



**PARKS ACTION GROUP**  
**EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES WORK-STREAM**

**MISSION:**

**To promote and support the development, spread, effectiveness and influence of community empowerment throughout the sector, and on the ground within the country's local public green spaces**

**MEMBERSHIP OF THE WORKING GROUP:** National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces [Chair]; Keep Britain Tidy; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Govt; Groundwork UK; Assoc for Public Service Excellence; The Parks Alliance; The Conservation Volunteers; Heritage Lottery Fund; Natural England; DEFRA; Local Government Association; Fields in Trust; National Assoc of Local Councils; Chris Worman (Rugby Council).

**WHAT WE AIM TO DO:**

- To learn from, engage with and help expand the number of existing park Friends Groups and area-wide community/friends' Forums, and park user groups generally, whilst stimulating a wider culture of empowerment that draws in often under-represented groups
- To learn from and engage on this issue with park management networks, local authorities (from core city to parish council level), national greenspace organisations (especially the 'community-facing' ones) and relevant organisations currently 'outside' of the sector

**CURRENT PLANS:**

- Build up a list/database of key national organisations and networks actively engaged in and/or supporting greenspace community empowerment.
- Identify existing relevant research and on-line resources
- Conduct two initial highly-focused surveys regarding the development of Friends Groups and Friends Forums (To be sent to local authority greenspace officers, and Friends Groups)
- Coordinate a series of regional Greenspace Community Empowerment conferences of Friends Groups and greenspace community groups, including under-represented groups, to enable outreach, debate, involvement of the relevant PAG members and others, promotion of the PAG's work, and the development of further Friends Forums and networking
- Identify and promote good practice case studies

**HOW WILL WE MEASURE SUCCESS?**

Mainstreaming of the principle of community empowerment throughout the sector



**The umbrella organisation representing and amplifying the voices of the grassroots movement of over 6,000 local Friends Groups throughout the UK**

## The challenge we all face

**Our local green spaces are vital for everyone and every community** - and for all age groups and interests! They are an essential and unique service promoting relaxation, recreation and play, wildlife and bio-diversity, attractive walking and cycling routes, green jobs and skills, heritage, flood control, health and social well-being, and community cohesion.



**However, there is growing alarm** from the public, from Friends of Parks groups, parks managers, experts and MPs, about the serious long-term damage being caused by devastating cuts to green space budgets for staff and maintenance, and the lack of funding and investment by local and national government. If not reversed, this neglect will cause them to go into serious decline and become problem spaces abandoned by park users and plagued by vandalism - or even being closed and sold off. We must not let this happen.

## The Friends Groups' movement

**The Federation is the voice of the dynamic and inspirational movement of over 6,000 local Friends of Parks groups throughout the UK** – the volunteers who act on behalf of the communities who use and care about our vital public green spaces. We exist to represent their activities, issues and concerns, and to amplify their passionate and knowledgeable voices. We are a democratic, accountable, 'bottom up', grassroots organisation of the movement's area forums and networks (currently numbering around 70 such Forums actively networking and coordinating over 3,000 of the local groups).

**We aim to share learning, develop good practice, and strengthen grass roots organisation, coordination and co-operation. Most importantly, we raise the issues impacting on our open spaces, including seeking the effective protection and improvement of all the UK's 27,000 public parks and green spaces.** We helped lead the successful campaign for a House of Commons Inquiry into how to end the current underfunding crisis, and have played a significant role since. We are the only community-level member of the sector / government liaison body, the Parks Action Group, and currently chair the PAG's Empowering Communities work-stream.

**We want to see an active Friends Group for every public green space**, and an active and independent Forum run by such groups in every area throughout the UK.

## What we can do

**We call on all those who value the UK's green spaces to work together to speak out and defend them, to call for the effective action urgently needed at Government level** – make parks a statutory service backed by adequate public funding and effective protection.

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



# FRIENDS GROUPS: ADDING VALUE TO PARKS SERVICES

## A growing movement

**The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS) is the umbrella organisation that represents and amplifies the voices of the Friends Groups movement across the UK.**

We aim to share learning, develop good practice, and strengthen grassroots organisation, coordination and co-operation throughout the UK. We provide support and advice for friends groups working together to make a difference to their local area, city, region and nationally.

Such groups and their coordinating forums are dependent on unpaid and over-stretched volunteer commitment at every level, including our own Federation officers and representatives, also active in their respective local Friends Groups and Area Forums.

- There are currently an estimated: 27,000 public parks & green spaces in the UK... 6,000+ local Friends of Parks groups.... Around 70 local Area Forums involving approximately 3,000 of the groups

So plenty of opportunity to expand further. We want to see an active Friends Group for every public green space, and an active and independent Forum run by such groups in every area throughout the UK.

