



## “I would be laughed out the stadium”: How to break climate silence in British football

### Key messages:

- Most football fans acknowledge the scientific consensus on climate change (84%) and are worried about climate impacts (81%), yet they underestimate how many fans share their beliefs.
- This misperception is linked to ‘climate silence’ – not talking about climate. Most fans converse about climate change at least several times a year with friends, family, and colleagues, but fall silent with other football fans. Climate is not seen as an appropriate conversation topic here due to stigma and social norms.
- Initiatives like Pledgeball – that engage people on climate action through sport – can help break ‘climate silence’ and change social norms. Fans who made a climate-related pledge reported talking about climate change more frequently, with pledging itself being a talking point.
- There is a strong appetite among fans for meaningful climate leadership by the football sector – 82% of respondents want their clubs to do more on climate.



Centre for **Climate Change**  
and **Social Transformations**



# Introduction

*This briefing is intended as a resource for sporting bodies, sports clubs, stadiums, sponsors, policymakers, and anyone interested in climate silence or climate action.*

Individuals are strongly influenced by their social and cultural contexts. The people around us and the conversations we have affect how we think, feel and behave, including in relation to environmental issues. Talking about climate change can increase acceptance of climate science and reduce misperceptions about other people's climate beliefs. Football creates communities and cultures, giving it enormous potential to influence people's climate-related views and actions.

Pledgeball is an initiative striving to mobilise climate action among the football community. It provides fans with information about the environmental impact of their lifestyle choices and asks them to 'pledge' a voluntary climate behaviour. Total carbon savings by different clubs are then estimated and published in the Pledgeball League.

Pledgeball leverages several psychological mechanisms. First, it boosts people's understanding of climate solutions. Second, it makes climate-friendly behaviours more visible, reducing 'pluralistic ignorance' (people's lack of awareness that most people support climate action). Third, it provides a talking point which may prompt climate-related conversations. All of these things can encourage action.

## What we did

We wanted to explore what football fans think about climate change and assess the effectiveness of the Pledgeball initiative. We conducted an online survey of 1,628 people, recruited either from Pledgeball's mailing list or online. We also interviewed<sup>1</sup> ten fans at Wembley Stadium and ten fans online. We relied on people's self-reported attitudes and behaviours, so we can only observe patterns, rather than draw conclusions about what caused them. All materials and data are available online.

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<sup>1</sup>The quotes used in this report have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity. Interview transcripts are available online.

# What we learnt

## 1) Football fans are worried about climate change, but are less aware of its links with football

The vast majority (81%) of fans were worried about climate change, and a third (35%) had already noticed environmental changes in their local area. There was also wide (84%) agreement that “most scientists think global warming is happening”. There was a mix of views about the relationship between football and the environment. Some fans claimed it was the first time they had heard about the link. While others noted how climatic changes are affecting football, e.g. pitches being flooded, irritated fans enduring hot stadiums, and increased water breaks changing the rhythm of matches.

## 2) Group loyalty could mobilise football fans on climate action

Interviewees recognised football’s soft power, calling it “the third biggest religion”, for its cult-like status and enormous capacity to influence. However, no one we interviewed had come across an environmental initiative tailored to football fans before. That made Pledgeball appear “different and special” and something fans “have to be part of”.

Fans explained that their allegiance to ‘the football community’ made them want to pledge: “There is nothing legal that can chase you or force you do it, but just [...] how much you love your team. If [it will help] my team win this tournament, [The Pledgeball League], of course, I’ll do anything. I’ll ride an E bike. I’ll be a part of making the environment better in every way I can”.

