

Officer Report

Case Reference: PL/2026/0374
Location: Land adjacent to Great Howarth School, Great Howarth, Rochdale, OL12 9HJ
Proposal: Change of use of existing hardstanding to school car parking for up to five years and associated works
Recommendation: Approve with Conditions
Officer: Anna Hayes

SITE

The application relates to an area of hardstanding situated just north of Great Howarth School within the Wardle, Shore and West Littleborough ward of Rochdale. The site is accessed via a single-track road which leads on to Birchen Head Farm to the north. A Public Right of Way (WarFp27) runs along this road. Existing 1m high iron railings abut the highway.

The site and adjacent open field were formerly used as a school playground and playing fields in connection with the now-demolished St John's Church of England Primary School until its closure in August 2001.

The site is located within the defined Urban Area according to the saved UDP Proposals Map and falls under the designation of saved UDP policy G/3 'Protection of Existing Recreational Open Space'.

The site is situated within Flood Zone 1 and is not at risk of surface water flooding. The site is within a Development Low Risk Area for coal mining as defined by the Mining Remediation Authority (Coal Authority).

PROPOSAL

Planning permission is sought for the change of use of the former playground/ballcourt for school parking, associated with Great Howarth School, for a temporary period of up to five years. The school-related car parking would occur between the hours of 07:00 – 19:00 Monday to Friday (excluding public holidays). Associated works include the creation of a new ramped vehicular access and the installation of a security gate.

The application form confirms that the work started on 2nd April 2026. At the time of the Officer's site visit on 8th May 2026, Heras fencing was in situ and gravel had been laid at the proposed site entrance (new ramp location).

RELEVANT PLANNING POLICY

National Guidance

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)

Development Plan

Planning decisions should be made in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise and the NPPF does not change the statutory status of the development plan as the starting point for decision making.

The development plan for the proposal consists of the Places for Everyone (PfE) Joint Development Plan, Rochdale Core Strategy (CS), adopted 2016, saved Unitary Development Plan (UDP) policies, and the Greater Manchester Joint Minerals Plan April 2013. The Council also has an adopted series of Supplementary Planning Documents and Supplementary Guidance Notes, which are other material considerations.

Places for Everyone Joint Development Plan (PfE) (2024)

The Places for Everyone Joint Development Plan was adopted and became part of the statutory development plan for each of the 9 authorities covered by the plan on 21st March 2024. The following policies are relevant:

Sustainable and Resilient Places

JP-S1 Sustainable Development

JP-S4 Flood Risk and the Water Environment

Greener Places

JP-G1 Landscape Character

JP-G6 Urban Green Space

JP-G7 Trees and Woodland

JP-G8 A Net Enhancement of Biodiversity and Geodiversity

Places for People

JP-P1 Sustainable Places

Connected Places

JP-C1 An Integrated Network

JP-C8 Transport Requirements of New Development

Rochdale Core Strategy (CS)

SO2 Creating successful and healthy communities

C6 Health and well-being

C7 Delivering education facilities

C8 Improving community, sport, leisure and community facilities

SO3 Improving design, image and quality of place

P1 Improving image

P2 Protecting and enhancing character, landscape and heritage

P3 Improving design of new development

SO4 Promoting a Greener Environment

G6 Enhancing Green Infrastructure

G7 Increasing the value of biodiversity and geodiversity

G8 Managing water resources and flood risk

G9 Reducing the impact of pollution, contamination and land instability

G10 Managing mineral resources

SO5 Improving accessibility and delivering sustainable transport

T2 Improving accessibility

Managing delivery and monitoring progress

DM1 General Development requirements

SD1 Delivering sustainable development

Rochdale Unitary Development Plan (UDP)

G/D/1 Defined Urban Area

G/3 Protection of Existing Recreational Open Space

EM/7 Development and Flood Risk

EM/8 Protection of Surface and Ground Water

RELEVANT SITE HISTORY

No recent relevant planning history.

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Highways and Engineering

Confirms no objection to the proposal.

Environmental Health

No comments received.

Sport England

Confirms that the ball court is assessed as being part of the whole of the playing field; however, the main natural turf element of the playing field has not been marked out for sporting use for over 5 years, coupled with the area of hardstanding having no basketball markings, and as such Sport England would be a non-statutory consultee as a result. It is noted that the lack of use does not change the status of the playing field land (comments summarised).

