

## **Submission to DCMS call for evidence on safety at major sporting events**

**Written evidence from:** Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust. We are a membership organisation representing over 27,000 members, formally constituted as a Community Benefit Society. We are affiliate members of the Football Supporters' Association, and officially recognised by Tottenham Hotspur FC. Over the past nine years we have regularly worked with THFC staff, the FSA, the FA, Wembley National Stadium Limited and Football Supporters Europe on match planning and crowd safety. Trust Board members have formally participated in meetings of Haringey's Safety Advisory Group, match planning meetings with staff of other English clubs, Wembley Stadium staff during our club's tenancy at the national stadium, the Metropolitan Police Independent Advisory Group for Football, meetings with staff from clubs THFC has played in Europe, UEFA and the FA. One of our former co-chairs also spent a year as a fan rep on FA Council.

### **Are UK stadiums and crowd management policies sufficient to maintain the safety of large volumes of fans at major events?**

1 The situation at most venues on most occasions has significantly improved over the last 20 years. Before that, the predominant problem was an attitude that saw fans primarily as a potential threat or problem.

2 However, in too many places where good practice has emerged, it has been on a grace and favour basis after sustained pressure from volunteer supporter organisations. This means that progress can quickly be reversed, as has happened in London after a change in police leadership of the IAG.

3 There is a culture of institutionalised defensiveness throughout football which means clubs and governing bodies rarely, if ever, admit to any shortcomings. This is extremely unhelpful to the necessary process of identifying problems and working together to fix them.

4 While there have undoubtedly been great steps forward in the policies adopted by a number of police forces and clubs, there are too many outdated and entrenched attitudes. While clubs and safety authorities publicly subscribe to a more modern, collegiate approach, the old view that fans are a potential threat first and foremost still exists. So, in 2022, it is still possible to attend meetings at which experienced football safety personnel express the view that 'Hillsborough was caused by drunken fans'. This kind of thinking needs to be rooted out.

5 There are very many professional staff members at clubs throughout the country who understand fan culture and fan behaviour, also understand safety issues, and are prepared to work with supporters while firmly

adhering to a set of standards. Their efforts too often go unrecognised, especially when policymakers are looking for easily digestible headlines. In addition, the work of academics such as Clifford Stott and Geoff Pearson and former police officers like Owen West has made a valuable contribution to developing progressive, successful policy and should be embraced far more than it is.

6 Our experience is that proper conversation, and exercises such as fan reps shadowing safety staff on match days, leads to better outcomes. This should not be a difficult concept to understand, but it too often seems to be.

7 The role of local authority SAGs needs examining. We are fortunate as Haringey has permitted a fan rep to sit on its SAG for a number of years now, and some other local authorities do the same. But the norm is not only for SAGs to bar fans from attending, but to refuse to engage with them at all. One of the worst offenders is Brent Council, which has responsibility for games at the national stadium. Brent's SAG not only refuses to allow fan representation, it refuses to communicate at all with supporter groups. A SAG is a public body with important responsibilities. It should therefore be accountable and transparent – within the boundaries of good security and safety practice. Every group associated with a major event at a major sporting venue is required to have a presence on a SAG, except for one – supporters, or customers. Where supporter representation does exist, it is grace and favour.

8 Our recommendation is that SAGs should be legally required to have fan representation on them, and that the work they do should be far more transparent. They should be required to explain and justify decisions, and there should be an appeal process applied where practicable. SAGs operating as some kind of secret state is not acceptable, and a balance must be sought between operational effectiveness and accountability. Provision should also be made for training of SAG reps, as fan reps are not usually safety professionals, and for SAGs to be required to recognise and demonstrate their role as servants of the public.

### **What steps can be taken to protect UK fans abroad at major events?**

9 The single biggest problem UK, and particularly English, club fans face abroad is the attitude of police and local authorities. In short, English club fans are too often treated as we were by the British authorities in the 1970s and 80s.

10 We are aware there are underlying reasons for this, connected with the poor behaviour of English fans in Europe over a sustained period in those decades. We do not seek to excuse that behaviour. However, we would point out the dangers in generalising about any group, including football fans.

11 Over many years, English football fans have also shown they are prepared to address the reputational issues associated with English support, and there are numerous examples of fan organisations getting to grips with detail and showing a willingness to work with the relevant authorities to ensure a safe and enjoyable time is had by all.

