
FRIENDS GROUPS AND VOLUNTEERING IN PARKS

Purpose of report

1. To provide with background to the involvement and support for friends groups and volunteers in Cardiff's parks, enabling Members to scrutinise the delivery of this service.

Background

2. Cardiff parks and green spaces make up 10% of the total area of the City, with 56 formal parks and gardens, 106 children's play areas and over 100 adult and children's football pitches contributing to the 1500 hectares (5.85 sq. miles) of green space and parks land.
3. Cardiff offers a wide range of opportunities for individuals to get involved in their local parks and green spaces, through friends groups and volunteer initiatives across the city. The City of Cardiff Council Corporate Plan 2017-19¹ commits to this, stating

"The Council has a commitment to make a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of communities. Parks and green spaces - which are a huge part of the city's appeal - are maintained by the Council. We will continue to work with "friends groups" to make the best use of important natural assets and vital recreational areas. This is in addition to working with partners to improve

¹ Cardiff Council Corporate Plan 2017-19 - <https://goo.gl/YDy23F>

community engagement and local management of green spaces and community facilities.”

4. The Corporate Plan 2017-19 contains the following Commitment:

“Deliver an updated Parks and Green Spaces Strategy by March 2018 including maintaining and increasing Green Flag status at parks.”

The following key performance measure is also included within the Corporate Plan:

- **Measure** Number of Green Flag Park and Open Spaces
- **Target** 11.

5. The Green Flag Award website² identifies the parks and green spaces in Cardiff that have been awarded Green Flag status. The Green Flag Award scheme is the benchmark national standard for parks and green spaces in the UK. The website also recognises high quality green spaces in the UK that are managed in partnership with voluntary and community groups through the Green Flag Community Award. The following parks in Cardiff have been awarded green flag status³:

Green Flag Award

Bute Park

Victoria Park

Roath Park

Rumney Hill Gardens

Parc Cefn Onn

Flat Holm Island.

² <http://www.greenflagaward.org/award-winning-sites/wales/>

³ Green Flag Status has also been awarded to Cathays Cemetery, Cardiff Bay Barrage, Thornhill Crematorium and St Fagans Museum

Green Flag Community Award

Plasnewydd Community Gardens

Chapter Community Garden

Hailey Park Meadows

Old St Mellons Community Playing Fields and Park

St Peters Community Garden

Radyr Woodlands.

6. The City Operations Directorate Delivery Plan 2016-18 indicates that friends groups and volunteers play an important role in ensuring the high standards in parks across the city. The following 'key achievement' is listed:

“Through our network of friends and volunteer groups we achieved volunteer hours in excess of 25,000 engendering a sense of community ownership, adding value to the service delivered and securing environmental improvements”

Friends Groups and Volunteers

7. The Outdoor Cardiff website directs individuals to opportunities for volunteering in conservation projects and friends groups in Cardiff. Outdoor Cardiff identifies that friends groups support their local green spaces through a range of practical and administrative activities including:

- Planting
- Clearance work
- Access improvements
- Historical research
- Fundraising and publicity
- Conservation work
- Habitat improvements
- Litter picks
- Survey work / citizen science.

8. The following Parks Friends Groups exist across Cardiff:

- Cath Cobb Environmental Group, St Mellons
- Cathays Cemetery, Cathays
- Clare Gardens, Riverside
- Coed y Felin, Lisvane
- Forest Farm Country Park, Whitchurch
- Hailey Park, Llandaff North
- Heath Park, Heath
- Howardian Local Nature Reserve, Penylan
- Insole Court, Llandaff
- Moorland Park, Splott
- Nant Fawr, Cyncoed
- Parc Cefn Onn, Lisvane
- Plasturton Gardens, Pontcanna
- Radyr Woodlands, Radyr
- Roath Park, Plasnewydd
- The Dell, Fairwater
- The Lan, Gwaelod-y-garth
- Llynfedw Gardens.

