



**AN APPLICATION FOR
THE REMOVAL OF CONDITION 4
AND THE VARIATION OF CONDITION 5
OF PLANNING CONSENT
05/01313/FULL
ON BEHALF OF
NORTHILL VA LOWER SCHOOL
BEDFORD ROAD
NORTHILL**

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1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Northhill School has been in operation for over 150 years, functioning as a Church of England Voluntarily Aided Lower School.

1.2 Permission was granted in 2005 to remove the existing outdoor swimming pool and to erect a multi-use games area (MUGA) together with mesh fencing. The MUGA was subsequently erected in 2005 and has continued in operation since that time.

1.3 Planning permission was obtained after several applications were made by Mouchel Parkman acting on behalf of the County Council. There had been significant concern from residents about the proposal and the final application (01/313) was a reduced scheme in a different location.

1.4 As concern had been raised by local people, the former Local Authority Mid Beds District Council, felt it appropriate to impose Conditions restricting the use of the site to pupils and staff only of Northhill School and to restrict the hours of operation from between 08:00 and 17:00 Monday to Friday.

1.5 With the successful operation of the MUGA and the fact that the school has applied under Condition 5 for a number of weekend uses of the site, which have not been opposed by residents and have been successful for the school. This proposal is sought to remove the restriction in Condition 4 which prevents members of the public using the site, and to amend Condition 5 which would allow the MUGA to be used outside of the 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday timeframe and for use on Saturdays but continuing the restriction for no use on Sundays and Public Holidays without prior written agreement by the Local Planning Authority.

2. Planning History

2.1 The school has the inevitable planning history associated with its use as an educational establishment. In recent times the school has had classroom improvements and extensions, together with the erection of the MUGA. A number of planning applications were submitted for the MUGA before approval was granted and the planning history is well known to Central Beds Council. There is no recent history of planning matters of a non-educational nature.

Car Parking Facilities

2.2 Part of the front play area of the school is now cordoned off permanently for staff car parking and for the use of the school outside of hours. There is sufficient capacity for at least eight cars to be parked in that area and, generally speaking, when the school is not being used as a school, the car parking area is largely empty. In addition, there is considerable roadside parking outside of the school along its frontage which does not directly affect neighbouring residences.

3. Range of Services

3.1 The main proposed use of the MUGA outside of school hours is for a tennis court. It is not proposed to use the facility for team games such as football or cricket. These facilities are already well catered for in the Parish with active football and cricket clubs on Ickwell Green. Whilst the MUGA has the facility for a range of sporting activities, if your Authority felt that it was appropriate or necessary to impose a Condition restricting the use of the site for team games such as cricket and football, this would not be resisted. We would be reluctant, however, considering the range of possible uses of the site, to have a Condition restricting use of the site to only tennis, as badminton and other recreational games involving the low single numbers of players can occur.

3.2 The MUGA is of necessity of a size which can accommodate both adults (e.g. members of staff) and small children from the age of 4 upwards. As such, the facility is able to accommodate both adult play as well as being highly suitable for young children.

3.3 It is envisaged that a single tennis court would be made available to occasional players who reside in or close to the Parish of Northill. At present there is no such facility in the village though a permanent court had existed some years ago, available in Ickwell adjacent to residential properties.

4. The Proposal

4.1 In allowing the use of the MUGA for primarily tennis in the (inevitably) summer evenings until 8.30pm and on Saturdays would provide a valuable community facility currently in demand and currently lacking in the village. On the four occasions that the MUGA has been used with the written approval of the Council, its use has been popular, however there have been no complaints or problems associated with the use.

4.2 It is expected that small groups of people, typically numbering between 2 and 4 (to allow doubles games) would pre-book the court and collect a key from a dedicated key holder. The individual prepared to hold the key has already been identified and is prepared to offer a reasonable out of hours facility, subject to availability.

4.3 It would be necessary for pre-booking of the site and for a simple vetting procedure such that any user of the facility where there had been concern or damage would be unlikely to be granted repeat use.

4.4 Some local opinion has been canvassed and discussions have been entered into with Parish Councillors and neighbouring properties most likely to be affected. The school has endeavoured to keep stakeholders informed of their use of the site by the direct notification of neighbours considered to be most likely affected by the use of the MUGA, as well as other interested parties.

4.5 It should be clear that the use of the MUGA would be made for sporting purposes only and not for informal recreational events and that the key holder would be clear that the use of the site would be for games such as tennis and for a restricted number of players. It is possible, however, that when a small number of players are playing that there may be friends observing though it is not considered likely that the numbers would even reach double figures on many occasions.

4.6 The school gate is securely locked and the MUGA facility also has a similar lock, the keys to open these would be provided by the key holder and as such the opportunity for inappropriate access to the school or the playing field would be minimal. In the event that individuals were found to have acted irresponsibly or dangerously, then a prohibition on future use by those individuals would become appropriate and if necessary, procedures reviewed.

4.7 At all times the school considers that the use of its facilities by local people and the community is both beneficial and efficient. At present the school buildings can be used for informal events and a number of groups use the school buildings for training, dance practice and for village/community based programs. The school governors would like to see this opportunity extended to the use of the MUGA on a managed basis.

