Design and Access Statement

Darland Academy

Wrexham AFC

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CHECKED

Chris Forshaw CMLI - Director	[redacted]

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1. Introduction

Wrexham AFC are undertaking a programme of improvement works at Darland High School to enhance the existing training facilities and ensure the site meets the requirements for EFL Category 3 Academy status. As part of these works, a new pitch drainage system and irrigation infrastructure is being installed within the area of the current school playing fields, to improve the quality and usability of the playing surfaces throughout the year.

Throughout the summer of 2025, the Club has undertaken the renovation of one full-size playing surface pitch, including the restoration of a structured drainage system and improved playing surface, to meet the requirements of the EFL Category 3 Academy status.

Along with these works, Wrexham AFC has already invested in new buildings within the main school site to provided needed facilities for players and staff and, through ongoing dialogue with the high school and the Council, has made improvements to travel arrangements and the condition of the site overall.

Further works will be undertaken to renovate the remaining playing surfaces and associated existing drainage system to ensure the facility is to the correct standard and can accommodate the required use for both the Club and the High School.

The purpose of this application is to gain planning approval for the engineering works required to necessitate the drainage and surface water attenuation, and to facilitate the installation of permanent structures required for the operation of the site, irrigation and maintenance.

2. Project Description

Full planning permission is sought for a development with the following description:

"*Full planning application for the undertaking of drainage engineering works, in addition to the erection of shipping containers, landscaping and other associated works.*"

The proposed works are summarised as follows:

- Installation of permanent irrigation tanks and pump housing;
- Provision of shipping container storage buildings;
- Construction of two swales (attenuation ponds) to attenuate surface water run-off from the site; and
- Hard and soft landscaping works involving reinforced hedgerows, low management grassland, permeable maintenance access routes, and stock fencing.

Note: This application seeks planning permission for the proposed works which are located within the red line boundary, to help facilitate the wider improvement works to the land drainage systems below the football pitches. A separate SuDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems) Approval Body (SAB) application is being submitted to deliver these wider works. Therefore, whilst the works to the football pitches are not technically being assessed as part of this application, they have been demonstrated on the site plan and the supporting documentation to show how the planning application relates to the wider improvement works.

3. Design Principals

3.1. Site Context

The site for the Wrexham AFC Under 16's Academy Facility is located to the rear of Darland High School and occupies the playing fields adjacent to Gamford Lane [Fig. 1], as well as some of the school grounds to the north of the existing drainage ditch watercourse.

Around the perimeter, in addition to Gamford Lane running along the northeastern boundary, there is a long-standing drainage ditch to the northwest between the playing fields site and the school, a new housing development to the west, and open agricultural fields to the south. This limits access to the site and controls the connections between the site and adjacent features, both physically and visually.

Fig 1 Location Plan



Bounded by a mature hedgerow the site is open grass land marked out for football pitches and training exercises. A newly refurbished playing surface occupies the southwest edge of the site with a newly laid central spine footpath and circulation road installed to control vehicles and pedestrians on the site.

Gamford Lane provides the primary access for maintenance and ground staff, as well as the access point for the construction works via Rosset Road. All other access for staff, players and parents is via the High School car park and adjacent public footpath. Visitors, staff and players will arrive at the school via the B5445 and

park in the car park located to the northwest of the school. From here they will head towards the Academy site [Fig. 2].

Fig 2 Site Plan



The site generally has a gentle, shallow but consistent cross gradient towards the ditch, from south to north, but not steep enough to ensure overground flows resulting in the surface soils becoming waterlogged during inclement weather events. There has been an existing historic drainage system running into the ditch under the current playing fields, this application provides the necessary enhancements and upgrades in the form of the drainage swales and earthworks, to facilitate the improvements to the playing surfaces.

