



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Stadia Development

11 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr P J Bradley
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Nelson McCausland) The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Edgar Jardine) Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Professor Eamonn McCartan) Sport NI

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I formally welcome the Minister, Mr Nelson McCausland. Thank you for coming along, Minister. The Minister is joined by Edgar Jardine, deputy secretary in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and Eamonn McCartan, chief executive of Sport NI. I ask the Minister to brief the Committee.

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

Thank you, Chairman. Chairman and members, I am grateful for this opportunity to brief the Committee on the progress that has been made on regional stadium developments. I am accompanied by Edgar Jardine, deputy secretary in DCAL and Eamonn McCartan, chief executive of Sport NI.

The Committee will be aware that there is a strategic imperative to address the long-standing deficit in the standard of regional stadiums in Northern Ireland. Members will also be aware of my predecessor's decision not to proceed with the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze as the solution to the stadium needs of the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Ulster council of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union.

That decision set in motion a process of examining alternative regional stadium provision, whereby each governing body of the sports involved was asked to consider its strategic requirements and submit its preferred options to my Department. Furthermore, the statement from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 8 April 2009, which referred to the fact that the Maze/Long Kesh master plan would not proceed in its original form, acknowledged the process of seeking alternative solutions to the governing bodies' stadium needs. Importantly, that statement also affirmed the Executive's commitment to meeting the strategic needs of the three sporting bodies.

I will now turn to the outcome of the governing bodies' deliberations. Although, as part of the options process, the governing bodies explored the potential for multi-sports stadiums and ways in which they could work together, the proposals that they eventually put forward clearly show that they saw the development of three separate stadiums tailored to their individual sporting requirements as the most practical and effective way of moving forward.

Ulster Rugby came to us with a proposal to develop the grounds at Ravenhill Park to accommodate some 14,000 to 15,000 spectators, on the basis that there is a need to ensure the long-term security of rugby at both professional and amateur level. Ulster Rugby views growing the game in all its aspects as being essential, with immediate emphasis on increasing the regular average number of people attending Ulster home games. It is considered that the redevelopment of Ravenhill Park in that way will help to achieve that. Ravenhill is also home to around 30 club

and schools finals, and there is a continuing and increasing need to satisfy the grass-roots end of the game in the long term. In addition, there is a fundamental need to develop rugby's coaching and management teams to take the game to consistent and higher levels of success.

The GAA's option was to redevelop Casement Park, essentially replacing the existing stadium with one capable of seating around 42,000 spectators. Strategically, the GAA's aim is to have one major stadium in each Province. The GAA views a major stadium as one that has a capacity of between 40,000 to 60,000, with at least two thirds of it seated and a minimum of 35% of the seats covered. The GAA's strategic plan for 2006-2010 seeks to have such a stadium in place in Ulster by 2015. It is anticipated that the proposal will address the physical inadequacies around health and safety requirements, for example, together with the need to accommodate major fixtures. It would also contribute to the quality of coaching and other facilities and provide opportunities to generate revenue for reinvestment into sport development, thus enhancing Gaelic games provision in Northern Ireland. In addition, the stadium could be used for other, non-GAA events, such as concerts, which would consequently add to the sustainability of the stadium and the sport as a whole.

The IFA initially considered two options: namely, the partial rebuild and refurbishment of Windsor Park to an all-seated capacity of 22,000; or a newbuild 20,000-seater stadium to be shared with Glentoran Football Club in east Belfast on the existing Blanchflower/Patton site. However, in September 2009, the IFA advised that it had decided to commit in principle to the redevelopment of Windsor Park to accommodate 20,000 seated spectators as its strategic long-term preference. Clearly, if international football is to continue to be played in Northern Ireland, there needs to be a venue that is capable of hosting major football fixtures in a safe, spectator-friendly environment with the range of facilities that are normally expected of current-day stadiums. In the past, that has been a critical constraint on the IFA's operational sustainability and its capacity to support the grass-roots development that is necessary to maintain and enhance future development.

It is worth pointing out that the governing bodies' proposals resonate with the broader strategic context within which government is currently working. For example, investment in infrastructure, including investment in sports facilities, is one of the strategic priorities set out in the Programme for Government 2008-2011. That priority is also reflected in the investment strategy for 2008-2018, which commits government to:

“invest in a range of new and improved sports facilities to a standard comparable with other similar UK regions, providing world class facilities and places for playing and watching sport that are accessible to all.”

