



**SPORT
ENGLAND**

ACTIVE DESIGN CASE STUDY
**ACTIVE PARKS
BIRMINGHAM:
LET'S TAKE
THIS OUTSIDE**



ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:

1. ACTIVITY
FOR ALL



5. NETWORK OF
MULTIFUNCTIONAL
OPEN SPACE



9. MANAGEMENT,
MAINTENANCE,
MONITORING &
EVALUATION



10. ACTIVITY
PROMOTION &
LOCAL CHAMPIONS



ACTIVE DESIGN CASE STUDY

ACTIVE PARKS BIRMINGHAM: LET'S TAKE THIS OUTSIDE

ACTIVE PARKS USES PARKS AND GREENSPACES TO CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN FUN PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES, IMPROVING THEIR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Active Parks uses local city parks and greenspaces to create opportunities for Birmingham's residents to participate in a wide range of fun physical activities to improve their health and wellbeing. Programmes run throughout the year and include activities to suit every member of the family – from walks and rambles, running, cycling, Zumba, Tai Chi, sports like rounders, basketball, boules, tennis, rowing and canoeing to other activities like gardening, conservation and bush craft.

Active Parks is part of the City Council's BeActive Scheme, which was started in 2008 to provide the city's residents with free access to sports facilities. The scheme has shown that price is a barrier to participation and that access to free exercise increases people's likelihood of participating. It has also had success with engaging demographic groups who are currently under-represented in terms of their engagement in sport and physical activity, such as women and ethnic minorities.

Active Parks is a natural extension to the BeActive Scheme, bringing activities out of the gyms and leisure centres and into the heart of communities. It locates activities in local parks closer to the people it is trying to engage. All activities are free and you can either book onto a session or simply drop in on an activity.

Active Parks first piloted in 2013 in six parks and has now grown to providing activities in over 60 parks across Birmingham, providing regular sessions tailor-made in partnership with local communities and groups. Placing the emphasis on having fun and improving social and mental well-being, over getting involved in traditional sports and fitness, Active Parks aims to make their sessions accessible and approachable for all individuals and families in Birmingham, improving the sense of community cohesion, ownership and pride in place.



**GAYNOR ROBERTS, ACTIVE PARKS
PROGRAMME MANAGER**

Gaynor, who manages the programme in Birmingham, explains how Active Parks works, who it engages and shares some personal highlights.



ACTIVITY FOR ALL

Activities that are put on in local parks are not simply locating a gym session outdoors; rather, they are designed to meet the needs of those who would not normally use traditional sports facilities. How Active Parks does this is to provide low impact activities that are fun, friendly, which are not intimidating and don't rely on owning sports kit and equipment. Taster days are run to see what locals want and then tailored to meet specific group's needs. Feedback from local 'friends of' groups, park rangers and users help the team tailor the activities that are on in a local park to match what the community wants.

By focusing on the fun side of the activities, Active Parks deliberately separates the nature of the activities from more formal leisure centre sessions, creating a community feel to the activities. The informal flexible nature of the sessions mean they are attractive to some groups that traditionally have lower rates of participation in sport and physical activity. For example, activities are tailored to help overcome barriers some people may have to being active such as child care, by including children in the activity.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO HELP IMPROVE HEALTH AND LIFESTYLES

"Active Parks works in co-production with local communities to help remove the barriers that prevent Citizens improving their health and lifestyles. We know that cost is not the only barrier but it is the biggest major contributor so we provide activities that are free at the point of delivery for participants so removing that barrier completely."

We know that physical distance is a barrier so we provide activities that are delivered right in the heart of our communities using parks and open spaces that are familiar and trusted. This attracts groups who would never think about 'going to the gym', but would join in an activity in their local space. Social distance is addressed by making our sessions accessible to anyone regardless of ability or levels of fitness – seeing someone you trust, like 'you' joining in and having fun is a positive method of attracting people to sessions that they would not otherwise have attended."

Not having to wear the latest 'branded' clothing to feel you fit in is also a barrier remover – as long as it's comfortable and safe then you can wear it! We also encourage people from the community to deliver or support sessions so there is always a familiar face for newcomers."

Gaynor Roberts







ACTIVE PARKS IN NUMBERS

From the pilot with just over 4,000 participants in six parks four years ago, attendance in Active Parks activities rose to just under 31,000 participants in the second year, and almost trebling in year three to 90,000 participants. Year three included 60 park locations with over 40 of those having regular weekly sessions with at least two activities every week. This growth is a success for Active Parks and shows the great potential that running tailored sessions, within local parks, has at engaging with people to encourage them to be more active.

