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Worcestershire County Council

Communities Greenspace Pack



Find out more online at:
www.worcestershire.gov.uk/countryside

Communities Greenspace Pack

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The Value of Greenspaces

A greenspace within a community, whether it be a village green, playing field, play area or piece of common is a huge asset in so many ways.

Access to open space, greenery and fresh air is now widely acknowledged as having huge health benefits for people's physical and mental well being. In the current climate with obesity and heart disease threatening to take on epidemic proportions, the opportunity for exercise in the immediate vicinity of where people live cannot be over stated.

Numerous studies have also shown that exposure to greenery, openness, wildlife and fresh air gives people a greater sense of well being, with reduced levels of stress, depression and time off work.

To many, Worcestershire may seem an idyllic and rural county - this can be deceptive. Often in a small rural village, despite sitting amidst fields and woods, there can be no publicly accessible open space beyond the rights of way network.

Thus the opportunity for children or families to kick a ball around, go for a picnic or have access to play equipment can be as limited, or in some cases more limited, than in the concrete and tarmac environs of our inner cities with their parks and playgrounds.

In many rural communities in Worcestershire there really is nothing for young people to do.

Another often over looked group are the elderly and less mobile who perhaps can't get further a field, so for them lack of local greenspace can mean no access at all.

Therefore, creating a greenspace in your community can have a multitude of benefits, from the health of local people, recreational space for families and young people, a venue for village and community events such as arts activities as well as being beneficial for local wildlife.

This pack is intended to help you through the various aspects of creating and / or managing a greenspace in your community.



What do you want from Your Greenspace?

Before considering locations, land and finance, it is worth defining what exactly you want a greenspace in your community to do:

- Open space
- Play area
- Dog walking
- Wildlife
- Area for sports
- Protection of historic feature
- Location for community events
- Location for arts activities

By prioritising and defining which of these are important to your community, this will influence aspects such as location, size and scale of your project.

There has been a range of new greenspace projects carried out in the county over the last decade or so. There are various Millennium Greens, Doorstep Greens and parish playing fields, so why not visit a few see what you like, do not like, what facilities and equipment they have and who supplied and installed what.



Creating Your Greenspace

All communities vary and the situations and potential for greenspaces within communities will also vary hugely.

It maybe that you currently have no provision at all and are starting from scratch, looking for a suitable site, how you might acquire it, fund it and develop it.

In other situations you may already have a site, whether a village green, playing field or perhaps just a piece of seemingly waste ground. The ambition might be to maximise the potential of an existing site, develop or update it. In this instance it is easier, in that you do not have to go about the process of acquisition, but you may need help applying for funding for developmental work, sorting out your insurance and health and safety obligations or enhancing the value of your site as a place where local wildlife can flourish.



Land – Acquisition & Tenure

This section really falls into two categories; those starting from scratch and so needing to find a suitable site for a greenspace in their community, and then more difficultly, trying to acquire it, either by purchase or leasing.

The second scenario is where a community already have land for greenspace in one form or another, in which case the task of acquisition is removed, but it does mean that the parameters and limitations are already fixed in terms of location, size, topography etc. There may be odds and ends that need tying up in terms of clarifying the legal status and ownership prior to any funding bids going in.

Spotting which pieces of land might make a good greenspace is the relatively easy part, whether the owner is remotely interested in selling or leasing it to the community may be another matter entirely. You can but enquire.

Land value is a difficult subject to broach, and is at the whim of supply and demand. There are unlikely to be a huge choice of suitable sites and so how badly you as a community want it and what the land owner thinks he/she can get for it will all come into play and prices will fluctuate wildly as a result. Even having an independent valuation may prove of little consequence.

If the purchase of the land is to form part of a funding bid, you will need a sympathetic seller and an in-principal agreement to sell pending the outcome of the funding bid.

In the event of a leasing arrangement the length of the lease may be significant in any application for funding. Some funders are unlikely to grant monies for site development if the long term security of the site is not guaranteed. Hence if looking to lease a site, it is suggested that at least a 20 or 25 year lease is sought.

Which ever way you manage to obtain a piece of land you will need a solicitor to draw up the agreement whether it be purchase or lease.

The other major consideration is who will own the land and who will be responsible for its management and upkeep. Will it be through the parish council, or will a trust, management board or association be set up to be specifically responsible for the ownership and maintenance of the greenspace?

