



Annual Report

1/10/22 - 30/09/23

Overview

The Bromley Friends Forum was formed in 2005 and works in partnership with the London Borough of Bromley and its main parks contractor, idverde, to create a better environment for all. Through the partnership, users and visitors get a greater say in what goes on in their local areas.

Forum's main objectives are as follows:

- support all Member Groups to promote, maintain and conserve the facilities, and encourage the positive usage of all parks and green spaces in Bromley for the health and well-being of the community
- support Member Groups with their aim to contribute towards the conservation and enhancement of the physical and natural environments
- to raise funds to help Member Groups to improve facilities, environments and activities available within the parks and green spaces across Bromley
- encourage new Friends Groups to form, providing advice and support, where required
- identify training needs and to support training and educational opportunities for Member Groups
- promote the benefits of being actively involved with a Friends Group
- act as a representative of all Member Groups.

Each Friends Group within the Forum helps care for a specific park or green space in the borough. Friends can get involved in improving:

- The conservation, protection and appearance of parks and green spaces
- The recreational facilities available to the general public
- The health, safety and well-being for all visitors
- The educational experience through the natural history and biodiversity of our community.

Committee

The Bromley Friends Forum operates through a committee which is elected each year. We host up to six meetings a year for our members and invited guests. Committee members also attend a variety of other pertinent meetings. These include Committee Meetings; Partnership Meetings; Panel Meetings (Countryside Consultative & Stakeholder) and the Biodiversity Partnership Meetings. In addition Forum attends meetings of the London wide movement on parks and green spaces, which are held every six weeks or so.

In the 2022-2023 financial year Forum Committee Members were as follows: Larry Herbert (chair), Keith Rodwell (deputy chair), Tony Allen (treasurer), Vivien Smith, Barbara Arora, Richard Gibbons, Walter Leonard & Kari Silvester.

Chairman's Statement

Although the Covid-19 pandemic remains ever present the 2022/23 Friends year was by and large back on a normal footing. Friends group activities and events continued a pace and a lot of new and exciting plans and projects were taking shape. This was in part due to the advent of the Jubilee Parks Fund which has been providing funding to a variety of different proposals.

Communications with LBB and *idverde* have improved but are not helped by continual staff changes. In the year *idverde*'s Operations Director has left as too LBB's Parks and Green Spaces Manager and this has led to some disruption and confusion. In the main meetings continue to be held via zoom rather than face to face and though this reduces travel time and improves attendance it does not always achieve the best results.

Some of the main threads Forum has followed in the year are:

Partnership Working / Communications

As stated above communications this year have not always been as clear and up-to-date as we would like. Lots of face-to-face meetings have had to be cancelled and there has been a lot more reliance on remote communication. At times these have not been as timely as we would have hoped and resulted in milestones being missed.

After discussion with LBB's Assistant Director it has been agreed that we will work together to improve ways of communication and develop a set of standards and practices which we can all adhere to. It is hoped that a revised 'terms of reference' document will be completed by the end of 2023.

Over the year there has been quite a number of departures from *idverde* and though new staff have been recruited many Friends Groups have had to accept changes to their site management arrangements. In some cases this has led to an upwards learning curve and a new unfamiliar management style.

Basic Tool Provision

Forum has been in discussions with LBB and *idverde* about basic tool provision for Friends Groups for a number of years now. In 2023 it was agreed a basic tool kit would be provided for new Groups and a budget of £2k had been set aside initially to cover the cost. The exact contents of this kit is in part dependent on the type of Group (urban or countryside) but will include the basics of gloves, hi-viz, first aid and other PPE items. Some element of hand-held tools would also be included.

Alongside the kit it has been noted that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of PPE and clearly loaning out items such as gloves and goggles is no longer an acceptable arrangement. Accordingly, *idverde* will supply these types of essential items and stock levels will be maintained to cope with demand. With regard to hand-held tools these will continue to be loaned but will undergo a rigorous cleaning schedule before being distributed to Groups. The situation will be kept under continual review and it is hoped that where there is a need *idverde*, in agreement with LBB, will be able to fully support any request.

Park Signage

As you will well know many of the signs in our parks are showing their age, contain out-of-date information and are generally in a poor state. A long-term project has been launched to look into new signs with commonality across all of the borough's parks and green spaces. A working party made up of senior Friends volunteers has been established to look into the practicalities and as a first step it was agreed to conduct a full audit of all the main entrance signs to our parks and green spaces. *idverde* have developed a Jotform to undertake this exercise and initial use is currently underway. The form will capture the location of current signs along with a photo and some indication into its state of repair. The audit process should conclude by the end of 2023 and the working party will then reconvene and determine how the project will move forward. It is noted that there is maintenance funding for repair but little to no funding for new boards.