12 Unfortunately, attitudes among too many police forces and safety authorities in Europe is stuck in the past. English fans are greeted and treated as a potential problem, and a hard public order approach is taken. We recommend asking Football Supporters Europe to contribute evidence, as they have worked with English fan groups on many occasions.

13 Some particularly poor examples are worth mentioning. Police in Spain and Italy are notorious for taking a hardline approach from the off – baton first and refuse to explain afterwards. We know of many fans who refuse to travel to games in those countries because of repeated bad experiences with the police. Attempts to challenge or question police actions invariably fail because the police forces are accountable to no one. In France, the attitude of police, combined with the view of too many local authorities that football is a problem to be controlled, leads to what is at best an unpleasant experience for visiting fans.

14 Solutions are particularly difficult to implement across so many different jurisdictions. But the role of UEFA needs to be considered carefully here. One of UEFA's roles is to act as an events organiser, and UEFA competition rules require host venues to hand over control of large areas in and around the venue footprint to UEFA. But major UEFA events have become a byword for poor and dangerous organisation. And, at less prestigious but still important games, the experience of visiting fans is about as far from the glamorous image portrayed by UEFA as it could be. It is too often a squalid and unpleasant experience. The challenge of requiring different jurisdictions to adopt similar approaches could be resolved by making UEFA, as event organiser, more directly responsible for what happens, and by giving the organisation limited powers to direct local security and safety authorities.

**Should regulations governing fans attending football matches be reviewed?**

15 There is a pressing need for review in this area. Currently, there are nine criminal offences that apply only to football fans, created by 11 acts. It is important we establish here that we are not necessarily arguing that the activities penalised by these laws are right or acceptable. We are arguing that making something a criminal offence when it occurs at a football match but not elsewhere unfairly targets and stigmatises football supporters.

16 One notable example is 'indecent' or 'offensive' chanting. The motivation behind the law is good, but in practice it establishes the principle that a chant or use of words is more indecent or offensive if it is used at a football match than if it is used at another sporting event, on the street, or in direct conversation. This simply doesn't make sense, and unfairly stigmatises football supporters.

17 There are also serious practical and philosophical issues around making subjective judgements on matters of offence, particularly when all levels of offence are deemed equally bad. This can, and arguably has, lead to the undermining of efforts to combat serious criminal offence.

18 Possession of alcohol, being drunk while trying to enter a ground, or drinking in view of the pitch are all offences at football grounds, but not at other sporting venues. This unfairly singles out football supporters, and falls short on a number of common sense evaluations. A football supporter cannot possess alcohol while entering a ground, but can inside the ground once they buy it. A football supporter cannot be drunk while entering a ground, but can be drunk while inside it. The 'no drinking in view of the pitch' rule is not only football specific, it has led to a number of frankly daft applications, such as the requirement for a hotel overlooking a ground to close the curtains at its bar. No logical explanation has ever been given as to why drinking in view of the pitch or arena is more dangerous at football than, for example, horse racing or boxing – where there have been numerous outbreaks of drink-fuelled disorder.

19 We should point out that, while most fans view football-only restrictions on alcohol and particularly drinking in view of the pitch as unfair and inconsistent, there is some debate about the desirability of allowing alcohol to be brought to seats because of the potential for more crowd movement while the game is progressing, and the tendency of a section of fans to throw drinks in the air at moments of high excitement. As ever, genuine conversation with fans to arrive at a solution would help.

20 One other example of a football-related action being a criminal offence but not a criminal offence if it happened elsewhere is the passing on of

tickets. Passing tickets to friends or other fans if the holder's circumstances change, particularly at the last minute, is an established part of the fan experience. It is, arguably, a good example of a solution to a problem emerging organically. It is, however, a criminal offence to pass on or resell a football ticket. It is not a criminal offence to pass on a ticket for rugby, cricket, boxing, athletics, cycling, table tennis, gymnastics, curling, darts or any other sport apart from football. This is an anomaly that needs changing. We are aware of, and have campaigned against, the threat posed by ticket touting – including when a number of clubs including our own signed commercial agreements with so-called secondary ticketing agencies that effectively operated a touting system. There are genuine issues with the passing on of and price inflation of tickets traded on an unregulated market, and the operation of ticket allocation systems when demand far outstrips supply. But these can be dealt with by sanctions at club level. There should not be a specific offence related to football.

22 Our recommendation is that there should be no football-only criminal offences unless there is a compelling case .

Conclusion.

If there is one point we'd choose to emphasise from this submission it is this. Working with supporters on an equal and respectful basis achieves results. It's this approach that should inform all action going forward.

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