

APPLICATION REPORT – FUL/348898/22
Planning Committee 12th October 2022

Registration Date: 13th April 2022
Ward: Alexandra

Application Reference: FUL/348898/22
Type of Application: Full Application

Proposal: Hybrid planning application seeking full/part outline consent comprising: (a) Full application for the erection of a visitor centre, events building with meeting pods, learning centre, forestry depot, ground mounted solar PV array and associated works, relocation of football pitch provision, necessary infrastructure, hard and soft landscaping, site wide vehicular, cycle parking and pedestrian improvements, including car park on Nether Hey Street., (b) Outline application (all matters reserved except for access) for a community growing allotment and swimming pond.

Location: Land at Snipe Clough, Oldham

Case Officer: Graham Dickman
Applicant: Northern Roots (Oldham) Ltd
Agent: Mr Ian Ford

INTRODUCTION

This application is presented to Committee as a major Council scheme which involves a departure from policies of the development plan.

Under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (Consultation) (England) Direction 2021, before issuing planning permission, the Local Planning Authority is required to consult the Secretary of State where the Local Planning Authority is minded to grant planning permission for development which involves:

- green belt development which includes 'inappropriate development' and comprises (a) the provision of a building or buildings where the floor space to be created by the development is 1,000 square metres or more; or (b) any other development which, by reason of its scale or nature or location, would have a significant impact on the openness of the Green Belt
- development which involves a loss of a playing field and where an alternative or replacement playing field is proposed to be provided, that alternative or replacement does not match (whether in quantity, quality or accessibility) that which would be lost, and Sport England has made representations objecting to the whole or part of the development

No planning permission shall be issued until the expiry of a period of 21 days from the date the Secretary of State acknowledges receipt of the referral, or the Secretary of State has notified the authority that he/she does not intend to issue a direction under section 77 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Thereafter, the authority may proceed to determine the application.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Planning Committee resolves that it is minded to grant permission subject to:

- the conditions set out in this report,
- referral of the application to the Secretary of State, and,
- that the Head of Planning shall be authorised to issue the decision following the confirmation that the Secretary of State does not wish to call in the application for her/his determination.

THE SITE

The Northern Roots site stretches south-east from Alexandra Park and encompasses a mix of flat grassland, heath, boggy wetlands, and dense wooded slopes.

The majority of the site is surrounded by residential areas and the adjacent Glodwick Cricket Club and Grade II listed Alexandra Park. To the south, further woodland exists and is within the ownership of the applicant. It is likely that this land will be considered in the future under a separate planning application for the next phase of Northern Roots.

The site is currently used by people for informal recreation, including walking dogs, horse riding via the existing bridleways, cycling, and nature watching. There is however evidence of inadequate sign posting, with paths and trails becoming overgrown and not fit-for-purpose. This has resulted in the site mostly being used by those who know it well, but potentially feeling unwelcoming and unsafe to those who do not.

Furthermore, the site is currently subject to fly tipping, illegal off-road motorbiking and anti-social behaviour, which further discourages residents and visitors from using it. Oldham Council's Environmental Services team spends around £26,000 per annum on its upkeep.

The site also has four playing pitches, with only two of these currently being used on the weekend.

The nearest designated sites of international importance are both located 8km away. The nearest designated site of national importance is 350m north. This is separated from the site by existing residential areas. The site does not fall within any Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) impact risk zones for which the proposal type is a risk category. The nearest statutory locally designated site is Glodwick Lows Local Nature Reserve (LNR) located 170m north.

THE PROPOSAL

The application has been submitted in a Hybrid form, encompassing some fully detailed proposals and other elements for which an approval to the principle of the development is sought, along with necessary improvement works to access infrastructure and landscaping.

The FULL elements include:

- the erection of a visitor centre,
- an event's building with meeting pods,
- learning centre,
- forestry depot,
- ground mounted solar PV array,

- relocation of football pitch provision
- car parking areas and access improvements.

The OUTLINE application (all matters reserved except for access) include:

- a community growing allotment,
- outdoor swimming pond.

Visitor Centre

The Visitor Centre will be located to the north-east of the site on the edge of the woodland. It is part single storey with an element of two storey and a gross internal floor area of 720m². The building will house a reception, a shop, a café, a multi-use and interpretation space, multi-faith prayer and meditation space, toilets and staff facilities.

Produce from the proposed market garden will be sold in the shop and used within the café in the Visitor Centre.

The overall building form has been driven by sustainable principles and design inspirations from natural forms. Uses have been positioned to maximise solar gains and create solar shading in certain areas. All of the spaces are linked by a glazed cloister which acts as a draught lobby. This is encircled by a rammed earth wall which moderates the temperature soaking up heat during the day and releasing it at night.

A natural amphitheatre where school and community groups can hold events is located close to the Visitor Centre and consists of a performance space with stepped seating around it. This follows the natural topography of the landscape and uses timber decking for the seating and self-binding gravel for the ground surface. The amphitheatre will have a natural appearance and will be sympathetic to the surrounding landscape.

The car park will have with 3 accessible spaces, 10 staff car parking spaces, 1 delivery bay and 17 cycle spaces.

Events Building

The Events Building and three meeting room pods will be located close to the Visitor Centre in clearings or areas of poor tree quality within the woodland. The Events Building will be a single storey oval structure with a gross internal floor area of 97.1m². The meeting room pods will be simple oval spaces which open out onto the woodland garden. They will have a gross internal floor area of 12.7m² each, therefore totalling 38.1m².

The Events Building and meeting room pods could be used as conference type facilities. The Events Buildings will be clad in timber shingles to give a rustic feel. The design of the buildings will enable them to blend with their natural environment.

Forestry Depot

The Forestry Depot will be located to the north-east of the site in an existing woodland clearing. The depot consists of a simple rectilinear yard containing two buildings - the forestry base and the workshop. Both buildings are single storey with a combined gross internal floor area of 293 m². The Forestry Depot is to be used by the Estate Management team for the long-term maintenance and management of the wider Northern Roots site. The yard associated with the depot includes staff parking and storage space for materials.

The buildings house an office, staff area and shower/ toilet plus workshop, meeting room, secure tool store and vehicle storage bays.

The Forestry Depot is screened by new planting and will be a natural coloured Forticrete block and standing seam roof allowing it to blend with the natural environment.

Learning Centre

The Learning Centre will be situated to the southern part of the site and act as a good focal point between the Visitor Centre and Bike Hub (application FUL/348472/22).

It consists of five single storey buildings grouped closely together surrounding a communal outdoor teaching space. The buildings have a gross internal floor area of 813m².

The Learning Centre will house a reception, teaching kitchen and breakout space, staff facilities, multi-faith prayer and meditation space, classrooms, toilets, and bunkhouse. There will also be communal outdoor space for outdoor learning. All buildings are fully accessible.

The site of the Learning Centre was deliberately chosen as the woodland in this location has been affected by ash dieback, meaning that trees in this area will need to be removed regardless of any building proposal. The existing woodland will also enable the buildings to be well screened and nestled within the surrounding landscape.

The associated landscape proposals build upon a woodland aesthetic working with the existing topography to retain as many trees as possible. A stepped route comprised of timber steps with self-binding gravel infill winds up the existing wooded slope to the Reception Building, linking the buildings to the car park and wider routes.

There will be 30 car parking spaces located to the north of the buildings, including 4 additional accessible spaces, 3 minibus spaces, 5 staff and 1 coach space. There is a delivery bay and 10 cycle spaces.

Ground Mounted Solar PV Array

A solar array will be located south of the Visitor Centre and market garden. Electricity will be generated and fed to a substation in the Alexandra Park Depot with the potential to provide electricity for the buildings within Northern Roots.

The layout of the scheme has been designed to best harness the power of the sun's irradiation alongside accommodating adequate separation distances between the arrays and trees that would otherwise shade the panels and reduce their availability to generate power.

The solar array will consist of 10 rows of solar modules (approximately 880 panels) with a containerised electrical switchroom.

Each row will be elevated above ground on the mounting frame, with the bottom (southern) edge at a height of up to 1.0m above ground level and the top (northern) edge at a maximum height of 3.1m. The module units are orientated southwards and will have an angle varying between 20 and 30 degrees.

The overall land area will be approximately 0.9ha. The physical footprint of the solar park component (e.g., arrays, inverters and cabling etc) would be approximately one third of the red line boundary area, therefore comprising a land take of approximately 0.3ha.

The installed capacity of the entire proposal is circa 440kW. The predicted annual power generation approximates up to 342 Megawatt Hours (MWh). The electricity output would result in annual offsetting of carbon dioxide emissions associated with fossil fuels equating to approximately 79,733 kilogrammes annually.

