

Written evidence submitted by parkrun UK

The social impact of participation in culture and sport inquiry

Executive Summary

- parkrun is one of the best examples of a global movement that can improve population health and wellbeing, including through social interaction and community cohesion.
- parkrun is breaking down barriers to participation and challenging what it means to be physically active.
- Physical activity initiatives should embrace movement in its widest sense, and be community-led, demand-driven, cost-effective and scalable.
- Within parkrun's approach is a respect for people's freedom to pursue what really matters to them and what they have reason to value.
- Health benefits of parkrun include: increased physical fitness, improved mental health, weight control, increased confidence and self-esteem, skill development through volunteering, socialisation, enhanced sense of community and improved management of long term conditions.
- parkrun facilitates, fosters and celebrates human interaction. It creates communities and improves integration into existing communities. It is the strong sense of identity, group cohesion and sense of community which may represent an effective long-term strategy for creating positive physical activity experiences and sustained participation.
- Education can be provided in a range of different formats, by a range of organisations, in a range of establishments and locations - including at parkrun, and specifically through volunteering.
- The World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030¹, recommended that member states promote the growth of "*free, universally accessible, whole-of-community events that provide opportunities to be active in local public spaces and which aim to cultivate positive experiences and build competencies, particularly in the least active*". parkrun was cited as an example, by the WHO, of such an initiative.
- This submission highlights parkrun's contribution in promoting positive and sustained changes in health, community and education.

Introduction

1. parkrun UK is a non profit organisation which currently delivers over 780 free, weekly timed 5k and 2k events in areas of open space across the UK. Supported by a small head office staff, parkruns are operated by local volunteer teams – organised by the community, for the community. In the UK, on average, 140,000 people take part every weekend, supported by around 15,000 volunteers.
2. Interventions to encourage people to be more active tend to focus narrowly on structured, organised exercise. parkrun's view is that **physical activity initiatives should embrace movement in its widest sense** if aims to reduce inequalities in participation, and the associated socio-economic inequalities, are to be achieved. Hence, parkrun participation includes walking, running or jogging the 5k or 2k events, as well as volunteering or

¹ <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272722/9789241514187-eng.pdf>

spectating. All of these activities involve **movement, in the company of others, in the outdoors.**

3. parkrun's **mission is to create a healthier happier planet, and ensure that parkrun events remain free, forever and for everyone.** This mission guides every aspect of the organisation's activities: i.e. strategy development, event delivery/operations, communications, projects and insight development.
4. To ensure that participation is open to as many people as possible, parkrun seeks to break down barriers to participation. For example:
 - Financial: parkruns are always free to take part in and don't require any special equipment or clothing.
 - Practical: they are easy to access, regular and permanent but without obligation to participate; they are family friendly and so childcare is not required.
 - Skill/ability: people can take part in whatever manner suits them (walk/run/jog/volunteer) and in a range of volunteer roles, with no previous experience being required. Support is available, such as guide runners or British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation, for those who might require it.
 - Psychological: the events are welcoming, mutually supportive and non-intimidating.
5. In their research into the public health potential of of parkrun, Stevinson and Hickson (2014)² highlighted the fact that *"Participation barriers are minimized, with no upper or lower age limit, no special clothing or equipment required, and no direct costs. Although some participants already run prior to starting parkrun, others are new to exercise, and parkrun provides the opportunity and support for becoming regularly active. Furthermore, unlike many mass participation events which are one-off or annual affairs, parkrun offers this opportunity on a continuous weekly basis"*.
6. In addition to addressing demand-side barriers to participation, the organisation also overcomes supply-side barriers to event delivery. Hence, whilst individually local, the fact that parkruns are based on a simple, replicable, cost-effective, community-based and community-led model means that **delivery of these events is scalable across the UK and around the world.**
7. The organisation's efforts to address health and wellbeing inequalities are reflected in the participation data. In the UK, in 2017, more than 50,000 people who took part had identified themselves as inactive at registration. The average time to complete 5k at parkrun is getting slower each year (e.g. from 26:51 in 2012 to 29:06 in 2017) and the number of walkers is increasing. For example, in 2017 65,000 walks were completed at UK 5k parkrun events, an increase of 88% on the previous year.

parkrun and health

8. The UK is experiencing a health crisis of epic and epidemic proportions, with rising health inequalities and an overburdened public health sector. However, there are voluntary sector

² Stevinson, C & Hickson, M (2014) Exploring the public health potential of a mass community participation event, *Journal of Public Health*, Volume 36, Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdt082>

organisations, such as parkrun, that are helping to change lives for the better and provide effective, proven solutions.

