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Fan Engagement at Liverpool FC: A report for Spirit of Shankly (SoS)



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Introduction – about my approach

Having worked extensively for the experts in modern fan activism and engagement, Supporters Direct (and helping establish its later offshoot SD Europe) over a number of years, part of my expertise lies in being able to recognise and understand the difference between ‘cultural’ and ‘structural’ communications problems within and between clubs, supporters’ organisations, and the authorities (broadly, The FA, Premier League and Football League/EFL and other leagues). My insights and distinctive approach to this area have been recognised by being invited to become a Fellow of the RSA.

As you would expect, as my own position on the issues are informed by my experience, I do not come from a ‘neutral’ perspective on the issues of communication and engagement with fans.

The evidence in research, recommendations generated from parliamentary hearings, other investigations by the authorities and government committees, and in reams of reports and writings about the subject by journalists and bloggers is that fans and their legitimate representatives must have a far more fundamental position in a football club. Any number of writers have written about what happens when they don’t. Rebranded, by journalist Scott Johnson, who wrote about the Cardiff City ‘rebranding’; and David Conn’s Searching for the Soul of Football are two must reads that demonstrate what happens when they’re not.

As a member and Diploma student of the Chartered Institute for Public Relations (CIPR), I also recognise the issues from the perspective of those trying to manage communications, especially at a corporate level, more broadly. Effective and appropriate communication and engagement with any audience/public or stakeholder is not always straightforward. Football does indeed have a mixture of cultural issues and problems that communications professionals in many other areas of commerce, industry – even others sports – don’t have to deal with, and it should be recognised that it isn’t an easy challenge.

However, football has proved itself somewhat stubborn, and I believe has a lot to learn when it

comes to dealing with fans as one of their 'primary stakeholders' or 'publics'. As a game in general I have found that it tends to be fearful of being honest, and acts as though fans are only interested in the money, the latest transfers, how much a shirt costs, or whether there are enough programmes or pies. Ironically, given their sometimes controversial and destructive relationship, the property development sector is one such industry that could teach football a lot about 'stakeholder management'.

Football clubs are not secret societies. They cannot just pretend to be private companies, about which owners disclose only what they choose to. This is particularly true in an age where information is so openly and freely available. The truth is that football clubs are still more like corner shops than conglomerates, and without the patronage of supporters, and the foundation of their communities, would at best be mere entertainment venues with a brand and a strapline. Or they would scarce exist at all.

If those running clubs want to operate in such a captive 'market' as football, the trade-off has to be that they respect and understand the relationship between the club and fans, and do their best to foster strong relationships on the basis of mutual understanding and respect that is demonstrated in their actions, and is not just words.

However, it is also equally important to note that for this sort of change to happen, those running clubs – and the wider game if change is to embed itself more permanently – also need to be congratulated for choosing candour and honesty where they choose this more difficult path.

About this report

In the latter part of 2016, Populus, the 'research and insight' agency, was commissioned to carry out a review of 'supporters' interaction' (a term equivalent to 'fan engagement' or 'supporter engagement') at Liverpool FC (LFC) on behalf of the club. It is to the credit of the club that they are openly prepared to examine practices and culture in an area such as this, particularly using external expertise. That should be acknowledged and commended. More clubs should consider similar exercises.

As a result of this review being commissioned, I was asked by supporters' organisation Spirit of Shankly (SoS) to look at this issue for them in parallel, though admittedly not with the range or resources of Populus or LFC. It must also be pointed out that I am not privy to the terms of reference of the study, and so it is not this report's job to critique the work of Populus. None of what is included here is intended to be so.

In November last year, I produced an initial note that helped to guide the discussion about this issue amongst supporters of the club. The second part of my work is this longer report, based on a series of interviews and discussions. I have spoken with former Chair of the Liverpool FC Supporters Committee (LFCSC), Bob Humphries; current LFCSC Chair Graham Smith (also on the SoS committee); Anna Burgess, who sits on both LFCSC and SoS committees; a gathering comprising xxxxxxxx from the LFSC committee, xxxxxxx, Jay McKenna, xxxxxxxx & xxxxxxxx from the SoS committee, and xxxxxxx from supporters' group Spion Kop 1906. I also spoke at length with Neil Atkinson and Gareth Roberts from the Anfield Wrap, the popular radio show, podcast and blog. Everyone I spoke to did so with great honesty, often great positivity, and with a clear desire to see things change for the better for everyone's sakes, not just their own particular area of interest. I would like to thank all of these people for sparing their time to talk with me and answer my questions.

I have also carried out desk research, including reading through minutes and papers from all LFSC meetings since its foundation in 2011, and additional reports, stories, and information

reporting on the LFCSC. I have referenced in my bibliography.

