

OVERVIEW: PARKRUN

If you happen to be in a park at 9am on a Saturday morning, you may well encounter a parkrun. [parkrun](#) (always one lower-case word!) is a free, weekly, timed 5K run – not, it is stressed, a race – open to all. The parkrun message is that ‘parkrun is for everyone’; locally driven, and as much about friendship, community and supporting sustainable lifestyle change as it is about running. In addition, a recent research study has concluded that parkrun may be a cost-effective way to improve public health, with evidence that it can improve participants’ physical and mental wellbeing. Started in 2007, parkrun is run as a not-for-profit initiative, by and for volunteers, supported in some areas by local councils, and other organisations such as universities. This overview looks at three locations in the North West – Burnley, Penrith and Ormskirk – and their experience of the benefits of parkrun.

The NHS ‘[Couch to 5K](#)’ programme on NHS Choices suggests using parkrun as a way to keep running and maintain momentum after completing the programme. Interestingly, in researching this overview, public sector involvement in parkrun in the North West seems primarily to come from councils, with no responses from health organisations. This may be because public health teams have moved from PCTs to councils. However, there is likely to be unrealised potential for health organisations and health professionals to promote local parkruns as a free, well-supported way to engage with physical activity at a level to suit the participant. It is vital for NHS organisations to encourage staff, as well as the public at large, to take part in physical exercise and to get involved in local community initiatives, and parkrun is one of the ways in which they could do this.

Currently there are 267 parkruns in the UK, with 28 of these in the North West. On average, each has 147 runners. These are a mixture of club runners, recreational runners, run-walkers,

walkers, runners with their dogs, runners pushing buggies, and juniors – children as young as four can complete some or all of the course with an accompanying adult. Each parkrun is locally organised, and staffed by volunteers, and the post-run tea, coffee and socialising is as much a part of the event as the run itself.

Background

parkrun began as a result of a sports injury. In 2004, Paul Sinton-Hewitt picked up a knee injury – while running – and during his recovery organised a 5K time trial for 13 friends in Bushy Park. On the event’s first anniversary, 155 people took part. A second parkrun began at Wimbledon Common in January 2007, and by the end of 2007 there were six. By the end of 2009, 23 parkruns had been established.

The ethos of parkrun is that any community that wants a run should be able to have one. A very small central core of salaried staff supports new events by working with local people who are interested in establishing one. Setting up a new parkrun takes around three to six months, including training, organising equipment, setting up the online event page and finalising the course. To establish a new event, parkrun contributes around half the cost, and seeks a £3000 start-up fee (£2500 plus VAT) from the area planning to run it. After that, it commits to support the event indefinitely.

While parkrun has commercial sponsors – currently Sweatshop, Adidas and PruHealth – their sponsorship is geared to the support and promotion of existing events. This includes financing the equipment to run existing events, course signs, barcode scanners, finishing tokens, and the website, as well as participation incentives for runners and



volunteers. For example, a parkrunner who completes 50 runs is presented with a red '50' running top at their home parkrun. Each parkrun also awards a 'parkrunner of the month' prize – a pair of running shoes – which can be for improvement, consistent effort, volunteering, or other contributions to parkrun.

Burnley parkrun was started by Burnley Council's Sport and Play Development Unit. They had no particular expectations of their event; they had heard about other parkruns and considered that it would be 'a good thing to do', especially as they already worked with the Parks Department. They spent around 7 months planning the parkrun, including devising a course which would cater to all abilities and had the right amenities nearby. The set-up of the event coincided with a partnership with England Athletics' 'Run England' programme, and the council used club contacts to identify potential volunteers, train them as run leaders, and engage them in the set-up process.