Drinking Fountains

Following a brief survey conducted by Forum it became evident that there was a lot of interest to have water fountains in our parks and that several Friends Groups were prepared to at least partially fund the cost. The practicalities of achieving this has been under consideration with LBB for a couple of years now and unfortunately any decision has yet to be established. There is the purchase cost as well as the on-going maintenance costs to be considered and whether these can be off-set by savings in a reduction in litter of plastic bottles and cans. Equally the cost of the actual water usage and who pays will need to be looked at. It is anticipated that only one or two fountains would be installed each year, with those sites that have had previous installations taking priority. It is expected that these installations would be brand new rather than restorations of the old facilities. It is likely that only sites that currently have water provision will be considered for a new drinking fountain.

Jubilee Parks Fund

At the start of our financial year LBB announced their Jubilee Parks Fund to provide £1m funding towards projects in our parks and green spaces. Each ward would be allocated up to £40k, with no one project more than £20k. The first tranche of applications were received in October 2022 and a second in April 2023. At the current time funding of around £500k has been approved and some of the projects well underway, if not completed. Further applications are expected throughout the lifespan of the current administration or until such time as the fund is exhausted.

Dog Poo Bag Dispensers

Forum has been in discussion with *idverde* with regard the provision of poo bags for the dispensers. The current contract has come to an end and a new contract is being negotiated with EcoGreen over a sponsorship deal. Forum is pleased to report that a contract has been agreed and new stickers and decals for the dispensers are being finalised. This will make it clear that the bags are intended for emergency use only and not to taken as a free resource. It has also been agreed that each dispenser will receive 400 bags per month and supplies will continue until April 2027. Distribution of the supply of bags will be managed by *idverde*, with Friends Groups expected to fulfil the physical aspect of replenishing the dispensers.

Treemendous Project

LBB's Treemendous Project plans to plant 5000 trees across the borough over the span of the current administration. Some 1500 trees have been planted this planting season and Friends have been encouraged to assist the contractor, Gristwood and Toms, with the watering. An App has been developed which will allow Friends to interrogate the QR codes and find information about the tree and the watering schedule it has received. Friends are also encouraged to report any issues with the trees and report any vandalism or similar that may have occurred post planting.

Trials

Two trials have been taking place this year. The first is a Nature Friendly Verges trial. This is a two-year trial and has been conducted this year in 11 different sites across the borough. In essence these verges will be free from mowing and left to grow to attract a variety of invertebrates. Comments from the general public are encouraged and it is understood that some 70% of those received are favourable. The trial will be repeated at the same 11 sites next year and further public comment collected. At the end of the trial public comment will be assessed with the view to potentially extending the programme more widely across the borough.

The second trial is for Sustainable Planting. This will be a three-year trial at 10 sites and will start in the autumn/winter of 2023. It is aimed at formal garden settings at places like roundabouts and carriageways and will look at drought resistant and perennial planting. Again public comment will be taken into account and future actions taken accordingly. Friends are encouraged to make comment on both of these trials.

Training

The Bromley Friends Forum, in agreement with *idverde*, organises five training courses on subjects related to parks and green spaces per annum. During 2023 we are most grateful to *idverde* who were able to extend this offer to seven courses. These were Conducting Amphibian Surveys (Apr); Summer Leaf and Tree ID (Jun); Biodiversity in Amenity Spaces (Jul); Invasive Species (Sep); Leading Work Parties (Sep); Habitat Management (Oct) and Identifying Winter Twigs (Dec). A new programme of training courses for 2024 will be agreed early in the new year though it is expected that certain favourites (e.g. leading work parties) will be repeated.

In addition, the Forum organises Emergency First Aid Courses and has provided three of these in the past year. As Friends Group numbers increase and first aid certificates last for three years it is likely that this number of courses will need to increase to meet the demand. We would propose to run four courses in the coming year, two in spring and two in the autumn.

Friends Group Assistance

Part of the Friends Forum objectives, as detailed in the overview above, is to provide support and advice to member groups and we continue to offer this on a regular basis both digitally and in person. Over the past year or so we have taken the opportunity to advise on matters such as insurance, data protection, DoE award scheme, safeguarding and risk assessment. In addition we have directly liaised with LBB and *idverde* in resolving Friends Groups issues.

