



UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVE FAN ENGAGEMENT:

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Foreword

By Niall Cooper, CEO Fair Game

It is often said that football is nothing without the fans. Owners come and go, but fans remain. This report unpicks that relationship and explores how important it is to the long-term sustainability of a club.

Since the start of the Premier League, football clubs have stared into the financial abyss time and time again.

The financial gaps between the divisions have grown, making the pursuit of success on the pitch akin to Russian Roulette.

There have been 64 cases of clubs in the top four divisions of the English men's football pyramid going into administration during that time, and currently 58% of clubs in those divisions are technically insolvent.

In short football is in a mess.

And when the survival clock ticks to a minute to midnight, it is often only the fans that can save the club.

It happened at Newport, at Exeter, and at Portsmouth. But sometimes even they can't intervene as was the case at Bury, at Macclesfield and of course at my own club Wimbledon.

At Wimbledon, the disconnect between the fans and the club's owners passed breaking point. The owners claimed losses of £1m a week and sold the club's league place to a town in Buckinghamshire. In allowing the move a three-man FA Commission stated: "Starting a new club such as Wimbledon Town would not be in the wider interests of football." The fans disagreed and Wimbledon FC reformed as AFC Wimbledon at the bottom of the football pyramid.

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I was central to that re-birth, even handing in the forms to the London FA and being in the room when the name was chosen. Now 22 years later, the Buckinghamshire side have slipped down two divisions, and AFC Wimbledon have risen six – and the two sides sit side by side in League Two.

The pain I felt then still burns, and it was central to the formation of Fair Game. In 2020 I stood to become an elected member of the Dons Trust, owners of AFC Wimbledon. My manifesto centred around one concept: What can football learn from the Wimbledon experience and how can we help ensure the game does not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Fair Game is dedicated to not just identifying the problems, but also finding the solutions. There is no doubt some owners can make a quick buck out of football. However, many fail, and when it comes to long-term financial sustainability of football clubs, our research has shown categorically that clubs need to create a deep and meaningful relationship with their supporters.

This report outlines 11 tenets that can help.

The report could not be timelier as the Football Governance Bill makes its way through Parliament. The Bill aims to ensure the financial sustainability of the English football pyramid. And central to being successful must be a redressing of the financial flow in the game and the importance of the fan.

Niall Cooper.



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Introduction

Recently, increased interest in Fan Engagement has emerged from what many consider to be crises in football governance and club sustainability, which has alienated many fans, and disrupted local communities. In the seminal Fan-Led Review of Football Governance (DCMS 2021), then Minister for Sport Tracey Crouch MP pronounced that “Football clubs are not ordinary businesses. They play a critical social, civic and cultural role in their local communities. They need to be protected - sometimes from their owners who are, after all, simply the current custodians of a community asset”. There are many issues for football to address, and therein an important role for Fan Engagement, but also in a more contemporary context, the introduction and role of a new Independent Football Regulator (IFR). Therein, and on behalf of fans, the Football Supporters Association (FSA) has declared; “Supporters have never had a better chance to raise their voice and ensure they are heard on critical issues related to the running and ownership of their clubs” (FSA, 2024a).

This paper was completed, shortly after the July 2024 King’s Speech, which included a commitment to “setting a minimum standard of fan engagement and requiring clubs to get fan approval to changes to the badge and home shirt colours, as well as placing the strong existing FA protections for club names on a statutory footing”. This is encouraging but, preceding the revived Football Governance Bill, this paper’s analysis of current proposals is largely based on the Fan-Led Review and White Paper.

One of the most significant drivers for the IFR has been the lack of an agreed settlement on the sustainable distribution of income in football. The last Government conceded that the IFR has been created not least because football has “failed” to achieve this itself (DCMS 2023). And the FSA has implored; “The regulator must be given the power to impose a financial settlement in the interests of the sustainability of the game as a whole; it’s far too important to be left to the squabbling between the vested interests of the richest club owners” (FSA, 2024b).

Whilst football remains to be persuaded that its own best interest lies in cooperation towards this, the role for effective Fan Engagement is not just about fixing problems, but releasing football's potential to have a really positive impact for fans and communities, for community engagement and development. This is already happening well at many clubs, but some clubs get it wrong and offer inauthentic experiences, where trust can break down with fans, and communities. This paper will conceptualise effective Fan Engagement and critically evaluate how best practise can be ensured.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Ultimately, effective Fan Engagement is a process which both enhances fan experiences, and improves the sustainability of football clubs, ensuring its benefits are mutually shared. It entails clubs reaching out to fans to value their involvement in decision making, not just to improve the matchday experience, but reaching beyond that too, embedding fans in club operations and strategic decision-making, and always working toward long-term sustainability.

This paper in preview

This paper develops ideas for “Understanding Effective Fan Engagement”, and firstly (after elaborating on the current context) by outlining the principles of the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement, and offering a universal definition. Together, these will establish clear accessible ideas setting out and clarifying exactly what Fan Engagement is, and how it should be done. The paper exposes and analyses some of the complexities of the Fan Engagement process, but also the very accessible rewards of three Virtuous Cycles of good practice. Next, Fan Engagement is further brought to life and illustrated with vivid examples from clubs of contemporary practice.

The paper then locates Fan Engagement within a broader Community Engagement process, and explores further benefits for clubs, fans, and communities, but also inauthentic attempts and antagonistic results, amidst more sincere and effective practice. These are all then framed in the light of seven deepening “Degrees of Fan Engagement” which populate a “Spectrum of Fan Engagement”. Those reveal the different depths of quality that are on show, and on offer. Thus, the Spectrum pivotally reveals what is attainable and desirable, signposting and incentivising, how more effective Fan Engagement can be embraced, pursued, and realised in practice.

This paper conducts an expansive critical analysis of the current State of Play, revealing extremely variable standards of practice. The current policy, proposals, and practice of Fan Engagement’s six key stakeholders is comprehensively evaluated, calling current strategies, standards, and proposed regulation into question. Thereafter, the paper moves on to address the Way Forward for Fan Engagement, setting effective standards at an Immersed Degree of engagement. This ensures clubs and fans develop mature cooperative relationships that offer the strongest mutual benefits. The paper will explore the regulation, financing and incentivised funding of Fan Engagement, and highlight the importance of a carrot and stick approach from the IFR. As a new regulatory body, and backstop for standards across football, the IFR will need to evolve clear, supportive, but firm leadership.

The paper then considers how further study might support more effective Fan Engagement, the focus, process, and analysis of research, to develop understanding and professional practice. Being able to accurately assess the quality of practice is an imperative, and the paper offers an adaptation of the Spectrum of Fan Engagement to evaluate effective practice. We conclude our findings by offering eleven Recommendations for the way forward for effective Fan Engagement. But first we will outline Fair Game’s own position on Fan Engagement, before exploring the important current context of new regulation, amidst crises at some clubs, and the opportunities for more effective Fan Engagement emerging from these.

Fan Engagement and Fair Game

Fair Game is campaigning to improve football across a range of areas, and has outlined three key principles for this (Fair Game, 2021b):

- sustainability - a financial structure that is fairer and more responsible;
- integrity - greater recognition of, and protections for, current competitions;
- community - embedded and structured fan engagement at all clubs.

Additionally, the Fair Game Index (Fair Game, 2023b) offers an annual snapshot of the off-field performance of the 92 clubs in the top four divisions of the English Football Pyramid, and in 2024; Scottish Clubs too. This enables clubs and their fans to identify where they score well, and where there is room for improvement. It assesses clubs across five key criteria;

- Financial Sustainability;
- Good Governance;
- Equality Standards;
- Fan Engagement;
- Community Engagement.

Each of these elements can be considered separately, but in reality, each are inextricably linked, and impact on the other. So, whilst this paper is primarily focused on Fan Engagement, it cannot help but intrude upon those other elements. Fair Game also plans further research in all these areas which will feed into its work with government and with the new IFR. Our research also aims to help clubs improve their performance, highlighting the importance of an issue, reviewing what it means to be effective in this area and looking at the benefits of taking action. A recent example of this is Fair Game's Code of Good Governance (Fair Game, 2023c), which included our Eleven Tenets of Good Governance. And, integrated within all of this, are ethical principles including how Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) can be developed for the widest range of people in football, and how football will address the urgency of environmental issues too.

Engagement with fans and local communities is a key part of all this, and with the same approach in this new research on Fan Engagement too. Many organisations, including notably the FSA, have also looked at this subject. Our research builds on their excellent work. It does so by looking at what effective Fan Engagement means for clubs and fans, how it can contribute to making football better across the range of areas where it needs to improve, and goes beyond the traditional ones such as fans' matchday experiences. Fair Game also believes that a fairer distribution of football's finances should reward clubs that are taking the right actions on fan and community engagement, EDI, the environment, and ethics too.



Fan Engagement in Context



The summary of the White Paper on Football Governance (DCMS, 2023) stated that English football is currently “endangered by the high and growing risk of financial failure” among clubs across its top five tiers. It also said there are “fundamental problems of perverse incentives, poor governance, and defective industry self-regulation “that “threaten the stability of the football pyramid as a whole, and risk leaving fans alienated and powerless”. Such a powerful and emotive statement from the then Government of this unstable context warrants further exploration at an important juncture for Fan Engagement.

The Regulatory Context

The new IFR will have a primary strategic purpose to ensure that English football is sustainable and resilient, for the benefit of fans, and the local communities that football clubs serve (DCMS, 2023). Supporting this purpose, are three specific primary duties:

- **Club sustainability** - to ensure the financial sustainability of football clubs in the English pyramid. Individual clubs would have the necessary resources and are appropriately run so they are resilient to risks.
- **Systemic stability** - to ensure the overall stability of the English football pyramid, offering protection against an event or events triggering the instability of multiple clubs at once, or of harming the football pyramid as a whole.
- **Cultural heritage** - to protect the cultural heritage of football clubs for their fans, protecting key heritage aspects of them from harm.

And there are also four pillars representing the key functional areas the new IFR will oversee:

- financial regulation;
- owners' and directors' tests
- corporate governance;
- Fan Engagement and club heritage.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

The exact outcomes of these regulatory proposals remain to be seen for Fan Engagement, clubs, fans, and communities. For effective Fan Engagement the devil will lie in the detail of how the IFR addresses this, and creates an appropriate balance between carrot and stick. The excellent intentions in the White Paper must not be lost to vested interest, nor dysfunctional governance, fudging to avoid political risks, nor to capitulation in the face of legal threats.

Crises for Clubs and Fan Engagement

It is now widely acknowledged that there have been crises that have threatened the sustainability of many clubs, and continue to do so now. There are many well run football clubs, with good owners and Fan Engagement strategies, but unfortunately there are many others too, which are not. Elite football has been criticised for its rapacious commercialism (Carrington & McDonald, 2009) and Fair Game warned “our national game is under threat” (Fair Game, 2021a). The White Paper highlighted “underlying fragilities” within the English football pyramid, a “dangerous trajectory”, and a precariousness which threatens the very existence of many football clubs (DCMS, 2023).

Effective Fan Engagement offers many opportunities for fans to contribute directly, shape and enhance the quality of their own fan experience, but that very experience remains in jeopardy. The phrase “without fans there is no football” is commonly heard, and similarly (in their forewords to the White Paper) both the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Minister for Sport, respectively stated that “Football is nothing without its fans” and “Without fans, football clubs are nothing”, and yet of equal importance; without clubs there will be no fans. The sustainability of football clubs is paramount to fans.

The White Paper described too many “catastrophic” failures, of how over 60 clubs have gone into administration since 1992, financial crises at Blackpool, Bolton Wanderers, Charlton Athletic, Derby County, Wigan Athletic, and others, with fans “fighting back against their owners”, and the league expulsions and demise of Macclesfield Town and Bury (DCMS, 2023). There are too many examples of clubs straining or collapsing under financial pressure, and the example of Bury FC is often cited as a tragic portend. The Fan-Led Review described its consequences as “asset stripping”, with “a devastating impact on the local economy, and leaving behind a devastated fan base and community” (DCMS, 2021).

Against this backdrop the then Minister for Sport described the plight of fans who are “hurt the most” with “owners treating them like chips at a poker table” (DCMS, 2023). The then Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced to Parliament that the unwavering loyalty of fans is being abused by some club owners wielding incredible power and influence. And further, that clubs need to be protected from their owners as they are “only temporary custodians of their clubs, and they forget fans at their peril” (DCMS, 2021).

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

The White Paper described some club owners as having forgotten they are only custodians for “one chapter in its history”, and identifies “poor governance”, “poor management” and “perverse incentives” to take “reckless decisions”, pursuing short-term interests with little accountability or scrutiny (DCMS, 2023). It also quoted previous Leeds United chairman, Peter Risdale; “Should we have spent so heavily in the past? Probably not, but we lived the dream.” And, in the same week that the Football Governance Bill (UK Parliament, 2024) was tabled, the Independent newspaper reported on a familiar trap; the lure of the Premier League, and events at Reading FC. Its owner’s attempt to sell the club’s training ground was “met with horror” and only derailed by planning limitations. A potential investor stated “he’s torturing the fans, the public and making a mockery of the English Football League (EFL) and other people who want to invest in football”, and the article identified the club’s fans as the “only true eternal custodians” (Lucas, 2024).

The White Paper described how many clubs, who have poor financial plans, still overspend, are reliant on owner funding, who “lack resilience against financial shocks”, and may be unable to adapt to changing circumstances (DCMS, 2023). It outlined how events like a geopolitical shift, a failed gamble for promotion, or a disengaged benefactor, leave clubs just a step away from a crisis. The increasing environmental challenges facing clubs is also looming on the horizon, and clubs will have to embrace those new pressures, and their financial realities, which will inevitably impact upon clubs’ sustainability. Previously, Fair Game has championed fans as a key resource to clubs (Fair Game, 2021b), and clubs can involve fans to help raise awareness of environmental issues, find solutions in how to address them, and to improve clubs’ environmental performance. Effective Fan Engagement has an important role to play ensuring the long-term sustainability of football clubs.

Crisis for Fans and Communities

Again, there are many well run football clubs with excellent relationships with their fans and communities. However, the White Paper described some clubs “recklessly chasing unaffordable ambitions... the plaything of the rich and powerful”, that has impacts on fans which is also felt across whole communities (DCMS, 2023). Effective Fan Engagement seeks to unite clubs, fans and communities. Unlike most other businesses, in football consumer choice seldom switches from brand to brand. For most fans the affiliation with a club is not a whimsy of convenience, but a cradle to the grave commitment, a fan for life; the clubs’ sell passion, and customer loyalty is secure. The White Paper also recognised these deep emotional social connections, and that if the worst happens to their club fans will not “substitute to an alternative ‘supplier’” (DCMS, 2023). It considered how fans suffer most, how that may harm mental wellbeing, and the psychological distress of loss; an inherited family tradition, a gaping hole from a familiar recreational and social outlet, feelings of a lack of social cohesion, identity and pride.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Effective Fan Engagement seeks to benefit clubs, fans, and the communities that host them. A concern of loss extends to communities too whereby clubs may offer a unique aspect of socio-cultural heritage. The White Paper (DCMS, 2023) considered the “catastrophic” and irreversible damage caused with the loss of a football club which can “hollow out’ towns and communities”:

- substantial long-term economic damage;
- scarring to local economies;
- the end of matchday demand and football-tourism;
- collapses in the supply chain that serves a football club;
- creditors unpaid, businesses and job losses;
- the significant social costs of financial failures to communities;
- a loss of social cohesion, civic identity and pride, and valued cultural heritage;
- and the loss of community initiatives, formerly led by clubs, too.

From Crisis to Opportunity

Football, and Fan Engagement, must address the crisis raised previously, and other issues too. Collectively these have all spurred the Government to intervene. And stakeholders, not only take succour from this, but utilise the opportunity as a springboard for increased action too. In the Ministerial foreword to the White Paper (DCMS, 2023), the then Secretary of State stated it was a huge step in securing the long-term future of football, and affirmed that it would restore fans’ “rightful place at the heart of our national game”, continuing that it would give fans “a greater voice in their own clubs, make sure those clubs are financially resilient - and ultimately, protect a beloved part of our national fabric”.

This paper will highlight huge variances and inconsistencies in current provision in policy and practice, the best and worst, and the rewards still on offer with more effective Fan Engagement. It will pick up the view from the White Paper and others that current standards are inadequate, consider more progressive proposals for the near and further future, and ask questions about the minimum Degree of Fan Engagement sought. Further research will also be required to set out and expand the benefits of more effective Fan Engagement, and there are many questions we pose around how that can best be conducted too. Whilst many aspects of effective Fan Engagement involve more thought and time than money, there are questions to be addressed about how Fan Engagement is regulated, financed, how funding is incentivised, and the catchment for whom this reaches. Most conclusively, how should the best way forward for more effective Fan Engagement be pursued. We begin by defining what good Fan Engagement means.



What is Fan Engagement?



Most fundamentally, this section sets out to clarify exactly what Fan Engagement is. And as Fan Engagement is a field muddied by different interpretations and disparities in policy and practice, it is essential that focus is anchored to a firm, and shared, understanding. This is addressed here firstly by expanding upon and explaining the Eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement. Thereafter, its previously ambiguous and contested meaning is outlined, before a more unifying and universal definition is proposed. Once that is established, focus can then shift to unpack the complexity of the Fan Engagement process in more detail, and reveal the different contexts in which it occurs.

Our 11 Guiding Tenets of Effective Fan Engagement Explained

The overall approach

- **Ongoing Dialogue** – The keystone and starting point for all Fan Engagement is an ongoing process of dialogue between clubs and fans. Both formally and informally, this continued two-way process creates opportunities for understanding which can deepen over time.
- **Transparently Sharing Issues** – Fans are key stakeholders in football clubs and sincere dialogue hinges on the transparent sharing of information, issues, and ideas, regarding the club. This should extend beyond purely matchday and football-related matters and permeate to include all club policy, operations, and finances.
- **Authentic Consultation** - Clubs should actively consult, and listen, to their fans, their opinions and concerns. Authentic consultation goes beyond purely gestural exercises, which may ask but not really consider, or deliver, on feedback. It entails a genuine interest in fans' views, and acknowledgements of the value of their input.
- **Valuing Fan Participation** – Authentic consultation enables fans to contribute to the running and strategic direction of their club. Fan groups offer clubs an extensive resource at their very fingertips. Clubs welcoming fan participation can draw upon and profit from their valuable expertise.
- **Trust Building Relationships** – Trust between clubs and fans is a precious commodity earned and built over time. An enduring goodwill requires nurturing, and can evolve into a relationship with real integrity when well-tended to through Fan Engagement. It can oil the wheels of participation, enabling clubs and fans to understand each other better, and work well together too.

Involving and responding to fans

- **Responsiveness to Fans' Contributions** – A trusting relationship between clubs and fans underpins clubs' attentiveness to seek fans' views, and commitments to act upon feedback received. This is demonstrated by a club's responsiveness to fans' contributions, recognition that they have been heard, transparency in decision-making, and demonstrations of how their input has been acted upon.
- **Involving Fans in Decisions** - Responsiveness to fans' contributions is a bridge to cultivating their participation in club decision-making processes. Fans should be involved in decisions which affect their interests, beyond purely matchday and football-related matters, including on club policy, operations, and finances.
- **Democratic Fan Representation** – Fan involvement can be mediated by fan representatives involved in club decision-making. As fan representatives speak on behalf of all fans, they should be elected democratically, and selected by a process which ensures they reflect the diverse interests and demographics of the fanbase.

Achieving and sharing results

- **Effective Fan Influence** – Democratic participation in decision-making empowers fans, and can animate their influence shaping the strategic direction of a club. Effective fan engagement encourages fans to express their views, and to exert their influence constructively, in the long-term interest and wellbeing of their club.
- **Improvements & Shared Benefits** – Fans, and their loyalty, are key to a club's prosperity, and effective fan influence can be harnessed to help clubs improve policies, operations, and finances. As fan engagement is a cooperative process, improvements gained should be for the mutual benefit of club and fans alike.
- **Enhancing Fan Experiences & Club Sustainability** – The shared benefits of fan engagement ensure they are realised mutually, by improvements in both the quality of the fan experience and the longer-term sustainability of clubs. Effective Fan Engagement enhances the fan experience and the sustainability of football clubs

Defining Fan Engagement

The Fan-Led Review (DCMS, 2021) described Fan (or Supporter) Engagement as a “transparent democratic process ensuring fans are consulted, and their voices are heard, when taking key decisions”. But Keogh and others assert that there is no single definition of Fan Engagement, and describe a “turbulent, dynamic environment with multiple stakeholders, often with different views and values” (Keogh et al., 2019). One important stakeholder, The FSA, stated that Fan Engagement is a “means of giving fans a sense of being closer to the club... a term that has come to encompass everything a club does to communicate with its supporters and everyone seems to have their own definition” (FSA, 2024a)! The White Paper on Football Governance agreed that Fan Engagement means different things to different people and offered “it means dialogue between a football club and its fans, ensuring that the views of fans are listened to and acted upon” (DCMS, 2023). Whilst agreeable, this definition is too simplistic and does not unpack the complexity of the engagement process sufficiently.

A definition of Fan Engagement cannot be too idiosyncratic to some organisations but not work for others. Nor can it be too narrowly focused on a specific issue, overly prescriptive to a particular way of doing things, or apply to some aspects of practice, but not the whole process. For Fan Engagement to be most effective, it is crucial that the concept is clarified and properly understood. As a form of practice and object of study it can only be carried out authentically, observed objectively, studied robustly, and improved effectively, if there is a clear definition.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

A strong definition of Fan Engagement must be sufficiently:

- inclusive for all football clubs, fans, and organisations with a stake in the process;
- objective to be comparable across all clubs;
- broad to range across all issues;
- flexible to accommodate different legitimate approaches in practice;
- universal to capture the whole process from the terraces to the Boardroom.

For these reasons, Fair Game has conducted extensive analysis to offer its own definition:

Fan Engagement is a process of ongoing dialogue
between clubs and fans that enhances the fan experience
and contributes to the long-term sustainability of football clubs;
through building trust and understanding on issues of shared concern,
and by valuing fan involvement in decision making,
clubs and fans act together towards their mutual benefit.

Understanding the Fan Engagement Process

The definition of Fan Engagement and eleven Tenets reveal a roadmap and route to extend, deepen and strengthen effective Fan Engagement. This process begins with dialogue and the Fan-Led Review was clear that “clubs should employ an engage and consult ethos”. There are many different ways that ongoing dialogue can be conducted but transparency must be at the heart of it. Rye and Bland believe “there is a huge variety of best practice which can be utilised” and that there should be a “reporting requirement” to enable this (Fair Game, 2021a). And Fair Game’s Code of Governance for Football Clubs states “Decision-making processes, finances and other operational activity... should be fully transparent to supporters in an easy-to-understand way” (Fair Game, 2023c). The White Paper stated that fans are a uniquely important stakeholder whose involvement in the decision-making process of clubs “improves transparency and accountability, improving the long-term sustainability of clubs” (DCMS, 2023). Significantly, Fan Engagement should permeate beyond purely matchday and football-related matters, and this will be elaborated upon later.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

In his foreword to the White Paper, the then Minister for Sport declared the objectives of improving Fan Engagement would be “to ensure that fans are consulted on strategic matters and other issues of interest to supporters in a manner which allows for open discussion and effective feedback” (DCMS, 2023). The Fan-Led Review (DCMS, 2021) concluded that as clubs take key decisions fans should be consulted and the voice of supporter representatives should be heard, and Fair Game that “Fans are critical stakeholders who need to be engaged and listened to” (Fair Game, 2021a).

Authentic Consultation is more than a gestural exercise that just asks fans for their opinions, it extends to how well their views are taken on board with genuine interest by clubs, and that they value fan participation in decision making. The White Paper asserted that an independent regulator would “deliver a cultural shift in football to one that is open and transparent, and in which fans are valued appropriately by all clubs” (DCMS, 2023). Fair Game’s proposed Code of Governance for Football emphasises that (alongside employees and other stakeholders) fans are pivotal to the existence of football clubs and “should be considered in all decisions to ensure the best outcome” (Fair Game, 2023c). This recognises that beyond a source of income, fan groups offer an extensive resource with valuable expertise that clubs can benefit from.

For clubs and fans to work together effectively in decision-making, relationships built on trust are vital. The FSA pointed out that when trust is created it can be a benefit to the “strategy and success of the club” (FSA, 2024a). Sometimes trust needs to begin to be built (or rebuilt) from an initial position of mistrust. Regardless, trust and understanding need to be tended to over time to ensure an enduring goodwill that oils the wheels of cooperation. When forged and earned, trust and integrity in a relationship between clubs and fans are powerful tools to deploy when working together effectively. The Fan Led Review emphasised the importance of discussion and feedback “to ensure a fan voice is heard by the club on key Issues” (DCMS, 2021), and Fair Game that club “Boards should be prepared to answer fans and other stakeholders’ questions” (Fair Game, 2023c). Fan Engagement is more than just a listening exercise and extends to the responsiveness of clubs to fans’ input. Trust grows when clubs acknowledge fans’ contributions and demonstrate how they have informed decisions, and been acted upon.

As stated previously, there are many benefits for clubs involving fans in decisions. The White Paper proposed a regulatory framework with thresholds for club licensing including fan interests; “The club must have appropriate provisions for considering the interests of fans on key decisions” (DCMS, 2023). Fans should be involved in decisions which affect their interests, beyond purely matchday and football related matters, and especially on those related club heritage and culture. Clubs are “community assets”, and “upholding the traditions of club and community is paramount to the community’s identity, that the club represents” (Fair Game, 2023c). Rye and Bland state that effective Fan Engagement goes beyond dialogue and encompasses “the actual way it is structured and its underpinning through ‘governance’ measures” (Fair Game, 2021a). Cultivating fan participation in decision-making processes should extend to all club policy, operations, and finances.

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Fan involvement in club decision-making bodies is often by proxy through fan representatives. It is crucial that fan representatives embrace the diverse interests and demographics of the broader fanbase. Keogh and others also discern distinctions between fans with mild attachments through to “highly engaged, ‘cradle to grave’ entrenched-fans” and also that Fan Engagement should be inclusive of home, away, and neutral fans too (Keogh et al., 2019). Accountability of representatives should be ensured by a democratic selection process controlled by fans. Fans are a club’s key stakeholders and “Wherever possible and practical, fans should be consulted on all major decisions” (Fair Game, 2023c). Such democratic participation in decision-making empowers fans to animate their interests, and exert their influence, constructively and effectively helping shape the strategic destiny of a club for its long-term wellbeing.

The White Paper aimed to ensure “fans have a greater voice; that owners are fit to become temporary stewards of these long-lasting community institutions; and that clubs operate in a financially sustainable way” (DCMS, 2023). And Fair Game’s proposed Code of Governance for Football encourages continuous improvement in all aspects of club operations to ensure best practice, and fan influence can be harnessed to assist this achievement. Effective Fan Engagement is a cooperative process, so clubs and fans who are more closely aligned are more likely to act toward their mutual benefit. Clubs frame the conditions for the quality of the fan experience, and fans (and their loyalty) are key to a club’s prosperity and sustainability. Effective Fan Engagement enhances both the fan experience and the sustainability of football clubs.

