

Supporters **Direct**

Submission to the London Assembly inquiry on Football Stadia in London

Background

Supporters Direct is a publicly funded organisation that assists football supporters play a responsible part in the life of the clubs they support. The organisation is funded out of the Reduced Pool Betting Duty and the funding is routed through the Football Foundation.

The organisation arose out of the third report of the Football Task Force, Investing in the Community, which heard evidence from a number of clubs, most notably Northampton Town, where a partnership approach between the supporters and the club had demonstrated an alternative model of governance for the football sector that escaped from the oppositionalism that had characterised relationships at many clubs. Furthermore, the club had also made great strides in relating to its local community, as witnessed by an award winning stadium that incorporated excellent facilities for the disabled and nationally commended anti-racist programmes.

Since it was formally launched in September 2001, we have worked with supporters at over 170 clubs in the UK, and overseen the formation of Supporters Trusts at 74 football clubs. The majority of these are English professional clubs, but there is a healthy representation within the non-league.

We also began to work with clubs in Scotland in May 2002 after a successful funding bid was made to the Scottish executive. We have also undertaken some work with Rugby league supporters, where we now have three trusts, though our ability to assist supporters of rugby league is hampered by the lack of specific funding to work in this sport.

Of the trusts we have set up, over 95% are registered as Community Benefit Industrial and Provident Societies with the Financial Services Authority. We use this vehicle as it offers limited liability to members, is not-for-profit, demands certain governance standards such as annual audited accounts, and must remain democratic. It also has a higher threshold for dissolution than other vehicles, and the regulation by the FSA is stronger than that of Companies House in relation to Companies limited by shares or by guarantee.

These trusts now have a shareholding at 35 clubs, and at 26, there is a member of the Board of the club who is there to represent the supporters of the club; the method of selection varies, but our recommendation is that the person should always be elected to provide accountability to the supporters for the actions of their representative.

In the Greater London area, we have Trusts at : Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur, West Ham United, Leyton Orient, Brentford, Queens Park Rangers, Enfield Town, Millwall, AFC Wimbledon and Crystal Palace. We currently are working with supporters at King's College London, Fulham and Chelsea, where a Trust is in the advanced stages of formation.

We address your key consultation questions in order below:

How involved have supporters been in the process of redeveloping or relocating the club's stadium? How have supporters got involved to positively affect a redevelopment or relocation?

The classic example of a positive input from supporters is Charlton Athletic FC, where supporters were crucial to convincing first the club, and then Greenwich Council, that the club's best hope lay in returning to their traditional home, The Valley. They fielded candidates in local elections and got a significant showing, convincing the authority that it was an issue that they not only should be involved in resolving but legitimately could be involved, such was the level of support for the move back.

However, other supporters have not been so fortunate; a clear lesson to draw from the experiences of supporters elsewhere is that it depends on the ultimate wishes of the club's owners and their needs. For example, the Board of Arsenal FC were committed to securing permission for a new stadium at Ashburton Grove, and in so doing were assisted by the Arsenal Independent Supporters Association in lobbying Islington Council.

Conversely, at Wimbledon, no one was told that the club would be ground-sharing at Crystal Palace in advance of the deal being announced, and no-one was consulted over the sale of the land to Safeway plc nor the proposal to move to Milton Keynes. The opposition of supporters to all of these decisions was the key difference – it appears that supporters are only involved if their desires and those of the club are matched.

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You ask whether supporters have become positively involved, and we must state that one's definition of 'positive' is crucial. At Brentford, for example, supporters groups are concerned that Griffin Park will be sold and developed without an alternative in place; a positive resolution here is for all these things to happen. Indeed, they have gone so far as to campaign in local elections and succeeded in getting a candidate elected to Hounslow Council.

At Fulham, a positive outcome would seem to be the redevelopment of Craven Cottage. A supporters group, Fulham 2000 were heavily involved in assisting the club in lobbying Hammersmith and Fulham Council and raising funds to support the achievement of planning permission. However, given subsequent actions, they have seen their trust in the club's desire to redevelop the ground somewhat diminished.

As a general rule however, supporters are rarely involved in these matters, and we would like to expand on this matter. We would only make a distinction between issues regarding ground development and other issues affecting a club's life as a degree of magnitude. Most supporters are not involved or consulted on matters concerning a club, so in that light, it is no surprise to find they are not involved in these crucial long-term development issues.

