



Football Focus - FSOA

Q Could you tell us a little more about the Football Safety Officers Association?

The creation of the FSOA came about during the flurry of activities that followed Lord Justice Taylor's report into the Hillsborough Stadium disaster. The police seriously examined their role at sports grounds and football authorities were forced to face up to their responsibilities for ensuring the care, safety and wellbeing of spectators. In particular, they were forced to look at how their grounds were managed with one of the main concerns being the variance in safety management performances at football grounds in England and Wales. Safety systems and practices had been evolved locally but in a piecemeal fashion and with very little consistency or uniformity of purpose. Such inconsistency included the appointment of safety officers, which before Hillsborough was not an established post at the majority of clubs. Even in the immediate post-Hillsborough era there were many clubs that felt that ageing club secretaries, with little or no knowledge or experience of safety management, could carry out the role of a safety officer. Others deemed it to be a match day only position. This was unacceptable to the few capable and competent safety officers at the time and created the climate which helped bring about the FSOA.

The Football Safety Officers Association (FSOA) of England and Wales was therefore formed in 1992 by a small group of Football Safety Officers to help develop and improve all aspects of stadium safety.

Membership of the FSOA was initially only open to safety officers, their deputies and assistants from football clubs in all leagues, as well as others with particular safety management roles within football. Today we have extended our membership opportunities to a wider audience of safety professionals such as facilities and stadium managers who work alongside safety officers to deliver a safe experience for all spectators who attend not just football but all events across all sites and venue's.

Starting with 28 members, FSOA membership now stands at over 300 as well as more than 50 corporate partners. Membership is voluntary but almost all English and Welsh Premier, Championship and Football League Clubs are represented, together with the national stadia of both countries. Membership also extends to clubs in the lower football leagues. Members and partners work together to share expertise and best practice to benefit the football industry as a whole.

Q What are your main aims and objectives?

The FSOA is a not-for-profit organisation that works to improve all aspects of safety at football grounds. We do this by promoting best safety management practices, enhancing the role of stewards and continually developing the expertise of safety officers.

As stadium design and facilities for spectators have been improved over the years, so too has the expectations of the fans who visit grounds. In order to keep pace with these heightened expectations the FSOA continues to play a significant part in evolving safety practices, mainly through the stewards employed by football clubs, to improve levels of customer care and quality of service delivery. Attending football matches should be an enjoyable experience irrespective of the match result. Safety officers, through their match day staff, play a significant part in achieving this objective.

Q Could you tell us more about the work the FSOA does and the services that you offer?

Our members are represented on various working groups related to all aspects of improving stadium facilities and safety management. Members have made important contributions to the development of various guidance documents, for example the (then) Football Licensing Authority 2009 publication on Safety Management and the Football Association's 2010 guidance on Crowd Management. FSOA members are regular speakers at safety and security training courses and seminars both in the UK and abroad. Our members were also closely involved with the training of stewards for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and the 2012 European Championships in Poland and Ukraine.

The benefits of becoming a member of the FSOA are huge, giving safety officers access to latest industry information and guidelines and the opportunity to share and expand their knowledge and expertise to benefit their clubs and fans.

The FSOA website, www.fsoa.org.uk, enables members to exchange information and access all current documentation relevant to their role. The website also includes a facility for members to upload and download post match safety reports. Safety Officers can, therefore, exchange match day information such as attendances, methods of travel, visiting supporters' numbers and behaviour, particular problems including any arrests or ejections and the reasons for these. This information allows members to plan their matches and the use of their resources more accurately and effectively without relying solely on police intelligence. The match day reporting system, like other FSOA services, is constantly evolving to take into account the needs of its members and demands of the football industry and the sports regulatory bodies.

Another valuable function of the website is the interactive forum where members can seek advice or exchange information on any problems or issues they might face in their day-to-day safety management operations.

The FSOA also hosts an AGM and a biannual Conference & Exhibition where speakers and exhibitors are invited to attend to address members and display the latest developments in spectator safety. The conferences have become an extremely popular fixture on the calendar, where experts gather to share their knowledge and learn more about the latest safety support systems, services, technology and equipment available to safety officers.

