



Requirements & Preferred Location for a Centre of Excellence

for Antrim County Board



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

I have been asked as a strategic town planner to prepare an independent report setting out the need for and merits of a Centre of Excellence for the County; the potential issues that will likely arise with such a facility; and finally a preferred location or scenario that best fits these needs and characteristics and therefore is most suited to the County's requirements.

The main sections of the report are:

- (a) Background informing a decision
- (b) Assessment of whether a centre is needed
- (c) Assessment of potential models or scenarios
- (d) Identification of a preferred location under the most suitable model.
- (e) Key recommendations
- (f) Initial Planning Appraisal of the preferred site for the main Centre of Excellence (Appendix 1)
- (g) Schematic costing of preferred site developments (Appendix 2)

This report also advocates a needs based assessment. This report sets out the strategic context to enable the Board to make informed long term decisions on strategic facilities rather than approaching the issue of provision and investment on an adhoc and piecemeal basis. To begin the process by assessing what is possible in any given location before assessing the overall needs will not necessarily ensure that what the county needs it will provide.

The production of this report is extremely timely given the recent announcement by Croke Park that relatively large sums of money will be made available for the development of facilities, synthetic pitches in particular, and especially where they are located in urban areas. This report identifies that with forward longer term thinking a greater range of funding sources will likely become available.

Before committing fully to the preferred site, the necessary site surveys, full planning assessment and legal research should be carried out.

The report has been produced following consultation with the County's Ground Committee and the Ulster Council.

2.0 RELEVANT BACKGROUND

2.1 Population

The spread of population within the county, which is the province's most populated, is shown in Figure 1 below. It is accepted that not all of this theoretically available population will be either acquainted with or predisposed towards Gaelic games.

Almost half of the county's population is located within Belfast, with large numbers also located in the areas close to the city such as Newtownabbey. The remainder of the population is dispersed throughout the county with a large element located in the larger settlements such as Lisburn, Ballymena and Antrim town.

I would point out that there are relatively large towns like Antrim town and Ballymena in the county in addition to the existing cities of Belfast and Lisburn. Increased population outside Belfast is likely to occur as strategic economic and regional planning policy seeks to focus development, infrastructural and economic investment away from the county's main city. These considerations are important in the context of a preferred strategic location for a potential Centre of Excellence.

Town	Total Population
Belfast	257,491
Newtownabbey	79,995
Lisburn	76,036
Ballymena	58,610
Antrim	44,588
Carrickfergus	35,323
Larne	28,671
Ballymoney	25,753
Moyle	10,742
Ballycastle	6,002
Aghagallan	3,806
Total	555,017

Figure 1: Population Figures (2001)

2.2 Urban and Rural Context

The location of the county's main settlements is shown below in Figure 2. This shows that generally speaking settlement size decreases the further north one travels in the county. The population in the north of the county is more dispersed and rural based with a larger number of small towns, villages and hamlets.

There would not appear to be any single large concentration of population in the north of the county to justify a single large scale centre of excellence.

It is noticeable that there is a belt of fast growing towns stretching from Larne and Newtownabbey in the east including Ballyclare, to Antrim town, Ballymena, Randalstown and Toomebridge in the west.

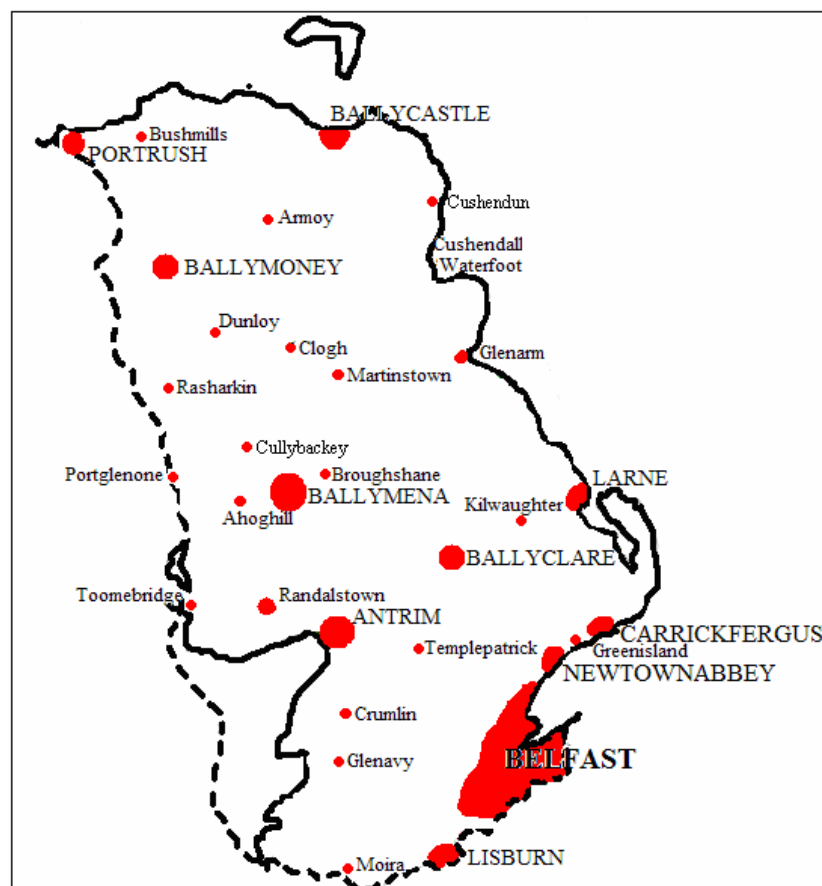


Figure 2: Towns and Cities in Co. Antrim

2.3 Transport and Access

Transport and access are a key consideration for choosing a viable and sustainable location for any Centre of Excellence. The principal components of the strategic road network within the county are shown in Figure 3 below.

The county is characterised by an extensive network of motorways unmatched anywhere in the province and A Class roads that make substantial parts of the county most accessible especially to the south and west. The M1 motorway and A26 act as a road based spine giving excellent strategic access to all areas of the County. The benefit of past investment in the road network in the Belfast area may be tempered by increased traffic congestion especially at peak playing periods in the evenings when commuter traffic can be greatest and the demand for use of facilities greatest.

A large scale facility to meet the strategic needs of the county would be best suited to a location on the strategic road network indicated below.

