The catalyst for change: Exploring sustainability and pressures in non-league football

James Machay ✉ . *Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences, School of Geography and Environmental Science. University of Southampton. United Kingdom.*

ABSTRACT

Attentiveness towards sustainability has expeditiously intensified due to the evolving climate emergency. Yet non-league football remains neglected in academic and media discourse regarding its capacity to become more sustainable. With non-league clubs at the heart of communities and climate change posing an imminent threat to society, this contemporary area warrants further exploration. Therefore, the aim of this project is to investigate sustainable practices and challenges restricting implementation across non-league football clubs in the South of England. Adopting a qualitative approach, this study employs semi-structured interviews with club representatives, alongside observations of club facilities. Analysis of these results conveys a prominent enthusiasm from clubs in improving their sustainability, with observations highlighting efforts in revenue diversification and a strong social sustainability focus. However, clubs encounter significant financial constraints and weak governance, hindering efforts. Despite these obstacles, this study concludes by identifying several opportunities for improving sustainability, including enhanced education, financial interventions, and increased regulatory support from the Football Association. Aligning with existing research on football's financial disparities, this study challenges elite football's resource-intensive operations and commercialisation. This is effectively achieved by elucidating the potential for non-league football to be a catalyst for positive sustainable change.
Keywords: Sport management, Football, Soccer, Sustainability, Environment, Socioeconomic impact, Grassroots sport.

INTRODUCTION

The climate emergency and sustainability

Catastrophic, existential and disconcerting, the climate emergency is no longer a distant threat, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) asserting that human activities have warmed the Earth's climate by more than 1°C since the late 19th century (IPCC, 2021). Subsequently, the cataclysmic intensification of extreme weather events including floods, droughts, and storms considerably influence 3.6 billion people (UN, 2023) by displacing communities as well as destroying vital infrastructure. Additionally, global sea-level rise has expedited, with a mean escalation documented at 4.62 mm per year between 2013-2022 (ibid). These environmental alterations contribute to monumental biodiversity loss, with 1 million animal and plant species threatened with extinction (ibid). In response to the escalating threats, the term 'sustainability' has evolved into a widely utilised buzzword (Shao, 2024), transcending political, social and economic realms (Isgren and Longo, 2024). This prominence has been sufficiently reinforced via international forums including the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development in Rio (1992) and The Paris Agreement (2015), which stipulated the goal of limiting global temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels (UN, 2024).

The role of football

With over 5 billion fans across the globe (FIFA, 2021), football is the world's most popular sport, exerting significant influence on cultures, economies and the environment (Doidge et al., 2019). This perspective is demonstrated via recent football campaigns against racism, homophobia, and inequality. The Rainbow Laces campaign, launched by Stonewall (a UK LGBTQ+ rights organisation) in 2013, was embraced by footballers wearing rainbow-coloured laces as a symbol of support. Notably, the campaign contributed to a slight deterioration of homophobic attitudes in sport, with the percentage of fans who found homophobic remarks acceptable diminishing from 25% in 2017 to 14% in 2022 (Stonewall, 2022). Similarly, in June 2020, the Football Association (FA) expressed its unwavering support for the Black Lives Matter movement. This was demonstrated by the display of Black Lives Matter logos across shirts and the endorsement of players taking a knee before matches (The Football Association, 2020). In addition, clubs are often involved in community initiatives (Sanders et al., 2012), such as food bank donation drives (Amann and Doidge, 2023) and fundraising for charities.

These efforts demonstrate football's profound social impact, uniting communities and promoting equality on and off the pitch.

The neglected notion of non-league football

Evident in Figure.1, non-league football in England comprises of clubs situated outside the Premier League and Football League (EFL), spanning levels 5-8 of the football pyramid. Encompassing approximately 320 teams (FA, 2017), these divisions extend across the country, serving as vital centres for social cohesion and local identity (Irving, 2023). Since the COVID19 pandemic, non-league football in England has surged in popularity, reinforced by "*overall weekly crowds of 65,000*" (Scotson, 2022) in The National League (Step 1). This figure surpasses attendances across numerous second-tier leagues in Europe (ibid), underpinned by more affordable tickets and a community-focused atmosphere (Carmichael, 2020). Moreover, while professional leagues such as the German Football League have introduced sustainability guidelines, including compliance with climate protection efforts to participate in the league (Werner, 2023, p.5), English non-league clubs remain absent from this discourse. This notion is ardently sustained by O'Gorman, (2015, p.793) who established that there is a strong bias towards professional football leagues combined with an academic neglect of football at youth and grassroots level. This disparity raises apprehension regarding the

scalability of sustainability efforts across football pyramids, due to clubs possessing limited financial and technical resources.
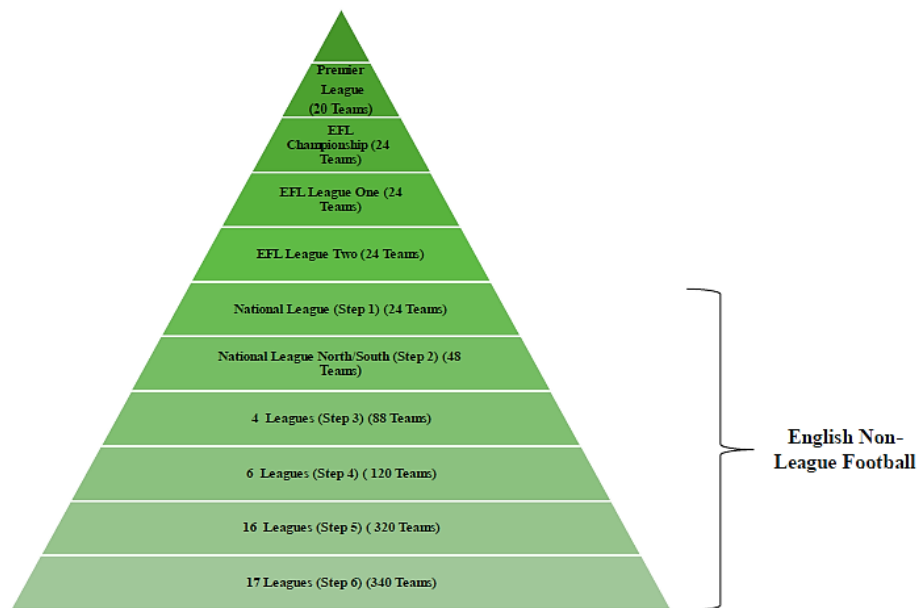
Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 1. The English League Football system illustrating the non-league pyramid

Structure to follow and objectives

Consequently, this study aims to evaluate sustainable practices in English non-league football, specifically clubs located in the South of England. The discoveries obtained from this research intend to propose recommendations that can inform policy and support non-league clubs in operating more sustainably. Accordingly, this study will commence with a comprehensive literature review, identifying voids and depicting the current state of sustainability within football. Proceeding this, a qualitative approach including semi-structured interviews and observations of club facilities will be analysed. To supplement these methods, three coherent objectives of the study will be followed:

  - Objective 1: To identify the key challenges and barriers clubs face in implementing sustainable practices.
  - Objective 2: To evaluate current sustainable practices of English non-league football clubs.
  - Objective 3: To propose recommendations for improving sustainable practices across English non-league football.

Henceforth, results, discussion and analysis will follow with limitations of the project discussed before conclusions and future research is suggested.

Literature review

Conducting a literature review is paramount to address notable gaps in academic research (Gratton and Jones, 2010), permitting this study to address coherent voids. Employing a systematic approach to gather relevant literature (Barisaux et al., 2024), databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus were used to obtain a diverse range of sources. While sustainability has become a critical concern across industries including energy, fashion, and transport (Nosratabadi et al, 2019), its integration within football

remains an evolving discourse (Khanna et al.,2024). This narrative is substantiated throughout recent tournaments, including the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, promoted as the first carbon-neutral tournament. This involved significant investment in modular, sustainability-focused infrastructure, including venues constructed of repurposed shipping containers (Medjralou and Zaoui, 2023). However, the tournament's sustainability claims were met with controversy, citing concerns regarding high energy consumption, water usage for grass pitches in the desert and emissions linked to travel (Nufer, 2024). To a similar extent, scrutiny of sustainable footballing governance has been topical due to recent club ownership alterations in England. For instance, the take-over of Newcastle United by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund in 2021 was predominantly funded by oil and gas reserves (Ingholt and Jørgensen, 2023), intensifying discussions regarding ethical responsibilities of clubs (Mabon, 2022, p.315). Moreover, literature related to this field fundamentally concentrates on top-tier professional clubs, perhaps attributed to its low commercial visibility and minimal media traction (Andrews and Harrington, 2016). Therefore, aligning with the projects overall aim of uncovering sustainability challenges in non-league football, this review will commence by defining sustainability in the context of football before analysing social, economic and environmental dimensions.

The concept of sustainability

The term sustainability is a contested, fuzzy discourse (Daddi et.al, 2021) as it encompasses several definitions, resulting in inconsistent use (Alhaddi, 2015). Contrarywise, this study will adopt the definition outlined in the 1987 United Nations (UN) Brundtland Commission, due to its acceptance as a foundational guideline for policy development. Hence, sustainability is defined as "*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" (United Nations, 1987). As Membrillo-Hernández et al. (2021) emphasise, this definition encompasses three fundamental dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. Conversely, Stephenson (2023) contends that while cultural sustainability is not explicitly included in the Brundtland framework, it is integral to shaping sustainable development. Consequently, this study incorporates cultural aspects within the social dimension to acknowledge its broader influence. In conjunction, this research draws upon the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, which evaluates performance across the three interconnected pillars (environmental, social, and economic) (Alhaddi, 2015). By applying the TBL perspective to this study, a holistic lens to assess the economic viability, social impact, and environmental responsibility of clubs will be accomplished. Proceeding 1987, allurement of sustainability has significantly escalated, stimulated by the establishment of the UN Millennium (MDG's) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) in 2000 and 2015 respectively. Correspondingly, public awareness of sustainability has markedly increased, mirrored by adoption of trends including veganism, minimalism, and second-hand consumption, with the UK's second-hand retail sector growing by 27.2% in 2021 (Sabanoglu, 2021).

Sustainability in football

Over a decade ago, football began to recognise environmental responsibility on an international level through carbon reduction efforts (Collins and Flynn, 2008). Since this juncture, "*it appears little attention has been directed towards its study and even less work has filtered down the football pyramid*" (Carmicheal, 2020, p.7). This statement holds strong verisimilitude, heavily reinforced by Hernández et.al (2023) who note that despite its significant economic and social impact, the football industry has lagged in addressing sustainability-oriented strategies. Hence, objective two of this study will unearth current sustainable practices within non-league football. Furthermore, the lack of sustainability across football demands urgent improvement, consolidated via a recent study ascertaining that sport contributes to 0.4% of total global emissions (Marrucci, et.al, 2023). While this figure may appear minor, it surpasses the carbon footprint of some nations including Denmark (ibid). This value is sufficiently reinforced by major footballing events including Euro 2020 obtaining a significant environmental footprint, with emissions reaching 3 million tonnes of CO_2 (ibid). As Pereira et al.

(2019) note, these events generate various adverse environmental impacts through travel to matches, waste, as well as energy and water use to maintain pitches. Additionally, these events ensue astronomical financial ramifications (Pache, 2020) and social challenges including displacement of local communities (Gleason, 2023, p.5). While Pereira et al. statement holds considerable validity, they fail to acknowledge that grassroots football does engage in unsustainable practices. This notion is buttressed by Mabon (2023, p.316), who contends that considerable emissions from lower tier football clubs in England are largely attributed to travel and stadium related activities. Besides, a major challenge in sustainability efforts is the presence of "*greenwashing*" and "*social washing.*" Whereby organisations promote misleading environmental claims to enhance their public image without substantial action (Mabon, 2010). Thus, this study will be aware of the phenomenon and attempt to avoid promoting misleading claims.

Economic sustainability and pressures in football
Economic sustainability in football refers to the ability of clubs to maintain financial stability while ensuring long-term viability (Villarino, 2021). This involves balancing revenue generation with expenditure and conforming to the obstacles proposed by commercialisation and sponsorship (ibid). Nevertheless, as Evans (2024) contends, financial distresses for football clubs include insufficient revenue generation, financial losses from relegation, TV broadcasting revenue, gate receipts and wages. Here, Evans provides a compelling rationale, particularly in the context of non-league clubs. This is because, unlike elite football clubs that benefit from lucrative broadcasting deals and commercial partnerships, lower-league clubs struggle to generate sustainable income. This is exemplified by the dissolution of clubs including Bury (2019), Macclesfield Town (2020), and Rushden & Diamonds (2011). Albeit the football authorities have attempted to mitigate unsustainable financial practices across football. To demonstrate, in 2004 the EFL introduced a Salary Cost Management Protocol (SCMP), restricting the spend that clubs could use on player wages. Proceeding this, in 2012 the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) introduced 'Financial Fair Play' regulations to prevent clubs from spending beyond their earnings and ensure transparency in financial dealings (Villarino, 2021). In turn, this has boosted more sustainable financial management in the football industry. While these regulations do promote fiscal responsibility, Villarino fails to acknowledge that the regulations may also impose additional constraints on less affluent clubs (Evans, 2024).

Social sustainability and community engagement in football
Off the pitch, clubs serve as the heart of their communities (Scottish FA, 2024), fostering social sustainability, which can be referred to as the sport's ability to promote social cohesion. Elite clubs including Barcelona and Manchester United have been exemplars in fostering equitable and supportive initiatives through various charitable programmes (Kolyperas, 2012). Such initiatives elucidate the clubs' recognition of their responsibility to leverage their global platforms for social good. This notion holds strong validity, reinforced by Amann and Doidge's (2023) study of non-league Whitehawk FC's participation in Pledge Ball, which encouraged fans from various teams to compete in reducing their emissions. Whitehawk fans pledged to reduce their emissions by 175,000kg (Miller, 2021), highlighting how clubs can cultivate environmental awareness. Conversely, acquiring a business perspective, some scholars refer to social sustainability through the lens of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This is well articulated by Porter (2019) who depicts CSR as the balance between business objectives and social goals, reinforced by clubs engaging with local businesses, schools, and the community (ibid).

Moreover, football functions as a formidable catalyst for social change, promoting equality and inclusion. Campaigns such as 'Show Racism the Red Card' and 'Rainbow Laces' actively challenge prejudice against racism and homophobia. Equally, symbolic gestures, such as taking the knee, evident in Figure.2 intends to highlight racial injustice, with 80% of players (in a PFA survey of 400 participants) (Sky News, 2020)

expressing their commitment to continue to support the campaign. Therefore, by harnessing its global influence, football can promote sustainability and foster social change.

