

Action research with parkrun UK volunteer organizers to develop inclusive strategies

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Date of deposit	03 12 2019
Document version	Author's accepted manuscript
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Citation for published version	Fullagar S, Petris S, Sargent J, Allen S, Akhtar M, Ozakinci G. Action research with parkrun UK volunteer organizers to develop inclusive strategies. <i>Health Promotion International</i> , 35 (5), pp. 1199-1209.
Link to published version	https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daz113

Full metadata for this item is available in St Andrews Research Repository at: <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

Action research with parkrun UK volunteer organisers to develop inclusive strategies

Abstract

This article addresses the challenge of promoting physical activity through a focus on equity and engaging physically inactive citizens through the development of inclusive strategies within parkrun UK- a free, volunteer-led, weekly mass community participation running event. We discuss how a UK-based action research design enabled collaboration with volunteer event organisers to understand participant experiences, constraints and develop localised inclusive practices. In contrast with ‘expert’ driven health behaviour interventions, our research pursued a ‘ground up’ approach by asking what can be learnt from the successes and challenges of organising community events, such as parkrun UK, to promote inclusion? A modified participatory action research approach was used with four parkrun sites across England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, that involved quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey data (N = 655) that informed the process. Our analysis explored parkrunners’ and volunteer organisers’ perceptions relating to i) the demographics of parkrun participation and ii) actions for change in relation to the challenges of engaging marginalised groups (women, ethnic minorities, low income, older people, those with disabilities or illness). We discuss the challenges and opportunities for addressing (in)equity and inclusion through volunteer-based organisations and the implications for translating knowledge into organisational strategies.

Key Words: parkrun; inclusion; community; running; action research; physical activity

Introduction

Like other advanced economies, the United Kingdom (UK) has developed physical activity and sport promotion strategies to engage inactive citizens and target socially marginalised populations (Sport England, 2016). The interconnected issues of widening social disparities, inequitable access to sport and persistent health inequalities (affecting quality of life and expectancy) have been consistently associated with lower participation. These involve populations such as those on low incomes, women, people with disabilities and chronic illness, older persons and those from ethnicity minorities (Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Such *et al.*, 2017). In addition to ‘top down’ policy approaches, calls have been made to develop ‘ground up’ and practice-led knowledge of physical activity promotion through analysis of community-based events (i.e. not designed by public health experts) (Reece *et al.*, 2018; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018).

Developing inclusive physical activity programmes that address constraints to sport and physical activity is important for reducing the likelihood that universal promotion could actually *increase* health-related inequality (Carey *et al.*, 2017; Hanson *et al.*, 2016). People with greater socio-economic resources are likely to be more active and derive greater health and social benefits than those who are poorer (xx 2018; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). This article focuses on parkrun¹ as one of the fastest growing global community-based running events, to examine the potential for developing equitable local strategies for physical activity promotion. We seek to contribute a methodological perspective on the processes and findings of an action

¹ parkrun is written with a lowercase ‘p’ throughout this article which reflects their branding.

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3 research project that engaged volunteer-led physical activity organisers in the
4 development of inclusive strategies. parkrun provides a unique health-oriented
5 organisational context for understanding the challenges and opportunities of
6 developing inclusive volunteer-led events.
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14 Community-based sport events that promote social interaction have been identified as
15 successful across a number of sites and localised programs (e.g., running and walking
16 groups, public exercise classes) (Heath *et al.*, 2012). Other studies have focused
17 specifically on the potential of leveraging mass participation sport events to sustain
18 regular participation in physical activity, particularly for traditionally ‘harder to reach’
19 groups, such as women (Lane *et al.*, 2015; Murphy *et al.*, 2015). Focusing on an Irish
20 running event, Lane *et al.* (2015) identified the issue of ‘relapse’ after ‘one off’ event
21 participation. An intervention was designed to promote local physical activity
22 opportunities with some success amongst women. Yet, mass sport events have also
23 come under scrutiny for their narrow focus on elite ‘sport identities’ that fail to
24 connect with diverse groups. This scrutiny also focuses on their top down
25 (commercial or non-profit) management and the lack of a demonstrable effect on
26 community participation after the extensive promotion of mega-sport events (e.g.
27 Olympic and Paralympic Games) (e.g., Weed *et al.*, 2015). Subsequently, working
28 with local communities needs to be at the heart of tackling inactivity and engaging
29 under-represented groups in more diverse forms of sport and recreation provision
30 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011).
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56 Our parkrun research project emerged out of a ‘sandpit event’ held by the UK-based
57 charity Cancer Research UK that brought together a range of academics, health
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3 professionals, and charity organisations to fund innovative approaches to prevention
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5 research with ‘hard to reach groups’. The research team was composed of
6
7 professionals (Cancer Prevention Ireland and the Islington Bangladeshi Association)
8
9 and academics from different disciplines (sociology, psychology, physiotherapy). The
10
11 collaboration was formed through a shared desire to understand how parkrun worked
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13 as an informal health promotion setting, to address inequalities affecting participation
14
15 and the prevention of chronic illness. Physical activity interventions that *engage*
16
17 citizens who experience inequality and poorer health outcomes have been identified
18
19 as important approaches in the broader ‘social ecology’ of preventing non-
20
21 communicable diseases (World Health Organisation, 2010). A recent Public Health
22
23 England report echoes this approach to valuing community-centred approaches when
24
25 it states: ‘participatory approaches directly address the marginalisation and
26
27 powerlessness caused by entrenched health inequalities’ (Public Health England,
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29 2015, p. 5).
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38 **parkrun Research Literature**

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40 The emerging body of research on parkrun from the UK and Australia has identified
41
42 the capacity of the event to engage people who are less active and experience
43
44 constraints to participation: those with lower levels of education (Sharman *et al.*,
45
46 2018), women, older people, those with various health/ mental health conditions or
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48 disabilities (Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Grunseit *et al.*, 2018; Morris and Scott, 2018;
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50 Stevinson and Hickson, 2014; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). One of the first studies
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52 conducted with over 7000 parkrunners in the UK identified the majority as not having
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54 been regular runners prior to their parkrun registration and reported benefits related to
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56 psychological well-being and sense of community (Stevinson *et al.*, 2015). [More](#)
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4 recently, in a prospective 12-month study of newly registered parkrun participants (n
5 = 354) showed that the participants benefited from improved fitness. In addition, to an
6 increase in weight loss, participants also reported an increase of 39 minutes of
7 increased physical activity per week (Stevinson and Hickson, 2018).
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14 parkrun has been consistently identified as a site of social interaction that connects
15 people in local places (Hindley, 2018) and across places with the rise of ‘parkrun
16 tourism’ (Sharman *et al.*, 2018). However, parkrun also risks entrenching inequitable
17 patterns of access to social and cultural capital if inclusion is not addressed (Wiltshire
18 and Stevenson, 2018). Stevenson and Hickson (2014) identified lower engagement
19 with participants with low incomes and culturally diverse backgrounds. There has
20 also been little research that has explored the more nuanced, intersectional relations of
21 inequality (connecting income, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality etc) that
22 shape participation. Importantly, the organisational identity of parkrun has evolved as
23 it has grown over time and moved from a ‘sport’ orientation to a focus on community
24 inclusion, collaboration and engagement for a ‘healthier and happier planet’ (Reece *et*
25 *al.*, 2018, p. 327). Our research sought to move beyond an assumption that parkrun
26 ‘is’ inclusive because it is free, local and non-traditional, to explore *how* parkrun
27 volunteers can be engaged to develop knowledge and inform strategies that are
28 responsive to the localised context of participation.
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51 **Background**

52 Since it began in 2004 parkrun has continued to expand across the UK and in April
53 2019 there were 616 sites. parkrun has maintained its ‘free’ participation policy
54 through a volunteer-based model of delivery. Core funding for the small paid staff
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3 team and operational costs is obtained from corporate sponsors (e.g., sport clothing,
4 insurance) which align with its mission. As a citizen-led community organization,
5
6 parkrun has sought to replicate its model across the globe and there are currently 1809
7
8 sites across the world (<https://www.parkrun.com/> last accessed 13 April 2019). In
9
10 April 2019, there were 1,996,908 parkrunners registered in the UK (who have
11
12 averaged 13.8 parkruns each). The average completion ‘times’ have steadily
13
14 lengthened, indicating a growth in walkers and slower runners (Reece *et al.*, 2018). In
15
16 recognition of the potential of parkrun to engage less active groups, strategic
17
18 relationships were developed with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games
19
20 and Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games legacy plans to support new events in
21
22 these cities. In December 2018, Sport England announced specific funding to
23
24 establish 200 new parkruns in areas of social deprivation and to encourage people
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26 who experience marginalisation (women, low income, culturally diverse, older,
27
28 disabled etc) to become more physically active ([https://www.sportengland.org/news-
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60](https://www.sportengland.org/news-and-features/news/2018/december/12/sport-england-partner-with-parkrun-for-three-years-with-3-million-investment/)), last accessed 20 May 2019).

parkrun promotes running (and invites walking) as physical activity where the event is ‘a run not a race’. The parkrun website articulates a participatory sport or physical culture:

“parkrun is all about inclusiveness and wellbeing. We want as many people as possible to feel part of a real local community brought together by our events, as well as our global parkrun family... parkruns are never more than 5km – it’s a distance that anyone can complete (even if some of us are walking by the end...).

