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LOSS ON THE TERRACES:

FOOTBALL, TOWNS & LOCAL IDENTITY



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Guiseley Football Club
Photo: Richard Boyle @hellorich



This report has been published as part of HOPE not hate Charitable Trust's Hopeful Towns project.

The project aims to better understand what makes a place confident, optimistic and open, and to help towns across England and Wales to fulfil their potential.

We want to address the root causes of hate, to stop divisive narratives from taking hold in the first place. And we want to promote policies which champion the value of towns, and stress that every town matters.

As well as producing research to understand risk and resilience in our towns, we're working with local partners in towns to develop local solutions and will be building a Towns Leadership Network to push for positive change across Britain.

Email us via towns@hopenothate.org.uk to get involved or find out more



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FOREWORD

ALISON MCGOVERN, MP FOR AND WIRRAL SOUTH AND SHADOW MINISTER FOR SPORT

People want to be a part of something. And as we've discovered through the outbreak of COVID-19, that doesn't stop when the football stops. As this report from HOPE not hate charitable trust makes clear, local football clubs hold rich meaning for town communities. Clubs and supporter communities are central to people's identity.

People have given up their time delivering food parcels, medicine runs, crowdfunding, much of this has emerged through the football community – they're passionate about community and want to be a part of it regardless of what's happening on the pitch.

But the financial crisis that the coronavirus outbreak poses to football clubs presents a crossroads, with many clubs- especially smaller, town based clubs- under threat.

There are lots of ways in which our cultural heritage is protected in this country, and football clubs are part of that heritage. They deserve to be treated as such.

Good club owners understand that clubs really belong to their communities, and many put huge amounts of money into it. That is to be respected, but good owners understand that clubs would be nothing without supporters.

But as this report outlines, there is a need to scrutinise whose heritage we are speaking about. There's a lot of hidden history in football. Women have been playing football since it started, but the fact that the FA tried to ban women's football for 50 years and stop women playing shouldn't be forgotten. We should understand that history so that we can learn from it.

Equally, there have always been women on the terraces, but most people's classic image of a football supporter is a man. So women are positioned as excluded regardless of whether they actually are. We need to embrace the hidden histories – and the hidden supporters – as part of football's folklore.

Similarly, the history of black footballers isn't told and celebrated in the way that it should be. We need to bring those stories to the fore. It's been deeply impressive and moving to listen to black players and managers – like Hope Powell – talk about their feelings on the game and what they expect from it, what it can be going forward. We



need to listen to people with experience about what good inclusion looks like.

For a long time, people have known that the game needs reform, in order to survive and serve its communities. A reliable, workable test for who is able to own and manage a club would make sure supporters know that a club is being run in their best interests and in the long-term interests of the game. Both political parties went into the 2019 election with commitment to that reform, and we have seen a lot of cross-party agreement about that change.

It is not for politicians to micromanage sport, but we do need to act as a backstop. We can think of countless examples of where governance have failed, and now we should be looking at what the principles of good governance are.

Football has huge potential for building hope in our communities. At it's best, football is an incredibly enjoyable team sport that exemplifies what we can achieve when we work together. It's a beautiful display of collaboration, and it symbolises the good in life when people work together.

INTRODUCTION

Across England, sources of collective identity – from community hubs and trade unionism to our local industries and high streets – have been on the decline. Now, as our sense of place and community decays from years of cuts and economic inequality, the fallout of the Coronavirus pandemic threatens another pillar of belonging. Our football clubs.

HOPE not hate Charitable Trust (HNHCT) research¹² has shown how community tensions, and support for the far right, can emerge from an overlay of underlying prejudice and cultural unease with economic hardship. Immigration and multiculturalism have become a focus for the grievances felt in many communities, but often, there are also deeper feelings of resentment – towards a distant and unfeeling economic and political system, a sense of powerlessness.

In a context of decline and loss, hate can thrive. The extreme end political right has long found a home in places that have struggled under the significant long-term decline which has disproportionately impacted Britain's towns. It has found strength in exploiting genuine anxiety in communities on the sharp end of economic inequality and austerity, offering up 'mass immigration' and 'cultural incompatibility' as simple answers to complex and embedded problems. It plays on a sense of entitlement that comes with being white, and male, to whip up anger around a sense of loss, frame it around identity and status, and direct it towards difference.

It's also in this context that lower-league football clubs, highly visible and collective forms of local identity, find themselves facing the biggest financial threat in decades. Even before the pandemic, 52 of the 72 English Football League clubs (tiers two, three and four English football) were making a loss year-on-year. Financial strain had already caused Bury FC to collapse, and recently Macclesfield Town FC were wound up by the high court. With Coronavirus now depriving clubs of ticket sales and exacerbating the game's existing financial problems, many more could follow.

Moreover, this impact will be disproportionately concentrated in England's towns. 76 towns have a club in one of the top five football leagues: 3 in the Premier League, 14 in the Championship, 20 in League One, 21 in League Two and 18 in the National League³. Many of these are in places

where community infrastructure is already weak, in communities that HNHCT research⁴ has identified as areas where visible decline and competition for resources are undercutting community resilience.

The closure of football clubs could further weaken resilience in struggling communities, where their closure may seem to signify yet another loss. This will loom even larger for those already feeling displaced in an age of progressive social norms. Despite significant progress to include women and Black and minority ethnic football fans, football remains dominated by white men. This is not about pandering to their needs in order to avoid community conflict, and there is clearly a need for the game to take inclusion much more seriously if it is to survive.

Nonetheless, local football clubs are shared spaces, support networks and economic hubs in an age where all three are becoming harder to find. They're collective identities, one of the keys to a sense of place in communities across the country. Brand new HNHCT polling has found that a third of people think the team they support is an important part of who they are. 55% of people believe that the local community will suffer, and 52% think that the local economy will suffer if a club closes.

This report was written before news of "Project Big Picture", a proposal that would entail a £250 million bailout for EFL clubs and more equitable distribution of broadcast income – in exchange for the six largest clubs in English football being granted overwhelming voting powers on how the game is run. The proposal has had mixed reviews and is the subject of ongoing debate, but it has at least demonstrated near-universal understanding among clubs that football finances are unsustainably unequal and that something needs to change.

The current crisis doesn't have to lead to yet another story of loss. A renewed game – one that is more sustainable, more inclusive, more rooted in place – is possible. Coronavirus is an existential threat to dozens of clubs. But, if they can make it through, they have the potential to become reinvigorated drivers of hope in communities across the country.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at the role that football clubs – specifically town-based clubs in the top 5 English leagues – play in community resilience and cohesion. We bring together a series of expert interviews, an anonymous survey of 40 football clubs, associated charities and supporters trusts, and exclusive polling carried out in September 2020 by Hanbury Strategy of 2,001 UK adults, weighted to be representative of the national population.

This report focuses on the top five leagues in England:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1. The Premier League (20*) | } The Championship, League One and League two are collectively known as the English Football League, and governed by the EFL. |
| 2. The Championship (24*) | |
| 3. League One (24*) | |
| 4. League Two (24*) | |
| 5. The National League (24*) | |

**number of teams per league*

THERE'S A LOOMING CREDIT CRUNCH IN LOWER-LEAGUE FOOTBALL. THIS FALLOUT WILL HIT TOWNS HARDEST

Coronavirus has exacerbated existing financial problems among smaller football clubs, threatening the existence of large parts of the game, and up to 60 clubs could close permanently⁵. Without action, the strain created by the pandemic and a potential back-up of toxic debt could spell the end for dozens of clubs.

The crisis in football will hit towns hardest – the only clubs that seem (mostly) safe from financial crisis are Premier League – or top flight – clubs. 85% of clubs in the Premier League are based in core cities, compared to the 77% of EFL (that's tiers 2, 3 and 4) that are towns-based. While city clubs are certainly important to a lot of people, England's large core cities have more alternative sources of identity than most towns – club collapses won't hit as hard in places where there are other large shared spaces and economic hubs.

THE FOOTBALL CRISIS COULD HAVE REAL CONSEQUENCES FOR OUR SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Not everyone in a community, or every community, cares about football – many just aren't interested in the game, and many have been systemically excluded from it. Still, the crisis in lower-league football could have a significant impact on community resilience. Clubs, both in-and-of-themselves and in the specific context of closure, have an outsized impact on local identities and confidence.

- **Shared spaces:** As the civic landscape around us erodes, football clubs remain important shared spaces in increasingly atomised communities.
- **Community support networks:** local clubs, like religious buildings and membership societies, have long extended their support beyond their immediate congregations. The pandemic in particular has seen many (but not all) clubs step up and support the people around them
- **Hubs of economic activity:** Losing clubs' highly visible forms of economic impact – particularly the pubs and cafes reliant on fans – could compound an existing sense of economic decline.
- **Formalisations of place identity:** clubs are, very simply, big and loud representations of place. Understanding the value of local clubs means understanding them as longstanding, living parts of local heritage.
- **Clubs are anchor institutions:** clubs are large, physical, immobile presences in our community. They form part of a place's identity by sheer existence – providing, even for those who aren't active supporters, a reference point and sense of consistency for the community around them.
- **Decline:** Through dying industries, shuttered high streets and closed community centres, Britain's political and economic system is telling an ever-growing number of people that it doesn't care about them. Large-scale club closures, in the face of the loss and anger already present in our communities, is another – very visible – sign that we don't matter.

KEY FINDINGS FROM OUR POLLING

- The majority of people (64%) agree that football clubs have an important place in British culture and identity. Just 10% disagree.
- Around half of Britons (45%) say that they support a football team, though men (60%) were twice as likely as women (30%) to do so.
- The majority (60%) of those who supported a team said that the football team they support is an important part of who they are.
- More than half of people (52%) agree that the local economy of a place will suffer if a local football club closes (just 12% disagree), while 55% say the local community will suffer.
- Among those who support a club, 70% think that the local economy will suffer, and 72% think that the local community will suffer.
- Only half (52%) agree that football is an inclusive sport; but this is concentrated among those who support a football team (78% agreed, 5% disagreed) while just 31% of those who did not support a team felt the same, 23% disagreed.
- A majority (57%) of people, including three quarters (73%) of those who support a team, want to see football clubs having more roots in their local communities (just 5% overall disagreed with this).
- More than half (56%) of people believe there's a racism problem in football, with only 14% disagreeing. The game itself seems to know this – 62% of people who supported a football team said there was a racism problem in the sport, more than among non-supporters (52%).

CLUB TOWNS

Our data would suggest that towns with football clubs are already at the sharp end of many challenges to community resilience, which create more fertile ground for hostility and hate. Nearly half of “Club Towns” are experiencing competition for resources, and a third are seeing visible decline and uncertain industrial futures. They are more likely to be diverse towns, navigating competition for resources as they change.

Statistically, towns with football clubs are more likely to be hostile to migration, but less likely than similar towns without football clubs – essentially, it looks like clubs are based in towns that need them as rare sources of identity and confidence. Moreover, “club towns” are more likely than the average town to be facing visible decline, deprivation and rapid change – reinforcing the importance of clubs as sources of continuity and resilience.

AN INCLUSIVE, COMMUNITY ROOTED FUTURE FOR FOOTBALL

If our clubs are to be true assets – definers of place identity and anchors of our communities – the conflicting identities and histories of the game must all be included. Football must understand and confront its past and current challenges with inclusion, and all clubs must start acting like they deserve the platform they often have. Our polling finds that support for saving local clubs is widespread; but it's also clear that fans must do more to win over those who currently feel excluded from the game if they are to garner sufficient political support for Government intervention.

WHY A CLUB MATTERS

In his article *The death of the 72? Why football outside the Premier League is on its knees* Miguel Delaney, Chief Football Writer at the Independent, writes:

“Football clubs are not just, well, football clubs. They are local social institutions. In many lower-league towns, in fact, football is now the sole true community hub. Even local authorities and police forces lean on these clubs, as they are increasingly rare places where people gather.”⁶

This is a popular notion in football writing – that years of public sector cuts and economic inequality have torn through our public realm and left clubs as some of the only community spaces left. It’s important to remember football’s history of exclusion and not to overlook the communities thriving without it, but a club’s value as a community in-and-of-itself is clear, and football’s impact often reaches well beyond the pitch.

Our polling for this report found that a third of people considered the football club they support to be an important part of who they are (with 60% of people who support a club believing as much). 64% of people agreed that football clubs have an important place in British culture and identity, with those who don’t support a club still being three times as likely to agree (47%) than disagree (15%).⁷

As far as we can tell, there are four key ways in which football clubs feed into local identity, which we explore briefly below.

Local clubs act as increasingly important:

1. Shared spaces
2. Community support networks
3. Hubs of economic activity
4. Formalisations of place identity

CLUBS AS SHARED SPACES

Over the last ten years England and Wales have lost over 940 youth centres and 4,500 youth workers. Youth services in some areas – including Luton and Gillingham, two football towns – have lost funding entirely⁸. Cuts have also closed almost 800 British libraries⁹, one in every five that existed in 2010¹⁰. Up to 1,000 Sure Start centres¹¹, 1,200 bus routes¹² and 5,500 pubs¹³ have

closed in the last ten years. In a civic landscape that feels ever-more suffocating, physical community spaces are important. We must pay very careful attention to the material impact of club closures, and the message it sends to communities already experiencing this seemingly managed decline.

Being around each other matters – even if we don’t always take our community spaces up on the offer, it’s obvious that the ability to see and interact with each other is important to our sense of community and place. This has become starkly and sadly clear under Coronavirus, and the withdrawal of access to physical space that it entailed¹⁴.

