

INFORMATION GUIDE TO SETTING UP A FRIENDS GROUP



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Setting up a Friends Group

INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed for anyone interested in starting a *'Friends of'* group in Coventry.

Created by the Council's Parks and Open Spaces Officers and Urban Rangers, this guide draws on our experience of working alongside the many fantastic groups already established in Coventry. We've brought together practical tips, advice and inspiration to help you get started and make a real difference in your local park or green space.

We hope the information within this comprehensive guide will answer any questions you may have - whether you're part of an existing Friends group or beginning to think about forming one.

Divided into several sections, the guide covers some of the most common questions we are asked, such as *"will our group need a constitution?"* and *"how do we attract more members?"*. We have also included a list of useful contacts at the end of the guide to help you get started.

Setting up a Friends group and keeping it running can be straightforward, especially when projects are small and community based, and group members are keen and enthusiastic. As the groups ambitions grow, for example - when planning larger restorations projects - organisation and time become more important. We believe with good planning and teamwork; groups will be successful at achieving their goals.

We hope this guide provides a helpful starting point and supports you as your group grows. Together, we can continue to make Coventry's parks and green spaces places that everyone can enjoy.

The Parks and Open Spaces & Urban Rangers Teams
Coventry City Council

FRIENDS – WE ALL NEED THEM

One of the main aims of our Parks Service is to enable the establishment of self-sustaining volunteer-lead groups whom we can work in partnership with to regenerate parks and green spaces. These groups, whose membership is made up of local regular users of the parks/open spaces, enables us to identify what issues and needs are most important to residents in the area. The parks service then work in-partnership with groups to help deliver projects.

As part of our philosophy of enabling ownership of our parks, it is essential that we continue to help develop these self-sustaining groups. After an initial period of high input whilst in the establishment phase, groups can run with reduced support enabling staff to aid development in new areas of the city.

What is a Friends Group?

A Friends group is a group of residents who come together on a volunteer basis with a goal to improve and maintain a space in their local area. This can be a park, woodland or green space. Each group has different aims for their space, depending on the needs of local people who use the area and see its potential. Such improvements usually include the spaces appearance, facilities, it's conservation value, safety of the area and overall use and appreciation. Groups usually start with a few members, with membership expanding when locals start to take notice and appreciate how the group have made positive changes.

Why form a group?

This can be for any number of reasons, the main one being to do something positive about a park or open space. A Friends group is an effective and recognised method of achieving this. Groups can also apply for grants that the Council can't – helping to achieve the groups set goals.

Other Friends Groups

In Coventry, we already have several active and successful Friends group. Each have different priorities for their area; there are no set goals for all - it's what you want in your local park, woodland or green space that counts.

As many groups have achieved success with projects (and learned lessons during the process) their knowledge and experience is a valuable source for new groups just starting out. Established groups are only too willing to share knowledge and offer advice, so we recommend contacting them. You can find a list of current Friends groups on the Council's website, and we've included a link to the page at the end of this guide.

Getting members and keeping them

As a Friends group, it's important to value and treasure people who are interested in joining your group. First impressions count, so a welcoming and positive experience during initial meetings will encourage people to return and give their time.

FRIENDS – WE ALL NEED THEM

(continued)

We've listed ideas below which could help towards expanding a group and keep members coming back in the early stages:

- Ensure the atmosphere is friendly and new members are warmly welcomed.
- Encourage and value new ideas and respect those different to your own.
- Arrange for each member to invite a friend or neighbour to the next meeting.
- Remember to give praise and thanks where it's due.
- Plan activities that encourage wide involvement, such as a family fun day.

Residents will show interest in joining a group if they feel they have something to offer. Therefore, when it comes to advertising it may be beneficial to list specific skills and experience that your group are looking for.

Examples could include those with knowledge and experience of:

- The history of the area.
- Resolving conflicts.
- Working with different cultures.
- Using software for producing poster/leaflets.

Reviewing progress

Many groups achieve an enormous amount without anyone else realising it. One way of overcoming this is to have an annual review, which could be compiled with the help of the Council and distributed around your local area. This will make the local population aware of your groups achievements and may inspire new members who also want to help make a difference to their area to join the group.

Getting out of a slump

Members leave for a variety of reasons, and this can sometimes cause the group to lose their enthusiasm and slow down progress. It's important to be proactive in recognising issues before they become problematic and cause further members to leave. Discuss issues with the group and encourage existing members to make suggestions for improvements if they are not happy with certain aspects of how the group is being run. It may help to appoint a dedicated member who others can raise issues with privately, before then discussing as a group whilst keeping them anonymous.