The central crux is the issue of whether clubs are free, sovereign corporate entities or something *more* than that. That something more is the reason for the football taskforce process, where it was felt that the concentration on this aspect of club as company had led to a pursuit of commercial goals that undermined this alternative model.

The facts provide contrary evidence; clubs are incorporated, mostly as Companies Limited by Shares, and operate within the various Companies Acts. They exist as commercial entities and have an operational need to maximise income. However, they rarely make a profit, and the use of the word 'investment' is somewhat misguided, since the traditional understanding of investment implies a return at some stage, through either dividend payments or a higher share price. Most clubs do not pay dividends, and for those clubs quoted on public exchanges, the share prices have uniformly slumped to well below the initial offer price.

The reasons behind this have been well documented and have a body of academic and financial research to substantiate them. Simply put, there exist within a football club other pressures that are not common to businesses. To analogise, if Safeway increase their market share in the course of a year, but are still behind, say, Tesco in overall share, shareholders would still expect a dividend payment. The Board would recommend a dividend that balanced prudent investment to maintain the upward trend, whilst still using the profits declared to reward investors.

At a football club, different pressures apply. Singer and Friedlander coined the concept of 'fan equity' in 1997 to characterise this difference. They noted that the stakeholders in football - the supporters - applied a pressure upon club-companies that did not exist in other environments. Should Arsenal finish second to Manchester United in the league, a pressure exists to reinvest any profit in strengthening the team to challenge for first position the following year. Indeed, in the USA where a field of economics concentrating on sports clubs has been in existence for much longer than the UK, analysis indicates that only one club can rely on declaring a profit each year, and that is the overall champions in that sport. All those who finish below them reinvest any surplus and do not declare a profit. They offer higher wages to star performers, and tempt others from rivals with attractive remuneration packages. In short, sports economics operate to the maxim 'second is nowhere'.

This model is operating in football in the UK, where investors thought the television revenues would lead to bountiful profits in the share flotation boom of 1996. Indeed, one could liken the investment frenzy to earlier bouts of mania - for tulips, canals, railways or for most recently, with dot coms.

There is also the added difference of the loyalty of customer base. Most football clubs don't have to work as hard to prevent customers leaving, and certainly not to local rivals. Supporters do not evaluate their choice of club and continued support with an assessment of the 'value' they derive from their custom.

As a result, clubs operate with corporate structures that are designed to work in markets and environments that are alien to football.

And yet there is a janus-faced attitude from many clubs; for example, during the negotiations with the EU surrounding transfers (where the current practice was in contravention of the Treaty of Rome and subsequent additional treaties) football collectively argued that it was not like other businesses, and that wider interests would be at risk should the Treaties be imposed as if football were merely another sector of the economy. At this point, they cited the 'something more' as a way to protect the system. This system, for example, was crucial to the survival of smaller clubs, and operate like redistributive transfer payments do in macro-economic policy.

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However, during the Football Task Force process, clubs argued that they had a responsibility to deliver shareholder value, and that any restriction on their freedom would be contrary to their legal duty in this regard. This refrain is commonly heard when clubs are asked to do something that isn't seen as central to the task of putting a team out on the pitch, but relates to the wider role of the club.

For example, community schemes are a way to use the power of football for good within an area and a way of cementing relationships with the local area. Of course, there is the added benefit of enticing the next generation of supporters. Even so, these benefits take a long time to filter through, and are not easily represented on a balance sheet. Many community schemes operate with tiny budgets and a strained relationship with the parent club, and the club will argue that where there is conflict, they must prioritise their central concern of income maximisation. Yet this causes tension, where community officers have been going to schools to promote a welcoming environment at the club, then the club increases prices for juniors. Or where community officers have been trying to reach out to local ethnic populations, then the chairman appears on national radio and states that immigrants should be deported and so on.

Yet the power of football is tangible; witness the education pilot schemes with 'difficult' (ie excluded) students, where asking them to learn the concept of calculating area would perhaps be treated dismissively, but asking them to measure the area of the football pitch in the company of their favourite player gets a different response; suddenly supposedly unteachable students have acquired key skills as laid down in the National Curriculum.