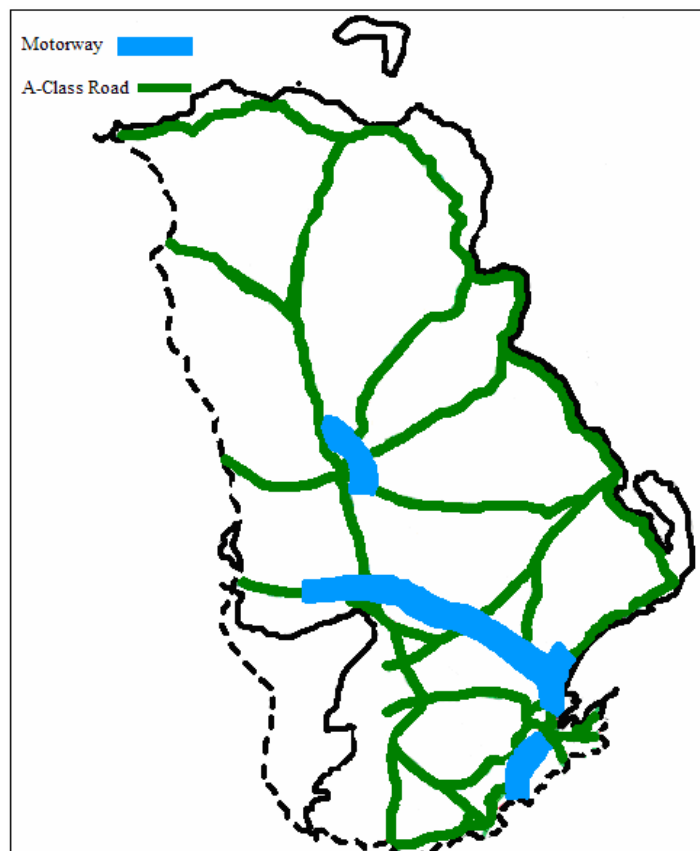


Figure 3: Road Network in the County

2.4 Clubs

The location of the county's clubs is a broad indication of where the GAA's population are currently to be found. The location of these clubs is shown below in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows a concentration of clubs in Belfast with a reasonable spread of clubs elsewhere with the exception of the north west and east of the county.

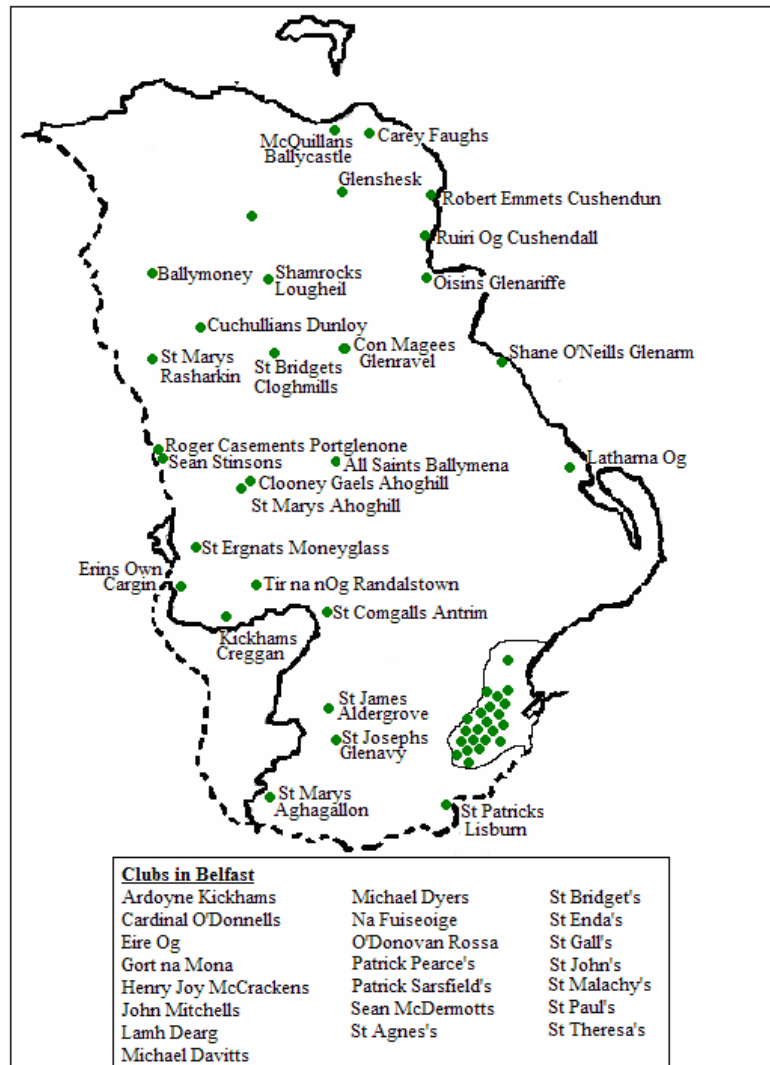


Figure 4: Location of clubs in Co. Antrim

2.5 Other counties

The County is one of the largest units in the Association if one were to consider the number of teams both adult and juvenile although this is not necessarily reflected in the number of clubs (more than half are dual) and in terms of County team success.

Although it is accepted that county Antrim should not be bound by what other counties do in regard to centres of excellence, it is worth noting the relationship of the size of the county in terms of registered teams to the size of the centre of excellence as shown in Figure 5 below:

County	No of Centre playing pitches	Total registered teams (2005)	Total registered teams per pitch	Youth teams (2005)	Youth team per pitch	Acres	Team (total) per acre	Youth teams per acre
Antrim	None	740	N/A	585	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Derry	9	308	39	223	26	40	7	0.22
Meath	7	599	86	367	53	28	22	14
Monaghan	6	326	55	231	39	N/K	N/K	N/K
Louth	6	479	80	365	61	35	14	11

Figure 5: Existing and Proposed Centres of Excellence

This table shows that there are counties with a smaller playing population, very often emphasising either football or hurling, but not both like Co Antrim, that have existing centres of excellence, and substantial ones at that. It is interesting to note that so called smaller counties like Monaghan and Louth, for example, have facilities with 6 and 4 playing pitches respectively.

3.0 CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE

The potential models or scenarios that *could* meet the county's facility requirements are set out, and from a preferred model, the most suitable location for a centre of excellence is identified. This report takes cognisance of all the County Board's land holdings and locations where access is currently available. The report is based on what the County needs rather than what can be accommodated on any one site.

3.1 What is a Centre of Excellence?

The concept of a "centre of excellence" originated in education and health and has been carried through to sport comparatively recently. The definition was originally based on high levels of skill or service provided in one location. In sport generally these centres have been provided as 'academies'. The provision of a high quality facility therefore must be complemented by a commensurate high standard of coaching and games promotion consistent with the academy principle. (i.e.) within Antrim facilities investment must be watched by significant investment in coaching especially.

There is no formal definition of a centre of excellence in GAA terms as they are relatively recent phenomenon. However, there is mention of them in the Strategic Review of the Association in 2002 in very general terms only.

Centres of excellence are characteristically strategic facilities providing a range of pitches both natural grass and more frequently synthetic surface for senior and juvenile coaching and training as well as ancillary amenities. They serve the catchment of a whole county and are of a sufficient scale to make them readily distinguishable from club facilities.

Therefore they require large sites and a number of potential sites must be excluded from consideration.

There are increasingly becoming a number of features provided within centres of excellence. These include:

- A substantial number of pitches (substantially more than one would find in a club facility).
- At least one synthetic pitch which is preferably a “third generation pitch” (defined below)
- Sufficient changing rooms suitably sized for large squads
- Kitchen and dining area
- Press / conferencing facilities
- Weights and conditioning room
- Hurling alleys
- Indoor sports hall
- Medical room, physiotherapy facilities potentially including hydrotherapy pool
- Coach and car parking
- Video tower
- Jogging / running route
- Sizeable equipment storage area to cater for training equipment
- Laundry room

This is not an arbitrary list but is made from my knowledge of existing and planned GAA centres of excellence as well as those of other sports in other countries.

Synthetic grass pitches (either sand, rubber or more recently water based that are also floodlit) are known as “third generation” pitches and are quite distinct from traditional “all weather” pitches which were commonly of gravel or cinder surface.

