



**CHESTERFIELD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

*Community, Customer and  
Organisational Scrutiny Committee*

**Scrutiny Project Group**

report on

*Friends Groups*

Date agreed by CC&OSC: 19.09.2017

## Project group members:

Councillors:

Lead	Kate Caulfield
Group Members	Jenny Flood Shirley Niblock Gordon Simmons
Project group officer support was provided by the Democratic and Scrutiny Team	

### 1.0 Introduction and review aims

- 1.1 This review looked at how friends and community groups<sup>1</sup> work with Chesterfield Borough Council to improve local parks and open spaces.
- 1.2 For the purpose of this review a friends group is defined as a group of local residents and other interested parties who dedicate their time, skills and knowledge to improve their local park or open space. The project group notes that other groups and organisations may use the term " friends ", for example the Friends of the Pomegranate Theatre, however these groups did not meet the project group's scope, and were therefore not considered in the group's research.
- 1.3 The council has an important relationship with the friends groups including as the landowner of the parks and open spaces and a public service provider. The management of the relationship between the council and the groups has not previously been reviewed. The project group wanted to consider if this relationship enables the best possible outcomes for the council, groups and the borough's parks and open spaces.
- 1.4 The review also aimed to evaluate how the various friends groups from across the borough worked together in order to share best practice. Transparency and accountability was also a key consideration.
- 1.5 The project group set out to achieve the following objectives:
  - To have increased and productive communication between the council and individual friends groups.

---

<sup>1</sup> Referred to as "friends groups" throughout the report.

- Better communication and the sharing of best practice between friends groups, and for a more consistent method of operation to be taken by the groups
- Increased support and training being made available to enable all friends groups to be effective and successful.
- For friends groups to have the support and resources to engage with all local residents.
- That all friends groups have strong, robust and inclusive constitutions in order to be accountable to local residents, and that the groups have the resources and training in order to do this.
- Greater synchronisation in the work and priorities of friends groups across the Borough, so as to maximise positive outcomes for the council's parks and open spaces and for local residents.
- That friends groups have the tools and training to make sure that equality and diversity is considered in their decision making processes.

## **2.0 Reasons for the review and link to priorities**

- 2.1 The review of friends groups was established as a result of the new annual work programming process. This process involved cabinet, overview and scrutiny and backbench members, as well as the senior and corporate management teams working together to create one overarching overview and scrutiny work programme for the municipal year 2016/17.
- 2.2. The review contributes to the council's vision "putting our communities first" and the Council Plan 2015 – 2019 aim "to improve the quality of life for local people" in particular the objective "to increase the quality of public space for which the council has responsibility through targeted improvement programmes".

## **3.0 Introduction to recommendations**

- 3.1 The project group sought in the review to learn how examples of best practice from elsewhere could be applied to Chesterfield so that all friends groups could play as full a part as possible in the care and management of the borough's open spaces. The group was also mindful that any changes recommended to the processes and resources needed to encourage new groups to form, and for established groups to succeed, should not create excessive demands

on officers' time and workloads. The group's recommendations have been formed with consideration to both these objectives in mind.

## **4.0 Recommendations**

### **The Project Group recommends:**

- 4.1 That an up-to-date data base of friends of groups' contacts is maintained by officers and that all friends of groups are given defined points of contact at the council to facilitate streamlined, effective and accountable channels of communication between groups and the council.
- 4.2 That the Friends of Groups information pack is reviewed and updated to provide:
  - Guidance on developing a new group or joining an existing group
  - Guidance on developing aims, constitutions, management committees and financial arrangements
  - Advice and tips for key management committee roles including the chair, secretary and treasurer
  - Tips for keeping the members of the friends of group, local community and council updated including social media and links to council publications, social media and websites
  - Basic insurance and risk management advice
  - Advice on developing an action plan
  - Templates and examples of key documents to assist groups
  - Where to go for help and support including Chesterfield Borough Council and Links CVS
- 4.3 That an annual survey with Friends Groups be carried out to collect information on their activities and achievements to enable the council to see how their work is contributing to the delivery of the councils objectives, as set out in the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy.

