Making a Difference

How to Set Up and Maintain a Community Group for Parks and Green Space

cabe
space

green
space
incorporating the Urban Parks Forum

3. Organising Your Group

3.1 Introduction

Once you have attracted the interest of six or more members, your group will generally be recognised as a valid and potentially sustainable community group. Now is the time to get organised and work out what it is that you want to achieve, what work the members of the group want to do, and how the group intends to operate and make decisions. This may not seem like a particularly interesting step in forming a community group, but it is an essential part of the process, especially if you are likely to apply for grants to fund your work. Time and care spent now in setting up the structure and operating basis of the group will help avoid difficulties later on, and give the group a much more sustainable future.

Most community groups are known as Unincorporated Associations. These are groups of people working together to achieve mutually agreed aims and they are not registered companies. Unincorporated Associations usually operate under a particular kind of agreement, called a constitution, which is a set of rules to govern how the group will run, what the group hopes to achieve, and how the members will work together.

Not all groups will want to formalise their structure and commit to the regular meetings, rules and processes that come with it. Not formalising the group can encourage a relaxed atmosphere and allow complete flexibility to reinvent the group whenever it suits. However there are drawbacks to remaining an informal group. The council will find it much harder to trust or publicly support your group if it has no rules, terms of reference or publicly stated aims and objectives. Grant giving bodies, including local authorities, are unlikely to support this kind of group as they cannot justify providing funds for a group that has no official statement of purpose. You might be lucky and receive individual small grants for clearly defined projects, but ongoing financial support is unlikely to be provided.

3.2 What do you call yourselves?

Although a group's choice of name is not critical to its success it does help to have a name that reflects and promotes your overall aims. When selecting a name think about how it will look when written down and make sure that the individual words cannot be abbreviated into a word that would be unwelcome.

Below are the main types of groups and organisations involved in relation to the improvement of parks and green spaces.

3.2.1 Friends Groups

The most popular choice is to operate under the title of 'Friends', as in the 'Friends of Albert Park', for example. It is a title that suggests a supportive and protective role and a commitment to bring benefits to the park, which is what most groups want. The best thing about the 'Friends' title is that it can include the group in every type of park interest and activity. It is a handy 'catch-all' title that gives the group a high degree of flexibility. In addition, the title is now well used and understood, quickly letting people know what the group is about.

3.2.2 Conservation Groups

These have a more specific, but narrower, area of interest than Friends groups. The term is often used to describe groups interested in conserving and improving the wildlife or ecological value of the site, but is also used by groups concerned with the conservation of the local heritage. Most historic parks are more than a hundred years old and of historic interest for their landscape design and park buildings, features and monuments.

3.2.3 Tenant and Resident Associations (TARAs)

These groups are usually focused on an area of housing and concerned with anything that has an impact on the lives of local residents. Whilst this guide is not about setting up resident or tenant associations, it is hoped that some of the information may be helpful to resident groups who would like to improve the quality of a local open space.

3.2.4 Park Watch Groups

These are similar to Neighbourhood Watch groups in that their main interest is park security and reducing antisocial activity, crime and the fear of crime within a park.

Once you have decided on a name for the group, you might want to consider designing a logo. They can make your letters, leaflets and posters look more professional, and are useful for creating a positive and recognisable image.

3.3 Organising a committee

A committee is elected by the members of the group to carry out work on their behalf, between normal meetings. The committee is responsible for the actions of the group so members should not act without the committee's authorisation. A committee is necessary if the work of the group is to last longer than a short one-off task. It is important to ensure that committee members cannot obtain personal financial benefit through being elected. There are three different types of committee member:

- ☐ **Elected** - most committee members are appointed by, and from, the membership.
- ☐ **Nominated** - by another group, usually when the two groups hope to form a working partnership with each other.
- ☐ **Co-opted** - brought in from outside the group because of their specific skills and knowledge.

Although the committee can have as many members as the group wants, there are three essential positions that every committee must have: chairperson, secretary, and treasurer.

3.3.1 The chairperson

The chairperson helps the group to achieve its aims, sets agendas, conducts meetings and acts as the leader of the group, ensuring its smooth operation. A good chairperson will act as a facilitator, ensuring positive discussions and involving all the group.

3.3.2 The secretary

The secretary ensures that all members of the group are kept fully informed and that they feel involved and included. The secretary looks after the group's paperwork and records, prepares papers and agendas for meetings, takes minutes of meetings, books meeting rooms, and supports the chairperson.

