

Counting The Cost Of Covid-19 On Professional Football Clubs and Their Communities (Abstract)

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COUNTING THE COST OF COVID-19 ON PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL CLUBS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

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Aim

A football club community trust (FCCT) serve their local communities through a range of programmes and initiatives aimed to improve the lives of people across a range of outcomes. The aim of this paper is to understand how the FCCTs of professional football clubs in the English Football League (EFL) responded to Covid-19 and what the impact of Covid-19 was on the local communities that FCCTs serve.

The project has two main research questions. We focus on RQ2 in this abstract. RQ1 is submitted as a separate paper. The rationale behind separating the two RQs is we wanted to focus on FCCT's independently, however we are aware that the two are inextricably linked (e.g. FCCTs are reliant on financial support from their football club).

RQ1 - what is the financial impact of Covid-19 on English professional football clubs so far?

RQ2 - what is the impact to the local community focusing on four professional football clubs and their football community trusts?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

There is a wealth of academic literature showcasing how professional sporting organisations are in a unique position to promote Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) compared to mainstream commercial organisations (Walters, 2009; François, Bayle & Gond, 2019; Hills, Walker & Barry, 2019). Breitbarth and Harris (2008) developed a framework that demonstrates how sporting organisations can engage in CSR.

The Covid-19 induced shutdown of professional football leagues, changed the organisational goals of professional clubs from being business and commercially driven to providing services to support social welfare (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2021). Our research is an opportunity to understand how FCCTs have undertaken this.

Methodology

Qualitative data was sourced from four professional football clubs and their FCCTs that are currently competing in the EFL at the time of writing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 individuals across a variety of roles (CEO, Head of Finance, Head of Commercial, Head of FCCT, Chair, Director of Football and Supporters Trust). Interview schedules were designed based on job role of the interviewee. For example, CEO's were asked specific questions on their CSR policy and how they view their FCCT in terms of the overall organisational objectives. Head of FCCTs were asked to describe how they responded to Covid-19 and describe if and how it changed the way in which the FCCTs operate.

Results and Discussion

Overall, there were four key themes that emerged from the qualitative data:

The role of FCCTs changed from deliverers of specific outcome driven programmes to social service providers.

Relationships with local authorities and community groups strengthened.
Increased importance of FCCTs and resource from their professional football clubs.
Increased exposure and profile of FCCTs.

During Covid-19 the FCCTs focus was to support everyone within the local community. They became care and social service providers, utilising club facilities to cook meals, provide food parcels to the local community, visit vulnerable and isolated people to ensure they were safe, deliver medicines and support in the Covid-19 vaccination programme. These services provided by the FCCTs had a considerable impact, as each of the four FCCTs gave examples of local authorities approaching them wanting to build new partnerships, something that had not occurred before Covid-19. Each FCCT reported they received excellent support from their club and considerable importance was placed on the services they were providing. Club staff that had been furloughed were encouraged to volunteer for the FCCT. Due to no matches being played FCCTs were able to utilise the club's communication channels, which provided additional exposure and reach of the activities the FCCTs were providing. This resulted in additional donations, offers of support from people within the local community and it was the catalyst in creating new links with organisations.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implications

The FCCTs responded to the needs of their local communities and in many instances were the first port of call for members of the public who required support. This represents the unique pull the FCCTs have because they are associated with a professional football club, they are viewed as a trusted organisation within their local communities. This allows the FCCTs to engage marginalised and hard to reach groups, that may not even be identified by local authority services. FCCTs should be viewed as central stakeholders to providing community-based initiatives. We recommend FCCTs are provided with clear lines of communication to local authority organisations and resources to grow their network of support. Awareness of the services provided by FCCTs needs to be amplified and football clubs across the board need to strengthen their relationship with their FCCTs, which can showcase the clubs CSR objectives. This study presents a live example of Matten and Moon (2008) implicit-explicit framework of how sporting organisations have responded to a macro-level (Covid-19) situation to shape a CSR response on a micro-level (local communities).

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