



**School of Sport
&
Exercise Sciences**

An Investigation into the current state
of adult 11V11 football in Kent

Keeping Up Participation Levels in adult 11V11 football in Kent

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A report produced by the School of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Kent on behalf of Kent FA

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Executive Summary

A report produced by the School of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Kent on behalf of Kent FA.

1. The Kent FA is the governing body of football in Kent and aims to develop, govern, promote and protect football in Kent. The Kent FA is committed to creating a culture of continuous improvement and working towards higher standards of service delivery to support football in Kent and ultimately provide a positive football experience to everyone.
2. The study investigated and discovered the barriers into the traditional form of the game of football for adults. Highlighting key literature and opinions of the current barriers into the game and perceptions of what barriers may be. Having consulted the key published findings, the aim of the project was to prove or dismiss the current perceptions by ascertaining questionnaires from the target audience.
3. The investigation featured both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was in the form of an online questionnaire. The aim of the questionnaire was to find out the existing barriers that prevent adult participants from beginning and continuing to play football. The questionnaire was primarily focused on male participants but it was answered by both male and female subjects. The sample size was 468.
4. Qualitative data was obtained via two focus groups with club committee members, league representatives, Kent FA professionals, volunteer coaches and participants. Also, qualitative data was aimed at gauging the committee members, club managers, league representatives, coaches and participant's opinions as to what are the barriers preventing participation amongst adult players might be. The focus groups were completed to identify if there was any correlation between the opinions of the club and league managers compared to the general football participant's views.
5. The key findings of the investigation were that four interwoven dimensions contribute to the decline of adult male 11 v 11 football in Kent. These include:
 - Management and provision.
 - Costs of playing and running clubs.
 - The state of pitches and facilities.
 - The game as part of the current lifestyle.

6. Recommendations obtained from the investigation include:

- The Kent FA needs to influence its strategic partners such as leagues to allow flexibility in administration and competitions and introduce alternative shorter and smaller formats of the game, to be more appealing and inclusive. This will ease transition into the 11V11 game and reduce the conflict with alternative formats as it is today.
- Develop better communication with leagues through dedicated members of staff and convey best practices of other leagues and counties.
- Engage with the clubs and make sure they are fully aware of the support mechanisms that Kent FA provides. This can help in preventing them from folding.
- Invest in upskilling clubs and volunteers, by guidance and training to becoming more IT aware in completing their registration processes online, modernise the process of running a club and improving their money management capacity. This will improve the overall management and reduce the burden of costs. This should be done as part of upskilling the volunteers to carry out the registration processes more efficiently.
- Support newly established clubs cash flow by introducing cash dispensation.
- Consult and influence the FA to review their procedures for levying fines and revise their effectiveness in reducing the annual cost year on year for regular football participants.
- Investment in facilities in order to modernise them and make them more appealing for participants to play and train and reduce match cancellations.
- The introduction and implementation of a number of initiatives or incentives to help combatting foul and abusive language providing training to volunteers, administrators, coaches and referees and/or initiatives driven by the leagues such as reward clubs with the best discipline.
- Reward the volunteers and other key personnel that support the game by providing incentives such as free or subsidised training courses.
- Encourage young people and women to get involved in administration of running clubs and other volunteering roles. Perhaps methods such as social media, dedicated web-sites, word of mouth and incentives could facilitate the promotion of roles and the recruitment process.

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1. Introduction

Grassroots football in the UK is arguably one of the most popular sports with the majority of football clubs being run by a large number of a volunteer workforce (Sport England, 2003). Recent statistics reveal that participation in sport, especially in voluntary sport clubs, is stagnating or even declining in Europe. This is also the case with amateur football in the UK which lies in a state of decay, despite its popularity and large volunteer numbers. A recent study commissioned by the FA (2015) revealed that 2360 grassroots football teams have been disbanded over the last five years, while the fall in the number of regular 11-a-side players (aged 16 or over) has been shown to be approximately 180000 since 2005. Additionally, the number of affiliated male teams has declined by nearly 4,000 since 2008 and one of the main reasons for this decline is a desire by many recreational participants to play football with greater flexibility and informality without needing to necessarily commit every weekend for a nine month season (Nichols et al., 2016).

The former FA chairman Greg Dyke's England Commission has also recognized the decline, unveiling plans to breathe new life into the grassroots game, from its dilapidated facilities to its ever-shallow pool of qualified coaches. The commission has undertaken to provide a 50% increase in full-size 3G pitches, which many say will barely scratch the surface at Sunday league level. *'Naturally, the need for funding and modernising of entry-level football has been stated in the context of the England national team, with shrinking contingent of young English players getting regular games at the top-level'* (Telegraph, 2014).

These generally are the problems facing clubs and other stakeholders, whilst at the same time trying to overcome such barriers to restore the county's participation level.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to conduct an investigation into the reasons underpinning the declining numbers of people participating in adult 11v11 football in Kent with the support of Kent FA and within available resources. In addition, recommendations were put forward after the analysis and conclusion from the research in an attempt to try and combat these potential barriers.



1.2 Objectives:

- To provide an overview of the current situation of adult football participation in Kent
- To explore the barriers preventing people participating in football
- To explore the barriers preventing people staying involved in football
- To offer recommendations to tackle the barriers preventing those who wish to play football through potential ways for improving the services provided and for understanding participants' needs and expectations.

1.3 Rationale

As stated in the introduction there has been an obvious downtrend in levels of traditional adult 11V11 male football membership in recent years. Furthermore, despite organised efforts by the FA to conduct research on why there has been this steady fall in the number of participants, these were mainly descriptive. The current research aims to conduct an in-depth investigation as to whether and why people are no longer attracted to the traditional form of football by focusing on only one area of the country, Kent. This will enhance understanding of the Kent football market and will help relevant stakeholders, such as the Kent FA and local leagues and clubs to introduce new ideas to increase participation and sustain the current membership levels.



2. Literature Review

2.1 English Sports System

In England, National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are heavily reliant on funding from the non-departmental, public body Sport England, which sits under the Department for Culture Media & Sport (DCMS). Sport England decides how to invest government and National Lottery funding to help people across England create a sporting habit for life (DCMS, 2013). The sport policy in the UK is formulated at a national level by DCMS, Sport England and NGBs and is subsequently implemented through a network of local volunteer-run organisations (Kay, 1996; May, Harris and Collins, 2012).

2.2 National Governing Bodies

NGBs are non-profit organisations and responsible for the regulation and administration of their respective sport. In the UK, there are more than 100 sports recognised by Sport England (Green, 2008). NGBs of sport remain at the core of Sport England's strategies and sports development objectives which aims to help more individuals in the UK, to undertake a sporting habit for life (DCMS, 2013). Over the past decade, sports councils and NGBs within the UK have been encouraged to professionalise their administrative structures (Walters, Tacon and Ternberth, 2010). For example, eligible NGBs that are recognised by Sport England submit Whole Sport Plans (WSPs) every four years. WSPs detail how each NGB plans to use National Lottery and Exchequer funding to increase the number of individuals participating in their sport once a week (Sport England, 2016a).

2.3 Voluntary Sports Clubs (VSCs)

The English sports system is heavily reliant on non-profit and volunteer based organisations. Particularly local football is principally supported by volunteers as there are over 400,000 volunteers contributing over 90 million volunteer hours each year (Sport England 2003). The local game in England, therefore, continues to attract large numbers of players, coaches, managers, referees and administrators who receive no financial rewards for their time and efforts. Without this longstanding voluntary commitment – almost always driven by a sincere sense of community participation and altruism - the local game in England would struggle to survive on anything like the scale and quality it does today, given the increasingly



competitive markets for leisure. This can also be attributed to the devotion and self-sacrifice of these committed volunteers, who in most cases hold a strong ‘protectionist’ approach to their positions and to the local football landscape. Historically, VSCs have displayed indifference towards national policy and the drive for professionalism is unlikely to align to volunteers’ beliefs and values, many of whom volunteer for their love and commitment to the sport rather than for delivering national objectives (May, Harris and Collins, 2012). Thus, this sort of attachment of volunteers with their clubs can also make the initiation of change and implementation of new policies problematic.

2.4 The Grassroots Football in England

It is argued that participation in the more traditional form of local football in England, that is the male, 11-a-side weekend match has been in decline since the late 1970s (The FA, 2007;2015). This remains a central concern for the FA since participation in the traditional form of the game is the place where the FA generates most of its local income. Some of the main reasons that explain this decline and have been noted in past research include the limited institutional support and associated facilities for the 11-a-side game. This to a large extent is due to most facilities for football throughout England being provided and controlled by local authorities over private businesses since the 1990s (Taylor, 2008). Local authorities however are reluctant to invest in sport and leisure particularly during periods of economic recession, austerity and uncertainty (Houlihan and White, 2002). This subsequently leads to reduced maintenance and groundskeeper staff alongside increased pitch fees to take part in association football. This decline in participation of the traditional game can also be explained by the simultaneous growth of private sector, small-sided football centres and leagues which operate beyond the affiliating control of the FA (The FA, 2004c). The decline in affiliated 11-a-side football can also be explained by a range of social and economic factors. For example, changes in work patterns, lifestyle and increased competition in the sport and leisure industry following the privatisation of provision in most instances and the diversification of the sport and leisure products on offer, including the emergence of the private sector small-sided football centres (Henry, 2001; Sport England, 2004;2005;2006). It is argued that the small-sided version of the game offers a greater degree of flexibility and is much more in line with the contemporary leisure behaviour which demands a wider choice of participation opportunities, shorter time to commit to leisure activities, next-generation



facilities, less bureaucratisation and organisation challenges to take part in sport, cost-effective prices and less travelling time to participate in sport (Coalter 2007; Jackson 2008). The FA is aware of the increased competition in the football industry with private providers of non-FA local football and has highlighted the need to provide greater flexibility in football provision to cater for these diverse lifestyle patterns and consumer needs (The FA, 2007).