While the growth in the number of people taking part is impressive it is the who is taking part in the sessions that is making a real difference. Active Parks has successfully engaged with groups that are traditionally under represented when it comes to participation. Over the period from April 2015–July 2016, attendance from BME communities was 52% and the proportion of women attending the activities was 46%. Recent reports have shown that 81% of participants accessing the programme come from the top two most deprived areas of Birmingham – areas that really need support in creating behaviour change. Participation has also increased in under-fives and the 70+ age range. Attendance by BME women has seen a significant increase due to the women's-only sessions. These sessions have been produced working in partnership with organisations such as Saheli Hub, who specialise in working 'with, but not exclusive to, Muslim and Asian women. By adapting sessions and settings for these groups, such as using portable screening, it has helped to meet cultural needs and increase participation for groups who may not have otherwise considered taking part in such activities in a public open space.

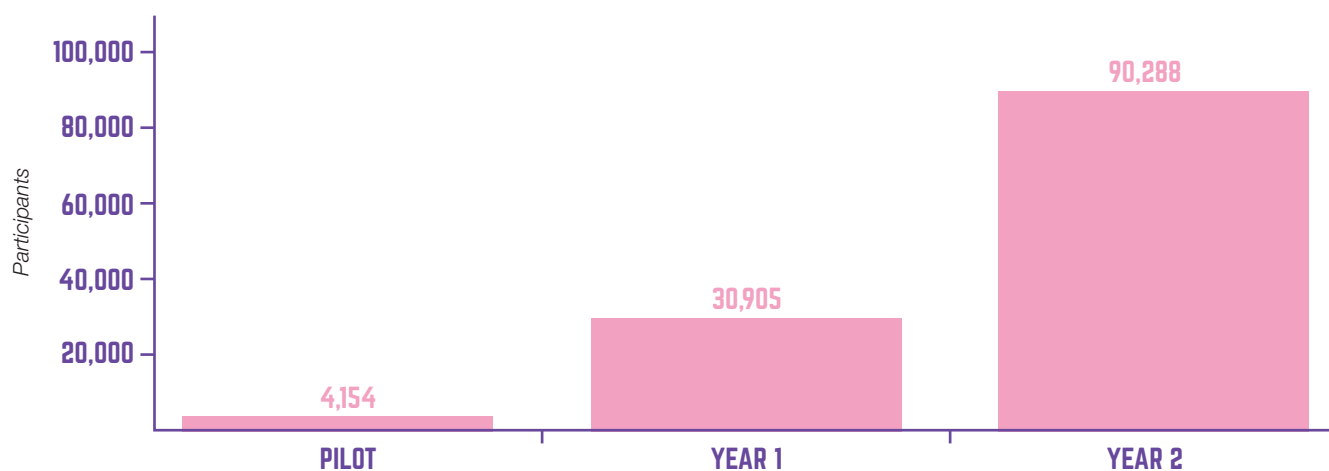
In September 2016, 15% of all participants in the programme were BME women. Active Parks also encourages and supports community members to be session leaders so that others can see someone like 'me' taking part and being involved in shaping and developing the programme.

TAILORING SESSIONS TO MEET USERS' NEEDS

"We design the programme in consultation with community groups and organisations, Friends of parks groups, residents, Children's centres, friends and neighbours of streets around our parks and open spaces – and activities are tailored to meet the needs of the people we want to attract, not the needs of the service and instructors! We want our participants to feel they are working with us, not having it done 'to them'."

We offer a wide varied programme such as led walks – which are great to combat social isolation and meet new friends – Tai chi, Zumba, Green Fit Baby (aimed at new parents to encourage them to come out of the house and meet other new parents), gardening, orienteering, Bush craft, Nature Play and much more. We never mention the word 'Sport' in our conversations or marketing as this word in itself is a barrier to many people – we instead talk of 'Fun Free Family games' (Multi-sports) or activity rather than Sport or Fitness – and fun – because if it's fun it doesn't feel like exercise!"

Gaynor Roberts



Active Parks in numbers



RECLAIMING THE SPACE

Without using Birmingham's network of local parks and open spaces, Active Parks would not have been as successful. The Active Parks team has worked with park rangers, the police and 'friends of' groups to put on activities that feel welcoming, friendly and safe.

NOT THE USUAL SKIPPERS

"We were running a session In Small Heath, which is one of our targeted areas. The session ran on the outdoor MUGA area at the Wellbeing Centre – alongside us was a regular Youth group playing football.

The group consisted of young Asian males aged 9–16 who initially looked at some of the taster sessions we were setting up – tennis, Frisbee, skipping, hula hooping – activities that they wouldn't traditionally be interested in – and walked on by to the football session. As they were quite a large group there were too many of them to play football all at once, so a group were standing around and we invited them to join us – by the end of our session there was no-one playing football and the group were taking part in all the activities that they had laughed at earlier!

The highlight for me was turning the skipping rope with another adult for these 15 year old males to 'skip' and seeing them encouraging each other to have a go – something probably neither I or them imagined happening at the start of the session. The youth leaders came over afterwards and said had they not seen it they would never have believed it – some of the group had been at risk of gang involvement and to see them being involved in this way was fantastic. We were then able to pass on details of the other regular sessions that the group could attend locally and also support the Youth group to apply for funding to purchase a kit bag consisting of this equipment."

