WHOSE GAME IS IT?

Football governance through the eyes of the supporters

The FREE Project
Football governance policy papers

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

The first two policy papers in this series explored the demand for further regulation of football from supporters. Taken together, they conclude that supporters have an acute understanding of the problems with current football governance and are highly critical of how it is governed at the top level. A number of suggestions were made to address the problems highlighted including reform, government intervention and increased supporter involvement.

This paper explores the latter point in more detail. If supporters are to be more involved in football governance – and there has been a recent policy focus on the way that this could improve football governance – what form might this take? Are supporters seeking out opportunities to involve themselves in football governance, at their clubs or elsewhere? Calling for greater supporter involvement is an important step, but it is vital to gain a greater understanding of how supporters feel about this. Policy recommendations in the area (DCMS 2011, 2013) very much focus on the role of supporter trusts and the work of Supporters Direct. However, one of the findings is that there is a variety of avenues through which supporters would like to be involved with football, not necessarily club ownership via a supporters trust., This paper analyses the supporters' extent of engagement with football governance themselves, and the dynamics around this. It further investigates the scope for supporter engagement and the potential barriers that fans see to their involvement by current governance structures.

The following paper in the series – Policy Paper #4 – focuses exclusively on club ownership and supporter trusts.

Executive summary

This paper is part of a series addressing the absence of the supporter voice in current discussions of football governance. 37 'heavily engaged' football supporters were asked to discuss their thoughts and experiences of supporter engagement in football governance. They were unanimously in favour of increased supporter representation in football governance, but differed in their personal engagement with the different options available to them as fans.

1. Reasons supporters get involved in club governance

The most common reason for becoming involved in football governance was cited as reactive, either in response to or in anticipation of a crisis in their club. This was generally a form of oppositional action: going against somebody and something in their club. A less-cited reason for involvement was described as proactive, and was more likely to entail working with their club in a voluntary capacity – to make a contribution to their club.

2. Reasons supporters do not get involved in club governance

As well as understanding why supporters get involved in governance at their club, we also asked why others don't. Reasons generally fell into two areas: either practical (not living in the locality, time) or related to their understanding of supporter involvement (not interested, not wanting to oppose anything, or because groups have no power). These barriers are not insurmountable. Participants discussed how they had overcome practical barriers; conceptual barriers are related to perceptions have the potential to be challenged.

3. The benefits of supporter involvement in football club governance

Supporters that were actively involved in their clubs, particularly those where trusts have a genuine say in the running of their club, described a number of benefits. Involvement can benefit fans individually by creating a feeling of contributing to the club's success, of giving back, and feeling more involved and connected to the club. Fans are also benefited collectively, by increasing their power and voice at their club. More obviously, fan engagement can help clubs, both financially in contributing to their survival and continued existence but also practically through providing support and time.

Conclusion and recommendations

- Clubs and supporter groups should work to **improve proactive supporter engagement**: encouraging fans to get involved in governance for altruistic reasons.
- Supporter groups and organisations can learn from **asking fans** why they do not get involved in governance. Many barriers can be overcome.
- **Supporters can benefit** from engaging with their clubs, both individually and collectively. This needs to be stressed by supporter groups.

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.[25] 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.[26]

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*[27] 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.[28]

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.

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

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

27   The Football Task Force 1999a, 1999b

28   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:

- a telephone survey statistically representative of each partner country's population[29] (total sample 7,252, UK sample 1,044; margin of statistical error: ±3.4, 95% confidence interval)
- an on-line survey statistically significant and targeted at a specific sub-group of the population, the football supporters[30] (total sample 11,384; UK sample 635)
- in-depth qualitative research with football supporters that signed up to take part in the project. Fans[31] 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

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

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

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

Introduction

Supporters' trusts are perhaps the most visible way for fans to become involved in governance at their club. This is the model acknowledged in recent policy calls to increase supporter involvement in governance, with the DCMS (2011, 2013) recommending the removal of barriers to supporter ownership and financial support and long-term strategy for Supporters Direct. Around 75% of professional clubs in England and Scotland - as well as many non-league clubs - have supporter trusts, and particularly at the lower levels of the game these have been instrumental in ensuring the survival of many clubs who have faced a financial crisis. But it is important to recognise the other avenues available to supporters wishing to get involved in football club governance, such as fan forums, councils, supporter associations, and official and unofficial fan groups.

