

# Module 3. Fan Consultation and Structured Dialogue

## Unit 3.1

### 3.1.1 Why clubs must consult

In studying this course, we will find subjects that re-emerge throughout. This does two things: it allows us to embed the learning by re-visiting key points and it also allows us to look at the topics from different perspectives (including from fans').

In different parts of this certificate, we explore the value of consultation and dialogue. From the club-fan relationship to the security forces-fan relationship, we show how applying the principles of fan engagement can create positive outcomes, both short-term and tactically, and over longer periods of time.

We also know from our own work in different parts of the UK and Europe that fan engagement can also help to address some of football's most long-standing issues relating to external public perceptions, which then opens up opportunities to work more closely with regulators, municipalities and other sectors such as education.

The need to consult is a pre-requisite for all the above.

Consultation gives fans a voice in a time when we are emerging (slowly in some parts of the world and not at all in others) from a detached and remote relationship with fans.

The revenue created by fans, especially at non-elite clubs, where ticket revenue is vital to the viability of the club, relies on a mix of factors going beyond the simple act of winning. We have also studied this in different parts of this certificate.

Fans need to have a voice. If we deprive them of that voice, we prevent them from being able to tell us what they think; they will become more remote, they will be more difficult to approach and engage. Eventually, the dissatisfaction felt by individuals, through the power of social media, will extend to pockets, and then, inevitably, large sections of the fanbase will be emotionally opposed to what you are doing as a club. See the case of



Newcastle United fans and their owner in module 2 of this course, which is a good example of what happens when, over a long period of time, the actions of an owner are not perceived to be in tune with the needs, hopes and beliefs of fans.

But from the point of view of fan engagement as a tool to increase attendance to grow a club, consultation is absolutely vital. There is no other business in the world that grows without speaking to its customers. It is an absolutely fundamental element of business growth.

Then, why do you consult? Because you want to understand what is important to your customer. A football club should do the same with its fans. **If you can find ways to open up a dialogue with fans, you will inevitably discover that there are things that they want that you cannot deliver.** They may want better players, but you cannot buy them until you sell the ones you already have. Every club cannot win. Every club cannot sign the best player. But what you will identify by speaking to fans are things that you are able to influence, but not fully address, things that are completely within your power to control and things over which you have little influence. You cannot do this alone. With fans, you can do more.

Significantly, you can help to create, improve and maintain the atmosphere in your stadium by closely connecting with supporters and formal supporter groups. Bart Wiley, Chief Operating Officer of MLS club Seattle Sounders confirms this in a recent conversation:

Seattle Sounders FC has long appreciated the supporter culture and what it did to get our club off the ground in 2009. Passionate fans lead to an electric atmosphere within the building, something we're quite proud of in Seattle. The goal continues to be to have the best atmosphere in Major League Soccer, leading our team to a positively entertaining style of play. Our players and the fans in attendance feed off the atmosphere created by our supporter groups, something for which we're thankful. (Wiley, 2020)

Kevin Rye, the English fan engagement consultant, offers a further note on why consultation is important: that it must be part of the wider engagement effort. In a recent interview he confirmed the following:

Consulting should be part of an overall engagement programme. If you have agreed to do something and all you want to do is to make it look like fans were involved, consultation can be seen as negative by supporters. **The importance of consultation within a wider engagement programme is that it builds the**



**relationship because you are co-creating with fans.** You are working with them to create and shape things. They feel they have a stake in this. (Rye, 2020)

There is another dimension to the importance of consultation, especially within a wider fan engagement programme or within an established set of dialogue processes, and this has the potential to help to address one of the specific issues football has: that clubs may fear the feedback they receive.

Research has shown that the simple act of asking a customer/partner for feedback increases their engagement with you. One expert explains:

‘To serve your customers well, you need to know who they are and what they want. Asking them shows that you care about them, so it’s the first step to creating advocates’ (Lieberman, 2018, para. 5).

So, through the simple act of making contact with fans and asking them for feedback, you have a positive impact on their levels of engagement, even before they have expressed an opinion.

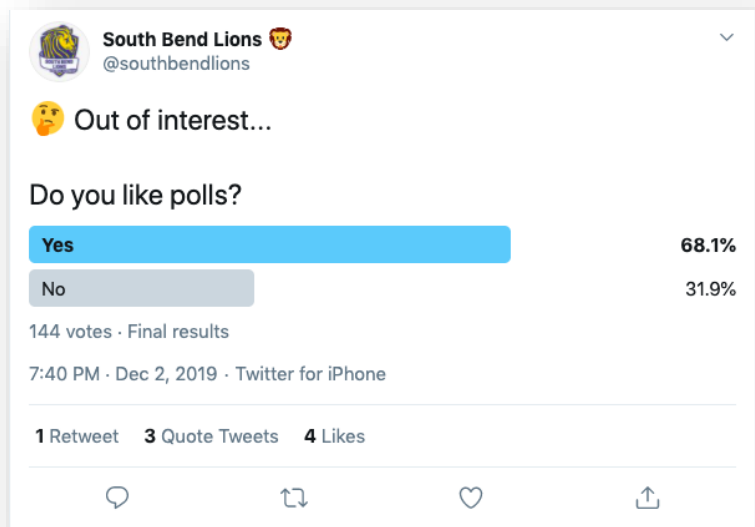
This should encourage clubs to feel more confident about contacting fans and asking them for feedback. And, as Rye, explains above, it must be done within a wider engagement strategy, otherwise it may look like you are ‘going through the motions’.