Furthermore, ‘Sport Matters: the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019’, which was recently approved by the Executive, has an objective to, by 2013 and subject to the normal approval processes, have addressed the need for modern, operationally viable and commercially sustainable sports stadia in Northern Ireland.

On 25 June 2009, my predecessor, having regard for that strategic fit, provided Executive colleagues with a broad outline of the options that were presented by the sports bodies, together with proposals to appraise those options and subsequently refer back to the Executive. At that time, the progress that had been made and the engagement that had taken place with the governing bodies up to that point was noted, and, helpfully, the Executive also agreed the process to be adopted in moving the issue forward. That included the preparation of a strategic outline case and the business case to test the options that the governing bodies submitted. Significantly, the Executive also took note of the fact that any proposals to take forward regional stadia development would be done within an indicative overall funding package of around £110 million, as anticipated in ISNI 2, subject to normal budgetary processes.

From the outset of the process and to provide an all-important focus for taking forward regional stadium development, my Department established an oversight steering group. That group comprises senior representatives of the Department, Sport NI, the Strategic Investment Board and, latterly, the Department for Social Development and Belfast City Council. It has been closely directing the various strands of activity agreed by the Executive Committee. In addition to the initial consideration of the governing bodies’ options, the group prepared a strategic outline case and secured approval of that from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), thus enabling work to commence on commissioning consultants to undertake a comprehensive business case on all the options.

I also considered it important to meet the governing bodies collectively to ensure that a coherent and consistent message on the agreed framework for progressing regional stadium provision was transparently outlined to them and that they were fully aware of the process and how they would be involved. I particularly wanted to emphasise to them that the effectiveness and efficiency of the consultation would largely and critically depend on their positive interaction and engagement with the consultants as they developed the outline business case on the sports

bodies' options.

Crucially, I also wanted to impress on the governing bodies the fact that the capital cost of stadium provision would not be fully met by government and that there was an expectation that the sports bodies themselves would contribute to the overall funding package, although I recognise that their capacity to do so may be different. Moreover, I wanted to let them know that government would not be supporting the ongoing running costs of the respective stadiums. I made it absolutely clear to them that it would be necessary to fully demonstrate that sufficient income could be generated from the individual stadiums to meet such costs and provide for a sinking fund to meet ongoing maintenance requirements.

Sport NI subsequently undertook an exercise in conjunction with the Central Procurement Directorate to secure the services of consultants. In early October 2009, six tenders were examined by an evaluation panel, comprising representatives from DCAL, Sport NI and the Strategic Investment Board, and the contract to carry out the economic appraisal of the sports options was awarded to a FGS McClure Watters-led consortium.

In examining the options, the consultants were tasked with producing an outline business case to green book standard that looks at the strategic context and how the provision of fit-for-purpose stadia can contribute to the aims of the sporting bodies and wider strategies, such as the strategy for sport and physical recreation and the DCAL and Sport NI corporate plans. More specifically, they are looking at, among other things, value for money, operational viability, sustainability and affordability. They will also examine the need for public expenditure, assess deficiencies in the present standard of regional stadium provision, analyse historic demand and usage and develop usage forecasts.

The consultants will produce a range of options for each sport, which will include retaining stadium provision at its present level; a do-minimum option; and the governing bodies' proposals, including variations around those proposals, such as scale and components. For each shortlisted option, they will identify, quantify and value the economic costs and benefits and the wider economic benefits that might accrue from investment in the stadiums.

In addition, the associated risks and measures to mitigate the effects of those risks will be identified and assessed, as will the non-monetary costs and benefits. At the moment, the

consultants continue to develop their recommendations. Nevertheless, there are emerging conclusions, and some are more clear-cut than others. I will take a closer look at those conclusions, from the least complex through to the most challenging. Perhaps the most straightforward is the rugby proposal to develop Ravenhill Park. The view that the consultants are coming to reflects the option that was presented by Ulster Rugby last year, through which it saw the future of rugby in Northern Ireland as being best supported by redevelopment at Ravenhill to accommodate 15,000 spectators.

