

Greenhouse 2 - The Consultation

Children, do you remember the couple who wanted a new greenhouse, the old lady who lived with them, and her dog Warren? And that they were just about to creep through their hedge and start building in the garden next door? Well, something terrible was happening in their own garden. It was in chaos! All the creatures who had lived happily together in perfect harmony had started arguing amongst themselves about where to put the greenhouse. They were shouting furiously and jostling each other, waving placards reading “Right Greenhouse, Wrong Location” and “Save Our Wildflower Meadow”.

“This is awful,” cried the wife. “They’re under a magic spell! How can we stop them?”

“I’ll stop them,” said her husband grimly. “There’s more than one person with magic around here.” He drew a wizard’s wand from the capacious pocket of his gardening trousers, and muttering an unrepeatable incantation, waved it above his head. A shimmering green shape appeared high in the sky above them. It drifted lower and lower until it came lightly to rest in the middle of the beautiful garden – well, not quite in the middle, but slightly to one side. It was a wonderful, shiny green star.

“There!” he said triumphantly. “The magic star has shown us the perfect place for the greenhouse. All we have to do is build as close to that star as we can.”

The no-longer-harmonious creatures stopped fighting, and gazed at the sparkling star as though hypnotised by it. They looked over their shoulders and saw how far the star was from where they slept, and then how far it was from where their opponents slept. And they began to fight again, even more ferociously than before.

“I don’t understand this,” the husband muttered. “It always works for Harry Potter.”

“Now what?” his wife wailed. “We must have a new greenhouse somewhere. My poor little seedlings are already so overcrowded they can’t move. And I told all the creatures of the garden they could put their seedlings in it too.”

Children, do you remember the man from the GFA, the national Greenhouse Funding Agency? He turned to the manager of the local Greenhouse Building Company (GBC). “What do we do?” he asked her. “This never happens. Usually everyone’s delighted to have one of our free greenhouses. Or if they aren’t, we just go ahead and build it anyway.”

The manager opened her mouth to reply, when with a blast of hot air and a big puff of blue smoke, the local agent of the Horticultural Management Group (HMG) suddenly appeared in their midst. Immediately the creatures clustered around him, waving their placards and pointing accusingly at each other.

"I hear all of you!" the HMG agent shouted above the din. "And I've come to help. Tell me your problems. I'm sure that between us we'll find a solution to this."

The manager of the GBC quietly steered the man from the GFA to one side. "Look," she whispered, "He'll distract them for a while, but it'll come down to us to sort it out in the end. What we need is a Public Consultation."

"A what?" said the bewildered GFA man. "That sounds a bit democratic to me. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Trust me," said the GBC manager. "We run them all the time. You and I can do it together. And of course the HMG agent will ask for one as well - the HMG love consultations, or referendums, as they like to call them. And it helps to deflect the blame from us if they're able to shout at him instead. Watch and learn."

Sure enough, the HMG agent soon emerged dishevelled and breathless from the angry throng of creatures. "This has all gone too far," he gasped. "We're going to need... a Public Meeting. And a Public Consultation, obviously!"

"A Consultation, a Consultation!" the creatures chanted reverently. "A Consultation!" cried the couple with relief. "Yes!" they all shouted. "We must have a Consultation!"

Warren the dog stopped barking, and nudged the old lady in the knees. "Sorted," he growled. "Our shed will be safe now." The GBC manager smiled at the GFA man. "See?"

But suddenly, children, there came an ominous rumbling from the north. All their shouting had woken up the neighbouring giant, and the garden next door was in his territory. He lived many miles away in an ancient ivory tower, but he was always alert to what might be happening on his southern border, and he had a team of industrious goblins who took very good care of his boundary hedges.

"Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the work of a GBC man," he bellowed. "You're putting a greenhouse in my garden? No one asked me. No one asked my goblins. Is this the GBC, up to its usual tricks?"

"It was his idea," said the GFA man defensively, turning to look for Warren. But Warren and the GBC manager had both mysteriously vanished.

"Well, I'm not having it," said the giant, fixing the quaking couple with a furious stare. "I'm very, very cross. Why should your greenhouse be in my garden? I already let you use my

greenhouses when you run out of space in your own, but to try and build a new one on my land without even asking me really is the last straw.”

The GFA man stepped bravely forward. “It will be all right,” he said, with a confidence he didn’t feel. “I’m sure you and I can work together if we do have to build the greenhouse in your garden. And besides, yours is only one of five possible sites we’re looking at. You see, we’re going to have a Public Consultation!”

