

BETTER FRIENDS

THE STATE OF THE MOVEMENT OF GREENSPACE FRIENDS GROUPS THROUGHOUT THE UK

The second report
presenting the headline
findings of the Parks
Community UK 'Better
Friends' Strength Checker

September 2023



Foreword

Our parks and green spaces have never been more appreciated by the public, and are now universally recognised as essential for people's health, for our communities, and for the environment.

In the past such spaces have been the preserve of dedicated yet rather paternalistic 'top-down' management – but community involvement is now central in helping shape their present and future. In particular, over the last 20 years a movement of over 7,000 independent local 'Friends' groups for parks and green spaces of all kinds has risen up throughout the UK. They are making a real difference to the spaces they love, in publicising and championing, animating and helping maintain, as well as improving and protecting them. They act as the 'eyes and ears' of the community and parks staff, contribute hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours, bring in tens of ££millions of extra funds and resources annually, and try to ensure good maintenance and management.

This is unfortunately a time of great financial challenges for Local Authorities and parks management. Government austerity policies have greatly impacted on all public services, and parks resources particularly are at an all-time low, despite their unique and precious daily benefits to all sections of our communities. Whilst at every level our movement is calling for the additional resources and strategic policies so urgently needed, tens of thousands of local activists continue to care for their local green spaces, get their hands dirty, and do their best to safeguard and enhance them.

We feel that this report is path-breaking¹. For the first time the character, scope and impact of this inspirational grassroots movement has been able to be presented - a movement which needs systematic ongoing support if our public green spaces are to thrive into the future ... as they surely must!

Dave Morris - Chair,
National Federation of
Parks and Green Spaces

***Celebrating our
green spaces***



¹ Initial report September 2021. Updated September 2023.

Introduction to the Report

The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces is the democratic umbrella organisation of the Friends Groups' movement, with Parks Community UK (PCUK) as its platform interacting with the local groups 'on the ground'. Together they are encouraging, supporting and promoting community involvement and empowerment in green spaces, and the sharing of good practice throughout the movement.

What is known about these important groups - what they do, how they are organised, their membership, their relations with parks managers, and their vision for the future? The more their efforts are understood the more appreciated will be the difference they make and the support they need.

PCUK, with support from NESTA, has created a free 'Better Friends' Strength Checker tool: www.parkscommunity.org.uk/betterfriends. It is there for any Friends Group to fill in anytime in order to gauge or audit themselves, their strengths, and areas for potential improvement. After filling in the detailed Questionnaire each group is sent a substantial Report with tailored but non-judgmental advice and suggested links to useful advice guides, mainly on the PCUK site.

A group can fill it in as often as they like so they can monitor their progress. The individual results are confidential to that group, but the NFPGS are able to compile anonymised statistics to help inform the whole movement and sector on the character and health of the Friends Groups movement.

'Better Friends' was launched in September 2020, and by July 2021 211 groups from all manner of local sites had filled it in. By September 2023 374 groups had completed the audit. These 374 groups operate in 192 local authority areas throughout England, Wales and Scotland [see full list and map in The Research Data Appendix 1]. Most groups completed the whole survey. It is clear from the level of responses in some areas that there will be potential for many more responses in future – for example wherever 'Better Friends' gets promoted by a local forum or local authority.

The initial report came after a very challenging year for most Friends groups as the pandemic crisis severely restricted volunteer activities. The NFPGS has continued to promote the 'Better Friends' tool and has now provided this revised Report to cover the whole period up to September 2023.

Below are some of the key aggregated findings. See The Research Data Appendix 2 for detailed statistics²

² Please note the Research Data Report is the initial data from September 2020 to July 2021. It is notable that the data for the full 3 year period is closely consistent with data from the initial period.

Some key findings

Local community organising and activities, to have a real effect, take a great deal of effort, people power, thought, resources, skills, meetings, planning and commitment. Being determined and well organised enables the involvement of many people, a large range of activities to be carried out, and the development of good partnerships.

Activities

The huge range of activities undertaken by Friends groups include practical volunteering (by 91% of groups), organising community events (88%) and reporting maintenance issues (82%). They manage projects (78%) and public noticeboards (59%), and meet regularly with those running the site (84%). As well as their traditional ways of communicating through flyers (66%) and email lists (69%) the groups create websites (64%) and employ social media like facebook (86%) and twitter/X (35%).

The total amount of volunteering is huge, with 34% of groups estimating their active members contribute 200-1000 hrs per year, 17% report 1000-5000 hrs per year, and 5% reckon over 5000 hrs.

The weighted average is estimated to be around 1000hrs per group, - meaning around 7 million hrs per year throughout the UK.

