



## **EFL & FSA Supporter Engagement Meeting**

*27 January 2021 – Remote Meeting*

### **EFL Executive**

Trevor Birch, CEO  
Mark Rowan, Communications Director  
John Nagle, Head of Policy  
Andy Pomfret, Supporter Services Manager  
Nick Roberts, Public Affairs Manager

### **FSA Executive**

Kevin Miles  
Malcolm Clarke  
Ashley Brown  
Deborah Dilworth

### **Championship**

Roger Ellis - Sky Blues Trust  
Steve Walmsley - Sheffield Wednesday ST  
Tristan Wooller - Huddersfield Town ST

### **League One**

Niall Couper – Dons Trust (AFC Wimbledon)  
Peter Leatham - Accrington Stanley ST  
Heather Alderson - Charlton Athletic ST

### **League Two**

James Young - Cheltenham Town ST  
Kristine Green - Grimsby Town ST  
Ian Bridge - Bolton Wanderers ST

## **1. Introduction**

The EFL's Communications Director, Mark Rowan (MR), opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees to what was the first of two EFL/FSA engagement sessions for the season. Reference was made to ongoing events since the previous engagement session in August 2020 and the fact that, due to the significant and widespread impact of the Covid pandemic, a number of items on the previous meeting agenda had been EFL-led. MR made the point that the EFL was therefore encouraged by the number of points put forward by the FSA for the latest agenda, stressing the commitment to healthy debate.

MR then stated that additional context around some agenda items in advance would assist the EFL in further preparing the appropriate level of information, and also ensure that the EFL had the appropriate representation at the meetings to respond accordingly. MR then introduced Trevor Birch (TB) to his first engagement meeting having been appointed as Chief Executive of the EFL at the start of January 2021.

## **2. Welcome by Trevor Birch (TB)**

TB welcomed the FSA and supporter representatives to the meeting and introduced himself with a brief overview of his personal and career background. He acknowledged the challenges involved in the role, including the priorities around navigating the Covid crisis and completing the current season. Reference was made to the meeting agenda, and updates around the impact on fixtures, covid protocols and the path ahead.

On return of fans, he stated while the efforts had been paused, the EFL is still working behind the scenes about a potential roadmap for future return. Away from Covid he added there were lots of strategic issues to focus on including financial sustainability and long-term reform of the game.



Kevin Miles (KM) offered a warm welcome to TB on behalf of the FSA. Outlined that the FSA and EFL have a lot of shared objectives. Stated that while the relationship will require full and frank exchanges, the FSA looks forward to continuing a collaborative approach with the EFL.

### **3. Matters arising** from last meeting

#### **FSA Network Member Updates – Deborah Dilworth (DD)**

DD provided a brief overview of some of the activities of the EFL network members, including reference to Nottingham Forest Supporters Trust launching a mental health initiative for fans. Subsequently, the FSA EFL network has formed a mental health awareness sub-group.

This has been inspired by the EFL's partnership with Mind and the FSA are keen to see if there are further opportunities for collaboration with the partnership.

*NB. FSA via DD has since met with EFL via Nick Roberts to discuss a potential partnership.*

### **4. Covid 2020/21**

#### **a. Testing, safety protocols, postponements, completion of competitions**

MR provided an overview of the current impact of the Covid pandemic, referencing protocols in place, and testing measures introduced across the EFL. The impact of postponements was covered along with the ongoing management of the fixture schedule.

KM asked for clarification on the postponement process, how clubs were approaching the issue of positive tests, asking if there were any trends in how they were self-determining whether their fixtures are at risk of postponement.

MR stated that circumstances involved in postponements can vary greatly from Club to Club, and in respect of Covid postponements, there are any number of investigations ongoing. Once these investigations have concluded the EFL, where appropriate, would be happy to provide some further information on the process to the FSA.

KM also questioned what consideration had been given to halting of season and the knock-on impact of any financial broadcast rebates and penalties. Asked whether the EFL could give a number on the potential financial cost of leagues failing to finish.

MR stated that clearly there would be a significant impact on the EFL and its Clubs in the event the season was not concluded. However it's unlikely a definitive figure could be shared due to commercial sensitivities.

Niall Couper (NC) stated that many supporters would like clear criteria around postponements so the playing field is level for all. States that in League One many smaller clubs are perceived to be at a disadvantage around squad depth so criteria would be welcomed.



JN acknowledged the point around the desire for objective criteria but outlined that there are a number of regional and public health considerations that vary from situation to situation and that public health has to take precedence over football regulations during a pandemic.