Of the 37-strong sample that composed our study in the UK, 8 supporters declared not to have any involvement in governance at their club. 16 were members of a supporters trust. 17 were members of other supporter groups or organisations that had a role at their club (3 were members of a trust *and* another group). Figure 1 (below) shows the membership of different supporter groups, broken down into active and inactive members. To be categorised as an active member, fans had to be involved beyond paying a membership fee: attending meetings, events, holding committee positions, helping to fundraise, or other organisational duties. Inactive members were those who had no further involvement than paying a fee or signing up to be a member. It is important to include this distinction when considering the extent to which supporters are involved in football governance. Although membership numbers are important to supporter groups – particularly trusts, where financial contributions are often vital to club survival – it is interesting to see how many supporters go beyond this and devote time and energy to football governance through becoming what we have termed *active* members.
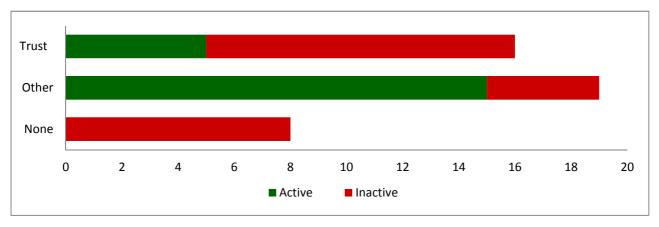

Figure 1 demonstrates that although membership of trusts compared to other groups is fairly similar, in terms of active members trusts have a much smaller share. This data is not presented to suggest that this is a pattern to be found acrss supporter groups, but that it is an interesting feature of this particular sample of engaged football fans. Over two thirds of our sample who were members of a supporters trust did not get involved beyond paying their membership fee. In contrast, three quarters of those who were members of other supporter groups and organisations *were* active. This is not to devalue those who pay membership fees. Being a trust member does not require any further involvement to have an impact on club governance; particularly at trust-owned clubs, financial contributions in themselves are contributing to the running of the club. This may account for some of the disparity. Being a member of a non-trust supporter group may lend itself more easily to active involvement, as opposed to the need for trusts to grow their paying membership. But if we are trying to understand the extent to which supporters are prepared to get involved in football governance, this disparity is of interest and should be acknowledged.

1. Reasons supporters get involved in club governance

"I'd like to be part of the solution."

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

Although not all respondents were actively involved, our participants believed that fans should have a greater involvement and representation in football clubs (addressed in policy paper #2). For those that were involved, the motivations to engage with their club are worthy of investigation, particularly if supporter groups want to increase their membership and get more fans actively involved. Reasons to get involved were either *reactive* or *proactive*. Reactive involvement is generally in response to trouble or crisis at their club – or the potential for it – and is the commonly painted picture of fans supporting their club. It is also usually in opposition to an aspect of the club governance – typically ownership. Proactive involvement is understood more in terms of working with the club for various – usually altruistic – reasons: to contribute to a successful club, to be a part of the club, and to give something in return.

Although this basic dichotomy simplifies what are actually very complex motivations, the distinction provides a framework to understanding the varying positions available to the supporter.

1.1. Reactive: to a crisis

"If it wasn't for the fans, and the Trust, there wouldn't be Exeter City now. Guarantee you that."

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

The image of fans 'rallying around' a club during a crisis is one that is becoming increasingly common, particularly at smaller clubs. As with the Exeter City fan above, a crisis is often the motivation for fans to join a supporters trust, with financial support vital to the continuation of the club. But a crisis may not be financial, or the risk of going into administration. Fans may feel that a problematic ownership regime in itself represents enough of a crisis for them to become involved with their club. If fans are dissatisfied with football governance, engaging with their club where possible is a step to affecting change.

"I became frustrated when it became obvious that the club was being dreadfully mismanaged."

[#34, male, aged 47, Scottish League One club]

A crisis, or the anticipation/perception/social construction of one, is not necessarily linked to financial concerns, as one Liverpool fan explains:

"The motivations for why people got involved [in the trust], only came once there's a lack of winning involved. I mean that comes down to competitive balance, if you don't feel you can win, then what is the point?"