Fan Engagement: Matchdays and More

The matchday spectacle and all the services and arrangements which surround it are central to the quality of the fan experience, and Fan Engagement very much encompasses that. The Fan-Led Review (DCMS, 2021) highlighted “operational” issues on matchdays that will be of concern to supporters, as well as related services like marketing and merchandising. The Fan Experience Company (Wilson et al., 2023) offers more detail of “The Fan’s Journey”, usable as a model for measuring and improving the fan experience. It seeks to capture the essence of that journey, walking the fan’s every step throughout their experience, and offer many touchpoints which can be reviewed, assessed, and graded. These start pre-match with aspects such as awareness of services and ticket sales, and continue with travel and access to the game, the fan welcome, the game build-up, match atmosphere, their exit and journey home, post-game media engagement, and much more.

Keogh and others describe the highly engaged emotional attachment fans have with their clubs and what gives fans a sense of value, and a sense of belonging (Keogh et al., 2019). They identify the importance of both “transactional” and “non-transactional” exchanges. Transactional exchanges, like ticket and merchandising sales, obviously occur in customer-relations between fans and clubs, but Keogh and others also draw attention to other non-transactional exchanges inherent within the quality of interactions that form the fan experience. These include the help

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available for fans accessing services, face-to-face access with players and approachability, the tone of player-fan interactions, identification with players' values including their online communications, innovative engagements, "charm offensives", and club and player altruism and participation in community activities. All of the previous are crucial concerns for effective Fan Engagement, fan affiliation and continued loyalty, the fan experience and the sustainability of football clubs.

Fan Engagement: Beyond Matchdays

Very significantly, Fan Engagement goes much further beyond the arena of the football spectacle in its remit; as football, quite simply, is much, much, more than that. Fans are pivotal to a club's existence, are more than just customers, and engaging them is much more than just good customer relations (important though that is too). Too often engagement comprises a mostly one-way flow of information from clubs to fans, with but limited channels for fans' feedback and opinion. The Fan-Led Review stressed the importance of fans having a voice in decisions that affect a "significant cultural part of their lives", and laments that fan consultation is often limited solely to matchday issues with no consideration of any "strategic or commercial matters" (DCMS, 2021). The FSA agreed that too much Fan Engagement has previously been a "consumer-focused" exercise on the matchday experience, rather than focused on issues of governance, strategic planning and ownership (FSA, 2024a).

The Fan-Led Review pointed out that it makes good business sense for clubs to liaise closely with their most important stakeholders, and plan with fans' views at the forefront (DCMS, 2021). Fan representatives should be given opportunities for regular, formal, structured dialogue with senior club personnel, including owners, directors and senior management. Fan Engagement offers the means to cultivate fan participation in club decision-making processes. Effective Fan Engagement improves, extends, and deepens that involvement. Fans can be influential in aspects of club policy, operations and finances, and significantly so in some. With unanimity, the Fan-Led Review (DCMS, 2021), FSA (FSA, 2024a), and Fair Game (Fair Game, 2023c) all agreed it is desirable that fans should have a greater influence within club governance.

The Fan-Led Review acknowledged that people participating on club Boards have the power to make decisions that affect every aspect of a club, and therefore; should utilise effective mechanisms to engage fans regularly, and to embrace a clear understanding of fans' views (DCMS, 2021). Club Boards should be accountable to fans, held responsible for their decisions by them, prepared to answer fans' questions, and have regular meetings and updates with fans (Fair Game, 2023c). This process should offer fans transparency; access to full annual reports, reviews of governance, financial, sporting and social matters, and also make all decision-making processes, finances and other operational activity fully understandable to fans.

The FSA (FSA, 2024a) and Fair Game (Fair Game, 2023c) advocated that Fan Engagement should be embedded in club governance, that fans should be legally represented on club Boards, and could include the appointment of Fan Directors (with rights as any other director). Alongside other inclusive and less formal opportunities, a Fan Engagement strategy can enable authentic fan involvement in club governance and decision-making, which could be underpinned

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by legal agreement. It could also ensure that fan representatives are elected democratically by accredited supporters (including supporters' trusts), and that representatives reflect the broader composition and diverse constituencies of the fanbase.

The Fan-Led Review emphasised that “Football clubs should be classed as heritage assets. They are integral to many families and to cities and towns in a way that’s not replicated in other businesses” (DCMS, 2021). And in the foreword to that White Paper, Lucy Frazer MP agreed, “Football is not just a sport. It is part of our history, our heritage, and our national way of life”. Fair Game also believes clubs are community assets that uphold “traditions of club and community”, and which are paramount for community identity (Fair Game, 2023c). And so, Fair Game also proposed that club Boards should make decisions that are sympathetic with clubs’ heritage and culture.

The FSA has gone further in suggesting that fans should have a right of veto on aspects of club heritage including stadium alteration or relocation plans, club badges and colours, and competitions too (FSA, 2021d). It believes football clubs deserve special protections, and suggest a “golden share” could be held by a democratic, legally-constituted, fan group. All are saying that a close social and cultural alignment between club, fans, and community is desirable, and Fan Engagement has an immense role to play in that. For all the previous reasons, Fan Engagement goes way beyond the matchday spectacle to improve the fan experience and the sustainability of football clubs.

Summarising What is Fan Engagement

The eleven Guiding Tenets of Fan Engagement outline important and different aspects of Fan Engagement, and collectively; the process as a whole. They do not need to, but can be seen sequentially from one to eleven as steps to begin the process, then consolidate it, deepen it, and arrive at desired outcomes. Having a clear conceptual definition of Fan Engagement is crucial to enable concerned parties to converge their understanding and promote joined-up policy and practice, “valuing fan involvement in decision-making”, “ensuring clubs and fans act together towards their mutual benefit”, and working toward long-term sustainability. And whilst effective Fan Engagement is definitely about improving the matchday experience for home and away fans, much of its most important work is carried out beyond that heightened realm, embedded in club operations and involved in strategic decision-making. Effective Fan Engagement offers benefits for clubs and fans.



Virtuous Cycles of Effective Fan Engagement



The previous section outlined the eleven Guiding Tenets of Fan Engagement, interrogated the whole process conceptually, and arrived, crucially, at a definition of Fan Engagement. There are various ways that Fan Engagement creates virtuous cycles to the benefit of clubs and fans, and communities. This section explores the benefits of three Virtuous Cycles of Effective Fan Engagement refocusing on the eleven Tenets, especially those delivering benefits and Enhancing Fan Experiences and Club Sustainability, as well as the match spectacle itself:

- Fan Engagement enhancing the match spectacle;
- Improvements enhancing fan experiences and club sustainability;
- Intrinsic benefits of the 11 Tenets of Fan Engagement.

The White Paper recognised the mutual benefits of effective Fan Engagement as clubs “receive valuable insight into their decision-making process from the perspective of their most important stakeholders”, and clubs can also communicate the rationale behind their decisions (DCMS, 2023). The Fan-Led Review concurred, stating that genuine two-way consultation between fans and clubs can be mutually beneficial as it opens club decision-making to constructive input from a uniquely important stakeholder, and asset; fans (DCMS, 2021). This cooperative approach ensures that the benefits felt and the improvements gained from Fan Engagement are shared mutually by club and fans alike.

The Fan-Led Review concluded that it makes good business sense for clubs to liaise closely with their most important stakeholder, and develop plans with their views at the forefront (DCMS, 2021). And Fair Game believes the long-term sustainability of a club is directly linked to good “Fan Engagement” (Fair Game, 2021b). Rye and Bland (Fair Game, 2021a) add that “research has shown that long-term sustainability of a club is directly linked to good fan engagement”, and that “good engagement can significantly improve club finances”. Though many benefits of Fan Engagement are mutually shared, some may more particularly benefit clubs. The football business can be capricious. Financial performance and financial stability are key concerns for clubs, and income generation from fans one of the highest priorities. But

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sustainable football clubs lie at the heart of many communities, and so financial stability is not just a reward for clubs, it can reward fans and communities too.

Fan recruitment is a crucial aspect for income generation, and football clubs compete to attract new fans. Effective Fan Engagement helps to recruit more fans, a broader range of them, and also strengthens the attachment of existing ones. Fans have varying degrees of attachment from none, to a little, through to fully fledged “Fanatics”. And Keogh and others highlight the efforts clubs go to, not just to recruit fans, but to convert low-involved fans to highly engaged ones (Keogh et al., 2019). They describe how fans with stronger emotional ties to their club (often season ticket-holders or club members) are more sought after by sponsors as they are more likely to “possess favourable purchase intentions towards sponsor products”. As effective Fan Engagement increases fan satisfaction and deepens fans’ attachments to clubs, it helps to increase match attendances, generates income, and may even make clubs more attractive for sponsors.

The Fan-Led Review emphasised the benefits of involving fans in the decision-making at clubs (DCMS, 2021) and effective Fan Engagement enables fans to feel more involved in their clubs. This helps stabilise attendances which reduces income volatility, and weakens the link between on-field performance, results, and attendance. That, and more transparency of a club’s financial realities, makes it more likely that a sustainable vision for a club is shared, and that fans have realistic expectations for their club. This rationalises some of the demands fans may otherwise put on their clubs, and reduces the pressure on clubs to gamble on future success financially. For lower league clubs especially, this is critical to sustaining their futures.

Fan Engagement Enhancing the Match Spectacle

One virtuous cycle of Fan Engagement relates to mutual benefits through an enhanced match spectacle. Effective Fan Engagement enhances the match spectacle, igniting a chain of benefits which improve club sustainability. The quality of match atmosphere attracts fans, and their attendance strongly influences club income. Effective Fan Engagement creates more highly engaged fans, improving the match atmosphere, growing attendance, and club income. More of this income can then be assigned to create more effective Fan Engagement, more highly engaged fans, who improve the atmosphere, and so on, as illustrated by Figure 1.

In sum, effective Fan Engagement benefits clubs by improving the fan experience and fan satisfaction, aiding fan recruitment and increasing the conversion of fans with mild interest to those with deep emotional attachments, generating income, offering fans a better understanding of their club’s sustainability, a role to play in that, and in building a sense of community and common cause. In effect; fans are paying to watch themselves, and each other. Kennedy describes this process, whereby fans are “co-opted and commodified as part of the spectacle” (Kennedy, 2013); fans are actually a product for sale, which fans then buy into, literally!

Figure 1: Fan Engagement Enhancing the Match Spectacle



Improvements Enhancing Fan Experiences and Club Sustainability

Another virtuous cycle of Fan Engagement can be highlighted by focusing more specifically on the relationship between the final two Tenets of Effective Fan Engagement, and Fan Engagement more generally. To recap, the 2 final Tenets outline:

- “Improvements & Shared Benefits” - Fans, and their loyalty, are key to a club’s prosperity, and effective fan influence can be harnessed to help clubs improve policies, operations, and finances. As fan engagement is a cooperative process, improvements gained should be for the mutual benefit of club and fans alike;
- “Enhancing Fan Experiences & Club Sustainability” - The shared benefits of Fan Engagement ensure they are realised mutually through improvements in both the quality of the fan experience, and the longer-term sustainability of clubs. Effective Fan Engagement enhances the fan experience and the sustainability of football clubs.

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Enhancing the fan experience creates more highly engaged fans, who in turn improve and increase the sustainability of clubs. This extends and deepens the engagement of fans, which further increases the sustainability of a football club, and so on. Figure 2 illustrates the close relationship between these two final Tenets, with effective Fan Engagement more broadly.

Figure 2: Improvements Enhancing Fan Experiences & Club Sustainability



Intrinsic Benefits of the 11 Tenets of Fan Engagement

The 11 Tenets of Effective Fan Engagement highlight key aspects of the engagement process, and each Tenet can be considered important in its own right. An effective Fan Engagement strategy embraces all eleven Tenets, and can also progress one through another sequentially. As such, the 11 Tenets can be approached holistically, each for their own merits, and also as they build upon each other, assuring the inherent benefits are felt mutually for clubs and fans. In doing so, an effective Fan Engagement strategy ensures benefits and improvements in both the fan experience and in the sustainability of clubs, as Figure 3 - the Circle of Fan Engagement, demonstrates below.

Figure 3: The Circle of Fan Engagement



As the Circle of Fan Engagement implies, ongoing and transparent dialogue creates the opportunity to deepen a shared understanding of issues. Through an authentic approach to consultation, these go beyond purely football-related matters and into all club policy, operations, and finances. In the past, the Government has emphasised “strengthening the ability of people to act on joint interests and in the common interest, including having equal concern for other communities” (DCLG, 2008). This resonates with the tenets of Ongoing Dialogue, Transparency Sharing Issues, and Authentic Consultation which all entail clubs and fans working together for

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common interest. Such an implicit and genuine interest in fans' views also values their participation in decisions, utilising their valuable expertise.

These relationships earn trust and build enduring goodwill, helping clubs and fans find common cause on issues which affect them, and enabling them to work together more cohesively. In this way, fans can become more inclusively involved in the decisions which affect their interests, and clubs can exhibit responsiveness to fan contributions as they improve services. This echoes previous government encouragement to build equity, inclusiveness, participation and cohesion, empowering people and organisations, to influence and help transform services affecting the conditions of their lives, working in genuine partnership (DCLG, 2008). Such an inclusive approach would extend to fan representatives democratically adopted within club decision-making and reflecting the diverse constituencies of interests, and demographics, of the fanbase. And so, fans are empowered to channel their influence constructively, and effectively, for the long-term wellbeing of their club. And so, the eleven Tenets of Effective Fan engagement collectively enhance the fan experience and the sustainability of football clubs.

Summarising Virtuous Cycles of Effective Fan Engagement

Virtuous cycles of Fan Engagement demonstrate win-win dynamics for clubs and fans. Each deploy effective Fan Engagement strategies which encourage cooperation; for clubs to involve fans, and both clubs and fans to work together, for their mutual benefit. The outcomes of this embrace are illustrated in the match spectacle, and in other contexts too, enhancing the experiences for fans, and sustainability for clubs. Outcomes can be assessed quantitatively, at least by stabilised attendances stabilising club income, and at best by increased attendances increasing club income. And outcomes can be assessed qualitatively in the authentic experiences and perceptions of the club staff and fans involved. All of this process is underpinned by effective adoption and application of the eleven Tenets in the Circle of Fan Engagement.



Fan Engagement in Practice

Whilst the previous section outlined the potential benefits from virtuous cycles of Fan Engagement, this one will reveal much more vividly how it is currently carried out in practice, and in many different ways. The FSA described how that has “evolved naturally” in recent years at clubs, often led by progressive fan groups, with some common formats, and others that differ significantly (FSA, 2024a). Fan Engagement can be:

- approached as an art or a science;
- planned formally and highly structured;
- quite informal and flexible;
- focused at a strategic level, or on people, communication, and interactions;
- aligned and underpinned by legal agreements or unharnessed as a creative cultural process;
- focused on matchday experiences, outreach activity in the community, or within a club’s organisational and decision-making processes;
- regulated to uniform standards, or uniquely bespoke to a club’s particular circumstances.

All of these are valid approaches, and effective Fan Engagement is a blend of most or all of these. In what follows, different elements and aspects of the Fan Engagement process will be outlined and congregated around six sub-processes: Flexible, Cultural, Matchday, Communication, Planned, and Legal. These will be vividly illustrated by examples of current practice at twenty or so English clubs, and also in comparison to an example from Germany. What happens at these clubs is not necessarily unique to them, or exhaustive of any other examples, they are simply indicators of what is actually going on in practice now. Some practice is led by the clubs and some by its fans, and some activity is conducted autonomously by fans in communities, by symbiosis, in the name of their club.

The additional examples from one German club are because many believe German football to be an exemplar for fan-centredness with packed stadia, heightened atmosphere, and passionate fan participation. The German Bundesliga has been credited with a comparatively more inclusive, fan-friendly disposition than many other leagues, and with nearly all clubs’ majority owned by fans, encouraging a degree of “participatory democracy” (Totten, 2014) for

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fans, uncommon elsewhere. And within German football, or worldwide, there are few clubs as fan-friendly as FC Sankt Pauli.

FC Sankt Pauli, from Hamburg, have recently won the German Second League, and been promoted back to the top Bundesliga. Historically, Sankt Pauli mostly yo-yo between the top two divisions of German football, but have attracted a significant global cult following with possibly more than eleven million fans worldwide (Montague, 2010). The club is exemplified here as, even within German football, Sankt Pauli offer a remarkably strong vision and integrity of effective Fan Engagement. For many, the club represents an ideal manifestation of fan and community centeredness, and its fans embrace community issues, and engage in prolific community activity, projects, and campaigns, in a transformative way (Totten, 2014). Davidson believes Sankt Pauli offer a beacon of hope as leading lights of football (Davidson, 2014), and Kuhn declares the club captured the imagination of other fans “as they spearheaded a radical football supporters’ movement that spread across Europe and beyond” (Kuhn, 2011).

Fan Engagement as Flexible Processes

The IFR will develop robust measures to give accurate insights and assess standards of Fan Engagement. These will need to be uniform enough to enable comparison between clubs, but they cannot be too rigid to stifle innovation. Fan Engagement has to be flexible enough to suit different club contexts and the Fan-Led Review stressed that clubs should adopt multiple strategies and multiple methods of Fan Engagement, and that best practice would likely involve using several mechanisms to embed fans within decision-making processes (DCMS, 2021). Fair Game also encouraged a “multi-level approach” (Fair Game, 2021b), not aiming for a single fixed method, and the FSA encouraged clubs to adopt their own bespoke approach whilst also being open to other “external ideas” (FSA, 2024a).

So, a healthy aspect of Fan Engagement is allowing clubs to be flexible, creative, experimental, adaptive, innovative, and free to fail sometimes in order to learn and progress; “Whatever works, works”. And often effective Fan Engagement can be idiosyncratic and bespoke to specific contexts and circumstances. Forest Green Rovers is a pioneering club that styles itself “the greenest football club in the world”, and fans are encouraged to engage with a range of environmental issues including Vegetarian catering on matchdays. And at Wigan Athletic FC there is a “#BELIEVE FansFund” whereby Fans, over 1,300 Believers, pay a monthly subscription and choose in which area of club operations their monthly subscription goes. Large supporter images are also placed throughout the stadium, internally and externally, alongside Club Legends to signify unity. And Wimbledon AFC and Bolton Wanderers have asked fans to select the teams’ kits.

The EFL has an annual Fan Engagement award to provide recognition to clubs who demonstrate the effective involvement of their fans either on matchdays, in specific campaigns, or by showcasing excellent communication. It was won in 2023 by Bolton Wanderers who signed a memorandum of understanding with the Supporters' Trust which acted as a

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springboard for a partnership that developed relationships, and influenced “club strategy, ideas, campaigns and capital projects”. Bolton also hold bi-weekly meetings between senior club staff and the Supporters' Trust, who helped shape the design of the FanZone. And Blackburn Rovers targeted a festive fixture against Watford to increase engagement. Multiple events were hosted in the FanZone, ticket prices were significantly reduced, and there were giveaways for supporters. The initiative saw fans across the world raise over £3,000 towards tickets for local families otherwise unable to attend, and to support Community Trust programmes too. And at Doncaster Rovers, a 500-strong fan community channel was created which includes fun forms of engagement such as match score predictions, post-match discussions, polls, and contests.

After relegation in 2023, Southampton put fans at the heart of a campaign to boost morale, reconnect with the fanbase, and increase attendances. A huge success, the campaign generated a record number of new Season Ticket holders, more in the Championship campaign than in the previous Premier League season. The campaign aimed to capture the emotions that fans resonate with and celebrated special “matchday moments' ”; reminding fans of the emotions they go through, seeing the stadium for the first time, celebrating a goal, or eating a pre-match hotdog or pie. And at Sankt Pauli, the largest fan club are the thousands of Ultras, for some of whom it is a full-time vocation. They are by far the most active fans in the stadium, priding themselves on their inventiveness, and frenetic endurance on the terraces. They have different working groups and organise in a semi-industrial process; their headquarters a disused factory with banks of sewing machines to produce stadium banners, others choreograph chants and terrace action, a group designs and makes merchandise to raise funds, and others works with refugees to bring them to matches.

Fan Engagement as Cultural Processes

In many ways securing an established, authentic, and effective Fan Engagement culture is the biggest prize of all. It can fuel a virtuous cycle of enduring goodwill, active participation, influence, and pride and trust in a club. The FSA (FSA, 2021a) believes this not only creates a fan base who feel positive about their club, but also provides valuable fan feedback for the business side of the club. In this way clubs can capitalise significantly from fans’ loyalty, and involvement and influence in most club policy. The English Premier League (EPL) (Premier League, 2023) identified “Leadership and Culture”, setting strategy and a culture of Fan Engagement, as one of its five key engagement themes. But what creates and sustains an authentic engagement culture can be a whole mix of measures allowing club and fans to attune to each other.

At its heart is the fan-facing “cultural offer” to fans which inspires their engagement. This might include a whole raft of formal and informal opportunities which promote a strong sense of community, and include; innovative or one-off fun initiatives, the quality and comfort of matchday services, perceptions of value-added membership packages, charm offensives, club and player altruism and work within local communities, the evocation of club nostalgia and matchday moments, and interactions accessing Club Legends, current players, senior staff, or

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club training sessions. And the quality and tone of those interactions is important whether they be in-person or online (Keogh et al., 2019). Uncaring one off-hand comments can lose fans' faith, whereas approachability, and empathetic identification with role models and heroes can kindle a flame.

Reading FC were recently nominated for the EFL Fan Engagement Award for initiatives delivered in the community, including a project in schools and an exhibition in Reading Museum, putting on matches for club legends with fan involvement, and a number of other off-field initiatives for the fans' benefit. And at Bolton Wanderers, there is belief that the club should be asking fans their views and responding to them as consumers who are paying for a service. There was recognition from the CEO that the fans would be there long after he was gone. The club works with the Supporters Trust, and encourages other groups to engage beyond the matchday experience, and can evidence increased attendances, ticket sales, and use of hospitality packages since engaging more with fans.

At FC Sankt Pauli, a reputation is enjoyed as being one of the most fan friendly clubs, with principles enshrined between it and fans in allegiance with its surrounding community, the social and political issues which affect it, a social responsibility beyond sport, and the club adopting many aspects of its fans political and subcultural leanings (Daniel & Kassimeris, 2013). Fans actively campaign on a range of social and political issues that affect their communities from the world of football and beyond, particularly issues affecting the district of Sankt Pauli itself; local problems (common to other inner urban areas), including poverty, unemployment, homelessness, low educational attainment (particularly amongst a large migrant population), inter-generational issues between young and old, and all accentuated against a backdrop of creeping "*gentrification*" (Totten, 2015). Fans describe a process of informal education and are involved in many community projects including youth work, computer literacy, and fundraising to raise awareness for a variety of causes. Club and fans have created an authentic vibrant democratic culture which has cultivated the empowerment of individuals, the fan-body itself, and broader communities too, and a strong sense of community is reflected in fan organisation which acts as a springboard for community action, and subsequently to community empowerment too (Totten, 2015).

Fan Engagement as Matchday Processes

For clubs and fans, matchdays and nights are the main event around which all other operations revolve in support. Many important operations go on before and after, but matchdays are the most heightened and emotional aspect of the fan experience. For clubs this is fundamentally about providing good customer services, but for fans this transcends purely transactional exchanges into other value-added perceptions of the experience. And the perspective of fan-friendly matchdays can be applied to home fans, the club hosting of away fans, and arrangements for fans travelling to away games too. Services might include pre-match awareness of services including ticket sales, concessions, and exchanges, and continue with

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travel and access to the game, the fan welcome, the game build-up, match atmosphere, their exit and journey home, post-game media engagement, and much more therein.

Doncaster Rovers 500-strong “fan community” engages actively and frequently around the issues that matter most to supporters and the club, with the flexibility to engage in an ongoing two-way dialogue on specific areas of interest. It has deep-dived into themes such as the matchday experience, ticketing, catering, merchandise, social media channels, as well as local community engagement. Lincoln was nominated for the EFL Fan Engagement award in 2023 recognising their efforts to improve the matchday experience. The club worked with fans to create and expand a Fan Village as a place to congregate, with food, drink and entertainment, as well as the introduction of a pre-match family area. And Stevenage, historically a club with a relatively small fanbase, has been able to grow this in recent years, with the help of schemes for young fans, packages for youth football clubs, and a Kids' Zone outside the stadium on matchdays. This, accompanied with some success on the pitch, has begun making a real difference, with the club enjoying by far its highest average seasonal attendance in the 2023/24 season.

Brentford FC introduced an “Every Seat Counts” initiative engaging with its fan groups to discuss how to maximise ticketing revenue whilst minimising price increases. Although demand for tickets was high, up to a thousand seats could be empty on matchdays, and only a small proportion of season ticket holders were using the club’s ticket exchange, which was not perceived as user-friendly. Through an in-depth consultation process a policy was designed to encourage season ticket holders to list unused tickets and offered the benefit of a “ticket credit” when they are unable to attend. “Ticketmaster” was integrated to improve exchanges, and via an extensive marketing programme, including film, email and infographics, the club succeeded in encouraging fans to ensure their season ticket was always used. Exchange usage increased significantly, a greater number of tickets became available, sales and club revenue increased, allowing it to freeze ticket prices.

In Germany, a match ticket guarantees free public transport for home and away fans on matchdays. And at Sankt Pauli, club and fans have worked together to ensure fan-friendly arrangements at stadia. The current head of security at the Millerntor stadium has his roots as a fan activist, fanzine editor and campaigner. And fans have worked closely with the club to pursue a relaxing of stewarding and a sympathetic embrace of fan banners and other homemade paraphernalia. In recognition of their success, clubs and fans were consulted by the German football authorities on fan arrangements and hospitality prior to the 2006 world cup, which was later described as the “most fan-friendly ever” (Totten, 2015).

Fan Engagement as Communication Processes

Fan Engagement communications include face-to-face people processes and interactions, as well as the use of other media, and transparent access to documentation. Proven mechanisms ensure a range of engagement opportunities, both formal and informal, through which fans feel actively involved in the day to day running of the Club, and in its strategic plans, and which enable authentic fan involvement and contribution toward Club issues. The Fan-Led Review described the mutual benefits of genuine two-way consultation between fans and clubs (DCMS, 2021). These might include consultations, fan focus groups, surveys and opinion polls, and access to senior club staff, the CEO, and club owner(s), and other mechanisms courting fans' views. All these enable opportunities for fans to constructively contribute their opinions to "football issues", and beyond; toward club business, policy, and financial matters.

