

# **CRIMINALISING FOOTBALL FANS: THE CASE AGAINST 'BUBBLE' MATCHES**

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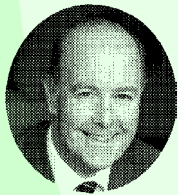
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The Manifesto Club campaigns against the hyper-regulation of everyday life. We support free movement across borders, free expression and free association. We challenge booze bans, photo bans, vetting and speech codes – all new ways in which the state regulates everyday life on the streets, in workplaces and in our private lives.

Our rapidly growing membership hails from all political traditions and none, and from all corners of the world. To join this group of free thinkers and campaigners, see: [manifestoclub.com](http://manifestoclub.com)

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## THE RISE OF 'BUBBLE' MATCHES



Cardiff City fans forced to travel on licensed coaches.

'Bubble' football matches are the culmination of years of growing restrictions on football fans who follow their team to away matches.

'Bubble' match travel amounts to 'kettling' on wheels. Travelling fans must be transported on licensed coaches and under police escort, from a designated pick-up point to a designated drop-off point. No independent travel is allowed to the match by car, train, or any other means of transport. Fans often must pick up their tickets on route, for example at a motorway service station at a halfway point. Their freedom of movement is suspended.

The next 'bubble' restrictions will be imposed on Portsmouth supporters travelling to Southampton for the local derby on Saturday 7 April 2012. Even if you live a long distance from the point of departure,

including in Southampton itself, as a Portsmouth fan you must leave from the specified Portsmouth departure point in order to go to the match. This is a condition of ticket sales. Fans will be met by the police in Southampton, and escorted to and from the ground through what the police call 'the sterile area'.

Pompey (Portsmouth) Supporters Trust vice-chair, Ken Malley, spoke out against these restrictions:

**'WE ARE AGAINST BUBBLE MATCHES BECAUSE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES AND BECAUSE IT GIVES THE IDEA THAT ALL FOOTBALL FANS HAVE TO BE CONTROLLED!'**<sup>1</sup>

This briefing document looks at the prevalence of bubble matches in England and Wales, and describes the disruption involved for ordinary supporters. We have identified at least 48 matches over the past decade where these draconian travel restrictions have been applied.

## THE PREVALENCE OF BUBBLE MATCHES

We sought to discover the prevalence of 'bubble' match restrictions by approaching police authorities with football clubs in their jurisdiction with:

<sup>1</sup> Telephone conversation, March 2012

**–WELL-SUPPORTED FOOTBALL CLUBS PLAYING AT PREMIER LEAGUE OR CHAMPIONSHIP LEVEL;  
–A HISTORY OF CROWD DISORDER PROBLEMS;  
–KNOWN TICKET RESTRICTIONS.**

Freedom of Information requests were made to 28 police authorities across England and Wales. From the information provided by the police, clubs and supporters' groups, we conclude that in the past decade at least 48 bubble matches have taken place, involving at least 14 major clubs in England and Wales. These clubs are: Cardiff City, West Ham United, Swansea City, Bristol City, Leeds United, Millwall, Portsmouth, Southampton, Blackburn Rovers, Burnley, Tottenham Hotspur, Stoke City, Wolverhampton Wanderers and Birmingham City. These matches have occurred in six police authority areas: Avon, West Midlands, Hampshire, Lancashire, West Yorkshire, and Metropolitan Police.

In spite of loud protests from supporters' clubs – and declining trouble at football matches – these extreme travel restrictions are still being considered and implemented.

The results of our FOI requests are laid out in the table below. It is likely that this estimate is conservative: a handful of police authorities have either delayed production of the information, or pointed to the exemption under Part II Section 31 (Law Enforcement) of the Freedom of Information Act.

