach the very top and elite level, you will need between five and 10 years' training to get there. Currently, we can actually introduce young people only at the age of 18. That is how the law stands. We can get them a certificate at age 16. However, we cannot actually take them out and let them try shooting until they are 18 years of age. That is how the law sits at present.

We can take a young person out at 18 years of age, as was the case with David Henning. Last week, David won the gold medal in the senior competition. David has now been shooting for five years. He has reached 21 years of age and is out of the junior bracket. He is now reaching a decent level. However, if we could get someone to that level at 15 or 16 years of age, their opportunity to win something on the world stage would be hugely increased. We are looking at being able to bring the athletes to the very top level and to put them on the world stage. We see no reason why people from Northern Ireland should not perform at the very top level on the world stage.

Mr Elliott: I know what it is like for an adult to go clay pigeon shooting. It might be useful if you could talk us through very quickly what it is like for a young person of about nine or 10 to go out and start shooting with an accomplice or someone who talks them or guides them through it. What is the actual process of training them?

Mr McCready: Primarily, you have to be able to ensure that they are safe in handling the shotgun. That does not have to be an adult's 12-gauge shotgun. There are other smaller gauges. When you go to other more professionally structured nations, such as Italy, they all start as standard with a 20 gauge, which is about 2 lbs lighter. At the early stages, it is very much about their ability to shoot safely as opposed to accurately. It is about instilling that mentality of safety. It is then a case of incrementally bringing them through the marksmanship elements. They start off with very basic things and hit very straightforward targets not only to get some confidence but to demonstrate that they are competent in what they are doing.

Mr Lynch: It states in the papers that you are not opposed to the fee increase but that you think that it should come in over a five-year period. Are you talking about the Department's figure being introduced over a five-year period?

Mr Barr: Not necessarily. We are saying that there has not been an increase for a number of years. We accept that we are at a stage now where there possibly should be an increase. However, if it is any sort of a sizeable increase, we feel that it should be phased in over time rather than just brought in with a one-off, sudden increase.

Mr Wells: I have a couple of questions. Are you opposed to the principle of cost recovery? Is that a principle of yours? A lot of folk out there would say that the people who apply for passports, driving licences etc basically cover the costs of those services. Do you believe that that principle applies to gun permits? If not, why not?

Mr McCready: It is a bit of a double-edged sword. The more you lose if there are non-renewals when you push the figure up, the more expensive it will get.

Mr Wells: Exactly the same principle would apply to a passport.

Mr Barr: We are not opposed to full cost recovery. We think that the cost should not be enormous. It then comes down to what the regime is, the number of people who are employed, the cost of running that department and its efficiencies. All those sorts of questions would need to be looked at. Given that we do not know what goes on, we are not in a position to answer that.

Mr Wells: I am intrigued about the restrictions on young people's taking up weapons. Is there a fear that we would get to the American situation and would have horrendous stories of totally legally held weapons getting into the hands of and being used by young people? The other day, there was a story about a five-year-old killing a two-year-old. Is there any evidence to suggest that that has ever happened or could ever happen in a Northern Ireland or UK-wide situation?

Mr Barr: If you look at the rest of GB, you see that there has been no minimum age and there is certainly no evidence, with the law control that is currently in place, of anything like that happening. I think that America is a different situation.

Mr Wells: I accept that. I was just teasing that out, because I have not heard of anything like that in the media in recent years. Clearly, the regulations work there. What do you think is the reason why Northern Ireland has been asked to step outside that?

Mr McCready: Our storage safeguards are stronger than they are in GB.

Mr Wells: So, what is going on here? Why do you think this is being implemented?

Mr McCready: As Clifford has said, it is not happening in GB. We are saying that our storage regulations are even more robust than they are in GB. So, I think that it is because of those two things added together. When there are any illegalities in shootings and all the rest, they tend to be committed by adults as opposed to juniors anyway. I think that our robust safeguards for storage are sufficient, and there is certainly no evidence to contradict that.

Mr Barr: That is one of the reasons why we feel that we should not be looking at granting a shotgun certificate to somebody of 10 years of age. We do not agree with that at all. It should be that that person of 10 years of age can take part in the sport under the supervision of a coach or parent who is supplying the shotgun and whose control they are under so that the child has use of the shotgun only on the range and in the stand under supervision. It is not granted to them as their shotgun.

Mr Wells: On the rule that someone who has had a licence for five years can supervise a young person, most of the farmers around me have had shotgun licences for 40 years, but none of them is competent to train a young person in anything. They use their shotgun to shoot the odd crow or fox, and then they put the shotgun back for another year. They are just not sufficiently skilled in tutoring a young person. Rather than just going by the five years, should there not be some formal recognised qualification before you can supervise a young person or some form of certificate from your organisation?

Mr Barr: If that farmer were to bring his son to one of our clay pigeon clubs, he would find that he is being supervised just as much as his son. There is supervision on our ranges. We have safety literature that our clubs have to abide by, and what we are proposing is for clay target.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, gentlemen. It is good to see you again. I will come back to the cost of the certificate. Obviously, I know very little about clay pigeon shooting. Is it a family-orientated sport that goes from dad to uncle to sons to daughters? You usually find that in clubs.

Mr Barr: Very much so.

Mr Anderson: You say that you are not opposed to an increase, but that would result in a big cost to families who have a lot of their members participating in the sport. Would you find that to be a problem?

Mr Barr: Yes, that could be a problem, if the cost is too high. Cost needs to be looked at to see where it will sit and what will happen to it going forward. If you state that it will be full cost recovery and that it will cost, say, £80 for a certificate in 2014, what safeguard do we have that it will not cost £160 in 2015 or 2016?

Mr Anderson: It can be an expensive sport when you consider the cost of the guns. Does each family member typically have a gun, or do they share guns? How does it operate?

Mr Barr: They can. Speaking for myself, my wife and my daughter shoot, and we all have our own shotgun certificates. So, there are three in our one family.

Mr Anderson: To make it to the very top grades and to world championship level and to win such accolades, you would probably have your own gun and would get used to that one gun. So, it will be an expensive sport. I am trying to tease out the fact that the increase could result in a big increase to

families, if the sport is family-orientated. I do not know what the make-up is, but you probably find that, in a lot of clubs, one follows the other.

Mr Barr: Yes, if the increase is what is being proposed, we believe that it will be off-putting and will harm the sport.

Mr Anderson: Would it be off-putting to extent that it would stop those people participating?

Mr Barr: We have spoken to some of our members who probably are not shooting at international level but are what we call club shooters. Some of them have said, "If this goes to £121, count me out; that is me finished with the sport." I think that £121 is a very high level to set the rate at. That is why, in the initial consultation, if it had been a 10-year permit, which you have with driving licences and passports and so on, it would be much more workable. We have seen the Chief Constable's and the Department of Justice's argument against that. They want a review of the individual at the five-year point. We do not necessarily think that that is required. We believe that there could be a lengthening to that time — perhaps to seven years instead of five. That would bring the costs much more under control where the amount of work for the firearms office and for people applying is concerned, as they would apply once every seven years rather than every five years. So, I think that the time frame needs looked at, but I see that the Chief Constable is looking to stick with five years.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, thank you both very much for coming to the Committee.