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3 And it's why we've kept the format of parkrun so simple: register once, then turn
4
5 up and take part wherever you want, whenever you want....parkrun's simple
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7 concept should – and really can – exist in every town in the world. So no-one
8
9 should ever have to pay to go running in their community regularly, safely and
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11 for fun". <http://www.parkrun.com/about/>
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15 The uniqueness of parkrun lies in its global governance structure, non-for-profit status
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17 and industry partnerships that shape the growth of active local and global
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19 communities. This occurs through a grassroots volunteer culture and innovative use of
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21 digital media (e.g., Facebook, Flickr, Twitter). Such an event subsequently offers a
22
23 unique opportunity to understand the “how, what and why” of parkrun's success as
24
25 well as the challenges. By collaborating with volunteer organisers to identify localised
26
27 strategies that could be embedded in delivery we can begin to unpick such areas.
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33 **Research Design and Methodology**

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36 **Design:** The project used a modified participatory action research (PAR) design
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38 across four parkrun sites in the UK (Northern Ireland (NI), South West England
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40 (SWE), Inner London (L) and Scotland (S)). A PAR design seeks to involve research
41
42 participants in each step of the research process. This is to enable shared
43
44 understandings to be produced through an ‘action-reflection’ cycle to effect social
45
46 change (Frisby *et al.*, 2005). Steps generally include framing questions about social
47
48 change, selecting methods, collecting data, analysing and reflecting upon the findings
49
50 to identify actions for change. The specific context of the research funding shaped our
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52 decision to adopt a ‘modified’ PAR approach. The collaborative sandpit process
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54 required each team to develop research questions and methods that were reviewed as
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56 part of the funding process during the sandpit. Therefore, there was no involvement of
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3 the parkrun co-researchers at the formative stage. In addition, the timeframe for data
4 collection and analysis was limited by funding to one year 2014-15 (with a one year
5 follow up in 2016 to identify the implementation of actions for change). The
6
7 following research questions shaped the direction of the study and the parkrun co-
8
9 researchers contributed to refining the study questions within the methods used:
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- 14 1. How inclusive is parkrun of non-traditional participants/ marginalised groups
15 who are less active (low income, cultural diversity, disability, age, gender, and
16 health conditions)?
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- 19 2. What do parkrunners identify as important aspects of the ‘participatory culture’
20 that sustains their engagement?
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- 23 3. What actions do parkrunners identify as potentially improving the engagement
24 of non-traditional participants to create a more inclusive parkrun culture and
25 engage marginalised groups?
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35 We drew upon a concurrent and mixed methods approach that was oriented by a
36 *qualitative* emphasis on interpreting equity issues that affect participation (Leech and
37 Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Hence, we adopt a constructionist approach that also
38 acknowledges the situated context of our research (human experiences and non-
39 human elements such as weather, parks, survey instruments, websites, audio
40 recorders, meeting notes, cake) and the partiality of all knowledge (participants’ and
41 our own). In this way we acknowledge Mantoura and Potvin’s (2013) critique of
42 normative notions of participation and consider the dimensions of knowledge
43 production that involve human and non-human actors. We were also guided by the
44 work of Baum *et al.* (2006, p. 854) who describe the epistemological approach of
45 PAR in terms of the process of researchers and participants co-producing shared,
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3 change-oriented contextual knowledge: ‘at its heart is collective, self-reflective
4 inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and
5 improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they
6 find themselves’.
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14 Below we outline the key phases of the collaborative action-reflection learning cycle
15 that guided the research process and ongoing interpretation of data collected through a
16 mixed methods approach. We followed the same process in each of the four research
17 sites.
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24 25 26 **Undertaking a Participatory Action Research Process**

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29 *Phase 1: Collaborating with volunteer organisers to understand the localised context*
30 *of parkrun participation*
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34 The four sites were selected due to their proximity to the primary research team
35 locations across the UK to develop an ongoing relationship with a local parkrun site
36 (SF and JS: South West England; GO: Scotland; MA, SF and SP: London; SA:
37 Northern Ireland). The volunteer run directors at all four parkrun sites that were
38 approached, enthusiastically agreed to be involved in researching strategies to support
39 inclusive participation. The four sites have been anonymized for publication and
40 included quite diverse characteristics with respect to socioeconomic, cultural, and
41 geographic differences. The Northern Ireland parkrun was located in a local parkland
42 in walking distance from the centre of a regional town with a number of low income
43 areas. The Scottish parkrun was located in a popular park on the outskirts of a semi-
44 rural setting of a university town. The London parkrun was located in a multiuse park
45 on the border of an affluent and deprived area with a large British South Asian
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3 population. The South West of England site was located in a popular parkland area on
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5 the fringes of a regional town with limited public transport and areas of middle and
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7 low income nearby.
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11 This phase involved forming a parkrun co-research team in each site (average of 6
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13 volunteer members involved in organising their local parkrun). Each team met
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15 formally three times on average over the project and informally with their research
16
17 team member(s) on numerous occasions (e.g., during parkruns, via email). Minutes
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19 were taken of meetings by the researchers and formed part of the dataset. The first
20
21 meeting involved a discussion of the project, ethical issues and an invitation to
22
23 contribute to refining the methods that had been selected within the timeframe. At
24
25 least one researcher facilitated a discussion of key questions to identify the
26
27 assumptions and perceptions of parkrun volunteers. Topics discussed included the
28
29 inclusiveness of parkrun, who does and does not participate from their local
30
31 community, reasons for participating and constraints to participation.
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37 *Phase 2: Researching parkrun participation and localised issues*

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39 The online and paper-based surveys were developed by the academic team with
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41 piloting and input from co-researchers in the context of the broader literature. The
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43 survey [monkey link](#) was distributed [by the run directors via their local social media](#)
44
45 [accounts two weeks before the site visit. On the day of the main site visit \(by the](#)
46
47 [whole academic team\), paper surveys were distributed and participants were invited](#)
48
49 [to fill in the questionnaire at the end of their run/volunteer shift. Announcements were](#)
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51 [made to ensure that no one was filling it twice, although this could not be guaranteed.](#)
52
53 [Each researcher who was assigned to their local parkrun site conducted numerous](#)
54
55 [visits over 12 months to observe, facilitate meetings with the co-research team and](#)
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57 [also participate in parkrun.](#) Overall, 655 on-line (393) and paper based (262) surveys
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3 were completed by respondents aged 16 years and older. We do not have data on
4 response rates or reasons for non-completion. Questions covered motivations for
5 participation, benefits, participation frequency, demographic details, perceptions of
6 inclusiveness and suggestions for change to increase inclusion of parkrunners from
7 diverse backgrounds. For example, ‘how has your involvement in parkrun impacted
8 on your health and wellbeing? ‘Has attending parkrun had an impact on your
9 friendships and social interactions?’ And, ‘what strategies could be used to support
10 parkrun to be more inclusive of people who don’t often participate?’
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24 We developed the above items rather than using existing validated measures and this
25 is acknowledged as a study limitation. During the site visits to administer the surveys
26 the academic team engaged in participant observation by either completing the run or
27 observing volunteers/runners. At each site in-depth interviews were also completed
28 (19 in total) after each event to explore the meanings of participation and perceptions
29 of inclusiveness (several involved a photo elicitation component and will be reported
30 elsewhere). Three in depth interviews were also conducted with core paid parkrun
31 staff to explore their perceptions of challenges relating to inclusion and organizational
32 learning. The interviews will be reported separately.
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47 *Phase 3: What do we know about parkrun participation? Creating shared*
48 *understandings of the survey data*
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52 The second co-research meeting was held at each parkrun site to discuss a draft
53 summary report that the academic team produced on the preliminary survey findings.
54 These reports provided data (graphs and text) on participant demographics, perceived
55 benefits and motivations, event management and communication. This phase of the
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3 project provided an important opportunity for discussing the volunteers' assumptions
4 and perceptions of parkrun's inclusiveness, against the data collected about the local
5 context. In terms of the issues raised by the data (a common observation was the low
6 numbers of people from culturally diverse backgrounds), the process of discussing the
7 reports enabled a shared understanding to develop about how inequalities shape
8 (non)participation. Surfacing assumptions and biases was important given that many
9 volunteers passionately believed that parkrun was naturally inclusive of everyone. We
10 also acknowledge that bias shapes the sample and hence we do not make any claim to
11 representativeness. Summary reports were revised slightly following the contributions
12 of co-researcher interpretations about the localised context (via multiple forms of
13 personal and professional expertise). The reports provided an important reference
14 point in the ongoing process of reflecting on who was not participating and how they
15 could be better engaged.
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33 *Phase 4: Identifying actions for change*