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

The problem with reactive engagement in periods of crisis is that it often occurs to late and under circumstances of extreme difficulty, as explained:

"It's the whole, why would you rock the boat while you're winning, but as soon as you start losing, people start asking questions, whereas maybe people should start asking questions more when you're winning in a way to sort of make sure there's no underlying problems there. Because then they only sort of start getting exposed when you start losing. So it's very difficult to rectify."

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

This is not always the case of course: one of the most high profile examples of supporter activism, the formation of FC United of Manchester by Manchester United fans unhappy at the club's ownership regime,[32] came at a time of significant success for the club. But our evidence from our sample showed that those who did not involve themselves in oppositional supporter groups were often at the clubs who were experiencing current success. It needs to be recognised that this type of supporter engagement is extremely hard on the fans themselves. It is not only resource consuming, but it signifies an emotional investment. Supporters deserve recognition for their readiness to act under these circumstances. The protection of the club is the ultimate objective of the supporters, because this brings benefits to the wider community, as explained by another of our participants:

> "The club was knackered, the trust had started to take it over, so I wanted to be a part of that. When everything went bad, I thought, I enjoy these days out, I like the people I go to the matches with, it feels like something that I'm a part of. And for the sake of two quid a month, it seemed like not a big investment to help something that a lot of people I knew, and I liked, thought was really important."

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

1.2. Reactive: in anticipation of a crisis

> "I think the whole thing's either about to fall apart or he's going to sell on quick again."

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

The frequency in which clubs have been entering administration over recent years, [33] and particularly the high profile cases of Portsmouth and Rangers, have not escaped the attention of fans of all clubs. Watching this happen to other clubs makes this a very real fear for fans, especially those with current ownership issues which the fans are very aware of. The example below is of a participant who saw the current owners as particular threats to their club, believing that the supporters will hopefully be in a strong position to help out when (and not if) these owners leave the club.

> "I know Vincent Tan is going to leave the club at some point or another, and there's a very good chance that the club will be in a financial mess when he does leave it, I'd like to be there helping out, I'd like to be buying shares or helping in some way just to be a part of the organisation supporting that."

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

1.3. Proactive

> "I would like to contribute more. I've always been a doer. You get out of something what you put in."

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

But it was also recognised that although many fans only consider getting involved with their club during times of crisis, this reactive move may be more successful (and enjoyable) if it was instead proactive – if fans did not wait for something to go wrong at their club to get involved, either on or off the pitch. For that to happen, though, they need to be offered the opportunity, and that is

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[32] See Brown & Walsh (1999) and Brown (2007) for more detail on the context and case of the formation of FC United.

[33] The 'winding up' of clubs is not a purely recent phenomenon: Accrington Stanley resigned from the Football League in 1962, and several others entered administration, liquidation or other similar states in the last few decades of the twentieth century. The late 1990s saw a rise on previous figures, yet the collapse of ITV Digital and the failure of the service provider to honour their deal with the Football League created a significant spike with 21 league and a further 7 non-league clubs experienced insolvency between 2002-2003. See data compiled by Dr John Beech at https://footballmanagement.wordpress.com/no-of-clubs/ for more details.

seldom the case. Clubs need to recognise the advantages, both for them and for the supporters, of facilitating proactive, genuine and continuous engagement with the fans.

> "People want the Trust at a time of crisis and not necessarily at other, and they don't often see the relevance when there isn't a battle to be fought."
>
> *[#28, male, aged 44, League Two club]*

The motivation to get involved in football governance for proactive reasons differs considerably to the response to dissatisfaction. Fans in this study expressed a willingness to give back to football and their club.

> "Try to invest in the place you live and everything you take part in, and I don't just turn up, pay my money, get pissed off for an hour and a half and then go home."
>
> *[#35, male, aged 32, Scottish League One club]*

Joining a trust or other supporter group can also bring a sense of belonging, and enhance the feeling of community that supporters get out of being part of something bigger than their own individual fandom.

> "I think it's just the feeling of being part of it, of almost being part of a bigger community of supporters and you share their knowledge and experiences."
>
> *[#9, male, aged 20, Premier League club]*

The reasons fans gave for their involvement in governance therefore fell into two areas: dissatisfaction with aspects of their club, or a more personal desire to contribute to their community. Acknowledging these contrasting motivations is useful as the latter category encompasses all fans from all clubs – everybody can relate to this. However, the former only applies to fans that either acknowledge or recognise a personal dissatisfaction, which may not be relevant to all. Indeed, even at clubs with governance problems, there may be fans that do not recognise these or consider them as important. In attempting to encourage supporters to engage with clubs, focussing on the personal motivation to 'give back' to their club may therefore be more effective than waiting until a time of crisis. Fans value the community aspect of their club, and if their motivation for getting involved is to be a part of (and preserve) this, proactive fan engagement may be more likely.

