



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Ministerial Briefing Regarding the
Olympics/Paralympics 2012**

27 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Declan O'Loan (Deputy Chairperson)
Lord Browne
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Nelson McCausland) Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Mick Cory) Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure
Professor Eamonn McCartan) Sport NI

The Chairperson:

Good afternoon, Minister and your colleagues, Mick and Eamonn. Thank you for coming along. We have just dealt with the draft museums policy. I apologise for our time management. I understand that you too, Minister, are time bound and under pressure for time as well.

I will hand over to you, Minister, so that you can make an opening statement on this item, which is essentially about the Olympics and Paralympics and media coverage, or the Committee's press release.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland):

Good afternoon, members of the Committee and Chairperson. Thank you for the opportunity to come here to address some of the issues that have been raised recently in relation to the funding and prioritisation of the elite facilities programme; the issues raised about Northern Ireland's involvement in the 2012 Games; and, specifically, the statements contained in the Committee's press release that was issued after the presentation the Committee received last Thursday from Jonathan Edwards and departmental officials.

I begin by assuring the Committee that sport has not in any way suffered under my watch. Since coming into office in July 2009, I have visited dozens of projects across the Province, east and west, north and south, from Ballinamallard to Ballymena, from Londonderry to the Mournes, where the Northern Ireland Executive have been investing in sporting facilities from grass-roots community projects to elite facilities for our high-performing athletes.

I will ask Eamonn McCartan to provide some examples of the sort of projects that we are talking about.

The Chairperson:

Minister, I should have said earlier that you are joined by Mr Mick Corry, DCAL senior official, and by Professor Eamonn McCartan, Sport NI chief executive.

Professor Eamonn McCartan (Sport NI):

Thank you, Minister and Committee, for the opportunity to present to you this morning.

Over the past six years, Sport NI has invested £71 million through DCAL and the Minister in small, medium and large-scale capital projects across the length and breadth of Northern Ireland. As mentioned by the Minister, SNI has made significant investments to address the infrastructural needs and facilitate the development of sport from both a participation level and a performance perspective.

For example, we have invested in the following capital projects that may be of interest to some of the members in attendance: in Glenravel Community Development Association, we have

invested £1 million; in Coleraine and District Riding for Disabled Association, for a multi-purpose sports facility, we have invested £1.3 million; in East Belfast, in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Association floodlit water-based and sand-dressed hockey pitches we have invested to the tune of £1.2 million.

In addition to the above projects, members will be aware of a number of high-profile, large-scale projects in which we have invested, namely: at Cookstown Hockey Club, a water-based hockey pitch to the tune of £0.7 million; Tollymore National Outdoor Centre in County Down, £5.3 million; and in the Sports Institute Northern Ireland, where we have invested £8.5 million. Those facilities have all contributed significantly to the sporting infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I have secured £175 million for sport for the next four years. That is clear evidence that I and the Northern Ireland Executive recognise the value that sport plays in the community and that sport makes a significant contribution to personal development, education, health, the economy and the development of communities. I will now address the issues that the Committee has raised in relation to the elite facilities programme.

With regard to the prioritisation of capital projects, I want to clarify for the Committee's benefit that the elite facilities programme was the top priority for Sport NI after its contractual commitments and statutory obligations. Those include a number of safety improvements at sports grounds where work was already under way. Indeed, they included the 50m pool in north Down, which Sport NI recognised in its bidding document as being inescapable. I hope that that brings clarity and precision to the issue of prioritisation.

As you know, my Department covers a diverse range of responsibilities, which includes museums, libraries, the arts, languages, inland waterways and fisheries. I have to consider all their priorities and needs before I settle on a departmental list of priorities. In finalising that list, first, I need to consider those projects that already have contractual commitments, statutory requirements or cover essential maintenance. I was, therefore, shocked and dismayed to discover your concern about the Department's priorities. I have no doubt that as the Statutory Committee

that is responsible for scrutinising those matters, you examined those priorities thoroughly when I sent them to you on 30 July 2010. I am surprised, therefore, that the ranking of the elite facilities programme has become an issue only now, in January of the following year. I have a copy of the correspondence that went to the Committee, which I signed on 28 July 2010. There was no response questioning prioritisation at that time.