Members will also be aware that, by way of illustrating Ulster Rugby's commitment to Ravenhill, the first phase of the redevelopment has now been completed, and a new state-of-the-art grandstand costing in the region of £4.5 million was officially opened in October 2009. The emerging conclusion is that the redevelopment of Ravenhill should continue and a further three phases should be carried out. That would bring the total capacity at the ground to around the aspirational figure of 15,000.

The consultants have been examining a number of variants around the GAA's preferred option of the redevelopment of Casement Park, which, as I previously mentioned, revolves around the GAA's strategic need for a major stadium that has a capacity of between 40,000 to 60,000, with at least two thirds seated and a minimum of 35% of the seats covered.

As members will know from the briefing paper provided, the variants being assessed by the GAA centre on the capacity of the ground, the extent to which seating should be provided and how much of the spectator area should be covered. Those variants assume the demolition of the existing stadium and a completely new stadium being erected.

I will now turn to the IFA's preferred option of redeveloping Windsor Park to meet its long-term strategic needs for football. The governing body has it in mind to upgrade Windsor Park and transform it into an all-seated stadium capable of accommodating up to 20,000 spectators. Again, the consultants are considering a range of options that might be adopted, relating to the size of the stadium and the balance of newbuild as opposed to refurbishment. One option that might be considered is the redevelopment of the east and south stands, together with extensive refurbishment of the north and west stands. The consultants have also looked at a further variation in the Windsor Park option, which might incorporate the neighbouring Olympia Leisure Centre facilities into the plan as a means of enhancing access to the stadium via the Boucher

Road.

One other factor affecting stadium provision for football, which the consultants are examining, is the proposal by Eastonville Traders to develop a 20,000-seater stadium in east Belfast on the site of the Danny Blanchflower Stadium, for use by football and rugby. Despite the fact that none of the governing bodies indicated that the proposal would be a preferred option, it was, nevertheless, thought to be useful to include an analysis of the proposal alongside the governing bodies' preferred options. We will need to take account of the outcome of that analysis in further considering the way forward.

Members will have gathered the complexity of the stadiums issue. Meeting the diverse stadium needs of the three sports and ensuring sustainability of their three separate stadiums was never going to be straightforward, but we have made considerable inroads into resolving a long-standing deficiency in regional stadium provision. As I indicated, the consultants still have some work to do to finalise the outline business case.

When my Department and Sport NI have a final report, we will wish to satisfy ourselves that the viability all of the recommended options has been closely and properly examined. That includes ensuring that the governing bodies have an ongoing level of reinvestment in their respective stadiums through a sinking fund, to cover essential maintenance and investment in their grass-roots activities.

Once satisfied in the value-for-money assessments and the other aspects of the preferred options, we will formally seek DFP approval of the outline business case. The Committee will be aware that the final decisions on budgetary approval will then be taken by the Executive.

I hope that I have given members some insight into where we currently stand on regional stadium development. I welcome any comment from the Committee that might assist and inform our approach to the remaining work and in the process to secure Executive approval. Thank you, Chairman. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Minister.

Mr McCarthy:

I also thank the Minister and his colleagues, but, at the outset, I must express disappointment that despite the time, energy and money that have been invested, the ideal of a multi-sports stadium for Northern Ireland has floundered. The shared future for sport, to which we all say that we are committed, is now gone. That is surely a massive missed opportunity. It seems that we continue to support duplication, separation and wasted funding.

When will the consultants complete their work on identifying the preferred options for each of the stadia? Has the Minister any idea when the outcome of that work will be available?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I will deal with the question in two parts; the first relates to shared future and the second to timescale.

The potential for the sports sharing their facilities was examined in the business case, because we should not confine ourselves to thinking that a shared future simply equates to a single stadium. There will be opportunities to share the stadiums that will be built. Football and rugby may share, and, as we develop a shared future, there may also be opportunities for the GAA to share its premises with other sports, although that would require changes in the rules.

However, the potential for sharing facilities was examined in the business case. The three sports' respective needs and regulations would be a limiting factor. Attendances of 15,000 to more than 40,000 for different sports with different needs must be borne in mind. Nevertheless, there may be some strategic opportunity for rugby to use the football stadium on occasions when the availability of a ground with greater crowd capacity than Ravenhill would be desirable. The size of Ravenhill meets normal needs, but there may be occasions on which a larger stadium is needed. Hence, an arrangement — subject to the agreement of all concerned — would be desirable and financially advantageous to Ravenhill and Windsor Park.

