

People and Communities Committee

Wednesday, 20th November, 2019

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Michael Collins (Chairperson);
and Councillors D. Baker, Black, Cobain,
Kyle, Magee and Newton.

Also attended: Aldermen Copeland, Kingston and Rodgers and Councillor
Brooks.

In attendance: Mr. R. Black, Director of Neighbourhood Services; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor McReynolds), Alderman McCoubrey and Councillors Bunting, Corr, Donnelly, McLaughlin and Verner.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Restructuring of Intermediate Football

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 10th September, it had agreed, in light of concerns which had been expressed by Members, to invite representatives from the Irish Football Association (IFA) to attend a future meeting to discuss its proposals for the restructuring of Intermediate football in Northern Ireland and associated changes to pitch criteria.

It was reported that Mr. S. Murphy, Chief Operating Officer, and Mr. L. Sillery, Club Licensing Manager, were in attendance on behalf of the IFA and they were welcomed by the Chairperson.

Mr. Murphy informed the Committee that the IFA's five-year strategy for 2017-2022 included a proposal for the restructuring of Intermediate football, with a view to providing a clear pathway for a club to progress from junior to intermediate to senior football and ensuring that the level at which it was competing was appropriate to its ability and ground facilities.

Mr. Sillery reviewed the format of the current Intermediate structure, which consisted of a Premier Intermediate League and four regional leagues, two of which extended to more than one division. Under the new structure, which had been approved by the Board of the IFA, a National Intermediate League, consisting of either twelve or fourteen teams, and four regional single leagues, each comprising fourteen teams, would be established.

He then drew the Members' attention to the following changes to intermediate ground criteria and pointed out the last significant changes had come into effect in 2008/09:

- **Spectator Viewing** - it must be possible for spectators to view a match from at least the full length of two sides of the playing area, excluding any sterile area where spectator access may be prohibited;
- **Spectator Accommodation** - the football ground must have as a minimum permanent covered accommodation (covered seating/covered terracing/ covered hard standing) for 50 persons;
- **Changing Room Accommodation** - the distance to the field of play from exiting the dressing room building must be no more than 55m. There must be separate changing rooms for both teams, each with a minimum surface area for changing of 15 m², each equipped with usable team/ coaching staff seating and clothes hanging facilities;
- **Access to Pitch for Players and Officials** - a permanent barrier with a minimum height of 1.2 m must be in place to safeguard the access from the changing room building to the field of play for players and officials. For the avoidance of doubt, temporary arrangements put in place on match days, such as crowd control barriers, will not satisfy this requirement;
- **Pitch Size** - the pitch must be a minimum of 90m in length with a minimum width of 55m.
- **Artificial Pitches** - any artificial grass pitch must comply at all times with FIFA quality standards or a comparable testing standard that certifies the pitch for football, in terms of playing performance, safety, durability and quality assurance. A valid, current field test certificate (pass) must be on file with the Irish Football Association at all times. Only 11-a-side football markings are permitted;
- **Obscured Viewing** - a boundary wall and/or fence and/or natural boundary must surround the football ground. The boundary wall and/or fence must be permanent, secure and of sound construction, with a recommended minimum height of 2m (measured from the exterior of the perimeter) and designed to obscure viewing into the ground from publicly accessible areas;
- **Shared Multi-Pitch/Multi-Team/Multi-Changing Room/ Multi-User Facilities** - the two Intermediate teams (home and visiting team), club and match officials have exclusive access to and exclusive use of the entire dressing room complex for at least 60 minutes prior to kick off, the duration of the match and 30 minutes following the completion of the match;

or

a dedicated external entrance to/exit from the Intermediate football dressing room area exists exclusively for the two Intermediate teams

(home and visiting team), club and match officials and permanent internal segregation arrangements are in place to separate from other teams or facility users.

Mr. Sillery concluded by pointing out that, in order to gain entry to the new intermediate structure, clubs would be required to meet the revised ground criteria and to sportingly qualify for the top 68/70 places, based upon the hierarchy in place within the current structure at the end of the 2020/21 season.

