FOOTBALL SUPPORTERS' ASSOCIATION

Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO)

An SLO is a selected person (or persons) responsible for bridging the gap between the club and its fans. SLOs may be volunteers or employees. An SLO should communicate fans' opinions to a club's board or senior staff members, and should also liaise with stewards, police and counterparts at opposition clubs.

What is it designed to achieve?

In recent years fan representatives across Europe highlighted the need for improved communications between supporters, clubs, governing bodies, the police and safety authorities. This culminated in the proposed implementation of SLOs after intensive discussion at national and European levels.

The key objective of the SLO position is to achieve transparency and improved communications between the parties involved. The SLO project acknowledges that supporters are not defined by their role as consumers in the professional football system and that it is in everyone's interests to make ever greater strides to build consensual and harmonious relationships between clubs and their supporters.

The supporter voice is often lost in the matchday planning by police, safety officers etc and the SLO can be that voice both directly and indirectly by encouraging fan representation.

Do clubs have to do it?

Working with Supporters Direct Europe, UEFA introduced a licensing requirement in the 2012/13 season for all clubs across Europe to appoint an SLO to ensure proper and constructive discourse between them and their fans. The Premier League also introduced a requirement in the 2012/13 season for every club to carry out 'supporter liaison' via, for example, a dedicated SLO. The introduction of this licensing

requirement constituted a landmark in club/supporter relations and emphasises the importance attached to dialogue and communication between clubs and fans.

Every club in the EFL is required to have an SLO whose responsibilities are not only to act as a point of contact for supporters but also to deliver the club's policy with regards to its stakeholders insofar as that policy concerns supporters; and to liaise with the club's management with regards to supporter issues.

We are now seeing SLOs appointed further down the pyramid as the benefit is recognised in the game.

At the higher levels of the game an SLO is often a full time employee and may even be part of a large supporter services team. Further down the pyramid the SLO is more likely to work alone and be either a part time employee or a volunteer.

In 2020 the UEFA Academy and Supporters Direct Europe launched an SLO certification with the plan being to deliver it alongside national supporter bodies and the relevant governing bodies or leagues. The FSA has been working with both the EPL and EFL with an aim to delivering this at some point in the future.

Clubs appear to slot SLOs into their structures in a variety of ways, some view them as part of the commercial and marketing team, others on the operational side, whilst some will give them a reporting line straight into the CEO.

Best practice is still open for debate but it is clear that an SLO must have a valid voice within the club and be heard at senior levels. Of course, it may also depend on whether or not your SLO is full time. If they are their work is likely to be split across a number of departments. The FSA does recommend that an SLO should not report to the safety officer as this often creates a conflict, although they may be considered a peer and hold the same reporting line.

What does good look like?

- The ideal would be for a full time SLO at every club but resources may not allow. If they are not full time work hours should be prioritised around matchday and matchday planning.
- A team of matchday SLOs can also be employed. West Ham United have stated a desire to take on up to 50 matchday SLOs to improve the matchday experience for supporters. Clubs lower down the league such as Lincoln City have operated very effectively with three or four matchday SLOs supporting the main SLO.
- A clear job description, reporting process and where the SLO fits in within an organisational structure / chart.

- SLOs should have a clear and visible presence at every game (ideally home and away) so that they can be a point of contact for supporters and can help address situations.
- Access to all necessary areas on a matchday and for stewards / police to have been briefed of their role.
- Full contact details including email addresses, social media handles and phone numbers for SLOs should be made accessible to supporters via club websites, matchday programmes and other means of communication.
- They actively seek contact with fans with the aim of presenting themselves as the club's point of contact, listening to the requests and concerns of fans and communicating these requests and concerns to the club.
- The SLO must be credible with fans and should therefore have experience with and contacts to the networks in the fan base at the club, as well as an understanding of life as a match-going fan.
- Participation in the club's Safety Advisory Group (SAG) is recommended.

What does bad look like?

- That clubs simply pay "lip service" to the requirement to appoint an SLO, perceiving the appointment simply as a box ticking exercise, with the person not necessarily fulfilling the responsibilities envisaged by UEFA. A common example might be an existing employee who has the SLO tagged onto what is already a full time role.
- The supporter representative on the board is also the SLO. There is a clear distinction between the two roles.
- SLOs are not the extended arm of the safety officer. They work to prevent negative incidents from happening through dialogue and communication.
- Their work is dependent on the information they receive from both sides and the credibility they enjoy with both parties.
- Stating that a director on the board of the club fulfils the role suitably.

Top tips

- UEFA are convinced clubs will get more out than they put in. With this, a full time position represents the optimum solution although there are opportunities to combine the role with other positions at smaller clubs.
- To avoid 'churn' with the position, a recommendation to clubs would be to fully explain the role, have a clear job description and reporting process and make the SLO understand what the position entails.

Finding the right person

Responsibility for selecting the SLO lies with the club management. Where possible, the SLO should be appointed from among the fans, although at large clubs we have noted successful appointments of SLO's who historically have supported other clubs and so an open-minded approach is important.

The SLO should be in regular contact with fans and enjoy their respect and acceptance based on his or her personality and aptitude. Where possible, the SLO should be given appropriate training, for example in the areas of communication, people management and conflict resolution. The provision of basic psychology and sociology skills, in particular with regard to group dynamics, is desirable.

Example Job Description

Bristol City Football Club (Supporter Liaison Officer)

The role of Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) is a complex one. The SLO must act as an advocate of both Bristol City FC and the supporters, representing the interests of BOTH sides. It is therefore essential that the SLO is credible and has the respect and acceptance of all parties. The SLO should therefore be chosen from among the supporters. The SLO must be present among them. The SLO must know them and be known and accepted by them. Only then can they assess the mood among supporters. Only then can they understand the problems fans may face and their needs and wants.

