



University disclosure helps We Love Stoke Lodge dispel myths and gives new hope for compromise solutions

Newly-disclosed documents could point the way to resolution of the controversy around Stoke Lodge Playing Fields, says the Bristol NW group campaigning to keep the site fence-free. The documents were obtained from the University of Bristol in response to a Freedom of Information request, and date back over 20 years.

The documents show that Cotham School transferred control of Stoke Lodge to the University of Bristol from its earliest days of using the site, and that in many ways, the community's vision for the future of Stoke Lodge is aligned with views expressed by the University, which still controls and manages the site and receives any income from renting out pitches.

We Love Stoke Lodge has put forward a range of measures and ideas to Cotham School, that are designed to meet the school's safeguarding needs without installing the 2 metre high perimeter fencing proposed by the school. These documents reveal that the University made similar suggestions over 8 years ago: WLSL proposals include using barrier hedging to strengthen the boundaries; installing appropriate, wheelchair-accessible gates and putting up clear signage about access and conduct, especially when the school or other sports users are on site. The University described Stoke Lodge as 'a fantastic local resource for recreational activity' that 'should continue to be used for recreational purposes by the local community' - and we agree.

The University also rightly stated that grass pitches should not be a fouling area for dogs - and again, all of the 1000+ members of We Love Stoke Lodge agree with this. The documents show that Coombe Dingle, rather than Stoke Lodge, has been the location for most of Cotham School's sports provision since at least 2006 (many years before the school took the view that perimeter fencing was required), with only a minor element of school sports being played on the grass pitches at Stoke Lodge. Local residents are equally, if not more, motivated to make sure the site is safe and mess-free for children to play in, so we have developed a range of ideas to address any issues with dogs at the Lodge, in addition to a strongly-backed community charter to keep dogs off pitch areas and under control.

Our vision for Stoke Lodge allows for physical activity and recreation of all types and at all ages and stages of life. The University has previously stated (in relation to the 2011 Town or Village Green (TVG) application) that:

'It is not the University's position to want to fence off the site but it does want to work with neighbours and Cotham School to improve site security, particularly if a new pavilion/changing block is to be built. This may or may not include repairs to fences and walls, improvements to entrances, and signage.'

This is entirely in line with the community's proposals, and a High Court judge has since ruled that it is **not** incompatible for Stoke Lodge to be a TVG and to be used for school sports. Nor would TVG status prevent the pitch improvements (such as drainage) that the University says are essential at Stoke Lodge. We believe that by working together we can build an amazing space for everyone. The school has so far spent over £100,000 of public money on legal fees in pursuit of a fence which neither Ofsted nor the DfES require and which the University, as controlling body for the site, did not consider necessary.

We join our MP, Darren Jones, in a renewed call for talks to reach a compromise solution and avoid triggering further litigation. These documents give us new hope that by working together we can respect the unique character of Stoke Lodge and realise its unique potential for leisure, exercise, recreation, rehabilitation, restoration and renewal for everyone in our city, in this last open green space in our area.

Timeline:

1997: University of Bristol in discussions with City Council to acquire Stoke Lodge, hoping to build a full athletics track at Coombe Dingle Sports Complex with grass pitches at Stoke Lodge.

May 2000: First draft transfer of control agreement between Cotham School and the University (conditional on Fairfield High School being found alternative playing fields).

Early 2000s: Cotham School starts to use Stoke Lodge and Coombe Dingle Sports Complex; the documents include an agreement passing control of the site and receipt of hire income to the University dated 1 February 2004.

Undated document from around 2006 headed 'Stoke Lodge/Coombe Dingle Options' notes that 'Cotham School's sports programme takes place mainly at Coombe Dingle'. Subsequent booking data confirms that this has continued to be the case from 2011 onwards.

September 2010: Council Cabinet decision that Stoke Lodge will not be fenced in but would remain with open access for all as of right; confirmation provided by Executive Member Clare Campion-Smith.

November 2010: University multi-sport hub paper for Sport England describes Stoke Lodge as 'undulating and poorly drained with underused pavilion'.

March 2011: application made to register Stoke Lodge as a Town or Village Green (TVG).

31 August 2011: Cotham School converts to academy status and signs lease for the playing fields; the lease is expressly subject to 'all existing rights and use, including use by the community'.

May 2018: High Court orders Council to review its TVG decision as a result of procedural errors; Cotham School announces plans to erect 2m high security fencing around the perimeter of the playing fields.

June/July 2018: Council decides to reject TVG status but informs Cotham School that planning permission would be required for a fence (due to the Grade II listed status of Stoke Lodge house).

30 November 2018: Cotham School announces that the Council has confirmed it can build a fence without planning permission and that it intends to start work in December. The community challenges the change of position by the Council and highlights potential offences that may be committed if the school proceeds without proper approvals being obtained.

17 December 2018