



**'Active Integration': Sport clubs taking an active role in the integration of refugees**

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics</i>
Manuscript ID	RISP-2019-0056.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Article
Keywords:	Refugees, Forced Migrants, Active Integration, Community Sport, Sport Clubs

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## **'Active Integration': Sport clubs taking an active role in the integration of refugees**

### **Introduction**

The summer of 2015 witnessed an intense focus in Europe on refugees after the greatest mass migration of people since World War II (UNHCR 2016). A record 1.2 million refugees sought asylum in the EU during 2015, which was more than double the previous year's numbers (Eurostat 2015). Within this difficult context, sport emerged as a significant social space where refugees can engage in community activity. Increasingly, sport is seen as a powerful development tool to promote peace and inclusion, combat anti-social behaviour, or for public health goals such as the range of physical and psychosocial benefits (Agergaard 2018; Nathan *et al.* 2013; Sherry, Schulendorf and Chalip, 2015; Hoyer *et al.* 2015). Sport has no inherent power of its own and is 'intrinsically value neutral' (Sugden 2010). One must be careful of 'overly romanticised, communitarian generalisations' of sport (Coalter 2010, p.1386) as it may be 'about fair play, team spirit, respect and discipline ... but for others it is associated with winning at any price, top-down domination, exclusion, sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia and so on' (Spracklen *et al.* 2015, p.117). Sport is only one element of a very complicated geo-political context for refugees.

There is a lack of robust studies of sport programs that support inclusion for refugees (Nathan *et al.* 2010; Spaaij *et al.* 2019). Indeed, Spaaij *et al.* (2019, p.1) observe that 'sport and physical activity have historically received scant attention within the field of refugee and forced migration studies'. The few studies that have been undertaken invariably focus on health and wellbeing benefits or settlement through social connections and integration (Amara *et al.* 2004; Block and Gibbs 2017; Nathan *et al.* 2010; 2013; Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2012; 2015). As is often the case in policy research in this field, refugees become an essentialised group that become divorced from the broader context (Bakewell 2008). Sport operates in a social environment, of which refugees are one part. Focusing on one group misses the other factors that help sport clubs be vehicles of integration. Sport is a rare social phenomenon where there are active agents whose pre-existing roles are to intervene: referees and coaches. This article argues that while sport is an excellent opportunity for refugees to connect with each other people, they are part of a plurality of local communities, all of whom can meet within a sport context. The success of

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3 these sport clubs rests on the hard work and dedication of volunteers and coaches. This  
4 article argues that coaches should take an active role in welcoming new members,  
5 introducing these members to different groups, and preventing cliques from forming. Many  
6 spaces of social interaction do not have individuals who feel able to arbitrate between social  
7 actors. In sport, coaches can help to balance out the power dynamics between existing  
8 members and new recruits, including refugees, and this can have a powerful effect on  
9 integration and belonging for all members.  
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18 This article contributes to the small but growing academic literature on refugees and sport,  
19 by shifting the focus from project outcomes on an essentialised group (refugees) to the  
20 practices of leaders within the programme or club. Developing the social skills of coaches  
21 and volunteers benefits all members, regardless of social background. This study is the first  
22 that focuses on table tennis with refugees and is based in the UK. It is the first research that  
23 addresses the inclusive narrative of sports clubs and how the volunteers and coaches  
24 operate effects social inclusion. In so doing it does not focus on results and outcomes but  
25 on the process of creating a supportive environment. The article demonstrates the  
26 importance of participant observation and qualitative analysis to provide holistic  
27 approaches to research. This study also demonstrates the importance of carefully managed  
28 approaches for all members of the community, rather than focusing (and essentialising) one  
29 particular group (i.e. refugees). Sport can breakdown these imposed identity categories and  
30 permits the individual to build a new identity as a table tennis player. After summarising the  
31 literature on refugees and sport, and the sport integration policy context, this article  
32 presents the methodological and ethical considerations. This is followed by the analysis with  
33 three key arguments that: 1) an active approach from coaches facilitates integration of *all*  
34 communities when done in 2) a welcoming environment with 3) a focus on fun and social  
35 interaction, rather than just sports skills.  
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### 52 **The importance of sport for refugees**

53 There is nascent academic research on the relationship between sport and refugees (Amara  
54 *et al.* 2004; Block and Gibbs 2017; Nathan *et al.* 2010; 2013; Northcote and Casimiro 2009;  
55 Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2012; 2015; *et al.* 2019). Most of these have been undertaken in Australia,  
56 reflecting the centrality of sport in their policy approaches. Each one focuses on refugee  
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3 participants, rather than the whole programme or sport club, which effectively divorces  
4 refugees from the wider club context. The literature falls under two broad themes of health  
5 and wellbeing benefits or settlement through social networks and integration. The refugee  
6 experience can be traumatic and confusing: risk factors include residing in disadvantaged  
7 communities, disrupted education prior to arrival in the host country, poverty,  
8 discrimination, mental and physical trauma, living in families torn apart by war and violence  
9 and struggling with multiple settlement challenges (Block and Gibbs 2017). Whilst newly  
10 arrived refugees can exhibit higher levels of stress and trauma than other migrants (Berry  
11 1988), care has to be taken not to pathologise their experiences (Marlowe 2010). Attention  
12 needs to be made to not over-research small populations of refugees (Sukarieh and Tannock  
13 2012). The literature tends to focus on the positive benefits of sport. It can help relieve the  
14 symptoms of stress and trauma (Bergholz *et al.* 2016; Gschwend and Selvaranjan 2007; Olliff  
15 2008; Nathan *et al.* 2010; Stone 2013). Sport enables people to master their body, acquire  
16 skills and develop their self-esteem (Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Bergholz 2013; Bergholz  
17 *et al.* 2016; Stone 2013). Sport programmes can provide a sense of structure and security in  
18 otherwise chaotic situations by re-establishing regular patterns of participation (Gschwend  
19 and Selvaranjan 2007; Lawrence *et al.* 2010). Ultimately, sport provides a fun, enjoyable and  
20 social activity that can allow refugees to 'switch off' from the trauma and stress in their lives  
21 (Stone 2013).

