

Consulting Communities - Volume 2
Nirvana Youth Conference 2014





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Nirvana Youth Conference 2014 Key Feedback

The purpose of this report is to summarise the feedback and views of the young people that attended the Nirvana Youth consultation event in April 2014 and those that have shared their concerns with the club on numerous occasions.

In order to protect and safeguard the welfare of children and young people in football, there must be a dialogue with those young people to understand their perspective. Many young people believe that in order for the culture of football to change it is important to recognise that honesty and transparency will allow an opportunity for staff, players, teams and communities to start to gain confidence in the football system.

Nirvana has been in continuous conversation with Government Ministers, the National FA, County FA, Kick It Out and local community groups to champion the voices of young people experiencing racism and discrimination in football. The grassroots community must be included and represented in discussions in order to help develop better ways of working with an emphasis on the essential duty to protect and safeguard the welfare of children and young people.

Recommendations from the event to the FA and Kick It Out:

- Authorities are asked to increase visibility of who they are and what they do to young people, **with a clear plan for young engagement**. Youth engagement should also be delivered in an appropriate way suited to the audience.
- **Greater communication with the grassroots community** in regards to initiatives, changes in policy and practice including opportunities for young people to engage and develop
- **Information aimed at grassroots audiences** and in particular youths should be easy to read and in a variety of formats including social media
- Provide an annual **publication of the ethnic breakdown** of authority's top tiers. As the diversity grows this will display a message that those positions are attainable.
- Provide clear information to **explain what actions authorities have taken** over the last 12 months to eradicate racism in football. Young people want to see actual change.
- Develop **grassroots champions** with clubs based in cities with a high Black and Asian population. These clubs would create a local presence and promote clear messages to local people.
- Introduce a **young representative** or shadow representative to sit on strategic boards allowing the young person to input and represent the youth perspective.

Emotional Wellbeing of Young Players

A research study in the United States concluded that racial discrimination could affect a person's long-term health. One of the most disturbing messages to come out of the Nirvana consultation is that some young people have stated that continuously witnessing or being a victim of racial abuse



has affected their view of the game and questioned their future participation. This is not an unfamiliar story as many parents and players have also made similar comments.

When on the receiving end of racism, players felt emotions of anger and frustration. Often it would leave a lasting feeling throughout their day and one person even described the feeling as being heart broken especially when treated as if they had done something wrong. There was a sense of feeling cheated and an internal debate whether they should accept the abuse or respond to it in order for it to stop. This is a historical battle that often led to confrontation and a negative outcome for the victim but provided instant gratification and a warning for the perpetrator to tread carefully in future. Times have changed and many young people are trying to follow the appropriate channels of complaint but believe they are often smacked with the reality of injustice.

An interview previously conducted and aired by East Midlands Today (news), saw a 14-year-old Nirvana player state that racism is part of the game. Unfortunately this is the mind-set of many young people who believe that racism is part of the fabric of football. Research done by Kent University found that as experiences of racism increased, young peoples' self-esteem decreased. The effects of this epidemic are clear to see in the attitudes of those that are affected. There is a clear lack of confidence in anyone that claims to be dealing with racism, which long term, along with other social aspects has resulted in a 'glass ceiling' perception in football by many members of the grassroots community.

When asked how racist abuse made them feel, comments from discussions were:

- Angry and upset
- Feeling of being cheated
- Treated as if they had done something wrong
- Felt unprotected
- Treated unfairly
- Abuse puts me off the game
- Emotional
- Heart broken
- Ruins my whole day
- Just want to play football
- Do we accept it or react? If we don't react they abuse more and really try to push our buttons!

*"I just want to play football, racial abuse puts me off the game" Anonymous
Aged 14*

Nirvana has had a small number of parents stop their child's involvement with football due to racism from other teams. Nirvana had also been informed by other clubs that volunteers within the city have stopped volunteering as coaches due to the experiences they had witnessed within grassroots football. The influence that this sport can have on a young persons life is truly amazing. Those who

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govern football have an important duty to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our young players and to consider their welfare.

Will things ever change?

Even for a club that is proactively championing change within football, it is still a challenge to get young people to sit down in a room and discuss racism. The words so often spoken are “what difference will it make”. And who can blame them for having such negative perceptions when change is still not forthcoming in many arenas.

The lack of visibility at a grassroots level of the FA both locally and nationally although not a problem, does not encourage natural relationships to build and develop with young players. Instead the young people felt slightly alienated and unfamiliar with authority figures. Often the only interaction came via disciplinary incidents as a victim or perpetrator.