There has also been criticism of the timescales involved. Let me address that issue. The projects are costly and complex. They require full and careful consideration. The complexity of our approval processes in Northern Ireland is recognised in many areas of government. Technically complex projects also require detailed careful consideration to ensure not only that finances stack up, but that engineering and construction is sound. You only have to look at the problems with the 50m pool in Dublin to realise what can happen. Applicants also requested more time. That helped some projects to overcome issues. For example, the original site for the velodrome project in Newcastle had planning difficulties. An alternative site was found in Downpatrick.

As you are all aware, the Northern Ireland block grant is being reduced by £4 billion over the next four years. One result has been that capital funding that is available across all Departments has been reduced dramatically. On 17 December 2010, my Department informed Sport NI that as a result of the draft Budget, funding would not be available for the elite facilities programme. Applicants were informed immediately of the position. Let me assure you that I am as disappointed as anyone that we cannot currently proceed with those facilities. However, this is an Executive Budget, and I cannot spend what I do not have.

Moving to the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, Northern Ireland has, unfortunately, lost out from the diversion of Lottery money to help to fund the construction of the Olympic park in London. However, that makes it particularly important that we do not lose out on other opportunities associated with the games.

I would now like to address issues that are contained in the press release. Last week, one Committee member stated:

“I do not want that to obscure the fact that there are huge positives for Northern Ireland, which, in many ways, is the biggest message of all.”

I agree with that Committee member. The headline and first paragraph of your press release refers to Northern Ireland’s failure to secure any 2012 Olympic events. I wish to remind you that with the exception of the preliminary rounds of football, it was never the plan for Northern Ireland to host Olympic sporting events. My Department had negotiated and agreed with the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) that if Northern Ireland had a stadium, consideration would be given to holding some of football’s preliminary rounds here. It is also correct to state that Northern Ireland will not host any Olympic events. However, Northern Ireland will host the torch relay for four days, and I will come back to that in a moment.

The second issue raised in your press release was that Jonathan Edwards and DCAL officials confirmed that setbacks with building the Olympic-sized pool in Bangor and three stadia meant that there was a lack of suitable venues for Olympic events. That statement was not confirmed by Jonathan Edwards or DCAL officials. I am deeply disappointed that those views were attributed to Jonathan Edwards. In fact, I spoke to Jonathan Edwards immediately after his visit here, because he came down to a photo call in the Department, and we talked about these matters. It is fortunate that we have the Hansard report, and what was stated in the press release is not in the Hansard report.

You also stated in your press release that we had lost a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to showcase the region on a world stage and to inspire and encourage our young people to participate in sport and pursue excellence. I am very disappointed that the Committee appears not to have listened to last week’s presentation on the excellent work and activity ongoing in those areas, and that you chose to highlight incorrect information to the public. That is not helpful to sport, athletes, the reputation of Northern Ireland or, indeed, to anyone.

Perhaps I can re-emphasise some of that work and reaffirm that Northern Ireland is benefitting, and will continue to benefit, from the many opportunities that the Games have presented for the people of Northern Ireland. Attracting teams to Northern Ireland is one of the Government’s key targets and a key priority for my Department. The task of attracting teams is not assisted by the unhelpful and negative comments emanating from the Committee and

individual Committee members thereby fuelling recent press reports that are potentially damaging to Northern Ireland.

Sport NI is implementing its action plan and communications plan to attract a number of Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes here in the run-up to the Games in 2012. Apart from all but the very best athletes in the world, few will know until later whether they have qualified to take part in the Games. Therefore, selection of training camp destinations will not be known for some time and will be dependent on the number of athletes and their disciplines.

Members raised issues about pre-Games training following last week's presentation. On the first issue of representation on the pre-Games training subgroup, I refer members to the Official Report (Hansard) of the information provided by Mick Cory. By way of a reminder, Sport NI chairs that group and there is representation from my Department, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Invest NI, Disability Sports NI and local government.

The second issue was the frequency and dates of meetings in the past six months. I can confirm that the group met six times in the past six months. I was asked to send through the dates of those meetings but I will give them to you now; 27 July 2010, 19 August 2010, 21 September 2010, 12 October 2010, 2 November 2010 and 11 January 2011. It may be helpful if Eamonn said a few words about pre-Games training camps here.

Professor McCartan:

I would be pleased to, Minister, for the benefit of the Committee. Pre-Games training camps are camps where athletes in an Olympic or Paralympic Games train at accredited venues prior to the competition. I think that we have some 26 such venues.

