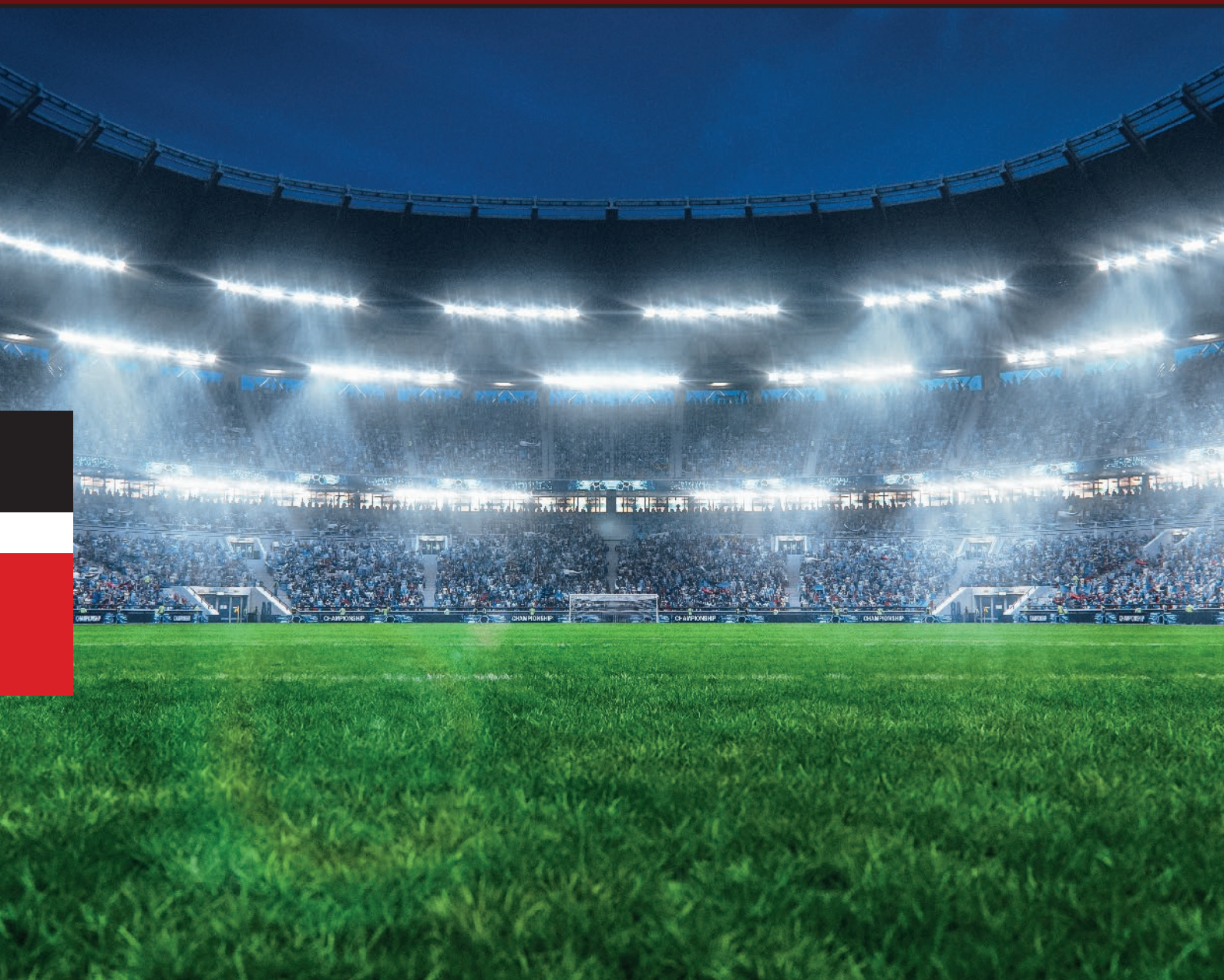


REPORT OF
THE INDEPENDENT
FOOTBALL
OMBUDSMAN



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Terms of Reference

This report covers the period
of 1/07/2023 to 30/06/2024
inclusively.



I am delighted to introduce the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO) Annual Report for 2023/24.

The IFO continues to play a crucial role in the effective functioning of consumer protection for Supporters within the football landscape.

Protecting the interests of Supporters is particularly important during times of economic turbulence which, over the last few years, has negatively affected millions of households up and down the country.

The IFO is mindful of the commitment that fans undertake in order to support their team; a commitment that goes beyond just their time and emotions. It is therefore pleasing to observe the measures that some Clubs are implementing in order to stamp out the unauthorised resale of tickets. In some instances, particularly at larger Clubs where demand outweighs supply, touts only add to the cost for fans where tickets are illegally sold at inflated prices.

Of course, not everyone that passes on a ticket should be defined as a tout. We have investigated a range of cases including those where fans have moved tickets on at (or close to) face value and others where individuals have sold tickets for significantly more. Although both examples given here might give rise to a sanction, there is a clear difference.

We have heard other appeals from Supporters who have been sanctioned for alleged poor behaviour, mostly during match days. Win, lose or draw - going to a match should be positive experience for everyone and it is incumbent on all Supporters to treat Club staff, players, officials and fellow fans with respect.

The rest of our casebook was comprised largely of complaints from Supporters regarding individual tickets, season tickets and matters relating to their membership of a Club. Outcomes of these cases and all of our other ones varied, meaning that not all were upheld in favour of the Supporter. However, we have investigated proportionately and both parties have always been invited to provide their evidence to us before we have drawn any conclusions.

Although our overall case load has continued to increase over the past couple of years, readers will notice that the volume of formal Adjudications published by the IFO has fallen. This is due to a greater emphasis on engagement and an enhanced willingness from Clubs to negotiate equitable outcomes as part of our process. This has meant that the process has become quicker in the vast majority of cases too.