Source: The FA, 2021.

Figure 2. England players taking the knee in fight against racial injustice before the start of a Nations League match.

Environmental sustainability and impact of football

As Werner (2023) proclaims, while the climate movement in sport is in its infancy, football and the environment share an undeniable relationship. Reinforced by Pereira et al. (2019), football impacts the environment through operational activities, while the environment provides appropriate weather conditions and natural resources such as the field of play. However, despite escalating apprehension regarding climate change, Khanna et.al (2024) argue that "*there is a lack of academic literature that explores the evaluation of football club's carbon footprints*" (p.1587). Authors juxtapose this postulation by emphasising the ecological footprint of stadiums. Reflecting this awareness, several clubs in elite leagues have initiated measures to mitigate their stadium's environmental footprint. For instance, Arsenal FC have equipped the Emirates Stadium with large-scale battery energy storage systems, running entirely on renewable energy (Vaughan, 2018). While this portrays a positive step towards sustainability, non-league clubs have taken limited action to address their environmental footprint (Khanna et al., 2024). Contrarywise, Mabon (2022) contends this notion by promoting the unique example of Forest Green Rovers who play in the National League (Step 1) and are hailed by FIFA (The International Governing Body of Association Football) as "*the world's greenest football club*" (UN Climate Change, 2020). The club has implemented numerous eco-friendly initiatives, including solar panels and the adoption of a vegan menu for players and fans. While this remains an isolated example, this approach demonstrates the potential for integrating environmental sustainability into non-league football operations. Moreover, travel to matches contributes heavily to a football club's carbon footprint. A recent study conducted by Loewen and Wicker (2021) displayed that the average football fan's carbon footprint amounts to 311.1 kg of CO_2 per year, with 70% of emissions attributed to personal transportation (p.1598). This indicates a major area for improvement, which remains largely unaddressed by many clubs (ibid).

Governance and policy influences

Effective governance and policy interventions are essential in promoting sustainability within football (Hernández et al., 2023). Within England, The Football Association (FA) play a crucial role in shaping footballing agendas, including regulations on financial management, stadium licensing and youth development. Still, while Carmicheal (2020) appropriately acknowledges that sustainability has been a key issue for the FA since 2007, he opposes that their efforts address their impacts as an employer, rather than the broader impacts of the game. This is a robust argument, advocated by the lack of regulations associated to sustainability set out by the FA across all football leagues in England. Conversely, as Mabon (2023)

connotes, organisations such as 'Football for Future' and 'Fossil Free Football' are lobbying governments, football associations, and leagues to implement policy towards climate change and environmental sustainability. Although, implementation remains inconsistent across different levels of the sport. This point holds strong verisimilitude, buttressed by the Football Foundation (UK Sport Charity) who fund facility improvements in the sport and encourage grant applicants to consider environmental impacts. Nonetheless, the Foundation "*does not offer specific advice, merely encouragement to consider those subjects.*" (Carmicheal, 2020, p.8). Thus, objective three will propose recommendations for improving sustainable practices across English nonleague football.

Source: UN, 2022.

Figure 3. The United Nations 'Football for the Goals' Initiative, in Partnership with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Furthermore, on a global scale, international organisations including the UN and UEFA have attempted to provide suitable frameworks to encourage sustainable practices across world football (Hernández et. al., 2023). This is supplemented by Figure.3, which depicts the UN's 'Football for the goals' initiative, launched in July 2022, which provides a platform for the football community to engage with the SDGs (UN, 2022). This has prompted the development of significant transnational policy documents for sport, with notable examples including the Kazan Action Plan (2017) and Commonwealth policy guidance, which accentuate the position of sport in nurturing social inclusion, peace and development (Bjelkanovic, B., 2020). While using the SDGs as a lens to analyse sustainable practices within non-league football would provide an insightful perspective, this study will not adopt it. This is because non-league clubs hold limited awareness of the SDGs, so this study will align with the TBL framework instead.

Research gaps and conclusion
In conclusion, while authors such as Mabon (2022) and Carmichael (2020) have contributed significantly to the comprehension of economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainability in the context of football, research on the English non-league pyramid remains sparse. While literature is relatively recent, depicting ongoing fluxes in policy, governance, and club operations, it overlooks the unique challenges and opportunities at this level, including its reliance on community support and limited financial resources. Ergo, this study aims to address these gaps by exploring how non-league clubs are attempting to become more sustainable while navigating evolving pressures. This will be achieved by employing semi-structured interviews and observations to evaluate sustainable practices, identify barriers for implementation and propose recommendations for improving sustainable practices of non-league clubs, aligning with the objectives.

METHODS

Research approach
To align with the study's primary aim of investigating the sustainability of non-league football clubs and barriers for implementation, this research employs an inductive, qualitative approach. As Bjelkanovic (2020)

notes, quantitative research records observable phenomena, while qualitative methods provide deeper contextual insights beyond numerical data. Thus, semi structured interviews serve as the predominant data collection method as they are the most effective and convenient approach of gathering information (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Moreover, this research will adopt a grounded theory approach (Gratton and Jones, 2010), permitting the emergence of themes and theories to rise inductively from the data via analysis (Khan, 2014). In addition to interviews, observations of club stadia will be conducted to evaluate sustainability practices in real-world settings. Observations will include infrastructure, waste management practices and energy usage. This approach is firmly reinforced by previous research in sport ecology, where interviews have been employed to investigate environmental and sustainability concerns within sport organisations (McCullough, 2013 and Carmichael, 2020).

Source: Authors own, 2024.

Figure 4. Illustration depicting the research path taken.

Epistemological and ontological considerations

Ontology examines the nature of reality (Gratton and Jones, 2010), while epistemology explores how knowledge regarding reality is acquired and validated (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Epistemological and ontological considerations of sustainability in non-league football centre on the role of supporter involvement and ownership as fundamental aspects of its social existence. Therefore, this study assumes an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology, facilitating an in-depth comprehension of club experiences interpreting sustainability. Likewise, this study acknowledges that these perspectives are moulded by valuable interactions, sufficiently reinforced by Burrell and Morgan (1979) who dispute that the concept of supporter involvement and ownership exemplify existence within broader social frameworks Ontologically, football is more than a game (Irving, 2023), representing clubs as pillars of their community, that fulfil social requirements, fostering a sense of belonging and pride. Alternative approaches, such as positivism are rejected due to their limitations in capturing the depth and complexity of human experiences. As demonstrated by McCullough (2013), qualitative interviews provide a means to investigate attitudes and social norms in ways that statistical tools cannot. Above all, the epistemological foundations of sustainability in football, particularly within governance and long-term planning, remain underexplored. This gap stresses the obligation for further research to clarify responsibilities in ensuring club sustainability and governance.

Sampling

This study used purposive sampling, (Draper, 2009) investigating clubs located between steps 1-6 of the English non-league pyramid. Clubs were contacted following reference of the FA handbook, which provided a comprehensive and up-to-date database of non-league clubs. This method strongly aligns with the objectives of uncovering barriers and current sustainability practices, as it facilitates interaction with participants who are actively involved in club operations. Initially, the study targeted clubs within The Combined Counties Football League (Step 6). However, due to limited responses, the scope was expanded to clubs located between steps 1-6, as clubs beyond this often lack dedicated facilities and have limited external staff. This systematic approach was first executed via a blanket email, (Appendix B) sent to 230 clubs situated across the South of England, in leagues achievable to reach in-person, minimising the environmental footprint of the project. Although, to introduce geographical diversity, one club from the North

of England was included to provide comparative insights into sustainability practices across different areas. Conversely, alternative methods including random or stratified sampling would not have been appropriate, as clubs determined by probability sampling may not have been willing to cooperate in this study. Though, as Sharma (2017) accentuates, purposive sampling could lead to selection bias. This may occur due to participants being selected based on their availability rather than through random selection (ibid). While this is a reasonable statement, convenience sampling is appropriate as it facilitates the inclusion of clubs with varying levels of engagement in sustainability practices.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted during the summer off-season to ensure the availability of stakeholders. While it is paramount to acknowledge stakeholders such as supporters, players, and governing bodies, this study focuses on chairpersons, secretaries, and commercial officers due to their pivotal role in decision-making and implementing sustainable initiatives within clubs (Marrucci et.al, 2023). Semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and online, lasting 30-50 minutes, with stadia observations solely occurring in person. This approach was inspired by the work of Irving (2023), who employed similar qualitative methods to explore community ownership models in football. Succeeding, Knox and Burkard's (2009) interview guidance, participants were allocated control over the interview location, allowing them to select the setting in which they felt most at ease, including boardrooms, clubhouses and changing rooms. Whilst 25 pre-determined interview questions were formulated (Appendix E), the flexibility of a semi-structured approach actively encouraged a two-way dialogue (Longhurst, 2003). Similarly, this approach over alternative methods, such as focus groups and questionnaires, enabled an enhanced and more detailed exploration of participants' thoughts. This is sufficiently reinforced by McCullough's (2013) work, in which interviews were used to record attitudes and behavioural controls in relation to sport and the environment. In conjunction, an informal pilot interview involving a volunteer from a community football club unaffiliated with the sample was conducted to refine the interview schedule.

Data analysis

Observation notes and interviews were transcribed employing NVivo software, facilitating familiarisation of the data in a preliminary form of analysis, also known as 'essence capturing' (Saldana, 2022). This inductive approach captured vital information relating to the research objectives by collecting perception and knowledge grounded in human experience (Azungah, 2018). Proceeding this, an inductive thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) approach was adopted, modelled by the work of Miles and Huberman (1994). This ensured a comprehensive grounded theory examination, permitting the emergence of recurring themes across the data to be recognised. This method was selected over content analysis, which involves determining themes prior to coding. This is due to permitting both emic and etic perspectives to be analysed during coding (Flowerdew, 2008), ensuring a nuanced approach to comprehending the data (Ibid). Subsequently, the coding process progressed through five main stages (Vaismoradi et al., 2016):

Table 1. Key stages used during data analysis (Source: Author's Own, 2025).

1	**Familiarisation with the data:** Reading and transcription of the data to gain an overall understanding.
2	**Initial coding:** Open coding of the data set to generate initial codes.
3	**Searching for themes:** Grouping of similar codes to establish potential themes by utilising descriptive coding.
4	**Reviewing themes:** Pattern coding including the refinement of data to uncover relationships and recurring patterns.
5	**Thematic analysis:** Generation of codes and themes, resulting in the synthesisation of patterns and broader themes, addressing the research objectives.

Nonetheless, due to the manageable dataset size, a manual coding approach (Flowerdew 2008) was elected instead of a software-based method such as auto coding, ensuring close engagement with the data. Initially,

relevant words and phrases were identified and assigned codes through open coding (Allen, 2017) to capture key themes and establish inductive connections between data. Then Axial coding (ibid) was applied using techniques suggested by Saldana, (2022) to identify relationships and refine categories. Finally, selective coding synthesised analytical patterns into broader explanations, which will be analysed in the proceeding chapters.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount to consider, ensuring research is both socially and morally acceptable (Gratton and Jones, 2010). This study adhered to stringent guidelines, with ethical approval obtained on: 22/07/24 (Appendix A), complying with the Ethical Review Governance Office (ERGO) standards which included a comprehensive risk assessment. Besides, as Henn et al. (2021) caution, ethical considerations may appear as "*boxes that simply have to be ticked in the right way*", rather than genuine safeguards. Accordingly, prior to conducting interviews, participants were prescribed the opportunity to ask questions, ensuring they were fully informed. In conjunction, stakeholders were required to sign a consent form (Appendix D) which are stored securely behind a password protected OneDrive. Moreover, participants were also provided a participant information form (Appendix C) displaying their rights, including the ability to withdraw from the study within 30 days post-interview and the right to anonymity. Similarly, observations were unobtrusive and caused minimal disturbance. Likewise, recognising that ethical research extends beyond a mere box-ticking exercise, assurances were taken to ensure genuine informed consent. Hence, language used in the participant information documents and interviews was transparent and free from technical jargon, preventing potential deception. Simultaneously, participants were offered follow-up opportunities and a condensed report summarising the findings, which will be sent after the study's completion. This approach is not only ethical but also aligns with the principle of giving back to participants (Cloke et al., 2004).

Validity and reliability

Ensuring validity and reliability in study methods are essential for producing accurate and truthful data (Gratton and Jones, 2010). As the study sought personal views, potential bias was considered by offering anonymity to reduce the fear of judgement. This is reinforced by Irving (2023) who suggests that research must focus on the subject matter, rather than diverging into areas of personal interest. Similarly, accurately transcribing interviews ensured no one was misquoted, giving the study integrity. Moreover, while qualitative research does not seek replicability in the same way as quantitative research, steps were taken to enhance verisimilitude. For instance, standardised interview schedules (Appendix E) and observational criteria were adhered to. Nonetheless, Pierce and Lawhon (2015) probe the validity of observations, highlighting that "*observations made while walking are not rigorously sampled or subject to tests of reliability*" (p. 4). While this criticism is credible, recorded observations provide valuable insights and strongly support findings, despite lacking formal rigor.

Methodological issues

As with any research project, several challenges arose, with a primary issue involving participants requesting online interviews due to time constraints. This limitation restricted in person observations of club facilities and may have hindered rapport-building, impacting response depth (Dowling, 2005). Nevertheless, the researcher holds a strong comprehension of the cultural and logistical dynamics of the sport, ensuring rapport was fostered from the outset.