How will the Parks Service help

It is the role of the Parks Service to provide parks, public open spaces and woodlands suitable for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Their aim is to ensure that the city's Green Spaces are safe environments in which people can play, learn and socialise. The Parks Service can help with initial group set up and provide a point of contact with the Council.

THE BARE NECESSITIES

The beginning of a new group

When starting out, an initial meeting is usually called after some form of public consultation (such as a neighbourhood survey or community mapping exercise), which will have helped to establish what the local issues are and if there is a need for setting up a Friends group. Alternatively, you can organise a practical session and start to recruit from those who attend or gain interest in an established online local group (such as Facebook group).

Getting started, your first meeting

Once you have people interested in joining the group and after completing the above exercises, it's time to arrange the group's first meeting. A public launch will help gain awareness, as well as choosing a good meeting point that's accessible to all.

Support can be provided for your initial meeting by the Councils Park Service by request. It is also a good idea to invite a chairperson from another existing Friends group, who can share their groups experiences and advice from the early stages of their establishment.

Setting your aims

By now you may be aware of the issues in your area, so it's time to decide what your initial priorities will be: Do you want to improve the play area, solve a dog mess problem, run a large community event, organise a litter picking day, develop or manage wildlife habitats or restore a historical feature? – Whichever aims you chose, decide which will become your main priorities to start with.

If you are not sure what your members and the other park users want to happen in your park – you need to find out. There are several ways of doing this: you could distribute a questionnaire, or you could organise a consultation event. The Council has experience in this area and can provide advice and suggestions. The Parks Service may already have some information based upon previous surveys.

Once your aims are prioritised, break down how the group will achieve them. This will include a discussion about the costs involved, where the money is coming from and which members will help with certain aspects. It is also a good idea to decide what the group would like to achieve in the first year and set a timetable.

Meetings/Work Sessions (see also planning projects/work)

During your initial meeting, decide on further meetings, how often will they be, what time is best, where to have them and most importantly, what to talk about. You may decide to also have short meetings before or after each practical session or - this can help keep the groups momentum and feeling of achievement.

THE BARE NECESSITIES

Advertising your meeting

If they don't know it's happening, they won't come! Make sure meeting dates are publicised in advance, giving people time to make necessary arrangements. If you wish to request a member of the Park Service to attend, at least 3 weeks' notice is required so that we can plan it into our diaries. Advertise the meeting on social media, as well as putting posters up locally. Include a map when advertising (or use What3Words) and if possible, place a poster at the venue or a sign outside to direct people in on the day.

Meeting timings

Consult with members as to the best time for meetings and vary times if necessary. Remember to inform people of changes to dates and times in advance. It is the groups Chair's responsibility to ensure the meeting keeps to time, and that everyone present is involved, and people keep to the point.

Making sure everyone's view is valued and heard

One of the biggest obstacles can be people's different perceptions of meetings. Few people ever realise they may be speaking for too long, going off point regularly or that the way they run a meeting is poor. Others may see things differently depending on their experiences. Your members will be coming to the meeting to learn what is going on and to contribute to decision making. Therefore, it is important they feel valued and heard. It is sometimes a good idea to rotate the chairing of meetings.

Writing a meeting agenda

To keep your meetings on track, always write a meeting agenda prior and share this out to members. An agenda keeps people on point, they know what you will be talking about during the meeting and can suggest topics to be discussed.

A suggested agenda format is as follows:

- 1) Welcome and introductions.
- 2) Apologies (list members who are unable to attend).
- 3) Minutes of the last meeting (this could be a printout for members to read at their leisure).
- 4) Matters arising from last meeting.
- 5) Reports/Updates on the decisions about group activities – list them, so people know specifically what activities you are referring to.
- 6) Treasurer's report.
- 7) Any other business – a chance for all members to ask questions and raise other points.
- 8) Date and time of next meeting.

Keeping Minutes

Write down all decisions and action points, agree and record who is going to carry them out, and send copies to all relevant people. You do not need to write down every single word that is said in meetings, just the main points.

THE BARE NECESSITIES

Equal opportunities policy

Coventry City Council have an Equal Opportunities Policy which you can request to view. You may then choose to follow the same policy for your group or gather ideas for creating your own policy. Contact the Parks Service who can provide a copy of this.

Working with the community

When planning and carrying activities with your group, always advertise the event as widely as possible, rather than just within your local in Coventry. There may be people who do not wish to get involved with the group on a full-time basis, due to time limitations, but would be willing to help on a particular project or issue they have a keen interest in.

