



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Establishing Fan Engagement as a Core Value in the Football Industry during a New Era of Regulation



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**Aaryaman Banerji &
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About Think Fan Engagement (TFE)

TFE was founded by Kevin Rye, an expert in Fan Engagement who has since 2001 worked across football with fans, their representatives, clubs, leagues, governing bodies & other stakeholders in football and sport across the UK, Europe & the World.

TFE empowers clubs to build meaningful fan relationships, and also works with others, including rights holders (leagues, associations), brands and other organisations who seek to understand fans better.

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Banerji holds an MA in History from Durham University (where his research was focused on the sociopolitical history of football), an MA in Law from BPP University, and the FIFA Master MBA, under the aegis of FIFA and the Centre International d'Etude du Sport.

Kevin Rye is the owner of Think Fan Engagement. He has worked in the field since 2004, working across football with fans & representatives, clubs, leagues & governing bodies and other stakeholders in football and sport across the UK, Europe & the World. He was also on the committee of the Wimbledon Independent Supporters Association at a critical time for Wimbledon's football club in 2001/2002, and the board of the owners of AFC Wimbledon, the Dons Trust, for two years in 2022-2024.

He also teaches Football Business & Media at UCFB - Wembley, has a Diploma in Public Relations and is a member of the CIPR and fellow of The RSA. Read his detailed biography at fanengagement.net/kevin-rye

Additional thanks to **Dr Connor Penfold**, Lecturer in Football Business & Media at UCFB - Wembley, for his invaluable advice and assistance in editing and proofing this report.

Executive Summary

This report has examined fan engagement at a critical time for football in England. The men's game is at a significant juncture, with the Independent Football Regulator (IFR) having commenced its formal operation in early November 2025. With fans a significant stakeholder within football clubs, fan engagement and consultation has been marked as a key part of the IFR's regime.

The work done on fan engagement over previous years has meant that the industry now has a more effective grasp of the importance of this area. Recent developments, however – ranging from the attempted creation of the European Super League to studies demonstrating an underwhelming level of fan satisfaction – have highlighted that there is still much work to be done.

While the regulator provides an opportunity to further improve understanding of fan engagement, a sole reliance on the new body would be strategically erroneous. This research shows that, while the regulator can enforce basic standards, it is the willingness of clubs, fan representatives and all those involved that will matter most in the drive for better fan engagement. The research, in this context, has defined fan engagement as a club's means of listening and communicating effectively with fans.

The research has found that there is a rich and quite diverse set of fan engagement practices, often scattered amongst clubs of different sizes at different levels in the pyramid. However, the increasing frequency with which fan engagement has become an extension of the marketing departments within clubs is notable. Given supporters should be examined as stakeholders, this is often an inappropriate approach to take. This report has sought to both understand and solve for the challenges of fan engagement within football. The result is a model that provides a set of principles and basic practices that are proportional but scalable, being something that can be replicated at Morecambe FC as much as at Manchester United.

The research itself is based on a number of research techniques, including a series of interviews with clubs, fans and experts in the field about their experience and -

importantly for a piece of research that seeks to provide practical outcomes - 'Action Research'. In this case, the researchers worked with Barnsley Football Club and their fans to help to establish their Fan Advisory Board. For this, the authors are immensely grateful to CEO Jon Flatman, Head of Supporter Services John Bird, and all those who gave their time up to be part of the process. We also used a great deal of secondary research, additionally utilising the experience and knowledge of both authors', and the consulting and research work of TFE, including the Fan Engagement Index.

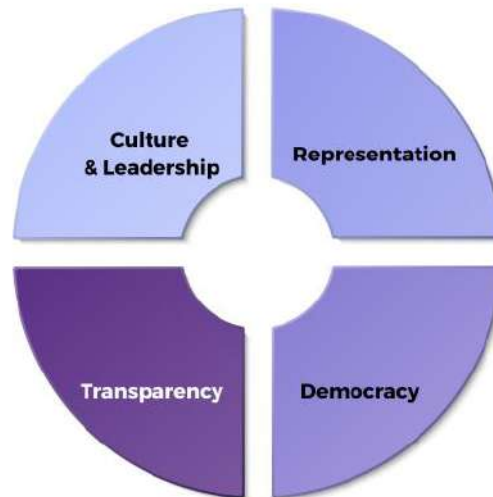
The model itself rests upon four areas: Culture and Leadership, Representation, Transparency, and Democracy. Each of these areas is a critical pillar in aiding the delivery of fan engagement in clubs, with each pillar then broken down into a set of practices that clubs can adopt to ensure that their strategies are effective. Within that breakdown (from section 5.3), the research provided short case-studies to demonstrate clubs that do well in this area, providing practical ways to help other clubs to actively improve.

The aim of this model is also to provide the opportunity for leagues, associations and other funding bodies to identify potential funding needs for the development of fan engagement. This could either be through clubs themselves opting to do so, or via central funding managed by the EFL or PL, the latter in much the same way that elite player funding for academies through the EPPP system, and funding for football club community trusts has done in their respective areas.

The model is outlined on the next page.

The Model of Fan Engagement

The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement



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Fig. 2: The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement (pt. 1)

The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement



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Fig. 3: The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement (pt. 2)

Readers will note that this model covers community work/engagement. It is vital to understand that fan engagement does not take place in isolation from the kind of community work that clubs undertake. Despite the fact that the two should be separate functions of a football club, it is essential for them to overlap and ‘talk to each other’.

It is our hope and anticipation that the model created will become a very practical tool for football clubs within – and outside - English football, as well as fans, administrators, policymakers, researchers and academics in the field.



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