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Our Ref:

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**SPORTS**  
COUNCIL NORTHERN IRELAND  
making sport happen for you

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cc. Mr. Parker  
Mr. Lister  
Miss Miller

Miss Hayes:

To be filed on Sectarianism in Sport file

L. Sloan

Dear Eddie

## SECTARIANISM AND ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Further to recent discussions, I have had the opportunity to amend the discussion paper which is now enclosed. I hope this fully and accurately reflects our various inputs. There are, quite clearly, a series of recommendations attached to the paper and I assume that our colleagues from the Department of Education (now Culture, Arts and Leisure) will reconvene the meeting at an opportune moment.

I trust the revised paper will be useful in informing that meeting when it occurs.

Yours sincerely



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DIRECTOR  
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10-12-99

99/10





## SECTARIANISM AND ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### Introduction

- 1 The Sports Council for Northern Ireland is committed to removing sectarianism from the practice of sport in Northern Ireland. This commitment is expressed via its key policy objective 'to improve the good reputation of sport in Northern Ireland' and through its policy 'Sport in the Community' which identifies the need to provide an environment which values and enables the full involvement of all people, regardless of religious belief, political affiliation or cultural identity, in all aspects and at all levels of sport and physical recreation.
- 2 This commitment is set in a wider context through the Northern Ireland Strategy for the Development of Sport which established the following guiding principles for development:
  - respect for the individual.
  - social inclusiveness.
  - equity in decision making.
  - openness to the needs of communities.
- 3 Association Football, through the IFA, is also committed to the removal of sectarianism from that sport in Northern Ireland. That commitment is very serious and is evidenced by the association's anti-sectarian policy, and the appointment of a Community Relations Officer to ensure the implementation of that policy. Association Football were the very first Governing Body of Sport in Northern Ireland to make such an appointment.
- 4 Sport, both in the context of specific sports and in a generic sense, has made a significant and long-standing contribution to building bridges between communities over a long period of time. The use of outdoor pursuits within the Youth Service, the cross-community work of initiatives such as Belfast United, and widespread sporting initiatives undertaken in the context of the Peace and Reconciliation programme over recent years, is testimony to the contribution sport has made to community relations in the recent past.
- 5 Sport reflects the society in which it is played. Therefore, sport in Northern Ireland, due to the political situation, inherits many problems of wider society. In no sport is this more evident than Association Football. Soccer is the major cross-community sport in Northern Ireland, both in terms of participation and support. Due to that fact alone, the Sport has the capacity to be both fraternal, and sectarian. It



is inevitable, therefore, that problems have arisen. For many years the Irish Football Association held the ideal that Football was above politics and that related problems resided with society and not Football. A policy of non-sectarianism was employed which many critics claimed was insufficient. The establishment in 1998 of a Community Relations programme within the Irish Football Association illustrates the acceptance of the obligations that the IFA have to the sports people of Northern Ireland. In being the first of sport's Governing Bodies to do so signified a commitment to a more proactive approach to dealing with sectarianism.

### The Problem

- 6     Sectarianism, and indeed racism and sexism, exists in Association Football throughout Northern Ireland, the UK, and indeed Europe. Northern Ireland, in that sense, is not fundamentally different from other countries in which this major spectator sport is played. There is much evidence to suggest that the problem is not an Association Football problem per se, rather that it is a problem associated with a particular hooligan element. If Association Football is successful and makes such behaviour impossible then the hooligan element will simply transfer to other fields, both within sport and beyond.
- 7     Association Football, nevertheless, suffers as the result of this wider societal problem. Sectarianism has, in recent years, been responsible for the abandonment of boys' matches, public disorder offences in and around Football grounds, fear of intimidation amongst some supporters, and most publicly the occasional unacceptable sectarian chanting at international and domestic matches.
- 8     The problems in Northern Ireland are in many areas exacerbated by the poor infrastructure and the geographical location of grounds, many of which are located in single identity areas and which, therefore, attract single identity support. The image of the National Ground, Windsor Park, in particular, in a clearly loyalist area, does tend to exacerbate the behavioural tendencies of some fans. This issue is beyond the current resources of the IFA and clubs and is a fundamental infrastructure issue (on the scale road building, railway building, gas line provision) for government and, indeed, Europe to deal with. The creation of genuinely high quality neutral grounds for Association Football within Northern Ireland will require a re-development programme of considerable scale, and is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 9     Association Football, via the IFA, has responded to the problem in the context of that which its resources and remit allow it to do.



## Response to Date

10 The IFA has responded to the Sports Council for Northern Ireland calls for action in six main ways:

- (i) The development of policy and practice.
- (ii) The development of its community relations programme targeting club staff and supporters.
- (iii) The development of resources to develop quality community relations in local contexts.
- (iv) The development and promotion of a 'fair play' programme.
- (v) The establishment of anti-sectarianism demonstration projects which can be duplicated elsewhere.
- (vi) The implementation of a broad-ranging community relations programme.

To take each of these in turn:

11 **The development of anti-sectarian policies, procedures and practices at all levels of local Soccer.**

11.1 The appointment of a Community Relations Officer by the Irish Football Association is the most significant factor in the development of the anti-sectarianism policies.

11.2 The release of an anti-sectarian statement by the Association, condemning bigoted behaviour and encouraging mutual respect is a significant and public policy statement. This statement has been included in all match programmes and has been endorsed by the General Secretary, the President and the International Team Manager.

