



Player Voice CIC

FOOTBALL UNITES 2020



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report captures and evaluates participants' experiences of the Football Unites pilot programme. It provides outcomes and lessons learned, including how plans changed due to the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19. The report is based largely on reviewing recorded online sessions in which the participants took part, and some online evaluation interviews and completed questionnaires, contextualised with relevant documents. Whilst there were constraints and challenges to overcome caused by COVID-19, it also opened other opportunities; in particular, online group interviews generated a richness of content that otherwise might have been hard to generate.

From the experiences gained and feedback provided, the report concludes that football academies now have a proven framework for exemplary player-led community involvement, demonstrating authentic social responsibility that can be emulated across football and other sports.

It was prepared by Kevin Harris for Player Voice, the GLA and the Project Steering Group.

November 2020

ABBREVIATIONS USED

PV - Player Voice, a community interest company empowering young players' voices and ideas to be heard.

CPFC - Crystal Palace Football Club

GLA - Greater London Authority, is also referred to as the Mayor of London in this report.

P4YE - [Project for Youth Empowerment](#): a community interest company supporting young people and families.

PKC - [Preventing Knife Crime](#), a community footballing organisation working with young people in South London.

WHU - West Ham United Football Club

YCSN - [Your City Says No](#) - supporting young people and families to find solutions to youth violence.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS AND LEARNING

- Football Unites used a player-led approach to engagement with local community projects, enhancing levels of confidence, teamwork and shared leadership among young academy players.
- Leadership groups were established and each carried out a ballot of social issues of most concern. Some 271 players aged between 9 and 18 years took part.
- Young players in the leadership groups identified Community Partners, collaborated with them, and planned and delivered local projects.
- The timeliness of the Football Unites project is demonstrated by recent high profile examples of the social responsibility of professional footballers.
- There were positive as well as negative consequences of the pandemic lockdown, as some young players gained confidence and had the chance to reflect. The threat of a greater administrative burden was readily met, and delivery challenges for the community partners were faced and overcome. Overall, the experience demonstrated powerfully the importance of improvisation and persistence.
- Players at both clubs were fully involved in planning and implementing their community engagement. They showed increased knowledge and understanding of social issues; and gained valuable learning in communication, shared leadership and teamwork. Levels of confidence were clearly boosted and the players gained an appreciation of the process of becoming a role model.
- Academy players confirmed the value of engaging in their community as part of their football academy experience, and have expressed their commitment and interest to continue supporting their communities in some way.
- The project was found to have strengthened the relations between academies and foundations. Both the community partners achieved their objectives and in some ways exceeded their own expectations.
- All participants regard the project as successful without having compromised the values that underpinned it. Football academies now have a proven framework for exemplary player-led community involvement.

1. THE VISION AND PRINCIPLES

Football Unites used a player-led approach to engagement with local community projects, enhancing levels of confidence, teamwork and shared leadership among young academy players.

INTRODUCTION

The Football Unites project involved young academy players in two London clubs, demonstrating a player-led approach to engagement with local initiatives, which in turn enhanced levels of confidence, teamwork and shared leadership.

The project was designed to 'unlock the potential' of football academy players to engage positively in their communities and make a meaningful difference. It was aimed at Premier League clubs in London and was aligned to the published priorities of the Mayor of London, to engage those clubs in promoting healthy activity and social integration in the capital¹. Thus it was embedded from the outset in salient social issues.

A year-long pilot was established, to run from September 2019 to October 2020. It involved commitment and input from **Crystal Palace FC** and **West Ham United** – academy staff and foundations - and advisory support from the **Premier League** and **Arsenal FC**. The clubs' contribution of staff time and resources to support all player engagement was match-funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA). A 'Theory of Change' template was prepared to track young people's development and learning through the project, such as understanding of social integration and level of confidence. However, due to changes in the programme caused by the pandemic it was not possible to pursue this rigorously. The project was designed and managed by **Player Voice CIC**, who worked closely with the **Mayor's Sports Team**.

¹ See the GLA's Sport Unites programme, www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/sports/sport-unites.

A player-led project

Player-led participation enables players to determine what their issues, campaigns and agendas are, and the process of engagement equips players with the skills necessary to organise and participate in projects where they can lead and influence or make decisions themselves.



'Collaborative, realistic and meaningful'

The project was based solidly on participatory principles, reflecting the Sport Unites argument that participation in sport is an important way of including and involving people from different backgrounds and communities. Wherever and whenever possible, project decisions were taken by academy players, and their suggestions were shared and discussed.

They were engaged from the start in a participative structure and process designed to be player-led in identifying the focus for their community project, its planning, delivery and evaluation. The project was thus fundamentally democratic and developmental.

This approach emphasises the need to give players experiences of engaging in their community when they are young, developing their 'life skills', for careers within or outside of football. Player Voice believes there is an ethical and social responsibility for clubs to support players in this way.

Players were asked to give approximately 30 hours of time over the 12-month period, the intention being that their involvement would not have a negative impact on school, training or matches².

At each club, **'leadership groups'** were established.³

² This amount of time was negotiated with staff in the early stages of project development.

³ For the Football Unites programme the term 'leadership group' is strongly associated with democratic procedure, recognising that not everyone can participate all the time and therefore allocating a degree of responsibility to an identified subset of the players who volunteered for the role; and undertook to consult with and represent their peers in given circumstances.

The players in the leadership groups were then supported in planning and delivering their own project with a 'community partner' organisation, which they were expected to identify and select themselves. The focus was on exploring and understanding the issues that the local initiative was seeking to address, and the problems it faced, while also linking this to active sport. In so doing, the activity served to motivate and inspire players, contributing to club values and developing them as confident communicators ready for 'shared leadership'.

At the same time, the project was designed to help clubs strengthen the relationships between academies and foundations, with an expressed intention to support more mutually-productive collaboration, developing the knowledge and skills of staff to then take their own projects forward effectively. This aspiration included the principle of not seeing foundation activity as just involving first team players.

The Player Voice model is designed to be collaborative, realistic and meaningful, while allowing clubs to tailor it to their own needs, with access to experienced support if needed.

2. THE FOOTBALL UNITES PROJECT: WHAT TOOK PLACE

Leadership groups were established and each carried out a ballot of social issues of most concern.

Young players identified Community Partners, collaborated with them, and planned and delivered local projects.

Project launch event

The Project was launched at an event at Selhurst Park Stadium in October 2019.⁴ This event brought together partner clubs and players to explain, inspire and motivate, giving participants an opportunity to talk about what 'player voice' means to them, and confirming 'buy-in' from senior club representatives.

The young players and leadership groups

London is an ethnically diverse city and the player cohort reflects this. Appendix 1 summarises the ethnic origin of the players involved from the two clubs.

