

IFO

THE INDEPENDENT
FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN

2022 23

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN



Contents

02

Foreword - Kevin Grix

03

About us

04

Our numbers

05

Investigations and
Adjudications

08

Case Studies
& Themes

11

Feedback

13

Profiles

14

Support Staff

14

Advisory Panel

15

Terms of Reference

In-line with the incumbent
Chief Ombudsman's presiding
period, this Report covers the
18 months to 30 June 2023.

It is a great pleasure to introduce the Independent Football Ombudsman ("IFO") report for 2022/23.

The period since my appointment in January 2022 transpired to be one of the IFO's busiest since it was established by the football authorities fifteen years ago. Our data illustrates that contacts from supporters increased and so too have case numbers compared with previous seasons.

Although at first glance a rise in cases might be considered as an indicator that standards are in decline - our experience is very different. It is almost inevitable that as the profile and awareness of the IFO continues to grow, so too will its case work. I am grateful not only to the football authorities and clubs for promoting the IFO to fans, but also to colleagues at Level Playing Field and the Football Supporters' Association who have been generous with their support and signposting.

An increase in our case volumes can be positive because it can help to identify trends which require attention, and provides more scope for clubs to learn from mistakes and improve for the future. Where we have found in favour of a supporter and upheld their case, the overwhelming majority of clubs have accepted our decisions with grace and positivity. The same have gone on to take appropriate steps to implement our recommendations and put things right.

My appointment in 2022 coincided with the retirement of my predecessor, Professor Derek Fraser. Professor Fraser served the IFO and its stakeholders with distinction for well over a decade (and longer still in his role at the Independent Football Commission). Up until his retirement, I served on his Advisory Panel for several years and benefited from his knowledge, experience and always his company.

At the end of 2022 my deputy Alan Watson CBE stepped down from his role and joined the IFO Advisory Panel. I simply couldn't have wished for a better colleague to be alongside during my first year in office. Diligent and thorough, robust yet reasonable, Alan is a model professional and I have learned a great deal from him. I was sorry to see Alan leave his post but he deserves a long and happy retirement and I am delighted that he will continue to play a vital role on the Panel and in his role as director in the future.

I have been grateful to members of the IFO Advisory Panel for their ongoing support and oversight. I would especially like to thank Mark James for the excellent counsel that he provides on case work and to Graham Courtney who I have turned to countless times for guidance. They give their time generously and it is appreciated.

Today, I am proud to say that the IFO has never been healthier. With the support of the football authorities we have continued to invest in the service, our systems and our staff to ensure that we meet the needs of all users. Joined by my new deputy, Judith Turner, case worker Tom Wicks and head of supporter and club liaison Sarah Simmonds, the newly assembled but vastly experienced and qualified team at the IFO is ready to serve all users who need us. Improvements to our processes and technology via a bespoke case management system and new telephone technology are among a number of improvements that will help us to keep pace and further enhance our approach to quality and standards.

In spite of these improvements, I am mindful that we must continue to retain the high standards that we have set for ourselves and to which all of our stakeholders have become accustomed. I am certain that with our team of excellent staff, we are best placed to accept that challenge.

I hope that you enjoy reading our report.

Kevin Grix

Chief Ombudsman



Approved by Government under
the Alternative Dispute Resolution
for Consumer Disputes (Competent
Authorities and Information)
Regulations 2015

We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation approved by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute and validated as a Complaint Handler Member of the Ombudsman Association.

What is the IFO?

In July 2008, the IFO was created by the English Football Authorities (the Football Association, the Premier League and the English Football League) with the agreement of Government.

The IFO acts as a check and balance and is the final stage within football's complaints procedure. It is the successor body to the Independent Football Commission (IFC), which operated from 2002 to 2008 as an integral part of football's self-regulatory system. In February 2016, the IFO was officially recognised as an Approved Alternative Dispute (ADR) Body under the 2015 Alternative Dispute Consumer Regulations.

What do we do?

The IFO was established to receive and adjudicate on complaints which have failed to be resolved by football clubs or the Football Authorities. Furthermore, if the football bodies have dealt with a complaint in full, then the IFO can review whether due process was followed and the complaint handled properly. In these circumstances the IFO does not offer an alternative interpretation of rulings, but an examination of whether a complaint has been handled appropriately.

