

WHOSE GAME IS IT?

Football governance through the eyes of the supporters



The FREE Project Football governance policy papers

Paper #1: What is wrong with football?

The FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) Project

FREE is the most comprehensive research project exploring the social and cultural aspects of football fandom in Europe to date. It has been funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development between 2012 and 2015.

These policy papers present the results of the project's governance-related research. They study in depth the way in which supporters in Europe are currently getting involved in football governance and/or club ownership. Supporter activism has developed over the last decades exponentially following the modernisation and commercialisation of the professional game. There are growing numbers of democratic supporter representative organisations advocating for the role of the fans as legitimate stakeholders. Since 2007 Supporters Direct Europe and Football Supporters Europe have been recognised as representatives of the supporters movement at European level. Their work and growing membership is testimony to the importance of this issue.

Supporter culture and the fan movement in Europe are diverse and heterogeneous. They present a diversity which is difficult to grasp in its entirety. These policy papers draw on a comprehensive and reliable data set:

- ④ A CATI telephone survey whose sampling technique make it statistically representative of the whole population of Austria, Denmark, France Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom (total sample = 7,252, margin of statistical error: ± 3.4 , 95% confidence interval)
- ④ An on-line survey targeted at a specific sub-group of the population defined as 'attentive public to football'. The survey was widely distributed online. It was self-selected. The final sample following data cleaning (N=11,384) obtained a sufficient number of responses to carry out a comparative analysis of six countries: France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the UK.
- ④ In-depth qualitative research with football supporters that freely signed up to take part in the project. For this, fans kept a diary and took photographs over eight weeks, with a semi-structured interview at the end. The total sample is composed of 65 supporters from 5 different countries: Austria, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the UK. These policy papers draw upon the comments made by those supporters based in the UK (N=37). For further details of these participants, please see Appendix 1.

Policy Paper #1: What is wrong with football?

The first paper in the FREE policy series discusses supporters' opinions on football governance and asks the fundamental questions that should form the basis of any policy proposals or recommendations for supporter involvement: What do supporters actually think about current football governance?

Any answers can then begin to form a platform upon which to build proposals for increased supporter involvement, as it will reflect their own concerns and insights rather than being based on assumptions. If supporters are to be more involved in the running of the game – and receive a real say rather than a token acknowledgement – it is vital that we ask and listen to supporters themselves.

Executive summary

The majority (70.5%) of UK-based supporters who took part in the online *FREE European Football Fans Survey (online)* believed that football is in need of more regulation from the authorities. When asked in more detail about this, a small group of supporters (n=37) demonstrated an acute understanding of the current power networks that they feel control the game, and were very critical of many aspects of modern football governance at the macro level.

1. An unequal distribution of power at the top level of football

Supporters believed that since the formation of the Premier League in 1992 and the media investment in this level of the game, the power of external stakeholders has grown whilst the Football Association (throughout the paper referred to as the FA) has seen its power weakened. Fans also felt that club owners at the top level hold a disproportionate amount of power and did not trust them. They felt this had a very real impact on the way the sport was governed throughout the pyramid, with financial concerns overriding all others.

2. A loss of trust in football institutions to govern effectively

Governing bodies across the game were generally not trusted by fans. The FA came under particular criticism for its perceived weakness. Supporters believed that this undermined their role as the governing body of football, and with the growing power of external stakeholders, they perceived that the FA could not be trusted to protect the values they believed should be inherent in the game. The inability to protect clubs outside of the elite was considered as one of the biggest concerns.

3. Lack of recognition of the football supporter

Supporters were critically aware of how their clubs understood them, particularly the bigger Premier League clubs. At this level, they felt little more than a consumer, and not a particularly valuable one. The most important concerns were the increased privileging of the television audience over those in the stadium; the growing corporate side of professional football replacing the traditional fan; and clubs failing to engage with, and value their supporters.

Conclusion and recommendations

- 🕒 The Premier League and its commercial partners should **develop a greater understanding of the fan in the stadium**, and demonstrate that they are valued.
- 🕒 The FA should **evaluate their role in the game**, define and focus their priorities.
- 🕒 Clubs must engage more with their supporters or risk losing them.
- 🕒 The recommendations of the House of Commons DCMS select committee should be implemented to change the culture of football's relationship with the fans.

The FREE Project

FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) is the most comprehensive research project exploring the social and cultural aspects of football fandom in Europe to date. FREE has been funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development between 2012 and 2015.¹ The FREE Project brings together a total of nine European universities from Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the UK. One of the four research strands of FREE focused on football governance and supporter engagement, which has been coordinated by the Loughborough University team.

The Loughborough research team is composed by Dr Borja García as Principal Investigator and Dr Jo Welford as Research Associate. Dr García is a Lecturer in Sport Policy and Management at Loughborough University, internationally known for his expertise on football governance. Dr Welford has been conducting sociological research in the area of football for over ten years. The main objective of this strand of the FREE project was to understand why, how and to what extent European football supporters get involved in football governance and club ownership.

Context

Despite the global popularity of the English Premier League, current concerns over the governance of the game have attracted the attention of many policy-makers and politicians. Some of the governance pitfalls of football are associated with a lack of engagement with supporters. In very broad terms, it is argued that opening the game up to the fans will not only connect the game to the community, but also to increase transparency and accountability. Supporter ownership is firmly on the political agenda.²

Yet this is not a new phenomenon. English football was heavily criticised for governance problems in the second half of the twentieth century, but little changed. In response to calls for governance reform, the Labour government set up a *Football Task Force*³ in 1997 and asked for reports on how to improve modern football. Their third report, *Investing in the Community*, found overwhelming support for providing a fan voice and recommended that the government should help fans wishing to hold a stake in their club. This resulted in the formation of Supporters Direct in 2000 to help supporters achieve a say in the future of their clubs and promote sustainable spectator sports clubs based on community ownership. Supporters Direct work with fans and clubs to set up supporter trusts, and have been involved in the 'rescue' of several football clubs at financial risk of collapse.⁴

The increasing number of supporter-owned clubs, alongside the most recent government proposals for supporter representation to be enforced through legislation, provides the context for this series of policy papers. There are a growing number of democratic supporters' groups working already in the UK and Europe towards further fan engagement and supporter ownership. The FREE Project sought to investigate whether supporters demand further football governance regulation, and whether supporters feel that they should have a greater representation in the governance structures.

