



**OXFORD SDG
IMPACT LAB**



Inclusive Community Sport, Participation, and Social Connection

**Developing Sustainable and Community-Led Cricket Provision in
Underserved Communities**

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Abstract

This research project examines how inclusive community sport initiatives may support participation, wellbeing, social connection, and longer-term community engagement in underserved areas. It focuses on the development of accessible, sustainable cricket provision in Ithica (pseudonym), a city neighbourhood in England, and its surrounding communities, working in partnership with a community cricket club established in early 2026.

The study explores barriers that may limit participation in community sport, particularly for young people, women, disabled participants, and groups experiencing uneven access to local facilities and organised provision. It situates these challenges within wider patterns of unequal access to sport associated with factors including geography, cost, transport, facilities, confidence, institutional access, and historical underinvestment.

As a newly established organisation, the cricket club provides an opportunity to explore how community-led sport provision can be developed with inclusion and accessibility in mind from an early stage. Rather than focusing solely on participation numbers, the study considers how provision might hone in on such themes.

Drawing on literature relating to community sport, social inclusion, youth engagement, disability sport, wellbeing, community development, and place-based inequality, the research uses an exploratory case-study approach informed by engagement with five institutional and sporting stakeholders. The study identifies key issues affecting the development of inclusive local cricket and generates provisional recommendations for the club and relevant stakeholders. These findings provide a foundation for further research involving residents, parents, and prospective participants to examine how community sport provision can respond more effectively to local needs and barriers to participation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Benjamin Margetts, our academic supervisor, for his invaluable guidance, support, and feedback throughout the development of this research project.

We would also like to thank all interview participants who generously contributed their time, experiences, and perspectives to the study. Their insights were invaluable in informing this research.

Finally, we are grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation and the SDG Lab for their support and for providing the opportunity to undertake this research project.

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1. Introduction

Participation in community sport is widely recognised as contributing to physical health, mental wellbeing, and social connection. ¹ Beyond these individual benefits, grassroots sport can strengthen community cohesion, promote active citizenship, and create opportunities for young people who may otherwise experience limited access to organised physical activity. However, participation in sport remains unevenly distributed. Factors including socioeconomic deprivation, gender, ethnicity, disability, geography, and access to facilities continue to shape who participates, who progresses and who has meaningful access to organised sport. ²

These inequalities are particularly relevant within cricket. Despite growing participation nationally, English cricket has historically been characterised by unequal access. This has been particularly pronounced in the men's game, where pathways into elite cricket have often been shaped by independent schools, established clubs, family connections, and existing social networks, although inequalities in access are also evident within the women's game (Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket, 2023; Borooah, 2023). Although recent initiatives have sought to broaden participation, many barriers remain, particularly for women and girls, disabled participants, ethnic minority communities, and those living in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. Consequently, improving participation requires understanding the wider social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence whether individuals are able to engage with the sport in the first place.

Ithica provides an important setting in which to explore these challenges. The area experiences comparatively elevated levels of deprivation, poorer health outcomes, and lower

rates of physical activity than much of Oxfordshire, while also possessing strong community organisations and significant local assets. Within this context, the establishment of the cricket club presents a unique opportunity to examine how a grassroots sports organisation can be developed with inclusion embedded from its inception. Rather than adapting existing structures, the club has the opportunity to shape its culture, partnerships, and delivery model around the needs of the local community.

Accordingly, this project investigates the following research question:

What institutional barriers and partnership opportunities do stakeholders identify in developing sustainable and inclusive cricket provision in Ithica?

To address this question, the report is organised into three stages. First, a literature review explores existing evidence relating to recruitment into community sport, community partnerships and pathways into continued partnership and progression. Second, stakeholder interviews and local demographic data are used to understand the barriers and opportunities specific to Ithica. Finally, these findings are synthesised to develop practical recommendations that support the long-term development of the cricket club.

Rather than viewing participation solely through the number of people playing cricket, this research adopts a broader understanding of community sport. It examines how participation is shaped by local relationships, community infrastructure, and institutional partnerships, recognising that sustainable grassroots sport depends not only on accessible activities, but on creating environments in which people feel able to belong, contribute and remain involved over time. In doing so, the project seeks to contribute both to the academic literature on

inclusive community sport and to the continuing development of the cricket club as a community-led organisation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Recruitment

Grassroots sports clubs do not recruit in a vacuum: who joins, and who does not, is shaped by structural barriers operating long before a prospective member reaches a first training session. This is particularly relevant for a community cricket club in Ithica, a ward that combines a level of deprivation among the highest in England with ethnic diversity well above the Oxfordshire average, and, on Sport England's own small-area estimates, the lowest rate of adult physical activity of any middle-layer area in Oxford. Read alongside Putnam's account of club-based sport as a generator of 'bridging' social capital between otherwise separate social groups, recruitment here is not simply an operational task but one with a bearing on the wider cohesion of the estate.

A first barrier concerns gender. National data show women are more likely than men to take up individual fitness activity in place of traditional, club-based team sport, an effect that interacts with local deprivation and facility availability rather than operating uniformly. This happens due to individual fitness culture (gyms, running, home workouts) accessed by women often offers flexibility that fits around caregiving and work schedules more easily than fixed training times and match commitments, and it sidesteps the discomfort some women report around male-dominated club cultures and mixed-changing-room environments in traditional sport. This interacts with deprivation because lower-income areas often have fewer accessible facilities for either option, so the "choice" towards individual activity is sometimes more a

function of what is locally available and affordable in comparison to genuine preference. Cricket-specific research reinforces this: players inside England's women's professional pathway disproportionately arrived through informal exposure via brothers or other male relatives already playing and disproportionately attended independent schools. This mirrors a wider access inequality in English cricket, skewed toward the seven per cent of pupils who are privately educated; recent evidence suggests this is sharper within the men's pathway than the women's. Even the largest systematic review of cricket talent development to date found environmental and socio-cultural constraints the least researched factor of all, underlining how little is understood about recruitment specifically, as distinct from elite talent identification. Nor can recruitment be separated from retention: girls reaching adolescence face a well-documented 'enjoyment gap' in school sport, driven by puberty, kit anxiety, and inconsistent menstrual health education. Governing bodies fund most of this research and are judged on producing elite players, so they favour quantifiable identification metrics over the sustained ethnographic work required to truly understand socio-cultural barriers. This remains an inference rather than an established finding, as Brown's review attributes the gap to the methodological limitations and the Western bias in the literature rather than funding priorities.

