

Evaluation of Scottish FA Club Support for Community Football Clubs

Report for the Scottish Football Association



Social Research



Service Design & Innovation



Strategy & Collaboration



Evaluation Support



Social Impact Measurement

April 2022



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Executive Summary

1. The Scottish FA commissioned Social Value Lab to undertake an evaluation of support for community football clubs in Scotland.
2. Evidence was gathered from survey data and consultations with players, volunteers, and officials from community football clubs that participate in the Scottish FA's Quality Mark accreditation scheme.
3. Scottish FA support for community football helps clubs to achieve a range of outcomes for their players and volunteers and enables them to improve their communities (See Diagram A).
4. The **key findings** were:

The impact of community football clubs on players and volunteers

- 4.1 Community football clubs provide a range of physical and mental health benefits to players and volunteers. On the physical side, club membership helps people to improve or maintain fitness, lose weight, or live better with long-term health conditions. The impact on mental wellbeing ranges from improved mood to coping better with anxiety, stress, or depression.
- 4.2 Most players and volunteers develop a variety of new (transferable) personal skills, both on and off the pitch, as a result of club membership.
- 4.3 Community football clubs open up their members to new sources of support and improve members' social networks.
- 4.4 Players and volunteers get a strong feeling of achievement, which has a knock-on effect on other areas of their life, including education and their behaviour outside football.
- 4.5 Through the pandemic most community clubs delivered a range of physical and social activities for their members. For most, this led to positive outcomes in

their physical and mental health during lockdowns.

The impact of community football clubs on communities

- 4.6 There was evidence that community football clubs can play a role in strengthening the bonds between members or sections of local communities through bringing people together around a shared purpose or identity.
- 4.7 Also evident from the research was that many clubs have used this position in the community to achieve positive change locally towards a variety of health, social or economic goals.
- 4.8 Taken together, the impact of community football clubs makes a significant contribution to a range of local and national policy objectives.

Scottish FA support

- 4.9 Most community clubs have benefited from a wide-ranging package of support, provided by the Scottish FA. There was evidence that this support has positively impacted clubs of differing sizes and stages of development (e.g., help for new clubs at inception through to supporting well-established clubs with large capital projects).
- 4.10 Support from the Scottish FA has enabled the majority of clubs to improve their offer to members (e.g., new activities, greater accessibility, improved facilities) and develop their practices (e.g., improved governance, better fundraising, new partnerships).
- 4.11 Most clubs were satisfied with the amount and quality of support they received from the Scottish FA and improvements suggested by clubs mostly related to increased interactions with Scottish FA staff (the same but more of it). No significant issues were found with the

package of support offered by the Scottish FA.

4.12 The majority of clubs have experienced some form of significant negative impact from the pandemic, the most common being a deterioration of their finances. For many, the recruitment of players and volunteers has been negatively affected and clubs also provided substantial evidence of the difficulties of operating during varying levels of social restriction.

4.13 However, consultation with clubs also demonstrated that from an operations point of view the pandemic has not been as difficult for all. Around two-fifths of clubs came through lockdowns with no significant ill-effects and there was limited evidence of some clubs actually having gained players during the pandemic.

4.14 The mixed experience of community clubs through the pandemic indicates a notable resilience of community football in general. Most clubs have endured hardships and continued to operate, and others came through relatively unscathed – it would appear that the pandemic has not been as catastrophic for community football clubs as might have been feared.

5. Our **key recommendations** are:

5.1 The Scottish FA should undertake further consultation with clubs to understand why a minority didn't view their package of support favourably and how player habits continue to evolve post-pandemic.

5.2 The Scottish FA should continue to explore the ways in which their support package to clubs could be further developed, using improvements suggested by clubs during this research as a starting point. This includes any additional support that is required to support affected clubs to recover from the pandemic.

5.3 The Scottish FA should explore what role it can play, alongside other key stakeholders, in ensuring clubs have access to adequate facilities and resources to meet their needs as they return to normal after the pandemic.

Diagram A: The Impact of Community Football



1: Introduction

This section describes the background to the research and the overall objectives of the evaluation.

Background

The Scottish Football Association (Scottish FA) is the governing body for football in Scotland. The Scottish FA is a membership organisation, with 89 member clubs and nine affiliated regional associations.

The Scottish FA is a member of UEFA and FIFA and holds a position on the International Football Association Board (IFAB), the body that determines the Laws of the Game.

The Scottish FA focuses on the whole range of football, from professional leagues and national teams to community and grassroots football development. This includes providing support to around 2,500 community football clubs across Scotland. Each year the Scottish FA provides more bespoke support to around 200 clubs through the [Quality Mark club accreditation scheme](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the suspension of all in-person community football activity. As restrictions eased, the Scottish FA provided support to community clubs returning to football through direct investment and participation support programmes focused on specific groups or issues.

To understand the impact these activities have had, the Scottish FA commissioned Social Value Lab to undertake an evaluation of its club support activities and community clubs' experience of the pandemic.

To ensure meaningful engagement, and following discussions with the Scottish FA, it was decided that the evaluation would focus on those clubs who have been involved with the Quality Mark scheme¹.

Objectives

The evaluation has several key objectives.

Assessing the impact that community football clubs make

This strand evaluates the difference that community football clubs make in the lives of players, volunteers, and the wider community. The impact of clubs was assessed against a range of outcomes, including physical health, mental health, skills, and support networks.

Assessing the impact of Scottish FA support

This strand looks at the difference Scottish FA support makes to community football clubs. Specifically, the evaluation explores:

- The perception of the Scottish FA support and its delivery.
- Barriers and enablers, what works well and what not so well.
- The impact of the club development on the clubs, their members, and the community.
- Future support needs and suggestions for improvement.

Assessing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on community clubs

This strand assesses how clubs have coped during the pandemic and how it has altered the landscape of community football. Areas covered include:

- Club activities during the pandemic.
- Changes in membership.

¹ The Scottish FA Quality Mark is an accreditation scheme aimed at improving and supporting specific criteria for individual clubs. Not all Scottish FA clubs participate in this scheme.

-
- Financial stability.
-
- The impact of the pandemic on players' health, wellbeing, and other social outcomes.
-
- Specific support needs related to the pandemic.
-

2: Methods

This section outlines the methodology used for the research, it’s limitations and the profile of research participants

For this study we have undertaken the following consultation with stakeholders.

- Scoping interviews with officials from 11 Quality Mark clubs
- Semi-structured interviews with 101 players
- Semi-structured interviews with 56 parents
- Semi-structured interviews with 57 coaches
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 club officials
- A players’ survey completed by 423 players from 8 different clubs
- A survey completed by 119 representatives from Quality Mark clubs

Profile of Player Survey Respondents

Fig. 2.1: Player Survey: Age of Respondents

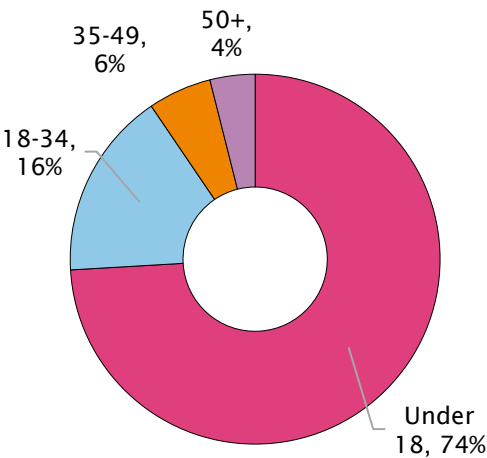
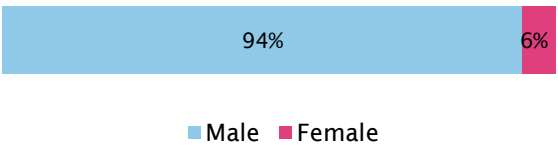


Fig. 2.2: Player Survey: Gender of Respondents



Profile of Club Survey Respondents

Fig. 2.3: Club Survey: Number of registered players (approx.)

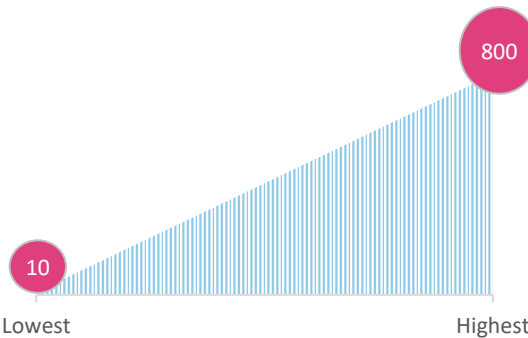


Figure 2.3 shows the range in size of clubs responding to the survey. The smallest club had 10 registered players, while the biggest had approximately 800.

Fig. 2.4: Club Survey: Number of volunteers (approx.)

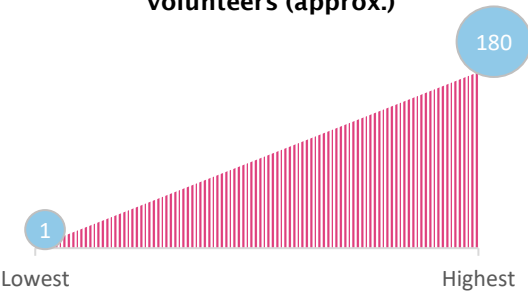


Figure 2.4 shows the number of volunteers per club. The smallest club had 1 volunteer, and the biggest had 180.

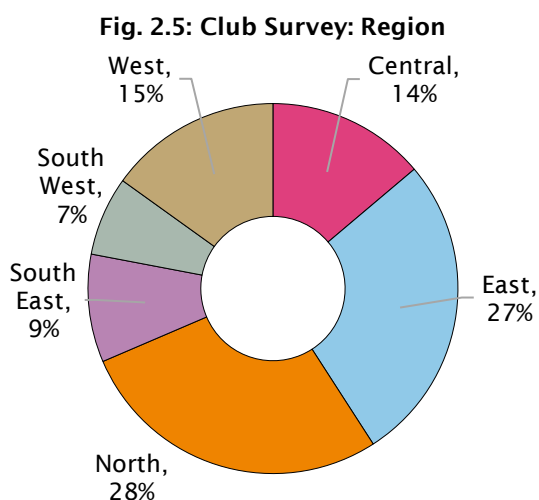


Figure 1.3 shows the distribution of clubs by region of Scotland. Over half (55%) of the clubs were in either the North or the East regions of Scotland.

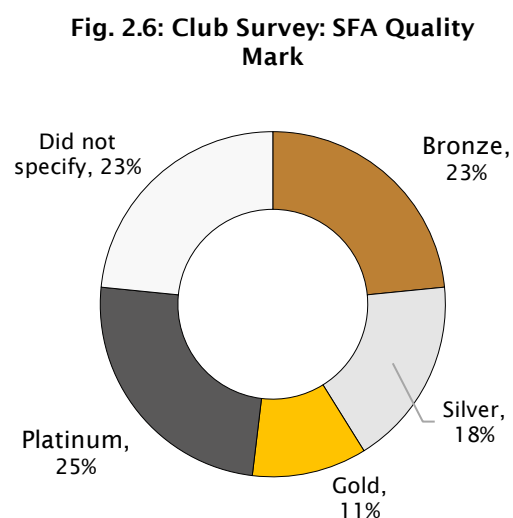


Figure 2.6 shows that most respondents we from clubs that had achieved the lowest Quality Mark level (Bronze, 23%) or the highest (Platinum, 25%). Just under a quarter of respondents (23%) did not specify what Quality Mark their club had achieved.