We anticipate that this trend will continue in the years ahead, reserving formal Adjudications for only the most complicated cases.

I would like to thank the Premier League, Football Association and the English Football League for their continued unwavering support for the work that my colleagues and I do. I give thanks also to our colleagues at the Football Supporters' Association and Level Playing Field, both of whom give their time and counsel generously - and to the Clubs who have co-operated with us throughout the past year professionally.

I must also acknowledge the courage of those Supporters who have juggled a dilemma and used our service to complain about their Club. Regardless of the case outcome, my colleagues and I have found Supporters to be courteous and dignified.

Last but by no means least, I must express my sincere gratitude to my colleagues Judith, Sarah and Tom without whom the IFO would be far less equipped to carry on the work that it does.

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 Independent Football Ombudsman (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 Resolution (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.

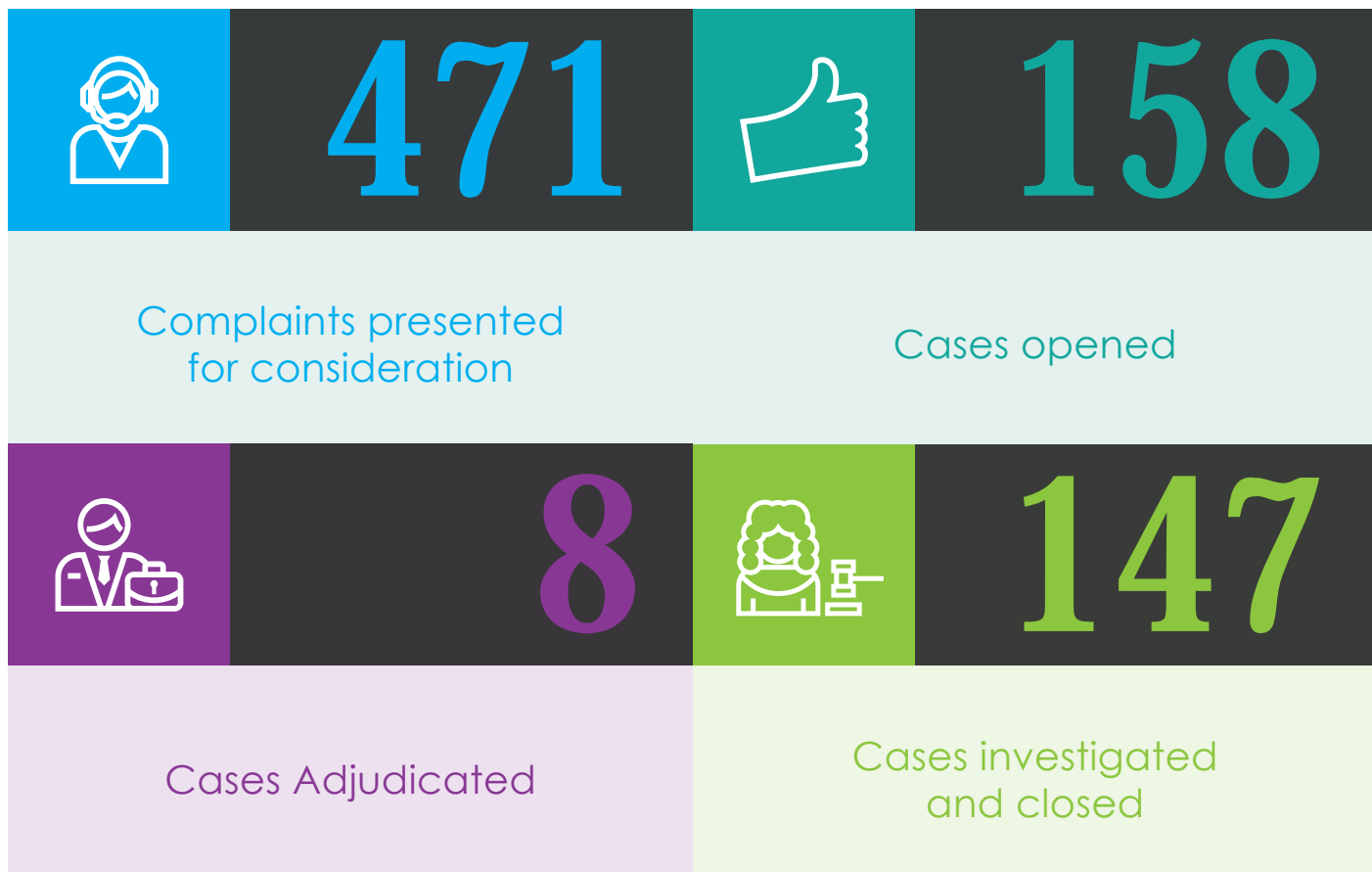
The IFO will not accept a complaint unless the provider of the goods or services has had the opportunity to resolve the complaint. The IFO has no remit for incidents which occur on the field of play or for referee performance. It also has no role in relation to grassroots football or the county Football Associations (save in relation to how processes are managed). 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 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.

