

WHOSE GAME IS IT?

Football governance through the eyes of the supporters



The FREE Project Football governance policy papers

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

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:

- ☉ 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)
- ☉ 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.
- ☉ 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 #2: What could be done to improve football governance?

Policy paper #1 in the series discussed what supporters actually think about football governance. It concluded that supporters are dissatisfied with current football governance in the UK, and feel that the game is in need of increased regulation. An unequal distribution of power at the top level of football is believed to have caused a shift in power towards external stakeholders and away from the Football Association. This has resulted in a loss of trust in football institutions, particularly the governing body, to govern effectively. Further, supporters feel that their importance to the game is not recognised by the football authorities, external stakeholders or their clubs, particularly those at the elite level. Supporters however had a number of thoughts concerning how the governance of football in the UK might be better regulated.

This second paper explores the opinions of supporters and their suggestions on how to improve football governance. Supporters who took part in the FREE Project generally made suggestions in two areas: (1) football governance reform, and (2) the need for greater supporter involvement. These will now be discussed in turn, using examples from the qualitative data (37 ‘engaged’ supporters in the UK).¹³

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

Executive Summary

Policy paper #1 discussed how supporters who took part in the study conducted by the FREE project were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with current football governance. Whilst there was general agreement about the need for increased regulation, supporters gave varied perceptions concerning how (and if) this might be achieved.

1. Football reform

Supporters understood that any improvements made to football governance had to start at the very top if they were to be successful. The overriding belief that this had to start with the FA: as the governing body for football, they should reform and make changes in order to be able to fulfil this role. The majority of the fans who took part study stated however that this would require external pressure. Some fans claimed that the government should intervene to ensure that reform happened, whereas others believed that sport was not the place for state intervention.

The financial situation of the game was of key concern to fans at all levels. Fans stressed that one outcome of any football reform should be a fairer distribution of the money currently flowing into the game at the top.

2. Increased supporter involvement

As supporters were critical of the lack of value assigned to the fan, they believed that a greater role for them in football governance could help to improve things for the fan. Again however this was considered unlikely without external pressure being applied to clubs to make them engage with their supporter base. Increased supporter involvement alone would not make a great difference; it would need to be in combination with wider football reform.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the perceptions of supporters who participated in the research study conducted by the FREE researchers, we can propose the following recommendations.

- ☉ It is vital that **supporters are actively involved in any decision-making processes** concerning policy recommendations for change.
- ☉ The FA should address the concerns supporters have that they are no longer fit for purpose. They should **respond to calls for reform** and improve the representativeness of their council and decision-making boards.
- ☉ Clubs must **engage more with their supporters**, or risk losing them. Supporters do not feel valued, and it is this that may turn them away from the game.
- ☉ **Supporter involvement in football governance** can begin to address the lack of fan engagement. But any steps clubs take towards this must be devised with supporters.

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 2015.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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*¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.

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

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

16 The Football Task Force 1999a, 1999b

17 <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:

- ① a telephone survey statistically representative of each partner country's population¹⁸ (total sample 7,252, UK sample 1,044; margin of statistical error: ±3.4, 95% confidence interval)
- ② an on-line survey statistically significant and targeted at a specific sub-group of the population, the football supporters¹⁹ (total sample 11,384; UK sample 635)
- ③ in-depth qualitative research with football supporters that signed up to take part in the project. Fans²⁰ 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

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

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

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

Introduction

Supporters are dissatisfied with current football governance in the UK, and feel that the game is in need of increased regulation. An unequal distribution of power at the top level of football is believed to have caused a shift in power towards external stakeholders and away from the Football Association. This has resulted in a loss of trust in football institutions, particularly the governing body, to govern effectively. Further, supporters feel that their importance to the game is not recognised by the football authorities, external stakeholders or their clubs, particularly those at the elite level.

Whilst supporters were generally in agreement about the current state of football governance, ideas about how to address these problems were more varied. The most pessimistic feel that nothing could be done; power networks are now so entrenched and so dominated by money that the situation is beyond challenge and change. These fans revealed that they could only therefore enjoy football if they gave little consideration to their concerns – as they felt nothing could be done to address these – and concentrate on enjoying football as best they could. Particularly for fans of lower league clubs, this involves distancing themselves from the Premier League and the rest of the elite level of football and focussing on their own level.