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36 A final group meeting was held with each parkrun co-research team to discuss a
37 finalised summary report that included further analysis of survey data on the
38 perceptions of inclusiveness and suggestions for change. This stepped process of
39 sharing research data during different phases enabled the co-researchers time to
40 reflect on issues and consider the strategies for change offered by parkrunners in their
41 event. Through reflective discussion of the reports, a set of draft actions for change
42 were produced by each site that responded to local issues. Summary reports were then
43 updated to include these local actions for change and circulated within the co-research
44 teams. Research team also created a one-page summary outlining key issues and
45 actions for change that was shared publicly in each of the four parkrun sites via social
46 media. Parkrunners were encouraged to provide any further feedback to their parkrun
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3 volunteer teams or directly to the academic team. After further discussions amongst
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5 the teams about informal feedback, minor changes were made to the site reports as a
6
7 result. For example, one site wanted the description of the health inequalities
8
9 reframed to avoid perpetuating negative perceptions (from ‘deprived’ community to
10
11 issues of inequality relating to access to recreation). This action-oriented process was
12
13 designed to engage the parkrun community at each site in the conversation about
14
15 inclusiveness and raise awareness.
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20 *Phase 5: Sharing knowledge about actions for change*

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23 The one-page summary reports were also shared with organizations named in actions,
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25 such as, local public health professionals or community groups. To encourage
26
27 knowledge exchange across the parkrun organisation, each summary report was
28
29 shared across the four parkrun co-research teams and presented at an annual parkrun
30
31 conference for regional ambassadors and event directors. While there was not scope
32
33 within the project to undertake an extensive follow-up twelve months afterwards, we
34
35 were aware of certain changes that had occurred. For example, one local authority
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37 included parkrun in their active living strategy to address the need for better ‘joined
38
39 up’ communication in the area (see Table 1).
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45 *Phase 6: Reflecting upon changes and challenges*

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48 We conducted a brief one-year follow-up via email and phone with each of the four
49
50 parkrun co-research team leaders to identify what actions had been implemented and
51
52 what key challenges arose in the process. Later we discuss the strategies and
53
54 implementation challenges that arose in the process of conducting this kind of PAR
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56 research within a short time frame. The modified PAR approach enabled the
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58 involvement of the four parkrun co-researcher teams over a concentrated period of
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3 time at key points in the process. The interpretation of different data produced
4
5 through qualitative and quantitative methods was crucial to designing actions for
6
7 change. The academic team assumed primary responsibility for data collection,
8
9 preliminary analysis, and report writing (which importantly lessened the demands on
10
11 co-researcher time given they were already active volunteers and many also had paid
12
13 work and unpaid care roles).
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16 17 **Analysis and Discussion**

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20 In this article we report on both the qualitative and quantitative data from the survey
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22 that was interpreted within the action research approach. The analysis of the whole
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24 dataset (across the four sites) was undertaken at the end of the project and in this
25
26 article we focus on the overall findings from the survey with reference to distinctive
27
28 site specific issues as they emerged in the research findings. Hence, we emphasize the
29
30 constructionist approach to knowledge that underpins our collaborative analysis of the
31
32 demographics of participants, the multiple meanings produced about the parkrun
33
34 culture, and the actions for change (Ponic and Frisby, 2010). Within the action
35
36 research cycle, the research team completed the initial analysis of the datasets and
37
38 each site visit involved academic team meetings to synthesize results. The closed
39
40 survey questions were analysed using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics by three
41
42 members of the academic team. The open-ended survey questions were thematically
43
44 analysed using a coding framework developed by two researchers with cross checking
45
46 and reflection occurring across the broader team (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A manual
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48 coding framework was developed for the limited number of survey questions.
49
50 Examples of qualitative codes developed for the survey analysis included: reasons for
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52 and benefits of participating (health, social interaction, helping others, sense of
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54 achievement, event organization) and strategies for change (communication and
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3 outreach, images of diversity and expanding inclusive ethos, accessibility and location
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5 and event format).
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12 Findings

13 1. Who participates in parkrun?

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15 While we do not claim that the survey results are by any means representative of
16
17 parkrun participation, they do align with broader patterns for runners in the UK
18
19 (white, middle class, younger age groups) (Department for Culture, Media and Sport,
20
21 2015). However, the demographic profile for our parkrun sample does reflect greater
22
23 participation by women than is evident in national sport and recreation data. We also
24
25 acknowledge the bias that is always present in survey recruitment and the challenges
26
27 of engaging people who may have low levels of literacy. Across the four sites there
28
29 were six hundred and fifty-five survey respondents (South West: N = 267; London: N
30
31 = 120; Northern Ireland: N = 98 and Scotland: N = 140; Missing: N = 30) who
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33 completed the online survey or paper surveys that were distributed on the day of field
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35 visit. 309 participants identified as men, 332 as women and 3 preferred not to say.
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41 This fairly even gender distribution is also similar to the gender breakdown of parkrun
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43 registrations where women make up approximately 50% (although women
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45 parkrunners actually participate at lower rates than men; *personal communication*
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47 *with parkrun*).
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52 The mean age of respondents was 41.9 years (SD = 11.18; Range: 16-79; 22 missing)
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54 with the highest participation age groups being 35-54 years (58.3%), 16-34 years
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56 (28.9%) and ≥55 years (12.8%). The ethnic background of the sample was
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58 predominantly white (93.1%; 17 missing), while 4.9% of the respondents reported a
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3 disability (19 missing), of these 1.7% reported physical impairment and 1.5%
4 reported visual impairment. The majority of parkrunners were in current employment
5 (86%; 18 missing) and 56.8% had a university or college degree or higher (19
6 missing). 4.3% reported less than £430 as monthly income before tax, 19.1% as £431-
7 1500, 25.8% as £1501-2600 and 17.2% reported at least £4301 monthly income
8 before tax (7.9% preferred not to say; 26 missing). 35.9% of the respondents had been
9 attending parkrun for less than a year (3.1% for 5 years or more: 27 missing). In
10 terms of frequency, most respondents reported participating monthly (47%) or weekly
11 (37.3%).

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25 The pattern of participation revealed largely middle-aged, white, more rather than less
26 affluent and mostly abled bodied parkrunners as the norm and is in line with
27 previously reported findings from a larger study by Stevinson & Hickson (2014).

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32 These patterns provoked discussion about local demographics, constraints and ideas
33 for change. Each parkrun site team also emphasised 'exceptions' to the norm relating
34 to certain individuals, families or groups who were identifiably part of the 'parkrun
35 family' (such as, a prominent volunteer organiser with British-Caribbean heritage,
36 older runners who had survived cancer and heart attacks). Discussions often moved
37 between reflections on the participation gaps in the data and the 'exceptional' stories
38 that were shaping perceptions of inclusiveness in relation to the broader parkrun
39 narrative. Next, we turn to the survey data that reveal the perceptions of parkrunners
40 across the four sites about inclusiveness as an ethos and practice.

51 52 53 **2. Inclusive parkrun ethos and practice**

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There was a common perception that the parkrun ethos (the 'parkrun family' is a
common descriptor) was inclusive of diversity, as this London respondent states: 'it
brings in people of all different ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds'. The majority

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2
3 of survey respondents (70.1%) reported that they felt parkrun images and promotion
4 reflected the diversity of people in the community. This inclusive ethos was
5 articulated in relation to parkrun being accessible to all because it was local, free and
6 welcoming. The research methodology importantly opened up the perception of
7 inclusiveness through the shared process of reflecting on the different datasets,
8 assumptions and discussions within co-research teams. In London parkrun, for
9 example, it was evident through the research that the ethnic and religious backgrounds
10 of parkrunners was not reflective of the majority of local residents in this culturally
11 diverse neighbourhood. There were number of comments about the need to address
12 the *lack of diversity* among participants (in terms of socio-economic status and
13 ethnicity), as these London respondents stated: ‘more work with local councils and
14 schools. parkrun is very middle class, there could be more interaction with people
15 from working class families’. Furthermore, a respondent suggested that,

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‘It would be good if the general atmosphere was warmer and more inclusive. The
runners at London parkrun do not seem to represent the 30% Bangladeshi
population in the area - I don't know why this is or how it can be improved, but
perhaps it suggests that many local residents feel it is 'not for them', which is at
odds with parkrun's ethos as a community venture’.