According to Stuart James, writer at the Athletic, *“Stadiums, essentially, are full of strangers. Except it never feels like that when they’re following your team. Although I don’t know the names of the people who sit around us every week, they’re as recognisable to us as the players.”¹⁵* That sense of physical community matters in an increasingly atomised society – the ability to perceive strangers as more than strangers, to conceive people as part of our community even if we don’t know them, can be difficult with the withdrawal of other traditional spaces like libraries, pubs and youth centres.

As Kieran Maguire, lecturer at the University of Liverpool, put it to us:

“Football clubs are unique in that they give an individual town or city an identity and a sense of belonging, which doesn’t exist in anything else. It doesn’t matter if you’re Leave or Remain, it doesn’t matter if you’re Labour or Tory, if you’re a Bolton fan, or a Bury fan, you have that common bond. It gives you an opportunity to engage with people. If you take away what football represents in terms of that identity, you’re reducing further the opportunity for people to come into contact with each other and you’re going to further accelerate the gaps and the divisions that we already have.”

The mixing of people from different backgrounds has been foundational in concepts of integration¹⁶, but while English football remains an overwhelmingly male, white space, it remains an important space where people mix. As psychologist and author Susan Pinker writes,



Burnley Football Club. Photo: Nathan Rogers @nathanjayrog

“feeling untethered is not only uncomfortable, it is bad for your health...over the last decade huge population studies have shown that social integration – the feeling of being part of a cohesive group – fosters immunity and resilience.”¹⁷

While Pinker’s work focuses on the importance of face-to-face interaction to physical health, it no doubt extends to the social health of our communities. Research from HOPE not hate Charitable Trust¹⁸, and from IPPR¹⁹ has shown how a lack of community spaces can form part of the backdrop to scepticism about migration, feeding a sense of decline and weakening community interactions.

Football clubs alone are obviously not enough, and anywhere that has to be accessed by a turnstile isn’t a truly *public* space. Still, football clubs are an increasingly rare chance for communities to mix, invest collectively in something and build resilience in the face of a shrinking landscape of shared spaces.

CLUBS AS COMMUNITY SUPPORT NETWORKS

Writer Kenan Malik notes that a football club is a “collective project” drawing thousands of people together:

“In many towns, from Barnsley to Sunderland, football clubs are often one of the most important

social institutions. They provide not just a sense of civic pride, but also a kind of collective hope or aspiration. And in recent years, as wider political and social projects and identities have disintegrated, so the sense of solidarity provided by institutions such as football clubs has become more important”²⁰

This sense of belonging and collective aspiration is important in understanding the role football clubs play in their communities, as well as the role of Club Charities or Club Community Organisations (CCOs) – sister organisations to football clubs that share their colours and identity, and are tasked with supporting the community around the club.

In the 2018/19 season, the EFL (tiers 2, 3 and 4 of English football) found that their CCOs spend around £63 million on community and social projects, with 886,000 people taking part in CCO activities. Paul Kirton is the founder of Team Grassroots, the UK’s leading amateur football organisation, and told us that *“for some people, football is their only physical activity. If that’s removed, that’s an issue for physical and mental health.”*

The importance of the physical and social infrastructures in our communities, and the vulnerable state that many are in, has been brought into sharp focus by the coronavirus outbreak. This is true of football, too – while

many club charities have a lot of work to do before they can call themselves community anchors, many more have been making the difference in towns across the country.

According to Alison McGovern MP, Shadow Minister for Sport, many local clubs *“know what’s needed, how to reach people and how to respond quickly. Faced with the shock of Covid-19 and the impact of austerity in our towns, sports clubs have stepped up to plug the gap left by the last decade of austerity. Within a couple of weeks of lockdown being announced Tranmere Rovers FC were supporting 1000 vulnerable people in my local community²¹.”*

The same was true before coronavirus – many club charities understood their platforms, and the responsibilities that came with them. As Jason Morgan, Chief Executive of the Charlton Athletic Community Trust, told us about the development of his charity:

“We knew that our alternative approach sometimes had better results, better methods of engaging groups of young people, than traditional approaches. We knew that police uniforms are a barrier, but a Charlton kit breaks down barriers. It’s the same with health checks, you and I probably don’t go to the doctor as much as we should do, but if we go to a football match and someone says ‘come on have a cholesterol check and we’ll stick a thermometer in your mouth’ we’re more likely to go “go on then” because we’re there.”

We shouldn’t be complacent about the failings of traditional support networks during the coronavirus crisis, but clubs stepping up to run foodbanks, anti-isolation projects or fundraising campaigns is undeniably valuable and provides a vision for football going forward. A game that’s locally-rooted, engaged in people’s lives and bigger than football itself is often cited as either a goal or a reality, depending on who you talk to. Coronavirus poses huge challenges to lower league clubs, but it could also be the call clubs need to shift towards a truly communal future.

This community work feeds into the link between football and identity specifically because it goes beyond football. As the Fans Supporting Foodbanks slogan states, “hunger doesn’t wear club colours”. Clubs are more often than not, not standalone Clubs form a part of our social tapestry, often going beyond their immediate supporters in much the same way as a church or any other local congregation.

Indeed, our polling found that 72% of those who support a football team think that the local community will suffer if a local football club closes, but this concern extended to the general population. More than half of people (55%) say the local community will suffer if a local football club closes.

CLUBS AS ECONOMIC HUBS

As large businesses and centres of big physical gatherings, football clubs have a significant role to play in local economies – particularly outside of big cities. While most football clubs can be ruled out as economic powerhouses on their own, this overlooks where the economic impact of clubs are concentrated – pubs, cafes, and other highly visible and physical parts of our local economies²².

In 2019, Championship games attracted an average of 20,000 people. League One matches averaged 8,741 attendees, and League Two matches 4,467²³. Even non-league football pulls its weight in terms of physical crowds – the National League, England’s fifth tier, averaged 2,174 people per game²⁴. Last September, non-league Notts County attracted 9,090 fans to a game against AFC Fylde, and sold more than 100,000 tickets over the season. Bringing these crowds through the neighbourhoods around stadiums – and their pubs, cafes and shops – isn’t a contribution to take lightly.

Beyond professional clubs, a study by the FA found that adult grassroots football²⁵ – that is, the football that’s played by “the public” rather than professional teams – had a direct economic value of £2 billion each year, with regular grassroots football players spending around £326 per year each. Around a third of this is their estimate of the amount spent socialising with teammates – typically in pubs and cafes. While the existence of Bury FC or Macclesfield Town won’t decide whether someone plays amateur football on a Sunday, the spending habits of football fans probably look similar, with pubs and cafes forming part of many matchday rituals.

Losing clubs’ very visible form of economic impact may mean an outsized contribution to an existing sense of decline in our towns. A recent analysis showed that since 2010 one British pub has closed every fourteen hours, with many more threatened from the impact of coronavirus²⁶. A study by Planet Football mapped the 21 football grounds with the most pubs nearby. Of these 21 grounds, 11 belonged to ‘towns teams’. Four of the top five – Newport, Wolverhampton, Ipswich and Blackpool – are town clubs, with a total of 119 pubs within a half-mile²⁷.

In towns that have been seeing industrial decline and economic contraction for decades, the collapse of a club will have a further knock-on effect for local economies, another important chapter in a narrative of decline and pessimism.

Our polling found widespread acknowledgement of the economic impact of football clubs for the wider community. More than half of people (52%) agreed that the local economy of a place will suffer if a local football club closes (just 12% disagreed).

FORMALISING PLACE IDENTITY

The sense that somewhere has a revered history or a distinct identity can be a major factor in determining how able it is to foster confidence or inclusivity. Without identifiers of a shared history or identity, it's harder for a place to articulate a story about its past and its future. As a focus group member in Newcastle-under-Lyme²⁸ told HOPE not hate Charitable Trust: *“this place needs investment and putting back on the map. It was on the map once.”*

For a long time football clubs have been a straightforward way of putting places on the map – key to an internal understanding of identity, and also the first thing that comes to mind for many outsiders. While there's obviously a lot more to Bolton, Barnsley and Blackburn than football, one of the most common ways people hear their names are as synonyms of their football clubs.

Football's romance and sentimentalism have always extended beyond the pitch, and the idea that it's “more than just a game” is as old as the game itself. Without putting on our rose-tinted goggles, it is important to recognise the role that clubs play in the collective mythology of towns – particularly in those where the loss of other longstanding institutions has fed a sense of decline. In its criticism of the way football is currently run the Football Supporters' Association, a 500,000-strong membership body of football fans, claims that:

“clubs are cultural commodities, the biggest expression of community identity in our country, with loyalty built up over generations. They should be afforded levels of protection in keeping with listed buildings or conservation areas. It is not appropriate to treat them as if they were a supermarket or mobile provider.”²⁹

While “biggest expression of community identity” is a bold claim, it's hard to think of other expressions of place identity that are as large, visible and explicit. For many supporters of local teams it almost seems cyclical – clubs are an important part of place identity, but also clubs are important because they are representative of places. 114 of the 116³⁰ football clubs in the top five leagues of English football are named after the local area or a nearby neighbourhood, a core foundation of a club's identity being where it plays³¹.

Clubs are valuable as increasingly rare shared spaces, support networks and economic hubs, but they're also a very direct and explicit representation of place. There are exceptions, obviously – many fans only care about their club and not the club's local area. Indeed, our polling found that of those who supported a football team, just 40% supported the team in the city or town based where they live – a majority (59%)



Burnley Football Club.
Photo: Nathan Rogers @nathanjayrog

supported a team outside their own town or city. Moreover, many locals around football grounds are fundamentally uninterested in the club. However, having an inherently place-rooted public identity makes many football clubs a part of communities' local heritage.

As the Royal Society of Arts told us, *“those with less traditionally valued forms of heritage have the most to gain from celebrating it as part of that place's story. This is how heritage can play a part in building more resilient and inclusive communities and place-based identities into the future”*. A lot of clubs have been around since the 1800s, and there are few parts of English cultural life that can claim the organic history, engagement and significance of its football clubs.

We shouldn't ignore the complexities of the game's place in society – one person's source of belonging can be another's symbol of marginalisation, and it is vital to challenge football's structural role in excluding different communities. However, football clubs have unique social value, and clearly have enormous potential to be foundational sources of rooted, and inclusive, identity.

FOOTBALL'S FINANCIAL CRISIS

An important disclaimer at the start of this section is that part of the problem with football finance is its murkiness and unpredictability, particularly in lower-league football. For example, it took the pandemic, clubs calling for player pay cuts and pressure from the Professional Footballers' Association (the footballers' trade union) for League One and League Two clubs to open their books to independent accountants³² this year. Our polling found that the majority of people (67% overall, and 78% of those who support a team) want to see clubs be more financially transparent.

Last-minute buyouts and backroom dealings have been a part of the professional game for a long time, and Coronavirus has muddied the waters even more. Most recent reporting was based on the assumption that crowds would start returning in October, a plan that the government then withdrew a week beforehand. Estimating the size of football's financial crisis has gone from a matter of estimated guesses to just regular guesses.

Nonetheless, it's clear that there's something really, really wrong with football. As the Fan Supporter's Association put it *"there's no set definition of a club in crisis, but fans know it when they see it – if it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck"*. Between Bury, Wigan, Bolton, Charlton, Macclesfield and others clubs making headlines in the last year – and League One Accrington Stanley owner Andy Holt admitting that "most [EFL] clubs are technically insolvent"³³ – there seem to be a lot of ducks around. So many that over 30,000 people have signed a petition calling for a governmental review of the way clubs are owned and run³⁴.

It seems that the only real stability in modern English football is through Premier League membership, who's 20 teams brought in over four times as much as the 72 teams in the Championship, League One and League Two³⁵. 85% of Premier League clubs are based in core cities, compared to the 77% of EFL teams (Championship, League One and League Two) that are based in towns. If the financial picture outside of the top flight is as bleak as it seems, there could be real consequences for the already strained sense of identity in English towns.

THE MAKING OF A CRISIS

Even before COVID, the Championship's wages/income ratio was over 100% for three of the last four seasons³⁶ – last year it was 107%, with Championship clubs collectively spending over £50 million more on wages than they brought in.³⁷ Deloitte estimates that English clubs spend twice as much on wages as German clubs, and 50 percent more than Spanish ones³⁸. This is before we consider the other costs involved in running a club like stadium upkeep, training facilities and transfer budgets.

In fact, systemic loss-making in the Championship could be even worse than it originally seems because of the distorting effect of parachute payments, multi-million pound payments from the Premier League to recently-relegated clubs intended to 'soften the landing' as they lose top-flight TV income³⁹. The EFL has six clubs receiving a total of £240 million in parachute payments⁴⁰, and even with this (time-limited) support clubs are living beyond their means.

While a lack of universal finance reporting among smaller clubs means that we can't know for sure, reckless spending does seem to be most acute in the Championship. The chance of being promoted to the Premier League – the richest football league in the world – encourages a 'casino-style' approach to spending, where clubs take on big debts in the hopes that expensive players take them up to the top flight. As Kieran Maguire, a football finance expert from the University of Liverpool and author of *The Price of Football*, told us:

"We've been building up a head of steam in the EFL, and the gap in money between individual divisions is so high that it encourages a casino-style approach. If you know that in the Championship you get £7m of T.V. money, but in the Premier League you know you get a minimum of £100 million a season, then that's worth rolling the dice for in the minds of many club owners."

"As a consequence, in 2019 the operating losses of clubs in the championship exceeded 600 million pounds. That's only sustainable if owners continued to underwrite those losses. And there's no guarantee"

While Championship teams seem particularly at risk, numbers in the other leagues aren't much better – the average EFL club spends nearly 100%

of their income on player wages alone. Stadium upkeep, backroom staff, training facilities and other costs are pushing the majority of clubs into debt. An investigation by The Times⁴¹ found that 52 of the 72 clubs in the EFL (made up of the Championship, League One and League Two) lost money in their most recent annual accounts⁴².