Leadership groups were established at both CPFC and WHU academies at the beginning of the project. They eventually comprised seven players at WHU and seven at CPFC, all aged between 16 and 18 years. These groups took part in introductory sessions, led by Player Voice with supporting club staff, to clarify their role, influence and expectations of decision-making in the project. The sessions also covered the project aims and were designed to help players feel comfortable and engaged. Arsenal FC as advisory partner shared advice, based on work they had been carrying out with their leadership group on addressing racism and discrimination.

⁴ A short film about the event is available at https://playervoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Player-voice_launch_video.mp4

The ballot – what are the issues that matter most?

Leadership groups at both clubs surveyed academy players from across their sites in a ballot of opinion to determine social issues of most concern to them in London.

At WHU, the 22 participants in the first leadership group meeting responded to an initial ballot. Their top four issues were then presented to and voted on via online surveys, by the leadership group and 95 other academy players - a total of 117. All respondents were aged between 9 and 18 years, and predominantly based in and around the London area

At CPFC, 154 academy players took part. An initial ballot took place for the leadership group to identify a shortlist of issues to put forward in a survey to the rest of the academy. Academy players were then given two votes each, resulting in 308 responses from 154 respondents.

This exercise was important in creating momentum in the project, giving a chance for the academies to hear the players' voices and opinions. A valuable lesson is that a ballot carried out as soon as a leadership group is formed can widen participation and consolidate the project. The results are:

SUMMARY OF BALLOT RESULTS

WEST HAM UNITED	%
Child and Family Poverty	14.1
Mental and Physical Wellbeing	15.8
Racism and Prejudice	27.1
Youth violence, gangs and crime	43.0

CRYSTAL PALACE FOOTBALL CLUB	%
Child and Family Poverty	4.1
Homelessness	4.8
Safe travel in and around London	15.9
Mental and Physical Wellbeing	16.3
Racism and Prejudice	24.1
Youth violence, gangs and crime	34.8

Because different processes were adopted, it would be misleading to compare results across the two clubs, or compile combined totals. Nonetheless, it is striking that the same three themes emerged in the same order at both clubs – (i) youth violence, gangs and crime, (ii) racism and prejudice, and (iii) mental and physical well-being. These themes resonate throughout the broadcast media. They also chime with the concerns of the 2019 UK Youth Parliament, which selected five key issues to be debated in the coming year (based on over 800,000 votes): they included –

- Put an End to Knife Crime
- Mental Health
- Tackling Hate Crime.⁵

In particular, the focus on youth violence and crime gave the young players a justification and opportunity to talk about the issue with people who are knowledgeable and involved.

Follow up on key issue

Members of the leadership groups met with senior GLA Policy Advisors for Youth Violence Reduction, in February (WHU) and March 2020 (CPFC) at City Hall. This was a significant learning event for the players, who presented their ballot results and discussed the concerns highlighted in the ballots.

⁵ British Youth Council (2019), Make your mark, <https://www.byc.org.uk/uk/uk-youth-parliament/make-your-mark>

Identifying, selecting and connecting with the community partners

WHU

The lockdown affected the options for academy staff to bring players together for decision-making or to research community-based initiatives with which to collaborate.

West Ham United Foundation was already delivering sessions in Britannia Village Primary School, so the decision was taken to base activity on that work and the needs of the school. This meant also that the activity could be organised comparatively quickly – an important consideration as the lockdown pushed decisions closer to the end of the school year.

The players wanted to know about the interests and needs of the pupils, so a number of questions were generated in class and sent to the players, who then in turn generated pre-recorded video material.

CPFC

CPFC players conducted an online interview process to select their community partner to co-develop a project. CPFC, Palace for Life Foundation and Player Voice worked together to help players to prepare for and conduct a player-led online interview process. This involved providing a guidance document and scoring sheet, supporting players to think through the questions they would like to ask, and guidance on how to conduct a good interview.

Two organisations applied: 'Your City Says No' (YCSN) and 'Project for Youth Empowerment' (P4YE). During the interview itself the players found out more about the work of the organisations, watching presentations and asking questions. Players led the interview themselves: one opened up the meeting and welcomed everyone, explaining the format, questions were asked in turn, and another player closed the meeting. After some discussion, collectively they decided to commission YCSN to deliver a programme focussing on addressing issues around youth violence, safety, and well-being. YCSN undertook to work closely with Preventing Knife Crime (PKC), a football organisation that provides free sessions, especially for young people who can't afford to play elsewhere.

Programme of activities

Britannia Village Primary School

Year six pupils continued to attend school during lockdown, and the children were able to meet the WHU players live online in four separate sessions. They submitted written questions; viewed the advance video prepared by the players; and then took part in groups from their classrooms.

The players and staff considered how to make the online experiences positive and motivational. The videos included clips of the players in action on the pitch, short personal introductions, and comments and observations on mental health and well-being, handling transition, staying active, and keeping out of trouble. The players shared thoughts about being themselves and handling difficulties, learning with a positive outlook, appreciating that it is normal to be anxious about change, and giving tips and advice about meeting new people and making friends.

Some of the pupils wrote up their thoughts after the event, and some also wrote to the Mayor. As part of the GLA funding for the project, an equipment fund of £500 was donated to the school and the children were involved in researching and making recommendations as to how it might be spent.

YCSN

The YCSN sessions were aimed at young members of PKC, with members of the CPFC leadership group participating where they could. Delivery of some of the sessions was disrupted and challenging, with the lockdown requiring all participants to be online.

At the centre of the material that was shared with the young people, was the stark fact that the organisation's founder, who led the sessions, had lost her son to knife crime. Her in-depth understanding of the mixture of causes that led to her son's murder was the basis and motivation for working to promote awareness and understanding. This may well have contributed to a high degree of focus in the sessions and an openness in the discussions.

