

# Fresh Players, New Tactics: Lessons from the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust

Phil Frampton, Jonathan Michie and Andy Walsh

Mural at Sixfields Stadium by Mark Pacan. www.pacan.com



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for

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the supporters' trusts initiative

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**Fresh Players, New Tactics:**  
Lessons from Northampton Town Supporters' Trust

A Report from the Football Governance Research Centre,  
Birkbeck, University of London  
for Supporters Direct

Research Paper 2001/01

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## Acknowledgements

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We are particularly grateful to John Dickie, the previous leader of Northampton Borough Council; Andy Roberts, local journalist; Russell Lewis, the Football in the Community Officer at Northampton Town FC; Tony Clarke MP, the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust's elected Director on the Board of Northampton Town Football Club; and Brian Lomax, the previous elected Director who is now Chair of Supporters Direct.

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Phil Frampton  
Jonathan Michie  
Andy Walsh

## Foreword

By the Rt. Hon. Chris Smith MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport



Football, so everyone says, is becoming predictable. They say that Manchester United will always win the League, that it's the big clubs and the big players that count, and that smaller clubs and ordinary fans are simply going to get lost in the process.

I don't subscribe to that view and I don't think many other fans do either. Despite the growing number of super clubs, worth tens - even hundreds - of millions of pounds, I do detect that supporters are establishing themselves as a major force in the world of football governance as well as being the linchpin of what actually matters in football - the results on the pitch.

The experiences of those who follow Northampton Town Football Club have provided a beacon for other supporters to follow. Supporters Direct is gathering momentum in clubs throughout the country, from the smallest right up to the biggest in the land.

The idea of fans banding together has not only served in many cases to protect the relationship between a club and its followers, but has also where necessary provided a real, tangible lifeline to those teams that have struggled to cope on the escalator of increasing costs.

That stability, rooted in a deep loyalty, rather than a transient investment or passing fad, makes Supporters Direct central to the future health of football in this country. The game in Britain is characterised by its diversity, with teams from every town. I am delighted to give my continued support to this scheme, which plays such an important part in helping to ensure that the rich variety of footballing endeavour will be preserved and enhanced for years to come.

## Preface

By Dr Christine Oughton, Director, Football Governance Research Centre, Birkbeck



This is the first in a series of Football Governance Research Centre papers commissioned by Supporters Direct. These will examine new governance structures for football clubs and explore the lessons that can be learned from the experience of supporters at different clubs. The past year has witnessed the formation of 15 Supporters' Trusts designed to provide football supporters with a genuine stake in their club. The concept of a 'Trust' as a governance structure is not new. But their widespread establishment at British football clubs *is* a recent development. Northampton Town FC was the first club to establish a democratic Supporters' Trust designed to give fans direct influence over the way their club is run. The trust was established in 1992 in order to save the club from bankruptcy and ensure that it would be properly managed in the future. Membership of the trust is open to all supporters. They have the right to elect a Director to the Board of the club.

This paper demonstrates that the lessons from the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust can provide both analytical and practical insight into this exciting new form of governance structure. Analytical research has already identified a number of appropriate legal/company structures that may be used to launch Supporter Trusts.<sup>1</sup> In September 2000 the government gave its backing to the policy recommendations of this research by establishing Supporters Direct to provide legal, financial and practical advice to supporters wishing to establish democratically run Supporters Trusts at their clubs.

This paper focuses on the next steps. After a trust is successfully established, what can be done to facilitate the growth of the trust, increase its influence with the club and strengthen its ties with the local community? To answer these questions the authors have carried out an in-depth study based on interviews with supporters and others. The paper demonstrates how a Supporters' Trust, working together with the club and the local community can increase its influence and enhance the performance of the club both on and off the field.<sup>2</sup> The findings are important because they provide the basis for a range of initiatives that may be used to strengthen ties between football clubs, their supporters and the local community and place clubs at the heart of local community development.

In the case of Northampton Town FC, Northampton Borough Council was well placed to play a proactive role because of their willingness, given the involvement of the Supporters' Trust, to build a new stadium to lease to the Club. This gives scope for including in the lease agreement items such as the need for supporter involvement. There are many other football clubs around the country that lease their grounds from the local authority, so there is clearly scope for lessons to be learned as to how local authorities could use their periodic lease agreements to encourage the club to more fully involve the supporters and local community. We would suggest that in cases where local authorities currently lease the football ground to the club, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport could brief local authorities on the sort of arrangements for supporter involvement that might be

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<sup>1</sup> See Michie (1999) and Jacquiss (2001).

<sup>2</sup> That football clubs should have strong links with the local community is an important principle for Supporters Direct. Quite apart from being important for the local community, this is also in the best long term interests of the clubs themselves. A recent report from FutureBrand found Manchester United to be the most valuable sports brand in Europe and that 'A strong passionate local fan base is the single most important factor driving brand value' (Garrahan, 2001).

proposed to football clubs as part of the agreement when clubs seek to negotiate, or renegotiate, the lease on the ground. Such considerations might also include introducing the role of ‘golden shares’.

But as also indicated below, there are many other ways in which local authorities can support clubs financially, by involving them in delivering local authority objectives, whether on social inclusion, anti-racist work, educational initiatives and so on. If the local authority does not own the ground, there may appear to be less scope to influence the club towards involving supporters and the local community. The opposite may be the case. With no ‘stick’ in terms of ground lease agreements, the local authority has to use the ‘carrot’ of funding, tied to delivering social objectives. The outcome is then tied to achieving these objectives, thus forcing the club to play a progressive role in the local community. And such work will be greatly facilitated if the club actively involves the local supporter base. This whole agenda, of how local and national Government could be more active in encouraging football clubs to act responsibly is one that the Football Governance Research Centre will return to in a subsequent Research Paper.



## **Executive Summary**

In 1992 the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust helped save Northampton Town Football Club, which was faced with bankruptcy. The Trust also established a legitimate role for supporters in the running of the club. In return for raising funds, the Trust secured a shareholding in the club. They also secured the right to elect a Director to the Football Club Board. This has therefore served as an example to supporters at other clubs. The example also played an important role in the establishment last year of Supporters Direct, the Government-backed initiative to assist supporters who wish to have a greater say in the way their football club is run.

At times of crisis, football fans will devote huge amounts of time and energy to save their clubs. But how can this be sustained year after year? If Supporters Direct is to encourage fans to establish Trusts, it needs to answer this question – both to its own satisfaction and to pass on the experience, good and bad, of those who have already travelled this road. Hence the current Paper, into the current challenges facing the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust, how these challenges might best be met, what lessons there are for others, and what Supporters Direct might do to facilitate best practice at all clubs.

We canvassed those involved with the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust. Focus groups were held; questionnaires circulated; and interviews conducted. Meetings were held with others in Northampton Town, including from the Football Club and the Council, and also with individuals from relevant national groups and organisations.

### *Northampton Town Football Club*

In 1991 Northampton Town Football Club was unable to pay its players £64,000 owed for two months' wages. Attendance at home matches averaged around 2000 and went nowhere near paying for the players' wage bill. In January 1992, the club's debts were reported by one shareholder at £1.6 million, equivalent to twice the club's annual financial turnover. Unpaid creditors included the local council. On hearing rumours of the club's financial crisis and faced with losing their club, Northampton Town FC fans took action. Northampton Town Supporters' Trust was formed. The official administrator brought in to run the club convinced the High Court that the club could return to solvency. The existence of the Supporters' Trust and its fund-raising exercise was given as one of the main reasons for the club being seen as a rescue prospect. When the administrator convened a meeting to organise the future management of the club, a new board emerged with four former directors and two representatives of the Supporters' Trust. The two Trust Officers at the meeting insisted that whoever sat on the board as a Trust representative must be elected by the Trust members.

Northampton Borough Council was involved with the Supporters' Trust from the outset. A representative from the Council immediately had a seat on the Trust's executive committee. The stadium used by the club in 1992 met neither the standards of the Football League nor lower divisions. The Council agreed to build a new community stadium that could be used by the club. The Council completed the stadium in 1994 with the assistance of a £1 million donation from the Football Trust.

### *Northampton Town Supporters' Trust*

The Trust holds just over 8 per cent of the club's shares and elects one director. The board is currently composed of 6 directors, and the borough council has an observer who attends each meeting and reports back directly to the borough chief executive. Three of the directors were on the board before the club went into insolvency. They were part of the consortium put together to get the club back on its feet. Currently no one director has a majority shareholding.

### *Anti-Racism and Ethnic Minority Inclusion*

In 1996, Northampton Town Football Club became the first professional football club to adopt an Equal Opportunities Policy. Northampton Town FC were also to the fore in the 'Kick It Out' anti-racism campaign. In 2000, the club launched another major anti-racist initiative through the Sixfields Anti-Racism Working Party (chaired by the supporters' director, Tony Clarke) with the support of the government sponsored Let's Kick Racism Out of Football. The aim was to combat racism in local football and draw more ethnic minority members of the local community into football.

### *Disability Initiatives*

Through Trust efforts and the role of the Borough council, the club can boast some of the best facilities for disabled supporters in the country. Since 1992, the Trust has held special fundraising events to assist with the supplying of extra facilities, donating several thousand pounds. This money has been used among other things to purchase six Sennheisser Units to assist visually impaired supporters listen to the match commentary. The club in 2000 was the only one in Britain to meet the Football Task Force's aim of clubs having facilities for the disabled and their carers equivalent to at least two per cent of a club's capacity. It was also the only club with dedicated disabled facilities on all four sides of the ground. In 1997 the club won the Football League Award for disability facilities and the Macdonald's Award for the best facilities and services for disabled supporters in British football.

### *Meeting Northampton Town FC's Supporters' Needs Today*

That Northampton Town Supporters' Trust remains a healthy organisation, after more than nine years of existence is a tribute to the members and Officers of the Trust. The Trust has played a trailblazing role for other football supporters' groups across the country. It has demonstrated how supporters can play a positive and important role at the highest level of the affairs of a football club. In terms of the future, our discussions with Trust members revealed a wish for more information, involvement and feedback regarding the affairs of the Trust. In particular, the Trust might usefully:

- Review the aims of the Trust and produce a 'Statement of Philosophy and Aims'
- Review the Trust's strategy, distinguishing between long and short term strategy
- Publicise the aims of the Trust more widely
- Improve the impact of Trust statements (for example through the club programme)
- Organise a recruitment drive amongst match going fans

### *Conclusions*

(i) Northampton Town Supporters' Trust:

- a 'mission statement' and 'five year plan' would help focus the Trust
- expand the ownership stake and increase the number of elected directors

(ii) Supporters at other clubs:

- supporters' trusts can assist fans to play a role in their club
- supporters groups need to be open and democratic and inclusive of all fans
- Supporters Direct to bring together officers of groups to allow for skills transference

(iii) Football Clubs:

- supporters' trusts can assist clubs to improve revenue streams
- supporters groups can improve relations with fans
- clubs will miss out on big market opportunities by not being socially inclusive

(iv) Local and Central Government:

- assist clubs on the proviso that they comply with policies regarding social inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

*'Now is a good time to re-evaluate the role of football clubs and their relationship with the community. Clubs' dual roles as businesses and community organisations are not incompatible but complementary. For instance, those with the most sophisticated community operations have succeeded in boosting home attendances. Principles of 'corporate citizenship' have as much relevance in football as they do in any other modern, fast-growing industry.'*

(Football Task Force, *Investing in the Community*, 1999, para 2.5)

At the time of writing (February 2001) Hull City football club is threatened with bankruptcy and closure. The crisis at Hull City is just the latest example of a lower league club pushed into bankruptcy by gross managerial incompetence and possibly fraudulent activity. The third division club faces disaster: debts are estimated to be at least £1.6 million, the Board are subject to a Football Association investigation and a Fraud Squad enquiry, and the fans are now in the unenviable position of hoping that a buyer will appear to put forward a viable bid to the administrators. However, even were such a bid to materialise there is no guarantee for fans that the new owners would be any more scrupulous in their dealings or effective in their management than was the previous owner.

What is particularly unfortunate is that given more time, the efforts of the fans' mutual, the Tigers Cooperative, to raise enough money to save their club from liquidation might have generated enough momentum to salvage their club from the brink of bankruptcy, but given the meagre two-week stay of execution before winding up, their efforts may prove to be in vain – at this stage, at least.

Clubs facing bankruptcy is not a new phenomenon. Fans rallying round to save their clubs has happened repeatedly in the past. But there are new developments. The first is that when almost ten years ago the fans at Northampton Town Football Club raised money to save their club, they did it on their terms. They were not prepared to simply hand money over to those who had been responsible for getting their club into trouble in the first place. They demanded a share of the club in return for funds raised. They expected and got the right to elect Directors to the Board. And they involved the local authority in their attempts to ensure that the club would in future act as a community club.

Secondly, the attempt by fans to demand a say in the way their clubs are run, including the possibility of taking an ownership stake and having democratically elected Directors, is now being given practical assistance on a co-ordinated national scale through Supporters Direct, the new national initiative with offices and full-time staff based at Birkbeck College in London, supported by the Government. The response has been overwhelming, with supporters from more than 100 clubs, Premiership, League and non-league approaching Supporters Direct for advice and assistance. The face of football is changing – and not just through the TV deals and sponsorship that the media tends to notice. The supporters have drawn a line in the sand. They are not just demanding a say; they are creating the mechanisms to make that voice heard on a continuing basis.

And thirdly, then, these cases of fans getting involved are no longer confined to small clubs facing bankruptcy and needing fans' money. Supporters groups are becoming proactive, demanding a say in the running of their clubs even where there is no immediate need on the part of the clubs to raise funds from supporters. And this is happening not only at small clubs, where perhaps it is easier to see that a few hundred fans can make a difference. It is happening across the divisions, including in the Premiership, including the biggest PLCs. Indeed, the role

of supporters was highlighted most dramatically through the campaign by supporters of Manchester United against the attempt by their Board to sell the club (or rather the PLC that owned the club) to BSkyB. The campaign was waged by the existing Independent Supporters Association. But it also led to a new organisation being created, of supporters who were also shareholders. Shareholders United Against Murdoch then reformed as Shareholders United, as a collective shareholding group that seeks to ensure that the PLC will act in the interests of the Football Club, the supporters and the local community.

New groups, including shareholder trusts, are being established almost every week with the assistance of Supporters Direct. An important issue is how these new bodies will sustain their activities over the coming years, ensuring that the voice gained by supporters does indeed become a permanent feature of the game. It is to consider this issue that the current Paper was commissioned by Supporters Direct. The obvious step was to look back at the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust almost ten years after it was founded to see how it had managed to maintain its momentum. This was not cherry picked as a 'successful' case to show off. Quite the contrary. One of the driving forces behind the Trust's original launch, Brian Lomax, had resigned as Chair of the Trust and as the Trust's elected Director on the Football Club Board. He had done this in part because of the role he is now playing nationally, as Chair of Supporters Direct. It was known that the Northampton Town Supporters Trust had since faced difficulties, as documented in the Paper below. This case was therefore chosen precisely because we thought it might flag up some of the difficulties and problems that other Trusts might face over the years ahead.