1 For more information please see www.free-project.eu.

2 All Party Parliamentary Football Group 2009; Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) 2011, 2013, 2014; Supporters Direct Europe 2012, 2013

3 The Football Task Force 1999a, 1999b

4 <http://www.supporters-direct.org/homepage/aboutsupportersdirect/history> gives an overview of the work of Supporters Direct over the past 15 years.

Data collection and sample

The FREE project collected three data sets from different populations across Europe:

- ⑤ a telephone survey statistically representative of each partner country's population⁵ (total sample 7,252, UK sample 1,044; margin of statistical error: ± 3.4 , 95% confidence interval)
- ⑤ an on-line survey statistically significant and targeted at a specific sub-group of the population, the football supporters⁶ (total sample 11,384; UK sample 635)
- ⑤ in-depth qualitative research with football supporters that signed up to take part in the project. Fans⁷ kept a diary and took photographs over eight weeks, with a semi-structured interview at the end of the time period (total sample 65, UK sample 37).

The FREE Project policy papers draw upon the UK data from each of these sources. The quantitative data provides contextual information, and answers the broad questions about supporter demand for further football regulation. The qualitative data attempts to answer the more complex questions about *why* supporters feel how they do, and reflects the thoughts, experiences and reality of this group of fans. Given the diversity of fan cultures, and as with all qualitative research, we do not claim our sample to be representative of all football supporters in the UK. We purposefully recruited a cross-section of fans that had a significant interest and investment in football. All were either season-ticket holders or a member of a supporter group (trust or other); some were both.

The FREE football governance policy paper series:

Policy Paper #1: What is wrong with football?

Policy Paper #2: What could be done to improve football governance?

Policy Paper #3: Are supporters getting involved in football governance?

Policy Paper #4: Supporter ownership and the supporter trust model in football

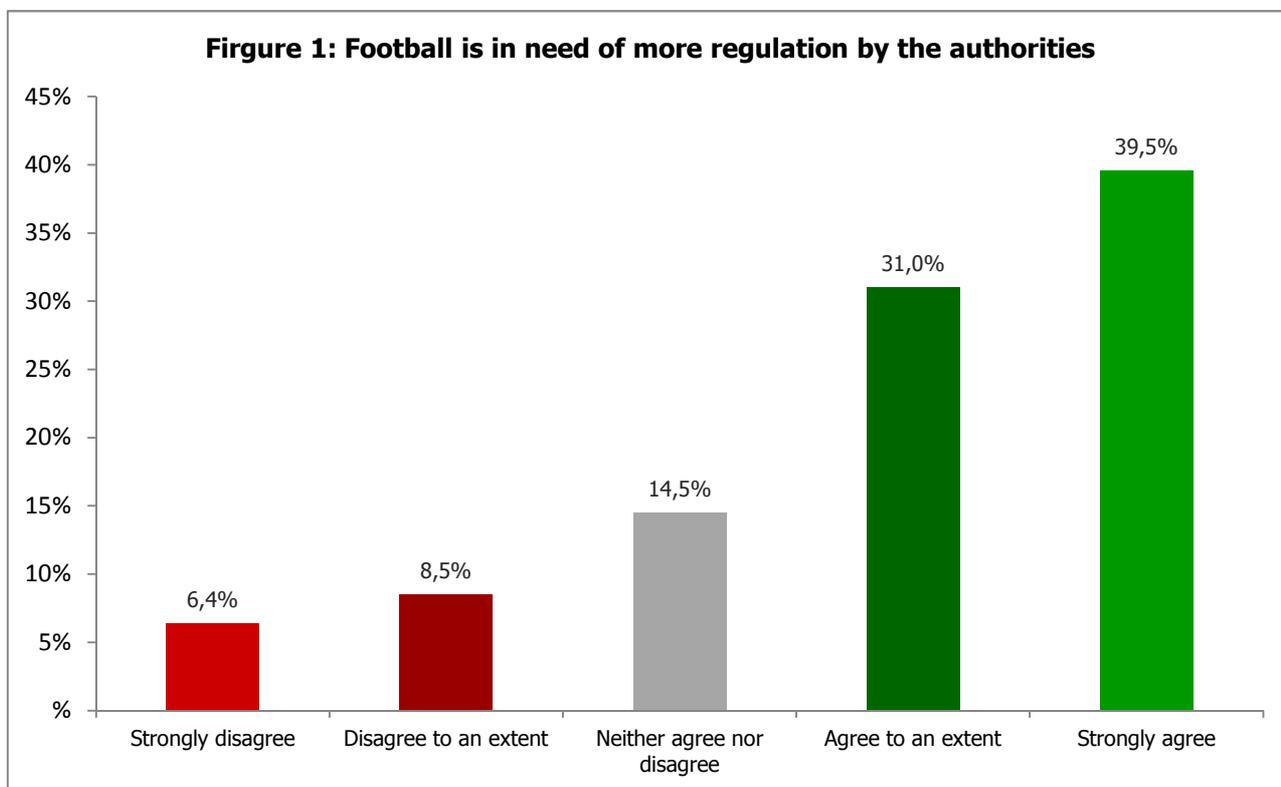
5 FREE Project Survey on Football in the European Public Opinion (2014).

6 FREE European Football Fans Survey (online) (2014).

7 For more details about the individual participants please see Appendix 1.

Introduction

The FREE Project asked fans for their reflections and opinions on the current governance on football in the UK. The FREE *European Football Fans Survey (online)* conducted across Europe asked fans whether they thought that football was in need of more regulation, with UK-based respondents (sample = 635) overwhelmingly agreeing (Figure 1).



Unit: percentage. Base: total number of UK respondents (635)

Source: FREE ONLINE Survey (2014)

This was followed up by a qualitative study of 37 fans across the UK, which sought to explore this response. What these supporters told us reflected a critical understanding of the current power networks that they feel control the game, and a realistic appreciation of their role as a football supporter. The participants discussed a number of issues related to governance that impacted directly on their experience of football: ticket prices, club ownership structures, safe standing, problems at grassroots football, and a lack of money at their club. But looking more closely at their understanding of how these issues relate to wider football governance illuminates a number of concerns on a bigger scale. Concerns that can be traced back to the core of how football is run, managed and organised at the very top level. These are problems that are judged to be inherent to modern football governance due to the considerable amount of money flowing into the elite professional game.