3.3.3 The treasurer

The treasurer looks after the financial affairs of the group by keeping accounts and accurate, up-to-date records. The treasurer is responsible for opening a bank account and paying in money, paying bills and managing petty cash and expenses payments and for making financial reports to the committee. The treasurer should be an honest, conscientious and responsible person, preferably with some experience of book-keeping and preparing basic financial statements.

3.3.4 Other positions

The marketing and publicity (press) officer communicates the aims and objectives of the group to the membership and the wider community, including the local press and other media, often through newsletters and members magazines (see section 4.3). While this position is not vital, it can greatly improve the success of a group. It helps if your publicity officer has basic desk top publishing skills and access to a computer, word processor or typewriter as well as a photocopier or other means of printing.

Other important positions include a fund raiser, deputy or vice-secretary and deputy or vice-chairperson, to assist these two busy positions and provide cover when the secretary and chairperson cannot be available. If you are thinking of developing a fully functional website for your group (section 4.3) it is a necessity for one person to oversee this, who will often be called the webmaster.

The group needs to find its own balance; too few people on the committee will result in some members being asked to do too much work and take on too much responsibility for the group; too many committee members will slow down the decision making process.

3.4 Developing a constitution

A constitution is a set of rules that defines how the group is run and becomes necessary as soon as your group starts to deal with money. There are usually plenty of model constitutions available, and the community development section of most local authorities should be able to supply you with one of these. However, the writing of a constitution gives you the chance to decide what things are important to your group, and how the group should be run. Direct copying of another group's constitution is therefore not recommended and for this reason we provide here only an outline of the main components of a constitution.

Constitutions are necessary for the following reasons:

☐ To ensure the group's aims and objectives are clear and agreed by its members.
☐ To provide mechanisms for making decisions and resolving disputes.
☐ To gain credibility with other organisations and bodies.
☐ To clarify liability and lines of responsibility.
☐ To ensure accountability.
☐ To enable the group to qualify for various grants where the awarding body insists on a group constitution.
☐ To enable the group to join other bodies that can help and support them.

A constitution is also vital if the group wants to apply for charitable status.

A constitution should include the following:

☐ **Group name**
To reflect the group's work.

☐ **Geographical area**
The physical boundary of the group's interest.

☐ **Aims and objectives**
The long-term aims and the short-term methods of achieving those aims.

☐ **Powers**
Identifying what a group can do to achieve its aims. These might include:
    o Setting up a bank account
    o Holding meetings
    o Fundraising
    o Hiring premises
    o Carrying out practical tasks.

☐ **Membership**
Identification of who can join the group and how, the different classifications of membership and membership fees and what is expected of members.

☐ **Management committee**
The structure of the committee, roles of committee members, and how members will be elected to, and resign from, committee posts and roles.

☐ **Equal opportunities**
A commitment to treat everyone fairly and equally regardless of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and physical and mental ability.

☐ **Meetings**
The arrangements for committee meetings, general meetings, annual general meetings, and extraordinary general meetings.

☐ **Finances**
Most groups will need to open a bank account and it is important to ensure that a minimum of two unrelated group members are needed to sign cheques - it is usually the group's treasurer and chairperson who have this responsibility.

☐ **Ending the group**
How and why the group can be dissolved and what happens to any funds.

3.5 What are your aims and objectives?

Defining the group's aims and objectives is very important, as these define the group's interests and help to prioritise future activities.

- **Aims** are the broad, general, long-lasting goals that the group intends to adopt and keep indefinitely.

- **Objectives** are more specific and shorter-term targets intended to contribute to the group's practical achievement of its aims. Objectives should be reviewed frequently as they will change as projects develop and the circumstances affecting the group change.

The group's aims and objectives should focus on its role in representing the whole community in bringing about improvements. For example, an aim of the group might be 'to bring about improvements to the park' and a specific objective might then be 'to work with the local authority to develop an improvement plan'.

3.6 What type of work will you do?

An important part of developing your aims and objectives is deciding what type of work your group will do. This may be best achieved in phases with the group first identifying a short-term work programme, then developing a vision or master plan for the site which can be used to work out a longer-term work programme.

The creation of a vision for the site has to be done later through a partnership between the community group, the wider community and the local authority. This should be a vision for the site as the community would really like to see it, and which meets local needs. You should try to be creative as well as practical in your ideas even if not everything seems possible at the beginning. The group can get involved straight away with small practical tasks, building confidence and gaining experience while helping to improve the site and working on longer-term plans.

It is important that people in the group enjoy the work they do. You therefore need to discuss what kind of work members are willing to do. Do not be too ambitious at first. It is better to start small with tasks that can show results quickly and then increase activity as skills, confidence, experience and support grow. Be careful not to overwhelm group members with unrealistic aims. Work should be selected to suit your group and developed as membership increases.

