

# Creating a Soccer Strategy

## Views of the stakeholders

*Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure*

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# PART ONE Executive Summary

## *Background and purpose*

This report describes the results of a consultation process commissioned by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the future of football in Northern Ireland. The purpose was to inform the Minister and his Advisory Panel, who are collectively engaged in the development of a strategy for the way forward for the sport in Northern Ireland.

The Minister described the aim of the consultation as follows: *'I know that throughout the Province, there are many people with their own views on how the state of soccer can be improved. I hope that this process will encourage them all to bring forward as many innovative ideas as possible.'*

This has been one of the most intensive and extensive consultations ever undertaken for any sport in Northern Ireland. Over the period November 2000 to January 2001 we undertook:

- interviews and focus groups with over 150 people including clubs, supporters, managers, coaches, sponsors, administrators and other interested bodies
- postal surveys of around 1,400 clubs and players
- street interviews with 750 members of the public
- public meetings at five locations throughout Northern Ireland to allow the public to express their views in an open forum.

The consultation has generated an extraordinarily high level of interest and passion. Everyone has a view on what the problems are and everyone agrees that something needs to be done about them. Football has been called 'the people's game'; this process has given the people an opportunity to have their say on the future of the game in Northern Ireland.

## *The main issues and recurring themes*

The report sets out the results of the consultation under a series of inter-related headings:

- Finance
- Facilities
- Structure
- Youth development
- Community involvement
- Image
- Sectarianism and hooliganism.

Our brief was simply to present the results of the consultation process in order to identify the issues surrounding soccer in Northern Ireland. These will feed into subsequent deliberations on a strategy for the way forward. Our report therefore does not contain any recommendations.

However, there were a number of recurring themes which emerged from our interviews and discussions:

- **The difficulties facing Irish League football**  
Many of the views expressed to us concerned the problems of Irish League football: the deteriorating condition of many of the grounds, the small crowds compared with 20–30 years ago, the poor image of the game in many quarters, the number of teams and competitions, and, linked to

all of this, the financial difficulties facing many senior clubs. We also found a wide range of views on what needs to be done to address these problems. There was clear support for *something* to happen and a great desire by most respondents to find a way forward for senior football.

- **The importance of development of soccer at youth level**

There was widespread agreement amongst those we consulted on the importance of providing opportunities and support for the development of young players. We were told of the many initiatives taking place in Northern Ireland in mini-soccer and schools' coaching. However there was also a strong view that there was a need for greater co-ordination and integration of this activity through the various levels of the game. A strategy for the development of football needs to consider how the game in Northern Ireland can benefit from the development of young players and how to ensure that there are opportunities for young players to progress within the game.

- **The opportunities for greater inclusion**

Football throughout Europe has lost its traditional identity with local communities. In Northern Ireland identity and loss of identity is a crucial issue for society as a whole and this adds to the complexity of the problems facing soccer. There is a strong view that, as a new society develops in Northern Ireland, football also needs to look at opportunities for greater inclusion of the Catholic community in general, women, families, young people and persons with a disability whether as players, supporters or administrators. We have been told that some progress is being made in relation to a number of these issues but this is inevitably going to take time to address.

- **The need for greater communication and working together**

The administrative structures of the game are diverse and complex. During the course of our research we heard much criticism by organisations and individuals of the structures of football in Northern Ireland. This is perhaps inevitable in such a diverse and complex framework but there was widespread agreement on the need for more communication and co-operation between all those concerned with the future of the game. Hopefully this report and the debate that follows will contribute to improvement in the communication of views and opinions about the way forward.

## *Conclusion*

The themes outlined above are only the headlines; the report contains more detail on these and the many other views and opinions expressed to us. As already indicated, the purpose of the report is to document the results of our consultation with the key stakeholders in the game of football in Northern Ireland.

This report does not offer any solutions, short-term or long-term, nor does it seek to estimate the costs of dealing with the problems. We believe that a successful strategy for the development of football in Northern Ireland must come from within the sport itself.

The team in PricewaterhouseCoopers has been privileged to be involved in the process of researching the views and opinions of the football community in Northern Ireland. We would like to convey our thanks to all of those individuals and groups who participated and responded so quickly and willingly to our requests. We hope that this report will assist in the development of a new strategy for the development of football in Northern Ireland which will be shared by all and will benefit everyone.

# PART TWO Background

## *Introduction*

On 16 August 2000 the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure announced the instigation of a process to identify ways of tackling the long-term problems facing local soccer. The focus of this process, 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland', was to be a Conference Workshop to take place in early 2001. He followed this up on 20 October by announcing the establishment of an Advisory Panel and a programme of consultation with key stakeholders within soccer.

## *Terms of reference for the Advisory Panel*

The role of the Advisory Panel is to help guide the development of the strategy. The specific terms of reference for the panel are:

- 1 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
- 2 To provide input to the consultation process and participate in the conference workshop
- 3 To quality assure the outputs from the process, including the draft strategy document which will be issued for wide consultation
- 4 To advise the Minister on any issue related to the strategy.

Members of the Advisory Panel are: Gerry Armstrong, Prof Alan Bairner, Hilary Brady, Iain Dowie, Jim Flanagan, Billy Hamilton, Bryan Hamilton, Johnny Jameson, Felix McCrossan, Sammy McIlroy, Nadine Nicholl, Martin O'Neill, Jim Price, Councillor Jim Rodgers, Eric Saunders, Marty Tabb and Stephen Watson.

## *Terms of reference for the consultation research*

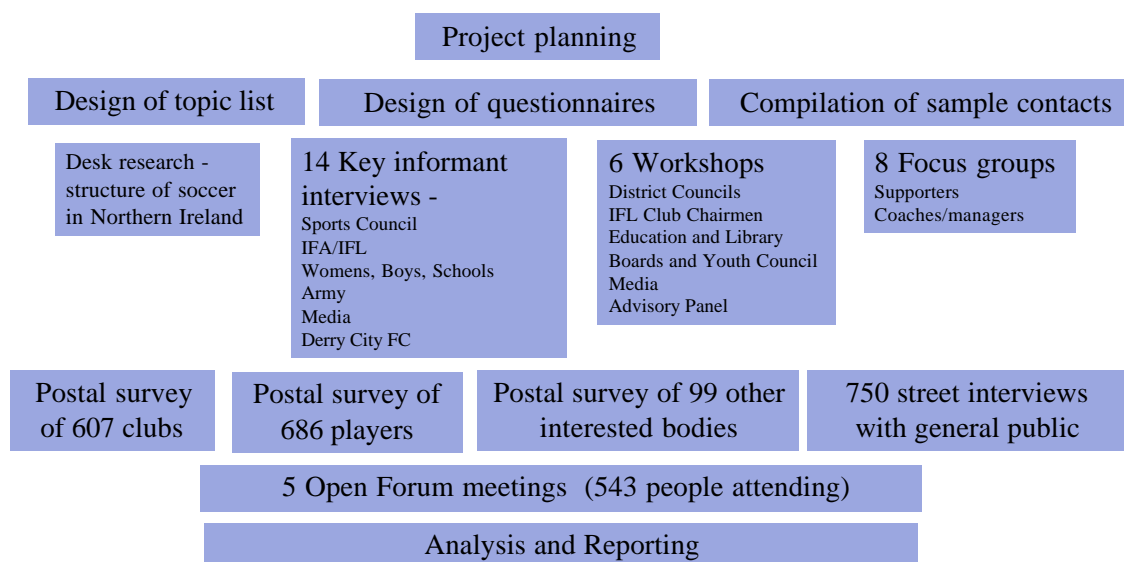
Our brief in undertaking the consultation research was as follows:

- 1 To carry out research that will be used to assist in the development of a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland
- 2 To gather information on how the game of soccer is seen and perceived in Northern Ireland
- 3 To draw out the issues surrounding soccer in Northern Ireland
- 4 To provide a comprehensive overview of the structure of soccer in Northern Ireland
- 5 To ensure that the research was comprehensive and that it covered all levels of soccer and all key stakeholders in the game.

The findings of this study will feed into a conference workshop organised by Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in February 2001.

## Overview of our approach

To meet the objectives for the research, the methodology was designed to be as inclusive and consultative as possible within the constraints of the timetable. The diagram provides an overview of our approach and the paragraphs which follow provide the detailed methodology.



Due to the tight timescales many of the research elements ran concurrently. All research was conducted during the period November 2000 to January 2001.

### Desk research

The aim of the desk research element of our approach was to provide a diagrammatic overview of soccer in Northern Ireland. This encompassed soccer at all levels including senior, amateur, youth, schools and women. Sources of information included local press, the NI Soccer Yearbook, the IFA, the IFL, and the various football associations. A separate report was prepared describing the structure.

To our knowledge, such a detailed piece of research has not been attempted previously. Whilst every attempt has been made to ensure that it is as comprehensive as possible we recognise the possibility that a number of smaller clubs or leagues not affiliated to the IFA may not have been captured.

### Key informant interviews

We conducted a series of 14 key informant interviews. Those interviewed included governing bodies, football associations, the media, and other individuals who had a recognised soccer background.

### Focus groups

A series of eight focus groups was conducted, four with supporters and four with coaches and managers. The supporters groups included both Northern Ireland supporters and senior club supporters (see table). Location, level of football played, and community background were taken into account in the structure.

Group	Type of participant	Location	Club
1	Supporters	East	Cliftonville
2	Supporters	South	Portadown
3	Supporters	North	Ballymena
4	Supporters	West	Derry
Group	Type of participant	Location	Club
5	Managers/Coaches	East	Premier
6	Managers/Coaches	South	Youth
7	Managers/Coaches	North	Junior
8	Managers/Coaches	West	Intermediate

### Workshops

Six workshops were conducted with the following organisations/people:

- District Council Chief Leisure Officers
- District Council Health & Safety Officers
- IFL Club Chairmen
- Education and Library Boards and Voluntary Youth Sector
- Media (through the Football Writers' Association)
- The Advisory Panel.

The key persons in each organisation were identified and sent a letter inviting them to attend the workshop. Each workshop lasted two to three hours.