In a similar fashion, anonymity requests imposed constraints on the research, limiting the level of detail that could be disclosed including club name, location and images of good practice. Furthermore, using purposive

sampling introduced the risk of researcher bias in participant selection (Sharma, 2017). Although, due to non-responses, it was paramount to use this method to ensure that the sample aligned with the research objectives (Gratton and Jones, 2010). Still, while clubs were permitted to nominate stakeholders for interview, it is crucial to acknowledge that all interviewees occupied more senior positions than the researcher, raising the possibility that these individuals might wield what Fleming (2019) defines as informal power. Similarly, the topic's potential negative implications for club reputation introduced biases, such as participants potentially framing their responses defensively or emphasising positive aspects of their club. Despite these limitations, the chosen methodologies facilitated rich qualitative exploration, offering valuable insights to the broader academic discourse.
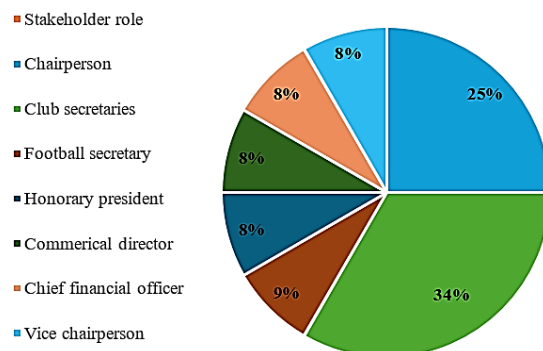
RESULTS

This chapter delineates results obtained from semi-structured interviews and stadium observations to comprehend how sustainability is defined and implemented across non-league football clubs in the South of England. This will be competently attained by illuminating dominant themes (Nowell et al., 2017) and insights that have emerged from analysis complemented by NVivo software (Limna, 2023). Through its epistemological intervention, this section will challenge prevailing narratives of elite football, which often neglect the nonleague pyramid (Wilson, Ramchandani and Plumley, 2018). Henceforth, this chapter will summarise the results before being divided into 6 sections, aligning with the research objectives. The discussion will commence by exploring the comprehension of sustainability within non-league, identifying the barriers to its implementation as well as the current practices in place. Proceeding this, it will propose recommendations for advancing sustainable practices across the English non-league pyramid, before addressing the study's limitations and exploring potential future developments in the field.

Participant overview
In response to the initial participant recruitment emails, 13.91% (n = 32) of clubs responded. This response rate was influenced by factors encompassing scheduling conflicts and a lack of club resources. However, interviews were conducted with 37.5% of the initial (n = 12) cohort. While this percentage may ostensibly appear low, the sample size does resolutely correlate with prior sport ecology research which obtained a similar sample size (Baldwin, 2010 and Carmichael, 2020), before reaching thematic saturation (Biddle et al., 2001). These interviews were conducted with clubs ranging from step 2 of the non-league pyramid (Vanarama National League South) to step 6 (Combined Counties Football League Division one).

Stakeholder Position of Interviewees

Legend:
- Stakeholder role
- Chairperson
- Club secretaries
- Football secretary
- Honorary president
- Commerical director
- Chief financial officer
- Vice chairperson

Pie chart values: 25%, 34%, 9%, 8%, 8%, 8%, 8%

Source: Authors Own, 2025.

Figure 5. The frequency of positions held by stakeholders who partook in the study.

Depicted in Figure.5, participants included club stakeholders comprising of chairpersons, secretaries, an honorary president, commercial director and a chief financial officer. Due to anonymity disclosure, participants will be referred to as Participant A-L (Table.2), to reduce identifying details (Saunders and Kitzinger, 2015). Although, several clubs expressed a desire for their names to be mentioned, aligning with the notion that stakeholders actively seek increased media attention (Cleland et al., 2018). Therefore, the occasional use of participant or club name will be presented when contextually relevant to enhance clarity and integrity of the findings.

Table 2. Participant information table including name, club, role, and reasoning behind interview motivations (Source: Authors own, 2025)

| Participant Name	Club	Role	Location/ Date	Reason for Interview
Nick Riley	Abbey Rangers	Chairman	Addlestone Moor (Stadium), 31/08/24	Nick has been Involved with the club for 17 years, serving on the club's committee before becoming chairman. He has a holistic overview of the club including knowledge on current sustainable practices and the long-term vision of the club. Nick is extremely passionate regarding community engagement, youth development and the environment.
Danny James	Bedfont	Football Secretary	Online, 21/08/24	Possessing a wealth of football and regional knowledge, Danny was involved with coaching before his current role as secretary. Danny provides an operational perspective that oversees club logistics and operations. As well as a comprehension of compliance regulations outlined by the league and governing bodies.
Mike Joiner	Chase Town	Honorary President	Online, 26/09/24	Mike has been associated with the club for nearly 60 years, offering a wealth of experience and insight into the club's evolution from grassroots level. Having overseen recent investment, Mike possess strong relationships with stakeholders and acts in an advisory role for other teams, collaborating closely with the FA. Additionally, interviewing a club in a different part of the country provides geographical variety.
Nick Dunn	Deal Town	Commercial Director	Online, 11/10/24	Nick is responsible for the club's engagement with the local community, partners and has been at the club in an official role for 4 years. Nick focusses on acquiring additional sponsorship and is a referee development lead for the Kent FA.
Neil McCormack	Real Bedford	Club Secretary	Ledger Stadium, 22/09/24	Neil oversees club facilities and infrastructure while coordinating short and long-term requirements of the club. This encompasses ground grading requirements and compliance with governance regulations.
Stephen Williams	Wokingham Town	Chairman	Online, 02/09/24	Stephen has progressed from being involved in the youth section of the club to chairman. This involvement spans several years and involves overseeing all aspects of the club.
Participant A	Anonymous	Club Secretary	Online, 11/10/24	Anonymity Requested
Participant B	Anonymous	Club Secretary	Online, 30/08/24	Anonymity Requested
Participant C	Anonymous	Chairman	Stadium, 14/09/24	Anonymity Requested
Participant D	Anonymous	Vice Chairman	Stadium, 05/10/24	Anonymity Requested
Participant E	Anonymous	Chief Financial Officer	Stadium, 21/10/24	Anonymity Requested
Participant F	Anonymous	Club Secretary	Online, 29/08/24	Anonymity Requested

Source: NVivo, 2025.
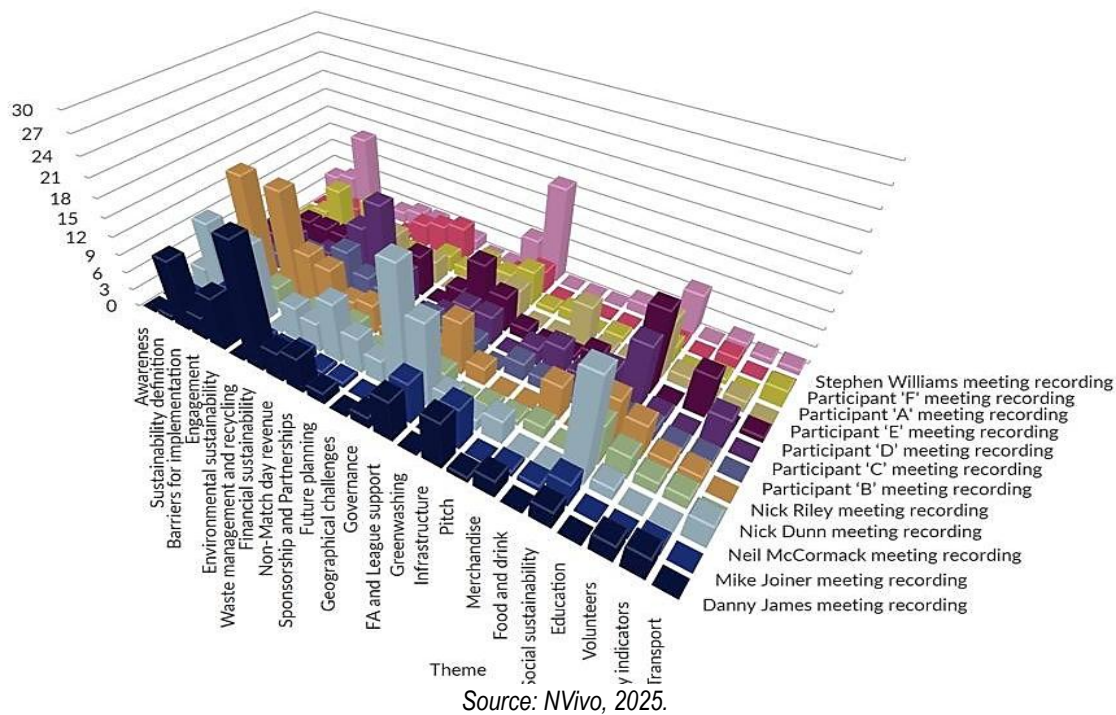
Figure 6. Thematic frequency analysis.

Thematic exposition

Data extracted from the interviews analysed through NVivo, divulges several key themes. Thematic frequency across each interview is illustrated in Figure.6, with highly referenced themes including social sustainability (88), barriers for implementation (88), environmental sustainability (79), financial sustainability (79), FA and League support (85). This aligns with current literature, which highlights that football clubs play a central role in their community (Baldwin, 2010) and that sustainability is a rapidly emerging topic within the sport (Villarino, 2021). Conversely, the lowest referenced themes include waste management (21), sustainability metrics (18), education (17) and transport (9). These results are surprising given footballs widely recognised role as an educational vehicle (Sanders et al., 2012). In parallel, these findings imply that non-league football still encounters complications in attaining long term sustainability, supplementing Carmichael's (2020) assertion that financial and operational stability remains elusive for lower-tier clubs.

DISCUSSION

Awareness and conceptualisation of sustainability

The sample accentuates a mixed comprehension of sustainability as a concept, coinciding with the affirmation that sustainability is a contested and fuzzy discourse (Alhaddi, 2015). 66.67% of stakeholders primarily associated the term with financial viability, exemplified by Figure.7, which outlines that economic terms such as "*revenue*", "*budgeting*" and "*cost*" were mentioned the most compared to environmental and social aspects. In combination, statements including: "*sustainability is principally about the economic sustainability*" (Participant K) as well as "*sustainability in our eyes means that we don't spend beyond the revenue that the club actually generates.*" (Participant C), represents a confined focus, coinciding with existing literature (Plumley, 2018, p.9). This is profusely fortified through the recent bankruptcy of several nonleague clubs (Irving, 2023), with stakeholders looking to avoid similar misfortunes. Nonetheless, the concept of sustainability extends beyond financial aspects, with several club representatives recognising this.

For instance, Participant G advocates that "*sustainability doesn't finish or end anywhere...It crosses so many factors*.," indicating a holistic comprehension. This connotes an increasing perception of sustainability within the game, converging with Todaro et al. (2023), who assert that an awareness of sustainability among key football club stakeholders is essential due to the increasing pressure from fans, sponsors, and regulatory bodies to adopt sustainable practices. Moreover, the increasing consciousness of sustainability is buttressed by 41.67% of clubs expressing a desire to operate in a more environmentally friendly manner, affirmed by the statement:

> "*[We are] trying to make sure that the club operates in a way that becomes a bit greener, trying to ensure that we operate in a way that's as environmentally friendly as you possibly can*" (Participant J).
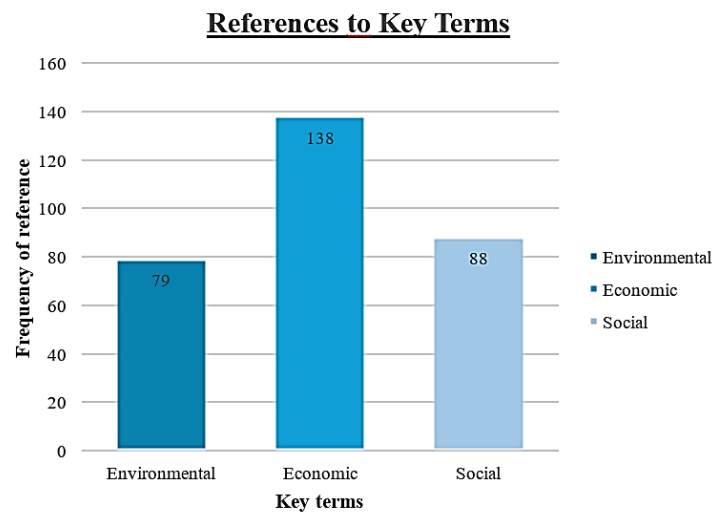
Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 7. Frequency of the three key terms mentioned across the interviews.

This propounds that while there is a perception of issues, implementation remains a challenge for non-league clubs (Carmicheal, 2022). Correspondingly, additional aspects of sustainability, including social and cultural dimensions, were acknowledged, albeit to a lesser extent. Although all participants demonstrated their club's awareness of their pivotal role within the community, associating with the broader societal responsibility that clubs hold (Baldwin, 2010). To a similar magnitude, the awareness of greenwashing among clubs appears mixed, with the term mentioned only 10 times across all interviews. While some club officials (n = 4) portrayed a basic understanding of greenwashing, others were unfamiliar. Participant G demonstrated a nuanced understanding, recognising greenwashing as a practice of making empty promises about environmental initiatives. This explicit stance is proactive, aptly conforming with established definitions across literature (Miller, 2017). This suggests a growing shift toward transparency and meaningful initiatives rather than superficial PR efforts. Overall, the disparity of interpretations and actions of sustainability stipulates a necessity for coherent communication and education from football governing bodies, bridging the knowledge gap.

Sustainability measuring metrics
One interesting finding lends itself to the state of sustainability measurement metrics across the footballing pyramid, which remain in their nascent stages. While no club exhibited a strong monitoring of their sustainable practices, (n = 3) clubs have adopted ad-hoc approaches, related to finance. For instance, Participants C

and I focus on recording attendances, food purchases, and "*per-capita spending*" (Participant C) as proxies for financial sustainability. In contrast, findings demonstrate that other non-league clubs struggle to quantify sustainability metrics. As one participant stated, "*I think it's quite difficult to put something quantifiable in place*" (Participant J). This is primarily due to the absence of clear guidelines and the financial constraints that prevent investment into robust tracking systems. Furthermore, unlike professional clubs that report carbon footprints and community engagement metrics (Pereira et.al, 2019), non-league teams often rely on informal assessments. This variation suggests that sustainability measurement is highly context-dependent and influenced by club priorities, rather than a standardised approach. Equally, a surprising result was that teams situated higher up the non-league pyramid demonstrated less aspiration to become more sustainable, compared to those lower down. One would expect larger teams, with greater financial resources and infrastructure to be more proactive in implementing sustainability measures. This result provides a new lens to future policy, juxtaposing existing literature which presents an elitist fixation on professional football, where structured ESG (environmental, social, and governance) disclosures and comprehensive sustainability strategies are more prevalent (Zülch, Cruz and Kirsch, 2021).

Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 8. Word cloud consisting of key barriers to sustainability identified by participants.

