



## Project Case Study: ParkPlay

### Introduction

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 committed to replicating this intervention in other areas of Essex and leveraged an impressive £70,000 from partners.

Active Essex (LDP, COVID Recovery Fund and Find Your Active)	£202,500
Colchester CCG	£15,000
Tendring CCG	£20,000
Basildon Brentwood and Basildon Health Alliance	£25,000
ECC Levelling Up Fund	£10,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£272,500</b>

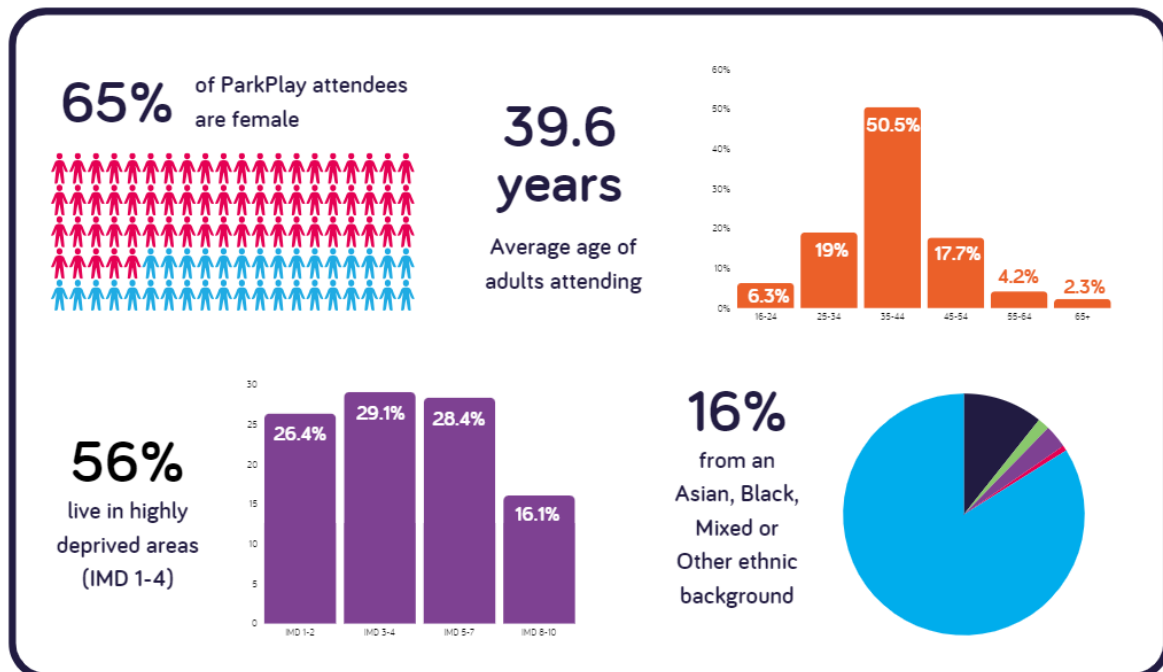
Almost three years after launching in Basildon, there are 14 ParkPlays in Essex with more planned to start in 2024. This felt like an opportune moment to review the impact of ParkPlay and reflect on what has been learned. To do this, Active Essex commissioned State of Life to analyse survey data collected from ParkPlay participants and non-participants (n = 741). In addition to this, Active Essex Researchers undertook 4 observations of ParkPlay sessions and 5 stakeholder interviews.

### Impact

#### *Who Attends?*

Since launching in 2021, Essex has seen 1,706 ParkPlay sessions, with 2,999 individuals attending on 28,410 occasions (an average of 9.5 attendances per person). Of course, some ParkPlays are bigger than others – for example, Vange sees an average of 36 players per week

with more than 20 players attending 95% of the time and Greenstead sees an average of 9 players, never seeing more than 20.



ParkPlay aims to be inclusive and specifically targets those who find it harder to be active. Encouragingly, State of Life found that of those ParkPlayers who responded to the survey, 67.8% live in an area of deprivation (IMD 1-4) and over a third (36.8%) live in one of the 20% most deprived areas in England. Furthermore, more than 20% of ParkPlayers reported having a limiting disability and 18.3% said they are from an Asian, Black, Mixed or Other ethnic background.

