The Origins And Benefits Of Supporters Trusts

Supporters' trusts in English football emerged in the early 1990s as a grassroots response to club mismanagement and financial instability, evolving into a formal, government-backed movement by 2000 that has since shaped fan ownership and governance across the game.[1,2,3]

Early development

The first supporters' trust was established at Northampton Town in January 1992, when fans facing the club's financial collapse created a democratic, non-profit organisation to invest in and gain representation on the board—replacing passive fundraising with accountable stakeholding. Structured as an Industrial and Provident Society on a one-member, one-vote basis, the model was quickly emulated by nearby clubs such as Kettering Town and, by the late 1990s, Crystal Palace.[2,3,4,5,6]

These early trusts arose amid a broader shift in fan activism following the Hillsborough disaster (1989) and the Taylor Report, which reframed supporters as stakeholders rather than mere spectators. The formation of the Football Supporters' Association in 1985 and the rise of fanzines further energised demands for meaningful involvement in club governance.[1,7,8]

Institutionalisation under New Labour

In 1997, the newly elected Labour government established the Football Task Force to examine ownership, control, and fan representation in professional football. Task Force participant Andy Burnham, then a special adviser, helped shape and drive the policy from within government, turning the Task Force's ownership recommendation into an operational programme that provided legal templates, governance support, and seed funding for trusts nationwide. Its 1999 recommendation led to the creation of Supporters Direct in October 1999 (launched publicly in 2000), a government-funded body tasked with promoting and supporting the formation of supporters' trusts nationwide.

[8,9,10,11]

Supporters Direct provided legal templates, governance advice, and seed funding, catalysing rapid growth: by the mid-2000s, over 150 trusts had formed across England, Scotland, and Wales, with many acquiring shareholdings and several clubs—such as AFC Wimbledon, FC United of Manchester, and Exeter City—transitioning to full or majority community ownership.[121,3]

Legacy and evolution

In 2018, Supporters Direct merged with the Football Supporters' Federation to form the Football Supporters' Association (FSA), continuing advocacy for fan representation, including the push for legislated "golden shares" and board-level fan voices. Today, supporters' trusts remain central to English football's governance landscape, embodying a distinctive "third way" between commercial ownership and state control.[3,5,8,10]

Supporter owned clubs

Several English football clubs are **100% (or effectively wholly) supporter-owned** as a direct result of **supporters' trust activity**, though the precise legal structures vary (some are owned by a

Community Benefit Society set up by the trust, others by the trust itself). The most prominent examples are:

Fully supporter-owned clubs created via supporters' trusts

AFC Wimbledon

- **Ownership model:** 100% owned by **The Dons Trust**, a democratic, not-for-profit supporters' trust.
- **How it happened:** Formed in 2002 by Wimbledon fans after the original club's relocation to Milton Keynes. Fans created a new club owned and run by the trust on a one-member, one-vote basis.[14,15]
- **Status:** Plays in the English Football League (League Two as of recent seasons) and is routinely cited as one of only two EFL clubs that are fully fan-owned.[15,16]

Exeter City

- **Ownership model:** Effectively 100% supporter-owned via **Exeter City Supporters' Trust**, which took control in 2003 and holds the controlling stake in the club's holding company.
- **How it happened:** The trust was formed in 2000, then changed its objective from "support" to "own" in 2003 as the club faced financial collapse and relegation. The trust bought the majority shareholding and has run the club ever since.[17,18,19]
- **Status:** Often described alongside AFC Wimbledon as one of the only fully fan-owned clubs in the Football League.[15,16]
  (Some sources describe the trust as holding a majority rather than literally 100% of shares, but in practice the club is treated as fully supporter-owned and run by the trust.)[20]

FC United of Manchester

- **Ownership model:** 100% supporter-owned via a **Community Benefit Society** set up by fans; each member holds one share and one vote.
- **How it happened:** Formed in 2005 by Manchester United supporters opposed to the Glazer takeover. The club was created from scratch as a fan-owned entity, with the supporters' trust / CBS as the owning body.[21,22]
- **Status:** Non-league (semi-professional), but one of the largest supporter-owned clubs in the UK by membership.[21]

Enfield Town

- **Ownership model:** 100% owned by the **Enfield Supporters' Society** (originally the Enfield Supporters' Trust).
- **How it happened:** In 2001, Enfield FC fans formed a trust to buy the club. When the chairman refused to sell, 89% of voting trust members backed a breakaway, creating **Enfield Town FC** as England's first fully fan-owned senior club.[23,24,25,26]
- **Status:** Non-league; widely described as the first fully fan-owned club in England.[24,25]

Other clubs that are wholly or effectively wholly fan-owned via trust/CBS structures

These are typically lower-league or non-league clubs where the supporters' trust (or a CBS created by fans) owns the entire club or all voting shares:

