



# An Investigation of Aberdeen Football Club's Proposed Relocation from Pittodrie Stadium to the Town of Westhill

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of Aberdeen Football Club's proposed relocation from Pittodrie Stadium to the environs of Westhill, almost seven miles west of the city-centre, and to assess the probability of acceptance amongst stakeholders of the football club. At the present time, writing in November 2024, it appears that the club has abandoned this plan. Instead, there is talk of a new stadium on the seafront not far from Pittodrie. However, the issues and stakeholder relationships revealed through this case remain worthy of extensive study for what they reveal about the intersection between the corporate world, the community organizations, and the hardcore supporter bases; and how each works according to a different logic and rhythm as they vie for power and ascendancy. During the fieldwork, conducted in 2018-20, the opinions of shoppers in both Aberdeen and Westhill were canvassed, alongside the views of supporters from one of the popular Aberdeen FC supporters' clubs.

**Keywords** Aberdeen · Aberdeen football club · Alienation from a sense of place · Football club stakeholders · Stadium relocation · Scottish football

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The irony of these protesters in Westhill who say we cannot have erosion of the Greenbelt, is that ALL of their house were built on land that was once Greenbelt - Alan Moir, Fyfe Moir and Associates, Accountants and Tax Advisers, September 2018.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 General Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of Aberdeen Football Club's proposed relocation from Pittodrie Stadium to the environs of Westhill (pop. 12,110), some 6.5 miles west of the city-centre, and to assess the probability of acceptance amongst stakeholders of the football club. The proposed location was in fact in between the two commuter towns of Westhill (population 12,110) and Kingswells (population 4,850) (2022 Census). At the present time, writing as at November 2024, it appears that Aberdeen FC has abandoned this plan. Instead, it hopes to move to a new as yet unapproved and unconstructed stadium on the seafront not far from Pittodrie (Gossip, 2024; Pilcher, 2022). However, the issues and stakeholder relationships revealed through this case remain worthy of extensive study for what they reveal about the intersection between the corporate world, the community organizations, and the hardcore supporter bases. In fact, we show how each works according to a different logic and rhythm as they vie for power and ascendancy. During the fieldwork, conducted in 2018-20, the opinions of shoppers in both Aberdeen and Westhill were canvassed, alongside the views of supporters from one of the popular Aberdeen FC supporters' clubs. Additionally, we offer suggestions for future research (Fig. 1).

## 1.2 Research Questions

In order to achieve the primary aim, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What were the motivations behind Aberdeen FC's plans to relocate away from the city-centre and leave the historic Pittodrie Stadium behind?
2. What were the major challenges surrounding the stadium move and how did the club respond in addressing these issues?
3. What were the views and general attitudes of residents and Aberdeen supporters in both Westhill and the city-centre towards the club in this transition?

**Fig. 1** Pittodrie Stadium.  
(source: author's collection)



### 1.3 Aberdeen FC

The current Aberdeen Football Club was founded on 14 April 1903 (Styles, 2000, p.118), as a result of the merger of three local clubs—Aberdeen, Victoria United and Orion FC. Since that time Aberdeen Football Club has become one of the most famous clubs in Scotland and has the reputation of being the biggest club in stature in the country's northeast. Competing in the Scottish Premiership, a division it has never been relegated from, Aberdeen has won four Scottish league titles, seven Scottish Cups and six Scottish League Cups. Most notably, Aberdeen FC is renowned for being the only Scottish club to have won two separate European honours, having won both the European Cup Winners' Cup and European Super Cup.

### 1.4 Documented Planning Permission Issues

It was a definite struggle for Aberdeen FC to determine a suitable site for the relocation in the twenty years up to 2020. Scotland was part of a strong bid for the 2008 UEFA European Championships and it was indicated to Aberdeen that, if that bid were to be successful, planning and construction of a new all-seater stadium could take place at Bellfield Farm, also on the city's western outskirts. However, with Austria-Switzerland's bid winning the rights to host the Championships, Aberdeen's plans fell through. At that time, a protestor to the initial works claimed: "It is like the lifting of a black cloud over the area," referring to Aberdeen's failed attempt to secure planning permission.

Aberdeen FC, and its then Chairman Stewart Milne, then placed their hopes in constructing a new stadium at a purpose-built sports centre in Loriston, on the southern outskirts of the city, for the start of the 2014-15 season. The sports-centre, Calder Park, was to double as a training facility and also provide finance through letting. The Aberdeen City Council (ACC) voted 24–19 in favour of a variety of measures including the local authority taking over public land, which had been previously leased by Cove Rangers FC (Hayman, 2012). The Aberdeen FC Chairman (1998–2019), Stewart Milne, expressed his displeasure towards the outcome saying that the council had "killed off" plans for the new stadium (Hayman, 2012). At that stage, Aberdeen FC was looking to sell Pittodrie Stadium, but had failed to find a buyer (McArdle, 2012).

The preferred option for many fans has always been the redevelopment of Pittodrie Stadium and the potential to remodel their spiritual home through a modern state-of-the-art redevelopment. The club has made it clear that it is in its best financial interests to relocate (Aberdeen FC, 2017). Furthermore, some are opposed to redevelopment due to the implications of partial stadium closures. UEFA regulations state that any construction work taking place on a stand means that the whole stand must be shut in tandem. This could effectively reduce the capacity to 12,000 as work is carried out, lasting three-to-four years, creating serious financial issues and potentially placing the club in a survival battle, as well as reducing the chances of on-the-pitch success (Aberdeen FC, 2017; Moir, 2018). A redevelopment would cost just about as much as building a new all-seater stadium (Aberdeen FC, 2017).

