



University of
Reading

Football Experiences

How football has impacted lives in Reading



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Many thanks to our interviewees, who so willingly shared their football stories

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1 Introduction

1.1 Football as a bridge to wellbeing and development

This report begins to explore how people in Reading experience football. It sets the scene for a much larger citizen science research project, which intends to investigate the use of community football as a transformational space for tackling poor mental wellbeing and social isolation in Reading. Such an initiative stands on broad shoulders – in recent decades there is a fast-growing evidence base that supports the use of physical activity across the range of mental health problems. (Mason, and Holt 2007, Carless and Douglas 2008). A trend not without some tension between clinician-based doubts about the lack of explanation for clinical change after exercise and those who reject problem focused diagnoses in favour of community-based activity (Callaghan 2004)

A general conclusion here suggests that qualitative methods hold the key to a better understanding of the effect of exercise on life quality. Mason and Holt's analysis of the Coping Through Football project – a London based multi-agency partnership – noted benefits in breaking isolation, safety through mutual support and belonging and how loss of a sense of self and previous held identity was recovered by revisiting the past in football (Mason and Holt 2012). The shift from mental health services enabled 'patients' to 'get out from under' a diagnostic label and join with others on a common platform of team-based sport (Robinson 2019).

The recruitment of men with mental health difficulties lacks investigation; an issue that is mostly resolved in the context of therapy via football by involving professional football clubs – usually Premier League sides (Crompton 2016, FA 2011). Some have suggested a 'stepped approach' where the first step is self-help to manage symptoms before resorting to a therapist (Rapee 2017) – an American suggestion for adolescents with anxiety.

Men are more resistant to lifestyle changes if there is an association with a football club. Clubs meet male needs and are familiar and non-threatening – they emphasis health not illness (Pringle 2009 and Pringle 2014). Others are more cautious about working with professional football clubs (Meier 2008) and look to a more political understanding of how these clubs operate. A caution that extends also to use of IT and media links (McLean & Wainwright 2009) who examined the impact of digital culture in football suggesting that empowering football fans and supporting their greater participation in their clubs is undermined by 'surveillance, ownership and control'. According to the player and manager Jack Charlton, 'Football and democracy don't mix'.

Football can bring people together in acts of solidarity and togetherness – reflected in the Anfield anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone' (McKeown, Roy & Spandler 2015). Therapeutic benefits can accrue by utilizing more collective and solidarity enhancing initiatives. More supportive social relations in football contrasted strongly with the more distant relations in mainstream mental health services. Health problems in a community can be met in partnership with other agencies and football has a capacity to bring people together from different backgrounds and ages (McElroy 2008). Although for those with learning difficulties any support offered need to be carefully considered within a mix of interventions (Hudson 2018).

Football lends itself to therapy being inclusive, having broad appeal, and providing opportunities for social engagement on a variety of levels. These qualities, and particularly the opportunities both to connect with people and to deepen trust in relationships through give-

and-take, are key to personal wellbeing and also to building a supportive and empowering community (Zischka 2019).

The proposed research initiative focuses on Reading and its disadvantaged communities - particularly on young people's voice and wellbeing. We are reminded (Marmot 2015) of the dangers of a sole focus on diagnoses and labels rather than targeting the community as a healthier place for youth to live - there may be a tendency to focus on the research rather than the community. And community resilience, as a capacity to bounce back from adversity, is the quality required to address wider social failings and inequities - starkly apparent in some Reading locations. What is suggested is a strong coalition of community people and agencies brought together through football.

Using citizen science to help uncover links between mental health and wellbeing needs a move from a 'disease' model to a 'psychosocial' model (Kinderman 2014 and 2018). Help should be tailored to each person's unique needs - care rather than concern, therapy rather than medication. It is suggested that our wellbeing and our mental health are not opposing poles of a single continuum - for instance, low levels of wellbeing do not necessarily cause mental health problems. The relationship may be asymmetrical.

However, to present mental illness as something that occurs in individuals divorced from their physical and social contexts is a major challenge not least to policy makers. 'Without action to minimise poverty and social inequalities which cause and worsen distress, effects of psychological treatments are at best short lived' (PSC 2016).

The proposed methodology builds on a substantial body of community-led participatory action research in action research partnerships with a highly diverse membership - comprehensive and inclusive coalitions (Lloyd-Evans et al. 2018). The research methods reflect a mix of more traditional participation such as focus groups and case studies but also a unique recourse to use of games, construction activities using giant Lego blocks, community panels, young researchers, life history and community events such as fun days. Others have explored similar methodologies (Carless and Douglas 2011) using a narrative approach that prioritises personal experience and illuminates its meaning. It is personal but also social in attending to the socio-cultural context.

1.2 Collecting football stories in Reading

This report opens the conversation on how people in Reading experience football. It is noteworthy that our research team met with immediate interest in this project from local people, with football being found to engage and enthuse people (particularly boys and men) from a wide variety of ages and backgrounds. The contribution that football makes to wellbeing, and the stepping stone it can provide to profound personal and social development was borne out in the stories we collected.

13 different stories or points of view were recorded by local residents. Minimal direction was prescribed to the conversations in order to allow people to express whatever came into their own minds when they thought about football. In these cases, the conversations usually centred on a particular theme or story. Other conversations required a little more structuring in order to draw people out. In these cases, open questions were posed on what football means to a person, how the game has changed over time, and how football has impacted the respondent and their community (including different social groups such as different genders and different ages).

Two of the 13 respondents were mothers, talking about the impact of football on the lives of their sons. Two other female respondents talked about on their respective father's passion for football and the role that football therefore played in their families whilst they were growing up. A female teacher spoke about how social distancing under Covid-19 had affected the game for primary school children.

Besides these five interviews with women, eight interviews were carried out with young men/men. Four of these interviewees were teenagers (white-British and Asian-British), who described what football meant to them personally. The other four interviews were with male adults. One was involved in a grassroots football club and focused on the impact of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown on the running of this club. One was currently a young football coach in a school, but talked more about what football meant to him as he was growing up. The other two covered a range of subjects but particularly focused on how football promotes community and how social interactions under the pressures of the game can bring out the best in a person. One of these was a younger man and the another a football enthusiast in his 60s who had former experience of being a captain as well as former experience of managing grassroots football teams.

Two of the teenagers and one of the adults were sons of the mothers who had given their side of the story, and so in these cases one story could be viewed from different perspectives. In this way we could record various experiences of football from the mouths of ordinary people in Reading, including both genders and a wide spectrum of ages.

Reading FC and its influence on town pride over the years was not a subject of this report. However, it is notable that Reading FC got mentioned by several interviewees and appears important to at least some of the local footballing community. One person reminisced on watching the team with her Dad, grassroots clubs maintained a connection, and there were testimonies of the club's pro-active engagement with a range of Reading's young people.

2 The interviews

Findings from the 13 interviews are now drawn together under themes. These themes cover:

- (1) The beautiful game: Comments displaying a widespread passion for the game and describing the joys and benefits of participating;
- (2) Personal development: Comments describing how football has been the medium for the development of character and confidence in a person, how it has aided their physical fitness and also how it has been used as a point of connection from which children have crossed the bridge into learning.
Having said that, football is a team game, not a personal endeavour, and it is the *social interaction* that makes these personal developments possible.
- (3) Social connections: Comments on how football connects people were grouped under three headings. Firstly, connections within family - how football has helped to shape family identity across the generations. Secondly, connections amongst peers – how football has helped people to develop friendships. Thirdly, connection between different social groups – how football provides a point of contact.

Each of these themes has its own section (2.1, 2.2 and 2.3). Mention was also made of changes in football over time, and these comments are now grouped together in the section 2.4. The changes were not so much in the game itself, but rather in media coverage and in the experience of watching it. Changes because of the lockdown were also described, and finally, women's football was commented on being a relatively new development.

