



Working in Partnership With Friends of Parks and Green Spaces

Partnership Agreement

1. Friends Groups and the Council Partnership Commitments

Friends of Parks and Green Spaces Groups (Friends Groups) are an important part of championing, developing, and supporting the maintenance and improvement of our Green Spaces. Green Spaces include Parks and Gardens, Green Corridors, Amenity Green Spaces, Playing Fields, Nature Reserves, and Play Areas.

We encourage Friends Groups for all these types of Green Spaces, small and large.

This agreement for ways of working reflects our joined-up approach to the development and maintenance of our Green Spaces and good governance in working between Sandwell Council and Friends Groups.

2. Purpose of Partnership Agreement and Ways of Working Commitments

Sandwell Council are committed to the delivery of the Green Spaces Strategy Implementation and Business Plan 22 – 25 (available on www.sandwell.gov.uk). Friends Groups are a vital part of achieving the improvements needed and set out in this strategy for the benefit of all residents.

This Partnership Agreement between Sandwell Council and Friends Groups will help to achieve the commitments within the Green Spaces Strategy Implementation and Business Plan 22 – 25 (and future strategies) in the following way:

- a. ***Equity in the ways of working between Sandwell Council and Friends Group.*** This will enable the council to work with and provide support and guidance to more Friends Groups.
- b. ***Transparency in the ways of working between Sandwell Council and Friends Groups.*** This will ensure that the commitments made within the Green Spaces Strategy, and those within this Partnership Agreement, are met.
- c. ***Good Governance arrangements in the way that Sandwell Council and Friends Groups operate and work together on the improvement of Green Spaces.*** This will ensure that those working with the Council on representing, championing, and working with our Green Spaces are doing so within the any laws, rules and regulations required (for example, with good financial arrangements, relevant insurances, the correct permissions and agreements for undertaking work on Council owned or managed land).
- d. ***Clear expectations on what Sandwell Council – and Council Officers and operatives within the Green Spaces service – can offer Friends Groups in terms of time and resource.*** This will ensure that the Council's resources are planned and managed well, and that the focus of officer time is spent on delivering the commitments within the Green Spaces Strategy.

- e. ***Accessible and representative of the community and residents in the way that Sandwell Council and Friends Groups operate when working on the improvement of a green space.*** This will ensure that Friends Groups are open and accessible to all residents, and that the Council provide support and signposting to improve the diversity and representation from the local community when working on the improvement of a green space.

Friends Groups are responsible for their own affairs, and the Council does not seek to involve itself in the management of Friends Groups. The intention of this Partnership Agreement is to provide a formality to the relationship. This partnership agreement approach is already in place in many Councils.

3. Working with the Council

- a. Friends Groups and the Council commit to a positive way of working for the benefit of the green space.
- b. Friends Groups are non-political and will not have a political affiliation and not seek to intentionally campaign for any political party, group, or individual (otherwise risking open engagement with all residents).
- c. Friends Groups will not do or fail to do anything that brings the Council into disrepute, or puts either public funds, users of the Green Space, or the Council at risk. This partnership agreement and ways of working will help Friends Groups take reasonable steps to avoid this. To help with this, all Committee members for Friends Groups and those involved in publicly communicating or representing on behalf of the Friends Group should read and understand this partnership agreement and the Friends Group constitution.
- d. Friends Groups will be voluntary, and committee members or members will not benefit financially from the work of the Friends Groups. Steps to ensure conflicts of interest are addressed where these might exist for Committee members or members of the Friends Group should be included in the constitution.

4. Working with Friends Groups

- a. Sandwell Council will provide senior officers for a quarterly meeting with all recognised Friends Groups (those with a signed Partnership Agreement), split by North and South of Sandwell.
- b. The attendance from the Council at these meetings will include at least either a Director or Assistant Director at each meeting, and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Green Spaces attending one meeting a year for each area (North and South).
- c. The meeting cycle will usually be four a year: December, March, June, September. Dates will be published on the Friends Groups page on www.sandwell.gov.uk and sent to all registered Friends Groups.

- d. Meetings will be held at an accessible and inclusive location and will be provided by the Council.
- e. Meetings will be 1.5 hours and held early evening (usually 6pm – 7.30pm) to help with travel and be more accessible to those working. Where the meeting takes place in the darker evenings, the meeting will be held in a venue that is easily accessible in the dark.
- f. The Quarterly meeting with friends will have an agenda to include the following regular items:
 - I. Best Practice Sharing and Progress (Friends Groups Updates)
 - II. Update on Green Spaces Strategy progress (Council Updates)
 - III. Fundraising Update for Friends Groups and information sharing on grants and funding opportunities available.
 - IV. Key Issues for Friends Groups (to be raised in advance of the meeting).
 - V. Guest speakers to support the training and development of Friends Groups.
- g. There will be an action log from the meeting for any actions agreed, and this will be shared with all registered Friends Groups for the area.

