



The Studio | 62 Carmarthen Avenue | Drayton | Portsmouth | PO6 2AQ
Tel: 07375 490164 Email: natalie@fellowsplanning.co.uk

Havant Borough Council
The Plaza
Civic Centre Road
Havant
PO9 2AX

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Via Email Only: planning.development@havant.gov.uk

Dear Sir / Madam,

Proposal: Change of use of existing amenity land to enclosed secure play area for the nursery school located within the existing hall with associated play equipment and landscaping.

Site Address: North Emsworth Community Hall (also known as SYRCH Centre), Lutman Street, Emsworth, PO10 7XQ

The application is submitted on behalf of Little Explorers Nursery School which is a community Early Years and Childcare setting for children aged 2 to 5 years. The nursery school is based within the existing hall but does not have a dedicated safe and secure outdoor play area which the children can use.

The proposals seek to enclose an area of public amenity land approximately 10 metres in length and 10 metres wide on the western side of the existing hall. The shape of the play area steps in slightly by 2 metres (m) in the south-western corner to give a buffer area away from the basketball net / hardstanding area. The removal of the corner makes it an irregular shape.

The land is currently laid to grass with a side door and windows (that are enclosed with roller shutters) which open directly onto the grassed area from the hall. The play area will primarily be accessed from the side door within the hall, but gates are proposed to the north enabling access to the car park / front of the building and to the south using a path leading to the Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) or the rear of the hall.

The play area is proposed to be enclosed by 2m high green wiled mesh fence which is open in nature allowing views through. To integrate this into the wider open space the design includes native hedging and tree planting to help blend it into its surroundings, against the backdrop of the community hall.

The fence is needed to aid supervision of the children but also prevent any anti-social behaviour occurring (there have been issues in the past with the property being vandalised). Much of the play equipment will be safely secured within the storage proposed or inside the hall apart from the landscaping and the wooden poles associated with the temporary tensile shade.



The design of the play area has incorporated natural features wherever possible to aid learning. This includes tree planting, sensory garden planting, a willow tunnel, timber sleepers to create a sand pit and seating, a mud kitchen and wildlife bug hotel. The wigwam shelter and other equipment will be removed inside when not in use.

