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# READING FC COMMUNITY TRUST: SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

## A qualitative investigation

**Commissioned by:**  
**Reading Football Club Community Trust**

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# Executive Summary

Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT) are a non-profit organisation who act as the community arm of Reading Football Club (RFC). They deliver a wide range of projects that aim to achieve social change and improve the lives of the people in the South West of England.

These programmes of activity are grouped within four different pillars, namely Education, Sports Participation, Health, and Social Inclusion and Community Cohesion. The Trust employs 23 permanent staff, a pool of over 60 sessional staff, and they engage with approximately 4,000 local people each week.

The UK Government are increasingly promoting sport and physical activity as a vehicle that is capable of making important health, social, and economic contributions to society. The increased emphasis on sport for development, alongside neoliberalism and austerity policies, has led to a growing need for non-profit organisations to demonstrate their social value. The aim of this study was to evaluate and evidence the social impact that RFCCT has had on its participants and the wider community.

This investigation employed a qualitative design to provide rich insights into the views and experiences of different stakeholders (e.g. participants, schoolteachers, and employees) who have engaged with RFCCT. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 individuals who have been affected by RFCCT's alternative education and employment programme entitled 'Reading Alternative Provision' (RAP).

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed the key areas of social impact. Through the development of strong social bonds and by providing a nurturing and supportive learning environment, RAP's primary outcomes are enhanced life skills for its participants. The development of these life skills contributes to a variety of secondary outcomes for its participants, including improved educational attainment, enhanced employability, reduced school dropout, higher aspirations, better interpersonal relationships, and reduced offending and antisocial behaviour. RAP also makes valuable economic contributions to the community by providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people from the local and surrounding areas.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how RAP specifically, RFCCT more generally, achieves positive social change and improves the lives of the people within the community. These findings will enable policymakers, funders, researchers, practitioners, and the general public to understand the social impact and value of RFCCT.

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# Context

Reading Football Club (RFC) are an established professional football club with a reputation for developing local, 'hard to reach' communities.

Nicknamed 'The Royals,' the club offer a broad range of services that aim to bring individual and personal wellbeing to its participants, as well as community development and economic growth. Delivered across the South West of England, the community arm of the club is provided by Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT), which was set up as a charitable enterprise in 1992 in partnership with the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA). Since its inception, RFCCT has grown into one of the UK's leading football related charities, delivering a wide range of programmes and activities that aim to bring about positive social change across Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell, Basingstoke, Slough, and South Oxfordshire. The organisation employs 23 permanent staff, as well as a pool of over 60 part-time and sessional staff, who collectively engage with around 4,000 participants per week (or 208,000 participants per year).

RFCCT's commitment to improving the lives of the people within the community have been recognised both locally and nationally, with the Trust winning numerous industry awards over the years. In 2019, for example, RFCCT won the 'Activate Learning Lifestyles Faculty Employer Award for Supporting Students with Additional Needs' and the 'Silver Business Award for Creating Employment Pathways for Young People with Special Education Needs.' The Trust's dedication to using the power of sport and physical activity to address social issues is also demonstrated by their increased, year-over-year financial investment. At the end of the 2014 financial year, RFCCT's expenditure was £940,000, whereas for the financial year ending 2018, RFCCT invested £1.2 million into projects that ran in the local community. This represents a £260,000 growth in investment over this four-year period.

RFCCT have successful working partnerships with numerous organisations across the public, private, and voluntary sector, with its most important relationship being with RFC. Indeed, RFC has the potential to maximise the reach of RFCCT's work in the community, and RFCCT must deliver on that work in order to achieve positive social change among the club's fan base and beyond.

## Mission statement

Through using the power of football and sport, RFCCT aim to provide quality experiences within the local and surrounding communities that focus on tackling social issues relating to health, sports participation, education, and social inclusion and community cohesion.

## Vision statement

By realising their mission statement, the Trust hopes to achieve the following three goals:

**Care:** To ensure as a Trust that they prioritise the wellbeing of the young people who participate in their projects and activities.

**Develop:** To provide individual pathways that enable its participants to develop their physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

**Educate:** To improve the academic skills and educational success of children and young people through the delivery of alternative education and employment programmes that run in partnership with both local and national organisations.

# Four key pillars of activity

The projects delivered by RFCCT are grouped within four main pillars of activity. These are:

**Education:** RFCCT's Education pillar offers a range of opportunities for children and young people who are struggling to reach their full potential in mainstream education. These programmes are divided between pre-16 alternative education provision and post-16 further education. The programmes are often delivered in partnership with local education providers, and they focus on helping the participants to attain academic qualifications, enhance their employability and career readiness, and develop important life skills such as confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth.

**Sports Participation:** RFCCT deliver a comprehensive range of football and sport development programmes for thousands of young people each year. From delivering breakfast, lunchtime, and afterschool clubs in mainstream and Special Education Needs (SEN) schools to delivering development centres, soccer schools, and disability sessions in the local community, RFCCT provide young people the opportunity to access quality sport and physical activity provision whatever their age, gender, ability, race, ethnicity, or social class.

## Social Inclusion and Community

**Cohesion:** RFCCT's Social Inclusion and Community Cohesion Department offer a diverse range of programmes designed to tackle antisocial behaviour, build strong and inclusive communities, improve physical health and mental wellbeing, and promote positive relationships between individuals and groups from different backgrounds.

