

Agenda Item xx: Report to Full Council on the proposal to run a Friendship Café in the Library, on Monday afternoons when the Library is closed and the space is not used.

Outcome:

To improve the lives for residents in Wroughton by reducing loneliness & isolation, giving residents the opportunity to get together & make new friends in a safe & welcoming environment, thereby improving their health & wellbeing.

Many people have friends who are life-age specific (eg: school parents, work colleagues). Some of these friendships endure, but some do not. As people age, their friendship group and therefore their support network often contracts due to physical limitations, relocation, loss of loved ones, changing family dynamics, etc. Setting up this group would help overcome some of the barriers to making new friends by providing a place where people can meet each other to chat.

If you google, there is research to suggest that there are substantial health risks related to loneliness in later life. Friendship leads to increased happiness, a reduction in depression, and improved emotional wellbeing: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/navigating-social-terrain/202411/friendships-and-healthier-aging-a-pathway-of-connection?msocid=0aaceb51e6ba68a73447f941e2ba6c53>

Update:

Volunteers to run the Group:

- A poster was put up in the ECC, online/ fb/ Wroughton Monthly asking if anyone would be willing to help set up and run and Friendship Group on Monday afternoons in Wroughton Library.
- Expressions of interest received from 6 residents plus Cllrs Diane Archer (Diane) and Lisa Campisano (Lisa).
- Meeting arranged with all 8 people, 7 of whom attended.
- 2 residents indicated they would be willing to share the voluntary role of co-ordinating/ running the Group. However, one has health issues which may mean that at times they would need to take a break from the role; the other will need to care for her husband for a few months as from January following an operation. Diane and Lisa would be willing to help with this role if needed (holidays excluded). Running/ coordinating the Group could include ensuring there are enough volunteers to help each week, applying for grants, arranging to get people in if the Group Users request it: eg: someone who could do a short course on bereavement support; or they could help by signposting people to existing support which could be Citizens Advice or Swindon Borough Council.
- Diane offered to adapt the constitution from Wroughton History Group so that the Friendship Group has a constitution and could apply for grant funding if any relevant funding opportunities were to arise. Most grants exclude parish councils and only cover capital funding. WPC could help a properly constituted group to make a grant application.
- A Treasurer is likely to be required if the Group applied for funding in the future. None of those at the meeting were keen on taking on this role.

- The remaining 3 volunteers indicated they would be happy to attend the sessions to help set up, set down, make and serve teas and coffees, wash up, talk to the people who would attend the group, get to know them, but did not wish to co-ordinate or run the group. Of those 3 people, 2 indicated they would be able to attend weekly, and the 3rd preferred every other week/ twice a month.
- A WPC volunteer recruitment form has been sent to the 5 non-councillor volunteers to enable the Deputy Clerk to take up references asap and for their permission to set up a volunteers whatsapp chat, with the intention that if Members agree, the Group could start on 20th January 2025, the start of Warm Welcome Week. Wroughton Library is a Warm Welcome Space. Warm Welcome Week is about promoting Warm Welcome Spaces as being places where everyone is welcome, connecting individuals and communities, so it ties in quite nicely.

Who the Group would be aimed at:

- Various people (all older people) have indicated that they would like to attend the group if it were to run. A couple of those people have left their contact details with the Deputy Clerk as they are not on fb. One person advised they had lost their husband and just wanted to make new friends. Some of those attending Wroughton Library's 50th Birthday also indicated they would like to join such a group. All had seen or heard of the advert asking for volunteers. Staff have not actively promoted the Group, and would not, until Members have made a decision whether or not to support it, as staff do not want to raise an expectation which might not be met.
- This is not about duplicating groups which already exist locally. It's not about a group which runs activities for people. It's not a specific interest group. It's about providing people with a warm, safe space, with free tea, coffee, squash, biscuits, where they can meet and get to know other people and make new friends.
- The group would be aimed primarily at older people, but in the interests of inclusion, we would not recommend excluding anyone over the age of 18.
- Whilst this Group would be facilitated by volunteers, it would take place in the library, which is already a Warm Welcome Space where free tea, coffee, squash and biscuits are provided to anyone using the library. The library is funded and maintained by WPC, the tea/ coffee/ squash & biscuits are provided by WPC, and there are the utility costs which are paid for by the ECC, which is also supported by WPC. There is also an element of staff time, even if the Group is run by volunteers as they will need some support. These are 'hidden' costs, most of which already exist and are paid for by WPC. The vast majority of that money comes from the precept paid by people who live in the parish. The Deputy Clerk has already been contacted by SBC who want to promote the Group to their Community Navigators who work with people who are socially isolated. Therefore the recommendation is that the Group is open only to adults who live within the Parish. Other parishes could facilitate similar groups if they so choose. SBC Housing also runs Community Cafes in Penhill and the Railway Village.
- The volunteers also asked about and discussed the question of whether users should be charged to attend the Group. They all felt that there should be no charge, as this could be a barrier to some of the most vulnerable people being able to access the Group. This would also lend weight to the rule that only people living in the Parish could attend, as no-one living outside the parish pays a precept to WPC and therefore should not benefit from a service funded by the precept. It was felt that if a charge was applied, it would be more difficult to exclude people from outside the parish.

Budget

Free tea, coffee, biscuits in the Library. It's likely that these would need to be replenished more often. In addition, people who attend may request support to be brought in occasionally from other organisations (eg: a short course in bereavement counselling) which may have a cost attached. The recommendation is that Members agree to allocate £250 to this Group for the 2025/26 financial year, with the intention that the budget would be used only if external funding could not be sourced; agreement to use the funding would need to be approved by the Clerk or Deputy Clerk in consultation with the Chair of the Parish Council, and any such expenditure would be formally reported in a timely manner to the next F&GP meeting. It is unlikely that any funding would be required between 20th January and 1st April 2025.

Where we would promote the Friendship Group:

- Soup & Sandwich – Fridays in the Catholic Church Hall
- Harry Garret Court – sheltered housing
- Hastings Court – sheltered housing
- Markham Place – sheltered housing
- Banks Place – retirement living
- On WPC's website and in local fb groups
- Through the library and WPC's noticeboards
- In the Wroughton Monthly

Re: the suggestion that WoLF could take on the responsibility for coordinating the Friendship Group as it would take place in the Library. The Friendship Group is not a WoLF (Wroughton Library Friends) function. WoLF exists to promote the library at local events and fundraise for the library. WoLF does not coordinate / run the regular groups which take place in the library, these are run either by the paid Library staff (eg: Lego Club, Knit & Natter) or by external agencies (eg: seated yoga).

Recommendations:

1. **Support and facilitate the starting up of a Friendship Group, to be run/ co-ordinated by volunteers, to be held in Wroughton Library every Monday afternoon 2pm-4pm, starting Monday 20th January.**
2. **The Friendship Group should be aimed at older people, but open to anyone aged 18 or above who lives within the Parish. The promotional material would make this clear. People attending would not be able to bring children with them.**
3. **There would be no cost for anyone to attend.**
4. **There would be no need to become a formal member of the Friendship Group. People would be free to come in and leave whenever they wished between 2-4pm on a Monday.**
5. **Allocate a budget of £250 to the Friendship Group for the 2025/26 financial year, with the intention that the budget would be used only if external funding could not be sourced; agreement to use the funding would need to be approved by the Clerk or Deputy Clerk in consultation with the Chair of the Parish Council, and any such expenditure would be formally reported in a timely manner to the next F&GP meeting.**