



## From Pitch to Place:

# The League of Ireland's 'More than a Club' Initiative

Impact Report on Wellbeing, Inclusion and Civic Value



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# Foreword

The Football Association of Ireland welcomes the publication of this independent evaluation of the “More than a Club” Football and Social responsibility programme. The League of Ireland department acknowledges the valuable support of Healthy Ireland and especially the encouraging support of Biddy O’Neill, Ingrid Doyle and Suzanne Lynch from the Department of Health. We also wish to thank the research and evaluation team at SETU Waterford, namely Dr. Barry Lambe, Dr. Aisling McGrath and Ellen Lavery for conducting the most in-depth study of community work to date with League of Ireland football clubs.

Football has enormous potential as a tool to promote and develop social value. It creates a sense of empowerment and positive development especially within vulnerable and marginalised groups. As the most popular sport in Europe, the social benefits of football have the potential to influence behaviours and spark positive change on a massive scale. The evaluation report “From Pitch to Place” highlights the positive impact of League of Ireland clubs in the community, especially their impact on Community Health, Wellbeing, Inclusion and the creation of Civic Value.

The “More than a Club” project supports League of Ireland football clubs to develop capacity for community-focused work. The popularity of football and its social benefits as evidenced by this report highlights a need for more Irish football clubs to embrace social responsibility. The exciting potential for League of Ireland football clubs to advance community health, promote social inclusion and social cohesion and facilitate community development is evident in this report. The socially responsible action of football clubs featured in this report has also challenged an increasing number of other League of Ireland clubs to go beyond their core business of the game to help address wider societal challenges.

The FAI and the League of Ireland department aim to support more clubs to develop their community engagement capacity and further enhance football’s positive social outcomes. Forging closer meaningful connections within local communities can help clubs to become more relevant to more people. Utilising the engagement power of football and the profile of League of Ireland football clubs as social enterprises well positioned to deliver interventions which can change people’s lives for the better, “More than a Club” presents a social innovation which can simultaneously benefit the football clubs, their communities and Irish Society.

To all of the Social and Environmental Sustainability Officers and local volunteers in football clubs who develop, coordinate and continue to deliver this amazing work, you are an inspiration and have positioned your football clubs as beacons of social good.

Derek O’Neill,

League of Ireland Social & Environmental Sustainability Manager.



# Acknowledgements

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We acknowledge the strategic engagement of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), the League of Ireland Department, Healthy Ireland, and the many local partners and organisations who contributed time, venues and practical assistance.

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# Introduction

## Setting the Scene

Football clubs hold a unique place in Irish society. They are more than just sporting organisations. They are trusted, visible, and deeply rooted institutions that bring people together across generations, backgrounds, and communities (1,2). From the shared experiences on match days to the sense of belonging that extends far beyond the pitch, football has a reach and influence that few other settings can match. More broadly, there has been growing recognition in Ireland and internationally of the power of sport to contribute to public health, social cohesion, and community development over the past two decades (3-6). Governments, health agencies, and voluntary organisations increasingly see sport settings as critical partners in tackling some of society's most persistent challenges such as physical inactivity, social isolation, mental health difficulties, and widening health inequalities (7-10). This shift reflects a settings-based understanding that improving health and wellbeing is not only about healthcare or individual responsibility, but also about working through the everyday places and institutions people already know and trust. Football clubs are one of those places. They have the profile, credibility, and social capital to reach groups who might never engage with traditional health services or who feel disconnected from mainstream opportunities to be active, social, and well.

The More than a Club (MTC) initiative was developed in this context. A collaboration between the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and Healthy Ireland, MTC aims to harness the unique reach of professional football clubs to deliver community-based initiatives that improve physical activity, mental wellbeing, and social connection. The model is built on a simple but powerful idea that football clubs can be more than sporting teams, they can also be anchors of local wellbeing, delivering meaningful social impact alongside sporting success. The approach is not unique to Ireland. Similar initiatives in the UK and across Europe have shown that football-led community initiatives can successfully engage people who are often left behind by conventional public health responses including older adults, people living with chronic conditions, and those facing social or economic barriers to participation (11-14). More than a Club represents Ireland's adaptation of this model, tailored to local needs and delivered in partnership with national health and sport strategies. As Ireland continues to face challenges such as rising inactivity levels, growing social isolation, and increasing demand on health services, initiatives like MTC demonstrate how sports clubs can be part of the solution. They show that health promotion is most effective when it is woven into the fabric of community life and when trusted institutions like football clubs become part of the public health infrastructure.



## Origins and Evolution of ‘More than a Club’

More than a Club began in 2017 as a joint pilot project between the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and Welsh social enterprise Vi-Ability, funded through the Ireland–Wales European Regional Development Fund. Its purpose was to explore whether the unique reach and visibility of professional football clubs could be harnessed to deliver meaningful social impact particularly in disadvantaged communities, while also supporting clubs to diversify their activities and strengthen their long-term sustainability. The pilot involved Bohemians FC and Cork City FC in Ireland and Conwy Borough FC and Haverfordwest FC in Wales. These clubs were supported to develop standalone social enterprises and deliver innovative community initiatives in areas such as physical activity promotion, education, dementia support, and volunteering. The results were promising and the clubs successfully engaged people who often remained beyond the reach of conventional services, including older adults, people with disabilities, and those experiencing social isolation (15). The work also helped improve public perceptions of the clubs and build stronger community relationships, demonstrating football’s potential to act as a platform for health, wellbeing, and social connection.

Building on these successes, MTC entered a new phase of development with strategic support from Healthy Ireland. From 2023, the initiative expanded to five League of Ireland clubs; Bray Wanderers FC, Cork City FC, Finn Harps FC, Waterford FC, and Wexford FC, each of which appointed dedicated community staff (commonly referred to as Football and Social Responsibility (FSR) Officers or more recently, Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) Officers) to design and deliver a portfolio of initiatives<sup>1</sup>. These include walking football, dementia-friendly “Football Memories” sessions, educational initiatives, Futsal for people with Down Syndrome, and a range of locally tailored interventions developed in partnership with schools, health services, and community organisations.

This expansion represents an important step forward but also underlines that this model of work within Irish football is still in its infancy. Unlike in the UK, where football-led community foundations have been operating for decades, MTC is only beginning to take root in Ireland. The current phase has been about demonstrating what is possible, testing and growing the concept across different clubs, building organisational capacity, and beginning to show how football can contribute meaningfully to national health and wellbeing priorities. What began as a proof-of-concept has now evolved into a structured programme with dedicated staff, emerging partnerships, and a growing reputation. But the work of embedding football as a recognised and sustainable community asset in Ireland is still

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this report the dedicated staff who coordinate MTC across the five LOI clubs will be referred to as community officers.

developing. More than a Club remains at a formative stage, and this evaluation is intended to capture the lessons learned so far, showcase achievements, and provide guidance on how the model can be strengthened and scaled in the years ahead.

## Why This Report Matters

This report represents the most comprehensive account to date of the MTC initiative and its development within Irish football. It captures the learning from a formative period in which the model has been tested, adapted, and expanded across five League of Ireland clubs, and it examines the conditions that support or hinder successful delivery. The purpose of the evaluation is not only to document achievements, but also to understand the challenges, trade-offs, and lessons that can guide the next phase of growth. By exploring how the initiatives are designed and implemented, how they are perceived by participants and partners, and how they contribute to wider health and social goals, this report provides actionable insights for the FAI, funders, policymakers, and clubs as they seek to embed and scale the model in the years ahead.

## Methods and Approach

This report draws on a formative, mixed-methods evaluation conducted between 2023 and 2025 to understand how the MTC model is being implemented, experienced, and developed across five League of Ireland clubs. The evaluation was designed to capture both measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of participants, staff, and communities.

Data collection combined multiple complementary components:

- **Programme-level data** provided by clubs and the FAI, including participation records and descriptions of activities delivered.
- **Case studies** of flagship initiatives (Walking Football, Down Syndrome Futsal, and Football for Children with Autism) integrating interviews, surveys, and observation data to explore participant outcomes and implementation processes in depth.
- **A community attitudes and stakeholder survey** capturing perceptions of the clubs' community role, visibility, social impact, and goodwill toward future initiatives.



- **Qualitative interviews** with community officers, club CEOs, the FAI, and strategic partners examining delivery experiences, barriers, facilitators, and sustainability factors.

This multi-layered approach provided both quantitative and qualitative evidence on reach, impact, and implementation, enabling triangulation across data sources. The design aligns with the principles of real-world and practice-based evaluation, emphasising learning, external validity, and stakeholder relevance rather than experimental control.

This document presents an accessible synthesis of the findings for clubs, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Full details of data sources, recruitment, and analytical procedures are provided in Appendix A, and a separate academic dissertation and related publications will expand on the methodological detail and theoretical frameworks used.

## Structure of the Report

The remainder of this report is structured into seven main sections that present the study's findings and recommendations. The following section provides an overview of the initiatives delivered across the five participating clubs. Four subsequent sections offer detailed analyses of the community survey results and in-depth case studies, illustrating examples of effective practice and impact. Supplementary survey findings are also available in Appendices B and C. The penultimate section examines the key barriers and facilitators influencing implementation, while the final section synthesises the overarching conclusions and sets out recommendations to guide the future growth and sustainability of MTC.

## Overview of Initiatives Delivered Across Participating Clubs

Addressing community need is central to the implementation and long-term sustainability of the MTC initiative. Community officers within each participating club work with local stakeholders and residents to identify priority issues and design initiatives that respond to local circumstances. Reflecting this locally driven approach, clubs deliver a diverse portfolio of activities targeting populations such as older adults, people living with chronic conditions, individuals with disabilities, school-aged children, and those from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of these initiatives represent resource-intensive, ongoing initiatives embedded within the clubs' community operations, while others are shorter-term or seasonal in nature, responding flexibly to emerging needs and opportunities. The following section provides an overview of programme delivery across participating clubs.



## A description of the initiatives being delivered across the five participating clubs

Initiative	Description	Participant Group
Walking Football	Walking Football is a small-sided, low-impact version of football designed to help older adults and those with limited mobility stay active, social, and connected through the game. Training sessions are scheduled weekly both indoors and outdoors depending on club.	Typically males aged 50+ (increasingly inclusive of women))
Down Syndrome Futsal	Weekly indoor futsal sessions tailored for children and adults with Down syndrome, promoting fun, friendship, and inclusion through structured play.	Children and adults with down syndrome
Football Memories	Informal weekly gatherings at club venues offering conversation, refreshments, and shared memories around football to reduce loneliness and support wellbeing	Older adults, retirees, and people experiencing social isolation
Autism Friendly Football Training	Weekly football sessions adapted for children with autism, providing structured, supportive, and enjoyable opportunities for participation and skill development	Children aged 6-16 years with ASD
Inclusive Match Day Experience	Autism-friendly match night experience featuring designated seating zones and sensory spaces to make attending League of Ireland games more accessible	Children with ASD and their families
Inclusion Camps	Seasonal football camps designed for children and adults with disabilities, focusing on fun, safety, and inclusive participation	Adults and children with disabilities
Football Boot Rooms	Confidential support service providing football boots and clothing to families in need, helping remove barriers to participation.	Community members requiring financial support
International Outreach	Donation of football kits and equipment to partner clubs and schools overseas, supporting sport participation among vulnerable children.	Children in partner communities abroad (e.g., Zambia)
Charity Outreach	Partnership initiatives with local charities, including food drives and awareness events on issues such as suicide prevention	Local charities and community members in need
Breakfast Club	Provision of a healthy breakfast in schools located in disadvantaged areas to support nutrition, concentration, and attendance.	School-children attending DEIS schools
Primary Schools Double Club	Educational workshops integrating football with numeracy and physical literacy to promote learning through sport.	Primary school children



Schools Positive Values Programme	Four-week classroom and activity-based programme promoting positive values, healthy lifestyles, and respect through football.	Primary and secondary school children
Girls Development Programme	Skill development sessions for girls to enhance confidence, ability, and long-term engagement in football.	Teenage girls
Gateway Soccer Connections – Cross Border Programme	Collaborative football programme bringing together schools across borders to promote social inclusion, respect, and cultural understanding.	School-aged children in border communities
Healthy Football League	App-based initiative encouraging fans to walk, run, or cycle to earn points for their club in a national health and activity league.	Local fan base and community supporters
Show Racism the Red Card	Anti-racism education programme delivered in schools, using football to promote inclusion, equality, and respect.	Secondary school children
Football Integration & Refugee Initiatives	Community football sessions for refugees and people in direct provision, fostering inclusion and connection through sport.	Refugees and ethnic minority groups
Pan Disability Football for All Abilities	Weekly inclusive football sessions delivered in partnership with local day centres for children and adults with physical or intellectual disabilities.	People with disabilities
SEED Programme	Collaborative initiative with Gardaí, ETBs, and local authorities supporting youth development, employability, and engagement through sport.	Adolescents and young adults
Climate Captains	Fan engagement initiative promoting environmental awareness and sustainable practices within football clubs and communities.	Club supporters and local communities
Powerchair Football	Adapted football for wheelchair users, providing weekly training and competitive opportunities in a safe and inclusive setting.	Children and adults with physical disabilities
Street Football	Informal after-school sessions in disadvantaged areas providing safe, supervised opportunities for young people to play and socialise.	Children and young people in socially disadvantaged areas
Community Connections	Public wellbeing events, talks, and physical activity sessions promoting positive mental health and social engagement.	Local community members of all ages
JAM Card Collaboration	Partnership supporting spectators with hidden disabilities through the use of “Just a Minute” (JAM) cards to signal need for additional assistance at matches.	Spectators and community members with additional needs



## ***'It has brought me back into the world'* - A Case Study of Walking Football**

Walking Football is an initiative implemented under MTC that promotes physical activity, connection, and mental wellbeing. Open to all, it particularly appeals to, and was designed to re-engage men aged 50+ in sport. The game retains the basic structure of football but restricts running and limits physical contact, creating a safer and more inclusive environment. This modification makes the sport accessible to those with varying levels of mobility, including those recovering from injury, managing chronic illness, or simply looking for a gentler form of exercise. Importantly, Walking Football offers a unique space where older men can rediscover camaraderie, purpose, and play often after retirement or periods of personal loss. It helps challenge societal norms around ageing and masculinity, showing that sport and connection are lifelong pursuits. As a gendered health intervention, it holds great promise for supporting men's health and wellbeing in the community while also offering opportunities to include women.

