

## The World's Greenest Football Club: Forest Green Rovers

*"Forest Green Rovers is dedicated to becoming a truly sustainable football club, a world first. We aim to make it a place where we can demonstrate eco-thinking and technology to a new audience, football fans. Indeed, we believe that we have the opportunity to introduce sustainability to the wider world of sport, not just football."*

Forest Green Rovers Footprint Report (2019, p. 1)

### Synopsis

Forest Green Rovers Football Club was established in 1889 (Barnard 2006). One hundred and twenty-eight years later, in 2017, the club turned professional following its promotion to Division Two in the English Football League.

Recently mainstream, online and social media have taken an interest in Forest Green Rovers who implement triple bottom line sustainability practices (Elkington 1994) in strategic operations of the professional football club. These strategies have attracted supporter and mainstream media interest, with the BBC, national British newspapers including the Guardian and The Times reporting on the football club's unique sustainable green practices.

Caulkin (2017) ran the headline in The Times '*Forest Green Rovers- the club where meat is off the menu, and the pitch is fed seaweed*'. While Forbes (2020) ran with an article titled '*A wooden Stadium, Organic Pitch and vegan Pies: Welcome to the World's Greenest Soccer Club*'.

### History of Forest Green Rovers

Established in 1889 Forest Green Rovers is a community led football club located in the town of Nailsworth in Gloucestershire, England. The club works closely with the local community having established a charity to educate and motivate people through football.

In 2010 Dale Vince, the founder of the Gloucestershire-based energy company Ecotricity<sup>1</sup> became a major share holder Forest Green Rovers and was appointed club chairman. In 2011 the club became the first and 100% vegan, carbon neutral sustainable football. Key to Forest Green Rovers's success has been the vision of Dale Vince to take the sustainability message to a new audience and thus contribute to "*long-term behavioural change, within the club of course, but also from our supporters and the rest of the sporting world.*" Forest Green Rovers Sustainability Report (2019).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ecotricity.co.uk/>

Dale Vince is not a traditional energy industry multimillionaire; “*He has the maverick past (as a New Age traveller) and the visions of the future (a vegan Britain entirely self-sufficient in green gas). And he has his fingers in many sustainably sourced pies, from rainforest regeneration to electric vehicles, documentaries like Seaspiracy<sup>2</sup> to tidal lagoons, artificial diamonds to plant-based football.*” Richard Goodwin 2022 **PHOTO?**

## Small business enterprise

### A sustainable British Football Club?

Forest Green Rover's holistic operational approach to running the club as sustainably a innovative expansion of traditional approaches corporate social responsibility. These practices are evident for all to witness, from their organic and vegan football pitch vegetable to solar panel floodlights, recycled water systems, underground heat sources, electric vehicle charging points, solar-powered robot mowers, and eco-meadow and eco walking trail to the more novel practices of only serving vegan food to management, players and supporters (Forest Green Rovers Sustainability Report 2017).

This commitment is evidenced through the clubs achievement of accreditation from Eco-Management and Audit Schemes in 2017; the offsetting of carbon football matchday tickets: kit manufacturing with a local UK manufacturer who utilise bamboo fibre and coffee waste in their manufacturing processes. Forest Green Rovers have achieved a number of sustainable bench marks including -

- 16% reduction in their carbon emissions,
- 44% reduction of individual spectator’s carbon footprint,
- 40% reduction in energy use
- 57% reduction in water consumption.

Having measured the clubs carbon footprint since 2011, adopting a carbon-neutral gas tariff in 2021 they have made significant improvements reduce the football clubs carbon footprint redcing it by 53% in ten years (Forest Green Rovers Climate Study 2021). Table one offers an indication of how this was achieved.