The Chairperson:

What proportion of the overall capital must the governing bodies of the three sports commit to their individual schemes?

The Minister of Arts, Culture and Leisure:

That is part of the process of assessing the viability and other aspects of the projects. The percentage commitment will vary, depending on the capacity of the individual sport and its financial position. Although options are emerging from the consultants' report, it is too early to be definitive about how much financial intervention will be required from government and how much will come from the sports themselves. It suffices to say that there will need to be an order of scale. If one considers, for example, rugby's requirement for a 15,000-seater stadium compared with the much greater capacity required in a GAA stadium, the amount of money in real terms will be different. The percentage of funding is something that is still being considered.

Mr D Bradley:

Good morning, Minister. I have three questions. First, is there an indicative budget for each of the three stadia? Secondly, can you give us an idea of what criteria will be used in the allocation of budgets? Thirdly, what weight will be placed on the potential of facilities to generate income other than from gate receipts?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I will take the first question. Perhaps Edgar or Eamonn can follow up with the details.

The figure that I mentioned in the presentation was the overall indicative budget of £110 million. How that will eventually be apportioned across the sports will depend on the outcome of the ongoing work by the consultants. All that I can say at this stage is that the sports will be treated fairly. I emphasised that point at the outset, when I met representatives from the three sports in July 2009. We brought them together because I wanted all of them to get exactly the same message and to be sure that they are being treated fairly and equitably. I think that they appreciated that. That is the way that we intend to follow it through.

As regards detail about criteria and so on, I will pass to the experts.

Mr Edgar Jardine (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

With regard to your third question about other sources of income, clearly, the stadia will be capable of staging other events, such as concerts. However, as regards the economic appraisal, we must be careful that that does not simply displace activity from other parts of Northern Ireland. Clearly, the stadia themselves will, potentially, compete against each other. Therefore,

we see potential and would encourage the stadia, purely for economic reasons, to increase the scope of their activity and to find additional funding streams.

Professor Eamonn McCartan (Sport NI):

As regards indicative costs, the outline business case has yet to be finished. It will be finished in the not-too-distant future. We will then have an idea of actual costs. We will have to move to the issue of indicative costs. We are working to an envelope of up to £110 million.

Mr D Bradley:

OK. Thank you.

Mr K Robinson:

Thanks, Minister and gentlemen, for coming along this morning. I must say that I am glad that, at last, it seems as though the logjam concerning stadia is beginning to ease. I welcome the indication of progress that you have made on those issues.

I want to ask you a few specific questions. Are the stadia being considered as three separate projects, or as one project? Is progress on one dependent on progress or lack thereof on either of the other two? Are they going forward as a package and to a timescale? Has the £110 million that you mentioned been ring-fenced? Is it available to be spent? I am thinking not just of the benefits of new or redeveloped stadia, but the job potential that they bring, particularly in the current economic downturn.

You mentioned finance streams other than gate receipts to sustain stadia in the long term. Was that taken into account when you looked at the business case for the Blanchflower Stadium site proposal, for example? Was it considered with regard to the proposals for Windsor Park, the GAA and rugby? Minister, I take it that you are suggesting that a capacity of 14,000 or 15,000 will do as the norm for Ravenhill, but if Ulster Rugby should attract a Heineken cup game or something of that level, is the thinking to transfer such an event to an enhanced Windsor Park or to a new stadium on the Blanchflower site?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

That is the thinking. There is the opportunity to have the sharing across sports that Kieran mentioned earlier. That makes sense; it contributes towards the shared-future vision.

How the stadia development is being considered is a question of semantics, to some extent. I see it as one project with three strands. That is how I personally look at it. Obviously, the strands are interconnected. If there is an indicative overall budget and a package of money, how that breaks down is that if one gets more, another will get less. Therefore, we have to get to the stage at which we have a sense of where each of them is going, to ensure that they all fit into that package. They are interconnected and interrelated. I see them as three strands of one project.

I will pass over to Mr Jardine to answer the other points.

Mr Jardine:

That is right. As the Minister said, due the complexity and scale of the three projects, it is unlikely that the choreography of the business case will translate on a one-for-one basis right through to the end. For example, Ravenhill Park has probably got planning permission for a couple of stands and that could move reasonably quickly, whereas Casement Park will involve a huge construction job. All the stadium business cases are looking at potential revenue streams; for example, corporate events, concerts and so on. Those additional streams will be looked at in all three business cases.