Groups responding identified things they could do better with



Fundraising for new facilities

Since 2015 we've added a new play area for older children, picnic spots with tables, benches and wheelchair access, a weather shelter, and a Heritage Trail – and controlled invasive Himalayan Balsam successfully. We organised major events each year until Covid-19 restrictions were introduced. And have set up a new website and a successful Facebook page.



Launching regeneration efforts

more active involvement and support, for example fundraising (20%), community engagement (20%) and use of IT/Tech (14%).

They also try to ensure they work closely with other user / stakeholder groups at their site (very closely 41%, fairly closely 37%), with those who own/manage the site (very closely 61%, fairly closely 25%), and link up with other nearby Friends groups where possible (50%).

Membership

The numbers of people involved varies greatly, but 25% report a membership of 50-250, 10% of groups report 250-1000 members, with 3% reporting over 1000 members. An average of 120 members per group is estimated, representing around 840,000 people throughout the UK. Groups' use of social media reaches millions of people.

The core of each group can also vary greatly, but 33% of groups report 7-10 activists, and 25% report over 11 active members. This means a grassroots volunteer 'army' of around 60,000 greenspace volunteers in 7,000 groups.

Of the make up of the membership it was reported that groups were most representative of their local site's users in terms of gender (43% 'very', 47% 'fairly'), social class (31% 'very', 54% 'fairly') and range of relevant interests (40% 'very', 50% 'fairly'). They were least representative in

Some of our achievements over the last few years include the opening of new 7 acre site, enhancing 4km of the riverside path, and helping bring in several £m investment, The expansion of volunteer and public engagement has seen our membership grow from 400 to 650+, and we received a Queens Award for Voluntary Service. We aim to continue with more of the same, and to become more representative of the local community.

terms of ethnicity (24% 'very', 37% 'fairly', and 36% 'not very') and disability (17% 'very', 37% 'fairly' and 43% 'not very'). This also seems to be more pronounced regarding the profile of the actively involved membership (eg 44% reporting that their active membership was 'not very' representative regarding ethnicity, with 19% reporting 'very' representative).

The survey results regarding age profile indicate a level of concern but may be under-reported due to a very general 'age' question, and under-18s not being factored in by many groups. Feedback from future priorities [See The Research Data, Appendix 3 backed by widespread anecdotal evidence, is that many groups would like to attract many more younger people.

Organisation

Groups are well organised on the whole, with the vast majority of respondents having a chair (88%), secretary (81%) and treasurer (84%). 51% reported having a specific rep to do publicity and PR. 47% indicated they have sub-groups. The vast majority have a constitution (83%) and bank account (81%).

Regarding committee/core group meetings, 74% report around 4-10 people attending. These meetings seem to be held regularly (60% reporting 5-12 times a year or more often).

General meetings of the wider membership are held less often, although 21% report these are at least monthly, and 56% report 1-4 times a year. 51% of groups report at least double figures for these meetings, and 23% report turnouts of higher than 20 people.

Achievements

Groups identified a hugely-impressive range of successes and improvements achieved over the last 5 years. [See The Research Data Appendix 3 for the full details]. Such specific achievements not only improve green spaces

We have installed gym equipment, 3 large murals celebrating the park, a temporary public toilet during spring/summer months, set up and run a community composting facility, a wildflower bank, maintained a pond and other wildlife habitats, run Saturday yoga sessions, and locked and unlocked gates each day (to minimise late night anti-social behaviour). We also run 3-5 large, successful events per year, and celebrated the site's history as an old railway line.



Running gardening groups and volunteer sessions



In recent years we've made successful grant applications for trees, notice boards, and conservation projects - and planted over 20,000 bulbs using volunteers. We supported a £2m flood works project, and organised 4 Park Fairs for over 7,000 people. All this helped ensure annual Green Flag awards. Now we want to strengthen our membership.

Organising youth events



for the benefit of all users, but also serve as examples of community action which can inspire people in the surrounding local communities. They also act as a spur to the group itself and its members, demonstrating that all the effort is really worth it and its worth continuing through various challenges and difficult periods. By scaling this up the positive effect being achieved by a whole movement of 7,000 such groups can be imagined.

The 'Better Friends' tool has a 'scoring' system in which groups are informed in their Report afterwards how well organised and effective they seem to be regarding each section of the Questionnaire, and overall. That way they can if they wish do another check in a year or two to see if their 'scores' have moved up or down. However, this is a somewhat subjective evaluation as every group and site vary greatly in size and range of issues, and many groups might be very effective - based on their aspirations, circumstances and capabilities - whilst remaining quite informal. The overall aggregated average 'score' for all the groups was 60%. This indicates that the movement is generally well organised and effective at the local level, but that there is much potential for developing further.