There is no doubt that this situation affects the running of local football, since county FAs have to tighten their budgets and deal with this drop off in participation. This leads to competitions and teams either merging or folding and the sharing of facilities increasingly becoming commonplace among clubs and teams (Taylor, 2008). In addition to that, the key voluntary administrative personnel in clubs is increasingly struggling to recruit new volunteers to support the club and the sport, which is a trend evident across most British sports nowadays (Sport England, 2003). Accordingly, the FA in recent years appears to follow a much more corporate philosophy which is in line with its public service remit, shifting from its traditional 'private members' type amateur structure and placing an emphasis from a 'bottom-up' organisational culture to a much more strongly 'top-down' form of managerialism. This is particularly the result of the FA since the 1990s being less autonomous compared to the past and under much more sustained external scrutiny by a wider range of stakeholders, including the British Government and corporate partners. This subsequently led to the FA becoming much more involved in the day to day activities and strategic direction of local county associations, which previously enjoyed financial and decision-making independence (Hamil et al., 2000). Such top-down interventions from the FA in the day-to-day activities of local county associations mark an unprecedented shift in the routine management and organisation of the local game in England. To this end, these recent centrally coordinated reforms by the FA and the challenges the local game is facing raise concern over the capacity of voluntary football clubs and individuals in key decision making positions locally to adapt to such changes, in particular with regard to:

- Local revenue generation for new and renovated facilities and development courses
- The handling of complex cases of ill-discipline
- Adjusting current football provision, including rules and regulations, to meet the new complexities offered by the diversification of consumer needs with regards to leisure participation



- Understanding of the local football market, acknowledge and respond to recent changes in sport participation and social attitudes around sport

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The data collected for this study consists of both quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data “will take the form of numerical values which represent the total number of observations or frequencies for the variables under study” (Collins & Hussey, 2003; p.43).

Qualitative data were collected with the use of two focus groups with players, club managers, Kent FA representatives, referees, coaches and other volunteers and league representatives. Gratton and Jones (2010, p. 286) describe qualitative research as:

“Research that assumes that reality is subjective and uncovers these subjective meanings, experiences and attitudes through words and rich description, rather than measurement and statistical analysis”.

The sample of the focus group consisted of 15 participants. The questions posed to the focus groups allowed participants to go into great detail concerning the reasons why they think adult male 11V11 football is in decline and why people do not continue playing football. All participants have a pivotal role in the operation of the game. Therefore, they are well placed to highlight any possible recommendations and suggest future directs to overcome the decline in participation levels and to attract and sustain participants in this traditional form of football.

The questions posed to the focus groups were semi-structured, which allowed the participants to lead the conversation and highlight any issues that they thought were of outmost importance, with the researcher being there to coordinate the process and bring some structure into the discussion (Gratton and Jones, 2010).

3.2 Analysis

The quantitative part of the data (questionnaires) was analysed through SPSS and graphs and tables were used to summarise the findings and identify relevant themes and patterns.



The questionnaires were analysed through descriptive statistics which estimate means and tendencies as well as frequencies within the sample. In the case of questions that were asked about satisfaction with the current provision of the game, Likert scales were also used since they allow for ranking the responses. The advantages of using Likert scales are that *“They do not expect a simple yes/no answer from the respondent, but allow for degrees of opinion and even no opinion at all”*(Gratton & Jones, 2010).

Focus groups were transcribed and analysed by discussing any correlations and points of interest raised by the respondents.



4. Findings

4.1 Survey

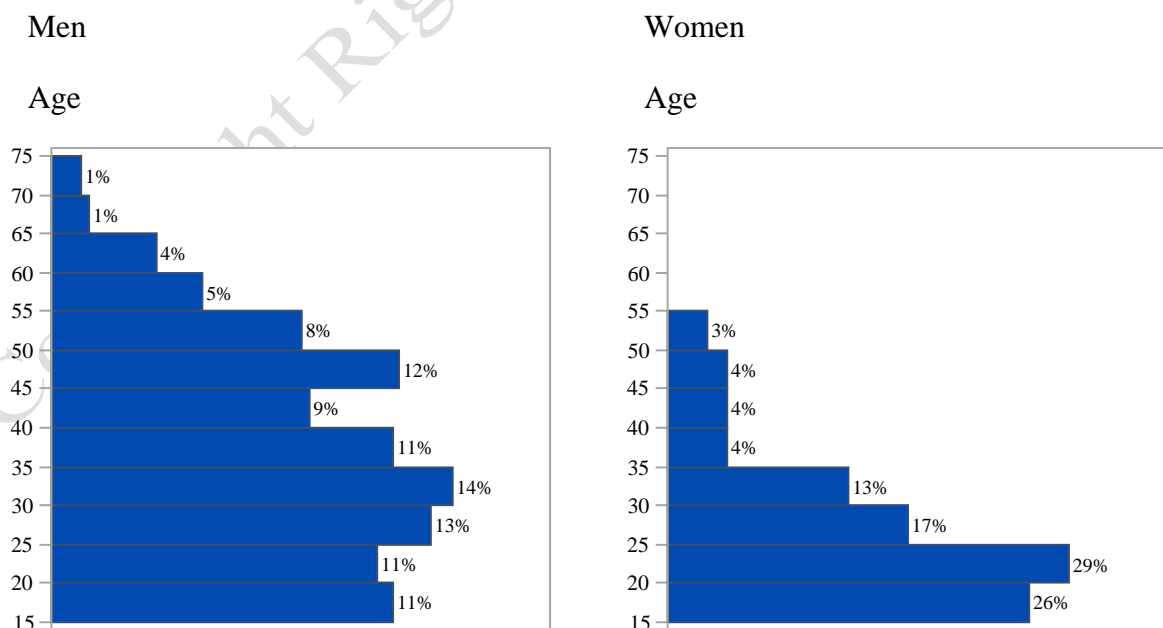
Age and Gender

At closing date, the survey contained the answers of 463 respondents with a gender distribution of 15% woman (70) and 85% men (393). The overall age distribution ranged between 16-73 with an average of 35 (SD = 13.4).

Broken down by gender the age distribution of men and woman in the survey is very different reflecting fundamental differences in participation (Figure 1). Men's mode cohort is at the age range of 30-35 which indicates that fewer people have been joining the game in the last few years. Ideally, the younger the cohort, the higher its share in the population. This would have reflected a healthy entrance of participants at younger ages while some expected drop-offs over the years. Women on the other hand, are much younger on average (26 Vs 36) and their distribution indicates increasing numbers of participants and shorter timespans.

Further differences between the genders are evident in the elder cohorts. Many more men participate in the game in different roles until later ages (above 40). Future work will need to be done to see where women joining the game in the present will tend to increase their timespan as participants.

Figure 1: Age distribution of Men and Woman in the survey.



Levels of participation and roles

Regarding the levels of participation in adult 11V11 in the survey the survey Figure 2 provides the breakdown of participation for men and women.

Figure 2: Do you actively take part in adult 11V11 football at the moment?

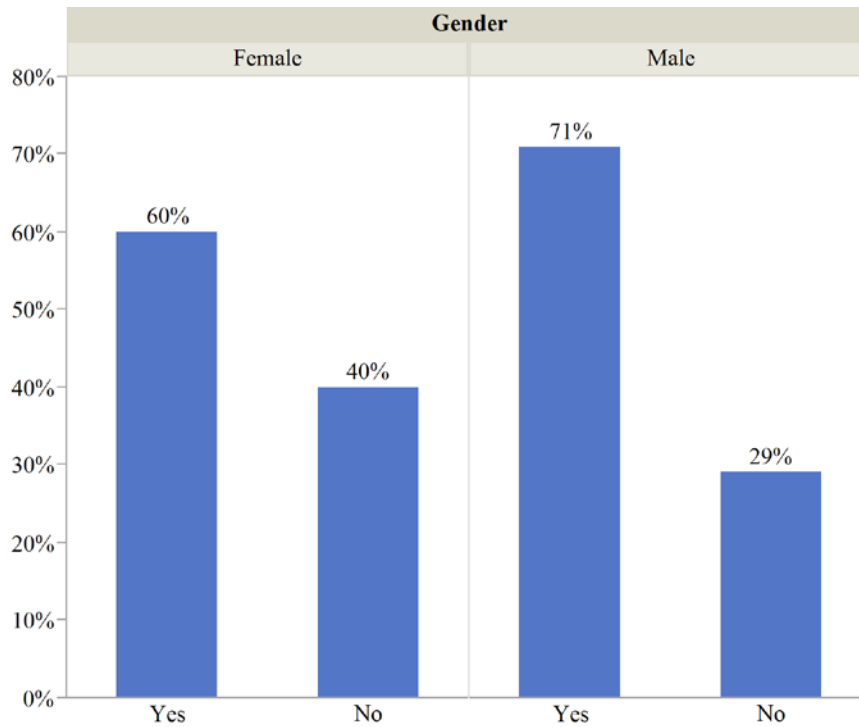
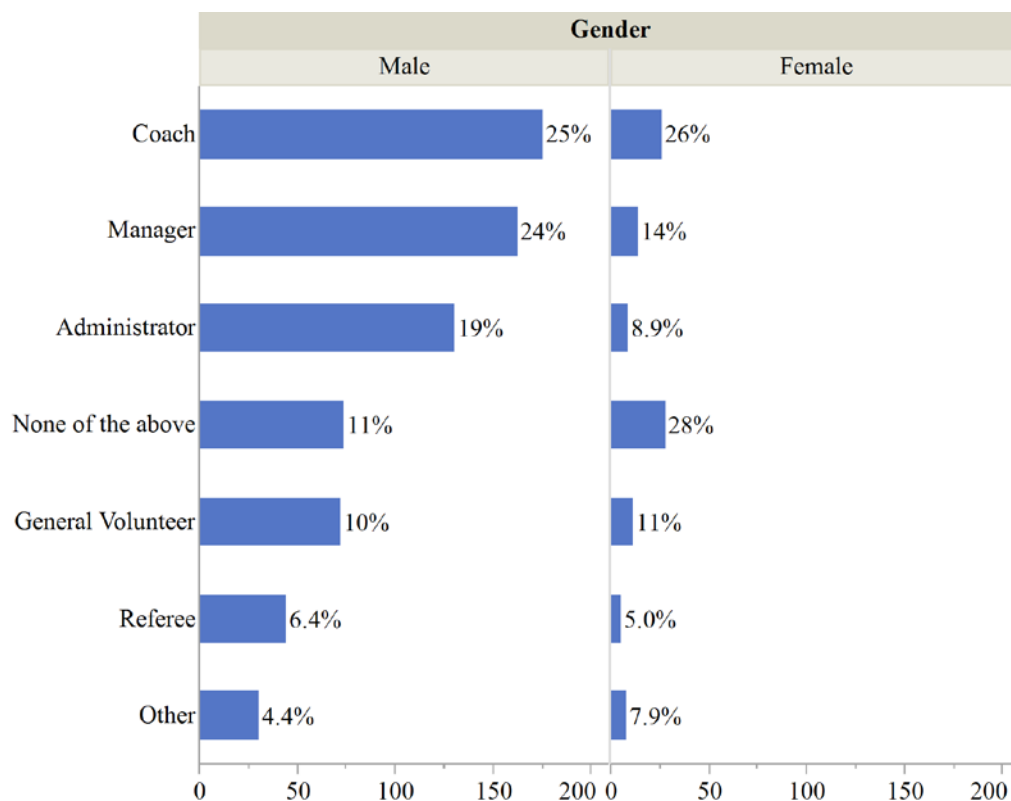


Figure 3 provides the breakdown of the responses we collected to the question: do you have any other roles in the game? Women have a high share of no other parts in the game. Their share in coaching, refereeing, general volunteering are similar, they have lower shares in managing while higher share in “no other role”. Generally women are twice less likely to volunteer in sport compared to men (Sport England, 2003). An implication of this is that more effort should be placed in encouraging women's involvement with the administrative part of running clubs. Perhaps methods like word of mouth, social media and dedicated web-sites could facilitate the advertisement of roles and the process of recruitment.

