

More than a Game:

Football as a force for good in
communities across England and Wales

September 2025



Premier League
Charitable Fund



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About the Centre for Young Lives



The Centre for Young Lives, founded by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE in February 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery unit working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK - with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges. Our team combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovative solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families.

About the Premier League Charitable Fund



The Premier League Charitable Fund is one of the biggest sport charities in the world. Established in 2010 to create positive sporting, health, personal and education opportunities for children, young people and the wider community, the independent charity distributes Premier League and partner funding to professional club charities across the Premier League, English Football League and National League.

Kick-off: foreword by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE

Children and young people are growing up in a world of increasing complexity. Many face overlapping challenges - poverty, poor mental health, school absence, exclusion, and exposure to risk - that can make them particularly vulnerable, limiting their opportunities and often shaping their adult lives. Some of the most vulnerable are falling through the gaps, missing out on a good education and even exposing themselves to the risks of serious violence or exploitation. The high thresholds for statutory support and a lack of early help, combined with the loss of many spaces young people can spend time in building strong relationships and developing their confidence and skills, are holding back too many life chances.

This is why the Centre for Young Lives is working with the Premier League Charitable Fund as its learning and evaluation partner to explore how football and football club charities can help to break down the barriers to opportunity facing some children and young people. As part of this partnership, the Centre for Young Lives conducted 'deep dives' into the work of Arsenal in the Community, Burnley FC in the Community, and Newcastle United Foundation. We spoke to senior leadership teams, coaches, partners, and young people and their parents, learning how the respective organisations operate in their specific contexts and identify and meet local need.

It is clear from our visits and discussions how football club charities, supported by the Premier League Charitable Fund, are uniquely placed to reach those children and young people who might otherwise fall through the gaps. Harnessing the universal appeal of football and the powerful connection between clubs and their communities, they provide safe spaces, tailored support, and regular opportunities to thrive and develop new skills.

This report shows how football's reach and influence can be transformed from something far greater than just a game into a force for better wellbeing, for inclusion, and for widening opportunity. Whether on the pitch, in schools, or through dedicated youth programmes, football club charities are showing how they can help young people to build confidence, improve their health, re-engage with education, and unlock pathways into brighter futures.

As the Government develops its forthcoming Youth Strategy and draws up plans for its Young Futures hubs, and at a time when many of our young people are looking for extra help to support their hopes and dreams, the work set out in this report demonstrates what can be achieved when national investment and local expertise comes together.

With the right interventions, delivered in the right way, the power of football can change lives and strengthen communities.



Baroness Anne Longfield CBE

Co-Founder and Executive Chair
Centre for Young Lives

Executive summary

About our Learning and Evaluation Partnership

The Centre for Young Lives has been the Premier League Charitable Fund's evaluation and learning partner since September 2024 to explore how football and football club charities are working with children, young people, and families to reach those children who might otherwise fall through the gaps. In this time, the Centre has drawn together the learning from across the Premier League Charitable Fund's programmes with children and young people, to understand, refine and amplify the key ingredients which make their work so impactful across communities. This included 'deep dives' into three sample football club charities: Arsenal in the Community; Burnley FC in the Community; and the Newcastle United Foundation. This briefing shares some of the key findings from the first year of that partnership.

About the Premier League Charitable Fund

Fifteen years ago, the Premier League Charitable Fund was established to harness the transformative power of football for communities across England and Wales. Since its inception, over £340 million has been invested to support football club charities in delivering school- and community-based programmes.

In 2024/25, the Premier League Charitable Fund supported 106 football club charities, investing more than £34 million and directly engaging more than 285,00 participants. It does this primarily through three national programmes specifically for children and young people:

- **Premier League Kicks:** inspiring young people to achieve their potential and develop life skills with access to free weekly sessions in communities with high levels of need, including football, multi-sports, mentoring, and education workshops.
- **Premier League Primary Stars:** uses the appeal of football to help children to be active and develop essential life skills.
- **Premier League Inspires:** uses the power of football to inspire young people aged 11-to-18 to develop the personal skills and positive attitudes needed to succeed in life.

It also has three funds to support football club charities deliver core activities, as well as further projects with their communities: the **Premier League and PFA Players' Fund**; the **Premier League Fans Fund**; and the **Premier League and PFA Core Fund**.

Kicking off their futures: the power of football in young lives

The Premier League Charitable Fund and football club charities are uniquely placed to reach and support children and young people. The widespread popularity of football, coupled with the brand of the Premier League and the appeal of professional football clubs and players provide a powerful foundation to engage young people.

Football acts as a hook, engaging participants in a winning combination of sports and activity, positive role models and relationships, friendship, collaboration, and a crucial sense of belonging - all vital in promoting both mental and physical health and

wellbeing and positive life chances. The Premier League and club brands provide credibility and local trust.

Beyond the pitch, programmes offer education, mentoring, social action, arts, and employment support, tailored to local needs and young people's interests. Consistency, reliability, and long-term community presence are key to maintaining engagement and building trust, with many staff drawn from the local community, enhancing relatability and understanding.

At a time when children and young people in the UK face growing and increasingly complex challenges, engagement in football is more important than ever. Many young people face many uncertainties, such as high and rising poverty, high levels of poor mental and physical health, school absence, and exposure to crime and violence. These are challenges that without support hold too many young people back and are too difficult to overcome.

Premier League programmes deliberately target areas of high need, using local data, insight and partnerships with schools, councils, police, and health services to reach children and young people in need of support. In 2024/25, over 60% of Premier League Kicks sites and nearly half of Premier League Primary Stars and Premier League Inspires schools were in the 30% most deprived communities.

