

WHOSE GAME IS IT?

Football governance through the eyes of the supporters



The FREE Project Football governance policy papers

Paper #4: Supporter ownership and the Supporter Trust model in football

The FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) Project

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

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

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

- ☉ 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 #4: Supporter ownership and the Supporter Trust model in football

Within the FREE policy papers on football governance, papers #1 and #2 focused on the demand for further regulation of football from supporters and concluded that supporters have an acute understanding of the problems with current football governance, and are highly critical of the way the sport is governed at the top level. Various suggestions were made to address the problems highlighted including reform, government intervention and increased supporter involvement.

Policy papers #3 and #4 explore the issue of increased supporter involvement in football governance further. Policy recommendations in the area strongly focus on the role of supporter trusts and the work of Supporters Direct. However, one of the findings in our conversations with supporters is that there is a variety of avenues through which they would like to be involved with football. Given that variety, it is necessary to disaggregate the analysis of this complex issue. Thus, the FREE policy paper series addresses forms of supporter engagement in two different papers. First, policy paper #3 focussed on wider fan activism via a variety of avenues, in an attempt to understand the perceived opportunities for and barriers to supporter engagement. Second, policy paper #4 focuses exclusively on club ownership and supporters' trusts.

Executive summary

This paper is part of a series addressing the absence of the supporters' voice in current debates about football governance. Supporters' trusts and the concept of supporter ownership deserved their own discussion, due to the particular nature of involvement that they offer fans and their acknowledgement in recent policy calls for increased supporter engagement in football.

1. Strengths of supporter ownership and representation

Those in favour of supporter ownership put forward several benefits. Mostly these concerned the potential for formal supporter representation on football boards to enhance governance standards at clubs, in particular transparency and communication. Fans also advocated for the need for football to regain its community roots, which supporter ownership is considered to offer, and the power trusts can give to fans as a collective.

2. The perceived 'ideal' model: part-ownership?

The 50+1 rule of ownership in German football was considered the ideal by supporters, although they generally acknowledged that this was unlikely to be successfully introduced in the UK. Many supporters in the qualitative phase of the study cited Swansea City and their 20% supporter ownership model as the ideal for their club. Overall, fans were more concerned about *how* their club was run rather than *who* the owner was. Supporter ownership was not considered a quick-fix answer to problems, but was clearly seen by many as a 'better' alternative to the single owner model prevalent at league clubs in the UK.

3. Concerns with supporter ownership

Participants showed some concern that supporter ownership is still unproven over the long term, especially at the highest level. Financially it is believed to be a risk because of the money necessary at the top level of the game. Furthermore, representativeness and out-reach communication were issues that our participants suggested need some improving.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- ☉ The **supporter trust model is positively perceived by fans, but it is not the only option** for fans to get involved in governance.
- ☉ **Supporters' trusts need more resources** to fund effective communication campaigns to appeal to a wider variety of fans.
- ☉ Trusts should try to make all fans **aware of what they do** and their ethos.
- ☉ Trusts and supporters groups should carefully consider the reasons why some fans prefer not to join in order to **design appropriate strategies** to challenge these.
- ☉ Divergent supporter groups and trusts could find a way to **come together under the common cause** that they all have – to benefit their club.

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 2015.³⁷ 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.³⁸

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*³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.

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

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

39 The Football Task Force 1999a, 1999b

40 <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:

- ④ a telephone survey statistically representative of each partner country's population⁴¹ (total sample 7,252, UK sample 1,044; margin of statistical error: ± 3.4 , 95% confidence interval)
- ④ an on-line survey statistically significant and targeted at a specific sub-group of the population, the football supporters⁴² (total sample 11,384; UK sample 635)
- ④ in-depth qualitative research with football supporters that signed up to take part in the project. Fans⁴³ 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

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

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

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

Introduction

This policy paper focuses on a particular form of supporter involvement: supporter trusts and the drive for supporter or community ownership of football clubs. This is of particular policy relevance to the UK context as recent governmental enquiries (2011, 2013) have recommended that the Football Association and the Premier League devise a long-term funding strategy for Supporters Direct, indicating their support for this model of football club ownership. Recent Labour Party proposals to introduce legislation giving supporter trusts more power (Labour, 2014) further evidence the shift towards this form of supporter representation and working towards ownership. In response to calls for legislation, the UK Government launched the Expert Working Group on Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement in November 2014. This was followed by a call for “expert evidence and opinion on legal and regulatory barriers and incentives to increasing supporter ownership and engagement in football clubs” (DCMS, 2014), demonstrating that supporter ownership is firmly on the current political agenda.