Analysis was undertaken to assess any divergences in the responses of clubs based on size, region, and Quality Mark level. As no significant differences were found, data from the club survey is presented as a whole throughout the report.

Limitations

While a comprehensive programme of consultation has been undertaken, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations to this research.

Firstly, Quality Mark clubs make up around 25% of the total registered community football clubs active in Scotland². These clubs typically have a higher level of engagement with the Scottish FA and will generally receive more (and more intensive) support from Scottish FA staff. Focussing on Quality Mark clubs was likely a useful means of ensuring engagement with the evaluation, but risks excluding the views on Scottish FA support from the wider group of 'ordinary' community clubs.

Secondly, every effort was made to ensure the representativeness of the sample of clubs selected for interviews and distribution of the players' survey. This was based on a range of criteria, including club size, Scottish FA region, Quality Mark level, sections (amateur, junior, youth, senior, women's) and SIMD data. However, availability of clubs and other factors meant that a completely faithful representation was not possible.

Particularly in responses to the players' survey (see Fig 2.2), there would appear to be an underrepresentation of women and girls (women/girls account for around 11% of registered players in Scotland). This may be a symptom of the sample of clubs included in the players' survey (or other methodological issues not identified) or may speak to the underrepresentation of women and girls in football more generally.³

The number of clubs that responded to the club survey also falls below the desired 95% confidence level (the minimum number for which we could be 95% sure the sample was

² 613 of the total of 2,479 clubs are Quality Mark clubs.

³ See the Scottish FA's strategy for Girls' and Womens' football, [Accelerate Our Game](#).

representative) and 5% confidence interval (the margin of error).

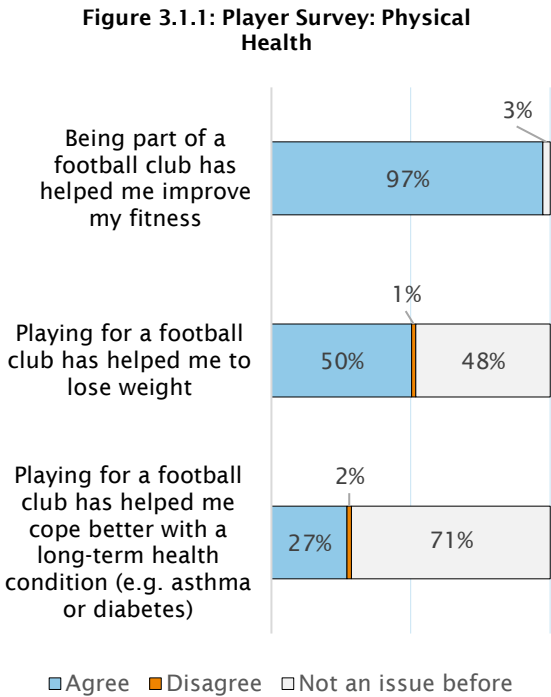
Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that in relation to responses relating to the pandemic, the findings represent a snapshot in time. During the period of fieldwork with clubs (October-December 2021) and in the months since, COVID-19 restrictions have been constantly shifting. Difficulties described by clubs in operating with strict COVID-19 protocols may no longer be as relevant in the face of easing restrictions and (hopefully) a return to relative normality.

3: The Difference Community Football Clubs Make

This section explores the impact that community football clubs make in the lives of players, volunteers, and the wider community.

Players

Physical Health



"I really noticed when football was stopped due to the pandemic how important it was to me. I lacked motivation to train, and my fitness deteriorated."

"It really helps you keep active through the winter, as I often struggle to find the energy to leave the warmth of my house, but for football I am excited to."

Players

Figure 3.1.1 shows the players' responses to how club membership has impacted their physical health. Almost all (97%) players agreed that it has improved their fitness, which coincides with club responses. Just over a quarter (27%) of all players agreed that it helped them cope with long-term health conditions, which represents 93% of the players for whom this was an issue. Half (50%) agreed that it helped them to lose weight, and close to half (48%) indicated that weight loss was not an issue for them.

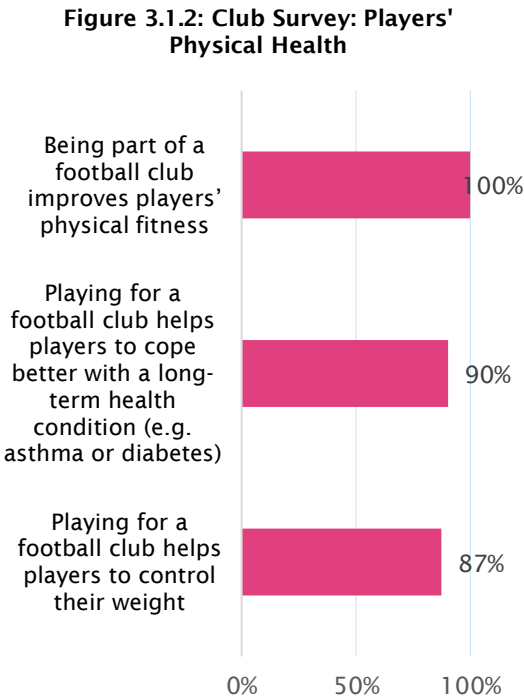


Figure 3.1.2 shows the clubs' impressions of the impact that belonging to a club had on players' physical health. All clubs agreed that it helped to improve players' fitness. Coping better with long-term health conditions and

controlling weight were two outcomes that almost all clubs (90% and 87% respectively) recognised in their players.

In interviews, players frequently spoke about how being part of a club had improved their physical health and activity levels. Players commonly reported that they had neglected their fitness before joining a club and had since seen significant improvements in, for example, their stamina, strength, speed, or agility. For many young people (including those who felt they had a good level of fitness before joining) the club and/or the opportunity to compete provided the motivation to improve and maintain their fitness levels.

"My fitness was really bad before I joined."

Player

Many younger players also reported that, were they not members of a club, they would spend a lot more time in the house, watching TV, playing computer games, or chatting online. And, as one adult player noted, for those people with full-time jobs, attending club training and matches can be the only opportunities they get for physical activity in the week.

"I used to be one of those kids that sits inside all day"

"I'm out and about more"

Players

Many players and their parents also described how staying active through football led to other positive changes in their nutrition, lifestyle, and exercise habits. The full impact of club membership on players' physical health goes beyond the training that happens in each session.

"The club has inspired them to take health and fitness seriously."

Parent

"It helps motivate me into participating in other forms of exercise such as running, which in turn helps me with diet."

Player

Mental Health

Figure 3.2.1: Player Survey: Mental Health

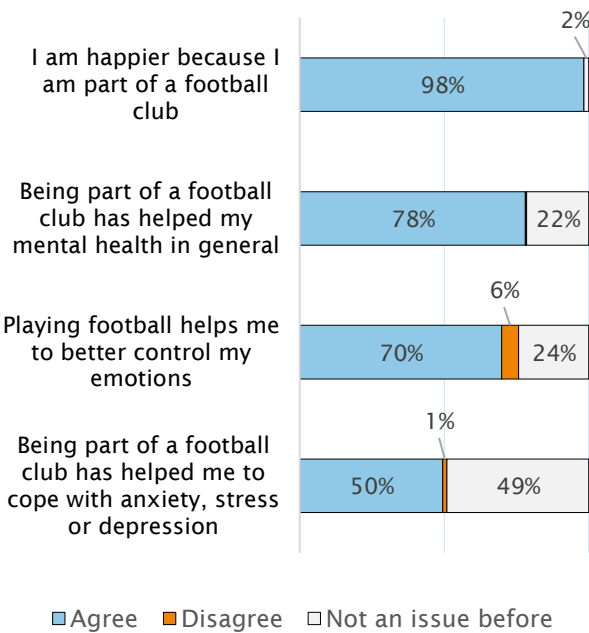


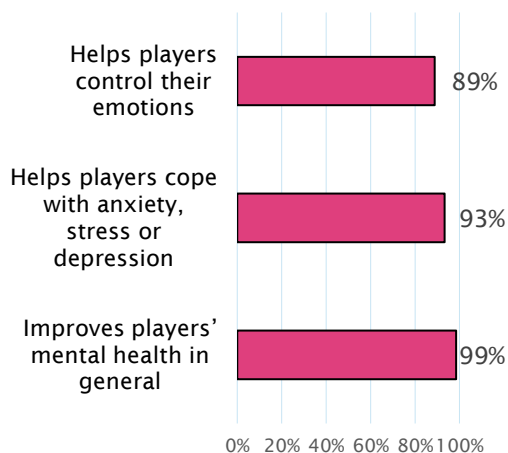
Figure 3.2.1 shows the players' responses to questions about their mental health. Almost all (98%) agreed that they were happier as a result of being part of a football club, and over three quarters (78%) agreed that it helped their mental health in general. Half (50%) of the players agreed that it helped them to cope with stress and anxiety, which represents almost all (98%) of respondents for whom this was an issue.

"My mental health would've been terrible without support from the club."

"Football has made me stronger mentally and physically and it's a good way to build confidence in what you do in life situations"

Players

Figure 3.2.2: Club Survey: Players' Mental Health



"My son suffers from anxiety, the only place he leaves that behind is when he is on the pitch playing football."

Parent

"For some of our players, football is their release from pressures at home, school, teenage years and peer pressure."

Club official

Figure 3.2.2 shows that almost all (99%) of clubs agreed that being part of a football club helped players' mental health in general. The majority were also aware of club membership having helped players to cope with specific mental health issues and manage their emotions.

In interviews, players and their parents described how being part of a football club directly and indirectly influences their mental health.

For some, participating in club football was a welcome distraction from other things that might be bothering them. Some saw the club as essential for relieving stress, while others were just glad of the opportunity to forget everything else going on in their lives and focus on playing.

"For 90 minutes you can just focus on football."

"If I'm at school and having a bad day I can focus on going to training later."

Players

A few parents and players reported that the club had been a significant factor in dealing with more serious mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression. As well as providing a positive focus for players struggling with these issues, several interviewees spoke about how the impact of the club in other ways (e.g., building confidence, socialising, improving physical health) had contributed to improvements in mental health.

"Football kept him going."

Parent

Players also mentioned how playing for a club had given them an avenue for dealing with negative emotions. For example, some players reported having learned to better cope with their anger or how they could take their frustrations out on the pitch in a positive way.

Frequently, though, players and parents talked about clubs simply providing an environment for players to enjoy themselves and how this contributed to their better mood or outlook.

"It really helps with my mood."

"It makes me happier all round and in every aspect."

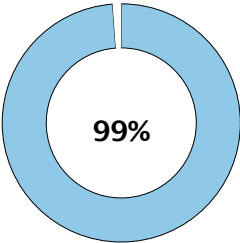
Players

"He comes here buzzing."

