



West Ham United Players' Project: Evaluation Summary Report

By Switch The Play Foundation and the University of Bath

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Introduction

1. The West Ham United Players' Project has been described by the club as '*the most ambitious and integrated community programme ever created by a Premier League Club*'.¹ Launched in 2018, it was born from a desire was to bring together all of the philanthropic work that the club does in terms of social inclusion, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and charity work, allied to the community facing work of the West Ham United Foundation, under one common identity. Players from the men's and women's and Academy teams are positioned at the heart of this, becoming an ambassador for areas of the club's community work which are grouped together under 11 different themes.
2. The primary aim of the research is to evaluate Players' Project activity across two seasons, from launch in November 2018 through to May 2020, in order to understand what impact the Players' Project has had on the local communities around East London. The secondary aim is to understand what variables underpin quality and impactful appearances, ultimately to inform and continually improve the club's ongoing approach to player appearances.

Key Findings

- A. The research presents **strong evidence to highlight the benefits of player appearances on beneficiaries across a diverse range of age groups, programmes and targeted outcomes**. These outcomes include inspiring people to learn new skills, creating enthusiasm for reading in young people, building confidence and self-esteem, and raising aspirations. Players' Project appearances are **having the intended inspirational effect on beneficiaries to support behaviour change**, both in terms of **targeted outcomes** (i.e. the desired outcome for the host organisation) and **personal outcomes** (i.e. identified by individual beneficiaries).
- B. There are a number of **positive impacts of the Players' Project on the club and players** themselves. These include improved staff engagement, improved player engagement, strengthened club identity and community emphasis, improved integration with the women's team, and making a positive contribution towards the club's duty of care over young players personal development.
- C. A number of **critical success factors and areas for further improvements** have been identified to understand the approach to delivering effective and impactful player appearances, which can be used to further enhance the impact of the Players' Project. Many of these learnings could be transferable to other sporting organisations in their approach to managing sportspeople's voluntary / community activity.

¹ <https://www.whufc.com/news/articles/2018/november/07-november/west-ham-united-launches-players-project>

Summary by Numbers

Figure 1: overview of Players' Project numbers from November 2018 to June 2020

	Total
Number of appearances	115 ²
Number of individual player appearances	281
Number of players	67
Number of players undertaking multiple appearances	49
Hours committed by players	587.9
Direct Engagement numbers (beneficiaries)	2,786
Average number of beneficiaries per appearance	24

- There were 115 total Players' Project appearances across the two seasons since its launch, with 281 individual appearances from players (reflecting multiple players usually attending the same appearances). This equates to **nearly 600 hours committed by players to support local communities**. These appearances are in addition to any commercial appearances that players conduct on behalf of the club.
- When considering the engagement numbers for appearances, the research found that volume isn't everything. The quality engagement between players and beneficiaries often happened where there was time for greater interaction on an individual level, something that players commented was something they personally found rewarding from the appearances.
- The impact of COVID-19 is particularly interesting. Across a 10-week period the club were able to significantly increase their community facing activity at a time of unprecedented need, with an average of 5 player 'activities' per week. Whilst the circumstances were unique in terms of player availability this does present some interesting future considerations as to what constitutes a player appearance with potential to be more flexible and creative around players time commitments, on the assumption that this type of appearance can be identified as impactful.



² Data includes COVID-19 virtual appearances from March-June 2020. The total amount of volunteering hours and direct engagement numbers only include data relating to appearances taking place to mid-March 2020.

Impacts

Community

6. The impact of the Players' Project needs to be understood in the context of the impact of the community work of the club as a whole, and then seeking to understand the contribution and added value that players make to this overall impact.
7. It is evident that at a headline level the club has a broad reach in terms of community facing activity, in terms of subject matter, targeted outcomes and specific audiences. Whilst this research is not an evaluation of the impact of the club on its community, it is also evident from the available data that this work is having a positive impact across a diverse range of themes and beneficiaries.