As part of our commitment to our Member Groups we have undertaken an exercise of seeking updated contact information in return for a £150 support payment. Of the 59 Groups now listed we are pleased to say 42 have responded and shown themselves to be active and responsible for sites across the borough. We have also set up a Forum WhatsApp Group for members to exchange a variety of news worthy information and hence improve the flow of communication across the network of Friends.

Reporting Lines / FixMyStreet

Over the past year or so there have been quite a number of personnel changes and it has not always been obvious of the reporting lines for discussing matters of outstanding business. A number of organisational charts have been issued from time to time and it is hoped this will continue to be kept up-to-date and issued in a timely manner. Friends Groups are reminded that their first point of contact for all matters related to their park or green space is their *idverde* site manager. Friends Groups are also reminded to report any concerns (including praise) on FixMyStreet. This helps to formalise any problems and ensures issues are recorded and monitored. This in turn helps to identify any trends or areas of concern that need to be rectified.

Footfall

As you are all aware our parks and green spaces have become extremely popular during the pandemic and the level of footfall continues to remain at a high level. This is creating a number of problems, not least massive damage to pathways, and it will take quite some effort in the coming years to rectify the situation. Some cyclists and horse riders have roamed freely where they are not supposed to, ball games have occurred on wild flower meadows and of course there has been a big increase in barbecues and illegal fires. LBB has now updated its Dog Protection Order, where the number of dogs that can be walked is limited and the places where they cannot walk made more specific. Notices to this effect have been placed in our parks and green spaces, especially around water bodies, where dogs are not allowed.

Litter & Fly Tipping

Allied to the above the level of littering and fly tipping has increased dramatically. Part of the problem is that there are insufficient bins in our parks, they are too small and the design of some allow foxes and the like to rummage through and redistribute the litter elsewhere. Restricted operational arrangements at the local waste recycling centres has not helped and it is all too easy to dump unwanted material during the hours of darkness. Some of the collection arrangements have equally not met the demand, especially at weekends.

Websites

A review of the three websites (LBB, idverde and Forum) has been undertaken in the past year to ensure consistency of information and to try and avoid un-necessary (and inaccurate) duplication. It is envisaged that the Forum website will hold the detailed information of Friends Groups whilst the LBB and idverde ones contain links to this data. The LBB and idverde websites will additionally hold strategic information such as policies (e.g. Open Space Strategy, Tree Strategy) and governmental requirements. Unfortunately progress to date has been rather slow to materialise but it is hoped these matters will be settled by the start of the new year.

Friends Groups

At our AGM in November 2022, we reported a membership of 56 Groups and some 800 active volunteers. This has now risen to 59 Groups though it is believed that the active volunteer count has remained much the same as several members have decided to leave and/or retire from volunteering. New Groups for this year are Stanhope Rec, Green Street Green and Chislehurst Cemetery. Forum has also been involved with helping the re-establishment of the Harvington Group in the past year and supporting the new committee in meeting its goals. We expect Groups to continue to increase in 2024, as well as dormant Groups, like Glentrammon, to come back on stream.

Green Flags

Bromley continues to improve the status of its green spaces and this year eight sites have been awarded Green Flags. These are Biggin Hill Rec, Chislehurst Rec, Chislehurst Commons, Darrick & Newstead Woods, Hayes Common, Keston Common, Queens Garden and South Hill Wood. In addition Winsford Gardens received a Green Flag Community Award for the 9th consecutive year.



Walks

Over the past year organised walks have been able to return to our parks and green spaces and gradually more people have been able to take advantage. A number of these walks are advertised for health benefits and it is recommended that Groups contact their local GP surgeries if they plan to formulate a regular programme of walks.

Events

In a similar vein there has been a huge increase in the number of organised events in our parks over the past year. Events such as Chislehurst Rocks, Whitehall's Apple Day, Bowie's Beckenham Oddity, Cator's Paws in the Park, music festivals in Queens Garden, Crystal Palace and Croydon Road Rec have all returned. In addition there have been open days at Scadbury Park and Priory Gardens both of which have attracted large numbers of visitors.

It is hoped in the coming year Friends will be able to organise more new and exciting events and idverde are keen to accept applications and help with the organisation of Covid secure arrangements.

