



IFO COMPLAINT REF: 17/01

STEWARDING AT THE READING v BRISTOL CITY MATCH, NOVEMBER 2016

Role of the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO)

1. The office of the IFO has been established by the three English football authorities (The Football Association [FA], The Premier League and The English Football League [EFL]) with the agreement of Government. The IFO has been designated as the final stage for the adjudication of complaints which have not been resolved within football's complaints procedure. The IFO is an Approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body and its findings are non-binding. IFO Adjudications will normally comprise two parts: an impartial assessment of the substantive complaint and a review of the procedure by which the complaint was handled. The IFO's role is to investigate the complaint and judge whether it was dealt with properly and whether the outcomes were reasonable for all parties concerned. Under the procedure agreed by the Football Governing Bodies, the adjudication of the IFO is final and there is no right of appeal against IFO findings.

2. The IFO must make clear that in investigating this complaint he has received the full cooperation of officials of Reading FC.

The Complaints

3. Two Bristol City supporters complained that their enjoyment of the match at Reading was impaired by shortcomings in stewarding, particularly the failure to deal with standing supporters who refused to occupy their allocated seats. Mr A further complained about the response of the Club to his complaints, while Mr B complained that the Club did not respond to his complaint at all.

The Facts of the Case

4. Reading played Bristol City on 26 November 2016 in an EFL Championship fixture. Initial planning for the fixture suggested around 2000 visiting supporters, though in the event some 3500 attended; the security classification was upgraded and the police presence was doubled accordingly. In view of the size of the away support the whole of the south stand was allocated, with a sterile area at the south east corner adjacent to the home "singing section". In anticipation of attempts by the Bristol City "risk group" of some 100+ mainly young men trying to move nearer to the home supporters (a common feature at many fixtures), the Stadium Manager decided to divide the away section of the concourse into two, so that it was not possible for away supporters in the south western area to move through the concourse towards the home supporters. There had been no serious problems at previous fixtures between the Clubs and Reading hoped that their various initiatives (joint fan zone; Bristol City colours and DVDs in the away concourse; segregated access; and meet and greet welcome messages) would ensure a trouble free day. The Club had also paid Bristol City to send 10 of their home stewards to the match to assist, though in the event, according to Reading, this was a disappointment since the majority neither had experience of football stewarding nor were familiar with the away fans.

5. By his own account, Mr A took his allocated seat in the upper part of Block R30 and around kick-off time some 100-150 young Bristol City supporters arrived, refusing to take their allocated seats and stood in the rows or the aisles. He claimed there was no attempt by stewards to get these fans seated or removed from the aisles. He said that at half-time he or his travelling companion spoke with a steward in the concourse and asked to speak with a supervisor. In the event no supervisor appeared in the second half and he argued that his enjoyment had been impaired by having to stand with restricted views of the game and that the inaction and absence of stewards constituted a safety hazard.

6. Mr B, quite separately and independently, told a similar story. He was also in the upper section of the away end and also pointed to the same origin of the problem in the young supporters who stood either in the seated areas or the aisles. He was forced to stand in order to see the game and this produced angry responses from those behind him. He wrote, "that alone spoilt my enjoyment of the afternoon as I am not someone who enjoys confrontation or rudeness". He reported two "flares which emitted large amounts of red smoke" (also mentioned by Mr A) which again produced no action. Like Mr A he requested stewards at half time to come and deal with the problem but no stewards came up to his section. He particularly cited the lack of stewards in the upper section and the failure to take "timely intervention" to deal with the problems.

7. Mr A submitted a complaint to Reading on 27 November and received a response from the Stadium Manager two days later. Although the Manager gave

an explanation for the policy adopted Mr A felt he was being fobbed off and asked for "a better explanation". On 6 December he was called by phone by the Customer Service Manager from which it emerged that Mr A wanted an apology, a review of the stewarding in the South Stand and the refund of his ticket price. It was agreed that the Safety Officer would also call him which she did the next day. The Safety Officer tried to explain the rationale for the operational decisions made but reported that Mr A was continually interrupting and became more irate during the conversation. Mr A was advised that if he remained dissatisfied he could refer the matter to the IFO and he did so on 19 December.

8. Mr B submitted his complaint to Reading on 4 December and received an automated reply, but received no substantive response. He made further enquiries which again produced automatic responses and did not receive a formal reply until 16 January after his complaint had been referred to the Club by the IFO. The Stadium Manager apologised that Mr B's original complaint had been mis-filed and his letter was along similar lines to that sent originally to Mr A.

Investigation

9. The IFO carefully reviewed the submissions made by both complainants, together with the correspondence to and from the Club. On 20 January 2017 the IFO and Deputy visited the Madejski Stadium and met with the Stadium Manager, Customer Service Manager and the Safety Officer. They also met with 2 staff in the control room and viewed the CCTV footage of the away sections during the match. They walked round the stadium and looked at the sections of the ground which were referred to in the complaints. The Reading officials provided an extensive dossier of documentation, which included matchday planning, the detailed deployment of stewards (in excess of the Green Guide requirement), full plans of the stadium and historical data on the fixture. The Stadium Manager explained his decision to close off the concourse access area to prevent movement of away supporters between the sections of the away end and reflected that this might have been a mistake, since had it been open it would have been possible to move the displaced or offending supporters to the adjacent section where there were more empty seats. Conversely, the absence of the concourse barrier might have led to all of the risk group congregating in the same section of the stand, closest to Reading's singing section.