Firstly, it is interesting to highlight what football fans considered as the ‘ideal’ in terms of ownership at their club. Supporters had a number of concerns over the current state of football club ownership in the UK, particularly the single ownership model and the lack of protection fans believed the FA offered clubs from damaging ownership regimes. But what most supporters were primarily concerned with was not *who* was running their club, but *how* it was being run, with concerns over transparency, security of the club and engagement with fans. This was examined in more detail in policy papers #1 and #3. The group of fans who participated in the FREE project expressed a variety of perspectives and understandings of supporter ownership and its potential role in UK football governance, particularly in relation to how their club was run.

1. Strengths of the supporter trust model

“I feel very passionately about the importance of community ownership”

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

Those supporters participating in the FREE project whose clubs were community or supporter owned felt strongly about the importance and value of this. Other fans discussed how this was something that they would love their club to be working towards, either in the immediate future or as part of a long-term strategy for sustainability. Participants shared a view that supporter ownership is currently more difficult to attain the further up of the professional football pyramid (see section 2 below). The participants that expressed clear support for fan ownership articulated their preferences around three main motives: Improving the club’s governance, maintaining a community ethos and increasing supporters’ power in the management of clubs.

1.1 Enhancing ‘good governance’ principles

“[If] there’s supporter representation, it’s very transparent, and I think that’s the key thing”

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

A major criticism of current football governance, particularly at the higher levels of the game, was a lack of transparency. Advocates for the supporter ownership model felt that fan representation at board level could enhance transparency in the running of the club, particularly in terms of the financial management. Furthermore, it was suggested that a board with fan representation would enhance communication and stakeholder representation, further indicators of good governance.

“I do think it would be good to have representation, proper representation on the boards of all football clubs, because there’s the old adage, communication is a two way thing, so it’s not just about the board communicating decisions back down to the fans, sometimes fans can have really good ideas... if they [fans] know they’ve got somebody representing them on the board, then they might just have that bit more confidence that actually the board is working in their best interests and it’s not just commercial decisions.”

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

Participants in the research discussed how one of their biggest current concerns about football governance is the lack of respect given to the fan, and the lack of value attributed to their contribution and long-term loyalty (see policy papers #1 and #2). Having supporter representation in the form of a board director or having part-ownership of the club would ensure the protection of the fan and their emotional and financial investment.

1.2 Community focus and ethos

A second area where these fans felt that supporter ownership could benefit football is in enhancing the community aspect of the sport. As explained in policy paper #1, our findings suggest that supporters dislike the disconnection between some football clubs and their communities. Participants in the project shared a view that involving the community and the fans in the day to day running of the club could help football to regain that essential link.

“To have supporters genuinely involved in the running, that’s how I understand football. It’s never been about winning, it’s all about identity and engagement and involvement”

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

“The good thing about communities is it should bring more of the community in ... if people are doing it voluntarily, without expecting any commercial payback, that’s lovely, we’re all doing it because we believe in it”

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

This certainly resonates with the community values that supporters trusts have shrined in their statutes, as advised in the model regulations designed by Supporters Direct. It is exactly that link to the community, which is part of the nature of the active trusts in Britain that many of the participants highlighted:

“I vividly remember, once I couldn’t even be bothered to turn on the radio, I thought, I’m sick of it, and I don’t know what it was. I think it was just seeing that the club was going down, and that there was no way it was changing. And my interest came back when I saw the trust forming, because I thought, ah that’s different.”

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

For fans who feel that modern football has lost its community values, the idea of a supporter owned club at the heart of the local community is an appealing one.

However as this paper will go on to discuss, it is also necessary to acknowledge that to other fans participating in the project it is difficult to marry the community-orientated nature of a supporter owned club with their aspiration to have on-field success. It is also important that this diversity of opinions is not used against those groups that want to further community links with their clubs.

1.3 Gaining power

Supporters' trusts by their very nature of bringing fans together under a common cause have the potential to create a collective to gain in power as it gains size. The idea that this power could be used to further a single cause was believed to be a very strong aspect of the trust model.