Most concerns that fans have refer to three (inter-related) themes: (1) an unequal distribution of power in football governance, (2) a lack of trust in the football institutions to act in the best interests of football (at all levels), and (3) a lack of recognition of the supporter as a stakeholder. These will now be discussed in turn, with examples from the qualitative data (37 'engaged' supporters in the UK⁸) of how fans believed that these top-level issues impacted their own day-to-day experiences of football.

8 See Appendix 1 for details of the supporters who volunteered to take part in the qualitative phase of the FREE Project.

1. An unequal distribution of power at the top level of football

“It annoys me that the power between the Premiership and the FA is so skewed.”

[#23, male, aged 38, League Two club⁹]

Supporters expressed a critical understanding of the current power networks that they believe now control modern football. Our sample felt that the formation of the Premier League and the media contracts that followed has allowed external stakeholders to gain power at the expense of the FA. At the time of the study, global media company BskyB had recently announced a new deal with the Premier League – worth £3 billion over three years – which fans believed cemented their controlling position in football.

Fans had two concerns about this changing network of power. Firstly, the perceived shift of power from the FA as a governing body of ‘football’ to those who had a greater financial stake in the elite level reflects conflicting interests. How can those who represent the top level of the game be trusted to make the right decision for football as a whole? Secondly, the current complex network of stakeholders is understood to have resulted in a loss of overall strategic direction. This is mainly due to competing interests among the stakeholders in the network, and the risk that with multiple actors, responsibility can be shifted around rather than forced upon one body. This, which is a typical contention of theoretical approaches to network governance, was very much seen in practice by the participants in our research.

“Well who controls football now? Who is the national governing body for football? Officially it’s the FA, but what the FA now is the national governing body for the grass roots game. It has almost zero influence on the professional game.”

[#5, male, aged 36, Premier League club]

“I think the problem is that they pass the book between each other. You’ve got the FA, the Premier League and the Football League and they just pass it round the houses ... No one accepts responsibility. It really is a shambles, I don’t know how it ever ended up that they have three separate bodies to overrule it, it’s just unbelievable.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

Fans believed that the power in football nowadays involves a network of three main parties: the Premier League, the media – particularly Sky TV – and the FA, with club owners increasingly gaining power.

1.1. The Premier League

“One of the sad things, football now, only seems to mean the Premier League.”

[#5, male, aged 36, Premier League club]

Premier League clubs are seen as having a controlling stake in the game. They are in the position to make decisions that will benefit this level of the pyramid without having to worry about the consequences for other stakeholders. The Premier League is perceived as being so autonomous and powerful that no external actor is able to control or regulate it, resulting in a perceived lack of accountability towards the wider football community.

“The Premier League don’t care about [club history], it’s a representative body for the owners, it’s a group of owners, run for the owners, by the owners.”

[#10, male, aged 32, Premier League club]

9 Gender, age and level of club are given to contextualise each quote. See Appendix 1 for details of their level of engagement with football.

“The Football Association in theory have the overall say in it but they don’t, it’s the Premier League where the money’s at, so the premier league can hold the football league and the FA to ransom, it’s just a shambles.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

1.2. The media and TV operators

“The control Sky television have over football clubs is just ridiculous.”

[#17, male, aged 37, Championship club]

Fans gave many examples of how they believe television operators are gaining increasing power and control over elite football. The financial investment made comes at a cost for the clubs that benefit financially and at an even greater cost to their supporters.

“Sky TV just have total dominance, you’ll play then, and that’s the end of it ... when you’ve got Sky dictating to everybody when games are played, it’s just not fair on supporters.”

[#17, male, aged 37, Championship club]

“At the moment football belongs to Sky and all the other media organisations follow in their wake.”

[#28, male, aged 44, League Two club]

“Monday at 8 o’clock kick-offs, sorry, they’re just a pain in the backside... television’s got far too much of an influence. But I don’t think the clubs have got any choice because of the revenue, because of the financial input that they get from it. I think they’re over a barrel with that”

[#7, male, aged 40, Premier League club]

“I mean let’s look at the way Sky just come in and rip up their fixtures, that’s fine to just travel left, right and centre, it’s now an accepted practice”

[#5, male, aged 36, Premier League club]

The disabled fans who took part in the study spoke about how the rearranging of matches to fit with TV demands had a significant impact on their chances of being able to attend the game, even if they already have their season ticket.

“[We] did get raw deal last year when you think we had what, 8 games on a Saturday 3 o’clock kick off and all the rest were switched for television purposes. Disabled supporters they need carers to go, they have to get that all organised, their care plans are booked like a month in advance, so it’s a lot of inconvenience, to have to rearrange their care plans and whatever to get the staff available to go with them on that day, as well as a lot of people in general just can’t do night games because come the end of the day then that’s when they’re at their worst”

[#17, male, aged 37, Championship club]

Some were very critical of the impact of this on football, not just their own experiences but the values that they believe the game should represent: a sport for all to be able to enjoy.

“We all had a go at that bloody Sky TV. I hate it, absolutely hate it, they’ve took away the naivety of what football was about, you know the man on the street, and his entertainment, they’ve turned it into something, a culture I can’t recognise to be honest.”