It is worth pointing out that more locally based centres may be capable of being provided that could fulfil a singularly reduced but collectively more geographically spread function than a single ‘supersized’ centre of excellence. A main centre would have to provide more pitches than would be customary in any club context and in this case it would be appropriate that at least one and possibly a second synthetic pitch would be provided. A third natural grass at least or possibly fourth pitch should have floodlights and dedicated changing rooms to enhance usage on the basis that many clubs will have 2 no. pitches. Locally orientated centres of excellence may only have one or pitches however.

3.2 Why Counties provide a Centre of Excellence?

There are several reasons why centres of excellence are provided by county boards. These include:

- A statement of a county's ambition;
- Lack of access by county teams to club facilities or other GAA facilities within a county on a regular and long term basis;
- The need to cater for the needs of increasingly large numbers of county teams and development squads including men, women and juveniles.
- An upgrade or provision of strategic facilities;
- The need for a range of support facilities and amenities beyond the mere provision of pitches such as elevated video points etc; to enhance coaching, competitive performance, games promotion
- The need to locate facilities in a single location convenient to the largest possible playing population.
- Providing certainty of venue and ensuring availability of facilities for training and coaching against increasing demand on pitches for games and competitive matches in particular.
- Reducing where possible the need to travel.
- To meet a county board's administration facility needs (i.e.) facilities for meetings, county convention, launches, press nights etc.

3.3 Key Issues Associated with Centres of Excellence

Based on the nature, scale and "market" of a centre of excellence the following issues are usually identified:

- A strategically accessible location convenient to the widest catchment and largest possible population in the county.
- Sufficient land to be made available to provide an optimum range of facilities.
- Sufficient finance should be in place and funding sources identified prior to embarking on any centre project.
- A practical and reliable local management structure to manage and maintain the centre usually with a connection to a local group of club.
- Sufficient range of facilities to cater for both hurling and football; all age groups; men and women's GAA activities;
- Weatherproof facilities to cater for increasingly extreme and unreliable weather.
- Using the facility as a promotional tool for Gaelic games in the county.
- Pitches are used primarily for coaching and informal games and seldom for formal or competitive matches.

- Creating a critical mass of facilities with resulting economies of scale in facility provision.
- Undertaking of a full feasibility study.

4.0 DO COUNTY ANTRIM NEED A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE?

This question can only be answered with regard to a brief and strategic assessment of the facilities at all levels in the County and what is potentially available to the possible end user of any Centre of Excellence i.e. development squads, senior and underage County panels.

4.1 Existing Facilities

The teams and development squads that could avail of a centre of excellence potentially have access to a range of existing facilities. The facility resource in the county can be subdivided for assessment into the following categories:

- club;
- educational;
- institutional and other sport's facilities
- local authority; and
- county board facilities

The assessment under each category is as follows:

4.1.1 Club

It is easily forgotten that clubs can only provide limited opportunity to the County Board for use of their pitches by development squads and county panels. Whilst the standard of club facilities in the county is generally high, reflective of sustained investment in club amenities, there is considerable existing pressure on club facilities including pitches, changing rooms and indoor halls to meet club needs alone. A brief survey of all 51 clubs in the county indicates that the majority of clubs have access to 2 pitches, whilst one club has access to 3 pitches. Only 5 clubs (under 10%) have access to their own floodlit pitches. The current popularity in Gaelic games and increased participation in ladies football and camogie in particular mean that there will be increasing pressure on club facilities.

4.1.2 *Educational*

Third Level

County Antrim is unique in Ulster in that it has the benefit of being home (or having ready access in the case of Coleraine University) to numerous third level educational establishments. These are included in Figure 5 below.

Name	Full Size Grass Pitches	All Weather Pitches	3 rd Generation Pitches	Floodlights	Gym / Sports Hall	Changing Facilities
Coleraine University	1	X	X	✓	✓	✓
UUJ	3	X	1	✓	✓	✓
Greenmount Agricultural	2	X	X	X	✓	✓
QUB	3	X	X	X	X	✓
St. Marys	1	X	X	X	✓	✓

Figure 5 Third Level Educational Facilities

There are a relatively high number of third level facilities within the County. These facilities however are under pressure from the various teams in these universities and colleges as well as other county teams and even clubs. They offer a level of associated expertise that potentially make them valuable resources for the County but have restricted (and often costly) access to these facilities.

Relatively limited access will ensure that third level colleges will not meet the regular facility needs of the County's development squads and team panels as these facilities only have maximum availability during the summer months.

Second Level

There are comparatively very few facilities potentially available from the relatively large number of schools in the county. There are a relatively small number of secondary level GAA participating schools that have or are capable of meeting the county's pitches needs. This is both a symptom and part cause of relatively poor performance of the County's schools in their competitions. These are relatively limited geographically mainly being concentrated in Belfast. These facilities include more notably the following:

Name	Full Size Grass Pitches	All Weather Pitches	3 rd Generation Pitches	Floodlights	Gym / Sports Hall	Changing Facilities
St.Malachy's College	X	X	1	✓	✓	✓
Garron Tower	1	X	X	X	✓	✓
St.Mary's CB Grammar	3	1	X	X	✓	✓
La Salle	2	X	X	X	✓	✓

Figure 6 Secondary Level Schools

If, as is hoped, an emphasis is to be placed on schools coaching these facilities will have to be retained for primarily schools coaching. As with all school land assets many GAA pitches are being lost to development.

Second level educational facilities are therefore relatively limited and should be set aside for the various schools own needs.

4.1.3 *Institutional and Other Sport's Facilities*

There are no facilities in institutional ownership that are potentially available to the County Board although these are usually an important element of any county's playing pitch stock. The County senior hurling squad have used Ballymena Rugby Club on occasion but this should only be seen as a temporary measure until such time as sufficient other facilities are provided. Land available there is also at most going to yield only one or two pitches which will have minimal benefit against overall need.

4.1.4 *Local Authority*

Local authority access to pitches is extremely limited. In fact, it is now a pressing issue for the Board and for clubs that not more local authority pitches are made available for matches in particular. Although there are 9 local authorities "serving" the County there is limited access to their facilities as set out below in Figure 7.

Name	Full Size Grass Pitches	All Weather Pitches	3 rd Generation Pitches	Floodlights	Gym / Sports Hall	Changing Facilities
Whiterock Leisure Centre	X	X	1	✓	✓	✓
Ballycastle Public Pitch	X	X	1	✓	X	?
Mallusk Playing Fields	2	X	X	X	X	✓
Falls Park	2	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 7 Local Authority Facilities

From the figure above it is crystal clear that local authority pitches provide an unsatisfactorily small input into the County's playing stock. Additional local authority pitches or enhanced access to existing pitches will likely only meet club needs in the foreseeable future. There is therefore little potential for access to these facilities for the County's squads and panels and this is certainly insufficient to obviate the need for a main centre of excellence.

