

UPDATE REPORT

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| BY THE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES READING BOROUGH COUNCIL PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE: 15th July 2020 | ITEM NO. 8 |
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Ward: Caversham

App No: 200512/FUL

Address: Westfield Road Recreation Ground Westfield Road Caversham Reading

Proposal: Retention of fenced off area of the Westfield Park Recreation Ground for educational use during school hours for use by the Heights Primary School until 31st August 2021

Determination Date: Originally 10/6/2020; EOT agreed until 17/7/2020

RECOMMENDATION:

As per the main Agenda report.

- 1.1 Paragraph 4.9 of the main agenda report sets out that due to Covid19 restrictions officers were unable to display site notices at the application site. However, the agent has confirmed that they received the planning site notices and that these were displayed at the site on 7th May 2020 and have submitted photographs to officers show the site notices in place.
- 1.2 Paragraph 4.12 of the main agenda report states that the applicant carried out their own public consultation exercise prior to submitting the planning application with 1,027 leaflets sent to surrounding properties. Officers can also confirm that in addition to this, the applicant also erected a number of their own site notices regarding the proposed further retention of the fence around the site prior to submission of the application.
- 1.3 Paragraph 6.2 of the main agenda report incorrectly states that the fenced off area is 1.9 hectares in size - the actual size is 0.23 hectares.
- 1.4 Paragraph 5 of the main agenda sets out the relevant national and local planning policy context. Reference to the Government's Policy Statement - *Planning for Schools Development* (2011) should also be included here which sets out the Government's commitment to support the development of state-funded schools through the planning system. In summary this document states that the creation and development of state-funded schools is strongly in the national interest and that planning decision-makers can and should support that objective, in a manner consistent with their statutory obligations. The statement seeks that all parties work together proactively from an early stage to help plan for state-school development and to shape strong planning applications. This collaborative working would help to ensure that the answer to proposals for the development of state-funded schools should be, wherever possible, "yes".

1.5 Paragraph 6.15 of the main agenda report sets out that '*the fenced off area within Westfield Road playing fields is used for short informal activities such as breaktimes where travelling across to Christchurch Meadows is not worthwhile as these sessions are short in duration meaning proximity to the school is important*'. The agent and school has asked that it is made clear that the fenced off area of the Westfield Road playing fields is not used out of preference, but on safety grounds and that given the number of children at the school with SEN provision requirements and the number of staff available to ensure student safety, using Christchurch Meadows for breaktimes would put pupils at an unacceptably high risk. When the weather renders the park unusable, the school cannot accommodate outdoor breaktimes for all children because there is insufficient space on the school site alone for them.

1.6 Further to publication of the main agenda report, the applicant (Department for Education) has provided further information on the need to retain the fenced off area to provide informal open space for the temporary school. The DfE considers the provision of this area an essential requirement for the benefit of the school pupils and notes that guidance documents BB103 (Notes on area guidelines for mainstream schools) recommends, (*inter alia*) that both soft outdoor areas suitable for PE as well as a variety of informal and social areas should be provided where possible. The DfE goes on to state that due to the very constrained nature of the school site and the number of pupils (which restricts how the adjoining playing field at St Anne's is shared), the use of the area of the park provides a valuable resource for a variety of activities when ground conditions permit.

1.7 A letter from the Chair of Governors at the school has also been received which explains further why the area is required and how it has been used. In summary this sets out that:

- The school currently has 325 pupils on its roll with 350 pupils expected on site from September. The site has approximately 1000sq.m of accessible outdoor space in and around the site (much of which is undulating and contains footpaths, storage sheds etc) which equate to less than 3 sq.m per child which is insufficient.
- The school has not been able to use the fenced off area of the playing fields during periods of wet weather - particularly due to the high levels of rainfall over the last winter - and it is not able to use alternative space for all purposes. When there is insufficient time and space to stagger use of the onsite space, many of the children are unable to have any outdoor breaktime. The use of other green spaces is only possible for outdoor teaching when there is sufficient resource available to manage crossing Gosbrook Road, which is not possible for break times.
- The school would have been able to use the fenced off area of Westfield Park extensively and effectively during the lockdown period, but the school was only able to open to the children of key workers. This area has begun to be

used more in the last few weeks, following the limited re-opening of the school.