DD states that there are a number of moral considerations around fans returning. JN agreed that there were, largely in relation to vaccination and that those are issues that will need to be considered at the relevant time

Heather Alderson (HA) understands that there are lots of considerations in the postponement process. Points out that there could be lessons to take forward from “deferring to the medical experts” in this postponement process.

#### **b. Return of fans, Club/Government approach/position**

JN talked through presentation slides to provide an update on activity since the last meeting, summarising the experiences Clubs had when some of them were allowed to admit supporters in December 2020. On the whole these events had been successful and the Clubs had provided positive feedback around the practicalities of welcoming fans back.

DD concurred and outlined that the FSA had produced two fan videos promoting the positive experience of fans.

Ian Bridge (IB) emphasised that communication with fans is essential. He stated that rather than being a local decision for clubs (to issue a code of conduct) he believes that a compulsory, centralised campaign would be welcomed.

Andy Pomfret (AP) provided some context and outlined that the EFL had developed a template code of conduct with input from various sources and provided this for clubs to adapt for their local circumstances. Due to the differences across the League in fanbase, stadia, and matchday processes, there had to be an element of flexibility so clubs could design and disseminate to fit individual, club-specific matchday requirements.

Kristine Green (KG) made the point that fans at Grimsby Town had felt that a ‘code of conduct’ wasn’t necessary the right terminology or tone of message to send out but would welcome any future dialogue and guidance in this area going forward.

Peter Leatham (PL) stated that Accrington Stanley had done a lot of work to educate their fanbase that the matchday experience would be different moving forward as part of any staged return, something that he believes is crucial to communicate.

MR welcomed the point and stated there was an opportunity to coordinate some form of collaboration between the EFL / FSA around the future return of fans.

**ACTION – EFL and FSA to arrange a meeting in due course to discuss any potential activity.**



## **5. Rescue package**

The FSA's Ashley Brown (AB) led this section, raising queries on the post-Covid financial picture and long-term implications for EFL clubs. He referenced the financial bailout, reports of EFL loans and government discussions.

TB outlined basic terms of the grants for lost gate receipts from the Premier League for League One and Two clubs. Added that Championship support constitutes the Premier League covering interest costs of any loan finance taken out by the EFL.

JN summarised EFL discussions with Government on financial support. Outlined that the EFL had put forward a number of ways in which Government could provide support, but the Government view remained that professional football in the EFL and Premier League should support itself.

Roger Ellis (RE) questioned why there hadn't been collaboration throughout the pyramid across the Covid period. And specifically asked about support for the National League. JN confirmed that football had indeed worked as a collective on a number of matters during the Covid response, but contended the assertion that the financial picture was "worse" in the National League, stating there were serious systemic challenges facing both the EFL and NL alike.

NC asked whether the Covid-response and financial bailout was, in effect, rewarding poorly run clubs and penalising sustainable clubs.

TB stated that £20m of fixed grants would not solve the EFL and clubs' financial future. Long term reform and financial controls across the board are a priority and will require collaboration across the pyramid.

James Young (JY) stated that there was an overwhelming priority for the EFL and authorities to foster financial sustainability. He was of the view that there were some concerns around football finance pre-Covid and that financial issues at clubs should therefore not wholly be attributed to the pandemic.

## **6. Governance**

AB stated the FSA were looking forward to updating TB on proposals around football governance and would like to understand the EFL's position on governance reform. TB responded that the EFL's view was fundamentally linked to the Premier League's review and the EFL would be contributing fully.

AB asked whether MSD holdings increased lending to clubs was of concern to the EFL. TB responded that there are regulations in place which prevent conflicts of interest.

AB asked what the EFL's view was on growing HMRC debt at clubs and whether usual embargoes were being applied to clubs and whether this should be communicated to fans. TB stated discussions with Government about potential ways forward remained ongoing. TB confirmed embargo penalties were being relaxed due to the pandemic. MR added that there were practical reasons around why embargoes weren't communicated, adding that clubs can go in and out of embargo in a matter of hours.



NC stated that transfer embargo announcements would be welcomed no matter the frequency, as it would provide a greater level of transparency about club matters. He also sought a view on how the FSA could put pressure on Government to launch its fan led review.

AB asked if there were updates on the EFL's FFP approach. TB stated that salary caps had been introduced in Leagues One and Two, while Championship discussion remained ongoing.

