



Getting the foundations right

It is important to highlight two fundamental areas that regularly surface at every level of the supporter involvement: consultation and confidentiality.

Both can be difficult, but from our experience it is absolutely critical that supporters and clubs embrace the challenge. They have to be brave and try to find solutions, rather than use them as a reason not to engage and leave an issue unresolved.

Consultation

Consultation is the level of participation at which people are offered choices on what is to happen.

There is widespread scepticism and a lack of clarity over what “consultation” means and it is useful to establish the purpose of consultation by a club. Is it:

- For information (the decision will not be changed by what is discussed)
- For comment (there is a genuine effort to seek and develop ideas)

Proper consultation takes time and can be a bruising process, however, it can build strong partnerships and help people understand or even make difficult decisions.

Clubs and supporters can work together to decide the areas that are of most importance to them and make a commitment to follow a process, in order to build trust.

This could be a voluntary agreement such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that is in the public domain or could go a step further with a legal agreement between the two parties. The FSA can assist by supplying template MoUs as we have supported their development at a number of different clubs.

Of course, it is important that good consultation stretches to other stakeholders beyond the supporter base. Examples might be:

- Local residents - particularly on matchday or ground improvement issues.

- Local authority - co-ordinated campaigns to help with planning decisions for facility development and relocation, or to work closely with the local Safety Advisory Group (SAG).
- Local police - such as the extensive work between Chester FC, Wrexham AFC and the local police to remove “bubble match” status.
- Local businesses.

Case study

A good example of consultation comes from AFC Wimbledon who surveyed their members on a range of issues at the club. The 3,000+ co-owners of AFC Wimbledon who make up the Dons Trust (each paying £25) were consulted on setting the price of match tickets for the 2016/17 season.

Following a comprehensive presentation of the challenges the club would face with their small Kingsmeadow stadium if they were promoted to League One, the supporters actually voted to increase ticket prices, recognising the need to increase the playing budget and the competitiveness of the team in the league above.

This came just two months after supporters at Liverpool walked out in protest at ticket pricing after they didn't feel they had been adequately consulted, forcing a U-turn from the Premier League club and highlighting the differences in approach.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a key consideration and should be agreed upfront between both parties. There is a balance to strike between confidentiality of what may be discussed and the need to communicate that discussion and the information to a wider audience – particularly as there is likely to be public interest and expectation to share.

It is far better for clubs and supporters to work together and communicate difficult decisions in order to educate supporters and the wider community on some of the factors that lead to a decision being made. Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) - a contract where one or more parties agree not to disclose certain information they have shared - may be an option in particular circumstances such as a club sale or ground move. They are unlikely to be suitable for normal, ongoing dialogue although some of the principles involved can help both clubs and supporters think about aspects of their relationship.

Discussions could be time limited so that a club uses a meeting with supporters as a sounding board for their views, in advance of a club announcement, with information subsequently being released into the public domain.

Parameters can be defined so that all parties are clear on how various aspects are treated such as the meeting itself, the information shared, the items discussed or the conclusions and opinions of participants. You then need to consider how far down the chain this information can be communicated.

As a general rule, we would expect supporters' groups to be given the ability to discuss a confidential matter as talked about in a structured dialogue meeting with their fellow board members, but not further without prior agreement.

Agreed reports rather than detailed minutes may help in some situations, alongside summary information if detailed information is deemed too sensitive. The most important aspect is that when an item is flagged as confidential everyone leaves that meeting understanding the restricted information, any agreement with whom it could be further shared, and any communications plan either immediately or further down the line.