A security fence and CCTV cameras will be located around the outside of the solar array. This will consist of a 3m high, black paladin fence. Rows of native hedgerow species will be planted each side of the majority of the fence line which will enable the appearance of this boundary to soften in time. The space in between each row of solar panels will be planted with grassland and wildflowers to enhance the biodiversity of the area.

Existing mature woodland on three sides of the solar array area will provide effective natural screening which restricts visibility of the area from a wider perspective.

The current landscape elements that contribute to landscape character such as hedgerows or trees within the area will be retained. The Solar Array Design and Access Statement provides details of the site assessment undertaken to decide on the best location of the Array within the site. Out of three identified areas, the proposed location was the preferred option due to the higher elevation and that the fact it was surrounded by mature trees to reduce visual impact. The ground is also level and ground conditions considered very good and free from buried utilities apart from one drain which skirts the western edge of the site.

A Glint and Glare note supports the planning application which concludes that the presence of mature woodlands will provide substantial visual screening of the site from any potential receptors, such as residential properties. Therefore, the solar array will not have an impact on public safety and amenity.

Community growing allotment

A market garden and community growing areas will be located on the site of two existing football pitches in the north-east of the site.

Community growing proposed south of the Visitor Centre will include a number of polytunnels. Produce from the gardens will be sold in the shop and used within the café of the Visitor Centre.

Northern Roots allows for its own community to be created with a shared interest and sense of purpose focused on community growing, enabling people to create new social networks, reducing social isolation and encouraging greater social cohesion.

The fresh produce of Northern Roots improves sustainability through the reduced environmental impact of food transport miles reducing the carbon footprint; and the sustainability of the food sector in Oldham is enhanced through its urban farm and growing element.

Relocation of football pitch provision and new car park

Two football pitches will be retained in their current location, to the north-west of the site, whilst two are being re-provided to the north-east adjacent to Glodwick Cricket Club.

The site will benefit from replacement of four poor quality playing pitches, where one pitch hasn't been used for over 5 years and the other 10 years, to four improved playing pitches. This will encourage more people and teams to use these spaces who have been put off by the poor-quality amenities in the past, which have often led to games having to be cancelled in poor weather.

The location of the re-provided pitches is easily accessible from existing parking, but additional parking will also be provided off Nether Hey Street which will be closer to this area. 22 spaces will be provided in addition to a minibus space and 3 accessible bays enhancing access.

The car park will occupy approximately 50% of the present maintained grassed area. It will be gated. Additional tree planting will be provided and the existing footpath route through the site will be unaffected.

Outdoor swimming pond

The proposed swimming pond is part of the Outline application. It will be situated north of the Learning Centre. This existing area has a natural collecting of surface water. The proposal seeks to deepen this, to create an area for wild swimming. Further technical details will be provided during the Reserved Matters process to consider layout and design and to explore technical matters including drainage and ensuring the water quality can be maintained for swimming.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the majority of consultation has been hosted virtually on the PlaceChangers website, an online, digital engagement platform which specialises in digital outreach to engage with a wider audience of participants in an easy to use, interactive format.

The more detailed stages of public consultation were managed in two phases, with the first stage running between 19th July and 20th September 2021 and the second stage between 24th November and 12th December 2021.

As part of the wider Northern Roots project, public engagement will continue even into operation to ensure the community is getting the best out of the project.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

A 'screening' request has been submitted as to whether the development would require the submission of an Environmental Statement under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (EIA Regs).

The development does not fall within any of the categories of development set out in Schedule 1 of the EIA Regs.

However, the overall area of the Proposed Development amounts to approximately 35 hectares, which greatly exceeds the Schedule 2, Column 2 threshold of 5 hectares. It is therefore necessary for the development to be screened.

The Council's assessment is set out in detail in a Screening Opinion dated 10th November 2021 which concludes that the development does not appear to involve development which would result in significant environmental impacts, either within individual themes or cumulatively.

Various specialist reports and assessments would nevertheless be required and these have been submitted.

There are considered to be no significant, potential environmental effects of the development when assessed against the criteria within Schedule 3 of the EIA Regs, including the extent of the impact, any transfrontier nature of the impact, the magnitude and complexity of the impact, (iv) the probability of the impact, or the duration, frequency and reversibility of the impact.

On the basis of the above, it is considered that the proposals would not have significant, or wider than local environmental effects, and therefore does not constitute development for which an Environmental Statement is required.

RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

FUL/348472/22 - Full planning application for the construction of a Bike Recreation Hub (Use Class F2(c)) consisting of 2 bike track areas and ancillary service area, hard and soft landscaping, new car park on Cherry Avenue and footpath diversions and improvements and vehicular access improvements. Approved 6 July 2022

PA/345179/20 - New community Growing Hub (Use class D1) Erection of single storey structures, polytunnel, sustainable drainage, hard and soft landscaping works and amended parking and servicing layout. Approved 22 December 2020

PA/344412/20 - Demolition of existing ancillary buildings and glasshouses at Alexandra Park Depot with phased replacement of new facilities including erection of 2 storey office building (Use Class B1), new glasshouse structure (horticultural use), remodelling and extension of existing portal frame storage unit, hard and soft landscaping works and amended parking and servicing layout. Approved 22 May 2020

RELEVANT PLANNING POLICIES

The 'Development Plan' is the Joint Development Plan Document (Local Plan) which forms part of the Local Development Framework for Oldham.

The proposed development site is predominantly located within the Green Belt, identified as open space, and adjoining Green Corridors and Links, a Registered Park and Garden and Alexandra conservation area.

As such, the following policies are relevant to the determination of this application:

Policy 1 - Climate Change and Sustainable Development;
Policy 2 – Communities;
Policy 5 - Promoting Accessibility and Sustainable Transport;
Policy 6 – Green Infrastructure;
Policy 9 - Local Environment;
Policy 17 – Gateways & Corridors;
Policy 18 – Energy;
Policy 19 – Water & Flooding;
Policy 20 – Design;
Policy 21 – Protecting Natural Environmental Assets
Policy 22 - Protecting Open Land;
Policy 23 – Open Spaces and Sports.

Saved Oldham UDP Policy D1.5 – Protection of Trees on Development Sites

CONSULTATIONS

Highways Engineer:	No objection subject to conditions in respect of measures to secure safe access to and within the site, which will be subject to planning conditions.
Environmental Health:	Conditions in respect of landfill gas and contaminated land are requested, along with the need for a Construction Management Plan.
Trees Officer	No objections subject to tree protection measures and implementation of replacement tree planting.
G M Archaeological Unit:	No objection as the development should have no impact on below ground archaeological remains.
G M Police	No objections subject to the security measures within the Crime Impact Statement.
Sport England	Objects to the application as it is not considered to accord with any of the exceptions to Sport England's Playing Fields Policy or with Paragraph 99 of the NPPF.
Ramblers	No objections to the overall proposals. Welcome the improvements to the PROW network in the area and would wish to ensure safe use where paths also accommodate vehicles, and to prevent unauthorised use by motorised bikes.
Tameside Council	No comments received
National Air Traffic Services	No objections as the proposal does not conflict with safeguarding criteria.
Environment Agency	No specific comments, but draw attention to the Agency's guidance on water risk management and flood risk standing advice
GM Ecology Unit	Recommend that the Biodiversity Net Gain Matrix is completed, and conditions are imposed requiring updated ecological assessment for specific areas prior to development.
United Utilities	No objections in principle subject to conditions requiring submission of a sustainable drainage system and measures to protect existing drainage infrastructure before work commences in each development phase.

REPRESENTATIONS

7 objections from local councillors

The application has been publicised by means of neighbour notification letters, site notice and press notice.

In response, seven objections have been received, all relating to the provision of a new car park on Nether Hey Street.

- It would take away a well-used open space,
- result in more traffic problems in a congested area with on-street parking issues,
- cause increased noise, anti-social behaviour, pollution, and litter,
- adverse impact on wildlife
- the site is remote from main development.

The objections are supported by Councillors Mushtaq, Chauhan, and Harrison.

Concerns have also been expressed from an adjacent landowner in relation to the creation of the new swimming pond and the impact on existing/adjacent waterbodies.

3 letters of support have been received drawing attention to the benefits to physical and mental health, improved recreational facilities, educational opportunities to address local skills shortages, and the proposal's green credentials.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Principle of the development

The proposed development comprises a variety of development projects which form part of a wider vision to create an eco-park and urban farm in one of the country's most dense urban environments, which suffers from high levels of deprivation. It is intended to deliver much needed, maintained greenspace for residents to access leisure, learning and recreation facilities.