2. Reasons supporters do not get involved in club governance

> "I just go to the games, I think I quite like that."
>
> *[#4, male, aged 24, Premier League club]*

Equally as important as why fans do get involved is the issue of why they don't. Again, having knowledge of the reasons fans do not get involved is essential when aiming to increase the numbers that do.

2.1. Not living in the community

> "I think if I was back home, I would be going to the meetings and things like that."
>
> *[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]*

Some of the fans who participated in the qualitative phase of the FREE study were not involved in governance, despite having a great passion for their club. One reason given was not living in the locality. Living away from their club can detach a fan from what is happening, so they may feel that they cannot contribute fully by not being there.

> "Because I'm far away I can't really affect that too much."
>
> *[#21, male, aged 19, League One club]*

Others would argue that living away from their club is simply a perceived barrier, as some fans in the study were active members of a trust or another group despite living away – technological advances mean that physical distance to some is less of an issue.

> "Although I can't make the meetings, the chairman was there answering questions and I emailed some questions in, and it was great you know, and these days it's all videoed so it all goes on to YouTube afterwards, that's great so, not being able to get along is not too much of a disadvantage."
>
> *[#25, male, aged 50, League Two club]*

> "Board meetings via Skype actually work OK, it's not ideal but it works OK. Most of this stuff happens remotely anyway."
>
> *[#28, male, aged 44, League Two club]*

2.2. Time

> "I don't have any extra time to give at the moment but it's definitely something I'd like to do."
>
> *[#3, female, aged 26, Premier League club]*

Further, some thought that they did not have enough time to become involved in governance – again a problem that could be very real, or could be challenged by asserting that a contribution can still be made without a significant time investment.

> "I'm not [a trust member], no, I mean it's been something that again I've looked into but for various reasons it's just not happened, being able to have the time to attend meetings and to get involved in that way."
>
> *[#30, female, aged 30, Non-League club]*

> "It's just having the time in a way, but I would, you know if there were the opportunities, I'd definitely get involved with it [Trust]."
>
> *[#1, male, aged 26, Premier League club]*

Joining a trust – simply signing up and paying a membership fee – does not take time in itself, but some fans viewed that this was not enough for them. It is unclear whether they would not want to simply join without being able to contribute more, or if they were aware that if they joined they

would be expected to contribute more. Either way, being involved in governance at their football club is perceived as being time-consuming and therefore that becomes a very real barrier to the fan.

2.3. Lack of dissatisfaction

"It just depends on how the club's doing on the pitch."

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

There was also the suggestion that fans may not feel motivated to get involved with football club governance because they are happy with how things are at their club. This supports the notion that most fans only see the need to get involved in a time of crisis – reactive motivation – and without a crisis, there is a lack of engagement.

"If there were issues with a club, I think it [trust] would hold more interest but because things are really solid there right now, like the talks between the fans and the club are fairly transparent, there doesn't need to be any, force the issue on anything in particular."

[#21, male, aged 19, League One club]

It may well be the case such as for this fan, the relationship between the club and its fans is a positive one. If a supporters' trust is only perceived as a way to express dissatisfaction, it will not appeal to fans in this situation. They do not consider it as a proactive model of engagement, but an oppositional stance. Two Manchester United fans gave an interesting insight into the relationship between fans, the Manchester United Supporters Trust (MUST) and the club (at the end of the 2012-13 season):

"I am [a MUST member] although I haven't paid my subscription for this year. Because I kind of thought the Glazers hadn't been too bad. They do kind of get on with it. I don't like the way they cream off all the profits, to pay the interest on their loan to buy it, I really hate that, but, could be worse."