The FSA (FSA, 2024a) offers much information and advice on communication mechanisms including Fans' Forums, Fan Advisory Boards (FABs) and Supporter Advisory Boards (SABs), Supporter Parliaments, Supporter Directors, Supporter Trusts, Independent Supporter Associations, Diversity Advisory Groups, Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs), and Disability Advisory Officers (DAOs). The Fan-Led Review placed emphasis on the role of SLOs, their consistency, and the benefits to clubs (DCMS, 2021). And Fair Game noted the importance of SLOs to ensure club delivery in a two-way interface with supporters, police, safety authorities, and other clubs as required per UEFA guidelines (Fair Game, 2024b).

The FSA (FSA, 2024a) wishes to raise the profile of SLOs and described how they can build bridges between club and fans, offer a point of contact for supporters, both home and away, facilitate fan engagement structures, advocate for the fans' voice within clubs, and liaise with stewards, police, and counterparts at opposition clubs. DAOs are responsible for supporting and advising their club in relation to improving access and inclusion for disabled supporters, employees, volunteers and players. And the FSA noted that the EFL has long compelled clubs to appoint DAOs to support the provision of inclusive, accessible facilities and services as part of their European licensing criteria. Some of the most effective Fan Engagement offered by clubs is through one-stop drop-in Fan Centres or hubs staffed professionally by SLOs, sometimes with youth and community work training or qualifications.

Other media used by clubs and fans might include club radio or TV channels, fan-friendly websites, online chat rooms and forums, fanzines, club statements, press releases, access to club management, and documentation of meetings, accounts, business performance, and club policy. Much has been written about the importance of fans being able to scrutinise club documents. And Fair Game (Fair Game, 2021b) believes fans should be allowed to examine accounts, attend AGMs, and access publications of formal club meetings, legal agreements, ownership and share rights, the wider Fan Engagement Strategy, and of all formal Club-Fan meetings. Fair Game also believes annual Supporter Reports should be made available to fans, which include a review of club business, and explain club sustainability, and engagement practices and processes (Fair Game, 2023c).

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Birmingham City FC host a quarterly “Blues Open House” evening for up to 100 committed fans which offers a unique insight into the progress and plans of select departments across the club, and whose work helps shape the views of “Bluenoses” across the globe. For the 2023/24 season, Bristol Rovers FC implemented various initiatives which aimed to comprehensively improve Fan Engagement, and further enhance the fan experience. These included; Fan Feedback Surveys, Special Moments, “Here to Help” support, wider communication with fan groups, and improved Young Supporters Offerings. And at Lincoln, the club consulted fans on increasing the age for concessions, from 60 to 65. Whilst the decision had already been made by the club, it engaged 92 season ticket holders in this bracket to explain the rationale and financial implications. Eligibility from age 60 was out of step with almost the whole Football League, and ultimately 90 of the 92 fans concluded that they understood the decision to increase to 65.

At Sankt Pauli, the club uses a blend of conventional and digital communications; from a plethora of meetings to the use of digital media linked to other networks globally, and fans control websites, blogs and fanzines themselves. The Ubersteiger fanzine is an extremely important organ for fans, the second biggest in Germany, running a weekly blog and hard-copy editions four or five times a year. It covers football issues, and political ones too; important themes have included anti-racism, anti-homophobia and local issues like gentrification and increasing housing costs (Totten, 2015). Another very important mechanism is the Fanladen, or fan-centre, part funded by the football authorities as well as other statutory organisations (common across Germany), and whose staff are community-work qualified, drawn from the fan scene itself, and offer a distinctive identity separate to the club. The Fanladen acts as a one-stop significant social and cultural hub, which engages fans in social and community projects, and is a highly regarded contributor to fan culture. Meetings and discussions are also especially valued as an essential part of democratic process, and include large ones like the Fanclubsprecherat (open to representatives from all 350-plus fan groups) and smaller ones like the weekly Ultras assembly (Totten, 2015). All these and other components of the fan organism interact with the club and each other as part of the whole. More streamlined organisational structures with a narrower democratic mandate are avoided, a sense of participatory democracy has animated fans, and all have become the basis for collective action, building capacity for sustainable change.

Fan Engagement as Planned Processes

In addition to less formal, but nevertheless important measures, Fan Engagement is increasingly planned as part of a more structured formal strategic process. The mechanisms to achieve may include those previously cited from the FSA (FSA, 2024a): Fans' Forums, FABs and SABs, Supporter Parliaments, Supporter Directors, Supporter Trusts, Independent Supporter Associations, Diversity Advisory Groups, and the FSA also offers detailed advice on how to approach "Structured Dialogue". The EPL (Premier League, 2023) also advocate FABs to engage in two-way dialogue with fans, as well as FEPs to utilise information gathered from Fans Forums, Fan Panels, and Fan Surveys to inform and shape discussion at FABs, Working Groups dedicated to more specific issues, and Fan Engagement Plans (FEP), and offers considerable guidance on how these may be implemented.

Fair Game considered various ways fans can be enabled to participate in a transparent process of Club Governance, contribute to major decisions being taken within the club, including strategic and commercial matters, and may be represented on the Club Boards. It outlined guiding principles including that Boards develop a bedrock and culture of integrity and honesty to cement trust with fans and other stakeholders (Fair Game, 2021b). It further emphasises that Boards should ensure their decisions are made in the best, long-term interest of their club and supporters, that fans should be consulted on all major decisions, and that those decisions are based on dialogue with fans. Fair Game is also concerned that Club Leadership is representative of the diverse Fanbase, its composition and constituencies, that Boards operate and appoint consistent with an embedded "equity for all" approach, and that the IFR provides oversight of this process (Fair Game, 2021b).

In addition to all of the above, other mechanisms within a structured Fan Engagement process might include club reports specifically for fans, Fan Engagement Standards, internal and external measures for clubs to monitor, evaluate, and assess Fan Engagement and involvement, Fan Share Schemes, Fan or Community Ownership Schemes, and "Shadow Boards". The last Government offered much thought upon Shadow Boards ((DCMS, 2021) and (DCMS, 2023)) how they might operate alongside club Boards and be licensed flexibly, how fans are represented and selected "in line with basic democratic principles". Shadow Boards can be engage and consult fans on: a club's strategic vision and objectives, short, medium and long-term business plans, operational matchday issues, proposals relating to club heritage, marketing, merchandising and sponsorship plans, stadium issues and plans, and the club's plan for broader Fan Engagement.

Cambridge is in the process of finalising a Shadow Board, have gone to great lengths to ensure that fans from a broad range of groups are included, and have also gone beyond some other clubs by offering it powers to protect some of the heritage "crown jewels" of the club. Premier League clubs are required to set up FABs to structure and resource Fan Engagement between senior staff and fans. But some clubs, including West Ham, select the fan representatives themselves. Some clubs have been criticised by fans for the lack of democracy in selecting representatives. At Carlisle United, the Official Supporters Club nominates directors to the club's two boards, and has representatives on the Supporters' Group Panel. This is a forum for all

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supporter groups, with a diverse membership, and meets with the club every few weeks to discuss fan-focused projects and initiatives. The club CEO attends the panel to answer fans' questions, provide detailed analysis of accounts, and offer regular updates and detailed financial information for fans.

At Bolton Wanderers, the club CEO believes he and other senior staff should be accessible to fans and leads regular, minuted, engagement meetings. The CEO responds to fans on issues raised, including ticket prices, and highlights suggestions which have been taken up. There are plans to produce a dedicated annual report for fans, engage on how the club becomes more sustainable, better engages with community groups, and with under-represented groups too. AFC Wimbledon have a Fans' Focus Group, consisting of 15 supporters and club staff, with the aim of executing suggestions to improve important off pitch matters. It covers areas such as the matchday experience, website and social media content, non-matchday events that fans would like to attend, how it may increase community involvement, improve attendance with females and juniors, and promote diversity.

At Sankt Pauli, the Fanclubsprecherrat (the body elected by the 350-plus fan clubs to speak on their behalf) incorporates delegates from the individual fan clubs of season ticket holders, as well as others more remotely affiliated elsewhere in Germany and around the world. The Fanclubsprecherrat makes public statements, represents the views of the fan clubs to others, and is bound by a constitution which declares; "Fanclubs act against every form of discrimination". And although the fans are cohesively organised, autonomously, bottom-up, and non-hierarchically, the Fanclubsprecherrat discusses issues democratically and votes on positions to be taken. This includes campaign plans, and supporting initiatives that give rise to prolific community action, empowering communities in a transformational and sustainable way (Totten, 2015).

Fan Engagement as Legal Processes

The most effective Fan Engagement is often underpinned by legal arrangements which define rights and protections in the relationship between club and fans. These may take the form of a Memorandum of Understanding, a more formal Legal Agreement, a club Licence Condition, or similar. The last Government outlined how the IFR might expect to see legal evidence that a club has an effective structure in place at senior level to discuss strategic matters regularly with fans (DCMS, 2023). The IFR may design and apply Specific Licence Conditions as part of its assessment process, and would also expect to assess evidence from fan representatives on how the club's framework works in practice. An established Fan Engagement Strategy may be underpinned by legal processes embedding fan participation, broadly and democratically, in club governance and decision-making processes.

Legal arrangements might encompass; club ownership, club heritage protections, Fans' Right of Veto in certain significant areas of policy interest, full legal representation of fans on the club Board, a democratic process for a Fan-elected Club Director(s) with rights as any other director,

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a fan Share Scheme directed through an independent Trust, Fan body, or similar. They might include regulatory mechanisms to assess club compliance and delivery of Fan Engagement in line with IFR or League standards. Fair Game proposed Fan Engagement must be one of the four central criteria (since extended to five to include Community Engagement) of a Sustainability Index, operated by the regulator, who could provide non-prescriptive, but strong minimum standards for Fan Engagement, and foster an environment in which clubs are encouraged to be innovative and qualitative in their engagement practices (Fair Game, 2021b).

And Fair Game is not alone in promoting a Golden Share arrangement for fans, ensuring a veto over significant changes to club structure, such as shareholding and voting rights, and long-term custodial rights over club “Heritage Assets”. A Supporters’ Trust could “hold the share lock that protects the crown jewels of the club” (Fair Game, 2021a); Club name, badge, playing colours, and stadia. Although Government (DCMS, 2023) has stated the IFR might not require every club to introduce a “Golden Share” due to legal concerns over the complexity and implications of universal implementation, it has stated it “can work well for some clubs”, that “No club will be prevented from utilising a ‘Golden Share’ model”, and noted that fan consultation had worked at Bristol Rovers (where the existing badge was kept) and at Aston Villa (where fans approved a new badge).

Stevenage implemented a Golden Share arrangement with powers of fan Veto over changes to “big identity decisions” in January 2023, but this was after changes were made to the club’s name and badge, without fan consultation on either. Following Stevenage, and before that at Brentford, Lincoln implemented a Golden Share arrangement whereby a power of veto is held by the Red Imps Community Trust, which has 5,000-plus members, and includes ex-players, and one of the club Board of directors. Lincoln also has two fans who sit on the board of directors; one from the Red Imps Community Trust, and one from the Gold Members.

More than 20 years ago, Exeter City FC became the first fan-owned club, and fan-owned clubs might include those with majority and minority fan-ownership, and minority fan-owned clubs include Accrington Stanley, Carlisle United, Lincoln City, and Grimsby Town. There are also “Phoenix” clubs arising from the ashes of previous collapses, like Chester FC and Bury AFC now alive again today. And there are “Protest” clubs emerging as alternatives to mainstream more commercialised ones, like AFC Wimbledon and FC United. And some previously fan-owned clubs like Brentford and Portsmouth have sold up to new investors.

At Luton, the Supporters’ Trust are custodians of the image rights of the club, and thereby would be able to veto any changes to club Heritage Assets. The Trust has taken the initiative in bringing different groups of fans together, which the club are supportive of and contribute to, with high-level representatives at meetings. And Bolton Wanderers signed a Memorandum of Understanding with its Supporters’ Trust, which elects its own representatives, and now host bi-weekly meetings between senior club staff (including the CEO and First Team Manager) and leading members of the Supporters’ Trust. This partnership has created a springboard from which influence has grown toward club strategy overall.

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Sankt Pauli fans, like nearly all German fans since 2001, have benefitted from the Bundesliga's "50%+1" rule which ensures clubs must be at least fifty percent "plus one voice" owned by their fan members to prevent majority control by any other single entity, Sankt Pauli fans are officially represented through the Abteilung Fördernde Mitglieder (AFM, fan membership scheme) which carries constituted voting rights and influences the politics and direction of the football club (Totten, 2014). And Sankt Pauli has been highly successful in making sure "50%+1" is an effective democratic tool by ensuring that the majority of members are actually fans, and fan-activists too.

Summarising Fan Engagement in Practice

This section has highlighted many different ways that Fan Engagement can be practised, how it can be approached either as an art or a science, and the lack of agreed universal standards against which to evaluate policy and practice. The complexity of the Fan Engagement process has been disentangled to reveal six distinct sub-processes. Flexible, Cultural, Matchday, Communication, Planned, and Legal processes. Each were illustrated with examples of current practice at English clubs, some of it led by the clubs, some by its fans, and sometimes activity conducted autonomously by fans in communities, and additionally FC Sankt Pauli were presented as exemplar for fan-centredness from German football.

These examples are merely a snapshot and not intended to be exhaustive of what is going on, or could be. They reveal some commonalities in principle and approach, but also some idiosyncratic practice in different contexts. All of this is desirable for effective Fan Engagement for which best practice can be shared, benchmark standards set, but which also has to adapt to circumstances, and opportunities to innovate. More of the benefits of Effective Fan Engagement will be considered next.



Further Benefits of Fan Engagement for Clubs, Fans, and Communities



This previous section highlighted the ways Fan Engagement is practised, with examples within Flexible, Cultural, Matchday, Communication, Planned, and Legal processes, some of it led by clubs, some by its fans, and sometimes conducted autonomously by fans in communities. And earlier still, this paper outlined self-perpetuating and Virtuous Cycles of Fan Engagement which benefited clubs and fans mutually. The benefits of effective Fan Engagement accordingly extend across clubs, fan communities (both home and away), but also other communities in the vicinity of football clubs too. Later in this paper different Degrees of Fan Engagement will be set out and considered, but essentially the deeper the Degree, the deeper the well of benefits on offer. This section will continue to address the quality of Fan Engagement through an analysis of its benefits for clubs and fans, which generally encompass and encapsulate community benefits too. The White Paper saw clubs as central to many communities; “the benefits of a thriving club extend well beyond their fans” and noted “even non-football fans value their local football club” (DCMS, 2023). The concept of community will therefore be central to this analysis as Fan Engagement is essentially a form of Community Engagement, and its benefits congregate around that.

This section begins by examining the relationship between Fan Engagement and Community Engagement, and the potential for football and fans therein. Then it will consider a role for Fan Engagement rebuilding a sense of community, and cultivating fan communities, alongside club heritage. It then moves on to consider the particular benefits of Fan Engagement as a form of Community Development and source for fan and community empowerment, building social capital, capacity, and networks, for fans and communities, and finally its potential for transformative community action.

Fan Engagement as Community Engagement

As clubs engage with fan communities, often with other broader communities too, and fans themselves may carry out activity autonomously with those broader communities (in the name of their club), Fan Engagement encompasses aspects of community work. An effective Fan Engagement strategy encompasses these different dimensions as it straddles club and fan activity, with community activity, the lines between which can be blurred. There is a strong link between Fan Engagement and Community Engagement; “a way to build and sustain relationships between public services and community groups - helping them both to understand and take action on the needs or issues that communities experience” (SCDC, 2020). For Fan Engagement, the services are those provided by football clubs and the communities include fans, and others too. And community engagement is a process whereby clubs, fans, and communities come together to take action on what's of mutual interest and importance.

Not least because of that importance, Fair Game plans to explore football's role in Community Engagement much further in the future. And at the heart of Community Engagement is a belief in fairness and inclusion, that people should have an opportunity to influence decisions on what matters to them. The benefits of Community Engagement by clubs are further enhanced when SLOs and staff are trained in aspects of community work. The White Paper stated clubs “should always function in the interests of their most important and longest-standing stakeholders: their fans and the local communities they are a part of” (DCMS, 2023). And the SCDC (SCDC, 2024) outlined four principles which underpin community engagement in practice, and which are shared with Fan Engagement:

- **self-determination** - a right to be involved in decisions;
- **empowerment** - developing people's capacity to exercise influence;
- **collective action** - cooperative approaches and activity;
- **working and learning together** - sharing experiences and collaborating on activities to improve the quality of life.

Football as Community Engagement

The liberating potential of sport has long been argued, and football retains that (Totten, 2017). Fan Engagement is not just about engaging individuals but extends to fan groups and communities too. Professional football is sometimes perceived as too commercially driven, and too institutionally and culturally conservative to engage authentically in grassroots community work, and that is too often true. But it can do it successfully, and sometimes simply because it is football! Football has a status, power and appeal that reaches beyond most sports, and the involvement of a professional club embedded in local community outreach work can excite interest in a way other organisations simply cannot.

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In the foreword to the White Paper, the then Minister for Sport declared; “Football touches all our communities in so many ways. The game is part of the DNA that makes up the identities of our regions, towns, and cities. Our clubs bring people together as part of something bigger, evoking a sense of pride and community. That is why, for so many people up and down the country, football is part of the fabric of our way of life and integral to our society and culture” (DCMS, 2023). And it is football that brings people together to commune, to watch, even on cold winter nights, and football is the cultural context, and “milieu”, which Fan Engagement inhabits.

Football has a long history of community activity and can be an attractive and exciting medium to rally around; as it offers a distinct theatre of opportunity for grassroots community activity. And Football in the Community schemes have worked with disabled, anti-racist, anti-crime, healthy lifestyles and tenants-based groups that have built capacity, new skills, empowered and motivated different communities through the game of football (Football Foundation, 2008). Through football, local issues can be projected onto a bigger canvas, sometimes where the importance of football itself seems less significant. So, in a sense the football match itself is really not that important, and it is what occurs through it, and beyond matchdays, that can become most significant.

Fan and Community Engagement

The White Paper stated that “unlike typical businesses, football clubs are community assets”, and that with the “direct and indirect economic benefits they deliver to local areas, they benefit wider society” (DCMS, 2023). Coalter is clear that what is offered “beyond sport” itself lends most significant impact for communities (Coalter, 2007), and Roults concurs stating that sport must be accompanied by other forms of advocacy and support (Roults et al., 2015). Fair Game has envisaged how a well-run club football can be the lifeblood of a community; its heritage, a tradition uniting a local area, providing support, a hub for social and sporting activities, and a sense of belonging (Fair Game, 2021a).

The White Paper also noted clubs often “engage in community initiatives, and contribute to civic identity and pride in place” (DCMS, 2023). For Fan Engagement in practice, this involves ensuring support for clubs and fans to work together, to realise the assets inherent within fan communities, to enhance the quality of fan experiences, and to improve decisions for the sustainability of football clubs, and their communities. Effective Fan Engagement reaches beyond the confines of good customer services, and can build a sense of community. As trust and cooperation mature between clubs and fans, it helps to create a closer social and cultural (socio-cultural) alignment which can extend to the wellbeing of communities around clubs too.

Fan Engagement Rebuilding a Sense of Community

Football support is often described as a tribal activity and at the heart of that lies a strong sense of community. Traditional notions of community have tended to focus on place or locality, with connotations of working-class culture, collective experiences, living and working together, perhaps supporting the local football team. This idea of “traditional” community is commonly evoked, courts most interest from policy makers and funders, and is in greatest evidence in attempts at community practice. But this is changing, and such a “deterministic” ideal of community is diminishing, as social relations are transcending locality, not least due to increased personal mobility and digital communications.

Senses of community are now much more complex than just the “traditional” one, but in a changing world in which many feel a loss of place, they also seek to rekindle a sense of traditional community, and for many; by choosing a football club. And though a sense of community may now be less prescribed, and more open to personal choice, many people seek tradition and continuity, and football offers that. Increasingly football is community in all its different manifestations, a canvas against which fans can project their own sense of belonging. It offers hope of something steadfast, passionately embraced, and shared. Effective Fan Engagement cultivates a strong sense of community.

Cultivating a Sense of Fan Community

Community implies a notion of collectivity, commonality, a sense of belonging, and of something shared. But what exactly is being shared can be thought of in at least six overlapping dimensions; Communities as Places inhabited, as Identities held, as Interests pursued, as Experiences encountered, as Actions taken, and even as ideas Imagined (Hylton & Totten, 2013a). Any of these dimensions of community can be sensed by football fans, often through more than one dimension, and for many fans through all six of them. If Fan Engagement is to develop effectively, within fan communities and beyond, these differing dimensions of communities and their characteristics need to be well understood. This enables good intentions to be focused to deliver real impact, and for football to enhance a sense of community.

Table 1: Senses of Community

Types of Fan Communities	Senses of Community
Places Inhabited	<p>“Consideration must be paid to fans, whose love of the club extends to the love of the ‘place’” (DCMS, 2023), and place or locality is the most common way to think of community.</p> <p>For fans important places include the town or district where a club is based, where fans may live or visit, its social fabric and history, and any particular or unique culture that exudes.</p> <p>It may include gathering points before games, especially in the vicinity of the ground, nearby familiar streets, shops, bars and eateries, and within the stadium, perhaps specific parts of it.</p> <p>All these places engender a strong sense of belonging, and of community, and effective Fan Engagement can occur in all of them.</p>
Identities Held	<p>Some fans feel their affiliation to a club follows a preordained family tradition, and fan identity creates a powerful sense of belonging, but fundamentally it is chosen. Mostly a lifelong allegiance, one club to the exclusion of all others, and felt with passionate fervour.</p> <p>Adornments (club uniform, badges, scarves, banners, and even tattoos) project, so one can identify another who belongs, and others who do not. Within clubs there are different fan sub-cultures who co-exist with different sub-identities. A strong sense of community is created and protected.</p> <p>Effective Fan Engagement can inclusively address needs or issues within sub-cultural groups, or toward social demographics which may be unrepresented, or marginalised.</p>
Interests Pursued	<p>Communities of interest share aspects with those of identity, also chosen and reflect a passion. Fans may share fundamental interests in football, specific clubs, and a desire to actively support them.</p> <p>Within that orbit, there is a multitude of sub-interests which reflect a diversity of tastes around which fans may affiliate; club history and heritage, the transfer market, going to away games or on tour, choosing to stand or sit, to sing and chant (or not), pre- or post-match meeting points and socialising, various rituals accompanying match days and nights, likes and dislikes.</p> <p>With an infinite variety of interests which fan sub-groups may congregate around, effective Fan Engagement inclusively recognizes a diversity of fan tastes and needs.</p>

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Types of Fan Communities	Senses of Community
Experiences Encountered	<p>Communities of experience are forged by fans in pursuit of their interests. These may be in the shared communion of match days and nights, at home or away, in transit to either; a feeling of belonging to something special, bigger than the individual fan.</p> <p>It may be a festival atmosphere as fans take over streets before converging into the stadium, in which emotions and senses are “heightened”, by music, chants and singing, fan choreography, feverish anticipation, the match drama, or afterwards as the gathering slowly disperses in reverse order back to the streets.</p> <p>For effective Fan Engagement there has to be a recognition of the diversity of experiences fans value and a commitment to enhance those experiences.</p>
Actions Taken	<p>For many fans it is not enough to simply be a passive consumer of the spectacle, and an authentic sense of community is forged through shared actions. Active communities work collectively to put ideas into practice. For many, to be vociferous, vocal and noticed is important, and for some the “Ultra” model of fandom is an ideal.</p> <p>Other activities may take place away from matches, fans may participate in fundraising or community work in the name of their club. Or, when fans experience discontent with their club, they may still support their team, but also engage in activism and protest campaigning toward their own club, or football authorities.</p> <p>Effective Fan Engagement galvanises activity and actions which bond fans.</p>
Ideas Imagined	<p>Not least in a digital age, a sense of community can also be imagined as much as it can actually be real. Some fans may only be remotely connected to others but imagine their sense of community, connected to the others too.</p> <p>Life-changes can disrupt or curtail previous supporter habits, fans can conscientiously follow a team from almost anywhere in the world, and nostalgia can trigger a sense of community; fans today may feel connections with those of yesteryear. Club history, lore, emblems and icons transcend distance and time and enable fans to imagine community shared.</p> <p>Effective Fan Engagement can reach out through social media and other means to connect fans together in the orbit of their sense of shared imagination.</p>

Club Heritage and a Sense of Community

An especially resonant sense of community through football, and worthy of further consideration, is expressed in relation to Club Heritage. The White Paper was clear that “Football is not just a sport. It is part of our history, our heritage, and our national way of life”, and that clubs are “community Heritage Assets that will outlive their owners” (DCMS, 2023). Fans celebrate shared socio-cultural identities, club icons, history and heritage, with deep attachments, and these offer clubs a “unique selling point”. As part of the ongoing dialogue between clubs and fans, effective Fan Engagement entails lobbying clubs on issues that are important to fans’ interests, and ensuring club decision-making processes protect those. Club Heritage is a high stakes issue for fans and aspects include club names, badges, shirt colours, stadiums, and training grounds, amongst others.

Proposals for the IFR include protections effectively offering a fans’ Right of Veto over proposed changes to club badges or home shirt colours, and for clubs; a requirement of the IFR’s approval for any proposed sale or relocation of the stadium. The White Paper (DCMS, 2023) recognised the significant value of a club stadia to fans, and described a remit to consider “the implications for club heritage and the views of fans”, but also states decisions “would primarily be on the basis of financial considerations”! And whilst the White Paper reassured that it would seek to avoid situations where clubs sell stadia, it acknowledged “asset value” and described considerations of stadium sale as “beyond its heritage or emotive value”.

Though the White Paper stated the IFR will “add, and reinforce existing, protections around club heritage” (DCMS, 2023), there are no guarantees, or Right of Veto, for fans that prevents club names or away shirt colours being changed, or stadiums and training grounds being sold, without fans’ consent. In Fair Game’s response to the White Paper, it observed that, though it might “safeguard the traditional features of English football that matter most to the fans and local communities of clubs”, it provided insufficient protection for a club’s name, with no mention of fan consultation. Fair Game recommended that the Right of Veto be extended to cover a club’s name and that it “be enshrined in individual club’s articles of association as part of a club’s licence” (Fair Game, 2024b). Effective Fan Engagement supports fan participation being embedded in club decision-making and a Right of Veto on significant aspects of club policy, especially a wider cultural capture of Heritage Assets.

Fan Engagement as Community Development

Previously, this paper highlighted close links between Fan Engagement and Community Engagement, but Community Development is a far more specialised form of practice, involving a deeper, more Immersed or Holistic, Degree of Fan Engagement. But whilst these distinctions in Degrees will be more fully considered later, suffice to say for now that deeper Degrees of engagement also offer deeper rewards, benefits, and more sustainable development for clubs, fans and communities. Research has demonstrated that the impacts of community sport initiatives are more substantial when delivered with the active support, and involvement, of community groups; in the form of Community Development (Partington & Totten, 2011).

Community Development recognises that people, groups and communities can be excluded from decision-making simply by the way it is structured and organised. Community Development seeks to challenge this through engagement, involvement, and action (SCDC, 2024). And similarly, Fan Engagement involves fans in decisions, and promotes their democratic representation. Booth characterises community development as “facilitating involvement in participative structures; encouraging, guiding, training and explaining ...oiling the wheels of participation” (Booth, 1997). And Fan Engagement embraces this form of collective action, promoting fan participation and involvement in decisions.

