

Councillor Sokalski

Thank you for your response to the Red Cross Petition presented at Three Rivers Policy & Resources Committee.

You chose to circulate your response to a number of councillors and local residents and therefore I am responding in like manner.

Although you have been a Croxley Green resident for many years you may be unaware of some of the history of the Red Cross Centre, both over the many years since it was built in the 1960's and more recently since the British Red Cross have been seeking to divest themselves of responsibility for the Centre both in the 1990's and more recently since 2019.

Croxley Green Parish Council deeply regrets that we have had to enter into rebutting correspondence of this sort. We were all elected to serve our residents and, I believe, we can do that much more effectively by working together rather than trying to score points off each other. The Parish Council believes co-operation will best serve the interests of all the residents that elected and fund us.

However, Parish Councillors thought it might be helpful to all concerned if we clarified a number of points in your response.

Extracts from your letter are set out below in italics

*"The site is a community asset that Three Rivers have been working to protect for over three years"*

Whilst we welcome the assertion, the only evidence of which we are aware is that the designation, which was first proposed by the Parish Council in 2014, was renewed by TRDC at our specific request in 2019.

*"Since taking over the Property Portfolio at Three Rivers I have sought to involve Croxley Green Parish Council over the future of the site. I have met with Parish Councillors and listened carefully to their ideas, shared ours, and I have been keeping them up to date on the situation."*

We were delighted to be able to meet with you and other District Councillors in All Saints Church on 21 July 2021 to discuss the future of the Red Cross Centre. That was the first opportunity we have had to discuss our thoughts with you about the possible use by the Parish Council of that building.

You may recall that Cllr Matthew Bedford, who had previously been the lead member responsible, said that he was unaware of ANY previous approach to Three Rivers District Council. Parish Councillors were surprised, as the Parish Council has written on several occasions to officers, including the Chief Executive, and members, including the Lead Member, without receiving any reply. I am attaching / enclosing copies of these letters for your information.

Cllrs Stephanie Singer and Margaret Hoffman, who were also there, may recall Cllr Singer asking how our plans might work and we outlined how we could organise the central space to be flexible to suit group meetings, clubs, fitness training like Pilates and Zumba, and the Council's evening meetings (no more than 45 all of which are booked a year in advance). We did not recognise much difficulty for this approach.

We had a further meeting including members of the public on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2021, to discuss a common approach toward the Killingdown Farm public inquiry, at the end of which you made a comment about the Red Cross Centre to Cllr Mitchell. He recalls only that you said Three Rivers District Council and the British Red Cross had reached an agreement in principle and Three Rivers District Council would be sending a draft memorandum of agreement to the British Red Cross.

*It is simply **not** true to suggest that Three Rivers want to “remove” a community space. The Council continues its efforts to provide a brand new, and crucially **more widely used**, community space on the site.*

As you are aware, publication of the Regulation 18 consultation on a new Local Plan was delayed until June. The Red Cross Centre is identified as being suitable for 6 dwellings. It was NOT mentioned in the “Potential Sites for Consultation” document (October 2018) nor in the “Additional Sites Appendix 1” document, apparently created in June 2019.

A draft version of the “Sites for potential allocation” document was considered by Three Rivers District Council on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The recommendation from the Local Plan Sub Committee includes the following words for site CG65 (the Red Cross Centre):

“Any development would need to provide suitable mitigation to address surface water flood risk on areas of the site. A detailed heritage impact assessment may be required prior to any development. The public right of way running along the northern boundary would need to be protected “

However the version eventually published for consultation in June 2021 includes the words:

“Any development would need to provide suitable mitigation to address surface water flood risk on areas of the site. A detailed heritage impact assessment may be required prior to any development. The public right of way running along the northern boundary would need to be protected. **Re-provision of the community facility would be required on-site.**”

The authority to make any minor changes was delegated to the Head of Planning Policy and the Director of Community Services in consultation with the Lead Member for the Local Plan. It seems that TRDC had no intention of retaining the community facility until the strength and depth of community feeling about TRDC’s position became clear in the preceding local elections whereupon the final sentence was added as a sop.

*The building itself also now needs significant investment and is in a dilapidated state. **Three Rivers would like the new hall to be unrestricted so that people of all ages in the community can enjoy it.***

The current restrictions, set out in the lease, may be varied by the landowner – in this case Three Rivers District Council. The Parish Council would welcome a modification of the current lease to enable wider community use.

*As far as I am aware, there has been no ‘offer’ from the Parish that would meet the objective of Three Rivers to have a more widely used community hall. It is in fact unclear how the Parish proposal would allow for **any** community use. As I understand it, the Parish requested the British Red Cross assign them the lease for free to allow the Parish to move their entire offices and store their ranger equipment in the current building.*

The Parish Council made an offer in good faith to the British Red Cross in October 2019 to take an assignment of the lease, **including the liability to refurbish the premises in line with the lease covenants and to operate the building for the wider community as provided for in the lease.** The

Parish Council suggested that it would additionally use the building for council offices – there are already offices there – and for council meetings. We are aware that Three Rivers were advised of this offer and we have had exchanges of emails with, among others, one of your then officers, Adrian Smallwood, to that effect.

