

# ROYAL BOROUGH OF GREENWICH

## COMMUNITY SAFETY & ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 25 JULY 2019 AT 7.00 PM

### MINUTES

#### PRESENT:

##### Members:

Councillor Adel Khaireh (Chair), Councillors Angela Cornforth, Ann-Marie Cousins and Ian Hawking

##### Under Standing Orders

Councillor Jackie Smith (Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Community Safety & Chair of Licensing Committee)

##### Officers

Deputy Director Communities & Environment, and, Managing Director of GSP Ltd and GSS Ltd, Assistant Manager (P&OS), Head of Parks, Estates and Open Spaces, Community Engagement Officer and Corporate Governance Officer

##### Other People in Attendance

The Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum and representatives from the Friends Groups for; Coldharbour Open Spaces, Oxleas Woods, Queenscroft Park and Rockliffe Gardens.

#### Item

#### No.

#### 1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received for Councillors Ashikodi, Hills and Mardner.

#### 2 Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

### **3 Declarations of Interest**

#### **Resolved -**

That the list of Councillors' memberships as Council appointed representatives on outside bodies, joint committees and school governing bodies be noted.

### **4 Action Points Review of the previous meeting, of 27 June 2019.**

#### **Resolved -**

That it be noted that the actions requested at previous meetings of the Panel been completed and there were no actions which are outstanding or ongoing.

### **5 Service Performance Report - Parks, Estates and Open Spaces**

Before moving to accept the Officers presentation the Chair advised Members and public attendees that the purposed of the report and discussion was to allow the Panel to scrutinise the performance of Parks, Estates and Open Spaces within the resources available. That the debate should be focused on the substance of the report and any issues raised should be in relation to the report and the Borough as an entirety.

The Chair advised that, in addition to Council Officers, the Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum was in attendance to respond to questions from Panel Members.

The Deputy Director Communities and Environment presented the report, advising that it covered the three main areas of how the Service worked with the Park Friends Groups, safety in parks and waste management in the parks. He thanked all the Friends Groups and staff for their work to maintain the parks during the recent heatwave.

Scrutiny Panel Members sought the Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum's views on the level of support Friends Groups received from the Council officers.

The Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum advised the Panel that the Forum represented all the Boroughs Friends Groups and worked to ensure a constant dialogue was maintain in respect of funding issues, ensuring those

funds were well spent and works or projects were completed as quickly as possible. The Forum also allowed Friends Groups to share issues or problems they were having with others who may have a solution, encoring an environment of mutual support between the Groups.

In respect of the support to New Groups, the Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum confirmed that they supported all groups, whether long term established or in the early stages of being formed. Further, the Forum was looking at the feasibility of creating a mentoring system between established and new groups.

In respect of Panel Members questions on the level of support given to developing new groups the Deputy confirmed that the post of Community Engagement Officer had been filled and the officer was working closely with the Forum and any interested Ward Councillors, on supporting the establishment of new groups. However, Officers need to ensure that any group established adopted and adhered to the agreed Friends of Parks contract.

The Community Engagement Officer confirmed that she was the first point of contact for Friends Groups, supporting both established and new groups as well as helping any person or group interested in setting up a new Friends Group. She advised that there was information on the Council Website on starting a new Friends group and she had been reaching out to interested people through the local Neighbourhood Panels.

The Deputy Director added that the Councils Enforcement Officers, who, dealt with antisocial business (ASAB) in parks, Park Rangers and other Council Officers would pass on the details, by agreement, of anyone identified as interested in maintaining the parks, displaying civic pride or an environmental champion, to encourage further engagement.

He continued that the number of people interested in becoming Environmental Champions was growing and a junior Environment Champion's scheme was being implemented through the Boroughs schools. A range of areas, other than parks and woodlands, could be adopted by Friends Groups or Environmental Champions, such as allotments or through the 'Adopt a Place' scheme which could be to 'adopt' a street or small area. The adoptees or Friends would be responsible for watering the trees and vegetation and any planting, as well as litter picking. He stated that there was a growing awareness among Officers, Members and the public of the value of our natural areas. As the Council resources were diminishing, issues, such as ASAB and littering remained and the local community were often in the best

position to challenge and combat these issues by embracing the areas in which they live.

