**EWG PROGRESS REPORT – December 2018**

**Sports Minister welcomes improved engagement between clubs and supporters**

This is the second of our updates on progress made following the publication of the Government Expert Working Group’s (EWG) report on Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement in January 2016.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Club Supporter Engagement**

In February[[2]](#footnote-2), the Minister for Sport and Civil Society, Tracey Crouch MP asked The English Premier League and the English Football League, and separately, the two national fan organisations: Supporters Direct and The Football Supporters’ Federation, to report back on the results from the first season (2016/17) in which all 92 professional clubs needed to meet the EWG’s requirement for club leaders (owners/senior executives) to engage in structured dialogue with a representative group of supporters (including the Supporters’ Trust). What follows is a summary of the feedback received from each.

*Club reporting*

The English Premier League (EPL) reported their clubs had met the requirement to meet with supporters at least twice a year, and that strong levels of engagement are in place at all.  The EPL noted that meetings can, and did, take different formats, with a majority of clubs having established forums or fan councils that meet regularly and comprise a small number of selected or elected fan representatives, plus senior club staff.  Other methods employed include one-to-one meetings with Supporter Trust boards. Meetings with disabled supporters associations, Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender fan groups and other innovations, such as, junior forums, are also features at many clubs across the League.

The EPL reported that senior staff members (commonly including the Chief Executive, and in some cases the Chairperson or vice Chair) were regular attendees at meetings. It was standard practice for the club’s Supporter Liaison Officer to also form part of the club delegation, and for other directors to participate.  Terms of References were routinely used to shape the representative group of supporters, with key elements, including the number of members and whom they represent, the selection process, and the term time.  The frequency of meetings, code of conduct and reporting were also covered.

Agendas were agreed in partnership with fan representatives, and a common approach was for clubs to tailor their staff representatives to best suit the discussion topics.  The minute of these meetings are published by the club, or in some cases the Supporters Trust or other fan representatives.  Further information on supporter engagement at the EPL clubs can be found in the accompanying PDF document titled ‘Supporter Engagement at Premier League Clubs’.

For the 72 professional clubs in the English Football League (EFL), in total 250 meetings/forums were held with fans over the course of the season.  This equated to an average of more than three-and-a-half per club, with 17 clubs hosting more than five sessions.

The EFL reported that clubs fielded senior executives with 52 Chief Executives taking part and, with 24 club owners/majority shareholders.  The main topics discussed in those meetings in descending order of regularity were around ticketing, the first team playing squad, supporter engagement, stadium/training grounds issues, club finances and club ownership matters.

In the non-league, Supporters Direct (SD) and the Football Supporters’ Federation (FSF) both back the extension to the National League and the pilot to extend structured dialogue with a range of clubs for this season.

*Fan organisations survey*

SD and the FSF jointly conducted an end of season survey of supporters groups across the EPL and EFL; consolidating the results to one per club they heard from supporters at 78 clubs.  The feedback they provided was that while clubs knew about structured dialogue and were meeting with supporters, in their opinion there was still some way to go to make sure these meetings were closer in line with what they wanted these structured dialogue discussions to deliver for supporters, which is the opportunity to engage in more strategic club (namely financial and business planning) matters involving a smaller representative group of fans.  This was illustrated in some of their results, which cited that:

* 35% of those surveyed said that they felt strategic issues could not be adequately discussed.
* 25% said that meetings are not the right size for constructive discussion
* 26% replying that clubs were not fielding appropriate people from the club.

A fuller summary of the survey results can be found here https://supporters-direct.org/articles/sd-fsf-end-of-season-review-for-structured-dialogue-commitments-at-club-level

*Summary*

Overall, we are appreciative of the efforts that clubs have made to engage better with their supporters, with the League's reporting on how their clubs are increasingly seeing the positive benefits this brings.  We are especially keen to build on the momentum gained from the first year of this formal arrangement, and to recognise those clubs that both the League and the supporter organisations tell us are among the best in this area.

As the supporter organisations survey results shows, we recognise that there is room for improvement in the interaction between club owners and supporters.  As the EWG did, we understand that there is not a one size fits all approach and that fans appetite for specific information, and to discuss certain issues, will vary from club to club, but that the general principle that senior club executives/owners are open to discussing the issues and understanding the views that are important to fans should always apply.

To this end, we would like to see greater evidence of where clubs and supporters are working in partnership to agree the items of discussion for the structured dialogue meetings, and where there are gaps in knowledge, that clubs make all reasonable efforts to share this information.  We refer to the guidance that the EFL has provided to their clubs on what information might be shared with supporters that met the commitments given at the EWG.  It states as follows:

*“Ahead of the supporter engagement sessions, clubs may receive requests from attendees to share information relating to the running of the club.  “It will be for each club to consider each request on its merits as there is no specific requirement to provide information that is not already in the public domain, however the EFL would ask clubs to look favourably on reasonable requests that will aid informed discussion of the matters at hand.”*

We would ask that the EPL give consideration to providing similar guidance to their clubs.  The Leagues may also wish to revisit the EWG recommendation that clubs look into providing a suitable template containing standardised minimum levels of information to be shared with supporters before meetings.

