

# CASE STUDY

parkrun

WOMEN  
**N**  
SPORT

## Why are women reluctant to run?

Women's experiences of parkrun and wider running activity.

2016-17



# WHAT DID WE WANT TO KNOW?

There are currently 596 parkruns taking place across the UK each week, with 120,000 runners, 43% of whom are women.

While these figures are encouraging, we know from parkrun data that women are more likely to be 'reluctant runners'. A reluctant runner can be defined as someone who has signed up for parkrun but has never attended, or attended once and never returned.

Funded by **Sport England** and in partnership with **parkrun**, Women in Sport undertook a research project to determine why some women are reluctant to reach the start line and as a result are not engaging in parkrun and general running as part of their lives. The research looked to further understand this target audience by exploring their motivations and barriers to running and to discover suitable interventions to encourage women from preparing to run to actually running.



# WHO DID WE TALK TO?

We interviewed:



## PARKRUN RUN DIRECTORS

To understand more about the parkrun environment and its appeal to women, we spoke to run directors from parkruns with both high and low levels of female participation.



## WOMEN VISITING PARKRUN FOR THE FIRST TIME

To capture their first experience of running at a parkrun event, identify motivations and whether it met expectations leading to repeat visits.

We held focus groups with:



## FEMALE RELUCTANT PARKRUNNERS

To explore their motivations for signing up to parkrun, barriers stopping them attending and potential interventions to initiate change.



## WOMEN NOT ENGAGED IN PARKRUN

To investigate their thoughts on the parkrun concept, motivations and barriers for wider running activity, and potential interventions to encourage participation in parkrun.

# WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

All the women who took part in the research had positive impressions of parkrun:

- “It’s for everybody and anybody, it’s meant to be inclusive”
- “It’s about building connections in the local community, getting people involved and meeting others”
- “parkrun allows ordinary people, who wouldn’t normally run, to take part in something”
- “It’s family orientated”

With these positive views, women are registering for parkrun. However, they share several barriers preventing them from participating. The research highlighted that reluctant runners can be women who are exercising regularly and are confident in doing so, as well as those who are inactive and less confident, and barriers were voiced by both.

## Barriers:

### PRACTICAL BARRIERS

#### TIME

- Lack of time for running activity amongst other priorities.
- Those with children find it difficult to leave their families on a Saturday morning.

#### ROUTE

- Laps can be boring and women don’t like a sense of knowing how much further to run.
- It can be demoralising to be lapped by other runners.

#### CONCEPT

- Practical elements of parkrun are not often made clear and women want to know what to expect in advance of attending. This includes timing methods, provision of bag drops, location of toilets, and whether headphones are permitted.

### LACK OF MOTIVATION:

#### TURNING UP

- It’s too easy to never turn up.
- Lack of reason to attend.
- parkrun is free so there is no financial commitment (no fee was also seen as a positive).
- Strong sense that parkrun has no idea who you are or whether you have attended.

### SELF-CONFIDENCE

#### RESEARCH

- Women talk about doing ‘lots of research’ before registering for parkrun; wanting to know how it works, what is involved and other people’s experiences.
- A lack of information leads to a fear of judgement for running too slowly and coming last for example.

#### REASSURANCE

- A desire to be told ‘everything would be ok’ if they attended parkrun and it would be a positive experience.

#### SOCIAL

- Concern that parkrun is cliquy and as a first timer this could be intimidating.

### CLARITY OF TARGET AUDIENCE

#### DISTANCE

- The 5km distance is positioned as being for beginners, but many women find this distance challenging.

#### TIMING

- Timed runs suggest parkrun is competitive and achieving fast times appears to be important.

#### AUDIENCE

- Impression that parkrun is dominated by faster runners who are usually male and competitive.



In order to understand how women feel after attending their first parkrun, seven women across four parkrun venues in England were interviewed. All the women had a positive experience, showing that once women get there, it is worth it.

#### THE WOMEN SPECIFICALLY HIGHLIGHTED:

- Positive encouragement from volunteers and spectators whilst running
- A team atmosphere - 'everyone doing it together'
- The inclusive nature and being able to run with dogs and children
- The friendly atmosphere
- The inclusion of a newcomers briefing and knowing you are not on your own

