



22 October 2019

Dear Jo

Thank you for your letter of 21 October.

We look forward to the meeting on Thursday - as you will recall, the Mayor intends this to be 'a genuine attempt to listen to each other and see what can be possible', and as such we are disappointed with the tone of your letter and your intended actions. We hope that discussions on Thursday can start from a more positive basis.

First, it is unfortunate that you intend to close the playing fields 'for as long as it takes' immediately before half term. We do not accept that the reason you have given - namely, that people walking on the fields have 'made the site uneven and potentially dangerous' - is tenable. There is no genuine comparison between pedestrian footfall and the wearing of the grass that has occurred in the localised area used by the school and Cotham Tigers for football, lacrosse and rugby training. One of us happened to be walking at the site on receipt of your letter yesterday afternoon and took the opportunity to video and photograph the pedestrian 'route' you have described (see attached photo 'Pedestrian route'): there is no sign of 'unevenness' that would be potentially dangerous to sports users. The photo labelled 'Pitch condition', on the other hand, is a current example of wear and tear to the pitch areas caused by the school or hirers. Finally, by way of comparison, I attach a photo (Sprint lanes) from April 2019 which shows the natural unevenness of the field, which the school considered entirely safe for use as an athletics track.

Secondly, you commented that 'the school has provided access to the school playing fields when not in use by the school. This is a huge concession on the part of the school'. You go on to imply that you will prevent this access unless the community 'respects and finds a way to work with the school'. In response to this we would make the following points:

- The school's rights as a tenant of Stoke Lodge Playing Fields are subject to 'all existing rights and use... including use by the community'. This was accepted by the school until very recently - in fact the school's own Governing Body minutes record that this is a shared use site. It is not a 'huge concession' to allow public access - it would be a breach of the lease not to do so.
- The school has repeatedly promised that there would be access to the playing fields when they are not in use by the school (or during maintenance) but in fact the unlocking of the gates has been erratic and unreliable, leaving the community uncertain of access and locked out on multiple occasions. At many times of day, the fields are empty but locked and inaccessible to all.
- The community has respected the school's wish to keep dogs outside the fence – within 24 hours of receiving an email from your Business Manager (before the fence was completed) we made posters, communicated widely and successfully gained the cooperation of the local community in this; cooperation has continued uninterrupted since that point. The local community is working with the school on this issue.
- We have also offered further cooperation which would help everyone involved - the school is currently spending around £7,500 a year having the gates locked 5 nights a week (but not at weekends), even during holiday periods. The school also incurs the time and travel cost of sending someone to unlock. We have offered to engage the community's support for ensuring that the field is clear from 9.15 to 12.45pm each weekday in term-time, saving the school time and money. We were

surprised that this offer was rejected without even a trial period.

Thirdly, you have accused us and our community of 'direct action including vandalism' at the playing fields – but on multiple occasions we have discovered and reported incidents of vandalism to you or to the police; we have cleaned graffiti off ourselves and mended fence panels; and as you will be aware, some of the cruder vandalism has been distinctly pro-Cotham and highly antagonistic to local residents. We have never condoned any vandalism at Stoke Lodge, and we also reject the unfounded and hurtful accusations in your letter.

It is correct that the community has recently laid bark chippings in some of the perimeter walkways. Unfortunately, the paths that were left for us to use outside the fence are very narrow and in wet weather quickly become dangerous. Last year one older lady fell and injured both her hip and her head (which she hit on the fence). As you will be aware, the school retains responsibility for the state of the pathways (and is potentially liable for any accidents if the pathways are in an unsafe condition). Laying bark chippings to make the pathways safer is therefore in the school's interest as well as that of the community and we are surprised that you take exception to actions that assist in improving conditions for all (including, for example, the parents of Cotham Tigers).

We do not feel that your letter, or the response it has necessitated from us, sets the right tone for Thursday's meeting. We can of course provide you with further information to address other matters in your letter; however, we would very much prefer to spend the time we have together to discuss with you compromise solutions for the longer term that could, if approached in the right spirit on both sides, help to reduce the legal costs that will otherwise inevitably be incurred by the school.

If progress is to be made, it will require an appropriate level of respect and cooperation on both sides.

We look forward to meeting you and your colleagues on Thursday and still very much hope that it will be the start of a new journey for the school and our community.

Yours sincerely

Emma & Helen