With minor exception the site is located within an area allocated as Green Belt. Consequently, it is necessary to assess the degree to which the development conforms with the aim and purposes of the Green Belt and the definitions of 'appropriate development' as set out in NPPF. Where there is deviation from this aim and purposes, development would be required to demonstrate that very special circumstances outweigh any identified harm.

Subject to specific locational factors, the various elements of the development would be appropriate within an urban context. However, location within allocated Green Belt requires further assessment.

The proposal requires an extensive area of greenspace to enable the vision of an urban farm and eco-park to be achieved. In order to satisfy the objective of demonstrating its eco-credentials and becoming sustainable, it is not possible to locate the forestry depot, visitor centre, learning centre, solar array, events building and meeting pods, and amphitheatre elsewhere outside the Green Belt, nor separate out certain elements of the project as this will not achieve the same agglomeration benefits and will prevent the site achieving its full sustainability credentials.

Green Belt Assessment

NPPF states that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open, noting that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.

The Green Belt serves five purposes:

- a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

NPPF Paragraph 149 states that a local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings or other development as inappropriate in the Green Belt. Exceptions include:

- buildings for agriculture and forestry;
- the provision of appropriate facilities (in connection with the existing use of land or a change of use) for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation, cemeteries and burial grounds and allotments; as long as the facilities preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it;
- engineering operations or material changes in the use of land (such as changes of use for outdoor sport or recreation) which preserve its openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it.

Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

Whilst the impact of each can be assessed on its own merits and having regard to the degree of conflict with Green Belt aims and purposes, it is also necessary to consider each element of the proposals as forming part of a unified whole.

In order to assess the impact on the Green Belt a 'Green Belt Assessment' and 'Green Belt Very Special Circumstances Case Report' have been submitted with the application. These documents consider the individual aspects of the scheme of the overall development objectives and benefits.

The Northern Roots site occupies a wedge of land slightly less than 0.5km in width located between established urban areas to the south-west and north-east. As such the site serves important Green Belt purposes "to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas" and "to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment" (NPPF paragraph 138).

Within the descriptions of "appropriate development" (NPPF paragraphs 149 and 150) the various developments can be considered as follows:

The proposed visitor centre and learning centre can be regarded, at least in part, as promoting and supporting the provision of appropriate facilities in connection with the existing use of land or a change of use for outdoor sport or outdoor recreation.

The parcels of land on which these facilities are proposed are presently devoid of built development. Consequently, these proposals would not preserve the openness of the Green Belt and result in conflict with the Green Belt purposes.

The impacts of the individual proposals are set out below.

Visitor centre, events space, and associated facilities

Although the Visitor Centre will be more visually prominent than the other buildings, it has been sensitively designed to blend with the surrounding natural environment and would be nestled into the woodland edge, with the woodland forming a backdrop. To the west of the Visitor Centre is an existing strip of woodland between this area and the football pitches. The buildings would therefore be well screened when viewed on entry to Northern Roots from the west.

The building roofs will be sedum on the single storey element to increase biodiversity, with a standing seam twisted roof over the café and butterfly roof canopy with elements of colourful dichroic glass which responds to changes in light.

The overall building form has also been driven by sustainable principles with uses positioned to maximise solar gains and create solar shading in certain areas and this is encircled by a rammed earth wall which moderates the temperature soaking up heat during the day and releasing it at night.

The events building and meeting room pods will be located close to the Visitor Centre in clearings or areas of poor tree quality within the woodland. The design of the buildings will enable them to blend with their natural environment being rustically clad in timber shingles.

Learning centre

The Learning Centre is located to the south of the site and consists of five single storey buildings grouped closely together surrounding a communal outdoor teaching space.

The buildings are all single storey raised slightly on stilts to minimise the impact on the ground and tree roots and to sit sensitively within the woodland setting being designed to be reminiscent of treehouse structures. They will be clad in timber shingles and shakes to give an organic feel and the majority of the buildings will have flat sedum roofs to minimise the scale and increase biodiversity.

The buildings comprising the Learning Centre have similarly been designed to maximise sustainability with the orientation and openings to maximise on solar gains and views out to the woodland, while the sculptural oversailing classroom roof provides solar shading. This will create a non-typical education space that feels organic and connects with the natural world surrounding it.

The existing woodland in this location enables the buildings to be well screened and nestled within the landscape. However, since in part the overall scale and elevation of the buildings relate closely to adjacent footpaths and public views, this will have a notable impact on Green Belt openness. The development has nevertheless been designed to be readily accommodated into its woodland backdrop and incorporate natural themes. It would consequently be suited to its setting.

In this regard, permission should only be granted where 'very special circumstances' can be demonstrated.

Forestry Depot

This facility is screened by new planting and will be a natural coloured Forticrete block and standing seam roof and designed to allow it to blend with the natural environment.

Whilst the forestry depot facilities assist in securing the creation and maintenance of a landscape integral to the objectives of Northern Roots, it could not be regarded as constituting appropriate facilities within the Green Belt in this context. Furthermore, there are inevitable impacts on openness and Green Belt purposes.

In this regard, permission should also only be granted where 'very special circumstances' can be demonstrated.

Solar array

The solar array is an integral part of the overall scheme and will directly power the Northern Roots project with any excess sold off and used to fund the running of the project. Consequently, it will ensure a local benefit.

As a result of the existing mature woodland on three sides of the solar array area, effective screening is naturally provided which restricts visibility of the area from a wider perspective. Views would be visibly restricted and contained within the much wider expanse of natural habitat and would not alter the distinctiveness or essential character of the area. The current landscape elements that contribute to landscape character such as hedgerows or trees within the area will be retained.

The modules will be low lying. Each row will be elevated above the ground rising at the top edge to a maximum height of 3.1m with an inclination/angle between 20 and 30 degrees.

Solar arrays are not included in the examples of appropriate development set out in the NPPF. It would inevitably result in some loss of openness to the Green Belt. It would therefore conflict with the Green Belt aim of keeping land permanently open and the purposes of checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas and safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.

NPPF Paragraph 151 does, however, qualify this by stating that very special circumstances may include "the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources".

The proposal would make a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions, which along with the functional integration to the wider development are positive benefits. Nevertheless, such benefits must be weighed alongside the identified impacts on the Green Belt.

Community growing hub, relocation of football pitch provision and outdoor swimming pond.

As uses of land, the growing hub, football pitches and outdoor swimming pond would comprise appropriate uses of land in the Green Belt.

However, it is necessary to demonstrate that they preserve the Green Belt's openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it. In particular, this will apply to any ancillary buildings or structures necessary to facilitate the uses for which separate planning permissions would be required.

Associated engineering operations

These works include the provision of new car parks, the enhancement of existing vehicular and footpath/cycle infrastructure within the site, including necessary drainage infrastructure.

It is considered that the nature of these works would not harm the Green Belt's openness or conflict with the purposes of including land within it.

Assessment of impacts on openness

As noted above, elements of the proposed built development could be deemed to provide appropriate facilities which would contribute towards the provision of outdoor sport and recreation, albeit in the context of the need to preserve the openness and not conflict with the purposes of the Green Belt. Similarly, the 'appropriateness' of material changes of use of land and engineering operations is subject to the same proviso (NPPF paragraphs 149-150).

The Supreme Court case of R (on the application of Samuel Smith Old Brewery) v North Yorkshire County Council [2020] confirmed that the assessment of openness is not limited to spatial considerations and that it was open to the planning judgement of the decision taker to determine whether the visual aspect of openness is relevant in any given case.

In this instance, having regard to the existing character of the site and the potential impact of the various elements of the proposed development, it is considered that visual impact would be a relevant consideration.

This has been assessed in the applicant's supporting submissions.

The site is visually well contained due to a combination of tree cover, surrounding development and landform. Substantial tree belts along the site's eastern and western boundaries provide significant screening to adjacent housing areas. This visual screening function remains present even in winter, when trees are not in leaf, due to the density of the tree cover and associated understorey.

There are more open views into the site from the north across the upper football fields. The distinctive rolling hills/landscape are visible to the south, although this will become more screened as trees come into leaf. New planting is proposed to help embed the proposals into the landscape.

Much of the internal areas of the site are visible from the extensive/well used footpaths and tracks that cross the green spaces. These are often enclosed in nature due to the containment from the woodland with only occasional longer views across the open field areas.