“It doesn’t matter, it’s too late now. I worry there’s nothing we can do to stop it. And the best, the only thing from my point of view, because I don’t like it, is to turn my back on it. I just want to watch some football.”

[#23, male, aged 38, League Two club²¹]

“I don’t think it will change until, the money dries up, and I can’t see the money drying up unless people stop watching football! And it’s like a vicious circle isn’t it?”

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

Discussions around what could and should be done generally fell into two areas: football reform, and increased supporter involvement. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive, as calls for football reform have acknowledged the need for increased supporter engagement and representation in governance. However the perceptions of this group of supporters did involve a separation of the two: the former is very much about governing body reform, whilst the latter is very much confined to the club level. For that reason, and for the sake of clarity, football reform and supporter involvement have been identified as two different sections below.

1. Football reform

“I would completely change the top, because unless you do that, any other changes are not going to be as successful as they could be.”

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

At the top level of football governance, fans felt strongly that significant changes needed to be made to even attempt to disrupt the current balance of power, an essential step in starting to change the sport for the better. Supporters argued that this could only be achieved by a strengthening of the Football Association, either from within or under pressure from external sources.

²¹ Gender, age and level of club are given to contextualise each quote. See Appendix 1 for details of their level of engagement with football.

1.1. Football Association reform

“I would change the Football Association from top to bottom, throw it out and start again.”

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

Following heavy criticism of the Football Association, it was unsurprising that many respondents considered this the first port of call for football reform. Supporters believed that the FA was currently weak and unfit for purpose, and felt that this needed to be addressed as a fundamental step to improving football governance.

“If we can’t have an FA, I’d like an effective governing body even if it’s newly created. There has to be something, because what we have now is not good enough, it does not place football fans at the heart ... I mean I don’t see why you can’t have good stadiums, good facilities, and low prices because of their revenue now with TV deal.”

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

“I wish the FA, would go back to basics, to its roots, which was the association of football.”

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

The lack of independence within the FA is a concern to supporters, who stressed that the governing body cannot be trusted to make decisions for the benefit of the whole game at present. Vested interests at the top are strong enough to influence decisions, in the eyes of the supporters.

“Maybe set up an advisory body with the FA and get them more involved in doing it cos I think the FA are very weak ... they’re more sort of focused on trying to get their own way, on certain issues, and I think they need to take a long hard look at themselves, reform and go in the right direction, it’ll help football. It’s an idealist view, but not realistic, I don’t think it will happen.”

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

Whilst the FA came under criticism from the participants in our research, it needs to be acknowledged that it has also taken positive decisions for English football. However, it should be a call of attention for the FA and other football stakeholders that fans in this research dominantly held a negative perception of the FA. This is, to a certain extent, a socially constructed perception, but a strong one that must not be taken lightly, as suggested in paper #1. There was however some optimism for the future of the Football Association, and this suggests that the two main aspects to be addressed in order to regain the trust of fans are honesty and transparency. It is interesting that despite a mostly negative view of the current FA, the participants expressed an overwhelming support for the concept of a football governing body.

“I think it’s been improving recently with the FA, it’s good that they’ve acknowledged that changes need to be made. They certainly have their flaws but, I think, in comparison to FIFA and UEFA, it’s certainly a lot more honest, a lot more transparent, which I think is good.”

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

Although few fans referred to international governing bodies, here the FA are considered in a more positive light when compared to FIFA and UEFA. We could conclude therefore that although the FA received the brunt of criticism from fans, this was because they perceived that they are the body who are (or should be) responsible for national football governance. Therefore considering the criticisms fans had of the current state of football it is unsurprising that these were aligned with criticisms of the FA. When placed in an international context, alongside FIFA and UEFA, the FA can be seen in a more positive light. The criticisms of the FA should not be understood in an entirely negative light: they suggests that the fans care enough about the FA, and believe enough in the concept of a national governing body, that they would like to see changes made to improve its efficiency and its reputation. In this respect, the analysis of the participants in our research is surprisingly similar to the enquiry into football governance by the House of Commons select committee on Culture, Media and Sport.

