

Chorleywood Parish Council:
Extraordinary meeting of Full Council,
4 June 2015

**Notes by GH (in attendance as a member of the public) of the meeting called
“to consider the proposal that Grovewood is withdrawn, at this stage of the process,
as a potential site for the location of a play-space”.**

These Notes do not attempt to be a verbatim transcript; they are intended and believed to be reasonably accurate summaries of the points made by each speaker. (I apologise to the speakers in Public Forum if I have mis-stated or mis-spelt their names.)

Public Forum:

Neils Blythe, a member of the Friends of Grovewood, recalled that the Friends of Grovewood had stated at the annual Parish Meeting that Grovewood was unsuitable for a play area and asked for it to be removed from the shortlist. Grovewood was woodland protected by Tree Preservation Orders, and a wildlife haven; installation of a play area would require cutting of trees. There would be safety and parking issues – inevitably people would drive there – and a risk of accidents. The site was at the extreme western edge, not the centre of the parish, close to the Swillett playground, and some distance from the centre of the residential area: a play area there would be a waste of public money. Grovewood is closely surrounded by houses, and a play area would adversely affect residents’ amenities: noise, pressure on car parking, litter, absence of toilet facilities. No one in Grovewood wanted the play area there, and the suggestion was causing great anxiety to residents. The site should be removed from the shortlist immediately.

Mel Peel, a member of the Friends of Grovewood, asked for the site to be removed from the list. It had been considered when possible play area sites were investigated in 2012 and not shortlisted; nothing had changed. There were 53 households in Grovewood Close and more than half of them were people over 60 years of age who particularly valued the quiet and secluded surroundings. Shortlisting Grovewood as a possible site for the play area was causing them stress. A play area would change the character of Grovewood. All the residents objected; never before in Chorleywood (as far as the records showed) had an entire street petitioned the Council on any issue.

David Walker explained that he was a member of the Play Area Advisory Committee and Chairman of the Friends of Chorleywood House Estate, but was speaking solely on his own behalf as a Chorleywood ratepayer and resident. He understood the fears of Grovewood residents. This meeting was not the place to discuss the suitability of Grovewood in comparison with the other possible sites; but what was proposed would halt the debate on Grovewood prematurely. Grovewood was not ideal; it might be that there was no ideal site anywhere. The Advisory Committee had arranged for information to be acquired on all the shortlisted sites, and the decision should be made when all

that information was available. It would be a dangerous precedent if a group with strong views was able to prevent consideration of part of a project. The Council should resist the removal of any site from the shortlist before completion of the Advisory Committee's work.

Marilyn Leadbetter asked whether, if a play area were put on the Common, it could be fenced? **Cllr Edwards**, from the Chair, answered No, for legal reasons fences cannot be erected on the Common.

Janet Cullen, a resident of Grovewood, supported her neighbours. She walked in the wooded area. There was a problem with dog fouling. The woodland was damp and would be an unhealthy place for a playground unless the vegetation was cleared.

Apologies for absence: received from Cllrs Copley, Wood, Trevett and Dickens.

[Present: Cllr Edwards, in the chair, and Cllrs Davies, Green, Khiroya, Kipps, Leeming, Morris, Preedy, Raw, Watkins, White and Worrall.]

Proposal, to be considered at the request of Cllrs Davies and Leeming,

“that Grovewood is withdrawn, at this stage of the process, as a potential site for the location of a play-space”.

Cllr Edwards confirmed that the Council had received a copy of the Constitution of the Friends of Grovewood and recognised them as a “Friends” group on the same basis as others in the Parish.

Cllr Davies, supporting the proposal, said he was concerned by the worry felt by Grovewood residents because of the possible damage to amenity; the uncertainty was unfair. He doubted whether Grovewood was suitable for a play-space; he was prepared to be persuaded otherwise if compelling reasons were advanced, but he had seen none, and could not see how that site satisfied the Advisory Committee's criteria. The site was surrounded by residential properties, which made it exceptional, and therefore the question whether to keep it on the shortlist should be considered tonight; there was a human factor and the uncertainty was causing distress and unhappiness to residents. Grovewood did not fit the criteria: it was not central to the area in greatest need of play facilities; installing play equipment would require destruction of trees and other vegetation; there would be car parking problems, and poor sightlines on the road around the wooded area would create a risk of accidents to children; there would be increases in noise and in the volume of traffic. Planning permission for a play-space in Grovewood would be refused. *[Applause from the floor.]*

Cllr Leeming, also supporting the proposal, said she recognised the concerns felt by Grovewood residents. The area was well used by walkers. The Parish Council's “four-year vision” included “consideration of the needs and views” of residents. The Grovewood management plan called for the creation of a shrub layer at the edges of the site to promote diverse habitats; there was now effectively a hedge around the site, with little possibility of oversight from outside. The area had improved over time and was now effectively a woodland nature reserve. She also questioned the need for a playground at

all: Central Government had made funds available for improving facilities in “deprived” areas, but Chorleywood is not deprived, its rural aspects should be preserved, and we should hang onto our open spaces. A play area should not be on the Common, but next to the tennis courts at Chorleywood House Estate. *[Applause from the floor.]*

Cllr Green, Chair of the Advisory Committee, opposed the proposal: neither Grovewood nor any other site should be removed from the shortlist at this stage. The Council had appointed the Committee and approved its membership and terms of reference; the Committee had kept the Council informed about its work, and the Council had not raised any issues. It would be wrong to change course as a result of pressure from one group of residents. Whatever Councillors thought of the merits of Grovewood as a possible location, they should support the process which had been agreed. The points made by Grovewood residents would be taken into account, but it was the Councillors’ responsibility to continue the agreed process to its completion. If the Council agreed, a representative of the Friends of Grovewood could join the Advisory Committee. That Committee should be allowed to reach its conclusions and make recommendations to the Council.