9. The Council provides support and advice to these groups through the direct partnership work with the Community Ranger Team. The team offer expertise, advice and guidance as well as acting as the direct contact with the Council enabling their work to develop. Networking between friends groups is also supported through the Friends Forum, which enables groups to share ideas and network with each other four times a year meeting with council officers. The Conservation Officer and Community Ranger Team facilitate this forum, also providing a social BBQ once a year to support volunteer networking.

10. In addition to the network of friends groups across the city, the Community Ranger Team supports other ways for communities and individuals to volunteer

with the Council. This can take many forms from individuals who have a particular interest through to work experience, corporate volunteer days, and other constituted and unconstituted community groups. Further work is currently underway to develop the range of opportunities and support through the development of a volunteer hub at Forest Farm.

Previous Scrutiny

2015/16 Budget

11. On 5 February 2015, the Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee considered the 2015/16 Budget Proposals. One proposal within the budget was a £250,000 saving against 'Remodelling of the Park Ranger Service'. The narrative for this saving stated:

"Remodelling of the Park Ranger Service resulting in reduced staffing and expenditure on supplies / services. The Council would discharge basic responsibilities for the management of its 2 Country Parks, 7 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, 4 Local Nature Reserves, 58 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation, Special Area of Conservation (European Designation), 236 hectares of Woodland and delivery of service level agreements linked to Cardiff Harbour Authority. The proposal would result in reduced community engagement / outreach work and park based community events, removal of site based staff in key parks e.g. Victoria, Bute, Thompsons and Roath. The impact on anti-social behaviour and byelaw enforcement e.g. dog fouling and cycling; and reduced cleansing standards in addition to a corresponding overall increase in complaints and requests for service would be monitored".

12. The Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee was approached by representatives of the Hailey Park Friends Group who had concerns regarding these proposals. The following excerpt is taken from their written submission to the Chair:

“As much as groups like Friends of Hailey Park (FoHP) all work hard for our individual group and park/open space there is a limit to what we can do now or in the future (for a variety of different reasons) so may not be able to take up any additional work and in fact could be doing less if we do not have rangers with us in which park or open space. Last year Friends of Hailey Park had 2 months when we could not work on the park and this year so far we have one month.

“Much of the physical work undertaken by volunteers is dependent on Rangers being present and providing preparation, tools, equipment and transport.

“Although it is recognised that the volunteer skill base varies most Friends groups feel that they require support and leadership of the Ranger Service. A number of Friends groups have suggested that they do not feel confident to work without the support and the role of Friends groups could be reduced to leading walks and litter clearance”.

13. The minutes of this meeting⁴ note the following in relation to this budget proposal:

“With reference to the cutting of 8 park rangers, Members noted the written submission received at Committee and sought reassurance on the impact on friends groups. The Cabinet Member shared the concerns regarding the reduction in the number of park rangers and the subsequent impacts of this; but noted that it was difficult to find the cuts elsewhere. He assured Members that they were looking very carefully at having a very flexible team, with different roles integrated to increase that flexibility. The Cabinet Member has asked officers to arrange a meeting with friends groups and others to reassure them on the intentions and to see what help can be offered to then going forward. He added that he was relatively assured that the service would cope with reduced numbers but the situation would be carefully monitored”.

⁴ February 2015 Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee minutes – <http://goo.gl/bi5Psu>

14. Following the meeting, the Chair of the Committee wrote to the Cabinet Member for the Environment with observations and comments from the meeting. This included the following in relation to the proposed cuts to Park Rangers:

“The proposals for the Park Ranger service have generated some degree of public interest, and as such, a written statement has been received by the Committee outlining some concerns. Many of these concerns were addressed by you during the meeting and we recognise that you are under pressure to find savings, and that you feel this area will have the lowest impact compared to other areas for savings you have considered. The Committee is glad that you are aware of the impact this remodelling may have on the support given to ‘friends’ groups, and we welcome the assurances you gave that these groups are being consulted on these proposals and exploring how the Council can continue to provide assistance to them.”