Malcolm Clarke (MC) asked about the status of the Premier League's reform review and sought clarification on the stakeholder engagement process.

TB stated that the Premier League was in "discovery phase" and had appointed consultants to manage the process. TB confirmed that he and Rick Parry had been taken through the top line stats by the consultants but there was no further detail at this stage.

MC raised the Government's forthcoming fan led review and Helen Grant MP's 10 Minute Rule Bill on an Independent Regulator, seeking views from the EFL on each. TB stated that the timeline and terms was at the behest of the Government but that the EFL will fully contribute to the review once more is known.

RE revisited FSA proposals on governance that were previously submitted to the FA Board. He argued that transparency and increased communication around 'crisis clubs' and broader governance issues would help foster a more favourable perception of authorities amongst fans. RE requested a written comparison of the policy proposals from the FSA on governance with the EFL's approach to these matters

**ACTION – JN stated that the EFL would respond in due course.**

JN was of the view that there was a fair amount of pressure on DCMS to proceed with the review from a number of stakeholders. KM stated that he was of the understanding that the Government's fan led review timetable is linked to competing policy priorities.

HA asked if the EFL was in favour of a "fan led review". JN responded that the EFL was very happy to contribute to reviews such as this as it had with the Government's Expert Working Group on Supporter Ownership and Engagement, though did state there was an element of unknown still around what a "fan led review" actually constitutes. TB added that the EFL can only respond to any questions as and when terms are announced.

IB stated that a common fan view is that the number of reviews are confusing, stating it would seem there is a role for an independent body to coordinate reviews centrally and break down the jargon.

### **iFollow & Ticketing**

AP presented a brief update on iFollow, providing some overview of streaming numbers and its positive impact for Clubs and supporters. The summary included reference to the EFL's piracy campaign launched in November 2020, to help Clubs by publicly raising awareness of illegal match streams.

DD stated the piracy numbers were an issue of concern. Tristan Wooler (TW) then talked through findings from a survey summary where 91% of Huddersfield Town Supporters' Trust respondents had said they



felt iFollow coverage did not represent value for money. IB stated that after initial issues with iFollow, the number of complaints at Bolton Wanderers had actually reduced significantly with the service level consistent. MR confirmed that ordinarily 70-80% of revenues went back to clubs directly, depending on domestic or International subscriptions.

MR added that since its capacity uplift, iFollow has proven to be a reliable and hugely important service. Since the restart last season there had only been a couple of notable matchday disruptions but as this season has progressed, the platform has been stable and a significant success with match passes having generated over £16m gross revenue to date in the 2020/21 campaign (at the time of the meeting).

IB asked whether consideration had been given about the future of iFollow once fans return post Covid-19. MR stated that it has begun to be considered but will be dependent on a number of factors which are largely unknown at present but the EFL commits to keeping FSA and fans informed on the position.

DD suggested that fans may appreciate understanding the work that has been going on behind the scenes at the EFL and Clubs to deliver the iFollow service throughout the season.

## **7. 'Crisis Clubs'**

AB stated that this matter was covered in a separate meeting held last week so the meeting moved to the next Agenda item.

## **8. Inclusion, Equality and Anti-Discrimination**

MR presented a brief summary of the EFL's 'Not Today or Any Day' inclusion campaign, along with matters relating to anti-discrimination activity on matchdays.

MR stated the EFL would welcome the opportunity to maintain dialogue with the FSA in the near future around some ideas being developed for possible future anti-discrimination activity.

MR outlined that the EFL remained of the view that taking the knee is a matter of choice for the players. Other activity is being looked at that supports the approach in this area.

JN indicated that the EFL intended to review its approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion issues in the near future He also Invited the FSA to engage in conversations in this matter to which KM responded the FSA would be very happy to be consulted.

**ACTIONS – MR to arrange a future meeting with the FSA to facilitate further discussion around Anti-Discrimination activity. JN to follow up and share consultation process with FSA at relevant point.**

## **9. AOB**

DD asked what the EFL's view was on support and provision for colour-blind people relating to kit clashes and advertising boards during games. MR responded that while there are no EFL regulations that



specifically deal with the matter of colour-blindness, there has been a range of FA guidance and best practice information issued to all Clubs previously.

**ACTION – EFL stated it would establish the last guidance issued on the topic and confirm for the FSA.**

IB asked what the terms of confidentiality were around the meeting. MR responded that minutes would be agreed and circulated with two weeks.

MR thanked all attendees for their time and the meeting concluded.