“Oh, a Consultation – that’s just fine then,” said the giant, sarcastically. “Did the GBC manager suggest that? Well you’d better involve my goblins in your Consultation, or you’ll wish you’d never been born. I’m going to leave a few of them here on my side of the hedge to keep an eye on you.” And the ground trembled as he stomped off.

So the GFA man and the GBC manager and the HMG agent went to work on the Consultation. By now, the creatures had organised themselves into five little stakeholder groups, each defending one of the five greenhouse sites. The GFA man thought it would be easy to get them to say what they thought about where the greenhouse should go. But they wrote pages and pages, children, and they all said different things, and they all insisted they were the only ones who were right, and soon the poor GFA man was in despair.

For example, the enchanted river which ran through the beautiful garden was to some of them a dangerous raging torrent, and to others a gently flowing stream. And how safe was it to carry the trays of tiny seedlings back and forth across it? How far was it reasonable to carry seedlings, and how big did the greenhouse need to be? And of course there had to be outdoor space for the seedlings, to acclimatise them to cold nights. The couple were keen for all the creatures to use the new greenhouse, and they believed in a "carry to greenhouse" policy. But some of the creatures wanted to use wheel barrows, or even tractors, to transport their seedlings, and nobody wanted all those wheel barrows and tractors cluttering up the beautiful garden.

And do you remember the fairies who taught Warren to speak? Well, in olden days those fairies had protected some parts of the garden with really strong spells, so that anybody building anything there would be cursed for ever and ever. Do you still believe in fairies, children? Well, the old lady and Warren certainly did, and they set out to scare all the other creatures with horrid tales about what the fairies could do.

Some of the creatures didn't believe a new greenhouse was needed at all, and that the entire Consultation was a waste of time. But no one listened to them.

Interestingly, both the GBC and the HMG agent were keen to build a brand new canal to bypass the fairies and their enchanted river completely. But they planned to put the canal across the giant’s garden – something he and his goblins had always opposed. And

although strictly speaking this wasn't part of the Consultation, it was at the back of everyone's mind.

So a Public Meeting was organised to discuss the five sites. Everyone in the beautiful garden was invited. Many of the creatures wanted to use a corner of the old lady's peaceful lawn, with or without her shed - including a man from the GBC, who was supposed to be neutral. Some creatures were worried about building in the giant's garden, in case the giant filled the greenhouse with his own seedlings as soon as it was built. Others didn't want to build on the wildflower meadow, because wild animals had been spotted there. Some thought you shouldn't build near exotic or expensive plants. And the HMG agent arrived late, with an excuse about having to get the accounts right before the pending AGM, leaving the poor GFA man to answer all the most difficult questions.

And the GBC organised a Public Survey. They used all the information which the GFA man had finally managed to collect from the creatures. The GBC had done this sort of thing before and felt they were pretty good at it, but the GFA man was dubious. "Who exactly are you going to Survey?" he queried anxiously. "And how will I interpret the result?"

"You don't have to, that's the point of our Surveys," the GBC manager replied patiently. "We're very good at asking lots of questions in a complicated way so that no one knows quite how to answer them, then we can interpret the result in any way we like. And as for who we'll ask, why, we'll ask everyone in the beautiful garden, and everyone in the giant's garden - in fact we'll ask every single creature living in the land of far, far away. Then no one can say afterwards that we've forgotten them."

The GFA man was still unconvinced. "Well anyway," he said, "I reserve my right to put the greenhouse wherever I want, Consultation or no Consultation."

"Fine," said the GBC manager cheerfully, wondering if the GFA would be closed down after the HMG shareholders voted in a new board of directors. And her elves published the GFA man's information pack on their elfNet, to avoid cutting down too many trees. And she hired an extra team of pixies, to tell every single creature in the land of far, far away that a Survey was coming. Not all the mischievous pixies told everyone they were supposed to tell, but eventually almost everyone was told, whether they wanted to know or not.

And so the enormous Survey finally began. And despite the elves' attempt to save trees, the garden was soon buried beneath big drifts of paper, mostly with pictures of green lawns on them, and everyone kept arguing about whether to believe in fairies, the enchanted river, and who had the most wild animals. And they forgot all about the tiny seedlings, which as each day passed were growing bigger and bigger.

To be continued