The kind of work that groups do can vary: some are interested only in being consulted on the way the site is managed and others prefer to concentrate on practical projects.

3.7 Types of work

3.7.1 Practical work
This includes:
- Improving footpaths, cycle routes and bridges.
- Cleaning and painting buildings, gates, fences.
- Litter picking.
- Removing graffiti.
- Clearing fly tipping.
- Tree planting.
- Gardening.
- Clearing ditches, ponds and streams.
- Wildlife, flora and fauna surveys.
- Habitat creation.
- Creating wild flower meadows.

3.7.2 Developmental work
This includes:
- Organising community events.
- Organising guided walks and talks.
- Applying for grants.
- Fund-raising.
- Carrying out customer surveys.
- Running teashops, cafes, kiosks and shops.
- Developing education packs and building links to local schools.

3.8 Specific areas of work

3.8.1 Improvement work

The group should exchange ideas about possible improvements. What new facilities would the group like to see provided? What aspects of the way the park is run do not meet the standards you want? Which aspects of the site should be protected and conserved? It is important to realise that these are only initial ideas and there may be a lot of work ahead to achieve them.

3.8.2 Conserving special qualities

Many sites have their own special local character and distinictiveness provided by the landscape, the planting, or the style of architecture in or around the park. Special character might also come from the way the site is used for shows, events, sport or children's play.

Proposed changes to the site need to take account of this special character and the affection people have for the site and its traditions. For example, the loss of a single football pitch may mean that an annual football tournament can no longer take place, careless tree planting may result in the loss of a popular view, or may even result in a show-field becoming unable to host shows that have taken place for years. Any proposed changes to the site need to be thought through and their long-term effects fully considered.

This concern is perhaps more important for older sites where the landscape has been carefully designed and where patterns of use have been established over many decades. Historic parks are often an important part of the local heritage and contain individual features that reflect the development of the town or community. Historic sites can be developed and changed and new facilities successfully introduced as long as the aspects valued by the community are carefully conserved. Groups must make sure they fully understand the design and cultural history of such sites before proposing changes. They may decide that the conservation, restoration or re-creation of historic or distinctive features is as important, or more important, than the creation of new facilities.

Case Study

Restoring a site:
Name: The Tavistock Improvement Group
Location: West London

A local community association became interested in the garden and decided to campaign to improve it. Social problems relating to vandalism, drink and drug issues and prostitution were evident, and this affected the wider community as the park became a virtual 'no go area'.

They set up a committee to work on the project, and local residents and community groups were approached to nominate members. From this, the Tavistock Improvement Group - an umbrella group comprising of eight representatives from different interest groups including the local authority, the biggest social housing landlord and other residents and community groups in the area - was formed.

The park has now been regenerated with provision for all sectors of the community, including target groups, the elderly and young children, and was reopened to widespread acclaim in the community and council.

Tavistock Gardens © GreenSpace

3.8.3 Responding to a threat

Sometimes community involvement in a park or green space starts as a reaction to a threat to the site. This could come from proposed development which would mean the total or partial loss of the site, the loss of a particular facility, or from a change in the way the site is managed. In these cases residents sometimes form a pressure group to oppose the changes, often with a lot of success.

Whether successful or not, it can be worthwhile to convert a pressure group into a campaign for sustained improvement which continues after the threat has passed. Many successful park groups started out as short-term opposition groups.

3.9 Working with the council's Parks Strategy and Site Management Plans

In most cases, parks and green spaces are owned by the local authority, and they are responsible for ensuring that development and management is appropriate. Community groups must work together with the council and the wider community to develop a mutually acceptable vision.

In the early days of a group's involvement, there can be a big difference between what the group wants and what the local authority wants. Working together on a joint masterplan or improvement plan is a good way of understanding each other and agreeing priorities and a shared vision.

The council is responsible for many parks and green spaces in its area and has to balance the time and money it spends on each site. To do this, most local authorities have a green space strategy or service plan that identifies priorities for improvements and spending from its available budget. They may also have produced management plans for individual larger parks. If there is a management plan for your site you should ask to see it and, if not, you could ask to see the grounds maintenance contract and lobby the council to produce a management plan.

Case Study

Responding to a threat:
Name: Novers Park Community Group
Location: Bristol

Having heard of the possible closure of Nover's Park through unofficial routes, 12 active local residents undertook a survey of 100 houses within the park's catchment area. They found that the majority of people consulted thought that management and maintenance of the park needed to be improved; there was particular concern about the lack of any development and improvement strategy. Local reaction to the perceived threat was immediate and residents were clearly willing to defend the park against closure.