Members' Meetings

Following the AGM in November 2022 we have been able to return to a more regular schedule of Members Meetings. Meetings were held in March, May, July & September 2022. All these meetings were held in person at the Civic Centre with an additional zoom option for those who did not wish to travel into Bromley. We expect to continue with this style of meeting, on a bi-monthly basis.

Topics for discussion at these meetings include updates on the partnership with LBB & idverde, as well as topical issues raised by Friends Groups in attendance. There is also an update from the biodiversity partnership with timely reminders of seasonal information. At the meeting in July we were pleased to welcome the portfolio holder, who presented an insight to how she sees the service evolving over the coming years. We plan to continue this trend of invited guests to our meetings for 2024. Once approved by members, previous minutes of meetings are available for download from the Forum website.

Partnership Meetings

The Bromley Friends Forum chairs a quarterly meeting with both LBB & idverde. This type of meeting discusses various aspects of business across the three parties and in particular brings to the table common issues and developments experienced by Friends Groups.

These meetings have now become virtual via Microsoft Teams and in the past year have been held in January, March, June and September 2023. The next meeting is scheduled for Jan '24. Full minutes of these meetings, once approved by attendees, are available for download from the Forum website.

Stakeholder Panel Meetings

The stakeholder panel of interested parties meets every six months or so to discuss developments and issues across the open spaces of the borough. A meeting was held in January 2022 and another in July 2022. Meetings are chaired by LBB and attended by a variety of stakeholders in the green community. These meetings are now held virtually with written updates on progress in the interim three monthly periods. It is anticipated that the next stakeholder panel meeting will occur in January 2024.

Countryside Consultative Panel Meetings

The Bromley Friends Forum attends the countryside consultative panel meetings, which are held approximately every four months. In this financial year meetings have been held in October '22, April '23 and July '23. These meetings have tended to be in person with the July one being out on site at a green space within the borough. Meetings are chaired by idverde and attended by a number of Councillors to gain a better insight as to how parks are managed in relation to the biodiversity needs. It is anticipated that the next panel meeting will occur early in the new year.

Biodiversity Partnership Panel Meetings

The Bromley Friends Forum attends the biodiversity panel meetings, which are held approximately every four months. In this financial year meetings have been held in January, May and September 2023. These meetings have a revolving chair and are held in person at BEECHE. It is anticipated that the next biodiversity partnership meeting will occur in January 2024.

National Meetings

The Bromley Friends Forum has attended several of the London wide meetings during the year. All of these have been virtual, and these continue on a six weekly cycle. Information, minutes and updates received from these meetings are regularly circulated to members and, where appropriate, ideas and concepts raised, used within the borough.

Publicity

Our social media presence continues to attract followers and our website gets around 200 page views per week. The 'Friends' page continues to attract the most visits and we are continually refining this page to provide the most up-to-date information on all our Member Groups. On Facebook our followers have risen to some 750 and we will endeavour to post more regularly in the coming year with a hope of attracting more interest and potential volunteers.

Forum Grants

During the 2022/23 financial year Forum has awarded the following small grants:

Date	Group	Reason	Value
Feb 2023	Crofton & Sparrow Woods	Website support	£132.22
Sep 2023	Richmal Crompton Fields	Hedging plants	£153.76
			<u>£285.98</u>

In addition, Forum has provided 34 Groups with a support payment of £150 each, giving an expenditure of £5,100. Further outstanding payments will be made in our coming financial year.

Summary of Accounts

A summary of accounts for the year ending 30th September 2022 are as follows:

Income		Expenditure		Assets	
Operational Grant	£9,000.00	Administration	£147.25	Brought Forward	£14,456.65
Donations	£30.00	Indemnity Insurance	£280.75	Excess for the year	£1,879.88
		Website Hosting	£38.65		
		Zoom Licence	£183.53		
		Training	£676.00		
		AGM Costs	£437.96		
		Group Support	£5,385.98		
<u>Total income</u>	<u>£9,030.00</u>	<u>Total Expenditure</u>	<u>£7,150.12</u>	<u>Carried Forward</u>	<u>£16,336.53</u>

Full accounts will be presented under a separate report.

For further details and information of what the Forum does please visit the Bromley Friends Forum website at: www.bromleyfriendsforum.org or alternatively visit the Bromley Friends Forum Facebook page or email us at bromleyfriendsforum@outlook.com.

Larry Herbert
 Chair, Bromley Friends Forum
 As at 30th September 2023