

Get involved in a Park near You

Friends of Parks Groups in Croydon

Everything you want and need to know about Croydon's Friends of Park Groups and how to start your own



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1. Introduction

This guide is aimed at people who want to take local action for their park or open space in Croydon to enhance its value for local people and wildlife. It provides key information about how to set up a group and where to get help and advice along the way.

Setting the scene

More and more people want to do more than just pay a visit to a park or open space, they want to get involved in the management and take practical action to make improvements. Friends of Groups are made up of local people who work in partnership with the Council to make local open spaces more welcoming, better used and better resourced.

The Great Storm in 1989 sparked the formation of the first Friends of Park groups, as people came together to assist the council in clearing up fallen trees in parks and woodlands. Since then the number of groups has grown and now stands at 35. The Council welcomes this development and supports local action through the position of the Community Partnership Officer, who works alongside colleagues in the Parks and Physical Activity Team in District Centers and Regeneration.

Friends of Park Groups provide an enthusiastic source of ideas and enthusiasm. Many groups run practical volunteering workdays on a weekly or monthly basis. Others are keen to explore opportunities to improve play spaces in parks, or to add infrastructure like outdoor gyms, seating, or to establish a community garden to grow flowers or food. Friends of groups are the eyes and ears of a park, able to report problems directly and get them sorted quicker.

The role of the Community Partnership Officer is to provide support to groups in the set up phase and beyond. This ranges from advice and information on:

- Committee set up and development of a constitution,
- Public Liability Insurance Cover
- Risk assessments,
- Publicity
- Meetings & venues,
- Funding for group set up and specific projects,
- Consultation and engagement events to involve the wider community into the park/wood,
- Liaison between different user groups and between the group and different section of the Council.
- Volunteer training, through the Council or external providers
- Free bi monthly drop in sessions/Friends group surgeries, a face to face service to talk about anything to do with Friends of Parks and general community involvement in Parks

The Officer also compiles the [Into the Great Green Yonder](#) programme of free guided wildlife walks –which allows groups to advertise their events Croydon wide, and manages the [Nature Conservation Grant](#) Scheme which is open to all Friends of Park groups to cover cost for insurance, plants, tools, training and other project materials to support their work in our open spaces.

In return the council expects groups to

- Become properly constituted
- Have a functioning committee/group structure
- Aim to have a membership that represents their local community
- Work in partnership with the council to bring about short and long term improvements



2. Developing a local group **Many Hands Make LIGHT Work**

Starting a new Group

There are two main ways that groups get started:

- An individual person or a group of people has ideas for a park/open spaces or feels that things could be done better. They then recruit friends and neighbours to get involved. A minimum of 3 people is needed to start an official group, in order to fill the main committee position in a group –chair, secretary and treasurer and to be able to work with the Council.
- An existing group, like a Resident Association decides to add a parks projects to its activities. Groups like this already have a formal structure and communications system in place and probably some existing financial support. They will create a sub group as part of their group committee.

Growth

Knowing what your group wants to achieve (your aims and targets, short or long term) is an essential first step before deciding on any form of organisation. You may have got together to do one definable project such as a clean-up or bulb planting, and longevity may not be your aim. However, success usually brings out further ideas and enthusiasm to go on to bigger and better things.

Most groups start with a core of enthusiastic individuals, but in order to grow in numbers to have a stronger voice the group will need a structure to encourage stability and recruitment. A group with a committee and elected officers and a membership process is able to access funding and will be able to negotiate with the council and other bodies about their park. A group with no formal structure, little pressure or formality, will make its members feel less committed, and it can be difficult to sustain the group as well as access funding.

Many groups feel more secure if they have a formal structure especially when dealing with larger projects which require accountability. All mayor funding bodies only pay grants to groups with a written constitution, group bank account and elected committee.

Commitment is needed but levels of commitment vary from group to group depending on what you are hoping to achieve. Allowing people to make very small contributions to start with may encourage new people to participate further.

There is no need for the group to become a charity as many funders welcome applications from basic community groups.

Friends of groups are very social where volunteers have a good time, by working with like-minded people and making a positive difference to their local environment.

Constitutions, Bank Account & Recognition

A constitution is a legal document that outlines the ways in which a group will operate. A written constitution is helpful so that outsiders such as funders can see how you operate and what your aims are.

The council will formally recognize and be able to work with your group once a constitution has been adopted. A copy of a model constitution can be obtained from the Community Partnership Officer, or found on the internet.

The Council works in partnership with local groups to bring about short and longer term improvements to parks and open spaces. Good communication and an element of trust are therefore essential on both sides.



3. Insurance

Groups that would like to carry out any practical work on Council owned land are required to hold Public Liability Insurance. This insures your group against any damage, which may be caused to property, the public and your own volunteers. Additional insurance cover can be taken out against personal accidents and group owned tools.

TCV, The Conservation Volunteers, offers very competitive insurance rates to affiliated community groups via their link with Zurich Municipal (including Resident Associations), who want to carry out practical nature conservation work or generally improve their open space. This includes holding community events, guided walks and consultation events. Groups need to affiliate to TCV's Local Groups scheme in order to qualify for a discount from Zurich Municipal. For further information about the scheme please visit www.tcv.org.uk

When carrying out any practical work we encourage and train groups to carry out a Risk Assessment, to ensure volunteers in your group stay safe and healthy. For more information and help visit the freebie-monthly Friends of Park Surgery at Bernard Weatherill House, simply contact the Community Partnership Officer for more details.