Barriers in implementing sustainable initiatives
Financial constraints
Linking directly to research objective one, encapsulated in Figure.8, financial constraints emerged as the primary obstacle for most clubs in implementing sustainable measures. This is consistent with Maguire and Philippou's (2023) research on the financial sustainability of clubs, accentuating that clubs tend to operate negative cash flows with heavy reliance on owner funding, intensifying peril of financial instability. A correlated discovery is the heavy reliance on grants, sponsorship and gate receipts outlined by most participants. This denotes the complexity for clubs in allocating funds towards implementing sustainable practices. On the contrary, while sustainability initiatives including LED lights and electric vehicle charging points are often considered to be "*more expensive to buy and to install*" (Participant H), they tend to be cheaper in the long run (Bello, 2020). Although, as Participant G indicates, obtaining the initial funds remains a challenge. This is becoming increasingly difficult with non-league clubs facing increased operational costs, player wages and a lack of commercial revenue streams (Maguire and Philippou, 2023).

Geographical challenges
The physical location of clubs presents another substantial barrier. Findings indicate that exogenous factors including topography, geology and settlement areas limit the implementation of sustainable practices.
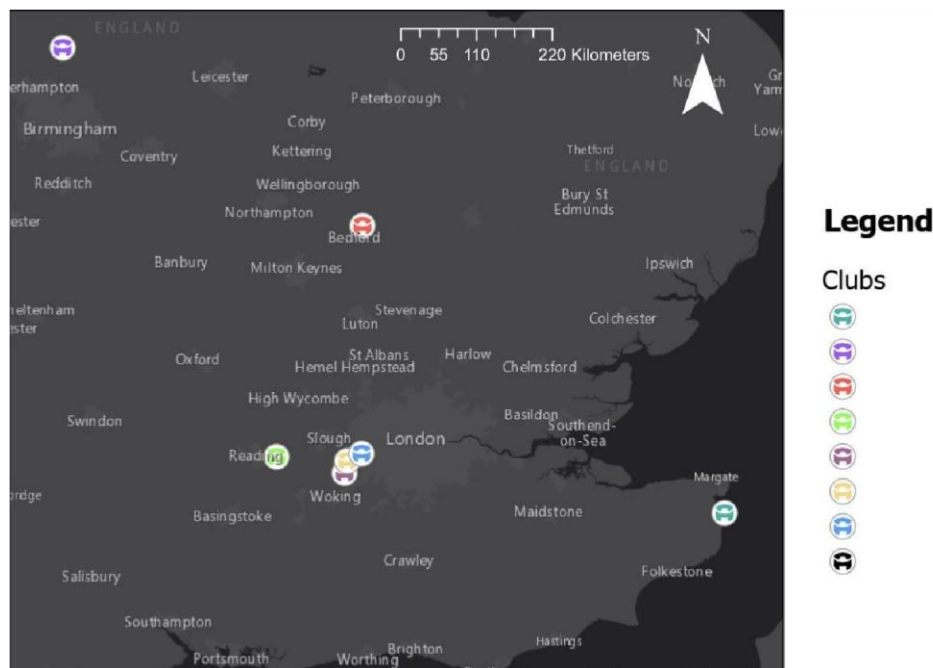
Source: Authors Own, ArcGIS, 2024.

Figure 9. Map of the study site including icons positioned at each club interviewed.

Exhibited in Figure.9, most clubs interviewed were situated West of London in Berkshire and Surrey, with other clubs in Kent and Bedfordshire. Although, one club is situated "*in a flood zone*" (Participant K) and another's ground is "*largely clay*" (Participant F), resulting in persistent drainage issues, leading to waterlogging of the pitch and frequent match postponements. Thus, straining the already limited resources of these clubs and further exacerbating the difficulty of implementing sustainable practices. While these findings do supplement extensive literature on climate change's impact on football clubs (Mabon, 2020 and Baldwin, 2010), by illuminating how shifting environmental conditions are disrupting operations, minimal academic work has addressed the broader geographical constraints that hinder sustainability efforts at non-league level. This void indicates that more attention should be allocated to specific locational difficulties faced by clubs. Furthermore, several clubs are situated in suburban areas with poor public transport connections. This is reinforced by Participant K who states, "*We're not very well served by public transport.*" While this may affect matchday attendances, geographical location can provide clubs with an opportunity to become more sustainable. For instance, since traveling by car is the primary choice for fans attending games (McCullough, 2013), clubs could draw inspiration from Sunderland AFC who provide a complimentary park-and-ride service along with cycling storage for fans. Similarly, results allude that displacement because of urban regeneration projects have displaced neighbourhoods that historically supported local clubs (Participant D). The relocation of these communities leads to a decline in volunteer numbers and financial contributions, weakening the clubs' ability to invest in sustainable initiatives (Jakobsen et.al, 2009).

Lack of governance and a regulatory vacuum
A salient barrier emerging during interviews was the lack of support from governing bodies, including the FA and regional leagues. Several participants mentioned that while the FA provide general advice on economic sustainability and best practice, there are "*no specific regulations or standards set by the FA or league regarding [social or environmental] sustainability*" (Participant A). Instead, communications from the FA typically focus on welfare and spectator behaviour rather than environmental issues. This critique is echoed

by Bury (2015), who questioned the FA's action plan to combat homophobia in football. Homogenously, regulatory frameworks imposed by leagues and the FA cultivate additional financial burdens that can detract clubs from pursuing sustainable practices. For instance, league mandates, such as printed programmes and ground grading criteria, impose high costs on clubs without incentivising sustainability. The FA's 56-page ground grading requirements (FA, 2024) outline facility standards for each non-league tier, covering pitch dimensions, changing rooms, floodlights, and hospitality provisions. Although, one participant expressed:

> *"There's no clear guidance...the FA are not pushing it [sustainability]... you're supposed to have some seats in your stand marked for away directors and home directors. Come on, we're step five football...it's a tick box exercise" (Participant L).*

Table 3. Key Themes and Stakeholder Perspectives on football governance and financial support (Source: Authors own, 2025).

Topic	Exemplary Quotes and Comments
League Programme Requirement	"*The league insists that we put a program out every week, and it can be online, or it could be hard copy.*" – Participant H
Financial Support from FA & PL	"*The fund from the Premier League has really helped.*" – Participant H
FA Grants & Loans	"*We had something like a £5,000 grant and a £7,000 loan, which we had to pay back... that's why I called it regurgitated money.*" – Participant I
FA Inspections & Ground Grading	"*We have an inspection every three months to make sure that the bounce is still as good as it should be.*" – Participant I
FA Sustainability Support	"*I don't actually think there's ever been anything about sustainability.*" – Participant F
League Economic Oversight	"*We have to provide them with accounts every year for them to make sure that we are not going above and beyond.*" – Participant E
FA & League Regulations	"*We get emails through all the time from the league about what we have to do, what we shouldn't do.*" – Participant L
Grant Conditions	"*There are grants available, but in our experience, they're not that easy to obtain, and they come with a lot of conditions.*" – Participant C
Sustainability Efforts	"*No, nothing environmentally... Not, not that I'm aware of. There has been a project through the county FA about going green.*" – Participant J
Ground Funding Support	"*The FA did have a partnership with some builders companies... you could get a decent deal on construction material.*" – Participant A
League Stadium Standards	"*Stadium power is a new initiative from the league where your ground's got to meet certain gradings.*" – Participant D
FA Priority Areas	"*All of their initiatives are mainly around football for all, safeguarding, Rainbow Laces... but not much on sustainability or finances.*" – Participant G

This reflects severe frustration with the absence of reasonable and sustainable ground-grading criteria. Moreover, this regulatory vacuum extends to the governmental level, where clubs have expressed a lack of incentives or support for sustainability from policymakers. This is reinforced through a study conducted by Khanna et al., (2024) who detected a lack of government incentives to switch to renewable energy sources. Contrarywise, non-league clubs do receive some support through local initiatives and grants. As one participant noted:

> *"The Football Foundation is fantastic in providing assistance through grants" (Participant K).*

However, these are often fragmented and insufficient to address the overarching lack of governance and regulation in sustainability. Comparably, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) including Football for Future is aiming to build sustainable culture within football, leading audits and workshops to educate

stakeholders (Football for Future, 2024). Beyond this support, the ownership and governance of stadiums further compound transitions to becoming a more sustainable club. For example, (n = 2) clubs operate in council-owned facilities, limiting their control over infrastructure modifications. Observations revealed that this often leads to neglect of facilities and delays in essential maintenance and upgrades. This challenge is exacerbated by bureaucratic inefficiencies, as highlighted by Participant A who claims that:

> *"Trying to get a local council to do something can be the proverbial banging a head against a brick wall."*

These prolonged delays can discourage clubs from pursuing sustainable improvements, cultivating a perpetual cycle of stagnation.

Lack of volunteer support
The void of volunteers across non-league football postulates a considerable barrier to the implementation of sustainable initiatives. Non-league clubs are heavily dependent on volunteers, a reliance that has been long established (Cuskelly, Hoye and Auld, 2006), reinforced by nearly 60% of participants (n = 7) in this study. Conversely, as one participant claimed, "*I think the volunteer sector generally across the country is probably drying up a lot with the cost-of-living crisis*" (Participant D). This aligns with a study by Papić (2022), who highlights that growing demands on volunteers within grassroot sports have deterred participation, as well as broader societal trends. Correspondingly, volunteers within the game are subject to roles which often lead to task and social frustration (Nichols, 2024). Thus, negatively impacting volunteer retention and restricting clubs' capacity to become more sustainable. Therefore, addressing the volunteer crisis will be crucial for non-league clubs to make meaningful progress in sustainability.

Cultural and educational obstacles
The lack of education and cultural awareness surrounding sustainable practices is a notable barrier for clubs to become more sustainable. One participant recognises that generational differences in perception can lead to scepticism regarding sustainable initiatives. As older supporters and club leadership may be more resistant to change, favouring to protect the club's historical practices (Ward and Hines, 2017), with some viewing sustainability as "*another fad*." (Participant H). As studies suggest, this cultural reluctance to alter established behaviours is particularly pronounced in lower-tier clubs, where sustainability may not be viewed as a priority or achievable goal (Carmichael, 2020). Hence, this resistance makes it difficult to gain internal support, impeding the adoption of sustainable approaches, such as reducing single-use plastics or embracing renewable energy sources. In a similar fashion, club officials lack the necessary knowledge or tools to effectively implement sustainable initiatives, which significantly hampers progress. Studies have exhibited that sustainability education is often not a priority within sport management programmes, leaving club officials underprepared to drive sustainable alterations within their club (Graham et al., 2018). Therefore, clubs remain unaware of how to improve their sustainability and are unconscious of potential grants that could transition the club to more sustainable operations.

Implementation of current sustainable practices
Environmental initiatives
Linking directly to research objective two, among the interviewed clubs, environmental initiatives were generally limited. Although, evident in Figure.10, clubs are imposing elementary practices including recycling and energy-saving measures. For instance, one participant stated, "*we've got LED lighting everywhere in the club...and sensors*" (Participant I), phasing out energy-intensive incandescent or halogen bulbs. This finding correlates with the recognition that lighting represents a significant contributor to energy consumption in

football stadiums (Marrucci, Daddi, and Iraldo, 2023). Perhaps indicating that awareness of sustainable transitions are permeating down the football pyramid. Furthermore, the findings indicate a strong fixation on transitioning towards the use of 3G (third generation) artificial pitches as a potential solution to environmental concerns. This is because they require less water, fertilisers and maintenance compared to traditional grass pitches (ibid). Correspondingly, 3G pitches can be used more frequently as they're highly durable resulting in less postponements. However, as noted, "*3G pitches use rubber crumb*" (Participant K). This concern is consistent with wider concerns regarding pollution from polyethylene, nylon and rubber pellets entering water courses (Bø et al., 2020). Besides, this area remains a contested discourse, with limited research into the climate impacts and benefits of hosting football on 3G surfaces (Mabon, 2022).
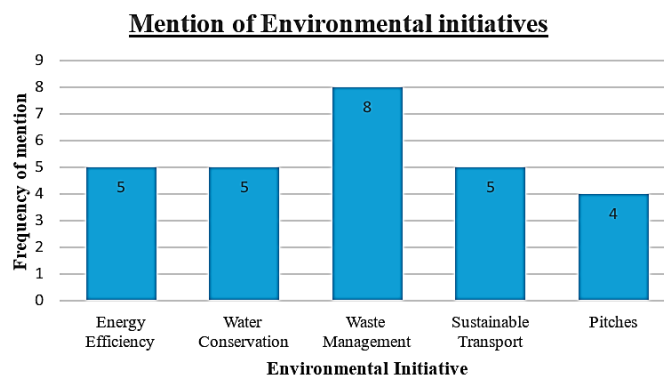
Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 10. Frequency of environmental initiatives mentioned in the interview process.

Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 11. Image of waste disposal at the site of Abbey Rangers.

Likewise, current environmental sustainability initiatives primarily focus on areas such as waste and water management. (n = 2) clubs are adopting rainwater collection systems to reduce water consumption for pitch maintenance, inspired by pioneers like Forest Green Rovers (Delia, McCullough and Dalal, 2024), who have introduced organic pitch maintenance (ibid). Equally, evident in Figure.11, several clubs have established basic recycling systems, including "*standard bins for: glass bottles...paper...cardboard...cans…and general waste*" (Participant D). This approach highlights the importance of correct waste segregation to reduce landfill contributions (Costello, McGarvey and Birisci, 2017). Similarly, both Deal Town and Abbey Rangers have introduced reusable cups to reduce single-use plastics. This involves a deposit return scheme, whereby fans

pay a small deposit when purchasing a beverage, which is refunded upon returning the empty container to a designated collection point (Zhou et al., 2020). Integrating these systems not only improves the sustainability of the club but also enhances fan engagement by fostering environmentally responsible behaviours (Casper, 2017). On top of this, notable environmental initiatives include plans to install cycling facilities and encourage car sharing to promote sustainable transport. This corresponds with conclusions by Marrucci, Daddi and Iraldo (2023) who determined that carpooling offers an eco-friendlier travel option by decreasing pollution, alleviating traffic congestion, and reducing the demand for parking spaces. Similarly, Abbey Rangers donated their old goalposts to Runnymede Borough Council, facilitating a circular economy (Khanna et al., 2024). Nonetheless, transitioning to more sustainable merchandise and food suppliers was minimally mentioned, perhaps due to cost considerations. Overall, while implementation of environmentally sustainable practices across the non-league pyramid has been slow, a growing awareness has been exhibited.

Economic initiatives

Gate Income	Secondary Spend	Sponsorships	Facility Rentals
Merchandise Sales	Self-Sufficiency	Break-Even Budget	Grants
Fundraising Events	Bar Profits	Ground Sharing	3G Pitch Revenue
Corporate Events	Education Programs	Cashless Systems	Financial Planning
Cost Reduction	Revenue Diversification	Volunteer Workforce	Non-Match Day Income

Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 12. A list of contributions to economic sustainability by interviewed clubs.