Checkoway describes how involving communities in policy and planning results in benefits for both agencies and citizens, sometimes changing power structures (Checkoway, 1995). And Fan Engagement promotes fan empowerment and influence, contributing to improvements and shared benefits for clubs and fans, enhancing fan experiences and club sustainability. Through Community Development, people have access to opportunities to come together, to learn and collaborate, to take action on what's important to them, and to share their experiences (SCDC, 2024). And Fan Engagement is a way to build and sustain relationships, valuing fan participation, helping clubs and fans to understand each other, and take action collaboratively on the issues they experience. There is a potential for effective deeply immersed Fan Engagement, informed by Community Development theory, to make deep development gains for clubs, fans, and communities.

Football and Community Development

A well-documented history charts sports, including football, venturing into the realm of Community Development. But sport, and football, have ambiguous credentials when it comes to their success in doing so (Totten, 2015). Community Development is a very specific form of activity, and therefore a specific understanding of its principles and practice is necessary to engage in it effectively. Two professional bodies offer well-accepted and established definitions of community development principles and set standards for its practice; The Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC, 2024), and the International Association for Community Development (IACD, 2023). And previously, the Government devised the “PAT 10” test to ensure that sports organisations’ purporting to be involved in community development actually were (DCMS, 1999).

There are similarities in the processes described for Community Development and with those for Fan Engagement, as many of the principles resemble, and chime with, those of effective Fan Engagement and its guiding tenets. Following these principles, sport, and football, can be a valuable tool through which to pursue Community Development (Hylton & Totten, 2013b), as the most effective immersed Fan Engagement can operate as a form of Community Development. The definitions and principles outlined by the SCDC, CDF, and PAT 10 can be translated to a Fan Engagement context, and are outlined next in Table 2.

Table 2: Community Development and Fan Engagement Principles and Processes

Community Development Principles and Process	Related Fan Engagement Principles and Process
<p>The “PAT 10” test and key touchstones:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Valuing Diversity ● Embedding Local Control ● Supporting Local Commitment ● Promoting Equitable Partnerships ● Working with Change ● Securing Sustainability ● Pursuing Quality ● Connecting with the Mainstream. 	<p>Definition of Fan Engagement</p> <p>Fan Engagement is a process of ongoing dialogue between clubs and fans that enhances the fan experience and contributes to the long-term sustainability of football clubs; through building trust and understanding on issues of shared concern, and by valuing fan involvement in decision making, clubs and fans act together towards their mutual benefit.</p>

<p align="center">Community Development Principles and Process</p>	<p align="center">Related Fan Engagement Principles and Process</p>
<p>SCDC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Groups and organisations come together to work collectively and help communities and agencies to improve the quality of community life. ● Supports communities to use their own assets, strengthening peoples' voices, to improve services and the way in which decisions are made. ● Community Development based fundamentally on values; justice, equality, respect for diversity, fairness for all, the right of self-determination. ● People and communities can make their own choices and decisions. 	<p>Fan Engagement Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clubs and fans coming together to work collectively to improve the quality of fans' experiences. ● Clubs supporting fans to realise their own assets, strengthening fan voices, to improve club services and the way in which decisions are made. ● Ensuring fairness for all fans; based on the values of justice, equality, respect for diversity. ● Right of self-determination for fans to make their own choices and decisions.
<p>IACD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promotes participative democracy - sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment of people within their communities. ● Values underpinning practice - Commitment to rights, solidarity, democracy, equality, environmental and social justice. ● Purpose - To work with communities to achieve participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice; a template against which to measure both the journey and the destination. 	<p>Fan Engagement Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A development process building active and sustainable clubs and communities. ● Mutual respect between clubs and fans. ● Removing barriers to enable fans to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Fan Engagement; Empowering Fans and Communities

Empowerment is based on the principle that people should be able to control and use their own assets and means to influence their own lives (SCDC, 2024). And effective Fan Engagement uses the medium of football to empower fans as individuals, as groups, and at its best communities too. But sport, and football, have often groped fuzzily towards community empowerment in a mechanistic way, critically unchallenging, and lacking an engagement at a socio-political level. So, it has often accommodated, and even perpetuated, sloppy practice and tokenism, even if unintended. The White Paper stated that “Ultimately, the Regulator has been designed to deliver a shift in culture that puts fans back at the heart of the game” (DCMS, 2023), and empowering fans involves a shift in power from clubs, enabling fans to influence what affects and interests them.

Schuftan contends that “empowerment of some, most of the time, entails the disempowerment of others – usually the current holders of power. it expands the political space” (Schuftan, 1996). So, the empowerment of fans and their communities is likely to necessitate the concession of power from clubs and established football institutions to establish influence (Totten, 2015). Empowerment is a process which can transform the relationship between the powerful and powerless and Baltiwala believes that it begins when people recognise their situation and act to change power relationships (Baltiwala, 1994). So, for football fans, the very act of speaking up about their concerns can be empowering in its own right.

Analysis of power relations reveals that empowerment is an ongoing process, and struggle; “that enables people to understand, upgrade and use their capacity to better control and gain power over their own lives” (Schuftan, 1996). This is in contrast to clubs imposing policy and operations in a ‘top-down’ way, and is better achieved through a ‘bottom-up’ interactive approach of fan and community self-help (Hylton & Totten, 2013b). Fan Engagement can be a fertile ground for bottom-up community empowerment, but Ledwith insists that “collective action for change has to follow through from local to structural levels in order to make a sustainable difference. Anything less is ameliorative” (Ledwith, 2011). So, the way football has previously been governed and structured is called into question.

Effective empowerment can be driven by fans, allied to a heightened sense of critical consciousness, and can be facilitated through a process of Fan Engagement, encouraging fans to organise from the bottom-up to gain influence. Participating in such networks and activities can be an empowering experience for fans, with the potential to have a developmental impact on their issues and situations, and often a developmental impact on individual participants too. Community empowerment has a more penetrative impact when strengthened by engagement with local identity, to which football can lend credibility. An authentic sense of local democracy helps to build capacity for self-help, which in turn strengthens community empowerment.

Fan Engagement: Building Social Capital, Capacity, and Networks, for Fans and Communities

Dolk and Kuhn emphasise the particular strengths of grassroots sport for community organising as it reflects values of “self-management, horizontal organising, mutual aid, a rejection of consumer culture and a strong sense of community” (Dolk & Kuhn, 2015). Campbell and Williams believe that sport can develop “social capital” (Campbell & Williams, 2015), which Brehm and Rahn describe that as “the web of cooperative relationships between citizens that facilitate resolution of collective action problems” (Brehm & Rahn, 1997), and the benefits of social capital generated by individuals are transferable to whole communities (Lawson, 2005). Tucker identifies the confluence of different types of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, and bonding capital) present in community sport, and which are enhanced through the broader participatory process (Tucker, 2015). Fan Engagement can be the starting point for the development of social capital that results in the formation of new groups and networks, which offer the potential to make a real difference not just to fans involved in them directly but also to wider communities.

Ledwith describes how “collective action grows in strength as individuals form groups, identify issues and develop projects, and projects form alliances that have the potential to become movements” (Ledwith, 2011). And Nahapiet and Ghoshal identify that collective power can be harnessed as “both the network and the assets that may be mobilised through that network” (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). So, the power of effective Fan Engagement can be both the networks that clubs and fans create as well as the assets held within them. Football clubs increasingly must consider global environmental and climate change issues in their sustainability plans, where it will be vital to engage with fans who are passionate about these issues, and the best ways to address them.

Clubs may address issues locally, and some fans might be involved in vibrant local activism, but also linked, beyond purely local issues, to seek strategic networks between different fan groups, and alliances between other clubs and fans too. Buoyant fan networks can extend a global perspective too, and effective Fan Engagement has the potential to create a virtuous cycle of self-development, with organisational skills built from within, strengthening community empowerment, and which can become transformative community action in practice.

Fan Engagement as Transformative Community Action

Community development and empowerment challenge passive consumer culture and entail participation, and involvement, towards sustainable transformative change. The transformative potential of football depends on movements for change to empower communities to challenge dominant structures of power (Totten, 2015). Effective Fan Engagement can act against injustice, enhance democracy, and develop cooperative communities. But there is also a difference between good work, which may improve the quality of experience, and transformative

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work, which addresses unequal power relations. Ledwith bemoans “action-less thought” founded on rhetoric not reality, and “thoughtless action” without reflection; doing, at the expense of thinking (Ledwith, 2011). She champions “thoughtful action” with critical consciousness to challenge “accepted” practice and dominant power relations; “praxis”, “the action and reflection of women and men upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1998).

Hylton and Totten state that social transformation through “thoughtful action” is aspirational for best practice in sport, and requires a transformational perspective (Hylton & Totten, 2013b). So, the empowerment of football fans is more likely to be transformative when allied to this sense of critical consciousness and driven bottom-up by the fans themselves. At its best, effective Fan Engagement can instil a sense of participatory democracy. It can release the potential for football as transformative community action, focused at the grassroots in the lived experience of fans. Fans may challenge existing arrangements, policies, and operational practice by clubs. Effective Fan Engagement can stimulate fan and community-led activity, embedded within clubs, to deliver a transformative arc of community benefits which can be observed and evidenced in situ. This enhances the fan experience, but it also contributes to the long-term sustainability of clubs, and the strength of communities too. At its best, Football and Fan Engagement, can help unite and empower clubs, fans and communities in close alignment and common cause.

Summarising Further Benefits of Fan Engagement for Clubs, Fans, and Communities

This section explored many of the benefits on offer for clubs, fans, and communities through effective Fan Engagement. The concept of community was central to this analysis as Fan Engagement, and Community Engagement and Development theory and principles were applied to the Fan Engagement process, and its benefits. Analysis of benefits focused on the power to enhance the fan experience, create a sense of community, and sustainability too. A proposition emerged that the deeper the degree of Fan Engagement, the deeper the potential benefits that might accrue, and this was particularly so, as the section ventured further into Community Development and Empowerment. Effective Fan Engagement finally revealed its potential for Transformative Community Action. However, the next section will consider where and when Fan Engagement falls way short of that mark.



Ineffective Fan and Community Engagement



The previous section explored some of the deepest probes and rewards of Fan Engagement as it ventured deeper into the realm of community engagement and development. In a sense it illuminated some of “the best” of Fan Engagement, but this section will expose some of “the worst”. Although good practice is widespread, bad practice is all too common too, and threatens to tarnish the reputation of football as a whole when it comes to fan and community engagement. To promote best practice and resurrect that reputation, it is necessary to call out bad practice and discourage it. This section will attempt to do that firstly by exposing inauthentic fan and community engagement practices, and then where recent breakdowns of Fan Engagement have resulted in acrimony between clubs and fans.

Inauthentic Fan and Community Engagement

A note of caution; amidst the many authentic efforts for community engagement with fans, not everything is actually as it seems. The Fan-Led Review stated engagement cannot simply be a “tick box” approach by clubs (DCMS, 2021), but sadly it often is. In addition to all the genuinely good work taking place, there are also clubs involved in Fan Engagement who employ “sharp practices”, motivated by other externalities, who sow mistrust and muddy the waters for other clubs’ more sincere community engagement strategies.

Clubs genuinely seeking to engage with their communities are more likely to reap the benefit of effective Community Engagement leading to fan growth anyway, which in turn can support more outreach community activity. But whilst so, there are also many clubs who trumpet initiatives in the name of fan and community engagement (and may be forms of Fan Engagement in their own right; yes), but they may also mask other intentions. Hylton and Totten (Hylton & Totten, 2013b) warn that there are “frauds and imposters out there” who may be involved in engagement with ulterior motives other than to significantly benefit fans and communities! This may be taking place for a variety of reasons but primarily includes; political convenience, commercial strategies, income generation, public relations, marketing, and talent identification.

Inauthentic Fan Engagement

Unfortunately, there are many areas of Fan Engagement that clubs may participate in with neither sincere endeavour nor ambition, and many reasons why that is so. Dialogue with fans can be infrequent with very limited access to senior club staff, fan consultations and surveys can be carried out with indifference to fans' views, and clubs can control the agenda for consideration, and flow of information, in quite minimalistic and untransparent ways. Clubs may be unresponsive, may seek merely to appease or placate fans, limiting and restricting their influence on decisions tightly, especially beyond matchday matters. Fan representation can be tokenistic, controlled by clubs, selection of fan representatives tactical, and undemocratic. FABs and Shadow Boards can be impotent, and Heritage Assets (protected or not) can be commodified, bought and sold, claimed by sponsors or investors.

The motivations behind inauthentic or duplicitous engagements may be that some clubs feel under duress to conform, and are only reluctantly wanting to be seen to be doing the right thing. This may be to promote or maintain brand prestige, or just to comply politically, without intrinsic motivation. Clubs may be unaware of the benefits of effective Fan Engagement, perceive little value in fan involvement, and mistrust ceding power and influence to fans. And for some less scrupulous clubs, naked commercial ambitions may overwhelm all others. So, fans are merely customers to be tempted, matchdays are opening hours, heritage and atmosphere are just other commodities. For such clubs, the only rewards that count from Fan Engagement are financial ones, Transactional Engagement, and there is little interest in non-profitable cultural activities, like improving the fan experience for its own sake. This may create short- or medium-term rewards but often at the expense of long-term sustainability.

Community Engagement for Income Generation

Often, community outreach work by professional football teams is understandably little more than a thinly veiled attempt to convert and recruit more customers. Clubs know, peculiar to sport, that potential "customers", once they define themselves as "fans", have created an affiliation and brand loyalty most likely as customer-for-life. Early recruitment is most profitable, and most Football in the Community schemes are aimed at encouraging more children to play and watch football; to promote closer links between professional football clubs and the local community; to encourage more people to become interested in and support their local club; and to increase attendances. Some clubs adopt schemes which offer free tickets for young people (some from poor backgrounds) to attend games. But, only on condition that they are "accompanied by an adult", who has to pay for their ticket!

Clubs may also portray community or social objectives to engage in partnership with other organisations, and work in disadvantaged areas; which are more likely to attract and receive grant funding or other support. Some areas experience the coming and going of "outsiders", people and organisations, with no discernible impact on deprivation or poverty. Community sport initiatives can seem addicted to grant funding, and a bemused local councillor compared

them to “American storm-chasers” charging around the country (taking pictures of storms and then selling them on) before moving on to the next one, another community, without much local commitment at all (Morgan, 2000).

Community Engagement for Public Relations and Marketing

There are many instances where it is claimed that community sport and community engagement is practised, when in fact it is not. Clubs may hijack the prefix “community” as a flag of convenience because of its perceived “feel-good” value simply to boost their image and corporate identity (Hylton & Totten, 2013b). This has also variously been described as deploying community as “a fashionable label with virtually no recognition that a particular set of practices and values is implied” (Haywood, 1994) and as “often sprayed on purely to lend legitimacy and positive feelings, credence and acceptability” (Plant et al., 1980).

Sometimes fan and community engagement initiatives are marketing exercises intended for brand exposure and product placement. Some community initiatives include corporate sponsorship, and some community outreach teams are housed within clubs’ marketing departments! Clubs and sponsors can boost their profiles and extend customer reach, by vividly displaying their logos, retail and merchandising products in authentic community settings, while the marketing team capture it all on film, for profit not posterity. Fan and community consultation may be treated as no more than a reluctant exercise, seen to be doing the right thing with little or no impact at all; “yes we’ve consulted”, job done, move on.

Community Engagement for Talent Identification

“Football in the Community” schemes can be genuine attempts to extend opportunities to participate in football, and enduring partnerships can be forged with communities, especially amongst underrepresented groups, and in disadvantaged areas. Many of these projects may be more focused on communities than football, but others appear more focused on football and talent identification. Some professional clubs may well go into schools or communities to provide short-term coaching sessions which bring some benefit, but these operations can also be a “Trojan Horse” for talent spotters to infiltrate. These can be one-off opportunities, “snatch-squad” operations, inviting only the most talented for further coaching; hit the community, and run. For others, left behind, opportunity dissolves and exclusion continues; “here’s what you could have had”, now back to normal.

Breakdowns in Fan Engagement

In his foreword to the White Paper, the then Minister for Sport considered the attempt at the creation of a European Super League in 2021, admitting “that it took mass protests and the threat of government action to halt this breakaway was, for me, the clearest indication of just how out of touch many football clubs and their owners have become from their fanbases” (DCMS, 2023). It is quite unusual for a Government Minister to condone mass protests and fan activism, which alas are not uncommon, and mostly reflect an outright failure and absence of effective Fan Engagement; Adversarial Engagement. But disenchantment can signal the beginning of “wakefulness” (Baird, 2010); as fan activism and protest have emerged from discontent, fans believing silence is no longer an option, and are organising themselves for action to express dissent.

Fan activism is an act of last resort and can be considered an aspect of Sport Activism which “advocates or acts for social or political change in sport or through sport” (Totten, 2017). There are different ways that fans can attempt to exercise power and extend their influence, including

- lobbying their club for better services;
- pressing their club or associations for more of a say in decisions;
- mobilising support behind a certain issue in football;
- attempting to exercise influence beyond football, using a fan base, to address social and political issues not confined to football itself.

Historically fan activism has mostly been seen to be on the right side of progressive arguments and social change, including anti-racism, anti-homophobia, greater support for the women's game, and safe policing, stadiums, and standing areas.

Fan Protests

Fans have utilised a variety of means to express their discontent, protest, and campaign for change; a “Methodology of Dissidence” (Totten, 2017). Many fans employ conventional media, including newspaper and fanzine articles, advertisements, flyers, and film documentaries. Many fans also employ newer media, including blogs, discussion forums, social media in general, and online videos can go globally viral. Surveys and petitions can easily be created, and “clicktivism” means results can be distributed more widely and quickly too. More sophisticated use of technology has also led to “guerrilla media” whereby activists produce sources of information to counter mainstream outlets. Some activists are even able to subvert, flood or hack mainstream sources.

Fan activists have organised strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, marches, flash mobs, sit-ins, squatting, occupation, blockades, and their presence at or absence from stadia to draw attention to causes. Some campaigns have involved whistle blowing, shareholder acquisitions, and legal proceedings. And football itself has offered a rich theatre of opportunity for fan

activism, a humorous playground for choreography and performance art, from the terraces or from the seats, for chants or banners, to employ passion, ridicule, parody, satire, irony and symbolism.

Recent History of Fan Activism

Much has been written from the UK about fans exercising their power and engaging in forms of Fan Activism. Brimson's compilation recounts various forms of "rebellion" at ten different clubs from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (Brimson, 2006), and the FSA described the rise of Independent Supporters' Associations (ISAs) in the late 1980s and 1990s, completely independent of their clubs, and who often made skilled use of the media, football phone-ins and the then newly developing internet (FSA, 2021c). Fulham and QPR fans fought a proposed merger, Chester fans fought to save their clubs from rogue owners, and Manchester United fans fought against a Rupert Murdoch buy-out. North and Hodson plot resistance from the early 1990s of Brighton and Hove Albion fans against potential ground relocation. Fans eventually deposed the club chairman, which was described as "effective guerrilla warfare" (North & Hodson, 1997). Also, in the 1990s, Maguire describes how some Charlton fans "were transformed from passive spectators into social activists" in response to ill treatment during their successful campaign over plans for stadium renewal (Maguire, 2005). Those fans took the club's owners to court and won, persuading the judge that it was wrong for the community for a club to be owned by people who could not run it properly (DCMS, 2023).

Enfield Town became the first supporter-owned club in 2001, and other fans exasperated by their own club owners, have led to the growth of Supporters' Trusts; some to pursue club takeovers, and others to establish breakaway clubs. After the original Wimbledon club moved over 60 miles to Milton Keynes and became MK Dons, disgruntled supporters formed AFC Wimbledon in 2002 and started again at the very lowest level of the football pyramid. FC United formed a breakaway from Manchester United in 2005, Ebbsfleet United FC became a fully fan owned club in 2008, and Portsmouth fans took control of their own club from 2013 to 2017.

Millward (2012) examined the emergence in 2008 of the "Spirit of Shankly" Liverpool supporters and how the effectiveness of their campaign targeting financial institutions led to the club being portrayed as a risky investment, and to the owner describing the "militant role (of) internet terrorists" who helped force the sale (Millward, 2012). Here, although a change of ownership occurred, no direct say in governance was gained by fans. Similarly, the "Green and Gold" protests of Manchester United FC fans from 2010 lobbied for a change of ownership rather than a fundamental restructuring between fan and owner control. The limits of this activism could be described as an exercise in consumer choice rather than a fundamental realignment of the fan-club relationship.

In 2013 the FSA launched its own "Twenty's Plenty" campaign (FSA, 2013), arguing for a £20 ceiling on ticket prices. Fans took the streets outside stadiums to protest, journalists flooded newspapers with supportive articles, and questions were even raised in Parliament.

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Significantly, those campaigning on behalf of Liverpool FC fans killed in the 1989 disaster at Hillsborough gained some justice by winning legal disclosures and recourse for investigation into misconduct by public authorities. In 2012 the Hillsborough Independent Panel published its report exposing the police campaign to blame Liverpool fans, which led to a new criminal inquiry, an investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the original inquest verdicts being quashed, a new inquest in 2014, and a verdict of unlawful killing in 2016 (Conn, 2019). In 2021 Bristol City became the first club to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with its supporters' trust, and the Football Supporters Association has celebrated "100 Years of Supporter Activism" (FSA, 2021c).

More recent years have seen continuing high levels of fan unrest and protest at all levels of football. Both in Britain and abroad, these have highlighted how fans are becoming increasingly aware and creative, and are learning from each other, working together and focusing on issues wider than ones only at their specific clubs. Many of these protests are concerned with the ownership of clubs; dissatisfaction with the current owners, slow progress in selling the club to new ones, and concerns over potential buyers.

In some cases, the protest will be directed at specific actual or planned actions by owners such as Reading fans' protest (with support from Wycombe fans) at the planned sale of the club's training ground to Wycombe Wanderers. Recent years also have seen protests against owners, and their perceived neglect of clubs, at Charlton Athletic, Southend United, Coventry City, Morecambe, Blackpool and Blackburn Rovers. Rather than isolated actions, these have been characterised by ongoing and open revolt against owners, often creating an enduring legacy of antagonism between fans and owners.

An increasingly energised fan base is prepared to protest over wider issues in the game such as the proposed European super league, in Germany over foreign owners and the sale of TV rights, and in Norway over the introduction of VAR. In many cases, fans are putting aside any differences they have with other clubs to work together. For examples, fans of Reading, Sheffield Wednesday and West Bromwich Albion (all with concerns with their owners) came together at the end of 2023 to demonstrate in Westminster and at the offices of the EFL for the introduction of an independent football regulator.

In addition, the rise of social media has seen the spread of new forms of protest across football - for example, the action against their owners by Reading fans to throw tennis ball onto the pitch in September 2023 was mirrored by Dortmund fans in February 2024 protesting against further investment in the Bundesliga media rights company.

Re-engaging Fans

Across more than a century, there has been an ebb and flow between clubs and fans contesting the way forwards. In that period football's authorities and clubs have tended to be more dominant than fans in exercising control, but fans have the discretion to consent or resist that control. Football has been a "contested cultural practice" (Totten, 2017) amidst which fans, clubs, and football's governing institutions have jostled for influence and control. Those dynamics of struggle seem perpetual, never completed, continually assembled and reassembled, persuasion secured, undone, and setback. Strong controls, so resistance is muted.

Fans always have the potential to offer resistance, and football clubs and institutions have to work hard from the top-down to secure consent and disarm potentially radical opposition, bottom-up from fans. However, there now seems to be a watershed moment within which enough fans feel alienated from corporate ownership, and the passive consumer spectacle, to seek a more authentic and democratic grassroots-led football culture, and for some; more fan-centred ownership models. Just as Giroux contends that if a society cannot question itself or imagine alternatives (Giroux, 2009); it becomes complicit with the existing order, fans are discontent, winning the arguments, and football is challenged to change. Effective Fan Engagement has an immense role to play in the changes that will occur.

Summarising Ineffective Fan and Community Engagement

Some clubs are enthusiasts and many practise effective Fan Engagement, but ineffective and inauthentic practice is also widespread in fan and community engagement, and some clubs cynical, or conforming under duress. Some clubs and fans directly experience the rewards of effective Fan Engagement, but discontent and antagonistic relationships are also common, and fan protests are also a frequent occurrence. Given such discrepancies in the integrity, application, and range of Fan Engagement in practice, this paper will next importantly consider the complexity of the whole Fan Engagement process, and its quality, through the lens of seven Degrees of Fan Engagement. These will be presented as a means to evaluate policy and practice within a Spectrum of Fan Engagement, which can also be deployed to signpost and incentivise effective Fan Engagement.



Degrees of Engagement: The Spectrum of Fan Engagement

At this point this paper reaches an important juncture and introduces a new concept which will become central to the subsequent analysis of Fan Engagement; The Spectrum of Fan Engagement. Previously, this paper highlighted significant variations in the effectiveness of Fan Engagement practice. These included the extent of its reach, its quality, its depth, and even its integrity and authenticity. This paper also alluded to differing Degrees of Fan Engagement, and a proposition emerged that essentially; the deeper the Degree of Fan Engagement, the deeper the well of sustainable developments, rewards and benefits, that may be on offer for clubs and fans to accrue. This was particularly true when Fan Engagement ventured further toward Community Engagement, Development and Empowerment.

This section will go on to explain and draw distinctions between seven differing Degrees of Fan Engagement, each located hierarchically within The Spectrum of Fan Engagement. The Spectrum and Degrees are presented as a central, and crucial, means to analyse and evaluate Fan Engagement policy and practice. And later in this paper, as a means to monitor and assess policy and practice, which can also be deployed to signpost and incentivise effective Fan Engagement.

The Fan-Led Review (DCMS, 2021) described how Fan Engagement has been practised and accomplished to varying degrees of effectiveness with highly variable standards, and the FSA highlighted a “number of levels” (FSA, 2024a). The Review also pointed to variance in relation to both quantity and quality, and the FSA to varying amounts of “value”. There has not yet been any consensus on what these different levels, standards or values are, or how they are measured or assessed. Fan Engagement can be better or worse, restricted or far-reaching, shallower or deeper, more or less; successful, progressive, beneficial, or sustainable. Different stakeholders may hold different perspectives, and the Fan-Led Review considered a “significant

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gap” between club and supporter perception. Indeed, there is great variance amongst the variables offered!

The FSA (FSA, 2024a) have offered a commendable, neat and accessible “Best Practice Pyramid” which outlines a hierarchy in practice (and will be returned to later in this paper). It illustrates the levels of involvement supporters can have within clubs, and proposes six (each accompanied by SLOs; from club-led engagement, to fan-led advisory boards, to minimum league standards, then (by way of a step through “structured dialogue”) to “FSA Best Practice”, to supporter directors, culminating in supporter ownership.

