



Friends of  
the Earth

# LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

CLIMATE ACTION  
FOR ALL

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# LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD<sup>1</sup>

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*SPORT AS A CATALYST OF CLIMATE ACTION FOR ALL*

## SUMMARY FOR POLICY MAKERS

This initiative spearheaded by Bohemian Football Club and Friends of the Earth Ireland represents a groundbreaking approach in engaging communities in discussions and actions related to climate change and energy efficiency, particularly among groups for whom such conversations have traditionally been uncommon. This innovative project marks a significant shift in the discourse surrounding climate action, moving it beyond the realms of environmental activists and policy circles into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.

### 1. SUCCESS IN ENGAGING NON-TRADITIONAL PARTICIPANTS IN CLIMATE ACTION

Central to this initiative's success is its unique engagement strategy, which capitalised on the deeply rooted communal ties and the cooperative ownership model of Bohemian Football Club. This strategy is not merely about disseminating information but about fostering genuine engagement and participation. The club provides a solid foundation crucial for initiating conversations on topics like energy efficiency and retrofitting – areas typically perceived as technical or outside the usual interests of football fans, and outside the means of many in the community.

### 2. CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS IMBUE WITH TRUST CAN BE GAME CHANGERS

The initiative underscores the profound trust communities place in sports clubs, revealing their potential as pivotal agents in driving climate action. This trust stems from the deep, longstanding

connections sports clubs have with their members and the local community. In the case of Bohemian FC, a club steeped in history and community engagement since 1890, this trust is particularly evident. The club holds an inherent respect and credibility which, if mobilised correctly, could serve as a catalyst for action on social topics as complex and urgent as climate action. This credibility is vital, as it transcends the typical boundaries of environmental activism, reaching individuals who might otherwise remain disengaged from climate issues.

The success of this short-term project indicates the potential for sports institutions to effectively bridge the gap between climate awareness and action, leveraging their trusted status to inspire and mobilise communities towards sustainable practices and policies. This model presents a replicable framework for other organisations, demonstrating the untapped potential of sports clubs in utilising their trust and cultural identity to catalyse community-based climate initiatives.

### 3. TRUST IS EARNED, AND EASILY SQUANDERED

This trust, however, is a delicate asset, earned over years of genuine engagement and can be easily jeopardised if misused. The effectiveness of using sports clubs as platforms for climate action is contingent upon respecting and aligning with the interests of the community.

For such initiatives to be fruitful, they must prioritise the community's unique needs and capabilities, adopting a bespoke approach to engagement. This means recognising the diverse challenges faced by different groups within the community, as Bohemian FC did through the development of “member profiles”, and crafting solutions that are both accessible and relevant to these varied experiences. It's about meeting people where they are, understanding their daily realities,

funding from the European Climate Foundation. It was written by Seán McCabe at Bohemian Football Club.

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<sup>1</sup> This report was commissioned by Friends of the Earth Ireland, as part of a programme coordinated by Clare O'Connor and Jerry MacEvilly, with

and providing practical, achievable ways for them to contribute to climate action.

Crucially, these efforts should not devolve into a tool for blindly implementing government policies or external agendas. If communities perceive that their much-loved institutions are being instrumentalised for purposes that do not align with their interests or values, the trust that took years to build can rapidly erode. The role of sports clubs in such initiatives should be as facilitators and collaborators, not mere conduits for policy implementation.

#### 4. HARNESSING THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS IN SPORTS INSTITUTIONS

The institutions possess a unique ability to convene a diverse network of stakeholders, ranging from dedicated members and passionate fans to influential sponsors and knowledgeable technical experts. This eclectic mix of perspectives and resources positions sports clubs like Bohemian FC not just as participants, but as dynamic facilitators in the quest for sustainable solutions.

Sports clubs can tap into their network of sponsors and partners to explore innovative financing models. These collaborations can lead to economies of scale, making sustainable solutions more affordable and accessible. For example, on the back of this project, Bohemian FC will look to engage the Community Credit Union, a club sponsor, in making the upfront costs for energy-efficient retrofits more manageable for Bohs members. Additionally, Bohs will work with building company, Premier Properties, another club's sponsor, to develop a list of "trusted" companies, willing to do the work for Bohs members.