A club that we will return to throughout this certificate and who have demonstrated their readiness to take on these ideas and apply them with imagination and humour are South Bend Lions, who describe themselves as ‘Indiana’s Other Team’ and who currently play in USL League 2.

As the tweet shows, they are embracing consultation in ways that will appeal to their base.



**Figure 1:** Results of a Twitter poll to South Bend Lion fans



Source: South Bend Lions official Twitter account. (n. d.) Retrieved August 2020 from <https://twitter.com/southbendlions?lang=es>. Screenshot by author.

They have followed this up by using a variety of ways to engage their fans and to co-create this new club's future with them.

So, in summary, consultation is very important, especially if it sits within an overall fan engagement strategy.

### Exercise:

*You have been asked by the CEO of a club to ensure that the next survey you deploy gets maximum engagement (in terms of responses and positive contributions). From what you have learned in this theme, what would you do to ensure this?*

## **3.1.2 Consultation as a core pillar of fan engagement**

As the first theme of this module confirms, to be effective, **consultation must form part of a wider fan engagement strategy.**

This course has presented **fan engagement as a strategic and cultural concept, rather than a tactical one, and this is very important.** If clubs only practise engagement at certain times (and this is usually the case when the team is not playing very well or when there are low ticket sales), fans soon recognise that these interventions are nothing more

than superficial gestures. There is no real sense that the club sees the value of partnering with fans or understands the value of having fans contribute to shaping the club's future.

In this course, we have offered up a wide definition of fan engagement: 'everything done to understand, protect and grow the fan's emotional investment in the club.'

We do this because it ensures that people do not simply see it as a tactical intervention (see above) or entertainment for fans. Fan engagement is the application of customer engagement in sport and, in this case, football. In other businesses, the leadership will work hard to make engagement 'part of the culture' by prioritising it, rewarding it, putting it at the top of agendas throughout the business and ensuring it becomes a 'high profile' business objective.

In football, as we have seen, it has not strong cultural platform on which to operate. If it is seen as transient, incidental or superficial, we do not only risk losing the opportunities it presents, but in the rarefied and highly-charged emotional context of football, it may be 'the final straw' that turns our loyal fans against us.

On your professor's 25 years' experience of working with customer engagement and 20 years' experience of applying it to sports, specifically football, it has become clear that you need to see it in the context of overall business growth. That is why my organisation, the Fan Experience Company, has created four fan engagement pillars:

- Club identity & meaning
- Consultation & dialogue
- Fan experience & execution
- People engagement

The titles have evolved over recent years, but they largely reflect the strategic models in practise at the most successful businesses in the world. **The point is that these pillars do not exist in isolation. Each drives the other in an eco-system where the company's identity and function drive its culture, which means that customers are prioritised, partners in the improvement process and beneficiaries of a continually improving experience.** This then drives their intention to stay with us and to advocate us to others.

*The issue that football has is that it believes that it does not maintain control over key factors and, subconsciously, rejects these ideas.*

For example, a club believing that the only driver of attendance is winning will see the only drivers of winning as investment in the team, better player bonuses, a better coach, better coaching practices and a better training ground.



If this club sees the issue as engagement, then it will look for the drivers of this factor and then see which it can exert the most control over. Of course, most clubs (especially those non-elite clubs who, it is believed, can benefit most from fan engagement) cannot, to a greater extent, influence winning. However, they can influence things like creating a clear identity and vision, developing and motivating their people to deliver it, working in partnership with fans to address issues and opportunities and, as a result, delivering consistently great experiences in areas that matter for fans.

Elsewhere in this certificate, we shared the work done by Leeds Rhinos, a rugby club from the north of England. Their approach to upskilling and motivating their matchday staff was not to address this isolation, but to begin with the fans.

Employees were asked to talk about what the club meant to its fans. The presence of a memorial garden, easily seen from the training suite at the stadium, brought this into sharp focus.

Getting people to connect better experiences with loyalty and retention was easy, so, by bringing in the club's identity, they could begin to explore questions like these two:

- What makes our club different?
- What makes our fans different?

While this can highlight the need to give club employees information about the club's history, heritage and achievements (see the case study elsewhere in this certificate), it serves to produce specific, actionable and meaningful outcomes. Yes, all fans of all clubs are important, but because ours have the reputation of being the League's most loyal – attending at times of very poor team performance–, they deserve more.

This, then, directly leads participants away from superficial, short-term engagement ideas towards those that require more of an organisation-wide fix.

So, that is why we have the four pillars of engagement and why it is important to include consultation and dialogue. It is a question of making it 'part of the way we do things' and not a short-term, superficial fix that fans can easily see through.

*Finally, there is one more question that will help you establish the strategic and cultural importance of fan engagement and the need to make it a key business objective. That question is why?, in order not just to ask why people attend, but to get them to examine their own deeper motivations for being a fan of the team.*



Just as we have shown in many of the case studies in this certificate, this question is capable of uncovering more of the subconscious drivers of the emotional connection between fans and their clubs. What is more, they are usually not about 'winning', but about ideas and concepts that can be more easily captured for the benefit of your club.

### Exercise

*You are talking to the CEO of a league who, after undertaking some research, has identified that few of the clubs in it are practising consultation and dialogue of any meaningful type.*

*How would you sell the benefits of developing this capacity to clubs and how might the league help the clubs to do it?*

### **3.1.3 Why fan consultation fails**

This theme will explore some of the reasons why consultation and dialogue programmes, as part of a wider fan engagement strategy, often fail.

