People enjoy the sun in Thompson Park, Burnley Burnley Borough Council

Our research into the state of UK parks has shown that more and more of us are regularly using our local park. And why wouldn't we?

Parks provide an essential place to exercise, socialise and get involved in our local community and natural surroundings.

As many people pursue new health goals this January, it's the perfect moment to shout about the amazing benefits of our parks, and the difference National Lottery players' money makes all over the country. Big or small, tree-lined or fountain-filled, a haven for timid wildlife or boisterous kids, here are six reasons to love your local park:

1. They keep us active

Parks provide an excellent place for people to come together to walk, run, climb and play in the fresh air. And the benefits of this are huge. Whether it's a ParkRun on the weekends, an evening game of five-a-side with jumpers for goalposts, or taking your dog for a walk, parks help us keep our bodies and minds happy and healthy. Research by the University of Exeter suggests that access to good-quality green space is linked to feeling healthier, a lower body mass index and decreased levels of obesity, and improved mental health and wellbeing. Since the National Lottery started investing in Parks for People 20 years ago, the number of annual visitors has increased by 8million. That's a lot more people getting outside and improving their health and wellbeing.

2. They make a great home for wildlife

The trees, undergrowth, hedgerows and plants that scatter our parks provide essential habitats for the birds, insects and small mammals that keep our fragile ecosystem going. In urban areas, parks provide routes for animals to travel through a hostile environment. Thriving wildlife attracts more visitors who spend money in the local area.

3. They are part of our history

Many public parks house the remains of our ancient history, from Roman ruins to Norman castles. These physical connections to our heritage are precious not only for their beauty but also their educational value, and we're learning more about them all the time. With support from HLF, Castle Park in Bishop's Stortford will be safeguarding the remains of Waytemore Castle, which dates back to William the Conqueror: read all about it on the council's website.

4. They house art and culture

Art doesn't just live in museums and galleries, although Britain is home to a brilliant range of those, too (thanks, National Lottery!). Many works of art by household names such as Barbara Hepworth, Antony Gormley and Andy Goldsworthy were made to live, weather and change in the great outdoors. And we Brits love an outdoor music festival. Parks provide an invaluable space to experience some of the UK's best visual art, music and theatre.

5. They weren't always public

Only in the midst of the industrial revolution did British society feel the need to open parks up for free to the general public. Before that, many towns had commons or 'pleasure gardens', but only for citizens who could afford the entrance fee. Sydney Gardens in Bath used to be one such pleasure garden; funding from the National Lottery is helping the park restore original buildings, and bring new, 21st-century activities to the once-exclusive park.

6. They bring us together

We eat, keep fit, play, escape from busy lives and office jobs, experience our heritage and discover our history all in our local parks. So let's hear it for our local parks. They are a fantastic, free resource that bring communities together and improve millions of lives.

Find out more about our funding on the Parks for People programme page.

#ParksMatter

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HLF Parks Programmes Manager Chris Falconer

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