1.2. Government intervention

“I don’t think the Government really should get involved in sport in general but this has been going on for far too long.”

[#3, female, aged 26, Premier League club]

Fans were divided as to whether they felt that the government should intervene, and pass legislation to force the Football Association and other stakeholders at the top end of the sport to reform and make changes to benefit the game. Some of the respondents highlighted that government ‘interference’ was the only option given the current dominance of economic powers over other football considerations.

“I think the government should force, even if it’s a case of enforce clubs to have a fans forum or get it so that fans could some kind of, fans could have a minority stake in the club, so that fans can have a voice at the clubs. So for me I think it should be forced through, possibly legislation and then, in the long term, that could then be phased out once it’s, become established.”

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

But fans understood that this could be difficult, due to the current stakeholders’ network of governance, coupled with a difficult historical relationship between the government and football fans.

“If the Conservative coalition Government, or even a Labour Government, if they’re in bed with the Premier League and they realise there’s a whole host of benefits for what’s going on, it ain’t going to happen.”

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

I don’t think any government is strong enough to implement it. There’s a lot of distrust between the government and clubs, especially after what happened with Hillsborough and everything like that, and, the consequences that have come out of that is I think there’s a lot of distrust over how the government have dealt with football in the past, and how they deal with fans.”

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

The government is not the only power that could force football reform. It was also suggested that in working with UEFA and/or FIFA, real pressure could be applied for change, although again it was admitted that this was unlikely.

“I think the government should go to FIFA. I mean admittedly FIFA is equally corrupt. But I mean it can’t do anything without the say so of FIFA and UEFA. Although I would tend to go to UEFA really, rather than FIFA, and just say, this cannot go on. We want to start again. But yeah the government has got the power to do that, the government could abolish the Football Association, although it won’t at the moment because FIFA will say no government interference.”

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

1.3. Encouraging and facilitating development below the top of the pyramid

In response to perceptions that football governance structures privilege the top level of the game, supporters were clear that this needs addressing. But what would they like to see done? Supporters believe that revenue distribution is an area where major changes need to occur, as this would positively impact the game as a whole.

“The FA could direct more money into, catering facilities, toilet facilities. Make going to the other part of football, instead of just watching, much more pleasant for people. They would then stay in the ground longer, they would come earlier. You could build up more of a community spirit in the ground ... But, that to me is something the governing body, should make money

available to clubs. What's the cost of that relative to the amount of money that comes into football. Because the fans will not accept that they spent a million pounds on upgrading the toilets and got relegated."

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

Fans of lower league professional clubs, in particular, felt strongly about the way money enters football at the top of the pyramid and very little filters down to them. But there was also dissatisfaction with the amount of money filtering even further down the pyramid, to the grassroots level of the game, where fans often either played themselves or were involved through their children. This perception of financial distribution is perhaps understandable given the £1 billion per year deal for 2013-16 that the Premier League signed during the period of this research. However, there is here a belief amongst some fans that the FA is responsible for the distribution of financial resources that come into the game. Whilst the FA receives (and therefore does indeed redistribute) income from the broadcasting rights of FA Cup and England matches, this is a significantly smaller amount than the Premier League receives and is responsible for redistributing. What fans were clear about was the need for 'football' as an entity to redress what they perceive as a growing imbalance between the top of football and the grassroots.

"I don't mind that amount of money coming in. But how many artificial football pitches could be built from 10% of the current television deal? A lot."

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

"I would love to see TV money distributed fairly."

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

"I would love to see like just the disparity of wealth being spread completely, so everyone, juniors, women, men etc, everyone is on a much more even keel. I'd love to see all the money that is being used in the business side, let's bring that right back down and, put that into a grassroots programme."

[#33, female, aged 23, Scottish Premier League club]

However, shifting the focus from the top level of the game is not purely understood in a financial sense. Supporters would like to see the lower levels, and others who are less visible such as women's football, receive greater attention and more encouraged to develop.

