

**Preston Robert Tisch Institute  
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Organizational Profile

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**CHELSEA FOOTBALL CLUB**  
**An Example of Social Responsibility  
During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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## Executive Summary

In March 2020, the start of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic led major league professional sports competitions around the world to shut down for the foreseeable future. During the hours, days, and weeks that followed, sports organizations began stepping up to new levels of responsibility for helping their communities. In doing so, they have been showing how businesses deemed “non-essential” during a pandemic could turn out to be quite vital. Chelsea Football Club has been providing one such example.

Like many organizations in London and around the world, Chelsea’s leadership had to decide how to respond to the public health crisis.

“We realized that we wanted to—and we had an obligation to—do some things for our community,” Chelsea chairman Bruce Buck recalled. “It was our owner, Roman Abramovich, who said, 'Let's identify what we can do that is really going to make a difference.'”

At the start of his ownership in 2003, Abramovich infused two values—“ambitions”—in the way that the club conducted itself: “creating world-class teams on the pitch” and “ensuring the club plays a positive role in all its communities, using football as a vehicle to inspire and engage.” These values formed a basis for the club's focus on achieving results, managing innovation, and serving the community. During the turbulent and uncertain period of the coronavirus pandemic, in what ways could those familiar factors combine for Chelsea to respond to the needs of its community of employees, supporters, neighbors, and partners?

New initiatives included teaming up with Britain's National Health Service to provide more than 11,000 hotel room nights, along with food and beverage and small gifts, so that medical workers could take respite in the club's home ground at Stamford Bridge. Teaming up with Refuge, a campaign to raise awareness and funds for the national charity that supports women and children who experience domestic violence, achieved more than £600,000 in donations—one of the largest single donations in the organization's history. Building on existing programming and modifying it for Covid restrictions, the Chelsea Foundation, the club's charitable and community programs arm, quickly adapted its range of programs—from football in the community and support for former players to STEM education, business and social entrepreneurship, health care, disability, anti-discrimination projects, crime reduction, and charitable causes—to be deployed under pandemic conditions.

Since their earliest recognition about the realities of the spread of Covid-19, leadership and people throughout Chelsea grasped that the best way to manage the coming changes would be by providing stability. The stability would come through grounding everything in the values and principles that had gone into Chelsea becoming a world-class organization. Meaningful results would follow decisions and actions that fit those values and principles. From there, the club could steer into opportunities that contribute to making a real difference in the community.

In effect, the most exceptional thing about Chelsea's response to the Covid-19 pandemic is that it isn't an exception. The circumstances have been more unique and turbulent than at any time in anyone's

memory. They required facing up to a new reality. But the decision-making and behaviors—the discipline—of people throughout the club fit a familiar pattern. All along, it hasn't been about coming up with bright ideas to do things that attract public attention. It has been about sticking to well-established values while searching for opportunities to do something new and different that improves society.

This organizational profile, which includes reflections from executives at Chelsea, Chelsea Foundation, NHS, and Refuge, describes the decisions and actions that led the club to both advancing new initiatives and building on existing programming. It reveals how, by continuing to take responsibility to respond to the needs in its communities since the beginning of the pandemic, Chelsea stands as an example of the powerful role that sport can play in society and the positive impact it can have when people focus on doing the right things.

# Chelsea Football Club

## An Example of Social Responsibility During the Covid-19 Pandemic

### Introduction

The start of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in London was causing people to fear for personal health and family safety. Hospitals were seeing overwhelming numbers of patients arrive with symptoms of the virus. Workplaces, schools, houses of worship, and athletics grounds were deciding whether to stay open. Restaurants, pubs, and shops were shuttering. Businesses, industries, and pastimes ordinarily considered a key part of British economy and culture were being deemed “non-essential.” Football, the most popular sport in England to watch and play, was going to be among that lot.

The public health crisis led major league professional sports competitions around the world to shut down for the foreseeable future. During the hours, days, and weeks that followed, sports organizations began stepping up to new levels of responsibility for helping their communities. In doing so, they have been showing how a business deemed “non-essential” during a pandemic could turn out to be quite vital. Chelsea Football Club has been providing one such example.

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At the beginning of March 2020, sport and government officials on the European continent were sidelining domestic and international competitions. Allowing tens of thousands of fans to travel and then gather in one place seemed to have the makings of what could become a “superspreader event.” Both the English Premier League and the Football Association Women's Super League, the top-tier competitions in which Chelsea fields teams, were still on early in the second week of the month. But, then, some players, staff members, and executives from a few different clubs reported going into self-isolation after having tested positive for Covid-19 or showing symptoms of the virus. By the end of the week, professional football in England was being called off.

There would be no matches played for at least a few weeks, though almost certainly much longer. With no matches being played, there would be no revenue flowing in from gate receipts, concessions, or television broadcasts for any clubs. The reality was pressing on the fundamentals of the business, which was sending leaderships to ring alarm bells, hit panic buttons, and reassess balance sheets.

Like all clubs, Chelsea’s leadership had to decide how to respond to the crisis.

“We realized that we wanted to—and we had an obligation to—do some things for our community,” Chelsea chairman Bruce Buck recalled. “It was our owner, Roman Abramovich, who said, 'Let's identify what we can do that is really going to make a difference.'”

Since the start of his ownership, Abramovich had infused two values—“ambitions”—in the way that the club conducted itself: “creating world-class teams on the pitch” and “ensuring the club plays a positive role in all its communities, using football as a vehicle to inspire and engage.”

The values formed a basis for the club's focus on achieving results, managing innovation, and serving the community. Now, in the turbulent and uncertain period of the coronavirus pandemic, in what ways could those familiar factors combine for Chelsea to respond to the needs of its community of employees, supporters, neighbors, and partners?