The following case study on Walking Football within MTC highlights that the weekly sessions not only encourage physical activity but also offer structure, routine, and social interaction which all vital for ageing well. Participants cite improved mental health, reduced isolation, and renewed confidence as key benefits of the programme.

Findings from participant interviews and focus groups with n=26 participants and surveys including open-ended responses (n=59) alongside officer insights (N=2) presented below, highlight the initiative's value in enabling older adults and those with long-term health conditions to remain active, connected, and engaged. For a summary of Walking Football survey data please see Appendix B.



## Key Insights

- 1) **Sustained participation delivers measurable health benefits:** Regular weekly engagement translates into improved mobility, reduced stiffness/pain for many participants, and increased everyday activity.
- 2) **Walking Football supports mental wellbeing:** Sessions provide a reliable stress-break and a noticeable immediate mood uplift; for some participants this contributes to reduced feelings of anxiety and isolation.
- 3) **Strong social outcomes reduce loneliness and build community:** The programme creates new friendships, a weekly social ritual, and informal mutual support that extend beyond the pitch.
- 4) **High acceptability and programme quality drive retention:** Positive experiences with coaches, organisation and the welcoming environment make participants likely to continue and to recommend the programme to others.
- 5) **Impact extends beyond individuals into club and community value:** Walking Football strengthens ties between participants and local clubs, builds volunteer capacity, and offers a low-cost route to community health gains.
- 6) **Barriers limit reach and scale despite strong local impact:** Stigma around the term “walking”, limited visibility, recruitment challenges, and small resource gaps constrain the ability to expand otherwise effective offers.
- 7) **Targeted, modest investments would increase reach and sustainability:** Small, focused funding for promotion, venue capacity, coach support and basic safety/volunteer training is likely to unlock larger returns in participation and wellbeing.
- 8) **Participant-led culture underpins long-term value:** The combination of enjoyment, mild competitiveness, and social ownership creates a resilient model that can be scaled if implementation supports are put in place



Participants in the Walking Football initiative reported high attendance, substantial perceived benefits to general health, sociability and exercise levels, and very high satisfaction with programme delivery (organisation, coaches, accessibility). Taken together, the findings suggest Walking Football is a widely acceptable, engaging intervention with meaningful perceived benefits for participants.

## Physical Activity & Health Benefits

Participants described Walking Football as **an accessible and regular reason to be active**, where the weekly commitment gets them moving when they **otherwise might stay at home**. Many emphasised the simple fact of “doing” as important.

Several participants framed attendance as habitual and non-negotiable once they started, describing **the session as part of their weekly rhythm**.

Almost all (93.1%) participants report that their overall health improved due to Walking Football\*

Players also spoke about **the importance of WF to manage conditions which may be long-term and**

77.6% of participants exercise more since starting Walking Football

**to help with reducing stiffness, also linking the sessions to maintaining movement and slowing decline in mobility.**

They described WF as a suitable, lower-impact way to stay active after full-contact sport became too demanding and without fear of

getting injured. Some accounts emphasised that the activity acted as a prompt for identifying and addressing minor injuries before they became larger problems.

62.5% are better able to perform their usual daily activities without problems

They also linked their participation in WF to **improved ability**

**in routine activities such as walking and household tasks.** There was **recurring reference to increased fitness and energy levels in their overall lives with greater confidence in moving around and renewed interest in other physical activities.**

*“I find myself more inclined to get up and go for walks. My mentality has improved and overall, I feel a lot healthier.”<sup>2</sup>*

61.4% are able to walk better without problems

<sup>2</sup> Quotes from the Walking Football participants/players are indicated in blue font.

\* Percentages are based on those who strongly agree or agree with statements

*“I am feeling more confident in doing simple things. It kick-started my return to fitness. The joy of playing football again gives me such a thrill it's like street soccer when I was a kid.”*

Several participants highlighted that WF strikes a balance where it is less intense than full football but still physically engaging and, for many, sufficiently challenging to feel beneficial. A number of respondents emphasised that the sessions were accessible for a range of abilities **while still offering meaningful physical engagement.**

Over half (54.4%) have less pain since starting Walking Football

A significant proportion (37.5%) are better able to wash and dress without problems

*“I went along not sure what type of game it was. To my great surprise, Walking Football had all the skill moves that a regular game had, control, passing, shooting without any hard tackles or the possibility of picking up an injury. It was perfect! Being involved has satisfied my need to have a game, kick a ball and perhaps feel a lot younger as well.”*

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

Beyond the physical, participants described strong mental health benefits. Walking football offers **stress relief, distraction from everyday worries, and boosts in mood and energy.** For many, it provides **routine and purpose**, particularly for retirees or **those facing life changes such as bereavement.**

*“My wife had died, so I needed something to do and I always enjoyed football, and I've had read and watched stuff about walking football, and I thought, it'd be great to be playing football at 70.”*

60.4% of players report renewed or new interest in other sport and physical activity



*“I have got back into playing team sport, normally as you get older if you participate in sport, you are usually restricted to individual sports. Playing football again changed my perception about age restricting what I am capable of doing. On a number of occasions playing a game of walking football has helped me clear my head of issues and was good for my mental health.”*

Many participants described a clear, **immediate improvement in mood after sessions** such as a sense of “bouncing” or feeling lighter that they notice as they leave the pitch. A common theme was the way WF temporarily **removes everyday worries and provides a form of escapism** while playing. Participants framed the session as a deliberate, reliable mental break, a weekly space where they can shift attention away from anxieties. Some participants emphasised the **cognitive benefits** of concentrating on play such as tactical thinking, team interaction and the flow of the game.

*“The alertness, movement, social aspect, generally better all-round it should be on prescription.”*

*“Everyone there probably has their own weight to carry. People probably have heart problems and all sorts of problems in their lives. Once you go in there, you kind of leave it all behind you.”*

*“It's just great to kick the ball around again. You know, like we did when we were 10. In a way, we're reliving our childhood. In our own minds, we're still that young.”*

Players also spoke about the programme **helping them through periods of low mood or depression**. They described the sessions as a meaningful change to their routine that improved their “headspace” and offered company when they might otherwise be alone.

Through Walking Football,  
70.2% of participants say  
they feel less anxious and  
depressed

*“At 55 years of age, I don't dread retirement anymore. I've something to look forward to.”*

For many, the regularity of sessions provided **structure and a sense of purpose within the week**. Participants said the commitment to come along and the expectation of others reinforced attendance



and bolstered mood. This sense of routine was reported as stabilising and something to look forward to and rely on.

*“The biggest benefit is to my mental fitness. I was 40 in 2017 and was just about reconciled with that when we went into covid lockdown. It wasn’t until I started playing walking football that I realised how much I was locked inside my head. It has brought me back into the world.”*

## **Social connection, identity and reduced loneliness**

The weekly sessions are an important and **reliable social anchor in the week**. Several participants said they had met many new people through the sessions and that those **new ties had extended beyond the pitch**. Participants spoke about social events linked to the group such as seasonal get-togethers, a Christmas evening out, maintaining contact outside of the sessions, and informal post-session chats which strengthened friendships and created a sense of community.

Since starting Walking Football 86.3% of participants report that they feel more sociable

*“We all meet up...It's kind of developing outside of the pitch too.”*

*“I am meeting new people and some that I haven't seen in years. Everyone is in the same age bracket so we all get along.”*

*“A WhatsApp group is maybe not that big a thing, but it goes on all week. Everybody's putting something on there. Funny clips, little things. If somebody was out there that was lonely or anything, they would have a constant stream of contact.”*





Participants reported practical **benefits arising from new friendships** such as introductions to services, offers of lifts, and a sense that someone would be there if needed. These everyday forms of support increased confidence and reduced isolation.

68.4% say that Walking Football has helped them to feel less lonely

*“Socially it's very beneficial. It has introduced me to a new group of friends. It has been a very beneficial experience and is invaluable in my retirement from work.”*

Some participants also reported an **increased sense of attachment to their LOI club, and pride in representing ‘their’ club**, which was seen as a valuable route for reconnecting older fans to the club. Others who did not strongly identify the group with the formal club that helped set it up, still described a clear feeling of belonging to the walking-football group itself through a shared interest and collective identity formed through play.

*“The joy of playing football again gives me such a thrill it's like street soccer when I was a kid. The social side is very good in terms of chatting to people.”*

*“It is a major thrill to represent Waterford FC who I have supported all my life with the fellow participants.”*



## Enjoyment, competition and retention drivers

Participants consistently described Walking Football as fun, engaging and crucially, still competitive in the ways that matter to them. That mixture of enjoyment and a modest competitive edge, delivered in a friendly, low-pressure setting, indicated strong commitment to keep attending further suggesting **sustainability and maintenance of important health benefits**. Many participants talked first about how much they enjoy the activity itself, which makes sessions something participants look forward to, providing an opportunity for men to come together.

*“The thing is that for guys, there aren't a lot of opportunities to do communal things together.*

*Women are so much better than we are. So, for*

*guys of our age to come together and roll back the years. I suppose the team element of it helps then as well, when you're coming down and meeting other lads.”*

96.5% of respondents report that they often or always attend the Walking Football sessions

Although slower and lower impact than full football, the sessions still contain moments of genuine **competition** such as small goals, tactical thinking and the desire to win which many participants said **keeps the game engaging**. Participants described a friendly but committed competitiveness which was not aggressive, but focused and energising. The social dynamics also create gentle accountability that helps sustain attendance.

*“I think the crack, the camaraderie, and also the banter is a big part of it. And the fact that the competitiveness that is in you has an outlet. That we don't, in your normal life, when you get to a certain age, you don't really have that outlet for competitiveness. But it's there. And even though it's walking, you're walking with a purpose.”*

Across interviews, intentions to stay involved were high where many participants reported they would definitely ‘100%’ continue attending. This strong forward-looking commitment is frequently linked to the combined effects of enjoyment, competition, routine and social ties.



## Participant Satisfaction & Recommendations for Sustainability

Participants were **overwhelmingly positive** about their experience of Walking Football. They described sessions as **well organised and clearly communicated, led by skilled, supportive coaches** who strike the **right pace and intensity for everyone**. People said the activities are **enjoyable and engaging**, and that the environment feels **welcoming and inclusive**, so much so that most said they would **happily tell friends or family to come along**. **Accessibility was raised as a real strength** where participants felt the programme made it easy for a wide range of people to join and stay involved (Satisfaction indicators ranged from 93.1% to 100% agreement, See Appendix B).

In terms of recommendations, a recurring concern was the way the activity is perceived. Several participants said the word “walking” carries an image of being old or frail, and that stigma makes it harder to recruit people who would actually benefit or enjoy the sessions. These accounts suggest that image and wording affect willingness to join.

*“The biggest thing is to try to get new players in. It’s still stigmatised. I tried to get a few players in who and they say... we were older. Because they hear the word ‘walker’.”*

Participants felt there was room for more active promotion. They mentioned that the programme is not always visible to the wider community and that more public-facing activity (demonstrations, local publicity) could help.

A number of practical barriers were reported such as limited venue capacity, costs for hiring indoor space (especially in poor weather), and occasional lack of equipment or small funds for basics (first-aid supplies, refreshments, transport). Participants said small resource gaps make running and expanding the sessions harder.

Although many participants said the evening slot suited them, some noted that work and other commitments could prevent attendance for potential recruits. For organisers, finding a time that balances convenience with venue availability remains a practical constraint.

Some participants described a loose relationship with the club that helped set up the sessions and while appreciative of initial support, they did not always identify the group strongly with the club



brand. This mixed feeling may affect how the group is presented externally and who takes responsibility for promotion and resourcing.



## Insights and Recommendations from the MTC officers

Two community officers reflected on how Walking Football was set up, why it works locally, practical challenges, and what is needed to sustain and grow the offer. Their accounts mix personal motivation, operational detail and strategic reflection.

The officers echoed the **power participant benefits found within the structured weekly activity, such as improved mood, social contact and renewed purpose**. They remarked on how the sessions were **effective for living well with long-term conditions in particular** and how Walking Football can provide a routine, help confidence and improve outlook.

*“I think any sport, once you participate in any sport, you always feel better after. Either swimming or cycling or running or whatever, it's good psychologically. That's what I find here.”<sup>3</sup>*

Officers commented on **how recruitment and local outreach rely on relationships and perseverance** where successful starts came from existing networks and partnerships. Where players already existed (e.g., another club or gym), a group could be established quickly; in other areas it took sustained, person-to-person outreach. **Word-of-mouth, local contacts and ‘persistence’** were repeatedly emphasised as the primary recruitment route.

*“There are a few people at it, but we'll keep going and we'll advertise it as much as we can. We'll make contacts. Like anybody that I feel, that I know has played a bit of football, maybe not playing anymore, you're saying, ‘hey, do you know something we're doing Thursday night?’ It's just getting out and talking to people as much as you possibly can.”*

The officers highlighted how **welcome culture is central to retention** where they highlighted the importance of tone and people. In particular, **friendliness, good banter and making newcomers feel included** were core to keeping people attending. Facilitators saw participant behaviour (being welcoming) as a key success factor.

*“When he came back, he was made feel so welcome by everybody that was there. And he really enjoyed it. And they highlighted the fact that he scored three goals in his first outing and that type of thing..., one of the reasons why it's successful is because the people in it are good people and they make people feel welcome.”*

The officers described **how running sessions and related community initiatives incurs real costs** such as venue hire, paying coaches for camps, equipment and incidental expenses. They described how summer camps and other income streams subsidise community work, but warned that funding gaps put roles and some initiatives at risk. Interviewees noted strong goodwill from club leadership (e.g., chairpersons who support community work), which helps with PR and some in-kind support. However,

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes from the community officers are indicated in green font.

they were clear that club enthusiasm does not replace the need for recurrent funding to sustain paid roles and wider county-level outreach.