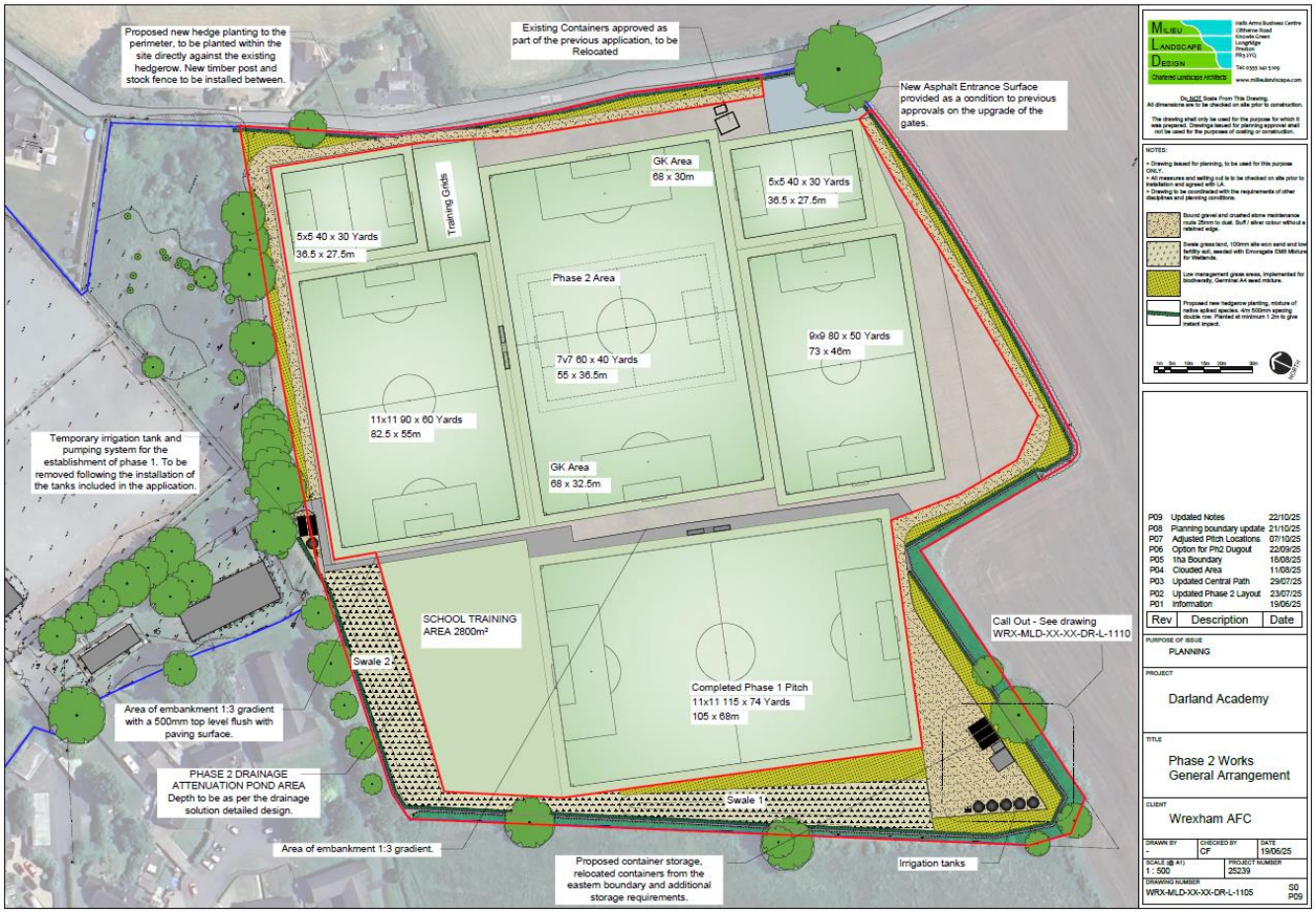
3.2. *Pitch Layout*

The layout of the new football facilities has been carefully planned to reflect the dual function of the site as both a professional academy training ground for Wrexham AFC and a sports facility for Darland High School, while meeting the technical and spatial standards required for an EFL Category 3 Academy. The arrangement establishes a clear functional hierarchy across the site, ensuring that each pitch serves its designated user group efficiently, while maintaining visual cohesion and a well-integrated landscape character [Fig. 3].