### Survey of clubs

The IFA provided us with details of all affiliated club teams and their secretaries in Northern Ireland. The contacts were screened for duplicate contacts and these were removed. The remaining 607 contacts were each sent a postal questionnaire. Due to the tight timescale for the research, respondents were asked to return the questionnaire within a two-week deadline. In total 170 completed questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 28%. A profile of respondents is provided in the Appendix.

We consider this to be a good response, given the tight deadline for return of the questionnaire, that no reminder questionnaires were distributed and the open-ended nature of many of the questions. We recognise that there may be a small number of clubs not affiliated to the IFA. Due to the difficulty of locating such clubs they have not been included in the survey.

### **Survey of players**

We also conducted a postal survey of 686 players. Identifying players for participation in the survey was a little more problematic. To our knowledge there is no central registration of players in Northern Ireland. Therefore we had to find an alternative method of obtaining contact details for players. This was done in a number of ways:

#### *Senior players*

The IFL were approached and they provided the contact details of two players at random from each club. Each of these players was mailed the questionnaire directly.

#### *Junior/Youth players*

Each year clubs that enter the Junior and Youth Cups must register their players directly with the IFA. The IFA provided us with contact details for two players from each team that was registered and again the selected players were sent the questionnaire directly.

#### *Intermediate and women players*

These were the most difficult type of players to source. We wrote to the secretary of each Intermediate and Women's club asking them to distribute questionnaires to three of their players selected at random.

In total 686 questionnaires were distributed of which 225 were returned, a response rate of 33%. Again we consider this to be good, given the tight deadline for return of the questionnaires, and the fact that no reminder questionnaires were sent out. A profile of respondents is provided in the Appendix.

### **Survey of Other Bodies**

The aim of this survey was to capture the views of those who had an interest or potential interest in soccer and who were not included in any of the other research processes. Contacts included leagues, referees' association, RUC, sponsors and potential sponsors. In total 99 questionnaires were sent out, of which 20 were completed and returned, a response rate of 20%.

### **Street survey**

A street survey was conducted with 750 members of the general public. To ensure that those interviewed had an interest in soccer, two screening questions were asked: only those were included who had watched a match on television in the last two years or who had attended a live match in the last 15 years.

Quotas were applied, which were representative of the population in relation to age (over 16), socio-economic group, religion and location. It was recognised that although women are less likely to participate in football it was important to ensure their views were captured. Therefore, quotas of 30% female and 70% male were used. The Appendix sets out the profile of those who responded to the surveys and some of the general findings.

### **Public meetings**

A series of five public meetings took place across the Province in January 2001. These meetings were attended by 543 people and provided the opportunity for the public to express their views on the issues they consider impact on soccer.

## *Views about the research*

### **Positive views**

One of the most significant aspects of this piece of research has been the willingness of those approached to participate. Rarely have we conducted research where there has been so much enthusiasm to put forward opinions. This reflects the standing that football has among those who are involved.

Not only were participants able to identify the issues which impact on football, they also expressed many ideas about the future of the game. Whilst the focus of this report is on identifying the issues we have included some of the ideas that were expressed.

Given that the postal surveys were conducted within a four-week time period and without follow-up reminders, we consider the response rate to be good. Many of those that completed questionnaires took time to detail their views comprehensively, again illustrating their enthusiasm for the future of the game.

There is a lot of feeling, fervour and passion about football in Northern Ireland. Tapping into and harnessing this energy will be key to progressing football in the future.

### **Negative views**

Concerns were expressed about what the soccer strategy and the Advisory Panel could actually achieve. These concerns related mainly to the powers that would be available to effect change.

Some expressed concern about the composition of the Advisory Panel and felt that certain aspects of football may not be adequately represented.

Others expressed concern about the IFA and IFL and their role, or lack of it, in the strategy.

Some were concerned that the strategy might focus only on senior football; others thought that senior football should be its only focus.

However, most concluded that the development of the strategy is an important opportunity for the future of football in Northern Ireland and that this opportunity should not be wasted.

# PART THREE The Emerging Issues

This section of the report sets out the issues that those connected with football consider impact on the sport.

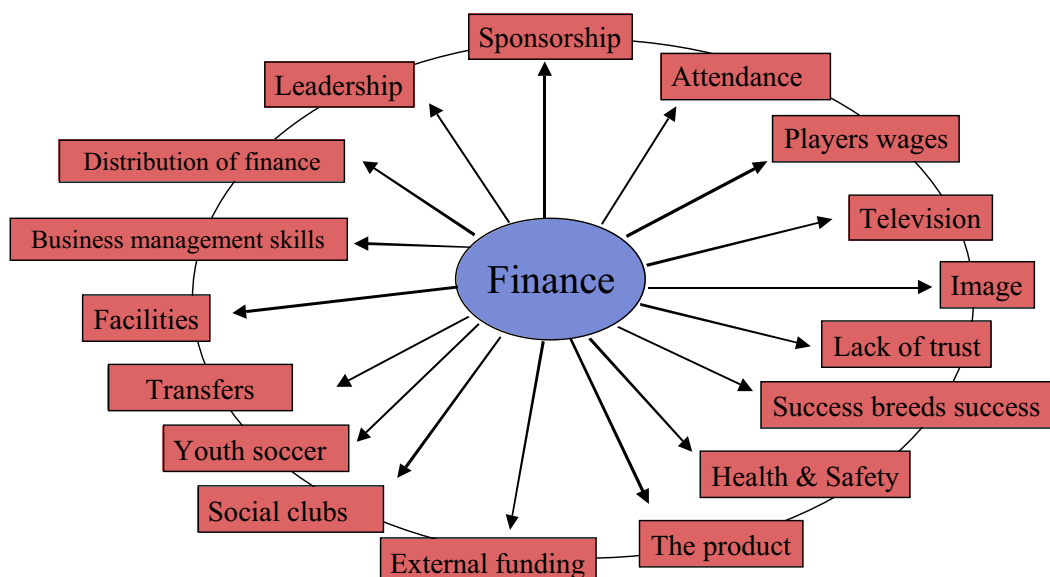
The issues identified were not only numerous but there was a lot of agreement on what participants believed them to be. We have therefore structured the report in the form of a comprehensive overview of the issues. To illustrate our findings we have included charts from the surveys and selected quotations from the quantitative surveys and the qualitative interviews with our focus groups.

We have summarised the issues under a number of key headings. We would stress that many of these issues are inter-linked and therefore should not be considered in isolation. Indeed, because of the links between the issues it has been difficult to prioritise them. However, we believe the following are key:

- Finance
- Facilities
- Structure
- Youth development
- Community involvement
- Image
- Sectarianism and hooliganism.

## *Finance*

Many considered that football had been underfunded for years and that this was reflected in the deterioration of facilities and reduced attendance at matches. Many of the issues surrounding finance were in relation to the Irish League clubs, which we were told all face serious financial difficulties.



It was not within the scope of this research to investigate and report on the financial state of Irish League clubs or any other part of the structure of football in Northern Ireland; we have simply reported the views expressed to us.

There were a number of factors which were thought to contribute to the perceived lack of finance in soccer currently.

#### **Lack of sponsorship**

Some considered that the game was poorly marketed. It suffered from a poor image, which meant that there were fewer companies willing to sponsor the game or indeed provide a greater amount of sponsorship.

It was thought that generally not enough was being done by the clubs, leagues and governing bodies to make sponsorship work effectively for the game.

#### **Leadership**

The view was expressed that there was little guidance or leadership from the governing bodies in the area of finance. It was thought that more guidance could be provided by the governing bodies.

#### **The product**

The view was expressed that soccer as a 'product' did not sell itself and that more needed to be done to make the experience more entertaining and to market it more effectively. Comparisons were made to the way in which ice hockey has recently been launched as a product in Northern Ireland. Several people made the point that marketing alone is not enough; the product needs to be right.

#### **Attendance**

Attendance levels at senior football games, we were told, have decreased over the years, which means that there is less income from gate receipts.

#### **Players' wages**

Many considered that the wages paid to senior players were a major issue. It was stated that gate receipts often did not cover the cost of players' wages. The view was expressed that spending money on players was a short-term strategy to try to gain success in the league but that it was placing many clubs in financial difficulties as not all clubs can be successful.

The view was expressed that some highly paid players made little contribution to their clubs off the pitch. Comment was made that, as part of their contract, professional players should be involved in coaching younger players through schools and local clubs. The benefits would be greater recognition in the community and a rise in the skills of younger players.

#### **Business management skills**

Business management skills were thought to be lacking within soccer clubs and this contributed to the financial situation. It was pointed out that some directors were successful businessmen, but that when it came to football they 'let their hearts rule their heads' and did not treat their soccer dealings in the way they would treat their businesses. Some 91% of clubs agreed that they needed more business management skills to help improve their financial situation.

#### **Facilities for training and coaching**

The view was expressed that, because of lack of finance, the facilities for training and coaching at all levels of soccer were not as good as they should be and that this impacted upon the skills development of players.

### **Transfers**

The introduction of the Bosman rule (which allows players who are out of contract to move clubs without a transfer fee) means that clubs are losing out financially on transfers. This is reported to have reduced income to football in Northern Ireland.

Some youth football clubs expressed the opinion that they spent a lot of time developing the skills of players, only for them to be 'poached' by senior teams without any acknowledgement of the time and effort given by the youth football club. This caused some feelings of resentment towards the senior clubs. Youth football clubs considered that senior clubs should acknowledge their role in developing players by giving a financial contribution. This could then be used to help develop the skills of a larger number of younger players.

However, it was also recognised that not all Irish League Clubs had the finance to provide facilities to support coaching and training.

### **Youth soccer**

It was considered that there was limited funding at both junior and youth levels. The Northern Ireland Boys Football Association commented that they received very little funding from either the Sports Council or IFA to help develop youth soccer. They considered that the contribution of youth leagues to soccer was undervalued and that much of the finance for youth soccer was distributed through schools' soccer.

Comments were made that youth soccer relies on the voluntary commitment of many individuals, yet there is little funding available from Government to finance the activity.

### **Social clubs**

Social clubs were reported to be an important source of income for some clubs.

