

# Memo

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**Our ref** 70218/01/BK/GCr  
**Date** 6 January 2026  
**From** Lichfields

## **Subject Mary Datchelor Playing Fields – Metropolitan Open Land Summary**

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### **1.0 Purpose of Note**

1.1 This note is prepared following a request from the Community Liaison Group, relating to the proposals for additional and improved sports facilities at the Mary Datchelor Playing Fields, for an explanatory note on ‘Metropolitan Open Land’ (MOL) – ie: what this designation is and what it means for potential proposed works to Mary Datchelor Playing Fields.

### **2.0 What is ‘Metropolitan Open Land’?**

2.1 Metropolitan Open Land (MOL) is a form of land designation, specific to London, that protects important open spaces within the city from inappropriate development. MOL land is strategic open land within the urban area. MOL is protected in the London Plan (2021) under Policy G3. It is afforded the same protection/status as the Green Belt (see London Plan Policy G3 and National Planning Policy Framework para. 153-160).

2.2 MOL areas provide open air facilities for sport and recreation, contain features of historic or biodiversity value, and/or form part of the green infrastructure network of a locality and MOL designation therefore serves to protect areas for landscape, recreation, nature conservation, and/or scientific interest. Its ‘openness’ is essentially its key characteristic.

### **3.0 What is inappropriate or appropriate development on MOL?**

3.1 MOL is protected in accordance with a number of national policy tests that apply to the Green Belt and restrict inappropriate development. Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the MOL’s character. MOL must remain ‘open’ land, with any proposals within MOL ensuring that the openness is not harmed.

3.2 Development in the MOL is inappropriate unless it follows one of the exceptions set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. The exceptions which are relevant to Mary Datchelor Playing Fields include (emphasis added):

- 1 the provision of appropriate facilities (in connection with the existing use of land or a change of use), including buildings, for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation, cemeteries and burial grounds and allotments; **as long as the facilities preserve the openness of the Green Belt** and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it;

- 2 the extension or alteration of a building provided that it **does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building**;
- 3 the replacement of a building, **provided the new building is in the same use and not materially larger than the one it replaces**; (*note that this exceptionally relates to the replacement of buildings in situ and does not relate to the relocation of buildings*).

3.3 Proposals to enhance access to MOL and to improve poorer quality areas such that they provide a wider range of benefits for Londoners that are appropriate within MOL will be encouraged. Examples include improved public access for all, inclusive design, recreation facilities, habitat creation, landscaping improvement and flood storage.

#### **4.0 How is openness assessed or impacted?**

4.1 There is no policy which defines ‘openness’, or how this should be assessed. However, planning best practice and associated case law indicates that it typically relates to the extent and position of built form on an open site, in terms of both the existence of built form at all, and in terms of whether this built form is perceptible in views of the site.

#### **5.0 What does MOL designation mean for proposals at the site?**

5.1 The Mary Datchelor Playing Fields fall within MOL and therefore ‘inappropriate development’ will be resisted, except in very special circumstances.

5.2 The intentions for the site however include the provision of additional and improved sports and recreation facilities, which should be considered an appropriate form of development as set out in the tests above, *as long as it does not harm the MOL’s openness* (exception 1 above).

5.3 As such, the design of the proposals must be driven by maintaining an open character to the site, as far as possible. This is intended to be achieved by:

- 1 Ensuring that any proposed built form does not result in a materially larger built form than what is currently on site;
- 2 That built form is positioned in their least perceptible locations, ie: around the edges of the site, and at the site’s lowest points utilising its topography.

5.4 This is why, for example, a pavilion building placed in the centre of the site would be unlikely to be successful, as this would have a more significant impact on the openness of the site.

5.5 Consideration also needs to be given to other associated structures including seating areas, fencing and lighting.

5.6 From initial discussions with London Borough of Southwark Planning Team, Officers have confirmed that positioning the pavilion in a corner of the site, particularly close to the shelter provided by the railway line is sensible for preserving a sense of open land. They have also cautioned that the quantity of ground area taken up by the pavilion will need to be carefully assessed and justified to ensure it does not create a sense of over-development.