

OFF THE BENCH AND INTO WORK

EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH
FOOTBALL CLUB CHARITIES

An ERSA Report supported by EFL in the Community.



ersa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report considers how Football Club charities are already delivering effective employment support, but argues that they are often under-recognised and inconsistently funded. Existing provision could be scaled up in line with government priorities if they were more widely recognised as partners and could access more sustainable funding.

The report explores both the challenges, such as the funding landscape and geographic disparities, and what is working in employment support delivery. Overall, it positions Football Club charities as anchor institutions in their communities, enabling them to successfully engage participants, including the hardest to reach, thanks to the power of the badge and their trusted place in local communities.

ERSA has conducted this research in partnership with EFL in the Community; including the sharing of data, jointly running a working group with a selection of Football Club charities, writing and distributing a survey on employment support provision, and organising in-person visits to select Football Clubs.

The recommendations provided are informed by this research, focusing on the opportunity for commissioners to partner with Football Club charities in order to scale up current delivery and make it more sustainable.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Football Club charities are trusted and visible organisations operating as anchor institutions embedded at the heart of their communities.
2. EFL clubs are rooted in some of the most deprived communities in England and Wales, effectively engaging with disadvantaged groups who may not otherwise access mainstream provision.
3. Many EFL Club charities are working with hundreds and thousands of participants, however this reach is inconsistent between clubs and regions.
4. Employment programmes are funded in a range of ways, from DWP contracts and local authority grants to donations. The structure and length of funding also varies, but is often not sustainable due to short-term contracts and a fragmented funding landscape.
5. Despite challenges, many programmes have been highly impactful and Football Club charities demonstrate key elements of good practice such as holistic, wrap-around support.
6. Existing provision aligns with government priorities set out in the Get Britain Working White Paper and targets key groups such as young people and those with disabilities or health conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Back a national framework for employment and skills through sport.
2. Multi-year investment in football club charity delivery.
3. Extend the funding of successful programmes to more Football Club Charities.
4. Recognise Football Club Charities as Strategic Delivery Partners.
5. Support Innovation and Shared Learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research for this report has been conducted using desk-based research, interviews, a roundtable discussion and an online survey.

Publicly available impact reports from EFL in the Community and information provided online by individual Football Club charities have been used to provide supporting data on reach and impact, alongside internal monitoring data.

ERSA has conducted informal interviews and organised visits with select Football Club charities to gain a greater understanding of their work and challenges. An in-person Football and Employability Working Group was also held with 12 Club charity and EFL in the Community representatives which was structured around 5 core themes to stimulate discussion.

These themes were:

Successful programmes.

Engagement with participants.

Engagement with others in the sector.

Funding.

The future and next steps.

ERSA and EFL in the Community also gathered responses to an in-depth online survey, collecting information on employability programmes offered, numbers supported, funding, impact, outcomes, barriers and challenges. The survey included both multiple choice and open questions which are used to inform this report. 38 of 72 EFL club charities responded to the survey in full, largely those delivering significant employability support, with a further 12 reporting that they do not currently deliver any employability provision. Data tables based on the survey can be found in annex 1.



INTRODUCTION TO FOOTBALL CLUB CHARITIES

Across England and Wales, Football Clubs are situated at the heart of their communities, with established relationships with people living in their local area. As some of the longest standing civic institutions in their towns and cities, Football Clubs are key sites in communities across England and Wales, making them well-placed to effectively engage with and support their local residents. Football Club charities have therefore developed into significant places of support, delivering a wide range of projects to improve the quality of people's lives, including to those who would not generally engage with mainstream provision.

Currently, 68% of the population live within 10 miles of an English Football League (EFL) Club and 82% live within 15 miles¹, giving them a vast reach, including to some of the most deprived areas in the country. Significantly, 83% of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England and Wales live within 10 miles of an EFL Club², illustrating that Football Clubs are well-placed to reach those most in need of support. The Premier League Charitable Fund, which supports charities connected to Premier League, EFL and National League Clubs, report that more than 50% of their activity takes place in the top 30 most deprived communities in England and Wales.³

A significant part of their work is aimed at education, training and employability projects and their impact in this area is already considerable: 238,010 participants attended education, training and employability projects and initiatives by EFL

Clubs and their charities in the 2023/24 season, with 70% reporting positive impacts on their engagement and progression in education, training and employment. These outcomes generated a total of £129.01 million of social value directly related to employment, education and training in the 2023/24 season.⁴ Many individual club charities are supporting hundreds, or sometimes thousands, of local people on employability programmes.⁵

The types of employability support offered varies across Clubs varies, but core provision includes:

CV writing and interview skills workshops.

Mentoring and career coaching.

Volunteering as a pathway to employment.

Apprenticeships.

Work placements.

Additionally, many Clubs provide:

A Youth Hub offer.

Sector-specific training.

Drop-in employment support.

Supported employment for people with additional needs.⁶

This provision can vary from 6 months to multi-year models, often with wraparound mentoring and mental health support embedded. Notably, the support provided to individuals is often more long term than the length of one programme; some participants at the Football and Employability

¹ EFL, *Measuring the Impact of EFL Clubs in the Community* (November 2024), available online: <https://www.efl.com/community/our-impact/>

² Ibid.

³ Premier League, *Premier League Charitable Fund Impact*, (n.d.) available online: <https://www.premierleague.com/en/Footballandcommunity/morethanagame/premier-league-charitable-fund/our-impact>

⁴ Op. Cit., EFL (November 2024)

⁵ Annex 1, Table 3

⁶ See Annex 1, Table 1

Working Group ran by ERSA and EFL in the Community emphasised that they offer support from “cradle to grave”, enabling people to drop in when they need to or come back for various programmes over their lifetime because the football club is the main place they go to for support.

In interviews conducted by ERSA, some interviewees raised concerns that they can be ‘pigeonholed’ due to assumptions made regarding the demographics likely to be engaged by Football Clubs, however, on the contrary, target groups are diverse across Clubs. The EFL in the Community impact report showed that of the attendees for all projects delivered by EFL Clubs and their charities in 2023/24, 38% were female, 23% were from minority ethnic backgrounds, and 10% had a disability.⁷ The localised nature of support, as charities embedded in their communities, provides scope for support to be targeted according to local needs and priorities. Almost all Clubs that responded to the ERSA survey indicated that they support young NEET people aged 16–24, but other priority groups are consistently reached, including:

Long-term unemployed adults.

Care leavers, refugees, ex-offenders.

Young people with SEND or additional needs.

People experiencing homelessness or mental health challenges.

Women and ethnically diverse communities⁸

Overall, Football Club charities are trusted and visible organisations operating as anchor institutions embedded at the heart of their communities. They are trusted civic actors firmly rooted in place, generally in the UK’s most deprived communities, delivering year-round provision and engaging those who would not otherwise access mainstream provision. Whilst they are already offering impactful employment support provision to a range of participants, there is significant scope to scale this up. Following the publication of the Get Britain Working White Paper, with its ambition to achieve an 80% employment rate,⁹ it is crucial to recognise the successful work already taking place and to build on existing models of support. Football Club charities provide a significant opportunity to do this.

