Herts Sport & Physical Activity Partnership

ParkPlay in Herts: 2023 - 2025

Reflections on launching ParkPlay in Hertfordshire: Insights, Challenges and Lessons Learnt.

Faye Lahiffe, April 2025

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Introduction and Background:

ParkPlay is a charity with a mission to build happier, healthier communities nationwide through the life-changing power of play. ParkPlay is supported by Sport England, and is empowering communities to bring free, outdoor play to their parks every week, welcoming people of all ages and backgrounds to connect and have fun. In less than 4 years, ParkPlay has successfully launched 85 ParkPlay programmes across the country and had a total of over 16,000 registered ParkPlayers, improving mental and physical health, bringing communities together and connecting people, raising up local people with greater confidence, training and skills, all in the communities of greatest health inequality and need.

ParkPlay was introduced in Hertfordshire in 2023, with the aim of providing free, fun and inclusive opportunities for families and communities to get active together in local green spaces.

The initiative aligns with the Herts Sport & Physical Activity Partnership's (HSP) strategic priorities, particularly in supporting Active Environments and tackling inequalities in physical activity.

Setting up a ParkPlay in any location involves completing an enquiry form, which is sent directly to the national ParkPlay team. The full setup process is outlined in Appendix 1.

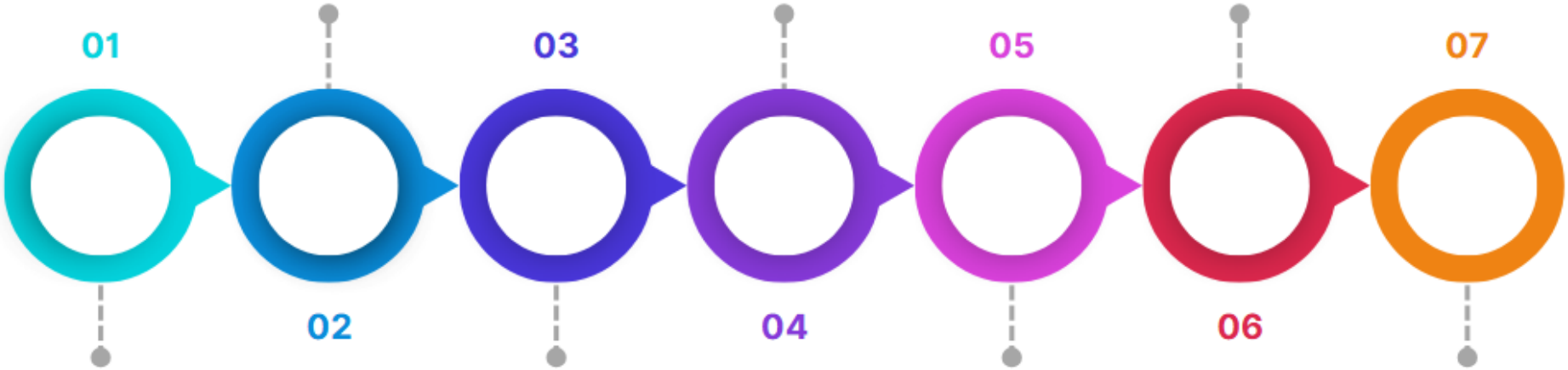
The current live ParkPlay locations in Hertfordshire are:

- **Hemel Hempstead ParkPlay**
- **Jackmans ParkPlay – Letchworth**
- **South Oxhey ParkPlay**
- **Woodhall ParkPlay – Welwyn Garden City**

Work is underway aiming to relaunch two existing ParkPlays this year in Broxbourne and Hertsmere alongside the introduction of any new ParkPlays that might develop. These relaunches are designed to build on the successful elements of previous ParkPlays, while also addressing the challenges encountered along the way. The goal is to refine the programme, strengthen community engagement, and ensure that the ParkPlay programme is more sustainable and accessible.

ParkPlay
in Herts

Timeline of ParkPlay's Journey in Hertfordshire



November 2023

Cedars ParkPlay launched in Broxbourne with Time For Change Kids as the delivery partner.

February 2024

Jackman's ParkPlay launched in North Herts with AITC as the delivery partner
Aycliffe ParkPlay launched in Borehamwood, with InspireAll as the delivery partner

March 2024

AITC took the lead in recruiting Playleaders and volunteers at all sites, except for Cedars and Aycliffe.

