

CFC Safety @ Sports - Main file.

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FROM: LYNDA LISTER
Sport and Recreation

DATE: 2 September 1999

2055/96

To: 1. Dr Rooney
2. PS/Minister

SAFETY AT SPORTS GROUNDS SECTARIAN BEHAVIOUR OF SPECTATORS

Summary:

Issue: In light of the sectarian chanting and banners at the Northern Ireland -v- France soccer match at Windsor Park on 18 August, consideration is needed on what action can be taken to tackle sectarian and disorderly behaviour by spectators at soccer matches in particular, and at sport events in general.

Timescale: As soon as possible.

Recommendation: That the Minister should:

- a. approach Adam Ingram asking him to consider the urgent introduction of legislation making provision for offences to deal with disorderly behaviour of spectators at sports events drawing on existing GB legislation, as appropriate;

- b. have an early meeting with officials of the Irish Football Association (IFA) the Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI) and the Belfast City Council (BCC)) to establish what action is already being taken and what further action is needed to tackle the problem; and
- c. decide on the way forward, in the absence of devolution, on the recommendations of the Inter-Departmental Working Group on Safety at Sports Grounds in Northern Ireland.

Background:

1. The friendly international soccer match between World Cup Champions France and Northern Ireland at Windsor Park on 18 August was seriously marred by sectarian chanting and banners. The match was televised live and the unruly behaviour of the spectators attracted front page coverage in the Belfast Telegraph (see Tab A). Such behaviour is common at Northern Ireland soccer matches both at international level (eg the match against Germany earlier this year) and at clubs such as Linfield (Windsor Park), Glentoran (Oval) and Cliftonville (Solitude). We have been considering what action can be taken to tackle this problem.

2. The bad behaviour of spectators at soccer matches is an element of the wider issue of safety at sports grounds in Northern Ireland. The background to this issue is that following the strengthening of safety legislation in GB, in the wake of the Taylor Report on the Hillsborough Stadium disaster in 1989, the need for equivalent action in Northern Ireland was considered by an Inter-Departmental Working Group chaired by DENV and drawn from the Department of Economic Development (Health and Safety Inspectorate), the Department of Environment (Transport Division and local government), the Northern Ireland Office (Police Division), the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. The Working Group's final report made 8 main recommendations:-

- Legislation similar to that existing in GB should be introduced in Northern Ireland to cover larger venues.

- Safety at smaller venues should be addressed by replicating GB legislation to enable district councils to limit spectator numbers.
- Ancillary legislation should be introduced to create offences for unruly behaviour.
- Existing legislation should be used by the RUC to charge for services.
- An overseeing body should be created.
- A publicity campaign should be mounted to promote awareness of safety issues.
- The GB safety guide should be adapted for Northern Ireland
- An approach for funding should be made to the Football Trust and the Lottery.

The proposed new legislation governing safety at sports grounds would affect 19 soccer grounds, 1 rugby ground and 7 Gaelic Football venues. A Cost Compliance Assessment prepared as part of the Report indicated that the cost of upgrading safety standards at Northern Ireland sports grounds, in line with GB would be in the region of £20m, with clubs meeting some 25% of the cost.

3. The Minister, Lord Dubbs, and Adam Ingram all agreed in principle to the recommendations contained in the Report but concluded that it would be a matter for the new Northern Ireland Assembly to decide how matters should proceed. In the absence of devolution, this presents uncertainties, including the Assembly's acceptance of the proposals and when new legislation could be taken forward within the Assembly's legislative programme.

4. In the meantime, however, it has become the overarching concern that further progress needs to be made, comparable to that made in GB, towards ensuring the safety and comfort of those attending sporting events in Northern Ireland. Towards this end DENI, in conjunction with the Sports Council, has drawn up a proposed scheme for an interim programme of safety improvement works at sports grounds in Northern Ireland to address immediate health and safety concerns. A bid has been submitted to the Football Trust for funding of £2m per year for each of the years 2000/01 and 2001/02 to support the scheme. The current position on the bid is that the Football Trust met on 26 July and although no

decisions were taken, it is clear that the DENI bid will not be met in full, partly due to a significant drop (from £8.5m to £6m) in the projected annual income to the Trust from the Pools' Companies and partly because Northern Ireland is competing with funding bids from Scotland and England. The Trust is expected to consider and decide on the distribution of its funds across the UK at its next meeting on 27 September.

Way Forward

5. We remain hopeful that we will obtain sufficient funding from the Football Trust for a scheme of safety improvement works. However, in the wake of the Northern Ireland -v- France match, we have been considering what other action might be taken to improve safety at sports grounds in advance of devolution and it is suggested that action should commence to introduce as soon as possible the legislation, recommended by the inter-departmental working group, to create offences for unruly behaviour. This new, stand alone, legislation, which would be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office, could draw on existing GB legislation such as the Football Offences Act 1991 and the Football Offences and Disorder Act 1999 (shortly to come into effect) which cover the throwing of missiles, indecent or racist chanting and pitch invasion. We believe that such legislation would lead to an improvement in crowd behaviour at soccer matches.

6. It is recommended that the Minister should explore with his colleague Adam Ingram the possibility of early legislation to introduce offences in Northern Ireland for unacceptable behaviour among spectators at sports events.

7. The IFA, as the governing body of soccer in Northern Ireland and the organising body for international soccer matches, has a responsibility for promoting better behaviour by soccer spectators and a more acceptable image of the sport. SCNI has taken a lead on addressing community relations/sectarian issues in its overall approach to sport development. Under existing health and safety legislation Belfast City Council is the enforcing authority in respect of the "worst case" soccer grounds in Northern Ireland.

8. In the wake of the Northern Ireland -v- France match at Windsor officials will meet with IFA, BCC and SCNI to discuss the potential for further action to combat sectarianism at football matches. It is recommended that the Minister should follow this with a meeting of these organisations to

establish what action is being taken by the IFA and soccer clubs themselves towards improving crowd behaviour and impress upon them the need for evidence of success.

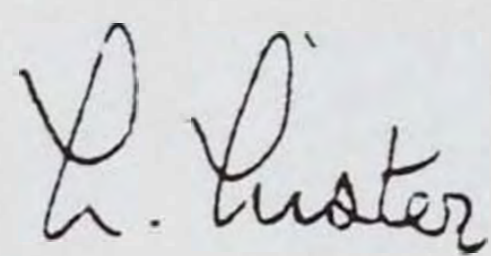
9. As mentioned in paragraph 3. above, the delay in devolution presents uncertainties for the longer term on the acceptance of the core recommendations of the Inter-Departmental Working Group on Safety at Sports Grounds. The Minister is therefore requested to consider whether we should seek to proceed, in advance of devolution, with the implementation of these recommendations.

Recommendations:

10. The Minister is asked to:

1. agree to an approach being made to Adam Ingram about the early introduction of legislation in Northern Ireland to create offences for unruly behaviour at sports events;
2. agree to meet representatives of the IFA, SCNI and BCC, to discuss what action can, and is being taken by the IFA and clubs themselves to tackle the problem of crowd behaviour at soccer matches; and
3. to consider, in the absence of devolution, what action can be taken to progress the recommendations of the Inter-Departmental Working Group on Safety at Sports Grounds.

Officials would welcome a discussion with the Minister on this issue.


L LISTER (MRS)

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