

Supporter Engagement in the EFL

The EFL has recently reinforced its commitment to fan engagement by amending Regulation 128. The Regulation now reads:

128 Supporter Engagement

128.1 Clubs shall hold at least two meetings/fans' forums per Season to which its supporters (or representatives) are to be invited to discuss significant issues relating to the Club. The framework for these meetings shall be documented in the Club's customer charter, but are subject to the following minimum criteria:

128.1.1 Clubs must be represented by the Club's majority owner, board Director(s) or other senior executive(s);

128.1.2 where meetings are not open to all supporters wishing to attend, the supporter representatives must be elected, selected or invited in line with basic democratic principles; and

128.2 Each club shall comply fully with the League's requirements to create a 'Fan Engagement Plan' and agree to:

128.2.1 produce & publish a Fan Engagement Plan on an annual basis;

128.2.2 nominate a senior Official to oversee delivery of the Club's Fan Engagement activity; and

128.2.3 provide to the League (no later than 30 June each season) an end of season summary of work carried out to achieve the Club's Fan Engagement Plan objectives

128.3 Where a Club amends its Fan Engagement Plan throughout the course of the Season, the Club must update the version published pursuant to Regulation 128.2.1 with the latest version within no less than 5 business days of it taking effect.

As part of our commitment to developing meaningful engagement between supporters and clubs and to support the principles laid out by the EFL, the FSA has produced the following guidance for supporters.

Engagement Plan

The EFL recommends clubs engage with supporters when creating their Fan Engagement Plan (FEP). The FSA wholeheartedly endorses this, recommending a multi-level engagement model.

The FEP is expected to include an opening statement or foreword, a commitment to regulation 128, details of the approach a club will take to fan engagement, the structure of a Fan Advisory Board (if the club is to establish one), a commitment to heritage items, a commitment to update fans, a supportive fan group statement and an outline of how supporters will be involved.

The FSA believes that to develop and implement the most effective FEP, supporters and clubs must work together. Ideally, clubs and fan groups should collaborate to develop their engagement plans. Fan involvement from the start gives the plan credibility and shows commitment from all parties to structured and meaningful dialogue.

Engagement Models

A club can engage with its fans in many ways. The FSA view is that a combination of methods is most effective. Fan representatives should help determine what is both reasonable and effective for their club. Consider not just the supporter landscape but also the resources of the club.

Some example engagement models:

Fan Advisory Board - the FSA recommends that every club should have an FAB to cover strategic club issues. Albeit not required by EFL rules it is likely that the football regulator will mandate it.

Fan consultation group - this construct will look specifically at matchday and operational matters. This role may be combined with that of the FAB.

Structured dialogue - Established supporter groups may wish to have direct avenues of engagement in addition to other models. This can be beneficial but in discussions with the club be clear about what these meetings will deliver in addition to the work of an FAB or equivalent.

Working group - Particular topics may require more detailed and ongoing discussions. Working groups can run continuously or be set up on an ad hoc basis. Formulated from a mixture of FAB & consultation reps, supporter groups and other supporter representatives.

Fan Forums - Usually held once or twice a year, a forum has a club top table who will both present and take questions from the floor. Although these can be beneficial, forums should always be considered as an extra to other constructs; they will not deliver good fan engagement alone.

Questionnaires - Can be a useful tool for consulting a larger number of the fanbase either on a specific or multiple topics. Questionnaire fatigue is a concern if used too often or they are too long. As with forums, these offer added benefits but will not deliver good engagement alone.

Formal Engagement Structures

The FSA recommends that any structured fan engagement vehicle, either strategic or operational, should:

- Operate according to the Fan Engagement Plan submitted to the EFL, and any subsequent football regulator requirement
- Hold at least quarterly meetings with club executives, directors and, potentially, owners with guaranteed attendance from the club CEO or equivalent twice per year
- Have agreed Terms of Reference
- Consist of 5 – 12 members appointed according to a democratic process, independent of the club
- Have reserved seats for representatives from key supporter groups, such as supporter trusts, democratically structured, independent supporter groups, equality & diversity groups
- State terms of office for any elected members

Representation

When creating a fan engagement plan, deciding on representation can be challenging. The FSA recommends working with recognised supporter groups to help define the model. Clubs must not hand pick members, nor hold a veto without good reason.

Fan representatives are expected to:

- Use all communication tools to canvas the opinion of members, and where possible the wider fanbase, to help set agenda items.
- Hold open meetings with membership prior to some of the meetings with the Club to illustrate they are acting as a conduit and taking all feedback on board.
- Seek feedback on the minutes and actions.
- Meet as fan representatives without the club. Where possible, deciding on a Chair who may become a formal main contact for the club and play an informal leadership role for supporter representatives.