As a result, views into the site from most directions will remain relatively unchanged as a result of the proposal and existing longline views into the surrounding open countryside will be retained. The greatest visual change will be from the public right of way known as the Tip Road, which runs to the west of the site.

It is recognised that the existing site has a strong sense of openness and there are presently no existing buildings or structures. The proposal will include four groups of buildings and two structures with a combined footprint of 12,373m² set within a site area consisting of 270,000m², representing 4.5% of the overall site area.

The layout of the site respects the existing rural landscape and topography enabling open views across the site which reflect the current sight lines. The areas surrounding the proposed buildings and structures will remain largely undeveloped, naturally maintaining the character of the open countryside.

The buildings have been designed to blend with the natural environment and use a palette of environmentally friendly materials driven by sustainable and environmental principles.

The site layout has therefore been designed to take advantage of the existing woodland around the site enabling the proposed buildings and structures to be located in areas which are naturally enclosed and screened by existing woodland.

Having regard to the chosen location, the visitor centre, events space, learning centre and associated facilities serve a purpose integral to the objectives of Northern Roots in assisting with the promotion of outdoor sport and recreation. However, the range of facilities provided would not in totality be regarded as constituting appropriate facilities within the Green Belt in this context. Furthermore, there are inevitable impacts on openness and Green Belt purposes.

In this regard, permission should only be granted where 'very special circumstances' can be demonstrated.

Very Special Circumstances

Locational Requirements

The proposal requires an extensive area of greenspace to enable the vision of an urban farm and eco-park to be achieved. All of the elements within Northern Roots have been carefully considered and are inextricably linked.

As a result, it is not possible to locate the forestry depot, visitor centre, learning centre, solar array, events building and meeting pods, and amphitheatre elsewhere or separate out certain elements of the project as this will not achieve the same agglomeration benefits and will prevent the site achieving its full sustainability credentials.

The solar array will be seeking to directly power the buildings on site with any excess sold off and used to fund the running of the project.

Northern Roots will occupy a significantly underutilised asset located adjacent to the inner-urban area which contains a concentrated area of acute and sustained inner-urban multiple deprivation. The legacy of Oldham's industrial past has left little room for green space for leisure and recreational uses. This will enable the project to benefit those in greatest need.

The inner-urban location also means the site is a highly accessible and sustainable location with good existing public transport links. In addition, the site links in with the existing 'Fruit Route' created by the Council which builds on the objectives of encouraging healthy eating and engagement with nature.

The integration of the project with the nearby Alexandra Park is a key objective of Northern Roots. The eco-depot which is currently under construction in Alexandra Park will become a new Environmental Centre of Excellence and will act as an anchor development for the project (Ref: PA/344412/20). In addition, planning permission for a Growing Hub was granted in December 2020 (Ref: PA/345179/20) and this forms a key part of the Northern Roots vision in helping the local community to learn to grow and improve their mental and physical health.

Due to these locational requirements, there are no alternative non-Green Belt sites which could accommodate the proposal as this specific location is vital to deliver the Northern Roots vision and strategic objectives.

The benefits of the Northern Roots project are extensive, with the vision to be the UK's largest urban farm and eco-park delivering much-needed greenspace for residents and visitors to access leisure, learning and recreational facilities as well as representing a visitor attraction with regional and national significance.

Social Benefits

NPPF Paragraph 92 directs planning policies and decisions towards achieving healthy, inclusive and safe places, promoting social interaction, safe and accessible environments, and enabling and supporting healthy lifestyles.

The proposed seek to improve access to the countryside

The site, stretching from Alexandra Park, along the River Medlock and down to Daisy Nook Country Park, is used by people dog walking, horse riding, biking and nature watching, but underinvestment in the site over many years means it is not sign-posted and paths and trails are often overgrown and not fit for purpose.

As such, the site is used by those who know it well but can be unwelcoming and feel unsafe to those who do not. Furthermore, the site is currently subject to fly tipping, illegal off-road motorbiking and antisocial behaviour, discouraging residents and visitors from using it.

Northern Roots will utilise this underused and underperforming asset and turn it into a welcoming and attractive place for local residents and visitors. The existing footpath network will be enhanced and improved encouraging people to access and explore the countryside. In addition, the various uses within the site have been located across the site to encourage nodes of activity throughout the site.

In terms of social benefits, the proposal aims to improve both physical and mental health and wellbeing, reduce social isolation, and improve community cohesion by bringing people together and providing improved opportunities for walking and cycling, and sports and recreational activities.

The positive impacts of childhood team sport activities are highest in urban areas where opportunities are typically limited. The proposals include improved facilities for team sports which allow participants to not only stay active but can help develop key cognitive skills in childhood, providing opportunities which are typically limited. On a larger scale through the improved sporting and leisure infrastructure available; improved football facilities, a swimming pond and the associated Bike Hub, routes for walking, running and cycling can all provide opportunities to meet new people, improving overall community cohesion for young people.

The market garden and community growing area provides a space for people to learn and develop horticultural skills which will deliver a wide range of health benefits. Not everyone has access to an allotment or a garden, or the knowledge to grow and care for plants. Northern Roots will provide a safe space for people to learn and develop through hands on teaching and demonstrations, providing both physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits, allowing for its own community to be created with a shared interest and sense of purpose focused on community growing, enabling people to create new social networks, reducing social isolation and encouraging greater social cohesion.

Nationally, poor diet is one of the main factors driving poor health, such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes. The importance of allotments as a source of healthy local food is recognised. There will be an opportunity to increase the quantity of fresh produce available to the local community through community growing sites, beehives and orchards, and more residents can receive the health benefits of fresh produce.

The fresh produce from the market garden area will be directly sold in the Visitor Centre shop and used in the café enabling the proposal to contribute towards improved nutrition and diet outcomes building on the benefits of local fresh produce through the community growing project at the Alexandra Park Depot.

Northern Roots includes significant levels of cycling and walking infrastructure, including pathways throughout the site to encourage activity and a bike hub with a pump track. The improved facilities for cycling and walking are central to the vision for Northern Roots. The number of people who will participate in additional walking and cycling is anticipated to be approximately 100,000 per year by year five.

The proposals will result in educational benefits directly with a Learning Centre, courses, schools' programme, forest school and workspaces creating a dedicated space that is accessible for all young people to meet and discover more about the environment. There are also opportunities to become involved in growing and learning about food from the community garden on site.

Northern Roots will work with local health and care providers to connect people in these communities, working with Oldham's social prescribing network to support access to increased physical activity, healthy food and activities. In addition, it will work with schools, colleges and universities to deliver courses, qualifications apprenticeships and jobs, providing economic opportunities in communities where this is much needed.

Overall, the proposals therefore accord with national and local policy which seeks to address the needs of the local community, enhance health and wellbeing, and promote social cohesion.

Economic Benefits

In terms of economic benefits, the project will create, and showcase, a wide range of green skills, jobs and technologies in an area of acute and sustained economic deprivation, in a sector which will rise in prominence over the coming years.

The site is anticipated to support 80 jobs in the various businesses and operational roles across to the site.

It is anticipated that there will be 150 volunteering placements per year in a range of activities, and approximately 28 traineeships and apprenticeships per annum once the site is fully operational in sectors ranging from horticulture and arboriculture to construction, green technologies, visitor services and marketing.

Furthermore, the wider regeneration benefits of the project include improving the external perception of Oldham as a place to live, work and visit which will attract further investment and kickstart development in the town centre.

Overall, the proposals therefore accord with national and local policy which seeks to achieve sustainable development by supporting skills development, education and innovation and improved productivity.

Environmental Benefits

The proposed landscaping, habitat creation and improvement, and woodland planting and management will encourage new flora, fauna and biodiversity. Approximately 268 new trees and 1.1 hectares of woodland cover will be planted which will enhance nature and contribute towards carbon reduction. Proposals for sustainable drainage solutions will improve poor drainage, reduce surface flooding and improve water quality across the site, whilst enhancing biodiversity. Growing fresh produce in the market garden which will be used in the Visitor Centre will reduce the environmental impact of food transport miles.

The proposed solar array will directly power the Northern Roots project with any excess sold off and used to fund the running of the project. The proposed solar array has an installed capacity of circa 440kW. The predicted annual power generation approximates up to 342 Megawatt Hours (MWh). The electricity output would result in annual offsetting of carbon dioxide emissions associated with fossil fuels equating to approximately 79,733 kilogrammes annually.