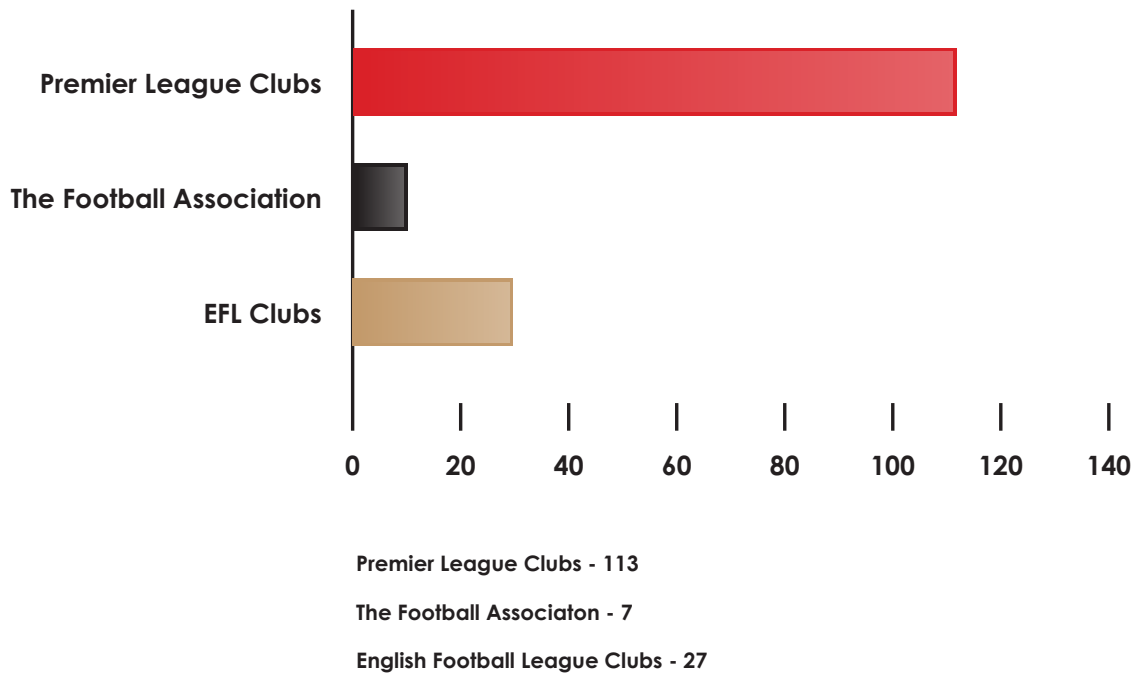
Our Numbers



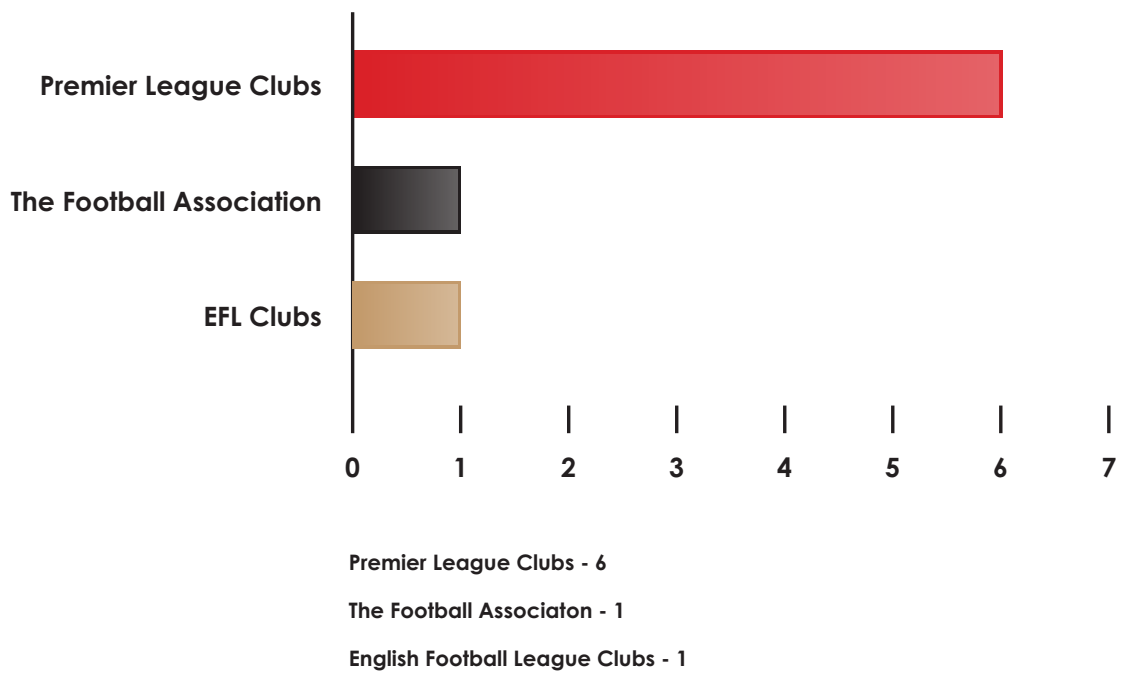
From 01 July 2023 to 30 June 2024, the IFO received 471 complaints from Supporters for consideration. Of these, 158 were accepted for full investigation, the other 313 were dismissed after preliminary assessment deemed them outside of the scope of the IFO.

For the same period, the IFO received 854 enquiries of which 383 were concerning matters that are outside of the IFO's scope. The most common out-of-scope topics involved grassroots football that did not relate to the way processes were managed, and referee performance/VAR. Other enquiries included player behaviour, on-field matters, Club, governance and fixture changes.