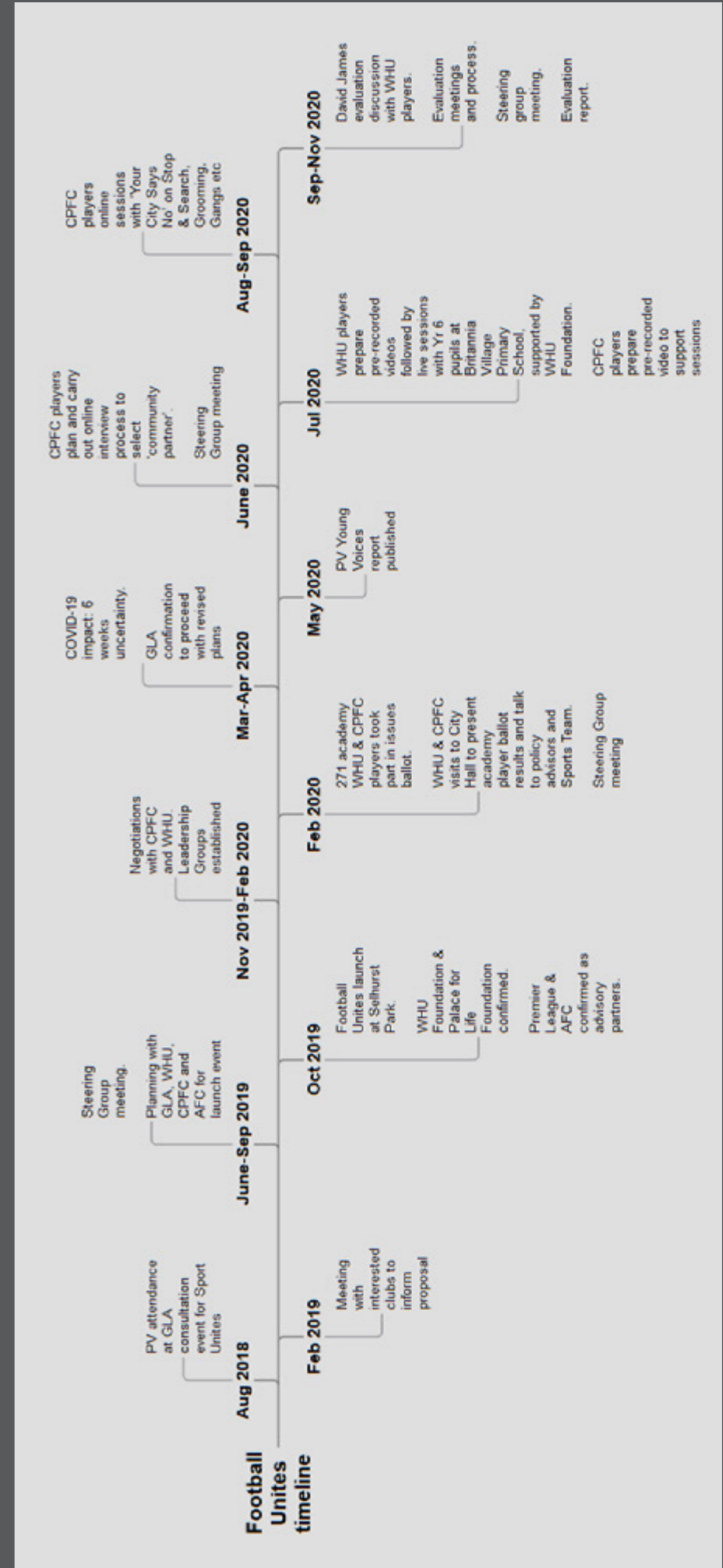
Additional points

Two online sessions with players were planned to be led by former international goalkeeper David James, for players to talk through their experiences and learning through the project. The WHU session took place in early September but because of time pressures towards the end of the project, the session with CPFC had to be cancelled. Indeed, once a substantial amount of time had been lost to lockdown, plans to convene the young players for feedback meetings became unrealistic, so players gave their feedback through written questionnaire responses.

At CPFC the programme was widened out to the new cohort of scholars who started back in July 2020 (U17-U18), as well as the existing seven members of the leadership group.

A steering group for the project, including representatives of the academies, foundations, funders, advisers and evaluators, was convened by Player Voice and met four times.

TIMELINE OF FOOTBALL UNITES PROJECT 2019-2020



3. THE WIDER CONTEXT

The timeliness of the Football Unites project is demonstrated by recent high profile examples of the social responsibility of professional footballers.

Overall, the project engaged with 34 staff and volunteers from the different partners, sharing experience, and building knowledge and skills within clubs and communities.

Football is a social sport in several senses, and the Football Unites project took place in a broader, changing social context that sharpened its meaning and heightened its relevance. For example, three issues relevant to the project have been receiving increasing media coverage over the past few years and months: **mental health**, **knife crime**, and **racism**.

- The Heads Together campaign⁶, established in 2017 and spearheaded by The Royal Foundation of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, set out “to change the conversation on mental health”. It has done so in large part through a strong association with sport and young people. Mental health and well-being subsequently became a focus in popular and social media as a dimension of the COVID-19 lockdown. It was also linked to the death in October 2020 of the young footballer Jeremy Wisten. The player’s mother called for “more mental health education for parents as well as more mental health support for young people, both in the education system and in football”.⁷ A commentator asked: “what is football saying, doing, or how is it responding? ... This is a whole game problem ... it’s a responsibility that the game cannot run from”.⁸

⁸ <https://www.headstogether.org.uk/>

⁹ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/we-miss-him-much-parents-19170643>

⁸ <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/opinion/2020/11/03/jeremy-wistens-sad-story-is-just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg/>

- Knife crime statistics in London rose noticeably in 2017-2018. The Metropolitan Police recorded a seven per cent increase in 2020 over the previous year.⁹ The issue affects young people profoundly and is a high priority for the Mayor’s office.
- The US protest movement **Black Lives Matter** was founded in 2013. Its purpose became subsumed in a more overtly global movement with the death of George Floyd in May 2020. The social power of sport was demonstrated once again through images of footballers, cricketers and other athletes “taking the knee” – a symbolic, universally recognised gesture with a profound political history barely known in the UK before the summer of 2020.¹⁰

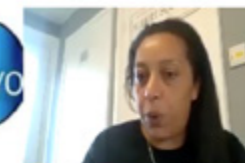
These and similar issues assumed greater significance in 2020 alongside the most influential force of all, COVID-19. The Coronavirus Act 2020 was passed by Parliament on 23 March and the first lockdown was imposed immediately by the government, having huge direct impact across society, on sport in general, and on the Football Unites project. Amendments to the project plan are summarised in Chapter 4 below, along with a discussion of some of the effects of lockdown.¹¹

To emphasise the power of this theme, **the high profile potential influence and social responsibility of professional footballers** is illustrated perfectly at the time of writing: news services are reporting a spectacular winning goal scored by Marcus Rashford in a European match

⁹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04304/SN04304.pdf>

Emotional Wellbeing

Thoughts, Feelings & Aspirations



Trans
Football
Skills
Into
Every
Life

alongside the announcement that a petition which he established has prompted a debate in Parliament on the topic of free school meals.¹⁰ Any change in social policy as a consequence will be associated inescapably with the straightforward compassion of a talented footballer, not a politician or a seasoned campaigner.