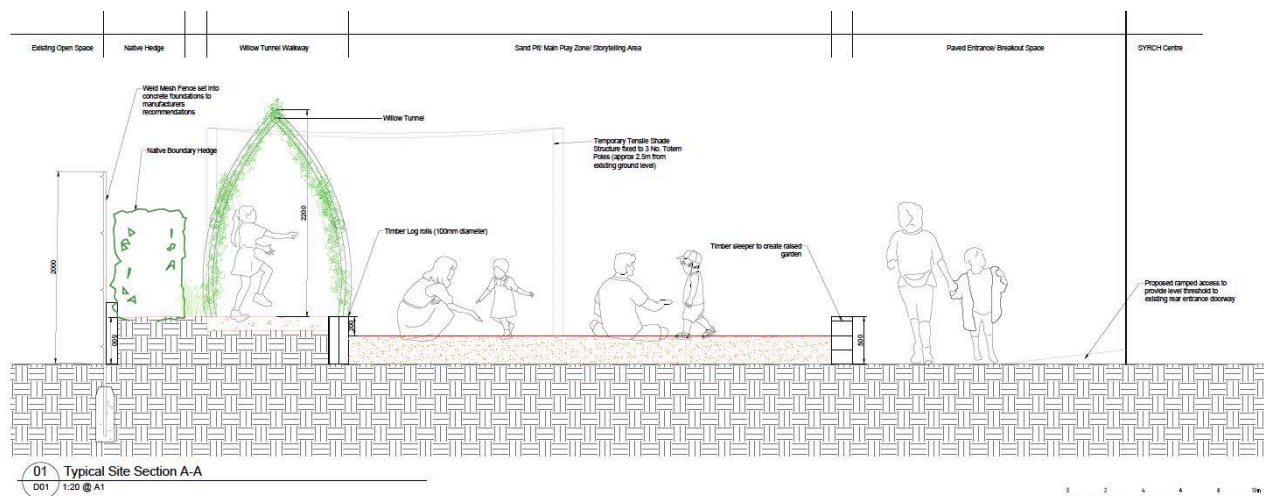
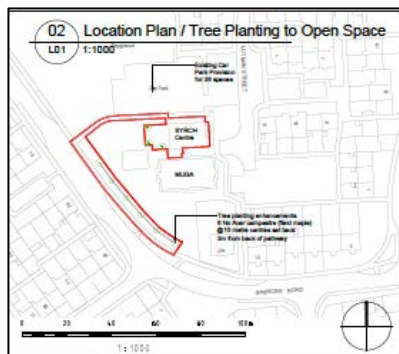
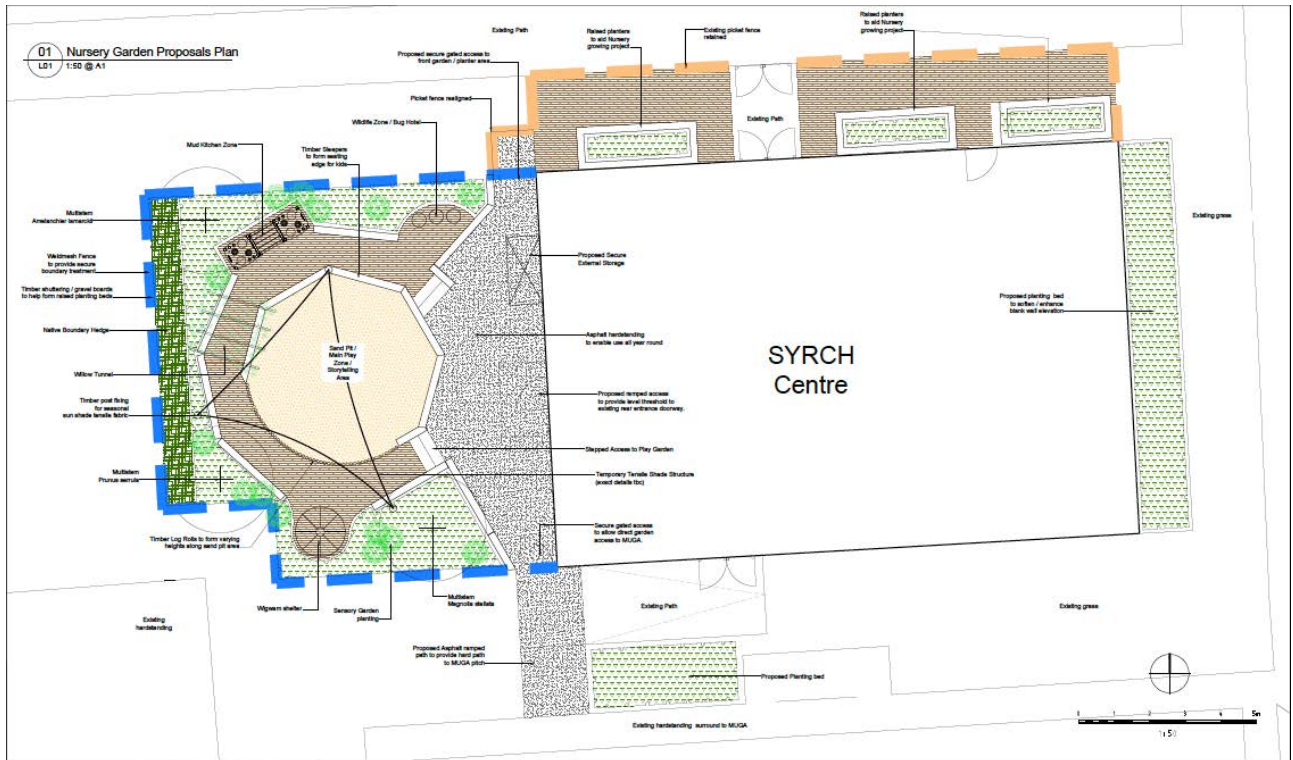
The appearance of the hall itself is also proposed to be improved by including planting along its the eastern side and rear. The design also includes the installation of raised planters along its frontage to aid the nursery growing project. These are sought either side of the entrances into the hall.

In response to the pre-application feedback received, the proposals include the planting of 6 Acer Campestre (field maples) along Spencer Road. This is seeking to mitigate the slight loss of amenity space through the enhancements made along this road where it is currently open. The trees are proposed to be planted 10 metres apart and 3m set-back form the pavement to ensure they are not near any underground services. There is also a suggestion that the treed area to the north east of the hall is included within the open space demarcation.

The wider open space known locally as 'Spencers Field Play Area' is in need of complete refurbishment. Various sources of funding (including CIL funds) have now been secured to replace the play equipment, supporting amenities such as seating, bins etc. There is a current public consultation being held with residents asking for them to share their views on

how the site should be redeveloped. These proposals are seen to compliment these long-term aspirations.

Extract of the Proposals



Relevant Planning Policies

The Havant Local Plan (Core Strategy) and the Local Plan (Allocations Document), together with the Hampshire Minerals and Waste Plan, provide the development plan for the Borough.

Given the location of the site, the Emsworth Neighbourhood Plan is also of relevance.