⁷ Op. Cit., EFL (November 2024)

⁸ See Annex 1, Table 2

⁹ Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury and Department for Education, *Get Britain Working White Paper*, (November 2024), available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper>



OFF THE BENCH AND INTO WORK

EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOOTBALL CLUB CHARITIES



LABOUR MARKET CONTEXT: ECONOMIC INACTIVITY AND THE NEET CHALLENGE

At the time of writing, the economic inactivity rate in the UK is approximately 21%¹⁰ and 12.8% of young people aged 16–24 years are not in employment, education or training (NEET).¹¹ Given this broader labour market context, delivering successful employment support represents a significant challenge both for government and providers. It is also important to note that such national-level statistics do not necessarily capture the extent of the challenges as NEET levels are not distributed evenly across the country. As already established, Football Club charities are often working in the most deprived areas of the country, with populations likely experiencing compound disadvantage. This is highly relevant as research shows that young people for example are at a greater risk of being NEET if they: have low levels of qualifications, are accessing free school meals, come from an ethnic minority background, have special education needs or a disability (SEND), or are care-experienced.¹²

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, 'Employment in the UK' (ONS, July 2025), available online: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/july2025>

¹¹ Office for National Statistics, 'Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)' (ONS, August 2025), available online: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/august2025>

¹² Baloch, A., Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring Compound Disadvantage, (Impetus, 2025), available online: https://impetus-org.files.svdcn.com/production/assets/publications/Report/Impetus_YouthJobsGap_ExploringCompoundDisadvantage.pdf?dm=1747140359



CHALLENGES

THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

The funding landscape for Football Club charities is complex in that it is often fragmented and inconsistent. **Programmes are funded in a multitude of ways, most notably via:**

Local Authority grants.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and European Social Fund (ESF) legacy.

DWP contracts (Youth Hubs).

Corporate partnerships and sponsorships.

Some funding also comes from:

Philanthropic donations.

Social impact investment.

National Lottery funding.

Trusts and foundations.¹³

Notably, almost 1/3 of respondents to the ERSA survey indicated 'other' as a source of funding. This suggests that programmes are, at least in part, not being funded using a mainstream source. Local authority grants and DWP contracts are the most commonly reported source of funding, but still only received by 34% and 32% of respondents respectively.¹⁴ This illustrates that, whilst Football Club charities are largely reliant on government or local authority funding, even this is not consistent. The funding structure is also mixed, with an equal number of respondents (26%) reporting that their contracts are fully outcome-based and fully grant funded, with the remainder stating that their model is a mix of upfront and outcome-based payments.¹⁵ The length of contracts can also vary, however, only 5% report having funding for employment support programmes that lasts more than 2 years whilst, on the other end of the scale, 21% are less than

6 months. The most common length of funding is 6–12 months (47%), followed by 1–2 years (26%).¹⁶

Throughout the research conducted for this report, funding was repeatedly referenced as the most significant barrier to delivering effective support. Concerns have been raised surrounding precarious funding that can always come to an end, even for large and successful projects, and there is often a lack of clarity on what is coming next. When asked what challenges their organisations are facing in terms of funding employability programmes, almost 82% of survey respondents cited short term funding, 71% noted the uncertainty regarding the future of funding, and 55% said that there was a lack of clarity on available funding.¹⁷

This fragmented funding landscape and short-term funding limits sustainability and the capacity to scale-up what works. **The funding landscape represents a challenge for Football Club charities by:**

Increasing the pressure on their operations and staff.

Bringing about the loss of good employees who face redundancy due to a lack of funding.

Causing stop-and-start provision whereby vast amounts of time and resource are spent on making programmes operational, to then have the funding come to an end before any success has been fully capitalised on.

Limiting the ability to support participants for an adequate amount of time.

Longer term funding settlements of more than two years would instead increase certainty around the future of programmes, allowing sustainable support to be delivered and successful initiatives to be scaled up.

¹³ See Annex 1, Table 4

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Annex 1, Table 5

¹⁶ See Annex 1, Table 6

¹⁷ See annex 1, table 7

GEOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES

There is inconsistency between Football Club charities and the scale of their employment support provision. Some of the disparity appears to be place-based and there is strong evidence of regional disparities in employability and skills provision across the UK more generally. The mapping tool launched by the Local Government Association (LGA) in 2021 showed that employment and skills support is fragmented and unevenly commissioned across different geographies.¹⁸ This still appears to be the case within the EFL network, where there is clear variance in provision levels; while many Clubs deliver significant employability activity, the distribution of programmes across regions suggests that some areas—particularly coastal, rural or economically disadvantaged regions—receive less sustained support. These patterns align with general regional inequalities, reinforcing the case for mapping and addressing provision gaps across the network.

The ERSA survey illustrated a variance in the numbers of people supported on employability programmes between Clubs, ranging from 3 to 3,000 over 3 years. A handful of respondent Clubs have supported close to or more than 1000 participants, a vast number given the highly localised nature of support, whilst 47% of respondents have supported less than 100.¹⁹ Additional Football Club charities reported that they are unable to delivery employability support, mostly due to funding access or local commissioning rather than a lack of demand or capability. 42% of respondents to the ERSA survey also cited a lack of visibility and awareness amongst commissioners as a barrier²⁰ which potentially limits access to funding. This evidence suggests that there is capacity for current provision to be scaled up if visibility, recognition and access to funding were more consistent.

The differences in provision are at least in part geographic. For example, those based in London are able to deliver significantly more through

London-only programmes like Training Ground. Other areas such as the West Midlands also have long-established provision, such as Walsall FC Foundation's apprenticeship programme which has been running for 30 years.²¹ Meanwhile, others may rely on shorter-term projects subject to funding. This has been further supported through discussion with EFL in the Community and Club representatives, who note that whilst some receive funding for employment support through successful partnerships with commissioners, others have struggled for recognition despite being ready to deliver provision.

The fact that some Football Club charities are successfully delivering employment support to hundreds or thousands of participants highlights the opportunity for this delivery to be scaled up. More consistent national recognition and funding would boost capacity and enable more Clubs to deliver extensive employment support.



¹⁸ Local Government Association, *Mapping national employment and skills provision*, (2021), available online: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/mapping-national-employment-and-skills-provision>

¹⁹ See annex 1, table 3

²⁰ See annex 1, table 8

²¹ Walsall FC Foundation, *Apprenticeships*, (n.d.) available online: <https://walsallfcfoundation.com/about/apprenticeships/>

WHAT'S WORKING

Despite the challenges outlined, Football Club charities are actively delivering successful employment support programmes which could be extended if adequate funding and recognition were provided. They have several key strengths that render them perfectly placed to successfully engage participants and adhere to multiple pillars of good practice in employment support.

ENGAGEMENT: THE POWER OF THE BADGE

One major advantage of Football Club charities is their ability to engage local people. This is in part achieved by their association with a Football Club which, as outlined earlier, are long standing civic institutions embedded in local communities across the country. To some extent, they have an existing potential participant base through the fanbase of their associated football club and football is high due to the large numbers of people who attend football stadiums. They also have the advantage of the Football Clubs' already-established social media presence and follower count to further promote their work.