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40 Settlement of refugee requires awareness of the social benefits of sport. Whilst some  
41 research highlights the economic barriers to sport, such as transport, equipment and  
42 subscription costs (Agergaard *et al.* 2016; Olliff 2008; Spracklen *et al.* 2015), sport can be a  
43 focal point for refugees can meet new people and develop their social networks (Spaaij  
44 2012; Spracklen *et al.* 2015). Language can be a significant barrier to integration (Ha and  
45 Lyras, 2013; Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2012, Werge-Olsen and Vik, 2012), but sport can provide  
46 opportunities for different linguistic groups to meet and practice their language skills.  
47 Refugees also develop relationships within each other and this is just as important for social  
48 support and wellbeing (Nathan *et al.* 2013). Promoting friendships and personal  
49 relationships can help overcome differences and develop prosocial behaviour. If carefully  
50 managed, sport can help to overcome cultural divisions within a refugee community (Spaaij  
51 2015), otherwise tribal, religious or cultural divisions impacts on the ability of the  
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3 community to self-organise and access local resources, such as language classes, legal  
4 advice, or support for children at school (Khan 2013). Sport can be a positive experience  
5 where refugees can display proficiency and feel connected to their new communities  
6 (Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Spaaij 2012; 2015). Most importantly, sport can provide  
7 continuity with their former lives (Olliff 2008; Werge-Olsen and Vik 2012).  
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14 Much of the literature focuses on integration of refugees (Adler Zwahlen *et al.* 2018;  
15 Agergaard *et al.* 2016; Amara *et al.* 2004; Doherty and Taylor 2007; Spaaij 2015; Stone 2013;  
16 Walseth and Fasting 2004; Walseth 2006; Werge-Olsen and Vik 2012). The term integration  
17 relates to a multidimensional process that sees new members of a community being able to  
18 fully participate in social, economic and political activities (Ager and Strang, 2004; Ha and  
19 Lyras 2013; Spaaij 2015). Castles *et al.* (2002) argue that successful integration requires  
20 adaptation on the part of both the migrant and the host society. This, like much of the  
21 literature, takes a dualistic approach where migrants and refugees integrate *into* a host  
22 community. In reality, there are many host communities, some of which are more  
23 integrated into the social, economic and political fabric of the nation than others. The 2018  
24 *Integrated Communities* Green Paper, in the UK, takes a similar dualistic approach when it  
25 ‘60% of minority ethnic pupils were in schools where minority ethnic pupils were in the  
26 majority’ (HM Government 2018a, p.11). It ignores the fact that these minority ethnic pupils  
27 are integrating with each other and that the least integrated community is the white ‘host  
28 community’ (Runnymede Trust 2018). Like refugees, host communities are not homogenous  
29 with shared values, but have a variety of political, religious, and cultural differences.  
30 Integration is a continuous and multi-faceted process. Sport provides the continuity and  
31 familiarity that allows integration to be developed. It allows refugees to build on existing  
32 traditions from their home country (Werge-Olsen and Vik 2012), find acceptance in the new  
33 community and help rebuild social networks and relationships (Spaaij 2015).  
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52 Overall, much of the literature focuses on the outcomes of specific programmes. As one of  
53 the exceptionally well-designed studies identified, ‘most studies are process orientated,  
54 looking at outputs not impact, and insecure funding environments create pressure to  
55 demonstrate positive “outcomes”’ (Nathan *et al.* 2013, p.2). However, by focussing on  
56 outcomes, there is a danger that projects take a functional approach that focuses on results,  
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rather than take a holistic view that understands outcomes in the wider context. Furthermore, policy drives results based on research on specific categories, such as that of the refugee (Bakewell 2008; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). The category of 'refugee' is invariably imposed on others; as such it removes the agency of those labelled as refugees. The status of refugee is rarely the dominant identity of sport enthusiasts. Separating these participants from other aspects of sport clubs artificially reinforces a politically infused label. For example, Nathan *et al.* (2010, p.2) recognise that the 'Football United program operates in partnership with migrant and refugee support organisations, football organisations, schools, corporate and community groups', yet the research only focused on refugees. Consequently, an important gap in the literature is the club environment and club personnel.

### **Sport Policy, Community Development and Integration**

Empowerment and community development, individually and in combination, have been mainstays in social welfare and economic development policies for governments globally (Lawson 2005, p.136), usually to address poverty. In the UK, sport has been an increasingly important element of community development since the late 1970s. For three years until 1985 the Action Sport initiative represented one of the first formerly evaluated projects regarding sport and community development. The project noted that

As long as there is large scale unemployment and deprivation, schemes such as Action Sport are here to stay; the primary argument for them has little to do with sport: given such problems, there is an important role to be fulfilled in providing a *range of opportunities and services* {original italics} for those who are disadvantaged (Rigg 1986, p3).

