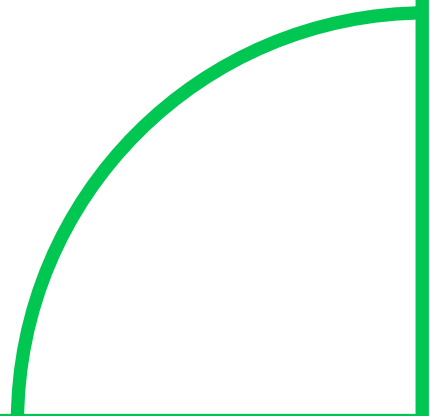




**SWITCH**  
**BEFORE PITCH**  
utilita🏠

# THE FINAL WHISTLE

For Grassroots Football  
in the UK.



# FOREWORD BY DAVID JAMES MBE

**“The Government has the power to save grassroots football clubs and stop the final whistle being blown. They must act, and fast.”**

Right now there are thousands of grassroots clubs on standby, having battened down the hatches, knowing full well the game’s over, never to return. The final whistle has been blown. And these clubs are not poorly run clubs - some of these clubs have a rich, 100-year history.

Managers, players and those who use grassroots facilities may be wondering ‘what next?’ How does such an important part of my life get replaced?

**Why has this been allowed to happen?** The main reason is the Government’s disregard, or misunderstanding of the value of community-run grassroots clubs to UK society, and that’s despite the facts being written in black and white.

As you’ll read in this report, it only takes some basic maths to work out the value of grassroots football to the UK - take that away, and the public purse will be forced to pay for the damage, despite there being simple solutions to save these clubs before it’s too late.

The Government has the power to save grassroots football clubs and stop the final whistle being blown. They must act, and fast.



## SAVE YOUR CLUB

Sign the petition today:  
[www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball](http://www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball)

The 'Final Whistle for Grassroots Football' report is a continuation of the 'State of Play' report, commissioned by energy supplier and prominent football supporter, Utilita, which was released in September 2020. It is reporting on, and bringing to light, the continued, growing, struggle clubs are facing across the UK, as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Part one

# Grassroots football clubs – a lifeline for millions

Before the pandemic, there were approximately 43,000 active grassroots football clubs across the UK. On average, each club is home to around 280 players from the local community – having a positive impact on the lives of more than 12 million people, not including all the local community members who volunteer or attend matches.

According to the Football Association, the value of adult grassroots football in England alone is £10.8 billion each year – £8.7 billion in improved physical and mental wellbeing and £2 billion in economic value. Each player spends approximately £326 on football subs, supplies and other enablers, which results in a £410 million tax contribution.\*

Without the positive impact of grassroots football clubs, Government income generated by taxes on grassroots football would end, and there would be an increased demand on public services to deal with the lack of football, starting with the NHS and community policing. It would be disastrous.

According to our latest research, being part of a grassroots football community plays an important part in the lives of every single member, and 81% of grassroots club members are gravely concerned about the future of their club, as a result of COVID-19. Considering that grassroots football community members spend approximately 13 hours per month at their local club, **having no club to go to will leave a massive void in their lives.**

**BEFORE THE PANDEMIC,  
THERE WERE APPROX.**

**43,000**

**GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL  
CLUBS ACROSS THE UK.**

**81%**

**GRASSROOTS' MEMBERS  
ARE GRAVELY CONCERNED  
ABOUT THEIR CLUB'S FUTURE,  
AS A RESULT OF COVID-19.**

Continued →

\* 2019 – The social and economic value of adult grassroots football in the UK – report: <https://www.thefa.com/news/2019/jul/09/social-and-economic-value-of-adults-grassroots-football-in-england-090719>

## Case Study



# Ray Fiveash

Chairman, Welwyn Garden City FC

"The stop-start nature of grassroots football, and life generally, continues to put immense pressure on clubs who need to make a positive return. Why? Because their communities need them, desperately.

"I didn't need this report to tell me how bad things are – I hear it all day and every day – for many people, the return of football will represent the return of normal life. It's our everything. As the club's Chairman, I know that there's at least 300 players and thousands of community members counting on me and a group of irreplaceable volunteers to keep their club alive – 2021 is Welwyn Garden City FC's centenary year, and I have to find a way to stop the final whistle from being blown, and quick."



## The negative impact of club closures, according to community members

Members of grassroots football communities say if their club were to close, their lives would be impacted in the following ways:

1.

Reduction in level of physical and mental health.

2.

Feeling of isolation due to reduced social interaction.

3.

