

CREATING A SOCCER STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

**Report from the Advisory Panel to the
Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure**



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FOREWORD

In October 2000, Michael McGimpsey MLA, Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, established an Advisory Panel to help guide the development of a strategy for tackling the problems facing local football. I was very pleased to accept the role of chairing the Panel.

A considerable amount of work and effort has been given by the Panel over the last twelve months in responding to the task set by the Minister. The detail of the Panel's input is set out elsewhere in this report. I should like to take this opportunity to place on record my personal thanks to the other Panel members for their contribution, particularly in terms of the huge amount of time they have given freely to the process. At all times – afternoons, evenings, weekends and even a beautiful Sunday afternoon in June – we believed that we were working towards one goal, the betterment of football in Northern Ireland. I should also like to thank the DCAL officials who supported the Panel's work.

No one individual or organisation owns football. Football belongs to the people, and through this process we hope we have engaged with the people and taken account of their views in this report. In many ways this is their report.

The Advisory Panel is sincerely grateful to everyone who contributed throughout the process and hopes that those concerned have been suitably acknowledged at Appendix II.

The Panel hopes that its report will be accepted as a positive and productive step towards creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland.

In presenting this report of over 150 recommendations to the Minister, the Advisory Panel is confident that, providing all elements of the report are accepted and acted upon, the game of football will thrive and flourish throughout our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Billy Hamilton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

BILLY HAMILTON
Chair of the Advisory Panel

October 2001

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The Panel was supported by the following officials of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Dr Eddie Rooney, Dr Dennis McCoy, Mrs Lynda Lister, Mrs Evelyn Miller, Mr Martin Moore, Miss Sharon McKernan and Miss Joanne Larkin.

INTRODUCTION

On 20 October 2000, Mr Michael McGimpsey MLA, Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, announced plans to develop a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland:

There are acute problems facing the game, including low attendance, the poor state of grounds and the financial difficulties of some of the clubs. Measures need to be taken to develop and secure soccer as a thriving and successful sport for the longer term and so I am introducing an initiative, *Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland*.

This followed appeals from a wide range of football interests for the Minister to help tackle the crisis that many increasingly felt the game was facing. Interestingly, the extent of this crisis was spelled out two years previously in the discussion document *The Way Forward*, produced by the IFA in October 1998 (IFA, 1998). It identified key issues such as too many matches, lack of planning, dwindling crowds and 'slow financial death'; and recommended new structures, facilities and programmes to be developed in the context of 'an entirely new cultural environment'. Unfortunately, many of its recommendations were not acted upon.

It is not possible to attribute problems to any one cause, or to pick out any one solution. Rather, the causes of the general malaise must be viewed as the combination of several factors, ranging from the local to the global.

Many point to the 1970s and the Troubles as the real starting point, and of course, football suffered greatly from the civil unrest during this period. Derry City was lost to senior football; Distillery was forced to abandon Grosvenor Park; and sectarian tension became an unfortunate feature of many matches. Many supporters became reluctant to go to matches, and attendances went into sharp decline.

But this is by no means the only cause, nor necessarily the biggest one. Particularly in the last decade, football across the world has been revolutionised by the globalisation and deregulation of communications media and the international economy. Most obviously, television has enabled top-level football to be marketed with ease as a commercial product. The football authorities have capitalised on this with innovations such as the FA Premiership in England and the Champions League in Europe. In addition, the 'Bosman ruling' has accelerated the international movement of players and reduced the transfer revenue of smaller clubs. All of this has meant that increasing revenue is shared out among fewer clubs in a small number of the larger countries, and has had a detrimental effect on smaller countries such as Northern Ireland. Local football must now compete with saturation media coverage of English and European football.

Despite its difficulties, football has continued to make a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland community. It has survived the trauma of the Troubles, still attracts considerable interest and showed its potential to attract paying spectators with this year's Irish Cup final drawing over 14,000 to a sold out game. What is needed is a collective drive to overcome problems while building on the often unacknowledged positive developments that are taking place.

In initiating *Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland*, therefore, the Minister began a collective process to understand and address the problems facing the game as a whole, rather than to deal with each problem in isolation. This process needed to examine football from the grass roots through to the highest level. It had to tackle not just the immediate issues, but also to point the way towards action that would provide long term solutions for an inter-related set of problems facing the game.

The Soccer Strategy process was founded upon the principle of bringing together as many informed views as possible from all the game's stakeholders. This was put into practice through a consultative research exercise and a major conference workshop organised around the principles of Future Search (see <http://www.futuresearch.net>), a method of bringing diverse interests together to develop a common agenda for action.

An Advisory Panel, bringing together a number of people with a wide range of expertise and experience in the game, both locally and further afield, was established by the Minister to oversee the strategy process. The formal remit of the Panel was:

- to act as a sounding board and offer advice to the Minister at all stages of the process for the development of a soccer strategy
- to provide input to the consultation process and participate in the conference workshop
- to quality assure the outputs from the process, including the draft strategy document which will be issued for wide consultation
- to advise the Minister on any issue related to the strategy.

Management consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers were commissioned to carry out the most extensive research on football yet undertaken in Northern Ireland, involving surveys of clubs, players and the general public; face-to-face interviews with key informants; focus groups; and public meetings across the province. Over 2,500 people were consulted in this process.

The research, published on 5 February 2001 (PwC, 2001), identified a wide range of issues which helped to inform the Future Search conference workshop, held in Newcastle from 10-12 February 2001. This brought together representatives from all the key stakeholders in the game, including administrators, players, coaches, managers, referees, supporters, the media, academics, Government, and voluntary and statutory agencies. The outcome of the conference was the identification of an agreed list of key issues to be addressed by the Soccer Strategy, and these are reflected in the chapters of this report.

The Advisory Panel then led a series of exercises to build on and refine the ideas that emerged from the conference. Several working groups were established to bring forward the recommendations that are set out in the following chapters of this report. These groups involved many of the key interests working together to identify what they believed to be the critical actions that would positively affect the game and address the main obstacles to progress.

In addition to harnessing local perspectives and expertise on football, the Panel has taken into account experience from outside Northern Ireland to identify good practice and lessons. Visits were made to the FAI Eircom League, Livingston Football Club in Scotland and the French national youth academy at Clairefontaine. Discussions were also held with the Norwegian Football Association.

The report that follows represents a considerable amount of work over the last year and is the product of much thought, discussion and debate. During the year, football has not stood still and developments have taken place, some directly as a result of the Minister's strategy process, such as steps to improve media relations and towards establishing a players' football association. Other developments have occurred independently of the process, including the decision to accord the Northern Ireland Boys', Schools' and Women's Football Associations voting rights on the IFA Council, the IFA's introduction of a club-based youth development programme and the Irish League's measures towards restructuring. The debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 21 May 2001 was another significant event, underlining the affection for the game and recognising its importance.

The Advisory Panel believes that its recommendations, many of which will undoubtedly take time to implement, will ultimately lead to a significant improvement in the overall standard of football in Northern Ireland and secure its future in the long term.

The next important step is a public consultation process on the report to gauge the reactions of the wider community on the Panel's proposals. The outcome of that process will inform DCAL's strategy for football for the future. It is important that the strategy is produced without delay, taking on board

the wide range of views that the Panel expects will emerge during consultation.

Encouraged by reaction so far, the Panel hopes that its report will be received positively and looks forward to critical and constructive responses from all football's stakeholders. The Panel also hopes that the goodwill experienced throughout the past year will be translated into material support in the future.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 1: Governance and Administration

A newly constituted governing body, combining the current functions of the Irish Football Association and the Irish Football League should be created, equipped to implement the recommendations in the Soccer Strategy. The governing body should be structured as a professional decision-making body and be founded on the following principles and features of best practice: accountability; focus; leadership; integration; equity; inclusiveness and fair representation; and transparency and openness to scrutiny.

The IFA and the Irish League should enter into a process of discussion and negotiation with the aim of agreeing a model for governance and administration.

Chapter 2: League Structure

The Irish League should comprise three divisions of fourteen teams each, with teams playing each other twice. There should be automatic promotion and relegation between each division, providing clubs fulfil certain standards in relation to open criteria, such as the standard of facilities.

The Irish League should form the top of a 'pyramid' system that enables progression from the grass roots through to senior football. Clubs at all levels should reserve the right to refuse promotion if they feel it is not in their best interests.

There should be three national senior competitions: the Irish League championship, the Irish Cup and one other. Consideration should be given to introducing an all-Ireland competition.

Throughout all leagues, the timing of matches should be flexible, with the final decision resting with home clubs, including the option of Sunday football where both clubs consent. Intermediate and junior leagues should be encouraged to change kick-off times to enable amateur players to attend Irish League matches.

The football season should continue as at present from August to May, but be kept under regular review.

Restructuring should be phased in, beginning in 2003-04.

Chapter 3: Club Development and Management

Clubs should take steps to introduce in-house business acumen and financial managements skills, and introduce financial plans, strategic plans and marketing strategies.

The governing body and the Sports Council should make available to clubs appropriate professional advice, including the provision of a training programme on club administration, management and marketing.

DCAL and the Sports Council should continue to develop and provide a programme of support to clubs for community-based activities and should consider the extension of the Football in the Community scheme to Irish League clubs.

Chapter 4: Youth Development

The governing body, along with all appropriate football associations and leagues, should sign up to a new common youth development policy.

Mini-soccer should be the basis for developing football skills for primary school-age children, and all existing eleven-a-side leagues for such players should move to mini-soccer.

Senior clubs should establish youth Football Development Centres providing mini-soccer for primary school-age children, community programmes for post-primary school-age children, and programmes targeted at talented players.

A Northern Ireland Football Academy should be established to develop the most talented young players and to provide the nucleus for future international school and youth teams.

The governing body should introduce a central registration system for youth players.

Chapter 5: Disability

The governing body should broaden its current learning disability programme to include people with physical disability and sensory impairment, and designate a post with responsibility for strategic development for disability football.

Clubs should seek to provide a range of activities involving disabled people.

Chapter 6: Women's Football

The governing body should designate a Women's Development Officer to co-ordinate and promote women's football. It should take steps to ensure that representatives of women's football are able to influence decisions relating to the future development and management of the game.

