



Colney Heath Scout Group
Roestock Park
Admirals Close
Colney Heath
St Albans
Hertfordshire
AL4 0QE

Date: 11th May 2021

Colney Heath Parish Council
Highfield Park Parish Office
Highfield Park Trust Visitor Centre
Hill End Lane
Hertfordshire
AL4 0RA

Dear Clerk and members of the Parish Council,

Roestock Park Scout Headquarters – Reference: CHSG/5/2021

Response to Colney Heath Parish Council concerning the freedom of information request that was made on 23rd April 2021.

Thank you for notifying us of the freedom of information request that was made to the Parish Council on 23rd April 2021. We are very happy to formally respond as follows:

1. Having listened to the Parish Council meeting on 22nd April 2021 I was disappointed by the disrespectful tone and nature of comments made by the representative from St Albans Scouts. I was led to believe that this person was a mediator for the Scout group. The speech was more emotion than fact and attempted to use the attitude within the village of Colney Heath to put pressure on the Council into making an emotive decision, which from reading the recent public interest report appears to have been an ongoing theme in previous years as all funds lead directly into Colney Heath village organisations! The decision needed is a wider business decision for the benefit of all Council tax payers. It is very clear from the speech the representative who spoke is not impartial or assisting this process. Please confirm that the representative is independent and has no personal relationship to the Colney Heath Scout Group?

David Barker is a Trustee for St Albans Scouts and has no personal relationship with the Scout Group other than having been involved as a Leader in the Group in the 1990s. Since that time he has had no involvement with the Group in Colney Heath but serves as a Trustee for St Albans District Scouts. In December 2019 David was asked by the Scout County and District to act as an independent representative to try to bring some resolution to four years of pain.

We do not believe the tone or nature was disrespectful – and we certainly do not agree that there was more emotion than fact – quite the opposite. Given the frustration there

continues to be within the Group and wider afield we feel that David Barker was very restrained in the meeting simply stating the facts of the situation as they stand.

Since December 2019 the Scout Group has found David Barker to be very helpful in advising us to dial down the rising anger, emotion and unrest there has been from our members, supporters and wider members of the parish. He has encouraged us to concentrate on the facts, channel our energy into meaningful dialogue and encouraged us to supply relevant information when it is requested by the Parish Council. We believe that over the last year we have fulfilled this commitment and without the support of the District representative we feel that tensions on both sides would have remained at fever pitch and the overall position would have remained at a complete loggerhead.

With regards to the point made about a wider business decision for the benefit of all Council tax payers – we couldn't agree more. For the last forty years the Scout HQ has operated at no cost to the Parish Council. We have offered a community resource, played a significant part in the life of the community and given thousands of local young people across the whole of the Parish and beyond life skills and tremendous opportunity. To be able to continue to offer this service, at no cost to the Parish Council is a sound and sensible business decision and one that a growing proportion of parishioners are increasingly calling for.

2. The scout representative made it very clear that the Scout group were 'happy' to take on a full repairing lease. If previous leases were also full repairing, this was not adhered to previously which is why the PPM report contained so much required work. What will the Council do to ensure any lease or licence issued is managed in the future? Have the scouts offered any reason why they did not carry out appropriate maintenance previously but are prepared to do it now?

We accept that over the last year of the 20 year lease the regular maintenance programme had slipped. Previous to this, a full programme of maintenance and regular remedial works was regularly undertaken and from the outset of this dispute we have said we are more than happy to fund and make any necessary repairs that are required for safety and legal compliance.

At no time during the 20-year tenure of the lease did the Parish Council ask to inspect the HQ – if they had done, the Scout Group would have welcomed them with open arms.

In order to remedy the situation, we have proposed to the council that a schedule of condition is undertaken on the completion of the Scouts undertaking remedial works and that this is written in as part of evidence of the condition of the property upon commencement of the lease.

