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# Moral Economy and the Ethics of the Real Living Wage in UK Football Clubs

Tony Dobbins<sup>1</sup> · Peter Prowse<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Real living wages (RLWs) are an important ethical and moral policy to ensure that employees earn enough to live on. In providing ‘a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’, they set an ethical foundation for liveability. This article explores the ethics and moral economy of the RLW for lower-paid staff in the overlooked economy context of UK professional football, illustrated by a qualitative case study of Luton Town Football Club (LTFC). The article provides theoretical insights grounded in moral economy concepts about how a RLW contributes to a broader common good means of enabling fuller human participation in decent working and living conditions. Applying these concepts using a multi-disciplinary moral economy interpretation offers deeper theoretical contributions than economic interpretations restricted to mainly technocratic economic distributive issues. LTFC are evidently ethically embedded in a moral economy as a local community club paying a RLW, and part of the overlooked economy. The research also contributes to contemporary debates on ‘Common Good’ HRM regarding the role of living wages in addressing grand common good challenges like inequality and quality of working lives.

**Keywords** ‘Common Good’ HRM · Contributive justice · Ethics · Football · Living wage · Moral economy · Overlooked economy

## Introduction

In a political economy context in the UK characterised by widening wealth inequalities and weaker trade union wage bargaining power, the living wage movement has become more significant for public policymakers, academics, and—most importantly—the growing proportion of low-paid workers struggling to meet rising living costs. For many lower-paid workers, the UK Government’s statutory national minimum wage (£10.18 in 2023)/national living wage (£10.44 for those aged 23 + in 2023) is insufficient to cover living costs and enable them to participate fully in society, hence momentum for a real living wage (RLW) (£10.90, £11.95 in London, in 2023) albeit one that is currently voluntary and not legally enforceable (Dobbins & Prowse, 2021).

Regarding definitions, Anker and Anker (2017: p. 8) suggest that there now appears to be a broad consensus on the following definition of a living wage:

Remuneration received for a standard work week by a worker in a particular place sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and her or his family. Elements of a decent standard of living include food, water, housing, education, health care, transport, clothing, and other essential needs including provision for unexpected events. (Global Living Wage Coalition, 2016).

In the UK context, researchers at University of Loughborough have developed a Minimum Income Standard (MIS) identifying the amount of money different types of households require to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living based on a basket of goods constituting a decent standard of living (Davis et al., 2022).

There is an existing body of academic knowledge about the real living wage in the UK and elsewhere (Heery et al., 2017, 2018; Howard, 2021; Johnson et al., 2019; Dobbins & Prowse, 2021; Prowse et al., 2017a, b; Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Werner & Lim, 2016). This includes the

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ethics of the living wage, addressed in *Journal of Business Ethics* (Werner & Lim, 2016). Of particular note, authors like Searle and McWha-Hermann (2021) and Werner and Lim, (2016) have made important contributions by extending the living wage research agenda beyond a traditional econometric employer-centred focus on financial considerations, towards a broader focus on the ethics of living wages and decent work and the effects on workers, which also draws on a wider range of academic disciplines.

Our specific contribution is that ethical concepts relating to a broader multi-disciplinary moral economy perspective offer greater heuristic insights on living wages compared to narrower more orthodox economic interpretations restricted to purely economic distributive and financial issues. Therefore, the research draws on and threads together a range of thematic ideas, notably from the work of Andrew Sayer, and applies them to the RLW: the Moral Economy (Sayer, 2000, 2007, 2019) and the related concepts of the Foundational Economy and Overlooked Economy (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018), distributive and contributive justice (Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009), and a human-centred capabilities approach relating to decent work (Sen, 1999; Yao et al., 2017). The justification for selecting and applying these concepts is that they all theoretically illustrate the moral and foundational elements of living wages for advancing meaningful human contributions to, and participation in, work, community and society. Living wages are not only about distribution of economic rewards, but a broader common good means of enabling fuller human contributions in work and life. The concepts are applied empirically using an illustrative single qualitative case study of Luton Town Football Club (LTFC). Currently, there is no research specifically providing primary empirical data on the ethics and moral economy of the RLW in the overlooked economy context of sport, including professional football clubs.

To address this research gap, this article explores the ethics and moral economy of real living wages (RLWs) for lower-paid staff in English Football League clubs using a case study of the RLW policy at LTFC. It is significant that Luton Town became the first Football League club to commit to pay a RLW and become accredited by the Living Wage Foundation in 2014, thus setting a ‘good employer’ benchmark in football. Civil society organisations like Citizens UK/Living Wage Foundation play an important role in improving labour governance standards (Williams et al., 2017). As of 2022, there were over 11500 LWF accredited living wage employers in the UK (LWF, 2022). That said, living wage accreditation in the UK context is voluntarist and an example of ‘soft regulation’ (Johnson et al., 2019).

The article is structured as follows. A review of the literature is presented in three sections: a brief synopsis of living wage research, the living wage as an ethical issue as

it applies to the specific sector context of UK football clubs, and the concepts relating to moral economy listed above. This is followed by a research methods section. An illustrative qualitative case study of the RLW policy at LTFC was undertaken, involving semi-structured interviews with various internal participants at LTFC, as well as selected external participants from The Living Wage Foundation, trade unions, and community/supporter representatives. Next, the empirical data in the findings section enhance knowledge about the impact of living wage policy and practice on lower-paid staff in an overlooked labour market sector that relatively little is known about—sport, specifically football. The final discussion and conclusion section relates the main findings to existing literature and our conceptual contributions and identifies some theoretical implications.

In summary, this article explores the ethical and moral implications of a real living wage (RLW) for lower-paid staff at Luton Town Football Club (LTFC) in the British Football League. The research question is: What are the ethical and moral economy implications of the real living wage at LTFC, in the overlooked economy context of football?

## Extending Living Wage Research

Faced with a backdrop of rising income inequalities and the decline in collective wage bargaining in many countries, the living wage has become an increasingly important ethical and moral social justice issue for public policy, practitioners, academics and, most importantly, lower-paid workers (Dobbins & Prowse, 2021). Civil society organisations like Citizens UK/The Living Wage Foundation in the UK, and other actors like trade unions, have mobilised living wage campaigns to tackle the symptoms of income inequality (Hirsh, 2017; Howard, 2021; Prowse & Fells, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). Statutory minimum wages are often insufficient to alleviate in-work poverty (Hodgetts et al., 2022).