Football club charities also act as trusted local partners, maintaining a permanent presence and leveraging relationships to support young people who are struggling and falling into crises. Their long-term visibility and engagement help link young people to wider services, respond to local incidents, and foster safer, stronger communities.

The evidence is clear: Premier League funded programmes and funds deliver a wide array of positive outcomes for children and young people, including improved relationships with peers and trusted adults, confidence and self-esteem, greater participation in physical activity and sport, better mental wellbeing, and more positive attitudes. These opportunities can be transformative for young people changing lives and strengthening communities.

Harnessing the power of football

Football club charities have the potential to support the Government's wide reaching ambitions for children and young people, from reducing school absence and exclusion to improving mental and physical health and to tackling youth violence and crime. The community work supported by the Premier League Charitable Fund demonstrates what can be achieved when national investment and local expertise comes together.

Recommendations

The power of football is already being harnessed through the Premier League's Youth Guarantee partnership with the Department for Work & Pensions, with every Premier League football club charity in talks with DWP to support the programme.

Much more is possible. The Centre for Young Lives recommends that Departments across government work to harness the power of football in young lives, including through:

- The Department for Education's goals to boost education for all children and young people - improve inclusion, improve attendance and reduce exclusions, including through the Curriculum and Assessment Review and the Enrichment Framework.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport's plans to deliver a transformative Youth Strategy and successful Young Futures Hubs protecting the most vulnerable young people and supporting them to thrive.
- The Home Office's Safer Streets Mission, including the Young Futures Prevention Partnerships to reduce youth violence and crime and boost life chances.
- The Department for Health and Social Care's shift towards prevention and community care to boost positive mental health and wellbeing and tackle obesity.

The Highlights

Over 2.5 million

people engaged in Premier League Charitable Fund supported activities since 2010.

106

football club charities supported by the Premier League Charitable Fund across England and Wales.

40%

of children and young people regularly play football.

Over half

of children and young people do not meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines of taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more every day.

94%

of Premier League Kicks (free, weekly football session in the community) participants participated in more competitive sport and physical activity after attending the programme in 2024/25.

77%

of Premier League Inspires (the Premier League's secondary school education programme) and 71% of Premier League Primary Stars (the Premier League's primary school education programme) participants had improved confidence and self-esteem after participating in the programme in 2024/25.

Young people living in more deprived areas are less likely to participate in youth groups and clubs

Over 60%

of Premier League Kicks sites and approximately half of Premier League Primary Stars and Inspires schools were in the 30% most deprived communities.

Introduction

Since September 2024 the Centre for Young Lives has been the learning and evaluation partner of the Premier League Charitable Fund, helping to understand the impact of its funding for football club charities on the lives of children and young people.

Between September 2024 and November 2024, the Centre conducted 'deep dives' into: Arsenal in the Community; Burnley FC in the Community; and the Newcastle United Foundation. Key insights from across these visits are summarised in this report. We began building a picture of young people's needs in each clubs' locality, drawing on published statistics about health, crime, education, and deprivation. We also spoke to local authority, health, police, and education partners of each organisation, asking them about key challenges in the area and what impact the work of the football club charities are having.

During the visits, we spoke to senior leadership, coaches, parents and young people, learning how the respective football club charities operate in their specific contexts and identify and respond to local need. We also observed programmes in action, witnessing the breadth of provision from Premier League Primary Stars tournaments to tailored Premier League Inspires classes to Friday night Premier League Kicks sessions attracting over 250 young people.

Across these three visits, we were struck by not only the power of football and the appeal of the Premier League and club badges to inspire and engage young people, but the quality of youth provision on offer, harnessing football to drive positive outcomes for children and families who need it most. This report provides a snapshot of our findings.

More than a game: 15 years of the Premier League Charitable Fund

Fifteen years ago, the Premier League Charitable Fund was launched with an ambition to transform communities using the power of football. Since then, annual investment via the Premier League Charitable Fund has almost quadrupled, with the Premier League committing more than £425 million since its formation in 2010 up to 2028. So far, the Premier League Charitable Fund has invested more than £340 million in funds from the Premier League, the Professional Footballers' Association, and other partners, to support football club charities across England and Wales to deliver community and school-based programmes. Last season (2024/25) saw more than £34 million invested into football club charities – and today more than 7,000 people are employed by football club charities, many of whom help to deliver Premier League-supported activity to over 2.5 million people to date.

Football club charities deliver programmes and support for people of all ages, supported by three funds operated by the Premier League Charitable Fund, as well as funding for three national Premier League programmes. The three programmes – Premier League Kicks, Premier League Primary Stars, and Premier League Inspires – are targeted at children and young people, taking advantage of the potential of football to inspire and engage and provide opportunities to improve their future life chances. These three programmes were the main focus of our visits.

At a local level, the independent football club charities and their respective football clubs work closely together, with charity staff often wearing the club badge and some sharing facilities and able to offer unique access to their clubs' stadium and players. Together, they harness the power of football and the club badge for good.

“The Premier League badge provides the prestige and quality assurance [...] the Burnley FC badge is the main attraction for local community engagement”
[Local authority representative, Burnley]

Football club charities also benefit from a national network supported by the Premier League Charitable Fund, with access to once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for children and young people – such as national competitions at Premier League stadiums – and the chance to learn from the best practice of other football club charities at networking and training events.

Premier League programmes and funds

Funding from the Premier League Charitable Fund supports football club charities to build their capacity and develop their workforce, as well as deliver tailored projects and the specific Premier League programmes. Three funds are offered: the **Premier League and PFA Players' Fund**; the **Premier League Fans Fund**; and the **Premier League and PFA Core Fund**.