The school pitch and training area are positioned closest to the High School buildings at the northern end of the site, allowing for convenient access during the school day without the need for pupils to cross academy

operational areas. This configuration benefits the school by providing a sense of ownership and identity for the school's use, while maintaining appropriate management separation from the academy facilities.

Fig 3 Pitch Layout



Progressing southwards across the site, the academy training pitches are arranged in a series of professional-standard surfaces, including 11v11, 9v9, 7v7, and 5v5 configurations, together with specialist goalkeeper and training grids. These pitches are orientated predominantly on an east-west axis to optimise sunlight exposure, with the existing high quality 11v11 pitch on the north-south axis. The layout allows for flexible rotation and markings, and use throughout the week, balancing intensive academy training schedules with matchday requirements and long-term surface durability.

The pitches are enclosed by a perimeter service road and path, providing clear circulation routes for maintenance vehicles, staff, and players while ensuring minimal interference with play areas. Beyond this formal edge, the landscape transitions to a softer and more naturalistic character, consisting of low-management grassland and a reinforced UK native hedgerow. This landscape buffer not only defines the outer edge of the sports complex but also enhances biodiversity, integrates the site into its rural context, and provides a visual and ecological transition between the academy and the surrounding countryside.

Together, the layout and landscape strategy create a high-quality, functional, and sustainable sporting environment. The arrangement meets the operational needs of a EFL Category 3 Academy while ensuring that the site delivers long-term community benefit, benefits the school, enhances ecological value, and creates a strong sense of place.

The facility and arrangement is designed to work with the topography and the available space and ensure drainage and falls can be accommodated within the general internal core of the site, ensuring that the established features on the perimeter are not impacted.

3.3. Drainage

Existing System

The existing site is almost entirely permeable, consisting of grassed football pitches and permeable paths and hardstanding areas. The roofs of storage containers and irrigation tanks are the only impermeable surfaces. The existing site served by a land drainage system, formed of a herringbone network of perforated pipes laid in gravel trenches. The layout of the pipework was evident during dry weather in May 2025, where the pipe routes are clearly identified as parched marks in the grass. The parch marks were surveyed to be at approximately 6m centres. A number of outfalls were found to discharge directly to the watercourse on the north-western boundary of the site.

