

# **Casement Park and Euro 2028: Key Points Summary**

February 2024

## Key Points Summary

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 presently 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. Planning permission for the proposed redevelopment was granted in July 2021. However, work has not yet started, due to lack of funds and, in November 2023, the withdrawal of the contractor for the stadium build.

Even though it is not yet built, or even started, Casement Park is one of 10 venues included in the joint UK and Ireland bid which was selected by UEFA to host the Euro 2028 finals tournament. This paper shows why the decision to include Casement Park as one of the 10 host venues is **a serious mistake**, likely to result in **a waste of scarce public resources**.

Having stalled due to lack of funds, the inclusion of Casement Park in the UK and Ireland bid means the project has potentially been thrown a financial lifeline. The UK government appears willing to step in and rescue the project financially, for the specific purpose of hosting the 2028 Euros.

But the funding of Casement Park remains controversial and **the provision of additional public funds over and above the £61.4 million agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive in March 2011 does not have cross-community support**. There is significant political opposition to giving the GAA a blank cheque in the face of rapidly rising construction costs, particularly in light of the tight constraints on public sector expenditure in Northern Ireland

Even if a funding package was to be agreed, there is **a high risk that the Casement Park redevelopment would not be completed in time for the 2028 Euros**.

As of February 2024, **the project does not have a contractor to build the stadium** and has yet to commence the procurement exercise, due to difficulties in compiling a list of suitable contractors. That will delay the start of works on the stadium.

The site is known to be **contaminated** with asbestos, raising the possibility of further delay, even if works were to commence.

More fundamentally, **the Casement Park design for which planning permission was granted does not actually satisfy UEFA requirements for a stadium to serve as a Euros Final venue**.

UEFA requires that stadia included in a Finals tournament must have “at least **30,000 net seating** capacity”. UEFA also **prohibits the use of temporary seating and standing spectators**.

With a spectator capacity of 18,500, Windsor Park football stadium does not presently meet the UEFA requirement for 30,000 net seating capacity. Ostensibly,

Casement Park was preferred as it has an approved design capacity of 34,500. Albeit, the political support for redeveloping Casement Park was undoubtedly the critical factor, as the inclusion of the site in the UK and Ireland Euro 2028 bid presented the opportunity to resuscitate a flailing project.

The problem is that the proposed Casement Park redevelopment was granted planning permission for a stadium with **a notional seating capacity of 26,011** and a further **8,175 spectators in a standing terrace**. That is, **a shortfall of at least 4,000** compared to UEFA's requirement for 30,000 net seating capacity.

The question then arises as to **how would the GAA meet UEFA's net seating requirement?** The public, whom the GAA expect to fund the proposed stadium, has yet to be provided with a full answer to that question. However, the intended approach is starting to crystallise. And it is bizarre.

As outlined by the Department for Communities (DfC), the lead funder within the Northern Ireland Executive, in order to meet UEFA's requirements, **the stadium would initially be constructed as an all-seated stadium, with a capacity of 30,000 spectators**. **Following the 2028 Euros**, the intention, as stated by DfC, is to **revert to the approved design**, i.e., with a standing terrace. That is, the intended 30,000 all-seated stadium would only be 'temporarily permanent'.

The approach outlined by the DfC suffers a number of **major problems**.

First, the GAA **do not have planning permission for a 30,000 all-seated stadium**.

In order to construct a stadium with 30,000 net seating capacity, the approved plans would need a redesign. **If the redesign was to represent a material change to the approved plans**, that would require **a fresh planning application**, which would further delay the project. Proceeding with such a design without regularising the plans would **risk enforcement action**, which would put the availability of the stadium for the 2028 Euros at risk. It would also be highly embarrassing for the Government if the stadium was built, at huge public expense, to a design which did not have the requisite statutory approval and became subject to enforcement action.

**The provision of public funding**, in the hundreds of millions of pounds, for the construction of **a stadium that did not conform to the approved plans** raises **serious issues around regularity and propriety** in managing public money.

Second, constructing a 'temporarily permanent' 30,000 all-seated stadium and then reverting to the original design **would undoubtedly add to the total project costs**, compared with building to the approved design, thereby adding further layers of complexity to the formulation of a funding package and the procurement process.

But even if the project was to be completed in time, **the site poses numerous difficulties** in successfully hosting three matches at the 2028 Euro Finals. **Those difficulties stem from the ground's constrained location**, as it abuts residential properties on three sides (the 'horseshoe' of Mooreland and Owenvarragh).