Figure 3: Other roles in the game.

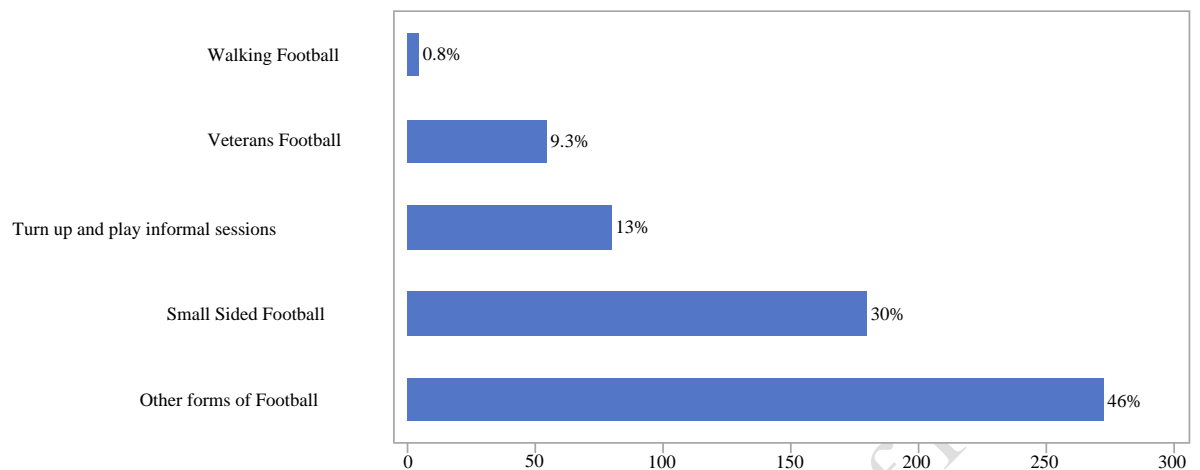


Participation in other types of football is very common among players of the standard (official) 11Vs.11 game. As shown in Figure 4, most participants reported they also play other forms of football while small sided being the single most common category (30%).

This raises the issue of other types of football being an alternative (competitive) or supplement (complementary) to the organised full size 11Vs.11 at the provision level. Deeper insight is needed to identify the strengths of Kent FA in this arena. Perhaps Kent FA can adopt a more inclusive approach to include a wider pallet of options for participants in different types of football. With the correct attitude and the right agenda this should strengthen the 11Vs.11 game while providing a wider base of participants as a whole.

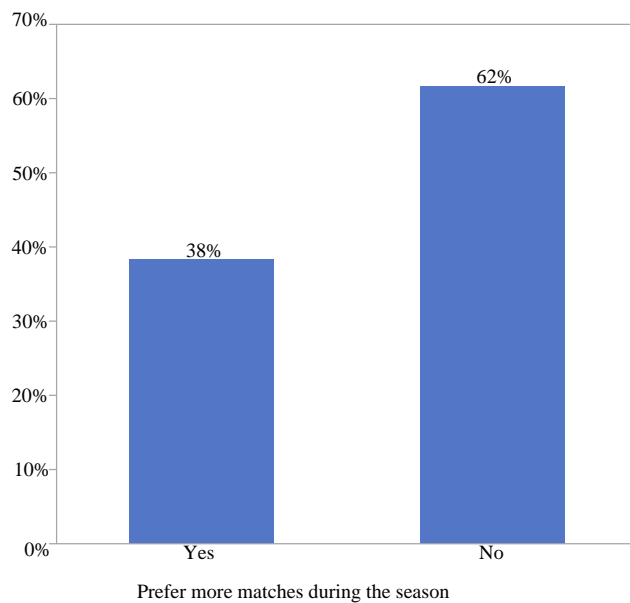
The competition of football with other sports is beyond the scope of the current work. Nevertheless, competitor analysis is needed to identify which other sports are on offer locally, with what other types of leisure football competes and how football clubs can fight competition with the services they provide?

Figure 4: Participation in other forms of football



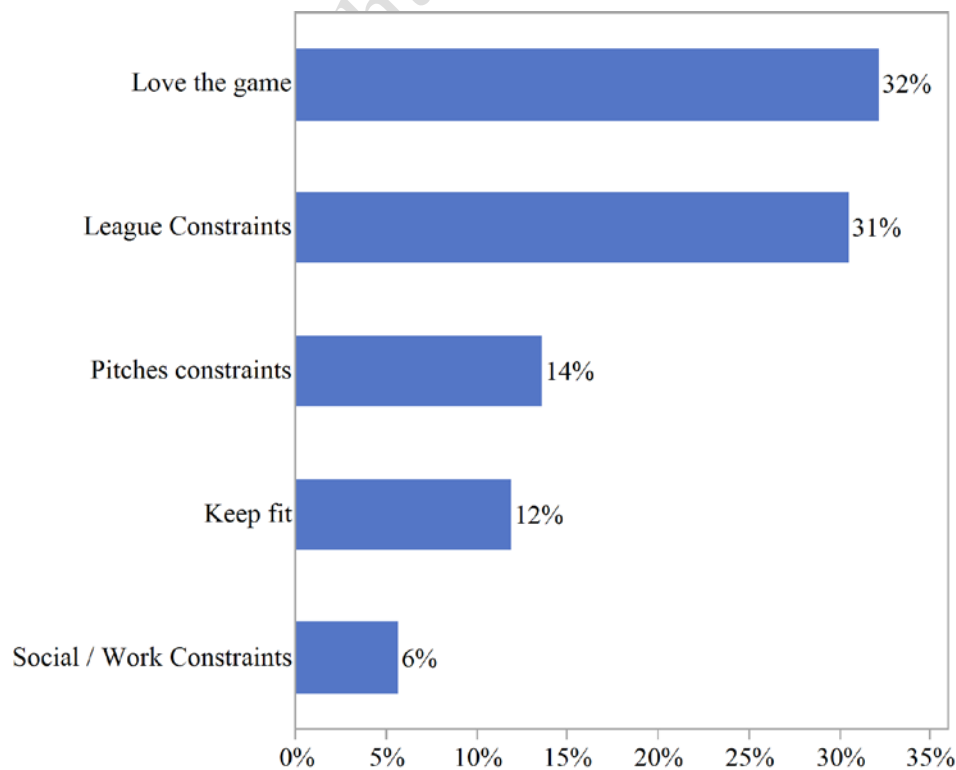
The question of willingness to be more involved in the game shows that the majority of both men and women are not interested (Figure 5). On the other hand, there is still a large share of participants who are willing and therefore, they could and should be offered more involvement. This should also be easier than involving completely new participants. This is inconsistent with the findings of the last national survey conducted by the FA which suggested that overall 75% of respondents aimed to maintain or increase their involvement. Thus, the local context and its distinctiveness should be considered before implementing new policies.

Figure 5: Would you prefer to have been involved in more matches during the season?



As for the reasoning the respondents provided for wishing to play more games just loving the game was the main reason in Figure 6. Other respondents have stressed that league constraints and pitches constraints are imposing limitations that if reduced more games could be played. In this case there was no mention of costs as a limitation for playing more.

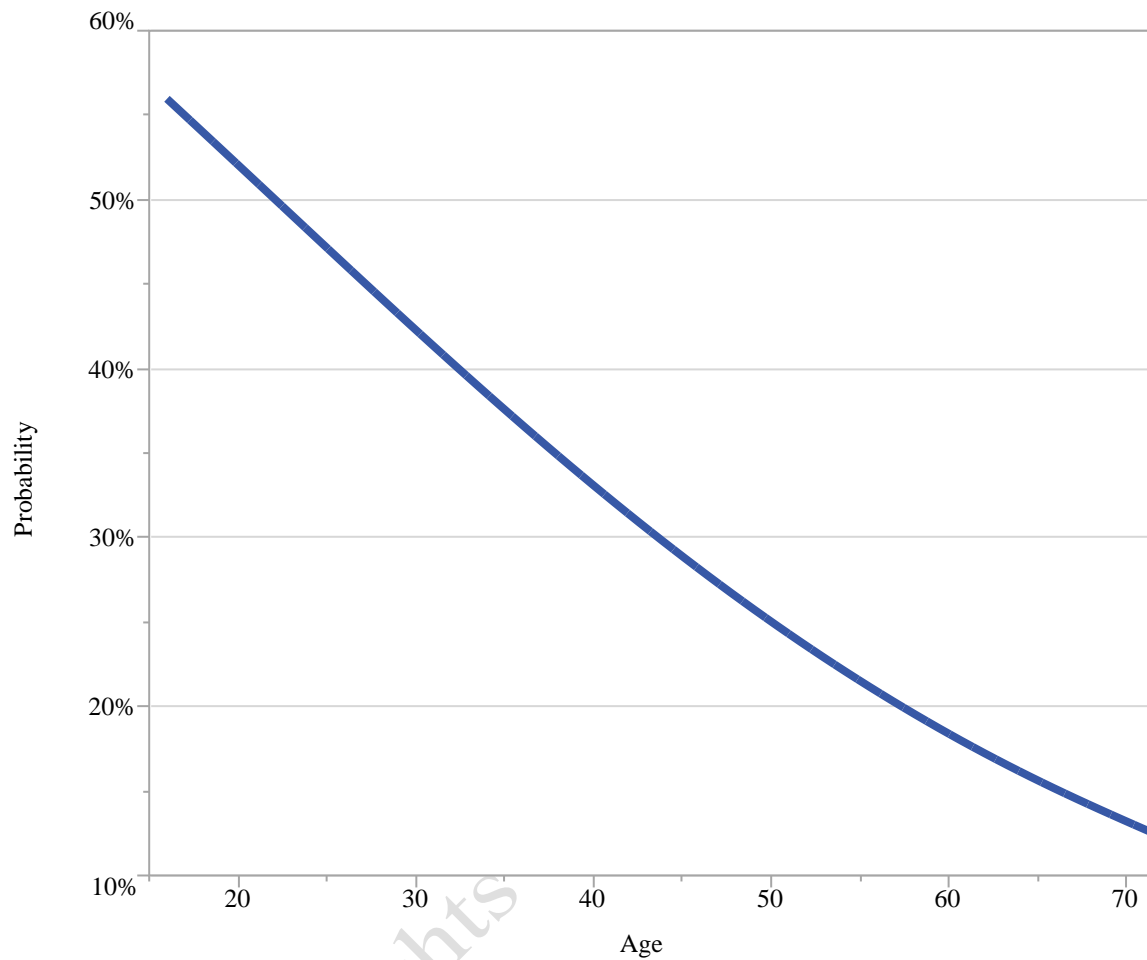
Figure 6: Reasons you wish to play more or limitations



