

Petitions Committee: Football governance

Activity

The Petitions Committee ran an online survey to ask petitioners for their views on measures the Government could take to improve the governance of football in England and protect the 'football pyramid'.

The survey was sent to people who signed the following petitions:

[Enforce the "50+1" Rule for professional football club ownership in the UK](#)

[Introduce an Independent Regulator for Football in England by December 2021](#)

We have summarised the key themes below and illustrated them with quotes from respondents.

Response

There were **9,323** responses to the Committee's survey

Methodology

Nvivo Pro 12 was used to identify and contextualise the most common words and phrases in responses to open questions in the survey. This allowed us to group and summarise recurring themes which were threaded throughout much of the responses.

In addition to this analysis of the data, Committee staff manually reviewed hundreds of individual comments and answers, using both subject searches and randomised selection.

Survey questions which produced statistical results have been included in the summaries of key themes.

Statistical results are presented as an average across all responses, unless otherwise stated.

About the respondents

- **77%** of survey respondents told us the club they support competed in the **Premier League** during the 2020-21 season. **11%** told us the club they support competed in the **Championship**, with the remaining **12%** supporting a club in **League One or below**
- There was a significant response from across all regions of England, with the largest numbers of respondents telling us they live in the **North West** (21%), **South East** (15%), **London** (11%), and the **South West** (9%)

Key themes:

The recently aborted 'European Super League' project has heightened pre-existing concerns about protecting the 'football pyramid', revenue sharing, club ownership rules, and the ability of supporters to influence decision-making

- 91% of respondents told us they were 'highly concerned' about **protecting the 'football pyramid'**, including the principles of promotion and relegation. This concern was uniformly shared by fans of clubs from all levels of the English football league structure
 - Concerns about **how revenue is shared** between the Premier League and the English Football League and grassroots bodies were largely shared by supporters, no matter what league
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their club competes in (72% of Premier League club supporters were 'highly concerned' by this, compared to 77% of supporters of clubs from the Championship and below)

- Concerns about the **ownership and direction** of the club respondents support were heavily concentrated among supporters of **Premier League clubs** (77% of Premier League club supporters were 'highly concerned' about this, compared with just 35% of supporters of clubs from the Championship and below)
- Supporters of Premier League clubs were also more concerned about the **ability of fans to influence big decisions** made by the clubs they support (78% of Premier League club fans were 'highly concerned' about this, compared with 64% of supporters of clubs from the Championship and below)

Quotes

Survey respondent: "I believe there needs to be a way for the fans of a club to have influence over how a club is run; and to make sure the fans are involved in some (not all) decisions which affect them and their club. The recent debacle around the European Super League is a case in point. This was a major decision which did not have the backing of the fans; and for those clubs to think the 'americanisation' of the infrastructure of the football pyramid was up for change. this demonstrated a level of hubris which caused a lot of hurt and disappointment. If football fans were included in proposals such as this, then the owners would have thought better of it."

Survey respondent: "A closed shop with no promotion or relegation is not sport, it's anti competitive. A sporting anti-competition law should be introduced to enshrine the

principles of promotion and relegation in all UK football leagues, from the Premier League right down to the lowest ranked league in the UK."

Survey respondent: "The super league breakaway showed that fans only have power in an external sense. We were able to influence events from the outside and acted as the moral compass for the clubs whose directors had made an appalling decision. However it was still not actually in the hands of supporters, had they wanted to the 'big six' could have followed through."

Survey respondent: "The distribution of finances throughout the pyramid needs to be urgently reworked. Football is not simply like other industries which can often be a survival of the fittest - the health of the game and the culture relies upon broad competition. This competition must not be restricted to a small number of wealthy clubs. There should be sufficient redistribution such that no club is constantly under threat of extinction, and that well-run clubs have realistic prospects of footballing progression and success."