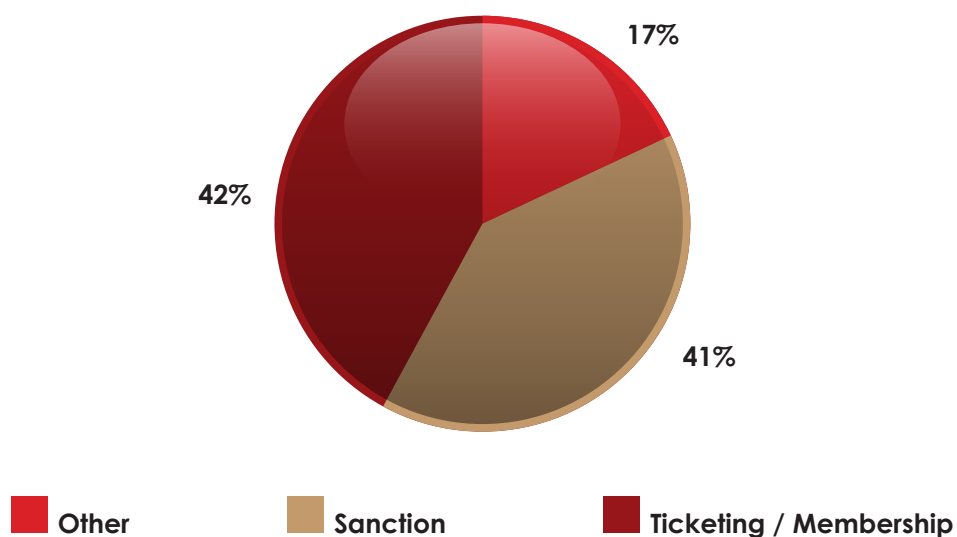
Cases that the IFO investigated and closed



Cases that the IFO Adjudicated



Case Category



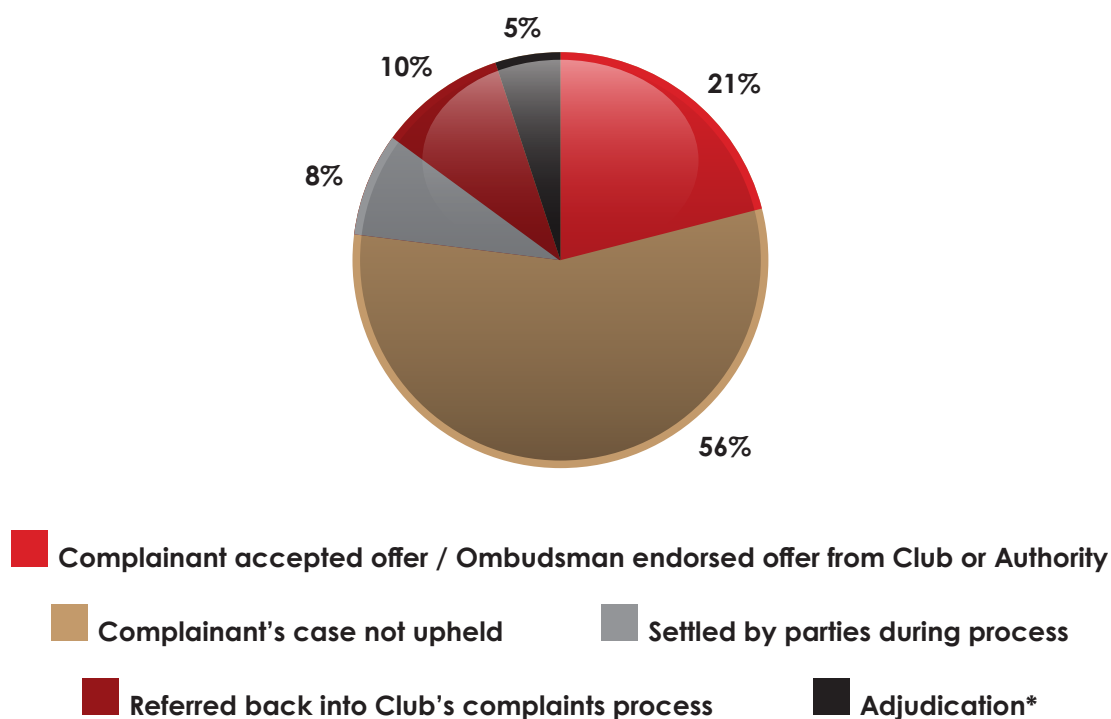
Other - Cases that fell under the 'other' category comprised of:

Hospitality issues - Cases about the provision of a hospitality service, or issue encountered within hospitality;

Matchday cases - Incidents in the crowd involving stewards, cases about stadium facilities, Club merchandise; or

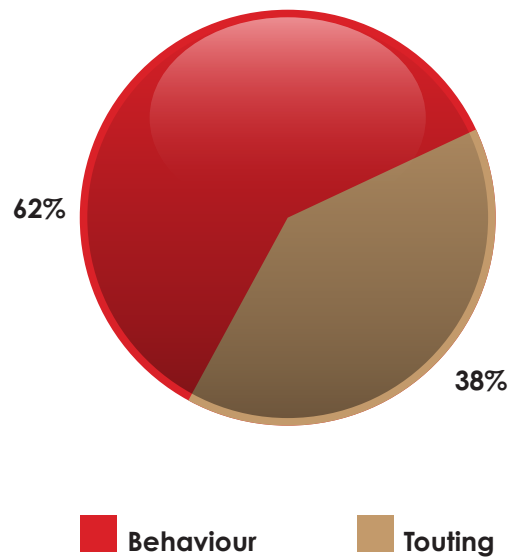
Miscellaneous - For example Supporter memorial wall plaque cases.