If picking the latter, then issues of a constitution, bank account and the legal status of the trust or group will need to be addressed.



Planning Permission

The inevitable question will be do I need planning permission?

Even though you may not be putting up buildings or constructing anything, you will almost certainly need planning permission to create a greenspace, as it constitutes change of use from whatever the existing land use is, to its use as a public open space.

This will, therefore, entail applying to your local district council for change of use from agricultural land to public open space for example.

This process can take several months and carry a fee of about £250.

The district council will have a planning officer able to assist and guide you through the process.

When it comes to your application being considered by the planning committee it will be to your advantage to have as much support as possible from groups and organisations who either would benefit or who support your vision for a greenspace.

Having letters of support from the school, youth groups, sports clubs, WI, parish council and other community groups will all show that there is a level of support for your application and a considered local need.

The planning committee in making a decision will consider such aspects as accessibility, highway implications, community safety and effects on neighbours or local residents. All these issues are worth considering early on, so as not to fall at the first hurdle of planning permission.

Assuming your application is granted you will then be free to seek funding to carry out your plans.

There is of course a Catch 22 element in all this. In the first scenario you do not want to buy a site on which permission will not be granted and obviously any funding will be dependant upon the planning permission being granted. So it may be that the initial £250 planning application fee has to be gambled in order to try and get the process going.

If of course you do already own or have tenure of the land you may still need to apply for change of use if community greenspace is not its current use.



Stakeholder Support and Consultation

In attempting to instigate a project such as this it pays to have as much support as possible from a wide array of groups and organisations. These fall into two categories; those within the community such as:

- Schools
- Play group's
- Youth clubs
- Sports clubs
- Women's Institute
- Parish Council
- Village hall committee
- Local charities

The second category is external organisations:

- County and District Councils - elected councillors as well as professional officers of the council
- National Playing Fields Association
- Sport England
- Local Wildlife Trust

Try to gain the support of as many of these groups as possible throughout each stage of the project. Their support on issues such as planning permission and funding bids may prove invaluable.

Consultation is key to the success of a greenspace project, both to win support and allay fears and anxiety. Arrange a meeting or put on a display, hold a drop-in session where people can come along to find out more about the project.

It is worth remembering that formal meetings can allow a few confident opinions to be aired (sometimes disproportionately) whilst equally many people are not confident or do not like speaking up at a public meeting. Whereas drop-in sessions tend to work better and allow more people to be engaged and have their say in a less formal atmosphere.

Try and engage with the full spectrum of the community, especially young people. Whilst one of the aims of creating a greenspace is often to provide facilities for children and young people, many schemes fail because they did not seek the views of those groups of people. It may be worth involving a youth worker or an officer from Children's Services to assist with your project.



Budget Planning and Funding

Prior to seeking funding it is worth doing a rough budget plan to assess the likely amount of funding required. This in turn will dictate the types of grant funding that are appropriate to your project.

So try and get estimates for the various elements of the project then add in 10% for contingency.

Creating or developing a greenspace is an expensive process and the required budget will run into tens or even hundreds of thousands of pounds.

The most likely source of funding in recent years has been lottery cash with schemes such as the Big Lottery being possible sources of funding.

Having come up with a budget for your project there are two approaches to seeking funding:

To go for one big bid to secure all the funding for pretty well everything from one source

or

To break the project down into parts and apply for multiple amounts of smaller grants to fund specific elements of the project.

There are pros and cons to both of these. In theory one big bid may seem the more appealing option, however there will be far more stringent criteria, detail and conditions and it may be harder to get. Whilst a number of small grants do require some repetitive paperwork, the grants might be easier to obtain, have a lot less criteria and conditions and have a far shorter application to decision time.

With most grants there is a considerable element of match funding, this means you can count the volunteer time that all the members of your group put into the project as 'in-kind' support set against the cash from the grant.

In order to apply for funding, the minimum requirement you need to have is:

- a constitution
- a bank account in the name of your group with at least two cheque signatories
- and as a constituted body you will need a nominated chair, secretary and treasurer plus other committee members

However, this is not as arduous as it sounds. It is easy to open a bank account and a model constitution can be provided that you could amend to suit your needs.

A directory of the types of funding available can be found at: <http://www.worcestershirepartnership.org.uk/home/wp-fundingdesk.htm>



Awarding Contracts and Working with Contractors

Once you have secured your funding and have a healthy budget to spend, you need to decide whom you are going to engage to deliver which aspects of your project.