By understanding the reasons for failure, the student is better able to formulate more effective approaches and, also, better able to diagnose issues encountered when seeking feedback and ideas from fans.

Consultation can fail for many reasons.

**It can fail because we are not allowing the full spectrum of our fans to have a voice.** This can happen because, perhaps, one of the increasingly diverse segments of fans following the club has been accidentally overlooked or because we find it uncomfortable to consult beyond an existing established audience.

Let's consider the club who has an established supporter consultation group whose membership has been static over the years. This group may be earnestly engaging with the club and levelling constructive criticism at it in ways which are helping to make improvements and shape future direction. However, external perceptions may picture this as a 'closed shop' to which only 'the chosen few' are invited. Very quickly, especially with social media growing exponentially, this can begin to undermine the group.

*This can be fixed by ensuring there is a clear and transparent process for membership of this group, with fixed terms for those participating and a review of participation to ensure that all sectors of the fanbase are properly represented.*



**The nature of fandom means that not every fan will have the same relationship with the club and that when these fans coalesce into independent groups, they may all have different views about what should be the club's priorities.** How do you address this within a consultation and dialogue programme?

David Rose was one of the founders of the Red and White Army<sup>1</sup>. Their objective is to give a voice to Sunderland fans by informing, liaising with and communicating with the club and –in the process– representing all the different Sunderland 'voices' in the community.

The group is democratic, inclusive and independent, and it ensures that it is not seen as an arm of the club, but that it is also seen by the club as having the status required to represent all fans.

Your professors spoke to David in the spring of 2020 and he explained that the make-up of the group meant that the club could be assured that all parts of the Sunderland community were being represented (Rose, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. This can clearly be seen on the organisation's website, where the different members are listed:

- A Love Supreme (independent fan group: publications, apparel, books, comment, etc.)
- Away Fan Rep (for those travelling to away games)
- Branch Liaison Council (part of the official Sunderland supporters group)
- Disabled Supporters Group (see inclusion)
- Family Zone Rep (to represent the needs of families and children)
- SMB – Pure Football Forum (independent fan group)
- The Roker End Atmosphere Group (fan group aimed at improving stadium noise and colour)
- Supporter Liaison Group (existing body working with the club)
- Roker Report Fansite (independent fan group)
- Wise Men Say Podcast (independent fan group)
- LGBTQ/Women Supporters (see inclusion)
- Corporate Hospitality (for corporate fans and those purchasing hospitality packages)
- Senior Citizens (see inclusion)
- SAFC Ladies supporters (fans of the club's women's team)

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<sup>1</sup> Official Website: <https://www.redandwhitearmy.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> This should be available in late 2020 at <https://fanexperienceco.com/resources/podcasts/>



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may mean that older fans are concerned about returning to games, as they have health concerns. The make-up of the Red and White Army ensures that they have a voice and the club can consider how to address these concerns with more confidence. Finally, it is also possible for anyone (as long as they are a Sunderland fan) to become a member of the Red and White Army and participate in representing fans' interests.

**There are also those issues created by a change of ownership at the club.** A new owner, for example, may wish to take on the decision-making with limited input from supporters. There may be an existing mechanism for consulting fans, but the new owner does not like it, for whatever reason.

*There can also be cases where fan groups coordinate their criticism of the club to the extent that the club, in the words of Kevin Rye, 'pulls the shutters down' (Rye, 2020) and no longer wishes to be open to fan input.*

For each of the above two scenarios, Kevin suggests ensuring that when initial consultation processes are agreed, use a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This is an agreement between two or more parties outlined in a formal document. It is not legally binding –and this should be stressed–, but it does confirm that all parties involved are willing to work together with a contract.

Another part of the consultation toolkit that will aid effectiveness and produce positive outcomes from both parties is to ensure that there are published minutes from every meeting. This ensures that communication is consistent and represents the exact positions and statements from both fan representatives and the club.

In the case of the Red and White Army, the minutes are published on their website, showing, in detail, who was present, what was discussed and what next steps or other actions have been agreed.

*Review the minutes of the latest meeting held between the Red and White Army and the club: [https://09aa3e36-dd11-450f-981b-2a770dc67c41.filesusr.com/ugd/6fecdb\\_7a8295f244fa408fbbefb684b16f4aee.pdf](https://09aa3e36-dd11-450f-981b-2a770dc67c41.filesusr.com/ugd/6fecdb_7a8295f244fa408fbbefb684b16f4aee.pdf)*

The minutes run to nine pages and provide a comprehensive picture for fans (albeit, perhaps, requiring a summary) of what the Red and White Army do in their regular communications.

The meetings are also strengthened by the presence of a member of the club's ownership team (Charlie Methven) although he has left the club. This is a key point, since the



involvement of the ownership team gives legitimacy to the discussions, allays fears that fans do not have access to key decision makers and allows the group to directly address their questions to them in an open and transparent forum.

It would be difficult to give a finite list of reasons why consultation fails, but in this theme we have attempted to give a representative group of reasons in the spirit of helping students to strengthen earnest attempts to give fans a voice.

Exercise:

*What consultation approaches does your club take?*

*Based on the learning in this theme, what do you consider to be the main strengths and weaknesses and how could the club improve it?*

### **3.1.4 Encouraging fans to engage in consultation**

The focus of this theme is on participation in consultation at clubs: how to make it happen and how to ensure that there continues to be an interest in dialogue among fan groups.

