

**To the chairperson & members
of the North Central Area Committee**

**Report on “Playing Fields” and “All-Weather Facilities” to the North Central Area
Committee, May 2024.**

1.0 Policy and Development Plan Context

Playing fields (grass pitches) are an important and essential resource to facilitate active recreation and field sports. Pitches are maintained and managed by DCC in public parks/open spaces and allocated to local community clubs based on an annual application submitted by the clubs and a letting process based on their needs and available pitches.

In the City as a whole, there are sixty seven parks/open spaces which provide in the order of 217 playing fields (including small sided games) for local soccer and GAA clubs. There are 110 clubs registered with Dublin City Council and affiliated with the GAA and soccer leagues. The allocation of these pitches in 2023 is on the Dublin City Council website. For 2024, the clubs have been informed of their allocation which is broadly the same as 2023 and the allocations will also be published on the City Councils website.

A perusal of the allocations demonstrates that there is little or no capacity to increase the play time on existing pitches and there is no capacity to accommodate new playing fields in existing public parks and open spaces. There is also little likelihood of new playing fields being achieved through the planning process as residential development in the city is now almost exclusively high density on smaller sites with a requirement for 10% of the land take for open space.

Historically, in the 1960/70's/80's when open spaces were being planned in the city suburbs as part of low density green field developments, the public open space in most cases was levelled to create amenity grassland for playing fields and kick-about space. Today public open space in high density schemes is planned to be a more diverse landscape to enhance habitat for biodiversity, to create opportunities for play and recreation and to accommodate features such as sustainable drainage swales. This combination of factors inevitably means that space for active recreation and playing fields is not being achieved through the development control planning process for new communities.

There are also other factors which impact on the availability and usability of recreation grounds.

The increase in rainfall and pluvial flooding events due to climate change is impacting on the usability of pitches. The winter of 2023/2024 was particularly wet with the highest rainfall in ten years recorded. The predominant soil type in Dublin is boulder clay which is susceptible to water retention, saturation and compaction. In response the Parks Service is increasing the resources allocated to pitch maintenance and de-compaction, however, many weeks of play can be lost over the winter period due to matches called off.

Based on population growth, the assumption that more people are playing sport, people are playing to a later age in life and female participation is increasing, the demand for playing fields will increase.

Unfortunately, unlike other Dublin local authorities which have a larger land bank and multiple 'regional parks' the City is at capacity and that is being reflected in competition between clubs and friction with Dublin City Council for access to playing fields.

St ANNE'S PARK:

St Anne's Park is a good illustration of this pressure where the demand for pitches has been increasing steadily over recent years due to a number of factors including local clubs having to vacate school grounds.

In 2018, this situation forced a reappraisal of the allocations in the park. Whereas in the 2017 season 23 clubs had enjoyed an allocation within St. Anne's Park this was reduced to 10 for 2018. This was achieved by reviewing the home base of individual clubs and not renewing the allocation to Fingal based clubs and offering alternative allocations to teams/clubs nearer their home base. The table below sets out the number of clubs and teams using the pitches in St. Anne's by year:

YEAR	Pitch Usage %	No of Clubs	No of Juvenile Teams	No of Adult Teams
2017	90%	23	*	*
2018	74%	10	*	*
2019	83.5%	10	*	*
2020	91%	9	*	*
2021	93%	10	260	58
2022	93%	9	312	56
2023	95%	9	319	53

*Hard copies of the allocation application forms containing this information have been archived but the trend is evident.

Discussions were held with local clubs and additional capacity was realised by the reorganisation of pitches which then afforded clubs the flexibility to mark out a number of smaller pitches for underage small-sided games so that more of the youngest teams could be accommodated where only 1 pitch/game would have taken place in the past.

However as is evident from the table above the local clubs grew their membership which is a reflection of the success of these local clubs in increasing youth and in particular female participation.

Also of particular note is that between 2021 and 2022, while the pitch usage rate remained static at 93% and the number of clubs enjoying an allocation of public pitches in St. Anne's actually fell slightly from 10 to 9 the number of teams using these pitches rose from 260 to 312 (an increase of 20%). This suggests that clubs are extracting greater utility from their allocations and are playing 20% more games on the same number of pitches. The pitch usage for 2023 at 95% and numbers of teams known to be using the pitches does give considerable cause for concern from a pitch management perspective and it is questionable how sustainable this level of usage is in the long term. Effectively every pitch in the park is being used to capacity.