The Premier League Charitable Fund also supports the delivery of three Premier League programmes. While all come with a degree of flexibility to allow club charities to tailor them to specific areas of need, they also offer consistency across the country, ensuring all are delivered to a high-standard and with the Premier League brand.

Premier League Kicks: provides free weekly sessions in areas of high need, using football, multi-sport activities, mentoring, and educational workshops to help young people develop life skills and reach their potential. By creating a safe space in their communities, Premier League Kicks encourages a feeling of belonging in areas where young people may otherwise feel unwelcome or unsafe. In 2024/25:

- £10 million was awarded to 93 football club charities, to help deliver over 63,000 free sessions across 1,200+ venues, engaging 104,000+ unique participants
- Over 60% of delivery sites were in the 30% most deprived communities

As a result of attending Premier League Kicks:

- 94% of participants participate in more competitive sport and physical activity
- 93% of participants enjoy engaging in football and sport more
- 82% of participants have more positive attitudes towards others

Premier League Primary Stars: uses the power of football to inspire children to learn, be active, and develop key life skills. It also supports teachers in delivering high-quality PE and educational content. In 2024/25:

- £7.8 million was awarded to 89 football club charities, to help deliver over 105,000 sessions across 2,000+ schools, which is more than one in ten primary schools in England and Wales¹
- More than 110,000 unique participants were engaged
- 46% of schools were in the 30% most deprived communities

As a result of attending Premier League Primary Stars:

- 73% of participants feel more inspired and engaged
- 71% of participants have improved confidence and self-esteem
- 70% of participants have improved attainment

Premier League Inspires: supports at-risk young people aged 11–18, helping them build personal skills and positive attitudes through targeted interventions, primarily in secondary schools.

This support can be tailored to meet different needs, but takes the form of face-to-face group sessions, mentoring, workshops and social-action projects. In 2024/25:

- £3.3 million was awarded to 45 football club charities, to help deliver over 39,000 sessions across 580+ schools, which is 16% of all secondary schools in England²
- More than 17,000 unique participants engaged
- 52% of schools were in the 30% most deprived communities

As a result of attending Premier League Inspires:

- 77% of participants have improved confidence and self-esteem
- 75% of participants have improved mental wellbeing
- 74% of participants feel more inspired and engaged

¹ Calculated using - Department for Education: Schools, pupils and their characteristics & Welsh Government: School census results 2025.

² Calculated using - Department for Education: Schools, pupils and their characteristics & Welsh Government: School census results 2025.

Chasing the game: why children need football programmes

More than a decade of austerity, the disruption caused by the global pandemic, and the pervasive influence of screens and social media have fundamentally reshaped young people's lives. School attendance has declined, with a rising minority disengaged altogether. Levels of poor mental health are at record highs, and many young people are at risk of violence, crime, and exploitation.

These challenges rarely exist in isolation: one child may struggle with several at once, each compounding the others and creating a ripple effect of disadvantage. Without timely and effective support, these pressures can profoundly affect not only a child's present wellbeing but also their long-term opportunities and life chances.

Children and young people growing up in poverty

In the UK, 4.5 million children are growing up in relative poverty - almost a third of all children.³ This creates significant barriers to opportunity. Children who are eligible for Free School Meals are more likely to be excluded or suspended from school.⁴ Children living in the most deprived areas are also more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than those living in the least deprived areas,⁵ and poverty also increases the likelihood that a young person will have a mental health problem.⁶

Special Educational Needs

Special Educational Needs (SEN) can be a major factor in shaping young people's life chances. By the end of secondary school in 2023, the attainment gap between children with SEN and those without was almost 2 years (22 months).⁷ Children with SEN are over three times more likely to be suspended from school,⁸ and children with autism are excluded at twice the rate than children without SEN.⁹

Children losing learning

Children missing school are losing out on a protective factor in their lives and are often vulnerable – which can be both a cause and consequence of losing learning. The number of children who are persistently absent, meaning they are missing 10% or more of their education, has almost doubled since 2018/19.¹⁰ The number of children who are severely absent, meaning they are missing more than 50% of their education, has almost trebled since before the pandemic.¹¹ Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, suspensions

³ HM Government (2025) Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2024>. Data refers to the number of children growing up in relative poverty after housing costs.

⁴ Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>

⁵ NHS (2024) National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 school year. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

⁶ Ward, Joseph L et al. (2025) Admission to acute medical wards for mental health concerns among children and young people in England from 2012 to 2022: a cohort study; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health. 9 (2): 112 – 120. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(24\)00333-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(24)00333-X/fulltext)

⁷ EPI (2024) Annual Report 2024: SEND. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-send-2/>

⁸ Department for Education. Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/7d386978-9385-4555-5b52-08ddf5e2701a>

⁹ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the autism assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Autism_Report_1.pdf

¹⁰ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24>

¹¹ Ibid.

have increased by 118% from 438,000 to 955,000. In the last year alone, they have increased by 21%.¹²

Youth violence and crime

Crime - and the fear of becoming a victim - is limiting the opportunities and futures of some young people. In 2024, 20% of 13-17-year-olds were a victim of violent crime¹³, while perpetrators of youth violence are getting younger: recent figures in London show a rise of 38% in the number of 10-14-year-olds suspected of serious violence between 2020 and 2023.¹⁴ Of these young people who have committed violence, 74% have been excluded from school.¹⁵

Mental and physical health

Across the country, children and young people are facing growing health challenges. Rising rates of obesity are putting millions at risk of serious complications early in life. In 2023/24, almost a quarter (22%) of reception year children (aged 4-5) were overweight or obese and 36% of year 6 children (aged 10-11) were overweight or obese.¹⁶ The unprecedented mental health crisis facing young people is well evidenced: one in five children and young people aged 8-16 had a common mental health condition in 2023.¹⁷ Together, these challenges are straining already overstretched services and underline the urgent need for earlier intervention to prevent problems from escalating.