Since then, in the UK, concerns with low participation and the establishing of targets for increased participation and associated social benefits have received significant attention (Social Exclusion Unit 1998, HM Government 2018a; 2018b). The role of sport in tackling social exclusion stems from the PAT 10 report (DCMS 1999) which noted sport could contribute to improving four key social policy outcomes: health, crime, employment and education. The importance of the associated social and economic outcomes heavily influenced government policy (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002), the development of the Framework for Sport in England (Sport England 2004). Successive governments over the

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3 previous 30 years has seen sport being used to achieve other outcomes, especially  
4 strengthening community involvement, building community capacity and ownership  
5 engagement, as a focal point for community identity and civic pride (Sport England 2005).  
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10 Focus on outcomes misses the holistic dimensions of the activities. Sport derives from a  
11 secondary set of social practices dependent on and reflecting more fundamental structures,  
12 values and processes. In fact, Coalter (2013) reverses the current fashion for arguing that  
13 sport can contribute to increased 'social inclusion' and suggests that various aspects of  
14 social inclusion precede such participation. The fundamental challenge of a domestic sport  
15 policy is both difficult to achieve but even more salient for nations where community sport  
16 policies are considered as being well developed. The challenge is shaped by structural social  
17 inequalities whilst attempting to consider the issues of integration for those, particularly in  
18 the circumstances of refugees, who know little of the host society. Nevertheless, much of  
19 the justification for continued investment in community sport remains the associated social  
20 policy objectives and outcomes, rather than making sport an engaging activity. The  
21 publication of the latest UK government sports strategy, *Sporting Future*, (DCMS 2015)  
22 reaffirmed the social purpose of sport and community sports funding as one not just of  
23 achieving participation numbers, but more widely focusing on the social good that sport and  
24 physical activity can unlock. *Sporting Future* set out a(nother) new approach to investment  
25 in sport and physical activity, based around the contribution that they make to five  
26 outcomes: physical wellbeing; mental wellbeing; individual development; social and  
27 community development; and economic development. The second annual report on the  
28 progress of the strategy re-emphasised government's commitment to deliver a step change  
29 in the numbers of people participating in sport and physical activity, with a specific focus on  
30 underrepresented groups and tackling inactivity. (DCMS 2018, p.9). This increasing belief of  
31 the potential of sport and other physical activities, such as walking, cycling and dancing, to  
32 contribute to a wide range of positive outcomes is reflected in the Sport England strategy  
33 for 2016–2021, *Towards an Active Nation* (Sport England 2016). Funding and investment  
34 decisions directly link to the Government strategy's five outcomes and their related Key  
35 Performance Indicators. This shift towards a more holistic approach, considering the wider  
36 social benefits of sport and physical activity, is linked to the social impact that community  
37 organisations can potentially make (and demonstrate) for the five outcomes.  
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5 Social and community development is the hardest outcome to evidence, because the  
6 concepts involved – social capital, trust, networks – are notoriously hard to define and  
7 measure (Barnes *et al.* 2017). Sport can act as a conduit for people of different backgrounds  
8 to interact but there is often a ‘disconnect between what newcomers and sport providers in  
9 a (small) community perceive’ (Nadeau *et al.* 2016, p.130). Indeed, the Institute for  
10 Canadian Citizenship, found that ‘sports seem to be recognized by new citizens as an  
11 integrator. It is not necessarily the primary reason new citizens choose to play or watch  
12 sports when they come to Canada. However, integration is often the result’ (Institute for  
13 Canadian Citizenship 2014, p.36). Likewise, empowerment of local communities entails  
14 building the resources, skills, and knowledge of local stakeholders (Vail 2007). All of these  
15 are separate from specific outcomes and focus on holistic practices. To help develop a sense  
16 of community, sport organisations can help by creating a value system that aligns with local  
17 cultures and beliefs (Shilbury *et al.* 2008).

## 30 Methodology

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32 This article is based on the findings of the Refugee Integration Project at Brighton Table  
33 Tennis Club (BTTC) in partnership with the University of Brighton and Football 4 Peace<sup>1</sup>, and  
34 funded by Sport England. This project is a physical activity and educational project which ran  
35 three core modules: table tennis skills; prosocial skills; and English lessons using table  
36 tennis. BTTC was founded in 2007 with the mission to use table tennis as a vehicle for  
37 community integration and wellbeing. It originally focussed on working with marginalised  
38 young people from the local community. It has grown to work with a variety of demographic  
39 groups, including refugees, people affected by mental health issues, cancer, players with  
40 Down’s Syndrome, Women-only sessions and older people. The club has nearly a thousand  
41 members registered members, with around 280 members playing once a week or more.  
42 BTTC is based in Brighton & Hove, a city with a population of 281,100, 18% of whom were  
43 born outside of the UK (Condon *et al.* 2018). In the city there are approximately 200 asylum  
44 seekers (receiving assistance from the Home Office), although many more may have arrived  
45 through alternate routes. The club is located in a ward ranked in the top 10% most deprived  
46 areas in England with the living environment being classified within the top 1% (Department  
47 for Communities and Local Government (DCLG 2015). Since 2015, the club has actively tried  
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3 to engage with the city's refugee population, leading to the development of this project.  
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5 While sport clubs may maintain their sporting focus to avoid becoming instruments of social  
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7 engineering (Coalter 2007), clubs like BTTC have developed 'innovative business model to  
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9 address local social problems and enhance organisational sustainability' (Reid 2017, p.598).

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11 The project went through a full ethics approval through the University Ethics Committee.  
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13 Ethically, the research team sought to go beyond the ethical requirements of the university  
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15 and centralised the needs of the participants (Perry 2011). There are extant power dynamics  
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17 that affect working with refugee populations (McKensie *et al.* 2007; Pittaway *et al.* 2010;  
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19 Perry 2011; Marmo 2013). The research team met regularly to reflect on the ethical impact  
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21 of the research. This continuous reflection refined the approach of the research assistant  
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23 and reinforced the reliance on participant observation and ethnographic interviews. Many  
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25 forced migrants are frequently interviewed as part of their asylum process. Formal  
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27 interviews, especially around a club that has supported the participants can also lead to  
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29 feelings that respondents should positive responses. For this reason, formal interviews were  
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31 restricted to longstanding and trusted participants in order to minimise any ethical power  
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33 imbalances. The popularity of BTTC has led to many journalists and academics taking an  
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35 interested and the research team felt there was a danger of over-researching specific  
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37 refugee groups (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012). Consequently, the team were careful to  
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39 minimise the over-interviewing of participants.