Planning further projects/work

It is essential to plan each project thoroughly in advance. Try to think of any issues that may occur and affect your projects and have plans ready to overcome these if they occur.

When running community events, there are certain health and safety requirements your group will need to fulfil prior. These include paperwork such as risk assessments, having insurance in place and safeguarding children. A well planned and well-run event can be great fun and very satisfying.

The Council's Events Team organises a variety of events across the city. When planning your own event in a park, please inform the Events Team during the planning process. They can register your event, offer help and advice and check your event doesn't clash with another event already planned in the same park on the same day.

PUTTING YOUR GROUP ON A MORE FORMAL FOOTING

In some cases, the first thing a group does is set up a committee, and in others it is something they get round to eventually. Neither of these approaches is right or wrong, but as soon as the group starts to make applications for funding and needs to open a bank account, it will have to form a committee.

Setting up a committee

Your groups committee will be made up of various roles which your members will elect. It is important that the right people are elected to the following necessary roles to enable them to complete specific duties required.

Chairperson

The main role of the Chair is the responsibility for the group. Therefore, the Chair needs to keep up to date with what is happening. A key skill the Chairperson will possess is leadership. A good leader sets a positive example for the rest of the group, is fair, and reliable. The Chair coordinates other committee members, encouraging those who have taken on responsibilities within the group to carry them out. They also ensure meetings run smoothly and to order and makes sure everyone gets a say and is listened to. The Chairperson will also be the main link with the Council.

Vice chairperson

The role of the Vice Chairperson is to take on some of the Chairpersons responsibilities in their absence. They can also share some of the responsibilities of the Chair role generally, these can be discussed and decided when both roles are assigned.

Secretary

The role of Secretary requires a person who is organised. The Secretary takes minutes at meetings and provides copies to members in time for the next meeting. Access to a computer and relevant software is essential.

Treasurer

The role of Treasurer is to keep accurate financial accounts which will be annually audited and made available to members at the Annual General Meeting.

Other committee member roles to consider

There are several other roles that make up a committee, such as ***Publicity Officer, Fundraiser*** and ***Social Media Officer***. Although these roles are not strictly necessary, other Friends groups have found them useful, and if you have several keen members, it could be beneficial to have them involved in the running of the group.

PUTTING YOUR GROUP ON A MORE FORMAL FOOTING

Write a constitution for your group

The next thing to is to adopt a constitution.

Reasons for a constitution:

- To ensure the group's aims are clear to all members
- To provide a means for making decisions and resolving disputes
- To gain credibility with bank managers and funders
- To clarify liability and lines of responsibility
- To ensure accountability
- To enable the group to affiliate to other similar bodies.

The easiest way to do this is to adopt a constitution similar to that of which existing Friends groups already use (the Council has examples of these).

Host Annual General Meetings

You need to have an Annual General Meeting once a year to elect or re-elect committee members and present an annual report of accounts to the rest of the group. It is a good idea to combine this with a talk or social event. Groups should also set out their aims and objectives for the following year.

Consider registering as a charity

As a Friend's group, it is not strictly necessary for you to become a registered charity, however it can prove helpful when it comes to marketing and fundraising. The word 'charity' evokes a positive response from the public, who will also feel reassured at your registered charity status.

To be able to write to potential funders as a registered charity also puts you a cut above the rest. Some funders, especially charitable trusts, prefer to give money to registered charities.

You could be putting your group at a disadvantage by not being registered so it's certainly something to consider. Becoming a registered charity does come with certain administrative responsibilities though – to find out more, contact the Charity Commission or VAC for further advice.

Consider writing a business plan

Potential funders will appreciate the professionalism when presented with a well-planned business plan. It can also be used for accounting procedures.

Research Insurance for events

It is vitally important that whatever your group decides to do, you are covered by some form of insurance (normally public liability insurance). If your activity is being supported by the Urban Rangers, the event will be covered under the Council's insurance policy.

PUTTING YOUR GROUP ON A MORE FORMAL FOOTING

(continued) If you plan to run your own separate events, consult with an insurance broker first to discuss available options. Usually the £5 million-pound public liability cover is required. For further advice, you can also contact a Council's Event Team.

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

All groups need publicity, and it needs to be positive. Good publicity can benefit your group by raising awareness of your existence, getting your message across and gaining new members. You need to have a clear and understandable message.

The main aims of publicity are to attract new members and money. Therefore, it is worth spending time and money on making sure it is effective. There are several ways of publicising your group and you may find some of the following ideas useful.

Social Media

A popular and easy way to keep in touch and spread the word to many people is by having good social media presence. Many Friends groups do this by having a Facebook page/group and an Instagram or X account. There may already be an established local Facebook group for your area that you can post on to begin with to gauge interest before starting and managing your own Facebook group.