Mr K Robinson:

I have a technical question that Eamonn may be able to answer. The Minister mentioned the all-seated possibilities for Ravenhill and the new football stadium. There seems to be a percentage of seating at Casement Park. Is there no requirement under health and safety for those stadia to be all seated, or is it the choice of the particular sports?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Ravenhill will not be all seated.

Mr K Robinson:

Sorry; I thought that it was going to be all seated. So there is no health and safety requirement on the sports to have all the spectators seated?

Professor McCartan:

To the best of my knowledge, there is no health and safety legislation that requires stadia to be all

seated. Certain sports set criteria for themselves; for example, the Premier League requires its grounds to be all seated. Therefore, you will find that there will be a mix and match and that there will be a mixture of seated and standing, and you will find that particularly in the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Mr K Robinson:

As far as we know, will that continue?

Professor McCartan:

Yes, as far as we know currently.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

With regard to your point about other sources of income, we want the sports to look not only at what they have currently, but to be visionary about the situation. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and it has to cater for the next 25, 30 or 40 years. Therefore, the governing bodies should be looking at visionary ways of generating other sources of income. We visited the three grounds and we know that they are thinking in those terms, although some more than others.

Mr McCartney:

At the beginning of the process, was any provision made for a bid beyond the three sporting codes; for example, for another public body to come in with a stadium development plan?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The three governing bodies that I mentioned are those that were involved in the initial process of the consideration of a national stadium. We asked them for their preferred option, and that was how the process was taken forward.

Mr McCartney:

I was wondering about a regional stadium development. In essence, we will end up with three stadiums in one city. With regard to the Programme for Government —

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I see where you are coming from. It was left to each of the sports bodies to make their decision, and that was what they came back with. We did not influence them in any way, nor did we try to

press them in any direction. We simply asked for their choice of what would be the best proposal for Northern Ireland, and that is what they came back with.

Mr McCartney:

There was no thinking in the Department or the Executive that that was an opportunity to show that —

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

At that stage last year, the Executive decided to go down the road of leaving it to the three sports bodies to come forward with their options.

Mr Jardine:

The initial, fairly extensive, site-selection exercise did not identify, with the exception of the Maze, a place where we could locate a stadium that would be acceptable to all three sports.

Mr McCartney:

I understand the process around the idea of the single site. However, with regard to regional stadium development and the Programme for Government aim to address regional imbalance, an opportunity was missed, in my opinion. We could have ended up with a smaller site and a public body possibly putting forward a bid to have a regional stadium outside the three main sporting codes and outside Belfast.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I am not entirely clear on your vision.

The Chairperson:

Raymond represents a north-west constituency.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Could anybody forget it?

Mr McCartney:

We are talking about regional stadium development. The Programme for Government has a strand aimed at ending regional imbalance. Anyone looking at this issue for the first time could

say that there is an opportunity to put something beyond the demands that were made. I support the terms of the three sporting codes. However, the vision has to come from beyond those sporting codes.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Each of the sports bodies has come to the conclusion that this best suits their needs. We asked them to find the best resolution for their needs and that was their conclusion.

Professor McCartan:

The needs of the three major governing bodies are multi-tiered. In the first instance the three governing bodies need a major stadium to help promote excellence in competition in their sport. The GAA has opted for Casement Park; rugby has opted for Ravenhill Park; and the IFA has opted for Windsor Park. Nonetheless, a second tier is required to provide for local or more domestic competition, and I dare say that a third tier may be required to look at community sport. The facility strategy that Sport Northern Ireland has developed has identified that tiered provision. However, like everything, we must address the primary, prioritised needs of the three governing bodies. It is they who have identified their key priorities. Also, in consultation with us, they have identified other priorities, but we are dealing with these at the moment.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I assure you that, in relation to some other funding streams, areas west of the Bann have done exceptionally well.

Mr McCartney:

I have not mentioned west of the Bann.

Mr K Robinson:

He meant west of the Foyle, Minister.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I am sorry; west of the Foyle.

Mr McCartney:

I stress that so that Hansard will record it.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Sorry; I did not go far enough west.