The chapter ends with four complete football stories /case studies in section 2.5. The key points are later drawn together and summarised in section 3.

2.1 The beautiful game

Football ignites the passions; it generates a thrill that is all the stronger because of being *shared*. Some people commented on the joy of playing and pride in players.

A male adult said, "The moment of release when your team scored was ecstasy. You could feel the ecstasy in the ground, you could feel emotion like you have never felt emotion before, a thousand people rising as one with joy."

A male teenager said, "When we're playing football together and when we finally win a match there's a strong sense of joint happiness or enjoyment, excitement that we won the match."

When asked how you feel when you play, a second teenager said, "you feel passion."

Moreover, a story from a mother and the testimony of some of the teenagers demonstrates what a large amount of *substance* football can add into a young person's life. It can even be their main thing.

A mother, speaking about the impact of football on her boys, said, "As soon as they could run around my boys were kicking a football around ... We started with Mini Kickers, and Summer Football camps, where they got the chance to meet ex-Reading players. When they were old enough, they signed up to play for a local grassroots team ... Over the years the boys have obtained medals/trophies ... Thanks to the club they are both with now, they have experiences in league promotion, runners up in the league, penalty

shoot outs in cup games and also being a partner with Reading FC, they have been flag bearers and also had penalty shoot outs on the pitch at Reading at half time ... A trip to Old Trafford last year for the boys was a dream come true for them and also seeing the 1999 squad play football was amazing ... Even when they boys go on holiday, they take a football! ... It is great to see my boys see their coaches, friends, and to see their faces light up when they play football and their red faces because they have given 1,000% to the game."

Her teenage son affirmed, "Football has crafted my life because it's all I do."

A different teenager said something similar – football being the one sport he did: "I would say that as a child I loved playing football and it was the only sport that I played until I started secondary school."

Team connection is also uplifting making football, in the words of one teenager, "more than a game."

This teenager said, "A lot of people who don't play football just say it's a game - you just kick a ball. But at the same time the whole team spirit in it and playing for 90 minutes, having to rely on other people, I think is pretty good and I feel like it's more than a game."

Later in the conversation he added, "Football brings people together – a way of life at this stage. People wouldn't survive without it. The football community is its own thing."

The way that the football community provides a sense of identity and can help a person develop is enlarged on particularly sub-section 2.2.1 and the whole of section 2.3. Comments were also made about how playing football has helped to keep a person positively focussed in hard times; a point that overlaps with theme 2.2.1 on personal development.

A male adult, reflecting on his childhood experience of football, said, "My mum got fed up with me kicking cans in the street, footballs over garden fences and upsetting the neighbours, so she signed me up to a club. I enjoyed the training, camaraderie and regular exercise. I was also diagnosed as a diabetic at this time so when I was really down it gave me something to focus on. I had a good luck card signed by Reading Football Club/Team (which I still have today) and Manchester United. This meant a great deal to me and my family."

A male teenager commented, "[Football] makes me happy, gives a rush and helps distract from other things in the world."

Football also helps people to get out and about and active and meeting people as this teenager wrote, "Now-a-days you find that people my age generally stay indoors unless they are going to do a fun activity so it helps people get out and meet people face-to-face."

Football was found to resonate with everyone we talked to on the subject and especially males. A very wide range of people had engaged with it to a greater or lesser extent.

2.2 Personal development

Three aspects of personal development were mentioned: building character, building physical fitness and also linking football to learning - helping some children to cross the bridge from one to the other. These three points are treated in turn (sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3):

2.2.1 Building character and confidence

A male football enthusiast in his 60s (with past experience also as a grassroots team captain and as a manager) gave a lot of information on how he felt that team interaction when playing football is able to bring out the best in people. He cited the film, 'Dead Poets Society' at the point in which the English master asked the boys why we play football. The point he made was that

"In football, others can bring things out of you that you cannot bring out of yourself."

His point, illustrated in the following examples, was that football enables personal development. The *team interaction* helps *you* as a person.

This interviewee's *first* point was that football is a "bridge to get close to people and to get some friendship out of a world that is quite lonely." It is important to note that the social aspect is *primary*, (and is also what makes personal developments possible), but for the purposes of this report the social aspects are treated later on in section 2.3.

In terms of *personal* development, the interviewee made a point that football is a place in which people can let their feelings out.

"I think they engage with it as a chance to actually let their feelings out. For example, if you got bad backgrounds and you've got a bit of anger, it's a chance to let the anger out. They engage it as a chance to try things out, to test themselves."

He felt that football is therapeutic – it provides an opportunity to be brave and make sacrifices. Confronting challenges together with others was felt to be unforgettable and helpful to bonding:

Talking about bravery he added that you, "share dangerous, risky experiences when you're playing against very thuggy teams." He gave the example of a friend being picked on by the opposing team and said, "in football you have a chance to intervene. Now as a bloke there are very few chances in life to be brave, really brave, not the sort of brave by being vulnerable but really brave putting your body on the line and biologically there's a lot of evidence that it helps them feel like a bloke if they actually have a chance to be brave."

He expanded on how football offers chances to make sacrifices for one other telling this story: "In one memorable moment, I'm with the ball and I make a mistake. So I slip or I give the ball to the opposition and the opposition player is running at our goal and is likely to score, so I am guilty and fearful of what will happen next. Then out of the blue everyone on the pitch saw 'X' sprint faster than you can imagine anyone could sprint - busting a blood vessel – in order to get back and to make a goal saving tackle and it wasn't mainly for the team - it was for me. So for blokes again there is so little chance for someone to actually do something for you. We don't operate in that sort of world but in a football game you make a mistake and your friends can cover for you ... without you asking, they do it ... It stays with you."

"You share the despondency when you lose, you share heartbreak. You have a chance to build up someone else if they make a mistake if they were the one that missed the penalty. Again, where else in life do you get a chance to do that at the moment it happens - not ten years later in some physiotherapy thing, but the moment it happens you've got a chance to be there for that person, to be alongside that person and they never forget the people that were there at the hardest time, emotionally the hardest time of their lives."

He felt that this level of sharing over time, including the good times and the bad, allows people to get to know each other on a level rarely experienced elsewhere.

This is where people "see how you operate ... what are your life values and life weaknesses ... real heart, real depth ... For me personally it's an opportunity to rely on God and people see it." Because of this depth of interaction, he felt that football, "can change people at the deep level - heart and mind ... this is a place where role models can stand tall."

He said that football helps people to learn the importance of sacrificing short term ambitions for the team and for better relations long term.

He explained that whilst football is tied to the competitive nature of many men, it also offers, "a place to learn to value the team over your own ambitions ... blokes actually choose to put someone else first and actually find that in the long run everyone wins." He gave this example, "You could go on and kick someone else off and take the position week 1. But 6 weeks later when you need that person, they're no longer coming to training ... you ... understand the behavioural dynamics of interrelations ... there's going to be real outcomes later on in the season." He concludes that football "has changed me because I started to understand the long-term repercussions of my interpersonal decisions."

A younger adult male also mentioned this point when talking about how football changes people. He also said he has seen people learn to put the team first instead of themselves, and that once people learn this they become less selfish off the pitch as well.

"There's some people who started playing in the team as if football is just a place for them to express how good they are and to just show off their own skills and to kind of just be the centre of attention. And I've seen that over time the realisation that the group and the family and the team is more important and that's the thing that becomes a priority and they start prioritising people and they start doing more and more selfless acts rather than selfish acts. And you see that on the pitch but then you also see it in the way they interact with others."

