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Sustainability in sport, why bother?

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Capstone

Sustainability in sport, why bother?

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Abstract (1.1)

This research was done to investigate why football clubs around the world should make the efforts required to be more sustainable whilst diving into the difficulties and benefits of doing so. Through reading existing material and visible proof from football clubs acting sustainable, this research aims to explore the social, financial, and environmental benefits of using sustainability within the field of sports. By looking into the world of sport today, many clubs can be seen ignoring the topic of sustainability and being a football fan myself made me wonder why this was the case. In today's world of sport, it often seems that being sustainable and successful does not go hand in hand. This was something that caught my attention and gave me the idea to conduct the research to investigate what clubs are being sustainable and how is benefiting their future success not just off the field but also on it.

Dissertation structure (1.2)

The first section is my literature review where I investigated already existing research on the topic chosen to better gain an understanding and influence my already existing opinion on the topic being discussed. This is then followed by a methodologies section where it outlines what type of influences I have drawn from to lead my opinion. This section also outlines what type of research and data that I will collect and how each participant will be chosen for that research. Then finally to conclude my research there will be a findings and analysis section which is where I discuss who was interviewed and how each interviewee gave me a unique perspective of the three pillars of sustainability.

Introduction (1.3)

There are an estimated 3.5 billion football fans worldwide making it without a doubt the most popular sport played in today's world. But beneath the multi-billion-dollar industry is a growing concern about the safety of the games future. The football industry relies on many external factors and complicated relationships between sustainability. The effect of sustainability in sports has become clearer in recent times, with constant headlines of clubs going into administration or even running out of money when building new infrastructure, it should be more of a concern for not just the people running the club but also the fans supporting them. The need for a change in the sport has been constantly increasing and has gotten to the stage where it just simply cannot be ignored. With climate change at an all-time high and global warming being caused by humans at 0.26 degrees Celsius per decade, which is the highest rate since records began, something needs to be done (Maynooth University, 2024). Although sport can have negative effects on our world it also has the power to inspire change. The global reach of the sport and the passionate fanbases looking up to players as role models can provide a platform for promoting and raising awareness about sustainability issues. The rationale for choosing this topic was due to the constant headlines of football clubs going into administration or bankruptcy. In recent years, these headlines have been come more prevalent. This prompted me to investigate the sustainability of these clubs and what they were doing incorrectly whilst also looking at examples of clubs who are doing things the right way.

Literature review (2.0)

Sustainability is a growing concern throughout the world today and has gained serious attention with problems such as global warming and climate change at the forefront of most news articles week to week. This literature review aims to look at the effects of these sustainability issues on football and how it can affect the day-to-day running of a football club and the future of the sport by looking into what these football clubs can do to promote sustainability.

Can all clubs be sustainable? (2.1)

Although sustainability in the sport of football is growing. Is it something that is viable for all football clubs no matter how big or small they are. Sustainability in football is viable for all clubs just at various levels, as financial consideration's do come into play. Wealthy football clubs in big European leagues are obviously at an advantage as they have the financial capacity to invest

in large scale initiatives, such as energy efficient stadiums, renewable energy, and sustainable merchandise. Their overall financial strength also enables them to offset costs through sponsorships, partnerships, and government incentives. An example of a club like this is Tottenham hotspur. They have been focusing on sustainability for many years now and the main place we can see this is their new stadium. The new stadium is designed with energy efficiency in mind, featuring a green roof and systems that reduce energy consumption. The new home for Tottenham hotspur cost just over £1 billion, making it one of the most expensive stadiums ever built. This one billion pounds consisted of a huge bank loan worth £637 million in 2017, with the rest being raised through private fundraising efforts. However, the UK government also granted them enhanced capital allowances, which meant they could claim back a huge amount of the tax paid on the building of the stadium. These incentives were worth around £70 million. (Daily Cannon, 2023). The inflated cost of the stadium is due to the sustainable features it has. It features a large green roof that helps to reduce the urban heat island effect and provides a habitat for local wildlife. The urban heat island effect can be defined as a phenomenon where urban areas experience higher temperatures than the surrounding rural areas (US EPA, 2025). The stadium also collects rainwater for use in irrigation and other non- portable applications reducing the overall reliance on water supplies. The stadium also incorporates solar panels to generate renewable energy, reducing the reliance on fossil fuels.

I understand that smaller clubs like the ones competing in the league of Ireland do not have the same financial means as premier league clubs like Spurs, however sustainable practices can still be taken seriously. Smaller clubs have more financial constraints, making it more difficult to invest in sustainability at the same scale. However, they can still adopt eco-friendly measures on a smaller scale. Such as reducing travel emissions, sourcing locally for food and merchandise and improving waste management (George Morahan, 2022). This article written by Morahan was very insightful into how smaller clubs can put the same amount of work into sustainable action as clubs like spurs with even less financial freedom. In the article he explains the new Green code for league of Ireland clubs. It is the first green imitative undertaken of its size. Mark Scanlon the league of Ireland director at the FAI has also stated that "We've seen how football can play a huge role in inspiring positive change across our communities and nowhere is that change needed more today than in combatting climate change and building more environmentally sustainable communities.' This article was very insightful as it clearly stated how league of Ireland clubs can still promote sustainability initiatives whilst not putting a financial burden on themselves. Mark Scanlon is also correct when speaking about the importance of inspiring change amongst communities. This can be seen through Arsenal football club who have become the world's first football club to achieve an SBTi net zero target approval. The SBTi stands for science-based target initiative which is to help organisations to set reduction targets in line with climate science (Darley, 2024).