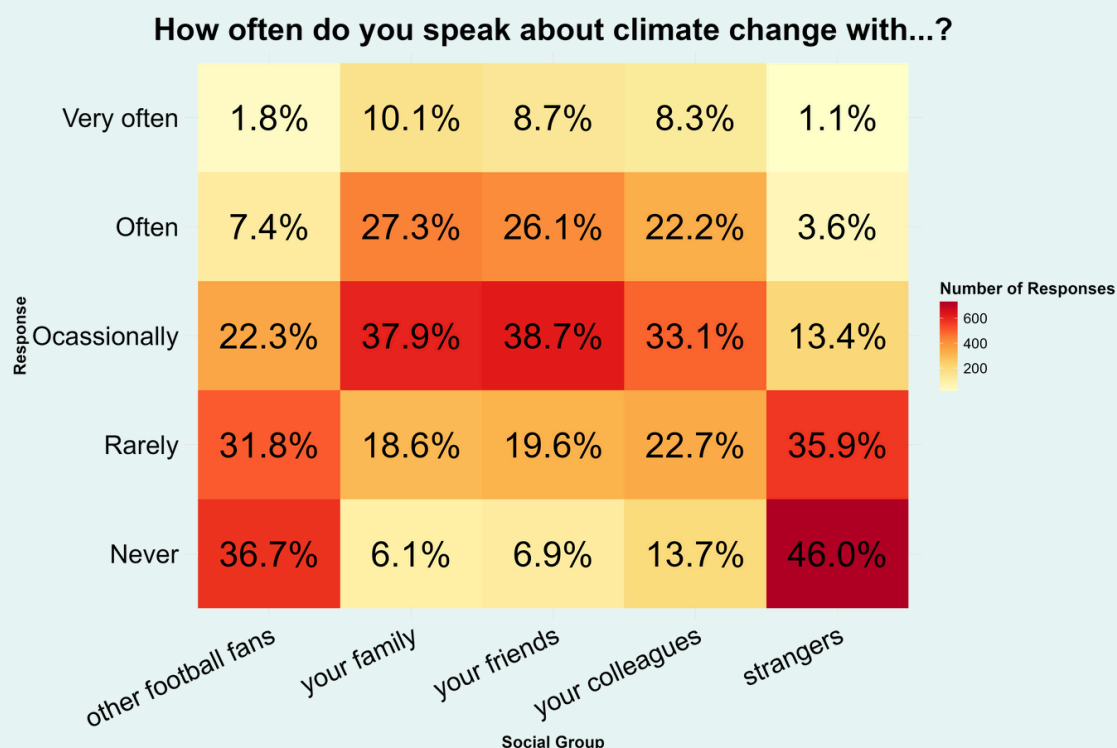
## 3) Football fans underestimate other fans’ support for climate action

Despite 84% of the sample acknowledging the scientific consensus on climate change, respondents estimated that only around 55% of other football fans think climate change is happening.

There was a mix of views on whether other football fans support climate action, mostly based on personal experience (e.g. ‘what do my friends and family think and do?’). Notably, we found that fans who had more conversations about climate change were more accurate about others’ beliefs (had lower ‘pluralistic ignorance’).

## 4) Football fans are largely silent on climate change

Most respondents spoke to their friends, family and colleagues about climate change several times a year. However, they spoke to other football fans about climate change about as frequently as they spoke to strangers about it, which was almost never. When climate change did come up in conversation, topics usually focused on extreme weather events, causes of climate change, climate-related news and politics, and carbon footprints.



*Figure 1: A heatmap of responses to a question given to 1,628 football fans. The majority of fans spoke about climate change 'occasionally' with friends, family and colleagues. They mostly 'never' spoke about climate change with other football fans and strangers.*

There was a perception amongst some fans that climate discourse at football was inappropriate: "football people are there to watch the football. And that's it". A range of reasons were given for this, including the minimal time available at games for talking, other people's assumed disinterest in the topic, not wanting to bring up something 'serious' and 'depressing', and the fear of being shunned. Some fans reported being stigmatised for their interest in climate action, while others anticipated this.

"I genuinely think if I started talking to somebody about [climate change] at football [they] would just blow up. 'What are you on about?' That would be the response I think I would get."

Interviewees listed several factors that would help them have more climate conversations. First, education (delivered in a way that wasn't overwhelming) to improve their knowledge of climate change and related terminology. Second, clubs normalising discussion around climate change. Third, being able to link climate change to football, particularly through tangible impacts they had experienced themselves (like pitches flooding and having to take more water breaks).

Several participants mentioned that it would be easier to broach the topic if there was a visible, tangible climate-related 'thing' (item, staff member, event) at football games that fans could collectively experience: "It becomes a football thing". Fans agreed that Pledgeball could achieve

this by being physically present in the stadium and highlighted that it was a more ‘fun’ and ‘positive’ way to start a climate change conversation.