Beneficiary Perspective

8. Beneficiaries from a number of appearances were asked a series of questions relating to the degree of inspiration they felt from appearances. **82% of beneficiaries strongly agreed (78%) or agreed (4%) that they had been inspired towards the targeted outcome of the appearance.**
9. The **150Club** provides a good example. **100% of respondents strongly agreed that the player appearance had inspired them to be more active.** 150Club is an initiative by NHS Newham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Newham Council and the 150Club partnership - made up of the West Ham United Foundation working with the council's leisure trust activeNewham and the Staywell Partnership. The 150Club is part of a bid to tackle high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease in Newham by helping people to stay healthier. The borough has the second highest predicted prevalence rate of Type 2 diabetes in England, with more than 24,500 of residents currently diagnosed with diabetes. This finding is significant in demonstrating the added value of the Players' Project in contributing towards the £1.4m annual savings to NHS estimated through the 150Club via diabetes prevention.
10. **Any Old Irons** aims to address loneliness in those over 60 giving participants the opportunity to connect with other fans and locals in their community. It is noteworthy because of the two-way impacts that have been identified between players and beneficiaries. For instance, in January 2019 the women's team personally took it on themselves to invite the Any Old Irons members to be mascots at one of their fixtures, such was the reported impact on themselves from meeting with the group previously.

Players engage with Any Old Irons participants, First Anniversary Event, November 2019

"Being a mascot for the women's team, fantastic, not just because of the event but because how wonderfully normal and lovely those women were, they totally embraced us and made our day by how they were." Any Old Irons participant, Focus Group



- Any Old Irons was consistently referred to as a model of good practice. The strength of relationship between players and beneficiaries is clearly evident.

“They remember names which is really, really important, they have obviously seen so much of us lot that they recognise us now and yet having your name remembered it very important, it makes you feel rather special.”

“One of my favourite moments and the rest will know this was meeting Adrian, our ex goalkeeper, I absolutely love the man, he is wonderful, he got really, really involved.”

- Responses rating overall experience across this sample of appearances shows the majority of beneficiaries (65%) thought they were ‘fantastic’ with 92% (65/71) rating the appearances as ‘really good’ or ‘fantastic.’

- What is particularly noteworthy in this beneficiary analysis is the range of beneficiaries included in this sample size. Of these projects Any Old Irons is targeting over 60s, 150Club is targeting adults with long term health conditions, Premier League Kicks is a young person’s engagement project, whilst the University of East London appearances were targeting University students with potential aspirations to work in sport. When looking at the individual findings relating to experience for each project there is a strong degree of consistency across each project.

No ordinary Joe's words to the wise
by Simon Mullock

MICHAEL ANTONIO'S MESSAGE
I go to schools and tell kids: 'Don't risk your life for wrong sort of respect'. I grew up with knife crime and have lost friends

By Tom Hopkinson
MICHAEL ANTONIO KNOWS LIFE IS ALL ABOUT PERSPECTIVE. Yes, he'd love to be in Gareth Southgate's England squad, facing Croatia today, having had a taste of the international scene under Sam Allardyce two years ago. He'd love to be starting every game at West Ham, too.

CRIME
And not having to make do with appearances from the bench, as he has in their last four Premier League fixtures.

But life could so easily have worked out differently for Antonio had he not made the right choices as a youngster.
And when you've had your fair share of "normal" jobs and made it to the top flight via non-league, it's one to realise things could be worse.

Wandsworth-born Antonio, 28, said: "Where I grew up there was a lot of knife crime. "Quite a few friends got stabbed and a couple died from it."

"Growing up, it was kind of a norm for me. "It didn't really make it into the news because it was happening every other day. "Now you're noticing it more because it's being portrayed in the papers."

"I go back to schools, I go back to my secondary school and I try to stop it from the age of 12 because, as well as you are in it, it's difficult to get clear, to look into the person's life for a bit of money, making your life for the wrong sort of respect."

Antonio is also part of The Players' Project, which sees stars from the men's and women's teams at West Ham acting as ambassadors in particular areas of community work.

The club is committing £10million over three years to try to help deprived communities and inspire change, with Antonio's focus on getting people into or back into work.

He added: "I'm working to give them experience of how to interview, so once they go in, they know to be confident, clear, to look into the person's eyes and let that person get to know them."

"The worst job I ever had was Higgson - oh, my. You'd sit there for an hour-and-a-half, it would be hot and humid, you couldn't have headphones on, you can't do anything."

"You'd have to watch people group-and-down in a swimming pool - it was painful."

Distance
No wonder he's philosophical about further England call-ups - Southgate also picked him in March 2017, but he had to withdraw through injury - even though they perhaps seem far away.

