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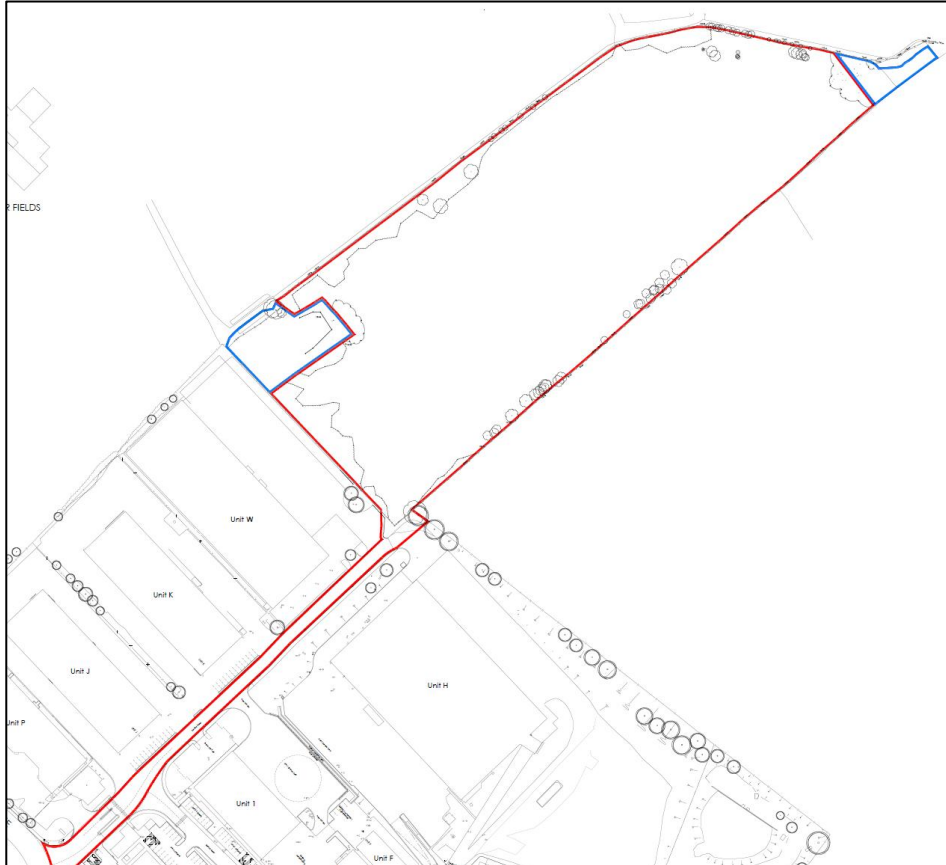
Jamie Smith
Yeagate Limited
The Gatehouse
Birch Business Park
Whittle Lane
Heywood
OL10 2SX

Re: Land at The Field, Birch Business Park

Dear Jamie Smith,

Thank you for asking Reading Agricultural Consultants to comment on the land use circumstance of 4 hectares (ha) of land at The Field, Birch Business Park, hereinafter referred to as 'the Site' and outlined in Figure 1. This letter aims to provide clarification on the classification of the Site as non-agricultural land and summarise the reasons Agricultural Land and Soils can be scoped out of the ES assessment.

Figure 1: Site Plan



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Registered Office as above

Company No. 3282982

Registered in England



Agricultural Land Classification Context

Under the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system, agricultural land in England and Wales is graded between 1 and 5, depending on the extent of long-term limitations to agricultural use. The principal physical factors influencing grading are climate, site conditions and soil which, together with interactions between them, form the basis for classifying land into one of the five grades.

Grade 1 land is excellent quality agricultural land with no or very minor limitations to agricultural use. Grade 2 is very good quality agricultural land, with minor limitations which affect crop yield, cultivations or harvesting. Grade 3 land has moderate limitations which affect the choice of crops, timing and type of cultivation, harvesting or the level of yield. It is subdivided into Subgrade 3a (good quality land) and Subgrade 3b (moderate quality land). Grade 4 land is poor quality agricultural land with severe limitations which significantly restrict the range of crops and/or level of yields. Grade 5 is very poor quality land, with very severe limitations which restrict use to permanent pasture or rough grazing.

Land which is classified as Grades 1, 2 and 3a in the ALC system is defined in Annex 2 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land.