The "power of the badge" is significant; enabling Football Club charities to engage potential participants, including the hardest to reach, and boosting their reputation as a trusted community organisation. As summarised in EFL in the Community's strategy for 2024-2029:

*"The Club badge brings people together. And when people come together they can make incredible things happen. The badge is the symbol of a trusted community organisation and as such can reach out to people who just wouldn't engage with other organisations."*²²

There is a general consensus amongst those engaged with as part of this research that the football environment plays an important role in their success and that the club brand does boost their engagement. 50% of respondents states that the football environment is very important in supporting participants' journeys and a further 32% said that it is important.²³ Additionally, 79% said that they integrate football-specific activities into their employment support programmes, including not only sporting activities but also coaching qualifications, stadium work experience and matchday roles.²⁴ This illustrates the advantage of their association with their football club in providing direct employment as a large employer themselves.

Regarding engagement, when asked "in what ways does the football club brand help engage participants in employability programmes?" the respondents largely agreed with each statement:

92% agreed that it increases initial signups.

74% agreed that it provides a sense of belonging and motivation.

68% agreed that it builds confidence and aspirations.

63% agreed that it improves access to employer networks.

53% agreed that it encourages sustained engagement.²⁵

Respondents were also asked how the football club enhances the credibility and appeal of their employability programmes, with many highlighting trust, reputation, engagement and links with the local community. For instance, one respondent stated:

²² EFL in the Community, Strategy 2024-2029, (September 2024), available online: <https://eflinthecommunity.com/3d-flip-book/efl-in-the-community-2024-2029/>

²³ See annex 1, table 9

²⁴ See annex 1, table 10

²⁵ See annex 1, table 1

"The Football Club's association significantly enhances the credibility and appeal of our employability programmes. As a well-established and respected institution within the community, the club carries a strong reputation for success, teamwork, and commitment—qualities that naturally extend to the programmes we offer. Being linked to a professional football club provides an immediate level of trust and recognition that helps engage participants who may otherwise be hesitant to join a traditional employability course."

The advantages of association with the Football Club goes beyond the capacity to initially engage and attract participants. By being placed at or close to the stadium, the environment itself is an attractive place that participants want to return to. One respondent described it as a "safe space" that people are more willing to engage with than other institutions such as local authorities or education providers and several others emphasised that it is more attractive than attending Jobcentre Plus. The environment is comfortable and relaxed, with staff tending to wear branded kit rather than formal wear, helping them to foster more trusted relationships as they appear less intimidating, particularly to disengaged young people.

The space provided by Football Club charities is also multi-purpose, enabling them to deliver a range of support to suit individual needs. For instance, Millwall Community Trust, located at the Lion's Centre adjacent to The Den football stadium, features a 4G football pitch, a sports hall, two classrooms, and a café area.²⁶ This combination of a sporting environment and spaces for learning and programme delivery supports the provision of holistic support. This space element works in conjunction with the place-based support provided by institutions embedded in their local community, essentially creating a community hub that offers employment support alongside other activities. Overall, the success of Football Club charities is linked with their capacity to engage participants

using the power of the badge. As anchor institutions within their communities, they are trusted, hyper-local, and effective in re-engaging those furthest from the labour market. The strength of this engagement is linked to space and place, in that they offer place-based support to their local communities in a welcoming space that people want to come to. Football Clubs can act as community hubs enabling holistic support and are often multi-purpose enabling diverse types of support to be delivered. They represent a "safe space" by creating a more relaxed environment than traditional spaces of support such as the Job Centre or educational settings. This can improve engagement by increasing participants' willingness to attend. Football Club charities are therefore perfectly placed to engage the hardest to reach because they are linked with an already-trusted brand, are placed within their local communities, and offer a space to deliver effective support in a comfortable environment.



²⁶ Millwall Community Trust, *Facilities*, (n.d.) available at: <https://www.millwallcommunity.org.uk/facilities>

CASE STUDIES:

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

To further illustrate both the success of Football Club charities, and the opportunities they represent to scale up, it is useful to look at some examples where extensive employment support is being delivered.

SUNDERLAND: FOUNDATION OF LIGHT

The Foundation of Light is the official charity of Sunderland AFC, working with people across the North East. The foundation offers over 40 programmes, supporting over 20,000 diverse people every year.²⁷ It is also home to the Beacon of Light, a community hub providing an inclusive space to deliver a range of activities, from sport and events, to education and wellbeing support. A major pillar of their work is education and employment support for both young people and adults, with programmes including:

Study Programme – Supporting young people aged 16–18 (up to 24 with EHCP) to gain qualifications and improve skills. Students are given tailored Vocational Pathways linked to an industry, helping them to gain vocational skills. They can also take advantage of links to local employers and work-related activities are combined with enrichment activities, helping to build confidence and social skills.²⁸

Relational Mentoring – A UKSPF-funded project supporting economically inactive people aged 16+. Relational mentoring offers tailored and specialised support through one-to-one contact with a mentor, with a focus on progressing closer to the labour market.²⁹

Vantec employability programme – Offering people aged 19+ the opportunity to gain work experience in manufacturing, warehousing, or logistics with wraparound support providing coaching and mentoring alongside pathways to employment.³⁰

The Beacon of Light also houses the Arriva World of Work Zone, featuring a partnership with the Harrison Centre for Social Mobility to provide equal access to education, enterprise and employability support. It also contains areas dedicated to building skills in different industries such as catering, engineering and construction.³¹

²⁷ Foundation of Light, *What We Do*, (n.d.) available at: <https://foundationoflight.co.uk/what-we-do/>

²⁸ Foundation of Light, *Study Programme*, (n.d.) available online: <https://foundationoflight.co.uk/what-we-do/find-a-programme/programmes/study-programme/>

²⁹ Foundation of Light, *Relational Mentoring*, (n.d.) available online: <https://foundationoflight.co.uk/what-we-do/find-a-programme/programmes/relational-mentoring/>

³⁰ Foundation of Light, *Vantec Employability Programme*, (n.d.) available online: <https://foundationoflight.co.uk/what-we-do/find-a-programme/programmes/employability-programme/>

³¹ Beacon of Light, *Increasing Skills and Opportunities*, (n.d.) available online: <https://beaconoflight.co.uk/sponsorship/world-of-work-zone/>

The World of Work Zone has supported 1,242 learners, of whom:

100% reported improved career opportunities.

91% achieved qualifications in sector-specific programmes.

83% achieved work placement aims in sectors with skills shortages.

76% progressed into employment, further education or training.³²

Overall, the Foundation of Light has supported more than 3,000 people on its employability programmes in the last 3 years. In 2024, the Foundation: delivered 750 sessions; upskilled nearly 1,500 people; improved employability and personal skills for over 1,800 through their learning sessions; supported 600 participants in their employment journey; and helped to secure nearly 100 jobs.³³ Furthermore, the foundation collaborates with numerous other partners, such as local councils, universities and community organisations³⁴, enabling the delivery of joined-up support and exemplifying the opportunity for Football Club charities to play a key role in partnership working in local areas.

The support offered by Foundation of Light demonstrates the capacity to successfully deliver programmes to local residents which incorporate wraparound support such as wellbeing mentoring, provide tangible employment pathways by providing sector-specific training and linking with employers, and establish a community hub where diverse groups of people can access the right support for them.