The National League (tier 5) are also vulnerable. EFL clubs receive “solidarity” payments from the Premier League (around £500,000 per League Two club, £700,00 per League One club and £4.5 million per Championship club⁴³) and some TV money. National League clubs still have overheads, with some spending more than League Two clubs on wages, but lack this consistent income and are therefore more vulnerable to the loss of paying crowds⁴⁴.

Financial precarity and regular loss-making has created something of a perfect storm. New lockdown measures have added up to six more months to the six months that football clubs have already spent without ticket income, which could tip many of football’s fragile institutions over the edge.

Nonetheless, there is widespread resentment among the public about football that sits at odds with a precarious reality. Our polling found that the vast majority of people (72%) feel resigned that football today is all about money, with more supporters (74%) than non-supporters (72%) thinking the game has been reduced to finances. Headline-making figures of the premiere league clearly continue to shape public understandings of the game, and more must be done to engage at the community level if football is to win public support for keeping the game alive.

THE PANDEMIC

Simon Sadler, owner of League One Blackpool FC, recently said he thinks clubs will “go like dominoes. Once one goes many will start to go. The money in League One and League Two isn’t there to support football without fans. Match-day income is around 60% of our revenues. Owners generally don’t have the deep pockets of those in the Premier League and Championship, and many now are very likely to be having problems in their own businesses.”⁴⁵

As Kieran Maguire told us, “in the Premier League only about 13% of money overall is generated from

match day. As you drop into the lower leagues, where the impact of broadcasting deals is far less significant, you become more reliant upon fans turning up to watch Walsall or Morecambe or Grimsby or Accrington. So for those clubs things are increasingly precarious, with no sign of return to matches in front of a paying audience – and I think the fact that the government announced that there’ll be no more social gatherings of more than six, that’s probably bad news for football.”

The further you get from the Premier League, the more vital matchday income is to keeping the lights on. Removing the distorting effect of the Premier League’s large parachute payments, matchday income ends up at about 30% of the average Championship club’s income⁴⁶. Pre-pandemic, Maguire found that matchday income made up about 35% of average income in League One⁴⁷ and 40% of average income in League Two⁴⁸.

Matchdays are the primary source of income for National League clubs, and even before the pandemic 21 of 24 clubs made a loss in 2018/19 (losses that year were over £13,000 per week per club⁴⁹). Tony Kleanthous, Chairman of National League club Barnet FC, told a meeting of club managers: “without supporters turning up, I’m not sure how we’re expected to pay the costs of running the club. What is making it hard is the cost of U-turns. If you are not able to plan, that is when things go wrong.”⁵⁰

This, sadly, makes sense. As Maguire told The Athletic, “Football is a part of the entertainment industry. Like all other businesses in this sector, it will be hit hard by the lockdown. The difference is football has higher fixed costs than most and these are the wages and transfer instalments”⁵¹.

Dr Rob Wilson, a football finance expert at Sheffield Hallam University, said that the pandemic “is the single biggest ever challenge to professional football in this country.”⁵² And according to Gary Sweet, CEO of Luton Town (a Championship side that went into administration three times between 1999 and 2007), “it’s more grave now than it was back then. Football can’t survive going a year without supporters – this is a problem and a challenge for the game, not just for Luton Town. If you go back to those two periods – at the end of the day if we weren’t there back then somebody would’ve bought the club. Right now there’s not really a queue of people willing to buy football clubs.”

FOOTBALL'S CREDIT CRUNCH

Extracts from our chat with Kieran Maguire, a football finance expert from the University of Liverpool and the author of *The Price of Football*, are scattered throughout this report⁵³. However, one thing is worth drawing out on its own:

Professional football, not just in England but across Europe, could be facing a credit crunch. A combination of high debts, constantly moving money and the impact of coronavirus could create a perfect storm, where bad debts closing one club could cause a knock-on effect that hits several more.

As Kieran explains,

“My fear in terms of a domino effect in football is in relation to football creditors. If a significant club goes bust and it has outstanding creditor fees for football transfers – the transfer market is now built on credit – we could face a situation, and this is broader than English football – this could be a European-wide issue, similar to what we experienced in 2007. Effectively the pass-the-parcel approach to toxic debt. If you’re paying next month’s wage bill relies on Roma or FC Kaiserslautern paying for an outstanding transfer and they say, “well we can’t”, all of a sudden you get a contagion in football.

And it could only take two- not even giant clubs, medium size clubs- if they go to the wall with large outstanding football creditors, then the impact on the rest of the industry could be amplified.”

While it’s hard to tell exactly how many clubs the pandemic is threatening (without action, it could very well be the entire National League and the 52 EFL clubs that were already reporting losses) what is clear is that this isn’t a regular crisis.

Photo: James Boyes / flickr



WHY LOSING A CLUB MATTERS

The crisis facing football is particularly important for two reasons:

1. Club closures are highly visible signs decay, and can stir anger and resentment in areas already suffering from long-term decline
2. Football clubs serve as anchor institutions – large, physical presences that help to define an area’s landscape and have an impact on the wider community, beyond their support base

HIGHLY VISIBLE DECLINE

There is a material, visible decline facing so many of our communities. As well as the loss of community infrastructure – community and youth centres, libraries and pubs – the long decline of the high street faces further challenges as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Analysis by The Guardian found that almost every town centre in England and Wales had declined between 2013 and 2018, with an average of 40 shopfronts shuttering per town centre and some high streets, like Eastbourne and Blackpool, losing a fifth of shops⁵⁴. This has obviously been worsened by the coronavirus crisis, with the British Independent Retailers Association reporting that 20% of its members may not reopen at all⁵⁵. Melanie Leech, CEO of the British Property Federation, told MPs that she expects up to 50% of shops on a typical high street to fold⁵⁶. HOPE not hate polling from May 2020 found that an overwhelming majority (89%) think that the coronavirus outbreak will mean more shop closures and accelerate the decline of the High Street – just 2% think that it won’t⁵⁷.

Our polling finds that outside of our immediate support networks (family, friends, neighbours), the most important parts of our communities are parks and green spaces (45%) and thriving town centres (30%). Last year The Guardian reported that Britain lost over 700 community sports fields between 2010 and 2018⁵⁸, while Fields in Trust found that nearly 2.7 million people don’t have a publicly accessible local park or green space – a number that’s rising⁵⁹. With a pub closing every fourteen hours and a fifth of shops being shuttered in five years, there are few high streets that you’d call ‘thriving’ right now.

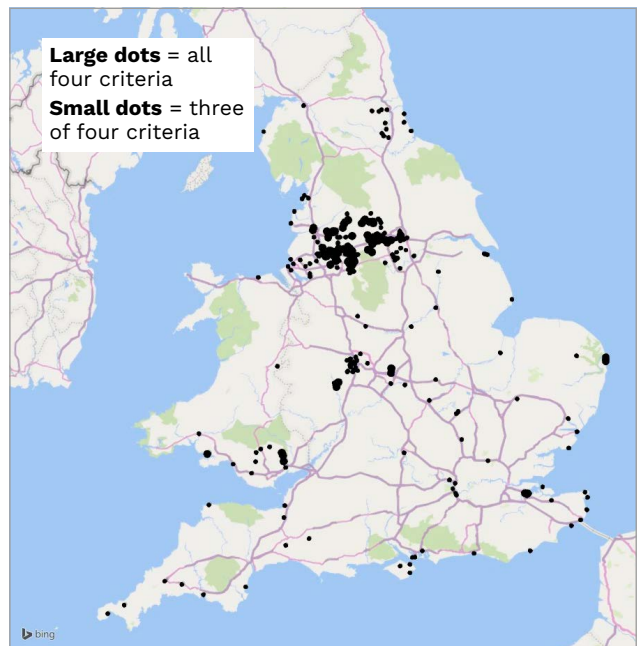
Visible landscapes of decline in town centres across the country. Boarded up shops, overcrowded houses and closed libraries send a message, that places and the people who live there don’t matter as much as they once did. The idea that people have been “left behind” can be an unhelpful one. It can be patronising, puts the spotlight on post-industrial towns as a homogenous entity, and pitches people in different communities as in opposition when they fundamentally aren’t. But that doesn’t make it any less powerful, providing a focal point for people who feel like they’ve been cut a bum deal by economic change and globalisation.

HOPE not hate Charitable Trust research has shown how highly visible decline can feed resentment and frustration⁶⁰. Areas facing lots of pub closures, problems with community safety and above average deprivation in their physical environment felt like they were deteriorating. A sense of cultural decline and economic abandonment undermines our ability to form and strengthen communities⁶¹. Moreover, in the National Conversation on Immigration we found that neighbourhood decline and badly-maintained private rental housing was often directly connected to people’s perception of how immigration had changed their communities⁶².

Non-Premier League football clubs are more likely to be in areas where there is a palpable sense of decline and fewer large cultural organisations, anchor institutions or hubs of activity. It’s hard to imagine large-scale club closures coming without cost to identity, community and belonging in parts of the country that increasingly can’t afford it.

Our recent report, *Understanding Community Resilience in our Towns*, found visible decline to be one of the core factors undermining resilience in English and Welsh communities. It also found this visible decline to be largely concentrated in towns in the North West. It’s also in the North West that many of our club towns are based (see the maps below for a comparison).

Moreover, our polling finds that fans in the North West are far more likely to support their local team than in other regions. Just 20% of respondents in the South East and around a third in the South West (33%) and West Midlands (32%) support the team based where they live, compare



to 54% in Yorkshire and Humberside, 48% in London and 53% in the North West.

While the crisis facing football clubs is a structural and national one, the club crises dominating the headlines recently have been concentrated almost entirely in the North West. Bury, Macclesfield Town, Wigan Athletic, Bolton Wanderers and Oldham Athletic have all made national news for their financial problems in the last year, with Bury collapsing and Macclesfield being wound up by the high court.

The whole idea behind ‘visible decline’ as a resilience challenge is that social problems and public realm issues reduce our trust in each other and amplify feelings of loss. The only real way to counter this is to address those problems – tackle the public realm issues facing our communities and foster local pride. This is where football’s crisis plays its part. Do football clubs move forward as more locally-rooted, inclusive,

present parts of our communities? Or do lower league teams continue to falter, and add to the sense of decline in our towns?

It is in this context that we must understand our football clubs – a context of decline, that a football club collapsing compounds in a very visible, very localised way.

FEATURE: GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

Grassroots football – the football played by ‘the public’ – has long been one of the most impactful and underfunded parts of the game. The grassroots infrastructure has long been financially supported by professional football, with the understanding that it’s typically what roots football in a community, particularly among young people. But, with Manchester United forking out only slightly less to buy Paul Pogba than the entire Premier League contributes to grassroots football⁶³, that support can often feel sub-par.

To find out about how Coronavirus has affected the grassroots game and what its future might look like we caught up with the unshakeably optimistic Paul Kirton. Paul is the founder of Team Grassroots, the UK’s leading grassroots football organisation, and a patron of Show Racism the Red Card:

What does grassroots football mean to the communities you work in?

Ultimately grassroots and community clubs are the last bastion, or community heart, in lots of places simply because there’s been a drive from the government of cost cutting that’s closed down community centres, open spaces, so lots of youth of today – their solace, their home, where they’re comfortable, is the football club.

The football club, at a grassroots level, is so much more than just a game on a Saturday or a Sunday. And families can get just as attached to the grassroots clubs as they do with the professional clubs, if not more, because you’re invested in it. You’re the person whose, quite often, literally cutting the grass or collecting the hotdogs for the Christmas party. Your coaches become role models for the young people. Quite often, especially in paces of high crime and gang-related activity, your coach is actually the person, not the police, putting the barrier in between going down the right path and going down the wrong path.

What do you think about the future of grassroots football?

I’m always hopeful, and I’m always optimistic for the future of grassroots football. When you put a wall in front of a person with that love of the grassroots game, they’ll build a door to go right through it. Grassroots football is played by 11 million people each week. You’ve got hundreds of thousands of people, the largest network of volunteers in the country, there because they love the game. Not because they’re trying to make a penny. To them it’s not a sport, it’s a way of life. And times are hard but when you’ve got someone who makes something a way of life, they’ll always find a way around things.

What I’m hoping is that COVID can be used to bring us together rather than fracture community clubs, because it’s something that’s affecting everybody. It can galvanise a team, a club, a league – it can galvanise people because it’s the one time where we can genuinely say we’re all in this together and we need each other to stick it through. The journey’s by no means over, but I’m hopeful.

And I am seeing green shoots of this. I’m seeing pockets of communities really coming together, you see community clubs doing foodbanks, reaching out to hard-to-reach parts of the community. There’s very, very few youth centres now. Very, very few community centres. More and more examples of green spaces being lost. And we are seeing a grassroots fightback, with people stepping up rather than stepping back.

Grassroots is the most important part of the game because without the foundations, a house, you can’t build a roof.

Photo: Richard Boyle
@hellorich



ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS

In 2019 economic thinktanks Common Wealth and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies proposed formalising the idea of football clubs as “anchor institutions”. As they explain it, *“Anchor institutions are large, immobile organisations which – through either purpose or history – have an intimate link with place...They will not be – and in many cases cannot be – outsourced or off-shored”*⁶⁴.

Common anchor institutions can be things like hospitals, police stations, housing associations and universities – big, physical presences in a community. The idea of anchor institutions is largely an economic one, and most of the research into them focuses on them as large employers and local spenders. However, there’s an important cultural parallel here. Football clubs – like local authorities, libraries and universities – are big, physical and visible institutions that have been a part of the local landscape for a long time.

When longstanding presences – even ones that we don’t directly interact with – start to disappear, it’s easy to see how a place starts to lose its gravity. There is a consistency, an almost mundane sense of continuity, that’s provided by the parts of our community’s environments that have been around for longer than we have, and that will be around after we’re gone. As one Macclesfield fan told the BBC after the club was wound up last month, “it’s just been a constant in my life for so long”⁶⁵.