## 1.5 Community Backlash

Although clubs often perceive that there would be major benefits in moving to an impressive modern structure they may encounter many strong objections (Aberdeen FC, 2017; Kennedy, 2012, p.341; Kiernan, 2017, p.887). In this case, objections were consistently prominent in all discourses, with multiple stakeholders loudly declaring their interests and views. The Westhill and Elrick Community Council voted 11–3 against approving the project, with 6 councillors abstaining (Humphreys, 2017). This was part of the consultation process and this council is distinct from Aberdeen City Council (ACC).<sup>1</sup> Not all residents at the Holiday Inn public meeting of 11 December 2017 opposed the new stadium idea. Accounting firm Fyfe Moir and Associates also outlined their strong support for the proposal, primarily due to perceived economic benefits (Moir, 2018). On 29 January 2018, the ACC councillors voted 32–9 in favour of the proposal and the national government refused to intervene (BBC, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The council communicated its official decision in April 2018 (Herald, 2019). Protestors lost the right to a judicial review on the grounds that there was no error of law committed (BBC, 2019; Herald, 2019). Over the years, while Aberdeen FC has planned for a new modern arena, it has consistently tried to reduce any stakeholder fears due to the ambitious nature of the stadium. The proposed stadium was criticized by Westhill residents for the light-and-sound pollution that could come with an all-seater stadium in a relatively quiet community and they debated whether the development would actually bring any economic benefits to the town as the club claimed (Aberdeen FC, 2017). Residents were also worried about hooliganism (Kennedy, 2013, p.141) and anti-social behaviour as they might well have adversely affected the local community's peaceful ambience (Aberdeen FC, 2017). There was also severe criticism of the choice of plot for the structure, coming from all angles. The increases in traffic on the roads in and around the new stadium may well have caused mass congestion on the A944, a vitally important transport link, which has already had documented problems in that regard (Aberdeen FC, 2017; BBC, 2018b). There were reports the plot lay dangerously close to two major pipelines which might not have been accessible for alterations if problems arose (Aberdeen FC, 2017). These problems were the least of the worries for the football club, as it continued to battle environmental activists who campaigned around the simple fact that the relocation was centered on a Green belted area (see Sect. 3) and therefore of doubtful legality (BBC, 2018b). Although the club managed to wrangle its way through numerous battles, the activist movement was one which grew as the stadium plan stuttered, and this created a negative vibe which followed the Kingsford Stadium plan wherever it went.

<sup>1</sup> While Kingswells is in the ACC area, Westhill is governed by Aberdeenshire Council.

## 2 Club History

Although there have been glimpses of success since this period, there was no time in Aberdeen's history quite like Alex Ferguson's tenure from 1978-86. After a consistent, yet unsuccessful, decade in the 1970s, Aberdeen had assembled the backbone of a title-winning squad, with players such as Willie Miller, Jim Leighton, Alex McLeish and Gordon Strachan. The tail-end of the 1970s saw some glorious failures in cup finals which epitomized the existing mentality of the club. The stewardship of Alex Ferguson was a catalyst moving into the 1980s, which bred success and which provided fans with the greatest eight years in the club's history.

In this period, success would be consistent, built upon an important league triumph in 1979/80, which gave the club the belief that it could become a major force in Scottish football. Building on this, the Scottish Cup would remain in the northeast, at Pittodrie Stadium, from 1981/82 to 1983/84, with three consecutive victories, consistent with the dominance this team also displayed in the league. The club won the old first-division back-to-back in 1983/84 and 1984/85. Five years of domestic dominance only provided the city and its football club the belief that it could not only top the domestic league, but strive for greatness in Europe. It was clear that this period was a time in Alex Ferguson's own career which would elevate his stature. In the end it was also the starting-point for his own cut-throat winning mentality which he would become famous for at Manchester United. The meteoric rise of Aberdeen FC and the success it sustained was mirrored by Ferguson's own growth, a manager who would never be replicated after his departure. The prosperity of Aberdeen's oil industry mirrored the club's on-field success and off-the-field the Aberdeen Soccer Casuals (ASC), as the first "casuals" firm (Kennedy, 2013, p.132) to operate in Scotland, saw their most visible supporters take on an aggressive modern look.

Despite success domestically, the fondest memory for Aberdeen fans was the European Cup Winners' Cup victory over Real Madrid on 11 May 1983 (Styles, 2000, p.119). Furthermore, they would secure the European Super Cup, in the aftermath, placing Aberdeen alone as the only Scottish club to have won two different European trophies. This team, known as the "Gothenburg XI," is a team which will be engrained in the club's history for decades to come.

Since 1990, the Old Firm (i.e., Rangers and Celtic) has completely dominated the Scottish league, casting a shadow of despair over the rest of the competition within the Scottish game. In fact, Aberdeen's final league triumph under Ferguson in 1984/85 was the last time any club outside of the Glasgow giants has won the league. Having tasted sustained success in the 1980s, and widely being the focal point of the Scottish game in that decade, it is difficult for Aberdeen fans to accept that they have not won a league title since. With Celtic struggling in the 1980s and 1990s, Rangers won a famous nine-in-a-row, ruling the then first-division with an iron fist (Kinnon, 2013, p.30). Aberdeen finished runners-up five times between 1987/88 and 1993/94, showing that it was capable of questioning Glasgow-based dominance. The mentality of falling short in glorious failure is one which is heavily evident in the club's history, whether it was in the 1970s, 1990 or 2010 s. This habit seemed acceptable from the club's point of view.

The appointment of Derek McInnes in 2013, then a promising young manager in Scotland, was a sign of intent from the club in a time of opportunity. Rangers, which had won nine league titles in a row between 1988/89 and 1996/97, had been removed from the SPL and placed in the Third Division of the professional game (Armstrong, 2013, p.74; Duff, 2013, pp.122, 127; Graham, 2013, p.87), following its 2012 liquidation (Armstrong, 2013, pp.72, 74; Franklin et al., 2013, p.26; K. James, Mayhew, Nesbitt, Murray, Innes, & Maligina, 2018; Richford & James, 2024). This was a double-edged sword situation for Aberdeen FC, in many ways, with The Rangers, a club that is widely resented in the Aberdeenshire community, being removed. However, both the club and many within the wider footballing community hoped and expected that Aberdeen FC could become a *bona fide* challenger to Celtic rather than the league being reduced to an uninteresting one-horse race. Ultimately, Aberdeen would finish second to Celtic four times between 2011/12 and 2018/19, including beating Rangers to the post in 2016/17 and 2017/18. In this spell, McInnes brought the Scottish League Cup to Aberdeen in 2013/14, along with final appearances in the Scottish Cup in 2016/17 and the League Cup in 2016/17 and 2018/19. For a club of Aberdeen's stature, how can continual disappointments in showpiece cup finals and continual third-place league finishes be acceptable, when seen in the context of Gothenburg?