Rules governing girls' and boys' football should converge to enable consistent opportunities for participation in youth football irrespective of gender, and consideration should be given to renaming the Northern Ireland Boys' Football Association.

The affiliation of women's clubs to Irish League clubs should be encouraged.

Chapter 7: Players

A Northern Ireland Players' Football Association (NIPFA) should be established to promote the welfare of football players; and to promote harmonious relationships between players and all other football interests.

Chapter 8: Refereeing

The governing body should appoint a dedicated Referees' Development Officer to manage and co-ordinate the administration of refereeing in Northern Ireland, to address the shortage of referees through recruitment, to raise the profile of refereeing, and to serve and advise the governing body's Referees' Committee.

The Northern Ireland Referees' Association should seek to promote constructive relationships with both players and supporters.

Chapter 9: Supporters

Football clubs should consider ways of consulting with their supporters on relevant issues, including examining the feasibility of formal representation on management committees.

Football supporters, and supporters' clubs, should consider the formation of an umbrella body that would be the recognised voice of Irish League supporters.

This new organisation should, in partnership with the governing body, the Irish League, the police and other relevant parties, draw up a code of conduct for supporters.

Chapter 10: Community Relations

The governing body, working with the Sports Council and anti-sectarian practitioners, should develop a strategy to tackle sectarianism in the context of promoting respect and tolerance.

The governing body should lead by example in setting itself as the 'gold standard' for community relations good practice, both at the level of management and within the design and running of its programmes.

The governing body should develop specific initiatives to counter public perceptions of football as sectarian and as unappealing to families in general, and to women and girls in particular.

Chapter 11: Media Relations

Media facilities should be enhanced and accessibility to players should be improved at international and local matches.

Every senior club should have a dedicated press officer, accessible to, and with proper authority to speak to, the media. The Irish League should facilitate media training for club press officers.

Steps should be agreed to improve media coverage of local football, in particular its visual presentation.

Chapter 12: Spectator Facilities and Safety Management

Clubs must accept responsibility for safety management at their grounds and they, along with their governing bodies, should recognise the need to promote a culture of safety, security and comfort for spectators.

Legislation should be enacted, making provisions for safety at sports grounds, and placing a requirement on the management of larger venues to obtain a safety certificate from the District Council. Venues designated as requiring safety certificates would include football grounds with a potential capacity of 3,500 or more, and Gaelic and rugby grounds with a potential capacity of 6,500 or more.

Safety matters at smaller venues should be addressed by legislation to empower District Councils to issue prohibition notices.

A funding package should be made available to establish a grant-aid scheme for improvement works at sports grounds over a period of around eight to ten years. A five-year funding programme should also be made available for stewarding.

Legislation should be introduced, making provisions for offences in relation to disorderly conduct by persons attending sporting events. The inclusion of offences in relation to sectarian and other offensive behaviour, and the misuse of alcohol, by spectators inside grounds should also be considered.

The Sports Council should be assigned as overseeing body to ensure the implementation of health and safety requirements at sports grounds, and to administer the recommended funding programmes.

Chapter 13: Playing Facilities

The Sports Council, working with other funders, providers and users, should carry out an assessment, mapping out existing and future requirements for all levels of football. The Sports Council should take the lead in encouraging and developing innovative proposals for providing adequate and sustainable facilities.

Chapter 14: National Stadium

A national stadium should be established. DCAL, in conjunction with the governing body and the Sports Council and other interested parties, should commit to establishing the stadium and prepare an action plan and timetable for its development.

Criteria for assessing the options should take account of: international standards; the potential to provide an inclusive venue and a welcoming environment for all; the potential to contribute to the long term development of football; and cost-effectiveness.

Chapter 15: Conclusion

This report should be published for widespread consultation at the earliest opportunity.

Government, the Sports Council, the Irish Football Association and the Irish Football League should give priority to working together to draw up an implementation plan, setting a timetable and identifying funding requirements and sources.

The recommendations should be treated and taken forward as a complete package.

1. GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

- 1.1 The Irish Football Association is recognised by FIFA, UEFA and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland as the governing body for all football in Northern Ireland. Established in 1880, it is the fourth oldest football association in the world. Its objectives include the promotion, development and regulation of all branches of association football. The organisation has a specific responsibility for international football, and runs Northern Ireland's national cup competitions at senior, intermediate, junior and youth levels.
- 1.2 The Irish Football League is responsible for running Northern Ireland's national league – the Irish League Premier and First Divisions at senior football level – as well as a Second Division at intermediate level; a Reserve League and a Youth League. It also runs cup competitions for each of its leagues. Established in 1890, it is the second oldest football league in the world.
- 1.3 Both organisations are established as companies limited by guarantee, each operating in accordance with its own memorandum and articles of association.
- 1.4 The consultation exercise recorded a wide range of concerns about the structure and management of football (PwC, 2001). These included uncertainty about the respective roles and responsibilities of the IFA and the Irish League, and perceived poor relations between the two, leading to conflicting decisions and a lack of unity in the leadership of the game.
- 1.5 The decision-making processes of the IFA, including the role of the Council, were criticised. Decision-making processes in the Irish League were also criticised. These concerns were also well aired by participants at the conference workshop in Newcastle. The Advisory Panel concurs that there are weaknesses in the management of football and agrees that the game requires new arrangements for governance and administration.
- 1.6 The consultation revealed that 'Almost everyone who expressed a view considered that there was a need for one governing body to take senior football forward' (PwC 2001, p. 17). This opinion was further endorsed by the participants at the Newcastle workshop, and forms the basis of the Panel's recommendations in this report.

- 1.7 The Panel believes that integrated governance and administration, introducing unity, clarity and synergy, can only bring benefits to senior football, and football in general.
- 1.8 Moreover, the recommendations contained elsewhere in this report will create new demands and challenges and will require strong leadership if they are to be implemented, and this will best be achieved by new arrangements such as those proposed below.
- 1.9 The Panel does not, however, propose the 'take-over' of one organisation by another, but rather the creation of a newly constituted body founded on principles of equity, inclusiveness, accountability and transparency, with a streamlined and efficient structure capable of leading football into the 21st century.
- 1.10 The Panel is conscious that problems in the governance of sport are not unique to football, or to Northern Ireland, and notes that other countries have successfully modernised and improved their football administrations in recent years. The Panel has also borne in mind the wider and increasingly important fundamental issues that affect all areas of our society, for instance, equality and human rights.
- 1.11 It is in the context of the above that the Panel has produced the following recommendations, including possible models of governance and administration that would maximise effectiveness and efficiency, and best serve the interests of football in Northern Ireland.
- 1.12 To assist the Panel, PricewaterhouseCoopers was employed to draw up the models shown at Figures 1 (governance) and 2 (administration), taking into account experience in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The models are based on the following principles and features of best practice:

Accountability

- 1.13 There must be clear lines of accountability from the membership to the Chief Executive via an Executive Board.

Focus

- 1.14 Clear lines of accountability underpinned by strategic and corporate planning allow a focus on the key issues for football in Northern Ireland and enable strategy to be linked to day-to-day delivery.

Leadership

- 1.15 A sharply-focused yet representative Executive Board provides generic leadership and effective decision-making.

Integration

- 1.16 The model of administration at Figure 2 attempts to reflect the optimum arrangements for running football, ensuring integration of activities for the total benefit and integrated arrangements for all support functions and the key area of revenue generation.

Inclusiveness and fair representation

- 1.17 Several mechanisms can ensure inclusiveness in a streamlined structure:
- a Membership Forum allows members to raise issues and the Executive Board to consult in a spirit of genuine involvement
 - advisory committees involve individuals who are not members of the Executive Board
 - the Executive Board itself includes representatives of the various constituencies within football in Northern Ireland.

Transparency and openness to scrutiny

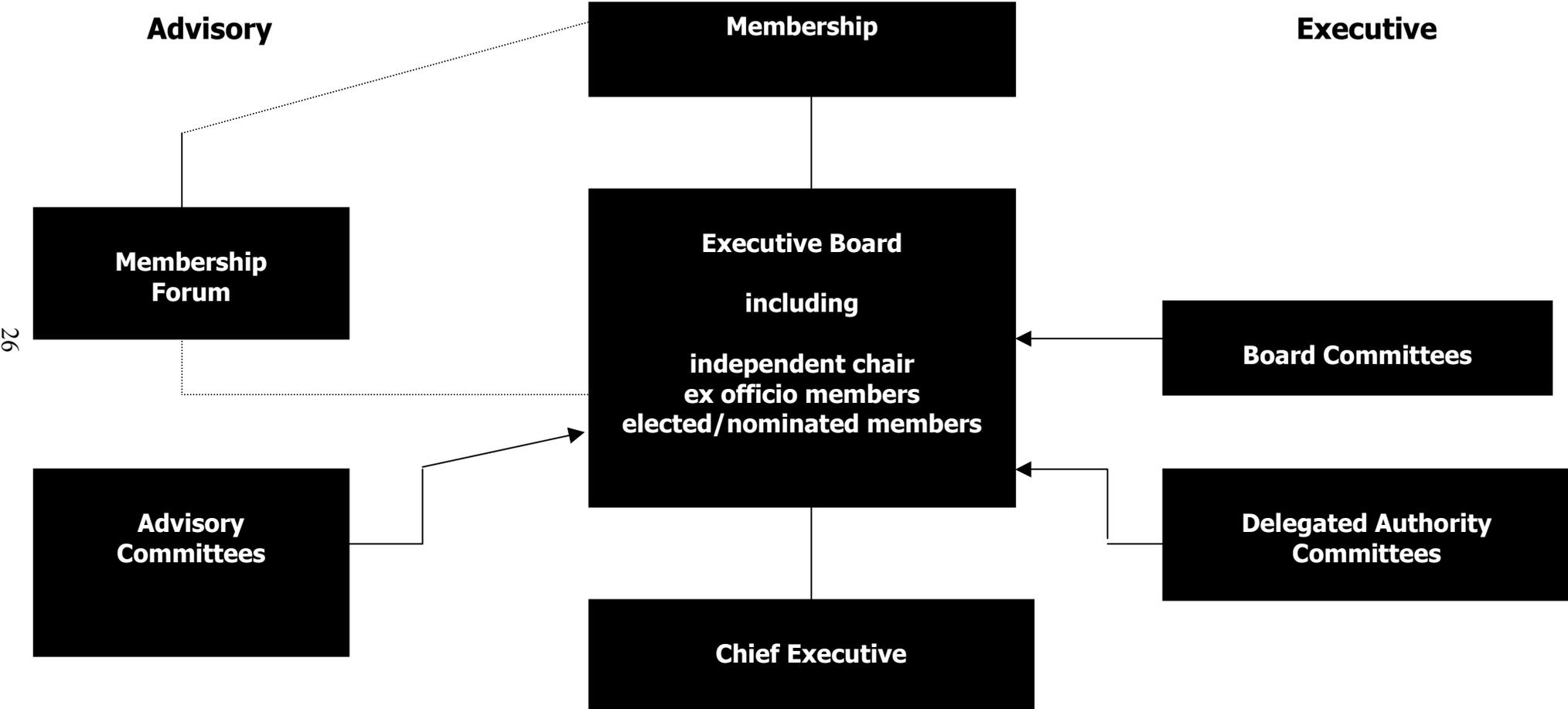
- 1.18 An independent chair and a number of independent members of the Executive Board strengthen the transparency of activities underpinned by accountability arrangements, the active promotion of the Membership Forum, and the production and publication of strategic and corporate plans.