The survey responses to open-ended questions about the strategies local parkruns
could use to be more inclusive were a major source of discussion amongst co-
researchers to identify local actions for change. In these discussions we oriented
conversations around the possibility of change, rather than solely focus on

1
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3 ‘constraints’. This acted as a means of increasing awareness about what existing
4
5 practices were working and how change could be enacted.
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10 When survey respondents were asked about how parkrun could develop strategies to
11
12 engage people from diverse backgrounds, the majority of comments related to the
13
14 need for more *promotional strategies* about the nature of the event (friendly ethos, run
15
16 at your own pace or walk) to reach the broader community. Typical comments
17
18 included: ‘people may worry they are too slow or unfit to take part (as I first did),
19
20 perhaps more could be done to focus on how parkrun is not a race or about a time’
21
22 (London respondent) and ‘people think you have to "run" but you can walk it’ (NI
23
24 respondent). In terms of the friendly parkrun culture, some respondents felt that there
25
26 was an insider/outsider dynamic created by established social networks in running
27
28 groups. Such groups were often mentioned in relation to their more visible ‘sport’
29
30 identity (club clothing, competitiveness) which was thought to exclude non-sporty
31
32 runners as a NI respondent said, ‘be less exclusive i.e. if you're not in X [name of a
33
34 running group] runners you're an outsider’. In contrast, other respondents commented
35
36 on particular inclusive practices that had become part of parkrun and could be
37
38 expanded upon. The NI site had begun to support a parkrunner-walker with a visual
39
40 impairment and this was commented on by many respondents: ‘guide dogs offered
41
42 and course to help people learn how to guide a person with a visual impairment
43
44 running/walking’. Respondents in the Scottish parkrun site also commented on the
45
46 role that café plays and how opening the café over winter would encourage post-run
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48 socialising.
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3 *Access to local parks* was also identified as a constraint to participation for sites that
4 were not easily reached by foot or public transport (the London site was the exception
5 in terms of a highly accessible location). 43.7% of respondents indicated that they
6 strongly agreed that parkrun was hard to get to without using a car. While parkrun is
7 a free event, the transport costs and car use is an equity issue for those on low
8 incomes or with mobility needs. In the next section we discuss what each of the
9 parkrun sites identified as the strategies for change and whether they managed to
10 implement these over a twelve-month period.
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24 **3. Inclusive strategies for change**

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26 Table 1.1 identifies key themes that encompass the types of inclusive strategies that
27 are being, or could be mobilised by volunteers to effect change at each parkrun site.
28 The central research team analysed the strategies developed across the sites to identify
29 meso or organisational level themes that can inform parkrun's local and global
30 capacity building strategies; i) promoting the parkrun 'ethos' in ways that attract
31 diverse participants, ii) developing joined-up relationships with local organisations
32 (e.g., cultural groups) to enable pathways to parkrun and access to parks, and iii)
33 fostering an inclusive culture that supports less confident runners from diverse
34 backgrounds. The challenge of change lies with both the *formulation and*
35 *implementation* of inclusive strategies that rely on volunteer labour and centralised
36 support from parkrun and partner organisations.
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54 [*insert* Table 1.1 Inclusive strategies and actions for change here]
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3 The twelve-month follow-up identified a number of constraining factors that impacted
4 on the parkrun teams' ability to follow through on some of their identified actions.

5
6
7 These issues reflect local differences between the contexts of parkrun sites and culture
8 of volunteer teams, as well as broader socio-political issues and challenges of
9
10 volunteer-based community organisations. Run directors and volunteer teams
11
12 identified immediate issues with managing the growing numbers of parkrunners (and
13
14 hence needing more volunteers). There was some reluctance to actively promote
15
16 parkrun to attract *more* participants, despite the desire to address inequalities. The
17
18 demands on volunteer organisers were felt to be increasing with the growth of various
19
20 bureaucratic requirements (e.g., safety, child protection requirements, managing
21
22 others) (see also, Nichols, 2017).
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31 For some parkrun sites, such as London, the question about how to engage with
32
33 culturally diverse communities raised a more complex set of issues about cross-
34
35 cultural understanding, engagement with groups and appropriate forms of promotion.
36
37 Culturally sensitive strategies arose (NI) when there was a local parkrun champion to
38
39 support initiatives (e.g., supporting the translation of parkrun promotional material
40
41 into different languages) given that there was no budget to support additional costs
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43 (on the process of developing culturally inclusive promotion see, Telenta *et al.*, 2019).
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47 For those parkrun sites that were not centrally located, within walking distance or
48
49 well serviced by public transport, the issue of transport proved to be difficult to
50
51 address in the context of cuts to local government budgets. A number of sites wanted
52
53 to have parkrun signage put in their local parks but without funding or park
54
55 management support this did not happen, except in NI where they had both. Signage
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57 of free events within and beyond parks has been identified in relation to promoting
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3 participation to regular events in low income neighbourhoods. On the other hand,
4
5 successful initiatives such as ‘first-timers welcome’ that Scottish parkrun initiated
6
7 were continuing (through news in local media/Facebook/word of mouth where more
8
9 time would be given to first timers in the beginning of parkrun every 2 months).
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14 The effects of austerity in the UK are exacerbated by some local councils that had
15
16 introduced charges for parking and were considering outsourcing the management of
17
18 parks. This raises the threat of parkrun being impacted on by other events (charity fun
19
20 runs that paid for park use). In the follow up, SWE parkrun identified a drop in
21
22 parkrun participation after parking charges were introduced. Broader initiatives that
23
24 were beyond the immediate remit of parkrun organisers provide more difficult to
25
26 implement (e.g. car sharing schemes or improved public transport access) and
27
28 highlight the need for joined-up planning for active living. In the context of austerity,
29
30 parkrun faces certain constraints in developing inclusive events. Especially when
31
32 local park authorities desire to charge for use, despite central health promotion
33
34 policies that emphasise the importance of physical activity (xx, author).
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43 **Conclusion**

44 The growth of parkrun arguably reflects changing participation trends with the rise of
45
46 informal community sport and physical activity events. The lessons learned from this
47
48 volunteer-led movement can contribute insights to inform the development of
49
50 inclusive, joined up strategies for physical activity promotion across sport, health
51
52 promotion, community organisations and local government sectors. This article has
53
54 sought to contribute knowledge about how participatory research processes can
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56 mobilise the expertise of volunteers and participants to inform future strategies within
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3 physical activity programmes. Participatory research methodologies can also inform
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5 knowledge translation practices by drawing upon the practical knowledge of
6
7 participants to consider how equity can be approached in sport and health promotion
8
9 contexts (Edwards and Rowe, 2019; Ponc and Frisby, 2010; Schaillée *et al.*, 2019).
10
11 One of the major limitations of our research was the constrained timeframe and
12
13 funding. This reduced our capacity as researchers to develop ongoing collaborations
14
15 with the parkrun sites and to consider the issues arising in the implementation of their
16
17 strategies. We also acknowledge that the sample is not representative of parkrun
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19 participants and we do not have data on response rates and nor for reasons for non-
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21 completion and further research into understanding diverse perspectives is needed.
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For many community-based sport organisations with a centralised governance structure (such as federated organisations), translating research into practical actions to effect ‘bottom up’ change is an ongoing challenge with respect to inclusion. parkrun continues to evolve as an agile, hybrid organisation with the capacity to engage committed parkrunners, volunteer organisers, sponsors and research partners in a change agenda. Our findings contribute knowledge about understanding the perceptions of volunteers and identifying local actions that enact parkrun’s strategic focus on creating a ‘healthier and happier planet’ and an inclusive ‘parkrun family’ (Reece *et al.*, 2018). There are further implications concerning the translation of research findings into multi-level organisational strategies that build capacity for inclusive practice across key areas (Batra *et al.*, 2016). Closing ‘the gap’ between an inclusive parkrun ethos and who actually participates, requires strategies to increase awareness of equity and inclusion across the organisation. This transcends through and from governance boards, developing volunteer training resources, online

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3 knowledge sharing platforms, diversity sensitive marketing, supporting champions of
4 change, as well as partnering with multiple stakeholders and research organisations to
5 develop effective implementation and monitoring practices. As our research has
6 demonstrated, there is a great deal of expertise within community based-
7 organisations, such as parkrun, that can be harnessed through participatory processes
8 to create organisational change.
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19 Funding

20 This work was supported by Cancer Research UK [anonymised grant number
21 XXXXXX]
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Action research with parkrun UK volunteer organisers to develop inclusive strategies

Abstract

This article addresses the challenge of promoting physical activity through a focus on equity and engaging physically inactive citizens through the development of inclusive strategies within parkrun UK- a free, volunteer-led, weekly mass community participation running event. We discuss how a UK-based action research design enabled collaboration with volunteer event organisers to understand participant experiences, constraints and develop localised inclusive practices. In contrast with ‘expert’ driven health behaviour interventions, our research pursued a ‘ground up’ approach by asking what can be learnt from the successes and challenges of organising community events, such as parkrun UK, to promote inclusion? A modified participatory action research approach was used with four parkrun sites across England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, that involved quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey data (N = 655) that informed the process. Our analysis explored parkrunners’ and volunteer organisers’ perceptions relating to i) the demographics of parkrun participation and ii) actions for change in relation to the challenges of engaging marginalised groups (women, ethnic minorities, low income, older people, those with disabilities or illness). We discuss the challenges and opportunities for addressing (in)equity and inclusion through volunteer-based organisations and the implications for translating knowledge into organisational strategies.