"I'd like to see more coverage of the not premier league. I'd like to see more coverage of the other British leagues in both men and women's football."

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

"If I'm a football coach, I want the FA to place *me* at the heart of their coach education vision. If I'm a football fan of a grassroots club, can my local authority come together with my local FA, with all the people that matter, and place our club at the heart of our community? Who's taking strategic leadership for our societies, for our communities? No one is because we come under big banners."

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

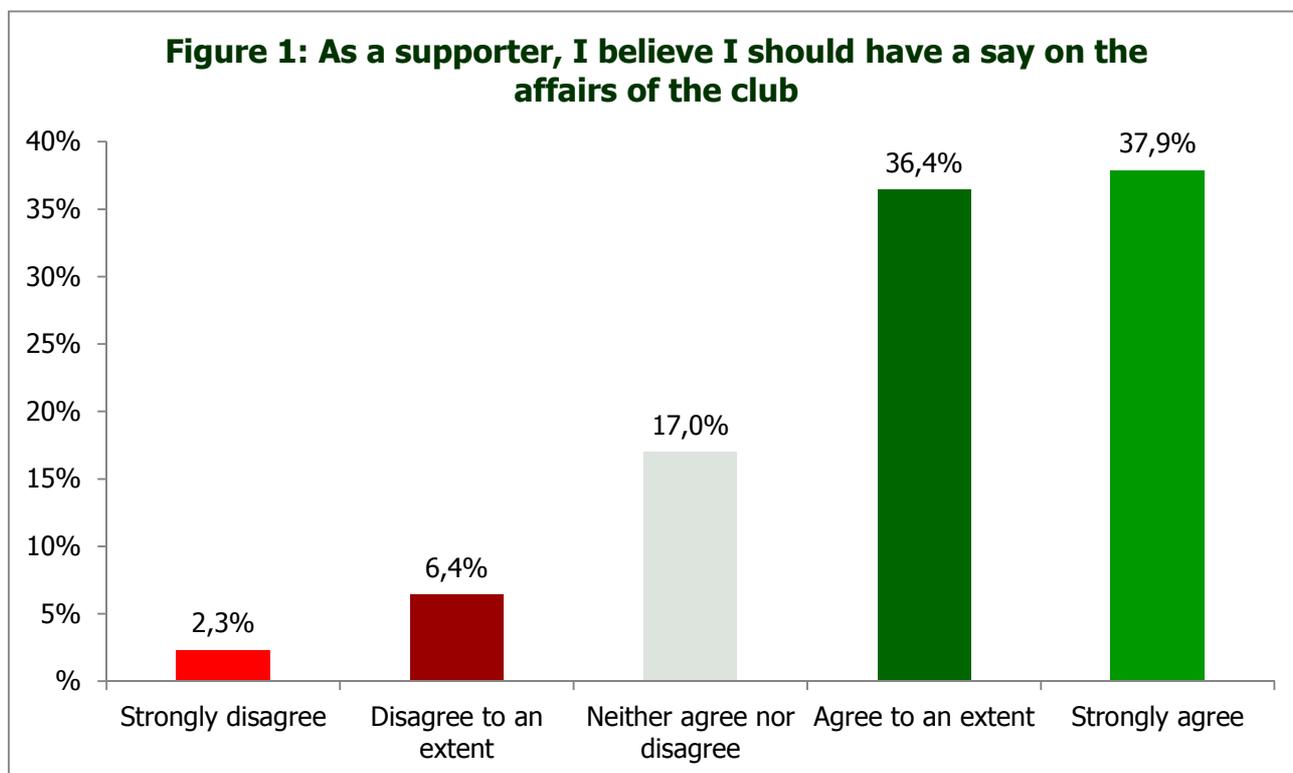
This is clearly in parallel with what fans feel that football should be about: the people, be it fans, players, coaches, at all levels of the sport.

2. Increased supporter involvement

“I don’t think they understand what a stake supporters have in it.”

[#2, female, aged 50, Premier League club]

Respondents to the FREE online survey overwhelmingly felt that fans should play a greater role in football club governance (Figure 1).



