



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Stadia Development:
Irish Football Association**

16 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Dr Leslie Caul)	
Mr Patrick Nelson)	Irish Football Association
Mr Jim Shaw)	

The Chairperson:

From the Irish Football Association (IFA), I welcome its president, Mr Jim Shaw; chairman, Dr Leslie Caul; and chief executive, Mr Patrick Nelson. We are looking for an update on the IFA's current position. A number of new members have joined the Committee since you last made a presentation to us. You will have heard the conversation that we had with officials from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). I welcome any remarks that you would like to make.

Mr Jim Shaw (Irish Football Association):

Thank you and good morning. Having been seated in the Public Gallery, we heard the background and overall current position on stadia development from the representatives of DCAL

and Sport NI. It is our intention to update the Committee on our project, and, with your permission, Chairperson, I will delegate that task to the chief executive, who is best versed to give you details. We will take questions collectively afterwards.

Mr Patrick Nelson (Irish Football Association):

Thank you for the invitation to make a presentation today. We had a good meeting with the Committee in the previous mandate, in November 2010. We want to build on that relationship with the new Committee.

Mick Cory mentioned that there was an NI Executive decision on 10 March about capital funding. The road to that point was a long one, and there were many false dawns along the way, but we were absolutely delighted that the Executive agreed funding for the national stadium redevelopment project and the subregional stadia project. It was good to sit in the Public Gallery and listen to DCAL and Sport NI updating the Committee on the programme so far. We have partnered well with them over the past two years and we look forward to continuing that partnership with DCAL, Sport NI and, now, with the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) as we move further into the project over the next four years. We submitted a brief paper to the Committee as an update on where we are. I do not propose to read that; I will just pick out the highlights.

I will begin with the national stadium development. There are a couple of current key issues. First, members will be aware that we have been working on an independent review of the IFA's governance. That is progressing very well, and, in fact, the IFA board and council have agreed the recommendations that the independent governance team had given us. We are putting those recommendations to a general meeting of the association later this month, on 29 June. We are hopeful that we will make good progress and get approval for those changes.

We will also formalise soon the new arrangement between the IFA and Linfield Football Club, which is, as I am sure you know, the owner of Windsor Park. We work under a contract with Linfield at the moment, and we have made an agreement to have a new structure in future. We need to formalise that now, which is one of our next steps. As was mentioned by Mick Cory and Nick Harkness in the previous presentation, we are working to develop more detailed business plans for the operation of the new Windsor Park. Those are some of the current key issues.

We have a couple of procurement projects under way. I mentioned that we are beginning to partner with CPD as well as with Sport Northern Ireland and DCAL. We are procuring a legal team to work on our behalf, particularly in the beginning, in formalising the new contract with Linfield, and we are procuring that team via CPD processes. That is our first introduction to CPD processes, and it is a good introduction to a small part of the project because we are clearly going to do a lot of CPD work over the next four years. So, we are procuring a legal team that way, the tenders are in, we will make a decision next week and we hope to formalise the deal quite soon.

We are also procuring a project sponsor. I think that Nick mentioned briefly in his presentation that the project sponsor will be the key full-time individual who will run this project on behalf of the Irish Football Association. Mr Swann asked about consultants and whether we could save on them. We have taken the view that we will hire a full-time project sponsor who will become a staff member of the association. I will take on the role of senior responsible owner in the project structure. The project sponsor will report to me and be our full-time person responsible for making the stadium project happen.

As regards the timeline, we are at a very early stage. We are at the beginning of the CSR period. We have to create a balance between following CPD guidelines in everything that we procure and ensuring that we try to spend everything within the CSR period. Work is still to be done on that to make sure that we manage both those sides of the equation.

I will touch briefly on the subregional stadia. We were equally delighted that the Executive approved a £36 million capital allocation for the non-national stadium projects: the subregional projects that will benefit the rest of Northern Ireland. They break into several strands. We have a facilities strategy that will cover this, but there will be several subregional stadia enhancements, probably at premier league level.

I should take the opportunity, at this point, to congratulate one of the members. I will not often be able to do this, but I congratulate Mr Hilditch's team on gaining promotion to the premier league. We look forward to seeing Carrick Rangers in the Premiership this season.

There will be some subregional stadia enhancements at premier league level. There will be some intermediate level enhancements, and we may even put in a challenge from there to ensure that there is an opportunity for lots of clubs to bid in and gain from this potential funding. We are

keen to build both a national and a regional training centre, because if we can qualify for another major tournament — the association has set that as one of its major objectives — the boost that it would give to the country is tremendous. The last time we did that was 1986 and we would certainly like to do it again. We believe that the training centre will help.