15. In response, the Cabinet Member for the Environment wrote to the Committee Members, commenting:

“Regarding the proposal to reduce funding for the Park Ranger Service, I understand and share concerns that we would not wish to see the level of service and support given to Friends Groups reduce significantly. Shortly, I will be meeting with the Friends Groups to allay concerns. Also, I will be watching carefully to ensure that the remodelling of the Community Park Rangers and the Urban Park Rangers can be done in such a way that we end up with an enhanced service, where possible.”

2009 Task and Finish Inquiry

16. In June 2009 the Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee published a task and finish Inquiry report ‘The Economic Role of Parks’⁵. The following Key Findings we made in relation to Friends Groups:

⁵ ‘The Economic Role of Parks’ Full Report available – <http://goo.gl/aSvFRJ>

“[...] local communities value their local parks. Friends’ groups can play a significant role in helping to maintain, improve and promote parks in their local neighbourhoods.

“While Cardiff does good work with Friends’ groups, there is scope for improvement and for involving Friends’ group even more within parks. This is true of small, neighbourhood parks and also of bigger, central parklands that belong to no-one and everyone at the same time.

“At the moment Cardiff Council interacts with Friends’ groups via the park rangers spread across the city. Other local authorities have, for example, established dedicated teams to deal with Friends’ groups.

“Some parks, such as the central parks of Bute Park, Sophia Gardens, Pontcanna Fields and Llandaff Fields, for instance, have not benefited from the presence of an active Friends’ group. This is largely due to the large size of the parks and the fact that their central location means that they do not ‘belong’ to one tangible community. Rather, they belong to the whole of the City if not, in fact, the nation.

“Cardiff Council has a regular Friends’ forum which allows the various Friends’ groups to come together to meet with Council officers. [...].

17. The task and finish Inquiry made the following recommendation with regard to friends groups:

“Encourage and develop Friends’ groups further in order to utilise the volunteer resource. In order to support these volunteer groups there should be an increase in dedicated officer time to supporting these groups (possibly with extra staff). Justification for this extra expenditure can be shown through the economic value study as referenced [in the full report].”

Way Forward

18. Councillor Bob Derbyshire (Cabinet Member for the Environment) has been invited to attend and may wish to give a statement. Jon Maidment (Operational Manager, Parks & Sport) and Nicola Hutchinson (Parks Conservation Officer) will also be in attendance to deliver a presentation and to answer Members' questions.
19. Representatives of Cardiff's friends groups have also been invited to attend the meeting. Steve Bool (Friends of Heath Park Woodland) and Martin Chamberlain (Friends of Forest Farm) will be attending the meeting and will be invited to outline the work undertaken by friends groups, the support they receive from the Council, and what involvement in a friends group brings to individuals.

Legal Implications

20. The Scrutiny Committee is empowered to enquire, consider, review and recommend but not to make policy decisions. As the recommendations in this report are to consider and review matters there are no direct legal implications. However, legal implications may arise if and when the matters under review are implemented with or without any modifications. Any report with recommendations for decision that goes to Cabinet/Council will set out any legal implications arising from those recommendations. All decisions taken by or on behalf of the Council must (a) be within the legal powers of the Council; (b) comply with any procedural requirement imposed by law; (c) be within the powers of the body or person exercising powers on behalf of the Council; (d) be undertaken in accordance with the procedural requirements imposed by the Council e.g. Scrutiny Procedure Rules; (e) be fully and properly informed; (f) be properly motivated; (g) be taken having regard to the Council's fiduciary duty to its taxpayers; and (h) be reasonable and proper in all the circumstances.

Financial Implications

21. The Scrutiny Committee is empowered to enquire, consider, review and recommend but not to make policy decisions. As the recommendations in this report are to consider and review matters there are no direct financial implications at this stage in relation to any of the work programme. However, financial implications may arise if and when the matters under review are implemented with or without any modifications. Any report with recommendations for decision that goes to Cabinet/ Council will set out any financial implications arising from those recommendations.

Recommendations

22. The Committee is recommended to give consideration to the information attached to this report and received at this meeting and to submit any recommendations, observations or comments to the Cabinet Member.

Davina Fiore

Director of Governance and Legal Services

3 March 2017