The traditional way in which football has negotiated this tension has been via the mediation of the regulatory authorities - the League and the FA. But arguably, these bodies have suffered at the hands of the rise of the commercial agenda in the 1990s. For example, Wimbledon argued that the League, as stated in their mission statement, had a duty to assist them in maximising revenue. The league argued that the club structure of English football was embedded in local communities and that the competitions were based on sporting merit - ie, a team had to achieve a desired position in the league by its endeavours on the field, not through relocating a club to bring football to an area.

The FA Panel decided to side with the club; they stated that the club had a responsibility to its shareholders that took priority. This marks a massive shift. The Regulatory bodies - like all regulatory bodies, from telecoms to transport - exist to ensure that wider public interest concerns are protected as sovereign businesses cannot be relied upon to deliver this wider public interest, and indeed, the legal framework in which they operate militates against this. But now, a precedent exists that not only allows franchising and the threat of a local community losing its cherished club. It allows all aspects of regulation to be challenged. For example, a rule exists that restricts clubs for recruiting youngsters from outside a 90-mile radius of the club. This was introduced to allow local clubs to become centres of excellence for their areas, where they could not if bigger clubs with greater resources and higher profiles might monopolise local talent. Yet a club could argue that it was a restriction on their freedom to trade that had negative effects for their shareholders.

What has been compromised has been the ability to regulate for the wider interests of the sport, and it is all the more amazing that such a precedent comes from a panel appointed by the FA.

There are other issues that football has lost the ability to regulate on in the future. For example, many clubs are owned and controlled by one individual, who operates as Chairman and Chief Executive and controlling shareholder. This model of corporate governance places great power in the hands of this individual, and experience shows that most 'scandals' that have occurred at clubs - Brighton, Carlisle, Chesterfield, Doncaster and indeed at Wimbledon - have come about because there is no counterbalance to their freedom to act. They make decisions without recourse to wider interests, without consultation with supporters and often without regard to League rules. Yet football is powerless to prevent them from becoming involved in football clubs. Indeed, there is nothing to stop Darren Brown, the ex-Chairman at Chesterfield who presided over a massive haemorrhaging of money during his time at the club (that is the subject of an ongoing Fraud Squad enquiry), from becoming Chairman of another club. All that is required is that an existing shareholder sells his shares and the League are powerless. Yet there is a clear case to be made for the League being able to have 'a door policy' in these matters, to ensure that its good name is not tarnished by the behaviour of a small minority.

Furthermore, even when there are no allegations of impropriety, the model of governance that sets one individual or a small coterie apart from everyone else without any checks or balances is flawed. Decisions are made according to a narrow set of interests that ignore the wishes of supporters or the local community. Some would argue that ultimately, such actions will come back to haunt a club, and in cases they do - but at a price.

For example, the traditional way in which customers signal their disaffection is by withdrawing their custom - but this is antithetical to the nature of football support. Additionally, if the decisions ruin the club and create a situation where the club folds, or will be living with the consequences for many years, then the supporters are forced to pick up the pieces. To analogise once more, a local shop that makes foolish decisions and alienates its customers will soon close. If there is demand, a replacement will soon start and manage its affairs better.

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The simple problem is that in most commercial enterprises, flawed decisions eventually affect turnover and profitability as consumers reject the company's products in favour of an alternative. The investors, fearing for the value of their investment demand changes to the company's management and strategy. The feedback loop depends on 2 crucial aspects – consumers ready to abandon a product and shareholders separate from the management of the club.

In football, this does not operate, as the consumers – the supporters – do not withdraw support, as to not support a team is antithetical to the identity of a supporter. Furthermore, the management of the club is in the main conducted under the auspices of the Board of Directors, who usually control a majority of the company stock. So, supporters do not 'punish' the management for poor decisions, and shareholders do not hold the Board to account as they *are* the Board.

Yet the supporters' failure to punish is not to imply disinterest – contrast the campaign to stop BSkyB taking over Manchester United in 1999 by its supporters and the singular lack of any interest amongst Sainsbury's customers as to which bid for the company they would prefer. Supporters have traditionally be excluded from decision making and for many, it has become a situation accepted with resignation. However, when serious decisions are made – and ground issues are such issues as they get to the heart of what it means to be a supporter of the clubs concerned – they do become interested, animated and express a desire to be involved in the decision-making process. The inability to do so results in what might be termed 'revolutionary outbreaks' – demonstrations and other forms of public protest, which all ultimately indicate that they feel that the club is not listening and is not acting in what they see as the best interests of the club.