There is a vast range of contractors delivering many different kinds of products and services at varying prices, so, it is worth shopping around and asking to get recommendations. Look at other examples and ask who did them.

You will probably have to engage more than one contractor to get the best specialist for the different aspects of the work such as landscaping, installing play equipment, tree planting etc.

Play Equipment

Play equipment can be one of the most expensive elements of a project so to avoid costly mistakes it pays to get it right.

It is worth defining early on what you are actually after. What ages are you catering for? Is it only a swings and roundabout type play ground for small children or are you aiming to cater for a wide range of young people?

All the leading manufacturers provide free advice so once you have an idea of the type of equipment you are after, get them to come out and meet you on site. They will come up with advice, proposals and drawings.

Get at least three different companies to come out to quote as specifications and prices do vary widely, so compare like with like. The companies want your business so negotiate

Find out which standards you should comply with. All such equipment has to comply with a British Safety Standard kite mark.

In planning your play area it is a good idea to allow for expansion, so have a larger surfaced area than needed for the equipment you are initially buying, which will allow for the installation of additional items in the future.

From a safety aspect you will need a safety inspection regime where the equipment is checked at certain intervals to ensure it is in safe and working condition. The manufactures will usually advise on the frequency and requirements of this.

There is always a temptation to think of children's play in terms of formal play equipment, when natural play can be equally as advantageous. Simple open space to run around or an old tree trunk to climb on can be equally valuable and of course far cheaper.



Arts Activities

In the warmer (and dryer!) months greenspaces can make ideal locations for arts activities. These could range from music festivals to face painting or even putting on theatre shows. They don't have to be Glastonbury, often small events can be a lot more intimate and special and can bring whole communities together in something very celebratory. Often grants and support are available from local authorities or other partners. For more support please call the County Arts Officer on 01905 765754

On-site Furniture

When it comes to the fixtures and fittings you might place on your greenspace, there is a vast array of companies all too willing to sell you a huge variety of bins, benches, fencing, gates and surfacing materials. It is, therefore, essential to research exactly what it is you want and look at several options and get several quotes for each item you think you require.

Think carefully about furniture, whether you really need it, the quality and durability as well as the level of maintenance it will require in the future. It is easy to spend a large amount of grant money on shiny new furniture at the beginning of a project, only for its maintenance to become a burden later on. It may be better to start with a few essentials at the beginning and then add to them later on.

In considering routes through the greenspace, surfacing, seating areas, picnic benches and site information, you need to take account of potential users who may have a disability. Give consideration to the gradient of slopes, eliminating steps and stiles and providing picnic benches that allow for wheelchair users. Making things wheelchair friendly also makes things easier for people with pushchairs. Don't forget that disability is not always about mobility. Think about other users who may be sight or hearing impaired and how you can make your greenspace more user friendly for them as well.



Insurance

You will definitely need insurance for your greenspace. Public liability insurance up to 3 million or even 5 million pounds is common these days.

The insurance will of course be dictated by what you have on the site in the way of equipment and facilities, certain elements like bike tracks or skateboard facilities are likely to incur a far greater premium than an area of grass with a couple of swings on it.

In addition to public liability you may want to consider personal accident insurance to cover members of your committee or the community actively engaged in any activity on the site. Whilst some policies can be obtained against theft and damage of play equipment, it would be up to you to decide if this is necessary in your particular situation.

Insurers of parish councils will often add in play equipment to existing policies.

Health & Safety

This is not a subject to be unduly worried about as long as a few simple steps are followed.

As the owner or manager of a public open space you have certain obligations to ensure the health and well being of those using it. In legal terms you have a “duty of care” to the public and need to be deemed to have taken all reasonable measures to ensure that they are not unduly harmed or put in danger as a result of the way you manage the site. Two things that you could undertake are:

Risk Assessments

This is basically common sense and takes the form of an assessment of the site and what is on it, together with a record of what action you have taken to minimise any identifiable risks.

Inspections / Safety Audits

This is a system of regular inspections to check that the site and any facilities upon it are safe and in good order. A record is kept and the inspection repeated at intervals such as 3 month, 6 month or yearly.



Maximising Biodiversity

Whilst factors such as open space, play areas, recreation or sport may be among the main reasons for creating your greenspace, there is no reason why it cannot also be beneficial to local wildlife.

