

Developing a Parks 'Friends of' Group

Information and guidance on setting up a 'Friends of' group in a Council owned Park or Open Spaces in Ards and North Down



Foreword

Ards and North Down has a wide variety of award-winning parks and open green space facilities across the Borough which provides the perfect opportunity for getting out and getting active. Ards and North Down Council recognises the value of parks, and whatever the size and condition of the park, we need your help to improve these public parks and open spaces.

Your local parks and open spaces provide opportunities for communities and visitors to enjoy a wide range of outdoor leisure activities, benefiting health, connecting communities, and providing a safe play area for children. Parks and open spaces can reflect the communities in which they are located and benefit from user engagement and input into how they are managed and developed. Communities working to improve a local park or green space with practical tasks, such as litter picks, tree planting and organising events, creates a sense of pride and ownership.

This guide has been written to assist communities interested in establishing a 'Friends' group, with the aim of improving the appearance, facilities, biodiversity, conservation value and safety of their local public park or open space. The guide contains contact details for council along with step-by-step advice on establishing your group, ranging from organising an event to applying for funding.

There are already a number of active 'Friends of' groups throughout the borough, working with us to improve parks and open spaces. Many have been running for several years. The Council recognises that groups may have different priorities for their areas, and that there are no quick fixes to improving public parks and open spaces. However, without the involvement of residents Ards and North Down would not be the borough it is. By working together, we firmly believe we can create the parks that we want, and residents deserve.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This publication has been developed to guide communities that are interested in establishing a 'Friends' group in Ards and North Down. It explains the basic stages of setting up a 'Friends' group, from forming a committee, to promoting the group, and fundraising events. It will show the benefits and the mutual support that can be achieved, by working in partnership with Ards and North Down Borough Council.

1.1 Working with Ards and North Down Council

Ards and North Down Council recognise the value and importance of parks to groups and individuals. They are environments which can enhance quality of life and provide a resource for both formal and informal recreation and physical activity, making an important contribution to the amenity and attractiveness of Ards and North Down, as a borough in which to work and live. Parks and open spaces are for the benefit of all the community, and in recent years there has been an increasing interest in parks and open space, and the outdoors in general. Ards and North Down Council is keen to promote Friends' Groups in Parks, so that through partnership, the development of the borough's assets can be best taken forward encouraging the active involvement of the community.

The majority of parks and open spaces throughout the borough are owned by Ards and North Down Council, which is responsible for ensuring appropriate development and management of the sites. This means that the council must balance the time and money it spends on each site. To do this, Parks and Cemeteries Service has produced a Service Plan which identifies priorities for improvements, and spending, from its available budget. Some of the larger parks have Management Plans which can be made available to you.

In the early days of a group's involvement, there can be a difference between what the group wants and what the council is looking for. Working together is a good way of understanding each other, and agreeing priorities and a shared vision. Community groups and the wider community, working together with the council, can develop a mutually acceptable vision.

The Parks and Cemeteries Service can offer the following additional support:

- A start up pack and guidance notes.
- The allocation of a supporting officer's time to assist you.
- Help with promoting your idea to park users and houses in the area.
- Help to organise a public meeting to test and encourage public interest.
- Help with the collection of names and the official formation of the group.
- Advice on the structure of the group, including the preparing of a constitution.
- An agreement between the council and the new group that defines roles.
- An induction day to introduce the group to the parks team.
- Advice on how to apply for external funding to development of your programme.

You should ensure that all communication with the council is carried out by only one or two members of the group. This should not prevent members of the group getting to know the park's team. This can be done informally during work tasks, at meetings and at events. The more you become acquainted with each other, the stronger the partnership will be.

Ards and North Down Council's Parks and Cemeteries Service is your partner in getting what you want in your park or green space. Once the initial contact has been established, remember to keep in regular contact to keep the momentum going. Invite key people from the council to your events and put them on your mailing list.