*“It's a general life thing. Like, if there's no funding, it can't be done, like, because everything costs money, unfortunately”*

The officers **stressed collaboration between clubs, officers, volunteers and local contacts as well as involving participants through shared responsibility** is important so that initiatives are not wholly dependent on one person. They argued for shared ownership to improve longevity.

## Conclusion

Walking Football within the More Than a Club initiative has demonstrated clear and consistent value for participants. Across interviews, focus groups and the survey responses, participants reported improved physical activity, better mobility, tangible mental health benefits, stronger social connections and high levels of satisfaction with delivery. Participants consistently reported that the programme helped them carry out everyday activities more easily, lifted their mood after sessions, and became an enduring part of their weekly routine, outcomes that together point to real gains in health, independence and community cohesion.

These participant-level impacts also create wider community and health-system value where the sessions strengthen local ties to League of Ireland clubs, generate volunteer capacity, and offer a low-cost model that can contribute to prevention and social-prescribing goals. In short, Walking Football is an effective, acceptable intervention that produces multiple, mutually reinforcing benefits for individuals and communities.

To enhance implementation and scale these impacts, modest, targeted actions may help with sustainability such as investing in local promotion that reframes the offer (e.g., reducing stigma, extending reach), secure small recurrent funds for venue and coach costs, and strengthen simple implementation supports (e.g., basic safety training, volunteer pathways). These practical steps will increase reach, improve sustainability and ensure the health and social benefits observed here can be realised by more people.



## ***“It’s his favourite day of the week” - A Case Study of Down Syndrome Futsal***

The Down Syndrome Futsal initiative is an inclusive football programme delivered under the More Than a Club (MTC) model. It forms part of a wider national movement led by the FAI, its ‘Football for All’ Programme, and League of Ireland clubs’ social responsibility initiatives to expand opportunities for people with Down syndrome to participate in futsal. Following the success of Ireland’s first International Down Syndrome Futsal Team at the 2023 Sports Union for athletes with Down Syndrome (SUDS) European Championships, interest and participation have grown rapidly, with clubs across the country developing local futsal teams and hosting inclusive festivals such as the Cairdeas Cup. These developments reflect a growing commitment within Irish football to inclusion, belonging, and lifelong participation.

Within this context, the Down Syndrome Futsal Initiatives evaluated as part of this work offer players structured, enjoyable sessions where the focus is on fun, friendship, and personal growth rather than competition. Coaches adapt activities to meet a wide range of abilities, ensuring that each player experiences success, connection, and confidence. For parents and guardians, the programme also offers valued opportunities for respite, social support, and pride in seeing the players thrive in a supportive team environment.



This case study draws on interviews with parents and guardians (n=10), a facilitator interview, observation data (from both training sessions and the Cairdeas Cup festival) and parent/guardian surveys (n=19) to explore the meaning and impact of participation. The findings are presented under six interrelated themes. Together, they highlight how the Down Syndrome Futsal initiative fosters inclusion, joy, and growth for players, families, and the wider community.

## Key Insights

- 1. Authentic club identity builds belonging and pride:** Wearing the same jersey and being treated as part of a real football club gave participants and families a strong sense of pride, equality, and connection.
- 2. Inclusive participation fosters genuine friendship and connection:** Futsal provided a trusted space where players and families formed real friendships, built confidence, and developed a lasting sense of connection on and beyond the pitch.
- 3. Supportive coaching nurtures confidence and independence:** Through encouragement, trust, and responsibility, players developed self-belief, life skills, and greater independence that extended beyond the futsal pitch.
- 4. Shared experiences strengthened family wellbeing and connection:** Watching their children thrive in a supportive environment gave parents pride, reassurance, and new social connections that enhanced family life beyond the futsal sessions.
- 5. Enjoyment drives participation and connection:** A fun, positive atmosphere kept players motivated and engaged, making futsal a highlight of the week and a joyful space for everyone involved.
- 6. Consistency and support are key to sustaining success:** Parents and facilitators emphasised that consistent weekly delivery, stable resources, and continued organisational backing are essential to maintaining the initiative's impact and future growth.

## Belonging and Identity through Inclusive Football

A strong sense of belonging was central to the Down Syndrome Futsal Programme. Parents described how the players felt part of a 'real' football club rather than a separate activity. **The consistent structure, club identity, and inclusive ethos created pride and ownership.** Players were not simply attending a session, they were representing their club, wearing the same kit and colours as any other team. Many parents highlighted how the players pride in wearing the club gear symbolised **achievement, belonging, and being "accepted into the team."**

*"It feels more like a club than anything else she would have done. I like that type of thing."*

*"It's his favourite day of the week."*

*"He loves coming up here. There's not a week that he'd miss it for anything."*

Being part of a recognised **League of Ireland club** gave players and families a visible identity and **sense of equality.** The jersey was seen as a badge of inclusion and recognition, worn far beyond training sessions. Parents spoke of **the players excitement in preparing for futsal nights** and the pride that came with representing their club.

100% agreed their children expressed excitement about attending the Futsal sessions

*"I don't think I've seen him without his jersey on since he joined."*

*"They play for a League of Ireland club... and they know they're part of something bigger."*

Parents and coaches described the mutual care and respect evident throughout the sessions. Players supported one another, celebrated small successes, and ensured everyone was included. Observation data confirmed this **atmosphere of empathy and teamwork that strengthened collective identity.**

*"They all get on together, they all support each other. You see them hugging each other there or picking each other up."*



**Belonging also extended to parents**, who found reassurance and understanding among others on the sidelines. Several described the comfort of meeting families who shared similar experiences and the **joy of seeing the players being accepted and thriving**.

*“I’ve picked up information from the other parents... I’ve learned from those who have gone ahead of me.”*

For participants and families alike, belonging was about recognition, pride, and inclusion—being part of something larger than themselves. Through authentic football culture and respectful, participant-centred practice, **the programme nurtured identity, confidence, and community** both on and off the pitch.



## Social Connection and Friendship

The Down Syndrome Futsal Programme created strong friendships and social connection both on and off the pitch. Parents described how **players bonded quickly and looked forward to seeing each other each week**. For many, it was one of the few places where friendships developed naturally and everyone felt included.

94% agreed their children talked about friends from the programme outside of the sessions

*“He’s made real friends here.”*

*“They all get on great together. They love seeing each other.”*

Parents reported growing confidence in communication and interaction. **Players became more outgoing and engaged**, chatting more during and after sessions, and maintaining contact outside of training.

*“He’s much more sociable now.”*

*“Excited about attending, chatting more to fellow players, getting involved more in play.”*

100% agreed their children had shown improvements in social interactions with peers since starting the programme

Sessions were characterised by teamwork, laughter, and mutual respect. Observations noted how players celebrated goals together and looked out for one another throughout play. Parents also valued the **friendships and support formed among families on the sidelines**, describing a welcoming and understanding environment that mirrored the players’ connections on the pitch. Through these shared experiences, the programme built a **genuine community of friendship, trust, and connection** that extended beyond the futsal sessions.



## Confidence, Independence, and Life Skills

Parents described how participation in the Down Syndrome Futsal Programme gave players **greater confidence, pride, and belief in their abilities**. Players approached training with enthusiasm and

94% agreed their children were more confident in trying new activities since starting the programme

assurance, reflecting a growing sense of competence and belonging. One parent said the coaches had “*given him so much confidence,*” while another noted that her sons “*confidence has grown immensely, and the friendships made are long-lasting.*”.

This confidence often developed alongside independence. Parents spoke of players taking responsibility for getting ready, packing gear, and reminding parents about training times.

*“John’s feeling of belonging has increased. He loves getting ready for training by himself and can’t wait for Tuesday nights.”*

*“He’s asking to go, getting himself ready, and reminding me what time it starts.”*

76% agreed their children demonstrated more independence in daily activities since starting the programme

82% agreed their children were better at following instructions since starting the programme

Learning the rules and playing as part of a team also **helped players develop focus, patience, and communication**. Parents described small but meaningful changes, such as listening better, learning how to take turns and working more cooperatively with others.

Facilitators encouraged independence by allowing players to make choices and contribute to sessions. As one coach explained, “*I don’t dictate to them what to do... I let them govern what we do.*” This approach supported decision-making, responsibility, and confidence in a supportive setting.

Through encouragement, trust, and shared success, the programme helped players grow in confidence and independence while developing everyday life skills that extended beyond the pitch.



## Family Wellbeing and Support

Participation in the Down Syndrome Futsal Programme was described as beneficial not only for players but also for their families. Parents frequently spoke about the **joy of watching the players play, the pride in seeing them accepted, and the emotional lift that came from being part of a supportive community**. The programme offered reassurance, respite, and shared understanding among parents who faced similar challenges.

77% said it increased their families' sense of community

*"Seeing the team enjoying themselves and having fun makes you smile."*

65% said they felt less isolated due to the connections made with other parents/guardians

For many families, **futsal evenings became a highlight of the week**—an opportunity to connect with others, celebrate progress, and experience inclusion through the players participation. Parents described how these positive experiences improved mood and strengthened family

relationships. The sidelines also provided a valuable space for informal support. **Parents exchanged advice, compared experiences, and built friendships that reduced feelings of isolation.** As one explained, *“I’ve picked up information from the other parents... I’ve learned from those who have gone ahead of me.”* This sense of shared understanding contributed to a collective wellbeing that extended beyond the players themselves. Families expressed gratitude to coaches and organisers for creating a safe, welcoming environment where both players and parents felt valued. For some, the **sessions offered rare moments of calm and connection where there is time to relax, chat, and enjoy their son or daughter’s success in a space free from judgement.**

*“it’s great to see my teen accepted into the team. Great to see the social connections between the players, wonderful to see coaches’ kindness and they are very patient and supportive”*

In this way, the programme not only enhanced players’ health and confidence but also supported the wellbeing of families. It provided a shared sense of purpose, pride, and belonging that strengthened family bonds and connected parents to a broader community of understanding and support.



## Inclusive and Enjoyable Participation

Enjoyment was the defining feature of the Down Syndrome Futsal Programme. Parents and coaches consistently described sessions as lively, positive, and full of laughter. Players looked forward to training each week, arriving with excitement and leaving with smiles.

*“It’s his favourite day of the week.”*

*“He loves coming up here. There’s not a week that he’d miss it for anything.”*

Parents highlighted the fun, relaxed environment where players were encouraged to try their best and celebrate small successes. The balance of structure and playfulness helped everyone feel comfortable and motivated to keep coming back. *“They just love every minute of it,”* one parent said, while another described how *“it’s great to see them all enjoying themselves.”*

Coaches and parents emphasised that sessions were inclusive but never pressured. Activities were adapted so that all players could participate fully and experience success. Observations noted the light-hearted atmosphere and camaraderie as players joked, cheered, and celebrated together.

100% said the activities were well suited to their children’s abilities and needs



*“As soon as the door is opened, kids and adults jump out of the car with enthusiasm.”*

*“Plenty of jokes and laughs throughout.”*

The combination of fun, friendship, and encouragement created an uplifting environment that players and families valued deeply. **Enjoyment was not just an outcome of participation., it was central to the programme’s success and sustainability.**

## Sustaining and Strengthening the Programme

Parents, coaches, and facilitators spoke passionately about the importance of sustaining and growing the Down Syndrome Futsal Programme. There was widespread appreciation for the impact achieved to date, along with a strong desire to see it continue, expand, and reach more participants. Parents described how much the sessions meant to the players and how the **programme had become an integral part of their weekly lives.**

*“He’d be lost without it.”*

*“It’s the highlight of his week.”*

Many felt the programme had found a successful model that should be supported long-term. They emphasised the **need for stability in venues, resources, and staffing to maintain consistency and quality.** Weekly delivery without breaks was seen as especially important, as routine and predictability helped players feel secure, motivated, and connected.

*“When it stops even for a week, he’s asking when it’s back on.”*

*“When it’s on a break, he asks about it constantly. The routine means everything to him.”*

100% were satisfied with the quality of the coaching

Parents expressed deep gratitude for the coaches and volunteers, praising their patience, kindness, and commitment, while recognising that continued success depended on more support and resources.

*“They’re doing an amazing job, but they need more help and funding to keep it going.”*

Facilitators echoed these views, noting that while enthusiasm and commitment were high, sustainability required additional investment and organisational backing.

*“We’ve built something really special here, but it needs proper support to last.”*

*“The interest is there. It just needs more awareness and consistency.”*



Parents also spoke about the **value of building pathways as players age and creating more local and regional opportunities to play**, helping to maintain engagement and connection over time.

*“It would be great if there were more teams, more matches, and more regular training.”*

*“We’d love to see more people getting involved—it’s too good to lose.”*

Across interviews, there was a clear belief that the programme’s strengths—its inclusivity, enjoyment, and sense of community, made it a model worth sustaining and expanding. Stakeholders saw ongoing support from clubs, national bodies, and funders as essential to protecting the gains achieved and ensuring continued growth.

100% would recommend  
the programme to others

## Conclusion

The Down Syndrome Futsal Programme highlights how inclusive, community-based sport can transform lives by fostering confidence, connection, and joy. Delivered through the More Than a Club and Football for All frameworks, the programme provides authentic football experiences where players feel pride, belonging, and equality, while families gain support and shared purpose. When delivered consistently, with skilled facilitation, and a positive, respectful atmosphere, the sessions become a valued part of participants’ lives. The findings underline the importance of continued investment and structured support to sustain and expand this successful model, ensuring more individuals and families can benefit from its inclusive and life-enhancing impact.



## ***“For the first time in his life he has friends” - A Case Study of Football Initiatives for Children with Autism***

The football initiatives at Waterford FC for children with autism comprise two linked initiatives—the ‘Football Friends’ training sessions and the ‘Inclusive Match Day Experience’. Developed as part of the MTC framework, these initiatives provide structured, supportive, and inclusive football opportunities for children and young people with autism. The weekly Football Friends sessions offer a consistent, fun, and non-competitive environment where participants can learn football skills, enjoy physical activity, and build friendships at their own pace. The Inclusive Match Day Experience extends these benefits beyond training, allowing children and their families to attend League of Ireland fixtures in an adapted stadium environment supported by trained ambassadors, designated seating, and a sensory room.