ParkPlay also aims to be accessible to all ages and, again, the data suggests that they are achieving this. And Over 80% of survey respondents said that they attend ParkPlay with family members and 15% said that they attend with friends. For Essex ParkPlays, an average of 63% of attendees are aged under 14, and nationally, almost a quarter of registered ParkPlayers who have attended at least one session are aged 45 or over. The inter-generational nature of ParkPlay was noted at an observation of a Colchester ParkPlay:

*“What I found really interesting, was that there was another physical activity session happening on the other side of the park. It looked like all the kids involved were having a great time, but the adults were all stood on the sidelines, rather than joining in like the adults had at ParkPlay.” (Researcher)*

### Physical Activity

ParkPlay provides an opportunity for people to be physically active, so it is unsurprising that that the average number of days doing physical activity rose from 3.19 for non-participants and those who had just started to 4.03 for ParkPlayers.

Survey respondents were also asked about their capability, opportunity and motivation for physical activity, which State of Life found to be positively associated with attending ParkPlay. This was backed up by what was said in interviews; ParkPlay seems to give people opportunities to be physically active that they haven't found elsewhere. Examples included older people who feel welcome because they are able to dip out to make the tea when they've done enough for their ability, parents who don't need to find childcare because they are being active with their children, and children who don't enjoy or aren't able to access the other opportunities available to them.

*"And people want to get fit and be active but they don't always want to sign up for a gym or play football. And that's not what ParkPlay is. It's active games. There's no pressure to win this, or bench-press this, or do this better, or score a goal. You play to your ability."* (PlayLeader)

*"We've seen children who feel like PE at school is not for them, suddenly they feel like they're in an environment where they can be more confident."* (ParkPlay Staff Member)

### **Wellbeing**

When asked about the impacts of ParkPlay, the Play Leaders we spoke to talked primarily about wellbeing and how bringing people together at ParkPlay gives has the benefits of both getting them active, which is beneficial for mental health, and giving them the opportunity to chat to others from the area who may be facing similar challenges to them, giving a feeling that people are not alone.

*"Mental health is a big thing, particularly at the moment. And I think a lot of them come along to get out in the open, jump around, talk to people. Some people it's the only socialising they actually get."* (PlayLeader)

State of Life found that life satisfaction, happiness, feelings of worthwhile and self-reported health were all positively associated with attending ParkPlay. For life satisfaction in particular, they 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.

In saying this, the increases in these wellbeing measures are considerably higher than expected (average life satisfaction score for non ParkPlayers of 6.56 compared to 7.89 for ParkPlayers). While probability suggests that attending ParkPlay does increase wellbeing, it is unlikely to be to this extent and State of Life have questioned whether those attending ParkPlay already have higher levels of wellbeing than those who do not.

### **Community Cohesion**

State of Life found that those who attend ParkPlay tended to have higher levels of resilience and increased neighbourhood trust and lower levels of loneliness.

The impact of ParkPlay on community cohesion is also something that was frequently mentioned in interviews with people speaking about the feeling of community that ParkPlay brings, the friendships that were being developed and the ways that ParkPlayers are supporting one another, even beyond a Saturday.

*“They have WhatsApp groups, they speak to each other, they meet each other... They help each other out. They’ve become friends. It’s really quite beautiful and it’s hard to explain... they’re learning how to communicate and how to share. I can’t express how lovely that is to watch.” (PlayLeader)*

As mentioned above, State of Life found that a high proportion of ParkPlayers attend with their children. They also found that ParkPlayers reported spending more time with their children than non-ParkPlayers, suggesting that ParkPlay may also be having a positive impact on cohesion within families.

State of Life also found that those who attend ParkPlay were more likely to be volunteering than those who do not (11% points difference). It was also mentioned in interviews how ParkPlayers are becoming more involved in other aspects of community life, with several stories of participants accessing other support available in the community as well as people starting to volunteer, at ParkPlay and beyond.

