



**SWITCH**  
**BEFORE PITCH**  
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# STATE OF PLAY REPORT

How Covid-19 has impacted grassroots football in the United Kingdom.

# FOREWORD

## BY DAVID JAMES

**There are more than 40,000 grassroots football clubs across the UK, powered by millions of young players' dedication to the 'Beautiful Game'.**

Back in the '80s, I was one of those youngsters, playing for my local team, Panshanger FC. My mum couldn't drive, so my friend and his Dad would take me to the club and watch me play in wind, rain, snow, and even the occasional bit of sun, and I'd pay my 50p a week 'subs' for the privilege – and giving the football club a small, but vital, revenue stream.

These clubs give millions of children of all abilities the opportunity to get some 'fresh air in their lungs' and forge new friendships, many of which last a lifetime. But it is the impact these clubs have off the pitch that cannot be overstated. In many cases, they are quite simply the lifeblood of their communities.

**In England alone, the Football Association claim the economic value of adult grassroots football is £10.8 billion, of which £8.7 billion is based on the social well-being benefits, with the NHS saving over £43million through reduced GP visits – and that's not even accounting for the millions of children who play.**

I am devastated to learn that over 10% – or around 4,000+ clubs say they will struggle to survive the next 12 months. For too many clubs, Covid-19 has been the final straw.

The irony of it all is that this pandemic is slowly wiping out a resource that most parents say they value for that very reason: the physical and mental health benefits.

In the Premier League, we have the richest football competition in the world. But at grassroots level the contrast could not be greater – and we, as the nation that invented the game, must make a stand.

I call upon the stakeholders who have the power to support and save these clubs, to breathe new life into them and ensure they remain the backbone of their communities.

The cost of poor physical and mental health, as a result of not having these clubs, would be a big enough

reason to intervene, not to mention the social skills and responsibilities that will help our children develop into work-ready young adults.

The Switch Before Pitch Campaign aims to support grassroots clubs and their communities to save and raise money, but this will only work if it's underpinned by the backing of local authorities and football organisations who have the power to pull those at risk of closure back from the brink.



For anyone who hasn't had the pleasure of playing, or being involved in, grassroots football, this report will take you on an important journey.

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## Part one

# How families benefit from grassroots football

On average, footballing families become a part of their local grassroots club for around five years and, during this time, around two in five parents volunteer to help (42%). Volunteers have become vital for many clubs, with parents not only helping to wash kits, ferrying kids to matches or 'running the line', but also running the clubhouse kitchen or becoming the club accountant.

The ten most common ways that parents volunteer to help are:

- ✓ Coach / assistant coach
- ✓ Linesman
- ✓ Groundsman duties
- ✓ Secretary
- ✓ Treasurer
- ✓ Welfare officer
- ✓ Carpooling / lifts / driver
- ✓ Fundraising
- ✓ Washing kit

### Grassroots football - the community glue

The five main reasons parents gave for encouraging their children to play grassroots football:

1. Physical and mental health benefits (63%)
2. Social element - making friends and being part of local community (62%)
3. Learning life skills that are transferable to school / workplace (48%)

### 4. A community-centric past-time (34%)

5. All pitching in to help each other out - helping to find work, etc (29%)

Over half of all players' parents agreed that their grassroots football club is a great place for their child' (55%), and 44% of parents said it's not just about the kids - the club is a great place for their entire family.

### Healthy body, healthy mind

Grassroots football clubs play an important role in promoting a healthy, balanced diet, regular exercise and emotional and mental wellbeing. Let's take a look at who is benefitting most:

The longer young players are part of a grassroots football club, the more they gain from the physical and mental health benefits, according to their parents. Considering that 50% of mental health issues are established by the age of 14, the role the clubs play in these young people's lives is of paramount importance.

Three in five parents of younger players (5-8 years) said their children benefit from the physical and mental health elements of playing grassroots football (**60%**). This rises to **70%** for players aged 12-16, said their parents.

The physical and mental health benefits are experienced more by male players (**65%**) than female players (**57%**), according to their parents.



### A vital resource we can't be without

Parents describing their club as a 'vital resource' were those in areas where families are experiencing financial hardship:

**52%**  
London

**36%**  
East  
Midlands

**34%**  
North  
East

**25%**  
Yorkshire &  
the Humber

**24%**  
North  
West

Almost a quarter of parents said their local community would really struggle without their club (**24%**).

## Case Study



### Family Benefit

Ray Fiveash, Chairman, Welwyn Garden City FC

Every family that joins a club like ours instantly becomes part of a larger community. The grassroots football community look out for one another, and do what they can to help make each other's lives easier. Without grassroots clubs, millions of families would be isolated and would suffer.

It would leave a hole in their lives - mine included.

The physical and mental health benefits of playing football are more crucial today than ever before; with childhood obesity on the rise, and with so many youngsters struggling with mental health issues, we can't take this resource away from them - we'd be facing a health crisis as a result.

I've watched young players grow in confidence by the week, and I overhear players talking about life off the pitch, and giving each other the support they might not be able to talk to their schoolmates or family about. Without grassroots football, life would become so hard for some families, it really doesn't bear thinking about the consequences.

**Part two**

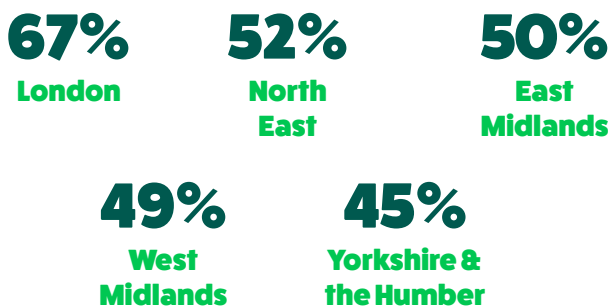
# The impact of no grassroots football during the pandemic for families

During Covid-19, the four-month closure of grassroots football clubs had a big effect on young players, with three in four parents saying their child had really missed having the ability to play (75%). Across the UK, 21% of parents said their child had really struggled to cope without football, which rose to 25% for children aged 9-11. This figure increased across all age groups for players in London (36%).

More boys seem to have struggled with the lack of football (22%) than girl players, their parents said.

For this reason, and many others, almost half of all parents really fear for the future of their grassroots football club as a direct result of Covid-19 (49%).

Parents in the following regions have the greatest fear about losing their club:



During the pandemic, 63% of parents said they had been approached by the club for financial support, to which 43% of parents responded to help fundraise for their child's club. Sadly, only 3% of parents said they were aware of any significant amounts raised, despite their efforts.



