

Setting up a Forum of Friends' groups

If you are already a member of a Friends' group, you might find it useful to be able to contact other Friends groups in your area to share experiences, identify funding and raise the profile of your activities and aims. By joining together with like-minded groups you might be able to make a louder voice for parks and green spaces in your area.

What are the reasons for setting up a Friends' Forum?

- Share information
- Promote networking between groups
- Provide support to Friends' groups
- Provide an umbrella group for the development of new Friends' groups
- Provide a context within which Friends' groups can work
- Create a stronger voice for parks and green spaces
- Produce best practice

Successful Forums can benefit both Park Friends' Groups and local authority officers.

How can a Friends' Forum help Park Friends groups?

- Sharing experiences/expertise –
 - constitution/organisation
 - events/insurance
 - issues/conflicts
 - funding
- Giving support
- Sharing resources especially where groups have low capacity
- Giving a louder voice to issues/get issues onto the political agenda
- Encouraging the development of new community groups/Friends' groups
- Mentoring
- Sharing information e.g. joint newsletter
- Providing a platform to work from
- Bringing decision makers to the table
- Promoting devolved management
- Exchanging ideas
- Encouraging a partnership approach
- Encouraging positive action
- Applying for joint funding
- Auditing and providing for training needs
- Helping to build bridges between groups and local authority officers
- Giving new groups a sense of belonging
- Giving new groups a context within which to work

How can a Friends' Forum help local authority officers

- Acting as the collective voice for Friends' groups
- Raising the profile of parks in the political agenda
- Raising public awareness of parks within a political context
- May help to safeguard budget provision
- May be able to engage elected members
- Strategically representing local grass roots issues
- Cutting across other services
- Encouraging the development of more Friends' groups or community group activity generally
- Bringing in additional funds or protect existing
- Helping to manage expectations and raise understanding
- Helping to engage hard to reach groups
- Providing a focus for communication and consultation
- Getting involved with consultation or data collection
- Providing ideas, concerns, compliments and thanks

How local authority officers can encourage the formation of Friends' Forums

- Facilitate the running of joint events
- Provide or train in specialist skills
 - Grant advice
 - Managing meetings
 - Finances
 - Risk assessment
 - Health and safety
 - First Aid
- Promote best practice
- Encourage visits to other groups or areas
- Facilitate the celebration of success together e.g Christmas party for Friends' groups
- Provide information and expertise
- Provide resources including in kind assistance
- Support development of the Forum, providing
 - Venues
 - Administrative aid – printing, postage
 - Database/IT support
 - Linkages/networks
 - Events
 - Help with funding bids
- Help sustain or rejuvenate the Forum
- Promote awareness and understanding of their problems
- Facilitate networking days of local groups
- Produce resources and documentation for common usage e.g model constitution

We are grateful to Wirral Parks department for organising a workshop for their Friends' Forum in March 2008, whose attendees provided all of this information.