



## **Sport Positive Leagues: Getting Stuck In But Still Work To Do**

*Claire Poole, CEO and Founder, Sport Positive*

*We're putting out the Sport Positive Leagues English Premier League 2022 Matrix, and I want to highlight here what it does and doesn't cover when it comes to club's environmental sustainability efforts.*

When collating the information from clubs progress in the past 12 months, it was so great to see that seven of the 20 clubs now have net zero targets, more clubs are now publicly reporting on their scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions, innovations are being developed and deployed to reduce impact, more education is happening, more clubs than ever have Sustainability Managers in place, they have engaged their players on sustainability campaigns; and the list goes on.

However, the landscape of sustainability in football is under increasing scrutiny, and recent news coverage on domestic flights to games, gambling sponsors being removed from shirts, existing and potential new ownership source of wealth and misleading advertising gave me pause about the fourth edition of this matrix, in spite of all the positive efforts many clubs are making.

We disseminate information and rankings that include many key areas within the sustainability landscape of football, such as policy, net zero commitment, public reporting, energy, travel, water, biodiversity, education and procurement. However, we still haven't come up with a definitively thoughtful and additive way to score sponsorship, in spite of conversations and efforts over many months and years.

The organisations a football club aligns itself with on the sponsorship and advertising side are part of the bigger picture when it comes to sustainability, so why haven't we added it to our ranking? Current Premier League teams have somewhere between 13-46 sponsors each; around 400+ organisations overall. There are very few fossil fuel companies, but whilst a lot of the sponsors do purposeful work, some can be viewed as having an adverse effect on our planet or our society in some way.

We want to include scoring for sponsorship in our matrices, but we haven't yet found one formula to ensure that this massive undertaking is done in a way that is sensible and responsible, not just in the environmental sphere we operate in, but considering purpose, as well as ethics and social impact. We are in ongoing conversations with a number of industry groups about what this could look like and hope we can share more on this in the not too distant future.

In light of this ongoing work and the context of sponsorship scores not yet being included, we want to be very clear. When we share the results of Sport Positive Leagues, we are saying within the structures that currently exist within these organisations, this is what clubs are doing across these 12 categories and this is how they compare to each other in these areas. We can also show how clubs are doing compared to last year, and new initiatives to be aware of.

If we acknowledge our matrix isn't exhaustive in key areas, why put it out at all? Firstly, through our work we encourage sports to be communicate environmental efforts on their journey in spite of imperfections; to bring fans, suppliers and partners along with them in a bid to engender positive change. Secondly, we know that since we started this work, it has been a catalyst for change at the highest level of English football.



With the changing landscape in mind, but also feeling a duty to practice what we preach, I asked some people engaged in this space if they thought this work was still helpful.

Caroline Carlin of Southampton FC replied, *“Ranking 18<sup>th</sup> place in the Sport Positive Leagues matrix back in 2019 was an important moment, and a significant catalyst for us to create our holistic sustainability strategy, The Halo Effect. The league table each year is seen as a useful benchmarking tool, showcasing the improvements we’ve made so far and highlighting the areas where we still have work to do. It has also been a helpful framework to shape some of the initiatives we have introduced as well as highlighting some impressive best practices across the league that we can also learn from.”*

Lindita Xhaferi-Salihi Sectors Engagement in Climate Action, Lead, UNFCCC said, *“What sport does, matters. It matters because right now we are losing the climate change battle. It is one where we all lose, or we all win. Sport has a unique platform to influence the systemic change we need by bringing others along, by supporting each other and by pushing each other to do more. Sport Positive Leagues is a tool to push each other to do more and accelerate action in specific areas.”*

Andrew Simms, Co-director of New Weather Institute and Badvertising Campaign leader commented, *“Sport, like every other sector and part of our lives, faces rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes to avoid climate breakdown. Nobody at the elite level is doing remotely enough, nobody is winning, no one is up for the cup. But the Sport Positive Leagues Premier League 2022 Matrix is showing us who is beginning to move. As top-level clubs engage, wake up and start taking the issue seriously, they’ll see the need and opportunities for joined up thinking. It would be self-defeating, for example, for a club to proudly purchase green energy, but have your stadium and team shirts used as billboards for sponsors promoting heavily polluting airlines, or energy hungry SUVs. Hopefully engaging with the Sport Positive League starts them on a journey to think through everything they do.”*

We evolve the categories and points system of our matrices every year; continually adding new ones and making it more difficult to get points in each of the categories without clubs consistently, strategically and holistically keeping environmental sustainability on the agenda.

This year a multitude of updates have been made to make it more difficult to achieve top points in the categories we share information on. The standout ones are top points in sustainable transport only allocate if clubs haven’t flown domestically to games in the past 12 months, top points in reporting only if clubs are externally publishing their full scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions, we have added a category on sustainable procurement, and in spite of the lack of a scoring system, we have collated information on all club owners, sponsors and sustainability activations.

Sport Positive Leagues is not an unassailable standard, it is a barometer to communicate areas clubs are making good progress in, and areas where there is much to do. I continue to commit to being transparent about what we are doing and why, and to keep attempting to encourage and move the needle on positive progress.

To view this year’s Matrix – head [here](#)