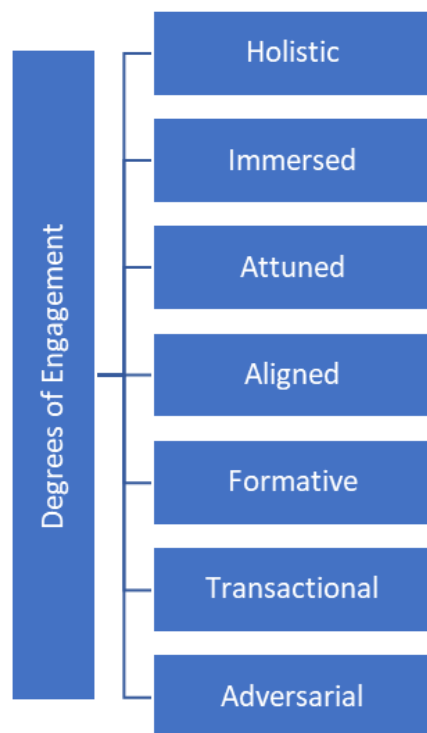
But within it, the measures vary at different levels between dialogue, representation, and governance. This does not reconcile where there may be:

- good dialogue but poor representation;
- good representation but poor dialogue;
- good representation but poor governance;
- good governance but poor representation,
- good dialogue but poor governance;
- or good governance but poor dialogue.

Indeed, Fan Engagement is a slippery and elusive concept to pin down. And that is because it is a process; not restricted only or either to principles, structure, aims, methods, actions, outputs or outcomes, all of which may change or evolve over time.

However imperfect, to distinguish different degrees of Fan Engagement attempts must be made to embrace the complexity of the whole process, variations in how that is carried out, and the quality of whatever manifests. Here is Fair Game’s attempt, which considers seven Degrees of Fan Engagement, which no doubt overlap, accommodate some generalisations, and acknowledge that individual club engagement strategies may operate to differing degrees simultaneously. Nevertheless, the seven Degrees of Engagement propose an overview of the quality of Fan Engagement against which any individual club’s overall efforts can be evaluated toward most typical characteristics. The seven Degrees of Fan Engagement are set out here in Figure 4, from weakest to strongest, least to most effective, hierarchically, within the Spectrum of Fan Engagement. And thereafter are explained further; beginning with “Adversarial Engagement”, then “Transactional”, “Formative”, “Aligned”, “Attuned”, “Immersed”, and finally; “Holistic Engagement”.

Figure 4: The Spectrum of Fan Engagement



Adversarial Engagement

Adversarial Engagement is characterised by a significant conflict in vision and values between club and fans, and maybe hostility toward the club from local communities. The club may claim to be acting in fans' interests, but in reality, is against, and in conflict, with fan opinion. There is also likely significant discontent with club policy expressed widely amongst the fanbase which may result in conflicting or confrontational exchanges between fans and club, and quite possibly fan campaigns or protests directed towards the club. Communications breakdown has occurred, and there is an absence of a functional mechanism for constructive dialogue between club and fans. These conditions reflect the lack of an effective Fan Engagement strategy, or mechanism for fans to communicate with the club.

Transactional Engagement

Transactional Engagement is characterised by a fundamentally commercial relationship between club and fans, and the club perceived as largely remote by local communities. Club communication with fans is largely restricted to customer-relationship strategies including good customer service, marketing, and public relations, essentially focused on income generation. There is a mostly one-way flow of information, from club to fans, largely confined to matchday

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matters. There may be public release on some aspects of wider club policy, operations, and strategic direction, accessible by fans. But the club controls the type and extent of information, and the means of access, without fan consultation, or means for fans to influence the process. Neither is there an obvious mechanism for fans to influence wider strategic policy. There may be significant disconnect in vision and values between club and fans, as the lack of an effective Fan Engagement strategy leaves little potential for an effective mechanism for fans to communicate with the club.

Formative Engagement

Formative Engagement is characterised by embryonic attempts to create a means for Fan Engagement. There may be irregular meetings or surveys conducted by the club with fans, or some other informal and irregular consultation with fans upon aspects of wider club policy whereby opinions are sought. Clubs control the agenda and content of consultations, and retain their own discretion to act on, withdraw or suspend such engagement, and the decision-making process remains unaccountable to fans. This means communication is still mostly a one-way flow of information from clubs, with limited channels for fans' feedback and opinion. In this way fan consultations may become largely gestural, or reactive, whereby fans are placated when their opinions are heard, but they may seldom be acted upon as fans have no direct influence on club policy. The club may also lack an adequate mechanism to assess compliance and delivery of Fan Engagement in line with League standards. All of this means there may still be some disconnect in vision and values between club and fans, and the club may be perceived as mostly remote by local communities.

Aligned Engagement

Aligned Engagement is characterised by Fan Engagement arrangements being in place with regular informal meetings, and additional opportunities for fans to constructively contribute their opinions beyond "football issues" toward club business, financial and policy matters. Fans are consulted, and the club is responsive to their input, but fans have very limited involvement in decisions and the club retains exclusive control of decision making. The club also retains control of Fan Engagement mechanisms, the selection of fan participants in them, and the issues on the agenda. But discussion may include the club's strategic vision, short, medium and long-term plans, proposals relating to club heritage, stadium issues, as well as plans for broader supporter engagement. In this context, club and fans are attempting to align their vision and values, and the club is mostly perceived as a local community asset.

Attuned Engagement

Attuned Engagement is characterised by the club and fans working together enabling fans to be influential in some aspects of policy, operations and financing, and significantly so in some. An established Fan Engagement strategy is in place, preferably underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding concerning fans' contribution in club governance. As such, fans are enabled to participate in a transparent process of club governance and contribute to major decisions being taken within the club, including strategic and commercial matters, and fans may be represented on the club board. Genuine two-way consultation occurs and includes regular scheduled, formal and structured meetings as well as other less formal, distinctive, and alternative means of Fan Engagement. And so, the club and fans are largely aligned in vision and values, and the club is firmly perceived as a local community asset.

Immersed Engagement

Immersed Engagement is characterised by an established Fan Engagement strategy underpinned by legal agreements concerning fans relationship with the club. Agreements may include a Fan Share Scheme, a Right of Veto in certain significant areas of policy interest, full legal representation of fans on the club board, a democratic process for a fan-elected club Director(s) with rights as any other director, or other similar arrangements. These mechanisms ensure fan representation in club governance and decision-making which is representative of the broader fanbase, its diversity, composition and constituencies. Accordingly, the club and its fans work in partnership such that fans are significantly influential in many aspects of policy, operations and financing. Other inclusive, and less formal, opportunities may also exist enabling authentic fan involvement and contributions toward club issues. Club and fans are closely aligned in vision and values, and the club is firmly perceived as an asset immersed in local communities.

Holistic Engagement

Holistic Engagement is characterised by fans having an extensive, or majority, influence upon most club policy, operations, and financing. Proven mechanisms ensure a range of Fan Engagement opportunities, both formal and informal, through which fans are actively involved in both the day to day running of the Club, and in its strategic direction. This enables the club and fans to share the same vision and values, and the club to be firmly established as an asset constructively immersed in local communities. The club's leadership is representative of the broader fanbase, its diversity, composition and constituencies. Fans may also possess club ownership, in part or in full, through a Share Scheme directed through an independent Fan

Trust, or similar body. The Fan Engagement strategy is underpinned by legal agreements embedding fan participation, broadly and democratically, in club governance and decision-making processes.

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement

Ideally all the results of the research, monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of Fan Engagement could be overarchingly housed under one roof. The Spectrum of Fan Engagement does this by gathering the seven Degrees of Fan Engagement along a continuum (as shown in Figure 4), and any given Fan Engagement strategy and its elements can be located at given, or different, points on it. The Spectrum of Fan Engagement might also offer a hierarchy of what is attainable and desirable for effective Fan Engagement. It can be applied to evaluate policy and practice, aid the recognition of achievement, or identify where there is potential for improvement, and promote benefits and rewards. It can signpost and incentivise how more effective Fan Engagement can be embraced, pursued, and realised in practice.

Table 3: Degrees of Engagement in Practice

Degrees of Engagement, and explanation	Examples in Practice
<p>Holistic Engagement Fans have extensive, or majority, influence upon most policy, operations, and financing.</p>	<p>FE strategy is underpinned by legal agreements embedding fan participation, broadly and democratically, in club governance and decision-making processes.</p> <p>Club leadership is representative of the diverse fanbase, its composition and constituencies, and fans may possess club ownership, in part or full, through a Share Scheme directed through an independent Trust, fan body, or similar.</p> <p>Proven mechanisms have ensured a range of engagement opportunities, both formal and informal, through which fans are actively involved in both the day to day running of the club, and in its strategic destiny.</p> <p>Club and fans share same vision and values</p> <p>Club firmly established as an asset constructively immersed in local communities.</p>

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Degrees of Engagement, and explanation	Examples in Practice
<p>Immersed Engagement Club and fans work in partnership such that Fans are significantly influential in many aspects of policy, operations and financing.</p>	<p>An established FE strategy is underpinned by legal agreements concerning fans’ relationship with the Club. Agreements may include a Fan Share Scheme, a Right of Veto in certain significant areas of policy interest, full legal representation of fans on the club Board, a democratic process for a Fan-elected club Director(s) with Rights as any other director, or similar. Mechanisms further ensure fan representation in club governance and decision-making is representative of the diverse fanbase, its composition and constituencies. Other inclusive, and less formal, opportunities also exist enabling authentic fan involvement and contributions toward club issues. Club and fans closely aligned in vision and values Club firmly perceived as an asset immersed in local communities.</p>
<p>Attuned Engagement Club and Fans working together enabling Fans to be influential in aspects of policy, operations and financing, and significantly so in some.</p>	<p>An established FE strategy is in place, underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding concerning fans’ contribution to club governance. Fans are enabled to participate in a transparent process of club governance and contribute to major decisions being taken within the club, including strategic and commercial matters, and may be represented on the club Board. Genuine two-way consultation occurs and includes regular scheduled, formal and structured meetings as well as other less formal, distinctive, and alternative means of engagement. Club and fans largely aligned in vision and values. Club firmly perceived as a local community asset.</p>
<p>Aligned Engagement Fans are consulted, and Clubs are responsive to their input, but Fans have very limited involvement in decisions and Clubs retain exclusive control of decision making.</p>	<p>FE arrangements in place with regular informal meetings and additional opportunities for Fans to constructively contribute their opinions beyond “football issues” toward club business, financial and policy matters. Club retains control of engagement mechanisms, selection of fan participants, and the issues on the agenda, but discussion may include the club’s strategic vision, short, medium and long-term plans, proposals relating to club heritage, stadium issues, as well as plans for broader supporter engagement. Club and fans attempting to align in vision and values. Club mostly perceived as a local community asset.</p>

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Degrees of Engagement, and explanation	Examples in Practice
<p>Formative Engagement A mostly one-way flow of info from Clubs, with limited channels for Fans feedback and opinion. Some informal and irregular consultation with Fans upon aspects of wider Club Policy.</p>	<p>Embryonic attempts to create means for FE. Clubs retain discretion to act upon, withdraw or suspend such engagement. Irregular meetings or surveys conducted by club with fans, and opinions sought. Club controls the agenda and content of consultations, and the decision-making process remains unaccountable to fans. Lack of any mechanism to assess compliance and delivery of FE in line with League standards. Fan consultations may be largely gestural and reactive, Fans placated and their opinions heard, but seldom acted upon as fans have no direct influence on club policy. Some disconnect in vision and values between club and fans. Club perceived as mostly remote from local communities.</p>
<p>Transactional Engagement A fundamentally commercial relationship, and mostly one-way flow of info, from Clubs to Fans, largely confined to matchday matters. No obvious mechanism for Fans to influence wider strategic policy.</p>	<p>Club communication with fans largely restricted to customer service, marketing, and public relations, essentially focused on income generation. Club controls the type and extent of info, and the means of access, without fan consultation or means to influence. Public release upon some aspects of wider club policy, operations, and strategic direction, accessible by fans. Lack of an effective FE strategy, or mechanism for fans to communicate with clubs. Significant disconnect in vision and values between club and fans. Club perceived as largely remote from local community communities.</p>
<p>Adversarial Engagement Absence of a functional mechanism for constructive dialogue between Club and Fans. Communication breakdown. Confrontational exchanges between Fans and Club.</p>	<p>Lack of an effective FE strategy, or mechanism for fans to communicate with clubs. Club claiming to act in fan interest, but in reality, against, and in conflict, with fan opinion. Significant conflict in vision and values between club and fans. Significant discontent with club policy expressed widely amongst the fanbase. Fan campaigns or protests directed towards the club. Hostility toward club from local communities.</p>

Summarising Degrees of Engagement, and the Spectrum of Fan Engagement

This section proposed that the Spectrum of Fan Engagement will become central to the subsequent analysis of Fan Engagement, and distinguished seven Degrees of Engagement within it. The section began by drawing attention to significant variations in the effectiveness of policy and practice, including the extent of its reach, its quality, its depth, and even its integrity and authenticity. It noted that there has not yet been any consensus on different levels, standards or values, or on how they are measured or assessed. It then drew distinctions between seven differing Degrees of Fan Engagement, each located hierarchically within the “Spectrum of Fan Engagement”. The seven degrees were then set out, explained with examples in practice, least to most effective, from; Adversarial, to Transactional, to Formative, to Aligned, to Attuned, to Immersed, and then to Holistic Engagement.

The Spectrum and Degrees were presented as a central, and crucial, means to analyse and evaluate the whole complexity of the Fan Engagement process, in policy and practice, “under one roof”. All Fan Engagement policy and practice can be plotted along a continuum across the spectrum, and further effectiveness signposted and incentivised. Later, this paper will utilise the spectrum and degrees of engagement to address the way forward for future Fan Engagement. But next, this paper will utilise the Spectrum of Fan Engagement pivotally, alongside the seven degrees, and the eleven Tenets too, to conduct an extensive analysis of the current standards of Fan Engagement, and proposals for future too. It will scrutinise the precise nature, quality, and potential effectiveness of contemporary policy and practice.



Fan Engagement; Evaluating the Current State of Play

The current standards of Fan Engagement proposed by football's regulators, being practised at clubs, and experienced by fans, are extremely variable, and range across all seven Degrees of Fan Engagement in different contexts; Adversarial, Transactional, Formative, Aligned, Attuned, Immersed, and Holistic. Individual clubs, and their fans, all find themselves at different stages in their journey along the Fan Engagement process. And whilst it might appear ambitious to comprehensively evaluate the current state of play for Fan Engagement here, this will be conducted through a critical analysis of the current standards of Fan Engagement, and of future proposals too. This analysis is considered in relation to the five key stakeholders, their policies, proposals and positions, and the overall state of play across the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement, and toward the seven Degrees of Fan Engagement across the Spectrum of Fan Engagement.

Current Standards and Proposals for the Regulation of Fan Engagement

A consideration of current standards of Fan Engagement need to encompass how it is currently regulated, and the currency of debate as to how it may be regulated in the near future. This includes the policies, proposals, and positioning of current regulatory bodies, the inevitable emergence of the Independent Football Regulator (IFR), its influence, and also that of key campaigning organisations representing clubs and fans.

All of these can be evaluated against both the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement, and the seven Degrees of Fan Engagement, to reveal the overall disposition and influence of key stakeholders in current standards of Fan Engagement. As it stands, Fan Engagement is

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regulated very lightly, which goes part-way to explaining the great variance in quality and effectiveness at different clubs. However, there has long-been campaigning (notably by the FSA and Fair Game) for regulation to be tightened and Fan Engagement to be improved, and extended. The White Paper has proposed to do so, and the field of play is inevitably changing.

Three bodies currently regulate aspects of Fan Engagement in football; The Football Association (FA), the EPL, and the EFL. As football's lead Governing Body, through its "Rules of the Association", and as "final arbitrator", the FA offers some aspects of heritage protection of high importance to fans; names, crests, and home shirt colours. Clubs may not change their name without FA permission, and clubs must consult fans on proposed changes to club crests or home shirt colours (The FA, 2022). Thereafter, the FA has a limited amount to say on Fan Engagement directly, but what it says, or does not say, is of utmost relevance for Fan Engagement across the whole sport.

The EPL's 'Fan Engagement Standard' (FES) (Premier League, 2023) outlined five clear themes:

- **Leadership and Culture** - setting strategy and a culture of fan engagement;
- **Listening** - to fans;
- **Collaborate and Participate** - a Fan Advisory Board to promote meaningful dialogue;
- **Share** - transparent decisions and information;
- **Learn and Improve** - to develop fan engagement.

And finally, within its Governance Regulations, the EFL, which regulates the vast majority of clubs, all beneath the EPL, advocates that clubs publish a Fan Engagement Plan (FEP) and a Fan Engagement Report each season.

Current Government Proposals to Regulate Fan Engagement

The White Paper considered fans as the most important stakeholder for any football club, and stated that the IFR would ensure all clubs meet "minimum standards of Fan Engagement" as part of clubs' licensing regime (DCMS, 2023). And following it, the Football Governance Bill (UK Parliament, 2024) was published carrying proposals for the statutory for the regulation of football. These included the appointment of an independent IFR, and for minimum standards for effective Fan Engagement to be set across the whole of the male English football pyramid; through a "fan interests" "Threshold Condition" (DCMS, 2023).

The White Paper recognised that clubs were in the best position to understand how to engage with their own supporters, but also stated that the IFR would also work with leagues, the fanbase, and the FSA to facilitate effective fan engagement. It proposed flexibility to suit each club's unique fan base, and stated that many clubs already have structures in place which work well. But it also stated that the IFR would have the power to review structures for engaging fans, make recommendations for improvements, identify any issues, and share best practice across

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clubs. The White Paper stated minimum standards would be set according to a proposed; “fan interests” “Threshold Condition”, designed to improve how clubs engage with their fans, and that the IFR should make its own independent assessment for minimum standards.

The White Paper also indicated that the EPL’s Standard was its own closest point of reference, revealing; “that clubs that comply with these new rules would meet the Regulator’s requirements for fan engagement” (DCMS, 2023). The suitability of EPL Standards for lower league clubs is an important consideration which has been questioned by others, and some feared that the Football Governance Bill might be too onerous for small clubs and perhaps even threaten their survival (BBC, 2024). But also, significantly, and as shortly will be revealed here, the White Paper generally appears to indicate that future standards will mostly be far higher than those currently set by the EPL. All of this demonstrates a strong intent, and potential powers, to ensure effective Fan Engagement, but where the bar should be set remains unclear; exactly to what minimum standards, and how? And if not achieved; what happens?

The White Paper and the subsequent Bill were welcomed by Fan Engagement’s two lead campaigning organisations, “wholeheartedly” by Fair Game (Fair Game, 2024b), and “warmly” by the FSA who declared; “at last!... a means to intervene and stop clubs being run into the ground, protect the heritage of clubs, give supporters a much bigger voice in the running of the game” (FSA, 2024b). But both believed the proposals should go further and not be too constricted by guidance “which does not unduly burden clubs” (DCMS, 2023). And as fans' most significant representative body, the FSA, suggested its view of minimum standards was higher than those proposed in the White Paper and Bill. Similarly, Fair Game, which had significant success influencing Government proposals, identified many areas in which the proposals should go further, and which are “essential for the sustainable and ethical future of English Football” (Fair Game, 2024b).

Evaluating Current Fan Engagement Standards and Proposals

Whilst the Threshold Condition(s) remain somewhat opaque, there needs to be much greater clarity on what minimum standards will be both for Fan Engagement strategies overall, and how these are effectively practised and experienced in the Fan Engagement process. Minimum Standards for Fan Engagement need to capture the whole engagement process, robustly, and with conceptual accuracy. In what follows, the current policy, proposals and positioning, in the Fan-Led Review and White Paper, and of the five key stakeholders in Fan Engagement, will be evaluated sequentially against each of the eleven Tenets of effective Fan Engagement, and in relation to the seven Degrees of Fan Engagement. The five key stakeholders are the FA, the EPL, the EFL, the FSA, and Fair Game. And in the tables that follow Fan Engagement will be abbreviated as FE.

Standards for Ongoing Dialogue

The EPL described effective two-way dialogue as “ensuring a meaningful” relationship, and its Chief Executive stated it was essential to “ensuring fan consultation and regular dialogue is embedded across all policies and practices” (Premier League, 2023). Currently, initiatives offer welcome structures within which dialogue with fans may take place, but they do not directly address the quality of it. This is reflected in the FSA’s description of scepticism from fans, and its emphasis on the importance of establishing clear understanding on all sides, and constructiveness especially during “challenging times” (FSA, 2021b).

Overall, a constructive flow of ongoing two-way dialogue cannot be restricted at some clubs to a possible bi-annual binary of; questions vetted in advance, answers rehearsed and delivered. Proposals for effective ongoing dialogue should go further to create more flexible and dynamic opportunities for constructive fan participation. And the quality of ongoing dialogue would benefit from measures to monitor and evaluate it effectively for clubs and fans.

Table 4: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards for Ongoing Dialogue

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review and White Paper	Requirement for clubs to regularly meet fans to discuss key strategic matters, and other issues of interest to supporters.	Attuned Emphasis on democratic principles.
EPL Policy	Club governance processes to communicate to fanbase. Board-level club official responsible for FE. At least two (board level) FE meetings per season updating plans. Fans' questions and points of concern to be submitted in advance. Core commitments for structured dialogue; (FABs, FE Platforms, and Working Groups). Fan representatives elected, selected or invited in line with basic democratic principles.	Formative / Aligned Formative ; Fan opinions sought. Club retains control of agenda, and discretion to act or not. Dialogue may be gestural, or reactive, fans may be placated, clubs and fans may still not be aligned in vision and values. Aligned ; Formal arrangements in place. May also offer additional informal opportunities. Discussion may venture beyond “football issues” toward club’s strategic vision, business, financial and policy matters.

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
EFL Policy	At least two (board level) FE meetings per season to discuss significant issues relating to the club. Advocate clubs publish Fan Engagement Plan (FEP) and a Fan Engagement Report each season.	Formative Some emphasis on democratic principles.
FA Policy	Limited to some club heritage protections.	Formative Some dialogue with fans upon changes to some Heritage Assets.
FSA Position	Described scepticism from fans and proposes more dialogue now, during “challenging times”. Key principles; independence, accountability, democracy, representation and inclusion.	Attuned Lobbying for greater and more open-access dialogue.
Fair Game Position	Proposals for effective ongoing dialogue to go further to create more flexible and dynamic opportunities for fan participation. Quality of ongoing dialogue assessed to monitor and evaluate effectiveness for clubs and fans.	Attuned Lobbying for greater and more open-access dialogue.

Standards for Transparently Sharing Issues

The White Paper stated clubs “should act as transparently as reasonably practicable” (DCMS, 2023) - but this is the only mention of transparency in the entire 130-page document. More reassuringly, the EPL has set out what a meaningful relationship should be, including Working Groups engaging with fans on an impressive range of topics. However, the FSA has expressed concerns over levels of democracy and transparency and Fair Game has consistently called for a Code of Governance for Football with transparency at its core, which would promote more effective Fan Engagement (Fair Game, 2023a).

Table 5: Policy, Proposals and Positioning -Standards for Transparently Sharing Issues

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review, and White Paper	Clubs should act as transparently as reasonably practicable.	Aligned / Attuned Aligned; focus in the Governance Bill. Extended commentary in the White Paper.
EPL Policy	Fan Engagement Statement within Club Annual Report. Publish Fan Engagement Plan each season; detailing key FE activities, roles and responsibilities of club FE officials, details of FABs, and all club Heritage Assets requiring fan consultation prior to any material amendment. Rationale for key decisions shared transparently, and in in a timely and accurate manner FABs to engage two-way dialogue securing fan’s feedback including; FEPs, Fans Forums, Fan Panels, Fan Surveys, and Working Groups engaging with fans on a range of topics.	Attuned Enabling fans to gain insight into the process of club governance and major decisions, including strategic and commercial matters, but with restrictions
EFL Policy	Advocated clubs publish Fan Engagement Plan and a Fan Engagement Report each season. At least two (board level) FE meetings per season to discuss significant issues relating to the club. But restricted by “contractual, legal and intellectual property obligations”.	Aligned Enabling fans to gain insight into the process of club governance and major decisions, including strategic and commercial matters.
FA Policy	Limited to some club heritage protections.	Formative Transparency for fans with some heritage change proposals

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
FSA Position	Democratic concern that selection of FAB participants can be controlled by clubs rather than by fans. Proposed more transparency over club ownership structures, club finances, and in the roles of SLOs.	Immersed Unrestricted open-access for fans.
Fair Game Position	Proposed a Code of Governance for Football “with transparency at its core”, which would promote more effective Fan Engagement.	Immersed Unrestricted open-access for fans.

Standards for Authentic Consultation

The White Paper described fans as the most important stakeholder for any football club, and that both parties benefit from their involvement in the long-term decision-making process at a club (DCMS, 2023). The EPL stated “It is important that clubs listen to the views of their fans” (Premier League, 2023), and it is perhaps revealing that the EPL even instructs clubs that “Listening” is one of the five key themes for Fan Engagement.

The evidence in the Fan-Led Review and White Paper indicates that current practices are some ways away from Authentic Consultation at many clubs, and that highly variable standards of Fan Engagement (FE) across clubs meant “fans feel they are not consulted as part of the strategic decision-making process at some clubs” and “it is vital the Regulator ensures their views are better heard by clubs” (DCMS, 2023). Effective Fan Engagement requires a commitment to authentic consultation. As the FSA said, this helps clubs and fans build partnerships, understand issues, and make difficult decisions. It acknowledges authentic consultation is an investment that takes time, and “can be a bruising process” (FSA, 2021a).

Table 6: Policy, Proposals and Positioning -Standards for Authentic Consultation

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review, and White Paper	Emphasises clubs actively consult, and listen, to fans, their opinions and concerns. Consultation going beyond limits of matchday issues, encompassing fan views to contribute to the running and strategic direction of clubs.	Attuned Fans are consulted and clubs should respond to their input.

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
EPL Policy	“Fan voices should be heard” in a structured and timely manner to assist clubs making informed decisions on fan facing issues.	Formative Advocate Aligned FE for all clubs, but condone purely Transactional FE at many. Situation reflects “work in progress”.
EFL Policy	At least two (board level) FE meetings per season to discuss significant issues relating to the club. Fans may be consulted, but are not directly involved in decisions.	Formative Advocate Aligned FE for all clubs, but condone purely Transactional FE at many. Situation reflects “work in progress”.
FA Policy	Limited to some club heritage protections, but FA retains decision-making.	Formative Opportunity for fans related to some heritage change proposals.
FSA Position	Proposed greater authenticity, and highlighted “widespread scepticism” amongst fans.	Immersed Democratic consultation process for fans.
Fair Game Position	Proposed greater authenticity.	Immersed Democratic consultation process for fans.