The reasons for focusing on a 'Qualitative' or interview format with the individuals I have are twofold: the first is that there is always a relatively small section of supporters who 'engage' regularly with the club at all levels – particularly senior official or owners, and they do so on a regular basis. In my experience, I have always found this route to be a very good indicator of the issues at any club, as they have a great deal of expertise in what the club does, as well as why and how it does it.

It was also a matter of getting good value for the limited resources available from a member subscribed supporters' trust, as SoS is. I could have attempted a survey of, for example, SoS members, but I judged that would have given me far less, and would have seriously hampered my ability to be able to provide the depth of understanding that I have gained from my conversations with those I have spoken.

The report will explain how the LFCSC came about – particularly what the issues were that might have affected the decisions behind it; what the initial – and later – structure was; how the issues raised by the LFCSC with LFC were dealt with on a regular basis; and finally a section on the solutions. My recommendations are divided into three sections to deal with the specific areas, for reasons that will become clear.

NB: Throughout this report, the terms 'fans' and 'supporters' are used interchangeably, having equivalent meaning.

Section 1: Background

The first part of this report is intended to act as an explainer, to help to set the scene, and explain some key terms.

Fan/supporter engagement – an introduction

1. 'Fan engagement' is used to describe any number of activities that a club undertakes in this area. It started off more as a term describing the development of customer services for supporters; much more about the fan as a 'consumer'. This view still persists in many quarters, and I believe it hinders the development of far a more appropriate relationship between fans and clubs in particular.
2. Although having no settled or agreed definition of 'fan engagement' in football is a problem, there is a recent development in the form of the Government Expert Working Group on Supporter Ownership and Engagement (which included Supporters Direct, alongside the football authorities and other supporters' trusts and the Football Supporters Federation), and I have settled on the definition they agreed upon: *'Supporter engagement...means dialogue between a football club and its fans, ensuring that the views of the fans - the lifeblood of any football club - are listened to, and acted upon'*.
3. Engagement in this context is less about the actual method of engagement (forums, Q&A sessions, online engagement), and more about the *culture* of engagement: the language used, the willingness to be open to dialogue, discussion and change, and how evident it is through these that the concerns and views of supporters are taken seriously, and acted upon.
4. It is also important that 'customer service' is not simply ignored: Having a hot pie and a seat that is comfortable is important, and there have been great strides by clubs in this area over recent years. However, the key is that this is not what defines the view of a fan towards their club, and that should not be the basis on which a club relates to its fans.
5. Football is a passionate game. In England specifically, it evokes that passion in a way that

few other areas of public life do. It goes without saying Liverpool FC and its supporters are one of those clubs synonymous with that passion, and the commitment from those fans is known across the game.

6. That commitment and passion to Liverpool Football Club was evidenced most starkly in February 2016, when estimates exceeding 10000 of its paying supporters (nearly 25% of those present) did something almost unheard of in English football at any level before or since: they walked out of a game early as a protest over ticket pricing and distribution. The 'Walk Out on 77' (#walkouton77) was the culmination of a frustration that had built up over a long period of time.
7. When mass protest such as this occurs, it indicates clearly that questions need to be asked as to what caused it, and particularly how aciton like it can be avoided in the future by proactively working with supporters to ensure that such a path is not considered necessary again.
8. It is vital for the owners, directors and officials of football clubs to genuinely understand that the passion and commitment that makes protest possible is something that is always more productive when it is understood and harnessed positively. When supporters feel that their view isn't respected, listened to and, where justified and necessary, acted upon (such as on ticket prices), or they feel that the process in which they are engaged is not being taken seriously enough, negative outcomes will almost certainly result. These often manifest themselves as:
 - frustration (which could be expressed in the general atmosphere at matches, around the club, and in the various places and ways that supporters communicate, including online);
 - cynicism (a belief that owners, directors and officials are simply seeking to look as though they're engaging - 'box ticking');
 - disengagement (declining to cooperate in the established process), and;
 - action (anything from media briefing to political process, or 'direct action', e.g. mass protest or boycotts)

'Fan culture' has moved on. Football administration hasn't

1. The emergence in the 1990s of football 'supporters' trusts', the first such established by the

undoubted visionary Brian Lomax at Northampton Town FC, provided an alternative view of the place of fans, forcing football to change many of its assumptions about them and their place at clubs, and in the wider game. The game I believe owes a huge debt of gratitude to the very much missed Brian Lomax MBE for his vision.