The IFO will not accept a complaint unless the provider of the goods or services has had the opportunity to resolve the complaint. The IFO has no remit for incidents which occur on the field of play or for referee performance. It also has no role in relation to grassroots football or the county Football Associations. Its coverage is limited to the 92 English league clubs and to the competitions organised under the umbrella of the three English Football Authorities.

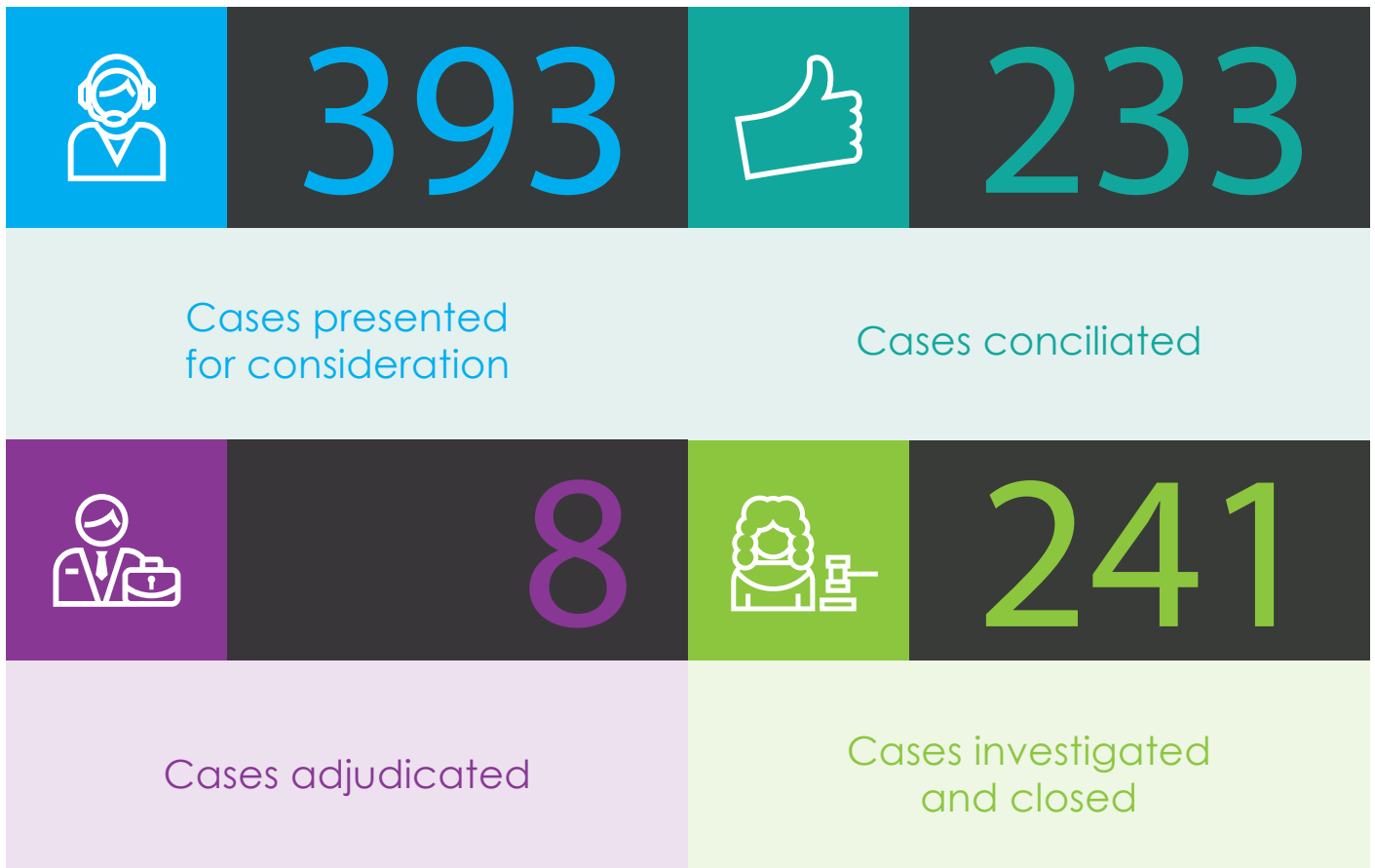
The IFO will produce an Annual Report to the Minister for Sport and the Football Authorities. This report will be made publicly available.

Who are we?