"In football, things change quickly," he said. "Three years ago I was in the Championship and then, within a year, I got into the England squad."

"Everything is a just step away because, if you have two, three or four good games, England are on your toes straight away."

"It's just about me getting back in the team and performing, then opportunities will arise again."

The Hammers bounce out of the international break with a home game against Reading on Saturday.

But six of the seven games that follow are against teams below them in the league.

Antonio added: "They are the teams we should be getting these three points against."

The Players' Project supports West Ham which continues not even to be the power of sport to motivate, educate and inspire people in the most community first team players will be helping to bring out community programmes that are genuinely life-changing experiences through the team.

HARD LESSONS: Hammers star Antonio has been together side of life

- It is evident from the research conducted that **Players' Project appearances are having the desired inspirational effect to support behaviour change, both in terms of targeted and personal outcomes.**

Host perspective

- It is evident from the hosts reported aspirations for appearances that they were placing high expectations on the types of impact that they were hoping that the **Players' Project appearance could help achieve.** It is therefore particularly significant that **all 15 host respondents to a survey (100%) noted that the players contributed positively towards the targeted outcomes for the appearance.**

- A common theme for why the players were so effective in contributing to the targeted outcomes is **the time spent and quality of engagement between players and**

beneficiaries. This is a theme that was reinforced in the player interviews and provides an important pointer to ensure the authenticity of appearances is maintained to help maximise the impact of future appearances.

17. Host satisfaction levels are high with 13 hosts (87%) indicating they were very happy with the quality of the appearance, and no hosts indicating any lack of satisfaction or neutral response to the quality of the appearance.
18. The evidence indicates that the following factors combined to ensure high satisfaction levels and a positive contribution towards the targeted outcomes of appearances:
 - the quality of the brief from the club
 - the players' understanding of that brief
 - their personal engagement style and ability to share and tailor their message effectively.

Media Coverage

19. Club stakeholders have reported positively on the level of interest in the Players' Project which has enabled them to get their messages beyond the direct beneficiaries of an appearance.

Example of media coverage of the Players' Project (The Times, November 2019)

‘Sometimes when it’s going well, I feel invincible’

Haller form mirrors club’s league slump
Striker not scoring but creating more chances

Result	Goals	Chances created
First five games for West Ham	3	3
Next five games	1	8

Photograph: Marc Aspland

Sébastien Haller, West Ham’s record signing, tells Henry Winter why his fee does not worry him, and says club must stick together after run of losses

forward is backstage at the London Stadium on Wednesday, conversing in perfect English with members of Any Old Irons, a club-organised group of fans of a certain vintage who gather to reminisce, to show their memorabilia and enjoy each other’s company.

The surrounding boroughs, Tower Hamlets and Newham, are in the top ten local-authority areas with the highest levels of loneliness in England and Wales. Mindful of loneliness particularly afflicting those aged 65-plus, West Ham invite 300 locals to these Any Old Irons social events across East London and Essex.

“I was aware it was a family club before I came here,” Haller, 25, says.

“It is important. It was one of the reasons I came here.” Other members of the family are nearby. Haller hears vice-chairman Karen Brady pledge to invest £26million in the local community by the end of 2021 through the West Ham United Foundation and the Players’ Project initiative.

Roberta Moore, Bobby’s daughter, takes a moving stroll down memory lane with the Any Old Irons podcast. Close by, Maria Abraham, the West Ham United Foundation health manager, explains how the club arrange transport to meetings for the Any Old Irons. “We offered to sort it for one, who was 96, and he said, ‘Oh, save it for the old people.’” Abraham says laughing. “He was happy on the bus. We offered to get transport for one 86-year-old lady who’s blind, but she said she likes to go on the bus because she gets chatted up.” Behind the pride, humour and stoicism, the reality is that they quietly crave company.

For some, public transport, the shops, and Any Old Irons gatherings are their lifeline from loneliness. For many, they live for match day. “A lot of people give time and money to see us play and support us every day, so it is normal and good for us to give back,” Haller says.

He appreciates the commitment to the community of home-grown midfielders such as Conor Coventry, an engaging 19-year-old who stops to enthuse about the Any Old Irons. “When you get them all together it’s crazy,” Coventry says. “The stories and the emotions they have for the club. It makes me want to work harder for them because of the players they’ve seen pass by and I want to be one they remember.”