The group decided that instead of lobbying the council for better services, a different approach was necessary. They decided to approach the local authority as a union, with the intention of suggesting that the group took over the site's management. The group organised a successful presentation to the Council Committee, and obtained a commitment from the Committee to work with the group on the development of a lease agreement. It was decided to transfer the management and maintenance responsibility for the park to the community group, including an allocation of revenue funding.

Novers Park © GreenSpace

The aims of the group should not be decided by the local authority. Indeed the group may feel that the local authority's vision for the site is wrong or too limited. In these circumstances, a first objective of the group could be to encourage the local authority to revise its vision. Ideally the local authority will welcome this interest and be open to agreeing better objectives for the site. If the visions of the group and the council are a long way apart, time and effort will have to be concentrated on changing the local authority's perspective and encouraging a revision of any existing management plan. This is best achieved through open and honest discussion. You must remember that if the group is successful in attracting grants to improve the park or green space, it will probably be the local authority that has to fund the operation and maintenance of these new facilities.

The parks department's strategy for managing its parks and green spaces will be based on the budgets and resources available. Community group involvement adds to these resources by bringing in the energy, knowledge and enthusiasm of the local population. This additional resource can be significant and encourage the local authority to be far more positive about a site than it was before.

Once you have looked at the council's strategies, plans and proposals you should have a fairly good understanding of the local authority's approach to managing your site. You should be able to choose which of the council's proposals you wish to support, and to suggest ideas which the council officers may not have considered. It is better for the group to be able to say what it wants to do, rather than the council dictating what you should do.

3.10 How to develop a vision and aims & objectives

You should work out your aims and objectives at your first meeting, which could take place at someone's home. You should let people know in advance when and where the meeting will be held and you should have someone to chair the meeting. This may be the first time a lot of the people will have met and each person should be allowed to introduce themselves and say why they want to be part of the group. The first meeting will be a brainstorming session, in which everyone gets to put forward their ideas. A brainstorming session and writing a wish-list are two good ways to start developing a vision and the aims and objectives for your group. It is best to start with a blank sheet of paper with everyone's ideas being noted on a flip chart or similar, for later discussion.

The following six methods can be used in addition to brainstorming. These techniques are designed to help communities decide what they like about an area, what they don't like, what they would like to see changed and how change might be brought about. Someone should always make a note of any ideas that come up and report them back, in summary, to a later group meeting.

3.10.1 Visiting the site

Going all round the site together makes it easy to see what is good or bad about the place. Even more helpful is to include a wide range of different people including your members, children, elderly people, council officers and councillors, disabled people and people from ethnic groups. This will produce a range of different opinions about what needs to be done to improve the site which is vital to ensuring a well-balanced vision that meets the majority of community needs and does not alienate certain sectors. It may be necessary to go round the site several times as ideas develop.

3.10.2 Looking at maps and aerial photographs

These allow people to see the site as it is today and in the past. There may be features or facilities that have been lost which people would like to see replaced.

3.10.3 Planning for Real

This is a practical exercise developed by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation and involves making a plan or a 3D model of your site, allowing people to fully visualise the changes. Scale models, coloured blocks or stand-up drawings on paper should be provided to represent different park items - buildings, playgrounds, groups of trees, gardens etc - and people should be encouraged to move them around so the effect of introducing new items can be appreciated. There should also be a box where people can leave anonymous suggestions and ideas which will feed into the discussion. 'Planning for Real' exercises can be expensive if full 3D scale models are used, but can be done cheaply by community groups with a bit of imagination. They are a great way to involve everyone, especially children, who can help in making the models. This process in itself is a useful form of involvement and can act as a means of consultation in itself.[5]

3.10.4 Placecheck

This is a system developed by the Urban Design Alliance (UDAL) for the improvement of public places. It can be applied to a whole neighbourhood or to smaller areas like a street, park or open space. The system uses check lists to identify improvements and detailed sets of questions which help groups to define:

☐ Who should be involved.
☐ What resources are available.
☐ What other methods can be used to refine ideas.
☐ How to tap into other available programmes and resources.
☐ How awareness can be raised.
☐ What other complementary initiatives exist.
☐ How an area can be made greener, safer, more pleasant, welcoming and accessible.
☐ How better use can be made of already available resources.

The process of working through the questions as a group helps define what people really think about the park and helps the group develop a clearer view of what needs to be changed and how the changes might be achieved.