Many academic studies of living wages have been econometric in focus, notably in the USA (Adams & Neumark, 2005; Brenner, 2005; Neumark et al., 2013). Nonetheless, as noted in the introduction, there is a growing body of academic research in the past five years or so that considers the ethics and social justice aspects of a living wage and/or socio-economic rationales for such (Dobbins & Prowse, 2021; Heery et al., 2017, 2018; Hirsh, 2017; Hodgetts et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2016; Prowse et al., 2017a, b; Schulten & Müller, 2019; Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Werner & Lim, 2016). For example, Searle and McWha-Hermann (2021) review articles on the living wage from 2000 to 2020 to examine how the context of living wage research has developed since early economic analysis, to incorporate a broader range of disciplines since around 2014, including more management and employment

relations insights, and analysis from psychology, medicine/health, sociology, social/public policy, theology. Searle and McWha-Hermann (2021) outline the redundancy of simple (economistic) study of wage rates without comprehending the factors that make work decent. Special issues of journals covering the living wage from an employment relations perspective have included *Labour & Industry* (Parker et al., 2016), *Employee Relations* (Prowse et al., 2017a), and *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* (Schulten & Müller, 2019). This body of research presents living wages in different countries as providing workers and their families with higher capacity to participate in society, develop and make meaningful contributions in work and life, and experience a decent standard of living.

## The Living Wage and Inequalities in UK Football Clubs

This section considers the RLW in the specific sector context of UK football clubs, to make a more specific contribution to living wages and ethical (moral economy) issues. There are extensive inequalities between and within UK football clubs. English Premier League football clubs are accumulating extensive wealth, especially the wealthiest elite clubs. Deloitte estimated an overall income of £5.25 billion for Premier League clubs in 2019/20, before the Covid-19 crisis hit the UK (Deloitte Football Money League, 2021). This vast wealth is not distributed fairly between and within football clubs. While Premier League club executives and players receive lucrative financial rewards, incomes are dramatically lower for matchday staff at the bottom echelons of the football labour market, with many encountering in-work poverty and earning below the real living wage. Indeed, of 92 clubs in the English Football League and Scotland, only Brighton, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Everton, Liverpool, West Ham United, Luton Town, Derby County, Fulham, and Celtic and Hearts in the Scottish League, are fully accredited by the LWF, ensuring that all directly employed staff, and external contractors and agency workers, earn at least the RLW rate of £11.95 an hour in London and £10.90 elsewhere (2023 rates). Staff in many other clubs working as cleaners, caterers, hospitality, security, stewards, and other matchday roles, are not paid the RLW; with many indirectly employed by agencies or sub-contractors. Job roles such as catering, cleaning, security, and hospitality in football clubs are usually casual and part time, due to the seasonal nature of sports events, and are the lowest-paid roles in clubs.

Despite various campaigns by trade unions (notably the GMB Foul Pay campaign, (GMB, 2016), and by supporters' groups and civil society organisations (Citizens UK/Living Wage Foundation), and political campaigns, few football clubs have improved the wages and working conditions of

lower-paid staff (Dobbins & Prowse, 2017, 2021). Football clubs remain among the lowest payers of the RLW (only a 3 per cent take-up), within the broader arts and entertainment category. Therefore, clubs like Luton remain the exception in British football in being RLW accredited employers.

This situation is economically and ethically problematic because many British football clubs are located in deprived urban communities, and some are among the most impoverished areas in Western Europe. It does not reflect well, ethically, and morally, on wealthier Premier League clubs, in particular, when many matchday staff only receive the lower statutory national living wage (NLW) or national minimum wage (NMW) (depending on age). As noted, the NLW/NMW are widely seen by labour market and social policy experts as not providing enough to live on in a context of widespread in-work poverty in the UK and rising living costs (Cominetti & Slaughter, 2020).

International studies of the living wage in football/sport are also rare, highlighting further a paucity of evidence. In the USA, Luce (2005) observes that worker's at the Seattle Seahawks football stadium combined with a local living wage coalition to win a strong contract for food concession workers, including better wages (see also the Stand, 2021). Globally, Brenner (2002) notes that the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) have adopted codes of conduct with living wage terminology.

## Applying Moral Economy Concepts to Living Wages

The next section combines ethical concepts related to moral economy to analysis of the RLW. The reason for this is to provide theoretical insights about how a RLW contributes to a broader common good means of enabling fuller human contributions in work and life. In particular, the ideas are influenced by the work of Andrew Sayer, in applying insights on the moral economy (Sayer, 2000, 2007, 2019; Stabile, 2008) and relating it to concepts like the foundational economy and overlooked economy (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018); distributive justice (Rawls, 1999) and contributive justice (Sayer, 2009); and a human-centred capabilities approach relating to decent work (Sen, 1999; Yao et al., 2017). The rationale for applying these approaches using a broader moral economy interpretation is to provide greater heuristic contributions than narrower more economistic interpretations restricted to purely economic distributive issues, in particular. This is also facilitated by the fact that the ideas originate from multiple disciplines and fields. For example, Rawls' work on distributive justice is anchored in political studies, while Sen's work on human capabilities is located in development and welfare economics and human capacity-building.

## Moral Economy

A RLW is an ethical and moral policy issue, and, therefore, an important element of the moral economy (Stabile, 2008). Sayer (2000, 2007, 2019) provides insightful conceptualisation of moral economy. Sayer (2019:p. 41) suggests that moral economy has been defined as consisting of both an ‘*object of study*’ (‘the’ moral economy)—something that might or already does exist—or as ‘*an approach to thinking about economic matters*’. Regarding the former, Sayer (2019) notes that scholars like E.P. Thompson (1971) have suggested that only very specific economic practices fulfilling particular moral elements can be labelled a moral economy. These are specifically associated with practices protecting people ‘from market forces’ and providing them with ‘enough to live on’. In relation to our research, the RLW is clearly a specific practice that is part of the moral economy, because it seeks to protect people from market forces and provide them with enough to live on, in order to cope with rises in basic living costs. Regarding the latter, Sayer (2019:p. 41) notes that, for other scholars, ‘all economies are moral economies’ because they relate to promoting particular universal ethical and social norms about what is right and wrong in society. Such norms ‘underpin particular economic practices and their respective social relations’, including employer–employee and state–citizen. For the purpose of our research, the RLW fits into a bigger moral economy context of broader ethical and societal norms relating to being able to participate in society, notably fairness at work and distributional and contributive justice (see below). The RLW is also a symptom and attempt to remedy unequal wage bargaining power between labour and capital associated with a weakening of trade union collectivism in the UK and elsewhere.