Finally, we have worked a lot on safe stadia over the past few years and believe that there is still a little more work to do in that respect. Therefore, the funding that goes outside the national stadium will focus on some of those matters. As Nick said in his presentation, we will be working with Sport Northern Ireland on a strategic outline case for the Department of Finance and Personnel on what steps we need to take to turn those dreams into reality. As we know, the allocation for that funding is currently 2015-17, but we believe and it is the view of Sport Northern Ireland that, if we get the preparation work done now, those projects will be well placed to take advantage of any capital slippage that happens elsewhere. We very much hope that the Committee will support us in that approach.

That is all that we would like to say at the moment. We are open to questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much and thanks for coming here to give us the opportunity to discuss this with you.

The paper that you presented gives us a timeline with a site works handover and completion by February 2016. Will that have an impact on the current funding package that is available?

Mr Nelson:

As I indicated in my brief presentation, what we have to do is ensure that we manage the balance appropriately between CPD procedures and trying to ensure that we deliver everything within this CSR period. There is still work to be done and creativity to be gained in identifying how we can bring the build period forward.

The Chairperson:

The Department and Sport NI have put in a series of rigorous structures to manage possible risks. Do you foresee any problems?

Mr Nelson:

Not at this point. We are looking forward to the first project board meeting on 30 June and we have worked pretty well with Sport Northern Ireland and the Department so far on this. We are all committed to ensuring that the projects are successful. We are committed to the Windsor Park project, and I know that Sport Northern Ireland will work as hard on the other projects as on this one to ensure that they are all successful. We will do everything we can to ensure that they are.

The Chairperson:

I ought to have declared an interest as a block booker for Windsor Park. We will move on to questions from members.

Mrs McKeivitt:

You are all very welcome. Will you please outline the possible revenue streams, referred to in your business plan, that will make the stadium viable?

Mr Nelson:

That is a good question. One of the first things you should note is that the stadium will have 18,000 seats, instead of the current 13,500. We have managed to squeeze in extra seats to raise the capacity to 15,000, as the Chair will know, because we have put some temporary seats in for the current campaign that we are playing. Raising the capacity to 18,000 seats will create an enhanced revenue stream. Of those 18,000 seats, 1,200 seats will be premium seats, which will carry a higher price. That will be close to the equivalent of about 20,000 normal price seats. That will be the first increased revenue stream.

The second is that we intend to build some rentable space in the building for functions such as conferences, banqueting and parties. The building has no such facilities at this point, so we will be adding that in.

As a third stream, we will do a small number of non-football events at the stadium. We are very committed to international, domestic and grass-roots football in the association, and our job is to raise as much money as we can so that we can spend it appropriately on developing those three strands of the game. Whatever we raise through the stadium, which will be an important new revenue driver for us over the next few years, our intention is to reinvest it at all levels of the game.

Mrs McKeivitt:

What non-football events do you plan to hold?

Mr Nelson:

They will be appropriate to the stadium's size. They may be concerts or other sporting events. We have had very brief conversations with promoters about this, and there are not many locations in Belfast that can take more than 10,000 people for a concert. Our capacity will be closer to 20,000 for concerts. Potentially, there will be other locations that can take bigger audiences, but there will be a certain cadre — if that is the right word — of bands that attracts an audience of 20,000 as opposed to one of 50,000. I could not name one at this point, unfortunately. You can see that I am not personally into music.

Mr Shaw:

If you look at our current accounts, you will find that we have turned over £11 million in the past year. Over 40% of that, directly or indirectly, comes through the senior international football team and associated activities, such as TV. That emphasises the need to have a very strong centre in the IFA for the international game at senior level. That money permeates down through ladies' football, boys' football and the grass roots. It is a big plank of our revenue stream, and without it, we would, perhaps, not be sustainable.

Mr Hilditch:

You are not planning a super-cross, then?

Mr Shaw:

No.

Mr Ó hOisín:

The IFA development is substantially different from the other two governing bodies' developments. Do you envisage any issues in the delivery of your project? I am thinking about ownership issues and governance across the board.

Mr Nelson:

Windsor Park, as you know, is owned by Linfield Football Club. We currently operate a contract

with Linfield that was signed back in 1983 or thereabouts. We have an agreement with Linfield to change the current contract into a new agreement whereby the Irish Football Association, through a subsidiary stadium management company, will take a 40-year lease on the new stadium. We will operate and manage it for that period and, through a lease back, we will allow Linfield to play its games there.