REPRESENTATIONS

In accordance with the requirements of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, the application has been advertised by neighbour notification letters and site notice (x2).

18 number of objections have been received. These are summarised below:

Highway Safety and Access

- There is already ample parking
- The proposed car park would discharge traffic onto a single track and unlit road immediately adjacent to an SEN school with pedestrians regularly using the road.
- The application has not been supported by a Transport Statement, visibility splay, swept path or road safety audit.
- Steep access ramp may fail to meet 'adoptable highway standards' especially when discharging onto a 'single-track, unlit road'.
- Residents already face parking stress due to lack of adequate off-road parking. This car park will worsen congestion and visibility hazards.
- Great Howarth Road is already busy enough.

- The Council is currently in breach of the Highways Act by allowing a private firm to obstruct a deemed highway with Heras fencing. You cannot sell land in a 'Fully Exempt' meeting that is legally burdened by a public right of way.

- Disagree with the Highways consultee assertion that this development will create no more traffic to the area, stating that Great Howarth School has tripled its intake therefore the response does not account for the surge in cumulative traffic volume.

Ground Stability and Structural Risk

- Vegetation growing through failed tarmac
- Clear signs of pavement and subbase deterioration
- Unknown construction depth or foundation condition
- The proposal fails to demonstrate that the site can fully support vehicular loading
- This site contains documented mine shafts therefore should be supported by a Coal Mining Risk Assessment or Phase 1 Desk Study

Drainage, Flood Risk and Watercourse protection

- No drainage strategy, flood risk assessment or drainage details have been submitted resulting in a policy breach;
- Increased surface water run off and pollution entering the watercourse resulting in ecological harm

Ecology

- Ecological appraisal has not been submitted
- The land is known for wildlife
- Evidence of presence of Schedule 9 invasive species (Giant Hogweed) growing at the allotment entrance, immediately adjacent to the school boundary and the site which the car park entrance is proposed. It is a criminal offence to allow this toxic plant to spread.

Other

- A formal Village Green application has been submitted for this land
- Historical community use - the area is best kept as a play area for children and dog walking/exercise – used by many
- Open quiet spaces are very important for mental and physical health
- Safety concerns including lack of lighting during winter and evening use and security risks
- Construction disturbance from noise and vibration of machinery

- Lack of transparency from the school
- Vague plans
- Unauthorised works
- Poor masterplanning – when the school extended last year, parking provisions should have been included then
- Concern for future housing - this site is listed on the SHLAA for 40 homes
- Questions whether the Council is effectively transferring a community asset (open space) into the control of corporate lenders and highlights risk that, if the company fails, the land could become a bank asset rather than remaining for community benefit.
- Loss of green space

Response to the above

A Town and Village Green application has been submitted to the Council's Legal Department. This will be determined separately by the authority as the registration authority for common land and village greens under the Commons Act 2006.

The Council's Environmental Management team do not maintain this site and therefore is not promoted as public open space.

The identification of housing potential from sites and buildings as set out in the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) does not imply that Rochdale Council would necessarily grant planning permission for residential development and the inclusion of any identified sites or buildings within the study does not preclude them being developed for other suitable uses. Capacities for new sites that have been included in the study are based on either applying a design template, assuming an average density or initial proposals put forward by a developer. In all cases, the consideration of a detailed planning application may find that these capacities are inappropriate due to highways issues, design or the need to provide other uses on a site.

Problems arising from the construction period of any works e.g. noise and disruption are not material planning considerations, and any works are temporary in nature.

Land ownership is not material planning consideration.

Councillor John Taylor has also made a formal request to call this application in to the Planning and Licensing Committee for a decision on 28th May 2026. The Chair of the Planning and Licensing Committee turned down this request as the reasons set out were not considered to be material planning considerations. The application is therefore to proceed to determination under delegated powers.

The school's existing or future pupil intake is not a matter that falls to be determined under this application. The proposal seeks temporary planning permission for an additional car parking area to serve an existing school and does not itself authorise any expansion of the school, increase in pupil numbers, or intensification of educational use. The Highway Authority has

assessed the proposal and raises no objection on highway safety or parking grounds. Consequently, concerns regarding future increases in traffic arising from pupil intake expansion are not attributable to the development proposed and carry limited weight in the determination of this application.

Other matters raised are considered in more detail below.