July - August 2024

Woodhall ParkPlay launched in Welwyn Garden City.
Hemel Hempstead ParkPlay launched at Yewtree Primary School.
South Oxhey ParkPlay launched at Warren Dell Primary School.

September 2024

Cedars ParkPlay along with Aycliffe ParkPlay were temporarily paused.

December 2024

A development day was held with all key partners to assess all sites and work on the approach moving forward.

March 2025

Currently, 4 sites are in operation, with 2 sites (Broxbourne and Hertsmere) set to be relaunched.

Background and approach taken:

Through funding provided by Hertfordshire County Council the Partnership took the early approach of targeting key Holiday Activity and Food programme (HAF) providers to take on delivery of ParkPlay in the initial three areas. The rationale was to try and create more opportunities for targeted families outside of HAF periods. The initial step taken to was to liaise with all local authority's to see where there might be interest in a partnership. From there the first three ParkPlays, focused on identifying a suitable organisation in each area. This was possible in **Broxbourne**, at **Cedars ParkPlay** with Time For Change Kids stepping forward however in the other two areas a different approach was taken.

In **Hertsmere**, the Local Authority identified InspireAll, the local leisure provider, as the primary delivery partner for **Aycliffe ParkPlay.** With its capacity to recruit and develop a dedicated workforce, InspireAll was seen as well suited for the role, particularly given its strong connection to the family centre.

Jackmans ParkPlay benefited from our close working relationship with Active in the Community (AITC) which have local knowledge and expertise. By leveraging links with the North Herts Centre for Voluntary Service, AITC were able to attract and engage a local Play Leader from the area.

The fourth and fifth ParkPlay sessions to launch were school-based models in **Hemel Hempstead and South Oxhey**. Through local engagement, the Partnership's place-based officers collaborated with schools to explore ways to better open their facilities to the community outside of school hours. As a result, **Yewtree Primary School** and **Warren Dell Primary School** agreed to host ParkPlay, with the benefit of securing some addition funding through the Department of Education's Opening School Facilities Fund.

The next ParkPlay to launch was **Woodhall ParkPlay** in Welwyn Garden City. Working closely with the Local Authority, King George V Playing Fields was identified as the most suitable location with its large open spaces and its proximity to residents.

In its early stages, Woodhall ParkPlay was the most attended ParkPlay site across all locations in the county. Milan Johnston, from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, highlighted the initiative's positive impact on local families, stating: ***"when speaking to some families during the promotion they praised the initiative, the fact it is free and with the cost-of-living crisis families finding it more difficult to be out together doing activities, so this enables them to have fun together for free".***

While progress has been made all sites faced some challenges. Including two ParkPlay sites having temporarily paused due ParkPlay leaders not being able to create the correct environment resulting in zero attendance. some sites experienced cancellations due to a shortage of Play Leaders, while others saw consistently low attendance, particularly on weekends with poor weather, sometimes resulting in no participants at all.

The Partnership is working with the local authorities and is open to discussions about the development of ParkPlay in any area.

Funding Arrangements:

Funding for ParkPlay in Hertfordshire has been secured through multiple sources. Initially the programme was funded through the **Hertfordshire County Council's Building Life Chances Fund** and some investment from **Public Health**, after which further contributions were secured from some **host Local Authorities** and the **Department for Education's Opening School Facilities Fund**.

Since 2023 when the programme was first commissioned, a total of £49,719 has been allocated to ParkPlay to assist in the development of ParkPlay in Hertfordshire. This funding was specifically aimed at creating the right conditions to help set up and launch ParkPlay events. This includes all land permissions, training and delivery for ParkPlay Leaders, all associated insurance policies and cover, attendance at meetings and events, providing the equipment for delivery and finally providing the platform which registers attendance.

Most recently by working closely with partners, the Partnership was able to secure additional funding from Letchworth Heritage Foundation to assist in the development and continuation of Jackmans ParkPlay. ParkPlay in Hertfordshire has evolved, bringing both successes and challenges, as such some partners have stepped away from providing financial support. This highlights the importance of our longer-term sustainable model which is to find community volunteers for all sites.

Partnership Working:

Strong partnership working is crucial to the implementation and success of ParkPlay across Hertfordshire. From strategic planning to on-the-ground delivery, these partnerships are key to driving the programme's ongoing growth and impact. One of those partners is the local district or borough council who provide ongoing support and guidance to the programme in their area.