The camps are usually hosted in the country in which the Games are being held. The target set for DCAL and Sport NI is by 2012 to seek to attract 10 sports or nations competing in the Olympic or Paralympic Games for pre-Games training and acclimatisation. Sport NI is fully committed to achieving that target and I am pleased to report that we are in sensitive negotiations with a number of countries and sports concerning those events.

Members should understand the timeline and timescales in attracting those events. The biggest and most successful countries, for example, the USA, China and Japan, went out and actively sought and booked the best facilities near London well in advance of the Games because they knew that they would be at the Games. That was their level of certainty.

The smaller and medium-sized countries — the ones that we are targeting — will not know how many athletes, if any, they will have, and they may not know the disciplines in which their athletes will qualify for the 2012 Olympics until the spring of 2012. At present, they are not looking at where they will locate their pre-Games training centres.

Sport NI is working closely with its partners — the Department, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Disability Sports and the governing bodies of sport — to attract pre-Games training camps to Northern Ireland. We have made considerable progress to date. We are progressing with those involved in paralympic sports, and we hope to announce soon that an international team will come to use Northern Ireland's facilities. We are progressing with sailing, fencing, table tennis, athletics, judo, badminton and gymnastics. We are operating in a very competitive and sensitive market, and I am confident that SNI and DCAL will attract 10 nations that will compete in the Olympic or Paralympic Games to pre-Games training here.

I believe that Northern Ireland will be able to realise the sporting, economic, and environmental legacy of the Games. That legacy is well highlighted on a number of fronts, but, most important, in participation, where we are running one of the most successful programmes in the United Kingdom through Activ8 with our young people. Through it, we hope to get more than 100,000 primary-school children involved in physical activity and healthy eating; that will be part of the legacy of the Games.

I am confident that we will meet our targets in the PSA that was set by the Department and ourselves.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

It is important to get that information across to indicate the extent of the ongoing work and the opportunities that are still there. Yesterday, we heard that the Lithuanian team wishes to discuss

basing itself here. I talked to the honorary consul of Lithuania some time ago about this opportunity, and now a more detailed conversation is under way. We use the network of honorary consuls to make contact with other countries. A great deal of work is going on, and I am sure that people will recognise, appreciate and applaud the work of Sport NI and the Department in that regard.

I remind the Committee that the Olympic torch relay will be here for four days and will cover our major towns and cities, providing an open and accessible opportunity for everyone to get involved. It will provide major international promotional opportunities in the run-up to the Games, highlighting Northern Ireland's landscape and cultural offerings. Young people and sports stars from Northern Ireland will have an opportunity to be torchbearers. Twenty-nine local projects have already been awarded the prestigious London 2012 Inspire Mark in recognition of their excellence and innovation. Those projects have been genuinely inspired by the 2012 Games.

I cite two examples: Activ8 encourages children of primary-school age to get active and stay healthy; it takes the excitement and values of the 2012 Games into primary schools across Northern Ireland, promoting sport, physical activity and Olympic and Paralympic values. The project aims at reaching 91,250 children between the ages of seven and 11. Jonathan Edwards launched a further stage of it last week.

The 5 Star Disability Sports Challenge aims to increase awareness of disability among children and promote understanding that disability is not an obstacle to achieving physical and sporting success. Since its launch in March 2009, the project has reached approximately 13,350 children in 89 schools across Northern Ireland. I saw for myself its benefits at Hazelwood Integrated Primary School earlier this month. It has been showcased across the UK and has been shared internationally in Jordan through the International Inspiration programme run by the British Council. I met a delegation of teachers and others from Jordan when they were at Stormont some time ago.

More than 130,000 people in Northern Ireland have participated in arts and cultural events as part of the Cultural Olympiad. Today, Legacy Trust UK announced its final selection of four

community celebrations to be held outside London, each of which will be awarded £750,000. I am pleased that the bid from the Belfast-based consortia was one of those selected, and it will deliver the “Land of the Giants”, an outdoor spectacular planned for the summer of 2012.

I am particularly encouraged that £24 million of Olympic-related business has been won by 30 Northern Ireland companies, including: Lagan Construction, which won a contract to build a key bridge worth some £12 million at the Olympic Park; the McAvoy Group, which won a major contract to build modular buildings at the basketball arena; Ulster Weavers Home Fashions Ltd, which has won a major licensing contract to produce official London 2012 kitchen textiles, and Macrete, which is supplying precast concrete. Baronscourt Technologies has also won a software contract directly with the ODA.