But in football, a club is less easy to resurrect. Wimbledon supporters have started a new club that will remain in south-west London, but they start 7 divisions lower than the club they used to have. The directors of clubs used to operate with a sense of custodianship; they were privileged to be charged with owning or managing an institution that was a source of pride in the area. The institution pre-existed them, and would be there long after they had moved on. Their task was to pass on the institution to the next generation in good health. But this concept is now less and less of a concern and at the root of it is the inability of the regulatory bodies to demand certain standards from its member clubs (in the manner of a night club demanding certain standards of dress), and the tension between clubs as commercial entities and clubs as something more.

The model we are advocating is a stakeholder model. It fits football well, because stakeholders have greater prominence and power than in other spheres, however limited that power is. The sight of fans massed outside the ground chanting 'sack the board' is an all-too-familiar one, and one which we would argue is not in football's interests as its the cry of people who have been alienated from decision-making influence in something they feel a sense of 'moral ownership' over.

It would be better to bring them into the structure as partners. After all, every club's greatest source of revenue comes from supporters, and that is something that will increase as a proportion of total income in the wake of ITV Digital. The talents amongst the supporters could be used constructively to assist the club, and the supporters could act as local advocates in the community. The supporters could also be involved in formulating policy - they aren't stupid and understand the financial pressure the club operates within. They could elect directors to the Board, who could improve consultation with supporters and see some much-needed transparency at the club. Finally, as someone with an interest in the long-term health of the club and not short-term financial interest, they could be an advocate for prudent management as opposed to the gambles that many clubs have made in paying salaries they could not afford on the possibility that they might be promoted.

Furthermore, the model of community ownership, where a partnership between local business and the supporters run the club for the wider benefit is a means whereby micro-level regulation can be carried out. Decisions are tested by proper argument and debate, and assumptions in financial models tested fully. The conflicting interests between shareholders and stakeholders can be resolved by uniting the two under the same roof and as someone has said, since football clubs don't make profits, a virtue could be made of necessity by turning the clubs slowly into community owned not-for-profit institutions, as is happening at several clubs now. This protects the assets from asset-strippers and developers who are circling many an ailing football club, looking to get for a low price an asset often purchased through public subscription or donated for quasi-charitable ends.

It wouldn't be the end of football's problems by any stretch, but we are convinced that the talents of supporters, allied to a conviction about the proper place of the club within the community has to offer more for football than a route that sees clubs operating in isolation seeking shareholder value above all else.

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How important is it that the club's stadium remains in or near to the club's historic location? For example, would the idea of a ground share be welcomed ever? Are borough boundaries suitable cut-off points when looking to relocate?

There are several issues here which need to be considered in some detail. As regards remaining as close as possible, we would say that this is axiomatic; a club acquires a relationship with the place it has played, and traditionally draws support from around that area. Subsequent migration might take those supporters and successive generation away from the immediate area, but the club's identity remains bound up with that area. For example, many Londoners who moved to outside London still support the club their grandparents supported when they lived in the area. Whilst they no longer reside there, the club is synonymous with that area.

We would always urge that a club looking to relocate consider redeveloping first; this is better business in most cases, as the land is already in use and often owned by the club. If that is not an option, then we would urge staying as close to it's traditionally defined home area as possible.

Ground sharing:

Many people cite the situation in Italy as favourable example of this, but a look behind the scenes suggests otherwise. There are 4 examples of ground-sharing - Rome, Turin, Milan and Genoa.

Of these, the majority are longstanding arrangements the clubs have always played at shared grounds. That doesn't stop the problems though, with Rome being the clearest example here. There are reasons why these are continued though - the all-important context and culture that so many debates on this issue miss out.

Clubs which began ground sharing in their earliest years have grown with these as ever-presents; instead of being things imposed from without, or sudden changes, they have always known things to be so. But that doesn't mean it's right - just that it seems to be right for supporters of those particular clubs, and no more or less. Furthermore, the capacity requirements of World Cup venues for which the above were all reconstructed meant that they were massive capital projects funded by the state. It's unlikely that they would have been undertaken without such finance. As a result, there's a certain amount of carrot and stick - the clubs got massively renovated stadia and therefore didn't need to look elsewhere.