Speaking to the English fan engagement consultant Kevin Rye was instructional in one key aspect of this: **the need to recognise the consultation should be regarded in its most generic state. Kevin identifies the best solution as recognising that there are lots of means to do this, and some of them are listed here:**

- One-to-one relationships between senior executives in the club and supporter groups, such as trusts or councils
- Discussions in fans parliaments
- Online fan forums
- Supporter liaison officers
- Online engagement
- Being present on match days

The final one is often underrated as a tool to understand the sentiment of fans. The CEO or senior executive who positions himself or herself in areas of major footfall around a stadium pre-match can elicit lots of useful information from talking to fans.

The message is clear: there are lots of techniques to allow you to hear from fans and lots of ways of interpreting and delivering the various consultation models out there, but the



most important thing is to listen and, according to Kevin Rye, to **go to the places where you can listen**.

A blended approach, where formal processes are complemented by informal listening, based on positive transparent relationships, is the template all clubs should follow.

This, of course, shifts the focus of this theme from 'recruiting' (i.e., how we find people to become involved in our various consultative exercises) to simply ensuring that you are culturally prepared to 'listen'.

*When we review the different approaches employed to 'recruit' fans to consultation processes, the best ones usually involve recognising the power of 'word of mouth' among the fanbase. This usually reflects both the positivity with which your consultative process is viewed by fans and how honest and transparent the club is in actioning them.*

Some clubs like to offer **incentives to fans**, as this can also help to increase the numbers participating in surveys, for example, especially where the respondents are required to provide personal data so that the club can identify the segment in which they sit in the fanbase.

**This could be monetary (e.g., a discount on purchases from the club's retail service) or emotional** (e. g., adding bonus points to a scheme like Philadelphia Union's where your points can be exchanged for a 'money can't buy' moment).

**In many respects, the word 'recruitment' may not be the best in the context of fan engagement. Perhaps, it is, after all, about advocacy. Recruiting people to our consultation opportunities and building a culture of co-creation are two sides of the same coin.** If the club listens, commits to making changes and then makes them, 'recruitment' opportunities will increase.

When all of this is in place, there is nothing that cannot be resolved well. With clubs battling with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their plans for season ticket sales, the solution communicated by English Championship club Stoke City shows just how important it is for the supporter's voice to be heard in the resolution of complex issues.

Let's explain the context: clubs will see their capacities reduced significantly to allow for social distancing after fans are permitted to return to stadia. In the case of Stoke City, a former Premier League club, this means that their capacity will be reduced from 30,000 to between 6,000 and 9,000. This, of course, has the potential to create massive upheaval among season ticket holders, as the numbers are likely to exceed the places available.



So, Stoke City talked to fans and listened. Their main issue was their opposition to a ballot scheme for every game. The solution they came up with as a direct result of consulting fans was described by various commentators as ingenious.

Malcolm Clarke, Chairperson of the Football Supporters Association (FSA) –himself, a Stoke City fan– commented the following:

While prioritising the loyalty of season card holders, it treats them all equally without recourse to the vagaries of ballots for each game, which would be an administrative nightmare and would leave uncertainty for all fans on which games they can go to. It is better than any other scheme I've so far seen. (Smith, 2020, para. 8)

The scheme, re-printed here from the local Stoke Sentinel newspaper, divides the 20/21 season's fixtures into two groups of 11 home matches.

The club is introducing half-price, 11-game season cards split into a red and a white category, with the games in each category clearly defined and adult prices starting from £165.

- 2020/21 'early bird'<sup>3</sup> purchasers and anyone who held a 2019/20 season card will have a priority window to purchase an 11-game season card.
- You can select up to six seats (from a maximum of two households) in your group (or 'bubble'<sup>4</sup>) from a seating plan specifically designed to meet social distance guidelines.
- You choose whether you come to the 11 games listed as 'red' or the 11 listed as 'white'. Your season card will then reserve you the same seat of your choice for every time you attend the stadium.
- As the games in each of the red and the white category are clearly defined, you will know exactly which games you have tickets for, you will not have to print tickets at home on a match-by-match basis and you will not face the potential disappointment of missing out in ticket ballots.

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<sup>3</sup> Those buying the tickets as soon as they go on sale.

<sup>4</sup> Following Prime Minister Johnson's announcement of 'The Rule of Six' to the UK Parliament on Wednesday 9 September that groups of no more than 6 people would be allowed to meet, it has become clear that using this 'bubble of 6' can help clubs to manage the arrangements of season ticket seats in a stadium.



- In partnership with the EFL<sup>5</sup> and Sky, Stoke City is also to make available a streaming pass for the 11 home games not covered by the 11-game season cards – as well as mid-week away league matches– for just £50.
- 11-game season cards can be purchased using a six-month payment plan.

Whichever way you look at this scheme, it shows ingenuity and the benefit of a wide supporter consulting base. The Supporter Services Manager at Stoke City, Anthony Emmerson, explains this and the club's wider approach to fan engagement in a recent podcast<sup>6</sup>.

