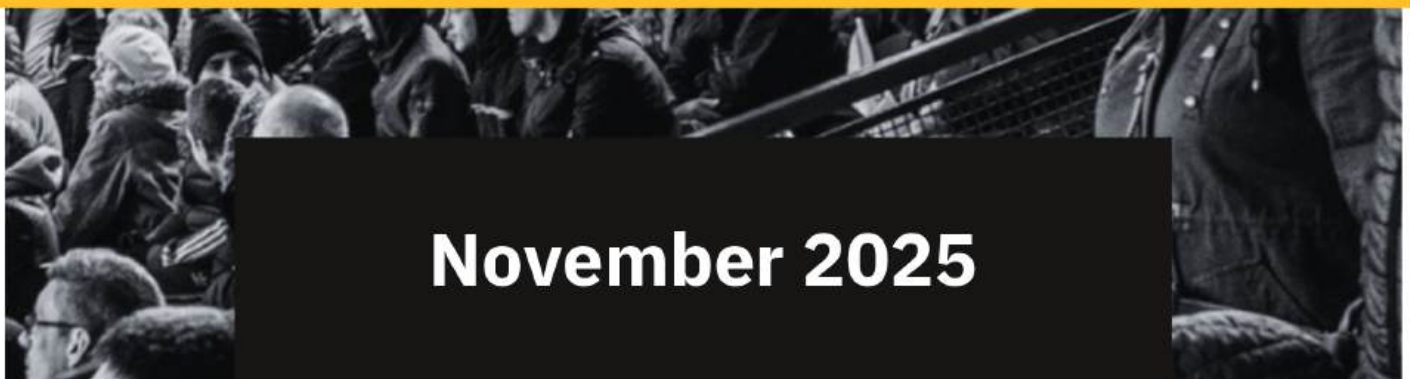




**FULL REPORT**

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



**November 2025**

**Aaryaman Banerji &  
Kevin Rye**

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fan  
engagement

[fanengagement.net](http://fanengagement.net)

# 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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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.

# 1. 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.

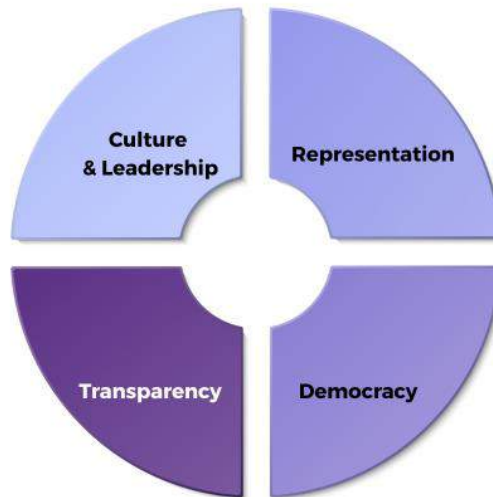
The model itself rests upon four areas: Culture and Leadership, Representation, Transparency, and Democracy. Each of these areas is a critical pillar in aiding the delivery of fan engagement in clubs, with each pillar then broken down into a set of practices that clubs can adopt to ensure that their 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

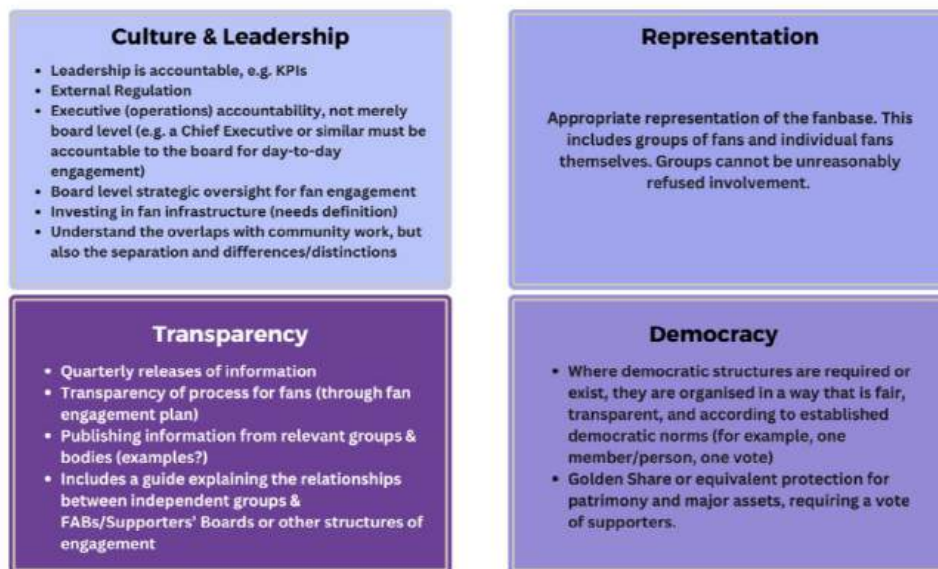
The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement



Rye & Banerji, 2025

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

The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement



Rye & Banerji, 2025

Fig. 2: 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.

## 2. Introduction

In 2019, the first Fan Engagement Index (FEI) was created to measure how well English men's football clubs practice their fan engagement. This was the first publication of its kind since the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) Working Group on Supporter Ownership and Engagement (2015), which marked greater formalisation of the regulations concerning fan engagement in the English men's game.

The term 'fan engagement' was at the time of the FEI's creation, predominantly used in discussions about sport in the United States (US), or in relation to technology companies attempting to enter the sports and entertainment marketplace.

It was in this context that the FEI was created, in order to capture and define the terminology associated with this emerging field.

The introduction to the first Fan Engagement Index noted:

*Why does football need the Fan Engagement Index? First of all, the relationship between clubs and their fans - their primary stakeholder - is ill defined, and described in so many different ways with varying terminology.*

*We've failed to settle on phrases and shared definitions that we can all work to. Common phrases and shared definitions matter, because then we speak the same language, and can understand and share experiences.*

*Secondly, leadership and best practice in Fan Engagement isn't visible enough. As an industry, we need to be able to see in practical terms what works across the game, and at clubs of every type. With all this, we will be able to make changes and improvements that will benefit us all.*

*There is no 'one size fits all' approach, but there are things that work that can be measured, and leaders in the game and good examples of Fan Engagement that need to receive more attention so that others can copy and learn from them.*

*Each club's Fan Engagement story is unique, and no index could capture each and every dimension of it. However, we believe that to tackle the first issue of shared definitions, there is value in creating a standard scoring system that captures essential elements of best practice and allows for comparison between clubs over time.<sup>1</sup>*

Now in its seventh year in 2025, and with the onset of the Independent Football Regulator, it is clear that this is an opportune moment to think more expansively about the impact of fan engagement. Specifically, about establishing a more common set of practices and principles that can be applied across different clubs.

It is also critical that as part of this, any model ensures it speaks to the business model of a club. In order to achieve an effective model which establishes fan engagement as a core part of the business practices of football clubs, the unique relationship that has emerged between clubs and fans must be better understood. This is with a view of creating a culture in which fan engagement becomes a significant driver of revenue at clubs, helping diversify income streams.

As this research notes, the unique place of fans as stakeholders requires the club-fan relationship be treated as an exceptional and significant connection for both parties, and carefully tailored as a result. To establish a healthy relationship between both requires the work and commitment of individual organisations, such as clubs, fan representatives, (Fan Advisory Boards (FABs)/Shadow Boards and supporters' trusts), as well as through a wider framework and culture stimulated by footballing governing bodies. This process of "fan engagement" – the relationship between a football club and its fans – should

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<sup>1</sup> The Fan Engagement Index 2018/2019 season

implement strategies and models with specific performance indicators to optimise this connection.<sup>2</sup>

This research, therefore, takes the learning, insights, and practice developed over a number of years to take fan engagement onto the next step of the journey to it becoming a central tenet of every football club, including its strategies, operations and processes.

## 2.1 Aim of the Research

The primary aim of the research is to develop a practical and scalable model of fan engagement that can be applied across the English football pyramid. It seeks to address the disconnect between clubs and fans, especially in light of increasing commercialisation and regulatory shifts. In establishing this model, it is crucial that it can plug into the role played by 'fan experience', which is generally accepted as the customer centred part of a fan's relationship with a football club.

## 2.2 Background and rationale to the research

The reformation of English football's pyramid structure in 1992, caused by the advent of The Premier League (PL), resulted in a drastic socio-economic and cultural shift in football and sport more widely.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the last thirty years has been characterised by globalisation, monetisation, and commercialisation of domestic men's football.<sup>4</sup> The rapid growth of the game, both at home and internationally, during this period has seen football's place within English culture and identity widely documented and researched. Research in academic and industry in this area has covered an impressively broad

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<sup>2</sup> Definition provided by <https://fanengagement.net>

<sup>3</sup> *The Club* Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson (London: John Murray) 2019

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

spectrum, such as the economic value of football clubs to the communities they represent, and the role of the sport in shaping local heritage.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 The position of fans as distinct stakeholders

A common conclusion drawn through the existing research on these topics is the view that the football industry in England is unique in nature, and contains several specificities which separate it from other economically lucrative sectors within the UK economy.<sup>6</sup> This distinction is the result of an amalgamation of factors, such as the social and human capital the football ecosystem relies on to prosper and a varying set of motivations for investment within the game. However, it is equally clear that the singularity of the industry has also been underpinned by the distinctive role of fans as stakeholders.

It is important to note here that the definition of 'fan' (or 'supporter') for the purposes of this research is the widely used concept of fan as a 'stakeholder' in their club. This is the definition used most commonly in both English and European football. In his research 'Football fans and stakeholder theory – A qualitative approach to classifying fans in Germany', Johannes Jaeger outlines that, 'When approaching the role of fans in modern football in Europe, it is essential to consider the European sports ecosystem, often approached through stakeholder theory (e.g. Morrow, 2003; Senaux, 2008; Anagnostopoulos, 2011)<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, according to Senaux (2008), football fans can be characterised as definitive stakeholders due to their legitimacy, power and urgency, fulfilling all three stakeholder classification criteria proposed by Mitchell et al. (1997)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For economic value of clubs to communities see <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/national-institute-economic-review/article/abs/benefits-to-their-communities-from-small-town-professional-football-clubs/5BF4398421E29BFE00248687CA93C83C>

for football and local heritage see <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2008.00190.x>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10432707/#:~:text=Football%20is%20unique%20in%20the,of%20football%20clubs%20%5B28%5D>

<sup>7</sup> Johannes Jaeger, Football fans and stakeholder theory – A qualitative approach to classifying fans in Germany (Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal, Vol. 11 No. 5, 2021)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

The position of fans is a result of their significant individual and collective emotional investment in football clubs, and this creates a distinctive responsibility for football clubs to represent and engage and communicate with these stakeholders, as well as reflect the distinct context in which the industry more widely operates.