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41 The project took a mixed methods approach in order to meet the requirements of the  
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43 funder, but also to provide multiple perspectives on the role of community sport as a means  
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45 for actively integrating refugees as well as to provide a robust framework for data collection  
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47 and analysis (Nathan *et al.* 2010; 2013). The study utilised a single case study of BTTC due to  
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49 the practicality preferred in examining real-life and contemporary events where multiple  
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51 sources of data can be collected to investigate a distinctive situation (Yin 2014). Accounting  
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53 for the ethical issues, the research team recognised that integration of refugees should not  
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55 focus on this potentially vulnerable group (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), but assess the  
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57 broader club environment and actively involved participants who were not refugees.  
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3 Quantitative survey data was collected twice over twelve months (November n=114 and  
4 March n=120) to assess (using a Likert scale) both refugee and non-refugee players'  
5 engagement with the club, their physical and mental well-being, and perceived sense of  
6 belonging to the community. Even though the research team designed the survey with a  
7 local charity that worked with young refugees, the BTTC coach who taught the English  
8 module, and trialled it with trusted young people, there were complications over language  
9 in the surveys that were exposed through the participant observation. Consequently, the  
10 quantitative data did not fully capture the complexity of the refugee players' experiences,  
11 their level of integration in the community, nor their English language skills. For this reason,  
12 the quantitative findings are not presented in this article.  
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23 Participant observation was the dominant method as the research team wished to build  
24 trust and minimise power imbalances. Overt participant observation by the research  
25 assistant took place weekly at BTTC and the sixth form college, as well as a variety of social  
26 events organised by the club over nine months, which included trips to competitions and  
27 travelling on the club's minibus. All observation notes were recorded in a field diary.  
28 Through these structured observations, it was possible to track language skills, behavioural  
29 changes of the individual players, as well as changes in the group dynamics. Over the course  
30 of a year, numerous ethnographic interviews (Spradley 2018) were conducted with  
31 participants of BTTC. The majority of these were with players of a refugee background, as  
32 well as other players at the club. These included refugee players from a variety of countries,  
33 including Afghanistan, Syria, Kurdistan, Sudan, Vietnam, Eritrea and Iraq. Ethnographic  
34 interviews took place during table tennis practise, lessons and social events. As  
35 ethnographic interviews take place throughout the fieldwork, and in the natural setting of  
36 the participants, it was felt that this gave more power to the participants, whilst minimising  
37 the likelihood of only positive answers being provided. Developing trust is vital in research  
38 with refugees (Hynes 2003). The research team were already known from other voluntary  
39 work in the sector and trust was built through continued and regular engagement  
40 throughout the year-long project. Language remained an issue in some cases, but the  
41 familiar surroundings, trust and support from the coach who taught the English component  
42 would help the researchers to engage in conversation, ask questions and derive meanings.  
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3 Observations and ethnographic interviews were triangulated with semi-structured  
4 interviews with key individuals. Interviewees were recruited with the support of BTTC, who  
5 played an important role in helping to identify participants. Players were approached by the  
6 researcher, together with the Club Director, after having created a list of possible suitable  
7 participants. Additional interviewees emerged from snowball techniques deriving from  
8 previous interviews. Eleven face-to-face interviews were conducted towards the end of the  
9 project with refugee players, the four coaches, including the one leading the English lessons,  
10 the Club Director, organisations from the wider networks, foster carers and social workers.  
11 Interview questions were carefully designed for each interviewee, considering their role in  
12 the project and their experiences at the club. All interviewees gave their verbal consent to  
13 be interviewed and recorded for the purposes of this project. Prior to interviews,  
14 participants were given the project information sheet to familiarise themselves with the  
15 research and the aims of the interviews. To guarantee confidentiality, the research team  
16 omitted the names of the refugee players and of their foster carers. Interviews were carried  
17 out at convenient locations suggested by the interviewee. Interviews were analysed using  
18 the principles of thematic analysis (Sparkes and Smith 2013). Coding frameworks were  
19 devised to reflect the theoretical focus of the project and the research questions as well as  
20 salient issues evident in the data to support the process of identifying, refining and  
21 interpreting key themes. The overriding themes that emerged related to the club as a  
22 positive welcoming space, that promoted social interaction, and this was facilitated by  
23 having community-focussed coaches.

### Findings and Analysis: The Importance of Taking an Active Role in Integration

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The success of integration projects resides on the hard work, dedication and skills of the coaches, managers and volunteers running them (Forde *et al.* 2015, Nadeau *et al.* 2016). These key individuals can actively encourage positive behaviours, organise tournaments and social events or manage 'teachable moments'. In his study of a Chicago Boxing Club, Wacquant (2004) highlighted how the Club's manager, Dee Dee, regularly imparted his vision for the Club through supervision of training and how members were socialised. In this way he conveyed his vision of pugilism more generally. At BTTC the director had a clear vision on the social role of table tennis, and this socialised coaches, members and

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3 volunteers into a specific welcoming approach at the club. The director constantly reflected  
4 on the vision of the club, and the way members interacted. This helped overcome  
5 difficulties and personal differences as the director affirmed the collective ideal of table  
6 tennis which became a unifying narrative for members. It is not enough to coach sporting  
7 skills and hope that values, respect and wider integration just passively evolve through the  
8 sport. Sport is not a neutral space; it must be carefully managed (Sugden 2010; Coalter  
9 2010). As one coach said, 'The club is the most welcoming place I've known... But it's not  
10 that the table tennis as a sport naturally does it, it's the club that has tried to nurture this  
11 environment.'