The point here is not that football clubs have a stranglehold on their communities – they very rarely do. Football’s long history of exclusion and internal struggle, as well as the fact that some people just don’t care about it, means that the game – while it’s clearly England’s most popular sport – is essentially a minority pursuit, with a predominantly white male following. While inclusion must become a priority for football, it’s worth noting that most English anchor institutions in 2020 aren’t universal, yet continue to serve a purpose beyond their immediate remit.

CLUBS AS ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS

Our nationally representative polling, on the face of it, seems to contradict the importance of clubs: only 13% of people think that their local club matters to their sense of belonging to the place where they live. Our out-and-out winners

were our family (79%) and friends (64%), followed by local parks and outdoor spaces (45%) and our neighbours (44%). However, when we compare this to the number of people who think clubs have an important role in British culture or are worried about the loss of pubs, their significance is more clear.

While clubs were only important to a sense of belonging to somewhere for 13% of people, there was a wider recognition of the impact that club closures would have on the local area. 52% of people thought that the local economy would suffer if a club closed (only 12% disagreed), and 55% of people thought that the local community would suffer (compared to 8% disagreeing).

A majority of people (64%) think that football clubs have an important place in British culture and identity, however only 40% of football supporters said their team is based in their town or city. What is more interesting is the 47% of people who don’t support a club but still agreed that football has an important place in British culture and identity.

The direct value of a club could be relatively small, but it has a broader contribution to the sense of local community – they matter to the place around you, and at the very least that means there’s a distinct *place* for things to matter to.

Interestingly, clubs are around as important to a sense of belonging to somewhere (13%) as places of worship (12%) and community and youth centres (12%), supporting the idea that they’re community assets – in line with other local institutions. This could reflect, even, the anchoring presence of religious buildings and community centres – like non-Christians understanding York Cathedral as a defining landmark, or community centres symbolising local communities even for those that don’t use them.

The importance of clubs as anchor institutions, and the consistency that comes with them, is particularly important when we look at where football clubs are based. According to our towns index, Club towns are more likely to face resilience challenges as a result of visible decline and uncertain industrial futures, and are less likely to be in the group of towns we’d consider to have ‘traditional demographics’ and strong national identities.

They're more likely to be diverse towns navigating the challenges that come with change – nearly half of club towns are experiencing 'competition for resources' – including problems accessing

employment and housing and above average population growth. In the face of this change, football clubs are anchor institutions with the potential to offer signs of stability and identity.

CASE STUDY: BURY FC

This year, the FA Cup kicked off without Bury Football Club for the first time since 1894 with the Shakers' collapse blamed, largely, on shoddy ownership. Stewart Day, a property developer, bought the club in 2013, mortgaged the stadium and invested over four million pounds from one of his own companies. When Day's companies faltered in 2018 and he couldn't pay the enormous debts that had mounted up, Steve Dale – who'd admitted to never having heard of Bury FC before – bought the club. Dale had closed over 25 companies before buying Bury, and many fans worried he was coming in to asset-strip the club and close it for good.

Dale had promised Bury's creditors that he'd pay at least 25% of its debts. When the EFL found out he didn't have the money to do this or keep the club running, Bury FC was declared insolvent and kicked out of league football.

The wounds are still fresh in Bury, and the long-term impact of losing the club on resilience, identity and belonging in the town is yet to be seen. There are rays of hope, with Bury Phoenix – a co-operative of over 300 fans – launching a new amateur club earlier this year. Bury AFC has a long road ahead, starting again as an amateur club in the North West Counties League Division One North – the tenth tier of English football. Still, the new club, proudly run "by the fans, for the fans", is an important showing of community and resilience in a town that's just lost a core part of both. As Dominic Martinez told Goal.com, "*we will be in control of our own destiny*".

Fans have often noted the parallel between a sense of decline, detachment and fragmentation in their hometowns and the football club that once served as a pillar of community. "*The system... always lets people down at the bottom,*" says Zoë Hitchen, a Bury supporter. "*It never lets down the people at the top... You can't split this from what's happening in the UK at the moment. You can't split it away from Brexit.*" Bury's old ground, Gigg Lane, is under 10 miles from the homes of Manchester United and Manchester City, two of the richest clubs in the world.

While it's too soon to see the full picture in Bury, the direct impact on fans was stark and immediate – so much so that the Pennines NHS created specialist mental health advice for Shakers fans. Liz Woodings, manager of Bury Healthy Minds, said: "*with Bury FC playing such a big role in many people's lives, strong emotional reactions are understandable. It's normal to feel very upset in circumstances like this because it's such a big loss to our local community and identity.*"⁶⁶ An Al Jazeera investigation into the immediate aftermath of the club collapse found a community in mourning:

"*We spent five days in Bury, and four words were used time and time again by so many of the people we met... 'it's like a death.'*"⁶⁷



Photo:
David Dixon

A TOWNS CHALLENGE



Towns with clubs in the top 5 leagues

The financial crisis in football, and the impact of lower-league club closures, will almost certainly disproportionately affect towns. 77% of clubs in the EFL are towns-based, compared to just 15% in the Premier League. Only 30% of Premier League teams are in Leave-voting constituencies. That figure is 58% for Championship sides, and 75% in Leagues One and Two.

Moreover, the loss of an asset as large as an average professional football club is much more likely to affect the cultural landscape of towns than the country's much larger core cities. As noted by the Centre for Towns, *“football clubs, especially those anchored in our towns, sit at the heart of our communities, providing a boost to economic activity and being the focal point for socially important activities.”*

Of the 116 clubs in the top five leagues of English football, 73 are “Towns Teams” – largely concentrated in the lower leagues: 3 in the Premier League, 14 in the Championship, 20 in League 1, 21 in League 2 and 19 in the National League.

It's important to note here that this is a very imperfect and approximate way of understanding the impact of football clubs, as it makes two

big assumptions: the cultural importance of a football club is most significant in the town that shares its name, and this geographical importance is the same across clubs. The first overlooks the potential impact of clubs in large towns on nearby smaller settlements, and the second means that we don't fully map the differing local importance of clubs to their specific communities. These are interesting areas to explore, but digging into the potential cultural size of all 96 clubs in the EFL and National League is beyond the scope of this report.

The divide between the astronomical wealth of the Premier League and the precarity of lower league clubs is a theme throughout this report, but is worth addressing directly as a signifier of the increasing divide between Britain's towns and core cities. No club outside the Premier League makes £10 million in broadcast payments, while the lowest-earning top-tier side gets £100 million⁶⁸. When financial security is seemingly only a reality for teams in the global-reaching Premier League, and 17 of those 20 teams are in core cities (10 in London, Liverpool and Manchester alone), it's easy to see how the gulf in football finances and a collapse of lower-league clubs will feed the town and city divide.

The Premier League's transformation into a global franchise⁶⁹, and the resulting concentration of money in English football at the top, increasingly seems to reflect the economic sea-changes facing the country as a whole. Indeed, fans of big city clubs being squeezed out or alienated by rocketing prices while fans of town clubs face anxiety and decline is a bleak analogy for the Working class experience in England. It's unlikely that this narrative actually impacts town communities significantly, but both the game and the society it exists in should be cautious of leaving this inequality to fester.

Interestingly, lower-league teams also struggle to sign foreign players, thanks to strict rules about work permits. Among non-European players, only those who have appeared for their national team in at least 30% of matches in the previous two years are eligible for transfers. They tend to be prohibitively expensive. As a result, only 19% of players in League Two come from abroad, compared with 62% in the Premier League – a very explicit sign of globalised football leaving lower-league (and mostly town-based) teams behind.



Richmond Park, home of Carmarthen Town FC. Photo: Nick Macneill

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN CLUB TOWNS

When it comes to community resilience, evidence suggests a specific ‘towns challenge’. The geography of a growing economic and values divide within the country has drawn lines on the map, between smaller settlements and cosmopolitan hubs; between diverse core cities and university towns and their neighbouring towns, coastal and ex-industrial communities. Recent HOPE not hate Charitable Trust has mapped out hostility and liberalism to migration to towns across England and Wales, looking at the broader issues which are winding up local tensions and feeding resentments.

Through developing a Towns Index⁷⁰, an extensive inventory of the UK’s towns bringing together well over 100 data variables for all 862 towns across England and Wales, we created 14 ‘clusters’. Each cluster represents a set of resilience challenges faced by each

town, from coastal challenges and cross-cutting deprivation to rapid change and competition for resources. Each of these factors correlates closely with hostility to migration and multiculturalism – based on our Fear and Hope attitudinal data⁷¹ – and speaks to broader resentments about a sense of loss, decline or suspicion of difference as a result of rapid change.

Our data would suggest that towns with football clubs are already at the sharp end of many challenges to resilience, which create more fertile ground for hostility and hate. Nearly half of “Club Towns” are experiencing competition for resources, and a third are seeing visible decline and uncertain industrial futures. They are less likely than average to be in the traditional demographics, strong national identity and less connected clusters. Instead, they are more likely to be diverse towns, navigating competition for resources as they change.

There are seven cluster challenges that disproportionately affect towns with football clubs, and with each challenge to resilience already in place, football’s financial crisis throws up further questions	
Visible Decline: Social problems and public realm issues that potentially reduce trust in others and amplify feelings of loss	<i>Can towns facing visible neglect afford another highly-visible sign of decline?</i>
Cross-Cutting Deprivation: A genuine and pronounced lack of basic resources, which can create a wider sense of hostility	<i>What impact will club closures have on local economies?</i>
Competition for Resources: Economic pressure on infrastructure, combined with a visible migrant community, that creates potential for narratives of scarcity	<i>What is a football club’s role in materially supporting its community? Can clubs fight the ‘not enough to go around’ narrative by bringing diverse communities together?</i>
Rapid Change : Gentrification, migration and growth that can create tension between new and existing residents	<i>Are closing clubs another sign of loss for people already worried about the pace of change in their area?</i>
Migration in the Community: Patterns of migration that are most at risk of tensions – either through pace of change or patterns of settlement	<i>Are clubs signs of consistency, or key to reshaping local identities? Can they be both?</i>
Authoritarian Footprint: Pre-existing organisational roots for the far right that mean there are foundations for far right agitators to build on	<i>Why did far right organisations, from the National Front to the English Defence League to the Democratic Football Lads Alliance, see football terraces as recruiting grounds? How does football reckon with a history of racism, sexism and homophobia?</i>
Coastal Challenges: social problems in coastal towns that lead older residents to fear deterioration and potentially see migration as part of the problem	<i>Can towns facing visible neglect afford another highly-visible sign of decline?</i>

