

Cabinet Member Briefing – 24th August 2022

Subject:	Friends Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism, Councillor Laura Rollins
Director:	Alice Davey - Director of Borough Economy
Key Decision:	No – For Information
Contact Officer:	(Interim) Service Manager – Parks, Sandwell Valley & Events – Matt Huggins

1. Summary

1.1 The Green Spaces Strategy Implementation and Business Plan 22 – 25, commits to a refreshed approach to working with Friends Groups in Sandwell. This includes:

- Moving to a Partnership Agreement between Friends Groups and the Council, and that Friends Groups who enter this partnership agreement are recognised by the Council as a Friends of (Green Space).
- Improving the information, signposting, and support available to Friends Groups to set up, develop, and carry out their work to improve the Green Space.
- Agreeing channels of communication and ways of working between Friends Groups and the Council to effectively manage Council resources and work in a more transparent and equitable way across all Friends Groups.

1.2 The approved decision of Cabinet on 20th June (Green Spaces Strategy Implementation and Business Plan 22 – 25 Cabinet Report – 1.5), was:

That approval be given to the proposed new ways of working with Friends Groups, and the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism be authorised to approve the final agreement with Friends Groups following consultation.

1.3 The Director of Borough Economy, Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism, and the Assistant Director: Green Spaces, Green Services, Events, met with Friends Groups on 17th August to present the intended approach to ways of working. The follow up letter to Friends Group and presentation given is attached to this report.

1.4 The next steps are:

- Approve the draft agreement for consultation to commence with Friends Groups (Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism – 24 August).

- Draft Partnership Agreement and survey sent to all Friends Groups; consultation open through the survey until 14th September (25th August).
- Final Partnership Agreement presented to Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism for approval (15th September).
- Friends Groups written to with final Partnership Agreement and timeline for registering a Friends Group with the Council (from 19th September).

2. Background

2.1 Friends Groups are dedicated local people who work together to improve the appearance, facilities, and quality and value of a green space. This include Friends Groups for parks and gardens, amenity green spaces, play areas, nature reserves, and green corridors.

2.2 Friends Groups activities include:

- Leading walks, talks, events and activities.
- Fundraising for improvements in the green space.
- Championing and promoting the green space to the community.
- Helping to inform the improvements for the green space, including bigger funding and investment projects.
- Volunteering time and coordinating volunteer activity in maintaining and improving the green space.
- Practical tasks like litter picks, tree planting, weeding, and education visits.

2.3 Friends Groups are a group of people in the community volunteering their time to work to improve the green space. This includes working in partnership with the Council (the land owner or manager of the green space).

2.4 Currently there are 14 Friends Groups listed as working with the Council. Activity varies between Friends Groups, and we do not currently have data on the fundraising, volunteering, or activities undertaken by Friends Groups in Sandwell. However, we do have examples of best practice ranging from extensive volunteering and fundraising by the Friends of Dartmouth Park, and Lightwoods House Volunteers, to the refreshing and support of a local level green space by the Friends of Goldcroft Park. There are also examples of Friends Groups doing excellent work for non-parks; such as The Friends of Sots Hole, and The Friends of Sheepwash (both nature reserves).

2.5 Many Councils already have in place partnership agreements for Friends Groups. These partnership agreements exist to offer clarity about the relationship between the land owner / or management lead for the Green Space, and the Friends Group for that Green Space. Sandwell Council has not had an agreement in place with Friends Groups for some time and this has impacted on the Council's ability to work equitably and transparently with all Friends Groups, support new Friends Groups to emerge and grow, and maintain focus on the delivery of green space priorities set out most recently in our new Green Spaces Strategy.

2.6 There are also some examples of Council Officer time and resources in green spaces being focussed on only several locations. The current ways of working – where some Friends Groups can have direct access to front line green services operatives and senior officers

daily – favours the more established Friends Groups and does not provide an equitable way to distribute officer time.

2.7 It is also the case that Officer time and Council resources must be directed to the delivery of the objectives and improvements set by Cabinet in the Green Spaces Strategy Implementation and Business Plan 22 – 25.

2.8 There are some examples of installations of new equipment, works taking place in green spaces, and other activities (such as events) undertaken by Friends Groups which are not approved by the land owner (the Council), or with adequate insurance or governance arrangements. Without a clear Partnership Agreement and ways of working, this puts both the Council and Friends Groups at risk (financial, legal, reputational, and drift away from delivering priorities set by Cabinet).

2.9 The Partnership Agreement will aim to achieve the following:

- The role and responsibilities of the Council and Friends Groups in the improvements and management of green spaces.
- What a Friends Group needs to have to be recognised by the Council and have a partnership agreement. This will include:
 - Boundaries of the green space the friends group cover.
 - A constitution and clear arrangements for committees, election of committee members, and terms of office.
 - Arrangements for meetings and decision making.
 - Transparent financial arrangements, including signatory and financial decision making.
 - Open access to membership and involvement from the community, including a commitment to equality and diversity.
- How a Friends Group is recognised with the council and the process for registering and when a Friends Group ceases to exist.
- How the Council and Friends Groups will communicate and meet: including how often and who attends.
- The support and advice available to Friends Groups.

2.10 Alongside the Partnership Agreement, the Council will transition to the following ways of working with Friends Groups:

- Friends Groups will need to register with the Council, and agree to the Partnership Agreement, to access officer time, and support from the Council for the Friends Group.
- Events organised by Friends Groups (and not through third party bookings via Friends Groups) will be managed through the Event Application Process (which is now online). This should already be happening and is not a change to our current ways of working.
- Senior Council Officers – including the Assistant Director of Borough Economy (Green Spaces, Green Services, Events), the Director of Borough Economy, and the

Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism (or delegated attendance for any of the senior officers or Cabinet Member) – will meet with all Friends Groups once a quarter (grouped by North and South of the Borough). These meetings will be the only formally recognised and supported meetings the Council will hold with the Friends Groups. The purpose of this meeting is to see our green spaces flourish through the hard work and efforts of our Friends Groups, volunteers, and the Council working together.

- The reporting of operational day-to-day issues will primarily be through the Council's website and reporting functions.

3. Legal Implications

- 3.1 The Council has the power under section 10 of the Open Spaces Act 1906 to hold and administer the open spaces in trust with the view to the enjoyment of the public and to keep and maintain the open spaces in a good and decent condition.
- 3.2 The Council is also the land owner of many green spaces under the management and maintenance of Borough Economy.
- 3.3 The Partnership Agreement – the final of which will be implemented following consultation – will provide a list of requests that need to be met in return for the benefits the Council will provide Friends Groups.
- 3.4 The Local Government Act 1972 section 111 gives the Council the power to enter in to arrangements which are ancillary to their power conferred under other statutory obligations. The implementation of a Partnership Agreement will also be reviewed by the Council legal team to ensure compliance with legislation and the powers of the Council.

4. Decisions

- 4.1 That the Cabinet Member approves this report, and draft Partnership Agreement for consultation to commence with Friends Groups from 25th August.

5. Additional Documents

- 5.1 Friends Groups Ways of Working Presentation
- 5.2 Friends Groups Consultation Meeting Follow Up Letter
- 5.3 Friends Groups Draft Partnership Agreement