Herts Sport & Physical Activity Partnership (HSP) provide the strategic direction, securing funding, and maintaining relationships with key organisations including the county council and the local authorities. This oversight ensures that ParkPlay aligns with broader physical activity and wellbeing objectives whilst focusing on long-term sustainability.

The **ParkPlay team** were responsible for creating the conditions for impact, overseeing the successful launch and setup of new locations, and providing ongoing support for Playleaders. By maintaining overall responsibility for sessions, ParkPlay ensures consistency in delivery and the highest possible engagement levels across all sites in Hertfordshire.

Active in the Community (AITC) are currently responsible for the coordination of the ParkPlay Leaders across the four active sites, with specific responsibility for finding voluntary ParkPlay Leaders over the next 9 months. They also assist in the communication and marketing efforts.

Playleaders are at the heart of the programme's delivery. They ensure that individual sessions run safely and smoothly, build local teams, and engage with the community to drive participation. Their role is vital in creating a welcoming and inclusive space, encouraging more people to take part in regular physical activity.

A collaborative approach was taken with key partners, involving weekly and monthly strategic meetings with members from both AITC and ParkPlay, which proved essential for reviewing progress, addressing challenges, and working on solutions. This proactive approach allowed all partners to make informed decisions ensuring the programme continues to grow and effectively meet the needs of local communities across the county.

By working together, this approach creates a well-structured and sustainable model that supports community engagement and ensures ParkPlay continues to grow and make a positive impact.

Recruitment of Playleaders:

To ensure the smooth delivery of sessions, each site requires a dedicated Playleader, someone who is embedded within the community, well connected and able to inspire local residents to come together and enjoy play. In 2024, AITC took on the responsibility of recruiting these Playleaders, ensuring each site is well supported.

AITC have expressed ***"We are delighted to have recruited some real superstars to the ParkPlay delivery team who have already contributed so much and gone above and beyond the expectation to help get the word out into the community, engaging local families and growing the word of ParkPlay in their area".***

The launch of Jackmans ParkPlay marked the beginning of AITC efforts in this area. Months of work went into preparing for the launch, including significant focus on recruiting volunteers. One key learning from this process was the need for clear and consistent communication among partners. AITC developed a job description to circulate through local contacts, leveraging the place-based work in Letchworth, alongside the ongoing efforts of the HSP. While the initial job description successfully recruited the current Playleader, discussions took place regarding the wording of the job description and how ParkPlay wanted the role to be represented moving forward.

Through promotion efforts to recruit, it was decided that the team should take a more community-focused approach, shifting away from relying on social media resources. Instead of using online platforms, AITC alongside support from HSP engaged directly with local communities through events at local colleges, student career fairs at the University of Hertfordshire and volunteering events.

From this collaborative effort, AITC successfully generated interest from around 30 individuals for the launch of future parks in Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage, South Oxhey, and Hemel Hempstead. This interest ranged from those eager to take on paid leadership roles to individuals interested in volunteering. The majority of these recruits were sourced through community events attended by AITC and HSP, reinforcing the effectiveness of direct in person engagement.

Positive conversations were had, and a cohort of 27 individuals were initially gathered, with a wide range of experience and community involvement, for potential training and engagement. However, only three Playleaders and three volunteers emerged from this group. Despite strong initial interest and enthusiasm, challenges arose as more people disengaged over time. Four individuals began training but did not complete it, and two volunteers either failed to show up for the launch event or became disengaged after a few weeks.

Challenges of recruitment:

One of the key challenges encountered was the initial approach to **identifying suitable communities and Playleaders.** The strategy focused heavily on delivering ParkPlay in areas of greatest need, prioritising locations based on deprivation and inactivity levels within the Partnerships place based work.

However, **not enough consideration was given to assessing local demand** and community readiness before launching the programme. This led to difficulties in recruiting committed Playleaders and maintaining engagement within some communities, which ultimately impacted the long-term sustainability. Despite these challenges, the current team of dedicated Playleaders remains a strong asset, contributing to the ongoing success of the project.

Overall, **engaging people has required more time and effort than initially anticipated**, and this remains an ongoing challenge with the current sites.

A key learning from this experience has been the **importance of community-led demand** and engagement in ensuring the success and sustainability of ParkPlay. Moving forward, any future sites should involve a more thorough approach, consulting with residents, community groups, and stakeholders to gauge interest and need before committing resources.