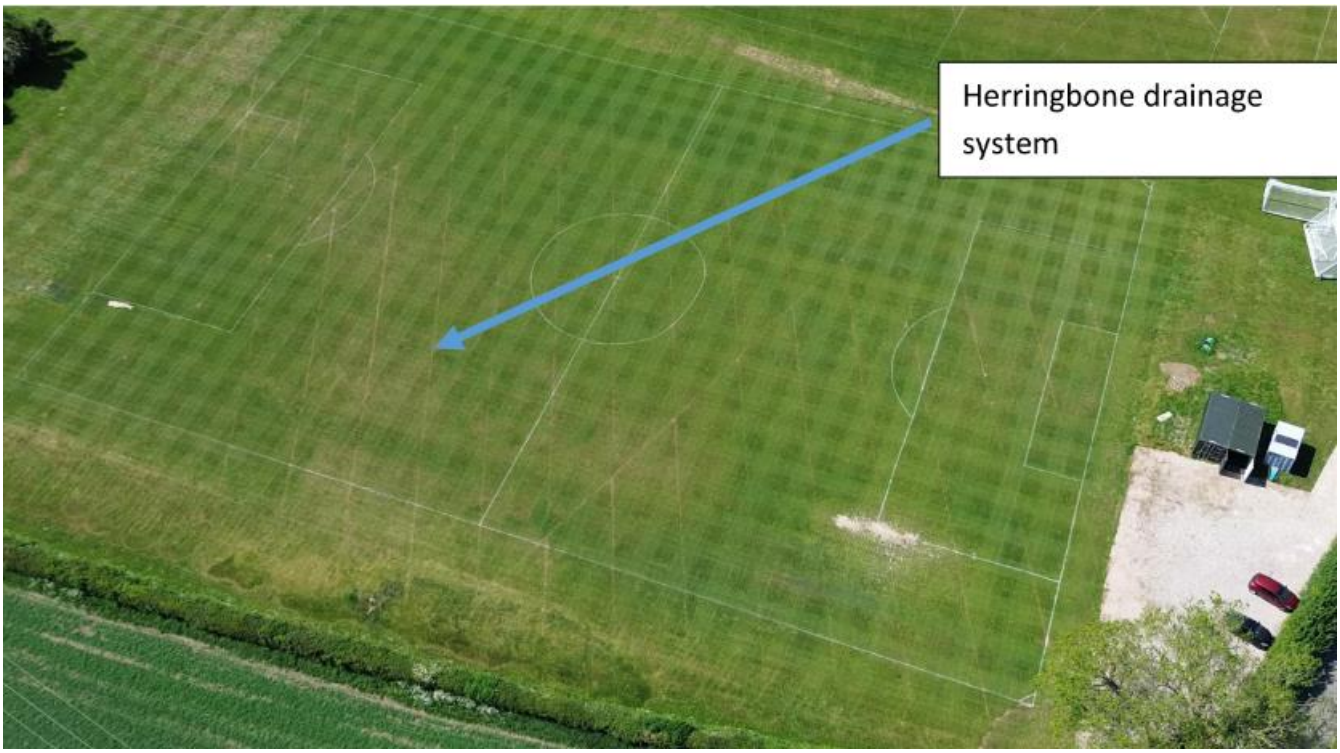


Fig 4—1 Parch march showing layout of existing land drainage system at the site.