Exercise:

*Review the consultation processes of your country's national association. Set out how they recruit fans to participate in dialogue and to shape the future of the game in your country. If this is not done, make a short series of recommendations as to how they could do it.*

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<sup>5</sup> The English Football League ([www.efl.com](http://www.efl.com))

<sup>6</sup> You can listen to it here: <https://shows.acast.com/fan-engagement-pod/episodes/anthony-emmerson-supporter-growth-manager-stoke-city-fc>



## Unit 3.2

### 3.2.1 The differences between consulting with fans and consulting with partners/stakeholders

By 'consultation', we are not just talking about fans, of course. Engagement is something that should have a positive effect on our entire community and all of the groups implied by this. This theme looks briefly at how it is possible for clubs to engage stakeholders through consultation and dialogue and picks out several best practices.

*First of all, because fan engagement is largely cultural in nature, clubs that practise it well are likely to find engaging local stakeholders easier as a result. It, therefore, follows that approaches based on the four pillars of fan engagement are likely to strengthen community links.*

In this theme we are going to explore two case studies to show these principles work.

The application of fan engagement (customer engagement in sport) should always be from the 'customers' perspective, that is, the fans. Their motivations, needs and expectations should drive the strategies designed to engage them. So, when we look at other stakeholders in football, the same principle applies.

English Championship club Huddersfield Town became famous for reaching the Premier League in 2017 and remaining there for two seasons, completely against the odds. The team, managed by former assistant to Jurgen Klopp, David Wagner, took the championship by storm in 2016/17 and surprised many in the following two seasons, by their determination on the pitch and their values of it.

Their approach to engaging local commercial partners continues to be very successful. The concepts applied challenge traditional approaches by placing engagement at the heart of their operation.

Previously, clubs would look to sell sponsorship locally, be it via hospitality packages, board advertising or shirt sponsorship. Underpinning this approach was the rather complacent idea that the status of the local club was so high, that everyone would be rushing to hand over their money.

**As we have seen, this flies in the face of the negative external perceptions that football has to endure and also excludes the needs of potential sponsors and partners.** Huddersfield Town's approach, under the leadership of their Commercial Director at the



time, Sean Jarvis<sup>7</sup>, was characterised by some creative and **extremely effective ‘connections’ between the needs of different** groups (Jarvis, 2020).

There is a large engineering firm in Huddersfield. One of their main business objectives was to ensure that a career in engineering was seen as attractive and that this would be facilitated if the company had better access to schoolchildren and higher education students. Schools and further education colleges would normally be difficult to reach for such an organisation whereas the football club already had strong presence there: naturally, because so many children love football and the local club while players from the club and other staff had delivered football training and related support to them.

Over the course of several meetings, Sean and executives from the engineering firm explored how they could work together to (1) support the company's aims and (2) encourage the company to invest in the club.

The solution they came up with was a ‘build a Go Kart’ challenge. Participating schools were provided with a series of materials by the engineering company and a competition launched. The winners were chosen at a special day at Huddersfield Town's John Smith Stadium where a racing competition was held.

Initiatives like this have helped the club to attract investment and practical support while assisting local businesses with their own objectives and the successful outcomes evidence of a ‘customer-driven’ approach.

Before the club achieved its dream of reaching the Premier League, the above initiative and other successful ideas led the club to launch a 100 Club for local businesses. Again, this was based on taking the ‘customer perspective’. Many local businesses would like to invest and support their local club but perceive that it may be too expensive and perhaps that it might not offer them the value they seek and the return on investment they desire.

So, the club created a corporate membership scheme which offered a finite number of places (100) and where the entry price was £10,000 (€11,000). The unexpected promotion meant that some SME (small to medium-sized enterprises) were able to enjoy global coverage for a comparatively small sum.

These members began to trade with other members (one did business with eight other members of the scheme in the years following this) while the club responded with **more and more value-adding benefits**, such as one where Grand Central (a rail company based

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<sup>7</sup> Sarvis is the former Commercial Director at Huddersfield Town (2007-2020) and presently Chief Executive of Leicestershire County Cricket Club



in Yorkshire) offered members a free trip on their train to London to visit the Houses of Parliament and meet the member of Parliament for Huddersfield (a town with a strong working-class heritage and labour movement).

Another organisation who has seen the benefit of engaging businesses differently – although this time on a national level– is the Danish Football Association (DBU). Following the launch of the new Kvindeliga (Women’s League) in 2019, the CEO of the League, Nicolai Kaas Nordstrøm, a keen networker, created a business network.

Gjensidige, a Norwegian Financial Services company, were already part of Nicolai’s network, and it was this that actually brought them to be exclusive league sponsors. As a result of this, the power of women’s football, with its messages of inclusion and the advancement of equality and the power of networking, combined to create an annual membership scheme.

Paying 15,000 kroner per year (approx. €1,500) offers member organisations breakfast networking meetings every three weeks together with site visits to best practice member companies as well as the advantages brought by football. In the case of Huddersfield Town, for example, the train is part of the solution: members are taken from Aarhus to Copenhagen for an international match, with a stop to visit a member organisation built in to the 5-hour journey.

*Both Huddersfield Town and the DBU have based their successful services on prioritising the needs of the customer. Neither have sat back and figured that football alone would make the difference, but both have ploughed new furrows that have led to spin-off ideas that continue to generate advocacy and income for the organisations.*

Exercise:

- *How would you characterise relationships between clubs, the national association and businesses in your country?*
- *Are the approaches traditional in nature (e.g., buying advertising space and shirt sponsorship) or are they more innovative and ‘customer-led’?*
- *Please give examples.*

### **3.2.2 Structured dialogue (including SLOs)**

In the many conversations with Kevin Rye, the English fan engagement expert, he has stressed that effective dialogue springs both from informal ideas (simply talking to people on a matchday) to more formal processes. In this theme we will describe one such



process, examine its effectiveness and enhance the student's learning by posing questions at the end.

