



Next-Generation Leaders
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***Local, National and International
Perspectives on the Role of Grassroots
Sports Clubs in Their Local Communities***

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Introduction to essay

This research was an academic proposed project at Durham University. The project was posed by Dr Stephen Crossley, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Durham University, and broadly centred around the idea that grassroots sports clubs in the UK have received relatively little attention in terms of the wider work that they are involved with and/or capable of. Through engaging with Dr Crossley prior to undertaking this research, he and I discussed the scope and methodology, alongside outputs, that this research project would deliver. It was agreed that a desk exercise to conduct a literature review on the subject of grassroots sports in the UK, a database of the grassroots clubs in East Durham, with an accompanying interactive map of grassroots clubs in East Durham. As a business studies student at Durham University, Dr Crossley supported my addition to the research of including what, if any, Social Return on Investment was being made through the provision grassroots sports clubs in the UK and in particular East Durham.

Literature review

The research was conducted via desk research and a literature review in regard to theories, primary and secondary data on the subject of grassroots sports at a local and national perspective, as well as its provision within a community area, and the measurement of Social Return on Investment (SROI). The area researched in this report is East Durham, County Durham, North East England. In all, over 110 sources on grassroots clubs and SROI were reviewed for this research project; of those 110 sources, 70% of sources were in relation to physical activity, grassroots sports, and grassroots clubs, with most emphasis being on physical activity. It was apparent from the literature review that there is a lack of information on grassroots sports clubs, and that often grassroots sport and Physical Activity are often linked together; even though they are quite distinct and can be quite different. The final 30% of sources in the literature review covered the social value of grassroots sports clubs and Social Return on Investment being made. One notable piece on this was the report Sport England commissioned from the Sport Industry Research Centre at

Sheffield Hallam University in 2020 (discussed on page 10 of report) which attempts to recognise the value of grassroots sports and grassroots clubs.

Methodology

In seeking to create an interactive map of the grassroots clubs in East Durham, my methodology mainly relied upon a online searches. I began the investigation of grassroots clubs with broad online searches before narrowing the search down, one specific search at a time; starting search was 'Grassroots sports clubs in County Durham'. This methodical way of searching was productive in presenting local grassroots clubs pages on social media platforms, such as Facebook. I mapped any of the clubs that presented in Durham, and was able to isolate those clubs that were in the East Durham area (see figure 2, map of East Durham Grassroots Clubs). My next search request online focused on 'Find a club Durham', which turned up the club directory, Club Durham (<http://www.clubdurham.co.uk/clubs/>); a directory of different sports clubs registered in county Durham. This was a pivotal find in the research for clubs as it allowed for narrowing of the search to allow in finding clubs based on specific criteria, such as age, gender, types of sporting clubs, allowing the research to link to several clubs and their respective websites. For example, I began by scoping rugby clubs through Club Durham and developed a list of postcodes of all the grassroots rugby clubs on the directory until I had exhausted my options. The research then moved on to systematically searching for other clubs in other sports via the club directory, which in turn led to finding both Football and Cricket Club directories in the form of the England and Wales Cricket board (<https://www.ecb.co.uk/play/find-a-club/>) and the Durham FA (<https://www.durhamfa.com/leagues-and-clubs/county-leagues>) and Team Stats directory (<https://www.teamstats.net/directory>).

What is Grassroots Sport?

International Sport and Cultural Association define grassroots sport as, 'a physical leisure activity, organised and non-organised, practised regularly at non-professional level, for health, educational and social purposes' (ISCA 2023). Law Insider defines grass root sports as, 'organised sport practiced at local level by amateur sport people and sport for all' (Lawinsider 2023). For the purpose of this research, both definitions will be considered in determining grass root sports clubs.

Grassroots sports can provide an essential forum for advancing physical fitness, interpersonal communication, and personal growth. Grassroots sports are frequently planned and managed by volunteers, neighbourhood associations, or educational institutions at a local or national level; making them accessible and often affordable. They cover a wide range of pursuits, from leisure swimming and fitness programs to community basketball competitions and youth soccer leagues (SportsEngland 2023). Sports at the grassroots level also place a strong emphasis on diversity, welcoming players of all ages, genders, and physical abilities.