The highly constrained footprint of the ground renders it **impossible to meet UEFA's extensive infrastructure requirements**, notably the requirement for an

outer perimeter within which temporary facilities could be located (broadcast compound, media centre, volunteer centre, etc.).

Again reflecting the constraints of the site, **the ground suffers poor accessibility, especially in relation to public transport.** One bus service, no train service and just one main road route connecting the site to the rest of Belfast. And the local area does not possess the parking capacity to support a large stadium.

The site's limited accessibility, with comparatively few entry and exit points, also means that the stadium is **oversized in relation to its location within a residential area.** That **would create huge difficulties in obtaining a safety certificate for a 30,000+ capacity stadium.** And the award of such a certificate would be open to legal challenge.

If **the GAA** are given a blank cheque to build a new stadium at Casement Park, they **would certainly gain a lasting legacy from the 2028 Euros.**

**The legacy benefits for other sections of the community are absent.** That is especially true for the Northern Ireland football community. In particular, the funds originally promised in 2011 for upgrading of football stadia across Northern Ireland, via **the Sub-regional Stadia Programme,** are **in danger of being left behind, if not squeezed out entirely** by the amount of funding that would be required to build the Casement Park stadium, leaving **no lasting legacy for football.**

Furthermore, the two main communities are sharply divided on the use of Casement Park for the 2028 Euro Finals. Building Casement Park on the back of the 2028 Euro Finals is **more likely to damage than to enhance community relations.**

With the Casement Park project delayed once again, due to the funding issues and the need to find a new contractor, **now is the time to reconsider the options.**

For the reasons outlined in this paper, **Casement Park is not a suitable location** for hosting the Euro 2028 Finals.

Arguably, Northern Ireland does have a need for a 30,000+ capacity stadium, but for use as a multi-sports stadium, in a neutral venue in public ownership. However, at this juncture, **a new multi-sports stadium is a longer-term consideration** and could not be considered a feasible option for hosting the 2028 Euros.

**Adding additional capacity to the Windsor Park stadium is a serious option and worthy of appraisal.** That option was **not** considered in the support given by government for the inclusion of Northern Ireland as a Euros 2028 venue. In the current circumstances, the option should at least be considered and subjected to a proper appraisal. In many respects, **Windsor Park is more favourably situated to host the 2028 Euro Finals** and there would be an identifiable and tangible legacy for the football community.

There is also the option of withdrawing Belfast as a Euro 2028 host venue. **Spending £500+ million to host the 2028 Euros, including £300+ million on an oversized new stadium, would not be cost-effective and would also entail a huge opportunity cost.** Funds diverted to hosting the 2028 Euros could be better

spent in helping to tackle the acute social and economic needs that have come to the fore in a climate of severely constrained public expenditure.

Finally, it may be noted that the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland is engaging with HM Treasury regarding the business case for provision of UK government funding for the proposed redevelopment of Casement Park. Having regard to the requirements for managing public money, that engagement poses a number of problems for HM Treasury, as follows.

First, the NI Executive has no spare funds. Effectively, therefore, the UK government is being asked to cover almost all of the project costs.

Second, **funds provided with the objective to support hosting of the 2028 Euros in Belfast cannot expect to achieve value-for-money**, particularly considering the risks highlighted in this paper. Also, the expected benefits of hosting the tournament would surely be outweighed by the combined costs of hosting the event and building a new stadium specifically for that purpose.

Third, while the Northern Ireland Assembly has previously voted to allocate £62 million for Casement, in the 2016-17 Budget, there is presently no legislative vote that would authorize subsidy payments to the GAA that are likely to exceed £200 million. The absence of parliamentary authority means that the expenditure of additional funds would fail to satisfy **the regularity criterion** for managing public money.

Fourth, there is a serious problem of **additionality** in providing **grant assistance** specifically for **a new GAA stadium**. The GAA have reiterated their desire to get the stadium built **regardless of what happens with the Euro 2028 finals** and have expressed confidence that “**significant funding**” will be secured from **the Irish government**<sup>1</sup>. To that extent, the provision of **UK government funding** for a new stadium **could not be viewed as satisfying the additionality criterion**. That is, in making grants to voluntary sector organisations, such as the GAA, a key value-for-money requirement is that the proposed assistance should be the minimum needed to bring about the project. Insofar as the GAA expects the stadium to be funded by the Irish government, the optimal UK government contribution towards meeting the costs of a new stadium for the GAA is zero.

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<sup>1</sup> RTE News, *Casement Park: Can fans and politicians unite over Euro venue?*, 30 November 2023, at <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2023/1130/1419354-casement-park-row/>.