## Case Study



# Covid-19 impact on families

Michael Richardson, Coach and Operations /  
Covid Safety Officer, Thetford Bulldogs FC

With over 250 youth players across three sites, restarting after lockdown was a challenge. I'd been furloughed, so volunteered to become the Covid-19 safety officer, making sure all three sites were safe for the return of football. Just this week I have been made redundant from my job, which means not only will I not be able to support the club for 35+ hours a week, but I may not be able to volunteer at all, depending on my next job!

I'm not alone either. Lots of parents I know are in the same boat, struggling to make ends meet. The one thing that keeps me going, through times of hardship like this, is the community that comes with being in a 'football family'. Other parents at the club have already offered me support in my search for a new job, and made helpful introductions – there will be millions of football parents out there wondering what they would do without their local club.



## Part three

# How grassroots football clubs have weathered the Covid-19 storm, and what the future holds

Grassroots football clubs have never had it as hard as they do today, because of closing their doors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the start of lockdown, grassroots football clubs' income has dropped by 46% on average - more than one in 10 clubs have seen their income reduced by 95-100% (11%), and it's these clubs who fear they cannot pull themselves back from the brink. A saddening 10% of clubs say they have no choice but to close.

When asked how much they think grassroots football clubs' incomes have been reduced by during the pandemic, parents underestimated by 8% compared to the reality (**38%**).

Grassroots clubs have seen the following reductions in income:

- a.** Less / no weekly subs - **75%**
- b.** Less fundraising - **68%**
- c.** Loss or reduction in sponsorship - **47%**
- d.** No functions taking place (room hire etc) - **35%**
- e.** Fewer players returning - **32%**

Some have had support, but not enough. Almost half of all grassroots clubs have received some sort of financial assistance (**48%**), but the average amount of financial income received by grassroots football clubs has only been £2,200, which doesn't come close to covering their losses, in many cases.

Below is a list of a typical grassroots club's overheads, ranked by the percentage of clubs who have said they will struggle to afford them in the coming seasons:

- ✓ Player training facilities - **60%**
- ✓ Ground costs - **53%**
- ✓ Ground maintenance - **43%**
- ✓ Staff and coach training - **42%**
- ✓ Equipment - **38%**
- ✓ League fees - **17%**
- ✓ Building maintenance - **20%**
- ✓ Certification - **17%**
- ✓ Insurance - **15%**
- ✓ Player registration fees - **13%**
- ✓ Council rates - **10%**
- ✓ FA fees - **10%**
- ✓ Professional services - **8%**
- ✓ Prize provision - **7%**

Continued →

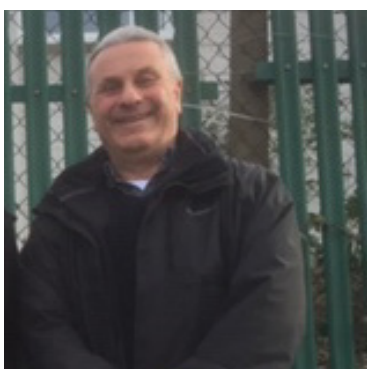


For many clubs, times had become extremely tough, even before the pandemic. Most struggling clubs said Covid-19 was the straw that broke the camel's back. So, what was causing headaches for grassroots football clubs, even before the pandemic?

- ✓ Lack of financial support
- ✓ Increasing costs / overheads
- ✓ Parents unable to afford the subs
- ✓ Players leaving / fewer teams
- ✓ Red tape putting off volunteers



## Case Study



### Weathering the storm

Mark Hudson, outgoing Chairman, Croydon FC

Even before the pandemic began, due to rising costs of running the club we were forced to make cutbacks. In order to make the club sustainable for the long term, we had to reduce our costs for the playing side which resulted in us dropping down the league.

We have a lease to play at our local sports arena, which has been closed since the start of lockdown, and we currently have no date for it to re-open. This means we are playing away games for now but that can only go on for so long with agreement from our League. We are paying to play at other grounds for some cup games but these costs are higher than what has been budgeted. Not playing home games also means our sponsors aren't getting any value, and we are not receiving takings in the clubhouse - our income is down by at least 90% and our outgoings are now much higher than we can afford to sustain.

**Part four**

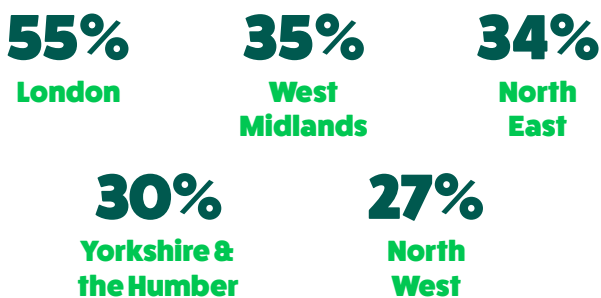
# The return to a 'new normal' for grassroots football

With grassroots football fixtures restarting from October 2020, the return to clubs is exciting for everyone involved. It's not plain sailing for many clubs, however. Let's have a look at the 'new normal' for grassroots clubs.

**Not enough players or teams**

More than three in 10 players are not returning, say their parents. This figure could continue to rise in the coming months, as only half of all parents have made their minds up about returning their children to their club.

Where are players not returning to grassroots football?



**Family finances getting in the way of play**

The 'new normal' has become a financial struggle for too many families across the UK – so many have seen their incomes affected by the pandemic.

74% of parents whose children play grassroots football have experienced a reduced income during the pandemic – here's why:

- ✓ 24% have been furloughed without 100% pay
- ✓ 21% have at least one earner being self-employed and couldn't work
- ✓ 14% of grassroots football parents have been made redundant
- ✓ 19% have seen a reduction in their income for other reasons

A concerning 56% of parents will struggle financially to enable their child to play grassroots football this year – so much so that one in five have not returned their child to the club, due to a lack of funds.

17% of families cannot afford equipment, such as kit and football boots, so their children have no choice but to stop playing.

Almost two in five parents will try to find a way to pay subs, to enable their child to play, despite not being able to afford it **(36%)**.

The regions where parents have been hit hardest financially, as a result of the pandemic are:

**86%**

London

**63%**South  
East**72%**North  
East**71%**East  
Midlands**71%**West  
Midlands

### Striking a healthy balance

One way that many young people entertained themselves during the many weeks of lockdown was to while away the hours gaming online.

This has resulted in **49%** of parents struggling to encourage their children to strike a healthy balance of playing football digitally and physically, with many preferring to play online, rather than getting out and playing on the pitch.

Online gaming taking precedence over playing physical football is more common amongst boys **(50%)** than girls **(45%)**, according to their parents.

## Case Study



### The New Normal for clubs

Simon Gilroy, HGV Driver, Dad and Chairman of Wark FC

When I'm not driving my HGV to earn a living, I'm Chairman of a very special club - Wark Juniors FC. My son and I joined the club in 2016, and I quickly found myself on a rescue mission. I was faced with the task of pulling a club back from the brink, a club which only had six players at the time.