The first football enthusiast felt that the close nature of the relationships in a good team also enables people to challenge antisocial behaviour, rubbing each other's sharp corners off:

"There was a girl at one of the local churches and she said that when her husband played for our team it was the best time ever for her marriage and the reason was that in our team we wouldn't take any rubbish. If somebody had a poor attitude, we would call them out on it."

He described how football helps people to learn how to achieve. Learning to take advice from others and putting in the hard work over time were both important steps for him.

"I think when I started I wasn't very good. So how did it change me? Well actually I found that actually if I learned to listen and do what other people said, put my pride away, and I gave it my all and I worked hard and I worked hard I could actually get into football teams."

He also felt that achievement requires learning to tackle big problems in little stages, taking one step at a time:

"Football changed me to see that actually to achieve the big goal you do the small goals. So when I joined the really good football team the first goal was as a substitute could I get on? Would they actually bring me on? And then eventually a week came along and they brought me on and then the new goal was could I be on for longer? And then could I be the first substitute that came on? Can you see in football you have a chance for small goals ... you can measure these achievements ... and then the first time after a while I was picked. I was in the team!"

Learning to listen, putting in the hard work in and breaking things down into small stages are all important lessons, and it was added that these lessons transfer to other areas of life as well:

"That's true of your faith, it's true of your career, what's the next step? Don't be aiming too high ... football taught me about the next step ... I started to realise that you set yourself small goals instead of making it a massive goal which was all or nothing.

The reward as you learn these lessons and experience achievement on the pitch was said to be pure joy. It also has an enabling effect; it increases a person's tenacity:

"I went to a secondary school and the people who were not academic left in the 5th year so before O-levels (GSCE). And I can remember the joy, the absolute joy of eventually making it into the school football team and again with blokes apart from passing your exams, what else is there that you actually have that satisfaction of getting hold of, of achieving?"

"Football taught me the joy of giving your all. Where else can a bloke give their all to something? I mean everything, I mean your time, your money, your blood, your sweat, your internal fears, nervousness, you're laying it all down for that team. It's not just changed me, it enabled me. I think the better question is how did it enable me to be me? ... for everyone that plays football it's different. You can't be me and it wouldn't be the same story but what football can do for people is it can bring out the bits of you that are there already and it can give that toughness to push you forward."

The interviewee added that football can provide *significance* for people who might not find it in other domains of life. This was said to build up people and community, since everyone needs significance and their personal niche.

"For example, supposing I'm not very intellectual, I'm not going to go to university, I'm not particularly good looking but I can play football. Can you see that suddenly instead of all the 'this community's bad it's down on me' suddenly there is a little bit of significance. So football in a community adds significance to people's lives that otherwise they do not have and without that what significance is 'society' offering the working class, white boys? It touches something and the trouble is that most of the intellectual league have no idea what it's like to live without significance. So within the community you are giving significance, you are giving a chance for people to excel in areas other than intellectual, so that affects the community.

Football was said to provide for community also in terms of role models for boys. Boys get the opportunity to hang out with and learn from a variety of male role models as an alternative to gang culture (where everyone is in the same boat). This gives young people the opportunity to experience multiple different ways of behaving. Children of single mothers who might have no other male role model could especially benefit from this.

“It massively affects the community in terms of role models for boys. There are so many single parents that actually need role models; they need people who handle themselves well; who show that there’s another way ... There are role models in a football team who know what it’s like to be anxious and shy yet are still prepared to stand up and speak about what’s right in the changing room and on the field to the referee ... There’s a lovely expression that says you are who you hang with; You become who you hang with ... So if you hang around with a lot of people who do not have a male role model in their house, all the same sort of people, you get gang culture. But if you provide football teams where a lot of the people will have had parents that role model, you’re now getting those people to hang around people who are not in that boat. So if you like it’s probably one of the biggest things that can affect the downside of single motherhood and what that means for the children ... football can actually help the fatherlessness ... and that changes life for 20, 30, 40 years and the next generation and the next generation.”

All these examples illustrate the idea that football provides a level of interaction between people that is both accessible and hard to get elsewhere, especially for men. This interaction enables personal and social development and brings out a person’s best.

A different adult male also spoke of how the pressures of football challenge and grow you, increasing your tenacity:

“When the going gets tough it’s a place where you can look at yourself and say, ‘do I have the character to be able to withstand things when they get difficult? Do I shy away or back away from things like that?’ So I guess it’s an opportunity to look into yourself just by kind of putting yourself in a position to be exposed to some pressure.”

He expanded on this later, applying the lesson in tenacity that football gave him to himself: “It exposes your weaknesses. For example, for me I thought was someone that wouldn’t give up so easily but then when push comes to shove on the football pitch I’ve seen myself give up a lot easier and a lot quicker than I thought I would and I think that’s something that just gives me a tangible lesson that OK, this is something that I need to learn and grow in.”

One of the teenagers also talked about how football stretches you on social, character and mental levels – this was a quote he made following his statement (previously quoted) that football feels like it is more than just a game:

“You actually have to trust people with stuff and when things aren’t going so well you gotta kinda show your more positive side and it’s also quite a mental game as well I guess.”

How football boosts confidence was mentioned by both mothers and their sons. Football provides a common point of connection / interest and a place where they belong which helps people to interact with others.

"Football has given my boys confidence; they are fit and enjoy playing ... they have made friends." Mother, reflecting on the influence of football on her boys. One of these boys themselves said, "It has made me more confident."

"I feel I was a shy child but when I talk about or play football it gives me confidence to talk to others about joining me to play or within my role as a sports coach. I feel I can talk to older and younger people which I couldn't have ever done before especially as a teenager!" Young adult male. In case study 1, the mother herself enlarged on the progress of her "10-year-old shy boy" as he learned to link his achievements on the pitch to other areas of life.

2.2.2 Football as an aid to physical fitness

Football is a healthy sport. Comments were made that it helps you get outside and active, keeping fit and pushing the boundaries. A *loss* of physical fitness was referred to multiple times as a problem since the 2020 lockdown, but these quotes are referred to in a later section.

"Football helps me with my physical health in terms of exercise and keeping fit" Male teenager

"It is good for people's wellbeing as it keeps people fit and helps them to enjoy themselves outside." Male teenager

"I think it gives people an opportunity to test themselves; push themselves to whatever limits they want to push themselves to so physically, as with every sport, and also emotionally and socially dealing with hard situations ... It's healthy and you can get stagnant if you don't get put under pressure sometimes." Adult male

2.2.3 Football as a bridge to education

It was said that football has been and can successfully be used to help children engage with learning.

Case study 1 was written by a mother, describing how a school project used football to engage her child in learning when the usual channels were not working for him. Taking children into the football stadium, core subjects like maths and English were deliberately connected to football-related examples and experiences. She said it "changed his perspective of learning" and "opened his eyes to what he could achieve."

The son himself, now grown up, also said that because of the football which he could connect with, the other learning made more sense. About later coaches with a background in football who taught him about nutrition and healthy living he said, "It was a discipline I live by today; because I enjoyed the football, I think I understand it more."

2.3 Social connections

2.3.1 Bonding across the family generations and mutual identity through football

Football interests can be passed from one generation to the next. Football becomes an important part of family culture and family identity. In this way it connects the generations. The following comments and stories illustrate this:

An extract from case study 2, told by an adult female, reads, "From the age of about 8 I used to go to Elm Park with my dad and brother ... I used to have a cup of Bovril with me Dad and sing songs ... My brother started taking my son when he was about 8 to Madejski, it's been a family tradition ... As times changed a cup of Bovril turned into a McDonalds ... My son now takes his nephew and niece, both 8, to matches and carries on the family tradition."

A different mother, talking about the impact of football in the lives of her boys, said, "Football runs in the boys' family ... it is an ingrained thing in their lives."

