

The role of 'friends of' groups in improving play opportunities in green spaces

Community play briefing 3



This briefing is for parish councils, friends of parks groups, community groups, voluntary management bodies, voluntary organisations and anyone from the local community who wants to support more and better play in green spaces.

Introduction

This briefing aims to provide ideas and practical advice on how communities can encourage play in green spaces by becoming involved in friends of the park and similar groups. It provides advice on setting up a friends group and information on getting the group involved through:

- **Organising events and activities to animate a space**
- **Providing information about the area and the green space to the community**
- **Identifying resources and pockets of funding to improve the quality of space**
- **Providing a safe environment to encourage play**
- **Undertaking some of the maintenance and improvements.**

Information is also provided on insurance and public liability issues and details of where to find out more information.

What is a 'friends of' group?

A friends of group is usually made up from residents who have got together because they have a particular interest in a local green space. Often working in partnership with the local parks department, the friends of group may work to:

- Ensure that a green space is better used by the local community
- Provide information to the local community about a green space
- Look at strategies for improved maintenance of a particular green space
- Identify resources for specific improvements to a green space
- Help to make a green space safer
- Organise fun days, events or activities for the local community
- Carry out practical tasks to improve/maintain a green space

'A friends of group is usually made up from residents who have got together because they have a particular interest in a local green space'

The number of friends groups has increased over the last ten years, and the current government drive towards localism and the 'Big Society' could see an even greater role for local communities in taking an active role in managing green spaces. A friends group is a good way of co-ordinating this community involvement.

Friends groups establish and develop for many reasons. Some can be very play focused, whilst some do not consider play at all within their remit or purpose. This briefing is focused on those groups who wish to encourage play within their green space. It may also be useful in persuading more friends groups that developing play opportunities in their park is more important and achievable than they may at first have thought.

Case Study: Friends of the park start-up packs

In Leicester, the City Council is keen to encourage more friends of groups and welcomes enquiries from anyone interested in joining an existing group, or forming a new one of their own. The council has developed a friends of the park start up pack which provides a simple guide for people looking to start a group, and supporting advice for established groups who want information on developing as a group. The pack includes information on starting a group, running meetings, sample agendas, minutes and group constitutions, as well as advice on funding. Many other councils have produced similar guides, with information provided on council websites.

www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council-services/lc/parks-green-spaces/main-parks/parksfriends

Getting the group involved in play

Green spaces come in many different forms and as such different spaces can provide different opportunities for play. A small grass area in a housing estate can provide space for informal play, a kickabout and even local events; woodlands can provide opportunity for informal play and adventure; sports grounds provide opportunity for organised play; parks with play equipment provide space for formal play – even allotments can provide opportunity for children to play.

If you want to get involved it is important to consider what types of play and activities a green space can provide. This can be achieved by simply listing the types and range of activities that currently take place in your green space and then listing ideas for activities that could take place. This is a good starting point for thinking about how the community can get involved with play. Better still ask children and parents what they think about the green space.



Events and activities

Community led events and activities can be an excellent way to involve children and parents and bring together the local community and instil a sense of pride in your green space. Many of these activities can be based around encouraging play, including fun days aimed at the whole family, or specific events aimed at particular age groups.

In planning events, you should consider who you are trying to get involved and the purpose behind the event. You will need the permission of your local parks department to hold an event, and they should also be able to provide the more practical advice in relation to permissions, safety, insurance etc.

Case Study: Playday

If your group is new to organising events, it may be useful to tie in with an established campaign, such as Playday. Playday is the national day for play, the UK's biggest celebration of children's right to play and a campaign highlighting the importance of play in children's lives. To celebrate Playday, thousands of children, young people and their families get out and play at hundreds of community-run events across the UK. Events range from jubilee style street parties, festivals in parks or village greens, mass adventures in woodlands, fields and even beaches, and public events at community venues. The Playday website has comprehensive guidance on how to get involved and organise your own event. www.playday.org.uk



Providing information

One simple way of involving your group in play is through the provision of information to and from the local community. People often have ideas about their local park or play space, or wish to report problems or incidents, but have no idea who to talk to. A friends group can work with the local parks department to provide signs and information with key contact details. This can be provided on specially designed signs, or on simple notices placed in secure display boards.