Ecology and Biodiversity

Paragraph 187 of the NPPF states that the planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment.

In England, biodiversity net gain is required under a statutory framework introduced by Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Under the statutory framework for biodiversity net gain, subject to some exceptions including 'developments below the threshold', every grant of planning permission is deemed to have been granted subject to the condition that the biodiversity gain objective is met. This objective is for development to deliver at least a 10% increase in biodiversity value relative to the pre-development biodiversity value of the onsite habitat. This increase can be achieved through onsite biodiversity gains, registered offsite biodiversity gains or statutory biodiversity credits.

PfE Policy JP-G8 also states that through local planning and associated activities a net enhancement of biodiversity resources will be sought where relevant. Development will be expected to achieve a measurable net gain in biodiversity of no less than 10%.

Certain developments, however, are exempt, including those which are below the threshold. This includes developments which do not impact a priority habitat and impacts less than 25 square metres (5m by 5m) of on-site habitat or 5m of on-site linear habitats such as hedgerows.

In this case, the development would meet the exemption criteria and is therefore exempt from BNG.

Drainage and Flood Risk

Saved UDP policy EM/7 states that development will not be permitted in areas identified as flood plains, or other areas where development could contribute to increased flood risk (now known as Flood Zones), unless an appropriate flood risk assessment (FRA) has been carried out. Saved UDP policy EM/8 also states that development likely to pose an unacceptable risk to surface water and ground water quality, or to water supply will not be permitted.

Policy G8 of the adopted Rochdale Core Strategy, seeks to promote sustainable development, secure proper drainage and to manage the risk of flooding and pollution. The policy aims to prevent an increased risk of flooding as a result of the development and to ensure satisfactory disposal of surface water from development sites. JP-S4 of PfE states flood risk will be managed by '2. Working with natural processes and adopting a natural flood management approach to slow the speed of water drainage and intercept water pollutants'.

The application site is not in a flood risk area and is not a major development. As such, a detailed drainage strategy is not required. In this case, the development is for the change of use of the existing hardstanding to school parking. Limited additional hardstanding is proposed

(ramped access) and the scale of runoff through the creation of the new ramp access is considered to be minor.

On balance, the proposed development accords with Policy G8 of the adopted Rochdale Core Strategy, Policy JP-S4 of PfE and the NPPF.

ANALYSIS

Principle of Development and Protection of Existing Recreational Open Space

The application seeks temporary planning permission for the use of an existing area of hardstanding within a former school playing field as a car park associated with the adjacent school.

The site lies within the Defined Urban Area and is designated as Protected Recreational Open Space under saved UDP Policy G/3. Whilst saved UDP Policy G/D/1 directs development towards the urban area, UDP Policy G/3 seeks to safeguard recreational open space from development that would result in its loss unless one of the policy exceptions applies. Similarly, paragraph 104 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that:

‘Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields and formal play spaces, should not be built on unless:

- a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
- b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
- c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.’

The application site comprises a former ballcourt associated with a school that has since been demolished. The hardstanding area is less than 0.2 hectares in size and is separate from the wider grassed playing field to the east (which is individually identified within the 2016–2026 Playing Pitch Strategy for a 7v7 junior grass pitch). The site is in a poor state of repair, with no visible markings, no active management or maintenance regime, and deterioration of the surfacing. The wider site is not operated as formal public open space and is not available for lawful public use.

Sport England initially objected to the proposal on the basis that the ballcourt should be considered as part of the wider playing field site and that insufficient information had been provided regarding the re-provision of the existing sports facility either temporarily or permanently, to assess whether the proposal meets any of the Exceptions of Sport England’s Playing Field Policy, in particular E4 or meets the requirement of NPPF paragraph 104. Following further discussions, Sport England confirmed that it considers itself a non-statutory consultee in this instance given that the wider natural turf playing field has not been marked out or used for organised sporting purposes for over 5 years. Nevertheless, Sport England maintains that a lack of use does not alter the status of playing field land (including the former ballcourt) and continues to seek mitigation through the future reinstatement or replacement of the basketball facility.

Notwithstanding the site's condition and limited recreational use, the proposal does not satisfy any of the exceptions set out within saved Policy G/3 or paragraph 104 of the NPPF. Accordingly, the proposal gives rise to a degree of conflict with policies that seek to protect recreational open space and playing field land.

