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To: Angela Smith

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NATIONAL SPORTS STADIUM

Summary

- Issue:** DCAL's current position on the National Stadium issue.
- Timescale:** Urgent.
- Presentational Issues:** There is ongoing media interest in the National Stadium issue and you can only expect this to increase over time. There will be mounting pressure on DCAL to clarify the way forward. The first matter to consider is what option you ultimately wish to pursue, ie a multi-sport National Stadium or separate provision for the major sports. (Cleared by the Press Office.)
- Recommendation:** It is recommended that you should, in the first instance, have a discussion with officials on the issues generally. There will be an opportunity arising for a briefing session on 3 April. As part of the briefing a range of options for moving forward should be considered.

Detail

Over the past few weeks, one of Northern Ireland's leading daily newspapers, 'The Belfast Telegraph' has been running a series of articles on the subject of a National Stadium. So far, the 'Telegraph's' Sports Editor, John Laverty, who is responsible for the series, has been concentrating on why Northern Ireland might need a National Stadium. More recently, though, he has begun to consider the question of how "the authorities", particularly Government, might go about developing such a facility. He proposes 2 options – a fully Government funded scheme or a privately financed

enterprise involving stadia management companies. Either way, Lavery maintains that the cost would be "a lot less than" previous Government estimates of £60-£100m.

2. Lavery's stated purpose in writing these articles is to try to open a forum of debate on the National Stadium issue. He intends to continue the series over the next few months. In doing so, he also hopes to answer "all questions" on the subject and to "burn the idea into the minds of (the Telegraph's) readers." Already, the articles appear to be attracting considerable interest and the General Secretary of the IFA, David Bowen, has just written to you asking if, in light of recent "media speculation" about a National Stadium, you would meet a delegation of Irish Football Association (IFA) officers and representatives of Linfield Football Club to discuss the matter. John Grogan MP recently asked a question on the subject during Northern Ireland Question Time and he has since written to you requesting a meeting on the matter.

Background

National Stadium (Multi-Sports Facility)

3. In 1999 a pre-feasibility study indicated that the idea of a National Stadium for Northern Ireland could be developed. In 2000, a soft market test identified the scope for such a development with private sector support, subject to certain conditions, amongst which was the need for a strategy for sport, particularly soccer. It was partly this that led the Department to announce the "Soccer Strategy" initiative in October 2000.
4. Before any commitment could be given to proceed with a National Stadium for Northern Ireland, there are a number of crucial issues to be addressed, including location, design, cost as well as the position of the sports concerned.
 - **Location:** This includes the need to find a neutral site, suitable for the major user sports. These potentially are rugby, soccer, gaelic football and athletics.

- **Design:** May have to be capable of meeting the needs of all 4 sports and could present difficulties given that different sizes of pitches would have to be accommodated, as well as an 8-lane track for Athletics.

- **Cost:** Major capital investment to provide a 35,000 seater stadium would be required, estimated in 1999 to be in the region of £60m but in reality, now more likely to be nearer the £100m mark. Although the potential for private sector support has been identified, there is still likely to be a need for a substantial amount of public expenditure.

- **Position of Sports:** Investigations with the 4 sports so far have failed to identify an absolute commitment on their part to a multi-sport stadium for Northern Ireland. At present, the IFA is broadly supportive of the concept of a multi-sport National Stadium but, in the absence of this, is interested in upgrading Windsor Park to meet the requirements of the new UEFA Licensing Scheme due to come into force in 2004. Rugby has been undertaking an assessment of its needs but is reluctant to take a final decision until it is clear as to the long-term possibility of a National Stadium development. Gaelic has assessed its needs on the basis of its existing stadia, but has also indicated that it is still open to being involved in a National Stadium development. The position of Athletics remains uncertain.

5. In an address to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 25 June 2002 on the Soccer Strategy, the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Michael McGimpsey MLA, stated that the development of a National Stadium (in terms of a multi-sport facility catering for major soccer, rugby, GAA and, possibly, athletics events) would not be a priority at this time. Rather, his Department would focus on building pathways for sport at grass-roots levels. This position was subsequently reaffirmed by you on 5 February 2003 in an answer to an Oral Parliamentary Question on a National Stadium which was tabled by John Grogan MP. The Department's current stance, however, does not rule out the possibility of a National Stadium in the long-term. As a consequence, the issue remains open to debate and the Sports Council, in particular,

remains keen to move the debate forward and has indicated that it is eager to see a multi-sport National Stadium developed.