- 4.4 That the council encourage and support friends of groups to develop a plan for their park or open space. This plan should be developed in consultation with both the council and the local community and should clearly set out both the group's and council's role in developing the park or open space.
- 4.5 That in addition to the support within recommendations 2 and 3, the councils' policy and communications service work with the green spaces team and friends of groups to develop case study material for Chesterfield Borough Council led promotional opportunities including Your Chesterfield (the Council's magazine that goes to all homes in Chesterfield borough), the website and social media channels.
- 4.6 That a bi-annual friends group's forum is re-established to share key messages, best practice, increase networking and support and to enable the work of the friends groups to be shared and celebrated with a wider audience.
- 4.7 That a working group be established to assist with the delivery of the recommendations within the report.

## **5.0 Review approach**

- 5.1 The review was carried out by:
- a) Reviewing and analysing the current resources and officer support available to friends groups provided by Chesterfield Borough Council.
  - b) Reviewing and analysing the current resources and officer support to friends groups provided by other local authorities. This included a visit to Karen Lewis, Community Partnerships Officer at Sheffield City Council.
  - c) Project group meetings to review findings.
  - d) Meetings and discussions with Cabinet Members and officers including:
    - Councillor Chris Ludlow, Cabinet Member for health and wellbeing
    - Michael Brymer, commercial services manager
    - John Ramsey, principal green space strategy officer
    - Lead officers from the policy and communication service
  - e) Consultation and discussion with local friends groups via an online survey and face to face meetings

- 5.2 The information received from the survey with the friends groups was collated and analysed for trends. This data together with the information gained from the subsequent meetings with friends' group members was considered by the project group in formulating their recommendations.
- 5.4 The project group selected a set of other local authorities to examine how they worked with friends groups. These were selected on a basis of either demonstrating best practice or having a similar demographic to Chesterfield.
- 5.5 The project group also referred to the extensive report "What are Friends for?" published by Cambridge City Council in 2013 as part of their research.

## **6.0 Review findings and analysis**

- 6.1 At the start of the review the project group recognised the importance of talking with existing friends groups in Chesterfield to learn how they operated and about the types of activities they were involved in. The project group also wanted to learn how the groups communicated with council officers, and about the level of support officers provided to the groups.
- 6.2 The group agreed that to gather this information a survey should be conducted with members of friends groups in Chesterfield. This action however highlighted some concerns regarding information management. The information published on the council's website was out of date and incomplete as was the information provided directly by the green spaces team. The Democratic and Scrutiny Officer then worked with group members to update the list so that it could be used to send a survey to key contacts in every active friends group.
- 6.3 After the survey had been completed by the friends groups, the project group invited representatives of each group to meet with them at the town hall. These meetings allowed the project group members to discuss the data collected directly with the friends groups as well as to hear their thoughts regarding how the relationship between friends groups and the council could work more effectively.

- 6.4 Representatives of the well-established groups were in agreement that council officers were able to be contacted, and were helpful and supportive when they interacted with them. However representatives of a group that was in its early stages of development noted that initially it had been difficult to find out which officer they should contact when setting up their group. All the groups noted that it can also be difficult to know who to contact at the council about specific enquiries that may not be the responsibility of the green spaces team. The green spaces team does have an online information pack on setting up a friends group which contains a list of key officer contacts; this list however is very out of date and needs to be reviewed.
- 6.5 Friends group representatives, as well as project group members were in agreement that while officers were very helpful when contacted, especially the Principal Green Spaces Strategy Officer, one officer should not be expected to deal with all enquiries from all of the groups. Project group members were in agreement that friends group and officer communication should be organised in a way that provided groups with a single point of contact, but at the same time did not put all the responsibility on one officer to deal with all of the enquiries from all the groups. This could potentially be facilitated by providing friends groups with a list of officer contacts at the council and their area of responsibility to enable enquiries to be dealt with by the appropriate officer.

**Recommendation 1** - That an up-to-date data base of friends of groups' contacts is maintained by officers and that all friends of groups are given defined points of contact at the council to facilitate streamlined, effective and accountable channels of communication between groups and the council.

- 6.6 The Chesterfield Borough Council website currently invites anyone considering setting up a friends group to contact the council by phone or email and includes a link to the document "Establishing a Park Friends Group". This document contains information and guidance to new groups and example documents such as a model constitution for groups. However due to officer resource this document has not been reviewed for some time and contains out of date information, especially with regard to officer contact details.