Case Outcome



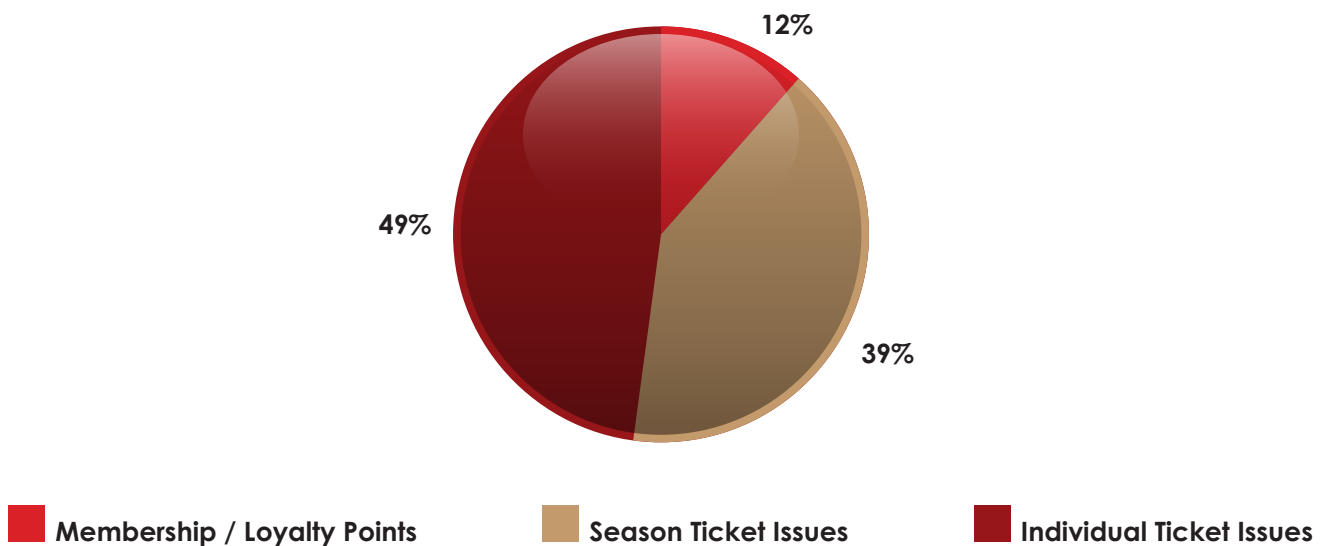
* 87.5% of cases requiring an Adjudication related to sanctions appeals. Summaries of all of these, including the recommendations made can be found below. Due to the non-binding nature of the IFO's recommendations, where Clubs or Authorities decide not to follow these, they must publish a statement to that effect, stating the reasons why, on their websites.

Sanctions



Most of the cases that fell within this category involved Supporters who received Club bans, preventing them from attending matches for a period due to behaviour or due to ticket touting. The IFO's function is to check that due process was followed, and, where necessary, check that the process is a reasonable one.

Ticketing / Membership



Cases that fell under this category predominantly concerned the application of policy regarding:

Membership/loyalty points - Membership policy, sale of membership, problems purchasing tickets with a membership;

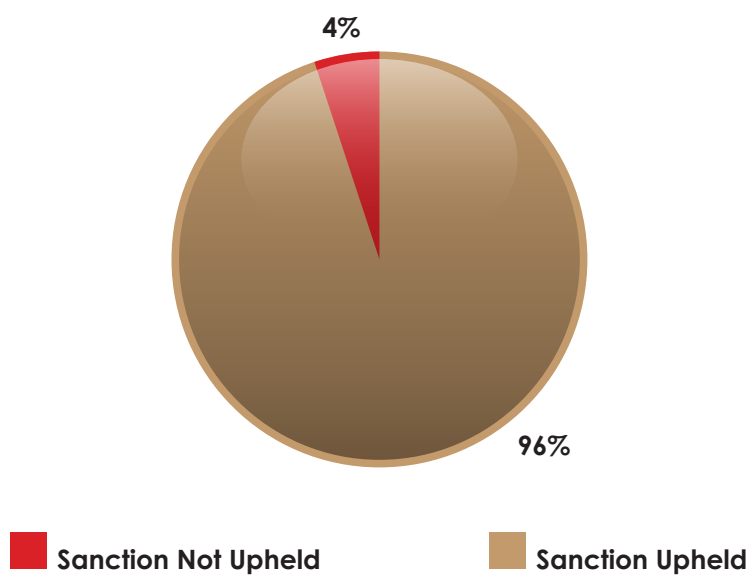
Season ticket issues - Purchasing/renewal problems; or

Individual ticket issues - Purchasing, ticket refunds and retailing, suitability of tickets.

Of the cases not requiring Adjudication, the following outcomes can be noted:

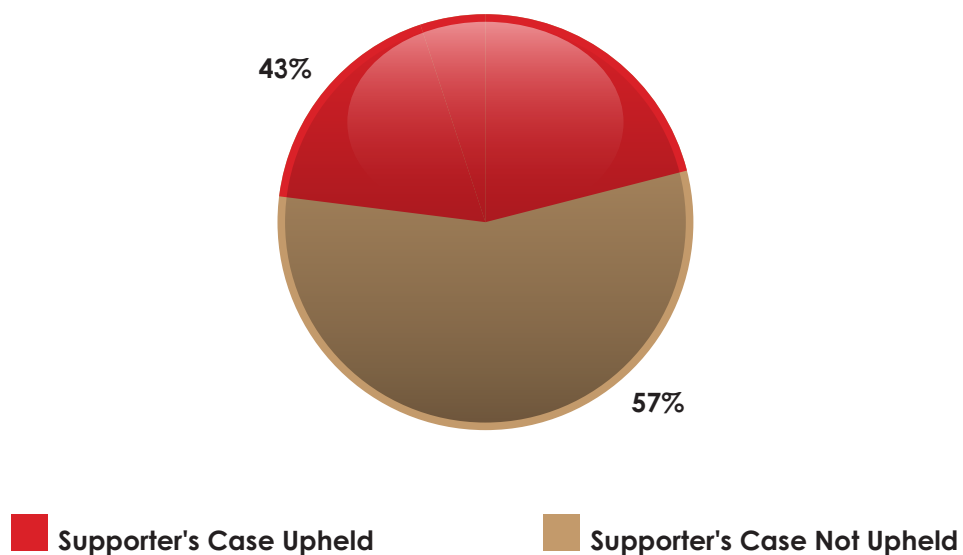
Appeals relating to Sanctions

(i.e. 41% of overall casework)



Cases relating to Ticketing/Membership and Other

(i.e. 42% + 17% of overall casework)



Investigations and Adjudications

IFO113/IFO114

A 12-Month Suspension Involving Two Supporters at Newcastle United

The Complaint

Two Newcastle Supporters received Football Banning Orders (FBOs) from a Court for an altercation with opposing Supporters. After the FBOs were terminated early, the Supporters each received a full season Club ban. The Supporters felt that the Club did not follow their own procedures or consider the Court's view. The Supporters felt that the Club reached a perverse outcome.

