

# Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

## Football After COVID-19: An Agenda to Protect Our Game and Our Communities

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## Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

# Football After COVID-19: An Agenda to Protect Our Game and Our Communities

## Key takeaways

1. We need to reform, not simply restart football in the Liverpool City Region (LCR). At present, little is being done in the short term to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the football industry in LCR. Urgent discussion, planning and action is required to help re-imagine and re-shape a more sustainable, socially responsible and effective football industry.
2. We propose the development of a strategic leadership group (SLG) that can act as a custodian for the football industry in LCR.
3. The SLG should be constituted by football authorities, policy leads, academics and stakeholders from the public and private sectors.
4. The SLG should aim to identify unresolved risks, co-ordinate a response to tackle these risks and identify potential future issues, and deliver and evaluate strategies to reform local football.
5. Promoting better connections between professional football clubs and the communities in which they are located will be key to ensuring grassroots football emerges in a healthier position as LCR seeks to “build back better”.

## 1. Introduction

The football industry, a major player in the Liverpool City Region (LCR) that contributes towards a range of key strategic economic, social and public health outcomes, has been impacted heavily by COVID-19. On 13 March 2020, the English Premier League (EPL) was postponed. Three days later, English football authorities postponed all “grassroots” (i.e. affiliated association) football, with a return date yet to be confirmed.

At a local, national and global level, things are not “business as usual” within the industry. COVID-19 has created novel challenges whilst revealing existing issues in the football ecosystem. These issues significantly impact professional clubs and grassroots football alike, both of which are the lifeblood of the LCR.

Here, we focus on two key challenges: the disconnect between professional football clubs and their communities, and the current absence of a “restart” date for the

grassroots football ecosystem and the potential costs of this for LCR communities.

This briefing argues for the creation of a strategic leadership group (SLG) and provides an initial agenda to support the football industry’s response to COVID-19 in the LCR.

## 2. COVID-19 and football

The onset of the pandemic and the subsequent postponement of football have revealed the fragility of the football industry ecosystem to club owners, investors, broadcasters and advertisers (Parnell et al. 2020). COVID-19 represents the most severe market shock to sport in the post-1945 period. Across Europe’s five top football leagues, the potential maximum revenue loss due to COVID-19 in the season 2019/2020 is [estimated at €4.14bn](#), with lost broadcasting revenue accounting for over half. This will no doubt impact upon the LCR, which is home to two EPL clubs.

The EPL is embedded within a [European multi-billion pound marketplace](#). Much of the EPL's growth is due to commercialisation. Global investment funds, multi-national conglomerates, sovereign wealth funds, even royalty, are all now common within ownership structures in the elite game. Professional football clubs are not only historic, cultural and geographic landmarks, but also important economic and social contributors to the City Region. Much attention and analysis during COVID-19 has focused on the professional side of the industry, yet we argue that grassroots football requires at least equal attention due to its own contribution and value.

Grassroots football in the City Region is suffering due to a lack of funding and no set date for a return to play. Yet [the economic benefits of grassroots football](#) are significant. According to a recent report commissioned by the Football Association (Birdsall-Strong et al. 2019), the direct economic value of grassroots football in England is £2.050bn per year – with this figure rising to £10.769bn once estimates of the social wellbeing value of grassroots football are included. This report identified that the health benefits of playing regular football are also significant, suggesting a potential saving to the NHS of £43.5m per year through reduced GP visits alone. Moreover, there is growing evidence through the “Football as Medicine” platform that football is an affordable and accessible option in community contexts to deliver on public health concerns and create social and economic value for communities (Krustrup and Parnell 2019).

Grassroots football therefore has a significant role – both proven and potential – to improve lives within the LCR, but this depends upon a robust structure that can withstand challenges from within and outside the game. The global pandemic has revealed weaknesses in the current framework.

### 3. What are the challenges for football in the LCR?

The COVID-19 outbreak has forced questions about the relationship between football and communities to the surface. We begin by looking at professional football clubs, their relationship to their localities and the recent emergence of a number of social justice advocates from within the game. We then consider grassroots football and the threat posed by the global pandemic against a backdrop of austerity measures, which have battered the communities that football should nurture.

