

FA SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITIES – SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The background to the research

In 2024, research was conducted by Humankind Research, on behalf of the FA, looking into South Asian communities and their experiences of football.

This research was conducted to help enrich The FA's understanding of South Asian communities and their experiences, with informed, independent, and impartial research so that the FA draw on it as their work progresses. The aims of the research are outlined below:

- Providing enhanced intelligence to guide the FA's work through to 2028, and contribute to how the FA executes its wider EDI strategy 2024-28
- Helping course-correct interventions in-place or planned, that warrant amending, if they are to achieve bigger impact on target South Asian communities
- Informing how FA messaging can be appropriately positioned so messages land as intended with South Asian audiences
- Supporting successful execution of programmes outside of the core South Asians in Football plan

Who we spoke to

The research conversations participants were part of were conducted with ~40 South Asian participants with varying degrees of relationship to football and across every major South Asian community, gender, faith and geographic region. Overall, we spoke to:

- **Parents and Caregivers** of children participating in football between 7-11 years old, with some also caregivers to younger children playing football, too
- **Young Players** between the ages of 12-18 years old
- **Practitioners** at the **Grassroots** level - a spread of coaches, referees, part-time administrators (organizing teams and leagues)
- Individuals working within **County FA organisations**, or in similar **administrative** roles

A note on this summary

Before reading this, it is important to bear in mind that:

- This is a **summary**, so we have not been able to include all the detail in the final report
- There may be learnings cited that **may not reflect everybody's** unique experiences - what we learnt aggregately from across research with ~40 participants from across England!

What we learnt!

There is evidence of what we might call progress, and cause for optimism

Like society, football is now felt to be much more **welcoming** to South Asians but that is **relative**, not absolute – there is still some way to go

Football at the grassroots seems to be becoming more **accessible** to South Asian people:

- It appears increasingly normal to see participation in and with **mainstream grassroots** football (esp. kids, but even adults) and gaining recognition and **progressing** in academies too (though obstacles remain), [as evidence by the FA's participation figures]
- Plus, ongoing and growing participation in **faith/ethnic specific spaces** (e.g., Gurdwara clubs, Tamil league), and schools – both critical safe-r spaces to nurturing footballing relationship
- South Asian caregivers supporting child's relationship in **highly involved** ways e.g., volunteering as coaches / refs – comfort to do so as others do the same

There is also a growing appreciation in South Asian communities not just the game itself, but the **many, wider benefits** to emotional wellbeing, and social and personal development that football

But there are plenty of enduring & new challenges, some of which link to significant barriers

Despite increasing cultural acceptance and love for the game, South Asian communities continue to face challenges...

- **Cultural and institutional biases** can negatively impact inclusivity in spaces where South Asian communities engage in football
- This is often driven by football's **reluctance** to make the game **more accommodating** to key South Asian groups, as well as the endurance of overt racism, often in mainstream spaces
- Some can feel **unsafe, unwelcome**, and having to **prove themselves** to gain recognition
- For players and talent, a subtler but more prevalent form of discrimination also persists: several South Asian players cited experiences of professionals **appraising** their skills through the lens of their **ethnicity**, suggesting their **talent is lesser** because of this, which can lead to feelings of **loneliness** and **stifled progression**
- There are still significant **barriers to reporting discrimination** for South Asian communities, e.g., fears of discredited experiences or re-traumatization make reporting discrimination in an imperfect system hard
- A sense that grassroots is not **accommodating** of **faith-based practices** including religious dress, clashes between match times and cultural commitments (e.g., prayer time, fasting) which reinforce the perception of 'not for us' – alienating and undermining inclusivity
- Overall, a sense that football is still **especially unwelcoming** for those with visible markers of faith (e.g., Sikh men facial hair or the dastar, Muslim women who wear the Hijab)
- **Nepotism** and a **lack of proactive inclusion** from white majority caregivers is still evident, with the effect of making it harder for South Asian caregivers to **integrate** into mainstream spaces and support their child's relationship to football
- Unsurprisingly, those with the **weakest relationship** to the game and culture of football often feel **least comfortable** in football spaces and are least exposed to the wider benefits
- For administrative and practitioner roles, **limited representation** and **support** means there is limited incentive to pursue these paths, thus making boosting representation harder
- Females in football face **gender-based** challenges, yet South Asian females face **additional barriers**, even in school – a key space for fostering a positive relationship to sport

- Some female players spoke of how **cultural expectations** placed on them delayed their entry into football - leaving them on the **backfoot**, and **less comfortable** in mainstream spaces

To support progress and address challenges faced by South Asian communities, this research points to several areas of focus

Each of which map to a different level at which The FA *may* be able to play a role

