



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE CLUBHOUSE.

WHAT SPORT LOST WHEN THE CLUBHOUSE DIED.

Every town and village used to have one: a room where sport lived and everyone belonged. Then they vanished, replaced by franchises, feeds and filtered algorithms, and the generation that plays the most sport was left with nowhere like it to belong. This paper is about what that cost, and how we get the room back.

FOR COUNCILS · COMMUNITY TRUSTS · CLUBS · ANYONE WHO GREW UP IN ONE

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THE ARGUMENT IN ONE PAGE

Sport's biggest loss in my lifetime was not a stadium, a trophy or a broadcast deal. It was a room. The clubhouse, the place where sport lived between matches, has quietly disappeared from most towns and villages, and the numbers that replaced it are called loneliness, drop-out and drift.

1. **The clubhouse was never about sport.** It was where a whole community met around sport: kids, parents, coaches, the older players you looked up to. Sport was the excuse. Belonging was the product.
2. **It has gone.** The buildings were sold or repurposed, and what replaced them, franchise pay-and-play, social feeds, filtered algorithms, kept the transaction and dropped the belonging.
3. **The cost is measurable.** Around 3.1 million adults in England feel lonely often or always, and 16 to 24 year olds are the loneliest group in the country. Community sport generates £122.9 billion a year of social value, and belonging is a large part of how.
4. **The crime evidence points the same way, honestly read.** No study proves sport reduces offending. What the evidence does support is that well-designed, trusted-adult, doorstep sport is associated with less anti-social behaviour. Trusted adults, on the doorstep, somewhere to be: that is a clubhouse.
5. **The current answers fail by design.** Feeds optimise for outrage, not belonging. Club apps handle fees and fixtures, not culture. Neither was ever built to be a room.
6. **The principle:** belonging is infrastructure. When the third place disappears, the drop-out, loneliness and crime statistics are the invoice.

This paper sets out five tests any council, trust or club can hold a space against, physical or digital, and then describes the clubhouse we are rebuilding for the generation that lives on its phone.

1 THE ROOM I GREW UP IN

I grew up in a clubhouse. Not as an idea. A real building, with a car park that flooded in one corner and a door that stuck in winter.

Training never started on the pitch. It started on the way in, because the coach would be there, and you got a chat before you got a session. How's school. How's that first touch coming along. He always seemed to know which of the two questions mattered more that week.

Inside, my mates were already on the sofas. The sofas did not match and nobody cared. There was a TV in the corner with the live scores ticking along the bottom, and half the room watched it sideways while pretending to do something else. You learned the results of a Saturday from the noises the adults made.

Outside, the older lads were playing cricket on the strip of grass behind the building. Different sport, same club, and nobody found that strange. If you hung around long enough and looked keen enough, one of them would hand you the bat, and for six deliveries you were the most important person in the place.

Then the part I only understood years later. Our parents arrived to collect us, and they stayed. They got a cup of tea, got talked into running the line, and some of them were still running that club a decade on. Nobody joined anything. You just kept turning up, and one day you belonged.

We lived our lives in that clubhouse. It was such a big part of the community that I could not have told you where the club ended and the town began.

Places like it don't really exist anymore. The buildings went first, sold off, knocked down, or turned into something with a booking system. And what replaced them was not another room. It was franchises, feeds and filtered algorithms: pay-and-play slots where nobody knows your name, and screens that will show you sport all day without once asking how your first touch is coming along.

Here is the part I cannot make peace with. The kids coming through now are the most organised, coached, timetabled and photographed generation sport has ever had. They play the most, and they belong the least. The generation that plays the most sport has nowhere like that room to belong.

Everything else in this paper is an attempt to say precisely what that room did, what it cost us to lose it, and how it gets rebuilt.



2 WHAT TURNED UP IN ITS ABSENCE

You cannot put a clubhouse on a spreadsheet. You can count what arrives when it goes.

3.1m

adults in England feel lonely often or always (7%)

DCMS Community Life Survey, 2023/24

16-24

the loneliest age group in the country, around 10% vs 3% of over-65s

ONS, 2018 vintage, pattern since reconfirmed

£122.9bn

annual social value of community sport and physical activity in England

Sport England, 2023/24

82%

of young people reached by the Youth Justice Sport Fund came from the most deprived 40% of areas

Ministry of Justice / StreetGames, 2023

THE LONELINESS LEDGER

Around 3.1 million adults in England, 7% of the adult population, say they feel lonely often or always (Community Life Survey 2023/24; a 2024/25 update was published in December 2025). The sharpest concentration is at the young end: ONS analysis found roughly one in ten 16 to 24 year olds lonely often or always against around 3% of over-65s. That finding is 2018 vintage, and I flag it as such, but the pattern has been reconfirmed since. Read it plainly: the loneliest people in England are the same generation playing and following the most sport.