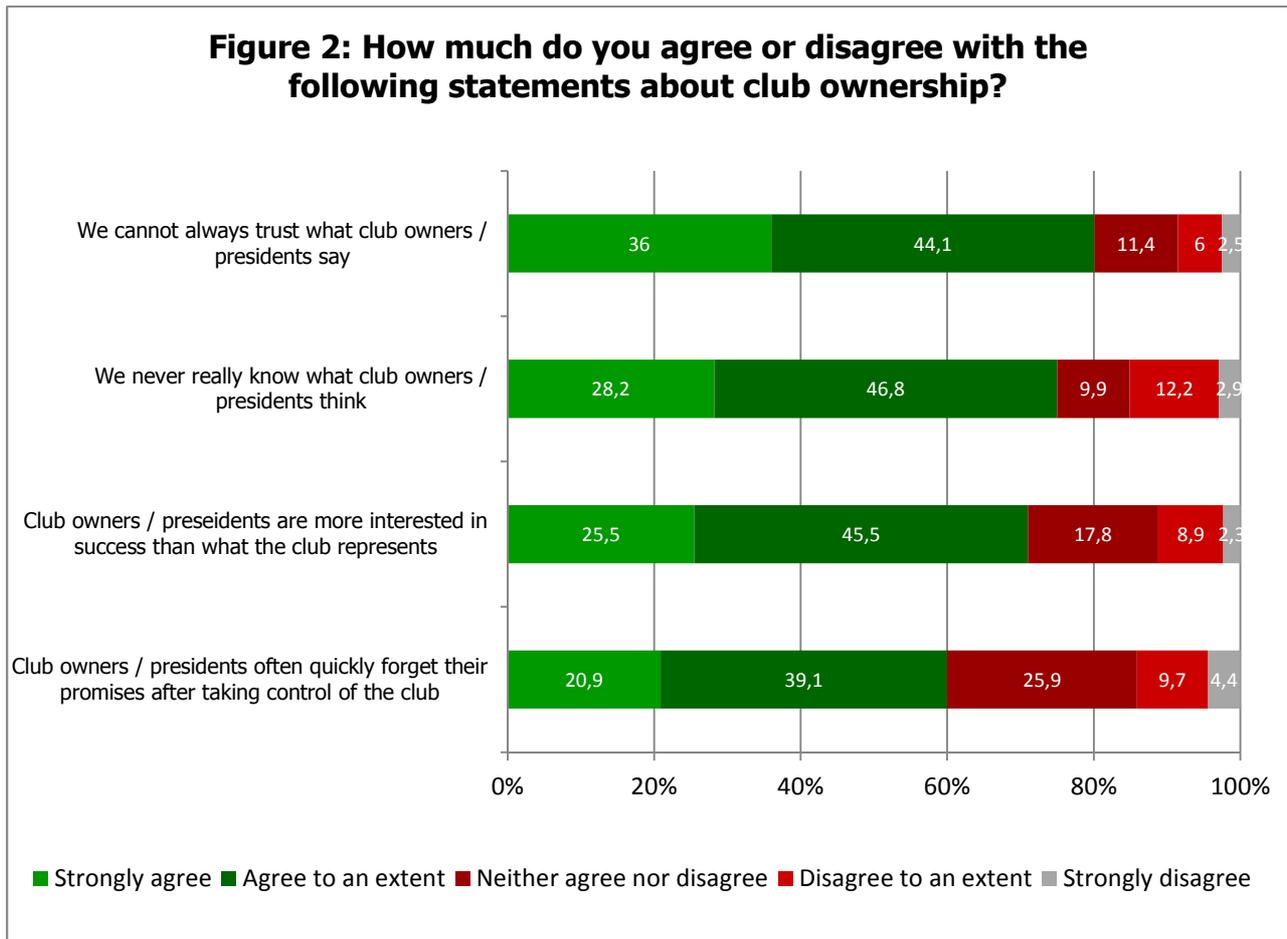
[#14, female, aged 65, Championship club]

1.3. Club owners

“Clubs are always one owner away from issues and problems.”

[#22, male, aged 45, League One club]

Club ownership is a very noteworthy area to examine fans’ perceptions and understandings, because this issue is perhaps where macro level policies and regulation can have the most direct impact on the fan’s micro-level and their club. The FREE *European Football Fans Survey* (online) asked a number of questions about the perception of club owners, and the results demonstrate a great deal of concern in this area (Figure 2).



Unit: percentage. Base: total number of UK respondents (635)

Source: FREE ONLINE Survey (2014)

The biggest concern fans have regarding club ownership was whether owners could be trusted to act in the best interests of their club. 80% of respondents agreed that supporters cannot always trust what owners say, with 71% agreeing that owners are more interested in success than what the club represents.

Interestingly, the qualitative data differed slightly, with the more in-depth discussions around ownership painting a more complex picture beyond the satisfaction/dissatisfaction dichotomy. Some were unsurprisingly critical of the single ownership model due to the lack of democracy in this system:

“The current overriding ownership and control model of football is fatally flawed. And so, the idea of one guy owning the club and doing what he wants to it is absolutely anathema to me.”

[#28, male, aged 44, League Two club]

However, not all participants were critical of this model, as supporters drew upon the current or past situation at their own club to frame their understandings of ownership. A number were satisfied with the present ownership situation at their club, which made them less critical of this single owner/benefactor model. Rather than being focused on WHO is running their club, most supporters are more concerned with HOW the club is being run. Their concerns refer specially to issues of transparency, security (i.e. long-term strategic future) of the club and engagement with fans. For example, fans at Notts County were positive about their current owner, a local businessman who fans believed understood the club and the community. So it is more about the perceived links between the club and the fans. A Leicester City fan explained one reason for his happiness with the club's current owners, the Thai-led consortium *King Power Group* fronted by Thai businessman Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha.

“When we beat Nottingham Forest to get into the playoffs, we were going back to the train station, the owners were there with us, you know celebrating with the fans, we were singing, the owners were joining in as well and it's like, you don't normally see this, you can see that they genuinely feel a connection with the club.”

[#12, male, aged 19, Championship club]

However, regardless of their satisfaction with their current club owner, supporters were still acutely aware of the major problem that the single ownership model can bring: instability. Particularly if the owners are perceived to be motivated by financial reasons rather than a love for the sport or the club, fans understand that there is a great risk attached to this model than, for example, ownership models that put the supporter at the heart of the club, such as the German model of football club ownership.

“You can't rely on oligarchs, because people like that could just turn round and go, do you know what, because they operate on a totally different level, there's no emotional connection to it.”

[#35, male, aged 30, Scottish League One club]

The best interest of the club is mainly defined around two dimensions, which are of course closely linked: (1) whether owners protect the future and sustainability of the club; and (2) whether they protect and develop the local community (and therefore the fan base).