People throughout Chelsea have grown accustomed to looking, listening, and monitoring for indicators of opportunity. Going into lockdown wouldn't change that practice. The circumstances more so heightened their taking notice of the many existing and emerging needs in the community. But which ones would be most appropriate for making a meaningful impact? Which ones would align with how the football club viewed its responsibility to the community?

## Chelsea Football Club and Its Community

Chelsea is one of the top football clubs in the world. Founded in 1905, “The Blues” are based at the 41,000-seat Stamford Bridge stadium in central London. In 2003, the club was purchased by Abramovich, a Russian-Israeli billionaire, for £140-million. The first purchase of an English Premier League club by a major foreign investor, Chelsea has since grown to a value of more than £2-billion. The growth is a result of long-term planning built on Abramovich's initial strategy of making substantial investments in the club's game on the pitch, in the stands, and around the community.

The strategy has led to Chelsea being able to recruit some of the world's top performing and most popular players and staff members to its men's and women's teams. It has also led to features such as the club's 140-acre state-of-the-art Cobham training grounds designed for developing players at all levels, from academy to first team. Since 2003, the club has won a total of 37 major trophies across men's, women's, and youth competitions in England and around the world. The success has helped in attracting a global fanbase that includes hundreds of millions of fans, more than 500 official supporters clubs, and 100-million followers across major social media platforms.

In 2010, club leadership organized community and charitable activities into the Chelsea Foundation. Its mission is “to use the power of football and sport to motivate, educate and inspire.” This arm of the club has been grown into one of the most extensive initiatives anywhere in sport. Each year, more than 1-million participants in 20 countries are engaged through 500 programs covering social issues that range from employment, education, humanitarian, diversity and inclusion, and crime reduction to sport coaching, training, and development.

When the Covid-19 case count started increasing toward pandemic proportions in London, the administrative, commercial, and social operations that had become ingrained at Chelsea needed to be adapted for sudden change. It would have been understandable had the club, like many organizations in a crisis situation, responded by turning inward and battening down the hatches in an attempt to understand and weather what might be coming. But Chelsea responded by orienting outward, scanning its community for opportunities to offer resources that could help resolve what was already happening.

From the outset of Chelsea leadership meetings to address questions about the impact of Covid-19 on the club, one of the first agenda items was what to do about retaining the rolls of 833 full-time employees and match day staff and 1,075 casual workers—a total of 1,908 colleagues.



Chelsea was among the first to announce that all employees would continue receiving full wages and there would be no general redundancies or furloughs. There was enough uncertainty and distress to go around in people's lives, personally and professionally. This was an opportunity to provide some stability. It could also send a signal that, even though there was no football being played, people could still contribute and feel a sense of purpose through their work.

### **Advancing New Initiatives and Existing Programming**

The Chelsea leadership meeting on the evening of Sunday, March 15, opened with updates on employee and operational health, and then moved into review of current activities being adapted for lockdown and physical distancing. For every check on a financial implication, there was a check on a social implication. However, money matters were turning out to be relatively easier to resolve than human factors. The discussion was reinforcing the direction given by Abramovich for the club to find ways of supporting the community beyond what was already being done. By the end of the meeting, Chelsea was advancing on that call to action.

### ***Teaming Up with NHS***

Like many people, Chelsea management was keeping tabs on the news about the rising number of Covid-19 cases. The caseload was already straining the National Health Service. More and more media outlets were reporting on the excessive demands being placed on health care professionals. It made the circumstances seem even more dire.

“Dealing with the fact that NHS people were exhausted. They were traveling long distances. It was difficult to travel. Some of them had cars, some of them didn't have cars,” Buck recalled. “Lightbulbs went off with us because we have two hotels at Stamford Bridge with 150 or 160 rooms that overnight, in lockdown, pretty much became totally empty. And this was an easy opportunity to keep our staff employed and help out the NHS.”

The club wanted to make rooms and meals in the Millennium & Copthorne Hotels at Stamford Bridge available for NHS staff. The accommodations at the Chelsea-owned hotels would start with a two-month period and then continue based on an assessment of needs at that future date. The costs for the accommodations would be fully covered by Abramovich.

Following the Sunday evening meeting, Buck placed a phone call to Julian Redhead. The medical director at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Redhead was at his desk in St. Mary's Hospital near Paddington Station, working out priorities for the next day when Buck's call came in.

Staff at St. Mary's and other NHS hospitals around London were working longer-than-usual shifts to continue providing care to patients. Many were finishing a shift and returning for the next one within a few hours' time. And, because of disruptions to public transportation, long commutes, or both, they were holing up in whatever quiet spaces they could find on-site to rest and recover until being called back to work.

“You could feel the pressure coming on to the staff more and more about how they were coping and how they were going to get through the next days. And we were talking about how much support we could give them internally,” Redhead recalled.

Redhead and his colleagues had been sharing ideas about how they could support the more than 13,000 NHS staff members in five hospitals across north west London. The staff are “the lifeblood of what was going to happen and providing the frontline treatment,” he said. “But it was one of things where we didn't have all of the solutions at the time.”

Then came the phone call from Buck.

Buck and Redhead had talked plenty of times before, having known each other for nearly two decades. Their conversations usually stemmed from Redhead's consulting to Chelsea on sports injuries and work as a practicing physician in emergency medicine at NHS. This time, though, especially under the circumstances, a phone call was rather unexpected.

Buck was calling to ask for Redhead's help in connecting to the right person at NHS about Chelsea wanting to offer of hotel rooms and meals at Stamford Bridge.

To Redhead, the offer was “a piece that fit the jigsaw for how the NHS could support its medical staffs.” And though Buck did not know until learning it during their phone conversation, Redhead had taken on responsibilities as one of the senior figures organizing and integrating the NHS response to coronavirus in north west London. It turned out that he was precisely the person in the NHS system who Buck was seeking out. Redhead could bridge the gap.

“It was really an incredible thing to be able to ring colleagues who are chief executives to say, 'Look, we've got this offer from Chelsea and Roman Abramovich,' and to then be able to put the processes in around it,” Redhead said.

