

Playing Field Study

Project Ref: 22315
ALA Project Ref: ALA823 New Woodley School
Client: Kirklees
Date: 21.01.2025

Overview

This letter provides a response to Sports England's comments on the planning application for a Special Educational Needs School (reference 2024/91998) at the Former Almondbury High School, Fernside Avenue, Huddersfield, HD5 8PQ.

This proposed Special Educational Needs and Disabilities School will provide 180 specialist places for children and young people with Autism within the Kirklees District. This will provide substantial benefits for children and young people with Autism.

Four key issues were identified within Sport England's comments as follows:

- *Point 1: The loss of playing field to the west of the existing buildings.*
- *Point 2: The loss of the tennis court.*
- *Point 3: The impact on the playing field to the east of the existing buildings.*
- *Point 4: Ball strike.*

Each of the above items has been assessed in further detail and our responses are set out below.

Point 1: The loss of playing field to the west of the existing buildings

Response: Sport England have provided an aerial photograph which shows that historically the area in question has been used for athletics with a long jump pit shown in the photograph.

The site in its current form does not have any pitch markings or athletics facilities in this area of green space – refer to site photo below (Figure 1). It is acknowledged in the Sports England response that this area does not measure large enough to accommodate Football Association Soccer Pitches.



Figure 1: Existing site photo looking at the area where the Long Jump Pit is shown on the site aerial (it no longer exists).

We have reviewed the existing gradients and attach a gradient map below (Figure 2). The slopes are graded using four colours – blue, light blue, orange and red, with blue being the most level and red being steepest gradient.



Figure 2: Gradient map of the existing site.

The gradient map shows that the area referenced as playing field in the Sport England letter has a variety of different gradients. A large percentage of this space is shown as red which is considered too steep for sporting use, with gradients between 1 in 3 and 1 in 8.

As shown in Figure 3 below, the built form of the school building does not impact upon the land historically used for athletics (ie. Long jump & shotput), and only affects the land with the steepest gradients which cannot be feasibly used for sports activity.

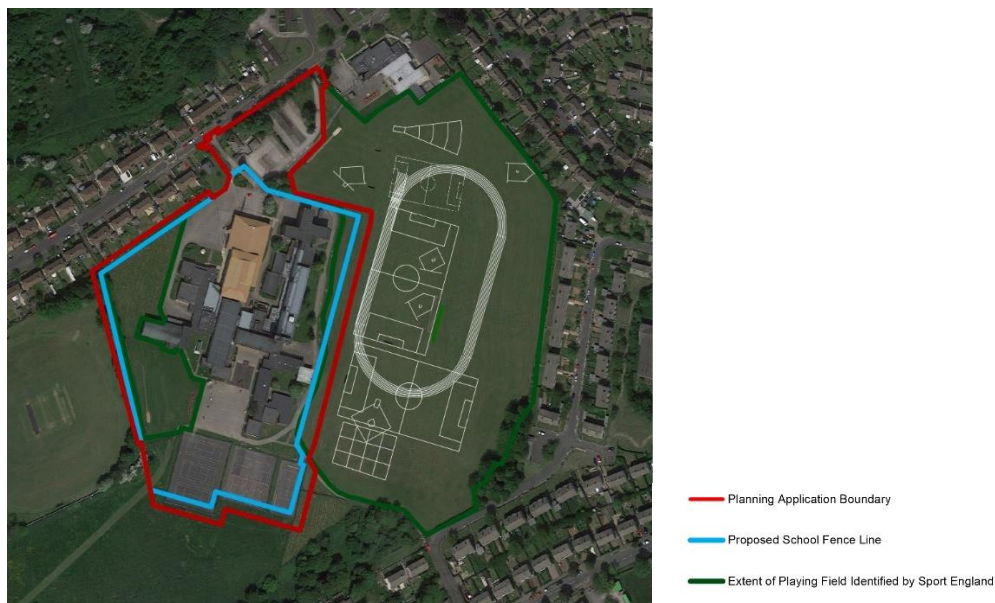


Figure 3: Existing aerial from 2016 which shows evidence of the Long Jump Pit to the west of the school (it no longer exists).

Therefore, the development will not prejudice the continued use of this area of the site for sports activity, as it is unusable in its current form, and as such meets **Exception 3** for the development of sports pitches as set out in Sports England Guidance.

Additionally, the retained area of pitches, which have historically been used for athletics, will be retained in continued use for alternative sports activity.

The submitted Illustrative Landscape Masterplan shows this area of the site used as a 'Forest School Play Space' which is a form of outdoor sports facility. This physical sporting activity is tailored to the specialist use of the site as a Special Educational Needs School for children and young people with Autism. This will provide a type of sporting activity that is significantly beneficial to children and young people with Autism.

