

# parkrun - Supplementary written evidence (NPS0139)

This evidence is submitted on behalf of parkrun Global by Chrissie Wellington OBE, Global Lead for Health and Wellbeing

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Based on parkrun's experience and success, this submission sets out how people of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, can be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles.
2. parkrun Global Limited is a UK-based charity supporting the delivery of 2,200 free, weekly, timed 5K events in areas of open space in 23 countries around the world. parkrun Limited is a subsidiary of parkrun Global, directly supporting 730 5k parkrun events across the UK, as well as 344 junior parkruns which are 2k events for 4 to 14 year olds and their families.<sup>1</sup> Our events are organised by the local community for the community.
3. We provide an ecosystem that encourages **movement, in the company of others, in the outdoors**, whether that be through walking, jogging, running, volunteering or simply coming along to watch and socialise.
4. Our stated mission is **to create a healthier and happier planet**, with accessible, socially-empowering activity at its heart.
5. In its first five years parkrun recorded 204,000 participants globally, 7.2 million in the second five years and 46.9 million in the third five years. In total, 2.6 million different people have taken part 40 million times since the organisation was founded in 2004. Prior to their closure in March 2020 around 187,000 people took part in parkruns across the UK every weekend, including 17,000 volunteers.
6. As evidenced empirically, parkrun is a force for social good. It engenders better mental and physical health, improves confidence and self-esteem, promotes the development of skills, fosters the development of meaningful connections and helps people better manage long term conditions.
7. As with Sport England, we follow the principle of proportionate universalism in that parkrun is universally open to all but also targets those most in need.
8. We would like to specifically highlight our continued success in increasing the activity levels of those who were previously inactive. For example:
  - In 2019 nearly 20% of parkruns in the UK were completed by people who did one bout or less of exercise per week when they registered for parkrun. Evidence (see below) suggests that inactives (less than once per week) and 'just actives' (about once per week) increase their activity by around 75% as a result of parkrun participation.
  - In 2019, 35% of UK registrants were from the bottom two deprivation quartiles, with 85,000 being from the lowest quartile. Participants from the lowest quartile completed 852,000 parkrun events in 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> All parkrun events were closed in March 2020 as part of efforts to control Covid-19. In August we published [our COVID-19 Framework](#) describing how we could appropriately reopen. This was reviewed by DCMS and the DCMO (Dr Jenny Harries) in September. Globally, we currently have over 420 events operating successfully under this Framework (60,000 people took part on 25/01/21).

- The average time to complete 5k a parkrun is getting slower each year with the increased number of inactive people and walkers taking part. In 2019, 142,000 walks were completed at 5k parkruns in the UK.
- 9. Sport England awarded parkrun a three year grant (2018-21) in recognition of our effectiveness at encouraging people to adopt more active lifestyles.
- 10. The World Health Organisation (WHO), in its Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030, cited parkrun as an example 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*”, calling for them to be scaled up.
- 11. An All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on parkrun was established in 2019, chaired by Nick Smith MP, to encourage cross party support for our work.
- 12. parkrun’s research, such as a survey with over 2,000 respondents, indicates that people’s mental health and feelings of isolation and disconnect have worsened since parkrun events were suspended.<sup>2</sup> With one million people completing a parkrun in the 12 months before events were paused, this suggests that 700,000 people now feel less connected to their community.
- 13. Looking to the future, the focus must be on catalysing behaviour change and addressing the socio-economic determinants of (ill) health. Our experience shows that the creation of strong, supportive and meaningful connections and communities underpins good health over the life course and increased health expectancy, and must be prioritised.
- 14. Importantly, all strategies and interventions designed to promote more active lifestyles must encourage all forms of movement, rather than adopting a narrow focus on “structured sport” or “exercise”, so as to engage those most in need. The new Sport England Strategy is a positive step forward in this regard.
- 15. We urge the government to continue to support cost-effective, scalable sustainable interventions with a proven track record in engaging those who are less active and generating sustained, meaningful public health gains.

