

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 19 JULY 2011
title: FUTURE OF FRIENDS GROUPS
submitted by: DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
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1 PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this report is three-fold:

- To bring Members up to date with the activities of existing Friends Groups.
- To advise of a request to set up a new group for Highmoor Park.
- To agree what future relations with Friends Groups should be and determine the extent of works they can carry out.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities

- Council Ambitions – to protect and enhance the environmental quality of the area.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The first group to be established was the Friends of Clitheroe Castle in 2007. The primary aim of the group was to support the Council in the re-development of the Castle Museum through raising public awareness and promoting private sector sponsorship. This met with some success as around £100,000 was raised through such channels. Since the reopening, the group has been fairly dormant but it is our intention for the group to act as community representatives as a wider management structure and turn their attentions to future opportunities within the Castle grounds.

2.2 The Friends of Brungerley Park was next to be formed. The group consists of regular park users who are keen for it to rekindle some of its former glory. They were successful in raising £25,000 through a grant from the Big Lottery to carry out improvement works and continue to be involved by carrying out some planting and painting benches, in consultation with grounds maintenance staff.

2.3 More recently, the Friends of Whalley Moor Woodland (Calderstones) was established. They were initially involved in a consultation exercise on the estate to develop ideas for public open space and the decision of the woodland play area. Like Brungerley, they have applied for external funding for further works but await the outcome of their application. They also have carried out further activities such as litter picking and the installation of bird boxes.

2.4 All three groups have formal constitutions, elected officers and bank accounts.

2.5 There is no doubt that each of the Friends Groups has made a positive contribution to the maintenance/development of Council owned land, enhancing, rather than replacing existing Council functions.

2.6 The scope of each group has followed that of a lobby group, which is generally the role of such groups, linked to parks/open space.

3 CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 Some time ago, the Council's Amenity Cleansing Manager was approached by a resident of Highmoor Park as he had identified a number of like-minded residents who wanted permission to improve certain areas of the estate.

3.2 At first this involved similar duties as the established friends groups, ie litter picking and enhancing flower beds. This has now developed into a much more ambitious list of projects, one of which includes proposals for planting of trees to create an avenue effect at the entrance to the estate and use of mechanical cutting equipment in order to carry out work currently undertaken by the grounds maintenance department.

3.3 During this activity, the resident who approached our staff, has held a series of residents meetings to try and get more people involved in works on the estate. A fledging friends group was established and a collection was carried out to raise money for the groups activities. The group is not yet constituted nor has a bank account. It has also developed outside any agreed plan with the Council and we are not aware as to whether they have formally elected officers.

3.4 The group, as it stands, are keen to move into greater things than previously agreed and are pressing Council staff for a decision of their future role. Given the nature of some of the work being proposed and its implications for health and safety, officers have been reluctant to take things any further at present, especially as the group is not properly constituted and do not appear to reflect the views of all residents.

4 ISSUES

4.1 Whilst officers do not want to stifle the enthusiasm of volunteers we only have a limited resources to deal with requests from such groups and so we need a much more structured system.

4.2 Members should also be aware that the proposals being presented are not universally accepted across the estate and, in the instance of Mearley Brook, may conflict with flood risk and biodiversity issues. We have received a number of letters from residents who feel that the scope of the group has grown beyond what they thought it was going to be and some feel there is no need for such a formal group at all.

4.3 The Highmoor Park situation is different from the other groups, as it is the first request from a housing development, although there is an element of public open space within the development that is currently managed very effectively by the grounds maintenance department

4.4 The split of opinion on the need and role of a friends group gives us a dilemma as, by taking the view of either party, could alienate others. The only solution therefore may be an independent ballot of residents. Although this will help arrive at a majority view it will demand additional work on our part.

4.5 Determining the scope of works we feel appropriate for such groups is not specific to Highmoor Park. Although the other groups have constitutions these do not identify the extent of work the Council would allow volunteers to carry out on its land.

- 4.6 As officers, we feel it is important to standardise such matters for the following reasons:
- It makes clear any health and safety issues
 - It prevents officer's time being diverted away from their duties.
 - It clarifies the parameters for all groups.
- 4.7 Given that the Council has to comply with a range of health and safety matters for its own employees, then it is obvious that we could not allow any actions by volunteers that contravene health and safety. This particularly relates to the use of machinery/equipment where specific qualifications/training and supervision is required.
- 4.8 Officers therefore feel that a standard memorandum/policy of understanding be developed that identifies the relationship between the Council and friends groups, the scope of works that would be acceptable, the necessary health and safety requirements along with site specific work schedules that identifies who does what.
- 4.9 We recognise, once again, that in the first instance, this will require additional work from officers of the leisure services/grounds maintenance department, but once established, should cut down on contact time and improve relationships.
- 4.10 Members should be aware that it will not be possible for officers to attend friends group meetings, provide administrative support or supervise volunteers but may wish to consider Members themselves being involved if a specific group is active within their ward.
- 4.11 Insurance matters between the Council and Friends groups will also need to be resolved. Under the Council's current public liability insurance, volunteers are afforded the same protection as employees, provide that the tasks they carry out are not beyond their experience/qualifications and appropriate risk assessments/training is carried out.
- 4.12 It is therefore important that officers assess the range of likely tasks and determine whether, given time and resources, they could be carried out by volunteers.

5 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The approval of this report may have the following implications
- Resources – there are no direct financial issues but there are however staff resource issues, depending on our scope of involvement.
 - Technical, Environmental and Legal – the Council's legal services team will be involved, along with operational staff, in drawing up a memorandum of understanding.
 - Political – such groups help demonstrate the Council's involvement in big society but also makes a clear distinction between the Council's core responsibilities and the added value of volunteers.
 - Reputation – this demonstrates that local people can be involved in decisions within their own communities, albeit in a controlled and planned manner.

6 RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE

- 6.1 Note the contents of the report and recognise the work already carried out by friends groups.
- 6.2 Consider whether the Council should encourage the formation of friends groups in areas other than designated parks.
- 6.3 If yes, determine whether an independent consultation exercise should be carried out to determine the formation of a friends group for Highmoor Park.
- 6.4 Agree to the establishment of a common memorandum of understanding for all friends groups.

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

For further information please ask for Chris Hughes, extension 4479.