The multifaceted network that sports institutions have at their disposal is a powerful tool in enabling community-led climate action. By harnessing this network for collaborative problem-solving, financing innovations, and knowledge sharing, sports clubs can play a pivotal role in developing

and implementing effective, community-centred solutions to environmental challenges.

#### Recommendations on the role of sports organisations in community empowerment.

Sports organisations provide a mechanism to engage a broad spectrum of people in local climate action. The partnership between Bohemian FC and Friends of the Earth in support of community-led solutions offers a template for Government and state bodies which should be further developed. To create an effective framework for enabling sports clubs around the country to play a catalytic role in climate action at community level, the following recommendations are proposed for government consideration:

- 1. Partnership and Empowerment Initiatives:** Building on this project, Governments should initiate partnerships with sports clubs to leverage their influential platforms for promoting community engagement related to climate awareness and action. This could include co-developing community-based projects that not only address climate issues but also resonate with the local culture and values inherent to the fan base.
- 2. Capacity Building and Resource Allocation:** Recognising the importance of community buy-in, as well as the diverse capabilities of sports organisations, targeted support should be provided to enhance sports clubs' capacity for climate advocacy and action within communities. This can encompass financial grants, technical assistance, and knowledge-sharing platforms that enable clubs and local organisations to facilitate community consultation and development of community-led solutions.
- 3. Authentic Engagement and Autonomy:** It is imperative to ensure that the development of local climate action measures through sports clubs is driven by genuine engagement with the needs and priorities of their local fan base and local communities, rather than being purely instrumental to policy objectives. This entails

creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration where fans and community members can voice their concerns, aspirations, and ideas. This allows tailored solutions to emerge. It is important to recognise that, even within the relatively small Bohemian FC membership, distinct groupings were identified as having unique challenges and needs regarding retrofitting and energy efficiency. Being able to identify such groupings and tailor approaches to these distinct profiles is crucial for effective and equitable implementation of retrofit solutions.

**4. Proactive Engagement:** Projects such as this may encounter scepticism or reluctance from fans initially. To overcome such barriers to recruitment, proactive engagement is required. Sports organisations should adopt multifaceted, personalised outreach strategies that go beyond digital communication. This approach should involve using respected club figures to actively engage with and mobilise community members through various mediums, including face-to-face meetings, community events, and direct outreach. Recognising the diversity within communities, these initiatives should aim to identify and address specific needs and reservations of different member groups, ensuring that all feel included and valued in the climate action conversation.

Implementing the solutions noted in subsequent sections requires a nuanced understanding of the cultural and social dynamics of fans in the local area, as well as a commitment to genuine partnership and community empowerment. By adopting such an approach, governments can unlock the potential of sports clubs and local groups as dynamic allies in the pursuit of a more sustainable and equitable future.

## 5. BLUEPRINT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The innovative collaboration between Bohemian Football Club and Friends of the Earth Ireland culminated in a Solutions Meeting, where six members and seven other stakeholders brainstormed and formulated a series of actionable

strategies. These solutions, set to be implemented in 2024, not only promise to enhance the community's energy efficiency but also serve as a potential template for other institutions aiming to engage in similar climate action initiatives.

Key solutions conceived in the meeting include:

- **Formation of a Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) through the SEAI's SEC Network Programme:** This involves establishing a Bohemian FC steering committee, fostering a united front among members for energy-related initiatives. This community-led approach transcends geographical boundaries, building upon the shared identity and commitment of club members.
- **Simplification of Retrofit Information:** Recognising the complexity of retrofit processes, there's a focus on demystifying this information. Utilising football-related analogies and language, the aim is to make technical details more accessible and relatable to the club's audience.
- **Building Trust with Contractors:** A curated list of trusted contractors and the concept of a 'test house' for demonstrations will be developed. This strategy is designed to bolster confidence in retrofitting processes and clarify their benefits.
- **Development of Targeted Funding Strategies:** Exploring diverse funding sources, including community energy grants and partnerships, tailored to the unique needs of different member profiles, ensures that financial support is effectively directed and utilised.
- **Collaboration with Credit Unions:** Partnering with credit unions to create innovative financial solutions like Green House Loans will make retrofitting more economically feasible for members.
- **Utilisation of Volunteer and Member Skills:** A database of members' skills and experience related to retrofitting will be

created, alongside opportunities for volunteer involvement in energy efficiency projects. In addition, promotion of engagement of youth teams to help older members prep their homes for work is something to be explored.