Therefore, following Sayer (2019:p. 41), the moral economy can be ‘descriptive and evaluative’, encompassing how moral norms like fairness at work and distributive and contributive justice inform social relations and economic governance, as well as the specific constitutive norms of economic practices like the real living wage and their moral legitimacy. Sayer (2000) observes that these moral normative philosophies rail against, and are in tension with, neoliberal political economy pressures to minimise wages and working conditions. Even within such neoliberal pressures and constraints driving a ‘race to the bottom’ in employment standards, there remains agentic scope for employers’ values and perspectives on the moral economy at work to encompass concern for their employees’ incomes and standard of living, and their physical and psychological well-being. This implies living wage accredited employers, for example, acknowledging the moral responsibilities they have to workers, suppliers, customers, and communities in which they are located (not only to shareholders).

Stabile (2008) conceptualises moral economy specifically relating to the living wage, and identifies three themes of sustainability, capability and externality (see also Werner & Lim, 2016). Sustainability is about workers being paid a living wage that enables them to sustain themselves, meet a range of basic living costs, and participate in society—in a context of rising inequalities. Secondly, and building on sustainability, a living wage is seen as enabling workers to enhance their human capability, including a reasonable standard of living to participate in society, and through increasing capacity for meaningful work (this is discussed further below under contributive justice and human-centred capabilities). The third dimension is externality, which relates to a perception that low-wage employers who do not pay a living wage impose costs on wider society by externalising the problem of low pay (including reliance on social welfare benefits to ‘top-up’ wages).

## Foundational and Overlooked Economy

A RLW is a key element of one of the essential pillars of foundational liveability—the amount of disposable and residual income after paying for life’s everyday essentials in the foundational economy (Califati et al., 2023). The foundational economy (Bowman et al., 2014; Foundational Economy Collective, 2018) is a central component of the moral economy. Bowman et al., (2014, 119) define the foundational economy as the zones that produce socially useful good and services in sheltered indigenous sectors with three related factors: first, they are required for everyday life; second, they are consumed by all citizens regardless of wealth; third, they are distributed according to population through (regional, local) branches and networks. Foundational sectors embedded in localities include privatised energy and telecommunications utilities; transport; private sector activities like retail banking, supermarket food retailing and food processing; and state-provided activities like health, education, welfare, and social care, characterised by increased tendering and outsourcing to the private sector. All are directly or indirectly governed by the state. Bowman et al., (2014) estimate that one third of the UK workforce is employed in foundational related activities. The coronavirus public health pandemic starkly illustrated how vital key workers in foundational economy activities have been for sustaining societal functioning, and how dependent we have all been on such human-centred capabilities providing social value (Winton & Howcroft, 2020)—as opposed to parasitic and predatory extractive market-valued activities associated with financialisation and maximising shareholder value, which are especially irrelevant during a pandemic. Yet many foundational economy workers remain undervalued, low-paid and experience labour market insecurity due to the dominance of market-valued extractive wealth



accumulation, financialisation, privatisation, and outsourcing. To strengthen the moral economy, the Foundational Economy Collective (2018) call for new social licencing regulations for the common good (a new social contract), whereby the right of employers to trade in local community foundational activities should depend on complying with public procurement rules and social responsibilities, like providing decent jobs paying real living wages, training, and recognising trade unions.

In addition to the Foundational Economy, there is also the substantial domain of the Overlooked Economy, characterised by the Foundational Economy Collective (2018) as lifestyle, comfort support systems, cultural and identity activities which are important for sustaining local communities, including hairdressing, takeaways, restaurants, hospitality, bars, museums, sports clubs/events. Again, the coronavirus pandemic has revealed just how important such overlooked economy activities are for everyday human lives, and how much they have been valued and missed. Football clubs like Luton are often physically embedded in their local community places and are a focal point for worker and fan participation, cultural identity and meaning. Football clubs are a key part of the overlooked economy in their local communities, and therefore fit the definition of community as ‘a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings’ (MacQueen et al., 2001).

### Distributive and Contributive Justice

The RLW is a central component of (re) distributive justice in the moral economy, serving as a policy lever for addressing low pay and ameliorating rising living costs. Distributive justice concerns the share of resources available to different people, set in a wider context of economic (in) justice and (in) equalities (Rawls, 1999).

But the RLW is more than just about economic (re)distribution of income and wealth, because a living wage also affects meaningful contributions and capabilities at work and in wider society—or contributive justice. A living wage is, therefore, interconnected with a quality of working-life element of contributive justice, encompassing subjective dimensions of perceived equity, job security, job satisfaction and overall meaningful work and dignity and well-being at work (Gomberg, 2007; Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009). This signifies the importance of exploring the wider development of meaningful work contributions of social value and opportunities for quality of work regarding living wage employment and a broader decent work agenda as a springboard for harnessing human capabilities (Carr et al., 2016; Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Sen, 1999; Stabile, 2008; Yao, et al., 2017). For example, in an empirical study of 606

employees in New Zealand, Yao et al., (2017) found that a LW may have more than a distributive financial impact in meeting employees’ living costs; it can also improve human capabilities and well-being through subjective perceptions of issues like job satisfaction, equity and security.

Incorporating a RLW as part of a broader decent work agenda is vital for creating more ethical and inclusive work environments and societies. In particular, there is considerable potential to increase quality of existing and future jobs in the foundational and overlooked economy. A RLW can also facilitate wider contributive justice and inclusion for citizens in society and enhance self-esteem, recognition, respect, dignity, and well-being through the social contributions people can make in good quality jobs—in order to advance the broader common good (Sandel, 2020). However, in order to address inequalities in the availability of meaningful work, the current scarcity of good quality jobs in many UK regions needs to be remedied through a broader new social contract (Dobbins, 2022; Sisson, 2020)—including a RLW as part of a broader holistic decent work policy programme.

### Connecting with Business Ethics debates on ‘Common Good’ HRM

The RLW, and RLW employers accredited by the UK Living Wage Foundation, relate to debates in business ethics (including in *Journal of Business Ethics*) regarding ‘Common Good’ HRM/people management policies of responsible (and irresponsible) employers (Aust et al., 2020; Brennan, 2019; Greenwood, 2013; Greenwood & Freeman, 2018; Islam & Greenwood, 2021; Pham et al., 2023; Werner & Lim, 2016; Wilcox, 2012). Recently, for instance, scholars have debated ‘Common Good’ HRM, arguing that, rather than focusing on the economic purpose of HRM, the main purpose of Common Good HRM is to support business leaders and employees in contributing to ecological and social progress and addressing grand common good challenges like poverty and sustainable working conditions (Aust et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2023). While not explicitly labelled as ‘Common Good’ HRM, Wilcox’s (2012) ethnographic research explored the moral agency of HR managers in an Australian company. She concluded that despite the inhospitable structural big picture context of commodified profit maximising market capitalism for constraining business ethics, there remains potential space for managers to act as moral agents exercising moral agency in their HR and workplace practices. Our research on the real living wage in football clubs contributes to critique and understanding of the ethical implications of people management and advances new moral economy perspectives to try to make ‘the institution of business a greater servant of humanity’ (Greenwood & Freeman, 2018: p. 1). In so doing, we pursue ‘a distinct ethical approach to HRM that is unashamedly normative and

socio-politically embedded' (Greenwood, 2013: 355), and 'reconnecting to the social in business ethics', we see the real living wage as an important ethical 'foundation upon which social life is built' (Islam & Greenwood, 2021: p. 1).

