

## URBAN DESIGN CONSULTATION RESPONSE

|                       |                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Design Officer        | Azhar Kapadi                                                                                                                |
| Date                  | 15.09.26                                                                                                                    |
| Application Reference | PL/2026/0679                                                                                                                |
| Address               | Land Off Heywood Old Road, Middleton, OL10 2HZ                                                                              |
| Proposal              | Construction of an SEN school, with associated access, parking, landscaping, drainage, land regrading and associated works. |

### Reason(s) for Consultation

Building / Urban design

### Scheme Image(s)



Source: Application submission

## Assessment

### National Guidance:

- The National Planning Policy Framework
- The ten characteristics of a well-designed place contained within the National Design Guide
- National Model Design Code
- Building for a Healthy Life design toolkit

### Sub-Regional Policy:

Places for Everyone Joint Development Plan (PfE)  
Greater Manchester's Streets for All Design Guide

### Local Policy:

Rochdale Core Strategy policies:

- S03 – To improve design, image and quality of place
- P2 - Protecting and enhancing character, landscape and heritage
- P3 – Improving design of new development
- DMI (General Development Requirements)

Supplementary Planning Documents:

- Oldham and Rochdale Urban Design Guide

The Unitary Development Plan

- G/BE/1 - Design Quality
- BE/2 - Design Criteria for New Development

## SUMMARY

The approach to parking should be further refined. The elevational design requires additional resolution - in its current form, the proposal fails to demonstrate the high quality of design expected by local and national design policy. There remains insufficient clarity regarding the design rationale and detailing to demonstrate that the proposed material palette and overall composition will deliver a high-quality architectural outcome. In addition to concerns regarding the proposed materials, the extensive use of canopies remains a key issue that adversely affects the overall building design.

The proposed changes suggested are not considered substantial and should be possible within this application. I would recommend arranging a meeting with the designer to discuss the recommendations and potential improvements outlined in this report.

## Pre-Application

Pre-application feedback indicated that the design should be more ambitious and enduring, supported by a clear design rationale, strong architectural precedents, and a comprehensive Design and Access Statement. While the design responds to functional requirements, it misses the opportunity to draw upon any precedents to inform both the elevational treatment and material palette. The entrance area to the building was noted to be lacking in engagement. I suggested redesigning this to create a welcoming and accessible arrival experience and do not discard landscaping.

There was a push for how pupils could directly benefit from interaction with nature through dedicated outdoor learning spaces, sensory gardens, and accessible natural play areas.

## Site Layout

The planting of trees at the site entrance and along the route to the school is welcomed. This is a positive change that will provide numerous benefits for site users and help retain the openness and greenery that are key characteristics of the existing site.

However, this positive approach is undermined closer to the building by the car park layout. The arrival experience will be dominated by long rows of parking on either side, creating the impression of driving through a car park. As this is a new development, there is an opportunity to improve this aspect and extend the tree-lined approach, at least to the neighbouring school site. There are clear benefits to keeping the car park separate and better screened.

At the pre-application stage, concerns were raised regarding the dominance of the car park and the need for greater screening. With the building now reoriented, there is an opportunity to reduce this dominance and significantly enhance the approach to the building.

Similarly the MUGA can easily be screened with trees to avoid looking at a mesh fence on approach to school.



## Design

The building is significantly smaller in scale and form than the neighbouring Edgar Woods Academy and adopts a softer material palette. This is considered an appropriate response to its different setting and context. Edgar Woods Academy has a notably austere and institutional character, and a softer architectural approach is therefore welcomed. There remains, however, an opportunity to introduce greater playfulness and visual interest into the design, helping to create a more engaging and distinctive building that avoids some of the starkness evident in the larger school.

### Activity Studio

This is the sole communal space for students in the full building and is externally designed to appear differently with the rest of the building. In principle there are no issues with this different elevational treatment but the building form could still read more coherently. The splayed angle contrasts awkwardly with the otherwise rectilinear vernacular of the building. I wonder whether the brick parapets could be raised and angled slightly to improve the elevation's legibility, or alternatively whether the feature-cladding area could become a more rectilinear 'box' form with straighter edges to create a more coherent composition. A brick plinth in this area would also help to ground the building and is likely to be required for practical construction reasons.

There is also a concern this element of the building risks repeating some of the qualities of the Edgar Woods Academy building, described by the architect as '*basic and bland in appearance.*' The applicant was explored to review design precedents to help communicate the design intent more successfully and this advice was not followed. There is reference to zinc cladding and whilst this material can demonstrate high-quality design it is very much dependent on its details which is unclear at the moment. Nevertheless, some precedents have been included to give you a steer in how this façade could be reflected. I would encourage the designer to also test different colours that work with brickwork proposed.