Parent

Social Skills and Networks

Figure 3.3.1: Being part of a football club has helped to improve my confidence / self-esteem



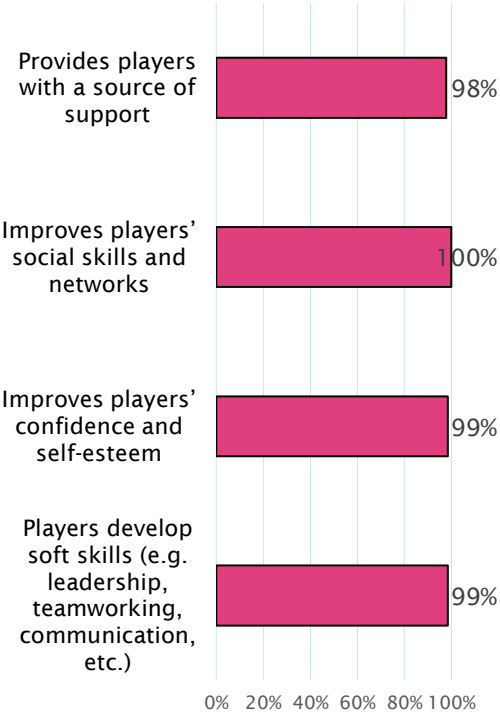
Almost all players and club officials agreed that being part of a club has a positive impact on players' confidence or self-esteem.

Players and their parents explained in interviews that, for many, the club creates an encouraging and safe environment that allows players to build confidence based on their needs.

For some players, being part of a club has enabled them to improve their confidence on the pitch, becoming more assured or vocal players.

For others, club football has boosted their confidence more generally, enabling them to come out of their shell, talk to new people or overcome social anxiety.

Figure 3.3.2: Club Survey: Players' Social Skills and Networks



"Now I just go up to anyone."

"I'm normally quite a shy person but football gives you a reason to talk."

Players

Importantly, several interviewees commented on how this improved confidence had continued beyond the club itself – at home or in school, for example.

"My mum has seen the difference it's made for me and is now trying to get my sister involved in the club, too."

Player

"She now speaks out in school and puts her hand up."

Parent

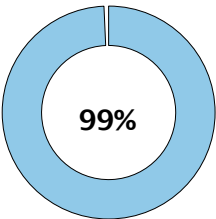
"It does help foster friendships and better community relationships."

"Being part of a Club helps to make friends and improve your social skills at the same time as learning, having fun and keeping fit."

"To me my football club is a family."

Players

Figure 3.3.3: I have made friends or improved my social network



Almost all players reported that they had gained friendships or widened their social networks through participation in club football.

This was reflected in conversations with players and parents, with most interviewees reflecting positively on the social aspects of being part of a club. Clubs have provided opportunities for players to meet new people and build friendships that extend beyond football.

"It has helped my communication skills hugely and has helped me in establishing relationships with many people I can now call friends."

Player

For some, clubs have enabled them to interact with people they might not otherwise have had the chance to meet – for example, people who attend different schools, people who live in different areas or people who come from different backgrounds to them.

"You learn how to speak with different people."

Player

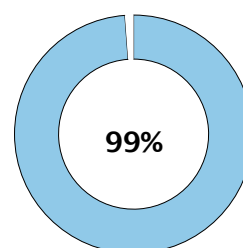
A few players also spoke about how the relationship they have built up with their teammates is special, particularly where they have been part of the club for a long time.

"You build a different bond with your teammates than other friends"

"I grew up with these boys"

Players

Figure 3.3.4: My teammates / coaches / managers are a source of support for me



Almost all players agreed that their support network had improved through involvement with a club. Interviews suggest that this is largely a result of the supportive environment created by clubs and coaches.

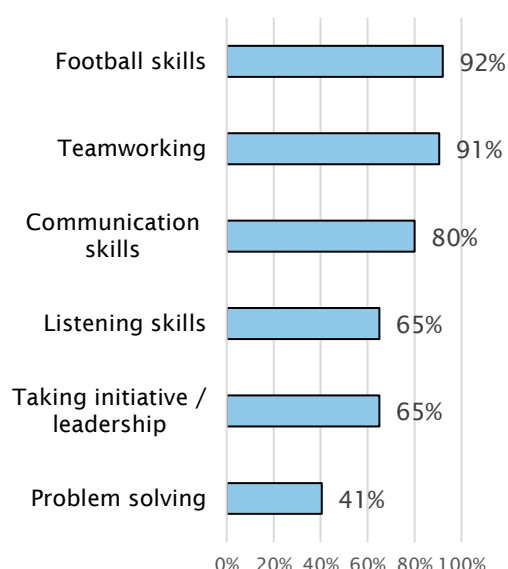
Players and their parents spoke about clubs being places where people felt comfortable, listened to, looked after and cared for. Several interviewees noted how coaches would regularly ask about players' wellbeing and offer advice and encouragement.

"The coaches listen to them, look out for them, ask how they are doing."

"The coaches are so inclusive, really supportive."

Parents

Fig 3.3.5: Player Survey: Skills developed through playing for a club



Responses from both the player and club surveys indicate that, in general, football clubs can provide a rounded learning environment for players. They can be valuable for not only improving players' football skills, but for developing their social and personal skills. As one respondent commented:

"[Clubs] offer much more than football coaching. Clubs give young people an opportunity to learn in a variety of ways."

Club official

In addition to those described in Figure 3.3.5, interviews with players and parents highlighted some of the other personal skills players have gained through participation in club football. For example, interviewees mentioned improvements in time management, organisations, taking responsibility, self-discipline, perseverance, and resilience.

Achievement

Figure 3.4.1: I feel that I have achieved things through playing for a football club

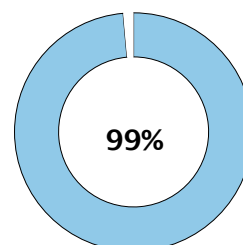
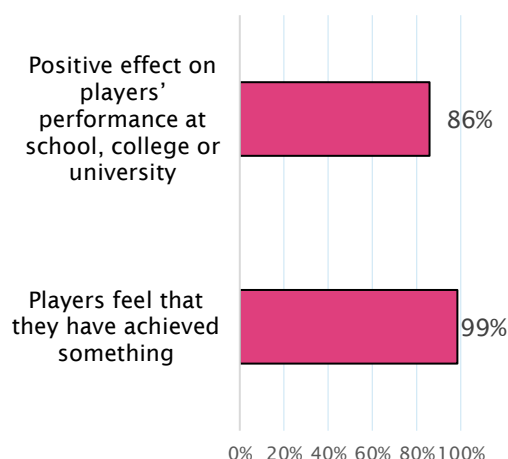


Figure 3.4.2: Club Survey: Players' performance and achievement



Almost all players surveyed said that they felt a sense of achievement because of participating in club football. Club officials were similarly positive about players' sense of achievement.

Interviews with players revealed that achievements were experienced in a variety of ways. Some players had the opportunity to gain more formal achievements through winning leagues or tournaments with their team, or through being recognised in their club's internal awards (best player, most improved, etc.).

"I've got two medals with my name on them."

Player

For others, a sense of achievement came from becoming better players or doing things well on the pitch.

"Whenever you play well, it makes you feel good."

Player

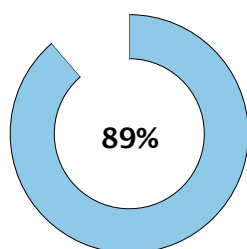
A few players also spoke about the prestige of being part of a squad or playing for a club with a good reputation.

"Playing for the biggest team in [the local area] - it's an achievement."

"Football has always been a big part of my life, so it gives me pride to play for my local team."

Players

Figure 3.4.3: Playing club football has a positive effect on my performance at school, college or university



Survey responses from players also suggest that, for many, the skills and achievements gained from taking part in club football translate to other areas of their lives (see Figure 3.4.3).

Sense of Community

Figure 3.5.1: Playing for a football club has made me feel more a part of the local community

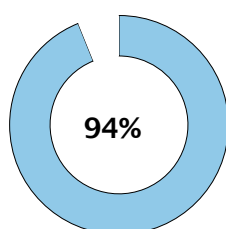
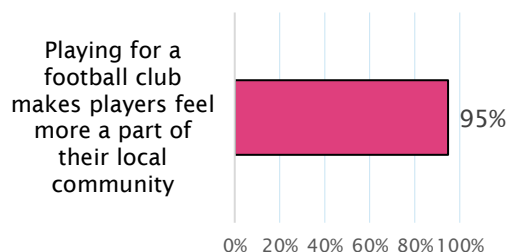


Figure 3.5.2: Club Survey: Community Impact for Players



Most players and club officials reported that clubs can help to create a greater sense of community in players. In interviews with players and parents, discussions of community tended to focus on the club itself as a community.

For some players, club activities are the focus of their daily lives – between training sessions, matches and socialising with their teammates, the club is their link to the local community.

"A lot of my life revolves around the club."

"For someone like me, [the club] is everything."

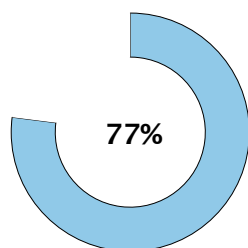
Players

Players and parents also commented on the community that is created by the club through the close relationships built up between players, families, coaches, and officials. Though mostly curtailed by the pandemic, the social events organised through the club (awards nights, fundraising events, dinners, etc.) also help to foster a sense of community among members.

"It gives them a sense of belonging, particularly if they live in the same town the Club plays in."

Club official

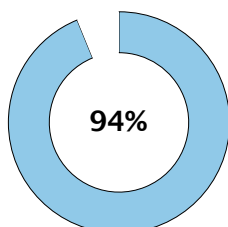
Figure 3.5.3: I have been given opportunities to volunteer or give back to the local community



More than three quarters (77%) of players reported that they had been able to volunteer or contribute to their local community through their club.

The most common examples of this provided by players in interviews were charitable activities (e.g., fundraising or organising collections for local charities) or assisting with coaching sessions for younger players at the club.

Figure 3.5.4: Being part of a football club has helped keep me from taking part in anti-social or criminal behaviour*



*excluding participants for whom this was not an issue before

For most of those players who had previously been involved in anti-social or criminal behaviour (a minority of survey respondents overall), clubs were a motivating factor in changing this.

In interviews, players and parents tended to focus less on anti-social or criminal behaviour and instead more commonly spoke about the club inspiring more positive behaviours. For example, interviewees mentioned players: developing better attitudes on the pitch; becoming more respectful; becoming more motivated to work hard; becoming more focused; and gaining a sense of purpose.

Volunteers

Health and Wellbeing

Figure 3.6.1: Club Survey: Volunteers' Health

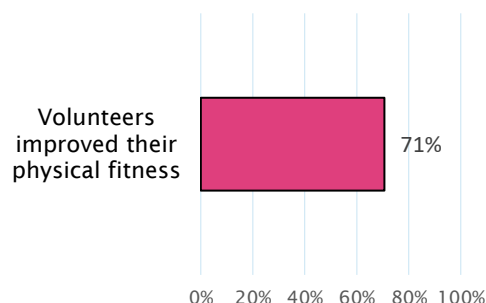


Figure 3.6.1 shows that almost three quarters (71%) of clubs agreed that club membership helped to improve volunteers' physical fitness.

