

## Supporters' Summit 2013

Members of the Nuneaton Town Supporters' Co-operative attended the 2013 fans summit on Saturday 22nd June, which was held at the very impressive FA's new national football centre at St. George's Park near Burton.

This conference combines the AGM's of both national supporters organisations of Supporters Direct and the Football Supporters Federation (FSF).

The opening plenary began at 10.30 with Brian Burgess Chairman of SD, followed by Malcolm Clarke, Chairman of the FSF making the opening introductions before the outgoing Chairman of the Football Association David Bernstein took to the stand in the Bobby Robson Conference Hall.

"150 years ago the founding fathers met in the spirit of teamwork and a determination to improve. Over the years all of us in the game have 'stood on their shoulders' sharing the burden of guardianship and development. It is a wonderful story – but it has always been with the football fan at its heart. John Charles, the Leeds United, Juventus and Wales legend once said; "the fans are the heart of football."

"I could not agree more. Those of us who have been privileged enough to have the transitory honour of leading our game in any form, must never forget that our stewardship is only temporary – and when Chairman, owners, managers, and players have been and gone – it is you the fans that still remain."

The FA Chairman was followed by a passionate speech on the state of the current game by Andy Burnham MP for Leigh. Burnham gave a rousing talk on how the game is moving away from its roots, stating that; "Money has taken over and I want the FA to assert its authority over the game. The day the Premier League was formed was the day power was given away."

He added that the Premier League have taken away the 5% of revenue they were giving to grass roots football, which hasn't helped England at international level as shown in it's recent demise in the under-21 tournament; "Isn't our U21's failure to win a game at the Euros the biggest warning sign ringing out on the state of the game?"

He went on to explain his disappointment that he never got the chance to push through the changes he wanted at the Football League AGM in 2009, as he was "removed from his position as culture secretary two days before he was to present it!" However, he described the FA's response to his seven challenges, as 'predictable'.

However, he was to make it clear on what he now wanted the FA to do. "I want the FA to reassert itself as the regulator for all. There is something wrong when kids can't pay pitch hire charges, or go to Premier League matches. It's greed when tickets cost £60. Premiership football is just not worth £60. We need far more supporter ownership like Germany with more recognition in the tax system and policy. I love the game, and I want the game to rediscover its roots for the health of the other 40,000+ clubs."

"Community clubs should be rewarded for refusing to sacrifice their future for short-term gain. When supporters are involved, the game gets better. The biggest problem in football is the lack of competitive balance, the gap between the top division and the rest. More supporter ownership is vital for getting football back on right path.

"I will pledge to this room to propose that the Labour manifesto includes changes to tax system to promote supporter ownership of clubs, and I call for the FA to take responsibility and use their power to take football back from the money men. I want the FA to reassert itself as the regulator, for all"

Andy Burnham's inspirational speech on the state of the game actually prompted an immediate response from the FA's David Bernstein.

And in fairness to Bernstein, he admitted; "Progress was too slow. I agree with the general thrust of what Andy says. I believed the select-committee report (on football governance) was a great opportunity."

He added; "When you've got the financial muscle and the strength the Premier League has, the only way of balancing that is with a strong FA. I do hope that Greg Dyke (the incoming FA Chairman) will be able to get the balance right."

\* David Bernstein's full speech can be read here: <http://www.thefa.com/News/2013/jun/fa-host-supporters-summit>

Following a great start to the day, members then spread out to take in a number of excellent workshops that had been put together by both organisations. The first period saw our Board members attend sessions on;

#### - Away Fans Matter

Martin O'Hara, Deputy Chair of the FSF stated; "Attendances in the PL dropped by 9% last season." It was announced that Rail Forum (Travel) were now negotiating to get rail companies working with fans for away travel. Ticket pricing at Premier League games was getting out of reach of ordinary people and this means losing fans to the game. A campaign was under way called 'football without fans is nothing'.

#### - Tackling Homophobia

GFSN members hosted a discussion on the issues of homophobia in football and how to tackle homophobic abuse drawing from anecdotal experiences of fans and the survey work initiated by Brighton & Hove Albion Supporters Club last season. The session highlighted the issues and gave proposals of how the FSF and the FSF can pro-actively campaign on this previously taboo subject this coming season.

#### - Sustainability or Bust

This session was chaired by David Lampitt, Chief Executive of SD along with Dr John Beech, who is the guy behind <http://footballmanagement.wordpress.com/> which examines clubs in crisis. Paul Rawnsley, a York City supporter who is Director of Sports Business Group for Deloitte the professional financial services company, joined them.

All three brought home the message of 'good housekeeping' for ALL clubs to make them sustainable. David Lampitt stated: "The football authorities have been given enough last chances when it comes to reforming the game's governance." Dr John Beech called for Premier League 'parachute payments' to be scrapped to give a better competitive and fair league. Indeed, he suggested that these were replaced by 'rocket payments' to assist Clubs being promoted. As for fans owned clubs, he went on to say "Fans are the psychological owners of their clubs. This makes it a different kind of business".

