

Laughton Parish Council meeting 15th July 2020.

Statement made by Miranda Dart, Chair of Laughton Parish Council.

Before I open the meeting up for public comment, I am going to take a few minutes on behalf of the parish council to provide the facts because from the emails I have been reading it is very apparent that there is much inaccurate information circulating from a variety of sources.

I realise that not everyone has followed the fence subject since the beginning because some of you may not have had children at the school then or indeed lived in the village. And nor is everyone aware of what the parish council has been doing and why because only a handful have, up until now, attended some but not all of the meetings. And indeed, the make up of the parish council has changed since this first came to the fore with only 2 councillors having been on throughout, myself being one of them.

So some facts:

Pelham Field was gifted to the Parish Council in 1966 by John Pelham, the 9th Earl of Chichester.

That generous gift naturally came with legal covenants which restrict the erection of structures on the field and limit its use to physical recreation for the residents of Laughton and their visitors. The covenants are there to ensure that the parish council, as custodian of the field, protects the openness of the field for everyone and that one generation does not favour one group over another.

The school tarmac playground was created in 1997 and is on Parish Council land. The agreement which created it stipulates that the playground should be fenced by ESCC and, in a manner which is acceptable to the parish council. It must also be fully open for community use outside of school hours.

Out of the blue, early in the summer of 2018, being told by the cricket club president that the school was going to fence Pelham field and have a locked gated for their own safeguarding needs, and then have that swiftly followed by ESCC threaten the compulsory purchase of the field, this placed the Parish Council in a difficult position and it had to act.

So, we arranged meetings so we could engage with the compulsory purchase threat by meeting with the County Councillor and we met with the school and their safeguarding advisors and the estates team to understand their position. Parents, staff and governors attended parish council meetings. And we listened.

Since July 2018, Pelham Field has been on the agenda and discussed and in the minutes of every regular parish council meeting bar one. (Sept 2018). These meetings -the dates of which are published a year in advance, are in public, the agendas are public and made available well in advance. The minutes are published quickly afterwards and are available on our website.

I would hope that anyone who has taken the time to attend recognises that we are open in our approach, take the time to listen with sincerity and are measured in reaching decisions.

At the Parish Council meeting held on 20th March 2019 it was agreed by the parish council, regardless of the individual viewpoints of some councillors, to explore the possibility of fencing.

So that is the background.

At the end of last year it was apparent that the exploration of the fencing was stalling due to a lack of progress getting a definitive response back from ESCC with regard to our legal fees connected with fencing the field. Therefore, all Cllrs were invited to contribute to a project plan to provide a road map in order that we could get the request moving forward and have the terms upon which the Parish Council could request firm quotes from solicitors to present to ESCC.

This plan was shared with Mrs West, ESCC and the whole parish. It was discussed by those parishioners who attended the meeting in February this year. The plan is on our website.

It was agreed by everyone that this was a very helpful way forward.

One of the early steps specified in the document was to contact the original grantor of the land.

The parish council had to do this because what the school was seeking was not consistent with the legal covenants which were placed on the gift.

The donor was asked whether the erection of a fence and entry gate by ESCC were consistent with the deeds.

His response was that he would challenge the proposal.

I had further private correspondence with Lord Chichester and again his response was that erecting a structure- here a fence for the school's safeguarding needs, was in breach of the terms of his grant of Pelham Field to the Parish Council.

So that is the situation. The Parish Council had to make the decision to continue exploring the fencing and face conflict and potential legal action from the generous donor, or stop.

It is very important to say that without the generous gift of the field in the first place we would not be having a discussion about any of this because- there would be no field, there would be no school playground, and no play areas.

As chair I sincerely believe we had to take the decision we did.

The field is still there for everyone.