A lack of purpose, and no sense of belonging.

4.

A dip in confidence.

## Part two

# Grassroots communities have done as much as they can

74% of grassroots club members say they have gone out of their way to do what they can to help their club, either through raising or donating funds, or volunteering.

**74%**  
**HAVE GONE OUT OF THEIR WAY TO DO WHAT THEY CAN TO HELP THEIR CLUB.**

A massive 89% are left wishing they could do more to help, which is impossible from a distance.

Almost two in every five members of a grassroots football club are aware that members of their club's management team have bankrolled the club from their own pocket during the pandemic.

**89%**  
**ARE LEFT WISHING THEY COULD DO MORE TO HELP.**



**Part three**

# The impact COVID-19 has had on our clubs

Every grassroots football club in the UK has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the State of Play Report in August 2020, a further 3,440 (+5%) of grassroots football clubs say the pandemic has majorly impacted their club's finances and 12% have said their club will not recover - resulting in the closure of more than 5K clubs.

Sadly, only time will reveal the full picture, however. Grassroots clubs say the worst is yet to come, with many saying they are in 'standby mode' - having battened down the hatches and made every effort to reduce their outgoings. **It will only be when football is set to return that they'll understand the full extent of the damage done, and what their future holds.**



The majority of club secretaries surveyed said they are concerned for the future of grassroots football in the UK (67%).

**A FURTHER  
3,440  
CLUBS SAY THEIR  
FINANCES HAVE BEEN  
MAJORLY IMPACTED,  
SINCE THE LAST REPORT.  
+5% SINCE AUGUST**

**12%  
OF CLUBS SAY  
CLOSURE IS  
INEVITABLE.  
+2% SINCE AUGUST**

## What are the main areas of concern for grassroots football clubs today?



### PEOPLE

A shortage of volunteers will increase the 'single person point of failure' crisis that has existed in grassroots football for a long time, meaning training and games cannot go ahead if that one person isn't available.



### PLAYERS

A lack of interest from existing players and the increasing challenge to attract new players to a 'stop-start season'. A lack of players means a lack of teams, and a lack of teams means a lack of leagues - the start of the end.



### PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

Reduced fitness levels and impact on mental health of community members will have a detrimental impact on a positive return to grassroots football.



### FINANCIAL

A lack of income through subs, sponsorship or fundraising ability.



### FACILITIES

Already underfunded and ill-maintained before the pandemic, the state of Government-owned training facilities are in constant decline, despite the rising cost to hire them.

# 84%

**OF CLUBS SAY THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAVE GONE AS FAR AS THEY CAN TO SUPPORT THE EXISTENCE OF THEIR CLUB.**

## Case Study



## James Fotheringham

Director of Croydon FC, home to 150 players

"Before this latest lockdown, our home ground remained closed and all training facilities were shut. With no home games, our income was down by 90%, which made hiring other facilities near-impossible.

The unavoidable stop-start nature of the season is extremely frustrating and provides no consistency for any of the players at the club. We are very quickly becoming homeless with the local authority confirming that there are no plans to reopen the ground any time soon. We might be in a situation that next year, this famous football club might not exist. Without facilities, we have no club. Without enough players, there is no team, no game, no league – it's over. We need something, and quick, to give our club hope."



## Part four

# Grassroots football clubs are in the red

The impact on grassroots football clubs' finances has been devastating. 96% of clubs have seen a reduction in income, but by how much?

**30% OF CLUBS SAY  
THEIR INCOME IS  
DOWN BY**

↓ **1-30%**

**39% OF CLUBS SAY  
THEIR INCOME IS  
DOWN BY**

↓ **31-60%**

**27% OF CLUBS SAY  
THEIR INCOME IS  
DOWN BY**

↓ **61-100%**

### Case Study



## Gary Maidment

Chairman, Ampthill Town FC

The Government will have a lot to answer for if grassroots clubs are left to close. Our club is on council-owned land that we lease. During the first lockdown, not only did the local council not offer any financial support - apart from a temporary payment holiday - they stung us with a huge bill for maintenance to their land!

We have applied for every grant going, and the club was awarded a £1,500 pitch preparation grant from the Football Foundation, which went towards pitch renovations costing £4,000 in total - in the grand scheme of things it was a drop in the ocean. Once a club has closed, the chances of it reopening are slim to none. There would be an incredibly high cost associated with establishing a new club, compared to the modest investment the Government can make here, to save functioning, impactful, existing clubs that impact the lives of millions.

