



## **An open letter in response to the 'Save Our Parks' campaign**

The Mail on Sunday has launched a major new campaign to save Britain's parks, citing threats from development and cuts to council budgets. However, community access to green space is also under threat in other ways - including creeping privatisation through the use of fencing to restrict access to land that communities have used for generations. **We Love Stoke Lodge** represents around 900 local people fighting to maintain open public access to a vital and historic 'green lung' at the heart of a Bristol community.

We recognise the financial pressures that all councils are under. We believe that communities can be the best defenders and advocates for our parks. Working together with and supported by our councils, communities hold the key to creating innovative solutions that protect our green spaces as enjoyed by previous generations, for the benefit of future generations.

### **What is the issue at Stoke Lodge?**

Stoke Lodge is around 22-acres of historic Grade II listed parkland, surrounding a Victorian mansion now used as Bristol City Council's Adult Learning Centre. The threat to community access arises from proposals by Cotham School (some 3 miles away) to erect a 2m high perimeter fence around the land.

As part of Cotham's academy conversion process in 2011, Bristol City Council granted the school a lease to continue to use Stoke Lodge for its sports provision (as it had done since around 2002). The Council protected the community's interests by expressly ensuring that the school's lease was subject to 'all existing rights and use of the property, including use by the community' - and at the time the school was happy with this arrangement. Now, however, the school wants to restrict and control access to, and activities on, this valued green space. The community is fighting to maintain open public access to Stoke Lodge, as has been enjoyed for many decades.

### **What is our vision for Stoke Lodge?**

We have offered a package of proposals for partnership working with the school. Our vision for Stoke Lodge includes measures to address the school's identified safeguarding needs (without erecting expensive and hostile fencing), together with an offer to target other sources of grant funding (not available to the school) that would enhance facilities for Cotham students and community sports groups and benefit community health and well-being for all. We proposed that by working together we could create something really exciting - a blueprint for others. School governors were asked by Bristol North West MP Darren Jones to consider our proposals but have rejected them and chosen to pursue plans for an even bigger fence and less community access. As a result, the community has had to take steps to maintain the position set out in the school's lease, by applying for Stoke Lodge to be registered as a Town or Village Green.

We understand that the school is no longer satisfied with its playing fields at Stoke Lodge. In recent times the school has not maintained any pitches or permitted third party hire, so local sports clubs have also had to move elsewhere. We believe that it may be more cost-effective for the school to move to other existing facilities rather than undertaking major structural and landscaping works to develop Stoke Lodge in line with its ambitions. We want to work with the school to continue the peaceful coexistence that has worked well for generations, but the school has the option to terminate the lease if it finds suitable alternative provision. If this happens then we see a future for Stoke Lodge that preserves this valued public asset via a community trust model, while also creating a new income stream for the Council - a win-win in cash-strapped times.

How can this be achieved? Currently the Council receives no income from the playing fields - the school pays a peppercorn rent and has directed any income from third party hire elsewhere. Through community support, fundraising and grant funding, we would bring the pitches back into use, generating third-party hire income and providing maintenance more cost-effectively. Ultimately a community trust would become self-supporting and could generate funds for the Council. Our vision for Stoke Lodge - in partnership with the school or as a separate community trust - would maintain community use and access in line with the Council's intentions, while providing an outdoor learning, sports and recreation area appropriate to this historic site and keeping this beautiful green space open to all.

Helen Powell and Emma Burgess  
On behalf of **We Love Stoke Lodge**  
1 October 2018

For more information visit [www.welovestokelodge.co.uk](http://www.welovestokelodge.co.uk)  
Find us on facebook at 'We [heart] Stoke Lodge'