As indicated below, the experience suggests that there is indeed a role for such Trusts as a continuing feature of football clubs. But it is a role that will be best fulfilled if such groups are conscious of the need to continually reassess their aims and objectives, their strategies and their ways of operating. It is a tribute to the supporters of Northampton Town FC that they are doing precisely this. It is also apposite and encouraging that one of the conclusions that emerged was that those involved in the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust thought they would benefit from better networking with supporters from other clubs. Again, this has echoes from the experience of Manchester United where the Board claimed that selling out to Murdoch was necessary to compete against other clubs. Yet the other clubs who made submissions to the Monopoly and Mergers Inquiry all supported the takeover. All the submissions from supporters – including of Manchester United but mostly of other clubs – were united in opposing the deal as being bad for fans and bad for the game. The mechanism for supporters from different clubs to network, share experiences and support each other now exists through Supporters Direct. The supporters of Northampton Town FC thought that they would learn a lot from this; we hope that it will be clear from reading this paper that supporters from other clubs can also learn much from the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust.

A final lesson from researching and writing this paper has been the fact that many of the issues are equally apposite to big and small clubs, to profit making PLCs and loss making privately owned clubs. When the idea of commissioning this paper was first mooted, the concern was expressed that it might not be of much interest beyond Northampton Town, and certainly not to supporters of Premiership clubs. The truth is that where the smaller clubs have shown a lead, the supporters of the Premiership clubs are now following. It might appear ironic, but in our view is entirely appropriate, that the Paper ended up being written by the person who chaired the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association during the successful battle against the BSkyB takeover; by the current chair of Shareholders United, the successor to Shareholders United Against Murdoch; and in the interests of balance, a supporter of Liverpool FC; with a Foreword from an Arsenal fan and a Preface from a Spurs Supporter. The lessons from Northampton Town will we are sure be put to good effect at all these Premiership clubs.

## **2. Researching Northampton Town Supporters' Trust**

Faced with the task of researching the development of Northampton Town's Supporters' Trust, our starting point had to be to canvass as wide a range as possible of those who were actually involved with the Trust and its history.

- i. Focus groups were held to elicit the opinions of Trust members who were not principal Officers of the Trust. One focus group was held in the town of Northampton. The other, for Trust members who lived away from the town, was held in Wellingborough. Each group had a range of age and social groups.
- ii. All those who said they wished to attend the focus groups were sent questionnaires to complete anonymously. 18 questionnaires were returned completed by Trust members. These questionnaires were used to get a comprehensive picture on a range of issues that the focus group could only discuss more selectively. The questionnaires asked for the respondents' views regarding why they had joined the Trust, what they considered to be the positive and negative aspects of the Trust's development and their aspirations for the Trust.
- iii. In-depth face-to-face interviews of an hour or more were conducted with a local sports journalist and Trust member, a leading councillor, the Trust director on the board of the football club and twice with the previous Trust director.
- iv. In-depth telephone interviews of up to an hour were conducted with the football club community officer, the Trust secretary, and an organiser of a breakaway group from the Trust.
- v. The views of organisers in the anti-racist field, including Kick It Out, CARE and community activists in Northampton were solicited.

As indicated in the Acknowledgements above, we benefited from discussing these issues with a number of other colleagues, both during the research and in drafting this Paper. We look forward to further exchanges when we present the Paper, both to members of the Northampton Town Supporters Trust and at the planned national seminar at Birkbeck. We would also welcome subsequent feedback via the Football Governance Research Centre's postal or email address given elsewhere in this Paper. Any such feedback will be fed into subsequent research papers, the regular Supporters Direct newsletter, seminars and other activities.

## **3. Background to Northampton Town Football Club**

Northampton is set on the River Nene in the East Midlands at the heart of a rural region. The town, with a population of 194,000, is the administrative centre for Northamptonshire County and as such is the home for the County Council. Nearby towns include Wellingborough, Rushden, Peterborough, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Luton. Shoe making is a traditional occupation in the 1000 year-old town. The town once laid claim to being Britain's premier boot and shoe-making centre - hence the Football Club's nickname, *The Cobblers*. The townsfolk cobbled shoes for King John and for Cromwell's Roundhead army. Established shoe manufacturers, Crockett & Jones and Church's and bespoke cobblers, Tricker's, still have production centres in the town. Northampton's historic traditions are evident in the almost eight centuries old market square, Queen Eleanor Cross and the many centuries old All Saints Church.

Apart from the football club other sporting attractions in the town include Northamptonshire County Cricket Club and the premier league rugby union club, Northampton. The rugby club, known as *The Saints*, were recently crowned European Club champions and home fixtures are attended by 3000 to 7000 spectators.

Also close to the town are Silverstone, Britain's premier Formula One Grand Prix motor racing track, and Towcester racing track featuring National Hunt horse race meetings. Northampton Town Football Club was founded in 1897. In its history it can proudly boast to have had, in Walter Tull, one of Britain's first black professional footballers.

This small club probably had its most successful period in the 1960s when in four years it won promotion from the then Fourth Division of the Football League through to the Third Division, the Second and finally, in 1966, to the then top flight First Division. It was a time of great excitement for the fans. In that season the average attendance at home fixtures was over 18,000.

*'For three years, I went to matches and never saw them lose.'*  
(Trust Member)

*'In 1966, 5000 people would attend reserve matches.'*  
(Trust Member)

Within the same decade, Northampton Town FC were back in the Fourth Division and struggling once more. By the early 1990s attendance at home matches had slumped to around 2000. For decades the team was based at the County Ground, home of Northamptonshire County Cricket Club. In the early 1990s the Borough council executed plans to build a new all-seated sports stadium with a capacity of 7500 at Sixfields and this became the new home for the football club.

The club recently won promotion to the Second Division of the Football League. Proof that the potential fan base remains large was provided in the 1998 play off final at Wembley Stadium when 42,000 supporters travelled to the match to cheer on the local team.

### *3.1 A Club Driven To Bankruptcy*

The closing months of 1991 found Northampton Town Football Club in crisis. Soon it would be revealed that the club was unable to pay its players £64,000 owed for two month's wages. The club, in the Third Division of the Football League, and dating back to its foundation in 1897, had a dilapidated ground that, in 1966 had graced the presence of current Premier League teams such as Manchester United, Liverpool and Arsenal. However, 1991 found Northampton Town FC in a parlous situation.

*'We seemed to limp from one crisis to another.'*  
(Trust Member)

Attendance at home matches averaged around 2000 and went nowhere near paying for the players' wage bill. In January 1992, the club's debts were reported by one shareholder at £1.6 million, equivalent to twice the club's annual financial turnover. The list of unpaid creditors went far beyond the players and included the printers of the match programme and the local council. Bills presented several years previously remained unpaid.

There are differing opinions as to how this state of affairs came about but it was a situation that has become increasingly common for smaller football clubs over the last decade. Other clubs that found themselves in financial crisis included Aldershot and Charlton Athletic. Aldershot's company had been forced to fold in 1991 and would only re-appear five divisions lower than the Third Division they had left.

A few years earlier the official receiver had been called in at Charlton Athletic and fans were out collecting money in buckets to help pay the transfer fee for new player, Ronnie Moore. The same player was reportedly kicked out of the local hotel for fear that the club would not pay the bill. Despite financial injections from the local Greenwich Borough Council, the club was in such a poor financial position that a decision was taken to move home games to Selhurst Park, the stadium of local rivals, Crystal Palace.

Other notable clubs who have stared at bankruptcy in recent years include AFC Bournemouth who had amassed £5 million in debts in 1996. Lincoln City FC were in such difficult financial straits in 1998 that they were moved to launch a special appeal for supporters' assistance. At Bury FC and Hull City FC, the same situation was being repeated as this report was being compiled. Whatever the particular reasons for each club's financial difficulties, the general picture of parlous financial set ups of football clubs in the lower divisions has spread to become commonplace. No qualifications or demonstrable ability is needed to own a football club. Far too often clubs fall into the hands of individuals who are clearly unsuited to the role.

*'The previous chairman, Mr McRitchie, bought the club after seeing an advert in Sporting Life. On one occasion he made an application to the council for funding and after our meeting he asked; 'have you got the money then?' He clearly thought that we would just hand over the readies so that he could take the money away with him.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

### 3.2 Supporters Move to Save Their Club

Football fans make an emotional investment in the clubs they support.<sup>3</sup> Fans follow the fortunes of their clubs and urge them on to greater success. Once they have opted to follow a club, attending through rain and snow, through good and bad times, despite defeats and disappointments on the field, these fans display enormous loyalty. It is this loyalty that offers each club a virtual monopoly market.

The events at Northampton Town Football Club in 1992 appear to bear this out – as do similar events when crises loomed at Charlton Athletic, Bournemouth, Lincoln and other clubs. On hearing rumours of the club's financial crisis and faced with losing their club, a significant number of Northampton Town FC's fans moved to take action to save the club from extinction.

*'Most football supporters are fairly passive, they want to go to the match and maybe have a few drinks. The fact that the supporters of Northampton Town were willing to come out to public meetings to talk about how they might save their club reveals a real depth of feeling, which you don't get for many other organisations. Certainly not for a political party.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

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<sup>3</sup> This has social, political and economic implications, as discussed for example by Michie (1999) and Hamil (1999).

Were Northampton Town FC to cease to exist, these fans had other sporting entertainment options available to them. They could travel to the nearby grounds of Peterborough and Luton or content themselves with watching top-flight rugby union at The Saints ground. They could watch motor racing at Silverstone or horse racing at Towcester, but the strength of their ties led them to stay with Northampton Town FC. They chose to save ‘their’ club.

### 3.3 The Formation of Northampton Town Supporters’ Trust

Among the fans, a small group including Brian Lomax (now a director of the government financed Supporters Direct) and Rob Marshall (editor of the club fanzine, *What A Load Of Cobblers*) called a public meeting of fans. The meeting was held at the town’s Exeter Rooms and discussed what action to take to prevent the club from folding.

#### **Box 1: Supporters Direct**

Supporters Direct is an organisation dedicated to providing legal and practical advice to supporters’ groups in forming trusts that allow them a greater say in how their clubs are run. In early 1999, the Football Task Force (see Box 2, below) called for greater supporter involvement in the running of clubs. In July 1999 the Co-operative Party published a pamphlet endorsing this call and proposing practical steps to achieve this. At the October 1999 Labour Party Conference, Chris Smith MP, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport gave Government backing to the idea. He convened a working group to advise on how this could best be brought about. Brian Lomax was invited on to this group because of his experience as the elected Director at Northampton Town FC, as was Jonathan Michie, the author of the Co-operative Party’s pamphlet, and Peter Hunt, the National Secretary of the Co-operative Party. Trevor Watkins joined the Working Party because of his role at Bournemouth, where a supporters trust had saved the club. The Co-operative Bank agreed to sponsor the new initiative, and David Dunn from the Bank therefore joined the group. The Working Party was serviced by the Football Trust, with particularly close involvement from Philip French (now at the Premier League) and Alastair Bennett (currently at the Football Foundation).

The Working Party proposed to the Secretary of State the foundation of Supporters Direct, and this was launched with full-time staff in September 2000. The background, aims and operation of the new initiative are described in detail by all the various participants, in Hamil *et al.* (editors)(2001).

A free ‘starter pack’ is available on request. A quarterly newsletter is also available free of charge, as are invitations to regular seminars and other events. Contact:

Supporters Direct, Birkbeck, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX

Email: enquiries@supporters-direct.org

Phone: 020 7631 6740

fax: 020 7631 6872

or visit the website: <http://www.supporters-direct.org>



*'There was a crescendo of rumours. That's what brought people there.'*  
(Trust member)

*'People were saying: 'something's got to happen. It can't go on.'*  
(Trust member)

The packed, standing room only, meeting was attended by 600 supporters.

*'It was like going to a match. There were so many people there that some couldn't get in and had to stand in the doorway.'*  
(Trust member)

That so many fans had turned up, including some who had previously played for the club, filled most of those attending with hope. Some still felt the task of saving the club was beyond the ordinary fans.

*'I felt concerned but buoyant because there were so many of us there.'*  
(Trust member)

*'I felt helpless at the time.'*  
(Trust member)

*'I was hopeful but I felt that we the supporters couldn't do much about it. It was too much money for us to find.'*  
(Trust member)

There were also those who were keen supporters of the club who stayed away. Many felt that they had no great part to play in saving the club.

*'I was of the opinion that some sort of knight in shining armour would invariably come along and save the day.'*  
(Trust member)

Out of this meeting came Northampton Town Supporters' Trust. The formation of the Trust was no accident. Brian Lomax had been working in a Housing Trust and had thought to adapt the constitution of that Trust to the needs of the club's supporters. He felt that a constitution based on a Trust would give the most open and democratic means of handling any funds raised. The aim was that the Trust would hand funds over to the club at the relevant time with guarantees that the money would not be frittered away.

*'The Trust involved giving a pledge regarding the funds we hoped to raise that was totally transparent to the supporters.'*  
(Trust Officer)

The Exeter Rooms meeting elected 30 delegates to attend a meeting eight days later where the Trust's constitution would be debated and adopted. The primary aim of the Trust was to save the club from extinction. To this end, Trust members organised fans to go onto the streets and into the pubs and workplaces to collect funds for the club.

*'I organised pub quizzes to raise funds in Wellingborough. Lots of people came because it was to help save the club.'*  
(Trust member)

A bucket collection at the home match that followed the Trust's formation raised £3500. In addition many supporters sent in large individual donations. The local community demonstrated its desire to retain their football club.

*'There is a sense of ownership in a small town like ours. People who support Northampton Town do so because of a connection with the town, that local patriotism for their local team exists even from people who don't even go to the matches.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

Such activities were not new to football clubs facing crisis. What was different about the aim of the Supporters' Trust was that the leadership had a clear strategy to protect their club from future crises by cementing their involvement in the running of the club's affairs. If supporters were so vital to the running of the club, they argued, then supporters should have a say in the club's affairs.

There was a feeling amongst many of those that joined the Supporters' Trust that much of the blame for the crisis at the club lay with the then directors. The fans were ready to make both financial and leisure time sacrifices for the club but the Trust leaders expressed a reluctance to send on the fans' donations to a board which they considered to have for some time mismanaged the club's financial affairs. Trust leaders wanted to ensure that they could justify and account for all funds raised as a result of the fans' sacrifices.