However, the extent of harm arising from the development is considered to be limited. The application relates only to a relatively small part of the overall site, representing approximately 7% of the wider recreational open space designation, leaving the majority of the grassed area remaining unaffected. Furthermore, the hardstanding area itself makes only a limited contribution to the recreational function of the wider site, given its deteriorated condition, lack of maintenance and absence of formal active sporting use.

Significant weight is afforded to the temporary nature of the proposal, which is limited to a period of five years. Aside from the new access barrier and ramp, the development does not involve permanent built form and would not prejudice the longer-term potential of the wider playing field for recreational, sporting or alternative uses. The temporary permission would allow the land to be reconsidered at the end of the approved period should circumstances change.

There are alternative areas of higher quality, accessible and actively managed open spaces by the Council within close proximity, including facilities at Wardle Road and The Cottons. These provide more suitable opportunities for both formal and informal recreation and reduce the likelihood that the development would result in a material deficiency in open space provision within the area. In addition, the proposal would provide a clear community benefit by supporting the operation of the adjacent school through the provision of additional off-street parking.

Whilst the proposal conflicts with saved UDP Policy G/3 and paragraph 104 of the NPPF, the conflict is lessened by the limited recreational value of the application site in its current condition, the small proportion of open space affected, the temporary nature of the development, and the community benefits arising from supporting the operation of the adjacent school. On balance, these considerations are considered sufficient to outweigh the limited harm arising from the temporary loss of the hardstanding area for recreational purposes.

Given the current state of the existing site, the LPA would consider it unreasonable to require the applicant to re-provide the two basketball hoops on site following the expiration of temporary planning permission, particularly given that other surfaced and maintained basketball provision is available at The Cottons which is less than 500m in distance from the site. Additionally, the Football Foundation confirm that the use of the land for car parking would likely support usage of the wider site through a more suitable parking area.

Design

One of the core planning principles of the NPPF is to always seek to secure high quality design. Section 12 of the NPPF places particular emphasis on achieving high quality design and section 16 places value on conserving and enhancing the historic environment. Paragraphs 131 and 135 of the NPPF state that good design is a key aspect of sustainable development and that planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments function well and add to the

overall quality of the area and are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping.

The proposal seeks permission for the change of use of the existing site for parking and the installation of a 6m wide steel swing vehicular gate, to be painted yellow, together with 1m high iron railings to infill existing gaps within the boundary treatment. The works also include the removal of a section of tarmac to facilitate the formation of a new vehicular access ramp, with a maximum gradient of 1:12.

Whilst the proposed gate and railings are utilitarian in appearance, they are not considered to result in any undue harm to the character or appearance of the surroundings within the defined urban area. The southern boundary of the site is already enclosed by fencing, and as such the introduction of the gate and infill railings would not give rise to a materially more enclosed or visually intrusive form of development.

Overall, the proposals are found to be acceptable in relation to visual amenity and compliant with P1, P2, P3 of the Rochdale Core Strategy as well as design policies contained within the NPPF and PfE.

Residential Amenity

At paragraph 135, the NPPF outlines the importance of planning in securing good standards of amenity for future and existing occupiers of land and buildings. Core Strategy policies DM1, G9, C1 and C6 cumulatively seek to reduce air and noise pollution, and DM1 in particular requires development to not adversely affect the amenity of residents or users through visual intrusion, overbearing impact, overshadowing or loss of privacy.

The use of the existing area of hardstanding for vehicular parking between the hours of 07:00 – 19:00 would not result in harm to the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers, having regard to light, outlook, privacy and noise. The south-eastern edge of the tarmac area is some 33m in distance from the nearest habitable room windows, so a sufficient buffer is retained. In noise terms, the character of activity around this area would remain comparable to the existing situation, with comings and goings concentrated within daytime school hours only (07:00–19:00, Monday–Friday). The use would not introduce a continuous source of noise, and the redistribution of vehicles away from the highway may reduce conflict associated with any potential constrained on street conditions. Furthermore, the temporary nature of the proposal (limited to a five year period) ensures that any minor and localised effects would not result in long term environmental harm.

Accordingly, the proposal would not materially increase noise levels or worsen air quality and is considered compliant with Core Strategy policies DM1 and G9 and paragraph 135 of the NPPF, which seek to ensure that development does not give rise to unacceptable impacts on residential amenity or pollution.

