

Parks and Leisure Committee
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast

Dear xxxxxx

MICHAEL DAVITT GAC PROPOSAL RE: BOUCHER ROAD PLAYING FIELDS

The Committee of Michael Davitt GAC respectfully requests that the Parks and Leisure Committee of Belfast City Council give due consideration to the following proposal for privileged access and use of the main GAA pitch at Boucher Playing Fields.

Background

Michael Davitt GAC is a club based in the Lower Falls council ward of West Belfast, designated as one of the most socially deprived areas of the city. Despite this, the club has been instrumental in providing access to quality sports coaching and participation for hundreds of people from the local area and beyond, young and old, boys and girls, and more recently, on a cross community basis.

The Club's Football and Hurling teams have been based at Boucher Road Playing Fields for more than 10 years, playing home league games for all age groups, and training on the main pitch during the traditional GAA season which runs from March to October each year.

Throughout this time, the club have continually campaigned for a more permanent residence at Boucher Road, as opposed to booking and paying for the pitch through the normal council channels as any other club would do. Council records will verify the expenditure that Michael Davitt GAC has incurred for this facility over the past decade.

Club officials have met and lobbied local politicians and other public representatives and the prospects of a breakthrough had on occasion appeared very positive, especially given the indications the club received from Senior personnel within the Belfast City Council. Alas however, the club and its membership have been left frustrated and disappointed that these initiatives have not led to any long term arrangement with the Council that would allow the 'access and residency' desired by the club.

The current position

Over the past year, club officials have once again intensified their efforts to achieve this ambition. The latest efforts being triggered to some degree by the Council's Pitches Strategy, which Michael Davitt GAC is very much in support of. Perhaps of more significance, is the fact that the club is on the verge of celebrating its Centenary Year in 2012, and there would be no more fitting attainment and legacy for the club committee to achieve, in this special year, than to deliver a pitch to the many juvenile

players and mentors that are the life blood of the club and the community moving into the next century of the club's existence.

Club officials have therefore re-engaged with local politicians from the Clonard and wider West Belfast area, senior officials within the County Antrim GAA Committee, and also with Rose Crozier, (Asst Director of Parks and Leisure, BCC) The club are very grateful for the response and support it has received from all those who have been involved in these discussions, and their advice and guidance has led to this specific proposal being put before you.

In relation to the Antrim County Board, the County Secretary has been authorised to confirm in writing the County's support in asking Belfast City Council to agree the allocation of the Boucher Road pitch to Michael Davitt GAC (see attached). The County Board fully appreciate the benefits of a club having a pitch that they may call their "own" as it offers a base and a place of identity which is recognised by players, managers, coaches, supporters and parents alike.

Michael Davitt GAC is one of a very small number of clubs in the entire county which does not have such a facility. There is no doubt that the lack of a home pitch has hindered the development and success of the club, particularly at juvenile level over the past 10 years and beyond.

The fact that Michael Davitt GAC continues to field teams from under 8 years of age through to senior level, is testimony to the commitment and dedication of successive groups of volunteers within the club. To have a pitch that they can call their "own" would be just and lasting reward and testimony for all their efforts.

Another key aspect of the letter from the GAA County Secretary is confirmation of the fact that allocation of the main GAA pitch at Boucher Road to Michael Davitt GAC will cause no detriment to any other club. Whilst a small number of clubs may have placed bookings for this pitch over the years, this has been limited to a very short period, usually during February/March for pre-season training or games, preserving their own club pitch until the season commences. The County recognises that this is no reason for any of its affiliated clubs to stand in the way of the long standing ambition of Michael Davitt GAC, one of its oldest clubs, to have access to the same quality of facility as other clubs that are fortunate enough to have, their home venue.

No interest whatsoever is shown in access to the main pitch at Boucher Road when the season gets up and running due to other clubs using their own playing facilities for training and fixtures.

Details of the proposal

Michael Davitt GAC seeks privileged access and use of the main GAA pitch at Boucher Road Playing Fields.

The Club requests permission to install 40 ft high ball stop nets behind each of the GAA posts and a 4 ft spectator boundary around the pitch, and gated entry to comply with Health & Safety requirements. The former is a very practical and standard fixture

to control footballs and in particular, hurling balls.. The latter is significant in that it will help protect the pitch, while enabling Michael Davitt GAC teams to be allocated home fixtures in the Senior Championship by the Antrim County Board; something the club has never experienced in recent history.

The estimated cost of these works (by BCC Works Dept) is circa £25k. The club is willing to meet the full cost of these works and is in a position to pay for the same with immediate effect. These improvements would benefit the Council's playing facility while bringing it up to County competition standard.

In terms of 'privileged position' Michael Davitt GAC would be seeking

- a minimum guarantee period of 20-25 years,
- total access to the pitch for training sessions and games.
- key holder status for the gate to the pitch for designated officers of the Michael Davitt Committee
- key holder access to Boucher Playing Fields request
- consultation before permission is granted for use of the pitch for purposes other than Michael Davitt club activity. (e.g. games in the local school leagues ,particularly those schools that the club has strong and lasting relationships with, such as St Peter's PS, St Clare's PS and others.
- use by the Antrim County Board as a neutral venue for club games, including championship fixtures throughout the season.

To summarise, Michael Davitt GAC is willing to invest in this project although pitches are BCC owned property; this is something that the club has aspired to for many years. The benefits for our club, and more particularly for the many young people that we serve in the community outweigh this monetary investment. There is no evident detriment or risk to BCC given the pattern of usage over the past decade and longer. Assurances offered by the most senior County officials as Michael Davitt GAC's governing body lend further assurances to this proposal.

We sincerely hope that the Committee will look favourably on this proposal from Michael Davitt GAC. Club officials will be more than happy to meet with Council members and officials to answer any questions or explain the rationale and details of our proposal.

Yours faithfully

Thomas Shaw
Club Chairman, Michael Davitt GAC

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