"If you being a community together and say, right, let's all share our knowledge and our skill and our life experience for one common cause, it's going to be a very powerful, successful thing"

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

Whilst the example above drew upon his experience as a fan of a community-owned club, a fan who was not convinced by the supporter ownership model (due to the club's previous fan-elected board putting the club into financial difficulties) considered the potential for gaining power from an alternative angle.

"Given what's gone before, the new owners are very, very aware of how influential the fan groups can be, so, he is eager to keep us onside"

[#26, male, aged 47, League Two club]

This fan was part of successful supporter activism at his club. Fans formed a protest group, and as a collective they campaigned against the existing board and forced personnel changes. So whilst supporters currently have no formal representation at the club, the informal power that they hold due to their past activism has encouraged the current owner to respect and consult them.

2. The perceived 'ideal' model: part-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? Many cited the German model as the ideal, admiring their 50+1 ownership regulations and believing that this was a major reason for the perceived superiority of the fan football experience in the country.

"I think it's [supporter ownership] a good idea, in a way, I think sort of along the lines of the German model would be good, where people are actually actively involved, it would be a lot better."

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

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 England – so to them at least, the German model represents an 'inaccessible ideal'.

"Germany's obviously the model isn't it but that's never going to happen in England now, it's gone too far."

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

"I think 100% fan ownership is probably always going to be a pipedream"

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

"I don't think the 51% German thing, you can graft that onto a British model, it's a very, very different culture"

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

"I love the way Germany works, with the 50 plus 1, but, I cannot see that that ever will work in England because of the cultural understanding of it all, I just can't see that it would happen. So I think the best we can hope for really is something like Swansea, and having 20%."

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

This final comment moves on to what UK-based fans feel it is feasible with the current structures – a part-ownership model as is evidenced by Premier League club Swansea City. Fans believed that this model could be achieved, whereas the supporters considered 100% fan ownership to be out of reach of the top levels of the game.

“The ideal scenario, in my opinion would be a part ownership model like at Swansea, they own 20% of their club I’m led to believe, so they have a say at board level, and a say in the running of the club, but as a trust they aren’t the only backer in the football club, and anyone who says trust models don’t work need to look no further than Swansea. I mean they just won a cup this season and they’ve had a great year in the Premier League [at 2013], so it can be done.”

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

“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 in England... I think for clubs in the Premier League and even the Championship to some degree, I can’t see it being 100% fan owned, but there’s absolutely no reason why, it couldn’t work well, 20%, something like that, where there’s board representation.”

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

It may be argued that, besides the clear management and governance implications, Swansea City are singled out because they play in the Premier League and, as such, they represent an example of a club that is heavily linked to its supporters and has also achieved on-field success. Their rapid rise from the fourth tier of the Football League to the Premier League in just seven years, following the Swans Trust formation and contribution to the survival of the club in 2001, is *the* dream that fans of lower league clubs hold on to: it can happen. This was pointed out by a noticeable number of supporters participating in our research.

Participants in our research gave much thought to different ownership models and demonstrated that they were well informed in relation to this. They considered the context very important and, therefore, suggested that part-ownership may be a good stepping stone where fan ownership is still a relatively recent and therefore untested model over the long-term. This is in contrast to Germany where clubs have a long history of supporter ownership. Moreover, the supporters in our sample were also acutely aware of the difficulties faced with achieving fan ownership.

“Unfortunately the supporters trust thing didn’t really work for us, it was during the supporters trust time that the academy ceased to exist, which was a disaster for us”

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

“We were all shareholders, it was a fans’ run club, badly. We went into administration it’s now been bought out by private investors. For us it [fan ownership] didn’t work, it’s great in theory ... we fared badly under fans”

[#26, male, aged 47, League Two club]

One of the reasons why partial ownership, such as in Swansea City was overtly cited by the participants in the project has to do with the economic development of the Premier League. In other words, fans in our sample were of the opinion that the current economic and commercial structures of English football are a big barrier to supporter ownership.

“I don’t think in the Premiership you will ever see 100% [fan ownership] behind the club”

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

“Whether it would work at a top club or not, I don’t know. I think it might be a useful model in the lower leagues, certainly initially.”

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

“I do think for lower league clubs like Wrexham and the way Portsmouth have gone, I think it’s a great model, for clubs in the Premier League and even the Championship to some degree, I can’t see it being 100% fan owned”

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

The result is that fans seem to perceive that supporter ownership is only a viable model for lower league clubs. This is of course a perception that may need to be challenged, but like any social construction it is a powerful element structuring the discourse of the supporters that participated in our sample.