### **Staff and volunteer team**

- 16. We have a small, diverse global team of 43 paid staff whose work is supported by thousands of volunteers. This structure facilitates agility, is resource effective and builds on the agency of local people and communities as architects of their own health. Importantly, the volunteer led model promotes inclusivity by offering people another way of getting involved in parkrun, empowers local people and communities and is proven to generate significant health and wellbeing benefits for those involved.
- 17. Volunteer roles range from those focused on event activation and delivery, to more specialist Ambassadorial positions. For example, we have a growing network of Outreach Ambassadors with the localised expertise and contacts to increase participation amongst target groups, and volunteer Health and Wellbeing Ambassadors which provide an important link with public health.

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<sup>2</sup> Nearly two thirds (62%) of respondents reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed, with 69% stating that their happiness has been hit and similar numbers also seeing their life satisfaction being negatively impacted. Significantly, 70% said that connections to their community had weakened.

## **Event delivery (operational model)**

18. Our **simple, standardised and scalable operational model** is deliberately designed to remove barriers to the provision of physical activity opportunities (supply side) and barriers to participation (demand side). It is our experience that, whilst barriers to participation are frequently addressed, the removal of barriers to delivery are often overlooked.
19. **On the supply side, opportunities need to exist for people to be active**, yet providers frequently face difficulties in actually launching and sustaining physical activity opportunities: e.g. the need for expensive equipment, new infrastructure, specialist personnel or excessive bureaucracy. By nurturing local community assets - whether that be passionate people, existing areas of open space and local infrastructure - parkrun makes it simple and easy for communities the world over to deliver events in a low cost, replicable and sustainable way, whilst also enriching and empowering the very communities of which they are a part.
20. On the **demand side**, as outlined below, parkrun's model purposely removes the **varied structural barriers to sustained participation**, including those evidenced by our own research, and hence promotes accessibility and inclusivity to all.<sup>3</sup>
21. **Resources**: parkruns are free to take part in and do not require specialised equipment or clothing. The free at the point of use model is possible through diversified funding streams, including commercial partnerships, public funding, a donation platform (parkrun Forever), a clothing line (CONTRA) and the sale of parkrun branded merchandise.
22. **Practical**: The events are regular, predictable and permanent but without obligation to participate each week. There are no restrictions on who can take part<sup>4</sup> and the registration process is short and straightforward. We proactively locate events in areas of social deprivation thereby helping to address issues of convenience and proximity (see below). Creating an environment where children can participate in a variety of ways, alongside family members and friends, encourages sustained participation and can help remove childcare barriers.
23. **Health/fitness**: People can take part in whatever manner suits them - ie there is the option to walk, run, jog or volunteer in a range of roles, with no previous experience being required. Events have at least one volunteer Tail Walker (who walks at the back and is the last to finish) to encourage participation by those who want to walk. Guides can assist those with visual impairments and British Sign Language interpretation makes the pre-event briefing more accessible to those with hearing difficulties.
24. **Social/psychological**: The events are social and welcoming and facilitate social interaction and meaningful connections, e.g. before the start during the First Timer Welcome and Pre Event Briefing, during the event with

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<sup>3</sup> **Resource**: cost of entry/equipment/clothing; lack of access to information;  
**Practical**: access to, and quality of, facilities, personal safety, caring responsibilities, time constraints, restrictive entry policies;  
**Health/impairment/fitness**: lack of accessibility for those with long term conditions or disabilities, (perceived) lack of skill, experience or fitness;  
**Social and psychological**: Cultural/religious beliefs, fear of judgement, lack of confidence, non enjoyment of activity, fear of being injured, lack of support or companionship

<sup>4</sup> Although you have to be aged four or over to register for parkrun

people participating together, at the finish line where finishers line up to have their barcodes scanned manually by volunteers and at the post-event gathering location (e.g. a cafe). Milestone rewards recognise and value sustained participation. This provides parkrunners with tangible targets that are not performance based and hence more inclusive to people of all abilities.

25. We keep this model under review and have taken steps to adapt or amend it to further enhance inclusivity, for example in 2017 the Tail Runner volunteer role was renamed Tail Walker, a seemingly minor but actually highly visible and significant marker of our commitment to encouraging those who want to walk. Last year 142,000 walks were completed at UK parkruns - and this is growing year on year. In 2019, after extensive consultation, we amended the gender categories on our registration form. In addition to the existing male and female options, we added 'another gender identity' and 'prefer not to say' in order to further enhance accessibility and inclusivity. Since then over 750 people have selected either 'another gender identity' or 'prefer not to say'.

