



Briefing for the Presentation to the DSD Committee, 19 January 2012

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### **Summary Agenda**

1. **Who we are:** A group of recreational poker players
2. **Specific goals:** Legislation that would allow poker to be played in regulated venues at stakes similar to those allowed in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland
3. **The Northern Ireland poker scene:** Primarily recreational with approximately 1-2000 enthusiasts who have found that their access to safe and regulated games has diminished over the past few years.
4. **Some poker myths:** Misconceptions about poker.
5. **Benefits of Legalisation:** Economic benefits: jobs, tourism, revenue. Cross community interaction.
6. **Additional Facts:** About poker and gambling.
7. **In Conclusion**

## 1. Who We Are

A group of recreational poker players who have watched their access to poker diminish over the past six years and have got together to try to get legislation brought into line with the UK, Ireland and other European countries. We have an organisation with over 50 active members and many supporters as reflected in the following figures

Over 700 have signed our e-petition in less than 5 weeks. We can provide details of all e-petition signees along with any comments.

We are enthusiasts – not addicts! – coming from all walks of life and from many religious / cultural / ethnic groups and all ages and genders.

## 2. Specific Goals:

We agree with former DSD Minister Alex Atwood who said:

*"My top priority in taking forward the review will be the public interest, striking a balance between developing gambling as a legitimate leisure pursuit and minimising its potential negative consequences."*

Below is the statement from the Review of Gambling Law Consultation Document as relates to poker:

### *3.3 Poker and other gaming in pubs and clubs*

*Driven by the popularity of televised poker, Texas Hold'em tournaments and other equal chance gaming are becoming a source of entertainment and income for pubs and registered clubs in GB. Generally speaking the types of games provided in these premises have controls designed to protect both the players and those providing the facilities to ensure that gaming remains ancillary to the main purpose of the pub or club.*

*The Northern Ireland law is more restrictive in terms of gaming that may take place in licensed premises and registered clubs to the extent that poker or other games cannot be organised commercially here. As with other aspects of gambling, the law in this area is complex. The review presents an opportunity to consider whether, in principle, there should be an easing of the current restrictions to permit registered clubs and licensed premises here to offer poker, bingo and other equal chance games, subject to limits on stakes and prizes.*

Our suggestion is for clarification in the law to make live poker legal in the current review of the legislation.

Ideally, the new legislation would allow for poker in permitted, regulated venues, with buy-ins similar to those in the rest of the UK and Ireland, all regulated and overseen centrally by an appropriate regulatory body.

We do not seek to determine the types of premises to be licensed. As poker in most European countries can be played in gaming clubs, poker clubs or casinos, we believe any combination of these will work.

We do not seek to set buy in limits as experience tells us that these limits are self regulating and reflect the current economic situation.

In addition, we ask that Poker Festivals be able to apply to the central body for one off licenses for events which, due to capacity, need to run in venues such as hotels.

We suggest a minimum age of 18 for all poker venues in line with the other European regulations.

Where premises are licensed for poker and also licensed for the sale of alcohol we would recommend that alcohol be banned from the poker playing area.

### **3. The N. Ireland Poker Scene Past and Present**

#### Past: (up to 2000) Poker was played in two specific areas.

Games played amongst friends or acquaintances, usually in private homes but occasionally in clubs or bars. The games were played for cash. Poker drives held in clubs and pubs. These drives had a fixed buy in with the money paid returned to the winning players. The 1985 legislation was of its time and reflected a need to regulate poker drives but made no attempt to regulate private home games.

#### Present: 2000 onwards. The internet years

Online poker first appeared in 1998 and snowballed as issues of trust and technology were overcome. This led to a corresponding rapid growth in live poker which at its height in early 2006 boasted more than 15 clubs and more than 20 pub venues in Northern Ireland. On any given night several hundred poker enthusiasts could be found playing throughout the province. Most clubs and many of the pubs were in “neutral” areas and this led to groups of players who reflected all social, religious, ethnic and gender groups. The growth has continued and there is a whole new industry out there which could never have been envisaged when the last gambling legislation in Northern Ireland was considered.

Since 2006 most of the games have closed or been closed due to enforcement or threat of enforcement. This has led to two very detrimental situations. Games have been polarised and now are found in back rooms that are not seen as neutral and do not attract players from outside the areas they take place in. Players who cannot find a neutral venue are forced to

travel to games in Republic of Ireland or Great Britain incurring heavy overheads in travel expenses etc. As an example, the last large tournament in Dublin (Dec 12<sup>th</sup>) had 450 entrants of whom more than 40% were from N. Ireland. Most of the tournaments in Ireland have similar attendance by Northern Irish players.