## Part five

# A lack of Government support for grassroots clubs

By nature, grassroots football clubs exist through the effort and determination of volunteers, players and the local community, not through any reliance on Government support. Going cap-in-hand isn't part of the grassroots DNA - clubs just want the ability to support themselves, which the pandemic has taken away.

The majority of grassroots clubs say they just need to be able to self-fund their club back to health, and haven't asked, or applied for, Government funds (82%). The majority of clubs (59%) disregard Government grants, with many claiming they are inaccessible and not worth the long-winded application process. Out of the 18% of clubs that have attempted to apply for Government funding, only 13% of clubs say they have received any level of funding - that equates to just over 1K clubs across the UK!\*

Right now, clubs need to raise around £8K to keep afloat, but with no play, no tournaments planned, and no public-facing activity, it's not possible.

Grassroots football clubs' main access point for Government financial support is the Football Foundation, which is funded by the Department for Media, Culture and Sport, the Premier League and the Football Association. The Football Foundation boasts that in its 19 years since inception, it has helped to fund grassroots football to the value of £1.5 billion. That's £78 million per year spent on clubs and associated services in England only. Divided by 38,000 grassroots clubs in England, that is the equivalent investment of £2,052 per club, which is a drop in the ocean.

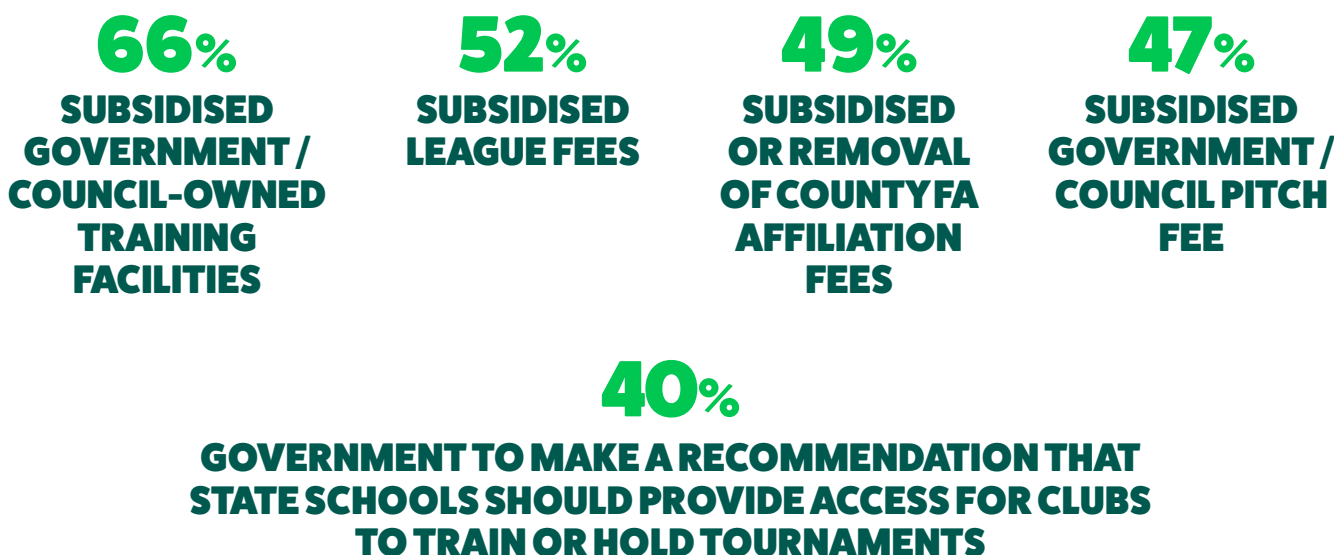
**ONLY 10%**  
**OF CLUBS THAT**  
**APPLIED FOR**  
**FUNDING WERE**  
**SUCCESSFUL.**

\* 18% of 43,000 clubs across the UK applied (7,740), of which only 13% were successful (1,006 clubs).

**Part six**

# What grassroots football clubs need

When asked what intervention would give clubs a chance to recover from the pandemic, the main five solutions listed by grassroots club secretaries were:



The majority of club secretaries hold the Government solely responsible for the failure of grassroots clubs. (60%) Football communities completely agree, with 75 percent calling for their local council or national Government to intervene to save their club!

Almost all (98%) of football community members say the obvious intervention that would be most welcome is for national Government and local councils to subsidise the state-owned training facilities for clubs, or open access to state schools outside of teaching hours, for grassroots clubs to share their facilities.