The Independent Football Ombudsman ("IFO") is comprised of a Chief Ombudsman and a Deputy Ombudsman, both of whom are classified as ADR Officials under The Alternative Dispute Resolution for Consumer Disputes (Competent Authorities and Information) Regulations 2015. They are assisted from time-to-time by the members of an Advisory Panel.

During 2022, the IFO strengthened its frontline process, with the provision of contracted triage and telephone support to Clubs and Complainants. In 2023, the IFO added a case handler to the team.

Our numbers



From January 2022 to June 2023, the IFO received 393 complaints from Supporters for consideration. Of this overall number, 241 cases were accepted for full investigation and 152 were dismissed after preliminary assessment as being outside of the scope of the IFO.

If the IFO accepts a complaint as in scope and then fully investigates it, cases may be closed informally as part of a conciliation (where for example an offer made by a Club or Authority is accepted by a Supporter), the case is closed by the IFO due to a lack of evidence or an act to settle the complaint by the Club or Authority is deemed reasonable by the IFO.

Where a formal Adjudication is required, the IFO will publish a decision. In the period covered by this Report, 233 cases were resolved or closed informally and 8 were subject to Adjudication. Adjudicated decisions are summarised in the pages below, along with some examples of the cases that were closed at an earlier informal stage.

Investigations and Adjudications

IFO Adjudication 22/12

A 10 Match Suspension and Loyalty Point Deduction at Brighton and Hove Albion

The Complaint

The Supporter received a sanction after a ticket was purchased in their name by their son, who was under 18 years old. The son gave the ticket to their girlfriend, who attended the match. The Supporter was unhappy with the way the appeals were handled and the outcome.

The Club's Response

The ticket terms and conditions stated that tickets for away matches are for the sole use of the assigned owner. The Club explained that they felt they had applied the sanction correctly and consistent with their supporters' charter document and that the case had passed through the appeals process.

The IFO's Findings

Following an assessment of the evidence, while the IFO acknowledged the challenges the Club faces with the unauthorised transfer of away tickets, the IFO was not satisfied that the Supporter's actions were consistent with that specified under the Club's sanction policy. The IFO also considered the Club's appeal panel policies could be improved.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that the Supporter's sanction was lifted, and the loyalty points restored alongside an apology from the Club. The IFO also recommended that the Club updates its policies to reflect the possibility (and purpose) of safeguarding staff on panels and during the appeals process.

IFO Adjudication 22/11

A One Year Suspension at Manchester United

The Complaint

The Supporter complained that the Club had unjustly imposed a suspension for allegedly advertising match tickets for sale. The Supporter felt that the Club had relied upon evidence of a fake Facebook account which had been set up in their name.

The Club's Response

The Club explained that the Supporter had advertised home and away match tickets and presented evidence to support their position.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO confirmed that the burden of proof for civil claims was with the person who asserts their claim to prove the facts in issue, despite acknowledging the challenges in doing so. Having noted that it is a difficult hurdle for the Supporter to prove a negative or an omission, the IFO also reviewed the evidence from the Club, which was considered to be more persuasive in this instance. The IFO could not, on that basis, agree that the sanction was imposed unjustly.

IFO Adjudication 22/08

A One Year Suspension at Manchester United

The Complaint

A Supporter complained that the Club had unjustly imposed a suspension for allegedly advertising match tickets for sale. The Supporter explained the extenuating circumstances for them not collecting their ticket. The Supporter disputed the Club's findings and claimed that they had not been given enough time to appeal, which itself was not dealt with fairly or in the way they were told it would be.

The Club's Response

The Club stated that the Supporter had been in breach of the ticketing terms and conditions relating to advertising or re-selling a ticket above face value and a sanction was issued accordingly. The Club explained that their panel had difficulties piecing the Supporter's explanation together and did not receive the evidence required to overturn the sanction at appeal.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO considered the evidence, and accepted the Supporter's account, based upon the evidence. The IFO found no basis for the Club to suspend the Supporter on the grounds that there had been an attempt to advertise or sell the ticket above face value. Furthermore, the IFO found shortcomings in the Club's management of the suspension and appeal.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that the Supporter's season ticket should be reinstated, which the Club accepted.

The IFO also recommended that the Club take steps to ensure that more meaningful information is collected when misuse of tickets is suspected.