9. Evidence points towards the impact that parkrun is having on social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing³. This includes independent scientific studies, as well as insight developed by parkrun itself. For example, in a recent parkrun survey of 5k parkrun participants 95% of respondents said that "*doing parkrun makes me feel healthier*", 95% agreed that "*doing parkrun makes me feel happier*", and 97% said that "*I feel more positive after I have participated at parkrun*".
10. Some specific, perceived benefits of parkrun include: increased physical fitness, improved mental health, weight control, increased confidence and self-esteem, skill development through volunteering, socialisation, and enhanced sense of community and improved management of long term conditions.
11. Stevinson and Hickson's (2014) study found that "*[t]he majority of participants were not regular runners or joggers before registering for parkrun, with a quarter doing no running/jogging at all. This quarter was more likely to include women, and those who were overweight, or with a limiting disability or health problem: all groups that are overrepresented in adult physical inactivity statistics. The initial non-runners also recorded the greatest improvements in objective measures of aerobic fitness. Over half of all participants reported benefits for health, weight control and psychological well-being*".
12. In the UK, parkrun has been recognised by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) as a viable option for patients being prescribed outdoor activity rather than medication (referred to as 'social prescribing').
13. Health and wellbeing are different for everyone, and within parkrun's approach is a **respect for people's freedom to pursue what really matters** to them and what they have reason to value. This personalised perspective means that any interventions to improve health and address rising inequalities must also be strategic and targeted, taking into account differing backgrounds, needs and resources. That also means listening to people and communities to understand the challenges and devise possible solutions. Autocratic, monolithic, one-size-fits all approaches to problems simply won't work.
14. parkrun is undertaking activities in a range of areas in its efforts to reduce health inequalities:

³ Stevinson, C & Hickson, M (2014) Exploring the public health potential of a mass community participation event, *Journal of Public Health*, Volume 36, Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdt082>

Stevinson, C., Wiltshire, G. & Hickson, M. (2015) Facilitating participation in health-enhancing physical activity: a qualitative study of parkrun. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 22(2),

Wiltshire, G., Fullagar, S., & Stevinson, C. (2018) Exploring parkrun as a social context for collective health practices: running with and against the moral imperatives of health responsabilisation, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 40(1), 3-17. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.12622

Gareth Wiltshire & Clare Stevinson (2017) Exploring the role of social capital in community-based physical activity: qualitative insights from parkrun, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10:1, 47-62, DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2017.1376347

Mark Stevens, Tim Rees & Remco Polman (2018) Social identification, exercise participation, and positive exercise experiences: Evidence from parkrun, *Journal of Sports Sciences*, DOI: 10.1080/02640414.2018.1489360