The Workshop finished with a video from Swansea City chairman Huw Jenkins, whose Trust own 20% of the club. He stated; "sustainability is behind every part of club - stability is key to their success."

#### - Reclaim Our Game.

James Mathie, Manager of SD chaired a meeting on how fans owned clubs can really make a difference, along with Chris Parker, Chairman of the Mariners Trust, Ben Shave, Development Officer of SD, and Juan Gonzalez, a board member of Real Oviedo FC in Spain, whose club emerged last year as being on the verge of extinction. Though those in charge of the club had its best interests at heart, the same could not have been said for some of their successors. What followed was one of the more remarkable grassroots campaigns of recent times. With the help of a social media campaign, a British journalist, and former players Juan Mata and Michu, they raised €2 million euros to become a fan owned club, which saw 25,000 football supporters from 86 countries raise around €4,000,000 to keep Oviedo alive, creating thousands of new shareholders in the club. The Real Oviedo Story chronicles the remarkable events in Northern Spain and beyond over the last twelve months. It can be viewed here: <http://www.supporters-direct.org/?news-article=the-real-oviedo-story-now-available>

Examples of Positive Fan Involvement was presented by Chris Parker of the Grimsby Town Mariners Trust, who have seen a rise of 500% in membership, He reported that Bradford City were setting up of a Supporters Board made up of members of different supporters groups and individuals.

The second Workshop session took in the following;

#### - Improving Football Governance

This was a Workshop to discuss how the network of democratic, not for profit supporters groups, aims for the future headed by Antonia Hadgemann who is Head of European Policy for SD. Talks and examples of good Governance were also given by Niamh O'Mahony from FORAS (Cork), Tony Ernst and Lena Wiberg from the Swedish Football Supporters Union, Adam Brown from the research group Substance and Diego Riva of Supporters in Campo.

Adam Brown called for football commitments in all three major party manifestos at the last election. Supporter pressure will be key. The Chair of the Swedish supporter union told how he has lead a successful campaign to retain 50+1 in Sweden has being the proudest moment of his life.

#### - Protect Your Stadium as an Asset of Community Value

This meeting was run by Tom Hall of SD, Mark Stennet of Oxford Utd Trust, and Albert Joyce a Civil Servant for the Department of Communities and Local Government. The new Localism Act was discussed and how it can be used by supporter groups to protect their stadia. Oxford was the first Stadium to succeed in having the Kassam Stadium listed, closely followed by our very own Liberty Way, whilst Anfield and Old Trafford are in the process of listing following applications by Supporter Groups.

The final session of the day took in the following Workshops:

#### - Fan Engagement: Why it works for Clubs and Fans

An incredibly inspirational talk by Tim Connolly of the Green Bay Packers, who are the only publicly owned club in American Football, and not a wealthy owner operating with a profit-at-all-costs philosophy. The Green Bay Packers are a publicly owned non-profit club with a unique stock ownership structure. Tim gave an extremely interesting insight into this fan owned club the other side of the pond. Green Bay is a town of just 102,000 in population, yet every game in their 79,000 stadium has been sold out for over fifty years. And they are now up to 106,000 people on the waiting list for a season ticket! He stated; "Great things happen when people work together" "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing!" and in relation to being a fans owned club he added; "the club can become whatever it wants to be."

\* Further information on the Green Bay Packers can be found here: <http://leagueoffans.org/2012/04/06/green-bay-packers-ownership-structure-remains-the-ideal/>

The day finished with a 'Football Question Time' with all members with a top table of Dr. Adam Brown a founder member of FC United, the research group Substance and consultant to Supporters Direct; Malcolm Clarke Chairman of the FSF and a FA Councillor; David Lampitt, Chief Executive of Supporters Direct, Tim Connolly Sales and Marketing of the Green Bay Packers, with Matt Scott, a SD consultant chairing the meeting.

Tim Connolly stated; "Football didn't start because people wanted to make money. It started because people wanted to play sport." He said of his own club, "football should be a release from daily drudgery. When fans are unhappy, that's been lost",

David Lampitt encouraged supporters to contact their MPs, and tell them how they can be part of changing football, and both he Malcolm Clarke praised the contributions made by supporters to the football governance review.

Adam Brown highlighted the role of supporters' trusts and supporter owned clubs in terms of community benefit they can deliver.

Following the closing of the meeting, we took the opportunity to a tour the fantastic facilities at St George's Park, which has twelve pitches, five of which have under soil heating. They also have a fully covered indoor pitch on 3G grass, which can be rented by the public. The facilities are second to none in the UK and well worth a visit if in the Burton area.