



Irish FA submission to the NI Assembly Committee for Communities on the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Amendment) Bill

Background

The Irish FA is the governing body for football in Northern Ireland. Our aim is to promote, foster and develop football for all across the country. Our business model is in many ways a simple one. Our objective is to raise as much money as we can through the assets and rights we hold or promote, and we budget to spend that money each year to develop football in a myriad of ways throughout Northern Ireland. Our member clubs are in effect our shareholders. Although we are a small country of around 1.8 million people, our remit in terms of providing football for all within Northern Ireland is vast, spanning the international game, domestic football and grassroots work where we encourage people to play for fun and fitness. Our charity arm, the Irish FA Foundation, is a significant provider of education, health and social inclusion work in Northern Ireland.

An overview on our work in relation to gambling

- We do not currently have a gambling partner and have declined recent overtures from such companies
- We have, however, sold LED pitch advertising minutes for senior men's games to betting companies in Europe.
- We have a developing relationship with Gamcare, the UK's leading provider on advice for those harmed by gambling, which has provided awareness training to our staff and offered free training out to clubs as well.
- This training has been extended to those participants on the Stay Onside community programmes and Connect programmes, both of which are run by the Irish FA.
- Our bespoke mental health programme, Ahead of the Game programme which is offered to all grassroots clubs, includes a section on gambling particularly led by former Northern International footballer, Keith Gillespie, who has personally suffered with issues in relation to it.

Key points from submission

1. Clause 9: 'Rule for societies' lotteries'.

In respect of the amendment to the rules for societies' lotteries, the Irish FA believes this bill will meet the overall policy objectives. Many football clubs run a weekly lottery at £1 a ticket and this is vital income for those clubs. For fundraising raffles, the £1 limit on a ticket price is restrictive and cumbersome. The cost of maintaining and developing capital facilities for football clubs can range from small amounts to hundreds of thousands of pounds.

We welcome the removal of the £1 limit and other restrictions as a real boost for clubs who sorely need to raise funds post pandemic.

We know that many football clubs at grassroots level missed out the NI Executive's hospitality, leisure and tourism grant as their rateable value fell short of the required figure, leaving them with little to offset the losses they have suffered from the absence of their usual revenue streams, namely pitch rental, sponsorships, and bar takings.

Whilst the lifting of this restriction won't be the 'silver bullet' it allows these clubs who have been so badly impacted to be really focus on being creative around raising funds.

2. We welcome the recognition of cheating as a criminal offence. We work closely, via our Integrity team, to monitor betting patterns and want to preserve and protect our game from this criminality.

UEFA and the Irish Football Association have a number of rules relating to betting which affect all players, managers, coaches, club medical staff, including Irish FA staff and other Participants (e.g. Directors, Licensed agents), covering three key areas; betting, the use of inside information and match fixing.

We have rules in place to ensure that in every football match both teams and individual players are playing to the best of their ability and with a clear motivation to win the game, without any conflicting objectives for either club or any player or club official.

It is also very important for the reputation of the game that players, managers, coaches, and other club officials are not involved in non-match betting (for example, on promotion and relegation in league competitions in which their team is involved).

There is now a wide range of types of bets that can be placed on football, including in-play betting. Consequently, it is vital for football to protect the integrity and reputation of the game. All Players and Participants are bound by UEFA and IFA rules and regulations.

3. We welcome the use of the levy to directly fund projects related to gambling addiction. We would also recommend that consideration is given to funding other sports type physical activity as this is a great diversionary tactic from issues around addiction. We believe it is right that businesses that make money from sport should contribute to sport in some way and any levy should be used to improve community sports facilities and clubs. There is a moral obligation for gambling firms to do this but the subsequent benefits for grassroots football could be significant if the levy was applied in this way.

Summary

We support, and have liaised with, our partners at the Northern Ireland Sports Forum on this submission but, in relation to football, we conclude that:

- We welcome the ability for football clubs to raise increased funds, particularly pertinent as our industry, like all others, continues to traverse out of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- We welcome the recognition of cheating as a criminal offence as this will further enhance the integrity of our game and ultimately attract and encourage more people to take part in it.
- We believe that the levy would be better used by being funnelled towards facilities and activities that keep people in our communities physically fit which, as we know, has a direct correlation to the positive mental wellbeing of us all.