

# IFO

THE INDEPENDENT  
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**IFO COMPLAINT REF: 22/02**

## **Entry Problems for Leeds Fans at Stamford Bridge**

### **The Role of the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO)**

1. The office of the IFO has been established by the three English football authorities (The Football Association (FA), the Premier League and The English Football League [EFL]) with the agreement of Government. The IFO has been designated as the final stage for the adjudication of complaints which have not been resolved within football's complaints procedure. The IFO is an Approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body and its findings are non-binding. IFO Adjudications will normally comprise two parts: an impartial assessment of the substantive complaint and a review of the procedure by which the complaint was handled. The IFO's role is to investigate the complaint and judge whether it was dealt with properly and whether the outcomes were reasonable for all parties concerned. Under the procedure agreed by the Football Governing Bodies, the adjudication of the IFO is final and there is no right of appeal against IFO findings.

2. The IFO must make clear that in investigating this complaint he has received full cooperation from Chelsea FC, the Metropolitan Police, the Local Authority and the Sports Grounds Safety Authority.

3. Six individual Leeds United supporters complained, through the Football Supporters' Association (FSA), about safety issues surrounding entry to Stamford Bridge at the Club's away fixture on 11 December 2021. Some enclosed photographs of the crush outside the turnstiles. They all complained that they had received an identical generic response which did not address their individual and legitimate concerns.

### **The accounts given by the complainants to the Club**

4. All the complainants were well used to the processes, and difficulties, of getting fans into a stadium in a safe and timely manner. Their experiences at Chelsea were variously described as "horrendous, dangerous and seriously unsafe, and the worst experience of crowd management ever encountered". The complainants all arrived at the away end at about 14:30 hours to find a large number of fans trying to make their way towards the turnstiles. The match was due to kick-off at 15:00. The Leeds fans were being separated from Chelsea fans making their way to their upper section of the Shed End by a standing barrier and a row of police and stewards. The respective queues for upper and lower tier were not clear and many fans ended up in the wrong queue. There appeared to be only three (maybe four) turnstiles that Leeds fans could use and their operation was painfully slow, partly because the instructions on the card reader seemed wrong - there was a cashless 'tap here' symbol and instruction alongside a clear glass panel with a light behind; many fans were "tapping here" with their ticket before realising they needed to scan the ticket on the glass panel, hence almost everyone was taking longer than was necessary. The crush began to build up until the pressure became dangerous. Some fans began to push backwards to prevent people in front from being crushed and some people started to panic. Many were shouting at the police to go further back in the crush to release the pressure, but the police seemed to have no idea what to do. Eventually, a barrier toppled over, which added to the problems. Close to kick-off some fans began pushing harder. Adding to the angst, there were Chelsea fans goading the Leeds fans as they made their way up the ramp to the right going to the home section. A double door to the right of the turnstiles came open and fans rushed in. As everyone had already passed through a line of stewards checking that they had valid tickets, it seemed a sensible way to get fans in more quickly, but several police very aggressively blocked the way and forced fans back into the already crushed gathering and slammed the door shut. One complainant had asked a police officer what could be done to ease the surge; he replied that it was nothing to do with the police - the fault lay with stewards who had not done the checks necessary before the turnstiles, so they were having to do them right at the turnstiles. There were only two stewards at the turnstiles providing assistance. The complainants got into the stadium around 15:15, but there were hundreds still behind them. After the

match there was a line of stewards and police extending about 20 metres segregating fans, after which it was a free for all. Whoever was in charge should have asked for the kick-off to be delayed.

5. The complainants asked the Club to review such a chaotic situation in order to learn something for the future. The complainants could not believe such events do not happen at every game with only three or four turnstiles for 3,000 fans who, since they can't drink near the stadium, will obviously be arriving around 14:30, all at the same time. If repeated often enough, the situation which the Leeds fans had faced would result in a disaster where people get hurt.

6. On 19 January 2022 the Club's Supporter Services Unit replied saying:

“The feedback we receive, whether positive or negative, is always appreciated. Turnstile capacity at Stamford Bridge is more than capable of handling organised entry of all 40,343 supporters attending the stadium. However, a group of approximately 500 away supporters arrived approximately 20 minutes before kick-off and rushed the turnstiles causing significant disruption and slowed entry in that area. A large number of those supporters were verbally and physically abusive towards Club Stewards and Police, while also attempting to gain unlawful entry to the stadium via fire exit doors, which other away supporters were attempting to open from inside to try and facilitate ticketless entry to the match. Extra Security and Police had been brought in before the game in anticipation of difficulties with the away supporters, however it was impossible for them to immediately control such an aggressive and orchestrated surge. The behaviour of those away fans resulted in an unpleasant overcrowding of the turnstile area. Order was subsequently restored and away supporters gained access via the turnstiles, including a group of 60 that Security and Police had held back for their own safety. We have not experienced similar behaviour from other visiting domestic away fans. Indeed, the last two home matches against Tottenham Hotspur and Chesterfield saw approximately 10,000 away fans safely accommodated in Stamford Bridge's away section with no issues witnessed or reported at all during entry to the stadium. Chelsea FC takes the safety and well-being of all supporters that visit our Stadium extremely seriously, and we go to great lengths to try and ensure our Stadium is a welcoming place for everyone that visits. It is a shame therefore that away fans' behaviour marred your Stamford Bridge experience and that of others. Thank you for taking the time to write to Chelsea Football Club.”