5. Communications

- a. The Council will publish an annual programme of works, and quarterly progress updates, on www.Sandwell.gov.uk for our Green Spaces. This will mean more transparent information is available about the allocation of resources and spend Friends Groups and Sandwell Council Partnership Agreement commitments for Green Spaces, and what Friends Groups should expect from the Council for that year.
- b. Friends Groups will communicate operational issues for green spaces through the Councils normal reporting systems through www.Sandwell.gov.uk report it functions or the MySandwell App. These will be responded to by Council Officers through our customer enquiries process, which has clear service level timelines for responses.
- c. Most operational issues or enquiries that need to be raised outside of the quarterly meetings can be addressed through the current Council's customer service enquiry process. This way of communicating ensures that enquiries are:
 - Allocated to the correct officer and team best placed to handle the enquiry (for example, a fly tip will be sent to the team that deals with the fly tip, and an issue with a tree will be sent to the team that deals with trees).

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- Responded to within our published timescales for handling enquiries (for example, 10 days for a customer enquiry, or within quicker timescales for fly tips or emergency issues).
 - Those making the enquiries can escalate the issue through the enquiries process if they are not happy with the response received.
 - The use of the customer enquiry process means that there is a greater level of transparency in communications, including ensuring that the Council are responding within agreed timescales, and that escalations are sent to the right senior officers.
- d. Our green spaces team and officers are focussed on the delivery of the improvements to our green spaces and will not be able to meet with Friends Groups outside these channels or conduct regular site visits with Friends Groups, other than the Quarterly meetings.
- e. There may be exceptions to this for major funding applications, or projects that are part of the programme of approved annual works for the Green Space. These exceptions will be specifically outlined in the programme of approved annual works.

6. Complaints and Disputes

The Council has a complaints policy, available at www.Sandwell.gov.uk. Where a dispute occurs, or a Friends Group has a complaint that has not been able to be resolved, the complaints process should be used to escalate the issue further.

7. Events

- a. Friends Groups are encouraged to organise fundraising, volunteering, and community engagement events in Green Spaces they are Friends of.
- b. Friends Groups will be allowed free use of the green space, only for the purposes of fundraising, volunteering, and community engagement within the Green Space.
- c. Friends Groups will still need to complete an event application, which is required to ensure the safety of events on Council Land. All events will be subject to our standard terms and conditions of booking.
- d. Friends Groups are not able to extend or offer out the free use or hire of green spaces; this will need to be channelled through the Council's venue hire / event application process.
- e. An application for the use of the Green Space for an event must be formally approved through the Council's event application process, before the event is publicised.

8. Fundraising and Finance

- a. Whilst the governance and finance arrangements are a matter for Friends Groups, to be recognised as a Friends Group with Sandwell Council we ask that:
 - i. Transparent records are kept of income and expenditure.
 - ii. Expenditure for equipment or developments in the green space are checked with Sandwell Council. A new bench or piece of play equipment for example may become an ongoing maintenance and repair cost to the Council, and as such new items of equipment or developments must be approved before being installed in Green Spaces owned by the Council.
- b. Fundraising is a vital part of Friends Group activities and we encourage this. Friends Groups should consult with the Council first on funding applications to certain organisations, as these may conflict with Council applications (an example is the National Lottery Heritage Fund). As general principle, applications for funding above £10,000 should be checked with the Council.

9. Built Facilities Management and Use

- a. Friends Groups can book the use of green space-built facilities (i.e. pavilions) for the purposes of Friends Groups meetings and activity related to the objectives of the Friends Group (detailed in the partnership agreement).
- b. Friends Groups will not be key holders or control bookings or use of a Green Space Built facility, unless this is part of an approved management agreement or lease arrangement. Any current arrangements (informal or formal) will be reviewed as part of this partnership agreement, with formal approval required by the Director of Borough Economy (with delegated authority to the Assistant Director for Borough Economy: Green Spaces, Green Services, Events).

10. Agreement Terms

- a. Friends Groups who register with the Council should sign the agreement for the ways of working outlined in this document. This agreement will be reviewed by the Cabinet Member responsible for Green Spaces every three years, and Friends Groups and the Council will sign the agreement on an annual basis.
- b. Friends Groups who chose not to register with the Council will not be eligible for the free use of green spaces for events, or attendance at the quarterly Friends group meetings.
- c. This partnership agreement is required for all Friends Groups, regardless of how they are incorporated. The way in which Friends Groups operate (either as a charity, voluntary organisation, or other type of set up) is a matter for Friends Groups and does not influence the terms of this partnership agreement.