A second barrier concerns ethnicity, especially salient given that Ithica's ethnic minority population is double the county average. English cricket carries a documented institutional history here: its colonial roots and association with 'Englishness' have historically marked it as exclusionary toward British South Asian and Black communities, thrown into sharp relief by the 2020 racism case at Yorkshire County Cricket Club. The subsequent Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket found, in 2023, structural racism, elitism and class-based discrimination still embedded in the sport's culture. The ECB's own South Asian Action Plan concedes the same point: although South Asian communities already form roughly a third of

the recreational playing base nationally, this was not translating into club membership, volunteering or coaching, prompting investment in urban cricket centres and school partnerships in deprived areas. Junior recruitment pipelines also typically run through local schools, whose social networks are themselves highly clustered by ethnicity: faith schools in particular increase ethnic concentration. Although recent multilevel analysis identifies an association between faith-school status and increased ethnic concentration, school composition also reflects residential settlement, local school markets, parental selection and substantial variation between ethnic groups and local authorities. A strategy built solely around the Club's existing informal contacts, or a single nearby school, risks recruiting from only one section of the estate. Studies have identified ethnic homophily in adolescent friendship networks, although its extent varies with school composition, the availability of same-ethnicity peers and majority–minority position (Smith et al., 2016). In two English schools, Bracegirdle et al. (2023) found similar proportions of same-ethnicity friendship and reported bullying ties, but they caution that network studies represent specific social contexts and require replication across more diverse settings.

A third barrier concerns disability. Disabled people in England are around twice as likely to be physically inactive as non-disabled people, a gap that widens with the number of impairments a person has; disabled people cannot be treated as a single audience with a single fix. Recent survey evidence found just under half of disabled respondents had no suitable local option to take part in sport, with lack of social care support, inaccessible transport and cost compounding one another. Inclusive recruitment therefore cannot rest on a single 'open session': it must be accompanied by provision that addresses the varied accessibility, transport, financial and support needs identified in the literature.

A fourth barrier concerns age and deprivation more broadly. Recent gains in activity are concentrated among older adults taking up individual fitness and strength activity rather than team sport; adults aged seventy-five and over remain the least active group overall, and poor health status is repeatedly identified as the primary barrier to sustained participation in later life. More broadly, the gap in activity levels between the most and least deprived areas has widened rather than narrowed over the past decade, a cumulative pattern consistent with a ‘Matthew effect’ in participation, plausibly visible locally in the contrast between Ithica and a more affluent part of Oxford such as Troy.

Finally, junior recruitment is mediated by parents, who function less as an audience than as gatekeepers. Young people want parents to encourage and enable participation without becoming overinvolved, a balance parents do not always strike. Parents’ capacity to facilitate access at all is further constrained by busy schedules, a child’s age, weather, transport, and cost; factors shown to interact rather than simply add together and reported significantly more often as neighbourhood deprivation increases. A strategy pitched only at children, without addressing parents’ logistical barriers directly, risks addressing the wrong audience.

Taken together, recruitment barriers in Ithica are unlikely to be generic: they compound local deprivation and diversity with cricket’s own institutional history of informal, family- and school-mediated entry routes. This points toward a recruitment strategy deliberately targeted by audience rather than a single undifferentiated offer, consistent with the more recent, place-based approach now favoured by both Sport England and the ECB.

2.2 Partnerships as Infrastructure for Sustainable Community Sport

Literature increasingly argues that the long-term success of grassroots sport depends less on the sporting activity itself than on the strength of the partnerships that support it. Community clubs rarely possess sufficient facilities, volunteers, funding, or expertise to operate independently; they function within wider networks of schools, local authorities, charities, governing bodies, businesses, and universities. Partnerships should therefore be viewed not as supplementary mechanisms for obtaining resources, but as fundamental infrastructure that enables community sport to exist and remain sustainable over time.

This perspective reflects a broader move from top-down provision designed to support community leadership, where residents and organisations shape both objectives and delivery. Vail argues that successful community sport rests on three interconnected elements: committed local leadership, collaborative partnerships, and high-quality programming. Sport becomes one component of wider community development, strengthening social relationships, confidence, and local capacity.

Parent and Harvey similarly note that partnerships have grown in popularity because they allow organisations to tackle complex social issues that no single actor can address alone. Partnerships are expected to improve efficiency, accountability, access to funding and community wellbeing. However, the authors caution that just creating links does not guarantee improved outcomes. Their model identifies three interdependent stages, formation, management, and evaluation, each requiring attention to organisational motives, communication, trust, reciprocity, and ongoing assessment.

This emphasis on relationship quality is reinforced by Misener and Doherty, who approach partnerships through the lens of social capital. While partnerships provide practical resources

such as facilities, sponsorship or volunteers, their greatest contribution may be less tangible: they generate networks of trust, reciprocity and cooperation that strengthen community cohesion beyond sport. Successful partnerships in their study were characterised by active engagement, mutual respect, and sustained communication, enabling clubs to reach beyond their sporting role and contribute to wider civic life. Grassroots clubs thus function as important community institutions, not merely recreational providers.

Importantly, the literature challenges the assumption that partnerships are primarily transactional. While resource acquisition matters, many authors argue that their greatest value lies in capacity building. Community organisations gain new knowledge, technical expertise and legitimacy, while partner organisations benefit from local knowledge, trusted relationships, and opportunities for meaningful social impact. Effective partnerships involve reciprocal exchange.

