



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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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

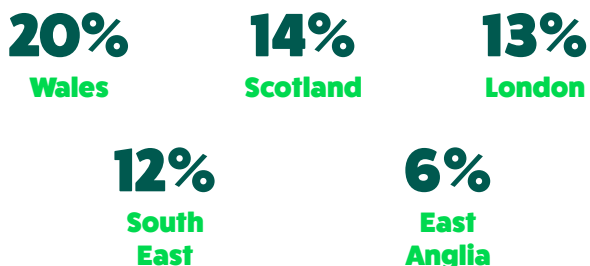
Too many clubs having already folded and the grim reality is that thousands more could now go the same way without intervention. Closures have hit well established clubs with large overheads and big clubhouses, through to the more recently established smaller clubs with huge ambitions. Parents, volunteers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

Grassroots clubs have closed, and more will go

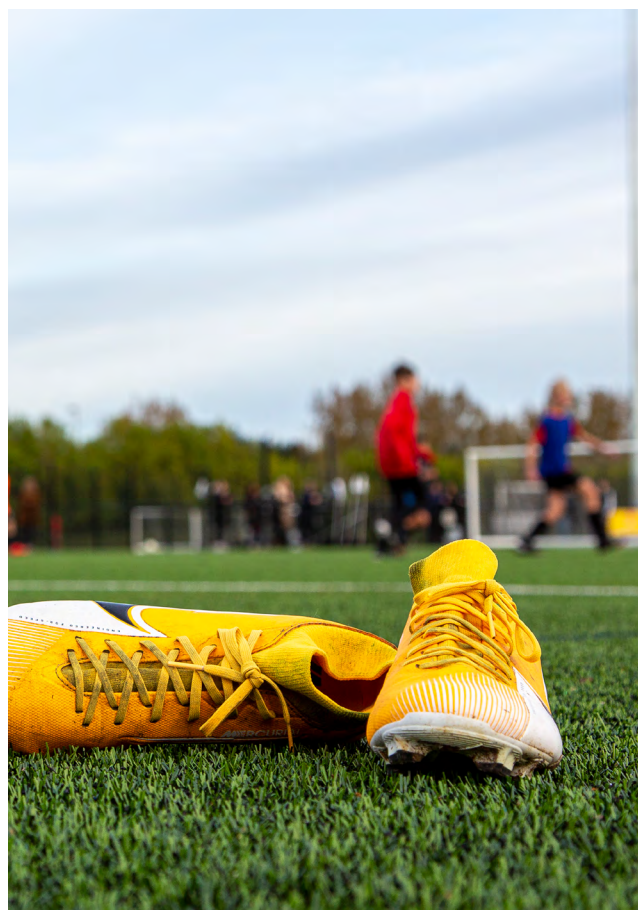
Despite grassroots clubs and their communities having pulled out all the stops to keep their clubs afloat, there have been casualties. A sorry **7%** of clubs have already closed across the UK. A further **16%** of British parents say they believe their club's future is in doubt.

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

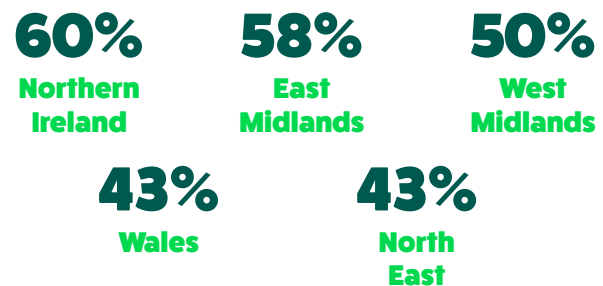
A further **34%** of families who are currently finding the money they need to enable their children to play football, say they fear they will not be able to afford it in the future.

Sample size of 344/1000

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

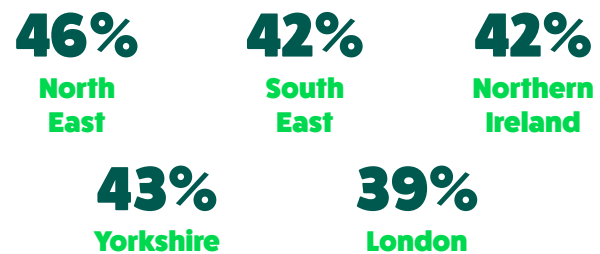
As a general rule, grassroots football clubs do not exist to make money, and therefore do everything they can to keep costs down to avoid increasing subs for hard-pressed families. However, they cannot run a sustainable football club at a loss, so subs must be paid.

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.

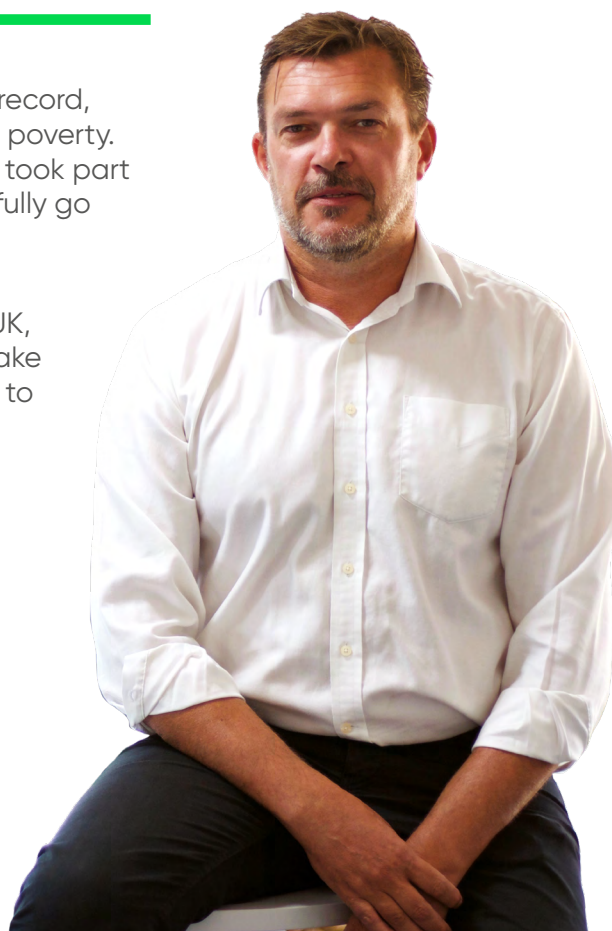
Having been at the epicentre of the UK's grassroots football community for so long, I know that there is one challenge that no club can overcome - and that is pride. Very few parents or their kids would be honest about why they're not turning up, or why they haven't returned for a season, and that is 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.

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.