



To: Executive Councillor for City Centre and Public Places: Councillor Carina O' Reilly

Report by: Alistair Wilson - Streets and Open Space Development Manager

Relevant scrutiny committee: Community Services 08/10/2015

Wards affected: All - Abbey Arbury Castle Cherry Hinton Coleridge East Chesterton King's Hedges Market Newnham Petersfield Queen Edith's Romsey Trumpington West Chesterton

WORKING WITH FRIENDS' GROUPS

Non Key Decision

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Cambridge has a significant number of open spaces, and some of these now have established and active Friends Groups associated with them. These groups undertake a range of different site management support functions including 'hands on' days involving operational tasks such as litter picking, vegetation management and site surveying; and organising community events and activities. They also provide a valuable conduit between the Council and the local community in terms of shaping strategic documents, for example, site management plans and providing membership feedback on public consultations.
- 1.2 The Council values both the existence and work of these Friends Groups and provides officer support and assistance to groups as resources allow. The scale and scope of officer support varies from group to group, but often includes acting as first point of contact for incoming enquiries and complaints, liaising with and on behalf of the group, attending meetings and supporting initiatives being undertaken by groups.
- 1.3 The Council has undertaken a review of Friends Group expectations and aspirations and associated support needs. The review also included an assessment of good practice from other local authorities, who are seen as exemplars in their approach to engaging and

supporting Friends Groups. The review results have been supplemented by a recently convened city wide Friends Group Forum, where recent service changes at the Council were outlined, operating experiences shared between groups and future engagement and support options considered.

- 1.4 This report highlights the results of this work and makes recommendations to improve how the Council works with and supports Friends Groups to deliver mutually shared management aims and objectives for the city's open spaces.

2. Recommendations

The Executive Councillor is recommended to:-

- a) Approve the development of a joint protocol which guides how the Council works with Friends Groups; and
- b) Instruct officers to:-
 - i. Support Friends Group to develop and adopt written constitutions that are robust, democratic and accountable;
 - ii. Support Friends Groups to engage fully in the review, development and implementation of existing and new open space management plans and projects;
 - iii. Develop generic support documentation to aid the sustainable development and functioning of strong, active Friends Groups;
 - iv. Hold a bi-annual Friends forum with guest speakers and minutes circulated to aid communication; and
 - v. To establish a Friends Group website, including online forum and generic and individual group pages/news, to aid communication.

3. Background

- 3.1 The development of Friends Groups linked to specific open spaces is a common feature across the UK. Groups can arise for variety of reasons, including a perceived need to take action voluntarily to ensure a higher standard of care than the Council is able to provide, or because of a perceived threat against which people feel a need to organise opposition.
- 3.2 They can also come about because local people want to have a greater say in how a local open space is managed, or used, how improvement or maintenance is prioritised, or to assert community ownership of a site that has fallen into disrepair or dereliction.

- 3.3 Some groups retain these early motivations for a long time, whilst others evolve into groups with wider roles and responsibilities, which complement the work of the Council. They can develop to a point where they become partners with the Council in caring for an open space in a particular way; or they can remain a pressure group keeping the Council accountable for the work it does (or does not) do.
- 3.4 The Council currently works with and supports 13 Friends Groups, which vary considerably in membership size and in the scope and scale of work they do for open spaces. A list of current Friends Groups is included in appendix A.
- 3.5 In 2013, the Council undertook a review of its Friends Groups' expectations and aspirations and associated support needs. The review also included an assessment of good practice from other local authorities, who are seen as exemplars in their approach to engaging and supporting Friends Groups including Brighton and Hove, Bristol and Sheffield City Councils. The results of this research are included in a background paper 'What are Friends for?', A report for Cambridge City Council by Phil Back Associates, October 2013.
- 3.7 Using these research findings, a Friends Forum evening was held for all Friends Groups on 27th August 2015. The aim of the forum was to discuss recent structural changes at the Council, provoke thoughts on current methods of working and relationships between the Council and the groups; share collectively any difficulties and positive experiences; and consider future engagement and support options. The key recommendations arising from the evening are as follows:
- To hold a bi-annual Friends forum with guest speakers and minutes circulated.
 - To establish a Friends Group website, including online forum and generic and individual group pages/news.
 - To develop full management plans for open spaces, complimented by shorter user friendly summaries.
- 3.8 In addition to these recommendations (3.7), sections 4-7 below outline the key findings of this research, identifies and recommends changes to the way the Council currently works, which would form the basis of the Councils proposed strategy for engaging and supporting Friends Groups hereon.

4. Friends Groups Protocol

- 4.1 Sheffield City Council supports around 70 Friends Groups, a third of which are described as 'hands-on', a third want to be consulted and a

third are more adversarial. They have also created a specific post to promote Friends Groups, seeing this as a way of enhancing open spaces beyond the level the Council alone can provide, and as a means of enabling community engagement. In all, two staff supports this large portfolio of activity.

- 4.2 Sheffield City Council has an established protocol for supporting new Friends Groups. This includes more intensive support for the first six months or so of the group's life, with an understanding that after this period of time they will need to have become self-sustaining, with their own constitution, committee, and vision for the future. New groups are also given 'freebies' in the form of bags, gloves, litter pickers, and graffiti removal kits.
- 4.3 Cambridge City Council will develop a similar protocol for setting up and working with Friends groups, including the creation of information and fact sheets to facilitate those individuals that wish to create or develop a constituted Friends group (see 5. below). The protocol will include details of what Friends Groups can expect from the Council and what the Council expect of Friends Groups, based on the principles of mutual respect, trust and partnership working. The Council recognises and accepts that there may be occasions when the two parties may disagree over an issue, but will ensure that due weight is given to opposing views in any consultation and decision making process.