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21 Most importantly, the managers of the club recognised that integration is not simply a new  
22 individual fitting into the host society. Rather than the dualistic approach outlined earlier,  
23 they recognise that there are many different groups and identities where an individual  
24 belongs. As the Director of BTTC observed,

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31 The BTTC and UK's 'host' community is richly varied with Travellers, players with  
32 disability, intergenerational and lots more. As are the migrant and refugee  
33 communities. The focus should be on integrating communities across all these areas.  
34 That to me is what a strong community looks like.  
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38 This attitude is important as it does not essentialise the refugees and make them different  
39 to other players. What the club does well is to create a new identity, that of BTTC. Although  
40 there are sessions for different groups within the club, the over-arching identity of the club  
41 is that everyone is a table tennis player. As the Director states, 'Here in the club you are not  
42 a refugee, or a person with a disability, you are a member of the club. Everybody is equal.'  
43 This helps break down the differences between groups, and facilitates the mixing of  
44 different groups, be they refugees or players with Down's Syndrome. For example, the  
45 Director states,  
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54 We had a competition which was community inclusion. And we had teams of three  
55 from ten different sessions. A team of people who had cancer, a team of people who  
56 were homeless, and the atmosphere was brilliant. The next time we ran it we just  
57 seeded them from 1-30 and then paired people up with the strongest with the  
58 weakest, and so on, so the teams were completely mixed. It was much more  
59 interesting. The people are table tennis players before anything else.  
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5 The club has understood the nuanced nature of communities and used this to take an active  
6 approach to integration. In this way, the club has provided a space where sport and  
7 community activities coexist, which greatly impacts how new players, including refugees,  
8 are integrated. This does not mean that treating players as equals means that differences  
9 are not recognised. The club has celebrated members' diversity through a variety of small,  
10 but powerful actions, such as hanging flags and maps on the walls of the club.  
11 Understanding and recognising different cultural norms is crucial for social integration (Ager  
12 and Strang 2004; Ndofor-Tah *et al.* 2019).

### 21 **Active Coaching: the importance of community focused coaches**

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25 The community focus of the club requires coaches that align with the club's ethos. This is  
26 achieved through recruiting community-focused coaches, and continuous training and  
27 mentoring. This requires an active and explicit reflection of what the club is trying to  
28 achieve. BTTC coach job descriptions clearly state that they should 'strike a balance  
29 between fun and seriousness'; the coaching style depends on whether the player is there  
30 for fun or for elite competition. At BTTC, the community focused coaches help create the  
31 right setting and atmosphere for transformational opportunities in the club. Negative  
32 coaching may work for some players who aspire to be elite competitors, but for community  
33 clubs, positive and welcoming behaviours, combined with fun sessions, help create the  
34 social environment where participants will return, socialise and integrate. Too often the  
35 focus of coaches, and the coaching framework, is to focus on the elite model (Vella *et al.*  
36 2013). The vast majority of sport coaching is based in the community and requires a distinct  
37 set of skills, such as positivity, proactivity, reflection, and awareness that not all players  
38 want to be Olympic champions.

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52 The inter-personal skills and outlook of coaches at BTTC is vital in creating the right  
53 atmosphere. It's not the sport that brings people together, but the people organising and  
54 running it. The Head Coach observed that 'people are people, we're here just to have fun  
55 and use table tennis to forget problems outside. We make people feel welcome, all our staff  
56 is friendly and not judgemental. I've been in four different clubs in my life, and I've never

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3 seen anything like it!'. Yet the club does not simply assert that this is the way to do things  
4 and leave the coaches and volunteers, they actively train and mentor them to help them  
5 develop the right inter-personal and community-facing skills. BTTC run staff and volunteer  
6 workshops on how to build positive relationships, managing behaviour, and most  
7 importantly, how to make new players feel welcome and foster a sense of belonging. This is  
8 the key to getting hard to reach players back to the club and engaging them for the long  
9 term.  
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18 This community-focused approach requires active interventions from managers and head  
19 coaches. Encouraging community-focussed and fun coaching becomes important when  
20 trying to nurture welcoming environments for new members, from whatever background.  
21 Integration does not simply emerge, but is developed along networks of teachers and  
22 mentors. The active approach is more clearly observed when tensions emerge between  
23 coaching styles. During one session, two young refugee players were upset after an  
24 interaction that suggested they should not be having fun. The director actively intervened to  
25 rebuild the trust with the young players as well as explain to the coaches that their  
26 approach was not conducive to building relationships. Whilst Wagstaff *et al.* (2017) highlight  
27 the importance of recruitment for positive coaches, ongoing training ensures that these  
28 skills remain explicit and up-to-date. Often sporting skills are seen as the explicit and active  
29 role of coaches, whilst team building, values and relationships are implicitly and passively  
30 developed. Flipping the focus to making inter-personal skills and values-based teaching the  
31 explicit dimension of coaching can help produce positive environments for community  
32 integration.  
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### 47 **Actively creating a positive welcoming environment**