4.1.5 *The County Board*

To ensure maximum access to facilities it has become increasingly necessary for the Board to provide its own facilities. These currently include as set out below in Figure 8:

Name	Grass Pitches	All Weather Pitches	3 rd Generation Pitches	Floodlights	Gym / Sports Hall	Changing Facilities
Woodlands (long lease renewal)	2	X	X	X	X	X
Casement Park	1	X	X	✓	X	✓

Figure 8 County Board Facilities

Casement Park has limited potential for training and coaching and the benefits of its floodlighting, recently granted planning permission, are primarily for the hosting of floodlit matches. Training and coaching under floodlights at Casement Park would certainly be uneconomic. Woodlands requires significant upgrading as seen from the range of amenities lacking there currently and evident in the table above and the issue of a lease and management plan have yet to be resolved. However at 26 acres it represents potentially a significant asset to the County subject to satisfactory licensing and management with Belfast City Council.

From the above it is clear that the Board has extremely limited facilities to offer its squads and teams both in terms of the range and location of facilities that it owns or that it will have a long lease to use.

It is clear from this whole section that there are very limited opportunities to cater for the envisaged increased use of existing facilities and pitches in the County due to:

- limited spatial spread of facilities; and
- limited range of and suitable access to existing facilities including weatherproof facilities especially with floodlighting and requisite changing facilities.

The needs of the development squads and team panels cannot therefore be met substantially by any or all of the existing facilities. It should be recognised that a series of local centres exist in function, if not in designation, through the provision of the smaller scale facilities identified above. However, the existence and potential of these smaller local centres in no way obviates the need for a main centre of excellence as will be made patently clear in the following sections.

4.2 Facility Demand in Co. Antrim

It is a modern day requirement to cater for the following needs:

- all year round use;
- use during inclement weather;
- night time use through provision of floodlighting;
- both male and female facilities; and
- ancillary and support uses such as administrative facilities, media related operations, medical facilities.

In looking at facility needs it is important to consider both existing and potential future demand as it is important to plan for the foreseeable future and not just for current needs or trends.

Existing Demand

The current potential demand for facilities for the County's teams and development squads, assuming successful involvement in respective competitions in hurling and football, is summarised below in Figure 9:

Team	September – January		February – April		May – August	
	Sessions/days per wk	Hrs per wk	Sessions/days per wk	Hrs per wk	Sessions/days per wk	Hrs per wk
Senior Footballers	2	4	3	6	4	8
Senior Hurlers	2	4	3	6	4	8
U21 Footballers	0	0	2	4	3	6
U21 Hurlers	0	0	2	4	3	6
Minor Footballers	0	0	2	4	3	6
Minor Hurlers	0	0	2	4	3	6
U17 Footballers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U17 Hurlers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U16 Footballers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U16 Hurlers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U15 Footballers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U15 Hurlers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U14 Footballers	0	0	1	2	2	4
U14 Hurlers	0	0	1	2	2	4
Total	4	8	22	44	36	72

Figure 9 Summary of Development Squads and Team Panels Pitch Requirements

The table above indicates the following:

- There is a minimum of 14 hurling and football squads requiring facilities;
- Facilities will be in demand for approximately 12 months per annum to varying degrees; as the GAA season increasingly takes up a full calendar year.

- Substantial demand is over the period September to April where weather and early night fall limit the use of sports facilities;
- At the potential peak period of the year (May to August) all teams generate a maximum potential collective requirement for 36 session's access per week for hurling and mens gaelic football alone.

On the basis that each potential pitch could accommodate one evening session Monday through to Friday, and a maximum of three sessions on either a Saturday or Sunday, a reasonable requirement of 8 sessions per pitch can be estimated. For a maximum of 36 coaching/training sessions per week for all current squads (second column from the right above) a minimum current requirement of 4 no. and quite possibly 5 pitches exists. If at least one synthetic pitch is provided 4 no. would likely be sufficient however.

This demand is likely to be potentially further increased by the following:

- creation of development squads at younger age groups i.e. under 13 and possibly younger;
- catering for ladies football and camogie as the Association moves inexorably towards full integration of its constituent groups.
- hosting of cúl camps etc and large scale coaching/promotion events;
- the need to protect pitches from over use.

Potential Future Demand

It is possible that there may be younger development squads as young as under 12 which would add potentially a further 4 teams covering hurling and football.

Ladies football may also need to be catered for sometime in the future. Currently the County has squads at Under 16, minor and senior. This comprises a further 3 teams for ladies gaelic football.

Camogie is also popular in the County and teams are fielded mainly at U16, minor and senior levels. Camogie therefore generates a demand for a further 3 teams.

It is accepted that men and ladies gaelic football, hurling and camogie are popular in the County and that perhaps the demand for pitches is greater than in any other County in Ulster. However, in the future there may be a requirement for as many as 22 squads covering all GAA pitch based activity.

4.3 Is a Centre of Excellence needed?

There is unquestionably a requirement for additional pitches (potentially 8 no.) and ancillary facilities that could be best met in a single location.

Such facilities can best be met in a centre of excellence stimulating an emphasis on enhanced coaching, resulting in economies on scale, running cost savings and obviating the need for effectively repeating facilities in various locations.

The preferred format and location for such a centre of excellence is discussed later in this report.

5.0 POTENTIAL MODELS

There are 3 “models” for providing a single and/or potentially multiple centres of excellence to meet facility and playing pitch needs for Co Antrim. These are:

- (a) A single purpose-built centre of excellence;
- (b) A series of smaller local centres; and
- (c) A main centre of excellence with other smaller local centres. (the combination of (a) & (b) above).

These are described below.

(a) A Single purpose-built Centre of Excellence.

This is likely to comprise the provision of a minimum of 4 no. pitches and as many as 8 no. in one location given an emphasis away from local centres. It should also comprise an indoor sports arena, ancillary car parking, gym/weights room, physiotherapy and medical facilities, media/press room, kitchen and dining area as well as changing rooms. The pitches should comprise natural grass, 3rd generation floodlit and juvenile pitches. A very substantial facility would be anticipated under this model or scenario in the absence of an emphasis on local facilities.

Under this model whilst Woodlands may meet the size requirement of a solitary centre of excellence it would be too remote to serve most of the county.

(b) A series of smaller local centres.

This potential model is a continuation of the current situation but where existing facilities are upgraded and new local scale facilities provided. These would be in a variety of locations. There would be no main centre under this model or scenario. It would inevitably mean an overlap of smaller scale facilities such as providing a small number of pitches at the County Boards' land holding at Ballygrooby and retaining access to Greenmount Agricultural College. The acquisition of smaller amounts of land to serve more local catchments is likely to be costly.

(c) A Main Centre of Excellence and other smaller Local Centres

This potential model is a combination of potential scenarios (a) and (b) above whereby a strategic, large conveniently located main centre of excellence is provided but supported by a number of smaller complementary centres utilising previous investments where feasible. This model would maximise the potential of Woodlands even if it were not the preferred solitary centre of excellence.

6.0 THE PREFERRED MODEL

6.1 The Preferred Model

The available models identified in Section 5.0 above that could potentially fit County Antrim can be assessed against a number of criteria which help identify which suits the county best.

The criteria are as follows:

- (1) Utilise the existing assets / investments of the County
- (2) Results in economies of scale and therefore cost savings
- (3) Utilise the County's excellent roads infrastructure
- (4) Best meets the general population distribution in the County
- (5) Provides a reasonable spread of facilities in each of the County Board's divisions i.e. South , South West and North Antrim
- (6) Provides a statement of the County's ambition / marketing
- (7) Provides a critical mass in each location to encourage the broadest range of uses and users.
- (8) Complements facilities existing and planned of the clubs / schools / local authorities
- (9) Provides maximum penetration to areas where the GAA is currently popular.
- (10) Provides access to areas where there is potential for the GAA to penetrate new locations / markets.
- (11) Likely to meet funding requirements for centres of excellence, urban development and third generation pitch provision likely to be announced by Croke Park soon.