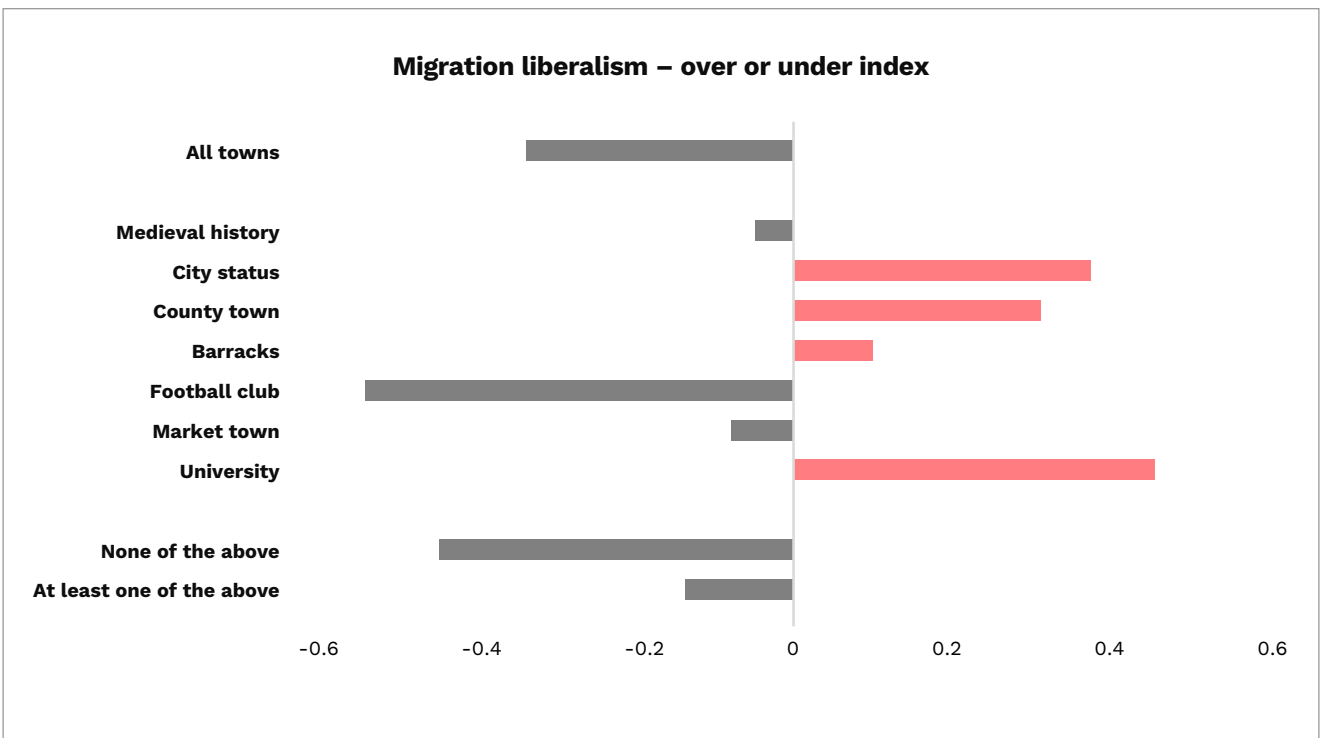
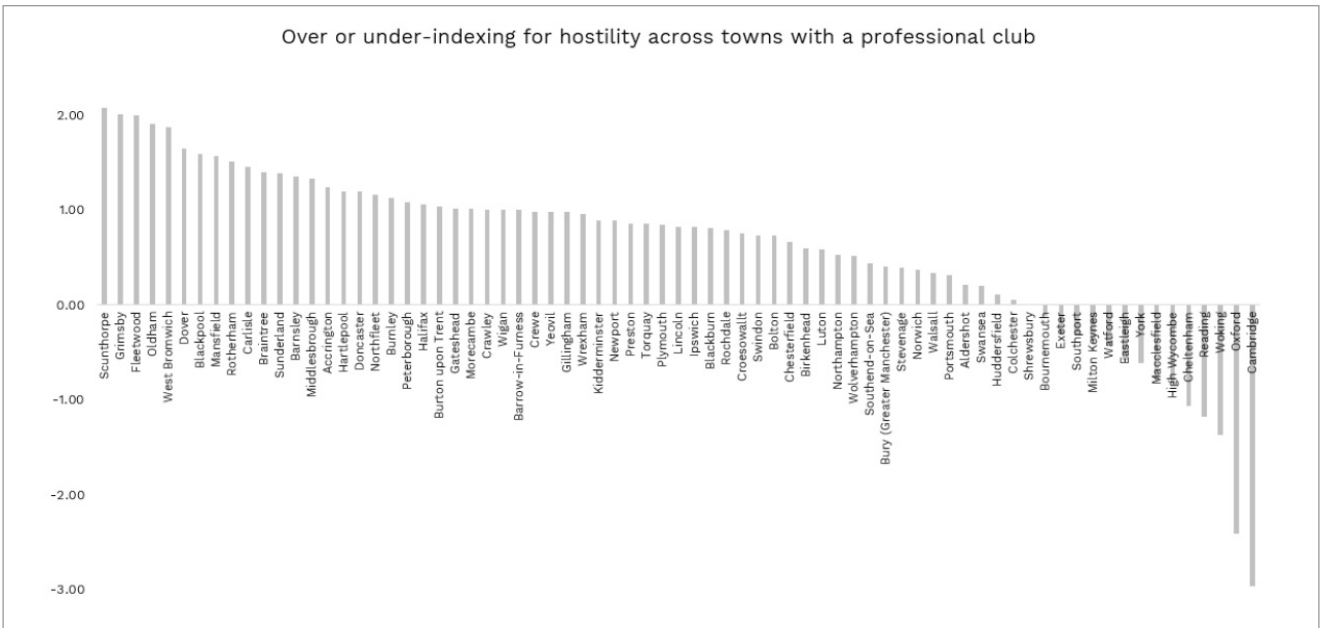
Our data also shows that the majority of club towns already over-index for hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism. This is where we seem to find our dilemma: how exactly do clubs form identities? And who for? Are they last bastions of a “white working class male” identity in English towns or a potential driver of diverse, engaged identities in changing communities? Are these two ideas fundamentally opposed?

Our Hopeful Towns research has shown that ‘heritage assets’, longstanding identifiers of a community, are important to fostering resilience and openness. It makes sense that a town having a revered history or distinct identity makes it more confident and inclusive – if we know what we’re about, then we’ll be less anxious about change. A lack of these ‘heritage assets’ can feed the idea that where you live isn’t valued or lacks a solid identity, making it easier for resentment or hostility to take hold.

‘Heritage assets’ such as a Medieval history, City or County Town status, a historic market, a well-

known military barracks, or a university offer established reputations or institutions that draw outsiders and form identities make a difference to how a town views migration. Of the 862 towns in England and Wales, those that were more liberal to migration were more likely to have these longstanding markers of identity. This isn’t to say that they inherently make a town ‘better’, or that our list of assets is in any way exhaustive. However, the data seems to show that these assets are important.

But despite a view of clubs as heritage assets, football towns are the least likely places to be liberal about migration, even less so than towns with none of the heritage assets that we identified. While at first glance this looks worrying, Club Towns are more likely to be in post-industrial towns or deprived areas. The titans of early football emerged from industrial towns and cities, with the Football League itself being founded by twelve teams from the Midlands and the North⁷². While there’s a long history of activism and resilience in working class communities, and

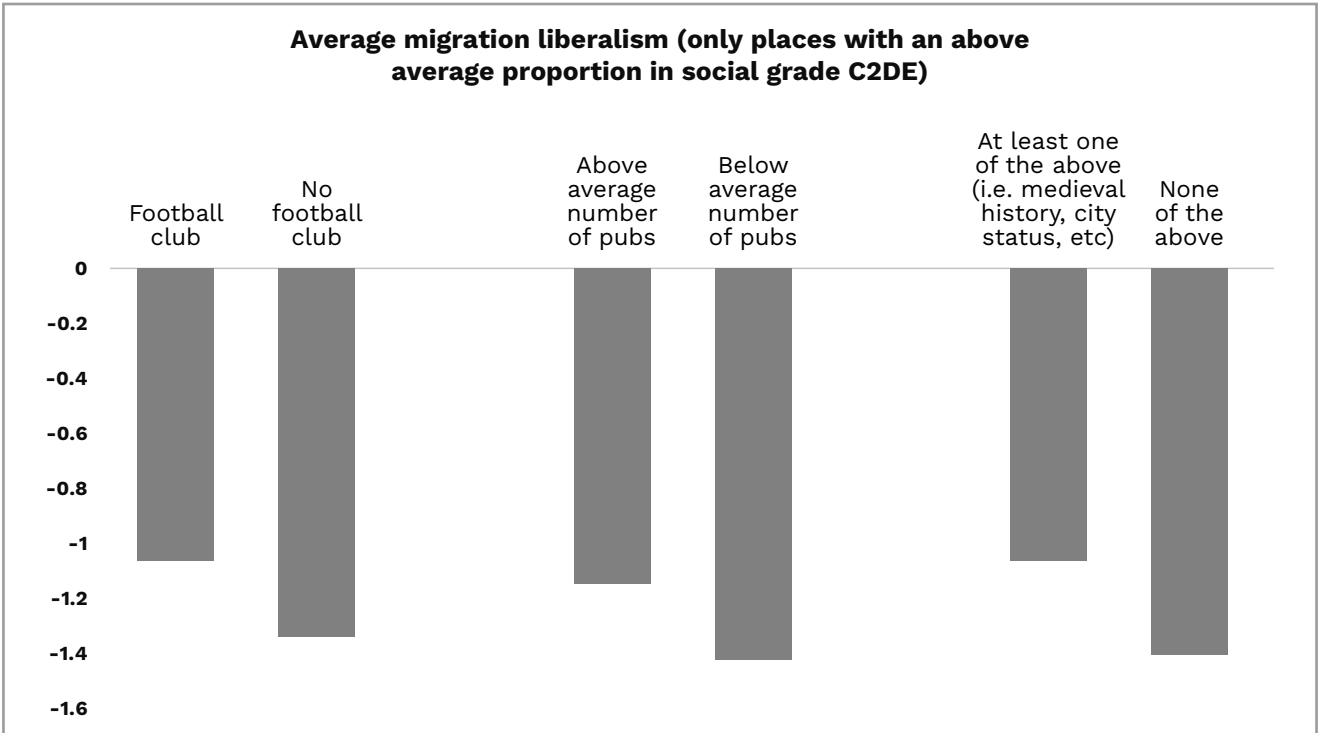


plenty of racism and xenophobia present in Middle Class England, there’s no denying the problems that material deprivation and industrial decline have caused for cohesion in our towns.

If we look at the attitudes to migration in working class towns⁷³ with professional clubs versus those in working class towns without, for example, we find that the latter are more hostile to change and difference. Looking at the 405 towns where more people than average are in social grades C2DE - manual/’unskilled’ work or unemployment. (C2DE social grades are not a direct proxy for being working class, but give us a point for analysis):

C2DE social grades are closely aligned with levels of education, a significant predictor of hostility to migration. These 405 towns are also more likely to be facing other challenges to resilience, like uncertain industrial futures. So, attitudes in Club Towns are generally more hostile than the towns average. But we can see that the presence of a football club appears to reduce this. The same goes for pubs – with working class towns that have more pubs tending to have less hostility.

In short, it seems that ‘heritage assets’, including football clubs, can provide much-needed sources of collective identity in towns at the sharp end



of class inequality in England. Disappearing clubs would be another hit to fragile collective identities in much of the country, and would

provide yet another obstacle to inclusivity and resilience.



Photo: Nathan Rogers
@nathanjayrog

EFL REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS

To better understand the crisis in football and its impact on our communities, we spoke to the heads of 40 EFL clubs, supporters trusts and club charities. Finances are sensitive areas for a lot of clubs and we wanted to ensure participants answered frankly rather than with local newspaper headlines in mind, so responses have been anonymised.

All of the clubs we spoke to said that their relationship to their community is very important, and half reported that COVID has significantly affected it. They were all concerned about the future of club finances in the EFL. As one explained, “a number of EFL clubs were facing financial difficulties pre-COVID. This situation is likely to get worse.” While they were less talkative than the supporters trusts or charities, the problem of uncertainty was a common theme, with one club bemoaning the “unknowns around fans in stadiums, local lockdowns and reduced capacities.

Of the supporters trusts – democratic, non-profit fan organisations tied to specific clubs – all believed that their club was important to the wider community and that COVID has affected the relationship between them. All were concerned about the future of club finances in the EFL.

Several noted the unique role that clubs play in their communities, as well as the belief that greater investment in the communication between clubs and communities is key to the way forward. As one told us, their club needs to “do more with schools, food banks, and make sure everyone can afford to attend”. There was a desire for better engagement with local communities and a better understanding of diversity. One trust told us that “our community is wide-ranging, and there has to be effective dialogue with everyone, from local government to local community leaders” in order for clubs to make it through the crisis. Another said that “sometimes trusts and clubs have little to no contact with the groups they want to engage with. It would be good if they could access help on this front.”

This need for better community understanding was reflected in a desire to reach past the club gates, with one supporters trust telling us that the way forward must include “remembering that many people within the community are not interested in football per se, but are happy that a successful local team puts the place ‘on the map.’”

The over-riding feeling of supporters trusts, though, was anxiety: “Money must be shared more fairly from the premier league they are ruining and dominating football. Do they want us just left with 20 Teams in the country? Support the tier system to help it survive.”

Of the club charities – sister organisations to football clubs that do local charity work – all but one reported COVID affecting their work, 60% saying it had affected their work severely. Similarly to the supporters trusts, multiple club charities said that greater redistribution of Premier League revenues will be important to the game going forward – with some identifying a chance for football clubs and charities to rise to the occasion rather than crumbling: we need “funding to develop new projects related to consequences of COVID, especially mental health support for young people”.

One club charity expects “a difficult couple of years to claw back income lost to COVID. We’ve lost all of our matchday revenue from groups of young people visiting the stadium on matchdays as well as losing significant income from our holiday camps”. Others are more optimistic, with one telling us that “Community Schemes can manoeuvre themselves in to a position where they play an important role in rebuilding and supporting the communities that they serve post-COVID”.

Interestingly, 60% of club charities were concerned about the future of club finances in the EFL, but only 20% were concerned about the future of club charities – underlining the separate identity that club charities have managed to foster. Still, as one charity CEO tells us, “I’m concerned about the survival in football clubs in general, which will no doubt affect their charities. The charities will be needed more than ever during the recession and recovery from COVID, so funding must continue to ensure we can keep helping those in need”.

Worryingly, one told us that there is “currently no legal obligation for a parent club to support the charity, putting enormous stress” on them. If clubs start to fold and whatever voluntary support left disappears, could the community work done by football clubs sever from the game?

WHOSE HERITAGE?

While professional football clubs seem to reduce hostility to migration, there's still a lot we don't know. As Dr Dan Burdsey, a lecturer at the University of Brighton and the author of *Racism and English Football: For Club and Country*, told us when we proposed the idea of football clubs as 'heritage assets':

"Well, whose heritage are we talking about? If you were to say to various excluded, marginalised communities, "it's important that you get behind this asset" a lot of them would say "well actually, I haven't been allowed to get behind it. Not only have we not been allowed to get behind it, it's been symbolic of our deleterious experiences in the town or the city.""

Football certainly has a lot to grapple with – an enduring default culture of white masculinity; a history of systemic racism, sexism and

homophobia; and the uncomfortable truth that historically, when far right organisations wanted to go recruiting, they often headed to the terraces. The relationships that BAME communities, queer people, disabled people and women have with the game require far greater scrutiny.

As such, this section is not a comprehensive look at the challenges in football, but a reminder that clubs can and must do better if they want to be the community anchors many see themselves as.

AN INCLUSIVE GAME?

From someone flying a banner reading **WHITE LIVES MATTER BURNLEY** over a game between Burnley and Manchester City in June⁷⁴, to racist abuse targeted at Alex Scott after speculation that she was going to present the BBC's A Question of Sport in September⁷⁵, there are plenty



Oxford United supporters in the Stratton Bank stand at Swindon Town's County Ground. Photo: Steve Daniels

of signs that football is not the progressive force that it likes to think it is. Anti-racism charity Kick It Out recently warned of a shocking increase in reports of racist and homophobic abuse last season, with reports detailing racist abuse rising 53% in 2019/20.

Our polling for this report found that more than half (56%) of people believe there's a racism problem in football, with only 14% disagreeing. The game itself seems to know this – 62% of people who supported a football team said there was a racism problem in the sport, more than among non-supporters (52%).

