

CASE STUDY – DEVELOPING A SOCCER STRATEGY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Background

On 20 October 2000, Michael McGimpsey MLA, Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, announced plans to develop a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland. This followed appeals from a wide range of football interests to the Minister to help tackle the crisis that many increasingly felt the game was facing.

The Minister's later speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly set out clearly the issues that needed to be tackled. The Minister said:

“Soccer is in serious difficulties due to a whole raft of problems. Grounds risk closure as they fall seriously short of acceptable health and safety standards. Matches are poorly attended. Clubs are in financial difficulties. There is hooliganism and sectarian behaviour by spectators, and the general public has a poor perception of the game. We need to restore to full health the sport that has served all sections of our community for so long and so well.”

“The Assembly should look towards a vision for football and see where the game should be in five, 10 or 20 years. What are the issues, and how should we tackle them? What are the problems, and how do we solve them? How can we improve the image of the game and increase spectator numbers? Can we broaden the spectator base to make the game attractive to women and families? What steps can be taken to create a welcoming and family-friendly environment? Can we increase access and participation? How should we go about developing youth football and women's football? What does it take to improve the infrastructure, grounds, facilities, administration, coaching and *funding?*”

Approach

The Soccer Strategy process was founded upon the principle of bringing together as many informed views as possible from all the game's stakeholders. The policy development process followed six key stages:

- Stage One: a consultative research exercise to establish baseline evidence;
- Stage Two: a major conference workshop organised around the principles of Future Search (see <http://www.futuresearch.net>);
- Stage Three: a series of working groups that developed the way forward on the issues identified at the Future Search conference and produced a consultation document 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland';
- Stage Four: consultation on the document;
- Stage Five: analysis of consultation responses and the preparation of an action plan for implementation; and
- Stage Six: negotiation with the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Irish

Football League (IFL) and others regarding implementation.

To oversee this six-stage policy development plan 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. 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; and
- to advise the Minister on any issue related to the strategy.

Stage One: The consultative research exercise was carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers and involved surveys of clubs, players and the general public; face-to-face interviews with key informants; focus groups; and public meetings across Northern Ireland. 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.

Stage Two: The Future Search conference workshop was 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 the following agreed list of key issues to be addressed by the soccer strategy:

- a review of the structure of governance and administration of football, including the administration and structure of the senior league;
- the development of youth football, including the concept of a centre for technical excellence/youth academy;
- the improvement of club development and management;
- the improvement of facilities and health and safety, including legislation and stewarding;
- the establishment of a Northern Ireland Players' Football Association;
- the development of improved media relationships;
- the promotion and development of refereeing;
- the promotion of community relations, anti-sectarianism and inclusion, including Football in the Community; and
- the development of a national stadium.

Stage Three: The Advisory Panel then led a series of exercises to build on and refine the ideas that emerged from the conference. Twelve working groups were established to bring forward recommendations that resulted in the publication, 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland: Report from

the Advisory Panel to the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure'. The report contained over 150 recommendations for the future development of the sport.

Stages Four and Five: The Department published the report for widespread consultation on 30 October 2001 with the closing date for the receipt of comments at the end of January 2002. The Advisory Panel was stood down at this point. The consultation received positive feedback, leading to the then Minister's statement in the former NI Assembly on 25 June 2002, endorsing the Advisory Panel's report as the way forward for the future development of football in Northern Ireland and seeking the agreement of the governing body to:

- give a commitment to implement changes in the structure of governance and administration of football; and
- lead in drawing together a long-term plan for the development of football, consistent with the Advisory Panel's recommendations, taken in their totality, this exercise to be taken forward with support and assistance from the Sports Council.

Outcomes

Stage Six: The Minister's statement indicated that on receipt of an agreed development plan a package of funding proposals would be presented to the then NI Executive seeking the necessary resources to support action to restore football as a successful sport. A small steering group of IFA and Sports Council officials was set up to take forward the task of drawing up a development plan. A draft plan was presented and agreed by the IFA's ruling Council at its meeting on 16 September 2002 and submitted to the Department by the IFA General Secretary on 23 September 2002.

The IFA submitted a five-year Development Plan to the Minister on 23 September 2002. The Soccer Strategy Advisory Panel met on 31 October and concluded that although there was much in the Development Plan to be commended, it fell short of the Advisory Panel's recommendations for the governance and administration of football in NI, including the management of the Irish League.

Following this, DCAL officials were involved in negotiations with senior representatives of football in trying to unlock the way forward, particularly on a number of contentious issues. Progress was made and the IFA Council met on 20 January 2003 and accepted a number of changes, and a revised Development Plan was presented to the Department on 23 January.

The Advisory Panel reconvened on 7 February 2003 to consider the IFA's revised plan. The outcome of the meeting was that the Advisory Panel accepted the plan, subject to a number of caveats. After the meeting, the Minister issued a statement conveying the Panel's decision, and setting out the basis on which the Department would offer funding in the future.

At the AGM of the IFA on 30 May 2003 the Development Plan was ratified.

Since that time, negotiations between the IFA, IFL and DCAL on the detail of implementation have continued.

It is too early to say what impact the Development Plan will have on the future of soccer in Northern Ireland. The Plan includes provision for monitoring, evaluation and review as well as a mechanism for reporting back to the Department. It will be several years before it is clear what the outcomes have been in terms of impact upon those who play, those who spectate and those who participate in other ways in the game.

Lessons Learned

The consultative process proved an excellent generator of ideas and helped to build relationships. Indeed, in social capital terms, it built “bonding” within stakeholder groups, “bridging” between them as they discovered that they had much in common, and “linking” as groups came together with those who had resources and those who controlled governance in the game.

Future Search was particularly successful as a consultative mechanism, though it was only part of the policy development process. The working groups, which grew out of Future Search, required careful planning and management.

The timescale for the development of policy, virtually from a blank sheet, was just over two years; the lesson being that policy takes time to develop and cannot be done successfully from scratch within weeks or even months.