She also said, "From the day my boys were born, their destiny was sealed!! They would follow Manchester United and play football. At one day old the boys were wrapped in Manchester United scarves, as soon as they were big enough, Manchester United kits were put on them. Their dad is an avid Manchester United fan, so they had no hope!!"

Later, she added, "Football has proved that generations are linked, and kids of any age can join in."

One of her (now teenage) sons commented that football has "connected people [different generations] for the love of the game."

A third adult female (case study 3), remembering her father's passion for football, also indicated that this was passed on to her: "Knowing all the words to some of the football songs as a child was so important ... What football meant to him, his family and in turn to me is hard to express in words. The game ... meant the world."

Case study 3 also suggests that the family football culture helped with maintaining extended family bonds.

"My Dad's family – brothers, nephews, nieces - would all meet up to go to a game and spend time together. This was an important part of our lives and connected us with them through football."

The mutual interest in football provides something for different generations in the family to talk about and to do together, building shared memories that they might otherwise never have. It was said that "shared memories are massive," and help to bring the family together and enrich relationships. Without the medium of the game (football is accessible and widely appreciated and non-threatening), it might be difficult to find ways to get these interchanges.

One mother said that her boys, "can 'read' a football game very well; they have conversations with their dad about what should have happened."

A male teenager wrote, "It is also a simple game that can be played with parents and their children at the same time which helps build father-son relationships. It is also a competitive sport; families young and old can watch football games together and cheer on their favourite teams which again builds relationships."

The male football enthusiast said, "I played in a team where the dad played in goal and 2 of his sons played out field. That was magic for their family history: shared memories of facing thugs, shared memories of lifting trophies, shared memories of it going wrong and quiet journeys in the car, memories that without football they would not have had. It would have been dad on the side line, kids on the park."

He added, "Where does a dad and lad go to build their memories? For many many millions they go to a football club and the son learns that their dad loves Bobby more and then the dad tries to persuade them to get a shirt. There's just so much wonderful interchange as opposed to dad and son's life being "tidy up your room, are you doing well at school?". It's rich, it's like the many strands that means there's the relationship and also the son and the dad start to understand what upsets the other person because you got the common understanding and you can talk about "was it the fact we lose? No it was the fact the referee was unfair." You start to understand even the value systems between the generations. The richness is off the scale."

This interviewee also talked about some men finding it difficult to share deeply, but that "in football stories, football memories, if you like it's smuggled in ... really significant interchanges [can happen] between people and across the generations."

This interviewee went on to compare the difference between 2 lads playing football – the better player in the end not doing as well as the one who had his father's support and enthusiasm – the family interchanges matter!

The fact that football rules have not changed much over the years was felt by this respondent to be a factor enabling different generations to connect. A father can connect with the experience of his son's play because he's been there.

"The older generation can appreciate the changes and the skills of the younger generation. You can look at them and say, 'I could have never have done that. That's awesome,' and you mean it because you've been there."

The final comment of these section, made by a younger male adult, links this section to the next. The respondent said that football is part of his family identity, passed down from his father, but it is also a way of connecting with peers.

"[Football] represents a big part of family ... my dad has always had as one of his passions and he kind of passed it down ... Personally, it's just something that's built a lot of friendships, long term friends that have always been around since playing football with them each week. So family, something that I've inherited so it's part of my identity, and then just a place where I can get to know people."

2.3.2 Helping people to make friends with peers

Football was said to provide a comfortable space in which people can meet with others. It takes the intensity out of the social contact and was felt to be a good ice-breaker.

A young male adult said, "with football or any kind of sport, that's the priority and on the side the relationships get built ... we don't necessarily have to talk but we can still build relationships."

A male teenager said, "To me football is a sport that helps me connect to people when I don't know how else to do so. For example, if I am in the park and my friends have a

football I will happily play a game with them even though I am not as good as them because it means that we can do something interesting together without having to have the initial awkward conversation about how each other are doing."

He added at a later point, "I think football is a great ice-breaker for groups of kids as it is a sport that most people have played to varying degrees."

Beyond easing the initial contact between people, football was also felt to be an important medium leading on to deeper relationships as people face a common challenge and learn to rely on one another in the team. Both watching and playing football were said to help people build their social life.

The same teenager who said football is a great ice-breaker added, "it allows people to build or at least start to build important bonds such as teamwork and trust as they need to rely on each other in order to win."

A female respondent talking of her dad (case study 3) said, "Through football and going to watch it regularly he created a social network and a social life that became very important to him."

A male teenager said that besides the fitness aspect, football is, "staying in touch with a lot of my mates and having a good time while doing it," and "Through football I've made a lot of friends, whether that's playing for a club or just playing during lunchtimes and stuff."

He also said, "We went a whole season without losing a match and at the end of the season you realise you've done something which hasn't been done in a while and you're pretty much one of the best teams out there in the area and you shared so many good memories with each other - I think that was like so amazing and it really made everyone much closer friends. It's like if we enjoy something good together and even when things weren't going our way - like not all the matches were like really really easy; some matches were a bit harder than others - and when you work with those people through those hard times it does bond people together I guess."

A different teenager said, "It helps me connect to people ... if I never played football then I wouldn't have had so many friends as I have."

A male adult said, "It helps people to connect because you've got an obstacle to face with a group of people and you have to do it together ... it's a game that you can't do by yourself."

To, "kick a ball around and enjoy what we're doing" is one level of connection, to play in a team adds challenges that can help people to develop in themselves and as a team, but this adult male also mentioned positive connections with *opposing* teams as being important – not only in terms of making more friends, but also in terms of learning to view opponents in a respectful way:

"So you got your teammates in that context but then also you connect with the opposition. What I've noticed over the years is that I've built some really good relationships with the opposing players even if in the game it gets heated and it's quite aggressive or anything like that. There's a mutual respect: we're both here, we're both enjoying football and we're both passionate about it and we've given each other a good battle. So it gives you a taste of the other side and that the other side is not always evil,

it's just they're the opposition and we respect them for it. So I think it's good to get on with both sides, with your team and the opponents as well."

The male football enthusiast and former manager said that the way football helps men to connect is a primary factor contributing to wellbeing. He starts with the issue of the mutual interest in the game easing the difficulties of social contact, pointing out that it allows very different sorts of people to get together in a meaningful way. He then goes on to describe how the connections are deepened by facing the challenges of the game together and learning to trust and rely on and cover for one another. He says that football provides a rare opportunity amongst men for this level of friendship to flourish.

He said, "men find it hard to actually communicate about any deep thing; they're so guarded, but football unlocks this." He went on to explain that playing in a team provides something in common for men to work towards in what is actually a socially safe environment. 'Safe' in the sense that there are 14 people, so "it's not the intensity of having say a golf partner or a squash partner." In this environment, men get to "grow comfortable with people that they didn't know before," but with whom they have, "such a strong common goal, people overlook the differences." Age, class, colour, intellect were all mentioned as unimportant – you only look at "what it is about that person that can help us as a team win football matches. So it allows the quiet people who don't want to talk much to just pitch up and be themselves and they get appreciated and the loud ones it gives a chance to actually talk and banter with people."

This interviewee said that "most blokes only have 2, 3, maybe 4 friends in their entire life that they will share deeply with, but people that engage in a football team, and I separate that out from pitching up on a park to play, people who play in the same team are likely to have friends in that football team that they will keep for life which is very rare for blokes."

He added, "I think that most people have no idea [what community is] ... 'well, I suppose I got on with a few people and we went for a drink.' No no ... I'll give you a definition of community - community is where you're in a situation where you know you're weak at something and you can rely on someone in the group to cover for your weakness and likewise community is where you also will be invited to cover for someone else's weakness. That is a community, that is a living dynamic thing. The best sort of football team ... is the first and I hope not the last time that they will ever know what community looks like, feels like, smells like. Be in a football team. Go 200 miles for a tournament that didn't exist, have shared experiences, have someone look after you when you're so injured or so sick, have someone pay when you've lost your wallet. This is football community."