The ethical concepts listed under the thematic headings of moral economy, overlooked economy, distributive and contributive justice/human-centred capabilities, are used to structure the findings. The next section looks at the case study context of Luton Town Football Club, and the research methods.

## Case Context and Research Methods

### Case Context

We undertook an in-depth qualitative single case study between 2019 and 2021. The case examines the ethical and moral economy implications of the real living wage at Luton Town Football Club in the UK, the first professional football club to be accredited by the Living Wage Foundation. Luton Town Football Club (LTFC) is a professional association football club based at Kenilworth Road in the town of Luton, Bedfordshire, England. Founded in 1885, it is nicknamed 'the Hatters'. The club's colourful history includes major trophy wins, several financial crises, numerous promotions, and relegations (Jackson, 2018; Wash & Pitts, 2014; Wikiwand, 2021). The club achieved promotion to the Premier League in 2023. Luton employ over 450 staff, as follows: 300 match day staff, 100 full-time-non-match day staff and 50 professional footballers. Table 1 outlines current direct and indirect employment related to club activities.

There is substantial economic deprivation in Luton, and the club is morally aware of its important role in the local community as a good employer. Therefore, the club officially announced in December 2014 that it would be the first Living Wage Foundation accredited employer in the football league paying a RLW. It significantly increased wages for staff, contractors and casual, matchday staff. This has had a subsequent multiplier effect by encouraging other employers in the town to pay RLW, including the local council. Office for National Statistics (ONS) Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings data identified a fall in workers in Luton paid less than the RLW, from 17,000 (21.4%) to 14,000 (15.8%) workers between 2017/18 (ASHE, 2017/18).

### Research Methods and Aims of the Study

The overarching research objective/question guiding the qualitative case study was to conduct exploratory research analysing the ethical and moral economy implications of the real living wage policy for low-paid staff at LTFC. In doing so, the empirical research was informed by the ethical concepts relating to the moral economy. It was particularly important to explore the rationale for a UK football league club to pay all their non-footballing employees the RLW and examine the practices and social relations of the moral, overlooked economy and ethical responsibilities of football clubs towards employees and the local community.

We researched the RLW at Luton because it was the first football league club to be accredited by the LWF. It was important to collect qualitative evidence on implementation of the RLW and the experiences of people who received the RLW and their perceptions of how it changed their lives.

**Table 1** Direct and indirect employment related to Luton town football club activities

Roles	Title	Tasks include	Gender male	Female
Board	10 Full time	CEO	Male	
		Club secretary	Male	
		Commercial and hospitality manager	Male	
		Financial director	Male	
		Chief operational manager	Male	
Manager	Full time	Catering operations and hospitality manager	Male	
Football professionals	Full time professionals	25	Male	
First team support staff	Full time	8	Male	
Non matchday staff	Full time	50	25 Male	25 Female
Academy staff	Full time	12	11 Male	1 Female
Matchday staff (events)	Full time 5%	150 catering and hospitality	50% Male	50% Female
	Part-time events 75%	100 stewards and events	80% Male	20% Female
	Agency staff 20%			
Luton town community trust (charity link]	Charity not LTFC employees	18 Full time	Males 15	3 Females
		26 Part time	Not available	Not available
		8 Unpaid volunteers		

The moral economy aspects of clubs like Luton, regarding how their adoption of a RLW policy affected employees and the wider local community, were of particular interest. Prior to commencing data collection, the authors engaged in a research ethics process to undertake a study involving human subjects, which was deemed low risk. We gained access to LTFC with the assistance of the Living Wage Foundation, having drafted a research letter explaining the purpose of our research which was communicated to the club. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The research method consisted of a single in-depth qualitative case study (Mitchell, 1983; Yin, 2018), comprised of semi-structured interviews and an element of non-participant observation.

We subsequently visited LTFC a number of times during 2019 to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with management and employees. Designing an interview population sample required identifying key actors in the club involved with/knowledgeable about living wage accreditation. To address this, five senior managerial and football board members were all interviewed. Management interviewees included the Chief Executive (CEO), The Finance Director (FD), The Club Secretary (CS), Commercial Hospitality Manager (CHM) and the Head of Catering Operations (HCO). Regarding employee interviewees, there was a sample of ten full-time staff paid the RLW plus two part-time

events catering staff. In addition, the induction of the part-time indirectly employed match staff was observed, and notes made during induction. There was also an opportunity for informal discussions with matchday staff, including on their knowledge of pay rates at LTFC compared to other local employers.

The Head of Community Trust was also interviewed. The Community Trust is not formally part of the Club but linked to LTFC through partnership activities like organised community coaching, and health, education and social inclusion projects (Walters & Panton, 2014). There are well-being activities and events for vulnerable and lonely people. External interviews included campaign managers from the Living Wage Foundation (LWF) and the GMB/TUC union campaign *End Foul Pay*.