2. However positive this development, we should be in no doubt that supporters' trusts emerged because of a catastrophic and lamentable failure by football as a whole, including owners, officials and regulators, to treat clubs with the respect they deserved: Aldershot, Maidstone, Charlton, Brighton, Wimbledon, are a mere five of the examples of this failure. The failure to respect the role of supporters was in some senses a mere extension of this.
3. Supporters began to describe themselves (and to be described) as having a form of 'moral ownership' over their clubs (often referred to in terms like being the 'lifeblood' of the club or game); or as a 'stakeholder', sometimes 'partner'. This was an important shift in the culture, and meant that moving to a more formalised relationship was in many respects far less of a radical change.
4. Supporters' trusts exist to seek a more formal relationship with their club, and it is now quite common to find them having quite formalised relationships with their clubs. This can range from regular meetings with the board. In some cases, this relationship is underpinned through written agreement, or some form of 'equity' or similar part-ownership of the club. In a number of cases, supporters' trusts have actually become a legal part or full owner of 'their' football club.
5. However, football is still a very 'conservative' game, and reluctant to embrace radical change. In my experience, amongst the upper levels of management and ownership of too many clubs, criticism, challenge or scrutiny – or all three, however constructively put – can often be taken defensively, and new ideas find it all too often difficult to take hold.
6. 'Ground' is often conceded reluctantly by clubs, and relationships very often managed either as a marketing/commercial/customer service issue, or as a communications professional might practice 'crisis' or 'issues' management: in a very 'political' fashion. The alternative is to view the club as something having various audiences/publics or 'stakeholders', where 'dialogue' in the truest sense happens (understanding - and sometimes, though not always, changing - each other) is used, and lessons can be learned and shared.
7. Although not the focus of this report, The FA's governance structure is not currently fit for

purpose to ensure this change in dynamic is embedded across football, and that the structure changes in tandem across the game. Specifically, it does not represent the interests of supporters formally as a stakeholder, alongside players and officials for example, within its rules. I do not believe that the professional game in particular (The Premier League and EFL) should be primarily responsible for this area, because their primary purpose is to organise competitions for their clubs, a fact that gets forgotten all too often.

8. Because of this mix of culture, complacency and failure to change and adapt to the new fan 'culture' and expectations, this leaves them poorly prepared for supporters as 'stakeholders', even more so as activists, who are concerned with more than just whether-or-not their seat at a match is pleasant to sit in, whether the queues in the club shop are too long, or whether their fizzy drink isn't flat.
9. Part of this comes through the simple 'not knowing' on the part of owners, directors and senior officials, of how to address a long-term fault in the game: I believe the willingness is often there, but in a market full of 'expertise' in 'fan engagement' that positions itself in the sphere of sales and marketing, the right advice and is all too often not. In some unfortunate cases, there are even some who fear what might eventuate if supporters start to think they can directly influence and change the direction of the club.
10. A major factor in all of this is what some term the 'brand loyalty' of supporters. (Not being a term I personally use). It is always difficult to find a comparable example of the loyalty of football fans, as it often makes no sense: the vast majority do not simply move clubs as one would a supermarket as the result of poor service or high prices. There are much lower limits to loyalty in almost every 'economic' relationship we have, and those limits can be tested, and relationships broken. However in football, it is difficult to test that relationship to breaking point - though some examples all too sadly exist today. It is the extraordinary limits to this breaking point that perhaps sometimes makes football clubs less inclined to work hard on the relationship: if you know that someone will keep coming back, it is much easier to end up doing less to make sure they return. However, I believe that the converse is also demonstrably true: that if you make fans feel as though they matter - and this does not simply mean good marketing or CRM - that they will reward you with loyalty, and that you also can benefit economically. Even if there is no significant uplift financially, why have a poor relationship through a lack of thought or consideration? It is vitally important, always,

for a club and its staff to have this in mind whenever they are thinking about ‘engagement’ or communications with fans.

Section 2: Findings

Introduction – The general culture at LFC

From my lengthy interviews with those concerned, a picture has emerged of a club – certainly in its relationship with its supporters – that has not completely recovered from the Hicks and Gillett era.

This period and eventual crisis - as they always are - was a very heightened time. It was also a time when ‘leveraged buyouts’ had become well known following the Glazer family takeover of Manchester United, and concerned a lot of supporters.

Although there were undoubted similarities with Manchester United’s takeover in 2005, in the case of LFC the whole process was more opaque, with the facts hidden from view, until dug out by journalists, fans and, ultimately, international bank financing and the High Court. Newspapers at the time were reporting of a club ‘on its knees’.

Trust everywhere was clearly in short supply, and by the time Hicks and Gillett were finally removed, it was, in effect, a club in the midst of a civil war. The two owners were labelled “untrustworthy” by a High Court judge.

