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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 (Williams and Fullagar, 2019; 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 (Wiltshire, Fullagar and Stevinson, 2018; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). This article focuses on parkrun[1] 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 research project that engaged volunteer-led physical activity organisers in the development of inclusive strategies. parkrun provides a unique health-oriented organisational context for understanding the challenges and opportunities of developing inclusive volunteer-led events.

Community-based sport events that promote social interaction have been identified as successful across a number of sites and localised programs (e.g., running and walking groups, public exercise classes) (Heath *et al*., 2012). Other studies have focused specifically on the potential of leveraging mass participation sport events to sustain regular participation in physical activity, particularly for traditionally 'harder to reach' groups, such as women (Lane *et al.,* 2015; Murphy *et al.,* 2015). Focusing on an Irish running event, Lane *et al.* (2015) identified the issue of 'relapse' after 'one off' event participation. An intervention was designed to promote local physical activity opportunities with some success amongst women. Yet, mass sport events have also come under scrutiny for their narrow focus on elite 'sport identities' that fail to connect with diverse groups. This scrutiny also focuses on their top down (commercial or non-profit) management and the lack of a demonstrable effect on community participation after the extensive promotion of mega-sport events (e.g.

[1] parkrun is written with a lowercase 'p' throughout this article which reflects their branding.

Olympic and Paralympic Games) (e.g., Weed *et al.*, 2015). Subsequently, working with local communities needs to be at the heart of tackling inactivity and engaging under-represented groups in more diverse forms of sport and recreation provision (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011).

Our parkrun research project emerged out of a 'sandpit event' held by the UK-based charity Cancer Research UK that brought together a range of academics, health professionals, and charity organisations to fund innovative approaches to prevention research with 'hard to reach groups'. The research team was composed of professionals (Cancer Prevention Ireland and the Islington Bangladeshi Association) and academics from different disciplines (sociology, psychology, physiotherapy). The collaboration was formed through a shared desire to understand how parkrun worked as an informal health promotion setting, to address inequalities affecting participation and the prevention of chronic illness. Physical activity interventions that *engage* citizens who experience inequality and poorer health outcomes have been identified as important approaches in the broader 'social ecology' of preventing non-communicable diseases (World Health Organisation, 2010). A recent Public Health England report echoes this approach to valuing community-centred approaches when it states: 'participatory approaches directly address the marginalisation and powerlessness caused by entrenched health inequalities' (Public Health England, 2015, p. 5).

parkrun Research Literature

The emerging body of research on parkrun from the UK and Australia has identified the capacity of the event to engage people who are less active and experience constraints to participation: those with lower levels of education (Sharman *et al.*, 2018), women, older people, those with various health/ mental health conditions or disabilities (Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Grunseit *et al.*, 2018; Morris and Scott, 2018; Stevinson and Hickson, 2014; Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018; Wiltshire, Fullagar and Stevinson, 2018). One of the first studies conducted with over 7000 parkrunners in the UK identified the majority as not having been regular runners prior to their parkrun registration and reported benefits related to psychological well-being and sense of community (Stevinson *et al.*, 2015). More recently, in a prospective 12-month study of newly registered parkrun participants (n = 354) showed that the participants

benefited from improved fitness. In addition, to an increase in weight loss, participants also reported an increase of 39 minutes of increased physical activity per week (Stevinson and Hickson, 2018).

parkrun has been consistently identified as a site of social interaction that connects people in local places (Hindley, 2018) and across places with the rise of 'parkrun tourism' (Sharman *et al.,* 2018). However, parkrun also risks entrenching inequitable patterns of access to social and cultural capital if inclusion is not addressed (Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). Stevinson and Hickson (2014) identified lower engagement with participants with low incomes and culturally diverse backgrounds. There has also been little research that has explored the more nuanced, intersectional relations of inequality (connecting income, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality etc) that shape participation. Importantly, the organisational identity of parkrun has evolved as it has grown over time and moved from a 'sport' orientation to a focus on community inclusion, collaboration and engagement for a 'healthier and happier planet' (Reece *et al*., 2018, p. 327). Our research sought to move beyond an assumption that parkrun 'is' inclusive because it is free, local and non-traditional, to explore *how* parkrun volunteers can be engaged to develop knowledge and inform strategies that are responsive to the localised context of participation.