5. Constitution

- 5.1 A constitution is a set of rules that defines how the group is run, what they do and how they work and becomes necessary as soon as a group starts to deal with money and/ or working with other groups. The writing of a constitution gives groups the chance to decide what things are important to the group.
- 5.2 The Council fully recognises the independence of groups to pursue their own agendas, but is keen for all groups to have a formally adopted constitution. This is considered necessary to enable the group to operate effectively, with clear, transparent procedures for democratic decision making and accountability. Obviously the larger and more representative a group is of its local community and associated open space user interests, the greater its democratic weight when working with the Council and other agencies.

6. Managing Expectations

- 6.1 It is acknowledged in the research that the Council could strengthen its relationship with Friends Groups by being more responsive to issues raised; by taking action more speedily; and by doing what they have promised to do or communicating clearly reasons where action is not possible.
- 6.2 One strategy for supporting this is through joint site visits/working group meetings involve Council officers and Friends to review issues and plans and agree actions. Another is through the engagement of Friends Groups in the development and implementation of site management plans. Both approaches will be followed by the Council.
- 6.3 Friends Groups have also suggested that dedicated staff, such as rangers or wardens, who focus on a small number of sites would also help with communications and relationship development.
- 6.4 Under the new Streets and Open Spaces service structure, the Operations Co-ordinator (Community Engagement and Enforcement) will be the day to day point of contact for Friends Groups. They in turn will call on rangers, grounds maintenance and other technical staff to work with and support Friends as required.

7. Community and Inter-group Engagement

- 7.1 Engagement between Friends Groups and their wider local community is very mixed. Some circulate a newsletter to local residents, regardless of their involvement or otherwise; others do a more limited distribution to paid-up members, perhaps supported by the use of noticeboards on the site where anyone can acquaint themselves with what the Friends are up to. Use of social media is extremely limited, and this may be because the demographic of Friends Groups is less familiar with this method of communication; but those groups that use it find it is rarely used in return. Activities such as being represented at local events have been successful in some instances and less so in others.
- 7.2 Some Friends have some contact with their counterparts elsewhere, but others are isolated, either by lack of awareness or lack of time to pursue any other network-building activity.
- 7.3 The Council has instigated working groups for some spaces, bringing different statutory and voluntary partners together, and including Friends, and these are generally regarded as more constructive.

- 7.4 Two ideas which were explored with Friends was the possibility of groups being able to access a central store of ideas, such as through a website, and the idea of bringing groups together to meet with the Council and with each other, to share news, information and ideas.
- 7.5 Both these ideas were generally welcomed both during pre-report interviews but also during the friends Forum evening. The website would be more resource-intensive, though, and the capacity challenge in the groups as they stand would perhaps limit its value for the moment, both in terms of website maintenance and of take-up of ideas.
- 7.6 The idea of a Forum is more realistic to achieve, and there is wide agreement that an annual meeting would enable this exchange to take place without asking too much in terms of either the group members or of officers, hence the trial of this prior to this committee report.
- 7.7 Several Councils hosts an annual conference for Friends so as to coincide with the annual budget cycle and service planning process, which includes a themed workshop session and a Q and A session with Councillors and officers.
- 7.8 The Council proposes to set up and run an annual networking event for Friends, supported by periodic newsletters and updates. It also proposes to create a small tool bank to help Friends groups with their works parties.

8. Implications

(a) **Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications identified in this report.

(b) **Staffing Implications**

There is no staff implication identified in this report.

(c) **Equality and Poverty Implications**

There are no negative issues associated with this policy, identified in the EQIA.

(d) **Environmental Implications**

The use of Friends Groups to carry out management support tasks, including grounds maintenance, specialist conservation tasks and community event organisation will have a medium positive rating on the environment. The work of Friends will supplement the Council's own site management and routine grounds maintenance work.

(e) **Procurement**

There are no procurement issues identified

(f) **Consultation and communication**

A comprehensive study of Friends group activities was completed and a full report on the consultant's 2013¹ research findings is available as a background document.

(g) **Community Safety**

The presence of a Friends Group will have a positive effect on community safety through an onsite presence, the reporting of anti-social behaviour or needed repairs, which can lead to a sense of civic pride and ownership of places close to people's homes.

9. Background papers

The following papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- "What are Friends for"?, A report for Cambridge City Council by Phil Back Associates, October 2013.

10. Appendices

Appendix A – List of current Friends Groups

11. Inspection of papers

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact:

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¹ What are Friends for, A report for Cambridge City Council by Phil Back Associates, October 2013

Appendix A – List of current Friends Groups

Friends of Bramblefields

Friends of Nightingale Rec

Friends of Cherry Hinton Hall

Friends of Stourbridge Common

Friends of Coldhams Common

Jesus Green Association

Friends of Histon Road Cemetery

Friends of Coleridge Rec

Friends of Histon Road Rec

Friends of Cherry Hinton Brook

Friends of Midsummer Common

Christs Pieces Residents
Association

Friends of Mill Road Cemetery