*"I absolutely loved it... a real sense of achievement going around"*

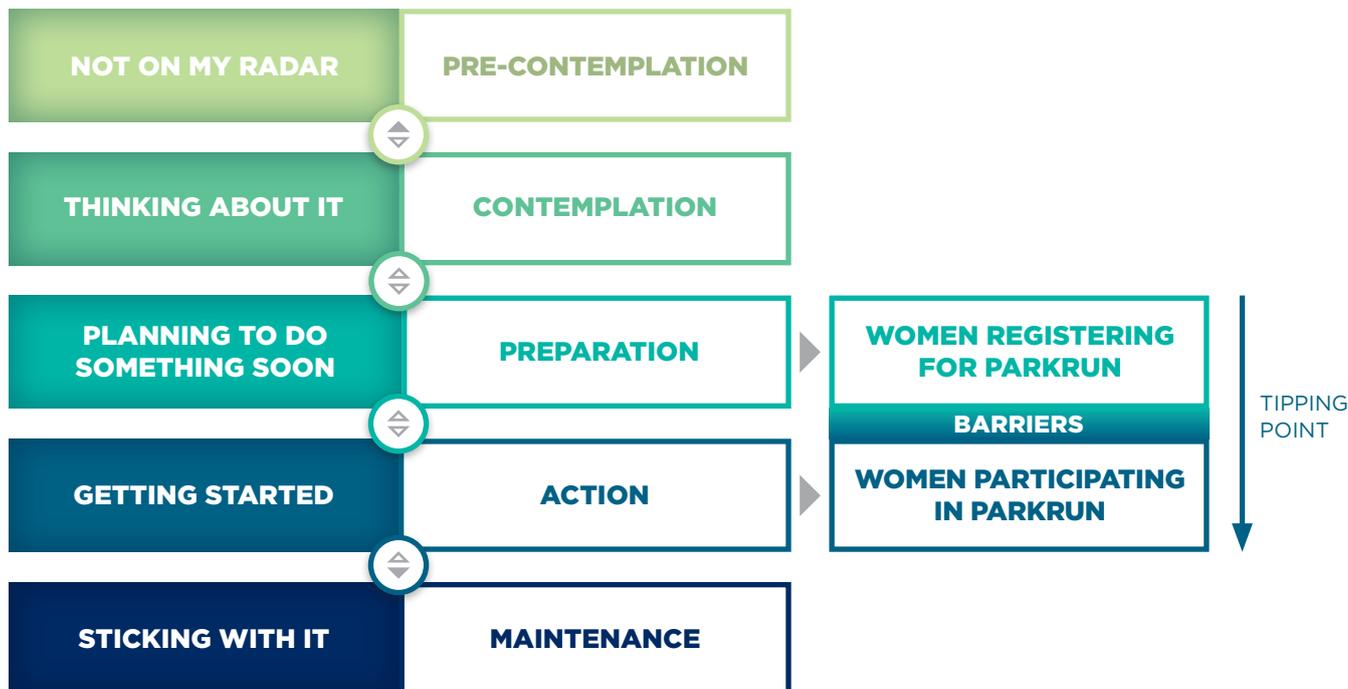
*"Nothing would put me off coming back, not even if it was raining"*

*"Amazing and the people are really lovely, so many volunteers - didn't realise it would be so big!"*



# INTERVENTIONS FOR ACTION

The research findings demonstrate that women are interested to participate in parkrun, but are not converting into regular participants. This is shown by a ‘tipping point’ on the behaviour change model below:



To encourage women to ‘tip’ into action and experience the benefits of parkrun, the following interventions were identified:

## TARGETED REMINDER COMMUNICATIONS

Targeted emails to reluctant female runners at specified times post registration. To remind and encourage women to take part, sharing the positive experiences of others and the associated benefits.

## FIRST TIMER INFORMATION

Improved information for women preparing to attend for the first time. Women want to know exactly what to expect at each stage of the parkrun process, including practical details as well as stories from women already taking part.

## VIDEO CONTENT

Footage to bring parkrun to life before attending for the first time. To show women what a typical Saturday morning parkrun looks like, to involve a wide range of women and families, show amenities available in parks, first timer briefings and tail runners, and importantly, social aspects.

## TARGETED SOCIAL MEDIA

Inspirational stories from a range of women already participating in parkrun. To highlight the physical, mental and social benefits of parkrun, through effective imagery, interesting stories and tips to prepare for running.

## FIRST TIMER BRIEFING

Raising awareness of briefings in advance of visit and allocating adequate time. To ensure women are provided with the right information for their specific running route and can ask questions. This reassures women at this crucial stage of their parkrun journey.

## ALIGN TO WOMEN’S VALUES

By identifying what is important to women through Women in Sport’s *Understanding Women’s Lives* research, parkrun can show how running can align with their personal values. This can be through pre- and post-event communications and practical elements within the park.

# WHAT NEXT?

**This project has challenged parkrun to ‘think differently’ about how they engage with their female audience.**

Work has now begun to test the interventions identified and embed the learnings in wider work. The targeted interventions should begin to impact on the conversion rates of female reluctant runners specifically and participation figures should continue to rise. parkrun has seen a positive 29% increase in the number of female parkrunners over the last year, so our suggested interventions should increase this even further in 2017.

Women in Sport will continue to support parkrun as they learn more about their female audience and encourage more women to get involved in the parkrun community.



## TESTIMONIAL

**Russ Jefferys, Head of Communications at parkrun** said:

*“Women in Sport have helped us better understand the barriers some women face in signing up to and participating at parkrun events. Their research and insight has validated some long-held assumptions and identified opportunities for parkrun to further remove barriers throughout the journey from pre-registration to participation.*”

*The team at Women in Sport are a pleasure to work with. They take a professional and proactive approach to their research and in presenting findings.*

*We have ended up with a range of interventions that we are preparing to implement and test, and I look forward to reporting back to Women in Sport and working with them to further understand how we can increase female participation at parkrun events.”*

# FIND OUT MORE

**Women in Sport**  
[womeninsport.org](http://womeninsport.org)

**parkrun**  
[parkrun.org.uk](http://parkrun.org.uk)

**Sport England**  
[sportengland.org](http://sportengland.org)