Announcement of Chelsea's offer was included in the next daily email communication sent to all NHS staff across north west London. The phone lines at the Millennium & Copthorne Hotels started ringing with calls almost immediately. Chelsea and NHS coordinators were still finalizing procedures for the accommodations with Millennium & Copthorne Hotels as the calls were coming in.

Meanwhile, hotels general manager Mark Gregory-White and the hospitality, housekeeping, and food and beverage teams were preparing for their NHS guests. New protocols for hygiene and infection prevention were being instituted in real-time. The hotel employees were figuring out the right ways of arranging things to be safe, from the check-in process to clean sets of sheets and towels to pre-packaged food for pick-up.

When word about the accommodations started circulating in news media reports on the morning of Wednesday, March 18, a little more than two days had passed since Buck's phone conversation with Redhead. Chelsea had taken a lead in making such an offer to the NHS. Soon after, hotel chains and independent hotels in other parts of England would be coming through with similar offers of accommodations.

As Buck would later recall, it was clear from the start how important it could be “to NHS workers, after a 12- or 14-hour stint in the hospital, to come five minutes to Stamford Bridge and have some food and have a bed with clean sheets to sleep in overnight.”



The offer would also prove to be important to the family members of NHS staff. They were at home and concerned for those in the household who were working on the front lines of the response effort. That family members were therefore feeling the strain, too, wasn't lost on Chelsea: members of the skeleton crew at Stamford Bridge delivered items from the club retail store to the hotel reception desks, so that NHS staff could have small gifts to bring to their families when they returned home.

As the Covid-19 pandemic raged on past the initial two-month mark, Chelsea extended the offer. More than 11,000 room nights have been counted so far. According to Redhead, the hotel rooms, food and beverage, and small gifts have left people in the NHS feeling “like the public is with them and understands the difficulties that staff have been going through.” According to Chelsea employees and supporters, feeling “gratified” about what their club was doing boosted their own morale in tough times.

Chelsea's offer to the NHS was meaningful to the club and its community from the start. The act satisfied people's social and emotional needs. It reaffirmed a sense of responsibility, individually and collectively. It would also end up signaling the scope of contribution that the club could make to the Covid-19 response going forward.

### *Teaming Up with Refuge*

By Monday, March 23, Chelsea was nearing two full weeks of self-imposed organization-wide lockdown. Most club personnel were carrying on with their work via video conference. Departmental discussions, project meetings, and even player training sessions were taking place from improvised workspaces at home.

A news headline that day proclaimed the British government readying to announce a nation-wide lockdown. Media outlets were reporting it along with photos and videos of the main streets, sidewalks, and landmarks of London completely hushed and empty—the rising Covid-19 infection rates had already led large numbers of people to quarantining, self-isolating, and social distancing in their homes.

Like millions of others now working remotely from home, people throughout Chelsea were regularly exchanging updates about navigating life in lockdown. Implications for physical and mental health were becoming clear and a frequent topic of conversation. For a set of Chelsea colleagues, those discussions extended into the subject of domestic violence during the pandemic. It wasn't that anyone of them had a direct personal experience with it. Rather, it was that a series of news articles about the brutal realities of abuse affected a new level of understanding around the issue.

The stay-at-home orders were provided a new perspective on domestic abuse. They gave greater weight to survivors' firsthand accounts and reports that anticipated an increase in acts of domestic violence. They highlighted the reality that potential victims of domestic violence were facing weeks of lockdown with their perpetrators. And they heightened the concerns of counselors and staff at Refuge, the national charity that supports women and children who experience domestic violence.

Refuge was not seeing a spike in calls to its 24-hours-a-day helpline. People within the organization believed this might be due to victims having no clear opportunity—no respite such as work, school drop-off, or errand run—to make a phone call for help. In public comments, Refuge chief executive Sandra Horley called the situation “a life and death issue.”

Over the course of a few days, Chelsea leadership felt conditions were such that the club could do something to make a meaningful difference.

Early the next morning, on Tuesday, March 24, Chelsea's head of special projects, Rola Brentlin, was starting her workday by placing a phone call to Refuge headquarters. She was calling with more than a message of appreciation. The call was to convey an offer of material and financial support on behalf of the club. In a moment, Brentlin was connected to Refuge director of fundraising Louise Firth.

When they spoke, Brentlin expressed how much the news articles were resonating among conversations at Chelsea. It was reassuring to hear, Firth later said, because Refuge's press team was doing "an amazing job of going out there and extending people's understanding about the consciousness of abuse. It felt like society really understood what victims are experiencing because they, too, were isolated from their friends and family, which is often part of an abuser's control." With that, the conversation turned to the larger reason for the phone call and Chelsea's interest in providing meaningful support to Refuge.

Brentlin referenced the hotel accommodations at Stamford Bridge being made available to NHS as an example of what Chelsea aimed to do. Extending the same offer probably would not make sense given Refuge's needs and privacy concerns—the organization's two main services, among many, include safe houses located at confidential addresses and the round-the-clock confidential National Domestic Abuse Helpline. But the hotels example could serve as a template if Refuge had interest in partnering with Chelsea.

The offer from Chelsea came at a point in time when non-profit organizations were reeling from corporate supporters having to cut or cancel budgets. Fundraising and income generation had become an even more difficult prospect than usual. So, the notion of drawing support from "an international business, a huge business, and the fact that we passed their due diligence and brand checks" was especially intriguing, Firth recalled.

Firth told Brentlin that she would communicate the offer to Refuge trustees and board members straightaway, but that a yes-or-no response would likely take some time. "We can't really act as fast as some supporters are maybe used to because we have to do all this research and due diligence," Firth explained. "We have to go through these processes and have to involve stakeholders where there are any significant risks." Meanwhile, Brentlin and Firth agreed that it made sense to begin softly brainstorming ideas with their respective teams.