- 6.7 As part of the group's research it reviewed the written resources provided by other local authorities to new groups setting up and compared them to the documents offered by Chesterfield Borough Council. The group found wide variances in style and content of the written resources available, some were very similar to the document provided on the council's own website, however other authorities' documents were much more comprehensive with regard to content, and were presented in a much more user friendly and modern style.
- 6.8 The set of guidance documents for new friends groups that stood out to the group were those offered by Sheffield City Council. At the outset of the review project and group members read the report "What are friends for?" which had been commissioned by Cambridge City Council to look at their relationship with friends groups. In this report Sheffield City Council had been praised for demonstrating "best practice" with regard to their collaborative and constructive relationship with its large network of over 70 friends and community groups. To learn more about this relationship and to consider if some practices could potentially be implemented in Chesterfield, the project group lead member met with Karen Lewis, Community Partnerships Manager at Sheffield City Council.
- 6.9 Sheffield City Council provides a Starter Pack, "Starting a New Community Group" for new friends groups. The document sets out comprehensive but clear information in a series of worksheets which promote good practice for operating a friends group as well as providing templates for key documents such as an example constitution. Sheffield City Council is happy to share this documentation with other authorities to utilise or adapt for themselves. The pack is attached at **Appendix D**.
- 6.10 The pack provides all the resources needed for a group to be set up correctly and to give it firm foundations. The representatives of the longer established friends groups noted that receiving structured support at the outset of forming their group in areas such as establishing a constitution and developing other essential policies and procedures had been key to their groups' success and longevity.
- 6.11 The survey of friends groups in Chesterfield showed that while all groups had a constitution only three had public liability insurance and only one had risk assessment forms. When the project group met with the friends groups, lack of available guidance and expertise was



cited as the main reasons for not having these documents in place. It is not realistic to expect every group to have the expertise “in house” to create these documents. Consequently the group members feel strongly that it is vital in order to ensure equality of outcomes for different groups that guidance on key documents and procedures, as well as information on running an effective friends group is available to all groups. Other authorities provide example risk assessments in their start up material in recognition that groups will need guidance in creating these documents.

6.12 The project group also reviewed the constitutions of friends groups in Chesterfield and found large variances between documents. While all the constitutions considered set out the minimum requirements needed to have a formally constituted group, some were much more detailed and specific than others.

6.13 The project group understands that each group’s constitution will by necessity vary, and that as each group is an independent organisation it is important that they should have control over their own affairs. To this end the council should not insist that each group’s constitution should contain mandated objectives or commitments; however the council should provide the tools to ensure that each group can build a strong constitution that will effectively meet the needs of each park or open space. This approach will ensure that each friends group is able to work with the council as well as their local community constructively and inclusively, and in a way that is both accountable and transparent.

6.14 The project group reviewed several example constitutions provided by other authorities, and again wide variances in style and content were seen. The project group approved of several elements included over different constitutions for example with regard to equality issues and accessibility. While, as already noted the group believes constitutions should not be excessively prescriptive or contain excessive details that could be better included in protocol papers for groups, constitutions should always formalise the working relationship between friends groups and the council. The project group were of the opinion that the wording used in the Manchester City Council example constitution met this objective effectively as it made it both the friends group and the council’s relationship clear and unequivocal, but was worded in a cooperative and “light touch” manner.

## **“Aims**

**(that friends groups) work in partnership with Manchester City Council Leisure Department (and whilst recognising that the ultimate responsibility for funding lies with the Council) to identify other funding sources”**

### ***Manchester City Council” Friends of Park” Start-up pack***

The full example constitution is included at **Appendix E**.

**Recommendation 2** - That the Friends of Groups information pack is reviewed and updated to provide:

- Guidance on developing a new group or joining an existing group
- Guidance on developing aims, constitutions, management committees and financial arrangements
- Advice and tips for key management committee roles including the chair, secretary and treasurer
- Tips for keeping the members of the friends of group, local community and council updated including social media and links to council publications, social media and websites
- Basic insurance and risk management advice
- Advice on developing an action plan
- Templates and examples of key documents to assist groups
- Where to go for help and support including Chesterfield Borough Council and Links CVS

6.15 The council’s Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2015 – 2024 is a key document that links with the council’s key corporate priorities as set out in the council plan. The strategy is primarily concerned with the management and development of publicly accessible green space that has recreational value within the borough. The strategy aims to direct and prioritise resources in order to gain maximum health and

wellbeing benefits through the provision of high quality and accessible green spaces.