“Venky's openly admitted when they bought the club that they had never watched a football game in their life, and the only reason they wanted the club was to boost their chicken brand.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

Supporters have given ownership and management issues careful thought. The importance here is that this very reflective approach demonstrates a clear engagement with football more widely, beyond the concerns of their own club. Fans have an acute understanding of ownership and governance debates. They make well informed judgments and are able to compare the situation across different European countries. Supporters have concerns over the current models of club ownership and in particular the impact that decisions made at this level could have on the fans and on the game in general. But still, their own club is their biggest concern, particularly long-term sustainability - the worst case scenario with a failed ownership is the folding of a football club.

1.4. The result: A weakening of the Football Association

“The FA have probably got their hands tied but I think they’re too remote sometimes.”

[#22, male, aged 45, League One club]

The growth in power of the Premier League and its commercial operators has been concurrent with a weakening of the FA, the national governing body of football. Supporters felt that the FA has little control of the sport, particularly at the top level, which allows the game to be run in the interests of those who have the greatest financial input. Despite the many areas in which the FA is active, from grassroots to education to women football, we found a common construction of the governing body as weak institution unable to effectively regulate the whole pyramid of football. This, of course, says as much about the current structure of football power as it does about communication strategies. Football fans have clearly constructed an understanding of reality in their minds that assign a weak and devaluated role to the FA, choosing to ignore the areas in which the governing body may still be effective.

The lack of challenge to the Premier League/Sky dominance is of great concern to fans, and they feel that the overarching network of power at the top level of football has created a difficult position for the FA. Fans believe that as a result they are no longer acting in the best interests of the game. One explained that the inability of the FA to control the commercial side of the game is ‘killing football’:

“All these questions that we deserve to be answered, will never be answered, because the FA has got such a huge vested interest in it at the top level, it’s just such a shame man, money, business, and these shady characters are killing football.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

This section described the supporters’ critical understanding of how the networks of power have developed at the top level of football. The next section demonstrates how supporters perceive that this shift in power relations has impacted the ability of governing bodies – not just the FA – to govern football effectively.

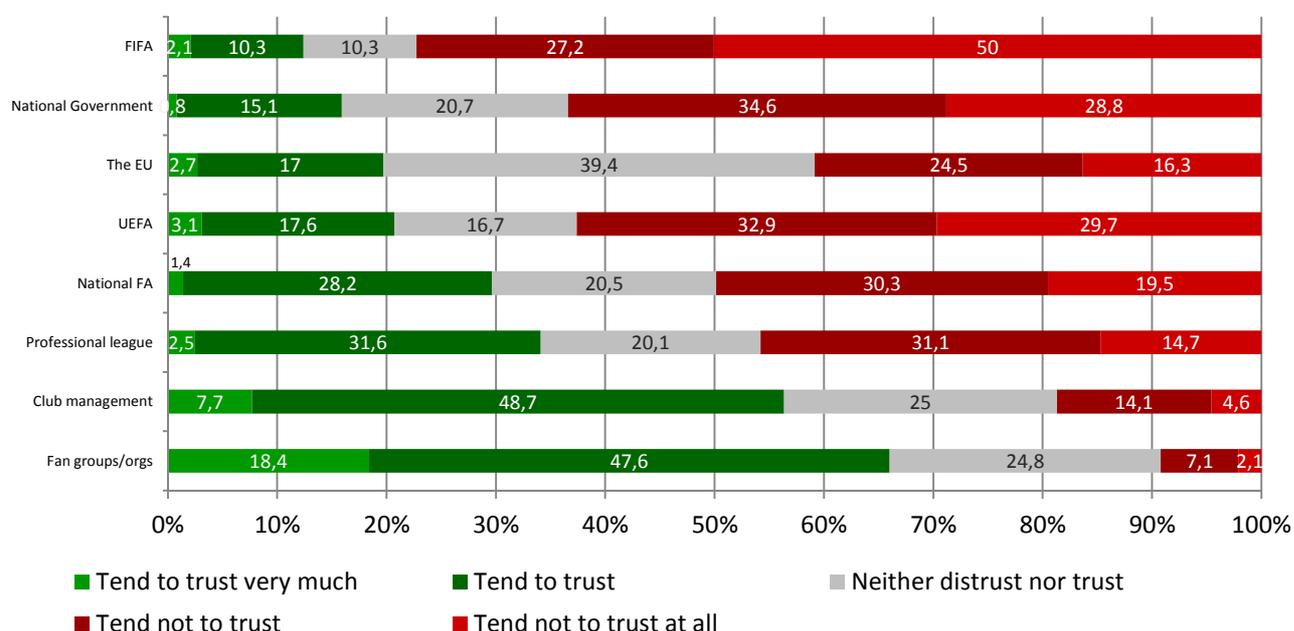
2. A loss of trust in football institutions to govern effectively

“The FA need to be, the guardians of football. I don’t have a lot of trust and faith in them to be honest.”

[#10, male, aged 32, Premier League club]

The FREE *European Football Fans Survey* (online) asked football supporters how much they trusted the different organisations and institutions that govern the sport. The responses (Figure 3) demonstrate that supporters do not have a great deal of trust in any of these organisations, apart from supporter-led ones. Further, it is notable that as the size and the scale of the organisation increases, the trust that supporters have in them appears to decrease.

Figure 3: How much do you tend to trust the following institutions or bodies with regard to the organisation of football?



Unit: percentage. Base: total number of UK respondents (635)

Source: FREE ONLINE Survey (2014)

Given what the data says about club ownership specifically (section 1.3), these figures are interesting with over 50% of respondents stating that they trusted ‘club management’ and less than 20% reporting a lack of trust. Management may in fact be interpreted in this case as a structure that goes beyond the owner, including the board, any trustees, management etc. It might be the case that club management is understood more positively compared to other institutions that are trusted to a lesser degree. What the figures do suggest, however, is the lack of trust in the FA as well as an even lower level of trust in regulatory bodies outside of the UK. Perhaps unsurprisingly given recent corruption stories in the media, FIFA is the least trusted organisation. The UK government and the EU also suffer from a lack of trust regarding football matters, an indication that fans have (slightly) more trust in football institutions than political ones when it comes to the governance of the sport.