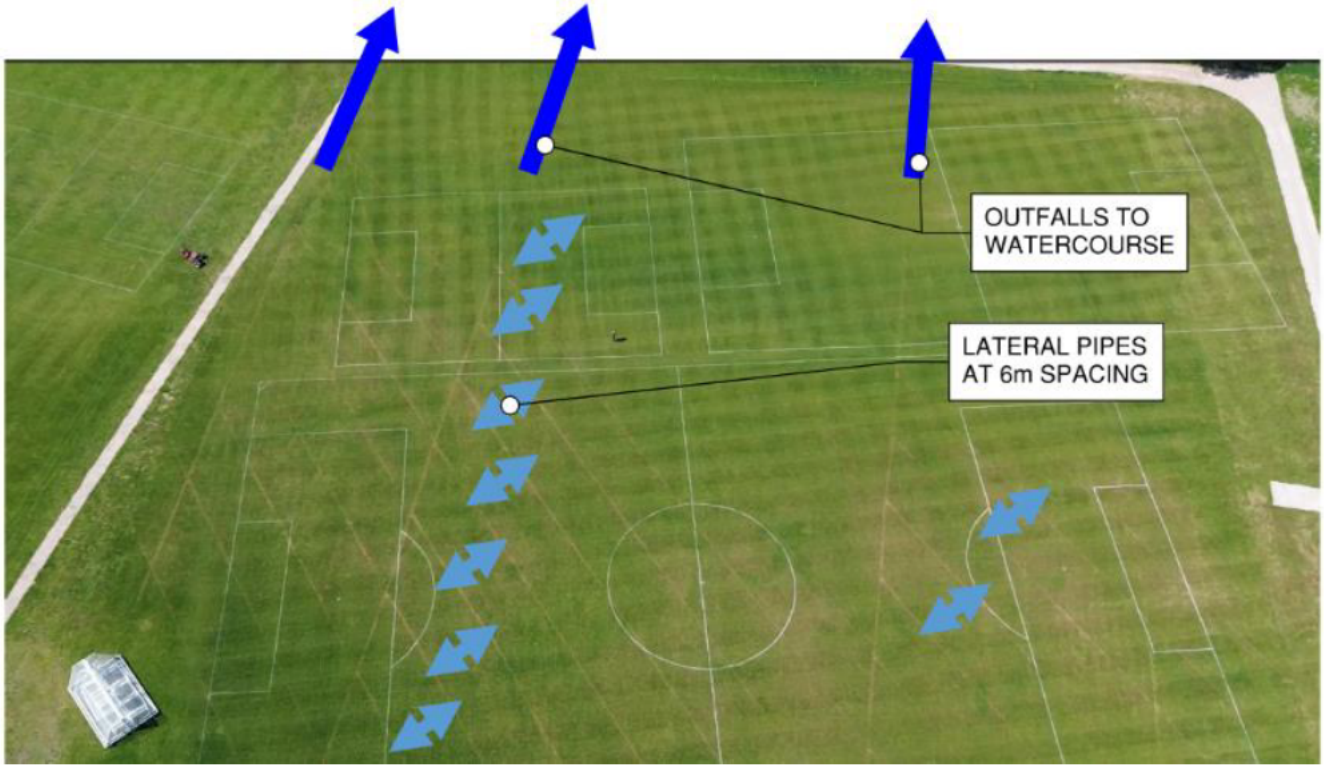
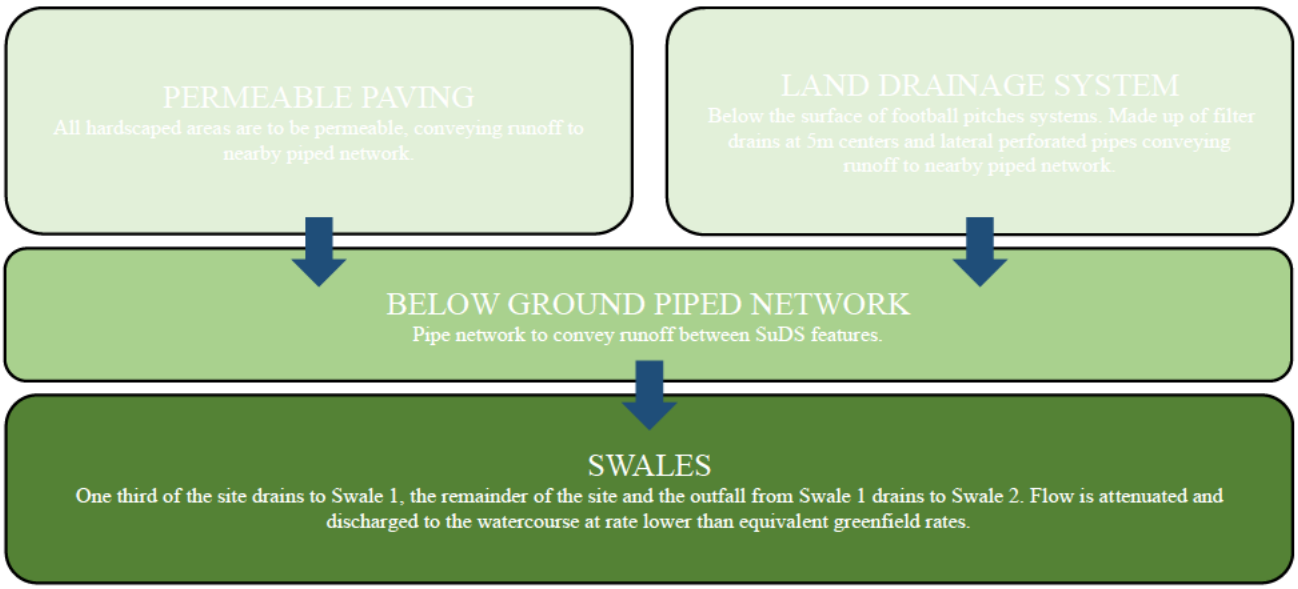


Fig 4—2 Parch march showing layout of existing land drainage system at the site.

Proposed System

It is proposed to renew the existing land drainage system at the site to provide drainage for the pitches, with a new carrier drain network provided to collect water from the land drainage system and also the surrounding impermeable paths and hardstanding areas. The existing outfalls to the watercourse are to be removed and the site will drain to two swales located to the north-west side of the site. These swales will attenuate runoff and before discharging at a controlled rate into the watercourse, via a newly constructed outfall. The proposed drainage system is to provide betterment to the existing greenfield runoff generated by the site. This will reduce flood risk by reducing the flow of water into the watercourse.