Together, these initiatives aim to make football genuinely accessible while promoting social inclusion, confidence, and family wellbeing. Recreational and social opportunities for children with autism are often limited, and parents described how these initiatives provide a rare and valued opportunity for participation and connection. This case study draws on qualitative interviews with parents, coaches and ambassadors involved in the initiatives, supported by observational data from both initiatives. The following sections present key themes illustrating how inclusive football can create joy, confidence, and belonging for children with autism and their families.



## Key Insights

- 1. Belonging builds confidence and identity:** Being part of a genuine football club fostered pride, self-esteem, and a powerful sense of inclusion among children with autism, helping them see themselves as valued players rather than outsiders.
- 2. Connection through shared experience:** The structured, inclusive environment of the Autism Football Initiatives enabled children to build real friendships, improve communication, and experience the joy of social belonging.
- 3. Learning through play builds confidence and independence:** The structured, supportive nature of the Autism Football Initiatives helps children develop patience, communication, and everyday functional skills that complement therapeutic goals and promote independence.
- 4. Joy, connection, and consistency sustain impact:** The Football Friends and Inclusive Match Day Experience initiatives create a powerful sense of inclusion and pride for children and families. Their success depends on the empathy of facilitators, reliable weekly delivery, and continued investment to sustain and expand these opportunities.



## Self-Esteem and Belonging

Parents consistently described the transformative effect that the Autism Football Initiatives had on their children’s confidence and sense of belonging. Many reported that before joining the sessions, opportunities for inclusion in community sport were limited or non-existent. The initiatives gave children **a place where they were understood, supported, and valued for who they are**. The sense of pride associated with being part of a real football club where wearing the jersey, training at the grounds, and being treated as players was especially powerful.

*“For the first time in his life he has friends.”*

*“He feels like he’s part of something real—he’s not different here.”*

*“He puts on that jersey every week and stands taller.”*

Parents and facilitators noted **visible improvements in children’s self-belief, independence, and emotional expression**. Regular attendance, consistent routines, and encouragement from coaches

helped participants build confidence both on and off the pitch. Being part of a team gave them a sense of identity and purpose that extended into home and school life.

*“He used to hang back before, now he runs straight out to join in.”*

*“She’s more confident now, not just here but in everything.”*

Facilitators also recognised the importance of creating an environment where every achievement, large or small, was celebrated. This inclusive ethos, coupled with patience and positive reinforcement, helped **children experience success and recognition, strengthening their sense of self-worth.**

*“When they score or even just kick the ball right, everyone cheers. You can see it in their faces—it means the world.”*

## Social Development and Connections

Parents described how the Autism Football Initiatives **created opportunities for genuine social connection**, often in ways their children had not experienced before. The structured, supportive setting helped participants to communicate, share, and cooperate with others in a relaxed and enjoyable environment. Several parents said that their children had begun to interact more confidently, both on and off the pitch, as their comfort within the group grew.

*“He’s interacting more with others, even outside of football.”*

*“He looks forward to seeing the other kids every week—it’s the highlight of his week.”*

Friendships developed naturally through shared experiences, celebration, and teamwork. Parents noted that these bonds extended beyond the sessions, with children talking about teammates at home and looking forward to every training day. For many families, this was **the first time their child had sustained peer relationships.**

*“He would have never had friends before, he would never interact, he’s going to be nine at Christmas, this is the first year that he’s asked for a birthday party, because for the first time in his life he has friends.”*



*“He talks about the players all week and can’t wait to get back out there.”*

Coaches and ambassadors also recognised the social growth that occurred through regular participation. The consistent routines, positive reinforcement, and inclusive ethos of the sessions helped participants engage more readily with others, take turns, and support their teammates.

*“They’re learning from each other all the time. You can see the teamwork and encouragement grow every week.”*

Together, these **experiences strengthened social communication, empathy, and mutual respect**—key developmental outcomes that extended beyond football and into everyday life.



## Building Life Skills

Beyond enjoyment and social connection, parents and coaches highlighted how participation in the Autism Football Initiatives supported the development of important life skills. The structure of the sessions such as clear routines, consistent expectations, and small group activities, helped children practise listening, following instructions, and managing emotions in a calm, supportive environment. Parents described **visible progress in attention, focus, and self-control**.

*“He’s learning to wait his turn, to listen, and to take part properly.”*

*“He would have struggled before if something didn’t go his way, but now he just keeps going.”*

Coaches and ambassadors observed similar developments, noting that many participants were becoming more patient, adaptable, and responsible through the regular rhythm of training. Learning to work as part of a team and respond positively to guidance translated into **greater independence and confidence in other aspects of daily life**.

*“You can see the difference every week—more eye contact, more listening, more understanding what’s happening.”*

*“They’re learning teamwork, and that carries into everything else they do.”*

Parents also spoke about **improvements in emotional awareness and resilience**. Small successes on the pitch; whether passing accurately, scoring, or coping with mistakes, helped children build persistence and pride in their efforts.

*“He’s calmer now, more confident. When something goes wrong, he doesn’t give up—he tries again.”*

For some families, progress achieved through **football complemented developmental goals that are often addressed in therapy**, particularly in the context of long waiting lists for support.

*“It was a big learning curve for him to have people in his space...we could be two years on the waiting list to go to OT to learn basic things like dressing yourself,*



*waiting in a queue, those sort of things...Joe is now able to put on the bib, take off the bib, he's able to queue in a line for the drills."*

These experiences highlight how inclusive sport, delivered with consistency and care, can **complement clinical and educational supports** by creating real-world opportunities to practise everyday skills in a positive and empowering environment.

## Enjoyment, Family Wellbeing and Sustainability

Parents consistently described how the *Football Friends* and *Inclusive Match Day Experience* initiatives **brought immense enjoyment to their children and families**. Sessions were the highlight of the week, offering laughter, excitement, and a sense of belonging in a safe and familiar setting. The opportunity to play, learn, and socialise without fear of judgment created visible joy and confidence among participants.

*"He loves it. It's the one thing he looks forward to all week."*

*"It's pure joy on their faces—just seeing them run out onto the pitch."*

The atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement fostered by coaches and ambassadors was central to this enjoyment. Parents **praised their empathy, adaptability, and patience in meeting each child's needs**, while ensuring that every success was celebrated.

*"They're just so patient with them. Every child gets a chance to shine."*

For many families, these initiatives provided far more than physical activity. They **offered connection, community, and respite** from the isolation that can accompany caring for a child with additional needs. Parents described the emotional comfort of being among others who understood their daily challenges, creating opportunities for shared advice and support.

*"You just feel part of something. Everyone gets it—you don't have to explain anything."*

*"As a parent, it's a very lonely world to be in... but to be able to come and talk to*



*other adults who know what you are going through—it's just an amazing place for the adults and for the kids that do it."*

The Inclusive Match Day Experience extended these benefits beyond the training pitch. For many families, **attending a League of Ireland fixture together was previously unimaginable**. With sensory supports, designated seating, and the guidance of trained ambassadors, families could enjoy the excitement of live football in an environment designed for comfort and inclusion. Parents described the **pride of seeing their children visibly part of the club and community**.

*"Whether they win or lose, the players always wave over at our guys. That's very emotional as well, that they take the time to look over and give them the wave."*

*"Without the assistance, you're going to be kind of up in a heap yourself... that whole anxiety and everything is taken out of it."*

Parents and facilitators alike highlighted the **importance of consistency, routine, and stable staffing** for sustaining progress. Weekly delivery helped children feel secure and supported, while familiar faces fostered trust. However, sustaining this model requires adequate resources, training, and the continued commitment of coaches and ambassadors.

*"When it's off for a week, he's asking every day when it's back on."*

*"We've built something really special here—it just needs support to keep it going."*

Looking ahead, participants identified **opportunities to widen access** while retaining the supportive environment that defines success. Expanding the number of Football Friends sessions and recruiting additional ambassadors could help more families benefit without compromising quality. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how joy, connection, and inclusion both on the pitch and in the stadium can strengthen family wellbeing and foster a culture of belonging within the club and wider community.





## Conclusion

This case study of Waterford FC's autism-specific initiatives demonstrates the transformative impact that tailored, inclusive football initiatives can have on children with autism and their families. Through Football Friends and the Inclusive Match Day Experience, children have developed socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively, while parents have found connection, reassurance, and a sense of community.

Across the four themes, the findings show how these initiatives nurture self-esteem and belonging, foster social interaction and communication, and help children practise everyday life skills in an inclusive, enjoyable environment. Beyond the pitch, they strengthen family wellbeing, reduce isolation, and create a shared sense of identity and pride linked to the club.

Critical success factors include the empathy and adaptability of coaches and ambassadors, the non-judgmental environment, and the consistent structure that allows children to engage at their own pace. However, sustaining this quality of delivery requires continued investment, training, and organisational support. The initiatives currently depend on a small, committed team of staff and volunteers which is a strength that also represents a vulnerability common to community-based inclusion initiatives.

While these initiatives help address inequities in recreational opportunities for children with autism, their future development will depend on widening access without compromising the supportive atmosphere that defines success. Expanding Football Friends sessions, training additional

ambassadors, and sustaining the Inclusive Match Day Experience will be essential to maintaining progress. Together, these initiatives illustrate how inclusive football can complement clinical and educational supports, providing authentic, community-based opportunities for growth and participation.



## ***'Not Just Lip Service'* - Exploring Community Perceptions of 'More than a Club'**

Understanding how the wider community perceives the MTC initiative is essential to assessing its reach, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability. Football clubs depend on the trust and goodwill of the communities they represent, and the credibility of their community role rests on how this work is recognised and valued locally. To capture these perspectives, a community and stakeholder survey was conducted across the five participating League of Ireland clubs: Bray Wanderers FC, Cork City FC, Finn Harps FC, Waterford FC, and Wexford FC. The survey aimed to explore public awareness of club-led community initiatives, perceived social impact, and willingness to engage with or support future initiatives.

The survey was distributed using a mixed-mode recruitment strategy designed to maximise inclusivity and reach. Responses were collected through targeted email invitations, social media promotion, QR codes displayed in community settings, and in-person data collection by research assistants on match nights. This approach enabled engagement with a diverse cross-section of stakeholders including supporters, parents, local residents, players, volunteers, the business community and representatives of community and partner organisations.



The questionnaire explored five key domains: (1) familiarity and communication of the clubs' community work; (2) perceptions of responsibility and alignment with community needs; (3) perceived impact across social, cultural, and health domains; (4) willingness to participate in, volunteer for, or donate to future initiatives; and (5) overall sentiment toward the club. A total of n=719 responses to the survey were received across the five clubs. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative comments were thematically reviewed and integrated to illustrate the lived meanings behind the numerical trends (See Appendix C for a summary of community survey results). This mixed-methods design enables a richer interpretation of findings revealing not only how many people are

aware of or support MTC activity, but also why these views are held and how they relate to trust, visibility, and local identity. The analysis presented in this chapter highlights widespread goodwill toward MTC and strong perceived social value, while also identifying recurring challenges around communication reach, staffing capacity, and the need for sustained organisational support. The following sections present these insights thematically, integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence under six interrelated themes.

## Key Insights

- 1) More than a Club is widely viewed as a **“game changer” for inclusion**, creating visible and valued opportunities for people of all abilities and backgrounds to participate, belong, and connect through football.
- 2) Awareness of MTC is high, but **clearer and more consistent communication could strengthen visibility** and help more people engage with and support the clubs’ community work.
- 3) MTC has become a **visible source of local pride** linking football, place, and shared identity in ways that strengthen community connection and reinforce the club’s reputation as a valued civic asset.
- 4) Communities demonstrate **strong goodwill toward their local clubs**, with clear willingness to volunteer, donate, or participate - an untapped resource that could strengthen sustainability if actively mobilised.
- 5) MTC’s community impact is widely recognised, yet **its continued growth is limited by financial and operational capacity**. The initiative’s strong social legitimacy has not yet translated into sustained investment or resources, leaving its long-term sustainability vulnerable without stronger structural support.
- 6) **Community engagement is viewed as central, not supplementary to a football club’s identity**, strengthening trust, goodwill, and long-term relationships between clubs and their communities.

## Perceived social impact and inclusion

### Survey Snapshot

- 77% believed MTC is having a **significant impact on social inclusion** for marginalised groups.
- 84% believed MTC is having a **significant impact on participation in sport and physical activity in their community**.
- 76% believed MTC is having a significant impact on **reducing social isolation in their communities**.
- 76% believed MTC is having a significant impact on **youth education or development in their community**.
- 90% or more perceived **positive effects across all social domains measured**.

Survey findings across the five participating League of Ireland clubs revealed an **exceptionally strong public perception of MTC as a catalyst for inclusion, participation, and social connection**. Respondents viewed the initiative as an authentic vehicle for bringing communities together through football, with benefits extending well beyond the pitch. Many recognised that club-led activities have made sport accessible to groups historically under-represented in football, particularly individuals with disabilities, young people, and those from migrant backgrounds. Qualitative responses deepened this picture, portraying MTC as a rare and valued source of belonging, confidence, and opportunity:

*“The work being done is creating so many new opportunities for people... it has been a game changer for the youth and teenagers.”*

*“By reaching out to all ages and abilities across the community they are encouraging people from all factions of life to consider their commonalities as opposed to their differences through the enjoyment of playing soccer.”*



*“The work you do is amazing and is having a great impact in the community—especially migrant integration, creating a sense of belonging for all regardless of background.”*

Several respondents highlighted the **transformative role of inclusive football for people with disabilities**, noting that few comparable opportunities exist elsewhere. These initiatives were viewed not as symbolic gestures but as *tangible pathways* into sport and community life:

*“Persons with disabilities in the whole of the county have virtually no opportunity to become involved and included in any team sport were it not for the efforts of the [Club] initiatives—it has been a game changer for the youth and teenagers who do have ability despite their disability.”*

*“I really believe that this makes the club better—that it is including everyone that wants to play football. The pride when they say they play for [Club] is unbelievable.”*

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that MTC is widely seen as a **legitimate and valued force for social inclusion**. It provides visible, meaningful opportunities for participation, reinforces community cohesion, and strengthens civic identity. The findings underline the initiative’s role as a trusted local platform for promoting health, connection, and equality which are key foundations for sustainable community engagement.