## 2.4 The business model of football clubs

Widespread industry and academic discussion regarding whether football clubs have continued operating as true representatives of their communities has arisen in the last thirty years. These range from the 1999 government appointed Football Task Force, 2011 & 2013 (follow-up) DCMS Select Committee Inquiry into the Governance of Professional Football Clubs, the 2015 Government Expert Working Group on Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement, and the recent Fan-Led Review of Football Governance. It also includes several other non-statutory reports from Parliamentarians such as those two undertaken by the Football All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in 2004 & 2009. A significant body of academic and other industry research has emerged during this period, including from Supporters Direct, who compiled an impressive body of industry-focused research.

Before this point, the structure of clubs, in addition to the regulation they were bound to, ensured a different sort of representation for fans as stakeholders. Until 1981, for example, clubs were structured as non-profit making models, with dividends capped at 7.5% and directors unpaid.<sup>9</sup> The advent of the 'Company Model', with clubs sometimes floated on a public stock exchange, adjusted the dial from a legal standpoint. Company law dictates that directors owe fiduciary duties to act in the best interests of the organisation in question. This, as David Conn has noted, has resulted in football clubs being treated less as sporting institutions and cornerstones of communities, and more as

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2023/jul/01/football-clubs-communities-fans-owners>

standard profit-making organisations.<sup>10</sup> Crucially for this research, one of the by-products of this has been the acceptance of football fandom as a corporate priority within clubs.

Jonathan Wilson has argued that, before 1992, there was a heightened motivation amongst club hierarchies to ensure that a high quality of football was prioritised in order to maintain critical matchday consumers, given that gate receipts were still the predominant income for top division clubs.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Wilson argues that the prioritisation by clubs of fans and community stretches back to the late nineteenth-century, an era during which time “provincial self-assertion” was the main focus of football clubs. This was a time when local factory owners and industrial entrepreneurs provided funding for local clubs as a means to “elevate their home through football”.<sup>12</sup>

This culture, however, is something that has arguably shifted significantly. In their 2010 report, Supporters Direct outlined how a combination of social and economic factors had led to the “umbilical’ relationship between clubs and their local communities [was] breaking down, if not broken.’<sup>13</sup> Since the formation of the PL, it is widely argued that the direction of travel from clubs has continued. As Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson have noted, the influx of broadcasting rights for the PL, as well as the erosion of regulation that marginalised the non-profit making element of clubs, has profoundly altered the financial landscape of English football.<sup>14</sup> As a result, an increasing number of clubs now prioritise providing a source of equity for owners, rather than representing and engaging with communities. For instance, during the 2022/2023 season, West Bromwich Albion (WBA) owner Lai Guochuan took out in excess of £5m from the club to put towards other business ventures in China.<sup>15</sup> This represented not only the removal of resources from a community asset in the UK, but the prioritisation and redirection of those funds towards non-UK based organisations. This example highlights that the ownership model of the

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<sup>10</sup> David Conn *The Football Business* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing), 2002

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2023/jul/01/football-clubs-communities-fans-owners>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Supporters Direct, *The Social and Community Value of Football* (Supporters Direct) 2010

<sup>14</sup> *The Club* Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson (London: John Murray) 2019

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/61992838>

organisation, that until recently was tailored towards engaging with fans and its locality, had now been shifted towards prioritising the financial sustainability of other businesses.

However, WBA is not an isolated example with regards to the lack of prioritisation of fans. Since 2023/2024 there has been a breakdown in the relationship between the ownership of Sheffield Wednesday and its fans, a similar disconnect between the ownership and fans at Reading FC, leading to several protests by fan groups (though new ownership has since arrived).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the case at Reading FC saw the English Football League (EFL) repeatedly sanction then owner Dai Yongge, claiming that he had shown a “clear disregard for his obligations” and failed to fund the club adequately.<sup>17</sup> This provoked increasing unrest amongst fans, leading to the abandonment of matches due to disruption, and then local MP James Sunderland speaking out in support of protests.<sup>18</sup> The case of Morecambe under the previous ownership of Jason Whittingham, (although recently sold to the Punjab Warriors group), is another example of this.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the increasing alienation of fans in recent seasons, characterising the globalisation of English men’s football as a net negative would be misleading. A 2019 Ernst and Young report found that the PL alone contributed £7.6billion to the UK’s economy, whilst over 100,000 individuals were employed in the football industry in the country in some capacity.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the PL’s broadcast reach in 188 countries has made it a vital cultural export capable of enhancing international relations.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, government research has shown that the PL consistently ranks amongst the three aspects of UK society most consistently admired by international governments, alongside

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/sport/23821935.wednesday-disarray-owner-labels-fans-selfish/>;  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-67250847>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.readingchronicle.co.uk/sport/24153668.reading-fc-fans-front-line-protesting-future/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.jamessunderland.org.uk/news/james-sunderland-backing-reading-fc>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.morecambefc.com/news/2025/august/17/Public-Statement-on-Behalf-of-Bond-Group-Investments/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey-sites/ey-com/pt\\_br/topics/ey-economic-advisory-/ey-premier-league-economic-and-social-impact-january-2019.pdf](https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey-sites/ey-com/pt_br/topics/ey-economic-advisory-/ey-premier-league-economic-and-social-impact-january-2019.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.premierleague.com/news/1280062>

the monarchy and the BBC. This attractiveness has resulted in significant foreign investment in English football clubs, and often by extension, wider society and economy.

This success, however, has been accompanied by the introduction of ownership models which often fail to recognise the unique relationship between football clubs and fans, as well as the duty of clubs as community assets and representatives of locality. A balance between reaping the benefits of globalisation and monetisation whilst engaging effectively with fans as a critical stakeholder within the sport is something that has proved challenging in English football. Should that balance be consistently found, however, English football clubs could find themselves able to leverage themselves on the basis that they are local institutions with global recognition.

This research begins to address this issue and contribute to the emerging body of knowledge on the subject. Specifically, it establishes a model whereby engagement with fans becomes a core aspect of the business model of clubs across the football pyramid.

The present situation is, however, difficult. In 2019, a survey conducted by the Football Supporters Federation (now part of the Football Supporters Association following its merger with Supporters Direct) found that 39% of fans surveyed said that their club misunderstood or did not act upon structured dialogue.<sup>22</sup>

In many cases, clubs struggling to engage positively with fans are utilising inappropriate models inspired by different sporting ecosystems. For instance, some clubs look to learn from the model used in competitions such as the NFL, and the culture of establishing a sports entertainment market, rather reflecting the role of football clubs as more community-focused sports organisations. However, given the different contexts and cultures in which football in England and sports in the United States operate, it has become increasingly apparent that by attempting to replicate engagement strategies in the US, clubs are looking in the wrong places for the right lessons. By doing so, clubs fail

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<sup>22</sup><https://thefsa.org.uk/news/fan-engagement-survey-shows-still-room-for-improvement>

to benefit from the emergence of a more anchored football industry in England which has been established from a participatory, collectivist tradition.

Although a number of clubs throughout the football pyramid do engage positively with fans, and have successful policies in place for optimising fan engagement, the overall level of engagement with fans by clubs remains greatly variable<sup>23</sup>. As Phillip E. Pfeifer has established, the more general trend across a variety of industries shows that it costs less to maintain existing customers than to acquire new ones.<sup>24</sup> In football, James A. Cleland has noted that the appreciation of fans as a unique stakeholder has been found to increase retention of less active fans, and boost commercial opportunities by growing the supporter base.<sup>25</sup>

In public relations theory, James Grunig and Todd Hunt's 'four models of public relations' as they relate to communication with 'publics' (a term similar to the term 'stakeholders' that we use here), is also relevant in a context of fan engagement<sup>26</sup>. These models of communication can be applied to any organisation, with that organisation using one or all of these models in its communication with its stakeholders (or publics), depending on the issue or context of what is being communicated.

A short explanation of the principal characteristics and features of each model is included below.

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<sup>23</sup> García, B. and Welford, J., 2015. Supporters and football governance, from customers to stakeholders: A literature review and agenda for research. *Sport Management Review*, 18(4), pp.517-528.

<sup>24</sup> Phillip E. Pfeifer, The optimal ratio of acquisition and retention costs, Vol. 13, 2, 179–188 *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14660970.2010.497348>

<sup>26</sup> James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983

<b>Model of Public Relations</b>	<b>Principal characteristic(s)</b>	<b>Features</b>
Press Agency/Publicity	One-way and 'propaganda'	<p>Press agency uses persuasion and manipulation to influence the publics to behave as the organisation desires. Stunts and events are used to attract media attention and gain public notice (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2000). It's a model of one-way communication which aims to persuade the recipients of the communication to act in a certain way (Seitel, 2003).</p> <p>In football, this would be used to announce season ticket price changes or kit launches.</p>
Public Information	One-way, truthful, factual	<p>The Public Information model aims to spread information and uses press releases and other one-way communication techniques to distribute organisational information. Its aim, according to Seitel (2003) is to inform rather than persuade.</p> <p>In football, this would be used to announce fixture changes or player transfer news.</p>
Two Way Asymmetrical	Two-way, persuasive, can be didactic (i.e. intended to teach, especially in a way that is too determined or eager, and often fixed and unwilling to change)	<p>This model uses scientific persuasion to influence the audience. It uses research to develop its message and feedback to gauge how successful this persuasion has been.</p> <p>This model is popular in advertising and marketing as it focuses on increasing the organisation's profits.</p> <p>In football this might be used where a club is determined to raise ticket prices, but doesn't have a fixed view on how much. It uses this method to work out by which amount it should increase prices by or which categories of ticket it should change.</p>
Two Way Symmetrical	Two-way, honest, mutual	<p>In this model, PR listens to the public and changes according to its publics' needs and desires. Real dialogue is undertaken with publics.</p> <p>In football this might be where a club undertakes a process of revisiting its club crest, but allows the fans the final say through a democratic vote on retaining the old design or agreeing to the new one.</p>

**Fig. 4: The four models of Public Relations proposed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt**

Yet these examples serve only as a small cross-section of the business benefits that positive fan engagement has the potential to bring. By failing to engage positively with fans, clubs miss the opportunity to leverage the potential marketing and commercial

opportunities that it presents, whilst risking the alienation of a critical and committed stakeholder. Indeed, the financial potential of fans for clubs is highlighted by the extent to which footballing organisations make an active impact on the everyday lives of local communities<sup>27</sup>.