Background

Since it began in 2004 parkrun has continued to expand across the UK and in April 2019 there were 616 sites. parkrun has maintained its 'free' participation policy through a volunteer-based model of delivery. Core funding for the small paid staff team and operational costs is obtained from corporate sponsors (e.g., sport clothing, insurance) which align with its mission. As a citizen-led community organization, parkrun has sought to replicate its model across the globe and there are currently 1809 sites across the world (https://www.parkrun.com/ last accessed 13 April 2019). In April 2019, there were 1,996,908 parkrunners registered in the UK (who have averaged 13.8 parkruns each). The average completion 'times' have steadily lengthened, indicating a growth in walkers and slower runners (Reece *et al*., 2018). In recognition of the potential of parkrun to engage less active groups, strategic relationships were developed with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games legacy plans to support new events in

these cities. In December 2018, Sport England announced specific funding to establish 200 new parkruns in areas of social deprivation and to encourage people who experience marginalisation (women, low income, culturally diverse, older, disabled etc) to become more physically active (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…). And it's why we've kept the format of parkrun so simple: register once, then turn up and take part wherever you want, whenever you want….parkrun's simple concept should – and really can – exist in every town in the world. So no-one should ever have to pay to go running in their community regularly, safely and for fun". http://www.parkrun.com/about/

The uniqueness of parkrun lies in its global governance structure, non-for-profit status and industry partnerships that shape the growth of active local and global communities. This occurs through a grassroots volunteer culture and innovative use of digital media (e.g., Facebook, Flicker, Twitter). Such an event subsequently offers a unique opportunity to understand the "how, what and why" of parkrun's success as well as the challenges. By collaborating with volunteer organisers to identify localised strategies that could be embedded in delivery we can begin to unpick such areas.

Research Design and Methodology

Design: The project used a modified participatory action research (PAR) design across four parkrun sites in the UK (Northern Ireland (NI), South West England (SWE), Inner London (L) and Scotland (S)). A PAR design seeks to involve research

participants in each step of the research process. This is to enable shared understandings to be produced through an 'action-reflection' cycle to effect social change (Frisby *et al*., 2005). Steps generally include framing questions about social change, selecting methods, collecting data, analysing and reflecting upon the findings to identify actions for change. The specific context of the research funding shaped our decision to adopt a 'modified' PAR approach. The collaborative sandpit process required each team to develop research questions and methods that were reviewed as part of the funding process during the sandpit. Therefore, there was no involvement of the parkrun co-researchers at the formative stage. In addition, the timeframe for data collection and analysis was limited by funding to one year 2014-15 (with a one year follow up in 2016 to identify the implementation of actions for change). The following research questions shaped the direction of the study and the parkrun co-researchers contributed to refining the study questions within the methods used:

1. How inclusive is parkrun of non-traditional participants/ marginalised groups who are less active (low income, cultural diversity, disability, age, gender, and health conditions)?
2. What do parkrunners identify as important aspects of the 'participatory culture' that sustains their engagement?
3. What actions do parkrunners identify as potentially improving the engagement of non-traditional participants to create a more inclusive parkrun culture and engage marginalised groups?

We drew upon a concurrent and mixed methods approach that was oriented by a *qualitative* emphasis on interpreting equity issues that affect participation (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Hence, we adopt a constructionist approach that also acknowledges the situated context of our research (human experiences and non-human elements such as weather, parks, survey instruments, websites, audio recorders, meeting notes, cake) and the partiality of all knowledge (participants' and our own). In this way we acknowledge Mantoura and Potvin's (2013) critique of normative notions of participation and consider the dimensions of knowledge production that involve human and non-human actors. We were also guided by the work of Baum *et al.* (2006, p. 854) who describe the epistemological approach of PAR in terms of the process of researchers and participants co-producing shared, change-oriented contextual knowledge: 'at its heart is collective, self-reflective

inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves'.