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

"It's [MUST] a bit sporadic at the moment because, the opposition appetite isn't there I don't think, as a club we're doing ok, but if we start doing badly again I can see the opposition rising again"

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

These two fans feel supporter engagement should be about opposition: reactive to a problem, to dissatisfaction either on or off the pitch. One admits not being particularly attracted to the trust currently as things are going 'ok', despite hating the financial operations. The second quote similarly constructs fan involvement and the supporters trust as 'in opposition' to the club, again only relevant if things are going badly, and there is something to oppose. This understanding that fan involvement in governance is in conflict with the club is a significant problem in attempting to appeal to a wide base of fans, if they feel that in joining a trust or other group, they are going against their club. In times of crisis this may well be the case, and was for a number of fans; however there are many examples of supporter groups working with the club, an angle which may be appealing to a much wider range of fans. Again the distinction between reactive and proactive fan engagement is linked to how fans understand their role in football club governance.

It needs to be pointed out that here we find again a problem of perception. For example, supporters trusts in their model statutes developed by Supporters Direct are required to work in co-operation with the club, as well as to work in the benefit of the community. Yet, many of the participants in our research seem to equate the supporters' trusts with plain opposition to the club. The need for better communication, as well as a need to differentiate the club as an institution from its management is clear.

2.4. Lack of interest in governance

"95% of the crowd doesn't care, they've got their season ticket, they go to the games."

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

Some were also aware of the fact that some fans are not interested in what goes on behind the scenes at their club – they want to turn up and watch games, and have no further involvement, particularly if the trust is perceived as being political.

"Some people want to be part of the power base, it becomes very political then. Sometimes it can get a bit too much for people, I think, when they just want to watch the games and, see their team do well, and they don't really want to get involved in that side of it."

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

One fan admitted that this was a reason for not getting involved himself – not wanting to get too close to club governance. It may be that fans feel that this might impact their enjoyment, or conflict with their role as a fan.

"I don't know why [I haven't joined the trust] actually, cos in a way I quite like that kind of thing, but ... myself and the people I've gone with, we're not, we quite, like the independence, I don't know, I'm just a fan. I'm not in any way involved with the club, apart from going to the games, I'm not involved with anyone else formally."

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

2.5. Lack of power help by supporter groups

"Certainly at the top level clubs, they can't really change anything anyway."

[#30, female, aged 30, Non-League club]

Finally, there is the feeling especially at bigger clubs that fans cannot make a difference; such is the lack of power or voice afforded to them. This is again an issue with fan groups and fan involvement in governance being understood as in opposition to the club – if the opposition has no power it is unlikely to be able to have an impact. This was the most popular reason cited for why fans do not get involved.

"Fan representation's a kind of tricky thing though because it can be tokenism and more often than not it is."

[#35, male, aged 32, Scottish League One club]

"I think people will always go. I mean that was one of the things about Rovers, when they, you know, when they were protesting about Steve Keane and that, they tried to get us, tried to do a boycott, but not, everyone goes. It ends up about ten sad loners outside!"

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

This is a concern that fans had about trusts in particular, if they had no official voice or representation at the club. This is perhaps one of the easiest barriers to lift, as it will depend on the legislation or self-regulation of football governance. The participants in our study seem to agree that the *status quo* affords little say to the supporters organisations and, in that context, they may not be willing to devote time and energy to a movement whose impact they cannot see.

"I have not really got much interest in [trust]. It's all been outspoken, they haven't got much power."

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

"I do quite like the idea of a supporter's trust, but I don't think the one at Newcastle is all that, powerful really. I think if it was something that had some, impact on the club, like if they had a seat round the table, so to speak, then yes."

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

"I think that's why more people don't get involved with things like supporters' trust because they think that they're going to be ineffective anyway, that they don't work or the clubs aren't going to take any notice."

[#30, female, aged 30, Non-League club]

Whilst the barriers above may be very real to fans, they could still be used to the benefit of supporter groups to try and increase membership. Convincing fans that supporter groups can affect change may be difficult at clubs where fan representation is minimal or non-existent, but to attract fans who feel that they could not contribute whilst not living close to their club, groups could look for ways to make exiled fans feel more involved. This is clearly a solid platform for building calls for fan engagement that will apply equally to those supporters who do not live in the locality of the community as those who do. Also there is clearly a problem with supporter groups, particularly trusts, being perceived as being in opposition to the club – even though all supporter groups believe they are acting in the best interests of the club. Changing perceptions such as these will be challenging and can only be done by different groups, even those with opposing interests, working together.

In order to engage more fans in governance, it is important to understand and promote the benefits gained, both to fans (individually and as a collective) and to clubs.