Background to the formation of the LFCSC

1. The Hicks and Gillett years were very fraught, and the club was in serious financial trouble. Fans viewed themselves as trying to ‘protect’ the club. Some have described the circumstances as ‘war like’; it was believed, with some justification, that the survival at the club was at stake.
2. There were however good relationships with the staff at some levels of the club.
3. Formal relationships with the likes of Christian Purslow (former Managing Director) and

Ian Ayre (then Commercial Director, now Chief Executive) were very defensive from the perspective of those I spoke to. Fans were concerned that the club was heading into financial meltdown, and it was believed that those such as Ayre and Purslow were, perhaps understandably, attempting to prevent some of that information from entering the public domain. It has been described as a 'them and us situation'.

4. When FSG bought the club, John Henry made it clear that he viewed SoS's role as vital in convincing his company to buying it. The incoming owners, led by John Henry and Tom Werner, talked of it 'not being about money, but about 'passion and our understanding of the fans of this club.'
5. Officials at SoS believed that there was an opportunity for a 'whole new relationship'. SoS officials told the new owners that after two years of political agitation, they'd learned a lot about how clubs generally, The Premier League, The FA worked, and about how Liverpool worked as well. They were trying to make the point that they could make a very positive contribution. Though there was no formal offer or proposal at that point, FSG made it plain they wanted to follow up on the discussions with SoS.
6. Three months after the takeover, in January of 2011, the SoS committee wrote a letter to FSG, requesting a follow-up discussion. They were concerned that contact had ceased. Not everyone on the SoS committee believes that the specific tone of the letter was the right one, and this may or may not have had an effect, although it must be pointed out that the committee is itself bound by collective responsibility for decisions.
7. With no explanation, relationships with senior officials at the club appeared to grow colder towards SoS, and in about Summer of 2011 the LFCSC was launched. At that point SoS was completely locked out of any discussions with the club or senior officials. From that point, the LFCSC was regarded (from the club' point of view) as being the only vehicle for engagement with the club for fans.
8. Given what would have been a pretty terrible state of relations at the club following the period of ownership by Gillette and Hicks, it is perhaps understandable that some at the club may have been more cautious. However, that is precisely the point at which bridges need to be mended, not burned.
9. Ultimately, and commendably I believe, SoS took the decision, after much internal discussion and at times, disagreement, to engage with the LFCSC to try to make it work

for fans.

This era is, I believe, vital to the issue of fan engagement at LFC now, because although this was over six years ago, the Liverpool Football Club Supporters Committee (LFSC) was formed in 2011, scarcely months after what became the Fenway Sports Group (FSG) took control in late 2010.

This is important, because the initial contact between the Spirit of Shankly and the incoming owners tended to indicate a potentially very positive relationship between the two – at least to the SoS committee.

I would suggest that from the moment the new owners largely ceased contact with the SoS committee in 2010, it sent a negative message to a group who had been formed explicitly because of the crisis at the club: they were effectively being dismissed, and their role in ‘forcing Hicks and Gillett out’ (something FSG’s representatives suggested themselves was ‘vital’) was consigned to history. What appeared initially to point to an era of greater collaboration and understanding turned not to be quite the gear-change expected.

It has never been good practice in any form of ‘fan engagement’ for a club to effectively shut out the biggest supporters’ organisation with no explanation. The real shame is that an attempt such as the LFCSC to manage supporter relations better instead ended up contributing to a sense of mistrust and almost certainly sowed the seeds of its own failure.

The formation and structure of the LFCSC

1. It concerns me that more than a little of the reasoning behind the establishment of the LFCSC and the form it took, might have been more to do with handling supporters as a ‘political’ problem rather than an enthusiastic embrace of ‘structured engagement’ with fans.
2. Whatever the thinking, in my view, the LFCSC was somewhat ‘thrown together’. Whilst the intentions towards supporters appear to have been honourable and well intentioned on the part of FSG from the start, something seems to have happened in

the intervening period. Ultimately, the decision to go with the LFCSC appears to have been somewhat hurried, while the execution of the idea was poor. It is evident that not enough thought was given to its structure, or how effective representation of the supporters would happen with a group as large as this, representing such a wide set of concerns ranging from 'corporate' to 'local' to 'BAME' fans. It has the appearance of being a repository for anything with the label 'fan', which with the additional problems around resources, meant that its ability to be effective was curtailed from the start.