Invest NI is working with local businesses to encourage them to compete for a total of £700 million worth of business. Last October, I attended a 2012 business event organised by NILGA in Coleraine to help promote those opportunities.

As you know, volunteering plays a valuable role in Northern Ireland society, and there are a number of excellent volunteering opportunities and projects in operation. There has been an excellent response from Northern Ireland volunteers willing to participate in the Games. We have established a 2012 bursary to provide financial support to assist volunteers who would not otherwise be able to afford to travel to London and gain that valuable experience. That will leave a legacy of supported and skilled volunteers for future events, such as the World Police and Fire Games in 2013. All of that work has been led and co-ordinated by my Department to specifically benefit Northern Ireland.

Last year was a golden year for our local sportsmen and sportswomen, with many achieving remarkable success on the global stage, putting Northern Ireland firmly on the map as a place of sporting excellence. Some of our facilities are indeed world class; for example, the Sports Institute at Jordanstown and Brady Cricket Club at Magheramason. Our sporting profile and the work I have just highlighted gives the lie to many of the recent ill-informed headlines that Northern Ireland has nothing to gain from the London Olympics. We have, and we are focused on gaining a lasting legacy of which we can all be proud and which, I believe, will benefit

Northern Ireland for future generations.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Minister. We will obviously appreciate copies of any briefing papers or documents you are working from. Thank you for that. I want to acknowledge, as you have said, the efforts of the Department and Sport NI in your attempts to promote sport here. As a Committee, we have accorded a high priority to sport, particularly with our inquiry into adult levels of participation in sport and physical activity, etc.

Obviously, this is an area of contest. Some Committee members may have a different understanding about some of the things you are saying. A lot of us suggest that there was a high expectation that we would host 2012 Olympic events or Olympic-related events. If you want to go down the route of evidence, there were plenty of documents in the public domain — including documents approved by Sport NI and DCAL, such as Sport Matters— with loads of references to ambitions to achieve events related to the Olympics here. That may have disappointed people. I could quote those documents verbatim, but I do not think we have the time today.

Our press release stated that delays in planning and funding of venues means that we will not host 2012 Olympic events. It is a fact that at one point there was the possibility of this region hosting the preliminary rounds of the Olympic football tournament. There is an area of contest.

At some point, your Department presented a number of facilities under the title “elite facilities”, and it is our understanding that Sport NI gave number-one priority status to elite facilities. Then, they may have reappeared in the bid or the spending proposals document under a different title, for example, “other major sports facilities”. There are some inconsistencies there.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I beg to disagree that there are inconsistencies. There is clear consistency across the board with the information, and, of course, a copy of what I have said will be given to the Committee.

At one stage, there was the thought that Northern Ireland might get some allocation of the football preliminary rounds if we had proceeded with a single national stadium. The decision not

to proceed in that direction but in the direction of the three-stadium project precedes my time as Minister. It was, of course, the decision of the Executive, and they signed up to it. That is the route that we are taking, and we believe that it is the right way forward. As I said, the decision precedes my coming to the Department, and I followed through what was planned. Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, the early rounds of the football tournament will not proceed in Northern Ireland.

However, the key point is about expectations. It may be that some people had greater and unrealistic expectations, but we should take actual Olympic events out of the discussion. I stress that it is the London Olympic Games, based in London. A couple of events, including shooting and sailing, cannot take place in London and will move outside, but the rest of the events are in London. If people imagined that other events from the Games would take place in Northern Ireland, then that was a misunderstanding or a false expectation. That does not happen; it is the London Olympic Games, and that is where the investment by the United Kingdom Government is focused.

We said that we were looking to bring pre-Games training camps here, and Eamonn outlined fully and eloquently in detail the work that is ongoing, the contacts that have been made, the areas in which we are working and the expectations that we have. We are very clear about that, and to say, as was suggested in some circles and in a number of newspapers this week, that there will be no training camps in Northern Ireland —

The Chairperson:

You will accept that that is not in our press release.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

No, I said that it was in some newspapers. I was quite specific.

The Chairperson:

To take the terms of reference for today, we are unclear about whether we are dealing specifically with our press release or whether we are dealing with some things that were said by other people in the media.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

It is important that we have clarity around the press release and on comments that were made in the media on the issue by Committee members. It is also important that we take the opportunity, for the good of sport and for the good of Northern Ireland, to bring clarity to a situation that has become somewhat clouded. That is good for sport, good for government, good for the Committee and good for Northern Ireland. It is important that we deal with it in that way.

