

**“Creating a Soccer Strategy”**  
**A response by the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition**

1. **Introduction**

We welcome the formation of a Northern Ireland Soccer Strategy, which recognises the central place of soccer in sport.

We would like to make a number of general comments about the Report of the Advisory Panel, and then address three areas of concern in more detail.

2. **General Comments**

In general, we welcome the content and direction of the report and many of its recommendations.

Widening the appeal of soccer for spectators and participants and promoting inclusion is the right direction for soccer. We welcome the acceptance of the need to rejuvenate soccer’s image, but there is a risk that this is a hollow and ineffective aim without practical proposals and action to create new avenues to inclusion.

We welcome the recognition that these aims can only be achieved through a series of measures across a range of areas – from modification and safety improvements at grounds to new programmes for community relations and community involvement, from reforming structures at youth, league and management levels to encouraging under-represented groups.

Community football programmes can have a very positive influence on the surrounding community, and we would like to see community coaching and other activities extended and well-resourced.

A simplification of governing structures for soccer is long overdue, and the Panel’s detailed suggestions for a new structure are welcome. Increasing the sustainability at club level must be a priority and we believe that a commitment by the governing body to provide assistance, advice and training in media relations, financial management etc to individual clubs is essential.

The government, soccer’s governing body and clubs need to take the responsibility of improving safety standards at grounds very seriously. The Report highlights the importance of this, and we welcome the concrete suggestions for making sure improvements happen.

The recommendations reveal a long-term approach both in the focus on the need for strategy at all levels, and in specific measures such as a Northern Ireland Football Academy. This is vital for the future of soccer in Northern Ireland.

### 3. **Women's Football**

The report acknowledges that women's soccer is fast growing, but fails to state clearly the value of women's soccer to the sport as a whole and wider society.

It notes that facilities are inadequate and that women have very little influence in decisions concerning women's football, but there are no practical suggestions to improve the situation.

A particular problem is also identified for girls between the ages of around 12 to 17, as doors close to their participation in football. At junior levels, where using merit does not divide boys and girls, equality of opportunity and treatment must be implemented. We need to guarantee 'entry level equality' which will filter down through the sport at senior levels.

It is clear from an examination of the Advisory Panel's composition, those they consulted as experts and the participants in the stake-holder survey that women's voices are not well-heard in football. For example, there was no focus group or workshop held for women's football clubs, and it would be valuable to re-visit this.

Section 6.4 notes "There is a perception that women's football in Northern Ireland is regarded as being on the periphery of the sport," but does not clearly and unreservedly state that this perception or the situation which gives rise to it must be altered. This must be clearly stated. There is an absence of a commitment to equal opportunity for women involved in soccer and to a certain level of support and resources from football's governing body.

There is a tendency also to view women's football as an extension of youth football, and we believe this approach will make it impossible to address the specific needs and issues of women's involvement.

It is clear to us that the recommendations for women's football do not go far enough and are much less specific than recommendations under other chapter headings. There are few specific measures and little indication of how the aspiration 'to promote women's football' will be implemented. This raises serious concerns about whether problems identified for women's soccer will be taken as seriously and solutions as well-resourced as in other areas.

Our specific suggestions include:

- Responsibility for women's football should be recognised in a series of commitments or goals by local clubs, district councils, and the governing body.
- There needs to be a recognition that the name of the Northern Ireland Boy's Football Association is in itself exclusive and discriminatory and must be changed.

- The length of the women’s soccer season should be decided in full consultation with the NIWFA and ways by which it could be extended should be sought, if this proves necessary from this consultation.
- More women need to be included in the administrative structures of football. Football is seen as an insiders ‘old boys’ network, and this is more acutely felt by women involved.
- There is a need to develop and implement a much more detailed strategy dealing specifically with women’s football with the support of the overall governing body.

That said, the proposal to appoint a Women’s Development Officer within the mainstream governing body is welcome. We also support the convergence of boy’s and girl’s soccer rules at youth level.

There is an urgent need for leadership on the issue of women’s football, and this must come from the highest levels, the Sports Minister and football’s governing body, as well as within clubs and youth leagues. We would like the Soccer Strategy to state explicitly that women have the right to be fully involved in football, beyond their capacity to be spectators or consumers.

#### 4. **Eradicating Sectarianism**

We believe it is vital to see reforms in football as providing opportunities to promote good community relations. Football authorities and clubs must take an active role in eradicating sectarianism: there is no acceptable level of aggressive sectarianism in our society or any sport, and it should not be seen as inevitable. We are not opposed to supporters identifying and feeling loyal to one club or another, but clubs must take a lead removing the negative, hostile or anti-social expressions which do occur.

In the area of sectarianism, like women’s football, we believe that the recommendations are not pro-active enough to improve the situation. The Report states that “the Panel prefers to view positively football’s potential for contributing to good community relations.” However, while respect and tolerance need to be promoted, leaders in football must clearly state their opposition to sectarianism as well.

- The link between hooliganism and sectarianism must be acknowledged and further explored, with a view to eradicating both.
- Also, there must be a recognition that the lay-out of some grounds exacerbates sectarian conflict between supporters, and there must be a commitment to change where this is the case.
- A public awareness or advertising campaign is another possible tool to combat sectarianism.

#### 5. **Broadening the appeal of Football**

As part of the commitment to broadening soccer’s appeal, we believe it is vital to make grounds a welcoming and safe place for families. Engaging the interest of children in football at an early age will encourage them to be life-

long supporters and players of football. We welcome the aim of making conditions at football matches more family friendly, but there must be a recognition that this will require pro-active measures and resources to counter the negative image of football in some minds and to reach out and encourage families, women and children to be spectators.

Measures will include

- Practical modifications (improvements to toilets, catering and other facilities, perhaps designated family areas)
- Marketing and publicity – family tickets or free attendance for children under 10, for example
- Addressing wider problems which discourage families from attending football matches (unacceptable behaviour by a minority of supporters, the perceived link between football and sectarianism, safety standards at grounds)

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure should seek to gather best practice on family friendly facilities and practices to be shared between football clubs and indeed other sports facilities to encourage innovation. Perhaps lessons can also be learnt from facilities from other sports: the popularity of the Odessey's ice hockey matches is partly due to their appeal to families and there are some practices which could be adapted to football.

## 6. **Conclusion**

We feel that some of the recommendations need to be further developed and given the attention they deserve. If the governing body seizes the opportunity to improve women's participation in football, develop junior and youth clubs and make inroads into tackling sectarianism in football, Northern Ireland soccer has a bright future. If these issues are side-lined, the strategy will fail to make football more inclusive, a sport for everyone.

*C McCartney 30 January 2002*