## Part seven

# The high price of grassroots training facilities

Around 95% of grassroots football training facilities are Government-owned. The cost of hiring council-owned training facilities for grassroots clubs varies wildly across the UK. Just one hour spent training on an all-weather pitch can cost anywhere between £30-£200.

The average grassroots football club will spend around £26,000\* per season on hiring local, council-owned training facilities, which

amounts to £1.1 billion\*\* of income for the local councils. With 5,000+ clubs on the brink of closure, the income a council can generate by hiring out sports facilities will be severely reduced, putting facilities at greater risk of deterioration or closure, which will impact the clubs that manage to survive.



### Case Study



## Becky Underwood

Club secretary and coach, Hatton United Junior Football Club, Derbyshire

"In our local area, training facilities costs range from £70 to £200 per hour. For our venue - the local leisure centre - it's £100 per hour. For all our 17 teams to train for just one hour each per week, it costs around £2,200 per month."

\* This is based on the average club having 10 teams, who train once a week, and the average cost per training session being £50.

\*\* 43,000 clubs spending £26,000 per year on council-owned training facilities.

## Part eight

# A call for urgent government intervention

This report acts as a call for urgent intervention from the Government, to subsidise or provide free access to training facilities for UK grassroots football clubs - either via council-owned sports grounds or state-owned schools, reducing one of the biggest outgoings that clubs will struggle to afford in the 2021/22 season.

This intervention must be in place for when grassroots football is resumed, in order to avoid 5000+ grassroots clubs closing, a figure that is expected to be the tip of the iceberg.

By supporting clubs to continue, the Government will have a positive impact on the lives of the 12 million people who are part of a grassroots football community - that's 17% of the UK - and will offset the avoidable cost of the end of grassroots football, in terms of the extra demand it will put on public spending.

Clubs closing will result in a deterioration of physical and mental health, and the fragmentation of communities and society is likely to result in a rise of community-based issues.

A message, from 12 million people belonging to a life-enhancing grassroots football club in the UK.

Ps. Visit the petition at [www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball](http://www.change.org/savegrassrootsfootball)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date 25/01/2021

**Dear Nigel Huddleston, MP**

Please do not blow the final whistle on grassroots football. You, as the Secretary of State for Sport in the UK, have all the power and must act quickly. A temporary reduction in local councils' income by subsidising access to training facilities will safeguard much larger savings in the long-run. Fail to do so, the Government will pay a much higher price, whilst impacting the lives of 12 million grassroots football community members in the UK.

Regards,



**David James, MBE**  
Former England  
goalkeeper



**Bill Bullen**  
CEO of Utilita,  
the UK's leading  
smart energy supplier

We co-sign this letter to represent the interests of 12 million+ football community members across the UK.

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



Grassroots football communities are renowned for their independence and their resilience in dealing with adversities, but COVID-19 will be the nail in the coffin for far too many, which could have been avoided. Grassroots football clubs are second homes for millions of community members – the beating heart of towns and cities right across the UK.

The disruption caused by the pandemic has impacted two football seasons already – two seasons during which clubs would normally have raised funds through holding public-facing tournaments and other fund-raising events, that would go on to cover a large part of our costs for the year. For a community-run, volunteer-led industry that relies on fund-raising through member involvement to make ends meet, being unable to come together makes it impossible for clubs to function.

The nature of grassroots football has meant that the Government's business support packages have had no impact – you can't furlough volunteers! The increasing costs and time investment required to keep clubs COVID-safe has eaten away at any small financial reserves that clubs may have had.

The data collated in the report is both substantive and credible – a true picture of the realities clubs are facing, and confirms the stories we hear each and every day. Our community is in crisis, and urgent support is required to avoid losing more than one in 10 clubs.



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

We had hoped that by publishing the 'State of Play' report in August, we wouldn't be required to publish an update, but sadly the continuation of the disruption caused by the pandemic has led to further devastation of grassroots football clubs.

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Despite our conversations with members of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the House of Lords since August 2020, which have outlined simple solutions to help grassroots football clubs, no action has been taken, hence this latest public call for action.

A sincere thank you goes out to the report case studies for sharing their experiences and stories of hardship, and the 4,137 members of football communities across the UK for taking part in the research - such a terrific response.

We will continue to support grassroots football clubs and communities in every way we can.



### Methodology

Utilita conducted two surveys, each revealing the views and experiences of 4,049 UK-based grassroots football community members and 91 grassroots football club secretaries, from 6-13 January 2021.

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

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

**DAVID JAMES**

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

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**#SWITCHBEFOREPITCH**