IFO Adjudication 22/05

Ejection at Luton Town

The Complaint

A mother complained that their son had been unjustifiably ejected at Luton Town, when attending as a Middlesbrough supporter. Their son had been ejected by three stewards after Middlesbrough scored and was not informed why by stewards or police.

The Club's Response

The Club explained that an authorised steward may refuse entry or eject a Supporter under the ground regulations or if in breach of the supporter code of conduct. The Club stated that they were satisfied that the Supporter was a member of a group which had been observed behaving antisocially and the stewards were justified in their actions.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO reviewed the matchday reports, the incident report and photographs. It was not possible for the IFO to determine with any certainty whether the Supporter's ejection was justified.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that stewards are briefed properly in relation to ejections and that match day and incident reports contain more specific information regarding breaches of the ground regulations and reasons for ejection. The Club accepted that additional training was required in this area.

The IFO also recommended that the Club provide a goodwill gesture of £50 for the unprofessional and confusing way in which the ejection was handled.

IFO Adjudication 22/03

A Ban at West Ham United

The Complaint

A West Ham United Supporter complained that they had been unjustly banned by the Club after a conviction for a football-related offence in Croatia. The Supporter felt that their subsequent appeal against the Club ban was not given due consideration. The Supporter explained the circumstances of their incarceration and that they had no other option but to plead guilty to ensure they didn't have to go through a trial and face potential imprisonment.

The Club's Response

The IFO held a virtual meeting with the Club. They provided their explanation for the basis of the Supporter's ban and noted that they were reviewing their offences and sanctions policy. The Club noted that if the Supporter could supply evidence from the authorities to support the case of mistaken identity, they would consider another appeal.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO had sympathy for both parties. While the Supporter's account was plausible, no substantive supporting evidence was provided. Moreover, the IFO recognised the challenges for the Supporter providing corroborating evidence. The IFO was unable to recommend the ban being rescinded but welcomed the Club's willingness to consider a re-hearing if the Supporter is able to produce suitable corroboration of their account.

IFO Adjudication 22/02

Entry Problems for Leeds Fans at Stamford Bridge

The Complaint

Six individual Leeds United Supporters complained about safety issues surrounding their entry to the away section at Chelsea's stadium. The Supporters were unhappy with the responses from the Club.

The Club's Response

The IFO received information and reports from the Club, the Metropolitan Police, the Local Authority and the Sports Grounds Safety Authority. The Club explained the additional measures put in place in advance of the match.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO was satisfied that Chelsea's planning followed well-established practice which had not caused problems in other similar profile fixtures. The IFO found that the security staff were overwhelmed with the volume of supporters arriving close to kick off but could not see what the Club could have done to mitigate this. The IFO noted that the handling of complaints was poor.

Recommendation

The IFO recommended that in conjunction with the police, the Club devise such a plan to deal with a situation where they identify that a significant number of fans have still to arrive at the turnstiles at a particular point before kick-off.

IFO Adjudication 22/01

Season Ticket Renewal at Manchester United

The Complaint

The Supporter claimed that their elderly father and cousin had been unjustly denied season tickets for the 2021-22 season. The complaint surrounded the new ticketing system which it was claimed incorrectly recorded that they wished to take a one-year break.

The Club's Response

The Club explained that their records showed the Supporter's cousin initially indicated in their survey that they wished to renew. They subsequently requested a one-year break, after which the Season Ticket offer was removed. The Club confirmed that the Supporter's father didn't respond to the survey, despite the Club calling them to explain the new process and the deadline, which then passed without response, after which the tickets were then sold on. The Club noted that they put markers on the accounts and confirmed the opportunity for both to obtain a season ticket in advance of the 2022-23 season.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO was satisfied that the evidence showed the Club were not culpable for the failure to renew the season tickets. The IFO noted that neither applicants paid for a season ticket and the Club were entitled to release the seats for sale after the deadline had passed. However, the IFO felt that the Club's communication could have been better and welcomed the Club's offer to allow both supporters the opportunity to purchase season tickets for the following season.

After considering all the evidence, the IFO will respond in one of three ways, depending on the content and merits of the case. It will do so by email or post as appropriate.

- To inform the complainant that no further action is to be taken, either because the case has no merit or the provider has already responded reasonably.
- To send an extended letter summarising the complaint and the IFO investigation, together with any recommended action.
- To publish a full adjudication where the nature of the complaint is complex and it merits a public airing of the concerns and issues raised. The Adjudication will be sent to the complainant and to the appropriate Football Authority or club. Adjudication Reports are published in full on the IFO website (www.theifo.co.uk). A summary of the adjudication will be included in the IFO's Annual Report and on the website of the relevant Authority.