However, collaboration introduces significant challenges. Differences in organisational culture, leadership structures and decision-making frequently create tensions. Unequal access to resources can produce power imbalances, with larger institutions unintentionally dominating despite community organisations possessing greater contextual expertise. Successful partnerships therefore require trust, open communication, mutual respect, and research agendas guided by community needs rather than institutional priorities.

Taken together, the literature suggests that sustainable community sport cannot be understood solely through participation numbers. Grassroots clubs are embedded within wider networks that provide resources, legitimacy, trust, and opportunities for collective action. Partnerships are mechanisms through which community capacity is developed and sustained. For newly established organisations such as the Cricket Club, understanding which partnerships generate

lasting value, and how these relationships should be structured, is as important as the sporting activities themselves.

2.3 University-Community Partnerships: From Institutional Support to Community Empowerment

Among potential partners, universities occupy a distinctive position. They combine physical infrastructure, specialist knowledge, research expertise, financial resources, and large volunteer populations. Increasingly recognised as anchor institutions, universities are expected to contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of their local communities. They should play an active role in addressing local inequalities through mutually beneficial community partnerships.

This role reflects an evolution in higher education. Historically, universities engaged with communities through outreach projects designed and controlled by academics. Contemporary research argues for collaborative models in which local organisations are equal partners rather than recipients of expertise. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) describe this as "adding chairs to the research table," where community members participate actively in decision-making. Under this model, research agendas and project outcomes are jointly developed according to community priorities.

For grassroots sport, this distinction matters. Community clubs possess thorough knowledge of local barriers and priorities but lack resources; universities have institutional capacity but limited local lived experience. Effective partnerships therefore combine complementary strengths: universities contribute research expertise, funding access, trained student volunteers, and technology, while community organisations contribute experiential knowledge, cultural

understanding, community trust, and established networks. Success depends on reciprocal exchange, not hierarchical support.

Den Besten (2025) extends this by suggesting that university engagement varies according to institutional resources: providing facilities and meeting spaces, encouraging staff and student volunteering, establishing formal partnerships, or supporting underrepresented groups. Universities also offer stability, as anchor institutions, they remain embedded locally for decades, offering continuity that voluntary organisations often lack. This assists long-term planning, capacity building, and external funding.

Within Oxford, these observations present several opportunities for the Cricket Club. The University of Oxford already possesses extensive sporting infrastructure (Iffley Road Sports Centre, college grounds) and numerous student clubs. Individual colleges and departments represent reservoirs of volunteers and expertise in sport, education, psychology, public health, and social policy. Structured volunteering, placements, or service-learning could create reciprocal partnerships, students gain experiential learning while contributing coaching, evaluation, or administrative support. Such arrangements align with universities' growing emphasis on civic engagement.

However, the literature cautions against viewing universities as automatic solutions. Institutional involvement may bring legitimacy and funding, but unequal resources can reinforce power imbalances unless partnerships are consciously designed to remain reciprocal. Community organisations may become dependent on temporary student volunteers, creating uncertainty once placements end. Sustainable partnerships require careful planning beyond short-term projects.

For the club, existing links with the University through the SDG Impact Lab and Laidlaw Scholars programme are valuable. Yet long-term success should not depend on university

involvement alone. Instead, partnerships should strengthen the club's community-led vision by providing resources that enhance local capacity without replacing it. Students might support coaching, grant-writing, evaluation, or inclusive recruitment, while strategic decisions remain guided by the club and its community. One important contribution universities can make is to leave community organisations stronger, as capacity builders, not service providers.

Schools may be particularly valuable long-term partners. They provide early access to young people and families, acting as gateways to lifelong participation. Beyond recruitment, schools can identify pupils who face barriers such as cost, confidence, transport, or limited family support. Partnerships can establish consistent pathways from PE and extracurricular activity to community clubs. Given evidence that girls disengage from organised sport during adolescence, collaboration with PE teachers and sports coordinators can help the club develop provision that reflects girls' interests and perceived barriers.

Community organisations and charities offer a different but equally important function. While schools provide access to young people, charities possess long-standing relationships with families who may not traditionally engage in organised sport. Organisations such as [redacted] and the Parasol Project operate within trusted networks and understand local cultural contexts and practical barriers. Rather than treating them solely as referral partners, the literature suggests they should be recognised as equal contributors whose experiential knowledge strengthens programme design and community engagement. This reflects participatory models where local expertise guides delivery.

Misener and Doherty (2012) also warn that partnerships may produce exclusion if they depend on existing personal networks or fail to engage underrepresented groups. Similarly, unequal access to resources can unintentionally position larger institutions as dominant decisionmakers despite community organisations having greater local understanding.

These concerns are especially relevant given the club's existing University relationship. While valuable for research, volunteering and evaluation, academic priorities, publication, student learning, institutional impact, could overshadow the club's own objectives. Community-based research should remain accountable to the community. Rather than asking how the club can serve university initiatives, partnerships should begin with what support the club needs to achieve its vision.

Overall, partnerships should not be viewed simply as routes to funding, facilities, or volunteers. They are forms of community infrastructure through which trust, knowledge, legitimacy, and capacity are built over time. For the Cricket Club, success depends not only on who it collaborates with, but on how relationships are developed, maintained and shared. Universities can contribute expertise; schools can facilitate recruitment; charities can strengthen trust; local businesses can reduce practical barriers; governing bodies can provide technical support. The sustainability of these partnerships ultimately rests on whether they remain reciprocal, community-led and aligned with the club's founding vision of making cricket accessible to those historically excluded from the game.

2.4 Pathways into elite sport, including cricket

Whilst this report primarily focuses on inclusive, sustainable community participation, it was the voiced ambition of the club founder to ensure that elite progression was possible through the club, to ensure that traditionally marginalised groups did not face a ceiling to their potential achievement. However, it is equally important to note that elite advancement is not the intended measure of community success.