In 2016, plans for Aberdeen FC's new focal point for footballing excellence and new stadium were revealed on land between Westhill and Kingswells on the western fringes of Aberdeen. The proposed Westhill stadium planning documents indicate that, in addition to the stadium, there would have been community 3G pitches; a multi-purpose gymnasium; learning-zone; an AFC Heritage museum; and over 1,600 car-parking spaces to ensure that the transportation issues were bridged. The planned single-tier, enclosed structure would have allegedly reduced surrounding-area noise, drastically improved atmosphere, and enhanced the match-day experience, providing a platform for future success (Aberdeen FC, 2017).

### 3 Literature Review

#### 3.1 Introduction

Stadium relocations are ventures which arguably carry significant risks for football clubs (Kennedy, 2012) and Aberdeen FC is no different, especially with such developments being in the pipeline for twenty years. Disputes between the supporters, commercial organizations, directors, leagues and clubs are likely in these instances, with stakeholder ethics and organizational legitimacy being the keys to passing such designs (Adams et al., 2017). However, conflict may arise from the lack of consensus over club purpose and direction and, although it is common that co-operation occurs, it can be a long-winded process to ensure that the transition to a new modern development takes place. And it is important that no stakeholder is adversely affected to the point of no return (Adams et al., 2017).

Although Aberdeen FC was set in its ways, and had begun construction, there was still mass supporter unrest, environmental activist protest, and local community

residents and numerous other stakeholder groups looking to halt the project or at least manipulate their way to a more satisfactory outcome. A football stadium is seen as a critical interface for many in a football club's social world to interact (Bale, 2000) and the supporters are key in co-creating a spectacle within the stadium on match-days (King, 1997) while also being the major consumer of the product and main revenue source. According to Giulianotti's (2002) typology of football fans, supporters have "hot" and "traditional" types of emotional commitment to their club and home stadium; followers are somewhat less committed and have "cool" and "traditional" forms of identification. Fans have "hot" and "consumerist" forms of identification with their club; while *flâneurs* have "cold" and "consumerist" attitudes (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009, pp.142–143). We might expect the first category of spectators, other things being equal, to be more strongly opposed to the relocation, although there may be some living near Westhill who may be indifferent or even positive towards the proposal due to ease of access. The people in the last two categories will probably be less concerned about the relocation. Kennedy (2012, p.343) makes a distinction between 'traditionalists' (cultural conservatives) and those with a *market-led* attitude.

### 3.2 Green Belted Area Policy

Green belt land policy is a significant factor in this case for opposing groups and in particular the West Aberdeen Environmental Protection Association Limited (WAE-PAL). The Green belt concept developed first in the UK in the 1890s as campaigners discussed the idea of Green belts around cities, which could serve as places of recreation and solace for city dwellers (Bishop, 2020a, p.2). Significant was Ebenezer Howard's concept of Garden Cities, self-contained urban areas surrounded by an agricultural belt and linked to each other via rapid transport systems. According to Bishop (2020a), the concept was based on the assumption of the urban, middle-class family, which needed clearly-defined separate zones for work and leisure. Hence, the normative ideal of the Garden City was moral as much as it was spatial. In the post-war period, these ideals were built into New Towns such as Harlow and Stevenage in the 1950s and Milton Keynes in the 1970s (Bishop, 2020a, p.2). In recent times, conflict has emerged between those wanting Green belts preserved at all costs and those seeing easing of restrictions as an answer to the housing shortage, which has become especially acute in London and the Southeast (1–2, 3). We observe this dilemma in the Kingsford Stadium case with stakeholders on both sides echoing either one or the other of these presumptions. However, while Westhill has a semirural atmosphere its houses were built on what was once Green belt land according to Moir (2018). As at 2017, Scotland had 11 Green belts, including areas in and around the Central Belt, between Glasgow and Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Ayr, Perth and St Andrews (Bishop, 2020a, p.4).

We should mention here the Spanish architect Manuel de Solà-Morales i Rubió, former professor at the Barcelona School of Architecture (ETSAB). He was a leading thinker on urban planning topics and introduced the term *terrain vague* to describe the peri-urban areas that are neither city proper nor countryside proper. In his Spanish-language book (never translated into English), *Las formas de crecimiento urbano*



(*Forms of urban growth*), de Solà-Morales i Rubió (2008) claimed that the Garden City is not a final solution but an intermediate position between city and country. It moves housing questions into the countryside just as much as it unlocks the potential of the city. The Garden City is a series of rings with the intermediate ring being industrial and the outer ring being green/rural. Planning policies about land use and ownership hold these rings in place. Nowadays some attention has shifted from the Garden City utopian ideal to solutions within the urban domain including regeneration.

Bishop (2020b, pp.161–162) suggests that the following key principles are important for the future of Green belt management: (a) A synergic holistic approach is needed rather than a clear green-red divide. Plans should incorporate housing, energy, water management, transport, etc.; (b) Assessment of quality of Green belts should be based on a hierarchy of considerations—water management, heritage protection, recreation, productive agriculture, energy production and infrastructure needs; (c) Urban growth should follow development corridors which might even extend Green belt land; (d) Land should be considered for development if there is insufficient *brown-field* options and where infrastructure exists, but new housing should be at a minimum density of 90 houses per hectare; (e) Primary legislation should allow public authorities to acquire land at close to agricultural values and pass it on to developers, aided by a betterment tax on developers; (f) The value-added should be used to acquire agricultural land for public access and nature conservation. Funds should be used for infrastructure (such as Kingsford Stadium perhaps? ), purchasing and improving brownfield land and subsidizing new housing; and (g) regional planning authorities should arrange an annual environmental audit. Westhill and Kingswells are mixed-mode or peri-urban *terrain vague* and it is here where both space exists and private developers hunt for opportunities. It would appear that future outcomes will be largely a function of the relative power and tactics of competing groups. Interestingly, for various reasons, Westhill-Kingswells residents claimed the moral high ground and that was a narrative that became difficult to argue against over time regardless of the ACC vote.