So does Haller. After spending time with the Any Old Irons, Haller finds a quiet corner near the home dressing room to discuss loneliness, his upbringing, his move, and address criticism of his and West Ham’s form. He has not scored for five hours, and

20. Whilst the rationale for the Players' Project is very much focussed on the local communities around the club's home in East London, the concept of 'community' in the context of a Premier League football club is interesting given that many will have a global fan base. This indicates that there is potential for the Players' Project to have a wider impact than just on their immediate geographical community and the direct engagement through appearances, but also through

Impact on the players

24. The personal benefits of appearances appear to have not been something that had received much prior consideration by the players but their reflections when prompted through the interviews did highlight a number of areas of personal benefit. These benefits include:

- Developing **improved perspective** from meeting new people and experiencing different environments.

“I enjoy it because I am learning off of older people who have been supporting West Ham for years and sharing their experiences and seeing things from a different perspective. I also like that we did this appearance together with the men’s team, it shows that we are equal and together on the same level as them.” Interview, women’s team player C

- **Learning about important social issues.**
- **Feeling more connected to the club.** This was especially true for new and overseas players.

“It helps me get to understand the club better and the community and the area I live in as a foreigner, it helps even more to help understand the environment, yeah, I enjoy it a lot.” Interview, women’s team player B

- **Feel good factor.** There is a collection of academic research to suggest that this type of volunteerism can benefit **individual subjective wellbeing** and support positive mental health for elite athletes.

“It makes you feel like you have done something worthwhile.” Interview, women’s team player C

“I think after that you feel happier for doing this kind of thing because you appreciate sharing moments when people are having difficult times.” Interview, men’s first team player A



- **Skills and competencies development**
- **Increased fan support and improved supporter relations.** This was particularly highlighted by women’s players who recognised the importance of growing the fanbase for the women’s game.
- **Positive diversion away from football.**

“It is nice to have something apart from the football pitch, not just coming into training and doing your work day in day out.” Interview, Women’s team player B

25. Specific benefits were identified from involving Academy players in appearances alongside experienced first team players. This included:

- **Improved perspective of the world outside of football**

“Sometimes young kids get wrapped up in a bubble where they don’t understand what the real world is like - sometimes it’s good, certain subjects, where you can go outside of that comfort zone than what you’re used to and experience the real world and what is actually going on out there.” Interview, men’s first team player B

- **Learning from senior professionals and better preparing them for a career as a professional footballer.**

“Younger boys 100% buddying up with the older guys, that mentorship, getting them speaking in front of people, training them up for what will be their career, I think absolutely there is so much benefit in that.” Interview, Player Care Department

- **Supporting their personal development.**

The approach to Players’ Project appearances – lessons learned

26. This section of the report analyses the approach to Players’ Project appearances with the aim of identifying both good practice and any important lessons of areas where improvements could be made to help maximise the impact of future activity. This analysis is summarised under the following key themes that have been identified through the research.

Theme 1 - Clarity of Purpose	Theme 6 – Player Engagement
Theme 2 – A whole club approach	Theme 7 – Support to deliver effective appearances
Theme 3 - Identity	Theme 8 – Appearance type
Theme 4 – Players’ Project Strands	Theme 9 – Authenticity of the appearance
Theme 5 – Organisation (including roles and responsibilities)	Theme 10 - Wider contextual factors

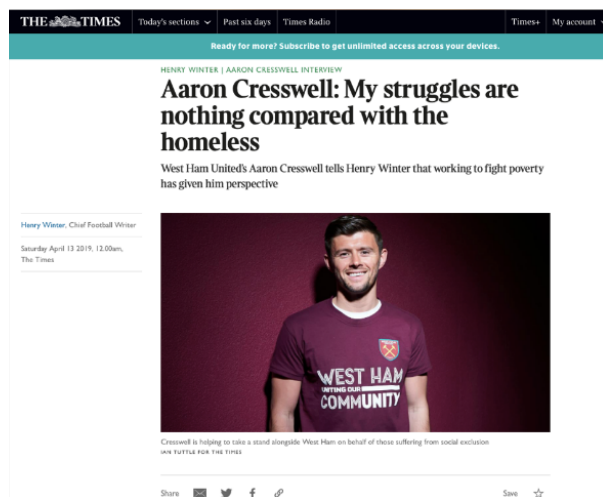
27. Recommendations have been developed alongside each theme, based upon the evidence of what works, or areas of future development [not included within this summary report].