Society cannot assume that young professional footballers will necessarily have the skills always to make appropriate use of their influence. Asked if he felt under pressure to be a role model, Liverpool’s Trent Alexander-Arnold made this point on national television:

“It comes as part-and-parcel of the job. Some people struggle with it, some people thrive from it... I have a responsibility to lead and try and help the younger generation to become better people and see that dreams can come true with enough hard work and desire”.¹¹

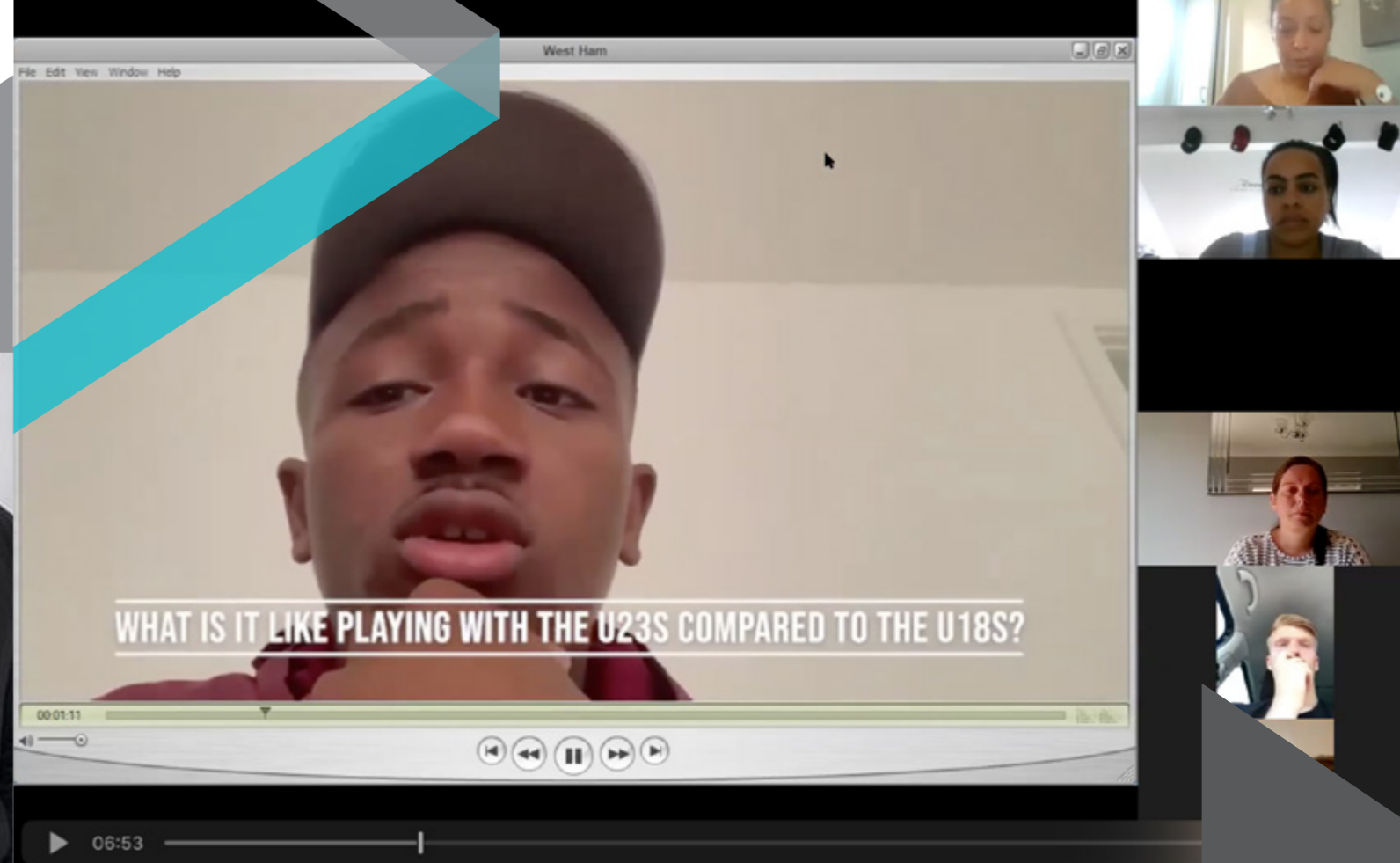
For most, this is an aptitude that needs to be learned and developed in context, with skilled support, before it is needed. That is where Football Unites comes in.

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54620118>

¹¹ Football Focus, BBC 1, 12 Sep 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000mmwt/football-focus-12092020>

4. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

There were positive as well as negative consequences of the pandemic lockdown, as some young players gained confidence and had the chance to reflect. The threat of a greater administrative burden was readily met, and delivery challenges for the community partners were faced and overcome. Overall, the experience demonstrated powerfully the importance of improvisation and persistence.



The purpose of this chapter is to highlight certain management issues that arose and are worthy of consideration in future comparable projects.

It would be hard to exaggerate the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in numerous ways, particularly with delays in the academic and football year. But there were positive as well as negative effects. In this case, the experience demonstrated powerfully the importance of resourcefulness, in terms of improvisation, agility, and persistence. All these attributes were apparent in the enterprise and energy shown by the Player Voice team, and by the various members of staff and community partners, in reassessing and reconfiguring the project, ensuring that activities took place and genuine positive outcomes could be claimed.

Tensions around the principle of player-led decisions

The uncertainty of the initial phase of lockdown put pressure on all those involved in trying to make the project work. At West Ham United, decisions had to be taken hurriedly to establish activities with a community partner. The West Ham United Foundation had been collaborating with Britannia Village Primary School and the end of term was approaching.

These concerns illustrate the level of professional commitment to the principle of a player-led project.

Staff Quotes

- **There was not time for full consultation with the young players: one of the staff said “It wasn’t possible to even have that conversation... We had to shape it”.**
- **“Their thoughts were getting back to football, and COVID, and parents that were keyworkers, it wasn’t ‘oh let’s roll with Player Voice’. We had to take the reins a little bit”.**
- **Both members of staff involved in this decision found it troubling, because they felt they might have violated the principle of player-led decision-making: “It was hard, I felt like I’d kind of let the boys down a bit”.**

In practice, this commitment also included a realistic assessment of the longer-term options, and the subsequent success of the work with the school put this episode into perspective.

Lockdown lessons

The lessons from the COVID-19 experience included the following:

Convening a group

It might be thought that convening a group of young people online is easier than face-to-face. But most of these young people were accustomed to being in a given room at a given time and in that sense what they did would then have been contained:

- “the players lost momentum under lockdown, it was hard to get them to communicate or respond”
- “to get them on Zoom, it’s probably harder because you can’t control them”.

From the point of view of Player Voice it was concluded that: “online delivery takes a lot of planning and preparation”.

Pace and reflection

Staff members felt that the lockdown allowed them all to slow down:

- “COVID made us stop and reflect and change the way we were going to do it”.

In a classroom, responses are usually expected at the time (i.e. synchronous), but the revised arrangements meant that more of the preparation and discussion could be asynchronous and therefore allowed time for reflection before answering;

“it gave the boys a focus – they were doing videos, they were answering questions, they were sending me content, they were asking me questions about the questions, and it had a real kind of conversation going.

So although it wasn’t easy... it was good and it still worked well”.

- “If that had been a classroom session, they may not have had enough time to be reflective, and think about their answers... The answers probably wouldn’t have been as in-depth”.

Confidence

Research has suggested that people who lack confidence in face-to-face communication are likely to feel more comfortable in online environments.¹² Staff speculated that some of the young people came across with greater confidence in Zoom meetings:

- “being behind the screen, for some of them it actually allowed them to be a bit more confident in asking some of the questions... Like, the screen is a bit of a protector... I can’t be confident that it would have gone so well if it was face-to-face”.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind the impact of lockdown on companionship, as summed up by one of the players:

- “It was hard over zoom, we didn’t get that personal connection”.

