



Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE,
ARTS AND LEISURE
INTERPOINT, 20-24 YORK STREET
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COR/99/2004

The Reverend W Martin Smyth MP
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16 July 2004

Dear Martin

Thank you for your letter of 28 May asking me to investigate immediately the situation regarding the future of Windsor Park Stadium. I apologise for the delay in my response.

As you are aware Windsor Park is used by the IFA for hosting its international football fixtures under an agreement between the Association and the stadium's owners, Linfield FC. Neither I, nor my Department, are party to this agreement nor are we responsible for the staging of international football matches in Northern Ireland, the upgrading and management of Windsor Park for that purpose or, indeed, the future of the stadium as a whole. These are matters for the governing body of football in Northern Ireland, the IFA, together with the owners of the ground, Linfield FC. These two bodies would therefore be better placed to answer some of your questions.

As to the particular applications from Windsor Park to the IFA to which you refer, neither I, my officials nor the Sports Council have any direct involvement in these, but there is no reason we should be given that they appear, from your description, to be internal to the IFA and Linfield FC. There is a proposal for upgrading Windsor Park contained within the IFA's Development Plan, but the same Plan expresses strong interest in the potential of a shared multi-purpose sports facility that meets international standards for Football. It is clearly a matter for the IFA to determine whether the agreement it has with Linfield FC for the use of Windsor Park is capable of delivering the standard of venue required and, if it is not, to ask Linfield to rectify the situation.

Turning to the other matters you raise, I am not aware of any promise to provide £1.2million from the Soccer Strategy for improvements to the North Stand and floodlights at Windsor Park. What I can say, however, is that an application for public funding for improvements to Windsor Park could be considered by the Sports Council as part of the Playing Facilities component of the Strategy. I would, nonetheless, emphasise that any such application must be assessed in terms of its potential to contribute to the wider objectives of the Strategy.



Equally, those applying for finances will need to be able to demonstrate the long-term viability of any significant public investment into a given ground through the preparation and presentation of appropriate business and financial management plans for their club/venue. I regard these requirements as essential in ensuring the proper accountability and value for money of public finances.

However, I can assure you that as Minister with responsibility for Sport in Northern Ireland, I have always been willing to do what I reasonably can to assist the IFA in staging Northern Ireland's World Cup Qualifying Games in the autumn. To this end, officials from my Department have already broached the subject directly with the IFA as part of our discussions on the Soccer Strategy. I believe that from these, both the Government and the Association recognise that there is really very little prospect of football clubs availing of any capital programmes under the Soccer Strategy by October 2004. This, of course, is due as much to the time taken to reach agreement with the IFA on a way forward on the Strategy as a whole as it is to other factors such as the sport's present state of readiness to satisfy future conditions of capital grant. In the case of Windsor Park, I can only advise that, if there are immediate needs, those directly responsible should look at alternative ways of raising the necessary funds. This could, perhaps, include gate receipts from matches, potential/predicted income from relevant contractual obligations, re-prioritisation of existing expenditure etc.

With regard to your specific request that I immediately investigate Windsor Park's situation, I can report that, as well as the aforementioned discussions initiated by my officials, the Sports Council has been consulting with the IFA about Soccer's longer-term facility development priorities, including Windsor Park. The Sports Council has also recently participated in an inspection of Windsor Park itself and has since written to the Association and Linfield FC regarding the floodlighting issue, to which you particularly draw attention. The Sports Council also stands ready to provide advice and guidance to the IFA and/or Linfield FC on options for resolving the floodlighting problem in time for the first World Cup qualifying games this year if necessary. It remains, nonetheless, a matter for the two parties concerned as to whether or not they wish to avail of that opportunity, but I hope that they will do so.

I trust you find this helpful.

Yours ever
Yours sincerely

ANGELA SMITH MP