### **External funding**

There was a perception in some quarters that more funding is available from UEFA (the European governing body) and FIFA (the world governing body) than is currently being accessed by the IFA. There was also a lack of understanding of how the funding that is received is applied in practice. Unfavourable comparisons were made with the Republic of Ireland where there appears to be more funding available to the game, although this must be linked at least partly to the relative success of the Republic's national team.

The IFA is quite clear that UEFA and FIFA funding is properly and appropriately used for the development of the international teams and for the development of mini-soccer. The IFA has increased dramatically the number of development officers and claims that Northern Ireland now has a system in place that is based on best practice elsewhere in Europe.

### **Health and safety**

Senior clubs recognised that some of their grounds did not meet health and safety regulations. However, they did not have the funding available to improve their facilities. The 15% contribution to government funding was a major hurdle.

### **Distribution of finance**

The view was expressed that tight control should be exerted over the provision of additional funding to ensure it was being used effectively.

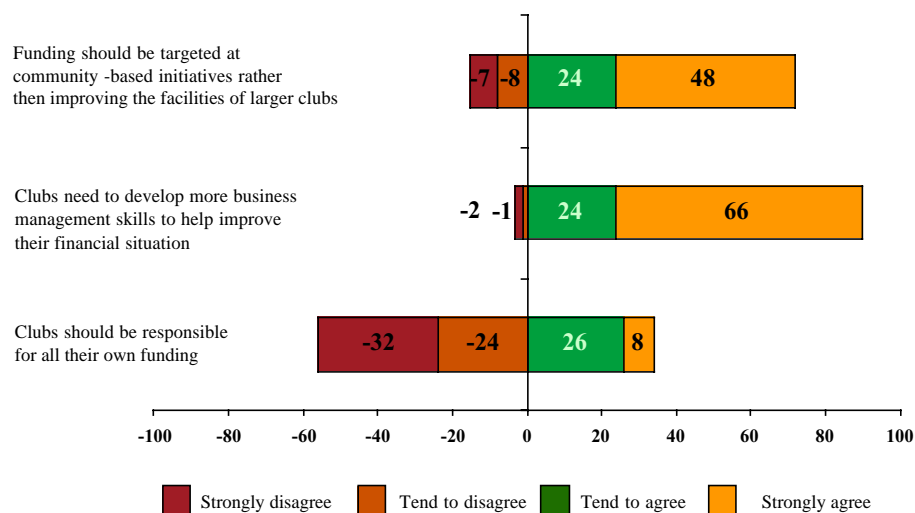
### Lack of trust

Some supporters expressed the view that they were reluctant to help out their club financially as they were unsure of the motives of directors and the extent to which the money would be used effectively for the good of the club.

### VAT

The view was expressed that senior clubs should not have to pay VAT on gate receipts. They felt they provided a service to the community that should be recognised by the Government through the refunding of VAT, as is the case in the Republic of Ireland.

## Opinions of clubs about finance



### Quotes on finance

Player: *The most important thing is a wise injection of cash at junior and intermediate level, which in the end will provide the Irish League teams with more local talent which will attract their families and friends to the game.*

Supporter: *A financial and marketing plan is essential to any business and soccer clubs are no different... If the IFA are going to throw money at these teams then the teams should produce evidence of their long-term improvement strategy, which should include a detailed financial plan.*

Other body: *Public funding should be distributed down through the various levels of football and not be the total ownership of senior football. Funding should be greatest to those clubs genuinely fostering a community spirit/involvement and sharing of their facility with all levels of the sport.*

Player: *I think that because of the high wages and low attendance, no club in the Irish League has much of a chance of survival. Smaller clubs just haven't got the money to attract better players. Therefore the standard is dropping every season, and not bringing in the support needed to make it a successful league.*

Supporter: *To simply give money to teams would defeat the purpose. This money would largely be used to*

pay off the tax man. Long-term objectives need to be achieved such as developing youth and providing adequate training and supporters' facilities.

Other body: Better sponsorship is needed, where companies actually sponsor stands/private boxes for corporate hospitality etc. The companies either maintain them themselves or pay to have them maintained.

## Facilities

### Overview

There were a number of issues raised concerning the lack or poor state of facilities. Some of these related to the national stadium, some to accommodation, particularly at senior clubs, some to pitch availability for amateur and youth teams, and some to the availability of training facilities.



### National Stadium

Many considered that Windsor Park was inappropriate as a base for international matches for two main reasons. Firstly, it is the ground of an Irish League team and unlike other senior clubs the club benefits financially from it. Secondly, it is located in an area viewed as belonging to one side of the community, meaning that a lot of people feel uncomfortable and unsafe attending matches there. Many expressed the desire for a National Stadium located in an easily accessible, neutral area with modern facilities.

### Senior club facilities

It was acknowledged that generally the facilities at senior clubs needed to be improved. Many of the strongest comments related to the poor state of facilities at Irish League grounds.

Health & safety was thought to be an issue, particularly on the occasions when there were large crowds.

The layout of some of the facilities was thought to exacerbate the problem of sectarianism at some grounds. The view was expressed that some facilities make you feel 'caged in' and 'if you treat people like animals, they will behave like animals'. Others commented that the location of exits at some grounds meant that it

was unavoidable that two sets of supporters met. We were told that legislation is needed to assist with the stewarding and policing of games at sports grounds in Northern Ireland.

The opinion was expressed that facilities were not currently very family-friendly. The lack of toilets, catering facilities and family enclosures was thought to be one of the reasons why so few families and women attended football matches.

**Spectators' needs**

It was said that spectators wanted to feel safe, comfortable and be entertained at matches. The current state of facilities in Northern Ireland was thought to limit the extent to which this could happen.

**Facilities for amateur/youth/women's football**

Some considered the facilities for youth and amateur football to be poor, particularly in relation to pitches. Some had had problems booking pitches.

For some, the cost of using Council facilities was thought to be expensive.

It was thought that there was a need for more small-size pitches for youth football.

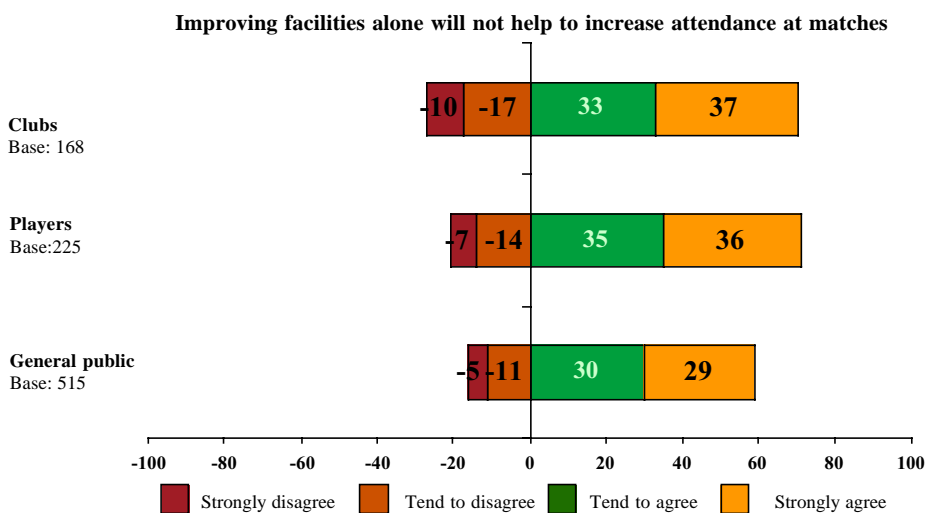
The lack of training facilities was thought to be to the detriment of youth soccer and the development of basic skills. The shortage of indoor or synthetic facilities and floodlighting restricted the opportunities for training, particularly in bad weather.

Women's football is played during the summer, in part to avoid having to compete with other leagues to obtain pitches during the traditional season.

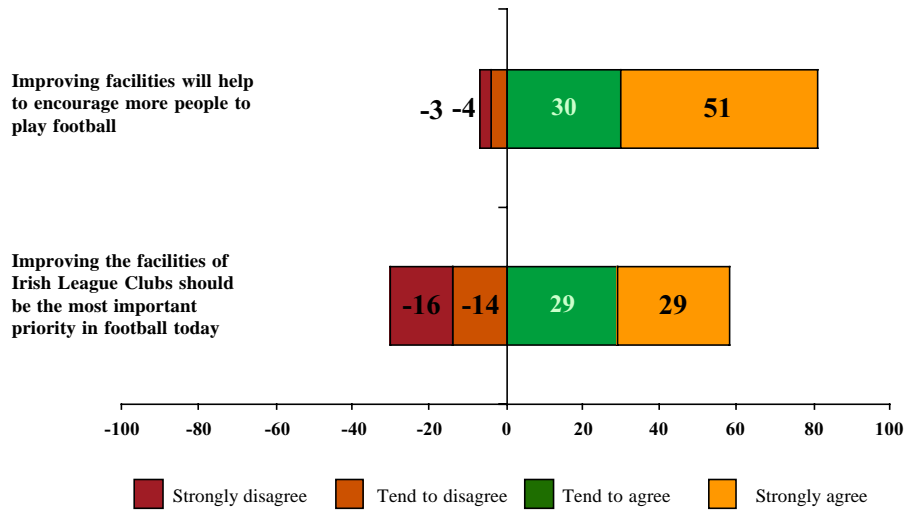
**The role of social clubs**

Social clubs, where they existed, were viewed as a good focal point for the clubs, as well as being a source of income. However, it was considered that the public were looking for more, to add to the entertainment product, and that football was failing to move with the times.

