

# **Parks and Green Spaces: A guide to increasing the diversity of park users, volunteers, staff and boards**

**This guide offers pointers for groups to ensure parks are available and fully accessible for everyone - regardless of race, disability, or sexual orientation.**

**It's essential that groups also ensure that these principles are applied to the make-up of their staff, volunteers, and boards.**

## **Why diversity matters**

With “Friends of” groups aimed at sustaining and developing parks and open spaces growing in number, there has never been a more important time for them to strengthen their diversity, equality, and inclusion.

‘Equality and diversity’ is about ensuring everyone has access to the same opportunities and fair treatment.

Actively promoting equality and diversity (and having a policy statement and action plan to match) can help your park or open spaces to thrive. It will help you attract a wider pool of board members, volunteers and users. Most importantly people of all backgrounds can come together and enjoy these important facilities.

## **Adopting a diversity, equality and inclusion statement or policy**

Organisations of all sorts are becoming more diverse and reflective of the communities they serve. This is as true for “friends of” groups as any other organisation or volunteer grouping.

The first question you should ask before you embark on this process is: is your group really committed to this? Are you prepared for uncomfortable challenges to your existing approaches and behaviour?

Here are some considerations to help you write your parks and open spaces diversity statement.

## **Share your story**

It's important a diversity statement rings true. Use your story to show how you can empathise with park users (potential volunteers) who may face challenges to using parks or open spaces. Whether this be from a lack of confidence or fear of discrimination

## **Focus on commonly accepted understandings of diversity and equality**

Concentrate on issues such as race, gender, social class and sexual orientation. Think about how racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism etc prevent users accessing open spaces without fear of physical or verbal harassment. Consider the challenges that need to be overcome to ensure these communities feel welcomed within your space.

## **Highlight actions that you have taken to help park users from underrepresented backgrounds access the space.**

Successful examples include the [Green and Black ambassadors network](#) in Bristol. If you don't have any examples, then now is the time to reach out. Speak to a local Somali youth group or woman's disability led group about the opportunities and activities that could be available. Make sure you also ask them about what's preventing them using the park currently.

## **Write about your commitment to working toward achieving equality and enhancing diversity.**

Describe specific ways you are willing to contribute. You may focus on pre-existing activities such as park runs or clean up groups in your local park. You can also suggest new activities based on models run at other parks and open spaces e.g. : excellent work pioneered by the [Sensory Trust](#).

## **Your statement should be relevant to your part of the country and local community.**

Your statement for a large open park in rural Devon should not be identical to a pocket park in Hackney, London. Look up the demographics of the area to which you are applying the policy and mention those demographics in your statement.

Groups may be uncertain about the steps needed to turn words into action.

Once your statement is drafted an action plan is needed to show how it can be implemented. Here's a great example from [Friends of Buford Park](#).

## **Building a more diverse board**

Starting, creating and sustaining a diversity and inclusivity strategy is a major undertaking - particularly for small, underfunded boards.

The desire may be there to improve diversity, but progress could initially be slow.

Restating commitment to diversity and inclusion is not enough. To make progress boards and volunteer groups must move into problem solving mode.

Here are a few simple approaches the board or panel of volunteers can take to help break the impasse.

### **Who has done it?**

Seek out one or two organisations or groups similar to your own that have had success for a frank discussion on what they did to achieve this. What can your group learn from their approach? If you're able to identify a group that has battled to achieve success, the learning will be greater. What got them moving? What did they have to change? What obstacles did they face? What did they have to change in their thinking, attitudes or practice?

## **What don't we see about ourselves?**

Are candidates you want to join your board or volunteers you want to recruit turning you down. You need to consider how you appear to others - what might it be that is stopping these people joining you?

## **Who don't we know?**

The key to becoming more diverse is not who you know but who you don't! You need to reach out to people on the edge of your current networks who are at the centre of the networks you need to connect to.

## **How do you ensure your board is inclusive?**

As well as ensuring diversity, the board must strive to be inclusive. Don't assume board diversity will ensure inclusivity! You must be willing to engage in some complex discussions around the culture and barriers in your group. You must also be receptive to any challenge to the status quo that emerge from these discussions. Be sure to include this thinking into your meetings and planned park activities.

## **What are your norms?**

Can you describe the behaviours and attitudes that board members adopt to enable inclusive dialogue (and those they need to be left at the door).

The Chair's role should be to explicitly encourage positive behaviours and question those behaviours that stand in the way of inclusivity. It's worth discussing potential issues with board members prior to meetings to avoid confrontation.

You should adopt an assessment process to measure the impact of your inclusivity policies. This will enable you to pinpoint both your strengths and areas for improvement.

## Recruiting more diverse volunteers and staff

Achieving diversity is a process, not a result. It's not about reaching a numeric target. It is about ensuring that your outreach initiatives encourage people of different racial backgrounds, sexual orientation, gender, disability and religious affiliation to join your park or friends of group and have a positive sustained impact on making your park or open space more accessible to all.

Here are a few simple steps you can take to ensure a more diverse volunteer base

### **Do your own research and be ready to listen**

The first step to creating a space that encourages diversity is to do your research. Think carefully about what you want to achieve and see what already works in park groups that are like yours. Look out for what works. Is there a volunteer programme that has had some great successes in recruiting people of different backgrounds, abilities, or a website with good case studies?

Don't reinvent the wheel BUT own the process!

### **Build partnerships and create a network**

A great way to build up diversity is to create a web of mutual support among communities, groups, businesses, and other organisations. If you want more children from diverse backgrounds volunteering, consider reaching out to a local school or college that attracts the demographic group you are seeking to engage. If they have wildlife ecological or outdoors components to their curricula all the better!

### **Keep up your relationship!**

Respect and cultivate your relationships. Whether you've partnered with another group, a college, a community, or you've recruited a new volunteer, keep up that relationship by crediting their contributions and remaining receptive. As with any relationship, the ones you make while you try to encourage diversity take some upkeep.

### **Do it!**

Once you have clear goals and a focused plan for reaching them, you need to start implementing them. The journey to diversity can't stop at good intentions - you must do it!

## Final thoughts

Encouraging diversity is about being proactive, rather than reactive.

Go into your diversity volunteer engagement with a willingness to adapt, and a positive attitude.

Sometimes the work you do in encouraging diversity will not see immediate results. As long as you continue to learn and make your organisation a more accepting place for all people, you will be creating positive lasting changes.

Remember diversity on your boards and in your volunteer intake will ensure a richness of insight, empathy, authenticity, gained through hardships and personal challenges.

**This experience will ensure better critical thinking about barriers and therefore a better experience for all park users!**