3. As a specific point, it is unclear to me why the creators of the LFCSC deemed it necessary to have a 'corporate supporters' representative on the LFCSC. It is my view that the concerns of corporate-level supporters would tend to be better handled by a commercial or marketing team. It would tend to reinforce the view that the LFCSC is more a way of trying to deal with any issues with the term 'fan' in one easy to manage place.
4. Principal Owner and Director, John Henry, and Chairman, Tom Werner, were meant to attend at least two meetings per-annum. This has not been the case, although there have been occasions where specially arranged meetings with LFCSC representatives have taken place when one of them has been in the country. Again, the commitment appears to have been well intentioned and honourable; however, once more the execution was poor, and has created a bad impression with committee members.
5. Where Tom Werner, John Henry and FSG representatives have met LFCSC representatives, there is a complaint that they tend not to be adequately briefed on issues, such as the views of fans on ticket prices, in advance of the meeting.

The LFCSC appears to have something of an 'orphaned' status in the club, despite the stated intention to use the LFCSC, and also the role of Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) to provide a structure of support for supporters' issues. The LFC website itself says: 'Through the members of the Supporters Committee and the existing club communication channels, the Club delivers all aspects of the Supporters Liaison Officer duties through a number of Club employees, rather than one dedicated person.':

<http://www.liverpoolfc.com/fans/lfc-supporter-liaison-officer/about-the-supporters-liaison-officer> My discussions with those involved in the supporters' committee indicate that generally not

been the case.

The absence of a person, persons or process designated specifically to service the committee's administrative needs causes a substantial problem in ensuring that issues are itemised, allocated, dealt with and followed up, something I deal with below.

In my opinion many of the founding 'Initial Aims' and 'Long Term Aims' of the LFCSC are not what could be considered specific enough to help to govern a strategic relationship of this type. Many of them are basically saying the same thing, and don't help to frame the relationship with anything measurable. This simply reinforces the narrative that the LFCSC is a repository, rather than a place where problems are tackled and solved. I have listed these aims below (these can be found on the LFC Official Site).

Initial aims

- 1. To establish a forum for supporters to communicate directly with the club in a structured manner.*
- 2. To help the club better understand the issues that most affect and concern our fans.*
- 3. To give the club an opportunity to explain the thinking behind key decisions.*
- 4. To enable fans to play a key role in helping the club achieve success on and off the pitch.*
- 5. To provide a greater degree of transparency about key issues that affect supporters.*

Long-term aims

- 1. To enhance the relationship between Liverpool Football Club and our supporters.*
- 2. To help ensure fans feel their loyalty is valued by Liverpool Football Club.*
- 3. To help improve Liverpool Football Club for the benefit of all supporters.*

The 'autonomy' of the committee was not something that in any real sense came with 'enforceability'. By that I mean that the LFCSC had no established process by which they could make legitimate requests or demands. The 'aims' set did not assist in that either, as the LFCSC could not point to anything specific to help to make their point about a given issue. And so it appears that the relationship became determined by the subjective view of either or both party at any given moment, on a given issue.

The more one examines the relationship, the more it appears that the actual role of the LFCSC was not properly thought out in structural, 'corporate communications' terms. As a result, its

ability to achieve much was seriously hamstrung from the start. I am not in a position to judge why, though often it is down to a simple lack of thought, but the consequent effects are clear.

Ultimately, because the committee did initially have a high degree of autonomy granted to it by the club, it was able to reorganise itself internally to focus on single issues, for example ticket prices and local fans, this was largely in spite of all the problems I have outlined here.

Consultation, decision making & issues management

1. Even the smallest decisions appeared to get stuck in some kind of bureaucratic or administrative process that no one I spoke to could quite locate or explain, least of all understand. Even simple requests, such as putting a tab/menu for the committee on the website, proved difficult to get done. When the committee was invited to comment on LFC TV's moving over to subscription only model, the questions related to potential views of fans were not responded to. People felt as though they were being marketed to, not engaged with.
2. There appears to be a 'misunderstanding' of the concept of 'consultation'. Consultation at LFC appeared too often to be a matter of 'going through the motions', with issues already decided upon on being presented to fans for 'consultation', whereas in fact it is more of a 'presentation' of a decision already made. The resulting frustration of fans was often directed at the LFCSC.
3. In one example, changes were made to the system of collection of tickets for European matches, however instead of discussion first, changes were announced and the consequences had to be dealt with. Fans unsurprisingly complained to the LFCSC, and the changes then had to be reversed by the club. This instance tends to show that 'consultation' was not being delivered properly. Instead, they have a plan they want to implement. The one positive is that they did change - though this was under pressure, and totally unnecessary.
4. Whatever the cause of the above, and other similar examples, this is not good practice in any form of 'structured engagement'. Even if the club intended on following its own views on the issue, there should be a process entered into to discuss, shape, and communicate any change sensitively. The outcome above was entirely avoidable had

those with the authority and responsibility handled the issue with greater care and, dare I say it, respect for supporters and their representatives.

