

CASE STUDY – Sunderland Green and Open Spaces Forum



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1) How and when did you come together and form an area forum?

The inaugural meeting of SGOSF was held in April 2017 although we officially launched in April 2019. The group came together following some initial intelligence gathering to explore whether individuals/groups felt there was a need for a city-wide network and what they would want from the Forum.

2) How many groups or members in the forum, and how many have attended in the last 12 months?

Thirty-eight have registered via the Forum's Facebook group.

Attendance during the last year has been between six and 16 people per quarterly meeting.

3) Has anything been difficult or challenging?

Yes, the length of time spent writing and agreeing a constitution saw meeting attendance wane.

Relationships with Sunderland City Council have been challenging resulting in a lack of progress in key areas where we had expected early gain eg generating ideas for managing parks, engaging people in open space activity, vision for green and open spaces. We started by writing to the Chief Operating Officer who directed us to another senior officer as a key contact. Just as our relationship started to develop with this person, his remit changed and his replacement was totally different, refusing to actively engage with us. We then tried meeting with the Portfolio Holder and while she appeared initially supportive and promised to speak to the senior officer concerned, nothing materialised. There is a new CEO at the Council and after contact was made with him requesting a meeting, we were advised that an Assistant Director should be our main point of contact. This is the individual we had spent most of last year chasing for a meeting!

It has been difficult finding organisations who can direct us to groups involved in the green and open space agenda. There has not been helped by the fact that there is currently poor VCS infrastructure provision within the city.

Difficulty obtaining funding. Initially tried the Community Foundation's Local Environmental Action Fund where we submitted an application twice and both times rejected on what appeared to be different types of technicalities.

4) What successes have you achieved?

We're still here after two years! Part of the reason for that is a dedicated Committee comprising individuals from Friends groups, an allotment association, sustainable development and community growing.

The Forum has made contact, primarily via word of mouth, with a large and diverse range of groups and individuals working on the open space agenda. This is encouraging and should provide a strong platform on which to build although it must be said that contact has not necessarily translated into groups joining the Forum.

At the beginning of August 2019, the Forum received notification from the National Community Lottery that we had been successful with our Awards for All application. We were awarded £5,980. The funding will be used to pay for things to help the Forum sustain itself eg meeting room costs, redevelopment of social media, hardware for presentations (a resource that can be used by others), support to run training events, publicity materials.

The Forum is also in the process of drafting a guide to setting up a Friends group. The work commenced before we were aware NFPGS had produced a guide. This will be shared with SCC and they will be requested to endorse it and support its dissemination.

We have also produced a PowerPoint presentation used when we address meetings across the city.

5) Why do you think you were successful?

Persistence, motivation and commitment in the face of adversity

6) What's happening now with your Forum?

We continue to cultivate contacts and build relationships through different channels. SCC conducts its business through Area Committees. The City is covered by five of these and one focuses on the VCS. Members of the Forum Committee are currently presenting to these fora.

The Forum Committee are looking to determine three/four key priorities for the year. These include, funding, influencing the Council, communication and membership.

We have maintained quarterly open meetings where we've used a formula that includes someone leading a discussion followed by an opportunity for people to either share what their group has been doing, has planned or to share learning from projects. However, our last meeting adopted a different formula, one that consisted of a walk and talk. We need to review both formats for the future.

7) What is planned for the future?

Using the Awards for All grant to:

- Revamp the Forum's social media presence
- Develop associated publicity materials.
- Continue with our quarterly meetings but review format.
- Celebrate our achievements in March/April 2020 with an event.

Focus on the three/four priorities (funding for the Forum less of an issue)

8) Any other comments or information you would like to share?



How to set up a Friends Group –working draft

If you would like to set up a Friends Group to improve or promote your park or open green/blue space then you need to first of all get a group of like minded people interested.

Sunderland Green and Open Spaces Forum is here for you if you want further advise email: sundgosf@gmail.com or visit our web site, www.sunderlandgosf.wordpress.com. You will also need to contact The Parks Department or the owner of the land, to inform them that you wish to set up a group.

Before you do this you need to have in mind what the aim of the group is. It should be a positive contribution to the site, such as:

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- Practical work such as litter picking, bulb planting, pruning etc
- Fundraise for improvements such as benches, outdoor gyms etc
- To hold community events, to promote your group and promote membership

The benefits could be:

- To bring local people together
- Promote green spaces
- Have a say how your park/green space is managed
- Improve the health of local people

How to set up your group

- Inform the Council or Landowner that you wish to set up a Friends Group
- Make contact with Norman Atkinson who should be able to offer you advise on behalf of Sunderland City Council.
- Liaise with him and tell him what your aims are and what practical work your group can offer.
- Plan a launch event it could just be a Litter Pick, or a walk around the park, something you can advertise and get the local community interested in your group. Don't forget to publicise your event, invite a local dignitary if possible, this will create interest
- Set up a mailing list, bearing in mind GDPR and keeping members details secure. It is a good idea to set up a new email address keeping it just for the Friends separate from your other emails. This will usually be the secretary's job. An email address will be needed when Setting up a Facebook Account or a Web Site.
- Use this event to get people interested. It would be a good idea to have a membership form designed to get people's details officially.
- This is also the opportunity to find out what improvements people would like to see in their park/green space. This feedback may be useful when creating your Mission Statement.
- Promote the Date and Time of the First Meeting.

First and subsequent meetings

- Identify what your group would like to achieve
- Elect an Interim Committee (necessary until you have a formal AGM)
- Write a Constitution
- Plan an activity eg coffee morning with a walk around the park for local people, invite local Nursing Home they enjoy outside activities and meeting new people. Some of these may want to join your group, or at least be associated with your group.

Formalise your group by electing a committee.

- You will need a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer as a bare minimum. You may also need a Publicity Person, Events Organiser, Fundraiser, Membership Secretary etc. It is advisable that everyone on the Committee has a job to do. Spreading the workload is better than one person having to do the lot. They will only feel put upon and may lose interest. Always value your volunteers.

Writing a Constitution

This is a set of rules by which the group is run. It is useful to create this at the beginning as the rules are then set and no misunderstanding can be created subsequently, if issues arise. You will need to include :

- Name of the Group
- Aims and Objectives

- How these will be achieved
- Who is entitled to become a member – equal opportunities statement
- Structure of the Committee and how they are elected
- How often you will meet, what quorum is needed to hold a meeting
- Rules that members need to abide by
- Finance rules, number of bank signatures required etc
- How the group can be dissolved, how the remaining funds and assets will be distributed