**Response to Letter of complaint from Phil Robinson, 24th June**

**From: John Meggison, Village Hall Committee member**

Phil Robinson submitted a letter of complaint to the Darsham Village Hall Committee on 24th June regarding the lack of progress with the playground project. I have written the following response to Phil Robinson's complaint as most of the negative comments appear to be addressed to myself. I have permission from the Village Hall Committee to do so.

The attached document shows my response in detail to the individual complaints. The original complaint is in black, my comments are in red.

Also, in a previous email to the VHC sent on the 5th June, Phil Robinson stated the following: "*I am aware that there are certain persons on the VHC that are opposed to anything like a playground near the property."*

Assuming that Phil is referring to myself - and I believe it is highly likely he is, I would stress that this is totally untrue – I am on record as saying, and will say again now, ***Heather and I want a playground at the Village Hall****.*We knew there was a small playground in the plans for the Village Hall when we moved in to Cheyney Green and we were, and are, very happy with that. It will be a welcome and long overdue addition to the village.

I volunteered as chair of the Darsham Village Playground Working Group (DVPWG) when it was set up. I have been instrumental in getting the project up and running on behalf of the Village Hall Committee (VHC), conducting extensive research, producing options and giving presentations.

I have always voted FOR a playground in dealings on the DVPWG and the VHC. We have a young granddaughter who will love the playground once it is built.

Unfortunately, I came off the DVPWG because of internal problems with some members of the group who were seeking to go beyond the remit and it created a very awkward working environment. Whilst on the VHC, I have consistently voted with the interest of the VHC at heart taking into account financial considerations and seeking to maintain conformance with the original plans and existing East Suffolk Council Playground guidelines to ensure the VHC do not submit planning applications that will be challenged and unlikely to succeed.

I hope this email and the attached document will help to clear up any criticisms. If anyone wishes to discuss anything further, please feel free to contact me.

Phil Robinson’s complaint in black. John Meggison’s response in red.

**Darsham Playground.**

PR: I would like to make a formal complaint on behalf of the Darsham Village Playground Working Group against the Darsham Village Hall Committee (VHC) regarding the way the last seven months of the proposed playground project have been handled. (Phil Robinson)

**Background**

On 11th October 2022 the Darsham Village Playground Working Group (DVPWG) was formed and within the terms of reference was to “Investigate **options** to develop the play area and proposing a design for the play area”. At that meeting Keith Rolfe confirmed that “we need planning permission in the first instance even though it was in the initial plans for the new estate”.

A series of formal meeting happened over the next two months based on the information produced initially, by the chair, John Meggison.

We were informed that the LAP, which was the only practical option, could be no larger than 100Sq m. This we subsequently found out to be incorrect as it can be between 100 and 399sq m.

JM response: We established early on from the current guidance used by East Suffolk Council, the Supplementary Planning Guidance 15, that the activity zone for a LAP should be 100sqm (Table 3, page 10). Later guidance we found from other documents stated ‘a minimum activity zone of 100sqm’.

PR: It became clear, as the meetings progressed, that whilst we were looking at the options for the whole village John was, and we understand why, looking at it from a residents point of view. He mentioned he had canvased the residents of Cheyney Green and that there was “Little support for anything larger than the original LAP (option 1) and there are likely to be objections if the design proposal is not considerate to their feelings. We know this was not the full picture from Cheyney Green and although there may be some who would object, there are also those in full support.

JM response: FACT: The majority of people I spoke to surrounding the village green (including Cheyney Green, Fox Lane and The Street) did not want more than the original 98sqm, as per the plans.

The East Suffolk Council ‘Helpful Guide’ to playgrounds states: “*How are you engaging local residents* *that would be directly affected by changes to the site? Residents that have property alongside the site may wish to have their views considered.”* As a member of the VHC, it should have been important that we did this but my representations were seen as ‘a conflict of interest.’

PR: He also stated the “The LAP was only designed to be for the Cheyney Green development (as per the guidelines). It was never meant to be a play area for the whole village. “

JM response: The LAP WAS only designed for the Cheyney Green development - as evidenced by the response we received from the East Suffolk Council Pre-Application Planning Advice. The entrance to it was sited at the end of what is actually a private road, maintained solely at the expense of the residents of Cheyney Green.

I accept, however, that the whole of the village will use the playground.

PR: On the 9th February 2023 John and Alan resigned and the DVPWG ceased but continued in an informal role.

JM response: We resigned from the DVPWG because of the unpleasant nature of the discussions, the fact that Phil was trying to undermine my position as chair and it was having a detrimental effect on our health.

PR: On the 20th February 2023 and on behalf of the remaining members of the working group I presented a plan with two options based on the actual measurements of the deeds provided to me. The initial size of the playground was 10.5 by 18.5, 194sq m. By adding a small semi-circle to the space this could increase to 231sq m.

JM response: Phil has already been told this is wrong. The deeds to which he refers are the conveyancing deeds for Plot 16 Cheyney Green and not the planning application documents for the Village Hall and the Cheyney Green estate. These plans, obtained from the East Suffolk Council Planning Portal clearly show the area designated as a LAP and measuring 98sqm. They were also agreed by the VHC and PC at the time planning permission was granted.

PR: It was pointed out that the original 98sq m would be impossible for having a working playground and it was felt that it would not be used.