1.2 What is a 'Friends' Group?

'Friends' Groups play a vital role in protecting and enhancing local parks and open spaces in Ards and North Down. Working in partnership with the Council they give local residents a greater say in what goes on in those areas.

The groups volunteer their time and energy to get involved with a huge range of different projects including:

- Fundraising for improvements and events in the park.
- Enhancing biodiversity (e.g. creation of wildflower meadows, installing bird and bat boxes).
- Practical tasks such as litter picks and tree planting.
- Improving access.
- Contributing to the planning and management of the park.
- Producing leaflets and other educational material.
- Acting as eyes and ears to protect the park.

It is entirely up to each individual to determine the level of activity they wish to undertake. Some may operate at a low level, simply distributing leaflets regarding the park, whilst others can be more active, raising funds and organising events.

1.3 Reasons for establishing a 'Friends' group

- Gives people an interest in their local park and a means of meeting the needs of the local community.
- Can work to improve a local park or green space with practical tasks such as litter picks, tree planting, enhancing biodiversity and organising events etc.
- Groups can work in partnership with the Council and other organisations to represent local views and improve and develop the park and green spaces.
- Friends Groups can make and secure grant applications to improve the park or green space. Fundraising for improvements is a key purpose of these groups which can access grants not available to Councils.

1.4 Benefits of forming a 'Friends' group

Ards and North Down's parks and open spaces provide opportunities for recreation and enjoyment, benefiting health, relaxation, play, peace and tranquillity for local

residents and visitors to the borough, while also benefitting the environment and local biodiversity. It is vital that these opportunities are available for all to enjoy and 'Friends' groups play a valuable role in the upkeep and enjoyment of our parks and open spaces.

'Friends' groups need local people to use parks wisely and often they consist of local people who will volunteer their time to improve the boroughs parks and open spaces. Anyone can join and volunteer as much or as little time as they wish.

'Friends' groups value and appreciate the boroughs parks and open spaces, and are able to suggest improvements, and encourage the restoration of these parks and open spaces, by raising funding for physical improvements, seeing joint projects through to completion, and giving opinions on proposed plans for the park.

'Friends' groups can make a huge difference. There are shining examples of reversing decline and bringing back quality, beauty, and shared stewardship of our parks and open spaces. By forming a group, you can help contribute, and identify what needs to be done; help to clarify priorities for local people of all ages and backgrounds; understand the challenges

1.5 What if the group does not agree with the Departments individual officers decision?

Ards and North Down Council encourages 'Friends' groups and staff to work closely together. If there is a failure to agree on a decision, then the group can appeal to a more senior officer or go through the Council's Complaint Procedure.

2.0 ESTABLISHING A 'FRIENDS' GROUP

2.1 Identify interested parties

This can sometimes seem like the most difficult and daunting stage to tackle but there are a few simple things you can do. Most groups tend to advertise by distributing flyers, putting up posters or holding an event such as bulb or tree planting.

Try to represent all communities surrounding the park as this will ensure that the group is acting on behalf of the wider community and assist in avoiding conflicts at a later date. A diverse group will provide more opportunities, knowledge and experience.

Inform local community groups, resident groups, and park users such as sports clubs and gardening societies. Invite members onto a steering group.

The more widely the 'Friends group is known the better, as it can support and be supported by organisations with similar aims or interests.

2.2 Set up a steering group

The steering group will guide the formation of the 'Friends' group. Six is a good number to get started. Once the group has a constitution, members can be elected as office bearers. The steering group members need not be office bearers once the group is constituted. The steering group will develop the initial interest, as well as developing the aims and constitution of the group, using a model which Parks and Cemeteries Service can provide.

2.3 Letter of intent

The steering group should write a letter of intent to the Head of Parks and Cemeteries, Ards and North Down Council 2 Church Street, Newtownards, BT23 4AP, to register their interest in setting up a 'Friends' group.

Anyone within the initial group of interested individuals can write to register the group's interest in becoming a 'Friends' group.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries will offer the assistance of a Council officer, who will work with the group initially if required, offering guidance and support. The officer's support may also be useful in developing the groups aims etc.