*“I’ve got 2 people, a mum and dad who come with their children – mum is now volunteering with ATF, dad has been linked with Pedal Power and has a bike that gets him to work, their son volunteers as a young leader at ParkPlay. They’re really doing stuff as a family! But when I first met that family, they were in crisis. And now they’re supporting other people... because they turned up for ParkPlay!” (PlayLeader)*

### **Impact on PlayLeaders**

While they were not included in the survey, the positive impact of ParkPlay on PlayLeaders was mentioned in interviews with multiple examples being given of people who don’t have a sports background using skills that they didn’t realise they had and growing in confidence. This includes one Mum who works in a solicitors office:

*“She initially needed a bit of persuading and was lacking in confidence but a few years later, she’s got massive amounts of confidence from it and skills that she never knew she had before but she also gets that warm feeling of being a pillar of her community, bringing her community together on a Saturday and enabling them to connect, enjoy themselves and be a bit more active, kids and adults all together.” (ParkPlay Staff Member)*

### **Social Value**

State of Life used the Wellby to calculate the social value of ParkPlay. Their report gives a very cautious estimate of ParkPlay’s potential wellbeing impact and return on investment and states that ParkPlay could be worth between £4.6m - £18.2m annually (based on current scale

and investment) with a social return on investment of £30 for every £1 spent. You can read State of Life's full report [HERE](#).

## Learning

### *Physical Activity Second*

As with many of Active Essex's other investments, a key learning from ParkPlay is that physical activity is not the primary draw for attending. Rather people come for the social element, the community and sometimes the free food.

As mentioned above, one of the key impacts of ParkPlay is increased community cohesion and ParkPlay no longer advertise their sessions as an opportunity for physical activity. Rather, they say it's about coming out, having fun and meeting people.

*"One of the things we've realised is that ParkPlay is not just about the activity and not just about the physical activity benefits, but it's about much more than that... We quite quickly realised that it was about the community and the connections that people were making." (ParkPlay Staff Member)*

*"I find that's something about [my ParkPlay], they all come for the social – the activities are the fun that goes with the social." (PlayLeader)*

Many of the PlayLeaders in Essex bring along food and drink and this is seen as an important part of the session and adds to the social element. One PlayLeader we were told about in another area of the country even shares a photo of the food she is preparing before the session to encourage people to attend. Given that ParkPlay is primarily in areas of deprivation, food poverty is an issue for some in these communities and it was commented that perhaps ParkPlay could do even more to address this:

*"The tea time clubs we run, we get 70 or 80 kids and we feed them and their families... ParkPlay has the opportunity to offer that support at the weekend but I'm not sure they fully understand what they could be." (Locally Trusted Organisation)*

### *Who is ParkPlay really for?*

As mentioned above, ParkPlay is effectively engaging those living in areas of deprivation. Evidence consistently shows that people living in these areas have poorer outcomes, including lower levels of physical activity and wellbeing, than those living in more affluent areas. So, it was surprising that State of Life found such high levels of wellbeing, particularly life satisfaction, among ParkPlayers. As previously mentioned, their suggestion is that this may be due to ParkPlay being attended by those who already have higher levels of wellbeing rather than the influence of attending ParkPlay.

It was acknowledged by a member of ParkPlay staff we spoke to that, for some, this may well be the case given that attending on a Saturday morning requires a certain level of motivation.

Furthermore, they noted the level of positivity among those who attend ParkPlay, further adding to State of Life's theory. However, they also suggested that this positivity can act as a draw for those who may have lower levels of wellbeing:

*"There is so much positivity [at ParkPlay]. Which is sometimes the reason people come after a boring, structured, negative week." (ParkPlay Staff Member)*

The PlayLeaders we spoke to also mentioned families who were facing significant challenges in life, such as a family who had recently suffered a very traumatic bereavement, a lady who is bringing up her grandson and an elderly lady who was really isolated during COVID and initially came along to ParkPlay very tentatively.

Another suggestion by ParkPlay to explain State of Life's findings is that the impact of attending on a Saturday has an immediate impact on wellbeing due to being welcomed into the community, the enjoyment, playing with family, as well as the endorphins produced by being physically active. A proportion of respondents completed the survey straight after attending a ParkPlay session and State of Life did indeed find a 'focusing effect' with higher levels of wellbeing reported by these individuals.

Without tracking individuals, it is not possible to know the extent to which attending ParkPlay affects wellbeing, how quickly this happens and whether baseline wellbeing levels for ParkPlayers are representative of others living in their community. And without speaking to more participants about their reasons for attending, it is not possible to know what role the positivity of those attending has on drawing in people from the local area who have lower levels of wellbeing.

