

**Statement to Colney Heath Parish Council Public meeting
Thursday 16th January 2020**

My name is Tom Llewellyn and I am the current Colney Heath Scout Group Chairman. I know you are all very aware of the ongoing saga over the renewal of the lease for the Scout headquarters in Roestock Park.

The Scout Group has played an active and important role in the community of Colney Heath Parish for nearly 60 years. For the last 40 of these we have enjoyed offering opportunities to thousands of young people from our base in Roestock Park. The Scout hut was built by the local Scout and Guide community for the local community with all the money being raised by the Scouts, Guides, leaders and supporters of the group.

During the last 40 years, the Scout Group has been financially independent. There has never been any financial liability to the Parish Council and we have always met all of our responsibilities around governance, statutory responsibilities and compliance. The Scout Group has been responsible for, and has always paid in full, the rent, insurance, upkeep and running cost of the Headquarters. In addition, like many Scout Groups across the UK, we have benefitted from a nominal rent to the Parish Council for use of the land - until 2016 this was set at £50 per year. During this time we have been very grateful for the long standing and positive support that we have received from the Parish Council.

In 2016 that all changed when our 1997 lease on the land expired.

The Parish Council minutes for Dec 2016 stated:

"The Scout hut were chasing their lease. Cllr Cook commented that due to the type of lease they would be getting it was just a case of renegotiating the terms and this would be done at a later date".

As the 1997 land lease was issued a year after the original lease had expired we were not perturbed. However, since 2016 we have been trying in vain to come to a sensible and acceptable agreement with representatives of the Parish Council to ensure that Scouting can continue to offer opportunities to local young people and adults.

Since 2017 these negotiations have become increasingly difficult, extremely protracted and in our view unreasonable. It is our understanding that the sole reason that the council has cited for non-renewal of our lease is that the current condition of the headquarters is not in accordance with the lease covenants. The Scout Group has always accepted there is some rectification work required on the building. We have consistently stated that we are prepared to look at a proactive programme of work to improve the building. To date, we find ourselves in a chicken and egg situation: the council being unwilling to renew our lease unless remedial works are undertaken, and the Scout Group not prepared to invest in such a programme without certainty over our longer term future.

On this particular note we would like to formally record our thanks to members of the Parish Council for the initial enquiries made around funding the Scout Group could potentially secure to assist with any remedial work.

Over the last two years we have seen an increasingly legalistic and aggressive stance taken by the Parish Council. A number of proposals have been put to us, one of these suggesting that our rent is increased from £50 per annum to £15,000 per annum which was clearly untenable and unaffordable. Proposals presented to date have suggested that the Parish Council take over the ownership of the Scout Headquarters meaning that access for the Scouts would be restricted. This is an unworkable and unacceptable proposal which would prevent our ability to run the Group and provide Scouting to young people across the parish.

The Parish Council are continually referring to our Scout Headquarters as the Roestock hut. This is inaccurate, unhelpful, confrontational and has created confusion in the village.

The Scout HQ is busy across the week with section meetings. Regular access is required to pick up and return our equipment, as well as committee meetings, fundraising activities and other events involved in the day to day running of a Scout Group. As such, the group needs constant access to the entirety of the site without any restriction.

In addition to scout group activities there has been a long tradition of the building being made available for the local community (for a nominal fee). These activities have helped us to raise additional funds to run the group.

We have informed the Parish Council that we would be very willing to accept more than a doubling of our annual rent for another 20 year lease which would secure the future of Scouting in the Parish. As part of this agreement, the Scout Group would provide a clear programme of work to rectify any immediate issues which posed a threat to the compliance of the lease. To date this offer has been refused by the Council leading us into a hugely unsatisfactory position where we were evicted days before Christmas with the locks changed preventing access to our property.

Last Friday at 6pm we received a 12 page 'licence' from the Council and their legal advisors which we have been requested to sign immediately if we want access to be temporarily returned. The licence would allow us restricted access to our own headquarters only until April 2020 in return for a rent of £1. Clearly we need time to properly study and assess this proposal and take legal advice before making any judgement or decision to sign. As such, we had no alternative but to make emergency arrangements for the Scout Troop this week and cancel the Cub Scout and Beaver Scout meetings that were due to take place. The real losers in this sorry affair are the young people.

I understand the Council have spent in excess of £6,000 in legal fees in 2018/19 alone on this case. We are a small group with limited funds and clearly have been unable to spend large sums required for legal advice. However, if the Parish Council persist in a such a confrontational, legalistic approach we intend to rally our supporter base in order to raise

the necessary funds for long term senior legal advice. We would far prefer this money to be used supporting young people in the Parish.

Clearly it is in the interests of all parties to resolve this current impasse as soon as possible and I request a formal meeting with all of the Parish Councillors to discuss this issue face to face. You will have seen from a recent petition there is a strong strength of feeling about this issue, not just from significant numbers of parishioners, but from a growing movement of discontent amongst many people further afield who will have benefitted from the opportunities that Scouting in Colney Heath gave them either as children themselves or gave to members of their family. To date over 7,000 people have signed a petition in support of the Scout Group and our job now is to bring this sorry state to a sensible conclusion.

Finally, as I close I would like to remind you of the strapline of the Parish Council - 'Serving the Community'. To quote from the Good Councillor Guide "you have a responsibility to be well-informed, especially about diverse local views. You cannot assume that you represent the interest of all your electors without consulting them" and "the best local councils want to foster vibrant and flourishing communities to improve the quality of life for people living in the local area".

I would ask the meeting here this evening to consider what consultation has taken place and how the community flourishes by evicting the Scouts and sequestering our building. I hope that together with the councillors here this evening we are able to restore the confidence and faith of a significant and growing number of parishioners who are concerned about the events to date and the behaviour of its parish council.

I will provide you with a written copy of this statement for inclusion in the minutes from today's meeting so that it is on the public record.

Thank you.

Tom Llewellyn
Chairman Colney Heath Scout Group