During discussion, Members expressed serious concerns in relation to the IFA's proposals and confirmed that they had been contacted by representatives of numerous intermediate clubs who had voiced their opposition. The ensuing discussion focused primarily upon:

- the detrimental impact which the reduction in the number of intermediate clubs from 116 to 68/70 would have upon local communities, in terms of physical and mental wellbeing and the potential loss of football talent;
- the limited timeframe for clubs to prepare for the introduction of the new league structure and associated ground criteria;
- the failure by the IFA to consult at any stage with the Council and other key stakeholders and whether an Equality Impact Assessment of its proposals had been undertaken; and
- the potentially significant cost to the Council of bringing the twelve pitches/facilities which were used for Intermediate football up to the required standard and to other clubs.

In response, Mr. Sillery stated that a fourteen-team league was viewed as being the optimum model and took into account clubs' additional demands in terms of cup competitions. He stressed that those clubs which failed to gain entry initially would be eligible to compete in junior football and have the opportunity, through their sporting performance, to return to intermediate level. He added that a ground share arrangement would be permissible from the IFA's perspective.

Mr. Murphy explained that, following discussions with representatives of the Intermediate league, the Board of the IFA had agreed to increase its funding allocation for ground improvements from €500k to €1m. All intermediate clubs would be entitled to apply for a share of that funding, which would be distributed by way of a small grants scheme. Those intermediate clubs which were using the Council's pitches could apply for funding which, if approved, would be paid directly to the Council. The Board had agreed also, in light of its request for the wording of the Obscure Viewing element of the ground criteria to be reviewed, to delay the implementation of the new league structure/ground criteria until the beginning of the 2022/23 season.

He confirmed that IFA officials had already carried out a cursory inspection of most intermediate grounds and that they would, upon receiving confirmation of a club's intention to retain its intermediate status, undertake a more detailed inspection to

identify the extent of the improvements which would be required and outline the funding process.

In relation to consultation, Mr. Murphy confirmed that IFA officials had engaged with the Intermediate league operators and, on two occasions, with the Chief Leisure Officers' Association which, as far as he was aware, included representation from local councils. He added that he was unable to confirm at this stage if an Equality Impact Assessment of the IFA's proposals had been undertaken but would seek clarification in that regard.

The Director of Neighbourhood Services pointed out that the Chief Leisure Officers' Association was a sub-group of SOLACE, a representative body for local government, and that it was his understanding that, on the two occasions referred to by Mr. Murphy, the IFA officials had attended in order to provide information on the new structure, rather than engage in a meaningful consultation process.

Mr. Murphy and Mr. Sillery were then thanked by the Chairperson and left the meeting.

The Committee agreed that it would be beneficial to hear from Mr. T. Pateman, Chairman of the Northern Amateur Football League, who was in attendance and he was welcomed to the meeting.

Mr. Pateman informed the Committee that he had been involved in amateur league football for the past fifty-three years. He reviewed the league structure in place currently within the Northern Amateur Football League, which included four intermediate leagues comprising fifty-five teams in total, and pointed out that it enabled clubs to move, via a promotion and relegation system, between junior, intermediate and senior level.

He explained that the IFA's proposals were, in his opinion, unnecessary and would be unlikely to reinvigorate intermediate football and pointed to the reduction in the number of clubs, uncertainty around the funding process and ground criteria and the limited timeframe associated with the implementation process.

The Chairperson thanked Mr. Pateman for his contribution.

After further discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the presentation from representatives of the Irish Football Association on its proposals for the restructuring of Intermediate football and changes to ground criteria;
- ii. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting outlining the extent of the work which would be required to be undertaken to bring those Council-owned pitches which were used currently for intermediate football up to the required standard under the proposed restructure, together with indicative costings;
- iii. agreed that the aforementioned report should set out potential actions which, in the opinion of the City Solicitor, could be taken

in relation to the failure by the Irish Football Association to consult with the Council at any stage in the restructuring process; and

- iv. agreed, should it be considered necessary for the Irish Football Association to attend a future meeting on this issue, that its Chief Executive and President be invited to attend in person.

Chairperson