## **5) Fans want the football industry to lead on climate action**

Fans felt there must be teamwork across the football industry to tackle climate change, but there was a strong preference for top-down policies. Governing bodies like UEFA, FIFA and the FA were seen as most responsible for taking climate action (because they have the most power), followed by clubs and venues, players, and then businesses and companies. For example, fans suggested governing bodies could set rules like ‘no flying to domestic games’, which would affect the whole sector.

The vast majority (82%) of fans wanted their football clubs to promote and implement (fair and non-disruptive) measures to protect the environment, believing that if teams started, fans would follow. Measures included physical changes within the stadium (such as cup deposit schemes) that help fans make green choices, as well as educational initiatives. One participant even suggested FIFA mandates that clubs raise awareness of climate change. Players were seen as the most effective messengers – particularly Ronaldo and Messi due to their extremely large and impressionable audiences – as long as they were ‘relatable’. Fans also felt clubs could do more to set a good example (particularly regarding domestic flights). Forest Green Rovers were frequently named as exceptional leaders in this area.

The participants who had backgrounds in sustainability explained that clubs sometimes struggle to know what environmental measures to take because there is inadequate guidance and support: “For me, there's no benchmark. I don't know if the targets I'm setting are good enough”. Clubs and governing bodies also feared accusations of hypocrisy and tokenism: “I think once you get your own house in order, then you can start going out to fans. People don't want to be [a hypocrite] when they know they're not [doing enough]”.

## **6) Impact Assessment: Initiatives like Pledgeball may encourage climate action**

Pledgeball appeared to have a positive effect across many measures. First, it encouraged climate conversations. Fans who had pledged spoke about climate change more often. In addition to this, some interviewees claimed that the Pledgeball initiative had helped them break climate silence at football and made information about voluntary climate action more ‘digestible’. Pledgeball was also a collective and social experience – 42% of fans who pledged had discussed this with another person, so it may boost fans’ collective efficacy (their belief that a group they belong to can successfully accomplish a goal). That said, people felt Pledgeball would have been more effective if it were more visible in the stadium – physically and through advertising.

# What we recommend

**Governing bodies, clubs, and venues should lead the way on climate action through communicating changes in their own behaviour and supporting fan behaviour.**

- Governing bodies, venues, and clubs could better communicate their own steps towards sustainability with fans. Framing such changes as ‘acting on fans’ concerns’ can strengthen fan-club relations (Smith, 2025), as long as climate actions don’t appear tokenistic, hypocritical or misleading.
- Venues shape the behaviour of fans at matches by controlling their physical and social environment. Fans should be able to provide feedback to stadiums about changes to the food on offer, transport available, provision of waste systems, and design of tangible climate-related activity to kick-start conversations.

**Pledgeball should continue to engage football fans on climate action.**

- Raising awareness of the fact that football fans understand climate change and support climate action – including by supporting fans to talk to each other about climate change – can help reduce pluralistic ignorance.
- Campaigns and activities that highlight the link between football and climate change can make climate action more meaningful to football fans.
- To become more effective, Pledgeball could make itself more visible (physically and digitally) in the football community. They should also extend this initial impact assessment, exploring more closely whether and how pledging contributes to reduced climate silence and pluralistic ignorance.

**Policymakers could harness the ‘soft power’ of sports by working with key individuals and groups (sporting bodies, clubs and players) to shape public engagement with climate action.**

- Social norms often flow from the top. Policymakers can establish clear sustainability expectations across the sector by creating specific and measurable benchmarks. Compliance could be incentivised with conditional funding, public rankings or recognition schemes.
- Policymakers can support change in the sector by helping groups and individuals meet and share best practices. This could be via dedicated web portals, cross-sector forums, or working groups. Participation in the network could be encouraged with grants for pilot projects.

- A mandate for wider action can be built by appealing to shared ‘football fan’ identities and team loyalty. This can help bridge political divides and engage hard-to-reach groups. Existing communication campaigns (e.g. Pledgeball) could be expanded, but communications could also become embedded in existing practices. For example, broadcaster standards could require commentary on the link to climate change during fixtures disrupted by extreme weather events.

## Conclusion

Despite the desire for climate action among football fans, there remains a painfully large climate silence within football. Governing bodies, clubs and initiatives like Pledgeball can work with fans to create new social norms, start conversations and encourage action. The benefits are huge – not just in terms of sustainability but also in improving club identity and community.

## Further reading

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