2.3.3 Bringing together different sectors of the wider community

Football was also seen to be helpful in bringing together different social groups – even complete strangers - within the wider community. It was seen to be especially useful in bringing together people who would otherwise find it difficult to mix. The common interest makes differences of class, age, gender and race irrelevant, and the deliberate efforts of teams to be inclusive is welcomed. In providing a common interest and common point of connection, football was felt to add to community spirit.

An adult male said that football tournaments across Reading have brought the community together, and efforts have been made to try and include as many different

groups of people as possible; no exclusions. He adds, "Because football is such a universal language ... there are common grounds amongst everyone. If you just want to play football it doesn't matter what kind of race, gender, age ... well age to some degree but it can be adapted so it's still safe..."

A teenager said, "Different religions and races in our team, we come together and play with no problems."

A different teenager said, "I think that football does build small communities as children and young adults can access many football clubs where they can meet and play with others who share their passions."

He also said, "Through my church, football has often been a sport that allows people of different ages and genders to come together and play when they may normally not mix with each other. I think it has been good for building relationships between people in my church youth group as everyone is welcome and it doesn't matter if you are socially awkward or someone who likes to take the limelight because you are able to play however you feel comfortable."

Later he added, "In the past I have gone to Palmer Park and played with complete strangers when there has been a fair set up. This was usually because a group of friends decided to set up a game and invite everyone to play so it has been good to connect with other kids my age and older through football."

A third teenager referred to a 'powerful sense of community' experienced between people that are supporting a team. He adds, "You go to matches and watch football with people and it definitely improves the community spirit."

Case study 3 refers to a person who immigrated into the UK in the 1960s. It describes how football and how a common interest in supporting big teams helped him not only to connect, but also to establish roots in a new country. His daughter writes that football provided, "a way to integrate in new country," and adds, "My Dad loved football and the friends he made through it. The camaraderie. It was something that in the 60s and 70s unified people especially those from other countries looking for some commonality. Searching for reasons to put roots down etc."

The male football enthusiast and former captain and coach spoke of how football helps different people to connect and, much more than a mere point of contact, to learn to appreciate one another and to establish genuine bonds. He talked about these bonds firstly across classes, then across the generations of a family, and also crossing the divide of illness and health and finally across different ethnic groups. The quote on intergenerational bonds can be found under the section, 'bonding across generations within the family,' but the other points he made are quoted below:

Bonding across classes: "In general, a middle-class person from Asia will get on with a middle-class person from West India - you know if you're middle class and you're all at uni you all get on generally. But what football does is allow you to connect across the classes and not just *connect* across the classes but it teaches you to *appreciate* the other things that they bring to the team that you do not ... It teaches you because that person is working class, you trust everything they say, there's no angle. What they say is what they mean and that brings to a team an honesty, an integrity, a realness. Now at the other end, the intellectual class ... they analyse and understand what's going on in the football match. They use their intellect to say this is what's going on, so at half-time

they will be able to say no no no, actually that person is doing this. So it's not just connection, it's bringing in things that really build; you actually look forward to having those different people that you connect with."

The sick and the well: I've seen the connection between people who have an illness and are going to die early and between people who have not got that illness. They are not treating that person with kid gloves. So for one moment in their life they've got a connection that is not determined by their illness, by their condition or by what their future holds.

Ethnicity: When it's someone from a different ethnic mix you start to connect to their music, they bring their music into the changing room and you all laugh at it because you don't like it but they still bring it in. It's not like the, 'you've got to pretend you like it'; it's just great.

Different ages: How football links different generations within one family has already been noted under the section, 'bonding across generations within the family.' However, the links across generations are not limited to family alone. Different ages can enjoy watching football together, tips can be passed down through the generations, and in playing together, older players can act as good role models to the next generation.

One teenager noted that the fundamentals of the game have stayed the same across the years so different generations are able to engage with the same game. He added, "Throughout generations it still remains a really popular sport and I think that's pretty amazing ... In a pub for example there's a mix of people from like 65+ to people who might be 18/19 ... and the fact that those people are all sitting together all enjoying football at the same time I think that's pretty powerful as well.

A male adult commented on the "wonderful way in which an older generation can tell a technique that's worked," was also mentioned. Good football tips are passed from one generation to the next.

A different adult said, "For a young person, and I think for me when I was a young person, to see people who are nice people who are also good at football was like, wow, you don't just have to be good at one thing ... (either you're good at football and you're not very nice, or you're a nice guy and that means you can't play football). So it gives people an opportunity to see their role models doing the sensible thing ... when you get that added dimension of something you actually enjoy, seeing that, I think, can connect two generations."

In the latter point on role models, the respondent suggests that it is easier for young people to connect with and learn from a good role model when the person is also good at something that young person appreciates (like football). A separate comment on role models is also recorded under section 2.2.1 under the title of building character. This comment was about the value of having father figures for the fatherless and opening up a new set of norms/possibilities to them. This comment also has to do with building community

The picture painted was not universally rosy however. One teenager raised the point that, "people have different viewpoints," and said that, "supporting different teams causes conflict."

2.4 Changes in football over time

2.4.1 Changes in media and in the experience of watching football

It was felt that there had been little change in the game over time – the rules are pretty much the same. However there have been much bigger changes in media and in the experience of watching it.

One teenager said, "Over the years has it changed? Not really ... the rules are the same ... its pretty much the same game and I think it's a pretty timeless game as well." Having said that, he added that there is much more *media* and media hype around football today, and this aspect has changed. Even on social media, "you're going to see a lot of football stuff and even if you don't like football it's always going to be there because there's going to be people in your close friends who obviously like it a lot."

The male football enthusiast also said in response to a question about whether football has changed, "Playing, no. Watching, sadly off the scale. The worst thing that's happened to football in my living memory is VAR (video assistant referee)." The respondent went on to explain that instead of the "off the scale joy" when a goal is scored, "now everyone has to wait; you can't afford to be joyous because it might be taken away, so VAR has removed so much of the joy out of the game."

Case study 2 is a memoir of the time when the Reading FC was based at Elm Park before moving to the Madejski stadium (with better parking facilities!!). Back at Elm Park, "the traffic was horrendous, cars parked all over the place."

2.4.2 Change because of lockdown

The lockdown has clearly affected engagement in football. The following comments imply that it is possible for football to take different forms, and some joy can be had in the game even under social distancing rules.

A school teaching assistant describes how football, which is "extremely important in school," has resurfaced in her year six primary school group since the partial easing of the lockdown. She said that in the playground, "The boys started playing football whereas the girls did other things such as chalking and skipping. As time went by, the girls joined, ... [and] the football game became extremely important to the whole group."

Because of social distancing, the school staff had to introduce new rules such as no tackling (no getting too close) and no touching the ball with hands. This made the game very different, and the children, "definitely had to improve their passing skills and their attitude to the game. By this I mean instead of holding on to the ball and being master of it, it was more important to pass." Eventually a whole new game came about, with added rules like all team members having to touch the ball before you can go for a goal and 5 seconds max with the ball. The teaching assistant commented that "it became a much more interesting game to play and to watch ... Being forced as we were because of lockdown to all play together was a very positive experience."

One teenager, in spite of his passion for the game, also implies that football can take different forms when he says, "In terms of teams we can't really get together as a group of people so it's obviously a lot harder but at the same time I have gone to meet up with

some mates and had a little kick about in the park and I guess that counts as football still.”

Another teenager also wrote, “I have met up with a couple of friends and passed a ball around...”