#### *Professional football*

Despite the often precarious nature of their finances, professional football clubs came through the global economic crisis in 2008 relatively unscathed, delivering impressive revenue returns. Indeed, the last decade has seen a significant increase in foreign direct investment in English football: individuals or corporations that are domiciled outside the UK account for the majority of the £80bn wealth in the EPL, with Liverpool FC (United States) and Everton FC (Iran) no exceptions. This capital has funded lavish spending. Between 2010 and 2018, EPL clubs spent in excess of £8bn on player transfer fees alone – [this equates to £1.93bn more than what these clubs spent in the previous 18 years combined](#) (Webber 2018).

Some of the wealthiest football clubs, however, choose to walk a fiscal tightrope by prioritising sporting performance ahead of financial longevity. Professional football's vulnerability has been foregrounded by the effects of COVID-19, including the loss of revenue, commercial challenges, and consequences for broadcasting rights and future planning (Parnell et al. 2020).

Unsurprisingly, professional football clubs engage in extensive corporate social responsibility programmes. In operation for decades, the multi-award-winning charities associated with Everton FC and Liverpool FC (as well as Tranmere Rovers and City of Liverpool FC) have enacted impressive responses to COVID-19, [providing important lifelines into their communities](#). It is also important to note football clubs' direct support, alongside supporters and local communities, for ground-breaking fan activism, notably [Fans Supporting Foodbanks](#). This is pertinent, as professional football clubs in the LCR operate in stark contrast to the disadvantaged communities that surround them.

However, accusations have been levelled at professional clubs that they are disconnected from the communities in which they are situated. Liverpool FC for example have been accused of [ignoring concerns from local residents about the regeneration of Anfield](#). Everton FC's proposed stadium development at Bramley-Moore Dock, by contrast, includes an [impressive legacy project](#) for their current Goodison Park site, with plans to deliver strategic community and social outcomes. Recent displays of political and philanthropic activism from players such as [Marcus Rashford](#) and [Trent Alexander-Arnold](#) have prompted debates about the changing relationship between professional players and the wider community. Key figures in professional football leadership have also recognised the increased role football clubs must play in their local communities, with [Everton CEO Denise Barrett Baxendale stating that football clubs should utilise "sport at the service of humanity"](#).

Lockdown has meant no football to watch, leaving fans and journalists searching for content. Clubs have had to revisit their role in society in their search for stories to share on social media. Alongside this,

football has been used by politicians to deflect on their performance in handling COVID-19, which has contributed to heightened scrutiny and analysis from the media, spiking an interest in the role of football in society and the communities in which they are meant to serve. As such, COVID-19 provides an opportunity to re-imagine and re-shape the potential future role of professional football clubs and players and their relationships with their communities through creating positive social change to address key local challenges in the LCR. During lockdown, football clubs and their players have had to revisit what they do beyond playing football. Despite the glimmer of positivity, this has raised further questions regarding the disconnect between clubs and their communities.

### *Grassroots football*

Driving up participation levels has become a top priority for football authorities. Utilising the UK's most popular sport to drive participation in sport is important to tackle inactivity and to promote health – the evidence is clear that football can be used as a medicine (Krustrup and Parnell 2019; see Figure 1). Despite this, the grassroots at the foundation of the football pyramid face several longstanding issues, many of which have been negatively impacted by austerity and further exacerbated by COVID-19.

A major impact on grassroots football has been the reduction in funding for local government, making decisions complicated and politically loaded, especially for discretionary services like the maintenance of football pitches. Sport and leisure are not classed as frontline services, and are thus often first in line to be hit with a reduction in spending. This has implications for the quality and maintenance of pitches and playing fields. Often, councils under these economic restrictions will outsource pitch



*Urban goals – Toxteth, Liverpool (Credit: Michael Kirkham)*

maintenance, resulting in loss of control and a possible reduction in skills, goodwill and quality. This situation has also led to increased costs for football clubs to play on facilities set by local authorities.

