

3. Starting a Friends Group

3.1 The green space / woodland continuum

Parks supported by Friends Groups vary widely. Firstly decide what type of group you are and what are your interests (woodland, wildlife, family events)? What do you want to achieve? How can you best achieve meaningful, and sustainable results?

Each Group needs to identify the elements within each of their parks, including details such as whether the site supports a Sight of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Delegated Sports facility. How can your Group contribute to the management of the site, working with the site manager to ensure that this is done effectively? Most parks have a mixed landscape, with trees, open space and flower beds. All will have a history and many will need efforts made to preserve its heritage.

The nature of the site will dictate the type of work and activity the Friends will want to do. In addition groups will need to identify the relationship they would like to have with the local community and the type of interaction they expect between the group and that community.

For Groups wanting or needing a more formal structure, they will need some form of governing documentation. Every Group should have some stated aims and objectives, and changes they wish to effect, but some Groups may also need a constitution, a committee and associated rules and regulations. This is especially important if you wish to apply for grant funding in the future.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

Every Group needs to start by identifying what type of landscape they are the custodians of as this will help to guide the formation of appropriate Aims and Objectives in partnership with *idverde*, acting for the Council, the park's landowner. It will also enable *idverde* to choose the most appropriate member of staff to work with you, to help you realise your aspirations.

3.3 Constitution

The Constitution outlines what the group aims to achieve in principle, who works with it, how the management committee is structured together, its constraints and so forth. A constitution has to be agreed at a formal, public meeting such as the first General Meeting.

Groups wanting to obtain grants, sponsorship or awards must make a clear statement that membership is open to all who share the aims of the group, to meet the basic requirements of many awarding bodies.

An example constitution can be found in Appendix B.

3.4 Communications

Your group might not be able to supply regular paper newsletters to your members, without a funding stream to accommodate the expense. Many groups have overcome this by either asking for a small subscription or donation from members to cover costs. Other groups use e-mail for information purposes.

3.5 Membership

Groups need to decide whether to be a group with membership open to everybody who shares the aims drawing upon annual subscriptions to cover their costs, or whether to become a truly open community group relying upon donations to provide their running costs. Whichever way is selected, the constitution must include a statement making it clear that the only restriction to membership is a person or household showing that the aims of the group are accepted.

3.6 Money

Groups will need somewhere to keep the group money. Many banks and building society's offer accounts, some specifically aimed at clubs and community groups.

These accounts are usually designated as a business account with specified signatories. Some Treasurers prefer not to be a signatory so that their independence is safeguarded.

3.7 Annual General Meetings

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is a public meeting open to anybody who is interested in the group or its activities whether or not they are a member.

Arrangements for e.g. publishing the agenda, election procedures, committee responsibilities etc. should be included in the group's constitution.

All items involving fundamental matters, such as the subscription rate or other amendments to the constitution must be on the agenda. They cannot be slipped in under Any Other Business.

3.8 Committee and Officers

The governing documentation, (constitution) must make clear the duties and responsibilities of the committee and any restrictions placed upon its members.

Usually a committee will have a minimum of three officers. The three main roles are Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. The group may choose to appoint any number of other positions, such as vice-chair, public relations, web-master, recruitment, social secretary.