- **Organising Community Engagement Events:** Events with stakeholders like the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) and credit unions will be instrumental in disseminating information and promoting energy-saving initiatives.

As Bohemian FC and its partners embark on these initiatives in 2024, they are not just charting a course for their community but also laying down a replicable framework for others. This holistic and inclusive approach to tackling energy inefficiency and poverty can be adapted and adopted by other sports institutions, leveraging their unique positions in their respective communities. By showcasing the success of these strategies, it is hoped that Bohemian FC will demonstrate the profound impact sports clubs can have in driving meaningful and sustainable change, inspiring similar institutions globally to follow suit.

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# PROJECT REPORT

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## 1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The Friends of the Earth Ireland report, "Still Left Out in the Cold," provides a critical analysis of energy poverty in Ireland, highlighting the inadequacy of current government responses, especially in the private rental sector. The report underscores the need for more comprehensive, inclusive policies that address the unique barriers faced by different sectors of society, including the poverty premium and digital literacy challenges.

Bohemian Football Club, collaborating with Friends of the Earth, has launched a project at the intersection of football, community, and climate action. This initiative aims to improve energy efficiency in the homes of Bohemian FC's members. The Football for Climate Justice survey, carried out in 2023 involving Bohemian members and European partners, supports the need for this project. The survey among fans of seven European clubs including Bohemians found that the Dublin club had the most people in full-time employment, but their members also had most difficulty paying utility bills. These results showed a significant need for energy efficiency improvements among fans, with many facing challenges in affording heating costs. This data reinforces the urgency for accessible and practical energy solutions.

The project's approach involves understanding the unique needs of different community groups, as illustrated by the member profiles developed through the survey. These profiles include pragmatists, homesteaders, step-by-step homeowners, and renters, each facing distinct barriers to energy efficiency. For instance, pragmatists are hesitant about the upfront costs and complexity of retrofitting, while renters deal with restrictions from landlords and the temporary nature of renting.

The Solutions Meeting, a pivotal part of the project, focused on developing tailored support packages for these profiles. Key outcomes included the concept of forming a Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) through Bohemian FC, simplifying retrofit information, building trust with contractors, exploring various funding opportunities, and engaging the community through events and workshops. These initiatives highlight the importance of a community-centric approach in addressing energy efficiency and retrofitting challenges.

The urgency conveyed by the Friends of the Earth report, combined with the insights from the Football for Climate Justice survey and the Solutions Meeting, underlines the need for policy makers to consider community-driven, practical approaches to address energy inefficiency and poverty in Ireland. These approaches should be inclusive, considering the diverse needs and challenges of different community groups, and leverage the unique trust and networks of organisations like Bohemian FC.

For a detailed overview of the Friends of the Earth report, visit [here](#).

To read the Football for Climate Justice Research Report and Fan Survey Report, visit [here](#).

## 2. NOTE ON THE RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Bohemian Football Club, fan-owned football club, has been at the heart of Irish football since its founding in 1890. Known for its deep community ties and cooperative ownership model, Bohs has always been more than just a football club; it's a community institution. Today, the club has over 2,500 members and draws capacity attendances of 4,500 to all home matches. This project, in collaboration with Friends of the Earth Ireland, sought to leverage these unique characteristics, engaging with members directly to address energy efficiency and retrofitting challenges in their

homes. The fan-ownership model was instrumental in fostering trust and encouraging participation in the project.

Recruiting participants for the project presented several challenges. Efforts included an email to all Bohemian FC members, a promotional video featuring Jonathan Afolabi and direct calls to senior members by club captain Keith Buckey. Despite these measures, reluctance emerged, partly due to the project's association with energy poverty. Members hesitated to participate, often believing others were in greater need. The limitations of digital communication also posed a barrier, and phone calls to reach out directly to members proved more effective. Eventually, the cohort for one-on-one interviews was expanded to include a broader range of members. This diversity led to the emergence of distinct member profiles, which became central to understanding different community needs and perspectives.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT OF PROFILES

The development of member profiles emerged from 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Bohemian FC members in 2023. These interviews were conducted both in person and over the phone, aiming to understand diverse perspectives on retrofitting and energy efficiency.

