

John Leech

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Safe standing should be the goal for football

I MUST begin by declaring an interest. I've been a season ticket holder at Manchester City for 29 years, and have been to away games at 42 different league grounds over the years. I have seen the highs and lows – relegation to the third tier and away trips to Oxford United and Grimsby, and winning the title in injury time last May.

It means I am more of a fan than the average MP. I am also a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

Just this week, my committee argued that the structure and rules governing the game in England is in drastic need of reform. The report recommends establishing a policy on ticket prices, greater representation for supporters and a fairer distribution of funds.

The report calls for football to put its house in order, and to legislate if they don't.

None of this will come as news to football fans. Everyone with an interest in football knows that the game is too reliant on TV, too obsessed with the Premier League and the big clubs, the wealth isn't fairly spread out, and the fans hardly get a look-in at most clubs.

Any system that ends up with 12 out of the 20 clubs in the Premier League ending the season in debt knows that that is not sustainable in the long run.

Last month, after City returned 900 tickets, the Manchester Evening News was rightly critical of Arsenal for charging City fans £62 to watch the game. No-one wants football to become only affordable to the rich, but working class fans can't afford, or will not put up with having to pay extortionate prices to see their team play.

Arsenal's argument was that they have a tiered price structure, and now City are champions they were a tier A club. I don't accept their argument.

A Premier League match costs the same to put on no matter who the

opponents are. It is becoming harder for loyal fans to travel to away days and a review of this is long overdue. A ticket for an away fan should be pegged at the same price as the best deal for a home fan. And capped at a reasonable level.

One sure way to reduce ticket prices, and increase choice, would be to introduce "safe standing" at matches. It is supported by many fans' groups, including the Football Supporters' Federation and Supporters Direct

For Champions League games, UEFA operate an all seater policy, like it is in England for all games.

However, several countries in Europe and worldwide, like Germany, Austria, Sweden, Canada and the United States, have "safe standing" for domestic fixtures.

For years, no-one over here would talk about safe standing. A generation of football fans were scarred by the tragedy at Hillsborough, when 96 innocent Liverpool fans died.

After the Hillsborough tragedy, the metal fences, put up as a result of hooliganism in the 1970s and early 1980s, came down, and all-seater stadiums were introduced. But the recent report into Hillsborough did not blame the disaster on the fact that there were terraces. It rightly blamed poor decision-making by those in charge of the emergency services.

Last December, I went to see City play Borussia Dortmund at their stadium. For league games, Dortmund operate safe standing, with tickets from about £12.50 and this gives them a capacity of 80,600 (15,000 more than for Champions League Games).

I genuinely believe that safe standing would be better than the current arrangement when people stand up in a seated area for most of the game.

Surely, safe standing is an idea whose time has come. More fans, more choice, cheaper seats, better atmosphere. That would be one reform I would support.



KEEN SUPPORTER
MP John Leech with his Manchester City scarf