2.4 Identifying a venue for possible meetings

The group will have to identify possible venues for regular meetings. These meetings should be organised in a facility that is local to your park or open space, and as open and accessible to as many community members as possible. Council will provide a venue in one of its parks, free of charge for one meeting a month. Requests for venues for other meetings can be submitted by the Friends Groups and will be granted based on operational and budgetary constraints

2.5 Annual General Meeting (AGM)

Once you have found a number of interested individuals the next phase is to hold an inaugural Annual General Meeting (AGM) to adopt a constitution and elect a committee. Thereafter hold the AGM once a year in order to elect or re-elect committee members and present an annual report and accounts to the rest of the group.

All meetings held by your group should have an agenda, indicating what issues will be included in your meeting. Minutes should also be taken at every meeting, to keep a record of what was discussed. Record the names of those in attendance, and any apologies sent by those who were unable to attend the meeting. Please include the allocated Parks Officers and any supporting officers in the circulation of your minutes.

2.6 Forming a Committee

The group's committee helps with the day to day running of the group, and is elected by the members of the group, to carry out actions and tasks on their behalf between

meetings. The committee is responsible for the actions of the group -so members cannot act without the committee's authorisation.

The aims of the committee should be achievable and realistic short, medium and long term visions for the park complimenting the aims of the Council's Parks and Cemeteries Service.

Remember "small wins" or successes will encourage support and participation. Short term achievable projects will achieve positive publicity, allowing the group to develop its role, experience and confidence in dealing with issues.

The Role of Elected Members -The Council is aware of the interest that councillors have in their local parks and open spaces within their constituency. Invite councillors to attend your meetings as non-voting ex officio committee members and include in your circulation of minutes.

2.7 Other forms of 'Friends' Groups

Below are some of the other types of groups and organisations with an interest in the improvement of parks and green spaces:

- Informal, un-constituted groups
- Conservation groups
- Community Watch groups
- Community Planning Groups

The Council's advice is to use the most popular choice, and to operate under the title of 'Friends...' for example, 'Friends of Castle Park.' 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 useful 'catchall' 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 all about.

2.8 Naming of 'Friends' groups

Ards and North Down Council reserves the right to the use of the names of all its parks and open spaces. The incorporation of the name into the title of your group will usually be granted but requires the agreement of the Head of Parks and Cemeteries Service.

2.9 Roles and positions within the committee (example)

1. **Chairperson**, helps the group to achieve its aims, sets agendas, conducts meetings and acts as the leader of the group, ensuring its smooth operation. The chairperson should act as a good facilitator, ensuring positive discussions, and involving all members of the group.
2. **Secretary**, ensures all members of the group are kept fully informed and that they feel involved and included. The secretary prepares the paperwork and agendas for the meetings, books meeting rooms, maintains the group's records, deals with the group's correspondence, and supports the chairperson.
3. **Treasurer**, looks after the group's financial activities, ensuring accounts and records are kept up to date and accurate. The treasurer is responsible for making financial reports to the committee.
4. **Events officer**, manages the event budget, seeks permission to hold the event, arranges the hiring of acts and booking of the venue, co-ordinates event set up, technical specifications, site plans, and health and safety.
5. **Marketing and press officer** communicates the aims and objectives of the group to the wider community, including the local press and other media bodies etc. Arranges a variety of PR on behalf of the group, to promote the group's achievements in projects, funding, newsletters and activities.
6. **Web Master**, designs the group's website, creates webpage, and inserts information and images. Responsible for updating the content of the site.

2.10 Developing a Constitution

A constitution explains how your group will be managed, from the aims and objectives of the group, through to how meetings will be run. The constitution of your group does not have to be complicated, but should reflect how you wish your group to be managed. Parks and Cemeteries officers can provide examples of a constitution form.