In interviews, coaches commonly mentioned the physical health benefits from being involved in a club. As well as the fitness gained from delivering training sessions, coaches talked about the positive impact of getting outdoors and being in the fresh air. Many coaches also reported that their duties at the club meant they were much more active than they otherwise would be. Football, coaches said, often kept them away from a more sedentary lifestyle and/or less healthy activities.

"It keeps me out the pub...or not in the pub for as long."

Coach

Figure 3.6.2: Club Survey: Volunteers' Mental Health

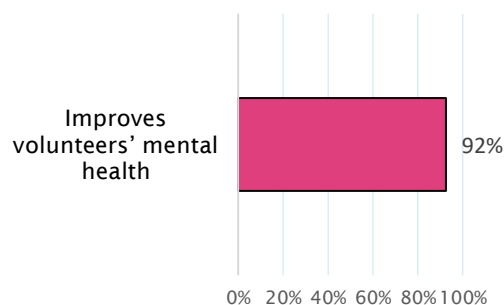


Figure 3.6.2 shows the clubs' responses to how volunteers' mental health is impacted by

being part of the club. 92% of clubs agreed that it improves volunteers' mental health in general.

Coaches commented regularly during interviews about their role giving them a positive focus and something to look forward to. It was clear that for a lot of coaches, being part of a club was a welcome release from the stresses of everyday life – an environment where they could focus solely on something they enjoyed.

"You switch off from everyday life when you're here."

"When you've had a hard week and you see them do something on the pitch, it's a buzz."

Coaches

Coaches and club officials also frequently spoke about outcomes for volunteers that are associated with mental health, if not directly linked. Many respondents mentioned that volunteers gain a sense of purpose or self-worth from their role in a club.

Similarly, satisfaction, pride and achievement were common themes in comments. For example, coaches reported the positive impact on them from: seeing players develop on and off the pitch; seeing skills that they have taught being put into practice; helping to divert young people from negative behaviours or raising their aspirations; and being looked upon as a role model for others.

"The best part is seeing boys come out of their shell."

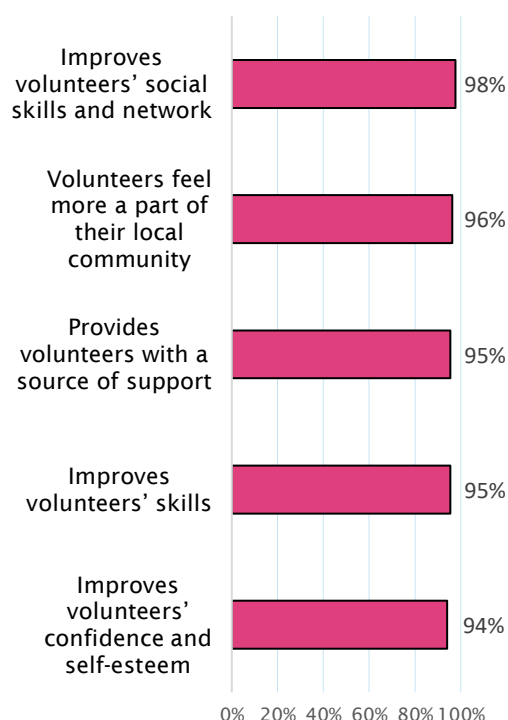
"You get satisfaction when they play well - proud moments."

Coaches

Some coaches and club officials observed that volunteering with a club was a way to be more involved in their children's lives and spend time with them in a positive and fun environment.

Social Skills and Networks

Figure 3.6.3: Club Survey: Social Impact for Volunteers



"Definitely makes us all feel like we are part of a community and giving something back."

"Volunteering can add purpose, routine, a social network and a sense of achievement that is rare in other walks of life."

Coaches

Figure 3.6.3 displays the social impact for club volunteers. The biggest impact was seen in the improvement to volunteers' social skills and networks (98%). Every aspect of the social impact for volunteers was recognised by over 90% of the club respondents.

The social impact of volunteering was a significant feature of discussions with coaches. Most agreed that they had made friends through the club and valued the interaction they had with other coaches, players and their parents. Coaches also spoke about clubs being welcoming and friendly places to spend time and the camaraderie that comes from a shared purpose.

"The social side is a big part of my week."

"I've made long lasting relationships."

Coaches

Similarly, coaches frequently talked about the sense of community that they gain from being part of club. Several coaches commented on how their role enabled them to give something back to the community or how they enjoyed the atmosphere at the club – one where everyone pitches in and helps out.

"The best thing is giving something back."

Coach

In interviews, coaches also commonly spoke of the community that formed around the club. For example, interviewees mentioned clubs being family-oriented or close-knit, allowing everyone to get to know each other (this is often supported by the social events that clubs organise beyond the football itself).

"It's nice to come to a place where everyone knows who you are."

"You get to build up relationships with everyone - it's bringing the community together."

Coaches

Improvements in skills and confidence featured extensively in discussions with coaches. All the coaches we spoke to had achieved at least Level 1.1 on the Scottish FA's Adult or Children's Coaching Pathway. In addition to developing their coaching skills or knowledge of the game, coaches mentioned improvements in a range of other skills, including:

-
- First aid.
-
- Knowledge of mental health and wellbeing.
-
- Communication (in general and in speaking to different groups).
-

-
- Working with children and young people.
-
- Working with people with specific conditions (e.g., disabilities, autism, or ADHD).
-
- Dealing with challenging behaviours / discipline.
-
- Managing their own emotions / ensuring there is always a positive atmosphere for players.
-
- Motivating others.
-
- Planning and preparation.
-
- Patience.
-
- Administration (e.g., managing bookings or recording monitoring data).
-

Often linked to the skills they had gained, interviewees frequently spoke about improvements to their confidence as coaches and in areas such as public speaking and communication.

Community

Club officials were asked to comment on the impact they felt their club had on the wider community. A club's influence will often be contingent on several factors (size, stage of development, location, etc.), and a few respondents were less sure that their club had much impact. However, most clubs were positive about their club's role in the community.

Based on responses from club officials, the activity and impact of clubs in the community is wide-ranging. However, several key themes emerged from comments. Firstly, the variety of footballing activities offered by many clubs provides a hook to bring people from many different backgrounds or groups together around one shared identity. For example, many clubs offer programmes for infants right through to older people, boys' and girls' teams and para-football. This, clubs reported, helped to bring people from all ages and stages of life together under the badge of the club.

"All of this encourages the local community to engage. People make new friends and support one another."

Club official

Several clubs also emphasised the focus they put on community building and the fact that this is often prioritised over achieving footballing success in the traditional sense. The purpose of many clubs is to be welcoming, inclusive and remove barriers to participation, rather than encouraging competition or striving to reach an elite level on the pitch.

"Everyone is equal, and they come and enjoy playing sport but [even more] being part of something bigger with friends."

Club official

Linked to this was the context reported by many clubs that they are a focal point for the community. They are able to draw different strands of the community together, whether that is simply people coming together to support the team, or by providing a platform for key stakeholders in the community to work together. For example, club officials spoke about how their club made links between families, schools, local businesses, charities, service providers and local authorities.

"We are a well-established team and now have links with all parts of the community. We have sponsors who support us as well as all generations coming to watch our teams play."

"Provides a focal point for people to get to know each other & find out more about what is going on locally."

Club officials

Particularly in smaller towns or rural areas, clubs can contribute to local identity. Several respondents commented on how their club is synonymous with a place (or vice versa) or how the locals are deeply invested in the success of the club.

"We are a one town, one club where 1 in every 4 children at school age is a

member of our club and probably everyone in the community has a son, daughter, nephew, niece or grandchild associated with the club."

"It brings the community closer together, especially when they are winning."

Club officials

More than just being celebrated by the local community, a significant number of respondents view their club as a means of achieving positive change. There were many examples provided in comments from club officials of clubs using their position or status as a force for good locally. Clubs and their members have carried out charitable activities directly or used their reach to channel support or funding to local causes. Clubs often support local businesses directly by procuring goods or services. Some clubs who own or operate their own facilities have opened these up for use by local community groups or classes. It should also be noted that many clubs are themselves set up as charitable trusts or social enterprises, with community goals enshrined as part of their legal status.

"Our club is a community club which gives back, we have raised thousands for the community."

"Our club plays a vital role in engaging with community activities and helping develop an engaged culture of our children making positive steps within the community - be that in fundraising, food bank support, other voluntary activities or events."

Club officials

Clubs also spoke about the contribution they make to addressing local issues or public health concerns. In addition to the obvious benefits to physical health from playing sport, club officials mentioned their involvement in programmes focused on mental health, obesity, and drug/alcohol misuse. Many clubs also participate in diversionary youth projects aimed at tackling anti-social or criminal behaviour.

"We are a local club run by local residents who provide a structured, organised sport to encourage young

people improve their health and well-being."

Club official

A few club officials commented on the unique position clubs can have to be able to tailor these wider activities to be responsive to the needs of the local community. As one official stated, this can also help to fill gaps where other service providers are limited in what they can offer.

"We have a captive audience from whom we can gauge the needs of the community and provide non-footballing activities tailored to the community. We are no longer just a football club."

"From young kids all the way to the elderly, our programmes are suited to meet all the needs of our area."

Club officials

Strategic Context

The findings from consultations with players, volunteers and club officials point to a wide range of outcomes, with the impact of clubs observed from the level of the individual to the wider community.

To fully examine the difference community football clubs make it would be worthwhile to consider the links between these outcomes and national policy in relevant areas. To that end, some of the key strategies and frameworks, to which community football clubs contribute, are outlined below.

National Performance Framework

The *National Performance Framework*⁴ sets out the Scottish Government's overarching vision for Scotland, including Strategic Priorities and National Outcomes. The evidence gathered through this research indicates a particularly strong contribution from community football clubs towards the following outcomes.

- ***We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential*** – for most, clubs have a positive impact on the wellbeing and happiness of players and membership enables them to develop positive relationships.

- ***We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe*** – community clubs can foster a sense of community among members, make them feel more connected to local communities and add to their levels of social capital (e.g., larger social networks, more social participation). Clubs also provide a focal point for community interaction and, for some, improve perceptions of the local area. Though evidence was limited, there was also an indication that clubs can make a difference to young people's participation in anti-social or criminal behaviour.

- ***We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society*** – there is strong evidence of community football's positive impact on the confidence of children and young people and of clubs providing a fertile environment for the development of a range of personal skills. Similarly, volunteering opportunities provided by community football clubs give learners of all ages the opportunity to gain new skills and often have these recognised through formal accreditation.

- ***We are healthy and active*** – the health benefits of sport are well-known and these findings reiterate the positive impact club membership has on people's levels of physical activity, fitness, weight and ability to live with long-term health conditions. The findings also capture the benefits for members across a range of mental wellbeing domains.

