

**YOUR
CLUB**



**YOUR
VOICE**

HAMMERS UNITED SUPPORTER VISION

**SIX PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING SUPPORTER ENGAGEMENT
MAY 2021**

HAMMERS UNITED SUPPORTER VISION

Owners of football clubs come and go.

Supporters remain.

One day, genuine supporter representation will be an intrinsic part of our national game.

When that day arrives, we must be ready.

Background

A disconnect between the owners and the supporters of a football club is not uncommon. Too often this disconnect is attributed solely to poor performances on the pitch.

It is not as simple as this.

Dig a little deeper and you discover that a disconnect is often far more complex. When supporters at 'successful' clubs are in protest, people begin searching for the real reasons behind these broken relationships.

So, why might supporters be unhappy?

West Ham United supporters are unhappy with the club's owners, specifically their questionable decisions, actions, motivations and behaviours.

In recent years, we have experienced a lack of genuine supporter engagement. There is plenty to discuss; not least the deep scars that have been left by the mismanagement of the stadium migration. This lack of engagement has seen calls for a change in ownership gather pace at our club.

These calls persisted throughout the 2020/21 season despite overwhelming admiration for the achievements of the manager, the coaching staff and the playing squad.

This led Hammers United to conduct a supporter survey to understand sentiment across the fanbase. In short, the reason there is universal support for the team yet ongoing calls for new ownership comes down to one thing.

Trust.

West Ham United supporters, like those of many other teams, do not trust the club's owners.

Many supporters at West Ham closely observe the behaviour of the club's owners and regularly reflect on the outcomes they have achieved. Supporters have drawn their own conclusions and the absence of open and constructive dialogue has harvested a culture of deep mistrust.

There is a widespread view that the club's owners are not motivated by the same interests, nor share the same opinions, as the majority of the fanbase. Many supporters believe the behaviour of the owners demonstrates a lack of consideration for their moral responsibility towards our fanbase. Supporters do not feel that they are properly consulted, or that their opinions are valued, on matters that affect the future of the club or where the overall supporter experience is concerned.

At West Ham, there is one decision above all others where supporters believe the owners were not genuine in explaining their motives; that being the botched migration to The London Stadium. Sold as a dream, for many it has instead been a nightmare.

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The stadium migration aside, there are a catalogue of decisions taken by our owners that have only served to distance them from supporters and enhance the view that they do not have the supporter experience at the heart of the decisions they make. These include:

- The sale of the Boleyn Ground
- The claims regarding the size of the season ticket waiting list
- The interest paid on directors' loans
- Neglect of the Green Street memorial gardens
- The redesign of the club crest
- Leaks to unofficial websites
- Opposition fans sold tickets in home sections
- The lack of transparency regarding away ticket allocation
- The extortionate cost of the match day mascot package
- Discounted replica kits only weeks after launch
- The redesign and supporter relocation in the new stands
- The inconsiderate use of social media and other outlets from board members
- Long queues due to enhanced security
- The betrayal of local businesses and stallholders
- The labelling of supporters as "customers"
- The farce of supporter advisory boards created by the club

Clearly, this is about much more than just football.

Owners need to engage with supporters, be prepared to listen, and act on advice.

The issue of football club owners who believe they can operate with impunity and without due consideration for supporters is gaining an ever-sharper focus.

Hammers United are looking ahead and plotting a course of action for a time when reform gives supporters greater representation at their respective clubs.

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- What influence can supporters have?

Supporters know their clubs, from top to bottom and inside out. They are best placed to make decisions that affect the experience they have at their club.

The Heart of the Game: why supporters are vital to improving governance in football

A football club and its supporters should share clarity in the areas where these decisions lie.

Knowledge and expertise are power when it comes to making decisions. There are decisions where supporters are the experts and supporters have vital knowledge.

If a supporters' group can build a membership that allows them to speak with a representative voice, a club would be wise to liaise with this group for the knowledge and expertise needed to make informed decisions around the supporter experience.

- Why would a club want to work with its supporters?

In simple terms: a club has a duty to treat supporters as such. Not as customers.

However, there is an opportunity to develop a positive relationship between supporters and club, where this can benefit both fans and owners.

This opportunity derives from the romance that exists around a football club built on tradition, connected to its community and in touch with its supporters. An atmosphere at a club like this can be something quite special. A club may operate internationally but it should not forget the importance of thinking locally, prioritising supporters and creating such an atmosphere at a club.

The club can use that atmosphere to drive trading potential with the aim of improving the club's competitive nature on the pitch and, in parallel, the supporter experience.

But it is a club. Not a brand.

- How can this be achieved?

In acknowledging our position, Hammers United have identified a way in which a close working relationship can be reborn with our football club.

Behind the scenes, our team have been busy developing a strategy.

This approach will help us get it right. We have dissected, analysed and now utilised the mistakes of the past, the disconnect that often appears between owners and supporters and, most importantly, the sentiments expressed by our membership and the wider West Ham United fanbase.

We have crafted our Supporter Vision.



HAMMERS UNITED SUPPORTER VISION

Our Supporter Vision is built on six distinct principles with an overarching goal of defining what is important to West Ham United supporters, while rebuilding the supporter experience at the club around this framework.

Each principle is described and explained below.

We believe the relationship between club, owners and supporters should be maintained upon these principles. It is our opinion that by working closely with supporters and sticking to principles that have been designed with supporters in mind, West Ham United will benefit.