**Opinions about improving facilities**

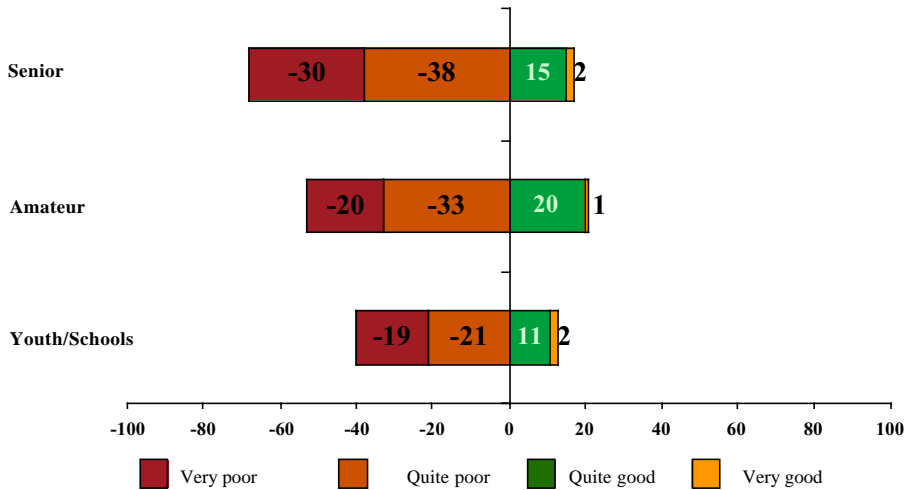


## Opinions of **clubs** about facilities

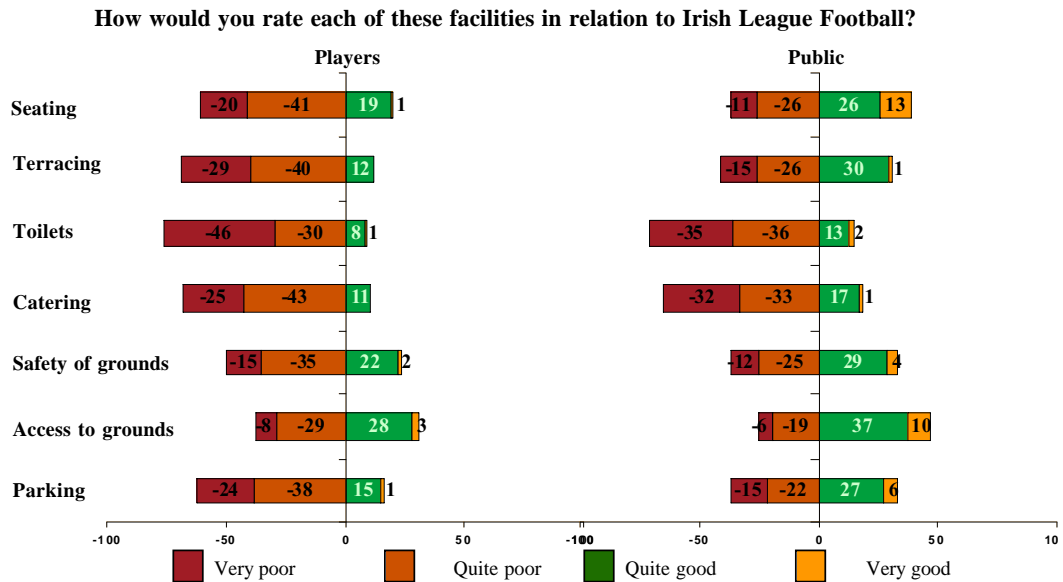


## Opinions of **clubs** about facilities

How would you currently rate the standard of facilities at each of these levels?



## Opinions of the public and players about Irish League football facilities



### Quotes on facilities

Manager: *For a family it needs to be seen as a day out. At White Hart Lane you can queue for a few minutes and get a drink and a burger from McDonald's-style stands. My kids love it, so we go across the water regularly to watch our team play. It's about creating an experience for the family.*

Player: *You need smaller, compact, developed (modernised) stadiums with modern toilet and catering facilities – all-seated stadiums to cater for the numbers who attend to create a better atmosphere rather than a sparse few hundred/thousand standing on a concrete stand.*

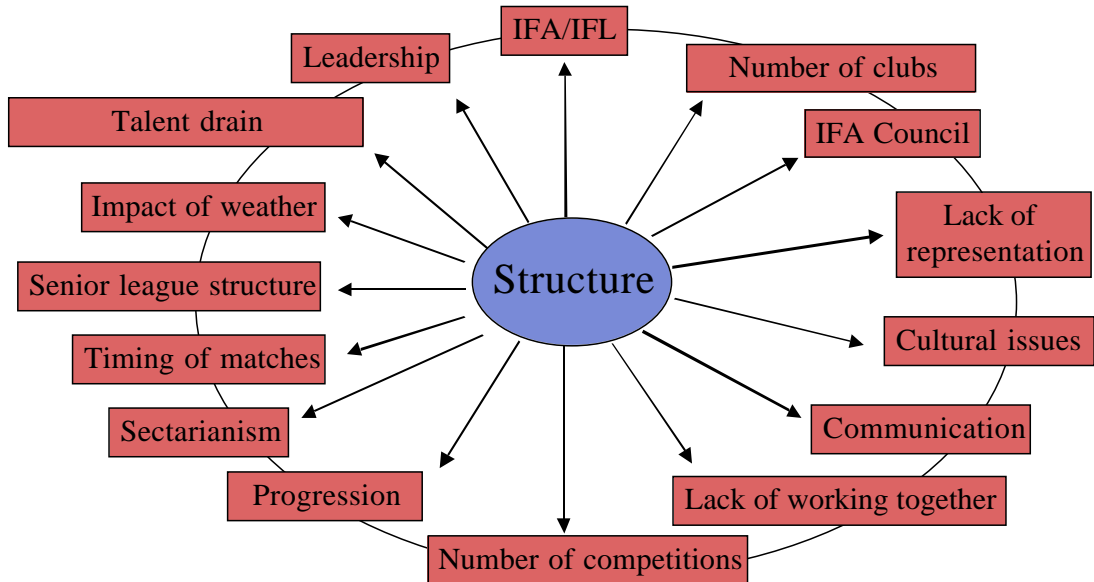
Manager: *If you get a crowd standing packed closely together they tend to behave as a pack and follow the crowd. They feel protected and brave and are therefore more likely to behave like thugs. However, if they are sitting on nice seats with adequate space they become individuals and are more likely to behave themselves.*

Player: *Better training facilities at club grounds would improve amateur soccer in Northern Ireland.*

Other body: *Improve facilities at clubs. For example, if we had a good all-weather training pitch we could involve the community in using the ground more.*

## Structure

All those to whom we spoke expressed views on the current structure of football in Northern Ireland.



### The role of the IFA and IFL

The IFA is the governing body of football in Northern Ireland and has specific responsibility for international football. The IFL is responsible for running senior professional football in Northern Ireland.

Some of our respondents were unsure of the roles and individual responsibilities of the IFA and the IFL. The perception was that the two organisations did not work together and indeed that perhaps there was a degree of conflict between them.

This lack of working together was thought to contribute to the poor image of soccer generally. Examples were given of senior league matches having to make way for cup matches that were thought to be of less importance. It was commented that the IFA and IFL often make contradictory decisions and that this should not be the case.

Almost everyone who expressed a view considered that there was a need for one governing body to take senior football forward. It was thought that this would lead to a more unified and organised way forward that was currently thought to be missing.

### IFA Council

Many expressed views on the operating structure of the IFA and in particular the role of its Council.

Those involved in senior soccer believed that they should be allowed to make their own decisions on how the senior game is run. Currently the voting structure means that junior clubs are able to vote on senior matters and vice versa.

The women's, youth and schools' football associations also commented on their limited or non-existent role

within the IFA and the make-up of the council. They considered that they were unable to influence any decisions which were made in relation to their area of football.

Many recognised that the structure of the IFA was not ideal and suggested that a more effective arrangement would be one streamlined organisation with separate sub-divisions for the different levels of soccer.

### **Cultural issues**

The view was expressed that those involved in the governance and administration of soccer were part of what would some would consider to be an 'old boys' network' and that it was difficult for outsiders to become involved. This limited the extent to which new blood and progressive thinkers were introduced to the structure. The term 'old men in grey suits' was used on a number of occasions to describe those involved in the structure of football.

The view was expressed that there is a perceived lack of Catholics in the administrative structure. This was considered to be a barrier to social inclusion and the integration of both communities into the running of the game. This was also thought to contribute to the perception, by Catholic clubs, of unfair treatment and exclusion from the mainstream structures of the game.

### **Communication**

The view was expressed that there was little evidence of the different levels of soccer and other bodies working together.

Many saw the benefits of closer links between senior and junior soccer, junior and youth soccer, youth and schools' soccer, senior and schools'/youth soccer, District Councils and all other soccer.

Many expressed the view that there were a lot of people/bodies pulling in different directions towards their own objectives but little evidence of them communicating with others and working together.

### **Number of competitions**

It was thought that there were too many competitions in football, resulting in too much football being played and players having less time to develop their skills. The number of fixtures was thought to have a particularly negative effect on full-time players.

It was also thought that there were too many youth and amateur fixtures at the end of the season due to bad weather and fixture clashes. This was thought to be detrimental to players and the standard of soccer generally.

### **League structure**

Some expressed the view that football at the senior level was a semi-amateur game trying to operate within a professional structure and that this was to its detriment.

Most people had a view on the number of clubs at senior level. A common view was that there was a need for more teams in a single senior league.

The view was expressed that senior clubs played each other on too many occasions, thus taking away the feeling that a senior match was an 'event' not to be missed.

Others thought that Northern Ireland was too small to sustain its current number of professional clubs.

There was some support for the view that alternatives such as an 'Atlantic' or 'Island of Ireland' league should be considered. The idea of a single Belfast or Northern Ireland club competing in a larger league was also aired.

A senior club manager made the comment that because of its size there was little difference between the top half and bottom half of the league. Because every point was vital he was reluctant to experiment by playing new younger talent.

Some expressed the opinion that there should be a central register of players at all levels of football. This would provide more control over registrations and could also be used to leverage more lucrative sponsorship or even insurance deals for players. It could also be used to monitor the number of matches played by younger players so that they did not 'burn out'.

The view was expressed that the future of soccer lay in developing a 'community' ethos and that a county structure would promote more involvement from the community. This was viewed as one of the reasons for the success of the Gaelic game.

Comment was made on the timing of the football season. Some advocated a winter break, when the weather is particularly bad. Some thought that the season should extend over the more clement summer months, benefiting both players and supporters.