Recommendations

- R1.1 A newly constituted governing body, combining the current functions of the Irish Football Association and the Irish Football League should be created, equipped to implement the recommendations in the Soccer Strategy. A suggested model is shown at Figure 1.
- R1.2 The governing body should be structured as a professional decision-making body and be founded on the following principles and features of best practice:
- accountability
 - focus
 - leadership
 - integration
 - inclusiveness and fair representation
 - transparency and openness to scrutiny.
- R1.3 An Executive Board of approximately 12 members should be created, made up of representatives of the membership, plus external appointments recruited through public advertisement to bring independent expertise.
- R1.4 The chair of the Board should be one of the external appointments.
- R1.5 The Executive Board should develop strategic and corporate plans every three to five years for approval by the membership. The board should also agree an annual business plan and hold the Chief Executive to account for implementation of the all plans. Plans should be published.
- R1.6 The Executive Board should appoint committees, either to advise on particular issues, or to carry out particular functions on its behalf.
- R1.7 A Membership Forum should be elected by the membership. The Executive Board should be required to consult with the Forum throughout the year. In determining the precise membership of the Forum, particular attention should be paid to ensuring inclusiveness.
- R1.8 The administration of the governing body should be headed by a Chief Executive, appointed to bring business acumen and a wide knowledge of football.

- R1.9 The administration should be divided into a small number of operational departments. A suggested model is shown at Figure 2.
- R1.10 Each head of department should be responsible to the Chief Executive, but would have delegated authority to take his or her business forward within clear parameters.
- R1.11 A performance management system should be developed for all employees of the governing body with clear performance targets.
- R1.12 The IFA and the Irish League should enter into a process of discussion and negotiation in order to agree models along the lines shown at Figures 1 and 2. Each organisation will wish to take on board a wide range of views and consult its stakeholders as part of this process.

FIGURE 1: POSSIBLE MODEL OF GOVERNANCE FOR A NEWLY CONSTITUTED GOVERNING BODY



EXPLANATORY NOTES (FIGURE 1)

Membership

- Membership made up of eligible representatives of all levels of the game.
- Meets at the AGM to hold the Executive Board to account.
- Elects a proportion of the membership of the Executive Board.
- Elects a Membership Forum.

Membership Forum

- A consultative body elected by the membership, to enable consultation with the Executive Board during the year.

Executive Board

- A body of approximately twelve members, some elected by the membership, others external appointees, recruited through public advertisement, and others *ex officio* (e.g. President).
- The chair to be one of the external appointees.
- On a transitional basis, representation to be guaranteed for predecessor bodies.
- Appoints the Chief Executive.
- Develops strategic and corporate plans for endorsement by the Membership and implementation by the Chief Executive.
- Appoints Advisory Committees as required to advise on particular issues.
- Appoints Board Committees as required to carry out duties on behalf of the Board (e.g. Audit Committee).
- Appoints Delegated Authority Committees as required to fulfil particular functions (e.g. Disciplinary Committee).

Advisory Committees

- Appointed by the Executive Board to advise on particular issues.

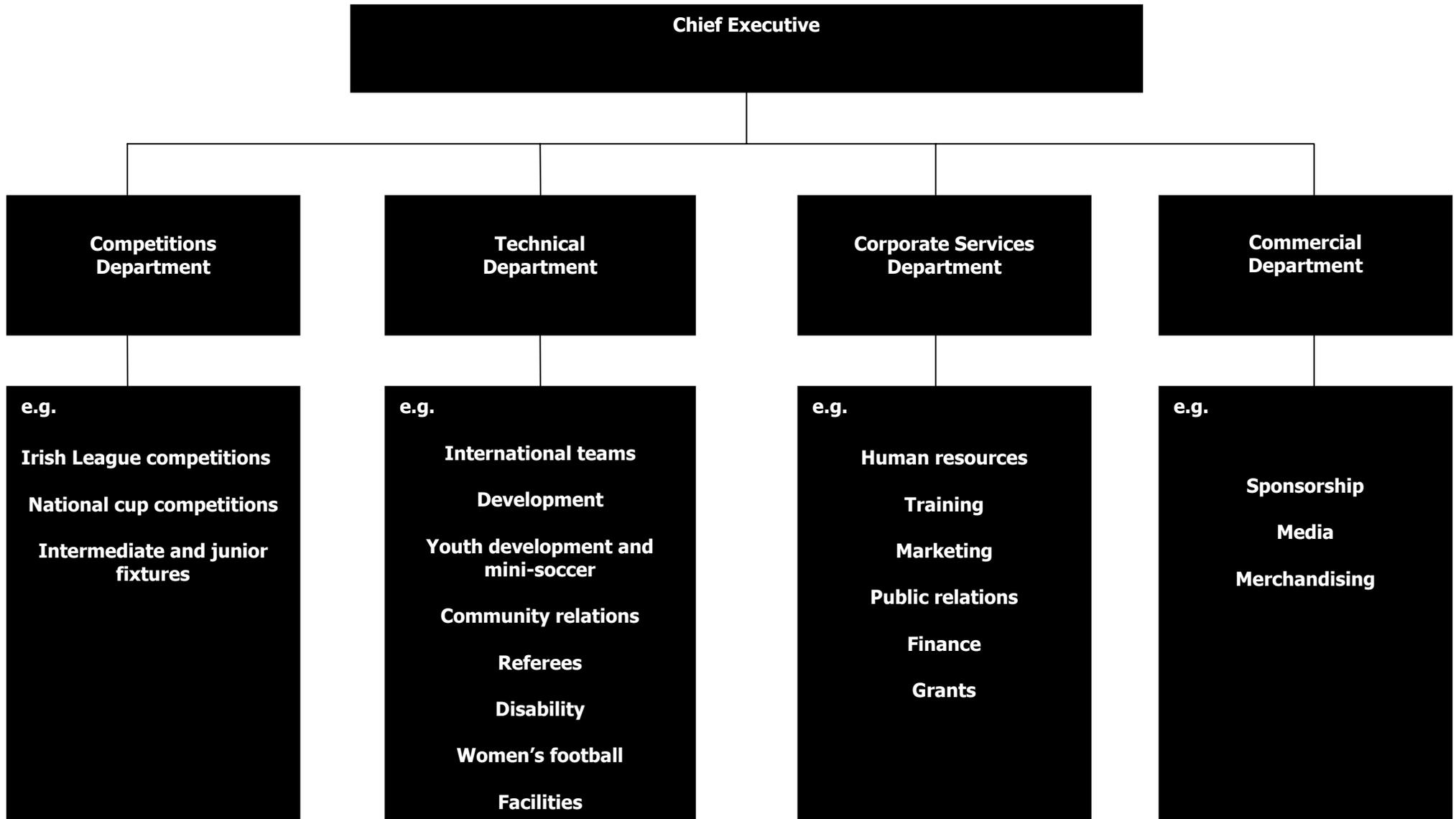
Board Committees and Delegated Authority Committees

- Board Committees appointed by the Executive Board as required to carry out duties on its behalf (e.g. Audit Committee).
- Delegated Authority Committees appointed by the Executive Board to fulfil particular functions (e.g. Disciplinary Committee).

Chief Executive

- Accountable to the Executive Board for the implementation of policy.

FIGURE 2: POSSIBLE MODEL OF ADMINISTRATION FOR A NEWLY CONSTITUTED GOVERNING BODY



EXPLANATORY NOTES (FIGURE 2)

Chief Executive

- Accountable to the Executive Board for the implementation of policy through the various departments.

Competitions Department

- Responsible to the Chief Executive for running Irish League competitions, national cup competitions, and for co-ordinating intermediate, junior, youth and women's leagues, etc.

Technical Department

- Responsible to the Chief Executive for international teams, youth development and mini-soccer, community relations, disability development, women's development, refereeing, etc.

Corporate Services Department

- Responsible to the Chief Executive for human resources, marketing, public relations, finance, etc.

Commercial Department

- Responsible to the Chief Executive for sponsorship, media, merchandising, etc.

2. LEAGUE STRUCTURE

- 2.1 The structure of senior football in Northern Ireland has always been a source of debate, with many issues to be taken into account, for example: how many senior clubs should there be, divided into how many divisions, and playing how many fixtures?
- 2.2 In recent years, the Irish Football League has progressively increased the number of its senior member clubs from twelve in 1983 to twenty in 1999, dividing into two divisions in 1995. It currently consists of a Premier Division and First Division of ten senior clubs each (plus a Second Division of thirteen intermediate clubs).
- 2.3 These changes have brought both benefits and problems. On the positive side, senior football has expanded geographically across Northern Ireland, and particularly to the west and south of the province. Two of the new clubs, Newry Town and Omagh Town, currently enjoy Premier Division status.
- 2.4 The introduction of two divisions with promotion and relegation has increased competitiveness and prolonged interest for the bottom clubs in the Premier Division and top clubs in the First Division, reducing the number of meaningless fixtures.
- 2.5 On the negative side, however, clubs in the First Division have suffered financially due to low attendances, minimal media coverage, and the absence of matches against the better supported teams of the Premier Division. The consequent pressure to gain promotion or avoid relegation has meant that some clubs have been prepared to overstretch their finances on players' wages. Many would argue that this increased pressure has discouraged risk taking and long term thinking in relation to managers' tactics and team selections, and thereby stifled the skills development of young players.
- 2.6 Additionally, in this period the number of league fixtures has increased from 22 to 36, with two consequences. First, clubs now play each other four times, as opposed to twice when there was only one division. Supporters have complained that this is too often, diminishing interest in the long term.
- 2.7 Second, the increase in league fixtures left little room for the other Irish League competitions, which were changed as a result to become midweek knock-out competitions, causing fixture congestion and making it difficult to distinguish between them. The Advisory Panel therefore welcomes the Irish League's recent decisions to reduce the number of competitions to three, with the withdrawal of

the Floodlit Cup in 1998, the Ulster Cup in 1999 and the Gold Cup in 2001. The Panel considers the present number of senior competitions to be the optimum.