How crucial is financial management in sustainability? (2.2)

However, through my research I have gathered the consensus is that its either one or the other, it is not possible to be sustainable and successful in football. I completely disagree with this general idea. There are two ways of seeing sustainability in football. The first is making short term sacrifices for immediate success. Essentially neglecting all sustainability actions and focusing on winning. To win now clubs may overcommit financially, hindering further growth. These clubs who want to succeed as soon as possible will sign high profile players and neglect their development processes in favour of this immediate success. Which is clear in some clubs win now mentalities. An example of this in Ireland is Dundalk FC. Dundalk is a team located in County Louth just north of Dublin. From 2014 to 2020 they were the most successful league of Ireland club winning 5 league titles and going on two Europa league runs in this six-year window. However, since then the club have been relegated to the second tier of Irish football whilst nearly being forced into liquidation. This decline on the pitch can be linked to growing debts in the regions of seven figures while the club has had four different owners in recent years. The lack of financial sustainability in place at Dundalk FC can be to blame for their loss of almost 1.5 million euro in 2023 (Irish independent).

But how can fans of Irish football expect Irish clubs to manage their money when the FAI have also been known to struggle with financial sustainability. From 2007- 2011 was the redevelopment of the Aviva stadium. This redevelopment would cost 411 million euro with the FAI planning to pay it back through money generated by ticket sales which did not happen. There was also a lot of uncertainty with the management of money during this period by John Delaney. Suspicions were raised about Delaney in 2016, when a bridging loan of 100,000 was given to FAI. This transaction was not publicly disclosed (O'Donoghue, 2024). This was not the first instance that money was not declared publicly by FAI. In 2010 following a world cup qualifier defeat Delaney made a deal with former FIFA chief Sepp Blatter. This deal involved a sum of 5 million euro which was transferred to the FAI due to Thierry Henry's controversial handball that knocked Ireland out of qualifying (Hughes, 2019). When situations like this are occurring, how can fans expect Ireland as a footballing nation to be successful when money is being hidden from clubs in Ireland that could go a long way in growing and securing the game for future generations.

The way in which he managed the money also came under scrutiny during his time in charge. Many critics argued that Delaney had too much control over his senior staff and would often make decisions without consulting the correct departments. His decision making had a massive impact on the reputation in the FAI and the connection between the organisation and the fans. These controversies ruined financial opportunities with sponsors, an example of this was the 13-year partnership with Ford (Sheridan, 2019). There was also the threat of sanctions from governing bodies. Due to these controversies, Delaney left his role in FAI. When financial sustainability is so important in today's game it is essential for everyone involved to see what

money is being spent on and who is getting what. Transparency is key and it has been something that has been lacking within the FAI in recent times. It is huge for the FAI as when an organization is involved in managing public funds and growing the sport in Ireland, a loss of transparency can contribute to a loss of confidence from fans and damage their already tarnished reputation. Throughout Delaney's time in charge there was also little involvement with the environmental effects that could disrupt football let alone the social or financial problems he created. There was no pathway built towards success but instead he was using his job title for his own personal gain. Hence why it is essential to have the right people in charge, especially when the future and stability of a sport within a country is at stake.

Using the three pillars of sustainability as a barrier to success (2.3)

The second way of seeing sustainability in football is by using it as a barrier to build success in the future. There are three pillars of sustainability. There is environmental, social, and economic. To use these pillars to build success, football clubs should focus on them individually rather than seeing them as all together. By focusing on each pillar individually it enables them to build long term success and ensure resilience in any future sustainability problems they may have. The first pillar, environmental sustainability, can have huge benefits in areas such as operational costs. Football clubs in today's world are multi-million-dollar businesses that compete in a highly competitive market, and like any other business in a competitive market they need to have a competitive advantage to stand out from the crowd. There is no reason this competitive advantage cannot be the environmental sustainability aspects of a football club. An example of this can be seen in the third tier of English football with a team called Forrester Green Rovers. In an article written in August of 2019 by Conor Ketley, it explains how unique club structure and a growing international fanbase contributes to competing on and off the football pitch. Between 1990 and 2010 they remained mostly in the bottom half of the conference league table before being purchased by Dale Vince, who founded his own electricity company in 1995 called Ecotricity. A steady improvement was seen from here on out with consistent finishes in the top 10 of the national league, until the 2016/17 season where they achieved promotion to the English

football league. A lot of this success can be accredited to the sustainable aspects of the club. One of these aspects is the effect veganism has had on the players. This is a sustainable eating practice avoiding meat and dairy and Vince is convinced it has helped his players reduce injuries such as soft tissue damage. Veganism is hailed as being one of if not the most environmentally friendly diets that someone can adopt. Research does show that meat and dairy products do have an impact on things such as the climate crisis. A study done by Xiaoming Xu shows that 57% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the production of meat and dairy products. Another benefit is recovery. In an article by Danielle Zickl, she outlines that new research does show that a vegan diet can help improve overall recovery time. This is due to the antioxidants found in the diet that directly help battle inflammation, which is usually experienced after running long distances. This research does support Dale Vince's claims on the benefits of veganism, however even though it does not prove the success on the field but does show the sustainability benefits off it.