*'The Trust was set up with two objectives: first to raise money for the club (but not for the incumbent regime), and to be accountable to the supporters for the spending of that money; and second, to seek effective involvement and representation for the supporters in the running of the club in order to ensure that such a crisis situation would never occur again.'*

*(Brian Lomax, 2001)*

The Trust emerged with a democratic structure and a membership that was open to all fans, at a price all fans were expected to be able to afford. The cost of membership was set and remains at £5 with old age pensioners and the young offered a concessionary price of £2. Life membership of the Trust was available for £25 but now is available for £35. In addition, families may join up for £10. Its initial leadership had the intention that the voice of the fans would be heard at the highest level of the club. In this sense, the Trust was the forerunner of many of the Independent Supporters' Associations that have spread around the country, each aimed at assisting the ordinary fans to influence the direction of their clubs.

### *3.4 The Supporters' Trust Secures Representation on the Board*

Notwithstanding all the efforts to save the club, an official administrator was brought in to run the club. He convinced the High Court that the club could return to solvency. The existence of the Supporters' Trust and its fund-raising exercise was given as one of the main reasons for the club being seen as a rescue prospect.

When the administrator convened a meeting to organise the future management of the club, two Trust Officers were invited. At this time all but two club directors, the chairman and his wife, had left their positions. The chairman and his wife were voted off the board and a new board emerged with four former directors and two representatives of the Supporters' Trust. The two Trust Officers at the meeting insisted that whoever sat on the board as a Trust representative must be elected by the Trust members and this was agreed.

The election in April 1992 of Phil Frost and Brian Lomax on to the board of Northampton Town Football Club was, at the time, a little-hailed landmark in the history of supporter involvement in professional football in Britain. Eight years on many clubs are going down the same road and Supporters' Trusts are sprouting up across the country and seeking elected representation on the boards.

### *3.5 Involving Northampton Borough Council*

Northampton Borough Council was involved with the Supporters' Trust from the outset. A representative from the Council immediately had a seat on the Trust's executive committee. The stadium used by the club in 1992 was The County Ground. This stadium was in such a condition that it neither met the standards of the Football League or lower divisions such as the Southern League Premier Division.

*'The ground was so bad that one manager always met players he wanted to sign at the motorway service station. He said that the ground was so bad that if the players saw it they wouldn't sign.'*  
*(Trust member)*

The Council agreed to build Sixfields stadium, a new community stadium that could be used by the club but also by other sports in the locality. The Council completed the stadium in 1994 with the assistance of a £1 million donation from the Football Trust. The council's intention was that the stadium be used for other sports including athletics, American football and amateur rugby league. However, today the Phoenix Athletics Team is the only other major user. The stadium has room for expansion and there is talk of using the nearby lake for yachting and water sports. Supporters' Trust members such as Brian Lomax have argued that, without the existence of the Trust representative on the board as a representative of the local community and the Council's direct involvement in the campaign to save the club, then it would not have been politically acceptable for the Council to step in. The use of public funds to assist a club so recently accused of serious financial mismanagement could otherwise not have been justified. The Trust's involvement guaranteed that the local authority were dealing with a reformed management and ensured that the public had a direct involvement in the affairs of the club.

Many clubs have, both in the past and present, received financial assistance from government bodies both at local and national level. The significance of Northampton Borough Council's financial assistance to the club was that the council placed conditions on aspects of running the club. One of these conditions tied in to the lease and licence to occupy the stadium was that an elected representative of the Supporters' Trust must be accepted on the board. The lease currently runs to the year 2019. In addition the council also insisted on having one non-executive observer on the football club board for the same period.

Trust members underline the rationale for the supporters having a voice on the board. The supporters are members of the local community and a key part of the club structure. They point to the transience of most officials and players involvement with their club. This is contrasted to the longevity of most fans' involvement with their club.

*'Players come and go, directors come and go, but the supporter stays.'*  
*(Trust member)*

#### 4. Developing the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust

Trust membership stood at around 600 in the year 2000, having reached a high point of 850 in the mid-1990s. Attendance at home fixtures is around 6000, so Trust membership represents around ten per cent of the average home gate. That the Trust's Annual General Meeting in 2000 was, after eight years of the Trust's existence, attended by almost 100 supporters is a tribute to the hard work of the Trust and its Officers. During the last eight years, the Trust has played an important role in the activities of the club and the development of its policies. It has raised significant funds for the club and provided a means of education for the supporters as to the affairs of the club. The Trust has notably also proved a valuable supply line for club personnel and willingly so, even if this involved losing capable Officers from the Trust's ranks.

*'Out of our people have come the club assistant secretary for example. But the Trust has a position that no one can be a Trust Officer if they have a full-time job with the club. This has affected us since the Trust lost very capable people but the club benefited.'*

*(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)*

These facts alone point to the potential longevity of Supporters' Trusts and the sincerity and intensity of the supporters. The leadership of the Trust has been able to create a potentially permanent institution and demonstrate that the Trust had a role to play in the life of the club. Throughout the last eight years the Trust has held regular Open Forum meetings to which various players, managers and directors have, from time to time, been invited to discuss issues of concern. Their attendance allowed the fans to discuss issues with them and assisted fans' understanding of the club's situation. It lowered the barriers between the club's professional staff and its supporters.

*'The Trust made you really feel a part of the club. Directors and the manager would come and answer any questions except about players' wages. People liked hearing the players and the managers speaking.'*

*(Trust member)*

*'One of the advantages of having an elected fans' director on the board is that we now have the most educated fans regarding the running of the club, in the League. They understand the problems. They can talk in details about club finances, coaching etc.'*

*(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)*

Each Annual General Meeting (AGM) elects the chairman, vice-chairman, honorary secretary and honorary treasurer. The AGM can also elect, if it so wishes, a president and two vice-presidents. Those elected to these posts, under the Trust constitution, also become the Trustees discharged with ultimate responsibility for the legal and financial affairs of the Trust. The Trustees currently meet on an 'as and when' basis, depending on the issues that need to be dealt with. Currently, the Officers place more emphasis on the executive meetings. The Trustees all sit on the Trust's executive committee, which is additionally composed of representatives from the different organisations involved with the club. Representatives are invited from the club itself, the playing staff, supporters clubs, the borough council, young supporters, disabled supporters and the travel clubs. The constitution was and is still clearly aimed to be inclusive of all the footballing community.

The meeting that follows the AGM then opens nominations for the Trust's representative chosen to sit on the club's board of directors. Any person standing for the director post must have served for at least two years on the executive committee. This measure was aimed to ensure that each candidate had proved their commitment to the Trust. The election, if needed, is by postal ballot of all members.

Meetings of the executive committee and the Trustees are generally held on a six-weekly basis. In addition, every couple of months, the Trust holds Open Forums to which the Trust membership and supporters as a whole are invited. The Trust invites officials and players of the club to attend and answer questions from the fans.

However, maintaining the health of the organisation has not been a simple task. Many Trust members saw and still see the Trust as having played a vital role in saving the club in 1992/3 and as a reservoir for assisting the club through hard times. Rather than hard times, the club saw success in the latter years of the 1990s. Reaching the play-offs, going to Wembley and achieving promotion had been accompanied by attendance at home fixtures rising from around 2000 to 6000. By 1998, the club had also paid off the last £50,000 of its historic debt.

Many people in the Trust feel that the club's recent success on the field and the Trust's success in its first task of rescuing the club has created a critical juncture for the Trust itself. There is an awareness of the Trust's reserve role as a watchdog to prevent mismanagement at board level as was felt had occurred prior to the Trust's formation and securing of representation on the board. This vigilance is especially evident in those Trust members who were involved in the 1992 activities to save the club. They fear events leading to their club being threatened in the future and believe the Trust can play a key role in protecting the club from crises.

*'The Trust is also there to see that the club never again falls into the wrong hands.'*  
(Trust member)

*'Hopefully, it should safeguard the club financially and stop any person coming onto the board whose only interest is lining their own pockets.'*  
(Trust member)

It was felt that many Trust members were content with the success both of the Trust and the club and as a consequence Trustee meetings became much less frequent.

*'Many in the Trust thought that the job was done.'*  
(Trust Officer)

*'In 1999, the Trustees only met on one occasion.'*  
(Trust Officer)

*'In 1994 we were all pulling in the same direction. There's not the edge on the meetings now.'*  
(Trust member)

*'There was a deeper problem of tiredness. We were victims of our own success.'*  
(Trust Officer)

*'We needed to define a new direction.'*  
(Trust Officer)

This uncertainty of purpose is felt to have been the background to some of the Trust's travel club organisers breaking away in 2000. The travel club took fans to matches and organised other recreational trips. It was a key source of income generation for the Trust. The breakaway organisers set up a new Sixfields travel club, taking many of the club members and offering all the surplus funds it raised directly to the club. The break away was soon followed by two calls for the Trust to hold

Emergency General Meetings. A motion of no confidence was put in the Trust chair. He promptly resigned, stood for re-election and was elected unopposed. Nevertheless, discontent in the ranks continued. Several executive committee members resigned.

*'We were doing all the work and they were sitting doing nothing at the top table. We decided to go our own way.'*  
(Organiser, breakaway travel club)

*'We lost one third to one half of the executive committee.'*  
(Trust Officer)

In many situations such a crisis could have led to demoralisation and decline of the organisation. However, the Trust leadership adopted a farsighted approach. They welcomed the EGMs as an opportunity to discuss the problems with Trust members and to bring fresh individuals onto the Trust committee.

*'We put it that we needed a new direction and new people. We asked for new people to put themselves forward and develop the Trust. The Trust members responded positively and we had a renewed purpose.'*  
(Trust Officer)

*'We should have done it three or four years ago.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

The type of crisis the Trust faced would inevitably have occurred given the perceived raison d'être of the Trust. All organisations face critical junctures in their development and the Trust was no different. An inclusive leadership will attempt at all costs to avoid unnecessary splits in the membership. For if a Trust is to represent all fans then it must take in the varying needs of different sections of fans, just as an inclusive club management must take into account all sections of the club. The Trust Officers have attempted to maintain unity of the fans by representing all shades. Thus despite the damaging formation of the breakaway travel club by the travel club's organisers, the Trust still offered a seat on the Trust executive committee to Sixfields travel club and at the time of writing, a principal organiser of Sixfields travel club remains a member of the Trust.

Any organisation needs to re-consider its aims from time to time. This particularly applies to those supporter organisations founded at times of crises to save their clubs. The Northampton Town Supporters' Trust is a case in point.

*'It was perfectly clear to the founding mothers and fathers what was necessary for the Trust to do. The new generation at the Trust are encountering an established institution so we need to clarify what our goals are.'*  
(Trust Officer)

*'I don't think the issue of the ambitions of the Trust has been addressed.'*  
(Trust member)

*'We need to ask, is it a supporters club or a Trust?'*  
(Trust member)

*'Yes, we helped to save the club but, beyond the crisis and other crises, there is a role for us.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

Some members feel that a discussion is required to refocus the work of the Trust.

*'The question is how to keep the momentum going.'*  
(Trust member)

*'We need a mission statement.'*  
(Trust member)

*'We need a 5 year business plan.'*  
(Trust member)

*'We need to draw up a list of the things we want to achieve.'*  
(Trust member)

Another symptom of the Trust's tendency to drift for a period was that there had been no major drive to increase Trust membership for a reported two years. The Trust had the facility of being allowed by the club to place leaflets appealing for new members at the turnstiles on match days. This facility had gone unused. Trust Officers reported that an estimated 2500 fans had been members at some time since the Trust's formation in 1992. The dangers of a stagnating membership for any such Trust are twofold.

Firstly, new members bring new funds both to the Trust and to the club. These funds not only increase the shareholding position of the Trust, they also demonstrate the value of the Trust as an income generating vehicle to the other directors of the club.

Secondly new members and a growing membership draw in more fans, ensuring that the Trust spreads its net and reaches out to new layers of fans. These fans are the source of knowledge regarding the needs of different sections of the fans. For example, if the Trust is to champion the needs of disabled, low income or ethnic minority supporters then it is best placed to do so when it has activists from these groups in its ranks.

Many in the Trust have drawn very positive conclusions from recent discussions. They see the need for the Trust to expand and maintain a freshness in its ranks.

*'The initial membership and committee members must not lose sight of the fact that new supporters are always coming to the club they support and these should not be forgotten... As in my own instance, there will also be supporters who do not join at the outset but are still potential members.'*  
(Trust member)

Trust members are also looking at new means of recruiting to the ranks, such as using leaflets in the annual season ticket distribution process. They are aware that, for the Trust to recruit widely, it must be clear as to what it is and what it is offering the supporters.

*'If a membership form to join the Trust was sent with each season ticket we would reach a database of 3500.'*  
(Trust member)

*'The Trust needs to be pro-active and say what it is.'*  
(Trust member)

Discussion has also arisen regarding the organisation of the Trust and involvement of the membership. Some Trust members and Officers considered that the Trust leadership had become rather remote from the membership.

*‘There seems to be a core elite. It’s a question of a willingness to open up.’  
(Trust executive member)*

*‘We looked like a cliquy cartel.’  
(Trust Officer)*

*‘The Trust Officers were too remote from the membership. We agreed we needed new people.’  
(Trust Officer)*

The executive decided to get out a quarterly newsletter for the members. The Open Forums had been allowed to lapse, so it was agreed to re-start these, with the aim of six being organised each season. These have once again proved a success, with the last two forums of 2000 having attracted around 100 fans each.

*‘We decided to get out a regular newsletter to keep members informed.’  
(Trust Officer)*

The Trust differs from other independent supporters’ organisations in that it does not have regular meetings at which its full membership can be involved in discussions on the direction of the organisation. Not all members of any voluntary organisation wish to be involved in the routine discussions of the body of which they are a member. The Trust has a democratic structure but if it is to open up to involve new members then there are issues that need to be addressed. If new members are to become fully involved in the Trust’s activities then they have to have somewhere they can go to participate in discussions regarding the Trust. The Open Forums do not appear to allow for this since they are directed at discussing club affairs rather than Trust affairs. The Trust may benefit from considering how those amongst the wider membership who wish to do so can be involved, not only in Trust activities but also in the more mundane discussions concerning the Trust’s direction.

The supporters’ director, Tony Clarke MP, believes that the whole process of discussion had been positive for the Trust in re-evaluating its direction and organisation. He argues that the executive should be opened up and that the Trust needs to be more open and encouraging.

*‘In the formative years of a Supporters’ Trust, it is inevitable that one or two individuals are seen as crucial. Each Trust needs a constitution that allows new blood to come forward and have the opportunity to challenge the legitimacy of the leaders.’*

*(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)*

*‘The current constitution has three levels of Officers - the executive, the elected Officers and the principal Officers. You need only one or two as principal Officers and six or seven as elected Officers. The executive can be much bigger to bring in others. We could widen the base at executive level and be as open and encouraging as possible.’*

*(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)*

New members can bring fresh finance, knowledge and energy. The newly elected committee members have demonstrated the potential. They have introduced fresh zeal to the Trust executive committee. There are those Trust members who are convinced that the organisation needs to set its sights higher in terms of membership and that this can be achieved by being more outgoing.