A simple logistic regression shows the declining propensity of the respondents to be more involved in the game as age goes up (Pvalue <0.001). The willingness to participate more in sport declines with age, which is to be expected due to commitments arising from work and family. The time available to people for any non-work activity is increasingly more fragmented and irregular reflecting hours at paid work (Nichols et al., 2016). If people only have brief and irregular blocks of time available it follows that they can only participate in these times. Thus, more effort should be made to keep the younger participants in the game once they finish school and clubs to liaise with local colleges and universities to attract students into the sport. Effort should also be made to sustain the current levels of involvement of older participants and understand their needs. An implication is that older participants need opportunities so they can participate for as much or as little they want, when they want. Strategies and 'products' enabling episodic participation have proved successful in other sports. This is also evident when analysing the data from the Active People Survey (AP1 to AP8) which reveal a steady decline in club-based participation and an increase in participation in informal settings (Harris & Houlihan, 2014; Nichols & Taylor, 2010). Over the period 2009–2014 the sports experiencing the greatest increases in participation were athletics and cycling: sports which can accommodate participation by individuals or small groups, and at a time to suit the individuals. Hence, the great popularity of park runs where individuals know they can participate on any Saturday morning, when it is convenient for them, but at the same time experience the rewards of a mass event. The sport to decline the most is football — a traditional team sport, requiring 22 people and a referee to get together for the same afternoon (Nichols et al., 2016).



Figure 7: Prefer more matches during the season Vs age



Further analysis of this question by gender or participation intensity didn't yield significant differences between segments in the sample.

Seventy five percent of the respondents think adult 11V11 is in decline (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Do you agree adult 11V11 is in decline?

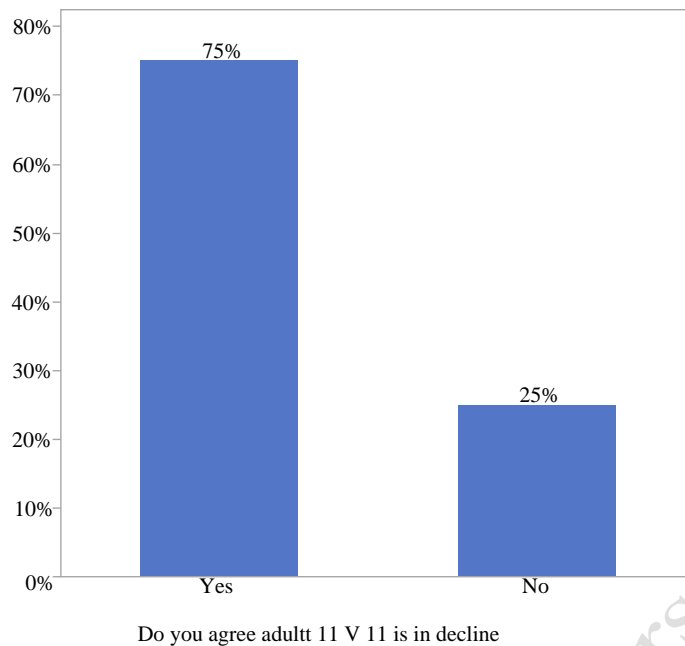
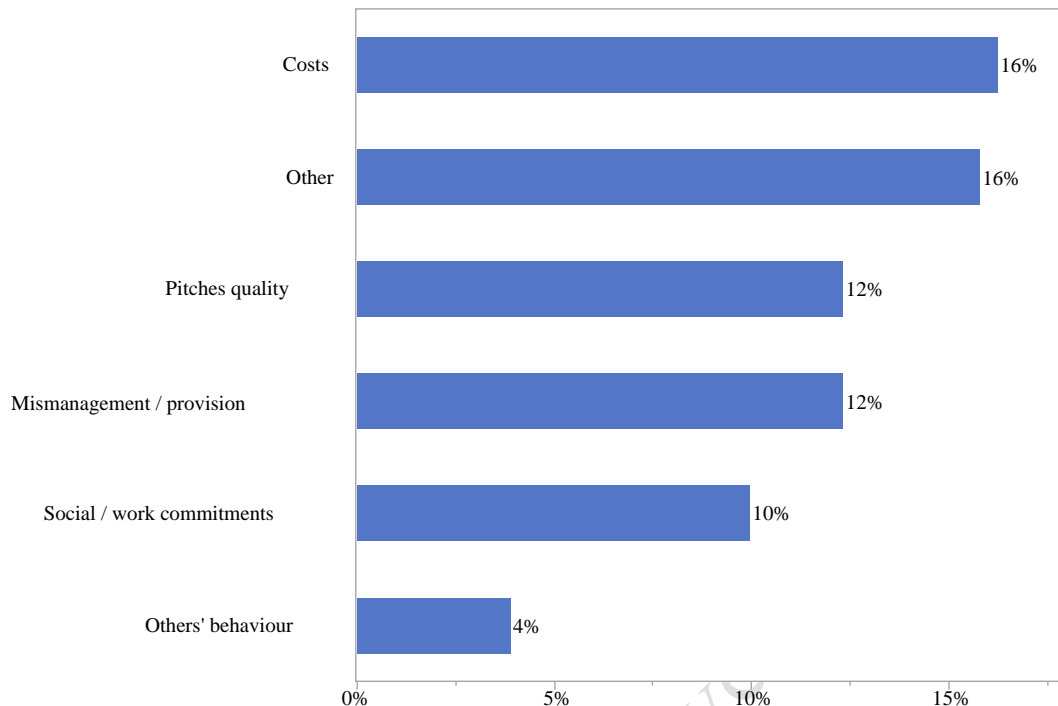


Figure 9 provides the reasoning to those who think the game is in decline with cost (16%) being at the top followed by other (16%), pitches quality (12%), mismanagement/provision (12%), social/work commitments (10%) and others' behaviour (4%). The "Other" category (16%) is mostly visual descriptions of the decline itself such as clubs folding and leagues shrinking.

Figure 9: The reasons you think adult 11V11 is in decline?



With respect to costs some of the comments were as follows:

- “Match fees, pitch hire and even the price of boots and equipment has spiralled! I can see why it's unaffordable for some people. I don't think players get value for money when it comes to match fees.”
- “Finance is a huge one (reason for decline). Just running one adult team (i.e. no Reserve side), our annual club outgoings are over £3,100 on League & FA fee's, kit, pitch-hire, referee costs, line-marking supplies, trophies, footballs, medical supplies, washing powder etc. for kit, and all the little extra's throughout the course of the season.”
- “I think that people have lost the love to play football as an adult, increasing the cost of running a team has caused players to have to pay £5-£6 per week as a minimum and as much as £15 to affiliate with a club.... It's a lot of money for the standard of facilities and also some of the officiating. Cost are far too high and without sponsors u could not afford to run a team.”
- “Yes I do. I think the leagues are too expensive for teams to enter and unless you are an affiliated club with money then you have no chance.”

- “Yes. With local pitches moving away from the council and into private organisations hands, the cost is driving people and teams out of the game. They need to realise that if they lowered the costs then more people would hire the facility which in turn would lead to more profit for them. Pricing people out of the game is no good for them or the players.”
- “Yes. I don't believe the money that is said to be available for grassroots football is being filtered down to all levels/leagues/areas.”

The quality of the pitches was mentioned in the following ways:

- “Grassroots football needs to be looked into in a much more profound way than it is. Facilities need to improve and the aspect of 3G pitches or County wide groundsmen's need to be something to look into.”
- “people don't want to pay to play on s**t pitches and cold showers when you can go play 5s or 7s on 3G flat pitches with good facilities for the same price and don't get fined for bookings or not wearing the right sock tape”.

The aspects of mismanagement contributing to the decline was mentioned in the following ways:

- “Yes, it is far easier, cheaper, less strenuous, more competitive and more enjoyable in most cases to play with Powerplay 6-aside every Monday night at the Community College ...”
- “Far less teams, far less players, Less commitment, far less quality. The shorter form of the games are booming but this is where the lads go to have a laugh. 11v11 is seen as the serious football and too many players do not want the hassle. This is all down to the FA's drive to improve the number of participants rather than the quality and structure of our clubs and game.”
- “By cutting the need for major red tape involved in registering and setting up a club every season, by looking at the quality of grounds and services available on match days and looking at respecting the need for football to be competitive and not disrespecting players with constant fines and minimum ways of appeal”.



- “Yes introduction of another county league has caused the loss of better clubs now taking the opportunity to fill the space left behind devaluing the grassroots leagues add to youngsters’ choice of other sports available to them and the extended educational system and you get decline.”

The theme of social and work commitments as a cause for decline was mentioned as follows:

- “Also weekend working is important to a lot of young players - they cannot resist the wages available.”
- “I think the social, economic and personal pressure on young adults is altered from previous years. I teach in Higher Education and the same is true there, where students are under a much greater set of socio-economic pressures and are often balancing a range of responsibilities and jobs.”
- “The work / social balance is in decline because the weekends are now not ring fenced as non-working or over-time days. Workers now have weekends as a rota to work.”
- “Absolutely. The product on offer is not as attractive as it was 20/30 years ago. We need to move away from the tradition of sat pm or sun am - which means that the availability of different surfaces etc.”

