



A WALK IN THE PARK

AS OBESITY LEVELS AMONG BRITAIN'S POPULATION BECOME MORE AND MORE OF AN ISSUE, HEALTH AND FITNESS CONTINUE TO RAPIDLY CLIMB THE GOVERNMENT'S AGENDA. **BECKY VOLKER** TAKES A LOOK AT HOW PARKS AND GREEN SPACES CAN BE USED TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF THE NATION.



KIDS WALKING, DARWIN GARDENS



Last month saw the publication of a public health White Paper, Choosing Health, which stressed the importance of incorporating exercise such as walking and cycling into daily life.

It's a well known fact that the number of gym subscriptions soar in January, as people emerge from their Christmas overindulgence buoyed up with good intentions to get fit and shift those extra pounds. But it's also a sad truth that many of these good intentions fall by the wayside come later spring, when pressures of time, work or money mean that regular visits to the gym aren't practical or affordable.

Parks and green spaces that are accessible, attractive and safe can encourage people to make healthy choices as



part of their daily routine. Moderate exercise, which includes walking, conservation work or gardening can be just as beneficial to health as more vigorous activity such as gyms and organised sport, and can be much more accessible to certain groups such as the elderly.

Local access to high quality parks and green spaces can have a significant impact on helping people to sustain physical activity. When exercise is a by-product of other enjoyable activities, such as savouring the fresh air and views whilst walking in the park, or chatting with friends whilst working in a community garden, people are more likely to incorporate this activity into their daily routine.

Parks provide a space for all communities to come together and exercise or engage in other healthy activities. Some minority ethnic communities, and particularly older members of these communities, do not have a tradition of engaging in organised sports and leisure activities, being much more likely to take part in a family walk or picnic in the park. Many lower income families and individuals cannot afford to take advantage of organised sports and leisure activities. In this way parks help to redress social inequalities and widen opportunities for free, health-giving leisure pursuits.

As well as providing opportunities for physical activity, parks can aid mental health by reducing stress levels and improving quality of life. The annual spend on parks is just £600m, which is only just over a third more than is spent every year prescribing Prozac to six million people, and is a tiny budget compared to the £74.9 billion spent on health during 2003-2004. It would be interesting to see if the provision of more high quality, accessible and safe green space would result in fewer people needing to be prescribed antidepressants.

In addition to their contribution to physical and mental health, there is evidence that parks and green spaces can improve the health of the nation's economy. In his research paper for the RSPB, Natural Fit (2004), Dr William Bird estimated that an urban park in Portsmouth providing 20% of total local physical activity could annually save the economy £4.4 million, including £910,000 to the NHS.

A study from Holland, Nature and Health (2001), found further evidence that proximity to green space can increase health, thereby reducing cost to health services: 'For every 10% increase in green space there was a reduction in health complaints equivalent to a reduction of five years of age'.

Many local authorities and other organisations have recognised the potential of parks and green spaces to encourage people to exercise more frequently, and have invested in a range of valuable activities to maximise their impact on health and fitness.

The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers run the Green Gyms initiative, which provides an opportunity for people to take part in conservation and gardening activities as an enjoyable route to improving their health and fitness. The London Borough of Hounslow and Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council are among many local authorities who are proactively marketing health walks in their parks, whilst the London Borough of Waltham Forest >>>



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<<< provides free outdoor gym equipment in its green spaces.

There is little doubt that parks and green spaces can have a significant positive impact on physical and mental health. But often people face real and perceived obstacles to visiting parks; many, particularly women with children, feel unsafe when using parks and some say that they never use them at all. As the value of green spaces can be difficult to quantify, they have been vulnerable to budget cuts, and over the past two decades have faced a cycle of decline that has seen site-based park staff axed and facilities become sadly neglected.

Re-investment in parks is essential to enable the recruitment of site-based park staff as a vital step towards improving the real and perceived safety of parks and green spaces. As Sally Keeble MP pointed out at the DTLR Select

Committee (2002), 'You would never build a leisure centre and not expect to have staff working on it and not provide revenue for its upkeep, maintenance and good function. But unfortunately, that appears to be the strategy when it comes to parks'.

The provision of high quality, attractive, accessible and safe parks and green spaces, and the effective, targeted marketing of their benefits will go a long way towards improving the physical and mental health of the nation. But their value will be decreased if they exist in isolation. They need to form part of a whole-city network of green, welcoming, safe and attractive neighbourhoods, streets and public places that will encourage people to get out in the fresh air and incorporate exercise as an integral part of their daily routine. ■