Lack of policy consultation is another threat to grassroots sport. For example, whilst Sport England can consult with local councils regarding any sale of playing fields, in reality it has very little political power to prevent sales. Furthermore, Sports England has little power in determining or directing where the redistribution of finance goes.

COVID-19 risks exacerbating the impact of a decade of austerity on local playing fields and other grassroots sporting facilities (Parnell et al. 2019). The impact of this on health and wellbeing is potentially significant (Widdop et al. 2018). We know that participation in football can benefit the realisation of children’s rights and welfare ([Esson et al. 2020](#)). We should not overlook the disproportionate

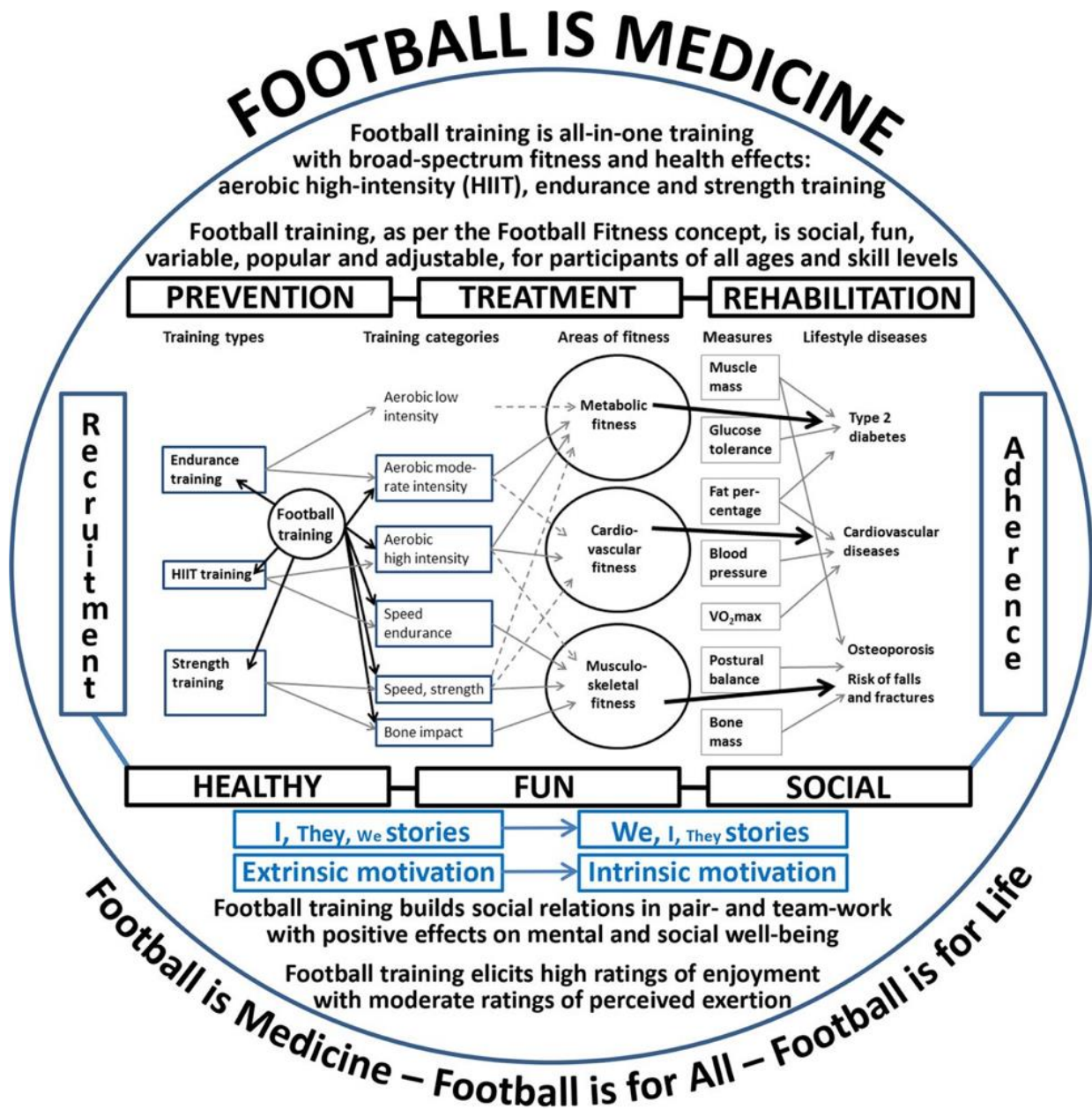
impact that stifling opportunities to play football can have, particularly against the backdrop of a decade of austerity measures that have pushed children and communities locally into poverty and threatened the future of the grassroots game.