### Cladding Areas

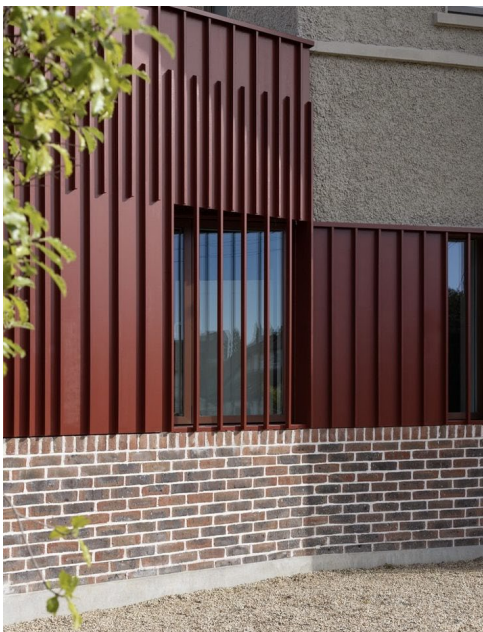
It was advised at Pre-App stage:

*'While timber elements have potential, if this approach were to be taken we would require detailed material specifications and high-quality visuals to fully assess their suitability.'*

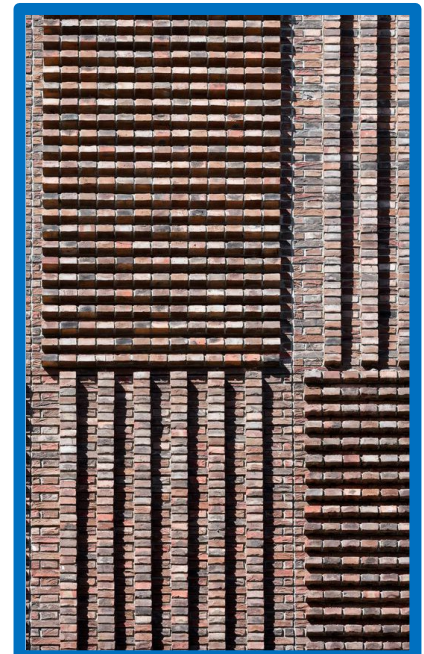
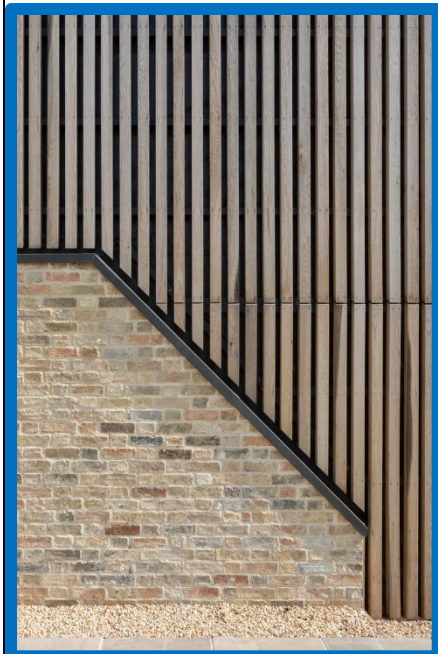
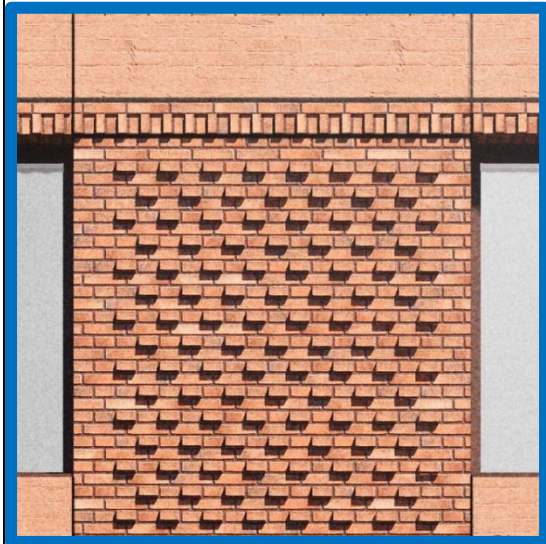
Due to the lack of detail and design precedents illustrating the intent for the cladding areas, I am unconvinced that this element adds value rather than making the building appear unnecessarily complex, mismatched, and somewhat haphazard. As shown, the cladding does not convey a high-quality design. Furthermore, I am concerned that 'timber effect cladding' is simply a low quality alternative to actual timber - where 'stick-on' cladding has been used elsewhere in the borough, it has rarely aged well and can quickly appear dated.

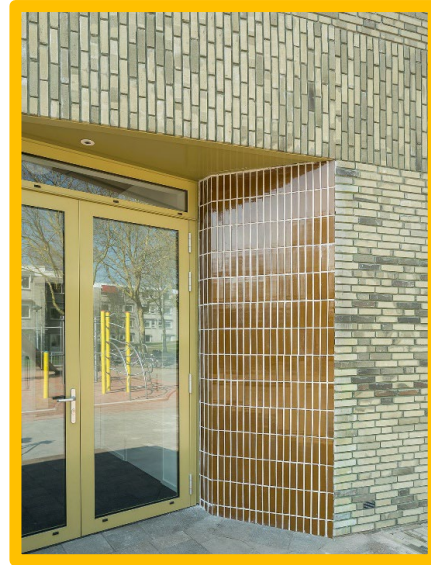
The rationale made by the applicant that this material is 'in keeping with the 'rural' character of the site and Green Belt backdrop to the north...' is rather weak and unconvincing.