Scenarios	1 Uses existing assets / investments	2 Economies of Scale	3 Utilises roads infrastructure	4 Population Distribution	5 Divisional Spread	6 Ambition/ Marketing	7 Critical Mass	8 Complements Clubs, Schools Facilities etc	9 GAA Areas	10 'New' GAA Areas	11 Funding Compliant
A Single Purpose Built Centre	X	✓✓	✓✓	-	XX	✓✓	✓✓	✓	X	X	✓
B Smaller Centres Only	✓✓	XX	✓	✓✓	✓✓	X	X	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
C Main Centre & Local Centres Combined	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓

Key
 ✓✓ Very Well
 ✓ Well
 - Neutral / Unknown
 X Poorly
 XX Very Poorly

Figure 10 Assessment of Models

The preferred model, using the assessment above in Figure 10, is one of a main centre of excellence complemented by a series of smaller local centres utilising existing and planned facilities some of which area identified in earlier sections.

7.0 ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL LOCATIONS

7.1 Potential Locations

Main Centre of Excellence

There are only three initially suitable sites for a main Centre of Excellence. The rest, identified in proceeding sections, due to various constraints including size are more suitable for local size centres. The potential locations that have become available to the County Board are:

- 1) Ballygrooby;
- 2) Antrim Town; and
- 3) Woodlands

There are no locations or sites within North Antrim suitable for a main Centre of Excellence as set out in Section 2.0 above in terms of population, settlement pattern or transport/access. A more recent alternative is lands available at / adjacent to Ballymena Rugby Club but this offers only potential for a maximum of 2 no. pitches which would yield less provision then any of the three options above. It would not therefore meet the requirements of a centre of excellence and is not considered as a viable alternative to 1) to 3) directly above.

Local Centres of Excellence

Section 4.1 identifies existing facilities in the County some of which in their current form have the potential, subject to development, to function as local Centres of Excellence. These are shown in Figure 5 (Third Level Colleges); Figure 6 (Second Level Schools); Figure 7 (Local Authorities); and finally the Board's own lands (Figure 8).

As indicated above local centres should be spread as equitably as possible amongst the three divisional boards. Special regard should be had towards providing at least one local facility within each of north, south and west Belfast also within the South Antrim Division. It may be advisable as a matter of principle to seek to have a centre in each of the neighbouring boroughs of Newtownabbey and Lisburn in the longer term, where significant population is already located, and to where population continues to leak out from Belfast.

It is recognised that current facilities where the County has only limited access, such as local authority pitches, may only have limited potential for expansion or upgrade.

7.2 Assessment of Potential Locations

The assessment of the potential sites and locations for a main centre of excellence are as follows:

Site/Location	For	Against	Verdict
Ballygrooby	<p>Convenient access off M1 motorway</p> <p>Land already purchased by Co. Board</p> <p>Within settlement belt identified in Section 2.2 above</p>	<p>A site of 13 acres can accommodate only 2 pitches.</p> <p>Located relatively remotely to existing settlements or clubs</p> <p>Unknown whether there is potential to expand site size.</p> <p>Position of Ulster Council as major funder is unknown.</p> <p>Site is not located within an urban settlement and would therefore fall outside likely funding requirements of the Urban Development Fund.</p> <p>No funds raised yet.</p> <p>Relative remoteness will not assist maintenance or management.</p>	<p>It is not considered that this site is suitable for the main centre of excellence as required in the County.</p> <p>Should be retained as an investment especially since planning permission for recreational use has been obtained.</p> <p>Planning permission should be renewed.</p>
Antrim town	<p>Site has excellent access off M1.</p> <p>Site is located within an urban area and would likely meet funding requirements of the Strategic Development Fund of Croke Park and the Urban Development Fund in particular.</p> <p>Site is located within a mixed residential/commercial area with hospitals, hotels, shops, restaurants in close proximity.</p> <p>Purchase price potentially represents good value.</p> <p>Site currently comprises 21</p>	<p>Limited current access exists to the site. Possibility of enhanced access through adjoining DSD lands.</p> <p>Purchase of land is yet to be completed.</p> <p>Site does not have planning permission for recreational use.</p> <p>Site investigations yet to be undertaken.</p> <p>Site has yet to be valued.</p>	<p>This site is considered the preferred site/location for the main centre of excellence.</p> <p>To meet all the county's needs further lands would need to be acquired.</p>

	<p>acres enough for at least 4 pitches possibly 5. Additional lands may likely be acquired by purchase / long lease from the Dept of Social Development.</p> <p>Site is located in a relatively large town within the County growth belt identified in section 2.2.</p> <p>Likely that St Comgalls would co-share some of the facilities, greatly assisting maintenance and management.</p> <p>Presence of a major facility would reinvigorate the GAA in one the county's largest towns.</p>		
Woodlands	<p>At 26 acres already provides 3 pitches.</p> <p>Located within Belfast – the county's main population centre.</p> <p>Very large site offers potential as Belfast's principal local centre.</p> <p>Potential to complement and act as a cluster to Casement Park.</p>	<p>Although located well in Belfast strategic road network, local road network is often congested and considered inadequate.</p> <p>Providing 3 pitches is currently considered below minimum requirement for a main Centre of Excellence.</p> <p>Inconveniently located to southwest and south division.</p> <p>Board only currently likely have a long lease for the grounds.</p> <p>Clarification needs to be sought on management / maintenance agreements with the Council.</p> <p>Vandalism continues to be an issue.</p>	<p>Considered to have potential as a local centre of excellence only.</p> <p>Potential to complement Casement Park as a warm up/team preparation facility.</p>

The preferred location for the main Centre of Excellence should therefore be Antrim town based on the above assessment. The non inclusion of Ballygrooby as the main centre in Antrim town would not necessarily mean that it is viable as a local centre as it would be located too close to the Antrim town main centre of excellence resulting in duplication of facilities. The location of the main centre within the south west divisional board area should mean that there is no need for any local centre as the main centre in Antrim town would also fulfil a local function. It is recommended that Ballygrooby be retained as an investment as it has planning permission for recreational use that makes the site of some commercial value in an agricultural area.

The provision of the main centre in Antrim town would provide maximum accessibility to the county from the sites realistically and currently available. Figure 10 below shows the 50 minute catchment from Antrim town to various parts of the county and indicates that the majority of the county is within this catchment. It is considered that 50 minutes would be a reasonable time to travel to and from coaching / training sessions. Comparison with figure 4 would indicate that very few clubs would be located outside this drivetime catchment.

An initial planning appraisal of the Antrim town site is contained in Appendix 1. There are no insurmountable planning issues. It would also be quite appropriate for the main centre to be located in the county town.

