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DESIGN, ACCESS & PLANNING STATEMENT

**Proposed Change of Use from Class E(a) (Retail) to Children's Nursery (Class E (F))
Green Mill, Well I' Th' Lane, Rochdale, OL11 1BB.**

1.0 Introduction

This Design, Access and Planning Statement has been prepared in support of a full planning application seeking permission for the change of use of an existing three-storey commercial building from a retail and warehouse function (Use Class E(a), formerly A1) to a children's nursery (Use Class E(f)).

The proposal represents the sustainable reuse of an existing building to deliver a specialist childcare facility focused on children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The development responds directly to a recognised shortfall in SEND provision within Rochdale and aligns with national and local planning objectives aimed at supporting inclusive communities, strengthening social infrastructure, and making effective use of previously developed land.

2.0 Site Context and Existing Building

The application site comprises a substantial three-storey building historically used for the sale and storage of nursery and children's furniture. The ground floor has functioned as a warehouse, with the upper floors used as retail showrooms. The building is of robust construction and is typical of Rochdale's mixed commercial environment.

The surrounding area is characterised by a blend of commercial, service, and leisure uses, including nearby restaurant operations and general employment activities. This mixed-use context provides an appropriate and compatible setting for a childcare facility, particularly one operating within structured hours and with controlled access arrangements.

3.0 Planning History and Material Considerations

Planning permission was granted in April 2016 under application reference 16/00292/FUL for the change of use from D2 (Assembly and Leisure) to A1 (Retail), establishing the lawful commercial use of the building as a warehouse and showroom for nursery furniture.

This decision is a highly significant material consideration in the determination of the current application. It confirms that the Local Planning Authority has previously accepted the suitability of the site for commercial activity involving customer visits, associated traffic movements, and reliance on the existing car parking arrangements.

The permission also included a restrictive condition limiting the use specifically to a warehouse at ground floor level and showroom use at upper levels, preventing wider retail flexibility. This demonstrates that the Council has historically sought to carefully control the nature and intensity of activity on the site.

In planning terms, this establishes a clear and robust fallback position whereby the building could continue to operate as a retail facility. Such a use would typically generate customer visits of longer duration, more variable traffic patterns, and greater reliance on parking provision. By comparison, the proposed nursery use introduces a more controlled and predictable pattern of activity, with short-duration drop-off and pick-up movements and limited dwell times.

The decision notice also secured the retention of the approved car park, confirming that the site benefits from lawful and established parking provision capable of supporting ongoing use. This is an important factor in assessing the suitability of the proposed development.

4.0 The Applicant and Operational Ethos

The applicant, Special Educational Needs and Disability Childcare Ltd, is an established childcare provider incorporated in May 2022 and operational since January 2023. The organisation specialises in providing care and education for children with SEND, addressing a critical gap in provision for families within the Borough.

The nursery operates with a clear and defined ethos centred on delivering high-quality, safe, and effective care tailored to the individual needs of each child. The approach is inherently child-centred, recognising that children with SEND require environments that are structured, supportive, and responsive to their unique developmental pathways.

The provision focuses on creating a nurturing and stimulating environment in which children feel secure, valued, and able to reach their full potential. Learning is delivered through a combination of structured activities, sensory engagement, and play-based development, all supported by trained and experienced staff.

This approach has been formally recognised through inspection by Ofsted, which awarded the nursery a “Good” rating across all categories in September 2024. This demonstrates that the operator has already established effective safeguarding procedures, strong leadership, and high standards of care and education.

5.0 Need for the Development

The applicant’s existing premises within Rochdale town centre are no longer capable of supporting the scale and nature of the services required. The current facility is constrained in terms of space and layout, limiting the ability to provide dedicated environments for different age groups and specialist needs.

Demand for SEND childcare has increased significantly, and there remains a clear shortage of suitable provision within the Borough. Families often have trouble accessing facilities that can provide both education and care in a supportive and inclusive environment.

The proposed development directly addresses this need by providing a larger and more adaptable building capable of delivering a broader range of services. It enables the nursery to expand its provision while maintaining the high standards already established.

6.0 Site Selection

In identifying a suitable site, the applicant undertook a review of alternative premises within Rochdale. One potential option on Drake Street was considered; however, this was discounted due to traffic congestion, poor accessibility, and difficulties associated with achieving appropriate fire safety arrangements.

The Green Mill building was ultimately selected due to its scale, layout flexibility, and ability to accommodate controlled access arrangements. The building provides sufficient space to create distinct zones for different activities and age groups, while its location within a mixed-use area ensures compatibility with surrounding uses.

7.0 – Proposed Use and Daily Operations

The proposed nursery will provide specialist childcare for children aged between 0 and 7 years with SEND, alongside before and after school provision for primary-aged children. In addition, the facility will offer weekend respite care for children up to 11 years and structured holiday programmes.