Theme 1 - Clarity of purpose

28. It is evident from across the interviews, including staff whose interface with the project would be limited, that **there is a strong commonality in understanding as to the purpose of the Players’ Project.**

29. Both players and staff **demonstrated an understanding of the social issues faced in local communities and recognised the club (and players’) responsibility to help contribute positively towards making a difference.**

Aaron Cresswell interview with The Times, 13 April 2019



Theme 2 – A whole club approach

30. The desire from the club at the outset was to develop a whole club approach towards its community work across all aspects of the club's activities. This has been reinforced through the research findings.
31. This whole club approach is viewed as one of the biggest differences from historic approaches to player appearances in the community, not just at West Ham United but also relating to stakeholders previous experiences at other football clubs.

“This is about the whole club – all of its community and CSR activity. I don't feel it's ever really been approached properly [like this] across any club I've worked with.” Interview, West Ham Foundation, Interview

32. A particular benefit has been the **inclusion of the women's team as part of the project**, especially with regards to them conducting joint appearances with the men's first team. This helps to reinforce an important equality message.



Theme 3 - Identity

33. The identity created with the Players' Project is important to the club in its ambition to achieve its aims with the project. The identity is viewed by stakeholders as a central factor in why it is viewed positively across the club. Packaging what the club were already doing into themes is seen to have helped, and this is supported by a consistent strapline, 'West Ham Uniting Our Community.'
34. However, it is important to make the distinction between the Players' Project identity as a means of helping to bring together the whole club approach which in itself helps to facilitate impact, versus the importance of the brand directly to the beneficiaries of appearances.

“We are sharing it under the Players' Project because the players understand it so they get a better experience and the people they are going to get a better experience.” Interview, West Ham United Football Media Relations.

35. The identity provides a common approach to how the appearances are presented to the players. Feedback suggests that it is easier for them to understand what the Players' Project is as opposed to the different individual projects they may have been asked to support.
36. It was noted that the Players' Project is about the player undertaking an appearance acting on behalf of and supported by the club and is not the appearance being introduced as a favour for an individual member of staff, which is how appearances may have been presented historically.
37. The **annual launch and anniversary events** are key elements in positively influencing player's perceptions about the project.

Theme 4 – Players' Project Strands

38. There is a high degree of consensus across a number of club stakeholders that **the principle of creating strands and matching players to those is important** to help provide a structure and identity to the Players' Project.
39. However, there are some challenges with the current approach. The themes create some **logistical challenges** in matching players to appearances. **Language** is an additional barrier that exacerbates the matching challenge and also influences the type of engagement in an appearance, i.e. limiting the potential for question and answer sessions. **11 themes are too many** for some stakeholders in terms of ability to recall and with considerable overlap.
40. In terms of players own perspectives it is important to note that **many players appear open to doing appearances across more than one strand**, albeit recognising that if individual players felt strongly about something to want to align to that then that was great.

Theme 5 – Organisation (including Roles and Responsibilities)

41. The **process of organising appearances** is viewed by stakeholders a key area of difference with the Players' Project versus previous approaches to organising community appearances.
42. The organisation of appearances taking into account the **player's role** at an appearance is viewed important to ensure they feel they can contribute meaningfully.
43. So, whilst the nature of player appearances prior to the Players' Project be introduced may not be significantly different, **the improvement in organisation is seen as important in helping to improve player engagement levels and increasing the number of community appearances undertaken.**
44. The process is still not without its challenges, the most frequently cited being:
 - **Scheduling conflicts**
 - **Ensuring player workload is fairly spread**
 - **Lack of dedicated capacity and accountability for the project.**

Theme 6 – Player Engagement

45. Research was undertaken into players motivation for conducting the appearances, their confidence and competencies in undertaking the appearances, alongside other player related considerations influencing appearances.
46. When exploring the concept of motivation through interviews with players and staff it is evident that there is a balance between external motivations, i.e. it is part of their job, and positive intrinsic motivators such as the feel-good factor from giving back.
47. Across all three player cohorts, confidence in conducting appearances was rated highly from the player survey.

