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OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 30.6.2016

## MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY, 30 JUNE 2016

### COUNCILLORS

**PRESENT** Derek Levy, Abdul Abdullahi, Joanne Laban, Edward Smith and Nneka Keazor

**ABSENT** Katherine Chibah

**STATUTORY CO-OPTES:** *1 vacancy (Church of England diocese representative), Mr Simon Goulden (other faiths/denominations representative), Mr Tony Murphy (Catholic diocese representative), Alicia Meniru & 1 vacancy (Parent Governor representative) - Italics Denotes absence*

**OFFICERS:** Nicky Fiedler (Assistant Director, Public Realm, Environment), Andy Ellis (Scrutiny Officer), Stacey Gilmour (Scrutiny Secretary)

**Also Attending:** Councillor Daniel Anderson, Cabinet Member, Environment  
Councillor George Savva, Associated Cabinet Member, South East (observing)  
8 Friends of Parks representatives

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### WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting, including Friends of Parks and other interested parties. Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Chibah and Statutory Co-optee Tony Murphy.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Nneka Keazor. It was agreed that if Councillor Keazor arrived after the reasons for the Call-In had been heard, she could partake in discussions however, on this occasion she would not have the opportunity to vote on the decision.

It was noted that Councillor Michael Rye was substituting for Councillor Joanne Laban as she was leading on the Call-in item.

It was also noted that Councillor Dinah Barry was substituting in the absence of Councillor Chibah.

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### DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were put forward.

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**CALL-IN REPORT:THE COUNCILS REVISED APPROACH TO THE FRIENDS OF PARK GROUPS**

The Chair invited Cllr Laban to present the Reasons for Call-In, summarised as follows:

- Lack of proper consultation with the Friends of the Parks Groups. It was felt that when a new agreement comes through it should be shown to both parties involved before a decision is made.
- It shows a low level of stakeholder engagement.
- The decision report shows no data from talks with Parks Groups; therefore it is not known what these groups thought of the proposals.
- The decision does not take into consideration smaller parks groups.
- The change in the number of voluntary hours per level does not take into account the size of the park or the difference in the membership of the groups.
- The decision states that friends of parks groups should log park issues via the website rather than their old form of communication with Officers, However, the new website has not yet been fully completed and there are complaints about its function, therefore it seems premature to go down this route.
- This decision has not been made in the true spirit of partnership.

The Chair invited Cllr Anderson to respond, summarised as follows:

- The changes had come about as a result of budget decisions back in February when it was agreed that a further range of budget savings would be necessary across the organisation.
- As a result of these savings it was agreed that from this year the Public Realm Improvement Team would see staff reductions and therefore Officer support to Friends of Park Groups would have to be reduced.
- The Officer's remit would be refocused on supporting funding bids, providing strategic support of volunteers and managing park improvement projects.
- Officers currently attend over 100 quarterly Friends group meetings per year. However this is no longer sustainable and it is proposed that the remaining Officer's role will be refocused as stated above.
- Moving forward the Council's proposals are aimed at maintaining the same outcomes, but it is about delivering them in a more efficient and effective manner.
- The work of the Friends of Parks Groups and all volunteers is very much recognised, respected and appreciated and it was hoped that the

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positive relationships between the groups, Councillors and Officers continues.

- The revised agreement maintains the spirit of the original agreement, but proposes delivering the same objectives through a different way of working, as indicated above.
- There has been engagement with the parks groups about the changes. All groups were written to and the proposals were discussed at the first round of introductory ACM meetings, to support the transition, which were held in late April/early May.
- It was appreciated that there were some concerns regarding the new agreement and we are keen to ensure that these concerns are listened to. It is an evolving and organic document and we will need to closely monitor how it is working over the next couple of months. If there are failings in any particular way these will be addressed.
- The decision also allows for future amendments to the Agreement if required and necessary.

Cllr Keazor arrived at this point of the meeting

The Chair invited Nicky Fiedler, Assistant Director, Public Realm, Environment to respond, summarised as follows:

- All of the groups were written to explaining the new approach in March 2016.
- They were also invited to a series of introductory area based meetings held on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> May.
- Further details were presented at these meetings about the new approach and the new Agreement and the groups were provided with the opportunity to feedback their views to Councillors and Officers during this period.
- Initial comments raised by the Friends of Parks groups at the ACM meetings were noted and addressed.
- Concerns regarding the reduction in staff had also been noted and we are currently trying to use the staff that we have to support the FOP groups in the best way possible.
- The Agreement retains the current three levels of Bronze, Silver and Gold, but the specific commitments for both the Council and Friends groups have been updated to reflect the revised approach.
- A few of the Friends groups have requested that the Council increases the volunteering target as a challenge to the groups to deliver more within their parks.
- All size groups, which ever level can now access the same level of funding. This provides equity across the piece.
- The ability to report park problems online has been available for a number of years and was a key part of the previous website's functionality. The new approach enables the Friends of the parks to report issues immediately, by assessing the same system Officers would use, therefore providing a more efficient and effective

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solution to all parties. Out of 120 issues reported per month, 90 are now submitted online.