NEET

In the UK, one in eight young people – almost a million (920,000) - between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).¹⁸ Extended periods out of work or learning make it harder to re-engage, with almost half (48%) of young people still NEET a year after they first become NEET,¹⁹ and 75% of young people who are NEET for three months having been NEET for 12 months.²⁰ Beyond diminished career prospects, unemployment can fuel isolation, reduced confidence, and poorer physical and mental health.²¹

¹² Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>

¹³ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

¹⁴ BBC. Child violent crime suspects 'getting younger'. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y6l36q6pqq>

¹⁵ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

¹⁶ NHS (2024) National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 school year. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

¹⁷ NHS England (2023) One in five children and young people had a probable mental health disorder in 2023. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/>

¹⁸ ONS (2025) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemployementortrainingneettable1>

¹⁹ Learning and Work Institute (2025) Young people who are not in education, employment or training – what does the data tell us? <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/young-people-who-are-not-in-education-employment-or-training-what-does-the-data-tell-us/>

²⁰ Impetus (2019) The long-term NEET population. Available at: <https://impetus-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/assets/publications/Youth-Jobs-Gap-The-Long-Term-NEET-Population.pdf>

²¹ Public Health England (2014) Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd2a040f0b65d88634a03/Review3_NEETs_health_inequalities.pdf

The Government's game plan for young people

In response to the growing crisis among children and young people, the Government has made breaking down barriers to opportunity for young people and delivering safer streets two of its core missions. The country is also seeking to secure sustained economic growth and improve the health of this young generation.

Supporting young people to succeed is inextricably tied to realising each of these four missions, from reducing the rate of young people who are NEET to unlock economic growth, intervening early to prevent youth crime and serious violence to create safer streets, or tackling the youth mental health crisis to improve life expectancy and life chances. The Opportunity Mission also explicitly sets an ambition to remove the barriers that underpin many of the challenges facing young people.

There are several plans and strategies in place or in development which underpin these ambitions:

A national Youth Strategy

The government has pledged a renewed focus on children and young people in a new Youth Strategy which is due in the autumn.

A new era of inclusion in schools

A greater emphasis on early intervention to support children and young people to succeed in school, a reformed curriculum and a reformed accountability framework from Ofsted. Details on plans for reform of the SEND system are due in a *Schools White Paper* in the Autumn.

A Youth Guarantee for work and training

The Department for Work & Pensions has introduced measures to tackle economic inactivity, through the Youth Guarantee, which sets out “a vision to ensure all young people aged 18 to 21 are learning or earning.” Eight Youth Guarantee Trailblazers have also been established to develop ways to identify, engage and sustain contact with young people most at risk of falling out of education, employment or training. The Premier League has already agreed a Youth Guarantee partnership with the Department for Work & Pensions, demonstrating the power of football in supporting young people into training and employment and breaking down barriers to opportunity.

Raising the healthiest generation

The Labour manifesto pledged to reverse the trend of worsening health outcomes among children and create the healthiest and happiest generation of children ever in Britain. For mental health in particular, this involves placing a trained mental health professional in every school, as well as walk-in hubs in each community.

Tackling vulnerability - Young Futures

The Young Futures programme, announced in the government's manifesto, aims to intervene early to prevent and support vulnerable young people most at risk of being

drawn into serious violence, gangs, or exploitation, as well as young people at risk of mental health problems.

The programme is based on the central recommendation of the Commission on Young Lives 2022 report '*Hidden in Plain Sight*'. The Commission, the precursor to the Centre for Young Lives, put forward a national plan to support vulnerable young people, to protect young people and support them to thrive through a "Sure Start for Teenagers" model of local joined up early intervention and support. 50 Young Futures Hubs will be created in this parliament with the first 8 trailblazers due to open over coming months.

Young Futures is made up of two parts

Young Futures Hubs - led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Government intends for the eight early adopters to open during the financial year 2025-26. A further 42 hubs will then open before the end of this Parliament, all of which will be targeted at areas with high rates of knife crime and antisocial behaviour.

Young Futures Hubs will not just be vibrant, appealing and inspiring youth centres that also deliver targeted support for those who need it. Strong positive relationships with trusted adults, great activities and opportunities, targeted outreach, and digital support will all enable the most vulnerable young people to experience new opportunities and support.

Prevention Partnership Panels - led by the Home Office. Panels will proactively identify and refer vulnerable teenagers – who may currently be falling through the net – to a range of different coordinated support services and interventions much earlier, including Young Futures Hubs. These interventions could include mentoring, sports programmes, arts and cultural programmes, and therapy or family support.

The role of football in creating change

Football is uniquely placed to tackle the challenges facing children and young people and contribute to the Government's missions because of its reach, accessibility, and influence in young people's lives. For young people growing up in poverty, football provides free or low-cost opportunities to participate in positive activities, breaking down barriers that so often prevent disadvantaged children from accessing clubs and support. For those with special educational needs, football can provide inclusive environments where they can succeed, build confidence, and feel a sense of belonging often missing from school or mainstream settings.

By engaging those at risk of becoming NEET, football programmes can re-ignite aspirations, build confidence, and connect young people with opportunities, helping to unlock economic growth. Football also plays a vital role in early intervention, steering young people away from crime and serious violence by offering safe spaces, positive role models, and alternatives to risky behaviours. Football supports mental health by promoting physical activity, social connection, and a sense of belonging, easing pressures on overstretched health services. In all these ways, football directly advances

the Opportunity Mission, removing barriers that fuel disadvantage and ensuring that every child and young person has the chance to thrive.