The Club's Response

The Club explained how the complaint progressed through their process. The Club stated the Supporters were in breach of their ticket terms, which was why they issued the suspensions.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO was satisfied that the matter received due consideration by the Club. The IFO found that the sanction appeal policy was separate to the complaints process and felt that this should be more explicit, which impacted the perception of the fairness of the process.

The IFO felt that interviewing the Supporters during the process may have removed the need for escalation to the IFO.

The IFO felt that the Club could have been clearer in explaining how the ticket terms applied and the offences the terms are designed to cover. However, the IFO considered that the sanction was one the Club were entitled to impose. The IFO also disagreed with the Club's view that the Court's decision was not relevant.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that the Club review and publish processes which are more objectively independent and transparent. The IFO encouraged the Club to re-evaluate the case in line with any revised process to consider a face-to-face meeting and the Supporters' mitigation, at the earliest opportunity.

The IFO also recommended that the parties consider a 'good behaviour agreement' when deliberating the proportionality of the ban.

IFO89

An Indefinite Ban at Brighton and Hove Albion FC

The Complaint

A Supporter received two FBOs following two football-related incidents, in 2004 and 2014. After the last FBO was terminated upon application by the Supporter, the Club imposed an indefinite ban, with a review after five years. The Supporter was dissatisfied with the sanction and the handling of the appeal. The Supporter felt that the outcome was unfair.

The Club's Response

The Club explained that following the termination of the first FBO, they allowed the Supporter to return. However, following a later incident, in which the Supporter was issued with another FBO, an indefinite ban was issued to the Supporter, as per the Club Charter. The Club stated that they considered the appeal and did not believe that any mitigating evidence presented would change the decision. The Club also noted that the Supporter has attended away matches during the ban, which was not permitted under the Club sanction.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO found that there were more people on the review panel than the published sanctions policy indicated. The IFO noted that the appeal allowed both parties to present their views, although having an independent view on the panel may have been helpful.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that the Club convenes a further appeal in line with their published process, if the Supporter requests, no earlier than 10 years after the original ban.

The IFO also recommended that the Club reviews the published information about the appeals process to ensure it is a fair reflection of what Supporters may expect in terms of the composition of the panels.

However, there were no grounds in which the IFO were able to recommend the ban was reconsidered.

IFO77

An Indefinite Ban at Fulham FC

The Complaint

A Supporter received an indefinite Club ban after an incident during a home fixture. The Supporter was unhappy with the length of time it took to go through the process and felt that the Club's decision was based upon a false version of events surrounding their ejection. The Supporter did not believe the correct protocols were followed with regard to the ejection, although those concerns were not raised during the initial complaint. The Supporter felt that the appeal was not given due consideration and there was insufficient evidence to warrant an indefinite ban.

The Club's Response

The Club explained their reasoning and shared CCTV footage with the IFO. The Club explained that there was a medical emergency elsewhere in the stadium which shifted focus. The Club noted that the process was paused as the matter was referred to the Police, before the Club progressed the matter.

The IFO's Findings

CCTV footage was viewed. It did not confirm precisely how the incident started. The IFO reviewed all evidence, including statements from stewarding staff, also noting that the Supporter accepted they were in breach of the Ground Regulations. The IFO considered that it was not unreasonable for the Club to impose the sanction. The IFO also stated that where an indefinite ban has been issued, there should always be the opportunity to review at some point.

The IFO observed that it is not unusual for clubs to await the outcome of Police investigations before proceeding with their own processes and that this was not unreasonable. The IFO noted that this could be clearer in the Club's Charter.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that the Club informs the Supporter of the steps required to convene a further appeal in the future.

IFO59

A 12-Month Ban at Leicester City FC

The Complaint

The Supporter received a 12-month suspension from the Club due to an alleged offence and/or breach of ticketing terms after their ejection from the stadium during a match. The Supporter felt that the suspension was excessive and they weren't given the opportunity to provide a defence. They were also unhappy with the way the matter was handled and felt that the Club were not transparent and did not follow their processes.

The Club's Response

The Club stated that the Supporter was in breach of the Ground Regulations and ticket terms, for which the Supporter was ejected. The Club told the IFO that they issued the sanction accordingly.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO deduced from the evidence that the Supporter was in breach of the ticket terms and Ground Regulations. However, the IFO found that the sanction and appeal correspondence lacked detail to allow the Supporter to respond to the allegations.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that a second appeal is held to enable the Supporter to respond to evidence submitted by the Club to the IFO.

IFO75

A 10-Match Suspension at Brighton and Hove Albion FC

The Complaint

The Supporter received a 10-match suspension for transferring a ticket to another person outside of the Club's published process. This was reduced to five matches upon appeal. The Supporter felt the Club did not consider the mitigating circumstances when reaching a decision. The Supporter was also unhappy that the appeal hearing minutes weren't available.