The economic side of football (2.4)

The economic side of sustainability refers to the ways in which a team will spend their money. When it comes to spending in football there are many regulations that clubs may have to follow depending on which league they play in. PSR (profit and sustainability rules) is an example of rules that are set out by the premier league. The goal of these regulations is to ensure that teams limit their financial losses by considering things such as squad cost ratio and anchoring which determines how much a club can spend based on the money they generate. These rules outline that premier league clubs cannot lose over £105 million pound throughout the year. As I am writing this literature review it has been released that no premier league club has recorded a loss and are compliant with the rules from 2021 to 2024 (Sky Sports). This is great news for sustainability in football as it shows that the biggest football clubs competing in one of the most competitive leagues in the world are showing an interest in the future of their teams and football. It has also been announced that as of February this year the premier leagues profitability and sustainability rules are to stay for the next season (Solhekol,2025). This also involves the involvement of SCR limits meaning clubs can only spend at most 85% of their revenue on

football costs. The SCR (squad cost ratio) means that there is a limit put on player wages, transfers, and agent's fees in relation to the revenue the club has. There are good aspects to this in terms of off the field. It ensures that huge clubs with rich owners such as Man city, Chelsea and Newcastle must limit their spending. But one thing I think should be improved is the way the ratio is enforced. For example, man city was the highest earning football club in England last year with 838 million euro generated, in comparison to a team like Fulham FC whose total revenue was estimated to be 362 million euro for the 2024/2025 season. There is a difference of just under 500 million between the two revenues, but both must follow the 85% rule. This rule means that a club like Man city can still spend 714 million for the next coming season and Fulham can only spend 307 million. This means Some clubs will choose to focus on sustainability aspect of their clubs and limit the rash spending and instead invest in the development of their club from the ground up. But there is another option, which is finding the right balance between the two. But finding this balance between the two is based on the goals of the club's owner's management and even their supporters. I understand that most clubs prioritise immediate success, even at the cost of long-term sustainability, while others may take a more measured approach by investing in youth and infrastructure to create sustained success overtime. But there are steps that can be taken to do both. For example, focusing on financial management. Implanting sound financial practices, such as budgeting and financial planning, can ensure that clubs live within their means and avoid taking on any more debt. Securing sponsorships can also help find the balance. Establishing partnerships with local communities can enhance support for the club, leading to increased attendance and loyalty from the fans. By implementing these new strategies, football clubs can create a suitable model that allows them to compete effectively on the pitch while also being responsible with their available resources.

The Sustainable practices that clubs can adopt (2.5)

This can be done in many ways, the first is adopting sustainable practices. Clubs can adopt practices such as reducing water usage and minimising waste during matches. Reducing water usage can lead to cost savings overall, as it will enable clubs to lower their utility bills. Likewise minimising waste helps to reduce the environmental impacts of events, contributing to a healthier planet. This will then promote sustainability and environmental responsibility, which can enhance the club's image and appeal to fans who value eco-friendly practices. According to a study done by Charlie Dundas in 2022, 36% of sports fans consider themselves environmentalists. However, of the 15 different sports fans surveyed, football fans only had 32% who thought of themselves as environmentalists. (Charlie Dundas,2022). This is why clubs supporting sustainable and ecofriendly practices is important. It firstly helps raise awareness about environmental issues and encourages fans to adopt ecofriendly behaviours in their own lives away from football. By doing this it will then attract a broader fanbase, particularly the younger generation who prioritise environmental responsibility. Overall, these efforts of

reducing water usage and minimizing waste can improve brand loyalty, as the fans who prioritise sustainability will appreciate the steps being taken in that direction. However, I do have a problem with this research done by Charlie Dundas. This is because throughout the article there is no mention of how many people took part in the survey or the age demographic of people asked. Which means bias could have been a factor in the results of this survey. The only information given about the survey is the fact that they are British. This leaves many unanswered questions like how the survey was distributed or even if the people asked were chosen just to back up his own findings rather than being proved incorrect by the British public.

Through researching the topic, I have found many authors who have the same beliefs on the subject that I have. For example, Nuuti Pulkkinen who has previously authored a paper on the impact of values on football fans. In this paper he made some remarkably interesting points about how aware football fans are of the issues of sustainability. He outlined the key reasons for people becoming aware of the issues was the 2022 world cup which was held in Qatar. The research undertaken also displayed that fans were mostly interested in their own teams' practices. This is exactly what I would have expected the results to be. This is due to the emotional connection between the club and fans of said club. Due to this connection, it makes them more invested in its club's actions and various policies surrounding the issue. They want to see their club success and be responsible in its operations. It also has local impacts too. Fans are often concerned about the impact of their own club on their local community. They may prioritise sustainability practices that directly affect their environment and community. Overall, the combination of emotional investment, local relevance, and competitive spirit drives fans to prioritise their own club's sustainability efforts. (Nuuti Pulkkinen, 2024)

What are footballing organisations doing to help clubs be sustainable (2.6)

Organizations like UEFA have also gone the extra mile and have set up initiatives such as the Hatrick program. The overall goal of this program is to support sustainable development of football across Europe by investing in the future of clubs by promoting the building of infrastructure and development programs. This programme was set up in 2004, with the goal to redistribute money from the men's EURO to each of their member association for reinvestment in in long term development projects. Since its birth in 2004 it has had an enormous impact in developing football infrastructure, increased participation, and the overall standards of sport in Europe. This program gives money based on certain criteria such as the population, footballing facilities and the actual need for development. These projects can range from a new football pitch or even developing a training centre for the academies of football clubs. UEFA does also monitor the progress of these projects to make sure that the money is being used correctly. It also involves regular audits to guarantee accountability for the management of these huge projects. A

vast number of countries have benefited from this program. According to the Hatrick website more than 1,000 pitches and 3,000 mini pitches were built and further 34 national training centres developed to prepare referees, players, and coaches. The funding of this program has even developed Albania's new national stadium which has since hosted a European conference final in Tirana. In the next four-year cycle of the project each member of the program will be eligible to receive a up to 17 million euro. According to their website they have invested 3.5 billion euro back into the Europeans game development (UEFA Hatrick).