Separate Provision for Major Sports

Soccer

6. The report of the DCAL Soccer Strategy Advisory Panel recommends that Government, the IFA and the Sports Council, should commit to establishing a National Stadium within a stated time frame. This however was purely in reference to the requirements of soccer and the Panel made no recommendations as to how this might be achieved.
7. In his speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly in June 2002, the then Minister, while ruling out a National Stadium (in terms of a multi-sport facility) in the short-term, did, nonetheless, acknowledge that, in the interim, the individual requirements of soccer, rugby, gaelic and athletics had to be met. With regard to soccer, he specifically recognised that there was a need for a football ground of international standard (ie a national stadium for football) in Northern Ireland and specified that this should offer a neutral and welcoming environment for everyone. He went on to call on the IFA to produce detailed proposals for meeting this need and indicated that he would look forward to receiving the Association's proposals.
8. In the football Development Plan subsequently produced by the IFA, the Association reiterated its support for the development of a National Stadium. However, in light of the Minister's stated position on the issue, the IFA submitted a proposal, as part of its Plan, for the upgrading of Windsor Park to international standards at an estimated cost of £15.5m. No details were provided by the IFA as to how this proposal would meet the requirement of a neutral and welcoming environment and the Association appears to have considered no alternative options. So far DCAL has not engaged in any discussions with the IFA on the Windsor Park plan. Such engagement would depend on the changes envisaged in the Development Plan coming to fruition and bringing improvements to the game at all levels.

9. The GAA last year unveiled its new Strategic Plan for 2000-2011 which contains highly ambitious proposals for the development of its facilities. Key amongst these were objectives for expanding the seating capacity of major grounds at Cusinstown Park, Belfast and Athletic Grounds, Armagh. These were to 35,000 (plus almost 12,000 standing) for Cusinstown and 25,000 (plus 15,000 standing) for Armagh. The GAA estimated the total cost of these particular proposals to be £23m (£15m for Cusinstown and £8m for Armagh).

Rugby and Athletics

10. The aspirations of rugby and athletics are less clear cut. Major Ulster rugby matches are currently played at Ravenhill Road, Belfast and there has been considerable speculation, particularly amongst the media, that the Ulster Rugby Football Union (URFU) is seriously contemplating a move to an alternative venue. This, however, is by no means certain. The URFU is still undertaking a needs assessment and has recently indicated to DCAL officials that it would prefer to know the Government's long-term position on a National Stadium before taking any final decision. Athletics has never properly clarified its position. However, it is believed that the sport probably would accept an upgrading of the Mary Peters' Track in Belfast which is owned by Belfast City Council.

Recommendation

11. It is recommended that you should, in the first instance, have a discussion with officials on the issues generally. There will be an opportunity arising for a briefing session on 3 April. As part of the briefing a number of options should be considered including -

- whether or not you should continue to stand by the Department's recent position,

Gaelic

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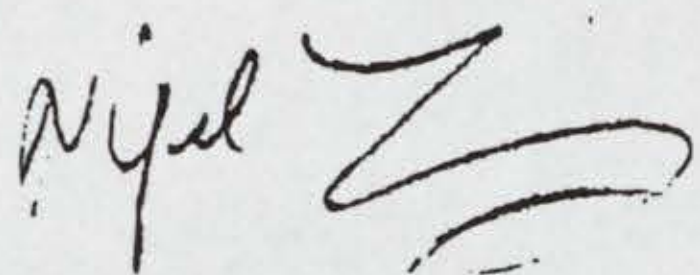
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 - whether or not you should continue to stand by the Department's resent position;

- whether or not you should completely rule out the possibility of a National Stadium and, if so, what alternatives can be considered;
- whether or not the entire question should be revisited and, if so, how best the matter can be moved forward.



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