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

This proclamation was further illustrated by the thoughts of the fans who discussed the issue of football reform. They felt that increased supporter involvement at the club level could challenge the network of power that they believe is detaching clubs from their communities.

“This isn’t Sky football’s game, we’re stewards of it, as I keep saying and the game is much bigger, it’s about community, it’s about identity, and if you take identity out of everything in society, as well as football, then we lose big time.”

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

Although participants are eager to discuss issues around the power relationships at the top of the game and the wider governance of football, it is at their club and local level where they want to be involved. Supporters seek improved communication with their clubs because they are eager to get involved and help the club move forward. However, there was little discussion of the need for supporters to be involved in governance beyond the local/club level. Interestingly, supporters have more faith in what can be achieved through coordinated action in their clubs than on regulation of legislation. It is perceived that legislation may lead to tokenistic reform, whereas supporters working together *en masse* could however pose a threat to the current *status quo*. Supporters are clearly demanded a **change in the culture of football** and a change in the way football clubs liaise with their supporters. They realise that as a collective, the fans have a degree of power:

“I think the way it [change] will happen won’t be by legislation, it will be by the likes of us trying to negotiate and giving a return for those that have took the game.”

[#8, male, aged 51, Premier League club]

“When power is in the hands of very few, if those very few people are directly benefiting from the power, either financially or emotionally, why are they going to change that? And it’s only, the power of the masses that can change that, and you have to find a way for that to happen.”

[#29, male, aged 43, Non-League club]

Although recognising the power that supporters might have, participants were pessimistic about this happening, returning then the issue of legislation as perhaps the only way to ensure real supporter involvement in football governance.

“I think it’s up to the smaller clubs to band together and say enough’s enough. But I can’t see that in the foreseeable future to be honest, all you can do is try and look after yourself.”

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

“I don’t see that [supporter representation at clubs] happening, from a ground swell of supporters demanding it. I think the higher levels of the game have got to go, actually, supporters are an important part of the game, you’ve got to find a way of bringing them back into it. And by saying that they have to have a place on boards, for instance.”

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

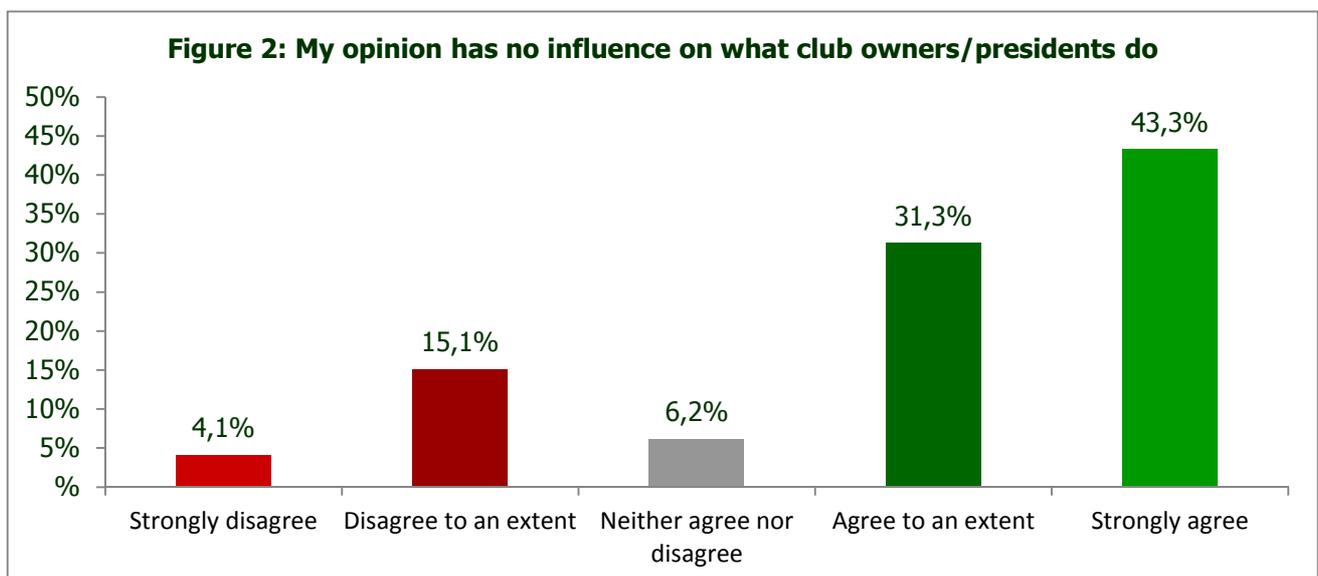
Thus, one can see here a complex and vicious circle that explains why supporters are unsure as to how best to reform football. This is very clear in the conflicting thoughts about legislation offered by supporters #8 and #4. Supporters are eager to jump into action because they feel they can contribute to redress the problems they perceive in football. However, they feel so alienated by current governance structures that, in turn, they struggle to identify precisely how to get involved and what role they can play. Although supporters fear legislation may lead to tokenistic and not genuine reform, it was clear in the eyes of the participants in our research that pressure from the top in the form of legislation may be the only way in which the mobilisation from the bottom can have a real impact in the governance of the game.