- 2.8 A further issue, highlighted by the consultation, has been progression, with the Irish League perceived by many as a 'closed shop' (PwC, 2001). This is caused by the lack of automatic promotion and relegation between the Irish League First and Second Divisions, and between the Second Division and intermediate football. Instead, entry is by application and election by the existing members. The absence of open criteria for this process exacerbates the closed shop perception.
- 2.9 The Panel appreciates that the Irish League's recent changes have been made in the best interests of senior football in Northern Ireland, and recognises the benefits outlined above. It welcomes the recent decision to phase in restructuring, starting with a twelve club Premier Division for 2002-03 and trusts that this will lead to a reduction in the number of fixtures.

Number of clubs and divisions

- R2.1 The Irish League should comprise three divisions as follows, with teams playing each other twice:
- | | |
|------------------|-----------|
| Premier Division | 14 clubs |
| First Division | 14 clubs |
| Second Division | 14 clubs. |
- R2.2 There should be automatic promotion and relegation between each division, providing clubs fulfil certain standards in relation to open criteria, such as the standard of facilities, to be determined by the governing body. The proposed UEFA Licensing Scheme (see Chapter 3, 3.3) may provide the framework for these criteria.
- R2.3 An offer of a place in the Premier Division to Derry City, absent since 1972, should be made.
- R2.4 The IFL Reserve League should focus on youth development and become an under-20, or under-21, league, with allowance for a limited number of over-age players (see Chapter 4, R4.20).

Progression

- R2.5 In order to introduce a truly open, inclusive and progressive league structure in Northern Ireland, the Irish League should form the top of a 'pyramid' system that enables progression from the grass roots through to senior football. Such a system would replace admission by election with promotion on merit (in terms of playing success) together with the fulfilment of certain standards in relation to criteria, such as the standard of facilities, to be determined by the governing body.
- R2.6 To achieve this, automatic promotion and relegation between the Second Division and intermediate football should be introduced. Arrangements should be agreed between the Irish League and the four intermediate leagues (currently the Northern Amateur, Northern Ireland Intermediate, Mid-Ulster and Ballymena Premier Leagues). For example, each of the four league winners could play off to determine which one(s) would be promoted. The relegated club(s) from the Second Division would join the most appropriate intermediate league.
- R2.7 A similar mechanism to that proposed above should be introduced between the intermediate leagues and relevant junior leagues.

Recommendations

- R2.8 Clubs at all levels should reserve the right to refuse promotion if they feel it is not in their best interests.

Competitions

- R2.9 The number of national senior competitions should be three: the Irish League championship, the Irish Cup and one other. With the League and Cup matches as weekend fixtures, the third competition could be run midweek. Consideration should be given to introducing an all-Ireland competition, possibly between the top four clubs from each country.

Timing of Matches

- R2.10 Throughout all leagues, the timing of matches - both the days on which they are played and the kick-off times - should be flexible, with the final decision resting with home clubs. This should include the option of Sunday football for fixtures where both clubs consent.
- R2.11 In the interests of stimulating increased attendances for senior football, intermediate and junior leagues should be encouraged to change kick-off times to enable amateur players to attend Irish League matches as spectators.
- R2.12 The football season should continue as at present from August to May, but be kept under regular review.

Implementation

- R2.13 Restructuring should be planned in advance and phased in over several seasons, beginning in 2003-04.

3. CLUB DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

- 3.1 Improvement in the management and development of clubs, particularly senior clubs, is essential. Some of the problems facing clubs are as follows:
- financial difficulties, including high levels of debt
 - low match attendances resulting in low gate receipts
 - poor standards of grounds, including inadequate training and coaching facilities
 - image, in terms of sectarian and unruly behaviour by a minority of supporters
 - under-developed involvement with women's and girls' football and with the local community.
- 3.2 As well as low income from the gate, other factors contribute to the financial difficulties of clubs, such as wage bills for players that are not affordable, a lack of good sponsorship deals, and an absence of appropriate in-house business management skills.
- 3.3 In addition, there are implications for senior clubs through the introduction of a domestic licensing scheme, based on minimum criteria laid down by UEFA as a condition for participation in UEFA club competitions, expected to come into operation for the 2004-05 season. By introducing the scheme, UEFA is pursuing a number of objectives, including improvements in the economic and financial capacity of clubs and increased transparency and credibility. Clubs will be required to demonstrate that they are financially viable. The administration and organisation of clubs will also need to be adapted to modern day standards.
- 3.4 It is recognised in Chapter 12 that substantial measures are required to bring spectator facilities at football grounds in Northern Ireland up to an acceptable standard. Whilst upgrading grounds should help to attract more spectators through the gate, other steps are required to alleviate the problems facing clubs.
- 3.5 As well as improving their financial and business acumen, and their marketing skills, clubs should continue to develop links with their local communities. Community involvement can benefit clubs by strengthening their identification with the community from which

they draw their support, increasing gate receipts in the long term. Football clubs are often situated in areas under-provided with community amenities and facilities, and can be an under-utilised resource for community development and regeneration. The findings of the PwC report (2001) indicated that the majority of stakeholders was supportive of increasing community involvement in the sport to improve its image and assist with the development of the game.

- 3.6 The Advisory Panel believes that football can benefit from community development initiatives and notes the positive experiences of clubs that benefited last season from the Sports Council's Safe Sports Grounds Revenue Programme. Under this programme, eligible clubs received funding to provide family friendly areas, operate community coaching schemes and engage in activities to attract family audiences.
- 3.7 Football in the Community is another development initiative which can benefit football. This is a programme that utilises football as a means to encourage children and young people to make constructive use of their leisure time. Coaching courses aimed at all abilities, and run by professional or semi-professional footballers, seek to increase participants' self-esteem and personal, social and team-working skills.
- 3.8 While the following recommendations are essentially aimed at senior clubs, it is considered that some represent good practice for clubs at all levels.

The Advisory Panel recommends that each club should:

- R3.1 Recognise and act upon the need to introduce in-house business acumen and financial management skills.
- R3.2 Take steps to introduce financial plans that will balance income against expenditure.
- R3.3 Devise and implement a marketing strategy.
- R3.4 Prepare a comprehensive three- to five-year strategic plan for its future development and management.
- R3.5 Consider the scope for introducing a voluntary cap on players' wages, at least in the short term, by negotiation with a newly formed Northern Ireland Players' Football Association (see Chapter 7).
- R3.6 Develop and pursue innovative ideas for increasing spectator numbers and widening the spectator base to include women and families. For example, free admission could be offered to primary school children accompanied by adults.
- R3.7 In line with practice elsewhere, record and make available attendance figures for matches which can be used to assess and analyse trends and to inform planning.
- R3.8 Encourage and develop involvement in the club by the local community, including consideration of schemes such as Football in the Community.
- R3.9 Establish a youth development programme and consider ways of encouraging and supporting women's and girls' football, including partnerships with women's clubs (see Chapters 4 and 6).
- R3.10 Consider ways of consulting with its supporters on relevant issues, including examining the feasibility of formal representation on management committees (see also Chapter 9, R9.1).

To assist clubs in taking forward these recommendations, it is considered that the governing body and the Sports Council should jointly:

- R3.11 Take the lead in making available to clubs appropriate professional advice to assist them in the development of their first strategic plan and to implement in-house financial management systems. This should include the development of a training programme on club administration, management and marketing.

Recommendations

R3.12 Provide clear guidance and advice on the implications for clubs in meeting the proposed UEFA Licensing Scheme criteria.

R3.13 Introduce a Club Mark scheme setting quality standards for senior clubs.

DCAL, in consultation with the Sports Council, should:

R3.14 Continue to develop and provide a programme of support to clubs for community-based activities, building on the experiences to date under the Sports Council's Safe Sports Grounds Revenue Programme.

R3.15 Monitor and evaluate the Football in the Community scheme at Derry City Football Club to assess its impact and suitability for replication elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

4. YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

- 4.1 The importance of youth development was underlined in the research exercise commissioned by the Advisory Panel. The research report stated that:

Almost everyone supported the view that youth development ... was crucial to the future of football in Northern Ireland and that it needed to be linked to community involvement in soccer (PwC, 2001, p. 21).

- 4.2 The Panel believes that the long term success of the Soccer Strategy is dependent upon establishing strong foundations through the development of a coherent, nation-wide youth development policy that would optimise both participation in football at community level and maximise the opportunities for young players to develop to their full potential. This would not only benefit young players, but would benefit clubs in terms of strengthening their links with their local communities, and would also help them to meet UEFA's proposed licensing criteria.
- 4.3 Such a policy should encompass a common football curriculum to ensure that young players are set on the same development path, irrespective of their gender or where they live.
- 4.4 A great deal of excellent work has been carried out by schools and clubs to promote the participation and progress of young players. The IFA's commitment to mini-soccer, the emergence of schools of excellence and the continuing development of youth teams and competitions are important trends that can be built upon. Progress, however, has been patchy and lacks the investment that the Panel believes is necessary for a successful youth development policy.
- 4.5 The Panel's recommendations centre around three key themes.

Promoting the widest possible participation in football

- 4.6 The Panel believes that mini-soccer should be developed as the key building block for initial participation in football. It should be expanded significantly as part of a co-ordinated plan, with tailored mini-soccer programmes replacing all existing eleven-a-side football for primary school-age children. Irish League clubs should play an active role in developing mini-soccer as part of their link to local communities.