The ALC system also describes other land categories that are used on ALC maps, including urban uses, non-agricultural uses, woodland, agricultural buildings and open water. The guidelines description of non-agricultural land states:

“Soft’ uses where most of the land could be returned relatively easily to agriculture, including: golf courses, private parkland, public open spaces, sports fields, allotments and soft-surfaced areas on airports/ airfields. Also active mineral workings and refuse tips where restoration conditions to ‘soft’ after-uses may apply.’

Site History

Historic satellite imagery included in Appendix 1 shows that the Site has not been used for agriculture for between 23 and 26 years. Until at least 2000, the Site is shown to have been managed as agricultural grassland; the 2003 satellite image appears to show the onset of a change in land-use.

Working forward in time from available historical images, the Site has been used only for non-agricultural purposes. Imagery from 2005 shows the Site in use for material storage, during which much of the Site appears to have been stripped of topsoil. Disturbance to the soils during this period appears significant.

Satellite imagery from 2013 to 2019 shows the Site as scrubland. The nature or extent of restoration is unclear. However, wheel rutting and some small material stockpiles remain. More recent imagery from 2020, 2021, and 2022 shows that a large part of the Site was heavily disturbed again and used for material storage and some landfilling works. Imagery from March 2021 and April 2021 shows the Site in active use, with soil spreading, severe wheel rutting, and pooling water.

In more recent years, images from 2023 and 2025 show the Site set aside under scrub, with scattered trees and bushes and some small material stockpiles still present.

Land Quality

The Site is shown on the published soil maps¹ at the boundary between the Brickfield and Blackwood associations. The Brickfield association typically comprises fine loamy over clayey or clayey soils, which are naturally poorly drained, in Wetness Class (WC) IV². The Blackwood association comprises deep sandy and coarse loamy soils. These soils are permeable but variably affected by groundwater and are in WC III or IV when undrained. This information relates to the natural soils likely to have been present at the Site and predates the soil disturbance shown in the satellite imagery.

The land at the Site was included within the Agricultural Land Classification survey and report³ undertaken for planning application 25/00418/OUT. This survey investigated the ALC within the proposed 25/00418/OUT Application Boundary as well as the wider Northern Gateway Allocation.

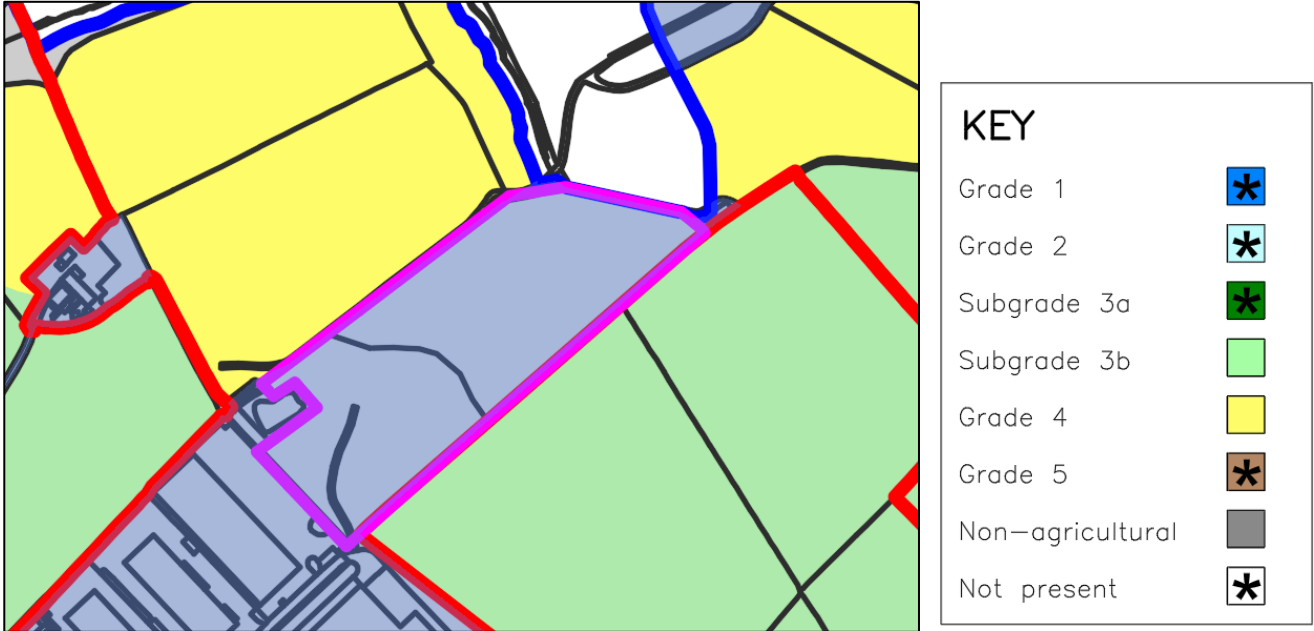
¹ **Soil Survey of England and Wales (1984).** *Soils of Northern England* (1:250,000), Sheet 1