More recently, the Parks Team has met with Raheny GAA, Naomh Barrog GAA and Raheny FC to discuss the needs of these clubs. Subsequently, the clubs have met and agreed to work

together with DCC to optimise the use of the available playing fields on the Raheny side of the park. This type of cooperation between clubs will be essential into the future to ensure that there is no tension and un-healthy rivalry between clubs for what are scarce and finite resources.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN REVIEW:

To optimize the availability of playing fields into the future the Parks Service made a submission to the Development Plan review and participated in a public consultation webinar highlighting the need for more playing fields and the protection of existing playing fields on institutional zoned grounds such as schools. The 2022 – 2028 Dublin City Development Plan consequently now provides increased protection of existing and established sport and recreational facilities (Policy GI49 refers). However, if the quantity of playing fields is to increase this can only be achieved by gaining access to under-utilised recreational grounds in the City or acquisition of lands outside of the City.

ALL-WEATHER PITCH FACILITIES:

All weather pitches have been suggested as a solution to the playing fields issue. However, clubs still value a good grass surface as a preference and a premium facility but there is a role for all weather surfaces particularly for training purposes. Chapter 4, Section 2.3 of the City Parks Strategy 2019-2022 sets out the adopted policy for 'All-Weather Pitch and Training Facilities' in public parks.

Parks Strategy section 4.2.3. "All Weather Pitch and Training Facilities"

There is an increasing demand for all-weather facilities for training and indeed league matches. The development of synthetic surfaces is improving the ability of such surfaces to simulate natural grass. They increase the frequency of use for games and reduce the wear and tear on grass pitches, which would otherwise be used for training. There is significant investment required to plan for all-weather facilities and the City Council has an obligation to ensure that any such investment on its lands is sustainable both in terms of the community use and financing the on-going maintenance and renewal of such facilities.

Retro-fitting all weather pitches into existing parks is problematic as these facilities are fenced and so parts of the public open space are isolated solely for the use of football clubs (which are often the most vocal of the representative groups that use a park). This may exclude those who value the open and green nature of a public park for informal play, walking, rest and relaxation and general passive recreation.

All weather pitches also require careful planning with regard to flood light spill onto residential areas, provision for changing room and storage facilities and car parking.

To achieve suitable accessibility Parks Services will be guided by sports governing bodies, such as the GAA and FAI to identify the locations in the city that they consider the most appropriate for the development of shared all-weather and training facilities which will then be available to local clubs to utilise. Partnerships with schools and other institutions/organisations will also be considered to develop sustainable community all weather facilities that will not deplete the available greenspace in any particular part of the city.

Over the last decade the Parks Service has developed three synthetic playing pitches in the NCAC in St Anne's Park, Kilbarrack and Clongriffin and up-graded facilities at Rockfield and Mayfield.

A new programme for the City is being drafted based on an identified need in the community. This draft programme will have to be tested against environmental and planning criteria before it can be formally adopted and actioned in the period 2025 to 2027.

A recent Part 8 for an All-Weather Pitch in the Central Area was withdrawn recently due to a submission by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage which recommended that the City Council carry out a Natura Impact Statement “to consider the possible in combination effects of other presently mooted developments of artificial pitches on playing field sites utilized by the Brent geese in the Dublin area as well as that proposed in the current Part 8 proposal”.

The DoHLGH also recommended that DCC “propose suitable measures to reduce the potential effects of the development proposed on the geese using (the) Park such as the removal of the proposed playground to a different part of the site, the deletion of new footpaths and access points.....so as to minimize possible disturbance of the geese by pedestrians and dogs”.