Sustaining participation

- 4.7 A regional network of youth Football Development Centres should be established to supplement the existing youth leagues and competitions. The Football Development Centres should act as hubs to maximise community participation in football and provide specific programmes to foster the development of talented players. As is the case for mini-soccer, the Panel sees Irish League clubs playing a key role in facilitating these Centres, building on recent progress made in this area by the IFA through the channelling of Champions League monies.

Talented player development

- 4.8 While a major focus of the proposed youth development policy is on widening participation, this does not diminish the importance of providing avenues to develop our most talented young players. A Northern Ireland Football Academy should be established to develop talented footballers and to provide the nucleus of future international school and youth teams.
- 4.9 Bringing about these changes will require new investment to extend mini-soccer, and to establish a framework and infrastructure for football development, including a Football Academy. Significant new investment in infrastructure will be required also to ensure the success of the youth development policy. This includes a new Technical Department of the governing body and coaching programmes as well as a players' registration system.

General

- R4.1 The governing body, along with all appropriate football associations and leagues, should sign up to a new common youth development policy, setting out agreed objectives and structures for the development of youth football.
- R4.2 The youth development policy should be underpinned by the following guiding principles:
- coherence
 - inclusion
 - equity
 - player-focused approach
 - coaching excellence
 - tailored programmes
 - progression for talent.

Mini-soccer

- R4.3 Mini-soccer should be the basis for developing football skills for primary school-age children and should provide the mechanism by which structured competition should take place.
- R4.4 All existing eleven-a-side leagues for primary school-age players should move to mini-soccer, with allowance for structured competition.
- R4.5 Where appropriate, District Councils and education authorities should provide dedicated mini-soccer pitches, marked out to specifications agreed with the governing body and participating leagues. Initial priority should be given to identifying suitable pitches in each District Council and Education and Library Board area.
- R4.6 There should be an agreed timetable for playing mini-soccer competitions. As far as possible, these should avoid the peak winter period when conditions are at their worst.

Football Development Centres

- R4.7 Senior clubs should establish youth Football Development Centres for primary and post-primary school-age players. These should include:
- mini-soccer programmes as the first step in promoting participation in football at community level
 - community programmes through which the Football Development Centres would act as hubs to maximise participation by young people in structured football development initiatives
 - programmes targeted at talented players.
- R4.8 Football Development Centres should also be established in areas where there is no senior club.
- R4.9 Consideration should also be given to the scope to cascade the Football Development Centre concept through clubs at other levels of football. For example, the Village Community Soccer Centre model, as outlined by the Northern Amateur League in its strategic plan for 2000-2010 (Northern Amateur Football League, n. d.), might be relevant.
- R4.10 Football Development Centres should be registered with the governing body and meet specified standards in terms of coaching, facilities and training development programmes.
- R4.11 Programmes within Football Development Centres should be designed to enable players to continue to play competitive football with their club of origin.
- R4.12 The governing body, in consultation with the Sports Council, should produce an implementation plan that incorporates a programme for establishing Football Development Centres, taking account of the need to expand the number of development officers.
- R4.13 The governing body and the Sports Council should co-ordinate a needs assessment of facilities and equipment required for football development centres.

Northern Ireland Football Academy

- R4.14 A Northern Ireland Football Academy should be established to develop the most talented young players and to provide the nucleus for future international school and youth teams.

- R4.15 The Academy should be based on successful international models such as the French Football Federation’s academy at Clairefontaine, tailored to meet the needs of Northern Ireland players.
- R4.16 Players attending the Academy would remain registered with their club of origin.
- R4.17 Discussion on the feasibility of including the Academy as part of the Sports Institute Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster Jordanstown campus should continue as a high priority.
- R4.18 Consideration should be given to the feasibility of running the Academy on a residential basis.

Youth and Reserve Leagues

- R4.19 Football Development Centres should provide opportunities for young talented players to experience competitive football by entering teams in the IFL Youth League.
- R4.20 The IFL Reserve League should focus on youth development and become an under-20, or under-21, league, with allowance for a limited number of over-age players (see also Chapter 2, R2.4).

Coaching

- R4.21 Coaching structures and programmes should be adapted to meet the needs of the new youth development policy and should include extending the number of qualified coaches at each level of the current IFA coaching ladder.
- R4.22 The governing body should consolidate its coaching activities within a new technical department, headed by a technical director to oversee and co-ordinate the development of coaching across all levels. This could be taken forward with the help and advice of the Northern Ireland Institute of Coaching.

Women’s Youth Football

- R4.23 Rules governing girls’ and boys’ football should converge to enable consistent opportunities for participation in youth football irrespective of gender (see also Chapter 6, R6.3).
- R4.24 There should be equity of treatment for boys’ and girls’ access to Football Development Centres.
- R4.25 The Northern Ireland Football Academy should cater for both sexes.

Recommendations

- R4.26 The Northern Ireland Boys' Football Association should change its name and formally adopt boys' and girls' leagues (see also Chapter 6, R6.5).
- R4.27 The Northern Ireland Schools' Football Association should promote girls' football in schools (see also Chapter 6, R6.4).
- R4.28 Existing youth leagues should provide support for the development of women's leagues in their areas (see also Chapter 6, R6.7).
- R4.29 Senior league clubs should be encouraged to establish women's and girls' teams to provide young players with a clear progression route into senior women's football (see also Chapter 6, R6.6).

Representation

- R4.30 Following the recent admission of the Schools' FA, Boys' FA and Women's FA to the IFA Council, the governing body should take appropriate measures to ensure that these representatives are given an effective voice in relation to youth development (see also Chapter 6, R6.2).

Registration

- R4.31 The governing body should introduce a central players' registration system to include records on all youth players participating in competitive football leagues in Northern Ireland. The registration system should include players' training and development details. This could act as a prototype for a comprehensive players' registration system for Northern Ireland.

Health Promotion

- R4.32 Health promotion and injury prevention should be included as elements within all structured youth development programmes.
- R4.33 Pilot health screening programmes for young players should be introduced in consultation with Health and Social Services Boards with a view to introducing comprehensive screening as part of the players' registration system.

Evaluation

- R4.34 The governing body, in consultation with the Sports Council, should develop a programme for ongoing evaluation of the implementation of the youth development policy.

5. DISABILITY

- 5.1 The IFA has been running a football programme for children and adults with learning disability for over four years. It is at the forefront of governing bodies' efforts in terms of providing access to sport for disabled people and the programme is regarded as good practice.
- 5.2 Over that period, the IFA has developed partnerships with Education and Library Boards, special schools and other organisations and intends to promote links between senior clubs, special schools and adult centres, initially as pilot schemes.
- 5.3 Until June 2000, the programme was supported by private sector sponsorship. Since then, the IFA has been responsible for costs.
- 5.4 Following the reorganisation of disability sport in Northern Ireland in April 2001, a unified governing body, Disability Sports Northern Ireland (DSNI) has been established. DSNI represents the vast majority of disability sports clubs and athletes in Northern Ireland and works to co-ordinate, promote and develop opportunities for people with physical, sensory and learning disabilities. It believes that each sport's governing body should be responsible for developing disability sport as a mainstream activity.
- 5.5 Given the positive work of the IFA to date, there is an opportunity for football to be the lead sport for disability in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations

- R5.1 The governing body should broaden its learning disability programme to become pan-disability, i.e. to include people with physical disability and sensory impairment.
- R5.2 The governing body should take steps to attract a new sponsor to support the broadened programme.
- R5.3 The governing body should designate a post (e.g. a Disability Development Officer) with responsibility for developing at a strategic level (as opposed to 'hands on') a future programme promoting football for disabled people.
- R5.4 Clubs, in establishing links with their local communities, should seek to provide a range of activities involving disabled people.

6. WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

- 6.1 Women's football is one of the fastest growing sports in the world and women's football in Northern Ireland reflects that trend. The game in Northern Ireland currently has an adult player base of some 700, who presently compete in a four division, 30 club, summer league. Northern Ireland is also represented internationally at senior, under-18, under-16 and under-14 levels. Women's clubs do not have their own facilities. Even though facilities requirements are minimal, provision is considered inadequate.
- 6.2 Interest in football is particularly high among girls up to the age of 12. They often play in mixed teams, both mini- and eleven-a-side. After the age of 12, however, there is less scope for young women to develop and progress in the game. This is because they tend to stop playing mixed gender football, as well as there being limited opportunities for playing football at secondary school. Interest picks up again post-16/17.
- 6.3 The Northern Ireland Women's Football Association (NIWFA) is the governing body of women's football in the province, as distinct from the IFA, which is the governing body of all football in Northern Ireland. The IFA provides a modest grant and is responsible for planning and organising all aspects of the women's international squads, including training and coaching, matches and tournaments.
- 6.4 With effect from 2001, the NIWFA has the right to elect a representative to the IFA Council. While this development is to be welcomed, the scope for the NIWFA to be involved in decisions by the IFA on matters concerning women's football is limited. There is a perception that women's football in Northern Ireland is regarded as being on the periphery of the sport. It is worth noting that FIFA, in the 1999 Los Angeles Declaration on Women's Football, supported the call for governments, and in particular, sports ministers, to implement and reinforce policies to promote women's football (FIFA, 1999).

Recommendations

- R6.1 The governing body should more actively lead the development of all aspects of girls' and women's football in Northern Ireland. This should become a mainstream activity of the governing body, with the establishment of a designated Women's Development Officer to co-ordinate and promote this branch of the game.
- R6.2 The governing body should take steps to ensure that representatives of women's football are able to influence decisions relating to the future development and management of the game (see also Chapter 4, R4.30).
- R6.3 Proposals for youth development should take account of the development needs for girls and young women, and rules governing girls' and boys' football should converge to enable consistent opportunities for participation in youth football irrespective of gender (see also Chapter 4, R4.23).
- R6.4 The Northern Ireland Schools' Football Association should promote girls' football in schools (see also Chapter 4, R4.27).
- R6.5 Consideration should be given to renaming the Northern Ireland Boys' Football Association as the Northern Ireland Boys' and Girls' Football Association (see also Chapter 4, R4.26).
- R6.6 The affiliation of women's clubs to Irish League clubs should be encouraged. It is considered that this would have mutual benefits for clubs and women's football. The proposal should be piloted at two or three senior clubs in different areas of the province (see also Chapter 4, R4.29).
- R6.7 Existing youth leagues should provide support for the development of women's leagues in their areas (see also Chapter 4, R4.28).
- R6.8 The women's football season should continue over the summer as at present.
- R6.9 As statutory facility providers, District Councils should recognise and act upon the need to provide summer facilities for women's football (see Chapter 13). The councils should initiate consultation with women's clubs at a local level.