Key Words: parkrun; inclusion; community; running; action research; physical activity

Introduction

Like other advanced economies, the United Kingdom (UK) has developed physical activity and sport promotion strategies to engage inactive citizens and target socially marginalised populations (Sport England, 2016). The interconnected issues of widening social disparities, inequitable access to sport and persistent health inequalities (affecting quality of life and expectancy) have been consistently associated with lower participation. These involve populations such as those on low incomes, women, people with disabilities and chronic illness, older persons and those from ethnicity minorities (Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Such *et al.*, 2017). In addition to ‘top down’ policy approaches, calls have been made to develop ‘ground up’ and practice-led knowledge of physical activity promotion through analysis of community-based events (i.e. not designed by public health experts) (Reece *et al.*, 2018; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018).

Developing inclusive physical activity programmes that address constraints to sport and physical activity is important for reducing the likelihood that universal promotion could actually *increase* health-related inequality (Carey *et al.*, 2017; Hanson *et al.*, 2016). People with greater socio-economic resources are likely to be more active and derive greater health and social benefits than those who are poorer (xx 2018; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). This article focuses on parkrun¹ as one of the fastest growing global community-based running events, to examine the potential for developing equitable local strategies for physical activity promotion. We seek to contribute a methodological perspective on the processes and findings of an action

¹ parkrun is written with a lowercase ‘p’ throughout this article which reflects their branding.

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3 research project that engaged volunteer-led physical activity organisers in the
4 development of inclusive strategies. parkrun provides a unique health-oriented
5 organisational context for understanding the challenges and opportunities of
6 developing inclusive volunteer-led events.
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14 Community-based sport events that promote social interaction have been identified as
15 successful across a number of sites and localised programs (e.g., running and walking
16 groups, public exercise classes) (Heath *et al.*, 2012). Other studies have focused
17 specifically on the potential of leveraging mass participation sport events to sustain
18 regular participation in physical activity, particularly for traditionally ‘harder to reach’
19 groups, such as women (Lane *et al.*, 2015; Murphy *et al.*, 2015). Focusing on an Irish
20 running event, Lane *et al.* (2015) identified the issue of ‘relapse’ after ‘one off’ event
21 participation. An intervention was designed to promote local physical activity
22 opportunities with some success amongst women. Yet, mass sport events have also
23 come under scrutiny for their narrow focus on elite ‘sport identities’ that fail to
24 connect with diverse groups. This scrutiny also focuses on their top down
25 (commercial or non-profit) management and the lack of a demonstrable effect on
26 community participation after the extensive promotion of mega-sport events (e.g.
27 Olympic and Paralympic Games) (e.g., Weed *et al.*, 2015). Subsequently, working
28 with local communities needs to be at the heart of tackling inactivity and engaging
29 under-represented groups in more diverse forms of sport and recreation provision
30 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011).
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56 Our parkrun research project emerged out of a ‘sandpit event’ held by the UK-based
57 charity Cancer Research UK that brought together a range of academics, health
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3 professionals, and charity organisations to fund innovative approaches to prevention
4 research with ‘hard to reach groups’. The research team was composed of
5
6 professionals (Cancer Prevention Ireland and the Islington Bangladeshi Association)
7
8 and academics from different disciplines (sociology, psychology, physiotherapy). The
9
10 collaboration was formed through a shared desire to understand how parkrun worked
11
12 as an informal health promotion setting, to address inequalities affecting participation
13
14 and the prevention of chronic illness. Physical activity interventions that *engage*
15
16 citizens who experience inequality and poorer health outcomes have been identified
17
18 as important approaches in the broader ‘social ecology’ of preventing non-
19
20 communicable diseases (World Health Organisation, 2010). A recent Public Health
21
22 England report echoes this approach to valuing community-centred approaches when
23
24 it states: ‘participatory approaches directly address the marginalisation and
25
26 powerlessness caused by entrenched health inequalities’ (Public Health England,
27
28 2015, p. 5).
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38 **parkrun Research Literature**

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40 The emerging body of research on parkrun from the UK and Australia has identified
41
42 the capacity of the event to engage people who are less active and experience
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44 constraints to participation: those with lower levels of education (Sharman *et al.*,
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46 2018), women, older people, those with various health/ mental health conditions or
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48 disabilities (Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Grunseit *et al.*, 2018; Morris and Scott, 2018;
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50 Stevinson and Hickson, 2014; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). One of the first studies
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52 conducted with over 7000 parkrunners in the UK identified the majority as not having
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54 been regular runners prior to their parkrun registration and reported benefits related to
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56 psychological well-being and sense of community (Stevinson *et al.*, 2015). More
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3 recently, in a prospective 12-month study of newly registered parkrun participants (n
4 = 354) showed that the participants benefited from improved fitness. In addition, to an
5 increase in weight loss, participants also reported an increase of 39 minutes of
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7 increased physical activity per week (Stevinson and Hickson, 2018).
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14 parkrun has been consistently identified as a site of social interaction that connects
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16 people in local places (Hindley, 2018) and across places with the rise of ‘parkrun
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18 tourism’ (Sharman *et al.*, 2018). However, parkrun also risks entrenching inequitable
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20 patterns of access to social and cultural capital if inclusion is not addressed (Wiltshire
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22 and Stevenson, 2018). Stevenson and Hickson (2014) identified lower engagement
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24 with participants with low incomes and culturally diverse backgrounds. There has
25
26 also been little research that has explored the more nuanced, intersectional relations of
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28 inequality (connecting income, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality etc) that
29
30 shape participation. Importantly, the organisational identity of parkrun has evolved as
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32 it has grown over time and moved from a ‘sport’ orientation to a focus on community
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34 inclusion, collaboration and engagement for a ‘healthier and happier planet’ (Reece *et*
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36 *al.*, 2018, p. 327). Our research sought to move beyond an assumption that parkrun
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38 ‘is’ inclusive because it is free, local and non-traditional, to explore *how* parkrun
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40 volunteers can be engaged to develop knowledge and inform strategies that are
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42 responsive to the localised context of participation.
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51 **Background**

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53 Since it began in 2004 parkrun has continued to expand across the UK and in April
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55 2019 there were 616 sites. parkrun has maintained its ‘free’ participation policy
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57 through a volunteer-based model of delivery. Core funding for the small paid staff
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3 team and operational costs is obtained from corporate sponsors (e.g., sport clothing,
4 insurance) which align with its mission. As a citizen-led community organization,
5
6 parkrun has sought to replicate its model across the globe and there are currently 1809
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8 sites across the world (<https://www.parkrun.com/> last accessed 13 April 2019). In
9
10 April 2019, there were 1,996,908 parkrunners registered in the UK (who have
11
12 averaged 13.8 parkruns each). The average completion ‘times’ have steadily
13
14 lengthened, indicating a growth in walkers and slower runners (Reece *et al.*, 2018). In
15
16 recognition of the potential of parkrun to engage less active groups, strategic
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18 relationships were developed with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games
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20 and Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games legacy plans to support new events in
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22 these cities. In December 2018, Sport England announced specific funding to
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24 establish 200 new parkruns in areas of social deprivation and to encourage people
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26 who experience marginalisation (women, low income, culturally diverse, older,
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28 disabled etc) to become more physically active ([https://www.sportengland.org/news-
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60](https://www.sportengland.org/news-and-features/news/2018/december/12/sport-england-partner-with-parkrun-for-three-years-with-3-million-investment/)), last accessed 20 May 2019).

parkrun promotes running (and invites walking) as physical activity where the event is ‘a run not a race’. The parkrun website articulates a participatory sport or physical culture:

“parkrun is all about inclusiveness and wellbeing. We want as many people as possible to feel part of a real local community brought together by our events, as well as our global parkrun family... parkruns are never more than 5km – it’s a distance that anyone can complete (even if some of us are walking by the end...).