Our findings have highlighted that individual community members play a vital role in the programme's success, rather than relying on large organisations for paid delivery. It is essential that the Playleader, the face families will see every week, is deeply embedded within the community and relatable to those attending. This personal connection builds trust and engagement, making the programme feel more accessible and welcoming. By having someone who understands the community's unique needs and dynamics, they are able to build stronger, more meaningful relationships, creating a sense of belonging that encourages sustained participation and support.

Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation:

The table provides an overview of key data from all ParkPlay sites in Hertfordshire since their launch. It includes information on the number of events held, cancellations, participant registrations, and attendance figures. Currently, Yewtree, Jackmans, Woodhall and Warren Dell are live; with Aycliffe and Cedars being temporarily paused.

ParkPlay	Status	Start Date	Number of events	Cancellation / no reports		People registered	Unique participants	Total attendances	Max attendance	Weely average attendance
				Number	%					
Hemel Hempstead	Live	20/07/2024	31	5	14%	219	141	416	31	14
Jackmans	Live	17/02/2024	53	5	9%	184	167	455	34	9
South Oxhey	Live	13/07/2024	32	5	14%	154	123	246	21	8
Woodhall	Live	03/08/2024	24	10	29%	257	75	172	40	8
Aycliffe	Temp paused	02/03/2024	32	0	0%	107	65	191	25	-
Cedars	Temp paused	11/11/2023	36	7	16%	190	86	317	33	-
Totals						**1,111**	**657**	**1,797**		

The following section provides a summary and analysis of this data, exploring key factors that have influenced these outcomes:

Pauses highlighted important lessons regarding the effectiveness of different strategies. There was a **lack of ownership and understanding** from InspireAll, the lead delivery partner for Aycliffe ParkPlay in Borehamwood, with the initiative being viewed more as an organisational responsibility rather than something driven by individuals embedded within the community.

Woodhall ParkPlay which is coordinated by AITC have **struggled to find the right team** to deliver the sessions which is highlighted by the number of sessions cancelled.

Similarly, at Cedars ParkPlay, the Time For Change Kids site **team in place was not the right fit** for the project's needs, leading to difficulties in engagement and delivery in part down to the lack of consistency of the Playleaders.

These experiences have provided valuable insights into the importance of aligning the right people, leadership, and ownership to ensure the success and sustainability of ParkPlay at future sites

With the exception of Hemel Hempstead ParkPlay, the data highlights several key challenges affecting participation, retention, and overall sustainability. One of the main findings is the **variation in demand across different locations.** While some areas have seen a high number of registrations, others have struggled to attract participants, which could suggest that the initial selection of the site many not have fully accounted for local interest and engagement levels.

Over the past two years, a large amount of time has been dedicated to marketing the programme within communities. This has consisted of distributing leaflets, displaying banners in the relevant locations, delivering presentations at stakeholder meetings, attending various countywide events to promote the programme and recruit volunteers and engaging with local colleges, HAF providers, schools and early years settings. Additionally, a lot of time has been spent promoting the programme across different social media platforms and securing features in newsletter articles to help spread the word.

While these efforts have somewhat raised awareness of ParkPlay, it hasn't always led to long-term participation. Without stronger connections and relationships within local communities, ParkPlay has struggled to become fully embedded therefore affecting its impact.

On reflection, there was a **lack of clarity around a strategic marketing plan** for ParkPlay at each site which led to uncertainty around roles and responsibilities. This meant that key aspects of the marketing were not consistently implemented across locations. It was often unclear who was responsible for specific tasks which caused delays and inconsistencies in promotional efforts at some sites impacting awareness and participation in the programme.

The weekly reporting has been another challenge. Incomplete or inconsistent records have made it difficult to analyse the programme's impact. Without clear data, it's hard to understand participant demographics or identify reasons behind drop off rates. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to evaluate how well the sites are performing and to make improvements. Going forward, it's crucial that all Playleaders complete the weekly reports consistently.

The success of community-based programmes really depends on creating a welcoming, engaging, and well-structured environment. If the team running ParkPlay do not build a strong sense of community or engage properly with participants, it can lead to low retention rates, slow growth, and even a disconnect with participants.

Without a space where people feel connected and valued, it's much harder to keep them coming back. This highlights how important it is to make sure the Playleaders are the right fit and they need to have the ability to build momentum and make the programme a success.