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49 Creating a positive welcoming environment is important to help new players, from any  
50 background, feel safe, included and comfortable. Echoing Forde *et al.*'s findings (2015,  
51 p.134), which pointed to multiple staff champions who worked directly with newcomers and  
52 were aware of the positive role that community sport and recreation could play in their  
53 lives, the inter-personal skills and demeanour of the coaches and staff at BTTC help create a  
54 positive environment with their approach to both old and new players. Joining a club can be  
55 intimidating, especially if one has never played that sport before or is new to the  
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3 community. Numerous observations demonstrated how initial interactions actively created  
4 this welcoming environment. A friendly 'hello' helped break down newcomer's anxiety.  
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6 Showing newcomers around the space and letting them have a quick game of table tennis  
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8 can help new players settle quickly and feel at ease. As one of Brighton and Hove Council's  
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10 Social Workers states,  
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14 The club has given them a sense of identity and connection here, and that's really  
15 important. They have connection to their birth heritage but also to here, they belong  
16 to something, and that's huge when you've been travelling and you feel not  
17 welcomed here and had so many doors shut in your face. Having someone who  
18 opens the door and invites you in, it's really important.  
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22 BTTC's positive welcome is more important to refugees who may feel that they have had  
23 many doors metaphorically shut in their faces. Having someone at the club actively greet  
24 you as a valued member of society can have a powerful psychosocial effect and give them a  
25 sense of belonging. Providing a sense of belonging is important for refugees (Spaaij 2015).  
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27 The experience of fleeing leads to a loss of ties in the home country and a loss of identity. As  
28  
29 one Foster Carer observes,  
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33 Sense of belonging is so important especially for a young asylum seeker who has lost  
34 his home and family. The club contributes to forging a new identity, they can proudly  
35 say 'I am a member of the BTTC'. He feels he is a part of something.  
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39 Refugee players at the BTTC have been made to feel welcome and accepted, and this is  
40 important when they don't have ties to the UK on arrival and struggle to forge relationships  
41 in the community. This is outlined by one of the young refugee players,  
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46 Now I see the club as my second home after I left my country.. when I came, I knew  
47 nobody in Brighton, I just knew my brother.. and now when I joined the club I made  
48 friends, I have gone on holidays, I have gone swimming with them.  
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52 Creating a welcoming environment helps refugees feel like they belong. This can help  
53 enormously with their integration in the UK. BTTC helps create a welcoming environment  
54 through the physical space of the club. This can be seen through the words of the founder of  
55 a local refugee charity that refers young people to the club,  
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3 There's a general welcoming environment and the club make it clear that refugees  
4 are welcome too. The fact that there's signs in the club that say 'refugees are  
5 welcome here' opens a dialogue about refugees being part of the club.  
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9 A large graffiti wall with 'Refugees Welcome' makes a very clear statement about the  
10 intention of the club and this helps create the welcoming atmosphere. All new players are  
11 asked to put a pin in a world map where they are from and also in a map of Brighton and  
12 Hove to show where they live now. There are more and more pins across all over the world  
13 and this is celebrated as a positive thing at the BTTC. The diverse and global feel to the club  
14 is reinforced with a variety of flags displayed along all the walls. This has a dual effect. It  
15 communicates that the club is a diverse and welcoming place for all members. It also makes  
16 individuals feel included in the club, as the foster carer of one of the refugee boys outlines,  
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25 At the BTTC he was made to feel special, there was a lot of emphasis on him at the  
26 beginning in terms of his flag being put up, he was really made part of it and he  
27 realised that he was good at table tennis which made him feel good about himself.  
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31 The combination of these active positive behaviours and welcoming physical space helps  
32 players build a sense of belonging to the club. It makes the individual feel special, at the  
33 same time as the club makes everyone feel equal as table tennis players.  
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### 38 **Actively Creating a Social Space**