Access and Highway Safety

Paragraph 116 of the NPPF states that “Development should only be prevented or refused on highways grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network, following mitigation, would be severe, taking into account all reasonable future scenarios”.

Policy T2 of the adopted Core Strategy seeks to improve accessibility by locating development where good access to public transport is available or can be provided and, in all circumstances, prioritises the safety, accessibility and amenity of those who live or have business in the area. Policy DM1 also states that all development proposals should provide satisfactory vehicular access with adequate parking, manoeuvring, and servicing arrangements taking into account of the proposed use and location.

A number of representations have raised concerns regarding the impact of the proposal on traffic congestion, parking pressures and highway safety, including concerns relating to the site's access arrangements. These concerns are acknowledged. However, the Local Highway Authority (LHA), as the Council's specialist adviser on highway matters, has assessed the proposals and raises no objection.

The LHA notes that the application seeks to make use of an existing area of hardstanding to help alleviate parking pressures and would not be expected to generate additional traffic movements. Although the access route is narrow, the LHA considers there to be very little chance of conflict between vehicles due to the low traffic volumes anticipated, with similarly limited potential for pedestrian conflict. The narrow width of the access is also likely to result in very slow vehicle speeds, and the proposed new access onto the hardstanding is considered suitable for the scale and type of traffic expected. The Highway Authority further confirms that no changes are proposed to the wider highway network and that no road safety concerns arise from the development. The LHA confirm that the gradient of 1:12 is within acceptable limits and whilst the hard surface has most likely not been built to accommodate vehicles, its use is not considered dangerous.

Whilst there are objections regarding the extent to which the proposal would alleviate existing parking pressures associated with the adjacent school, in the view of the LPA it is reasonable to conclude that the provision of additional off-street parking capacity would provide support for the operation of the school and some benefit by accommodating vehicles within a designated parking area, reducing on-street vehicle circulation associated with searching for parking spaces, manoeuvring, and informal stopping along Great Howarth.

On the recommendations of the LHA above, Officers have no reason to disagree and consider the proposal to be acceptable in regard to highway safety and would not be in conflict with paragraph 116 of the NPPF and Policy T2 of the Core Strategy.

Conclusion

The proposal would make beneficial use of a poor-quality area of hardstanding to provide additional off-street parking in support of the adjacent school. While the temporary use would result in the loss of part of a protected recreational open space and therefore gives rise to some conflict with saved UDP Policy G/3 and paragraph 104 of the NPPF, the harm is considered limited having regard to the site's limited recreational value, its poor condition, the small proportion of the wider designation affected and the five-year temporary period proposed. The community benefits of supporting the operation of the school and helping to better manage school-related parking are considered to outweigh the limited harm identified. The proposal is otherwise acceptable in respect of design, residential amenity, highway safety, ecology, drainage and flood risk, and is therefore recommended for approval for a temporary period of five years subject to conditions.

Recommendation: Approve with Conditions

Condition(s) (3)

- 1 The temporary change of use of the land for car parking hereby granted is for a limited period of five years only, expiring on 05 August 2031.

Reason: The use hereby granted is for a temporary period only to allow car parking associated with the Great Howarth School in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Core Strategy.

- 2 The development hereby approved shall be carried out in accordance with the following drawings and documents hereby approved unless otherwise required by the conditions below:

Plans

Drawing 23-149-GRH-MHA-XX-ZZ-DR-A-0601-P01 (Site Location Plan)

Drawing 23-149-GRH-MHA-XX-ZZ-DR-A-0602-P03 (Existing and Proposed Site Plan and Gate Elevation)

Reason: For the avoidance of doubt and to ensure a satisfactory development in accordance with the policies within the adopted Rochdale Core Strategy, the saved Rochdale Unitary Development Plan, the adopted Places for Everyone Joint Development Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework.

- 3 The approved car parking area shall be retained and kept available for the parking of motor vehicles associated with Great Howarth School and shall not be used for storage, operational activities or any other purpose.

Reason: To ensure that adequate off-street parking remains available to serve Great Howarth School, in the interests of highway safety in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Rochdale Core Strategy and the National Planning Policy Framework.

Approval Reason(s) (1)

- 4 Procedure Statement

The proposal complies with the development plan and would improve the economic, social and environmental conditions of the area. It therefore comprises

sustainable development and the Local Planning Authority worked proactively to issue the decision without delay.