Supporters are acutely aware of the limitations of the supporter trust model and full community ownership. However, they tend to see this as a step in the right direction despite their concerns as it represented a move away from the single owner model.

“No I don’t [see supporter ownership as an answer]. I see it as a damn sight better than one person owning a club”

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

“If we could get every club, give or take, fan owned, I think that would be fantastic, sometimes it’s not going to work, but then the current ownership structure isn’t really working that well”

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

“I’d always thought that supporters running their club seemed like a better idea than oligarchs coming in and pumping all their money in”

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

It is necessary to acknowledge, however, the wide variety of opinions amongst the participants in this research. This is testimony to the very diverse nature of the football supporters’ community. There are also those fans who clearly were not interested in owning their club:

“I don’t actually want to own a football club. I want to be a member of a football club but I don’t actually want to own a football club. It’s, so badly organised in this country, I’m not prepared to have my money essentially go on player’s wages, that’s all it goes to. And I mean if you just pay your money through the turnstiles then you’re paying for a bit of entertainment. Ok 90% of it is going to players wages, but you can dip out of that at any time you want to. But no I don’t want to own an English football club.”

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

Thus, even a sample of supporters this size expressed quite a wide range of opinions on supporter ownership and how they felt it could be integrated into the different levels of the game. However we identified two dominant perceptions: First, that 100% ownership is more suited to small, lower league clubs and, as a result, at the top-level only part-ownership is currently viable; second there was a clear message that some form of supporter ownership, whilst not the perfect answer, is better than none.

2. Concerns with supporter ownership

“Supporters’ Trusts are great if you’ve got a big enough fan base.”

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

Supporters in this study demonstrated a critical understanding of trusts, giving an important insight into why fans that support the idea of fan ownership might not be getting involved in trusts. This insight came from fans who were members of trusts, including at trust-owned clubs, and those who were not members. Supporters’ concerns fell generally into three areas: financial matters, issues of representativeness and the perceived ethos and values of trusts.

It is necessary to point out that these are the perceptions of the fans participating in our sample. Perceptions do not necessarily equate reality. However, socially constructed realities need to be taken into account by stakeholders and policy-makers as they may suggest the need for better communication or out-reach structures.

2.1. Financial concerns

“2,000 fellas in a back street pub in Blackburn could not fund a Premier League club, and sustain it.”

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

Although the trust model was generally supported by fans, they were cautious mainly due to what they considered the major drawback to this happening in reality: the finances required to firstly buy, and then run, a football club. This concern returns us to the issues discussed in Policy Paper #1, that financial controls are not strict enough and football now at the top level is not a financially level playing field. As a result, fans believe that to compete at the top level, more money is required than can be raised by supporters and the local community. This is exemplified by fans of Wrexham and Exeter City:

“If you looked at the budget, and you know on that, on those wages, with those fans for that year, with those costs, there’s always a hole, we’re going to lose £150,000 this year because you can’t always rely on going to Wembley, so you have to budget for your loss. And as a community owned club, you can’t perceive the idea that you’ve got no money because the bank is not going to ... So you have to find a way ... that’s the thing, how do you do it?”

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

“Exeter City most probably have got 2500 trust members, some of them could be paying just £2 a month. If you look at it like that, a trust gives money to the club, but the club’s still got to find their own money. And football these days is about money. You can’t get around it. It’s about money money money.”

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

However, it is the implications of those financial restrictions what seems to be a more powerful concern for the supporters. Two members of community-owned clubs that participated in the project gave an insight into what may in fact be a more significant barrier to fans joining trusts: the perception that being community owned might be incompatible with on-pitch success.

“If you use the word ‘success’, I don’t judge its success on, whether or not they won trophies ... But a lot of people will still see it as if you’ve got your 30 goal a year striker, if you’re winning the trophies, they see it in that very simplistic way, which is nice, but it makes it difficult, [you have to] manage your expectations, you know, being happy with what you’ve got.”

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

“I still wasn’t 100% sure of the trust because of money. It’s only down to money. Without the money, not saying you can’t progress, because you can, but, it just makes it difficult ... Can’t

complain really, we still have a football club which nearly went out of business almost 10 years ago. Maybe one day someone with loads of money will see Exeter City as a club that could go somewhere because a trust run club like the size of Exeter City in my eyes will never be able to compete with very limited funds.”