12 **The design and delivery of Community Relations programmes aimed at clubs, Association staff and supporters.**

12.1 The need for equity training has been accepted and approved by the Irish Football Association and will commence during the current calendar year.

12.2 Supporters have been involved, through open meetings and focus groups in the design and development of programmes



to promote the new anti-sectarianism guidelines.

- 12.3 Community Relations has now become an integral part of the IFA Preliminary Coaching Award through the Community Relations and Equity Model which has been developed in conjunction with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. To date 90 coaches have taken the Community Relations Module as part of their Preliminary Coaching Badge. Community Relations elements have also been introduced into the IFA's residential courses and plans exist to introduce Community Relations issues to referees' training.

13 **The development of resource materials on the practicalities of good Community Relations practice within local Soccer.**

- 13.1 The IFA has reviewed resource materials available elsewhere in the UK in the context of anti-bigotry programmes. Subject to support from DENI and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland the IFA is committed to developing such resources in support of its Community Relations programme.

14 **The development of 'fair play' principles to be adopted by clubs and IFA management as a bench-mark for relationships, structures and activity programmes.**

- 14.1 A Code of Conduct has been drawn up by the IFA.

- 14.2 A 'fair play' league has been established.

- 14.3 There are proposals to extend the Code of Conduct through local councils, private sports centres, and facilities.

15 **To develop and deliver an anti-sectarian initiative with one major club and work to ensure its replication.**

Work is commencing with Glenavon and Lisburn Distillery Clubs, who together with their local councils, are beginning to address the problems of supporter behaviour on a wide number of fronts. Problems do arise, however, due to the lack of finance available within senior clubs and real progress cannot be made until resources are made available to update outdated grounds, professionalise stewarding and generally improve the physical environment for Soccer supporters.



16 Miscellaneous work being carried out by the Community Relations programme for the benefit of Football.

- 16.1 A partnership has been developed with the RUC Community Affairs Team.
- 16.2 Media channels associated with the Nationalist/Catholic community have been approached pro-actively in order to promote Northern Ireland Soccer in all communities.
- 16.3 A number of local projects, such as the partnership with Ballymena Borough Council to create a street Football league have been initiated.
- 16.4 The 'something more than Football' project has developed at Glentoran FC, in conjunction with the inner East Youth Project and the RUC. This project opposes violence and seeks to develop preventative initiatives with young people and strengthen the bonds between Glentoran and their locality.

Conclusion

- 17 Association Football is acutely aware of the problems that sectarianism brings to the game and has acted swiftly and significantly to minimise that effect. The problem is societal rather than specific to the sport of Football and genuine solutions will only be found within the wider context. The Association does not, and cannot, provide all the answers but will contribute, strongly, to the solutions.
- 18 The response of the IFA and its constituent bodies has been impressive. It must be remembered that these initiatives are relatively new and have not had time yet, to have significant impact. Like all strategic initiatives actions need time to bed in and generate results. The IFA is to be commended for the work it has done, we can expect that work already completed will impact further in future years, and we must guard against panic measures which may not be appropriate given the effective strategic response already taken.
- 19 That is not to say that the current programme is perfect and the following recommendations are designed to improve what has already been started. The IFA have recognised the problem and have initiated a series of actions designed to ensure that the Association maximises the contribution it can make to the eventual solution. Whilst we believe the IFA's response has been strategic, is appropriate, and will have increasing impact, we also believe that the IFA need to publicise and advocate the actions already taken more widely. We believe there are a range of actions which can be implemented easily and which help



to publicise and promote the IFA's commitment to resolving the problem.

- 20 Soccer remains the most popular sport in Northern Ireland and has done a huge amount to foster good Community Relations and encourage others into good practice. Soccer is also one of the fastest growing sports in Northern Ireland and the recent explosive growth of the women's game is having further impact. Global trends suggest that there remains considerable potential for growth in Northern Ireland and Association Football, therefore, has huge potential to continue to contribute to the Community Relations agenda in Northern Ireland.

### Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- (i) the IFA be commended for work undertaken to date and that they continue to be resourced in the development and delivery of their Community Relations programme.
- (ii) the IFA's appointment of a Community Relations Officer be continued, with Government support, and that immediate consideration be given to extending that appointment to enable a five year contract to be offered.
- (iii) The IFA be resourced to improve the identification training and deployment of stewards at international matches and that these arrangements be cascaded to all domestic matches.
- (iv) DENI give immediate consideration to establish a budget to support the development of appropriate educational resource materials: these could be designed and developed as demonstration models for other sports to employ.
- (v) The RUC be approached and offered a more significant and strategic input to the ongoing policy and strategic developments.
- (vi) That the IFA, through its Board, maximise public commitment to the anti-sectarianism statement and endeavour to ensure similar statements are made by the Boards and League Chairmen of clubs throughout Northern Ireland.
- (vii) That the IFA utilise match programmes, ground advertising, and half-time activity to promote and advocate anti-sectarian policies and practices (for example, by the use of half-time announcements, on pitch advertising, and the use of player and manager endorsements.



- (viii) A significant research programme , embracing comparative research, market research, and both applied and pure research, be established at the earliest opportunity in order to further quantify the scale of the problem and help to identify further and better responses.
- (ix) Government consider the extent of the infrastructural problem and that the costs and possibilities of establishing high quality neutral venues, particularly for the National Team, be explored.

7/12/99