#### **Structure for progression**

Having a clearly defined progression structure within football so that all players can find a level that suits their ability was thought by some to be very important. The view was expressed that the current structure restricts this happening.

It was thought that many senior clubs do not do enough in relation to the development of youth talent. A common complaint by youth football clubs was that senior clubs poached their best players without acknowledging the time and dedication coaches put into the development of their young players.

Senior clubs, on the other hand, felt aggrieved at the number of young players being scouted by clubs across the water without passing through a senior team.

The view was expressed that currently too many young players were going to clubs in England and Scotland only to return, disillusioned, when they did not make the grade. Much of this disillusioned talent was being lost to football in Northern Ireland as a result.

In relation to senior football, concern was expressed that due to the voting system some clubs were prevented from progressing.

Some thought that there were too many clubs in the Northern Ireland structure. They saw a benefit, particularly in relation to the progression of players, in reducing the number of clubs but including more teams within each club.

The view was expressed that, although one town in Northern Ireland had one senior team and twelve junior teams, there was little opportunity for younger players to progress because they had to compete against older 'social players': there was a gap in provision between junior and senior teams that was not being filled.

### Referees

Comments were made on the perceived need to provide better training for referees. There was a view that referees did not have the respect of players and that something should be done to improve their image.

### Timing of matches

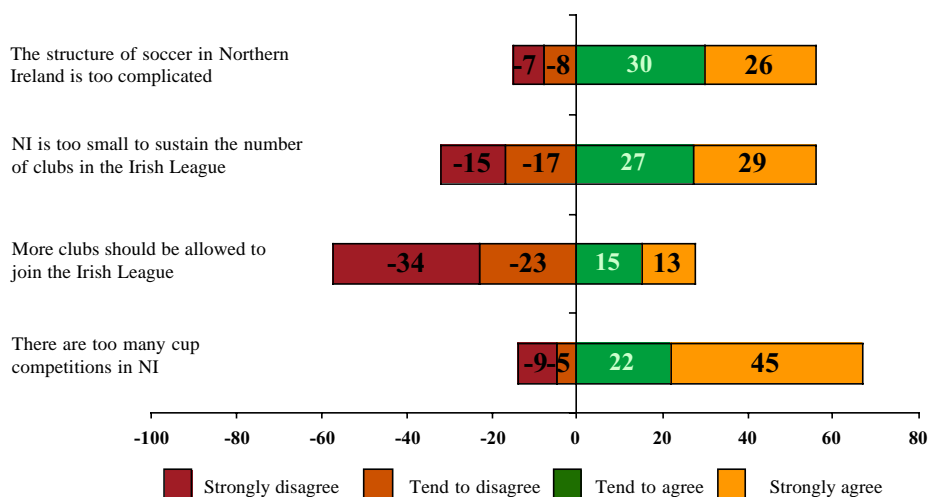
It was recognised that the timing of senior football matches often meant that they were competing against many factors including televised soccer, shopping and amateur football. To increase attendance, it was thought that clubs needed to be flexible in relation to the times they played, taking into account external factors.

The issue of not being able to play on Sundays was highlighted. This meant that fixtures had to be fulfilled within a six-day week.

It was recognised that there had been a move towards Sunday football elsewhere and some considered that Northern Ireland would eventually follow suit. However, they also recognised that there were some who would not play due to religious belief. For many, the conclusion was that if two clubs agreed they should have the choice to play on a Sunday.

A few suggested that the English example could be followed, whereby senior teams play on Saturday afternoons and junior teams play on Sunday mornings.

## Opinions of clubs about structure



### Quotes on structure

Player: Allow professional/ex-professionals to play in amateur league but do not pay them. A lot of older pros would like to play in amateur clubs to help develop young kids, but are prohibited from doing so.

Player: The Northern Ireland team should use a neutral stadium that suits both sides of the community.

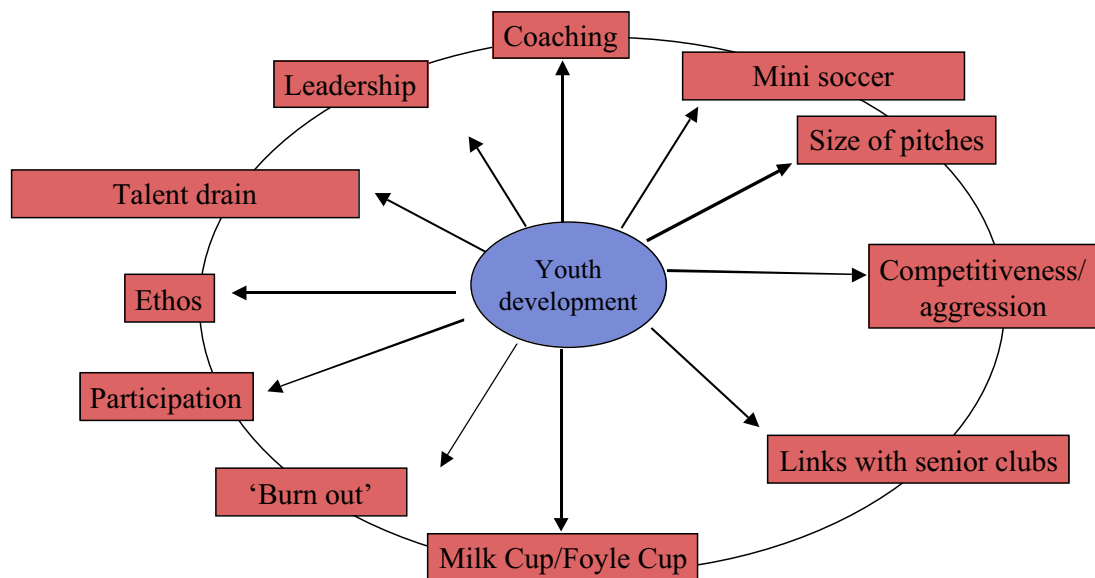
Player: Get the structure based on counties with clubs aspiring to produce players for their country.

Club secretary: *It's not what you know, it's who you know. We have three young players who are attracting interest from English Premier League clubs. None of these lads have ever been offered NI schoolboy trials, let alone been selected for a squad. More coaches and coaching facilities must be set up outside Belfast.*

Other body: *All soccer should be administered by only one body, i.e. the IFA, with senior clubs being run by a senior clubs committee of the IFA. This would end dual registration and disciplinary problems currently being handled by both IFA and IFL.*

## Youth development

Almost everyone supported the view that youth development – ‘development at grass-roots level’ – was crucial to the future of football in Northern Ireland and that it needed to be linked to community involvement in soccer.



### Coaching

Much of youth soccer currently relies on the voluntary commitment of individuals to coach and manage the teams. However, the extent to which many of these people have the necessary/desired skills to coach football was questioned.

Comment was made on the aggressive/competitive attitude expressed by some coaches during matches. It was thought that coaches should have skills other than just soccer development, e.g. in dealing with and developing children, and health & safety.

Some suggested that all people involved in coaching should have at least some basic form of training, although it was recognised that the IFA have been pro-active in this area.

### **Mini-soccer**

Many considered that mini-soccer played a vital role in the development of boys' and girls' soccer skills. It was also thought to be good for encouraging team participation as it allowed everyone to get involved and, therefore, there were fewer problems with children feeling excluded.

Many considered that it was inappropriate to put young players on full-size pitches, as currently happens. The suggestion was made that more young people should play mini-soccer until the age of approximately 14. This would mean that less talented children kept their interest in football and became potential future supporters.

### **The talent drain**

The view was expressed that many young talented people join clubs in England and Scotland at too early an age and that many return home unsuccessful and disillusioned. It was suggested that there should be some way of preventing this from happening at such an early age.

It was highlighted that there were few links between senior and youth clubs and as a result there was limited progression to senior Irish League clubs.

The view was expressed that some senior clubs sign as many young people as possible so that they cannot sign for other senior clubs. This was thought to be unfair to those young people who had cut links with their youth football club but yet did not get to play regularly for the senior club.

The Milk Cup was highlighted as a good example of youth football, although it has become less 'local' as it has become more successful in attracting visiting teams.

Those involved in youth soccer expressed the view that young people can often play too much soccer. For example, they may play for their school team and for a youth team as well as playing other sports such as rugby or Gaelic football. This was thought to be detrimental to young people's development and resulted in them 'burning out'. It was suggested that some form of registration and monitoring should take place to ensure that young people do not play too much soccer.

### **Ethos**

It was thought that the ethos of soccer should always be paramount. Not all soccer should be competitive and participation should help to develop other skills such as communication, tolerance and social skills.

The reason for managers' participation in youth soccer was questioned by some. Was it because the managers wanted to win and feel good about themselves, or was it because managers were focused on developing the needs of young people? It was thought that soccer needed to become much more focused on the needs of young people.

### **Schools**

The availability of quality coaching in schools was thought to be uneven. The lack of male teachers at primary school level was thought to impact upon the availability of coaching.

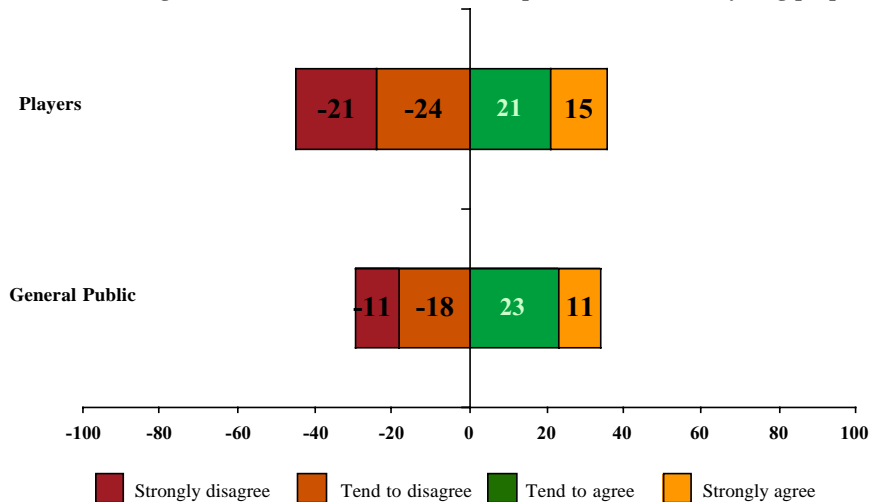
### **IFA role in youth soccer**

Some questioned the commitment of the IFA towards the development of youth soccer and expressed the view that it was not part of their 'core' business.