Constitutions are important for the following reasons;

- To ensure the groups aims and objectives are clear and agreed by its members.
- To provide a mechanism for making decisions and resolving disputes.
- To gain credibility with other organisations and bodies.
- To ensure accountability.
- To clarify liability and lines of responsibility.
- To enable the group to qualify for various grants if the awarding body insists on a 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.

2.11 Registering for Charitable Status

As well as the vital support the council can provide to you as a group, there are various organisations that will be able to offer help and advice. Once your group is constituted, you may wish to consider becoming a registered charity.

2.12 Benefits of charitable status

The main benefits of charitable status are tax related. Special advantageous reliefs and schemes concerning income tax, corporation tax, council tax/rates, and others, are available to recognised charities. Charities do however pay VAT but there are exemptions available for a range of activities.

2.13 Northern Ireland Register of Charities

If you want your group to be entered on to the Register and become a charity, you will need to apply to the office of The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

You can get hold of an application form and charity trustee declaration form from the website www.charitycommissionni.org.uk, by writing or by phone, at the contact details below. The Charity Commissions website provides a checklist on how to identify whether an organisation is a charity when you are asked to contribute.

You can contact The Charity Commission as follows; Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, Marlborough House, Central Way, Craigavon, BT64 1AD

Tel: 028 3832 0220

2.14 Setting up a Bank Account

You will need a bank account to manage any money that is generated through fundraising, and to pay for items such as stationery etc. Set up the account in the name of the group, with at least 2 signatories. The signatories must be members of the committee, usually the chairperson and the treasurer. It is possible to have 3 signatories on the account, allowing a member of the committee to sign if another is unavailable.

2.15 Insurance and Health and Safety

If your group intends to undertake practical tasks, and hold events then you will require insurance, usually public liability insurance (which covers accidents to the public on site) and public accident insurance (to provide compensation for your volunteers).

To comply with Health and Safety laws the group is required to carry out risk assessments, prior to an event. This would involve looking for hazards (e.g. using tools), deciding who might be harmed and how, and then recording the findings of

your assessment (e.g. the main risks and the measures you have taken to deal with them). Parks and Cemeteries officers can provide assistance and advice.

3.0 ADVERTISING

3.1 Local Media

Often the best way to inform people about your event is through social media, posters, local newspapers, radio or television. The local press usually have a 'What's On' column which advertises details of events from local groups. Contact the news desk, at least one or two weeks before the event, so that they can put the date in their diary.

Things that you need to tell the media:

- What is happening
- When the event is taking place
- Where it is taking place
- Who is involved
- Any prizes
- Who is presenting
- Any additional information
- Who to contact for further information

This information can be put together in a press release. Sometimes the press will send a photographer and/or a reporter but this is not always guaranteed. If the media does not attend you can send them a description of the event and what was achieved, along with photographs taken before, during and after the event.

3.2 Newsletters

These are a great way of informing your members, and the wider community, of what your group is up to; celebrating successful events, promoting forthcoming events and recruiting new members.

3.3 Websites

If a member of your group has experience of web design, the group could set up its own website providing information about the group, a history of the park, and a list of activities/events that your group is involved with.

3.4 Social Media

Using social media can be a great way to share information about your cause and simply sound the trumpets about what you are doing. An added bonus is that it's mostly free to. While social media allows for quick distribution of information to a wide audience, it can also allow for some feedback that may be considered negative. Groups should be aware of this when considering their promotions.

4.0 FUNDRAISING

In the majority of cases your group may wish to raise funds to help run the group and carry out projects. Some groups organise fund raising events, such as a plant sale, to raise revenue. Building positive relationships with local organisations may help you to get some resources for free. For example, you could persuade a local cafe or supermarket to provide free refreshments after a clean-up event.