## Visibility, communication and public awareness

### Survey Snapshot

- 85% of respondents said they were familiar with their club's community work.
- Over 85% agreed that clubs have a responsibility to deliver community initiatives.
- Over 85% agreed that clubs should be spending money on community initiatives.
- 79% believed this work is aligned with community needs and 91% agreed it is having a positive impact locally.

Survey findings indicate that **public awareness and support for the League of Ireland clubs' community initiatives are very strong**. A large majority of respondents reported being familiar with their club's community work and believed such work was both appropriate and impactful. This suggests that MTC has achieved considerable visibility across the participating communities. However, the data also reveal a small but meaningful **proportion of respondents who were unaware of specific activities, highlighting ongoing challenges in communication and public engagement**.

Qualitative responses illustrate this dual narrative of recognition and opportunity. Many stakeholders praised community officers and local staff for visible, hands-on outreach:

*"Everyone is aware of the community side – [Officer] has involved people from all sides of the city and loads of associations that would be overlooked as not worthy of the time – [Officer] is a great ambassador for the city, not just the club."*

At the same time, others described limited knowledge of particular initiatives or uncertainty about how to get involved:

*"I wasn't aware of the community work. But I agree there should be more done to instil pride and activity in the club and the community. It's a super ground and more should be done to attract footfall, activity, pride and participation."*



*“There’s been an impact, that much is for sure, but like everything, more can always be done. Becoming more visible in these areas, making a bigger deal of it with media and social media, and making more people aware of the opportunities and the rewards in becoming volunteers as well as participants should all be a focus going forward.”*

These comments highlight **the value of strategic communication** not only to increase participation but also to showcase the breadth of outcomes already being achieved. Respondents suggested simple, cost-effective measures such as stronger social-media presence, community newsletters, school outreach, and visible representation at local events.

Taken together, the survey data and community narratives suggest that **MTC has established a positive public reputation** but could amplify its influence through improved visibility. Sharing more stories of success and **broadening communication channels would help convert latent goodwill into active engagement**, ensuring that the initiative’s impact is fully recognised and supported across the wider community.



## Local pride, identity and civic value

### Survey Snapshot

- 72% of respondents believed MTC is having a significant impact on **increasing pride in the local area**.
- 70% believed MTC is having a significant impact on **strengthening their community's cultural identity**.
- 79% believed MTC is having a significant impact on **improving the club's reputation as a community-focused organisation**.

Survey findings show that MTC is strongly associated with feelings of civic pride, community identity, and belonging. Respondents consistently reported that club-led community initiatives have deepened local attachment and generated a sense of shared ownership in their clubs' successes, both on and off the field. High levels of agreement that **MTC strengthens cultural identity and enhances club reputation** suggest that the initiative contributes meaningfully to how people experience their community and perceive their local club's role within it.

Qualitative responses vividly illustrated this **connection between football and local pride**. Many respondents described MTC as giving their community a renewed sense of visibility, optimism, and collective purpose:

*"The impact [club] have had within this community has been huge and it shows in day-to-day actions as kids now carry footballs and wear their jerseys with pride — they feel part of the club and, more importantly, part of their community."*

*"Ever since I started attending games... I felt part of something, a family growing together."*

Such expressions reveal how **MTC's community initiatives foster both individual belonging and collective identity**. The initiatives ranging from inclusive football sessions to family-friendly matchday



activities, serve as social meeting points where relationships are built, memories formed, and community narratives strengthened.

Respondents also emphasised the symbolic visibility of inclusion through club colours, photographs, and event coverage. These visible markers of participation were described as “proof” that the community work is authentic and impactful:

*“The significant impact can be measured on the smiles of the people who took part in the Down Syndrome event... brilliant photos which create lifelong positive experiences.”*

*“Photos and short videos showing real people make it clear this work isn’t tokenism — it’s meaningful.”*

The findings underscore that MTC is perceived not merely as a social initiative but as **part of the cultural fabric of each club’s community**. The initiative has become a symbol of shared values and local pride, reinforcing trust and strengthening the social licence of League of Ireland clubs to act as community anchors.

## Goodwill and willingness to support future initiatives

### Survey Snapshot

- 85% of respondents said they were more likely to support their club’s future community initiatives (e.g., volunteering, donating, or participating) after learning about MTC activities.
- 76% said they were more likely to attend more matches after learning about MTC activities.
- 91% held an overall positive opinion of their local club in general.

Survey findings highlight a substantial **reservoir of public goodwill toward League of Ireland clubs and their community initiatives**. Most respondents reported being willing to support future activities



through volunteering, donations, or participation, and more than three-quarters indicated they were more likely to attend matches after learning about MTC initiatives. These results suggest that community work not only benefits participants directly but also enhances engagement with the club as a whole.

Qualitative comments provided valuable insight into the nature of this goodwill. Many respondents described feeling **more connected to their local club and motivated to contribute when they saw tangible examples of community impact**:

*“Since learning about the community work, I’m much more likely to support their future efforts.”*

*“If asked, I’d volunteer time. People want to help when they see the impact.”*

*“I would definitely participate in any fundraising the club would do for community work.”*

These expressions of readiness illustrate that **MTC is helping to foster reciprocal relationships between clubs and their communities**: as clubs demonstrate social value, residents and supporters respond with increased loyalty, advocacy, and practical support.

Respondents also noted that visible, inclusive activities make **people feel proud of their clubs and more inclined to contribute financially or through volunteering**. This aligns with broader evidence from community sport research, where trust and emotional connection are key drivers of sustained engagement. One respondent articulated this dynamic clearly:

*“Knowing this, I feel more connected to the club and motivated to support future initiatives—whether by volunteering, donating, or encouraging others to get involved. It’s inspiring to see a football club lead with heart and purpose.”*

Findings demonstrate that **MTC has generated widespread enthusiasm and trust that could be harnessed more strategically**. Establishing simple, visible pathways for supporters and community members to contribute such as; structured volunteering, community fundraising, or partnership



opportunities, could transform this goodwill into a sustainable engine for long-term community engagement.

## Perceived resource and capacity constraints

### Survey Snapshot

- *Over 90% of respondents agreed that the MTC Initiatives are having a positive impact in the community.*
- *Only 57 % believed MTC is having a significant impact in attracting investment or sponsorship.*

While quantitative data confirm widespread belief in the positive social impact of MTC, qualitative insights reveal that many community members recognise the strain placed on clubs delivering this work with modest resources. **Respondents consistently described club staff and volunteers as overstretched and delivering high social returns despite limited infrastructure and funding.** The finding that only 57 % perceived a significant impact in attracting investment or sponsorship reinforces these concerns, suggesting that social credibility has not yet translated into financial stability.

*“It’s a terrible indication of how badly our communities are funded when our clubs are stretched to do this type of community work.”*

*“Their commitment to youth development, inclusion and community engagement reinforces their role as more than just a football club—they are a vital community partner. Continued support and investment in these areas can further enhance their positive impact.”*

This highlights the tension between **impact and capacity**, with MTC’s visible success creating both pride and pressure. **Clubs are recognised as credible and effective community anchors, but their ability to sustain delivery is undermined by reliance on short-term or under-resourced structures.** Respondents viewed sustainable investment not as a luxury but as essential to protecting the social gains already achieved through MTC.

Several respondents offered constructive, pragmatic suggestions for strengthening reach and efficiency, including stronger local partnerships, improved facilities, and targeted funding for programme coordination and transport. **Community members expressed readiness to help expand the reach of MTC but emphasised that additional resources and local collaboration are prerequisites for growth.**

*“If investment in facilities can be found, then the future is very bright.”*

*“A lot of the initiatives are all based in [town]; it should be spread throughout the whole county.”*

*“Go into schools and offer each student a free ticket... parents will bring them and they’ll feel the love for football.”*

Overall, the data demonstrate that MTC’s strength lies in its authenticity and community trust, yet **its long-term potential depends on converting social impact into sustainable investment and partnership support.** Without adequate resources, the ability of clubs to maintain inclusive, high-quality initiatives at scale will remain limited placing at risk the very social value that communities so clearly recognise.

## Community work as core to club-community relationships

### Survey Snapshot

- *94% of respondents agreed that MTC improves the club’s reputation as a community-focused organisation.*

Survey results also reveal a powerful link between MTC and public perceptions of trust, reputation, and belonging. **The vast majority of respondents regarded community initiatives as vital to a club’s social credibility and as key drivers of positive relationships with supporters and local residents.** This



finding reinforces that the community sees engagement work not as an optional add-on but as a defining part of what it means to be “more than a club.”

*“Their commitment to youth development, inclusion, and community wellbeing demonstrates that they are deeply rooted in the values of the area. This strengthens their reputation and makes them a club that people can genuinely feel proud to support.”*

Qualitative evidence underscored that **genuine, consistent outreach rebuilds trust and deepens community connection**. Respondents who had previously felt detached from their local club described how regular, visible initiatives helped restore confidence and pride in the club’s role:

*“The club hasn’t historically had a good relationship with the greater football community of [county], but it is clear to see that the community programmes being run over the last few years have strengthened the LOI club and more so the greater community.”*

*“Community initiatives have helped, but more consistent engagement is required to bring everyone back on board.”*

Stakeholders also expressed a clear expectation that football clubs should maintain active community engagement. **Community work is increasingly perceived as a core responsibility of professional clubs which is an essential element of their social licence to operate**. As one respondent put it:

*“They should be obliged to involve the community within the club as that is important for the general community and should be a precursor for any grants being allocated.”*

Many respondents viewed MTC as **evidence that clubs are giving back**, with outreach activities reflecting shared values and mutual benefit rather than one-way charity. They saw this reciprocity as essential for sustaining both community trust and fan loyalty.

*“I think the FC should absolutely be doing community work—to give back, to encourage a deeper connection, and to improve support for the club also.”*



Overall, the combined evidence suggests that **MTC has fundamentally reshaped how communities perceive the role of their local football clubs from sporting entities to civic partners.** Consistent, visible engagement strengthens trust, nurtures belonging, and fosters long-term community relationships that extend beyond match days. **This relational foundation, built through authentic and inclusive practice, represents one of the most enduring legacies of the MTC initiative.**

## Conclusion

The community survey findings demonstrate that MTC has achieved widespread visibility, legitimacy, and trust across participating communities. Quantitative and qualitative evidence together show that MTC is not perceived as symbolic or peripheral work but as a meaningful, credible, and valued expression of what football clubs can contribute to society. The initiative is strongly associated with inclusion, civic pride, and a renewed sense of belonging among local people. At the same time, the findings highlight clear conditions for sustaining and expanding this impact. Public goodwill, willingness to volunteer, and enthusiasm for participation are abundant, yet the capacity of clubs to meet this demand is constrained by limited staffing, resources, and communication reach. Addressing these gaps will be vital to translating community support into long-term sustainability.

Overall, the evidence affirms that MTC has strengthened relationships between football clubs and their communities, positioning them as trusted civic partners in wellbeing and inclusion. By embedding community work as a core club function and investing in the structures that sustain it, MTC can continue to deliver lasting social value for people and places across Ireland.



## Implementation Insights: barriers, facilitators and key success factors

This section summarises stakeholder perspectives on how the MTC programme has been implemented across the five clubs. It explores what stakeholders say has helped or hindered the delivery of MTC in practice, and to identify the conditions that enable sustained community impact. It draws on 14 qualitative interviews conducted over 2024–2025 with the five community officers (n=9), club CEOs (n=2), Healthy Ireland representatives (n=2), and the FAI Community Development Manager (n=1). The findings were organised into six overarching themes.



## Key Insights

- 1) Clubs that **embed More than a Club into their core mission** deliver more consistent, higher-quality, and sustainable initiatives.
- 2) A small number of **anchor, year-round initiatives build trust, identity, and stronger referral pathways** than numerous short-term activities.
- 3) Without **sustained investment, protected delivery capacity, and new governance models**, even the strongest community initiatives risk plateauing.
- 4) Effective partnerships underpin the impact of MTC, but **deeper, more structured collaboration will be key to unlocking their full potential**.
- 5) **Skilled, supported, and valued volunteers are essential** to initiative quality, participant trust, and long-term sustainability.
- 6) **Visibility transforms initiatives from hidden successes** into credible, trusted initiatives that drive participation, partnerships, and long-term support.

## From Projects to a Core Club Function

A recurring message across almost every stakeholder interview was that the biggest determinant of successful implementation is whether the MTC programme is seen as a core part of the club's purpose or as a peripheral, 'nice-to-have' project. Where MTC is embedded into the club's organisational structure supported by leadership, visible in strategy, and linked to long-term planning, initiatives are more consistent, volunteer recruitment is easier, and delivery is more resilient to disruption. It was clear that the extent to which MTC is integrated into core club operations varies considerably between clubs.

Several interviewees described a cultural shift in how community engagement is understood inside their organisations. Traditionally, League of Ireland clubs have centred almost all activity on the first team and match-day results. Yet, MTC challenged that mindset by positioning community work as mission-critical to the club's identity and sustainability. This shift was most evident where senior leadership actively championed MTC not just in public messaging, but by integrating it into strategic documents, dedicating staff time, and allocating resources.

Structural changes have been particularly influential. Examples include appointing a Disability Access Officer (DAO) with a formal link to the FSR role, adding community outcomes to board-level agendas,

and incorporating MTC projects into the club's strategic plans. These steps have moved the work from being dependent on one or two enthusiastic individuals to being institutionalised and protected within the club's governance.

