

From: John Walker

To: Don Allan
Ronnie Jordan
Eamonn McCartan
Ronnie Spence

12 June 1998

1. This Minute records the agreed outcomes of our meeting this morning:-

(a) Shared Objective:

To reach a joint decision, as soon as possible, on whether a viable proposal exists to build an international sports stadium in Belfast, which is capable of hosting a Premier League football team;

(b) Interest Groups:

- (i) Private sector consortium, ie, Graham Axford and his Associates and advisers
- (ii) Local supporters/prospective Trust members
- (iii) Government, ie, DOE, DENI, SCNI, Belfast City Council

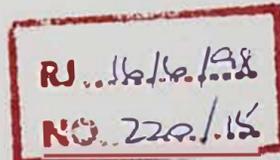
(c) Modus Operandi:

- (i) Private sector consortium to take lead in finalising a firm proposal
- (ii) DENI, SCNI, DOE, as appropriate, to facilitate consortium in this task
- (iii) DENI, SCNI, DOE to consider jointly any emerging proposals, in advance of any discussion with other interest groups.

2. Ronnie Spence indicated that he would be updating Lord Dubs on recent developments. This will be done in consultation with DENI and will be copied to other Ministers.

John Walker

John Walker



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COPY
Original (itself a
photocopy) given
to Ronnie Cox
on 25/6.

J

FAX: 01232 526475

TEL: 01232 526313

FAX COVER SHEET

DATE: 11.6.98

TIME: 11.25

TO: JACK PALMER

FAX:

FROM: JOHN WALKER

FAX/TEL:

RE: Draft from RBS (PS had Dubs.

CC:

Number of pages including cover sheet: 5

Message:

Obtained from Jack Palmer on 24/6

He retrieved it from Tim Floyd who had it
at home while on holiday.

It is a photocopy of the original.

Jack says he responded verbally to John Walker
on 11th June & then gave the fax to
Tim to put away.

Nearly 2 weeks later he still had it (at home).

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/DRAFT

FROM: RONNIE SPENCE

cc

TO: PS/LORD DUBS

DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SPORTS FACILITY IN BELFAST

1. This minute provides an update for Lord Dubs on progress towards the development of an international standard sports stadium, on a site on the north foreshore in Belfast and the prospects of attracting an English Premier League club, ie, Wimbledon, as an anchor tenant.
2. The project has moved forward significantly since the Minister met with the private sector promoters in March, and we could be very close to pulling off a major coup over the next few weeks. The benefits to be secured from the successful outcome of current work are significant and exciting for Northern Ireland:-
 - we could have a modern 40,000 seater stadium, the building of which would be financed by the private sector. This would represent an investment of up to £50 M;
 - the facility could accommodate other sports, in a manner which would compliment the Sports Council's long cherished goal for a national stadium;
 - there would be significant opportunity for local employment in the construction, running and maintenance of the stadium;
 - the stadium plus supporting sports and commercial facilities would give a massive boost to our regeneration work in this area of Belfast;
 - properly negotiated and managed, the introduction of a Premier League club to Belfast would be a major stimulus to the sporting image of NI and to the future health and development of soccer in NI.
3. Whilst the benefits are such as to encourage us to make our very best efforts to secure them, there remain major issues to be resolved and success is far from certain. The Sports Council has a number of concerns, which they have recently raised with Tony Worthington. I am due to meet with them tomorrow, as part of the process of resolving these concerns. We are certainly keen to involve the Sports Council fully in the critical work to be undertaken over the next few weeks, which we intend will be managed by a small Working Group, to be chaired jointly by myself and Don Allen, the Chairman of the Sports Council.

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4. There are also significant issues to be resolved with the soccer governing bodies in Europe, England and Northern Ireland and with the prospective anchor tenant from the Premier League.
5. Much of this immediate work is extremely sensitive and will require careful and diplomatic management. It will be important for all of the parties to work in close co-operation and to observe strict confidentiality. There will be real risks that misplaced or untimely words or actions could quickly unravel the whole package.
6. In this context, it would be helpful if we could ensure a consistent line at all levels. As you know, the subject has already been raised in Parliament and it is likely there have been discussions in the margins of various meetings with the soccer authorities in England and possibly Europe. It is possible that the issue could be raised with Ministers during the World Cup and, to cover this eventuality, it would be helpful if the Secretary of State were to drop a short note to Tony Banks. A draft is attached, the content of which has been agreed with DENI.
7. We will press on with the aim of completing the further work over the next few weeks. This is important since there is at present a window of opportunity, especially in regard to the anchor tenant, which will not be available for too long.
8. I shall keep the Minister informed of developments.

RONNIE SPENCE

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DRAFT LETTER FROM SECRETARY OF STATE TO TONY BANKS MP

You will be aware, from the PQs tabled by Keith Simpson, the Member for Mid-Norfolk, of reports of efforts to attract Wimbledon Football Club to Belfast. There have been much fuller accounts in the media of negotiations to attract the same Club to Dublin.

The position in Northern Ireland is that a private sector consortium has been developing plans for a major new sports stadium in Belfast, which would be built to international standards and would have a Premier League club as an anchor tenant. Their plans will reach the stage over the next few weeks where there will be the need for formal discussions with key interest groups, not the least of whom will be the various soccer governing bodies and the prospective Premier League club. All of this will inevitably bring the debate into the public domain. Until then, there is some very sensitive work to complete and a Working Group, on which the local public and statutory interests are involved, along with the private consortium, has been set up to manage this task.

The success of this project is far from certain. There remain significant hurdles to be overcome, but a successful outcome would offer very significant benefits to Northern Ireland in terms of capital investment by the private sector, positive impact on its international image and opportunity for substantial cross-community participation. As such I would view the project as the type of development which we need to underpin the peace process.

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I am sure you will be meeting frequently with senior members of the soccer authorities during the course of the World Cup and it would be extremely helpful if you could speak positively about our approach to this project and the beneficial impact it could have. I know that Wimbledon, the club concerned continue to explore other options but we would be very keen to make a positive bid. This would need to have the full support of the Irish Football Association and the Football Association in England and the work which will be undertaken over the next few weeks will address these issues.

In the meantime, anything you can do to convey our support for and positive approach to the project would be much appreciated.

I am copying this letter to Chris Smith and the Prime Minister.

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