

GREEN SPACES NEED FRIENDS!

- the why, what and how of Friends Groups

Slowly but surely, especially over the last 20 years, an inspirational UK grassroots movement has been arising of people dedicated to improving, caring for, protecting, animating, appreciating and publicising the local green spaces they love. There are now over 7,000 local independent and voluntary 'Friends of' groups (involving around 60,000 activists and 800,000 members), each collectively contributing and 'adding value' to their sites to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their desire and capacity.

This 'added value' has been calculated to amount to the equivalent of over £150m per year. Most groups are in urban areas, but some even span entire National Parks such as the Friends of Pembrokeshire Coast.

Such groups bring enormous benefits to the green space, to management and to the volunteers themselves. Of course, every site is different, and also every group has its own character, history, preferred activities, and vision of what it is trying to achieve. But by getting organised, by being recognised and



supported, by sharing ideas and examples of good practice with other such groups, and by building site-level partnerships with other user groups and of course with management, their regular voluntary efforts can be very effective for years and even decades. <https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NFPGS-PCUK-Benefits-of-Friends-Groups-A4-Infographic.pdf>

Whether called 'Friends', 'societies' or 'user groups' - and although every site and every group is different and unique - there's a common thread which knits this movement together: communities are essential to the present and future of our public spaces, and they are determined to show this by getting more and more engaged, involved, and empowered. A detailed Autumn 2023 report on the character and activities of this important movement can be found here and should be essential reading for all those in the sector who are serious about community engagement and involvement: <https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/NFPGS-PCUK-Second-Report-2023.pdf>

Greenspace staff and Friends Groups need to - and do - work closely together. Here's some useful guidance on how to get the most out of this vital relationship: <https://parkscommunity.org.uk/park-green-space-management/partnership-working-with-landowners-and-managers/> Most management and Councils have been increasingly embracing this movement. And most Friends Groups likewise are keen to support - rather than be used to supplant - the hard-working and under-resourced workers and rangers whose job it is to somehow make sure our public green spaces are properly managed and maintained. Together we are stronger!

Being Friends

So what can Friends groups do, and how can new ones get established?

Volunteering efforts can include:

- producing flyers, social media publicity and running noticeboards;
- planting flowers and trees, doing litterpicks, and maintaining landscape features;
- organising walks, talks, and events of all kinds;
- doing wildlife surveys and conducting public consultations;
- helping manage buildings;
- reporting maintenance issues and liaising with staff and management;
- developing ideas for improvements
- fundraising and applying for grants for projects - being part of decision-making
- lobbying and campaigning for resources and against inappropriate development;

In fact a strong group may be able to do all of the above! See the table here, on what groups around the country are actually doing: [to be provided]

In addition groups can and should try to develop links with other user groups and 'stakeholders' of that site (eg sports clubs, fitness groups, any cafe operators, local residents associations and schools). See some guidance on this here:

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

In Control	You run your site, or the parts of it you want to.
Key partner	You are fully informed about all matters you want to know about. Involved in all the decision-making you are interested in.
A partner	Regularly informed about some key issues. Involved in some of the decision-making
Consulted Regularly	Informed about some things. Consulted sometimes.
Consulted occasionally	Only contacted when it suits the management, maybe on one issue. Your emails and phone calls are replied to.
Existence noted	Your activities and views are noted but carry little weight.
Ignored	Your efforts and views are ignored.

Draft parkscommunityuk document - feedback welcome

How new groups can get started...

Groups may form out of all kinds of situations and initiatives. Starting a community group can sometimes be fairly straightforward, especially if there are a group of site users already keen to get things going (the best scenario). Or it can be extremely challenging, especially if initiated by management from scratch, more in hope than expectation! Either way, the big challenge will be building on any initial enthusiasm and developing the group into a mature self-directed group with an ongoing core of activists. Its usually a matter of taking it step by step, people getting to know each other and working out the kind of things they might like to do, building membership gradually, and not forcing things by expecting immediate complex constitutional discussions and forward planning likely to put many people off.