When word of Chelsea's offer started making its way within Refuge, there was a sense of excitement tempered by trepidation. "It was so powerful to learn that this was coming from the top of Chelsea and that Roman Abramovich also wanted to help personally," Firth said. But, because Refuge hadn't previously partnered with an organization on such a scale, there was "the questioning about 'Would it work?', 'Would it be successful?', 'How much are Chelsea willing to commit to underwriting this campaign?'" There were also the layers of research and due diligence to conduct and consider.

Refuge, by nature of its mission, is a risk-averse organization. Because of the purpose and sensitivity of its work, investigating a potential donor or partner's history with regard to domestic abuse is a particularly crucial part of the comprehensive approval process. "It's a difficult thing to have to say to your potential supporter," Firth explained, but without it, "it's the beneficiaries of Refuge services who

would ultimately suffer.” And when it came to considering a football club as partner, there was an additional element to contend with, which came in the form of a myth.

A long-standing and widely held belief exists about there being a direct relationship between male football fans watching their team lose a match and a rise in reports of domestic abuse. The link turns out to be, at the least, an oversimplification. As Refuge specialists make clear, domestic abuse is a pattern of behavior and not something that suddenly happens when someone becomes upset with the outcome of a sports event. Yet the false belief persists in much of the public. Refuge did not want a partnership with Chelsea to in any way contribute to perpetuating it.

That thinking led to another issue about connecting the two brands. An observation about public impressions was taking hold in discussions: “Refuge is very pink and Chelsea is very blue.” The two organizations were generally identified along two discrete gender lines. Without a tight connection, a partnership could appear to be more about good intentions than positive impact. Relying on good intentions could easily lead to any effort coming up short of anything meaningful and sully the reputations of either or both organizations.

Five days after Chelsea's offer first came in, decision-makers at Refuge were rounding-out their due diligence. The careful assessment and evaluation of risks was happening in full, but at a faster pace than usual. But, as Firth said, the prevailing thought had shifted to “this is a really good idea and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us. It's an opportunity to strike a much more strategic and longer-term partnership, as well. We need to use this moment.”

Heading into the final weekend of the month, Refuge leaders made the decision to approve a partnership with Chelsea. It would be a new and big way for Refuge to reach people. It was the right thing to do.

Continued support from the Chelsea board and the fresh go-ahead from Refuge leadership cleared the way for developing a public campaign to raise awareness and funds in support of women and children who were experiencing domestic abuse during the pandemic. Still, there were matters of reviewing and approving programming and fundraising concepts that would convert idea into action.

In their conversations throughout the week, Brentlin and Firth had been exploring ins-and-outs of some programs that Chelsea worked on with non-profit and community partners. In each example, there were a few specifications that led to effective results. One was that strategy used the power of football as a platform for educating people, helping them understand the issue as something affecting broader society, and orienting them toward action. Another was that players and staff who became involved in the effort did so because it mattered to them and not because someone at the club instructed them to do so or was trotting them out for public relations. A third was that the club committed its extensive assortment of resources, which an initiative could draw on as things evolved and new ideas came to the fore.

The campaign with Refuge would aim at opening people's eyes to the reality that domestic violence is not a “women's problem” or “someone else's problem,” but “everybody's problem.” It would raise awareness and funds in the throes of the pandemic and in the long-term. But nearing one month into the public health crisis, there was already a degree of fatigue over campaigns. So what could be done to break through?

Word about the partnership agreement being finalized reached Chelsea Women manager Emma Hayes during an update meeting with club leadership. “The next thing you know,” club chairman Buck recalled, “every player on the team wanted to figure out how they could help, how they could promote it.” It was the type of response that had become familiar within Chelsea, but by no means taken for granted.

Hayes had been managing the women's team since 2012, building it to world-class status within a few years of being appointed to the position. An essential part of that growth has been her instilling a “duty of care” as a value in everything that players do, both on and off the pitch. Not only for themselves, but for the team, the club, and the community. Being good players means being good citizens.

When the Chelsea Women came together for pre-season training ahead of 2019-2020 competition, Hayes explained that they would focus that year on “being grateful.” To reinforce the message from the start, Chelsea Women's pre-season included traveling for friendlies in France and Israel. The matches could allow Chelsea to do its part in further raising the profile of women's football; in France, following on the nation's successful hosting of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup earlier in the summer, and, in Israel, working with charities to promote tolerance and understanding across diverse communities. During the FA Women's Super League regular season, the team would then continue being involved in supporting Chelsea's partnerships with global children's charity Plan International, Stonewall's Rainbow Laces campaign for LGBT inclusion in sport, the club's Say No To Antisemitism campaign, and other activities run through the Chelsea Foundation. In Hayes' design, these experiences meant something more profound than keeping up community relations—they were reminders of the personal and social responsibilities that come with the good fortune of being able to be involved in professional football at a top club.

When the FA suspended all professional competitions in England back on March 13 and Chelsea went into lockdown, Hayes resolved that the women's team would carry on with its activities, however modified and remote they may be. Sport officials were targeting an April 3 restart to the season and the squad should be ready on the off-chance that the public health crisis would improve enough for matches to resume. In any case, whenever it was that they could take the pitch again, players and staff would have been confined to their homes for an extended period time. It would tax them physically and emotionally, personally and professionally. So, in the meantime, going on with team activities could provide the benefits of continuity, camaraderie, optimism, purpose, and peace of mind.

On Tuesday, March 31, Hayes logged in to a video meeting to discuss Chelsea Women's involvement in the Refuge campaign. She had no formal training about domestic abuse, but she did have an experience with it that had stuck with her since childhood.

During the meeting, and later in public comments, Hayes shared a story about the time when a relative and children escaping an abusive partner stayed at her family home. The relatives did not have a safe place to stay. “I have horrible memories of that as a child,” Hayes said. “I was nine. She came with her children to stay with us for a while, almost in hiding. I remember feeling every day going out to play that 'I hope he doesn't come and get her, is he going to get us?' That was scary.”