As depicted in Figure.12, current economic initiatives span from unconventional sponsorship to alternative revenue streams (Bjelkanovic, 2020). This exhibits a subtle volta in the financial landscape of non-league football (Villarino, 2021), transitioning away from traditional revenue sources such as gate receipts and local sponsorships towards diversified, external funding models. For example, the varied revenue generation strategies reported by clubs, such as facility rentals and unique sponsorship deals, demonstrate a level of innovation and adaptability that has not been documented in existing literature. Similarly, traditional sponsorship deals described by Hindmarsh (2020) as local businesses or wealthy individuals were often supplemented by innovative approaches, including Real Bedford's partnership with cryptocurrency companies. This suggests that non-league clubs may be more adaptable to emerging trends than previously suggested (Irving, 2023). Moreover, diversification of revenue sources was a common theme across all clubs, as:

> *"You're trying to diversify yourself away from Match Day revenue, because you don't want to be solely dependent on what happens on Saturday at three o'clock...we do happy hours before and after*

the games...you want to keep them [the fans] there for as long as you possibly can...you're trying to maximise your match day revenue" (Participant C).

This necessity to transition beyond traditional reliance on matchday revenue is exemplified by clubs ground sharing, including Bedfont who have shared its ground with both Spartans Youth and British Airways in the past. This practice has become a vital source of revenue outside of matchdays (May and Parnell, 2016), permitting clubs to use their facilities year-round. Such partnerships not only ensure continuous income but also establish connections with local communities (ibid). Analogously, every club (n = 12) rents their clubhouse out for wakes, parties and related events. These efforts align with findings from other studies, emphasising the requirement for clubs to use their facilities creatively (Mabon, 2020). Above all, grants and external funding remain critical to the financial sustainability of non-league clubs. While this study did not extensively explore grant funding, many clubs continue to rely on these resources to support infrastructure and community projects (Bingham, 2012). For instance, Abbey Rangers have applied for a £20,000 grant from the Heathrow Community Trust to invest in youth programmes, ensuring long-term sustainability and providing opportunities for future generations to engage in the sport. Ultimately, diversifying revenue streams is paramount for reducing reliance on bi-weekly facility usage, ensuring economic sustainability. While grants and funding can offer valuable support, they should not be viewed as a primary or consistent income stream.

Social initiatives

Youth Teams	Women's Teams	Community Engagement	Local Partnerships
Food Bank Collections	Mental Health Support	Charity Events	Educational Programs
Accessibility Initiatives	Hardship Fund	Development Fund	Walking Football
Inclusive Policies	Social Media Guidelines	Anti-Discrimination Efforts	Local Employment
Volunteer Opportunities	Community Hub	Networking Events	Fan Meetings

Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure 13. A list of contributions to social sustainability by interviewed clubs.

Prominent in Figure.13, social sustainability efforts, particularly in community engagement and youth development were notable across every interviewed club (n = 12). This coincides with the traditional assertion that non-league clubs are community hubs (Porter, 2019). In fact, (n = 4) clubs actively engage with local schools, offering free tickets and organising mascot packages and fun days, to boost attendance. Additionally, creative engagement efforts, such as designer kit competitions for school children have successfully increased community interest and matchday attendance at Deal Town. Homogenously, youth development is a focal point for all teams, with clubs running extensive boys' and girls' teams, disability

football programs, and walking football for older individuals. This is strongly buttressed by one participant who stated,

> *"We've got 45 boys' teams...20 girls' teams...100 people regularly doing walking football, men and women...it is a community hub." (Participant C).*

Likewise, a couple of clubs have partnered with local schools to provide facilities for teaching, utilising football, as an important driver of popular culture (Mabon, 2023). This pattern is consistent with previous literature, which identifies that the primary goal of clubs' social actions are to collaborate with local associations and promote social inclusion for vulnerable groups (Villarino, 2021, p.3). This is further supplemented by Real Bedford's hardship fund, which provides financial assistance to ensure that all children, regardless of their economic background, can participate in football activities. In summary, while current literature highlights the connection between clubs and local communities, it must be noted that clubs hold an advantageous position to be an advocate for sustainability, because of the close affiliation communities have with their teams (Loewen and Wicker, 2021).

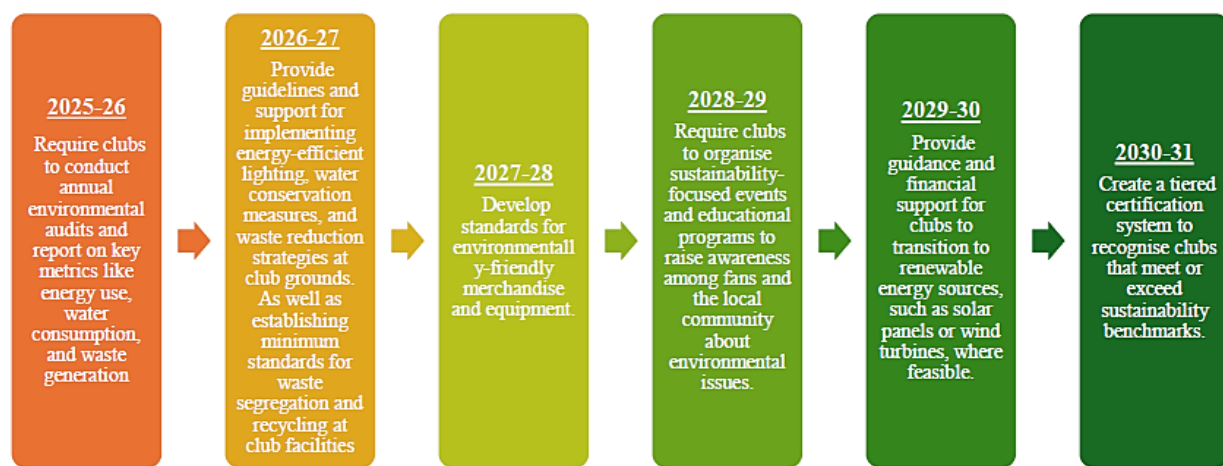### Recommendations
Financial Interventions
Connecting directly to research objective three, introducing financial interventions such as targeted grants, tax incentives, and sponsorships specifically designed for sustainability could alleviate economic pressures, encouraging non-league teams to become more sustainable. This concept is consistent with Khanna et al. (2024) who imply that more attractive economic initiatives valuing greenhouse gas emissions or implementing a carbon tax will reduce emissions. Correspondingly, as fans and consumers alike are paying increased attention to brands and companies social and ethical behaviour (Villarino, 2021) clubs could discover a niche, attracting more fans, growing economically. Respectively, clubs must persist in diversifying their revenue beyond match days. By using existing infrastructure for no football activities including community and corporate events, clubs can mitigate their financial risks and generate a consistent revenue flow (Öner, et al., 2024). Furthermore, strengthening relations with local businesses and educational institutions by providing tailored sponsorship packages and exposure on social media (Supporters Direct, 2011) can increase brand awareness and financial backing. Finally, the adoption of financial metrics is crucial for long term viability. Introducing financial tools like the S-Score (Evans, 2018) can assist clubs in monitoring financial health, evaluate revenue diversification, and make data-driven decisions, fostering long-term growth.

Regulatory support and policy interventions
With the biggest barrier for implementing sustainable initiatives identified as weak governance, improved regulatory support from governing bodies is mandatory to establish clear frameworks and foster a culture of responsibility within the sport. Without coherent regulatory guidelines, non-league clubs are left to navigate sustainability on their own, resulting in inconsistent practices and a lack of strategic direction. To address this issue, governing bodies such as the FA must take a proactive role in providing guidance and introducing sustainability regulations for clubs at all levels. Perhaps this could include mandatory reporting on energy consumption, and waste management. As noted by one participant:

> *"It should be regulated. It has to come from government. It has to be a top-down thing... I know that there's a push back on extra regulations, extra red tape, but you're not going to make meaningful change unless you actually mandate it." (Participant K)*

This strongly represents the consensus among the other stakeholders, that sustainable initiatives must be mandated rather than voluntary. While some clubs may resist additional regulations, without regulatory intervention, meaningful progress towards sustainability will remain limited (Melia-Jones, 2020). Contrarywise, there is some promise as Participant J highlights, "*We have a growing relationship with our local council now, and they're supporting sport more...we've seen funding pots that are available with the local council.*" While this is an isolated example, by providing funding and outlining sustainability targets, local councils can provide incentives for clubs that demonstrate significant improvements, while also holding those that fail to comply accountable. Additionally, a sustainability league table or accreditation (Khanna et al, 2024), as evidenced by elite football leagues, could encourage clubs to become more sustainable. This would not only foster competition (Melia-Jones, 2020) but also encourage clubs to adopt best practices, leading to overall improvements across the sport. In summary, Figure.14 depicts a potential roadmap for improved governance and regulation of sustainability within non-league football. The process begins with initial audits and progresses through to sustainable certification and ongoing regulation:

2025–26
Require clubs to conduct annual environmental audits and report on key metrics like energy use, water consumption, and waste generation

2026–27
Provide guidelines and support for implementing energy-efficient lighting, water conservation measures, and waste reduction strategies at club grounds. As well as establishing minimum standards for waste segregation and recycling at club facilities

2027–28
Develop standards for environmentally-friendly merchandise and equipment.

2028–29
Require clubs to organise sustainability-focused events and educational programs to raise awareness among fans and the local community about environmental issues.

2029–30
Provide guidance and financial support for clubs to transition to renewable energy sources, such as solar panels or wind turbines, where feasible.

2030–31
Create a tiered certification system to recognise clubs that meet or exceed sustainability benchmarks.

Source: Authors own, 2025.

Figure14. A potential roadmap for improving sustainability governance and regulations in non-league football.

Education and awareness
Education and awareness campaigns targeted at club leadership could help shift cultural perceptions of sustainability (Stephenson, 2023). While club committees are often rigid and entrenched in historical practices (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020), the volta towards sustainable practices must be illuminated. As mentioned, a key challenge identified in the research is the lack of knowledge on sustainability among stakeholders, with one participant noting, "*If we could go to somebody who's been dealing in football clubs on these issues and get best practice, that would be superb*" (Participant K). This accentuates that clubs could benefit from a top down approach that includes providing resources such as lists of trusted builders, accountants, and consultants who specialise in sustainability. In addition to educating club leadership, it is crucial to extend education efforts to fans and volunteers. Raising awareness among supporters regarding the importance of sustainability can aid a more environmentally and socially responsible fan culture (Kraft, Bühren and Wicker, 2025). This could include campaigns to promote eco-friendly practices and support initiatives that foster inclusivity and community engagement (Hernández-Hernández, Londoño-Pineda and Cano, 2024). To a similar extent, educating volunteers and enhancing recruitment would provide clubs with the human resources required to drive sustainability initiatives. By providing sustainability orientated workshops and training, clubs can equip fans, volunteers and stakeholders with the necessary knowledge to

reduce their environmental impact and promote social responsibility both within and beyond the footballing community.

Project limitations

While the methodology chapter aforenoted several constraints, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study and their potential impact on the results. One primary limitation is the relatively small sample size (n = 12) and regional bias. Although efforts were made to include a northern club to mitigate bias and reduce the study's carbon footprint, future research should expand the sample size and incorporate a more geographically diverse pool. Equally, providing the vast number of non-league clubs, a significantly larger sample was impractical within this study's scope. However, the number of interviews aligns with previous research (Baldwin, 2010 and Carmichael, 2020), reinforcing validity of the approach. Furthermore, nonresponse bias (Gratton and Jones, 2010) is another constraint, as despite multiple follow-up attempts, some stakeholders did not respond, potentially skewing results by excluding perspectives from participants less conscious of sustainability. Regarding analysis, NVivo ensured a structured approach to identifying key themes. Conversely, as reinforced by Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis inherently involves a degree of subjectivity, as the interpretation of themes may be influenced by the researcher's perspective. Therefore, a mixed methods approach incorporating quantitative analysis, such as surveys could have provided additional validation to the findings. Equivalently, investigating specific clubs could have offered a more dynamic comprehension of sustainability challenges and practices over time but would've taken up considerable time beyond this study's means. Moreover, unconscious bias was perhaps an issue as subtle verbal and non-verbal cues, such as nodding, may have influenced responses (Gratton and Jones, 2010). Though, efforts were made to conduct interviews objectively and allowed participants to speak freely without excessive prompting. Likewise, stadia observations could've been more structured, using a checklist, permitting consistent evaluation of key sustainability factors such as energy efficiency, waste management and water usage. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights, providing a foundation for future research.

Future research

Future research should build upon these findings by investigating cost-effective sustainability practices for resource constrained clubs and conduct comparative regional or international analysis. Thus, identifying underlying geographical patterns and best practices of sustainability. To a similar extent, it would be beneficial to interview governing bodies such as the FA and the Football Foundation, given their critical roles in shaping football policy and funding, despite their previous decision to decline comment. Besides, future studies should perform quantitative analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of sustainable initiatives across a larger sample of clubs. Likewise, investigations into fan attitudes and demographic factors influencing perceptions towards sustainability employing netnography (Fenton, Keegan and Parry, 2021) could offer valuable insights into key motivators, enhancing the effectiveness of sustainability campaigns.

CONCLUSION

This study marks the first known scholarly attempt to critically examine sustainability within a non-league context across England. The results obtained have several implications for practice and policy, as more pressure and accountability should be positioned upon the governing bodies to implement legislation. Casting analytical attention on sustainability in nonleague football, this research draws focus on the often-overlooked efforts and challenges faced by non-league clubs, elevating their profile. In doing so, this study has exposed deep-rooted, elitist structures embedded within football, which establish ingrained disparities in sustainability efforts. Through a combination of interviews and observational analysis, it is apparent that while some clubs

demonstrate a commitment to sustainability, their initiatives are constrained by financial limitations and a lack of governance. These findings reveal a narrow comprehension of sustainability among stakeholders, aligning with existing literature. Similarly, while the study corroborates literature highlighting financial barriers, it juxtaposes dominant narratives by showcasing the strong emphasis on social sustainability within nonleague football. This affirms that, despite systemic challenges and neglect from the media, these clubs remain vital community cornerstones. Ultimately, this research has successfully answered its aims by exploring sustainability challenges and opportunities within non-league football in the South of England. While contributing to the limited but emerging literature on this topic, it emphasises the necessity for further exploration, particularly regarding governance that could facilitate sustainable development. Respectively, future research should extend beyond regional analysis, examining non-league sustainability on a national scale, assessing the role of fan engagement in fostering long-term ecological and financial sustainability. Overall, this study has demonstrated that non-league clubs are adopting sustainable practices and with the appropriate support, they can become catalysts for positive change.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – ERGO ETHICS APPROVAL OBTAINED: 22 07 2024

95249 - Assessing the sustainability of non-league football clubs in England

Submission Overview	**Submission Questionnaire**	**Attachments**	**History**

Details

Status	Approved
Category	Category **C**
Submitter's Faculty	Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences (FELS)

APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Sir/Madam,

I hope this email finds you well. I am currently conducting a research study on sustainability practices within non-league football as part of my degree at the University of Southampton.