We would ask that supporters are also proactive in requesting the information they are seeking to inform agenda items.  To help with this, Supporters Direct has recently published guidance for clubs and supporters designed to help promote good practice with regard to engagement.  It can be viewed here https://supporters-direct.org/assets/media/articleFiles/file-yksdlGdIrYMO.pdf

Finally on this subject, while it has been useful to get separate feedback from the Leagues and supporter organisations, going forward we would expect there to be a more joined up approach when it comes to surveying results.

**Structured dialogue between fans and the football authorities**

In line with the recommendation of the EWG, separate dialogue discussions between the football authorities and a representative group of supporters on matters of mutual interest are also continuing.

Meetings between the EFL and supporters took place in May and November this year, with EFL Chief Executive Shaun Harvey and senior staff on hand to answer questions on a range of subjects, including safe standing, youth development and away fans experience at matches.  The written reports of these meetings are provided for information below.

https://www.efl.com/siteassets/efl-documents/efl-supporter-engagement-meeting---final.pdf

https://www.efl.com/siteassets/efl-documents/efl-supporter-engagement-meeting-minutes-may-2017.pdf

The EFL also met with more than 200 supporters from 53 clubs as part of its 2016/17 fans forum programme.

The EPL is also continuing with its twice-yearly formal meetings with supporter representative groups, and a representative of each of its 20 member clubs. The meetings, which take place in March and October, are co-chaired, with minutes agreed then circulated among all attendees.  The EPL’s Executive Chairman, Executive Director, Head of Policy and supporter relations attend meetings and other staff chosen based on agenda items.

The EPL also reported that they are continuing to meet on an informal basis with representatives of groups throughout the season, with a view to furthering discussions and initiatives that stem from the formal meeting agenda.

Again we are encouraged by the on-going commitment to engaging with supporters and their representative bodies on the areas of most relevance to fans.  Going forward, we believe, these regular discussions provide a platform to test and formulate ideas that can only improve the game.

**Supporters on club boards**

Supporters Direct has published guidance on the role that supporters can play on club boards, with tips for how supporter directors and clubs can get the most from the role. You can read it here https://supporters-direct.org/assets/media/articleFiles/file-PrnsElwZ7R6r.pdf

**Owners and Directors Test (ODT)**

In line with the recommendation in the EWG, the EFL has pledged to consult with its clubs during the 2017-18 season in order to understand any specific concerns that exist in relation to the conduct of owners and whether they can be dealt with under existing regulations (or if reform is required).

In the meantime a series of amendments have been agreed across the Professional Leagues for immediate introduction in a bid to strengthen the existing test. These include an extension of the disqualifying condition concerning the commission of a criminal offence within this country to anyone who has engaged in similar conduct overseas, whether or not it has resulted in a conviction.  The aim of this amendment is to ensure that no owners or directors could pass the test by arguing that an act considered a criminal offence in the UK was legal in the territory where the act took place.

Supporters Direct and the Football Supporters’ Federation have also prepared a number of recommendations for improvements to the ODT and the Government as per the commitment in the EWG will ensure that the Leagues take proper account of the feedback.

**Football Association (FA) Reform changes**

The FA has completed its review into the reform of its governance arrangements. Among the changes it has made is the introduction of 11 new members to the FA Council, including a further football supporter representative, bringing the total to 2 supporters representatives.

**Insolvency and assistance to supporters’ trusts to bid for club ownership**

A reminder that The EFL’s Insolvency Policy includes that in the event of any of its clubs falling into insolvency that the insolvency practitioner assigned will be required to meet with that club's supporters’ trust, and the trust given the opportunity to bid for the club.  Discussions between The FA and EFL with R3: The Association of Business Recovery Professionals, to develop best practice guidance for the insolvency profession are continuing.

Furthermore, should the owners of any football club give consent to sell the club to its supporters, then the supporters’ trust of clubs from the EPL, the EFL and the National League can apply, via Supporters Direct, to the Fans Fund Panel for help with professional fees needed to put together a credible bid.

Supporters Direct are continuing to build on existing networks to develop the database of suitable professional experts willing to provide pro-bono advice to supporters’ bids.  The database is expected to be in place by the end of the current 2017/18 season.  Once available the database will also be a useful tool for clubs looking to recruit additional skills and expertise onto club boards.

SD are also continuing to work on a proposal for the FA to consider on giving supporters the first option on reforming the club in the unfortunate event of a club being liquidated.

**Government to review tax relief schemes**

We reported last time that while we are keen to explore potential social investment funding models, including in more detail the merits of the Community Owned Sports Club proposal as supported by the EWG, the general principle remains that tax relief should predominantly be used to support amateur, non-profit making sports clubs whose primary objective is to facilitate and promote participation in sport.

**Next steps**

We will report back on further progress being made with implementation of the recommendations in the EWG report a year on from this update, including end of season results for structured dialogue for the 2017/18 season.

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-expert-working-group-on-football-supporter-ownership-and-engagement [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/football-expert-working-group-progress-report [↑](#footnote-ref-2)