ROTHERHAM UNITED COMMUNITY TRUST: YOUTH HUB

Rotherham United Community Trust represents an example of employability support funded by government and delivered at Football Clubs. It became the first professional football club to host a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Youth Hub in 2021. The DWP introduced Youth Hubs in 2020 as part of their response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on youth unemployment, forming part of the 'Youth Offer' for people receiving Universal Credit aged 16-24. DWP work coaches are based at Youth Hubs, allowing young people to access Jobcentre Plus support in a friendlier environment co-located with other support services. The DWP's process evaluation of the Youth Offer found that hub spaces were seen to be less corporate than Jobcentres, instead feeling "relaxed, informal and friendly."³⁵

Rotherham United's Youth Hub receives referrals directly from Jobcentre Work coaches. At the Youth Hub, individuals are given tailored action plans, aiming to improve employment outcomes for long-term unemployed individuals and groups facing barriers to work. Direct employment support includes CV writing and mock interviews (sometimes conducted by real employers), employer presentations, and work experience. But the support is also holistic and wrap-around with a big focus on wellbeing; participants can be referred to other programmes ran by the Community Trust such as football activities and mental health support. They also deliver online sessions through Google Classrooms and outreach work, taking the youth hub to areas outside of the town centre where transport might be a barrier, particularly amongst disadvantaged communities.

470 people have been referred to the Youth Hub by the Jobcentre, 136 of whom have secured employment.³⁶ More participants are supported through an additional employability and skills offer delivered by the Trust. Whilst the DWP Youth

³² Beacon of Light, *Our Impact on North East Lives*, (n.d.) available online: <https://beaconoflight.co.uk/who-we-are/our-impact/>

³³ Foundation of Light, *Yearbook 2023-2024: Year of Impact, Lifetime of Happiness*, (May 2025), available at: https://foundationoflight.co.uk/media/vrqintvz/yearbook_23_24_final_spreads.pdf

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Department for Work and Pensions and Government Social Research Profession, *Youth Offer process evaluation*, (October 2024), available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-offer-process-evaluation/youth-offer-process-evaluation>

³⁶ Rotherham United Community Trust, *Employability*, (n.d.) available online: <https://ruct.co.uk/education-and-employability/employability/>

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Hub offer is a referral-only model, open access support is also available and internal opportunities are offered such as courses through its Sports Colleges. The large, multi-purpose space on-site at the New York stadium enables a wide range of events such as job fairs, workshops and guest speaker sessions. Alongside DWP funding, additional programmes are funded through other models, such as grant-funding from Maximus as part of their Local Impact Fund.³⁷

The co-location element of the Youth Hub model and the emphasis on providing a more relaxed space than the traditional Jobcentre environment makes Football Club charities the ideal location. As established, they are generally multipurpose spaces and therefore suited to co-location, as well as being organisations that can engage people who are otherwise hesitant to access support from other services, in part due to it being seen as comfortable and informal space. Overall, Rotherham United Community Trust offers an example of the success that can be achieved through government partnership with Football Clubs. Funding extensions have allowed the Youth Hub to operate for more than 4 years, thus providing sustainability and, as a result, consistent support to its community.

TRAINING GROUND

EFL in the Community's Training Ground is an employability programme currently available to 16–24 year old NEETs residing within the Greater London Authority area. It is funded by the UK government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and delivered by 11 Football Club charities across all London boroughs in year 1 with 6 continuing into year 2 following reduced UKSPF national funding. Training Ground offers wrap-around support by combining developing employability skills with improving health and wellbeing. The provision includes one-to-one mentoring, group workshops teaching life skills and work experience and volunteering opportunities.

Employability offer:

Employability and interpersonal skills development programmes including team building, communication skills, work-place behaviour, CV writing and job interview preparation.

Mentoring sessions signposting participants to other services in the local area.

Work placements and volunteering.

Drop-in sessions available to participants for 8 weeks after the conclusion of the programme.

Health and wellbeing offer:

12 week mentoring programmes with options health and wellbeing sessions.

Mental health and physical activity programme.

Access to money management programmes.³⁸

Training Ground has been highly impactful, with 884 young people actively engaging between April 2024 and March 2025 and a completion rate of 96%. Of those, 288 participants (33%) progressed into education, employment or training, exceeding the Greater London Authority's (GLA) benchmark of 25%.³⁹ The programme also produced tangible outcomes amongst those further from the labour market, moving them closer to work by building

³⁷ Maximus, *Investing in Rotherham's future through the Local Impact Funding*, (11 July 2025), available at: <https://www.maximusuk.co.uk/case-study/investing-in-rotherhams-future-through-the-local-impact-fund>

³⁸ EFL in the Community, *Training Ground*, (n.d.) available online: <https://eflinthecommunity.com/training-ground/>

³⁹ EFL in the Community, *Training Ground Impact Summary: April 2024–March 2025* (2025). Unpublished.

job readiness. For example, 83% of participants made their first even job application and 42% had their first ever interview, thus building skills for the future.⁴⁰ Wellbeing outcomes were also high, with 88% of participants reporting that they feel more confident.⁴¹

Training Ground again demonstrates the potential for success of government-funded programmes delivered by Football Club charities. The roll out across London has been successful, achieving measurable outcomes through a holistic models of support prioritising both employability and wellbeing. As such, Training Ground provides a scalable model that could be replicated in other regions across the country if investment was provided.

It is important to note that UKSPF funding has at times raised major concerns surrounding emerging cliff edges and, whilst calls for an additional year of funding were heeded, 2025-26 has been labelled a transition year, with a new funding framework expected after 2026.⁴² This new funding model should invest in programmes such as Training Ground, but consider minimising the cliff edge by offering longer-term packages.

GOOD PRACTICE IN EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

The above case studies are examples of extensive employment support delivered by Football Club charities, they demonstrate several key elements: Positive outcomes have been achieved through partnership with central and local government.

Football Club charities have the capacity to deliver wrap-around employment support with tangible employment and wellbeing outcomes.

Football Club charities have a proven track record in engaging key target groups such as young people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Football Club charities can act as employer

gateways by embedding employer-led activities, job fairs, sector-specific training and tangible employment pathways into their employability programmes.

Crucially, many of these key elements are present at Clubs across the country. Almost all Football Club charities demonstrate good practice in employment support. For example, many provide long-term and ongoing support, closely work with employers, and deliver holistic support focused on overcoming additional barriers:

79% of respondents provide ongoing support after participants complete their employability programmes.⁴³

82% work directly with employers to provide job opportunities for participants.⁴⁴

95% provide specific support to participants to overcome barriers.⁴⁵

It is clear that key elements essential to effective employment support already exist. However, the established barriers short-term funding and lack of awareness amongst commissioners can hinder the capacity to scale this up. In brief, these organisations are already delivering tangible results with disadvantaged groups yet remain under-recognised and inconsistently funded. There is therefore a significant opportunity for government to partner with Football Club charities, which have an already established and successful infrastructure which could be scaled up if provided with adequate funding and recognition.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *UK Shared Prosperity Fund 2025-26: Technical note*, (UK Government, 2025), available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-2025-26-technical-note>

⁴³ See annex 1, table 11

⁴⁴ See annex 1, table 13

⁴⁵ See annex 1, table 15

POLICY ALIGNMENT AND OPPORTUNITY

In 2024, the government announced its new plans for employment support reform in the 'Get Britain Working' White Paper.⁴⁶ A significant part of this focused on reforming Jobcentres, but organisations in the employment support sector are ready and able to deliver on the government's ambitions; this includes Football Club charities. As highly localised organisations with strong links to their communities, they can play a role in local skills and 'Get Britain Working' plans. The work already being done aligns with policy priorities, with a strong focus on young people, skills provision, and health.