Questions were asked regarding the current geographical focus of initiatives to tackle racism and discrimination by authorities. If you were to look at the demographics in the UK for population of Black and Asians outside of London, Leicester is approximately 6th with 4% of Black or Black British and 1st for Asian or Asian British with 26%. One of the suggestions to come out of the event is to focus efforts in the cities with the highest ethnic minority population when delivering targeted work programmes. This includes the professional clubs recruitment strategies to involve more ethnic minority (specifically Asian) players.

The familiar issue of role models or lack of continued to surface through discussion. Although this may seem to be accepted by young people, there is a real negative outlook to the possibilities of real achievement both on and off the pitch. Where there are successful ethnic minority players or staff, many young people feel a sense of disappointment with their commitment to stand up and be counted and hold authorities to account for bad practices specifically around race.

Although it is debatable whether players and clubs are appropriately sanctioned for their misconducts, there has been incidents where teams have been rewarded and supported in other ways i.e. via funding, partnerships and supported applications even after displaying discriminatory behaviour and being sanctioned for it. This reinforces belief that there is in bias of favour of those that are acting in a discriminatory way towards others, and an unwillingness or inability to address this effectively.

The development of an Inclusion and Anti Discrimination plan is a welcome initiative. However many clubs and players are still unaware of its existence. Developing better communication channels with clubs can help to deliver stronger messages. If the Inclusion and Anti Discrimination plan is a key driver for many areas of work around discrimination, this should be sent to every affiliated team by the designated county FA. The shielding of the plan only draws clubs and individuals to presume it is not a priority and that there is something to hide.



In other industries communication documents are tailored to the audience. Information aimed at a grassroots audience and in particular youths, should be easy to read. Youth engagement should also be delivered in an appropriate way suited to the audience.

“What will be different after this meeting?” Anonymous Aged 14

Match Officials and representation

Young people’s experience of inconsistencies by referees is growing and the sense of discriminatory decisions being made is also a growing perception for many young people. It is widely documented that more ethnic minority referees are needed, which may not raise the standard but may help to balance the poor representation that already exists.

Suffice to say that many young people may have inherited negative attitudes towards the role of a referee due to the historical treatment they have received or witnessed. Therefore although greater representation is needed, there may be a cultural and emotional barrier to embracing the role of becoming a referee. This is not representative of a whole community but was the view displayed by many of the youths that participated, however there should be some form of awareness raising highlighting referees from ethnic minority backgrounds.

It was noted by the young people that referees are an important part of the game and that many have found the young referees coming in to the game as having a more culturally aware and equitable manner when engaging with ethnic minority groups.

The lack of visible ethnic minority representation in the boardrooms and at a senior level of authorities is a concern and has become noticeable to many young people. This again leaves young people asking why the racial diversity of high-level groups is lacking? Is this because they are not trusted to do the job? Or is it because they are not the best person for the job? Many young people are left drawing their own conclusion to the answers, which in some cases is ‘because I am Black or Asian’. For these perceptions to change, the current way of working must change. Ever true, the famous saying of ‘if you do what you always did, you will get what you always got’ comes to mind. For the good of the game and for the future of football a solution to the handling of many issues needs to be addressed.

“If people were fair in the first place we wouldn’t be in this situation”

Conclusion

The age old comment of hard to reach or easy to ignore communities of interest was again challenged by Nirvana who managed to give a voice to the voiceless youth of grassroots football. It is evident that young people are interested in making a difference but what is also evident is that some



specific training or experienced facilitators are needed to deliver meaningful engagement with young people.

In comparison to the professional game, grassroots football is a giant in terms of numbers. It is estimated by Sport England that approximately 1.84 million play football on a regular basis, yet the same rigor and commitment to engage, support and mentor the young players of the future is not given. Information from football authorities should be delivered in an appropriate format that is accessible and understandable to young people. A suggestion that those with the responsibility to engage with young people should have either youth work experience or be trained to deliver the best outcomes.

Some of the questions that were asked by young people at the event are as follows:

- What evidence is there that Kick It Out is working?
- When does Kick It Out have an opinion or a position on a racist incident?
- What funding is available for local communities that are already doing work around discrimination?
- Why are the referees so inconsistent in the reporting of racism? Is it because of inheriting racist attitudes at the top or is it because of the cultural issues regarding the players?
- Why is there a complete lack of Asian players coming through the professional ranks? Even in cities where there is a big ethnic minority influence.
- Will things change after this meeting?
- If people were fair in the first place many discussions would not be needed.
- What is the point of collecting data with no action?
- Why do Asian players rarely make it to the Premier League?

All of those involved in Leicester Nirvana FC are fully committed to continue championing the voices of young people experiencing racism and discrimination in football and to challenge racism in football. We will continue to work with the football authorities and other partners for, with and on behalf of our young people to ensure that they are able to participate fully in the game safely, free from bias and racial discrimination. We will continue to keep you informed about our on-going initiatives.