### **Communications and resources:**

26. The way in which we communicate our message helps to further our efforts to engage a wide variety of people. In the past we were guilty of amplifying conventional imagery (e.g. of sporty white males appearing to be at the start of a race), however over the past few years we have worked really hard to ensure that our written and visual content aligns with our mission, and resonates with target audiences by addressing commonly held concerns and barriers.
27. We communicate with parkrunners immediately following their registration, welcoming them to parkrun and sharing information about what to expect at their first event. A message of congratulations is sent after their first parkrun and on the achievement of milestones.
28. We have strong and positive relationships with media outlets at the national, regional and local levels who support us in disseminating information about parkrun, raising awareness of our events and promoting participation amongst new audiences. Our commercial partners also provide an important platform for promoting parkrun to new audiences.
29. Our weekly podcast, Free Weekly Timed (hosted by sports reporter, Vassos Alexander) provides an accessible channel through which people can consume entertaining, inspiring and informative content about parkrun.
30. We have developed health and wellbeing-focused resources, such as flyers and videos, that are based on insight around barriers to participation and are shared with stakeholders who then cascade them to their audiences.
31. Online resources, such as guidance documents and social media forums, support those who may need additional information and encouragement, for example those with long term conditions. In January 2021 we launched [Strive for Five](#), an eight week plan for people who want to be able to walk 5k.
32. Direct communication with parkrunners also takes place at the local level, including through event day briefings, event websites and social media channels. This helps to strengthen community interaction and a sense of connectedness.

## **Targeted projects, including cross-sectoral collaboration (national level)**

33. The basic, fundamental model outlined above removes as many barriers to participation as possible, but without necessarily targeting specific groups. This alone achieves significant impact, even amongst hardest to reach groups. However, layered on top of that is the opportunity for more targeted interventions. These projects are frequently undertaken in collaboration with others, including cross-sectorally, in order to better reach out to those people who may never have heard of parkrun but who may benefit most from what we offer. In some cases, we simply enable another organisation to leverage and capitalise on our event ecosystem (see the example of 5K Your Way), which has proven to be an effective, resource efficient way for all parties to engage target populations.
34. Below are examples of projects we are undertaking in collaboration with organisations working in the physical activity, health, criminal justice and education sectors.

### Physical activity sector

35. A three year grant from Sport England (2018-2021) is leading to an increase in the number of 5k and junior parkrun events in areas of deprivation, as well as the number of participants from these areas. 34 new parkrun events have been launched in the most deprived areas in England, over 4,900 people who live in the most deprived areas have participated in those new events and nearly 1,000 people from deprived areas have volunteered at new events in deprived areas. Almost 10% of these people were inactive when they registered for parkrun.<sup>5</sup>
36. Establishing events helps to address accessibility barriers but the real measure of success is whether people from these communities actually take part regularly over extended periods of time and then go on to make positive lifestyle changes. This highlights the need for all organisations to evaluate whether their impact is sustained and meaningful and be held to account in this regard.
37. The Sport England grant is also supporting our work to increase the number of females participating in parkrun. For example, the joint parkrun and Sport England/This Girl Can International Women's Day celebration(#IWDparkrun) took place in March 2020. On this day 151,000 females completed a parkrun globally, with 3,000 doing so for the first time. The #IWDparkrun saw the highest total number of female volunteers ever recorded at parkrun on a single weekend.
38. With regards Active Partnerships, we share the goal of reducing inactivity and have worked hard over the past few years to connect directly with the relevant lead within each Partnership and create the opportunity for regular dialogue and the sharing of ideas. We benefit from their in-depth local insight, knowledge and connections, which has been of use when establishing parkrun events in areas of deprivation, creating pathways between schools and junior parkrun events (see below) and building links with public health.