Numbers on diversity in football are hard to find, and football's governing bodies should put more resources and effort into understanding their fans. The most recent figures we could find were from 2010, when the Premier League estimated that 19% of their seats were occupied by women, and 8% by people from black or minority ethnic backgrounds⁷⁶.

However, for many people hard numbers aren't even necessary. As The Athletic's Ryan Conway and Carl Anka put it in *Why are football crowds so white?*, "the next time you're allowed, buy a ticket to a football match, look around and observe. How many of the fans look like you? Or, more jarringly, how many don't?"

*"In a coronavirus world, football on television has now become the go-to experience for everyone. There is no one in grounds. "Football without fans is nothing" is something you hear everyday. But for most black and Asian fans, stadiums closing changes nothing — the television-first experience has been their norm."*⁷⁷

Dr Burdsey sees this problem as a structural one:

"I think it suits football really well- it suits professional football for the discourse to be that racism in football is a fan issue, because it deflects it from the central workings of clubs, of governing bodies. 20 years ago there was this denial that football was racist, now no one in football is really denying there's a problem. They're denying where the problem is. Or they're defining where the problem is and who it comes from.

My take is that football has never done enough. It's never done enough to recognise its own internal problem. You know, someone who worked in football governance

asked me "how do you bring more Asian communities into the game?". And I said "well, my recommendation is that you make a public apology to these communities for your part in their exclusion" and they said "no, no we can't do that". We need to recognise that we are responsible."

The game's problems with gender also run deep. In 1921 the FA banned women from playing on Football League grounds, stating that "the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged." This is despite (or maybe because of) a real energy and popularity behind the women's game at the time – on Boxing Day 1920, Preston-based Dick Kerr's Ladies beat St Helen's Ladies 4-0 in front of a 53,000-strong crowd. The ban wouldn't be lifted until 1971, 50 years later⁷⁸.

As Lindsey Mean and Beth Fielding-Lloyd write in *Women Training to Coach a Men's Sport: Managing Gendered Identities and Masculinist Discourses*, "despite increasing female participation in English football, the sport remains rooted in the values and discursive practices of orthodox masculinity. This is exemplified by the English Football Association (FA), which has been criticized for ineffective responses to addressing the inclusion of women as players and workers within the organisation"⁷⁹. Our polling for this report found 40% of men have seen a live football match in the last year, compared to just 20% of women. And, while 30% of men have played football in the last 12 months, only 10% of women have. It's hard to see this as unrelated to the game's history of undermining and marginalising female footballers, workers and supporters.

As Alison McGovern, Shadow Minister for Sport, told us:

"There's a lot of hidden history in football. Women have been playing football since it started, but the fact that the FA tried to ban women's football for 50 years and stop women playing shouldn't be forgotten. We should understand that history so that we can learn from it.

Equally, there have always been women on the terraces, but most people's classic image of a football supporter is a man. So women are positioned as excluded regardless of whether they actually are. We

need to embrace the hidden histories – and the hidden supporters – as part of football’s folklore.

Similarly, the history of black footballers isn’t told and celebrated in the way that it should be. We need to bring those stories to the fore. It’s been deeply impressive and moving to listen to black players and managers – like Hope Powell – talk about their feelings on the game and what they expect from it, what it can be going forward. We need to listen to people with experience about what good inclusion looks like.”

There are good people doing good work across the county to recognise football’s hidden history and write a different future. Fans for Diversity, a collaboration between the Football Supporters’ Association and anti-racism charity Kick It Out, have supported the founding of over 150 supporter groups that work to make the game more diverse. One, the Punjabi Rams⁸⁰, have been making headlines⁸¹ by bringing the members and culture of a proud working class, East Midlands Sikh community to Derby County⁸².

Women’s football, a century after it was banned by the FA, is again biting at the heels of the men’s game – with over a billion people watching the Women’s World Cup in 2019⁸³ and increasingly powerful calls for equal pay across genders⁸⁴.

However, if our clubs are to be true assets – definers of place identity and anchors of our communities – the conflicting identities and histories of the game must all be included. Football must understand and confront its past and current challenges with inclusion, and all clubs must start acting like they deserve the platform they often have.

Our polling found that, while 78% of people who supported a football team agreed that it was an inclusive sport, just 31% of those who didn’t thought the same. If football wants to live up

to the mantle of “the people’s game”⁸⁵, it must be for *all* of the people. The game, its regulatory bodies and its clubs must stop looking at inclusion as a charitable obligation or a nicety, and instead come to see it as necessity.

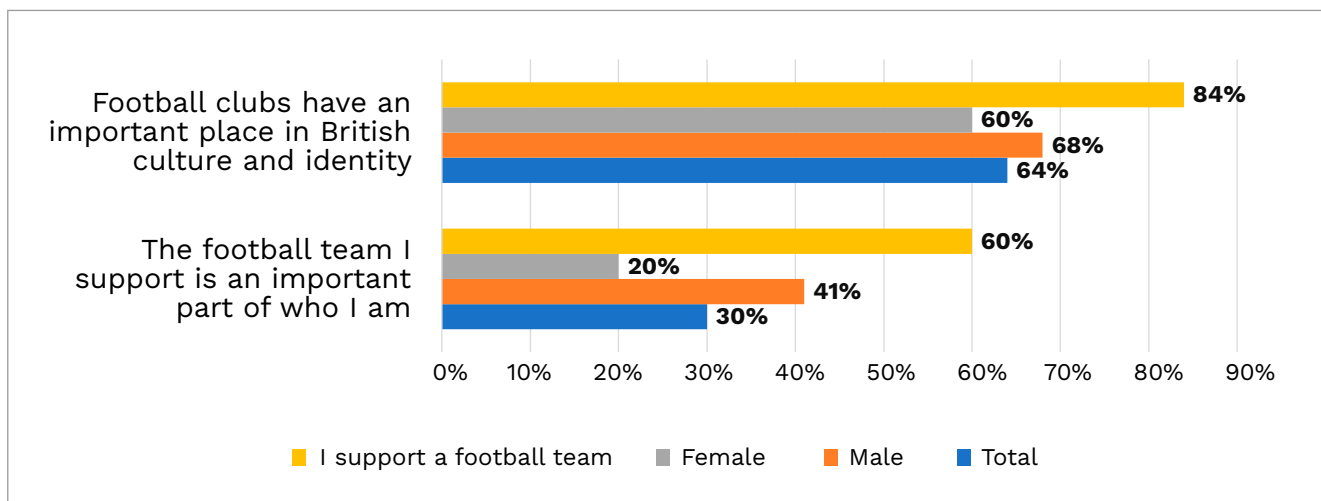
FOOTBALL AND THE FAR RIGHT

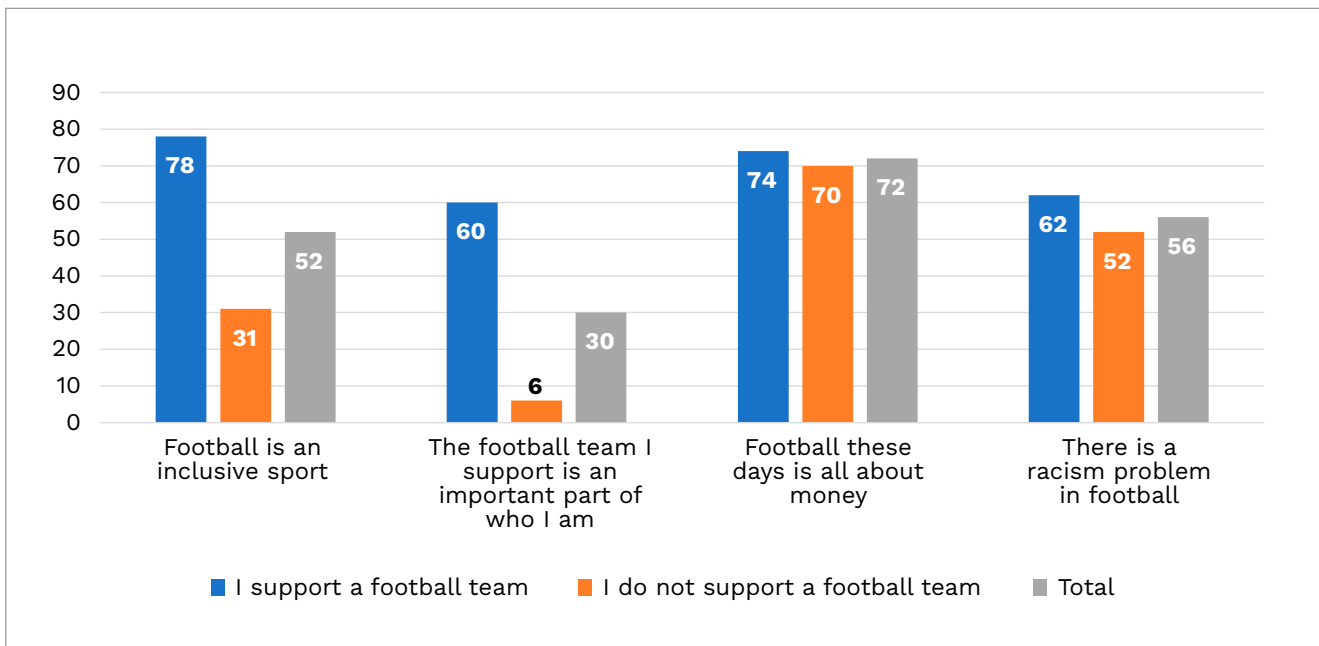
Even the most nostalgic football fan can’t deny the game’s history with hooliganism, and in turn hooliganism’s history with extremism⁸⁶ – causing many people to see clubs as an engine room for the far right.

Brendon Batson is a former footballer and one of the Three Degrees, three legendary black West Bromwich Albion players from the 70s and 80s. In Paul Rees’ book *The Three Degrees*, Batson recalled: “We’d get off the coach at away matches and the National Front would be right there in your face. In those days, we didn’t have security and we’d have to run the gauntlet. We’d get to the players’ entrance and there’d be spit on my jacket or Cyrille’s shirt.”⁸⁷

One of these grounds could very well have been Chelsea’s Stamford Bridge, where the Chelsea Headhunters, a football hooligan firm, was notorious for its links to neo-Nazi organisation Combat 18 and fascist group The National Front⁸⁸. Since 2017 the Football Lad’s Alliance have led several high-profile marches through London, stoking xenophobia and racism and regularly erupting in violence.

In fighting extremism football clubs, and football towns, need to be proactive in seizing the narrative. Campaigns like Football Lads and Lasses Against Fascism are doing good work making extremists feel uncomfortable on the terraces, but they need support. Distancing themselves from extremism isn’t enough, clubs need to step up and join the fight against it – and working actively to define their communities before the far right do it for them.





A FUTURE OF LOCAL, INCLUSIVE FOOTBALL

Our polling finds that nearly half of the UK supports a football team, and over a quarter of football supporters consider their club important to their sense of local belonging. Detached from a local area, 60% of football supporters said that the football team they support is an important part of who they are.

45% of British people (60% of men, 30% of women) report supporting a football team. 54% of people (68% of men, 40% of women) watched a football game on TV in the last year, and 29% (39% of men, 19% of women) have seen a live match. One in every five people (30% of men, 10% of women) have played football themselves in the last year.

While 52% of people agreed that football is an inclusive sport, that sentiment was concentrated among those who support a football team (78% agreed, 5% disagreed) – just 31% of those who did not support a team felt the same, 23% disagreed. Despite having far lower engagement with the game, there was not a huge gender divide between respondents in saying that football was an inclusive sport (59% male, 46% female).

57% of people (62% of men, 53% of women) want to see football clubs having more roots in their communities, 73% of those who support a team and 46% of those who don't agreed that clubs needed to do more.

While “rooted in the community” will mean different things to different people, there are a few obvious ideas – affordable tickets, an environment that's proactive about hate crimes and the reports of BAME supporters feeling

unsafe⁸⁹, more support channelled to community work.

Importantly, one finding ties the gender disparity in football with the more “rooted” future that people want – while only 37% of male supporters live in the same place as their team, 46% of female supporters do, suggesting a link between female fandom and local communities. A path forward that supports local teams in navigating the world during and after Coronavirus, and that does so in a way that is focused on inclusion and engagement with the local area, could open up football to more women while rooting clubs in their communities.

PROGRESSIVE FANDOM?

Recently, football clubs started taking the knee before games in a show of solidarity with Black Lives Matter, a now global movement for justice and equality for black people sparked by the murder of George Floyd by US police. While it was a powerful show of support, the way it ended – a slow petering out and complaints of a lack of leadership from the EFL and the FA – was perhaps more in keeping with professional football’s history with activism.

In September Les Ferdinand, Director of Football at Championship side QPR, said that kneeling had become “little more than good PR”⁹⁰ after his side played Coventry City in the first televised game without kneeling. “What are our plans with this? Will people be happy for players to take the knee for the next 10 years but see no actual progress made?”

Progressiveness of all kinds in football can often feel a bit empty, and professional clubs are regularly accused of “rainbow laces” activism – visible but palatable shows of support that don’t rock the boat too much or address structural problems. As Kelly Welles put it in the New Statesman, were Harry Kane to call out the use of homophobic slurs on the pitch – as England cricket captain Joe Root did in 2019 – the most consequential thing to come of it would likely be “a publicity stunt for Harry Kane’s sponsor, Nike, ... presenting a new range of athletic wear for gay people”⁹¹.

To better understand the past, present and future of football’s relationship with social attitudes, we spoke to Dr Dan Burdsey from the School of Sport and Service Management at the University of Brighton. Dan researches the relationship between football and race and is publishing his new book, *Racism and English Football: For Club and Country* later this year. This is a short extract from that conversation, which can be found in Appendix 2.