10. The Safety Officer gave a full explanation of the operational decisions which had subsequently led to the complaints. She refuted the accusation that stewards had made no attempt to sort the problems out. At the outset stewards made robust efforts to get people into their correct seats and to sit down. However, there were so many people in the wrong seats and the point-blank refusal of the younger fans to move led to the plans being aborted. She became increasingly concerned about the safety of her stewards who were being subjected to verbal abuse, some pushing and physical threats. With the agreement of the Match Commander, the Stadium Manager and the Safety

Officer decided to withdraw the stewards from the upper sections of the away end and the aisles (apart from the dividing line between the two sections of the stand) and to redeploy them in the vomitories and at the bottom of the stand, with a watching brief to monitor the situation. In the event of a medical emergency or disorder they were readily available for redeployment. The Safety Officer accepted that this was unusual (and indeed unprecedented in this stadium), but argued that the decision was made for sound operational reasons and that to take proactive action against the offending fans ran the risk of provoking disorder. She denied that though there was standing in the aisles this constituted any safety risk and she was confident that stewards and/or police could have been redeployed quickly if the need arose. In the event, that had not been necessary. The IFO commended the Club officials for their candour in discussing the events and for their extensive background documentation, which include confidential intelligence briefing.

Findings

11. As is normal IFO practice this Adjudication addresses the substantive case first and subsequently how the complaints were handled. The IFO is impressed with the experience and professionalism of the stadium authorities and the stewarding and safety records indicate an attention to detailed planning. Nevertheless, the decisions made on the day in all good faith and for sound operational reasons did inconvenience the complainants. There was in fact no disorder and the main problem, a common issue for football as a whole, was standing supporters adversely affecting those who wished to remain seated, compounded in this case by fans remaining in the aisles. Even Mr B concluded "there was no sign of poor behaviour at any point other than standing in the way". There was only one ejection and one arrest (after the match and outside the ground). It so happens that a "mystery shopper" from *VisitFootball* attended the match in the away end and their report was generally very complimentary and made no mention of the incidents subject to these complaints. Indeed it commended the stewards for "providing a very good sense of safety and security". The CCTV footage showed that after the stewards were withdrawn there were indeed fans standing in the aisles, though it was also clear that there was no crowding or surging and supporters were able to move up and down the aisles with ease. Despite the proven absence of stewards in the aisles (except on the dividing area between the two away sections) the IFO is satisfied with the Safety Officer's assessment that there was no threat to public safety and that stewards and police could have been redeployed quickly had the need arisen. Despite this, the **IFO upholds the complainants' claim** that their enjoyment was impaired by the practice adopted by the stadium authorities and makes the recommendation below.

12. The response by the Club to Mr A's complaint was exemplary. He received a substantive reply within two days and two senior officials contacted him by phone in an attempt to resolve his complaint. He resented what he saw as crass and irrelevant questions about the identity of the steward he spoke to or what

he was wearing, though these were part of the Club's genuine wish to investigate his complaint thoroughly. The Club's handling of Mr A's complaint cannot be faulted. It is of course quite different in the case of Mr B, whose complaint simply fell through the cracks, which is unacceptable. The Club will wish to review its complaints administration to ensure that all complaints are accurately logged and responded to.

13. Both complainants reported independently that they approached stewards unsuccessfully to seek a resolution of the problems they faced and again the Club will wish to review the communications practice between stewards and supervisors. The IFO is satisfied that both complainants have received an apology for their experiences on the day and that no further or public apology is called for since the stewarding decisions were based on a professional assessment, backed by the Match Commander. Mr A specifically sought a refund of his ticket price, not mentioned by Mr B. The IFO believes that they are both entitled to some compensation, in Mr B's case justified by the shortcomings in the handling of his complaint. **The IFO therefore recommends that each complainant be given a goodwill payment of £30 and that they are provided with complimentary tickets for the next match between the two Clubs.**

Conclusion

14. An unusual combination of circumstances led to the rare decision not to make further attempts to prevent fans standing in the aisles, whereas it is normally accepted safety practice to always keep the aisles clear, even where no action is taken against other standing supporters. Reading FC will not wish this situation to recur and should consider further operational initiatives to prevent it happening again. The complaints were yet another example of the damaging consequences of clubs being unable to get fans to remain seated. Wider opinion is moving somewhat and several clubs have expressed a willingness to host an experiment in "Safe Standing", which should make it easier to enforce a no-standing policy elsewhere in a stadium. In this case the stewarding decisions were soundly based, but which impacted negatively on the two complainants, whose case has been endorsed in the Adjudication.

Professor Derek Fraser, Ombudsman

13 February 2017

Alan Watson CBE, Deputy Ombudsman