

Bowlee Football & Community Wellbeing Hub: Your questions answered.

Thank you to everyone who came along to the recent public consultation and shared their views, it genuinely makes a difference. We know a lot of you have questions about what is being proposed at Bowlee, so we've pulled together the ones we heard most often, with honest answers to each.

We want to be open about what this is, what stage it's at, and what it could mean for the area. If your question isn't covered here, please get in touch or leave your feedback through the survey (details at the end).

About the proposal

- What is being proposed at Bowlee?

The proposal is intended to serve both the wider community and the club, with a strong emphasis on developing grassroots and community sport while enhancing health and wellbeing across the area. It supports a broad and inclusive programme of activity, including women's and girls' football, disability football, youth participation, and local grassroots clubs, alongside wider initiatives that promote physical and mental wellbeing.

We are proposing investment into the Council's current Sports Hub at Bowlee that will create a football and community wellbeing hub, providing a training pitch for Rochdale AFC with a 3G pitch and grass pitch for Rochdale AFC Community Trust on one part of the site (circa 7 hectares), with two 3G pitches and three grass pitches alongside cricket provision, a children's playground and free parking for the wider community, managed by the Council's Leisure Trust, Your Trust, on the other half of the site (11 hectares). This is a partnership approach to managing the site going forward, with each half planned to have a separate building, replacing the existing pavilion on site.

Only four pitches are currently usable on the site, and the pitches require significant investment to bring them back into use. The improvement will be delivered through this scheme and the ongoing maintenance schedules once the site is opened.

- Who is behind the proposal?

This is a partnership between Rochdale Borough Council, Rochdale AFC, Rochdale AFC Community Trust and Your Trust. The aim is to provide community benefit, while also enabling Rochdale AFC to have a training facility within the borough, as the club currently trains outside the borough.

It isn't the club acting alone, the Council and Your Trust are involved precisely because the aim is community benefit, not just a facility for the football club.

- Is this a "done deal"?

No. We are at the pre-planning application stage and wanted comments from those members of the public who are most likely to be affected if these proposals go forward. No planning application has been submitted yet, and no planning permission has been granted. The purpose of the public consultation is to hear your views before the plans are finalised and give the community as much information as possible before an application is submitted. As part of the planning process, formal public consultation will take place.

- Where is the site?

The site we are looking at are the current designated playing fields within Bowlee Park.

The fields are currently used as playing fields and, as such, are subject to certain uses and covenants. We aren't looking to change any areas of the park into playing fields that aren't already designated sports pitches.

We appreciate some of these sports pitches aren't currently in use as sports pitches due to poor drainage and not fit for purpose buildings, but as one of the council's designated hub sites for sports facilities, we want to bring these areas back into use so we can meet local demand.

Open space and access

- Will I still be able to get to the country park?

We heard this loud and clear at the consultation, and it's one of the points we're looking at most closely. Yes. The proposal is to develop the existing sports pitches and buildings, with possible benefits being explored including the enhancement of the park, lighting to the routes through to the new pitches and potential BNG enhancement.

- The car park is used to reach the country park, what happens to it?

We understand the importance for the community to have access to the car park to provide access to the country park. We are currently working within the design to ensure this is maintained and there are no plans to close the public vehicular access, with parking being expanded to meet the additional demand.

The car park is set to expand and be improved, and the site will have little usage during the daytime – we envisage there being plenty of free parking spaces available for visitors to the wider park. How the car park is accessed and managed, along with signage and wayfinding, is one of the things we're actively working through.

- Will this become football-only, or paid access? Will the free, informal use of the land be lost?

We understand the concern that open land used informally today could become formal or paid space. The intended approach is to *add* facilities for the community, including for grassroots and informal use, rather than take away what's already there.

Furthermore, the improvement to the country park could help offset the potential loss of informal use of the fields, as its overall size would still be large enough to accommodate informal activities beyond the designated playing areas.

In terms of the hire charges for the new pitches, these are set in line with Football Foundation guidance, in line with the Council charging policy and Your Trust.

- What about the loss of open space, given the housing planned nearby?

Some residents have raised the nearby housing proposals to the south (around 1,500 homes) and the worry about open space being lost across the area. That's a separate scheme from ours, but we understand why people see the two together. We'd encourage everyone to look at our proposals on their own merits, and the wider picture is something the planning process will properly consider.

This plan regenerates existing playing fields retaining green space in an area under development.

The club's role

- Is the football club taking public land for commercial gain?