### 3.3 Stakeholder Theory

We selected Stakeholder Theory as the main theory framework to be used in this case study. Freeman (1984, 2021) defines Stakeholder Theory objectives as: (1) Redistribute benefits to stakeholders, and (2) Redistribute important decision-making powers to stakeholders. Stakeholder Theory has grown in importance on the back of high-profile corporate governance failures and there is now a strong focus on accountability and transparency for organizations. The public has become less tolerant of instances of corporate irresponsibility and, consequently, firms are under increasing pressure to consider their roles in society and how their business operations might affect environment and community (Blowfield & Murray, 2008). To many stakeholders, Aberdeen FC did everything but pay attention to the needs and wants of its local community and it was ignorant of how its stadium relocation plans, as opposed to simple redevelopment of Pittodrie, would have affected residents' and supporters' lives.



Therefore, for sport managers, it is crucial to gain knowledge of how your stakeholder relationships are developing whether it be with supporters, fans or councils. It is the close attention to stakeholders which allows managers to properly strategize and gain the upper hand in their industry into the future. Organizations must ask themselves: what obligations does this organization owe to its current stakeholders; how should its decision-making be oriented to balance its various stakeholders' interests; and what strategies are its stakeholders likely to employ in the long- and short-term to try to influence the organization? (Walters & Tacon, 2010). As the club wanted to modernize its facilities, it seems that it wasn't able to really understand the true feeling of discontent of many connected with the club.

Rapid commercialisation within many sports industries has had a dramatic effect on the management structures of sports organisations. The influence of broadcasting companies, sponsors and other commercial organisations, as well as the financial implications of legal decisions, have transformed relationships between those groups involved in the "production" and "consumption" of sport (Walters & Tacon, 2010, p.570).

In the context of football clubs, it's pivotal that directors seriously consider multiple stakeholder groups and ensure that main groups such as supporters, who are also the primary customers, are treated fairly. Engaging in CSR initiatives to identify stakeholder needs is the key to keeping the organization's objectives relevant and achievable (Walter & Tacon, 2010). Failure can result in a rapid loss in support and then a subsequent fall in revenue, effacing the business case for CSR (Morrow, 2004). Stakeholder groups can be a dangerous force for organizations to face if mistreated. Groups may well complement each other and form strategic alliances to stand up to business decisions which aren't fit for purpose, in the overall wider view, increasing the persuasive powers of their claim (Neville & Menguc, 2006). Football clubs are an exceptional case for Stakeholder Theory and have unique features. Lawrence (2019) argues that the goal of football clubs should be to maximize *utility* (happiness) of stakeholders rather than profit, and he also notes that half of EPL clubs fail to report profits. Supporters' relationships with their club are often based on "fan equity." Therefore, despite the fact that decisions, such as stadium relocations, may cause great distress, their loyalty towards the club will very often mean that they continue to provide resources regardless of the club's actions (Walters & Tacon, 2010).

When a club becomes less responsive and attentive to stakeholders' demands, neglecting the opinions of supporter groups, a stakeholder has the choice of choosing an alternative product (supporting a new club) or expressing their dissatisfaction at the club in the hope that change occurs—Hirschman's *exit, voice or loyalty* thesis (Hirschman, 1970; Kiernan, 2017). In the UK, some people do quietly switch to following a non-league club for financial or other reasons. The most famous case is that of FC United of Manchester formed by Manchester United fans opposed to the Glazer family takeover (Kiernan, 2017). Kiernan sees *loyalty* in football as going beyond one particular club, but loyalty to the game, so FC United supporters are still able to combine *loyalty* with *exit*. And a defiant and decisive exit can be also be viewed as something approaching *voice* (884). It is important that club supporters

are offered additional commitments to fairness with their custom being the key to keeping the club afloat in many cases. Supporters have an emotional attachment to their football club and neglecting this would truly be a case of capitalism consuming football to the point of abyss. However, there will always be varying stakeholder responses to every decision that an organization makes. These responses can facilitate or hamper the club's ambitions to change and modernize (Morrow & Idle, 2008).

When facing the same or similar pressures, in the age of modernization of infrastructure in sport, the same stakeholder conflict has arisen in protest time and time again. With regaining legitimacy paramount, isomorphic procedures are undertaken, i.e., analyzing other clubs' struggles and identifying their solutions (Cousens & Slack, 2005). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe isomorphism as "the constraining process which forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same environmental conditions." Legitimacy is the factor which defines successful organizations and attending to stakeholders is clearly linked to higher levels of legitimacy. Football clubs are undergoing bureaucratization and other reforms to make their organizations more similar to the benchmark after controversial business decisions. This naturally makes football clubs more homogenous in their approach to stakeholder relationships, with the risk of taking chances with (powerful) stakeholders too great to gamble with (Peachey & Bruening, 2011).

### 3.4 Alienation from a Sense of Place

Football fans are clearly alienated from clubs in many ways (Kennedy, 2013; Kieran, 2017). The specific form of alienation examined here is the one proposed by Penny and Redhead (2009). Through investigation of Manchester City's move to the Etihad Arena, these authors discovered that fans lost the sense of place that they had established through many years of attending the club's original home, Maine Road. Hirst (2005) argues that different geographical spaces, under different social and political conditions, are constructed by sources of conflict and political/social power. He concludes that physical spaces are resources of power and meaning, although the relationship between power and space is complex (Kelly, 2018, p.318). Fans experience identity formation within the football stadium (Kelly, 2018, p.318; Wise, 2018); this identity is torn away from them when clubs relocate to new stadiums (Wise, 2018, p.146).