The FA received significant criticism from this group of supporters, primarily for failing to do two things that fans believe should be its role: protecting the whole of football (not just the elite) and governing the game effectively.

2.1. The FA is not acting in the best interests of the whole of football

“Clubs like us are just small fry, we don’t bother to people at the top level of the game.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

Supporters considered that the increase in the number of external stakeholders (non-football organisations such as media companies and sponsors), and the power they now hold, has created a situation where they now act in ways that solidify their position and economic/market prowess. This is identified as coming at the expense of the rest of the pyramid, and some supporters were particularly critical of the perceived lack of importance afforded to clubs outside of the elite. The FA was considered as an accomplice in the prioritising of the elite, and criticised for not protecting the whole of the game.

“Most of all, it’s [FA] supine, because, it’s allowed the whole sport to splinter, and then become competing vested interests. And its role is to do completely the opposite, and that is to empower the Premier League clubs to, compete at European level. And to empower, schools to deliver football within the school curriculum. To empower, clubs for kids, to provide the facilities. That’s its job as a governing body, is to empower, and have the strategic plan, so that one section of the game does not become dominant to the disadvantage of the others. And that’s what we have in English football at the moment. I mean it’s never been well run, but the more money that’s come into it the worse it’s been.”

[#20, male, aged 53, League One club]

The aforementioned quote suggests that the networks of power that have developed at the top are now preventing the FA from doing “it’s job as a governing body” – protecting the whole of the sport of football in England.

Supporters believe that the regulatory football bodies have not done enough to protect clubs and their fans from falling prey to damaging owners. In that respect, the different arrangements to check owners or directors of football clubs are ‘fit and proper’ were heavily criticised due to their perceived ineffectiveness and fans believed that the FA should take more responsibility for this. The so-called fit and proper person’s tests (FPPT), designed to decide if an individual is suitable to own or become a director of a club, is the responsibility of the Premier League and the Football League. Even though they are not responsible for enforcing this test at professional clubs, supporters thought that the FA should take more responsibility to ensure that clubs (and their fans) are protected from owners that are not fit to own football clubs. This demonstrates clearly how the perceived weakness of the FA as a governing body may have some elements of constructed reality. Yet, it does not render invalid the analysis that clearly calls for the need of a stronger governing body of the whole game. In that respect, it is necessary to note how much in line the opinions of the participants in the FREE project research are with the recommendations for football governance of the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport.

2.2. The FA is not governing the game effectively

“What is the FAs priority though? What is their priority?”

[#20, male, aged 53, League One club]

As introduced above, fans feel that the role of the FA is to govern football at **all levels**; to protect what they feel are the inherent **values** of the game; and to protect **all parties** with an involvement in football. Yet there is an acceptance that the FA is no longer fulfilling this role – particularly the protection of fans, players and clubs from outside interests that could damage them and their values. This is mostly attributed to the shift in the balance of power in the British game to the more commercial stakeholders, as explained above. The same supporter continued to demonstrate how money often penetrated conversations on this topic.

“They’re not governing the game, at all. Everything that the FA do is reactive ... we’ve had no vision in football as to what we actually want. We’ve only had vision of what can we actually get. How much money can we get? No thought about what is the long term impact, and also how do we spend it? But you’ve got to decide, what is the point of this sport that we are charged with running?”

[#20, male, aged 53, League One club]

The common perception of the FA by this group of supporters is one of a traditional body resistant to change. For example:

“I think the FA are very weak as well, their governance of football is really poor I think, in this country. It’s a lot of old men in there who have their own way, who have got their own political agenda and who don’t care about the game.”

[#1, male, aged 26, Premier League club]

Interestingly, one fan believed that the FA did actually have the power to overrule the other stakeholders, but they chose not to do so because it was in their best interests.

“I think the FA, definitely, they are the one who could put a stop to all the issues with SKY, the money, transfer fees, wage caps and things like that...they could put a stop to it all but they are sitting nice in their offices and they don’t need to change anything, according to them.”

[#12, male, aged 19, Championship club]

These problems are considered to be inherent in the governance of modern football, and fans understand that the decisions made at the top level have a huge impact lower down the pyramid.

It is of interest that even though the survey data highlighted that international governing bodies (FIFA and UEFA) were trusted less than the English FA, it was the FA who were the target of criticism by fans who took part in the qualitative study – very few mentioned FIFA or UEFA. One explanation for this is that supporters in England dominantly experience their football in this country: they are in a sense ‘closer’ to the FA than any other organisation. But the lack of criticism directed at FIFA and UEFA is a notable omission, and suggests that supporters consider the FA to be responsible for the regulation of football in England and it is therefore their failings that have created problems.

3. Lack of recognition of the football supporter

“Supporters seem to be now just customers, pawns in a game for people to make money.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

Supporters felt that they were not considered as important stakeholders in football.

3.1. By those with the controlling power

“How dare they, without asking us? Without us, there wouldn’t be nothing.”

[#14, female, aged 65, Championship club]

Supporters felt that the increasing global fan base of British football and the potential for greater financial gain is encouraging stakeholders such as Sky and the Premier League to shift their focus towards the much larger TV market than that of the limited capacity stadium. Although this was also a complaint about clubs, in creating the financial windfall Sky were considered to blame, as to them, viewing figures are everything. Fans agreed that this reflected a lack of concern for the fan in the ground.

“The attendances do take a massive hit when it’s on Sky, which is not good... TV has got such a stronghold over football fans and, no one wants to step up and do anything about it”

[#12, male, aged 19, Championship club]

This is an interesting perspective because the fans also understand that spectators in the stadium are part of the ‘product’ that TV operators are then trying to sell.

3.2 By the governing bodies

“Is football now, in the view of the FA, for the armchair watcher or the attendee at the stadium?”

[#20, male, aged 53, League One club]

Further, matching their lack of trust in the governing body to act in the best interests of the fans, supporters argued that the FA did not recognise the importance of them for football (and, the importance of football to them).

“It’s quite clear now football is just run at the top of the game by an increasing number of people who A) don’t know anything about football, what it means to people, to the communities and towns, and B) they don’t care, even if they do know they are just not arsed, people who couldn’t care less about us.”