Our members are at the forefront of every football match day operation when supporters expect and deserve every effort to be made to ensure their reasonable care, comfort and safety. The person who has to ensure this, the safety officer, carries a tremendous responsibility on his/her shoulders and it is a burden that can take its toll. That is why our

Association is committed to supporting members in any way it can to ensure they have the competencies, status, authority and self belief to effectively carry out their role.

Q What do you think has been behind your success?

The FSOA was initially created by safety officers for safety officers, and the vast experience, expertise and knowledge of our members means we can work to make a real difference in the constantly evolving world of football safety. We also work closely with football governing bodies, national bodies such as the Home Office, the Department for Culture Media and Sport, Local Government agencies such as the Core Cities Group and the Association of Chief Police Officers. Our partners in the development of constantly improving safety, security and customer care and service delivery include the Sports Grounds Safety Authority, the Football Supporters Federation and Level Playing Field.

Whilst membership of the FSOA is open to safety officers, their deputies and assistants, we also welcome membership from individuals, organisations or companies whose roles, products or services complement the aims and objectives of the association and which will assist or support the membership.

Since our inception other sports in the United Kingdom have adopted the principles and ideals formulated by the FSOA with other Football Safety Officer bodies established in Scotland and Northern Ireland and also in other sports such as cricket, rugby league, rugby union and horse racing.

Q What are some of the main issues you are faced with relating to stadium safety?

There are a number of issues that safety officers are faced with as they plan their matches and the use of their resources. These include the threat of terrorism, improvised explosive devices, pyrotechnics, new stadium design and spectator engagement, as well as the financial implications of upgrading or installing new safety systems.

Safe standing is another issue that is getting much attention following the introduction of rail seating at Celtic Park. A representative from Celtic FC attended our last conference to speak to members about the process that has been involved in introducing rail seating for just under 3,000 of the club's fans. Despite standing being banned at major football grounds in England and Wales following tragedies such as Hillsborough, safety officers still have to deal with fans persistently standing at matches, which in itself has the potential to be dangerous. The issue of whether standing could be reintroduced in a safe manner by using rail seating is one the FSOA is watching closely.

Q How has providing safety changed in recent years?

Safety management is ever evolving and we work to keep up to date with the constant developments in technology, stadium design and issues affecting the wider industry to ensure safety officers are equipped with the knowledge required to carry out their role effectively and keep spectators safe.

There are various issues that have played a part in changing the way safety is provided, including technical advancement in relation to stadium access, the availability of CCTV

and other software programmes for grounds, the global threat of terrorism and the withdrawal of police at some football stadiums.

Q How do you see this area developing in the future?

The future will continue to present many challenges to stadium and spectator safety but experience has shown our ability to respond effectively to whatever issues have arisen. Over the years, as safety legislation, safety regulation, safety guidance and safety expectations have continually evolved, so has the need for the FSOA and its members to keep pace with change as it happens.

One problem facing the association as we have strived to keep pace with changes and challenges over the years, has been the lack of adequate funding from the football authorities, in the way other football bodies are supported. We have, however, succeeded in creating a platform for sustainability through determination by developing professional relationships with our now sponsors, Showsec, Dallmeier and BSKYB. Despite this, the aim is still to become a part of the football family with support in the form of financial assistance from the Football Authorities.

Stadium and spectator safety is a dynamic and on-going discipline and it is the FSOA's clear intention to remain at the forefront in the development and improvements of this discipline. As the principal organisation representing football safety practitioners in England and Wales, the FSOA is a key partner with the football authorities and sports grounds regulatory bodies in delivering safety, security and service to football fans at every level of the game.

Q Have you any advice for clubs looking to provide a safe match day experience?

There are many things a safety officer should do as they prepare for a match, including consultation with spectators, forward planning, information sharing, intelligence gathering, creating comprehensive contingency plans, taking a multi-agency approach, carrying out risk assessments, reporting procedures and effectively sharing information and plans to stewards and staff. Obviously, being a member of the FSOA will give clubs peace of mind that their safety officer has the knowledge, backing and support to provide a safe match day experience!