*'The Trust should concentrate on increasing its membership numbers. Only by doing so significantly will it have credibility.'* (Trust member)

*'We should use our spot in the match programme to tell supporters what we want.'* (Trust member)

Trust members at Northampton Town also believe that they could benefit from discussing with Trust executive members at other clubs.

*'There is a need for Trust executive Officers around the country to get together and discuss and learn off each other.'* (Trust member)

#### *4.1 Fundraising and Shareholdings*

The Trust first received shares in 1993. It uses its surplus of income over expenditure to purchase shares in the club. It was reported at the Trust Annual General Meeting in 2000, that the Trust held over 30,000 shares in the club. The arrangement regarding the Trust's purchase of shares is that the Trust and non-directors at the time of writing must pay £3.10 for each share. The other directors purchase shares at a price of £2 each. That these directors purchase shares at a lower price was justified by the fact that individual directors have each signed a £40,000 bank guarantee against potential club losses. In 1995, the Trust attempted to bring the demanded share price down by offering to deposit £20,000 (the level of all Directors' guarantees at that time) in an account as the Trust guarantee in return for a share purchase price of £2. The board turned this offer down.

### **5. The Director's Role on the Board**

From the outset of the reconstituted board in 1992, the Trust was permitted to elect two of the six directors on the board. However, in 1994, when the club had returned to normal trading, the majority on the board decided that the Trust was only justified in having one director. It was decided that the Trust could keep its two directors until such time as one of the Trust directors left the board. When this occurred late in 1995 the board then declined to have a replacement director from the Trust.

In 1993 there had been an agreement with the directors that, once the Trust had invested £50,000 in the club then the Trust could have a second seat on the board. By 1995, the Trust had invested over £50,000. The board raised the necessary threshold to £100,000. In 2000, this figure had been achieved and the Trust had bought over 8 per cent of the club's shares. However there is still a view that the other directors would not accept a second Trust representative on the board. Indeed, some Trust members believe that the other directors would prefer not to have any elected supporter representation on the board.

*'The club tolerates the Trust but it does not encourage its development. I believe they see it as something they have to put up with as a consequence of moving to the council-owned Sixfields stadium.'* (Trust member)

Some Trust members believe that the Trust is under pressure to raise finances for the club in order to justify its representation on the board. However these Trust members argue that supporters'

representation on the board is justified, irrespective of Trust investment in the club. They point to the money that supporters regularly put into the club when they pass through the turnstiles.

*'The directors seem to believe that a seat on the board should be justified through financial commitment to the club. They conveniently forget the money that supporters put into the club via the ticket sales.'*  
(Trust member)

The shifting goalposts regarding Trust representation on the board reflects the underlying tensions between the fans' representatives and the other directors. It is inevitable that there will be some conflicts between the perceptions of the fans concerning the needs of the club and the perceptions of those who consider that their individual share ownership entitles them to run the club.

*'On occasion the supporters' rep may be isolated and then the fact that you are the supporters' rep can be a focus for the other directors' frustrations.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

Such conflicts need not be unhealthy for the club providing that both parties keep the interests of the club paramount. Ordinary directors can too often lose sight of the need to service their customer base. The club is part of the local community and, in the case of Northampton Town, is firmly tied into the community by the conditions of the lease.

*'There are other things that spin off from having a supporter as a director, which the commercially minded director would not automatically think of. It makes no commercial sense to build the Walter Tull memorial but in terms of bonding and building a life within the community it was a great initiative. The anti-racist campaigns are not a commercial consideration as they actually cost the club money but they are important nonetheless.'*  
(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)

Individual directors may also have conflicting views regarding the needs of the club, and the current supporters' director feels that this also can give him a pivotal role in influencing the club's direction. He points out that, in these situations, alliances are often formed and hence the supporters' director is by no means isolated.

*'Some friction and disagreements between directors is inevitable. The other directors sometimes disagree with each other and sometimes with me. It's part and parcel of the general friction at any club.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

The current supporters' director also feels that, as the representative of the fans, he has a powerful position.

*'The other directors look at me on equal terms. The position is very powerful. I am one voice in six but I am also the representative of the supporters.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

*'The Trust is both a shareholder and cash injector. The Trust has put in as much money as some other directors – sometimes more. We have a right both as a shareholder and cash injector.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

The Leader of the Borough Council has further emphasised the role of the Trust by stating:

*'We have been blessed in that we have had two outstanding individuals as supporter directors. The role they play has to be accountable to the members of the Trust and therefore they have to be representative, which is a very difficult job. They are also representative of the wider community. In the commercial world a company will bring in non-executive directors to broaden the base of experience of the board.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

In the competing demands for club finance, supporters' representatives can place the fans' needs to the fore and attempt to secure a balanced approach regarding the overall needs of the club. The role that supporters' representation and consultation with the fans can play was demonstrated when, on one occasion, the board imposed a substantial increase in ticket prices. Brian Lomax, the then Trust representative on the board argued against the level of the increase warning that it would upset the fans. The directors went ahead but, when they announced the increase, angry fans staged a protest invasion of the pitch. Lomax took the issue back to the board and ticket prices were brought down. Since that time the board has adopted a new procedure where the rationale given for price increases is explained and discussed with the Trust and the fans. This has prevented any further incident.

The board is currently composed of 6 directors and the borough council has an observer who attends each meeting and reports back directly to the borough chief executive. Three of the directors were on the board before the club went into insolvency. They were part of the consortium put together to get the club back on its feet. Currently no one director has a majority shareholding. It is this situation in particular that allows the supporters' director to play an important and sometimes pivotal role in the decisions of the board. However, should a majority shareholder emerge at any stage, then the Trust will have to review its strategy both in relation to the board and the club itself.

*'If someone came in to the club and bought a majority shareholding, there could be a problem with the Trust's position.'*

*(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)*

The Trust is an entirely voluntary body. Its directors receive no financial remuneration for their role on the board. Consequently, Trust directors have to find the time to play their role both in the Trust and as board members. Lomax reports that he spent an estimated 20 hours each week on his Trust and board activities. As the current Trust representative on the board is a Member of Parliament he also finds himself pressured as regard to time commitments.

*'A match day began for me at 12.30pm and went on until 7.00pm. I spent my time circulating amongst the fans and the volunteer staff, such as the programme sellers and stewards. I listened out for problems and tried to make all the volunteers feel appreciated. During the match I would sit with the other directors because that is where much of the business seemed to be discussed.'*

*(Brian Lomax, former Trust director)*

Lomax feels this is part of the case for the Trust having a second director on the board so that the Trust representatives could play a more effective role. A second director would also allow for the more experienced director to assist the incoming director in assuming his or her duties. The Trust representatives could second each other's resolutions and thus ensure that supporters' proposals were given a proper airing. Lomax feels that the Trust needs to aim for maximum supporter representation on the board:

*'In any strategy statement, I would want to see part of our goal as the maximising of our shareholding and the number of directors we have on the board.'*

*(Brian Lomax, former Trust director)*

His experience as a director has strengthened his belief that supporters should run their own clubs:

*'I'd like to think that one day all football clubs will be true community clubs run by the supporters.'*  
(Trust member)

Feelings on this issue amongst Trust members appear to be mixed. Some consider that the Trust lacks the human material capable of playing the part as a club director.

*'The capable people just don't have the time.'*  
(Trust member)

*'I don't think that we should have an extra director because there's not the quality.'*  
(Trust member)

The current supporters' director considers that some of his fellow directors share this view.

*'The other directors do have a fear that someone will come forward in the future that they can't deal with.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

However, the current and previous Trust directors harbour no such doubts. They pointed to the many Trust members with professional experience.

*'Amongst the twelve new executive members there are some very, very capable people.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

*'I don't subscribe to the view that we will not have the people to put forward. The constitution of the Trust ensures that anyone who is up for director has to have proved themselves.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

As to the type of candidate that members should elect as their director, the current supporters' director has his own views. He considers that supporters' representatives should be willing and able to represent all sections of the community, responsible, diplomatic, able to listen to all sides and able to stand their ground, both at board level and within the Trust itself.

*'Fans should elect for the director those who are socially inclusive, diplomats, act responsibly, can be good listeners and can stand their corner.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

*'It is important that anyone elected onto the board for the Trust can prove that they can be inclusive in their approach because they need to represent all the fans.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

### *5.1 Directors' Confidentiality*

The elected board member is bound by a high degree of confidentiality regarding board discussions. This is an extremely complex area where a director must have a sense of propriety and avoid giving out information that could damage the day to day activity of the board and the club as a whole. There are discussions at board level, such as individual players' wages, discussion of which needs to remain confidential.

*'For example, there's no problem about talking about the overall wages bill but not about individual players' wages.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

In the case of ongoing discussions, where no final decision has been taken at the board meeting itself, directors would be advised to report only that the issues remain unresolved.

*'Outcomes from board meetings are important to report but if issues are not resolved I can only report that they are still not resolved.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

*'It would damage the club if I didn't maintain confidentiality. No fans want that.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

At the same time, the director needs to maintain the maximum possible openness with the Trust membership. The current director believes that there should be a transparent relationship from the outset where the members fully understand the degree to which candidates for election feel that they can be open regarding board discussions.

*'The ground needs to be set out right from the outset as to what extent the Trust members can expect to hear about information from the board.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

## **6. Club Involvement in the Community**

*'Football clubs in England have deep roots in their communities. The club-community relationship has traditionally been based on mutual support. Clubs draw strength from the goodwill of the local people, who have nurtured and supported them over the generations. Clubs repay this by providing a community focus and source of civic pride.'*  
(Football Task Force, *Investing in the Community*, 1999, para 2.1)

The Government stated in the policy document *A Sporting Future for All* that it desired to see 'leaders and role models in sport who represent all the people who live in our communities'. By giving support to socially inclusive initiatives and community based schemes this target is achievable. Professional sport and football in particular has the ability to reach out to those sections of the community that are currently under-represented. The experience of Northampton Town FC is that this is no easy task and that stating an aim is not enough; sustained support is required. Professional clubs can be convinced of the commercial benefits but the requisite skills need to be developed and strategies for dealing with issues must be shared more widely.

By developing community based schemes, clubs can attract new fans to the club and strengthen the loyalties of longer established supporters. The Football Task Force (see Box 2) noted that those clubs who had some of the best Football in the Community schemes had benefited significantly from an increase in the number of new supporters at games.

*'Wimbledon has no fewer than 22 per cent of season ticket holders who claim to have been introduced to the club through its 'Football in the Community' scheme.'*  
(Football Task Force, *Investing in the Community*', 1999, para 3.19)

## Box 2: The Football Task Force

The Football Task Force was established in July 1997 by the incoming Labour Government under the auspices of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Its remit was to make recommendations in pursuit of the following goals:

1. To eliminate racism in sport and encourage wider participation by ethnic minorities in both playing and spectating
2. To improve disabled access to spectating facilities
3. Encourage greater supporter involvement in the running of clubs
4. Encourage ticketing and pricing policies that are geared to reflect the needs of all, on an equitable basis, including for cup and international matches
5. Encourage merchandising policies that reflect the needs of supporters as well as commercial considerations
6. Develop the opportunities for players to act as good role models in terms of behaviour and sportsmanship, and to become actively involved in community schemes
7. Reconcile the potential conflict between the legitimate needs of shareholders, players and supporters where clubs have been floated on the Stock Exchange

David Mellor was appointed to Chair the Task Force. The other members (including those who joined after the initial appointments) were:

- Keith Wiseman (replaced by Graham Kelly, then David Davies), FA
- Peter Leaver (replaced by Mike Lee), Premier League
- David Sheepshanks, Football League
- Gordon Taylor, Professional Football Association
- Sir Rodney Walker, Sports Council (later Trevor Brooking, Sport England)
- John Barnwell, League Managers Association
- David Phillips, Association of Premier and Football League Referees and Linesmen
- Graham Bean (replaced by Allison Pilling), Football Supporters Association
- Tony Kershaw (replaced by Ian Todd), National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs
- Steve Hennigan, Disabled Supporters Association
- Chris Heinitz, Local Government Association
- Sir Herman Ouseley, Commission for Racial Equality
- Rogan Taylor, Liverpool University's Football Research Unit
- Eleanor Oldroyd, Radio Five
- Sir John Smith
- Adam Brown, Manchester Metropolitan University

The Secretariat was provided by the Football Trust (which has since become the Football Foundation).

The Task Force published four reports, on:

1. *Eliminating Racism from Football*
2. *Improving Facilities for Disabled Supporters*
3. *Investing in the Community*; and
4. *Commercial Issues*

The first three reports were adopted by the Task Force unanimously. This included the third report that called for greater supporter involvement in football clubs, citing the experience of Northampton Town Football Club and Supporters Trust as a model.

For further detail on the Task Force, its deliberations and its reports, see Burnham (2000), Coward (2000), Lee (2000), Brown (1999, 2000) and Faulkner (2001).

The Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research, at Leicester University, went even further in its evidence to the Football Task Force:

*'Schemes at these clubs are providing enormous net commercial gains in terms of recruiting new fans to their clubs. In fact, nationally, attracting close to seven per cent of the home fans each week is probably worth around £20,000 per club per weekend on average, or £400,000 to £500,000 per club per season, or close to £10 million in gate receipts alone in the FA Premier League every year.'*

Though these figures relate directly to the Premier League the commercial benefit of undertaking community work is plain to see.

The current supporters' director on the board of Northampton Town Football Club believes that Trust representatives have a key role to play in the development of socially inclusive policies at the club.

*'How far the Trust can play a role in developing social inclusion policies at the club depends largely on the social awareness of the Trust representatives on the board.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

In the first year at Sixfields Stadium, the previous supporters' director Brian Lomax would organise the distribution of car parking permits to the disabled. He had taken responsibility on the board for dealing with disability, equal opportunity and race issues. He maintained a continual dialogue concerning equal opportunity, disability and anti-racism issues with the borough council.

## **7. Anti-Racism and Ethnic Minority Inclusion**

One of the aims of the Football Task Force was to eliminate racism in the game and to draw more ethnic minorities into football at all levels. For a small football club with slender resources, Northampton Town can argue that they have been to the fore in starting to take up these issues. The involvement of the Trust director has been notable.

*'Myself and Brian Lomax before me have kept a handle on the board on the issues of race and football in the community.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

The town has a varied ethnic community comprising around 8 per cent of the borough's population. According to the 1991 census, 4000 people were reported as describing themselves as Black, 2500 as Indian, 1000 as Pakistani and 1000 as Bangladeshi. The latter figures are thought to have increased substantially over the last ten years while an estimated 1800 Somali refugees have been accommodated in the town. Racist abuse and chanting were reportedly no strangers to the ears of black footballers visiting Northampton Town FC in the 1970s and 1980s. But the efforts of the club appear to have much improved the level of respect shown by fans for black footballers.