Clubs and governing bodies sometimes maintain that these moves are necessary to maintain health and safety regulations. While this is often true, authors such as Penny and Redhead (2009) and Church and Penny (2013) point out that these moves represent further commodification of football. Clubs are taken out of their spiritual homes and relocated to gentrified stadiums for the purpose of increasing the number of seats available for sale. Lawrence (2016) states that football fans place a significance upon grounds not unlike the religious significance placed upon a church. Significantly, Bale (1994) is sometimes credited as being the first to bring Yi-Fu Tuan's (1974) term—*topophilia* meaning "love of a place"—into the geography of sport literature. All three articles cited prior to Bale (1994) agree that sport, particularly football, is hugely important in the construction and reproduction of individual identities in modern society. The use of physical stadia in the creation of identities, power rela-

tionships and meaning shows just how precious stadiums are (Kelly, 2018, p.318) to many dedicated club supporters.

Bairner and Shirlow (1998) state that traditional football stadiums in Northern Ireland are also used in the creation of identities and traditions, of both club and community. These authors find that Windsor Park (the home ground of Linfield FC) provides the physical space for an imagined Ulster amongst young working-class Protestant men. In a sense, it provides a way for these men to live out a fantasy of a political and social ideal that some in Northern Ireland desire. Given the current political situation in Northern Ireland, a purely Protestant Northern Ireland is impossible. Hence some elements within the Linfield FC support find Windsor Park to be a utopia where they can live within their desired, imagined political environment.

Kennedy (2012, p.345) finds that both supporters and opponents of Everton FC's proposed move to Kirkby "recognized that it was necessary to preserve community, but this was accompanied by a debate that was tempered by what was deliverable in an economic sense and the financial benefits to be accrued from moving to a new location." The discussion between supporters suggested that ideas surrounding "community" were being colonized by language associated with the market. This augmented earlier findings by Kennedy and others that most fans used commercial *rhetoric* to buttress their arguments. The central finding of the earlier work was that Everton supporters were able to utilize the language of the market both for-and-against the relocation, with a mixture of pragmatism and scepticism inherent in their comments. The contrast with Aberdeen FC is that Aberdeen is in a smaller, less lucrative and more isolated league and country. Hence, many fans articulate traditional values in an unashamed manner.

Potter (2013) argues that fans become alienated due to these new stadiums, not only from the club, but from the physical stadiums. Leaving behind the history, memories and relationships created within the old hallowed grounds, supporters once again find themselves trying to renegotiate new meanings. We can compare the historic and quaint traditional stadium of Bohemians 1905 Praha, with its terrace behind the goal, with the new concrete bowl of Slavia Praha, less than a mile away to the east, with its four-star hotel and McDonald's outlet built into the stadium wall. In the case of modern football, it is those who own the stadiums and the clubs that rent from them who are the chief beneficiaries of this new capitalism (e.g., West Ham United leaving Upton Park for the London Stadium (James, 2022)). The decaying and weedstrewn terraces at Cathkin Park, Glasgow, the home of Third Lanark FC until 1967, stand as a decrepit monument to an old-fashioned and allegedly outdated supporter culture.

## 4 Methods

In this brief section, we provide details on the choices made by the authors about how to collect and interpret primary data so as to be able to answer the research questions.

As we previously stated, our main research aim was to identify and explore the main stakeholder reactions to Aberdeen FC's proposed relocation to Kingsford Stadium, whether that be from club officials, supporters, residents or environmental activists. Therefore, we saw it as crucial that a diverse range of stakeholder opinions

was recorded so to increase the validity and usefulness of the findings. We were aware that, with many stadiums in the UK being a hundred years old, the decision to redevelop or relocate will be one faced by many clubs, and this enhances the potential usefulness of this piece of research. We show the problems that can be encountered and Aberdeen FC was very likely taken by surprise by the number of objectors and how articulate they were in explaining their positions. The first-mentioned author gained a detailed and nuanced understanding of the issues by travelling to Aberdeen and exposing himself to the public mood, from Westhill in the west to the pubs in the Pittodrie vicinity to the east.

Even though the research aim was clear, the researcher wants to point out that his own personal opinion on the relocation fluctuated as the data collection was carried out. Overall, he made three trips to Aberdeen during 2018-20 in order to collect primary data. We viewed it as important, right from the beginning, to ensure that we interviewed a diverse set of individuals and that each major “camp” was represented in the primary data. Respondents quoted in the next section are either club executives, supporters’ club members, environmental activists, and/or local shoppers/residents at either the city-centre or Westhill. Respondents were sought at the big Union Square Shopping Centre in the city-centre and at the smaller Westhill shopping complex. Union Square was visited on a Saturday afternoon so as to access a broad cross-section. Where a person’s real name is given, as with the club executives, suitable permission was received.

This research can be viewed as ethnography due to the researcher’s “immersion” (Atkinson, 2017, p.50; Crone & Lozano-Sufrategui, 2019, p.87) in the field during his systematic collection of data. Ethnography does not require, as is sometimes supposed, travel to a foreign country or interacting with people from an ethnic group different from one’s own. Both researchers are keen supporters of Scottish football and the project had clear objectives and boundaries and was conducted in a systematic way. The first researcher also plays for an amateur club in Glasgow. In Aberdeen, after a short adjustment period, he immersed himself in the Aberdeen context. He was invited to visit Aberdeen FC and do a tour and he was also made welcome on a Monday night visit to the Pittodrie Bar supporters’ club. He interacted and had numerous conversations with fans there as well as interviewing the supporters’ club president. It was a Monday night and football was on the TV. He was welcomed because people were aware that he had travelled 150 miles to come to hear people’s viewpoints on the controversial issue of the relocation. People felt that Aberdeen FC was not listening to their views and so the researcher’s sincere interest was appreciated. There is also a perception in the northeast that people in the Central Belt (Glasgow through to Edinburgh including towns in between) are not interested in their affairs (Moir, 2018), which made the researcher’s efforts more impactful. There was typical Scottish banter and, as he was thought to be a fan of St Mirren, because he was from Paisley, he was teased for a cup defeat at the hands of Aberdeen. This banter was taken in good spirit and it allowed bonding to occur. Arguably, the quality of interview data received was directly correlated to the effort made by the researcher and the atmosphere created by the banter. On other days the researcher visited both Union Square and Westhill shopping complexes on different afternoons and through various conversations in those places he gained a feeling for the area and for people’s views.