Cllr White explained that she is on the Council’s planning committee. She understood the worries felt by Grovewood residents. But in the interests of the whole community including Grovewood, the Council should not truncate the process it had decided on. The views expressed on behalf of Grovewood residents might not reflect the views of the community as a whole. It was impossible to know for certain that Grovewood was not the best site. Maybe there would be no suitable site at all. To reach an acceptable decision, the Council should keep to the process it had adopted: if Grovewood were removed and then the other sites were unsuitable, there would be a call to re-open the possibility of Grovewood.

Cllr Khiroya said he understood the principle of keeping Grovewood on the shortlist, but favoured taking it off.

Cllr Preedy said she felt split, but thought it was true that the expert reports were needed in order to reach the correct conclusion. The Council should wait for the reports.

Cllr Kipps also felt split. He did not think Grovewood was suitable, but to take it off the shortlist now would detract from the eventual decision.

Cllr Raw said the Advisory Committee had worked hard and it would be unfair to interfere with its work before it was completed. Grovewood should stay on the list.

Cllr Watkins said he had been on the Advisory Committee since 2011, and Grovewood had not been shortlisted on the previous occasion. If he had been able to attend the Grovewood site visit, he would have argued strongly against shortlisting it this time. Whatever location is proposed, someone objects. Why should Three Rivers not put their project on their own land? Why shortlist Grovewood when other sites not shortlisted in the previous exercise are not shortlisted this time? The play-space will not go to Grovewood, and the Council should not prolong the uncertainty.

Cllr Morris said he had been on the Council for 20 years. If Grovewood was to be removed from the shortlist, as it should be, the Common should also be removed. The best place for a play-space was Chorleywood House Estate.

Cllr Worrall strongly desired to improve facilities within the Parish. The Report on Grovewood [*provided by the Friends of Grovewood*] was persuasive, but applied to other sites as well. The experts' reports were needed; so was protection from rogue parking. The safety of children was paramount. The whole community needed to act together.

Cllr Edwards noted that the Advisory Committee had asked for reports on all four shortlisted sites from three experts: the Police, the play experts at TRDC leisure department, and the Countryside Management Service. The CMS has been unable to prepare its report in the winter months; it was now or would soon be preparing it, but its completion might run into August. The other reports had already been provided. Having asked those groups for their opinions, the Council should obtain them and make its judgement on which site, if any, should be adopted.

Cllr Davies, replying, said he was saddened that some of his colleagues appeared to be promoting bureaucracy above humanity. A play space in Grovewood was not going to happen, and the possibility should be killed off tonight. He proposed:

That Grovewood is withdrawn, at this stage of the process, as a potential site for the location of a play-space.

Cllr Morris proposed an amendment to insert, after "Grovewood", the words "and the Common". **Cllr Worrall** seconded that amendment. Following a query from **Cllr Davies** as to whether that amendment was permissible, and with the advice of the Clerk, **Cllr Edwards** ruled that the amendment could be proposed.

In response to an interjection from the floor, **Cllr Worrall** confirmed that she is a member of the Committee of the Friends of Chorleywood Common; that she had not attended any meeting of that Committee at which the play-space proposal was discussed; and that she had made those facts clear to all meetings of the Parish Council at which the play-space proposal had been considered.

The Council voted on the amendment: in favour, 6; against, 2; abstentions, 4. The amendment was carried.

Cllr Green objected vehemently that the amendment undercut the work of the Advisory Committee.

The Council voted on the amended proposal: in favour, 6; against, 6.

Cllr Edwards, commenting that there was no way he could win, **cast the Chairman's deciding vote against the amended proposal, with the effect that Grovewood and the two sites on the Common all remain on the shortlist.**

[Many of the members of the public present expressed dissatisfaction with that result.]

[Comments – to which readers will give whatever weight, if any, they think fit.

1. *Considerable criticism was made of the effect of the amendment; but if I have recorded correctly the Councillors' respective comments before the amendment was suggested, the 12 Councillors present were divided 6 (at most) in favour of, and 6 (at least) against, the proposal to remove Grovewood, only, from the shortlist.*
2. *On an evenly divided vote, in the absence of a casting vote from the Chair, the result would have been that the proposal had not been carried and was therefore defeated.*
3. *The effect of the Chairman's casting vote is that all sites remain on the shortlist, and discussion of all of them will continue, which is in accordance with the principle that a casting vote should be used to enable further debate to take place, rather than to determine finally the matter in question.]*

GH
6 June 2015