YOUTH GUARANTEE

In the 'Get Britain Working' White Paper, the government reinforced its commitment to the Youth Guarantee, stating that every young person aged 18–21 should have access to further education, help to get a job or an apprenticeship.⁴⁷ The Youth Guarantee brings existing provision together, including Youth Hubs, apprenticeship opportunities, skills bootcamps and further education, all of which is currently being provided by many Football Club Charities.

Young people are the group most consistently targeted by Football Club charities, with 89% of respondents to the ERSA survey supporting NEET people aged 16–24.⁴⁸ Many are already delivering the types of provision set out in the Youth Guarantee, with 58% providing apprenticeship opportunities and 37% hosting a Youth Hub.⁴⁹

Further education and skills for young people is a key pillar of the support provided: in the 2023/24 season, EFL Clubs provided 13,592 secondary school children with education support and supported 18,114 school leavers looking to move into further education, employment or training.⁵⁰ Most offer courses and qualifications, often in the sport sector, but also in other industries such as the Foundation of Light's study programme and training through the Arriva Work Zone. This work is set to continue as, in their 2024–29 strategy, EFL in the Community commit to "collaborate with our network on further and higher education and skills training. This will empower individuals at all career stages to progress by acquiring new skills and qualifications and addressing critical gaps in education and training."⁵¹

13% of respondents also run employer-led skills bootcamps⁵², but there is scope to grow this since, as already mentioned, over 80% reported that they work directly with employers. A further 45% of respondents provide sector-specific training⁵³, thus providing young people with the skills sought by employers and creating direct pathways to employment.

Notably, as part of the Youth Guarantee, the government state their aim to partner with sports organisations, including the Premier League.⁵⁴ In order to ensure that these partnerships extend across the country, particularly in the most deprived areas, they should be developed across the football pyramid. Considering the huge number

46 Op. Cit., Department for Work and Pensions (November 2024)

47 Ibid.

48 Annex 1, table 2

49 Annex 1, table 1

50 Op. Cit. EFL (November 2024)

51 Op. Cit. EFL in the Community (September 2024)

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Op. Cit., Department for Work and Pensions (November 2024)

of Football Clubs spread across the country, many will be situated within Youth Guarantee Trailblazer areas. There is therefore a significant opportunity for EFL in the Community and their club charities to play a role in supporting the government's plans for young people; much of their work already reflects the priorities outlined in the Youth Guarantee and could be rolled out further if given more consistent national recognition and funding.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The 'Get Britain Working' White Paper emphasises tackling economic inactivity caused by ill health, noting that, at the time of publication, a quarter of all people aged 16–64 were classed as disabled and they are 3 times more likely to be economically inactive despite 600,000 stating that they would like a job.⁵⁵ Additionally, a 2024 report by Resolution Foundation reveals that 34% of young people aged 18–24 report symptoms of a common mental health disorder, and these young people are more likely to be out of work.⁵⁶ As such, the joining up of health and wellbeing support is an important part of decreasing economic inactivity. One part of this, as emphasised in the whitepaper, is partnering with the NHS and reducing waiting times, but other organisations can play a part in improving the wellbeing of those they work with.

As sports organisations, Football Club charities unsurprisingly run a significant number of programmes focused on physical health and activity, delivering a total of £67.91 million of social value relating to physical health across the 2022/23 and 2023/24 seasons. Mental Health and wellbeing support is also prominent, often embedded as part of their employability programmes through mentoring or referring participants to wellbeing programmes taking place in the same location. Overall, during the 2023/24 season, 222,972 participants attended health and wellbeing initiatives at Football Club Charities.⁵⁷

Supporting individuals' health and wellbeing is already a significant element of the work done by Football Club charities, and could be further integrated with employment support work if the latter was more widely funded. The extension of programmes such as Training Ground, which explicitly delivers employment and wellbeing support in tandem, could play a role in local work, health and skills offers and supporting disabled people back to work.



⁵⁵ Op. Cit., Department for Work and Pensions (November 2024)

⁵⁶ Charlie McCurdy and Louise Murphy, 'We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment' (Resolution Foundation, February 2024), available online: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2024/02/Weve-only-just-begun.pdf>

⁵⁷ Op. Cit. EFL (November 2024)

OFF THE BENCH AND INTO WORK

EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOOTBALL CLUB CHARITIES



COMMISSIONING RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **Back a national framework for employment and skills through sport**
Many Football Club charities are delivering highly successful skills and employment support programmes, but national recognition and funding is inconsistent across Clubs and regions. A national framework that can be aligned to local skills plans and focused on priority groups would enable the good work already being done to be scaled up across the country.
- 2) **Multi-year investment in Football Club charity delivery**
Short-term funding is a significant barrier to delivering effective employment support. The majority of current funding contracts are less than one year, causing uncertainty and limiting effective delivery. Longer-term funding contracts would enable the establishment of sustainable employment support programmes that would support more people into work.
- 3) **Extend the funding of successful programmes to more Football Club charities**
Programmes such as Training Ground in London or the placement of DWP Youth Hubs at Football Clubs have been successful. This impact could be scaled up considerably if the funding was extended to more Football Club charities across different regions.
- 4) **Recognise Football Club charities as Strategic Delivery Partners**
Football Club charities are able to engage large numbers of people in their local communities, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and the hardest to reach. They should be considered as preferred partners, recognised as key providers of adult skills, and embedded in local or combined authority commissioning frameworks.
- 5) **Support innovation and shared learning**
As flexible and multi-purpose organisations providing a wide range of types of support to diverse groups, Football Club charities are sites where models could be tested. Funding to test models of support for priority groups would support innovation. As part of this, data and evaluation infrastructure should be supported to promote shared learning.

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ANNEX 1

DATA TABLES

This annex presents data tables based on ERSA's survey of 38 Football Club charities of EFL Clubs who deliver employment support.