- **AFC Telford United** – Formed by fans after Telford United's liquidation; owned by a supporters' trust/CBS and often listed among wholly fan-owned clubs.[27,28]
- **Aylesbury United** – The Aylesbury United Supporters Trust gained control in 2009, making it a fan-owned club.[29,30]
- **Banbury United** – A supporter-led community benefit society took formal control in 2015.[30]
- **Bath City** – Frequently listed among fully fan-owned clubs.[31]
- **Dorchester Town** – Supporters' Trust holds a joint majority and, in many descriptions, effective full control.[30,31]
- **Lewes FC** – Community-owned via a supporters' trust/CBS model; often cited as 100% fan-owned.[31]
- **Tonbridge Angels** – Fan-owned via trust/CBS structures.[31]
- **Hyde United**, **Prescot Cables**, **Pilkington**, **Bamber Bridge**, **Atherton Town**, **Congleton Town**, **Hendon**, **Newark Town**, **Newport (IOW)**, **Peacehaven & Telscombe**, **Saffron Walden Town**, **Wythenshawe Amateurs**, **Hull United AFC**, **Litherland REMYCA**, **Camden & Islington United**, **City of Liverpool FC** – All set up or taken over by supporters' trusts or CBSs and described as fully fan-owned.[30,31]

Many of these were either:

- **Phoenix clubs** formed by trusts after the original club collapsed (e.g., AFC Telford United, FC United, Enfield Town), or
- **Takeovers** where the trust/CBS bought out private owners and became the sole owner (e.g., Aylesbury United, Banbury United).

Important nuance: "100%" vs "majority"

- In the **Football League**, **AFC Wimbledon** and **Exeter City** are the standard examples of clubs that are effectively 100% supporter-owned via trust activity.[15,16]
- Several sources refer to **around 17 clubs** in England as "wholly owned by supporters," including Wrexham (historically), AFC Telford United, Wycombe (at a point), and FC United, but some of those figures mix:
    - clubs that are 100% fan-owned, and
    - clubs where the trust holds a controlling majority but not literally every share.[27,28]
- Some high-profile "fan-owned" clubs (e.g., **Swansea City**, **Newport County**, **Wycombe Wanderers**) have **significant but minority** trust shareholdings, not 100% ownership.[32,33,34]

Benefits beyond ownership

Supporters' trusts in British football have delivered a wide range of benefits beyond fan ownership, from improved governance and financial sustainability to deepened community engagement and social impact.[35,36,37]

Governance and representation

Supporters' trusts act as a formal, democratic channel between fans and club leadership, giving supporters a structured voice in key decisions. This has led to:[37]

- **Board representation**: Trusts have secured supporter-elected directors at nearly 60 clubs, enabling fans to influence issues like ticket pricing, stadium security, and club expenditure.[36]
- **Improved accountability**: Trusts promote transparent, responsible governance by encouraging clubs to operate sustainably and engage constructively with stakeholders.[35,27]
- **Crisis intervention**: In several cases, trusts have played pivotal roles in rescuing clubs from administration or financial collapse, stabilising operations and protecting community assets.[36,38]

Financial sustainability and investment

Even without majority ownership, trusts have mobilised significant capital and resources for their clubs:

- **Fundraising**: Trusts have raised hundreds of thousands—or even millions—of pounds through community shares and campaigns. Examples include AFC Wimbledon (£1.26m for a stadium), Wrexham (£750k for full ownership), and Portsmouth (£2m+ for a majority stake).[27]
- **In-kind support**: Fan-owned or trust-affiliated clubs often benefit from volunteers offering services at reduced or no cost, lowering operational expenses.[28]
- **Strategic partnerships**: Trust ownership structures help clubs build long-term partnerships with local organisations, as external partners view them as credible community-focused entities.[28]

Community engagement and social value

Supporters' trusts strengthen the bond between clubs and their localities, turning football clubs into hubs for social good:

- **Community projects**: Trusts facilitate initiatives in health, education, fitness, and social inclusion—such as anti-racism campaigns, activities for the elderly, and programmes for disadvantaged groups.[35,36]
- **Volunteering and skills development**: Trusts create opportunities for fans to volunteer, develop skills, and take on leadership roles, fostering civic participation.[35,27]
- **Local identity and cohesion**: By anchoring clubs in their communities, trusts help preserve regional identity and promote social interaction across diverse groups.[36,39,12]

Examples of non-ownership impact

- **Swansea City**: The supporters' trust owns 20% of the club and has been a key partner in its rise from near-relegation to Premier League stability, influencing strategic appointments and community initiatives.[40]

- **Kilmarnock (Killie Trust)**: Injected nearly £300,000 into youth development, accessible seating, and safe-standing sections, while securing a fan director on the board.[41]
- **Motherwell (Well Society)**: Helped reduce club debt and fund the youth academy, demonstrating how trusts can support operational stability without full ownership.[41]

In short, supporters' trusts have become vital institutions for improving football governance, unlocking investment, and amplifying the social role of clubs—whether or not they hold equity.[42,43,44]

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