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# End of Fund Report: Play Bradford

**University of Bradford Union of Students (UBU)**

Funding period: January 2024 to June 2025

Fund: BUCS Active Wellbeing Fund



## 1. Introduction

The Play Bradford project was born from a desire to remove barriers to participation in physical activity and create lasting, meaningful connections between movement and mental wellbeing for students at the University of Bradford. Funded by the BUCS Active Wellbeing Fund our application was to provide opportunities for hard-to-reach and underactive student groups to engage in physical activities to build fitness, social mobility and confidence allowing students to continue pursuing an active lifestyle.

Although the original format of the project was to deliver a wider range of activities across the student body under a single Play Bradford banner, a series of unexpected organisational changes led to a dramatic shift in the project and in how it was delivered. This report outlines what was achieved, how the programme adapted, and most importantly, what impact it had on the students who took part.



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## 2. Context and Changes to Delivery

In the early stages of the funding period, the University of Bradford Union (UBU) underwent significant internal changes. Ellie Richards, who had authored and submitted the Play Bradford bid, left UBU just weeks into the funding cycle. Simultaneously, the union lost over a third of its core staff team due to a voluntary severance package put in place by the university in response to wider institutional financial difficulties. Those of us who remained were faced with delivering on existing commitments, many of us in new job roles, while navigating a complex restructuring process under the leadership of a new Chief Executive with a different strategic vision.

Amidst this environment, the capacity to deliver the programme with the breadth and frequency originally intended simply did not exist. This allowed us to refocus our efforts on what we could realistically deliver while still functioning within the remit of the funding.



Between July to October 2024, while adapting to our new roles, the activities paused, but from November onward, Play Bradford refocussed to expand on our wellbeing walking programme, drawing from earlier pilot work and based on clear feedback from students who had taken part in our summer walks. With funding directed into sessional delivery support and logistics, and with the

addition of a qualified Mountain Leader in November 2024, the walks increased in capacity, went further afield and reached a broader range of students.

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## 3. Delivery Overview: Event Breakdown

The project consisted of 15 wellbeing walks and two football events over the funded period. Here's a detailed record of our walking programme:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Walk Location</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
29 May 2024	Lister Park, Bradford	9
5 June 2024	Ilkley	13
12 June 2024	Bingley	6
19 June 2024	Leeds Canal Towpath	15
26 June 2024	Baildon Moor	18
3 July 2024	Huddersfield Canal Loop	6
11 July 2024	Knaresborough	42
24 July 2024	Keighley Tree Identification Walk	10
31 July 2024	Haworth	7
10 November 2024	Fewston Reservoir	25
8 December 2024	Malham Cove	18
3 February 2025	Bingley to Keighley Linear	23
8 March 2025	Hoffman Kilns (Settle)	24
12 April 2025	Settle Circular Walk	27
9–11 May 2025	Northumberland National Park (overnight residential)	35

In addition, we delivered:

- **28 February 2025:** Five-a-side first round - 80 attendees
- **13 March 2025:** Five-a-side finals - 40 attendees

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#### **4. Wellbeing Walks**

There was, at one point, a hesitation in narrowing the project to focus so heavily on walking. The original Play Bradford proposal was built around flexible, drop-in sports, games and tournaments that brought students together through casual competition and shared activity. But as the academic year began and the staff and sabbs settled into the new structure, it became clear that the resources required to coordinate, staff, and market such a diverse programme simply weren't available.

What we did have, however, was a strong foundation from which to grow: the early summer wellbeing walks had been easy to deliver, low cost and well-received, especially by students who expressed discomfort or anxiety in more traditional sport environments. Importantly, these activities attracted those who wouldn't typically define themselves as "active" or "sporty" which is a key target group for the Active Wellbeing Fund.

By shifting focus, we weren't stepping away from the purpose of Play Bradford, we were trying to engage students in its core aims by promoting wellbeing through activity, connecting students to their regional environment and creating shared experiences that build confidence and friendships groups.



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## 5. Reach of the Project

The Play Bradford initiative engaged a diverse cross-section of participants over its delivery period, reflecting the inclusive ethos at the heart of UBU and the project. In total, the project reached well over 250 individuals, with sustained engagement through both structured events and word of mouth. A key feature of the project's reach was its emphasis on those traditionally excluded from university sport or physical activity, including disabled students, international students, and those with low confidence or social anxiety.

The wellbeing walks in particular acted as a draw for students seeking gentle, social ways to engage in getting fit and making friends. Attendance grew over time, and the geographical range of walks allowed participants to explore areas of Yorkshire and beyond that they might otherwise never have visited. From local parks to the dramatic coastline of Lindesfarne, these trips offered meaningful contact with nature and encouraged new forms of connection.



Importantly, the project's reach extended beyond the student population. Several local young people with a range of disabilities from the Bradford community joined walks regularly, including individuals with visual impairments and learning disabilities. These interactions created a sense of community and empathy that went beyond the immediate outcomes of fitness and wellbeing.

