

Childrens play area in Barnes Park, Sunderland

The Heritage Lottery Fund's (HLF) Parks for People scheme, which has invested millions of pounds into restoring and improving green spaces all over the UK, has touched almost every local authority area in the North East.

Thanks to the dedication, vision and energy from local communities and park users, there have been some huge changes in the North East to restore parks that were neglected or run-down. Since 1994, HLF have jointly invested with the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) £60million in over 50 parks related projects in the region. Soaring visitor numbers suggest the investment has paid off in spades.

An improved outdoor space makes a dramatic difference to the quality of life for so many people on a daily basis. "Parks are free," says Jerry Dronsfield, North Tyneside park and allotments manager. "They provide a green space, a place for physical activity and they promote health and wellbeing. It's what we call here a 'Natural Health Service'. And here it's been absolutely fantastic."

Locals appreciate that money has gone towards park staff and upkeep: Morris Boyle, retired chair of the Friends of Barnes Park Group, says: "One of the important things about parks is that if they are not maintained then people don't go in. If you don't maintain them then they quickly fall into decline, but when there is a lot of footfall people feel safer and that encourages more visitors."

Perhaps most importantly, the changes that have taken place in the North East will last well into the future. Francine Marshall, education and events officer at Stewart Park, Middlesbrough, explains: “The work we do now is of vital importance for the next generation and the one after that. We see ourselves as caretakers of the park for the next generation and that is really important.”

Whilst this is great news for the North East, HLF’s recent State of the UK Public Parks Report – which launched in June – published the worrying reality for many parks across the UK. Many are struggling to keep up with maintenance and many falling back into the disrepair that was commonplace in the 1980s. Two decades of public and National Lottery investment has ensured that the majority of UK parks are in better condition, but unless future funding is generated in new ways, parks are at serious risk of rapid decline and even being sold off and lost to the public forever.

It’s not all doom and gloom however and here are just a few examples of successful parks projects, mainly managed by local authorities that have been a resounding success in the North East:

Wallsend Parks, North Tyneside
Wallsend Parks opened in 1900 and was originally intended as a green space for workers from the nearby Swan Hunter shipyard. Comprising 40 acres over three interconnecting sites (one on the site of a coal pit and another on the grounds of the manor house, Wallsend Hall), it fell into a gradual decline over the last few decades, says North Tyneside Park and Allotments Manager, Jerry Dronsfield. But that has dramatically changed since last year, thanks to an ambitious £7m redevelopment.

Some of the much-needed restoration and improvement works have included refurbishing the tennis courts, improve plantings, restore views, and rebuild the Victorian bandstand and – the “really exciting bit”, says Jerry, the extension of the 1930s bowling pavilion to include a caféwhich is designed as a social hub for the area. The biggest lure so far, though, is the innovative play area, which includes a zip wire and youth shelter for older children and a sand pit for toddlers. It has already attracted some 100,000 more visitors to the park. “With parents, if your children are happy, then you’re happy,” says Jerry.

Students working alongside local historians have produced 17 colourful illustrated panels on the park’s history and biodiversity, which will go on permanent display. They discovered, for example, that part of Hadrian’s Wall was unearthed when the shipyard expanded to build the Mauritania and that very piece of wall was once on show at Wallsend.

One of the original aims was that Wallsend should become a destination park, rather than one purely for locals, says Jerry, and the evidence is that this has already happened. “Its a cultural hub for the area,” he says. “What has happened is fantastic”.

Note: Wallsend Park was awarded a £7m grant from HLF and BIG Parks for People programme.

Ouseburn Parks, Newcastle Upon Tyne
Twenty minutes walk from the centre of Newcastle, or just five minutes by bus and “you can feel like you are in the middle of the countryside,” says Parks Manager Seamus Tollitt. Wildlife includes foxes, kingfishers and now a family of otters, or maybe two, who have returned to the newly-cleared river.

Ouseburn Parks is a network of five interconnecting areas: Jesmond Dene is a long thin strip that follows the Ouseburn Valley, and was once the back garden of local Victorian industrialist Lord Armstrong (who dynamited the area to create a waterfall). Often visitors don’t realise they can walk for a full two miles between the parks without crossing a road,

explains Tollitt.

All of Ouseburn Parks have been transformed over the last decade; indeed the overall scheme won an award for its restoration in 2012. Attractions include a green visitor's centre, landscaping, path improvement, maintenance, plantings, the restoration of historical buildings, the opening up of vistas and a revamp of the ever-popular Pets Corner. And the result? "There has been a 40% increase in visitors to the parks," says Tollitt.

This huge change has been boosted by the efforts of local volunteers who range from 18 old to 80 years of age, including people with special needs. They have donated hours of labour helping with practical conservation such as clearing paths and riverbanks to bee-keeping (there are hives on the roof of the visitor's centre), or taking guided walks.

Pensioner and volunteer Maggie Dowman has been working at Jesmond Dene for 10 years and loves the recent changes. "The vast majority of people who come with their dogs, children or on bicycles see what has been done and really appreciate it," she says. "It's a beautiful park, we're lucky to have it and it would not look as good without the HLF. When we're working, visitors pass us by and say, 'You're doing a great job there!' and we wave back and say, 'Do come and join us!'"

