

From: PS/Secretary of State (B)
7 October 1998

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Mr McConnell

SECRETARY OF STATE'S VISIT TO OMAGH: 5 OCTOBER 1998

The Secretary of State was grateful for the briefing which you provided for her visit to Omagh on Monday afternoon. The visit was split into two parts, the first being a half-hour question and answer session with Omagh District Councillors. The second part was to help in the launch of 'Omagh Renewal and Beyond'.

2. As you know, the first ten minutes of the meeting with the Council were spent listening to Councillors debate whether the meeting should be open to the public or not. This was all prompted by Councillor Oliver Gibson (DUP) in what was a vain attempt to have Pat Doherty (SF) who was sitting in the public gallery at the start of the meeting excluded. In the end, after what proved to be a frustrating wait, the Council decided to open up the meeting to the public, including the press.

Progress on Compensation and Benefit Payments: Sperrin Lakeland Application

3. In response to a question about compensation claims, the Secretary of State said that all practicable steps were being taken to ensure that claims for both criminal injury and criminal damage compensation were handled as quickly as possible. She read out the total number of claims received. She suggested that if there were any particular problems with individual cases for compensation claims and also benefit claims, then Councillors should approach Mr McConnell who would try to do his best to expedite matters.

4. The Secretary of State acknowledged that she had received the Recovery Plan from the Chief Executive from Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust. It was being examined quickly and carefully with a view to providing access to the appropriate resources as soon as possible.

Help for Traders

5. The Secretary of State recognised the need for special help to small businesses in the town following the bombing. She was aware that an approach had been made to Monica Wulf-Mathies for European funding. She undertook to do everything we could to help the traders.

Future of Acute Services for Omagh: Retention of Accident & Emergency Services at the Tyrone County Hospital

6. Councillors Gormley and Byrne made an impassioned plea for the retention of acute services and the accident and emergency department at the Tyrone County Hospital. This, they argued, was vital for a town which had a population of 25,000 people. They hoped that the Secretary of State would press on the Western Board the merits of their case. The Secretary of State responded by saying that she had heard what they had to say and would make their views available to the Western Board. There would, however, be a full consultation period and she was sure the Western Board would take into account the need to ensure necessary skills and expertise are available to deal with emergencies in the future.

7. Councillor Baxter then suggested that while consultation was taking place, decisions were being taken at the same time to reduce services at the Tyrone County Hospital. He claimed, for example, that a decision had already been taken to remove outpatient cancer services from the hospital. Consequently, he argued, there was no proper consultation going on. The Secretary of State undertook to investigate the situation and write to the Council about the exact nature of consultation that was taking place as regards services provided at the Tyrone County Hospital (**Action: PS/Mr McFall, DHSS**).

Investment Tenant for the Proposed Advance Factory

8. The Secretary of State acknowledged that finding a tenant for the Advance factory was important. Empty factory space served no-one any purpose. She gave an assurance to the Council that she would keep their position very much in mind during the 11 City Tour of America this month.

9. At this stage, I invited the Chairman of the Council to end the meeting and suggested the remainder of the agenda could be handled in correspondence as the Secretary of State's programme was over-running and guests had gathered for what was the main purpose of the Secretary of State's visit. The Secretary of State, after some discussion, agreed to see a delegation from the Council to complete the rest of the agenda as soon as possible.

Omagh Renewal and Beyond

10. Following a video presentation by the Chief Executive, John McKinney, of the Omagh Renewal and Beyond document, the Secretary of State, in a short speech, praised Mr McKinney, the activities of the Council and the various other sectors eg voluntary and business for the constructive work which had been carried out since the bombing. She promised in return as much Government help as possible. Addressing each of the action areas, she said on the human front that we were giving urgent consideration to the Sperrin Lakeland's recovery plan. On reconstruction, she was aware that a lottery bid had been lodged for rebuilding help. The Government would help in the trading field by approaching Europe for the recovery of central area businesses. To meet investment needs, the Secretary of State reminded the audience of the Government's commitment to build an Advance factory and that she would bear in mind Omagh's needs during the inward investment tour of America this month. Finally, she praised the constructive attitude displayed by the community in Omagh and their desire to portray a positive rather than negative image. Of course, it was important to remember the past although she hoped that the pain of the past could be transformed into a positive image of Omagh in the 21st Century.

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