**Health:** RFCCT promote healthy lifestyles through various sport and physical activity programmes. This includes a programme of activity that is delivered in partnership with the English Football League Trust and the Wembley Fund to offer young people with SEN or other disabilities the opportunity to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. The programme also offers young people (16 to 19 years old) with SEN the chance to take part in a traineeship scheme, which seeks to enhance their employability by providing them opportunities to gain sport coaching qualifications and work experience as a sport coach.



# Introduction

The UK government have become increasingly interventionist in setting the sport policy agenda and the sport development work that subsequently arises from it (Bloyce and Smith, 2010).

They now promote sport and physical activity as a vehicle that is capable of making important health, social, and economic contributions to society (HM Government, 2015; Sport England, 2016).

Alongside the increasing focus on using sport and physical activity for social good, the UK government have also implemented a wave of neoliberal and austerity-driven policies and politics in recent times (Widdop et al., 2018). This includes the implementation of a rigorous, targeted, and 'payment-by-results' approach to public spending in community sport (HM Government, 2015). The emphasis on increased efficiency, user choice, and competition for contracts means that non-profit organisations, such as RFCCT, are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness and social impact<sup>1</sup> of their programmes in return for the investment made (Arvidson and Lyon, 2013). Indeed, evaluations and social impact reporting are now viewed as a way for both private and public sector funding bodies to measure, manage, and determine the performance (and fate) of non-profit organisations.

This situation has resulted in an upsurge in evaluation and social impact measurement within the charitable sector. The vast majority of the research conducted to date has used a statistical or quantitative approach to determine social impact. An example of this would be measuring (i.e. counting) the number of participants from an education and employability programme that move into employment or further education.

While such findings are useful, quantitative approaches are very poor at identifying the breadth and depth of reasons for the impact occurring (e.g. the cause of entering employment/further education). To better uncover how projects are affecting its participants (and the wider community), researchers need to understand the meaning of the phenomenon for those involved (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). To understand the meanings that these people construct, researchers need to understand the influence that the particular mechanism (e.g. project) has had on their thoughts, beliefs, and actions, which calls for a qualitative research design (Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

Therefore, the aim of this research report was to evaluate and evidence the social impact RFCCT has had on its participants and communities by providing rich and informative insights into the views and experiences of different stakeholders (e.g. participants, schoolteachers, and employees) who have utilised RFCCT's provision. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to develop a detailed account of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences of engaging with RFCCT. By adopting a qualitative approach, this research report will help policymakers, funders, researchers, practitioners, and the general public to better understand the social impact and value of RFCCT.

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<sup>1</sup> Social impact is a complex and difficult to define term (Barman, 2007). For the purpose of this research investigation, we define social impact as the net effect of an activity on the social fabric of the community and wellbeing of individuals and families. In other words, social impact refers to an action or series of actions that lead to significant or lasting changes in people's lives.



# Research design and procedures

This investigation employed a qualitative design, which is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

The overarching aim of this report was to capture the social impact of RFCCT by using the thoughts, experiences, and opinions of its participants, in their own words.

## Participant recruitment

A purposeful and non-random sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for this investigation; that is, we chose a selection of individuals who would help us to learn a great deal about the social impact RFCCT has had on the lives of the people within the community. We first held a series of meetings with the manager of the Trust, as well as other senior members of staff, to discuss the nature of their provision and to determine which projects we should specifically explore for this investigation. At the conclusion of these informal meetings, it was decided that we would focus our efforts on exploring the views and experiences of individuals who have utilised services of 'Reading Alternative Provision' (RAP). This decision was grounded in the belief that a sample of these people would be able to provide in-depth, relevant information that would help us to understand the social impact RFCCT has had on its participants and the wider community.

Following this, the community trust manager identified 15 different stakeholders who could provide rich and detailed insights into their experiences of engaging with RAP. We then held conversations with these people

via telephone and/or emails to discuss the purpose of the investigation and ethical considerations, including what was needed from them in order to take part in the study, how their data would be recorded, stored, and used, and informed consent. For individuals under the age of 16, these conversations took place with the adult who was responsible for the young person.

## Overview of Reading Alternative Provision

RAP is a part-time or full-time programme for young people aged 8-16 years who have found attending mainstream school difficult. The provision is based at RFCCT and young people are referred to the programme from local primary and secondary schools and local authorities. Through providing high quality education provision, RAP aims to help students develop the skills and qualities to reengage into mainstream school or to leave at 16 with a range of qualifications and progress to further education.

## Participant background information

The final sample comprised 12 people. All participants, as well as any other individual that they mentioned during data collection, have been given a pseudonym (i.e. a fictitious name) when quoted within this report to help ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

### Further details about each participant are provided below:

**Mike** was a young male who was employed by RFCCT on a part-time basis. He helped facilitate the delivery of various different programmes within RFCCT, including RAP.

**Amber** was a young female who was employed by RFCCT on a part-time basis. Amber helped facilitate the delivery of various different programmes within RFCCT, including RAP.

**Joey** was a young male who was employed by RFCCT on a part-time basis. He helped facilitate the delivery of various different programmes within RFCCT, including RAP.

**Robert** was employed at a local college as an alternative provision manager. As part of his working role, Robert regularly referred students to RFCCT's alternative education and employment support programme (RAP).

**Kelly** was a programme leader for a sport related course at a local further education college. The programme she was responsible for ran in partnership with RFCCT, and it aimed to provide its students with the opportunity to undertake work experience across RFCCT's projects, including RAP.

