

**Deputation Speech to Leeds City Council  
18<sup>th</sup> April 2007  
Linda Lukats  
EMBARGOED UNTIL 1.00 p.m. on 18 April**

Lord Mayor, elected members of Leeds City Council, ladies & gentleman – Good afternoon! Thank you for giving the Wharfemeadows Action Group the opportunity to present to you the overwhelming public opposition to the Leeds City Council's plans to fence off the River Wharfe in Otley.

The three founder members of the Wharfemeadows Action group, present here today, are Tony Hartigan, Sylvia Reid & myself – Linda Lukats. We are all Otley residents and council taxpayers. The sole aim of our action group, which is non-party political, is to co-ordinate the overwhelming opposition in our community to your fencing proposal.

Today we have presented a petition with over 6,000 signatures opposing the fencing to Councillor Andrew Carter, current Leader of the Council. When we met Councillor Carter 4 weeks ago to explain our objections, he assured us that nothing further would happen until counsel's opinion had been received and the people of Otley had been fully consulted.

We have met with other elected council members and have also presented a separate letter of support signed by our local M.P., 3 city councillors & Otley's Town councillors – representing cross party support.

This opposition to the fencing is based on several grounds:

For a start – the river is one of the main attractions of Otley and is integral to the enjoyment of the many people who come to Wharfemeadows Park – both local residents & visitors from all over the country. Visitors to the park, of all ages, enjoy sitting on the steps, feeding the ducks & swans and fishing. The riverside is where Leeds people come for a day trip – where they can relax and picnic by the river. It is a place of natural beauty – the gateway to the Dales. It is the life-blood of Otley and its appeal would be markedly reduced if the river was fenced off & made inaccessible.

Economically – many of the local businesses depend on the custom of visitors to the town. Fencing off the river will discourage visitors & have a damaging knock on effect on the local economy.

As council taxpayers, the people & representatives of Otley have not even been consulted with regard to these plans. Why waste their money on something that they clearly do not want nor support?

Our understanding is that the proposals have been made on the basis of flawed recommendations by RoSPA – which we would like to point out is a charity with no mandatory authority. This plan (you were told) was a response to a coroner's instruction at the inquest into the tragic drowning incident at Roundhay Park in 2005. RoSPA cited the case of Tomlinson versus Congleton Borough Council as an example of the legal consequences of a council not following their recommendations. In fact, the House of Lords overturned this Court of Appeal's legal ruling in 2003! The case is there for you to read! RoSPA clearly failed to do so.

The Law Lords upheld people's right to enjoy natural hazards and take responsibility for themselves and their children. We urge Leeds City Council to do likewise.

The coroner's recommendations, **NOT** instructions, related solely to signage in Roundhay Park & no criticism was made of Leeds City Council in relation to this tragedy.

How has the situation gone from improving signage, at minimal cost, at Roundhay Park to spending £165,000 on Band 4 Exclusion Fencing in Wharfemeadows Park, where no such tragedy has occurred? It is easy to see that, if implemented across Leeds, the RoSPA mindset on waterways could cost the council millions of pounds. A ludicrous waste of council taxpayer's money, especially after it has been announced that the city's capital funding will be severely stretched for the next 5 years! Something has gone seriously wrong with the council decision-making process.

For once, a deputation is attempting to save the council money!

In the name of commonsense & consideration for the rights & wishes of the local people, we urge you to reconsider the fencing off of our river. The river in Wharfemeadows Park has had an excellent safety record for over 80 years, a fact completely ignored by RoSPA in its misguided report. We are not against sensible safety measures. For example, fencing off the children's playground from the busy Farnley Lane would be a good idea!

Do we really want to set a precedent in Leeds for the nation's waterways & natural beauty spots to be enclosed & inaccessible to future generations?

~~We have provided all councillors with a written briefing explaining our objections in more detail. Please read this and also visit our website that has a great deal more information which you may not be aware of.~~ Do not underestimate the strength of opposition in Otley to your current plans. We are determined to see common sense prevail!

We trust that you are, too.

**ENDS**