

How friends' groups work

Aim

Friends groups are established as independent voluntary local user groups with the purpose of being the principal forum for discussing views about an area such as community woodlands, parks, playgrounds etc.

Friends Groups Working & the Council

Think of a friend's group as a PTA for a local school. It is there to help and support the school and raise funds where possible.

The Council will support friends' groups that are representative of the community as a whole, are actively inclusive of all user groups and represent the views of all members of their group. We work in partnership with all groups that meet these overarching criteria to improve parks and open spaces.

Financial support is not available to friends' groups as we hope to encourage self-sufficiency and independent governance. However, we will support, wherever possible, the group to raise revenue through grants and other approved income sources. There may, on occasion, be council grants that the group may apply for.

The Councils/councillors commitment to the friends' groups includes:

- attending a minimum of two meetings per year, and an extra two site walkabouts
- consulting the group on all matters that affect them
- technical advice or 'in-kind' resources, where feasible, to support activities beneficial to the area organised/supported by the park friends' group.

The formation of a friends' group

A democratic process is important for a group to be truly representative. We encourage friends' groups to be constituted and elect a chairperson, secretary, and treasurer annually at the AGM. It is not expected that ward councillors or officers are elected to these positions. Model constitutions are available from the Charity Commission for voluntary groups and the Council may be able to assist with this.

To make sure that groups are representative of the community and reflect the users of the park, we recommend the following key areas of interest:

- biodiversity and conservation
- events and activities
- disability, discrimination and accessibility for all - particularly socially excluded groups
- children, young people and the elderly
- sports and play
- fundraising and income generation
- areas of activity.

Clear aims and objectives. The group must:

- have a clear constitution
- have stated members and officers
- not replicate the role of any existing forum or group
- have a clear vision as to what they want to achieve, for example:
 - organise events
- have maintenance days
- work in a specific area of the park
- research into historic features and areas
- encourage young people into the park, or other audiences
- apply for a grant - for example from us, Awards for All or GreenSpace.

Develop membership

- use a website to promote activities
- link with council databases and publications
- attend events and fetes locally to promote your work
- link to council website
- get coverage in the local paper - invite the paper along to meetings or send them minutes.

Beyond consultation to partnership

Friends of groups do not always work – they can drift apart.

This is usually because they do not move beyond talking to getting things done. This causes problems not only in developing membership, but also in terms of how they are viewed by the community.

The successful friends' groups work in partnership with the local community and Council (Parish, Borough, & County) to set up events. It is also useful to partner other organisations such as schools, or a local charity.

Clear programme. Keep it simple (KISS).

- have a core annual event
- organise smaller events such as maintenance days with a parks development officer
- work with a local school to do bulb planting, then invite them back to see the flowers

AGM and elections

- you must have an AGM - Annual General Meeting
- all posts must be advertised at least a month in advance
- the advertisement must be wider than current membership.

Be aware of wider 'volunteers' and issues.

- join the [community network of Conservation Volunteers](#)