THE VALUE OF THE ROOM

Community sport and physical activity in England generate £122.9 billion a year in social value, on the government-approved wellbeing methodology (Sport England with Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University, 2023/24). One active child aged 11 to 16 carries roughly £4,300 a year of wellbeing value. Grassroots football alone is worth £15.9 billion a year (The FA, 2024). A large share of that value is not the exercise. It is the belonging around the exercise: one 2025 study links competitive sport participation to a stronger sense of public belonging and lower loneliness and self-harm risk, though it is a single cross-sectional study and shows association, not cause.

THE CRIME EVIDENCE, HONESTLY

The Ministry of Justice's £5 million Youth Justice Sport Fund reached more than 7,800 at-risk young people through 220 community organisations, 82% of them from the most deprived 40% of areas. The honest reading of the wider evidence is this: no trial or meta-analysis proves sport reduces offending, and the university that evaluated the fund has itself cautioned that the "what works" evidence base here is problematic. What the evidence does support is that well-designed, trusted-adult, doorstep sport is associated with less anti-social behaviour. Association, not causation. But look at what the association clings to. Not the sport. The design around it: trusted adults, on the doorstep, somewhere to be. That is a clubhouse, described in the language of a funding application.

"Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment

of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives."

UNITED NATIONS · TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD: THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, A/RES/70/1 (2015), PARAGRAPH 37

3 THREE REPLACEMENTS, NONE OF THEM A ROOM

Nobody decided to kill the clubhouse. We replaced it three times over, and each replacement kept a piece of the job and dropped the rest.

THE FEED IS NOT A ROOM

The feed took the clubhouse's job of keeping you close to your sport, and it does that part brilliantly. Sport all day, every day, from every angle. But a feed is optimised for engagement, and the reliable engine of engagement is outrage: the refereeing scandal, the pile-on, the transfer rumour built to enrage. Belonging never trends. A filtered algorithm also decides who you see, so a kid who loves their sport meets a curated stream of strangers rather than the thirty people from their own club. There is no coach at the door, no adult in the room, and no version of the question that mattered in my clubhouse: how are you getting on. A feed can show you your sport all day and never once know your name. The result is a generation watching sport alone, together.

THE CLUB APP IS NOT A CULTURE

The club app took the clubhouse's admin: fixtures, availability, subs. It does that competently, and it was built for the person collecting the money, which is fair, because somebody has to. But ask what it offers a player between matches and the honest answer is a payment reminder. There is no sofa, no score ticking in the corner, no older lads outside, no reason to open it unless you owe something. Club software manages the logistics of a community while ignoring the community itself. Fees are not culture, and a register is not a room.

THE FRANCHISE IS NOT A CLUBHOUSE

The paid session took the clubhouse's coaching. Some of it is genuinely good coaching, and I will not pretend otherwise. But it is a transaction: book the slot, arrive at 8:57, coached hour, car park by 10:05. The parents do not stay, because there is nothing to stay for. Nobody hands the keen kid a bat, because the next booking is waiting. You can buy an hour of sport. You cannot book belonging, because a third place only works when you can turn up without a booking, without a reason, and still be known.

Each replacement kept the transaction and dropped the belonging. The sport survived. The room did not.

4 BELONGING IS INFRASTRUCTURE

Not an atmosphere. Not a nice-to-have. Infrastructure, with everything that word implies about funding, design and maintenance.

We fund pitches, kit, coaching hours and facilities, and we should. But the room around the sport, the place sociologists call the third place, not home, not work or school, the place where you are simply known, sits on nobody's budget line. So it decayed quietly, and when infrastructure decays the bill still arrives, just at a different address. When the third place disappears, the drop-out, loneliness and crime statistics are the invoice, and it is paid by councils, the health service and youth justice rather than by the club that lost its room.

If belonging is infrastructure, it can be designed, tested and maintained like infrastructure. My clubhouse was not magic. It was five design decisions nobody wrote down. Here they are, written down, and they apply to a physical room and a digital one alike.

1

THE OPEN DOOR

You can turn up without a booking, a fixture or a reason, and it is normal that you did. Belonging cannot start with a transaction.

2

TRUSTED ADULTS AT THE THRESHOLD

Somebody known meets you on the way in, knows your name and asks how you are getting on. This is the culture and the safeguarding in one move.