The Chairperson:

I acknowledge that there is a lot to play for in attracting international teams to come here. That is the point that you are making, and we acknowledge it.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

That is right. It is important that we emphasise that, because the myth of the past week was that nothing was going to happen in that regard.

I was asked about prioritisation. The Budget 2010 spending proposals were sent to the Committee on 28 July. It is quite clear from those proposals that the plans for major facilities are ranked thirtieth on the list of capital investment plans. My point, which I made earlier, is that there are a number of things that have to take precedence because they are contractual commitments and because they are statutory obligations. It is also worth pointing out that that list covers capital investment plans for the entire Department, so the list covers museums, sport, libraries and the arts. For example, the Metropolitan Arts Centre was ranked fourth, and the 50m pool was ranked first. There is a contractual commitment to building the pool, the hole has been dug in the ground and work has started in Bangor, so we have to continue that. That is why the situation is as it is. Do you want to add anything to that, Eamonn?

Professor McCartan:

No.

The Chairperson:

There are issues about which I could be pedantic. For example, the way in which the information

was presented and the fact that the Committee said to the Department that it felt that it did not have sufficient time to consider the bids last September. Also, Committee staff had to manually number the bids and match them to an index list.

So, there are lessons to be learned on how the Department presents information to a statutory Committee. The projects were labelled as “elite facilities” on one occasion, yet on another they were termed as “other major sports facilities”. We are trying to work our way through this as a Statutory Committee, and there are lessons to be learned at the Department’s end on how information is communicated.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

In front of me, I have a copy of the letter that I sent. In that letter, I say that there is a briefing paper attached. I assume that that briefing paper is the one that was sent to the Committee. There are numbers down the side of this copy.

The Chairperson:

Maybe, you could clear that up afterwards. Maybe, you could make your main point.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I am just responding to the point you made about the numbering. The list that I have in front of me has numbers.

Mr O’Loan:

I express my appreciation to the Minister for coming here today along with Mick and Eamonn. It is very good that we can communicate fully about these issues. Everything around the Olympics is very important, and it is important that there are accurate statements on the matter and that we have thorough information. So, I appreciate the Minister requesting to come in front of us. Of course, that was something that the Committee was very pleased to facilitate. We have a mutual duty to do what is best in the public interest, which includes providing the best sporting facilities for all of the people that we represent.

I want to raise a few points about what has been said. The information that all of you have

given has been very clarifying. I met a very angry young lady last evening. Her name is Maeve Kyle, and she is quite happy for me to name her and quote her. Everyone here will know that Maeve Kyle has given so much to sport over many decades that any of us who are commenting on these matters should feel rightly humbled in the face of what she has contributed to sport. She is a person who should be taken very seriously.

She was angry about the issue of the elite facilities. She is very involved in sport and is obviously very knowledgeable about the whole sporting framework. She feels very let down, because she thought that there was a very clear commitment to providing those facilities.

In 2006, a DCAL press release states that former Minister David Hanson had:

“unveiled government plans to spend £53 million on elite facilities for Northern Ireland Olympic sports before 2010.”

That was the information that went into the public arena. That was the clear indication that was set in people’s minds; that we were creating those facilities and that their creation was very much linked to the Olympics in 2012. Nothing was set into the public mind to alter that. Clearly, promoters of the different schemes were investing a huge amount of effort and money towards creating those facilities. They were not doing that in the dark; they were working closely with government bodies and directly with the Department and felt that they were on a track towards achieving something. Going back to the comments of Maeve Kyle, it is only now that their hopes are being dashed, and they have been quite unprepared for that. I will come back to the whole financial situation to which the Minister referred, but does he feel that enough has been done to work with the public and with those directly involved in the sporting system to make clear where the projects were, the assessment of risk around the delivery of the projects and the timescale in which they might be done?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

That was a fairly lengthy question that covered a number of issues. I welcome the fact that the Deputy Chairperson, at the beginning, emphasised the importance of getting clarity around issues. I share that view. Right from the start, it was made clear in all of the process that any investment would be subject to a business case, affordability and a competitive process. There had to be a business case that stood up, we had to be able to afford it — in other words, the money had to be

there — and there had to be a competitive process. Folk knew that from the start because that is how it is with all competitive processes. It does not apply to just sport. If it is a capital funding programme in the arts, or whatever it might be, or in another Department, those things are always and obviously basic requirements.