ParkPlay certainly seem to be more focused on the impact that the intervention can have in areas of deprivation, even if it attended by the happier, more motivated, more positive members of those communities:

*"If you advertise this free opportunity to be active, you can see that the people who jump on that first could be slightly more pre-disposed. On the flip side, if I go to places like Northlands or Jaywick, you might get people who are slightly more pre-disposed but they're still in Jaywick!" (Park Play Staff Member)*

Interestingly, when ParkPlay was tried in more affluent areas of Essex, it didn't work and those sessions have now stopped. A number of those we spoke to suggested that ParkPlay wasn't as needed or as valued in these communities and that middle-class families are more likely to have other activities on a Saturday morning.

*"I think the communities don't need it quite so much. They can afford to pay for that activity as a family – they don't need it to be free." (Active Essex Staff Member)*

### ***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.

It was acknowledged by a member of Active Essex staff that one of the reasons ParkPlay has worked so well in Basildon is because of the partnership between the Active Partnership, the Local Authority and a Locally Trusted Organisation who are embedded in the community and have been able to identify PlayLeaders who are the ‘right’ people.

One of the functions that the ParkPlay central team has is to support PlayLeaders with necessary governance such as DBS checks, insurance, safeguarding and permissions. It is hard to see how local people would be able to operate in such a safe way if they were not associated with ParkPlay or perhaps some other organisation willing to do these things. Even the Find Your Active small grants programme offered by Active Essex requires people to be part of a constituted group or a sole trader, which we have seen from other work feels unobtainable for some community members who are perfectly placed to engage their community and get them involved in physical activity (see Microgrants Report).

*“I hope that we are helping ‘lift up’ communities and individuals and giving them some support so that they can ultimately do something brilliant for themselves. Which might be more difficult if you just said ‘crack on’.” (ParkPlay Staff Member)*

ParkPlay also offers training to PlayLeaders building both their capacity and, perhaps most importantly, their confidence. Again, we have seen from previous work (see Microgrants Report) that local people often need to be encouraged and in interviews we heard many stories of local people experiencing a lack of confidence in their ability to volunteer at or lead a ParkPlay.

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

It is clear that for ParkPlay, taking a place-based approach is incredibly important and there is a recognition that they have not always been as flexible as needed to achieve this:

*“We’ve realised too that we need to have some red lines but they need to be quite wide – so as long as ParkPlay is safe and welcoming it looks very different in different places. So as an organisation we have to be quite hands off and allow that to flourish.” (ParkPlay Staff Member)*

They now aim to consider at the beginning what is going to work in that community and be sustainable, as well as what the assets and resources are. This level of flexibility makes things complicated operationally because across the country there are different models with some PlayLeaders being voluntary, some being paid, some being paid by ParkPlay and some being paid by other organisations. But there seems to be an acceptance of this diversity by the ParkPlay team and an attempt to embrace it.

A member of Active Essex staff also noted the importance of early conversations to make sure that the conditions, both within a place and the system, are right for ParkPlay. They felt that the time had not always been taken to do this, which had sometimes led to challenges with implementation:

*“We’ve almost set them up to fail because we didn’t ask that question in the first place. We’ve funded it the wrong way. We put investment on the table and there hasn’t been the time and energy to go into it... I realise sometimes you need the money on the table to go out and have those conversations – it’s a real chicken and egg situation.”* (Active Essex Staff Member)

As with other Active Essex interventions, we have seen that it is not possible to ‘scale & replicate’ without thought for the context. For example, the positive working relationship with ATF as a delivery partner was identified as a success and this model was used in other areas. However, even when the organisations chosen were embedded in the community as ATF is, they saw it more as any other paid opportunity, taking the money and using a portion of it to pay a young sports coach to deliver a session on a Saturday morning. In contrast, ATF had embedded ParkPlay into their wider work, seeing it as part of a ‘package’ and encouraging their PlayLeaders to take ownership.