**Carole** was working as a careers leader at a local alternative education college. As part of her working role, she often referred pupils to RFCCT's alternative education and employment support programme (RAP).

**Ray** worked at as the Head of Special Educational Needs at a local secondary school. As part of his working role, Ray often referred pupils to RAP.

**Emma** worked within student support services at a local secondary school. As part of her working role, Emma regularly referred pupils to RAP.

**Toni** worked at a local college who specialised in alternative education provision for young people. As part of her working role, Toni frequently referred pupils to RAP.

**Jonny** was a young male who frequently attended the projects provided by RFCCT, including RAP.

**Gordon** was a young male who regularly attended RAP, as well as other programmes provided by RFCCT.

**Harry** was a young male who frequently attended RAP.

## Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis

Data for this study were generated via individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant, which ranged from 20 to 46 minutes in duration.

The aim of these interviews were to explore the views of the participants and allow them to talk in rich and open ways about their experiences of engaging with RAP. In total, over 391 minutes (6.5 hours) of interview data were generated for this study. All interviews were recorded on a digital audio device and transcribed verbatim. The data produced from the 12 interviews were analysed using a thematic approach.

This is a method that describes the data set by identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun et al., 2019). We read and re-read the transcripts to develop an empathetic understanding of the participants' world and engaged in an ongoing dialogue about what we saw as the emerging patterns related to the research goals. These patterns were then reviewed, meanings interpreted, and verified as prevailing themes.

Once the themes were generated, we then sought to identify quotes that best represented the essence of each theme. Essentially, we aimed to use a selection of the participants' own words to shed light on the ways that RAP specifically, RFCCT more generally, has improved the lives of the people within the community.



## Limitations of the research design

As with all forms of research, there are limitations to any one study. The limitations of this research lie in the representative capabilities of qualitative inquiry and especially the purposeful and convenience sampling strategies employed here.

Although our sample of 12 participants represented a range of people who utilised the services provided by RFCCT, this is still a relatively small number when one takes into account the size and reach of the organisation. Moreover, the individuals interviewed for this study were only asked questions about their views and experiences of RAP.

Therefore, the findings of this report might not be representative of the entire population of people who access and engage with RAP or any other programme delivered by RFCCT.

That being said, our study does give a greater voice to the individual, which might generate naturalistic generalisations (Stake, 1995). This is because it provides the situated reader with enough detail about the case under study so that they might reflect on it and make connections with their own knowledge and experiences. In other words, we hope 'the research bears familial resemblances to the readers' experiences, settings they move in, events they've observed or heard about, and people they have talked to' (Smith, 2018: 140).

The research presented in this report has received full approval by the Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Governance Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University.



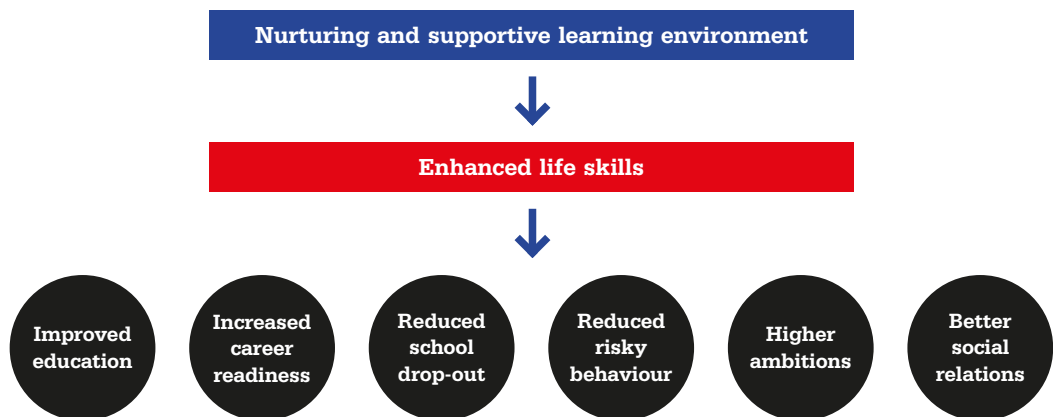
# Research findings

The overarching aim of this research study was to understand the social impact of RFCCT by listening to the views and experiences of the people affected by its activity.

Specifically, we interviewed 12 different stakeholders to assess the perceived impact of RFCCT's alternative education and employment programme (RAP) for its participants and the wider community. Our analysis of the interview data revealed that RAP achieves positive social change and improves the lives of the people within the community in a variety of different ways. Through the development of strong social bonds and by providing a nurturing and supportive learning environment, RAP's primary outcomes are enhanced life skills for its participants. These include the development of their confidence, communication, resilience, self-esteem,

emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, self-worth, and decision-making and problem solving. The development of these life skills contributes to a variety of secondary outcomes for its participants, including improved educational attainment, enhanced employability, reduced school dropout, higher ambitions, better social relationships, and reduced harmful and risky behaviours. By providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people in the local and surrounding areas, RAP also makes valuable, social and economic contributions to society.

**Figure 1** below provides a thematic overview of how RAP achieves social change against a variety of primary and secondary outcomes.



**Figure 1:** Thematic map of the social impact of RAP, including its primary and secondary outcomes.

The transformative capacities of RFCCT's RAP project and its key areas of social impact for its participants and communities are explored in detail below.