The difference this makes is significant. In clubs where this integration has occurred, initiatives run year-round, volunteer teams are stable, and activities are protected even during periods of financial or sporting pressure. Where buy-in is partial or symbolic, however, community activity tends to be more fragile and subject to last-minute cancellations, reactive decision-making, or loss of space and staff time to other priorities. Embedding MTC as a core function also enhances accountability and safeguarding. Clear reporting lines, shared policies, and formalised roles ensure that responsibility for vulnerable groups does not rest solely on goodwill. Instead, it becomes a shared organisational duty, which in turn builds credibility with partners, funders, and participant families.

*“It’s first and foremost about having a role within the club and a part of the club identity that says we are here to serve the community as well as provide football opportunities for players and entertainment for fans. We see ourselves as a club as part of the broader community picture — an ecosystem.” FSR Officer 2025*

## Fewer, Better, Year-Round Anchor Initiatives

A strong consensus across interviews was that the most effective clubs focus on delivering a small number of core, high-quality initiatives consistently throughout the year, rather than trying to run many different activities sporadically. This strategic choice is often described by community officers as moving from “doing lots of things once” to “doing the right things often.”

The value of this approach is multifaceted. Firstly, predictability builds trust and participation. When initiatives occur at the same time, day, and venue each week, families can build them into their routines which is a crucial factor for groups such as older adults and families with neurodiverse children. For example, parents of children with autism described how the consistency of Football Friends sessions reduced anxiety and increased ongoing engagement.



Secondly, focusing on a smaller portfolio allows for greater depth and quality. Staff and volunteers can develop specialist skills, refine delivery, and build meaningful relationships with participants over time. This depth also strengthens partnerships where external agencies such as disability services or schools are more likely to refer participants to initiatives that they know are established, well-run, and reliable.

A further benefit of this “fewer but better” approach is that programme identity and reputation grow more quickly. Flagship initiatives such as Down Syndrome Futsal or Walking Football then become well known in the community and often act as entry points into wider club activities. They attract local media coverage, funding, and volunteer support more easily than smaller, one-off projects.

Clubs also reported that this model makes the workload more sustainable. Attempting to deliver a broad and constantly changing programme offer can spread staff too thin, increase safeguarding risks, and dilute the quality of delivery. Concentrating on a handful of anchor activities enables officers to plan ahead, manage resources more effectively, and focus on delivering meaningful outcomes rather than chasing breadth.

Finally, some clubs use short tactical pauses in long-running initiatives to reassess delivery and protect ethos. For instance, one club paused its Walking Football group for a month to reset group dynamics when competitiveness began to undermine the programme’s inclusive atmosphere. Such decisions, only possible when initiatives are strategically managed, help preserve the integrity and long-term impact of the offer.

*“If you want taster sessions and one-off sessions, don’t phone me. We’ve been doing that for donkey’s years... every program we do has to have a continuation.” FSR*

Officer 2024

## **Funding, Capacity and Organisational Constraints**

Despite strong support for the MTC model across all stakeholder groups, limited and insecure resources were repeatedly identified as the most significant barrier to effective delivery and long-term sustainability. Community officers and CEOs alike described a constant balancing act between



ambition and reality where they expressed wanting to grow and innovate, but felt constrained by funding cycles, staff time, access to facilities, and administrative demands.

Funding instability remains the central challenge. Short-term funding agreements often on an annual or even quarterly basis, make it difficult to plan strategically, invest in staff, or commit to multi-year partnerships. This insecurity also affects recruitment and retention where staff on temporary contracts can struggle to build trust with participants or embed initiatives within the community. Several community officers emphasised that even when funding is secured, it is often only just sufficient to cover delivery costs, leaving little room for innovation, monitoring, or scaling.

Another common challenge is role masking where staff funded to deliver community initiatives are informally redirected to unrelated club tasks, such as match-day operations or commercial activities. This can dilute delivery quality and undermine accountability to funders. The risk is particularly acute when SES roles are part-time or when community delivery is seen as a secondary function rather than a strategic priority.

*“There’s always the risk that the role gets pulled into match day duties or other parts of the club. You lose focus on the community work if that happens, and it’s hard to say no when resources are tight.” FSR Officer 2024*

Administrative burden was also widely cited as a constraint. Although most officers accept that reporting is necessary and valuable, they described current processes as overly time-consuming and not always aligned with how initiatives operate on the ground. This can take staff away from delivery, reduce flexibility, and, in some cases, limit their ability to evaluate outcomes meaningfully.

*“There’s always a tension with time. You’re expected to deliver sessions, build partnerships, do reports, chase funding, and still have time to plan. It’s not realistic with one person doing everything.” FSR Officer 2025*

Facilities and access remain significant barriers. A shortage of affordable, community-based spaces particularly indoor venues during winter, frequently leads to session cancellations or reduced delivery, disrupting continuity and undermining participant engagement.

Despite these challenges, clubs are actively developing creative solutions. Many have forged partnerships with local authorities, schools, and community organisations to secure in-kind venue



support or co-funding arrangements. Others have successfully leveraged club sponsorship relationships to support programme costs, while some are exploring shared delivery models or pooled staffing across clubs to stretch limited capacity further.

A number of stakeholders proposed that the long-term sustainability of MTC could be strengthened through the establishment of separate charitable foundations or social enterprises, similar to models widely used in the UK and Europe. This structure was seen as a way to unlock new funding streams such as lottery and philanthropic funding that clubs as trading entities cannot access, while also safeguarding community delivery from the financial pressures and fluctuations of first-team operations. While not yet common practice in Ireland, some clubs have already begun to explore this route, and it was highlighted as a potentially important evolution in how community initiatives are governed and resourced.

What is clear is that sustained investment, protected roles, and better-aligned reporting processes are critical for the next phase of MTC. Without these structural supports, even the most effective initiatives risk plateauing or remaining dependent on the extraordinary efforts of individual staff members.

## **Partnerships as Multipliers of Reach and Quality**

Across all stakeholder interviews, partnerships emerged as one of the most powerful facilitators of successful programme implementation. They multiply reach, strengthen quality, enhance credibility, and provide the specialist knowledge and resources that clubs often cannot deliver alone. Effective partnerships transform MTC from a club-led initiative into a community-owned movement, one that is embedded across multiple sectors and settings. While progress has been strong, the depth and strategic use of partnerships varies, and there is scope for clubs to embed this work more systematically.

One of the clearest findings was that strategic partnerships enable access to priority populations who might otherwise remain unreached. Relationships with schools, disability services, local authorities, community health teams, and migrant support organisations were all highlighted as essential for widening participation. These partners are trusted messengers within their communities and can promote initiatives in ways that clubs, as external entities, often cannot. In some cases, they also provide transport support, staff supervision, or translation services all of which directly remove barriers to participation.



Partnerships also enhance programme quality. Specialist organisations bring expertise on inclusion, disability, or safeguarding that strengthens delivery and ensures sessions meet participants' needs. For example, disability organisations often co-deliver sessions or train club staff in communication strategies, while local health services offer advice on adapting sessions for people with chronic conditions. This collaborative model ensures initiatives are not just accessible but effective for the communities they target.

Another significant benefit is resource sharing and sustainability. Many clubs rely on partners for access to facilities (particularly important in winter when indoor spaces are needed) or for joint funding bids that make initiatives financially viable. Local authorities and schools, for example, often provide venues free of charge or at a reduced cost, while health services or charitable foundations co-fund activities that align with their strategic priorities. This collaborative approach stretches limited budgets further and builds long-term resilience into the MTC model. Nonetheless, some stakeholders noted that these collaborations are not yet fully maximised, with opportunities to deepen relationships, formalise agreements, and expand joint planning still to be realised.

Partnerships also strengthen legitimacy and credibility. When clubs are seen to be working alongside respected community and public-sector organisations, it signals that initiatives are safe, inclusive, and meaningful. This in turn builds trust among participants and their families, a particularly important factor for groups who may have had negative experiences of sport or institutions in the past.

Finally, stakeholders emphasised the importance of peer learning and knowledge exchange between clubs and partners. Site visits, shared training, and informal peer networks allow organisations to learn from one another's successes and mistakes, reducing duplication and accelerating the adoption of effective practices. However, many interviewees felt that this type of collaboration could be further supported and structured for example, through regional learning days or a shared best-practice platform.

*"I think the partnerships is probably a key element to the FSR role as well, because I feel maybe across the board that without partnership it mightn't actually happen."*

FSR Officer 2025



## Volunteer Stewardship, Workforce Fit and Safeguarding

Volunteers are the lifeblood of MTC delivery. Across almost every interview, stakeholders emphasised that the quality and sustainability of initiatives depend not just on having volunteers, but on having the right volunteers with the right skills, attitudes, and preparation. The shift from *“any help is good help”* to *“volunteers as a skilled workforce”* is one of the clearest markers of programme maturity.

The most successful clubs adopt a deliberate and strategic approach to volunteer recruitment and management. Rather than relying on ad-hoc sign-ups or informal word-of-mouth, they recruit with clear role descriptions, focusing on the competencies needed for the specific participant group. This is especially critical in initiatives designed for people with disabilities, older adults, or those experiencing social isolation all groups that often require sensitive communication, consistency, and a strong understanding of safeguarding principles.

Clubs that view volunteer involvement as a form of stewardship rather than *“helping out”* see the best results. Volunteers in these settings are treated as valued members of the delivery team, provided with induction training, ongoing support, and regular debriefs. These processes not only improve delivery quality but also increase volunteer retention, as people feel more confident, supported, and connected to the club’s mission. As one officer put it, *“If I lose them, I’m in trouble. The whole thing is in trouble.”* This illustrates just how central volunteers are to programme continuity and success.

Safeguarding emerged as a central theme throughout the interviews not just as a regulatory requirement but as a defining feature of high-quality delivery. Initiatives that involve children, vulnerable adults, or people with disabilities require staff and volunteers to understand and consistently apply safeguarding practices. Clubs with well-structured safeguarding procedures such as designated safeguarding leads, clear reporting protocols, and regular refresher training, reported fewer issues and greater confidence among participants and families.

However, volunteer dependency also carries risks. When initiatives rely heavily on a small number of committed individuals, cancellations or disruptions can occur if those volunteers step back. Several community officers noted that this fragility can undermine continuity and participant trust. To address this, some clubs are building volunteer pipelines, encouraging participants’ family members, former players, or local community members to train and join delivery teams. Others are exploring shared volunteer pools across clubs or partner organisations to ensure backup capacity.



A further insight is that volunteer engagement itself is often a pathway to wider community impact. Volunteers frequently develop new skills, expand their social networks, and report a sense of purpose from their involvement. For some, this is a stepping-stone to further training or employment in sport, health, or social care. These wider benefits not only support retention but also strengthen the programme's value proposition to funders and partners.

*Getting good people on board with you is crucial... you can't do the job properly without that." FSR Officer 2024*

## Visibility, Goodwill and Legitimacy

Across all interviews, visibility was repeatedly described as a powerful catalyst for programme growth, sustainability, and long-term legitimacy. It plays a crucial role in shaping how communities, partners, funders, and even club staff perceive the value of MTC. In many ways, visibility is the bridge between what happens inside a programme and the broader impact it has outside it.

One of the clearest patterns to emerge was that consistent storytelling and communication amplify reach and engagement. Clubs that regularly share participant stories, match-day appearances, short videos, or social media posts about their community initiatives reported faster growth in participation, stronger partnerships, and more positive media coverage. These narratives humanise the work, showing not just what is being delivered but why it matters - for example, how a walking football group helped someone reconnect socially after retirement, or how a disability session boosted a young person's confidence. As one officer explained, *"We did maximum visibility on that, all the social media and then repetitive invitation. So that was a really big part of it. And then their own networks and word of mouth. So, people were bringing friends down and telling someone else about it."*

Visibility also builds trust and credibility with communities. When local people can see the club's commitment to inclusion through media coverage, visible presence at community events, or participant testimonials, scepticism often turns into support. This is particularly important for groups who may have historically felt excluded from football environments or who doubt whether professional clubs genuinely care about inclusion beyond public relations. As one FSR officer noted, visibility can *"change hearts and minds"* by demonstrating real-world impact rather than relying on promises or mission statements.



Moreover, visibility often acts as a virtuous cycle: the more visible initiatives become, the more partners, volunteers, and participants they attract. Media exposure can lead to new funding opportunities, local sponsorship, or partnerships with organisations keen to associate with a credible, socially impactful brand. For example, some clubs reported that coverage of their DS futsal sessions or autism-friendly match days directly led to new community referrals and increased engagement from schools and disability services.

However, stakeholders also cautioned that visibility must be carefully paced and managed. Increased attention can raise public expectations and sometimes beyond what clubs have the capacity to deliver. A sudden surge in demand, for example, can overwhelm staff or stretch facilities, potentially compromising quality or safety. Several interviewees stressed the importance of aligning communications with delivery capacity, using referrals through trusted partners to help manage participant flow, and avoiding over-promising in external messaging.

Visibility is also closely linked to legitimacy in the eyes of funders and policymakers. Evidence of public engagement, media attention, and visible community outcomes strengthens the case for continued or expanded investment. Clubs that systematically capture and communicate their impact beyond number to human stories, are often better positioned to secure funding and negotiate new partnerships.

Finally, visibility shapes internal legitimacy within clubs themselves. As community initiatives gain public recognition, they are increasingly seen as central to the club's brand and identity rather than peripheral work. This shift, in turn, can unlock more board-level support, budgetary allocation, and strategic alignment.

*"I think we've probably highlighted with a lot of videos that we've done, the imagery that we've done... unless you put it out in the public domain, it's no good." CEO 2025*



## Conclusion

The implementation analysis highlights that the success of MTC is rooted in the commitment, adaptability, and relational skills of community officers operating within diverse club contexts. Effective delivery depends on local leadership, strong partnerships, and alignment between club priorities and community needs. However, this analysis also underscores that capacity limitations, role security, and short-term funding cycles remain key barriers to sustainable implementation.

Across all clubs, the community officers' ability to build trust, engage underrepresented groups, and embed inclusive practices has been central to the initiative's reach and credibility. Where strong organisational support, adequate resourcing, and collaborative relationships exist, MTC initiatives have become integral to club identity and community reputation.