7. PLAYERS

- 7.1 Players are football's most important asset. In the Irish League, players provide the product which spectators pay to see and the results which bring success to clubs. As such, some of the top players are able to command high wages, and clubs have been willing to pay them. In many cases, this has contributed to the financial difficulties facing Irish League clubs. But players can also be an important link between club and community, with an important and influential role to play in the promotion and development of football in Northern Ireland. There are many excellent examples of players becoming involved with the community, demonstrating their commitment to the development and growth of football.
- 7.2 The Advisory Panel recognises that players are an important stakeholder group without a collective voice since the demise of the Northern Ireland Professional Footballers' Association in 1996, and recommends its re-establishment as the Northern Ireland Players' Football Association (NIPFA).
- 7.3 As well as representing players' interests, the Panel believes that the new NIPFA should have a key role in promoting and co-ordinating players' involvement in coaching and other outreach activities with local communities, and promote harmonious relationships between players and other football interests and organisations.
- 7.4 In order to include players at all levels, the name 'Players' Football Association', rather than 'Professional Footballers' Association', has been chosen. The Panel hopes that eventually the NIPFA will include female players and intermediate and junior male players.
- 7.5 The Panel is encouraged that players have already begun preliminary discussions about the implementation of the recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

- R7.1 A Northern Ireland Players' Football Association (NIPFA) should be established as a branch of a recognised trade union. Its purpose should be twofold: to promote the welfare of football players in Northern Ireland; and to promote harmonious relationships between players and all other football interests and organisations.
- R7.2 The functions of the NIPFA should be as follows:
- representing players
 - providing services to members (including both general services available to all union members, and specially tailored services to players)
 - outreach
 - organising annual awards, social and charitable events.
- R7.3 The NIPFA should represent players collectively in two ways. First, it should act as the collective voice of players. Second, as a branch of a recognised trade union, it would seek to regulate the relations between players and their employers.
- R7.4 The NIPFA should promote and co-ordinate players' involvement in coaching and other outreach activities with local communities. In seeking good relations between players and clubs, the NIPFA should encourage the negotiation of relevant clauses in players' contracts.
- R7.5 A further function of the NIPFA should be to organise an annual awards ceremony, and other social and charitable events. These could assist with promotion and attract commercial sponsorship.
- R7.6 In the first season, membership of the NIPFA should be open to all Irish League Premier and First Division players. Eventually, however, membership should be expanded to include female players and intermediate and junior male players.
- R7.7 The primary source of finance for the NIPFA should be members' subscriptions, with the favoured means of collection being either by direct debit from members' bank accounts or by deduction at source from players' wages.
- R7.8 In addition to the standard trade union levy, the NIPFA could choose to introduce an additional levy on its members to cover the costs of any additional services or activities.

- R7.9 Additional funds should be sought from sponsorship and commercial deals.
- R7.10 The possibility of charitable funding should be explored. This would entail establishing separately constituted organisations that could obtain charitable status. A suggested model is the SPFA Education Trust which provides assistance to Scottish players taking part in education.

8. REFEREEING

- 8.1 Referees in Northern Ireland continue to achieve recognition at the highest levels, with local referees on the FIFA and UEFA lists receiving regular appointments to World Cup, UEFA Champions League and other UEFA matches.
- 8.2 Every week in Northern Ireland, football benefits from the commitment of its referees, who serve all levels of the game, giving up their free time to do a difficult job for nominal remuneration. Without this effort and commitment, both on an individual basis and collectively through the Northern Ireland Referees' Association, football would not be able to function. Refereeing is an essential component of the game.
- 8.3 The Advisory Panel recognises, however, that some weaknesses must be addressed if refereeing is to flourish in Northern Ireland.
- there is a shortage of junior referees, including female referees, and numbers are declining overall
 - there is insufficient support for young referees and junior referees, and there are insufficient opportunities for young, talented referees to progress quickly
 - there is an absence of forward planning and effective co-ordination
 - there is ineffective communication among referees, and between the IFA and referees
 - the organisation and co-ordination of refereeing is almost entirely dependent on the goodwill and voluntary commitment of individuals.

Recommendations

Governing Body

- R8.1 In line with recent FIFA guidance (FIFA, 2001), the governing body should appoint a dedicated Referees' Development Officer. The purpose of this post should be to manage and co-ordinate the administration of refereeing in Northern Ireland, to address the shortage of referees through recruitment, to raise the profile of refereeing, and to serve and advise the governing body's Referees' Committee.
- R8.2 Duties should include:
- management of a refereeing section within the governing body
 - the co-ordination of recruitment and training, ensuring training covers all aspects, including child protection training
 - the development of criteria for match appointments that include consideration of referees' development needs
 - maintenance of up-to-date records and information, including a central register of referees
 - networking with associations, clubs and other interested parties, e.g. schools, youth clubs and other education bodies
 - lending support to the Northern Ireland Referees' Association in seeking sponsorship
 - the development of a three- to five-year forward plan, in liaison with the Northern Ireland Referees' Association.
- R8.3 In line with the FIFA guidance (FIFA, 2001), the governing body should review the membership of its Referees' Committee to ensure its composition is made up of 'experienced former match officials'.
- R8.4 The governing body should put in place procedures for an annual review of referees' remuneration.
- R8.5 The governing body should work with the Northern Ireland Referees' Association to develop proposals for the formal training of club officials who support referees at intermediate and junior matches.

Northern Ireland Referees' Association

- R8.6 The Northern Ireland Referees' Association should seek to promote constructive relationships with players and supporters through liaison with the Players' Football Association (see Chapter 7), and supporters' bodies (see Chapter 9) respectively.
- R8.7 The Association should seek sponsorship to assist with costs, e.g. kit sponsorship.
- R8.8 The Association should work with the governing body in developing a forward plan for refereeing.

9. SUPPORTERS

- 9.1 Supporters actively contribute to the image of football and the atmosphere at matches. They are key stakeholders upon whom the professional game depends not only for revenue, but for many other support activities. The Advisory Panel regrets, however, that attendances at matches seem to have fallen to a low level.
- 9.2 The Panel believes that supporters are entitled to watch football in a safe and comfortable environment, free from intimidatory behaviour.
- 9.3 Supporters have a duty to behave responsibly in order to create and sustain a safe and comfortable environment, and to help improve the image of football and attract more supporters. The Panel recognises that the overwhelming majority of supporters is well behaved. It welcomes progress made to date by supporters of the international team who have become increasingly aware of how their behaviour is perceived by others, and by the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs which has made conscious efforts to eradicate sectarian behaviour.
- 9.4 The Panel also believes that football authorities and clubs have much to gain by consulting with supporters, and commends the IFA's Football for All campaign for its involvement of international fans.
- 9.5 Major progress has been made in England since the formation of the Football Supporters' Association (FSA) in 1985. The FSA has become an effective and respected voice for supporters, lobbying on issues affecting supporters, campaigning against racism, and gaining recognition by Government, the football authorities and others. The FSA is now consulted regularly as a matter of course.
- 9.6 The FSA is made up of individual supporters of different clubs. It represents the broad interest of football supporters in such a way as to complement supporters' clubs associated with particular teams.
- 9.7 The Panel understands that a Northern Ireland Football Supporters' Association was established in 1997 but folded after three years. Among reasons given for this was the failure to establish effective relationships with the FSA in England, and with the IFA and the Irish League.

Recommendations

- R9.1 Football clubs should consider ways of consulting with their supporters on relevant issues, including examining the feasibility of formal representation on management committees (see also Chapter 3, R3.10).
- R9.2 The governing body, building on the work begun by the Football for All campaign, should consider ways of continuing and formalising consultation with international supporters.
- R9.3 Football supporters, and supporters' clubs, should consider the formation of an umbrella body similar to the FSA that would be the recognised voice of Irish League supporters. This could either be organised as an entirely new organisation made up of individuals, or as an amalgamation of existing supporters' clubs, similar to that which already exists for international supporters' clubs.
- R9.4 This new organisation should seek official recognition from the governing body, and should establish a close working relationship with the FSA.
- R9.5 The new organisation should, in partnership with the governing body, the police and other relevant parties, draw up a code of conduct for supporters, to which supporters' clubs would sign up, outlining duties and responsibilities in relation to spectator behaviour.

10. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

- 10.1 The research commissioned by the Advisory Panel found that hooliganism and sectarianism were key problems identified as contributing to the current difficulties within the game (PwC, 2001). Three themes emerged on these issues:
- many Catholic supporters felt uncomfortable and unsafe attending international matches and some senior fixtures
 - many Protestants and Catholics stated that the poor behaviour exhibited by some spectators deterred them and their families from attending international matches
 - some considered the general public's perception of sectarianism to be more of an issue than it actually was.
- 10.2 Sectarianism and hooliganism are not the same, although they are sometimes connected. The Panel recognises that sectarianism in football is part of a wider set of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that are embedded within our community.
- 10.3 Despite the difficulties in addressing this issue, the Panel has been heartened by the success of recent efforts by the IFA and others, including the Sports Council and supporters, to tackle sectarianism, particularly at international matches. The research report also provided support for the IFA's anti-sectarian Football for All campaign, but argued that more needed to be done at all levels of the game to deal with the minority of supporters responsible for sectarianism at matches (PwC, 2001).
- 10.4 It is important that there is realism in implementing measures to address sectarianism in football. The Panel's recommendations are concerned with removing sectarianism while supporting the right of clubs and supporters to celebrate diverse identities.
- 10.5 The Panel recognises that football is the only major team sport in Northern Ireland which is played by and supported by large numbers of both main communities. While regretting that the cross-community contact resulting from this has sometimes been marred by sectarian conflict, the Panel prefers to view positively football's potential for contributing to good community relations.