The purpose of this study is to explore practices, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing sustainability in non-league football. I believe football is a powerful catalyst for change, and your valuable experience and insights in the field would be incredibly beneficial to this research.

I would like to invite you to participate in a semi-structured interview. Your participation does not require your club to have active sustainability initiatives in place, as this study also aims to raise awareness and highlight challenges in the field.

Details of the Interview:
- Duration: Approximately 30-40 minutes.
- Format: Preferably in-person (video call option available).
- Date and Time: At your convenience.
- Location: Preferably a football related facility (stadium).

If you agree to participate, please let me know your availability between now and the end of September.

Thank you for your time and considering this request. Please feel free to reply if you have any questions or need further information.

Kind regards.

APPENDIX C – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title: Assessing the sustainability of non-league football clubs in England.

ERGO number: 95249

You are being invited to take part in the above research study. To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information before you decide to take part in this research. You may like to discuss it with others, but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

This research is part of a student project completed as part of an undergraduate degree in Geography at the University of Southampton. As a passionate football fan and a concerned environmentalist, I am deeply invested in exploring how non-league football clubs in England can contribute to sustainability. I believe that by giving non-league clubs, which are often overlooked in the media, a voice, they have the potential to become vehicles for positive change. Therefore, I will be asking a series of questions relating to sustainability including themes of food and transport. Thus, enabling a deeper understanding on potential areas for improvement. The expected outcome of this research includes non-league clubs facing several barriers to implementing sustainable practices including financial, geographical and socio-political constraints.

Why have I been asked to participate?
You have been approached to participate in this study due to your involvement with a non-league football club. Your insights and experiences are invaluable as they will contribute to a deeper understanding of the sustainability practices and challenges faced by your club. The research aims to include approximately 12 participants to ensure a diverse range of perspectives are represented. Your participation is paramount as it will help highlight the specific financial, geographical, and sociopolitical constraints that non-league clubs encounter when trying to implement sustainable practices. By understanding your experiences and perspectives, this research can provide practical recommendations and raise awareness about the potential of non-league football clubs becoming more sustainable.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Participation in this study is not mandatory, However, if you decide to take part, you will be expected to participate in a semi-structured interview, either in person at your club or via video call, lasting approximately 40 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked questions related to various aspects of sustainability, including food, transport and waste management at your club. The interview will be audio-recorded to enable accurate analysis of the information you provide. These recordings will be transcribed and deleted following the conclusion of the project. The information you provide can be anonymised upon request. Additionally, there are no compulsory follow-up activities unless you express an interest in being updated on the final publication of the research. Whereby, you will be provided with a summary of the findings. Furthermore, the research project is expected to last several months, but your direct involvement will be limited to a single interview. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw up to 30 days after the interview has been conducted.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

While there will be no direct benefits to you personally, your participation will contribute to a wider understanding of sustainability challenges faced by football clubs. Similarly, your participation may inform future policies and initiatives in this topical area of study. Additionally, your club may receive publicity on a small scale if the project is successful.

Are there any risks involved?

This research involves minimal risks. While there are no physical risks, you may feel some discomfort when discussing financial or operational difficulties your club may face. If you feel distressed at any time, the interview will be terminated and you are free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer. Additionally, there is a risk of your opinions being taken out of context or causing offense to supporters, sponsors, or others with conflicting views. To mitigate this, you may request to anonymise your answers. Whereby full names and personal information will be replaced with pseudonyms. Furthermore, a comprehensive risk assessment has been conducted to ensure your safety throughout the study.

What data will be collected?

Data collected for this research will focus on gathering qualitative insights regarding sustainability practices, challenges, and perspectives from you regarding your football club. Personal information such as your name and contact details will also be collected solely for the purpose of follow-up and communication, if requested. The data will be obtained through a semi-structured interview conducted either in person or via video call. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing your responses. Additionally, observations will be recorded related to sustainability practices within the stadium , if permitted on the consent form. All collected data, including interview recordings and personal information, will be stored securely on a password-protected OneDrive. To ensure safety, personal data will be separated from non-identifiable information and restricted access will be implemented to maintain confidentiality.

Will my participation be confidential?

Recorded personal data will be separated from non-identifiable data, and all information will be published according to the anonymity preference selected on the consent form. Audio recordings will be stored on a secure device and transcribed, then destroyed upon receiving my mark and graduating from university. Your participation and the information collected about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. Only the researcher and responsible members of the University of Southampton may be given access to data about you for monitoring purposes and/or to carry out an audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations. Individuals from regulatory authorities (people who check that we are carrying out the study correctly) may require access to your data. All of these people have a duty to keep your information, as a research participant, strictly confidential. Additionally, all data, including consent forms, will be securely stored. Electronic data will be encrypted and password-protected behind a personal OneDrive, while physical documents, including signed consent forms, will be kept in locked cabinets accessible only to authorised personnel. For sustainability, participants will be offered the option to sign a digital copy instead of a printed one.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part, participation in the research is entirely voluntary. It is your decision whether you wish to take part. If you choose to participate, you will be required to sign a consent form indicating your agreement.

What happens if I change my mind?

If you decide to change your mind and withdraw from the study, you may do so. You have the right to request the withdrawal of your data up to 30 days after the interview without giving a reason. After this period, your data will be retained for the purposes of completing the study objectives, in accordance with GDPR exemptions for research purposes.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The results of the research will be handled with confidentiality, ensuring that your personal details are kept according to the anonymity preference selected on the consent form. The project findings will be written up in my dissertation, which may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences. Similarly, you will receive a summary of findings if requested on the consent form.

For further information, or if you wish to file a complaint, you can contact me at: **** or my supervisor: ****

What happens if there is a problem:

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the researcher who will do their best to answer your questions. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint about any aspect of this study, please contact the University of Southampton Head Research Ethics and Governance (023 8059 5058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk).

Data Protection Privacy Notice

How will the information about you be used?

For the purposes of data protection law, the University of Southampton is the 'Data Controller' for this study, we will need to use information from you for this research project.

This information will include your name and contact details. People will use this information to do the research or to check your records to make sure that the research is being done properly. We will keep all information about you safe and secure.

Once we have finished the study, we will keep some of the data so we can check the results. We will write our reports in a way that no-one can work out that you took part in the study.

What are your choices about how your information is used?

- You can stop being part of the study at any time, without giving a reason, but we will keep all anonymous information about you that we already have.
- We need to manage your records in specific ways for the research to be reliable. This means that we won't be able to let you see or change the data we hold about you.

Where can you find out more about how your information is used?

You can find out more about how we use your information:

- By sending an email to University's Data Protection Officer (data.protection@soton.ac.uk).
- By asking one of the research team or from our general privacy policy.

Thank you for taking the time to read the information sheet and for considering participating in the research.

APPENDIX D – CONSENT FORM

Study Title**:** Assessing the sustainability of non-league football clubs in England.

Ethics ERGO number: 95249

Version and date: V1.0, 10 06 24

Thank you for your interest in this study. It is very important to us to conduct our studies in line with ethics principles, and this Consent Form asks you to confirm if you agree to take part in the above study. Please carefully consider the statements below and add your initials and signature only if you agree to participate in this research and understand what this will mean for you.

Mandatory Statements: Please add your initials in the boxes below if you agree with the statements:

Mandatory Consent Statements	Participant Initials
I confirm that I have read the Participant Information Sheet version 1.0, dated 06/06/24 explaining the study and I understand what is expected of me.	
I confirm that I have been given the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions about the study, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I agree to take part in this study and understand that data collected during this research project will be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason.	

Additional Statements: Please add your initials in the boxes below if you agree with the statements:

Additional Consent Statements	Participant Initials
Section: Audio Video Recordings and Transcripts	
I understand that taking part in this study involves audio recording. I am happy for my interview to be audio recorded and understand that the audio recording will immediately be deleted once the final transcription has been checked and completed.	
I understand that I can skip or refuse to answer any question(s) without any consequences.	
Section: Withdrawal of data	
I understand that I can withdraw my data from the use in this study within 30 days following my participation.	
Section: Sharing of data and future use	
I understand that all personal information collected about me (e.g., my name and contact details) will be kept confidential (i.e., will not be shared beyond the researcher) unless required by law or relevant regulations (e.g., for the purpose of monitoring the safety of this study).	
Section: Participation prior to the project conclusion	
I understand that my personal data will be kept until the conclusion of the project and that I can or ask for them to be removed prior to this at any time by contacting: ****@soton.ac.uk	
I would like to be contacted following the publication of the project detailing a summary of the findings.	

Anonymity preference: Please add your initials in the box below regarding your personal and club anonymity in this research:

Section: Anonymity preference Personal
Full Anonymity: My identity and responses will remain completely anonymous. No identifying information will be linked to my responses. Instead, pseudonyms such as 'Participant A' should be used.
Partial Anonymity: Some identifying information may be collected, but my full identity will not be disclosed in any publications. My first name and gender can be used.
No Anonymity: I agree to be identified by name in publications and reports based on this study.

Section: Anonymity preference Club
Full Anonymity: The club's identity and responses will remain completely anonymous. No identifiable information will be published. Instead, pseudonyms such as 'Club A' will be used.
No Anonymity: The club agrees to be identified by name in publications based on this study.

Name of participant   **Signature**   **Date**

Name of person taking consent   **Signature**   **Date**

*Once this Consent Form has been signed by all parties, a copy of the signed and dated form should be provided to the study participant. Original signed copy should be stored in the study site file (If applicable).

APPENDIX E - INTERVIEW PLAN

Personal Introduction:

Interviewer: The purpose of this study is to raise awareness of sustainability in non-league football and by giving non-league clubs, which are often overlooked in the media, a voice, they have the potential to become catalysts for positive change.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would not like to talk about before we start this interview?

Interviewer: Just to let you know, I'll be recording and transcribing this interview.

Interviewer: To start, could you please tell me a bit about yourself, your role, and how you became involved with the club?

Interviewer: So, I have some standardised questions to ask which focus on environmental, economic and social sustainability, so feel free to answer as you see fit, whether it's a simple yes, no or with more detail.

Evaluating Current Sustainability Practices:

Interviewer: What does sustainability in football mean to you?
- If it helps, I see sustainability as encompassing environmental, economic, and social dimensions within the sport. To be maintained at a manageable level.

Interviewer: How important is sustainability to you personally, and how does it align with the club's values?

Interviewer: How important is implementing sustainable practices at the club?

Interviewer: Can you describe any sustainable initiatives that the club has implemented?

Interviewer: What are the main challenges the club faces in implementing sustainable practices?

Interviewer: Are there any ways that the club has reduced its environmental impact? (including waste management, energy use and water consumption).

Interviewer: Do you and or the club wish to be more sustainable?

Economic Sustainability:

Interviewer: What are the main financial challenges the club faces in maintaining economic sustainability?

Interviewer: How do you make the club more sustainable on non-match days? i.e. renting the clubhouse/ facilities etc.?

Interviewer: How does this impact your budget and financial planning?

Interviewer: Does your club engage in fundraising or sponsorship efforts specifically related to sustainability?

Social Sustainability:

Interviewer: How does the club engage with the local community to promote sustainability?

Interviewer: How do you involve different stakeholders, such as fans, sponsors, and local businesses, in your sustainability efforts? What feedback have you received from them?

Measuring Impact:

Interviewer: How does the club measure the impact of its sustainability practices? Are there specific metrics or indicators you use to assess progress?

Interviewer: Does the club have to adhere to any regulations or standards set out by the FA regarding sustainability? such as FFP etc.?

Proposing Recommendations:

Interviewer: Based on your club's experience, what recommendations would you give to other non- league football clubs looking to improve their sustainability?

Interviewer: Are there any resources or partnerships that have been particularly helpful for your club's sustainability efforts?

Collaboration and Support:

Interviewer: Have you collaborated with other clubs or organisations on sustainability projects?

Interviewer: What kind of support, whether financial, advisory, or technical, would be most beneficial for enhancing the club's sustainability?

Interviewer: Has there been any support either financial advisory etc. from the league or the FA?

Future Plans:

Interviewer: Do you have any future plans to implement additional sustainable practices?

Interviewer: Are your club's off-field future goals related to sustainability?

Ground-Related:

Interviewer: What measures has the club implemented to ensure that the pitches are maintained in a sustainable way?

Merchandise and Greenwashing:

Interviewer: Have you taken steps to ensure that your merchandise is produced sustainably?

Interviewer: How do you avoid "*greenwashing*" in your club's sustainability communications?

Closing:

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to ask, discuss or share with me that we haven't covered?

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time and good luck with the rest of the season.