A More Active Scotland: Scotland's Physical Activity Delivery Plan

*A More Active Scotland*⁵ sets out the Scottish Government and relevant partners' shared

⁴ <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/national-outcomes>

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2018/07/active-scotland-delivery->
[Continues over]

goals for supporting and enabling people in Scotland to be more physically active. The impact of community football clubs is seen across several of the framework's outcomes: enabling the inactive to be more active; enabling people to stay active throughout their lives; improving wellbeing in communities through physical activity and; providing opportunities to participate, progress and achieve in sport.

In addition, based on the findings of the research community football clubs are well placed to help deliver on some of A More Active Scotland's key actions. These include increasing social prescribing initiatives, developing the physical confidence of children and young people, and providing opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to take part in active recreation.

Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027

The Scottish Government's Mental Health Strategy⁶ recognises the benefits of physical activity on mental wellbeing. Feedback from players, volunteers and club officials provides further evidence of this and sheds light on the role club membership can have in improving general mental wellbeing or helping people to live with specific mental health issues.

A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections

*A Connected Scotland*⁷ is the Scottish Government's national strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building social connections. The impact of community football clubs aligns with several of the themes set out in the strategy, including:

- Community cohesion and creating strong social networks
- Building positive and healthy relationships
- Creating opportunities for people to connect

- Promoting physical activity
- Promoting and enabling volunteering

Community Learning and Development

Community Learning and Development (CLD)⁸ describes a broad range of practices that aim to empower people of all ages to make positive changes in their lives, and in their communities, through learning, personal development and active citizenship. The outcomes for members around skills development and volunteering described above highlights the potential role community clubs have to play in areas of national policy related to CLD, such as adult learning, employability & skills and youth work.

Similarly, the research highlights the range of volunteering opportunities created by community football clubs and the positive outcomes for those who give their time to volunteer with clubs. Creating such opportunities and achieving positive outcomes for volunteers are key features of the national volunteering framework *Volunteering for All*⁹

Covid Recovery

Looking ahead, the Scottish Government's *Covid Recovery Strategy: for a fairer future*¹⁰ outlines the negative impact of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of children and young people in particular and sets out actions to address this. Key actions include the promotion of physical activity and an increase in mental health support – given the positive outcomes across these areas resulting from club membership, community football clubs are well-positioned to play a role in supporting this recovery.

[plan/documents/00537494-pdf/00537494-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00537494.pdf](https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland-strategy-tackling-social-isolation-loneliness-building-stronger-social-connections/documents/)

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/documents/>

⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland-strategy-tackling-social-isolation-loneliness-building-stronger-social-connections/documents/>

⁸ <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/community-learning-and-development-planning-2021-2024/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/volunteering-national-framework/documents/>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-recovery-strategy-fairer-future/documents/>

4: The Impact of Scottish FA support

This section outlines the support community football clubs have received from the Scottish FA, the impact this has made, and opportunities to develop this support in future.

Support Given to Clubs

Figure 5.1: Rating of Scottish FA support for your club

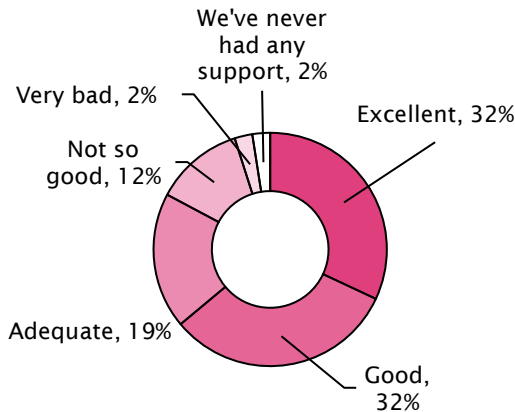


Figure 5.1 represents how clubs rated the support they received from Scottish FA. Most clubs found that the support was either Good (32%) or Excellent (32%). A small minority of respondents (14%, 21 respondents) had a negative view of Scottish FA support or said that their club had not received any support.

"The support from Scottish FA made great difference to our club."

Club official

Figure 5.2: Scottish FA support has helped us to...

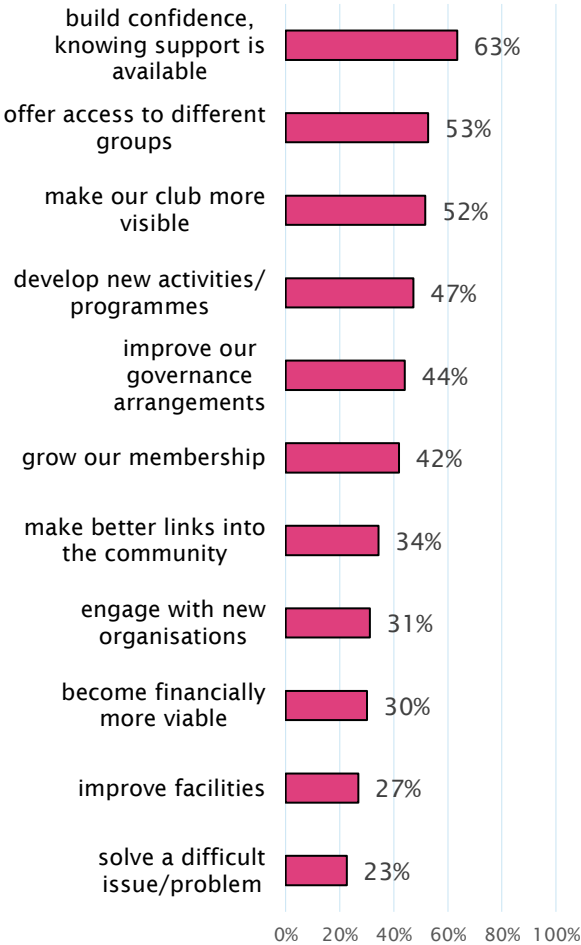


Figure 5.2 displays the types of support clubs received. The most frequent type of support was building confidence, knowing that Scottish FA was there to help (63%). Some clubs received help with specific problems and issues (23%).

"We are lucky in the region to have great support with regular contact but also knowing we can have immediate access to SFA North."

Club official

In survey comments and interviews, club officials described what Scottish FA support had enabled them to do and how it had supported their development as a club.

For some, Scottish FA support was valuable in establishing clubs in the first place through, for example, providing advice and guidance to new clubs at inception.

"We knew we had numbers [to set up the club] but we just wanted to make sure that we were ticking the right boxes, i.e. getting coaches the right training, getting the right people in, getting the right qualifications and setting up, you know, the proper way or the best way that we could so we took a lot of advice from the SFA."

Club official

Embedding good practice was a common theme in interviews. Many club officials mentioned how Scottish FA support had contributed towards a professionalisation of their approach or a positive change in culture. Examples of this include:

-
- Support to develop more robust governance, arrangements and club policies.
-
- Assistance in drafting strategic/business plans.
-
- Support to improve communications, internally (players, parents, coaches) and externally (e.g., with local authorities or other stakeholders).
-
- Advice on improving IT systems.
-
- Marketing and/or social media support (e.g., providing graphics/templates or linking to support for improving club websites).
-
- Making links between clubs to share knowledge/good practice.
-

Given that the office bearers and committee for most community clubs are volunteers (many without a background in management or previous experience of running a club), access to this type of expertise can prove invaluable. As one club official commented:

"You have different skill levels throughout the club in all different roles, some much more experienced than others. But the fact is, these are all just volunteers doing their best. So, to get guidance from professionals, particularly in the early days, is key to that successful outcome."

Club official

Linked to the improvement of practices and processes at a club level, club officials commented on how Scottish FA involvement had led to the development of coaches and other staff.

Over and above the standard courses required for most coaches (typically the first few courses in the Children's or Youth Pathway), clubs welcomed the additional workshops made available by the Scottish FA. For example, clubs mentioned mental health first aid training and, more recently, COVID-specific courses being particularly helpful.

Club officials also spoke about the benefits of having Scottish FA staff visit the club to facilitate training sessions with players, coaches, or parents. In interviews, several club officials also commented positively on having had a Scottish FA development officer posted to work intensely with the club over a period of several months. Having Scottish FA staff work directly with clubs in this way created learning opportunities for coaches and staff and ultimately improved their offer to members.

Clubs frequently mentioned how accessible Scottish FA staff are and how they are readily available to offer support. This can be particularly helpful to clubs in situations where they lack the relevant expertise or are dealing with potentially serious issues (e.g., around child protection). As one interviewee noted:

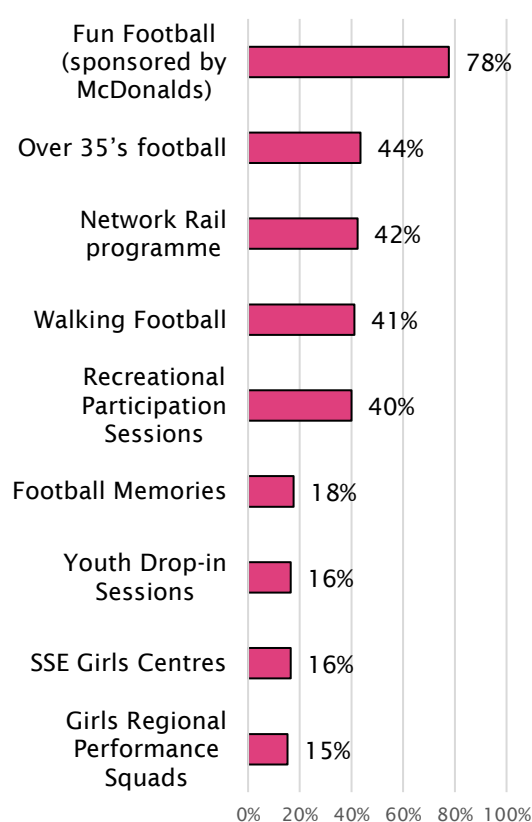
"We've got quite an experienced team and most of the time we know how to manage [difficult situations] but there are occasions when even then we still need a bit of direction on this. Thankfully not too often that happens but there are occasions and it's just really reassuring."

Club official

In addition to the direct funding available to clubs, many club officials reported that funding workshops provided by the Scottish FA and signposting to other sources of funding were beneficial to the development or growth of their club.

Funding for clubs extends to direct or in-kind funding support to access Scottish FA-supported programmes. Fig 5.3 shows which of these programmes survey respondents had participated in over the last five years.

Figure 5.3: Over the last 5 years, which of the following SFA-supported programmes have your club participated in?



Participation in these programmes has helped clubs to broaden their offer to communities and make more activities available for specific groups, such as women/girls, disabled people, older people or people with dementia.

"These are opportunities that we've taken advantage of for the benefit of the club, yes, but more importantly, I think for the benefit of the community as well."