The power of football and the role of football club charities

The power of football, the Premier League, and the club badge

Football remains the nation's sport of choice, a central component of childhood and families, and the most popular physical activity among young people. In Sport England's Active Lives Survey 2023/24, 40% of children and young people age 6-16 said they had played football the week prior to the survey.²² This widespread popularity has been boosted in recent years by the success and rising popularity of the women's game, with the Lionesses' wins at Euro 2022 and Euro 2025 driving growth in the grassroots women and girls' game. After the first of those victories, almost 1,500 new women and girls' football teams were registered in 2022/23,²³ and almost a quarter of girls said they played football in the last week at the time of the Active Lives survey in 2023/24, up 3.8% from 2017/18.²⁴

Premier League programmes and football club charities combine this immense popularity of football with their own established and trusted brands. In 2023, a fifth of young Britons age 18-29 described the Premier League as one of their top interests.²⁵ An evaluation of the Premier League Inspires programme found that 78% of football club charities value the Premier League brand as 'important' or 'very important', with one club charity describing how the brand "brings the credibility and professionalism which mainly attracts the schools, while the club brand engages the participants and to a lesser extent the school".²⁶

"Turf Moor and Burnley FC are very visible – the stadium can be seen from anywhere in the city and its colours are everywhere. When people see the badge they immediately trust you." [Senior leader, Burnley FC in the Community]

Above all, the club badge itself brings a singular local appeal. Of all the Secondary Schools participating in Premier League Inspires, 75% view the club/football club charity brand as 'important' or 'very important', with one charity explaining how their badge is:

"Instantly recognisable within schools to the extent younger people want to be involved and have improved their behaviour to attempt to be referred into the next cohort"

But football and the Premier League is only part of the story. Many young people may have no interest in football and are instead attracted by the wider offer from football club charities, which goes beyond the pitch. Programmes include volunteering and social action projects, education and employment support, mental health and mentoring support, and creative opportunities in music, drama, and the arts.

²² Sport England. Active Lives Survey data tables: Children and Young People 23-24 Table 7. Available at: <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives/active-lives-data-tables?section=children-and-young-people-surveys-section#academic-year-2023-24-37619>

²³ England Football. Women's and girls' football in England reveals recent growth. Available at: <https://www.englandfootball.com/articles/2024/Feb/09/womens-girls-football-increased-numbers-reported-by-county-fas-20240902>

²⁴ Sport England. Active Lives Survey data tables: Children and Young People 23-24 Table 12. Available at: <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives/active-lives-data-tables?section=children-and-young-people-surveys-section#academic-year-2023-24-37619>

²⁵ YouGov. What distinguishes younger Premier League fans from older ones? Available at: <https://business.yougov.com/content/48038-what-distinguishes-younger-premier-league-fans-from-older-ones>

²⁶ Sport Industry Research Centre and Sheffield Institute of Education (2025) Premier League Inspires: Evaluation report. Shared with Centre for Young Lives by the Premier League Charitable Fund.

Skilled staff using the power of the club badge

During our visits to football club charities, we saw how staff were uniquely relatable to the young people they worked with. This is not only down to the tracksuits they wear and the club badges on them, but their lived experience, and the fact that they were drawn from the local community, skilled at and committed to engaging young people, and invested in by the football club charities.

“It’s our love for this borough that makes us do what we do [...] these people are my people” [Manager, Arsenal in the Community]

Much of this success is testament to the pathways provided by the programmes for participants to progress into voluntary, sessional, part-time, and full-time work. In every charity we visited, we met at least one member of staff running a Premier League Kicks session who had been a former participant of the programme. Staff were keenly aware how this background makes them relatable to young people and more understanding of the challenges they face, having shared some of these experiences themselves.

“Because I was a participant before, you’re from the area, you understand what they are going through and you can relate to them more” [Sessional coach, Arsenal in the Community]

The quality of the workforce can also be attributed to their training and experience: some are graduates of Premier League programmes, while others we spoke to had come from the education sector or the NHS. Their development is supported by the Premier League and PFA Core Funding, which supported 95 football club charities and a workforce of over 7,000 people in 2024/25. As well as funding, the Premier League Charitable Fund provided over 100 training and development opportunities, including youth work and mentoring training and qualifications, and Youth Mental Health First Aid training.

Purpose off the pitch – programmes for every young person

While football underpins every Premier League programme, the work of clubs and club charities goes far beyond the game itself, by adapting to and meeting young people’s needs with trained youth workers, “not just football coaches putting out cones”. As a result, participants can access opportunities and support such as mentoring, educational workshops, wellbeing sessions, and volunteering and social action projects, all alongside playing football.

At Newcastle United Foundation, what began as football sessions have evolved into a diverse programme, now offering multiple sports and even e-sports through their hub’s gaming room. Crucially, the charity places youth voice at the centre, giving participants real influence over what is on offer. Staff explained how they respond directly to requests, introducing activities as varied as gaming, other sports sessions such as cricket or American football, and also hair and beauty sessions.

In Burnley, the local context has shaped a very different intervention. With rates of dental decay among children significantly higher than the national average - 38.7% compared to 23.7% - Burnley FC in the Community introduced a six-week social action project through Premier League Primary Stars to help children understand about the impact of sugary drinks and making healthy choices.

Bringing opportunity to all

Premier League funded programmes are deliberately targeted at areas where need is the highest, with programme funding contingent on reaching the right areas and groups. Football club charities identify target areas through local data mapping and collaborating with statutory partners such as local councils and police forces. With poverty and deprivation underpinning a wide variety of vulnerabilities, many of the programmes target areas where these challenges are most acute. The Premier League Charitable Fund reported that in 2024/25, 60% of the 1,278 Premier League Kicks venues across England and Wales were in the top 30% most deprived communities, based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Similarly, 46% of all primary schools engaged in Premier League Primary Stars and 45% of secondary schools involved in Premier League Inspires were in the 30% most deprived areas.