### **The reaction of complainants to Chelsea's response**

6. Chelsea did not seem to have any interest in what fans were saying. The Club's response was harking back to all the preconceptions and misrepresentations that came out of the Hillsborough disaster and so, if they refused to accept that anything was wrong, fans would just have to sit back and hope nothing as serious

ever happens in the future. The complainants took issue with some of the points the Club had made.

- The reply was a complete misrepresentation of what had happened; it was a classic case of blaming the fans rather than acknowledging the Club's own failings.
- The vast majority of the Leeds fans crushed outside their ground were not drunk.
- None of those in that crush were without tickets as they had all had their tickets checked manually by a line of stewards some 100 yards before the turnstiles. Suggesting that fans inside were trying to get ticketless fans into the ground was ludicrous.
- The Club had admitted that the arrival of 500 at the same time caused a crush, but that was because they were trying to get them all through four tiny, cramped turnstiles. The home end had far more turnstiles per stand capacity.
- No one "rushed the turnstiles". The issue was that several hundred fans were held, with the turnstiles not admitting anyone for several minutes at a time and the crush just built and built. There was no rush but there was a crush.
- The complainants had not heard abuse; it was merely fans getting more and concerned about the situation and police and stewards were doing nothing to help.
- "This is a generic reply which appears to be blaming me and other innocent fans who appear to have been caught up in the issues which were not of our doing, nor did I feel supported and made to feel listened to on the day or subsequently with this reply."

### **The IFO investigation**

7. The IFO obtained a report from Hammersmith and Fulham Council who had been represented at the match. They said that the match was high risk category owing to history between supporters and intelligence of pre-planned disorder. Three planning partnership meetings were held in advance of the fixture with the Club, the police and the local authority. Approximately 500 Leeds supporters arrived 15 minutes before kick-off. Arriving opposing supporters had to be separated by the police throughout. Pressure in terms of numbers grew at the away entry point to the Shed End turnstiles and stewards had difficulty in maintaining control with the entry checks and the pulsing of supporters through the queuing system to the turnstiles, owing to the numbers and arguably some bad behaviour. Police had to intervene to assist but there was a push of supporters towards the turnstiles which caused concerns over crushing and barriers were knocked over. All turnstiles were working but the crowd pressure made entry into the stadium difficult. There was a lot of tension and anger amongst the Leeds supporters

towards the police and stewards owing to the congestion. Some distressed Leeds supporters and police officers had to be pulled from the congestion at the turnstiles owing to crowd pressure. An emergency exit to the upper tier was opened from inside by a fan, which resulted in dozens of supporters forcibly entering the stadium. Police had to enter the stadium in order to secure the emergency exit. The last of the Leeds supporters entered the stadium at 15:20hrs. The incident was deeply concerning from a safety perspective.

8. In responding to the IFO on the complaints, the Club submitted a report of the Club's match day safety team's review of the events at the Leeds match. In the light of police intelligence, the Club had brought in extra police and stewarding resources and Leeds had provided eleven of their own stewards to assist. In advance of the match, the Club had provided Leeds with detailed arrival instructions for onward communication to travelling fans, including advice that they should be in their seats no later than 30 minutes before kick-off, and a warning that those arriving late should not expect entry before kick-off. The Club's turnstiles are Green Guide compliant and each allows entry to more than 660 persons per hour. There were eight turnstiles in operation for the Leeds match, five for the upper tier and three for the lower. Leeds' ticket allocation was 2,850. The Club deployed 94 stewards and security staff to supervise the entry of Leeds fans, supported by 15 police officers. They were deployed in a series of barriers on the approach to the turnstiles; each line was able to hold back fans and "pulse" groups through to the next stage in order to alleviate pressure on the front of the queue at the turnstiles.