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

Although fans stressed that their club’s survival was more important to them than on-field success, it was also clear that the ‘dream’ of moving up through the leagues is something that fans still hold on to, however small the chances of this happening. In that respect, the promotion and relegation principle of the so-called European Model of Sport articulated by the European Commission back in 1998 is still very much in the back of the supporters’ mind, as demonstrated by our sample. This is a difficult context to supporters’ trusts to operate within, because they need to manage the expectations of supporters in an environment where the dream of sporting success is still engrained in the collective imaginary.

2.2. Representativeness

“There’s still a measure of tension between those who stood on different sides.”

[#25, male, aged 50, League Two club]

Supporters are a divergent group of people, from different backgrounds, viewpoints, and expectations of what they want from their club. Attempting to assimilate all of these into a single vision for a Supporters Trust is a serious challenge, and one that our fans felt trusts were struggling to achieve.

“There’s a lot of in fighting between United fans now, the Glazer ownership has completely divided a lot of the fan base, so, to actually have everyone working together towards the same goal would be, quite nice, but, personally I don’t think it will ever happen. Everyone’s got different values, everyone believes that the takeover was wrong, but then it’s how to address it.”

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

“You have in your fan base, let’s say a third, who have been passionately behind it, a third who don’t really know, undecided, who will always go with whatever happens to the club, and then another third who don’t believe in the idea that it can ever work, and would much rather be a rich benevolent benefactor, even if they’re not there, they’ll still believe in that model.”

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

The divisions between fans can be very problematic for those involved - and perhaps off-putting for those who are not.

“It was quite difficult, we marched in to [town], we were spat at and abused, there were squirmishes after some matches, nothing too serious but the tensions were running very high, both sides of the argument was that, each was destroying the club, both sides obviously very passionate about what they believed in.”

[#25, male, aged 50, League Two club]

“We did try [to get interest in a trust], we did do some open letters that got some publicity back home, in the papers and stuff, local press, turned the club against us, so ... Didn’t win many friends with those.”

[#19, male, aged 32, Championship club]

Supporters’ trusts are set up as democratic and participatory community-linked organisations. These are some of the requirements enshrined in the model statutes designed by the parent organisation Supporters Direct. However, our research reveals that there is still a perception by some fans that trusts struggle to be representative. Another concern identified by the participants in the research is that the trusts are as at risk of being mismanaged as any other ownership model, and difficulties faced at Port Vale and Notts County were fresh in the memory of fans at those clubs. On the other hand, it needs to be acknowledged that supporter organisations allow for democratic accountability mechanisms, hence mismanagement might be stopped by members of the trusts. In sum, trusts present naturally the advantages and disadvantages of any open participatory organisations.

“I think fans and supporters’ trusts need to take on a bit of responsibility and say, well, if you’re going to actually represent the trust and Spurs fans, you need to have a little bit more, experience, qualifications, to know what you’re talking about, and not just, I’ve been a season ticket holder for 40 years, and my favourite player is ... It shouldn’t be about that. It is a business and so that’s equally as important.”

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

“I’m all for fan ownership, but fans who know what they’re doing. The ideal model would be fans who are businessmen and have got a bit of money behind them, if they happen to be fans as well, it’s a dream.”

[#26, male, aged 47, League Two club]

“It’s about finding enough committed people to drive actually what is needed to be quite a sophisticated marketing campaign, in terms of perpetual presence. These are issues about any voluntary organisations, they’re not really issues about football trusts.”

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

Trusts aim fundamentally towards gaining ownership of the club, and this will be to some one of their greatest strengths. However, due to the differences in fan perception and expectation, it may be seen by others as one of their weakness. Our participants were quick to point out that ownership is a complex, difficult and potentially risky position to hold, which is often mixed with an emotional investment in their football clubs. In relation to issues of representation and democratic structures, our research suggests that supporters’ trusts face a challenging task to reach out to a diverse group with limited resources. There are certain perceptions, as evidenced in our sample, that may not necessarily reflect the reality, but they still work as a barrier for individuals to join supporters’ organisations. This is, again, a complicated scenario that all stakeholders need to acknowledge.

2.3. Trust values and ethos

“They’ve [trust] got their strategy wrong, they’ve appeared incredibly local.”