- The key changes to the Agreement are:
  - (i) Maintaining Green Flag standard-not accrediting it;
  - (ii) Change in Officer support;
  - (iii) Not required to attend consortium meetings;
  - (iv) Increased funding

The Chair then invited the Committee to put forward any questions or comments, which were as follows:

- Cllr Rye re-iterated the reasons for the Call-In. These being: lack of consultation, the fact that the revised Agreement was not shown to the Friends of Parks Groups before it was signed off. No data from talks with the groups was included in the decision report and not enough notice had been given of the planned meetings.
- Nicky Fiedler responded and confirmed that the groups had received 28 days' notification from the invite to the actual meetings taking place, so there had been plenty of notice. There had been good attendance at the ACM meetings and as previously stated, concerns raised at these meetings had been discussed and addressed. However no further information had been received from the groups stating that they were not happy with the proposed amendments to the Agreement.
- Cllr Rye asked if the smaller groups had been engaged with. Nicky said that she did not have the exact figures for attendance, but all groups had been invited.
- Cllr Rye asked if there was a signing in register at the ACM meetings and were formal minutes taken. Cllr Anderson and Nicky agreed that there did need to be a formal register of those attending the ACM meetings, as well as a formal note of the discussions that take place. This would be arranged for future meetings. **Action: Nicky Fiedler**
- Cllr Levy commented that online problems were generic and not just relevant to this decision. It is not being said that the Friends of Parks Groups can only use the website to report any issues. Every park has Ward Councillors that can be contacted as well as the ACMs. That line of contact is always open.
- Cllr Laban asked whether the final Agreement had been shown to the Friends of Parks Groups before it was intended to be published and felt that it would have been in the spirit of the partnership for them to have seen it.
- Nicky advised that the proposed amendments were put forward at the initial meetings. However the actual document wasn't as, at that stage, it was still an evolving document.
- Cllr Anderson added that although this was a fair point raised by Cllr Laban, there had been a clear two month period between what was discussed at the meetings and what had ultimately been signed off.
- Cllr Smith commented that with Council resources becoming less and less the Voluntary Sector were becoming more and more invaluable,

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therefore it was important to engage and consult with them in the best way possible and to retain a true partnership spirit.

- Cllr Barry asked if anything had come out of the introductory meetings between the Friends of Parks Groups and the ACMs. What had the FOPGs asked for. Nicky advised that some groups had asked for an increase in the hourly commitment and this had been responded to in the Agreement.
- At no later than the first meeting of 2017/18 (preferably February 2017) it was agreed to invite the three ACMs and representatives from the Friends of the Parks Groups to attend to provide views on the revised approach to engaging and to see if there have been any further amendments to the Partnership Agreement since today's meeting.  
**Action: To come back to Overview & Scrutiny meeting no later than the first meeting in 2017/18 -Andy Ellis/Stacey Gilmour**

The Chair then invited the Friends of the Parks Groups to put forward any questions or comments, which were as follows:

- Will the Friends of the Parks Groups have the opportunity to work with the Council on a Management Plan? Nicky advised that Management plans are very resource intensive so unfortunately the Council could not commit to that. However, if a particular park or project requires a Management Plan then of course the Council would work in partnership with the Friends of the Parks Groups
- Can the Friends of the Parks Groups leave here tonight with the clearest impression that the Partnership Agreement as it stands is still up for discussion.
- Cllr Anderson responded that it is an evolving document so any concerns can continue to be addressed. He continued by saying that he wants to find a way whereby no group feels disenfranchised and it is therefore important to establish some pragmatic, common sense Agreement. If there are problems in some of the workings we will seek to address them within the scope we have.

The Chair asked Cllr Laban to summarise her position which was as follows:

- A better protocol is needed in Public Realm to ensure that we better engage and consult with our Partnership Groups.
- The report is not very well written as it does not include data from talks with Park Groups. We need to know what people thought, their comments, views etc.
- This decision questions the true spirit of partnership.
- There needs to be some sort of protocol for the twice yearly ACM meetings.

The Chair asked Cllr Anderson to summarise his position, which was as follows:

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- The more efficient approach is aimed at sustaining the same outcomes of the original Agreement and also provides opportunities, through a more strategic approach and the sharing of best practices, to develop further the successful partnership with the Friends and the Council. The revisions of the Agreement, and the new ways of working, will continue to ensure that the resources of both the Council and the Friends Group enable maximum benefit to our parks.

The Committee then voted on the decision:

Councillors Abdullahi and Barry voted in favour of confirming the decision.

Councillors Rye and Smith voted in favour of referral back to the Cabinet Member for reconsideration.

The Chair, Councillor Levy, utilized his casting vote in confirming the original decision. He stated that this followed careful consideration of the opinions of both the proponent, Councillor Laban, Councillor Anderson as Cabinet Member for Environment and officers. In conclusion Councillor Levy confirmed that he had not heard sufficient evidence to refer the matter back to the Cabinet Member for reconsideration.

**The Committee therefore AGREED TO CONFIRM THE DECISION.**

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#### **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

No items were put forward.

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#### **DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The dates of future meetings provided with the agenda were noted.