Within the elite sporting world, the socioeconomic and racial overrepresentation of white, privately educated athletes is pervasive. A cross-sectional study of Olympic athletes in the

Anglosphere found that these groups were overrepresented relative to their national populations. A systematic review identified cost, both pecuniary and temporal, as barriers for childhood participation. Moreover, as these children progress towards elite pathways, there exists bias in talent identification. A systematic review found that although many talent identification systems focus on particular physical characteristics, no single variable consistently predicted later elite performance. Till and Baker argued that talent is complex, dynamic, and poorly predicted at young ages, challenging the efficacy of early selection systems. One such transient and imperfect predictor is relative age, with Cobley et al. finding that children born soon after the age cut off were more likely to be selected than younger children within their age bracket. This was particularly important in adolescent males, for highly competitive sport settings, suggesting that selection may mistake temporary age or maturity advantage for long term potential. A meta-analysis of Güllich, Macnamara and Hambrick found that world-class athletes tend to specialize later, participating in a more diverse range of sports during childhood compared to those who achieve only junior success. This points to an opportunity for the Cricket Club – providing early enrichment. This also poses a possible risk, in that a narrow focus on early pathways into elite cricket can hamper continued success into adulthood. Dunn et al. systematically reviewed longitudinal talent research over 3 decades, showing non-linear development with multiple entry and re-entry points. This illustrates the importance of building resilience within the culture of the club, particularly as underprivileged communities may feel disenfranchised. Building resilience into the culture of the club provides opportunities for mentorship. Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler highlight the opportunities for mentorship for the Cricket Club, suggesting that a holistic approach to development of talent requires a supportive peer group, accessible role models, integration of sport with education and family life, gradual exposure to elite demands, and coherent organizational culture.

Within English cricket specifically, trends of overrepresentation continue. Brown found that 42% of male professional players were privately educated, a 6x factor of overrepresentation. This overrepresentation intersects with race, as British South Asian players were strongly represented in younger pathway groups, but were much less represented, after controlling for educational background, compared to their White British peers. Borooah draws parallels to the Indian caste system, with similar stratification of professional opportunity. However, Noorbhai found more variable routes towards professional success in Pakistan and the West Indies, with club cricket and city academies at the forefront, showing that reliance on elite-school pathways is not an inherent requirement of player development. Fletcher, Piggott and North found that once within the system, those from South Asian backgrounds struggled to rise into influential governance networks, perpetuating a cycle where existing leaders, dubbed ‘blazer boys’, from traditionally overrepresented backgrounds control the admission of new players. Hylton and Long found that in Bradford and Leeds, there is extensive participation and interest in informal South Asian cricket, but weaker connection to ECB-recognised structures. With the genesis of the Cricket Club in its initial stages, this may act as an opportunity to cement the place of the Cricket Club within English institutions. For some South Asian cultures, barriers to off-pitch social activities in traditional, well-established clubs may pose socially exclusionary barriers to integration. Fletcher and Spracklen found that alcohol-centred socializing acted as an informal test of belonging, posing an issue for observant Muslims. As a new institution, the Cricket Club has the opportunity to define a progressive culture from the beginning. Women’s cricket, which is relatively newer than male institutions, has slightly less overrepresentation of privileged groups, such as having less overrepresentation of independent schooling at 50% vs 59% according to The Sutton Trust. This is an opportunity for the Cricket Club, firstly to establish a female track of equal importance to the male, and to attempt to emulate the female non-traditional background success with male players.

The landmark report, the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket highlighted the intersecting barriers involving class, race, gender, geography, and institutional culture. Interviewing volunteers within the pipeline towards elite competition, barriers to progress included quantifiable metrics such as travel time and financial burden, as well as less tangible, hidden cultures that act as a vicious cycle to exclude underrepresented groups. This suggests that pathways into elite cricket are not simply filters for talent. Instead, deeply entrenched systemic inequalities lead to uneven distribution of exposure, coaching, match volume, visibility, and social capital. The principal research gap is not evidence that inequalities exist, but in evaluation of interventions that improve progression. This creates an opportunity, once the club is established, to trial interventions that improve progression of players from the deprived Ithica area into elite pathways.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This project adopted a qualitative, descriptive case study design, focusing on key stakeholders. A case study approach was chosen to allow in-depth examinations of a single, bounded context, rather than broad but shallow coverage across multiple clubs and areas. Participant selection began with existing contacts connected to the university; from this starting point, further participants were identified through opportunity sampling as they became accessible through proximity to the club and, in the majority of cases, through a direct suggestion or introduction from a participant already interviewed, reflecting an element of snowball sampling alongside the opportunity-based access. Individuals were selected on the basis of their relevance and proximity to the club and its cricket provision.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals in positions of ownership, experience, and operational involvement within the wider community, reflecting the study's focus on those directly responsible for shaping and delivering cricket provision. Each interviewee was asked a consistent set of core questions relating to the research project, with flexibility to explore themes as they arose, in order to gauge the thematic and institutional barriers to inclusive participation as understood by differing perspectives. This format was chosen to allow comparability across interviews while remaining responsive to factors specific to individual participants' roles and experience.

Interviews were audio recorded with the informed consent of participants, and fully accurate handwritten transcripts were produced from the recordings. Transcripts were then

thematically coded by hand, with codes developed inductively from the data to identify recurring institutional and organisational barriers to inclusive participation.

3.2. Data Collection and Sampling

A total of five individuals were interviewed, comprising leaders, club founders, and university sport contacts. Participants were selected on the basis of their relevance and proximity to the club and its cricket provision. This strategy was supplemented by a snowball sampling approach, whereby initial contacts identified through direct outreach were asked to suggest further individuals with relevant knowledge or involvement, allowing subsequent lines of enquiry to be followed as the study progressed.

Initial contact was made via email addresses obtained through the university. Interviews were conducted online, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, and all took place within a three-week period across July and August 2026. Each participant was asked a consistent set of core questions covering broad topic areas (role, perceived barriers to access and participation, engagement with the local community), with flexibility to explore additional themes as they arose in response to individual answers.