*'At the County Ground there used to be a lot of racist chanting and abuse. In the 1970s when black players came they sometimes had bananas thrown at them and were subject to people making grunting noises but now you very rarely hear racist abuse. The club does a good job with the schools and the disabled.'*  
(Trust life member)

In 1996, Northampton Town Football Club became the first professional football club to adopt an Equal Opportunities Policy. Northampton Town FC were also to the fore in the 'Kick It Out' anti-racism campaign.<sup>4</sup> The supporters' director, Brian Lomax, played a pivotal role in this activity. He was the chair of the working party established by the club in 1995 to relaunch the local 'Let's Kick Racism Out Of Football' campaign. The campaign brought together many organisations in the town. This body not only staged anti-racist events at matches but also, under Brian Lomax's aegis, formulated the equal opportunities policy for the club that was unanimously adopted by the board in 1996 and presented to the fans at a home fixture in 1997. The board now has a policy of banning those found guilty of using racist words or behaviour. Lomax also reports that supporters now report and identify those guilty of racist behaviour in the crowd. The Anti-Racist match days have continued to be held on an annual basis. Trust Officers are nevertheless aware of the size of the task still before them.

*'We have not eradicated racism but I believe the action we have taken at Sixfields is a good example to others. We work with the police on surveillance against racism and act on racist issues when they arise.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

Attempts to attract ethnic minority supporters to attend matches include the consistent targeting of schools with high proportions of ethnic minority students. Players and coaches visit these schools regularly, and many free tickets are given out to allow children to attend matches. The club also plays a part in the town's annual ethnic Roots Festival and the rally was opened in 2000 by the black former England star, Cyril Regis. It must be said, though, that the number of people from ethnic minority communities attending matches is reportedly still low.

*'You see a few black fans at the matches.'*  
(Trust member)

*'You see the odd Bengali at the matches'*  
(Trust life member)

*'We're not yet attracting many from the ethnic minorities.'*  
(Tony Clarke MP, Trust director on board)

The Football Task Force recognised that ticketing issues were partly responsible for the lack of black and Asian faces at matches:

*'It is possible that black supporters have been disproportionately affected by the increase in ticket prices in recent years.'*

(Football Task Force, *Eliminating Racism From Football*, 1998, para 5.6)

If a football club does want to be representative of the community in which it is based then it has to work at encouraging attendance from the different sections that make up that community. Strengthening a club's ties with each section of the community will give commercial spin-offs, which in turn will help sustain and strengthen the club.

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<sup>4</sup> On the 'Kick it Out' campaign nationally, see Power (2000).



### **Box 3: The Walter Tull Memorial Match and the Walter Tull Memorial Gardens**

At a home fixture in January 1997, Northampton Town Football Club presented its new anti-racist and equal opportunities policy to the fans. Brian Lomax reports:

*'This match was designated the Walter Tull Memorial Match, in honour of the club's first black player. Walter was only the second black professional footballer in football history. He joined Northampton Town from Tottenham Hotspur in 1911, and played over 100 games for the Cobblers, scoring nine goals from midfield. In 1914 he was among the initial army volunteers at the outbreak of the First World War and two years later became the first black Officer to receive a commission in the British Army. He was killed in 1918 on the Somme, only weeks before the Armistice, and has no known grave.*

*'In partnership with the Borough Council, the working party has now established a Walter Tull Memorial Garden at Sixfields, where the ashes of those supporters who request it may be interred. This was officially dedicated in 1999.'*

(Brian Lomax, 2001)

The Football Task Force recommended that professional clubs and the administrators of the sport set targets for increasing the number of black and Asian coaches. This has been taken up enthusiastically at Northampton Town FC, although the scheme has had its difficulties. As Trust representative on the board and chair of Northampton Town 'Football in the Community', Lomax was involved in a club initiative to take the football club out to the town's small Bangladeshi community. With the co-operation of the local mosque and the Islamic Community Centre, the club established regular 'Football Fun Days' for the Bangladeshi youth in the Victoria Park area of the town. The scheme involved 50 Bangladeshi youth being coached by club representatives and playing football with adults and children involved with the club. On the first outing it was so successful that Bangladeshi girls attended the following event. The target of the club's involvement was to end up with three Bangladeshi youth each securing an FA coaching badge. This target remains but the scheme has faltered. The main problem encountered has been the lack of a clear understanding between the community leaders and the club as to how to develop the scheme.

In 2000, the club launched another major anti-racist initiative with the Sixfields Anti-Racism Working Party (chaired by the supporters' director, Tony Clarke) with the support of the government sponsored Let's Kick Racism Out of Football. The aim was to combat racism in local football and draw more ethnic minority members of the local community into football. The starting point of this was a local conference, Understanding Racism in Local Football. The conference attracted 100 people from local schools, local authorities, anti-racist groups and the managers of local football teams and leagues.

## **8. Disability Initiatives**

There was a time when the Trust would buy blankets and refreshments for wheelchair-bound supporters. But now, through Trust efforts and the role of the Borough council, the club itself can boast an impressive record in this field, with some of the best facilities for disabled supporters in the country. Since 1992, the Trust has held special fundraising events to assist with the supplying of extra facilities, donating several thousand pounds. This money has recently been used to purchase six Sennheisser Units to assist visually impaired supporters listening to the match commentary.

The club in 2000 was the only one in Britain able to match the Football Task Force's aim of clubs having facilities for the disabled and their carers equivalent to at least two per cent of a club's capacity. It was also the only club with dedicated disabled facilities on all four sides of the ground, allowing supporters to watch the match where and with whom they so desired. In 1997 the club won the Football League Award for disability facilities and the Macdonald's Award for the best facilities and services for disabled supporters in British football.

In December 2000, the local authority's free newspaper, *Northampton Today*, was able to report that the number of disabled parking spaces at the ground had increased from 59 to 74 at the beginning of the 2000/2001 season. Northampton Borough Council consulted disabled supporters before these improvements were carried out and dedicated car parking spaces now exist at three ends of the ground:

*'Additional facilities at the stadium include:*

- 150 designated wheelchair spaces within the ground with 19 for disabled away supporters;*
- six Sennheisser Units to enable visually-impaired supporters to hear the running commentary of the game;*
- disabled toilets in every section of the ground;*
- ground-level access to the stadium's function rooms.'*

*(Northampton Today, December 2000)*

Northampton Town FC has also pioneered the development of playing opportunities for those with disabilities. In particular, it has played a significant role in the development of football for those with learning disabilities. Its 'Football in the Community Scheme' led the way in organising league football on a national level for those with learning disabilities. The impact was such that, when England won the European Cup for learning disability teams in 1996, the manager and eight of the squad came from Northampton Town FC. The 'Football in the Community' Scheme works with each Special Needs school for six weeks at a time. Many children are involved in the FA Soccer Star Awards and club manager Kevin Wilson plays an active part. At the end of the scheme in 2000, 150 children were invited to Sixfields Stadium and presented with certificates by Kevin Wilson. The club, in co-operation with the local authority, runs training days and an annual football tournament for the disabled, and the club teams remain successful. Northampton Town's multi-disabled team in 2000 reached the final of the FA Multi-Disabled tournament, only to lose to Chelsea at Stamford Bridge.

## **9. Meeting Northampton Town FC's Supporters' Needs Today**

Discussions with members of the Supporters' Trust revealed that despite, and partly as a result of, the club's success and the Trust having its representative on the board, there are still issues that the fans wish to be resolved. These reflect the continuing need for vocal supporter representation. The principal issues that have been raised concern the limited capacity of the stadium, ticketing policy, the question of reserved seating and car park facilities. When Sixfields Stadium opened in 1994, home fixtures were attracting an average of around 3500 people for each game. The ground capacity of 7500 may have appeared adequate at the time but recent club successes on the field have boosted attendance figures to 6000. Many matches have to be scheduled as 'all ticket'. With 40,000 supporters travelling to watch Northampton Town FC play at Wembley in 1998, the club clearly has a potential fan base far in excess of the ground's capacity. Matches scheduled as 'all ticket' are often the most potentially attractive games with the most likelihood of drawing along more casual fans. Many Trust members thus felt that the club was losing an opportunity to draw these fans in.

*'The ground needs to be extended to get in all the local supporters.'*  
(Trust member)

*'The ground is too small. The ground takes 7500 but last time we went to Peterborough we took 3000 supporters. The limited capacity means that many games are all ticket and that puts people off.'*  
(Trust member)

Trust members living more than ten miles from the stadium expressed particular frustration with the frequency of all ticket games. They had to make a substantial journey to the ground before match day, there being no facility to purchase tickets away from the ground.

*'A third of the Cobblers' support comes from outside Northampton. When it's an all ticket match, it's a 40-mile round trip from where I live to buy a ticket. I don't know if my kids will come on the day but I have to buy them a ticket in advance anyway.'*  
(Trust member)

Trust members understood that the borough council and the club faced difficulties regarding the issue of expanding the stadium's capacity. They recognised that, were the club to reach Division One of the Football League, the current stadium would be far too limited, create more difficulties for supporters and result in a huge loss of potential revenue for both the club and the town. Nevertheless, there was a fear that if the team was relegated in the following season, then attendances and income from home fixtures could fall, leaving the club saddled with the increased overheads resulting from the stadium's expansion. Others considered that the stadium was too small for even the team's current fan base and that ground expansion was urgently required.

*'Division One is a realistic goal but, if we got there, the ground would be too small. But if we got up to Division One then went down again, crowds would go down and the club would end up with huge overheads like paying more rent.'*  
(Trust member)

Some Trust members were critical of the Borough council's servicing of the ground. They felt that the council had neglected the upkeep of the stadium and commented on the lack of expansion since the stadium opened in 1994.

*'The council haven't put one new seat in the ground since it opened.'*  
(Trust member)

*'The scoreboard doesn't work anymore and the lights are poor.'*  
(Trust member)

Some Trust members also felt that the council was an impediment to expanding the ground because of the number of committees that any decision would have to pass through before it could be affected.

*'The problem is to get the council to put the changes through.'*  
(Trust member)

Further concerns about the club's ticketing policy given the limited capacity were expressed in regard to the reserved seating system. Some Trust members expressed their dissatisfaction with the system. They felt that it did not allow them to bring along friends, children and other relatives

who were casual supporters because their children or guests would often have to sit far away from them. The view was expressed by several Trust members that match attendance should return to a more flexible positioning arrangement for fans. They wanted to see the return of standing areas or the creation of unreserved seating areas. They pointed out that visiting fans could choose their seats more easily than those home fans with season tickets. More flexible seating or standing arrangements would, they felt, return match days to a more sociable environment.

*'The problem with the all seated ground is that if my nine year old son wants to come he can't sit near me.'* (Trust member)

*'They should bring back standing. It's more sociable. Some don't go now because they don't like the reserved seats. You can't sit with who you want.'* (Trust member)

*'There should be a section of unreserved seating. You can't bring along casual supporters because they'll be sat at least 30 seats away from you. I can't say to my kid that he should sit on his own.'* (Trust member)

Some disgruntlement was expressed in regard to season ticket prices for children watching Northampton Town. Members were aware of much cheaper charges elsewhere, including in the First Division of the Football League.

*'My lad's season ticket costs £200 but at Blackburn you can get a ticket for £70 with the second one free.'* (Trust member)

Getting to and from home fixtures was also considered to be extremely problematic. Fans who lived in Wellingborough felt that a supporters' coach should be available to take fans to fixtures. They felt that many football followers in their town had been lost to Northampton Town because of lack of transport and local ticket sales. Instead some fans had opted to watch the Conference League team, Rushden & Diamonds, in the nearby town of Irthlingborough.

*'No match coaches go from Wellingborough and we are losing fans to Rushden & Diamonds.'* (Trust member)

*'You can only get to Sixfields by car but the car parks around the ground are 2000 light on capacity. If the council dealt with that then more people would attend.'* (Trust member)

Trust members from Rushden and Wellingborough considered that their only option was to use their car on match days but expressed dismay at the difficulties involved in parking at, and leaving, the ground on match days. They wanted to see more car parking space, more exits and a police officer on point duty to smooth the flow of traffic away from the ground.

*'It takes for ever to get out of the ground after the match. The police should have someone on point duty to smooth the flow of traffic.'* (Trust member)

Trust members appeared aware that their representative on the board was taking most of these issues up both with the board and, where appropriate, with the council. However, they stated that other than the Trust director, they were not aware of any other Trust activities to advance the

demands of the fans. Regarding the anti-racist activities in particular, few Trust members showed awareness of the extent of the activities. Lomax felt that the initiatives he had taken when a director were seen solely as his activities, though he had tried to make them as public as possible and promote collective ownership of the policies.

Whether the Trust as a body is wise to leave the securing of its wishes regarding the club so largely to the Trust representative on the board is a point at issue. Whoever represents the Trust on the board has limited time and resources to pursue Trust policy. In addition, without thorough discussion within the Trust, initiatives may fail properly to reflect the views of the supporters, or to carry the supporters along. In hindsight Lomax considers that had the Trust established working groups on various issues this would have assisted his work as a director. Such groups would involve more Trust activists in effecting the strategy of the Trust. By widening discussion, more time resources could be given to each issue. The Trust does have executive members who take responsibility for specific areas but this could be strengthened by more individuals being drawn in to apply their talents and efforts to different aspects of the Trust's activities. Such a strategy might also help to overcome the feeling that does exist to some degree within the Trust that a small clique of Officers dominate the organisation and spoon feed the other members with information.

*'It seems like a small clique that holds the power.'*  
(Trust executive member)

Northampton Town Supporters' Trust is not unique in this regard. The same issues apply to other supporters' associations and voluntary organisations as a whole. Initiatives such as working parties to involve more of the membership, where successfully applied, have strengthened these groups. Those individuals who find themselves in leadership positions often have difficulty enough in finding time to devote to the task of running a group but it is important that time is set aside to communicate with the membership effectively. When a group's members are critical of the way it is run it invariably points to a breakdown in communication. Acknowledging criticism at the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust has led to more volunteers for the Executive which in turn should lighten the workload of the leaders of the Trust. It is important that leaders of any group are alert to accusations of elitism however unfounded those criticisms appear to be.

Without more Trust members being involved in applying Trust strategies, the fans as a whole will not be as aware of the point of view of the Trust on various issues as they could be. For the Trust to maintain its claim to represent the majority of fans then its views need to be clearly known and discussed. Furthermore, a clear putting of the case to the fans may reveal other points of view and other ideas that could assist both the Trust and the club.

There is also a danger of the Trust not being seen by the fans as an independent body. In this event, when fans have disagreements with the club direction, they may bypass the Trust. Where this occurs, it is important that Trusts apply the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust approach to the breakaway Sixfields travel club and attempt to draw independent fans' initiatives back into the fold, including by offering representation within the Trust itself. Trusts should have nothing to fear from genuine Independent Supporters' Associations. At Manchester United, the ISA has successfully worked alongside the more recent Supporters' Trust initiative, with both organisations believing that there are important roles to be played by the two organisations separately, and with their combined efforts to democratise the club being more than the sum of their parts.