We have also stated that we are happy with the following clause that has been included within the proposed heads of terms agreement issued by the Parish Council: *The Tenant will provide an annual report to the Landlord of the maintenance undertaken which can be checked against the agreed maintenance specification and schedule including a minimum of twice yearly, meetings between representative of both Parties to monitor the compliance with the lease and address relevant matters, concerns or site issues as required by either of the Parties*

3. It is well known that all maintenance work has been done by volunteers and parents on this building over at least 20 years. What gives parents and the Council confidence that the Scout group will use professional qualified tradesman to carry out required works both now and in the future?

We believe this is a misjudged and misinformed point of view which disrespects the skills, knowledge and experience of the volunteers and parents who have supported the group over the last 40 years.

Where it is necessary, we will always use qualified people. As an example, one of our current trustees is a fully qualified electrician, one of our supporters is a qualified carpenter, another is a gas registered heating engineer, another is a fully qualified asbestos expert. In addition, since the start of this dispute a number of professional, qualified tradespeople have been in contact with the group to offer their support.

Over the years the Scout group (like all charities) has benefitted from the tremendous generosity, goodwill, expertise, experience and community spirit of individuals across the Parish and beyond. Ironically, the facility would have never been built in the first place if the mentality outlined in the question had been adopted.

Given the fact that the questioner states they are a volunteer and a trustee we are surprised by this question as it suggests that professional, qualified tradesmen and women should be prevented from volunteering their expertise to organisations and charities such as the Scouts.

4. A Councillor noted that the lease has ended at the meeting. If this was a full repairing lease as requested by the representative last night, why has the Council did not insist the works were completed as part of dilapidations before the end of the lease?

It is correct that the lease has ended (in 2017) – but let's not forget the reason it ended was because of the Parish Councils refusal to renew it. The Scouts have said throughout they are happy to make the necessary repairs to bring the HQ to a legal and safe condition. The question around dilapidations needs to be addressed by the Parish Council.

5. What clauses have been put in the Heads of Terms that the Scout Group feel are totally unreasonable and unfair as stated by the Scout representative?

We would refer the questioner to our response made to the Council on the 7th March with regards to the proposed heads of terms. This clearly outlines the clauses which we feel are unacceptable and unfair.

6. With regards the quote that there is 'rising anger across the Parish' made by the Scout representative I am unable to find the figure for the numbers of children from the Colney Heath Parish that would currently benefit from use of this building? Can you please confirm that figure?

Over the term of the last lease thousands of young people and their families have benefitted from the use of the building – not to mention other members of the community who have used the facilities. In addition to the Scouts, the Guides, Brownies and Rainbows benefitted from weekly use of the HQ for many, many years and some of the other local community groups have included: The Twinning Association, Toddler Group, Larks in the Park, German Toddler Group, First Responders, Train2First Aid, Playful Minds Training

workshops, Schools Appeal meeting, Dog training, numerous Parish residents, GCSE/A Level Dancing Practice, Ballroom Dancers. In 2019 when the Secondary Schooling Crisis group was formed we also allowed them to meet at the Scout HQ free of charge.

Currently there are 52 children (male and female) and 25 volunteers actively taking part in regular group activities. In addition, our supporter base of families and other local individuals and businesses continues to grow. We are delighted that the group has doubled in size over the last year (even without a HQ!) and demand continues to rise exponentially – not just across the Parish but as a national trend. In addition, given the significant new housing plans there are for the Parish, demand will increase further as new families and young people move into the area.

In order to meet the growing demand, the Scout Group have been working with the District Commissioner for Scouts to put in place a full five-year development plan for the Group based on further growth. Across St Albans waiting lists are growing and organisations such as Scouting have never been needed more by young people and their families.

We believe it is short sighted to simply base the granting of a lease solely on the number of children benefitting at a single point in time – particularly given the growth plans in place and our desire to encourage others to benefit from use of the Scout HQ.

We actively want to encourage and support use of the HQ by other community organisations such as the Guides and other community interest, education or religious groups. Scout Groups across St Albans have a strong track record in using their facilities for the benefit of others in the local community and in also attracting other third party uses. We want to continue this and replicate it further in Colney Heath Parish.