The Club's Response

The Club stated that the Supporter was in breach of the ticket terms and the sanction applied accordingly. The Club noted that emails were sent to the Supporter and their son advising that ticket identification checks would take place before the fixture in which the incident occurred.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO considered that it was not unreasonable for the Club to have reached the decision it did and although the Club Charter document could have been clearer about when discretion is exercised, the IFO felt that this did not cause detriment.

Recommendations

No recommendations were made.

22/13⁽¹⁾

An Indefinite Ban at Brighton and Hove Albion FC

The Complaint

A Supporter received an FBO and Club sanction following an incident with a steward. The FBO was terminated, although the Club issued an indefinite ban, following two appeals.

The Club's Response

The Club felt the criminal matters were irrelevant and separate from the Club processes and they considered the sanction was consistent with their Club Charter.

The IFO's Findings

The IFO noted the presence of staff involved in consideration of the incident and felt that it would be beneficial to have an independent voice on the panel.

The IFO disagreed with the Club's view that the FBO hearings had no relevance. It was noted from the FBO termination hearing that the District Judge found that given that Sussex Police's dedicated Football Police Officer felt that the Supporter had learnt their lesson, they did indeed have the right to attend matches again.

Recommendations

The IFO recommended that the Club add some element of independence within the composition of its sanctions and appeals panels.

The IFO also recommended the Club re-consider the sanction, given that the Judge deemed that the Supporter had 'earned the right to attend' matches.

23/02⁽¹⁾

An Incident at Wembley

The Complaint

The Supporter was accused of headbutting a steward before a match and was denied entry to the stadium. The Supporter alleged that a steward damaged and tried to steal their expensive watch and stated that they incurred additional expenses.

The FA's Response

The FA provided the rationale behind their decision not to uphold the complaint, which emanated from a review of the CCTV footage and staff accounts of the incident.

The IFO's Findings

On the balance of the evidence, it wasn't possible for the IFO to determine a true picture of what happened. The IFO found that the stewards were within their right to ask for the Supporter's ticket and the Supporter should have complied with this request. The IFO found no evidence of a headbutt, nor the steward being responsible for any damage to the watch.

Recommendations

No recommendations were made.

Case Studies & Themes

After considering all the evidence, the IFO will respond in one of three ways, depending on the content and merits of the case.

- The case may be closed at an early stage because the Club or Authority is considered to have responded appropriately or the Supporter has accepted an offer.
- The case may be closed via communication with the parties. In these cases, the IFO will explain the basis of any decision, which could include endorsing an offer that has been made by the Club.
- The IFO may Adjudicate where the nature of the complaint is complex, and/or it merits a public airing of the concerns and issues raised.

Some examples that have been resolved without the requirement for an Adjudication can be found below.

Family Memorial at Stadium

The Complaint

Following their father-in-law's passing, a Supporter contacted their Club and purchased two commemorative plaques to be engraved by the Club and located at the stadium. A year after making the order, the Supporter received confirmation that the stones had been laid and a map showing the location, revealing the stones were not located together.

The Claim

The Supporter wanted an apology and for the stones to be moved so that they were side-by-side.

The Response

The Club accepted that there was a breakdown in communication, stating that there wasn't a section in their terms which provided the stones would be placed together. The club also noted that they physically couldn't put two large stones together due to the format of the memorial.

What the IFO Did

- The Club was asked for a response to the complaint. The Club offered a full refund and stated that if the Supporter wished to purchase again, they could, but the stones would not be placed together.
- The IFO considered the offer to be fair, given that the terms did not confirm that the stones would be placed in a particular position.

Sanction for Abusive Social Media Comment

The Complaint

A Supporter published a comment on social media aimed at the ticket office staff, which the Club deemed to be abusive. The Supporter was issued with a one-year Club suspension which, they did not think was justified.

The Claim

The Supporter felt they had been singled out amongst many other posts which the Supporter considered to be more offensive. The Supporter wanted the sanction cancelled.

The Response

The Club referred to their Club Charter which explains that abuse towards staff will not be tolerated. The Club explained that they met with the Supporter to discuss the matter, before the Club deliberated and issued a one-year suspension.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO noted that the Supporter had been afforded the opportunity to present their case.
- The IFO acknowledged the Club's zero-tolerance approach that was detailed in the Club Charter.
- After considering the mitigating factors the Supporter presented, the IFO was satisfied that the Club did not reach an unreasonable conclusion. It was noted that reinstatement was also subject to the Supporter signing an Acceptable Behaviour Contract.

Online Ticket Purchasing Issues

The Complaint

A Supporter tried to purchase a ticket for a match using their membership but was unable to do so due to a technical issue with the Club's website. The Supporter complained and was told that the tickets had sold out after the issue was fixed.

The Claim

The Supporter was seeking a free ticket or compensation amounting to the cost of their membership.

The Response

The Club said the issue was remedied within minutes after the tickets went on sale. The Club explained that they offered cancellation and a full refund of the membership, or the opportunity for the Supporter to buy the ticket they had managed to reserve for the Supporter.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO asked the Supporter if they had been in contact with the Club about the reserved ticket. The Supporter stated that they were no longer able to attend the match when the ticket was offered.
- The IFO felt that the Club offered a fair resolution by reserving a ticket for the Supporter to buy, which the Supporter chose not to accept. In terms of the alternative offered, the IFO found that given that the membership had been used to buy tickets on multiple occasions before and that the Supporter did not want to cancel it for a refund; no further action was recommended.

Problems Purchasing Child Tickets

The Complaint

A Supporter and their son (both season ticket holders) claimed that they couldn't purchase two additional child tickets, given that the ticket office had limited opening hours and there was no online facility to do so. The Supporter decided to book one adult and one child ticket with the intention of attending the ticket office on matchday to explain and change the ticket type. On matchday, the Supporter was unhappy that the Club downgraded one of the tickets but refused to refund the difference in cost.