Police Authority	No. of bubble matches	Year	Football Matches
Avon	7	2002	Bristol City v Cardiff City
		2002	Bristol City v Cardiff City <sup>Play off</sup>
		2007	Bristol City v Cardiff City
		2009	Bristol City v Cardiff City
		2009	Bristol City v Cardiff City <sup>Cup</sup>
		2010	Bristol City v Cardiff City
		2011	Bristol City v Cardiff City
West Midlands	17	2001	Stoke City v Cardiff City
		2001	Stoke City v Cardiff City <sup>Play off</sup>
		2003	Stoke City v Cardiff City
		2003	Coventry City v Cardiff City
		2004	Stoke City v Cardiff City
		2004	Wolves v Cardiff City
		2005	Coventry City v Cardiff City
		2005	Stoke City v Cardiff City
		2005	Wolves v Cardiff City
		2005	WBA v Cardiff City
		2006	Birmingham City v Cardiff City
		2007	WBA v Cardiff City
		2007	Wolves v Cardiff City
		2007	Coventry v Cardiff City
		2008	Wolves v Cardiff City
		2009	WBA v Cardiff City
		2009	Birmingham v Cardiff City
Hampshire	2	2011	Portsmouth v Southampton
		2012	Southampton v Portsmouth <sup>7th April</sup>
Lancashire	2	2009	Blackburn v Burnley
		2010	Burnley v Blackburn
West Yorkshire	6	2005	Leeds v Cardiff City
		2006	Leeds v Cardiff City
		2007	Leeds v Cardiff City
		2010	Leeds v Cardiff City
		2011	Leeds v Cardiff City
		2011	Leeds United v Millwall

Met Police	7	2003	Millwall v Cardiff City
		2003	West Ham v Cardiff City
		2004	West Ham v Cardiff City
		2005	West Ham v Cardiff City
		2005	Tottenham v Cardiff City
		2005	Millwall v Cardiff City
		2011	West Ham v Cardiff City
South Wales	7	2011	Cardiff v Leeds
		2008	Cardiff v Swansea <sup>CUP</sup>
		2008	Cardiff v Swansea
		2009	Cardiff v Swansea
		2009	Swansea v Bristol City
		2010	Cardiff v Swansea
		2010	Cardiff v Bristol City
TOTAL	48		

Data received from police authorities, and from football supporters organisations.

## THE IMPACT OF BUBBLE MATCHES

In order to impose restrictions on travelling supporters, a number of clubs issue vouchers rather than tickets. The vouchers are then exchanged for tickets at a designated point on route to the stadium, often a motorway service station, but in the case of Bristol City matches it has usually been an industrial estate in the docklands area of Avonmouth. The 'voucher for ticket' exchange is

policed, and travel beyond the point of exchange is also controlled, with coaches and minibuses permitted to travel on to the stadium, but usually not private cars.

Unsurprisingly, a significant number of fans are put off going to bubble matches, and ticket revenue for the clubs is reduced. At one of the restricted matches, Bristol City took 200 fans to Swansea rather than the usual 2000, a 90% reduction in support for their team on the day.<sup>2</sup>

For the Millwall match at Leeds on 3 December 2011, coaches had to leave the football ground in London at 5.30am, meeting the police at Woolley Edge Services on the M1 motorway, where pre-paid vouchers were exchanged for match tickets. This was the only place where it was possible to acquire a match ticket, and the early kick-off time of 12.30pm added inconvenience for the supporters.

The extreme measures involved in bubble matches cause considerable disruption for fans. This is not surprising, because the whole system is designed for the convenience of the authorities – the police and the clubs – rather than for the supporters.

Clubs' restrictions on visiting fans may make matches cheaper to police. This will happen if the risk category, into which all matches are graded, is lowered because of the tighter controls imposed. Clubs may therefore be tempted to opt for bubble matches, despite their unpopularity, since the savings can be close to £20,000 for a Championship level fixture.

<sup>2</sup> Time to burst the bubble, Bristol City Supporters Trust [www.bristolcityst.org.uk/trust\\_news/article000564.shtml](http://www.bristolcityst.org.uk/trust_news/article000564.shtml)

Of course, authorities claim that these restrictions make visiting supporters feel safer. However, a perverse result of the bubble restrictions is that football supporters can be more exposed to troublemakers, because they are travelling in a convoy of readily identifiable vehicles. Supporters travelling independently by car or train can usually move unobtrusively in and around the stadium, with the application of a minimum amount of common sense and caution. When this is effectively banned, supporters are wholly reliant on police security.

The 'bubble' group is unlikely to endear itself to opposing supporters. Indeed, these high-security measures can ratchet up fear and distrust. The sight of kettled supporters being escorted to and from the ground can lead to the very taunting and abuse which the authorities would presumably like to see reduced.

## WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR BUBBLE MATCHES?

It is often difficult to know who is responsible for the decision to instigate a bubble match. Ultimate responsibility for selling match tickets rests on the clubs, with the away club selling the away tickets and the home club the home tickets.

Each professional match in England and Wales is partly governed by a safety advisory group (SAG), which

considers the safety aspects and agrees on the organisation required. This group is based at the club where the fixture is taking place, and comprises officials from the club, the emergency services, the Football Licensing Authority (now the Sports Ground Safety Authority, or SGSA), and representatives of the local authority.