So, it often goes something like this:

- get together a small group of interested users, and decide there and then 'yes, lets set up Friends of X Park'. Those there should choose one of their number to be the initial acting secretary/contact, and start creating an initial membership list
- call a wider and publicised open meeting (using flyers, social media publicity, word of mouth etc) to 'brainstorm' issues about the local site and what people might like to do together
- kick things off straight away with regular members' meetings, and some simple, positive activities (see the list above), making it friendly and fun, satisfying and empowering.
- build up the membership, probably adding everyone interested to an email list
- develop good relations between the group and those who manage the site
- gradually develop the group's social media for wider communications, and maybe a whatsapp group for the core people involved
- consider long term need for a constitution, bank account, public liability insurance, various policies, range of officers/ reps
- arrange and publicise first AGM

There is lots of detailed advice and guidance about starting and running a group, written by and for Friends Groups, on www.parkscommunity.org.uk Here's a very basic starter document:

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/starting-a-friends-group/lets-be-friends/> and advice on strengthening and broadening the membership: <https://parkscommunity.org.uk/community-involvement/making-our-groups-stronger-and-more-diverse/>

Remember, aim for the group to:

- involve the views of all the various types of users, engaging people of all ages, backgrounds and interests
- be positive and determined, and work together through thick and thin
- be an independent group, but prepared to work constructively with management, and specialist user groups at the site

These extra documents are helpful in considering how active, involved and influential a group can be:

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

* https://parkscommunity.org.uk/how_to_guide/ladder-of-participation/

Friends United

Joining or setting up an Area Forum

Existing groups for a range of sites in a local area, town or county benefit greatly if they can network to share news and support each other, and act collectively to develop good partnerships with the local authority and other relevant area-wide organisations. The best way to achieve this is to have an area greenspace/Friends forum/network, preferably run by the groups themselves or as a joint effort with the Local Authority. There are already around 70 such Forums linking up around 3,500 of the existing local groups. Some guidance on this can be found here: <https://parkscommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NFPGS-Setting-Up-Friends-Forum.pdf>

A UK-wide movement

The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces is the democratic umbrella organisation promoting and co-ordinating the ever-growing movement of local Friends groups in all corners of the UK. We exist to champion their activities, issues and concerns, and to amplify their passionate and knowledgeable voices.

The Federation was set up to enable this movement to share learning, develop good practice, and strengthen grassroots organisation, communication and coordination. We also raise nationally the strategic issues impacting on the UK's 27,000 public parks and green spaces. We want to see active and influential Friends Groups for every public green space, and such groups sharing good practice and supporting each other through area Forums in every Local Authority area.

To this end we have developed Parks Community UK as our peer-to-peer 'service arm' to the grassroots. It contains a wealth of guidance documents, case studies, and a free self-evaluation tool for existing greenspace community groups. Why not check it out?! www.parkscommunity.org.uk

Please note that the NFPGS, despite its vital role in the sector, is not yet funded - we are all unpaid volunteers also involved in our local greenspaces and area Forums. So please make use of our online resources!

We urge everyone to support and help build the Friends Groups' movement in every locality and area throughout the UK.

National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

www.parkscommunity.org.uk @ParksCommUK

www.natfedparks.org.uk

@natfedparks

www.parkscharter.org.uk

Guidance links

Here's a list, all in one place for easy access, of the key documents linked to in the text above:

Benefits of Friends Groups:

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NFPGS-PCUK-Benefits-of-Friends-Groups-A4-Infographic.pdf>

Better Friends - the state of the UK Friends Groups movement (Autumn 2023):

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/NFPGS-PCUK-Second-Report-2023.pdf>

How involved and empowered is your group?

https://parkscommunity.org.uk/how_to_guide/ladder-of-participation/

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 Landowners and Managers:

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

Setting up an area Forum

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NFPGS-Setting-Up-Friends-Forum.pdf>

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/>

Friends United – A brief overview of the Friends Group movement

<https://parkscommunity.org.uk/news/friends-united/>