Providing positive activities in deprived communities is especially important, as young people in these areas often describe travelling to activities as a major obstacle.²⁷ Young people eligible for Free School Meals are also less likely to take part in clubs or groups, including sports. This makes it crucial that opportunities are delivered directly within these communities, ensuring that those who need them most are not excluded.

Strategic partnerships

“These relationships are forged with a purpose” [Local authority representative, Arsenal in the Community]

There is a strong consensus that the clubs and club charities recognise their value, which is often their facilities, their talented and popular staff, and a club brand which can attract other partners as well as children and young people who would otherwise not be engaged. This understanding of their value is shared by statutory and community partners, allowing football club charities to establish themselves within local networks and bring a unique offer to the table, without duplication or gaps.

One example of these partnerships is a current pilot programme to support young people known to the police. Of the £10 million funding distributed by the Premier League Charitable Fund for the delivery of Premier League Kicks in 2024/25, £214,000 was awarded to 23 football club charities to deliver a targeted police partnerships pilot with matched funding from local police. The pilot delivers projects which are co-designed by the football club charities and the police, tailored to individual need to support referred young people who are known to the police. Interventions include one-to-one mentoring for young people at risk of criminal exploitation, and intervention programmes to tackle knife crime and violence against women and girls.²⁸

We also spoke to staff at the Newcastle United Foundation, which operates a joint programme with the Foundation of Light (the official charity of Sunderland AFC) to tackle youth violence and knife crime, funded by Northumbria Violence Reduction Unit. The initiative – called the YOLO programme – offers a one-to-one mentoring service for 20 weeks to young people referred by Northumbria Police or youth justice services known to have carried or be at risk of carrying a weapon. The mentoring sessions

²⁷ UK Youth and SQW (2025) Barriers and Enablers to Participation in Youth Activities Research. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/688b2d741affbf4bedb7b12e/Barriers_and_Enablers_Final_Report_accessible.pdf

²⁸ Premier League. Premier League continues police partnership to build safer and more inclusive communities. Available at: <https://www.premierleague.com/en/news/4349943/premier-league-kicks-police-partnerships-pilot>

include knife crime awareness but also broader educational workshops about social media, drug and alcohol awareness, anti-social behaviour, goal setting, and health relationships. Young people are also supported to engage in activities such as sport, music, art, or social action projects.

The visibility and longevity of Arsenal in the Community's programmes have made the club a trusted partner, with one local authority representative describing the charity as an "anchor organisation" able to harness its wide appeal and trust with local people. Arsenal in the Community staff sit on multi-agency boards, make use of local authority data to shape provision, and act as a critical link between young people and systems they might otherwise avoid. For example, a representative from the Metropolitan Police told the Centre for Young Lives that the trust the charity has nurtured among local communities has been vital in responding to serious violence and encouraging young people to engage with the police and other agencies.

Around the grounds

In Autumn 2024, the Centre for Young Lives conducted ‘deep dives’ into the work of Arsenal in the Community, Burnley FC in the Community, and the Newcastle United Foundation. The following case studies provide an insight into their work and the impact it is having in their communities.

Arsenal in the Community: “Be Together”

Arsenal plays a pivotal role in driving socio-economic development in Islington and surrounding boroughs. It works with local people of all ages through targeted and universal programmes focussed on improving health and wellbeing, fostering social inclusion and strong communities, and widening access to education and employment. From its purpose-built hub beneath the Emirates Stadium, the charity operates across the three North London boroughs of Islington, Camden, and Hackney, where many young people face complex and overlapping challenges like poverty, poor health, and exposure to crime.

- Nearly half of all pupils across all three boroughs are eligible for Free School Meals with the three ranking behind only Manchester for the highest rates of eligibility in England.²⁹
- Camden has the second highest crime rate in London, with Islington fourth and Hackney fifth.³⁰
- Children across the three boroughs are growing up with above average rates of obesity.³¹
- Children in Camden and Islington are missing school more often than the national average.³²

Supporting Islington, Camden, and Hackney

In 2023/24:

- 2,452 young people participated in a Premier League Kicks session delivered by Arsenal in the Community. 360 young people joined an educational workshop through Premier League Kicks, where coaches or external partners work with young people when they aren't on the pitch.
- Sixteen primary schools partnered with Arsenal in the Community to deliver the Premier League Primary Stars programme, with 27 teachers upskilled in teaching PE lessons.
- 23 schools and 896 young people were reached through Premier League Inspires.

Strong, young Gunners

²⁹ Department for Education (2025) Academic year 2024/25: Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/35da2a41-6eac-4aa1-06e0-08ddd1f87e8>

³⁰ Metropolitan Police. Monthly Crime Data: Overview of Crimes. Available at: <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/metropolitan.police.service/viz/MonthlyCrimeDataNewCats/Coversheet>

³¹ NHS England (2024) National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

³² Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/14d10c06-4eab-425f-cf7e-08dde004d340>

At a Premier League Inspires session, the theme of ‘strong young Gunners’ uses first team players Bukayo Saka and Leah Williamson as role models in a workshop about effective communication, both on and off the pitch. Students in the class were identified for a range of reasons – from those with issues around attendance and behaviour, to children struggling at home, to children who struggled to build friendships. Across 2023/24, the Premier League Inspires programme delivered by Arsenal in the Community was specifically designed to develop participants’ skills and knowledge, improve their confidence and self-esteem, and to inspire and engage them. Of the 2023/24 cohort, three-quarters said they felt their confidence and self-esteem had been improved by the programme, and 70% felt they had learnt new skills and knowledge.