## 10. The Football Task Force

As stated above, the Football Task Force terms of reference were stated as being *‘To consider, and make recommendations on, appropriate measures to:*

- *Eliminate racism in football and encourage wider participation by ethnic minorities, both playing and spectating;*
- *Improve disabled access to spectating facilities;*
- *Encourage greater supporter involvement in the running of clubs;*
- *Encourage ticketing and pricing policies that are geared to reflect the needs of all, on an equitable basis, including for cup and international matches;*
- *Encourage merchandising policies that reflect the needs of supporters as well as commercial considerations;*
- *Develop the opportunities for players to act as good role models in terms of behaviour and sportsmanship, and to become actively involved in community schemes;*
- *Reconcile the potential conflict between the legitimate needs of shareholders, players and supporters where clubs are floated on the Stock Exchange.’*

In this section we consider the lessons from the experience of the Northampton Town Supporters’ Trust in relation to the aims of the Task Force. First we look at the role of the Supporters’ Trusts and supporters’ groups. We then consider the role that supporters’ representatives can play as elected directors, followed by implementing socially inclusive policies at club and local level. Finally we consider how local authorities can team up with clubs and supporters’ groups to achieve the particular aims of each of these bodies and the Task Force.

### *10.1 Should Supporters take a Share?*

The role that Northampton Town’s Supporters’ Trust has played both in the rescue and the development of Northampton Town FC leads little room for doubt that independent supporters’ groups can play a positive role in their football club. The club has benefited with regard to the raising of much needed finance, a more knowledgeable and understanding fan base and fan input of ideas for the club’s development. The Trust has demonstrated that those directors who have the interests of their clubs at heart need have nothing to fear from the involvement of elected supporters’ representatives on the board. On the contrary, the experience of Northampton Town Football Club suggests that it is in the best interests of other clubs to consider whether the inclusion of genuine supporters’ representatives on their boards might not enhance their ambitions for their own clubs. Supporter involvement should not be viewed as being a block to ambitious clubs but rather should be seen as representing a key component for securing those ambitions.

Ambitious directors will take a close look at the Northampton Town example and see the benefits of a socially inclusive approach. In particular, by working in a healthy partnership with elected supporters they can engender a co-operative spirit of club development and draw on the suggestions of their supporters.

Many Trust members at Northampton Town consider that there is some antagonism from the other directors towards their having an elected director on the board. Since both parties undoubtedly have the interests of the club at heart, such antagonism appears unwarranted. In an age when Public Limited Companies (PLCs) are becoming a common ownership form for clubs, the example of Northampton Town appears to run counter to the trend. On the one hand, the Northampton Town experience emphasises that football clubs are very much part of the community and that supporters and the local community have an important role to play in protecting their communities’ clubs from being the victims of remote financial wheeler-dealing.

At the same time, supporter involvement offers an important lever for ambitious clubs. Whether that ambition is measured in terms of League status, trophies, business development or contributions to the local community, when a club sets its ambitions, it would benefit from considering how supporter involvement might help it achieve its goals.

There are those who argue that football today is dominated by huge transfer fees for players and investment inputs for stadium and youth development, and that such sums of money require turning to the stock market. However, one only has to look abroad to find that two of Europe's biggest clubs, Real Madrid and Barcelona, are supporter-owned, mutual companies. Notably, when it comes to buying new players, both these clubs remain the expressed envy of Britain's biggest clubs. Ambition and competing at the highest level are clearly not synonymous with being a club whose supporters are left without a voice.

### *10.2 ISAs or Trusts?*

The past decade has seen a growing movement of fans determined to have their say in the affairs of their clubs. The most dramatic and successful example of this was the movement of fans at Manchester United to prevent BSkyB from taking over their club. The success of this movement has undoubtedly inspired many fans to go beyond protesting at club action or inaction and to consider how they might play a more positive part in the development of their club.

Independent supporters' groups have sprung up all over the country. Some of these would class themselves as ISAs and some as Supporters' Trusts. By Supporters' Trusts we mean those fans' organisations that have set up a democratic Trust to hold fans' money for input to the club, often in exchange for shares. By ISAs we refer to those independent supporters' groups that have not taken the step of formally organising themselves as Trusts.

Not all ISAs will wish to transform themselves into Trusts. They may feel that they do not have the strength or personnel to do so. Alternatively they may feel so isolated from the individuals that make up the board that they consider that they have more important and more tangible immediate issues they wish to address. Nevertheless, most ISAs that exist recognise that they need some orientation to their club's boardroom.

In some cases ISAs exist side by side with Trust organisations. Not all fans wish to be so tied into organisational, financial and legal involvement with their clubs. ISAs could as such represent a different fan base than that of the Trust and may have differing considerations. Furthermore, even where Trusts are well established as at Northampton Town, contrasts of opinion sometimes lead to groups breaking away. The task of maintaining the unity of any organisation through all its ups and downs is extremely difficult. Groups of members may feel that they have to establish their own body to further their demands. Artificial amalgamations of these groups may be detrimental. However, if the ethos of a Trust is to represent the widest possible section of fans, then that Trust needs to make room for any ISAs to be not only represented in the Trust's ranks but also to be given a clear hearing as to any alternative viewpoints those ISAs might have. Barcelona may be a club owned by its fans on a mutual basis, but disagreements have still led to the formation of an ISA, L'Elefant Blau (The Blue Elephant), that has striven to operate as a campaigning body within the mutual as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Some ISA members may fear that those organisations that have become Trusts may lose their sense of being independent bodies and, while pressurising at board level, the Trust might cease to maintain its independent stance toward club affairs as a whole. Trusts that go this way, ceasing to explain their views to the fans as a whole, will be making a mistake to the detriment of both the

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<sup>5</sup> On the situation at FC Barcelona, see L'Elefant Blau (1999, 2000) and Brown and Walsh (2001).

Trust and the club. If a Trust is to represent the fans' views then it needs to maintain a consistent dialogue with the fans. Otherwise it can no longer claim to be the voice of the fans. The Trust can only maintain a meaningful dialogue by pointing to where it stands on club issues and the needs of the fans. This may involve using space in the match programme, fanzines, web sites or simple leaflets. In addition, the fans need to be aware of the reasons why they would benefit from spending their time and money in joining a Trust and this does not simply involve 'having a say'. The ongoing discussions at Northampton Town point to Trust members' awareness of the danger of Trusts sitting back and not continually reasserting their role in the club.

Regarding fans purchasing shares to seek representation on the boards of football clubs, it can be argued that the fans should not have to put any further income into a club to justify a say in their club. After all, fans put large sums of money into the club each year as season ticket holders. The fans' combined annual financial input often far outweighs the year on year investment of individual directors. A recognition of the value of the fans' involvement was made in 2000 when the chairman of Lincoln City FC offered to donate his 400,000 shares to the club's Supporters' Trust in return for the fans putting money into the club – a situation which would give the supporters control over the club.<sup>6</sup> However, few individual directors appear willing as yet to give up their perceived privilege of plotting the future of their clubs away from the keen eye of the mass of fans. The Supporters' Trust movement argues that the purchasing of shares can be a way to secure a voice in the affairs of the club. This would appear to be borne out by the cases of Northampton Town FC, Lincoln City FC, Luton Town FC and others. At the same time it is vital that no-one is excluded on financial grounds, and that fans are able to join any trust for a sum low enough so that none are excluded – certainly no more than the price of a match-day ticket. This is a principle that Northampton Town Supporters' Trust established from the beginning and have stuck to. It is also a principle that Supporters Direct have adopted and now insist upon for any new supporters trusts.

### *10.3 PLCs*

The situation regarding supporters and shareholdings appears relatively simple when dealing with the smaller clubs. It becomes more complex when a club becomes a PLC. Any PLC has the creation of profit as a return to its shareholders as its *raison d'être*. This may not conflict with the development of the club in many instances, but there is always the danger that it will, and that the interests of the shareholders will be given priority. Were, for example, BSkyB to have taken over Manchester United PLC, then the time may have come when the intrinsic pursuit of profit could have led to decisions that, at worst, could have separated the club from its supporter base. The proposed move of Wimbledon FC, previously to Dublin and now to Milton Keynes, is another case in point. If a club were to abandon the domestic league and opt for competing solely in a European Super League, profits might well be boosted from television and sponsorship income but many of their fans would be physically and financially no longer able to attend matches.

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<sup>6</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2001, Lincoln City Football Club's new chairman Rob Bradley announced that the Lincoln City Membership Scheme's Community Ownership Package for the shareholding of the Club had been successful and that the club was being restructured as an Industrial and Provident Society run on the principle of one person one vote with representation at board level from supporters. He added: 'Our bid has been assembled with the help of Supporters Direct, The Co-operative Party, Lincoln Co-operative Society, local business people who are keen to invest in the club, and other significant advisors. The whole thrust of the bid though has come through the love of this club by its supporters and their wish that the club should be part of the community that they live in.'



PLCs tend to be dominated by large institutional shareholders that have to answer to their own shareholders as to the financial expediency of their investments. Their shareholders invest to secure profits. In the main, their decision to invest has nothing to do with any interest in the fate of a local community or its football supporters but is rather determined by expected profit levels, share prices and dividend payments. ENIC's decision to invest in Tottenham Hotspur in early 2001 was quickly followed by an announcement to dispose of their substantial investment in Glasgow Rangers FC. The announcement of ENIC's intention to disinvest in Rangers was made immediately prior to a vital game against Celtic, showing little regard for the stability of the football club at an important stage of the season.

However, it is not necessarily the case that institutional investors will always dominate the football PLCs. Where fans have bought shares and pool their ownership in a Trust, the fans themselves can represent a major collective shareholding in their club.

#### *10.4 Defensive Shareholdings*

The expressed goal of the recent spate of Supporters' Trusts is to achieve a greater voice for fans in the future direction of their clubs. As part of this process of democratisation, winning a place on their clubs' boards for elected representatives of the fans can play a useful role. In some cases this has already been achieved. The example of Northampton Town demonstrates that this can prove a successful arrangement both for the board and the fans. However, as Tony Clarke MP and other Trust members have pointed out, the situation at Northampton Town FC remains unstable with regard to the degree of the supporters' involvement on the board. With Northampton Town Supporters' Trust owning just over eight per cent of the club's shares, the club remains open to the other ninety per cent of shares being bought by one individual. In this case, the supporters' director would have but a token say in the affairs of the club.

Trust members feel that the Trust still needs to play a role in defending the club from the possibility of private shareholders misusing their positions on the board. Some but by no means all members of the Trust have drawn the conclusion that the Trust needs to go further in its input and expand both its membership of the board and its shareholding to ensure that the supporters retain a say in perpetuity.

In simple terms, only with a majority shareholding can the Supporters' Trusts ensure a long term say in the direction of the club. Whether Trusts will travel down this road of attempting to secure a more permanent place in their club's decision-making remains to be seen. That will probably depend on the success or otherwise of each Trust in learning and applying the lessons from the sterling work of the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust pioneers. What is certain is that all those directors who principally have the interests of their club at heart have nothing to fear from supporters increasing their contribution to, and involvement in, their club.

#### *10.5 A Team Affair?*

One issue where Northampton Town Supporters' Trust members appear in agreement is that the Trust should have no public say in the picking of the club's football teams. They recognise that the team cannot be chosen by committee. Even where supporters own the club, as at Real Madrid and Barcelona, the coach is left to pick the teams. Every fan has his or her view of who might be included or excluded from their team and those lively discussions are part of the meat and veg of being a football fan. The fans' views on team selection often differ enormously. The manager is there to pick the team on the basis of accrued knowledge of the players that are available, how

they interact with each other on the field and how they can deal with the relative strengths and weaknesses of the opposing team. Not even the most knowledgeable fan is party to the knowledge of the manager and the playing staff.

Thus, independent supporters' groups that wish to publicly intervene in the selection of the team, run the risk of undermining those selected to play and thus the team as a whole, while at the same time, representing a relatively ill-informed view of a section of the fans. Football clubs are made up of different inter-locking components with differing roles. Independent supporters groups that wish to publicly declare on matters of team selection will learn that, in the long term, their actions will neither improve support for their group nor the success of their team.

### *10.6 Elected Supporters' Directors and Confidentiality*

Tony Clarke MP has pointed to the potentially powerful position of elected supporters' directors. Where the directors are part of a shareholding Trust offering additional finance to the club, they not only have a rightful position on the board but also can claim to speak for a significant number of fans. The fans represent both a major customer base and a fund-raising contributor to the club. The supporters' directors can wield an important influence. Boards are unlikely to establish a satisfactory relationship with supporters' representatives who are simply co-opted as directors. Supporters' representatives need to be elected by a significant section of the fans. What gives the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust its authority on the board is that the Trust can speak for a large number of fans at the club. Continual efforts must be made to maintain the Trust as representative of the fans.

*'We laid down conditions about the role of the supporters' trust. We believed that there should be input from the grass roots fans and that the supporters need a voice. As the supporters' trust are responsible to their membership there are democratic checks, which ensure that the information gets back to the fans.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

If the supporters' director is not subject to election and re-election then that director can lose legitimacy on the board. The director can easily become isolated from the fans, lose authority on the board and become a cause of friction between other directors. So too, having the supporters' director as a non-voting member on the board serves little purpose. In this eventuality, the position of the supporters' representative is so weak that the 'fans' director' is tied to collective responsibility but not at all responsible for any board decisions. Token gestures of this nature have been proven not to work and make no progress in bringing together the different elements of the club.

As executive directors, supporters' representatives play an active part in the direction of the club. They take responsibility for different aspects of club development. At Northampton Town FC, previous elected directors have taken responsibility for implementing the agenda of social inclusion – anti-racism, disability facilities, club involvement in the community and so on. By taking a keen interest in their allotted fields of board responsibility, Northampton Town FC's supporter directors have demonstrated their use for the club and maintained their authority.

The problem of time commitment for those supporter directors who are in full time employment is an issue. One supporter director stated that he gave 20 hours a week of his time to the club. Other Trust members doubted whether they could give the time required to be an active board member. Here the Trusts or sympathetic boards might consider approaching the relevant employers requesting them to offer the director some leave of absence. They can point to the benefits offered to the local community through the development of their club. Once additional directors are

elected to the board, the load of each director is likely to ease since they can divide up their responsibilities regarding the Trust.

It is important that the supporters' representatives on the board remain answerable to the Trustees and to the Trust membership as a whole. It is not the remit of this paper to be prescriptive on these issues; nevertheless the experience of the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust suggests that some general guidelines are required. The relationship between Trustees and the general membership needs to be a two-way process. In the case of the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust, the structure allows for monthly executive meetings. All members are invited to participate in these meetings. Where this is the case, members should be actively encouraged to attend and have their say. Where executive meetings are closed, a structure needs to be put in place where general meetings of the whole membership occur at least once every two months – with the proviso that any formal resolutions put before the general meetings should be placed before the Trustees and executive beforehand.