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40 Successful integration rests on social relationships. Sport can provide a space where these  
41 social relationships can form, develop and continue. For refugees, as for many younger and  
42 older people, forming social relationships can be difficult, especially if they are new to a  
43 country. BTTC highlighted the social side of sport beyond the physical activity, skills-  
44 acquisition and mental concentration. By creating a welcoming environment at BTTC  
45 through the active involvement of coaches, many people, including refugees, felt safe and  
46 relaxed in the environs of the club.  
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54 Refugee players often sit and chat in the club's social space, mixing with other  
55 players from all over the world. This time, around the table, there are refugees from  
56 Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, Chad, other young players from the local community in  
57 Kemptown [an area of Brighton], older players, and coaches. They are chatting about  
58 table tennis, the next competitions, school and homework. The atmosphere is  
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3 relaxed and pleasant, and everyone seems to be comfortable in the space. Refugee  
4 players laugh, joke and are involved in the conversation. Some of them have already  
5 spent a few hours here, playing table tennis, socialising and coaching other players.  
6 (From the research assistant's field notes)  
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10 Alongside the active socio-personal skills of coaches and volunteers, the physical space of  
11 the club facilitates these interactions. There is a small social area in the club with a sofa and  
12 a table. There is a small kitchen area where tea and coffee can be made, and sometimes  
13 there are snacks and fruit. Players can come early and sit and chat to friends, or stay after  
14 their session. Often members of the club, including staff, stay and socialise in the club  
15 beyond the hours of their sessions. For many, BTTC is a place where they chat, eat, have  
16 coffee, play chess and so on. This social space provides opportunities for individuals to  
17 socialise and make friends before, during and after their sessions.  
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26 **The coaches provided fun activities** in a positive environment significantly helped refugees  
27 to find a place in the community, socialise and make friends. The positive atmosphere at  
28 BTTC helps contribute to positive emotions, and to shape a sense of belonging. The impact  
29 of this socialisation should not be underestimated. The founder of a local charity praises the  
30 club as,  
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35 It's been a game changer for a couple of the young people we work with. There's a  
36 couple that hadn't had fun for such a long time and then they went to the BTTC and  
37 they really had a great time. That's what they get from it.  
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41 Block and Gibbs (2017) noted that participation in enjoyable group activities - even short-  
42 term or one-off events were seen as strengthening connections between community sports  
43 organisations and young people from a refugee background. The director and coaches of  
44 BTTC made socialising and fun a priority. Many of the activities they organise are not  
45 explicitly linked to table tennis. They have organised other sports activities such as volleyball  
46 and football, as well as trips to watch cricket. It was observed that these spaces away from  
47 the club were important sites of sociality as the young people chatted, made jokes, shared  
48 music, and sang songs. The coaches actively invite different players to come to showcase  
49 table tennis events and tournaments elsewhere in the country, like Cardiff and Liverpool.  
50 The minibus also becomes a social space where the players can get to know each other and  
51 make friends. Having the opportunity to socialise with people from the same age group, and  
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3 who may have gone through similar experiences, helps refugee players form meaningful  
4 relationships with others. Young unaccompanied refugees, particularly when they first  
5 arrive in the UK, often face loneliness and isolation, as they do not have any relationship in  
6 the new country, as two different players highlight,  
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10 “After I arrived, I made a friend at the club, then life became easier for me. It’s really  
11 hard when you arrive and you don’t know anyone and you’re alone.” Refugee player  
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14 “At the club, I made a lot of friends from different countries and from the UK. I don’t  
15 have friends from college or anywhere else, only at the club. I see them outside of  
16 the club too.” Refugee player  
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20 Refugee and non-refugee players regularly interact at the club and outside the club. Sport  
21 may be a space of socialisation and integration, but integration is only a success when those  
22 bonds extend beyond the club’s activities. Sports clubs can be focal points of activity, but it’s  
23 only through actively fostering and nurturing social relationships that wider social  
24 integration can occur. The development of social relationships at the club does not occur  
25 overnight. They have developed over time and thanks to the hard work and dedication of  
26 coaches and volunteers who actively try to support and nurture this approach. As argued  
27 earlier, sport has no intrinsic power. It can provide a space where social relationships can  
28 develop organically. But social benefits can come quicker and more meaningfully when staff  
29 take an active role in encouraging the fun and social elements of sport and create spaces  
30 where social interaction can take place.  
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## 42 **Conclusion**

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44 The main contention of this article is that successful integration of refugees in sport projects  
45 comes from an active approach from managers, coaches and volunteers. Sport can be a  
46 positive experience for refugees arriving in a new community. There are various aspects of  
47 BTTC which have helped facilitate the integration of refugees: the active approach taken by  
48 staff, the positive welcoming atmosphere and inclusive narrative, and establishing the club  
49 as a safe space, fun activities and sociability. It is important to reiterate that there are many  
50 other factors that impact on an individual’s integration in their community, namely  
51 education, employment, language, racism, and others (Ager and Strang 2004; Ndofor-Tah *et*  
52 *al.* 2019). Integration does not have to be the motivation, nor the outcome. Actively making  
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3 the club a fun, welcoming environment helps everyone, regardless of background, to feel  
4 included. Ultimately, this approach is sustainable as it does not cost much financially, but  
5 resides in the social skills of the coaches. This extends beyond one specific group, like  
6 refugees, to all members as there is not one host community, but many communities.  
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12 ‘Sport’ does not passively encourage positive behaviours. The success and failure of these  
13 projects resides on the hard work, dedication and skills of the individuals running the  
14 project. These managers, coaches and volunteers can actively encourage positive  
15 behaviours, organise events and programmes, and build on ‘teachable moments’. Or they  
16 can simply coach skills and hope that values, respect and wider integration just passively  
17 evolves through the shared activity. This is not to say that this does not happen. Our  
18 findings suggest that a more active approach where the coaches, volunteers and managers  
19 consciously manage the situation is more beneficial and will have more positive integration  
20 outcomes. In summarising the importance of the role of the coach it’s important to note  
21 that the types of roles and nature of coaching (i.e. for enjoyment rather than as a sport  
22 specific activity) are essential to encouraging people to feel a sense of belonging. Equally,  
23 it’s important for coaches to be sensitive to participant needs and the individual nature of  
24 activity and programmes as is sensitivity to life stage and demographic differences. The  
25 sessions at BTTC have been successful because the coaches have helped to build confidence  
26 and self-efficacy amongst *all* participants, not just one target group. The sessions have also  
27 been successful in inducing a sense of belonging, community and inculcating the social  
28 relationships that have been formed.  
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45 Furthermore, the role of community sports organisations - and in this example, a specific  
46 sports club – and their values are important to creating a safe and welcoming environment  
47 where policy outcomes might be achieved. Producing a fun environment, that explicitly  
48 treats all participants as valued members of the club helps promote integration for all  
49 members. BTTC have looked at integration holistically. Refugee integration is not the focus,  
50 but fostering a welcoming environment and an inclusive narrative helps make all players,  
51 regardless of background, legal status or age group feel that they belong in the club. Fun  
52 does not come at the expense of competition. Many players openly stated that they had not  
53 played table tennis, and some did not like the sport. Yet the environment created at BTTC  
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3 produced a safe social space where players could go to enjoy themselves. Playing sport, as  
4 well as other social activities, produced solidarity amongst players. Regular tournaments  
5 and opportunities to play in leagues also encouraged some to practise their skills and  
6 improve their performances. It is testament to the active inclusive approach at BTTC that  
7 one of their young people (from a refugee background) helped found a similar table tennis  
8 club in Worthing a year after this project finished.  
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16 There were some study limitations and methodological challenges throughout the study.  
17 Despite an extensive amount of time spent developing a quantitative survey, that included a  
18 full collaborative approach involving this club, refugee organisations, and participants, the  
19 survey was of limited use. This was due to suspicions of the reliability of the data.  
20 Observations made by the researchers suggested that participants were not reflecting on  
21 their answers. In particular, providing the survey in English did not provide optimum  
22 quantitative data. Limited resources of the project meant that there were no funds to  
23 translate the survey into the wide range of languages of participants. The trust and rapport  
24 between the coaches, researchers, and the participants, built over the year-long program,  
25 enhanced communication of the participants' experiences that could not be articulated in  
26 the surveys. For this reason, the authors identify the importance of participant observation  
27 and qualitative analysis in order to understand the holistic aspects of social inclusion in a  
28 sports club. There were also a limited number of formal interviews with refugee participants  
29 due to ethical concerns about over-interviewing, as well as difficulties arranging and  
30 scheduling interviews around their school timetable. As many of the young people had  
31 endured several interviews, particularly from The Home Office and Social Services, and also  
32 likely to want to provide positive feedback of program, it was felt that conversational  
33 ethnographic interviews were a more robust approach. The research is also limited by the  
34 time period of the study, which meant that it is not possible to determine any other positive  
35 or negative practices all impacts over a longer period of time.  
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54 Like sport, integration is a regular, iterative practise that develops over time. The regular,  
55 mundane interactions at a sport club like the BTTC build up into a new set of skills, outlooks  
56 and behaviours. The everyday, mundane but repetitive practises are really important at  
57 fostering friendships and trusting relationships. Sport clubs like BTTC provide the space and  
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3 the opportunities to put these regular, repetitive exchanges into action. Following Robinson  
4 (2015, p.904), 'the everyday is seen here as constituting the normal routines and the  
5 relationships and the transformative aspects of existence'. Consequently, the everyday and  
6 mundane can have transformative potential. This transformation can occur simply through  
7 the everyday relationships built at BTTC. Integration developed thanks to the active  
8 involvement of the various people associated with the club. This can come from the  
9 managers, volunteers, coaches or other players. By associating with the club, players  
10 developed a sense of belonging to the club and recreate the positive, welcoming identity  
11 BTTC seeks to cultivate. Actively developing a core image of their community club is a  
12 central feature of their integration activities and this helps build a sense of belonging for  
13 members. Community sports organisations in the UK - and specifically sports clubs -  
14 continually face challenges to devote resources to social policy outcomes beyond increasing  
15 sport participation. This article has illustrated one club that has taken on the challenge  
16 through the active approach of coaches, volunteers and managers to consciously manage  
17 inclusive sport activities is central for the integration of refugees. The study found three  
18 significant areas of impact: first, an active approach from coaches can facilitate integration;  
19 second, such an approach has greater potential if conducted in a safe, enjoyable and  
20 welcoming environment; and that sport is a positive social activity for refugee background  
21 youth if the focus of the activity centres on fun and social interaction, rather than just  
22 sporting skills.