The following SuDS train is proposed to attenuate, treat and convey the surface water runoff.



3.4. Materials

The material palette for the landscape has been carefully selected to reflect the dual function of the site as both a professional football academy and a school sports facility, combining durability, practicality, and visual coherence. Materials have been chosen to support the site's operational requirements while contributing to an attractive, legible, and sustainable environment. Across the hard landscape, surfaces and structures are designed to be robust and low-maintenance, suitable for the high footfall and regular use expected from both academy and school activities.

Primary pedestrian and circulation routes are finished in asphalt, providing a smooth, even, and slip-resistant surface that ensures full accessibility for all users, including wheelchair and pushchair access. The asphalt paths also offer visual consistency and durability, linking the various pitches and facilities into a cohesive network. Where edges meet planting or grassed areas, restrained concrete edging provides a neat, functional transition that can withstand regular maintenance activity. The perimeter road for grounds maintenance and service access is surfaced in compacted crushed stone to ensure year-round usability and resilience to vehicle loads, while remaining visually recessive within the wider landscape setting.

Within the naturalised perimeter zones, material selection takes a softer and more ecological character. Low-management grassland and reinforced native hedgerow planting form the dominant landscape elements, contributing texture, seasonal change, and biodiversity value. These areas are intentionally informal in contrast to the precision of the sports surfaces, creating a clear yet complementary relationship between the professional pitches and their setting. Where fencing is required within the perimeter, timber post and mesh stock fencing has been selected for its practicality and minimal visual impact, maintaining safety and site integrity.

Overall, the materials strategy supports the site's long-term function, balancing the needs of a high-performance sporting environment with those of accessibility, environmental sensitivity, and aesthetic quality. The result is a landscape that feels coherent with adjacent sites and fields, purposeful, and durable and enhances both the user experience and the wider ecological and visual character of the site.

4. Landscaping and Biodiversity

4.1. Landscaping

The overall landscape strategy for the new football pitch area is designed to balance the requirements of high-quality, professional grade playing surfaces with a more naturalistic and ecologically rich perimeter environment.

At the heart of the site, the pitches themselves are maintained to a professional standard, with tightly controlled grass quality, drainage, and surface uniformity to meet performance and safety expectations and the EFL Category 3 Academy status. These core playing areas represent the most intensively managed parts of the site, requiring regular mowing, feeding, and irrigation. Around these, a clear visual and functional transition is created through a hierarchy of landscape character moving from formal, high-maintenance sports turf to increasingly natural and low-input edge treatments.

The internal circulation path and service road define the boundary between these contrasting zones. Beyond this perimeter route, the landscape softens into a more naturalistic character, designed both to reduce maintenance demands and to provide ecological value. Low-management grassland establishes an attractive, subtly textured setting that contrasts with the precision of the sports surfaces. This grassland is managed with minimal mowing, allowing grasses and wildflowers to develop structure and seasonal interest, while also supporting pollinators, birds, and small mammals. It functions as a visual buffer, blending the

formal playing fields into the surrounding environment, and provides valuable habitat diversity within what would otherwise be a heavily managed site.

Forming the outermost edge of the site, the existing hedgerows are to be widened, restocked, and reinforced with a mix of UK native species. This enhancement creates a strong, continuous green boundary that frames the site while improving security and improving ecological connectivity across the wider landscape. The thickened hedgerow provides enhanced ecology, improved security for the site, acts as a natural windbreak, and contributes to carbon storage and microclimate regulation. Together, the hedgerow and low-management grass areas form an ecologically functional perimeter that complements the intensively maintained sports core, integrating the pitches sensitively within their setting.

Overall, the landscape approach combines functional sports provision with environmental stewardship, creating a multi-layered site that delivers visual quality, biodiversity value, security, and long-term sustainability. The strategy ensures that while the pitches meet professional standards of performance, the wider environment contributes positively to local ecology, landscape character, and the sense of place.