Mr McCartney:

Please take careful note: I mentioned no specific area. My basic contention was that it is our role to bring vision to such projects. I was supportive of a stadium at the Long Kesh site, and Mr Jardine knows that. I am supportive of what you are doing, Minister, with respect to the three stadiums. My question is whether there was a missed opportunity. Could we have addressed the Programme for Government commitment to tackle regional imbalance? Whether we like it or not, people will say that this amounts to three stadiums in one city and that the North is bigger than a single city. That is my point. I am not saying to what part of the North a stadium should go. Of course, I would make my arguments that there are other parts of the North that I would support —

The Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I would be disappointed if you did not make your arguments. What we are looking at here is a facility strategy, of which this is a part. The overall package will give an end result that will be good for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney:

What is the process now? Do you have to seek the money? Is final approval an Executive decision, or does it lie with your Department?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The £110 million is an indicative figure. I cannot remember the exact words that I used in the presentation about how that went through the Executive. Basically, every party was committed to this and the figure was indicative. The undertaking by the Executive was that this would happen.

Lord Browne:

Thank you, Minister, for your presentation. There have been media reports that discussions are ongoing between the Irish Football Association and Linfield Football Club regarding the refurbishment and increased capacity of Windsor Park. Can you inform the Committee if, and to what extent, your officials, advisers and Department have been involved in those discussions?

I am sure that you are aware that there are contractual issues with Linfield and the Windsor Park site. Can you update the Committee as to the current situation as to the 89-year contract between the IFA and Linfield Football Club at the Windsor Park site? I ask that because there are 11 other clubs in that division and sometimes they feel that Linfield gets an unfair advantage. I would like to think that that would not be an issue under the new arrangements.

Minister, you said that the Eastonville Traders's proposal for the Danny Blanchflower Stadium site has not gone out of the equation. I would like to think that that is still under consideration, perhaps as an additional or junior stadium.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

On the basis of a major restructuring making Windsor Park a viable alternative, I and my predecessors have made it clear in discussions with the IFA and Linfield Football Club that a renegotiated contract that satisfies all concerned parties is absolutely essential. That is primarily a matter for the IFA and Linfield Football Club to determine. I am aware that the IFA and Linfield Football Club have been in discussion about the agreement and departmental officials are assisting them in finding an equitable solution. It is clear that remaining with the existing contract would seriously impinge on the ongoing sustainability of the stadium, which is an important consideration in addition to the other one that you have raised. Those discussions are ongoing.

Lord Browne:

Is the Danny Blanchflower Stadium option still under consideration?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

As I said, that site is being looked at in the context of the consultant's report.

Mr PJ Bradley:

I welcome the Minister and his officials. We are talking about the enlargement of Casement Park, but I was just thinking that with my own County Down on the way back up we will also require an improvement to be made to our ground, given the crowds that follow the team.

The Chairperson:

That is a good point.

Mr PJ Bradley:

I am not ignoring Tyrone, although they are on the way down.

I imagine that all three sporting bodies have their own feasibility studies in respect of their own requirements. How easy will it be for the consultants to challenge, add to or take from those studies?

The viability of the proposals must be assessed, including the viability of the stadium to be sustainable, which will require a great deal of engagement with the respective organisations. Those bodies are fairly professional and know what their requirements are. I fear that consultants who may not be aware of those requirements could delay the whole process.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

You are correct that the sports bodies have their own ideas of what they want to happen. Some of those ideas are more developed than others; it varies from sport to sport as to how far advanced those visions are. There are extensive challenges, and it will not simply be a case of accepting something.

The consultants are very thoroughly examining each of the three processes, and are considering whether the figures that are being proposed are credible and realistic. They are also considering the long-term economic future of the stadium development, its financial viability, whether it will meet the needs of the sports and its future prospects for increasing the numbers of spectators.

It is an extremely thorough process, involving ongoing conversations between the sports bodies and the consultants. The consultants will be challenging, advising and guiding the sports bodies and asking the right questions. That process will take time, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we must get it absolutely right.