Programs like the Hatrick one is huge for not only suitability in sport but also the future of the sport. Through infrastructure development, it allows smaller clubs to make the necessary changes and upgrades to their existing facilities to continue to grow the game in the local communities surrounding them. This investment is hugely important for football clubs as it contributes to an environment where players can grow and attract new fans of the game to play. Without the right infrastructure in place, the sport will struggle to grow. This then creates a positive effect on the growth of grass roots football. These programs promote and encourage the participation of the game at a youth level through schools and communities. By using these programmes to increase participation it will not only connect the community but also provide more opportunities for young people to play sport. By involving the youth, it promotes the love of the game and helps to ensure the longevity of the sport by continuing to attract new fans. Along with promoting the game these programmes also promote diversity and inclusion. Whilst growing the game is the main priority of this program it also benefits for financial sustainability as there also resources provided to help member associated manage their finances. This essential as it makes sure that football clubs involved in the program are operating within their means and that they can develop and implement their own strategies to better their club for the future. These programs are essential for the sustainability of football. They provide continuous support to help build infrastructure, development of young players and financial support. By focusing on these areas, they create a beginning for the growth and development of the sport at all age levels.

Conclusion (2.7)

Sustainability in football is essential for all parties involved in the world of football, right down to the fans and all the way up to the multi-millionaire owners of these football clubs. For many around the world football is not only a sport but an escape from reality where for ninety minutes of the week everything can be forgotten about. It has the power to change people's moods and lead their opinions through other aspects of life. Hence why football should lead by example. There are over 3.5 billion football fans worldwide who are heavily influenced by the clubs they support in their everyday life and are willing to do whatever it takes there for their club to win. Hence promoting sustainability should be at the top of every football club's list. By acting and working to become more sustainable as a club, fans will follow and make attempts to be more sustainable in their own lives. This knock-on effect would have huge benefits to environmental,

social, and economic factors of the local areas these clubs operate in. There would be an increase in community engagement, increased protection of natural resources and would also guarantee not only the future of the football club but also the areas they operate in.

Research question (3.0)

Sustainability in sport, why bother. This research question aims to answer the question if it is beneficial for football clubs around the world to be more sustainable. This is a hugely important question in today's world of sport as football has a significant impact on not just the environment but also the social and economic sides of sustainability.

Why was this research question chosen (3.1)

This research question was chosen to see what is already being done by football clubs to become more sustainable and investigate how and why some clubs are choosing to neglect their sustainable responsibilities in favour of short-term success. While sustainability is a growing concern for people around the world today many choose to neglect its importance and to adopt change in their lifestyles. Hence why understanding its importance can help. By understanding the motivations for change football fans can see the benefits it can bring their club and their local areas.

Objectives of research question (3.2)

- Assess sustainability in sport in the present.
- What are the reasons for a club to be more sustainable.
- What is stopping clubs from improving or acting on their sustainability goals.

The research question also enabled me to analyse what clubs are doing with their infrastructure and the running of the matches in terms of sustainability. An example of this above was Tottenham hotspur and their new stadium that was built with sustainability as a focus of the project. It also enabled me to analyse huge sporting events that have brought sustainability into the public eye e.g. the 2022 world cup in Qatar. By following these objectives, it also allowed me to develop my own opinions and even voice my own opinions on the topic. By researching the topic, it helped me see gaps in the research where many clubs were not interested in involving fans with their sustainability journey. Which personally I think should be a priority. By following the objectives of assessing, identifying, analysing, and developing my own ideas, it helped create a precise roadmap to ensure my research remained focused on answering the question of why football clubs should be sustainable.

Methodology (4.0)

The theoretical assumptions used in my research (4.1)

To guide my research, I chose to lean on the theoretical assumptions around the field of sustainability in sports. Sustainability is influenced by a vast number of different topics such as economics, sociology, and ecology. These three topics had a great influence throughout my research. Ecology provides the basis for understanding sustainability as it studies how organisms react with each other and the environment they thrive in. Ecology can be related to how football can be sustainable through the implementation of sustainable practices such as water conservation, reducing waste and recycling. Football clubs all over the world can be seen using these practices such as Tottenham hotspur who as mentioned above have built a brand-new stadium with environmentally friendly infrastructure. Economics also has an effect as this can be linked to the cost benefit analysis side of sustainability. This investigates the financial costs of doing these practices and if the benefits are worthwhile. There are a range of benefits to taking up these practices, such as a more loyal fan base, and long-term savings due to the use of renewable energy. Economics can influence the decisions being made by the club's management and the willingness to try and implement some of these brand-new practices. And the final theory and perhaps the most vital is sociology, which investigates the overall social implications of sustainability. In sport, sociology investigates the behaviours of fans, and their values in comparison to the topic of sustainability and how likely they would be to adopt sustainable practices. Sociology helps to understand the values of communities, such as are they actively focused on sustainability. This research allows clubs to better understand these areas values and whether they should implement sustainable practices. Sociology can even be linked to how consumers behave and respond to sustainability. Clubs can partner with a range of environmental groups to better the reputation of the club and to raise awareness for organisations that promote sustainability. In conclusion, the three theories of economics, sociology and ecology help to create a structure where the field of sustainability can be understood as a whole, which was crucial when focusing my interviews around the 3 pillars of sustainability.

The power of football (4.2)

Football has the power to lead people's lives, especially through their behaviour and morals. These morals are directly influenced by people's upbringing and the culture that they surround themselves with. Clubs and fans together form a community that can influence and affect one's ethical choices. As mentioned before, the three pillars of sustainability include economic, social, and environmental sustainability. These 3 pillars of sustainability helped me make my own relevant assumptions about the topic being researched. The main assumption was why it was important for football to be sustainable in the eyes of the fans. Hobbies and interests have proven to continuously influence people's behaviour. In a study done by Dr Ciara McCabe on mental health, she outlines that 'a wide range of activities and hobbies may play a role in social prescribing and behavioural activation.' These activities such as playing and watching football have the power to influence our values and change the way football fans may interact with the world around them. (faster capital, 2025).