Finally, in some areas **high cancellation rates** have affected participation patterns and negatively impacted engagement. Due to Playleader availability, there were periods of frequent cancellations, which ultimately broke the habit-forming cycle for attendees, making it harder for ParkPlay to establish itself as a consistent and trusted community activity. Addressing this issue will be crucial to maintaining long-term participation and ensuring the sustainability of ParkPlay across Hertfordshire. Moving forward, there will be a greater focus on strengthening Playleader teams to ensure there is enough staffing across the board.

Feedback:

Feedback from residents in Hertfordshire:

While there have been some challenges along the way, there is no denying that ParkPlay has had an impact on the local communities in Hertfordshire, offering families much needed opportunities to connect, be active, and engage with others. One participant shared, ***"Without this programme we would just be at home doing nothing,"*** highlighting how ParkPlay provides a welcoming and safe space for children and families, encouraging them to get outdoors and enjoy physical activity together.

For one parent, ParkPlay has become the ***"highlight of my daughter's week,"*** providing an opportunity for him and his child to play and bond with others outside, as they don't have a garden at home.

One parent said***, "I've been handing out leaflets to everyone in our block of flats because I want people to know it's here and how good it is."*** This reflects the strong need for free, and accessible family provision.

Although the attendance figures can fluctuate with some weeks seeing only a few residents, this does highlight the real impact the programme is having on some individuals. It is clear to see that ParkPlay is reaching the right people in some areas providing that sense of belonging, and creating stronger, healthier and more connected communities.

Feedback from Playleaders:

A huge part of this impact on communities is down to the dedication and passion of the playleaders, who give their all each and every week. They are the heart of the programme and ensure families have an enjoyable experience and want to return week after week.

A Playleader at Jackmans reflected on the positive impact of the programme, highlighting the joy and engagement it brings to participants of all ages.

"Every session I have been to all attendees have ended up having a great time even if they were hesitant to get involved at the start"

The Playleader highlighted that ParkPlay not only encourages physical activity but also helps bridge generational gaps, creating a shared experience where everyone can take part and enjoy the games together.

"I absolutely love being a Playleader! Seeing families come together, have fun, and enjoy that amazing community feel is so rewarding. Watching all ages smiling and laughing, knowing that ParkPlay has played a part in creating those moments, is truly special. We've seen a fantastic impact on families, becoming more active, gaining confidence, getting involved in sports beyond ParkPlay, and most importantly, having fun"

Long Term Impact & Legacy:

The feedback received from people attending ParkPlay has been overwhelmingly positive. There has been very little negative feedback, indicating that the sessions are being well received. However, the challenge remains in securing regular attendance and embedding ParkPlay into participants weekly routines.

Conversations with the Playleader at South Oxhey revealed attendance tends to spike towards the end of the month when free activities are more desirable, compared to the start of the month after payday, when paid activities often take precedence. This suggests that ParkPlay is not yet seen as a regular weekly activity but rather more of a "once-a-month" event for some participants.

Our Playleader at Woodhall ParkPlay highlighted the significant impact of ParkPlay through conversations with parents and grandparents, many of whom have not fully engaged in physical activities since their school years. One parent shared how much she enjoyed playing football again after so many years and, as a result, has now connected with a local recreational women's football group to explore further opportunities to stay active.

ParkPlay has had a positive impact on participants, particularly those who may face personal challenges. A first-time attendee at Woodhall ParkPlay, despite struggling with chronic anxiety, thoroughly enjoyed the session and expressed her gratitude afterwards. The experience was so meaningful that she even showed interest in volunteering in the future. This highlights how ParkPlay not only encourages physical activity but also is key in terms of personal growth for participants.

The school-based models have shown great impact and has proved to be a better approach. Schools are seen as a trusted and familiar environment for children and families, making them ideal locations for community-based physical activity programmes. This means families are more likely to attend regularly, which allows Playleaders to build strong connections with participants, create a strong sense of belonging and encouraging children and families to lead more active, healthier lives.

A key impact of a school-based ParkPlay is the consistency in attendance. By hosting sessions in a setting where children already feel comfortable in, children and families feel more at ease and are more likely to take part regularly. Across all ParkPlays, our school-based models, particularly Yewtree have seen the most consistent turnout throughout the year. Furthermore, school staff are becoming strong advocates for the programme, actively promoting it to students and their families which not only increases awareness but also helps bring the wider community together, making physical activity more accessible for everyone.

By hosting ParkPlay within schools, the programme has strong potential for long-term sustainability. As ParkPlay becomes more embedded within the community and attracts more families it builds a strong foundation to eventually become fully community led in the future.