Today we have 50 fantastic players and we have all pulled together and worked hard to ride the Covid-19 wave. All our income has disappeared, and only last week I had to dip into my own pocket to buy a £2K set of goals - a game of football's not possible without them!

Our club is in a rural setting and due to the nature of where we are job losses have been rife. Most people are self-employed, or work on nearby farms - or at least did, until they lost their jobs. This means two things; a loss of income will result in us losing subs, but this doesn't mean those players can't attend - we will always let them play, even if they can't afford subs - no matter what. Secondly, it will mean parents can't volunteer as they once did, as their employment situation will change. These challenges mean we face further financial losses as a club, and we will almost definitely lack key members of the team such as coaches. Despite how far we have come, the outlook is not looking good for our club.

**Part five**

# Rescuing the UK's grassroots football clubs from closure

Over half of all grassroots clubs say their local communities, players and their families have been incredibly supportive during the pandemic. Evidently, club managers are looking towards the official football and sport associations for support.

When asked who, or which, organisations grassroots clubs expected more support from during the pandemic, they said:

- 1. The Football Association - **57%**
- 2. Local council - **30%**
- 3. Sport England - **7%**
- 4. Local community - **7%**

Interestingly, parents are looking much closer to home for support, putting themselves and the club's community at the top of the list, followed by local and national government:

- 1. Local community - players' family and friends (**35%**)
- 2. Local council (**22%**)
- 3. National government (**16%**)
- 4. The closest premier ship club (**7%**)

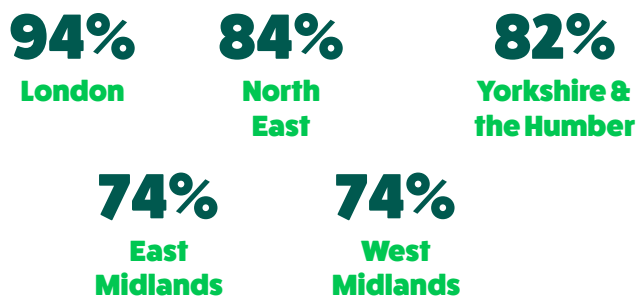
**Family fundraising**

There is a disparity between the amount of support clubs feel they can lean on families for, and the level of support families really want to offer. Reassuringly, it would seem

that those parents who are able, are willing to do more than clubs have understood to be true, but they just need a little advice on how to best help.

More than four in five parents would do everything in their power to fundraise for the club (**81%**), but **60%** of parents say they don't know where to start but would welcome ideas.

The regions where a higher percentage of parents would spring into action to fundraise for their clubs, as long as they were given advice as to how, are:



The support offered by parents wouldn't end with families either - one in five parents (**18%**) would encourage the wider community to help too.



## Case Study



### Rescue mission

Gary Maidment, Chairman, Ampthill Town FC

Grassroots football has never been a profit-making business – normally clubs break even if they're lucky, but over the last five years costs have been rising, making the books very hard to balance. Our club is on council-owned land that we lease. During the pandemic, not only did the local council not offer any financial support – apart from a temporary payment holiday – they stung us with a huge bill for maintenance to their land!

We have applied for every grant going, and the club was awarded a £1,500 pitch preparation grant from the Football Foundation,

which went towards pitch renovations costing £4,000 in total – in the grand scheme of things it was a drop in the ocean.

I was very interested, and actually very motivated, to learn from this report that such a large percentage of parents would be up for doing more fundraising – so we're excited to see what inspiration and ideas come through via the Switch Before Pitch campaign on ways we can save and raise money as a club.

## Final thought, from Paul Kirton, Founder of Team Grassroots



**Grassroots and amateur football clubs are the beating heart of their community. They cannot be allowed to disappear.**

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Yet, as this important study reveals, thousands are fighting for their lives. Shockingly, 10% of grassroots clubs don't think they'll exist 12 months from now.

Unlike those clubs in the Premier League, they don't count their revenue in tens or hundreds of millions; often just a few hundred pounds can make a massive difference.

No, for grassroots clubs it's not about TV riches or superstars, it's about being a force for good: introducing young and old to the physical and mental wellbeing benefits of playing football, the social element of being part of a community hub, helping young people steer clear from trouble on the streets and giving children the confidence and discipline to realise or exceed what they previously thought was the limit of their potential.

Normally, in times of hardship, clubs would turn to parents, community organisations or local businesses for financial help.

But 2020 is different. The coronavirus pandemic has seen to that.

Local lockdowns, shielding and social distancing have – in countless cases – sent bar takings into freefall and seen sponsorship depleted as companies struggle to stay afloat. Worse still, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs and many still in work have seen hours or wages cut.

Paying the few pounds a week 'subs' for their children's football has become a struggle.

But there is still hope. This report and Utilita's Switch Before Pitch campaign will help ensure the grassroots community is heard. It will galvanise us and leave governing bodies, key stakeholders and the professional game in no doubt as to the severity of the situation.

Yes, it will cost millions to safeguard and support the clubs who are struggling. But do nothing, ignore the true value of the grassroots game, and the cost to society will be even higher.

## A special thank you, from Bill Bullen, Conservationist and CEO of Utilita Energy

Firstly, I thank all of the parents and club secretaries who have made the State of Play report a reality, and I'd like to extend a special thank you to the grassroots clubs who have shared their stories of hardship – it takes a special kind of strength to do so.

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The report provides a snapshot of the fact that although many clubs were finding it tough to survive before Covid-19, this latest storm has created a near-impossible challenge for too many clubs. All individuals and communities are experiencing the impact of Covid-19 – as an energy company that uses technology to help households take control of their energy usage, we are seeing the struggles first-hand and doing everything in our power to help.

So it's really important to save money where we can. The cheapest, and greenest, energy is the energy we don't use, and we hope the Switch Before Pitch campaign enables today's households, and bill payers of the future, to save money by using and wasting less energy – freeing up finances for the things that people love most – in this case, football!



### Methodology

Utilita commissioned a survey of 61 grassroots club secretaries from 21-29 August, 2020. A further survey was commissioned by Utilita and conducted by OnePoll of 1,000 parents of grassroots football players aged 5-16, from 24-28 August.

The former England star, **David James**, has calculated what football equipment clubs could afford if players follow these simple ways to save energy:

"Small savings go a long way. Do your bit for your club today."