Mr Ó hOisín:

What about the other grounds at the subregional level?

Mr Nelson:

We have a facilities strategy that we look at regularly to make sure that we understand what we think are the right needs and the right places to put other capital investments. Those decisions have not been made yet.

Mr Swann:

Thank you for your presentations. I do not know whether I have to declare an interest; I have watched Ballymena play the odd time, so I do not know if that comes into it. My interest is more in the subregional stadium programme rather than the national stadium project. Have you any criteria or locations in mind for where that work will be going on? I am concerned that, according to your project plan for the national stadia and the subregional stadia, there is an overlap in the timeline. I want to be reassured that the subregional stadia programme will not suffer at the hands of finishing off the national stadium and that the same level of dedication will be afforded to the subregional stadia.

Mr Shaw:

You are right; there are two distinct areas. There is the national stadium development, which is the main theme at this point, and the subregional development. We said earlier that we should start as early as possible in developing the strategy for the subregional programme so that we are ready to go when and if the capital funding becomes available. In my opinion there will not be any great risk of one impacting on the other time-wise, that is for sure. We said that the subregional programme would, potentially, be competitive, but we mean that in the nicest possible sense. Clubs will compete for the funding with business cases that will justify the location and the fact that they should be considered ahead of others. I do not think that the two will cross over to the extent that one will be seriously impacted on by the other.

Mr Swann:

Does the IFA have enough personnel and expertise for that?

Mr Shaw:

We will make them available if we need to.

Dr Leslie Caul (Irish Football Association):

There is an advantage in the sense that, given the way that things have happened, we will have to create the infrastructure within the IFA to deal with procurement issues. We will have gained, through the national stadium project, some experience of the CPD and funding requirements. The structure will stay in place as we go forward with the subregional facilities.

Mr Hilditch:

Patrick, did you give a timeline for the Linfield agreement?

Mr Nelson:

Which part of it, David?

Mr Hilditch:

You indicated that a legal team will be appointed soon to formalise the agreement. Have we got a timeline for that?

Mr Nelson:

I mentioned that we have tendered for that under CPD processes. That is the first time that we have used CPD processes and worked on that. The tenders are in and we will meet next Monday to score those and appoint a team. Linfield already has a firm of solicitors that will be working on its behalf. We will put the two teams together in the very near future and they will come up with the appropriate documentation to formalise the agreement that we have already created.

Mr Hilditch:

Congratulations. I know from having been a member of this Committee in the previous mandate the difficulties that the IFA faced around this time last year. You have brought the association on very well in that period to get it to a state of readiness. To me, as a lay person, the timeline given

by Sport NI is probably the worst-case scenario. That is something that the Committee should push on. The timeline is for some five years, but, to be honest, I think that that could be tightened. From the point of view of your association, if that timeline were tightened, would you be in a state of readiness? I think that the Committee invited people from the three associations to speak to us so that we could hear that.

Mr Nelson:

Yes, we absolutely are in a state of readiness on this. As I mentioned, we are in the process of hiring a full-time project sponsor who will have the appropriate expertise to run this project on our behalf. We will be taking complete part in the project board that Nick talked about in the previous presentation; in fact, I will be chairing it. We will align every resource that we need within the association to make sure that the project goes ahead successfully.

Dr Caul:

As I said to Mr Swann, we are putting in place the infrastructure and committees to deal with this. We have taken the governance issue through to an AGM, which will be held in the not too distant future. We have, to a large extent, brought ourselves and Linfield together, in the sense that the lawyers should be able to tie it up. We have cleared at least three of the issues that were put to us in the past.

Mr D Bradley:

Good morning, gentlemen. In your opening presentation you mentioned the development of subregional stadia. You referred to the premier league and the intermediate clubs and said that there would be a bidding process to secure funding. What criteria do you envisage being used to award that funding?

Mr Nelson:

We still have some work to do on that, but, in principle, our thinking is that we want to look at strategic need throughout Northern Ireland for what is, in one respect, a very large sum of money. However, given that we have 900 clubs in Northern Ireland, 500 boys clubs and 50 women's teams, it could almost seem to be a small sum. We have to make sure that we spend it very wisely and strategically. We are keen to ensure that clubs have very strong community links. We want to make sure that clubs operate not just within their community but outside it, if that makes sense. We want to see evidence that clubs are very much community organisations. We want to

try to fund revenue-earning assets with this money, some examples of which are 3G pitches and club rooms, as opposed to just stands that are used only on a Saturday afternoon.