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Case Study: Wigan Playwatch

In Wigan, a joint initiative between the council, Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust, the police and local communities has established a playwatch scheme for play areas and parks. Playwatch encourages local communities to be the eyes and ears of play areas, providing an easy mechanism for people to report incidents directly to the playwatch development officer and play maintenance supervisor. Local people or groups are 'recruited' to be part of the scheme, they are then provided with information to help them report incidents, and even provided with basic equipment such as litter pickers to help with low level maintenance issues. Where a scheme is established, bespoke signs are installed, providing local people with information that their play area is part of the scheme.

www.wlct.org/culture/childservs/playwatch.htm

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Funding and resources

Friends of groups are well placed to access funds and resources that are only available to community organisations. In the past, government initiatives have provided significant funds for play, including play events and activities, play rangers and money for new play areas. The new government's drive towards local control and ownership of assets and services could provide an opportunity for friends of groups to access funds for play. Those groups that have ideas and plans in place will be ahead of the game when opportunities arise.

Even though current funding streams are limited, it is worthwhile your group developing plans and proposals for improving play within your local



green space. The key starting point is to decide what you need money for and how much.

It may be helpful to consider the six key stages outlined in Design for Play:

1) Prepare – think about what you need and who to involve. Contact your local parks department, find out who owns the green space and carry out local surveys to find out what children and local communities want.

2) Design – turn your ideas into designs that consider landscape and features, and how the space will be used rather than just choosing a list of equipment.

3) Construct – choose play equipment manufacturers or contractors who provide opportunities for local communities to be actively involved in the construction of their local play area. This could include design, help with construction and making artworks.

4) Use – through day-to-day involvement friends groups can monitor use, report incidents or suggest improvements. They can involve the community in celebrating openings or organise activities and events.

5) Maintain – friends groups can be involved in ongoing maintenance of a play space through volunteering with council staff or contractors or simply, as with Wigan Playwatch, acting as the eyes and ears of the area.

6) Review – friends groups have a key role keeping an eye on what has worked well, how a green space is used, the views of children and the wider community and if further improvements are needed.

Case Study: Bletchingly Grange Meadow

In March 2008, three parents met in despair over the play facilities available for their children in the village. There was nothing suitable for toddlers and nothing engaging for the older children. The group formed Bletchingly Playground Friends, and embarked on a campaign to raise £50,000 for a new play area. The campaign started at their village fair, then went on to organise fundraising events, including a very successful swimathon. The group were also successful in securing several community grants, and raised a total of £36,503. In response, Tandridge District Council secured the balance from the government's playbuilder programme. The group then held a series of events to agree the favoured design of the play space, and held an opening event in late 2009. In 18 months a group of local parents went from an idea to celebrating the opening of a new play area.

A safe environment for play

Friends groups have an important role in encouraging a safe environment for play in green spaces. Children and their parents/carers may just want somewhere to go where they feel safe. This doesn't always require an organised event or activity, but just the reassurance that there is a group overseeing an area.

Case Study: Bristol Play in Action

Play in Action is a new scheme in Bristol that has enabled people to support a wide range of play opportunities in their neighbourhood. Play in Action was funded by the DfE as part of the play volunteer programme and builds on Bristol's pathfinder and Big Lottery play programmes. Play in Action places a focus on what 'others' can do to enhance children's play and aims to inspire adult volunteers to set up play projects locally. Play in Action recruits and trains local adult champions to oversee children's play areas and advocate for play in their neighbourhood. Volunteers receive initial training on the importance of play and the

benefits it can bring to their local community. Volunteers can then choose to work alongside play rangers, start a play project in a school, organise a playful street closure, volunteer on an adventure playground, advocate for children's play at their Neighbourhood Partnership or Park Forum or start their own playful idea! Adult volunteers working alongside Play Rangers for four years in Bristol have focused on four highly deprived areas, running sessions three times a week all year round and contributing to a 40 per cent reduction in antisocial behaviour. They work with between 30 and 70 children in all weathers. Play in Action has been developed by Bristol City Council Youth and Play Service in partnership with CSV and the voluntary and community sector.