Employability programmes at Football Club charities

Table 1

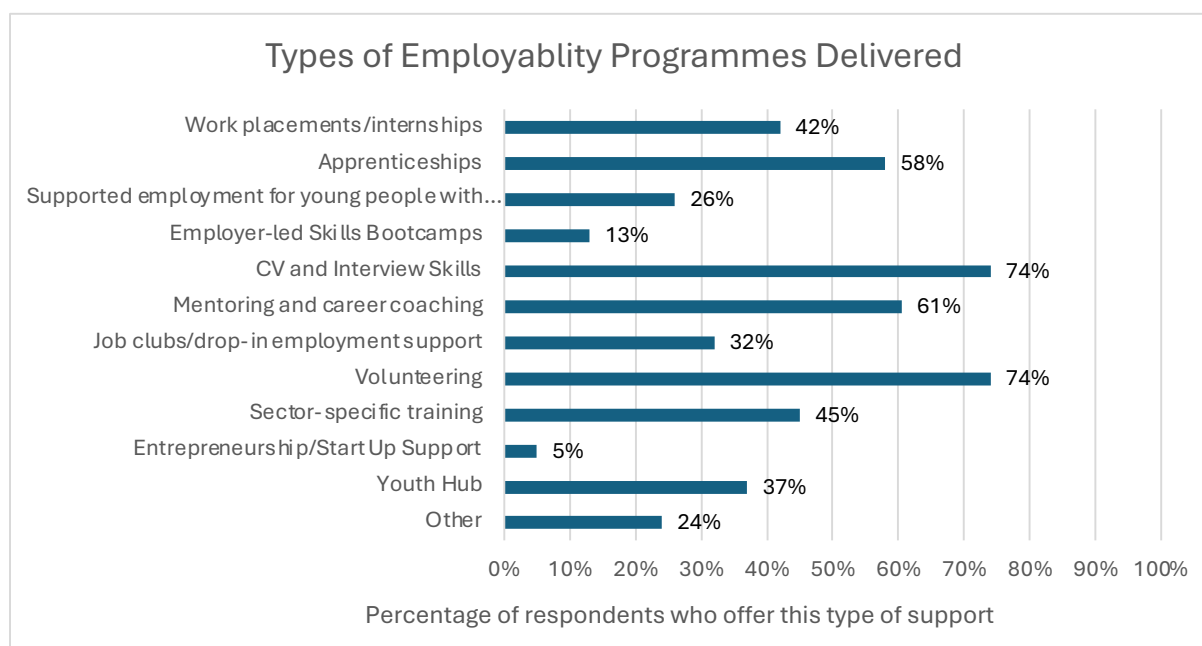
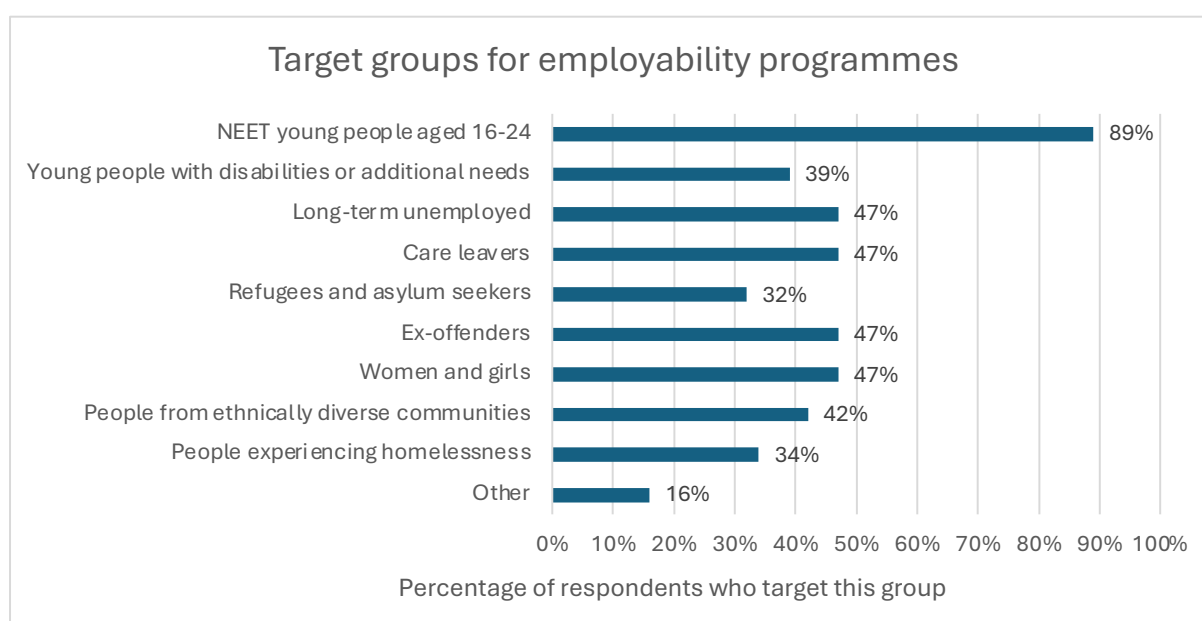