It's important to keep your social media page up to date. Collaborating with others online and good use of hashtags (on platforms such as Instagram and X) will help your posts be seen by more people and encourage more followers to your page.

Make sure posts are written professionally (with no spelling mistakes or misspelt names) and include accessibility options for users with disabilities to ensure they can still access your content (these options are available on some platforms already).

Once your group is more established, consider creating a group logo to use across your social media and marketing materials.

Newsletters/Subscribers

Don't underestimate a hard copy of a newsletter posted through letterboxes for keeping your members and the rest of the public informed of what you are doing. You can also compile a subscriber list and email your newsletter.

PUTTING YOUR GROUP ON A MORE FORMAL FOOTING

(continued) Newsletters should contain short informative articles, forthcoming events and a way for readers to comment on issues (such as providing social media links, a QR Code to take them directly to a page on your website or email address).

Posters/leaflets

As well as advertising your events online, a poster can be very effective. This can be displayed in a park's noticeboard, local library, schools, shop community boards, sports centres, pubs, community centres, clinics, places of worship, neighbourhood offices, as well as being distributed to houses (possibly with free newspapers).

Important things to remember with posters and leaflets are – make them colourful, clear and concise, include where, when, who. Again, include either an email address so you can be contacted, links to your social media page or a QR Code. Also include any sponsors you may want to mention for certain events they are involved in.

Local Media

Local radio stations are always keen to hear stories. Newspapers may print a 'good news' story if you have tackled a popular issue such as littering.

Hints for writing a successful press release:

- Keep it short and to the point, no more than one side.
- The first sentence should include who, what, where, when and why.
- Summarise your main points in your first paragraph.
- Use your following paragraphs to expand on the main points.
- Give a daytime contact number and make sure they are available.
- Include an email address and social media links.
- Suggest a photo opportunity.
- Try to get to know local journalists.

Effective partnerships and networking

As the old saying goes 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. There are obvious advantages for groups to share information, advice, skills and expertise. It allows your activities to be effective, efficient, economical and sustainable.

If you, as a Friends group have a success or a failure with an event, it is useful to share your experience with the other Friends groups. The Urban Rangers can put you in touch with existing group members.

Campaigning/petitioning

These can be presented to your local Councillors who would then hopefully present your case to committee for their appraisal.

USEFUL COUNCIL CONTACTS

Customer Services

Open 9am–5pm Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays).

Email: customer.services@coventry.gov.uk **Tel:** 08085 834333

Visit: <http://www.coventry.gov.uk/myaccount>

Urban Rangers

Contact the Urban Rangers inbox - working hours 9am-5pm Monday to Friday. The rangers aim to respond at their earliest opportunity.

Email: urbanrangers@coventry.gov.uk

Instagram: Follow @CovUrbanRangers for updates and social media collaborations:

<https://www.instagram.com/covurbanrangers/>

Booking Park Events

You can find information and guidance for booking an event space for a public event on the web link below.

Visit: <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/parks-open-spaces/book-park>

Community Resilience Team

The Community Resilience Team works with individuals, small and large voluntary organisations, and communities to identify and build on already existing strengths and skills within neighbourhoods.

Email: communitydevelopment@coventry.gov.uk

Other Friends Groups in Coventry

Visit our website for a list of other Friends of groups and links to their social media pages.

Link: <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/park-volunteering/friends-parks-groups>

Community Litter Picking

To arrange a litter picking event in your park or surrounding area, request bags and loan of litter picking equipment, contact the City Services team.

Telephone: 08085 834333

Email: cswhitley@coventry.gov.uk.

USEFUL CONTACTS

The Conservation Volunteers

www.tcv.org.uk

Charity Commission

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>

Voluntary Action Coventry

www.vacoventry.org.uk

Coventry Community Empowerment Network

<https://www.communityempowermentnetwork.org.uk/get-involved>

Federation of City farms and Community Gardens

www.farmgarden.org.uk

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

www.ncvo.org.uk

FRIENDS GROUP REGISTRATION FORM

Group name:	
Main contacts name:	
Main contacts role/title:	
Telephone number:	
Email address:	
Meeting venue address: (please include a postcode)	
Do you have a regular meeting day and time? (example: 1 st Monday of the month):	
Please write a short summary, detailing the aims of your group:	

Please post or email your completed form to:

Abi Foster, Commercial & Visitor Experience Manager.
City Services, Whitley Depot, 259 London Road, Coventry, CV3 4AR.

Abi Foster - abi.foster@coventry.gov.uk