The lesson from Turin is less favourable for proponents of ground sharing. The two clubs share a stadium when they previously didn't. The relationship isn't helped by the fact that the Stadio Dell Alpi is not the best arena for watching football, due to the presence of the running track. Architecturally stunning but unfortunately, the stadium doesn't *work* as a football ground. Juventus have threatened to move away to a purpose built facility and Torino have threatened to move back to their old ground that they have retained as a training facility. The problems of the ground are compounded by the fact that neither set of fans loves it as much as they loved their old ground. Memories still exist of a time when things used to be different, which means that neither truly gives themselves over to the new ground; it has not become normalised for them.

In Munich, both Bayern Munchen and TSV 1860 Munchen moved into the Olympic Stadion built for the 1972 Olympics. After 30 years of sharing, both are moving out to separate purpose built facilities. Again, the problems of design (again, a running track) are compounded by the fact that long-standing city rivals just do not like the fact that they share the same ground.

The main fallacy though, it seems to us, is that the proponents of ground sharing argue that it's the only way for the club or clubs concerned to survive, economically speaking. By doing so, they're making a value judgement that hides itself as sound economic sense. But there are other values than simple profitability; tradition, sense of place and belonging, a comfort from familiarity. But to ignore this and seek to override it is arguably the fundamental problem that has bedevilled the game for the last 10 years. There is a view often propounded that the emotions of supporters are a quaint affectation, but one that can't be allowed to stand in the way of revenue streams. We disagree. Commercial revenue streams are not value-free and neutral. Like most things, there's a choice - between the preservation of something valued by the community, or it's sweeping away in the name of financial benefit masquerading as progress.

Football provides a group identity and a community of its own; there is much reference to the role of clubs within their communities, but much less reference to the fact that clubs themselves *are* communities. The stadium functions as the group home, and whilst not owned by them in the manner of one's own home, is a repository of memories; of previous generations, of good times and bad. We would also argue that most groups desire a home and a sense of permanence or at least security. Furthermore, if part of being part of one group is being different towards another in the same area, then that sense of place, a feeling that this is 'ours', is all the more important. In sociological discourse, the phenomenon of

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topophilia (love of place) is extremely important to understanding the relationship between a supporter and the stadium. As a result, the pressure for exclusivity is common and resistance to ground sharing strong.

That is not to say that ground sharing cannot work, but we would be sceptical. Those instances where it has worked in professional football have all been temporary; in all cases, the express desire has been to move back to a single occupancy stadium as soon as is practical. For example, Bristol Rovers moved out of Bristol to share Bath City's Twerton Park in the late 1980s. Despite spending many years there, supporters never felt it was 'home'. They appreciated its amenities and those of the city of Bath, but never felt that it was or ever could be theirs. The same is true of Charlton Athletic supporters referred to above, and still continues to this day with Wimbledon supporters who are currently looking for a new ground for their club, AFC Wimbledon. A stark lesson can be seen at Fulham, where the club have lost many supporters over the course of one season by moving to play at Loftus Road. That move was seen as temporary to allow Craven Cottage to be redeveloped, but when the club began to intimate that it might not be temporary, attendances began to fall. We would feel this fall to be related to a feeling that the club playing at Loftus Road, with no plans to return to Craven Cottage is felt to be no-longer 'Fulham' anymore, as the concept of Fulham is intimately bound up with Craven Cottage.

Ultimately though, surely no club should contemplate moving ground - to a shared stadium or to a brand new purpose built one for them alone - without the consent of the supporters. If the ideas are sound and it is demonstrably in the best interests of the club, then that argument should be had in public with the facts. We would be in favour of a recommendation – that no planning permission be granted for the redevelopment of an existing facility (unless safety concerns compel such redevelopment) or move to a new facility without their being a majority of the clubs supporters in favour of such a move. Indeed, if ground-sharing is to work, it would only be if both sets of supporter determined that it was the best move for their respective clubs. If such a move is seen to be imposed from above, say to allow a piece of land the club used to play be sold for private profit, then such would be the resentment amongst supporters that we would be tempted to argue that the arrangement will never truly be accepted as legitimate by supporters.

The mechanisms for that majority decision to be arrived at are a matter for more detailed consideration than is strictly relevant here, but we would point to existing precedents – Leeds United and Everton Football Clubs have both held referenda of supporters on whether they should proceed with plans to move elsewhere. Chesterfield and AFC Wimbledon – as clubs owned by their supporters – are having meetings with a final vote to determine what the clubs should do with regard to where they play their football. The key principles that must be demanded are that the ballot is conducted fairly and openly and we would always urge a third party service, such as the Electoral Reform Ballot Services, to be used to conduct such a ballot.

