

Clerk to West Hill Parish Council
Manana
Higher Broad Oak Road
West Hill
Ottery St Mary
EX11 1XD

26th October 2018

The Directors
The Smile Learning Trust
c/o West Hill Primary School

Dear Directors

Community Access to the West Hill Primary School field

West Hill Parish Council (WHPC) acknowledges your letter of 15 October 2018 stating that you do not wish to pursue the above matter.

The Council is shocked and dismayed at the Trust's response to its initiative to reinstate general community access to the field, something that was a feature of West Hill life for some 30 years. We have been in discussions with you about this for over 6 months now, and had been hoping to move forward in a constructive manner to address your concerns. The Council was prepared to discuss funding assistance for repairs, CCTV, lighting and any other matters, which might legitimately adversely affect the school, provided the community had full use outside school hours. However, your letter states you wish to put an end to such discussions.

The Council's response to your letter was debated at an Extraordinary Council Meeting on 22 October 2018 and such is the importance of the issue to the village that the Council intends to make both your letter, and its response, public.

Your letter acknowledges the agreement allowing community access to the field outside school hours, which accompanied the joint venture development of the village hall and the school in the 1980's. It further notes that a deed, which we have requested but so far have been unable to obtain, states that the agreement was subject to change and summary termination. It also implies that the transfer of the land from Devon County Council to the Trust was the trigger for such termination, although the Council is not aware of any termination being notified to anyone. The first that the community knew of it was when the gates were locked and a private property notice erected.

You note that you have accommodated and explored our request but ***"can see no benefit to the school"***. The agreement, which was part of a mutually beneficial arrangement facilitating a much larger hall, use of village hall land as a playground, car park and playing field than the school alone could have hoped to obtain, was never intended to be a direct benefit to the school but to the West Hill community who otherwise lack any accessible outside space.

The indirect benefit to the school is clear as it would provide somewhere central and safe for the adults and children of West Hill, the latter being the *raison d'être* for the school, to meet, play and exercise in the evening, at weekends and during the school holidays.

You have raised numerous objections during discussions and in your letter:

Safeguarding, which of course is not an issue outside school hours;

Insurance, where we believe we have satisfactorily demonstrated no liability will fall on the Trust;

Vandalism, which the Trust deem to be so important, yet it was not reported to the police until the Council urged you to do so;

Litter, which was an issue the Council was happy explore with you;

Legal agreements, a new issue, which is presumably cost related.

The dismissive attitude of the Trust towards the community whom it serves, as indicated in your letter, appears to be completely at odds with its *“obligation to promote community cohesion under the Education Acts”*, and *“by engaging with other partners, parents and wider communities”*. The stated objectives of the Trust include: *“the Trust [is] a fantastic opportunity to further develop the schools AS WELL as increase the range of opportunities for ALL our local children AND their communities.”*

It is to be hoped that a similar attitude will not be shown by the school authorities to the request by the Devon Air Ambulance Trust to use the field as a community landing site.

The Council has been formed and elected to serve the entire community of West Hill. It is deeply regrettable that the Smile Learning Trust, a new and seemingly unaccountable entity, has taken control of our village school and sought to deny wider community access to its playing field after a period of over 30 years, during which time the school and community co-existed in harmony.

WHPC stands ready to work with the school, the governors, the Trust and Devon County Council to ensure that re-instatement of community access the school playing field outside school hours is achieved to the benefit of **all** stakeholders in our community.

The Council will continue every effort to achieve this objective and hope that the Trust will work with us to do the same.

As requested, we have addressed this letter to the Smile Learning Trust although we find this unsatisfactory as the Trust does not appear to have an email address, telephone number or website.

West Hill Parish Council

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