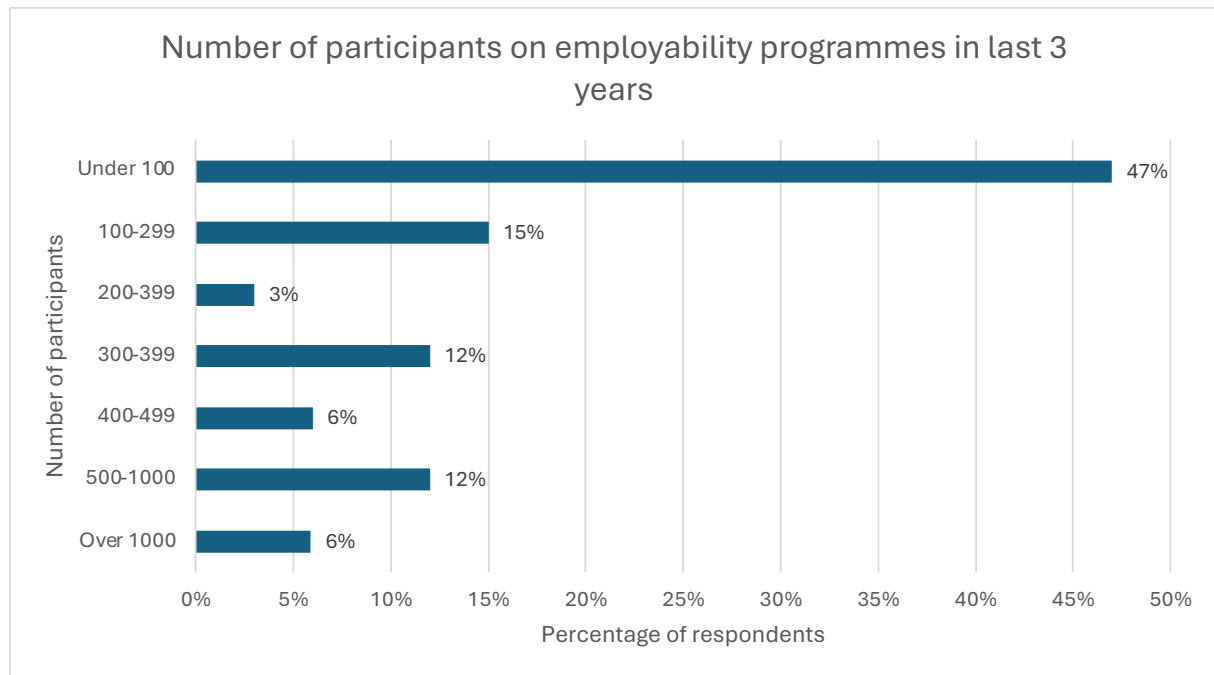
Table 2



OFF THE BENCH AND INTO WORK

EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOOTBALL CLUB CHARITIES

Table 3



Funding Challenges and Other Barriers

Table 4

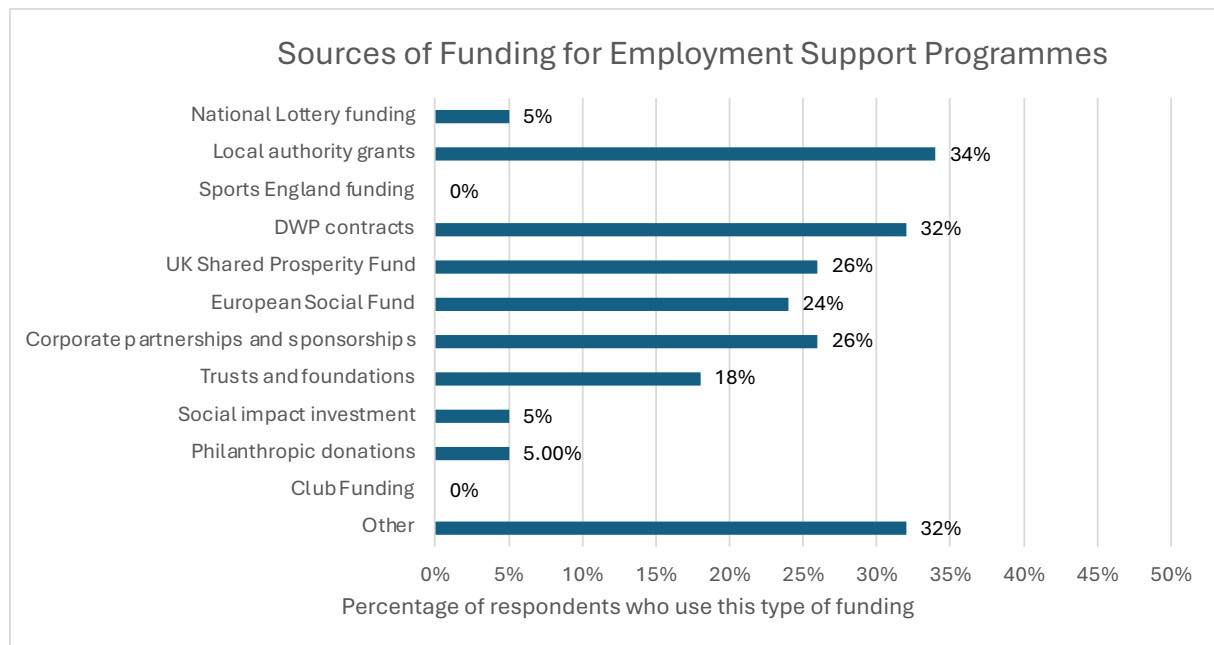


Table 5

Structure of Employment Support Funding

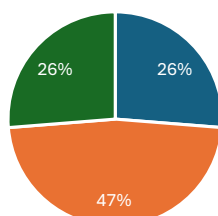
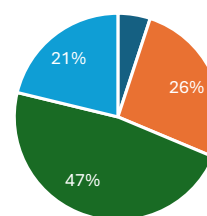


Table 6

Average Length of Funding



■ Fully outcome-based ■ Partially outcome-based ■ Fully grant-funded ■ More than 2 years ■ 1-2 years ■ 6-12 months ■ Less than 6 months

Table 7

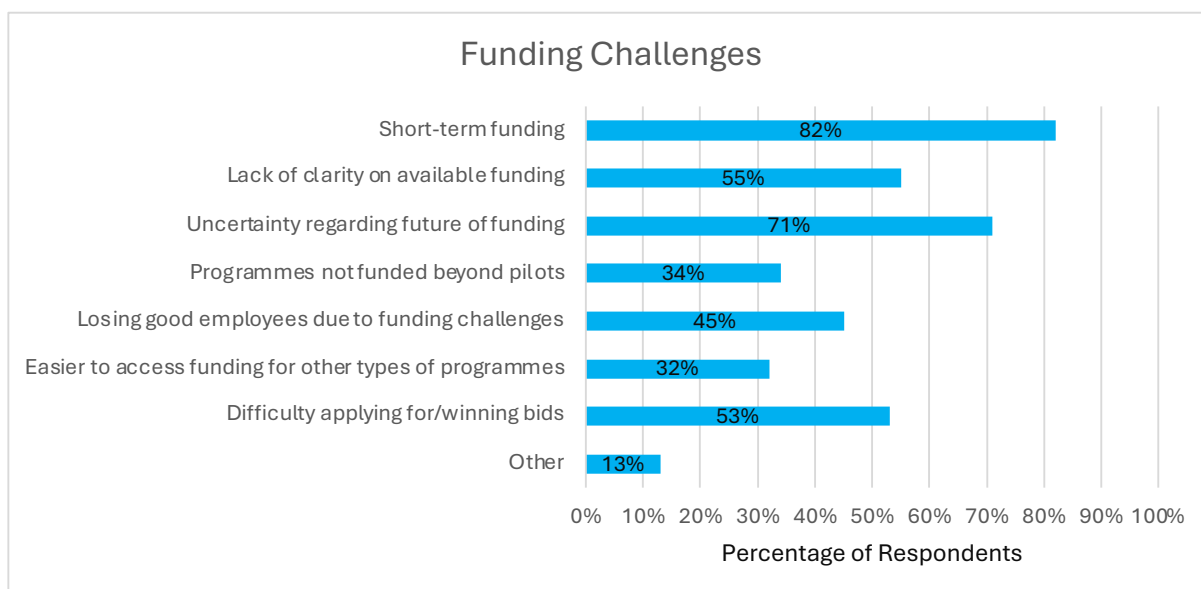
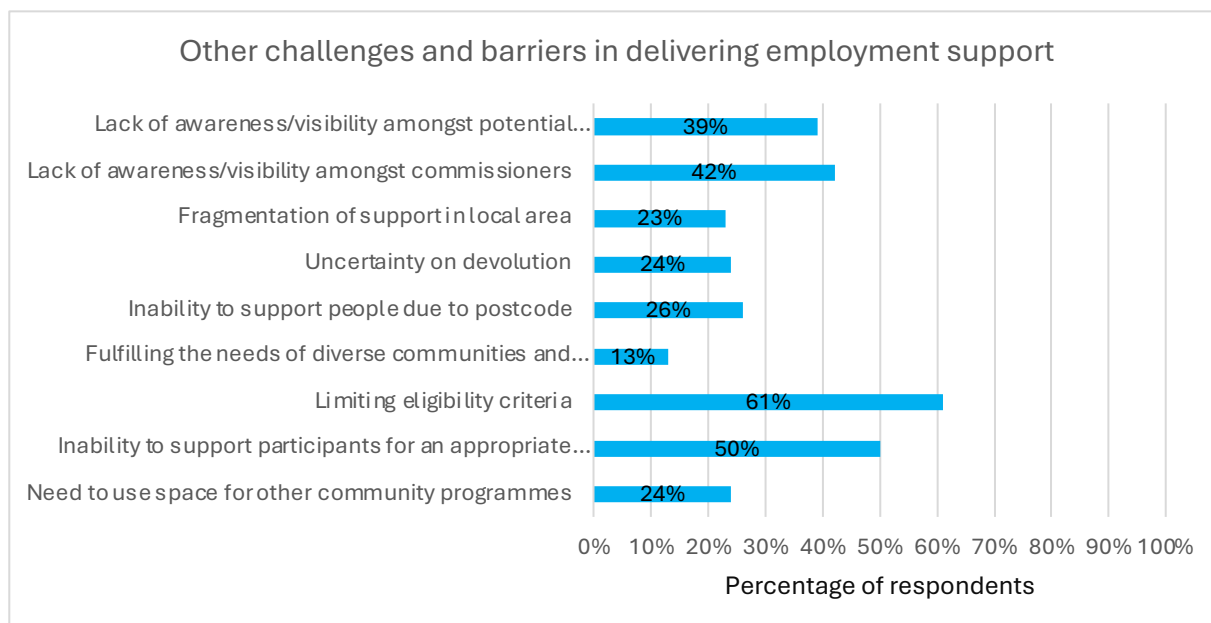


Table 8



OFF THE BENCH AND INTO WORK

EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOOTBALL CLUB CHARITIES

The Role of Football

Table 9

How important is the football environment in supporting participants' employment journey?