Standards in Valuing Fan Participation

Currently many but not all clubs benefit from valuing fan participation. Both the EPL and the White Paper value fan participation, but both are conspicuously unclear on how to ensure that all clubs do so too. Policy seems limited to some persuasion for clubs to try engaging their fans. And the means to ensure all clubs do so, sometimes appears to appeal to a sense of necessary due diligence, rather than publicising the obvious benefits of effective FE practice to create a more unconditional buy-in. Effectively valuing fan participation is better grounded on a bedrock of genuine curiosity, and a genuine desire from all clubs to engage.

Table 7: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards in Valuing Fan Participation

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review, and White Paper	Commitment to ensuring long-term meaningful engagement with fans.	Aligned White Paper insists on engagement. .
EPL Policy	Commitment to ensuring long-term meaningful engagement with fans and envisage that being built on existing work undertaken by clubs. Asked clubs to commit to fan support and provide resources for fan groups to “encourage enhanced organisation and participation”.	Aligned Aspirations for club and fans working together, enabling fans to be influential in some decisions. But in reality, many clubs operate below that standard.
EFL Policy	None specific.	Formative Aspirations for club and fans working together, but in reality; many clubs operate below that standard.
FA Policy	None specific.	Transactional Only value fan participation in certain heritage-change issues.
FSA Position	Highlighted the valuable insight and perspective that fan participation offers. Propose more recognition of the “reservoir of talent”, good will, and potential effort available to clubs. Committed to “real” engagement as two-way process, not just good public relations.	Holistic FE at centre of club decision-making
Fair Game Position	FE as one of three key core sustainability themes.	Immersed Fans involved in most key decisions

Standards for Trust Building Relationships

Effective Fan Engagement can only be built, and emerge, from more deeply trusting relationships between clubs and fans. However, despite the wariness of many clubs to immerse themselves in Fan Engagement, there is very little offered from football’s regulators on how to build a bridge for more trusting relationships. At some clubs this can become adversarial, potentially poisonous to the fan experience, even create hostility toward the club from local communities, and at worst can jeopardise a club’s sustainability. Trust between clubs and fans is such a precious commodity and has to be earned and built over time. Though some clubs enjoy trusting relationships with their fans, it cannot be taken for granted by others, or assumed that it is just there, or will just happen anyway, and risk it being overlooked in a fog of other priorities. This is an area that football’s regulators should consider more urgently.

Table 8: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards in Trust Building Relationships

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review and White Paper	Recognition of need to build trust and mechanisms to deliver it.	Aligned Warning of impending crisis if trust is not properly addressed, and promotes much stronger FE.
EPL Policy	Information should be shared in “a timely and accurate manner to build trust with fans and inform conversations”.	Formative Hope for trust but not directly addressing issue. Potential for Adversarial engagement at some clubs.
EFL Policy	None specific.	Formative Hope for trust but not directly addressing issue. Potential for Adversarial engagement at some clubs.
FA Policy	None Specific.	Transactional Not obviously considered or pursued.

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
FSA Position	Highlighted wariness and scepticism from fans. More credible investment needed to support trust building and release the benefits from club and fan relationships. Trust fundamentally built by more transparent disclosures by clubs of ownership structures, financial arrangements, and with SLOs to “bridge the gap”.	Immersed Trust building is a key concern. Warning of impending crisis if trust is not properly addressed, and promotes much stronger FE.
Fair Game Position	Recognition of need to build trust and mechanisms to deliver it.	Attuned Warning of impending crisis if trust is not properly addressed, and promote much stronger FE.

Standards of Responsiveness to Fans’ Contributions

In the foreword to the EPL's Fan Engagement Standard, its Chief Executive stated “It is vital we ensure the voices of supporters are not only heard in the stands, but also when it comes to having a say on key issues relating to their clubs” (Premier League, 2023). But fan consultations can be perceived as tokenistic when clubs exert too much control of the process and the decision-making remains too remote from fans. Constricted feedback channels can also mean fan consultations appear largely gestural, or reactive, by clubs.

Effective Fan Engagement is enhanced when fans perceive attentiveness and responsiveness to their contributions. In this respect, the White Paper was stronger on the principle and processes enabling and enhancing fans’ contributions, than on ensuring the responsiveness of clubs to that input. Clubs may lack an adequate mechanism to assess compliance and delivery of Fan Engagement in line with League Standards. The FSA’s recommendations on the transparency of discussions with fans and of the decision-making process are therefore important.

Table 9: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards of Responsiveness to Fans' Contributions

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review and White Paper	Strong on principle and processes enabling fans input, but unclear ensuring the responsiveness of clubs to that input.	Formative Principles yet to be clarified into concrete policy and regulatory mechanisms.
EPL Policy	Principles outline importance that fans' views are heard, that clubs demonstrate they have engaged with fans, and collaborate on fan-facing issues. Clubs may lack an adequate mechanism to assess compliance and delivery of FE in line with League Standards. Clubs may seek fan opinions but not always act on them.	Formative Stronger on principles than in ensuring effective practice, reflecting embryonic attempts, and variable quality of consultations.
EFL Policy	Basic outline for consultation. Clubs may lack an adequate mechanism to assess compliance and delivery FE in line with League Standards. Clubs may seek fan opinions but not always act on them.	Formative Stronger on principles than in ensuring effective practice, reflecting embryonic attempts, and variable quality of consultations.
FA Policy	Fans invited to contribute on some heritage-change issues. No guarantee how effectively their views are considered. Some changes have gone ahead explicitly against the wishes of fans	Adversarial / Transactional Adversarial; When changes have gone ahead explicitly against the wishes of fans. Transactional; As unclear how responsive the FA are to Fans input and when they have been heard.
FSA Position	Proposed demonstrable evidence to alleviate concerns from fans that FE and consultation are more than just raising issues, and hoping they have been heard. Recommend minutes are recorded of all FE meetings, and that decision making is explained alongside how fan views have been taken into account.	Immersed Championing of fan power, and fan rights.

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fair Game Position	Recommended minutes are recorded of all FE meetings, and that decision making is explained alongside how fan views have been taken into account.	Attuned Envisioning partnership working with clubs and fans.

Standards Involving Fans in Decisions

Perhaps on this aspect of Fan Engagement football’s regulators and campaigning organisations are more voluble in their outlook and positions, than in any other. This is particularly true when it comes to football’s Heritage Assets’ and the role of regulators, clubs, and fans in their protection. For that reason, protection of Heritage Assets will be considered firstly here on its own, before moving onto how fans might be involved in decisions otherwise, and more generally.

Involving Fans in Heritage Decisions, specifically

There are differences in position regarding the strength of heritage protection, the degree of fan involvement, on what constitutes a Heritage Asset, and whether it needs protection at all. The FA raises its head more prominently on Heritage Assets than on any other aspect of Fan Engagement. Through its “Rules of the Association ”, it declares provisions to protect registered club names, crests, and home shirt colours, and rules itself as the final arbitrator for any proposed changes (The FA, 2023). On this, the White Paper concurred, but was less clear when it came to the sale or relocation of stadia. Fair Game agreed that the FA’s remit covers “intrinsic representations of a club’s history”, but also believed that same status should apply to a club’s stadia, its current competitions, and the tradition of FA Cup replays. (Fair Game, 2024c).

The existing provisions for the protection of Heritage Assets from the FA and the EPL, and those proposed for the new IFR, receive mixed reviews from fans, the FSA and Fair Game, as they offer mixed messages on protection, leaving fans reliant on the FA to enforce most protections on their behalf. FA rules state that clubs may not change their name without its permission, but without mention of fan involvement. However, the FA stated “Club crests form an important part of the identity of a club and changes can be an emotive issue”, and therefore clubs must conduct a “thorough and extensive” consultation with supporters to establish whether a majority are in favour of a change, and similarly for changes to home shirt colours (The FA, 2023). Fair Game declared this a situation that “needs to be rectified”, calling for more protections for a wider range of club heritage considerations, and for these to ultimately be determined by fans. Amongst other ideas, Fair Game has promoted a majority Fan Right of Veto over such changes, guaranteed in a statutorily regulated “Golden Share” which would offer

fans the final-say on all heritage issues, and that the IFR should ensure those powers of protection are “enshrined...as part of a club's licence” (Fair Game, 2024b).

Table 10: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - involving Fans in Heritage Decisions

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
<p>Fan-Led Review and White Paper,</p>	<p>IFR to implement further protections for fans, including club heritage, and commitment from clubs to consult fans on “material amendment” to a Heritage Asset, including joining breakaway leagues, and the sale or relocation of stadia, as fans “deserve this level of engagement”.</p> <p>Proposed IFR as “regulatory backstop for heritage protection”, not fans, and FA as regulator for changing club’s name.</p> <p>Clubs required to seek “pre-approval” from IFR on the sale or relocation of stadia, that decisions be primarily based on financial considerations, but then also, a remit to consider the views of fans, and implications of a club’s historical connection to its locality.</p>	<p>Attuned</p> <p>Involving fans strongly in most heritage protections decisions, but not all.</p>
<p>EPL Policy</p>	<p>Fan Engagement Plans should provide a list of all Heritage Assets in scope for fan consultation.</p> <p>Fans may be consulted, but are not directly involved in decisions.</p>	<p>Formative</p> <p>Beginning to involve fans more explicitly in heritage issues.</p>
<p>EFL Policy</p>	<p>None specific.</p>	<p>Transactional</p> <p>No direct involvement in heritage issues.</p>
<p>FA Policy</p>	<p>Rules state clubs may not change their name without permission.</p> <p>Fans are invited to contribute on some heritage-change issues and protections.</p>	<p>Formative</p> <p>Fans invited fans to contribute on some heritage-change issues.</p>

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
FSA Position	Proposed “optimum solution” is supporter ownership; a minimum of “50+1%” shareholding in a club, and control of all Heritage Assets.	Holistic Protected by legal agreements, and a Right of Veto for fans in all decisions.
Fair Game Position	Proposed fans have final say over heritage and stadia changes, enshrined in a club’s licence. Proposed compulsory football club corporate governance, including wider protection of all Heritage Assets; to include club’s stadia, current competitions, and FA Cup replay tradition. Proposed a “Golden Share” for fans’ final-say on all heritage issues.	Holistic Protected by legal agreements, and a Right of Veto for fans in all decisions.

Involving Fans in Decisions, Generally

Addressing the leadership, structure, and culture of clubs’ decision-making processes is extremely complex, but effective Fan Engagement compels a consideration of how extensively fans can be involved in decisions. For the EPL, clubs are expected to share; the club’s strategic vision, short, medium and long-term strategy, business performance updates, operational matchday issues, proposals relating to club Heritage Assets, a club’s communities’ strategy, its equality, diversity and inclusion commitments, and plans for broader supporter engagement (Premier League, 2023). Football’s regulators have slightly different views on the decision-making areas in which fans should be involved, but agree that ultimately this is best achieved by consultation.

Fair Game believes a Golden Share would solidify the status of fans as the most important stakeholders, give fans the right to hold their own club to account directly, and engender true Fan Engagement and participation putting fans “firmly at the heart of regulation” (Fair Game, 2023a). And the FSA, as previously outlined, has its own “Best Practice Pyramid” (FSA, 2024a), illustrating six levels of fan involvement in clubs. It states the “optimum solution” is supporter ownership, but it also recognises supporter ownership is not always possible, and recommends that clubs and supporters should aim towards this, and “strive to achieve and participate” in all other levels too.

Table 11: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Involving Fans in Decisions Generally

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review, and White Paper	IFR would seek consultation on key strategic matters, and prior to any change (DCMS 2023). White Paper emphasises collaboration “involving fans in the decision-making process of their club to the benefit of both”. IFR to have “appropriate provisions” to consider the interests of fans on key decisions	Attuned Proposals promote involving fans in most decisions, reflecting FE in most areas.
EPL Policy	Culture of engagement promoted as first FE theme. Board-level official within the FAB, accountable for FE activities. Fans may be consulted, but are not directly involved in decisions.	Aligned Promoting fan involvement indirectly in some decisions, but not others.
EFL Policy	Advocated clubs publish Fan Engagement Plan (FEP) and a Fan Engagement Report each season. Fans may be consulted, but are not directly involved in decisions.	Formative Promoting fan awareness of some decisions, but not direct involvement.
FA Policy	None specific.	Adversarial / Transactional Adversarial; Sometimes proposals and policy are in conflict with the wishes of clubs and fans. Transactional; Fans are seldom directly, or not at all, involved in non-heritage decisions.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
FSA Position	<p>Proposed “Golden Share” for fans, to include control of majority club ownership, and all decision making.</p> <p>Proposed a Right of Veto for fans, enshrined in legal agreements, in most decisions.</p> <p>Advocated, in everyone’s interest, to build “consensual and harmonious” relationships.</p> <p>Proposed “optimum solution” is supporter ownership; a minimum of “50+1%” shareholding in a club.</p>	<p>Holistic</p> <p>Protected by legal agreements, and a Right of Veto for fans in most, or all, decisions.</p>
Fair Game Position	<p>Proposed a compulsory Football Club Corporate Governance Code is “crucial to address the broken culture within our national game”, and must include a commitment to long-term sustainability, FE and equality standards.</p> <p>Proposed the range of football divisions covered by the IFR should be extended and advocate “a culture shift that embeds integrity, clear accountability, and transparency within football’s ecosystem”.</p> <p>Proposed a Right of Veto for fans, enshrined in legal agreements, in many decisions.</p>	<p>Immersed</p> <p>Protected by legal agreements, and a Right of Veto for fans in many decisions</p>

Standards for Democratic Fan Representation

If Fan Engagement is to be effective, Fan Representation needs to be democratic and inclusive at all clubs. Though the White Paper and the EPL both appear to support democratic fan representation in principle, neither are clear how, and to what degree, this is ensured in practice. And even if fan representation is ensured, it could be done in so many ways that are hardly democratic. Many great and powerful institutions operate in ways that are barely democratic, and many more with obvious flaws in their democratic processes. The IFR should consider regulating minimum standards for effective and democratic fan representation.

Consideration must begin at what level fans are represented; from the bottom-up, or from the top-down, from informal fan forums, to board level presence, and ideally at all levels. And even if the level of representation can be settled, consideration needs to be given to how fan representatives are chosen, as all fans cannot reasonably congregate in any one meeting, and if they are to be represented, by whom? The FSA and official fan groups may be an obvious starting point, but there are many fan groups, many fans who may not be part of any recognised ones. Fair Game noted that the “modern landscape of football” requires a strong commitment to inclusivity at all levels, integrating EDI, to reflect the diversity of a fan-base, including otherwise marginalised fans too. And further requires that not only clubs and fan groups comply, but also “leverage the wide range of perspectives for better decision-making and community engagement” (Fair Game, 2024b).

Table 12: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards for Democratic Representation

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review and White Paper	Fan-Led Review clear that “engagement mechanisms” must enable fans to “control the selection of their own representatives” and the issues under consideration (DCMS, 2021).	Aligned Democratic in principle but unclear how, and to what degree, this is ensured in practice.
EPL Policy	Supports democratic fan representation in principle, but not always ensured in practice.	Formative Promoting representation but without ensuring how this occurs democratically.
EFL Policy	None specific.	Transactional No policy or democratic mechanism for participation or selection.
FA Policy	None specific.	Transactional No policy or democratic mechanism for participation or selection.

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
FSA Position	Insist selection is democratic. Fan representatives need strong mandate from other fans, and must be “representative” of broader fanbase, its diversity, composition and constituencies. Supporter Directors should be elected by fans and also represent the wider fanbase. SLOs (as trusted go-betweens) should not also be Directors.	Attuned Fans should be able to select their own representatives. Representatives should reflect wider fanbase.
Fair Game Position	Strong commitment to EDI integrated at all levels. Proposed EDI integrated into regulatory framework to ensure compliance. Representatives to be selected democratically by fans, and “representative” of broader fanbase, its diversity, composition, constituencies, and otherwise marginalised fans.	Holistic Very strong emphasis on inclusive democratic principles, with EDI legally constituted.

Standards for Effective Fan Influence

The EPL stated that “embedding impactful approaches to fan engagement requires effective leadership, accountability and commitment from both clubs and fans” (Premier League, 2023). Effective fan influence can only be evidenced where fans have participated in decision-making and witnessed the impact of their input. And effective Fan Engagement would facilitate the involvement and influence of fans with clubs.

The Fan-Led Review and the White Paper have made a number of proposals for ensuring that fan influence is effective. However, these stop short of giving fans confidence that the full range of their interests will be protected, including heritage issues. A number of key issues and areas of concern remain to be clarified including how:

- the IFR will enforce legal protections for Fan Engagement;
- external oversight, monitoring, evaluation, and regulation will be delivered for mechanisms such as Fan Advisory Boards, and others;
- IFR decisions will be judged, such as those made on stadia sales and relocation.

Table 13: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards for Effective Fan Influence

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review and White Paper	<p>Fan-Led Review stated that FE needs to be underpinned by legal protections “which cannot be pushed aside, withdrawn or suspended if Clubs take exception to criticism”, unclear how IFR will enforce.</p> <p>Proposed IFR as “regulatory backstop for heritage protection”, not fans, and FA as regulator for changing club’s name.</p>	<p>Aligned</p> <p>Proposals to protect some fan interests legally, and consult, but not for fans to decide which.</p>
EPL Policy	<p>Club leaders have responsibility to set appropriate tone, vision and strategy for FE, underpinned by culture of FE and collaboration throughout club.</p> <p>Chair of FABs complete assessment of own effectiveness, and publish findings in FE Statement.</p> <p>No external oversight, monitoring, evaluation, or regulation.</p>	<p>Attuned</p> <p>Encouraging FE strategies, fans to participate in genuine two-way consultation.</p> <p>Fans contribute but do not decide.</p>
EFL Policy	None specific.	<p>Formative</p> <p>Proposals to consult, but not for fans to decide.</p>
FA Policy	None specific.	<p>Transactional</p> <p>Will consult fans on heritage-change issues, no means to ensure effective fan influence.</p>
FSA Position	<p>Proposed fans are incorporated, and constituted, within the democratic governance of clubs.</p> <p>Endorsed “optimum solution” as supporter ownership, a majority shareholding in their club.</p>	<p>Holistic</p> <p>Fans constituted at heart of all club decisions.</p>

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fair Game Position	Proposed fans have final say over heritage and stadia changes, enshrined in a club’s licence. Critical of how decisions requiring IFR approval will be judged, without club or fan influence.	Immersed FE including fan vetoes, and means to acquire Golden Shares in club governance.

Standards for Improvements & Shared Benefits

All the key stakeholders support Improvements and Shared Benefits for clubs and fans through Fan Engagement. The Fan-Led Review stated that fans offer clubs “an extensive resource”, and that clubs welcoming fan participation are able to “draw upon and profit from their valuable expertise” (DCMS, 2021). However, the overall picture described seems to be one in which up until now, some clubs have invested much more than others in Fan Engagement. The EPL (Premier League, 2023) described a “journey” in which some clubs may be further ahead, but for which some clubs may be at a relatively low starting point, still only making embryonic attempts at Fan Engagement. Clubs who have established effective Fan Engagement are beginning to reap rewards with Improvements and Shared Benefits. For other clubs there is encouragement and support to deepen their Fan Engagement, but the potential rewards of Improvements and Shared Benefits are yet to be fully harvested. And further regulation may be necessary to hasten and achieve this.

Table 14: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Standards for Improvements & Shared Benefits

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fan-Led Review and White Paper	Fan-Led Review stated fans offer clubs “an extensive resource”, which clubs can “draw upon and profit from their valuable expertise”. White Paper clear both clubs and fans shared benefits from fans’ involvement in long-term decision-making at clubs.	Attuned Extremely vocal in outlining the benefits on offer.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
EPL Policy	<p>“Learn and Improve” as final FE theme, as “each club and its fanbase are on a journey to enhance existing activities”.</p> <p>Clubs to publish FE Plan.</p> <p>Encouraging and supporting clubs “to enable meaningful and sustainable change” to learn, develop, and evolve FE “in step with good practice”.</p> <p>Provides training for Board-level officials and SLOs, but “encouraged” clubs to train key FE personnel.</p> <p>Values clubs working together “to ensure good practice and learned experiences” shared across League.</p> <p>Clubs to attend minimum two EPL Working Groups to share best practice.</p> <p>Very good intent, but also recognition that some clubs are way behind others, not yet possessing adequate mechanisms in line with EPL standards.</p>	<p>Formative / Aligned</p> <p>Formative; Recognises many clubs only at start of FE process.</p> <p>Aligned;</p> <p>Encouraging improvements and for clubs and fans to align vision and values.</p> <p>Indicative of attempts to move from a Formative to a more Aligned degree of FE, and perhaps beyond.</p>
EFL Policy	None specific.	<p>Formative</p> <p>Good intentions but only the most basic provisions for FE.</p>
FA Policy	None specific.	<p>Transactional</p> <p>No strategy to involve clubs and fans.</p>
FSA Position	<p>Stated FE creates a fan base who feel positive about club, and provides valuable feedback for club business side.</p> <p>Stated FE lends close association for clubs and fans, encourages and strengthens loyalty to benefits clubs.</p>	<p>Immersed</p> <p>Clearly calling for closer relationships between clubs and fans, and sense of mutual interests and benefits.</p>

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
Fair Game Position	Very actively campaigning for stronger FE, and inherent benefits for clubs and fans.	Immersed Clearly calling for closer relationships between clubs and fans, and sense of mutual interests and benefits.

Standards Enhancing Fan Experiences & Club Sustainability

There is little dispute that in principle all the key stakeholders support measures that enhance fans’ experiences and clubs’ sustainability. For the previous themes a range of policies and proposals for effective Fan Engagement (FE) were considered, contrasted, and tabulated, from Government, the EPL, the EFL, the FA, the FSA and Fair Game. But current Standards Enhancing Fan Experiences and Club Sustainability need to be considered differently. In a sense there is no minimum, nor ceiling, expressed for the quality of the fan experience or for the stability of club sustainability, other than they are realised and developed to their full potential. And so, there is little to distinguish the six key stakeholders other than their previously stated ambitions and positions on how this is best achieved.

If robust minimum standards are in place across all the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement, that is almost a guarantee for enhancing fan experiences and club sustainability. The FSA believes that if the right individuals are involved, and a relationship trust has been established, Fan Engagement enhances “the strategy and success of the club” (FSA, 2024a). Ultimately, only fans can describe the quality of their experience and whether it has been enhanced. Attempts to monitor, evaluate, or assess the quality of the fan experience have to involve fans at individual clubs and, by proxy, enable conclusions within leagues and nationally too. And whilst Club Sustainability might consider a club’s current financial or cultural buoyancy, it also requires a gaze into the future. Effective Fan Engagement in all the ways previously described should culminate by Enhancing Fan Experiences and Club Sustainability. And it is tempting here to consider conclusions and the way forward, but that will come later in this paper, and after consideration of the key stakeholders’ current degree of Fan Engagement, overall.

Key Stakeholders' Current Degree of Fan Engagement: Overall

As has been illustrated, different stakeholders can pursue Fan Engagement to differing degrees in different areas. But from the patterning that reveals, it is still valid to discern how their overall current disposition can also be concluded.

Table 15: Policy, Proposals and Positioning - Overall

Body	Overall proposed Degree of Fan Engagement
<p>Fan-Led Review and White Paper</p>	<p>Attuned Proposals within the Fan-Led Review, and White Paper oscillate between Aligned and Attuned Engagement. Not clear yet how that may evolve further in practice, and whether proposals may yet mature to an Immersive Degree of Engagement. Overall, they currently appear mostly at an Attuned degree of Fan Engagement.</p>
<p>EPL Policy</p>	<p>Formative Principles and policies range between Formative, Aligned and Attuned Engagement. This is partly due to the tone of policies, which are stronger on what could or can be done, but weaker on what must be done. Adoption of Standards by clubs appears quite discretionary, as monitoring and assessment seem unreliable, and enforcement avoided, so some clubs remain trapped in Adversarial Engagement, or condoned within Transactional Engagement. Overall, the EPL is never less than, and closest to, Formative Engagement, with wide-ranging policies developed in detail, and elements and aspirations toward deeper Degrees of Engagement.</p>
<p>EFL Policy</p>	<p>Formative Principles and policies range between Transactional, Formative, and Aligned Engagement. This is partly due to the tone of their policies which are stronger on what could or can be done but weaker on what must be done, and notably sparse in detail. Adoption of Standards by clubs appears quite discretionary, as monitoring and assessment seem unreliable, and enforcement avoided, so some clubs remain trapped in Adversarial Engagement, or condoned within Transactional Engagement. The EFL is closest to a Formative Degree of Engagement, and seldom either side of that, despite aspirations for a deeper degree of engagement.</p>

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Body	Policy / Proposals / Positioning	Degree of Fan Engagement
FA Policy	<p>Transactional</p> <p>FA only engages with fans in a few minimalistic ways, fundamentally on some heritage-change issues.</p> <p>FA prefers to focus on grassroots, representative football and FA Cup. Despite some more Formative arrangements, their absence from the broader field of Fan Engagement reflects a Transactional relationship with fans, which can sometimes be Adversarial.</p>	
FSA Position	<p>Immersed</p> <p>FSA's positions are never less than Attuned, and vary from there to Immersed, and Holistic engagement Its overall positioning is mostly Immersed, almost Holistic, as a champion of fan rights and involvement.</p>	
Fair Game Position	<p>Immersed</p> <p>Fair Game's positions are never less than Attuned, and vary to Immersed, and Holistic Engagement.</p> <p>As a progressive campaigner for both clubs and fans, its overall positioning balances strongly as Immersed, with only a few positions either side of that.</p>	

Summarising Fan Engagement: Evaluating the Current State of Play

As stated previously, current standards of Fan Engagement are extremely variable whether assessed by policy, proposal, or practice; league to league, within leagues, club by club, or as experienced by different fan groups. The sector encompasses both the worst and best of Fan Engagement. Football's traditional regulators vary in the depth and detail of their Fan Engagement policies, more attentive to some of the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement than others, and sometimes conspicuous by their absence of interest. The White Paper's claims (DCMS, 2023) that the football authorities have failed to ensure effective Fan Engagement (a position supported by the FSA and Fair Game); that many fans are discontent, and some clubs are in crisis. If this is correct, and we believe it is, the question is then whether current strategies and standards go far enough.

The five key stakeholders vary and range in their outlook across all seven Degrees of Fan Engagement in different contexts; Adversarial, Transactional, Formative, Aligned, Attuned, Immersed, and Holistic. In this regard overall, the FA, EPL, and EFL cannot be seen much further forward than a Formative degree of engagement, whilst the FSA and Fair Game beckon all towards a more Immersed degree of engagement. The White Paper has proposed a more Aligned, and mostly Attuned degree of engagement, and the five key stakeholders have yet to converge towards consensus. But there are questions to answer. For example, the IFR will regulate minimum standards for Fan Engagement, but to which Degree? And over time those minimum standards may shift and deepen Fan Engagement, but to where?