Your group may wish to apply for funding to help improve your park/open space. When applying for funding, please bear in mind the following points:

- It is important that the funder you apply to is willing to give funds for projects like yours. Make a list of the funder's aims and objectives and make statements about how your project will reach these.
- Don't be too extravagant with your first bid, it is better to apply for smaller amounts of money when you first begin. Funders like to see experience of dealing with money and projects, before they offer you a large sum of money.
- Funders like projects which meet the needs of local people. If you have completed a piece of consultation that shows your project will meet these needs, try to refer to it in the application.
- Funders also like to fund projects which include more than one group or organisation. Refer to the fact that you work in partnership with Ards and North Down Council and any other groups or organisations.
- Mention any match funding you have received. Equipment, facilities or staff given in kind can be classed as match funding. Contact the Parks and Cemeteries officer to get a cost for these items.

4.1 Funding Advice

There are a number of funding opportunities open to community groups, these may be provided by local or national organisations. Advice on what funding is available and how a community can go about obtaining funding is also available locally and nationally, listed below are organisations and publications that you may find helpful.

- County Down Rural Community Network.
- North Down Community Network.
- Grant Tracker www.grant-tracker.org
- Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful
- Ards and North Down Council provides assistance to help access external funding.

4.2 National Funding Bodies

These organisations provide advice and information on funding, rather than providing grants and awards themselves, and are a good place to start if you are new to fundraising. Many of them are based online, and have some excellent information, guidance and advice available.

5.0 Sources Of Possible Funding

The Big Lottery Fund NI

The Big Lottery Fund (NI) is one of a number of significant investors in community groups and projects in Northern Ireland. It provides grants from £300 to over £500,000 to local organisations ranging from small local groups to major national charities. It has various funding programmes for Northern Ireland, for example the 'Awards for All' initiative (which is a quick way for groups to access small Lottery Grants of between £500 to £10,000).

The Big Lottery Fund website contains a searchable database of funding as well as comprehensive information and guidance on how to apply for funding see www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/fundin

Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

The purpose of the Community Foundation is to connect local and international donors with community projects that require funding. The website provides information on rolling funding streams see www.communityfoundationni.org/funds and www.communityfoundationni.org/apply

Note that the Community Foundation twitter account also provides up-to-date information on funding opportunities <https://twitter.com/CFNIreland>

NICVA

In addition to public funding, there are also a number of charities and corporate organisations (e.g. Tesco, Asda and various high street banks) that provide grants for various community projects. The NICVA Grant Tracker website is dedicated to finding such grants and fundraising opportunities - www.grant-tracker.org/. There are over 900 potential sources of funding schemes available to search.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Library has a subscription to GrantTracker that can be accessed through the AsslSt intranet - <http://assist.assemblyni.gov.uk/services/rsrchlib/eresources/azresources.htm>

Note that NICVA's twitter account is also very useful source for providing up-to-date information on small grant funding opportunities for local organisations see https://twitter.com/nicva_fradvice

Organisations can join NICVA for free if they are voluntary, community or social enterprise organisations with an income of under £20,000 per year and includes a reduced annual fee for the use of Grant Tracker. See www.nicva.org/article/free-nicva-membership-for-small-organisations

6.0 Further Information

Ards and North Down Council will always welcome people interested in setting up a 'Friends' group, to help care for their local park/open space, and will offer advice to those trying to establish their group.

6.1 Useful Contacts

Parks & Cemeteries Service

Ards and North Down Borough Council
2 Church Street
Newtownards
BT23 4AP

T: 0300 013 3333

E: andparks@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

W: www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/parks

The Conservation Volunteers

E: tcvni@tcv.org.uk

T: 028 9064 5169

W: www.tcv.org.uk/northernireland

Fields in Trust

E: info@fieldsintrust.org

T: 020 7427 2110

W: www.fieldsintrust.org

The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS)

E: info@natfedparks.org.uk

W: www.natfedparks.org.uk

County Down Rural Community Network

Ards Network Centre
43-45 Frances Street
Newtownards
BT23 7DX

T: 028 9182 8884

W: www.countydownruralcommunitynetwork.com

North Down Community Network

NDCN Wellbeing Centre
25-27 Main Street

Bangor
BT20 5AF

T: 028 9146 1386

E: admin@ndcn.co.uk

W: www.ndcn.co.uk