Professor McCartan:

I hope that the consultants would not hold the process back. When we come to the table there are five or six levels of expertise providing input, including representatives of the Department, Sport NI, the SIB and the governing bodies. It is our collective aspiration to create a stadium that is fit for purpose for the development of the sports and for the governing bodies. The funding will contribute to the development of the governing bodies at high-competition and grass-roots levels. I do not see how or where the consultants would hold that process back. Furthermore, our tried and tested public procurement process, the green book and all the other elements in the process will make sure that it is fair, objective and transparent and that it will, as the Minister said, contribute to the long-term sustainability of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Mr McNarry:

I also welcome the Minister and officials. The briefing that the Department has submitted to the Committee states that:

“The Department, when satisfied on value for money assessments of the preferred options, will formally seek DFP approval of the Outline Business Case. “

And that:

“Final decisions on budgetary approval will be taken by the Executive.”

Are you able to tell the sporting fans and spectators when you are actually going to give a date for this work to start?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

As soon as the consultants have completed their process.

Mr McNarry:

That is not what I asked. Can you give me a date?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I indicated in my presentation that that work is very well advanced. It has not yet been completed, but it will be completed as soon as possible. I cannot give a date today. Any person who has looked at the complexity of the process would realise that that would be unrealistic. All that I can do is say that the work is well advanced. We want to make sure that we get it right. I made the point in my answer to the previous question that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If it takes an extra week or two, or an extra month, I do not have a problem with that. I just want

to get it right.

Mr McNarry:

I would like you to get it right. However, you will appreciate that I am asking that question because the fans and spectators are anxious to have something to look forward to. Whatever happened with the Maze project, the fans lost out. Whatever is going on with Windsor Park, the fans are losing out. Whatever is happening with rugby and GAA, the fans are losing out. Otherwise, we would have no need for the proposals. The fans are asking me when the work will be done. Will it be next year, or the year after that? You are governed by budgets, and this Assembly is due to end next year. Can you give a date that falls within the lifetime of this Assembly?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I assure you that I have had a number of meetings with Northern Ireland football supporters, who are well organised and extremely vocal. I have met individual supporters clubs privately, and the Department had a formal meeting with the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs. That organisation was extremely satisfied with the report that we gave to it. It was pleased with the progress that was being made and it was looking forward in anticipation of a new stadium that would take Northern Ireland football to even greater heights in the future.

Mr McNarry:

I am sure that the supporters would say that, but —

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

They did, absolutely.

Mr McNarry:

If you are telling me that the supporters did not ask for a date, they did not ask for a date. What I am hearing from them is that they would like to know a date.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

When I met the supporters, they were quite content that we had mapped out the timescale and that it would be done as soon as possible. I do not anticipate that the consultants will take that much longer, but I do not want to tie myself down to saying that that will be done in a week or a month.

As I said, it is dependent on the engagement between the sporting bodies and the consultants. It is not entirely down to the consultants. It is also down to the sporting bodies providing the right information and getting their own visions and structures in place.

Mr McNarry:

I understand that. We know how much it cost for consultants on the scrapped Maze project. How much are these consultants costing?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

You will be pleased to know that the cost is around £20,000.

Professor McCartan:

My apologies. To which consultants are you referring? The consultants who are working on this are costing around £70,000.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Sorry, the cost is £70,000.

Mr McNarry:

Thank you, Eamonn. When the whole lot is packaged together, how much are the consultants costing to get to the end product, which is a concept that people have been talking about in recent weeks?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The consultants are costing £70,000 precisely.

Mr McNarry:

So that is the deal for them, and they will not cost much more than that.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Yes, and I am sure that they are good value at that price.

Mr McNarry:

That remains to be seen. From the cash that was set aside in the budget for the Maze project, how

much is left in your kitty for regional stadium development?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The Executive agreed an indicative budget of £110 million.

Mr McNarry:

Have the Executive absorbed the money that had been granted, which was left from the bids with which the Department did not proceed?

Mr Jardine:

A significant amount of money was surrendered to DFP. Some of it was used for projects in other sectors and will be brought back from those sectors in the next CSR period.

Mr McNarry:

The Department still has a budgetary line under the heading of stadia development, and it includes a considerable amount of money. Where is that being used, what is it for, and is it additional to or part of that indicative figure of £110 million?

Mr Jardine:

We have surrendered a significant amount of the money that we have not used, and we will bid back for that in the next CSR. As the Minister said, the next CSR is a new ball game; all bids will be considered, including the one for a stadium project, which the Executive are making a priority.