Gaynor Roberts

It's important that for people to want to use parks and open space; they not only need to feel safe, but also that the open space is attractive and well maintained, together with the activities being well run. Birmingham has introduced 'mystery shoppers' to parks and Active Parks activities. While feedback from the users is essential to provide information on how to help improve and adapt future services, the 'mystery shopper' removes the responsibility and pressure for regular attendees to be critical of something important to them. This helps to make sure that the parks are kept up to scratch and any issues are fed back to the rangers and session leaders to improve the look and feel of the session the experience for session participants. The mystery shopper focuses on a number of elements but mostly ensures that the session is welcoming and adaptable to the needs of the group. They also make sure the session leader ensures everyone gets the best from the session regardless of their level of fitness or ability, and more importantly that it is fun and that participants feel they have enjoyed their time at the session and would recommend the session to their family and friends – or indeed bring them along the following week. This monitoring has helped to make sure that the Active Parks program keeps providing sessions that people want, and at locations that provide safe, welcoming environments where people want to be active.

INFRASTRUCTURE – USING WHAT'S THERE

Active Parks try and use what is in the park as part of the activity. A great example of this are the band stands in Summerfield and Handsworth Parks, which are used by the Zumba and Tai Chi sessions when it's raining, allowing the activity to continue. The programme is also working towards removing some of the 'plastic' equipment from sessions next year and incorporating more of what is available naturally to provide activity – such as trees, den building, camp fires (which will also encourage community cohesion and social networking), bug hunting, nature orienteering, building shelters, and nature trails. This will help to encourage families to be active together, experience what is available at no charge and show that they can spend time outdoors as a family.



POP-UP EQUIPMENT

There are a number of sessions where groups request some equipment to support their event. The Active Parks team supports these activities by using a van to drop off equipment on site. Using the van allows the Active Parks team to operate at low costs with the flexibility of visiting multiple sites. It means that equipment doesn't need to be stored at a single site, and allows more sites to use the same equipment. It also helps to support Activators to create 'free form' sessions. This is like having 'pop-up infrastructure' supporting activities across many parks allowing open spaces to be used for a whole range of activities and events. This idea of using pop-up equipment has also been adopted by Warsaw, European City of Culture, where containers store equipment which is pulled up to transform spaces into dance and music venues, and activity events.

CREATING LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES AND SELF-SUSTAINABLE GROUPS

One of the real strengths of Active Parks is helping to create self-sustaining local groups. Active Parks takes a different approach to group leaders; rather than being simply a gym instructor for the session, they operate as a 'social group leader', often checking up on users in sessions and calling in on those who have not shown up for a while. This level of care is important when trying to improve the health and well-being of some of the most isolated individuals. Local champions within the community are supported and encouraged to become group leaders. Supported by the Active Parks team, local champions are trained, provided uniforms and access to the volunteer pathways to help them grow into group leaders.

Using local champions within local areas strengthens the community cohesion present within local groups and maintains familiarity and comfort with locally-known group leaders and volunteers.

LOCAL CHAMPIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY ARE SUPPORTED AND ENCOURAGED TO BECOME GROUP LEADERS.





LOUISE – PARTICIPANT TO LEADER

“One of our partner Friends of Parks Groups (FOPG) contacted us to say they had a volunteer very keen to support the park – the volunteer, Louise, was interested in walking and jogging but had no qualification or experience.

The Active Parks team, working with the FOPG provided a run leader to deliver a nine week Couch to 5km programme which is aimed at beginners using a mixture of walking and jogging to get people up to 5km (or continually active for 30 minutes three times a week) by week nine. This way Louise could see what was involved in leading a session, could see if this was for her, have the support of someone else who had worked on the programme previously and also not feel that as a volunteer she was committed to having to be there every week initially. This also provided certainty that the sessions would continue if Louise didn't think this was for her. Week one started the first Tuesday in November at 6.30pm.

Marketing and promotion had been undertaken solely by the FOPG as we didn't want to overwhelm Louise, or make her feel she had to get people there as the time of year meant that numbers could have been low anyway. However, we had 26 people arrive for the first session! It was

cold, dark and raining and with participants all adding to the fun by wearing head torches it looked like we had a group of 'Daleks' in the park; it made for an interesting session!

The next morning I took a call from Emma from the FOPG asking if the group could have another led session that week as the group were really keen. Twelve months later we have two C25K sessions, a social running group, an intermediate running group and a 5–10km session, all delivered in this park! And yes, Louise is still there leading the social running group and a C25K group. We supported Louise to undertake her 'Leadership in Running Fitness' qualification and she now volunteers twice a week at the sessions, along with all the other time she freely gives up to verbally spread the word of the programme to everyone she meets.

We have also supported four other local residents to gain their qualification that all come along every week to volunteer at the sessions – all of who were complete beginners to running at the start. Numbers have increased and at the last course in the summer we had upwards of 43 new starters for the beginner sessions – all promotion still coming from word of mouth or local networks – and all started from one volunteer wanting to give something back to her community.”

Gaynor Roberts