- 6.16 The friends of groups have and can continue to play an important role in the delivery of the strategy. This includes attracting external funding in order to drive improvements and attract more people to use parks and open spaces. However from the meetings held with the representatives of the friends groups it became clear that most groups were unaware of the strategy and how their work was contributing to the achievement of its objectives. Some groups did note that they were aware of the strategy but had not used it when setting out their objectives. Only two groups advised that they were both familiar with the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and had used it when drawing up their improvement plan so to ensure that their priorities and objectives supported those of the council.
- 6.17 As previously noted the project group used an online survey in order to consult with and gather information from friends groups in Chesterfield. The questionnaire sent to the friends groups is attached at **Appendix A**. The survey received a good response from the friends groups with eight groups completing the online questionnaire.
- 6.18 The survey responses provided a significant amount of quantitative and qualitative data about friends groups and their activities. The full results of the survey are attached at **Appendix B**. The survey results provided a comprehensive record of the activities of friends groups in areas including community engagement, fund raising and bidding to external organisations.
- 6.19 Currently the green spaces team is generally well informed with regard to the activities of friends groups. For example if friends groups are holding a fundraising event this needs to be discussed in advance with officers. There is however no strategic over-arching data collection exercise with regard to friends group activities and subsequent evaluation of this data against the objectives of the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy.
- 6.20 Sheffield City Council, who has strong and constructive relationships with their network of friends groups, conducts an annual survey of friends groups. This allows data to be gathered on group composition, activities, fund raising and information on how many hours group

members have spent on site as volunteers or organising events. The survey used by Sheffield City Council is attached at **Appendix F**.

- 6.21 Project group members were in agreement that the actions of friends groups operating on council owned land must support and be in alignment with council priorities and that for this to happen council officers must be fully aware of the each group's activities and objectives. This will also improve opportunities for publicising friends of and council improvements to parks, events and opportunities for volunteering and links to recommendation 2.

**Recommendation 3** - That an annual survey with Friends Groups be carried out to collect information on their activities and achievements to enable the council to see how their work is contributing to the delivery of the councils objectives, as set out in the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy.

- 6.22 One of the key areas that the project group were keen to review was how the relationship between friends groups and the council was managed. The group found from their discussions with both the groups and officers that the relationship was generally good with open channels of communication. Friends' group members consult with officers regarding their plans and officers attend friends groups' committee meetings where appropriate.

- 6.23 As previously noted the majority of friends groups advised that they were unaware of the content of the council's Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, and as a consequence did not know how their activities were in alignment with council priorities. It should be noted that communication between the council and the groups is at a level where it would be extremely unlikely that a group's activities would be totally contrary to the objectives of the council. However it is possible that some groups could be carrying out activities that are not as strategically focussed and aimed at meeting the council's objectives for parks and open spaces as they could potentially be.

- 6.24 From the responses received to the survey only 20% of the friends groups in Chesterfield stated that they had a current management, improvement or master plan for their park or open space. The groups that did have a plan advised that they had been developed and agreed with the green spaces development officer and had been drawn up with full regard to the council's Parks and Open Spaces

Strategy. These groups advised that developing a plan had positively assisted them in producing better outcomes for their park or open space. These plans had also been beneficial in clearly defining the relationship and responsibilities between the council and the group with regard to the development of the park and open space.

- 6.25 The friends groups that did have a plan noted that it was important that the community was involved and consulted in their development to ensure that the group's priorities were aligned to those of the local community as well as to those of the council and the friends group members.
- 6.26 Sheffield City Council, which the group used as an example of "best practice", had in the past considered using a formal partnership agreement between the council and friends groups to set out mutual expectations. This approach however was never implemented as it was feared that it could become a contractual relationship that might not be sustainable in the long term. The project group note that it is important that expectations between the council and the friends groups are clear from the start of the relationship.
- 6.27 The project group appreciates that each friends group has varying levels of expectations of both their role and of the balance of responsibility between the council and themselves with regard to the upkeep and development of parks and open spaces. All groups were in agreement however that the relationship between themselves and the council, as well as each group's objectives needed to be clearly defined for each party by developing a mutually agreed plan. This approach would help define the relationship between the groups and the council, provide a basis for mutual accountability and understanding and also assist with the setting of clear, targeted and realistic objectives for both the council and the friends groups from the outset.