4.2. Biodiversity

The main plateaus are designed as high quality playing surfaces and as so are short mown technical grass surfaces. This will extend up to the perimeter footpath route, but beyond this feature, the scheme proposes longer low management grass surfaces and native shrub and hedgerow planting.

Low-management grass areas situated between sports pitches and naturalised native hedgerows provide valuable ecological benefits by acting as transitional habitats that connect intensively used and more natural spaces. Allowing the grass to grow longer and incorporating a mix of native species encourages a diverse structure that supports insects, pollinators, and small mammals, which in turn attract birds and other wildlife. This mosaic of vegetation strengthens local biodiversity and forms an important ecological corridor linking the hedgerows with adjacent green spaces. Reduced mowing and the absence of fertilisers or pesticides improve soil health by allowing organic matter to accumulate, enhancing microbial activity, and preventing compaction. The deeper root systems of the low-management grass help to retain moisture, improve water infiltration, and reduce surface runoff from the sports pitches. These areas also contribute to carbon capture through increased root biomass and lower maintenance emissions, while helping to moderate local temperatures by reducing heat build-up from surrounding short-mown turf.

Overall, the low-management grass provides a visually soft and ecologically rich buffer that enhances habitat connectivity, supports soil and water health, and strengthens the resilience of the wider landscape.

Enhancing an existing UK native hedgerow by thickening and widening it with additional native species greatly increases its biodiversity and ecological value. A well-structured, species-rich hedge provides vital habitat, food, and shelter for a wide range of wildlife, including birds, small mammals, invertebrates, and pollinators. By diversifying the planting with native shrubs and trees such as hawthorn, blackthorn, and dog rose, the hedge offers a continuous supply of nectar, berries, and nuts across the seasons, supporting wildlife throughout the year. A wider, denser hedge improves its function as an ecological corridor, enabling safe movement of species between habitats and linking fragmented green spaces.

The deep root systems of native plants stabilise soil, reduce erosion, and improve water infiltration, while the leaf litter and shaded ground layer enhance soil structure and microbial activity. In addition, the hedge contributes to local climate regulation by capturing carbon, providing windbreaks, and moderating microclimates around adjacent open areas.

Overall, strengthening the hedge with native planting creates a resilient, multi-layered habitat that enriches biodiversity, improves ecosystem connectivity, and reinforces the ecological framework of the surrounding landscape.

5. Stakeholder Engagement

The development of the football academy and shared sports facilities has been guided by a collaborative and coordinated design process between Wrexham AFC, its appointed design team, and Darland High School.

From the early stages, both parties have worked closely to ensure that the site layout, material choices, and landscape strategy meet the functional, educational, and professional needs of all users. Regular design coordination meetings have enabled the integration of the school's operational requirements with the club's technical and performance standards, ensuring that the facility functions seamlessly for both academic and academy purposes.

Throughout the process, progress and proposals have been reported to the English Football League (EFL) to confirm compliance with EFL Category 3 Academy standards, ensuring that the final design aligns with the expectations of a professional training environment while continuing to serve the local school and community effectively.

6. Conclusion

The proposed development at Darland High School represents a significant investment by Wrexham AFC to deliver a high-quality, sustainable, and inclusive sports facility that meets the requirements of EFL Category 3 Academy status while continuing to serve the local school and community. The design integrates professional-standard pitches with a carefully considered landscape strategy that enhances biodiversity, respects the site's rural context, and provides long-term environmental benefits.

Accessibility and circulation have been planned to ensure safe and equitable movement for all users, while the material palette and drainage solutions support durability, functionality, and resilience to changing weather conditions. The collaborative approach between Wrexham AFC, Darland High School, and the design team has ensured that the scheme responds to both operational and educational needs, creating a facility that is fit for purpose and future proofed.

Overall, the development will deliver a positive legacy for the region, combining sporting excellence with ecological stewardship and community benefit.