Below we outline the key phases of the collaborative action-reflection learning cycle that guided the research process and ongoing interpretation of data collected through a mixed methods approach. We followed the same process in each of the four research sites.

Undertaking a Participatory Action Research Process

Phase 1: Collaborating with volunteer organisers to understand the localised context of parkrun participation

The four sites were selected due to their proximity to the primary research team locations across the UK to develop an ongoing relationship with a local parkrun site (SF and JS: South West England; GO: Scotland; MA, SF and SP: London; SA: Northern Ireland). The volunteer run directors at all four parkrun sites that were approached, enthusiastically agreed to be involved in researching strategies to support inclusive participation. The four sites have been anonymized for publication and included quite diverse characteristics with respect to socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic differences. The Northern Ireland parkrun was located in a local parkland in walking distance from the centre of a regional town with a number of low income areas. The Scottish parkrun was located in a popular park on the outskirts of a semi-rural setting of a university town. The London parkrun was located in a multiuse park on the border of an affluent and deprived area with a large British South Asian population. The South West of England site was located in a popular parkland area on the fringes of a regional town with limited public transport and areas of middle and low income nearby.

This phase involved forming a parkrun co-research team in each site (average of 6 volunteer members involved in organising their local parkrun). Each team met formally three times on average over the project and informally with their research team member(s) on numerous occasions (e.g., during parkruns, via email). Minutes were taken of meetings by the researchers and formed part of the dataset. The first

meeting involved a discussion of the project, ethical issues and an invitation to contribute to refining the methods that had been selected within the timeframe. At least one researcher facilitated a discussion of key questions to identify the assumptions and perceptions of parkrun volunteers. Topics discussed included the inclusiveness of parkrun, who does and does not participate from their local community, reasons for participating and constraints to participation.

Phase 2: Researching parkrun participation and localised issues

The online and paper-based surveys were developed by the academic team with piloting and input from co-researchers in the context of the broader literature. The survey monkey link was distributed by the run directors via their local social media accounts two weeks before the site visit. On the day of the main site visit (by the whole academic team), paper surveys were distributed and participants were invited to fill in the questionnaire at the end of their run/volunteer shift. Announcements were made to ensure that no one was filling it twice, although this could not be guaranteed. Each researcher who was assigned to their local parkrun site conducted numerous visits over 12 months to observe, facilitate meetings with the co-research team and also participate in parkrun. Overall, 655 on-line (393) and paper based (262) surveys were completed by respondents aged 16 years and older. We do not have data on response rates or reasons for non-completion. Questions covered motivations for participation, benefits, participation frequency, demographic details, perceptions of inclusiveness and suggestions for change to increase inclusion of parkrunners from diverse backgrounds. For example, 'how has your involvement in parkrun impacted on your health and wellbeing? 'Has attending parkrun had an impact on your friendships and social interactions?' And, 'what strategies could be used to support parkrun to be more inclusive of people who don't often participate?'

We developed the above items rather than using existing validated measures and this is acknowledged as a study limitation. During the site visits to administer the surveys the academic team engaged in participant observation by either completing the run or observing volunteers/runners. At each site in-depth interviews were also completed (19 in total) after each event to explore the meanings of participation and perceptions of inclusiveness (several involved a photo elicitation component and will be reported elsewhere). Three in depth interviews were also conducted with core paid parkrun

staff to explore their perceptions of challenges relating to inclusion and organizational learning. The interviews will be reported separately.