APPENDIX F – NVIVO CODEBOOK

Name	Description	Files	References
Awareness	The level of comprehension and knowledge regarding sustainability.	5	13
Sustainability definition	How sustainability is perceived and defined by non-league club stakeholders.	11	30
Barriers for implementation	Challenges preventing the adoption of sustainability measures.	11	88
Engagement	The extent to which clubs, fans, and stakeholders participate in sustainability initiatives and promote best practices.	7	22
Environmental sustainability	Efforts to reduce the club's environmental footprint.	11	79
Waste management and recycling	Strategies for managing waste effectively.	8	21
Financial sustainability	Ensuring the club's long-term financial viability through responsible budgeting, revenue diversification, and cost-effective operations.	12	79
Non-Match Day revenue	Income generated from activities outside match days, such as venue hire, events, and community programs.	11	51
Sponsorship and Partnerships	Collaborations with businesses, organisations, and brands to support club sustainability.	12	59
Future planning	Long-term strategies or proposals aimed at ensuring the sustainability of non-league clubs.	6	14
Geographical challenges	Location-based difficulties that affect sustainability efforts, such as transport accessibility, rural vs. urban constraints, and local environmental factors.	7	22
Governance	The role of leadership and policies in implementing sustainable practices within the sport.	12	67
FA and League support	The influence and assistance provided by governing bodies in promoting sustainability within non-league football.	12	85
Greenwashing	The comprehension of misleading stakeholders by falsely portraying a club's sustainability efforts as more substantial or effective than they truly are.	4	10
Infrastructure	The sustainability of club facilities.	8	27
Pitch	The environmental impact and sustainability measures related to pitch maintenance, including the use of natural vs. artificial turf, water usage, and eco-friendly treatments.	7	21
Merchandise	The sustainability of club-branded products, considering factors such as ethical sourcing, materials used, and recycling initiatives.	10	22
Food and drink	The sustainability of food and beverage offerings at the club, including local sourcing, waste reduction, and eco-friendly packaging.	5	9
Social sustainability	Community engagement, inclusivity, and social responsibility initiatives by the club.	12	88
Education	Initiatives aimed at increasing awareness and knowledge regarding sustainability among players, staff, supporters and the wider community.	6	17
Volunteers	The role of volunteers in supporting sustainability and wider initiatives within the club.	8	20
Sustainability indicators	Metrics and benchmarks used to measure and assess sustainability performance.	8	18
Transport	Sustainable travel options for players, staff, and fans, including carpooling initiatives, and reducing the carbon footprint of travel.	4	9

APPENDIX G – TRANSCRIPT EXAMPLE:

All other transcripts are available on request.

<u>Nick Riley (Participant G) meeting recording:</u>

Date: 31/10/2024
Region: Surrey, Abbey Rangers, Addlestone Moor.
Anonymised: No
Role: Chairman

Interviewer 00:01
So can you tell me a bit about yourself, your role, and how you became involved in Abbey Rangers?

Interviewee 00:08
I'm the chairman. Nick Riley, Chairman of Abbey Rangers, started down here 17 years ago, got my son down to play football when he was about five. Got asked if I could help put some cones out one evening, and then ended up being a coach, then ended up being a manager, managed teams from under sevens all the way through to the under 23 development squad. Ended up on the committee, then ended up as vice chairman, with the chairman saying you won't have to do anything, just turn up at some Cup finals. And then he stepped down, and then I ended up as chairman. So it's a real passion. I love football. I love I love the community aspect of Abbey, and I really like the youth aspect as well, because I think we're as much life skills coaches out there, as we are football coaches. If you can get kids on the right path early, then it's a lot easier than trying to rehabilitate or getting get on the right path later.

Interviewer 01:13
So, I have some standardised questions. Feel free to say yes, no or add more detail where you want.
What does sustainability and football mean to you?

Interviewee 01:23
Wow, it's a big question. Sustainability doesn't, doesn't finish or end anywhere. For me, it's, it's part of everything that we should all be doing. It crosses so many factors. Obviously, when people think of sustainability, you think of energy, and you think of plastics as well. Obviously, you know, I was out there when you turned up, just turning the water on the pitch, thinking that's not a great advert for sustainability. Although I drive it forwards, the club as a whole, very much shares my values and philosophies. For me, sustainability at Abbey, or anything at Abbey, it's a conduit for how we can we can teach, guide and lead our children how to move forwards. There's some bits I want to start talking to you about as we go through this about recycling. That's a huge aspect down here, but it's about everything that we teach down here. One of our core values at Abbey Rangers is respect, and that obviously goes to teammates. It goes to officials. It goes to parents, opposition, and it goes to the environment as well. So we don't expect kids to leave litter, we don't expect them to, you know, when the pitches are soft and muddy, we don't expect them to smash them up before or after the game. It's a lot of sort of respect. So I think that's where sustainability comes in. And one of the things we'll be talking is the financial aspect of it. So for me, sustainability, it's often got an upfront investment, but then with back end, but you've got to have, or find that upfront investment, both in funds and in time. So I think that's a really broad aspect to it, but it ties in with the values and philosophies of Abbey Rangers.

Interviewer 03:27
And I saw you recently donated your old goal posts?

Interviewee 03:30
Yes, so you're following us. So again, the circular economy, as I'm sure you know, re-engineering things. You know, it's going massively forwards, whether it's especially with things like mobile phones. You know, I haven't bought a new mobile phone for a couple of times. Now, I get the refurbished ones purely because we're just going to, you know, I don't want to start getting too preaching, but the planet is going to run out of important minerals and resources soon. And as a grassroots Football Club, we have often repurposed things coming into the club where, what I call you may be a bit young for this, but the Wombles, which you to look it up, they just recycled and repurposed everything. So our first flood lights came off the M 25 we didn't steal them off the M 25 it's when they were doing works years, decades ago. There they had temporary lighting. One of our committee members then got into a conversation with the construction team, and they were taking them down, saying, Where are you going with those? I think they were being ditched. And they said, Look, we're buying all the beer and set them up at Abbey Rangers. That was our first set of flood lights. So we're very used to receiving, yeah, I call it recycled, repurposed goods, and then we look to do it as well. So we've got a really good, growing relationship with our local council now, and they're supporting sport more. All partly because I've held their toes to the fire and told them that we've just been awarded sports club of the Year by Runnymede for 2024 with a lot of the work that we're doing down here. So yeah, to be able to recycle, repurpose going forwards is huge for us as well. And again, as I said in the post, it just takes a change of mindset, a bit of effort up front, and it can then be done. And I mean those goal posts brand new, are just under £6000 pounds, so they needed a bit of TLC, but that's probably the best part of maybe £3000/£4000 pounds of value. We just gave to Runnymede that will go, you know, so it's going to save them money. They can spend that money on other services. And again, it's kids over local parks that can, that can, that can use them as well.

Interviewer 05:49
So, you've got that initiative. Have you got any more that you've implemented to reduce environmental impact, waste management, water consumption, etc?

Interviewee 06:00
No. Water consumption is very difficult. You know, every year we put a lot of investment, time and money into our pitches, and it's guaranteed, if ever you want to have a barbecue or a UK holiday, just give me a call and ask when I'm putting £13,000 pounds worth of grass seed down, because it won't rain for about two, three weeks. So we have to get water out onto the pitch. We are looking at whether we can get, we've got a big water tank, whether we can get a water but to take rainwater off the roof. There's lots of things we're looking at, but there's not much that we're doing at the moment, but it's coming.

Interviewer 06:47
So, do you wish to be more sustainable?

Interviewee 06:48
100% , so you want me to talk about some of the projects now that we've got that we're looking at. So some of the main things we've got down here is water usage, and obviously power usage, particularly through our flood lights. That's the main source of power, not yet, because, again, we installed those ages ago, and we need to get them upgraded, and that's 10s of 1000s of pounds, and I'll come on to grants in a bit as well. We sat at this very table, actually, probably about a year and a half ago, and had a really long conversation with

a with a really good company, one of our sponsors as well, called Power Core, about solar panels on the roof here. But the whole problem, then, is storage of the power, because we can collect the power during the day, but we've got minimal use for it during the day, so we need to store it to then use it at night, when we turn the flood lights on. Then you're bringing in the aspect of batteries, which is a lot of money and a lot of space, and that technology still doesn't quite seem to be there yet. So you've then got to store it. You obviously lose a lot of power as well once you transfer it into a battery, and then the battery back to when you need it again. It just didn't financially or logistically make sense. Another thing I've looked at, but again, I've heard of it more than seen it is on the top of flood lights. You can actually get small turbines to help run them almost as a wind turbine, but again, that people talking to me about it, rather than seeing the technology. At the moment, one of the big bug bears of mine has been single use plastic, and that is massively prevalent in this club, because in this clubhouse, we can serve all our drinks in glass, but as soon as you step outside, you can take glass onto the terrace. As soon as you go pitch side, it's FA rules. You can't take glass out there, so we serve everything in the single use plastic we've been toying again for maybe a year for the multi-use plastic. And I have just basically made an announcement to the clubhouse that single use plastic is now banned. We're not ordering anymore. I've got two companies that have given me quotes for the multi-use plastic. One through our Brewery, which is Heineken, and another one through a contact that I know. Again, it's about, I think it's about £1000 pounds to get these sort of cups in. Yeah, we've got some here already, which we've trialled, branded as Abbey Rangers, which looks good. We've then got to figure out a way of how to get them back, because a lot of people may still put them in a bin. So do we do a deposit scheme on them, where you know your first pint is an extra pound, but when you bring the cup back, or you take it, you either keep it, but it's extra money, or you come back. They do it at the oval, at the cricket. So lots of places that do it, because, again, it's just slight, and I know that if you do that, all the kids will be out there collecting the cups, bringing them back in for us. So we just got to figure that out. The big thing that we just done, is we changed at the beginning of this year our waste collection company from Grundons, big, big, huge business. Then So Green came in, and I do favour local small businesses. They've just got that extra edge to them. And the UK economy, the backbone of the UK economy is small businesses, all you ever hear about is the big corporates, but it's the corner shops and the window cleaners, they're the backbone of the UK economy, So Green are literally over the fence there. They've come in, made us some great offers about what they want to do, and they want to get involved in the community. They want to get involved in Abbey Rangers. They have now become our first team shirt sponsor as well. You won't see it today. The shirts are still just getting printed up, but they do recycle as well as waste collection. And we sat down, and again, what I really liked about them is they sat down and said, tell me about Abbey Rangers, tell me about the dynamics, the rhythm, how it works, etc. And we've done really well. So we've got all the main big bins outside. So we've got general waste and then recycling as well. And they are going to help us monitor all the data, the how many tips we do, how many cubic litres, etc. The problem we've got now is I just put bins out there. And even if I put a grey bin and a green bin, it just it's not really going to work. People will just mix the rubbish up. So we need to go bigger, and we need to go properly on it, and I've spent a lot of time. And I'm really interested because, again, there's Formula One says they're going to be carbon neutral by heart of belief, 2035. They're going to be carbon neutral. But again, they do, they do some bits around, you know, Again, it's just the bin stations, one for recycling, and we're speaking with So Green as well. We can just put all our recycling in one so I've just applied to the Heathrow Community Trust, because we're within Runnymede, so we've got planes flying over us. So Heathrow always want to invest in community projects. So I've just applied to them for a grant, a large grant. It's £20,000 pounds, but Abbey Rangers will put 10% in towards that. Well, I've applied for bins, but that's the big thing, because there's what we've done with So Green has been fantastic, but I just need to and this is where we're talking about the education aspect. With these bins, as you've seen, they're going to be really properly built. They're going to be on proper stands, etc. Some will be fixed outside, we can have a quick look at the grounds in a bit if you want. Some will be fixed. Some will be mobile. We'll have them in the

clubhouse as well. You can have signage around them so it'll be very clear. What's recycling, what's waste. You just got to make things simple for people visible, simple, I lift the lid up, I put it in. It's done. When the bins full, we can just open it, wheel the bin out, empty it in the right bin, put it back. That's simple. What we can also then do is sell advertising around a bit as well so people can be proud sponsors. Yeah, we've got our, you know, Billy Bob's whatever, you know, proud supporter of the environment at Abbey Rangers, and you start getting that really great community tie in. One of the things I have noticed, is that, oh no, I'll say it's about 50/50, the kids often aren't the worst. The adults are sometimes the worst as well. So again, if I can get that new generation coming through, it's just eliminating single use plastics, because what we see a lot of out there, as well as people will bring the Lucozade bottles and drink those. So another thing we want to start doing, and we're seldom at cost, is selling Abby Rangers bottles here that they can then use loads of times. And I'm also looking at getting a water refill station. Because at the moment, if you come in and ask here, can you fill my water bottle up the bar, the bar staff will do it. No problem. Of course, the kid walks in and it's busy. On a Sunday, we'll have 25 games. We'll have 800,000 people through the club. They think, oh, it's easy, if I just buy a bottle of and also, of course, water is a lot better than these sugary Lucozade drinks that they get as well. So if I can get a couple of hydration stations out there, where it's good water, they can just fill their bottles up. That's what I'm looking to do. And that will almost a tick next to our recycling bit, because, again, through data, what we look to do is, obviously, minimise landfill waste, maximise recycling. What we then look to do is keep that landfill waste number low and start reducing our recycling as well as we start getting rid of more and more single use plastic. And do that, and it's something we don't get the kids that much here. Schools get them, you know, whatever it is, six, seven hours a day, five days a week, we get them for an hour and a half mid-week training, and maybe a couple of hours on a Sunday when they play. But dare I say, kids, maybe sometimes, aren't that fond of school. They love football. They love Abbey Rangers, that way, we bring in people like the first team. We've got a fantastic first team here. Play a good level with ninth tier, eight promotions away from the Premier League, we start getting them promoting, you know, don't use, don't drink this, you know, Ribena thing, and I'm taking revenue away from the clubhouse. You know, use fill up your water, but all the kids will be like, I want to follow some forward at Abbey. So there's a good there's a good vehicle that we can do for that. Then it's LED flood lights out there.

Interviewer 17:13
So you mentioned economics, obviously a massive challenge. But what other challenges do you face in implementing sustainable initiatives?

Interviewee 17:22
It is finance, really. I say it's finance and time. But again, we're a big club. We've got 51 teams down here, so about seven 800 players and just over 2000 members. So out of those 2000 members, we've got doctors, lawyers, accountants, advertising, electricians, plumbers. We've got the lot, yeah, and we've got people that have said, Oh, we can help with you know, I run projects for sustainability, or I run projects for integrated LED lighting, etc. So I'm not saying they'd be the best, but we've got this great resource that we can tap into on it, but it's the two biggest obstacles for us is money we run. The club is really well run financially, and we run it almost as two halves. So we've got the membership and the football side, so everything that the people pay for their little Jimmy to play football every week, goes into providing football services. We've then got sponsorship and the clubhouse and everything else that produces revenue that we can then put into other projects. So we do it separately, because I don't want someone's money for their son to play football, to go into a first team budget, or the car park or something. I like to keep it separate, and if we then want to have a go fund me page or something, you know, or an initiative to get funds in. But the projects I'm looking at like, I say, the recycling waste station. That's 20,000 pounds. The flood lights. I'd have thought would be, I'd have thought that's the best part of 50 grand. And out of these you can get, you never get full funding. You go

through the Football Foundation. I've got great relationship with them, on first name terms with them, and the Premier League stadia fund, normally get between about 50 to 70% Yeah. So if you're working on something like led flood lighting, you're still going to be sat with a good 20 grand, you know, bill or something. And you've got to sell a lot of chicken nuggets to make 20 grands worth of profit out of that. So that's that, and it's getting we've got a good structure here. We've got the executive committee that really we're the ones that look at tomorrow all the time. So we're the ones that are looking at Sustainability and Environment, basically the whole three year plan where we want to be as a football club through everything from where do we want our kids to be, where do we want our football development to be? Where, you know what we want to do. We want to change this clubhouse, Sustainability, Environment, sponsorship, all of that. We've then got the main committee that do the pitch allocations, training, sort of run the day to day club. And then we've got a fantastic sort of subgroup, which is all these brilliant helpers, but we just need more people around that, particularly with some big projects. I've got a managers meeting on Monday, and one of the things I'm going to say to them about is start talking to your teams about getting more helpers for projects. So it's still very much a volunteer run club. You know, yeah, exactly we, you know, on a Sunday you come down, there'll be parents out there doing litter picks, car park duties, helping serve here. So volunteerism is getting more and more difficult.