Therefore, the proposed development also meets **Exception 5** for the development of sports pitches as set out in Sports England Guidance.

Point 2: The loss of the tennis court

Response: The new Woodley School and College will provide 180 places for children and young people with complex Autism aged 5 – 19.

The design intent is to retain the two larger MUGAS to ensure formal marked sports facilities are available, however the design of the third MUGA is to ensure an inclusive exercise facility is provided. This is in the form of play equipment to allow movement of jumping, balancing, swinging, which are appropriate physical activities for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder with a high level of severity.

It is noted that the students are unlikely to play sports in formal teams and exercise is likely to be on an independent basis or 1:1 with teaching colleagues, not in larger student groups. Please refer to *Embracing Neurodiversity in Education and Physical Activity* (Appendix A. Sharon Gray - Kirklees SE) report as written by an independent SEND specialist, whom Kirklees Council liaise with about inclusive design. On this basis, the students will make very little use of three formally marked MUGAs, thus the design intent is for inclusivity of the cohort of students.

The Lawn Tennis Association acknowledge "in the education setting it is likely that two courts would be sufficient provision".

This meets **Exception 5** for the loss of pitches in accordance with Sports England Guidance.

Notwithstanding this, the MUGA in question will retain its fencing and extents, so should the site cohort of students change, or the needs of the students develop, and traditional team games be appropriate the space in question could be returned to a tennis court with minimal works

Point 3: The impact on the playing fields to the east of the existing buildings.

Response: Figure 4 below shows the extent of playing fields as indicated by Sport England bounded by a thick green line, alongside the proposed development extent bounded by a thick red line.



Figure 4: Sport England playing field extent shown bounded by green line (left), including proposals (right)

The overlap between the two lines demonstrates a small encroachment onto the 'defined' playing pitch to the east by approximately seven and ten meters. Notwithstanding this, existing gradients in this area as shown in Figure 3 are steep, on average a 1 in 9 slope, which is unusable for sports.

The existing layout of all sports pitches (Figures 5 and 6a below) reflect the inability to make use of the embankment along the centre of the site. The proposals increase the gradient of this embankment but do not affect any of the existing pitch markings / sports markings or encroach into their safety run-off margins.



Figure 5: Existing summer pitch layout (left), Existing winter pitch layout (right).



Figure 6a: Existing summer and winter pitch layout with red-line boundary.

As shown in Figure 6b below, the proposed school fence line sits atop the embankment, away from the playing field sports markings.



Figure 6b: Existing summer and winter pitch layout with proposed school fence line.

The Figure 7 sections below show the fence line to the top of the embankment, and identify the 7-10m slope into the playing field. The embankment finishes before the current position of the safety run-off zone and pitch markings, therefore neither are affected.