“Thinking back to the seventies, the NF went to particular football grounds because they thought that there was a particular audience there, and that they could piggyback on the white masculinity and the tribalism – insider- and outsider-ness – in the game.

I’m sure others would argue that people with problematic, racist tendencies go to football and the diverse players – black players, immigrant players, are an antidote to that. I think it’s a pretty weak argument, a sort of conservative position that just because fans are chanting black players’ names that it means you have enhanced racial consciousness.

I’ve written about Mo Farah or Amir Khan and people, and said that this isn’t lasting. It doesn’t create a new sense of multicultural nationalism. There are reasons why the exceptional migrant or the exceptional person of colour is celebrated because they fit particular scripts of legibility.

There was a paper that came out of Hertford that said that Mo Salah is responsible for decreased islamophobia in Liverpool, and I’d be really, really critical of that argument. I’m not saying it doesn’t have some individual impact on some individual fans, but the idea that people seeing him in the prayer position on the pitch had opened people’s eyes to Islam? I mean come on, these problems of islamophobia and racism are a bit more deeply engrained than that. These arguments don’t have an awareness of the celebration of the exceptional Muslim, both in terms of sporting talent and in not being like others, can actually validate the demonisation of other Muslims. “We like Salah, but you’re not Salah”.

I’m absolutely aware of the community – the ward around my club, Everton, is one of the poorest in the country – and it wouldn’t survive without the club. Economically, it wouldn’t survive – half the shops are boarded up. In a bigger city like Liverpool it’s probably not a good example. But I could think of the whole – you know, M62, Mill Town clubs. I could see that it’d be desperately problematic. It would be losing a sense of identity which has been engrained, in some cases, for nearly 150 years. And the kind of identity which is probably about a shared identity of town and place, but also an identity of family – football is a good way of connecting the generations, and in places like Bury I could see there being a gap entering in which nefarious political or social movements could get the crowbar into. People do need an identity, and you can see groups like the DFLA and the Infidels – football hooligans without the football match.

I don’t think anti-racism is at the top of the list of the average fan, I don’t think it’s the priority in their identity – that doesn’t make them racist, far from it. But we need to do a lot more to make people who want to stir up racism in the game unwelcome. And we see people doing that well all the way back to the 70s and 80s.

Football has the capacity, but also it has the responsibility – because we can define what we want the club to be about – to decide what we want our identity to be. The most successful eradication of racism at football clubs has been from fans. It's not front the clubs themselves, although the clubs are very quick to harness that when it does happen.

It's obviously easier for me [as a white bloke] – it's still intimidating, but it's easier than the targets of the abuse. But those of us who can challenge have got to do it. We have to decide what we want the identity of the club to be.

Racism is like climate change – small measures like not buying plastic bags don't seem like much. But we have to believe we can make a difference, we have to keep hope. Racism in society has been so deeply engrained over 400-500 years, and it'll take a long time to make any significant change. But we have to try, otherwise what's the point?"



Pier Pressure are the fan base of Eastbourne Town Football Club
Photo: EddersGTI

THE WAY FORWARD

One supporter's trust told us that for clubs to survive there need to be the "establishment of an emergency fund for smaller clubs, from government and Premier League resources". But the answer to the challenges facing football clubs and the potential fallout for their communities isn't just about giving clubs money.

While football clubs are important social institutions, they're also private businesses that have been fostering this unhealthy financial environment for a long time. While the impact of Coronavirus on our clubs should clearly be taken seriously, any support must also be accompanied by serious changes in how the game interacts with the communities around it.

Our polling showed that many feel that both the Government and the FA must do more to challenge this; overall, more than twice as many agree (43%) as disagree (18%) that the government should do more to support lower-league football clubs who are struggling as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Those who support a club are significantly more likely to agree with this (63%) than those who do not (27%). And two thirds agree that the Football Association should do more to support lower-league clubs; just 5% disagree. This rises to 80% of those who support a team (and 55% who do not).

Support for saving local clubs is widespread; but it's also clear that fans must do more to win over those who currently feel excluded from the game if they are to garner sufficient political support for Government intervention.

Phoenix clubs, new teams that often carry over the names, branding and support of their predecessors, often emerge as symbols of hope following club collapse – with AFC Bury being the most recent example. However, there isn't a 'model' for phoenix clubs – or for the transition of clubs into fan ownership in any way, really. Each case is unique, and is often a big undertaking relying on spontaneous work by individual people. If the financial crisis facing the EFL and National League is realised, this patchwork method of saving or reinventing clubs might not be sustainable.

Moreover, the financial issues in lower-league football won't go away after Coronavirus as they are not simply Coronavirus-created. They're reflective of a game that seems increasingly detached from its communities, that 72% of our poll felt was just about money. To truly

'rescue' lower-league football – to deliver on the conception of it as a people's game, and make sure that it serves the communities clubs are rooted in – there need to be serious, wide-reaching changes.

Earlier this summer the government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport pledges £16 million to 'rescue' Rugby League, and to "safeguard the immediate future of the sport for the communities it serves". 'Rescuing' the EFL will be more complex, and likely much more expensive, but is not beyond the realms of possibility.

SUSTAIN THE GAME!

The recent Sustain the Game! Campaign, launched by supporters groups across England and Wales and coordinated by the Football Supporters' Association, has called on authorities to protect the existence of local clubs and address the longstanding issues in the game that COVID has brought to a head. The Government's 2019 manifesto committed to a fan led review of football governance – a promise that has gained particular significance in the face of the game's financial crisis and several high-profile cases of financial mismanagement.

Almost all of the 92 Premier League and EFL clubs have backed the campaign, which calls for new regulations set under five key principles:

- "Protect our clubs – football clubs are community assets and an important expression of individual and local identity, they deserve legal protection and urgent support to secure their future;
- Transparency – everyone has a right to know who owns their club, and how clubs and the authorities operate. Owners are custodians of clubs on behalf of all of us;
- Financial controls – fans want rules with real teeth which are independently enforced, clubs and leagues can't be left to regulate themselves;
- Strengthen the pyramid – football as a whole is wealthy, but we need a smarter and fairer use of the money in the game to encourage sustainability;

- Supporter engagement – fans are the lifeblood of the game, they need a voice in their clubs and on all issues that affect them and their communities.”

There are kinks to be worked out here – what, for example, would ‘smarter and fairer’ use of the money in the game look like? What might sound like community ownership or external intervention could also look more like empowered EFL regulators. However, the vision that the FSA puts forward is one that we support.

In terms of material policy change, the two ideas that we’ve heard the most in our research have been the creation of an external regulator and the support of community ownership.

OUTSIDE REGULATION

Damian Collins MP, former chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, recently proposed the establishment of a Football Finance Authority (FFA) that’d be created by the FA and backed by the government. Former FA Chairman, Lord Triesman, said: *“It is a pity that football so seldom does the work needed itself. But it doesn’t. This is therefore an especially important intervention.”*

This makes sense, and the desire for proper protections chimes with many voices in the game. As one club charity told us, football needs *“more robust regulation...akin to listed buildings or green spaces”*.

In our interview Kieran Maguire, a football finance expert at the University of Liverpool, laid out the case for regulation:

“The present model of self-regulation isn’t working. There were recommendations made to the EFL in terms of its government structure – of having independent directors and things of that nature – and those proposals were rejected by the EFL, who seem to like the idea of club directors being on the board.

As long as football authorities ultimately are representative of a very small stakeholder group, i.e. club owners, then long-term issues in terms of sustainability of the game I don’t think are going to be achieved.

We have Ofgem, we have Ofwat, we have many regulators of industry. There have

been proposals put forward by the FSA around broadly same issues – some form of external government monitoring services, better representation of other stakeholders. Ultimately, for me, the most important people in football are the fans and the players, but the people running the game are neither. The amount of influence they have is relatively minor.

The present model has failed. It’s encouraged casino ownership, it’s encouraged creative accounting, it’s encouraged brinkmanship under the present rules and regulations. So perhaps we need somebody who can look at it from a more distanced eye.”

A particularly immediate form of regulation, as we seem headed for an age of club bankruptcies and buyouts, is an owners test, which Alison McGovern MP explained to us:

“There are lots of ways that other parts of our society are regulated – after the 2008 crash we took a very close look at who was allowed to operate financial services. We can learn from other regulation, and I think we need a good process where we understand the rules that we need to introduce, either legislatively or through codes of practice, and then we need to understand how to implement them. We need a better idea of what makes a well-run club, and over time that needs to change the culture. It’s about rules and regulations, but it’s also about a process that can drive cultural change. Poor owners can undercut and undermine those trying to make positive change.”

While the form and focus of regulation is beyond the scope of this report, it’s clear that it’s needed – clubs, for better or worse, are community assets. They should be treated as such.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Kieran Maguire explained to us that *“an overreliance upon a single individual really increases the risk factor for clubs, and it only takes two or three people’s personal circumstances to change, or for them to decide to sell up, for things to become very precarious.”*

While he didn’t tell us that to advocate for community ownership there’s certainly a nugget



in there – regulation would help solve football’s casino-style problem of risk and debts. But why not just change the players?

Germany’s 50+1 rule means that a club can’t play in the Bundesliga if commercial investors have more than a 49% stake in it, ensuring that clubs (and by extension fans) hold a majority of their own voting rights. According to a spokesperson from ‘50+1 Stays!’, a campaign to protect the model of ownership from calls for greater private investment, *“I don’t know if I’d like to be part of club if I knew that it actually belonged to one rich individual, a company or a foreign country which is using it for geopolitical reasons.”*

Common Wealth, a thinktank specialising in economic sustainability and public ownership, and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies have laid out the case for greater community ownership here in the UK:

“Fan ownership of football clubs enables collective decision-making that reflects the significance of clubs for a large community base, while a collective ownership model can help to insulate clubs against unsustainable, profit-driven management practices.

Alongside regulation and democratic reforms for day-to-day operation – such as a cap on ticket prices, a legal obligation to pay a living wage, and prioritising local procurement – clubs need to meaningfully advance their own roles as anchors in communities: as large employers and purchasers, they have the ability to catalyse economic and social justice in the areas they are based, as well as acting as cultural landmarks.”⁹²

On a practical level, these proposals would mean a 1 or 2% levy on player transfers to create a fund for fan buyouts, that could be made available in the case of club bankruptcy or collapse. Last month Macclesfield Town FC was wound up with debts of £500,000. A 1% levy on Leicester City’s £80m sale of Harry Maguire to Manchester United alone could have paid these debts and left £300,000 for rebuilding.

There’s also precedent for communities ‘rescuing’ struggling local assets directly. The Community Right to Bid gives the local community six months to determine if they can raise the funds to buy a community asset that’s being sold. These are usually hotels, churches or other big venues, but could provide a loose model for our clubs – if a club collapses, isn’t it better to give the locals a chance to rescue it before it disappears?

Football clubs are often the largest cultural venues in towns, and shifting towards a model of democratic ownership has the potential to transform their relationships with their communities. From Kick It Out to Football Lads and Lasses and Against Fascism, those creating a more inclusive, accessible, meaningful game will have an easier time without the debt-driven, casino-model of club finances dominating concerns about the game. If done right, community ownership could spur a new sense of agency in communities across the country while ingratiating clubs with local art, music and other cultural scenes. Rather than empty stadiums, the grounds of football clubs could stand as local landmarks – symbols of our towns’ pride and potential, and platforms for their local cultures.

After all, if they’re going to be heritage assets, we should make sure our clubs are theatres rather than ruins.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has highlighted the important role clubs have, and have the potential to have, for communities across the county. It was written before the proposal of Project Big Picture, a large rescue package for EFL clubs in exchange for a concerning concentration of formal power over the game's future among the six richest clubs in England. Whether Project Big Picture goes ahead is yet to be seen, but suggests that an urgent review of the game in one form or another is likely. While we are not football experts, with smaller clubs facing a financial crisis, we believe there are a few routes forward which could ensure clubs can stay open and serving their communities to be more confident, open and welcoming places:

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT:

- Engage with calls from Sustain the Game! to make football more sustainable and better regulated - either through the establishment of an independent regulator or fulfilling your 2019 manifesto promise of a fan-led review into football.
- Ease the transition of struggling clubs into community hands to ensure that financial crises don't cost our communities local institutions that have stood for over a century.
- Leverage any rescue packages to make inclusion work, community accountability and financial sustainability core conditions of public financial help.

FOOTBALL GOVERNING BODIES:

- Use it or lose it – introduce more thorough, independent, fan-involved regulation around football finances, fan ownership and community accountability, or support the creation of an external regulator.
- Provide real leadership on inclusion and justice within football, and the game's response to inequality in wider society. Work with Fans for Diversity, Kick it Out and other equality and inclusion organisations to create a formal, aggressive strategy to tackling bigotry and marginalisation within the game.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

- Treat local clubs like other heritage assets, and explore options should the football financial crisis reach them, including preserving the club's heritage and transitions into community ownership.
- Encourage cohesion, safety and public health teams to engage with local clubs, club charities and supporters trusts, and push clubs to be a leading part of inclusion work in the local area. Support Fans for Diversity's work in creating diverse, exciting supporters groups.

CLUBS:

- In the light of the FSA finding that 39% of supporters believe their club either misunderstands or doesn't act on Premier League and EFL mandates to meet with fans, clubs should focus on clarity and accountability. As the football financial crisis deepens, ensure that fans are represented and understood in the future of a game that wouldn't exist without them, and that the local community has a say in the future of the club – whatever form that takes.

COMMUNITIES:

- Organise: ensure that you're heard in decisions about your club's future by making some noise, and putting pressure on teams to act like the community institutions that they are. This could be through growing the local team's supporters trust, or working with Locality to campaign for local accountability and ownership. Check out the FSA's guidance for supporters of clubs in crisis, which includes building fan unity, getting media coverage and fundraising for supporter ownership and fan activism.

