

Right Hon Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BELFAST
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Mr N McCafferty



16 April 1999

Dear Dr Mowlam



Firstly let me apologise for the length of this letter. I am fully aware of how busy you are at present so you may wish to consider this letter at an appropriate time: maybe with a cup of coffee, or a large brandy.

My name is Nick McCafferty. 37, born and bred in Belfast and currently Senior Branch Manager for Nationwide Building Society in Belfast. However I am writing to you in my capacity as a member of the consortium to bring Premier League Soccer to Northern Ireland.

Back in December 1997 my colleague Bob Jones, Marks & Spencer, wrote to you concerning this matter. As a result of that correspondence members of the consortium had the opportunity to discuss the project with your colleague Lord Dubs at Hillsborough Castle on the 6 March 1998. At that meeting we presented Lord Dubs with the rationale behind our venture, namely: -

- i) To bring increased inward investment to Northern Ireland and in particular Belfast via the £50 million project
- ii) To heighten and engender a positive profile for Belfast as a competitive European City, with a state of the art sports stadium, team and the profile that goes with such a venture
- iii) To develop tourism within Northern Ireland by giving tourists a reason to come to the country on repeat visits rather than just one
- iv) To use soccer in Northern Ireland as a positive bridge building tool rather than as a conduit for the sectarian issues we have (hence the club to be called Belfast United)

I think it is fair to say Lord Dubs was suitably impressed by what he heard and set the administration process in motion to grant the request we made of him i.e. to make available the landfill site at Dargen Crescent on the north fore shore of Belfast Lough. Our consortium has worked closely with Mr Ronnie Spence and Mr John Walker and together we have achieved a lot of success in slowly but surely progressing the project.

Having established the availability of the land the consortium stepped up our efforts to ensure the availability of the necessary finance: a figure of £50 million plus. Corporate Finance Partners, London under the directorship of Mr Graham Axford in conjunction with KPMG produced a financial package which would ensure not only the success of the building of the stadium, but also its long term viability and the transfer of Wimbledon Football Club to Belfast with adequate compensation for the affected soccer bodies and clubs of the Irish Football Association. A total package that would be funded in its entirety by the private sector, requiring no, I repeat, no public finance. However the net result would be a soccer stadium with a capacity of approx. 40,000 available to whoever may wish to use it, after the needs of the football club have been fulfilled. (Similar to what has recently been established in Sunderland, Middlesborough, Bolton, Reading and many other British cities.)

Our next approach was to enquire from the European controlling body for soccer UEFA whether they would sanction the move of Wimbledon to Belfast. UEFA's response was that within their constitution they rule that if the authority currently presiding over the club wishing to move i.e. the English FA and the authority presiding over the jurisdiction where the club wish to move to i.e. The Irish FA agree to the move, then in exceptional cases UEFA will give due consideration, there is no greater deserving and exceptional a situation than Northern Ireland.

Our first difficulties, as anticipated, occurred at this stage. We made approaches to both the IFA and the Northern Ireland Sports Council. In both instances we met with instant opposition ending up with the IFA completely opposed to negotiating the proposal and the Sports Council, after a series of unproductive meetings, dismissing the project as "a distraction". However we continued to persevere.

The local media began to enquire about the project and after a series of ill informed articles appeared in the press the consortium agreed to open the project to the public at large via a BBC Northern Ireland "Spotlight" investigation. This programme was met with a positive response by the general public. As a result the Belfast Telegraph in conjunction with Deloitte/Touch undertook a public opinion poll of people throughout Northern Ireland.

The headline figure was an overwhelming 67% of the people were in favour of bringing Premier League football to Northern Ireland. (Where have you seen statistics like this before!)

Throughout the process we have had on going correspondence with Wimbledon Football Club culminating in a letter to the club chairman Mr Sam Hammon outlining why Wimbledon (because they currently rent a stadium and are actively looking to relocate). Why Belfast? Mr Hammon phoned me in early January with a conversation long these lines. Given a choice he would prefer to relocate to Dublin rather than Belfast because Dublin is trouble free, more cosmopolitan, greater potential fan base and overall a more attractive proposition. I then began to sell Belfast/Northern Ireland, the benefits, the potential, the people and the fact that I felt Ireland as an island could only accommodate one Premiership soccer club and Belfast can offer as much if not more than Dublin. He then give me a commitment that if we could confirm our ability to raise the capital then he would be willing to negotiate a move to Belfast and rename the club Belfast United.