Consumption	2018/19 Emissions (tonnes)	2019/20 Emissions (tonnes)
Electricity	0	0
Gas	36.8	1.98
Water	2.9	6.6
Transport Pool vehicles	10.2	8.65
Transport Coach	33.9	18.25
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83.8</b>	<b>35.46</b>

Table One: Forest Green Rovers emissions and carbon footprint detailed in the clubs Climate Study 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/07/seaspiracy-earth-oceans-destruction-industrial-fishing>

## **Promotion innovations**

Forest Green Rovers have found a place of interest in the world football community with no promotional effort. Interest in a sustainable football club has gained momentum in the UK and world wide. FIFA the world football governing body have identified Forest Green Rovers as '*the world's greenest football club*' (BBC 2018). In 2018 The United Nations certified Forest Green Rovers as '*the world's first carbon-neutral football club*' while also appointing the Chairman Dale Vince as a UN Climate ambassador (McLaughlin, 2018). The Financial Times reported on the success of Forest Green Rovers's sustainability initiatives, commenting on the fact the sustainability is '*big winner*' that has put the club in a unique and competitive position in the football (Murad, 2019) – in 2019 the club reported a 19% higher turnover than any other professional football club operating at the same divisional level (Murad, 2019) Such media interest and reporting has promoted and reaffirmed Forest Green Rovers's authentic and unique commitment to a strategic green approach and sustainable operational practices in management of a professional football club. Leading to the support, respect and interest from the general public, footballing governing bodies, eco-conscious values organisation, third party certifying organisations, other sporting organisations and the football supporters wider community (Samuel 2022)

## **Relationships with the community**

Forest Green Rovers green and sustainable approach to football has impacted on the changing landscape of the club's supporters; the social impact of the vegan/organic playing surface, and the provision of vegan food in its catering outlets.

### *Forest Rovers supporters*

Forest Green Rovers commitment to sustainability has established a new supporter community located in twenty countries outside of the UK, including Russia, Norway and Holland. In 2019 the launch of the bamboo supporters kit sold out within twenty four hours across sixteen different countries including Australia, South Korea and Malaysia (Forest Green Rovers Footprint Report 2019). The growth in football supporters interest is evident in the significant media attention the club received - for example the club reported the following in media coverage in 2019:

- 2,303 media articles published in international publications
- 37,442 Facebook '*likes*' in 2018
- 27,657 current Twitter followers who describe Forest Green Rovers as a respectful, open and family-friendly football club.

Forest Green Rovers have very strong on our family values. The club has a commitment to ensuring a safe environment which is established with the input of Forest Green Rovers Young Ambassadors' program which brings local children's voices to the club management; for example they provide dedicated spaces in match day programmes and on the club website to host Young Ambassador blogs (Samuel 2022).

At the start of every season the club gifts five hundred football kits to local children and gives local children free entry to many matches. The club has strong links with local schools through player and staff visits, sustainable education days and vegan cooking sessions held at

the club house. Forest Green Rovers' links with local schools and its proactive community engagement have developed a social foundation that has helped the club become known as a *'friendly respectful club'*.

### *The football pitch playing surface*

In 2021 Forest Green Rovers constructed an organic and vegan playing surface which is maintained with ethically sourced seaweed, sugars, coconut, sand, and bacteria. Forest Green Rovers' drive to share its sustainability knowledge and expertise about the green pitch playing surface has resulted in the club hosting the leaders of several world-renowned sporting institutions keen to learn more about the management of sustainable organic playing surfaces - including Wembley Arena, Wimbledon Tennis Club, Real Betis Football Club and Aston Villa (Samuel 2022).

### *Vegan catering outlets*

Significant praise and criticism have been attributed to Forest Green Rovers' vegan only food policy. The exclusively vegan offer has in the main been positively received and it is now understood that most Forest Green Rovers stakeholders are happy to consume vegan food on match day and have noted that how vegan food consumption can positively contribute to climate change (Samuel 2022).

## **The Future**

Forest Green Rovers' pursuit of a green and sustainable football club has a future focus in the construction of a football stadium. The club are seeking the construction of a socially ecologically football stadium. They have been granted planning permission to build the world's first all-wooden 5,000 capacity *'Eco Park'* stadium, which has been described as: *'the greenest football stadium in the world'* (McLaughlin, 2018).

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