All sites are different in size, topography and location, but the following might be included to a greater or lesser degree:

Trees – these have a wide range of values to birds and insects as well as providing shade, so whether it is the incorporation of existing trees on the site or the planting of new trees, they have the potential to greatly enhance the amenity and biodiversity of a greenspace. If you are planting new trees, base your species choice on what seems to do well in the area and a general preference for native species.

Grassland and wild flowers – whilst most recreation areas will involve an area of mown grass for sports / recreational activities, there may be the potential for areas of rough or longer grassland and wildflowers. These areas will have a far greater wildlife value and considerable financial savings in terms of maintenance and mowing.

Ponds and wetlands – water is a fantastic resource for biodiversity. In suitable situations ponds, a canal or riverside can make a great feature for both people and wildlife.

Orchards - once a common feature in the Worcestershire landscape, they have sadly declined in the past 50 years. An orchard is a valuable habitat for a vast array of wildlife as well as a source of local fresh fruit. Could you incorporate some fruit trees to celebrate this aspect of the County's heritage.

Think about the character of the local area when planning for wildlife and landscape. What makes your patch distinctive or unique? The Landscape Character Assessment and Biodiversity Action Plan for Worcestershire will be useful documents to look at.

www.worcestershire.gov.uk/biodiversity

www.worcestershire.gov.uk/ica

You may already have significant wildlife value on your site. This may include species that are protected by law. There are a number of sources of advice to help with carrying out a survey of your site.



Ongoing Management

Grounds maintenance and ongoing management

With any site there are regular tasks that will need carrying out - mowing grass, emptying bins and carrying out safety inspections. Who is going to carry these out, how often and how much will it cost will need to be agreed. The best way to agree and record this is through writing a management plan. This need not be an arduous task and can be as simple as two sheets of paper. The important thing is that, once agreed, it is adhered to so that anybody who needs to can pick it up and follow what it prescribes.

Funding the ongoing life of the site

Many of the grant schemes and funding opportunities to create greenspaces are good at paying for capital works and start-up costs, but not maintenance. Therefore, you are likely to need a strategy of how to fund these. It may be that the parish council could raise the precept, or that you could run a series of fundraising events to bring in the necessary funding.

Combating vandalism and anti-social behaviour

Whilst there is no easy answer to these problems and the level and nature of them will vary wildly in different situations, there are a few measures that can be taken in order to minimise the likelihood of problems occurring:

Consultation and engagement - From the very outset of a project try to involve all groups, especially young people and teenagers. What would they like to see? How might they be involved in the design and development of the site? Projects where vandalism and anti-social behaviour are high are often those where young people feel alienated or not involved.

Good relations with your site neighbours - By its very nature many people are cautious of, or dislike change. Those who border your site need to be kept informed of what is going on, and to feel consulted and involved. A friendly approach from the start, seeking their views and opinions can avoid a lot of potential aggravation and grief at a later stage.



Useful Contacts

If you would like more advice on taking your community greenspace project forward, please get in touch with us at:

Community Greenspace Team, Worcestershire County Council
 e mail: communitygreenspace@worcestershire.gov.uk
<http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/countryside> Tel: 01905 766155

The following organisations may be useful in the setting up and running of your green space project:

Play England <http://www.playengland.org.uk> Tel: 020 7843 6300

Sport England <http://www.sportengland.org> Tel: 020 7273 1551

Arts Council <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk> Tel: 0845 300 6200

BTCV <http://www2.btcv.org.uk> Tel: 01302 388 883

Awards for All <http://www.awardsforall.org.uk> Tel: 0845 600 2040

Big Lottery <http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk> Tel: 0845 410 2030

Heritage Lottery Fund <http://www.hlf.org.uk> Tel: 020 7591 6000

Wychavon District Council <http://wychavon.whub.org.uk> Tel: 01386 565000

Wyre Forest District Council <http://www.wyreforestdc.gov.uk> Tel: 01562 732928

Malvern Hills District Council <http://malvern.whub.org.uk> Tel: 01684 862151

Bromsgrove District Council <http://bromsgrove.whub.org.uk> Tel: 01527 881288

Redditch Borough Council <http://redditch.whub.org.uk> Tel: 01527 64252

Worcester City Council <http://www.worcester.gov.uk> Tel: 01905 722233

Community First <http://www.comfirst.org.uk> Tel: 01684 312730

Worcestershire Partnership <http://www.worcestershirepartnership.org.uk> Tel: 01905 728739