The internal layout of the building has been carefully considered to ensure that the scale of occupation is appropriately distributed across the three floors, with each space designed to accommodate specific age groups and activities in a safe, structured, and manageable way. This approach ensures that the overall number of children on site at any one time is effectively dispersed, avoiding undue concentration in any single area and supporting both operational efficiency and safety.

At ground floor level, the nursery will accommodate younger, non-mobile children within a dedicated space designed to provide a calm and controlled environment. This area, together with a small sensory room, will accommodate approximately 15 children, reflecting the higher staff-to-child ratios required for this age group and ensuring appropriate levels of supervision and care.

The first floor provides several larger activity spaces. The Acorns room, which benefits from direct access to an external fire escape, will accommodate approximately 26 children. A separate sensory room, designed for small-group use, will accommodate up to 6 children at any one time; however, these children will typically rotate from other rooms rather than increasing the overall occupancy. The main open-plan Butterflies room, located adjacent to the reception area, will accommodate between 35 and 40 children in a structured and supervised setting.

At second floor level, the Willows room will accommodate approximately 25 children, while a dedicated respite room will provide space for up to 20 children requiring more specialised or short-term care. In addition, a climbing and activity room, characterised by its larger volume and adapted internal environment, will accommodate up to 12 children at any one time.

This distribution of children across the building ensures that the nursery operates in a controlled and organised manner, with each space tailored to its intended function and occupancy level. It also demonstrates that, while the overall capacity of the building is significant, the actual use is carefully managed through spatial planning and operational controls.

From a planning perspective, this approach is important in understanding the nature of activity generated by the development. The dispersal of children across multiple rooms and floors ensures that arrivals and departures are naturally staggered, reducing pressure on access points and the surrounding highway network. It also ensures that internal noise and activity levels are contained within defined areas, supporting the conclusions reached within the accompanying noise assessment.

The daily operation of the nursery remains centred on delivering a balanced combination of care and education within a safe and supportive environment. Activities are designed to promote development across cognitive, physical, and social domains, with a particular emphasis on sensory engagement and individual learning.

The environment will be carefully managed to ensure that it remains calm, predictable, and responsive to the needs of each child. Staff will be trained in SEND provision, enabling them to support children effectively and adapt activities to suit individual requirements.

Operating hours reflect the needs of working families, with weekday provision from early morning through to early evening, and more limited weekend hours focused on respite care.

8.0 Access, Movement and Highway Considerations

The site benefits from an existing and established access arrangement, including a dedicated off-street car parking area, which was formally assessed and accepted by the Local Planning Authority as part of the 2016 planning permission under application reference 16/00292/FUL . This earlier assessment is a highly material consideration in the determination of the current application, particularly in respect of highways and parking matters.

At the time of the 2016 decision, the Council's Highways Officer raised no objection to the proposed retail use of the building, concluding that the development would not result in a severe impact on the highway network. This conclusion was reached having regard to Paragraph 32 of the National Planning Policy Framework, which states that development should only be refused on transport grounds where the residual cumulative impacts are severe. The proposal was also considered to comply with Policies A/8, A/9 and A/10 of the Rochdale Unitary Development Plan, which require that development does not adversely affect the safe and efficient operation of the highway network, provides safe access for all users, and incorporates appropriate parking provision.

The officer's report confirmed that the site benefits from dedicated off-street parking, with approximately eight spaces identified within the car park area, alongside the availability of unrestricted on-street parking within the immediate vicinity, particularly along Well I' Th' Lane. It was further noted that the surrounding highway network and local road conditions could accommodate the level of traffic associated with the approved use.

Importantly, the Highways Officer at that time accepted that the approved retail use was unlikely to attract heavy volumes of traffic, describing it as a relatively low-intensity, niche commercial operation. However, the report also highlighted a key concern that, without appropriate controls, the premises could potentially operate under a broader A1 retail use, which may give rise to increased traffic and parking demand. This concern was addressed through the imposition of a restrictive planning condition limiting the use to the specific showroom and warehouse function.

This historic position is particularly relevant when assessing the current proposal. The nursery use now proposed is, by its very nature, a controlled and managed operation with predictable patterns of activity. Traffic generation will primarily consist of short-duration drop-off and pick-up movements occurring within defined time periods, namely the morning arrival window and afternoon collection period. These movements will be further managed through staggered attendance times, ensuring that peak demand is spread and that pressure on the local highway network is minimised.

In comparison to the lawful fallback position of a retail use, which could generate longer dwell times, more varied trip purposes, and less predictable customer flows, the proposed nursery use represents a more regulated and lower-impact form of development in transport terms. The intensity of vehicle movements is not expected to exceed that previously assessed and accepted by the Local Planning Authority.