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3 And it's why we've kept the format of parkrun so simple: register once, then turn
4
5 up and take part wherever you want, whenever you want....parkrun's simple
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7 concept should – and really can – exist in every town in the world. So no-one
8
9 should ever have to pay to go running in their community regularly, safely and
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11 for fun". <http://www.parkrun.com/about/>
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15 The uniqueness of parkrun lies in its global governance structure, non-for-profit status
16
17 and industry partnerships that shape the growth of active local and global
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19 communities. This occurs through a grassroots volunteer culture and innovative use of
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21 digital media (e.g., Facebook, Flickr, Twitter). Such an event subsequently offers a
22
23 unique opportunity to understand the “how, what and why” of parkrun's success as
24
25 well as the challenges. By collaborating with volunteer organisers to identify localised
26
27 strategies that could be embedded in delivery we can begin to unpick such areas.
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33 **Research Design and Methodology**

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36 **Design:** The project used a modified participatory action research (PAR) design
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38 across four parkrun sites in the UK (Northern Ireland (NI), South West England
39
40 (SWE), Inner London (L) and Scotland (S)). A PAR design seeks to involve research
41
42 participants in each step of the research process. This is to enable shared
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44 understandings to be produced through an ‘action-reflection’ cycle to effect social
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46 change (Frisby *et al.*, 2005). Steps generally include framing questions about social
47
48 change, selecting methods, collecting data, analysing and reflecting upon the findings
49
50 to identify actions for change. The specific context of the research funding shaped our
51
52 decision to adopt a ‘modified’ PAR approach. The collaborative sandpit process
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54 required each team to develop research questions and methods that were reviewed as
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56 part of the funding process during the sandpit. Therefore, there was no involvement of
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3 the parkrun co-researchers at the formative stage. In addition, the timeframe for data
4 collection and analysis was limited by funding to one year 2014-15 (with a one year
5 follow up in 2016 to identify the implementation of actions for change). The
6
7 following research questions shaped the direction of the study and the parkrun co-
8
9 researchers contributed to refining the study questions within the methods used:
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- 14 1. How inclusive is parkrun of non-traditional participants/ marginalised groups
15 who are less active (low income, cultural diversity, disability, age, gender, and
16 health conditions)?
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- 20 2. What do parkrunners identify as important aspects of the ‘participatory culture’
21 that sustains their engagement?
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- 24 3. What actions do parkrunners identify as potentially improving the engagement
25 of non-traditional participants to create a more inclusive parkrun culture and
26 engage marginalised groups?
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35 We drew upon a concurrent and mixed methods approach that was oriented by a
36 *qualitative* emphasis on interpreting equity issues that affect participation (Leech and
37 Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Hence, we adopt a constructionist approach that also
38 acknowledges the situated context of our research (human experiences and non-
39 human elements such as weather, parks, survey instruments, websites, audio
40 recorders, meeting notes, cake) and the partiality of all knowledge (participants’ and
41 our own). In this way we acknowledge Mantoura and Potvin’s (2013) critique of
42 normative notions of participation and consider the dimensions of knowledge
43 production that involve human and non-human actors. We were also guided by the
44 work of Baum *et al.* (2006, p. 854) who describe the epistemological approach of
45 PAR in terms of the process of researchers and participants co-producing shared,
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3 change-oriented contextual knowledge: ‘at its heart is collective, self-reflective
4 inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and
5 improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they
6 find themselves’.
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14 Below we outline the key phases of the collaborative action-reflection learning cycle
15 that guided the research process and ongoing interpretation of data collected through a
16 mixed methods approach. We followed the same process in each of the four research
17 sites.
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24 25 26 **Undertaking a Participatory Action Research Process**

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29 *Phase 1: Collaborating with volunteer organisers to understand the localised context*
30 *of parkrun participation*
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34 The four sites were selected due to their proximity to the primary research team
35 locations across the UK to develop an ongoing relationship with a local parkrun site
36 (SF and JS: South West England; GO: Scotland; MA, SF and SP: London; SA:
37 Northern Ireland). The volunteer run directors at all four parkrun sites that were
38 approached, enthusiastically agreed to be involved in researching strategies to support
39 inclusive participation. The four sites have been anonymized for publication and
40 included quite diverse characteristics with respect to socioeconomic, cultural, and
41 geographic differences. The Northern Ireland parkrun was located in a local parkland
42 in walking distance from the centre of a regional town with a number of low income
43 areas. The Scottish parkrun was located in a popular park on the outskirts of a semi-
44 rural setting of a university town. The London parkrun was located in a multiuse park
45 on the border of an affluent and deprived area with a large British South Asian
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3 population. The South West of England site was located in a popular parkland area on
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5 the fringes of a regional town with limited public transport and areas of middle and
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7 low income nearby.
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11 This phase involved forming a parkrun co-research team in each site (average of 6
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13 volunteer members involved in organising their local parkrun). Each team met
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15 formally three times on average over the project and informally with their research
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17 team member(s) on numerous occasions (e.g., during parkruns, via email). Minutes
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19 were taken of meetings by the researchers and formed part of the dataset. The first
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21 meeting involved a discussion of the project, ethical issues and an invitation to
22
23 contribute to refining the methods that had been selected within the timeframe. At
24
25 least one researcher facilitated a discussion of key questions to identify the
26
27 assumptions and perceptions of parkrun volunteers. Topics discussed included the
28
29 inclusiveness of parkrun, who does and does not participate from their local
30
31 community, reasons for participating and constraints to participation.
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37 *Phase 2: Researching parkrun participation and localised issues*

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39 The online and paper-based surveys were developed by the academic team with
40
41 piloting and input from co-researchers in the context of the broader literature. The
42
43 survey monkey link was distributed by the run directors via their local social media
44
45 accounts two weeks before the site visit. On the day of the main site visit (by the
46
47 whole academic team), paper surveys were distributed and participants were invited
48
49 to fill in the questionnaire at the end of their run/volunteer shift. Announcements were
50
51 made to ensure that no one was filling it twice, although this could not be guaranteed.
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53
54 Each researcher who was assigned to their local parkrun site conducted numerous
55
56 visits over 12 months to observe, facilitate meetings with the co-research team and
57
58 also participate in parkrun. Overall, 655 on-line (393) and paper based (262) surveys
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3 were completed by respondents aged 16 years and older. We do not have data on
4
5 response rates or reasons for non-completion. Questions covered motivations for
6
7 participation, benefits, participation frequency, demographic details, perceptions of
8
9 inclusiveness and suggestions for change to increase inclusion of parkrunners from
10
11 diverse backgrounds. For example, ‘how has your involvement in parkrun impacted
12
13 on your health and wellbeing? ‘Has attending parkrun had an impact on your
14
15 friendships and social interactions?’ And, ‘what strategies could be used to support
16
17 parkrun to be more inclusive of people who don’t often participate?’
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24 We developed the above items rather than using existing validated measures and this
25
26 is acknowledged as a study limitation. During the site visits to administer the surveys
27
28 the academic team engaged in participant observation by either completing the run or
29
30 observing volunteers/runners. At each site in-depth interviews were also completed
31
32 (19 in total) after each event to explore the meanings of participation and perceptions
33
34 of inclusiveness (several involved a photo elicitation component and will be reported
35
36 elsewhere). Three in depth interviews were also conducted with core paid parkrun
37
38 staff to explore their perceptions of challenges relating to inclusion and organizational
39
40 learning. The interviews will be reported separately.
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47 *Phase 3: What do we know about parkrun participation? Creating shared*
48
49 *understandings of the survey data*
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52 The second co-research meeting was held at each parkrun site to discuss a draft
53
54 summary report that the academic team produced on the preliminary survey findings.
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56 These reports provided data (graphs and text) on participant demographics, perceived
57
58 benefits and motivations, event management and communication. This phase of the
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3 project provided an important opportunity for discussing the volunteers' assumptions
4 and perceptions of parkrun's inclusiveness, against the data collected about the local
5 context. In terms of the issues raised by the data (a common observation was the low
6 numbers of people from culturally diverse backgrounds), the process of discussing the
7 reports enabled a shared understanding to develop about how inequalities shape
8 (non)participation. Surfacing assumptions and biases was important given that many
9 volunteers passionately believed that parkrun was naturally inclusive of everyone. We
10 also acknowledge that bias shapes the sample and hence we do not make any claim to
11 representativeness. Summary reports were revised slightly following the contributions
12 of co-researcher interpretations about the localised context (via multiple forms of
13 personal and professional expertise). The reports provided an important reference
14 point in the ongoing process of reflecting on who was not participating and how they
15 could be better engaged.
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33 *Phase 4: Identifying actions for change*

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37 A final group meeting was held with each parkrun co-research team to discuss a
38 finalised summary report that included further analysis of survey data on the
39 perceptions of inclusiveness and suggestions for change. This stepped process of
40 sharing research data during different phases enabled the co-researchers time to
41 reflect on issues and consider the strategies for change offered by parkrunners in their
42 event. Through reflective discussion of the reports, a set of draft actions for change
43 were produced by each site that responded to local issues. Summary reports were then
44 updated to include these local actions for change and circulated within the co-research
45 teams. Research team also created a one-page summary outlining key issues and
46 actions for change that was shared publicly in each of the four parkrun sites via social
47 media. Parkrunners were encouraged to provide any further feedback to their parkrun
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3 volunteer teams or directly to the academic team. After further discussions amongst
4 the teams about informal feedback, minor changes were made to the site reports as a
5 result. For example, one site wanted the description of the health inequalities
6 reframed to avoid perpetuating negative perceptions (from ‘deprived’ community to
7 issues of inequality relating to access to recreation). This action-oriented process was
8 designed to engage the parkrun community at each site in the conversation about
9 inclusiveness and raise awareness.
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20 *Phase 5: Sharing knowledge about actions for change*