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## Some thoughts on community involvement in green spaces: adding value, or substituting for collapsing services?

We need Friends of Parks Groups for all sites, and Friends of Parks Forums for all areas of the UK, and it is good the Government recognise this. However, they also need to recognise that in the vast majority of cases the community groups do not wish to and cannot take on responsibility for their site - the landowner needs to have the responsibility for good maintenance and this then gives the community groups the support they need to bring in the added value to the site. The added value can only be given by volunteers if the site is "fit for purpose".

The Government needs to understand that Local Authorities are under so much pressure from the Government to cut their budgets that parks and open green spaces are being hit with so many cuts that there are hardly any staff left in many areas to help support the community groups. Maintenance of the sites is being cut to below a decent core level such that the groups are unable to add any "added value" as the maintenance is so poor!

Community groups are being seen as essential to keep the maintenance to a decent level and this SHOULD NOT BE THE CASE. In Birmingham (where I am based, and where we have a very active Forum for over 100 local Friends Groups) the community groups told the Council that if the front line staff is cut anymore and maintenance is lost then the groups could not keep giving their time volunteering as there would be no support for them and this was essential.

Continued budget cuts to our open green spaces will only result in the loss of volunteers, sites going downhill so much that they become no go areas with no facilities, crime moves in and the area becomes deprived, reducing house prices. People who could afford to would move away, businesses would not want to work in the area and the health of the residents and the area would decline drastically. It would cost so much more than what was cut to put the area back to its original state.

It is a no brainer to stop the cuts and keep green spaces in a good condition. In their proper condition green spaces:

- Promote volunteering
- Promote community cohesion
- Improve both physical & mental health, increasing life expectancy & reducing the strain on GP's & the Health Service
- Improve air quality & climate control
- Improve flood alleviation, reducing bills for flooding

- .. Reduce urban heat islands
- .. Etc!

The Government need to understand this and see the reality of what their actions are doing to the country. It will cost them so much more to put it right!

We can help by gathering the information from our groups across the country to back all this up and show what a group can achieve, but only if the correct support from the landowner/management is there!

*Sarah Royal [NFPGS CEO]*

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## Park managers and Communities: the logistics of working together

As a former Local Authority officer and Love Parks national worker liaising with local government and communities, my awareness and concerns have arisen in relation to the increasingly fractured relationship and growing void between park management and community. To be more specific, the loss of resources and associated staffing changes can – and are – leading to a domino effect with an impact on the capacity of communities to mitigate the impact of cuts on the standard of our parks: viz:

<b>Park Managers</b> Austerity measures, less resources	<b>Park Communities</b> Less capacity and capability
<b>Loss of budget</b> <b>Staff rationalising</b> <b>Lack of continuity and strategy</b>  <b>Loss of site knowledge</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of site facilities</li> <li>• Loss of site features</li> <li>• Loss of site identity</li> </ul> <b>Loss of frontline staff: rangers; community development, etc</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of site presence</li> <li>• Loss of community input</li> <li>• Increased ASB</li> </ul> <b>Income generation demands</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inappropriate activity</li> <li>• Intensity of events</li> <li>• Development threats</li> <li>• Access limitations</li> </ul>	<b>Staff rationalising</b> <b>Lack of LA contact</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of support and advice</li> <li>• Lack of information</li> <li>• Suspicion and hostility</li> <li>• Loss of networking</li> <li>• Loss of mentoring</li> </ul> <b>Loss of budget</b> <b>Declining standards / targets</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of facilities</li> <li>• Less community events</li> <li>• Lower use</li> <li>• Increased ASB</li> <li>• Loss of pride, sense of place</li> </ul> <b>Inactive and apathetic groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of members</li> <li>• Less representation</li> <li>• Lack of skills and capacity</li> <li>• Reduced resilience</li> <li>• Loss of community input</li> <li>• Less activity, loss of 'eyes in park' and 'self policing' benefits</li> <li>• Less cohesion, more conflict</li> <li>• Site under increased threat</li> </ul>

There is clearly a close correlation between the two columns. In my view the importance of park managers and community development cannot be overstated. This is a close, synergistic relationship and should be even more vital now, however sadly:

- LAs do not have the capacity to maximise the value
- LAs are undermining the relationship as shown above with organisational and operational pressures leading to conflict and jeopardising the partnership.

Unless adequate and ongoing resources are found, who will arbitrate between park managers and communities in the future? Such resources are greatly diminishing. The State of UK Parks research reports 2014/16 confirm this, despite the increase in number of local groups.

*Nigel Sharp [NFPGS Secretary]*