Ormskirk parkrun received financial support from Lancashire County Council and West Lancashire Borough Council, and local VCFS (Voluntary, Community and Faith sector) investment from West Lancashire Clinical Commissioning Group, through a funding programme called 'Mobilise the Community Around Health'. Greg Mitten, Chief Officer of



West Lancashire CVS, explained 'The CVS model in West Lancs builds on the gifts, capacities and skills of individuals and communities and connects these with local public and private sector assets, resources and knowledge. All of the programme streams connect with the CCG's health priorities and its aim to reduce health inequalities in the borough. The parkrun proposal addresses health priorities and connects them with the physical assets of the university, promotes volunteering and is a positive example of "The 5 Ways to Wellbeing".'

Ormskirk parkrun is held at Edge Hill University. Paul Greenwood, Edge Hill's Head of Sports Services, was keen to host the event in order to:

- engage with the local community, to break down any perceived barriers

- showcase the campus and particularly its new sports facilities (available to the local community), with a view to increasing their usage
- offer an additional recreational activity to Edge Hill students
- promote the local athletics club, Liverpool Pembroke and Sefton AC, which is linked to the parkrun

Penrith parkrun was set up by Eden District Council, who wanted to promote participation in running. At first they had thought of supporting an annual running event, but when parkrun was brought to their attention they felt that it would offer better value for money and that a weekly run offered greater sustainability than a one-off event. In addition, the council already owned a sports site which could accommodate the event. The council held an open meeting about parkrun for the local sports clubs, who received the idea positively and have both participated and volunteered.

Promotion to Staff and Clients

While part of the parkrun ethos is that it grows organically and through word of mouth, local events have also undertaken some promotional activity.

Burnley Council promote active lifestyles and particularly outdoor activities including rounders, walks and bike rides to their clients, and have planned a radio campaign. Burnley parkrun is also supported by two local running clubs. Initially the run was launched without publicity other than a press release to the local paper.

Ormskirk parkrun have promoted their event in the West Lancashire Borough Council staff newsletter. Edge Hill University did not promote the parkrun initially as they wanted to use a 'soft' launch to see how they coped with run numbers. However, the university is now planning to promote it to the new intake of students in September, and is considering an incentive scheme linking the parkrun to discounts on gym memberships or other facilities.

Penrith parkrun has been promoted to council staff through internal meetings and news boards, and externally it is promoted through the tourism team, via the council website, and through social media. They also plan to promote the event to leisure centre members.

Results and Benefits

Paul Foster, the originator of Burnley parkrun, feels that it has proved itself. Two years in, the event is entirely run by volunteers and has grown steadily, averaging 227 runners a week over the last month. It has also helped Paul to bring other initiatives and events to Burnley, such as new beginner running groups, getting more people qualified as run leaders, establishing new safe, [traffic-free 3-2-1 run routes](#) in parks around Burnley, and developing the Pennine Lancs 10K, which attracted over 2000 runners. Further benefits have

been the establishment of a new volunteering initiative, increased use of the park, and the opportunity for two different council departments to work together for mutual benefit.

At the time of writing Ormskirk parkrun has been running for just ten weeks, but despite its soft launch and difficulties such as construction work, it averaged 79 runners a week over the last month. The parkrun has begun to grow via word of mouth, attracting Edge Hill staff, and feedback has been positive.

Ormskirk's Event Director, Paul Cotterill, made the point that while Ormskirk parkrun is growing steadily, its main appeal may be to people who already engage in physical activity. A possible next step would be to establish an event where it might attract more non-runners and promote increased physical activity, and have a greater impact on local public health and reduction of health inequalities; especially if this can be linked to encouraging primary school children to take part in physical activity.

Penrith parkrun is only 17 weeks old, but it is already close to achieving a key aim, for the event to be run by volunteers. The event has averaged 65 runners a week over the last month, and while the council did not want to measure success solely by numbers, this has exceeded expectations. Ian Parker, who helped to establish the run, feels that the initial investment of £2500 is paying for itself, as the same sum would be needed to finance a six-week 'come and try it' course with no continuation route. The council views the parkrun as an additional local opportunity to participate, and an additional use for their outdoor leisure facilities. They also emphasised their pleasure that it promotes fun, has a social element, and allows different types of runners to take part.