“It was so fun and gave me so many opportunities to try new things, explore new activities and meet new friends. I loved training with the coaches” [Premier League Inspires participant]

A safe and accessible place to belong

“The Arsenal motto is “Be Together” and that is very much the case. It feels like a family, and you are treated like family.” [Young participant, Arsenal in the Community]

The Arsenal Hub is located next to the Emirates Stadium, bordering some of the most deprived areas in Islington. With a staffed reception and classrooms and football pitches constantly buzzing with activity, young people and staff alike describe the space as welcoming and “without a stigma attached”.

Beyond the hub, Arsenal’s work extends deep into the local area, with a mission to support young people to achieve their potential and build stronger, safer, and more inclusive communities. Where pitches don’t exist or are in need of renovation, the Arsenal Foundation has supported the refurbishment and development of pitches across the three boroughs. As well as installing new astro-turf, upgrades also include the addition of floodlights to allow play during evenings and nets or fences to prevent the loss of balls.

Burnley FC in the Community: opening opportunities in a one club town

As a proud ‘one-club town,’ Burnley enjoys a passionate fanbase and the club’s badge carries significant weight locally, symbolising pride, trust, and credibility. This trusted position has enabled Burnley FC in the Community to transform lives across Burnley, Pendle, Rossendale, the Ribble Valley, and West Yorkshire, reaching over 32,000 people in 2024 through more than 50 different programmes, providing a total social value of £33.7m. The portfolio of projects is diverse, with programmes for everyone from pre-schoolers to seniors and tackling issues like mental health, youth violence, cancer rehabilitation, food poverty and more.

- 40% of children in Burnley are living in relative low-income households, which is the ninth highest rate in the UK and almost double the national average of 21.8%. Neighbouring Pendle has the highest rate in the UK at 44.6%.³³

³³ Department for Work & Pensions (2025) Children in low income families: local area statistics, financial year ending 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-2014-to-2024>

- Anti-social behaviour is more prevalent in Lancashire than any other police force area.³⁴
- A quarter of children in Burnley are living with obesity, well above the national average of 22%.³⁵ In Burnley, 41% of children are active for less than 30 minutes a day, with a national average of 29%.³⁶

Making an impact in Burnley and the surrounding area

Burnley FC in the Community has an extensive reach, engaging 42% (32,000 people) of the population across the communities of Burnley, Pendle, Rossendale, the Ribble Valley and West Yorkshire in 2024 in their different programmes:³⁷

- 1,608 young people in total engaged in Premier League Kicks in 2023/24, including 500 girls and young women. 630 participated in an educational workshop and 104 in volunteering or social action.
- 54 schools reached through Premier League Primary Stars and 75 teachers supported with PE lessons. The project also delivered 21 social action projects and 38 anti-discrimination workshops.
- Limitless Clarets provided sensory sessions, accessible climbing, golf, multi-sports and football to 267 young people with SEND.
- 202 referred participants completed mentoring programmes through Premier League Inspires, and 40 had one-to-one wellbeing checks. Alongside regular Premier League Inspires delivery, Burnley in the Community delivers an annual careers day in collaboration with a local Pupil Referral Unit, and a careers day for five local secondary schools.

Making use of scarce facilities

“One of biggest challenges for the NHS is space so they have a good partnership with Burnley FC in the Community where they provide support workers and Burnley provides the facilities” [Lancashire and South Cumbria Foundation Trust representative]

Burnley FC in the Community operates a range of high-quality facilities that serve as important hubs for sport, education, health and wellbeing and community engagement. The Prairie Sports Village and the Leisure Box are widely used by children, young people, and older residents across Burnley and neighbouring Pendle. Local partners make frequent use of these facilities. We heard how Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation work with Burnley FC in the Community use the space at Turf Moor and the Leisure Box for mental health nurses to work with patients in a welcoming and non-clinical environment.

The charity also rescued and now runs the Whitehough Outdoor Centre, a 22-acre outdoor education site offering activities for schools and community groups, ensuring

³⁴ Office for National Statistics (2024) Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area data tables, March 2024. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables>

³⁵ NHS England (2024) National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

³⁶ Sport England. Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 2023/24.

Available at: <https://activelives.sportengland.org/Result?queryId=147283>

³⁷ Burnley FC in the Community. About us. Available at: <https://burnleyfccommunity.org/about-us/>

its continued role as a valued resource for learning, recreation, and personal development. These facilities provide welcoming, accessible spaces that encourage participation, foster community connections, and support physical and mental wellbeing.

Newcastle United Foundation: serving the North East

The Newcastle United Foundation serves a large geographical area in the North-East of England, stretching from Newcastle-Upon-Tyne to the Scottish border in the north and across to parts of the Lake District to the West. With a purpose-built hub within sight of St James' Park Stadium, it is clear how the city's passion for the club helps the foundation connect with the community, break down barriers, and support the local area, while also running programmes further afield.

Such is the scale of the area covered by the Foundation, and the range of its activities, it supported 79,287 people through free programmes in 2024/25. These programmes cover education, sport, personal development, and wellbeing, to support local people to be active, learn, and feel happier and healthier.