Others are less convinced that this restrictive form of play is enough. It is felt that the full experience of challenge and the full benefits of team interaction cannot be had. Fitness has been affected and also all that building of character and significance mentioned in section 2.2.1 has been constrained.

One teenager, now that some training is allowed, said that, “I think we should be able to train full contact and not all this non-contact.”

The male football enthusiast said, “not being able to play football has robbed from a lot of lads ... So it’s not just being fit or ‘I’m bored’ it’s all the stuff that at its best helps bring men out of boys. All of that has been ripped away, so in the same way an intellectual person would say “I’ve lost a year of uni. How’s that going to affect my career?” I think you could say for football and for a lot of people who play football, maybe working class whatever, it’s robbed a year and they’ll never get back a chance to become the man they could have become. And in some way, you can re-sit exams but you can’t re-sit your age from 16 to 17 either having role models, having a reason to be disciplined ... you can’t get that back, you are now 17 you didn’t experience that.”

A mother writes that the lockdown, “has affected my boys greatly, their fitness has dropped, at the start of lockdown they would kick a football between them but as lockdown went on longer, they complained they missed football, it was like they were lost. Training stopped, games stopped, football was not shown on TV.”

Her teenage son said about stopping play that it was, “overall the right thing to do but it hurt.”

Another son said, “it’s affected my fitness.”

Case study 4 describes the experiences of a grassroots football club in Reading. It provides some insight into the extent of activities that had to be closed in just this one organisation, and it is not just the training and games, but also the loss of community contact through festivals and presentation events. There are financial implications with lost income (but also a reduction in outgoings) and some description of the measures that might have to be put in place in order to get going safely again – although uncertainty hangs over everything at this stage.

The interviewee comments that the club members suffer from reduced fitness, but also from lack of structure as such a big part of their world is taken away.

“Football is a massive part of our member’s day to day world and it forms structure week by week. To have that taken away has been hard for many to deal with.”

The club has encouraged teams to keep talking and to stay positive.

A parting comment from this club interviewee is the hope that the lockdown will at least make society more aware of what an important part community activity plays in people’s lives. He hopes for “a new level of respect and appreciation” for the people who invest time in one another free of charge.

A different adult said that he had taken quite some time off football even before Covid-19. Getting back into it has been a shock because of lost ability, but the reset has been good for reflecting on what he wants out of the game and resetting his approach.

"I've been playing football for a long time and I feel like I've never had a break from it so it's been a really good time to just reset even though slowly trying to get back into kicking a ball around has been quite disheartening because I've just never had a time where I've stopped playing so I've never really seen a big drop in my ability and then it's like, 'what the h_ is going on?' But I think it's been healthy and I think it's reset the cycle and it's given me time to just reflect on what I want from the sport, what I want out of the team I'm playing for and how I want to approach that when it gets started again."

2.4.3 Change as women's football takes off

A male teenager said of football, "It is stereotypically a boy's sport so many girls may not join in either because they don't like it or they feel that they will be judged for playing it, therefore it is much easier to get a group of boys and men to play it rather than women and girls."

Having said that, there were a few mentions of more women coming into football in recent times. On the whole, this was viewed positively. There was a recognition that, having been traditionally played more by men, there were differences in skills and in media coverage – although this is something that could change.

"I would say that football has definitely changed on a more professional level as football for women has become more popular. The stereotypes about women not playing football still exist but I feel that they are slowly fading away as more and more women take an interest in the sport." Male teenager.

The same teenager later added, "I think that it's a good thing that women are able to play football and hopefully it will break down the stereotypes of football just being a men's sport so that more girls will get involved. However, I don't think it is getting enough coverage on the media as if you were to look up football you would see that men's football coverage far outweighs women's football coverage."

A different teenager felt that it is fair that women footballer's wages were less than men's because men's football was the more skilful game attracted more spectators. However, he felt that times are changing and more girls and women were coming into the sport so that "in the next few years [women's football] will definitely start improving."

One adult male said the differences between men and women's football ran deeper than skills however. Skills can improve, but he felt that football appeals to men and calls out their best in ways that are hard for them to experience elsewhere:

He said, whilst welcoming women's football, that it was "a different game ... And the reason it's a different game is because football touches a lot of evolutionary, biological stuff in a man. A man wants to be brave more than wants to win, the desire to be a hero, this is like not on the scale. So if you look at it at skill and rules, you can say it's the same game. But if you look at what it does for the person, it's lightyears away."

It is notable in the account of school children starting to play football again that the boys began before the girls, but then the girls joined in too. Adapting the game for social distancing, with passing having to replace tackling, seemed to work for the whole group.

A younger adult, when asked how football has changed over the years, said, "I think having more girls involved is a great thing." The reason he gave was that it enables healthy, low pressure interaction between the sexes:

"I've been in contexts where girls are realising that they can play and I think that's quite a healthy change and I think that will lead to more healthy friendships between young people. It means that you have a context in which you can make friends with people of both genders without feeling like you have to put on a show. You can just be yourself and break the ice between people who might otherwise have felt like 'I can only talk to girls' or 'I can only talk to boys' in like a weird kind of romantic way. But if they are on the football pitch together they feel more comfortable to just be friends and then set stronger foundations or whatever after that rather than just unhealthy quick starts and awkward encounters."

He added, "It bridges the gap between what's a guy sport and what's a girls sport. Personally, it's great in my own context with a daughter, it means that I can share a passion with her and she won't feel like she's the odd one out at school or anything like that and that; she'll have friends."

2.5 Football stories / Case Studies

2.5.1 Case study 1: The impact of football on child development

Reading Football Club helped me as a parent because my son was falling behind in year 5 primary school; he lacked interest in the core subjects which had an impact on his overall learning. So, after an intense parents evening interview it was decided he went on one of the no-extra-cost 8-week courses set up with the school and the local team Reading at the "New" stadium ... I remember the Teaching Assistant who went with him and one other child, a young girl with the same challenges.

He was a very sporty child and, like most 10-year olds, he thought he was going to be a footballer!

Working with the teachers and coaches in a unique way they taught him his tables without him realising. e.g. 11 footballers each wear 2 football boots = How many boots in total? 22. So, he was then confident in his 2 x tables which lead to division. They touched on area/perimeter all relating it to football pitches. The list is endless. I as a parent noticed a change in him after 2/3 sessions, his teachers noticed after the first week. Both him and the other girl were eager to open their maths books and show off their new skills. It changed his whole perspective of learning and what was important to him. It opened his eyes to what he could achieve and maybe he actually could be a footballer one day and now he could read, understand and sign his own contract.

I cannot speak highly enough about this because I feel the impact it had on him helped him along with his other teachers pass his SATS the following year in year 6. He then went to JMA Secondary school who the football team are supportive of. He carried on working hard at school work which was always a challenge to him but he played football every Saturday with training in the week for a grassroots team. Fortunately, he got scouted and went on to play for Fleet Town at the age of 15/16 youth team. I was so proud he went through so many interviews/games and enjoyed playing for 2 seasons. Part of this was to continue working hard with school work to pass his GCSE – he decided he wanted to be a Sports Coach at 16 and went to college for 2 years to do this. This 10-year-old shy boy was now a 16-year-old having left school with GCSE English, Maths, Science, Tourism and Leisure and having the confidence to get a bus to Fleet to college. I'm happy to say he passed and is a 26-year-old Sport Coach with his own coaching company that he is building whilst working in a school setting himself now.

As a parent I thank sport – football mainly - for what it helped my son achieve. I can never repay those coaches and teachers at Reading Academy but I will always be grateful to them. As well as his school teachers who helped him and myself along his school journey – some of them may never know just how much!

I feel a scheme like this is invaluable to children of all abilities especially those struggling because the school setting is not for everyone and you don't always have to sit down to learn.