Note: Ouseburn Parks was awarded a £4.4m grant from the HLF and BIG Parks for People programme with match funding from Newcastle City Council. Work in the parks was finished in 2011 and is funded up until 2016.

Barnes Park, Sunderland

When Barnes Park put a bid in for a National Lottery grant, unusually, they asked local wheelchairs users and their carers what they might want. The answer was freedom. And the result, says Helen Peverley, project manager of the bid is "a unique park for people who don't usually have access to an outside space" that is safe. The largest of the Sunderland's green spaces, and a green lung for the west of the city, Barnes Park is two miles long, and part of that is now a sensory garden (on the site of one of the old tennis courts) designed for everyone but aimed at blind and partially-sighted people and those with special needs. It features a camomile lawn, scented plantings, musical instruments and paths and facilities that are completely wheelchair-friendly.

Of course, you can still find in all the more traditional elements of a park here – duck ponds, play areas, a bandstand, a large lake (with new bridge) woodland and recreational areas – have been vastly improved or restored. Improvements included restoring the historic features, such as the civil war cannon dredged from the River Wear. "That cannon is the icon of Barnes Park," says Maurice Boyle, ex newspaperman and Chair of the Friends Group when the bid was submitted. "Every single child in Sunderland has had their photograph taken beside that cannon. Myself included". Maurice has been coming to the park "since I was in a pram," he says. "I can remember the Mayor of Sunderland doing ballroom dancing on the tennis court during the war. And I knew it before the grant, when it had fallen into disrepair and was a den for antisocial behaviour". Now retired, he still comes every day with his grandchildren. "There has been huge appreciation for what the improvements have done," he says. "It's added that bit of class that Sunderland needed".

Note: Barnes Park was awarded £2.4m from HLF and BIG Parks for People programme. There were also contributions from Sunderland Council. The work was completed in May 2011.

Stewart Park, Middlesborough

"People were worried it would become too manicured," says Francine Marshall, education and events officer. "But it's kept its character and is very much like a country estate."

Once the grounds of the manor house, the land was donated to Middlesbrough in 1928 for the wellbeing of local steel and ship workers and has been well known locally for Pets Corner, which contains highland cattle, deer, even llamas and is a draw for children of all ages. But it encompasses much more: 120 acres of parkland, an arboretum, two lakes, wildfowl plus the Captain Cook Museum (the land once contained the house in which he was born, now marked by marble urn). The grant has, says Francine, re-invigorated and restored the land, opened it up, added a play area, education and visitor's centre and made the land into "a first class facility for Middlesbrough".
All that was left of the historic buildings from the original manor was the stable yard, walled garden and servants' quarters, all of which have been restored. "People are always coming up to us and saying, 'Wow! Was this always here?'" says Francine. "It was. But it was a council depot with heavy vehicles coming in and out".

The changes have made an enormous difference. "People always came but the park felt tired and a bit unloved. What we wanted was somewhere not just to feed the ducks or walk the dog but where you might take a class or join an event." Stewart Park now has numerous classes, run by staff funded by the grant, as well as a scheme to provide meaningful horticultural work for adult trainees for those who need social support. "We want visitors to stay all day. And to see it as their park. That is really important. It really is".

Note: Stewart Park was awarded £4.4m from the HLF and BIG Parks for People programme which included funding for four new park staff to run the facilities and provide events and activities for visitors. Other costs of the £8m project were met by other organisations including Middleborough Council.

Hardwick Park, Sedgedfield, County Durham
A former 18th century pleasure grounds in Durham, just outside Sedgefield, Hardwick Park fell into such decline after the Second World War that its huge ornamental lake was used to graze cows, the trees were overgrown and paths around its tumbledown, historic follies almost impassible. That changed with a £5m HLF grant driven through by local residents concerned that the park's historic importance was being lost. Now restored and improved, visitors (including those in wheelchairs) can take, for example, the very popular mile-long scenic walk around the lake.

What sets Hardwick Park apart, though, is its vast programme of events, run by staff and volunteers. These range from the very elegant Shakespeare in the Park in summer (performed in front of the restored folly, the Temple of Minerva) to activities ranging from bush craft skills, bird migration, photography walks and guided historical tours. "As well as restoring the historical elements, the HLF grant has helped restore wildlife back to the park too. We have a huge variety of birds and a rare wetland area," says parks manager Sara Fortune, "so it's a nice blend".

The bonus, she says is the volunteer scheme is drawn from local residents, which have come about since the refurbishment. They help with events and maintain the park "and there is so much more to maintain now," as she points out. The satisfying element is that visitor numbers have doubled and, she reports a 99.5% satisfaction in visitor surveys. "But it's 100% been a wonderful project for the area. For Sedgefield, this is their jewel".

Note: Hardwick Park received a £5m grant (match-funded by Durham Council) from the HLF and BIG Parks for People programme. Work finished in 2010.

Further Information
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