

SETTING UP A FRIENDS OF GROUP

A Practical Community Guide

This guide is designed to help residents, councils and community groups set up a successful Friends of a green space group - whether that's a park, field, meadow, playing field, river corridor or pocket of nature.

What is a Friends of group?

A Friends group is a volunteer-led, community-focused group that cares about a specific green space and works to improve it for:

- Local people
- Wildlife and biodiversity
- Long-term sustainability

Friends groups usually work with landowners (parish councils, borough councils, schools or trusts), rather than replacing them. They add local knowledge, care and energy. They can be informal or formally constituted, depending on need.

Why set one up?

Community benefits

- Community benefits
- Builds a sense of ownership and local pride
- Brings people together around a shared, positive goal
- Encourages volunteering and community connection
- Strengthens relationships with councils and land managers
- Helps deliver visible improvements such as benches, paths, planting and equipment

Nature and climate benefits

- Better habitats for wildlife
- More thoughtful management (e.g. longer grass, native planting)
- Opportunities for monitoring and learning (bioblitzes, surveys)
- Nature-based solutions (rain gardens, trees, hedges)

Core principles

Successful Friends groups tend to share these principles:

- Positive and inclusive – welcoming, friendly, non-expert
- Community-led – shaped by local people
- Collaborative – working with councils, not against them
- Nature-friendly – guided by ecology, not just aesthetics
- Practical – small actions that add up
- Visible – people can see what's happening and why

Step 1: Start with people

Most Friends groups begin with a small core group - often just 3–6 people.

Good first steps

- Talk to neighbours who already care about the space
- Connect with existing groups (in bloom, schools, wildlife groups)
- Ask the parish or borough council who has previously shown interest

You don't need everyone to agree on everything - shared values matter more than shared ideas.

Step 2: Clarify the purpose

Early on, agree a short, clear purpose. For example:

“To help care for and enhance the green space for people and wildlife, working with the council.”

This helps when:

- Talking to residents
- Applying for funding
- Inviting partners

You can evolve this later.

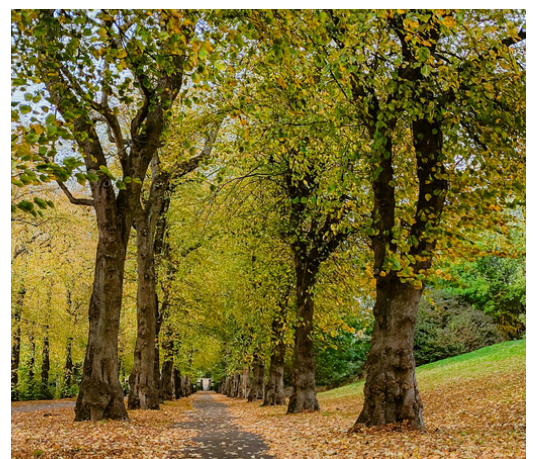
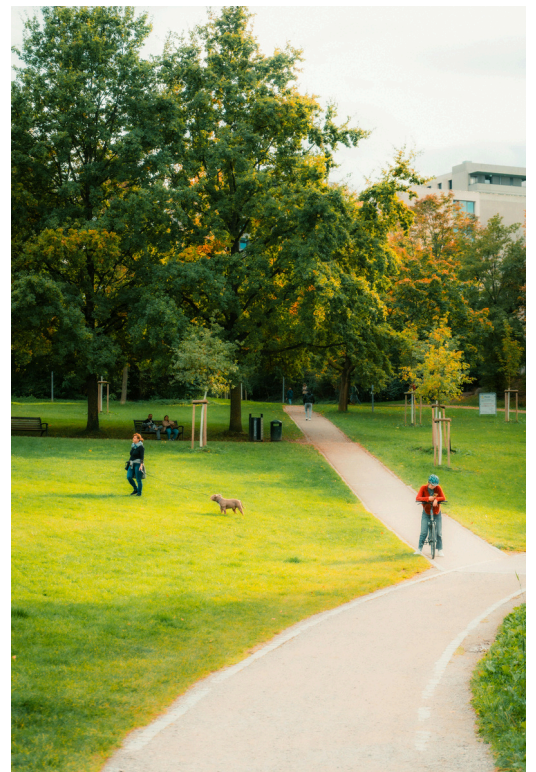
Step 3: Build relationships

Most green spaces are owned or managed by:

- Parish or town councils
- Borough councils
- Schools or trusts

Early conversations should focus on:

- Shared goals
- What's already happening
- What support is possible (permissions, tools, insurance)



Step 4: Decide what you'll actually do

Start small and visible. Examples include:

Practical actions

- Bulb or tree planting
- Wildflower seeding
- Creating dead hedges or habitat piles
- Light litter picks
- Watering new planting

Nature-focused actions

- Leaving grass long in agreed areas
- Pollinator patches
- Bird or bat boxes
- Rain gardens or SuDS-style features

People-focused actions

- Guided walks
- Family activities
- Information signs
- Seasonal events



Doing a few things well builds trust and momentum.