Details of interviews are provided in Table 2. All club interviews were face-to-face at club premises. Background interviews with the Living wage Foundation, the GMB/TUC campaign lead, and Head of Community were by telephone. Data saturation was achieved through interviews with senior management, and key staff who received the RLW, and non-participative observations of 20 matchday staff at inductions. Non-participative observation of the matchday induction enabled a checklist of key issues related to terms and conditions, and understanding the club culture as communicated

**Table 2** Respondents of the Luton town football club study

<b>Management Board</b>	htfh
Chief Executive-[CEO]	ryyh
Finance Director-[FDO]	y
Club Secretary-[ClubSec]	y
Commercial Hospitality Manager-[CHM]	y
Head Catering Operations [HCO]	y
<b>Staff Paid RLW</b>	<b>y</b>
Commercial Sales [Ellen] [Female, FT, 8 years at Club]	y
Worker -Kitchen Worker [Jaqi] [Female, FT, 5 years at Club]	y
Assistant chef [Billy] [Male, FT, 3 years at Club]	y
Security and Parking [Will] [Male, FT, Worked 20 years at Club]	y
Cleaner Jenny [Female, FT, Worked 13 years at Club]	y
Cleaner [Alison] [Female, FT, Worked 5 years at Club]	y
Kit Cleaner [Mary] [Female, FT, Worked 14 years at Club]	
Maintenance [Joe] [Male, FT, Worked 3 years at Club]	y
Apprentice Chef [Jens] [Male, FT, age 17, Worked 2 years] £7 per hour	y
<b>Part-Time Match Staff</b>	<b>y</b>
<b>Observation of 20 Inductees</b>	
<b>Part-time interviewees</b>	
Food Catering Sales [Yolanda] [Female, aged 19, Works 12–14 h PT, Worked 3 months at Club]	yy
Food Catering Sales [Jay] [Male, aged 17, Works 2–14 h PT, Worked 3 months at Club]	y
<b>Head Luton Town Community Trust (Charity)</b>	<b>y</b>
Community Trust Worker [KTCommTrust]-[Male, FT, Worked 20 years at Trust]	y
<b>External interviews</b>	<b>y</b>
Living Wage Foundation	y
GMB union	y



to inductees. All interviews were between 45 min to an hour, and recorded and transcribed. Analysis was themed under concepts of the moral economy, the foundational and overlooked economy, distributive and contributive justice, and connecting to business ethics debates in people management.

## Findings

The ethical concepts above inform our empirical findings, under the thematic headings of moral economy, overlooked economy, distributive and contributive justice/human-centred capabilities.

### Moral Economy

The Luton CEO is very much a moral agent, viewing the club as an important actor in the moral economy. He was the driving force behind the club becoming real living wage accredited with the Living Wage Foundation, underpinned by moral economy philosophy:

After several years, almost decades of chronic management of a football club that we all love, when we took custodianship of the club back in 2008, we did it with, effectively, a mission or a mantra of ... or a set of cornerstones, if you like, which were not just only based around football success, but actually about our community engagement, our charitable engagement as well, and effectively, what we did was saw that there was not just a duty or responsibility in effectively using the club crest, or the authority of the football club in its environment, but actually an opportunity to use the club's authority to do some good. [CEO]

The CEO added that a key factor influencing the decision to be the first UK football league club to pay the voluntary RLW was as a moral agent to prevent poverty as an employer:

When we read that paying members of staff below the Living Wage Foundation's guidelines of minimum salary, we were adding to poverty, we didn't feel as though we wanted that responsibility. So, we just felt, quite simply, we don't want to add to poverty in Luton, we want to improve people's aspirations. So, it was quite simply that, that we ... and actually, we might not be able to change poverty in the whole of Luton, but we can certainly make a difference for those people we employ. [CEO].

It was notable that the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) was not explicitly used: it was more a case of moral business practices. The Club Secretary added:

I don't think any club would actually sit round and say the only reason we engage with the community is for ethical ... Everybody sees that. Every school-child is the potential future season ticket holder. That might sound harsh and callous, but it's a realistic approach, and it makes it easier to justify doing what you want to do. The corporate social responsibly isn't something, I don't think ... It's not a real phrase I've ever heard usually here, but we do it, but we don't do it because there's a blueprint which says a good CSR is to do this, this, this, and this, we actually do it because it makes sense for us to do it. [CS].

In terms of leadership decisions, the Finance Director costed and approved the increased wage budget for paying the RLW for the club. However, the primacy of moral agency and values for investing in people was emphasised by the CEO:

The values of the organisation come before your bottom line, at the end of the day... So, if it was the finance director that was running the business, we probably wouldn't do some things... What better way to invest, than invest in people? If the finance director wanted to challenge that, then we can get a new one, can't we? [CEO].

### Overlooked Economy

As a community-based football club, Luton is part of the overlooked economy, with a sense of identity in Luton as a town. This sense of place-based community with binding social ties in Luton the town precedes the club's RLW policy. Nearly all respondents including most of the leadership team were local, and were proud how LTFC were the first club in the football league to adopt the RLW. More broadly, respondents were proud of the club's positive influence locally and community integration. All spoke of pride supporting the club and working for a community-focused club.

The critical contribution of the club in the local community was highlighted by the Club Secretary:

Yes, so you talk about community, bringing people in, looking at local employment within the community, as well, and your community involvement as well. That fits into a lot of things in corporate social responsibility, that businesses use as well, so it's quite an interesting way of looking at that, as well, it's not just looking at ethical things, it's looking at bringing things within the community, and using the community, integrating in the community from a commercial as well as an ethical sense. [CS].

The Club Secretary also outlined the importance of collaborating with other partners including Luton Council, and

ensuring that external sub-contractors and agencies involved in recruitment also pay the living wage:

We certainly made sure that any regular subcontractor who's on site here pays the living wage. We have agency stewards and staff like that, we make sure that agencies pay it, too. Again, that was something which was more difficult for us, because we were already paying for an agency staff member. Somebody who we'd want to pay the living wage, let's say it was £8 at the time, to get the equivalent through an agency was £11, and yet, the person might've only been receiving £7. [CS].

The Catering and Hospitality Manager outlined the importance of recruitment and explaining the club's RLW policy to recruitment agencies:

Because we need the agency to work with, we cannot just rely on ourselves recruiting people. We never know when we need extra staff and you've got a lot of people cancelling last minute as well, it does happen because they're not well ...Some recruitment agencies we work with are really surprised that we pay the [living wage] rate and they accept it... when I talked to them that I pay my staff the Voluntary Living Wage, they automatically upped that rate without charging me the premium, which was good of them and I said, 'It can only strengthen the relationship,' because if you're looking after your staff that's good because that's what we want as a club as well (CHM).

Most people are recruited from the local community. For example, recruiting events staff for catering and ground hospitality is a huge challenge and often entails recruiting young(er) people locally. The research team observed two inductions for casual events staff, which focused on the history and community contribution of the club and emphasising how the living wage pay rates at the club were above the local pay rates.

The club also has very close links with the local community through organisations like the Community Trust. The Community Trust, although run independently as a charity, links directly to the club by providing football coaching in schools and holiday camps during school holidays, coaching in the community, and integrating communities:

So, for example the Cohesion Team are all local, they're all you know, born in Luton, lived in Luton, gone to school in Luton and are off the estates that they now go back and deliver into [the community]. I suppose you'd call them sink estates but they're actually, you know, they're estates that are regarded as deprived-with antisocial behaviour problems and sort of a lot of youth are disengaged, you know, typically

referred to as hard to reach. As a further example, we slashed our costs for holiday camps for six weeks and took the decision to slash prices by 30% and we maintained our income and increased the numbers massively. We had over one thousand kids on our holiday camps. But if you have not got £7 a day, it's a fortune. [CommTrust].