Geographical location and ties to the local community were felt to be the most important facets of a club's 'identity' and worth protecting

The Government's [fan-led review of football governance](#) is considering whether measures are needed to protect clubs' identities, so respondents were asked what they felt were the most important facets of the identity of the club they support

- 72% of respondents told us they felt that the **geographical location of the stadium and/or training facilities** was 'extremely important' to the identity of the club they support
- 70% felt that **ties to the local community through charitable**

and educational activities, for example were 'extremely important' to their club's identity

- A significant number also felt that a **commitment to local players through the club's youth system** (61%) and **club badge** (58%) were 'extremely important' to a club's identity
- Supporters felt less strongly about their club's **strip design and colours** (48% felt this was 'extremely important') and having **owners from, or based in, the area where the club is located** (36% felt this was 'extremely important')

Many supporters want a formal role in the ownership of, and decision-making by, the club they support, but accepted this would need to be carefully designed to ensure it is fit-for-purpose

- Many respondents called for the Government to impose an ownership model on football clubs which embeds representatives of supporters in clubs' corporate structures
- Many respondents felt imposing such a model, along the lines of the '50+1' ownership model used in Germany, would ensure that no English club could attempt to break away from the existing 'pyramid' without supporters' approval
- However, there were concerns that, without sufficiently careful consideration, any such model may not be fit for purpose
- Some respondents felt imposing a '50+1' model, or similar, was unrealistic, and instead called for supporters, perhaps those with season

tickets, to be given sufficient formal voting rights that key decisions cannot be taken without their backing. Some also called for greater accountability from club Boards

Quotes

Survey respondent: "Football clubs are not a commodity to be exploited by businessmen who only care about making money. The 50+1 structure as in Germany is the only way forward as I see it to protect the foundations of football in this country and avoid another 'super league' proposal in the future."

Survey respondent: "I would like to see the German system of 50 + 1 ownership of clubs introduced, so owners cannot asset strip the club or use it to try and hide their human rights abuses in their own countries. Sport must be kept competitive or it ceases to be sport. We cannot let owners sell my fathers past, mine and my children's present, or my grandchildren's future."

Survey respondent: "Clubs should be required to put any major changes proposed to a vote, with all Season Ticket holders and Members given equal voting rights to shareholders and requiring a pre-determined percentage majority in favour before such changes are allowed to proceed, the results of all such votes made binding on all parties."

The majority of respondents would support requirements for clubs to improve their engagement with supporters, and other measures being considered as part of the Government's fan-led review

Respondents were asked to what extent they would support a number of measures being considered as part of the Government's [fan-led review](#):

- 99% of respondents told us they would 'fully' or 'partly' support Government-backed **requirements for clubs to improve their engagement with supporters**
- 98% of respondents told us they would 'fully' or 'partly' support **stronger regulation and scrutiny of clubs' business practices** including their finances, such as through the creation of a regulator
- 97% of respondents told us they 'fully' or 'partly' support **strengthened Owners' and Directors' Tests**
- 97% of respondents told us they would 'fully' or 'partly' support **measures to protect clubs' identities** such as their geographical location or club badge

Quotes

Survey respondent: "The Government should speedily appoint a regulator, backed by a committee drawn from current or former professionals, fan representatives, lower league and junior football and those with a [financial] interest in the game including owners. The regulator should have the power to oversee the structure and finance of the whole game in the UK, backed by appropriate legislation that will allow him/ her to enforce compliance if [necessary]. The regulator's first task should be setting up the 50+1 ownership rule, which is essential if the attempted coup this year is to be prevented in the future, within the earliest possible timeframe."

Survey respondent: "To protect clubs, there needs to be a more nimble regulatory body to stop rule breaches. Clubs break the rules, mismanage finances, and the cases are ongoing for months if not over a year, then by the time they dole out the penalties, it's

too late for the teams affected by the rule breakers."

Survey respondent: "[A new, independent regulator] should be funded, at least in some part, by the owners of these clubs. The cost of such an organisation, by comparison to the money transacted daily at football clubs, would be insignificant and it would help to set clear to foreign investors that there are certain responsibilities when owning and running an English football club."