There are people in the club who understand how to work with fans and want to consult with them. One such area concerns the staff and management of the ticketing operation, who came in for wide praise from almost everyone I spoke to as 'always trying to do the right thing for the fans'. However, it appears that their hands are tied in many cases, with decisions overruled arbitrarily, or in some cases, not made at all.

The 'walkout on 77'

The most notable occasion where consultation has been rendered meaningless was in 2015. Members of the LFCSC, Spirit of Shankly and Spion Kop 1906 entered into what they understood was a genuine dialogue over ticket prices. Over a period of around six months, constructive discussions were held, with clear indications that compromises would be made. (Although requests for the owners to attend were rejected on the basis that the owners were being represented by those from the club present at the meeting.) In the very last ticket meeting, despite the very open discussions and exploring of the issues, it was fed back that representatives wouldn't get what was hoped for [and believed was possible, according to those involved in the process]. The Walk Out on 77 was organised, successful, and the owners changed their minds.

To those involved in this incident, it reinforced that whoever is making the decisions, they are not being made by the people fans are meeting with. There also seems to be an 'arbitrary' nature to decisions and interventions. The manner in which the otherwise productive discussions were abruptly halted were the almost exclusive cause of the protests, and completely unnecessary and avoidable. It is speculation to apportion responsibility, but there is a reasonable assumption that the decision was made far further up the chain of command than simply, for example, those running the ticketing operation. It is not to football's credit that unsurprisingly - though it should be surprisingly - that the club broke off relations following the protests, and since the Walkout on 77, the supporters' committee has never had the same relationship with the club. Whatever it was down to, breaking off relationships should only ever

be a last resort after everything else has been tried, and even then, only in extreme cases. It might be argued that organising a mass walkout of supporters was going beyond what was acceptable on the part of supporters' groups, but I believe I have already established that this could have been avoided in any number of ways, and on any number of occasions. I return to my earlier discussion of supporter loyalty; for supporters to take such action must surely point to the limits of the relationship being tested close to breaking point.

It is also worthwhile, briefly, addressing the precise nature of LFC's ownership: Some might take the view that the nature of the owners being absent from the UK causes a lot of the problems, but I am not convinced the problems as they are will be solved by having UK-based owners. There is without doubt a problem at some clubs with what might be termed 'absenteeism', but that happens with UK-based owners too, and should never be used as a simple catch-all to attempt to explain away every problem that occurs. There are many factors involved, as I have already explained. It is also not something that I am in a position to investigate in any detail in this report.

Section 3: Recommendations

Part of the role of this report is to suggest where things could head next. From my extensive experience in dealing with clubs, fans and governing bodies, I seek to divine what I believe are the best ways of addressing what are clearly difficult and in some cases, rather broken relationships.

I do this below, both in terms of the structure and secondly, the culture. If a 'structured relationship' is to work, and not be mere words, the culture needs to be right, and based on honesty, transparency and respect.

As outlined previously, 'Supporter engagement...means dialogue between a football club and its fans, ensuring that the views of the fans - the lifeblood of any football club - are listened to, and acted upon'. We are not then in any doubt over what we mean. Even if the term is used to apply to areas such as the quality of hot food or the price of merchandise, the central meaning in this case is about acknowledging the role of supporters, and ensuring that their views are not ignored, or always simply 'managed' in the political sense. Indeed, that they are welcomed, and contribute to good decision making.

When FSG bought Liverpool FC, it is clear to me from the evidence that at least initially they showed some good instincts. Knowing what had happened under the ownership of Hicks and Gillet, they wanted to pursue a different way of interacting with fans. Even if mistakes were made by SoS in the way they approached the issue initially, that should not have altered the

view the new owners had that the club had to constructively harness the sheer passion that Liverpool fans had shown - in part through becoming organised as those who formed Spirit of Shankly did. Nonetheless, within a relatively short space of time a different, I believe mistaken, path was chosen.

One can only make assumptions why that happened in this specific case. I have touched on some of the reasons why football as a whole struggles to change its practice, and some of those may apply here – I suspect they do. Selecting the ‘path of least resistance’ often seems attractive, especially when it concerns a club in some turmoil. However, I am utterly convinced that had they committed to the ‘heavy lifting’ required to clear the debris left from the battles with Hicks and Gillett, and entered into frank and open discussions with SoS and supporters about the future relationship, they would not have presided over the deterioration of relationships they did. It resulted in the Walk out on 77, one of the biggest single demonstrations of supporter power seen since the formation of The Premier League, perhaps even since the successful campaign against compulsory ID cards in the 1980s. That should not be underestimated.

