

Field of Dreams or White Elephant? The Case against an Over-sized Casement Park

Key Points Summary

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The respected sports journalist Martin Breheny has described the proposed redevelopment of Casement Park as a '**white elephant**'¹:

*A capacity of 34,500 would be required only once a year for the Ulster final. **There is no logical, or indeed sporting case, for building such a large stadium for one game per year.*** [Emphasis added]

The large outlay of public funds that would be required to build an over-sized stadium for which there is no sporting need cannot be justified, especially in a time of severe cuts to public services. A stadium that would only be full once a year should not be prioritised over the more pressing need for investments in such vital areas as housing, health and education.

This paper explains why the Casement Park proposal is over-sized in relation to its location and, if it ever comes to fruition, a white elephant project for which there is no compelling need. The following is a summary of the key points made in the paper.

Casement Park is a Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) sports ground located in Andersonstown, West Belfast. The ground opened in June 1953 but has not been used for sporting purposes since June 2013. It currently lies derelict.

The Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association (UCGAA) is proposing the construction of a new 34,500 capacity stadium on the existing Casement Park GAA ground. The proposed redevelopment is currently stalled due to insufficient funds.

But the Casement Park site is **the wrong location** for a 34,500 capacity stadium.

On three sides of the ground, the boundary abuts residential dwellings, that is, the 'horseshoe' of Mooreland and Owenvarragh. Consequently, the site is **a severely constrained location** that cannot accommodate a stadium of the size proposed. **Ingress and egress are substantially constrained by the restricted number of access points, with major implications for safe evacuation.**

Owing to the horseshoe configuration and consequent reliance on exiting via the Andersonstown Road, the project has been dogged by **concerns around safe evacuation** in the event of an emergency resulting from a closure of the Andersonstown Road exits.

A major review of the project found such a scenario to be "reasonably foreseeable". The proposed 'solution' to the safe evacuation problem in that scenario remains hypothetical, underpinned by computer modelling rather than actual experience of managing a major event at the location.

¹ Irish Independent, *Will nobody shout stop as €30m set to be wasted on Casement's white elephant?*, 8 Feb 2020, at <https://www.independent.ie/sport/gaelic-games/will-nobody-shout-stop-as-30m-set-to-be-wasted-on-casements-white-elephant/38937457.html>.

Reflecting the constrained location, it is likely that the proposed new stadium would have to go through **a relatively extended 'bedding-in' period in the effort to achieve a full capacity safety certificate**. For example, there is a need to develop concrete **contingency plans for emergency evacuation scenarios**. Those plans will take time to design and test and will not necessarily yield a satisfactory solution.

In addition to safety considerations, the Casement Park project has been beset with problems around **traffic and access**. Again, the site's constrained location is the main limiting factor. The local area does not have sufficient parking space to accommodate the number of vehicle trips that a major event at Casement Park would generate. The proposed mitigation arrangements rely considerably on the use of a widely dispersed array of park and ride facilities. Those facilities may not all be available as required and it is conceivable that **Casement Park may be prevented from holding a full-capacity event if UCGAA are unable to acquire the facilities needed to implement their traffic management plan**.

For all of the above reasons, the Casement Park site is best developed to a capacity of no more than 15,000. That is as much as is needed for Antrim GAA, and the very limit of what the site can safely sustain. Such a capacity could also be delivered within the existing budget envelope.

Funding for the project was first agreed in March 2011. Since then, **the expected construction costs have risen sharply**, from £77.5 million in the original estimate to **over £150+ million** by mid-2023. It is **not at all unrealistic to anticipate the costs will spiral above £220 million**.

The GAA's insistence on capping its own contribution at £15 million means that the public purse is expected to bear **all the risk of cost increases**. **That is entirely contrary to the requirements for good governance and accountability in grants of financial assistance to the voluntary sector**.