The type of data that was collected for analysis (4.3)

For this research, I will be using and collecting my own qualitative data. I feel qualitative data is the best choice for this research as it would allow me to draw out a more intimate understanding of the topic. Qualitative data is also exploratory in nature, which means it is perfect for exploring new areas of research, allowing me to gather current information and confirm or even alter my own beliefs on the topic. This type of research would also help me get a first-hand account of people who operate or are affected by this topic in their day-to-day lives. This would also give me insight that I would not get from quantitative research methods like surveys. By strategically picking who will be interviewed it would let me draw on lived experiences that are relevant to the field of sustainability in football.

Why qualitative research (4.4)

The research was mostly based around the assumption that the vital information I needed was best sourced through individuals who have lived experiences on the topic with support from external articles and fan forums. To find more philosophical assumptions that were not my own, I decided to undertake my own qualitative research. Qualitative research would be the most effective as it allowed me to draw out an intimate understanding of the topic by speaking to people who have done their own research in the field and even people who work in the field in their day-to-day lives. Qualitative data relies on the lived experience and opinions of others that cannot be measured numerically but rather obtained through interviews and other observations. These interviews are much more beneficial to the topic I am researching as with surveys they can have many issues. One would be overall bias; bias refers to a prejudice that can influence honesty and decision making which can cause problems for surveys when researching. There is

also little to no flexibility in surveys, which makes it impossible to follow up on any responses that could be interesting or unexpected. Purposive sampling was also used when picking participants for the research. Using this method allowed me to research deeply into lived experiences or different perspectives, meaning that the data being collected is accurate and highly detailed. By focusing on individuals with these lived experiences, it maximizes the effectiveness of the research being conducted. By being enabled to select participants, it can ensure that the study is focused, relevant and can give high-quality data. This method is hugely important for qualitative research as it enables for detailed insight into expansive topics resulting in more impactful research outcomes.

Instrument design (4.5)

The instrument design was semi structured for interviews that lasted about 40 minutes but could have gone longer based on the value of information I was getting. These semi structured interviews allowed me to gain more information than I could have gotten from any other research. This is due to the elaborative nature of the interview. I used the ability to ask open-ended questions and even follow up on responses if necessary. These open-style questions allowed me to focus on the experiences and gain firsthand knowledge of the people I was interviewing. It also helped me relate the questions to the three main themes I wanted to focus on, social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Each interview was based around each of these important aspects with each interviewee having different opinions and expertise on each one. To talk about the themes of social and financial sustainability, I chose to interview a Dundalk FC fan. This is because, as mentioned above, Dundalk was nearly forced into administration in the last year due to the poor running and financial failures of the football club. This Dundalk fan was my pilot interview and acted as my pilot study for the research. This pilot interview helped me see and identify problems with the design of my semi structured interviews, such as unclear questions or issues with timing and planning. The pilot study also indicated how much data I would need to collect throughout my research. It allowed me to research sample sizes, and gain insight into the direction my study was going. It was also important that ethical standards were met when talking and engaging with the participants. I needed to ensure that I was mindful of the potential risks when interviewing someone such as causing them harm or bringing up any sensitive topics that could cause any sort of distress.

The benefit of my pilot study (4.6)

The pilot study also helped me see that some of my questions needed to be refined. Many of them were left open-ended, which meant when a question was asked it allowed the person I was interviewing to speak for longer, meaning there was a chance that they could go off topic. Likewise, I also removed any leading language to make sure that the participants felt they could answer honestly without feeling forced in a certain direction. Additionally, I also added more questions to gain even more information to cover all bases. But there can be limitations with this method. Due to me picking a small, selected sample, it could limit the outcome of my findings. However, the pilot interview mentioned above helped enhance the reliability of the data I was collecting with minor changes made to the interviews.

Analysis and findings (5.0)

This section will outline the findings I have discovered through my qualitative research I have conducted using semi structured interviews. The participants (selected through purposive sampling) all gave different insights into the three aspects of sustainability. When looking through my research and findings, the focus was to see what themes each participant leaned on due to their different experiences. Each interview gave three unique perspectives on the pillars of sustainability. I also wanted to use their lived experiences to gather their thoughts on whether they believe football clubs around the world should aim to be as sustainable as they possibly can in relation to their unique circumstances.

Pilot interview with Dundalk fan (5.1)

The pilot interview was done with a Dundalk fan who has been going to matches in Oriel Park since the age of 6. This interview's focus was to delve into the fans' perspective in terms of the financial running and social effects of the club in the local area of Dundalk. As of the past year Dundalk FC have been in the news due to the near administration of the football club mainly because of the poor financial planning by its owners. The club was purchased in 2023 by Brian Ainscough, but the FAI admitted that a loophole utilized by Ainscough meant not all financial checks were carried out before the ownership change (Gray, 2024). I asked the Dundalk supporter if he had ever thought about the financial aspects of the club prior to the financial difficulties. It was clear that he never felt he had to worry about the financial side assuming that 'because of our success in past European competitions we all just assumed that the money was there for the future.' Since the news did come out about the finances, it has been on the minds of the fans a lot more 'constantly thinking about how to save money and reduce expenses. I then asked if he thought the club should be doing more in terms of sustainability goals. Sustainability is particularly important for football clubs. However, the fan outlined that the club's reality is to bounce back from its financial mistakes. The club's immediate need is to recover financially. He explained that the club could do more for environmental sustainability, but the focus should not go beyond the immediate needs of the club. However, amidst their financial trouble Dundalk does still have environmentally friendly initiatives. I asked when he attended Oriel Park for matches if he noticed anything ecofriendly like recycling bins, etc. There are plenty of recycling bins around the stadium, but he also explained that majority of fans now use digital tickets rather than the paper ones which helps with the overall environmental sustainability image of the club. I also wanted to understand what he believed the most important thing the clubs should focus on is. The fan explained that as of right now the focus should be on the finances. He exclaimed that if it were not for John temple, the club would have entered the SCARP process. I asked him if he had any ideas on how the club can bounce back as soon as possible and he mentioned that there should be a focus on developing local talent to create a strong backbone for the club. This interview was a great insight, particularly into the opinions of a fan and what they tend to experience on not just a matchday but the whole experience surrounding the club. It gave me the opportunity to utilize his lived experiences and concerns surrounding financial sustainability in his football club, from the point of view of someone with little knowledge of how a football club is run.