- Nearly a third (30.5%) of children live in relative low-income families in Newcastle.³⁸
- Rates of persistent and severe absence in Newcastle both exceed the national average with more than 2.6% of children missing half or more of school, compared to 2% across England.³⁹ The rate of school suspensions in the 2023/24 academic year in Newcastle was nearly double that of the national average.⁴⁰
- Over 25% of children are living with obesity, above the national average of 22%.⁴¹

Reaching across the North East

In the 2024/25 season:

- 2961 participants were reached through Premier League Kicks, with 589 girls and young women engaged.
- 897 young people and 12 educational institutions were involved in Premier League Inspires, including mainstream schools, SEND departments, and Pupil Referral Units across Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside, and Gateshead.
- All Premier League Inspires participants reported feeling inspired and engaged by the programme, with schools citing match tickets, stadium tours, and other club-linked events as beneficial in improving attitudes to learning.

³⁸ Department for Work & Pensions (2025) Children in low income families: local area statistics, financial year ending 2024

³⁹ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England

⁴⁰ Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England

⁴¹ NHS England (2024) National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

Bespoke support for schools

“Key, targeted interventions that are really bespoke where we think the most need is” (Partner School delivery staff, Newcastle United Foundation)

The Premier League PFA Partner Schools programme provides dedicated full time staff members to six partner secondary schools in the North East. We heard that the partner schools had typically benefited from the Inspires programmes and sought out additional support and staff time from the charity as a result. We spoke to five young people who are in Year 9 or year 10 at one of these schools.

They told us how the support had helped them to regulate their emotions and behaviour better, with one admitting they thought they would have been suspended from school without the intervention. Students put these changes down to their relationship with the member of staff. They described him as “like a friend”, who is “relatable”; as someone who makes them feel safer in school and who they look forward to seeing.

Creating chances: harnessing the power of football in young lives

Children, young people and families today face many significant barriers to their ability to thrive – with rising poverty, unprecedented levels of school absence, poor mental health and the ubiquity of screens – and yet our systems are too often fragmented and outdated, unable to engage young people or meet the needs they are presenting.

The Government has committed to breaking down the barriers facing these children and families – but the success of its game plan relies on the ability to harness the power of key partners who are already shaping young futures across local communities.

Across the first year of our evaluation and learning partnership with the Premier League Charitable Fund, the Centre for Young Lives has seen how football and football club charities are uniquely placed to engage young people and turn the tide on the challenges they are facing. We visited football club charities where staff are breaking down the barriers to opportunity facing many young people, opening up opportunities, boosting physical and mental health and diverting some of the most vulnerable children away from exploitation or serious violence.

Combining trusted local delivery, skilled and dedicated staff, and the inspirational power of football, football club charities reach young people in ways that traditional services often struggle to. They engage young people through positive activities led by experienced coaches which focus on shaping the person before the player. Their staff work in a relational way to strengthen mental and physical health, build skills and confidence, and deliver wider social and community benefits.

The evidence gathered by the Premier League Charitable Fund demonstrates how this model can transform lives and communities, equipping young people with the tools and opportunities to thrive.

Football, in particular, acts as a powerful hook - drawing young people in through passion for the game, the pride of the badge, and the appeal of the Premier League - creating a sense of belonging, motivation, and hope.

Reaching the goal line: recommendations for government

The Premier League Charitable Fund's model demonstrates what can be achieved when national investment and local expertise comes together. In just fifteen years the Fund has taken many small local charities to places of sustainability and an ability to reach unmatched numbers of young people from disadvantaged communities. With 106 football club charities across England and Wales supported by the Premier League Charitable Fund in 2024/25, a network of over 7,000 staff and infrastructure is already in place to support young people to reach their potential and positively impact communities.

The Centre for Young Lives recommends that departments across government partner with football charities to harness the power of the game across its Missions. The Premier League is already a key Youth Guarantee partner of the Department of Work and Pensions, committing to providing skills and opportunities and using its influence to reach and engage young people.

We recommend:

- **The Department for Education** should harness the power of football in promoting an inclusive and high-quality education for all children. The Premier League's school-based programmes – Premier League Inspires and Premier League Primary Stars – deliver outcomes that align with the Department for Education's (DfE) priorities of school inclusion and tackling pupil absence.
 - We heard how Primary Stars programmes encourage children to engage in high quality sports sessions during PE and break times – including opening up early access for girls. The DfE should work with the Premier League Charitable Fund to establish pilot partnerships to promote physical activity in primary school through the Primary Stars programme, including through the curriculum review.
 - As part of its ambition to bring forward a new era of inclusion in education, the DfE RISE teams should work with the Premier League Charitable Fund to expand the Premier League Inspires Programme into schools where there are high rates of severe absence and exclusion. An expanded Premier League Inspires programme could also help to meet rising levels of Special Educational Needs.
- **The Department for Health and Social Care** should harness the power of football to deliver early interventions that address the growing mental health challenges faced by children and young people and drive down childhood obesity. This could include:
 - Publishing guidance and providing support to health professionals to establish Social Prescribing pathways into football programmes and other physical activity.
 - Working with the Premier League Charitable Fund to pilot mental health and wellbeing workers in football programmes and football club charities to help address high mental health needs.
- **The Department for Culture Media and Sport** should harness the power of football to break down barriers to opportunity for children and young people and create safer streets through the Young Futures programme and the Youth Strategy.
 - DCMS should accelerate Young Futures trailblazers through partnership with football club facilities.
 - Through the Youth Strategy DCMS should work with football clubs and other sports facilities to open up safe spaces to young people in their communities.
- **The Home Office** should harness the power of football to deliver on the safer streets mission and reduce youth involvement in crime, including by:
 - Expanding pathways into mentoring and support through Prevention Partnerships Panels.
 - Piloting programmes with boys and young men around healthy masculinity and tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG).

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To find out more about the Premier League Charitable Fund, visit:

<https://www.premierleague.com/en/footballandcommunity/morethanagame/premier-league-charitable-fund>

To find out more about the Centre for Young Lives, visit:

<https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/>