**The supporter liaison officer (SLO)** was, as we have studied in other parts of this certificate, a regulation introduced by UEFA to improve relationships between clubs, fans and security forces.

Supporters Direct (Europe)<sup>8</sup> exists to increase supporter involvement in the running of football clubs and football institutions, and to promote solidarity towards the grassroots levels of football.

**At present, and in the light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Supporters Direct is re-emphasising the four ways in which it supports achievement of its objectives** (here, re-printed from their website):

- **Democracy:** Football fans need to have a say in the running of their clubs through democratic structures and by upholding a community focus. More football clubs should be member-run, and, if not possible, supporters should have shareholding rights and board representation. Supporters need to be represented at football governing bodies too.
- **Cooperation:** Fans, football clubs and football governing bodies need to work together closely by being partners in dialogue. The relationships between national supporter organisations and football governing bodies need to be improved and provide the necessary platform for fans to self-organise and create representative bodies that positively contribute to the development of domestic football. At club level, the role of supporter liaison officers is key to ensure cooperation.
- **Solidarity (fair competition):** There must be fair redistribution of revenue across the pyramid, from the top to the grassroots and across leagues. It is essential to ensure that football remains a fair competition.
- **Sustainability:** Licensing regulations need to help clubs to increase their financial, social and environmental capital in a sustainable way. Given its stature and influence in the world, football needs to lead as an example to other sectors by taking meaningful responsibility for its structural, financial, social and environmental sustainability.

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<sup>8</sup> Official website: <http://sdeurope.eu/reforming-football-for-the-better-the-supporters-approach/>



Key to the success of the cooperation strategic dimension is the role of the SLO. The role, emerged alongside UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations and its history, has been one of connecting stakeholders, overcoming traditional problems associated with football matches and increasing commitment to supporters and fan engagement throughout Europe.

The Financial Fair Play regulations and the creation of the SLO was informed by the work of Supporters Direct (Europe)<sup>9</sup>. In a survey conducted by Supporters Direct on behalf of UEFA in 2007, football associations expressed the view that dialogue between supporters and associations and also between supporters and clubs was worth improving, as it enables supporters to become more serious and responsible partners.

Under article 35 of the UEFA Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play regulations, clubs across Europe are required to appoint a supporter liaison officer (SLO) to ensure proper and constructive discourse between them and their fans.

Particularly,

1. the license applicant must have appointed a **supporter liaison officer** to act as the key contact point for supporters, and
2. the **supporter liaison officer** will regularly meet and collaborate with the relevant club personnel on all related matters.

In the website, the following is explained:

Supporter liaison officers (SLOs) act as a bridge between football clubs and supporters by providing a two-way flow of information around key topical issues.

The role, first created in Germany, ensures that fans' voices are heard within every club's internal structures while working to ensure an enjoyable match day experience for everyone in the stadium.

SLOs work with many different departments within a football club but their expertise is focused on supporters. An SLO needs to have a deep insight into their club's fan culture but also the capability to establish and maintain trusting relationships with different stakeholders including a variety of supporter groups, club staff, police representatives, social workers and their counterparts at other clubs. (Supporter Liaison Officer: An Introduction, n. d., para. 1-3)

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<sup>9</sup> Official website: <http://sdeurope.eu/slo/implementing-slo/>



As we know, the diversity of football cultures across Europe means that no 'one size fits all approach' will work. To illustrate this, one can compare the actual operation focus of SLOs in different countries. In Slovakia, for example, the detailed match-by-match activities of Slovan Liberec SLO, Tomas Čarnogurský, will be different from that of Lena Gustafson-Wiberg, of Swedish Club Djurgårdens, but the principles remain.

The creation of the role of SLO was initially viewed by many as a response to some of safety and security challenges football faced, but its strong focus on engagement has allowed it to make a big difference in many other areas, including the needs of different fan groups.

Dave Messenger, the SLO at English Championship club Watford, was interviewed by the Supporters Direct Europe team. In such interview, he described some of the work he does when asked what he has enjoyed most in his work:

There are a few that stand out. Opening the club's Sensory Room in December 2016 was a great moment and we have now had more than 100 families use the facility on a matchday, with 12 of those now transitioned to general access areas of the stadium. I have also been instrumental in supporting our LGBT supporters' group and managing the relationship between the club and our atmosphere group, the 1881 Movement. Between the groups they produced a memorable rainbow mosaic display at a home game and I continue to help all of our supporters' groups across the world to stay connected to our club. (SLO of the Month: Dave Messenger of Watford FC, 2020, para. 6)

The SLO role is an example of a structure put in place to ensure successful dialogue between key stakeholders in football. It has key principles, but, in practice, its flexibility allows it to contribute to fan engagement in clubs with contrasting needs.

Exercise:

*If your club is in Europe, do you know if it operates an SLO? How easy is it to find out about the SLO and his/her activities? Please, identify the key focus of your SLO and decide whether or not, in your view, the structure offered has aided dialogue in your country.*

*If you do not live in Europe, how valuable would the SLO role be for your club? Is there someone performing a similar role? Please, comment on the opportunities present in your country for such an approach.*



### 3.2.3 Setting up a system for fan consultation

In this theme we will explore dialogue and consultation through case studies, as this helps the student to contextualise the theory and see it in practice.