Part of the strategy plan for the club is to develop community events. For example, the Hospitality Manager outlined community initiatives like assisting with food banks, schools, colleges, and the university:

Yesterday we were working on a cook-off competition. Luton Food Bank is the charity of the year and so they're going to have a dinner here on the 13<sup>th</sup> June, and we as a team, like Luton Food Bank, the Commercial Manager, myself, the Marketing Manager, and other people will get involved and we just came up with this cook-off competition. So, basically yesterday we had four teams of students from Central Beds College and two guest teams, and they had to cook something using some of the food bank donations. Every single dish they have to put something from the food bank. You're talking about tinned tomatoes, tinned potatoes, tinned mushrooms, you know, rice, flour; and we only allow them to use chicken. We also had a 2011 Masterchef finalist involved-he's a massive Luton Town supporter (CHM)

Finally, all interviewees mentioned the future of the club's relocation closer to the town centre (see Independent, 2019). In particular all interviewed employees focused on the real potential for the club to play a prominent community role in the centre of Luton. All mentioned the proposed new stadium, but as a community hub for local communities in addition to football. Jens, an apprentice chef at the training ground summarised the pride attached to a community vision:

Yes, looking forward to that (stadium move). Because we've got the models down there in the training ground as well and we'll be the catering department and hospitality department, (and) will be looking after both of them in the new stadium. [Jens, apprentice chef].

### **Distributive and Contributive Justice/Human Capabilities**

This section considers the implications of the RLW at LTFC for distributive and contributive justice. In doing so, it outlines some examples of workers' experiences.

## Distributive Justice

The RLW policy at the club was vital for distributive justice through addressing low pay and ameliorating rising living costs. All the full-time staff interviewed for the research whose pay was increased due to the RLW were aware of and knowledgeable about the higher rates and the impacts.

For example, Will works as a car parking attendant at the club. As the person who first meets and greets new players and even new managers he has to work with the utmost discretion. However, Will was especially affected by receiving the RLW, having moved from a lower-paid job in the security sector where most people only earn the national minimum/living wage:

Before, (this job) I was struggling for my petrol money to put in my car for the kids to drop them to school, and now you get an extra “£40 a month, it’s a lot of difference, yes, budgeting-wise, you think, oh, It’s extra. Yes, it’s helped. It helped a lot. And it gave motivation, when they first announced it, we are a living wage club, it motivated you as a person, as an employee, but for the community they are doing lots of things in schools, running football community projects [Will, security].

Jens said that his current Luton apprentice wage rate of £7.44 per hour compared favourably to his friends on apprenticeships elsewhere earning the NMW apprentice rate of £4.15 (at the time of the fieldwork). When asked if he thought this made a difference to his life, and affinity with the club, Jens stated:

Yes, I do. I save quite a lot of my money up for the future, and that, and I’m saving up for a car, as well... and I can help my mum pay rent, and that... Then, I’ve got my own bits of money whenever I go out with my mates and that. Well, because I’ve been a season ticket holder since I’ve been five, I’ve always supported Luton, but I never knew any of the players, obviously, when I was a season ticket holder, but now I’m close with all the players, the management staff. It’s just nice to see another side of the club, instead of just sitting down, watching them run around the field [Jens, apprentice chef].

Two (female) cleaners, Jenny and Alison, have both worked full-time at the club for over 10 years. Alison commented on the living wage being important for living with dignity, adding:

I’ve not found more money in Luton for a cleaner (compared to here) [Alison, cleaner].

Events worker Jay, aged 17, contrasted his pay rate at Luton with other jobs available:

Yeah, it’s good because there’s a big difference of what you earn compared to other jobs that pay minimum. Ah, I think at Luton I get £7 an hour... now when I get paid, I can go out and buy my own clothes if I need them, or new shoes. I pay like £20 a month to the family and because if I was earning like £5 (hourly) I wouldn’t really get enough like to help. I worked at like a corner shop near where I live, and I think I was only getting like £5 an hour so I was like “Oh this is too long for the amount of money I’m going to earn”. I think there is a chance, well if you work hard enough you can become supervisor so then you earn more money and you do more hours [Jay, events worker].

Here Jay outlined not only the extra monetary value of a living wage rate above the NMW but also the opportunity for advancement and providing more independence and enabling him to contribute to the family income.

In addition, the club adopted an integrated reward system with a foundation of paying the living wage, but not only rewarding the lowest-paid workers. Therefore, the club’s reward policy did not only entail increases for lower paid staff but has knock-on distributive effects for pay grades above the RLW. The Club Secretary explained that when the RLW rate increases, all job grades have a RLW ‘plus’ graded rate:

We now have a living wage plus 10%, level, a living wage plus 20% and a living wage plus 30% grades... So, every time the living wage goes up now, all these people move up with it. So, 90% of our staff at the moment are getting annual pay rises, which is, as you know, a lot of people around the country aren’t getting pay rises, and it’s maintaining that cushion for those people, above the living wage. [CS].

The rationale for pay increases across the club when the RLW increases is to avoid compression of pay grades and maintain pay differentials for most staff. A consequence for the club was higher wage expenditure. Retail staff at the club were the highest paid retail staff in Luton and it meant all staff (even aged under 18) received higher wage rates than the statutory National Minimum and Living Wage rates. Table 3 illustrates how even younger lower paid staff received far higher wages than statutory minima rates and would be eligible for adult rates aged 18, compared to the adult statutory National Living Wage rate of 23 years plus. It must also be emphasised that the main occupations at LTFC are cleaning, catering, hospitality and retail—which are all lower paid occupations nationally (Cominetti & Slaughter, 2020).

### Contributive Justice/Human-Centred Capabilities

A broader culture of contributive justice was also evident at the club and experienced by workers. This involved experiences of meaningful contributions, dignity and well-being at work, and human-centred capabilities. In terms of what might be labelled as Common Good HRM, there is a clear range of interrelated human-centred policies linked to improving pay (the RLW), recruitment and retention, training and development, and promotion. The Commercial Manager emphasised human-centred values and related outcomes:

They talk about, in business, you can't change things 100%, but you can change 100 things by 1%, or whatever. If you have staff that go over and above because they're happy, they're content, they're sensibly paid, rather than underpaid, I'm sure you get more out of people. [CM].