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

No fans denied the fact that trusts act in the best interests of the club. There was, however, a disagreement between what the best interests are, and how these should be achieved. At bigger clubs in particular, supporter groups were perceived as factious, limiting their appeal. Some fans in this study disagreed with the values of the trust, or the ethos of the trust concept itself. If fans do not agree with the trusts actions and perspectives, they are unlikely to support them, as explained by two fans that have not joined trusts at their clubs.

“Some of the issues that have gone on have put me off a little bit, you can agree with some of the, what they’re [trust] trying to do but not necessarily always the way they go about it, or just some of the other things that have cropped up, that I’ve thought, maybe not right now!”

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

“The trust, I have not really got much interest in that, I think...It’s all been outspoken, in the club, they received quite a lot of criticism, when the club was in administration.”

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

This begins to resonate with problems that occur with being perceived as acting in opposition to the club, despite always having the best interests at the heart of their activities. Trusts hold a fragile position because of their ethos to gain control of football clubs: it is difficult for them to align with the current owners if they aim themselves to take ownership. Fans may not wish to involve themselves with a group that is not considered to be working with their club.

“Spirit of Shankly doesn’t help, you can’t be just a fans’ group if you put down on your website that your overall aim is ownership of the club, that’s a competitor.”

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

“There is increasingly an anti-trust mentality at clubs, they tend to see them in a very kind of adversarial way. We’ve [trust] had quite a lot of flak about saying critical things about the ownership.”

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

If the overall aim of the trust is club ownership, unless there is a financial crisis or period of administration, this is always going to be at the expense of the current owner. Clearly this is unavoidable for trusts. But when accepting that fans come from different perspectives, this will alienate some. Similarly, some supporters felt that what they perceived as a political aspect of trusts would not appeal to all fans.

“The insistence with the word ‘union’ put an awful lot of people off, a lot of apathetic people off, if I’m honest. So, from a leadership and management point of view it was a bad strategy, to call themselves a ‘Football Trust’, and I’m not saying that you should change your values, it was just a softer language, whilst those, you could have carried through the same agenda.”

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

3. Addressing the criticisms

It may be concluded that supporters in this study were overly critical of trusts, but this is not necessarily the case. Most of our participants were passionately in favour of some form of supporter ownership. It is that passion what made them speak so overtly about the things they would like to see improve. The section above needs to be understood as the aspects that participants in the project would like to improve in relation to the concept of supporter ownership and supporter trusts. As a concept this in itself is seen positively. It should be remembered that this group of fans were overall very passionate about their clubs, and about the need for increased supporter involvement in football club governance, both at their own particular club (if this was not already happening to their satisfaction) and in football more widely. The participants in our sample also made constructive suggestions about how trusts might address some of the criticisms directed at them in order to appeal to an even wider range of fans.

1. Work on umbrella fan engagement, with other fan groups if necessary, to unite all fans

“The Supporters’ Council is to give fans a voice. So rather than have just the trust giving fans a voice, we want to give all of the fans a voice. And we also want it to be a voice of all the fans, regardless of financial barriers. All supporters and all supporters’ clubs can participate in this meeting for free, no financial barrier whatsoever.”

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

“Anything that’s done under an umbrella banner, I’ll be there.”

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

2. Try and ‘speak’ to more people through outreach and communication strategies

“The small minority of Liverpool fans from Spirit of Shankly, they have very much a common cause now, and that’s why I’ve come to admire them, because they did improve, they were very insular... And whilst that’s changed in the last, two years, there’s been a softening around it, they’ve become a bit more outward looking, they can’t be local in a global, for want of a better word, a global fight, a global struggle.”

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

3. Be financially accessible

“I’m wondering if Wrexham’s the cheapest club to own in the country, I don’t know, it’s £12 a year, I don’t know what others charge, but there can’t be many that are charging less than that, it’s quite good value! And this year they’ve done this deal where if you buy a season ticket, you can get it for 30% off if you’re a member of the trust, so you can actually save yourself more money.”

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

4. Think outside the box to attract an even larger number of fans...

“I work in branding, in marketing and identity, so, I think well what can I offer on those terms, that would give value to the football club and to the trust? And I have started a campaign to get 10,000 owners. The thing for me was making the distinction between being a member of the supporters’ trust, a member, or being an owner of the football club, the two things are intertwined. But in terms of people’s sense of, what do you get for £12? Well if you’re the owner of a football club, it’s a very different thing than if you’re a member of the trust.”