Whilst we welcome the statement that Three Rivers District Council has an objective to have a more widely used community hall we have seen no previous mention of this as either a strategic or an operational objective. We entirely support the proposal and are ready to work constructively with Three Rivers District Council to achieve this new objective as soon as possible.

You state that it is “unclear how the Parish proposal would allow for **any** community use”. As Three Rivers District Council has failed to engage in any discussion with the Parish Council, it is hard to guess how you know what we propose. In many communities the “village hall” provides both a substantial community facility and office space for the local parish council as, for example, in Sarratt.

It is a **total fiction** to assert that the Ranger equipment would be stored in the current council building. On the contrary the Parish Council had asked the Red Cross whether it would like to continue to use part of the current building for its mobility aids service – the only activity that the charity wished to continue in this area.

*While I understand the Parish’s desire for new offices, it is highly uncertain that the building could be used as office premises (almost certainly requiring planning permission for change-of-use) and not get in the way of enabling a more widely-used community hall – a key objective of Three Rivers.*

It is hard to understand why there should be planning issues with using a part of the building for offices, given that there is already an office in the building. If it were necessary to secure a change of use classification through a planning application Three Rivers District Council, as the local planning authority, would be able to consider any application on its merits and condition any approval given.

*Ultimately, the British Red Cross have the lease to the site and control what happens next.*

We find that statement surprising. The Red Cross has been in breach of its lease covenants (for example covenants 3, 4 and 14) for some time – a breach that the landlords, Three Rivers District Council, appear to have condoned. As the remedy for any breach as described in clause 4 of the Lease is for the “Council or any person or persons authorised by it in that behalf at any time thereafter to re-enter upon the demised premises or any part thereof in the name of the whole and thereupon the term hereby created shall absolutely determine”, the Council would appear to have been able to control the disposition of the premises at all times. The lease specifies that the landlord, TRDC, has full control over the assignment of the lease.

*Three Rivers have been engaged in negotiations for some time to agree the formal surrender of the lease and at this stage both parties are working towards an agreement in principle. It has proven difficult to agree to the terms which meet the British Red Cross's expectations.*

I refer to my comment immediately above – the Council was able and should have controlled this process from the outset. It would be interesting to know what you intend people to understand by “some time”. We were told in July 2021 by the Head of Property at the British Red Cross that they had at no time asked for money to surrender the lease and he had taken his staff off the case because of the lack of response from TRDC. He also commented that every time they dealt with Three Rivers District Council it was with a different member of staff due to staff turnover at the Council.

*Once agreement is reached, as the site is brownfield, affordable housing would be included on top of the new community hall as a critical step in relieving pressure on Green Belt. Lib Dem-run Three Rivers are fighting to protect as much of our Green Belt as possible from the huge Government housing targets.*

We find that comment to be, frankly, scarcely credible. Six dwellings set against the housing target of 12,624 is just four ten-thousandths of the total. We do wonder if the locality would be better served by expending energy on challenging the target than arguing over six flats. We are also concerned at the apparent blatant disregard of the Croxley Green Neighbourhood Plan (2018), vetted by TRDC and 'made' by referendum, that argues for the retention of the facility. The Red Cross building, an asset of community value, should be retained, and properly maintained as a multi-purpose sustainable venue.

*From my meetings with the Parish, I asked whether the Parish would be interested in putting themselves forward to run the new hall for the benefit of the whole community. While other community groups have expressed interest, I've **not** yet had a response from the Parish. I am keen to further discuss this with them.*

Again, regrettably, this is simply not true. At the meeting on 21 July, both you and Cllr Singer asked if the Parish Council would be interested in running the theoretical new facility and to both I gave the only possible reply – that we would be interested but needed to understand exactly what was proposed. As far as I know, that was the only time the idea has been proposed. As no formal approach or invitation has been made the parish council cannot be expected to respond to a totally hypothetical proposal.

*Three Rivers and the Parish have increasingly been working well together. In particular, our co-ordinated responses to Killingdown Farm planning appeal. I have been supporting the Parish and Residents Association in their appeal submissions, including recommending they have a joint representative to strengthen their appeal evidence.*

Let us be very clear – Three Rivers' Councillors decided, against the advice of their officers, to deny planning permission for the Killingdown Farm site; Hill, the developers, appealed as was their right and the matter became the subject of Public Inquiry. Public Inquiries have two main parties, the appellant and the Local Planning Authority. Any other party can seek Rule 6 status and such parties are required to offer only such evidence as is not being offered by other parties. In order to protect the interests of residents and to use public and private money to best effect without facilitating time wasting at the inquiry, the Parish Council joined with other local interested parties and applied as an 'umbrella' for Rule 6 status.

*I really hope this positive and constructive relationship can be built upon to the benefit of the community.*

The Parish Council had also hoped that it could develop a proper relationship with the District Councillors but publishing inaccurate correspondence tends to undermine relationships and create a toxic and unproductive atmosphere. This is particularly the case as you decided to make your response public via social media when a private conversation might have sufficed. You should be aware that this letter will be placed in the public domain, in the same way, at the same time it is emailed to you.

Cllr Nigel Cole  
Chair, Croxley Green Parish Council