It is important that members also fully understand that their directors will be bound by a responsibility to maintain confidentiality regarding discussions at board level. This issue of confidentiality is a potential minefield. Supporter directors need to have the maximum transparency with their members but at the same time they must understand that breaches of confidentiality not only undermine their role but may also undermine the club as a whole. Trust members have shown at Northampton Town that there is a general understanding of this issue. The Trusts are therefore likely to elect responsible candidates who will at the same time understand that their role is to primarily represent the interests of the supporters on the board.

### *10.7 Social Inclusion*

The 1998 Football Task report, *Eliminating Racism from Football* recommended that the government should 'carry out a follow up report to determine progress' regarding anti-racism and ethnic minority inclusion in football. Three years on, it is time that progress is reviewed and full consideration given to breaking down the evident barriers that continue to hinder the achievement of the goals of the Task Force.

In local leagues, perceptions and experience of racism have led to the formation of the rapidly growing Asian leagues. No clubs appear to have yet overcome the alienation of ethnic minorities from attending football matches. Many people in ethnic minority groups feel that they are not part of the football fan community. Northampton Town is no different in this respect. Attempts to draw along isolated groups of people from ethnic minority groups to watch matches may falter. Thought should be given to the fact that most young people from the ethnic minority groups exist in the multi-racial education environment. Where tickets are handed out to schools and colleges and whole classes of students invited along, this can give a more comfortable environment in which ethnic minority young people can enjoy a football match with friends without feeling that they will be isolated.

The Task Force also recommended that support be given to 'schemes using football to tackle youth crime and clubs to have incentives to establish study centres at grounds.' (Football Task Force, *Investing in the Community*, 1999). There needs to be support, in terms of finance and resources, for clubs to undertake initiatives designed to tackle social exclusion. Many clubs have taken initiatives but in the main these are limited. The world of the professional leagues is dominated by authorities and management that give the impression of being 'pale, male and stale'.

Attendance at league matches continues to be dominated by white, able-bodied males. The large price hikes have also begun to exclude a layer of the poorest sections of the community from

attending matches. This tendency impacts particularly on ethnic minorities who often come from the less well off sections of the community and those with disabilities who often face other financial pressures. Clubs have to continue to give thought to the impact of ticket prices both on their traditional fan base and on the new sections of the community they are aiming to attract. All the good work aimed at making match days more attractive to ethnic minorities and the disabled, or to the new generation of young supporters, can be undermined by price exclusion.

For a small club with limited resources, Northampton Town has played an important part in developing club strategies aimed at social inclusion of groups previously discriminated against in the nation's footballing community. The club's record with regard to the disabled has been recognised as outstanding in the world of professional football.

The representatives of the Supporters' Trust can take credit for encouraging some of these developments. The involvement of the local authority in the affairs of the club has also helped to achieve much needed improvements in facilities. What the Northampton Town Supporters Trust has underlined is that supporters' groups can play an important role in implementing the aims of the Football Task Force with regard to social inclusion. Any supporters' group that aims to represent the fans as a whole must have a socially inclusive agenda.

When Trusts do engage in discussion and activity with regard to these issues, however, they should be encouraged, where resources permit, to set up small working parties reporting back to the Trust executive to ensure that members are as involved in such initiatives as is possible. For these activities to develop and succeed, supporters' groups should encourage their members to actively recruit and involve those other supporters from the relatively excluded groups.

Particularly at the smaller clubs, the resources applied to this area of club activity may be quite limited. A small club may find that its 'Football in the Community' personnel are too stretched to give the necessary attention to those people they come into contact within the community at large. This can undermine activities because, certainly in the case of Northampton Town FC's experience, developing an understanding and *modus vivendi* with the various groups and agencies in the community takes time and patience. In this situation especially, the active assistance of supporters in implementing the agenda of social inclusion is vital. Players can also give their invaluable assistance. However thought should be given to involving players more fully by involving them in discussions so that they are fully aware of the issues and the aims of the work in question.

#### *10.8 Local Authority Involvement*

*'I come from the bread and circuses tradition of politics; you get bread but circuses and roses too. Life is much more than simply fixing pavements and emptying the bins.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

Since Northampton Town FC faced bankruptcy in 1992, Northampton Borough Council has played an important role in the club's affairs. Not only has a council official sat as an observer on the board but a council representative has had a seat on the Supporters' Trust executive committee. As owner of the club's stadium, the council has been instrumental in developing the vastly improved facilities for disabled fans. In 1992, the borough council took the view that Northampton Town Football Club was an important asset for the local community. They moved in to assist. A local authority lending assistance to its football club is not a new phenomenon.

*'The local authority has had a long relationship with the football club. Even when the club was at the old County Ground we assisted the owners to get guaranteed secured loans on their TV money and so on. Whatever the press may say we made sure that the council was never at any risk. We always had first call on their income, we knew what they were getting and we were able to make sure that any monies were always repaid and I have to say that they always did repay.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

The important departure was that the local authority tied their assistance in to a say in the club's affairs. As owners of the club's stadium, the council had a right to do so. But the councillors also recognised that saving the club from future crises meant maintaining a say in the club and assisting with its development. By taking the decision to establish a 'community stadium' the local authority was able to both save the town's football club and further its own social agenda.<sup>7</sup>

*'As an administration we were determined that we wanted a community stadium. We used the money from the sale of the council transport company to build it. It was always made plain that the football club was going to be the prime user but that it would be a community stadium owned by the people of Northampton. In this way we did not just sell off our assets; we were simply rearranging our asset portfolio. A town of our size needs a stadium.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

Furthermore in pursuance of the social agenda the local authority recognised that the importance of football to the town meant that any developments in the fight against discrimination and for social inclusion at the football club would have positive repercussions in the local communities they represent. The local authority has therefore played a much more positive role in the football club than many of its counterparts.

Local authorities and other government-funded organisations appear to recognise the importance of football clubs to the community. They have lent the clubs material, and sometimes financial, assistance. However, too many local authorities and government funded organisations have, in the past, failed to use their support for football clubs as a lever to improve life for the community at large. Assistance given to clubs has often amounted to a blank cheque. The local authority has a duty to ensure that the money is used wisely on behalf of the community.

*'Year on year the council does give the club an advance on future earnings, as there is a time in the year when the club does not have much income coming in but it still has to function. We are always happy to do that and they always pay the money back on time. The club opens their books to us when they borrow money from us, and the Borough treasurer goes through the books to check their ingoings and outgoings whenever we lend them any money.'*

*(Trust member)*

Northampton Borough Council has long recognised the benefits of assisting its local sports clubs, but great care has been taken to ensure that the club and the local authority both benefit from closer co-operation without putting either at risk.

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<sup>7</sup> In cases where local authorities currently lease the football ground to the club, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport could brief local authorities on the sort of arrangements for supporter involvement that might be proposed to football clubs as part of the agreement when clubs seek to negotiate, or renegotiate, the lease on the ground. As indicated in the Preface above, these are issues that will be explored more fully in a subsequent Research Paper.

Community organisations that receive funding from local and national government have to clearly demonstrate that their activities fall within the remit of the lender's agenda for the community. Local authorities and national government funded organisations should view football clubs in a similar light and offer assistance for clubs to improve their record in terms of the socially excluded and the community in general. Such assistance can be provided in terms of lending undoubted council staff experience on issues relating to the community, joint activities and monitoring improvements in designated areas of concern.

Councils have to be careful not to lose sight of the reasons for getting involved with a local club. It is all too easy to become distracted by the prestige and glamour associated with professional sport even in the lower leagues. There is the potential for a conflict of interest to arise between a councillor's role as elected community representative and as a council appointee to the board of a commercial operation. Northampton Borough Council gave careful consideration to the offer of a seat at the boardroom table:

*'We took the view that, as the football club was a commercial operation it was not right for the council to sit on the board of directors. When the then board asked us if we did want a seat there was a bit of a clamour amongst councillors but there is a danger for politicians taking up seats like that with a commercial operation. There is always the 'Doncaster shadow' hanging over such matters and it can create difficulties. Perfectly fine for a councillor to take a seat using their own money but it is an entirely different matter if they are there as nominees. Instead as a condition of our assistance to the club we have a council officer as an observer at all board meetings, he is an executive officer appointed to the role by the Chief Executive.'*

*(John Dickie, former leader, Northampton Borough Council)*

Few clubs have yet adopted equal opportunities policies for their staff as recommended by the Football Task Force. Those that do implement equal opportunities policies could well benefit from the local authorities experience in this field. Clubs would also benefit from linking up their activities to local authorities that have access to additional sources of funding (such as regional aid and European Commission funding). Most local authorities have a great deal of experience in accessing such funds.

The 1998 Football Task Force report, *Eliminating Racism from Football* recommended a more considered approach to how taxpayers' money should be used in football when it stated that 'The Football Trust (and bodies awarding grant-aid to football clubs) should require recipients of grant-aid to implement the nine-point plan of the Kick It Out campaign on a regular and on-going basis.' This and other similar recommendations in the Task Force reports need to be applied and monitored by the Football Foundation (the replacement for the Football Trust), local authorities and other grant-awarding organisations to all elements of social inclusion in football. Local authorities and national government-funded organisations need to realise that where funds and material assistance are provided to clubs without assurances and monitoring of efforts to implement either their own or the Football Task Force's stated agenda to make football clubs more socially inclusive, this is a wasted opportunity to use taxpayers' money for the benefit of taxpayers as a whole.

Despite the positive impact that the local authority has had at Northampton Town FC and the benefits to the wider community, there are still those who believe that the action taken is a misuse of the council's funds. Northampton Borough Council's end of year accounts are currently being scrutinised by the District Auditor and cannot be signed off as a citizen of the Borough is currently

challenging the right of the local authority to give public funds to a commercial concern. John Dickie is dismissive of the accusation:

*'He claims that we have wasted public money, he has done the same when we spend money on leisure facilities. It is not a statutory function to help out sporting clubs that are commercial operations but I take the view that the football club is part of the fabric of the town, and is how the town is often seen; if the club is doing well the mood is good and the same with the rugby club. It is all to do with public psyche, which cannot be measured. When the club won promotion the town was packed with twenty or thirty thousand people but the club only gets a gate of around six thousand and people get a little buzz whenever the team wins.'*

Local authorities can also provide an important lever where tackling issues requires a multi-agency approach. Club involvement with local community groups, schools, colleges, ethnic minority organisations, disability organisations, local junior football clubs, anti-racist organisations and so on can only assist the profile of the club, help to widen its market and tailor club actions to the needs of its fan base.

Consideration should also be given by grant-awarding organisations to clubs' attitudes towards their supporters' groups. The 1998 Football Task Force report, *Eliminating Racism from Football*, recommended that 'Professional clubs and Conference clubs should form partnerships with local organisations – supporters groups, local authorities, community groups and police – to market the club to a wider audience'. Partnerships between football clubs and supporters' groups can only be fully effective if the clubs are prepared to be more democratic and inclusive in their own approach to the fans and their organisations. Northampton Town FC and Supporters' Trust and Northampton Borough Council have demonstrated what even small clubs can achieve. Another important example has been the recent work involving the club, supporters' groups and local authorities at the South London club, Charlton Athletic. It is only just over a decade ago that Charlton Athletic was on the verge of extinction due to inability to pay its creditors. Today Charlton are in the Premiership despite being a relatively small club. A partnership between the club, its local authority, Greenwich Borough Council and the Greenwich Development Agency has led to the creation of a specific body to tackle racism, Charlton Athletic Race Equality (CARE) with a budget of over £200,000.

Football clubs may be apprehensive about putting resources into social inclusion activities, but Charlton Athletic have demonstrated that there are many community organisations that are willing to share the financial burden to improve life in their community. These organisations recognise that the local clubs are part of that community. Notably, with a positive approach, CARE has been able to secure funding for its activities from a wide spectrum of local community organisations. Funding sources have included the supporters' club, local theatre organisations, colleges, community organisations, the borough council and the Greenwich Development Agency. In addition, funding has been sought and gained from the European Commission and the Lottery.

CARE has been able to utilise this funding for holding regular anti-racist days, staging anti-racist plays in theatres and schools, holding free Family Fun Evenings in the club's stadium, The Valley, holding anti-racist conferences and for liaison with the local community organisations. Of crucial importance is the support for CARE's work given by the club chair and chief executive, with the club giving CARE a substantial quota of free tickets to bring people from community organisations to home fixtures. It is of note that Charlton Athletic and Northampton Town FC are among the few clubs that have implemented the Football Task Force recommendation for clubs to adopt an equal opportunities policy for their staff and for staff recruitment. Both clubs were cited in the Task Force reports for their anti-racist, supporter-led work.

## 11. Lessons for Supporters' Groups

Years of decline on the pitch for Northampton Town FC were reflected in the appalling state of the club off it. The old cricket ground was ill suited to the needs of the football club, and the board was incapable of turning the club's fortunes around; it was the possibility that the club may actually go out of business that got things moving. It is doubtful if many of those attending the first meeting in the Exeter Rooms believed that the proposals to save the club would be as successful as they have been. Indeed, the concern now is that the new Sixfields stadium is not big enough, especially if the club enjoys further success on the pitch. Without the intervention of the supporters themselves at the height of the crisis then Northampton Town FC would no longer be in existence. The biggest lesson for any football supporter looking at Northampton Town is that fans do make a difference.

The local authority's role was crucial, but they could not have justified their intervention had it not been for the groundswell of support for the club in the town and the role of the Supporters' Trust, with the arrangement for elected supporter directors as a guarantee that public money was being used legitimately in the interests of the local community. There are those who still now think that it is was a gross waste of tax payers' money to build a stadium at Sixfields but there are many more who would agree with the former leader of the council, John Dickie, when he said:

*'The football club is part of the fabric of the town. In many ways a town's identity is tied to its football club. When travellers pass by on the motorway and they see a sign for Northampton they will know that we have a football club in the town.'*

There were those Northampton Town fans who came to the fore at the time of the crisis who recognised that as individuals they could do little on their own and that it was vital to involve a wide section of support if the club was to be saved. The democratic structures that the founders of the Trust put in place have served it well over the last ten years. The initial rules and regulations allowed those supporters who were not involved in the day to day work of the Trust to have faith that the money collected was going to be safely administered on their behalf. At a time when the town was rife with speculation on how the gate money collected on a match day was being used this was extremely important.

The then club chairman, Mr McRitchie, was dismissive of the efforts of the Trust and accused them of deception by using the name of the football club to raise funds from the fans and then refusing to hand the monies over to him as the club owner. Mr McRitchie failed to understand that he had lost the confidence of the fans. The fans no longer saw him as the rightful owner of the club, the fans were certainly not ready to hand over yet more money without some reassurances as to how the money would be spent. The fans' loyalty was being expressed not just in turning out on a Saturday to support the team but by collecting extra funds to save their club from extinction. The ability of the fans and their leaders to convince politicians and accountants that the club should be saved is a testimony to the enthusiasm shown.

