

## **Justice Committee**

### **Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill**

#### **Written submission from Rangers Football Club**

I write on behalf of Rangers Football Club in response to the call from the Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament for written evidence in respect of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill.

This submission follows oral evidence I gave on behalf of Rangers Football Club at the Justice Committee on Wednesday 22 June.

#### **1. General Principles**

As stated in oral evidence given to the Justice Committee previously, as well as in public statements, Rangers Football Club supports efforts to tackle offensive behaviour, both at football matches and on the internet.

The Club understands its responsibilities in this regard and has been an active participant in the Joint Action Group which was set up following the initial summit in March.

As a Club, we acknowledge the issues we have within a small element of our support and are continually working with supporters groups and others to address these areas and will continue to do so.

We will also continue to support the Scottish Government campaigns to tackle issues such as the increase in domestic violence following Old Firm matches, which was the catalyst for the original summit in March.

It is important, however, to reiterate that football clubs are not the cause, nor are they the sole solution, to addressing offensive and threatening behaviour of individuals. Nor can they be responsible for curing the ills of society.

It should be acknowledged that the general behaviour of football supporters across Scotland is extremely good, including at Old Firm matches.

Football matches in Scotland are played in a safe and generally comfortable environment. The management and policing of matches has advanced immeasurably over the years. There is virtually no violence at or around football stadiums when matches take place, unlike many European countries. The incidence of racism has diminished to a very low level whereas this continues to be a significant issue in leading footballing countries in continental Europe.

In this context, Rangers Football Club believes the challenges facing football should be kept in perspective. Football makes an overwhelmingly positive contribution to society.

There is a danger of demonising football at a time when there are a number of challenges facing the future of the game in Scotland as a whole.

Problems on the day of football matches primarily take place well away from stadia where they are played. They often arise in communities many hours after the end of the match and alcohol is the single biggest factor in the behaviour of the individuals involved. For this reason, Rangers Football Club fully supports the introduction of minimum pricing for alcohol as we believe this will have a positive effect within Scottish society as a whole.

It is also important to reiterate that this proposed legislation comes against the backdrop of an agreed plan between the police and clubs to reduce the number of police officers at football matches across the country and I will address this issue in the next section.

## **2. Offensive Behaviour at Regulated Football Matches**

Rangers Football Club welcomes the focus to address offensive behaviour at football matches throughout Scotland and, along with Celtic FC, called for the establishment of a national Football Policing Unit at the original football summit in March.

We are pleased that this unit is now up and running as we are acutely aware of inconsistencies in policing such behaviour across the country.

The inconsistencies in the enforcement of existing legislation has a major effect on the behaviour of fans. Greater and more consistent enforcement of existing legislation, we believe, will have as much if not more impact than the introduction of new legislation in this area, though we fully understand and support the Scottish Government's desire to eradicate offensive behaviour.

We would also encourage greater use of football banning orders.

Neither the police, nor the courts have a consistent approach.

This lack of clarity regarding arrestable offences still exists under the proposed legislation and this needs to be addressed sooner rather than later in order for police across the country to have a clear understanding of what constitutes an offence and to stop the police, the procurator fiscal and the court system being overwhelmed.

For Rangers, and I believe other clubs, there are more problems with fans who attend 'away' games. Fans who attend away games often sense the police priority is to ensure visiting fans are dealt with on a 'get them in, get them out' basis and the chances of being arrested are less than at a home match. If fans believe they can 'get away with' certain behaviour at certain stadiums, they will engage in that behaviour.

The agreed plan to reduce police numbers at football matches will inevitably exacerbate this situation and will certainly distort any evaluation of the impact of the legislation, as practically, there can only be arrests when police officers are present. This will lead to distorted figures given that many matches will have no police officers

present yet Old Firm matches, for instance, will have significant numbers (although it should be noted that police numbers are also being reduced at Old Firm matches).

For the avoidance of doubt, low attendances (and therefore no police presence) does not mean, no offensive behaviour. There have been countless examples of offensive behaviour at matches in the lower leagues for example, yet this is unlikely to be addressed going forward.

It is important to state that the perception that there are only problems at Old Firm matches, or that it is only Rangers fans who sing offensive songs, is simply untrue and it is crucial that the new Football Policing Unit applies a fair and even-handed approach when it comes to addressing offensive behaviour.

We are concerned that the new Football Policing Unit has, so far, had a disproportionate focus on Rangers supporters and indeed, the unit has attended 100% of our matches this season, often filming fans, including children, who are not engaging in any offensive behaviours. We are unaware of any other club that the unit has so far attended 100% of their matches.

This is extremely troubling for Rangers Football Club and its supporters as it appears the Football Policing Unit is manifesting as an 'anti-sectarian unit', not an 'offensive behaviour' unit and there is a disproportionate focus on Rangers supporters.

Whilst the Bill does not focus on sectarianism specifically, the policy memorandum contains numerous references to "sectarianism" and as such, there needs to be further clarification on two things before the Bill goes before the Scottish Parliament:

- a) how does the Parliament define sectarianism; and
- b) that the legislation will tackle ALL forms of offensive behaviour, not just sectarianism.

With songs glorifying the death of Rangers fans in the Ibrox disaster and pro-IRA songs among those being regularly sung by other clubs, we would ask for assurance that any new legislation was enforced consistently and even-handedly to tackle ALL offensive behaviour and that the legislation makes clear whether or not songs or chants in support of terrorist organisations will be an offense under the new legislation.

The list in subsection (4) makes no mention of proscribed organisations and we would ask that this be included.

For the avoidance of doubt, Rangers Football Club acknowledges the problems that exist with elements of our own support and we are continuously working with supporters groups and others to address this. We have been very clear that any songs or chants that include references to 'fenian bastards' or 'F\*\*\* the Pope' are unacceptable. The Rangers supporters' working group has also recently reiterated this stance. Supporters also recognise that the song the Billy Boys is prohibited by UEFA, although we now face the bizarre situation where the supporters of other clubs sing various versions of the same song without sanction.

We firmly believe we have the most robust system in Scottish football for tackling offensive behaviour by supporters and within the last 10 years have taken action against more than 3,000 supporters for a wide range of issues, including more than 550 banned for sectarianism. No Club does more to identify and deal with rogue supporters and we would be more than happy to work with the SPL and SFA to share our best practice.

### **3. Threatening Communications**

Rangers Football Club fully supports this section of the Bill and will be happy to work with the police and authorities in this area.

It is not clear, however, that this proposed legislation would cover websites/blogs/posts/uploads etc that are clearly 'offensive', such as the recent website set up glorifying the death of Rangers fans in the Ibrox Disaster. We would ask that provisions were made within the Bill to include such examples.

### **Conclusion**

Rangers Football Club thanks the Justice Committee for the opportunity to present both written and oral evidence and we reiterate our commitment to the Joint Action Group and tackling offensive behaviour at football matches.

We are more than willing to play our part, as are our supporters, and we look forward to an amended Bill that addresses the points within our submission.

David Martin  
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