A 2020 study by The European Club Association (now rebranded as European Football Clubs), found that across Europe, 54% of participants surveyed (from a total of 14,000 respondents across seven different markets globally), claimed that they were emotionally invested in a football club to at least some level, with the figure rising to 84% in the 8-15 age group.<sup>28</sup> This indicates the potential for an even stronger level of support amongst future generations to emerge.<sup>29</sup> The report also showed a high percentage of fans arising from older demographics, with 71% of participants between the ages of 55 and 64 reporting that they follow football in some capacity.<sup>30</sup> This suggests a degree of long-term, cross-generational investment in the sport, and by extension, within clubs themselves. With that in mind, it appears logical to suggest that a significant amount of income could be generated for the club over a long period, should the relationship with the stakeholder be managed appropriately.

The emotional investment provided by fans has resulted in football clubs becoming a cornerstone of local communities across England, as well as points of cultural heritage and social identity<sup>31</sup>. The societal importance of clubs has been articulated by a wide range of football writers, academics, commentators and policymakers over many decades. By way of example, football historian David Goldblatt has remarked on the centrality of football as the most significant and largest cultural phenomenon of the twenty-first century, and that football in England is fundamental to a sense of place and

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<sup>27</sup> Stone, C., 2013. *The role of football in everyday life*, (pp. 7-22). Routledge.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.ecaeurope.com/media/4802/eca-fan-of-the-future-defining-modern-football-fandom.pdf>;  
<https://www.ecaeurope.com/media/5626/eca-future-of-fandom-report-engaging-the-younger-generation.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Stone, C., 2025. *Football, Community and Social Responsibility*. Routledge.

community.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, it would appear essential that the importance of football culture and its fans is recognised by owners of football institutions. Yet currently, such recognition - where it exists - often continues to be unstructured.

Importantly, this current situation is being played out in the context of a new era of regulation within men's football. The government's Fan-Led Review into football governance, published in November 2021, and the subsequent policy that has arisen, has brought with it the ratification of the new Independent Football Regulator. As part of this, the reworked version of the Football Governance Bill (now the Act) presented to Parliament by the Labour government outlined a range of measures concerning fan engagement, including a minimum standard.<sup>33</sup>

While the introduction of these changes undoubtedly presents a significant opportunity for the football industry to reform and make consistent its approach towards fan engagement, it would be naive to assume that any change would not be without challenges. The significant shift in the landscape on which clubs will have to operate following the implementation of new regulations, the process of adaptation to the rubric, and expectations surrounding fan engagement may itself prove challenging for stakeholders. Compounded with current difficulties for many clubs in establishing a long-term strategy for positive fan engagement, the challenges in creating a pyramid-wide culture of positive fan engagement are clear.

It is also evident that this challenge exists more widely within English/British corporate culture. Professor Jim Macnamara's work on 'Organisational Listening' resonates powerfully here. His study 'Creating an 'Architecture Of Listening' in Organizations'<sup>34</sup> involved 36 case studies of major government, corporate, NGO, and non-profit organizations in the UK, US and Australia. The organisations studied operated in a range

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<sup>32</sup> David Goldblatt, *The Age of Football* (London: Macmillan) 2019; David Goldblatt *The Game of Our Lives* (London: Penguin) 2015

<sup>33</sup> <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/56544/documents/5215>

<sup>34</sup> Professor Jim Macnamara, *Creating an 'Architecture Of Listening' in Organizations*, University of Technology Sydney, 2015

of sectors including health, transport, finance, IT and telecommunications, retail, automotive, food, environmental protection, and education, as well as specialist communication service providers. This major study found that organisations frequently 'talk the talk of two-way communication, engagement and dialogue with their stakeholders and publics.' There is no reason to suggest that we do not find the same challenges in English men's football.

# 3.0 The Present State of Fan Engagement and Key Challenges in Creating Effective Fan Engagement Strategies

## 3.1 The present State of Fan Engagement

The precise definition of “fan engagement” within football has been the subject of increasing research across the past decade. As this body of work has developed, several critical points of commonality have transpired in attempting to define what constitutes “fan engagement”. Leading sports industry academic Rui Biscaia has suggested that fan engagement is composed of any activity which gives “meaning” to the connection between sports organisations and fans.<sup>35</sup> The Football Supporters’ Association (FSA) have written that fan engagement gives supporters “a sense of being closer” to their club.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Kevin Rye and Think Fan Engagement (TFE), have noted that fan engagement consists of the entire “relationship between a club and its fans,” highlighting that “fans are a stakeholder in their clubs, arguably the most important, and Fan Engagement is all about how clubs listen and communicate with them”.<sup>37</sup>

These definitions form the foundation through which this research understands fan engagement. Indeed, as Rye has stated, fan engagement should be defined as the “relationship between a club and its fans,” with positive fan engagement considered anything that gives “meaning” to this relationship or provides fans with feelings of becoming “closer” to their club.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, any actions taken by clubs which alienate fans, either intentionally or not, should be classed as negative fan engagement.

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<sup>35</sup><https://johancruyffinstitute.com/en/blog-en/sport-marketing/fan-engagement-fans-influence-sports-organizations/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://thefsa.org.uk/our-work/supporter-engagement/>

<sup>37</sup><https://fanengagement.net/what-is-fan-engagement/#:~:text=Fan%20Engagement%20is%20about%20the,listen%20and%20communicate%20with%20the m.>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

In recent years, there has also been an increasing amount of work conducted on the business benefits that practicing positive fan engagement can produce for clubs. This argument has been articulated by Pete Girogio, author of Deloitte's Sport Loyalty Scoreboard, who has argued that the loyalty of fans gives sports clubs an already captive market of consumers willing to exclusively spend money within their organisation, as opposed to competitors.<sup>39</sup> As Girogio stipulates, this is an advantage uncommon to organisations outside the sports industry, but at present, its full potential is not capitalised on by sports organisations.<sup>40</sup> Whilst Girogio's work refers to sport more widely, his argument is particularly relevant in relation to English football clubs. Biscaia has also highlighted that positive fan engagement has the potential to lead to increased fan interaction, and drive revenue within organisations.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Nicole Allison has found that fan engagement, when prioritised by sports organisations, catalyses financial growth and provides a concrete boost in income.<sup>42</sup> This is also the case with regards to fan experience. Mark Bradley, founder and director of The Fan Experience Company, has argued that improvements in fan experience within football have the potential to generate a significant growth in attendances at matches, and consequently, income for clubs.<sup>43</sup>

The distinct nature of football fans is further underscored by the experience and expertise of those within clubs. David Lowes, currently Non-Executive Director, and Board lead for Fan Engagement at Lincoln City FC notes that in football, the 'pyramid' of brand-building is reversed, with loyalty already present, whereas with most consumer brands, this loyalty is something that has to be built purposely.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/Industries/consumer/articles/sports-loyalty-scoreboard.html>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/Industries/consumer/articles/sports-loyalty-scoreboard.html>

<sup>41</sup> Nicole Allison, Going beyond on-pitch success: fan engagement as a catalyst for growth. Working Paper. Birkbeck, University of London, 2013  
<https://johancruyffinstitute.com/en/blog-en/sport-marketing/fan-engagement-fans-influence-sports-organizations>

<sup>42</sup> <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/9825/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://fanexperienceco.com/2022/02/its-a-shame-about-roi/>

<sup>44</sup> David Lowes: why his business experience matters: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7y3c9Hyg-s>

Several studies have assessed the current standard of fan engagement within professional English football, albeit with reference to different definitions. Supporters Direct published its ‘Pyramid of Fan Engagement’, with a tiered system of measuring this across a pyramid structure (see Appendix A). Whilst at its summit, the pyramid has placed clubs which are majority supporter owned, it is clear that there is still a minority of clubs at the bottom tier of the pyramid who are barely meeting the minimum standards. In terms of how fan engagement is understood and measured, the Fan Engagement Index is the industry standard. Established by Kevin Rye, the index awards up to 240 points to clubs overall based on the quality of their Fan Engagement, which it describes as follows:

“It comprises three categories, each offering up to 80 points. Final figures correct as of the 31st of May of the end of the season concerned. All of the data collected for the Fan Engagement Index are publicly available, via club, league and other websites and sources. It involves no surveying of fans or others. We do not contact clubs directly during the process, to as closely as possible mirror the journey of a fan attempting to find out the information themselves, and to ensure fairness to all clubs.”<sup>45</sup>

The FEI divides the structure of fan engagement into three subcategories – “Dialogue”, “Governance” and “Transparency”, each comprising several specific prerequisites for clubs to fulfil in order to build a strong score overall.<sup>46</sup> All 92 clubs within the top four divisions of English football are annually ranked on their fan engagement. TFE and Rye’s work has shown that across several years, the level of fan engagement within football has varied greatly from club to club.<sup>47</sup> In doing so, it has highlighted that while there are examples of best practice, the overall standard remains inconsistent across the football pyramid.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://fanengagement.net/scoring-and-algorithm/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://fanengagement.net/fan-engagement-index/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://fanengagement.net/>

Despite this, there are several examples of positive fan engagement carried out by clubs, particularly those near the summit of the FEI. The Fan Advisory Board implemented by Lincoln City FC, for example, has provided clear, conscientious feedback into the running of the club, and has been able to take material steps in shaping off-field direction.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the strategic/operational division between Everton's FAB and its 'Fans Forum' (which is a body of representatives that interrogates operational activity at the club; see Appendix B). Stoke City FC's Supporters' Parliament has historically provided an effective, direct method of constructive criticism between fans and the club.<sup>49</sup> This demonstrates that while there are currently clear examples of optimal levels of fan engagement, these practices are not standardised across the industry.