As it stands, Adversarial, Transactional, and Formative degrees of Fan Engagement appear to be below minimum standard for the new IFR. And initially, Immersive and Holistic degrees of engagement appear a step too far to consider, perhaps partly as they threaten the grip on power currently held by some large commercially-orientated clubs. However, both the Fan-Led Review and White Paper often allude to ambitions for more immersed engagement. And other clubs, and fans, might also seek a stronger degree of engagement, so this paper will next consider the way forward, including what a more Immersed degree of minimum standards might look like.



Fan Engagement Addressing the Way Forward



The previous section looked at the current state of Fan Engagement, highly variable standards, and critically evaluated the policy, proposals and practice, of the Fan-Led Review and the White Paper and the five stakeholders across the eleven Tenets, and in relation to the seven Degrees of Fan Engagement, and revealed highly disparate ambitions.

The FA, EPL, and EFL appeared not much further forward than a Formative Degree of Engagement, The White Paper pursued a more Aligned or Attuned Degree, whilst the FSA and Fair Game advocated a more Immersed Degree of Fan Engagement. We highlighted that many clubs and fans might also seek a more Immersed Degree of engagement, and now this paper will consider the way forward, including what a more Immersed Degree of minimum standards might look like.

In this section, we will highlight the importance of extending the franchise for effective engagement, and advocate for minimum standards to be set at an Immersed Degree of Fan Engagement, illustrated across the eleven Tenets. We will then consider the regulation, financing, and incentivising of more effective Fan Engagement, the centrality of the IFR to that, and the importance of the overall financial settlement between the football leagues. Next, we highlight the need for support, for clubs to implement their plans effectively, and equitably. We emphasise the importance of the IFR taking a carrot and stick approach, that both incentives and rewards progress, but takes firmer action where necessary.

We then move to consider how further study might support more effective Fan Engagement, the whole research process, and more specifically how to authenticate good practice, and the value of using multiple methods within an Action Research approach. Finally, we propose the Spectrum of Fan Engagement as an adaptable means for the Holistic Evaluation of Fan Engagement. But before doing this, we highlight the need to look more widely at what, or whom, is covered by the proposals for Fan Engagement.

Extending the Franchise for Effective Fan Engagement

Most often Fan Engagement is contextualised in the home fan experience, but the away supporter's Voice must be heard as clearly. The EFL offered a welcome reminder that it encompasses away fans too, and contemplated "how are the expectations of away fans considered and what can help influence their matchday experience?" (EFL, 2023). It highlighted the role of SLOs as an "ally of the fanbase", to travel with fans away from home offering support from "a reliable friendly face". Effective Fan Engagement needs to encapsulate the away fan's experience, and facilitate a club's own fans' experience at away games.

Equally important, current proposals for the IFR's remit only cover the top five tiers of English men's football, which Fair Game described as "failing to adequately protect the grassroots game", and ignoring large sections of the football pyramid where financial stresses are most severely felt; "clubs that go bust or into administration are nearly always in the lower echelons of the football pyramid" (Fair Game, 2024b). Fair Game recommended secondary legislation for the IFR to expand its remit to oversee all men's professional clubs down to National League North and South (Fair Game, 2024b). And similarly, as the entire women's game has been excluded from the IFR's oversight, it might rightly demand the same protections too. And also excluded, is any contemplation of support for transgender or mixed football.

Setting Standards for Effective Fan Engagement

As previously outlined, the extremely variable current standards of Fan Engagement being practised range across all seven Degrees of Fan Engagement at different clubs. And individual clubs, and their fans, all find themselves at different stages in their journey along the process.

Currently, clubs could be compared to participants in one stage of a cycle race; some have raced ahead individually, many are contained within a long weaving Peloton, and others are left straggling behind. Minimum standards for Fan Engagement should establish a finishing line, and time, for those eligible to enter the next stage, but have not yet clearly done so. So, some riders have already crossed the expected line, the Peloton, as a whole, needs to move forwards with momentum, many riders have to speed up, and some may not make it in time. The regulation of minimum standards for effective Fan Engagement will establish a baseline for successful completion, and a time to do it within. We believe minimum standards should eventually be pursued to an Immersed Degree of Fan Engagement and therefore outline what that might look like next.

The Needs of Clubs

Discussions with clubs (conducted by Fair Game) suggests the transition to required Minimum Standards could be up to three years. This would allow time to address a range of issues, and to develop the training that some clubs will need to develop their capability and understanding. Issues to address include; the legacy of mistrust with fans, finding ways of re-engaging with fan groups that are currently antagonistic towards clubs, establishing the required information to enable fans to make informed decisions, and protecting clubs' commercial interests.

Support needs, in terms of information and training, will vary from club to club but will include help making the first step, addressing mistrust and sustaining progress. The IFR and the football authorities can also help clubs to make the transition smoother by working to minimise reporting requirements, including avoiding overlapping ones. They can also help clubs to think about the progressive steps they need to take year by year and use these to monitor progress.

A more Immersed Degree of Engagement

There may be some way to get Fan Engagement for all clubs to where it needs to be; where its rewards are fully reaped, where clubs and fans are working closely together on the key issues affecting them, where there is widespread trust in the processes, and confidence in delivering results. In the table below, we look at what is required across the eleven Tenets of Effective Fan Engagement, the quality of Fan Engagement sought, and the mechanisms to deliver that, to reach the Immersed Degree of Engagement.

Table 16: Delivering Immersed Engagement

Aspect	Quality of Fan Engagement	Delivery Mechanism
Ongoing Dialogue	Focus on quality and effectiveness, deepening opportunities for mutual understanding, and club-fan partnership working.	Legal agreements ensuring fan representation in club governance and decision-making.
Transparently Sharing Issues	Transparent sharing of information beyond matchday matters to cover all club policy, operations, and finances. Fans participating in Board-level decision-making have same legal rights as any other director.	IFR to establish legal parameters to maximise transparency for fans whilst protecting other legal and commercial sensitivities. Fans and IFR hold clubs to account.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Aspect	Quality of Fan Engagement	Delivery Mechanism
Authentic Consultation	<p>Fan participation and representation in club governance and decision-making welcomed.</p> <p>Fans significantly influential in many aspects of policy, operations, financing and strategic direction of club.</p> <p>Clubs realise extensive resource and valuable expertise of fans.</p>	<p>Legally-established club FE strategies ensuring mechanisms enabling clubs and fans to work in partnership.</p>
Valuing Fan Participation	<p>Clubs and fans closely aligned in vision and values and firmly perceived as assets immersed in local communities.</p>	<p>Fans have veto in certain significant areas of policy interest.</p>
Trust Building Relationships	<p>Clubs and fans understand each other better, nurture an enduring goodwill, and build partnerships with real integrity.</p>	<p>Engagement process underpinned with measures on how to build trust, build on existing trust, and monitor it.</p>
Responsiveness to Fans' Contributions	<p>Transparency in all decision-making.</p> <p>Clubs attentive to fans' views, committed to act on feedback, with demonstrable recognition views have been heard.</p>	<p>Requires minutes of fan consultation meetings, and transparency including fan input in decision-making process.</p>
Involving Fans in Decisions	<p>Fans guaranteed authentic involvement in decisions which affect their interests, as defined by fans, beyond purely matchday and football related matters, to include all club policy, operations, finances, and strategy.</p> <p>Opportunities for fans to experience ongoing authentic involvement, oiling the wheels of fan participation, and contribution.</p>	<p>Legal agreements enable fans to share a stake in club ownership and ensure their representation on club Board.</p>

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

Aspect	Quality of Fan Engagement	Delivery Mechanism
Democratic Fan Representation	Fan-elected representatives in club governance and decision-making, who reflect the broader fanbase, its diversity, composition and constituencies.	Fully democratic process electing fan representatives.
Effective Fan Influence	<p>Fans significantly influential in many aspects of policy, operations and financing, shaping club's strategic direction.</p> <p>Fans encouraged to express their views and exert their influence constructively.</p> <p>Club and fans closely aligned in vision and values, immersed in local communities, and protective of their interests.</p>	<p>Fans legally entitled, and empowered, to participate in decision-making.</p> <p>A Fan Share Scheme, or a Right of Veto in certain significant club policy areas.</p>
Improvements and Shared Benefits	<p>Develop more effective FE strategies that quickly ensure improvements for the mutual benefit of club and fans alike.</p> <p>Fan influence harnessed to help clubs improve policies, operations, and long-term financial security.</p>	<p>IFR to lead process whereby the FA, all Leagues, clubs, FSA, and fans, cooperate, and converge on policies to improve FE.</p> <p>IFR coordinates key stakeholders to share, and promote, evidence of effective FE strategies' role in clubs' prosperity.</p>
Enhancing Fan Experiences and Club Sustainability	<p>Create virtuous processes whereby effective FE strategies enhance Fan Experiences and improve Club Sustainability.</p> <p>Ensure long-term benefits realised by clubs and fans alike.</p>	<p>IFR to exert influence on financial flow in football, to ensure a more equitable distribution of income across football pyramid, which incentivises and rewards clubs with effective FE strategies.</p>

Regulating, Financing and Incentivising Fan Engagement

Regulating Fan Engagement

The IFR will develop measures to assess standards and degrees of effective Fan Engagement. And, as stated earlier here, “Fan Engagement is a process of ongoing dialogue between clubs and fans that enhances the fan experience and contributes to the long-term sustainability of football clubs; through building trust and understanding on issues of shared concern, and by valuing Fan involvement in decision-making, clubs and fans act together towards their mutual benefit”. IFR measures must be sufficiently:

- robust to give accurate insights into Fan Engagement;
- flexible to suit different club contexts;
- generic to enable comparative analysis between clubs.

IFR measures will need to apply over time, to periodically assess, and identify, the change in the quality of Fan Engagement. The IFR, FA, Leagues, clubs, FSA, and fans must work together to establish and accomplish this. Regulators may need to intervene when results signal necessary, and the IFR will offer support for this process, and enforcement when required. The IFR will have powers to regulate football, reward, enforce, and sanction, leagues and clubs, with the power to act if there is a “persistent and wilful lack of engagement” by a club, in breach of its licence, for which a range of options will become available (DCMS, 2023). Fair Game has asked for clarification on the IFR's enforcement powers “to avoid rendering it toothless except in extreme circumstances, and to make it clear to fans and clubs what the consequences are for transgressions” (Fair Game, 2024b).

Minimum standards for effective Fan Engagement should:

- extend, deepen, improve, reward progress, and harmonise progression;
- incentivise progress, using both carrot and stick, but always carrot first.

At the same time, regulatory “tough love” may be required to challenge avoidance and incentivise all leagues and clubs to get serious on Fan Engagement, in their own best interests. Some clubs may need more support to transition than others, ultimately some may need to be sanctioned for over-complacency, and, as a last resort, some clubs’ owners may have their operating licences suspended, or lost, for non-compliance. In such last-ditch circumstances, funds could be also ringfenced to enable clubs to operate “under special measures”, and to enable fan buy-outs. In taking this forward, the IFR must have teeth, and be brave, to act righteously in all regards, including the pursuit of minimum standards of effective Fan Engagement.

Financing Fan Engagement

Football is a very wealthy sport, and the flow of income going into the football pyramid in season 2022/23 was estimated at £3.19bn (Fair Game, 2024b), but the inequalities inherent in the current financial distribution within the football pyramid cannot be ignored. The IFR will potentially referee a financial settlement to be reached between the EPL and the EFL, and the distribution of income across leagues and clubs will have a massive impact on all aspects of football. Whatever the outcome of this, it will have a knock-on impact for clubs investing in effective Fan Engagement.

Fair Game has been clear there must not be any extra financial burden on clubs lower down the pyramid, particularly those already struggling to survive, and the resources available for support will be vital in ensuring that all clubs have equitable potential for effective Fan Engagement (Fair Game, 2024b). Support and funding, provided by the IFR, must be ring-fenced to provide training, and enable collaborative interventions. Fair Game has also consistently argued that Fan Engagement “money goes to well-run clubs” (Fair Game, 2024b). High and early achievement by clubs can be rewarded, and funding set aside ensuring research and development occurs to support, and share, best practice for effective Fan Engagement.

Incentivising Fan Engagement

One way to incentivise effective Fan Engagement might be through incremental funding based on performance. What follows is purely illustrative and not intended as any properly costed proposal. Once a settlement is reached for financial distribution in football at different levels, it could be that say 5% (just for instance) of distribution is set aside purely for Fan Engagement. Every club could access the first 1% ring-fenced for Fan Engagement, and produce a Fan Engagement report as an account for the legitimacy of that spending.

Clubs judged to be at Adversarial or Transactional Degrees of Engagement would receive no more of that funding, but the remaining 4% could be set aside as matched funding toward an approved Fan Share buy scheme. But Clubs attaining an assessment at a Formative Degree of Engagement would receive 2%, with only 3% set aside for a Fan Share scheme. And so on, such that clubs would receive incremental 1% at each subsequent Degree of Engagement assessed; So, 3% for clubs assessed as Aligned with 2% set aside, 4% for those Attuned with 1% set aside, and the whole 5% for those assessed as successfully Immersed in Fan Engagement, or Holistically so.

Further Study to support Effective Fan Engagement

Research into Fan Engagement may be carried out in an almost infinite number of ways depending on what is being sought, and how. A fuller examination of this is contained in Appendix 1; a short paper titled "Studying Fan Engagement: The Way Forward" (Totten, 2024), which looks in more detail at key principles and various approaches for conducting research in this area.

The Focus of Fan Engagement Research

Fundamentally, as Fan Engagement is a process, that dynamic distinctly shapes the approaches that may be taken. Researching and evaluating an ongoing process is complex as it may comprise many elements, and be in a state of change or flux. And as a key element is dialogue, it necessitates accommodating a range of perspectives and contributions from amongst others; clubs and fans. Further, evaluating that process needs to bridge outcomes that may enhance the fan experience, or contribute to the sustainability of clubs, or do both. We begin by considering the purpose of further study:

- developing the evidence base to identify the benefits of further Fan Engagement for clubs and fans;
- assessing the quality of policy and practice, identifying examples of good and bad practice;
- sharing examples of best practice with interested stakeholders (not least clubs and fans);
- publicising specific aspects of best practice that might be more universally transferable, or applicable, to other contexts.

In addition, analysing the means and process by which Fan Engagement is achieved involves consideration of some important but opaque terms (which could extend to incorporate consideration of any or all of the eleven Tenets):

- How well have trust and understanding been built?
- And on which issues of shared concern?
- How highly are fans valued
- To what extent are fans involved?
- And in which decisions?
- How well are clubs and fans acting together?
- And to what extent towards their mutual benefit?

The Fan Engagement Research Process

Fundamentally, a Fan Engagement research process has to be rigorous and start firstly with what exactly needs to be known, before trying to establish the best direction forwards to method, and in what context(s) is the inquiry rooted, broadly or specifically:

- start by identifying what the study is focused on and for which audience;
- consider whether it is looking at Fan Engagement broadly (macroscopic) or at more specific issues (microscopic);
- use a wide range of official and unofficial, formal and informal sources (further detailed in appendix1);
- tailor the research approach(es) being clear on whether the study is monitoring, evaluating or assessing Fan Engagement;
- consider approaches which combine elements of each of the above, including innovative approaches;
- create study samples (of clubs, fans etc) ensuring they are representative of the field;
- analyse findings rigorously and critically before drawing conclusions or recommendations;
- disseminate findings strategically, and engage with those who may be implementing conclusions and recommendations, or be impacted by them, to test them.

Analysis of Fan Engagement

Analysis might consider the extent to which:

- Fan Engagement is regarded as effective by fans at specific clubs, or generally;
- proven mechanisms have ensured a range of engagement opportunities through which fans are actively involved in both the day to day running of the club, and in its strategic direction;
- genuine two-way consultation occurs and includes regular scheduled, formal and structured meetings as well as other less formal, distinctive, and alternative means of Fan Engagement;
- club governance is a transparent process sharing short, medium and long-term plans and proposals accessible by fans;
- engagement opportunities enable authentic fan involvement and contributions toward club policy including those relating to the club's strategic vision, commercial matters, club heritage and stadium issues, and plans for further Fan Engagement;
- a Fan Engagement strategy is underpinned by legal agreements embedding fan participation, broadly and democratically, in club governance and decision-making processes;
- fans may possess club ownership, in part or full, through a Share Scheme directed through an independent Trust, fan body, or similar.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

- there is legal representation of fans on the club board, a democratic process for a fan-elected club Director(s) with rights as any other director, a fan Right of Veto in certain significant areas of policy interest, or similar;
- club and fan leadership are representative of the diverse fanbase, its composition and constituencies.

Authenticating Fan Engagement in Practice

If claims are made that effective Fan Engagement is taking place, they need to be verified. Reports and research can often appear remote from reality, sometimes as second-hand commentary from those “who briefly met the natives” (Totten, 2011), but equally studies that rely too much on anecdotal evidence can lack credibility, without objective substantiation. And so, there are limitations to a stark choice purely between either an insider or outsider gaze, neither of which offer the whole story on their own.

The real and potential benefits of Fan Engagement may be missed by conventional research, monitoring and evaluation techniques. But, to evaluate Fan Engagement in practice, there is a particular value in direct testimony from clubs and fans immersed in the process, who have “lived the experience” (Partington & Totten, 2011), and seek to benefit from it. It is imperative that their understanding, and authentic experiences, form part of the insight into effective Fan Engagement, to get “under the skin”, and allow the collection of rich, insightful data.

Fan Engagement using Multiple Methods

Given the inherent complexity of researching the Fan Engagement process, the many different methods available, and the relative merits of each, a multi-method approach is the most desirable one to be taken. It allows the triangulation of data, both macroscopically and microscopically, a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods for statistical indicators to be further illuminated more authentically, in practice.

A multi-method approach also lends agility to draw from a versatile toolkit of ideas and methods to capitalise on the circumstances encountered. Key methods to utilise within such a research strategy might include documentary evidence, media and social media analysis, surveys, focus groups, expert panels, interviews, observation and case studies. And there is also a need to examine the potential of using longitudinal studies focused on specific cases.

Fan Engagement as Action Research

An Action Research approach aims not just to know what is going on, but to understand and explain it, with a view to enhancing Fan Engagement in the future. Action Research follows a cyclical process, whereby study findings are subsequently acted upon, and integrated into future practice, to ensure improvements and benefits for both clubs and fans. Research can promote Fan Engagement itself, and as a campaigning organisation Fair Game embraces this position. It seeks to delve deeper, to understand relationships affecting Fan Engagement, to test ideas and see them put them into practice. Action Research has the potential to empower clubs and fans to have their opinions, thoughts and experiences acted upon.

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement as Holistic Evaluation Tool

Ideally and holistically all the results of the research, monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of Fan Engagement could be housed under one roof. We introduced the Spectrum of Fan Engagement earlier as a way to do this, and here we demonstrate how it can be adapted and utilised, as a one-stop holistic universal tool, to evaluate and assess standards of Fan Engagement. This could apply in any context, not least the Fair Game Index. The Index has evolved from a measure in 2023 that was based mainly on the processes clubs follow in Fan Engagement to one in 2024 which had a much greater focus on how clubs involved fans in decisions and responded to their input. We are proposing to develop this further in 2025 to look at where clubs are positioned across the Spectrum of Fan Engagement.

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement offers a hierarchy of what is attainable and desirable for effective Fan Engagement. Any given Fan Engagement strategy and its elements can be located at given, or different, points on the spectrum. It recognises and rewards achievement and incentivises clear areas for improvement. It embraces, promotes and signposts how effective Fan Engagement can be pursued and realised in practice; a way forward.

The table below also shows how notional scores could be assigned to the Degrees of Engagement, which can be further characterised, and related to examples in practice, and how they may also be related to indicators and evidence. At this stage, these are purely illustrative scores as we develop the concept of the Spectrum of Fan Engagement and test it with clubs.

Table 17: Spectrum of Fan Engagement and Fair Game Index

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement (As previously explained, with examples in practice)		
Index Scores	Degrees of Fan Engagement	Indicators and Evidence
20 19 18	Holistic Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of legal agreements, ownership and share Rights, the wider Fan Engagement Strategy, and of all formal club-fan meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, Fan Group statements and Testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
17 16 15	Immersed Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of legal agreements upon Fan Rights and Representation, of a Fan Engagement Strategy, and of all formal meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, Fan Group statements and Testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
14 13 12	Attuned Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of any Memorandum of Understanding and other agreements between clubs and fans, of a Fan Engagement strategy, of Fan Representation, and of all formal meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, Fan Group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
11 10 9	Aligned Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of a Fan Engagement strategy, and of all formal meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, Fan Group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement (As previously explained, with examples in practice)		
8 7 6	Formative Engagement	<p>Transparent reports of Board meetings, and of Fan Engagement activity including public meetings with supporters' trusts, independent fan groups, fan forums, or other groups of fan representatives.</p> <p>Reports of other Fan Engagement measures including the creation of a FAB or Shadow Board with access to club Directors and senior staff, the appointment of a SLO in a stand-alone role, or similar.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
5 4 3	Transactional Engagement	<p>Fan survey and testimony.</p> <p>AGM attendance, public meetings and fan forums with access to club Directors and senior staff. Other mechanisms courting Fans views. Appointment of a club SLO.</p> <p>Club statements, press releases and publication of some meetings, accounts, business performance, or policy. No obvious mechanism for fans to respond or influence process.</p> <p>Publication of club policy. Absence of any mechanism for Fan Engagement beyond customer relations.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
2 1 0	Adversarial Engagement	<p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>

Summary of Fan Engagement - Addressing the Way Forward

In this section, we have highlighted the importance of extending the franchise for effective engagement to be more inclusive. We outlined the variable standards of current practice, and advocated ambitions for minimum standards of Fan Engagement to be set at an Immersed Degree. We illustrated what this would mean in practice across the eleven Tenets, in terms of the quality of Fan Engagement and delivery mechanisms.

We then considered the regulating, financing, and incentivising of more effective Fan Engagement, the roles that various key bodies need to play, the centrality of the IFR to that, and the importance of the overall financial settlement between the football leagues. We highlighted the need for financial support, and more, to enable clubs to implement their plans effectively, and equitably. We also emphasised the importance of the IFR taking a carrot and stick approach, involving both incentives and rewarding progress, but taking firmer action where necessary. And we laid out a view of how that could be incentivised through graduated funding.

Next, we considered how further study might support more effective Fan Engagement, the focus, process, and analysis of research. We then considered how to authenticate good practice and the value of using multiple methods, within an Action Research approach. Finally, we offered the Spectrum of Fan Engagement as a means for the Holistic Evaluation of Fan Engagement. And next we conclude our findings and offer 11 Recommendations in the way forward for effective Fan Engagement.



Summary and Recommendations for Effective Fan Engagement



Previously within this paper, various sources have warned of a potential crisis in sustainability that threatens the very existence of many clubs across the entire English football pyramid. The White Paper described “underlying fragilities”, precariousness, and a “dangerous trajectory” (DCMS, 2023), and the FSA highlighted widespread mistrust and discontent amongst fans (FSA, 2021c). And yet, Baird reminded us that disenchantment can signal the beginning of “wakefulness” as English Football finds itself at just such a juncture (Baird, 2010). The creation of the IFR offers an opportunity to “protect a beloved part of our national fabric”, ensure clubs are “financially resilient”, and restore fans’ “rightful place at the heart of our national game” (DCMS, 2023). Fair Game and others have long argued, and research has shown, that the long-term sustainability of a club is directly linked to effective Fan Engagement (Fair Game, 2021a). And here, in the final section of this paper we set out our own clarion call of how that can best be achieved.

This paper conducted a thorough review of Fan Engagement, based on a review of academic literature, the experiences of fans and fan groups, what clubs are doing and how they measure against what Fair Game has identified as the required standard. It has also looked at how the Fan-Led Review and the White Paper has sought to address this, as well as the policies, practices and positioning of the five key stakeholders. We have drawn on these sources to:

- develop a shared understanding of what Fan Engagement means;
- Identify the benefits that it offers clubs, fans, and communities;
- analyse how Fan Engagement is currently carried out in practice;
- evaluate the current state of play for policy and practice
- set out proposals for a way forward to more immersed Fan Engagement.

Understanding Effective Fan Engagement

We now conclude by summarising our approach, then our key findings, before offering our eleven Recommendations for more effective Fan Engagement. In so doing, we also implicitly cover the following areas:

- improving relationships between clubs and fans;
- the necessity for a more equitable financial settlement across football;
- why minimum standards should be set at an Immersed Degree of Fan Engagement;
- the need for clubs to be supported as they transition to the required standard;
- how minimum standards need to be incentivised and enforced.

Our approach in summary

Firstly, we clarified exactly what Fan Engagement is:

- situating it in contemporary context, including regulatory changes;
- outlining the principles of 11 Tenets of Fan Engagement;
- proposing a universal definition, which looked beyond matchdays to the whole range of issues on which clubs and fans need to work together;
- highlighting the importance of a clear and shared definition that enables all the key parties to work together on joined-up policy, practice, and research;
- Illustrating 3 Virtuous Cycles and benefits of Fan Engagement, including those offered through the Match Spectacle, the direct link between “Improvements and Shared Benefits” and “Enhancing Fan experiences and Club Sustainability”, and the “Circle of Fan Engagement” around the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement.

Secondly, we looked at Fan Engagement in Practice, and situated that as part of a broader Community Engagement process:

- populating current examples of practice at clubs within six overlapping processes - Flexible, Cultural, Matchday, Communication, Planned, and Legal;
- exploring further benefits for clubs, fans, and communities, including rebuilding a sense of community;
- considering the principles and processes of Community Engagement and Community Development (including Empowerment, Building Social Capital, Capacity, and Networks, and also as Transformative Community Action), and how they relate to Fan Engagement;
- revealing ineffective and inauthentic practice, and breakdowns in Fan and Community Engagement, amidst more sincere and effective practice.

Thirdly, we looked at differing Degrees of Engagement, and The Spectrum of Fan Engagement:

- placing the Spectrum of Fan Engagement at the epicentre of the analysis, monitoring, evaluation and assessment of Fan Engagement;
- evaluating policy and practice in the light of the seven deepening Degrees of Fan Engagement; Adversarial, Transactional, Formative, Aligned, Attuned, Immersed, and Holistic;
- presenting these Degrees along the Spectrum of Fan Engagement, along a continuum, offering a hierarchy of what is attainable and desirable.

Fourth, we evaluated the current State of Play for Fan Engagement:

- revealing widespread extremely variable standards;
- considering proposals for the regulation of standards for effective Fan Engagement;
- using the eleven Tenets and seven Degrees of Fan Engagement, we reviewed the current policy, proposals, and practice of the Fan-Led Review and White Paper and Fan Engagement's five key stakeholders - the FA, EPL and EFL and the FSA and Fair Game.

Fifth, we set out to address the Way Forward for Fan Engagement:

- extending the franchise for more widespread and inclusive policy;
- setting standards at a more Immersed Degree of Engagement;
- regulating, financing, and incentivising developments;
- furthering study to support effective professional practice;
- utilising the Spectrum of Fan Engagement as a holistic tool to evaluate effective practice;
- considering the role of fans, clubs, regulators and researchers, in getting there.