The emerging Havant Borough Local Plan was formally withdrawn on the 16th March 2022. However, the Council's published the Open Space Strategy in support of the previous Local Plan would be a material consideration of any future application.

The following planning policies will be of relevance:

- AL1 - Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
- DM1 - Recreation and Open Space
- DM8 - Conservation, Protection and Enhancement of Existing Natural Features
- CS1 - Health and Wellbeing
- CS16 - High Quality Design

In terms of planning constraints, there are no ecological, heritage or environmental designations that would preclude development. The site is within an area of public open space which is currently accessible from the side of the community hall.

Principle of Development, Pre-application Discussions and Justification

The proposed play space would incorporate an area of 'amenity greenspace' identified within the Council's Open Space Strategy (OSS). However, it is not formally designated as a Local Green Space by the Emsworth Neighbourhood Plan.

Policy DM1 of the adopted local plan states that:

Development of existing open space [spaces identified within the OSS], including play spaces, playing fields, pitches, courts and allotments, for alternative uses will only be permitted where the following criteria can be met:

1. It has been demonstrated that there is a surplus of provision according to the local standards set out in the Council's Open Spaces Plan or any subsequent review of the plan; and
2. It has been demonstrated that the land cannot reasonably be converted to another type of open space for example green infrastructure for which the Council's Open Spaces Plan has identified a deficit.
3. If the land has been identified within the South East Hampshire Coast Brent Goose Strategy (2002) as providing habitat for Brent Geese then it must be demonstrated that any impact on this habitat can be fully mitigated. (This is not relevant in this particular instance)

A pre-application enquiry (under reference GEN/22/00129) was submitted prior to this planning application being proposed in February 2022.

The response indicated that where there is no identified surplus of the original type of open space, contributions to new provision of an equivalent or improved standard, both in terms of quality and quantity, will be required in line with the Council's Open Spaces Strategy and developer contributions policy.

Paragraph 9.7 of the OSS indicates that there is currently a surplus of amenity greenspace within the Borough, although this surplus is expected to reduce by 2036 because of the anticipated increase in population. This will in part address criterion 1 above.

In terms of criterion 2, the proposed use will be an outdoor play area associated with the existing nursery where there are no likely alternatives that would not result in the loss of open space. Whilst the proposals are not seeking to demonstrate that the land could not reasonably be converted to another type of open space, mitigation in the form of replacement open space of land is not currently identified.

Paragraph 10.02 of the Core Strategy indicates that where compensatory provision is to be provided locally, it should be of the same type that has been lost to development or be of the same or improved quality and quantity and address an identified need. In this respect, it is noted that the replacement provision would be broadly of the same quantity of the open space to be lost and located close by (see figure 1 in the Appendix and photographs provided of the neighbouring treed area).

In weighing whether the proposal would meet the policy requirements the Local Planning Authority can also place weight on the benefits of the proposal in terms of providing external amenity space for a children's nursery which will contribute to health and wellbeing objectives. In addition, the OSS scores the Spencer Road Open Space (Reference 450) against a number of criteria. Opportunities to improve the overall quality of the open space at Spencer Road should be considered as part of the proposal and can be factored into the Local Planning Authorities determination.

Overall, the Council's planning officer considered:

"Pending the above considerations and compliance with policy DM1, it is considered that a positive case for the proposal could be made in principle."

In terms of the play space itself, no significant concerns were raised by the Council's Leisure and Community or Landscape Teams. However, they wanted the following to be considered:

- The proposed new fenced area for the nursey would abut an existing basketball area. From a H&S perspective, the fencing would need to be high enough to prevent basketballs flying into the children's nursey area and causing injury;
- Soft landscaping should be provided around the perimeter of the play space to soften the appearance of the fence.
- The fencing should be of a robust construction, designed to prevent climbing and colour treated to soften its appearance.

Current Proposals

Following this pre-application response, Deacon Landscape Design Team and Fellows Planning were appointed to ensure that the outdoor play area provided a seamless transition from the hall and its appearance blended into the backdrop of the wider amenity land. The team also explored alternative locations for the enclosed play area, but the grassed area to the west of the building was deemed the most appropriate location.