*“We’ve said time and time again that you can’t just take a project, plonk it somewhere else and expect it to work.”* (Active Essex Staff Member)

One of the considerations which does seem to have been made consistently in Essex is which green spaces are the right ones for a ParkPlay. Even at the beginning, the ParkPlay team looked at a number of parks in Basildon and were guided by Active Essex and Basildon Council on which ones were most appropriate. Since then, choosing new areas has also been guided by local people, with one PlayLeader explaining how the ParkPlay team had trusted her on where the right place was:

*“They wanted to do it in [another area] but I couldn’t commit to [that area] and I didn’t want to commit to [that area] because [ParkPlay area] is often forgotten about – it’s a much smaller community. Even the leisure centre doesn’t do classes. And now they’ve put loads more houses, people moan about kids walking the streets. Luckily, they came and surveyed the parks here.”* (PlayLeader)

Similarly, the PlayLeaders are trusted to deliver the sessions in a way that suits and responds to the needs of those who are attending. This is something that the PlayLeaders we spoke to are happy to do, suggesting that they normally go into a session with an idea of what they are going to do, but not with a plan:

Sometimes this means that sessions do not look like ‘ParkPlay sessions’ but, again, the ParkPlay team is attempting to embrace this:

*The best example of this is Southall – it’s so informal and loose and they’re playing games with glitter filled balloons but then I realise that there are 120 people here and they’re have a great time. Why should I care if they’re not playing one of our prescribed games?* (ParkPlay Staff Member)



In saying this, there was some challenge from those we spoke to that there could be scope for even more flexibility such as delivering sessions after school when you have more of a 'captive audience' rather than on a Saturday morning.

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

The greatest learning for ParkPlay has been the importance of getting the 'right' person.

*"If you're a sporty person, the person leading the session doesn't really matter – it probably helps if they're engaging. But if you're not, this is all about people and enjoyment."* (ParkPlay Staff Member)

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 and engagement with the community outside of a Saturday. It was noted that this was one of many learnings that was influenced by ATF who tend not to use traditional sports coaches, but people who have enthusiasm and a desire to help their community.

When asked what skills and qualities a good PlayLeader has, those we spoke to said things like 'enthusiastic', 'empathetic', 'caring', 'vibrant and bubbly personality', 'understanding of local area', 'able to galvanise communities' and 'good with kids but gets on well with adults'. It is worth noting that nobody said that good PlayLeaders deliver good sessions. In fact the opposite is true; one PlayLeader was described as *"not doing anything extraordinary in terms of how she runs the session"*, but this was seen as a positive in that it puts her on a level with those attending and makes it easier to draw them in to help.

Interestingly, there was disagreement among the people we spoke to about how important it is for the PlayLeader to come from the area the ParkPlay is being held in. One PlayLeader felt they could deliver a ParkPlay session anywhere and another felt that being local and having so much local knowledge and so many local connections was one of their greatest strengths as a PlayLeader.

*"Whether you're setting up here, or Dagenham, or Luton, or wherever it is, you never know who you're going to get anyway."* (PlayLeader)

*"I think if people know that you're from their area or from their life, they trust you a little bit more... so they're more likely to come along. That's the person who lives round the corner from me, she lives in my street, her kids went to school with my kids – all of that stuff helps."* (PlayLeader)

However, the consensus is 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. One PlayLeader who does not live, but works locally was described as:

*“engaging but inclusive. He looks like the community – he doesn’t stick out like someone who’s just been plonked into [the area]. He just goes down in his shorts and trainers. He fits in. He doesn’t lead in a ‘dictative’ way, it’s a ‘we’.”* (Active Essex Staff Member)

In more than one area of Essex, there have been challenges finding the right person (or people) to deliver ParkPlay and it has been suggested that in one particular area of Essex, these people simply don’t exist. However, one PlayLeader challenged this idea strongly, suggesting that every community has assets and sometimes we just need to work a bit harder to find them.

*“I think it’s so important to find that leader that’s already based in that community because they’re your asset, they’re the people that make it work, the people that know the area and know their community well. For years, agencies have been shipping people in who can do stuff but actually there’s lots of talent in the area – tap into it, use it.”* (Play Leader)

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

The question of sustainability was one that came up a lot with acknowledgement all round that the current model in Essex is unlikely to be sustainable long-term. 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.