A cross-section of cases that have been resolved without the requirement for an adjudication can be found below.

Season Ticket Renewal Problems

The Complaint

Supporter A was a season ticket holder at Everton for over 10 years. The Supporter's complaint was that although they had tried to renew their season ticket online and had received a screenshot of the transaction being successful, they had not received their season ticket. Supporter A went to the Club's ticket office to sort out the issue, but the Club did not help. Supporter A stated that they had been told that the season ticket was no longer available and they would have to join the waiting list.

The Claim

The Supporter wanted the Club to allow them to renew their season ticket.

The Response

- The Club explained that having checked their systems which noted that Supporter A had not renewed their season ticket in time. No funds had been taken and confirmation had not been provided.
- The Club said that if the Supporter had contacted them before the deadline, they would have been able to assist.
- The Club verified that the Supporter visited the ticket office with a screenshot of their ticket order history which suggested the sale had been completed, but the Club could not replicate the issue the Supporter reported or establish why it had happened.
- The Club informed the Supporter that if they purchased an official membership for the next season, they would put them into the top tier priority on the season ticket waiting list.

What the IFO Did

The IFO reviewed the evidence from both parties. The IFO noted that Supporter A provided evidence that the transaction was successful, although it was unclear why this was received, given that the Club's records showed that the transaction had not been completed. The IFO considered that as the Supporter received a confirmation from the Club, they would not reasonably have followed this up with the Club after purchase. However, the Supporter would have known that no money was taken by the Club, which should have prompted contact at an earlier stage.

- The IFO considered that there had been failings on both sides.
- After discussions with the Club, a pro-rata priced season ticket for the rest of the season was offered, with assurances that Supporter A would be able to renew the season ticket for the following season.
- The IFO communicated the offer to the Supporter who gratefully accepted.

Restricted View Ticket

The Complaint

Supporter B purchased a Leeds match ticket via Club ballot. The ticket was reduced and the Supporter knew that the ticket was marked as having a 'restricted view'. Supporter B was unhappy with the view from the seat, noting that they would not have bought the ticket had they been aware of the view in advance. They also felt that the price reduction was not sufficient. The Supporter lodged a complaint with the Club and was dissatisfied with the response.

The Claim

Supporter B was seeking an apology and a replacement ticket without a restricted view for another match.

The Response

The Club said that they took on board Supporter B's comments about the response times and apologised for the delays. In respect of the seat, the Club felt that the information relating to the seat having a restricted view was provided before purchasing and afterwards, within the confirmation email. The Club said that the Supporter should have contacted them after making purchase had they wished to query this or to request a refund.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO noted from the evidence that the Supporter would have known that the ticket they had been offered in the ballot had a restricted view and that Supporter B proceeded with purchase. Supporter B did not make contact with the Club after purchasing, to either find out more about the view or to apply for a refund.
- The email confirmation provided that the ticket was refundable 'up until 24 hours prior to kick off', although the Supporter did not make contact with the Club until lodging the complaint, after the match.
- In terms of the ticket, although part of the pitch was blocked from view, the Club were found to have offered a price reduction which they did not necessarily have to provide under Premier League rule R.6.4, which states that 'A Club's ticketing policy should allow for a reasonable reduction in the price of tickets for seats with a restricted view of the goalmouth.'
- Although the IFO noted that there was a delay with the Club responding, it did not feel as though the detriment this caused reached the threshold for compensation to be appropriate.

Cup Season Ticket Sanction

The Complaint

Supporter C was a cup season ticket holder at Manchester United. The Supporter received a one-year suspension from the Club after they found a third-party to be in possession of Supporter C's tickets for the FA Cup semi-final match against Brighton. Supporter C appealed, providing an explanation. The Supporter was unhappy that the Club did not overturn the decision.

The Claim

The Supporter wanted the Club to remove the suspension.