I am disappointed that we are not able to proceed. I am disappointed, as is, I am sure, every member of the Committee, that £4 billion has been taken out of the Northern Ireland Budget. The allocation of money to Departments for capital spend and so on has been an Executive decision. I have a budget in which I have to work, which sadly means that the money is not there currently to proceed with the projects. There is pain in the Department, just as there is pain in every other Department and across society, because of public expenditure cuts. However, it was clear at the beginning and throughout the process — people would have been familiar with it — that the three requirements, the business case, affordability and the competitive process, had to be in place.

I suggest that there is ample evidence of the amount of work and effort that has been put in to the process by the applicants and Sport NI in collaboration with my Department. If we look at the effort that has been put in, the commitment has been there. I do not know whether I addressed all of the points that you made.

Lord Browne:

I share the Minister's disappointment that the remaining elite facilities could not be funded by the Executive. However, I am sure that we accept the economic climate in which we are living and the £4 billion of Tory cuts in the block grant. A lot of work has gone in to preparing business plans for the elite facilities. Is it possible that the Minister could look at them again in a favourable light? Perhaps the Executive could look at them in years to come and perhaps we could have the elite facilities when times improve.

The Chairperson:

Minister, I have received an indication that you are under severe time pressure. If I allow each member to ask a question individually, it might meet your time pressures. Is that OK?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

It will depend on whether I can remember them all.

The Chairperson:

Do you want to do them individually?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

It is easier to just do them one at a time.

Lord Browne:

I am sorry for interrupting.

Mr K Robinson:

Rather than be left out, I have a very simple question. How many pre-Games training grounds have Scotland and Wales obtained at this point? Do they have countries lined up to come there for training?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I will answer the first question, and I will let Eamonn respond to Ken's question. I hope that we will have those facilities in the future. I expect that when we get over the current financial difficulties, we will be in a position in which we will be able to take Northern Ireland to an even higher level of sports infrastructure.

There were years of underinvestment under direct rule. There has been substantial investment in the past few years, and there is substantial investment to come in the next CSR period, both in national stadiums and in grass-roots facilities. As for what are termed major or elite facilities — however we define them — I hope that, at some point, funding will become available. When and what funding becomes available depends on other pressures in the system. A lot of work has been done, and that work and information will feed into the business cases for future projects.

Professor McCartan:

In answer to Ken's question, to the best of my knowledge, there was a report just before

Christmas that indicated that Scotland had achieved two, and Wales two. These matters are live, and they change from day to day. You must also remember that Scotland is hosting the Commonwealth Games and has put in place a very extensive international lobbying network, first to secure the Games, and while they were doing that, quite rightly, piggybacking work on the pre-Games training and holding camps. That is the position to the best of my knowledge. You should also take into account the relative difference in infrastructure between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

Mr Hilditch:

The Committee has to appreciate that it finds itself stuck between Labour promises and Tory cuts. Minister, thanks for coming along. We are all aware of the legacy in Bangor of the Olympic-size swimming pool. Some £15 million of £50 million has gone on that, and it will be a welcome benefit and legacy of 2012. You have also given examples of where money has been spent throughout the Province. At the hells of the hunt, the rest of the elite facilities were not ready to proceed. Did they lose the money or did sport gain throughout Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I welcome that question because one of the things that I am keen to stress is that nothing has been lost to sport. The money in the budget has been put into sports facilities across the Province. As I indicated earlier, I have had the privilege and opportunity to go to many different facilities and see the outworkings of that money. I will give some examples: Tollymore National Outdoor Centre received £5.3 million; Lavey GAA club and Termoneeny Community Association got a covered 3G pitch; Donaghmore District Community Association got a sports hall; Donaghadee Sailing Club got a clubhouse facility; Drumragh Sarsfields got a floodlit pitch and changing facilities; Coleraine, Riding for the Disabled got funding for and a multi-purpose sports centre; and there was investment in Cookstown Hockey Club. There is a list of projects that have been carried out, and therefore sport has benefited in a real and meaningful way. That outworking and spending of that money on those projects is certainly valued and appreciated by sportspeople across the Province.

Mr Sheehan:

Thank you, Minister, for coming along and for your presentation. Thanks to Mick and Eamonn

as well. I am interested in the ongoing negotiations to attract teams for pre-Games training. Have any of those countries given a firm commitment that, if they qualify, they will come here?