Players engaging with 150Club participants, First Anniversary Event, November 2019



48. A number of factors have been identified through the research that have been seen to influence player engagement:
 - It is important to **manage expectations with individual men's first team players**, with the perception of higher expectations being placed on them when they might be the same age as Academy players without having had the prior experience of doing appearances (especially if coming from overseas).
 - There is an opportunity to give players **greater ownership** through the choice of which theme/strand they are attached to and also empowering them to influence what appearances take place.
 - The **annual event** at the stadium has good player recall and feedback and is viewed as really helpful in reinforcing what the Players' Project is all about, and that it is something that is important to the club.

49. It is important to be explicit that **the current demands present no reported issues for players with their time commitment** to conduct appearances. The existing level of commitment was deemed to be appropriate with all players who were interviewed.
50. The **role of foreign players** highlights both positive and negative influences on engagement. Advantages for foreign players conducting appearances include the opportunity to better integrate into the country and the ethos of the club.
51. However, it is also important to be mindful of the perceived disadvantages of appearances for foreign players particularly around language and translation barriers, and the limitations on the number of confident English speakers able to conduct appearances which heavily rely on verbal correspondence and/or do media interviews.
52. Some stakeholders noted that there is scope to further improve player engagement. It was considered that the most effective mechanism for this would be for this to be driven more from a peer-to-peer (player-to-player) perspective.

Theme 7 – Support to deliver effective appearances

53. Despite the high level of confidence expressed in conducting player appearances around one third (9/25) of players identified further needs in relation to delivering a successful Players' Project Appearance which they believe should be addressed through training or support. Further support could be provided to players in areas such as:
 - Understanding the needs of different audiences, particularly where the subject matter is more complex/challenging
 - Communication skills and how to interact with different audiences.

Theme 8 – Appearance type

54. The desire of the club to focus on important social issues in the community is laudable but, in some instances, further consideration is required to ensure that the appearances don't have unintended negative consequences for the players.
55. Evidence suggests that particular types of appearances may place a greater emotional burden on players. This particularly related to hospice and hospital appearances.

“I found [these types of appearances] really hard, how do I go to another parent and talk about their kid who has a couple of weeks or months to live, me personally I found that really hard.”
Interview, men's first team player B

56. This is further exacerbated by the expectations being placed on players by their status, which might not necessarily match their confidence or competence to undertake appearances on challenging subject matters.

“These are 20-year-old kids some of them and you're putting them into some quite serious themes when you're talking about some of these events – you don't want to set them up to fail.” Interview, Player Care Department

Theme 9 – Authenticity of the appearance

57. The **authenticity** of the appearance is an important theme that has been identified by the research team from reviewing all the feedback. The **quality of interaction between players and beneficiaries** is key to building player motivation and value and also for beneficiaries.
58. Maintaining a focus on the primary objective of the appearance is important, i.e. the engagement of a target audience of beneficiaries with the desire to support a specific outcome. The key word here is 'engagement'. From the reaction of players when recalling experiences of appearances, it is clear that it is the interaction with people that draws positive emotion and where they feel the value from what they are doing.

“A couple of hours there with the kids and a smile on their face, that’s what you want to go there for.” Player Interview



59. On the contrary there are a number of comments and researcher observations that relate to the pull of media demands detracting from this. The authenticity and engagement with beneficiaries can be impacted by too much time posing for photographs or doing interviews.

“I don't like doing media - I do these appearances to give back to the community - I don't want everyone seeing it, as it looks like I do them just for the media coverage, I want it to stay private.”
Player Survey response

Theme 10 – Wider Contextual Factors

60. A number of wider contextual factors were identified as influencing the quality and effectiveness of the Players' Project approach including:
- Understanding the players context for conducting appearances including:
 - **The pressures on the players in terms of performance** on the pitch.
 - Understanding the other **pressures for commercial appearances**

- The **transient nature of football** and the demands of being a professional footballer influence how they might engage in appearances.
- **The League Table and Managerial changes** – there were fewer appearances organised between January to mid-March 2020 and the corresponding 10-week period the previous season. There were also fewer players engaged in those appearances. The club's values and its commitment to community are a constant and striking the balance between short term priorities on the pitch and longer-term ambitions is a sensitive one to strike.