The Response

The Club provided evidence that a third-party was in possession of the Supporter's tickets for the match, which was in breach of their ticketing terms and conditions.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO reviewed the Supporter's account and noted the extenuating circumstances. In their appeal, Supporter C explained that they received upsetting news of the death of a close friend on the day before the match. As per their religion's custom, the funeral was arranged the next day, which coincided with the day of the match. Supporter C decided they could not attend the match and did not want the tickets to go unused, so gave them away. Supporter C explained that the ticket office was closed so they could not contact the Club before.
- The IFO asked the Club to verify the opening hours and whether the circumstances could be considered as mitigation.
- Given the circumstances, the Club offered to remove the suspension. The IFO closed the case on this basis.

Season Ticket Sanction

The Complaint

Supporter D was a season ticket holder at Manchester United. The Supporter received a one-year suspension from the Club after they found a third-party to be in possession of Supporter D's tickets for the home match against Leicester. Supporter D appealed, providing an explanation. The Supporter was unhappy that the Club did not overturn the decision, adding that the Club reached a different conclusion with a similar case with another season ticket holder, that they knew.

The Claim

Supporter D wanted the suspension to be overturned, their season ticket reinstated and to be refunded for the matches they had missed due to the suspension.

The Response

The Club provided evidence that a third-party was in possession of the Supporter's tickets for the match, which was in breach of their ticketing terms and conditions. The Club stated that the ticket holder explained that they paid a higher amount than the ticket cost and a sanction was issued accordingly.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO noted that each case is considered independently upon its merits and could therefore not compare another party's case.
- The IFO reviewed the Supporter's account. Although the parties disagreed with the amount the third-party paid Supporter D for the ticket, both parties were broadly in agreement that the ticket had been given to someone outside of the Club's process.
- The IFO did not find the conclusion reached to be unreasonable in the circumstances.

Merchandise Complaint

The Complaint

Supporter E purchased a Wolves jersey online from the Club shop. The Supporter complained that the jersey was not the size it was labelled as. The Supporter contacted the Club and did not receive a response they were happy with.

The Claim

The Supporter was seeking a refund.

The Response

The Club rejected the Supporter's claim and referred Supporter E to the sizing guide on their website. Furthermore, Wolves noted that the jersey was considered as 'personalised' as the Supporter opted to add a Premier League badge to the jersey and therefore could not be exchanged or refunded unless it was faulty.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO asked the Supporter to measure the shirt to ascertain whether it was consistent with the size guide on the Club shop website. Evidence of the measurements was sent to the Club.
- The Club considered the evidence and agreed that the shirt was not consistent with the published sizing. The Club offered a refund (and allowed Supporter E to keep the original shirt) and sent Supporter E a new shirt, in the size the Supporter requested. The Supporter accepted the offer.

▄▄ The Independent Football Ombudsman have reviewed a number of complaints from Manchester United Supporters. During these reviews the team have conducted their investigations in a professional and unbiased manner, using ethical practices and promoting fairness. On the small number of occasions where our fans are unhappy with their interactions with the Club, we have no hesitation in promoting the free and impartial service offered by the IFO. ▄▄

Manchester United FC



▄▄ Level Playing Field appreciates its long-standing and collaborative relationship with the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO), which is important in promoting accessibility and inclusivity within the football landscape.

The charity deeply values the IFO's independence, which ensures that the requirements and concerns of disabled fans are addressed impartially and effectively when needed. On occasions when a complaint cannot be resolved at local level, the independent skills of the IFO help to ensure a fair outcome.

Joint efforts between Level Playing Field and the IFO have resulted in tangible improvements in accessibility and equality within football, making the sport more inclusive and enjoyable for everyone to watch. This success has seen a high level of mutual respect develop between the two organisations. ▄▄

Level Playing Field



▄▄ At Arsenal we work closely with our supporters to ensure their enquiries are dealt with seamlessly and efficiently in line with our club regulations and policies. We believe in the transparent process that allows supporters to refer matters to the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO) to assess and adjudicate on our decisions where they see fit. The work of the IFO, in our experience, has been invaluable in building confidence, providing impartial advice, and delivering outcomes for supporters in a timely and professional manner. ▄▄

Arsenal FC



▄▄ The EFL has, alongside the other football authorities, long recognised the value provided by the Independent Football Ombudsman as the final stage in football's complaints process. The ongoing work by the IFO to further modernise their processes and strengthen relationships with a range of football stakeholders is welcomed. Their impartial and thorough approach to complaint handling and adjudications provides supporters across our 72 Clubs with an important opportunity to have any unsettled disputes independently reviewed, and the EFL continues to welcome their input on football matters related to complaint management and the broader fan experience. ▄▄