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23 The one-page summary reports were also shared with organizations named in actions,
24 such as, local public health professionals or community groups. To encourage
25 knowledge exchange across the parkrun organisation, each summary report was
26 shared across the four parkrun co-research teams and presented at an annual parkrun
27 conference for regional ambassadors and event directors. While there was not scope
28 within the project to undertake an extensive follow-up twelve months afterwards, we
29 were aware of certain changes that had occurred. For example, one local authority
30 included parkrun in their active living strategy to address the need for better ‘joined
31 up’ communication in the area (see Table 1).
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45 *Phase 6: Reflecting upon changes and challenges*

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48 We conducted a brief one-year follow-up via email and phone with each of the four
49 parkrun co-research team leaders to identify what actions had been implemented and
50 what key challenges arose in the process. Later we discuss the strategies and
51 implementation challenges that arose in the process of conducting this kind of PAR
52 research within a short time frame. The modified PAR approach enabled the
53 involvement of the four parkrun co-researcher teams over a concentrated period of
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3 time at key points in the process. The interpretation of different data produced
4
5 through qualitative and quantitative methods was crucial to designing actions for
6
7 change. The academic team assumed primary responsibility for data collection,
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9 preliminary analysis, and report writing (which importantly lessened the demands on
10
11 co-researcher time given they were already active volunteers and many also had paid
12
13 work and unpaid care roles).
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16 17 **Analysis and Discussion**

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20 In this article we report on both the qualitative and quantitative data from the survey
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22 that was interpreted within the action research approach. The analysis of the whole
23
24 dataset (across the four sites) was undertaken at the end of the project and in this
25
26 article we focus on the overall findings from the survey with reference to distinctive
27
28 site specific issues as they emerged in the research findings. Hence, we emphasize the
29
30 constructionist approach to knowledge that underpins our collaborative analysis of the
31
32 demographics of participants, the multiple meanings produced about the parkrun
33
34 culture, and the actions for change (Ponic and Frisby, 2010). Within the action
35
36 research cycle, the research team completed the initial analysis of the datasets and
37
38 each site visit involved academic team meetings to synthesize results. The closed
39
40 survey questions were analysed using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics by three
41
42 members of the academic team. The open-ended survey questions were thematically
43
44 analysed using a coding framework developed by two researchers with cross checking
45
46 and reflection occurring across the broader team (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A manual
47
48 coding framework was developed for the limited number of survey questions.
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50 Examples of qualitative codes developed for the survey analysis included: reasons for
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52 and benefits of participating (health, social interaction, helping others, sense of
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54 achievement, event organization) and strategies for change (communication and
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3 outreach, images of diversity and expanding inclusive ethos, accessibility and location
4 and event format).
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12 Findings

13 1. Who participates in parkrun?

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15 While we do not claim that the survey results are by any means representative of
16 parkrun participation, they do align with broader patterns for runners in the UK
17 (white, middle class, younger age groups) (Department for Culture, Media and Sport,
18 2015). However, the demographic profile for our parkrun sample does reflect greater
19 participation by women than is evident in national sport and recreation data. We also
20 acknowledge the bias that is always present in survey recruitment and the challenges
21 of engaging people who may have low levels of literacy. Across the four sites there
22 were six hundred and fifty-five survey respondents (South West: N = 267; London: N
23 = 120; Northern Ireland: N = 98 and Scotland: N = 140; Missing: N = 30) who
24 completed the online survey or paper surveys that were distributed on the day of field
25 visit. 309 participants identified as men, 332 as women and 3 preferred not to say.
26 This fairly even gender distribution is also similar to the gender breakdown of parkrun
27 registrations where women make up approximately 50% (although women
28 parkrunners actually participate at lower rates than men; *personal communication*
29 *with parkrun*).
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52 The mean age of respondents was 41.9 years (SD = 11.18; Range: 16-79; 22 missing)
53 with the highest participation age groups being 35-54 years (58.3%), 16-34 years
54 (28.9%) and ≥ 55 years (12.8%). The ethnic background of the sample was
55 predominantly white (93.1%; 17 missing), while 4.9% of the respondents reported a
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3 disability (19 missing), of these 1.7% reported physical impairment and 1.5%
4 reported visual impairment. The majority of parkrunners were in current employment
5 (86%; 18 missing) and 56.8% had a university or college degree or higher (19
6 missing). 4.3% reported less than £430 as monthly income before tax, 19.1% as £431-
7 1500, 25.8% as £1501-2600 and 17.2% reported at least £4301 monthly income
8 before tax (7.9% preferred not to say; 26 missing). 35.9% of the respondents had been
9 attending parkrun for less than a year (3.1% for 5 years or more: 27 missing). In
10 terms of frequency, most respondents reported participating monthly (47%) or weekly
11 (37.3%).

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25 The pattern of participation revealed largely middle-aged, white, more rather than less
26 affluent and mostly abled bodied parkrunners as the norm and is in line with
27 previously reported findings from a larger study by Stevinson & Hickson (2014).
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These patterns provoked discussion about local demographics, constraints and ideas
for change. Each parkrun site team also emphasised 'exceptions' to the norm relating
to certain individuals, families or groups who were identifiably part of the 'parkrun
family' (such as, a prominent volunteer organiser with British-Caribbean heritage,
older runners who had survived cancer and heart attacks). Discussions often moved
between reflections on the participation gaps in the data and the 'exceptional' stories
that were shaping perceptions of inclusiveness in relation to the broader parkrun
narrative. Next, we turn to the survey data that reveal the perceptions of parkrunners
across the four sites about inclusiveness as an ethos and practice.

2. Inclusive parkrun ethos and practice

There was a common perception that the parkrun ethos (the 'parkrun family' is a
common descriptor) was inclusive of diversity, as this London respondent states: 'it
brings in people of all different ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds'. The majority

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2
3 of survey respondents (70.1%) reported that they felt parkrun images and promotion
4 reflected the diversity of people in the community. This inclusive ethos was
5 articulated in relation to parkrun being accessible to all because it was local, free and
6 welcoming. The research methodology importantly opened up the perception of
7 inclusiveness through the shared process of reflecting on the different datasets,
8 assumptions and discussions within co-research teams. In London parkrun, for
9 example, it was evident through the research that the ethnic and religious backgrounds
10 of parkrunners was not reflective of the majority of local residents in this culturally
11 diverse neighbourhood. There were number of comments about the need to address
12 the *lack of diversity* among participants (in terms of socio-economic status and
13 ethnicity), as these London respondents stated: ‘more work with local councils and
14 schools. parkrun is very middle class, there could be more interaction with people
15 from working class families’. Furthermore, a respondent suggested that,

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‘It would be good if the general atmosphere was warmer and more inclusive. The runners at London parkrun do not seem to represent the 30% Bangladeshi population in the area - I don't know why this is or how it can be improved, but perhaps it suggests that many local residents feel it is 'not for them', which is at odds with parkrun's ethos as a community venture’.

The survey responses to open-ended questions about the strategies local parkruns could use to be more inclusive were a major source of discussion amongst co-researchers to identify local actions for change. In these discussions we oriented conversations around the possibility of change, rather than solely focus on

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3 ‘constraints’. This acted as a means of increasing awareness about what existing
4
5 practices were working and how change could be enacted.
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10 When survey respondents were asked about how parkrun could develop strategies to
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12 engage people from diverse backgrounds, the majority of comments related to the
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14 need for more *promotional strategies* about the nature of the event (friendly ethos, run
15
16 at your own pace or walk) to reach the broader community. Typical comments
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18 included: ‘people may worry they are too slow or unfit to take part (as I first did),
19
20 perhaps more could be done to focus on how parkrun is not a race or about a time’
21
22 (London respondent) and ‘people think you have to "run" but you can walk it’ (NI
23
24 respondent). In terms of the friendly parkrun culture, some respondents felt that there
25
26 was an insider/outsider dynamic created by established social networks in running
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28 groups. Such groups were often mentioned in relation to their more visible ‘sport’
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30 identity (club clothing, competitiveness) which was thought to exclude non-sporty
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32 runners as a NI respondent said, ‘be less exclusive i.e. if you're not in X [name of a
33
34 running group] runners you're an outsider’. In contrast, other respondents commented
35
36 on particular inclusive practices that had become part of parkrun and could be
37
38 expanded upon. The NI site had begun to support a parkrunner-walker with a visual
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40 impairment and this was commented on by many respondents: ‘guide dogs offered
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42 and course to help people learn how to guide a person with a visual impairment
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44 running/walking’. Respondents in the Scottish parkrun site also commented on the
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46 role that café plays and how opening the café over winter would encourage post-run
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48 socialising.
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3 *Access to local parks* was also identified as a constraint to participation for sites that
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5 were not easily reached by foot or public transport (the London site was the exception
6
7 in terms of a highly accessible location). 43.7% of respondents indicated that they
8
9 strongly agreed that parkrun was hard to get to without using a car. While parkrun is
10
11 a free event, the transport costs and car use is an equity issue for those on low
12
13 incomes or with mobility needs. In the next section we discuss what each of the
14
15 parkrun sites identified as the strategies for change and whether they managed to
16
17 implement these over a twelve-month period.
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24 **3. Inclusive strategies for change**