**Recommendation 4** - That the council encourage and support friends of groups to develop a plan for their park or open space. This plan should be developed in consultation with both the council and the local community and should clearly set out both the group's and council's role in developing the park or open space.

- 6.28 The project group, at an early stage in their research looked at friends' group websites and social media activity to gain information

about each groups activities. The project group found wide variances in how each group was using websites and social media, with some groups having both their own websites and social media accounts while others had no web presence at all. There were links to some group's websites from the council's website, but not all groups' websites were listed.

- 6.29 During project group meetings with the friends groups, the representatives noted that maintaining an up-to-date and professional looking web site was very time consuming and that not all friends groups were fortunate enough to have the expertise available to their group in order to do this type of work. Several groups noted that while they still had a website their primary method of online communication was via a Facebook page as this method of online communication had numerous advantages over a traditional website. The representatives noted that a Facebook page was both easy to set up and maintain, as well as having the benefit of being easier for members of the local, and wider community to access and subsequently get to know about the activities of the groups.
- 6.30 In addition to using websites and social media the different friends groups had mixed approaches to how they communicated with their local communities. The friends groups noted that it was important for them to engage with the wider community beyond those who came to their meetings or sat on their committee, so as to learn about what the community wanted for their park or open space.
- 6.31 The methods of communication that the groups had used included leafletting their local area, public meetings and using community events on their park or open space so they could talk face to face with local residents to learn about what they wanted to happen in their park. The success of leafletting had been very disappointing for many of the groups as the activity was very time consuming and had resulted in very low response rate. Public meetings had also been held by some groups in the past, but these had been discontinued due to poor attendance. All of the friends groups that were spoken to thought that face to face communication with local residents was the most effective method of learning what they wanted for their park or open space.
- 6.32 In order that friends groups' activities are to be focussed on the priorities of their local communities the project group members and

the friends' groups' representatives were in agreement that there must be effective communication between the group and their local community.

- 6.33 While information on the friends groups' activities can be found by following links from the council's website to individual websites, the representatives of the groups felt that the council could do more to promote their activities to a wider audience. This could be done by including news stories on their activities in council publications or promoting their events on the council's web site and via social media activity.

**Recommendation 5** – That in addition to the support within recommendations 2 and 3, the councils policy and communications service work with the green spaces team and friends of groups to develop case study material for Chesterfield Borough Council led promotional opportunities including Your Chesterfield (the Council's magazine that goes to all homes in Chesterfield borough), the website and social media channels.

- 6.34 With friends groups being comprised of volunteers each group will as a consequence have members with different skills, strengths and experiences that can be utilised for successful operation of the group and for the benefit of their park or open space. Enthusiasm and generosity in giving up their time are attributes that are common to all friends groups, but the project group acknowledge that some groups will have more specialist knowledge than others in key areas such as compiling risk assessments, writing policy documents, obtaining insurance and submitting bids for funding etc.
- 6.35 In order to achieve the best outcomes for parks and open spaces and communities across the borough, steps should be taken to enable the sharing of skills and best practice between groups.
- 6.36 One solution considered for this issue solution is the development of a central store of ideas e.g. via a website, however this was considered to be too resource intensive for both the council and its officers, and friends groups. Another option which the project group considered and discussed with the friends groups was the establishment of a friend's group forum to enable group members to come together and meet with officers to facilitate communication and information sharing. Some of the longer established friends group advised that a

forum for friends groups had been facilitated in the past by the council, and that they had found this arrangement useful. During the project groups research members saw at first hand the value and potential of friends groups coming together and talking to each other to share ideas and experience. All the groups consulted with said they would like a forum to be re-established so that they could meet with their counterparts from other friends groups in order to share information, ideas and best practice.

