

PEOPLE AND THEIR PARKS - A SHORT HISTORY

Since the 19th century there has been public pressure for more and better parks and for good facilities in those parks. Some were originally created as a result of public petitions or even subscriptions. The vast majority of public parks were set up and maintained entirely by Local Authorities. However until relatively recently they were generally run by uniformed staff, with no active involvement of the park's users.

Park users began setting up the first few 'Friends' groups in the 1980s. However, due to alarming public service cuts and loss of staff in the 1980s and 1990s, and even threats of some spaces being sold off, what started as a handful of groups developed into a movement of thousands of groups by the mid-2000s. These groups were determined to challenge the drastic deterioration of standards and make a difference, whether by lobbying their Councils for better maintenance and more resources, by organising events and activities to try to animate neglected spaces, or by raising money for improvements.



There was also change at a national level, with the creation of the quasi-governmental 'CABE Space' to promote parks, park staff and Friends groups. In 2003, the Local Government Select Committee of MPs at Westminster recommended an increase in funding and that the good management of parks become a statutory duty. Meanwhile the Lottery began its 'Parks for People' program, leading to over £1 billion additional funding over the next 20 years with exemplary projects aiming to help drive improvements in standards. The Green Flag Award accreditation scheme was also launched, in which standards (including the level of community involvement) could be evaluated annually.

Local Friends groups began to link together to form area Forums to share news and raise their collective voices with their local authorities regarding policies, staffing and budgets and so on. In 2007 some of the larger and stronger Forums began meeting up, leading to the formation of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS) - the democratic umbrella organisation for the whole movement. This was a game changer. The Federation enabled the systematic promotion of the voices of the movement at all levels including to Government, publicise the movement's urgent calls for action over the crisis facing green spaces, the need for Friends Groups and community involvement and empowerment for all green spaces, and the importance of peer-to-peer networking at the Local Authority level and across the country. The Federation was able to promote the Green Flag Awards and the need for 'in perpetuity' legal protection for green spaces via Fields In Trust legal covenants.

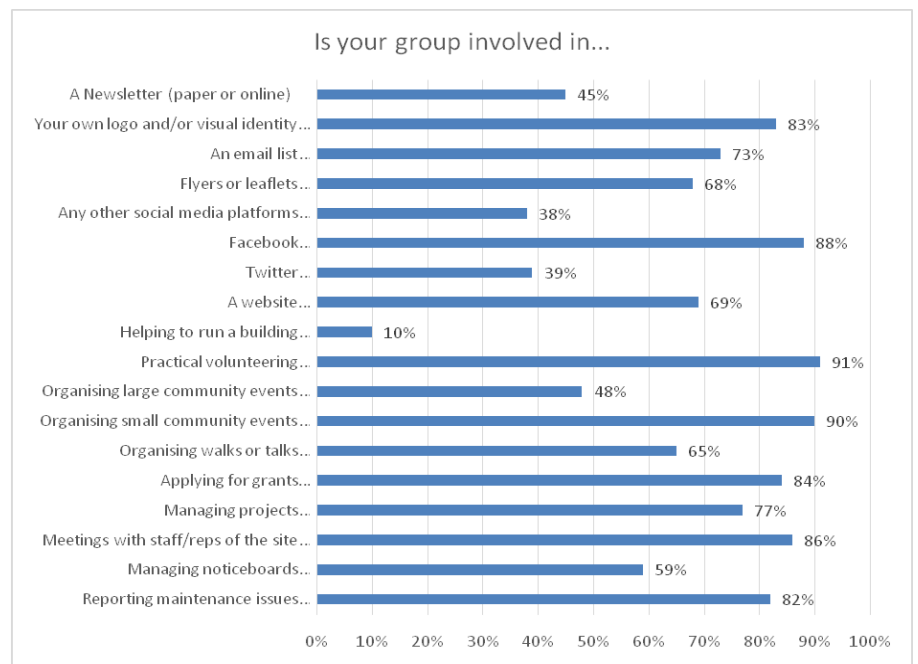
The Lottery produced 2 major 'State of UK Parks' reports in 2014 and 2016, aided by research conducted for them by the NFPGS. These reports estimated that there were

around 5,900 Friends Groups at that time, providing £140m annually to the sector through their volunteering and fundraising. The reports also called for urgent action by the sector and Government to reverse the continuing decline of parks. The Federation and others lobbied for Government action to address the underfunding crisis, resulting in a new Select Committee Inquiry and 2017 report on the 'Future of Public Parks'. The Minister for Parks accepted the Committee's calls for support for the Friends Groups movement. He also accepted the Committee's calls for a new Government/Sector liaison body, the Parks Action Group, which was set up to link 9 national greenspace organisations with Government departments and policy development. The NFPGS was the only grassroots member of the PAG, and was tasked with leading the Empowering Communities work stream. As a result the NFPGS, supported by Locality, organised 9 regional community conferences in 2019.

Outside the PAG work, the NFPGS coordinated the launch by 12 national bodies of the Charter for Parks. A new online 'one stop shop' advice and guidance platform www.parkscommunity.org.uk was set up by and for Friends groups - it is the NFPGS's key 'community-facing' resource. In December 2021 the NFPGS produced a path-breaking report 'Better Friends - the State of the Movement of Greenspace Friends groups throughout the UK'. The report provides detailed national statistics on the character, activities, membership, inclusivity, volunteering hours, partnerships and achievements of the local groups [See graphic]

It was calculated that there are around 7,000 Friends Groups with a total membership of around 840,000 people, involving around 60,000 regular active volunteers providing 7m hours volunteering each year. There are around 70 area Forums networking approximately 3,500 of the groups.

The Federation is entirely run by volunteers, and they are also active in their local areas. In October 2019 it was registered as a charity and is seeking significant funding so that it can fulfil its crucial mission of supporting the grassroots groups and the UK's green spaces generally.



Looking to the future, the Federation's aim is for a well-coordinated and well-supported movement of active and influential Friends groups for all 27,000 parks, linked together through a strong Friends Forum in every local authority area, working in partnership with those who own and manage green spaces.