Setting up a system for fan consultation and dialogue is important. However, depending on the size of your club, who your fans are, and how many of them there are, the system you will set up will be different.

We study the principles behind consultation and dialogue in detail in these courses, and, although clubs will be different and the tools they use to engage fans vary, there are clear principles involved. Ideally, we would like to have every fan involved, but, in practice, that is different, so different clubs find ways to ensure that fans –representing the different groups that follow and support the club– will always have a voice.

You could actually try to ensure every fan has a voice (this has been attempted by some clubs). Let's say your senior team devote two evenings a week to dialogue and consultation and share the work, say, between four of them. Let's say that these meetings begin a month before the season starts and end a month before it finishes. So, in the UK for example, that would mean that ordinarily you would have 43 weeks, multiplied by 2 days per week, which equals to 86 meetings per season.

If, for example, you have 5,000 season ticket holders, you could invite, say, up to 60 to each session. Perhaps, not everyone can attend, so you make it possible to watch the match via a video link, but at that meeting, **everyone** gets to meet a member of the senior team, meet a player and a member of the coaching staff, hear the club's plans and have the opportunity to have their voice heard.

Does this happen in football anywhere in the world? It does not seem like it does, but if it is happening, this is likely to be in the USA, where this approach is used in sports like baseball. Baseball, and specifically the MLS, curates the relationship between its fans and its clubs very carefully. The sport bristles with examples of its social history –mainly the 'blue collars'–, 'working class' in nature, and, to match this, it makes sure that it does not behave in detached ways that separate it from its supporter base. Football could clearly learn a lot from this, especially at non-elite levels where the maths may work out better.

So, a club with 1,500 season ticket holders holds one event every two weeks throughout the year. That is 26 events with 60 being invited to each one. There may only be two or three executives and space may be limited, but it would still be possible to let those who cannot attend watch the event via video link.



Access to key decision-makers and access to the 'magic' are key to maintaining and growing levels of fan engagement in clubs and leagues, so the baseball approach allows us a glimpse of what things might look like if we were really serious about maximising this.

The other option, offered by many U.S. sports, is to have a kind of fan expo where, once a year, people who love the club can come to town, stay in a hotel, attend different events and workshops, meet and have photos taken with players, learn about the heritage and history of the club from former legends and purchase merchandise at the same time.

These are examples of why it is dangerous to restrict one's thinking to existing models of engagement and to consider things through the eyes of fans.

Wolverhampton Wanderers, the English Premier League club, has a Fans' Parliament, which forms part of the club's structured dialogue with its supporters; nevertheless, within this system, they also offer their younger fans a voice. The Junior Fans' Parliament<sup>10</sup> offers kids a chance to air their voices and to contribute to growing the club.

Huddersfield Town, who we have already met in this module, created their Fan Panel in the 2013/14 season. Your professor was involved in this process as an independent and unbiased facilitator, showing examples of how other clubs addressed dialogue and engagement, as well as sharing with the participants best practice ideas from elsewhere to help address the issues that emerged.

The club introduced the All Together Town (ATT) fan engagement programme, whereby directors and the club staff meet with a panel of supporters every three months to gain feedback on a wide variety of important issues. Each meeting is recorded and the minutes published on the club's official website. The commercial director is present and, according to the subject matter, the appropriate club representative is also there. For example, when the fans have concerns about in-stadia refreshments, the stadium company's catering partner appears in the meeting and takes questions.

There are currently 13 individual panel members as well as five supporter groups on the ATT Voices Panel, including former club playing legend Andy Booth. It continues to give a voice to fans representing every section of the loyal Town fanbase.

Finally, let's look at what experts say about fan dialogue and consultation. Kevin Rye's organisation, Fan Insights, conducts research and publishes a fan engagement index each season. This can be downloaded and you can see all of the clubs in the English

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<sup>10</sup> Official website: <https://www.wolves.co.uk/fans/junior-fans/>



Football League system and the way they are ranked according to the quality of fan engagement/consultation and dialogue practices they engage in and the quality of outcomes.

Have a look at <https://faninsights.co.uk/fan-engagement-index-2/>

Kevin argues what follows in the introduction to this season's Index:

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.

**Kevin has created a series of measurements in three areas: dialogue (the process of engagement), governance (how engagement is underpinned or reinforced internally and externally through rules and regulations), and transparency (how that engagement is shared and made public).** He then measures each club against these criteria and publishes the results.

This approach attracted the interest of the media (Magowan, 2019), which, in turn, led fans to look at their own club's ranking and draw conclusions. This, in turn, led clubs to review their practices, learn from the best practice in the document and improve.

Exercise:

*As the theme has shown, there are many different ways of setting up a system of consultation for clubs and national associations globally. These will depend on the circumstances, resources and issues of each club and national association.*

*So, based on what you have learned, which approach would work best for your club? Please, summarise your solution in no more than 5 bullet points*



### 3.2.4 The importance of transparency and communication

As our own research suggests, an important driver of fan engagement is trust. **Where there is strong emotional loyalty there is also trust.** Fans believe that the club or those governing the game have the supporters' own interests at heart.

It is the hardest thing to establish with fans. If you can establish trust, that is a real positive, and it will benefit all of your stakeholders and your club; however, maintaining it during all of the many challenges football throws at clubs and fans is very difficult.

