

Cabinet Member Briefing – 21st September 2022

Subject:	Friends Final Draft 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:	Assistant Director – Borough Economy (Green Services, Green Spaces, Events): Matthew Huggins – matthew_huggins@sandwell.gov.uk

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Cabinet Member Briefing (24th August – Friends Groups Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working) approved a draft partnership agreement and ways of working document to be consulted on with Friends Groups.
- 1.2 A survey was circulated on 25th August to all Friends Groups and available online through our website, Sandwell.gov.uk. The closing date was 14th September at 8am. We received a total of 9 responses, representing 7 Friends Groups.

2. Consultation Results

2.1 Key points raised during the consultation:

- **Concern that the Partnership Agreement was an oversight of Friends Group from the Council, and a desire that the current ways of working remain.**

This concern has been responded to in the revised draft partnership agreement and ways of working text attached to this report. The introduction gives greater explanation as to the purpose of the partnership agreement and clarifies the extent to which the Council is involved or not in the affairs of Friends Groups. It is also noted that this way of working with a partnership agreement between Friends Groups and the Council is already in place in many other Councils.

- **Questions about some of the points in the draft Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working text; mostly around clarity of language and more explanation about what the specific commitment means.**

The points where there was some concern or questions raised about clarity of language or what this means for Friends Groups have been expanded upon in the revised draft partnership agreement.

- **Three respondents raised concerns about the requirement in the Partnership Agreement for Friends Group to hold public meetings. It was noted that by respondents that this was not their usual practice, and concerns about whether this would be practical.**

It is recognised that the requirement for 3 public meetings a year will be onerous for some Friends Groups without the resources or volunteer time to accommodate this. It is though also essential that Friends Group are accessible to all residents, and as such this requirement has been amended in the revised partnership agreement for one public meeting open to residents a year. We have also offered support with an accessible venue to allow for this to happen.

- **A concern from one respondent about whether the Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working will be possible for them, as they are a Charity.**

We have clarified this point in the revised partnership agreement. The structure and entity of a Friends Group is not the concern of the Council. However, all Friends Groups – regardless of whether a charity – will need to commit to the partnership agreement to be formally recognised and supported by the Council as a Friends Group.

- **A concern from one respondent about the need for Friends Groups to have a management agreement or lease in place to be able to continue as key holders for buildings owned or managed by the Council.**

This has been clarified with the Friends Group and further clarity in the revised partnership agreement. The current approach where some Friends Groups hold keys or have open access to buildings managed or owned by the Council, without an agreement in place, can present a risk to the Friends Group and the Council.

- **Concern that the process feels too quick for some Friends Groups and that the process lacks consultation.**

It is noted that this process is being implemented within a robust timescale. The Green Spaces Strategy approved by the Cabinet on 20th June made a commitment to implement a partnership agreement and improve ways of working with Friends Groups. The Council have had an all Friends Groups meeting with the Cabinet Member, Director of Borough Economy, and Assistant Director of Borough Economy, and a survey. We have also had representations from Friends Groups outside of these formal processes. However, we have proposed an amendment to the timescales for review of the partnership agreement, to consider a Cabinet Member only review after one full year of implementation.

- **Concern about the use of the portal or going through customer services for day to day issues. The request has been for a named officer for each Friends Group, with direct contact maintained outside of the Quarterly Meetings.**

It is noted that this will be a change for Friends Groups, some of which are used to regular and open access to Council officer time. However, this is not a sustainable position and would divert officer time from the commitments made in the Green Spaces Strategy. The Council have clarified the communication terms and timescales, including the escalation of issues not dealt with, and given further clarity on the use of the portal / customer enquiry process outside of the quarterly meetings.

3. Decisions resulting from the consultation survey:

3.1 That the concerns and questions raised about the content of the partnership agreement and ways of working draft have been addressed in the revised wording where possible

3.2 That the Council is unable to make the following changes requested by some Friends Groups. These requests are that:

- ***The current ways of working remain the same and that there is no need for a Partnership Agreement or formalised approach to ways of working.***

The Council is unable to meet this request as it would contradict with the commitment approved by the Cabinet in the Green Spaces Strategy Implementation and Business Plan on 20th June. The consultation has not presented substantial arguments that a formalised approach to working with Friends Groups would not be beneficial to the Council, Friends Groups, or the implementation of the Green Spaces Strategy.

- ***Friends Groups have a dedicated council officer to liaise with on a day to day basis outside of the quarterly meetings.***

The Council is unable to meet this request as the service would not be able to sustain this level of commitment to communications with Friends Groups outside of the Council's existing communication channels (customer services enquiries). The new ways of working within the partnership agreement also provide a greater level of transparency and governance around communication timescales and standards.

3.3 That the Council implement the final draft Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working. The Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working approach will be evaluated after its first full financial year of operation, with a report to the Cabinet Member on progress and any improvements or changes proposed. This evaluation will be presented to the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Green Spaces in April 2024.

3.4 That the Assistant Director writes to all Friends Group with responses to their questions and concerns, and the final partnership agreement and ways of working document (at the end of October 2022).

3.5 Friends Group and the Council transition to the new Partnership Agreement and ways of working from 1st October 2022. There is currently no deadline set for Friends Group to sign up to the partnership agreement, but this will be reviewed in January. It is expected that all Friends Groups who wish to be recognised by the Council formally and benefit from the partnership agreement sign up to this by the new financial year at the latest (April 23).