



ULSTER
GAA

Response to Consultation on the Review of the
Civic Forum

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29th August 2008

Who we are, what we do and who we represent:

In considering the social aspects of sport, special account must be taken of the GAA, which is the largest sporting and cultural body in the county and the outstanding representative of the voluntarist, community based model of sport and cultural organisation¹.

The GAA in Ulster

"Nobody could have designed the coalition that is the GAA; it brings together, a common purpose, so many shades of opinion, so many "states of mind, so many different political, social and cultural perspectives, such a combination of radicalism and conservatism, of urban and rural, some might even say of the urban and the ingenuous, that, theoretically, it should not survive never mind thrive. But that is its strength; it tolerates- it even cherishes-diversity, and it succeeds, not in spite of that, but because of that".²

The GAA has grown over the past one hundred and twenty four years to become Ireland's leading sporting and cultural organisation and the most vibrant in the world. It both organises and provides a physical infrastructure for gaelic football; hurling; rounders; and handball and works in very close collaboration with the governing bodies for ladies gaelic football and camogie. Progress is being made towards the formal integration of all three governing bodies.

The following points highlight the importance place that the GAA has in Irish Society.

- GAA organisational practices and conventions promote social contact between people, enhance trust and support the shared acceptance of norms and values in society.
- Irish Sports Volunteers 400,000 adults represent 15% of adult population
- GAA is the dominant sports organisation on the island of Ireland which accounts for 40% of those who volunteer for sport. (17% in soccer)

¹ Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland p.73 Delaney L/ Fahey T (ESRI) Irish Sports Council/ 2005

² GAA Strategic Review- Enhancing Community Identity GAA 2002

- Among Irish adults 30% are members of sports clubs, GAA largest membership body with 29% of all sports club membership is in GAA clubs.
- Of the Adult population in Ireland 46% attended a domestic sports event, over 60% of those attendances were at GAA events
- The GAA has a strong cultural network with a range of cultural activities and events organised throughout Ulster

The Association is strictly amateur and is almost wholly underpinned by a volunteer input. It is organised nationally on the basis of a single HQ; four Provinces; 32 Counties; and some 2,600 Clubs. Ulster forms a Province and brings together nine Counties and almost 600 clubs.

The report commissioned by the Irish Government titled the “*Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland*” points the concept of “social capital” of sport particularly the GAA, the report defines social capital as “*The social networks, norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation among groups, some see it simply as a new term for **community**. It is usually measured by reference to the density of people’s social networks; the extent of their participation in clubs, societies and other organisations; their level of trust in others; and their acceptance of shared norms, values and identities*”³

The report highlights the GAA’s place in Irish society: *The GAA’s organisation strength is greater than the relative numbers of those who play its games would suggest. It is by far the largest sporting body in the country and is the strongest representative of the voluntarism community based model of a sports organisation. In 2003, it had 2595 affiliated clubs on the island of Ireland, of which 2124 were in the Republic and 411 in Northern Ireland (GAA 2004). It had a additional 242 clubs oversees, which are supported by Irish Diaspora.*

It (GAA) is particularly strong in rural Ireland though it also has a strong presence in urban areas. A Club Development scheme initiated in the 1970;s aimed to make clubs into community and social centres, and club premises have since then been development to meet this goal. Today the GAA defines it mission in sporting, cultural; community development and national identity terms⁴.