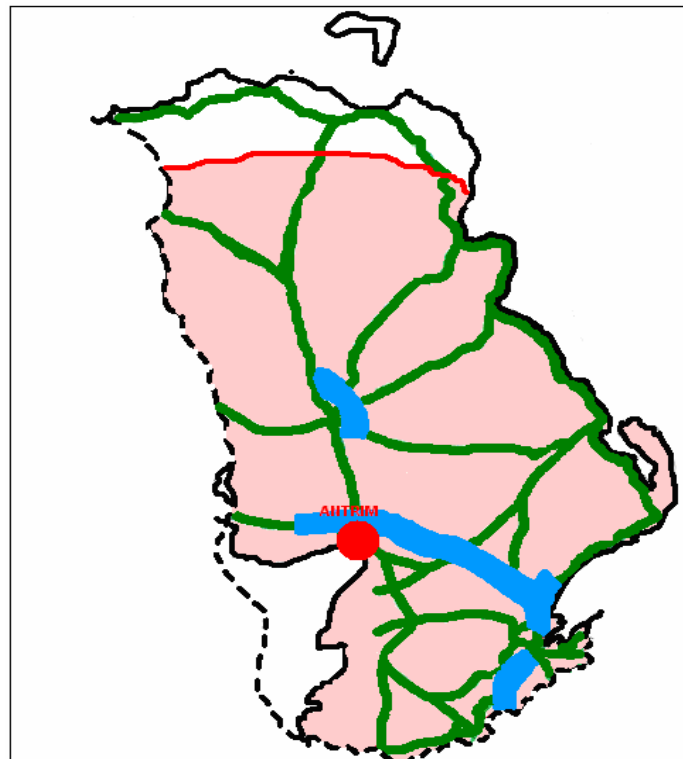


Figure 10. Areas of Co Antrim within a 50 minute drive time of Antrim Town

Local Centres

As indicated above the preference should be to have at least one local centre in each divisional area with a facility in each of north, south and west Belfast. These centres should be derived largely from the range of facilities that the County now has in its ownership or at least has access to. These are set out below. In the longer term further local centres of excellence should be provided in each of Lisburn and Newtownabbey bearing in mind the requirement for at least 2 grass or one third generation pitch as a minimum requirement.

The location of the main and local centres of excellence are shown in Figure 11 below.

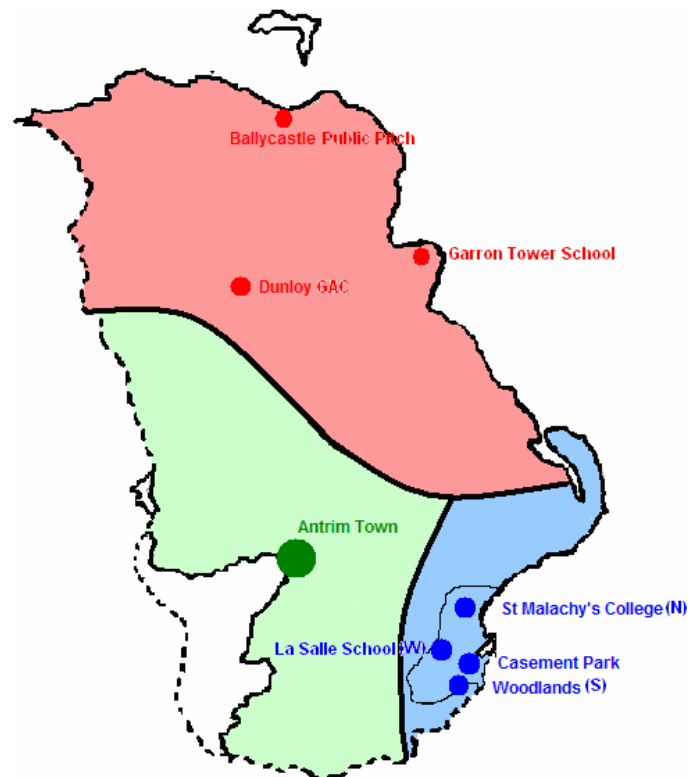


Figure 11 Location of the main and local centres of excellence

8.0 PROPOSAL FOR A MAIN CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

8.1 Proposed Main Centre of Excellence

The main Centre of Excellence should be at Antrim Town from all the viable locations potentially available.

As there is currently 21 acres more immediately available with potential for further land to be made available subject to negotiation with the Department of Social Development I would propose two phases. Phase 1 would meet current needs and phase 2 would meet current needs further and future needs also.

Phase 1

The provision of 4 no. full size pitches, of which a minimum of 1 no. third generation pitch (possibly 2 no. subject to available funding) is recommended in this first phase. All 4 no. pitches should be floodlit. On the basis that funding from Croke Park would currently appear to be skewed towards floodlit synthetic pitches the provision of the third generation pitches should be 'frontloaded' into Phase 1. These pitches should be accompanied by a car park to accommodate approximately 100 car parking spaces and some 10 coach parking spaces.

The main centre structures should comprise:

- (1) Some 8 no. changing rooms
- (2) Kitchen/dining area
- (3) Press/conference/convention facilities
- (4) Weights and conditioning Room
- (5) Medical and physiotherapy rooms
- (6) Video tower overlooking at least two pitches.
- (7) Laundry room
- (8) Sufficiently large kit and equipment storage areas

As set out below there is a strong case for funding to be made available. The Board should "aim high" and seek to provide these facilities in a first phase.

Phase 2

I am aware that there is the possibility of acquiring further adjoining land from the Department of Social Development. If this is the case I believe that a strong case could be set out for a "groundbreaking" indoor pitch that I would term "fourth generation".

I believe such a facility could be based on the JJB facility in Dundalk in terms of its size (180m by 75m approx) and covered structure. Such a facility would be capable of accommodating GAA matches from U12 down and accommodating a range of not only summer camps but also winter sessions and could be the envy of not only every other County Board in the Association but also every other sporting organisation in the province. Preferential rates could be given to the GAA's own clubs if access were not given for free.

I believe such a development could be undertaken as a joint venture with a private company (such as but not necessarily JJB) so as to ensure that the GAA have primary and priority access but that it be made available at commercial rates to other sports clubs. It could be made available at reduced rates to community groups. Such a facility would meet not just the Association's needs but the sporting needs of a variety of other sporting organisations in the Toomebridge, Antrim Town, Randalstown, Ballyclare and Larne areas. A GAA facility capable of accommodating other sporting activities would fit well with the overall aims of the Department of Social Development and could potentially act as leverage for acquiring more land and providing direct access through Department Lands.

Such a proposition would not only likely be attractive to the Department of Social Development but would also offer up the potential for funding from such diverse organisations as Peace and Reconciliation, the International Fund for Ireland and also the Sports Council. Such a facility, including both phases 1 and 2, would also meet the likely requirements for funding under the GAA's own Strategic Development Fund and therefore I feel the scheme could be ambitious in each phase.

Phase 2 could therefore comprise the following:

- (1) Indoor synthetic pitch (subject to funding and suitable partnership arrangements being put in place).
- (2) Additional 4 no. natural grass pitches to take the total to 8
- (3) Jogging/Running Route
- (4) Handball Alleys.

An indicative costing exercise has been carried out and is enclosed as Appendix 2. A further more detailed costing exercise can be carried out if the County Board indicate that they are prepared to proceed further with Antrim town.

8.2 Proposed Local Centres

North Antrim

There are a relatively few number of facilities that could be upgraded to provide a sufficient standard of facility to serve the local needs of the County. These are:

Garron Tower: I am aware that the School may amalgamate but every effort should be made to seek to have the 26 existing pitches retained and if possible enhanced. These facilities could be enhanced considerably with a 3rd generation pitch (floodlighting and artificial surface). In this regard a facility similar to Saint Malachy's College in Belfast would be viable. Such dual use (effectively community use and educational use) would be

encouraged by potential funding sources such as the Department of Education and the Sports Council. (although their funding is likely to be skewed towards Olympic facilities).