Our Supporter Vision

Six principles for building supporter engagement:

Responsibility and Trust

Identity and Heritage

Stadium and Experience

Community and Supporters

Service and Loyalty

Engagement and Communication



HAMMERS UNITED SUPPORTER VISION

Responsibility and Trust

What is ownership when it comes to a football club and who decides its direction?

Owners are custodians of a football club belonging to its supporters. They must acknowledge and respect their position of responsibility and trust and work with supporters accordingly. A supporter's interest is not fleeting, it transcends generations. Supporters should understand and advocate everything that a club is setting out to achieve. Those who make decisions on their behalf should involve supporters, respect and value their relationship with them and set out a strategy that has the best interests of supporters at its heart.

West Ham supporters value their connection to their club, everything about the supporter experience, a level of effort from their players and a respect for all domestic competitions. They want owners that they can trust to run their club properly, owners who will uphold its reputation and owners who will be accountable to supporters.

Identity and Heritage

What is West Ham United, what does it mean to people and what does it stand for?

The identity of a football club is rooted in its history and heritage. This is cherished by supporters. Supporters love to share memories of players they watched and the family they watched them with. They love to reminisce about the badges and the colours they wore. Every element of pride should be respected and preserved. The identity of a club needs to be defined from these experiences and the culture needs to be celebrated. Supporters should be able to live and breathe this identity and their club should do the same.

West Ham supporters value our crest, our home, our history and our heroes. This heritage allows us to understand our culture and develop it by building upon what is considered to be important as we evolve.

Stadium and Experience

How can you meaningfully affect the design and atmosphere of a stadium?

A stadium is where supporters come together to share their passion, express their emotions and enjoy the match day experience. Our home ground should reflect our identity and culture, it should celebrate our history and heritage. It should be intimate and atmospheric. It should be inspiring and intimidating. It should be a place we are proud to call our home. It should be a football stadium fit for purpose and something we admire. And it should be ours.

West Ham supporters create the atmosphere, but a stadium amplifies and accentuates it. The proximity of the supporters to the pitch, the connection between sections of the ground, the enclosed nature of a stadium and the groups of supporters who have forged relationships over the years allow a stadium to enhance an atmosphere.

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Community and Supporters

What is the role of a football club, what is its influence and what can it give to a local community?

A football club should be a focal point. It must be a source of pride and prosperity for its local community. A football club is in a privileged position to serve its supporters and its local community. In protecting and delivering an authentic experience by supporting the local community a club will, in turn, serve its wider community of supporters. Supporters want to see local businesses thrive and local people offered opportunities. Supporters want everyone in a local community to feel part of their club and to be proud of its location.

West Ham supporters, wherever they are from, value east London and the people who call it home. Local sellers should be encouraged to trade on a matchday, while local people should be encouraged to come to work at a club and a local area should thrive.

Service and Loyalty

How can a football club ensure its supporters feel like they are more than just customers?

The supporter should be valued. A supporter's loyalty is unwavering. Supporters follow one team, through thick and thin. Clubs should prioritise an appreciation of that loyalty when it comes to operations such as ticketing, transport, stewarding, merchandise and the experience of the travelling fan. A club is nothing without its supporters and a club must appreciate that at all times. Supporters simply want to follow their team, from near or afar.

West Ham supporters value ticketing transparency, matchday staff who understand us and the little touches that cater for people's needs. A club has a responsibility to truly value a supporter's loyalty beyond simply monetising it for financial gain.

Engagement and Communication

How can you welcome and value the opinion of supporters and what should you talk to them about?

Supporters are emotionally connected to their football club. They are affected by the football but they are also impacted by the trust in the relationship they have with their club in every other sense. Supporters crave understanding from a single source of truth. Supporters deserve respect, not contempt. Consultation with supporters should be open and inclusive, club communications should be sensitive and transparent, while media with a range of perspectives should be welcomed. A supporters' group is a demonstration of unity and a collective voice, and this should be valued and harnessed.

West Ham supporters want to be heard. Genuine engagement with supporters' groups is vital and we feel representation at board level is necessary.



What actions could be taken now ?

Responsibility and Trust

Thousands of members and non-members alike who took our survey see new ownership as their top priority for the immediate future.

Supporters might be interested in a formal response from the board to this supporter vision.

Identity and Heritage

Redesigning the club crest was another priority that ranked highly among supporters and 94% of supporters feel this redesign should not happen without them being consulted.

Supporters have indicated they would be interested a supporter driven consultation on the crest

Stadium and Experience

97% of supporters feel the design of The London Stadium should be further improved to enhance atmosphere.

Supporters might benefit from reading a comprehensive set of findings from the work begun in 2018, where the club committed to a “study of all the options available” (with reference to the stadium).

Community and Supporters

Supporters want local sellers and businesses to play more of a part on a matchday, with 76% believing that chain restaurants, bars and outlets are not an improvement on local cafes, pubs and stalls.

These businesses and sellers might be interested to hear how contractual barriers, making trade either not possible or not profitable, could be re-negotiated or removed on their behalf.

Service and Loyalty

Only 11% of supporters are confident that ticketing policies are fair and transparent.

Supporters considering buying a season ticket, or fixture by fixture away tickets, have indicated they would be interested in transparency over demand and allocation of those tickets.

Engagement and Communication

Only 6% of supporters feel their views are considered, although Hammers United welcome the commitment from club staff around engaging with the Independent Supporters Committee.

We suggest that the club now commit to involving supporters in conversations at board level and that discussions are opened around a process for embedding this structure.