We also want to encourage partnership contributions. Those may come from clubs, councils or other partners. As the departmental officials mentioned earlier, the association will be contributing a significant sum to the Windsor Park project. We would like to use the same principles with the rest of the capital allocation to ensure that, if clubs or other partners are going to benefit from it, they are able to contribute themselves.

Mr D Bradley:

Do you see the concept of a club as a hub, where you invest in a club and those facilities can be shared by other clubs around that hub?

Dr Caul:

It is fairly well established among our premier league clubs that it is very difficult to sustain a football club at the highest level through gate revenue. Basically, clubs now have to address other revenue streams. We help clubs to see future revenue streams and how to maximise their facilities. Some clubs will become very community-orientated in how they operate, bearing in mind that facilities need to be used throughout the week and not just on a Saturday afternoon, and that additional facilities, as Patrick said, can be provided. We should refer to the national stadium, because there is the perfect opportunity for the Windsor Park project to reinvigorate the local community there. That principle applies to all football clubs. "Hub" is a good word, but it is not just about football, although that is the main issue. There are other issues, including using facilities for their maximum benefit.

Mr D Bradley:

Will you outline what type of facility you see the national training and development centre being? Where would that and the regional training centre be located?

Mr Nelson:

It is a little too early to say where it might be located. When we develop our thoughts further, I am sure that a number of associations will want to be attached to the centre. It could potentially be attached to a club or a greenfield site with a partner such as a council. We are fairly open on that at this point. We hope that it will be a place where we can bring all of our international

teams. Members may not be aware that we send out eight international teams in the green shirt. It is not just the men's senior team; it is all the way down to under-16s. We start with under-17s women as well and go up to senior women, so there are eight teams that we bring together.

We also have lots of development squads from the 12-15 age range, where we are preparing the next set of internationals. We would like to create a training centre that gives them the best facilities, the best sports science and the best diet and nutrition advice so that not only do they become good footballers for Northern Ireland but, when they head across the water as young players to make their career in the professional game, as they often do, they have a better-than-even chance of making it there. That is the idea. It requires some significant capital funding that we have never had the opportunity to access before. We are delighted that we have the opportunity now and we look forward to making the best of it.

Mr D Bradley:

Would the regional training centre be a separate facility or would they both be under the one roof?

Mr Nelson:

The idea that we have at the moment is that the regional training facility would be a separate facility because a lot of things tend to be Belfast-based. If possible, we would like to put something in a location outside Belfast.

We are quite keen to make the regional training facility accessible to what we call intermediate and junior football. We want to increase the standard of domestic football in Northern Ireland, not just at the senior level but at intermediate and junior level. If we can put together a regional training facility that is accessible to some of the smaller clubs and gives them better facilities, better advice and better nutrition, etc, that will improve the domestic game that we all go and watch on a Saturday afternoon.

Mr D Bradley:

Is there not a danger of duplicating facilities?

Mr Nelson:

Possibly, but there is an opportunity to do both. I do not think that they would be precisely on the

same scale.

The Chairperson:

The Olympia leisure centre, owned by Belfast City Council, is one of Windsor Park's neighbours. What discussions have you had with the council about the possible regeneration of that site and whether it can do anything in partnership with you?

Mr Nelson:

We have had initial conversations with the city council and we are keen to try to put together a joint approach for the whole site, from Boucher Road to the railway. It is up to the city council how much time, effort and resource the council can put into the front end of Boucher Road, including the Olympia leisure centre. We would be happy for it to work with us on redeveloping that area. We have had a couple of meetings with the Greater Village Regeneration Trust, which speaks for many of the residents of the area. We want to try to make sure that its members are as fully briefed on the project as they can be because we do not want to leave anybody behind on this.

Dr Caul:

To quickly add to what Patrick said, there is the greater footprint of the Windsor Park site from Boucher Road to the railway and there is the development of Windsor Park itself. Although our priority is Windsor Park itself, we have to keep both in mind.

The Chairperson:

Parking has previously been an issue, as residents of the area will be aware. With the increase in the number of spectators, is there any way in which that can be alleviated?

Dr Caul:

We have spoken to and will continue to speak to Translink about railway access to the Adelaide site. Some of the old railway line infrastructure that exists around the stadium would be extremely useful in that respect.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your time. The Committee will maintain a keen interest in the development and keep in touch.