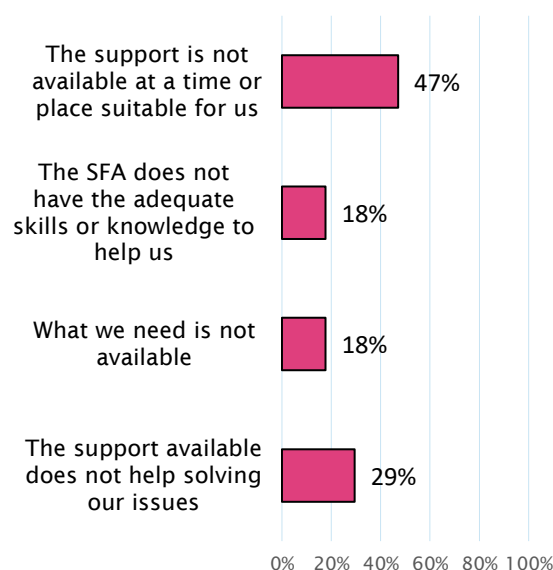
Club official

A few club officials mentioned support they had received to assist with larger scale projects such as facilities improvements/ expansion or community asset transfers. Examples of this kind of support included relevant workshops, advice, support with applications and help in liaising with stakeholders/funders. Clubs agreed that this support had helped to improve their knowledge of these activities, with one interviewee noting that without Scottish FA support this process would have been much more difficult to negotiate.

Improving Scottish FA Support

Whilst the majority of clubs view support from the Scottish FA favourably, some were less positive. Clubs who rated the support offered by Scottish FA negatively (only 14% of all clubs) were asked to provide reasons for their rating (fig 5.4).

Figure 5.4: Negative view of SFA support - Why did you rate the SFA support this way?*



***Note: these percentages relate only to those clubs who gave a negative view of Scottish FA support, not all clubs that responded.**

The most common reason, given by almost half (47%) of these respondents, was that the help available was not available for the club at the time they needed it.

"On the odd occasion we have needed to telephone the phone just rings."

Club official

A few respondents to this question provided additional comments to explain further how they felt Scottish FA support had at times fallen short. Examples included:

- A few officials reported that, for unknown reasons, they had no interaction with the Scottish FA and/or found no interest from them in working with their club.
- A couple of officials representing more rural clubs indicated that they felt support was less forthcoming for clubs outside the Central Belt or larger cities/towns.
- One club official felt that their club had been overlooked for opportunities in favour of other clubs, partly on the basis that their club was reasonably successful and self-sufficient.
- A few respondents commented on a perceived lack of understanding from the Scottish FA about the expectations placed on mostly volunteer club officials. For example, respondents noted the burden of admin placed on volunteers (on top of running a club in their free time), a lack of support or adequate communication around PVG applications and training courses being offered on inconvenient days/times.
- A few clubs noted that, generally speaking, they felt that Scottish FA support was not adequately resourced.

"Community clubs have qualified youth workers within clubs who teach in schools and the community. The SFA are learning from us and then promoting the work but there is no investment to make the support stronger."

Club official

It is worth noting again that these comments are from a minority of respondents and that

most clubs held a positive view of Scottish FA support.

However, all clubs were asked their views on how Scottish FA support might be improved or further developed in future.

A common theme in comments from club officials was that they would welcome more frequent communication or feedback from Scottish FA officials. Some clubs indicated that they would appreciate more regular day-to-day interaction with Scottish FA staff (e.g., more informal emails or phone calls). Others said that they would benefit from more guidance or information on specific issues (e.g., funding opportunities, CPD opportunities or upcoming workshops).

Many clubs reported that they would like more visits from Scottish FA staff and coaches to help deliver sessions and give guidance to club officials and volunteers. Some clubs mentioned that they had benefitted from these types of visits in the past and would like more of them. Others felt that this would help to improve Scottish FA visibility at their club.

"A highly qualified skilled coach visiting the club for a three-month period. I mean, that was great, very positive. If I'm being greedy, I'd like it a bit more often – that was maybe five years ago. So, you know, maybe if there was a bit more of those opportunities to tap into their knowledge and experience. I would never say no."

Club official

Linked to this, a couple of club officials said that it would be beneficial to have more Scottish FA staff in their region (e.g., more Club Development Officers) with responsibility for overseeing a smaller cluster of clubs. This would prevent support from being spread too thin and allow for more face-to-face time with clubs. However, both understood that this might be unrealistic.

While most acknowledged the need for robust regulation and vetting of volunteers, many club officials felt there was an opportunity for the Scottish FA to support clubs by reducing the amount of 'red tape' they must deal with. For example, clubs mentioned that the PVG application process could be slow and onerous, which can cause delays to coaches or

teams getting started. Some clubs also indicated that the amount of information volunteers need to provide, and the qualifications required can be off-putting to many.

"A good volunteer is, hard to get. So, if you've got people willing and able and held back by red tape - now, very necessary red tape of course - then there has to be a way to improve upon that."

Club official

Several officials also suggested that there was scope to improve the burden of reporting for clubs. For some the issue lay with the *SFA Live* system which they found difficult or overly complicated to use (especially where volunteers were not particularly IT literate). One club official commented on the fact that *SFA Live* doesn't link to or interact with *My Club Hub* (the tool they use for club administration, itself promoted to the club by Scottish FA staff in the region), meaning data needs to be input twice. Other club officials said that they would welcome support from the Scottish FA to look at ways of reducing the amount of data clubs are required to report on in general.

"It's [data entry] a distraction [from other club activities]. It could be streamlined a bit."

Club official

Other examples of potential improvements mentioned by club officials included:

-
- More direct Scottish FA funding to clubs.
-
- A reduction in fees for coaching courses.
-
- Scottish FA facilitated opportunities to learn from other clubs (e.g., 'best practice' meetings).
-
- More funding workshops.
-
- Scottish FA support to recruit qualified referees in regions where they are currently lacking.
-

In addition to improving Scottish FA support in general, clubs were asked what specific support would help them to improve participation with a more diverse group of players (e.g., disabled people, older people, LGBTQ+, people from a Black or Minority Ethnic background).

Clubs frequently mentioned that they would welcome more information and awareness-raising activities on working with hard-to-reach or underrepresented groups. Respondents talked about having more Scottish FA run courses (e.g., on understanding the needs and coaching requirements of particular groups) and more opportunities to learn what other clubs have done.

A few respondents saw a role for the Scottish FA in making links between clubs and key stakeholders, third sector organisations or community groups who they might be able to form partnerships around initiatives.

"[More support] to understand who to speak to in the community to develop new programmes (perhaps from experience elsewhere). We want to help in any way we can but sometimes that first contact or finding the right partner can be the challenging aspect."

Club official

Similarly, a few clubs said that increased support from the Scottish FA to publicise those programmes already being offered by clubs would help increase the participation of marginalised groups.

Some club officials said that increased funding was needed to allow clubs to run additional programmes. One commented that funding for specific posts in each region – 'Inclusion Development Officers' – would help clubs to improve participation.

Others mentioned that they were being held back from fully engaging with certain groups due to a lack of adequate facilities (e.g., not large enough or fully accessible to all) and would welcome support – financial or otherwise – to address this.

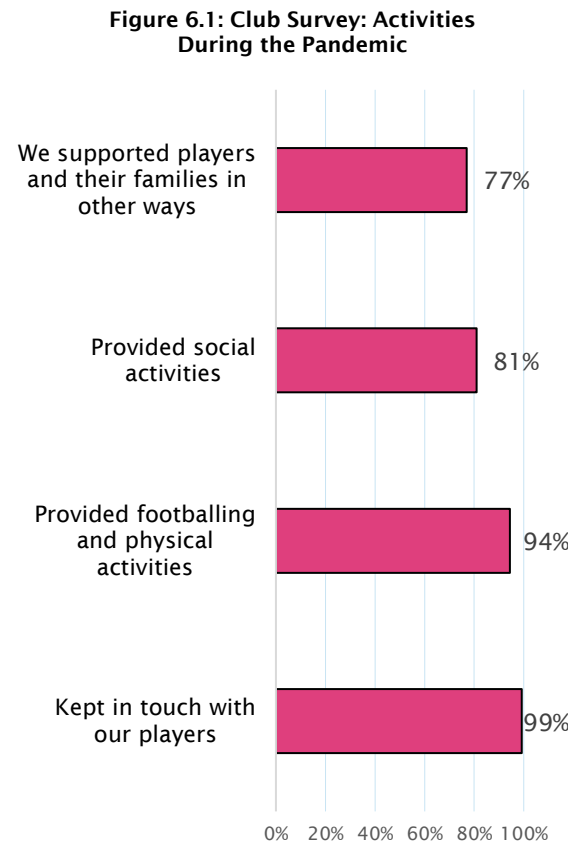
It is worth noting that several club officials were confident that their clubs were successfully working with a range of groups in the community, including traditionally hard-to-

reach groups, and/or that there was good support out there already for clubs to access to help with this.

5: Clubs and The Pandemic

This section outlines how clubs have operated through the pandemic and the difference this has made to players. It also examines how the clubs themselves have been affected and their support needs going forward.

Activities



best goal videos, attempting skills and tricks.

- Videos of football drills players could attempt at home.
- Workout plans and videos.
- Fitness challenges – e.g., running/cycling a certain distance.
- WhatsApp group chats.
- Quizzes and other online social events.
- Socially distanced social visits to players from coaches.
- Sharing links to other sources of support (e.g., mental health resources).
- Delivering food parcels in the community.

Figure 6.1 shows the ways in which clubs provided additional support to their players during the pandemic. Almost all clubs (99%) kept in touch with their players, and 94% provided football-related activities during the pandemic. 81% of clubs provided social activities for their players, and 77% provided further support to players and their families.

Specific examples of what clubs did during the pandemic, provided by players, coaches and club officials included:

- Skills challenges posted to social media – e.g., setting ‘keepie uppie’ records,

Players

Figure 6.2, Player Survey: Support During the Pandemic

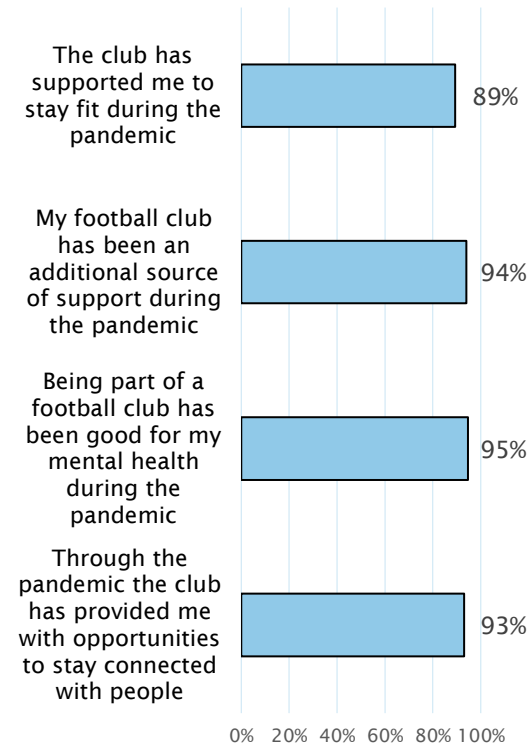
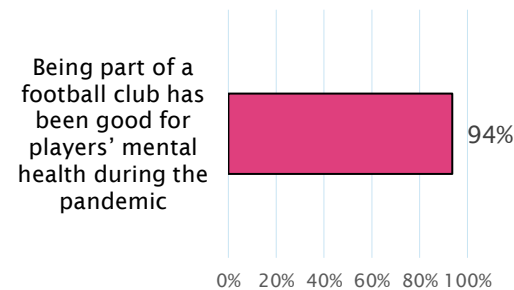


Figure 6.2 shows the support that players received from their clubs during the pandemic. 95% of players agreed that the clubs had been good for their mental health, which closely reflects the club responses on this topic (94%, Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3, Club Survey: Pandemic Impact on Players



"It helped me stay fit because there wasn't much to do for fitness in the pandemic."