3. The benefits of supporter involvement in football club governance

> "You get a say in your football club."
>
> *[#24, male, aged 44, League Two club]*

A greater understanding of the benefits of supporter involvement in football governance, both to fans and to their club, could be useful in promoting this involvement to a wider range of fans.

3.1. To supporters

> "We [supporters group] want to give all of the fans a genuine voice."
>
> *[#32, male, aged 63, Scottish Premier League club]*

Fans who were involved in football governance were quick to stress the personal benefits they gained from this. A feeling of contributing to the club's success, of giving back, and feeling more involved and connected to the club were important reasons suggested.

> "The sense of community and empowerment we now feel as fans of Wrexham, by owning the club and actively helping the club and feeling a part of it. Having gone through such adversity for 10 years we all know that everything we do now will benefit the club directly, and raising funds is critical to our survival as a community club."
>
> *[#29, male, aged 43, Non-League club]*

Those who were involved described how this should be a give and take relationship: as well as benefiting from any changes that help fans, keeping your club afloat or simply helping out on a match-day can bring an immense source of personal and community pride as well as being vital to the day-to-day running – and even survival – of the football club.

> "I enjoy the games more now, because I'm more interested in the club overall, I'm more interested in the games. And I actually sit at [ground] now and feel a lot more pride in what's going on because when [previous owner] was running the club, you really didn't get that feeling."
>
> *[#34, male, aged 47, Scottish League One club]*

> "I think being a volunteer as well as a supporter, you get to see behind the scenes, and, because you're there most of the time, willing to help out, you get more involved with the club itself. That should give you a bit more passion towards the club."
>
> *[#24, male, aged 44, League Two club]*

An increased awareness of the benefits to fans personally might be critical in helping to engage more. As well as personal benefits, fans who get involved in governance themselves can also help to ensure that other fans can have their voices heard within the club. One aspect of football that fans feel particularly frustrated with is that they don't feel listened to. Being 'on the inside' allows fans not just to have their own say but also gives a greater insight into the extent to which clubs may actually listen to fans more widely.

> "I have the opportunity to advance the involvement of fans in how the interests of fans are best served, and that their club would listen if approached in a reasonable manner."
>
> *[#32, male, aged 63, Scottish Premier League club]*

Mutually supportive relations in the community are a form of social capital which can bring pleasure to the individual as well as those who benefit more directly from contributions. Supporter groups and clubs should comprehend and build on this. If fans only see their involvement as benefiting their club and not themselves, they will be less likely to engage; yet all fans in the study that were involved equally emphasised the personal benefits. Supporter groups and clubs might consider how they can stress these benefits which involve thinking creatively about how they might structure opportunities for fans to engage in governance to develop their own skills or to reward particular contributions. Clubs, supporters and governing bodies together are encouraged to get

together and design incentives such as professional development programmes whereby supporters may earn professional qualifications through their volunteer involvement in trusts or other organisations. In that respect, the volunteer education and qualification programme of the English Amateur Swimming Association is an example of best practice.

3.2. To the club

> "To ensure that the club's run on a sound financial footing and there are no disasters in the future."
>
> *[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]*

Aside from the obvious benefit of financial contributions (although being involved in governance does not necessarily require the fan to donate money) there are numerous ways in which football clubs can benefit from involving fans in aspects of governance. Clubs can use numbers of fans becoming involved behind the scenes – they can represent and promote the club, and become an important source of help to the club if they feel a valued part of the community.

> "We're offering people the opportunity to be club ambassadors, and that's really just a way to get people more engaged and also get the club free staff, free volunteers."
>
> *[#34, male, aged 47, Scottish League One club]*

Clubs should not fear fan engagement, because supporters have the best interests of their club at heart, always, and many will do all they can to help out. Whilst 'free staff' may not be the best way to describe fans willing to give up their time to help out, the human capital that supporters as individuals and as a collective can offer to their club is huge. Supporter groups can also help the club improve or maintain their links to the community, something that for our interviewed fans was extremely important.