In response to the pre-application the detailed design included:

- A native hedgerow along the western side of the play area to help blend in the proposed fence within its surroundings.
- Tree planting is proposed in the corners of the play area and additional soft landscaping provided around the perimeter of the play space to soften its appearance.
- The shape of the outdoor play area steps in at its closest point to the basketball hardstanding area. A 2m high green mesh fence is proposed around its perimeter to ensure the play area is secure and provides protection from any nearby balls flying.
- It should be noted that this is a term-time early years provision and the basketball area doesn't get used very often, especially during the day when children are at school. The MUGA is used most frequently after school.
- Whilst the Council acknowledges that there is a 'surplus' of open space currently, the application seeks to make improvements to the appearance of the hall and new tree planting along Spencer Road as mitigation for the slight incursion. These landscape enhancements would bring wildlife and biodiversity benefits alongside improving the amenity value of the open space which is in need of improvement.
- It is acknowledged in the Council's Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Infrastructure Projects that Spencers Field Play Area is in need of improvement and funding has now been agreed to support its upgrade, alongside other support from The Emsworth Residents Association, County Council, Emsworth Forum CIL and the National Lottery. This funding totals a sum of £85,000 and views are currently being sought from residents in how they would like to see the play area improved. This is in partnership with the Spencers Field Community Group who are seeking the improvements to be suitable, fun and long lasting. A representative from the Nursery attends the Community Group meetings.
- The Council are also reminded that whilst a permanent change of use is sought, this could easily be reverted back to amenity space if the nursery re-located from the existing hall and a similar provision was no longer sought. The outdoor area could also be adopted for another purpose associated with the community hall use (owned by the Council).
- The treed area to the north east of the hall could also be included in the designated open space area (see Appendix One) which is a comparable size to the proposed enclosed outdoor play area.
- The Council should also note that this is still a play area specifically designed for children of 5 years and under to the benefit of the local community.
- The application is supported by Hampshire County Council's Services for Young Children Team (letter dated 18th July 2022). Hampshire County Council has a statutory duty to ensure there is sufficient good quality early years and childcare provisions to meet the needs of working families and children. In addition that these children receive a good level of development as per the early learning goals.

- The letter highlights the importance that this application from Little Explorers Nursery is to enable the young children in their care to have greater opportunities to access an outdoor environment which in turn, supports their overall learning and development.
- Particular reference is made in the Early Years Foundation Stage from the Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines (2019), building its recommendations in light of reviewing a large body of evidence, concluding that 'the amount of physical activity in the Under-5 period influences a wide range of both short-term and long-term health and developmental outcomes' Reference is also made to the link between physical activity and obesity levels, particularly in later life.
- There is evidence that outdoor play and physical activity have a positive impact on life expectancy, well-being and symptoms of stress and anxiety. Due to Covid-19, many children have been housebound for long periods of time, especially during the lockdowns. Consequently, this will have a negative impact on their overall development.
- The National Childbirth Trust article, 'The Benefits of Children Playing Outside,' (NCT, 2017) is backed up by research suggesting that alongside the overall developmental benefits, 'being outdoors helps children sleep, eat, and live more healthily. This encourages them to form healthy habits for life.'

As Example Elsewhere in the Borough

We would also like to bring to the Councils attention that a similar proposal was approved at The Acorn Centre, 3 Kestrels, Eagle Avenue, Waterloooville PO8 9GX under planning reference APP/17/00155 in June 2017. This application highlighted in their supporting documents that the fencing was required in order to provide a secure play area and to reduce anti-social behaviour which currently occurred whilst the temporary fence was not in use. Although the proposal did result in a loss of space in the courtyard area, which all can use, it was considered that the benefits to the safety and well-being of the children that attend the day care centre outweighed any possible negative impact from the loss of the open space. This application acknowledged that it was for the change of use (as the fence was permitted development) but the open nature of the fence which allowed a clear view to the surroundings to the east and west limited the extent to which the proposal could appear incongruous within the character of the streetscene. As such the proposal was not considered to have a significant adverse impact on the character and appearance of the area. It was subsequently approved, without mitigation or enhancements made elsewhere.

Summary

With the above comments in mind, this application in our view should be fully supported given it would provide the children wider access, through free-flow to the outdoor environment, which will enhance their holistic learning and development. The proposals have been sensitively designed to help blend the new outdoor play area into its wider setting and made secure to prevent balls flying into this space. Furthermore, this proposal can support and improve the children's overall health and wellbeing and provides a foundation for a healthy lifestyle, possibly continuing into adulthood.

We hope the pack of information provided is sufficient to assess the proposals, however, please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely



Natalie Fellows BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI

Director at Fellows Planning Ltd.

Email: natalie@fellowsplanning.co.uk

Tel: 07375 490164

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Appendix One – Open Space Demarcations at Spencers Field (current and proposed)

Appendix Two – Site and wider context photographs

Appendix One – Open Space at Spencers Field



Existing Area of Open Space above and Proposed Demarcation below



Appendix Two – Photographs





Rear emergency access to hall



View of open space from Spencers Road



Existing tree planting on the corner junction



Area of proposed tree planting