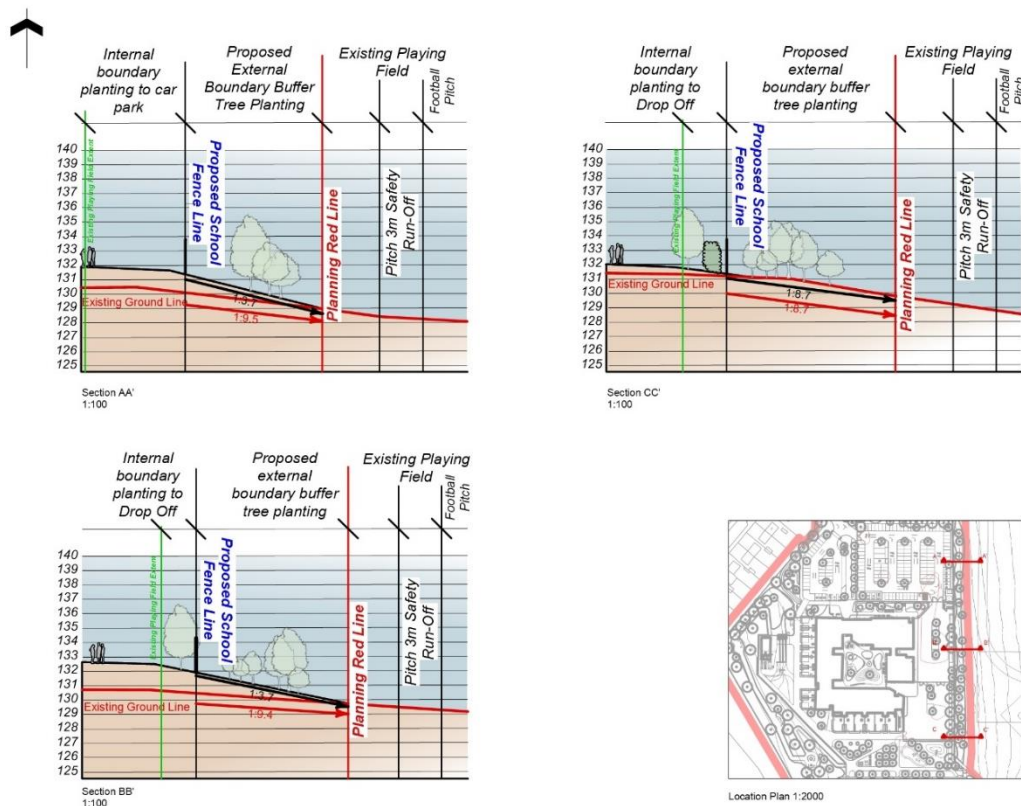


Figure 7: Sections through proposed school eastern boundary to existing playing field and pitches.

As part of the proposals, new tree planting will be planted in between the school fence line and the red line boundary as shown on the sections. The existing gradients in these areas are circa 1 in 9, which is not acceptable for playing pitch markings.

As such it is clear that the proposed development affects only land incapable of forming part of a playing pitch, and does not impact any run-off safety margins.

Therefore, the proposed development meets **Exception 3** for the development of playing pitches in accordance with Sports England guidance.

Point 4: Ball Strike

Response: A ball strike risk assessment has been undertaken by Labosport Ltd who have reviewed the site distances and topography to analyze the risk of balls surpassing the site boundaries of the cricket pitch at Almondbury Cricket Club.

The below diagram (Figure 8) shows the agreed proposed location of the recommended mitigation for a maximum height of 7m, offset from the boundary by 6m.



Figure 8: Proposed location and heights of ball strike mitigation

To be effective during all times of play when there is a risk of ball strike, no access is to be allowed into the area between the cricket square and the ball stop netting fence line.

A proposal has therefore been developed by Ares Landscape Architects which utilises 2.4m high weldmesh perimeter fencing to form the 2.4m boundary requirement (see Figure 9 and Figure 10 for illustrative layout and fencing plan), with retractable ball stop netting to be installed along the 27m extent to a height of 7m as required in Figure 8.

An access controlled area is therefore created between the ball stop netting line and the existing fence line which, available for maintenance to the fence line and vegetation when cricket is not in play.



Figure 9: Proposed location of ball strike mitigation on Masterplan.

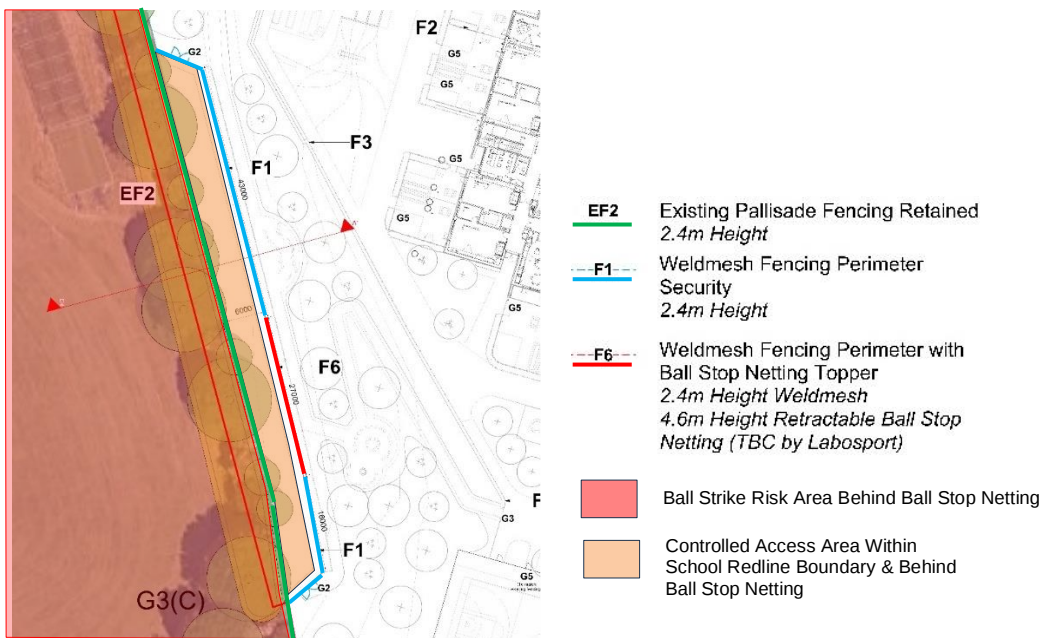


Figure 10: Proposed fencing plan of ball strike mitigation.

An example of an integrated weldmesh and ball stop netting system is given below (see Figure 11).



Figure 11: Example of weldmesh fencing with ball stop netting topper.

Appendix.