[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]

The fans of Scottish clubs in the sample demonstrated similar opinions towards the SFA:

“I honestly believe that Scottish football authorities have absolutely no regard or thought for the ordinary fan. Unless the hierarchy at a national level and at club level change their attitudes towards those who make this great game of football what it is, then I fear for the future of the game.”

[#36, male, aged 60, Scottish League One club]

One fan felt that Wembley stadium, the ‘home of the FA’, epitomised this lack of respect to the fan in the stadium to prioritise the financial and commercial gain from corporate tickets.

“You’ve got that beautiful stadium you’ve got that middle bit that has all been sold off to whoever, you go to an FA cup final, as your team can, only have 20,000 tickets, how dare they, who the hell do they think they are? That’s our stadium, the peoples’ stadium, not the FA’s ... there was all them empty seats, how dare they, and it really does, that does really wind me up and that’s where the FA has failed the people.”

[#14, female, aged 65, Championship club]

This fan feels that as the national football stadium, this should be considered as the ‘people’s stadium’, but that the FA has not understood this by dedicating a large area to corporate tickets at the expense of the football supporter. Even though the stadium was built by the FA at their cost, and they need to recoup this investment, it is felt here that this approach to ticketing reflects the priorities of the FA: money over the fan experience.

3.3. By clubs/owners

“I appreciate that Sky gives the clubs this much money, my problem is, I am sorry what about us?”

[#14, female, aged 65, Championship club]

Although Sky were considered at fault for offering significant financial encouragement for clubs to prioritise their TV schedule, supporters laid some blame with clubs for allowing this to impact on the supporters who financially and emotionally commit a great deal to the club, particularly season ticket holders. Fans of higher level clubs understood that the revenue they generated for through ticket sales cannot compete with the revenue generated by TV audiences, and felt that this was reflected in the way that clubs related to the local fan base.

“With, like this new [TV] deal they’ve signed, more of the money now is people outside of England who aren’t ever going to be going to games ... But when more of your money’s coming from people that aren’t going to games, then they’re a voice to the clubs and TV and fans are ever less important.”

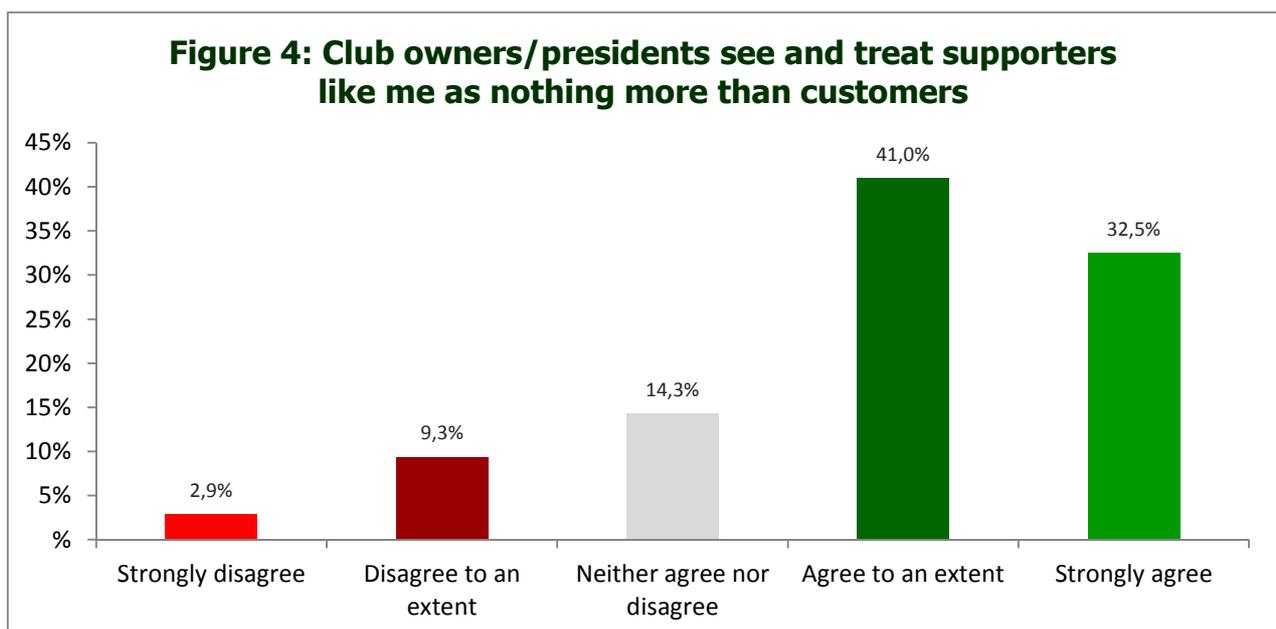
[#4, male, aged 24, Premier League club]

As a result, some fans felt like their clubs considered them more as a consumer than a supporter.

“I think sometimes with United they see you as a customer, as opposed to someone who necessarily puts their heart and soul into going to the games, pays a lot of money, does all the graft, and then they will replace you with someone who, really, they could just get more money out of.”

[#1, male, aged 26, Premier League club]

The survey data supports this concern, as 73.5% of UK respondents felt that their club owner treated them as customers with only 12.2% disagreeing with this (Figure 4).



Unit: percentage. Base: total number of UK respondents (635) / Source: FREE ONLINE Survey (2014)

Conclusions and Recommendations

In order to develop a greater understanding of the potential for supporter involvement in football governance, this policy paper asked the fundamental question that forms the basis of any policy proposals or recommendations: What do supporters actually think about football governance?

Conclusions

The fans who took part in the FREE Project demonstrated a critical awareness of the current state of football governance and outlined a number of concerns they had. The thoughts of this group of fans lead to the conclusion that there is **a clear demand for further regulation of football**. Supporters are heavily critical of the current network of power that controls the game, expressing that this has weakened the governing body of football, which is no longer fulfilling its purpose. This is in line with the conclusions of the House of Commons' enquiry into football governance. Although fans discussed ticket prices, safe standing, TV scheduling and other issues that affected them individually, greater concern was expressed at the difficulties facing football as a whole. This is mainly reflected on two problems that were identified of outmost importance: the loss of community connections and the feeling that football, particularly at the top level, does not value its fans.