As is discussed in more detail later in this report, grassroots sports can encourage physical and mental health, teamwork, discipline, and respect while fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity throughout communities. In addition, they act as a productive environment for talent, as many professional athletes began their careers in amateur sports leagues (TheFA 2023).

Scope of study

The scope of study for this report is County Durham, focusing in particular on East Durham, as defined by the East Durham Area Action Partnership (AAP 2023). East Durham AAP stretches from Seaham in the north to Blackhall Colliery in the south (see figure 1). The area is centred on Peterlee and is bordered by Hartlepool to the south and Sunderland to the north (Durhaminsight 2023). The population for East Durham between the ages of 0 to 24 is 26,078 (ONS 2020). 47.9% of the total population of East Durham live in areas in the top 10% most deprived nationally and 30.1% of 0 to 15 year olds live in areas in the top 10% most deprived nationally (IMD 2019; ONS 2017), furthermore, 21.7% of children under 16 are living in absolute poverty in families (HMRC 21/22).

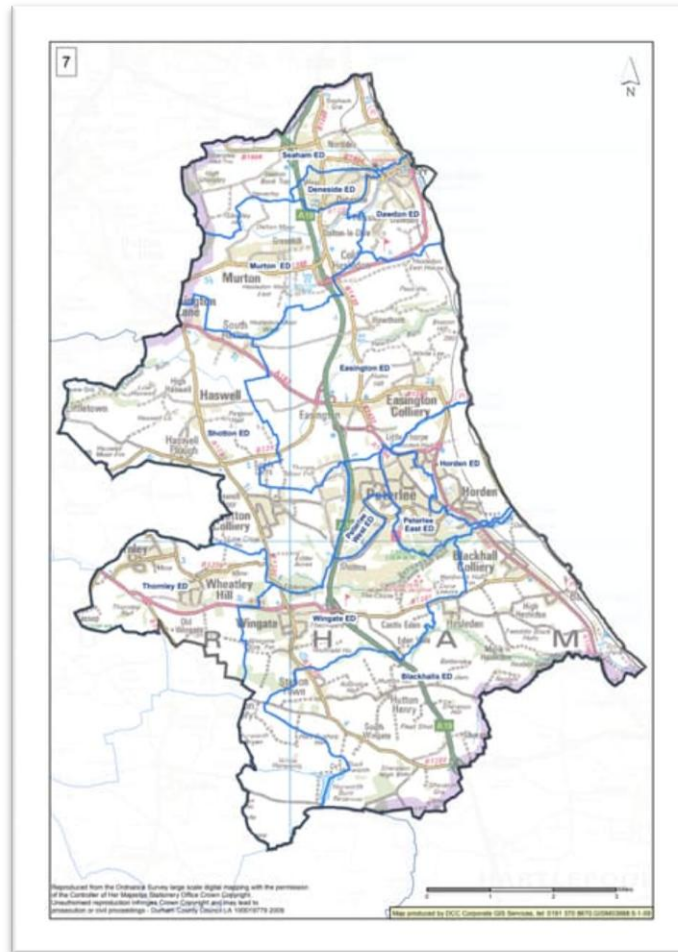


Figure 1 Map of East Durham Action Area. Image sourced from East Durham Area Action Partnership (AAP 2023).

As an output of this research is a GIS map of grassroots sports clubs in East Durham (see fig 2), the parameters of which clubs were chosen took into consideration two things: if the clubs had a presence in East Durham and the size of the club, e.g. membership/participation. These constraints brought the focus of the research to these types of sports clubs: rugby, cricket, football, boxing, rowing, tennis, fencing, table tennis, lawn bowling, field hockey, netball.

On the About Us page of the East Durham Area Action Partnership (EDAAP), under What They Do, it is noted amongst others things that EDAAP 'allocate funding to local organisations and support their development and monitor the difference that funding and support is making to communities' (AAP 2023). One the current 11 priorities for EDAAP during 2023/24 is Mental Health & Wellbeing. The ADAAP total budget for funding for projects in East Durham that meet any of the main priorities is £119,900; with a minimum grant of £5000 available (AAP 2023).