A Scrutiny Member believed that the level of Parkfest events had decreased, none appeared to be in the East area of the Borough and asked if, once established, if any Friends Group could participate?

The Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum advised that 11 Friends Groups ran or were involved in the 26 events held and it was unlikely more events could be accommodated within the confines of the financial grant. Having said that, they had not yet had to turn away any Friends group from participating in Parkfest

The Parks Strategy and Development Manger responded to Panel Members that there were 26 established Friends Groups, advising that the Bostall Gardens Group had not yet been fully established. That all established Groups could participate in Parkfest adding that there were a number of other community events supported by or run by Friends Groups, such as the Plumstead Make Merry.

Councillor Jackie Smith, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Community Safety advised the Panel that the Royal Borough of Greenwich did not have responsibility for any park or open spaces in Thamesmead as they were wholly owned by Gallions and Trust Thamesmead, who funded and ran a number of events and festivals in these parks.

The Scrutiny Panel sought further information on how officers handled situations where the expectations of a Friends Group could not be met?

The Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces responded that the Officers focus was on supporting Friends groups but making it clear that it could take time to raise funds or find ways to achieve the desired outcome and the onus always had to be on actions for the improvement of or benefit of the park or open space.

The Deputy Director added that the support from Officers and the Council could not always be financial and in order to embrace all individuals' interested in playing their part in maintaining our parks other ways needed to be considered. However, there would always be occasions where funding levels and the outcomes desired by a Friends Groups would not always match and Officers' had to be clear on what was achievable and realistic about the timescales.

The Chair invited the representatives from Friends Groups to make brief presentations to the Scrutiny Panel.

The Friends of Oxleas Woods representative advised the Panel that they were established just over a year with 250 members with an emphasis on preserving the ancient Oxleas woodland. In respect of the Groups relationship with the Council, there were times when the Groups aspirations and work was frustrated by actions taken by the Council due to a lack of communication. He exemplified the Parks Department felling healthy and protected Oak Tree's in Jacks Wood upon instruction of the Councils Insurance Department without, the Group felt, full investigation into the necessity of such action. Further, the Councils Public Health Officers contractor used a Rodenticides based rat poison near the Wood however, Rodenticides are not encouraged for use near wildlife areas. He advised that the Park Rangers were very supportive but the main issues the Group faced were a lack of resources and failure of the Councils interdepartmental communication. He felt that there was a lack of direct involvement by Ward Councillors and believed that up until about four year ago Members were appointed to Friends Groups, but rarely attended meetings.

Members sought information on what could be done to improve departmental joint working

The Deputy Director stated that he felt that cross Departmental communications worked well but there were always opportunities for greater synergies. That as part of the Council's agreement to the Climate Emergency Cabinet Members had to sign off on the agreement for any tree on the highway, estate, in a park, or protected tree to be felled. He accepted that there were challenges and that new groups sometimes had a fresh perspective and picked up on issues that longer established groups did not experience or had developed ways to mitigate. Officers were happy to work with individual groups to focus on these and how to resolve issues. He accepted that there was a need to develop better communications as to when the Council was undertaking activities to ensure the Friends Group knew what, where and why.

**Action: DDC&E**

The Parks Strategy and Development Manager added that, in respect of the issue of the use of a Rodenticides based rat poison, this had been an error, as the contractor had been recommended by the Environmental Health Department and it had been taken on good faith that the appropriate baits would be used. He confirmed that Officers' had learned lessons from this incident.

The Friends of Coldharbour Open Spaces representative addressed the Panel advising that there were also a relatively new, small group, covering a large area. He advised that the Community Engagement Officer had been nothing but helpful and supportive at every step, however there had been breakdowns in communication with the Parks operational team. He exemplified that there had been two incidents, one where volunteers spent some considerable time planting bulbs, which were completely mown down by the Grounds Maintenance team. On another occasion the Grounds Maintenance team carefully mowed around a row of recently planted sapling trees, the next member of the team mowed over the entire row of sapling trees, destroying them all. The Friends group felt that it would be helpful to know that conversations went both up and down the chain of Council Officers. They also had issues regarding the number and location of rubbish bins that everyone but the Park Rangers felt were in the wrong place.

The Scrutiny Panel noted that there had been some failures of communication both between department and with the Friends Group and recommended that Officers to look at ways of improving or developing clearer lines of communication.

The Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces noted the speakers' comments regarding the cascading of information between Council Departments and Officer. That there appeared to be a need to improve joint working and lines of communication between the Parks and Open Space Management Team, Friends Groups and the Parks Operational teams, particularly around the issues highlighted to establish a common framework of understanding.

**Action: DC&E / Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces**

The Friends of Rockliffe Gardens representative advised that Friends of Rockliffe Gardens were established around five years ago, following a comment on Facebook and volunteers needed the will to preserve their park as all Friends Groups were formed of volunteers who did not always have a lot of free time.

He echoed the comments of the previous Friends representative as they had similar issues where planting had been undertaken, with the agreement of the Parks Officers, and destroyed by the operational team mowing. He advised that the Group was facing frustration among volunteers who had put extensive time and work into establishing a project which the Council commenced but are slow in progressing. There was a feeling that, as a small group they did not have the time to pursue the Council in the same way larger groups could. The main problem was one of time and how to overcome these delays to maintain volunteers' enthusiasm and each Friends

Group covered a different type of area, were different sized groups with volunteers of different skills a time availability.

He advised that Parkfest was organised and run by volunteers, who were responsible for getting sponsorship and it was not unusual that the responsibility for organising Parkfest or other projects to mainly fall to one volunteer. Further, Rockliffe Gardens was one of the first parks to trial keep its gates open 24/7, as a way to tackle misuse of parks. Initially there was concern at having the gates continuously unlocked, but increased visibility and use appeared to have reduced a number of issues. He stated that the Friends Groups all had a good relationship with Council Officers but there needed to be a realisation and acceptance that the main cost of Friends Groups was volunteers' time.

The Friends of Rockliffe Gardens representative advised that they had an ongoing project and whilst phase one had been completed, the Group was struggling to get the next phase completed, mainly as a result of the volunteers inertia as they need to see the Councils plan for and information on how phase two was to be achieved.

At the request of the Panel the Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces confirmed that a meeting would be set up, directly with the Friends of Rockliffe Gardens, over this issue.

**Action: Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces**

The Deputy Director confirmed to the Panel that the Friends Groups volunteer contract and constitution was clear on the strain on their time which could be exacerbated, depending on the capacity of the Group and different Groups would face different challenges.

The Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces responded to the Panel that the opening of gates 24/7 was conducted, as a trial at a number of parks, which was considered sufficient and successful with the gates, for the trial group, being left open. She confirmed that the data on the action taken and impact on reports of ASAB could be supplied to Member.

**Action: Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces**

The Panel noted the comments made regarding time pressure and that most members of Friends Groups had full time jobs and had to fit in volunteering. There was a possibility that larger or more demanding groups could take more attention and asked Officers to ensure that they ensured that non-vocal and smaller groups' were supported and Officers be pro-active in mitigating any imbalance from happening. Further, if there was the possibility of

Officers holding regular quarterly meetings directly with respective Friends Groups.

The Deputy Director stated that he felt that there had been a lot of benefit to himself and his officers to hear these comments and to understand the issues created for Friends Groups and the Officers need to develop better flow of communication. He accepted that there may be an element of having created good working practices with established Friends groups that may not, have yet, been replicated with new groups.

The Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces advised that there was Parks & Open Spaces Strategy and five year action plan detailing agreed priorities and setting out what achievements were anticipated and clear links on how this was to be achieved.

The representative for the Friends of Queenscroft Park expressed that they were experiencing many of the same issues as Rockcliffe Park Friends Group. There were a number of things the Group would like to do and had requested, several times, to see the Management Plan for the Park, which they still had not seen. She confirmed that volunteers knew the commitment that would be required from them and questioned if the smaller and newer groups were getting the same services as other parks and it would be helpful to know the working baseline.

The Panel requested that Officers provide the Friends of Queenscroft Park and any other Group which request it a copy of the Management Plan for the Park.

**Action: Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces**

The Deputy Director assured the Friends Group representatives and Panel Members that Officers did not have different levels of treatment. However, the Green Flag parks required a slightly higher treatment level. A fine balance needed to be maintained between what the Council and Officers, as well as volunteers, could achieve on the limited resources available. He accepted that there appeared to be a need for greater clarity as to what the Council could do and what was expected from Friends Groups.