Satisfaction levels

Satisfaction levels with 25 different aspects of the football playing experience have been ranked by the participants in the survey. This allowed us to rank the different dimensions. For the whole sample, the highest ranking dimensions are the overall experience, days and kick-off times, organisation and travelling (3.7 on average on the 1-5 scale). On the other hand, the three least satisfying are the surfaces, pitches and facilities (2.3 on average on the 1-5 scale). Braking down the sample by gender, age or participation intensity did not produce statistically significant differences between the segments in the sample.

We also checked for thematic consistency in the ranking by means of factor analysis. We found two main clusters of questions for which respondents answers were highly correlated. Figure 10 provides the 25 dimensions with the corresponding average rank they received colour coded by groups. The top 14 aspects in the ranking, all receiving an average



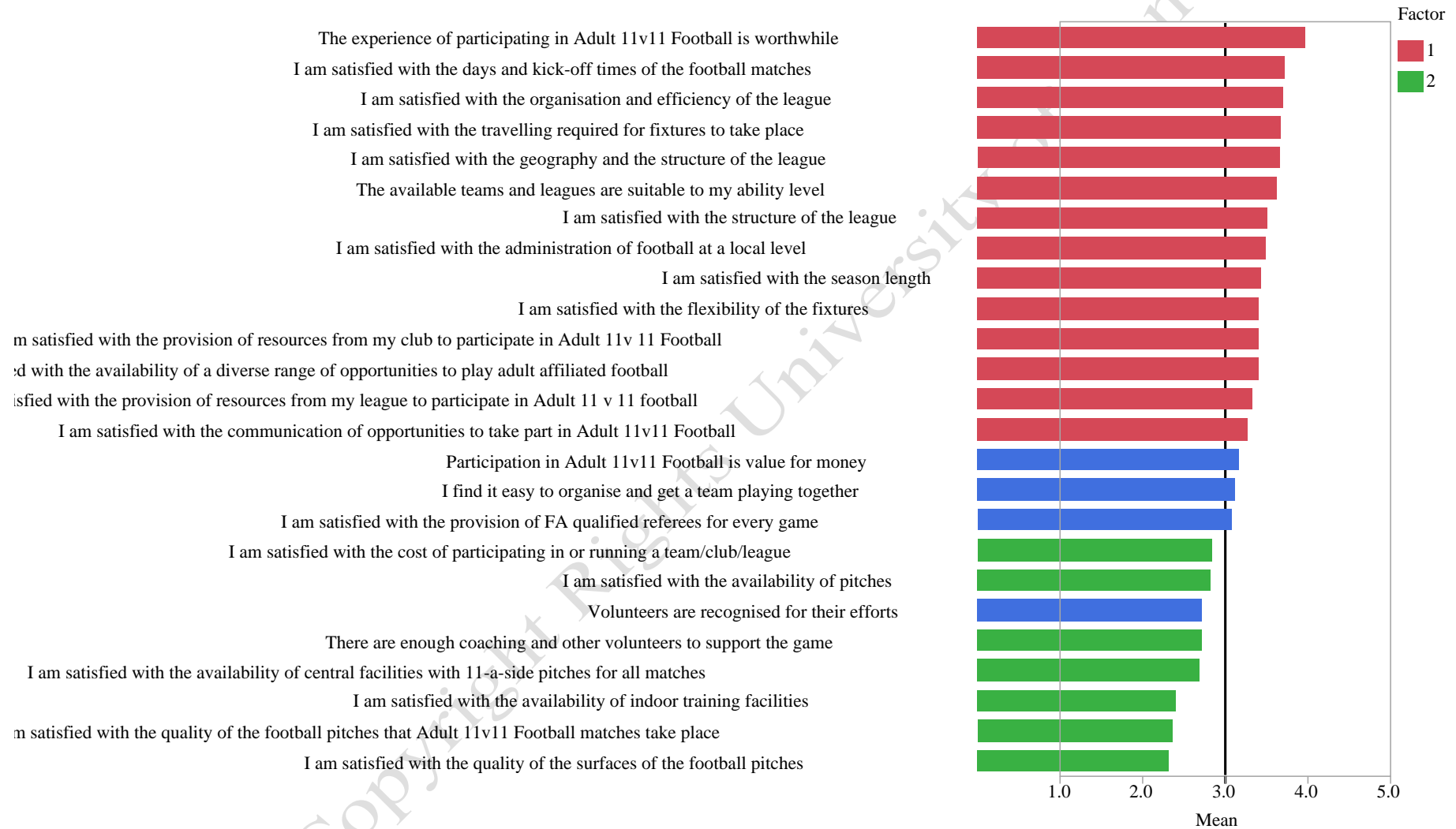
value of at least 3.2, belong to the first group are marked in red. Namely: “I am satisfied with the communication of opportunities to take part in Adult 11v11 Football”, “I am satisfied with the provision of resources from my league to participate in Adult 11V11 football”, “I am satisfied with the provision of resources from my club to participate in Adult 11v11 Football”, “I am satisfied with the availability of a diverse range of opportunities to play adult affiliated football”, “I am satisfied with the flexibility of the fixtures”, “I am satisfied with the season length”, “I am satisfied with the administration of football at a local level”, “I am satisfied with the structure of the league”, “The available teams and leagues are suitable to my ability level”, “I am satisfied with the geography and the structure of the league”, “I am satisfied with the travelling required for fixtures to take place”, “I am satisfied with the organisation and efficiency of the league”, “I am satisfied with the days and kick-off times of the football matches”, “The experience of participating in Adult 11v11 Football is worthwhile”. Substantially, these dimensions mostly deal with management and provision of the game and competitions.

On the other hand, the worst 5 aspects by rank together with two others make up the second group of highly correlating responses, marked in green in the figure. Namely: “I am satisfied with the quality of the surfaces of the football pitches”, “I am satisfied with the quality of the football pitches that Adult 11v11 Football matches take place”, “I am satisfied with the availability of indoor training facilities”, “I am satisfied with the availability of central facilities with 11-a-side pitches for all matches”, “There are enough coaching and other volunteers to support the game”, “I am satisfied with the availability of pitches”, “I am satisfied with the cost of participating in or running a team/club/league”. These low ranking aspects of the game mostly have to do with the quality of the physical facilities and the pitches.

The remaining four statements, marked in blue in Figure 10 were not clearly distinct by correlation with the others and, therefore, do not represent a group of their own using this method. Their ranking is rather mediocre with reference to the other two clearly distinguishable clusters. In addition, it is not clear that they can be classified as a coherent group thematically.



Figure 10: Satisfaction level mean rankings – whole sample



Considered quitting

Fewer than half of the respondents in the survey have mentioned they were considering quitting the game altogether (Figure 11). Their elaborated reasoning was clustered thematically into seven different categories as shown in Figure 12. The two most frequent answers involved mismanagement/provision issues or the quality of the pitches. On the other hand, the least frequent were other participants' misbehaviour and referees' performance. In this context the issue of cost was only mentioned 8% of the times.

Figure 11: Have you considered quitting?

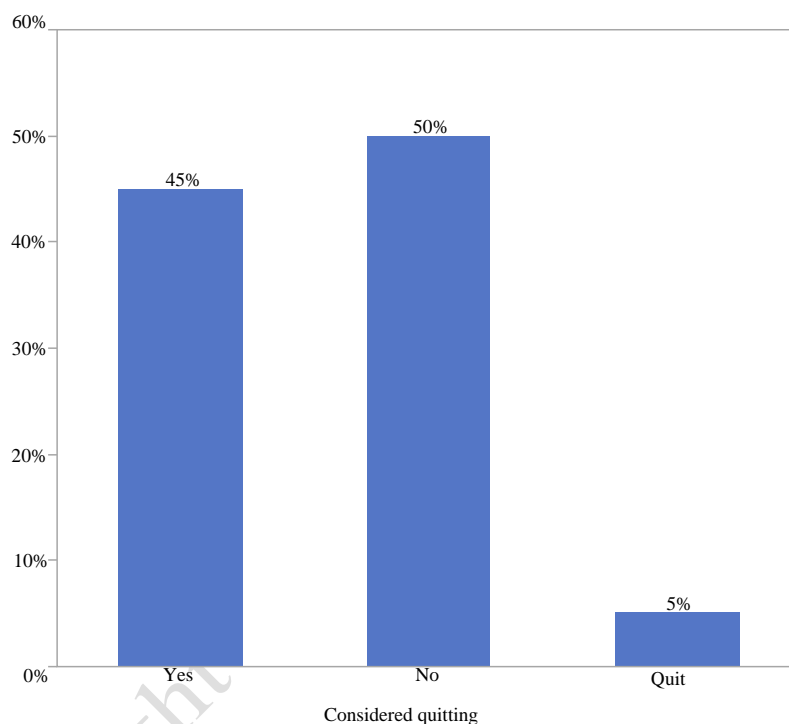
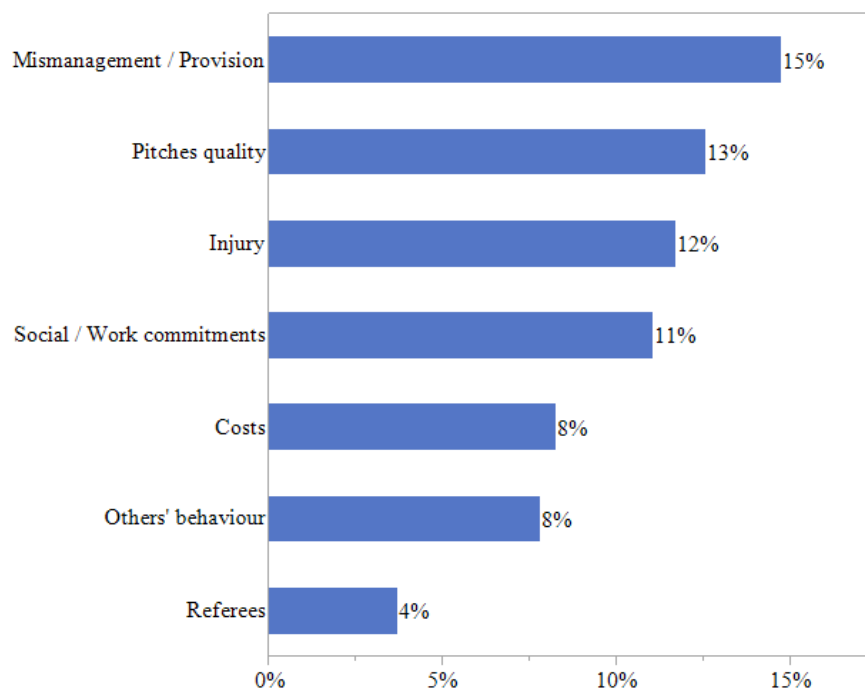


Figure 12: Reason considered quitting



Barriers for others to play the game

The respondents had the opportunity to share their opinions with regard to what they think are the main barriers for others to play the game. Figure 13 provides the distribution of their coded open ended answers. In this case the answer with the highest frequency was cost (47%) followed by social and work commitments (42%). In this case mismanagement/provision (17%) and the quality of the pitches (13%) were not the top issues. The Other category (13%) includes mostly personal fitness and ability, the social status affiliated with the game etc.