## Nurturing and supportive learning environment

Every individual who was interviewed for this investigation believed that RAP helps to improve the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of its participants. When asked what enables the achievement of this social change, the young people who attended RAP advocated that the primary driver is its nurturing and supportive learning environment. In particular, they highlighted how the strong social bonds between the staff and the participants are the catalyst for the project's success:

It's an environment I like to be in, because they can have it with us (banter). Like, we bounce off each other a lot and, like, they're mature about it. Like, they're not just going to go off the wall at us for stuff like that. They know how difficult it is, and then all they really want to do is help us [...] They know about our backgrounds, how stuff is, and they do have close bonds with our family as well, through it. [...] [At school] it didn't really seem like they cared. But here, they got to know us personally. Instead of just doing their job, they built that bond with us.  
**(Gordon, RAP Participant).**

I would say the people over here, they're not set to one job. At school, you're just meant to teach, whereas here, they're, like, friends, in a way, they're not really like teachers, they're like different people; there are lovely people who work here.  
**(Harry, RAP participant).**

[...] that's what my school never did. Like, they didn't get to know me for who I was. But here, they got to know me for who I was, and I have a close bond with all the staff here [...]. They know what I'm like and [...] if I ever need anything, I know where to go. They're here for me, basically.  
**(Gordon, RAP Participant).**

The wider stakeholders who referred pupils to RAP also argued that the individual and community benefits associated with the project stem from its 'unique' learning environment:

It's young. It's energetic. It involves everybody. It's very upbeat. It's got an air of positivity about it. For example, in the social areas, there's very contemporary music [playing]. There's activities such as [video consoles]. What I'm saying is it's not just about the football. The surrounding social element also is really important, and it seems to offer a very attractive way of spending time for young people. I think it brings young people together from many different schools and different sectors of the community.  
**(Carole, wider stakeholder).**

If you speak to them about their experiences of being [in] school, and how they feel disrespected by adults, not listened to by adults, not helped by adults, judged by adults. They come to us with a very poor worldview of themselves, of adults, of what we are supposed to do in society. So all of a sudden, you've got this group of people (RAP employees) who take these kids who are at their lowest, and they listen to them, they understand them, and they challenge them. The way that these Reading Football Club staff, when they understand and talk to kids is very, very unique.  
**(Toni, wider stakeholder).**

## Enhanced life skills

According to our interviewees, the positive relationships between the staff and the participants act as a building block to help the young attendees develop their life skills. In particular, they expressed how the safe, secure, and motivating climate at RAP helps to increase the self-esteem, self-worth, self-efficacy, confidence, and communication skills of its participants:

When people come in here, like new students and stuff, they get you speaking to them and I, kind of, like, started feeling confident talking to people, and I started doing it without them asking me. And then, like, I started building friendships here with people and stuff.  
**(Gordon, RAP participant).**

It doesn't feel like I'm out alone, I know that people here, it doesn't really matter to them where you come from, they know they will, like, comfort you and support you any way possible.

**(Harry, RAP participant).**

Probably because where they are, where the staff are nice and when I probably first came here I thought people would be more strict. I didn't know, but now I know they're all nice it's made me more confident; [it's] encouraged me to get to know more and different types of people.

**(Jonny, RAP participant).**

I would say that the building of positive relationships with adults, the building of confidence and self-esteem and communication are probably among the top skills that our kids will learn with these guys (RAP staff). I think their confidence and self-esteem has grown. And, I think their communication and interpersonal skills has grown massively. [RAP] has giving them the skills to be able to move back to other areas of society, which they really do struggle with.

**(Toni, wider stakeholder).**

There's a change in their attitude. They believe in themselves a lot more. They're more focused and positive. Even the way that they talk to people is better. Rather than barking at people, they can respond in a positive manner. They can actually hold a conversation with people, which a lot of students struggle to do. But, ultimately, I think it's just then they believe in themselves more. They're not afraid to give things a go anymore. They're not afraid of failing so much. If they get it wrong, they get it wrong. They pick themselves up and try again, so it's resilience as well.

**(Emma, wider stakeholder).**

## Improved academic skills and educational success

As mentioned above, most of the young people who attend RAP struggle to reach their full potential at mainstream school. The support networks provided by RAP helps them to overcome these issues and challenges. Most notably, the staff are able to change their perspective and attitude to learning, which in turn increases their academic engagement:

My education increased, because I never used to like doing education. And then, when they used to convince me to do it, I used to do it. Then, it slowly became into a natural habit that I'd come in, do it, then play football. Instead of come in and then going straight to play football and not do education. **(Gordon, RAP participant).**

Because at the school I'm with all my mates there, so I'd like to act more cool instead of doing the actual work. [...] They just said to actually succeed in life you have to just keep your head down and do learning, and stuff like that.

**(Jonny, RAP participant).**

We didn't think that he'd survive in a secondary school. Even his mum didn't, but [RAP] had an opening, so he took him down to the football club [...] and now his attitude is... We were all talking at the end of term and said, "What do you want to do? What do you want to get out of next year?" He said, "I'm really proud that I've managed to finish my first year at school. I've managed to stay in for a year." He said, "Next year," he said, "I want to be even better and I want to do a full year without getting in trouble, just to prove to everyone that I can do it." He's a lot more positive in himself. His behaviour is manageable. For him to say, "I hate school, I don't like work, I don't like this," to go, "I want to stay in school, I want to be a success," that's a massive turnaround and the staff at RAP are largely responsible for that.

