

Lord Mayor and members of the Council,

Hello. My name's Jo and I'm from Bramley, LS13. I'm here representing 1100 local residents from a campaign group called A Place to Sit, campaigning to be heard by LCP Group, the new owners of our local shopping centre in Bramley.

Bramley Shopping Centre is a medium sized shopping centre and a designated purpose-built town centre, with about 20 shops, including a Post Office, coffee shops, opticians, two chemists and a Tesco.

And until June this year, it also had 22 benches.

The benches were spread out across the site in such a way that enabled people to put down bags of heavy shopping between shops, or make their way along the walkway – from the optician to Tesco, from the bus stop to the Post Office, from the escalator to Boots, at their own pace, using the benches to take breaks.

On 21 June, without consultation, the new owners removed every single last one of those 22 benches.

The impact of this on many people in the community has been nothing short of devastating. Many of us who live in Bramley walk or use public transport. Many of us are disabled, in ill-health, have mobility problems, are older, and some of us have long-COVID.

Since the benches were removed, some people simply cannot use their local shops. Like Janet's older neighbours, who used to go the centre every day. Now, they stay at home, and rely on Janet to do their shop for them instead.

One resident said this "My grandma went for an optician's appointment last Saturday. She became unsteady on her feet and needed somewhere to sit. There wasn't anywhere so she leant on a barrier which collapsed and she went with it damaging her hip."!

Bramley Shopping Centre is surrounded by housing and a sheltered housing complex. It is the nearest place to get your pension, your food, your prescription and to find company, to socialise with other people. Benches are places to sit and rest, and can make the difference between leading an active life – and being unable to leave home. They are also mobility, independence, health, and a really important social outlet.

Until LCP Group removed the seating, the town centre was the heart of our area. It was where our communities came together, where younger and older people mixed, and we all belonged there. Now, unless we can pay for a seat and a Costa coffee, we

don't belong there. Older people, disabled people, parents with small children, people who live alone, breastfeeding parents, people on low incomes – don't belong there any more.

We're campaigning for the benches to be restored.

We're standing up for people like Jill, aged 73 who has arthritis, and liked walking the half mile from home to Bramley Centre. She can't walk there now as she needed somewhere to sit before walking back home. She takes a car now, but says walking was good exercise.

LCP Group has told us this change is part of their improvements. Last month, after significant pressure, they put back 8 benches. Three of them are unusable, and unsafe.

They have not replaced any benches on the long walkway – which some residents cannot use without stopping for a rest.

Bramley residents need all 22 benches to be restored.

Leeds City Council Planning Department has advised LCP that their actions are in breach of the planning application. We hope LCC's Planning Team will take steps to enforce this.

But this is not just about 22 benches. It's about us. Me and you and what we believe in. It's about Joyce who walks down from her house for an hour every day to do a bit of shopping.... and as respite from the stress of caring for her husband who has dementia. Joyce doesn't come anymore.

It's about reducing our reliance on cars for short journeys

It's about communities influencing commerce, not the other way around.

It is about our city and what we care about.

It's about equality.

So today we say to Leeds City Council: This is unacceptable.

Show us that you are serious about Leeds being the best city to grow older in.

Show us that you are serious about supporting communities to have better wellbeing, health and mobility.

Stand up for citizens who are excluded from Leeds life because of access issues.
Make improving access a top civic priority.

Stand up for a Place to Sit.

Leeds City Council's equality policy states, "We want to live in an equal society that recognises different people's different needs, situations and goals, and removes barriers that limit what people can do and can be."

In the words of one campaigner, "It might be a bench to some people but disabled and older people depend on them benches."

Give us your full support and commitment to make sure this issue in Bramley is properly addressed as soon as possible. We need your action.

Thankyou to the Bramley Ward Councillors for their dedicated work especially on this issue. Thank you for listening.