This sampling approach reflects the study's focus on institutional and organisational perspectives on barriers to inclusive participation; parents, players, and community stakeholders were not interviewed, and their perspectives are therefore not represented in the interview data.

3.3. Analysis Approach

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically by hand, following a hybrid approach that combined inductive and deductive elements. While codes were generated directly from participants' own accounts, the interview schedule and literature review had already directed

attention towards recruitment, inclusion, partnerships and sustainability, meaning the analysis could not be considered purely inductive; these existing areas of focus informed which recurring ideas were noticed and prioritised during coding, even as the specific themes themselves were allowed to emerge from the data rather than being imposed in advance.

Each transcript was read closely to identify recurring ideas, concerns, and institutional factors raised by participants. Coding was carried out by the researcher, with fellow members of the research cohort checking the coding during the analysis process to provide a degree of verification and support interpretive consistency. Initial coding produced a broader set of candidate themes; these were subsequently narrowed to three core themes through a process of merging overlapping codes, in which closely related ideas raised across multiple interviews were consolidated into single, more comprehensive themes reflecting common patterns across the dataset. This process resulted in three core themes, institutional barriers to partnership, creating an inclusive culture from the outset and building a sustainable future from the outset.

3.4. Ethical considerations

As the research involved direct engagement with individuals connected to the Cricket Club, several ethical safeguards were observed. In line with the ethical approval for the project, no children were interviewed as part of this study; all participants were adults directly involved in the interview. Given that interviews were conducted online, care was taken to ensure no children were present or visible during recorded sessions.

All interviewees were informed prior to and at the start of each session that the interview could be audio recorded for the purpose of producing a written transcript, and consent to recording was obtained verbally before proceeding. Any sensitive or identifying information disclosed during interviews, including names of third parties, or other identifiable individuals not party

to the research, was redacted or anonymised in the resulting transcripts to protect the privacy of those referenced.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Thematic Analysis in Interviews

Interviewees were anonymised using pseudonyms, and identifiable place names redacted.

Person Interviewed (pseudonym)	Background
Zeus	University stakeholder
Poseidon	University stakeholder
Athena	University stakeholder
Apollo	Athlete
Ares	Cricket development stakeholder

4.1.1. Overcoming institutional barriers to partnership

Interviewees affiliated with the university commented on their support in principle for community partnerships, with one interviewee noting sport in particular as a “great entry point.” One interviewee spoke proudly of the “facilities and expertise” that could be shared, suggesting that positive community good could occur through partnership. Contextualising facilities within the structure of the collegiate university, one interviewee with both university and college affiliations spoke about the desire to “open up college and university facilities,” suggesting that stakeholders at various levels of organisation had a role to play in community partnership.

Despite the support in principle, the autonomy of “separate legal entities” within the collegiate university structure creates friction, with a university interviewee with operation experience commenting that “management of [college] grounds” does not involve the central

administrative body. Two interviewees from the central university voiced their relative frustration about this bureaucracy, with one noting that this was “probably one of the biggest barriers.” Another interviewee explained that this tension was not necessarily deliberate, but a consequence of “600 years of convoluted governance and history”. Whilst two university-affiliated interviewees spoke about the role of “groundsmen” operationally, one of those interviewees further highlighted a “responsibility” for the “domestic bursar,” a role held within a college’s governing body, to “oversee” the sharing of grounds.

Within the city, one university-affiliated interviewee commented that “most of the sports grounds are run by colleges who don’t generally, with some exceptions, share with community teams.” This creates a rural-urban divide, with the same interviewee noting “a very good” cricket provision in the wider county, contrasting with a “dearth” within the city. Another interviewee concurred by highlighting existing provision of youth cricket from a club rather than facility perspective. In the area of this new club, one interviewee with experience running initiatives noted that the only current provision “indoor cricket” run by the county board. This was contrasted by the interviewee with those living in a “lovely leafy green village” finding club cricket “more accessible.”

An area identified by the club founder as a potential outreach outlet was local primary schools. One interviewee spoke about the decreasing emphasis of sport in the curriculum, as assessment of schools was based on delivery of a “primarily academic” curriculum. This created challenge for schools wishing to provide “co-curricular or enrichment activities,” leading to disparities based on the availability of “parent volunteers,” with reduced access often in “the highest areas of population density, those in areas of historic deprivation”. One interviewee with previous experience leading a visiting club initiative helped illustrate how these can act as a “positive

intervention” to make up the shortfall in school-provided provision. This interviewee highlighted how visibility in schools, such as being able to “see the faces” of club coaches, and “flyers and stickers” that pupils could keep, could act as a pipeline into out of school club participation. This interviewee’s experience suggested that “simplistic messages” to schools would help broaden the reach by streamlining logistics on the school side, but another interviewee with experience running school partnerships disagreed, suggesting that a collaborative approach, “a conversation with the school,” allowed for a more sustainable long-term partnership.

The club founder was also enthusiastic about potential partnerships with independent schools in the wider county. One interviewee cautioned against over-reliance on the charitable activity of independent schools, due to logistics of transport during “an evening after school when it's rush hour,” further suggesting that keeping practices local may be better for engagement. However, the same interviewee suggested that the occasional use of a “grass pitch” for “games on a Saturday or Sunday” would be a “fantastic opportunity,” highlighting the potential logistical and operational support in terms of “security, the ground, the provision.”

4.1.2. Creating an inclusive culture from the outset

Interviewees spoke of positive potential for inclusion within cricket, with one interviewee explicitly emphasising that the sport is “potentially very inclusive.” However, whilst this is “potentially” the case, all interviewees noted the current reality where some groups are marginalised. It was highlighted by one interviewee that inclusion is not necessarily in conflict with the ambition for elite pathway progression, as “having fun builds up the performance pathway.” This suggests that the dual aims of the club founder, developing inclusive community provision whilst maintaining potential for elite progression, could indeed work in harmony.