15. Interventions and partnerships: Based on evidence and insight, parkrun UK has developed initiatives focused on increasing participation by those who are less active. These include, but are not limited to:
- A joint initiative with the RCGP which involves GP practices developing closer links with local parkrun events, becoming certified 'parkrun practices' and signposting patients and carers to parkrun.
 - In collaboration with the NHS, parkrun organised a UK-wide celebration for the NHS's 70th birthday on 9 June 2018. Figures suggest that more than 16,000 additional walkers and runners participated and that there was a 14% increase in those taking part who were inactive (an additional 981 previously inactive people). There also appears to have been a 37% increase in first time participants, suggesting 2,462 additional first-timers participated nationally.
 - A three year Department of Health funded project to increase engagement by those with long term health conditions. This is based on a peer support approach, led by volunteer Outreach Ambassadors with specialist expertise in specific conditions including deaf and hard of hearing, dementia, diabetes, learning disabilities/autism spectrum disorder and mental health.
 - In November 2017 the first prison-based parkrun was launched, in order to facilitate rehabilitation, improve health and wellbeing of staff, prisoners and their families, and reduce reoffending. At the time of writing there are five HMP events, with many more in the pipeline. This has the support of HM Prison Service (HMPS), who are subsidising the cost of event start up on HMPS-operated sites.
 - A specific project to grow junior parkrun events in areas of social deprivation and the number of participants from deprived areas. By the end of 2017, 80 new events had been launched in more deprived areas of the UK, and 13,000 young people from disadvantaged areas had run 87,000 times at these events. Events in disadvantaged areas dominate the most effective events in engaging previously inactive people. Across every single positive outcome measured as part of the annual project survey, children who live in more disadvantaged areas of the UK were more likely to see a benefit as a result of their participation in junior parkrun.
16. Staffing and volunteer management: parkrun has a dedicated member of staff (Head of Health and Wellbeing) to take forward work in this area. The organisation is expanding its network of Outreach Ambassadors who have the specialist knowledge to work with specific communities to increase participation, including recruiting two volunteer Health and Wellbeing Ambassadors. The organisation is committed to promoting the impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing, and providing opportunities for people to get involved in this aspect of parkrun participation, through targeted training and support.
17. Operations: Changes have been made to event delivery in order to maximise inclusion and reduce health and wellbeing inequalities. These include: making the subtle but significant change to the title of Tail Runner to Tail Walker (the volunteer who walks at the back of the group of walkers/runners and who is always the last to finish), as a reflection of parkrun's commitment to supporting participation by those who want to walk. parkrun also encourages events to have welcome briefings for first timers and is supporting the introduction of volunteers trained in British Sign Language (BSL) and the growth of a guide-runner network.

18. Communications: parkrun ensures that its messaging and imagery is in line with its mission, and resonates with its target audiences. This includes social media and the parkrun website, including the weekly newsletter. parkrun has developed health and wellbeing-focused resources, such as flyers and videos, that are based on insight around barriers to participation. In particular, parkrun is attempting to dispel some commonly held concerns, for example about lack of fitness, about finishing last, that there is a pressure to run, that newcomers are not welcome, that it's a race or that they will feel left out. The communications emphasise that parkrun is open to all, that participants can walk, jog, run, volunteer or spectate, and that the focus is not on times or positions, but on inclusivity, friendship and personal achievement.
19. Data, research and insight: parkrun is committed to developing insight and building a robust evidence base. It undertakes its own research as well as working closely with the Advanced Wellbeing Research Centre (AWRC) in Sheffield, which chairs the parkrun Research Board. In 2017 parkrun conducted a UK-wide survey to find out whether health care practitioners were signposting people to parkrun (also known as social prescribing), the methods for doing so and the barriers that might exist. Almost two thirds of those surveyed (63%) revealed they currently prescribe parkrun in some form, climbing to 72% for those who are registered with parkrun. 88% of those surveyed said that they would consider referring service users to parkrun. parkrun also undertakes repeated research into reluctant runners (those who register but don't take part). This insight informs the development of interventions to overcome some of the perceived barriers.

Research into junior parkrun indicates that nine out of ten children are happy and proud after junior parkrun events, with 59% being healthier because of parkrun. This research also suggests that 45% of children are accompanied by an adult, suggesting that the benefits extend to other members of the family, for example increased levels of physical activity and feeling part of a community.

parkrun and community

20. Health, wellbeing and happiness shouldn't be viewed solely from the perspective of the individual, communities can also be healthy or unhealthy and communities also have a vital contribution to make to the health and wellbeing of individuals.
21. A healthy community is one where people have adequate access to food, water, shelter, income, safety, work, recreation and healthcare services; they are clean and safe and have a strong local cultural and spiritual heritage; they have opportunities for learning and skill development and contain strong, mutually supportive relationships and networks; they involve residents in decision-making, as well as protecting the natural environment and using resources sustainably.
22. parkrun is a community-based, community-led organisation, socially-focused which **facilitates, fosters and celebrates human interaction** and doing so helps to create communities, and also enables people to integrate into existing communities. This interaction and group dynamic can have an impact on encouraging sustained participation in physical activity. As Steven et al (2018) made clear, *"group identification was significantly associated with greater participation, exercise-specific satisfaction, group cohesion, and life*

satisfaction. Findings provide real-world evidence of the health-related benefits associated with forming strong social identities in exercise settings”.