Notably: George Summerscales (club captain for 12 consecutive years, 51 County Caps and played for England; Stan Hodgson (44 year playing career began 1945, captained the club, played 88 County Games, 11 England caps, toured with the British Lions and played for the Barbarians); Michael Weston, 'our most influential player' (club captain, and with Stan Hodgson, transformed the County side to become Northern Champions 6 times, runners up and co-holders of the County Championship, captain of the County side from 1961-1968, capped 29 times for England, captained England, twice toured with the British Lions and played for the Barbarians).

[The relationship between grassroots sport, communities and government](#)

The National Audit Office produced a value for money report on Grassroots Participation in Sport and Physical Activity: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, in 2022. Value for money reports examine government expenditure in order to form a judgement on whether value for money has been achieved and may make recommendations to public bodies on how to improve public services (NAO 2022). With a public cost of £8.8 billion, the UK government committed to a lasting legacy of The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, including an increase in grassroots sports participation. Since 2012, numerous strategies have been implemented by successive governments to further objectives for grassroots sport and physical activity; such as levelling up and tackling obesity (NAO 2022: 5). The social and economic benefits to England in 2017-18 from community sport and physical activity made an approximate contribution of £85.5 billion (including £9.5 billion from improved physical and mental health), an estimated return on investment of £3.91 for each £1 spent on community sport and physical activity (NAO 2022: 5).

The government department with the overall policy responsibility for maximising participation in sport and physical activity in England is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. The Department set out its strategic objectives in 2015:

- More people from every background regularly and meaningfully taking part in sport and physical activity, in volunteering and experiencing live sport;
- Maximising international and domestic sporting success and the impact of major events; and

- A more productive, sustainable and responsible sport sector

In an effort to increase participation in sport and physical activity, the Department directs most of its spending for this objective through Sport England; an arm's length body created in 1996 to develop grassroots sport and get more people active across England (NAO 2022: 5). Since 2015-16 to 2021-22, Sport England has spent an average of £323 million a year totalling £1.9 billion (NAO 2022: 6). It is worth noting that Sport England receives around one-third of its income from the Exchequer (i.e. public funds), with the remainder from the National Lottery (NAO 2022: 6). Sport England and the Department are not the only operators in this environment, central and local government bodies have a role in encouraging physical activity. For instance, the Department for Transport delivers measure to encourage active travel, including walking and cycling infrastructure, and, at a more localised level, local authorities manage public sector sport and leisure facilities (NAO 2022: 6). The third and private sectors also contribute, including facility providers, grassroots sports clubs and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) such as the Football Association (NAO 2022: 6).

The value for money report on Grassroots Participation in Sport and Physical Activity: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2022, made the following recommendations for Sport England:

- ***Check that its distribution of funding supports its objective to target lower socio-economic groups*** (NAO 2022: 13).
- ***Exploit its networks to identify and share findings, themes and learning from its work that could accelerate greater collaboration across the sector*** (NAO 2022: 13).
- ***Set out how it will reach organisations it has not previously funded to support its objectives*** (NAO 2022: 13).

[The social and economic value of grassroots sports on communities \(Looking at how community sport is organised and governed in East Durham/County Durham\)](#)

Social return on investment (SROI) is more commonly being used across a wide range of policy areas to measure social value and to justify public investment. At a basic level, SROI is a framework for understanding and measuring the non-market economic, social and environmental value created by an activity, organisation or

intervention. In an effort to measure the social and economic value of physical activity and grassroots sport, Sport England commissioned a report from the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University in 2020. As was noted in this section above of this report, for every £1 spent an estimated return on investment of £3.91 for grassroots sport and physical activity was made (SportEngland 2023). The research further noted that the combined social return on investment (SROI) of taking part in community sport and physical activity in England in 2017/2018 was £85.5 billion (SportEngland 2023). The breakdown of this SROI is in noted in figure 3:

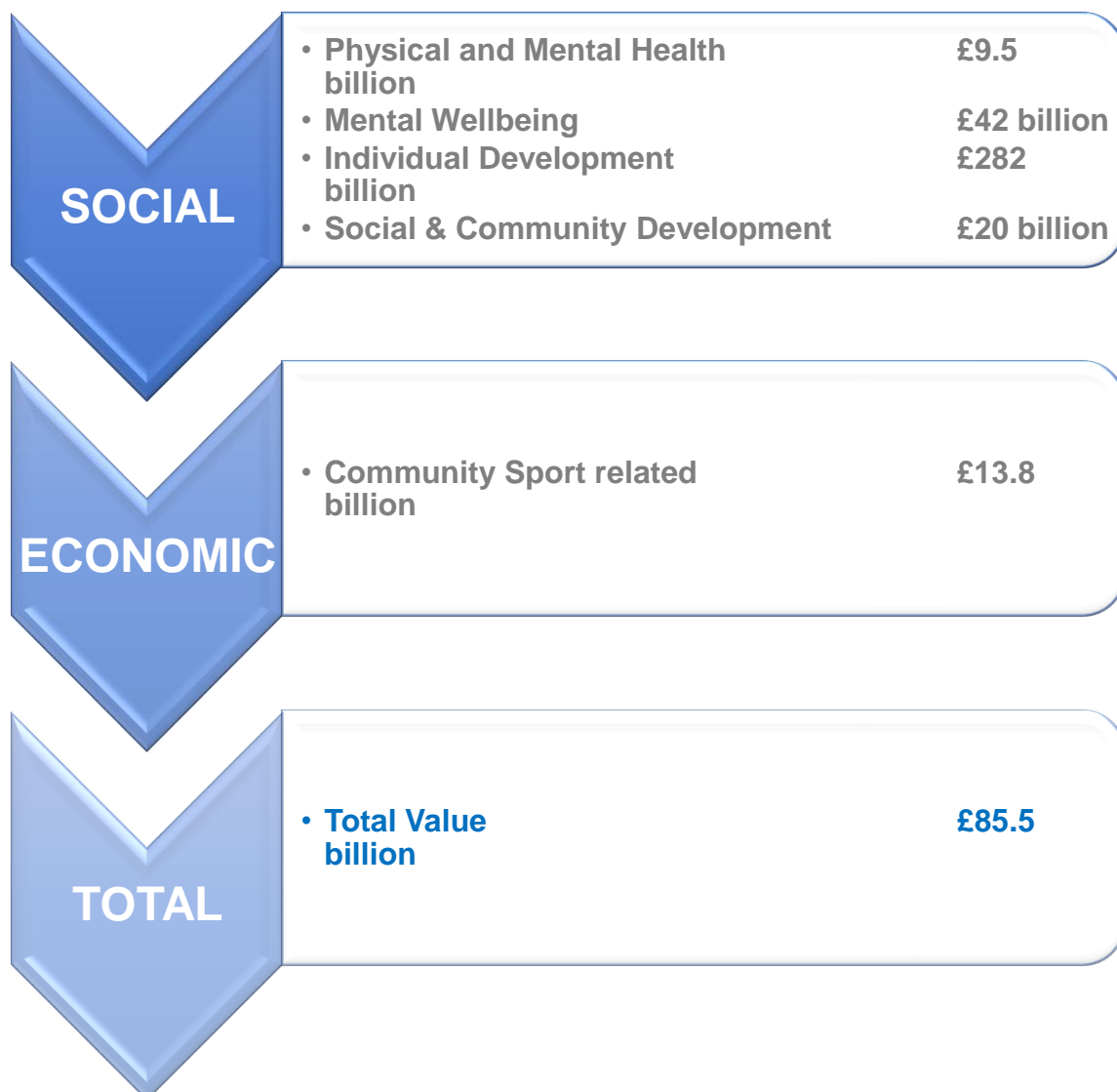


Figure 3: Social Return of Investment: Sport England. (SportEngland 2023)

Some of the key findings from the research on the SROI are highlighted in figure 4.