Recommendations

- R10.1 The governing body, working with the Sports Council and anti-sectarian practitioners, should develop a strategy to tackle sectarianism by promoting respect and tolerance, building on work to date. The strategy should:
- recognise the crucial role of supporters and ensure that they are involved fully in the development and implementation of measures to combat sectarianism
 - encourage codes of conduct to be promoted actively by the governing body and by clubs and supporters
 - identify specific support measures to assist clubs and supporters in developing anti-sectarian policies and promoting cultural diversity
 - introduce 'fair play' awards to clubs to reward the behaviour of supporters as well as players.
- R10.2 The governing body and the Sports Council should sponsor awareness training in anti-sectarian policies and cultural diversity for all levels of football.
- R10.3 An anti-sectarian element should be included in all training for stewards (see also Chapter 12, R12.14).
- R10.4 The governing body should lead by example in setting itself as the 'gold standard' for community relations good practice, both at the level of management and within the design and running of its programmes.
- R10.5 The governing body should develop specific initiatives to counter public perceptions of football as sectarian and as unappealing to families in general, and to women and girls in particular.
- R10.6 DCAL and the Sports Council should commission research to assess changing public perceptions and attitudes to football, with a focus on identifying the barriers to inclusiveness.
- R10.7 Government should introduce legislation to control spectator behaviour at sports grounds as outlined at Chapter 12, R12.17.

11. MEDIA RELATIONS

- 11.1 After many decades of almost unchallenged supremacy, local football now finds itself in a media environment where it is increasingly competing with other sports for column inches and airtime. Other sports have achieved significant increases in media coverage and consequently have enhanced their public image. It is now time for football to do likewise.
- 11.2 Positive media coverage cannot be taken for granted, and football organisations and clubs must proactively sell their stories and professionally manage their relationships with the media.
- 11.3 Through the *Creating a Soccer Strategy* process, both football authorities and journalists have acknowledged that poor relationships have existed between the media and the football sector at most levels, with faults on both sides. This acknowledgement was the first step in building trust and working together to improve relations and, ultimately, the presentation of football in the media.
- 11.4 The aim of the proposals below is to promote trust, and improve relations and communications between the media and football interests at all levels, in particular, the governing body, the Irish League and senior clubs and, more generally, players and sponsors.
- 11.5 The Advisory Panel notes and welcomes the fact that implementation of the recommendations below has already begun with a media seminar in August which brought together journalists, clubs, the IFA and the Irish League. It also welcomes the Irish League's proposed introduction of a communications code of practice (Irish Football League, 2001) for clubs.
- 11.6 The media and football organisations that have taken part in the implementation to date have agreed the following principles as the basis for improved relationships:
- the media should seek to achieve good quality, high volume coverage of football
 - football authorities should be accessible to and co-operative with all sections of the media ('lack of information leads to speculation').

International football

- R11.1 Media facilities should be enhanced at international matches. For example, the press box at Windsor Park should be upgraded to include more ISDN lines, telephone lines and television monitors.
- R11.2 Accessibility to international players should be improved. For example, 'mixed zones' with upgraded media facilities should be provided at international matches; and an hour long open session to enable the media to mix with players should be organised during the week prior to international matches.
- R11.3 The Irish Football Association should utilise e-mail as its preferred method for the dissemination of press releases.

Irish Football League and senior clubs

- R11.4 Every senior club should have a dedicated press officer, accessible to, and with proper authority to speak to, the media, in line with the proposed Irish League communications code of practice (Irish Football League, 2001).
- R11.5 The Irish Football League should facilitate media training for club press officers.

Television and photographic coverage of local football

- R11.6 By exposing unused seating and terracing, the positioning of television and press cameras at many local matches, often presents an inaccurate impression of attendances and atmosphere. In many cases, this could be avoided by more thoughtful planning and organisation by host clubs and associations, broadcasters and photographers. The relevant parties should therefore agree steps to improve the visual coverage of local football.

12. SPECTATOR FACILITIES AND SAFETY MANAGEMENT

- 12.1 It is generally accepted that facilities at football grounds in Northern Ireland, particularly at senior league clubs, fall far short of acceptable standards of comfort and safety for spectators. Indeed, facilities at some grounds are so poor in terms of health and safety that they risk closure. The serious deficiencies in the facilities contribute to the problems facing many of the senior clubs, the poor spectator experience and the image of the game overall.
- 12.2 The Advisory Panel firmly believes that further steps must be taken to provide safe, modern and comfortable facilities for spectators, combined with improvements in crowd control and safety management. The Panel also takes the view that clubs must accept responsibility for safety management at their grounds. It is essential that they, and governing bodies, recognise the need to develop and promote a culture of safety, security and comfort for spectators and to develop a positive attitude towards customer care, making attendance at matches an enjoyable and entertaining experience for supporters.
- 12.3 In putting forward recommendations for action, the Panel has noted the developments that took place in the 1990s to carry out major improvements to football grounds in Great Britain, following the Taylor Report (Taylor, 1990) in the wake of the Hillsborough stadium disaster of 1989. The 1998 report of an Inter-Departmental Working Group (unpublished) established to look into safety at major sports grounds in Northern Ireland (covering football, rugby and Gaelic games) has also been taken into account.
- 12.4 The Panel considers it regrettable that substantial measures to improve the standards of grounds in Northern Ireland have not kept pace with progress in the rest of the UK, although the initial work which has begun in the past year under the Sports Council's Safe Sports Grounds Scheme is very welcome. This scheme enabled major works and urgent minor works to be carried out at football, Gaelic and rugby grounds, as well as safety management training.
- 12.5 Building on the success of this interim scheme, the recommendations below recognise the needs of all major sports grounds in Northern Ireland, including those of Gaelic games and rugby, as well as football.

Legislation (Health and Safety)

R12.1 Legislation, similar to that in Great Britain, should be enacted for Northern Ireland, making provisions for safety at sports grounds. Such legislation should place a requirement on the management of larger venues to obtain a safety certificate from the District Council detailing structural and stewarding requirements, as well as other arrangements. This legislation should complement existing Northern Ireland legislation for health and safety.

R12.2 The legislation should designate venues which require safety certificates as follows:

- football venues with a potential capacity of 3,500 or more
- Gaelic and rugby venues with a potential capacity of 6,500 or more.

It is considered appropriate to categorise Gaelic and rugby venues separately from football. The approximate perimeter of a football pitch is approximately 300m, whereas that of a Gaelic pitch is 500m, and a rugby pitch 400m. As Gaelic and rugby pitches are significantly larger than football pitches, they are therefore able to accommodate larger numbers of spectators safely.

R12.3 Each safety certificate would specify the detailed safety requirements for each ground, and would be unique to that ground. The safety certificate would cover, for example, arrangements for:

- entrances and exits
- viewing capacities, including arrangements for seating and/or standing, and family enclosures
- safety management and stewarding
- crowd management
- disabled spectators
- spectator facilities, such as toilets
- services such as CCTV

- first aid
 - contingency plans.
- R12.4 The standard of specification would increase commensurately with spectator capacity, potentially through to high level and, where appropriate, international, requirements for higher capacity grounds. Certificates would be reviewed annually or where there had been substantial structural change in the ground's spectator facilities.
- R12.5 Safety matters at smaller, non-certificated, venues should be addressed by replicating GB sports grounds legislation to empower District Councils to issue prohibition notices. This would enable District Councils to limit spectator numbers and prohibit the admission of spectators. It would also strengthen and complement existing health and safety legislation.
- R12.6 District Councils should be empowered to issue, review and amend safety certificates, charge for safety certificates, inspect grounds and obtain relevant information and issue prohibition notices if there is a risk to spectators.
- R12.7 Clubs should be required to apply for safety certificates and have the right to appeal where certificates have been refused, amended or suspended.
- R12.8 Before safety certificates are issued, other interested parties should be consulted, e.g. the police and those directly responsible within District Councils for environmental health and building control.
- R12.9 Offences should be created where grounds:
- admit spectators to a designated venue or structure without a safety certificate
 - breach the conditions of a safety certificate
 - breach the conditions of a prohibition notice.
- R12.10 The safety guidance material available in Great Britain (the 'Green Code') (DCMS, 1997), suitably adapted for Northern Ireland's needs, should be introduced to provide guidance to District Councils, clubs, governing bodies etc., regarding the requirements of each respective safety certificate.

Funding Package

- R12.11 A funding package should be made available to establish a scheme for improvement works at sports grounds. The package should make provision for assistance towards major structural works at grounds requiring safety certificates, and minor safety works at smaller venues. All awards for funding should be determined on the basis of need and risk assessment.
- R12.12 Grants, up to a maximum of 85%, should be made available towards limited expenditure, with clubs providing the balance, and should be conditional upon clubs meeting specified requirements, e.g. equality and child protection policies, as well as any requirements in relation to the broader development needs of the particular sport.
- R12.13 The funding package should provide for a structural development programme to be carried out over a period of around eight to ten years.
- R12.14 A five-year funding programme should also be made available for stewarding, to cover the cost of training needs and payments to stewards at fixtures attracting a large number of spectators. It is considered that by the end of the five-year period, clubs should be self-sufficient and able to cover their own stewarding costs. Furthermore, grounds should have improved and be more easily managed, with fewer stewards needed. However, a modest budget for training should continue to be provided on an annual basis (see also Chapter 10, R10.3).
- R12.15 The funding package should be administered by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, drawing on the knowledge and experience of operating the existing, interim Safe Sports Grounds Scheme, introduced in August 2000.

Legislation (Spectator Behaviour)

- R12.16 Legislation should be introduced in Northern Ireland, in line with that in Great Britain, making provisions for offences in relation to disorderly conduct by persons attending sporting events. Such legislation should make provisions for controlling spectator behaviour inside grounds, i.e. past the turnstiles. Offences would include, for example, the throwing of missiles and pitch invasion. By and large, existing public order legislation is considered appropriate for dealing with behaviour outside grounds.

R12.17 The inclusion of offences in relation to sectarian and other offensive behaviour by spectators inside grounds should also be considered for inclusion in any new legislation (see also Chapter 10, R10.7). It is recognised that while such legislation may be difficult to enforce, it may nonetheless act as a deterrent. The need for legislative provisions in relation to the misuse of alcohol should also be examined.