**(Emma, wider stakeholder).**

Without that (RAP), he wouldn't have gone onto where he's got to (full-time employment). So English and maths, he never wanted to do, it was just something not on his radar, but they got him to understand that, actually, you do need to do this in order to get to where you want to get to. So yes, in terms of academic progress, he wouldn't have even engaged with that if it wasn't for them.

**(Robert, wider stakeholder).**

The changes in the young people's attitude and engagement to learning can have profound, positive implications for their academic achievement and educational attainment. For example, it can lead to them undertaking and potentially passing their GCSEs. Importantly, our interviewees stressed that these educational successes would not occur without the intervention of RAP:



[Before I came here] I felt like, "If I sit them (GCSEs), I'll just make myself look like a fool if I fail." I told those lot (staff at RAP) this and then they, kind of, like, helped me with the way of, like, easy stuff to get easy marks. And then, when I went into my actual exams, I felt more confident that, "Yes, I can pass these." Then, when I came out of the exams, I was thinking, "Yes, I feel very confident on these now."

**(Gordon, RAP participant).**

[If I didn't come here] I'd probably end up not getting an education. I probably wouldn't be able to complete my GCSEs.  
**(Jonny, RAP participant).**

Yes, there's one of our students, he's just finished Year 11. He was at very high risk of being permanently excluded – very high risk. We tried everything in school. We tried different ways to support him, different ways to help him. We've had youth workers, we've had counselling, we've had family workers. We've had in-school support, we've had outside-school support, but it made absolutely no difference whatsoever. But then he went to [RAP] for day release and it worked. We've managed to get him to do several GCSEs. Without RAP he would never – never – have done his exams; no. [Rather,] he would have had a criminal record and he would have been excluded permanently from school.

**(Emma, wider stakeholder).**

Quite early on in Year 11, he got involved in another serious incident which, again, would have resulted in permanent exclusion. So then, he ended up going to Reading Alternative Provision full-time. But, again, it was helpful for that to happen, because, you know, I don't think he would have got anything out of Year 11 if that hadn't happened. But because they were able to hold him and work through qualifications, he's got a post-16 option now, which is excellent, because he wouldn't have anything.

**(Ray, wider stakeholder).**

## Increased employment readiness

In addition to improving the academic skills and educational success of its participants,

RAP also provides its participants the opportunity to engage in a variety of work-based learning activities. According to our interviewees, this helps the young people to develop a range of skills, behaviours, attitudes, and attributes that will support their personal and professional development:

There was one called Prince's Trust, and that helped me, like, just build social skills as well. Like, they helped me to talk to people. There were difficult people on there, like who I used to be, and I, kind of, showed leadership to, like, get them out of the bubble.

**(Gordon, RAP participant).**

We have those summer camps and I normally come along. [...] This has given me more options in the way of jobs, [...] I'm learning things now that can help me benefit in the future.

**(Harry, RAP participant).**

[A pupil who] started at RAP, we created the opportunity for work experience for him. [...] He did two afternoons a week, which was out of school hours, which is quite unusual for children at pupil referral units. Also, he maintained that. So, I think the resilience he has developed at RAP is quite key. I think also he would not have had the confidence to go in the workplace without the skills that RAP has given him. I think the respect he has developed through RAP and, of course, the ability to follow instructions [contributes] as well.

**(Carole, wider stakeholder).**

I think about the unspoken skills around employment, so having appropriate conversations and knowing about things that are going on outside of your postcode or outside of your house or outside of the school, like current affairs and politics. And also, respecting time and punctuality, that, actually, you're not just wasting your own time or just being late, you're actually wasting somebody else's time if you are late, for something that you've committed yourself to. It's the core skills that everyone seems to take for granted within a workplace. So yes, even just making yourself a cup of tea when there's somebody else waiting to make one, you might offer to make them one as well.

**(Robert, wider stakeholder).**

Alongside work experience opportunities, RAP also provides its participants the chance to obtain extracurricular awards and qualifications, which helps to further enhance their employability and career prospects. As



Gordon summarises:

I wouldn't have thought about the Sports Leaders' Level 1 or Level 2 badges, that would have not ever been in my mind-set to get either of those. And then, when I got them, it, kind of, motivated me to, "I want to get more of them, and I want them fast." (**Gordon, RAP participant**).

## Reduced school dropout

Our analysis of the interview data also revealed how the skills and values promoted at RAP are transferrable across different areas of the participant's lives. For example, the interviewees explained how the personal and social skills that the young people develop through RAP are relevant and helpful for their engagement at mainstream school. Specifically, they described how RAP helps them to develop coping strategies to better manage the demands of the school setting, which in turn reduces the likelihood of them being excluded:

**Harry:** There are always people at your school who are always there to destroy people's confidence [...], to break you and they literally annoyed me to the extent that I actually threw a [cricket] bat at someone.

**Researcher:** Has that happened since you've been coming here?

**Harry:** It's not happened.

**Researcher:** Why is that?

**Harry:** I used to keep a lot of stuff to myself, I didn't really talk about it, as such, but now, because you build friendships here (at RAP), you feel it's easier to just talk to people. It's felt very nice just to talk to people [such as staff and other participants at RAP] and now all that anger that's inside just doesn't really seem to cause any reaction.

I don't think we'd buy into a programme that we didn't feel was right for the children that we're working with. So, you know, if it wasn't working, we wouldn't use Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT). Actually, what we've found is that, you know, it has had, for the most part, a positive impact on their ability to

cope within school when they're with us. (**Ray, wider stakeholder**).