Interviewee 18:45
On a non-match day, how are you sustainable? Would you rent the clubhouse, pitches etc?

Interviewee 20:57
Yeah, it's difficult. We've got a 3g pitch up there, which, again, we're the management company for, but we share it with the school, so we have all the financial responsibility of that. We do as many external hires as possible. But with 51 teams down here, there's not a lot of availability. The girls are fantastic at doing events here. This is the most, most multi-purpose room I've ever seen. I've seen it look like an enchanted garden, a casino, you know, all sorts or just a 40th birthday party. And we're raised funds through there. So we look to monetise this as much as possible, but we also give it away for free a lot to causes like we have Chertsey High School. We have their disadvantaged children come in during the week for special teaching. We've got a special needs school there. We let them use our facilities a lot, because, again, if I'm looking to monetise something, I'm going to get that money and then put it towards community use. So I might as well just, if it's a community use that wants it, I might as well just give it to them for free.

Interviewer 22:10
How does the club engage in the local community?

Interviewee 22:13
Yeah, we still need to engage more. There's a lot more that we need to do. We've got the local fire station next door. They've become members. They come in and have drinks, and they'll be in to watch the game today. But we're a bit of a sleeping giant here. Our biggest strength is our resources, everything that we've got, yeah, and our values and philosophies. Our biggest weakness is that we're the area's best known secret. So yeah, people will walk in and go, I mean, people that come to a game and say, Have you got car parking? Have you got toilets? They think we're over the local wreck. Then they come in and go, you've got an actual you've got a proper setup here. So we got to get our marketing better around that. Yeah, across everything as well. I mean, it's great that you've seen that we've donated that stuff to Runnymede, the goal post. And, of course, there's no such thing as a selfless deed, you know. I was doing it because I wanted to get the message out there about, you know, think before you throw things away, someone else can pick that up as well. That's brilliant, you know. But again, it's self-interest. I want to get the brand name and awareness out

there. I just had an extension built at home, and the builder would put things out at the front of the driveway. And a lot of people get arise about that. And it's the normal, dare I say, country cousins, that come and collect it. But much before that, that it goes in the skip into a landfill, we've got to start repurposing things more.

Interviewer 23:43
You mentioned your analytics. How do you measure the impact of either your initiatives or your environmental impact?

Interviewee 23:53
So we're still at nascent stages of that. So with our recycling, we know how much everything just goes into general waste, or we've got bins out there that says recycling, but everything general waste is put in there. So as soon as I get these new bins put up, I'll be able to, I'll get data from so green on a you know, they provide it, you know, weekly, if we want, because they do two tips, two collections a week, and they'll be able to start providing us data on and the landfill, how much landfill waste we're, you know, we're getting rid of, and how much recycling as well. So we'll be able to monitor that. Let's say the next big thing will then be electricity and flood light usage. Say, water. I haven't quite looked at yet, because it's only as a, you know, sort of June, July, that we use a lot of water the rest of the time. We're trying to get it off the pitch, not on the pitch, so that they'd be the power will be the next one. But until I can get sight of how we could afford LED lighting, or some kind of sustainable lighting, I need a grant, but I also need sponsorship on that. That's we just can't raise that much money. When I say cost of living is going up, we've got, we've got some of the cheapest membership rates in the area. I'm under a lot of pressure to increase it, but I'm also seeing increased hardship cases from the local community. And again, you know that's we do it two ways. I don't want to start top skimming memberships to start paying for environmental things down here.

Interviewer 25:41
Does the club have to adhere to any regulations or standards set out by the FA or governing bodies for sustainability?

Interviewee 25:49
I don't think there's not for sustainability. That's all off our own back and what we want to do. So the FA you also got a lot of ground grading, you know, health and safety, you know, everything like that. They're all over us. So when you look at something like the flood lights, yeah, they do a lux or, you know, lux test on it, just to make sure, you know, there's no dark spots in any area of the pitches. And of course, we got floodlit 3g as well. So that's not ground graded, but we still do the Lux tests on those. But yeah, for sustainability, no, we're left on our own. So you know, if there was regulation coming in, brilliant, but as a club, we would never look at statutory or FA regulation as the benchmark. You know, if it was there, is there. But we've got our own ideas and philosophies of what we want to do. One of the clubs I really admire, I say I admire them. I bought into Dale Vince years ago, Forest Green Rovers. So when I was I used to work for a ground transportation company, a chauffeur drive company, and so this would have been 20 years ago. He just started Ecotricity then. So we moved our electricity over to Ecotricity. We went to carbon neutral. I started putting something called one water in our cars, which is all of their water, all their profits goes to water aid in Africa. So Forest Green Rovers, so I would love to be known as one of the best environmentally sustainable clubs outside of the EFL. That's my objective. It's very difficult to sit down and say, I know what we need to do. Like I say, - 8 - you know, I can map it out, but it's very difficult to say this year we'll do recycling. Next year, we'll do you know, power and electricity. The year after that, we can look at water. It's very much finance and time dependent, because we're all volunteers there, and we're all working 30,40, 50 hours a week to pay the

mortgage and, you know, at home and put food on the table, and in our spare hours, we're down here, but, yeah, something like Forest Green Rovers, absolutely, that's an objective.

Interviewer 28:39
Based on your and your club's experience, what recommendations would you give to other non-League clubs looking to improve their sustainability?

Interviewee 28:54
Stop talking about it and get it done like I say, I turn around to our two club house managers. You know, we've had, we've had sample cups in of the multi-use plastics since before the tournament, and our tournament was May, so yeah, maybe the best part of six months we've had those cups in. But there's always a reason to not do something. And one of those main reasons is just what you do day to day. Anyway, we're all busy doing the day to day stuff to, you know, focus on today and tomorrow to tomorrow, but you can run out tomorrows pretty quickly. So sometimes you need someone to, you know, grab the ball by the horns and say, Enough. And I said to them, there's no more. You're not ordering single use plastic. Again, I've made the decision you've got about, you know, six weeks' worth of it here. So you've got six weeks to get these other cups in. Yeah. So it's just sort of, you know, stop procrastinating. Stop procrastinating and get it done. Yeah, and it doesn't matter if it's a small win, get a win on the board, because a lot of these things, you know, if you can get a couple of small wins on the board, you may get someone else interested in it, and then you can get a little bit, you know, if you get that momentum, momentum is a massive thing in sports, a massive thing in life. Absolutely, so start with a couple of small, small little, quick wins somewhere, and go from there. But I get it, it's for other clubs. Looking at it, it's easy to have the ideas and think, Oh, it's just that next step. Just pick something, one thing, get it done. Make a decision and get it done. Get good people around you.

Interviewer 30:40
What kind of support financial advisory would be most beneficial to the club for enhancing sustainability?

Interviewee 30:58
I mean, there is, I'd say there is things out there, I think, as we've said, for me, it is, it's finance, and it's time and again, I found a lot of people that are help advise me on things. I mean, I'm a chartered accountant. I run businesses and help run businesses for years, so I've got to, I'm not an expert on everything, but I've got a pretty good steer on what to do, what needs doing. It's very much finding someone that will say, Nick, I'll come in and help you deliver this. I'll give you, you know, it's a four - 9 - month project. I can give you two, three hours a week, and let's get, let's get this project done. You and I own it, and we get it done. That would be heaven for me. 31:38 Has there been any support from the league or the FA at all? Interviewee 31:41 No, no, I wouldn't say. I wouldn't say I've really seen support from them again. I'm on really close first name terms with Surrey FA, their ex Chairman's a real good friend and part of Abbey Rangers when all of their initiatives are mainly around football for all safeguarding, Rainbow laces, you know, the whole sort of more the personal aspect, rather than, you know, respects and pieces and quiet Sundays and that sort of it. You don't really see anything from them around sustainability or around finances. It's kind of a rail that they want to steer away from. Again, if it was, you know, I'm on really good terms with the with the local council. And, I mean, they always have these online teams sports forums, and we all go on there, and it's football clubs, cricket clubs, netball, hockey, all of us. But I said to them, Look, teams doesn't work. I'll host the next one. Have it down here. Shot my mouth off. They said, brilliant. Abby Rangers is hosting it. I was like, Oh, crap. And we had it here, and it was fantastic. And they said, they said, Oh, we've got to have them in person more, because we have our business forums in person, and they work really well. And I said, bring me to your next business forum. I want to, I want to connect. Because I said, there will be people there that are like, I'd much rather

give my sponsorship money to you than just put it like the praying spray, and I'll put it in the local I say the local newspaper, they don't exist, but Surrey live or something like that. So it's, it's that connectivity that I need. I don't need someone just advising me. I need someone that can say, I can introduce you to 50 local businesspeople. Two of them may turn around and say, I'd love to get I'd love to get on side with Abbey Rangers. I'd love to be associated with you. I've got a modest budget here. Because, again, the first thing I'll say is, tell me about your business. Tell me what you're looking for. And some of them may be, we actually create waste, or we create we're not good for the environment or something. So I'm like, Jesus come on board with us. We've got this old sustainability bit, and you can sit there and say, we're helping Abbey Rangers do this, and it will sort of balance out sort of thing. So what, what I need is not advisory. It's people that can help me do it, or people that can help me say, I can help you get this money in to do it. We're really happy to put our hands in our back pocket. We work really hard, but we can't find 20 grand to do something. We can find two, three five, then we can get a grant, but then we've still got that, yeah, that bit that's missing.

Interviewer 34:36
So you mentioned the non-disposable cups. Have you taken any other steps for the merchandise, or want to be more sustainable?

Interviewee 34:46
We've got these (cups) used to be plastic, so we've got we've got that. So when you mean merchandise, you just mean anything else, Interviewer 34:53 Yes, t shirt, the shirts, or anything from the club. Interviewee 34:58 No, but I know where you're going with the whole, the shirts are made from recycled plastics, or shirts or something, because I know a lot of clubs are doing that now. No, we haven't I got to admit, at the moment, on things like shirts, we don't do a lot of we do all the club kits. One of our first team players sat there, so everyone's sort of kitted out, and that's very much about what prior, I mean, that is where I go. I say, lazy, what price can I get the kit in for? And also, we pick a supplier. So we're with Joma at the moment. I've probably got Kappa here. And again, it's what pressure can you then put on a kit supplier to say, start, you know, getting, you know, better, on recycled materials or something. And one of the things we look at as well is, you know, it's the whole marketing piece, because you look at something that you could say, I mean, again, when I worked in ground transportation, hybrid cars were all the range. Everyone wanted, oh, we've got to give us a hybrid Lexus. But when you looked at it, and you looked at the cradle to grave on it, you know, the Mercedes was actually a far better car for the environment. So there's, there's a lot of misconceptions around things here. And what is the cost? What's the environmental cost of re of getting old plastics and repurposing them into a shirt, because you can sit there and say, Oh, electric cars have got 0, effect on the environment. Hang on a minute, because it's fossil fuels that are creating electricity, plus all of the batteries and everything there, you know, all of the minerals that are having to go into those batteries. There's obviously huge supply chain issues around that. Where are those cars coming from? Are you better to get local? It does get confusing, which is where I like to try and simplify things as much as possible.

Interviewer 36:54
How does the club avoid greenwashing?

Interviewee 37:01
Well, Grundon has promised me the earth with it, but, yeah, look, there's how do we avoid it? We're not really in that space at the moment, to be honest, with people coming in and promising things with that sort of green wash, like I say, we look to and it's actually a secondary, or maybe even a tertiary aspect of it, we look to use a lot of local people, a lot of local suppliers, but that's because we're a local community football club. So instead of going to the massive company that will be bringing stuff in on the trucks where get the local

deliveries and everything coming in. So that's the sort of secondary aspect of it that, you know, instead of someone driving here from Southampton, you know, - 11 - they're coming, they're coming from, you know, two miles away. But yeah, if the question were, how would we stop greenwashing. I don't suffer fools lightly. If someone's coming in waving an environmental or sustainable flag in front of me, I'd want to see actual data or justifiable What are you actually doing? Not just we're an environmental business, or we've recycled this or something. And again, I'm talking about all this fantastic recycling we're doing, and it's going out there and so green and picking it up. Where's that going? I don't know. So you can only do this is an old thing, if you, if you start looking at the big picture, too much easy to sit down and go, I'm not doing anything. Yeah, do what you do. And think I've done my bit in the chain. Hopefully other people are as well. And again, in business, I've seen it before where, you know, the procurement teams turn around and start saying, You've got to be a sustainable business, you've got to be minority owned, you've got to have all these things. And you just end up thinking, What are you doing? Where are you going with this? You know, we look at getting the best people in that can do the job, and that will be several aspects that will be finance, reputation, quality of what they do, deliverability, sustainability comes into that. So it's one of those key aspects. But I wouldn't be looking at someone just giving some empty words, if they're saying they're sustainable, show me how.

Interviewer 39:26
Is there anything else you'd like to discuss or share that we haven't covered?

Interviewee 39:30
I don't think so. I think that was the main bits, because I wanted to pick up the goal posts on bits, the flood lights we've spoken about. I don't think there's much else. We've got the paper cups, again, polystyrene. We used to serve the food in the polystyrene bits. That's now everything's now card and paper, etc. And if we can, it's recycled card and paper, and then that will go into recycling again. And. No, I think that's most of it. And then, like, I say it's how much can we get the message out there? Because we are quite a prominent football club in the area. There's a lot of people down here that really respect us, so it's just leveraging that position. Yeah, yeah. It's just leveraging that position to sort of further get the message out there, but we realize we're on a journey.
We're very humble about where we are, and we want to take small but very deliverable steps on this.

APPENDIX H – SIGNED CONSENT FORMS

- Due to anonymity requests, signed consent forms are available on request.