EFL



W Liverpool FC's robust complaints procedure and clear, transparent and fair sanctions policy means that our experience with the IFO has been limited, but where we have had contact with them cases have been managed with mutual respect and professionalism. We recognise the important changes the IFO has made recently to modernise, to build trust with all stakeholders and to invoke confidence in their adjudications. While we have faith in our own procedures, we appreciate and support the work of the Ombudsman as a final, independent, step in the complaints process and acknowledge the valuable safety net it provides for all fans. //

Liverpool FC



W Wembley Stadium has scored consistently well on customer feedback scores over the last 18 months, due to the stringent internal processes we have in place. On the limited number of occasions where a resolution has not been possible, we have found the IFO a very useful and professional mediatory partner.

The new structure within the IFO has made all our dealings with them easier and uncomplicated. We look forward to maintaining a positive working relationship in the future. //

Wembley Stadium



W The FSA has developed greater relations with the IFO during the past 18 months and during that time we have been impressed with work they do to secure resolutions.

It's totally free and a huge benefit to supporters who we'd always encourage to use the IFO when needed - they will listen to your complaint and they will take it seriously.

The IFO is a great conduit to help build relations between clubs and their supporters and we look forward to continuing working together in the seasons ahead. //

Football Supporters' Association





Kevin Grix
LL.B, MCI Arb, Barrister
Chief Ombudsman

Kevin was appointed on 01 January 2022 and is responsible for directing the activities of the Independent Football Ombudsman ("IFO"). Prior to his appointment, Kevin sat on the IFO's Advisory Board between 2015 and 2021 where he advised his predecessor on casework and dispute resolution procedures.

Prior to his career as an Ombudsman, Kevin spent eight years working in football market operations for a leading online sports trading platform. He was responsible for overseeing the management of thousands of football markets, trading and settlement.

Kevin read law at university for three years and graduated with honours, prior to studying to be a Barrister in London at the Inns of Court School of Law. He was called to the Bar by the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple, after successfully passing his Bar exams and is also professionally qualified by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. Kevin has a dual-mandate, serving also as the Chief Executive and Chief Ombudsman at Dispute Resolution Ombudsman, which operates high profile schemes in sectors including rail, retail, construction and licensing.

Kevin is on the Board of Directors at the Ombudsman Association; a professional body that advises government and helps to oversee the ombudsman and complaint handling landscape in the UK, Ireland, British Overseas Territories and British Crown Dependencies. He is also a non-executive director and trustee at a Citizens Advice Bureau.

Kevin has a keen interest in consumer affairs and has appeared several times on television, radio and in the press to provide expert opinion on a range of issues that affect consumers. He has a specialist understanding of consumer law and has written and presented a series of accredited courses and seminars in this field. He is the co-author of Volume 28 of Atkin's Court Forms and Precedents on Ombudsman schemes in England and Wales. Published by LexisNexis in 2020, it forms part of the UK's only encyclopaedia of civil litigation forms, precedents and procedure and is a leading authority on the process that should be followed by complainants.



Judith Turner
LL.B, MCI Arb, Solicitor
Deputy Chief Ombudsman

Judith read Law at King's College London for three years before graduating with honours in 1998, qualifying as a solicitor in 2001.

Judith is the Deputy Chief Ombudsman for a national Ombudsman scheme that operates in high profile sectors including rail, retail and home improvement. Specialising in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and consumer law, Judith leads on compliance with The Alternative Dispute Resolution for Consumer Disputes Regulations 2015 within her own organisation and helps to advise other bodies, including the IFO, as to their application, exemplifying and advising on best practice in this area.

Judith has written and presented a wide variety of accredited training courses on Consumer Law and Compliance and is a regular speaker on these matters, appearing in trade and mainstream press and radio providing insight into many areas that affect consumer dispute resolution. Judith is the current Chair of the Ombudsman Association Policy Network and serves as a member of the Civil Justice Council's ADR Liaison Panel. She has written extensively on ADR and consumer issues and is the co-author of the Ombudsman content for Atkins Court Forms. She is a lifelong football fan supporting Barnsley FC.

Support Staff



TOM WICKS
LL.B, CIArb
Case Handler

Tom joined the IFO in 2023 having worked for various Ombudsman schemes since 2018. He is accredited by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators and studied law at university. As a lifelong football supporter, he enjoys football at all levels. Tom is the Editor-in-Chief of a printed Watford FC fanzine.