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

5. ... Especially the younger generation

“One issue that I really feel strongly about and I’m trying to drive is about our message and the promotion because at the moment it’s very clunky. We [trust] are engaged with social media a bit, but it’s all very kind of Facebook and the website and the odd Twitter thing. And I am a passionate believer, I read an article, that said actually the most effective way to persuade

‘Generation Y’ers’ is not with the printed word at all but with a video, that the role of viral video is going to be absolutely crucial in marketing anything in the next 25 years. And that’s really one of the reasons why the whole [Hull City] Tigers thing resonated so strongly because they’ve got that.”

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

6. Pick the right battles – don't oppose everything

“One of the problem’s Liverpool have got is, Spirit of Shankly have reacted to everything, that’s the other thing is, credibility. So every time the owners do something they don’t like, they put out a statement, and their fans go, oh not again.”

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

7. Share best practice and learn from other clubs

“We got a hell of a help from Exeter when we started out. They came to our first meeting, they turned up, gave us advice, I sat in the boardroom at St James’ Park while they talked us through the pitfalls that they had. That really made an impression on me. And they were passionate and evangelical about the fan-owned movement, and it was really infective.”

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

8. Increase awareness of the work the trust does, and why

“I think the more Spurs fans actually understand that the trust is there as a democratic group to actually represent the fans’ views, it’s all about awareness isn’t it.”

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

Many of these suggestions relate to communication and strategies. Many of them involve trusts working on their approach, marketing and strategic communication to increase membership. This, however, is largely dependent on resources. It is fair to say that supporters trust and other fan organisations need to be given adequate resources in order to communicate with the wider fan community of their club.

This is even more important given the context in which trusts operate. It has already been noted that fans are less likely to consider joining a trust if they perceive the trust to be working in opposition to the club. Yet it is trusts in this situation that can build proactive membership, enhance the supporter voice, and develop a working relationship with their club. Breaking this vicious circle will not be easy for trusts. Supporter organisations clearly need more resources in order to improve their communication and outreach activities. But, let’s not forget these tend to be mostly volunteer organisations. Football stakeholders and public authorities are encouraged to provide funding schemes to help develop fan engagement. This needs to be done at local, national and even European level. Following elementary principles of good governance, it is necessary that these funding schemes do not compromise the independence of the supporter organisations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

“I’ll support Spirit of Shankly because I’d rather be in, supporting someone.”

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

This group of supporters want change, and they want to see supporters formally involved with their football clubs. The difficulty is how this is best achieved. In terms of supporter ownership, the overriding perspective was that supporter *representation*, with Swansea City frequently cited as the ideal, was a realistic and valued model. 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.

Recommendations

In addition to the recommendations that our participants put forward that we have already discussed in section 3 of this paper, there are various other recommendations based on our findings.

- ④ The supporter trust model has clearly had success at a number of clubs, and indeed many small clubs (and a couple of big ones) would have struggled to survive without them. But **this is not the only option for fans to get involved in governance** Fans want openness and transparency. Fan ownership is seen as a way to achieve this but it is not the only way.
- ④ **Supporter trusts should listen to fans’ concerns** about supporter ownership model in order to appeal to even more fans. The supporters in this group had some valuable critical insights into this model of club ownership, and taken as a whole, these insights are likely to cover the majority of reasons why some fans are not convinced by the supporter trust model. We recommend trusts to work on understanding the barriers that fans perceive in their decision not to join the movement.
- ④ It is clear that some fans are **not fully aware of what supporter trusts actually do** (and aim to do in the future). This is something that trusts could address through out-reach and communications campaigns. This, however, needs proper resources that sometimes supporters’ trusts do not have.
- ④ **Football stakeholders and public authorities at local, regional, national and European level should provide funding schemes to encourage supporter engagement, trust development, capacity building and sharing of best practice.** Funding should not compromise the independence of the supporter organisations.
- ④ To appeal to and pull together more fans, divergent supporter groups and trusts should study ways to **come together under the common cause** that they all have – to benefit their club. Umbrella organisations that attempt to do this may have much better representation amongst fans and therefore greater collective power within their club.

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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 ^{44 45}	Season ticket holder	Supporters' Trust member	National supporter org member ⁴⁶
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

44 At the time of the study.

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

46 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%