

FROM: JACK PALMER
Head of Sport

DATE: 18th November 2003

To: Angela Smith

**BBC NEWS RELEASE AND UTV BROADCAST ON WINDSOR PARK'S
'FAILURE OF UEFA TEST' AND CONSEQUENT THREAT TO
INTERNATIONAL SOCCER IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Summary

Issue: Response to BBC news article and UTV interview with IFA stating that DCAL needs to act immediately after Windsor Park recently failed a UEFA test.

Timescale: Immediate

Presentational Issue: By going public, the IFA are trying to 'get their retaliation in first'. Almost certainly they have found the necessary groundwork to the staging of the UEFA Under 19 Tournament beyond their capabilities, and have not asked for help until the 11th hour. They are calculating that the public will join them in blaming Government. [Cleared by the Press Office]

Recommendation: That you respond quickly to the IFA statements in the media. In addition you should stick to the Line to Take set out in the most recent submission to you on the Future of Linfield FC and Windsor Park (Sub/279/2003 refers) and also agree the proposed revised Line to Take in relation to the UEFA U-19 Tournament.

Detail

On Sunday 16th November, BBC News carried an article, both on Ceefax and on its web site, warning that Windsor Park's future as a venue for international soccer was under threat after "a warning" from UEFA about sub-standard facilities. The article claims that the IFA General Secretary, David Bowen, had informed DCAL that "immediate action needs to be taken" otherwise international Soccer matches could be taken out of Northern Ireland. It is also stated that the owners of Windsor Park,

Linfield FC, have submitted major plans and funding proposals to meet stadium costs and subsequent upkeeps. The article finishes by commenting that some money could be forthcoming from the £8m allocated by Government to local football but which has not yet been distributed. The essence of these points was reinforced by IFA President, Jim Boyce, in the course of an interview with UTV which was broadcast yesterday evening. During the interview, Boyce stated that the Association had informed DCAL of failings at Windsor Park and the consequent implications for the future of international Soccer. An article, along similar lines, also appeared in today's Irish News.

Background Update

2. We suspect that these media statements were prompted by very recent discussions between DCAL officials and the IFA on the UEFA Under-19 Tournament. The IFA wrote to DCAL last week appealing for an immediate commitment from the Department to finance the Championship. This was on foot of the UEFA stadia inspection visit to Northern Ireland in September (which included Windsor Park) and letters subsequently received by the Association from its funding partners requesting assurance, by the end of November, that £500k Government investment had been secured for the staging of the Tournament. In a written response, sent on Thursday 13th last, DCAL advised the IFA that we are still awaiting the business case requested from the Association in March 2002 by the then Minister for Sport, Michael McGimpsey. DCAL went on to inform the IFA that, until a satisfactory case is received, we would not be in a position to make any financial commitment. Following further correspondence, officials arranged to meet with the IFA, at the Association's headquarters, on Friday 14th and again on Monday 17th, to re-clarify DCAL's requirements. Whilst the IFA is now, *hopefully*, looking at mechanisms to deliver the necessary business case and reassure its funding partners, it is very evident from our discussions with the Association that it is facing considerable difficulties, as well as major local and international embarrassment, over this matter.

3. The IFA is also aware, from the Linfield FC/PWC presentation it attended with DCAL and SCNI on 29th October last on the future of Windsor Park (Mr Carson's submission, Sub/279/2003, to you of 5th November refers), that the position of international soccer in Northern Ireland has been placed in further jeopardy as a

result of Linfield's financial problems. Until the recent exchange of letters and meetings between DCAL and the IFA on the Under-19 Tournament, the Association appears to have been labouring under the assumption that Government would provide the solutions, and the funding from the Soccer Strategy budget (or indeed an additional source!), that would settle all outstanding issues over the future of Windsor Park, international Soccer and the Under-19 Tournament. Now that it is apparent to the IFA that Government will not simply provide answers and money on demand, the Association seems to be attempting, through the media, to transfer complete responsibility for the looming crisis within Northern Ireland football to DCAL.

Recommendation and Lines to Take

4. You should not be prepared to allow the IFA, as the governing body for soccer in Northern Ireland, to transfer all responsibility for the looming crisis within Soccer to DCAL. In light of the IFA's decision to run to the media, it is imperative that the Department respond immediately. A draft Press Release, prepared by DCAL Press Office, is therefore attached to this submission for your consideration.

5. Beyond this, you should continue to stick by the Line to Take on the position of Windsor Park as set out in the 5th November submission to you from Nigel Carson (Sub/279/2003). In relation to the UEFA Under-19 Tournament you should, if approached, now say:-

"I am aware that UEFA has awarded its 2005 Under-19 Championship to Northern Ireland. I am delighted at the prospect of the Tournament coming to Northern Ireland as I believe it can do much to improve the image of soccer and sport more generally here. I am sure that everyone responsible for the staging of the event will do all that is necessary to ensure that it can take place here. I, for my part, am eager to give those responsible as much support as possible in this endeavour. Indeed, even before the Championships were awarded to Northern Ireland, my Department had informed the IFA of what was required from them to ensure that any Government assistance could be delivered in good time. Whilst I am still awaiting receipt from the IFA of the case for Government assistance previously requested, I can confirm that officials

A DCAL spokesman said:

have been in touch with the Association to reinforce DCAL's requirements and to advise them again on how these should be addressed."



JACK PALMER

Ext 58935

cc. **Secretary**
Mrs Moore
Mr Carson O/R
Mr Kirk
Mr Mee
Ms Ashfield

"DCAL is aware that UEFA has minimum criteria for international soccer games, including tournaments. That is why, when the IFA brought just such an issue to the then sports minister over eighteen months ago, they were asked to provide specific information to help us to progress the case. In addition, the Department gave the IFA guidance on how they might get assistance in the task if they needed it. The information has still not been received by the Department.

"I can also confirm that last week, on receiving a message from the IFA about their concerns over UEFA's criteria, the Department arranged to discuss the issue with the IFA immediately.

"I have to stress that DCAL has been consistently willing to respond to approaches from the IFA about its concerns.

SB 105/11/08
SB 136/11/03

A DCAL spokesman said:

“Government has made very clear its willingness to help the overall health of the game and has secured public funds to do just that through, for example, the Soccer Strategy and the Safety at Sports Grounds scheme.

“But the running of the sport is a matter for the IFA, and the securing of any public resources that are invested, whether in football in general, or stadiums in particular, is dependent, among other things, on the IFA providing specific information necessary to ensure the safeguarding of taxpayers money.

“DCAL is aware that UEFA has minimum criteria for international soccer games, including tournaments. That is why, when the IFA brought just such an issue to the then sports minister over eighteen months ago, they were asked to provide specific information to help us to progress the case. In addition, the Department gave the IFA guidance on how they might get assistance in the task if they needed it. The information has still not been received by the Department.

“I can also confirm that last week, on receiving a message from the IFA about their concerns over UEFA’s criteria, the Department arranged to discuss the issue with the IFA immediately.

“I have to stress that DCAL has been consistently willing to respond to approaches from the IFA about its concerns on

soccer. However, in order to give any material help, the Department needs appropriate, timely and full responses from the body responsible for running the sport.”