An initially highlighted challenge to inclusion in cricket, which correlates with the literature, was described succinctly by an interviewee as the “expensive” nature of the sport. This interviewee continued to describe this as “detrimental,” whilst also cautioning of the “potential stigma” of subsidised memberships and bursaries, highlighting a culture of socio-economic privilege in existing cricket clubs. The intersection of socio-economic disadvantage with race was highlighted by two interviewees familiar with the local area, with one highlighting “South Asian communities” as often playing cricket. Another interviewee developed this point further by emphasising the “massive cricketing culture” but also noted that this same group had “disproportionate representation of socially, economically challenge.” Thus, whilst the racial inclusivity of cricket seems “really attractive and positive,” as highlighted by one interviewee, it is also important to acknowledge the barriers facing these otherwise enthusiastic groups from participating in formal provision.

One interviewee with practical experience coaching youth cricket with girls spoke about the relatively “level playing field in terms of the skill element” in primary school aged cricket. This could perhaps streamline logistics when working with primary schools, but the interviewee equally emphasised that a “female coach” was “really important,” and that “pathways towards more elite cricket” ought to be “separated by sex.” This again highlights the dual model of inclusion and elite progression, with a nuanced practical approach to both. Whilst much of the dialogue during interviews centred around building female participation from a young age, two interviewees with experience running community sport initiatives highlighted that “working parents,” particularly “mothers” were an overlooked group within the larger landscape of female underrepresentation in cricket. It was highlighted that even those exposed to cricket

through their children “don't have the time” to play personally. One of those interviewees linked this to the health benefits for ageing adults, helping them to stay “active later in life.”

4.1.3. Building a solid foundation for a sustainable future

All interviewees with experience in the youth sport field spoke about the importance of establishing clear safeguarding measures to build parental trust, indeed as the “number one” issue to consider when “working with young people.” One interviewee spoke about balancing a drive for volunteer recruitment with safeguarding checks, suggesting that “relevant safeguarding online training sessions” could help streamline the process, and that DBS checks could be obtained “free [of charge] for volunteers.” Beyond keeping children safe, one interviewee highlighted “the trust side,” that rigorous safeguarding builds a community reputation that brings parents on board.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of developing a pool of talent within the committee, ensuring that management does not fall upon a single individual. For example, one interviewee who had seen the cricket club stall at a community festival spoke about the need to “recruit and train a broader number of coaches,” emphasising that this is necessary to “build... depth.” This interviewee proposed the club initially “borrow” from “other clubs” or the “collegiate university,” suggesting that there is an existing talent pool in the local area that could be rallied together. Interviewees consistently emphasised distributed leadership, defined roles and succession planning as important. The same interviewee who spoke previously about the “600 years of convoluted governance and history” of the university suggested that a new club should similarly “have a committee, have a structure, have a constitution” to build a reputation that facilitates long-term collaboration with existing college grounds. One interviewee with decades of experience in the local area emphasised the importance of “succession planning,” lamenting that previous initiatives have “die[d]” when the founder “move[s]” away. Another interviewee

who works with many community clubs succinctly put that “without people, you can’t operate.” When asked to expand on what a barebones committee would require as an initial starting point, the interviewee listed: “a chair, secretary, safeguarding officer, treasurer and head of junior cricket.” The interviewee went on to explain the necessity not just for strategic leadership through the chair, but also of diligent administration through the secretary, safeguarding officer, and treasurer. It was noted by this interviewee that “individuals that not just represent the community but are also a key part of the community” would enable the relationships between the club and the local community to be “more long-lasting”. This interviewee, as well as the previous university-affiliated one, explicitly stated that club leadership cannot be centred around a single individual.

Whilst strong and stable leadership within the club is important, one interviewee with more experience in an operational capacity noted that some employees responsible for direct implementation of schemes are overlooked in conversations about new initiatives. When asked about transport to venues further afield, this interviewee encouraged the club to not only speak to management, but “talk to the drivers” about willingness to work beyond normal sociable hours. Moreover, due to the autonomy given to “college groundsmen” by college governing bodies, described as people who “like to do their own stuff,” it was noted that sustainable partnerships with colleges must take a bottom-up approach.

5. Discussion

5.1. Overcoming Institutional Barriers

It is widely agreed, indeed as part of UN SDG 17, that partnerships are essential in sustainable development. Many interviewees spoke at length about the importance of outreach by large established institutions to support grassroots initiatives. Much of our research centred around the University of Oxford, a centuries old institution that one interviewee noted owns “the majority” of cricket grounds within the city centre and has become almost synonymous worldwide with the city. However, insiders spoke candidly of challenges coordinating outreach efforts between the central university and the colleges. Interviewees described how the collegiate nature of the University of Oxford means that cricket grounds are independently owned and managed by constituent colleges. Whilst a centralised drive, described by all three university-affiliated interviewees, from the university in recent times may break down these barriers somewhat, the status quo means that collaboration with venues in Oxford requires coordination with responsible parties at each college. This highlights the friction created by both size and delegated autonomy on multiple levels – from the central university to the colleges, and from colleges to their responsible officers. As college governance structures differ, the Domestic Bursar was identified by one university-affiliated interviewee as a potential point of contact regarding college grounds. It is therefore recommended that the club consider reaching out to the relevant Domestic Bursar when exploring potential college partnerships.

Cricket in England and Wales is organised by the ECB, with further organisation through the county board Oxfordshire Cricket. It was highlighted by an interviewee that some county-led provision existed already within local schools in the Ithica area, as well as a once per week

softball session for amateur juniors. Whilst it initially appeared to the authors that there may have been a lack of coordination between grassroots initiatives and the county-led interventions in underserved areas, it later transpired from a further interview with a county leader that this provision is intended to be a pipeline into more formal club provisions. This highlighted to the authors that there exists some opacity from the perspective of outsiders as to the progression routes from schools, into after school clubs, into formal club provisions, and subsequently into elite performance pathways. The importance of clear signposting, as highlighted by many interviewees, is important in an existing climate where both the formal literature and online public-facing information are scant.