Step 5: Community engagement

Good engagement is about inviting, not instructing.

What works well:

- Friendly signage explaining why things look different
- Social media posts sharing stories, not just actions
- Leaflets to nearby residents for bigger changes
- Informal conversations on site

People are more supportive when they understand the purpose.

Step 6: Communications basics

You don't need everything — just the right things.

Useful channels

- Facebook group or page
- WhatsApp community
- Parish council website or newsletter
- On-site signage

Tone

- Positive
- Curious
- Non-judgemental
- Local

Tell stories about people, wildlife and small wins.



Step 7: Events & activities

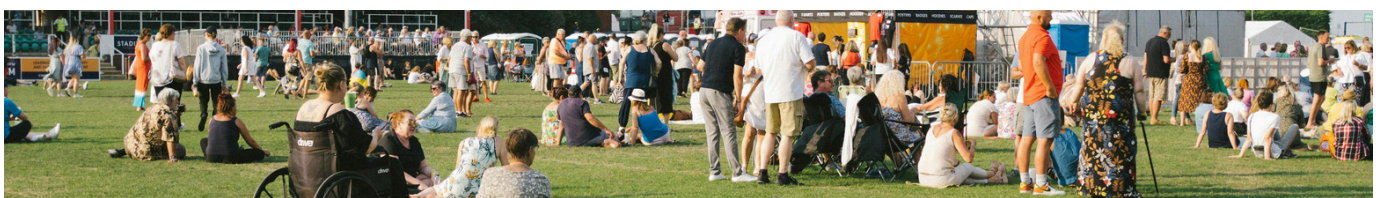
Events are powerful for:

- Bringing in new people
- Building understanding
- Creating advocates

Ideas include:

- Introductory talks
- Nature walks (bats, birds, plants)
- Bioblitzes
- Practical volunteer mornings

Partnering with local experts (ecologists, council officers, wildlife trusts) adds confidence and credibility.



Step 8: Funding & costs

Many Friends groups run on very small budgets.

Typical costs

- Plants or seed
- Signage
- Tools or materials
- Insurance (if installing things)

Funding sources

- Council grants
- Council environmental funds
- Small local grants
- Crowdfunding for specific projects

Keep finances simple and transparent.



Step 9: Insurance & structure

You may not need a formal structure at first. You may need insurance if you:

- Install structures
- Run public events
- Use tools

Options include:

- Being covered by a council
- Umbrella organisations
- Community insurers

Start informal; formalise only when needed



Step 10: Measure and celebrate impact Impact isn't just numbers.

Celebrate:

- New volunteers
- Wildlife sightings
- Positive feedback
- Before-and-after changes

Sharing success builds confidence — and helps other groups learn.

Tips from experience

- Start with what's possible now
- Explain why before what
- Build trust slowly
- Let the space guide the work
- Celebrate the quiet wins

Have questions?

If you would like to talk through setting up a group in your area, please do email us at hello@cheltenhamactionfornature.org



Useful links and resources

1. The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) - Starting a Friends Group

- Provides a step-by-step guide to setting up and running a Friends group, including advice on funding, governance, and volunteer management.
- Covers insurance, health & safety, and partnership working.

2. The Nat. Association for Environmental Education - Friends of Green Spaces

- Resources and case studies specifically aimed at schools and communities working on green spaces.
- Good examples of engagement activities and biodiversity projects.

3. Keep Britain Tidy — Friends Groups and Green Space Management

- Guidance on community involvement in local green space maintenance.
- Advice on litter picking, local action groups, and sustainable practices.

4. The Wildlife Trusts — How to Set Up a Friends Group

- Emphasises the wildlife and habitat management side.
- Useful templates for group constitutions and volunteer roles.

5. Groundwork UK — Community Green Space Toolkit

- Toolkit including planning activities, fundraising, community engagement, and environmental improvements.
- Has practical worksheets and checklists.

6. Local Government Association — Community Engagement in Parks and Green Spaces

- Offers guidance on working with community groups and managing partnerships with local councils.
- Explains legal and governance frameworks.

7. Open Spaces Society — How to Protect and Improve Local Open Spaces

- Legal background and advice on protecting green spaces.
- Useful if groups face challenges around land use or rights.

8. Urban Pollinators — How to Create a Pollinator-Friendly Space

- Practical advice and plant lists for supporting pollinators in green spaces.