This variation of standards should be interpreted as the net result of a range of factors. Perhaps most significant, however, is the continued lack of an overall strategy of fan engagement which can be applied across the pyramid (NB: This is not a direct reference to emergence of 'Fan Engagement Strategies' in the PL and EFL, which are a positive step-forward). While Supporters Direct produced some benchmarks by which fan engagement can be understood (see Appendix A), this model can be built on, particularly in specifying an exact method or model to reach the targets set within the pyramid. Equally, as Rye has argued, a widespread culture of acknowledgment of the business potential of positive fan engagement does not exist, and some clubs therefore do not seek to prioritise the development of strategies of fan engagement.<sup>50</sup> It is this gap in the existing literature that this research begins to address.

### 3.2 Potential Impact of a Regulator on Fan Engagement

The discussion surrounding positive strategies for fan engagement has been enhanced since the government's Fan-Led Review of Football Governance (FLR) in 2021. The

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.weareimps.com/fans/fan-advisory-board>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.stokecityfc.com/news/2022/march/15/supporters-council-meeting-minutes/>

<sup>50</sup>

report highlighted the relationships between clubs and fans, and the protection of clubs as tenets of cultural heritage as key points to be addressed.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, given the nature of the review being “fan-led”, fans were established as a key stakeholder in shaping football’s future. However, the FLR found that there had been “limited progress on delivering the relatively unambitious minimum standards” expected of clubs in engaging with fans.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the review set out several recommendations regarding fan engagement, which have since been translated into legislation.<sup>53</sup>

While these recommendations were an admirable start in addressing the outstanding problems regarding fan engagement, Banerji’s research has outlined how such work requires a degree of development and “refinement” to fully grasp the process of optimising fan engagement across the football pyramid.<sup>54</sup> What the findings of the FLR, and the subsequent White Paper on this subject show, however, is that this research project is conducted in the context of a rapidly shifting landscape of football governance, including regulation around fan engagement. In turn, this research leverages upon the unique opportunity presented by this changing outlook, and provides recommendations on how fan engagement can be optimised in a new era of football governance, and also how the footballing authorities and leagues might shape the changes being made, to create the best available conditions for clubs to improve their practices of fan engagement. Indeed, this research presents an opportunity to add the refinement required within the original recommendations made by the FLR, and to amend any shortcomings in the work done so far in this area.

### 3.3 Challenges in Creating Effective Fan Engagement Strategies

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<sup>51</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fan-led-review-of-football-governance-securing-the-games-future/fan-led-review-of-football-governance-securing-the-games-future>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Governing-the-Beautiful-Game-.pdf>

The variability in standards of fan engagement are partially the result of existing challenges within the culture of football that often sets back the creation of positive, long-term fan engagement strategies. Hence, any model that looks to create the conditions for positive fan engagement should seek to fully understand and address the nature and context of these challenges. This research has highlighted three main, often interconnecting, challenges which prevent clubs from being able to engage positively with fans.

The first of these is the uniqueness of the football industry, and in particular, the unique nature of fans and clubs as stakeholders. The nature of fans, as consumers with significant emotional investment within footballing organisations, and the cultural heritage provided by a business – in this case a football club - and its place in shaping local identity is not widely found outside the sporting ecosystem. As has been noted, examples of disillusionment amongst fans as a result of this unique relationship being undervalued or misunderstood have, in recent years, been increasingly widespread.

In addition to the previously cited examples of WBA, Reading, Sheffield Wednesday and Morecambe, several further instances have laid stark the lack of comprehension amongst certain club hierarchies of football's connection to society in England and Wales. In 2012, for example, Cardiff City owner Vincent Tan opted to change the clubs predominant kit colours of 114 years from blue to red. This was met by significant backlash by club supporters, and protests from fan groups and eventually reversed.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps most infamously, however, was the permission granted for the relocation of Wimbledon FC to Milton Keynes in 2002, which two years later resulted in the club's dissolution and replacement by Milton Keynes Dons, while supporters of the original club were forced to found a phoenix club in the form of AFC Wimbledon in 2002.<sup>56</sup>

It could be argued that these examples are a result of a cultural misunderstanding or, in the case of Wimbledon Football Club, ignorance on the part of club owners failing to

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/vincent-tan-cardiff-not-change-4874620>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.afcwimbledon.co.uk/club/honours/>

recognise the emotional investment and cultural significance of football clubs within local communities. As Banerji has argued, the rapid globalisation and commercialisation of English football over the last three decades has made football clubs an increasingly attractive business proposition for global investors.<sup>57</sup> This has been highlighted, for example, by the increasing value of domestic broadcasting rights for the PL from £304 million to £6.7 billion since 1992.<sup>58</sup> One of the significant shifts that has occurred as a result is an influx of investment in clubs by organisations and individuals with diverse commercial backgrounds, but with limited or no experience within the football industry. In the 2023/2024 season, for instance, clubs across the football pyramid had ownership structures with backgrounds in industries as wide-ranging as the real estate market, construction, professional gambling, mass chicken farming, travel retail, mining, tinned tuna, and famously, Hollywood acting. This is a small sub-section of the complete set of commercial backgrounds that constitute owners of football clubs. While a minority may have background in the sports field, it is arguable that many of those that do not, as well as several that do, often fail to appreciate the significance of supporters to clubs in English football.

This lack of understanding can lead to a lack of engagement with fans, and the alienation of fans as a stakeholder within football clubs. However, even in cases where ownership models understand the relationship between football clubs, fans and local communities, they often do not have the *motivation* to establish a positive relationship. The authors would suggest that this is also a result of owners failing to realise the monetary potential of positive fan engagement, and the impact it can have as a significant revenue stream, driven by the peculiar dynamics of the football economy.

Finally, in cases where clubs have the best intentions of creating a positive relationship with their fans, this task often proves extremely difficult given both the sheer number of

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Governing-the-Beautiful-Game-.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.givemesport.com/why-the-premier-league-was-formed-in-1992/#:~:text=BSkyB%20secured%20Premier%20League%20broadcast,managers%20for%20the%20TV%20scheduling;https://www.sports.legal/2024/02/inside-the-english-premier-leagues-latest-media-rights-deal-what-does-it-tell-us-about-the-current-state-of-play-of-the-market/>

fans, and the number of different groups within that number which need representation. By way of example, in 2024, Cray Valley Paper Mills, a club currently playing in the largely semi-professional Isthmian League South East Division, the eighth tier of men's football in England, sold out their 1550 capacity ground for a midweek FA Cup match against Charlton Athletic.<sup>59</sup> This highlights the level of support clubs across the pyramid generate, and the large numbers of individuals and groups which are present in supporters of clubs across the football pyramid. Each of these groups needs to have engagement tailored to address their priorities. This can be challenging for clubs with no effective fan engagement strategy, and for clubs that have successfully represented a diverse spectrum of supporters, it requires significant work to do so. Brighton and Hove Albion, for example, have established working groups and forums for 'Supporters Club', 'Matchday Experience', 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', 'Ticketing', 'Catering' and 'Disabled' supporters.<sup>60</sup>

This research addresses each of these issues. In doing so, it formulates a model which has the potential to educate and upskill relevant people in football clubs - whether part of the actual ownership, the operational side, fans and their fan representatives (including supporters' trusts and other activists) or any other interested party – on both the significance of fans and communities, the monetary potential they provide, and a clear plan of how to interact with them appropriately. By doing so, it seeks to directly address the ongoing challenges in fan engagement, and create a mutually beneficial relationship between clubs and fans.

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.charltonafc.com/news/cray-valley-pm-replay-sold-out>

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[https://assets.ctfassets.net/rrpvignyaa1/2u50jyug7LSL6OoNgo1VOF/5572cb1145ed6c3d3f7021c7ee1d5dd3/FAB-Engagement-Report\\_2024\\_25.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/rrpvignyaa1/2u50jyug7LSL6OoNgo1VOF/5572cb1145ed6c3d3f7021c7ee1d5dd3/FAB-Engagement-Report_2024_25.pdf)

## 4.0 Methodology

The process of creating a model of fan engagement has involved a robust, systematic methodology. Given the primary aim of this research, qualitative research methods were deemed the most appropriate methodological choice, as these aid in exploring, understanding, and interpreting the experiences, perspectives, and meanings that individuals attach to their lives. As such, the methodology for this research involved three main elements, detailed below. For each element, the research has gathered diverse opinions and analysis from a strong variety of stakeholders. Most of these individuals and organisations have requested anonymity and non-quotation, and are thus not mentioned directly in this report, though the level their club plays at and the role of the interviewee was (see Appendix C). Those who were happy to be identified can be found at Appendix D.

### I. Secondary Research

Current methods of fan engagement, best practices, experiences and culture from primary material were researched and analysed, as well as an understanding of the historical context from which the current basis of fan engagement has been formed.

This encompassed sources including published club plans (including Fan Engagement Plans), written documentation, media articles, data and in-person visits to clubs. This formed a solid foundation on which to understand the current fan engagement landscape, and the direction in which the field is moving. In order to create a thorough model, it is important to place the primary elements of the research within the wider framework of the secondary literature.

### II. Primary research (interviews)

The secondary research was supplemented by a series of interviews conducted over the course of several months. These involved individuals from within clubs, the wider football industry and other sports (see Appendices C and D). While most had a direct involvement in fan engagement, a number were able to provide valuable context to space in which fan engagement operates. To extract meaning from the interviews, each transcript was subject to Thematic Analysis (TA). TA is a common process of data analysis used in qualitative interview-based academic and industry research to help identify, analyse, and report patterns (i.e. themes) within data.<sup>61</sup> The data was initially coded, and later organised into themes. These themes were as follows:

- Biggest challenges (fan engagement)
- Wider financial culture of the football industry
- Proportionality (how is your approach tailored by the size of your organisation. Where non-football club participants are were concerned, this issues was discussed in terms of their experience of it as a fan or practitioner)
- Historical elements (how have previous changes to the industry affected your experience)
- Independent Football Regulator (views on it, its purpose, role, effectiveness)

It is from these interviews that the main challenges of fan engagement in the present climate were observed and reviewed, and solutions drawn out.

### III. Primary research (Action Research)

As part of this project, 'Action Research' was carried out. Action Research is described as "a broad family of research approaches that emphasize social change and transformation, active collaboration through participation between researcher and

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

members of the system, and iterative cycles of action and reflection to address practical concerns.”<sup>62</sup>

This had a twofold purpose. First, to observe first-hand some of the ongoing stresses to fan engagement. Secondly, this allowed the opportunity to see how certain ideas proposed by the research would operate in real-world scenarios. In particular, the research is grateful for the opportunity to work with Barnsley FC, specifically John Bird (Head of Ticketing and Supporter Liaison at Barnsley FC) and a Jon Flatman (then acting, now permanent, CEO of Barnsley FC) to help establish a Fan Advisory Board at the club. This involved attending meetings remotely and in person, advising on the structure, Terms of Reference (TOR) and rules of the FAB. This offered a key insight into the process and priorities of setting up a body of this nature. The authors would also like to take the opportunity here to thank those fans who took part in the process of creating the FAB.