There's one [pupil] there at the moment who is doing day release. [Before he started at RAP] he would be in the office every single day: "I've been kicked out of lesson. I've walked out of my lesson. My teacher is an idiot. I'm not doing that. I'm not doing this." Since he started at RAP (8 weeks ago) I've seen him in the office about three times. So, although we can't say, "There's an immediate difference in his levels and his academic progress," the fact that he's managing to stay in his classes, the fact that he is now completing work, the fact that he's not getting pulled up and in trouble as much, it will make a difference to his levels. It will make a difference to his progress. (**Emma, wider stakeholder**).

## Reduced harmful and risky behaviours

Another key area of impact was RAP's ability to address risky behaviours. The young people who attended RAP explained how the programme encourages its participants to develop prosocial attitudes and goals for the future, which helps to prevent and/or reduce their offending and antisocial behaviour. For example, Gordon described to us how the staff at RAP motivated him to stop his offending by changing his thinking, values, and behaviours:

So, my first incident was in a construction class and I got mad at someone and I chucked a brick, so they excluded me for that, permanently. [...] When they convinced me (staff at RAP), I told them, and then they, kind of, like, supported me with that to help me stop doing stuff like that. When I got older, I realised, because of their help, I needed to grow out of who I was, because I'm going into the real world and, like, I can't be doing that in public or something, losing my temper like that. (**Gordon, RAP participant**).

I used to sell drugs often. I went through a stage of, like, "Oh, I'm not going to get anything out of anything, so I might as well go down that route." [...] I used to come here, I used to smell of weed and I used to have lots of money on me. [...]





From [coming] here, I've realised what those drugs have done to people and, like, I can't go down that path and do something like that to someone. [...] The consequences are a 30-year prison stretch, and I'm not really looking to do that. So, that, kind of, put me off it as well. I can remember saying, "I don't want to do it anymore. I want to find something I can do, that's legal," and then we, kind of, built on stuff.

**(Gordon, RAP participant).**

The wider stakeholders who referred pupils to RAP also highlighted how the project helps young people to foster self-esteem and develop new skills, including perspective taking and self-management, which in turn encourages the young people to reduce their substance abuse and misuse:

The whole ethos of RAP is that you need to be fit and healthy. They promote the idea that it is less attractive to be hanging round with other youths possibly doing drugs, because health is important. [...] So, I do think RAP has a positive influence over other risk-taking behaviours, because they are taught they need to be able to run around and have optimal health to perform well in life.

**(Carole, wider stakeholder).**

Some of our students potentially engage in substance misuse. So, having a reason not to do something like that, like going to RAP, where obviously you can't smoke or have it on you or anything like that, gives them that boundary and where the boundaries are enforced. [Furthermore,] they understand the reasons behind that, and the level of trust and the level of relationship that they have with the staff there, they wouldn't do it purely because it's disrespectful and not because they might get told off, you know? I think that's really important.

**(Robert, wider stakeholder).**

The wider stakeholders also argued that RAP might be especially effective at reducing risky behaviours among its participants because it runs throughout the summer months. Unlike mainstream schools, which typically close for a 6-week period during July and August, the staff at RAP deliver a programme of activity during this time. The wider stakeholders were of the belief that the continuous and ongoing support over the summer period is crucial

to RAP's ability to promote desistance from offending or other antisocial behaviour. As Robert explained:

The other aspect, as well, of RAP is they do run a summer programme, which is absolutely brilliant for a lot of our students because it prevents them from slipping into old established behaviours that maybe they don't have a chance to exhibit while they're at school.

**(Robert, wider stakeholder).**

## Higher aspirations

Through improving the life skills of its participants, especially in terms of fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem and through the development of social skills, RAP also helps young people to re-envisage a more positive future, which further encourages desistance from a pattern of offending. As Ray, Emma, and Jonny explained to us:

Before I came here, I didn't know what I wanted to do in the future. I didn't have any idea I wanted to mentor kids. I was one of the kids who, someone would ask, "What do you want to do the in the future?" and they'd say, "I don't know," and I said that for a couple of years. Then, when I realised the help they've done for me, I, kind of, want to give that back to younger kids, and try and put them back on the straight path, instead of going down what I went down (selling drugs and violence). **(Ray, RAP participant).**

I think RAP shows them that they've got choices. They don't have to follow the crowd. They don't have to join a gang. They can get respect by talking to people in a positive, decent manner. They don't have to throw insults around and use their fists to gain respect from people. They don't have to rule by fear. They can actually rule by using their intelligence, by showing respect to people. RAP does show: "Right, there's another way. I don't have to do what all my friends are doing. I don't have to go and [take drugs], and hang round the park. I don't have to be swearing at people. I can go out and I can earn myself some decent money. I haven't got to go and steal things."

**(Emma, wider stakeholder).**

**Researcher:** After your GCSEs do you have any plans? Do you know what you



would like to do?

**Jonny:** One of my lessons, the tutor told me that when he was younger he bought a train ticket with some of his mates and went around Europe. That's probably something I want to do.