2.1. Club-Supporter Engagement

“The fans are a big part of the game and I think sometimes the clubs take them for granted.” WP

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

Football clubs and their owners were heavily criticised for failing to engage with their fans. The survey data highlighted that fans feel that they do not have any influence on their clubs (Figure 2).



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

Supporters understand that at the top level of the game, TV and sponsorship deals are growing at a greater rate than match-day income, and believe that this privileges the TV audience over the fan in the stadium.

“When you look at the income from your support, against the income from everything else, then really is the support side of a major significance for the owners, in the hierarchy, because it’s not ... sadly, the base support isn’t a great deal of money to them. And sometimes you feel that’s how football is reflected, a bit, in the way you’re treated.”

[#15, male, aged 65, Championship club]

Most fans expressed that they wanted their club to recognise their investment (financial and emotional) and value them as more than customers. The first step to involving supporters more has to be the recognition of their importance. Once this has been achieved, fans believe that clubs will be more prepared to engage with their supporters in order to build a relationship with them.

“I think they [fans] are just seen as people to make money out of at the minute, I think they need to be put more, back into the club.”

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

“Clubs need to absolutely say, right, fans are the core, they’re the one constant that we know we’re always going to have, and they’re our stability, our chance to be sustainable, our chance to grow, etc, etc, therefore they must engage better.”

[#3, female, aged 26, Premier League club]

Fans of smaller clubs felt that they did have more of an opportunity to be involved. It was mainly those in the top two tiers, and particularly the Premier League, that believed that their club could and should do a lot more to make supporters feel a valued part.

“Even if they just had open discussions with the fans a few times a year to try and get an understanding of what people feel, and try and abate people’s fears and work on things like ticket pricing, I think it would be a lot better for a lot of fans in the game. I think clubs are starting to do that slowly, but it’s not quick enough.”

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

“You want the club to take a leading role and say, no we’re going to be different, we’re going to build this relationship with our fans, there isn’t going to be a token relationship. Liverpool have a supporters’ committee that is a token relationship. So you would like a club to say, no, we’re going to, we’re going to cut these prices now, we want you through the gate, get with the team. So it’s got to be the club as well, the club has to lead, in something that’s more than just a corporate social responsibility.”

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

Fans overwhelmingly felt that it was their club who should take responsibility for engaging with their fans and involving them, even if only on a consultation basis. Whilst legislation demanding clubs engage with supporters was discussed, fans felt that this could only be genuine and beneficial (as opposed to a token offering) if it came from a recognition within the clubs themselves that supporters are important stakeholders, are of value to the club, and therefore should be acknowledged and treated as such.