9. With 30 minutes to go before kick-off there were still almost 2,000 Leeds fans (out of 2,598 recorded as attending) yet to enter the stadium; CCTV footage showed the away turnstiles almost completely clear at that time. The police were tracking three groups of fans making their way to the stadium from different directions. In contravention of instructions from police and stewards that they should proceed to the Stamford Gate, a group of 60 tried to enter by force through the Britannia Gate. That attempt was thwarted, but the group then engaged in fighting with police and Chelsea fans. At around 14.40 the three groups converged on the stadium almost simultaneously and proceeded towards the turnstiles, where they were broken up by the Club's control measures. A group of around 250 was allowed to move forwards, then were held by police to avoid overcrowding at the turnstiles. As it was getting towards kick-off time, fans became impatient at being held back and surged forwards, physically pushing barriers, police and stewards out of the way to get to the turnstiles. The police instructed officers at the front of the queue to withdraw for their own safety; the Club's control room instructed their own personnel likewise. The surge of fans against the turnstiles prevented them from operating efficiently; orders to stop pushing and alleviate the pressure were ignored. Stewards were able to maintain breaks in the crowd further back so that the surge was confined to the group approaching the turnstiles. Entry was slow because of the pressure against the turnstiles.

10. At 15.09 fans who had entered the stadium pushed a steward aside and forced open a fire exit, through which at least 50 fans gained access before it was closed by police. The last Leeds fans from the groups entered the stadium at 15.20. During the match Leeds fans damaged 190 of the new rail seats installed as part of the safe standing experiment.

11. The Club had carried out a comprehensive debrief and review with the Local Authority, the Metropolitan Police and the Sports Grounds Safety Authority. They had identified key factors as follows:-

- The failure of a large number of fans to arrive in good time had led to frustration and impatience when entry was delayed by safety measures.
- Lack of discipline, ignoring instructions and anti-social behaviour by fans at the front of the queue had led to the withdrawal of police and stewards in the interests of safety.
- Pressure on turnstiles prevented fans from entering at the usual flow rates.
- The groups further back were successfully held by stewarding barriers.

12. The IFO and Deputy visited the Club and met with the match day safety team and the Club's Legal Counsel. Together they watched CCTV footage taken from four different cameras of events at the away entry point between 14.40 and 15.20 on the day of the match. Events were very much as described in the Club's report to the IFO. By 14.54 the lower tier queue was flowing properly as pressure eased, but problems persisted in the other queue with lots of pushing and apparent difficulty in operating the turnstiles. At 14.55 the police and stewards withdrew from the queue. At kick-off there were 1,991 away fans inside the stadium; the last of the group entered at 15.22. The match officials were not prepared to delay the kick-off.

13. The Chelsea officials explained that their queueing system has been operating since 2005 and they had successfully managed much larger numbers of away fans than at the Leeds match; they regarded the Leeds situation as a one-off event. At the series of barriers which they use, they have a "soft" ticket check, a subsequent check to ensure that the fan is in the right queue, and a final check and search. The officials said that there were no issues with the operation of the turnstiles other than those caused by the pushing of fans. During discussions, the IFO sought what mitigation would be introduced to improve arrangements in the future. The Club said that in order to help prevent a similar occurrence they would be using heavier crowd control barriers, there would be revisions to the tactical positioning of police in and around the entry system and further reminders to visiting fans that arrival in good time is essential.

14. The officials provided a copy of a document titled “Visiting Club Supporters Advice - Season 2021 - 2022, Chelsea v Leeds United, FA Premier League, 11th December 2021, Kick Off: 15:00”, which they sent to Leeds to communicate to purchasers of away tickets. The document set out that supporters must have had two doses of a, Covid-19 vaccine or proof of a lateral flow test carried out within 48 hours of the fixture and that “this will be checked upon entry.” Specifically under Stadium Entry the document says:

“Chelsea FC operate the following queuing procedure (see below) to co-ordinate and moderate the flow of supporters to the turnstiles to ensure a safe entry into the Stadium.

On arrival at the queuing system the following processes will occur:

Pre-entry ticket checks

Body and bag search

Electronic ticket scan

Entry through turnstile

During these procedures it may be necessary to temporarily hold supporters at cordon points to achieve a safe and steady flow through to the turnstiles.

Turnstiles will be open 2 hours (90 minutes for midweek fixtures) before kick-off, and it is advised supporters to be in their seats no later than 30 minutes before kick-Off.

Please note that large numbers of Supporters arriving late cannot have an expectation of making it into the Stadium before kick-off.”

Leeds confirmed to the IFO that they had posted details of the leaflet on their website.

15. The IFO and Deputy viewed the away end access area and turnstiles. The “tap here” option (see paragraph 4) is required for when season tickets are being used; it was clear that other tickets needed to be shown to the screen to be scanned. In watching CCTV footage, it was clear that when there was no pressure on the turnstile, there was no apparent problem in fans presenting their tickets to effect entry and the flow was good.

