Four London parks to re-open this week following major refurbishments

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As part of the biggest investment in the city's open spaces since Victorian times thanks to the Parks for People scheme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Big Lottery Fund (BIG).

From all corners of the city, parks are re-opening their gates wide to visitors this summer following major conservation, refurbishment and community-led schemes that are transforming the open spaces of London.

Bishops Park and Fulham Palace Grounds in the West, Barking Park in North, and Brockwell Park and the Horniman Gardens in the South – which have received over £11million in lottery investment between them – are the latest historic open spaces to proudly go on show after extensive improvements.

Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund London Committee explains the transformational effect that these schemes are having on London's parks. "During this exceptionally historic London summer as people across the capital celebrate the Queen's Jubilee and we host the Olympics, this bumper crop of openings – four of eight major park regenerations across London completing this year - will be the icing on the cake for many local communities meaning that they can enjoy their local park to the full once again.

"Before the lottery came into being over 17 years ago many of London's parks and gardens were in a sorry state, underused by their communities and even in some cases avoided altogether. Now, with well over £100million invested in London's parks for the restoration of historic features, much-needed refurbishment of pathways, plants and trees, and countless schemes getting people involved as volunteers and apprentices, the capitals' parks are once again becoming destination green spaces that people can be proud of and want to visit.

He continued: "The parks opening next week will join a list of landmark parks and open spaces already restored across the capital such as the beautiful Battersea Park, Valentines Park, Chiswick House and Gardens, Russell Square, Bushy Park and grounds of Kensington Palace to name but a few. Public parks are not only fantastic for local people, they also support a wealth of wildlife species and really are the green lung of our city. They are essential for healthy happy connected communities and their continued recognition, reinvestment and sustainable management is vital."

Here we take a look behind the scenes, through the eyes of people working at some of the parks opening this week, at what a dramatic impact completing these parks projects has had on local communities:

The Horniman Gardens, Lewisham: £907,000 grant towards a 16-month project designed to strengthen the connection between the gardens and museum and create new Display Gardens, Pavilion, Sound Garden, Animal Walk and London skyline terrace (total cost: £2.3million)

Gordon Lucas is Gardens Manager at the Horniman and for five years has been involved in the Parks for People project, which has included redesigned spaces, refurbishment and brand new buildings. "We always needed an outside educational space, for example," he says, "and we never had one. All our events were dictated by the weather and so there was no way to do what we call "dirty activities" such as potting up plants or insect discovery for younger children.

We staff had to take our muddy boots off and tip-toe into the museum," he laughs. That's all changed with a "beautiful new pavilion" incidentally with stunning views. "It will be such a well-used building," he predicts.

The whole project has linked the gardens and the museum back together, he says, and the difference the HLF grant has made is apparent in every area of the park. "All the facilities are better", he says, "from the bandstand right down to the toilets. This has improved the whole quality of what we can offer to the public. It's now a marvellous place for the communities of Lewisham and south east London and we've done a good job of it. What it can offer now and into the future is phenomenal."

Bishops Park and Fulham Palace Grounds: £3.65million grant towards two-year project to restore the urban beach, ornamental lake, Gothic lodge and create new play areas, café and education facility (total cost £8million)

Roger Weston, local resident for 30 years, has been involved with the Friends of Bishops Park for ten and is currently the Deputy Chair. "All parks need a little TLC," he says, "which often they don't get". Bishop's Park, opened in 1893 on land given by Ecclesiastical Commissioners, was a prime example. "Two World Wars and major urbanisation in the area had left its mark," he says. "It was very much a peoples' park in the beginning, originally for the local working class and became gentrified over the years."

The Friends decided, amongst other issues, that the park was overgrown, rundown and desperately needed play areas. "The aim was to draw more families into the park," he says. "And one of the issues for children was to provide play equipment for all ages including more adventurous equipment to keep old children and teenagers amused." And now? The slides and swings are already very popular, he says, and there is a skate bowl for teenagers. Plus there are the other new or restored attractions – the urban beach (the restored balustrade area or Bishops Park Beach), the lake, a refurbished café and clubroom. And the verdict of the Friends? "We are all very pleased and excited," says Roger. "So far all the comments have been positive. And whenever I go now, there are always lots and lots of kids."

Barking Park: £3.25million grant for two-year project to redevelop the Lido including splash park and wet play area, new Visitor Centre with café, refurbishment of lake and boating facilities, replanting the historic ornamental gardens, and improvements to pathways, boundries, entrances and security (total cost £7million)

"Once people might have come here for ten minutes to walk their dog," says Andy Johnson, Park Manager for Barking Park. "But that's all changed. There is a different atmosphere now. It's a much more family-orientated and welcoming environment." The oldest park in Barking and Dagenham, Barking has undergone a long refurbishment with an HLF grant. It has become a place where people can come and stay until the sun goes down. "It's an all day destination" he says. "We have a café now, a children's play area, boating facilities and the old lido, closed for many years has become a new Splash Park facility – a fun water fountain-based activity area." Other attractions include the replanted ornamental gardens and pond dipping platforms as well as new public toilets. The Centre includes fantastic classroom facilities and provides a venue for everything from environmentally-based school activities to children's parties."

The HLF grant has made a huge impact, he says. "It has given the community access to a park which lots of local people had fond memories of but had seen deteriorate over the years. Now they can feel proud of it again."

Brockwell Park, which has received just under £3.5million in lottery funding will see its play area opened this week in the first stage of a series of events for the park, which is due to complete its full refurbishment later this year. London can also look forward to Lordship Recreation Ground (LB Haringey) and Lloyd and Aveling Park (LB Waltham Forest)

opening their gates anew in the Autumn.

Notes to editors

The Parks for People programme uses Lottery funds to support the regeneration, conservation and increased enjoyment of public parks. The programme aims to improve the local environment and put parks firmly back at the heart of community life. In England the two Lottery Funds have been working in partnership since 2006 to deliver a £150m investment in public parks.

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG), the largest distributor of National Lottery good cause funding, is responsible for giving out 40% of the money raised for good causes by the National Lottery. BIG is committed to bringing real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need and has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK. Since June 2004 BIG has awarded over £4.4bn. Visit the Big Lottery Fund website.

Further information

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