The IFA, however, stated that they were committed to developing youth talent and had increased the number of their development officers over the last few years.

## Opinions about youth development

**There is a lot being done in Northern Ireland to develop the soccer skills of young people**



## Quotes on youth development

Player: *I think that the IFA have to go back to grass-roots. The rural areas seem to have very few youth teams. Schools seem to have brought in other sports like hockey and rugby. Football has to promote itself more in primary and secondary schools, both Protestant and Catholic.*

Player: *To improve the level of soccer in Northern Ireland we must start at the grass-roots, by setting up more soccer schools which are available to everyone. Set up coaching schools, available to everyone.*

Player: *If there was a good school of excellence that concentrates on football at a young age as in England, it would help promote players here and stop so many good players going to England and signing contracts.*

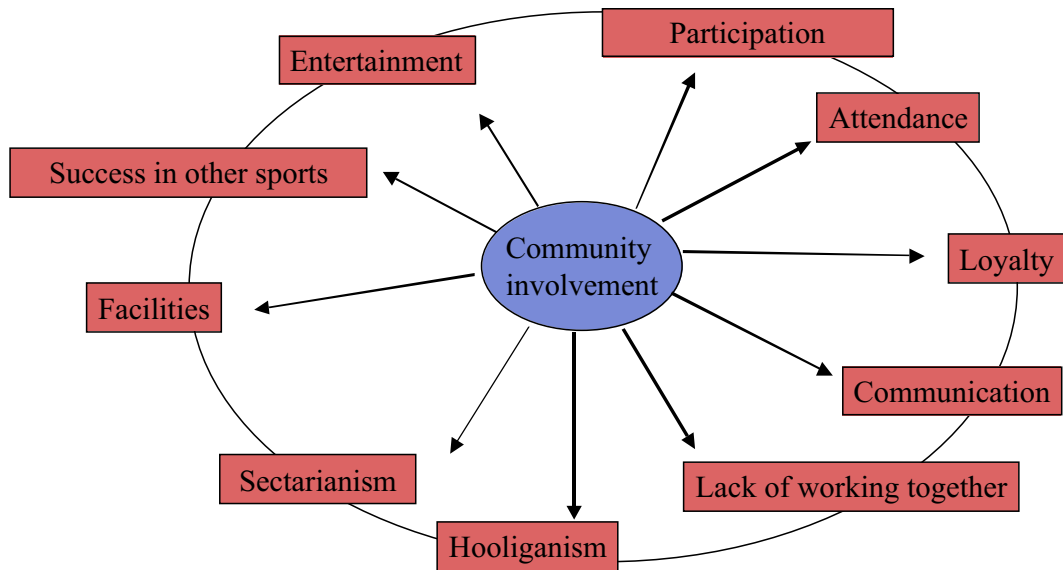
Manager: *Youth leagues should be government-funded.*

Manager: *Where are the local senior teams when these young people are being scouted across the water? I would like to know where they are when Newcastle are snapping up our players. The senior teams seem to be completely oblivious to the young talent that exists in this country.*

Manager: *Any investment into Northern Ireland football should be long term. The emphasis should therefore be on the youth of the future...be they potential stars or potential supporters.*

## Community involvement

Community involvement, along with youth development, was often cited as one of the main areas to focus on in relation to the future of football.



The view was expressed that low attendance at senior soccer was compounded by the natural drift of population in some areas, resulting in less community involvement and loyalty for some clubs.

Many considered that more should be done to encourage women and children to attend senior matches.

Soccer was considered to compete against a lot of other social influences such as TV, other sports and shopping. This limited the extent to which young people and the community became involved in the sport.

Many commented that much of the success of Gaelic football was because the support for the clubs was based in the community.

The current lack of community involvement was thought to impact upon senior clubs as they found it more difficult to get loyal supporters.

### Women's soccer

Many expressed the view that women's football was one of the fastest developing areas.

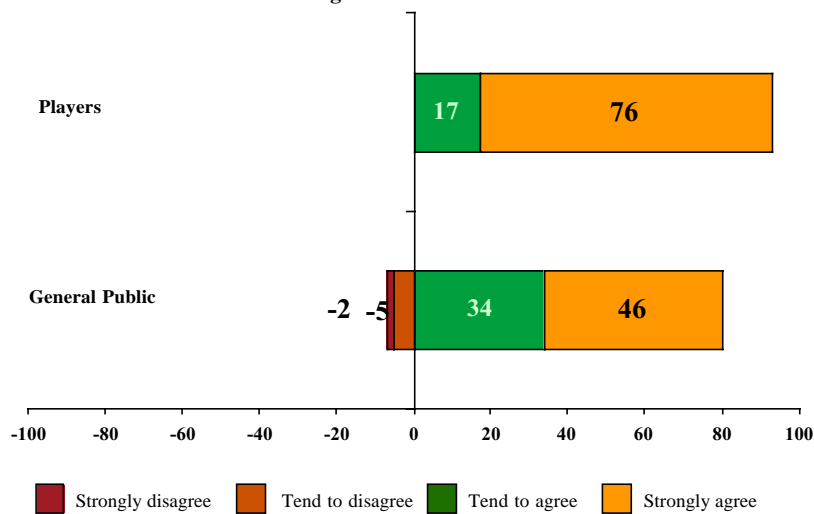
However, some felt that women's soccer was treated as being on the periphery of the core game and, therefore, was not as important. Currently the NI Women's Football Association has no voting rights on the IFA Council. This means that they have limited influence on decisions made by the ruling body with respect to women's football.

The NI Women's Football Association said that women's teams and clubs were reluctant to become involved with many of the established clubs in Northern Ireland because many are perceived as being in one side of the community or the other. They wanted to ensure that women's football was open to everyone and not associated with many of the problems in the current structure of soccer.

One issue facing women's football is the lack of established clubs. Many of those competing are little more than teams and this means that they have limited facilities, coaching and development structures.

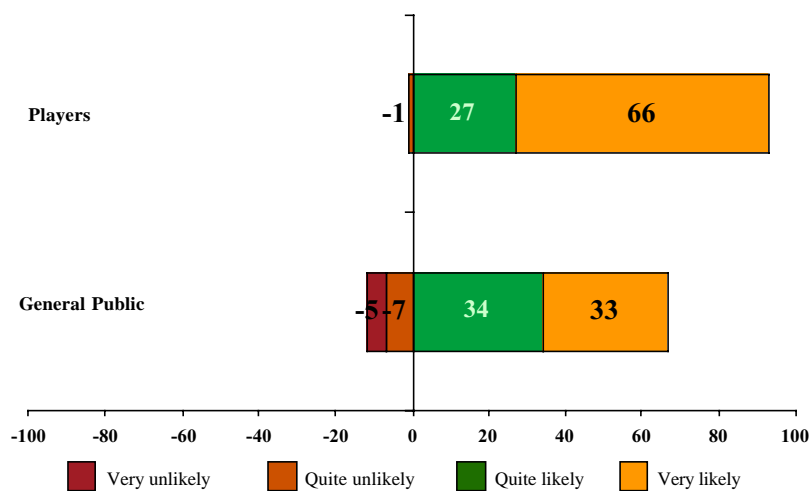
## Opinions about community involvement

### More should be done to encourage families to attend football matches



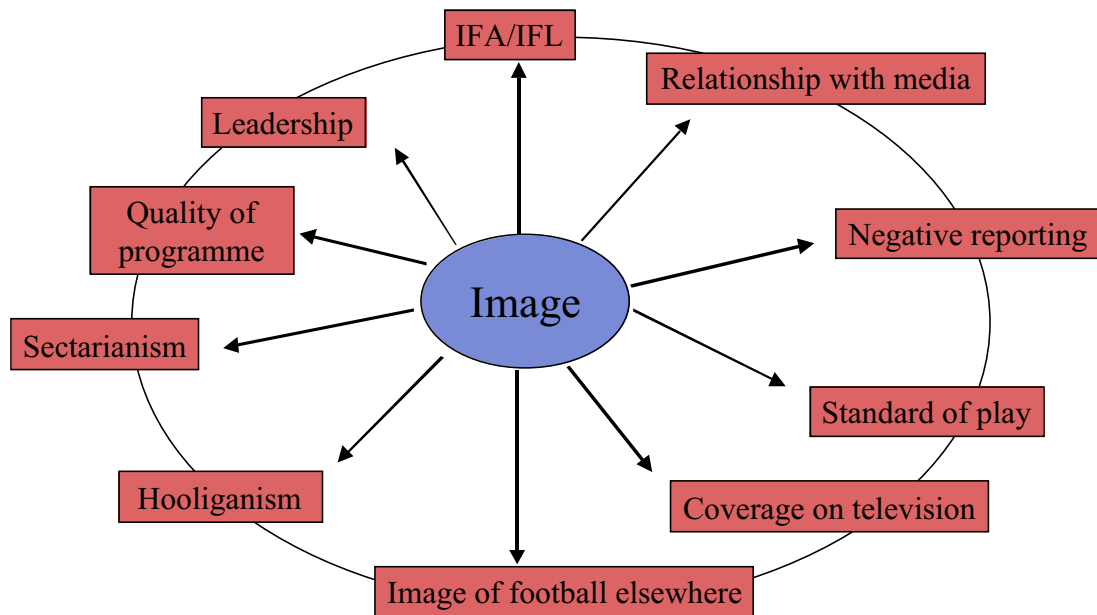
## Opinions about community involvement

### How likely or unlikely would you be to support a community based club that offers soccer from youth through to senior level?



## Image

Soccer in Northern Ireland was considered by most to have a poor image: it not only has to live up to the commercial success of football in England and Scotland but has to deal with sectarianism, thuggish behaviour, poor media coverage, and a lack of good facilities.