Ex-Wolverhampton wanderer's footballer interview (5.2)

My next interview was with an ex-Wolverhampton Wanderer player who played for them from July 1982 up until May 1987. The mid 80s was a particularly dark time for the Wolverhampton football club as 'Wolves have gone Bust' is the headline that appeared on the Express & Star on July 2nd, 1982. This was due to the building of a new stand in Molineux. I asked him to explain the set-up of the club for scholarship candidates. He said initially the setup seemed professional for the young aspiring footballers with dorm facilities for the players, but he soon realized after the new ownership a lot of things were about to change.

What was your experience playing football at such a young age abroad (5.3)

I first asked what it was like going over at the age of sixteen to play football when the club was going through a change of management. He explained that at his age he never investigated or cared about the off field running of the club but rather just focusing on his scholarship and trying to break into the first team. This displays the naivety of not just young players but also fans. At 16, whether supporting or playing for a club, they tend only to care about football aspects. During his time at the club, he played under 4 different managers with Tommy Docherty being the most renowned amongst them. This shows the financial stability of the club at the time, having to constantly change managers after 3 years of relegation from the first division in England to the fourth. I asked when these changes of management were happening did, he believe it was due to finances. He explained that most of the academy and young first team players mostly assumed it was due to poor results on the field rather than any financial trouble that was happening behind the scenes 'but again young player like us had to worry about our performances on the field and leave the management to worry about the finances'. However, it was soon impossible not to see the financial issues within the club. When the takeover by the Bhatti Brothers was completed, the ex-player explained that it was obvious they had no interest in investing in the club. As soon as they took charge, he began to experience problems with his pay being delayed or even being incorrect for some weeks. According to sky sports, the club was bought by the Bhatti Brothers purely as a property investment to build a shopping centre beside the stadium. This article also explained how the club's reputation in the community was affected with attendance at matches being as low as 2,000 during this dark period. (Phillips, 2022). I asked the player if he ever remembered the attendances being this low, he explained that there were times it was obvious few were coming to games, but it never really influenced the players, he remarked. It is important for owners of football clubs to have a connection to the sport unlike The Bhatti brothers. In the 80's Wolverhampton was in a crisis under constant change of management and ownership going into administration. Which was due hugely to the investment

of the Bhakti brothers. They purchased the club in the 80's for the wrong reasons. The Bhatti brothers had no interest in football but bought the club to further add to their already huge property portfolio. I asked the ex-player what it was like playing during this time and he described it as horrific. No money was given to facilities for players or staff. He mentioned one instance where the players had to train in the stadium's car park due to the lack of available pitches. This soon became a superstition of the club to train in the car park every Friday before a game.

How involved were communities in football in the 80's? (5.4)

My next line of questioning was to investigate how involved local communities' football clubs such as wolves were back in those times. During these times there was a barrier between the local community and the football club with many local businesses reluctant to work with the club due to the financial situations happening in the background. I asked the ex-player if he had ever noticed sponsorship problems or people pulling away from the club. He said that apart from seeing less fans in the stand, there was not much to see, he explained that sponsorship drama was again a worry for the management and staff rather than the players. But that connection with the locals must still have been strong as in the end they were taken over by the local council and a Wolverhampton-based property developer. This shows the social impact football can have. Through the local connection, local businesses and the council stepped in to save the club from extinction and work towards improving it for the future. My final question for the ex-player was, if he were to change one thing about the club back then what it would have been. He explained that back then there was truly little communication between the people running the club and the player themselves. He felt that this would have benefited the whole club in this dark time as clear communication would have fostered trust and understanding whilst also creating a positive team environment.

Ex-financial director for the FAI interview (5.5)

My next interview was focused on the financial side of sustainability as I had an interview with an ex-financial director for the FAI. This interview was great as being a football fan myself I never really understood or gave a second thought about how a club or national side can cope financially throughout the year. With years of experience in accounting and finance, the FAI role was a dream job due to his interest in football. The role involved paying staff, organizing flights and hotels for players, and even occasionally helping grassroots clubs in Ireland with funding. However, the job was stressful as with international teams' income, it often comes in big chunks at the start of the year and needs to be spread throughout the season.

What was the priority when money came in (5.6)

I asked him what the priorities are when the money comes in and without hesitation, he stated that staff will always be paid first. He explained that there were times where they needed to pull in 2-3 grand just to make this payroll. Once the staff is paid, he described that the next payment would be down to 'who's shouting the loudest.' He also said that sometimes it even comes down to paying someone because they might be needed in the future. I asked if disappointing someone was a constant occurrence when paying out money and he explained that everyone would be paid at some point but just not immediately for everyone owed. He explained that there was never any worry of going bankrupt as the government would always step in. He outlined a specific time when they were re-financing the Aviva football stadium during the 2016 euros and banks were asking what backups they had if anything would go wrong. These backups were the government, if the FAI could not pay the government would, especially it being the national stadium. This was not really a shock to me as it was regularly in the news about the government bailing out the FAI when they lacked available funds. The other aspects of hotels and flights mentioned above were also fascinating. I asked what the requirements were for the hotel that players would stay in, and how expensive they could be. He explained that the players were put in high-end hotels but on the cheaper side of the scale to control costs. He also explained that sometimes they did not have the funds to pay the full fees for these hotels and had to pay late at certain times during his time in charge. This shows the importance of qualifying for international tournaments such as the Euros in 2016. In the euros, for qualifying Ireland would have received a base fee of just over 9 million euros. Throughout the tournament, they were also rewarded with their results. The ex-Fai worker stated that Irelands income for that tournament would have come out to over 11 million euro. I asked him where this money would be spent and he explained that out of that 11 million you would take out the players bonuses for qualifying for the tournament, the manager bonuses, the cost of the private planes and the private training camps throughout the tournament. This meant after the tournament there would have been a profit of around 2-3 million. This interview was the first time I heard about national team players being paid to play for their country. I asked what the process behind this was and what would go into negotiating their bonuses. Usually, the captain of the team and a legal representative would represent the players during these negotiations. It was qualifying for tournaments like this that gave him some sort of cash flow.