These precedents are not only what we would see as 'morally' correct ways in which to proceed to but also crucial stages of the consent process, in that enabling supporters to own the decision brings a degree of finality to a fraught issue. But it is also clear that referenda are often manipulated and require a similar quality of information to be provided for all possible viewpoints upon which supporters would be asked to decide. It would be very easy for a club to make a case for moving through releasing partial information and constructing a case. To guard against this, we would argue that the presence of a supporter on the Board of the club would enable full access to that Director to the development of those plans; it would make the presentation of biased and flawed case more difficult.

Such a referenda would also address the point about Borough boundaries and tackle a regulatory problem within the game. The Football League, for example, stipulates that a club must play within the conurbation from which it takes its name. However, conurbation is a term that might be easier to define in a provincial town than it is in a major city. In Chesterfield, it is easier to define where Chesterfield starts and somewhere else begins – usually through a green belt surrounding the town. No such ability exists in Greater London.

In strict terms, under League rules, a club playing in Bromley could relocate to Harrow and still remain within the rules. Conversely, the Football Conference stipulates that a club must not move outside the postal code of the area it currently plays in. Again, this is easier in the smaller communities that tend to predominate in the lower reaches of the football pyramid, but ultimately places a football club's development plans in the hands of a system designed to manage a mail system effectively.

Bolton Wanderers are often cited as an example of the anomalies above; they moved from a site demonstrably within the town of Bolton to a purpose built facility, the Reebok Stadium, which is located in Horwich, a satellite suburb of Bolton. As Horwich 'looks' to Bolton as it's nearest major town and is within easy access by road and rail, it was seen as a good move by supporters as they knew that it was perfectly possible for the club to relocate there whilst still being clearly 'Bolton'.

The lesson of this has not yet been fully realised in our opinion. The regulatory authorities have consistently pointed to the difficulties of defining what is an acceptable distance for a club to move. They wish to restrain clubs to the extent that they

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cannot do what Wimbledon FC Ltd did in wishing to move 70 miles to another part of the country, whilst also not implementing an overly restrictive rule that fails to aid clubs faced with often complex situations regarding the availability of land near to them.

The regulatory bodies are grasping for an effective means to define what the area the club belongs to actually is, when in truth, the easiest way would be to ask the people who see themselves as the guardians and definers of that very identity – the supporters. By stipulating that no move could take place without an affirmative vote of supporters, they transfer judgement about the correctness of a move away from an arbitrary rule back to the people best placed to evaluate whether the place the club proposes to move to is somewhere they feel is part of the area they see the club 'belonging' to.

The above may be considered to be a matter for the appropriate League bodies, but as a public authority, the London Assembly could show the way by implementing such a requirement as part of its planning policy. The track record of the authorities is not great in terms of preventing asset stripping or from preventing clubs from making poor decisions; they were singularly unable to prevent the owners of Wimbledon, Brighton and York City from selling the grounds they played in, leaving the club's homeless. They seem similarly unable to prevent Fulham and potentially Brentford from doing likewise.

In 1999, the Football League AGM rejected a proposal to prevent clubs from selling grounds until funding, planning and land had been secured for an alternative. Such a rule would have prevented the situation identified above, but the League is ultimately a collection of club's, and votes are cast by club owners. Sadly, experience over recent years suggests that the interests of the owners and the long-term interests of the club are not as congruent as one would wish. Indeed, the regulatory bodies often state that as privately owned corporate entities clubs can not be prevented from taking such courses of action. However, a public authority is able to stipulate in such matters as the competent authority in planning issues. In so doing, the London Assembly can respond to the particular problems that face clubs in Greater London and protect those vital community assets for future generations.

In conclusion then, the answer to the question of 'how important it is that a club remains in or as near to the club's historic location' is 'as important or as unimportant as the club's supporters deem it to be'. Similarly, would a ground share be welcomed? In certain circumstances, it may well be – but the time to ask such a question is when concrete proposals are available and all the possible alternatives have been considered. These may seem somewhat trite, but in making supporters a key part of the process be extremely radical proposals which would ultimately help secure the sporting and cultural heritage contained within these community assets and help devolve decision making in this issue to a group of people vitally important to the sector but often woefully disregarded.

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