The proposal also introduces a significant improvement in terms of on-site safety through the creation of a secure pedestrian route between the site entrance and the building. This will be achieved by installing a fenced corridor, ensuring that children are physically always separated from vehicular areas. This measure not only enhances safety but also ensures that vehicle movements within the site remain controlled and do not conflict with pedestrian access.

The site remains sustainably located, with established pedestrian connections and access to public transport services operating along Oldham Road and Queensway, both within close walking distance. The proximity of local services and facilities further supports the accessibility of the site for staff and visitors.

Having regard to the previous highways assessment, the established parking provision, the availability of additional on-street parking, and the controlled nature of the proposed nursery use, the development will not result in any severe or unacceptable impact on the highway network. The proposal therefore remains fully compliant with Policies A/8, A/9 and A/10 of the Rochdale Unitary Development Plan, as well as the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework.

A further important consideration in assessing the highway impact of the proposed development is the internal distribution and management of occupancy across the building. As set out in Section 7.0, the nursery does not operate as a single concentrated space but instead distributes children across multiple rooms and floors, each with defined capacity limits. This arrangement inherently results in staggered arrival and departure patterns, as children are brought to and collected from different areas at slightly varied times depending on age group, care requirements, and session structure. This natural dispersal of movements reduces the potential for peak-time congestion and ensures that vehicle activity associated with the nursery remains spread over a broader time period rather than occurring as a single concentrated surge.

This operational characteristic is materially different from many alternative uses within Class E(a), where customer arrival patterns are less predictable and can lead to sharper peaks in parking demand and vehicle turnover. In this respect, the proposed nursery use represents a more controlled and manageable form of development in highway terms, further reinforcing the conclusion that the scheme will not result in any severe or unacceptable impact on the local highway network.

In conclusion, the proposed development represents a logical and acceptable evolution of the site in transport terms, and there are no highway or parking grounds upon which planning permission could reasonably be refused.

9.0 Design Approach and Inclusivity

The design approach is based on retaining the existing building envelope while undertaking internal adaptations to suit the proposed use. This ensures that the development does not adversely affect the character of the area while enabling the building to function effectively as a nursery.

Internally, the building will be reconfigured to provide a range of spaces tailored to different activities and needs, including areas for play, learning, quiet time, and sensory engagement. The layout will support inclusive access, with appropriate circulation routes and facilities provided for all users.

The development inherently promotes inclusive design principles, ensuring that children with a wide range of needs can be accommodated safely and comfortably.

10.0 Residential Amenity and Environmental Considerations

The proposed use is not expected to give rise to unacceptable impacts on surrounding amenity. The operation of the nursery is limited to daytime hours, with no late evening activity. Noise levels associated with the use are typical of childcare environments and are not considered to be materially harmful within a mixed-use setting.

The reuse of the existing building also contributes to sustainability objectives by reducing the need for new construction and minimising environmental impact.

11.0 Fire Safety and Building Regulations

Fire safety will be addressed through the Building Regulations process, with the building upgraded as necessary to meet all relevant standards. As an existing commercial structure, the building can accommodate compliant fire safety measures, including protected escape routes, fire detection systems, and appropriate compartmentation.

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Given the nature of the occupants, evacuation procedures will be staff-led, supported by comprehensive training and management systems. The proposed use does not introduce any constraints that would prevent full compliance with Building Regulations.

12.0 Planning Policy Assessment

The proposal accords with the National Planning Policy Framework, particularly in its support for community facilities, inclusive development, and the efficient use of land.

At the local level, the development complies with the Rochdale Unitary Development Plan. It satisfies Policy BE/2 by retaining the existing building and avoiding harm to visual amenity. It aligns with Policy EM/3 by maintaining an active and employment-generating use within a mixed employment area. It meets the requirements of Policies A/8, A/9, and A/10 in relation to highway safety and parking, and it is consistent with Policy S/8 in that it introduces a complementary community use without undermining retail function.

13.0 Planning Balance and Conclusion

In determining this application, it is necessary to consider whether the proposal accords with the development plan and whether there are any material considerations that would justify refusal.

In this case, the proposal represents a clear example of sustainable development. It reuses an existing building, delivers essential community infrastructure, supports employment, and addresses a recognised need for SEND childcare provision within the Borough.

When considered against the lawful fallback position established by the 2016 planning permission, it is evident that the proposed use does not give rise to any greater impact in terms of traffic, amenity, or character. On the contrary, it represents a more controlled and socially beneficial use of the site.

The development therefore accords with both national and local planning policy, and there are no material considerations that would outweigh the significant benefits it delivers.

Planning permission is respectfully sought.