Phase 3: What do we know about parkrun participation? Creating shared understandings of the survey data

The second co-research meeting was held at each parkrun site to discuss a draft summary report that the academic team produced on the preliminary survey findings. These reports provided data (graphs and text) on participant demographics, perceived benefits and motivations, event management and communication. This phase of the project provided an important opportunity for discussing the volunteers' assumptions and perceptions of parkrun's inclusiveness, against the data collected about the local context. In terms of the issues raised by the data (a common observation was the low numbers of people from culturally diverse backgrounds), the process of discussing the reports enabled a shared understanding to develop about how inequalities shape (non)participation. Surfacing assumptions and biases was important given that many volunteers passionately believed that parkrun was naturally inclusive of everyone. We also acknowledge that bias shapes the sample and hence we do not make any claim to representativeness. Summary reports were revised slightly following the contributions of co-researcher interpretations about the localised context (via multiple forms of personal and professional expertise). The reports provided an important reference point in the ongoing process of reflecting on who was not participating and how they could be better engaged.

Phase 4: Identifying actions for change

A final group meeting was held with each parkrun co-research team to discuss a finalised summary report that included further analysis of survey data on the perceptions of inclusiveness and suggestions for change. This stepped process of sharing research data during different phases enabled the co-researchers time to reflect on issues and consider the strategies for change offered by parkrunners in their event. Through reflective discussion of the reports, a set of draft actions for change were produced by each site that responded to local issues. Summary reports were then updated to include these local actions for change and circulated within the co-research teams. Research team also created a one-page summary outlining key issues and

actions for change that was shared publicly in each of the four parkrun sites via social media. Parkrunners were encouraged to provide any further feedback to their parkrun volunteer teams or directly to the academic team. After further discussions amongst the teams about informal feedback, minor changes were made to the site reports as a result. For example, one site wanted the description of the health inequalities reframed to avoid perpetuating negative perceptions (from 'deprived' community to issues of inequality relating to access to recreation). This action-oriented process was designed to engage the parkrun community at each site in the conversation about inclusiveness and raise awareness.

Phase 5: Sharing knowledge about actions for change

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

Phase 6: Reflecting upon changes and challenges

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

Analysis and Discussion

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

Findings

1. Who participates in parkrun?

While we do not claim that the survey results are by any means representative of parkrun participation, they do align with broader patterns for runners in the UK (white, middle class, younger age groups) (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015). However, the demographic profile for our parkrun sample does reflect greater participation by women than is evident in national sport and recreation data. We also acknowledge the bias that is always present in survey recruitment and the challenges of engaging people who may have low levels of literacy. Across the four sites there were six hundred and fifty-five survey respondents (South West: N = 267; London: N = 120; Northern Ireland: N = 98 and Scotland: N = 140; Missing: N = 30) who completed the online survey or paper surveys that were distributed on the day of field

visit. 309 participants identified as men, 332 as women and 3 preferred not to say. This fairly even gender distribution is also similar to the gender breakdown of parkrun registrations where women make up approximately 50% (although women parkrunners actually participate at lower rates than men; *personal communication with parkrun*).

The mean age of respondents was 41.9 years (SD = 11.18; Range: 16-79; 22 missing) with the highest participation age groups being 35-54 years (58.3%), 16-34 years (28.9%) and ≥55 years (12.8%). The ethnic background of the sample was predominantly white (93.1%; 17 missing), while 4.9% of the respondents reported a disability (19 missing), of these 1.7% reported physical impairment and 1.5% reported visual impairment. The majority of parkrunners were in current employment (86%; 18 missing) and 56.8% had a university or college degree or higher (19 missing). 4.3% reported less than £430 as monthly income before tax, 19.1% as £431-1500, 25.8% as £1501-2600 and 17.2% reported at least £4301 monthly income before tax (7.9% preferred not to say; 26 missing). 35.9% of the respondents had been attending parkrun for less than a year (3.1% for 5 years or more: 27 missing). In terms of frequency, most respondents reported participating monthly (47%) or weekly (37.3%).