**Researcher:** That's amazing. Would you ever have dreamed about doing that before coming here?

**Jonny:** No, I never would have had the confidence to do that.

## Better interpersonal relationships

Another key outcome of RAP was improved social relationships. By providing a motivational climate that helps to improve the self-worth and self-esteem of its participants, as well as their attitudes, prosocial behaviour, and interpersonal skills, RAP helps young people to develop more positive and healthy relationships in all areas of life. This includes making new friends at school, as well as having better interactions with teaching staff:

Yes, like, I built bonds with people from my school who I didn't really think I would be friends with. It's, kind of, weird, like, I built bonds with people I absolutely hated at school. I'd think to myself, "Oh, I couldn't be friends with you," and when I went back to school, I, kind of, opened up to people and showed them I'm not just who I was. I, kind of, built friendships with loads of people and now I have more friends than what I had.

**(Gordon, RAP participant).**

Before I even came to this, I was not really a person who would go out and talk, I would literally just stay on my own. I felt, kind of, sad and then I came here. Obviously, people interact with you and I'd feel like, "Oh, okay, they're not as scary as they seem." You get to know more people and as you get to know more people, I gathered more confidence. I thought, "I'll try this at school," because I thought, "It's working here, so it might work at school." It did and now I've got a big group of friends. **(Harry, RAP participant)**

There's a young man who has been going to [RAP] for two years. The huge difference in the way he communicates with staff on site now compared to when

he did two years ago, there's a massive improvement. He was very rude, very abrupt. He wouldn't show us any eye contact. He'd be very derogatory about staff, he'd laugh and snigger and just wouldn't give staff the respect or the time when they asked him a question he'd just brush them off. Fast forward two years, although not a lot has changed for this boy and his life, but you've got to understand the background of these kids, and what that child goes through emotionally at home. But from the perspective of his interaction with staff, he comes in, he holds conversations, he can hold good eye contact. He laughs in the right places, he's not rude or abusive anymore. I think it's down to the way they talk to him and interact with him at RAP. **(Toni, wider stakeholder).**

Importantly, the life skills promoted at RAP also help its participants to build stronger family relationships. For example, Jonny and Harry described to us how since attending RAP they have had better communication with their respective families (e.g. expressive, open, and respectful), as well as spending more time with them:

I barely have any arguments [at home] now. [...] It makes me feel like a different person, in a way. It just felt so much nicer, knowing that my anger, was not there; it's made me feel very happy and everything. **(Harry, RAP participant).**

I do more stuff with my family than I would before. I probably interact with my family more than before I came here. I'd not talk to my family that much. [Whereas now I] go out for family meals, and sometimes just go out to my other family members' houses.

**(Jonny, RAP participant).**

Because RAP brings together young people from different racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups, it also encourages the participants to develop cultural empathy and open-mindedness. This in turn can help the young people to build better and stronger relationships with people from other cultures. As Carole explained:

One of the aspects that I have observed when I've done other visits to [RAP] is that it's more than just white youths involved. There is quite a lot of different cultures. It was quite multi-racial, I'd say. From that point of view, when I came across a student who was quite



fixed in some of his views, in a not very positive way, I thought it might be a good intervention for him to pursue a love of football but also to mix with many different types of young people, all who love football. And, it has proven to help him. He is more open-minded. He is more flexible. And he's more willing to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds.

**(Carole, wider stakeholder).**

## Wider social impact

Our analysis discovered that the social impact of RAP was not limited to the individual and personal wellbeing of its participants. By providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people in the local and surrounding areas, RAP also makes an important economic and social contribution to the community. According to our interviewees, RAP is especially effective in terms of helping further education students and neophyte sport coaches to develop knowledge, understanding, and skills that will support their personal and professional development. This includes competencies such as communication, influencing, empathy, and emotional intelligence. As Kelly, Joey, and Mike explained to us:

Some of our young people have gone and got some employment through the Community Trust by doing coaching in the evenings with Little Kickers and Kicks and the other projects [...]. The other thing is that the Trust also support our learners with is work experience. So, we put them through the [academic] programme and then they do their work experience up at [RFCCT], but they also get to go on their FA Level 1 coaching qualification, and if they show willing and desire, they are actually supported by the Trust to do their FA Level 2. [...] The work experience is brilliant because it gives them an opportunity to see what it's like out in the real world. It also gives them a better understanding of what is going to be asked of them when they're going into employment, and employability skills. So, they pick up skills along the way that are going to look good on their CV, so when they apply for something in the future, they are going to have a better chance to be one of those top five that gets interviewed. **(Kelly, wider stakeholder).**

Since being employed with [RFCCT], I've become a lot more mature in how I view a lot of things. And I think RAP especially has developed me as a person, [particularly in terms of] confidence, being able to talk to a lot of different people, and being able to take a lot of pointers from people. Also, the way I deal with problems at home, the way I deal with maybe a friend who might come to me and say, "Look, I'm having a tough time," or family members might say, "I'm having a tough time," and then I can help them and then they'll be like, "Wow, thanks for the help." So my quality of life and the way my life has changed is drastic since joining [RFCCT] but in a very good way. **(Joey, RAP employee).**

I've had a rough time in my life as well. I was homeless once for six months, I had to live with my friend. [So], when I first had the job [at RAP] I was a little bit... I wasn't that confident. I didn't know how to approach the child and stuff like that. I've done a lot of courses like mental health, first aid and all this stuff, so now I know and understand. It's made me more confident as a person. It helps me. Before I wouldn't be able to just approach someone and be like, "Hello, how are you doing?" Now I can. RAP has just helped me with my confidence. It's helped me to just go out and do what I've got to do and just reach my goals with helping young people. **(Mike, RAP employee).**