Our key findings in summary

Fan Engagement is key to fixing football's problems

- The Fan-Led Review and the subsequent White Paper have recognised many of the problems facing football and proposed solutions to it, including the key role that significantly raising the standard of Fan Engagement should play in this.
- But it must be part of a key part of a package of reforms that address other key issues such as the financial distribution, ownership and governance and protection of Heritage Assets.
- Engaging effectively with fans is critical if clubs are to be sustainable.
- Fans must be part of how the solutions to fix football are designed and delivered.

Fan Engagement is Broad and Deep

- The Paper sets out our eleven Tenets of Effective Fan Engagement based on:
 - laying the right foundations** - ongoing dialogue, transparency, trust, valuing authentic fan consultation;
 - working with fans** - representatively involving fans, responsibly and responsively;
 - delivering results** - influence, improvements and benefits, sustainability and experience.
- Our definition of Fan Engagement reflects the White Paper's aim that 'fans have a greater voice; that owners are fit to become temporary stewards of these long-lasting community institutions; and that clubs operate in a financially sustainable way'.
- We define Fan Engagement as a process of ongoing dialogue between clubs and fans that enhances the fan experience; and contributes to the long-term sustainability of football clubs; through building trust and understanding on issues of shared concern; and by valuing fan involvement in decision making clubs and fans act together towards their mutual benefit.
- Fan Engagement should extend well beyond matchday experiences to include discussions on strategy, policy, operations and finance.
- Club Boards should make decisions that are in line with their clubs' heritage and culture.

Effective Engagement can deliver significant benefits

- Effective Fan Engagement can deliver significant benefits, particularly when allied with taking action in the community through Community Engagement and Development.
- Football has a status, power and appeal that reaches beyond most sports, and the involvement of a professional club embedded in local community outreach work can excite interest in a way that other organisations simply cannot.
- It can deliver benefits in areas such as cultivating a sense of fan community, including that centred around club heritage.
- Participating in networks and activities related to Fan Engagement can be an empowering experience for fans and grow their social capital - their connections and their access to information, resources and people that can support each other.
- It can generate virtuous cycles where the benefits to clubs and fans reinforce each other. For example, effective Fan Engagement creates more highly engaged fans, improving the match atmosphere, growing attendances and increasing club income. More of this income can then be assigned to create more effective Fan Engagement, creating more highly engaged fans, who improve the atmosphere, and so on.

Fan Engagement approaches are highly variable

- Fan Engagement, as practised by clubs, seeks to address a wide range of issues, including the culture of how fans feel about and interact with clubs, matchday experiences, communication, club governance, legal arrangements including protection of Heritage Assets.
- Clubs employ a huge variety of approaches and there are many examples of them delivering significant benefits for fans and clubs. Our research does not advocate for any particular approach over any other - the key issue is the Degree of Fan Engagement.
- The paper sets out a Spectrum of Fan Engagement, ranging from Adversarial and then Transactional at one end to Immersed and Holistic at the other and outlines the characteristics of what they would look like in practice.

The Way Forward requires raising current highly variable standards

- Throughout football's history, including today, there have been many examples where Fan Engagement has been inauthentic and counterproductive and where relationships between clubs and fans have broken down.
- The Fan-Led Review and the White Paper, and others, have recognised that fans must be at heart of fixing the problems that football faces and need for significant improvement in the standards of Fan Engagement.
- Regulatory proposals have set a generally high level of ambition for Fan Engagement which we characterise as currently Attuned, but with ambitions to progress further.
- Fair Game believes that the Independent Football Regulator can and should aim for a higher Immersed Degree of Fan Engagement and develop a plan to secure a swift transition to this. The FSA's comments and proposals suggest that its ambition is at a similar level.
- This ambition is some way ahead of the FA, the EPL and EFL which tend to be at the Formative Level, though the latter two have committed to a series of concrete actions. And existing FA rules to protect heritage assets are an important part of the picture.
- Given the scale of the challenge in raising standards of Fan Engagement, the financial settlement between the EPL and the EFL will be critical in providing clubs further down the football pyramid with the resources needed to do this.
- Getting to the required standard will also require a combination of support (information, sharing of best practice, education and training), incentives and, in some circumstances, sanctions.
- There are also key issues to address in terms of stronger protections of Heritage Assets and securing legal protections for fan involvement in clubs

Fair Game has the opportunity to play an important role:

- helping clubs to raise their standards of Fan Engagement;
- engaging with clubs on what the eleven Tenets of Fan Engagement should mean in practice;
- working with clubs to identify the right areas of support to help them raise their level of Fan Engagement and to create the incentives to reward clubs that are making progress;
- following up with relevant stakeholders on delivering the eleven recommendations, including planning further research, looking at examples and models that have worked well and what they have achieved.

In Conclusion

Fair Game will continue to campaign and lobby, with others, to champion the most effective Fan Engagement, and for the imperative to take action now. As previously stated, in rallying for these causes, the FSA declared; “Supporters have never had a better chance to raise their voice and ensure they are heard on critical issues related to the running and ownership of their clubs” (FSA, 2024a). And Clubs may never have a better opportunity to engage fans to improve their long-term sustainability. This paper has set out the case for more effective Fan Engagement expansively, and now concludes by bringing this together with our eleven recommendations for football’s regulators, clubs, the future study and exploration of the field, and for fans too.

Our 11 Recommendations for more Effective Fan Engagement Explained

For Regulators (IRF, FA, EPL, and EFL)

1. **Be Ambitious** - The greater the depth of Fan Engagement, the greater sustainable and potential rewards to be realised for clubs and fans. Minimum Standards should be forward- looking, and set at an Immersed Degree of Engagement for the near future.
2. **Converge Policy** - All four of Football's key bodies (IRF, FA, EPL, and EFL) should work together to seamlessly converge the regulatory landscape for Fan Engagement. Robust and universal Immersed Minimum Standards should be set, integrated, enabled, and enforced by all four bodies. This should include establishing clear, robust, and enforceable protocols for when a club's non-compliance may leave it in breach of its operating licence.
3. **Support Clubs** – All clubs should be supported and incentivised to rapidly transition toward an Immersed Degree of Fan Engagement, within a realistic period of good grace. Progressive stepping-stones should be rewarded, and carrot and stick mechanisms should include the supply of resources, training, expertise and advice, but sanction firmly as a last resort.
4. **Empower Fans** – Fans should be legally guaranteed a real voice in club decision-making and strategic direction. A Right of Veto should apply in some areas, including an extended cultural capture of what constitutes Heritage Assets.
5. **Assess Progress** - Minimum Standards for an Immersed Degree of Engagement should be allied to accurate measures which monitor, evaluate, and assess achievement, and indicate where further progress can be made. Measures should be universal enough to enable comparison from club to club, but flexible enough to recognise and encourage bespoke initiatives at different clubs.

For Clubs

6. **Seize Initiative** – Minimum Standards for effective Fan Engagement are coming, and will be set beyond existing ones, not least by the IFR. Clubs should plan ahead, get ready, and get going quickly, to seize the initiative on this, and will be better prepared, and benefit more greatly, when Standards are eventually set.
7. **Collaborate** – Clubs should collaborate with their fans to devise and develop their Fan Engagement strategies and plans, openly and transparently, inclusively and democratically, and above all authentically. Clubs should also collaborate with other clubs to seek support, and work together to identify what works best, and share best practice.

For Study and Exploration

8. **Be Robust** – Regulators, clubs, and the research community should explore and build robust universal measures to monitor, evaluate and assess effective Fan Engagement. In particular, qualitative measures should be developed, to enhance fan input into research, and applied to capture qualitative aspects of the Fan Engagement process, and authentic perceptions of the fan experience.
9. **Share Ideas** – Propositions on the benefits of Fan Engagement should be tested and shared, to establish and substantiate what actually works well, to develop professional practice, and to spread and deepen the benefits more effectively. As Fan Engagement is still a relatively, and very much, emergent field of inquiry, but a growing one too, findings and evidence should be shared to develop a conventional wisdom of what works best.

For Fans

10. **Grasp Opportunity** – As the establishment of the IFR offers a generational opportunity, fans should get ready to exploit this chance to maximise their involvement. Fans and fan groups should prepare, get organised, and campaign, to shape and define thresholds for Fan Engagement.
11. **Spearhead Leadership** – Fan groups should intensify their efforts to clarify, establish, and position, joined-up proposals to promote their involvement and protect their interests. The FSA should continue to offer leadership, to quicken a coordinated mobilisation of fan groups, to advocate and lobby in their best interests.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE FAN ENGAGEMENT



Appendix 1: Studying Fan Engagement; The Way Forward,

By Mick Totten (June, 2024).

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore how best to study Fan Engagement, and reveal its effective practice. It begins by considering what the focus of research should be, and how that has previously been considered within the Fair Game Index. A way forward considers the Fan Engagement research process, its components, and how to form conclusions and disseminate findings. A Fan Engagement research methodology will evaluate quantitative and qualitative methods, indicators and evidence, to authenticate Fan Engagement in practice. The paper concludes the way forward to study Fan Engagement should utilise multiple methods, including more qualitative ones, to promote Action Research, and improve professional practice. Finally, it proposes the Spectrum of Fan Engagement as a holistic means to evaluate and assess effective Fan Engagement in practice.

Revealing Effective Fan Engagement

The study and research of Fan Engagement may be carried out in an almost infinite number of ways depending on what is being sought, and how. It is impossible to explore all of those options here. What is being sought could be any aspect or element of the engagement process in any number of settings, or the whole process in a specifically defined context. And how that is conducted could employ any number or combination of different research methods in any number of different ways. So, rather than attempt to extrapolate all those options, what follows outlines some generalities about research principles, the process, stages, and some examples of how that may be implemented to reveal aspects of effective Fan Engagement, or not!

The Focus of Fan Engagement Research

The focus of Fan Engagement research might land upon any aspect or element of engagement, or the whole process, in any number of settings. And distilling the focus for research involves vital and necessary analysis. So, purely as an example, what if the focus were “what is effective Fan Engagement, generally?”. How might that be approached and what might analysis entail? Considering Fan Engagement generally would necessitate a return to the definition of what Fan Engagement is, clarifying exactly what that is, and unpacking exactly what that implies, to refine the specific focus for what is being sought by research.

Fundamentally, as Fan Engagement is a process, that dynamic distinctly shapes the approaches that may be taken. Researching and evaluating an ongoing process is complex as it

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may comprise many elements, and be in a state of change or flux. And as a key element is dialogue, it necessitates accommodating a range of perspectives and contributions from amongst clubs and fans. Further, evaluating that process needs to bridge outcomes that may enhance the fan experience, or contribute to the sustainability of clubs, or do both.

In addition, analysing the means by which Fan Engagement is achieved involves consideration of some important but opaque terms:

- How well have trust and understanding been built?
- And on which issues of shared concern?
- How highly are fans valued?
- To what extent are fans involved?
- And in which decisions?
- How well are clubs and fans acting together?
- And, to what extent towards their mutual benefit?

Furthermore, the focus of Fan Engagement can be considered:

- Macroscopically - observed in general trends across the whole fan body of a club, even a league, or leagues.
- Microscopically - observed in relation to the experiences of specific groups, even individuals.
- Quantitatively - in terms of measuring criteria like the percentage spread of opinions shared, the numbers involved in an activity, or in many other ways.
- Qualitatively - in terms of what fans or clubs feel or believe, what people have experienced, how they make sense of that, and why?

All of these challenges do not mean Fan Engagement is too difficult to research, but they do condition how it is approached and the nature of methods chosen.

Fan Engagement Research within the Fair Game Index

Previously, Fair Game has considered Fan Engagement within the Fair Game Index in three categories; Dialogue, Governance, and Transparency, and assigned a score to each based largely on the availability and thoroughness of documentary evidence (Fair Game, 2023b). Overall scores were then adjusted in proportion to the percentage of stadium capacity achieved across a season. The Dialogue theme considered the presence of two-way communication between clubs and fans included structured meetings with fan representatives, fans forums, social media platforms, and other initiatives and innovations. The Governance theme considered what underpins club-fan relationships including whether there are Fan Directors on club boards, Supporter Charters, SLOs, and if there are Memorandums of Understanding or other legal agreement with fan groups. The Transparency theme considered whether reports

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are published of club Board meetings, and those with fans or their representatives, including agendas circulated in advance, and minutes afterwards.

These measures have successfully revealed whether some Fan Engagement mechanisms are in place and whether relevant documents exist to substantiate that. Future measures can go much further from that platform to consider Fan Engagement more broadly and deeply, especially in how effective engagement mechanisms are in practice, and how they might be improved and extended further? Fans need to be consulted extensively and their voices distinctly heard in the results. The Fair Game Index can evolve to accommodate a more qualitative lens for the accurate assessment of effective Fan Engagement, and how well it actually works? All of this, of course, is constricted by real world considerations of capacity, resources and opportunity, in congruence with intent, at any point in time. But, as discussed using the methods suggested previously, there are opportunities to improve the Fair Game Index to become a more rigorous and reliable instrument in the assessment of authentic and effective Fan Engagement.

The Fan Engagement Research Process

Fundamentally, a Fan Engagement research process has to be rigorous and start firstly with exactly what wants to be known. A laser-like focus has to refine specifically what the object of inquiry is before trying to establish the best direction forwards to the method. And further, in what context(s) of Fan Engagement is the inquiry rooted, broadly or specifically? Thereafter, the research process may incorporate or involve any, or all aspects of;

- monitoring, evaluation or assessment;
- the specific aspect(s) of Fan Engagement sought
- an appropriate blend of methods which can capture the object of inquiry;
- in which context of Fan Engagement, the inquiry is situated;
- and, from whom or what the information is sought.

Sampling

A sample, large or small, needs to be identified as representative of Fan Engagement in context. Thereafter, and with appropriate consent:

- methods can be deployed to gather specific information from appropriate sources;
- the sample can be consulted, monitored or observed;
- data can be gathered, and responses noted.

Data Analysis

Data can be gathered, prepared, and organised, to enable analysis of findings which may reveal the extent to which:

- Fan Engagement is regarded as effective by fans at specific clubs, or generally;
- any or all of the eleven Tenets are incorporated into practice;
- proven mechanisms have ensured a range of Engagement opportunities through which fans are actively involved in both the day to day running of the club, and in its strategic direction;
- genuine two-way consultation occurs and includes regular scheduled, formal and structured meetings as well as other less formal, distinctive, and alternative means of Fan Engagement;
- club governance is a transparent process sharing short, medium and long-term plans and proposals accessible by fans;
- engagement opportunities enable authentic fan involvement and contributions toward club policy including those relating to the club's strategic vision, commercial matters, club heritage and stadium issues, and plans for further Fan Engagement;
- a Fan Engagement strategy is underpinned by legal agreements embedding fan participation, broadly and democratically, in club governance and decision-making processes;
- fans may possess club ownership, in part or full, through a Share Scheme directed through an independent trust, fan body, or similar;
- legal representation of fans on the club board, a democratic process for a fan-elected club Director(s) with rights as any other director, a fan right of Veto in certain significant areas of policy interest, or similar;
- club and fan leadership are representative of the diverse Fanbase, its composition and constituencies.

Forming Conclusions and Disseminating Findings

Through the rigorous and critical analysis and evaluation of findings, a cycle can be triggered to improved understanding of effective Fan Engagement as:

- sense can be made of what the findings reveal;
- conclusions may be drawn of what has been discovered, or not, about Fan Engagement;
- an assessment, in relation to appropriate criteria, can be made of the quality of Fan Engagement revealed;
- clear conclusions can be drawn, which may lead to recommendations;
- findings can then be published and disseminated amongst those with an interest or stake in Fan Engagement;

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- scrutiny and feedback may be sought, or provoked, that creates dialogue which helps to improve understanding of Fan Engagement;
- debate can help to inform or improve policy and practice, as well as similar future research.

A Fan Engagement Methodology

A methodology (the ideas and means) to evaluate Fan Engagement has to consider a mix of methods, combinations of quantitative and qualitative approaches, a mix of indicators and evidence, to authenticate its effective practice, and actions to advance that.

Fan Engagement Quantitatively

Quantitative analysis of Fan Engagement includes documentary searches for evidence, perhaps to simply establish whether something exists, or to further explore the contents. This could be whether fan engagement strategies or initiatives are recorded, or of what arrangements or decisions have been agreed? Surveys can also be easily used to garner fans' opinions on different aspects of their experience. Survey results reveal general patterns, which can be compared amongst fan groups, or toward an expected outcome or standard.

Other criteria can also be considered through surveys like the distribution of opinion across different variables such as “socio- demographic” groups, or fans of different clubs. When those patterns reveal results, which are significantly above or below average conclusions can be drawn that the variable has an impact in Fan Engagement. Collectively, patterns highlight trends which reveal disparities in engagement. Findings can be used to identify specific groups, or clubs, who may be considered priorities groups for further engagement. This common strategy of “targeting” can concentrate efforts to improve Fan Engagement strategies, policies, projects, and initiatives, or incentivize more innovative approaches (Hylton & Totten, 2013a).

Documentary Indicators and Evidence of Fan Engagement

Good research must “hit the books”. Prior to, and in addition to, considering the commissioning of original and bespoke research conducted with clubs or fans there are a wealth of documentary sources that can be drawn on:

- previous documentary evidence including policy reports and academic theory and studies;
- reports of Fan Engagement strategies, fan surveys, other Fan Engagement activity, or of an absence of any mechanism for Fan Engagement beyond good customer relations;

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- club statements and press releases, fan group statements and fan testimony, press coverage and social media analysis;
- published reports, agendas, notes, and minutes for AGM attendance, club accounts, business performance, club board meetings, other meetings between clubs and fans (both formally and informally), those with access to club Directors and senior staff, public meetings with supporters' trusts, independent fan groups, or other groups of fan representatives, fan forums, and other gatherings and mechanisms courting fans' views;
- reports of fan advisory groups, or Shadow Boards, with access to club Directors and senior staff, the appointment of SLOs in a stand-alone role, or similar;
- legal agreements, ownership and share rights, Memorandum of Understanding and other agreements between clubs and fans, of fan rights and representation.

Fan Engagement Qualitatively

Qualitative analysis of Fan Engagement may be less common than quantitative analysis but it is increasingly growing, and is a type of research which could, or should, be developed more fully (Hylton & Totten, 2013a). It is more likely to be used by academics than by clubs or policy makers. This is because it is not only costly in terms of both time and resources, but also because it reveals more complex information which is open to differing interpretations. Such complexity is often perceived as too resource-intensive to be worthwhile. And sometimes, the findings are perceived as too challenging to be implemented and translated into practice. But qualitative research veers away from a preoccupation with numbers and concentrates on the real meaning and significance of Fan Engagement. It offers deeper insights into the behaviour, motivations, and opinions of clubs and fans.

Qualitative research employs methods like interviews, focus groups and observations of practice to gain insights. It concentrates on how people behave and what that behaviour means to them and to others. Understanding how and why people behave and relate to each other in particular ways, and what that signifies, is at the root of Fan Engagement. Qualitative analysis extends beyond the playing field, onto the terraces (or seating areas), to the streets around stadia, into fan meetings, within the Boardroom, amongst fan and football media, and more. These are all settings that cultivate and reflect the fan experience, seed the culture, and prevailing winds for Fan Engagement, which may previously have been dominated by other specific ways of thinking.

Dominant ways of thinking can appear to become normalised, may block newer emergent thinking, and create a dominant culture which shapes and creates fan expectations across football as a whole. For fans who feel excluded from decision making change is unlikely to occur without first challenging, or changing, the dominant cultures of clubs. The complexities of beginning to address cultural change in practice deter many attempts from the outset, so often the existing order or culture often persists, and with that so too does fan exclusion. The inherent difficulty in addressing Fan Engagement in a qualitative way signals why it is less common in practice. But until Fan Engagement is addressed substantively in a qualitative way, exclusion

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will continue to manifest itself and therein lies a challenge for clubs, fans, football authorities, the FSA, Fair Game, and others too!

Authenticating Fan Engagement in Practice

There can be an opaqueness about the inner workings of football clubs or fan groups, but if claims are made that effective Fan Engagement is taking place, they must be verified. Reports and research can often appear remote from reality, sometimes as second-hand commentary from those “who briefly met the natives” (Totten, 2011), but equally studies that rely too much on anecdotal evidence can lack credibility, without objective substantiation. And so, there are limitations to a stark choice purely between either an insider or outsider gaze, neither of which offer the whole story on their own.

The real and potential benefits of Fan Engagement may be missed by conventional research, monitoring and evaluation techniques. To evaluate Fan Engagement in practice, there is a particular value in direct testimony from clubs and fans immersed in it, and who seek to benefit from it. The views and opinions of people who have “lived the experience” need to be used (Partington & Totten, 2011). Their understanding, and authentic experiences, must form part of the insight into how effective Fan Engagement is built, sustained, and improved. Research must enable access, and overcome potential issues with gatekeepers, to enter the realm of Fan Engagement itself, to get “under the skin”, allowing the collection of rich, insightful data.

Fan Engagement using Multiple Methods

Firstly, a note of caution that any “ideal” methodology can crash on the rocks of reality and the resources available to support it. However, what follows can be implemented in part or in full in the short term or across a longer period. So, given the inherent complexity researching the Fan Engagement process, the many different methods available, and the relative merits of each, a multi-method approach is the most desirable one to be taken.

Such an approach improves the validity of a study as it allows the triangulation of data, and the cross checking of the existence of common theory and phenomena across all the research methods (Bell & Waters, 1993). A multi-method approach enables Fan Engagement to be studied both holistically, and in multiple contexts, both macroscopically and microscopically. A mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods is further desirable as documentary or statistical indicators can be further illuminated in more depth, and more authentically, in practice. The multi-method approach also lends agility across the whole spectrum of monitoring, evaluating and assessing Fan Engagement. And an action research approach provides opportunities for conclusions reached by studies to inform the practice of effective Fan Engagement.

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In sum, a multi-method approach as described enables the study to draw from a versatile toolkit of ideas whereby strategy and methods are shaped to capitalise on the options available and the circumstances encountered (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), reflecting the variety of different settings that Fan Engagement operates within. Key methods to utilise within such a research strategy might include documentary evidence, media and social media analysis, surveys, focus groups, expert panels, interviews, observation and case studies. There is also a need to examine the potential of using longitudinal studies focused on specific cases, and Action Research too.

Fan Engagement as Action Research

Fan Engagement aims to enhance the fan experience and contribute to the long-term sustainability of football clubs. It benefits from an Action Research approach, which aims to know whether Fan Engagement is going on and to understand and explain it, aiming to enhance it for the future (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). Action Research follows a cyclical process with study findings subsequently acted on and integrated into future practice to build capacity for Fan Engagement, and ensure improvements in practice that benefit both clubs and fans.

It is impossible for research to be completely objective, with a degree of subjectivity in any process. Research can promote Fan Engagement itself, and as a campaigning organisation Fair Game embraces this position. Unlike more detached approaches where researchers might not interact with those being studied, Action Research provides opportunities for them to interact with clubs and fans. It seeks to delve deeper, to understand relationships affecting Fan Engagement, to test ideas and see them put them into practice. Action Research can empower clubs and fans to have their opinions, thoughts and experiences acted on (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and Thomas argues that such analysis holds to scrutiny “otherwise hidden agendas, power centres and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain” (Thomas, 1993). Studies of effective Fan Engagement must understand and analyse the power relations that impact upon it.

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement as Holistic Evaluation Tool

Ideally and holistically all the results of the research, monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of Fan Engagement could be housed under one roof. The Spectrum of Fan Engagement offers such a holistic housing. Here we look at its role in housing and potentially in the Fair Game Index, and elsewhere.

The Fair Game Index has evolved from a measure in 2023 based mainly on the processes clubs follow in Fan Engagement to one in 2024 which had a much greater focus on how clubs involved fans in decisions and responded to their input. We are proposing to develop this further in 2025 to look at where clubs are positioned across the Spectrum of Fan Engagement.

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement offers a hierarchy of what is attainable and desirable for effective Fan Engagement. Any given Fan Engagement strategy and its elements can be located at given, or different, points on the spectrum. It recognises and rewards achievement and incentivises clear areas for improvement. It embraces, promotes and signposts how effective Fan Engagement can be pursued and realised in practice; a way forward.

The table below shows how notional scores could be assigned to the Degrees of Engagement, which can be further characterised, and related to examples in practice, and also to indicators and evidence. At this stage, these are purely illustrative scores as we develop the concept of the Spectrum of Fan Engagement further and test it in context with clubs.

Conclusions

This paper has explored how best to reveal effective Fan Engagement, what the focus of research may be, and how that has previously been considered within the Fair Game Index. A Fan Engagement research process was unravelled to consider sampling, data analysis, and how to form conclusions and disseminate findings. A Fan Engagement research methodology was evaluated quantitatively, with documentary indicators and evidence, and qualitatively, to authenticate Fan Engagement in practice. This paper concludes that the study of Fan Engagement should use multiple methods, especially more qualitative ones, to promote Action Research, and improve professional practice. And finally, the Spectrum of Fan Engagement was proposed as a holistic means to evaluate and assess effective Fan Engagement in practice.

Table A1 The Spectrum of Fan Engagement

<p style="text-align: center;">The Spectrum of Fan Engagement (As explained previously with examples in practice)</p>		
Index Scores	Degrees of Fan Engagement	Indicators and Evidence
20 19 18	Holistic Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of legal agreements, ownership and share rights, the wider Fan Engagement strategy, and of all formal club-fan meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
17 16 15	Immersed Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of legal agreements upon Fan rights and representation, of a Fan Engagement strategy, and of all formal meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
14 13 12	Attuned Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of any Memorandum of Understanding and other agreements between clubs and fans, of a Fan Engagement strategy, of fan representation, and of all formal meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
11 10 9	Aligned Engagement	<p>Full documentary evidence of a Fan Engagement strategy, and of all formal meetings.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>

The Spectrum of Fan Engagement (As explained previously with examples in practice)		
8 7 6	Formative Engagement	<p>Transparent reports of Board meetings, and of Fan Engagement activity including public meetings with supporters' trusts, independent fan groups, fan forums, or other groups of fan representatives.</p> <p>Reports of other Fan Engagement measures including the creation of a Fan Advisory Board (FAB) or Shadow Board with access to club Directors and senior staff, the appointment of a Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) in a stand-alone role, or similar.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
5 4 3	Transactional Engagement	<p>Fan survey and testimony.</p> <p>AGM attendance, public meetings and fan forums with access to club Directors and senior staff. Other mechanisms courting fans' views. Appointment of a Club SLO.</p> <p>Club statements, press releases and publication of some meetings, accounts, business performance, or policy. No obvious mechanism for fans to respond or influence process.</p> <p>Publication of club policy. Absence of any mechanism for Fan engagement beyond customer relations.</p> <p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>
2 1 0	Adversarial Engagement	<p>Fan survey, fan group statements and testimony. Press coverage and social media analysis.</p>

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