Any group wishing to engage in regular practical nature conservation work in a park or open space can receive funding through the [Nature Conservation Grant](#) Scheme to cover the group's annual insurance cost.



4. Training

Training is of major benefit to any group. By acquiring skills and developing knowledge, members of a local group can undertake work independently of the original support structure, develop ideas, exchange skills and information with other groups and pass on their knowledge to new members, as well as the wider community. In this way, the community can become better educated on environmental/park affairs and find greater empowerment. Gaining skills for the whole group also leads to greater sustainability.

The Community Partnership Officer can help with assessing the group's training needs and finding the right course. Occasionally training courses are run specifically for Croydon's Friends of Park groups such as Emergency First Aid (annually), tools maintenance, Funding Workshops, How to write Risk Assessments and Woodland Management .

Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) is the Council of Voluntary Service (CVS) for the Borough of Croydon, serving as the umbrella organisation for voluntary and community groups. CVA offers a range of training courses around the basics of how to run a group, including fund raising, book keeping, recruiting volunteers and computer skills. Find out more at www.cva.org.uk



5. Fundraising

All groups will need money to cover the day to day things, like meeting room hire, gloves, postage, tea and coffee. Many groups ask their members for an annual membership fee to cover their basic costs. The level of membership is decided by the group at their AGM (Annual General Meeting).

The group treasurer will keep records of any spending and income, and once a group has decided to go ahead with a bigger project, this is even more important as all grant giving bodies want to see records, that their money has been spent correctly.

Money needed, for larger projects can take a considerable amount of time and can be raised through donations, fundraising events, grants or sponsorship.

The Community Partnership Officer has information of grant giving organisations which specifically fund parks and environmental projects and can give advice on which grant to choose for your project and how to fill out funding applications. The Community Partnership Officer also manages the [Nature Conservation Grant](#) Scheme, a small grant which can fund tools, training and equipment, grants range from £50-£500. This grant can also be used as match funding for larger funding applications.



6. Publicity

Publicity is vital for the growth of your group, and for keeping in touch with other groups and individuals. Displaying posters with a contact name or group e-mail/phone number around your open space, at the local library, community centre, college and any other public places is the first step to let people know you exist.

Provide news of your activities and future events to local organisations, who may include it in their newsletters, and keep the local newspaper informed about upcoming events. Many groups have web pages, or use social networking facilities to promote their existence and special events and to communicate with their members.

The council is able to assist with publicity through the Council's own social media network and various e-newsletters.



7. Networking

As the number of Friends of Park groups has grown in Croydon, they have now formed an independent umbrella group –the [Croydon Parks, Woodlands and Greenspaces Forum](#) , which meets 3 times per year to share information about council initiatives, funding advice and to network. As a new or established group, you might consider joint projects, combined training courses or the sharing of expensive or specialist equipment, like use of a volunteer chainsaw operator, or an expert in fungi and wildflowers.

In 1984 an independent umbrella group called the Association of Croydon Conservation Societies (ACCS) was formed which represents the many Friends of Parks groups involved in woodlands and other conservation groups in the borough. The group meets bi-monthly to discuss borough wide biodiversity, nature conservation or planning issues. To find out more visit www.accs-croydon.co.uk or e-mail accsmail@gmail.com

8. Links & useful web pages

For any advice, information about parks and open spaces, how to get involved in an existing group or set up a new one, guided walks and events, the John Muir Family Award Scheme or Forest School please contact:

Croydon Council

Community Partnership Officer, 020 8726 6000, ext. 64952

Biodiversity@croydon.gov.uk

[Croydon Parks and Open Spaces](#)

[TCV -The Conservation Volunteers](#)

Britain's largest practical conservation charity, provides information and advice to local action groups, like insurance, tools & plants, training, and affiliation to the national group network

[TCV Croydon](#) office 020 8686 4993

[Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society](#)

The Society offers a varied programme of walks and talks on subjects such as local history, botany and ornithology. Members are able to offer information on special subject and the society has an extensive library which can be accessed by appointment.

[Croydon Voluntary Action](#)

Support the voluntary sector in Croydon by providing training and information on finance management, legal issues & funding.

Tel: 020 8253 7060, CVA Resource Centre, 82 London Road, Croydon, CR0 2TB,

[Disability Information Trust](#)

They provide information about a whole range of disability issues, including tools, access and links to other organisations, tel. 01865 227592

[Design Council](#)

Extensive resource section with information about green space design, community stewardship and architecture.

[London Wildlife Trust](#)

The Trust manages 3 sites in Croydon: Hutchinson's & Chapel Bank, and Bramley Bank.

[London Friends of Parks Network](#)

Representing more than 500 groups across London

[Croydon Parks, Woodlands and Greenspaces Forum](#)

Parks for London –Safe guarding our Green Spaces

Independent charity working with people that keep them safe and beautiful

Croydon RSPB

The group has been carrying out bird surveys in Croydon since 1995. They pass on information to local Friends Groups and the Council to help with conservation planning, and give illustrated talks to a variety of organisations.

Woodland Trust