Recommendations

Based on the perceptions of supporters in the FREE Project, we propose the following recommendations.

- ④ **Stakeholders across domestic football should consider why fans believe that football is in need of more regulation, and work together to begin to address this.** Supporters are concerned that the current network of power allows the different parties involved to absolve themselves of responsibility when it comes to making changes to benefit the game. If football is to continue to be governed in this way, all stakeholders must find a way to work together for the good of the whole game, not just the top level.
- ④ **The current network of power may be cementing the position of the Premier League on a global scale, but it is alienating the fan in the stadium.** The power held by those with the greatest financial stake is perceived by this sample of supporters to be skewed, unfair and unreflective of the wider football pyramid in the country. Whilst this will be difficult to address in the current free market economy, the Premier League and television operators should develop a greater understanding of the fan in the stadium, and strive to show that they are valued. If properly understood, the consideration of supporters in the stadium as co-creators of what is being broadcast can only be positive for the commercial development of the product. This also makes good business sense, as empty stadiums will limit the appeal of the televised product. We therefore recommend the clubs, the leagues and the television operators to consider the impact that their commercial activities may have on those attending the stadium and whether it may affect the value of the product. This can be done by positively engaging with supporters' organisations at local and national level.
- ④ **The FA should address the concerns supporters have that they are no longer fit for purpose.** These are not new criticisms and they have been articulated by the DCMS (2011, 2013). The FA should evaluate their role in the current game and focus their priorities. Fans are unclear what the priority is for the FA in the current football context; they would benefit from outlining this and communicating it to fans so they are aware of their remit and limitations. They should respond to the repeated calls for reform and improve the representativeness of their council and decision-making boards. **We strongly recommend including supporters in the consultative and decision-making bodies of the FA.**

We recommend that at least two representatives of the supporters are elected by independent supporters' organisations into the FA Council. We would also recommend the FA to study the inclusion of a representative of the supporters as an independent director of the FA board. These recommendations are in line with the good governance indicators designed by Jean-Loup Chappelet as part of the Basic Indicators for Best Governance in International Sport (BIBGIS), one of the leading models in assessing good governance in sport.

- ④ **Clubs must engage more with their supporters**, or risk losing them. Rising ticket prices were less of a concern to fans than the loss of community values that they are currently experiencing. Supporters do not feel valued, and it is this that may turn them away from the game. This has to be more than a tokenistic relationship, but a structure of genuine fan consultation and involvement on key issues that makes them feel part of the club. Legislation may be the only way to ensure this, but forcing clubs to engage with fans is unlikely to create a genuine culture of fan involvement. To be most effective, change must be motivated from within clubs. We recommend clubs recognise 'fan equity', defined as the intrinsic value that fans and local communities bring to the club. In doing this, clubs will soon find areas where cooperation with supporters can yield results.

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Appendix 1: Qualitative phase participant details

A total of 37 football supporters based in England, Scotland and Wales volunteered to take part in the qualitative phase of the FREE Project. Their anonymised details are below.

#	Age	Gender	Country	Level of club supported ^{10 11}	Season ticket holder	Supporters' Trust member	National supporter org member ¹²
1	26	Male	England	Premier League	Y	Y	N
2	50	Female	England	Premier League	Y	Y	Y
3	26	Female	England	Premier League	Y	N	N
4	24	Male	England	Premier League	Y	N	N
5	36	Male	England	Premier League	N	Y	Y
6	47	Male	England	Premier League	Y	Y	N
7	40	Male	England	Premier League	Y	N	N
8	51	Male	England	Premier League	Y	Y	Y
9	20	Male	England	Premier League	N	Y	N
10	32	Male	Wales	Premier League	Y	Y	N
11	45	Female	England	Championship	Y	Y	N
12	19	Male	England	Championship	Y	N	Y
13	25	Male	England	Championship	N	Y	N
14	65	Female	England	Championship	Y	Y	N
15	65	Male	England	Championship	Y	N	N
16	56	Male	England	Championship	Y	N	N
17	37	Male	England	Championship	Y	N	N
18	27	Male	England	Championship	Y	N	N
19	32	Male	England	Championship	N	N	Y
20	53	Male	England	League One	Y	N	N
21	19	Male	England	League One	N	N	N
22	45	Male	England	League One	N	N	N
23	38	Male	England	League Two	N	Y	Y
24	44	Male	England	League Two	Y	Y	Y
25	50	Male	England	League Two	N	N	N
26	43	Male	England	League Two	N	N	N
27	47	Male	England	League Two	N	N	N
28	44	Male	England	League Two	N	Y	Y
29	43	Male	Wales	Conference	N	Y	Y
30	30	Female	England	Non-League	N	N	N
31	39	Male	Scotland	Scottish PL	N	N	N
32	63	Male	Scotland	Scottish PL	Y	N	N
33	23	Female	Scotland	Scottish PL	N	N	N
34	47	Male	Scotland	Scottish L1	N	N	N
35	32	Male	Scotland	Scottish L1	N	Y	N
36	60	Male	Scotland	Scottish L1	Y	Y	N
37	22	Female	England	Bundesliga 1	N	N	N

10 At the time of the study.

11 Participants often had a 'second' club in a different league that they also spoke about.

12 For example Supporters Direct, Football Supporters Federation.

Summary of qualitative phase participant details

Gender		
	#	%
Male	30	81%
Female	7	19%

Age		
	#	%
18-25	7	19%
26-35	7	19%
36-45	10	27%
46-55	8	22%
56-65	5	13%
Average (mean) age = 39.59		

Level of club supported		
	#	%
Premier League	10	27%
Championship	9	24%
League One	3	8%
League Two	6	16%
Non-League	2	6%
<i>English Leagues Total</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>81%</i>
Scottish Premier League	3	8%
Scottish Championship	0	0%
Scottish League One	3	8%
<i>Scottish Leagues Total</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>16%</i>
International	1	3%

Season Ticket Holder		
	#	%
Yes	19	51%
No	18	49%

Supporters Trust Member		
	#	%
Yes	17	46%
No	20	54%

National Supporter Organisation Member		
	#	%
Yes	9	24%
No	28	76%