Structured engagement

1. ‘Structured Engagement’ is an accepted phenomenon in English football. The concept has been around for many years, and its formal position is now established following the report of the 2014-2016 Government Expert Working Group on Supporter Ownership and Engagement.
2. Whilst it is important to address the obvious failures of the LFCSC model, it is equally important not to believe that the causes – and therefore the solutions – are all structural. However, structure plays a vital, if not crucial, part in ensuring that a good culture can be fostered. (I go onto deal with the culture and practice in more detail following this section.)
3. I have divided the ‘structured engagement’ recommendations into two areas. One concerns the overall relationship concerned with what I term the ‘strategic governance and ownership issues’, covering overall structures and processes concerning the club and its relationship with the fans, its operation as a business, and the sort of things that

concern a supporters' trust, as unique to other forms of organisation. The second section deals with those issues that would broadly fall into the category of 'supporter services', issues that could and should be dealt with by the SLO/supporter services function at LFC.

4. To be effective, as with the current arrangements, both of these areas should be incorporated into the LFC Supporter Charter.
- a) Strategic, governance and ownership issues
5. It must be understood that whilst I am the author of a report for the Spirit of Shankly, and so seek the best possible outcome for them, as an expert in the field of communications with supporters I am also writing this from a position of experience. Consequently, I only recommend what I view is best for a genuinely productive relationship between fans and club, however much a challenge this might be to established thinking at LFC, or in the wider game.
 6. As part of the supporters' trust movement, which itself is a unique and vital part of the wider supporters' movement, Spirit of Shankly should regularly examine whether advances or changes in the relationship in the informal sense between club and fans can be underpinned with changes in the formal relationship. In some cases, this might mean a degree of 'enforceability' in the legalistic sense - at least in the sense that such changes are 'codified'; written down and agreed between both parties, equally.
 7. This is not something that anyone should fight shy of, particularly given that a whole host of relationships in football are already governed by formality, and by enforceability: player contracts, relationships between the club and sponsors. It is plainly the fact that formality that actually allows the relationship to function, because both parties understand and accept the terms of the relationship as legitimate, and unambiguous.
 8. One of the major weaknesses of the LFCSC was that in many respects, after being established the club largely left it to its own devices. Although there was regular involvement of senior executives in meetings, there wasn't a great deal of process - nor enforceability to enact and sustain it - created to manage the new relationship. Perhaps some within the club didn't consider it necessary, but it was certainly a shame that it

happened. Whilst the club should be praised for having the foresight to establish such a body, I view this major lacking as the part of the cause of a great deal of the problems, and very much an opportunity missed.

9. There was an undoubted degradation of the relationship between supporters and the club following the escalation of action over ticketing, concluding with the Walkout on 77 in February 2016. It is also evident that the LFCSC 'ship' has sailed, and that it would be counter-productive to attempt to continue in this vein. The establishing of the ticketing group involving Spirit of Shankly itself, Spion Kop 1906, also demonstrates that a different, more direct form of 'engagement' with fan representatives is possible. By this I mean that it is no longer necessary to establish a third-party that 'channels' those relationships, as the LFCSC seeks to do.
10. I take the view that relationships with supporters need to be managed in a different way, one that reflects the 'realpolitik': the reality on the ground. The important distinction here is that although Spirit of Shankly do campaign on and support other groups on 'grassroots' issues such as ticketing or the treatment of fans inside the stadium, in its legal 'DNA' is an organisation concerned with the strategic issues of governance and ownership of the club, as in common with all supporters' trusts, and the belief that the day-to-day issues are best dealt within a more formalised - and ultimately more efficient - structure.
11. I recommend that LFCs relationship with Spirit of Shankly, as the largest and most representative organisation for Liverpool fans, be put on a more formal footing. Specifically, I recommend that regular, joint meetings between the most senior executives and an equal number of representatives of SoS should be established, to discuss strategic issues of interest and concern – on both sides. The emphasis should be on the 'strategic' nature of these discussions. They should not be concerned with what would generally be regarded as 'day-to-day supporter services issues', unless they form part of an ongoing, strategic issue, such as an infrastructure project, a new ticketing system, or a new stand.
12. This type of relationship is one that Supporters Direct ago established some time ago in its paper, 'Recognising Value: Developing a Structured Relationship between Supporters' Trusts and Clubs'. Although the paper itself is referring to the relationship

within the context of a wider licensing and regulatory system that currently does not exist, many of the elements laid out on Page 11 of the document provide a good starting point to help both sides to understand how the relationship might be itself be 'regulated'. It is important that those in senior positions in the club, and SoS, have confidence in any new system, and such a guide should provide some comfort in that respect.