**DAVID JAMES**

Simple ways to save energy	Saving per player (per household per year)	Saving per team (for 11 households per year)	Football equipment for your club
When your mum isn't looking, switch the heating down by 1 degree (She won't notice the difference!)	<b>£80</b>	<b>£880</b>	Team Football Strip (£250) 2 Goals (£250) Team Training Tops (£180) 10 Training Footballs (£80) First Aid Bag (£25) Team Trophies (£95)
Unplug your games console and phone charger when they're not in use	<b>£30</b>	<b>£330</b>	2 Portable Goals (£264) 12 Corner Flags & Poles (£66)
Turn off at the plug, and don't use standby	<b>£30</b>	<b>£330</b>	4 Training Rebounders (£300) 1 Handheld Rebounder (£30)
Turning off your light when leaving your bedroom or the changing room	<b>£14</b>	<b>£154</b>	15 Cones (£54) 30 Hurdles (£140)
Washing your football kit at a lower temperature (30 instead of 60)	<b>£9</b>	<b>£99</b>	1 Agility Speed Training Kit (£99)
<b>Total</b>	<b>£163</b>	<b>£1,793</b>	<b>£1,793</b>

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**#SWITCHBEFOREPITCH**





**SWITCH**  
**BEFORE PITCH**  
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# THE FINAL WHISTLE

For Grassroots Football  
in the UK.

# FOREWORD BY DAVID JAMES MBE

**“The Government has the power to save grassroots football clubs and stop the final whistle being blown. They must act, and fast.”**

Right now there are thousands of grassroots clubs on standby, having battened down the hatches, knowing full well the game’s over, never to return. The final whistle has been blown. And these clubs are not poorly run clubs - some of these clubs have a rich, 100-year history.

Managers, players and those who use grassroots facilities may be wondering ‘what next?’ How does such an important part of my life get replaced?

**Why has this been allowed to happen?** The main reason is the Government’s disregard, or misunderstanding of the value of community-run grassroots clubs to UK society, and that’s despite the facts being written in black and white.

As you’ll read in this report, it only takes some basic maths to work out the value of grassroots football to the UK - take that away, and the public purse will be forced to pay for the damage, despite there being simple solutions to save these clubs before it’s too late.

The Government has the power to save grassroots football clubs and stop the final whistle being blown. They must act, and fast.



## SAVE YOUR CLUB

Sign the petition today:  
[www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball](http://www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball)

The 'Final Whistle for Grassroots Football' report is a continuation of the 'State of Play' report, commissioned by energy supplier and prominent football supporter, Utilita, which was released in September 2020. It is reporting on, and bringing to light, the continued, growing, struggle clubs are facing across the UK, as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Part one

# Grassroots football clubs – a lifeline for millions

Before the pandemic, there were approximately 43,000 active grassroots football clubs across the UK. On average, each club is home to around 280 players from the local community – having a positive impact on the lives of more than 12 million people, not including all the local community members who volunteer or attend matches.

According to the Football Association, the value of adult grassroots football in England alone is £10.8 billion each year – £8.7 billion in improved physical and mental wellbeing and £2 billion in economic value. Each player spends approximately £326 on football subs, supplies and other enablers, which results in a £410 million tax contribution.\*

Without the positive impact of grassroots football clubs, Government income generated by taxes on grassroots football would end, and there would be an increased demand on public services to deal with the lack of football, starting with the NHS and community policing. It would be disastrous.

According to our latest research, being part of a grassroots football community plays an important part in the lives of every single member, and 81% of grassroots club members are gravely concerned about the future of their club, as a result of COVID-19. Considering that grassroots football community members spend approximately 13 hours per month at their local club, **having no club to go to will leave a massive void in their lives.**

**BEFORE THE PANDEMIC,  
THERE WERE APPROX.**

**43,000**

**GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL  
CLUBS ACROSS THE UK.**

**81%**

**GRASSROOTS' MEMBERS  
ARE GRAVELY CONCERNED  
ABOUT THEIR CLUB'S FUTURE,  
AS A RESULT OF COVID-19.**

Continued →

\* 2019 – The social and economic value of adult grassroots football in the UK – report: <https://www.thefa.com/news/2019/jul/09/social-and-economic-value-of-adults-grassroots-football-in-england-090719>

## Case Study



### Ray Fiveash

Chairman, Welwyn Garden City FC

"The stop-start nature of grassroots football, and life generally, continues to put immense pressure on clubs who need to make a positive return. Why? Because their communities need them, desperately.

"I didn't need this report to tell me how bad things are – I hear it all day and every day – for many people, the return of football will represent the return of normal life. It's our everything. As the club's Chairman, I know that there's at least 300 players and thousands of community members counting on me and a group of irreplaceable volunteers to keep their club alive – 2021 is Welwyn Garden City FC's centenary year, and I have to find a way to stop the final whistle from being blown, and quick."



### The negative impact of club closures, according to community members

Members of grassroots football communities say if their club were to close, their lives would be impacted in the following ways:

**1.**

Reduction in level of physical and mental health.

**2.**

Feeling of isolation due to reduced social interaction.

**3.**

A lack of purpose, and no sense of belonging.

**4.**

A dip in confidence.

## Part two

# Grassroots communities have done as much as they can

74% of grassroots club members say they have gone out of their way to do what they can to help their club, either through raising or donating funds, or volunteering.

**74%**  
**HAVE GONE OUT OF THEIR WAY TO DO WHAT THEY CAN TO HELP THEIR CLUB.**

A massive 89% are left wishing they could do more to help, which is impossible from a distance.

Almost two in every five members of a grassroots football club are aware that members of their club's management team have bankrolled the club from their own pocket during the pandemic.

**89%**  
**ARE LEFT WISHING THEY COULD DO MORE TO HELP.**



## Part three

# The impact COVID-19 has had on our clubs

Every grassroots football club in the UK has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the State of Play Report in August 2020, a further 3,440 (+5%) of grassroots football clubs say the pandemic has majorly impacted their club's finances and 12% have said their club will not recover - resulting in the closure of more than 5K clubs.

Sadly, only time will reveal the full picture, however. Grassroots clubs say the worst is yet to come, with many saying they are in 'standby mode' - having battened down the hatches and made every effort to reduce their outgoings. **It will only be when football is set to return that they'll understand the full extent of the damage done, and what their future holds.**



The majority of club secretaries surveyed said they are concerned for the future of grassroots football in the UK (67%).

**A FURTHER**  
**3,440**  
**CLUBS SAY THEIR FINANCES HAVE BEEN MAJORLY IMPACTED, SINCE THE LAST REPORT.**  
**+5% SINCE AUGUST**

**12%**  
**OF CLUBS SAY CLOSURE IS INEVITABLE.**  
**+2% SINCE AUGUST**

## What are the main areas of concern for grassroots football clubs today?



### PEOPLE

A shortage of volunteers will increase the 'single person point of failure' crisis that has existed in grassroots football for a long time, meaning training and games cannot go ahead if that one person isn't available.



### PLAYERS

A lack of interest from existing players and the increasing challenge to attract new players to a 'stop-start season'. A lack of players means a lack of teams, and a lack of teams means a lack of leagues - the start of the end.



### PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

Reduced fitness levels and impact on mental health of community members will have a detrimental impact on a positive return to grassroots football.



### FINANCIAL

A lack of income through subs, sponsorship or fundraising ability.



### FACILITIES

Already underfunded and ill-maintained before the pandemic, the state of Government-owned training facilities are in constant decline, despite the rising cost to hire them.

# 84%

**OF CLUBS SAY THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAVE GONE AS FAR AS THEY CAN TO SUPPORT THE EXISTENCE OF THEIR CLUB.**

## Case Study



## James Fotheringham

Director of Croydon FC, home to 150 players

"Before this latest lockdown, our home ground remained closed and all training facilities were shut. With no home games, our income was down by 90%, which made hiring other facilities near-impossible.

The unavoidable stop-start nature of the season is extremely frustrating and provides no consistency for any of the players at the club. We are very quickly becoming homeless with the local authority confirming that there are no plans to reopen the ground any time soon. We might be in a situation that next year, this famous football club might not exist. Without facilities, we have no club. Without enough players, there is no team, no game, no league – it's over. We need something, and quick, to give our club hope."



## Part four

# Grassroots football clubs are in the red

The impact on grassroots football clubs' finances has been devastating. 96% of clubs have seen a reduction in income, but by how much?

**30% OF CLUBS SAY  
THEIR INCOME IS  
DOWN BY**

↓ **1-30%**

**39% OF CLUBS SAY  
THEIR INCOME IS  
DOWN BY**

↓ **31-60%**

**27% OF CLUBS SAY  
THEIR INCOME IS  
DOWN BY**

↓ **61-100%**

### Case Study



## Gary Maidment

Chairman, Ampthill Town FC

The Government will have a lot to answer for if grassroots clubs are left to close. Our club is on council-owned land that we lease. During the first lockdown, not only did the local council not offer any financial support - apart from a temporary payment holiday - they stung us with a huge bill for maintenance to their land!

We have applied for every grant going, and the club was awarded a £1,500 pitch preparation grant from the Football Foundation, which went towards pitch renovations costing £4,000 in total - in the grand scheme of things it was a drop in the ocean. Once a club has closed, the chances of it reopening are slim to none. There would be an incredibly high cost associated with establishing a new club, compared to the modest investment the Government can make here, to save functioning, impactful, existing clubs that impact the lives of millions.

## Part five

# A lack of Government support for grassroots clubs

By nature, grassroots football clubs exist through the effort and determination of volunteers, players and the local community, not through any reliance on Government support. Going cap-in-hand isn't part of the grassroots DNA - clubs just want the ability to support themselves, which the pandemic has taken away.

The majority of grassroots clubs say they just need to be able to self-fund their club back to health, and haven't asked, or applied for, Government funds (82%). The majority of clubs (59%) disregard Government grants, with many claiming they are inaccessible and not worth the long-winded application process. Out of the 18% of clubs that have attempted to apply for Government funding, only 13% of clubs say they have received any level of funding - that equates to just over 1K clubs across the UK!\*

Right now, clubs need to raise around £8K to keep afloat, but with no play, no tournaments planned, and no public-facing activity, it's not possible.

Grassroots football clubs' main access point for Government financial support is the Football Foundation, which is funded by the Department for Media, Culture and Sport, the Premier League and the Football Association. The Football Foundation boasts that in its 19 years since inception, it has helped to fund grassroots football to the value of £1.5 billion. That's £78 million per year spent on clubs and associated services in England only. Divided by 38,000 grassroots clubs in England, that is the equivalent investment of £2,052 per club, which is a drop in the ocean.

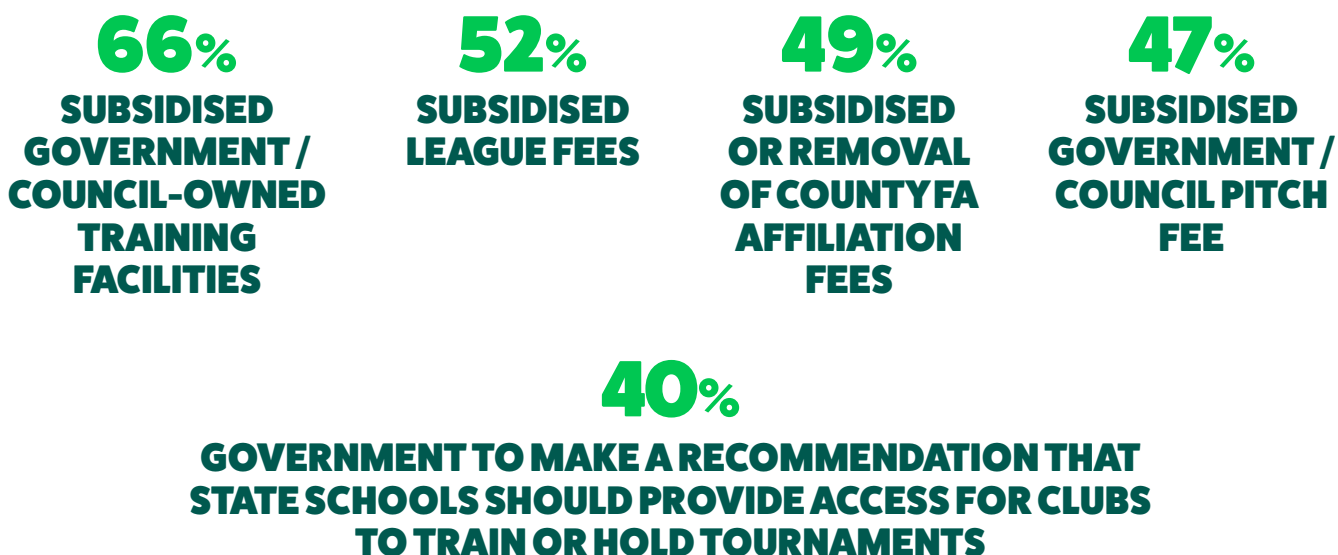
**ONLY 10%**  
**OF CLUBS THAT**  
**APPLIED FOR**  
**FUNDING WERE**  
**SUCCESSFUL.**

\* 18% of 43,000 clubs across the UK applied (7,740), of which only 13% were successful (1,006 clubs).

**Part six**

# What grassroots football clubs need

When asked what intervention would give clubs a chance to recover from the pandemic, the main five solutions listed by grassroots club secretaries were:



The majority of club secretaries hold the Government solely responsible for the failure of grassroots clubs. (60%) Football communities completely agree, with 75 percent calling for their local council or national Government to intervene to save their club!

Almost all (98%) of football community members say the obvious intervention that would be most welcome is for national Government and local councils to subsidise the state-owned training facilities for clubs, or open access to state schools outside of teaching hours, for grassroots clubs to share their facilities.