Ballycastle: This Moyle District Council facility is likely to continue to provide a facility for the northern coast. It is proposed that access to this facility is maximised and that at this stage minimal physical works are required to the existing facility.

Dunloy: The proposed indoor hurling facility at Dunloy, whilst likely to be used extensively by the club, offers the potential for use by the County. The proposed indoor hurling alley offers a facility that would be unique in the county and should be supported in recognition of the special standing and popularity of hurling in North Antrim.

I would suggest that the County Board support any funding application by the Cuchullains Club in return for access to the proposed facility for the County's teams and development squads. A legal agreement could be put in place to this effect.

The provision of facilities in locations identified above would maximise provision in North Antrim to serve the north eastern coastline (Garron Tower), the northern coastline (Ballycastle), and what I would term the central north area (Dunloy). I firmly believe all three facilities would complement each other and function as a so called cluster. This is also shown in Figure 11.

South West Antrim

As indicated above I believe the provision of the main centre of excellence in Antrim town, which would also perform a local function as well as county wide facility, would obviate the need for any other designated centres in the South West Division. At this stage in regard to local facilities the focus is on north, west and south Belfast.

South Antrim

Within Belfast there is a requirement for a local centre in each of North, South and West Belfast. There is also a requirement for potentially a local centre in each of Lisburn and Newtownabbey in the longer term.

On this basis the preferred locations are:

North Belfast:

It is accepted entirely that St Malachy's College receives considerable pressure from other sporting organisations and community groups. However the priority should be to retain and where possible enhance access to this facility. There may also be potential for the school, and indirectly the County Board, to have a further pitch in any redevelopment

of the adjacent lands formerly known as the Girdwood Barracks. An aspiration should be to acquire or have provided jointly with the school a full size pitch to complement the existing juvenile size pitch, to facilitate competitive matches as well as coaching and training. The additional pitch should however be floodlit. Such a pitch could be shared with other sports given the pressure for development.

South Belfast

Woodlands should be upgraded especially to provide 1 no synthetic pitch if an acceptably long lease can be agreed with Belfast City Council and management and maintenance agreement put in place that is agreeable to the County Board. A proposal for a synthetic pitch covering south and potentially west Belfast is likely to be well received for funding purposes by Croke Park in my opinion. Land prices are likely to preclude the acquisition of land for an alternative facility in south Belfast. Woodlands at 26 acres offers not only the potential to act as a local centre of excellence for south Belfast but also to be the main local centre of excellence in all of Belfast. There is also potential for ancillary facilities to complement the upgrade of Casement Park as indicated below and to act as a cluster with the county ground.

West Belfast

Pressure on facilities in west Belfast, where the concentration of club is greater, would be greatly alleviated by the provision of a third generation pitch. It is possible that La Salles existing facilities at Glen road could be upgraded for such a purpose.

Casement Park should be considered separately from the local and main centres of excellence but can meet the needs of the various county teams. It should be upgraded to enhance the match preparation and post match recovery of the county's teams possibly in tandem as a cluster facility with Woodlands. This would include match preparation area, weights room, gym, plunge pool, media room and meeting room at the County ground. I believe that careful consideration should be given to reappraising the capacity of the ground in the likely event of the Maze development going ahead and to the grounds potential for other supporting and revenue generating potential uses. The grounds future potential can be considered in a masterplan for the ground.

An indicative costing exercise has been undertaken for those works, identified at this stage, that are required to be carried out subject to further more detailed consideration.

9.0 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

Strategic

- 1) A centre of excellence be provided to complement and supplement a series of smaller scale, mainly existing, facilities to meet more local needs.
- 2) Of the available sites **Antrim town** provides the site that best meets the relevant criteria in terms of:
 - a) size of site
 - b) strategic access
 - c) central location
 - d) potentially available for strategic development and urban based grants from Croke Park.
 - e) offers potential dual club use and could be managed/maintained locally by the St Comgalls club
 - f) offers potential for a commercially viable development with necessary amenities and services in close proximity.
- 3) Local ancillary centres should be provided in each of the County's other divisions namely North Antrim and South Antrim. The Antrim Town Centre of Excellence can fulfil a local function also for the South West.
- 4) Local centres are proposed for Ballycastle Public Pitches, Garron Tower and Dunloy GAC in North Antrim and in St. Malachy's College (North Belfast); Woodlands (South Belfast) and La Salle School Grounds (West Belfast) even if the existing school should be relocated or closed.
- 5) The County Board should still retain a level of access to the County's specialist and high level expertise at UUJ and St Mary's College.
- 6) An equal emphasis should be placed on the highest standard of coaching at the County's centre of excellence.
- 7) The Board should retain the lands at Ballygrooby as a valuable land bank/commercial asset since it has planning permission for recreational use. If necessary planning permission should be renewed.
- 8) The Board should seek to acquire adjoining lands in Antrim Town for future expansion in the reasonable expectation that, given the location next to residential and commercial land uses (Junction One), it will very likely appreciate in value.

The Main Centre of Excellence

- 9) My calculations would indicate that initially a minimum of 4 no. full sized pitches of which one at least should be 3rd generation (see definition above) and the remaining pitches be of natural grass for use by the local club for competitive games in a first phase. All 4 pitches in the first phase should be floodlit. This requirement is based upon:
- a) the needs of current pitch demand
 - b) meeting the future needs of the Association's umbrella organisations including camogie and handball in which the county has a proud history as well as the emerging needs of ladies Gaelic football.

A second phase of a further 4 no. pitches could be provided including an indoor facility to meet not just the county's needs, but potentially more, given the excellent strategic location subject to funding and suitable partnership arrangements being made.

- 10) The following ancillary facilities may also required over the two phases:
- a) Potentially 16 no. full sized changing rooms (potentially 8 no.pitches)
 - b) referees and coaches rooms
 - c) indoor sports hall
 - d) conference room capable of holding County Convention.
 - e) smaller meeting rooms
 - f) dining area
 - g) kitchen for fully prepared/cooked meals
 - h) press room
 - i) medical room
 - j) physiotherapy rooms
 - k) 'plunge' baths
 - l) hydrotherapy room
 - m) fitness suite/gym.

- 11) If the County Board are minded the following should be undertaken:

- (a) Site Surveys;
- (b) Full planning assessment;
- (c) Legal research;
- (d) Firm discussion with the Department of Social Development;
- (e) Valuation of the lands

Local Centres

- 12) A series of local centres should be developed in the North and South Antrim administrative areas.

North Antrim

Dunloy – provision of an indoor hurling alley.

Garron Tower – upgrade of existing pitches as per St Malachy's College in Belfast.

Ballycastle Public Pitch – enhanced access to the Council's playing pitches.

South Antrim

North Belfast – continued access to existing facilities at **St Malachy's College** and possibly access to full scale GAA pitch in any development of the adjacent Girdwood Barracks site.

South Belfast – upgrading of **Woodlands** with permanent floodlighting and permanent changing rooms/showers and provision of synthetic grass pitch.