How does the FAI obtain their funds (5.7)

The main money that would come in would be in the form of grants from UEFA, the government and FIFA. However, he described these grants coming in as 'lumpy.' He explains that you 'might get four or five million in one go and often haven't had that money in a while, so people are screaming at you for it.' Luckily, he worked as part of a team who would work together to forecast future expenses and figure out when money might be needed. This money is organized as a union with a financial representative and the captain negotiating on behalf of the team. This means they are paid based on their overall results with the team, e.g., win, lose, or draw. I was also interested in how fans can affect the finances of the company. According to the ex-employee, little is earned directly by the FAI in the form of ticket sales and merchandise in comparison to the grants they receive. This is because most tickets are sold as season tickets upfront at the start of the year, meaning it is another situation where the money being received comes in big chunks. In 2024, there were 21,000 season tickets sold for the year, the most for any country in Europe according to the FAI website (FAI, 2023). He also described the importance of matches such as international friendlies and tournaments like the nation's league for cashflow. The reason for these friendlies is down to UEFA. UEFA in the late 2000's took over the broadcasting for all European countries which means more money for the countries involved but also gives UEFA the power to dictate when the games are played. This means if there is no competitive game, UEFA makes it a requirement to play friendly and if the FAI cannot organize one, UEFA will. I asked him what he thought of these international friendlies, and he said he has mixed feelings about them. He explained that there's often times that Ireland would play teams like Georgia or Gibraltar which would not sell tickets and create any sort of cash for the organization. He explained that the hope was for friendlies to be against nations with star players such as Portugal or even games with rivalry such as England or Scotland. He explains that even when he attended games he even looked around to see and estimate the number of tickets that might have been sold. This was the kind of stress that came with the job as he was constantly looking for when the next influx of cash would be.

Long term benefit of football to the Irish environment (5.8)

He also recalled a time where the FAI did some research alongside UEFA, which was a long-term study of the benefit of football to the Irish environment in total. An outcome of this was discovering that with every euro spent on football the government saves 4 euro on future health issues. This research was done in the hopes of getting the government to see why the FAI should receive capital grants over other sporting organizations such as GAA and the IRFU. Year after year these organizations were competing to get as much money as they can.

How were the finances managed throughout his time in charge (5.9)

Alongside the topic of paying and generating money, the main questions I had for him were how the overall finances were managed. He criticized the setup of the department. When he first started, it was not a very professional setup. He stated that finance did everything involved with

money and no one else was involved. This caused problems within as he outlined that other departments like the ones involved with running summer camps did not have any idea whether they were making or losing money or even how much money it would cost them to run the camp. This did seem like a downfall in financial management as communication between the two departments was just not there. This meant when setting the budget there was no indication of how much money was needed for things such as locations and equipment for the kids. The budget was an estimate. This was one initiative that he changed during his time to increase financial sustainability. Rather than looking at each department's previous expenditure throughout the year he told them to form their own budget and report it back to him. This allowed him as the year went on to track each department's expenditure and see what the money was being spent on. This was a much more efficient way to manage funds and this method of managing the money got better year after year. This method allowed the staff to track the money and to continuously develop the budgets and refine them year after year. This meant that the longer this process of budgeting went on the more accurate they would become. He even said he noticed each department was more aware of their expenditure through these budgets, which he said is exactly what he wants.

What was done to help grass roots football in Ireland (5.10)

The next aspect of the finances I wanted to find out about was how money is being managed or put aside for grass root clubs in Ireland. When a club receives money, which is usually a grant from either the FAI or the government, the FAI offers advice to all clubs about the overall structure of how this money should be spent and managed. An example that was used to explain it was the construction of a new astro. A new astro could cost upwards of 400,000 euro due to the amount of work involved, e.g., levelling of the area, cost of the grass and floodlights. The ex-FAI finance director outlined that generally if the government signs off on the project, they will help with a percentage of the cost. He also stated that the government announce 'large scale capital grants' which are open to all sports in Ireland such as football, Gaa, rugby and many more. I asked what the criteria are to get one of these grants, and it is a lottery system. He explained that it is a fair chance but 'then it gets into lobbying.' He even stated that it helps to get to know the people involved. He explained that if you are in the ear of the sport minister or the Tánaiste, it is highly likely you will get yours signed off on. But when the grants are received, the club must use that money on the infrastructure they stated in their application for the grant. This is because the FAI will go out and check if they have used the money for what they said they would. I asked him what the re-percussions would be if the money was not used correctly. He stated that if the money were used incorrectly there would be little chance of them receiving other grants due to the fact they cannot be trusted with the money. There's also the potential that the league they are competing in will look unfavourably on them and could even get taken out of the league. This shows that for the whole sustainability aspect of grass roots, the clubs are trusted

to spend their money on their needs and if the money is not used correctly there are some huge repercussions.