4.8 At present the school grounds are also occasionally used by the 'Friends, Parent and Teachers Association' (FTPA) of Northill School, primarily to raise money for the school, but also to raise awareness of the school and its facilities. These events are usually well attended, primarily by parents of attending children and their family relatives; however, on occasion events attract the wider community, particularly when fund raising.

4.9 We do not consider that the proposal here to widen the use of the MUGA would significantly impact on the residential amenity of neighbours and residences in the vicinity. The proposal to restrict access via a key holder with a simple code of conduct, and the limited size of the MUGA in relation to the type and nature of games that can be played on it, mean that the level of noise and disturbance from its use on light evenings in the summer and on Saturdays, is unlikely to impact

greatly on residential amenity. The MUGA already has a secure acoustic fence to reduce the impact of noise which is most effective.

4.10 In the past, when the school utilised the swimming pool, whilst its primary use was for the school children, on occasion it was used for non-school purposes and the school has both a current and historical role in meeting community needs outside of its main education function. The governors of the school, supported by the staff and the FPTA would like to see this community involvement continuing.

5. Factors Driving Demand

5.1 Whilst there is undoubtedly a latent demand for the use of the MUGA by the wider community, many of whom may enjoy a game of tennis from time to time, there has been specific demand by parents of children attending the school who would like to bring their children to the courts after school or at the weekend in order to practice tennis. A number of children at the school have shown considerable promise in playing the game and may reach a high standard of attainment if allowed to practice more frequently. Currently this is not possible as parents cannot supervise their young children due to Conditions 4 and 5.

5.2 Not surprisingly, very few families can afford or indeed have the space to provide a fully equipped tennis court, and whilst there are facilities available in Sandy, Biggleswade and other towns, these are not always available or as convenient as a village based facility and may involve the use of cars, whereas the school is within walking and cycling distance for many.

5.3 Evidence obtained anecdotally from other schools and organisations that have similar facilities suggest that there is a steady latent demand for facilities but which are weather dependent and highly seasonal. It is likely, therefore, that the MUGA would remain largely unused during the late autumn through to early spring months simply because it would be dark after school and there are no proposals to install floodlighting.

5.4 With only Saturdays being available as part of this proposal, and a typical game of tennis lasting from 1 – 2 hours, the number of people that could use the facility is, by its nature, restricted. We would nevertheless expect to book the courts out on an hourly or half hourly basis and where there was high demand, restrict individuals to single slots. Players may continue playing beyond their allotted slot if no other users of the court come forward, but must retire in the event that other players arrive.

5.5 We are confident that a common sense approach to the use of the facility would be made to ensure both its efficient use and its preservation. By offering a secure and simple time restricted, key holder led booking system, we consider that the school will maintain control of the facility and the opportunity for inappropriate behaviour or avoidable disturbance will be limited. Players will be encouraged to be mindful of residential properties adjacent and to keep noise levels to a minimum when arriving and leaving the premises as well as during play.

6. Planning Policy

6.1 Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 in the section under Planning Objectives states quite clearly that open spaces, sport and recreation all underpin people's quality of life. It is considered to support rural renewal and that open spaces within rural settlements and accessibility to local sports and recreational facilities contribute to the quality of life and the well being of people who live in rural areas. Furthermore, by ensuring that open space, sport and recreational facilities are easily accessible by walking and cycling, this promotes more sustainable development.

6.2 PPG17 states that Local Authorities are encouraged to enhance existing open space and sport and recreational facilities. Local Authorities should seek opportunities to improve the value of existing facilities, in particular they should encourage better accessibility of existing open spaces and sports and recreational facilities, taking account of the mobility needs in the local population.

6.3 Whilst Northhill School has an existing car parking area that could be available, it is envisaged that many of the people who would play on the MUGA are likely to arrive on foot or by bicycle as they would live locally, there is also considerable on-street parking outside the school.

6.4 PPG17 states in Paragraph 23 that:

Local Authorities should ensure that provision is made for local sports and recreational facilities (either through an increase in the number of facilities or through improvements to existing facilities).

6.5 In this particular case, we have an existing facility where the responsible party is prepared to allow sensible managed access by the community and we consider that this is clearly supported by guidance in PPG17.

6. Summary

6.1 The use of the MUGA by the school has now been in operation for five successful years. On occasion the facilities have been used at weekends by written approval from the Local Authority. The proposal is to extend the time when the use of this facility can be made, primarily for tennis.

6.2 There is a recognised level of demand from pupils at the school (and their parents) together with the wider community to utilise this facility outside of the current restricted hours. Condition 4 prohibits parents assisting their children on the courts after hours. Condition 5 restricts the time available.

6.3 There is clear support in both National and Local Planning Policy for the provision of sports based facilities and for the wider use of existing facilities, particularly those in school or community ownership/control. The school is keen to make the facility more widely available, whilst respecting neighbours' quality of life.

6.4 A simple and secure booking system, including a locked-gate policy would ensure that potential players could not easily abuse the use of the site. It is expected that use of the site for tennis would, by its nature, be restricted to small groups of players, normally in the single figures, typically between 2 – 4 players with possible occasional observers. The court size allows only one tennis court to be established at a time and therefore the amount of people that could be playing is quite small.

6.5 The staff, school governors and FPTA consider that with such a valuable facility as the MUGA potentially available to the wider community, that its managed use could provide a well needed facility for local residents and the community without significant detriment to neighbours in a very sustainable situation.

**Landscape Land and Property
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