West Belfast – Provision of third generation pitch in association with **La Salle School**.

In the longer term it would be advisable to seek to have locations for local centres of excellence in both the Lisburn and Newtownabbey areas. In terms of the latter area there is potential to enhance the use of Mallusk Playing Fields. Neither Lisburn nor Newtownabbey however are potential locations for a main centre of excellence due to their relative remoteness to large parts of the county.

- 13) To complement the centres of excellence the facilities, amenities and potential of Casement Park should be reconsidered in any reduction in the capacity of the stadium. In any such reduction the emphasis should be placed on providing revenue generating uses on site and on upgrading facilities for the pre match preparation and post match recovery of our own county teams.
- 14) Casement Park should be the subject of a masterplan to consider all options for the county ground.

Funding

- 15) As a guiding principle the County Board should not spend its money on capital projects where other alternative funding sources are potentially available i.e. the necessary financial investment in people such as coaching should complement the provision of the centres themselves consistent with the original intention of centres of excellence.
- 16) The Board should consider reusing or leasing out its facilities to clubs and other sports where this is appropriate. Accommodating a wide range of community and other sporting activity needs, on the Board's and Association's own terms will broaden the potential range of available funding sources. Such facilities include the 3rd generation pitches, sports hall, dining facility, conference facility and meeting rooms.

- 17) The County Board should seriously consider the potential in providing any new facilities of joint ventures with local community groups or more particularly the private sector.
- 18) The main centre of excellence should be the subject of a more detailed feasibility study.
- 19) A very large indoor centre (as opposed to a 'sports hall') should seriously be considered as part of a second phase to the development of the Main Centre of Excellence in Antrim town. The indoor centre could be provided as a joint venture with a commercial partner or consistent with other partnership models acceptable to Croke Park were more land to be made available by the Department of Social Development. Such a facility should be capable of providing a full scale juvenile match.
- 20) The centre of excellence should form part of an application for funding (potentially 100%) under either or both the Strategic Development Fund or Urban Development Fund.
- 21) The County Board should ensure that the existing Grounds Committee has the necessary financial and skills resources provided to it to ensure that the County has a vigorous voice in the funding application and allocation process at Croke Park given that we are the second most populous county in the GAA.

9.2 **The Way Forward**

A feasibility study for the main, and any necessary local centres of excellence, should be undertaken to support an application for funding to Croke Park under the Strategic Development Fund and the Urban Development Fund in particular. There are guidelines for such applications about to be published in Croke Park. The deadline for receipt of applications will likely be the end of this year or possibly early next year.

My consultation with Croke Park indicates that there is funding available within the Strategic Development Fund of which E9million is available for urban based development and E18million available for full length artificial pitches. There are currently no requirements for matching funding and no limit on funding to be given and for this reason I believe that the county should be ambitious.

The tasks to be undertaken and identified in recommendation of above should be carried out as soon as practically possible as these point will need clarification for any funding applications.

This report should form part of any applications for funding.

APPENDIX 1

Initial Planning Appraisal of Preferred Site for Main Centre of Excellence in Antrim Town

Strategic Planning Context

The Regional Development Strategy identifies Antrim town for further substantial growth. In the period up to 2016 the district of Antrim, including the town, is identified for accommodating a further 8,000 or so housing units. This is substantial figure and will undoubtedly justify both enhanced recreational facilities and the extension of the development boundaries of the town.

Local Planning Context

The planning and future development of the town is determined to a very large degree by the adopted plan for the town. The adopted plan is the Antrim Area Plan which runs from 1984 to 2001. In the adopted Plan the site is identified contiguous to the defined development boundary of the town. Sites on the town side of the site, and largely within the ownership of the Department of Social Development, are identified for future residential development.

This 1984-2001 Plan, whilst considerably outdated, is currently used to assist in the determination of planning applications. It is currently being reviewed and a draft plan will be produced from March of next year (2008) which will thereafter be the subject of public consultation. Submissions will be received up to this date, and possibly beyond if the plan is delayed further, for those seeking to have amendments made to the existing adopted plan. It is very strongly urged that the County Board make a submission therefore at least seeking the extension of the boundary as development within the boundary would generally be acceptable in principle and development located outside the defined boundary would likely be considered unacceptable in principle. The proximity of the site to the existing defined boundary greatly assists in this case as does the fact that recreational use of the site will also be sought.

Key Planning Issues/Findings

The following are my key planning findings and opinions following my review of the town plan and discussions with the local planners from the Planning Service based in Ballymena.

- Given the future growth needs of the town there is an excellent chance that the development boundary can be extended for recreation purposes which I consider a relatively benign reason for extending this boundary.
- A formal submission to the emerging draft plan should be made regarding expanding the town boundary to include the subject lands.
- There is possibly a strong case for having some of the lands within the subject site zoned for residential subject to satisfactory access being provided.
- The ability to provide access through the DSD lands is greatly enhanced by the fact that their lands are zoned for development (residential) and access in principle could serve both their zoned lands and the potential GAA site.
- If sufficient sites are to be identified for future development in this part of the town (which is possible) the Roads and Planning Service may have to completely reinvestigate the issue of strategic access to this part of the town including potentially providing a cross route north of the subject site and the existing rail line linking the Ballymena Road with the Niblock Road.
- If adjoining lands to the north west were to be zoned for development, access north of the rail line, where it crosses over the Ballymena Road, may be possible as a supplement to or

alternative to having to provide access through the DSD lands off Meadowlands/Niblock Road.

- The potential for the further zoning of lands for development in this part of the town may make the acquisition of further adjoining lands costly unless lands are targeted to the north east (i.e. furthest from existing roads and from the existing town boundary).
- The potential purchase of further lands may be greatly assisted if a case could be put to adjoining developers that their open space requirements in developing their sites could at least partly be met by the Association's provision of pitches and amenity lands i.e. greater levels of development can be accommodated on their sites if they do not provide the open space that the GAA can provide. This argument would require further research.

Further more detailed planning analysis is required and would be the subject of a separate report or potentially would be contained in the necessary feasibility report.

APPENDIX 2

Schematic Costing of Preferred Site for Main Centre of Excellence.

The schematic costing only of potential phases 1 and 2 of the Antrim Town development has only been carried out at this stage. Subject to the County Board ratifying this report a more detailed costing exercise can be carried out.

PHASE 1

Element	Cost
1 no. third generation pitches @ £750k each	£0.75M
3 no. sand mattress pitches with floodlights	£1.05M
Changing pavilion with 8no. changing rooms and domestic kitchen for light snack	£0.75M
Car Park for 100 cars	£0.2M
Professional Fee's @ 10%	£0.36M
VAT	£0.68
TOTAL	£3.79M

PHASE 2

Element	Cost
4 no. sand mattress pitches @ 0.25 each	£1.0M
Extension to pavilion to include meeting rooms, fitness suite, sports hall etc.	£1.5M
Professional Fee's @ 10%	£0.25M
VAT	£0.48M
TOTAL	£3.23M

LOCAL CENTRES

Element	Cost
North Antrim	
Dunloy	Club funded
Garron Tower – Third generation pitch	0.75
Ballycastle Public Pitches	No expenditure necessary
South Antrim	
St. Malachy College (Girdwood) sand-based pitch	0.25
La Salle third generation pitch	0.75
Woodlands third generation pitch	0.75