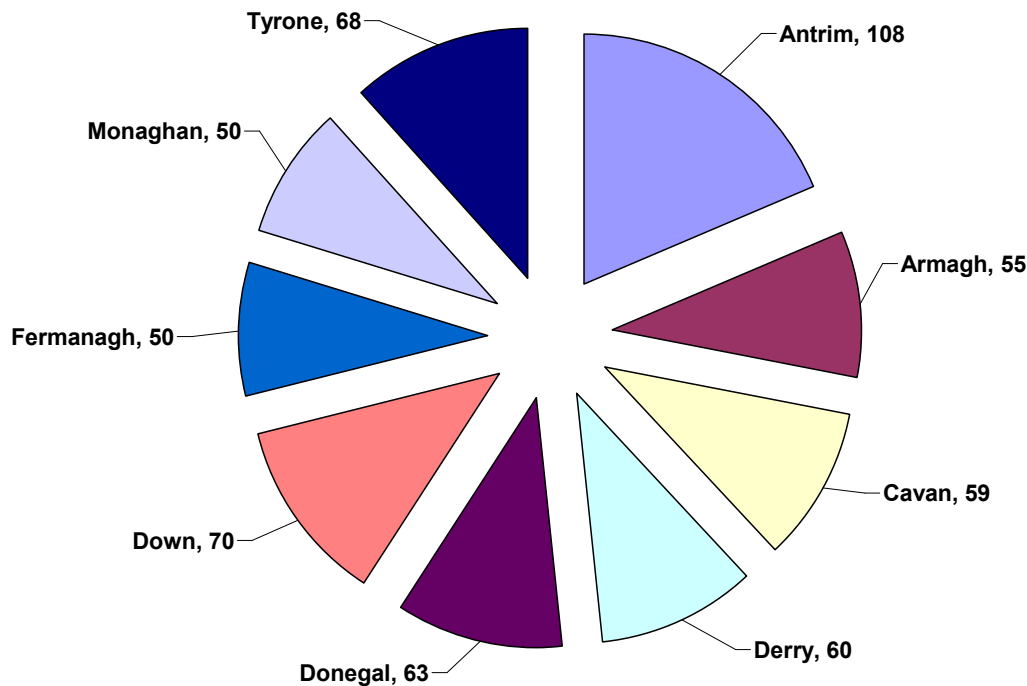
³ Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland p.1 Delaney L/ Fahey T (ESRI) Irish Sports Council/ 2005

⁴ Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland p 12. Delaney L/ Fahey T (ESRI) Irish Sports Council/ 2005

The vision and mission statement for the GAA in Ulster can be summarised as follows:

“Using The National Games to Build A Sense Of Local Community Identity And National Tir Grá Within Irish Communities Everywhere.⁵”

Ulster: Counties and Clubs



Gaelic games attract huge levels of participation and attendances. Well over 100,000 people attended the 2005 Ulster Final and Replay and over four million people watched Ulster teams live on television in the 2005 Championships. In Ulster alone there are some 90,000 active players.

The Club lies at the core of the Association and is where by far the greatest volume of its work is located. This reflects and brings life to a central ethos of the GAA – its base in the local community and the importance within it of “attachment to place”. This is why the GAA’s overall Strategic Review document published in 2002 was deliberately titled “*Enhancing Community Identity*”. It is important to stress the particular nature and style/ethos of the GAA club. Whilst no two are the same virtually every one will provide, at a minimum, the following:

⁵ GAA Strategic Review- Enhancing Community Identity GAA 2002

- ⇒ a structured games and coaching programme (in football and/or hurling) for teams at U8; U10; U12; U14; U16; U18; U21; Adult “Seconds” and Adult “Firsts” and recreational levels
- ⇒ a social/community hub for all the family
- ⇒ access to, and development of, areas of Irish culture including the language; music; song; dance; and drama
- ⇒ a base or premises that are available to and used by a wide range of other locally-based groups and organisations (eg play groups; boxing clubs; fitness clubs; historical societies; adult education; and community development groups)

GAA clubs thus do much more than just provide opportunities to play gaelic games. They also:

- ⇒ contribute to local well-being
- ⇒ build social capital and enhance the capacity of communities and individuals
- ⇒ act as community anchors, thus either standing as bulwarks against decline or contributing to regeneration and renewal
- ⇒ keep alive a strong ethos of volunteering
- ⇒ generate huge amounts of financial and non-financial investment from their own sources. Provide physical infrastructure and facilities for communities and sometimes only facility in the community

Response on the Consultation on the Review of the Civic Forum

1. Introduction

Ulster Council GAA are strongly in favour of the concept of a Civic Forum. Several leading members of the GAA played an active part in the previous Civic Forum. We do however have concerns about the structure and remit of the previous Forum and welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

2. Context for a Civic Forum

- 2.1 Ulster GAA supports the ongoing implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement acknowledged that it was advantageous to have a forum to advocate the views of civic society and offer support and opinion to politicians who govern that society. Ten years after the signing of the Agreement Ulster GAA believes that there is still a role for such a body today. Any new Forum should not in any way conflict with the role of the Assembly and its elected members instead it should complement the political process by contributing to it.
- 2.2 Any new body established should have the full support of all political parties and should be championed by both the First and Deputy First Ministers. If however there is significant political opinion that there should not be a Civic Forum concept we would see no point in establishing such a body as it would not enjoy the full support of all sections of the community.