#### **4. Our proposed response**

Tackling the challenges that confront the football ecosystem in the LCR requires the formation of a unified and coherent Strategic Leadership Group (SLG) that can act as a custodian of the game at all levels.

The SLG should include representatives from all stakeholders in the football industry, alongside football authorities, policy leads, academics and stakeholders from the public and private sectors. In the short term, the group must act to protect the industry from the real and present challenges presented by COVID-19.

Figure 1. The positive health impacts of playing football



(Source: Krstrup and Krstrup 2018)

However, in the medium to longer term, the group should engage in critical discussion to identify the key issues, challenges and risks that the football industry faces – developing a long-term strategic plan that will enable stakeholders to protect and sustain football throughout the City Region. The issues that the group should examine include the:

- Governance and management of professional football clubs, including supporter representation on their board
- Disconnect between professional football clubs and their communities
- Deployment of football resources and activity across the LCR

- Empowerment of professional players to capitalise on their brand to positively influence society
- Strategic response to the issues facing grassroots football locally and nationally

The SLG will need to think both locally and globally. This should include working with Liverpool’s local [2030Hub](#) – whose aim is to eliminate poverty, make economic growth inclusive and sustainable, and to restore ecosystems in cities.

### **5. What next for football in the LCR beyond COVID-19?**

Liverpool City Region represents a unique location to trial the SLG. It hosts two historic, community embedded and successful football clubs. At present, it is home to two of the most successful managers in the world with unprecedented global and local reach. Moreover, part of this history is a response to a thriving grassroots football programme, creating competitive life-long playing opportunities, connections across our communities, and the nurturing territory for many of our professional talents who have gone on to represent Everton, Liverpool and beyond.

In the short term to medium term, the establishment of a strategic leadership group (SLG) for the football industry for the LCR, constituted by key stakeholders from across the football ecosystem, is essential. Working together, the SLG would act as a catalyst to co-produce an imagined future built around transformative capabilities, delivered by sustainable and accessible infrastructures that are physical, digital, and social in nature. The SLG would therefore support the outlined initiatives for the LCR but would no doubt contribute nationally over time.

Failure to think forward and work toward a common agenda has implications for the professional, private, public, and community branches of the football ecosystem in the sense that we will simply “return to business as usual” – this means continued unsustainable football operations, growing inequalities in local communities, a declining grassroots game, depriving footballing opportunities for children and young people in the LCR, reducing talent development pathways, and leaving us as a region unable to capitalise on the health, social and economic returns associated with playing football.

Failure to act on that imagined future means that we fail to realise the potential benefits to our health and mental well-being of transformative grassroots solutions. Finally, failure to move away from an overreliance on the activities driven by our professional local clubs creates a world in which football clubs exist as connected entities consisting of a team (players and coaches), brands (the commercial side), and charities (community departments), when really what COVID-19 has shown us, is that they should perhaps see themselves as transformative services that deliver value to regional economies and society through a range of provisions inspired by, but not dependent upon, the live event.

Arrigo Sacchi, former manager of AC Milan, once said, “Football is the most important of the least important things in life.” Evidence suggests it is more important than that. Undoubtedly, football alone will not change the world, yet it may no longer be an option not to try to genuinely tap into its potential. We must act now to develop a coalition of the willing – those invested in and passionate about an agenda to protect our game, our communities, our pitches and our people – in the LCR.



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