The following are examples of the comments on the cost issue

- *“Totally financial, each home game costs us £130... a new kit is easily £600 (you need two)... for players who are un-employed or on low-income, to pay £10 a week (£40-£50 a month) for games and training is just not feasible.”*
- *“Financial first and foremost as facilities cost too much. Secondly our league seem to have fines or charges associated with everything and when publish*

accounts annually they make more and more money each season that isn't reinvested into for example teams that might be struggling financially."

- *"I think financially people can struggle, especially when the finance isn't "pay as you play" and the money debt begins to build up over time. Also I think people find travel a bit difficult especially when teams are close to London."*

In the context of social/work commitments comments included the following:

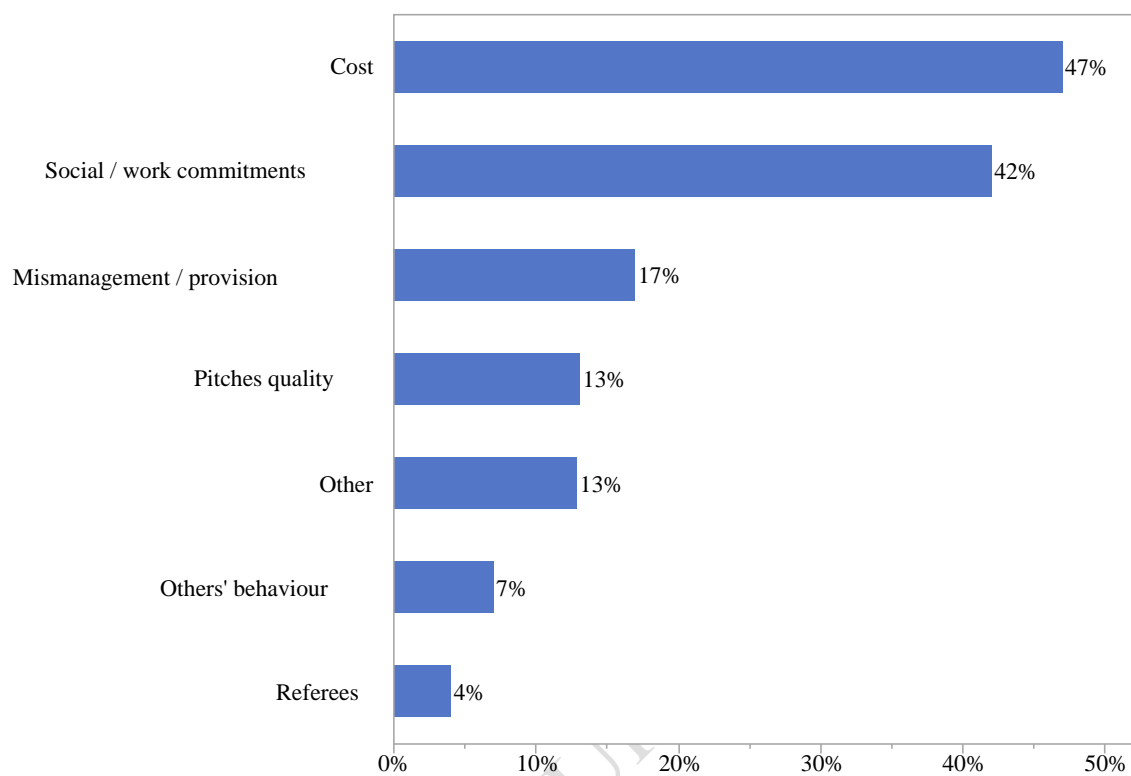
- *"It seems that people struggle with personal commitment and managing their time whether this is for administration or playing. Also players' commitment to turn up on a Sunday morning appears lacking. We have a squad of 27 but struggle to get 11 to turn up on a Sunday morning."*
- *"The main Issue is the Increase in Sunday working which now means a lot of Players have to work Sundays instead of playing. When Sunday opening was an Issue the Players could play every week."*

The "Other" category included the following statements:

- *"There's a perception that only a certain socio-economic strata of society play football. However, it's a cheap past time but all classes need to be made to feel welcome."*
- *"Usually personal, fear of not performing well"*
- *"Fitness and age"*



Figure 13: Barriers for others to play the game



Leagues

The majority of the respondents (68%) think that leagues should improve to make football more appealing as presented in Figure 14. Their detailed open ended responses were coded into five different categories presented in Figure 15. In this case, the most frequent issues mentioned were: management support (21%), help with costs (18%) and improved flexibility (17%). Assistance with costs (13%) came one before last which was a collective of other suggestions. The Other category (13%) included more specific ideas that were valuable yet not easy to aggregate into categories.

Figure 14: Leagues should improve to make football more appealing

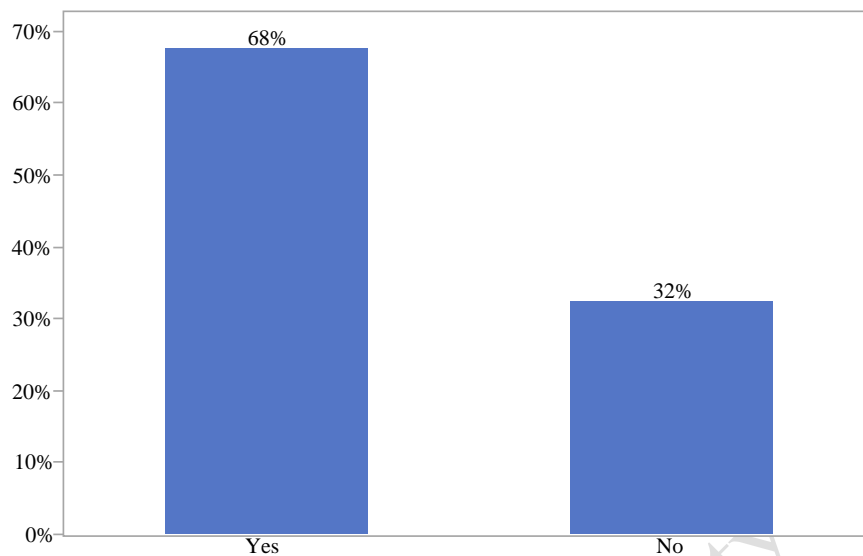
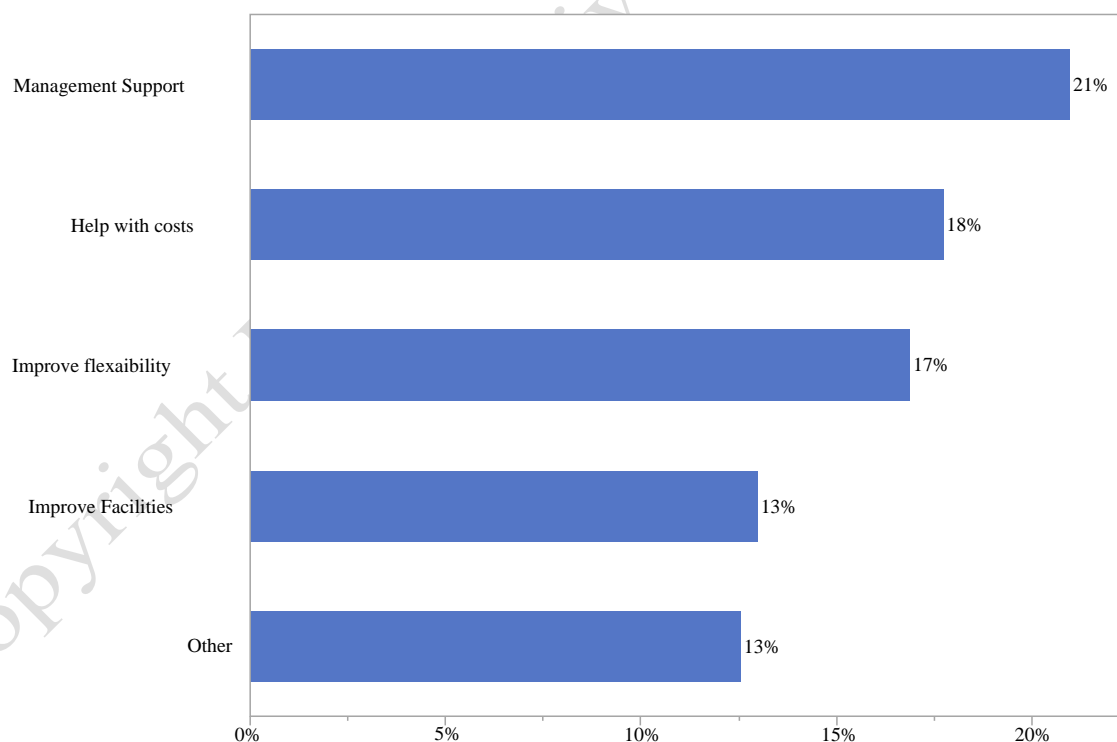


Figure 15: What should leagues improve to make football more appealing?