- A. Embracing Neurodiversity in Education and Physical Activity (Sharon Gray, October 2024).

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Embracing Neurodiversity in Education and Physical Activity

A truly transformative approach to education recognises the unique strengths and needs of each individual, engaging the entire school community and beyond in a collaborative effort to foster learning, growth, and holistic well-being. By prioritising social, emotional, and developmental health while advocating for neurodiversity and supporting our most vulnerable students, we can create nurturing, inclusive environments where all learners can thrive. This approach empowers every child, regardless of their challenges, to achieve academic success, build resilience, and develop the skills needed for a fulfilling life.

Inclusive Physical Activity for Individuals who are autistic

Autistic individuals interact with physical activity in ways that may differ significantly from those of their neurotypical peers. To effectively support their needs, physical environments and activities must be intentionally designed with careful consideration for safety, sensory regulation, and accessibility. Research underscores the importance of tailored physical activities, which can enhance not only physical health but also emotional well-being, social engagement, and self-regulation for autistic individuals.

While we aspire for autistic children to participate in team games, it is essential to recognise that, due to their unique developmental needs, they require appropriate early activities to foster their growth and development. Creating opportunities for these foundational skills is crucial; our ultimate goal is for these children to access as many opportunities as possible, but they must first engage in tailored experiences that build their confidence and competence in movement and social interaction.

Traditional team sports often pose barriers for autistic students due to challenges with communication, sensory processing, and social interaction. Therefore, inclusive physical activities should focus on adaptable, individualised options that promote movement and engagement in ways that feel comfortable and enjoyable. Specialised environments, such as forest schools and sensory-friendly playgrounds, provide ideal settings to promote physical health while accommodating the specific needs of autistic individuals.

Supporting Research

A 2021 study published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders found that physical activity, particularly when adapted to meet sensory needs, significantly reduces stress-related dysregulation and non-problematic behaviours in autistic children, while enhancing their social and emotional functioning.

Additionally, research by Bhat et al. (2022) highlighted the positive impact of motor skill interventions—such as jumping, spinning, and climbing—which are vital in environments tailored for autistic individuals. These activities promote balance, coordination, and overall motor skills development, which are crucial for this population's growth.

For example, activities like climbing and walking in a forest school setting provide valuable sensory input, promoting motor development and physical fitness in a calming, natural environment. Similarly, sensory activities such as swinging, spinning, and jumping on play equipment in a Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) facilitate self-regulation through proprioceptive and vestibular input, essential for emotional balance and coordination. Running, scootering, and cycling in designated areas encourage safe physical activity, promoting both fitness and independence.

Incorporating sloped areas for rolling and running creates dynamic environments where students can engage in unstructured, free-flowing movement. Research shows that such movement is critical for motor skill development and cognitive growth. While traditional team sports may not be suitable for many autistic individuals at this stage, maintaining larger MUGAs for activities like basketball or tennis—adapted to individual needs—ensures that students can participate in sports in a non-competitive, self-paced manner as they progress in their development.

Addressing Sport England's Concerns

I understand that Sport England has raised concerns about the application, emphasising that the outdoor space was previously designated for tennis, football, and athletics (including long jump). While we respect their perspective, it is essential to recognise that the needs of autistic students differ from those of mainstream students. Research indicates that these individuals are unlikely to engage in traditional team sports due to unique sensory and social challenges. Therefore, activities like jumping, swinging, spinning, and climbing are far more appropriate for their development and well-being at this stage.

As an expert in this field, I provide independent advice and recommendations in support of this design, which is better aligned with the physical and sensory needs of this population. A recent review published in Autism Research suggests that autistic individuals show greater physical engagement and developmental progress in environments designed to accommodate their specific sensory and motor needs, as opposed to traditional sports settings.

Furthermore, Sport England's objections fail to account for the specific needs of autistic individuals and apply mainstream standards to a population for whom these standards may not be suitable. Our proposed design is grounded in best practices for autism-inclusive spaces, ensuring safety, accessibility, and opportunities for movement in ways that traditional sports facilities do not offer. Therefore, the proposed design ensures equal and inclusive access to sporting facilities for these groups.

Community and Accessibility

It is vital to extend access to these specially designed spaces beyond the school setting to the broader community. By making playgrounds and MUGA areas available to autistic individuals throughout Kirklees and surrounding areas, we create safe, inclusive environments where physical activity is accessible to all. This initiative not only fosters a sense of community but also reflects the growing understanding of the importance of inclusive design in promoting health, well-being, and social inclusion for autistic individuals.

By prioritising the needs of individuals with severe autism, we ensure that physical activity is not just an afterthought, but a critical component of their overall development, independence, and quality of life. Together, we can build a more inclusive society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Sharon Gray October 2024