13. Some of the criteria from the above report that could be utilised in the future relationship include:
 - Ensuring SoS remains properly constituted (ensuring its rules are fit for purpose, according to the laws governing Community Benefit Societies/IPs, and the membership criteria of Supporters Direct);
 - Ensuring that it operates open membership;
 - SoS establishing a development plan, including targets for increasing membership;
 - Clear evidence of structured engagement on the part of SoS with all LFC supporters' groups in order to ensure that it can speak for the widest set of supporters possible
14. I would propose a minimum of four such meetings a year, formally minuted, and published with such records being signed off by both sets of representatives. I believe that it would be best for these minutes to be published for all to see. However, it is perfectly proper that certain issues be redacted in the minutes of meetings, along with best practice in business. Even in the case of club where fans have a substantial or controlling interest, it is not unusual, and is perfectly reasonable, to expect legitimate commercial confidentiality be respected. This would need to be properly discussed and agreed in advance.
15. LFC is currently undergoing a change in management at the top, and I understand that the role of Chief Executive is being divided into a 'Chief Operations Officer' and 'Chief Commercial Officer and Managing Director'. I would recommend that both of these executives, along with the Communications Director, attend these meetings.
16. I would also recommend that at least one of the directors of the owners, Fenway Sports Group (FSG) as owners be present at the first and final meetings each year. This is

important because those who ultimately control the business should seek an understanding of the relationship between the club that they own and a group of its key stakeholders. If they don't meet the representatives of those stakeholders, they miss out on insight and understanding that could help them in their deliberations about the business.

17. I also recommend that in seeking to establish such a relationship in the future, LFC and SoS seek further, appropriate advice from recognised experts in this field. As we have seen with the mistakes made with the LFCSC, it is a vitally important relationship to get right, and a change of this type should be managed thoughtfully.

b) Supporter Services relationship

18. Other organisations that might represent sections of the fanbase such as LGBT or BAME groups should be able to demonstrably feed in their 'strategic' concerns to SoS, and SoS's legitimacy with these groups will be regulated by the suggested criteria from Supporters Direct's best practice advice. Despite being 'special interest' groups, their members are also fans like any others, and they have as much right to be heard in that respect as any other on issues of strategic importance that would be governed by the structured relationship between SoS and the club.
19. However, as these groups are demonstrably not themselves established for the same purpose, they must be provided with an appropriate - though not equivalent - structure and process to ensure that their concerns are treated with the respect and seriousness that they deserve.
20. It is important to ensure that they continue to be able to have a relationship with the club, and more importantly, for that relationship to also be far more effective than it has been previously. I would recommend a broader umbrella group that can be under the oversight of the SLO function at the club, meeting several times a year, and taking in representatives of other supporters groups – but also including SoS representation itself, as they need to feed issues of concern in on an equal footing. The SLO function should through a properly established, agreed process, be in a position to feed these concerns directly into the departments or executives concerned. There should be guaranteed times for dealing with issues raised, as would be standard practice in other

areas of business, particularly service-related industries. One of the weaknesses of the LFCSC has been that complaints, problems and queries were not subject to any kind of process, and were resolved or not on the basis almost exclusively of chance.

21. Again, appropriate advice must be sought from recognised experts in this field to ensure the structure and related processes work efficiently.

Shifting the culture

1. One of the most difficult things to do when it comes to football clubs is to change the culture, particularly the relationship(s) with fans.
2. To continue down the path set in 2011 with the creation of the LFCSC would be a serious error, and would only serve to reinforce the mistakes made in 2011. Indeed, those mistakes would be worse, given the hindsight we now have.
3. As previously pointed out, the creation of the LFCSC came about with no real consultation and with an absence of discussion with the major supporters' organisation, SoS. This is even more of a mistake when their role in helping to end the chaotic ownership of Hicks and Gillett is considered, and the fact that SoS was actually created explicitly because of the chaotic ownership of the two.
4. Whatever the system of engagement that Liverpool FC decides is the best for them, they must ensure that simple things such as 'consultation' are done properly and to a process; and that what seems to be a habit whereby decisions and agreements relating to the LFCSC and supporters are overruled with little explanation, or arbitrarily broken, comes to an end.
5. Trust is a major element of this, and trust has to be earned. This partly comes through meeting, talking and understanding each other's positions (and I mean this to refer to supporters as equally as I do to the club), and partly through having confidence in the structure of engagement and dialogue. If it is judged necessary to use an external party to help these conversations, then that should be done. No effort should be spared to get this relationship right.
6. Any discussions, meetings or processes should be undertaken with open minds on all sides, with appropriate advice and guidance. There must be a preparedness to adopt measures that might be difficult or even be seen as tactically 'disadvantageous' or

problematic in the short term, will actually benefit the relationship between the club and its supporters over a longer time frame. The long-view is critical consideration in all of this.

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