Some of the more informative comments on the topic include the following:



- *“Have a better organisation of the leagues, understand quality in teams, and place teams in appropriate leagues to help make it more competitive.”*
- *“In certain cases adopt a cooperative approach towards clubs rather than a dictatorial one. Demonstrate motivation, enthusiasm and inspire clubs to become more involved in the administration of a league.”*
- *“Lower league fee's. Give prizes for winning things rather than more costs to clubs. Winning a cup or league means we have to pay additional fees for programs which we don't want and engravings for trophies. Surely leagues should pay for this out of our fees?”*
- *“Help create formats for all levels of ability and commitment.”*
- *“Assist teams with feeder squads. i.e. kids teams to then evolve into adult football.”*
- *“better technology in terms paperwork, better support, better referees”*
- *“Online system for fixtures, discipline, results, communication with players”*
- *“Floodlit midweek matches on full size good astro pitches. More exciting opportunities with leagues - better social media interaction by leagues - updated league tables, statistics, top goal scorers, player of the week, team of the week etc. Help local leagues make themselves more "premier" style with branding, websites, media etc - more appealing to youngsters”*
- *“Maybe to advertise around the local schools encouraging school teams to stay together and join their league. Perhaps there should be a new team starter pack to help players and volunteers start up a new team including FAQ's, do's and don'ts and guidance on how to start in the first place (this may be better for the FA to organize)”*
- *“More teams. Join with other local leagues. For example, I play in the ... and its falling apart, but they refuse to go down the road and join ... more established league with far more divisions and teams”*
- *“Leagues are already hampered by the lack of volunteers - especially adult leagues at regional level”*
- *“Instead of reducing leagues, try to expand them by making connections with youth leagues to bridge the gap between youth and adult football”*



- *“Don't kill the game we love with more FA process and rules! Embrace players and get them evangelising about the game! More social media broadcasts / events! Perhaps have incentives linked to shops if you play in a league”*
- *“More assistance in helping me run a club, for example good quality low cost pitches. Assistance for teams setting up (concessions on kit etc.) Assistance for teams who have unemployed players”*
- *“Try to be more forward thinking and modernise the way admin is run. On the whole there have been improvements in the last 10 years but there is still some work to do”*
- *“Maybe look closer geographically at who plays where, have a league base pitch which hosts weekly games to clear any potential back logs in advance.*
- *“Free to play. Or set up a scheme where league joining fees are reduced or raised based on a clubs discipline throughout the previous season. This would improve respect throughout the leagues as well as making it cheaper for the good guys”*
- *“League rules & regulations differ from League to League, but certainly with the ..., the League rules need to be more club-friendly and sympathetic towards the costs of running a club. I.e. Charging both teams who get to a cup final £50 each for 16 match programmes (a folded piece of paper from an inkjet printer, with all the content in the programme written by officials from the two clubs), and asking both teams to provide footballs for a final (a neutral game), and then say 'tough' when a clubs' footballs in that final get lost in a mass of brambles next to the ground, is a disgrace. Clubs are already struggling financially, yet if a team works hard all season & gets to a cup final, and a match ball or two of theirs happen to be cleared into oblivion by a defender into a tree or brambles, in addition to having to purchase a bundle of 'programmes', that club is easily a minimum £100 out of pocket”*
- *“Locality of teams being close (less time traveling more time playing and getting on with other aspects of life)”*
- *“Cut down the ridiculous over-the-top cost of fines, allow more leniency with fixtures, give more notice with the fixture list (i.e. don't give us a week's notice*



of a game, or release just two or three fixtures at a time so our players cannot plan anything with their families)’’

- *“Reduce heavy handed fines for breaches beyond control’’*
- *“Reduce the petty fines for small admin errors. The club is run in a very tight budget, but a few minor mistakes means a £50 fine, where are we supposed to find that sort of money?’’*
- *“Be more efficient, ours are not good! Results and League tables never updated quickly. But they are volunteers’’*
- *“More interaction with Clubs, other than the AGM the Clubs rarely see the League Officers. It would be nice to see Officers out and about at matches at the weekend’’*
- *“Work more closely with local councils to ensure pitches are better-maintained.*
- *“Not be bias, be more flexible with fixtures (i.e. How can it be fair for a club to give 30 days’ notice for a week off, whereas the league can give 3 days notice for a fixture change?!) Not fine clubs so heavily for petty things - especially when the money is not put to any good use’’*
- *“Could look to be more flexible in kick-off times and look to provide different types of football e.g veterans leagues, 6-a-side under the league banner*
- *“More local games within 20-30 minutes drive’’*
- *“Display fixtures for whole season in advance, be more flexible with kick off times, deal with players with poor discipline more effectively. For example those players that intimidate referees and other players should be reported to the Kent FA by the league and warned about their conduct’’*
- *“Ensure referees are given full assistance and backing in completing their roles, maybe with some better training. Liaise with local league managers regularly to emphasize the importance of respect, expectations with in their roles and ensuring the game is enjoyable’’*



Clubs

The majority of respondents (64%) also think clubs should do more to make the game of football more appealing (Figure 16). The breakdown of their reasoning presented in Figure 17 shows that improving the management/provision (24%) is the most frequent answer. The second category is a cluster of other suggestions (16%), followed by reducing costs (14%) and improve facilities (13%). Closing the list is the request to control others' behaviour better (4%). The Other category (16%) included mostly personal ideas that were not intuitively conceptualised.

Figure 16: should clubs do more to make football more appealing?

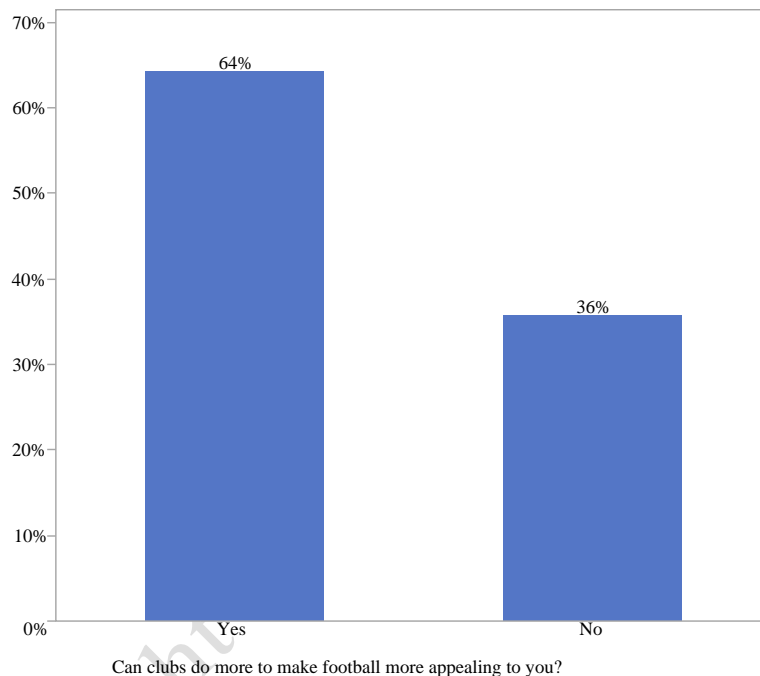
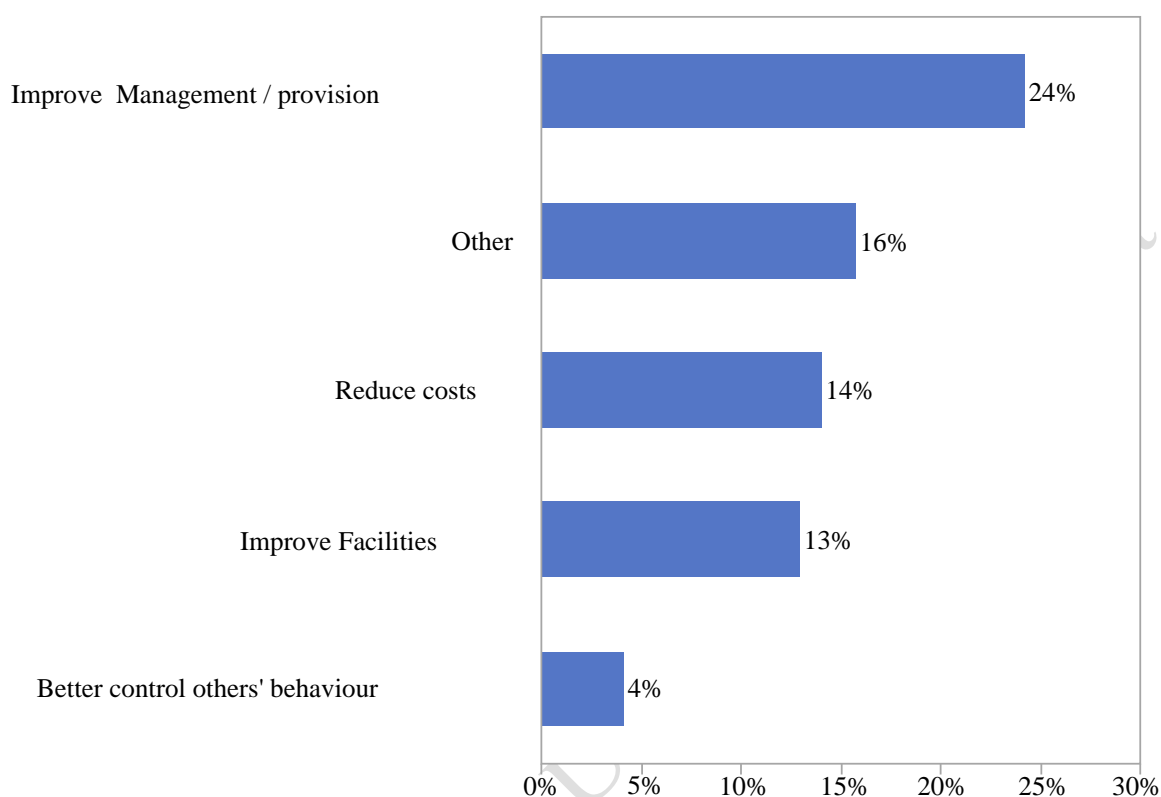


Figure 17: What should clubs do to make football more appealing?



A sample of the more informative responses are as follows:

- *“Ensure that the clubs are run well by making sure the manager has been trained properly. I played for clubs who were really well run and that was due to organised and enthusiastic managers”*
- *“Reduced cost, accessible locations and greater advertising”*
- *“Openly invite anyone interested (advertised on social media) to watch a game/ training session so they can see how it works and find out more as opposed to them personally training and committing straight away, hard for adults to do with work commitments and family etc.”*
- *“Abolish fines for bookings etc., replace with suspensions, reduce costs of pitch hire etc.”*
- *“Better Run - Admin of some clubs is truly shocking.”*

- *“Club spirit has all but gone from grassroots as lots of younger players consider themselves as superstars and clubs should be grateful that they're playing for you. Clubs could eliminate fees (match and signing on) to attract more players but how do the bills get paid?!”*
- *“Times of games to work around family life and or facilities for all the family”*
- *“Clubs are doing everything they can but they are normally made up of a few committed volunteers and small fan base. With limited resources they do a great job just surviving”*
- *“To me as someone who is searching for the players I don't think this question would apply. Clubs are always advertising for players but maybe are only targeting certain groups, ages, abilities. So some fall through the gaps. Many of our players at my club are 18-20 and this is their first ever team. Which to me is surprising as it's not due to ability but maybe financial or social and geographical barriers which had stopped them previously”*
- *“Structured pathway to adult football across different levels. I see too many good players drift away because the gap from youth to senior football is too big and lower league senior football is poor quality for players coming from... youth league”*
- *“Offer similar training/membership style as youth football”*
- *“For my club, nothing really.....is an extremely well run club. We have free to train trial periods for new recruits, we are a very welcoming bunch, we also have a 1st and reserves team so footballers of different ability levels can get a game and are sponsored by a great local pub which we all go to after a match for a few drinks and free food, which they supply”*
- *“I play at quite a high level and have to pay to play - I get no kit provided no physio service and limited opportunity for strength and conditioning - I feel that needs to be something that they look at in order to improve people”*

4.2 Focus groups

Managers and volunteers

The focus group including managers and volunteers has raised the following issues on the current debate: costs for participants and clubs, flexibility of the game, the league and requirements, management and provision, discipline and referees' performance, organisation and administration, and current lifestyles.