The pattern of participation revealed largely middle-aged, white, more rather than less affluent and mostly abled bodied parkrunners as the norm and is in line with previously reported findings from a larger study by Stevinson & Hickson (2014). 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 of survey respondents (70.1%) reported that they felt parkrun images and promotion reflected the diversity of people in the community. This inclusive ethos was articulated in relation to parkrun being accessible to all because it was local, free and welcoming. The research methodology importantly opened up the perception of inclusiveness through the shared process of reflecting on the different datasets, assumptions and discussions within co-research teams. In London parkrun, for example, it was evident through the research that the ethnic and religious backgrounds of parkrunners was not reflective of the majority of local residents in this culturally diverse neighbourhood. There were number of comments about the need to address the *lack of diversity* among participants (in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity), as these London respondents stated: ‘more work with local councils and schools. parkrun is very middle class, there could be more interaction with people from working class families’. Furthermore, a respondent suggested that,

> ‘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 ‘constraints’. This acted as a means of increasing awareness about what existing practices were working and how change could be enacted.

When survey respondents were asked about how parkrun could develop strategies to engage people from diverse backgrounds, the majority of comments related to the need for more *promotional strategies* about the nature of the event (friendly ethos, run at your own pace or walk) to reach the broader community. Typical comments

included: ‘people may worry they are too slow or unfit to take part (as I first did), perhaps more could be done to focus on how parkrun is not a race or about a time’ (London respondent) and ‘people think you have to "run" but you can walk it’ (NI respondent). In terms of the friendly parkrun culture, some respondents felt that there was an insider/outsider dynamic created by established social networks in running groups. Such groups were often mentioned in relation to their more visible ‘sport’ identity (club clothing, competitiveness) which was thought to exclude non-sporty runners as a NI respondent said, ‘be less exclusive i.e. if you're not in X [name of a running group] runners you're an outsider’. In contrast, other respondents commented on particular inclusive practices that had become part of parkrun and could be expanded upon. The NI site had begun to support a parkrunner-walker with a visual impairment and this was commented on by many respondents: ‘guide dogs offered and course to help people learn how to guide a person with a visual impairment running/walking’. Respondents in the Scottish parkrun site also commented on the role that café plays and how opening the café over winter would encourage post-run socialising.

Access to local parks was also identified as a constraint to participation for sites that were not easily reached by foot or public transport (the London site was the exception in terms of a highly accessible location). 43.7% of respondents indicated that they strongly agreed that parkrun was hard to get to without using a car. While parkrun is a free event, the transport costs and car use is an equity issue for those on low incomes or with mobility needs. In the next section we discuss what each of the parkrun sites identified as the strategies for change and whether they managed to implement these over a twelve-month period.

3. Inclusive strategies for change

Table 1.1 identifies key themes that encompass the types of inclusive strategies that are being, or could be mobilised by volunteers to effect change at each parkrun site. The central research team analysed the strategies developed across the sites to identify meso or organisational level themes that can inform parkrun’s local and global capacity building strategies; i) promoting the parkrun ‘ethos’ in ways that attract diverse participants, ii) developing joined-up relationships with local organisations (e.g., cultural groups) to enable pathways to parkrun and access to parks, and iii)

fostering an inclusive culture that supports less confident runners from diverse backgrounds. The challenge of change lies with both the *formulation and implementation* of inclusive strategies that rely on volunteer labour and centralised support from parkrun and partner organisations.

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.	
- Changing facebook photo to reflect the 'back end' of the group, not fastest runners up front	SWE SCOT
- Holding 'first timer' targeted event promotion through local media and social media	SWE, SCOT, SCOT
- Inviting local politicians on 'parkrun day' to raise awareness and gain support	NI
- Creating YouTube videos	SWE, SCOT
- Presentations at Community Relations Week, Inter-ethinic forum and promotional posters in different languages and diverse images in press releases used	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	All sites
- develop relationships with running groups and beginner programmes (couch to 5km) to foster pathways to parkrun participation (course completion ritual with first parkrun)	NI
- start new targeted running groups with a focus on non-traditional participants through collaboration with local organisations (eg. Social housing & councils)	NI