"The support has been fantastic and kept me from feeling isolated."

"It was always reassuring to know I had people within my club to talk to if needed and how they always were offering support."

Players

When interviewed, club members frequently mentioned the difference that club membership made to their physical and mental health during the pandemic. The social aspect of the clubs was described as a key source of support by players, parents, and coaches alike. Some players reported feeling more connected to their team because of the lockdown activities provided by the clubs, as it meant that they stayed in touch with their teammates and felt they all had a shared experience that brought them closer together. Many players mentioned that having people to talk to during lockdown was important to them, and the clubs provided that social network.

"We have all had to be there for each other more, and our team is now much closer than it would be otherwise."

"When we came back, we felt like more of a team."

Players

Parents noticed that the sessions organised by football clubs prevented players from becoming socially isolated, helped with combatting loneliness, and for some helped to bring siblings closer together as they had a shared interest and activity.

"Being in isolation without the club, he would've been really lonely. It's the best thing that's happened to him."

"At the start I could see him going into his own bubble."

"Dread to think what would've happened without football, he might have gone back into his shell."

Parents

Coaches and volunteers also mentioned the benefits of the social aspect of the football clubs, in particular the opportunity to see different faces and interact with different people during lockdowns. Comments from coaches indicated that the positive impact reached beyond face-to-face interactions, to include online activities as well. As one coach said:

"Even just posting stuff online, I couldn't wait to see what would come back."

Coach

Many club members also mentioned the physical benefits of club membership, citing fitness and training activities, as well as simply getting outside and away from screens. Their comments indicate that even though, as the survey figures demonstrate, some players lost fitness over lockdown, this would have been even more pronounced without the activities provided by their club.

"It's easy to get used to just sitting about doing nothing."

Player

"There would've been a lot more Xbox."

Parent

Coaches and volunteers similarly credited the club activities with helping to maintain their fitness, giving them something to do and a reason to get out of the house. The impact on the players' fitness was recognised by many coaches, who also commented on the lack of motivation and interest that some players had on returning to football. One coach reflected that there were more muscle injuries amongst players after lockdowns compared to before, and another reported that the lockdowns had impacted the mental and physical agility of older members and volunteers to a much greater extent than younger players.

Among the coaches that we spoke to, there was an emphasis on encouraging players to get back into football and overcoming the setbacks that the pandemic had created. For example, some mentioned using competitiveness as a motivational tool for their

players, while others described trying to make sessions as fun and enjoyable as possible.

"We tried as hard as possible, keeping them fit and active, their standard as high as possible."

"Everyone having a laugh, that was really important."

Coaches

Coaches also mentioned positive outcomes that came from periods of lockdown. Some described how their club's focus shifted, for instance, towards giving more attention to girls' teams; others described how the time allowed them to improve their theoretical knowledge and create more varied and imaginative session plans. A prominent feature of the interviews with coaches was the gratitude they expressed towards the clubs, as their role provided them with a distraction from the seriousness of the pandemic, a positive focus, and a sense of achievement.

"Being able to turn off from the seriousness of the pandemic was great."

"Being able to see how the kids were being encouraged to keep going - if they're happy, I'm happy."

Coaches

Parents that we interviewed described how the clubs had benefited families. With young people being home-schooled and under strict social restrictions, parents were grateful for all activities that gave their children something to do, and relieved the pressure on them to provide entertainment, support and distraction. For some, the sessions organised by the clubs gave them a break from the demands of parenting during a pandemic; for others, it gave parents the opportunity to focus on another sibling, which was particularly important to families with children who have atypical needs such as autism. Many parents mentioned that it brought them closer together as a family through shared interests and passions.

"I would think, at least he has training tonight, or at least he has an online activity tonight."

"I feel like I owe the club a lot."

"It kept the whole household sane."

Parents

Despite the support provided by clubs, inevitably there were some negative outcomes for players resulting from the pandemic.

Figure 6.4: Club Survey: Pandemic Impact on Players

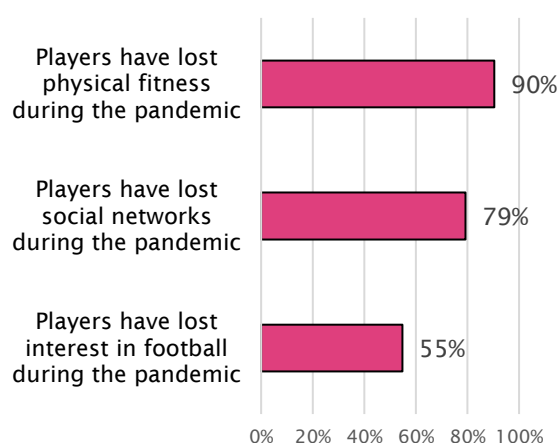


Figure 6.4 shows the clubs' perceptions of how the pandemic impacted their players. Over half (55%) of the clubs agreed that players lost interest in football over the course of the pandemic. Most clubs agreed that players' social networks and fitness had deteriorated over the pandemic (79% and 90% respectively).

"Coaches are doing their best to motivate players, but some players don't want to put in the effort."

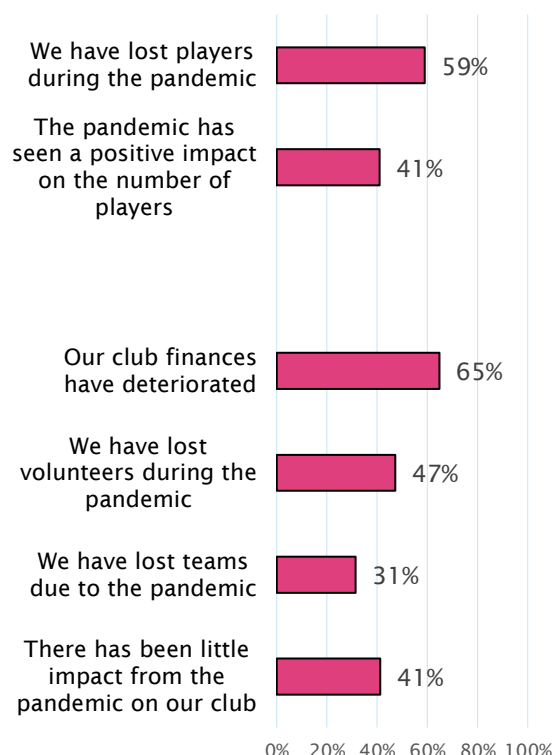
"Getting the players back to fitness was the main challenge."

Coaches

Impact on Clubs

The impact of the pandemic has not been uniformly felt by all clubs, as Fig 6.5 demonstrates.

Figure 6.5: Pandemic impact on clubs



Responses from clubs show that most experienced some form of negative impact - the most common being deteriorating finances, which around two-thirds (65%) of clubs reported. A majority of clubs (59%) said they had lost players, while the remainder (41%) saw a positive impact on the number of players.

Almost half (47%) said they had lost volunteers, and just under a third (31%) lost entire teams as result the pandemic.

In terms of finances, many of the clubs we spoke to and some of those who responded to the survey had received direct funding from the Scottish FA and other sources during the pandemic, which was hugely beneficial to them. Some clubs were also able to continue to collect members' dues throughout lockdown. A few clubs noted that although normal income streams may have been reduced, so too had their main overheads (heating facilities, pitch hire, transport, etc., which helped to keep the impact on the club to a minimum.

However, clearly this was not the experience for a lot of clubs. Some of the pandemic-

related financial impacts mentioned by club officials and others included:

- A partial or complete loss of members' dues during lockdowns.
- Financial hardship of members or their families (e.g., unemployment resulting from the pandemic) leading to fewer dues being collected overall or more difficulty in collecting these dues. It should be noted that many clubs made conscious efforts to support members in difficult financial positions, temporarily waiving fees or adopting a 'pay what you can' model.
- Additional costs resulting from COVID-19 protocols (e.g., cleaning products, sanitiser, masks).
- Loss of sponsorship as other businesses tried to reduce costs.
- Loss of grant funding.
- Limited ability to do traditional in-person fundraising activities.

In addition to the financial difficulties faced by some players and their families, there were a variety of reasons why clubs felt they had lost players through the pandemic. Some suggested that the extended time spent away from the club or from football in general made it more daunting for some people to come back.

"I think a break of that long makes it challenging for people to return to a routine or have the confidence to join social environments."

Club official

Similarly, some referred to the loss of routine, structure or focus for some players and how this was difficult to re-establish.

"Kids need repetitive structure in their life, for some they found a new routine during pandemic which they now find hard to break."

"A change in lifestyle and circumstances has resulted in a change in mindset and habit meaning that football no longer means as much to them."

Club officials

Several respondents mentioned how the spell away from football had led to other interests taking hold in players' lives. Based on comments, this would appear to be especially true of players aged 15-18, where even in normal times clubs can struggle to maintain their interest due to other factors.

"The break was so long that the 'waverers' found other interests."

Club official

"For my own squad and at the age group they are at (late teens), some players found it difficult to get their buzz back into football."

Coach

There was an indication from some clubs that the restrictions placed on clubs, particularly in the early stages of returning to football, had put some players off from coming back.

"They were put off by lack of changing facilities, travelling and other obstacles to participation."

Club official

Many club officials and coaches said that they believed that the regular contact they had with players during lockdowns had been key to retaining players.

"Due to efforts of coaches and officials the impact has been less than it would have been."

Club official

Though the challenges faced by clubs during lockdowns and other restrictions are wide-ranging, the effects of the pandemic would appear not to be entirely negative. Around two-fifths of clubs (41%, see Fig. 6.5) said that the pandemic had led to an increase in players.

It is also worth noting that around two-fifths (41%, see Fig 6.5) of clubs reported that the impact of the pandemic on their club had been

minimal. This would indicate that, for some clubs at least, where there have been negative impacts resulting from the pandemic these have been manageable.

The findings would also suggest that the impact of the pandemic on clubs has not always been straightforwardly positive or negative. Clubs may have initially lost income but later acquired additional players or may have lost one team but gained another. This was captured in comments from some club officials:

"The impact is complex. In some cases it has been drastic - loss of a senior women's team. In other cases it has resulted in creation of new options and improved cooperation."

"Whilst the short-term impact was mainly negative, the long-term has some positives. Coaches have looked afresh at training and ways of involving and monitoring players through social media. The importance of the social aspect of bringing players physically together has been highlighted. The importance of all involved knowing and applying basic health measures has also been reinforced."