*“When we started, it was hoped that it would be a paid role that lasted. But then you do the maths... that’s not sustainable.”* (Locally Trusted Organisation)

It may seem tempting to consider delivering Saturday morning sessions without the ParkPlay branding, but as mentioned above, ParkPlay gives support to local people to become PlayLeaders by helping with governance as well as building their capacity and confidence - contributions that should not be underestimated in terms of value.

In some areas of the country, PlayLeaders are not paid and funding is only required to cover ParkPlay’s central costs and their role in ‘setting the conditions’ before launch and supporting the PlayLeader. While this ‘volunteer led’ approach has been shown to work in other models, such as Park Run, it was felt that the context is likely to be different and that people living in affluent areas are likely to have more capacity to give their time than those living in the areas of deprivation targeted by ParkPlay where people are likely to live less predictable lives and either be more financially-poor or time-poor. Indeed, one of the Play Leaders we spoke to said that if they weren’t doing ParkPlay on a Saturday, they would have to use the time for other work:

*“If I wasn’t at ParkPlay, I would be working. I work 6 days a week mornings and evenings. If I wasn’t being paid, I’d have to find that income from somewhere. If I was retired, I would definitely volunteer. While I’ve got a mortgage, I would volunteer when I could.”* (PlayLeader)

There was also a suggestion that financial reward can raise aspirations and helps people see that the skills they have are valuable.

*“Why would you expect someone to spend their time getting 30 people... I think it’s a real skill to get 30 people together to be active. If this has so many benefits, why would that not be financially rewarded.”* (Locally Trusted Organisation)

In saying all this, one PlayLeader we spoke to felt that being part of the ParkPlay community in her local area was reward enough and if even ParkPlay stopped existing, they would still go to the park each week, although they might take days off when it’s raining.

Another question raised around sustainability is value for money, particularly for those areas where there are only a small number attending each week. Again, it would be tempting to think that these ParkPlays are not reaching enough people and so should be stopped. However, one PlayLeader we spoke to helpfully mentioned that it can take time to build trust within communities, particularly communities in areas of deprivation which are so often ‘done to’:

*“There’s a need to build trust so it’s about turning up every week even if you only get two people because those two people will tell other people you’re reliable. And let’s face it, I come from an area where people come in to do these ‘wonderful projects’ and then drop you on your face and let you down. Stuff didn’t materialise and then every time someone says they’re going to do something you’re a bit like ‘yeah alright’. So proving you’re going to be there and you’re going to do what you say - it’s what you need to do to build trust.”* (Play Leader)

And so Active Essex have a difficult decision to make about how long to continue with ParkPlay in areas where the community hasn’t really engaged with it. Are they not engaging because they don’t want it? Or has it not been there long enough to build trust?

As with all other elements of their model, 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. It was noted that in some areas of Essex, this has been challenging to date because the ParkPlay team have been looked to to make decisions about places they don’t know well.

*“It’s difficult because we received the funding for [that area] but now [local stakeholders] are almost completely out of the loop and they do expect us to make those decisions.”* (ParkPlay Staff Member)

## Conclusions and Recommendations

There is considerable evidence that **ParkPlay is a valuable intervention**. It has managed to engage communities living in areas of deprivation, it has demonstrated positive outcomes across health and wellbeing as well as community cohesion, and State of Life’s cautious

estimate suggests that ParkPlay's potential wellbeing impact and return on investment is excellent. Furthermore, ParkPlay plays an important role in Active Essex's intention to work in an 'Asset Based Community Development' way by building the capacity and confidence of local people to deliver physical activity opportunities which respond to the needs and wants of their community.

It is clearly 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 engage the community deliver on a Saturday. When these elements are missing, ParkPlays have been less successful and Active Essex may have been better off using their limited resources on developing ParkPlays in other areas where there are the right conditions. It is therefore recommended that **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.

**The sustainability of ParkPlay is a key issue** that needs to be considered as the level of investment to continue delivery of the 14 ParkPlays across Essex is significant, particularly while central costs are having to be 're-couped' through local investment. While no recommendations can be made here about a way forward, it is strongly recommended that **Active Essex and ParkPlay discuss this issue and work together** to come up with possible solutions.

*This report was produced by Active Essex Insight & Evaluation Team with support from State of Life and ParkPlay*