The Claim

The Supporter was seeking a refund for the difference in cost between the adult and child ticket.

The Response

The Club explained that the Supporter's refund request was rejected due to the game having been played.

What the IFO Did

- Upon further investigation, the Club stated that a refund of the difference in cost should have been issued on the day of the match.
- The IFO communicated the offer of a refund to the Supporter and explained that the Club would be in touch with them directly.

Suspected Touting Sanction

The Complaint

A Supporter received a one-year Club ban for selling their match tickets, which they denied. The Supporter stated that stadium security staff scanned the ticket and refused them entry to the stadium due to being intoxicated.

The Claim

The Supporter was seeking for the ban to be rescinded.

The Response

The Club provided evidence that a third-party had been in possession of the Supporter's ticket, having purchased the ticket outside of the Club's process, a breach of the ticket terms and conditions.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO reviewed the evidence and found that the sanction and appeals process had been followed.
- The IFO felt that based on the balance of the evidence provided by both parties, the Club had not reached an unreasonable conclusion and was therefore entitled to issue the sanction.

Lifetime Ban for Behaviour at a Match

The Complaint

A Supporter received a lifetime ban for discriminatory behaviour, in 2018. They were issued with a Football Banning Order ("FBO") in Court. Upon expiry of the FBO, the Supporter received a lifetime ban from the Club, which despite appealing, was upheld.

The Claim

The Supporter wanted the ban to be overturned.

The Response

The Club explained that after issuing the sanction, they had not communicated with the Supporter in a clear enough manner. However, the Club were satisfied that the correct decision was reached.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO agreed that the Club had not been consistent with their communication.
- During the IFO process, the Club offered to write to the Supporter to clarify: the conditions of the ban, how and when they could appeal and what the Club would expect the Supporter to demonstrate for the Club to consider varying the ban. The IFO felt this was fair and proportionate and would help the Supporter to understand their route to returning to matches.
- The Club agreed to engage with the IFO to discuss best practice around the sanctions and appeal policy.

Restricted View

The Complaint

A Supporter had a season ticket in the front row of a block. The Supporter claimed that the block in front obscured their view of the pitch for several matches and after reporting the matter to the Club, they had not done anything to resolve the issue.

The Claim

The Supporter was seeking a full refund of their season ticket.

The Response

The Club did not believe that the images the Supporter provided represented a fair representation of their view. The Club noted that the Supporter had moved seats for the upcoming season into a section where they could stand. The Club explained that despite their belief that the Supporter's view was not restricted, a 25% refund had been offered.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO reviewed the photographic evidence from both parties and undertook independent research.
- The IFO referred to the Premier League handbook's provisions on ticketing, which allow for a 'reasonable reduction in the price of tickets for seats with a restricted view of the goal.'
- Based on the IFO's assessment of the evidence, the IFO endorsed the Club's offer which, based on the evidence, was deemed generous.

Membership Pricing Issues

The Complaint

A Supporter purchased a 50% discounted Club membership in order to be eligible to buy match tickets. However, the discount was not applied, and they paid full price. The Supporter contacted the Club to request a refund of the membership overpayment and purchased match ticket in the interim but was unhappy with the Club's response.

The Claim

The Supporter was seeking a refund of the additional 50% membership cost.

The Response

The Club stated that they considered the matter closed as they had since refunded the additional membership cost and refunded the booking fees as a gesture of goodwill.

What the IFO Did

- The IFO noted the refund, which was what the Supporter was seeking in resolution.
- The Supporter stated that they had not received the settlement and the IFO contacted the Club to follow up. The IFO shared with the Supporter the additional information the Club required to process the payment.

At Wolves, the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO) has provided invaluable support to both the Club and its Supporters. This support enables the Club to access fair and impartial advice when dealing with issues, while also offering a clear escalation point for Supporters in the rare instances where they are dissatisfied with the resolution of an issue in accordance with our policies.

By providing a neutral third party to mediate disputes and offer guidance, the IFO helps to foster a positive and constructive relationship between the Club and its Supporters.

Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club



We welcome the continued efforts of the Independent Football Ombudsman in offering free and impartial support to fans undergoing our sanctions and bans process.

While we have a robust sanctions and bans process in place, which centres around an evidence-based framework, we appreciate the importance of fans having the option of being referred to an independent third party to review their case should they wish.

Manchester City Football Club



Newcastle United supports fans, staff and other stakeholders by following an internal process designed to effectively manage enquiries. Any complaints are thoroughly investigated by the Club, with the correct procedures, professional codes and regulations in place to ensure that each individual is treated fairly throughout the process of finding a resolution.

The Football Club always looks to find a solution to complaints and concerns in the most effective manner, but in a small number of cases where consultation with the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO) has been required, valuable, comprehensive advice from the organisation has helped to resolve matters in the most professional manner.

Newcastle United



We aim to provide the very best levels of customer service for our Supporters but recognise there may be times where Supporters are dissatisfied with the outcome of our sanctions or complaints policy. We are supportive of the IFO providing an independent platform to support fans in these circumstances. We have worked with the IFO who have reviewed a small number of cases which have been referred following the exhaustion of our complaint's procedure. Our experience of this interaction has been entirely positive and one in which it is clear to see that the IFO are working to build relationships with all stakeholders.

We have been grateful of the IFO's support in reviewing our policies and procedures and providing guidance on best practice that will allow the Club to provide better experiences for all Supporters.

AFC Bournemouth





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 the Dispute Resolution Ombudsman, which operates high profile Alternative Dispute Resolution 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, providing 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, ACI Arb

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 also 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 at county level. 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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