With that, Hayes supplied a missing link for the campaign project teams. As Refuge's Firth recalled, Hayes “really spoke from the heart, really got it. Her leadership as the women's team manager was just

really powerful because it was a woman and she talked about personal experience.” Hayes especially understood the significance of what was trying to be accomplished through the campaign, was convinced of it, and was uniquely positioned within the club ranks to take the lead in multiplying its performance capacity.

The launch of the campaign was set for Thursday, April 2. On the day prior, Chelsea media production designers and digital content team members were working from their homes, putting the finishing touches on a collection of video messages that would feature in the digital campaign. The first compilation included messages from Hayes, women's team stars Bethany England, Sam Kerr, Magdalena Ericksson, and Anita Asante, men's first team captain César Azpilicueta and forward Olivier Giroud, and two domestic abuse survivors. The messages having been personally recorded in each person's home gave the overall production a raw and immediate quality that Chelsea and Refuge wanted to communicate in the campaign.

The campaign launch arrived as Refuge's national network of services were exceeding capacity. A report from the British Office for National Statistics later in the year would show a 65 percent increase in calls to the national helpline from April to June. The report also showed a 700 percent increase in visits to the helpline website—from about 26,000 to more than 210,000—during that same span of time. The need for awareness and funds to respond to the rise in domestic violence incidents was turning out to be as critical as domestic violence professionals had feared.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, and to encourage fans and the public to join in, Chelsea added another wrinkle to the promise of campaign partnership. The club was going to match all donations received in the six weeks following the start of the campaign. The commitment was being personally directed by Chelsea owner Abramovich.

“Every time that Chelsea did something, we had these moments,” Refuge's Firth said.

One of those moments came in early June, when the Chelsea Women were crowned champions of the Barclays FA Women's Super League.

On Friday, June 5, two weeks after FA officials decided to not resume the season, the league championship was awarded to Chelsea. The calculation was based on the number of points-per-game earned during competition earlier in the year; Chelsea had gone undefeated in 15 matches, winning 12 and drawing three. Along with a team trophy, the winner also received £100,000 in prize money. The following Monday, June 8, the Chelsea media office prepared a press release to go out the next day announcing that the Chelsea Women would be donating the prize money—in full—to Refuge.

The championship, the way it was determined, and what the Chelsea Women decided to do with the prize money garnered some larger-than-usual attention from the media. The publicity was generally good for the club and could help boost the Refuge campaign. But, to Hayes's team and people throughout the Chelsea, even more important was that it was sending a message of personal and club commitment to victims of domestic abuse.

Chelsea supporters were also sending a message along the same lines. Many were making one-off donations to the campaign. But they felt there was more that they could be doing through their connection to the club.

Back in late April, Chelsea had announced that it would be reimbursing season ticket holders and hospitality suite patrons for any 2019-2020 Premier League home matches played behind closed doors due to the pandemic. At the time, the nation-wide lockdown meant no one knew when or whether those fixtures would be taking place. But by early June, around the same time that the Women's Super League season was ended prematurely, English Premier League and club executives were finalizing plans for "Project Restart."

For all the uncertainty swirling around due to the pandemic, there were some certainties in working out how to resume the season. One was that "Project Restart," if it went ahead, would require matches being played behind closed doors. There was no safe way to have fans in the stands for the time being. That led to another certainty: clubs having to reimburse ticket holders.

Regulations and protocols for "Project Restart" were being agreed upon in mid-June. The Chelsea men's first team was gearing up to play a match scheduled for Sunday, June 21, its first game since March 8. All matches to play out the season would be behind closed doors. Reimbursements would be going to ticket holders for the fixtures at Stamford Bridge, along with those for the cancelled women's team matches at Kingsmeadow.

Fans awaiting word of the ticket refund policy and its mechanisms were sending emails about it to club officials. But many of them were not inquiring about how or when the reimbursements would come. Instead, they were wondering if the club might offer an option for donating the outstanding funds to charities. The idea gained immediate traction with Chelsea executives.

In the third week of June, season ticket holders and hospitality suite patrons received emails about the refund policy. Enclosed in the offer was another offer: fans could choose to divert the funds as a donation to either the NHS, Refuge, or Plan International.

Most fans selected the donation option. Funds were earmarked for all three charitable causes. Refuge was selected most often.

By the end of June, Chelsea's donation to Refuge totaled more than £600,000. It was one of the largest single donations in Refuge's history.

The campaign with Chelsea "amplified what we are doing," Refuge's Firth said. "We'll never know the true halo effect of people seeing the campaign and donating to Refuge, but our fundraising from the general public since has been astronomical. We have tripled our fundraising target this year." While most charitable organizations are cutting staff positions and scaling back spending, Refuge has been able to increase its investments in those areas and, most importantly, meet demands for its services.

When Firth was brought on at Refuge nearly three years ago, 80 percent of the funding for its safe houses came from federal and local government sources. Over the past year-plus, thanks to voluntary income from supporters in the public and partners like Chelsea, the balance is closer to 50-50. The

difference gives Refuge some independence and flexibility to deliver services based more on knowledge accrued by professionals than decisions made by commissioners. About 6,500 women and children staying in safe houses, calling the hotline, and accessing counseling and advocacy services are directly benefitting from that support every day. By extension, so, too, does the community.

At Chelsea, it was satisfaction enough for people to know that the campaign was helping Refuge's efforts and giving it a launchpad for new growth. Learning that survivors and staff in some of the refuges were thankful was a bonus. But then came an even bigger mark of the difference that the club's involvement was making for women and children residing in the refuges.

“Some organizations have beneficiaries where the donors or the funders can meet them or there's a way to be able to give that feedback. But ours have to be completely anonymous, unless, on a few occasions, we have survivors who are further down their journey and wave their right to anonymity or if the perpetrator had a conviction or passed away,” Firth explained. Bringing direct feedback to donors is a challenge. But Refuge staff recognized an opportunity to do it for Chelsea.