Professor McCartan:

You need to understand the nature of this. First, the larger countries such as Australia, Russia, Canada, America and China will have tried to source the most appropriate facilities that as close to London as possible. Those are also, generally speaking, the cash-rich countries, so, well in advance of determining how many athletes they are bringing, they will be able to send the money to secure those facilities. It goes from that end of the continuum to the lower end, where there may be a country with only one or possibly two athletes attending the Olympic Games, and their training and holding needs will be very small.

You must also understand that there is a whole host of people negotiating with the international Olympic committees — large, medium and small — and those Olympic committees are trying to suss out the best deals. They are negotiating with Scotland, Wales, England, France and Belgium and the Republic of Ireland and sussing out the best deal they can get. However, they must also bear in mind that, at this stage, they do not know who their athletes will be. They have some idea about who they might be, but many athletes in those countries have not yet qualified, so many of the countries do not know what training and holding camp needs they require.

The Chairperson:

Are you happy enough, Pat?

Mr Sheehan:

So the answer is no, then? None of the countries have given a commitment?

Mr Mick Cory (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

Let me answer that. No; and even among those countries in other parts of the UK that have given a form of commitment and signed memorandums of understanding, I am aware of one case where a region has poached countries from another region that has signed. So there is no such thing as a contractual commitment. There may be an understanding, but this is a competitive environment.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I have two things to say on that particular point. Eamonn was able to outline to us the countries with which conversations and discussions are ongoing. He was also able to confirm that the sort of countries that we are aiming at are not yet at the stage of making decisions. We should not really expect to be able to chalk up a particular number of countries at this stage. It would be an unrealistic expectation. That will become clear later this year or in the early part of next year. I know that Eamonn is not a prophet, but he made a guess at what he thought the outcome might be, so we have gone as far as we can possibly go today in the circumstances. From talking to Sport NI and our officials, I am reassured that we are on top of this.

The point was made about the Commonwealth Games. In Delhi, the Scotland team was marketing in a strong way for the next Commonwealth Games, and on the back of that, it was also looking at this issue. In spite of that, Scotland has just two results, two teams. So bearing in mind the size of Northern Ireland, the location, the transport issues involved in getting to London and all that, we are in a very healthy position. I am not a prophet either, but I would rely on Eamonn's guidance that we have realistic expectation.

Mr O'Loan:

Once again, Minister, we kept you late at the start and I know that you are under time pressure, so I will try not to be long.

Thank you for the information you have given us. It has moved us to a better place and more informed public comment on those issues.

I have just two remarks. I do not think we should close the door on the idea that something could be done about these elite facilities to move them forward within this four-year period. The First Minister responded very positively in the Chamber when I asked him whether, even after the Budget closes, there will still be opportunities for gaining further capital and using it over the four-year period. My party has put forward significant plans in that arena, and I seek the support of all Committee members and the Minister in doing so. I do not want to raise further false hopes in the sporting community, but I believe that something real can be achieved.

Finally, I will remark on the issue of pre-Olympic training. That is one of three PSAs on the

Olympics, and when officials came before us last week and it was clear there was going to be questioning on that, the information provided to us in the written document sent to the Committee before the meeting was far from specific. When I asked questions about it, the specific information that we have received today from Eamonn was not forthcoming. I think we have a legitimate grievance about that.

However, I am prepared to put that behind us now and say that we have got the information and are much better informed. It is up to us all now to move forward and give the Department and Sport NI every support in what they are doing towards achieving this international engagement with the Olympics, which is very important to us.

The Chairperson:

I support that point, Declan. There is commitment from the Committee to get and remain involved with the Department and Sport NI to achieve what we can in the time remaining. Minister, would you care to sum up?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I will make two brief points: first, I am glad that I have had this opportunity. That is why I wrote to the Committee and asked to come along today to clarify these issues. I think that is a good and helpful thing.

Secondly, to pick up on Declan O’Loan’s point, the Department has a range of responsibilities. If capital money were to become available, I have bids in front of me from museums, libraries, the arts, sport — a whole range of issues. All of those capital bids are there, and if money becomes available, I would have to give consideration to all the priorities and needs before settling on a final list.

However, on the very specific question of whether I have closed the door; I have not closed the door on anything. If money becomes available at some point, I assure you that I will be only too happy to see what we can do with regard to sports. I think I have already indicated that in the commitment that we have given to capital expenditure for sporting facilities across the Province in the current term of the Assembly.

The Chairperson:

OK; thank you Minister, Eamonn, and of course, Mick.