Chair of formal constructs

Any formal construct, such as an FAB or consultation group, should be encouraged to elect a Chair from amongst the appointed fan representatives. Alternatively, co-chairs can be considered, with the other coming from the club. Chairs are instrumental in setting agendas, leading meetings, agreeing minutes and co-writing engagement reports.

Democratic Process

Some, if not all, members of any fan engagement vehicle should have a mandate from the broad supporter base through some form of democratic process. Even when candidates are unopposed, an affirmative vote should be held to give them a mandate. Fan reps are there as representatives of fellow supporters, rather than to further their own personal opinions, and fans of a club should have a say in who that is.

There will be a wide variation in how the electoral process, the electorate and its constituencies will look.

It may be necessary to have a shortlisting process before names are put before an electorate to keep the numbers of candidates on a ballot paper manageable and realistic. There may be shortlisting criteria based on competency and skill sets to ensure the quality of supporter representation if election is to be to a Fan Advisory Board looking at strategic issues at the club.

Independence

It is important that any process of shortlisting and approving candidates to be put before an electorate is visibly independent of the club. Any pre-selection should be done by a panel, ideally independent.

One of the panel members could come from the FSA; the others should be persons of standing and integrity, possibly from the local community. The FSA and our members locally can help facilitate this.

The club will be involved with any election process. GDPR requirements may well mean that they are the owners of any “electoral roll” equivalent, but there must be transparency in the process; a club can neither select nor veto a supporters’ representative (except for reasons such as criminal activity or a football banning order).

Reserved seats

The FSA recommends that a specified number of places be reserved for representatives of key independent, democratically structured, supporter groups at a club.

If a supporters’ trust exists, it should be provided with at least one seat. Additional seats can be allocated to other groups who can prove to be democratic, transparent and open to all. The FSA’s Affiliate membership status would meet this criteria.

The FSA provides training and support for fan groups, to ensure effective representation of their members and the wider supporter community.

Topics of Discussion

Rule 128 states that the club is to invite supporters to discuss “significant issues” relating to the club, including operational and matchday topics.

Strategic and operational discussions are crucial for meaningful engagement and impactful consultation.

Some examples of topics considered appropriate for discussion are:

- Club business strategy, governance & finance
- Stadium renovation / strategy
- Club heritage, e.g. colours, kit, crest and stadium sale / move
- Which competitions the club plays in
- Sponsorship principles / core values
- Corporate social responsibility & community
- Equality, diversity & inclusion
- Environmental sustainability plans
- Independent board appointments
- Match day experience & operational issues, including kick off times
- Ticketing pricing & distribution
- Safety & security

Agendas, Meeting & Reporting

Agendas

The FSA recommends that agenda items are proposed by fan organisations and clubs before a meeting agenda is mutually agreed. This should be circulated prior to the meeting. It is important that the meeting is clearly structured to allow for effective discussion. The role of a chairperson will be key to a productive meeting.

Minutes

Minutes should be taken from each meeting with actions clearly recorded. All parties should have the opportunity to review and amend before finally agreeing to the minutes. Minutes are not a transcript of everything which is said in the meeting, but a record of the decisions taken and the actions arising.

Reporting

Minutes or an executive summary should be published centrally e.g. on the official club and fan groups' websites. This means a record of the meeting is accessible for all fans.

External Communication

For engagement constructs to have credibility with the wider fanbase, it is essential that work is communicated externally. This can be tricky with confidential items as it will not always be possible to provide full details.

Minutes give a detailed view of a meeting and are essential internally but may have to be reduced or redacted. They can also be difficult to digest, so a written summary of key topics might prove more popular. This method allows for mention of the key topics discussed without detailing confidential elements within them.

It is important that engagement wins are celebrated by both clubs and fans. Where positive change has been influenced the club should be encouraged to acknowledge the work and input of fans in reaching those outcomes.

Confidential Information

For any engagement vehicle to be effective, members must respect each other, their views and any collective decisions made, recognising items highlighted as confidential.

Any discussion points highlighted as confidential information, should be treated as such. There must be no public disclosure of confidential information in accordance with terms agreed by the engagement group and the club.

If required, the FSA can provide a confidentiality agreement template.

Supporting Documents

We recommend that any supporters engagement vehicle ensure that they have additional supporting documents which detail expectations around member behaviour, disciplinary process and how to deal with confidential information and breaches.

The FSA can provide suitable policy templates for groups to adapt and adopt as required.

Measuring Success

Fan groups, as well as the club, should be involved in the annual assessment of fan engagement and party to any changes to the Fan Engagement Plan. A joint review of the action points and outcomes from meetings throughout the season can be used to assess the effectiveness of a fan engagement plan.