Looking ahead, sustaining these gains will require strategic investment in workforce stability, cross-sector partnerships, and continued organisational commitment. These findings affirm that implementation is not just about programme delivery—it is about embedding community engagement as a core, enduring function of the football club system.



# Summary and Future Directions

## 1. Overview, Impact and Implementation Learning

### 1.1 From Concept to Proven Model

The MTC initiative has evolved from a promising pilot into a credible and increasingly structured model for community engagement within Irish football. Originating in 2017 as Football in the Community (FITC), the programme has progressed through several iterations, most recently aligning with UEFA's Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) framework. This evolution reflects a growing recognition that football clubs can act as trusted, accessible platforms for promoting health, wellbeing, and social inclusion.

Across participating League of Ireland clubs, MTC has demonstrated that when properly supported, football-led community work can deliver measurable impact and build deep local connection. The initiative has shown that clubs can act as “anchors” of community wellbeing, reaching individuals and groups who might otherwise be excluded from traditional health or social initiatives. Through activities such as Walking Football, Down Syndrome Futsal, autism-friendly football initiatives, and school-based wellbeing initiatives, the clubs have provided meaningful opportunities for participation, belonging, and civic pride. These achievements have strengthened the public image of the League of Ireland and reaffirmed football's potential as a public good.

All participating clubs have made important contributions; however, natural differences in the scale and regularity of programme delivery were evident. In some instances, these variations reflected staff turnover or limited dedicated capacity, which can disrupt continuity and slow partnership development. In others, it reflects the diverse and demanding roles that community officers often hold within their clubs, where community activities must compete with wider operational responsibilities. Rather than signalling shortcomings, these variations reflect common structural pressures and evolving practice. They also highlight opportunities to strengthen role clarity, develop shared leadership models, and provide modest capacity supports that would enable clubs to sustain and expand their community activities without compromising the other demands they already manage.

The evaluation indicates that community delivery is strongest where the work is clearly valued and supported within the wider structure of the club. Visible endorsement from club leadership,



recognition of community activities as part of the club's identity, and effective communication of impact all appear to help sustain momentum. These factors help to legitimise community engagement internally, attract partnerships externally, and build a culture in which community work is seen as integral rather than additional. Where these conditions exist, the reach and quality of delivery tend to be greater, offering useful learning for other clubs seeking to strengthen their approach.

Although the intensity of delivery varies across clubs, the overall trajectory is clearly positive. There are numerous examples of strong practice, growing partnerships, and tangible local impact. Taken together, these experiences show that MTC is an effective and adaptable model when implemented with adequate support, resources, and strategic alignment. The initiative remains in its formative stage, but it has already demonstrated that football clubs can contribute meaningfully to community wellbeing and inclusion. The priority now should be to consolidate this foundation by embedding the work more fully within club structures, strengthening local partnerships, and continuing to evolve the model as a sustainable national platform for health, inclusion, and civic value.

## 1.2 Evidence of Impact

The evaluation provides clear evidence that MTC is achieving meaningful outcomes for participants, families, and communities, and is strengthening the role of football clubs as trusted community institutions. When delivered consistently and supported by appropriate structures, the model generates measurable benefits across physical, mental, and social wellbeing domains. Participants report improvements in physical activity levels, mobility, and confidence, as well as reduced feelings of isolation and stronger connections with others. Families describe enhanced wellbeing, social support, and pride in their club's role in the community, while clubs themselves report increased visibility, goodwill, and reputation.

These positive outcomes are evident across all case studies. Walking Football has enabled older adults and those living with health conditions to re-engage in physical activity in a safe and enjoyable environment, often leading to better health, mood, and social connection. The Down Syndrome Futsal programme has shown how inclusive sport can enhance confidence, independence, and friendship among players while providing important social support for families. Similarly, the autism-specific football and matchday initiatives at Waterford FC have offered children and parents a sense of belonging, equality, and relief from isolation, demonstrating how carefully designed initiatives can create joy and inclusion for whole families. The community survey reinforces these findings, with the



majority of respondents recognising MTC as a “game changer” for inclusion and social cohesion and expressing high levels of pride and goodwill towards their local club’s community work.

While the overall picture is highly positive, the evaluation also highlights that the intensity of delivery and the depth of outcomes vary between clubs. In clubs where community work is well established, adequately resourced, and consistently delivered, the impact is both deeper and broader. In others, capacity constraints or interruptions to delivery mean that benefits are less visible or reach fewer participants. This variation may reflect differences in the underlying support structures, staffing stability, and integration of community work within club operations. Importantly, even in clubs with limited capacity, participants and local stakeholders report strong appreciation and enthusiasm for the work that is delivered, underscoring the model’s fundamental acceptability and potential for growth.

At an organisational level, MTC has begun to strengthen the civic and reputational value of participating clubs. Community engagement has improved perceptions of clubs as inclusive and socially responsible, creating new pathways for partnerships, volunteering, and sponsorship. In some settings, the work has helped reconnect local supporters with their club, while in others it has opened doors to groups who might previously have felt excluded from football. This emerging civic role not only benefits local communities but also contributes to the long-term sustainability of clubs by fostering trust, loyalty, and new networks of support.

Taken together, the evidence shows that MTC has proven its effectiveness as a model for health and social impact when delivered under the right conditions. The initiative engages people who are often hard to reach through traditional services, builds local pride, and generates visible goodwill that extends beyond the pitch. The challenge now is to ensure that these benefits become consistent, scalable, and sustainable across all clubs. Strengthening capacity, securing stable roles and funding, and embedding community work within club structures will allow the model to realise its full potential as a national platform for wellbeing and inclusion.

### **1.3 Implementation Learning**

The evaluation has identified several factors that influence how effectively the MTC model is delivered across different settings. These insights highlight what enables success, what limits progress, and what needs to be strengthened as the initiative continues to evolve. Overall, the findings indicate that the



model itself is robust and capable of producing meaningful impact, but that its consistency and sustainability depend on how it is supported, structured, and embedded within each club.

A key lesson concerns the importance of dedicated capacity and continuity. Clubs that have maintained stable staffing and protected time for community work have been able to plan, deliver, and evaluate their initiatives more effectively. In contrast, turnover or gaps in dedicated staffing can interrupt delivery, reduce visibility, and weaken relationships with participants and partners. Establishing community engagement as a recognised and safeguarded area of work, supported by clear job roles and secure funding, will therefore be critical to sustaining delivery and building long-term trust with communities.

Another recurring theme relates to partnerships and integration. While individual community officers have forged valuable relationships with schools, disability organisations, and local agencies, most (but not all) clubs remain somewhat peripheral to the formal community development and health promotion networks operating in their areas. Stronger links with local sports partnerships, health services, and local authority structures could enhance reach, coordination, and legitimacy. Embedding clubs more deeply in these networks would also help position football as a recognised contributor to local health and wellbeing plans, rather than as an independent provider of sport-based activity.

Communication and visibility also emerged as important enabling factors. Where clubs actively share their community achievements, there is greater internal and external recognition of the value of the work. Storytelling through social media, matchday promotion, and local press has been shown to attract participants, volunteers, and sponsors while reinforcing the club's public image as a socially responsible organisation. However, this communication often depends on the initiative and capacity of individual officers, highlighting the value of a more coordinated approach to communications where clubs are supported to share consistent messages and showcase their community work more widely.

At national level, the FAI now delivers a diverse range of initiatives that contribute to social inclusion and community wellbeing. While each programme has its own origins and areas of focus, they share overlapping objectives, audiences and outcomes. The current landscape, however, can appear fragmented, with multiple titles and identities sometimes used interchangeably across clubs and communications. With the launch of the FAI's new Social and Environmental Sustainability Strategy there is now a clear opportunity to unify all of this community-focused work under one coherent national framework. The strategy's three strands—Climate Action and Environmental Sustainability,



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Health and Wellbeing—provide an overarching structure through which the collective impact of football’s social initiatives can be better coordinated, communicated and recognised. This alignment offers clarity of purpose and a stronger foundation for sustaining and scaling the FAI’s contribution to community wellbeing nationwide.

At club level, similar issues of clarity apply to how community work is understood and organised internally. While the rebranding from FITC to MTC and the alignment with UEFA’s and the FAI’s Social and Environmental Sustainability framework have given the initiative a stronger direction, the scope of the community function still varies between clubs. In some cases, community officers also manage other operational or commercial duties, and in others, the purpose and contribution of the role are not fully understood by colleagues. Establishing a shared understanding of what constitutes “community work” within the MTC framework would help ensure that public investment in these roles continues to deliver tangible health, inclusion, and wellbeing outcomes.

Overall, the implementation learning suggests that MTC has reached a pivotal stage in its development. The model works effectively when conditions are supportive and structures are stable, but continued progress will depend on embedding these enabling factors more systematically across all clubs. Ensuring continuity of staffing, strengthening local partnerships, clarifying roles, and improving coordination and communication are central to moving the initiative from a promising set of individual projects to a consistent, scalable national model.

## 2. Recommendations for Growth and Sustainability

The evaluation demonstrates that MTC has proven its value as a model for community engagement through football and is now ready to move from development to consolidation. The next phase requires both practical improvements in how initiatives are delivered at club level and strategic actions to strengthen the system that supports them.

The recommendations are therefore presented in two parts:

- **Operational and programme-level recommendations** focus on what clubs and community officers can do to enhance delivery, quality, and consistency within their local settings.



- **Strategic and system-level recommendations** identify the broader governance, funding, and policy actions needed at association and national level to enable this work to flourish and scale sustainably.

Together, these two levels of recommendation are designed to ensure that the initiative not only continues to deliver local impact but also becomes a stable and visible component of Irish football's social contribution.

## 2.1 Operational and Programme-Level Recommendations

The evaluation highlights that MTC has delivered clear benefits where it has been supported with dedicated capacity, continuity, and leadership. The following recommendations focus on strengthening operational delivery within clubs and ensuring that community work is embedded as a core, sustainable function.

### 1. Protect and define dedicated community roles

Clubs should ensure that community engagement is embedded across their structures by maintaining dedicated community officer posts with protected time and appropriate support. These roles should be clearly integrated within club operations, with regular access to management, alignment to local partnerships, and opportunities for professional development. The FAI can assist by providing role templates and guidance that help clubs translate the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Health and Wellbeing strands of the Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) Strategy into day-to-day practice.

### 2. Recruit participants strategically to broaden participation and inclusion across all communities

Clubs should adopt a more targeted and inclusive approach to participant recruitment, reaching those who currently face barriers to participation — including women and girls, ethnic minority or migrant communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people experiencing social or economic disadvantage. Partnerships with Local Sports Partnerships, Age & Opportunity, Family Resource Centres and specialist inclusion networks can enhance outreach. Tailored promotion, accessible venues and times, and visible diverse role models will help ensure initiatives reflect community diversity and support the equality and inclusion objectives of the FAI SES Strategy.



### **3. Establish and sustain a suite of national anchor initiatives**

The FAI should define and maintain a core suite of anchor initiatives that provide national consistency and visibility for football's contribution to community wellbeing. These initiatives such as Walking Football, inclusive Futsal, Football for All, and autism-friendly football—should reflect the priorities of the FAI's Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) Strategy, particularly the strands on Health and Wellbeing and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. The process for identifying and supporting anchor initiatives should be transparent, evidence-informed, and responsive to local consultation. Establishing clear criteria for programme inclusion, quality standards, and periodic evaluation will help ensure that anchor initiatives remain impactful, inclusive, and sustainable across all participating clubs.

### **4. Extend the scope beyond football-specific activities**

While football will remain the core delivery medium, clubs should be encouraged to explore broader health-promotion and wellbeing initiatives that reflect community need such as; physical-activity-for-health sessions, mental-wellbeing workshops, educational and life-skills initiatives, or walking groups. Broadening scope can help engage new audiences and demonstrate football's wider contribution to health and inclusion.

### **5. Maintain programme continuity and participant stability**

Regular, year-round delivery supports participant wellbeing, motivation, and trust. Clubs should plan for staff rotation or substitute delivery options to avoid interruptions during leave periods. This is particularly important for inclusive initiatives, where breaks can cause distress or disengagement.

### **6. Sustain engagement through consistent delivery and multi-level opportunities to connect**

Inclusive community initiatives achieve the greatest impact when they provide participants with a dependable weekly routine, opportunities to engage regionally, and periodic national celebrations. Each level plays an equally important role in maintaining motivation, belonging, and social connection. Regular local sessions create structure and stability, regional gatherings foster friendship and shared identity across clubs, and national events such as the 'Cairdeas Cup' offer recognition and pride in being part of something larger. Together, these layers of activity help sustain participation and reinforce the inclusive ethos that underpins MTC.

### **7. Enhance communication, storytelling, and visibility**

Clubs should actively promote their community work through match-day communications, local media, and digital platforms. Telling the stories of participants, families, and partners helps build local



pride and internal recognition. The FAI can support this by providing shared branding tools, templates, and guidance to ensure that community work is consistently visible and understood across all clubs.

### **8. Grow community capacity through allied roles**

Where feasible, clubs should embed additional roles—such as Disability Access Officers—within their structures to complement the work of the community officer. This can strengthen collaboration and distribute responsibility for inclusion and wellbeing more widely within the club.

### **9. Strengthen workforce development and shared learning**

Clubs should continue to invest in the professional development of community officers through structured continuing professional development (CPD) aligned with the FAI's Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) Strategy. Training should include inclusive coaching, behaviour support, safeguarding, evaluation, and partnership development. This should be complemented by a structured national community of practice that enables officers to share experience, mentor newer clubs, and collaborate on programme innovation. Strengthening both individual and collective learning will build long-term capacity for delivering inclusive, evidence-informed, and sustainable community initiatives.

## **2.2 Strategic and System-Level Recommendations**

The evaluation confirms that MTC has evolved beyond its pilot phase and demonstrated clear potential as a national model for community engagement through football. To consolidate and scale this progress, several system-level actions are needed at FAI and national level to provide long-term stability, coherence, and policy alignment.

