

Needs survey

Barnet Green Spaces Network

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Suzanne King

Roger Chapman

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Introduction

There are about 200 parks and open green spaces in the London Borough of Barnet (Barnet). One way in which Barnet is able to manage such a large amount of green space is by working with Friends groups who look after their local site. Not all sites have Friends groups.

The Barnet Green Spaces Network (the Network) was established in summer 2019. There are currently (December 2022) about 40 Friends groups in the Network. It is affiliated with the London Friends of Green Spaces Network (LFGN), which in turn is affiliated to the national network.

The Network holds quarterly meetings to which members of Barnet's environmental team's staff may be invited. At the October 2022 meeting of the Barnet Green Spaces Network it was agreed that a short questionnaire would be sent to members of the Network asking about the support they could offer each other and the support that they needed to run their Friends group and look after their site. This short report sets out the findings from that survey.

Of the approximately 40 members of the Network 21 responded to the questionnaire. Only one response per site was invited and members were asked to co-ordinate responses, so this is a survey of groups, not individuals. The survey was open from 28th October until 26th November and was run using Google Forms. Some of the questions were set by the Biodiversity Officer.

Because of the small sample size and the open-ended nature of some of the questions, this report uses a narrative approach to reporting the findings.

Conclusions

The Friends groups that replied to this survey in general feel that they lack the necessary technical skills to manage and care for their open space. In particular there was a demand for training in general site management, ecology and tree management. Groups were in far less need of support with general administration and financial management, although help with fundraising was highlighted as desirable.

There was a call for Barnet to do more itself to maintain sites and the buildings and sports facilities that some contain. Related to this, it appears that Grounds staff and contractors need to be better trained in ecology and more careful with existing planting when working on sites.

It was thought that to improve biodiversity in the borough Barnet could change the mowing regimes and also create more meadows, wetlands and woodlands. Some groups felt that their sites were overused by people and dogs. There was a call for the public to be educated about ecology and the management of sites to help preserve existing and new planting.

It might also be time for a review of the insurance policy that covers volunteers working on sites to allow the use of some battery powered tools.

The Network could support groups in building better relationship with Greenspaces and other teams within the Environment team. This could help address the issue of finding contractors and dealing with neighbours as well as getting more support for individual sites.

Both Barnet and the Network could help with fundraising. Although Inclusion Barnet helps with this it may not be specific enough for individual groups.

Currently the Network does not have a website. A website could act as a repository of information for members and others involved in managing Friends groups and sites but funding would be needed. Through the Network website, perhaps supported by Barnet Volunteering, a pool of volunteers who could be deployed to various sites as needed might be organised.

Findings

Main issues faced

Question 2 asked about the main issues faced by Friends groups. The key issues that emerged were:

- lack of Barnet funding and maintenance
- poor training of (some) Grounds staff and contractors who cutdown plants and churn-up paths without making good
- training for volunteers on biodiversity and general management of the site
- while some groups have formed very good relationships with Greenspaces, others feel that they lack sufficient support
- dealing with neighbours related to land grabbing and removal of trees
- dealing with a general ignorance of biodiversity/nature and anti-social behaviour, including rubbish, dogs and dog waste, low level vandalism, fires, rough sleepers, fly tipping
- overuse by the public

Skills

Question 3 asked about skills that groups felt they had and those they lacked or needed enhanced.

Despite concerns expressed at meetings about the necessary administration, groups were more likely to say that they had skills related to administrative tasks than that they had skills required to look after the site.

Half or more had skills related to organisation:

- financial management (17/21)¹
- setting-up the group (14/21)
- fundraising (12/21)
- project management (11/21)
- health and safety/risk assessment (11/21)
- website, social media and other promotional skills (11/21)

Whereas fewer reported skills needed to look after their site such as:

- habitat creation (8/21)
- tree management (5/21)

The skill most demanded was:

- tree management (14/21)

but other practical skills were also said to be needed:

- first aid (11/21)

¹ Numbers in brackets throughout the report refer to the number of respondents who gave this answer out of the 21 who responded.

- habitat creation (11/21)
- manual labour (8/21)
- health and safety/risk assessment (8/21)
- website and social media (8/21)

While there was a certain amount of skill in website and social media reported, not all respondents felt confident and at least one wanted to relinquish this responsibility.

The skills least likely to be needed were skills in financial management and setting-up the group. Only one group felt they needed more financial management skills.

Skill sharing

Question 4 asked about skills that they would share with other groups. There were offers of various ecological expertise, including that related to tree management. There was also an offer of help in setting-up websites.

Improving Friends' sites

Question 5 asked how respondents thought that their green space could be improved. Answers are obviously specific to particular sites but a few themes emerged:

- better biodiversity management, specifically improved habitat and linking together green spaces to make habitat corridors
- better land management, including mulching (or the materials for volunteers to mulch)
- provision of dog free and people free areas
- better care of buildings, playing courts, etc.

Support

Question 6 asked what support the group needed to achieve these improvements. The main types of support requested were:

- advice (10/21)
- finance (9/21)
- more volunteers (9/21)
- access to contractors (9/21)
- better/more appropriate tools (3/21)

Question 7 asked how the Network could better support the group in caring for their space. They were asked to give a first, second and third choice from a list of ways in which the Network might be able to support members.

Four groups ranked each of fundraising, lobbying Barnet and sharing volunteers as the most important help that could be given. Three groups ranked free training (including signposting to free training) as most important. Three groups also ranked lobbying Barnet and general maintenance advice (including signposting) as their second choice.

No group wanted more help with GDPR or setting-up, although one group ranked running the group their second choice and another ranked this third. Only one group thought that there was no way in which the Network could better support them.

Question 11 asked what else the Network or Barnet could do to help respondents and their groups. Two main issues arose from the written-in answers:

- monitoring and recording species, both flora and fauna
- contact lists for people in the Network and for Barnet officers

Also listed were:

- better liaison with other groups and organisations by Barnet
- better communication between Barnet and groups so that contractor and volunteer work is co-ordinated
- help promoting the Friends groups

Improving biodiversity

Question 8 asked what respondents thought Barnet could do to improve biodiversity on their site, choosing from a list.

The main things, all mentioned by nine respondents were:

- change mowing regimes
- meadow creation
- funding advice

Also mentioned were:

- creating a wetland habitat (8/21)
- tree planting (7/21)
- general advice (7/21)
- woodland creation (5/21)

Question 9 asked what respondents thought could be done to improve biodiversity across the borough, choosing from a list.

The most popular responses were:

- meadow creation (17/21)
- tree planting (16/21)
- woodland creation (12/21)
- general advice (12/21)
- change mowing regimes (10/21)