

Parks and Green Spaces: Working with local authorities

This leaflet outlines the key methods and approaches your “Friends of” park group can use when working with your local authority.

Understanding what local authorities do

- Local authorities support residents and partner organisations to define and deliver on local priorities. They have responsibility for the economic, social, environmental and overall wellbeing of their area. This includes supporting a viable and extensive parks and recreation offer.
- They provide or commission services to support these functions. Some also fund voluntary bodies such as “Friends of” parks groups to help maintain neighbourhood parks and open spaces.
- They have income raising responsibilities, such as council tax.
- Local authorities employ professionals who contribute to the upkeep of parks and open spaces. These include park wardens, wildlife specialists and leisure staff. In addition, many employ research and policy staff, environmental health officers and planners, who support their parks and recreation agenda.
- Local authorities can be structured in many different ways. In most of England there are two tiers – county and district. Cities such as London and Manchester have a metropolitan structure.
- Councillors are elected to represent people in a defined geographical area, a ward, for a fixed term of four years
- Councillors can have a number of roles including: representing their wards; being involved in decision-making as part of committee or board membership; overview and scrutiny. In addition, they have regulatory duties and community leadership and engagement roles.
- Cabinets, made up of councillors who hold a responsibility (or ‘portfolio’) for a particular area of work, are the main decision-making body for most local authorities. These usually reflect the political balance of the council

as a whole. However, in areas with directly elected mayors, the mayor has specific powers that enable them to pick the cabinet directly from the area's elected councillors.

Understanding how to build relationships and work with your local authority

- Develop an understanding of how your local authority works. Speak with councillors and officers in your local authority to get their perspective.
- Focus on building relationships with elected members and staff before trying to tackle specific (especially contentious) issues. Remember staff working across parks and open spaces are not always office based and have many competing priorities.
- Try to build relationship with Councillors with different functions. This may include members of the Leisure or Recreation panels, the overview and scrutiny committees, neighbourhood forums and the cabinet.
- Its important that you engage with Councillors from all political parties. If the Council changes political leadership you don't want to start your lobbying from scratch!
- Tap into the local knowledge of councillors and the technical knowledge that parks staff will have.
 - The main role of a Councillor is to represent their local ward. They know their communities very well through surgeries, neighbourhood forums and casework. They will have useful insights into how parks and open spaces in their ward are used. This will also have an understanding of the needs of the community and how best to engage them.
 - Officers will have indepth technical knowledge of how parks work. They will also be able to support you with applications for events and activities and understand what is required to ensure they are approved.
- Familiarise yourself with national and local parks support organisations such as [the parks alliance](#) or local organisations such as [Bristol and Bath Parks foundation](#).