Ratcliffe (2012, p.488f, cited in Atkinson, 2017, pp.58–59) talks of the crucial role of radical empathy within ethnography; this includes “a stance of openness to others, a willingness to be affected by them, to have one’s own experience shaped by them.” As mentioned, the first researcher is a dedicated supporter and player of football and the second researcher has a strong interest in the game. The first researcher empathized with club executives because they sincerely believed that the relocation would help the club to reach the heights it had achieved in the past. He also empathized with the Pittodrie Bar supporters due to their dedication and “traditional” “hot” identification with the club and historic stadium. So we approached the project with a view to being fair to all stakeholders, but at the same time we were traditional supporters. The first researcher mentioned how his opinions fluctuated during the data collection process as his empathy and interest made him amenable to the merits of the various viewpoints that he was hearing. Many Scottish fans are bored and disillusioned by the fact that the title race is a two-horse race since no club other than Rangers and Celtic have won a title since 1990. We hope that this situation will change. Traditionally, when we look for challenges to the Old Firm, we turn to clubs with a record of success in the past such as Aberdeen and Dundee United.

There was a sincere desire on the part of the researcher to listen, learn, empathize and understand. Empathy and basic knowledge of football allowed for bonding to occur and communication to continue at beyond a superficial level. The researcher deeply felt and respected the dedication and passion of the football supporters and club executives, fan-to-fan. He aimed to avoid the four errors of ethnography, which Conquergood (1982, cited in Hamera, 2018, p.366) listed as *curator’s exhibitionism*, *custodian’s rip-off*, *enthusiast’s infatuation* and *cynic’s cop-out*. The first two want to showcase the exotic and take the participants’ views as product, respectively. The third wants to refashion the differences into “romantic celebration of a simple difference” while the last hides behind a purported “unintelligibility of difference.” Being a dedicated fan, player and researcher meant listening to and respecting the interviewees in their similar capacities as supporters or administrators. Research roles and football context roles were welded together as the outlook and ethics of one role complemented the outlook and ethics of the other (in a way not too dissimilar to how a serious football journalist might operate). So, a research context and a football context were both operating at the same time and the ethics and culture of one merged with those of the other to produce a strong synthesis.

## 5 Findings

We use the engaging Q-and-A format to present the study findings. For space reasons, we omit responses to the first three questions. The fourth question was about whether the respondent supported the relocation and why. We now turn to responses to Q4.

***Q4 - Are you as an individual for or against the relocation to Westhill and what is the key factor influencing your opinion?***

At Union Square Shopping Centre, Aberdeen City Centre, there was a mostly positive response to the proposed relocation to Westhill. For example, a Union Square shopper interviewed at the shopping centre commented as follows:

[1] I can't see why not. The football club has been more and more in the background the past ten years with no one really giving a s\*\*t. A new stadium with new improved players and a manager is needed if you ask me. A new start to get Dons [i.e., Aberdeen FC] back on track.

In the interview with Dave MacDermid, the then club marketing manager, he highlighted the direction the club wished to take amid controversy:

[2] The project itself is one of ambition and drive shown by our club. It is a project which has been in the pipeline and in our vision for a very long time now and the community in and around Aberdeen have been aware of our plans for almost twenty years now. With every chance, there will be risk and people who can't see the success before them, but, with our plan, we feel the community have accepted and got behind our plans to expand. The community has always been at the club's heart and our progression isn't leaving anyone behind.

A relocation doesn't just affect the towns and cities involved directly, it can also impact on transport networks in and around these places and the relocation to Westhill was no different. With the nature of the shoppers, these people may prefer football traffic to separate itself from Aberdeen to allow easier parking and access to the city-centre. It seems that there was a highly positive reaction to how the transport links may shape up in any new format. It appears that some shoppers at Union Square looked forward to less busy transport networks at weekends and more accessible parking with football traffic heading 6.5 miles west from the city-centre.

Raymond Edgar, the Project Manager of the relocation development, offered a reassuring hand to any Aberdeen FC fans worried about transport on match days and potential implications for local roads:

[3] Kingsford location is prime for supporters travelling to the football in and around Aberdeen and with training facilities also on the single site—accessibility along with efficiency has made the project viable for supporters and stakeholders of Aberdeen Football Club. The shuttle bus proposals have been rigorously interrogated, and the integrated transport strategy has been approved by the city council's transportation, roads and planning departments.

In an interview with the environmentalist No Kingsford Stadium (NKS) group in 2018, the argument of impracticability of the transportation situation was clearly outlined:

[4] It's hard to work out where this all comes from? Staggering buses full of thousands of supporters on a match day, seven miles from the city-centre, ensuring all make the match for kick-off? This is a ridiculous strategy and the

process of interrogation must be called into question here. That is, if the volume of fans still exists by the time this is all said and done.

An unnamed Aberdeen FC official, who wished to remain anonymous in the research, highlighted that it was vitally important for fans to get on the club's side with the development if they wished to try regaining the glory days once again:

[5] We want to be the people who take Aberdeen Football Club back to the glory days. We aren't producing Willie Millers, Alex McLeishs and Neil Simpsons anymore, we want to produce that level of talent again. We are stuck in a rut where we are right now, and I know that the first steps in bringing our club back to where it used to be is revamping our model and strategy. It should be an exciting time.

The major problem will continue to be the funding gap with the Old Firm. It is hard to see how moving 6.5 miles west can resolve this issue. Even if Aberdeen FC can produce such players again, they will all probably leave the club as youngsters for more money.

Tourism impact is a key factor in relocations of this nature—taking a major tourist attraction out of the city community and moving it away can have seismic effects on income in the area. But, when asking the regular shoppers within the city, tourism might not be at the forefront of their minds because they all live within the community permanently.