The use of sustainable drainage systems to reduce the impact of development on the natural water environment has become increasingly common over the past decade, in response to government guidance. The Northern Roots site has low water quality in certain areas, with pollution in the water and limited water storage capability. These issues will be addressed through various water management strategies, many of which use natural elements including ponds and wetlands, shallow swales, rain gardens, filter drains and bio-retention systems. The whole system can be used as an educational tool telling the “story of water” through educational programmes and direct observation of water’s value for farming, irrigation of sports areas, biodiversity and other uses.

Overall, the proposals therefore accord with national and local policy which seeks to conserve and enhance the natural environment and meet the challenges of climate change.

Conclusion

The proposals must be assessed in their totality given the evident benefits which would accrue from the achievement of the Northern Roots’ objectives. In that context, various elements of the scheme would result in development which would be ‘inappropriate development’ as defined in NPPF and therefore require demonstration of ‘very special circumstances’ to overcome the resultant harm to Green Belt policy.

As set out above, there are identified benefits in the direct and observable sport and recreational facilities which would be created. In addition, in the longer term the Northern Roots proposals have the potential to generate momentum for the revitalisation of the town and to secure engagement and resultant positive outcomes for the local communities which are presenting unable to engage in and benefit from the natural environment in the area.

Collectively, these numerous and significant benefits represent the ‘very special circumstances’ and are shown to outweigh the identified harm to the Green Belt.

Impact on existing playing pitches

The proposals will result in the creation of 4 improved playing pitches, albeit with the loss of areas which have been previously used for such purposes.

It is proposed that two pitches will be retained as existing, whilst two new pitches would be provided to the northeast, adjacent to Glodwick Cricket Club.

Within the Council’s Playing Pitch Strategy (2015), the land named “Hope Playing Fields” is listed as lapsed, noting that it was overgrown and had not been used for recreation since approximately 2010.

The applicant considers that the site will benefit from replacing poor quality playing pitches (two are considered lapsed) with four improved playing pitches. Within the public engagement process, local teams and general public indicated a desire to use the pitches more but due to the quality of the current provision, the pitches were unattractive in their current state. Teams

have been put off by the poor-quality amenities in the past, which have often led to games having to be cancelled in poor weather.

This location of the replacement pitches will also benefit from additional parking to be provided off Nether Hey Street which will be closer to this area.

The site of the re-located pitches was originally an all-weather pitch created for St Albans school which was demolished in the late 1980s and the site has not been used for sport since. The current condition is very poor and in need of considerable repair. There is currently no recreational or sport value and therefore the proposal will be an improvement to the space.

The relocation of existing pitches will allow the market garden, commercial growing and allotments to be developed in a location which has been chosen due to the suitable ground conditions for growing food and the proximity to Oldham Town Centre. Allotments are considered as a recreational use with an abundance of benefits to mental and physical health.

When considered collectively, the two relocated pitches in addition to the market garden, commercial growing and allotments are considered to be at least equivalent to terms of usefulness, attractiveness, quality and accessibility.

When the proposals are considered as a whole, the improvements will bring about a wide range of social, economic and environmental benefits that would outweigh any harm from the loss of the presently unused pitch spaces.

In this context, the applicant considers that the proposed scheme is in accordance with Local Plan Policy 23 and NPPF Paragraph 99, and the re-provision of playing fields and the development of the wider proposals, specifically the market garden, commercial growing and allotments should be considered acceptable in this location.

Sport England comments

Sport England considers that the trigger for consultation in a statutory rather than in an advisory capacity is where the whole of a development (within the red line boundary of a planning application) includes a playing field that falls within the definition in the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (DMPO).

Sport England notes that its statutory remit is not merely to protect pitches that are currently or historically marked out, but the whole of a playing field including any areas that have never been marked out but have the potential to do so.

This is because playing field land is becoming an increasingly scarce resource that is needed to respond to changes in demand for different pitch types and sizes over time. Any unmarked areas can be used to accommodate more pitches.

Sport England considers that Snipe Clough Playing Fields falls within the statutory definition of a playing field as it is currently in use which triggers the requirement to consult. Any unused pitches or playing fields that lie within the red line boundary are not treated separately as Sport England's comments relate to everything that falls within the red line boundary.

It considers that the lawful use of a playing field, even if unused, is still that of a playing field until such time as its use is changed or it is developed. Neither the DMPO, NPPF or Sport England Policy make any distinction between used or unused playing field nor is there a positive obligation (under planning law) for any playing field to be actively used as such. It should be noted that a playing field does not have to be available for, or in community use to fall within the definition of playing field.

In this context, Sport England objects to the proposal as it considers the mitigation for the loss of approximately 4.3ha of playing field falls short of what is required to meet Sport England's Playing Fields Policy and paragraph 99 of the NPPF.

In submitting an objection, Sport England states that it does not object to the principle of the development as a whole only those elements that affect the playing fields. It acknowledges that the proposal as a whole satisfies many of the 'Big Issues' set out in Sport England's 'Uniting the Movement' Strategy. However, Sport England's statutory remit to protect playing fields falls within that same Strategy and it considers that the wider health and physical activity benefits of the proposal need to be considered alongside Sport England's statutory remit, the one cannot off-set the other.

The proposal is required to meet either Sport England Playing Fields Policy Exception E1 (surplus to requirement) or E4 (replacement).

With respect to E1 (paragraph 99(a) of the NPPF), the Council's Playing Pitch Strategy (2015) sets out whether there is an excess or deficiencies of pitch provision in the analysis area. The Strategy is considered out of date (no updates to the baseline data have been undertaken for three years or more).and no longer robust as there have been changes in demand and supply since 2015.

As there is no evidence submitted of an excess of provision within the sports catchment area then no part of any of the playing fields affected can be deemed surplus to requirement, and Exception E4 (paragraph 99(b) of the NPPF) must be applied. Sport England notes that surplus to requirement in this policy context does not refer to surplus to the current owner/users requirement but to meet a local community sport need across a wide range of pitch sport types now and in the future.

With respect to Exception E4, each of the sites affected are either in use as playing field now or are disused playing fields. To meet the Exception, an equivalent or greater quantity (playing field area) and equivalent or better quality (pitches and ancillary facilities) need to be provided. Simply marking out a pitch, even if improved, on an existing or disused site constitutes qualitative improvements only and does not meet the policy requirements because it does not result in the genuine creation of replacement playing field land.

The existing playing field area of Snipe Clough playing field is approximately 3.42ha, with two pitches currently marked out although historically it has had up to four pitches marked out. The proposal would see the southern part of the playing field lost to the market garden representing a loss of playing field land equating to approximately 1.8ha. The mitigation proposes to create two pitches on the former St Albans School playing field. The relocation site was the playing field of the former school and contained a redgra pitch, MUGA and area of natural turf playing field

During pre-application discussions, Sport England advised that if a Feasibility Study is undertaken on the relocation site that shows significant works are required to bring the land back into use e.g. cut and fill, levelling etc then there may be a case to be made that this constitutes a genuine creation of new playing field. No such Feasibility Study has been submitted.

The creation of pitches without support from ancillary facilities is often unsustainable so it is likely changing rooms/toilets will be required in addition to the proposed car parking. Consultation with the Football Foundation and Manchester FA is required to understand what pitch type and size, and if any ancillary provision, is needed. Even if the Feasibility Report

demonstrates this area creates new playing field that would only partially mitigate the total loss of playing field across the whole proposal.

The Lees Recreation Ground (also known as Hope Playing Fields) is a currently unused playing field of approximately 2.5ha that historically accommodated up to three pitches and would be lost in its entirety to the market garden and solar array.

As stated previously, Sport England applies its policy to any land in use as playing field or last used as playing field and which remains undeveloped, irrespective of whether that use ceased more than five years ago. Such land can retain the potential to provide playing pitches to meet current or future needs.

No evidence has been submitted that the playing field is surplus to requirements to meet local community sport needs, and therefore the playing field is required to be replaced in accordance with Sport England Playing Fields Policy E4.

In light of the above, Sport England objects to the application because it is not considered to accord with any of the exceptions to Sport England's Playing Fields Policy or with Paragraph 99 of the NPPF.

Sport England advises that the applicant has needs to satisfy one or more of four options in order to resolve the objection:

1. Relocate the proposed new sports facilities (Bike Hub, Swimming Pond) to the playing field to be lost. Subject to consultation with British Cycling and Swim England, this might provide sufficient benefits to sport to outweigh the loss of playing field to meet Exception E5;
2. Provide the outstanding loss of 4.3ha of playing field off-site in consultation with the Council and National Governing Bodies of Sport;
3. Submit a Feasibility Study for the relocation site at St Albans School playing field that demonstrates a genuine creation of new playing field which would mean mitigation for the loss of a smaller amount of 2.8ha will be required; or
4. Wait for a revised Playing Pitch Strategy to be developed to help inform whether the unused playing field is surplus to meet a local community sport need.