2.5.2 Case study 2: Family traditions (told by an adult female)

From the age of about 8 I used to go to Elm Park with my dad and brother. We used to go midweek and at the weekend. My mum knitted us hats, gloves and scarves.

We used to walk from our house to Elm Park, the traffic was horrendous, cars parked up all over the place. When we got there, we would stand on the terraces watching the game. It was great! We knew all the players names. I used to have a cup of Bovril with me Dad and sing songs.

At the end before the club was moved people took grass for memorabilia. I stopped going to matches in 1980 as my Dad passed away.

My brother started taking my son when he was about 8 to Madejski, it's been a family tradition since my Dad died. As times changed a cup of Bovril turned into a McDonalds and the next generation of fans moved into Whitley. My son now takes his nephew and niece, both 8, to matches and carries on the family tradition.

2.5.3 Case study 3: Making connections through football, putting down roots in a new country and developing family culture

When my father came to this country as a young man in the 60s the primary reason was for employment. He did not want to leave his beloved Ireland. He lived and worked as a carpenter. To say that he loved football is an understatement. Back in Ireland he had played quite competitively and received some medals some of which I now own.

Depending on where he lived, he supported many different teams. Football was for him a way to integrate in a new country; a way to make friends which he rapidly did. Through football and going to watch it regularly he created a social network and a social life that became very important to him. He only began to attend matches less when he met my Mum at an Irish Dance. He brought her to some QPR games but she did not share his enthusiasm for the game. Ha Ha!

Football remained extremely important to him throughout his life. My Dad's family - brothers, nephews, nieces - would travel over from Ireland for the weekend and we would all meet up to go to a game and spend time together. This was an important part of our lives and connected us with them through football!

I grew up with football being talked about, commented on and sung about regularly!!! Knowing all the words to some of the football songs as a child was so important and fun.

My Dad loved football and the friends he made through it. The camaraderie. It was something that in the 60s and 70s unified people especially those from other countries looking for some commonality. Searching for reasons to put roots down etc.

What football meant to him, his family and in turn to me is hard to express in words. The game, on a local, National and international level meant the world. It would sometimes cause my Mum to say...You Love football more than ME!! He didn't - it just looked like that sometimes!

RIP Dad. Miss you and love you

2.5.4 Case study 4: The impact of Covid-19 on a grassroots football club in Reading

This grassroots club ran 23 teams for season 2019/2020. This season came to a halt in March due to Covid 19 and the FA put grassroots football into complete lockdown.

Each team would train once a week between September and June. Generally, as the weather warms up, lots of new members arrive and recruitment for next season and new teams would thrive April - June.

Between April - June we had also planned to host football festivals for disability football, adult football, all girls football, under 7s and under 8s. These were all cancelled. Not only do these festivals bring in income to club, it also raises the awareness of club locally. We had planned to partner the FA with a number of free all girls football sessions but this is now shelved until 2021.

The club presentation day was also cancelled which was an exclusive event at the local bowling centre. The committee of the club decided to arrange an online presentation day and each member of the club received a bespoke certificate in the post and the members of our disability team received a club football shirt in the post.

We have set out a recovery plan for next season and help to get football started. This includes:

- A reduction in Fees and a more flexible way of paying (spread over 5 months not 3)
- Return to training in August subject to government confirmation
- An improved club insurance package that offers all our members extra protection
- Booking more time slots and additional venues to train
- A kit for all coaches (wipes/masks/hand wash)

If the number of members at club remains the same, we will see a reduction in fee money of around £15K for season. However, we did not spend anything on training in April/May/June. The club is represented with teams in 4 leagues and each of the leagues have agreed to reduce or not charge for team registrations next season which will represent a saving of around £1000. The local FA Berks and Bucks have not charged us this season for team and club affiliation which also represent a saving of around £1000. Reading FC, I suspect have their own financial issues and we have not heard from them since the pandemic started.

Things are still very sketchy as to when we can officially start again, and we are waiting for an update from FA. But the thinking currently is each venue used will have to have a risk assessment and procedures will include things like separate points of entry/exit, a register of who attends sessions and games, and good distancing maintained. We will only return when it safe to do so and if that means a cost implication then we will spend accordingly. I can see a number of the measures being in place for a long time yet. The reduction in fees for coming season is only a one off and we will revert back to our normal fees. I suspect the cost of hiring facilities will increase as businesses try to recoup money they have lost.

Football is a massive part of our members' day to day world and it forms structure week by week. To have that taken away has been hard for many to deal with we have encouraged teams to keep talking to their members during lockdown and to stay positive. It has been pleasing to see over the last few weeks teams getting out for a 'kick about' whilst following the strict guidelines and a small step back to what will be a new normal - and some much-needed fitness to some of our members who have not been out for last few months.

My parting comment is this... only a few of us commit our time free of charge to make sure we can offer something safe, energetic and rewarding to our members. Winning does not matter anymore - it is about taking part being in that team with your friends, making new friends and developing social skills.

As coaches and helpers, we are not perfect; we make mistakes, but we try our best. There is so little appreciation and respect for the effort that we make. In the new world we are entering I am hoping there will be a new level of respect and appreciation.

3 Key points emerging from this research

13 different stories or points of view were recorded in order to open a conversation on how people in Reading experience football. The interviewees included both genders (though predominantly male) and a wide variety of ages. All of the points made in the following summary are drawn from people's comments and experiences. The observations are ordered by theme.

3.1.1 Summary of all points made

Theme 1: The beautiful game:

- People commented on the joy of playing and pride in players. "ecstasy ... a thousand people rising as one with joy"; "you feel passion"; "You see their [my boys'] faces light up with they play ... their red faces because they have given 1000% to the game." It became clear that football ignites the passions; it generates a thrill that is all the stronger because of being *shared*.
- Football adds substance and structure to a young person's life. It can even be, "all I do." It helps people to get out and about, active and meeting people. It has provided a positive focus to some in hard times.
- Team connection is uplifting making football, "more than a game." "The football community is its own thing." This social aspect emerged as the overarching theme throughout.
- Football is easily accessible on many levels. It lends itself to a friendly kickaround, to team training and to competitive play. All levels of skill can participate, and it can be found anywhere you go. Players and spectators can both engage. It appeals to a wide cross-section of different groups across society, and particularly engages men and boys on a level and scale that is difficult to find elsewhere.

Theme 2: Personal development

Football has been a medium for the development of character and confidence in a person.

The team interaction when playing football helps the individual, bringing out their best. "In football, others can bring things out of you that you cannot bring out of yourself." Note then that although this section is about personal development, football is a team game and it is the *social interaction* that makes these personal developments possible.

- Football is a place where people with anger can, "let their feelings out." It provides, "a chance to try things out, to test themselves." It stretches you on multiple levels, mental, physical, emotional and social. Pressures and challenge can enable growth. "I guess it's an opportunity to look into yourself just by kind of putting yourself in a position to be exposed to some pressure."
- It also provides an opportunity to be brave and make sacrifices. And, "when things aren't going so well, you gotta kinda show your more positive side." Confronting challenges together with others, sharing the good times and the bad over time was felt to be therapeutic, unforgettable, and helpful to building trust: "In a football game you make a mistake and your friends can cover for you ... without you asking, they do it ... It stays with you." This level of sharing over time was felt to be rarely experienced elsewhere.
- Football helps people to learn the importance of sacrificing short term ambitions for the team and for better relations long term. "[Football] has changed me because I started to understand the long-term repercussions of my interpersonal decisions." Once people

learn to put the team ahead of themselves, they have been seen to get less selfish off the pitch as well.