“Some of the kids were over-the-moon excited that they knew their home was potentially being funded in some way by some of their heroes. So, they created these kinds of pieces of art to say 'thank you'.” The drawings and handwritten notes were variously addressed to “Mr. Abramovich,” “Mr. Buck,” teams and players, and staff, including Hayes and Brentlin. Recipients of the pieces took photo images and started sharing them with colleagues via email and messaging apps. That new pieces were still arriving in the mail at Stamford Bridge in mid-August—more than one month after the campaign closed—was “heartwarming” to Chelsea leadership, personnel, and supporters. The campaign was making a difference.

Time will tell the longer-term impact of the campaign. “We really hope there is the continued momentum of people's understanding about the consciousness of abuse, especially the kind of more insidious types of abuse,” Firth said. “Not just the physical and sexual violence, but the coercive control, the gaslighting, the stalking, the using technology to perpetrate abuse.” There is also hope that donations to Refuge will continue.

Today, especially as the world is still living with Covid-19 pandemic and its ramifications, stay-at-home orders do not mean that everyone is safe in their homes. Chelsea's partnership with Refuge is serving as an innovative example for responding to that problem. Here again, it does so by drawing on the knowledge and experience of the club's people, their understanding needs in the community, and their sense of responsibility for improving it and society.

## **Advancing Existing Programming** ***Chelsea Foundation***

“Simon's people are used to doing these things. This is what they do,” Chelsea chairman Buck observed. “When we went into lockdown, they had to shift to do projects where it wasn't in direct contact with people and they had to do it remotely. But this is what they do.”

Buck was referring to Simon Taylor and staff at the Chelsea Foundation. The charitable arm of the club, the Foundation is responsible for developing and carrying out community programs. The initiatives with NHS and Refuge, though they drew on people and departments from various parts of the club, were



ultimately run through the Foundation. They were two among a long list of programs that the Foundation was running since Chelsea went into lockdown.

Back when he received the initial message about the club going into lockdown, Taylor, who heads the Foundation, knew two things needed to be done immediately and simultaneously. There was contacting partner organizations and sites about cancellation of all face-to-face events on the schedule for the next two months; programs for youth, coaches, educators, pensioners, and vulnerable groups were running in hundreds of towns, cities, and boroughs across the United Kingdom and 21 countries. And there was building a new delivery system for programs that could provide support to the community.

Taylor's sense of direction came from knowledge and experience he has accrued since joining Chelsea in 2005. It was the second year of Abramovich's ownership. Chelsea leadership was beginning to focus on upgrading club-sponsored community programs and charitable efforts. Doing so would be an important part of building a high-performing organization and world-class club. The five years of successful growth that followed led to the Chelsea Foundation being formed in 2010. Taylor was put in charge of it.

The Foundation is now the largest community organization in English football. It gives more than £10-million each year to programs covering areas ranging from football in the community and support for former players to STEM education, business and social entrepreneurship, health care, disability, anti-discrimination projects, crime reduction, and charitable causes. With such resources and range, there is a temptation to try to do everything that hints at community-mindedness. But, as Taylor says, “you really have to have a clear vision of where you want to go, which groups you want to engage, which realms you want to engage them in.”

The strategy that converts vision into action does not start out by imposing Chelsea resources on the community. Nor does it assume that everybody who has a need for particular resources or services must want them. The strategy is community-centric rather than club-centric. It starts by researching how the lives of people in the community can be changed through the Foundation's work.

The research aims at understanding who the people are, where they are located, what is of value to them, and how they would likely use available resources or services. It also examines assumptions, gaps in existing knowledge, and changes in perception about the needs that the program hopes to fulfill. The information is then connected to the Foundation's mission and integrated with program concepts, which can be tweaked accordingly.

This method follows Chelsea leadership's guideposts of improvement, innovation, and community. For example, consider the club's Say No To Antisemitism initiative. Launched in 2018, the initiative grew out of Abramovich challenging the club to do something meaningful about rising incidences of antisemitism in football stadium stands and across society. It was an advancement of the Foundation's Building Bridges equality and diversity campaign that has been in place since 2010. It was also an innovation—no major professional sports organization had yet embarked on an open-ended, public campaign to educate people in the organization and the community about the horrors of antisemitism.

The years of hard work and experience that shaped the Foundation's method kicked into effect when the specter of a pandemic set in across London and Chelsea went into lockdown. Especially at the start of a

crisis, Taylor said, “it's very easy for people to panic, but it was important that we had a clear vision of where we wanted to go and making sure that everyone was going down that path.” That path started out in schools across many of London's neighborhoods.

During a regular year, program delivery had staff connecting often with the children, parents and guardians, teachers, and coaches in those communities each week. A by-product of the 2,000-plus education sessions that the Foundation was running in partnership with primary schools annually was that staff got to know the communities well. Another by-product was that it gave the Foundation an almost block-by-block feedback mechanism.

When Foundation staff started contacting school staffs to cancel scheduled programs, they took time to inquire about what was happening in and around each school. Foremost, they were asking out of genuine concern. Second, the information could be input to the new system of programs that the Foundation was building in response to the pandemic.

As they were receiving information, Foundation staff could see what was happening in different parts of England, including areas of London. Sharing the information with each other, they quickly recognized disparities in what schools were providing. At hand, beyond prevailing socioeconomic imbalances, was that schools in some neighborhoods were staying open while others were closing. Staff zeroed in on the latter variable as one that the Foundation could do something about immediately.

Many of the schools being kept open were attended by the children of key workers—doctors, nurses, paramedics, police officers, fire fighters, teachers, transportation operators, critical retail clerks, and other professionals who were working long hours to provide essential services to the community. The schools that decided to close were scrambling to get students and faculty set up for remote lessons at home. In both cases, children were going to be sheltering in their homes for long spells of time every day. And, with their parents and caretakers either away at work or working in the next room, they might benefit from some additional activities.