<sup>5</sup> This grant is also supporting our work to increase the number of females participating in parkrun. This led to the joint parkrun and Sport England/This Girl Can International Women's Day celebration(#IWDparkrun) in March 2020. 151,000 women and girls completed a parkrun globally, with 3,000 doing so for the first time. The #IWDparkrun saw the biggest number of female volunteers ever recorded at parkrun

#### Public health sector:

39. The [NHS Long Term Plan](#) (2019) recognises the value of linking the voluntary and public health sectors through social prescribing; ensuring that community assets can be utilised for public health gain. An example of a successful social prescribing intervention is the [parkrun practice initiative](#).
40. A collaboration between the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and parkrun UK, the initiative was launched in June 2018 and encourages GP practices to link with local parkrun events to become certified 'parkrun practices'. These practices commit to signposting patients and carers to parkrun, as well as staff taking part themselves. Over 1,500 practices have signed up since the launch. The initiative has been promoted by [Public Health England](#), as well as receiving a [General Practice Award](#) and a [memcom20 award](#).
41. An evaluation of the parkrun practice initiative was led by Dr Jo Fleming at the University of Warwick. The findings have been published in the [British Journal of General Practice](#) and in [Health and Social Care in the Community](#).
42. We have a strong relationship with Public Health England and NHSE. Reciprocal signposting takes place, for our communications signpost to PHE's Couch to 5K resources and PHE promotes parkrun to C25K participants. NHSE has agreed to integrate information about parkrun into the training given to Link Workers.
43. We are working closely with the National Social Prescribing Student Champion Scheme to raise awareness of parkrun amongst medical students.
44. The [5K Your Way initiative](#), a collaboration between parkrun and Move Charity, encourages those living with and after cancer, as well as health care professionals to walk, run, cheer or volunteer at parkrun events on the last Saturday of every month. There are currently 64 groups across the UK and Ireland and 5KYW has drawn on our volunteer-led model in recruiting 180 volunteer ambassadors to lead those groups.
45. Between 2015-2018 we implemented a three year Department of Health funded project to increase engagement by those with long term health conditions. It was based on a peer support approach, led by volunteer Outreach Ambassadors with expertise in specific health conditions. This project brought about specific adaptations to our events, for example having British Sign Language volunteers deliver the pre event briefings, establish the Guiding role to assist visually impaired participants and creating guidelines for events teams. Valuable learnings were gained from this project, including the need to ensure that any activities and structures could be sustained beyond the duration of the funding.
46. We believe that organisations like Sport England can play an important role, not only as an investor in physical activity, but as a facilitator which brings people and organisations together especially across sectors. For example, Sport England separately funds both ourselves and RCGP and hence could take the lead in bringing us all together to streamline resources and maximise impact.

#### Criminal justice sector:

47. The first parkrun event on the custodial estate was set up in November 2017 to help promote healthy active lifestyles, facilitate rehabilitation and improve relationships between staff, those in custody and their families. We currently have 24 events on the custodial estate across the UK, including two in Young

- Offenders Institutions (YOIs) and two on the female estate. We have around 25 more inquiries at varying stages of activation. This is a collaborative effort between ourselves and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), with the latter facilitating access to sites, providing guidance and expertise and contributing the start-up cost for all events activated on HMPPS sites in England and Wales. Prior to the closure of events in March 2020, 3,500 people had walked or run at these events, supported by 1100 volunteers.
48. An evaluation of the initiative is being undertaken by HMPPS, in collaboration with parkrun, Professor Rosie Meek and the parkrun Research Board (see below).
  49. We are exploring opportunities to work more closely and strategically with the Police Service and Probation Service to ensure a whole pathway approach to rehabilitation and desistance from crime.

### Education

50. We are collaborating with [Youth Sport Trust](#) and [Kids Run Free](#) to implement a pathway approach to physical activity for children and young people. Collectively we want to build stronger links between link primary schools, families and community based interventions in order to facilitate sustained participation.
51. We have a strong relationship with British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS), with a number of parkrun events being held on our near higher education campuses and parkrun being promoted to staff and students.
52. We have convened a working group comprising the RCGP, higher education institutions and the National Social Prescribing Student Champion Scheme to embed parkrun and the parkrun practice initiative into the medical school curriculum. As part of this, information and resources are shared with medical schools via direct email communications, presentations and webinars. Medical students are also being encouraged and supported to undertake projects related to parkrun. Furthermore, university medical centres are themselves becoming parkrun practices and committing to signpost staff and students to their local parkrun event/s.