² **Jarvis et al (1984).** *Soils and Their Use in Northern England*. Soil Survey of England and Wales Bulletin 10, Harpenden.

³ **Reading Agricultural Consultants (2025).** *Agricultural Land Classification and Soil Resources at Northern Gateway JPA1.1*. Available at: <https://www.rochdale.gov.uk/planning-permission/search-planning-applications> 11082

Within this survey, the Site was classified as non-agricultural. Agricultural land surrounding the Site was classified as non-BMV land in Subgrade 3b and Grade 4, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: ALC Assessment



**The Site is shown outlined in magenta. The red and blue lines are assessment boundaries within planning application 25/00418/OUT.

Summary and Conclusion

The Site extends to 4 ha of scrubland with scattered trees and bushes.

Historic satellite imagery shows that agricultural use of the Site ceased over 23 years ago, between 2000 and 2003. More recent imagery shows two long periods of disturbance, during which the land has been stripped of topsoil and used for material storage and infilling.

Severe disturbance of the soil profile creates a high likelihood of topsoil and subsoil mixing upon respreading, creating an expensive, impractical management problem to rectify. In addition, moving the soil resource weakens and damages its natural structure. Trafficking by vehicles causes compaction and potentially irreparable damage. Remediation is difficult and often impractical, with no guarantee of success.

The Site formed part of an ALC survey of the wider area, reported in 2025, and was classified non-agricultural, surrounded by non-BMV land in moderate quality Subgrade 3b and poor quality Grade 4.

In conclusion, the Site is clearly not in use for agriculture and was assessed as such during an ALC survey reported for the wider area. The current ground conditions at the Site are unknown; however, the surrounding data indicate the site would also have originally been of non-BMV quality.

Taking the extent of subsequent disturbance into consideration, there are no prospects of significant likely effects being identified in respect of Agricultural Land and Soils at the Site.

I hope this clarifies this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Alex Mitchell,

Soil and Agricultural Land Quality Surveyor

Reading Agricultural Consultants

Appendix 1: Google Earth (GE) Imagery⁴



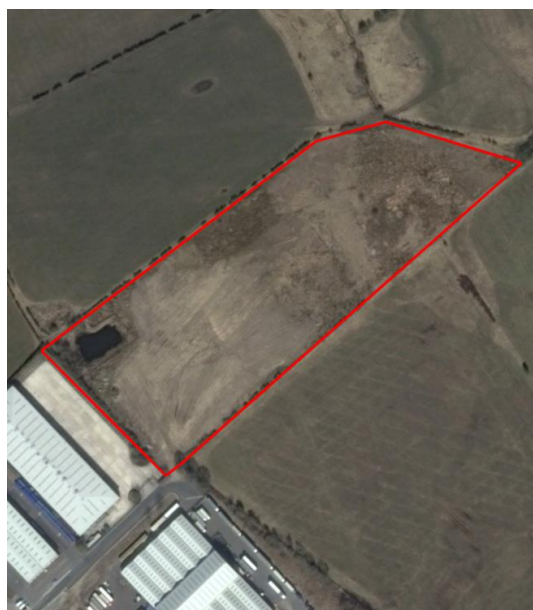
December 2000



April 2003



December 2005



April 2013

⁴ All images © Google 2026. - Data Providers © Maxar Technologies. © Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky. Landsat/Copernicus. © 2025 Airbus.



March 2017



April 2018



May 2019



April 2020



March 2021



April 2021



January 2022



April 2022



April 2023



June 2023



March 2025