

THE DEBATE

## TRUST US, WE'RE A COMMUNITY GROUP

A TRUST SET UP TO MANAGE A PARK OR GREEN SPACE IS PERHAPS THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF DEVOLVING POWER AWAY FROM THE LOCAL AUTHORITY TO THE COMMUNITY. BUT IS THIS THE BEST WAY FOR PARKS TO BE MANAGED? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND PITFALLS OF COMMUNITY GROUPS OBTAINING TRUST STATUS?

**KEITH PIMM**, CHAIR OF EXHIBITION AND BRANDLING PARKS TRUST, AND **NICK OCKENDEN**, PROJECT OFFICER AT GREENSPACE, TAKE A LOOK.



Degraded by the surrounding motorway, by the 1990s Exhibition and Brandling Parks had become run down in comparison with others in Newcastle, but they were still valued. In 1999, a local group proposed a regeneration approach drawing on community aspirations and energies which was accepted by Newcastle City Council (NCC). A 'Whole Systems' community conference held in 2000 highlighted the opportunity the park presented for community initiatives and called for regeneration through community engagement, facilitated by a Trust.

A Trust was chosen as a legal entity which could seek resources, employ staff, run projects, hold a lease on the park (essential for seeking funds for redevelopment) and access funds not available to NCC.

Being a Trust, with substantial community representation within the Board of Trustees, has been a catalyst for ensuring high levels of community involvement. We have set up a range of structures to enable people to participate, including a community planning weekend, open forums, and working groups to develop projects.

We have also facilitated the development of a wide range of community initiated projects and events including the Newcastle Society for the Blind People's Sensory Garden, the Skate Park, and a range of arts, intergenerational and school projects and events which have increased park use and demonstrated the potential of civic spirit.

Blind people continue to maintain their Sensory Garden and the Friends group the flower beds they created in Brandling Park, demonstrating that community engagement can develop sustainability.

The Trust's commitment to engaging the community, which inspired the Friends group, has stimulated dialogue with other park users, enhancing community ownership and communication. This has led to improved maintenance, a reduction in graffiti and a greater sense of security. This demonstrates the potential of the civic spirit to respond to the opportunity for action both at the strategic level, developing innovative, creative projects and in enhancing social contact and cohesion.

As a Trust, we have enhanced opportunities for securing funding, some of which is not available to local authorities. We have secured some £300,000 from grant giving bodies, a similar sum from public funds, around £100,000 of pro bono help and incalculable voluntary support. The Trust has also secured a grant from the Northern Rock Foundation for a community engagement worker to expand the opportunities for the participation of people in regenerating the park.

There is no doubt that obtaining Trust status has enabled us to involve the local community in the park in ways which would perhaps not be available to local authorities. However, I would stress that community involvement was not automatic, it required positive commitment from the trustees, and lots of time and effort.

**KEITH PIMM, SECRETARY,  
EXHIBITION AND BRANDLING PARKS TRUST**

Research conducted by GreenSpace shows that less than 3% of groups working with parks and green spaces are classed as Trusts. While there are many advantages to establishing themselves as such, this figure shows that over 97% of groups feel that they can function adequately without taking this step.

Trusts perform a vital role and often allow groups to access monies and take on management responsibilities that they would not have been able to do in their previous guise. However, in order to take this step, they must first ask themselves two important questions.

First of all, if they could actually achieve more. Whether this is about providing the community with a greater sense of ownership over the green space, accessing new types of funding, adopting new management procedures or just about being more responsive to the needs of the community, there needs to be a concrete justification behind their existence.

Secondly, whether they want the extra responsibility, administration and liability. The role of Trustees will demand a high level of work and many smaller Trusts find it hard to recruit and retain Trustees. Inadequate access to revenue funding also means that Trusts can become preoccupied with applying for grants to ensure their survival. This can jeopardise their existence as well as diverting their energies from the improvement of the green space.

It is clear that taking on Trust status is not something which should be entered into lightly. It is safe to assume that the 3% of groups we are aware of who are Trusts took the time to research and consider their decision, because they are all still functioning effectively.

If a Friends group does decide that Trust status is the best way forward, then it is crucial that it gets support from its local authority and other professional bodies. Training, advice and even mentoring or direct intervention can be vital in ensuring that fledgling Trusts, often made up of volunteers who have not done something like this before, become sustainable and effective in the long-term.

A failed Trust presents a highly undesirable scenario and can risk a complex legal situation. It can result in possible uncertainty over land ownership, responsibilities and the assets which belong to the Trust. It also risks creating a PR nightmare for the local authority, and has the potential to severely damage community relations.

It is vital that Friends groups are not forced into becoming something they don't want to. But if it is decided that Trust status is the right course of action, then they must be fully supported. Practical examples from around the country demonstrate that when Trusts work well, they can make huge contributions to our parks and act as a crucial partner for the local authority. However, there are hundreds of groups out there who will not want to follow their example, and should not be forced to. Trust status, with all its benefits, is not a natural end point for all Friends groups to aim for.

**NICK OCKENDEN,  
PROJECT OFFICER, GREENSPACE**