Maintenance and management

Local communities and groups are becoming increasingly involved with the maintenance and management of play spaces. Low key maintenance, such as litter picking can usually be carried out through agreement with the parks department, however, more involved work will require proper training, and will require you or your group to have suitable insurance.

These requirements should not put you off; if the proper procedures are followed local involvement can make a huge difference to the condition and use of a play space.

Insurance and public liability

Even small voluntary organisations need insurance and must take responsibility for checking that they are sufficiently covered for damage, accident and loss against property, volunteers and children.

Voluntary organisations run a wide range of different activities and it is best to seek professional advice on what cover is appropriate for your particular group. To get advice on a 'best buy' you can ask an insurance broker. Buying from a broker should not cost you more as they earn commission from the insurance company.

Your local parks department should also be able to provide further advice.

Next steps – what you can do

- If you are not already part of an established group, but want to get involved with play or a local friends group, try contacting the local parks department to see what is going on in your area.
- If you are already part of a group and want to support play as part of your group, try and get buy in from other members of the group. From here you and the group can decide what the current issues are, and how the group may be able to get involved.
- Read through the useful resources provided at the end of this briefing, these will give you lots of ideas and contacts for getting involved with play.
- Have a think about practical steps such as getting representative involvement of children and young people, and acquiring the relevant insurance.
- Remember, the issues you are facing have more than likely been shared by other community groups, so make use of the Playful Communities website and Play England resources to search for advice, guidance, case studies and contacts.



Remember

'Your local public parks and green spaces, whatever their size and condition, need you! They 'belong' to everyone and are used by over three million people making two billion visits each year!'

Gilly Drummond in *Making a Difference*, Greenspace

Useful resources

Design for Play – A guide to creating successful play spaces

This Play England guide shows you how to design good play spaces and provides advice on how to engage and involve the community at all stages of the design process.

www.playengland.org.uk/designforplay

Better Places to Play through Planning

This Play England publication provides information on how opportunities for play can be maximised through the formal spatial planning process.

www.playengland.org.uk/betterplaces

How to involve children and young people in the development and design of play spaces

A Play England and Participation Works publication on involving children in the design process.

www.playengland.org.uk/howtoinvolvechildren

Useful websites

Playday

Playday is an annual celebration of the child's right to play. The website provides information and resources for community groups and others to organise local events on playday, held on the first Wednesday in August.

www.playday.org.uk

Playful Communities

Playful Communities provides information, advice and resources for individuals, local community groups, voluntary sector organisations and others who are developing play provision in their local neighbourhood. The website includes resources for local people involved in managing staffed play projects and volunteering, as well as for those supporting or maintaining play areas.

www.playfulcommunities.org.uk

CABE

CABE have a range of resources to support community groups who want to be involved in the design and management of green spaces.

www.cabe.org.uk/community-groups

Greenspace

Greenspace have a wealth of information on their website on developing friends groups including *Making a difference*, a guide to setting up and maintaining a community group for parks and green space.

www.green-space.org.uk/community/communityresources/formafriendsgroup/index.php

Greenspace have also developed a toolkit aimed at involving young people in parks and green space community groups.

www.green-space.org.uk/downloads/parkit/toolkits/Young%20People%20toolkit.pdf

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For further information about the Engaging Communities in Play programme visit www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/engaging-communities-in-play

Play England promotes excellent free play opportunities for all children.

We believe that all children should have the freedom and space to play enjoyed by previous generations.

This involves more than just providing well-designed play areas; it requires the commitment of local and national decision makers to create more child-friendly communities.

By making play a priority we can create healthier and happier communities for all.



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