## Part seven

# The high price of grassroots training facilities

Around 95% of grassroots football training facilities are Government-owned. The cost of hiring council-owned training facilities for grassroots clubs varies wildly across the UK. Just one hour spent training on an all-weather pitch can cost anywhere between £30-£200.

The average grassroots football club will spend around £26,000\* per season on hiring local, council-owned training facilities, which

amounts to £1.1 billion\*\* of income for the local councils. With 5,000+ clubs on the brink of closure, the income a council can generate by hiring out sports facilities will be severely reduced, putting facilities at greater risk of deterioration or closure, which will impact the clubs that manage to survive.



### Case Study



## Becky Underwood

Club secretary and coach, Hatton United Junior Football Club, Derbyshire

"In our local area, training facilities costs range from £70 to £200 per hour. For our venue - the local leisure centre - it's £100 per hour. For all our 17 teams to train for just one hour each per week, it costs around £2,200 per month."

\* This is based on the average club having 10 teams, who train once a week, and the average cost per training session being £50.

\*\* 43,000 clubs spending £26,000 per year on council-owned training facilities.

## Part eight

# A call for urgent government intervention

This report acts as a call for urgent intervention from the Government, to subsidise or provide free access to training facilities for UK grassroots football clubs - either via council-owned sports grounds or state-owned schools, reducing one of the biggest outgoings that clubs will struggle to afford in the 2021/22 season.

This intervention must be in place for when grassroots football is resumed, in order to avoid 5000+ grassroots clubs closing, a figure that is expected to be the tip of the iceberg.

By supporting clubs to continue, the Government will have a positive impact on the lives of the 12 million people who are part of a grassroots football community - that's 17% of the UK - and will offset the avoidable cost of the end of grassroots football, in terms of the extra demand it will put on public spending.

Clubs closing will result in a deterioration of physical and mental health, and the fragmentation of communities and society is likely to result in a rise of community-based issues.

A message, from 12 million people belonging to a life-enhancing grassroots football club in the UK.

Ps. Visit the petition at [www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball](http://www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date 25/01/2021

**Dear Nigel Huddleston, MP**

Please do not blow the final whistle on grassroots football. You, as the Secretary of State for Sport in the UK, have all the power and must act quickly. A temporary reduction in local councils' income by subsidising access to training facilities will safeguard much larger savings in the long-run. Fail to do so, the Government will pay a much higher price, whilst impacting the lives of 12 million grassroots football community members in the UK.

Regards,



**David James, MBE**  
Former England  
goalkeeper



**Bill Bullen**  
CEO of Utilita,  
the UK's leading  
smart energy supplier

We co-sign this letter to represent the interests of 12 million+ football community members across the UK.

## Final thought, from Paul Kirton, Founder of Team Grassroots



Grassroots football communities are renowned for their independence and their resilience in dealing with adversities, but COVID-19 will be the nail in the coffin for far too many, which could have been avoided. Grassroots football clubs are second homes for millions of community members – the beating heart of towns and cities right across the UK.

The disruption caused by the pandemic has impacted two football seasons already – two seasons during which clubs would normally have raised funds through holding public-facing tournaments and other fund-raising events, that would go on to cover a large part of our costs for the year. For a community-run, volunteer-led industry that relies on fund-raising through member involvement to make ends meet, being unable to come together makes it impossible for clubs to function.

The nature of grassroots football has meant that the Government's business support packages have had no impact – you can't furlough volunteers! The increasing costs and time investment required to keep clubs COVID-safe has eaten away at any small financial reserves that clubs may have had.

The data collated in the report is both substantive and credible – a true picture of the realities clubs are facing, and confirms the stories we hear each and every day. Our community is in crisis, and urgent support is required to avoid losing more than one in 10 clubs.



## A special thank you from Bill Bullen, Conservationist and CEO of Utilita Energy

We had hoped that by publishing the 'State of Play' report in August, we wouldn't be required to publish an update, but sadly the continuation of the disruption caused by the pandemic has led to further devastation of grassroots football clubs.

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Despite our conversations with members of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the House of Lords since August 2020, which have outlined simple solutions to help grassroots football clubs, no action has been taken, hence this latest public call for action.

A sincere thank you goes out to the report case studies for sharing their experiences and stories of hardship, and the 4,137 members of football communities across the UK for taking part in the research - such a terrific response.

We will continue to support grassroots football clubs and communities in every way we can.



### Methodology

Utilita conducted two surveys, each revealing the views and experiences of 4,049 UK-based grassroots football community members and 91 grassroots football club secretaries, from 6-13 January 2021.

The former England star, **David James**, has calculated what football equipment clubs could afford if players follow these simple ways to save energy:

"Small savings go a long way. Do your bit for your club today."

**DAVID JAMES**

Simple ways to save energy	Saving per player (per household per year)	Saving per team (for 11 households per year)	Football equipment for your club
When your mum isn't looking, switch the heating down by 1 degree (She won't notice the difference!)	<b>£80</b>	<b>£880</b>	Team Football Strip (£250) 2 Goals (£250) Team Training Tops (£180) 10 Training Footballs (£80) First Aid Bag (£25) Team Trophies (£95)
Unplug your games console and phone charger when they're not in use	<b>£30</b>	<b>£330</b>	2 Portable Goals (£264) 12 Corner Flags & Poles (£66)
Turn off at the plug, and don't use standby	<b>£30</b>	<b>£330</b>	4 Training Rebounders (£300) 1 Handheld Rebounder (£30)
Turning off your light when leaving your bedroom or the changing room	<b>£14</b>	<b>£154</b>	15 Cones (£54) 30 Hurdles (£140)
Washing your football kit at a lower temperature (30 instead of 60)	<b>£9</b>	<b>£99</b>	1 Agility Speed Training Kit (£99)
<b>Total</b>	<b>£163</b>	<b>£1,793</b>	<b>£1,793</b>

**UTILITA.CO.UK/SWITCH-BEFORE-PITCH**

**#SWITCHBEFOREPITCH**





# PRICE TO PLAY **REPORT**

A study revealing the impact of the cost of living crisis on participation levels in grassroots football.



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Grassroots football ambassador shares his views on the latest research.

## **4 / Club closures and future closures**

Reality of club closures in the past and future tense.

## **5 / Impact of the pandemic on clubs**

Club and community resilience carried many through the pandemic.

## **6 / Reduced participation**

Players fail to return to football for a range of reasons.

## **7 / Cost of living crisis**

The deepening financial strain for families is a very real, and will stop young people from playing.

## **8 / Final thought by Paul Kirton**

Grassroots evangelist calls for urgent intervention to save the game.

## **9 / A special thank you**

from Bill Bullen.