METHODOLOGY

OPINION POLLING

Hanbury conducted a survey of 2,000 adults between September 8 and September 11 2020, using an online panel of respondents. To ensure the sample was as representative as possible, we sourced the most up to date census statistics to inform our weighting and sampling criteria, and collected responses according to strict quotas. Respondents under the age of 18 were disqualified. Each panellist is assigned an individual ID by the online panel provider, which is used to select panelists for the survey according to the target sampling criteria and to ensure panelists are not over-contacted, which limits survey fatigue and potential bias. The data was also passed through a series of automatic and manual checks to deal with any poor quality responses or duplication that might have occurred. Finally, to adjust for small discrepancies in sampling, the data was then weighted to be nationally representative using an RIM weighting scheme, which weighted respondents based on the interactions between region, gender and age.

SURVEY

The HOPE not hate Charitable Trust sent an anonymous survey to the CEO, communications team or a senior staff member at every club and club charity in the English Football League (tiers two, three and four of the football pyramid), as well as the public email addresses of every club's main supporters trust. We received responses from six professional clubs, twenty four club charities and ten supporters trusts.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE: FULL INTERVIEW WITH KIERAN MAGUIRE, THE PRICE OF FOOTBALL

Kieran Maguire is a football finance expert from the University of Liverpool and the author of *The Price of Football*, examining how football clubs operate as businesses and how to read, understand and interrogate the finances of professional clubs.

With recent stories like Bolton, Bury, Charlton, Macclesfield, and Wigan coming so fast it can feel like football's in a really odd place. Has lower-league football always been this precarious?

If you look at the number of clubs that have gone into administration we're actually coming out of a fairly fallow period. Prior to Bury and Bolton, it had been four or five years since a club had gone into administration. If you go back a decade you could be getting six, seven, eight clubs going into administration in a single season.

The reason why clubs have been slightly better off is the strength of the Premier League and the money which it generated. Some of that money drips through to the lower league clubs as what we refer to as solidarity payments. The value of those payments actually exceeds the money that the EFL generates itself from its TV deal.

So is this new spate of clubs going into administration just part and parcel of the way that the game works or is this something else?

We've been building up a head of steam in the EFL, and the gap in money between individual divisions is so high that it encourages a casino-style approach. If you know that in the Championship you get £7m of T.V. money, but in the Premier League you know you get a minimum of £100 million a season, then that's worth rolling the dice for in the minds of many club owners.

As a consequence, in 2019 the operating losses of clubs in the championship exceeded 600 million pounds. That's only sustainable if owners continued to underwrite those losses. And there's no guarantee. Football could fall out of favour. There could be political issues which will make the game less desirable – which we've seen in terms of Chinese investment. Where that's

decreased as a result of external issues in terms of our present governments relationship with the Chinese government and therefore the desire to invest in UK football clubs has been impacted.

Football was reliant upon the benevolence [...] of club owners. And if they reached a can't pay situation, as we saw with Stewart Day at Bury, before he sold it to Steve Dale who took a won't pay approach. Or similar to Bolton under Ken Anderson, he wasn't willing to fund the club. Then at that point the clubs can't stand on their own two feet, because they've been making losses historically. An overreliance upon a single individual really increases the risk factor for clubs, and it only takes two or three people's personal circumstances to change, or for them to decide to sell up, for things to become very precarious.

How has COVID affected football finances?

In the Premier League only about 13% of money overall is generated from match day. As you drop into the lower leagues, where the impact of broadcasting deals is far less significant, you become more reliant upon fans turning up to watch Walsall or Morecambe or Grimsby or Accrington. So for those clubs things are increasingly precarious, with no sign of return to matches in front of a paying audience – and I think the fact that the government announced that there'll be no more social gatherings of more than six, that's probably bad news for football.

Simon Sadler, who owns Blackpool, recently warned of a domino effect where a few clubs going will cause others to go. Do you have much truck with this idea? Could a few clubs sinking scare investors or cause a wider collapse?

My fear in terms of a domino effect in football is in relation to football creditors. If a significant club goes bust and it has outstanding creditor fees for football transfers – the transfer market is now built on credit – we could face a situation, and this is broader than English football – this could be a European-wide issue, similar to what we experienced in 2007, effectively the pass-the-parcel approach to toxic debt. If you paying next month's wage bill relies on Roma or FC Kaiserslautern paying for an outstanding transfer and they say, "well we can't", all of a sudden you get a contagion in football.

And it could only take two- not even giant clubs, medium size clubs- if they go to the wall with large outstanding football creditors, then the impact on the rest of the industry could be amplified. In terms of Simon's comments, I take them on board. My view is that the vast majority of people, especially a lower league level, they do not invest in football to make money. Because if they did, they're very stupid.

How can we make football more sustainable? Is there any way lower-league clubs can come through the other side of COVID stronger?

The present model of self-regulation isn't working. There were recommendations made to the EFL in terms of its government structure – of having independent directors and things of that nature – and those proposals were rejected by the EFL, who seem to like the idea of club directors being on the board.

As long as football authorities ultimately are representative of a very small stakeholder group, i.e. club owners, then long-term issues in terms of sustainability of the game I don't think are going to be achieved.

So do you think clubs, given their importance to their communities, should be better regulated or controlled externally?

We have Ofgem, we have Ofwat, we have many regulators of industry. There have been proposals put forward by the FSA around broadly same issues – some form of external government monitoring services, better representation of other stakeholders. Ultimately, for me, the most important people in football are the fans and the players, but the people running the game are neither. The amount of influence they have is relatively minor.

The present model has failed. It's encouraged casino ownership, it's encouraged creative accounting, it's encouraged brinkmanship under the present rules and regulations. So perhaps we need somebody who can look at it from a more distanced eye.

Do you think COVID has brought home how important fans are to the game?

I think historically club owners have viewed fans as people to be monetized, people to be patronized, and people to be exploited from a financial perspective. And they've been taken for granted, the contributions that fans make. As somebody who watches any game of football, even I ended up switching off matches when the resumption arose. A football match in an empty bowl is not a football match.

Football fans turn a football stadium into a living, breathing organism. You combine that with the players and you've got this incredible spectacle. You take away the fans and the product – which is a horrible word to use – the product is diminished.

If the collapse of a few big or medium sized clubs created a hole in finances and you saw 10-20 clubs in lower leagues go, what do you think that would mean for Britain's communities?

I think football clubs are unique in that they give an individual town or city an identity and a sense of belonging, which doesn't exist in anything else. It doesn't matter if you're leave or remain, it doesn't matter if you're Labour or Tory, if you're a Bolton fan, or a Bury fan, you have that common bond. It gives you an opportunity to engage with people. If you take away what football represents in terms of that identity, you're reducing further the opportunity for people to come into contact with each other and you're going to further accelerate the gaps and the divisions that we already have.

APPENDIX TWO: FULL INTERVIEW WITH DAN BURDSEY, UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON

To better understand the past, present and future of football's relationship with immigration and social attitudes, we talked to Dr Dan Burdsey from the School of Sport and Service Management at the University of Brighton. Dan researches the relationship between football and race and is publishing his new book, *Racism and English Football: For Club and Country* later this year.

What do you think of the view of clubs as heritage assets – the idea that they carry weight for a community's history?

Well, whose heritage assets are we talking about? If you were to say to say to various excluded, marginalised communities, "it's important that you get behind this asset" a lot of them would say "well actually, I haven't been allowed to get behind it. Not only have we not been allowed to get behind it, it's been symbolic of our deleterious experiences in the town or the city".

So, you're obviously aware of that kind of contested position of a football club in its community. And successful clubs with rich owners also have problematic issues around identity and exclusion, it's important to keep that on the table.

What I'm thinking about is how the effects of difficult financial and economic scenarios do play out. It's been argued by academics for a long time that when there are scarce resources it is the "other", in sociological terms, who is often picked out for demonisation and marginalisation. And different kind of rings of inclusion are invoked – 'you're white so you're one of us', then when things are more tricky 'well you're white, but you're not British'.

How will the implications of COVID play out in British communities then? Particularly through football?

Well we know that islamophobia, whenever there are incidents of Islamic terrorism, gets replicated in football and cricket. So I do wonder – I can't think of any top-level Chinese footballers off the top of my head, but we know that racism happily homogenises different backgrounds, so how long before there's racism or chanting directed at a Korean footballer?

How do we make sure that football doesn't get more insular after COVID, that there isn't this othering that we see in difficult times during these very difficult times?

Well my contribution to the field has always been to put the focus on structural, institutional, systemic elements of racism in football. That's not to deny the problems of fans, but I think it suits football really well- it suits professional football for the discourse to be that racism in football is a fan issue, because it deflects it from the central workings of clubs, of governing bodies.

20 years ago there was this denial that football was racist, now no one in football is really denying there's a problem. They're denying where the problem is. Or they're defining where the problem is and who it comes from.

My take is that football has never done enough. It's never done enough to recognise its own internal problem. You know, someone who worked in football governance asked me "how do you bring more Asian communities into the game?". And I said "well, my recommendation is that you make a public apology to these communities for your part in their exclusion" and they said "no, no we can't do that". We need to recognise that we are responsible.

I'm what you'd call a critical sociologist, so we're always looking to hold institutions to account. While we're all huge fans ourselves, we do see sport as a really problematic institution. But you shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater – when you look at what Marcus Rashford's doing, even a real sceptical academic would be hard to say he's done something brilliant and there's clearly an effect.

I get the point that it's good PR for [the Premier League and EFL to support BLM], but I never had that when I was a kid – think what it means to kids now.

I'd be travelling out to seaside towns when I was researching and in some of them people would say "well we're about 20 or 30 years behind big cities in the way we think about race here". But I think, on the other hand it can happen that sport brings different communities together outside of cities – it's often in pockets, it's quite transient, it's quite limited – but it happens.

How do football clubs deal with this conflicted identity? Thinking back to my own childhood in Luton where the EDL saw the club as a sort of engine room, how do clubs measure up between this potential toxicity and its importance to a place's identity?

Absolutely, and I think different people would have different responses to this. Thinking back to the seventies, the NF went to particular football grounds because they thought that there was a particular audience there, and that they could piggyback on the white masculinity and the tribalism – insider- and outsider-ness – in the game.

I'm sure others would argue that people with problematic, racist tendencies go to football and the diverse players – black players, immigrant players, are an antidote to that. I think it's a pretty weak argument, a sort of conservative position that just because fans are chanting black players' names that it means you have enhanced racial consciousness.

I've written about Mo Farah or Amir Khan and people, and said that this isn't lasting. It doesn't create a new sense of multicultural nationalism. There are reasons why the exceptional migrant or the exceptional person of colour is celebrated because they fit particular scripts of legibility.

There was a paper that came out of Hertford that said that Mo Salah is responsible for decreased islamophobia in Liverpool, and I'd be really, really critical of that argument. I'm not saying it doesn't have some individual impact on some individual fans, but the idea that people seeing him in the prayer position on the pitch had opened people's eyes to Islam? I mean come on, these problems of islamophobia and racism are a bit more deeply engrained than that. These arguments don't have an awareness of the celebration of the exceptional Muslim, both in terms of sporting talent and in not being like others, can actually validate the demonisation of other Muslims. "We like Salah, but you're not Salah".

I'm absolutely aware of the community – the ward around my club, Everton, is one of the poorest in the country – and it wouldn't survive without the club. Economically, it wouldn't survive – half the shops are boarded up. In a bigger city like Liverpool it's probably not a good example. But I could think of the whole – you know, M62, Mill Town clubs. I could see that it'd be desperately problematic. It would be losing a sense of identity which has been engrained, in some cases, for nearly 150 years. And the kind of identity which is probably about a shared identity of town and place, but also an identity of family – football is a good way of connecting the generations, and in places like Bury I could see there being a gap entering in which nefarious political or social movements could get the crowbar into. People do

need an identity, and you can see groups like the DFLA and the Infidels – football hooligans without the football match.

I talk a lot in my book about the politics of progressive fandom. I don't think anti-racism is at the top of the list of the average fan, I don't think it's the priority in their identity – that doesn't make them racist, far from it. But we need to do a lot more to make people who want to stir up racism in the game unwelcome. And we see people doing that well all the way back to the 70s and 80s.

Football has the capacity, but also it has the responsibility – because we can define what we want the club to be about – to decide what we want our identity to be. The most successful eradication of racism at football clubs has been from fans. It's not front the clubs themselves, although the clubs are very quick to harness that when it does happen.

It's obviously easier for me [as a white bloke] – it's still intimidating, but it's easier than the targets of the abuse. But those of us who can challenge have got to do it. We have to decide what we want the identity of the club to be.

Racism is like climate change – small measures like not buying plastic bags don't seem like much. But we have to believe we can make a difference, we have to keep hope. Racism in society has been so deeply engrained over 400-500 years, and it'll take a long time to make any significant change. But we have to try, otherwise what's the point?

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FINAL-VERSION.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/the-report>
- 3 The National League technically has 19 ‘towns’ (ie not core cities) in it, but the National League’s Notts County and the Championship’s Nottingham Forest are both in Nottingham and we don’t want to double-count one town (while it has city status, Nottingham falls into the Centre for Town’s town criteria - see justification on page X)
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- 8 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jan/20/youth-services-suffer-70-funding-cut-in-less-than-a-decade>
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- 22 It also doesn’t look at the total disappearance of clubs, rather the impact of a club being in the Premier League – the former will have a much sharper impact on the economic realities of people’s lives.
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- 33 <https://theathletic.co.uk/1813859/2020/05/14/efl-clubs-premier-league-bailout-225-million-avoid-cliff-edge-breaking-law/>
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- 35 <https://www.centrefortowns.org/blog/47-football-on-the-brink>
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