This isn't a money-maker for the club. It's a long-term investment in facilities for the town, delivered in partnership with Rochdale AFC Community Trust, the Council and Your Trust. The significant funding for the Rochdale AFC side of the site is through private investment – there is no public money or grant income being utilised, nor is there a business plan associated with renting out the facility.

Bowlee remains a Council-owned community asset, delivered through a partnership between Rochdale Borough Council, Rochdale AFC and Your Trust. The purpose is to turn an underused and constrained playing field site into a modern football and community wellbeing hub, with clear community access, improved facilities and long-term public benefit. The current site has significant drainage issues, with only a limited number of pitches regularly usable, and the existing pavilion is not fit for purpose. The proposal improves the site rather than removing its sporting value.

Rochdale AFC will have dedicated training facilities, but this sits alongside substantial community provision, including two full-size community 3G pitches, improved grass pitches, a new community pavilion, changing rooms, café, community space, play area and health and fitness facilities. Your Trust is expected to manage the community-facing elements, ensuring local clubs, schools, leagues and residents can access the site.

- What's in it for the local community?

We are creating a year-round facility that gives local people more opportunities to play, train, exercise, socialise and access wellbeing support. The scheme increases usable football capacity from around 24 hours per week to approximately 158 hours per week, creating a net increase of 134 hours. It further champions inclusive opportunities in women's and girls' football, disability sport, youth engagement, grassroots clubs, and wider health initiatives.

We are also retaining sport on site, improving pitch quality, relocating cricket provision within Bowlee, improving car parking, adding accessible parking, EV charging, cycle storage, landscaping, biodiversity areas, pathways and a play area. This is a long-term investment in Middleton, Bowlee and the wider Rochdale borough.

Environment

- What about light from the floodlights?

Ensuring that proposed floodlighting is appropriately sited and designed to reduce impact upon surrounding biodiversity has been integral to the emerging design. We are using specialist floodlights which will be informed by technical inputs to reduce and mitigate potential floodlight spill to minimise the impact on neighbours and wildlife.

The pitches are proposed to be laid out in such a way that they have limited impact on nearby residences.

LED floodlights consume less energy, which reduces the overall carbon footprint of a sports venue. Their long lifespan also means less frequent replacements, contributing to reduced waste and a lower impact on the environment. LEDs can also reduce light spill because they provide more directional light control and a detailed lighting assessment will be undertaken to demonstrate compliance with relevant standards for the planning application.

- What about wildlife, ecology and biodiversity?

Our proposals will be accompanied by full ecological assessments, and the scheme will need to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain, meaning it should leave the natural environment measurably better than it is now, not worse. These are things we're required to do, and we take them seriously.

No trees with preservation orders are being removed. Very little tree removal is required, but any trees that are removed will be replaced on at least a two-for-one basis.

- Will this help with the problems with dog fouling on the site?

A few residents mentioned the current issues with dog mess on the land. A managed, well-maintained site would be expected to help reduce that, and the allocation of non-sport field spaces as dog-friendly fields will also ensure people have spaces to walk their dogs freely.

The consultation

- I didn't receive a leaflet, how were people told about this?

We're sorry if one didn't reach you. Leaflets were delivered by a trusted distribution company, following our standard process, on a scheduled date and we're checking the distribution records with them in response to this feedback. Sometimes a leaflet is missed or gets mistaken for junk mail.

Either way, we want as many people as possible to be able to take part in this pre application consultation.

The consultation boards from the event are available online, as is the feedback survey. <https://www.rochdaleafccommunity.org/bowlee-have-your-say/>

The boards are also available to view in person with hard copy feedback forms at Middleton Arena.

- Will there be another in-person event?

We are not holding a second event. Instead, the exhibition boards from the consultation are being put on display at Middleton Arena, so you can view them in your own time and feedback either there or online through the Council's consultation platform or the Rochdale AFC Community Trust website.

It is worth noting that this is a pre application consultation for feedback on the proposal – there is a formal consultation process that will be followed once a planning application has been submitted.

- How can I give my feedback now?

You can complete the questionnaire here: <https://consultations.rochdale.gov.uk/council-wide/football-and-community-wellbeing-hub-at-bowlee-pla/>

- How long do I have? When does feedback close?

The online consultation and the exhibition will run for around two weeks, until 17 July.

- What happens to my feedback?

Everything we hear is logged and considered. It helps shape the proposals before we submit a planning application, and it will be set out in the Statement of Community Involvement that goes with the application, showing how we consulted and how we responded. We'll keep the community updated as things move forward.

Thank you again to everyone who has taken the time to share their views. We're listening, and it matters.