Overall Key Learnings:

Over the past two years, valuable insight has been gained from different approaches taken, playleader recruitment, and overall participation. Here are the key takeaways from our experience so far:

- **The importance of having a strong team in place** at each ParkPlay from the very beginning is crucial, including securing a number of quality local volunteers early on.
- **ParkPlay leaders should not be viewed as sessional staff**, but as integral parts of the programme.
- There must be **consistency of delivery staff** at each site, stressing the importance of a team.
- Each **ParkPlay needs to be seen as a community event** and not a 'session' for a paid member of staff.'
- Whilst you might have need in an area it **doesn't mean you have demand.**
- **Naming of a park is important,** local people sometimes don't call a Park by its official name.
- **A few weeks of poor attendance can lead to others not attending,** therefore being in a cycle of poor attendance.
- No delivery because of **a lack of available Playleader has a huge impact** in terms of consistency of attendance, this has to be avoided at all costs.
- **Good sports coaches don't necessarily make good Playleaders.**
- Whilst younger Playleaders have a wealth of skills, **they can lack some of the softer skills** often seen in those people with more experience and knowledge of engaging adults and young families.
- **You must go where the energy is** and where there are people who want to work with you, just because there is a need in an area doesn't mean that the programme/project will work in that area.
- **These programmes must move at the pace of the community,** while contractual targets are important, it's important to recognise that rushing can impact the programme's long-term success.
- **Word of mouth is the most valuable** marketing and communication tool available.
- Input and buy-in from the **Local Authority** is really important and to focus only where there is energy, demand and need.

Looking Ahead:

The Partnership remains committed to expanding ParkPlay's reach across the county, ensuring that more residents can benefit from this initiative.

To build a stronger and more sustainable ParkPlay programme in Hertfordshire, several key steps need to be taken.

Our Future plans include:

1. **Strengthening local teams** by developing Playleaders into Programme Directors. These leaders will take on greater responsibility, including managing volunteers at their ParkPlay sessions, ensuring sustainability and deeper community engagement.

2. **Reassess the conditions at the four current ParkPlay locations** to evaluate demand and make changes to improve engagement or redirect resources to areas with stronger interest.

3. **Relaunch two existing ParkPlay locations** and introduce three new ones, ensuring the right conditions are in place from the start for sustainable, well attended sessions. This includes working with local district and borough council colleagues who can demonstrate local need, energy and demand.

4. The Playleader **recruitment process to be strengthened** ensuring that those taking on the role are not only enthusiastic and passionate about leading sessions but also well connected within their communities to drive participation and long-term engagement. By taking on a more demand-driven approach, ParkPlay can be better positioned to create meaningful and lasting impact in the communities it serves. It is hoped that the lessons learned from this experience will help ensure future ParkPlay launches are supported by a strong and committed team.

Through continued collaboration with AITC, ParkPlay, and our Local Authority Partners and organisations, we will continue to strive to create a lasting positive impact, making physical activity a key part of everyday life for residents across Hertfordshire.

Conclusion:

To conclude, delivering ParkPlay over the last two years has provided valuable insights into what makes a successful and sustainable programme. Although there have been some success stories there is still a lot of work to do to embed this programme more firmly within communities across Hertfordshire. A key takeaway is the need to build strong local teams from the start, with committed Playleaders who are truly part of their communities.

Moving forward, all locations will be reviewed to understand where support is needed most, relaunching paused sites with the right conditions in place, and helping Playleaders step up into Programme Directors. By working closely with ParkPlay and key partners and equipped with a clear understanding of what works and what doesn't, the team is in a strong position to build a more sustainable, long-term programme that will positively impact even more residents across Hertfordshire.

Appendix 1 - Setting up a ParkPlay:

Key Considerations for setting up a ParkPlay:

Right leader and team: Finding the right person to lead it and then building a team of people who can connect ParkPlay to the community is the most important part for making a ParkPlay a success.

The cost to starting: ParkPlay operate as an independent charity, therefore they need to be able to cover the cost of setting up a ParkPlay. This is to help cover the costs of things like insurance and equipment.

The time it takes to start: Setting up a ParkPlay typically takes 2-4 months, depending on the team, community engagement, and local support. The process isn't rushed, ensuring there is a strong foundation for long-term success.

To learn more about setting up a ParkPlay in your area, visit **park-play.com** or complete their enquiry form by scanning the QR code:

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this report, please get in touch by emailing hspinfo@herts.ac.uk

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