### **Research and insight**

53. We support the development of insight both through research undertaken internally and in collaboration with academic institutions/research centres (including studies that we commission).
54. The [parkrun Research Board](#), chaired by the Advanced Wellbeing Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), was set up to oversee high-quality external research related to parkrun worldwide. The Board comprises multi-disciplinary specialists with diverse research interests and expertise, and its outputs include seminal work related to health, wellbeing and activity.
55. We systematically capture, analyse and publish registration and participation<sup>6</sup> data. Registration metrics include: postcode (linked to Indices of Multiple Deprivation), date of birth, gender and activity level, which gives us the qualitative data from which we can monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions. In addition to this we undertake periodic surveys; the findings

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<sup>6</sup> Each parkrunner has a unique, printable barcode which is scanned at the finish line, with the results being sent to head office via an online platform.

of which directly inform our work. For example, a biennial survey to understand the barriers to participation in parkrun (especially amongst those who have registered for parkrun and never participated) and annual surveys to measure the impact of junior parkrun on young people, families and volunteers.<sup>7</sup> In October 2020, we conducted research into the health and wellbeing impact of Covid-19 and associated restrictions on our community.

56. Research conducted by SHU in 2018 highlighted the significant and wide ranging health and wellbeing impacts of parkrun, including those related to mental health and social connectivity as well as physical health and fitness.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that the greatest gains were experienced by those who volunteered as well as walked or ran. A subsequent longitudinal study, with over 1000 respondents, showed that inactive people (those who did less than one bout of exercise a week) and just actives (about once per week) increased their activity by around 75%. We are changing people's behaviour based upon this evidence.
57. Decisions about where to locate our events have been informed, in part, by a parkrun-specific statistical tool (an algorithm) developed by researchers to measure and maximise the predicted public health impact.

## Conclusion

58. To conclude, it is important to understand what policies and practices can promote physical activity participation, but ultimately the question that needs asking, and answering, is "**what types of movement and what environments are most effective at engendering holistic health over the life course and increased health expectancy for all?**"
59. It is important to support the delivery of opportunities which foster rich and meaningful connections, encourage the adoption and maintenance of long term, active lifestyles and promote empowered, healthy people and communities.
60. Change doesn't happen overnight, and there is a need to support (sometimes small, yet innovative) organisations to deliver over the long term and create a culture where organisations have the space to take risks and learn through trial and error.
61. The focus should be on movement, rather than solely on structured sport or exercise. This should include volunteering as a valued form of participation in its own right.
62. Sustained behaviour change, including the adoption of healthy, active lifestyles, can only be done by addressing the social determinants of ill health. Inactivity is a symptom of deeper socio-economic problems, and resources should be dedicated to addressing the root causes.
63. It is necessary to understand and then remove as many structural barriers to physical activity provision and to participation as possible through the implementation of a simple and low cost operational model that can be implemented at scale over the long term.

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<sup>7</sup> We found that nine out of ten children were happy and proud after junior parkrun, with 59% being healthier because of parkrun. This research suggests that 45% of children are accompanied by an adult, indicating that the benefits extend to other members of the family.

<sup>8</sup> 60,000 people responded to the survey. 91% reported a sense of personal achievement, 89% reported improvements to their fitness, 85% reported improvements to their physical health, 69% reported improvements to their mental health, 79% reported improvements to their happiness and, importantly, 81% of those previously inactive reported improvements to happiness.

64. Interventions should be led by the community and empower those communities, drawing on and nurturing diverse local assets, including land (existing facilities), organisations and people. It is vital to involve those who are less active, inactive or who have poorer health outcomes in the development of solutions to their own, real-life challenges.
65. Intra and inter sectoral collaboration can support the achievement of shared objectives, including as a means of reaching out to audiences that may not otherwise engage in an intervention. Of note is the need to work closely with those working across public health and education.
66. Targeted interventions can be effective in addressing the needs of specific groups. Organisations can often be empowered to leverage and capitalise on existing infrastructure, rather than setting up separate, resource intensive projects.

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