The FAI and their influence in the top tier of Irish football (5.11)

With funding to small clubs scarce I was curious to see how involved the FAI were with the top division of football in Ireland, the league of Ireland. When he was in charge the prize for winning was only 25,000 euro compared to the 125,000 euro a club would receive now for winning it, showing the recent growth in funding over the past 10 years. Every league of Ireland club must apply for a license to take part in the league. The Fai would investigate the stadium infrastructure, and the clubs would present budgets to them. These budgets would include how much money they would spend on players and other footballing costs and must show where they would get this money from. They would also include a player costs budget which would be kept on record by the FAI. The ex-financial director explained that when a player is signed, they would have to register the contract with the FAI so they can determine if there is enough remaining in the budget to successfully sign the player. This process is essential for financial sustainability. It means that the players' wages are controlled, and no club can physically spend more money than they have, thus ensuring the safety of the club for the year. However, unfortunately if a club is successful in European competitions, the money is theirs and theirs alone. The club can choose to do whatever they like with this money and are under no obligation to tell the FAI what they are doing with it. A recent example that I have mentioned throughout the research is Dundalk FC. Dundalk did not ask the FAI for advice on how to manage the money but instead did it themselves and went to the brink of administration.

What changes would he make to the financial processes in the FAI (5.12)

To conclude the interview my final question was if he could go back and change something about the financial processes, what would the change be. He said that he would 'drive down the professionalism of the whole thing.' He explained that he does not understand why so many of the teams and players are professional due to the small amount of money in it. He said eventually these professional wages are hurting their clubs in the long run, especially the underage teams. It boils down to Ireland not being big enough to have our own professional league. In the news recently, Stephan Bradley who is the current manager of Shamrock rovers, who revealed an invite to the Dail to speak about academy funding in the league of Ireland. According to the Irish sun, the FAI has already made its case to the government for 8 million euro per annum to be invested into player development to catch up with other nations (O'Riordan, 2025). I do not see the need for this investment. Why should a league that only generates 160 million euro be compared to the premier league which generated 3.6 billion in the 2024 season? Competing with leagues like this just is not feasible for the FAI, and I cannot see why it should even be considered. Instead, I would agree with the ex-finance director for the FAI and investigate scaling back the professional aspects of the clubs. This could be done by cutting player wages

and then investing this money into their own individual academies to secure the future of not just the league but the sport in Ireland. The huge benefits of investing in youth can be seen in today's game, the transfer of Caoimhin Kelleher to Brentford for example. Caoimhin was signed by Liverpool from his boyhood club Ringmahon with a 20% sell on clause. A sell on clause entitled Ringmahon to a percentage of any future transfer fee received if the player was to be sold again. A sell-on clause is huge for small clubs as they allow smaller clubs to benefit from a player's success, even after they have moved. Ringmahon are expected to receive 3 million euro from the transfer (Irish Times, 2025). This shows how clubs could benefit from scaling down the professionalism of the league like the Ex- FAI financial director said, instead of paying huge wages to try and grow the league invest it in their future and use that money to compete with other European leagues.

Through talking to the three different participants in my research, it helped me better understand different opinions through lived experiences on each of the three pillars. When chatting to the Dundalk fan he helped me understand how much of an effect a football club can have on the people living in the area, especially when the club nearly ceased to exist due to the poor running of the finances. Then also chatting to the ex-wolves player about how the failed running of a football club can influence the players' morale and even their performances on the pitch with the lack of support at certain times. Then Finally my interview with the ex-Fai financial director, who broke down what it takes to organise money within the sport and what it takes to guarantee the future of the sport in Ireland.

Discussion/Conclusion (6.0)

Through researching the topic of sustainability in sport over the past few months it has opened my eyes to the influence it has in our world today. The main body of this research was outlining what clubs are doing to be sustainable, such as English clubs like Spurs and Forest green rovers and why other clubs should follow suit. Sustainability cannot be seen as a trend to keep people happy but instead must be used as a building block for a healthier future for not only the football clubs but also the communities they represent. The work displayed in the literature review shows how some clubs are willing to put in this effort but also displays others naivety around the topic. By refusing to look at the benefits involved with being sustainable means overlooking the amazing opportunity to better the sport for future generations. Through my own research

especially through interviews it helped me form my own opinions on what should be done and what can be done to benefit everyone involved within the sport. Especially from the interview with the ex-Fai financial director, who also gave the idea to scale down the professionalism of the first division which I think would benefit the club and fans in the long term by securing their future. By also interviewing a fan in today's game it helped me see that some of my findings were the same as already existing research such as that fans in today's game do care about the future of their clubs. The Dundalk fan gave me valuable insight into a fan's perspective of what it is like to worry about the future of a football club you have supported since a young age. But there were also some limitations with my research. This is because it was mainly refined to Europe and Ireland as this is where I had the most knowledge in. However, being based in Ireland I felt it would be more beneficial to my research if I remained focused on that region throughout. Which can also be seen with my interviews being done with people who have experiences with football in the UK and Ireland. However, my research still shows that by becoming sustainable it creates a future for clubs; by creating more jobs, attracting more players, and even attracting more consumers whose values align with the football club. However, there are challenges involved with sustainability. By taking up sustainable practices it can become expensive as it does involve investment in new infrastructure and technologies, that may have high upfront costs. However, by overlooking these barriers to sustainability it creates a sense of community. Fans, players and even sponsors will all benefit from the rewards by sharing these new sustainable practices in the transition to a sustainable sports world. In conclusion, 'why bother?' should not be the question being asked by football clubs, but instead 'how can we.' Sustainability should not be looked at in just an environmental way. By embracing sustainable practices, football clubs can reduce their impact on the environment and create a long-lasting impression on society. The football industry must act now to prove that sustainability, and success can go hand in hand. The future of the sport relies on the football clubs around the world to act sustainably guaranteeing the future of the sport for generations to come.

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