Survey respondent: "The Owners & Directors Test is not fit for purpose... A more stringent and transparent test procedure needs to be put into place to ensure that the Clubs we love are presided over by honest people. The Clubs, after all, are valuable community assets and a strong element of identity for a lot of people. There needs to be more mechanisms put in place which ensure that the ownership and fans agendas are in alignment. Certainly, one part of that would be to ensure that there is proper fan representation at Board level at all clubs. The fan representatives should be vetted and from FSF-sanctioned Fan Trusts (people who essentially only have the welfare of their clubs at heart)."

Survey respondent: "Making money is paramount. But surely this can be done alongside adhering to British footballing traditions and involvement of those clubs fans with decision making. Whether that be open forums or club conferences where fan groups can have their voice heard."

Survey respondent: "I don't think I like the idea of having a representative of the fans on the board as I think this would be too destructive, however I feel that a member of the board could be designated to liaise with supporters groups/forums. This could be beneficial to the board in ascertaining how the fans feel about any given subject affecting the clubs. There needs to be more

liaison between clubs and the hierarchy who need to be more transparent.”

Respondents also proposed a number of other measures the Government could support which they felt would ensure football clubs are run in the best interests of supporters

Respondents called for:

- A ban on leveraged buyouts that can saddle the purchased club with sizeable debts;
- ‘Financial fair play’ requirements to ensure clubs spend within their means, and other measures to promote sound financial planning;
- Legal protections for clubs as cultural and community assets; and
- Measures to make football more affordable for supporters, including steps to reduce the cost of match tickets and merchandise.

Quotes

Survey respondent: “Leveraged buyouts by absent foreign owners, or sovereign wealth funds should not be allowed to turn our clubs into “trinkets for billionaires”. Football is not an ordinary business, it needs protection from pure financial concerns as it is a vital part of our culture, and as many people’s passion, a core element to aid individual and communal well-being.”

Survey respondent: “How can kids develop a passion for the game if they can’t go to a game because its too expensive, can’t watch on TV because its too expensive and can’t imitate his hero wearing a replica shirt because his family can’t afford it.”

Survey respondent: “A new financial fair play rule could be introduced forcing the clubs to spend a percentage of the money they spend

on transfers and wages on improving and supporting the city and the area that supports them.”

Survey respondent: “I feel that football clubs should be protected legally as cultural assets, perhaps in a similar way to listed buildings etc, with their cultural and community value prioritised and thus restrictions and responsibilities imposed on ownership to ensure that they are run with the best interests of the community in mind.”

Survey respondent: “Football clubs are highly important community assets that are an integral part of local identity, local history, local pride and ambitions, and play a key role in binding communities beyond the football itself, especially outside the big cities.”

Survey respondent: “The local football club, perhaps more than any other institution, is part of the fabric that binds a community, helping give a sense of identity, cohesion and common purpose. It’s so much more than a sports club or a business, especially with the community and charity work that so many clubs do. For example, my local club’s facilities have been used for the COVID-19 vaccination programme. A football club can and does also reach pockets of society which are hard for other organisations to get to, such as young people who are alienated from school or older, isolated people.”

Survey respondent: “The financial model of football is not sustainable as highlighted by it’s quick and easy collapse during the pandemic. No multibillion pound company should have zero reserves for tough times because it is over leveraged for player wages (many of who took no wage hit to protect their club) while thousands of supporters lost their wage completely. The clubs employ thousands of people across the country directly and indirectly but above all of those things they provide a focal point for cultural and social life for many millions more. Football is Britain’s gift to the world among

others and we should not let callous money men and corrupt money launderers ruin this for profit margin.”

Survey respondent: “Premier League clubs in particular should do far more to support youth football by helping to provide all weather facilities across the country.”

Survey respondent: “A surcharge on top flight TV revenue should be levied to create a fund to act as a lender of last resort to stop community assets disappearing due to owner negligence. Greater solidarity payments should also come with a requirement that a large proportion of it goes in to the up keep of facilities, charitable activities, accessible activities (e.g funding for facilities accessible by the public) and youth development in both the men's and women's games.”