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26 Table 1.1 identifies key themes that encompass the types of inclusive strategies that
27
28 are being, or could be mobilised by volunteers to effect change at each parkrun site.
29
30 The central research team analysed the strategies developed across the sites to identify
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32 meso or organisational level themes that can inform parkrun's local and global
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34 capacity building strategies; i) promoting the parkrun 'ethos' in ways that attract
35
36 diverse participants, ii) developing joined-up relationships with local organisations
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38 (e.g., cultural groups) to enable pathways to parkrun and access to parks, and iii)
39
40 fostering an inclusive culture that supports less confident runners from diverse
41
42 backgrounds. The challenge of change lies with both the *formulation and*
43
44 *implementation* of inclusive strategies that rely on volunteer labour and centralised
45
46 support from parkrun and partner organisations.
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54 [insert Table 1.1 Inclusive strategies and actions for change here]
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3 The twelve-month follow-up identified a number of constraining factors that impacted
4 on the parkrun teams' ability to follow through on some of their identified actions.

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6
7 These issues reflect local differences between the contexts of parkrun sites and culture
8 of volunteer teams, as well as broader socio-political issues and challenges of
9
10 volunteer-based community organisations. Run directors and volunteer teams
11
12 identified immediate issues with managing the growing numbers of parkrunners (and
13
14 hence needing more volunteers). There was some reluctance to actively promote
15
16 parkrun to attract *more* participants, despite the desire to address inequalities. The
17
18 demands on volunteer organisers were felt to be increasing with the growth of various
19
20 bureaucratic requirements (e.g., safety, child protection requirements, managing
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22 others) (see also, Nichols, 2017).
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31 For some parkrun sites, such as London, the question about how to engage with
32
33 culturally diverse communities raised a more complex set of issues about cross-
34
35 cultural understanding, engagement with groups and appropriate forms of promotion.
36
37 Culturally sensitive strategies arose (NI) when there was a local parkrun champion to
38
39 support initiatives (e.g., supporting the translation of parkrun promotional material
40
41 into different languages) given that there was no budget to support additional costs
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43 (on the process of developing culturally inclusive promotion see, Telenta *et al.*, 2019).
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47 For those parkrun sites that were not centrally located, within walking distance or
48
49 well serviced by public transport, the issue of transport proved to be difficult to
50
51 address in the context of cuts to local government budgets. A number of sites wanted
52
53 to have parkrun signage put in their local parks but without funding or park
54
55 management support this did not happen, except in NI where they had both. Signage
56
57 of free events within and beyond parks has been identified in relation to promoting
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3 participation to regular events in low income neighbourhoods. On the other hand,
4
5 successful initiatives such as ‘first-timers welcome’ that Scottish parkrun initiated
6
7 were continuing (through news in local media/Facebook/word of mouth where more
8
9 time would be given to first timers in the beginning of parkrun every 2 months).
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14 The effects of austerity in the UK are exacerbated by some local councils that had
15
16 introduced charges for parking and were considering outsourcing the management of
17
18 parks. This raises the threat of parkrun being impacted on by other events (charity fun
19
20 runs that paid for park use). In the follow up, SWE parkrun identified a drop in
21
22 parkrun participation after parking charges were introduced. Broader initiatives that
23
24 were beyond the immediate remit of parkrun organisers provide more difficult to
25
26 implement (e.g. car sharing schemes or improved public transport access) and
27
28 highlight the need for joined-up planning for active living. In the context of austerity,
29
30 parkrun faces certain constraints in developing inclusive events. Especially when
31
32 local park authorities desire to charge for use, despite central health promotion
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34 policies that emphasise the importance of physical activity (xx, author).
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43 **Conclusion**

44 The growth of parkrun arguably reflects changing participation trends with the rise of
45
46 informal community sport and physical activity events. The lessons learned from this
47
48 volunteer-led movement can contribute insights to inform the development of
49
50 inclusive, joined up strategies for physical activity promotion across sport, health
51
52 promotion, community organisations and local government sectors. This article has
53
54 sought to contribute knowledge about how participatory research processes can
55
56 mobilise the expertise of volunteers and participants to inform future strategies within
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3 physical activity programmes. Participatory research methodologies can also inform
4
5 knowledge translation practices by drawing upon the practical knowledge of
6
7 participants to consider how equity can be approached in sport and health promotion
8
9 contexts (Edwards and Rowe, 2019; Ponc and Frisby, 2010; Schaillée *et al.*, 2019).
10
11 One of the major limitations of our research was the constrained timeframe and
12
13 funding. This reduced our capacity as researchers to develop ongoing collaborations
14
15 with the parkrun sites and to consider the issues arising in the implementation of their
16
17 strategies. We also acknowledge that the sample is not representative of parkrun
18
19 participants and we do not have data on response rates and nor for reasons for non-
20
21 completion and further research into understanding diverse perspectives is needed.
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28 For many community-based sport organisations with a centralised governance
29
30 structure (such as federated organisations), translating research into practical actions
31
32 to effect ‘bottom up’ change is an ongoing challenge with respect to inclusion.
33
34 parkrun continues to evolve as an agile, hybrid organisation with the capacity to
35
36 engage committed parkrunners, volunteer organisers, sponsors and research partners
37
38 in a change agenda. Our findings contribute knowledge about understanding the
39
40 perceptions of volunteers and identifying local actions that enact parkrun’s strategic
41
42 focus on creating a ‘healthier and happier planet’ and an inclusive ‘parkrun family’
43
44 (Reece *et al.*, 2018). There are further implications concerning the translation of
45
46 research findings into multi-level organisational strategies that build capacity for
47
48 inclusive practice across key areas (Batra *et al.*, 2016). Closing ‘the gap’ between an
49
50 inclusive parkrun ethos and who actually participates, requires strategies to increase
51
52 awareness of equity and inclusion across the organisation. This transcends through
53
54 and from governance boards, developing volunteer training resources, online
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3 knowledge sharing platforms, diversity sensitive marketing, supporting champions of
4 change, as well as partnering with multiple stakeholders and research organisations to
5 develop effective implementation and monitoring practices. As our research has
6 demonstrated, there is a great deal of expertise within community based-
7 organisations, such as parkrun, that can be harnessed through participatory processes
8 to create organisational change.
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19 Funding

20 This work was supported by Cancer Research UK [anonymised grant number
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Table 1.1 Inclusive strategies and actions for change

Key areas of change [abbreviations: NI Northern Ireland, SWE South West England, SCOT Scotland, LON London]	Parkrun sites that identified actions
1. Promotion of parkrun ‘ethos’ to attract diverse participants in local areas. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changing facebook photo to reflect the ‘back end’ of the group, not fastest runners up front - Holding ‘first timer’ targeted event promotion through local media and social media - Inviting local politicians on ‘parkrun day’ to raise awareness and gain support - Creating YouTube videos - Presentations at Community Relations Week, Inter-ethnic forum and promotional posters in different languages and diverse images in press releases used 	SWE SCOT SWE, SCOT, SCOT NI SWE, SCOT NI
2. Developing joined-up relationships with other local government and NGO organisations to support better promotion, pathways into parkrun and support for the use of local parks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop relationships with running groups and beginner programmes (couch to 5km) to foster pathways to parkrun participation (course completion ritual with first parkrun) - start new targeted running groups with a focus on non-traditional participants through collaboration with local organisations (eg. Social housing & councils) - Hosting a forum with council for all parkruns and clubs in the area 	All sites NI NI
3. Fostering an inclusive culture within parkrun activities to engage participants who are less confident runners and/or are from diverse backgrounds. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular ‘welcome talks’ to orient new runners before the run begins & hosting ‘bake offs’ to encourage socialising after the run - Make use of cafes (fixed or mobile) after runs to support socialising - Work with local organisations and individuals to identify ways to support involvement of people with disabilities (eg., guide runners/walkers for those with visual impairment) 	LON LON, SCOT, SWE, NI NI