This emphasises the broader role of contributive justice as part of club philosophy for non-football staff. Regarding recruitment, the CEO mentioned that when recruiting, even signing professional footballers, the club seeks to attract people who will fit into its distinctive 'culture' of moral and ethical values:

Because the culture of the organisation, effectively, means that we're recruiting people that want to work for that culture, and they want, also, to share in the responsibility of doing good, as well as winning football matches. There's enormous sense of pride amongst the staff, but even when we talk to football players, who you would think really wouldn't care, when we talk about our set of values that we've got within ... yes, some don't care, but some do, and when we're recruiting players, and perhaps even paying them less than other football clubs might, they might just be

willing to forego that little bit of an edge, just to work for the right football club. [CEO].

From the notes and observations, staff induction events that we observed were very important for inculcating the moral values and culture of the club, its importance to the community, the difference between the RLW paid to staff and the statutory minimum rates, and training and career development opportunities at the club.

Training was a key issue for all staff. For instance, events staff were encouraged to train for supervisory roles and in-house training and development opportunities were highlighted at staff induction events.

A key human-centred factor also highlighted was development of teamworking but also customer care skills. Apprentice Chef Jens highlighted teamwork among all staff, citing the example of empathy with players after a major match:

Last season we had a 28-match unbeaten run, and suddenly we lost our 29<sup>th</sup> game, and everyone dropped their heads and that, but it was nice to see everyone pull up down the training ground, lift everyone's heads up. We just tried to make the day after the easiest day the players ever had, and just try and make them feel comfortable, so they could just focus and try and forget about that game. It's just something that you should do because you see them upset and that, and you just want to try and cheer them up and get them ready for their next game. [Jens, apprentice chef]

There are career development opportunities for staff, both full-time and events staff, with opportunities for promotion or moves to new roles. For example, a catering worker stated:

Well, if you work hard enough you can go to a supervisor so then you can earn more money and more hours (as a supervisor). [Jay, part-time catering].

**Table 3** Pay differences between Luton real living wage (RLW) rates and national living wage (NLW) hourly comparative rates 2020

	Club hourly rate (RLW)	NLW Hourly rate (2020)	Increase in NLW rate (%)	Increase pay (35 h) from NLW rate (week)	Increase for average 3×4-h shifts events per month (12 Hrs) month
RLW Adult rate (Hour)	£9.30	£8.72 (over 25)	+6	+£20.30	+£6.96
Club hourly rate 18+	£9.30	£7.70 (over 21-under 25)	+20	+£56	+£19.20
Club hourly rate 18+	£9.30	£6.45 (18–20)	+44	+£99.75	+£34.20
Club rate 17-under18 (90% RLW)	£8.37	£4.55	+83	+£133.70	+£45.84
Club rate 16-under 17 (80% RLW)	£7.44	£4.55	+63.5	+£101.15	+£34.68
Apprenticeship rate 18+	£9.30	£4.15	+124	+£180.20	N/A
Apprentice rate 17-under 18	£8.37	£4.15	+101.5	+£147.70	N/A
Apprentice rate 16-under 17	£7.44	£4.15	+79.5	+£115.15	N/A

Payment of the RLW and related human-centred people management practices may not have immediately tangible and measurable outcomes, but staff retention rates appear to have improved. The CEO commented on this:

So, I don't need proof, tangible proof on certain aspects of the business in order to make good judgemental decisions going forward. It's an instinct, it's a gut reaction, but we genuinely do have a very good staff retention ratio here. We're a developing business, and the culture's developing, as well, and you do need fresh faces, so you need opportunities to bring those fresh faces in. But I'd much rather have this problem than have one where we couldn't. But in terms of quality of all staff, yes, I think we could almost have a tangible measurement on that, and where this really matters, and one reason why football clubs don't particularly measure these issues because within the full-time employee roster of staff, it would be a relatively simple thing to pay the RLW, but the difficulty for us was implementing it amongst the casuals, so it's the match day staff that also matter. [CEO].

That being said, retention of events staff, in particular, was still a challenge as the club could only guarantee limited part-time hours. This is also related to the fact that football is seasonal (the football season runs from August to May). But, nevertheless, the advantages and pulling power of the higher RLW rate were outlined by the Head of Catering:

...so, let's say they're going to get another job, a shift off in the pub (or night club), it's a six-hour shift, they'll be getting £7.71 an hour or £7.85, they'd rather come here and do a four, five-hour shift, they will be getting £8.75, they will be pretty much the same and they're working less hours. I've got a couple of benefits on top of other employers, because a lot of my employees are Luton Town supporters. Yes, it's just the atmosphere is great on a match day because we're going through great momentum (of promotions) as well. There is a lot of factors that contribute to that, and I think that being able to offer them a better rate is just a cherry on top of the cake, if you know what I mean, so it just completes the package and makes it more interesting for them. [Head of Catering Operation]

In addition, more intangible outcomes of loyalty and commitment were apparent among staff who were interviewed, who evidently found their work meaningful and experienced dignity. Alison, a cleaner at the training ground, was invited to attend promotion celebrations at the Town Hall in 2019, and stated:

I assumed I was working after the (2019 Championship) celebrations but the CEO and Chairman of the club came over and said "Alison" no cleaning leave it and come and join us. Its all-free beer". My two girls were so proud of me and said "Mum-you are famous!". I won't change and move jobs because I am working with very nice people. [Alison, cleaner].

Also, Ellen, who works in the commercial department, stated:

The only way I can describe this football club is, it's like a family, so there's so many different people and so many different levels, but because we've been a small club, the mentality is that everyone gets on, works together, and is close-knit, whereas the higher leagues you can go, depending on who owns them and the type of businesses they run, it's not so close-knit. So, I think it's the way that we work, it's different to other clubs. The football team have brought the town up [Ellen, commercial department].

Together, these empirical examples at Luton highlight a connection with moral economy and business ethics in exercising moral agency in the workplace and local community. The CEO played a key leadership role in supporting moral economy, evidenced by RLW accreditation with the Living Wage Foundation and subsequent promotion of the living wage initiative. For instance, clear ethical and moral norms and values regarding the RLW were explained to new matchday staff during induction, along with related opportunity for dignity, recognition, and advancement. As a community-based football club, Luton is part of the overlooked economy, and there was a real sense of identity with the place-based community of Luton. The RLW was important for providing distributive justice, in the form of higher pay for workers and their families and subsequent multiplier benefits for the wider community. But it was more than that. There was evidence that workers experienced contributive justice because the RLW and the wider culture of moral economy encouraged meaningful contributions, dignity and well-being at work, and human-centred capabilities.