Our next difficulty however arose when the financiers expressed an unwillingness to proceed further until the IFA retracted their statement of December 1998 which stated that English League Soccer would never be sanctioned in Northern Ireland. This statement coming without ever really getting into any detailed discussion or negotiation. The IFA fear being that the advent of English Premiership soccer in Belfast would be the death knell of the Irish League. Our view is quite the contrary. We feel that if the IFA are willing to join us in negotiations we can actually bring financial benefits, employment benefits, tourism benefits, bridge building benefits, positive profile to Belfast, the feel good factor associated with such a proposition in addition to a much stronger more vibrant, better supported, better financed, less sectarian Irish League. Unfortunately the Irish Football Association representatives are unwilling to talk to us, never mind negotiate or indeed consider properly our proposal.

Hence my reason for writing to you Secretary of State. Over the last couple of weeks I have been reading the local press proposals for a new National Stadium for Northern Ireland. A very worthy cause but also very expensive. A proposal for £50 million public spend for this stadium let alone the millions being demanded by the Irish Football Association from government for the upgrade of their existing stadium to the standards of the Taylor report. Facilities, which to be honest are populated by very small crowds in comparison to those we project would attend if we are given the chance to combine Premiership soccer via Wimbledon/Belfast United and a new revitalised Irish League. We need this impasse to be broken, our proposal should be given greater consideration by the appropriate bodies. If the general public have shown a desire for this to happen then the project should be given a chance rather than stopped in favour of alternatives that if successful would place a massive draw on the exchequer.

The terms of reference for the working group established to investigate the possibility of a national sports stadium for Northern Ireland include many aspects of the work our consortium has already carried out. However in our view the key issue is to secure an anchor tenant to ensure the long-term viability of the project. We believe this could and should be Wimbledon Football Club. However we need to discuss the issues in detail with the associated parties, many of whom are members of the working group. Our view is that Northern Ireland currently has insufficient key events that would regularly draw crowds in excess of 25,000. With an anchor tenant i.e. Wimbledon playing at least 20 home games per season we can ensure regular sporting events and accommodate other events sporting or otherwise. The recent World Cross Country championships brought in an additional weekend spend to Belfast of approximately 2 million. We could generate this at least every other week in addition to other events, e.g. The success of the Ulster Rugby Team this year was monumental. It may never be repeated. Now Ulster Rugby is on the map, the province could be seen as a natural neutral venue for future European finals - but we don't have a facility. A stadium in Belfast, the home ground of Belfast United (Wimbledon FC) would be the ideal situation. When Dublin was used for the Ulster European Final the additional weekend spend was £40 million.

Difficult, intense, open, honest, debate, discussion and negotiation is required. The prize is indeed great and the potential magnificent. A situation very similar to the peace process. Can you personally or through your officials attempt to allow this project to be given the chance to succeed that we as a consortium feel it merits, in the interest of good commercial business, good economics for Northern Ireland, good profile for Northern Ireland, good for bridge building within the community and good for giving Northern Ireland a sense of normality. If we fail because after we tried it couldn't or wouldn't work so be it. However if it fails because it never got off the ground or given a chance; well yet again the people lose out.

I appreciate you taking the time to consider my letter. I would appreciate your thoughts and preferably your action if at all possible. Continued success with the Peace Process. I continually hope and pray for its success.

Yours sincerely

Nick McCafferty

PS:

I leave you with the thoughts of three pupils of Hazelwood Integrated College who debated the subject "Should English League Premier Soccer come to Belfast?"

"Big League Football is a good idea for Northern Ireland. I believe we need something to unite all people of all religions and sport is probably the best way. Sectarianism divides the people of Northern Ireland, maybe big league football could bridge the gap between Protestants and Catholics and create a more integrated society."

Rachel Edwards

"I agree with big league football coming to Northern Ireland, because it will boost the tourist industry in Northern Ireland, injecting more money into the economy"

Orla Teague

"If big league football came to Northern Ireland it would put this country on the map.... It would also bring more money into the country, as football is a moneymaking industry. Think of all the merchandising associated with football"

Philomena Campbell