SARAH SIMMONDS
Supporter and Club Liaison

Sarah joined the Independent Football Ombudsman in 2022 as Head of Contact. Sarah has worked for various Ombudsman schemes since January 2018 gaining a BTEC level 5 in investigation & complaints handling and City & Guilds in Consumer Law and Customer service. Sarah has been involved in football from an early age as her dad managed teams at grassroots level and brother played for the County. Sarah is a lifelong Arsenal supporter.

Advisory Panel

The IFO Advisory Panel comprises members with a broad range of experience, on which the IFO can draw in particular cases. Expertise may include legal and financial issues; governance and compliance; stadium operations; communications; supporter relations and community initiatives; and complaint handling within ADR procedures.

ALAN WATSON **CBE**

GRAHAM COURTNEY

PHIL GOLDSTONE

TOM WOODHOUSE

ELA MISTRY-JACKSON

GILLIAN FLEMING

SUSAN WATSON

MARK JAMES

Terms of Reference

Preamble

The Independent Football Ombudsman (the IFO) is appointed by the Football Association (FA), the English Football League (EFL) and the Premier League (PL) [hereafter, the football authorities], in consultation with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The IFO provides independent external scrutiny of complaints within a transparent, accountable and effective system of self-regulation by the football authorities. This includes a commitment to the Customer Charter or other relevant Club policies and review PL, EFL and FA processes where necessary.

The football authorities are committed to providing robust and open complaints procedures, widely publicised, taken seriously by the Clubs, reinforced by the PL, EFL and the FA and subject to external review. The IFO will also provide an external and independent voice in discussions within football on issues which affect the public.

The Independent Football Ombudsman's Terms of Reference

(i) The IFO acts as a check and balance within football's complaints procedures and its adjudications will be published. These adjudications shall be final and the football authorities expect that normally IFO recommendations will be implemented. If, in exceptional cases, there is a failure to agree, the football bodies concerned will publish their reasons and their proposed alternative resolution of the issue.

The IFO's role is not to interpret the rules and regulations of the football authorities and it cannot change the outcome of disputes, overturn decisions made or provide alternative interpretation of the rules. Instead the IFO's function is to check that due process is followed, and, where necessary, check that the process is a reasonable one – for example, the timeliness of response and whether it has been viewed by appropriate levels within the football authorities.

(ii) The IFO will have regard to best practice in commercial matters within professional football, particularly with regard to customer service. The IFO will be consulted and will advise on:-

Codes of Best Practice relating to supporters and customers in general, and customer charters or other relevant policies issued by each of the football authorities, and by individual clubs;

the football authorities' operation of the complaints resolution hierarchy based on the Codes of Best Practice, with the Independent Football Ombudsman as the final step in that hierarchy checking that due process was followed; and

the football authorities' procedures for review and monitoring of commercial and customer matters.

In this, the IFO is to have particular regard to:-

- Ticketing policies
- Accessibility of matches
- Merchandise; and
- Supporter and other stakeholder involvement.

(iii) Where complaints resolution indicates wider action is appropriate, to recommend changes to Codes of Best Practice and Customer Charters or other relevant policies, to request review of the rules and regulations of the football authorities relating to commercial and customer-related matters and to request research or other investigation into policy relating to those matters.

(iv) The IFO will be consulted by the football authorities on significant changes to regulation or practice in the areas of supporter and customer relations.

(v) The IFO is tasked with meeting supporter organisations on an annual basis and with reporting the outcome to the authorities. The IFO will produce an annual report to be submitted to the football authorities and to the DCMS. The published IFO annual report will identify broader issues arising from its investigations and adjudications which should be addressed by the authorities. The work of the IFO will be reported in Club, League and FA annual reports as applicable and any public policy implications will be reported to the DCMS by the football authorities at the existing established and regular meetings between football and the Department.

The Constitution of the IFO

The office of the IFO will consist of the Ombudsman and a Deputy. An Advisory Panel will be appointed by the IFO so that, according to the requirement for particular expertise, a Panel member can sit with the IFO and/or Deputy IFO to advise on complaint adjudication or on issues arising from complaint investigations.

Appointments

The Ombudsman and Deputy will be appointed by the football authorities in consultation with Government.



**THE INDEPENDENT
FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN**

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