### Standard of play

Most thought that the standard of football in Northern Ireland was about what you would expect from a province of our size. However, other small countries had been able to improve their standards because of their development structure.

### Media

It was thought that televised soccer matches at senior level did not contribute to enhancing the image. Often the camera angle was level with the pitch, making the game seem slow-paced and unprofessional. This contrasted with England and Scotland where cameras are at a high level to give a higher and better view of the game. Also the camera often focused on empty stands rather than on the stands with the spectators. The atmosphere was not captured as effectively.

The media was considered to play a detrimental role in the promotion of soccer and developing the opinions of young people in relation to soccer. Many felt let down and disappointed by the media. There was little coverage of games on television or radio. Often local results were difficult to obtain, even on local channels.

It was thought that senior clubs and the IFL did not do enough to work with the media to enhance the image. Indeed the relationship between the two appeared very strained.

The media expressed the view that soccer is not given top priority due to low ratings. They also commented that senior football does not liaise effectively with the media, for example in the provision of information regarding teams and kick-off times, and of interviews with players.

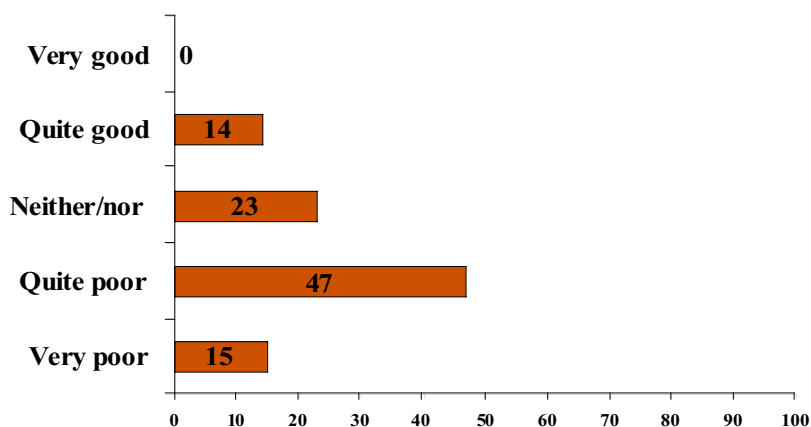
The view was expressed that there was a lack of media attention in the west of the Province. Clubs had made attempts to raise their profile, but to no avail.

A comparison was made with the extensive coverage of Gaelic football. Some suggested that this was because it was a 'Catholic minority sport'. However, others suggested that Gaelic football had simply 'got its act together' and was actively promoting itself and doing deals with local network channels.

It was acknowledged that the variety and standard of football on TV deterred many supporters from coming along to watch a local match. To attract supporters from the comfort of their own home there needed to be something worthwhile on offer such as comfortable facilities, entertainment, food and ease of access. Many likened the situation of football to that of cinemas in the 1970s and 1980s. They pointed out that cinemas had repackaged themselves to focus more on what their customers wanted. Football needs to do the same.

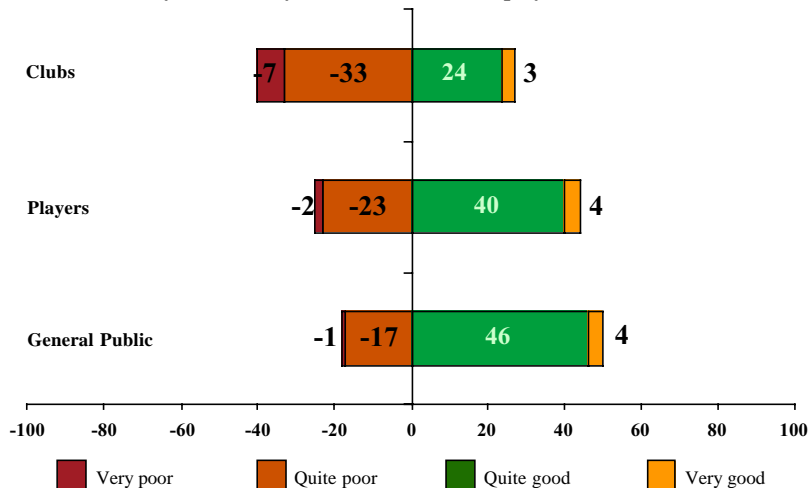
### Opinions of clubs about the image of soccer

How would you currently rate the image of soccer in Northern Ireland?

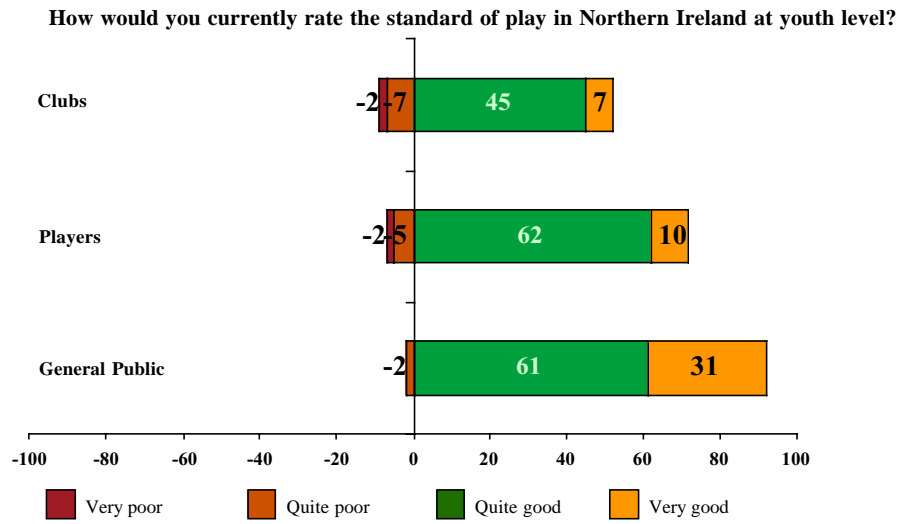


### Opinions about standard of play at senior level

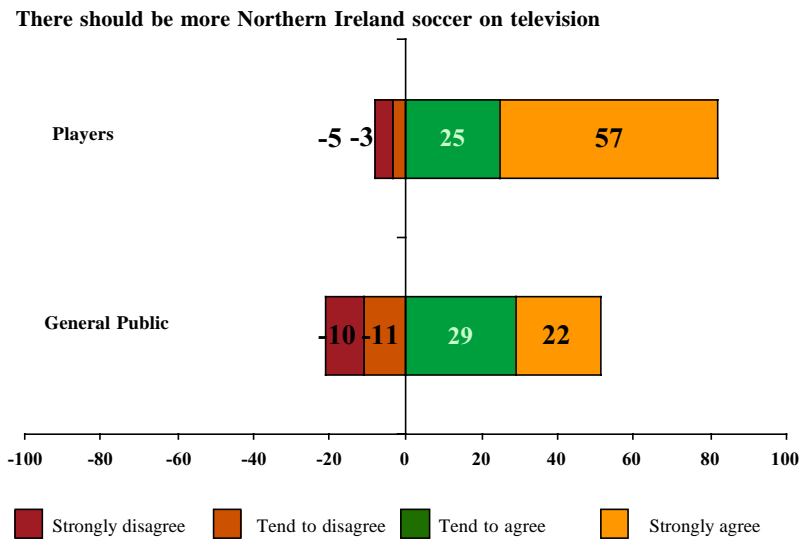
How would you currently rate the standard of play in Northern Ireland at senior level?



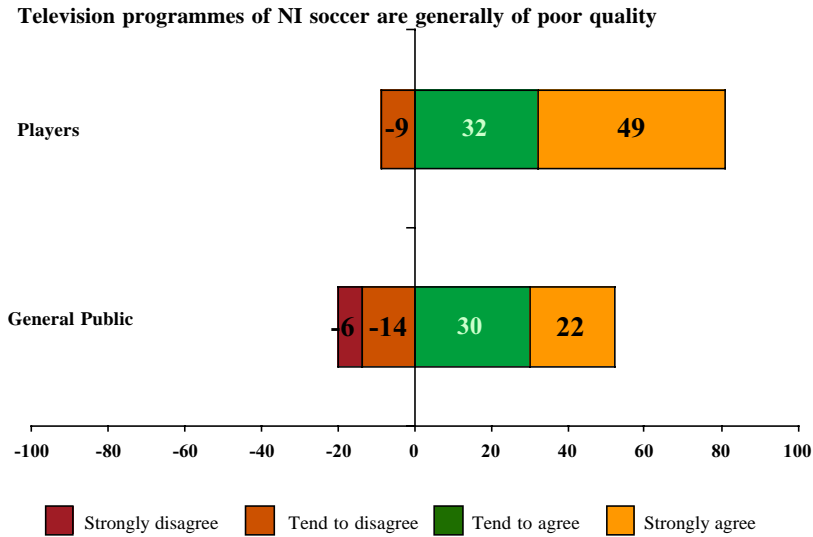
## Opinions about standard of play at youth level



## Opinions about the media



## Opinions about the media



### Quotes about image

Player: *More television and media coverage would encourage me to attend an Irish League match more often.*

Other body: *Very few businesses wish to be associated with soccer, unlike in England.*

Other body: *Actions of managers and players that incite bad supporter behaviour should be punished by the football authorities. Bad supporter behaviour greatly affects attendance at games and the image of football. TV companies and press should be encouraged to help promote the game with possible live games similar to the GAA.*

Manager: *You need the TV coverage to bring in the sponsors. That generates money to improve clubs and facilities, which in turn will attract more supporters.*

Media: *Football believes that the world owes it a living – entertainment has moved on.*

## Sectarianism and hooliganism

The extent to which sectarianism in football is an issue was perceived differently by both sides of the community.