Friends Groups Will	
1	Ensure the Friends Group has a constitution that includes governance arrangements, elections of committee, management of finances, and decision making.
2	When the Friends Group are making proposals for the Green Space, they should show that the views of the Friends Group are representative of the local community. This could be through open meetings for residents, surveys, or consultation groups.
3	Hold meetings accessible and open to residents who wish to attend (at least one a year).
4	Ensure that the meetings, activities, and engagement with residents is Inclusive to everyone and reflect the diversity of the area as much as possible. For example, this means ensuring that meetings are at venues that can be accessed by residents, regardless of political belief, region, sexual orientation or identity, or disability. The Council will provide signposting and information to Friends Groups on how they might go about this – including offering access to accessible venues (where possible) for Friends Groups open meetings.
5	Dates for Friends Groups meetings that are open to residents, including an Annual General Meeting, to be published on the Council’s Friends Group web page.
6	Evidence the Friends Group holds an Annual General Meeting (AGM) and elections of committee members into posts.
7	Work in partnership with officers from the Council and external partners to improve the green space.
8	To provide between 30 – 50 volunteering hours per year (in total for the Friends Group, including all activities) for green space improvement activities.
9	To provide a programme of works / projects to be undertaken by the Friends Group for the improvement of the Green Space, for Council approval. This includes any proposed works or projects that will require Council resource (including officer or operative time), future investment or maintenance costs (such as the install of benches or planting of new trees. This does not need to include any works that do not result in work on the green space, or that would result in commitments being made for the Council to future maintenance costs or resources.
10	To have a bank account for the Friends Group, annual report at the time of partnership renewal on finances. An annual report can be just a summary of events and activities undertaken for year, income and expenditure summary, and the elected committee representatives at the time of the annual report.

The Council Will	
1	Provide the park or green space (if appropriate for the type of event) free of charge for official Friends Groups events (not 3rd party events via the Friends Group). Friends Groups will still have to pay the administration fee for the processing of the event application, which includes our Safety Advisory Group review of the event.
2	Work towards application and retention of the Green Flag for the park or green space (only for those who currently have a Green Flag Award, or it is approved by Cabinet as part of the annual programme of works that a green space is working towards this). This includes increased consultation with Friends Groups involved in a Green Flag process for a new Green Flag award, or an annual discussion with the relevant Friends Group about the Green Flag Management Plan for a park or green space that has a Green Flag award.
3	Attendance by a senior officer (Director or Assistant Director level) and Cabinet Member at a Quarterly meeting with all Friends Groups.
4	Provide relevant information, signposting, and online resources to Friends Groups (through Sandwell.gov.uk). The Council will also send relevant information and resources about the improvement of a Green Space to Friends Groups (i.e. a new funding opportunity) by email, as well as updating the online information.
5	Involve the Friends Group on relevant public consultation exercises and feedback results about Green Spaces.
6	Inform and consult with the Friends Group regarding proposed use of the Green Space for events, or for any other use not within the normal purposes of the green space.
7	Provide briefings and communication on the progress of the Green Spaces Strategy, and other corporate matters affecting Green Spaces, at the Quarterly meetings.
8	Provide annual certification and recognition to those Friends Groups with a Partnership Agreement, including listing on the Councils website as a recognised Friends Group.
9	To produce a programme of annual works for green spaces, and to share this with Friends Groups (this will be published on Sandwell.gov.uk)
10	Provide information about funding opportunities for Friends Groups.

Partnership Agreement Signatures

Friends Group

Friends Group Name:

Friends Group Signature Name:

Friends Group Signature:

Date of Signature:

Sandwell Council

Sandwell Council Signature Role:

Sandwell Council Signature Name:

Sandwell Council Signature:

Date of Signature:

This agreement is in place until 31st March 2024 and will be renewed with the Friends Group annually from 1st April 2024. Renewal is subject to the commitments within this agreement being met.

Appendix: 2023/2024 Meeting Dates

	North	South
Quarter 3 (22/23)	1st Dec (6pm – 7.30pm)	5th Dec (6pm – 7.30pm)
Quarter 4 (22/23)	20th Feb (6pm – 7.30pm)	27th Feb (6pm – 7.30pm)
Quarter 1 (23/24)	15th May (6pm – 7.30pm)	22nd May (6pm – 7.30pm)
Quarter 2 (23/24)	14th Aug (6pm – 7.30pm)	21st Aug (6pm – 7.30pm)
Quarter 3 (23/24)	20th Nov (6pm – 7.30pm)	27th Nov (6pm – 7.30pm)
Quarter 4 (23/24)	4th Mar 24 (6pm – 7.30pm)	11th Mar (6pm – 7.30pm)