- 6.37 Bi-annual meetings facilitated by the council would have the benefit of further strengthening the communication channels between the friends groups and the council and also enable officers to give out information once, rather than always needing to meet with groups individually. This will provide a "safe space" for friends groups to discuss and consider common issues and support each other. These meeting would also provide valuable case study material to support recommendation 5.
- 6.38 Other methods of communication between groups, and between groups and the council, used by other authorities were also looked at. Sheffield City Council and Mansfield District Council, amongst others publish a newsletter. Sheffield City Council publishes an e-newsletter four times a year that it circulates to friends groups, containing news from the council and features on interesting activities that others might wish to replicate. This also gives Sheffield an opportunity to communicate the same messages at the same time to all its wide network of friends groups. Mansfield District Council publishes a newsletter called "Parklife" quarterly to which all friends groups are encouraged to have an input in. The newsletter enables groups to promote their activities, encourage new members to join and allows them to report any good new stories to other groups and the community in general. The newsletter has been a success and in addition to it being available on their website, their officers are now looking into the newsletter being added to their district wide newspaper to help promote friends groups throughout the district. An edition of Parklife is attached at **Appendix C**.
- 6.39 After careful consideration of benefit against resource we are not recommending the development of a friends of newsletter at this time with the preference being for wider community communication as detailed in recommendation 5.



**Recommendation 6** – That a bi-annual friends groups forum is re-established to share key messages, best practice, increase networking and support and to enable the work of the friends groups to be shared and celebrated with a wider audience.

- 6.40 Friends groups play an important role in the life and development of the parks and open spaces in the borough by applying to external organisations for funds to enable improvements to the parks and open spaces to be made. The funds that are accessed by the friends groups are largely from sources that are not available to the council, so without the work of the friends groups many of the improvements and new facilities in the borough's parks would not be possible.
- 6.41 Friends groups in Chesterfield have been successful in securing substantial grants in recent years to enable several schemes to be developed; including the Stand Road friends group receiving £13,000 from Viridor to fund a wetland area project, and the Somersall Park friends group receiving £8,000 from Tesco Bags of Help.
- 6.42 Friends groups are encouraged before making a bid for funding to initially speak with the green spaces officers at the council to see if the council can support the bid and to offer technical guidance. This is a critical part of the process as some grant giving organisations require some match funding for the project for which the bid is being made to be in place before an application is submitted. The Council has in some cases been able to assist with providing the match funding required enabling friends groups to make bids for grants but this is not always the case so dialogue is needed.
- 6.43 From the consultation held with the friends groups it became clear that the process of applying for grant funding was an area of great concern to several groups. Areas of concern included:
- Lack of expertise and knowledge amongst group members to enable the successful completion of complex grant application forms
  - Difficulties in getting the match funding needed in order to make a bid
  - Lack of coordination between groups and the council in the submission of bids, resulting in bids from neighbouring groups

being submitted to the same organisation at the same time for similar projects which had resulted in bids being unsuccessful

- Written guidance or pro-formas not being available to assist groups in writing bids that had a good chance of being accepted and also being successful

6.44 As previously noted there is currently limited communication and best practice sharing between friends groups in Chesterfield, meaning that the expertise that there is with regard to submitting bids is concentrated in a few groups. These groups have consequently been more successful in accessing external grant funding than others. The project group members were very concerned about this situation and the subsequent inequalities that it could create with regard to the facilities available in the parks and open spaces, and between the different communities across the Borough.

6.45 All representatives of the friends groups agreed during the consultation that more support and guidance from the council and partner agencies e.g. Links CVS being available to groups would be extremely beneficial when they were submitting bids. There are currently some very brief guidelines regarding the bidding process included the start-up pack, however other authorities provide much more detailed guidance to their groups. This can be seen in the document provided by Manchester City Council which is attached at **Appendix E**. The friends groups that had been successful in bidding for grants also advised they would be happy to share their experience to support other friends groups in Chesterfield in the writing and submitting of bids.

6.46 The project group agreed with the friends groups that there needed to be much greater coordination and communication between all groups and the council with regard to the bidding process. This would ensure that neighbouring friends groups were not simultaneously bidding to the same organisation at the same time for the same money. The project group notes that a more coordinated approach being taken in the submitting of bids could result in more bids being successful. Recommendations 2 and 6 within this report support this aim.

**Recommendation 7** – That a working group be established to assist with the delivery of the recommendations within the report.

6.47 The project group agreed that in order to support the delivery of the recommendations, a working group with representation from all stakeholders needed to be established.