23. parkrun events are open to all, and so people of all backgrounds and abilities can take part in whatever way suits the individual, and in a friendly and welcoming environment. It is worth noting that this is why volunteering is such a critical form of participation. Without volunteering opportunities a large number of people would be excluded from engaging. The first timer- and welcome briefings bring people together before the start, with rounds of applause to celebrate milestones or achievements, and most events have a venue for post-parkrun socialising, such as a cafe. The simple finish line technology also ensures face to face contact between participants and volunteers, through the handing out of finish tokens and the scanning of barcodes.
24. The findings of Stevens et al (2018) suggest that, *“in exercise groups where regular participation is a group norm (e.g., parkrun), individuals’ desire to align their behaviour with this norm may have positive implications for their group-relevant participation. Furthermore, the reciprocal effects we observed between group identification and participation further speak to the potential of such interventions. ...To the extent that individuals’ participation increases, their sense of group identification should also increase, with a positive upward spiral potentially ensuing.”*
25. The human interaction and positive benefits accrued from parkrun mean that people commonly identify with being a ‘parkrunner’. As Wiltshire et al (2017) make clear, participants are *“...able to reconcile the healthy/unhealthy, thin/overweight, fit/unfit binaries that were previously inimical to physical activity participation by adopting a new subject position of being a ‘parkrunner’”*. Put another way, the sense that everyone is ‘in it together’ means that the narrative shifts from the focus on ill health and any associated guilt/shame, towards a positive sense of collective effort and achievement. It is also the **strong sense of identity, group cohesion and sense of community** at parkrun which *“may represent an effective long-term strategy for facilitating positive exercise experiences (and greater participation)”* (Stevens et al, 2018).
26. In addition to **facilitating social connectedness** at its events, parkrun also fosters a sense of community through the availability of parkrun merchandise. This includes branded clothing and barcode wristbands, as well as the rewarding of branded t-shirts, for those who reach participation milestones, such as 50, 100, 250 or 500 parkruns. Rewarding volunteering, through the provision of purple branded t-shirts for those who have volunteered 25 times also reflects the view that volunteers are as much part of the parkrun community as walkers or runners, and should be celebrated.
27. parkrun is also outward facing, and actively reaches out to individuals, groups and organisations to encourage them to take part, such as schools, places of worship, sports clubs or GP practices to name but a few. In addition, parkrun encourages participants to get involved in external organisations or events, signposting to different opportunities that might exist within the local community. It is also common to find parkrunners undertaking activities which will benefit the locality, such as park maintenance, fundraising/campaigns to support local charities and litter picks.

28. In short, **parkruns are communities in and of themselves, but they are also deeply embedded in the communities in which they exist** and help to make those communities healthier.

parkrun and education

29. Education can be provided in a variety of different formats, by a diverse array of organisations, in a range of establishments and locations - including at parkrun, and specifically through volunteering.
30. parkrun's volunteering system includes a variety of roles and no previous experience is required. The volunteer roles include, but are not limited to: event director, run director, marshal, timekeeper, barcode scanner, tail walker, photographer and token sorter.
31. In terms of youth development, parkrun encourages children and young people to volunteer, including using parkrun to achieve awards such as the Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) award. It has a strong relationship with British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS), with a number of parkrun events being held on our near higher education campuses. Most junior parkrun events have close ties with local schools, and a team of Outreach Ambassadors work closely with teachers and other staff to promote participation in junior parkrun.
32. However, education doesn't stop at 18 years of age. Such a diversity of volunteering roles provides people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities the opportunity for personal and professional development, by learning new skills and increasing confidence and self esteem.

Recommendations for action by Government or others

33. parkrun plays an important yet underappreciated and undervalued role in promoting positive and sustained changes in health, community and education. It is recommended that:
- the cost-effective, replicable, scalable community-led and community-based model be carefully considered, promoted and encouraged by policy makers and practitioners in continued efforts to reduce inactivity and promote health and wellbeing.
 - there is a move away from quantifying physical activity in terms of volume and intensity (as opposed to movement and community) when designing/evaluating PA interventions.
 - that DCMS and the HM Government take into account parkrun's impact, and the factors that underpin it, in making future funding allocations.