Within a few days of Chelsea having gone into lockdown, Foundation staff had created a series of daily workbooks that were made available online. At the same time, they had set up and were delivering virtual classroom sessions in partnership with local schools. Players, including Ruben Loftus-Cheek from the men's first team and Carly Telford from the women's squad, were dropping for virtual visits. Physical education activities, soccer schools, and an exercise series that could be done either in a small, enclosed garden or indoor space were recorded and uploaded to Chelsea websites and YouTube. The first phase of the pandemic response system that Taylor envisioned was up-and-running.

Meanwhile, Foundation staff and coaches were also attending to the next phases of programming. It included expanding a series of online activity workbooks, fitness sessions, and skills challenges to encourage school-aged children to stay physically, emotionally, and academically active. Portions of the content were designed to involve family members, so that they could spend some recreational time together. And it considered special needs, such as sessions for children with disabilities and their parents.

Foundation staff were also re-engineering programs for people over 50 years old. The Activate Seniors program, which is aimed at improving physical health and social wellbeing through activities, such as

walking football (a milder-paced version of the traditional game), wasn't safe to run. Social distancing measures, plus the risk for severe illness from Covid-19 increasing with age, created layers of caution.

So, on the physical health front, modified-and-adapted exercise workbooks were developed and delivered in sport and fitness equipment packages being distributed to senior and pensioner groups. For social interaction, Foundation staff arranged virtual reminiscence sessions with former Chelsea players Pat Nevin, Paulo Ferreira, Dennis Wise, and Claire Rafferty; other sessions included participants sharing experiences of living in London during World War 2 and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure that those without proper technology could participate in virtual exercise session and keep in touch online, the Foundation provided computer tablets and equipment as-needed.

Involving former players and retired employees in community activities was a way of Chelsea reaching out to and through alumni. According to chairman Buck, they have always been regarded by leadership as “a crucial part of the club's soul” because of the role they played in shaping Chelsea's history. Outreach to former players, such as through the Past Players' Trust that raises money for those in need of medical or financial assistance, was important before the pandemic and even more so during it. Outreach through former players was, too.

To improve efficiency and bolster the reach of some programs, the Foundation connected with existing club partners.

For youth, the Foundation turned to Hyundai. The global automaker had become familiar to Chelsea supporters through company logos on team playing shirt sleeves, stadium signage, advertising campaigns, and sponsorship activations. But the partnership also included programs for grassroots football in communities. When those were put on hold due to social distancing measures, program developers shifted to creating a drills-and-skills video series. New videos featuring Chelsea men's and women's teams players and Foundation coaches introducing favorite skills, drills, tips, and challenges were posted online and via the club's social media channels each week. Children could view the videos, then practice using football equipment or household items that they had on-hand at home.

For the elderly and vulnerable, the Foundation connected with Levy Restaurants, the club's official food services partner. Social distancing measures made it even more difficult than usual for the thousands of people who were homebound or went to senior centers and community facilities to receive meals. To do something about it, Foundation head Taylor initiated phone calls with Chelsea executive chef Chris Garrett and members of the Levy UK hospitality team, whose catering services were used for the large numbers at Stamford Bridge venues and the Cobham training ground. Next came phone calls between them and the Foundation's health and wellbeing staff, who had experience supporting elderly and vulnerable groups in the community. Then came coordination with charitable and non-profit organizations for the actual distribution of meals, such as Age UK, The Smile Brigade, Unity Works, and housing units. An initial six week-long run of the program starting in mid-April led to 78,000 meals—13,000 meals per week—being delivered to people who needed them.

Between meal delivery for the elderly and vulnerable in nearby neighborhoods and meal accommodations for NHS workers at the Stamford Bridge hotels, Chelsea and its partners provided more than 120,000 free meals to the community within the first few months of the pandemic. As the pandemic neared the one-year mark, deliveries of fresh and healthy food were ongoing. Foundation staff had also been volunteering and assisting in setting-up player donations at foodbanks in London, Surrey, and Sussex.

An important aspect of the Foundation's new system for program delivery is that it does not simply try to modify the existing vision and resources. Rather, it takes what already exists and reconfigures it to be productive.

The tough thing, Taylor says, is that “you can't help everyone at the same time. So, it's very important that we have the vision, which is set by the top of the club and down into the Foundation, of where we want to deliver and how we want the club to be during this time.” Everyone has to buy in and be “pulling in the same direction and not running off doing individual programs.” Otherwise, things would fall apart quickly, if they even got far off the ground in the first place.

According to Taylor, it is “really about recognizing that what is needed in one part of town is different than what is needed in other parts and then creating things” for people to make use of and enjoy. But that does not mean diversifying or trying to do too many things at once. It means searching for a change taking place in the community, deciding to do something specific about it, and acting in an innovative way that fits with the club's vision.

The Foundation's work is not done to generate goodwill, lure new fans, or spot grassroots talent for the club. If results in any of those areas come to pass, the club welcomes it as a positive extra. But those are transactional pursuits, and outside the purpose and purview of the Foundation.

Short-term, brand-laden outreach and throwing money around is almost anathema in Chelsea circles. Doing things to try to look good to the public rather than trying to make a real difference is, too. Video of Frank Lampard, men's first team manager at the time, calling an NHS doctor during a break from treating patients in the coronavirus wards was uploaded to social media channels not to advance the club's public image, but because it might draw public attention to the work being done by medical professionals.

The belief is that there is little value to be found in style without substance. To be sustainable over the long-run, the focus is—and must be—to do things for the community because that is the right thing to do and because the Foundation has the capacity to do it.

The Foundation has had more than a decade of successful growth and, yet, was able to adapt quickly and effectively to pandemic conditions. This owes a great deal to its systematic approach. More so, it is testament to its people.

