

Save Oakfield Group  
New Bilton  
RUGBY  
Warwickshire

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2018

Mr Ali Kurji  
Chief Executive  
Heart of England Co-operative Society Ltd  
22 Abbey St  
Nuneaton  
Warwickshire  
CV11 5BU

Dear Mr Kurji,

As local residents and Co-op shareholders, we are writing this open letter to you in the hope that you will clarify a recent citation.

On 21<sup>st</sup> October 2018 the Mail on Sunday ran an article on the need to protect green spaces for the health of the nation, backed by Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill and Lord Coe.

In the article '**Spiked fence keeps families out**', they mention Oakfield Recreation Ground and quote you as saying '**We have fenced off the land to safeguard members of the Public.**'

We would like to know what the safeguarding issues were, prompting you to take such action?

You will recall that Rugby Borough Council announced a couple of years ago that it was your legal right to deny local residents access to Oakfield following your rejected planning application in March 2016 (the fifth such rejection since 1962 - see Appendix A).

In April 2016, both the Rugby Advertiser and the Rugby Observer published articles quoting your Society Secretary, Steve Slater as saying '**...we have to announce that we are left with no alternative, given that Rugby Borough Council's lease on the land has run out, but to fence off the land as the Society can no longer take on the legal responsibility for public access.**'

In a press release issued by Rugby Borough Council, May 2016, the council said '**The Co-op has now exercised its right not to renew the lease and instructed the council to remove the children's play area and return the recreation ground to its previous condition ready to hand back. The council's insurance on the site and its responsibility to mow and maintain it will end at midnight on 22 June 2016.**'

The inference being that up until 22 June 2016 the council was taking care of the site's indemnity insurance, upkeep and maintenance. Indeed, an open post in June 2016 by the head of the council, Cllr. Michael Stokes, shared his personal thoughts on your action. '**Oakfield Rec was a site that made money for the Co-operative, it didn't cost them a penny and Rugby Borough Council covered all costs as well as paying rent. Now the Co-operative have evicted the council, the rent immediately stops. They now bear the cost to insure the land, secure the land and maintain the land.**'

It may widely be regarded that denying public access following a failed planning application is the sort of tactic and behaviour that can be expected of a commercial developer, not a caring Co-operative that genuinely has the community at its heart.

Within our local community, we have many members of the Heart of England Co-operative Society. For them (and following your recent quote in the Mail on Sunday) we implore you to share your safety concerns of members of the public and why you took the decision to fence off Oakfield with such an obtrusive spiked metal fence, particularly as this action seems to have financially cost you more than keeping the rolling Council contract in place.

We look forward to hearing from you. Please use our email address, [saveoakfield@gmail.com](mailto:saveoakfield@gmail.com), for future correspondence.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Joy on behalf of Save Oakfield

c/c

Michael Powell, the Mail on Sunday,  
Councillor Michael Stokes, Leader of Rugby Borough Council,  
Mark Pawsey, MP.

## **APPENDIX A – Timeline: Oakfield Recreation Ground in New Bilton, Rugby**

The land was leased to Rugby Borough Council (RBC) for around 35 years up until 2013/14.

RBC paid rent, maintenance, upkeep and public liability insurance.

RBC had play equipment for the local children.

- 1962 Planning application to build a petrol filling station [P3509-13302-62/2/25] - REFUSED.
- 1968 Planning application for residential development [P3509-20267-68/9/27] - REFUSED.
- 1973 Planning application for residential development [1570/A/73/14148] - REFUSED.
- 1975 1973 planning refusal was appealed, refused again.
- 2013/14 Around 2013/14 the lease runs out and the Co-op does not wish to renew it.  
RBC had a rolling contract in place.
- 15/10/2014 The Co-op has a public consultation meeting to show the community a proposed housing development.
- 7/5/2015 The Co-op submits an outline planning application with access for the erection of 60 residential dwellings.
- 15/5/2015 RBC writes to residents 15/5/2015 giving them a deadline of 11/6/2015 for anyone wishing to make representations.
- 9/6/2015 Sport England objects to the development.
- 8/1/2016 The application is amended to 50 dwellings and a Multi-use Games Area.
- 2/2/2016 RBC deadline for objections.
- 16/2/2016 Sport England withdraws its objection.
- 9/3/2016 Planning meeting - Application REFUSED.**
- At the Planning meeting, the Planning Officer recommends refusal based on 3 technical points. The Co-op's agent threatens to fence off the site if Planning permission is refused. The application is unanimously refused by all Councillors.
- June 2016 The Co-op serves notice on RBC to remove the play equipment by 22/6/2016.
- 23/6/2016 Head of RBC, Cllr. Michael Stokes gives his personal thoughts on the situation and how he has tried to open communications with Ali Kurji, Head of the Heart of England Co-Operative, but been ignored.  
<https://www.facebook.com/CllrMichaelStokes/posts/1757191221230930>
- 23/6/2016 The Co-op fences off the land.
- 16/8/2016 The Appellant Planning Appeal Online form is completed.
- 20/10/2016 LPA Questionnaire is completed.
- 17/11/2016 LPA Statement of case PDF document is created:
- 22/12/2016 Planning Inspectorate letter with Inquiry dates – 10am 21/3/2017 for 5 days, at The Town Hall in Rugby.
- 3/4/2017 The Co-op withdraws from the Appeal process.
- 31/1/2018 New Planning Application submitted for 'Erection of an Extra Care Retirement village for the elderly (62 apartments and 14 bungalows)'