5.2. Creating an Inclusive culture from the outset

Interviewees identified considerable potential for inclusive cricket, but also raised institutional, financial, cultural, and practical realities of the current cricket landscape that must be deliberately addressed. There is an optimistic outlook for the inclusion of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and genders in grassroots cricket initiatives. The literature suggested that female participation was a growing, but still underrepresented field. A recent impact report by [Oxfordshire Cricket](#) showed a 53% year on year increase in girls' participation within Oxford City. However, one interviewee highlighted that initiatives to increase female participation were not evenly distributed across other characteristics. Whilst the literature suggested a degree of intersectionality in traditionally explored categories of marginalisation, such as race and socioeconomic class, the experiences of mothers and working parents received less attention. Mothers, and working parents in general, were a group highlighted in interviews as often being overlooked in inclusive initiatives. This highlights the intersectional nature of exclusion, and thus the need to consider the intersection of different marginalised characteristics when planning an inclusive culture. Developing engagement from parents, not

just as volunteers supervising children's teams, but as players, could help cultivate a community that endures beyond the first generation of children involved.

5.3. Building a solid foundation for a sustainable future

The history of the collegiate university and the future of the cricket club share a common theme: the importance of strong governance alongside delegation of authority for institutional longevity. The interview data similarly emphasised the importance of distributing responsibility rather than relying on a single individual. The importance of structure was corroborated by interviewees, who commented that previous sport initiatives reliant on a single individual had struggled when commitments of greater importance became that individual's priority. Thus, building a team with diverse talent and backgrounds may support the longevity of the cricket club. Long-term sustainability does not rest with a single person.

The importance of establishing and maintaining financial stability was highlighted as essential for the sustainability of the club. Without healthy finances, clubs become limited in their ability to maximise their potential, through reduction in training provision and decreased match opportunities. For example, one interviewee highlighted that venues may be reluctant to hire out facilities to clubs without established financial arrangements, whilst another noted that league matches have fees established by regulation that must be paid to independent umpires. It was noted that once established, the majority of a club's income typically originates from membership subscriptions and the sale of refreshments for profit. This poses a challenge in less socioeconomically privileged areas, especially where the club's founder aims to ensure cost is not a barrier to entry. An emerging market that was suggested for exploration is sponsorship through larger companies. Clear messaging to sponsors about the inclusive, sustainable aims of the cricket club is essential to ensuring that stakeholders feel

their donations are being used for the greater good. Collaboration with kit recycling agencies may provide heavily discounted refurbished kit to players, with the additional benefit of decreasing the club's environmental footprint. Public sector funding may also be available, such as through the UK Government's Pride in Place Programme, alongside existing tax advantage schemes, such as registration as either a community amateur sports club or a charity. These creative solutions require time to source and implement, illustrating the importance of appointing a dedicated treasurer, as highlighted during interviews, to maintain transparency and balanced books.

Institutional trust is built through strength and transparency. Youth organisations operate within established child-protection and safeguarding requirements. It was highlighted that a dedicated safeguarding officer was necessary to ensure compliance at all times with ECB guidelines and national legislation. Moreover, it is the responsibility of everyone involved to keep children safe, so adequate training and checks must be established for all volunteers. DBS checks, which are free for volunteers, must be obtained for relevant roles in line with current ECB requirements. It was noted by one interviewee that whilst formal screening (e.g. interviews and obtaining references) of each volunteer may be overly bureaucratic and time-consuming, one approach is to appoint those who are actively involved and trusted by the community.

This ties neatly into the importance of representation within the club committee. According to one interviewee, it is "extremely crucial" that the club "not only represents but is actively involved" in the community. One interviewee suggested that schemes where organising committee members are brought in from outside institutions can struggle to secure local

engagement due to scepticism towards a top-down approach. Thus, appointing multiple long-established community members may support active engagement from the outset and reduce reliance on any one influential figurehead. Representation also overlaps with the importance of creating an inclusive culture from the outset, such as appointing a women's cricket leader to support gender balance within the club. A committee ensures that as the club expands, workload can be spread across multiple volunteers, tapping into their unique expertise, whilst fostering a sense of bottom-up community partnership.

Further bottom-up engagement with employees at partner organisations may also be important for the longevity of the community cricket club. Whilst engaging with leadership figures involved in management of facilities and organisations helps to build a network, the cricket club should also seek the support of facility groundsmen and minibus drivers to ensure the operational delivery of partnerships is sustainable.

5.4. Recommendations

Sequence and priority	Proposed action	Potential lead	Partners to explore	Evidence basis
1. Establish governance and safeguarding. Immediate.	Form a representative committee with defined roles, constitution, safeguarding and appropriate checks.	Founder	Community leaders; Oxfordshire Cricket	Interviews: committee structure, treasurer, and safeguarding roles; risks of reliance on one individual. Guidance: ECB.
2. Consult and co-design. Immediate.	Consult and co-design: involve residents and prospective participants, including women and parents, in shaping provision and club leadership.	Committee – community lead	Residents; parents; community groups	Interviews: community representation, parent participation and bottom-up leadership. Literature: gender and socioeconomic barriers to access.
3. Confirm facilities and operational relationships. Immediate-medium term.	Identify suitable venues and build contacts with both decision-makers and frontline staff.	Committee – secretary, chair	Oxford colleges (Domestic Bursars); schools, Oxfordshire Cricket; operational staff	Interviews: Domestic Bursars as college contacts; importance of institutional and frontline relationships. Literature: SDG 17.
4. Develop an accessible operating model. Medium term.	Address funding, fees, equipment and transport; establish clear routes from school/community cricket into the club.	Committee – treasurer, youth cricket lead	Schools; Oxfordshire Cricket; funders; sponsors; transport providers	Interviews: financial sustainability, signposting and school-to-club pathways. Literature: financial barriers to participation.
5. Pilot, evaluate and develop. Medium-long term.	Begin manageable provision; assess participation, experience and retention.	Committee; future SDG Impact Lab research group	Participants (subject to ethical approval); schools; Oxfordshire Cricket; facility providers.	Synthesis of findings and limitations: recommendations for future research groups.