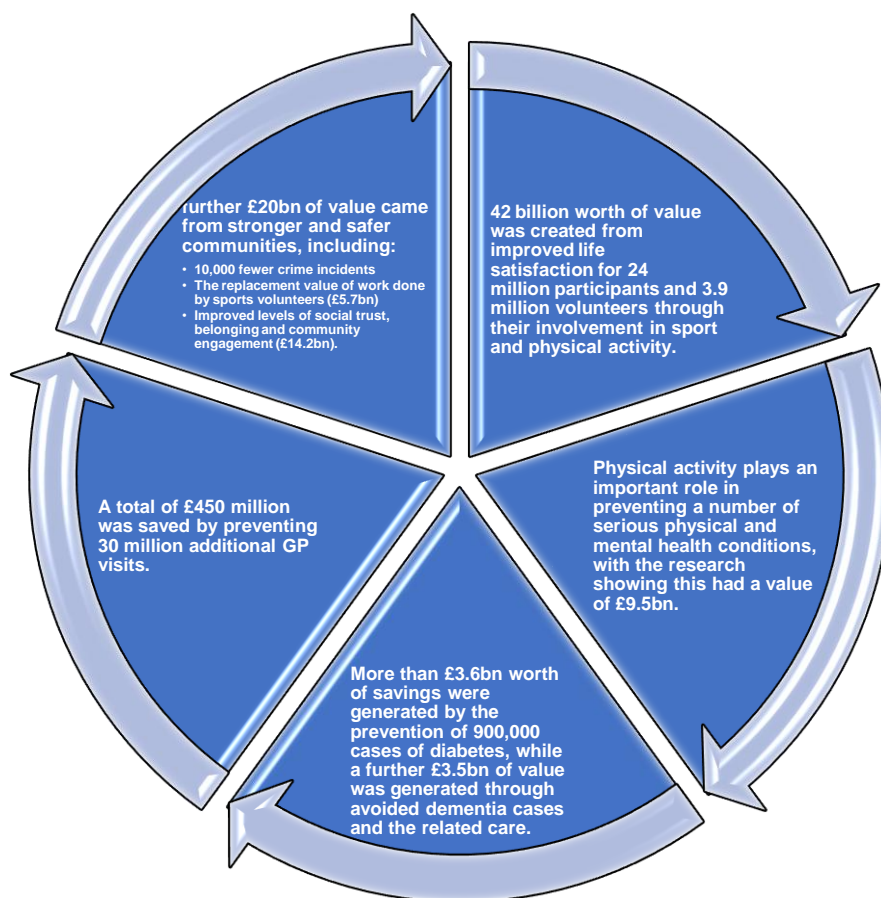


Figure 4: Key SROI Findings: Sport England Research. (SportEngland 2023) Diagram authors own

Further to the national report produced by the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University, Sport England produced a breakdown of the social value figure for each local authority and Active Partnership area. The SROI figures for the North East and for County Durham (which is the same as the Active Partnership area) are noted in figure 5. Of the 42 Active Partnership areas in the UK, with 1 having greatest SROI and 42 having the lowest SROI, County Durham Sport ranked 40th with a total return of £728,035,000. However, County Durham is one of the smallest Active Partnership areas, furthermore, in the Mental Wellbeing SROI bracket, with a total of £432,912,500, Active Durham Sport ranked in the top 50% of areas. The Sport England breakdown of social value is based on per £ spent on all physical activity/sport, it does not separate grassroots sports out. In that, it is hard to estimate how much SROI grassroots sports clubs have really had on an area such as East Durham.

	Physical and mental health outcomes	Mental wellbeing	Social and community development	Totals
North East	£438,078,100	£1,986,796,300	£949,853,100	£3,374,727,500
County Durham Sport	£86,271,300	£432,912,500	£208,851,200	£728,035,000

Figure 5: SROI Figures, County Durham Sport Active Partnership area (Sport England 2023)

Future research

During year 2 I intend to expand and conduct this research internationally. I am seeking to replicate the study next year in New Zealand to understand the different contexts that grassroots sports clubs operate in and how they are supported and valued outside of the UK. I intend to produce a report into the provision of supported grassroots sports clubs and their impact on the local participants and communities in which they're situated. This research might also make recommendations of how such projects, may be replicated in the UK.

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