- The school acknowledges that the fenced off area is not ideal but is the only way to ensure the safety of large numbers of children (many with additional needs). The area remains fully accessible when not in use and children from other schools often use the area for play after school.
- The school regrets the impact of the continuing use of the its temporary homes has on its neighbours and does everything it can to mitigate this. The school is not within walking distance of many children's homes which creates additional challenges, but it should be noted that the school has been recognised by a number of sustainability awards, including a Modeshift Stars Gold Award for its travel plan and the lengths the majority of parents go to achieve its aims. When standards fall below this there are procedures in place to address concerns.

1.8 One additional objection from a local resident has also been received raising the following points:

- The fenced off area is only used by the school for around 4 months of the year and the rest of the time it is too muddy to use
- The school has been using areas of the playing field outside of the fenced off area during break times and when seeking shade under trees so questions whether the fence is needed
- The fenced off area is unused by the local community
- Seeks that any further application to retain the fence is rejected

Case Officer: Matt Burns

Statement submitted by Dr Alex Vugler on behalf of the Friends of Westfield Park in respect of this application reference 200512.

WINTER USE

We object on the grounds that the school does not need this public space to survive. Annually, for at least four months the land becomes so muddy (figure 1) that it is impossible to use putting it out of action to the whole community. During this time the school uses a wide variety of other spaces including St Anne’s playing fields, their own playground, the tarmacked area of Westfield Park, Christchurch fields and tennis courts.

They have demonstrated every single day that they are able to open and NOT using the fenced area that they can and do cope, for months at a time.



Figure 1.

SAFEGUARDING

During a site visit, Councillor Rowland and Parks Manager Ben Stanesby witnessed children from The Heights being escorted from Christchurch Meadows. They did so without using the available crossing, choosing to use Christchurch Meadows rather than the safe, enclosed space at Westfield Park, demonstrating that even when they have sole use of the space made available to them they often choose to use other areas. This is something local people have witnessed on a regular basis.

They told you in the last meeting it was essential to keep children safe, behind a fence. Why then do they continually use unfenced areas of Westfield Park (figure 2) and unfenced areas of Christchurch Meadows (figure 3)?



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

COVID

The COVID crisis highlights the need for everyone to have public green spaces in which to safely socialise, exercise and relax, to benefit health. It is rare to see this space used by local people as fences say 'keep out'. (figure 4) Locals typically live in flats and small terraces, the fence penalises those most in need.



Figure 4.

COMMUNITY AND CONDUCT

The school makes no effort to engage with the local community. The conduct of local parents does nothing but alienate the school. They drive dangerously in our streets (figure 5), idle their cars for heating during winter at pick up and drop off times and park in our precious bays (figure 6). Their children have been seen to be helped to urinate by their parents in the treeline of the park. When challenged, parents are often abusive.



Figure 5

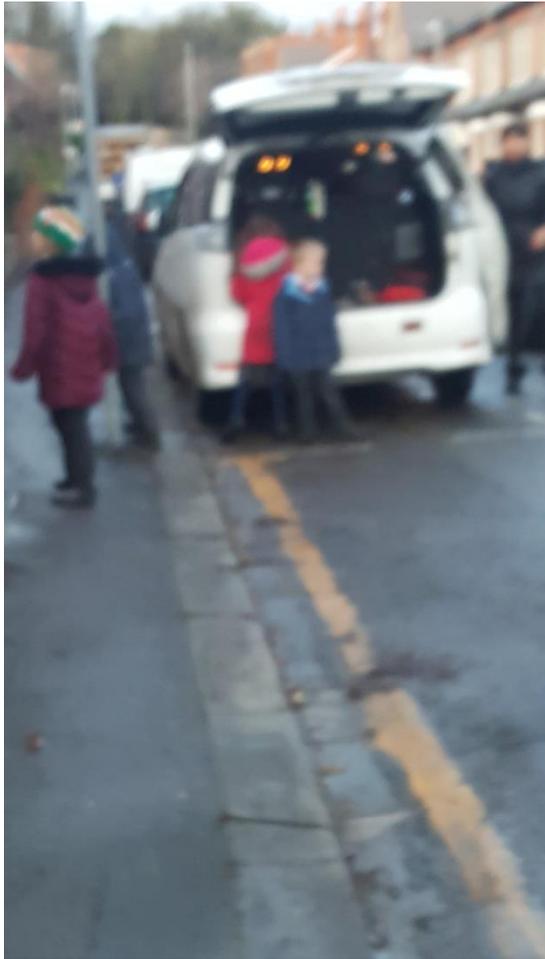


Figure 6.