2.0 Proposed All-Weather facilities to serve the Kilmore Area

Towards the objective of delivering a full-sized all-weather pitch for the area DCC Parks and local area office officials met with representatives of the 4 local football clubs and local elected representatives last year and committed to carrying out surveys of overwintering geese on the larger open spaces in the Kilmore area. While the surveys did show that these sites remain important feeding sites for this protected species the recommendations of the DHLGH would seem to indicate that further winter surveys will be required to progress the all-weather pitch programme. Dublin City Council will be meeting with the DHLGH to consider their recommendations and a report on the outcome of the issues in question will be brought to councillors in due course as well as a timeline for progressing plans which include commitments to investigate further All-Weather facilities to serve the North Central Area such as Streamville and St Anne’s Park.

In the meantime the emerging preferred location for a full sized all-weather facility to serve the Kilmore area is the former football pitch to the north of the Glin Sports Centre on the Glin Road. This site was suggested for inclusion in the review of potential locations by local football clubs at the most recent meeting of representatives of 4 local football clubs, DCC Parks and local Councillors hosted by the Area Office in November. The representatives of the local football clubs indicated at the meeting that this was an ideal location for a facility to serve the area as it was centrally located and was acceptable to the local clubs. Furthermore as the site has not been maintained as football pitch in many years and is currently under rank grassland it is not a recorded Brent Geese feeding site.

The location of this proposed facility in close proximity to an existing DCC Sports Centre would also seem ideal from a management perspective. Sports center staff will be available during the school week to arrange for schools’ access rather than this falling to club volunteers allowing maximum community benefit to be extracted from a significant investment of public monies. The range of existing infrastructure at the center such as parking, changing and toilet facilities will also enhance the utility of the proposed facility.

As the local clubs have previously advised that this location was acceptable it is proposed to proceed with the necessary internal conversations and bring the proposal to Part 8 planning in 2024 with a view to constructing in 2025. In parallel it is further proposed to continue meeting with the local clubs and councillors to discuss and agree an equitable access arrangement to this community facility.

Stardust training facility

A Sports Capital Grant application has been submitted to extend the currently undersized synthetic training pitch in Stardust Park to a half-sized pitch (50m X 30m) and upgrade the lighting to LEDs. This will greatly improve its utility and will go some way to meeting the winter training needs of local clubs. This upgrade will be able to proceed if there is a positive outcome on the grant application.

3.0 PITCH MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME:

While All-Weather pitches have an important role in providing for sporting activities in the community it is evident from the St. Anne's case study above where over 372 teams are using the grass pitches on a weekly basis that such all-weather facilities have really only a supporting role to play in this regard. As the vast majority of football matches and training will continue on council owned grass pitches it is essential that the pitches be maintained and improved on a multi-annual basis to optimize playability and minimize the time pitches called off due to weather.

DCC Parks commissioned Alan Lewis a sports turf consultant registered with the STRI and who works with the GAA, Horse Racing Ireland and Cricket Ireland to carry out a full assessment of the pitches in St. Anne's Park which looked at pitch quality, soil profile, drainage characteristics and a full chemical analysis of the soils. The study of the confirmed a number of key points. Firstly the pitches in St. Anne's Park are being over-played which is an inevitable consequence of successful national and local initiatives over recent years to increase participation at youth level and in particular female participation. The effect of this over-use of grass pitches is increased wear and compaction which impacts upon surface drainage leaving the pitches more vulnerable to being called off due to weather. On a positive note the study identified St. Anne's as having a good depth of quality soils and good natural field drainage. The remediation required is to relieve the surface compaction mechanically and to open the surface with topdressing sand to allow the surface to more efficiently shed rain into the soils and away via the natural field drainage.

This work was carried out in the past by way of specialist sports turf contractors which did limit the number of pitches which could be so ameliorated each year but critically also restricted the opportunities to respond quickly to changing ground conditions and breaks in the weather. It is now proposed to take on this work by direct labour and St Anne's is to be used as a test case in 2024 on the north side of the city with a view to scaling up across the area in the coming years. To support this, specialized turf grass machinery has been purchased and will be operated by trained Parks staff when ground conditions are suitable over the summer months. Targets have been set to de-compact and top-dress all of the pitches in St. Anne's Park this summer. The lessons learned in St. Anne's Park over the coming months will inform how this ambitious programme will need to be resourced in terms of machinery, staff and training to extend same across the North Central Area and city-wide.

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