



**SWITCH**  
**BEFORE PITCH**  
utilita🏠

# STATE OF PLAY REPORT

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

# FOREWORD

## BY DAVID JAMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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## Part one

# How families benefit from grassroots football

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

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

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

### Grassroots football - the community glue

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

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

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

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

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

### Healthy body, healthy mind

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

## Case Study



### Family Benefit

Ray Fiveash, Chairman, Welwyn Garden City FC

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

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

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

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

**Part two**

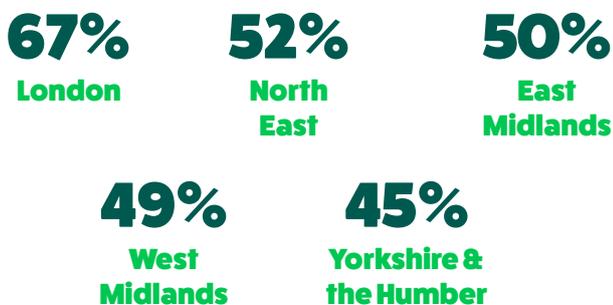
# The impact of no grassroots football during the pandemic for families

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

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

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

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



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



## Case Study



# Covid-19 impact on families

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

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

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



## Part three

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

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

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

Grassroots clubs have seen the following reductions in income:

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

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

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

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

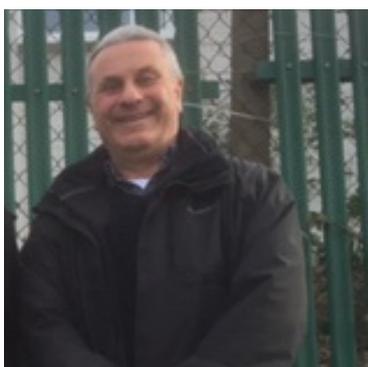
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For many clubs, times had become extremely tough, even before the pandemic. Most struggling clubs said Covid-19 was the straw that broke the camel's back. So, what was causing headaches for grassroots football clubs, even before the pandemic?

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



## Case Study



### Weathering the storm

Mark Hudson, outgoing Chairman, Croydon FC

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

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

## Part four

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

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

### Not enough players or teams

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

Where are players not returning to grassroots football?

**55%**  
London

**35%**  
West Midlands

**34%**  
North East

**30%**  
Yorkshire & the Humber

**27%**  
North West



### Family finances getting in the way of play

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**86%**  
London

**63%**  
South East

**72%**  
North East

**71%**  
East Midlands

**71%**  
West Midlands

### Striking a healthy balance

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

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

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

### Case Study



## The New Normal for clubs

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

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

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

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

**Part five**

# Rescuing the UK's grassroots football clubs from closure

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

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

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

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

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

**Family fundraising**

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

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

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

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



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



## Case Study



## Rescue mission

Gary Maidment, Chairman, Ampthill Town FC

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



### Methodology

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

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

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

**DAVID JAMES**

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

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