Additional Points

There were particular issues for Britannia Village School that had to be overcome, as explained by the coordinating teacher:

- “The current climate of COVID proved challenging for many aspects of the project with limited face to face contact and not having all of the children returning to school to participate. Additionally how we had to structure the school day to ensure staff were as distanced as possible and not mixing ‘bubbles’ proved a challenge”.

It is possible that the greater dependence on online - which requires suitable hardware, bandwidth, and time management competence, among other things – could exclude some people. Player Voice worked with academy and foundation staff to ensure that the issue did not apply to any of the young players involved.

It’s also the case that having digitally recorded events has advantages for evaluation and other aspects of project management, because material can easily be saved, shared and reviewed.

12 See e.g. Caplan, S.E., (2005) A social skill account of problematic internet use, *Journal of Communication*, 55(4), p721–736.

The administrative burden

The need for improvisation and persistence in managing the project under changed circumstances could understandably result in more administration for staff. There was recognition of the justification:

- “there was a lot of back-and-forth to get things done but you can appreciate why.. and it is about making sure that the objectives are met where possible, or having to adapt it because of COVID. Whilst I feel there was quite a bit [of admin] I could also appreciate why”.

There was also an expressed preference for the use of online compared with the original intention to run face-to-face workshops:

- “Neither of us really have the time to get as much of the administration that was needed done as possible. And more workshops would have created more admin”.

One member of staff felt that the project was “over-planned”:

- “You probably don’t need as much detail, in the planning... It took up a lot of time, but then I wouldn’t want to take away from the outcomes, the experience is worthwhile”.

It is understood that WHU academy is now exploring recruitment of an intern to support delivery next year.

Delivery challenges

All participants faced and overcame challenges in the delivery of the project. Delays through the summer affected everyone at CPFC because the academy grounds were being redeveloped and schedules were subject to change at short notice:

- “Due to ongoing construction and building work we do not currently have a fixed site for the academy players to train. They are training on

multiple sites. COVID restrictions, protocols and risk assessments have also contributed to their playing fixtures changing last minute”.

As they graduated into a new season, several members of the leadership groups were moved into different teams with different schedules.

The challenges were particularly acute for the postponed delivery of the first of the sessions to be delivered by Your City Says No, as reported by their founder in her efforts to engage the participants from PKC:

- “From the 1st session it became apparent that face to face conversations needed to be had with the PKC Players so I went to the training ground on Wednesday to speak with them. The intention was to deliver session 1 however it was raining very heavily [and] access to a laptop was not possible because there were no inside facilities.”

At WHU, arrangements were “very rushed” in order to meet the school’s end-of-term timetable. It may be that a great deal depended on the pre-existing good relationship between the West Ham United Foundation and Britannia School:

- “It was such a tight turnaround... it did feel a little bit rushed at times but the product that came out at the end was still very good... Year 6’s in the last week aren’t necessarily the easiest people to engage”.
- “It was very rushed and it’s almost testament to how good this programme is that the end product that came out was still the quality that it needed to be”.

It is striking that in spite of all the setbacks at both clubs from March through to August, the commitment to the project never wavered, benefits were anticipated without question and pursued without hesitation, the young players continued to participate with enthusiasm, and significant outcomes were achieved.

Project management and support

The partnership role played by Player Voice was described by one community partner as “exemplary”. This is noteworthy given the challenges of reconfiguring the project in flight.

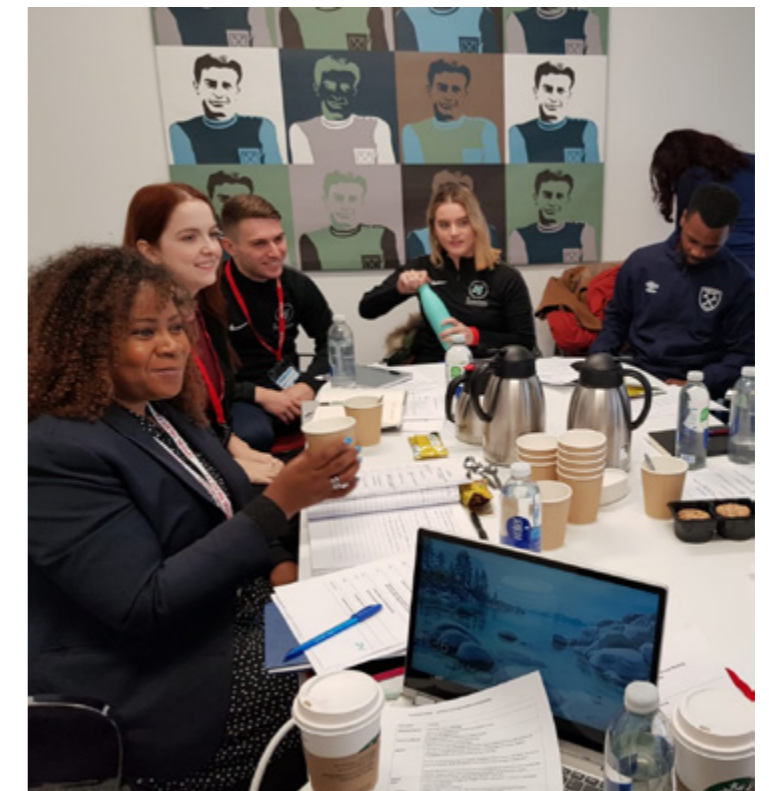
Others noted:

- “The support was there. In terms of Player Voice, of lot of support”
- “Yeah, Bev and her team gave far and away enough support, always checking in... faultless there”.

A note on gender and race

As a final observation on management, the significant contribution of women to this project, especially black women, should be noted. A project of this kind could easily reinforce and even entrench unrefined masculinities without offering wider perceptions and experience, such as those of gender or race; and it is of enormous credit to those involved, from the clubs, community partners, and from Player Voice, that a broad range of diverse influence and affirmation was made available consistently.

From the outset, Player Voice CIC has expressed an interest in establishing a similar project for women’s football: this in turn could generate significant additional insights and lessons.



5. OUTCOMES, BENEFITS AND LESSONS FROM THE PILOT

Players at both clubs were fully involved in planning and implementing their community engagement. They showed increased knowledge and understanding of social issues; and gained valuable learning in communication, shared leadership and teamwork. Levels of confidence were clearly boosted and the players gained an appreciation of the process of becoming a role model.

Academy players confirmed the value of engaging in their community as part of their football academy experience, and have expressed their commitment and interest to continue supporting their communities in some way.

The project was found to have strengthened the relations between academies and foundations. Both the community partners achieved their objectives and in some ways exceeded their own expectations.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of project outcomes as they apply to the main categories of participants – the young players; community partners; academies and foundations at the two clubs; and the GLA.