The Chair of Governors himself has tried to sensor us. He sought to have a direct statement from the applicant the last planning committee meeting edited from our objection letter. He emailed us a letter of intimidation to our personal email address. How is a planning applicant allowed to behave in such a way? How can this be seen to be respectful of our views?

All we ask is for you to consider the facts. The facts the school stated in their original meeting. Does the school need this space to SURVIVE? To continue to exist? The answer is quite simply they have demonstrated by their own actions that this space is a want but certainly not a need.

Thank you.

Statement submitted by Iain Leech Regional Planning Adviser for the Department for Education in respect of application ref. 200512

Good evening, my name is Iain Leech and I am a planning adviser within the Department for Education.

The proposed application is required in order to provide vital external play space for the Heights Primary School for a temporary period only. The proposals are to allow the school to continue to use an area of Westfield Road Recreation Ground for educational purposes during school hours only for one further academic year, until 31st August 2021, by which time the school's permanent home will have been constructed at Mapledurham Playing Fields.

As members are aware, the temporary school site is heavily constrained and there is limited space for external play. Even with the area of Westfield Park, the subject of this planning application, the levels of play space are still well below that recommended under government guidance. The outside space subject of this application is therefore vital to allow the primary pupils external play for the next school year. The site would only be used during school hours, 10.40am-3.30pm from Monday to Friday, remaining free for community use at all other times, continuing the existing arrangement.

On the school's full return to the site in September, there will understandably be an increased emphasis on the health and wellbeing of pupils reemphasising the value of this space for pupils. The pandemic has also increased the importance of external space for schools.

The proximity of the space to the temporary school buildings is essential. It is already unviable to be able to staff use of outdoor space further afield. Staffing profiles and numbers for the year ahead may well be impacted by Covid-19 making scope for walking to other venues for outside social activities or sport even more limited. This is a key part of national curriculum. It should also be highlighted that the school has a relatively high proportion of pupils with Special Educational Needs. The fenced-off area of the park is therefore vital to ensuring that these pupils can be appropriately looked after and kept safe, with suitable staffing ratios.

The point has been made that the space is underused and extremely muddy – this is down to a combination of a very wet autumn and winter and the fact that the area was, up until the wet weather, being used by the school regularly. When the area was not able to be used, the children were unable to have an outdoor break time. The area has seen limited use more recently due to the required closure from March of the school for most pupils as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

As noted in the Committee report, the application has been supported by the Council's Lead Member for Education - raising the point that the frustrations of local residents with how long the fence has been in place are shared by the school. The applicant team are doing all they can to ensure the permanent site opens as soon as possible and so that the fence can be removed, and that part of the park returned to its previous condition.

On this latter point, once the school relocates, the land will be grassed and reinstated and the fencing removed. A suggested planning condition will ensure officers have control over this reinstatement.

In relation to transport impacts in respect of the temporary school, highways officers have raised no objection. The School has achieved STARS Modeshift Gold accreditation for its Travel Plan.

The applicant team undertook a comprehensive consultation exercise before submission of the application and contacted over 1,000 neighbours and business around the site before the application was submitted. Leaflets were also attached to lampposts around the site. The applicant has also worked with officers at pre-application stage to ensure a comprehensive application was prepared.

The existing temporary permission expires in August 2020 and this current application will allow the school's use of the park to continue for a further temporary period until the school's permanent home is constructed. The appointed contractor is progressing well on the permanent site which is well on course to be completed by summer 2021. The school is very much looking forward to moving to their new accommodation

The proposals are in accordance with national policy and the Council's adopted development plan. We would respectively urge Members to approve the application in the line with the planning officer's recommendation for approval.