Aberdeen FC's Raymond Edgar outlined the fact that, though the stadium relocation was consistently a talking point for the council, it was only a matter of time before the plan passed:

[6] The football club has been chasing this project for decades now and we have fought to keep a cornerstone of economic benefit here in Aberdeen since the Loriston days. Accessibility has always been the argument but, as a committee, they have been unable to hold back the club any longer. In the long run, hopefully there will be talking amongst us to make sure Aberdeen and its citizens don't suffer as a result.

By way of contrast, the Chairman of the Pittodrie Bar in Aberdeen City Centre, located just two hundred yards from Pittodrie Stadium, made his feelings clear to the researcher about the general opinion of the diehard Aberdeen FC supporter:

[7] What the f\*\*k is there to like here? The club don't care about the fans, don't care about what we think, the s\*\*t that goes on for us in all this. They ask for our opinion and if they don't like it then we are told to f\*\*k off. How does a club expect us to get behind them when the people paying their wages can't get a say in where we go, what we do? [Then owner Stewart] Milne will regret this one day when he sits on the ton of cash he makes from this, builds his own legacy but forgets about our own club's.



Aberdeen FC and Raymond Edgar have always outlined in media propaganda the idea of modernization and this was reinforced in the primary data:

[8] Modernization of facilities is our main goal. We want to compete with the best in the country, the Old Firm have top class facilities at Lennoxton [Celtic FC] and Auchenhowie, it is part of the DNA of top clubs. Our teams train at the University here in Aberdeen, we don't even have our own dedicated facility. The relocation not only brings a brand-new home of Aberdeen Football but provides facilities for our players to dedicate themselves from top to bottom. Without this step, we can never dream of taking the next step as a football club in Scotland.

***Q5 - Do you feel that with Aberdeen FC taking the decision to relocate to a well-documented green belted area in Westhill, there will be a widely negative environmental impact attached to the project?***

One of the most controversial aspects of the relocation, the move upon a Green belted area, was a subject again put to supporters who, for many reasons, were evidently not happy with the relocation. My conversations with respondents suggest that there was always going to be at least a small backlash in media scrutiny and negativity from the Westhill community due to the fact that the plot was originally Green belted land. Perhaps the politics behind the relocation is a matter which some supporters are not completely educated on. However, most supporters were at least able to provide an opinion after the situation was briefly detailed to them. As for the researcher, it was his original thinking that the Green belt issue would not be an apparent problem for Aberdeen supporters as, if they really wanted a move away from Pittodrie, this would be no obstacle. This is another occasion where the interview and conversation data completely contradicted his prior expectation.

Environmentalists WAEPAL talked the researcher through the Green belt policy and included the following opinion on the practicality of Scottish Green belt law:

[9] The Green belt policy was entirely set aside for the stadium and training development, based on a spurious "economic development" case. The environment, has yet again, played second fiddle to the preservation of the Green belt. There are brown fields sites within Aberdeen that may have provided locations for the development, but an economic argument was used, say that these sites were not affordable to the club and therefore were ruled out. What is exactly the point of a Green belt policy if it can be violated by these football clubs with no regards for the environment it shall be moving in to? It is incredibly disappointing for those who campaign and fight for these areas across the North of Scotland.

***Q6 - Do you feel that the relocation, including a huge upgrade in training facilities will have a widely positive effect on youth development at the football club?***

Having a deep passion for youth coaching, the (first-mentioned) researcher thought that it was important to sample the feeling towards Aberdeen FC's steps in modern-

izing training facilities and its inevitable benefit to its youth system and first team. Despite the negativity of the interview and conversation responses so far, question 6 offered some evidence of the support and club being on the same page. The club has built training pitches at Westhill but the new stadium plan, in total, appears very unlikely to now proceed (Pilcher, 2022).

***Q7 - Is the fact that transportation to games will now become much more difficult in comparison to travelling to Pittodrie a defining aspect for fans?***

Travelling to and from games safely is such an important aspect for fans and doing it efficiently is very important. For many season-ticket holders, and fans that attend home games regularly, Pittodrie Stadium was in the heart of the city and easily accessible, a 5–10 min walk at the very most for many. The interview and conversation data strongly indicate that transportation simplicity is valuable to respondents with many respondents agreeing that the complexity of commuting to Westhill home games and the tarnishing of the community feel that Pittodrie has, by moving 6.5 miles away from the city-centre, was a defining factor for fans.

***Q8 - Do you feel that, especially on match days, the local economy will boom with the football club relocating to [Westhill] town?***

This seemed like a straight-forward question with many respondents believing that the local economy in Westhill would have boomed as a result of the relocation, especially on match-days. It was a relatively daunting prospect for many in Westhill to have Aberdeen FC, a big fish in the northeast of Scotland, come into their town and possibly reshape the whole environment around itself. Some respondents were aware of the economic advantage a club the size of Aberdeen might bring, but how the town would have responded to that external investment remained to be seen (and now may never happen).

MacDermid outlined that even though the club and its new stadium were heavily scrutinized in terms of leaving the city in an economic hole, there were signs of prosperity outside football to potentially carry the burden in the coming years:

[10] It's picking up now; we went through quite a big hit in 2015 but we now have the new Tecca which can hold up to 25,000 away towards the airport, that has been brilliant. There is things which are coming together recently to boost it and we feel the Kingsford Stadium project is just a part of that and the evolution of the community.

Aberdeen, the council, were getting slaughtered because nothing was happening in the community and now that things are happening they can't win. We have to get transportation strategy right or we are on a hiding to nothing. The economy will continue to grow, we feel, the pubs will still be rife with supporters, they aren't travelling as far as they may be thinking. We have to make it as easy as possible but that is just because you're dealing with 100 years' worth of tradition and people just don't want to change.

***Q9 - Are Aberdeen FC being fully transparent in their dealings and being inclusive to the residents of Westhill in the process?***

In hindsight, the researchers acknowledge that this question may have been slightly ambiguous to some respondents when distinguishing if the question asked whether Aberdeen FC had been transparent in its actions regarding the relocation thus far or whether residents had been included in the decision-making process. Despite these concerns, an overwhelming majority of respondents denied that Aberdeen FC had been transparent or inclusive, and this is a strong indicator of the divide between the football club and the community it hoped to enter.