- Hosting a forum with council for all parkruns and clubs in the area	
3. Fostering an inclusive culture within parkrun activities to engage participants who are less confident runners and/or are from diverse backgrounds.	
- Regular 'welcome talks' to orient new runners before the run begins & hosting 'bake offs' to encourage socialising after the run	LON
- Make use of cafes (fixed or mobile) after runs to support socialising	LON, SCOT, SWE, NI
- 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)	NI

The twelve-month follow-up identified a number of constraining factors that impacted on the parkrun teams' ability to follow through on some of their identified actions. These issues reflect local differences between the contexts of parkrun sites and culture of volunteer teams, as well as broader socio-political issues and challenges of volunteer-based community organisations. Run directors and volunteer teams identified immediate issues with managing the growing numbers of parkrunners (and hence needing more volunteers). There was some reluctance to actively promote parkrun to attract *more* participants, despite the desire to address inequalities. The demands on volunteer organisers were felt to be increasing with the growth of various bureaucratic requirements (e.g., safety, child protection requirements, managing others) (see also, Nichols, 2017).

For some parkrun sites, such as London, the question about how to engage with culturally diverse communities raised a more complex set of issues about cross-cultural understanding, engagement with groups and appropriate forms of promotion. Culturally sensitive strategies arose (NI) when there was a local parkrun champion to support initiatives (e.g., supporting the translation of parkrun promotional material

into different languages) given that there was no budget to support additional costs (on the process of developing culturally inclusive promotion see, Telenta *et al.,* 2019). For those parkrun sites that were not centrally located, within walking distance or well serviced by public transport, the issue of transport proved to be difficult to address in the context of cuts to local government budgets. A number of sites wanted to have parkrun signage put in their local parks but without funding or park management support this did not happen, except in NI where they had both. Signage of free events within and beyond parks has been identified in relation to promoting participation to regular events in low income neighbourhoods. On the other hand, successful initiatives such as 'first-timers welcome' that Scottish parkrun initiated were continuing (through news in local media/Facebook/word of mouth where more time would be given to first timers in the beginning of parkrun every 2 months).

The effects of austerity in the UK are exacerbated by some local councils that had introduced charges for parking and were considering outsourcing the management of parks. This raises the threat of parkrun being impacted on by other events (charity fun runs that paid for park use). In the follow up, SWE parkrun identified a drop in parkrun participation after parking charges were introduced. Broader initiatives that were beyond the immediate remit of parkrun organisers provide more difficult to implement (e.g. car sharing schemes or improved public transport access) and highlight the need for joined-up planning for active living. In the context of austerity, parkrun faces certain constraints in developing inclusive events. Especially when local park authorities desire to charge for use, despite central health promotion policies that emphasise the importance of physical activity (Fullagar, 2016; Williams and Fullagar, 2019).

Conclusion

The growth of parkrun arguably reflects changing participation trends with the rise of informal community sport and physical activity events. The lessons learned from this volunteer-led movement can contribute insights to inform the development of inclusive, joined up strategies for physical activity promotion across sport, health promotion, community organisations and local government sectors. This article has sought to contribute knowledge about how participatory research processes can mobilise the expertise of volunteers and participants to inform future strategies within

physical activity programmes. Participatory research methodologies can also inform knowledge translation practices by drawing upon the practical knowledge of participants to consider how equity can be approached in sport and health promotion contexts (Edwards and Rowe, 2019; Ponic and Frisby, 2010; Schaillée *et al.*, 2019). One of the major limitations of our research was the constrained timeframe and funding. This reduced our capacity as researchers to develop ongoing collaborations with the parkrun sites and to consider the issues arising in the implementation of their strategies. We also acknowledge that the sample is not representative of parkrun participants and we do not have data on response rates and nor for reasons for non-completion and further research into understanding diverse perspectives is needed.

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

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