3

CONVERSATION IS THE PRODUCT

The scores, the sessions, the gentle mickey-taking. Fixtures and fees are plumbing. If the everyday chat of the sport does not live there, it is not a clubhouse.

4

EVERY GENERATION IN ONE ROOM

Kids, parents, coaches, the older players a kid can look up to. The older lads handing over the bat is how a club reproduces itself.

5

FREE TO BELONG

Charge for extras if you must. Never charge at the door. A clubhouse with an entry fee is a venue.

These five tests need nothing from us. A council can hold a leisure strategy against them. A trust can hold a doorstep programme against them. A club can hold its own group chat against them, and will find it passes maybe one. That is the point of writing them down: the method stands whether or not you ever look at what we built with it.

5 REBUILDING THE ROOM

We are rebuilding the clubhouse where sport's communities already live: on their phones. Not because a screen is better than a building, but because the building is gone and the people are there.

A ROOM, NOT AN APP

SHOT Clubhouse is a digital clubhouse. Each club gets a space where its players, parents, coaches and fans share the everyday conversation of their sport: the scores, the sessions, the team news, the gentle mickey-taking that tells you that you are among your own people. We measure it the way you would measure a room, by whether people come back when nothing is scheduled. That is test three, conversation as the product, with fixtures and payments demoted to plumbing where they belong.

SAFEGUARDED BY ARCHITECTURE

A room full of children needs adults at the threshold, so ours are built into the structure rather than left as settings: age-tiered accounts, guardian visibility, and messaging rules that decide who can contact a child before any message is sent. The trusted adult who met me at the clubhouse door, rebuilt as architecture. That is test two, and it is the one no general-purpose feed can retrofit.

DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY BUILT IN

The chat with the coach on the way in was development, disguised as conversation. So the clubhouse carries it natively: PERFORM gives every coach session-by-session development frameworks across 47 sports, aligned with what governing bodies already teach, and the Sport Head ID gives every player an identity that belongs to them, carrying their story between teams, clubs and sports for life. The keen kid who got handed the bat now has a record of the day it happened, and every generation shares the one room, which is test four.

LOCAL AT HEART, GLOBAL IN REACH, FREE AT THE DOOR

A clubhouse is local by definition: your pitch, your people, your league. The network around it is global, so a small club's room sits on the same infrastructure as anyone's. And the door is free: the club and community layer is free for every club, team, school and coach, forever, with no card and no catch. Tests one and five. A clubhouse that charges at the door is a venue, and we did not set out to build a venue.

Hold what we built against the five tests. Then hold everything else your club uses against them too. That comparison is the whole argument.



6 GET THE ROOM BACK

The clubhouse did not die of anything incurable. It died of nobody owning it. Here is what owning it looks like, depending on where you sit.

If you run a council or a leisure strategy: before the next facility decision, ask where the room is. Hold what you already fund against the five tests in this paper. A pitch without a third place around it delivers the exercise and forfeits most of the belonging, and the belonging is where a large share of that £122.9 billion of social value lives.

If you run a community trust or a doorstep sport programme: you are already the trusted adults at the threshold; the evidence on anti-social behaviour clings to exactly what you do. We want to put a free digital clubhouse behind every doorstep programme in the country. Talk to us.

If you run a club: your culture deserves better than a group chat. Open your clubhouse at shotclubhouse.com. It is free for every club, forever, and the five tests are the standard we invite you to hold us to.

If sport has ever felt like home: you already know everything this paper argues. Send it to the person who made it feel that way, and to the person who should build the next room.

Take your SHOT. Own it. Make impact. · shotclubhouse.com

SOURCES

- DCMS, Community Life Survey 2023/24, loneliness measures (a 2024/25 update was published in December 2025)
- ONS, loneliness analysis by age group (2018; the age pattern has been reconfirmed in later releases and is flagged as 2018 vintage in the text)
- Sport England with Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24
- The FA, Grassroots Football Strategy 2024-2028 (October 2024)
- Ministry of Justice / StreetGames / Alliance of Sport, Youth Justice Sport Fund, 2023
- Loughborough University, statement on the youth offending evidence base, 2023; Getting On Track evaluation, January 2024
- Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2025, competitive sport participation, public belonging and loneliness (single cross-sectional study; association only)
- United Nations, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (2015), paragraph 37; UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/79/8 (2024)

The clubhouse in Part One is my own childhood, told from memory and offered as testimony, not data. All statistics are cited at claim level above; where evidence is old, single-study or association only, the text says so.