In conjunction, these three areas provided a rigorous scope for research, and a clear understanding of the place and role of contemporary fan engagement.

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<sup>62</sup> [https://jprm.scholasticahq.com/article/13244-participatory-research-methods-choice-points-in-the-research-process?attachment\\_id=36974](https://jprm.scholasticahq.com/article/13244-participatory-research-methods-choice-points-in-the-research-process?attachment_id=36974)

# 5.0 Findings

## 5.1 Current Shortcomings of Fan Engagement Models

A key principle of the model proposed by this research is to provide a framework that alleviates the most widespread current shortcomings with regards to fan engagement. Whilst this report has already outlined several of the key challenges facing fan engagement, it is also necessary to highlight how these translate into material shortcomings, and what subsequently needs to be done in order to improve this.

The first, and perhaps most basic, shortcoming that has emerged in certain contexts in the football pyramid, is lack of urgency or priority in engaging fans. As already highlighted, a large part of this may stem from a misunderstanding of the football industry, and ‘of fans as stakeholders’, by club hierarchies. Indeed, the Fan-Led Review of English Football found, in certain cases, a degree of “disconnect between the interests of fans and owners.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, in recent years, there has been “limited progress on delivering the relatively unambitious standards” of fan engagement laid out by the EFL and PL<sup>64</sup> In too many cases this has resulted in a stagnation of both the relationship between fans and clubs in general and its further development, something which may even have the potential to create commercial setbacks for clubs.

Despite the persistence of these problems, there has been limited attention given to creating a model which can be applied to clubs in order to alleviate the challenges identified.

Furthermore, even where fan engagement is seen as a matter of priority by clubs, the approach taken in implementing positive strategies is often flawed, or seen as a tickbox exercise, without any adaptability or flexibility to meet the most pressing problems

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fan-led-review-of-football-governance-securing-the-games-future/fan-led-review-of-football-governance-securing-the-games-future>

<sup>64</sup> IBID

presented to clubs. As outlined by the Fan-Led Review, this can create a “disconnect” between clubs and supporters. Moreover, it is too frequently the case that fan engagement has become an extension of the marketing departments within clubs. Given supporters should be examined as stakeholders, this is frequently an inappropriate approach to take.

In a climate in which football has become increasingly globalised, clubs have often struggled to find the right representation for different segments of their fanbase. This presents a challenge to ensure that particular groups are appropriately represented, and who in some cases, find themselves increasingly isolated from the club. As was demonstrated through action research undertaken by TFE with Barnsley FC – including setting up of the club’s Fan Advisory Board - fans of Barnsley believed it imperative for the Fan Advisory Board to find ways to accurately represent a diverse range of fans, not just a specific cross-section.

Finally, this new era of regulation, led by an Independent Football Regulator, will be able to assess the level of fan engagement within clubs in more detail than before, building on the work of the Fan Engagement Index and internal rules and regulations within leagues. With the Football Governance Bill now having passed into law, it is clear that this will encompass several areas. These include a strong culture of engagement and ‘consultation’ with fans by clubs, the greater democratisation of fan engagement and strong requirements regarding changes to club heritage and location.<sup>65</sup> As a result, it is essential for clubs to ensure strong levels of engagement across all levels, in order to avoid excessive scrutiny from the regulator.

## 5.2 Think Fan Engagement’s Model of Fan Engagement

### **Objectives of the model**

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/21>

As the first two sections in this report have outlined, the current standard of fan engagement within English men's football is both variable and has often been unstructured in nature. Yet the current environment, with the creation of the Independent Football Regulator, as well as some of the new practices including Fan Engagement Plans, has provided optimal conditions to shift this culture towards one of more rigorous, industry-wide standards. In order to do this, however, the football industry, and clubs in particular, need to be provided with clear direction and best practices to optimise fan engagement.

Yet this objective, acting alone, is too vague of a rubric to guide this research and to formulate a new model for fan engagement. As a result, the overarching objective has been supplemented by five secondary objectives, which together shapes the nature of the model and best practices suggested by this report. These objectives have been set out in full at the bottom of this section.

The first of these secondary objectives is to establish fan engagement as a core part of the values of football clubs. This means that fan engagement is viewed as a critical priority when drawing up both long and short-term strategies within clubs, and that it is consistently provided with adequate resources and time to establish itself as a fundamental tenet of clubs' operations. By doing this, the model should seek to improve fan engagement to such an extent that it results in an increase in revenue for clubs, while also ensuring the relationship between fans and their club is valuable.

Critically, this model should be able to incorporate clubs of variable commercial sizes, playing across a spectrum of divisions. The model does not look at clubs with a specific commercial background or status. Indeed, it is essential that the football industry more widely comes to recognise that clubs' best practices of fan engagement need not be variable according to factors such as commercial size, and that there is a set of intrinsic principles which should be followed by all clubs. As part of this, it is essential the model introduces a method of connecting fan engagement to fan experience, and creating a symbiotic relationship which ensures the potential of both elements is optimised. Finally,

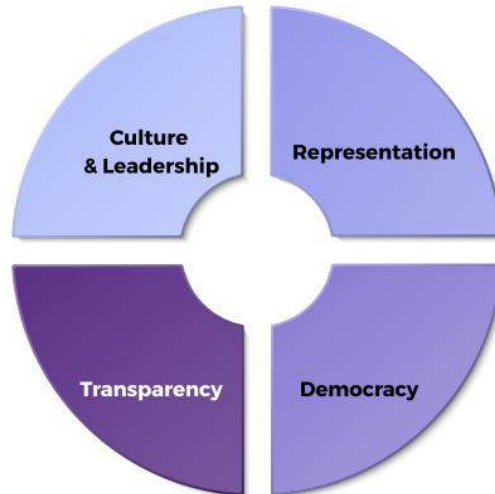
with a new era of regulation on the horizon, a section of which is slated to impose minimum standards of fan engagement, this research seeks to work with clubs to prepare for a closer, more regulated control over engagement practices, and facilitate a positive relationship with the independent regulator regarding fan engagement, from its outset.

The objectives of the model of fan engagement being proposed are summarised below:

- a. Create a culture within clubs where fan engagement is prioritised at all levels, and is seen as a core aspect of the club's values and business.
- b. Outline a clear set of strategies that can be used by clubs to drive revenue through positive fan engagement, and create commercial opportunities.
- c. Create a framework that can be implemented effectively by clubs across the football pyramid.
- d. Provide a blueprint for clubs to follow which would allow them to stay comfortably within the new standards expected by new regulation, and optimise the opportunity offered by regulation.
- e. Connect the concept of fan engagement to that of fan experience, creating a fully integrated system of managing the relationship between clubs and fans.

### 5.3 The Model of Fan Engagement

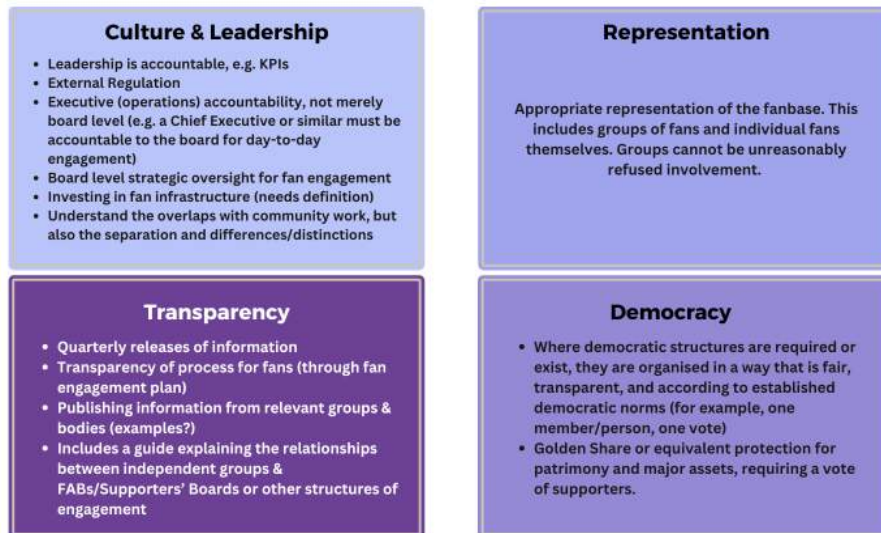
The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement



Rye & Banerji, 2025

Fig. 5: The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement (pt. 1)

The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement



Rye & Banerji, 2025

Fig. 6: The Think Fan Engagement Model of Fan Engagement (pt. 2)

## **The facets of each pillar of fan engagement - summary**

Each of these areas, as shown in Figure 1, are linked, and interdependent on each other. The functionality and optimisation of each is dependent on the effectiveness of the other three. While it is possible to incorporate individual elements of the model, to do so will reduce the overall effectiveness of fan engagement strategy.

Each of the four sections are also divided into subsections, providing specifically actionable points that are considered best practice, in order to realise the full potential of each area. These are outlined in further detail in the section below, through a small summary and the inclusion of case studies that highlight best practice.

## The facets of each pillar of fan engagement – detailed explanation

<b>Pillar of fan engagement</b>
<p data-bbox="203 548 561 583"><b>Culture and Leadership</b></p> <p data-bbox="203 646 1393 873">This section contains both major elements of regulation and oversight, but also looks at culture and practice at leadership level that have a direct and positive impact on fan engagement practice at clubs and staff. It includes statutory regulation, board and operations-level behaviours and culture.</p> <p data-bbox="203 936 1247 972">The pursuance of culture and leadership in fan engagement should mean:</p> <ul data-bbox="253 1005 1393 1493" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="253 1005 930 1041">● Leadership is accountable, e.g. internal KPIs</li><li data-bbox="253 1073 1393 1171">● Operational accountability, not just board level (e.g. a Chief Executive or similar must be accountable to the board for day-to-day engagement)</li><li data-bbox="253 1203 1013 1239">● Board level strategic oversight for fan engagement</li><li data-bbox="253 1270 781 1306">● Adaptability to external Regulation</li><li data-bbox="253 1337 870 1373">● Willingness to invest in fan infrastructure</li><li data-bbox="253 1404 1393 1493">● Understand the overlaps with community work, but also the separation and differences/distinctions</li></ul>

## Findings of the research

The findings in this research indicate that clubs that were successfully underpinned by a culture of fan engagement, with a clear leadership structure that facilitated the achievement of KPIs, acted as the basic denominator between organisations that implement successful and effective policies of fan engagement. To achieve a successful culture of fan engagement, there are several components that clubs need to take account of.