> "I am wearing a wristband at the moment, a Rovers trust wristband that says "Bringing Black-burn Rovers Back to the Community" and that's what the main thing, the main plus point of it is, it bring the club back into the community and makes it, important, the critical reason of football clubs are, to instill pride and a sense of community in the town and if we don't have that then the football club ceases to exist in my opinion."
>
> *[#13, male, aged 25, Championship club]*

Although much fan engagement is constructed as oppositional to current governance structures, and therefore is likely to be seen as a threat by current powers, this is not necessarily the case. Several fans in this study engaged with their club in a more proactive way, and gained benefits from this. It seems vital for clubs to work with supporters, rather than against them, to create a relationship were all parties can benefit from the passion that fans have for their club. It seems also necessary to work on a de-construction of the perception that fans only come together in opposition to their club. Like with all socially constructed (or perceived) realities, only the patient work of all stakeholders together will yield results.

What this tells us about the extent to which supporters are prepared to get involved in football governance is in the most simplistic form that fans are more prepared to engage where they a) perceive there to be problems; and/or b) feel that they can make a difference. If both of these factors exist together, supporters involve themselves *en masse*. Involvement is reactive to an obvious crisis. Outside of this 'last-resort' situation, engagement is less clearly defined. In some cases it is in anticipation of a crisis: mobilising supporters in preparation for a takeover, or in response to a problematic ownership regime. What is less common is proactive supporter engagement, particularly where there is no identified 'problem' to solve or 'crisis' to challenge. This is a gap that clubs and supporter groups need to target: clubs, to improve the relationship with their fan base and supporter groups, to build a relationship between supporters and clubs that benefits all and helps to maintain the positive status quo.

Conclusions and recommendations

In order to develop a greater understanding of the potential for supporter involvement in football governance, this paper investigated whether supporters are actually getting involved in football governance themselves. Understanding motivations supporters having for getting involved in football governance (and not getting involved) is important when considering the potential for increased supporter involvement in football clubs.

Conclusions

This group of supporters, through their discussions around governance, want change. The difficulty is how this is best achieved. They believed that supporters should be more involved in football governance, with a genuine say in the running of their clubs. They want to be involved but often feel that what is available to them is not what they want, although it represents a shift in the right direction. Opportunities for engagement may not be visible to fans, or appealing. Many of the concerns fans have with getting involved in club governance will be equally relevant to anything outside of this.

It is clear that the distinction between reactive engagement in football governance, usually in opposition to something or somebody at the club, and proactive engagement, for more altruistic reasons such as giving back to the club, is an important one that structures the way supporters understand and react to opportunities available to them. Reactive involvement is the most common reason for getting involved in their club, yet proactive involvement is open to all fans – it does not require dissatisfaction, opposition, a crisis or a cause.

The challenge to increasing supporter involvement in football governance is to create a structure of opportunities that appeal to and unite fans despite (and perhaps even in celebration of) their differing perspectives.

Recommendations

Based on the experiences and opinions of this sample, there are a number of recommendations we can propose for any attempts to increase and improve supporter involvement in football governance.

- Clubs and supporter groups should recognise the importance of and work to improve **proactive supporter engagement**: that is, encouraging fans to get involved in governance for altruistic and community-orientated reasons. Most supporters get involved reactively, in response to a (current or looming) crisis at their club. Whilst supporter input is vital at this time, this should not be the case.
- **Football stakeholders are encouraged to work together to change the culture of fan engagement**, which is now perceived as reactive and oppositional. For this to happen clubs should engage in genuine consultation and supporter organisations need to be given a real say.
- Related to this, supporter groups should where possible emphasis that they are **working with the club rather than against it**. Greater numbers could be attracted to groups proactively than are currently.

- Supporter groups and organisations can learn a great amount from **asking fans why they do not get involved in governance themselve**s. Some of the barriers discussed by supporters in the FREE project, such as a lack of time, money and not living in the locality, can be overcome by groups with some imaginative thinking. For example, those who do not live in the locality can be asked to help with task that can be done remotely, and be involved in meetings and other activities via Skype or digital media.
- Clubs, leagues, governing bodies and supporters organisations should join their forces to create programmes leading to **professional qualifications for those fans volunteering within their clubs**. The volunteer education and training scheme of the English Amateur Swimming Association is an example of best practice in this respect.

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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[34] [35]	Season ticket holder	Supporters' Trust member	National supporter org member[36]
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

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34   At the time of the study.

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

36   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%
English Leagues Total	*30*	*81%*
Scottish Premier League	3	8%
Scottish Championship	0	0%
Scottish League One	3	8%
Scottish Leagues Total	6	16%
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%