JM response: Who pointed this out? The current guidance used by East Suffolk Council, the SPG 15, shows the activity zone for a LAP should be 100sqm (Table 3, page 10). Later guidance states ‘a minimum activity zone of 100sqm’. Why would local authority guidance say 100sqm if it was ‘*impossible for having a working playground’* in that space?

I have previously produced a plan showing it is possible to get 2 main items of equipment plus 3 small items and a table within 98sqm. These include a timber junior swing, a small climbing frame and slide, a spring horse, a balance beam and joined logs.

PR: On the 11th March 2023 I was told that “Having had an estimate from a groundworks company it would appear that the costs of pursuing this size are prohibitive. So, at the meeting on Tuesday 7th, we have agreed to get estimates for two sizes of area, the original 98sq m and an enlarged area of 170sq m.”

JM response: Correct. The increase of the LAP to 170sqm was actually my suggestion, as a compromise. I felt that if we increased the area towards the car park without moving it any closer to the houses in Cheyney Green, that might be acceptable.

PR: On 4th April 2023 we were informed that “The village hall committee voted on three options at its' last meeting, by a majority of 8 - 2 we decided to proceed with the two areas as described last night at the parish council. These are the areas of 98sq m and 170sq m. The larger area of 210sq m was rejected by the committee. “

JM response: Correct.

PR: On the 31st May 2023 Mark Hemingway called and told me that they had decided to go with just the 98sq m option.

JM response: Correct. The vote was 5 – 4 for the smaller area (98 sqm). I could not vote for the 170sqm because, at that stage, the VHC had not consulted the residents of Cheyney Green to assess their views.

**PR: Summary**

The reason for our complaint is that throughout the process the playground working group have not been confident in the accuracy of the information passed by John Meggison to the VHC. We have raised the concern with the joint chairs of the VHC that he has a conflict of interest and that we are concerned that his reports to the VHC have not been factually accurate. These concerns were dismissed.

JM response: The concerns were dismissed because they were not true. Please give me examples of any further specific allegations so I can respond.

PR: As a charity Darsham Village Hall has an obligation to deal with conflicts of interest and loyalty, while all trustees are obligated to act in good faith, and only in the interests of charity. It is not clear that this has been the case during this process.

JM response: I fail to see how I have a conflict of interest when I have consistently voted to have a play area and have been instrumental in getting the project up and running, producing options and conducting extensive research. I have voted with the interest of the VHC taking into account financial considerations and maintaining conformance with the original plans and existing guidelines to ensure the VHC do not submit planning applications that will be challenged. The VHC have a duty to consider the views of all residents and specifically those that would be directly affected by changes to the site.

The playground working group also feel strongly that the village should have been informed of the various options/proposals and invited to put forward ideas, suggestions and/or to comment on these at a stage where they could have made a difference. We still have no indication that anything is to be put forward to the village and, when options have already been voted on by the VHC, it seems that even if consultation does happen it will be nothing more than a tick-box exercise.

While we have not been made aware of how and/or why the decision to propose a playground, smaller than on the original plans has been made, JM response: (incorrect – it is the same size as the original plan) it appears that little consideration has been given to the children and young people in our village who at present must travel at least 2 miles to access the nearest playground at Westleton. While this may be practical for some it certainly will not be accessible for all, neither is it ideal for environmental reasons (travel by car) or reasons of community (less opportunity to form friendships within the village). We are thus concerned that the VHC have made their decisions without taking into full account the best interests of all the charity’s beneficiaries.

If funding is of concern, we would like to point out that whatever is decided the whole 460sq m area will have to be levelled in order to put playground equipment onsite. We recognise that the cost of this will be high, however it can be offset by fund raising and sponsorship. Information relating to persons around that could help were mentioned at the playgroup meetings and I have also last week passed this onto Paul Diamond. The DVPWC have indicated they would be happy to assist with this.

JM response: Please note at the end of Phil’s presentation to the VHC on 20th Feb he stated “The VHC would then be responsible for identifying and obtaining planning, funding for both the initial build and ongoing maintenance and ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place for the future operation of the play area.”

To date, I am not aware that the DVPWG have raised any money towards the playground.

We know that other local villages have managed this and we feel strongly that Darsham could do the same.

Based on the above, only the VHC members know what was discussed during this time. The process has not been transparent and it appears that decisions may have been based on what people feel, or on what they have been inaccurately led to believe, rather than on fact. JM response: Again, examples please, this is pure conjecture.

I believe that the Parish Council should be aware of the events that have taken place and hope that some members of the VHC would be prepared to put all the options to the village. If a decision is made by the village rather than just the VHC or the DVPWG it would at least be democratic.

Phil Robinson, on behalf of the DVPWC 24th June 2023

Since this complaint was submitted, some members of the VHC have changed their minds and, despite having already voted twice for the small area, they have collectively changed their minds and are putting a consultation document to go out to the whole village.

This move, I believe, is contrary to the guidelines of the Charity Commission which oversees the running of groups like ours (i.e. once a decision has been made following the proper procedures, however, even if the trustees do not all agree, they must all abide by that decision.)

At this moment in time, I have no choice but to accept the change of mind of the VHC and continue to progress the project in the way favoured by the majority. I will seek to ensure that the consultation document that goes out is fair and truthful and the results are dealt with in the proper manner.

John Meggison

15th July 2023