## Tackling Today, Making Tomorrow

Why has Chelsea Football Club, a “non-essential” business in terms of the pandemic, been able to play a vital role in its community?

Since their earliest recognition about the realities of the spread of Covid-19, leadership and people throughout Chelsea grasped that the best way to manage the coming changes would be by providing stability. The stability would come through grounding everything in the values and principles that had gone into Chelsea becoming a world-class organization. Meaningful results would follow decisions and actions that fit those values and principles. From there, the club could steer into opportunities that contribute to making a real difference in the community.

In effect, the most exceptional thing about Chelsea's response to the Covid-19 pandemic is that it is not an exception. The circumstances have been more unique and turbulent than at any time in anyone's memory. They required facing up to a new reality. But the decision-making and behaviors—the discipline—of people throughout the club fit a familiar pattern.

Crisis usually sends organizations degenerating into panic mode, running around in different directions, and drastic cost-cutting. If any of those tendencies began emerging within Chelsea, they were quickly curbed by the focus of ownership, board, personnel, and supporters on preserving and promoting the club's values.

Strength and performance through commitment to those values allowed speed from decision to action. When good project concepts were brought to the attention of ownership and the board, there was very little lag in the time between approval and execution. That was important, especially during the initial outbreak of Covid-19, as there was no luxury of weeks or months for back-and-forth discussion.

Chelsea chairman Buck has a policy of leaving his office door open for anyone in the club to come by when they have something they feel is worth sharing. “If my door is closed because I am on a call or in a meeting when they come by, they know that they can come back in 10 minutes, when it's open, and talk then,” Buck said. That culture of accessibility can be found throughout club offices at Stamford Bridge and the Cobham training ground. Finding ways to extend it with so many employees working from remote locations during the pandemic has been a key to enabling Chelsea's efforts in the community.

The regard that ownership and the board have for the club's people, values, and structure is a “story that began 15 years ago, when Mr. Abramovich bought the club,” Buck said. “He wanted to use the force of football to do good deeds. And that hasn't stopped.” All along, it has not been about coming up with bright ideas to do things that attract public attention. It has been about sticking to well-established values while searching for opportunities to do something new and different that improves society.

This ethos is something that Chelsea director Eugene Tenenbaum has seen time and again in working closely with Abramovich during most of the past three decades, including in pursuit of purchasing the club. “He likes to figure things out. He is an entrepreneur. He likes challenges,” Tenenbaum said. “Once he gets focused, it's not luck. He likes to understand what a project is about and involve himself for the long-term. He likes a drive for results. He likes to win. And he wants to help out.”

This explains why, for example, during those hours in mid-March 2020, when Chelsea was going into lockdown and professional football was about to be shut down, leadership resolved to continue paying all employees as if the club would be operating as normal. It also explains why Abramovich insisted that it be done without taking advantage of wage subsidies through the government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Job layoffs to cut costs and bailouts to stave off collapse are usually among the first measures that employers resort to during a downturn. But “in such a trying time,” Tenenbaum recalled, Abramovich “did not want extra stress around the club and community.”

Maintaining full employment despite main revenue streams being halted also stemmed from a sense of responsibility. Employment would provide people with income, dignity, and community, which could lessen the impact of the pandemic on their financial, emotional, and social wellbeing. In turn, it could lead to their continuing to do things to help society rather than add to its problems.

Trying to account for and analyze every bit of decision-making and action that Chelsea and its people have been taking in response to the pandemic is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, it is an attempt at touching on some examples that discuss the club living up to its leadership's value and ambition “to play a positive role in all its communities.” Importantly, it aims at understanding how and why an organization deemed “non-essential” during a pandemic can nevertheless prove to be vital to its community.

When Chelsea went into lockdown in March 2020, no one could have known that it would be mid-June—about 100 days—before Premier League matches kicked-off again under Project Restart. “We were hitting a lot of panic buttons when it came to football,” chairman Buck said. “But, when it came to community activities, we were speaking with one voice and moving it along quickly. We knew that Mr. Abramovich was going to support any reasonable project that we had developed because that's the way he is.”

That spirit is carrying on through the present—and showing little indication of letting up.

On Tuesday, January 5, 2021, the British government announced that the nation would be going into lockdown for third time since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Like before, Chelsea responded by extending the Stamford Bridge hotel and food accommodations to the NHS. It was one of the ways that the club continued responding to the needs in its communities as the pandemic was raging on.

By Tuesday, May 18, with the public health situation improving and some government lockdown restrictions easing, Chelsea welcomed the return of fans to a match at Stamford Bridge. It would be the final match of the Premier League season. Seeing 8,000 supporters in the stands was an important milestone for people throughout the club—a moment made even more satisfying because the men's first team, under manager Thomas Tuchel, was on its way to the UEFA Champions League final later in the month and the women's team had already won the league title and reached the UEFA Women's Champions League final.

On Wednesday, May 26, just days before the men's team winning the Champions League trophy, the Chelsea Foundation, hosted a day-long event at Stamford Bridge for key workers from three local NHS hospitals. With support from former player Joe Cole and his wife Carly's 11 Foundation and club sponsor Yokohama Tire, the event was an opportunity for NHS staff members to enjoy playing in six-a-side tournaments and gathering socially around the pitch at Stamford Bridge. At the same time, the Foundation was working with club partner Plan International on an auction of player-signed shirts to raise funds—doubled through match funding by Chelsea—for the humanitarian organization's ongoing coronavirus appeal.

On Saturday, June 19, Chelsea and the NHS were partnering on another event at Stamford Bridge. This time, it was around using the home ground as a mass vaccination site. The club's involvement would include providing venue space, coordinating crowd management, and amplifying public service messages so that 6,000 residents of London's Hammersmith and Fulham community could receive a dose of Covid-19 vaccine.

“We're still doing this,” Chelsea chairman Buck says of the club's efforts to assist its communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. “We're still thinking about it. We're still trying to develop more projects that make sense in this world that we are living in.”