This section begins with a short review of the issue of social cohesion and integration, with reference to the young players. It goes on to summarise the outcomes that emerged for the young players, under five headings: Project planning and implementation; Understanding of community organisations and social issues; Communication, collaboration and leadership; Collective learning and life skills; and Accepting responsibility.

Social cohesion and integration

The original stated objectives and intended outcomes of the pilot included developing an understanding of “the issues and challenges of, and potential opportunities for, social integration”. Players in the two leadership groups were asked the following question:

- ‘How comfortable are you with mixing with people from different backgrounds to your own?’

The responses are summarized in the table below:

	WHU	CPFC	Total
Always	6	4	10
Often	8	-	8
Sometimes	7	-	7
Rarely	0	-	0
Never	1	-	1

This is a tiny sample, but the results suggest that for this project, social cohesion and integration was not the significant issue that might have been assumed. However, in practice it could well be more prominent in similar projects elsewhere or at other times.

Project planning and implementation

As noted above (Chapter 4) circumstances meant that the players at WHU did not have the opportunity to choose a community project with which to work. Nonetheless, both sets of players were fully involved in planning and implementing their community engagement, and this is testament to all involved, especially the players themselves. At WHU for example, the group said “they wanted to find out what was important to Britannia and the children”. They did not simply go through the motions, but showed collective commitment,

thinking through processes and assessing what would be required. At CPFC, the Palace for Life Development Officer reported a subsequent conversation with a representative of the organisation which was unsuccessful in interview: “They said to me... ‘I can’t believe I got drilled, by the young people’. They weren’t expecting it to be so thorough and in-depth”. This nugget of feedback marks a high level of assuredness, thoroughness and responsibility on the part of the young players: they were doing this for real and clearly had taken it on as their project.

Understanding of community organisations and social issues

Players at both clubs showed increased knowledge and understanding of social issues. This learning was mediated through engagement with the community partners. At WHU, it came largely through reflecting on what they were going to say and on how issues might impact the lives of London’s children. At CPFC it was mainly through the slightly more formal learning process of the YCSN presentations.

The CPFC leadership group prepared for their online interviews with the two applicant community organisations by reading the applications, and agreeing their questions. They clearly absorbed enough information to then be able to probe for more, in some depth - as evidenced above. When it came to the YCSN sessions, which went into detail about aspects of gang culture and knife crime, they again absorbed the information and showed this through reflective comments in the subsequent discussions. For example, one participant remarked:

- “It all starts from the grooming... you just get sucked in... I knew the basics, but the depth that you went into, really got my eyes opened”.

One young player hinted at the lasting impact of this learning:

- “I would like to continue to press down on youth violence and gangs. I think this is a major problem affecting the wider community”.

For the WHU leadership group, preparing their pre-recorded messages for the school pupils provided an opportunity to reflect on choices such as staying safe, making the right friendships, and mental health and well-being. They showed responsiveness to the children’s sensitivity at the time of their transition to secondary school, and lived awareness of the dangers of the street. As one of the players said:

- “it relates to what’s around me and what I’ve had to grow up through”.

Thirteen of the 14 leadership group members expressed interest in staying engaged with the community in some way. For example:

- “Yeah, I would love to help address the issues in my community as that’s where I’m from and I’ve always said I want to give back”.

Communication, collaboration and leadership

David James saw the advantage offered to the young players on this project. After inspiring the WHU leadership group with one or two anecdotes, he observed:

- “You’ve got an opportunity to help each other, with a support network behind you”.

It is apparent that the players fully appreciate the connections between the collective nature of their activities with the community partners, the decision-making responsibility invested in them as a leadership group, and their ability to communicate and work together on the pitch. One of the WHU players summed up how:

- “it correlates to how you’ll be on the pitch –

doing things outside, it all links together”.

Before lockdown, members of the leadership groups had the chance to discuss issues face-to-face with some of the Mayor’s policy advisors; and then subsequently, online, reflected on those issues among themselves in preparation for exploring them in more detail, with others they did not previously know, in local community contexts. As a communications exercise, that is a sound, thought-through process that offers experience of how to address different audiences; paying attention to different viewpoints; recognising when to speak and when not to; and so on.

For example, a member of staff at WHU noted how the young players in the live Zoom session “were really considerate of the age they were delivering to”. The players also had opportunities to develop confidence in presenting on camera, both recorded and live. The CPFC academy staff member noted that;

“Because they had to record it, they had to think more about, well, ‘what part of this do I want to give the young people that are going to be watching this video?’”

What emerges from these experiences is a sense of **‘shared leadership’**, an interactive process with the objective of leading one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals. It calls for the capacity to ‘self-direct’, together with an ability and readiness to direct others, and the ability to be directed.¹³ Unlike hierarchical leadership, it includes an appreciation of interdependence as a feature of both teamwork on the pitch and of social action off the pitch. One of the players illustrated the benefit,

¹³ See e.g. Pearce & Conger (eds.), *Shared leadership*. Sage, 2003; Kang & Svensson, ‘Shared leadership in sport for development and peace’, *Sport Management Review* 22 (2019) 464–476.

on the basis of self-knowledge:

- “I’m more reserved, on the quiet side... if there’s like more than one, like me and my team-mates if we was all to come together it kind of gives an extra boost and a helping hand for me to come out of my shell a little bit and express my thoughts”.

This shows how the enhanced sense of leadership is closely related to **confidence**, which was demonstrably boosted in lots of instances throughout the project – from joking with a former England goalkeeper, to being ready to intervene in an online session to insist on another participant having the chance to speak, or asking probing questions of a charity in interview. The CPFC leadership group members

- “can be quite shy, they don’t really talk a lot, but actually... they literally ran that interview from start to finish, they handled it and managed it amongst themselves”.

The project as a whole “allowed them to recognise each other’s strengths. Those that weren’t as confident, still had a role”.

Similarly, engaging with the community partners provided lessons and insights into **teamwork**, including one exceptional example. It is unlikely that any who witnessed it could ignore the impact of the YCSN session in which the presenter enabled the participants to distinguish “good” and “bad” teamwork through an account of the coordinated actions of the young men involved in her son’s murder.

Collective learning and life skills

An array of terms relating to personal development emerged consistently from the various online project and evaluation sessions, including the meeting with David James, such as “demeanour”, “responsibility”, “role model”, “confidence”, “leadership”, “teamwork” and so on. For example, the word “demeanour” was used by one of the young players and by several commentators.



For our purposes, these terms can be clustered into broad groups, as shown in the graphic. The first group comprises characteristics or attributes, such as confidence, associated with the inner person; the second includes personal attributes as seen by others, such as being a role model; the third group of terms refers to the ways in which the individual relates to others around them.

These are not hard and fast categories of course, nor could they be evidenced in all the players: that would require extensive and expensive evaluation. But what they amount to is **a rich collective learning experience in the development of life skills** – competences such as anticipation, critical thinking, listening, decision-making, communication and collaboration, along with personal and social responsibility.¹⁴ An unexpected addition to the list of life skills was offered by the PKC coach during an online session, when he referred to “hazard perception” as an important skill both on and off the pitch – an observation that resonates strongly with this project as a whole.