## Discussion

Living wages are an important ethical and moral issue, and a vital aspect of a moral economy. This article advances knowledge about moral economy in the overlooked economy context of professional football in the UK. The research draws on concepts that were chosen due to their theoretical relevance to moral economy, notably from the work of Andrew Sayer, and applies them to the living wage: the Moral Economy (Sayer, 2000, 2007, 2019)



and the related concepts of the Foundational Economy and Overlooked Economy (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018); distributive and contributive justice (Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009), and a human-centred capabilities approach relating to decent work (Sen, 1999; Yao et al., 2017). More specifically, these concepts were identified because they all theoretically illustrate the importance of the moral and foundational elements of living wages for advancing meaningful human contributions to, and participation in, work, community and society. Living wages are not only about more fairly sharing distribution of economic rewards, but a broader common good means of enabling meaningful human contributions and dignity in work and life (Laaser & Bolton, 2022). Accordingly, multi-disciplinary moral economy perspectives offer greater heuristic insights on living wages compared to orthodox economic interpretations restricted to mainly economic distributive and financial considerations. In so doing, the research draws on a wider range of academic disciplines beyond economics.

The moral economy concepts were applied empirically using an illustrative single qualitative case study of Luton Town Football Club (LTFC). Currently, there is no research specifically providing primary empirical data on the ethics and moral economy of the living wage in the overlooked economy context of sport, including professional football clubs.

Below, we summarise some key empirical findings that illustrate these ethical concepts. Firstly, a real living wage is an ethical and moral policy issue, and, therefore, an important element of the *moral economy* (Sayer, 2000, 2007, 2019; Sabile, 2008). The RLW is clearly a specific policy that is part of the moral economy, because it helps to protect people from market forces and provide them with enough to live on, in order to cope with rises in basic living costs. Even operating within systemic neoliberal pressures to exploit labour in a country like the UK, there remains agentic scope for employers' values on the moral economy at work to encompass concern for their employees' welfare, including incomes and standard of living, as well as wider well-being and dignity at work. This implies living wage accredited employers like Luton Town FC, for example, actioning the moral responsibilities they have to workers, suppliers, customers, and communities in which they are located (not only to shareholders). Our findings illustrate that LTFC is strongly morally embedded in the local community. More specifically, the CEO was the moral agent driving implementation of a RLW at LTFC, and there was a determination to espouse strong moral leadership by becoming a 'good employer' and ethical role model to influence other businesses.

Secondly, football clubs like Luton are also part of the *overlooked economy* (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018), because they are embedded in local communities, and

are a focal point for worker and fan participation, cultural identity and meaning. The importance of LTFC to the local community is revealed clearly in the findings. Nearly all research participants lived in the local Luton area and were proud how LTFC were the first club in the football league to adopt the RLW. More broadly, people were proud of the club's positive influence locally and community integration.

Thirdly, the RLW is a central component of (re)distributive justice in the moral economy, serving as a policy lever for addressing low pay and ameliorating rising living costs. Distributive justice concerns the share of resources available to different people, set in a wider context of economic (in)justice and (in)equalities (Rawls, 1999). Our findings at LTFC, illustrate that the economic distributive justice effects of a higher RLW were important for providing additional income for workers and their families to address living costs and prevent in-work poverty.

Finally, the RLW also has implications for, and connections to, *contributive justice/human-centred capabilities*. The RLW extends beyond distributive justice, because it also affects meaningful contributions and capabilities at work and in wider society—or contributive justice. A living wage is, therefore, interconnected with a quality of working-life element of contributive justice, encompassing overall meaningful work and dignity and well-being at work (Gomberg, 2007; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009). Elements of contributive justice/developing human-centred capabilities were evident at LTFC. Positive employment relations practices and outcomes arising from the RLW extended beyond distributive justice to include improved staff retention, training, career development and promotion opportunities. Moreover, a sense of pride, loyalty, and commitment to working at the club (and more meaningful work) were also evident outcomes.

## Theoretical Implications

Interpretative analysis of the insights can inform theory development, theoretical implications, and future research agendas, as follows.

This study explored the moral economy of living wages in the context of football. There is a need to use the multi-disciplinary conceptual tools of moral economy in other contexts, and with an explicit theoretical objective to go beyond overly economic and technocratic perspectives on policies like living wages (Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2021). This can provide greater theoretical understanding of the role of moral economy policies like living wages in enabling fuller human participation in decent work, and more cohesive community and society—even within broadly hostile neoliberal political economies like the UK.

This also relates to the potential for research to explore the role of living wages in facilitating foundational liveability

in different overlooked economy and local community contexts, whether that be in sport, culture, museums, and so on (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). We need to know more about how important such overlooked economy activities are for nourishing and enhancing everyday human lives.

The insights uncovered here also open up significant potential for theoretical development and a research agenda considering living wages and other HRM policies as vital dimensions of sustainable ‘Common Good’ HRM (Aust et al., 2020; Brennan, 2019; Greenwood, 2013; Greenwood & Freeman, 2018; Islam & Greenwood, 2021; Pham et al., 2023; Werner & Lim, 2016; Wilcox, 2012). This includes research considering the agency role of organisational leaders (and other stakeholders) as moral and ethical agents for enacting ‘Common Good’ HRM in order to help address grand common good challenges like poverty, inequality, and good working conditions (Aust et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2023). Aust et al., (2020: 8–9) note the lack of both a developed theory and empirical research on Common Good HRM. Our research on the living wage helps to address this lack of theory, backed by empirically informed study, about Common Good HRM approaches. Further research is required to understand how a living wage, alongside other ‘Common Good’ HRM values and policies, can enhance opportunities for sustainable quality of work and life regarding living wage employment and act as a foundation to harness and develop human-centred capabilities for fuller participation in work and society (Carr et al., 2016; Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Sen, 1999; Stabile, 2008; Yao, et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

Through theoretically grounded generalisation and discussion, and empirical case study evidence, this article has advanced knowledge about the moral economy of living wages in the overlooked economy context of professional football. The wider theoretical insights opened-up by moral economy related concepts and ideas on the ethics of the living wage can be applied to research (and policy) in other comparative contexts in sport and other overlooked economy sectors, and nationally and internationally. This requires moving away from and beyond overly economic perspectives on living wages and related ‘Common Good’ HRM policies. There is considerable potential and promise for future moral economy research on ‘Common Good’ HRM that addresses grand common good challenges like improving working conditions, fair pay, and tackling poverty and inequality in work, community and society.

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**Data availability** Data is available on request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Human and Animal Rights** Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals (If applicable).

Not applicable.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was agreed with all interview participants.

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