### i) Leadership is accountable, e.g. internal KPIs

The first of these is a culture of accountability. This entails two points. The first is the presence of a senior executive of the club having direct oversight of fan engagement strategy. The second is a more junior/middle staff member(s) employed specifically to implement fan engagement strategies.

This extends to having both members of staff having oversight and responsibility for the operation and implementation of fan engagement.

#### Brighton & Hove Albion

The CEO & Deputy Chairman, Paul Barber, is at the forefront of engagement activity, and highly visible throughout the year, as detailed in their annual Fan Engagement Plan and report for 2024/2025. This extends to the Chairman, board and other senior leadership positions in the club, as well as the Head of Supporter Services and other similar roles, in the club.

This means that the problem common in a lot of football clubs is avoided, whereby those leading fan engagement operationally in mid-level positions cannot get through to the leadership and senior decision makers.



**Leadership is  
accountable**



### Link: Brighton Fan Engagement Report & Plan 2024/2025

[https://assets.ctfassets.net/rrpvignyaa1/2u50jyug7LSL6OoNgo1VOF/5572cb1145ed6c3d3f7021c7ee1d5dd3/FAB-Engagement-Report\\_2024\\_25.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/rrpvignyaa1/2u50jyug7LSL6OoNgo1VOF/5572cb1145ed6c3d3f7021c7ee1d5dd3/FAB-Engagement-Report_2024_25.pdf)

## ii) Adaptability to external regulation

The changing regulatory landscape, and introduction of an Independent Football Regulator, has created a new challenge for clubs insofar as having to meet a new set of regulatory and governance standards. The regulator will have oversight of overall fan engagement, with specific benchmarks engagement and consultation, but with the leagues – and therefore the clubs themselves - playing a critical role in delivering fan engagement on a season-by-season basis.

 <p><b>Adaptability to external regulation</b></p>	<p><b>Exeter City</b></p> <p>Exeter City's democratic structure of fan ownership and consistency at the top of the annual Engagement Index is recognition of its commitment to excellence in this area.</p> <p>This is because the model of ownership mandates that fan engagement is placed at the centre of everything that the club does, underpinned by the objects and the rules of the Exeter City Supporters Trust.</p> <p>It has built into its ownership and therefore operation, processes that allow for renewal and change to take place within a secure and consistent framework.</p> <p>These structural factors also apply to fellow fan-owned club, AFC Wimbledon, and other clubs owned similarly.</p>
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**Link: Exeter City FC Strategy 2020-2025**

<https://www.weownexetercityfc.co.uk/trust-strategy-2020>

## iii) Investing in fan infrastructure

Where financially possible, an investment in infrastructure which is hospitable to the fan experience is critical for clubs. Notably, this is one of the mechanisms through which fan engagement and fan experience can be linked, and thus creates an opportunity for clubs to generate long-term revenue. A grander and albeit contextually different example of this was seen in the aftermath of The Taylor Report, during which time infrastructural changes made to football stadiums resulted in both an increase and

diversification of attending fans, as has been shown by Sean Hamil and his colleagues in 'A Game of Two Halves'.<sup>66</sup> It is an economically logical conclusion that such results may be recreated through twenty-first century revitalisation of infrastructure. Indeed, at PL level, Tottenham Hotspur's stadium redevelopment, and fan amenities have provided a substantial and well publicised long-term benefit in terms of stadium revenues.<sup>67</sup> Developments do not need to be on a scale of this nature, with more modest undertakings able to provide a significant long-term change in revenue.

#### Stoke City

As part of a series of developments at their stadium, Stoke City introduced vastly improved sightlines for wheelchair users by installing elevated platforms in existing seating areas, as well as installing further wheelchair user spaces around the ground both pitchside and in elevated areas.

This means that for the first time wheelchair users will have a choice in where they watch Potters games – something that Level Playing Field have always campaigned for. (See Level Playing Field Ticketing & Seating Management Guidance)

The new developments will also mean that wheelchair users will have unobstructed views of the pitch, a problem that was identified by the club as the original viewing areas meant that sightlines were blocked when fans stood up during key moments of the game.



**Investing in fan infrastructure**



**Link: Stoke City's Accessible Facilities**

<https://www.stokecityfc.com/tickets/matchday-information/accessible-facilities>

66

A game of two halves? : the business of football, Hamil et al, Mainstream Pub., 1999

67 <https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/services/consulting-financial/analysis/deloitte-football-money-league.html>

 <p data-bbox="305 600 513 667"><b>Investing in fan infrastructure</b></p>	<p data-bbox="581 264 716 289"><b>Southampton</b></p> <p data-bbox="581 323 1341 420">Southampton invested substantially in matchday infrastructure at St Mary's for the 2024/2025 season. This includes new fan-zones, alongside other elements of stadium and fan experience.</p> <p data-bbox="581 453 1333 550">There are now two new fan-zones, Kingsland and Northam, and the 'Kingsland Family Zone, as part of the improvements. The Northam Fan Zone includes a 700 capacity covered area.</p> <p data-bbox="581 583 1354 642">There are also two new safe-standing areas for home and away fans, with the home end having a capacity of 7,000.</p>
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**Link: What's changed at St Mary's? Everything you need to know**

<https://www.southamptonfc.com/en/news/article/whats-changed-at-st-marys-this-season-everything-you-need-to-know-so-far>

**iv) Effective community engagement**

Linked to point iii, clubs able to effectively engage with their local communities through non-football initiatives, are served with three principal benefits. The first is the fulfilment of their role as community assets. This links to the second, which is a reputational enhancement through community schemes, which enables the third: the increase of the catchment area of clubs, so as to recreate in the long-term an increase in non-matchday revenue from engagement of a larger subsection of the population. This is naturally an extension of the point about reputational enhancement, but one that links to clubs' activities on non-matchdays. There is also an overlap in being able to utilise infrastructure created in relation to increasing the catchment area of clubs, to host community activities.

### Doncaster Rovers

Through the community trust, Club Doncaster Foundation (which covers all three sports clubs in the group: Doncaster Rovers FC, Doncaster Rovers Belles FC and Doncaster Rugby League), the club undertakes a significant amount of community work that utilises the stadium facilities and environs, as well as reaching out into the wider community.

This includes a fitness suite at the Keepmoat Stadium where vulnerable and those with complex needs can access a full range of gym equipment, in a safe and secure environment that would otherwise be more difficult for them to access.



**Effective  
community  
engagement**



**Link: Club Doncaster Foundation**

<https://clubdoncasterfoundation.co.uk/>

## Pillar of Fan Engagement

### Transparency<sup>68</sup>

Transparency is an important factor in fan engagement. The definition of transparent is to be, 'Open to public scrutiny; not clandestine'<sup>69</sup>. As one of the measures of the Fan Engagement Index, transparency plays an important role in this model, both as a pillar, as well as a central facet across the whole model.

While football clubs, like all commercial and most non-commercial organisations, need to be able to conduct some of their business in confidentiality, they must also ensure that they provide enough reassurance to fans that money and resources are not wasted or misappropriated, and that decisions are being made according to process. One of the key challenges when it comes to transparency is ensuring balance. For example,

<sup>68</sup> An additional note on Transparency: Transparency is itself important across the whole of this model. Whilst transparency itself is a specific element of this model, transparency also applies in general terms to the way the club operates towards its fanbase. This means that even where information or processes can't reasonably be disclosed, there is a general assumption that this is the exception rather than the rule.

<sup>69</sup> Penguin Dictionary, second edition, 2004

the club must be able to conduct the necessary business to achieve its aims on the pitch (i.e., player recruitment) without unnecessary interference, but with a sense of overall accountability, even if this is not direct. It is necessary to reassure the reader that in no sense are we advocating direct accountability of the playing side to an FAB, for instance.

This perspective is best explained by use of an example. In this sense, if a club has, for two seasons, changed its manager and coaching staff three times and had a concomitant turnover of players, this could suggest at least some sense of internal malaise. At worst, it could be pointing to a failure in strategy and leadership at the top of the club. In these circumstances, there should be no reason as to why the FAB or other body of fans have no right to ask questions why this is happening, and what is being done to address it. The absence of direct accountability does not mean that fan representatives have no right to ask, but simply that they have no right to demand such an issue be directly addressed to their satisfaction as a consequence of them raising it.

In the past, where fans operated almost exclusively externally to the club (via supporters' trusts or independent supporters' associations), the issue would have more likely been raised via public means, such as a demonstration or a press statement from the trust or group. However, the structures of representation now available through, for example, an FAB or a supporters' trust director/representative, means that the issue can be raised and discussed in a calmer, less publicly charged setting. This should, in theory, remove the need to raise it externally. This proposes a significant change to the dynamic present at some English football clubs.

Although transparency is important, it must also be understood in terms of its impact on operations, specifically employees. While focusing on mostly office and factory environments, a study by Ethan Bernstein (as reported in the Harvard Business Review) is informative. In it he '...introduce(s) the notion of a transparency paradox, whereby maintaining observability of workers may counterintuitively reduce their

performance by inducing those being observed to conceal their activities through codes and other costly means; conversely, creating zones of privacy may, under certain conditions, increase performance.<sup>70</sup> This underscores the point that transparency must be managed sensitively, and in a way that does not unreasonably disturb the ability of an organisation to carry out its principal functions.

The pursuance of transparency in fan engagement should mean:

- Quarterly releases of information
- Transparency of process for fans (through the fan engagement plan), including a guide explaining the relationships between the various structures of engagement, e.g. FABs/Supporters' Boards, supporters' trust elected or appointed directors to the football club board, or other structures of engagement
- Publishing information from relevant groups and bodies such as FABs, fans parliaments and other club organs (includes reports of board meetings or activity), notwithstanding reasonable redactions
- The authors are aware of some disagreement within football about the structure and position of Fan Advisory Boards (FABs) in relation to the club, specifically about the question of 'independence' of the FAB. There are some who view 'independence' as a zero-sum game, and the only guarantee of its being able to carry out its role. However, this report takes the view that the ideal position for a FAB is more subtle than simply a notional 'independence' from the club. In the context of this report, independence from the club on the part of a FAB is essentially impossible. This is because 'independent' in the true meaning of the word means 'not affiliated with a larger controlling unit'<sup>71</sup>. In comparison to, for example, a supporters' trust or other body that does not need the club to exist, a FAB relies upon the club for its very existence, and therefore cannot claim this title.