Looking more widely, a recent research study explored the public health potential of parkrun. All adult parkrun registrants were invited to participate in the study, with 7308 providing valid data. The study found that 51% of participants were not regular runners before registering, with a quarter describing themselves as non-runners; 'this quarter was more likely to include women, and those who were overweight, or with a limiting disability or health problem: all groups that are overrepresented in adult physical inactivity statistics' (Stevinson and Hickson: 4-5). Over half the survey respondents 'reported benefits for health, weight control and psychological well-being; particularly in the case of regular attenders (Stevinson and Hickson: 5). The study also found that, while running or athletics involvement normally decreases with age, parkrun is most popular among 35-54 year-olds (61% of attendees), and 14% of attendees are over 55. The study concluded that there was scope to investigate parkrun's effectiveness as 'a cost-effective community-based intervention for improving public health' (Stevinson and Hickson: 7).

Finally, some comments about parkrun from regular participants:

'parkrun gives me a kick-start to the weekend like no other. I'm up and about and have done some worthwhile exercise giving me the rest of the day free to spend with my husband.'

'I was running when I started parkrun and thought I quite liked running on my own. The parkrun community are so passionate and supportive, it's hard not to be drawn in. We used to fit running into our Saturdays, and now we fit our Saturdays around parkrun. It doesn't just benefit your physical health when you get involved, it improves your mental wellbeing, you feel part of a family. That is a powerful thing.'

'parkrun has changed my life. I've never been happier or healthier. It's not just the running but all the wonderful new friends I've met are fundamental to the success of it. A couple of years ago I couldn't run down the street. On Sunday I'm doing my first half marathon on my 50th birthday!'

'I was first properly introduced to parkrun when I was expecting my daughter...I was soon swept along with enthusiasm and found myself volunteering! My first parkrun, post baby, was more of a park-walk if I'm honest and I struggled round in 40 minutes and 40 seconds. 17 months on I'm a stone lighter and almost 12 minutes faster...and it's mostly thanks to parkrun and the great community of people that come with it who have encouraged me all the way.'

Risks

While it would be impossible for a running event to be entirely without risk, various measures are in place to mitigate risks at parkruns:

- anyone wishing to set up a new event has to complete a standard risk assessment, usually with a member of the parkrun team
- the parkrun website and event pages contain safety information and advice such as descriptions of potential hazards. Runners are also reminded to 'give way to other park users'
- children under 11 have to run with an adult, and dogs must be on a lead; this message is reinforced at the pre-run briefing
- before each run, one of the Run Director's duties is to walk the course. If they feel that it is not safe to run, the event will be cancelled for that week. parkruns may also be cancelled if another event is taking place in the park which may conflict with it
- the course information page for each parkrun asks runners to make sure they are fit enough to run 5K
- all runs are marshalled by volunteers, who can help in the event of an incident

Tips and Advice

Burnley and Penrith parkruns provided some further suggestions for a council thinking about supporting a parkrun:

- allow 8 to 12 months to set it up
- ensure that thought is given to the site and route, bearing in mind that it will be used every week of the year, and that stakeholders are consulted and aware of how the event runs
- ensure that for each event there is a core team of volunteers who are committed to parkrun and who know what they are committing to. Advise them to visit a local run and get involved
- link in with local clubs and running groups
- don't just measure by number, look at the wider positives
- work with a new parkrun group and support them through the process
- be patient and watch it grow!

The Ormskirk parkrun team recommended linking with the community and voluntary sector, and using the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model to encourage joint working between partners.

References and Acknowledgements

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[James Brilliant, 'Parkrun, the running revolution coming soon to a park near you', The Guardian, 11 March 2013](#), accessed 10 June 2014.

[NHS Choices, 'Life after Couch to 5K'](#), accessed 1 July 2014.

Stevinson, C and Hickson, M (2013) 'Exploring the public health potential of a mass community participation event', *Journal of Public Health*, 36(2): 268-74.

Information on all parkruns, and their contact details, can be found on their event page at www.parkrun.org.uk