Club officials

Similarly, while clubs gaining players is on the whole a positive, it would not have been without challenges (particularly while still operating under restriction). With new players can come the need for additional volunteers, increased costs or more time spent on administration (e.g., collecting subs or managing waiting lists).

Figure 6.6: Changes to the club resulting from the pandemic

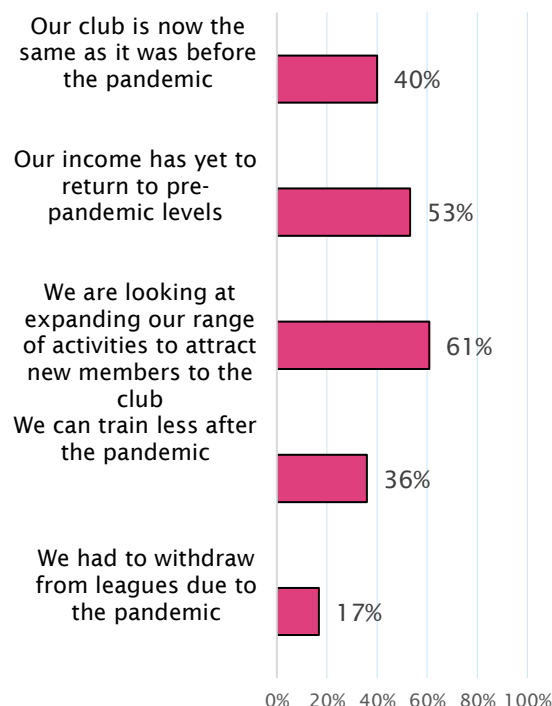
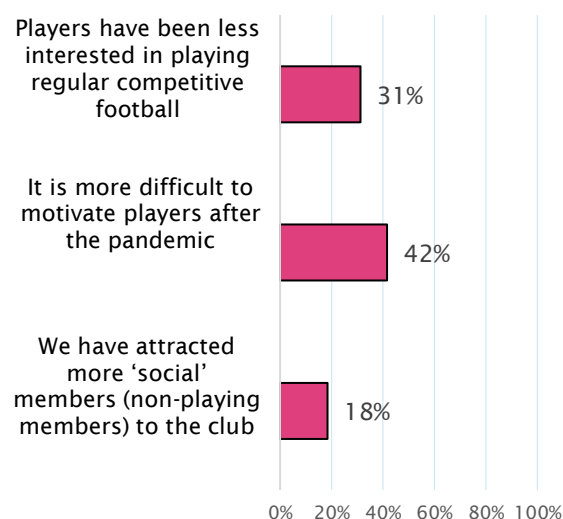


Figure 6.7: Changes to members resulting from the pandemic



It is clear from responses that as they emerge from the pandemic most clubs find themselves in different position to when it started. For more than half of clubs (53%), income streams have not returned to what they were pre-pandemic. As mentioned, there is a variety of reasons that some clubs' income from membership fees has not returned to normal. Some clubs have frozen their fees at pre-

pandemic levels, even while the cost of outgoings (e.g., facilities, pitch hire) have increased. Club officials also spoke about difficulties in trying to replace sponsors.

"The club is struggling to return to its pre-pandemic financial position with the loss of sponsors and reluctance to commit from them."

Club official

Facilities remain an ongoing challenge for many clubs, particularly for the majority who don't own their own pitch or training ground. Some venues have remained closed since the start of the pandemic. Others have been operating on reduced opening hours. This is on top of the public health restrictions placed on certain venues (e.g., no external visitors to school facilities) and activities (outdoor only) at different points throughout the pandemic which limit what has been possible for clubs to achieve. It is perhaps for these reasons that around a third of clubs (36%) said they are not offering the same amount of training as they were pre-pandemic.

"Our club lost its training base and home as the senior club focussed on commercial income and ended our access to stadium and equipment storage."

"Facility hire is the biggest problem with most on reduced opening hours."

Club officials

Even where clubs have been able to get players back in, this has presented challenges for some (as demonstrated in Fig 6.7). A significant number of clubs have observed issues with players' interest and motivation since returning to football.

Despite the challenges clubs have faced and continue to face as they emerge from the pandemic, it was clear from comments that many clubs are optimistic about the future. Some spoke about how they have begun to build their membership back up as restrictions ease (some clubs reported that they are now bigger in size) or how the lessons learned through lockdowns have meant they are returning to normal activity in a stronger position. More than half of clubs (61%) also

indicated that the pandemic had led to them looking at offering a wider range of activities going forward (see Fig 6.6).

"Now that we have returned almost to normal our club is beginning to build our members base back up again, bring in new players, new volunteers, so perhaps the pandemic has had a bigger effect on our club than we may have first thought, as more people may be more willing to come in and be involved with football."

"It has made us more aware of mental health issues. Health & Safety aspects of the club have been tightened."

Club officials

There were also many comments from clubs about how they were beginning to see improvements in their members' physical and mental health as activities opened up again.

"The appetite our players and volunteers have had to return to the pitch since restrictions eased has been inspirational."

"Resumption of outdoor training has seen a marked improvement in [players] confidence and mental health."

"There has been a visible impact on the mental health of some individuals, return to regular training and involvement has helped."

Club officials

Clubs were asked what support they needed to assist with their recovery from the pandemic. For most, their response was in keeping with the general opportunities to improve Scottish FA support identified by clubs (see Section 5). Examples of the main post-pandemic support suggested by clubs included:

-
- Increased general funding/financial support (either directly or through a reduction in fees).
 - More information and guidance on available external funding.
-

-
- Facilities - help to secure appropriate venues and financial support to assist with the (rising) hire costs.
-
- Continued, regular guidance on clubs' responsibilities in relation to COVID-19 restrictions.
-

6: Conclusions and Recommendations

This section summarises the key findings from the study and makes recommendations for the future development of Scottish FA club support.

Conclusions

From the research the following conclusions can be drawn:

The Difference Clubs Make

1. Community football clubs make a significant contribution to the physical and mental health of their players. In a general sense, the findings would indicate that the majority of players experience improvements their fitness, mental wellbeing or happiness. It is also clear that for those players who live with particular physical conditions (e.g., asthma, diabetes, obesity) or mental health issues (stress, anxiety, depression), involvement with football clubs can be hugely beneficial.
2. Improvements to physical and mental health are not limited to a club's players. Feedback from community clubs point to a meaningful impact in the health and wellbeing of volunteers as well.
3. The research also suggests that the social aspects of community clubs are as important as the football itself for many members. Club membership provides opportunities for players and volunteers to improve confidence, meet new people, make friends and build support networks. Many clubs have also successfully fostered a genuine sense of community within the club.
4. Community clubs contribute to a number of other positive outcomes for their members, including improvements in physical and personal skills, sense of achievement, performance in education, and helping to prevent anti-social and criminal behaviour.
5. There is good evidence that community football clubs make a positive impact on local communities. Clubs can be a focal

point for bringing people together, improve links between members and communities and contribute towards local identity. In addition, clubs have successfully used their position to give back or create opportunities for their local communities.

6. The research highlights the contribution community football clubs make to a range of key national policy priorities, including tackling health inequalities, improving mental health, addressing social isolation and skills development.

The Impact of Scottish FA Support

7. In general, clubs were favourable to the support provided by the Scottish FA, with only a small minority of clubs adopting a negative view.
8. It was clear from respondents that the Scottish FA has provided a wide-ranging package of support to many clubs, from day-to-day advice to support with large-scale capital projects. And evidence indicates that this support has been useful to clubs of all sizes and stages of development.
9. For those clubs that were less positive about Scottish FA support, the most common reason for this was an inability to access support at a time that suited their needs.
10. Where clubs suggested improvements to the support offered by the Scottish FA, most related to increased interaction with Scottish FA staff. This could be through more formal or informal communication or feedback, more opportunities to learn directly from Scottish FA coaches or more regular presence from Scottish FA staff at clubs.
11. There was also evidence that some clubs would welcome more support from the

Scottish FA around monitoring and volunteer registrations.

12. Clubs offered useful feedback on where additional Scottish FA support could help them to improve their offer to a more diverse group of players. Suggestions included information and awareness-raising on working with particular groups, creating links with key stakeholders and support to access suitable facilities.

Clubs and the Pandemic

13. Through the pandemic clubs delivered a range of physical and social activities for their members. Though not possible for all, most clubs provided opportunities for players to stay fit, stay in touch and access support.
14. For the majority of players, the activities organised by their club, or simply being part of a club during the pandemic, has had a positive impact on maintaining their fitness, improving their mental health, staying connected to other people or accessing additional support.
15. Most clubs have experienced some form of significant negative impact resulting from the pandemic. Most commonly clubs' finances have been adversely affected in the form of lost revenues, financial hardship of members and/or additional costs relating to COVID-19 protocols. Funding provided by the Scottish FA has helped to alleviate the financial impact of the pandemic for many clubs.
16. While some clubs have actually boosted their membership following the return to in-person football activities, most report that they have lost players due to the pandemic. This has had a knock-on effect for some, with a minority of clubs having had to shutter whole teams and/or withdraw from leagues.
17. There are positives to take from the experience of clubs through the pandemic. Given that roughly two-fifths of clubs found no significant impact resulting from the pandemic – and given that most clubs who did have continued to operate – this would suggest that community clubs in Scotland are resilient. There is also evidence that clubs have or are planning to use lessons learned during

the pandemic to explore new opportunities in future.

18. Even as restrictions ease, certain challenges relating to the pandemic will remain, at least in the short-term. More than half of clubs have yet to return to their pre-pandemic level of income and it is unclear if or how long it will take for this to happen. Similarly, some clubs currently face challenges in recruiting players lost through the pandemic or motivating those that have returned.
19. Looking ahead, there were several potential opportunities identified by clubs where the Scottish FA could provide additional support to help with their recovery from the pandemic. These include funding, information and guidance and improving club access to facilities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, we make the following recommendations.

Data and Insight

1. Steps should be taken to understand in more detail the reasons why certain clubs adopt a negative view of Scottish FA support, or why some clubs perceive that they have never had any support. This may involve further consultation with clubs.
2. Given the impact of the pandemic on how members interact with clubs as 'consumers' (e.g., clubs expanding their range of activities, less interest in competitive football, more social membership), the Scottish FA should continue to monitor these changing habits with a view to identifying possible future support needs for clubs.

Scottish FA Support

3. The Scottish FA should look at how its support package to clubs could be further developed. Though it may not be possible to adopt all of the suggestions for improvement offered by clubs, it would be useful to explore the ways Scottish FA staff could increase the level and frequency of interactions with clubs and how they can be better supported with their reporting requirements.

Resourcing Clubs

4. Similarly, the Scottish FA should explore how it can provide further support to those clubs still recovering from the effects of the pandemic. Whilst the Scottish FA's ability to provide direct funding will be limited, there may be opportunities to support clubs to access external sources of funding or provide guidance on boosting revenue streams.

Stakeholder Engagement

5. There may also be a role for the Scottish FA in working with key stakeholders (Scottish Government, clubs, local authorities, and others) to ensure clubs have access to adequate facilities to meet their needs as they return to normal after the pandemic.

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