Mr McNarry:

Correct me if I am wrong, but until now I thought that the Committee was considering, and the consultants were looking at, proposals from the three sporting bodies as alternatives to the Maze project, which did not go ahead. We were told that that work was ongoing and was taking some time. At what stage did the consultants say that they would like to include consideration of an east Belfast development? None of the three sporting bodies considered that or put it in their proposals. Who introduced the idea of an east Belfast development? Was it the consultants?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The IFA was initially looking at two options. We pressed the IFA to give its preferred option, and it put forward Windsor Park. The east Belfast proposal became the IFA's second option, and

it is being looked at, but the focus is very much on Windsor Park.

Mr McNarry:

I do not understand. Did Ulster Rugby or the GAA have second options?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

That proposal is not an issue to do with the consultants or the Department; it was simply the fact that it was the IFA —

Mr McNarry:

Yes, but the IFA did not come forward with that proposal; it put forward its preferred option. How did another option get in?

Mr Jardine:

Initially, the IFA had two options. When we go to DFP —

Mr McNarry:

Sorry to interrupt you, Edgar. We were told that the delay in papers being sent to the Committee occurred because the IFA had not put its paper together yet and had been given a dispensation. The other two sporting bodies had compiled their papers. We were told that each sporting body was asked to give a preferred option. We were told that the IFA's preferred option was Windsor Park, which is what the media and the press reported. How on earth has another option, which the Committee has never discussed or had put to it in any form, been offloaded onto us? Why are we looking at that option? What is the benefit of it?

Mr Jardine:

We are looking at it because when we take a final business case to the Department of Finance and Personnel, it will legitimately ask not only what the preferred options were for the sporting bodies, but whether the Department has considered all possible solutions to the question of stadium provision. It is incumbent on all of us to look at variants of the options that the three sporting bodies put forward; we are not taking the options suggested by the three sporting bodies as the only ways to resolve the issue. We are imposing other variants to look at value for money, including scale.

Mr McNarry:

I accept that and can see the merit of doing that. However, the only option that I can see in black and white is an option for soccer. Are you exploring variants for the GAA and Ulster Rugby?

Mr Jardine:

The Eastonville Traders's proposal is not just a soccer option; it would address the needs of rugby. The business case will look at the income and expenditure —

Mr McNarry:

Let me get this straight. Are you saying that the Eastonville Traders's option, which you say addresses the needs of rugby, is presented as having the full support of Ulster Rugby?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

No; the sporting bodies put forward their preferred options. The preferred option for Ulster Rugby was Ravenhill. However, the Eastonville Traders's option had been talked about by the IFA, and it was kept in for the purpose of comparison.

There are various possible permutations of the Windsor Park, Ravenhill and Casement Park options. For example, on one occasion I looked at three different suggestions for how to configure Windsor Park. Ideas were put forward at an earlier stage regarding Casement Park that were dropped, and others came forward instead. Although none of the governing bodies indicated that the proposal for the Blanchflower Stadium site would be the preferred option, the consultants are simply examining the proposal in their consideration of potential options. That proposal is being included in discussions with the promoters, but each of the sporting bodies is very clear as to its preferred option.

Mr McNarry:

I am not 100% sure that it is not being implied that there might be a problem with Windsor Park and the Department is protecting its back. If that is what the Department is saying, I think that you should be a bit more up front and open. If the Department has an indicative budget of £110 million to work with, which I do not think that it will end up getting, and the bids are in excess of that, someone will have to do a little bit of juggling. I hope that, sooner or later, we will see how the Department is going to juggle that money.

The Chairperson:

Is there any anticipated spend in 2010-11 on the capital side for any of the three stadia, and if so, how much?

Mr Jardine:

There will not be any significant spend. It will probably be 2011-12 before we get into a situation of serious spend.

The Chairperson:

Minister, would you like to conclude by picking up on some of the points that David raised?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The sports bodies are reasonably content with the way that the process is going. From what I have heard in conversation, supporters are also content. We are content that the work is moving ahead as quickly as possible, and I think that it is a good news story for Northern Ireland. We hear enough bad news stories, and some people have the capacity to turn a good news story into a bad news story, as we know only too well. We flag up the fact today that it is a good news story, the work is ongoing, and we will see three good stadiums in place for Northern Ireland in due course.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for coming Minister, Eamonn and Edgar.