Charging for the Policing of Sporting Fixtures

R12.18 In Great Britain, legislation permits the police to charge for services at sports grounds. Such powers also exist in Northern Ireland but current policy is not to charge for policing at sporting fixtures. It is likely, however, that charging will be introduced within two to three years. At present policing is negotiated between the police and the individual club. The merit of charging for policing is recognised in principle. However, it is recommended that any proposals for charging should be introduced incrementally, against a background of improvements in grounds and stewarding arrangements and a reduced dependency on policing.

Overseeing Body

R12.19 A body should be established in Northern Ireland to oversee the implementation of health and safety requirements at sports grounds. The role of the body would be similar to that of the Football Licensing Authority in Great Britain and its functions would be to:

- monitor the work of the 26 District Councils in their role as certification authorities by assessing the contents of certificates and ensuring consistency in enforcement
- promote a health and safety culture by raising awareness of related issues
- provide specialist advice and information to certification authorities, sports clubs, governing bodies, emergency services, etc.
- monitor trends and developments in the control of safety at sports grounds in Great Britain
- advise on where funding should be targeted
- provide training for officers engaged in the certification process.

Recommendations

- R12.20 DCAL should monitor the policy, role and functions of the overseeing body. The body should be funded by DCAL.
- R12.21 The overseeing role should be assigned to the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which would be well placed to take on this role and develop a safety culture. It would be responsible for mounting a publicity campaign and introducing the Northern Ireland guide (see Chapter 12, R12.10) on the standards to be attained at sporting venues in Northern Ireland.

13. PLAYING FACILITIES

- 13.1 During the course of the consultation process, comments were made about the inadequacy of playing (including training and support) facilities for football, at all levels of the game (PwC, 2001). On the other hand, it was noted that several clubs have successfully managed to develop their own facilities with funding from, for example, the Sports Council Lottery Fund. Implementation of the recommendations in this report will put further pressure on existing facilities and the Advisory Panel feels that there is an urgent need to assess how to improve the facilities base.
- 13.2 The Advisory Panel takes the view that in the case of clubs with their own facilities, the development of these facilities is primarily the responsibility of the clubs themselves. Clubs should consider the longer term needs, in terms of facilities, in drawing up plans for their future development and management. Such plans should take account of the need for clubs to meet their share of the financial investment required. Clubs must be proactive and innovative in raising funds to support their own development, and the Panel also urges the Minister to seek extra funding for playing facilities.
- 13.3 The Panel notes the scope for financial support for capital development through schemes administered by the Sports Council, particularly the Sports Lottery Fund. It also notes the statutory responsibility of each District Council to secure the provision for its area of adequate facilities for recreational and physical activities (The Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, article 10). The Panel believes the roles of the Sports Council and District Councils are crucial in meeting the future needs of football.
- 13.4 The Panel is aware that its recommendations for the future development of football in Northern Ireland will have knock-on implications for playing facilities. For example, the recommendation in Chapter 4, R4.3, that mini-soccer should be the basis for developing the skills of children of primary school age will have implications for facilities at schools, District Council grounds, and senior clubs.
- 13.5 The recommendations in Chapter 2 for changes in the league structure will have implications for some clubs aiming to progress upwards in the pyramid structure in terms of being able to fulfil criteria in relation to the standard of facilities.

- 13.6 Existing facilities for women's football are considered inadequate (see Chapter 6). The provision of adequate summer facilities for women's football has implications for District Councils. The recommendation for the affiliation of some women's clubs to senior Irish League clubs (see Chapter 6, R6.6) would have an obvious knock-on effect for those clubs in terms of facilities, albeit minor, for, say, changing accommodation.

- R13.1 The Sports Council, working with other funders, providers and users, should carry out an assessment, mapping out existing and future facilities (and equipment) requirements for all levels of football. This should include intermediate and junior football, and take account of the recommendations for mini-soccer, a revised league structure and improved provision for women's football.
- R13.2 The Sports Council should take the lead in encouraging and developing innovative proposals for providing adequate and sustainable facilities. This exercise might examine, for example, the scope for shared facilities with other sports, or a transfer to new ownership or leasing arrangements.
- R13.3 It is suggested that appropriate priority should be accorded to the needs of football over the next five to ten years in allocating funds from a variety of funders, including the Sports Council Lottery Fund.
- R13.4 In the short term, District Councils and Education and Library Boards should take early steps to provide dedicated mini-soccer pitches, marked out to specifications agreed with the governing body. Immediate priority should be given to identifying suitable mini-soccer pitches in each District Council area and at participating schools.

14. NATIONAL STADIUM

- 14.1 Northern Ireland does not have a sports stadium that meets all the expected standards for hosting international football. It is the strong view of the Advisory Panel that this is not acceptable and that steps should be taken immediately to address this deficiency.
- 14.2 The Panel supports the need for a large venue for football in Northern Ireland to cater for:
- international games
 - major European club matches
 - major domestic games such as the Irish Cup final.
- 14.3 The venue should meet international standards and be acceptable to all sections of the community.
- 14.4 The Panel is aware of previous discussions on the feasibility of establishing a national stadium. The National Stadium Working Group, set up under the auspices of the Sports Council in 1999, concluded that such a stadium was feasible under certain conditions. The Panel is disappointed that there has been no further progress in developing a strategy for establishing a stadium. This uncertainty is not helpful to football.
- 14.5 The Panel believes that Government, in conjunction with the governing body and the Sports Council, should act quickly to end the uncertainty by making a firm commitment to establish a national stadium. It recognises that early decisions would be required on fundamental issues including:
- the sports that would be accommodated in the stadium: football only, or a mix of sports?
 - the preferred location
 - the optimum capacity
 - options for financing the project.

Recommendations

- R14.1 A national stadium, which would provide a neutral and welcoming environment and meet international standards for football, should be established.
- R14.2 DCAL, in conjunction with the governing body and the Sports Council and other interested parties, should commit to establishing the stadium and prepare an action plan and timetable for its implementation.
- R14.3 Criteria for the stadium and options for its development should be agreed as soon as possible. The criteria for assessing the options should take account of:
- the ability to provide facilities that meet international standards for football
 - the potential to provide an inclusive venue and create a welcoming environment for all supporters and players
 - the potential to contribute to the long term development of football in Northern Ireland
 - cost-effectiveness.

15. CONCLUSION

- 15.1 In presenting these proposals, the Advisory Panel believes that its recommendations for change must be treated and taken forward as an integrated package if the game of football in Northern Ireland is to improve. The Panel acknowledges that some recommendations are relatively straightforward and could be implemented almost immediately. Others will require a greater degree of management and more time to realise. Some will require a very considerable level of additional funding.
- 15.2 Furthermore, the Panel makes its recommendations with the expectation that a UEFA Licensing Scheme will become operational in season 2004-05. This scheme will set high standards for clubs wishing to compete in UEFA competitions. The Panel believes that the successful implementation of its recommendations will help clubs, with support, to achieve these standards.
- 15.3 The Panel is also satisfied that its proposals for football are broadly consistent with the aims and objectives for sport overall as set out in the *Strategy for the Development of Sport in Northern Ireland 1997-2005* (Sports Council, 1997).

Recommendations

- R15.1 This report should be published for widespread consultation at the earliest opportunity.
- R15.2 The Advisory Panel recommends that the Government, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, the Irish Football Association and the Irish Football League should work together to make change happen. The Panel therefore recommends that these four parties give priority to working together to draw up, as a matter of urgency, an implementation plan and timetable, and identify funding requirements and sources.
- R15.3 The recommendations should be treated and taken forward as an integrated package.

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APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGM	annual general meeting
CCTV	closed circuit television
DCAL	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
DSNI	Disability Sports Northern Ireland
FA	The Football Association
FAI	Football Association of Ireland
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association (International Federation of Football Associations)
FSA	Football Supporters' Association
GB	Great Britain
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IFA	Irish Football Association
IFL	Irish Football League
ISDN	integrated services digital network
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NIPFA	Northern Ireland Players' Football Association
NIWFA	Northern Ireland Women's Football Association
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
SPFA	Scottish Professional Footballers' Association
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations

APPENDIX II: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Advisory Panel wishes to thank and acknowledge the assistance and contribution of the following:

Mr Mark Adair
Mr Fraser Agnew MLA
Mr Freddie Anderson
Mr Ken Barrett
Ms Fiona Bloomer
Mr David Bowen
Mr Jim Boyce
Mr Michael Boyd
Mr Derek Brooks
Mr Lee Carroll
Ms Rhoda Cassidy
Mr Jim Cleary
Mr Maurice Clements
Mr Norman Coleman
Mr David Currie
Mr Brian Dempster
Mr John Devine
Mr Peter Dornan
Mr Roy Downey
The Football Association
Football Association of Ireland
FAI Eircom League
Mr Brian Gilliland
Ms Anne Gourley
Mr Jim Gracey
Mr John Hamilton
Mr Tony Higgins
Mr David Hilditch MLA
Mr Mervyn Hill
Mr Spike Hill
Mr Brian Houston
Institut National du Football (French National Football Institute)
Mr Bob Jenkins
Mr Norman Kelly
Miss Lisa-Jane Kerr
Mr Jim Lawlor
Livingston Football Club
Mr Stephen Looney
Mr Raymond Loughrey
Mr Basil Marshall

Mr George Matchett
Mr Tommy McCallion
Mr Noel McClure
Mr Billy McCoubrey
Mr Roy McCreadie
Mr John McCrossan
Mr Shane McCullough
Mr Pat McGreevy
Mr Allen McKinstry
Mr Dave McVeigh
Mr Roy Millar
Mr Damien Mooney
Ms Maura Muldoon
Mr Raymond Nesbitt
Norges Fotballforbund (Norwegian Football Association)
Mr Jimmy O'Brien
Mr Danny O'Connor
Mr Shaun Ogle
Mr Kevin O'Neill
Mr John Quinn
Mr John Rea
Mr Jim Roddy
Safety Officers' Association
Mr Paul Scott
Scottish Football Association
Mr Jim Semple
Ms Dawn Smith
Mr Edward Smith
Mr Alan Snoddy
Mr Brian Strain
Professor John Sugden
Mr Peter Valentine
Mr Harry Wallace
Mr Gerry Ward
Mr Terry Watson
Mr Alfie Wylie

The Panel also acknowledges all those who participated in the consultation exercise, all those who contributed their views by correspondence, and all those who attended the media seminar on 16 August 2001.