Additionally, the five-a-side football tournament brought together over 120 participants and spectators, including many students from non-sporting backgrounds who hadn't engaged with UBU sports activities before. The event's open structure and low-barrier entry ensured a diverse turnout, adding to the overall reach of the programme. Many of the participants were international students and for most, was their first interaction with UBU.

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## 6. Impact on Students

## **i. Physical & Mental Health Benefits**

The majority of students who attended the walks had not previously engaged with physical activity on a regular basis. Many of our students were new to the UK and several had disabilities. Many of our students really enjoyed the walks as they provided a way to make friends, see the UK and to get fit.

Across the 15 walks, students consistently fed back that they felt physically refreshed, mentally clearer and built social networks. The hikes were not intensive in the beginning and increased in intensity over the year leading to a two-day residential in Northumberland. They were challenging enough to inspire a sense of accomplishment, especially when climbing through Malham Cove or navigating the moors around Settle. The inclusion of a Mountain Leader brought not only safety but also educational value, helping students learn about terrain, map-reading, and risk management in the outdoors.

A core outcome of the walking programme was the breadth of its appeal. These events were designed to be inclusive with well-planned routes that considered pace, terrain, and team spirit. As a result, disabled students, blind students, and students with learning difficulties felt welcome and supported. Many students told us that this was their first physical activity experience at university. Furthermore, the presence of local young people from the wider community enriched the programme and helped bridge town-gown divides.



## **ii. Social Confidence & Mobility**

For many students, particularly international and first-year students, our walking group became a place of belonging. One of the most telling signs of impact was that students began to return.



Repeat attendance grew, especially after November, with several students attending all the walks. The social aspect grew naturally, with an incredibly active WhatsApp group, arranging to meet at the union before setting off, and even organising their own informal strolls around local parks between walks. One autistic student with a visual impairment, even went to Italy to stay with an international student who returned home.

“It was the only thing I did all week that was uni work. It got me out of the house, and I met people I wouldn’t have met otherwise.”

Beyond this, the walks also provided a way for students to see the UK. Students without cars or family in the UK explored parts of Yorkshire and the Northeast they’d never visited before. For some, the residential trip to Northumberland marked their first overnight stay away from home.



As well as the physical health benefits, the walks were an outlet for students facing isolation, stress, and lack of routine. Participants consistently reported improved mood, better sleep, and a sense of purpose after joining the group.

Many who joined did so alone and formed deep bonds through shared experience. Several international students reflected on how important the project was to helping them settle in and meet others.

A unique element of the wellbeing walks was how we welcomed non-student disabled participants as well. Local community members, including a few blind, learning disabled and neurodiverse individuals, joined several walks and quickly became part of the group.

This gave the walks a different element which helped to recruit students to volunteer to guide our blind hikers or to support some of the guys with learning disabilities.

“Once I saw Luke (a blind hiker) go up the hill, I thought if he can do it so can I”

Having such a broad group helped break down barriers and create a shared sense of wellbeing that where age, ability, or any other attribute didn't really matter.

Experiences like this go far and are remembered forever.

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## 7. Five-a-Side Football Tournament

While walking became our central focus, we knew that competitive sport still had a role to play and felt a commitment to providing at least one activity that was related to the initial funding bid. In February and March 2025, we ran a five-a-side football tournament, culminating in a semi-final and final played on the university MUGA pitches. Trophies were awarded and the energy was high.

Though only two events, the tournament reached 120 students and served as a vital winter touchpoint for students looking to stay engaged during cold months when walking activity was less feasible.

Furthermore, this tournament engaged international students, most of whom have not engaged with UBU before.



## 8. Budget Spend Summary

The £1,750 funding allocation from BUCS was fully directed to project delivery.

Category	Description	Amount (£)
Mountain Leader Fees	5 sessions incl. Fewston, Malham, Settle	1,260.00
Travel & Transport	Minibuses, coach hire, walk logistics	456.88
Football Tournament Costs	Venue hire and trophies	301.90
<b>Total Spend</b>		<b>£2,018.78</b>

Costs exceeding the grant were absorbed internally to ensure project continuity.

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## 9. Reflections and What's Next

This project has been a journey in more ways than one. It started as a broad, energetic vision, and after a period of real turbulence, it emerged as something quieter, deeper and arguably more aligned to the students it intended to serve.

We've learned that small can be powerful. That physical activity doesn't have to be structured or branded to be meaningful. That walking which is often overlooked, can change not just days but lives.

Moving forward, we aim to:

- Embed the Mountain Leader-supported walks into our core wellbeing calendar.
- Develop student-led walk leaders for sustainability.
- Run seasonal sports tournaments where resource allows.



## 10. Conclusion

Play Bradford didn't go to the initial plan and because of this, it allowed us to develop something that has had a massive impact on those who participated. By changing course, we built something that allowed students to build friendships, improve fitness and something that really left an impact in the lives of those who attended. We are grateful to BUCS for the support that enabled this project to develop and deliver as it has.

