

Covid-19 and Disabled Supporters - a guide for clubs (accessible text-to-speech option)

Covid-19 Fan Survey

On 13th March 2020 football was suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic. Since then, Level Playing Field has turned its attention to supporting disabled fans and clubs during this period of uncertainty.

Disabled supporters told us about the anxiety and concerns they are feeling in relation to live sport recommencing, and not knowing when that will be. We decided to conduct a survey to gain a better understanding of what disabled supporters are currently experiencing and what their thoughts and feelings are regarding live sport recommencing. The survey ran from 7th May to 9th June and we had nearly 600 responses. The results are outlined in our accompanying survey summary report, [which you can download here](#).

This document is intended to be read alongside the survey summary to offer clubs additional guidance as they make difficult decisions at this time. It's important to be mindful that with any changes that clubs make, the Equality Act is still applicable and they still have a duty to make reasonable adjustments within those changes for disabled people. We believe it's important that disabled fan's voices are heard as clubs make these decisions, which will have an impact on them as supporters. Both the survey summary and this club guide seek to do just that. We've included some good practice examples from various clubs too.

This guide is a working document, which will evolve as decisions are made and as fans return to stadiums. Please get in touch with us if you'd like any more information about our survey results (there are lots more quotes available) or anything else relating to disability access and inclusion.

Fan Wellbeing

One of the key findings from the survey was the extent to which the loss of live sport has impacted disabled supporters' wellbeing. When asked to rate the impact on their mental health, almost half of supporters gave a rating of either 4/5 or 5/5. When asked to rate the impact on their life & wellbeing if they were unable to return to live football next season, 62% gave a rating of either 4/5 or 5/5.

Many clubs have taken steps to support their fans in their personal wellbeing during this time. Whilst we recognise that resources are stretched and that many club staff are still furloughed, our hope is that many of these measures will continue until all fans are able to return to stadiums. They include:

- Phone calls from players, former players and club staff to elderly and disabled fans

- Offers to collect and deliver groceries, and other such errands, for vulnerable supporters
- Regular ongoing check-ins for those supporters most 'at-risk' during this time
- Video messages for supporters and options for supporters to send video messages
- Hot meals delivered to those most in need in the local community
- Video meetings and online discussion groups for isolated supporters
- Educational or fitness videos produced by clubs for supporters and their families.

Communication

Throughout the survey responses, the thing that supporters wrote about most often was communication. In this difficult time, with much uncertainty over what will be happening in future, many supporters have experienced anxiety over not knowing what to expect. This can be particularly difficult for certain disabled supporters who find changes in routine challenging.

We appreciate that there have been a lot of unknowns from the clubs' perspective too, which is to be expected in this unprecedented season. Fans don't necessarily expect answers to every question, they just need to hear from their club and to receive reassurances that they're not going to lose out. Having a designated disability contact facilitates this important communication.

We would encourage all clubs to prioritise regular communication with their supporters, explaining what decisions have been taken and what is still to be worked out, even if updates are minimal. This could take the form of a monthly newsletter or mailout. We would also encourage clubs to provide all key communications in as many formats as possible:

- On club website (including any disability-specific information on the relevant page)
- text-to-speech option
- large text option
- printed versions
- video-based information with British sign language (BSL)
- video with subtitles

It's important to be mindful that 79% of the surveyed disabled supporters said they were in the high-risk category for covid-19. Therefore any guidelines that are different for 'high-risk' fans should be made clear to your disabled supporters where possible. Also, when fans are allowed to return, communication about away travel needs to be clear, as many disabled fans rely on club transport. Open, honest dialogue with supporters is key to effectively navigating this difficult time..

Ticketing

Once supporters are permitted to return to watching live football in stadiums, it is likely that many vulnerable supporters will not be able, or not feel comfortable, to return. It's important these fans, including many disabled supporters, do not feel pressured into returning for fear of losing ticket privileges, such as their regular seat or loyalty points. This was a concern that was expressed by dozens of supporters in the survey comments.

Watford FC plan to reserve seats for season ticket holders who are not able to return. Their seat can then be sold on a match-by-match basis during the interim period. Such agreements made with supporters will be agreed on a case-by-case basis and will offer some flexibility and adjustments over a return date. This is good practice and we would encourage other clubs to be flexible and to assess each supporter on a case-by-case basis.

Some other measures being taken by clubs to address fans' ticketing concerns are:

- Freezing loyalty points and any other benefits that have been accrued (including away games)
- Offering refunds for matches that fans cannot attend (remainder of this season and the next)
- Supporting season ticket holders with amending their direct debits or payment plans

Operational Challenges

On page 12 of the survey summary you can see which measures supporters identified as the most important for them to feel comfortable returning to stadiums to watch live sport. We appreciate that there are many operational challenges which clubs will need to consider when this happens and that government guidelines will inform many of the decisions that are made. That said, here are some disability-specific considerations which stewards and front-line club staff should be aware of:

- Social distancing will be more difficult for many, e.g. ambulant disabled or blind supporters
- Assistance animals, such as guide dogs, are not trained to social distance
- Some disabled supporters can not reasonably be expected to wear face masks
- Hot running water is essential in all toilets, particularly in accessible ones and changing places
- Returnable sensory packs and radio/ADC headsets will need to be sanitised after use
- In-seat refreshments services could be offered to disabled fans to facilitate social distancing. This is a service that MK Dons offer and will look to continue to provide in a safe manner.
- If refreshment kiosks are closed, considerations for disabled fans with special dietary requirements should be made

Alternatives to attending

As previously stated, disabled supporters should not feel pressured into returning to watch live sport once stadiums reopen. In the survey we asked supporters which alternatives to attending they would like to see from their club (results on page 13 of the summary). The ability to stream live matches was, predictably, the alternative that supporters requested the most, with 85% of respondents saying that they'd like this option from their club.

In order to make live streaming as accessible as possible for disabled supporters, we would encourage clubs and media providers to offer an audio descriptive commentary (ADC) service for blind or partially sighted supporters, such as the one Wolves have implemented. There could be licensing implications around this, please contact your governing body and CAFE on how to implement ADC effectively. We would also encourage the use of a text commentary service or British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter for deaf or hard-of-hearing supporters. It is worth noting that some disabled supporters may have other access requirements in relation to live streaming. Contact us for further guidance.

The live streaming of certain leagues has already begun and many clubs, like West Brom, have provided digital passes for their season ticket-holding disabled fans to watch their team's remaining matches. This is a good alternative to attending. Clubs that only provide these passes to full-paying season ticket holders, meaning that disabled supporters who paid a concession rate are denied a pass, may leave themselves open to accusations of discrimination. We have also had enquiries from disabled fans about whether their companion, who attends matches with them, would be eligible for a live streaming digital pass. It is worth noting that some disabled fans may still require a companion to assist with the live streamed matches.

If vulnerable supporters cannot attend matches or watch them on tv (if they don't have the internet for example) then clubs may consider providing a safe alternative viewing space with a large screen on a matchday. Or alternatively they may allow some supporters to come to watch training from an appropriate distance, or send matchday programmes so that these supporters can feel included.

We fully recognise the challenges of meeting fans' desires and expectations. Level Playing Field exists to be a part of the solution. Our staff are on hand to offer advice.

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