5.5. Limitations

Due to time constraints, we were unable to speak to many people, with our interviews placing an emphasis on institutional figures. The authors recognise that an institutionally focused study of community cricket risks reproducing a top-down perspective. Future work with the cricket club would ideally take place in person in Ithica, but this was limited as the club had not yet begun training sessions. We would have liked to speak to the following, but were unable:

- Local primary school leaders – unavailable due to school summer holidays
- Parents in the local area
- Non-cricket community group leaders – e.g. faith

Being unable to speak to these groups means that many of our findings relate to systemically embedded challenges of wide groups, lacking the minutiae and nuance that directly interviewing participants would have allowed. This study cannot determine whether the proposed cricket activities are wanted, culturally appropriate, practically accessible, or likely to be sustained by residents. This opens future avenues for exploration, which must involve co-design with marginalised groups, prospective players, and local organisations. Subsequent groups may wish to evaluate the efficacy of this collaboratively designed provision, such as quantitatively and qualitatively evaluating interventions proposed have adequately addressed the inequalities identified, or whether marginalised groups feel it is not enough.

Due to the limitations of our ethics approval, we were not allowed to speak to children. This made it difficult to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of local children in the Ithica area. It is unclear whether future groups may gain this ethics approval. In any case, we wish to highlight that a comprehensive understanding of youth experiences is not possible through engagement with adults alone.

6. Conclusion

The existing literature highlighted deeply entrenched barriers to participation in cricket for historically marginalised groups. These took the form of both structural and cultural factors, with stakeholders identifying barriers that were broadly consistent with those reported in the literature. However, it also became clear that the establishment of a new club presents the opportunity to craft an inclusive atmosphere and structurally equitable institution from the outset. This work, supported by The Oxford SDG Impact Lab, shows promise in its intended contributions to society - a bottom-up initiative which may be able to further the SDGs.

A sport club is an opportunity to promote Good Health and Well-Being, SDG 3, through promotion of increased exercise to both children and adults. The ambition to create over 50s and disability-inclusive training sessions could act as a non-medical health intervention, similar to a social prescription, in an area that traditionally lags behind neighbouring affluent areas in terms of life expectancy. Gender Equality, SDG 5, would be promoted by the appointment of a women's lead, to ensure that an equal emphasis is placed on participation for all genders. Reduced Inequalities, SDG 10, and Sustainable Cities and Communities, 11, can be promoted by a committee that is not only representative, but actively engaged in the committee, so that the club truly serves its locality. Finally, Partnerships for the Goals, SDG 17, present an opportunity to not repair the previously unfortunate 'town and gown' differences, but accelerate the progress of the club through tapping into the wealth of resources and talent available across Oxfordshire. Whilst the authors caution that these are optimistic intentions rather than demonstrated outcomes, these goals are plausibly achievable if inclusive provision is successfully built and continuously evaluated from the outset.

It is important to acknowledge that results were limited, due to the preliminary stages of the cricket club's genesis, meaning this report takes an inherently top-down approach. This opens

an opportunity for future research groups, which the authors encourage to adopt a bottom-up strategy, directly interviewing participants to quantify and qualify the intended inclusive atmosphere that our recommendations seek to build.

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Appendix A

Interview Document

Aim

To explore adult stakeholders' views on barriers to cricket participation and progression, and the feasibility, acceptability, and priority of proposed club initiatives.

Intended Participants

Adults only, including:

- Parents and carers
- Teachers and school leaders.
- Community and faith representatives.
- Coaches and cricket administrators.
- Oxfordshire Cricket representatives.
- Adult former players or community members.

No children or young people will be interviewed.

Introductory questions (depending on who we are talking to):

1. What is your role in the community or local sport?
2. What experience do you have of youth cricket or community sport?
3. What opportunities currently exist locally for young people to play and progress in cricket?
4. Which groups are most likely to be overlooked or excluded?

Barriers:

5. What are the main barriers to starting, continuing, or progressing in cricket?

Prompts:

Fees and equipment.

Transport.

Lack of school cricket.

Limited facilities.

Session times.

Family knowledge of pathways.

Racism or discrimination.

Gender or cultural barriers.

Selection bias.

Academic or family commitments.

6. Which barriers could the club address directly?
7. Which require support from schools, Oxfordshire Cricket, or other organisations?
8. What would help families trust and engage with the club?

Proposed interventions

Present a selection of the following:

- Subsidised membership or hardship funding
- Kit-lending scheme.
- Transport support.
- School or community-based sessions (e.g. during PE sessions)
- Flexible and year-round training.
- Formal partnership with Oxfordshire Cricket.
- County coaches observing local sessions.
- Recruitment of local coaches and mentors.
- Family induction and communication.
- Girls-only and mixed-session options.

- Community advisory group.

Questions for each intervention

9. Does this address an important local problem?
10. Who would benefit most?
11. Could anyone be excluded or stigmatised?
12. Would families and local organisations support it?
13. What resources would be needed?
14. What could prevent it from working?
15. Who should lead or support it?
16. Could it be sustained for at least three years?
17. How could it be improved?
18. Would you or your organisation support it?

Closing questions

19. What would success look like for the [redacted] Cricket Club after one and three years?
20. How should the club balance participation with elite progression?
21. What have we overlooked?
22. What could damage community trust?
23. Who else should we speak to?

Appendix B

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the interview, a verbal explanation of the project and the broader work of the Oxford SDG Impact Lab was provided. Explicit informed consent was gained from each participant to record audio from the interview on a mobile phone application, under the conditions that the audio would be held securely for the purpose of transcription only, not shared more widely, and deleted before the end of the project on 7th August 2026. The ethics approval for the project, which forbids interviews with children, was explained to participants. Participants were confirmed through visual and verbal means to be adults. They were kindly requested to keep children away from earshot of their microphone, with adequate compliance in all interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time from the study, through communication to any of the researchers, without needing to state a reason. No participants withdrew over the course of the study.