# FOREWORD

## BY DAVID JAMES MBE

Two years ago, nobody could have anticipated the socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet - coupled with the knock-on effect of the Ukraine war, rising global energy prices and other unforeseen factors - here we are facing a cost of living crisis that's set to blow the final whistle on thousands more clubs as families struggle to afford to send their children along to play the game they love.

We all know the benefits associated with playing sport and we cannot let well-established community football clubs - some of whom have existed for more than a century - to close.

I implore anyone who has the power to intervene not to ignore the warning signs presented by this latest report. Grassroots football clubs are the glue that brings together and solidifies communities, where young people meet role models and forge friendships that determine their futures - I am living proof of that.

Without football, many young people's lives would no doubt have taken a far worse path - I'm sure mine would have been very different. The UK can ill-afford the immediate burden that the closure of grassroots clubs will have on the NHS, policing and other social support.

This study has identified affordability as the primary barrier stopping young people playing grassroots football - and there is no way this should happen in a country hosting the world's richest league.

Delve a little deeper and the associated cost can be broken down into two: the cost of equipment and the cost of subs. Affording boots and equipment is being tackled through national recycling campaigns such as Football Rebooted, but affording weekly subs is the major challenge that we need to help families overcome. If we fail to do this, we will lose these clubs forever.



## Part one

# Club closures and future closures

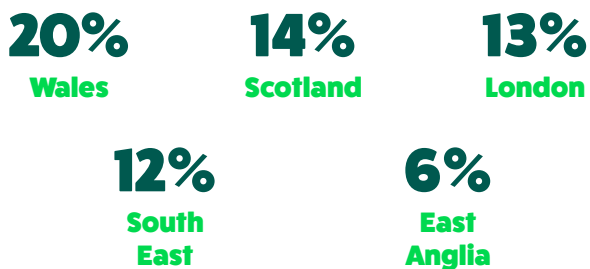
Too many clubs having already folded and the grim reality is that thousands more could now go the same way without intervention. Closures have hit well established clubs with large overheads and big clubhouses, through to the more recently established smaller clubs with huge ambitions. Parents, volunteers and communities have pulled together, but sadly for many enough was enough.

### Grassroots clubs have closed, and more will go

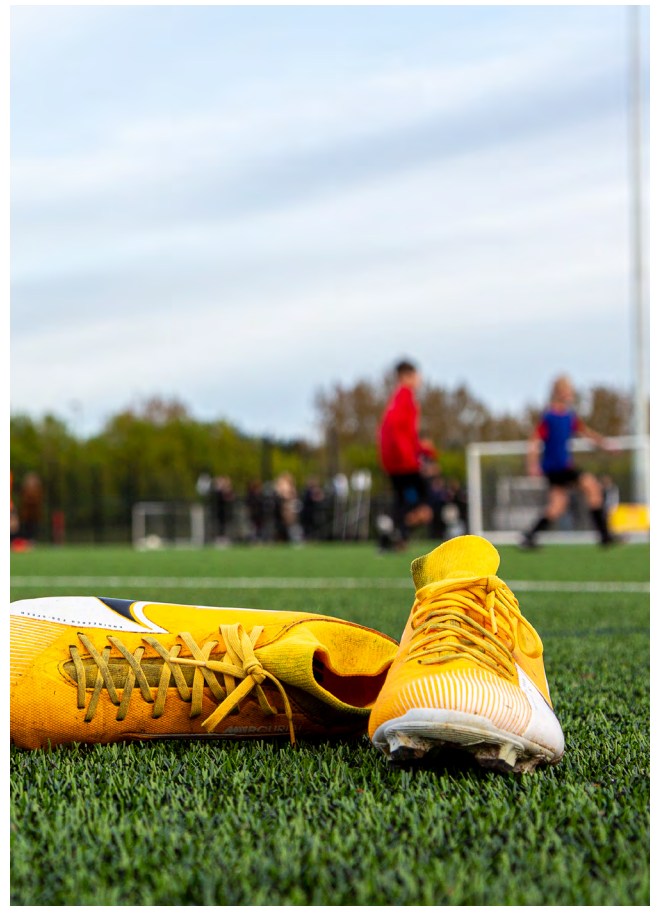
Despite grassroots clubs and their communities having pulled out all the stops to keep their clubs afloat, there have been casualties. A sorry **7%** of clubs have already closed across the UK. A further **16%** of British parents say they believe their club's future is in doubt.

### Where have clubs closed?

(% of parents who said their child's club had closed)



Almost half (**48%**) of parents said their child's club had been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Only **7%** said their child's grassroots football club hadn't been affected at all.



## Part two

# Impact of the pandemic on clubs

The pandemic hit every family in a variety of ways – same storm, different boats. But the knock-on effect has impacted nearly every club in the UK, for a variety of reasons. This report was keen to understand, from the perspective of a parent on the sidelines, what impact their child's club had experienced.



When asked what impact the pandemic has had on their child's grassroots football club, parents said:

- ✓ Fewer fixtures – **35%**
- ✓ Reduced number of teams – **34%**
- ✓ Lack of coaches – **29%**
- ✓ Lack of volunteers – **29%**
- ✓ Lack of referees – **28%**
- ✓ Lack of players – **28%**
- ✓ Loss of places to play – **26%**
- ✓ Lack of sponsorship – **25%**
- ✓ Loss of buildings / clubhouse – **17%**

## Part three

# Reduced participation

With participation rates weaning, we were keen to understand the barriers stopping young people from returning to their clubs now that it is safe to do so. It is not surprising to learn that financial struggles are the biggest barrier.

### Not enough players already

Players need clubs, and clubs need players – one cannot exist without the other. Sadly **10%** of players have not returned to their football club since the interruption caused by the pandemic.

### Where have players failed to return to play?

**21%**  
London

**15%**  
West  
Midlands

**9%**  
South  
West

**8%**  
North  
West

**7%**  
South  
East

The most devastating part of every young person's absence from their grassroots football club is the impact it has on their health. Nearly half (**46%**) of all parents whose children no longer play claim it is having a negative impact on their child's mental and physical wellbeing.

### What's stopping them?

When asked why their children haven't returned to football, parents gave the following reasons:

1. Physical health – lack of energy/ unhealthy diet/Covid concerns – **40%**
2. Mental health – anxiety/ lack of confidence – **32%**
3. Can't afford the subs – **31%**
4. Can't afford other aspects (kits, equipment, etc) – **27%**
5. Prefer not to say – **18%**

In the wake of a global pandemic, physical health concerns are expected to be a major barrier to playing football outside of a school setting. Health concerns may not be associated with the player themselves but could be the adult that takes the child along to the club, or other adult volunteers.