Decisions about safety and organisation are usually taken within this group, and as a result no individual party necessarily takes responsibility for the decisions being made. However, safety rules from the SGSA make it clear that it is the club which carries ultimate responsibility for the match. Since bubble matches are generally unpopular with supporters, it is easier for the buck to be passed among the various parties than for one to publicly admit that it is responsible for deciding on 'bubble' conditions for away supporters.

## CRIMINALISING FOOTBALL FANS

It has become commonplace for travelling football supporters to be regarded with suspicion at best, and as alien and dangerous at worst. Pat-down body searches before entering the ground have been added to bag searches as common practice. Filming of supporters by the police has also become routine. The number of stew-

ards at matches has been growing, as have reports and incidents of their heavy-handed behaviour. Some grounds have introduced web-cams for stewards to film spectators at matches, and the practice looks likely to spread.

The bubble match is merely the most extreme example of restrictions on away fans' freedom of movement. A more common form of restriction comes in the application of the Traffic Commissioner's Guidelines,<sup>3</sup> under which police can advise coach companies on the route they should take, and the time they should arrive in the host town or city.

Although travel restrictions are not as severe as in bubble matches – independent travel is not banned entirely – these guidelines can still lead to extreme restrictions on coach-travelling fans.

One recent case affected Carlisle supporters, travelling for a match in Preston on 26 December 2011. The head of Carlisle United Supporters Club, Kate Rowley, had arranged through her brother (a parish priest in Preston) to stop at the Blessed Sacrament Club prior to the game for food and drink. Food was purchased in readiness for their visit. However, their plans were thwarted when Lancashire Police imposed restrictions on their travel, which meant that coach parties were prohibited from stopping.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'Legal Requirements at Sporting Events' [www.route-one.net/documents/legal\\_requirements\\_at\\_sporting\\_events.pdf](http://www.route-one.net/documents/legal_requirements_at_sporting_events.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Kate Rowley to Chief Superintendent James Lee, Preston Police

Another instance of heavy-handed behaviour came in 2008, when 80 well-behaved Stoke City supporters were asked to leave a pub near Man-

chester, and were forcibly taken back to Stoke, missing the away match at Manchester United they had set off to watch. Greater Manchester Police later apologised and paid out almost £200,000 in compensation. Authorisation for this came from Section 27 of the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, which had been used inappropriately. There had been no complaints about the fans' behaviour and the landlord of the pub in question later said that he would welcome them all back and serve them sandwiches!

## ARRESTS IN DECLINE – BUBBLE MATCHES ARE NOT NECESSARY

These extreme travel restrictions occur at a time when violent or disorderly incidents in and around football grounds have declined markedly. In the season 2010–11, total match attendance at professional matches in England and Wales was more than 37 million, representing by far the largest spectator events in Britain. The total number of arrests in that season was 3089, which represents less than 0.01% of all spectators, or 1 arrest for every 12,249 people. This was a record low according to the Home Office.

This was a reduction of 9% on the 2009–10 totals. Just 332 of the arrests were for violent disorder, 40% down on the previous season. 71% of matches had no arrests at all.<sup>5</sup>

Although bubble matches affect clubs with a history of crowd disorder, all current indications are that football-related violence is at an historic low. It is highly questionable, therefore, whether these extreme travel restrictions are necessary and proportionate.

## FOR THE ABOLITION OF BUBBLE MATCHES

Of course, no one wants to see violent disorder at football matches, particularly if it involves innocent parties getting caught between warring groups of supporters.

Yet we need to ask: is it fair that the vast majority of supporters, who behave well, should have their freedom to travel to a popular leisure activity curtailed, because of the (increasingly slight) risk that there will be disorder caused by a small number of troublemakers?

<sup>5</sup> Statistics on football-related arrests and banning orders, Season 2010-11, Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/football-arrests-banning-orders/fbo-2010-11?view=Binary>

Bubble match restrictions do not target the minority of troublemakers. Instead, they punish all away fans, and hope to deter the violent minority by doing so. This is surely wrong

in principle. Under Britain's common law, people are treated as innocent until proven guilty, not the other way around. People are held to account for their own actions, not punished for the actions of others.

We call on football clubs, the police and local authorities to reject and end the extreme and discriminatory practice of bubble matches. Instead, police and football authorities should concentrate on tackling troublemakers and incidents of disorder directly, with the co-operation of football clubs and supporters' organisations.

The disorderly few should be held to account for their behaviour – and the vast majority of peaceful football fans should have their rights to freedom of movement restored.





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