

CASE STUDY: Birmingham Open Spaces Forum

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1) How and when did you come together and form an area forum?

BOSF is a volunteer network organisation, set up at the end of 2004, that brings together all the community groups in Birmingham with an interest in green open spaces. Our main focus is supporting the volunteers who add value to the city's open space.

We came together as a result of Friends Groups speaking about the importance of networking together and helping each other out.

2) How many groups or members in the forum, and how many have attended in the last 12 months?

We currently have around 130 groups in our forum, some large and very active and others with just a few dedicated volunteers. They vary from Park Friends, to Nature Reserves, playing fields and In Bloom groups.

Over the last 12 months we have helped to start up 10 new groups who have joined the network, from across Birmingham.

3) Has anything been difficult or challenging?

Our biggest challenge at the moment is the amount of cuts to the Council budget affecting our parks and open spaces. We have mobilised our network and have successfully spoken out on the importance of our green spaces.

We have managed to save our Park Ranger staff and a number of the Park Keepers. However, there is now a large percentage of "Rank" grass in Birmingham that will never be cut again. This is causing problems for many groups and has given residents the reason to set up a new group to see what difference they can make.

There is also a lack of funding going to our groups, as some groups have not written a funding bid and do not know how to start.

4) What successes have you achieved?

We have successfully managed to save a proportion of the Parks budget and still have Council Rangers and some Park Keepers. If we did not exist to harness the community voice, our Council Parks section would not be as big as it is and would have less resources. It is however an on going battle.

We help out all our groups to look at what funding is available to them and provide support to those groups who need it, helping them through a funding bid to Lottery Awards for All, so that they learn new skills. Every group should be putting in an Awards for All bid for their site!

We are continuing to work with our network, giving them the support they need and adding in their voice to council decision making and other partnership groups in the city.

5) Why do you think you were successful?

We help to bring together an organised voice to speak out for our green spaces. As soon as the council starts to consult on budget cuts we get the information out to all our groups, point out the sections to read on green spaces and let them know when and where they need to send their responses to. We also give them information on our response and examples of what they could say. Reminders are regularly sent out, so that we make it as easy as possible for the groups to be able to have their say and be heard.

We also meet regularly with Parks Staff to discuss on going issues and see how we can help each other out. The Councillors and Cabinet Members also know who we are and know that we can work in partnership with them, helping more groups to start up and look at what the volunteers and community can do to bring the added value to their sites.

6) What's happening now with your Forum?

We are currently going through a process known as Theory of Change to look at moving forward in an organised and sustainable way. This will be followed by another funding bid for our next 5 years of work.

We are continuing to work in close partnership with Birmingham City Council, who are going through another reorganising process, to make sure green spaces are recognised for their multiple benefits and the value of the volunteers is harnessed.

We have set up an offer of Free Insurance to our BOSF member groups, working on council land. For this we ask them to send in their volunteer hours each month and we send them £10 a month for sending this in to us as well.

We are collecting in volunteer data from a lot of our groups on activities and volunteer hours. This data is sent in to the Council Parks data to create a bigger picture on how our parks and green spaces are used. We also send this data back to the groups to help them out with their funding bids. An Infographic is created from this data that shows a good picture of the hard work of Birmingham's parks volunteers. (copy to be sent for past 12 months soon)

Regular newsletters are sent out to our groups and all interested parties and we organise monthly social networking activities to help get everyone together to share experiences and news. These are either coffee mornings in a variety of parks, training sessions looking at funding, risk assessment writing or first aid and our annual Conference.

We work in partnership with other organisations that include the Wildlife Trust, Friends of the Earth, Access Forum and Natural Capital Roundtable. We are the vice chair of the Greener Birmingham Group, which is a partnership of all environmental groups and organisations in Birmingham looking at working closer together.

7) What is planned for the future?

As the Commonwealth Games are coming to Birmingham in 2022, we are working with the Greener Games group to look at how we can create a green legacy for Birmingham from them.

We are also carrying out funding applications to work closer with the young people in Birmingham and introducing them to the work of volunteers in their local parks.

As Birmingham is now part of the bigger West Midlands Combined Authority, we want to do more with our neighbours, helping out their community forums and create a larger network of support and advice for our West Midlands friends groups.

There is always our on going work of support our groups, helping new groups to start up and keeping a strong community voice making a difference for our parks and open spaces.

Thanks to BOSF – don't forget their pics below ↓

Photos from Birmingham Open Spaces Forum



Image 1: Christmas Lecture



Image 2: BOSF Conference 2018



Image 3: BOSF Conference Lunch



Image 4: BOSF Kings Heath Coffee Morning