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<sup>70</sup>Ethan Bernstein, The Transparency Paradox: A Role for Privacy in Organizational Learning and Operational Control, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 2012)

<sup>71</sup> Penguin Dictionary, second edition, 2004

- Nonetheless, the ability of the FAB to be able to operate in such a way that means it can develop a culture where legitimate scrutiny and questioning is standard must be encouraged if not facilitated. Therefore, this report recommends that FABs should only comprise ‘fan members’, regardless of whether the FAB members are appointed or elected or a mixture of both.
- The difference between the two uses of the word ‘independence’ is that we advocate a FAB to have independence of mind, and the ability to scrutinise without interference within the terms of reference and other agreed governing documents and practices. Having club co-chairs or members is in direct contradiction to that aim. Instead, the club should meet with the FAB on a predetermined basis as separate from the FAB. This accords with what we believe to be the most appropriate model of ‘Shadow Board’ (upon which the FAB/Shadow Board in football is based), which is according to the principles laid out by the Corporate Governance Institute’s guidance. Specifically, ‘Checking and balancing the official board’. In this model, a shadow board ‘[might] act as a separate, unofficial group that reviews and critiques the decisions of the official board of directors. They can offer alternative perspectives or point out potential flaws in the board’s decisions. This structure is less common and can sometimes arise in activist or oversight situations.’<sup>72</sup>
- The above should help to counterbalance the guidance within the Act establishing the Independent Regulator, where FABs are given the flexibility to be appointed as opposed to any strict requirement for ‘democratic process’ for the appointment of the board.

## Findings of the Research

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<sup>72</sup><https://www.thecorporategovernanceinstitute.com/insights/guides/a-shadow-board-of-younger-employees-could-save-your-company/#:~:text=Shadow%20boards%20are%20used%20by,staff%20for%20future%20leadership%20positions.>

Since the establishment of the FEI, transparency has become an important element of fan engagement. Clubs have in the past tended to find openness a challenge.

When it comes to transparency, it is not 'one size fits all'. For example, transfer business being disclosed to all directors on a board, including supporter directors, otherwise it would become impossible for them to meet the standards of fiduciary duty to the company required by law.

It should also be common for Fan Advisory Boards to discuss matters concerning club strategy and budget in line with their role (subject to reasonable Non Disclosure Agreements).

We would expect neither of these areas of the business to be disclosed to the wider fanbase to the same level as the representatives. Accordingly, the research found that clubs who invest trust in fan representatives in this way are the most effective at fan engagement.

This should also apply to actual processes, as well as to information that might be published by the club (minutes or proceedings of meetings). Clubs should ensure that the manner in which fan engagement is actually organised and who is responsible for what, is also as clear and unambiguous as possible.

i) Quarterly Release of Information – This research found that clubs which regularly release information to fans, across a number of areas, have higher levels of satisfaction and engagement. This includes information about systemic changes within the club, such as strategic planning, but also basic information such as changes to logistical

plans during matchdays. This latter point is something which again connects the idea of fan engagement to fan experience.

 <p><b>Quarterly Release of Information</b></p>	<p><b>Carlisle United</b></p> <p>Over the last couple of years Carlisle United has become an exemplar in publishing meetings and information about fan engagement, particularly their regular structured dialogue with the Carlisle United Supporters Group (CUSG) and supporters' trust. As of 2024 &amp; 2025, achieving maximum points in the Transparency score for the Fan Engagement Index.</p> <p>They have become the second ranked club in the country for engagement, earning a Fan Engagement Gold Award in 2024 &amp; 2025, only one of three clubs to earn one.</p>
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**Link: Meetings between club and CUSG**

<https://www.carlisleunited.co.uk/news-tags/cusg>

The latest Football Governance Bill has stipulated that the incoming Independent Football Regulator will enforce a base level of consultation/engagement with fans about key topics. This sort of information transparency may be a starting point to facilitating that. While a degree of regularity in such transparency is important, it need not be excessive. A quarterly release of information provides a good balance between excessively onerous commitments, and providing clear updates.

- i) **Publishing Information from Relevant Groups and Bodies** – Linked to the above, it is good practice for clubs to publish information about both direct internal changes and changes to the external football landscape and the manner in which they will affect the club. For example, a breakdown of the impact of the Independent Football Regulator, perhaps with a focus on areas of greatest concern to fans, such as ticket prices and financial sustainability, demonstrates a professionalism and

provides an opportunity to fans to engage directly with any concerns about external changes they may have.

#### Lincoln City

Lincoln City FC has set high standards in respect of the sharing of information as part of their approach to fan engagement. They have an extensive Fan Engagement section on their website that reflects an embedding of a culture within the club that has been present for many years.

This consistency has been reflected in their consistent scores in the Fan Engagement Index, as one of only three clubs to earn gold Fan Engagement Awards in both 2024 & 2025.

In line with best practice, they have also now gone beyond the EFL rule requirements on fan engagement and in the summer of 2023 the club's board approved the role of a Fan Engagement Director (FED), with David Lowes taking on the role.



**Publishing Information  
from Relevant Groups and  
Bodies**



#### **Link: Lincoln City Fan Engagement**

<https://www.weareimps.com/club/fans/fan-engagement/fan-engagement-boardroom>

ii) **Transparency of Process** – In addition to information, transparency should encompass transparency of process. This particularly concerns areas relating to fans. Perhaps the primary point to which this relates is the creation of Fan Advisory Boards and Golden Shares. A criticism of each of these models has been that they may afford clubs the opportunity to opaquely appoint individuals that would not serve to enforce accountability.



### Transparency of process

#### Norwich City

Norwich City have a reputation for the consistency of their fan engagement, and in ensuring that supporters' groups are directly involved in their programmes. This applies to the newly formed Supporter Panel, which acts as their fan advisory board.

It has been established as a forum that provides insight from individual fans (up to six) and recognised supporters' groups (up to six). The individual fans are elected via an open nominations process.

The club reviews the long-list and selects the candidates. The supporters' groups select their own representatives, 'with democratic means of this being required by the club.'

#### Everton

Everton's Fan Advisory Board is a different example of a Fan Advisory Board to many in the Premier League. Described as follows: 'The Fan Advisory Board (FAB) is an independent body for in-depth consultation with Everton's hierarchy, including members of the Club's Board of Directors.'

Although it operates with a high degree of independence, its rules and operation were agreed by the club, including their procedure for agreeing candidates for election, and it remains a critical part of the club's fan engagement structure and delivery.

The FAB comprises 11 members, each over the age of 18, who represent the diversity of the fanbase. The 11 positions of the FAB will be made up of seven 'reserved' and four 'unreserved' seats'.



### Transparency of process



#### Link: Norwich City Supporter Panel

<https://www.canaries.co.uk/club/supporter-panel>



#### Link: Everton FAB

<https://www.evertonfc.com/fans/fan-advisory-board/meet-the-fab>

**iv) Transparency between elements of structured engagement** – The relationships between different organs of fan engagement must be clearly outlined to avoid overlap and duplication. This would clarify the responsibilities of the Fan Advisory Board in comparison to the fans parliament, supporters’ trust, and detail the extent to which each can hold the Board accountable.

 <p><b>Transparency between elements of structured engagement</b></p>	<p><b>Accrington Stanley</b></p> <p>When it comes to fan engagement, size is not the relevant factor, but practice. Accrington Stanley has as a club changed significantly over recent years, with its physical infrastructure improving significantly to help to improve the bottom line. This investment in physical infrastructure can be applied to their fan engagement in terms of commitment by club, staff and volunteers.</p> <p>The club and its senior staff have a very clear, close and productive relationship with its fans, which as the club has developed physically, has clearly developed alongside it. Information about the relationship with OASST (the supporters’ trust) is clear and unambiguous (via the Fan Engagement Plan), and appears to be part of an overall and wider culture of transparency encouraged by the ownership.</p>
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**Link: Accrington Stanley Fan Engagement Plan**

<https://www.accringtonstanley.co.uk/fans/fan-engagement-plan>

<b>Pillar of fan engagement</b>
<p><b>Representation</b></p> <p>Fanbases organise as they see fit. Across English football, there exists a myriad of fan-led groups, such as supporters’ trusts, independent supporters groups, LGBTQ+ groups, Disabled Supporters Associations (DSAs), Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) supporters’ groups, as well as organised Ultra or other TIFO groups. Some</p>

fans also choose not to organise. In all cases, the most appropriate response from the club is to embrace this and meet those fans accordingly.

The pursuance of representation in fan engagement should mean:

- Appropriate representation of the fanbase. This includes groups of fans and individual fans themselves. Fan groups cannot unreasonably be refused involvement.

## Findings of the Research

**i) Appropriate representation of a cross-section of the fanbase** – representation of different strands of fandom is important, as is accounting for each group’s purpose and collective aims.

There can be a tendency, in the interests of ‘efficiently’ managing resources, for some clubs to exclude certain groups from having direct relationships with the club and its officials without a good or justifiable reason.

### Portsmouth

Portsmouth have operated the Tony Goodall Fans’ Conference since 2010. The purpose of the group is ‘to discuss all things concerning the Blues – ranging from facilities to prices for tickets and a cup of tea. The conference has various sub-groups who meet regularly with club management on specific areas such as hospitality, away travel, etc.’

At the time of writing, the group is attended by representatives of 20 supporters’ groups and networks, and is in addition to club open fans forums and direct engagement with the Pompey Supporters Trust (concerning patrimony & history) and other groups, along with regular updates from the Chief Executive.