*'I'd advise any new Trusts or supporters groups to identify and contact local councillors who are fans and are likely to be supportive.'* (Trust member)

A supporters' group needs to find an avenue and structure ensuring that all the membership can be involved in the activity, discussion and development of the organisation, if they so wish, on a regular basis.



*'Any new Trust may therefore wish to ensure that all members and supporters benefit from regular and effective communication so they know what is going on - obvious but when everyone around you is hyped up about what is going on and giving 100 per cent, it's easy to forget that the person in the next room hasn't got a clue about what's going on.'*  
(Trust member)

At Northampton Town the Trust has realised that regular meetings and press releases are not enough if momentum is to be maintained. Not every member can attend meetings, and other methods of communication need to be developed to keep the members of the Trust informed of developments. This should be seen as a two way process. Those members who do not play an active role in a group may still have ideas that need to be harvested.

As a voluntary group the leaders can be reasonably confident that every individual who joins the group does so because they wish to see the group succeed. The crisis of confidence witnessed by Northampton Town Supporters' Trust in the year 2000 demonstrates this most graphically. Faced with a challenge to its authority and criticism of the way that the Trust was being led, the Officers used the opportunity to examine the Trust's direction. This open and honest approach has re-energised the Trust with a new group of activists joining the executive committee. This exercise shows that when handled correctly, even potential conflict can be turned to a group's advantage.

The executive officers do not have a monopoly on good ideas, and the leaders of a group need to ensure that the membership is involved with the work of the group and that members feel able to bring forward suggestions and ideas.

*'A Trust should try and avoid becoming exclusive and keep its doors open to all supporters who should be made welcome and made to realise that their membership is valued.'*  
(Trust member)

To be able to succeed over a prolonged period groups need to actively recruit new members and be readily contactable so that any fans who wish to join can do so readily. The experience of Northampton Town Supporters' Trust shows that even when a group has been established for some time it can still attract a new layer of activists if the leadership remains alive to the possibility and benefits.

When a supporters' group or Trust is first established there is usually a clear objective or set of objectives for the group to work towards.

*'Any new Trust should set out long term objectives to say what it aims to do once it has achieved a position where it can speak for supporters at board level and also how it can give value to that representation, both to supporters and to the club.'* (Trust member)

The view amongst many of the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust members is that this needs to be worked at and must be reviewed regularly to ensure that the group remains focused. It is essential that the membership of any organisation is aware of what is trying to be achieved and that this is then communicated widely. This will give the organisation purpose and help in attracting new members. It is no accident that the most successful pressure groups and political parties have regular conferences. These conferences serve a number of uses but the primary purpose is to review the year's work and plan the work for the forthcoming year.

Many supporters' groups that have played an important role in articulating the concerns of fans at individual clubs have failed to last the test of time because they have lost touch with their core constituency of fans and have lost their appeal. Too often AGMs are seen as a boring necessity and the least important meeting of the year where the committee is elected and the Officers' reports are received. AGMs should be used to review and develop the long and short-term objectives of a group.

As has been stated elsewhere in this report, nine years after the first meeting, the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust AGM in 2000 was attended by nearly one hundred members. Undoubtedly many of those in attendance were there to hear the guest speakers, but this large audience also heard how the Trust had operated over the previous twelve month period and the members were able to question the Trust representative on the board of directors.

As suggested above, the work of the leadership of a supporters' organisation can be greatly assisted by the establishment of working groups of members on specific subjects. This involves a wider layer of fans in developing the work of the supporters' organisation on an on-going basis. The ability to involve this wider layer of supporters helps the organisation discover and develop new activists.

Supporters groups are an established entity at most British football clubs but they vary in complexion and purpose. It would be folly to try and draw up a blueprint for establishing a supporters' group, though equally each group would be foolish to ignore the lessons of others. The founding of the Coalition of Football Supporters saw the National Federation of Supporters' Clubs and the Football Supporters Association join together with a number of independent supporters' associations (ISAs) and fanzines; these bodies have a wealth of experience in representing football supporters. The burgeoning supporters' trust movement adds a new dimension to the way that fans organise, and all supporters groups will benefit from the exchange of ideas and experiences that will come if these groups are under one umbrella. It is to be hoped that Supporters Direct will be able to play this networking role, linking together the existing organisations and supporters' groups as well as fostering the growth and development of new groups.

## **12. Lessons for Northampton Town Supporters' Trust**

That Northampton Town Supporters' Trust remains a healthy organisation, after more than nine years of existence, is a tribute to the members and Officers of the Trust. The Trust has played a trailblazing role for other football supporters' groups across the country. It has demonstrated how supporters can play a positive and important role at the highest level of the affairs of a football club.

In terms of the future, our discussions with Trust members revealed a wish for more information, involvement and feedback regarding the affairs of the Trust.<sup>8</sup> Some members of the Trust felt that the only way to have an active input into the activities of the Trust at present – aside from executive meetings – is to assist in fund-raising activities. It would be of great benefit to the life of the Trust and the football club itself if these members were encouraged to play a wider role. The Northampton Town Supporters' Trust has already demonstrated the maturity of the organisation in inviting those members who have recently raised criticism to become more involved in the running of the Trust. To develop this process further and guard against problems in the future, it is suggested that the aims and strategy of the Trust be clarified. Particular regard needs to be paid to those areas of

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<sup>8</sup> A list of the specific concerns raised by supporters is provided in the Appendix to this Paper.

concern raised by Trust members in relation to supporters' needs at the club. In particular, the Trust might usefully:

- Review the aims of the Trust and produce a public 'Statement of Philosophy and Aims'
- Review the strategy of the Trust, distinguishing between long term and short term strategy
- Publicise the aims of the Trust more widely
- Improve the impact of Trust statements (for example through the club programme)
- Organise a recruitment drive amongst match going fans

A discussion on the development and implementation of future strategy would prove valuable both for the understanding of the membership and the development of the work of the Trust – providing it is conducted in a thoughtful and non-adversarial fashion where every member is invited to offer an opinion. An important part of any such discussion would relate to the issue of the Trust and its shareholding. There was a view from some that any Statement of Philosophy and Aims should include a commitment to maximise the Trust shareholding in the Club and increase the Trust's representation on the Club Board. There is certainly an immediate need for a second elected director to support the existing elected director and share the workload that inevitably falls on the directors elected to represent the Trust. The Trust thus needs to clearly define its ambitions in relation to board involvement. These ambitions then have implications with regard to Trust membership and recruitment and the developing of Officers able to play a role as future directors.

A list of more specific and immediate issues raised with us by supporters is provided in the Appendix to this Report. Consideration could be given to how best to discuss these issues amongst the wider membership and beyond. On different spheres of activity, members could be involved, depending on willingness, via the establishment of small working groups which could report back to the executive and/or the Trustees and assist the Officers in developing a clear strategy for Trust and club development.

Particularly encouraging was one final aspect of feedback, namely the desire for more contact with activists in other supporters' groups and Trusts. It was felt that despite the view from the outside that Northampton Town Supporters' Trust had shown the way, they themselves could benefit from the exchange of ideas and experiences. This is an area that Supporters Direct has a particular duty to deliver on. It is to be hoped that the current Report will play some role in this process.<sup>9</sup>

### **13. Conclusions**

The conclusions from this study of the experience of the Northampton Town Supporters' Trust have been drawn at various points in the text above. Here we summarise and group these according to the key audience for these conclusions, as follows:

#### *(i) Northampton Town Supporters' Trust*

- A 'mission statement' – or simply a listing of current aims and objectives – would help crystallize the new phase in which the Trust is now operating
- A 'five year plan' – or even a 3-year one – would help focus the Trust on how to achieve its new objectives

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<sup>9</sup> For interested readers, Supporters Direct publishes a quarterly newsletter available free of charge on request. They also provide a free email discussion group, provide a regularly updated website with links to other supporters groups sites, and host various other activities, details of which are available on request – see Box 1 above for contact details.

- Central to both of these should be the aim of expanding the ownership stake of the Trust in the club through recruiting new members and continuing to raise funds, and to increase the number of elected directors

*(ii) Supporters at other clubs*

- The setting up of a democratic supporters' trust can assist fans to play a role in their club and gain representation on the board
- Supporters' groups need to be open and democratic and should aim at being inclusive of all fans

*(iii) Football Clubs*

- Supporters' trusts can assist clubs to improve revenue streams
- Clubs should give their support to genuine supporters' groups, and should welcome the election of supporters onto the football club board
- The growth of democratic supporters' groups can be of great assistance in developing a club by improving relations between fans and by involving fans more fully in achieving the varied ambitions of the club
- Clubs will continue to miss out on big market opportunities by not being socially inclusive

*(iv) Local and Central Government*

- Sporting clubs have a social and economic impact on their local community; developing links with sporting clubs and supporter groups can assist local authorities' social and economic agenda
- Support should be given to clubs for initiatives to tackle social exclusion; if clubs can assist the local authority to deliver on policies such as social inclusion, it becomes legitimate for those clubs to receive local authority funding for such activities
- Local authorities and other Government funded organisations should only assist clubs that comply with local authority policies with regard to social inclusion and Government policies with regard to supporter representation on the boards
- DCMS should brief local authorities on the sort of arrangements for supporter involvement that might be proposed to clubs as part of any ground lease agreement

*(v) National supporters' groups and Supporters Direct*

- It is in the interests of Supporters Direct, the Coalition of Football Supporters (CoFS), the Football Supporters Association (FSA) and National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs (Nat Fed) to develop the maximum co-operation to assist the fans movement and the Football Task Force agenda of social inclusion
- Supporters Direct and other national supporters' groups should convene national and regional schools aimed at bringing together officers of groups to allow for skills transference and education concerning those tasks and skills considered necessary for the development of supporters' groups at club level.

## **Appendix: Areas of concern identified amongst supporters**

The following areas of concern were identified amongst supporters of Northampton Town Football Club during the research for this paper:

### **1. Board Involvement**

- Uncertainty as to the authority of the Trust directors on the Football Club board
- Uncertainty as to the value of an additional Trust director on the board
- Uncertainty as to the availability of suitable candidates to become additional Trust members on the board

### **2. Stadium development**

- Parking
- Exiting the ground
- Lighting
- Limited seating capacity
- Lack of a safe-standing area
- Limited toilet access

### **3. Ticketing Policy**

- Need for an unreserved seating area to permit family attendance
- Home fan exclusion despite away fans' non take up of tickets
- Lack of ticket sales facilities in outlying towns
- High relative price of tickets for children

### **4. Transport**

- Lack of coach availability for supporters in outlying towns

### **5. Membership Development**

- Need for a greater proportion of fans to be in the Trust
- Feeling of non-involvement of sections of the membership
- Disputes with breakaway travel club undermining the authority of the Trust
- Need to recruit more young members

### **6. Social Inclusion**

- Need to continue development of disability facilities
- Lack of member involvement in anti-racist/ethnic inclusion activities

How these and other issues might best be tackled by the Trust is discussed in the Paper above, in particular Section 12.

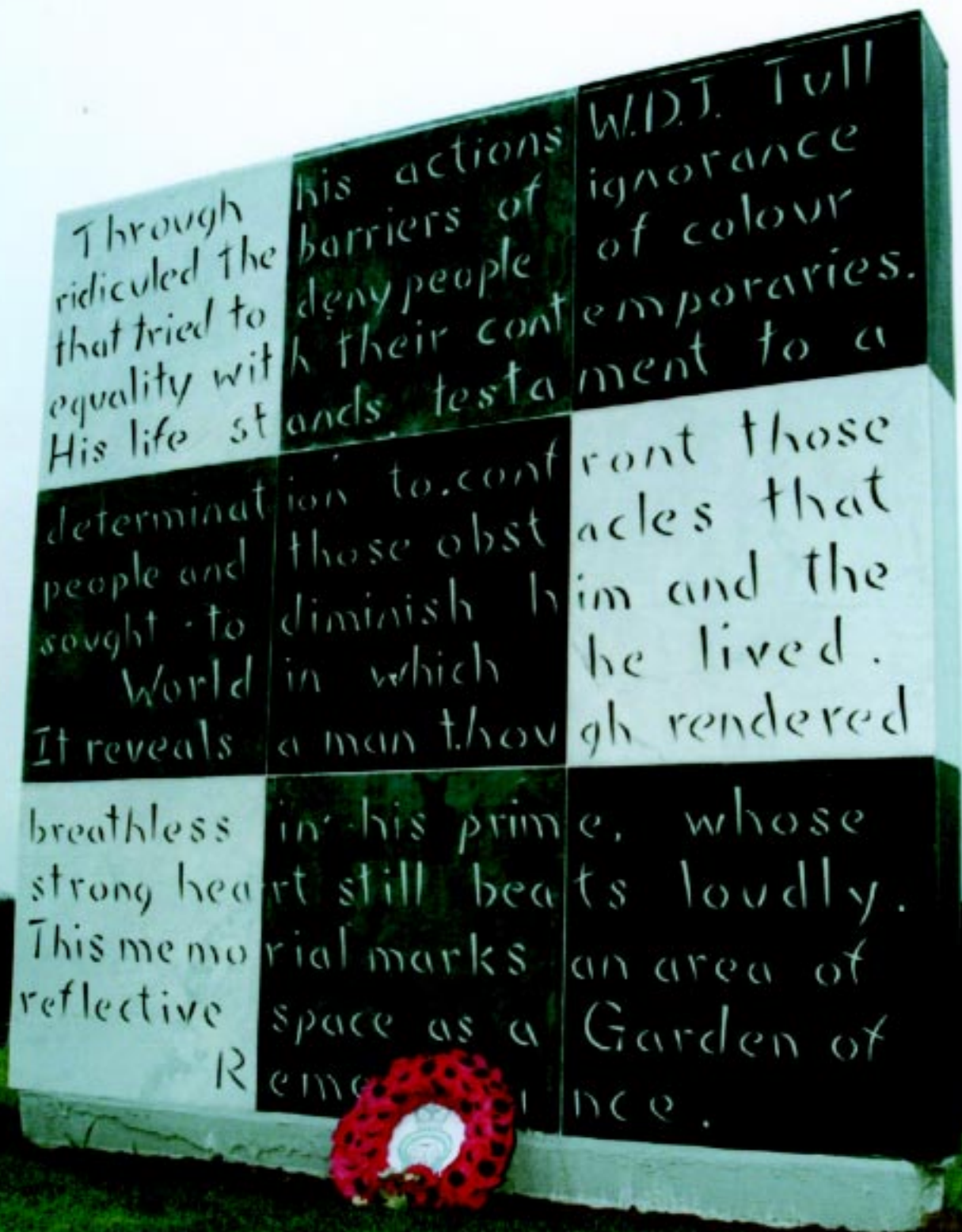
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**Walter Tull Memorial, Sixfields Stadium, Northampton Town FC**

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