## Part four

# Cost of living crisis

In 2020 Utilita's State of Play Report revealed that many families had experienced a loss of income or employment as a result of the pandemic. These households have been facing a cost of living crisis since the start of the pandemic, which is only going to get worse as 10 million households are plunged into fuel poverty. Read on to find out how the situation will impact access to grassroots football.

### Financial struggles

The cost of living increase has been exacerbated by the rising price of energy, which is set to impact family expenditure further still with more price rises expected in October. Two of the main barriers to young people returning to grassroots football today come as a result of the cost of living crisis - affording subs and the kit needed to play (**34%**).

Utilita's State of Play Report 2020 revealed that **18%** of parents could not afford to buy boots, shin pads and other items needed for their child to play grassroots football. In just two years this figure has almost doubled (**34%**).

The demand for 'pre-played' kit is increasingly evident by the overwhelming response to Utilita's 'Football Rebooted' boot recycling movement.

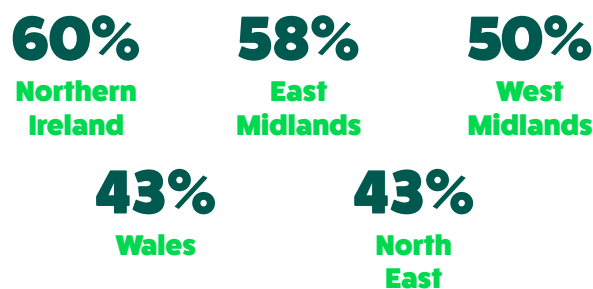
### The worst is yet to come

A further **34%** of families who are currently finding the money they need to enable their children to play football, say they fear they will not be able to afford it in the future.

### Where is affordability impacting families the most already?

- ✓ London - **50%**
- ✓ South East - **45%**
- ✓ Yorkshire - **40%**
- ✓ Scotland - **32%**
- ✓ North West - **30%**

### Where are families bracing themselves for future financial strain?



## It's not just one pair of boots anymore

Two thirds of grassroots players (**67%**) are required to have more than one pair of football boots or Astroturf trainers as a result of playing on a range of surfaces, according to parents. Sadly **27%** of parents admitted their inability to afford more than one pair of boots, limiting where their child can play.

## Subs-zero

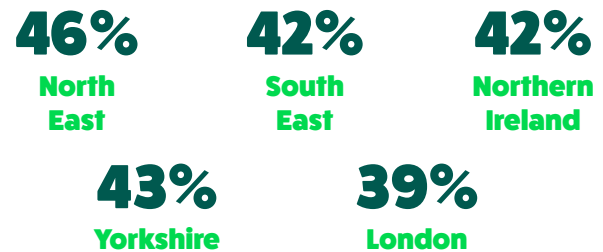
As a general rule, grassroots football clubs do not exist to make money, and therefore do everything they can to keep costs down to avoid increasing subs for hard-pressed families. However, they cannot run a sustainable football club at a loss, so subs must be paid.

When asked if families can comfortably afford the weekly, monthly or annual subs required to be part of a club, an alarming **35%** said they

are already struggling to afford subs, or know they will be less able to afford the subs in the near future. A third of parents said they already can't afford the cost of subs, but they make sacrifices elsewhere in their lives to enable their child to play (**33%**).

A further **2%** of families get financial support from the club, and **4%** said they would prefer not to say.

## Where are families struggling to pay their subs based?



## Final thought



## Paul Kirton

Founder of Team Grassroots, the UK's largest online grassroots football community

Grassroots clubs have demonstrated their incredible resilience during the last three seasons. The first being 'no play', the second being 'stop-start play', and this last season being 'game on'. The community spirit carries these clubs through, and they would never knowingly let

a child miss football because they can't pay. However, this report has identified a major participation problem ahead, with so many families unable to pay now or in the near future. As much as clubs would love to help anyone struggling, it's not sustainable to provide financial assistance to more than a few players at a time.

Having been at the epicentre of the UK's grassroots football community for so long, I know that there is one challenge that no club can overcome - and that is pride. Very few parents or their kids would be honest about why they're not turning up, or why they haven't returned for a season, and that is totally understandable. But it is for this reason that a major intervention is required, to help these families avoid coming cap in hand to continue playing, or start playing, grassroots football.



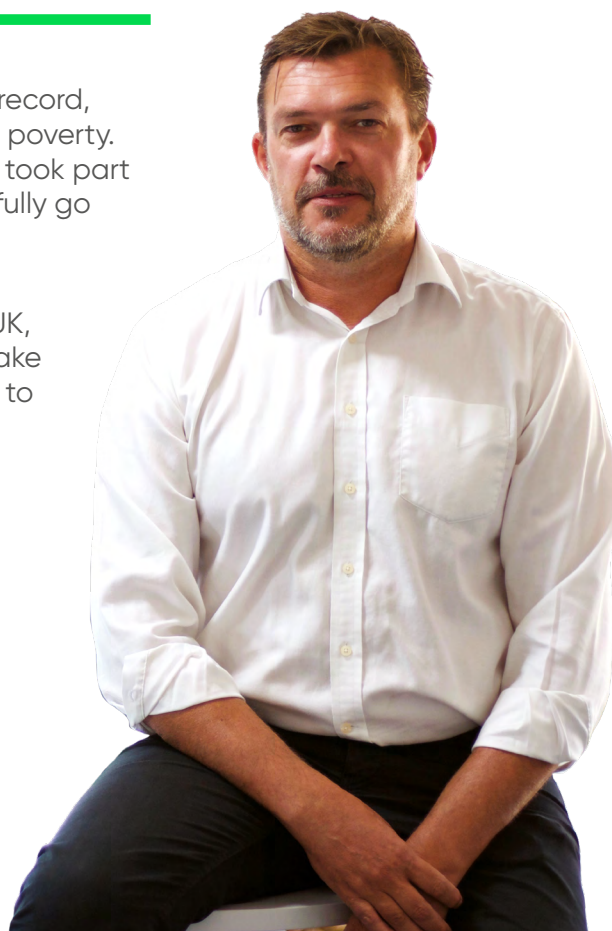
## A special thank you, from Bill Bullen, Conservationist and CEO of Utilita Energy

Answering questions about affordability would have been really hard for so many hard-pressed parents who are wondering how the hell they are going to make ends meet in the next 12 months.

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This coming winter is going to be the hardest on record, with as many as 10 million households facing fuel poverty. I extend a big thank you to all 1,000 families who took part in this important study, as your honesty will hopefully go some way to encouraging intervention.

David James MBE and Paul Kirton are two of the biggest champions of grassroots football in the UK, and together we hope to push the agenda to make the Beautiful Game play on for many more years to come for families who love it as much as we do.



### Methodology

A survey of 1,000 footballing families was undertaken by OnePoll from 22–28th April 2022.