Demand for poker has increased dramatically in the past few years. Our addenda *Poker in Ireland and Europe* and *Recent Poker Event Numbers* show the demand for poker tournaments in Ireland, the rest of the UK, and Europe, and are indicative of a similar demand in N. Ireland. In addition, there are more than 20 poker clubs currently operating in the Irish Republic.

#### 4. Some Poker Myths

- Myth: Poker is a game of luck, not skill

- Fact: To get consistent results, a player needs a grasp of maths, probability, game theory, psychology, body language and lots of practice.

Poker is a skill based game that has been accepted as a mind sport by the International Mind Sports Association (like chess and bridge). The International Federation of Poker does not regard poker as gambling, as unlike craps, slot machines and the like, in which the odds are against the player, poker players wager favourable odds. In addition, poker is played against other players, as opposed to other casino games, which are played against the “house” and in which the odds are stacked against the player.

Professor Charles Nesson of Harvard Law School uses poker to teach law students courtroom techniques, and is developing a worldwide university based mind sports research network in conjunction with the IFP.

- Myth: People lose houses and businesses in the big games

- Fact: In club games the buy-in is fixed or subject to modest limits. If there are big games (we don’t know about them) they will be private games unaffected by this legislation.

- Myth: Poker players are gambling addicts

- Fact: We are not aware of any “problem” poker addicts. Poker is far less likely to lead to such problems than – say – lottery scratch cards or horse betting. Poker is a commitment to an evening of play, not conducive to the quick result and return (impulse gambling) that most problem gamblers seek.

According to a recent study (*British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010*) : “ amongst those who played poker and take part in 6 or fewer other gambling activities, problem gambling prevalence rates were much lower (1.4%) than with Fixed odd betting

terminals (5%) and football pools (2.5%).” This is also less than the overall rate of problem gambling (2.2%) found in the DSD’s own survey (*Northern Ireland Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010*). Legalising poker will not lead to new problem gamblers.

## **5. Benefits of Legalisation:**

### **To Players:**

- Local players need not travel many miles to play in a legal game in a safe environment.
- Poker provides a social outlet for many people who are not inclined to visit pubs or clubs. A game of poker is cheaper than a night out with the added benefit of a potential return on their money.
- Poker is a game that encourages positive social behaviour and responsibility, and it is our experience that live poker fosters cross-community interaction which leads to friendships in and beyond the poker room. It is a good example of what N. Ireland strives to be, a place where all people just get along and live their lives.

### **To N. Ireland:**

- Poker festivals have indicated to us that they would run events in N Ireland. There were over 30 poker festivals in Ireland last year and nearly 900 in Europe. The UKIPT, for example, had between 400 and 1,100 players at each stop this year at a range of locations around the UK and Ireland. The demand is clearly there from both players and festival organisers.
  - Boost to the local hotel and travel industry with players travelling in.
  - Boost to the local food service industry
  - We estimate a minimum 1.5 to 2 million pounds entering the local economy via hotel and food expenditure alone.
- Employment
  - In March 2009 there were 14,000 employees in the GB casino industry. Based on N. Ireland’s population, we extrapolate the creation of 420 jobs here.
  - Poker has a high ratio of jobs to revenue, and big spin-off benefits
- Revenues stay in Northern Ireland
- Greater integration of communities as we continue to grow as a country

## 6. Some Additional Facts:

- The only countries in Europe where poker is not regularly played in clubs, casinos and other venues are Andorra, Turkey, Vatican City, Norway and N. Ireland. (See *Poker in Ireland and Europe* Excel addendum).
- The only place that the UK and Ireland Poker Tour cannot travel to is the only place that is both part of the UK and part of Ireland – N. Ireland
- There are 330 licensed bookmakers in N. Ireland, as well as 40 bingo halls, two dog racing and two horse racing tracks, and 165 amusement arcades with gaming machines . Allowing a few poker venues is not going to significantly increase gambling or create new problem gamblers.
- Legitimate venues that offer poker seek to run socially responsible operations, as evidenced by our addenda: *The Gaming & Leisure Association of Ireland Core Principles and Code of Practice* and the *NI Bingo and Gaming Association Proposal* letter. Currently, poker games that have been forced into the shadows have no compelling reason to run honest and socially responsible operations.

## 7. In Conclusion:

1. Poker is a sociable activity that encourages cross community interaction.
2. Poker has the potential to bring significant economic benefit to Northern Ireland.
3. The changes that we are asking for only bring us into line with other European jurisdictions including the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

We simply ask that our hobby gets fair treatment in line with other similar activities, through an easing of the current restrictions to permit registered clubs and other premises here to offer poker at stakes similar to those throughout Europe.

Reference materials (addended):

*The Gaming & Leisure Association of Ireland Core Principles and Code of Practice* (Word File)  
*NI Bingo and Gaming Association Proposal* letter (PDF)  
*Poker in Ireland and Europe* (Excel Spreadsheet)  
*Recent Poker Event Numbers* (Word File)