On the matter of costs the participants questioned the amount of money they pay for pitches and there is lack of clarity on where this money is being spent as there is no improvement of facilities. Furthermore, the lack of funding available to councils, which affects the provision of quality facilities, was mentioned. It was suggested that clubs should perhaps start sharing the costs. It was also stressed that financial reasons lead also to the decline since it has become more costly to play football.

There is also an issue with fines in cases when a team is actually struggling rather than being aggressive or disrespectful. Teams under stress that fail to show up with 11 players get a fine which is probably counterproductive. With fines being part of the game some find it hard to maintain a monetary "safety net". Raising the funds needed on a weekly basis is hard enough, increasing the regular contributions to cover the fines is almost impossible in many circumstances and only becomes worse when a team is struggling with reduced commitment of its players.

The poor standards of facilities and the limited access to good facilities were also highlighted. Facilities' provision and maintenance is not unique to football but perhaps in this sport they need more looking after than in others. In addition, it was mentioned that there were pitches closing down as councils cannot keep, or perhaps not interested enough in maintaining them.

In this context, it was stated that 3G pitches for all clubs would solve the issue but it is impossible for each club to have one. This is different to what the players' focus group suggested who prefer grass. Lack of communication between players and committee members is evident here, since the latter do not understand the needs of the former or they are not clear about them.



About the lack of flexibility and management the discussants mentioned that the FA constantly sets higher standards but the clubs do not have the appropriate infrastructure (both in terms of financial as well as human resources) to meet these standards. Nevertheless, apparently there are disparities and lack of clear rules and procedures on what the age divisions should be in different leagues. The participants suggested that there has to be consistency across the board for all clubs. Some discussants made the point that procedures and processes are quite bureaucratic and inflexible and there is lack of structure overall.

Mistreatment involving fines and bans by leagues has also acted as a catalyst for teams folding. Sometimes fines require payment by individuals (players) that are not willing to do so. This introduces extra pressure on club management.

People choose sports that are more flexible and easy to keep up with. The culture of society has now changed. There are nowadays more alternatives to play with, more competition and other interests. Lack of commitment is evident.

With respect to current lifestyles it was suggested that the standard 11V11 is now facing more competition than ever not only with other leisure opportunities but also with work and social constraints. In addition, there was a notion that there needs to be some update (upgrade) to the overall game experience, on and off the field to raise participation closer to its potential. Family reasons also contribute to the decline since the generations changed and nowadays there are younger people 18-23 with dependent children.

The issue of different lifestyle choices is raised here. Moreover, it also hints at the lack of flexibility that is evident with the scheduling of fixtures and matches, which for an adult player is not really helping due to work and family commitments.

With regard to the management and provision of the game, participants highlighted a sense of competition between different levels of administration, instead of collaboration, over power, prestige and not just money.

Focus group 2- players and volunteers

This focus group including players and volunteers provided a somewhat different perspective of the game, while considering the same themes. For them, fitness, team spirit and social reasons were the main sources of motivation to participate in adult football.



With respect to costs and finance the issue of sponsorship for a club's viability is raised. Discussants stated that men's football is more promoted than women's football and the girls don't have the same opportunities to participate. Furthermore, the participants stated that the FA invests mainly into the super league, and the league, Tier 3 and Tier 4, don't have any money at all and are completely struggling. The *rolling subs* initiative seems to help picking up the game, as it is more inclusive and everyone has the opportunity to play rather than sitting in the bench. Referee' fees, pitch fees are going up but quality goes down, they are not value for money. It's about supply and demand, as there are not many pitches there is nowhere else to go and play. So raising the standards of what is paid for would help.

Management wise it is down to a few enthusiastic and committed volunteers who give up money and their time to sustain clubs. These particular individuals were praised for their contribution, while there was a general appreciation that this volunteer structure of management is perhaps not sustainable. As for leagues and county associations, lack of common sense was mentioned in a couple of common practices. In addition, lack of flexibility in terms of the kick off times, dates and fixtures are all imposing difficulty for some teams to find available players. It was mentioned that most committee members are elder and that younger people and women are underrepresented in decision making. It was recommended to provide incentives to encourage young people to get involved in administration. This would imply subsidising teams so all means cycle within the game.

The poor condition of the pitches and facilities was also raised and considered to effect the quality of the game that is played. Nevertheless, players suggested that they don't like playing in 3G pitches all the time, as it feels like they are in training and not in competition. So, perhaps children could be allowed to play in 3G pitches to rest the grass for adults as the participants suggested. The risk of injury is also a contributing factor for the lack of commitment as players have other priorities in life such as work commitments. Therefore, the players mentioned that playing during summer is less preferable. Otherwise, pitches are mostly maintained by non-professionals, which doesn't help and maintenance standards should be raised.

For improvement of provision, it was suggested to reward the volunteers by providing incentives such as paid or subsidised training courses.



5. Summary and Conclusions

This project investigated the current state of adult football in Kent by means of an online survey and focus group sessions. In this we covered many diverse interwoven issues that are involved in the practice of the game its management and its provision. It is clear that popular football is undergoing through pressure with both reduced demand and supply is slow to adapt. At the current point of time football participation level is challenged at four interwoven dimensions:

1. Management and provision.
2. Costs of playing and running clubs.
3. The state of pitches and facilities.
4. The game as part of the current lifestyle.

Each of these aspects needs to be addressed in order to bring participation in football up to its potential. The importance of these aspects is ranked differently when considering barriers of entry versus limitation to increased participation and playing.

The following sets of operational recommendations for Kent FA were constructed based on the findings of this project and their synthesis. With respect to improving the management and provision of the game, Kent FA should intensify its relationship with the leagues and clubs within its jurisdiction. This will allow the FA to act also as an agent of renewal by introducing the leagues to best practice innovations locally and nationally.

With the leagues, Kent FA should discuss the opportunities of introducing more flexibility to make participation more appealing and inclusive. Flexibility is needed across the board. For example, to give more freedom to the clubs to set the exact time of their game as long as they report the scores by a deadline.

Flexibility is also needed in competitions and the format of the game (shorter, smaller formats). This also has the opportunity to reduce the conflict between Kent FA and external forms of the game. Offering the variety of playing formats will allow serving the 11V11 game by means of maintaining a larger pool of affiliated participants without other barriers between them.



Communication with leagues should be enhanced through dedicated members of staff at the Kent FA in order to have instant information and to be able to provide better support. This will enable the Kent FA to introduce the leagues with best practice innovations locally and nationally.

As for the clubs and their financial burden, Kent FA should improve its communications to make sure they are all aware of the support and guidance Kent FA can offer. This will improve the opportunity of assisting clubs that currently end up folding. In addition, upskilling volunteers' money management skills by providing guidelines or training on how to manage club finances would streamline the operation overall.

With respect to the burden of cost and financial management Kent FA should be more attentive to the clubs. For example: providing cash flow support to newly formed clubs by introducing dispensation of the affiliation fees over a certain period can help. In addition, Kent FA should consult and influence the national FA to review their fines procedures and their effectiveness. A deeper investigation is needed to verify that fines are achieving their disciplinary targets while minimising the counter-productivity burden in terms of costs and management pressure.

Regarding the pitches and facilities investment is needed not only in new grounds but the management of the existing ones should be improved. This will reduce the amount of games cancelled and improve the experience of the participants.

Kent FA should also introduce and implement a number of initiatives including incentives to help combat foul and abusive language in the game. This could be done by providing training to volunteers, administrators, coaches and referees. Otherwise, incentives should be offered to the best discipline. Furthermore, Kent FA should improve its engagement with participants by promoting its role as the regulator and its contribution to the game in the county.

Since there is a recent increase in women's participation, it is worth considering the potential of widening their lifespan in the game by introducing a veterans' league. In addition, young people and women should be encouraged to get more involved in administration of clubs and leagues. This should improve the representation of these groups in decision making within local football.



To conclude the recommendations arising from the investigation of the current state of adult 11v11 football in Kent are provided below:

- Kent FA needs to influence its strategic partners such as leagues to allow flexibility in administration and competitions and introduce alternative shorter and smaller formats of the game, to be more appealing and inclusive. This will ease transition into the 11V11 game and reduce the conflict with alternative formats.
- Develop better communication with leagues through dedicated members of staff and convey best practices of other leagues and counties.
- Engage with the clubs and make sure they are fully aware of the support mechanisms that Kent FA provides. This can help in preventing them from folding.
- Invest in upskilling clubs and volunteers, by guidance and training to becoming more IT aware in completing their registration processes online, modernise the process of running a club and improving their money management capacity. This will improve the overall management and reduce the burden of costs. This should be done as part of upskilling the volunteers to carry out the registration processes more efficiently all together.
- Support newly established clubs cash flow by introducing cash dispensation.
- Consult and influence the FA to review their fines' procedures and revise their effectiveness in reducing the annual cost year on year for regular football participants
- Investment in facilities in order to modernise them and make them more appealing for participants to play and train and reduce match cancelations.
- The introduction of initiatives and incentives to help combatting foul and abusive language. Providing training to volunteers, administrators, coaches and referees driven by the leagues such as reward the best discipline.
- Reward the volunteers and other key personnel that support the game by providing incentives such as free or subsidised training courses.
- Encourage young people and women to get involved in administration of running clubs and other volunteering roles. Perhaps methods such as social



media, dedicated web-sites, word of mouth and incentives could facilitate the promotion of roles and the recruitment process.

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