Finally, it is noted that should the Planning Committee be minded to grant planning permission for the proposal contrary to Sport England's objection, then in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Consultation) (England) Direction 2021, the application should be referred to the Secretary of State, via the Planning Casework Unit.

Assessment of impact on sports provision

It is acknowledged that the requirements of Sport England cannot be fully satisfied on the basis of the present proposals, and that the overall loss of area with potential for active playing pitches will be reduced. The proposals envisage an improvement in the quality of the 4 pitches which will be provided, alongside other sports and recreation facilities as part of the overall Northern Roots package. Sport England suggest that those concerns could be lessened if the alternative sports provision was on the former playing pitch sites, thereby retaining their active sporting use.

The swimming pond location is site specific, based on topography and an existing waterbody and would be impractical to move to the former pitches.

Moving the bike hub (as approved under application FUL/348472/22) would not result in any additional gain as its provision is anticipated to be achieved nearby.

Sport England considers that the loss of the unused playing pitches is a significant negative consideration, whilst the applicant suggests that the use of the pitches has lapsed. In either scenario, the primary objective must be to achieve overall sport and recreational benefit from the proposals.

In this context, ensuring the new provision is available before the former playing pitches are redeveloped would achieve that objective, whilst also ensuring the proposed recreational and health benefits of the growing hub can come to fruition in a location which has been identified as highly suitable for such a use.

Therefore, it is recommended that a condition is imposed that the areas of former playing pitches are not developed until the replacement pitches are provided and brought into use.

NPPF Paragraph 99 states that:

“Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, 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.”*

Whilst it is acknowledged that the Playing Pitch Strategy dates from 2015, it is considered that the proposal would be in accordance with the requirements of sub-paragraphs b) and c).

It also achieves the aim in paragraph 98 that *“Access to a network of high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity is important for the health and well-being of communities, and can deliver wider benefits for nature and support efforts to address climate change”*.

Local Plan Policy 23 requires that sites currently or most recently used as open space or for sport or recreation should not be lost unless it can be demonstrated that the development brings substantial benefits to the community that would outweigh the harm resulting from the loss of open space. This can include:

g. a replacement facility which is at least equivalent in terms of usefulness, attractiveness, quality and accessibility, and where appropriate quantity, to existing and future users is provided by the developer on another site prior to the development commencing; or

h. if replacement on another site is neither practicable nor desirable, an agreed contribution is made by the developer to the council for new provision or the improvement of existing open space or outdoor sport and recreation facilities and its maintenance within an appropriate distance from the site, or within the site.

In either instance, where this involves the loss of playing fields, the development should be approved by Sport England.

The proposals will result in a reduction in the playing pitch area available for sports. However, this must be weighed in the balance of the wide-ranging public benefits which would accrue from the Northern Roots development. As with the NPPF, the exceptions do not specifically distinguish between sports use and recreational use. In that context, neither suggests that benefits in one sport recreational sphere cannot be weighed against the loss in another.

Following publication of the previous Committee agenda, the applicant submitted a further representation raising concerns at the implications for the project of the proposed wording of Condition 13, in particular the requirement for replacement playing fields to come forward in advance of any development on the existing playing fields.

Whilst the applicant has no objections to the condition in relation to the Snipe Clough pitches, it is considered that the condition as previously worded would prevent early delivery of the development on Phases A and B from coming forward. This includes the 'upper' market garden (Phase A) which can commence almost immediately after consent and is something that will bring a key benefit to the local community, and the solar array (Phase B) for which initial funding has been raised and there is a route in place to gather further capital for the project.

Consequently, the applicant suggests the condition as previously worded would undermine the ability to bring forward the project, the public benefits of which are accepted as outweighing any conflict with planning policy.

The overall benefits of the development are recognised, and in view of the potential adverse impact of the condition on the potential deliverability of the scheme, it is recommended that the conditions are amended as set out at the end of this report (Conditions 13 and 14).

Consequently, it is recognised that this would not overcome Sport England's objection, nor remove the need to refer the application to the Secretary of State. However, it is not considered that, in light of the viability considerations and resultant gain in sport and recreational facilities overall, Sport England's position would justify rejection of the application.

Loss of Open Space (car park proposals)

Although not defined as a playing field, the proposed new car park at Nether Hey Street will also lead to the partial loss of an area of public open space. However, the considerations above would similarly apply.

Therefore, the loss of part of this space must be weighed against the substantial benefits from the creation of replacement playing fields in the vicinity. Furthermore, a significant area of the existing open space will be retained, along with the footpath route which passes through it.

In addition, mitigation has been put in place for any loss of trees or open space to allow the proposal to be built which includes additional tree and shrub planting to enhance the biodiversity of the area and improved playing fields nearby.

Highways Impacts

The Highway Engineer has assessed the suitability of the existing highway layout and has some concerns with conflict arising between different sets of drivers, pedestrians and cyclists.

A Transport Assessment has been submitted which looks at existing highway conditions and the likely effect that the proposed development will have on the local highway network.

The Transport Assessment as submitted shows that the site can be accessed by sustainable modes of transport with good links to public transport. The nearest bus stops to the site are located on Honeywell Lane / Keswick Avenue, Abbey Hills Road and Furness Avenue. An additional regular service is available at stops on Ashton Road at a slightly greater distance. The site is located 1.5 km from Oldham Town Centre. It is well served by public transport. Oldham King Street tram station is 1.5 km away from the site, which connects the site to the wider area of Greater Manchester.

The site currently accommodates people arriving by car at an existing car park at the northern end of the site.

There are also opportunities for walking and cycling in the immediate area with links to local pedestrian and cycle infrastructure. Both will be enhanced as part of the development.

There are a number of definitive public rights of way that pass through the site. Some of these will be enhanced as part of the development, which will improve pedestrian routes through the site.

The proposed development will be located with links to existing or proposed cycle infrastructure in the area. A link to the existing cycle network on Kings Road should be incorporated into the highway improvement at Kings Road/ Honeywell Lane.

Individual Travel Plans will be required (by condition) as each element of the development is brought into use so that more sustainable modes of travel to those parts of the development are promoted and encouraged for all future users.

The Transport Assessment looked at the impact of the development on the local highway network of people choosing to drive to the site.

Additional vehicular movements at each of the nearby major junctions – Kings Road/Park Road/Woodstock Street, King Street Roundabout/A62 Oldham Way and Honeywell Lane/A627 Ashton Road/Hollins Road were looked at. At all but one of those junctions, the additional movements during the morning, inter and evening peak periods were shown to be less than 30 vehicles per hour.

The total impact at the Kings Road/ Park Road Woodstock Street junction was shown to exceed 30 vehicle movements per hour during the evening peak on a weekend day when traffic flows are usually lower.

The Transport Assessment has demonstrated that there will not be a severe impact on the local highway network in terms of traffic generation.

Primary access to the proposed development will be taken from Kings Road near to Honeywell Lane. The existing access will require amendment so that it is suitable for use by the volume and type of traffic that will be attracted to the site. This will include a narrowing of the very wide carriageway and provision of pedestrian and cycle facilities.

The Highway Engineer has serious concerns about the use of the short length of highway outside the nearby residential properties on Honeywell Lane. If there is an increase in the use of this it will result in additional manoeuvres to and from it at its junction with Kings Road, conflict between two-way traffic along it due to its narrowness, and conflict between users at its junction with the access to the proposed development.

There are a number of options available which would successfully resolve the issue; however, they are all subject to further consultation with others, including the local residents. Mitigation measures will be carried out by way of condition.

A car park will be provided for the relocated sports pitches off Nether Hey Street. This will provide a convenient place close to the facility for players and spectators and will reduce the requirement for any additional on street parking demand on the local highway network close to the pitches.

Ecology and Trees

The application accompanied by an Ecological Assessment

GM Ecology Unit is satisfied that any ecological impact can be alleviated successfully. In addition, a net gain in biodiversity can be achieved as the site offers clear potential for biodiversity net gain in excess of 10% as will be required under the Environment Act.

An assessment of the potential gains using the DEFRA Biodiversity Metric will be required to be completed as a condition of any approval.

Given the potential timescales for implementation of the various developments proposed, it is recommended that updated ecological assessments are undertaken in relation to species including bats, badgers, amphibians, and hedgehog, and for the treatment of invasive plants.

The Council's Trees Officer has assessed the submitted details and has no objection in principle to this proposal.