The member profiles developed in this project primarily focus on those who are currently unable to access or afford full retrofits. This focus is informed by the Football for Climate Justice survey, which suggests that at least 80% of Bohemian FC's membership faces such challenges. These profiles aim to understand and address the specific barriers this significant portion of the membership encounters in improving their home energy efficiency.

#### PROFILE 1: PRAGMATISTS

This group is typically cautious about the financial implications of retrofitting. They understand the benefits but are deterred

by the upfront costs and the perceived complexity of applying for grants. Barriers include a lack of clear information about retrofitting processes, distrust in service providers, and broader economic concerns that impact their ability to invest.

*"The whole grant thing's a maze, isn't it? Feels like you need a degree to get your head 'round it. My builder said it wasn't worth it".*

#### PROFILE 2: HOMESTEADERS

Older members often face physical and financial limitations that make comprehensive retrofits challenging. Their barriers include a strong attachment to their current home setup, limited budgets, especially in retirement, and a preference for minimally disruptive improvements. They often lack technical knowledge about retrofitting options and require assistance in planning and implementing changes, as well as physical support in preparing a household for improvements – such as clearing out an attic to have insulation installed.

*"I'm not too keen on turning the house upside down at my age. Small things, maybe. I'd get the attic insulated but I'd need help to clear it out".*

#### PROFILE 3: STEP BY STEP

Members in this category, often with limited financial resources, are interested in retrofitting their homes in affordable stages. They tend to be new homeowners who are already fully leveraged financially, and they may struggle with budgeting for retrofitting projects, prioritising which improvements to make first, and accessing affordable financing. This group also faces the challenge of balancing immediate household needs with long-term energy efficiency goals.

*"With the kids and all, there's not much left over at the end of the month for big house projects. I'd love the place to be warmer, but they can just wear more clothes for now".*

#### PROFILE 4: RENTERS

Renters, particularly younger members, encounter unique challenges in enhancing their home's energy efficiency. They face financial constraints and - depend on landlord approval for modifications. This group also deals with the lack of incentives for investing in improvements in properties they don't own and the complexity of navigating legal and regulatory hurdles in making energy efficiency improvements in rented properties.

*"It's like, why would I spend my money on a place I might not be in next year? And if I ask my landlord to do it, he'll probably throw me out!"*

These profiles, informed by the members' feedback, highlighted the diverse challenges and needs within the community, shaping the project's approach to developing effective, inclusive retrofitting solutions. The development of these member profiles underlines the need to avoid simplistic, one-size-fits-all solutions. Each group within the Bohemian FC membership has unique challenges and needs regarding retrofitting and energy efficiency. Tailoring approaches to these distinct profiles is crucial for effective and equitable implementation of retrofit solutions, ensuring that the diverse needs of the club's membership are adequately and sensitively addressed.

## 4. THE SOLUTIONS MEETING

The Solutions Meeting, a critical component of this project, was convened to develop practical responses to the challenges identified in the member profiles. This meeting brought together a

diverse group of stakeholders, including club members, technical experts, and policy experts. Representatives were present from:

- CODEMA,
- The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
- The Community Credit Union
- Premier Properties
- Mitsubishi Electric
- Friends of the Earth
- Bohemian Football Club

The primary aim of the meeting was to work through the different member profiles – Pragmatists, Homesteaders, Step by Step, and Renters – and to build comprehensive, tailored packages of support. It was an opportunity to translate the insights gathered from the one-on-one interviews and surveys into actionable strategies.

The meeting's focus was on brainstorming and refining support packages that would cater to the diverse needs within the club's membership, taking a step towards creating actionable and impactful strategies for energy efficiency and retrofitting solutions. The solutions discussed aimed to be both innovative and practical, ensuring they were accessible and beneficial to all members.