In the last five years we have organised a Multi Faith Christmas Tree, community litter picks, and "Picnic in the Park" - and facilitated the community garden for a Women's Gardening Group. We've also improved the cricket and football pitches, and worked with HS2 corporate volunteers reconstructing raised beds/pots. The lake has been desilted, with repairs to concrete wall edges and paths. The plan now is to develop the Centre, cafe, and toilet provision.

The future

55% report that their site has a Management Plan. A majority of groups (58%) indicated that they have created their own list of improvements they'd like to see at their site.

The overwhelming majority of the responding groups feel that they are very effective (44%) or fairly effective (46%) and a similar percentage report they are very optimistic (50%) or fairly optimistic (40%) with only 7-8% 'not very' on both counts! Of course, the results are likely to be influenced by the fact that those taking part are probably the groups who are better organised and/or more connected (for example to local forums and the NFPGS). Such groups are likely to have ongoing access to advice and encouragement, and examples of good practice, and hence be more effective and optimistic that they can make a real difference.

The Research Data, Appendix 3 also contains the groups' notes on some of their plans and goals for the coming 12 months.

These are highly interesting and encouraging, demonstrating that - despite the current chronic underfunding and lack of staffing of local parks services, and the effects of the covid pandemic - members of so many local Friends Groups remain committed to serving their communities by seeking further improvements to the green spaces they love and which are so vital to everyone. The movement is continuing to grow, and the mission of the NFPGS is to help achieve a Friends Group for all 27,000 public open spaces, and a Forum of such groups in every area to help groups share good practice and support one another.

Attracting a wider cross section of members is a key aim in the coming 12 months, including more younger, ethnic minority and disabled people. We plan more working task days to achieve better maintenance results, make local paths and bridleways more accessible and safe for disabled users, and get more support and funding from local government.

In the coming years we want to grow the size of the group, be more diverse in membership, encourage other groups to come to the park, plan more maintenance activities, social and sporting activities, nature walks and workshops - and be more inclusive, inviting children's groups, disabled groups, and elderly people's groups.

Conclusions

Based on the findings in this report we draw the following conclusions:


1 All those who care about the future of the UK's public green spaces should actively support the involvement and empowerment of Friends groups, and to encourage such groups to form for every local site currently without one. This commitment should be reflected in all greenspace policies, Management Plans, funding bodies' grant conditions, and discussions about the needs of greenspace.

2 NFPGS/PCUK should look into producing more specialist tools for calculating volunteering hours, and also the level of 'external' income being raised for local sites.

3 NFPGS/PCUK should look into developing more resources and guidance on how groups can strengthen and diversify their membership.

4 Friends groups should continue to link up locally, regionally and nationally to discuss their issues, support each other and share good practice.

5. To enable this process to take place effectively, the NFPGS needs to be properly funded and resourced.



We're developing a better committee structure, greater diversity, vision for the future, and improved coordination with the council.

We thank all those groups who have taken the time to fill in the Better Friends strength checker. We also thank all those involved in Friends groups for the time and effort they put in for the benefit of green spaces and the communities that use and rely on them.

We believe this Report demonstrates that community engagement, involvement and empowerment in greenspace is making a massive difference to these vital spaces for our communities, thanks to the commitment and intelligent efforts of tens of thousands of local volunteers and activists.

Recognising, embracing and expanding on this is vital, and means going well beyond traditional 'tick box' exercises or occasional public consultations towards the development of real community/management collaboration and partnerships site by site, area by area, region by region, and nationally.

With substantial ongoing recognition, encouragement and support - from the NFPGS, from parks management, greenspace NGOs, and from all tiers of Government - this grassroots army of community volunteers can only grow and become ever more important in the future.

Dave, Paul, Sarah, Michelle, Shelly, Nigel

National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces / Parks Community UK

September 2023



Being proud of successful Community/Council partnerships

Some Key Guidance Resources

Setting up a Friends Group:

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/starting-a-friends-group/lets-be-friends/>

Making our groups stronger and more diverse:

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/community-involvement/making-our-groups-stronger-and-more-diverse/>

Improving relationships among user groups sharing a green space:

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/community-involvement/how-to-user-groups/>

Partnership Working between Friends Groups and Parks Managers:

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/park-green-space-management/partnership-working-with-landowners-and-managers/>

What is community empowerment, and how can we make it happen?

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/community-involvement/what-is-community-empowerment-and-how-can-we-make-it-happen/>

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