7. I note from previous minutes and correspondence that the Parish Council have made an offer to refurbish the building allowing the 3 groups to remain using it for free? As a volunteer and a Trustee of a registered charity myself I am unclear why a group of unpaid volunteers would turn down such an offer and take on such a huge burden themselves? Could you please confirm when this offer was made by the Council and what official response was received from the Scout group?

Our records show that the Parish Council offered us a lease arrangement in April 2018 suggesting an annual rent of £15,000 per annum or an hourly rate of £12.50 per session. For the last 20 years the Scouts have benefitted from a peppercorn rent of £50 per annum. As a fellow volunteer and Trustee, we are confident that the questioner would agree that the offer in April 2018 was unreasonable, unfair and unsustainable for a charity such as the Scouts.

In December 2019, after the Parish Council had evicted and locked the Scouts out of the building, they offered a short-term licence to occupy (for three months) proposing a peppercorn rent (if demanded) for its use. The extremely short-term nature of the licence that was offered, plus the very restricted access to the HQ that was proposed made it an unrealistic and unworkable offer.

We are confident that the questioner will understand why both offers were unacceptable as the Scout Group requires:

1. Longer term surety

2. Less restrictive access in order to effectively operate the Scout Group on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, we are unclear on the relevance of 'unpaid volunteers' taking on responsibility of a lease and associated maintenance and repairs. This is a very normal practice undertaken everyday by trustees of thousands of Scout Groups, Guide Units, other organisations and charities across the UK.

8. Why is there a fundamental difference between what the Council and the Scout group believe with regards the works that should both be carried out and costs? Why did the Scout representative state that it might be 'convenient' for the Council to have a higher figure?

This is a very good question – we are also unclear as in our eyes it is actually reasonably straight forward. What we do know is that following the helpful survey provided by the Parish Council and some additional independent expert advice commissioned by us (as outlined in previous correspondence to the Parish Council) we prepared a schedule of works required in order to bring the HQ to a safe and legally compliant state. The Parish Council then asked us to provide quotations for the works that was outlined which we also supplied. The Council then questioned the Group around funding and this information was also supplied.

It is our strong belief that the Parish Council are confusing the Elemental Schedule and Costings outlined in the survey they commissioned. The total year one costings outlined in the report (£97,750) are not all works that are required to make the Scout HQ legal and safe. In fact, the report actually stated very clearly that "with the exception of a small number of items, the majority of the recommendations comprise maintenance works of a non-urgent nature and these could be deferred to subsequent years".

As outlined in the representation made by David Barker at the meeting the costs continually being quoted by the Parish Council (in excess of £100k) include rough estimated costs to undertake everything from installing a disabled WC through to painting the walls, cutting the grass and even included a regular window cleaner at the Scout HQ – not to mention the repairs to the public car park outside of the Scout HQ boundary.

With regards to the term 'convenient' made in David Barkers representation we are also unsure what he meant by this and would suggest you address this question to him personally.

9. As stated by the Scout representative last night it is the 'duty of Councillor to serve the best interest of its parishioners' with this in mind have the Council considered what else could be done with the building in Roestock Park that could better serve the parishioners that could home all the Scout groups but also provide a facility for the wider community?

This is clearly a question for the Council to answer – but we would also be very interested to see the list of other options the Council have considered for the Scout HQ in Roestock Park.

We are also unclear on what the questioner means by the term 'better serve'.

With regard to the provision of a facility for the wider community we refer the questioner back to Q6 which clearly demonstrates that the facility has been available for use of the

wider community during the full tenure of the last lease. In addition, as mentioned previously, this has been at absolutely no cost to the Council.

We hope this information is helpful and would ask that this response is also forwarded to the individual who has asked the questions. In the spirit of openness, we also intend to publish this on our website and would be grateful if the Parish Council did the same when posting their official response to the freedom of information request.

Kind regards,



Tom Llewellyn
Chairman, Colney Heath Scout Group