## 5. THE SOLUTIONS

The Solutions Meeting yielded a series of innovative and practical recommendations. These suggestions were crafted to address the diverse needs and challenges identified in the member profiles, focusing on creating accessible and effective solutions for energy efficiency and retrofitting. The following seven solutions will be pursued:

1. **Sustainable Energy Community (SEC)**  
**Formation:** The meeting suggested setting up a Bohemian FC SEC to unite members in energy-related actions. This community would not be confined by geography but bonded by club membership, fostering a

shared commitment to energy efficiency initiatives.

2. **Demystifying Retrofit Information:** There was a consensus on the need to simplify complex retrofit information. Using football-related analogies and language could make the information more relatable and understandable to members, bridging the gap between technical jargon and practical understanding.
3. **Trust-Building with Contractors:** The creation of a list of trusted contractors was proposed, along with the idea of a 'test house' to demonstrate retrofitting processes. This approach aims to build confidence among members in retrofitting services and to provide a clear understanding of the potential benefits.
4. **Targeted Funding Strategies:** Diverse funding sources were considered, including community energy grants and collaborations. Tailoring these strategies to the unique needs of different member profiles could maximise accessibility and impact, ensuring that financial support is effectively utilised.
5. **Credit Union Collaboration:** A partnership with a credit union was discussed, potentially forming a common bond for Bohemian FC members. This could lead to innovative financial solutions like Green House Loans, making retrofitting more financially feasible for members.
6. **Volunteer and Skills Utilisation:** Assessing and utilising the skills within the club membership was identified as a key strategy. This approach could involve creating a database of members' skills related to retrofitting and organising volunteer opportunities to support energy efficiency projects. In addition, promotion of engagement of youth teams to help older members prep their homes for work is something to be explored.

7. The club is also looking into the establishment of "Repair Teams" small teams of handy volunteers who could go to houses in the local area and provide/advise on basic insulation upgrades (with the permission of the householder). This could be helpful for renters struggling to keep their houses warm.
8. **Community Engagement Events:** The organisation of events with stakeholders like SEAI and the Credit Union was recommended. These events could serve as platforms for disseminating information and showcasing Bohemian-branded home energy-saving kits, further engaging the community in the club's energy efficiency initiatives.

## 6. CONCLUSION – A PATH FORWARD

The initiative by Bohemian FC and Friends of the Earth has effectively demonstrated a concept: when a community approach is authentically adopted in this case through fans in the local area, it's possible to accelerate climate action through trusted institutions like sports clubs. The project successfully engaged members in a conversation about energy efficiency and retrofitting, a topic previously unexplored by many. This project not only fostered awareness but also identified key opportunities for tangible action. The comprehensive approach, encompassing workshops, interviews, and the Solutions Meeting, led to the development of innovative solutions tailored to the community's diverse needs. As a result, several promising strategies have been outlined, set to be implemented in 2024. This marks a significant step forward in engaging the club's membership in proactive climate action and community-based energy solutions. The outputs of this work in 2024 should be prototypes for adoption in other similar institutions around Ireland.

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## OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

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The project had clear objectives and a structured methodology laid out below:

### OBJECTIVES

- Identify and Engage Non-Traditional Groups: Target groups who have historically been less involved with the environmental movement and the energy transition.
- Conduct Workshops and Interviews: Lead workshops and one-on-one interviews to discuss perceptions of retrofitting and heat pump installation, improve accessibility, and collect testimonials.
- Prepare a Report for Policymakers: Synthesise insights from discussions to inform policymakers on community engagement and support scheme design.

### METHODOLOGY

1. Project Kick-Off: Internal meeting to define objectives, timeline, and roles.
2. Engagement Strategy Development: Focus on engaging club members and local residents, using familiar communication channels.
3. Participant Identification and Engagement: Identify potential participants within the club and local community.
4. Workshop Planning and Execution: Organise and conduct a workshop to foster dialogue and gather community insights.
5. Conduct One-on-One Interviews: Follow up the workshop with detailed interviews for more personalised feedback.

6. Feedback and Resource Development: Use collected information to create educational materials and provide feedback to participants.
7. Report Preparation: Compile findings, testimonials, and recommendations into a report for policymakers, focusing on community engagement and support scheme accessibility.
8. Project Conclusion and Evaluation: Summarise outcomes and evaluate the project's successes and challenges to inform future initiatives.

This structured approach ensured comprehensive engagement and the collection of valuable insights, contributing to informed, community-centric policy recommendations.