*The important thing about trust is that you have to have processes for consultation and dialogue that are open, transparent and democratic.*

In recent times, even clubs who have a strong record of supporter consultation have made decisions that have damaged relationships and fan perceptions. Tottenham Hotspur used the Government's recently launched furlough scheme to reduce non-playing staff salaries by 20% (and let the Government pay the remaining 80%). While they were in their rights to do this (the scheme was available to all UK employers), it led to protests from fans.

The Tottenham Hotspur Supporters Trust (THST) were among many of the club's stakeholders to express dismay that one of the wealthiest clubs in Europe would take advantage of a scheme meant to help struggling employers. The club relented and decided not to employ the scheme.

As the BBC article reports, this particular supporter group felt the decision was the right one:

'This is the first step, but a big step, in restoring relations between fans and the club.' (Tottenham Hotspur reverse furlough decision for non-playing staff, 2020, para. 9)

Liverpool FC also put some non-playing staff on furlough, only to reverse the decision after a backlash from supporters. Now, while transparency and communication were not factors in these issues, they have been part of the response from clubs to rectify the situations, especially since they are important tools when dealing with clubs' most loyal supporters.

*The supporters that could be described as the most loyal are, of course, those described as Ultras, and relationships between these groups and the clubs they love have often been strained or difficult.*



Liverpool fans groups The Spirit of Shankly and the Spion Kop 1906 cooperated to organise a walkout of several thousand fans in the 77<sup>th</sup> minute of their game against Sunderland in February 2016 to protest against rising ticket prices and, specifically, the £77 top-priced ticket in the new main stand announced for the 2016/17 season.

At the time of the walkout, Liverpool were leading 2-0, but with a far emptier stadium Sunderland were able to score two late goals and achieve a 2-2 draw.

Jay McKenna (from Spirit of Shankly) explained what had led up to the protest:

We sat with Liverpool, and said 'let's have a proper discussion about ticket prices, put all the data on the table', and we set up a working group, and up to a point they cooperated, sharing information on prices, allocation, and for a period we got to have some very meaningful conversations, and some actual two-way dialogue – and they tabled some proposals – until the owners intervened and decided that there was an arbitrary, overall financial target to be achieved.' The result was that the discussions ended, and the net result, protest. (McKenna, 2020, para. 12)

Ultra groups in countries like Italy, Spain and Poland –as we have studied in this certificate– often have political connections or affiliations whereas in Germany and England they more often take the **form of activists**. Kevin Rye explains the following:

Ultras are a fairly new form of activist group, although they share plenty of the traditions of other independent activists, but are often organised more informally, often online, more like a gathering of like-minded individuals with a common cause, which in most cases is a desire to sing and support the team, and carry out flag displays (what is often termed 'Tifo'). Sometimes this can also involve fireworks and smoke bombs, something not permitted in English stadia. (Rye, 2020, para. 1)

**Kevin Rye offers several insights into the best ways to engage, consult and maintain dialogue with ultra groups, suggesting that their fundamental motivations mean that their presence in stadia often serve to improve the atmosphere.** One of the results of the work of the Huddersfield Town ATT group (see previous theme in this unit) was to convince the club to allow them to take over a part of the stadium usually offered to visiting supporters.

Over a period of time, one fan (David Scholefield) led on this project. David, who sadly died in 2019, represented groups that were key to the success of this project (North Stand Loyal and Cowshed Loyal) and brought colour and noise back to the stadium, something that many visiting fans remarked on when the club won promotion to the Premier League



in 2017. Speaking at the time of his death, Sean Jarvis, the club's Commercial Director called him 'a scholar, a gentleman and an inspiration' (Robinson, 2019, para. 13), and your professor has dedicated this certificate to his memory.

*So, in order to work successfully with these groups, transparency, honesty and clear communication are vital. It may be that formal structures are not flexible enough to effect the best relationships with ultra groups and some flexibility is built into the consultation and dialogue approaches.*

**Kevin Rye also suggests working closely with the SLO (see previous themes), as they will have stronger and likely closer relationships with fans.** It is also possible that existing official supporter groups, such as Supporter Trusts, may be able to liaise with and report on behalf of such groups.

Such dialogue, when it meets these criteria, can lead to specific beneficial change for the club. Cardiff City, who, in 2009, spent many months talking to some of the club's most loyal and fierce supporters, found that by listening closely they could make more progress on key issues.

'Beer' was one of the areas that emerged from early discussions, and, while it may be expedient for clubs to assume that this will be about the price of alcoholic beverages in the stadium, the issue important to the ultra groups was actually about the 'speed' of serving of the drinks. Fans wanted to be able to leave their seats at half time, purchase and consume a drink (which regulations required to take place in the concourse) and return to their seats for the start of the second half. Current serving times and the associated long queues made this objective impossible to achieve.

The fans' input led to an initiative where they would purchase tokens before the match, when kiosks were less busy, and then exchange them for freshly poured beer at half time. Because no money changed hands, it was easier to manage, with a separate set of serving areas set up for this purpose. The result? Happier fans, more engaged fans and an increase of over 40% in beer revenues for the club in, as one recalls, the six months that followed.

*As this and the previous units and themes have shown, the tools needed to engage fans of different types may be both formal and informal, but the principles of good dialogue and consultation are the same. Applied with a will and readiness to listen, to be flexible and to experiment and the outcomes for fans and for clubs can be lasting and transformational in terms of increased engagement and advocacy.*



Exercise:

*From your own knowledge of football in your country, what are the characteristics of ultra groups?*

*Armed with this knowledge, how would you design a process to begin and continue dialogue with them and to produce measurable results?*



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