As listed by the UEFA SLO Handbook, the standard required skills are:

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

- *Experience of positive people management.*
- *Experience and contact with key supporter networks at local and national levels.*
- *Basic educational, psychological and sociological skills in dealing with people, especially with regard to group dynamics.*
- *Sound understanding of new media/technologies (desktop business applications, internet, etc)*
- *Political neutrality.*
- *Commitment to key values such as antidiscrimination and the rejection of violence.*

PERSONAL SKILLS

- *Good communication and conflict resolution skills.*
- *Ability to work in a team.*
- *Willingness to learn.*
- *High degree of commitment, motivation, reliability and flexibility.*
- *Ability to communicate, in particular in groups and in public.*
- *Service-oriented thinking and behaviour.*
- *Assured negotiating skills and assertiveness.*
- *Appropriate life experience and experience of dealing with fans; knowledge of and contacts within the club's fanbase.*
- *Flexibility (time-wise), especially at weekends, and personal resilience.*
- *Professional manner according to the situation.*
- *Calming, de-escalating, de-emotionalising professional conduct in stress and conflict situations.*

DUTIES

The SLO's duties can be split into 3 areas: Home Matchdays, Away Matchdays & Between Matches.

Home matchdays

City's SLO should attend all / practically all first team home games.

In advance of home matches, City's SLO should consult with supporter groups re any displays of flags, banners, etc., assist with coordinating procedures for such displays and assist with preparation of any planned on-pitch supporters' presentations.

Before the match, City's SLO should mingle with supporters in pubs and bars around Ashton Gate and also within the stadium; upon arrival of away supporters' coaches, meet the visiting SLO and be available to answer any outstanding questions about the day's arrangements.

During the match, City's SLO should sit/stand with supporters in standard price accommodation (i.e. not in corporate hospitality or the directors' box); at not less than 50% of games City's SLO should sit/stand with supporters in the lowest priced area of the ground.

During half-time, City's SLO should circulate among fans in main gathering points, i.e. on concourses and in the Sports Bar, or take up a presence at a well publicised, accessible information point in order to be available to answer any supporter questions / assist with queries and/or problems.

After the match, City's SLO should take up a presence in the vicinity of the information point (or similar contact place) and communicate there with fans,

subsequently attend any fan meetings in pubs in Bristol and, if applicable, any events organised by supporters' groups.

Later, City's SLO should summarise any complaints from fans at the match and try to establish the circumstances and underlying reasons for these complaints and any other issues that arose.

Throughout matchday ,fans should be able to contact City's SLO by mobile phone (voice & SMS)

AWAY MATCH DAYS

City's SLO should attend all / practically all first team away games.

In advance of the match, City's SLO should gather and distribute travel information, including details of meeting places / pubs for away fans, contact the home team's SLO, provide information for supporters about the upcoming game on the club website, via social media and by e-mail/phone contact with supporters' groups, etc.

On the day of the match, City's SLO should travel to the away games with supporters, alternating the mode of transport to cover all options over the course of the season, e.g. CATS, private coaches, train, car sharing, etc.

Before the match, City's SLO should mingle with supporters in pubs and bars around the ground and also within the stadium; upon arrival of CATS coaches (if not personally travelling on them), City's SLO should meet supporters as they disembark, meet the host club SLO, be available to answer any outstanding questions about the day's arrangements and provide a presence for imparting information outside of the away supporters' section of the ground.

During the game, City's SLO should have a presence in the City supporters' section and communicate with fans at half-time.

After the game, City's SLO should take up a presence near the away section exit, communicate with fans as they leave and monitor their departure.

Later, the SLO should summarise any complaints from fans at the match and try to establish the circumstances and underlying reasons for these complaints and any other issues that arose.

Throughout matchday ,fans should be able to contact City's SLO by mobile phone (voice & SMS).

BETWEEN MATCHES

City's SLO should attend all meetings of organised fans groups, e.g. Supporters Club & Trust and Senior Reds, unless the respective organisation indicates that it would

prefer such attendance to be by invitation. City's SLO should be available in person at Ashton Gate at well-publicised set times for supporters to call in and ask questions, i.e. 'consulting hours'.

City's SLO should actively communicate with supporters via letter, e-mail, telephone and all forms of social media, including maintaining a regular presence on all main fans' forums, including but not limited to OTIB and Ziderheads.

City's SLO should organise/attend meetings to inform fans about the latest developments at the club/deal with fanrelated requests and concerns.

City's SLO should initiate meetings between supporters and club representatives and institutional representatives (police, stewards, local authorities, etc.), for example, with the aim of improving dialogue between the various parties and their understanding of each other's roles and views.

City's SLO should work with the media, e.g. Radio Bristol and The Post, paying special attention to ensuring that supporter liaison work and fans in general are accurately portrayed in the media.

City's SLO should contact the SLO of the other club before a game to exchange information of relevance to fans.

City's SLO should attend relevant national and regional meetings of the Football Supporters Association

City's SLO should act as a point of liaison between club officials and supporters facing a possible stadium ban and ensuring on the supporter's behalf that due process is followed and that the supporter is made aware of his/her rights, including in respect of representation and appeal.

City's SLO should assist supporters groups with the staging of supporter events, e.g. by arranging for the presence of club staff and/or players.

City's SLO should communicate/network with the SLOs of other clubs, attending regional and national meetings.

City's SLO should attend without fail all SLO training meetings organised by e.g. SD, the FA or Football League.