Furthermore, the provision of additional funds over and above what was agreed in March 2011 **does not have cross-community support**. For that reason, the provision of additional funds by the UK and/or Irish governments, without NI Executive approval, would be contrary to the good governance of Northern Ireland.

At this time, public sector budgets in Northern Ireland are very tightly constrained. That serves to crystallise in stark terms the range of opportunities that would have to be foregone in the event the Casement Park project was to proceed with substantial additional funding. The **opportunity costs** include: fewer new social homes; a worsening of educational outcomes; longer hospital waiting lists; and delays to critical investments in health services.

Arguably, Northern Ireland does have a need for a 30,000+ capacity stadium, but for use as **a multi-sports stadium**. Such a stadium should be located in **a neutral venue** with **good transport access** and **ample external space for fan circulation**. A multi-sports stadium should also be held in **public ownership**. The Casement Park site meets **none** of those criteria. It is **not a neutral venue** and its proposed redevelopment would not be in public ownership.

Nonetheless, the GAA's proposed redevelopment of Casement Park has been thrown a financial lifeline following its inclusion as one of the venues in the UK and Ireland bid to host the 2028 Euro finals. The Secretary of State's commitment to 'find the money' in the event of a successful bid is **tantamount to handing the GAA a blank cheque**. That is not a sustainable position.

Handing the GAA a blank cheque **could also result in a waste of public funds**. That is because there are **a range of risks around having the Casement Park stadium completed and fully prepared to serve as a venue for the 2028 tournament**.

In the first instance, Casement Park was granted planning permission for a stadium with a seating capacity of 26,011 and capacity for a further 8,175 in a standing terrace. But UEFA requires a minimum 30,000 seated capacity, with all seating permanent. It would therefore be necessary for UCGAA to commission **a stadium re-design** to bring the seating capacity to a level that is over the mandatory 30,000 all-seated capacity threshold for use of a stadium in the Euros. A re-design may well require a variation to the planning consent, which would take time.

The planning consent also includes a total of 46 conditions. Some of those conditions need to be met before development works can begin. Other conditions relate to the management of risks that may materialise during construction. It is entirely possible that such risks may occur, for example, since asbestos is present on the site.

All of the above factors heighten **the risk of delays** to the anticipated timescale for construction of the stadium, with **knock-on implications regarding preparedness for the Euro 28 finals**.

Nonetheless, the fundamental problem with the Casement Park location is the constrained site location. That poses a number of **risks to the successful staging of Euro 2028 matches at the venue**, as follows.

Safety certification. It is entirely possible that the ground will not have received a safety certificate for a full capacity event in advance of the Euro 2028 finals. And any such certification would be open to legal challenge. Consequently, Casement Park represents a high-risk venue for the UEFA finals in respect of crowd capacity and safety.

Traffic and access. UCGAA's traffic management planning has, to date, been focused entirely on spectators travelling to GAA matches from locations dispersed across Ulster, such as Tyrone, Derry, etc. There is no plan yet for enabling travel and access to Casement Park for an event such as the Euro finals.

The Casement Park site comes nowhere near meeting UEFA's requirement that the stadium must be well connected to public transport hubs, such as trains, metros, trams and buses. It is served by one bus route. The nearest train station is a small commuter halt located over two kilometres away from the ground, with the route involving pedestrian travel through a very busy motorway underpass.

In addition, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to meet the UEFA requirement that “crossovers between routes taken by the various target groups (VIPs, sponsors, media and fans) should be minimised at all times”.

Infrastructure. UEFA has stringent and extensive infrastructure requirements. The Casement Park site itself **could not meet UEFA’s infrastructure requirements**. The site is surrounded on three sides by the horseshoe of Mooreland and Owenvarragh and fronts onto a busy arterial road. The only possibility would be to disperse the infrastructure components, such as the hospitality village, across the local area. But even if appropriate sites could be sourced, which is not a given, that would surely require statutory permissions and would encounter strong local opposition.