16. The IFO discussed the complaints with the Metropolitan Police. Police intelligence had suggested a real risk of disorder at the fixture, given the history between the teams; the match was given the highest security grading. The primary focus of police at matches is crime prevention and detection, not crowd

management, which is for the stewards under the control of the Safety Officer. Stewards had asked for police help because they were overwhelmed and feared for their safety. The police confirmed that problems had arisen from the arrival shortly before kick-off of groups of fans anxious to enter the ground before the match started. The police had viewed CCTV footage of the events and were satisfied that there was a breach of the peace and some disorder among away fans.

## **Findings**

17. The IFO must make clear that none of the complainants was said to have been involved in the group who were fighting, in opening the fire door, in surging towards the turnstiles, or in damaging seats. The IFO must also make it clear at the outset that there were worrying scenes at the turnstiles and that there is no doubt that the complainants had disconcerting experiences and legitimate concerns for their welfare and safety. The question for the IFO to consider is to what extent, if any, Chelsea were culpable for that situation. As police intelligence suggested that there was a high risk of disorder at the game, Chelsea brought in extra police and stewarding resources. It was also helpful to issue the away fans' guide although, in all probability, it wasn't read by all away fans. There is usually a reasonable expectation that many supporters will not arrive until shortly before kick-off; that is by no means a behaviour exclusive to Leeds supporters. However, in December 2021 the country was emerging from the grips of the pandemic and extra safety measures had been adopted in public places as a matter of common practice. In such circumstances, it is not unreasonable to suggest that fans should have expected additional checks and should have taken steps to mitigate the resultant delays by turning up in good time.

18. However, 30 minutes before kick-off some 2,000 out of 2,598 Leeds fans recorded as having attended, had yet to enter the stadium, despite Chelsea's advice that fans should be in their seats by then and a warning that fans arriving "late" could not expect to enter the stadium by kick-off. The IFO is satisfied that the convergence of three separate groups of fans, totalling around 500 and coming from three separate directions, around 20 minutes before kick-off, had a major impact on what took place. Fans understandably wanted into the stadium before kick-off, but the surge towards the turnstiles was counter productive in that the pressure caused resulted in many fans having difficulties in operating them and the pace of entry was accordingly reduced.

19. The IFO is satisfied that Chelsea's planning for the match followed well established practice and their crowd queuing system had not resulted in problems at previous high profile matches. It is clear from the CCTV footage and evidence obtained from the police, that the security staff were overwhelmed by the surge of fans, many of whom failed to follow instructions; for their own safety, security staff were forced to withdraw at one stage. Although it is difficult to see what more

the Club could reasonably have done to cope with the situation, they have nevertheless taken certain steps to try to prevent any recurrence (see paragraph 13).

20. The way in which Chelsea dealt with the subsequent complaints was poor. The replies were generic with no attempt to address the particular aspects of the individual complaints. The emphasis was to put all the blame on Leeds fans, which some complainants understandably took personally, when only a small percentage was culpable. They took particular exception to the allegation, which the IFO finds unsubstantiated, that the fire doors had been opened to allow ticketless fans entry, their view being that it was done simply to alleviate the crush.

21. The IFO shared the draft findings of his investigation with the FSA and each of the complainants. The FSA's prime concern was that the focus at the match seemed to have been the prevention of crime and disorder, while safety concerns and crowd management contingencies did not seem to have featured in the planning; the absence of so many fans at 14.30 should have triggered a contingency plan to deal with a surge of fans likely to arrive simultaneously. **The IFO recommends that, in conjunction with the police, the Club devise such a plan to deal with a situation where they identify that a significant number of fans have still to arrive at the turnstiles at a particular point before kick-off.**

22. The complainants generally remained of the view that the main cause of the congestion was that tickets were not scanning, and turnstiles were not working, properly; they also cast doubt on the ability of each turnstile to cope with 660 people per hour. Some complainants refused to believe that there were eight turnstiles for the Leeds fans. All considered that the police should have been asked to intervene at an early stage and that the "bad behaviour" cited was largely fans shouting at police to do something about the crush.

## **Conclusion**

23. There is no doubt that there were worrying scenes as Leeds fans queued to enter Stamford Bridge. Although the Club's planning followed their well established practice, they were unable to cope with the surge of fans trying to enter the stadium in time for kick-off. Although the IFO found it difficult to see what more the Club could have done in the circumstances to cope with the situation, there are obviously lessons to be learned from the experience and the observations of the complainants. The IFO welcomes the steps the Club have taken to try to prevent any recurrence and recommends that they draw up a contingency plan to help cope if an abnormal build up of fans trying to enter the stadium is likely.

**Kevin Grix, Ombudsman**

**6 July 2022**

**Alan Watson CBE, Deputy Ombudsman**