The representative for the Friends of Queenscroft Park informed the Panel that 40 new trees had been planted, which the Friends Group were happy to take care of and water. However, there were issues regarding the watering of the trees as, whilst there was water on site they had not been given access to it. This issue had been raised and they needed support in managing this, it appeared to be an issue of miscommunication.

The Parks Strategy and Development Manager confirmed to Members that his team was aware of the situation and was working to resolving the situation.

The Panel appreciated that the situation was being resolved but concern remained that it appeared that there was a failure in the lines of communication that was allowing these issues to be encountered by more than one Friends Group. It appeared that whilst the existing level of communication was good there were some areas where there appeared to have been breakdowns in the lines of communication.

The Panel proposed that that Officers initiated a single email address, which was passed to all the Friends Groups, where they could raise these concerns rather than contacting different departments or officers.

The Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces confirmed that there was a generic email address for Parks, which was available to all members of the public. She felt that the Members proposal for a dedicated contact email address for the Friends Groups was worth pursuing and committed to investigate the feasibility of making this happened.

**Action: Head of Parks Estates and Open Spaces/ DCS&E**

The representative for the Friends of Queenscroft Park assured Members that the Community Engagement Officer was very supportive and the position on communication between the Friends Groups and the Council had improved. However, Friends were all volunteers and not a replacement for the Councils management of parks and as funding became more restricted a vision on how parks would be managed and Friends Groups supported was needed, with strategic leadership from Council on how to manage this and this needed to be shared with the Friends Groups.

The Friends of Oxleas Wood representative added that it was appreciated that the Council and Officers had limited resources and the Friends Groups were grateful for the support from Officers. However, these lines of communication needed to be maintain and ways of improvement in some areas was needed to support existing Friends Groups and encourage new ones.

The Parks Strategy and Development Manager confirmed that Officers worked closely with the Friends Groups, advising that seven rounds of funding were recently secured through the Friends Groups. He accepted that they were not getting things right every time, and Officers tried to learn

from these mistakes. He felt a lot of good outcomes were being achieved through this partnership working.

The Chair of the Greenwich Parks Forum advised they also work with wildlife groups and all the areas cared for by the Friends Groups were public open amenities of ecological importance. The aims of the Groups and desires of the Council may not always entirely match, or how to achieve the desired outcomes but both the Council and the Friends Groups were dedicated to the upkeep and perseveration of these valuable amenities.

The Panel accepted an address from Councillor Jackie Smith, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Community Safety, who advised that the Council had to look at ways of maintaining all their services on reducing budgets and with increasing uncertainties. The planting of new trees in the Borough was a long standing policy but Officers needed to ensure that they would be maintained and those tasked with or who have agreed to do so had the resources to do so. The increase of biodiversity, with more 'wild' areas and fewer 'maintained' areas was ecologically sound but a balance between these areas had to be maintained and Officers should be ensuring they was an awareness of areas of mixed wildlife and maintained areas to avoid mowing grass areas and wildflowers alike. She noted that an increasing number of Authorities were allowing central reservations areas to be turned over to sowing of wildflowers and not mowed, this was beneficial for the environment and wildlife as well as being a long term financial saving. She appreciated the benefits of Friends Groups and the projects undertaken in Parks but cautioned there was a need for stringent financial checks and balances to ensure the Authority could preserve front line services.

The Chair thanked the representatives from the Friend Groups for their time and contribution to the discussion and the Panel had learned a lot. He also thanked officers for their presentations and continued support to the Friends Groups.

### **Resolved –**

That the Officers Service Performance Report on Parks, Estates and Open Spaces be noted.

That Officers be recommended to consider

- The establishment of regular meetings between Parks Officers and the Friends Groups to identify specific issues the group was experiencing.

- The creating of a generic contact email address for the use of Friends Groups to directly contact Parks Officer, which is decimated to all Friends Groups.

## **6 Commissioning Future Reports**

The Chair asked Members to advise both him and the Corporate Governance Officer of any parties that they wished to invite to attend the next meeting to give evidence to the Panel in respect of the Item on Hate Crime. Ideally by no later than Friday 28 July 2019.

### **Resolved -**

To note the work items that are scheduled to be presented to the meeting of the Community Safety and Environment Scrutiny Panel on 19 September 2019.

The meeting closed at 8.27 pm

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Chair