If brick is intended to be the primary material, these 'timber effect' areas could instead be expressed through a more considered and stylised application of brick detailing, resulting in a stronger and more cohesive design.



Similarly, I am not convinced by the use of Rockpanel in these areas for the same reasons. As a flat applied product, it risks appearing superficial and could give the building a rather tacky appearance. The intended effect may be achieved more successfully by recessing these areas slightly and using a material such as glazed brick if the colour palette is a fundamental part of the design concept. Used selectively, this would not be prohibitively expensive and would deliver a far more durable and high-quality outcome. As a complementary material to the primary brickwork, it would create a much more coherent and effective composition.





### Canopy / Overhangs

I am particularly concerned with:

1. The extent of the canopy overhangs, and
2. The visual prominence and dominance of these features within the overall design.

They are noticeably distracting and overbearing, exerting a negative influence on the elevational design. The primary entrance canopy is excessive in its projection, compromising the building's form and legibility. There appears to be no clear justification for it extending as far as the footpath, raising

concerns that client requirements are clashing with the design and placemaking principles set out in this report.

Similarly, canopies appear to have been added to every classroom and HomeZone entrances. Their proliferation is excessive and their design lacks integration with the wider architectural composition. This approach should be rationalised and, if canopies are considered essential, an alternative design strategy should be explored, albeit one that may have cost implications.

### Suggestions

1. A stronger design response would be to recess entrance areas, introducing depth and visual interest to the elevations. This would likely require wider corridors and deeper recesses, potentially necessitating additional structural support to the oversailing roof.
2. Alternatively, and particularly for the rear classrooms, the roof could be cantilevered to provide the required shelter. Given the importance of the roof design, and the strong preference for parapet roofs to avoid the bulky and visually dominant roof forms highlighted at pre-application stage, this approach would provide greater architectural interest but again have added cost implications.
3. In selective areas, have cantilevered slim profile canopies but the extent to which they overhang would have to be reduced for this to be possible

### Windows

The overall architectural approach to the fenestration is positive, with a clear coherence in the proportions and hierarchy of the windows and doors. It is refreshing to see that the design has avoided the use of standard domestic window types / shapes. Overall, the fenestration is well proportioned in relation to the primary masonry façade.

However, early consideration should be given to window frame depths, vent requirements, and other associated components, as the intended glazed areas should not be compromised through future value-engineering exercises. It is strongly recommended that these requirements are fully accounted for at this stage of the design process.



I am also unclear about the glazing arrangement to the front elevation within the vent zone. This appears inconsistent with the treatment adopted elsewhere on the building and results in an

element that feels somewhat unresolved and visually incoherent (see image). Can the designer clarify?

To maintain the softness of the elevations, I would opt for a lighter colour window frame, but this can be solved at conditions stage.

### Brickwork

I welcome the use of brick as the primary material; however, I remain unconvinced by the use of brick slips, and this may be difficult to address through condition wording at a later stage. Greater assurance is needed that a high-quality outcome can be achieved if slips are proposed, including appropriate detailing such as window reveal depths and junction treatments. Adhesive brick slips will simply not be acceptable.



*SO Fier, EVA Architecten - Special education school in Utrecht, Netherlands*

The parapet areas could be improved with some further detail (cost neutral); the building can take positive cues from this precedent, which employs a similar colour /material palette.

Illustrate the parapet accurately on drawings with the capping trim (if applicable).

### **Drawing Clarity / Other**

The elevations suggest a flat roof parapet but the roof plan appears to show a pitched roof form. I assume it is the former in which case illustrate the parapet accurately on drawings with the capping trim (if applicable).

The roof windows appear to be placed randomly when assessed against the floor plan. Surely they would make more sense to sit centrally within a corridor when they are located here i.e. *Classroom 1*.

Soft Play areas would benefit from natural light.

Plant rooms occupy some of the best spaces opening out unto the sensory courtyard. Better design would put them to the back of house areas, possibly near the car park if access is readily required

### Sensory Courtyard:

Provide detailed information (can be a condition) regarding the sensory courtyard going forward – this can be a strong and central feature to the school.

### Greener Environments

There is an opportunity to incorporate a green roof, which would not only enhance the architectural design and help the building reflect its existing green setting, but also support compliance with key Core Strategy policies, including S04 (Promoting a Greener Environment) and C6 (Improving Health and Wellbeing). Furthermore, a green roof could help address some of the concerns previously raised regarding the canopy design by providing additional visual and environmental benefits.