### **1. Clarify national identity, role definitions, and branding**

The More than a Club framework and associated community officer roles were developed prior to the introduction of the FAI's Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) strategy. As these roles evolve into SES Officers, there is now an opportunity to revisit and clearly define the programme's aims, scope, and strategic contribution within this new direction. Working collaboratively with clubs and key partners, the FAI could reflect on how MTC's community engagement remit aligns with the broader SES agenda, ensuring clarity of purpose, role definition, and communication across all clubs. This will help consolidate the SES framework, avoid duplication, and reinforce the visibility of football's social and environmental impact nationally.



## **2. Secure sustainable, multi-annual investment**

Sustained community delivery requires predictable, long-term funding. The FAI should work with government departments, health agencies, Sport Ireland, local authorities, and philanthropic partners to explore multi-annual investment models that secure continuity of club-based community posts and programme delivery. This could include examining national-level funding mechanisms (e.g., strategic posts, evaluation, and coordination) alongside local co-investment approaches (e.g., venue, staffing, or delivery supports) to create a blended model of sustainability. Reviewing comparable frameworks in other jurisdictions, such as those used by football and community trusts in the UK and Europe, may help identify adaptable and effective approaches for Ireland.

## **3. Establish dedicated charitable community entities to strengthen governance and accountability**

The FAI should support clubs to establish separate charitable community entities or formally structured community departments within club governance to plan, deliver, and sustain community engagement activities. Evidence from UK and European football demonstrates that charitable foundations enable clubs to build stronger community partnerships, attract external funding, and enhance transparency. FAI guidance and financial assistance should be provided to cover the initial costs of legal registration, governance training, and branding. These entities should have a clear remit focused on inclusion, wellbeing, and health outcomes, ensuring eligibility for charitable funding streams and protecting community work from competing commercial pressures.

## **4. Develop a national framework and reporting system for social impact**

The FAI should create a concise framework defining the principles, quality standards, and outcome domains for community engagement in football. A unified monitoring and reporting system should collect comparable data across clubs, integrating participation metrics, wellbeing outcomes, qualitative case studies, and Social Return on Investment (SROI) estimates. This evidence base will enable credible national reporting and advocacy for the sector's social contribution.

## **5. Harness community goodwill through a formal volunteering pathway and local partnerships**

More Than a Club has created strong local goodwill. To sustain this resource and reduce reliance on a small number of volunteers, clubs, supported by the FAI and partners, should develop a simple, formal volunteering pathway that turns informal offers of help into valued roles. A structured approach (e.g. clear role descriptions, short induction and basic training, defined time commitments) will make it



easier for people to step in, support delivery, and remain engaged over time. Formalising volunteering also creates reliable capacity for fundraising, outreach and events and deepens the club's civic role.

#### **6. Embed football's community role within national health and wellbeing policy frameworks**

The FAI should continue to align MTC and related initiatives with wider policy agendas such as Healthy Ireland, the National Sports Policy, and local authority wellbeing plans. Formal agreements or memoranda of understanding with agencies like Sport Ireland, the HSE, and local authorities would strengthen legitimacy, coordination, and access to joint funding opportunities.

#### **7. Support national visibility and communication of impact**

A coordinated national communications strategy should showcase football's contribution to health, inclusion, and community development. The FAI could develop shared branding assets, case-study libraries, and digital campaigns that highlight success stories from across clubs amplifying the visibility of community work and reinforcing its value to policymakers and the public.

### **3. Conclusion**

The More than a Club initiative has demonstrated that football clubs can act as powerful community anchors, using the appeal of the game to promote health, inclusion, and social connection. Across participating League of Ireland clubs, the evaluation shows that when adequately supported and resourced, community initiatives can achieve measurable benefits for participants and families, while also strengthening the civic role and public reputation of clubs themselves.

At the same time, the findings highlight that delivery remains uneven. Differences in staffing continuity, leadership support, and organisational capacity mean that the intensity and visibility of community work vary between clubs. These variations are a reflection of the enabling conditions required for success. Where those conditions exist, for example dedicated roles, stable structures, and clear support from club management, the outcomes are consistently positive and sustainable.

The MTC model is still in its formative stages, yet it has already proven its capacity to deliver meaningful social impact through football. The next phase should therefore focus on consolidating these foundations by embedding community work as a recognised and protected function within every club, supported by coherent national structures, clear governance, and sustainable investment.



With continued commitment from the FAI, club leadership, and external partners, More than a Club can evolve into a fully integrated national framework for community engagement through football; one that enhances wellbeing, inclusion, and local pride across Ireland. The evidence from this evaluation provides a clear direction of travel, to build on what works, ensure consistency across all clubs, and continue demonstrating that football is not only a game to be played but a force for social good in every community it reaches.



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# Appendices

## Appendix A Evaluation Design and Methods

### Purpose

This appendix summarises all data collection activities that informed the evaluation of the *More than a Club* (MTC) initiative. It provides an overview of the study design, theoretical framework, and data sources used across each chapter, and outlines key methodological strengths and limitations.

### Theoretical Framework and Research Design

This evaluation was guided by principles of implementation science, recognising that the success of community-based sport initiatives depends not only on outcomes but also on the processes through which initiatives are adopted, delivered, and sustained. A Hybrid Type II effectiveness–implementation design (Curran et al., 2012) was used to assess both the impact of MTC on health and wellbeing outcomes and the factors influencing implementation across League of Ireland clubs.

The evaluation drew on two complementary frameworks:

- The RE-AIM framework (*Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance*) structured the overall design and reporting of findings, enabling systematic assessment of who was reached, what effects were achieved, and how delivery was maintained and scaled.
- The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al., 2009) guided the exploration of contextual determinants influencing implementation. CFIR domains such as *intervention characteristics, inner and outer settings, individual characteristics, and process* were used to interpret barriers, facilitators, and mechanisms of successful delivery.

Together, RE-AIM and CFIR provided a comprehensive framework for evaluating *both outcomes and context*, aligning closely with the socio-ecological perspective underpinning the FAI's Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) Strategy. This approach acknowledges that individual, organisational, and community factors interact to influence programme success.

A pragmatic mixed-methods design was adopted to generate both measurable outcomes and in-depth contextual understanding. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and



sequentially, allowing triangulation and complementarity. The evaluation therefore combined participant surveys, qualitative interviews, and observations of key anchor initiatives to capture the full scope of MTC's delivery and impact in real-world settings.

The research process was rigorous and conducted under full ethical approval from the South East Technological University Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent, with parental consent obtained for minors. Data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout. Although this report was written to be accessible to a non-academic audience, it forms part of a broader programme of research that will culminate in a postgraduate dissertation and related academic publications.

## Overview of Data Collection Activities\*

Chapter/Focus Area	Data Sources and Methods	Participants
Walking Football	Participant surveys, interviews (participants, facilitators), focus groups, and observations of local sessions and a national tournament (mixed quantitative–qualitative approach)	59 survey respondents; 13 interviews; 10 focus-group participants; 2 facilitator interviews; 3 club observations; 1 tournament observation
Down Syndrome Futsal	Surveys, interviews with parents and facilitators, and club-level and national tournament observations	19 survey respondents; 6 parent interviews; 1 facilitator interview; 3 club observations; 1 tournament observation
Initiatives for Children with Autism	Parent and facilitator interviews, and observations of Football Friends and Matchday Experience	6 parents; 4 facilitators; 1 matchday experience observation; multiple Football Friends observations via embedded researcher
Community perceptions of MTC	Mixed-mode community survey (online, QR, in-person)	719 respondents (supporters, residents, parents, partners, volunteers)
Implementation Insights	Stakeholder interviews with club and national actors	15 interviews (Community Officers, Club CEO's, Healthy Ireland, FAI)

*\*The data collection timeframe was from April 2024–October 2025.*

## Strengths and Limitations

The evaluation employed a robust, multi-method design that captured diverse perspectives across clubs, participants, and stakeholder levels.

### Strengths included:

- Integration of **RE-AIM** and **CFIR**, providing both outcome- and context-focused insight into implementation.
- A **natural-experiment design** conducted in real-world football-club settings, enhancing *external validity* and ensuring findings are directly applicable to practice.
- **Methodological triangulation** across surveys, interviews, and observations.
- **Multi-site design**, enabling comparison across different club environments and programme types.
- **Depth of qualitative inquiry** capturing participant, facilitator, and organisational perspectives.
- **Rigorous ethical oversight**, ensuring participant protection and research integrity.

### Limitations included:

- Potential **self-selection bias** in voluntary survey participation.
- **Variation in sample size** across programme components, limiting representativeness in some cases.
- Reliance on **self-reported data**, which may be subject to social-desirability bias.
- **Cross-sectional timing** of some datasets, limiting conclusions about longer-term impact and sustainability.

Despite these limitations, the combination of RE-AIM and CFIR frameworks, alongside mixed-methods triangulation and rigorous ethical procedures, provides confidence in the credibility, depth, and transferability of the findings.

## Appendix B Summary of Walking Football Survey Data

### Survey Respondents by Club (n=59 in total)

Club	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Bray Wanderers FC	N = 12	20.3
Cork City FC	N = 13	22.0
Finn Harps FC	N = 21	35.6
Waterford FC	N = 9	15.3
Wexford FC	N = 4	6.8

### Profile of Participants

Variable	Categories	% of Respondents
<b>Gender</b>	Male	100
	Female	0
	Prefer not to say / non-binary	0
<b>Age group</b>	<40	6.8
	40-59	27.2
	>60	66.3
<b>Employment Status</b>	Employed	33.9
	Retired	57.6
	Unemployed / Unable to work	8.5
<b>Education</b>	Primary	8.9
	Secondary	28.6
	Tertiary / Postgraduate	62.5
<b>Relationship Status</b>	Married/Cohabiting	72.4
	Widowed	8.6
	Separated/Divorced	5.2
	In a relationship	1.7
	Single	12.1
<b>Ethnic Background</b>	White Irish	94.8
	Asian	1.7
	Other	3.4

### Participation and Club Connection

Statement	% Never/Rarely	% Sometimes	% Often/Always
Attend the club's home matches	44.0	22.0	33.8
Attend Walking Football sessions	0	3.4	96.5

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree
I feel a better sense of belonging to my local LOI club	82.7	17.2	0
Walking Football sparked my interest in other sport or physical activity	60.4	32.8	6.9

## Health and Wellbeing Outcomes

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree
My overall general health has improved	93.1	6.9	0
I do more exercise now	77.6	22.4	0
I feel less anxious or depressed	70.2	24.6	5.3
I feel less lonely	68.5	29.8	1.8
I feel more sociable	86.3	10.3	3.4
I have less pain or discomfort	54.4	26.3	19.3
I am better able to walk without problems	61.4	35.1	3.5
I am better able to do my usual daily activities	62.5	28.6	8.9
I am better able to wash or dress myself	37.5	50.0	12.5

## Programme Delivery and Quality\*

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree
The programme was well organised	96.6	3.4	0
The coaches were knowledgeable and skilled	94.8	5.2	0
The sessions were engaging and enjoyable	94.8	5.2	0
The environment was welcoming and inclusive	100	0	0
Communication about the programme was clear	93.1	5.2	1.7
The pace and intensity of sessions were appropriate	96.6	3.4	0
I felt supported by facilitators and coaches	96.6	3.4	0
I would recommend Walking football to a family member or friend	98.3	1.7	0
I was encouraged to give feedback	94.8	3.4	1.7
The programme was accessible to all who wanted to participate	98.3	1.7	0

\*Satisfaction indicators

## Appendix C Summary of Community Survey Results

The following tables provide a summary of descriptive findings from the community and stakeholder survey conducted across the five participating League of Ireland clubs. They highlight respondent demographics, awareness and perceptions of club-led community work, and the perceived impact of the MTC initiative on local communities.

### Survey Respondents by Club (n=719 in total)

Club	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Bray Wanderers FC	102	14.2
Cork City FC	15	2.1
Finn Harps FC	310	43.1
Waterford FC	195	27.1
Wexford FC	97	13.5

### Respondents Characteristics

Variable	Categories	% of Respondents
Gender	Male	79.5
	Female	19.5
	Prefer not to say / non-binary	0.9
Connection to club	Supporter	45.9
	Player / Coach / Parent	16.1
	Local resident / School / Organisation	16.9
	No direct connection	21.1
Overall opinion of the club	Positive / Very Positive	91.1
	Neutral	5.6
	Negative	3.2

### Awareness, Responsibility and Alignment

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Familiar with club's community work	84.8	7.9	7.2
Club communicates community work well	83.8	10.7	5.6
Club has responsibility to deliver community projects	85.3	10.2	4.6
Community work aligned with local needs	78.8	14.6	6.7

## Perceived impact across community domains

Statement	% Significant* impact	% Moderate impact	% Minimal/No impact
Improving relationships between community members	71.8	22.7	5.5
Increasing pride in the local area	71.9	22.5	5.7
Supporting social inclusion for marginalised groups	77	17.1	5.9
Enhancing opportunities for volunteering	68.9	24.7	6.5
Reducing social isolation	75.9	18.9	5.2
Encouraging participation in sport and physical activity	84.5	11.4	4.0
Supporting youth education and development	75.7	18.9	5.4
Supporting local businesses	62.5	28.6	9.0
Increasing footfall on match days	68.2	23.3	8.4
Attracting investment or sponsorship	56.9	34.0	9.1
Strengthening cultural identity	69.5	23.2	7.3
Improving the club's reputation as a community-focused organisation	78.7	15.3	6.0
Community work has a positive impact	90.7	7.4	2.0

\* Significant Impact combines *Significant* and *Very Significant* responses

## Goodwill and Future Support

Statement	% Likely/Extremely Likely	% Neutral	% Unlikely/Extremely Unlikely
Likely to support future community work (volunteer, donate, participate)	84.6	8.8	6.6
Likely to attend more club matches	76.4	18.5	5.1



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## From Pitch to Place:

# The League of Ireland's More than a Club' initiative

**Citation:** Lambe, B., Lavery, E. & McGrath, A. (2025). *From Pitch to Place: The League of Ireland's 'More than a Club' Initiative*. Impact Report on Wellbeing, Inclusion and Civic Value. South East Technological University.



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