3. Remit of the Civic Form

- 3.1 Any body established to follow the Civic Forum concept should have clear remit and should not overlap with the responsibilities of the Assembly, government departments or any other public bodies. The new body must add value to the development of society and enhance overall community development

- 3.2 We have a strong opinion that the Civic Forum should not be a policymaking or lobbying body. The forum should be allowed to submit a corporate response on government consultations and should be allowed to develop reports, which can be submitted to the executive with a clear focus on social and economic issues.
- 3.3 Ulster GAA would strongly encourage any new body to adopt a social partnership model similar to the arrangements currently in place in the North and South of Ireland and across Europe. Social Partnership has played a vital role in the expansion of the overall European economy and the model has yielded tangible results were applied.
- 3.4 Thought may be given to adding an additional remit to the forum over the lifetime of the next Assembly, which includes research reports and investigation in to a range social issues. The Forum should be equipped to accept requests from the Assembly to investigate specific matters.
- 3.5 Ministers, Junior Ministers, Departmental Secretaries, and government officials should meet with the body on a regular basis in both plenary and sub-committee format.
- 3.6 Each government department should have a liaison officer to the new body who serves as a point of information and also available to provide advice and guidance on each departments area of responsibility.

4.0 Recommendations

- 4.1 Ulster GAA is strongly in favour of the Civic Forum being constituted as a social partnership body, which can give advice to government on social, economic and cultural matters as laid down in the NI Act 1998. This body could act the anchor body for the enhancement of social partnership and the development of links between voluntary and community sector, business, trade unions, rural interests and government. Ulster GAA would strongly suggest that the

body should be structured as a proper social partnership forum.

- 4.2 The new body, before it begins to operate, should have a definition of relationships established by both the First and Deputy First Ministers, the Executive and the Assembly to ensure that any advice and evidence it puts forward will be understood and considered appropriately.

The Civic Forum should have a membership between of 45-50 people which should include representatives from the following sectors with approximate representation figures.

- Rural Sector: 5
- Community and Voluntary Sector: 8
- Education Sector: 5
- Business: 8
- Cultural, Arts and Sport: 4
- Churches: 4
- Trade Unions: 4
- Victims and Survivors 2*
- Ministerial Nominations 6

*The Victims Commission should also have a role and possible representation on the committee as the corporate voice for victims and survivors.

- 4.3 In addition to core membership acting in a plenary format the forum should establish sub-committees to take forward specific pieces of work if necessary
- 4.4 Members should be nominated to the forum from their respective bodies and have an opportunity to report to each body on the activities of the forum.
- 4.5 In order to reduce the burden on members plenary sessions should take place at least 6-8 times a year with sub-committees meeting on a month basis if necessary

- 4.6 The Forum should produce a four-year work plan and budget within two months of being established. Any work plan should complement and reflect the aims and objectives in the programme for government.
- 4.7 The First and Deputy First Ministers should appoint a part-time Chairperson and be allowed nominate up to six members in total as part of the Forum. However, The Civic Forum should embody the requirements of equality and inclusion and its membership should reflect this.
- 4.8 Any new body must have a small professional staff to support its work and manage its day to day affairs in conjunction with the Chairperson
- 4.9 A media information campaign is vital to the establishment of any body so the public understand its role and remit from its establishment
- 4.10 The consultation document on the Review of the Civic Forum does not mention the provision under Strand 2 of the Agreement (Section 19) for the establishment of an independent consultative forum 'representative of civil society' on a north-south basis. Ulster GAA strongly believes that this body is a vital part of any new body and should be linked with the existing social partner body in the South of Ireland and not developed as separate add-on. The remit of this body should be formulated as part of the review and development of a new civic body.
- 4.11 Ulster GAA is also strongly of the view that East-West arrangements should be considered as part of the machinery of any new body.