### 41 **Funding**

42 This work was supported by the Sport England under Grant number 2016009936.

### 46 **Acknowledgements**

47 The authors would like to thank Brighton Table Tennis Club and their various members for  
48 helping this research to take place.  
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56 <sup>1</sup> Football 4 Peace is the in-house NGO of the University of Brighton. It seeks to use sport to  
57 build bridges between divided communities. It uses a values-based methodology to teach  
58 participants how to work together. For more details see Sugden 2008.  
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3 Active Integration – response to editor  
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6 The authors thank the editors for the opportunity to redraft and resubmit the article. In  
7 particular, we thank Reviewer 1 for their constructive comments. As a result, we feel that  
8 the article is stronger. All edits have been highlighted in yellow on the resubmission. Below  
9 we outline the feedback of the reviewer and how we addressed this:  
10

11 The introduction: We take on board the reviewer’s suggestion to shorten the introduction  
12 and focus on the context of the study, a brief overview, and aim of the paper. We have  
13 reduced and redrafted this section into three clear paragraphs: context, overview and  
14 outline of the paper.  
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17 Literature Review: We have tightened the section on refugees and sport, in line with the  
18 Introduction (p3). Reviewer 1 suggests that we argue for a gap on holistic views of clubs not  
19 being included. We agree and have added this explicitly. We have reworded some of the  
20 section around outcomes. However, we stand by the assertion that focussing on the  
21 experiences of one group (particularly refugees) can essentialise and fetishise their  
22 experiences (and have added the literature to support this assertion). This is supported with  
23 a stronger ethical paragraph in the methodology section.  
24  
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26

27 Methodology: To emphasise the ethical considerations of the project, and to reinforce the  
28 argument made in the earlier literature review, we have separated and tightened the  
29 paragraph on ethics, with stronger links to literature. The reviewer recommended  
30 shortening the quants section, which we have done substantially (we shortened and  
31 removed about 2 paragraphs).  
32  
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35 The reviewer also specifically requested us to address two points. We have added a  
36 sentence (p9) to address the language issues during the fieldwork. They also asked about  
37 interview recruitment. We have made this clearer and elaborated (p10).  
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39

40 Findings and Analysis: We thank the reviewer for their comment that this had been  
41 improved. We acknowledge their comments and have signposted and emphasised where  
42 the findings are grounded in research, including specifically address the table tennis club in  
43 the project, rather than making more general points (on p10, 12,13, 14, 15, and 16). There  
44 are two reflections on issues (p11 and 13).  
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46

47 Conclusion: We have added a line regarding sustainability (p17) to take note of the  
48 reviewer’s comment on sustainability of this approach.  
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51 We trust that this satisfies the editors’ concerns and we look forward to any further  
52 feedback.  
53

54 Kind regards,  
55 Mark, Marc and Elisa.  
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