Jimmy Bone, then the Head of Player and Coach Development at the Scottish Football Association (SFA), really summed up the importance of this project to not just Aberdeen, but to its community (personal interview):

[11] Aberdeen doing well is vital to the whole city. The club work very well in the community and have always bent over backwards. The whole community will benefit from the Kingsford project in the long run, Aberdeen's dedication to the community will ensure that.

Aberdeen FC have a record of developing players up through their youth system and bringing them up into their first team – the club take the discovery of talent and development of young football players in the Grampian area very seriously.

Green land is just sitting there. It's just fields upon fields. After the construction of the new facilities and the stadiums, all you will still be able to see is fields. Protestors are really clutching at straws with the green belt issue - there is so much opportunity to be had with land which otherwise would be just fields. Protestors just don't want the football.

I went to Westhill for a coaching course with the SFA at one point and it was just grass pitches and a pavilion. The area needs an upgrade and taken into the future like many parts of our country. Although we feel like we are making progress here, we are still a long way from success in reaching our goals.

Bone is highly positive about the relocation and casually dismisses environmentalist concerns. It is probably just as well that the club now wants to build a new stadium on the coastline not far from Pittodrie. It seems that ultimately they got the message about resident, environmentalist, and supporter discontent about the Westhill move. Only club executives and casual “cool” followers (Giulianotti, 2002) living outside of Westhill seemed to support the move, but the strength of opinion of the latter group was nowhere near as strong as the level of discontent expressed by the opposition camp. Notably, a survey of 533 Westhill residents revealed a 60–40 split against the relocation (Walker, 2016).

## 6 Conclusion

Although Aberdeen FC saw this project as having endless positivity and benefit, there was mass controversy surrounding the proposed relocation. Investigating different stakeholder opinions, the main downfalls of the planning were the occupation of Green belted land, which is considered to be legally and ethically suspect, and the destruction of the local economy as a result of the club moving the stadium away from the city-centre. The economy has been in downturn for a decade and the additional pressure applied by this venture would have only caused further problems. In our research, it was found that hooliganism increases were not welcomed in the Westhill area. Furthermore, the transport implications made the match-day logistics problematic at best. The club maintained that its site for construction was perfectly legal while promising many potential match-day measures to ease transport pressures including shuttle buses and bypass redevelopment.

There was proven to be a strong distaste towards the idea of a relocation from Aberdeen FC supporters all over the city. The research conducted at The Pittodrie Bar really portrayed the discontent towards the abandonment of the spiritual home of Pittodrie for a structure 6.5 miles outwith the city-centre. Aberdeen FC's disconnect with fans will have to be repaired in the coming years if any transition is going to be as smooth as the club would like. The residents of Westhill understood the obvious benefits of upgrading facilities, but many disliked the idea of football and its potential consequences such as hooliganism and traffic congestion. The football club failed to prove to the Westhill community that it would have accommodated their concerns, including modifying a successful transport network to handle supporter influx.

An interesting point is that the alliance between traditional football supporters, environmental activists, and Westhill residents was an unusual coming together of people. Although they may never have worked together or even met they formed a chorus of oppositional voices. These people had talent and expertise in their day-jobs in many cases and proved to be a formidable opposition for the club. Furthermore, to demonstrate the point about how isolated the northeast is, every quoted person and group in the ongoing drama was a resident of the northeast. Unlike the proposed Everton relocation to Kirkby, as outlined in Kennedy (2012) and elsewhere, there was almost zero interest from the broader world and little media attention outwith Aberdeen.

### 6.1 Limitations

There were some limitations in conducting the research which must be highlighted to provide context to the results. With the first-mentioned researcher being based in Paisley, 154 miles away from Aberdeen, there was extensive travel required in order to complete the research objectives with the researcher having to make short trips in order to collect the primary data. The distance and the overall unfamiliarity of the area meant that the researcher could only travel three times during busy University sessions to complete the research and the time spent in the City of Aberdeen required a period of adjustment before the interviews could take place.

Another limitation of the research was the impact of the coronavirus pandemic which swept through the world in February 2020. The pandemic meant that individuals were required to stay at home unless they were leaving to buy essentials or carry out emergency actions. These circumstances disrupted the research and made it impossible to carry out further in-person interviews with travel impossible and the researcher unable to meet interviewees. However, most fieldwork was conducted prior to the first lockdown which began on 23 March 2020. After lockdowns ended, the relocation plan had been abandoned and so research was halted.

## 7 Suggestions for Further Research

It would be possible to replicate this study in the case of other professional football clubs in Europe that put forward proposals for relocation. This article gives some idea of the myriad and complex issues involved and the arguments likely to be advanced by various stakeholders. Fans can also be interviewed and surveyed a year or two or three after relocations to observe satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the move, as James (2022) did, in an unpublished University of the West of Scotland Honours dissertation, where he surveyed Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham United fans about the stadium relocations of their respective clubs. One reason why he found that Tottenham fans were more supportive than West Ham fans was probably the fact that the Spurs' new stadium is built on the site of the old one. Furthermore, Spurs own their new stadium whereas West Ham are merely tenants of theirs. Fan discussion forums are a useful way to collect data as fan passion over these issues usually ensures a high response rate.

**Author Contributions** KJ devised the project, RB completed the literature review, RB collected all the primary data in Aberdeen; RB wrote the final dissertation after receiving regular advice from KJ; KJ wrote the journal article based on the dissertation and updated it. RB has approved the plan to turn the dissertation into a published journal article.

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**Data Availability** Please contact authors for data requests.

### Declarations

**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate** This project is based on an Honours dissertation by RB. The project received ethics approval by the Ethics Committee of School of Business and Creative Industries, University of the West of Scotland.

**Consent for Publication** Every person whose name is included in this research paper gave consent to publish.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

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