The WHU players were encouraged by David James to reflect on their own background as context for their experiences, to see their own development constantly as progression. It is in this sense that the project has contributed to skills development through experience. One of the CPFC players expressed this very clearly, by referring to what he describes as experience giving:

“I learnt about experience giving. How I can teach or influence others not in my position from my own experiences to help them for the better”.

Accepting responsibility: being a role model

Young players from the WHU leadership group

¹⁴ See for example <https://www.britishcouncil.gr/en/life-skills/about/what-are-life-skills>.

had the benefit of a stimulating online session with David James. He told them:

“People are going to want to know a lot about you, people are going to ask you questions... You’ll find that people will be judging you by every movement, everything you do, everything you say, even at your age... the lens that is looking at you is not straight”. The players came to appreciate that the process of becoming a role model as a professional footballer starts at this point – in the academy, not later when Celebrity takes the wheel and the speed goes up. Sometimes, as the project has shown, it can take a while for this to be fully appreciated. One of the WHU staff said:

- “We were saying to the boys, as footballers, you have this social responsibility... as young footballers, your voice is really loud. And they just didn’t get it. Some of them were really interested in the project, and helping the community but didn’t realise the impact that they would have, particularly with young people... Until they had those live sessions, with those children who were just so enthused to see them, and were cheering them as soon as they saw them on the camera, I think that there, the first week we had, that was a real eye-opener for the two boys who were on the Zoom call. And then the following week we had the press release from Marcus Rashford, and I think suddenly the light-bulb went on”.

Likewise, the CPFC players gained clarity in understanding the responsibilities implied in their role. A representative of one of the charities interviewed for project selection mentioned that the boys were “seen as ambassadors”.

The CEO of Your City Says No said: “some Crystal Palace players can be very relatable”. By way of contrast she referred to the less dependable impact of dominant media-farmed celebrities and stressed

the value of “having role models that are local, that they can recognise and relate to”.

For clubs, academies and foundations

A key concern in this project has been to help strengthen the relations between academies and foundations. It was felt at WHU that “the academy and foundation don’t work closely enough” and at CPFC “this was something that was needed”. Intentions to work more closely were expressed by all parties. It may be that aspirations were primed, and the project came along at the right time. One foundation staff member said “it’s only a positive, things like this help break down barriers”; and at CPFC it was claimed that “the project’s opened the doors in terms of the initial conversations”. There was a sense of celebration in that the activities have “really helped cement the importance of a leadership group and ‘player voice’, and given them a social action project”.

From the virtual touchline, David James asserted that “if the first team does anything in the community, they should invite the young players along”. The quality of initiatives was stressed by others, with one academy staff member calling for more than “just turning up with a T-shirt on”. Whether or not stronger relationships can be developed and sustained, it can be claimed that the Football Unites project has contributed to this objective:

- “This project has made the links with the Foundation a lot stronger. There’s still a lot more to do, and it’s something we want to make sure that stays... In terms of the players and the Foundation, that’s massively improved”.

For community partners and projects

In programmes of this kind there can be a risk that community projects are exploited and gain little or no benefit. Such concerns do not apply in this case. Both the primary school and YCSN achieved their objectives and in some ways exceeded their own expectations.

Britannia Village Primary School

Britannia School pupils had a deeper understanding of how to handle their transition to Year seven. They were instilled with confidence and engaged visibly with young black role models. The coordinating teacher said that the children “took a lot from it, they were very engaged by the videos, especially for children who’ve been seeing videos for the last four months or so”.

He went on to explain the particular significance of the players’ contributions, making an impact where others cannot. Teachers try to help pupils to think about their future aspirations as they go into transition, but then:

- “the penny’s dropped in a 2-minute video; whereas I know a lot of Year 6 teachers have been mentioning it all year.”

West Ham United Foundation’s Senior Development Officer picked up on this theme:

- “He hasn’t met that child, but by saying ‘I played in the World Cup’ this kid is instantly engaging, he’s going to want to know everything that he’s got to say, for as long as he’s got to say it... There are some really important messages that the players have been speaking about... We can speak about that all day long as coaches and teachers, and we’re only going to get so far, but for a player to come in and add that extra dynamic, as being that role model, because it doesn’t matter if they’re a scholar who’s not a first team player, the kids see him as a

professional footballer and ... they hang off every word that person is going to say”.

Some of the children's written comments afterwards are given below:	The schoolchildren were encouraged to write to the Mayor. One wrote:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I learnt that it is better to have confidence when you go into secondary or transition anywhere'. • 'You should be careful of who you hang around with even if they're your friend' • 'That we should stay away from gangs' • 'Even footballers feel scared to transition' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Dear Mr Khan, • 'London is an amazing place but sometimes it could be a hard place to grow up in. especially when you are going into secondary school. Because if you don't take the right path in life then you can be led to some wrong places which you do not want to be in'.

West Ham United Foundation is now offering support for additional sessions with the pupils, and it is anticipated that the project will be repeated next year. Participation in sport has been enhanced within the school, with pupils involved in researching and recommending ways to spend the equipment grant.

Your City Says No

YCSN faced significant challenges in delivering the intended face-to-face programme, including difficulty in anticipating numbers attending, reduced interaction, not being able to have group work or role play, and so on.

Nonetheless, the benefits were very much welcomed. YCSN “reached a wider cohort,” including parents wanting to learn more about their work, and a wider network of young people. The CPFC players had a “huge impact” on the PKC players, and one of the leadership group members has undertaken to work more closely with YCSN, exemplifying the ongoing relationship with the club. The collaboration with PKC appears to have been a triumph, with a football tournament celebrating the collective experience of the project, and confirming the logic of CPFC’s involvement leading to increased sports participation. The PKC children who took part (approximately 30) included several girls, one of whom contributed to the online sessions, sharing her experience of gangs and grooming. One remarked:

- “The things that we learned about I knew happened but I never knew anyone that had experienced it. It was good to talk to other people that had the same experiences and I am now confident that I can look out for the signs to keep me safe”.

It was noted above that benefits for the young players were perceived to apply on-pitch and off-pitch. This message was echoed in one of the CPFC sessions, spreading out beyond the leadership group and the community partner (YCSN) to the young footballers of PKC. Their coach told them:

- “Along the way, all these skills that are being learned, you do take them to the pitch. It’s on and off the pitch”.

5.5 For the GLA

The GLA staff were especially supportive when the project had to be adapted to online delivery. The provision of access to City Hall provided good learning experiences for the players.

“Football Unites tested an innovative engagement model, enabling young players to acquire life skills, engage with their communities, acting as true role models for other young people. More importantly, this project handed the leadership and prioritising power to the young people themselves, allowing them to explore and express their voice. Football Unites furthered the Mayor’s commitment to work with London’s football clubs to support and expand their vast capacity for making a positive impact in the community, especially with young people.”