This can be related to the concept of co-creation, a modern approach in the marketing literature. Co-creation refers to the role that spectators play, together with those on the pitch, in creating the product that is sold to television operators. Still in its infancy, co-creation is for example being praised in some German football clubs which effectively liaise with their fans to discuss different choreographies and needs to create a visually attractive atmosphere. Some French rugby clubs, such as Stade Français, have also developed co-creation strategies. We would encourage football clubs to reflect on these concepts and to develop their thinking along these lines in order to work together with their fans in what can be a win-win situation for both the club and the supporters.

2.2. Supporter Ownership

“I look at something like the Bundesliga and I go, actually why can't football in England be like that?”

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

Do fans want to own their football club? The German model was cited many times as the ideal. Participants admired the 50+1 ownership regulations in Germany, believing that this was a major reason for the perceived superiority of the fan football experience in that country. However, most supporters admitted that although this was the ideal in their eyes, it was not something that they thought could become a reality in the UK. The most common club discussed in terms of the ideal in the UK was Swansea City – 20% owned by the Supporters Trust. Fans believed that this model could be achieved by all clubs, whereas complete fan ownership was perceived as out of reach of the top levels of the game.

“I would love to see, how Swansea are, 20% [owned by] the fans, and there is genuine consultation, with fans, where they have an actual, genuine, say, in decision making. That I think would be the ideal scenario.”

[#3, female, aged 26, Premier League club]

The word ‘genuine’ repeatedly came up during discussions of supporter engagement and involvement. Fans want a *genuine* say at their clubs, not a token offering, and see part ownership as a way to achieve this without the financial risk of full ownership.

Despite championing supporter involvement in football club governance, fans in this study were on the whole not convinced that supporter ownership and the Supporters Trust model is the only possible answer. Those who supported the notion of full ownership were in the minority, and even they acknowledged the difficulties faced by this model. It is considered a financial risk, and as explained above, incompatible with the elite level of football and the monetary demands required to compete in the Premier League.

These issues are followed up and explored in more depth in Policy Papers #3 and #4.

Conclusion and recommendations

When asking what could be done to improve football regulation, a great disparity of opinions was found. Whilst Policy Paper #1 demonstrated that a diagnosis on football's current state of affairs was fairly consensual and consistent, this paper concludes that how to actually address those concerns is clearly more difficult. The majority of supporters who participated in the FREE study affirmed that external regulation and legislation was necessary, whilst others disagreed. However, reform at the top of the game was an overriding suggestion, with the Football Association a particular target for change. Fans also agreed that supporters should be better represented in football governance at club level, so their financial and emotional investment could be recognised.

Recommendations

Based on the FREE project's research, we can propose the following recommendations.

- ☉ **Football stakeholders should seriously consider the implementation of the recommendations made by the House of Commons enquiry into football governance.** The participants in our research reached similar conclusions in their analysis to the Select Committee on Media, Culture and Sport. The lack of engagement with fans and the weak role of the FA as a governing body were both addressed by the parliamentary enquiry. The recommendations deserve a more serious reaction from football stakeholders than what has been done.
- ☉ **It is vital that supporters are included in any decision-making processes concerning policy recommendations for football reform.** They make a significant emotional and financial investment into the game, and although calls for their increased involvement are welcome, they must be actively incorporated in the implementation of any changes. The FREE project is just the very beginning of this, as its research was designed to empower the participant supporters.
- ☉ **Supporter involvement in football club governance structures** is a way to address the lack of representation and the lack of engagement with fans. But this must be a well-thought through process that includes supporters in the decision making. Any recommendations of how clubs do this should be designed with supporters themselves in an attempt to meet their varying needs, concerns and capabilities.
- ☉ **Clubs must engage more with their supporters, or risk losing them.** Supporters do not feel valued, and for that reason may turn 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 their 'fan equity', that is 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 positive changes.
- ☉ **The change of culture in supporter engagement needs to start with initiatives that demonstrate the commitment of the club to the fan.** We would recommend the development of supporter representative structures at each club, such as supporters' forums or annual supporters congress. Clubs can also create awards for community or fan engagement. In order to achieve a genuine relationship, it is necessary to make it visible, so that the culture of engagement can evolve.

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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 ^{22 23}	Season ticket holder	Supporters' Trust member	National supporter org member ²⁴
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

22 At the time of the study.

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

24 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%