## So, why rap?

While the social impact of RAP has been demonstrated above, we feel it is important to share some additional interview extracts that have not been captured across our analytical narrative. The quotes are not directly connected to a particular theme or social outcome, but they do further highlight the need and importance of RAP for the development of the local community:

Schools shouldn't kick kids out straight away. They should look at this place and send them here [...], so kids don't just end up selling drugs and that, they could potentially find something here, like, it could open pathways up for anyway. Like, I couldn't be more grateful to get sent here than kicked out of school. **(Gordon, RAP participant).**



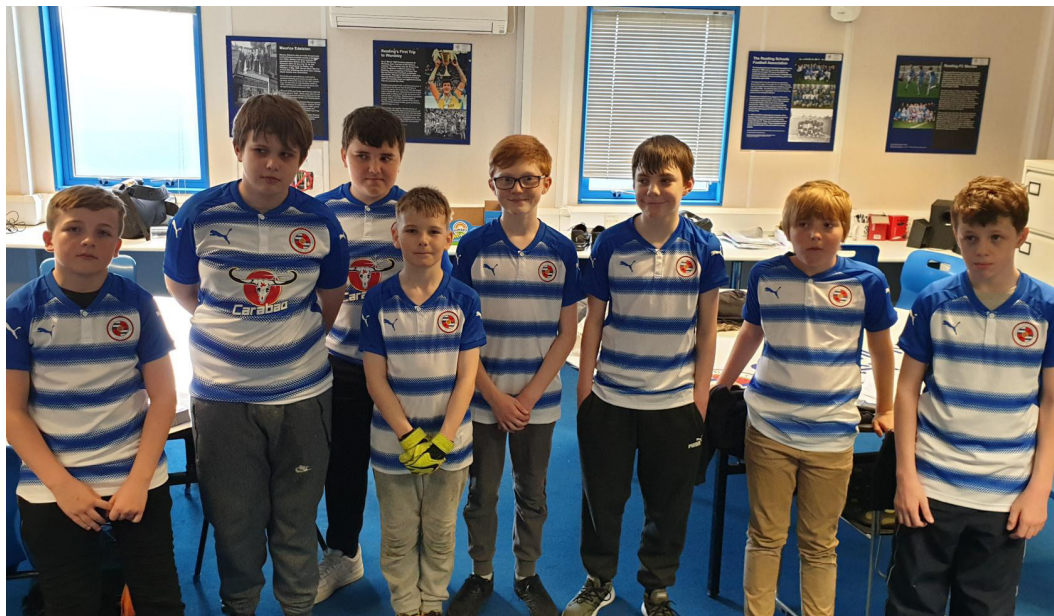
Okay, so before I came here I wasn't at school because I was out of school for a year and a half. When I started coming here it was helping me to really talk to people, have social communication, and then later on, as I've been here, they've helped me to get back to learning and being able to help me to complete my GCSEs. **(Harry, RAP participant)**.

When every club does something like this, it'll be even nicer. [...] I just love the... It's a very good community, basically. Like, you're all coming to the same thing, just to have a bit of fun and learn and do a bit of football. So, it's just a bit of fun, really. **(Jonny, RAP participant)**.

I think it changes their hope. I think that's what's different. Certainly for students in a pupil referral unit they do feel often extremely rejected by the mainstream school system, and so they are wrestling with feelings of rejection whilst trying

to get used to new environments. Also then they will be in an area with other students going through the same thing. So it's quite a melting pot of frustration, which obviously whilst we do all we can there is an element for some students of hopelessness, which is so bad. And I think what RFCCT does is work from a positivity angle, and turns around that hope, and helps it develop into confidence and a 'can do' attitude. **(Carole, wider stakeholder)**.

I think the best thing about the project is definitely the staff, their understanding of students. The positive relationships that they build with students is incredible. They take kids that are at rock bottom, who haven't been to school for years, and they will engage them positively. That is fabulous. RAP is often the tool that gets them reengaged with society again. **(Toni, wider stakeholder)**.



# Conclusion

The exploratory aim of this report was to evidence and evaluate the social impact of RFCCT by using a qualitative research design.

Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 different stakeholders (e.g. participants, schoolteachers, and employees) to generate rich insights into their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of RAP. Our thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that RAP achieves positive social change against a variety of outcomes for its participants.

This includes the development of life skills, improved academic achievement, enhanced employability, reduced school dropout, higher aspirations, better interpersonal relations, and a reduction in offending and antisocial behaviour. RAP also makes economic contributions to society by providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people from the local and surrounding communities.

While we believe that the research presented in this study will help stakeholders to understand the social value of RFCCT, we cannot presume that our findings are representative of the entire population of people affected by the organisation. The quantity, diversity, and different characteristics of RFCCT's programmes makes it difficult to translate our research findings to other areas of the Trust's work. Therefore, we recommend for RFCCT to undertake exploratory qualitative research studies for each of the projects that they provide.

This would enable RFCCT to better understand and demonstrate the social value of their work in the community. We also believe that RFCCT need to make further efforts in developing clear aims and intended outcomes for each of their projects. This will allow the Trust to develop more robust monitoring and evaluation strategies, which will help to improve the quality and validity of their reporting processes.

Finally, alongside performing additional qualitative investigations into the views and experiences of people affected by RFCCT, we would also encourage the Trust to evaluate their social, environmental, and economic impact using a quantitative approach. In particular, we would urge RFCCT to employ a social return on investment (SROI) framework to measure the financial value of their work and to identify opportunities for improvement.



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