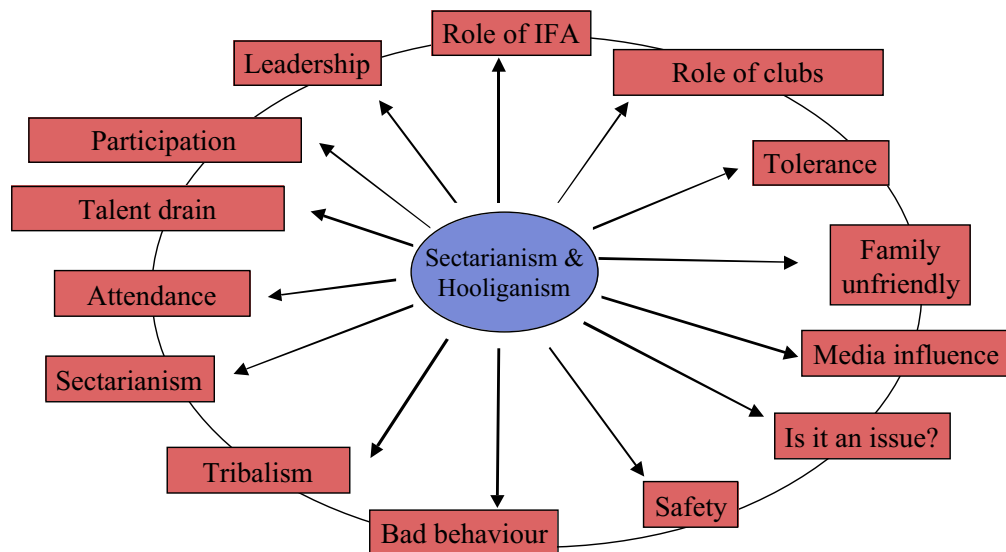
Some believed that bad behaviour/thuggery/hooliganism was the key issue. However, the supporters of clubs which would be perceived to be Catholic considered that sectarianism was the main issue in football in Northern Ireland. They reported that they felt uncomfortable and unsafe when attending international matches and some senior fixtures and that this deterred them from attending more often.

Many, from both sides of the community, said that they were deterred from going to international matches because they did not want to expose their children to the behaviour of some spectators.

However, some considered that the general public perceived sectarianism to be more of an issue than it actually was.

There was recognition of the work that had been done so far by the IFA in relation to reducing sectarianism at international matches. However, many said that more should be done to eradicate the problems of sectarianism and bad behaviour totally.

The view was expressed that clubs themselves were not doing enough to tackle the issue.

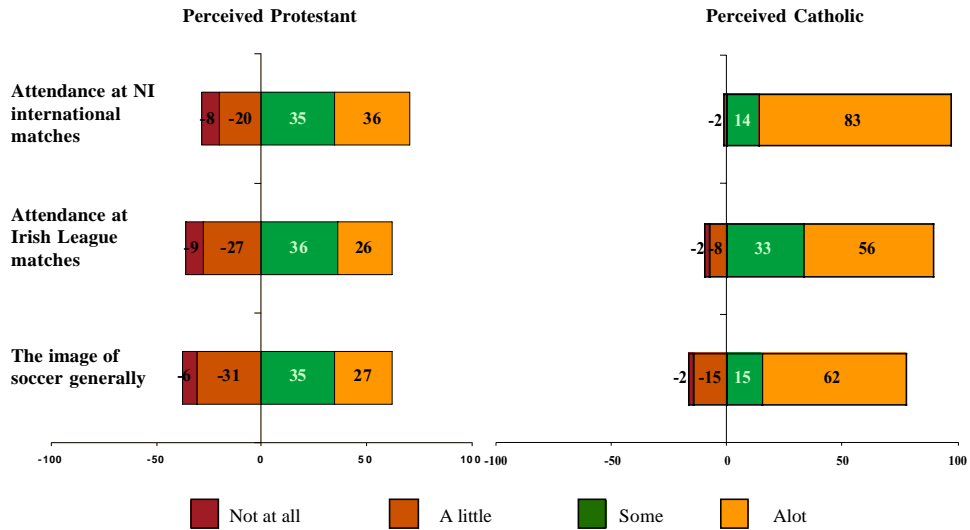


Many considered that many of the problems associated with sectarianism and bad behaviour were because of the type of supporters that were attracted to the clubs.

It was thought that there was a small core of people involved in sectarianism and bad behaviour. The same steps should be taken in Northern Ireland as were taken in England to wipe out racism in football.

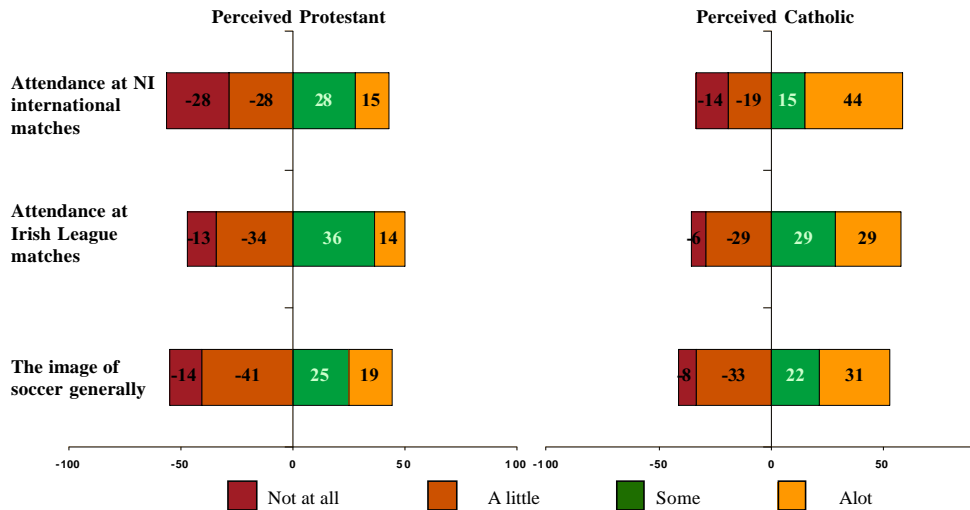
## Opinions of clubs about sectarianism

To what extent do you consider sectarianism impacts upon the following?



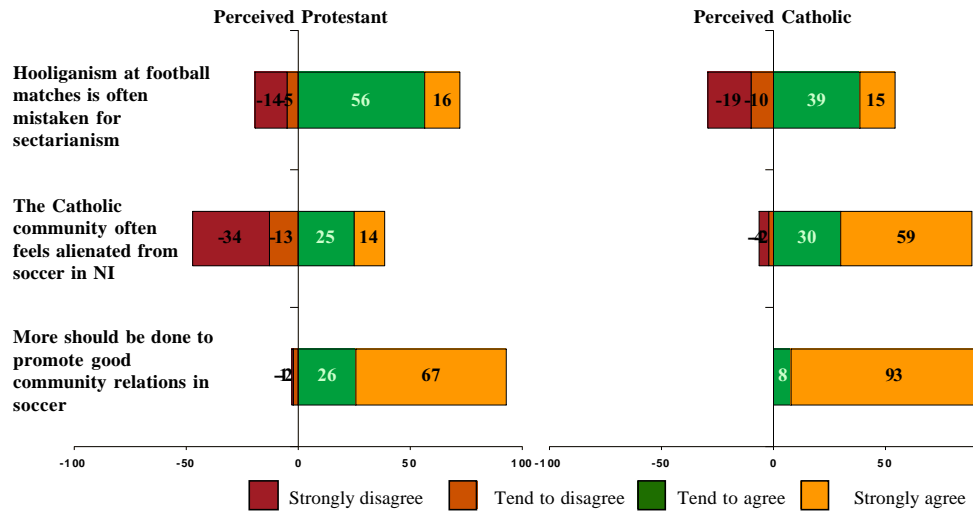
## Opinions of clubs about hooliganism

To what extent do you consider hooliganism impacts upon the following?



## Opinions of clubs about hooliganism and sectarianism

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following?



### Quotes about sectarianism and hooliganism

Supporter: *I would consider going to Windsor Park myself but I wouldn't take my son. Why would you go to somewhere where you don't feel safe or comfortable?*

Club secretary: *The fear of travelling to away venues for both communities should be treated as a priority.*

Other body: *Saying that sectarianism isn't a problem at Windsor Park is like saying alcohol isn't a problem in Saudi Arabia.*

# APPENDIX

## Profile of respondents to the surveys

### 1 General Public Survey

Age	16–24	21%
	25–34	29%
	35–59	34%
	60+	16%

Sex	Male	68%
	Female	32%

Socio-economic group	ABC	43%
	C <sub>2</sub> DE	57%

Location	Greater Belfast	38%
	North	12%
	South	26%
	West	25%

Religion	Perceived Protestant	58%
	Perceived Catholic	41%
	Other	2%

### 2 Survey of players

Level of football played at your club	Senior	26%
	Intermediate	33%
	Junior	67%
	Youth	27%

Location of club	Greater Belfast	28%
	North	16%
	South	31%
	West	25%

### 3 Survey of clubs

Position	Chairman	13%
	Secretary	80%
	Treasurer	5%
	Manager	4%
	Other	8%

Level of football	Senior	8%
	Intermediate	39%
	Junior	80%
	Youth	24%

Location of club	Greater Belfast	39%
	North	17%
	South	22%
	West	24%

Religion	Perceived Protestant	65%
	Perceived Catholic	33%
	Other	2%

#### 4 Findings from the General Public Survey

Do you play soccer for a team?	Yes	12%
	No	88%
Does a member of your family play soccer for a team?	Yes	40%
	No	60%
Are you a member of a soccer club?	Yes	16%
	No	84%
Are you a member of a soccer supporters' club?	Yes	21%
	No	79%
Do you follow a football team on a regular basis?	Yes	65%
	No	35%
What level of football does the team you follow play?	English	67%
	Scottish Football	34%
	Irish Football League	22%
	Football Association of Ireland League	3%
	Local club football	5%
	Other	1%
How often, if at all, do you attend an Irish Football League match?	Never	58%
	Rarely	21%
	1–2 times a season	7%
	More often	14%
How often, if at all, do you attend amateur soccer matches?	Never	64%
	Rarely	20%
	1–2 times a season	6%
	More often	10%
How often, if at all, do you attend youth or schools' soccer matches?	Never	69%
	Rarely	16%
	1–2 times a season	8%
	More often	7%