**Appropriate  
representation of a  
cross-section of the  
fanbase**



**Link: Tony Goodall Fans Conference minutes, December 2024**

<https://www.portsmouthfc.co.uk/news/2024/december/18/tony-goodall-fans--conference--december-2024-minutes>

 <p><b>Appropriate representation of a cross-section of the fanbase</b></p>	<p><b>Cambridge United</b></p> <p>Since the early 2000s, Cambridge United has seen representation of fans evolve regularly within the structures of the football club. Originally, the supporters' trust, Cambridge Fans United, took a seat on the board in exchange for a purchase of shares, with the role written into the articles of the company.</p> <p>This position is still held by the trust, but since that time, they have continued to incorporate multiple voices within the decision making processes of the club.</p> <p>They have developed relationships with women's group, the Amber Belles, and also introduced a Cambridge United Supporters Panel (CUSP) with members elected for two-year periods, in order to help improve many of the fundamentals of the matchday experience.</p> <p>A new Shadow Board has also been created, with representatives from supporters' groups (including CUSP, above), in order to help provide scrutiny of the football club board, and expressly to 'help unify and give a stronger voice to fan groups, strengthen fan engagement and ensure fans can act as a sounding board for the Club.'</p>
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<p><b>Barnsley</b></p> <p>Barnsley FC's Fan Advisory Board was established in early Spring 2024. The FAB was established with support &amp; guidance from Think Fan Engagement as part of the action research element of this paper.</p> <p>The group was established intentionally as an independent group (in the same manner as Everton's FAB) to 'ensure and develop transparent communication between the club staff, board and the whole fan base to provide constructive challenge and guidance to Barnsley FC.'</p> <p>The group should also represent the interests of fans in support of the club's strategic goals.' Reviews of the Terms of Reference of the group take place on an annual basis and are a collaboration between the club and the group.</p>	 <p><b>Properly constituted Fan Advisory Board with appropriate representation of the fanbase</b></p>
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**Link: Cambridge United Fan Engagement Plan**

<https://www.cambridgeunited.com/sites/default/files/2024-07/CUFCFanEngagement.pdf>



**Link: Barnsley Fans Advisory Board**

<https://fab.barnsleyfc.co.uk>

## Pillar of fan engagement

### Democracy

Democracy is an actual event (a vote or election), a set of processes (rules and governance) and a culture. In many cases, structures of fan engagement such as Fan Advisory Boards or Fans Parliaments are subject to democratic processes. This can also apply to a supporter director elected by the membership of the supporters' trust to represent the organisation on the board of a football club, or a similar director or representative to the board elected by fans who qualify according to a specific criteria (a membership or fan ID).

It is important to note that where democratic structures are required or exist, they are organised in a way that is fair, transparent, and according to established democratic norms (e.g., one member/person, one vote). No individual can be reasonably excluded from standing for such a role, which for the avoidance of doubt means exclusions because of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability or other protected characteristic, but also membership of an organisation that is otherwise in good standing with the club.

The pursuance of democracy in fan engagement should mean:


- Where a democratic model is used by a FAB/Shadow Board or other representative body, elections should take place according to published and fair democratic processes.
- Golden Share or equivalent protection for patrimony and major assets with a democratic mechanism as part of the protection

## Findings of the Research

### Democracy

In relation to fan engagement, democratic processes should be used to underpin or create certain elements of the club's activity. This might be the case with, for example, a supporter-elected director, elected by the membership of a supporters' trust, or election of FAB members by the wider fanbase.

- i) **Where a democratic model is used by a FAB/Shadow Board or other representative body, elections should take place according to published and fair democratic processes** - The FSA's guidance on this is generally accepted to be best practice.
- ii) Golden Share or equivalent protection for patrimony and major assets, underpinned/guaranteed with a democratic mechanism as part of the protection

 <p><b>Golden Share (or similar mechanism)</b></p>	<p><b>Brentford</b></p> <p>Since returning to private ownership in 2012 Brentford's former owner, Bees United (the Brentford supporters' trust) has retained a veto over certain decisions.</p> <p>In agreeing to the sale of the controlling shareholding to Matthew Benham, Bees United retained a 'special share' that grants the right to veto the sale of the stadium unless certain conditions are met. These are laid out in Brentford FC Limited's company articles of association.</p> <p>In addition, Bees United retained the right to have a fans' representative on the main Brentford FC Board of Directors, currently Stuart Hatcher who is also the Chair of Bees United.</p>
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<p><b>AFC Wimbledon</b></p> <p>Part of the reason that AFC Wimbledon exists in the form it does (fan-owned) is because of the failure of the rules and regulations of football to protect major assets and patrimony of its predecessor, Wimbledon Football Club.</p> <p>As a result, protection of the club's major assets is explicitly recognised within the model of ownership, where a set of 'Restricted Actions (RAs)' are present within the rules of the owning body of the club, the Dons Trust.</p> <p>These 'RAs' refer to actions that threaten the trust's status of ownership, the stadium and similar major decisions, and require special thresholds for votes taking place concerning these issues. This provides a level of protection to matters important to the fans above and beyond the new regulations.</p>	 <p><b>Golden Share (or similar mechanism)</b></p>
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**Link: Bees United Golden Share**

[https://www.beesunited.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Bees-United-approved-rules\\_2021.pdf](https://www.beesunited.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Bees-United-approved-rules_2021.pdf)



**Link: The rules of the Dons Trust (including the ‘Restricted Actions’ clauses)**

<https://thedonstrust.org/constitution>

### **Implementation of the model**

In order to be fully effective, any fan engagement model should observe the following three principles:

- i. Place fan engagement at centre of the business model of football clubs
- ii. Incorporate clubs of all commercial sizes
- iii. Take into account the changing regulatory landscape in football

The exact application of the above model of fan engagement may vary from club-to-club, depending on the circumstances. However, the four pillars of Culture & Leadership, Transparency, Network/Representation and Democracy present a solid foundation from which any variations can be based, whilst providing a series of core requirements to which organisations should aspire.

For all of these elements to function properly, they must take place in an overall context of transparency and openness, which includes the nature of the process being detailed and available to the wider fanbase. This should be extended to other elements of the club’s operation, and links with the publication of quarterly information by the club, where much of this information can be made available. This should all be placed in an easily accessible place so that anyone can find it easily, for example a ‘fan engagement’ tab on the club website.

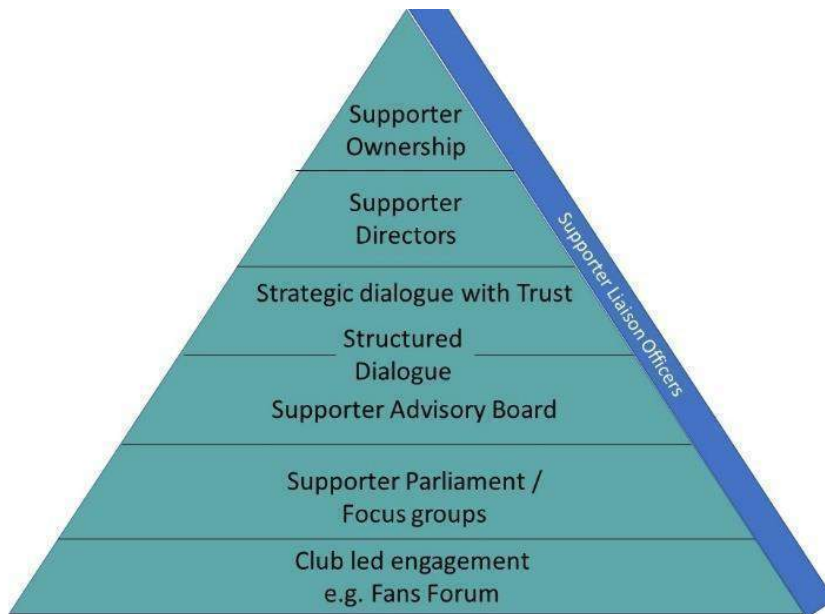
## 6.0 Conclusions

If implemented successfully, TFE's Model of Fan Engagement enables clubs to pursue a culture of good fan engagement, balancing the need for revenue generation, ensuring that the playing side does not overly dominate thinking in this area, and greater balance can be achieved. It will also help clubs, those working in them and in leagues and governing bodies to visualise how to ensure clubs can operate a 'fan centric' model of business & operations.

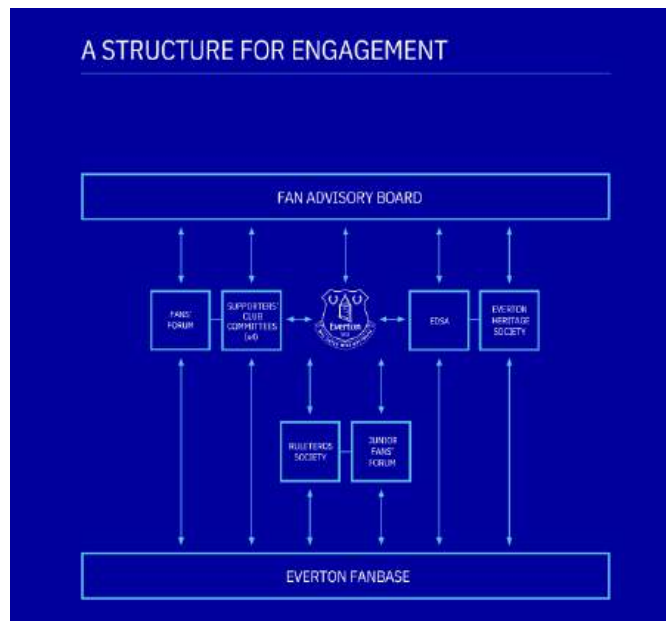
The aim of this model is also to provide the opportunity for leagues, associations and other funding bodies to identify potential funding needs for the development of fan engagement. This could either be through central funding managed by the EFL or PL, and might involve directing clubs to ringfence a proportion of the central income received towards the development of fan engagement services, 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.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, his model creates a potential environment in which the club's existence as a social and community asset begins to drive and shape its operational and longer-term revenue strategy.

# Appendices



Appendix A Supporters Direct's Pyramid of Fan Engagement



Appendix B Everton FC's structure of fan engagement

<b>Level club plays at</b>	<b>Role held by interviewee</b>
Premier League	Director of Communications
Premier League	Head of Supporter Services
Premier League	Head of Supporter Services
Premier League	Head of Supporter Services
EFL League One	Supporter Director
National League Premier	Chief Executive
EFL Championship	Head of Supporter Services
EFL Championship	Head of Supporter Services
Rugby League Super League	Chief Executive

**Appendix C Participants interviewed (clubs)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Role (at the time of interview)</b>
Daniel Crawford	Fulham Supporters Trust	Board member
Katrina Law	Tottenham Hotspur Supporters Trust	Board member
Mark Bradley	Fan Experience Company	Director

**Appendix D Participants interviewed (other)**



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