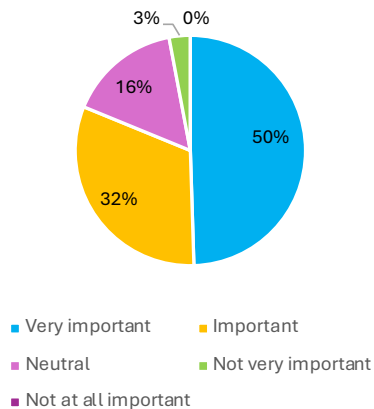


Table 10

Do you integrate football-specific activities into employability programmes? (e.g. coaching qualification, stadium work experience, matchday roles)

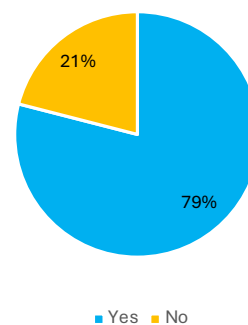
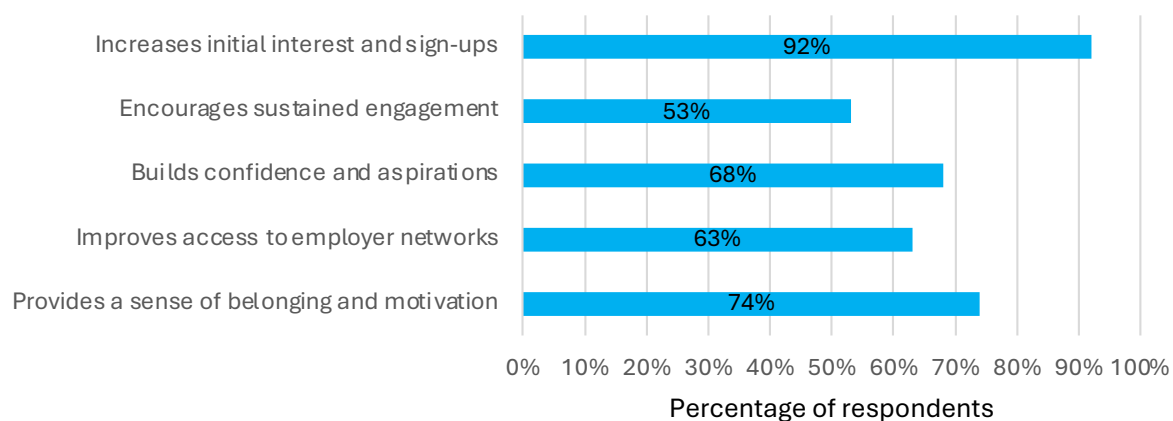


Table 11

In what way does the football club brand help engage participants in employability programmes?



Holistic Support

Table 12

Do you provide ongoing support after participants complete your employability programmes?

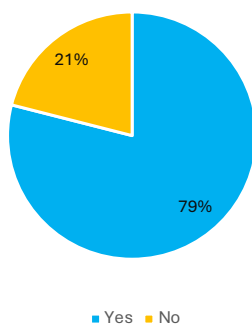


Table 13

Do you work with directly with employers to provide job opportunities for participants?

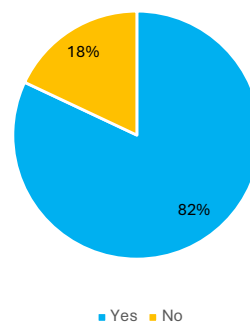


Table 14

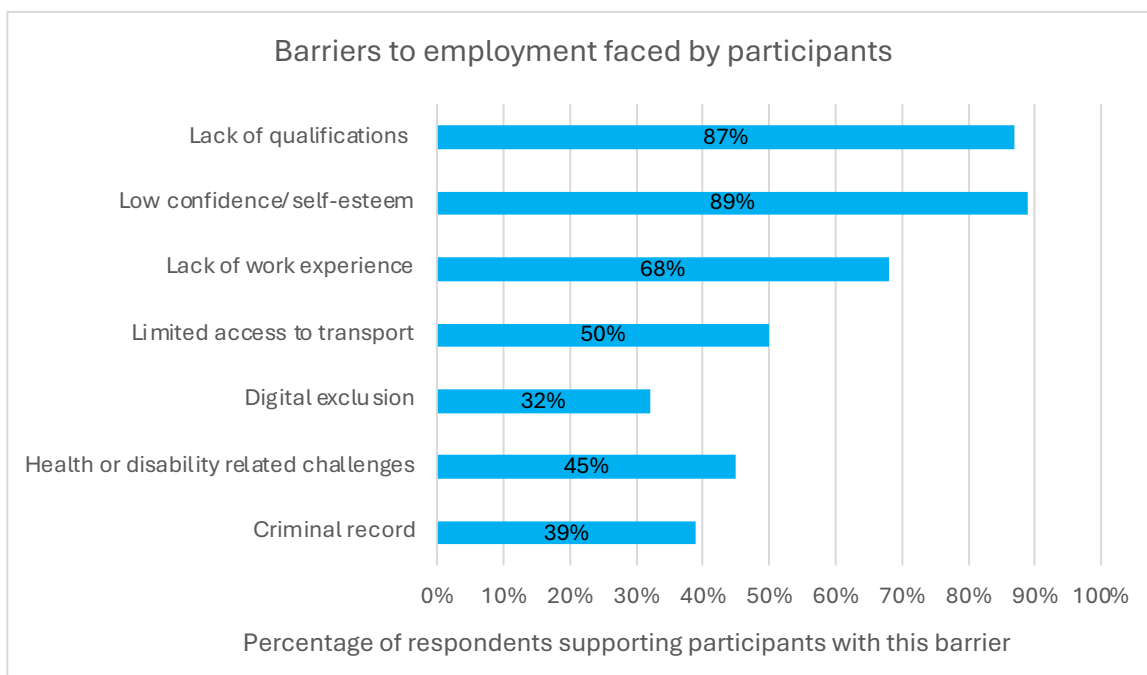
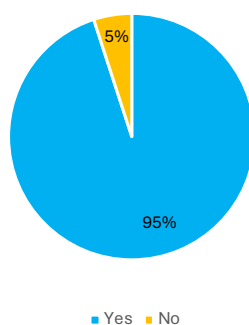


Table 15

Do you provide specific support to help participants overcome these barriers?





ersa

Employment Related
Services Association

ersa.org.uk