It is noted that approximately 6 individual trees and 1.1 hectares of tree group or woodland cover are proposed to be removed' in order to implement this proposal as submitted. However, it has been shown that this level of proposed tree loss has/can be kept to a minimum by the considered design and positioning of the buildings, facilities, activities, and infrastructure throughout the site.

This proposed tree loss can be mitigated throughout the site and the wider Northern roots site as there is sufficient available and suitable space, by undertaking compensatory tree planting at the minimum required ratio of three new trees for every one semi or semi mature tree that is agreed can be removed.

Approximately 268 new trees and 0.8 hectares of new woodland planting is detailed or indicated on the Masterplan and Planting Plans. Further new planting commitments would be made to ensure adverse effects on tree cover are mitigated in accordance with Local Policy within the wider Northern Roots land ownership boundary'.

The 3:1 minimum requirements of the replanting policy can and will be exceeded. Further information is required in this area as many of the proposed new trees are only indicated at this time.

It is recommended that an Arboricultural Impact Assessment, Arboricultural Method Statement, and Tree and Hedgerow Planting Scheme are secured by condition

Residential Amenity

Due to the wide range of proposals within the proposed scheme, there is likely to be varying operating hours, specific to each development. Furthermore, much of the area is and will continue to be open 24/7 due to the nature of the site.

G M Police supports the proposals subject to measures set out in the submitted Crime Impact Statement, including detailed design and siting to limit opportunities for break-in, changing facilities for the sports pitches and swimming pool to be secure, car parking to contain perimeter fencing and lighting, CCTV, sign posting and clear pathways.

In general, there are no residential properties in the immediate vicinity of the various proposals within the overall site.

The exception relates to the proposed introduction of the new car parking area at Nether Hey Street. This will occupy part of an existing area of open space, and concerns have been expressed by local residents and elected members that this could increase anti-social behaviour and crime, along with increasing parking and access problems in the area.

To help reduce the potential of anti-social behaviour, security lighting will be proposed, and a security gate will be put in place at the entrance of the car park. This form of traffic control prevents cars from leaving the site after a certain time and will be locked by the site management team. Signs will clearly show that this form of traffic control will be implemented past a certain time, preventing cars from leaving and therefore discouraging cars from entering the space after a certain time, helping prevent anti-social behaviour.

In respect of the loss of open space, this is considered earlier in this report.

Drainage

The DEFRA Flood Risk Maps identify the site as falling within Flood Zone 1, at the lowest risk of flooding. Smaller areas within Flood Zone 2 lie within the overall development site; however, none of these areas are specifically subject to proposed development.

Flood Risk Assessments and Drainage Strategy documents have been submitted in respect of the built development proposals.

United Utilities has raised no objections in principle; but given the scale and range of the proposed developments, detailed assessments of impact on existing infrastructure and proposed drainage are required. Phased conditions are therefore recommended.

The swimming pond forms part of the 'outline' element of the application and therefore full details are not available at this stage. Recommended Condition 8 requires submission of those details prior to work commencing on that aspect of the development.

Energy

In accordance with Local Plan Policy 18 'Energy', each individual development over 1,000 square metres will be required to reduce energy emissions by +15% increase on Part L for domestic and non-domestic buildings.

An energy statement has been provided which demonstrates that the targets can be achieved through energy efficiency and incorporated design measures. In addition, the benefits from the provision of an on-site energy source via the solar array will ensure the required targets can be met.

This matter will be controlled by planning condition.

Ground conditions

The application is accompanied by Phase 1 Geo-environmental Reports.

The Environmental Health team has considered these documents and does not foresee any impediments to the proposed development. Nevertheless, conditions are recommended in relation to the need for subsequent full site investigation and assessment, and for implementation of any identified remedial measures.

CONCLUSION

The proposals represent a significant scheme which is envisaged can act as a large-scale demonstrator of how the natural environment can be harnessed and enhanced to be productive and help in improving local economic and social outcomes. The project aims to contribute towards making Oldham a more attractive and desirable place to live, encouraging people and businesses to visit and potentially locate in the borough.

The benefits are identified as improving a significant but severely under utilised and neglected site on the edge of the urban area that is close to some of the more deprived areas in the borough and will provide opportunity to encourage increased use for recreational and sporting purposes improving health outcomes, including encouraging regular exercise, and alleviating identified poor health indicators amongst the local population.

Conflicts with Green Belt policy have been assessed, and it is acknowledged that Visitor Centre, events building/ meeting pods, Learning Centre, forestry depot, and ground mounted solar PV would all constitute 'inappropriate development' in the Green Belt.

Very Special Circumstances are required to be demonstrated to outweigh the resultant harm as required in paragraphs 147 and 148 of the NPPF and Local Plan Policy 22.

In this context, the overall social, economic, and environmental benefits which would accrue from the scheme in its totality are deemed sufficient justification to outweigh any identified harm. The benefits relate directly to the productive enhancement of an undervalued space in the urban area with proximity to areas of deprivation.

RECOMMENDED CONDITIONS

1. Development comprising any part of the FULL application must be begun not later than the expiry of THREE years beginning with the date of this permission.

REASON - To comply with the provisions of Section 51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

2. For the approved developments comprising the OUTLINE application, submission for approval of the reserved matters of 1) Appearance, 2) Landscaping 3) Layout and 4) Scale shall be made to the Local Planning Authority before the expiration of three years from the date of this permission. Development comprising any part of the OUTLINE application, shall be begun either before the expiration of three years from the date of this permission or two years from the date of approval of the last of the reserved matters.

REASON - To comply with Section 51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

3. The development hereby approved shall be fully implemented in accordance with the Approved Details Schedule list on this decision notice.

REASON - For the avoidance of doubt and to ensure that the development is carried out in accordance with the approved plans and specifications.

4. No development comprising the erection of the external walls or roof of any individual building hereby approved shall take place until samples of the materials to be used in the construction of the external surfaces of that building have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details. The materials to be used throughout the development shall be consistent in terms of colour, size and texture with the approved details.

REASON - To ensure that the appearance of the development is acceptable in the interests of the visual amenity of the area having regard to Policy 20 of the Oldham Local Plan.

5. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall be brought into operation until the car parking spaces and associated vehicular and footpath access as indicated on the approved plan has been provided in accordance with the details of construction, levels, and drainage, which shall have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority prior to the commencement of the construction of the accesses and parking spaces. Thereafter the parking spaces shall not be used for any purpose other than the parking and manoeuvring of vehicles.

REASON - To ensure adequate off-street parking facilities are provided and remain available for the development so that parking does not take place on the highway to the detriment of highway safety having regard to Policies 5 and 9 of the Oldham Local Plan

6. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall be commenced until a scheme in the form of a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP), including details of construction vehicle access routes, has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The scheme shall include details for the methods to be employed to control and monitor noise, dust, and vibration impacts. The approved scheme shall be implemented to the full written satisfaction of the Local Planning Authority before the construction works are commenced, which shall be maintained for the duration of the construction works.

REASON - Prior approval of such details is necessary since they are fundamental to the initial site preparation works and to safeguard the amenities of the adjoining premises and the area having regard to Policy 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

7. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall be commenced until details of facilities for the storage and removal of refuse and waste materials have been provided in accordance with a scheme which has previously been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The approved scheme shall be retained thereafter.

REASON - To protect the amenity of the area having regard to Policy 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

8. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall commence until the following information has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Details of a sustainable surface water drainage scheme and a foul water drainage scheme. The drainage scheme shall be in accordance with the Non-Statutory Technical Standards for Sustainable Drainage Systems (March 2015) or any subsequent replacement national standards and must include:

- (i) An investigation of the hierarchy of drainage options in the National Planning Practice Guidance (or any subsequent amendment thereof). This investigation shall include evidence of an assessment of ground conditions and the potential for infiltration of surface water in accordance with BRE365;
- (ii) A restricted rate of discharge of surface water agreed with the local planning authority (if it is agreed that infiltration is discounted by the investigations);
- (iii) Levels of the proposed drainage systems including proposed ground and finished floor levels in AOD;
- (iv) Incorporation of mitigation measures to manage the risk of sewer surcharge where applicable; and,
- (v) Foul and surface water drained on separate systems.

Prior to the commencement of the use of the proposed development within that Phase, the drainage scheme shall be completed in accordance with the approved details and shall be retained thereafter for the lifetime of the development.

REASON - To promote sustainable development, secure proper drainage and to manage the risk of flooding and pollution having regard to Policy 19 of the Oldham Local Plan.

9. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall commence until the following information has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority:

Details of the means of ensuring the water mains and public sewers that are laid within the site boundary are protected from damage as a result of the development. The details shall include a survey that identifies the exact location of the water mains and public sewers, the potential impacts on the water mains and public sewers from construction activities (including the construction compound), the impacts post completion of the development on the sewer infrastructure that crosses the site and identify mitigation measures, including a timetable for implementation, to protect and prevent any damage to the sewers both during construction and post completion of the development. The details shall include a pre and post construction condition survey of water mains and public sewers within the red line boundary.

Any mitigation measures shall be implemented in full in accordance with the approved details and timetable for implementation and shall be retained thereafter for the lifetime of the development.

REASON - To protect drainage infrastructure, to secure proper drainage and to manage the risk of flooding and pollution having regard to Policy 19 of the Oldham Local Plan.

10. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall be brought into use until a sustainable drainage management and maintenance plan for the lifetime of the development has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

The sustainable drainage management and maintenance plan shall include as a minimum:

- a. Arrangements for adoption by an appropriate public body or statutory undertaker, or, management and maintenance by a resident's management company; and,
- b. Arrangements for inspection and ongoing maintenance of all elements of the sustainable drainage system to secure the operation of the surface water drainage scheme throughout its lifetime.

The development shall subsequently be completed, maintained and managed in accordance with the approved scheme.

REASON - To promote sustainable development, secure proper drainage and to manage the risk of flooding and pollution having regard to Policy 19 of the Oldham Local Plan.

11. No works to trees or shrubs shall take place between the 1st March and 31st August in any year unless a detailed bird nest survey by a suitably experienced ecologist has been carried out immediately prior to clearance and written confirmation provided that no active bird nests are present which has been agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

REASON - To ensure the protection of bird habitats, which are protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, having regard to Policy 21 of the Oldham Local Plan.

12. Prior to the commencement of the construction of any building within each Phase, as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01, details for demonstrating that each building will achieve a 15% reduction in carbon emissions against Part L of the Building Regulations 2013 shall first be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. No individual building shall be first occupied until the approved measures have been fully implemented for that building.

REASON - In order to secure a sustainable form of development having regard to Policies 1 and 18 of the Oldham Local Plan.

13. No development comprising the alternative re-use of the Snipe Clough playing fields (Phase E as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XXXX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01) shall commence until the improved and replacement playing pitches hereby proposed have been constructed and are brought into use.

REASON - To ensure that the development leads to the enhancement of sport and recreation facilities having regard to Policy 23 of the Oldham Local Plan and paragraphs 98-99 of the NPPF.

14. No development comprising the alternative re-use of the Lees Recreation Ground/Hope Playing Fields (Phases A and B as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01) shall commence until a detailed specification for, and proposal for delivery of, the improved and replacement playing pitches hereby proposed has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The development shall be implemented in accordance with the approved specification and timeframe.

REASON – To ensure that the development leads to the enhancement of sport and recreation facilities having regard to Policy 23 of the Oldham Local Plan and paragraphs 98-99 of the NPPF.

15. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01, shall be commenced, other than site clearance, until a site investigation and assessment into landfill gas risk and ground contamination, including any historic gas mining legacy features, has been carried out and the consultant's written report and recommendation have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. In order to fully discharge the condition, the written approval from the Local Planning Authority will be required for any necessary programmed remedial measures and to confirm that the site has been made safe and stable for the development.

REASON - In order to protect public safety having regard to Policy 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

16. No development associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall be commenced, until a scheme and timetable showing how that Phase helps contribute towards the achievement of Biodiversity Net Gain, has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The development shall be fully implemented in accordance with the approved details and timescale.

REASON - To ensure that the proposals result in enhancement of biodiversity having regard to Policies 9, 20 and 21 of the Oldham Local Plan, and paragraph 174 of the NPPF.

17. No development associated any Phase as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall take place until full details of both hard and soft landscape works, with an associated implementation plan, have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The hard landscape details shall include proposed finished levels or contours; means of enclosure; hard surfacing materials and street furniture, where relevant. The soft landscaping works shall include planting plans; written specifications (including cultivation and other operations associated with plant and grass establishment); schedules of plants and trees, noting species, plant/tree sizes and proposed numbers/densities and the implementation programme.

All planting shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details in the first available planting season following the completion of the development, or such longer period which has previously been approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority and shall be maintained for a period of 5 years from the agreed date of planting. Any trees or plants which die, become diseased, or are removed during the maintenance period shall be replaced with specimens of an equivalent species and size.

REASON - Prior approval of such details is necessary as the site may contain features which require incorporation into the approved development, and to ensure that the

development site is landscaped to an acceptable standard having regard to Policies 9, 20 and 21 of the Oldham Local Plan, and saved Policy D1.5 of the Unitary Development Plan.

18. No development, including site clearance, excavation or construction works or the entry of vehicles or plant into the site, associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall commence until all existing retained trees and hedges on and adjacent to the site, other than those indicated for removal on the approved plans, have been physically protected from damage by plant, equipment, vehicles, excavation, deposit of excavated material and any other cause. This shall be achieved by the erection of 2.3 m high fencing using vertical and horizontal scaffolding poles, or other stout fencing to Local Authority approval with the uprights driven well into the ground, erected in accordance with BS5837:2005, outside the canopy. The fencing shall be maintained for the duration of the development operations and no operations or storage whatsoever shall take place within the fenced protection areas.

REASON - Prior approval of such details is necessary to protect existing trees and hedges having regard to saved Policy D1.5 of the Unitary Development Plan.

19. No development, including site clearance, excavation or construction works or the entry of vehicles or plant into the site, associated any Phase as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall commence until a detailed method statement for removing or for setting out the long-term management / control of Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and Rhododendron identified on the site shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The method statement shall include proposed measures that will be used to prevent the spread of the invasive species during any operations and shall also contain measures to ensure that any soils brought into the site are free of the seeds / root / stem of any invasive plant covered under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended. Development shall proceed in accordance with the approved method statement.

REASON - To prevent the spread of invasive plant species having regard to Policy 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

20. No development, including site clearance, excavation or construction works or the entry of vehicles or plant into the site, associated any Phase as indicated on plan ref: 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall commence until updated surveys and reasonable avoidance method statements in relation to bats, badger, hedgehog, and amphibians (learning centre and swimming pond only) have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The development shall be implemented in full accordance with any identified mitigation measures.

REASON - To ensure the protection of protected species having regard to Policy 21 of the Oldham Local Plan.

21. No external lighting associated with any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01 shall be installed until details have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The approved scheme shall be retained thereafter.

REASON - To protect the amenity of the area and minimise any impact on the natural environment regard to Policies 9 and 21 of the Oldham Local Plan.

22. Subject to the submission and approval in writing of the Local Planning Authority of evidence to demonstrate impracticality of any measure, the proposed developments shall be implemented in accordance with the security measures as set out in paragraph 3.3 and Section 4 of the submitted Crime Impact Statement Version B: 27.01.22 (2021/0526/CIS/01).

REASON – In order to ensure the development is implemented in a manner which reduces the risk of crime having regard to Policy 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

23. The use of the Visitor Centre or Learning Centre hereby approved shall not commence until a highway improvement scheme, in accordance with details which have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority, has been carried out at the junction of the access road to the development and its junction with Kings Road and Honeywell Lane. The improvement will include narrowing the carriageway, providing pedestrian and cycle infrastructure on Kings Road and the access road, and improving access at Kings Road/ Honeywell Lane including the highway leading to and in front of 256-272 Honeywell Lane. All works that form part of the approved scheme to be retained thereafter.

REASON – In the interest of the safety of all users of the site having regard to Policies 5 and 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

24. The use of the Visitor Centre or Learning Centre hereby approved shall not commence until a scheme of measures to provide safe access to the facilities for pedestrians and cyclists along routes shared with vehicular traffic from the junction with Kings Road/Honeywell Lane has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority, and the approved measures have been fully implemented.

REASON – In the interest of the safety of all users of the site and occupiers of adjacent residential properties having regard to Policies 5 and 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

25. Within three months of the first occupation of any Phase as indicated on plan ref : 2642-PLA-XX-XX-DR-L-0016 Rev P01, a travel plan for that part shall be submitted for the written approval of the local planning authority. The approved travel plans for each part shall be implemented within a further three months of the written approval of the Local Planning Authority.

REASON - In order to promote sustainable means of travel having regard to policies 5 and 9 of the Oldham Local Plan.

SITE LOCATION PLAN (NOT TO SCALE):