- The close nature of the relationships in a good team also enables antisocial behaviour to be challenged, "If somebody had a poor attitude, we would call them out on it."
- People learn how to achieve as they take advice from others, put in the hard work and learn to tackle to tackle big problems in little stages, taking one step at a time. These lessons transfer to other areas of life as well.
- The joy of achievement has an enabling effect, increasing a person's tenacity. "It can give that toughness to push you forward." It provides significance for people who might not find it in other domains of life. "The intellectual league have no idea what it's like to live without significance."
- Football boosts confidence. It provides a common point of connection/ interest and a place where you belong. This helps people to interact with others.
- "[Football] is a place where role models can stand tall." It provides an opportunity for boys to hang out with and learn from a variety of male role models as an alternative to gang culture (where everyone is in the same boat). This gives young people the opportunity to experience multiple different ways of behaving. Children of single mothers who might have no other male role model could especially benefit from this. It opens up a new set of norms/ possibilities to them and may even change the course of the next generation. It is easier for young people to connect with and learn from a good role model when the person is also good at something that young person appreciates (like football).

Football as an aid to physical fitness

- Football is a healthy sport. Comments were made that it helps you get outside and active, keeping fit and pushing the boundaries. "It's healthy and you can get stagnant if you don't get put under pressure sometimes." A *loss* of physical fitness was a referred to multiple times as a problem since the 2020 lockdown.

Football as a bridge to education

- Football has been successfully used as a point of connection from which children have crossed the bridge into learning. School projects have used football to engage children in learning when the usual channels were not working for them. Core subjects like maths and English were deliberately connected to football-related examples and experiences, and because the child was already connected with the football, it was easier for him or her to make sense of the other learning. "It changed his perspective on learning," and, "opened his eyes to what he could achieve." "Because I enjoyed the football, I think I understand it more."

Theme 3: Social connections

Connections within family - how football has helped to shape family identity across the generations

- Football interests can be passed from one generation to the next. Football becomes an important part of family culture and family identity. In this way it connects the generations. The mutual interest in football provides something for different generations in the family to talk about and to do together, building shared memories that they might otherwise never have. Having deep conversations can be awkward, but, "in football stories, football memories, if you like it's smuggled in ... really significant

interchanges [can happen] between people and across the generations ... so much wonderful interchange as opposed to dad and son's life being 'tidy up your room! Are you doing well at school?' It was said that "shared memories are massive," and help to bring the family together and enrich relationships. Without the medium of the game (football is accessible, widely appreciated and non-threatening), it might be difficult to find ways to get these interchanges. These interchanges are important - a child does much better with his or her parental enthusiasm and support.

- A family football culture can also help with maintaining *extended* family bonds, providing some structure around which to arrange a meetup.
- The fact that football rules have not changed much over the years was felt to be a factor in enabling different generations to connect. A father can connect with the experience of his son's play because he's been there.

Connections amongst peers – how football helps people to develop friendships.

- Football eases social contact, making it a comfortable space in which people can meet with others. In first place there is a mutual interest, but it also takes the intensity out of the meeting because the focus is on the game rather than on the other person. "We can do something interesting together without having to have the initial awkward conversation about how each other are doing." The incorporation of multiple players also reduces/ spreads out the intensity of the social contact. It was felt to be a good ice-breaker amongst people who do not usually mix.
- Both watching and playing football were said to help people build their social life. "If I never played football then I wouldn't have had so many friends as I have." "Through football and going to watch it regularly [my dad] created a social network and a social life that became very important to him."
- Relationships are deepened as people face the challenges of the game together and learn to trust and rely on and cover for one another. "It allows people to build or at least start to build important bonds such as teamwork and trust as they need to rely on each other in order to win." "When you work with those people through those hard times it does bond people together I guess."
- The way football helps men to connect is felt to be a primary factor contributing to wellbeing. Football provides a rare opportunity amongst men for this level of friendship to flourish. "I'll give you a definition of community - community is where you're in a situation where you know you're weak at something and you can rely on someone in the group to cover for your weakness and likewise community is where you also will be invited to cover for someone else's weakness. That is a community, that is a living dynamic thing. The best sort of football team ... is the first and I hope not the last time that they will ever know what community looks like, feels like, smells like. Be in a football team. Go 200 miles for a tournament that didn't exist, have shared experiences, have someone look after you when you're so injured or so sick, have someone pay when you've lost your wallet. This is football community."

Connection between different social groups – how football provides a point of contact

- Football was seen to be helpful in bringing together different social groups – even complete strangers. It was seen to be especially useful in bringing together people who would otherwise find it difficult to mix. The common interest makes differences of class, age, race, gender and intellect irrelevant, and the deliberate efforts of teams to be inclusive is welcomed.

- Different personalities also all have their place. "It allows the quiet people who don't want to talk much to just pitch up and be themselves and they get appreciated and the loud ones it gives a chance to actually talk and banter with people."
- In providing a common interest and common point of connection, football was felt to add to community spirit. You can even learn to view opponents in a respectful way: "It gives you a taste of the other side and that the other side is not always evil, it's just they're the opposition and we respect them for it." (Not that this always happens – another respondent felt that "supporting different teams causes conflict.")
- A story was told about an Irishman who immigrated into the UK in the 1960s. Football and a common interest in supporting big teams helped him not only to connect, but also to "put down roots" and "integrate in a new country." It "unified people, especially those from other countries looking for some commonality."
- Football helps different people to connect and, much more than a mere point of contact, "it teaches you to *appreciate* the things that they bring to the team that you do not ... So it's not just connection, it's bringing in things that really build; you actually look forward to having those different people that you connect with."
- How football connects family across the generations has already been noted, but links across generations are not limited to family alone. Different ages can enjoy watching football together, tips can be passed down through the generations, and in playing together, older players can act as good role models to the next generation.

Changes in football over time

- Changes were not so much in the game itself, but rather in media coverage and in the experience of watching it.
- Reading FC has moved from Elm Park to Madejski stadium, where parking facilities are better.
- The 2020 lockdown has affected engagement in football. It is a hard time for football clubs in Reading, with activities curtailed and financial implications. Uncertainty continues to hang over their future at the time of writing. Players have also been negatively affected. "Football is a massive part of our member's day to day world and it forms structure week by week. To have that taken away has been hard for many to deal with." "You can re-sit exams but you can't re-sit your age from 16 to 17 either having role models; having a reason to be disciplined ... you can't get that back." Fitness has also been affected.

In some cases, football has taken different forms, and joy was found in the game even under social distancing rules. Others were less convinced that this restrictive form of play is enough. They felt that the full experience of challenge and the full benefits of team interaction cannot be had without full contact.

- Women's football was mentioned as being a relatively new development. On the whole, this was viewed positively. There was a recognition that, football having been traditionally played by men, there were differences in skills, and therefore in media coverage and in pay. However, it was felt that this was something that can change. One male appreciated the involvement of girls because it facilitated healthy, low pressure interaction between the sexes. Having said all that, football did appeal to men more than to women amongst our interviewees, and it was said that it is difficult for men to get the same sort of connection and challenge elsewhere.

3.1.2 Conclusion

These conversations revealed that football is a particularly accessible sport with broad appeal. It offers a level of social interaction between people that it is not so easy to find elsewhere, especially for men. It is seen to enrich family relationships across the generations, and it helps people build friendships into the wider community too – even providing a bridge between strangers from a wide variety of social groups. Through supportive social interactions people learn, develop in character and confidence, find significance and flourish.

And the conclusion? In the words of a grassroots club coach:

“Only a few of us commit our time free of charge to make sure we can offer something safe, energetic and rewarding to our members. Winning does not matter anymore - it is about taking part, being in that team with your friends, making new friends and developing social skills. As coaches and helpers, we are not perfect; we make mistakes, but we try our best. There is so little appreciation and respect for the effort that we make. In the new [post-Covid] world we are entering, I am hoping there will be a new level of respect and appreciation.”

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