



# Project Case Study: ParkPlay

2024



Produced by  
Active Essex Insight & Evaluation Team  
with support from State of Life and ParkPlay



# About ParkPlay



ParkPlay is a national charity that empowers communities to make use of their local parks for free community play every Saturday morning. The sessions are designed to be a safe, welcoming and inclusive way for communities to come together, connect and have fun through active games.

The very first ParkPlay was launched in Basildon in 2021 with the support and guidance of Active Essex and ATF. Following some success in this area, Active Essex and partners invested funding into additional ParkPlays in new areas of Essex.

**14**

**ParkPlays  
in Essex**

**1,706**

**Sessions  
delivered**

**2,999**

**Individuals  
attended**

**28,410**

**Attendances**



# Impact

ParkPlay is effectively engaging deprived communities, those with limiting disabilities, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and people of all ages. Compared to non-players, ParkPlayers report higher levels of physical activity, higher levels of wellbeing as well as higher levels of resilience, increased neighbourhood trust and lower levels of loneliness. For life satisfaction in particular, State of Life found that the more frequently someone attends ParkPlay, the higher their life satisfaction is likely to be. Furthermore, the highest positive effect is found in the 20% most deprived areas,

where ParkPlay is mainly focused. State of Life used the Wellby to calculate the social value of ParkPlay. They very cautiously estimated that in terms of wellbeing improvements, ParkPlay could be worth between £4.6m - £18.2m annually (based on current scale and investment) with a potential social return on investment of £30 for every £1 spent, however there are a number of caveats to this. Read State of Life's full report [HERE](#).



# Learning

## *Physical activity second*

Physical activity is not the primary draw for attending. Rather people come for the social element, the community and sometimes the free food.

## *Who is ParkPlay really for?*

Given the high life satisfaction scores reported by ParkPlay participants, State of Life suggested that those who already have higher levels of wellbeing may be attending rather than the intervention increasing these. It was acknowledged by a member of ParkPlay staff we spoke to that, for some, this may well be the case. However, they suggested that this positivity can act as a draw for those who may have lower levels of wellbeing, an idea that is supported by stories about some of the families who attend.

### ***ParkPlay is a good example of 'joint effort' working***

As opposed to 'top down' approaches which impose solutions onto communities or 'bottom up' approaches which leave communities to develop their own solutions, 'joint effort' working uses the knowledge and skills of both communities and 'the system'. ParkPlay is a great example of this where (when it's working well) the central team both work with 'the system' to set the conditions for success and support a local person to engage their community and deliver on a Saturday.

### ***Embracing a place-based approach is hard to do and we haven't always got it right***

Since launching in 2021, ParkPlay have learned a lot about the flexibility needed to achieve a place-based approach. They now aim to take time and consider with local stakeholders what is going to work in a community and be sustainable, as well as what the assets and resources are. This level of flexibility makes things complicated operationally but ParkPlay are embracing this diversity.

### ***People are a key ingredient for success***

In the early days of ParkPlay, some of the PlayLeaders came from a sports coaching or personal trainer background, but it was found that these kinds of people tended to focus more on the delivery of the session and less on the people. Learnings show that the best PlayLeaders don't just deliver on a Saturday but are embedded in the community and are seen as relatable, whether they live locally or not.

### ***There is a need to consider the sustainability of ParkPlay in Essex***

Currently there are 14 ParkPlays in Essex with more due to launch in 2024. To continue with all of these using the current delivery model would cost an estimated £75,000 per year. There are multiple considerations that could be made including paying PlayLeaders vs a volunteer model and only continuing with well-attended ParkPlays vs building trust with harder to reach communities by turning up week-by-week. None of these decisions are easy so ParkPlay are attempting to take a place-based approach to the question of sustainability and are seeking to consider this with local stakeholders so that something that is acceptable to those involved and that fits the context is put in place.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

1

## *ParkPlay is a valuable intervention*

- ParkPlay has successfully engaged communities living in areas of deprivation and has demonstrated multiple positive outcomes.
- While more work is needed to fully understand the potential social value of ParkPlay, State of Life's cautious estimate is positive.
- ParkPlay plays an important role in building the capacity and confidence of local people to deliver physical activity opportunities which respond to the needs and wants of their community.

2

## *It is important to get the conditions right for ParkPlay*

- Where ParkPlay has worked particularly well in Essex, there has been engagement from different parts of the local system, close partnership working with local organisations who 'get it' and the 'right person' to deliver.
- The way ParkPlay is funded by local places should be reconsidered so that initial funding is given for a scoping and development phase to ensure that all the necessary conditions are in place before committing to delivery.

3

## *The sustainability of ParkPlay needs to be considered*

- The level of investment to continue delivery of the 14 ParkPlays across Essex is significant.
- It is strongly recommended that Active Essex and ParkPlay discuss this issue and work together to come up with possible solutions.