3.10.5 What makes a place great?

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has created a system called What makes a place great? [6] This system looks at four key indicators:

☐ Sociability.
☐ Uses and activities.
☐ Comfort and image.
☐ Access and linkage.

Underpinning these four main criteria are sets of measurable indicators such as crime statistics, number of women, number of children and elderly visitors and levels of cleanliness etc.

PPS also produce How to turn a place around[7] which identifies 11 key principles to transforming any public space into a more vibrant community place (see listings on page 32).

3.10.6 ABC System

The organisation Common Ground, is promoting the use of its 'ABC' system to help groups understand what makes their area different from others. The system says there should be less emphasis on the 'rare and beautiful' and a greater appreciation of the everyday things that surround us and which help to define our neighbourhoods.

The Common Ground approach encourages communities to recognise and celebrate their own unique culture; 'Local Distinctiveness is about what small places mean to us, their detail, patina, and identity. It involves everywhere and everyday places are as vulnerable as the beautiful and rare, perhaps more so because politicians and professionals have no time to care.' [8]

3.10.7 Enquiry by Design

Enquiry-by-Design (EbD) is a planning process developed by the Prince's Foundation which brings together major stakeholders to discuss, develop and draw possible urban design and planning solutions to specific, place-based problems. This process helps reach agreement between groups that would normally hold differing opinions. Participants with different skills and knowledge of the site work in teams in workshops to investigate and understand current urban issues and future trends, creating consensus and focusing solutions.[9]

While this method is commonly used by large planning projects, the process of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in a collaborative and inclusive consultation process is applicable to thinking about the direction you wish your park and group to move in.

3.11 How to deal with conflict in your group

Whatever methods you choose to develop your aims and objectives, they are likely to lead to a wide range of different ideas. It is likely that some members of the group will make radical suggestions that are simply not practical or feasible. While these can be destructive and waste time, it is crucial that all members of the group are given a chance to voice their ideas and concerns; it is better to accept all ideas at the start, even the less sensible ones, letting consensus opinion remove the more obscure and less well-informed ideas.

In development periods such as this, a feeling of inclusion must develop within the group otherwise members risk being isolated and may leave at a time when it is important to build support. Consensus will be reached, and this will be helped by a capable chairperson, who can let everyone voice their opinions and does not let individual members dominate the discussion or put down the opinions of others.

In order to justify the inclusion of more radical and creative ideas, it may be necessary to carry out a deeper assessment of local need, and find out how many local people would be likely to support radical change. For example, a short questionnaire could be distributed to local houses, businesses, and park users, asking people to express their views on the idea and provide some indication of how often they or their families would make use of the new facility. It is important to present this questionnaire as a test of popularity and an examination of need, and not to raise expectations or cause outrage. Perhaps the more radical ideas could be examined at the same time as less controversial suggestions, so that residents can see that there is a range of options. Radical ideas with the potential for causing widespread upset could be tested first on a sample of trusted members to prevent causing panic amongst the wider community.

Reaching agreement on the group's aims and objectives represents an important milestone in the group's development, and it is important that all members are involved in this process. Serious disagreements amongst the membership regarding aims and objectives are likely to cause major rifts and prevent the group from fulfilling its true potential. Such disagreements should be taken seriously and a determined effort made to sort them out.

3.12 Equal opportunities and other policies

In order to truly represent the local community the group will need to adopt a policy of equal opportunities and encourage diversity in all of the group's activities. Diverse communities are something to celebrate, and nothing would undermine your group's work more than an accusation that the group does not treat everyone fairly.

It is commonly recognised that ethnic minorities and women suffer from discrimination. There are many other groups that suffer too. People are treated unfairly because of their religion, their age, a disability or illness, because they are single parents or on a low income.

All local authorities and grant awarding bodies will insist that the group has adopted an equal opportunities policy and incorporated it within their constitution before they can support the group. The development of such a policy provides the group with a real opportunity to discuss the issue of fair treatment and develop a commitment to equal opportunities.

An equal opportunities policy (statement of intent) should be developed with all of the committee members of the group, to ensure all opinions and ideas are included. This will also provide a training opportunity to highlight some of the issues and to provide education on the importance of considering equality to key decision makers.

Your group should consider the following when developing an equal opportunities policy:

☐ Recruitment to the committee and membership of the group.
☐ Providing training on equality issues to new committee members.
☐ Ensuring work days or events are flexible enough to meet the needs of individuals.
☐ Ensuring that work is appropriate to individuals' needs and abilities. For example, consider providing special equipment or assistance for people with disabilities.

More established groups, with strong memberships, might consider creating an objective to improve equality of representation in the committee and membership of the group. Progress towards achieving that objective can then be monitored.