## **7.0 Review conclusions**

7.1 In conducting this review the project group has met with friends groups from across the borough and would like to acknowledge the positive contribution that they make to the upkeep and development of the Borough's parks and open spaces. The project group recognise that many of the improvements to and activities that take place in the parks and open spaces would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of the members of the friends groups. The project group would also like to express their appreciation of the work of the officers who work with and support the friends groups with their activities.

7.2 In acknowledging the vital role of friends groups in the upkeep and development of the Borough's parks and open spaces, as well as to ensure that current groups flourish and that new groups are formed, the project group notes that there has to be high quality and easy to follow written guidance on key documents and procedures available to all friends groups.

7.3 During the project group's research members saw at first hand the value and potential of friends groups coming together and talking to each other. Consequently, for there to be the best possible outcomes for parks and open spaces across the borough, both the project group and the friends groups think it is essential for there to be structures in place to encourage and facilitate effective communication between groups. This approach should not only ultimately reduce the demand on officer time but also allow for there to be greater equality of outcomes across all parks and open spaces for the benefit of all communities across the Borough.

## **8.0 Considerations**

8.1 To inform the review, the project group considered the equality impact of the recommendations. No negative impacts were identified within the equality impact assessment; indeed the improvements suggested should improve accessibility and engagement in

volunteering opportunities with the friends of groups and improve parks and open spaces for all members of the community.

8.2 Resourcing the recommendations was at the forefront of the project group’s consideration to ensure that unrealistic expectations are not raised with the groups and further resource pressure placed on the council. Following further conversations with relevant officers the project group consider that the revised recommendations should be achievable within existing resources however this will need to be a further point of exploration with Cabinet colleagues and officers.

8.3 Risk management was also a key consideration. The table below highlights the key risk considerations.

Description of the Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Mitigating Action	Impact	Likelihood
Retaining the current approach to engagement between the council and the friends groups reduces the opportunity for maximising positive outcomes for different groups, parks and communities across the borough.	Medium	High	The recommendations within the review aim to offer more support to groups including guidance on setting up new groups, developing aims, constitutions, committees and financial arrangements, basic insurance and risk advice and signposting for further help and support. These recommendations also aim to improve overall relationships and engagement between the Friends of Groups and the Council.	Low	Low

<p>The recommendations will create additional financial and resource burdens for the Council which have not previously been planned for and do not fall within the priority areas identified within the Council Plan.</p>	<p>Medium</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>The project group understands that some of the recommendations could initially take significant amounts of officer time. In order to mitigate this, the group has not put time frames on when the recommendations should be completed by. Also, the project group included the recommendation to establish a working group, which can include elected members, to assist with achieving the recommendations and reduce the reliance on individual officers to carry out the work.</p> <p>Engagement has taken place with the Greenspaces team as part of the review. They have indicated that some of these recommendations could be built into standard practices and work planning. However other recommendations (e.g. providing advice on developing constitutions, action planning etc.) will need to be prioritised and phased over a period of years. This will need to be clearly communicated to Friends of Groups to avoid creating unrealistic expectations. The working group will need to give further consideration into the impact on priority areas and additional resource requirements.</p> <p>Some of these recommendations impact significantly on the Policy and Communications Service e.g. communications and marketing support, increased consultation activity. The working group will need to give further consideration to understand the Policy and Communications implications.</p> <p>Stakeholder identification and engagement has been identified as a learning point for future reviews.</p>	<p>Medium</p>	<p>Medium</p>
<p>Increased level of expectation from friends groups in terms of council support that may not be sustainable in the long term.</p>	<p>Medium</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Please see points above.</p> <p>In the longer term these changes should enable groups to support each other more effectively and share knowledge, experience and skills.</p>	<p>Low</p>	<p>Medium</p>

## Appendices

- A:** Survey sent to friends groups
- B:** Summary of responses received to the survey sent to friends groups
- C:** Mansfield District Council "Park Life" newsletter
- D:** Sheffield City Council guide "Starting a new Community Group"

- E:** Manchester City Council” Friends of Park” Start-up pack
- F:** Sheffield City Council Friends of Green Spaces Survey
- G:** List of Friends and Community groups in Chesterfield Borough.

## **Bibliography**

- What are Friends for? - A report for Cambridge City Council by Phil Back Associates Ltd, October, 2013
- Chesterfield Borough Council Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2015 – 2024

### **Contacts:**

**Project Group Lead** – Councillor Kate Caulfield

**Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer** – Rachel Appleyard