

Response to County Ecologist and NatureSpace comments

The proposed play area is located wholly within an area of ancillary space comprising intensively managed amenity grassland, currently used for informal recreation. The grassland is routinely mown and lacks habitat features typically associated with suitable Great Crested Newt terrestrial habitat, such as rough grassland, scrub, woodland edge habitat, log piles, rubble piles, refugia or other sheltering opportunities.

Great Crested Newts are known to occur within ponds in the wider area surrounding the application site, the closest being located 175m south of the proposal boundary on the other side of Botley Road. The proposed development area is separated from these ponds by a mosaic of existing school infrastructure including buildings, hard surfaced areas, roads, access routes, managed grounds and fragmented landscape features. Collectively, these features reduce ecological connectivity and limit the likelihood of regular movement between the known breeding ponds and the application site. The application site is therefore considered unlikely to be regularly used as terrestrial habitat by Great Crested Newts.

The development footprint is confined to a small area of low-value amenity grassland and does not involve the removal of any habitat features likely to support sheltering, foraging or hibernating Great Crested Newts. The proposal therefore results in a negligible loss of terrestrial habitat and does not affect any breeding habitat.

Given the limited ecological value of the affected grassland, the absence of suitable refugia within the development footprint, the fragmented nature of the surrounding landscape and the small scale of the proposed works, the likelihood of Great Crested Newts occurring within the site is considered low and the risk of harm to individual animals negligible.

Notwithstanding this assessment, a precautionary approach will be adopted during construction. All contractors will be briefed regarding the potential presence of amphibians, vegetation clearance will be phased during daylight hours, and any excavations left open overnight will include suitable escape ramps or be covered overnight. Should any amphibians be encountered during construction, works will cease in that area and advice will be sought from a suitably qualified ecologist.

It is therefore considered that the proposal is unlikely to result in an offence under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and that no significant adverse effects on Great Crested Newts are anticipated.

The applicant has prepared a 'Great Crested Newt (GCN) Risk Assessment and Precautionary Measures Note' to accompany the application and which will be issued to all contractors undertaking works on the site.

Response to Arboricultural comments

The applicant notes and has carefully considered the Arboricultural Officer's comments regarding the proposed artificial grass surface within the Root Protection Areas (RPAs) of the retained trees.

The suggestion of a hard-wearing amenity grass surface has been reviewed; however, given the intended use of the area as a dedicated school play space subject to intensive year-round use, a natural grass solution is not considered to be a viable long-term option. The School has advised that no other grass play surfaces are retained within the site for this reason, as previous experience has demonstrated that heavily trafficked grassed areas rapidly become worn, compacted or muddy depending on season, and unsuitable for use.

The introduction of a small, isolated area of natural grass within an enclosed play space would also present ongoing practical operational and maintenance challenges for the School. Given the intensity and frequency of use anticipated throughout the year, a natural grass surface would require regular repair and would incur additional maintenance and reinstatement costs. It would also require segregation and be unavailable for play activity when closed off to allow re-establishment of the grass.

The proposed artificial grass surface has therefore been selected to provide a durable, all-weather play environment whilst avoiding the need for more intrusive hard surfacing solutions.

The potential impact upon the retained Category A oak is considered to be negligible for the following reasons:

- Historic trenching associated with existing services along the eastern site boundary is likely to have severed roots extending into the development area. The actual root distribution is likely to be less extensive than that implied by the theoretical RPA calculation.
- A substantial area of open ground within the calculated RPA will be retained and protected from regular recreational use.
- The retained open ground area will comprise approximately 48m² of the calculated 106m² RPA located within the application site and will be enhanced through proposed biodiversity and habitat enhancement measures.
- The retained area will be subject to significantly less intensive management than the existing regularly mown amenity grass and will therefore provide improved conditions for soil health and future root development.
- Whilst approximately 58m² of the calculated RPA falls beneath the proposed artificial grass area, the extent of actual rooting affected is anticipated to be substantially less owing to the historic service corridor and associated root severance.

Similar considerations apply to the retained Category B and Category C Ash trees. Whilst portions of their calculated Root Protection Areas extend beneath the proposed artificial grass surface, significant areas of their RPAs will remain undisturbed as open ground.

The retention of undeveloped and enhanced areas of open ground adjacent to the proposed play area will continue to provide opportunities for soil aeration, water infiltration and root growth.

Furthermore, the artificial grass surface will be installed using an arboriculturally appropriate no-dig construction methodology designed to protect the soil profile and avoid root damage. No level changes or root pruning are proposed within the RPA's of the retained trees.

Comments regarding the long-term management requirements associated with artificial grass surfaces within Root Protection Areas have been noted. The School already maintains an extensive area of artificial grass immediately adjacent to the proposed play area and consequently has an established inspection and maintenance regime in place for such surfaces. The proposed play area will be incorporated into this existing maintenance programme, including routine inspection, cleaning and removal of leaf litter and debris to ensure the surface remains free draining and permeable. As the proposed area forms a direct extension of an existing artificial grass facility, no additional or unusual maintenance requirements are anticipated. The incorporation of the new play area into the School's established maintenance regime will help ensure that surface permeability, drainage performance and overall condition are maintained throughout its operational lifespan.

Taking account of the existing site conditions, likely constrained root distribution, retention and enhancement of the adjacent open ground area, and implementation of an appropriate no-dig specification, it is considered that the proposals will not result in a materially adverse effect on the health, vitality or longevity of the retained trees.

Response to Eastleigh Borough Council Planning comments

Temporary ground protection is proposed within the Root Protection Areas (RPAs) of the retained trees as a precautionary measure to safeguard the rooting environment during construction and installation activities.

The proposed play area surfacing will be installed in separate operations i.e. rubber crumb surfacing located outside the RPAs and artificial grass surfacing within the RPA's. During the course of the works, operative movements, material deliveries and installation and erection of equipment will require access across parts of the site, including areas within the RPAs. The temporary ground protection is therefore intended to prevent soil compaction and protect underlying roots during these activities, in accordance with the principles of BS5837:2012.

The temporary ground protection will be taken up and replaced or removed as required during the course of the works.