Quote by Mayor of London Sports Team





6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

All participants regard the project as successful without having compromised the values that underpinned it. Football academies now have a proven framework for exemplary player-led community involvement.

This pilot project was genuinely vulnerable to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, but all participants regard it as successful without having compromised the values that underpinned it. A key lesson has come from the proven success of the online sessions, which point to a possible revised model with less emphasis on face-to-face interaction. That doesn't amount to a recommendation for total dependency on online: as one of the young players said:

- “Hopefully after lockdown if it continues then some more face to face helping people will be an improvement but as it stands I have nothing to improve”.

The outcome objectives concerning benefits for the young players and for the community partners have clearly been met. Relationships between clubs and community partners; and between academies and foundations, have been strengthened. Participation in sports has been enhanced through the community partner organisations.

Further, the players have shown commitment to remaining active in their communities. This needs to be seen in a broader social and footballing context. First, early experiences of volunteering in some cases can be profoundly off-putting, so the sense of reward expressed by the participants represents a social investment. Secondly, this is a world in which only a select few go on to fulfilling professional careers, and the experience described in this report can be expected to accumulate beyond the academy years, through the various education and career pathways they follow.

A model to demonstrate all of the above has been tested and proven in spite of unprecedented logistical difficulties.

Among the ingredients that have made this a successful project, the following stand out:

- **Organisational commitment**, with good working relationships between academies and foundations, and openness to shared learning
- An adaptable model of participation, together with access to experience and skills in participation **principles and processes** (whether independent or among existing staff)
- Thorough **planning**, combined with a **readiness to improvise** without compromising values or standards
- **Communication** skills and efficient communication channels.

Clubs seeking to adopt and adapt the model will wish to pay careful attention to the timing of activities within the academic and football years: it was noted that “involvement of the boys could be more fruitful starting in January, this is one of the quieter months in the academy calendar”. Participating staff have suggested that 30 hours of player time would be excessive if more of the interaction took place online.¹⁵ A scheme of work “with guided learning hours, similar to a sports leaders’ model” was also suggested. With a view to persuading other clubs to give this kind of project serious consideration, one academy staff member concluded:

- “It would be a model that other clubs that kind of need that steer in the right direction, would really benefit from”.

Football academies now have a proven framework for exemplary player-led community involvement, demonstrating authentic social responsibility that can be emulated across this and other sports. This project has enacted at the micro level the meaning and implications of developments that have taken place at the macro level, with football and footballers demonstrating awareness and responsibility with regard to significant social issues. Taken together, this leaves the impression that a historical transformation is underway.

¹⁵ The pilot project model allowed for the launch event, meetings at City Hall, and a proposed evaluation event.

APPENDIX 1

The diversity of the player cohort

	CPFC Leadership Group	New Cohort of Scholars from CPFC	WHU Leadership Group*
White British	2	10	8
White Other		1	3
Multiple/Mixed Ethnicity	2	4	3
African Black	1	3	
African and Caribbean Black	1		1
Black British		5	
Black British African			10
Black British Carribbean			3
Black Irish		1	
Kurdish	1		
Latin American		1	

* 22 players joined the first sessions of the leadership group and led on the first ballot. Subsequently the group reduced to seven.





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Palace for Life Foundation

West Ham United Football Club

West Ham United Foundation

Arsenal Football Club and the Premier League as Advisory Partners

The Mayor of London's Community Sports Team

Your City Says No

Preventing Knife Crime

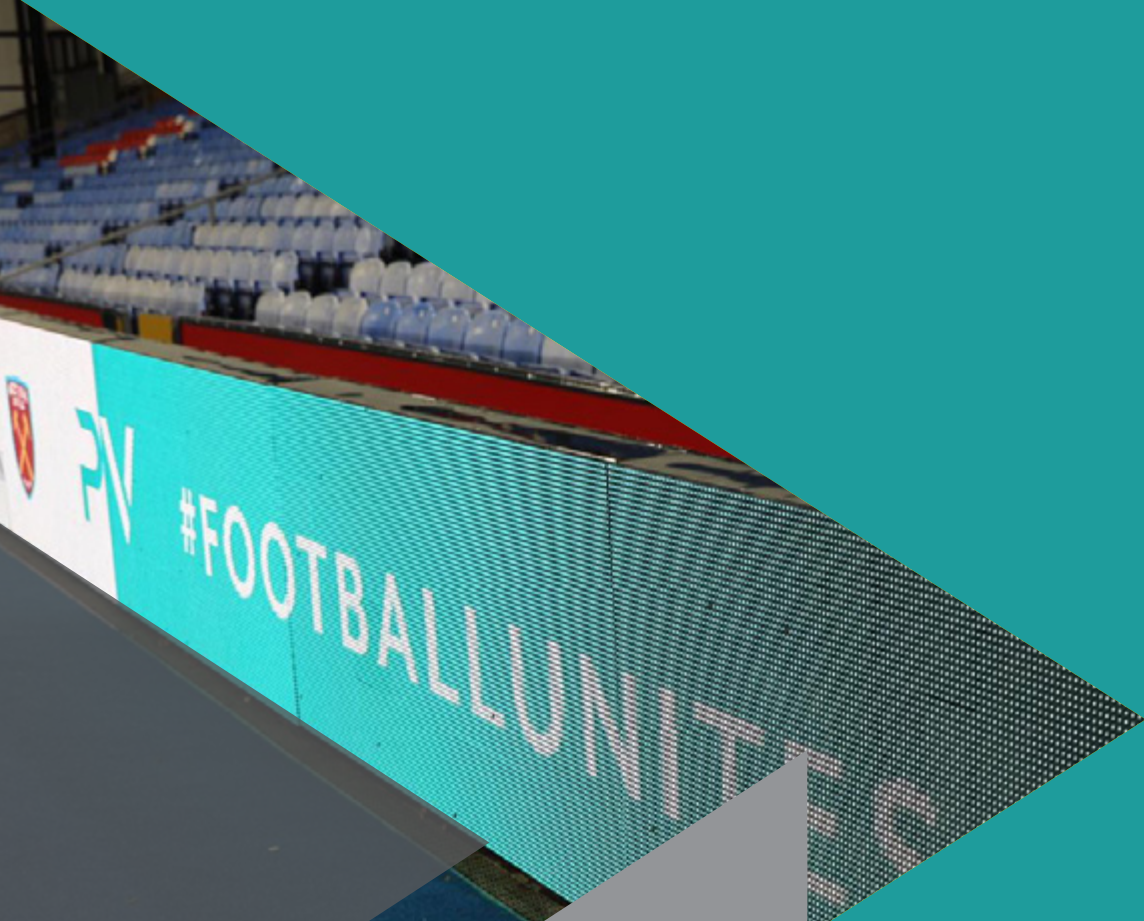
Britannia Village Primary School

David James

Kevin Harris (Evaluator)

In Focus

Player Voice volunteers and supporters



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