



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 3937, 9 June 2017

Standing at football matches

By John Woodhouse and
Jack Dent

Contents:

1. The current position
2. Calls for change
3. The Government's position



Contents

Summary	3
1. The current position	4
1.1 <i>Football Spectators Act 1989</i>	4
1.2 Sports Grounds Safety Authority	4
2. Calls for change	6
2.1 Opinions of football supporters	6
Football Supporters' Federation campaign	6
Supporter surveys	6
2.2 Club support for safe standing	7
English Football League	7
Premier League	8
2.3 Celtic's safe standing section	8
3. The Government's position	9

Summary

Current law

From August 1994, under the *Football Spectators Act 1989* (as amended), clubs in the English Premier League and Championship have been required to provide all-seated accommodation. This followed Lord Justice Taylor's report into the Hillsborough disaster of April 1989.

The 1989 Act applies to England and Wales.

In Scotland, the Premier League made it a condition of membership that clubs had to provide all-seated accommodation. This requirement was [relaxed](#) in 2011. Clubs can apply to pilot safe standing areas. This requires the approval of the local authority.

Calls for change

The [Football Supporters' Federation](#) has been [campaigning](#) for the introduction of "safe standing" areas.

At a February 2014 meeting of Football League clubs, it was revealed that a majority of clubs were in favour of reviewing the current position and permitting supporters to stand in "rail seating" areas at Championship grounds.

In Scotland, Celtic installed 3,000 "rail seats" at their stadium in July 2016. This is the first example of a safe standing section at a UK football ground.

The Government's position

In November 2016, the Government [said](#) that all-seater stadiums remained the best means of ensuring the safety and security of fans.

In February 2017, the Government said it was "unconvinced" by the case for safe standing but that it would monitor how it was working at Celtic (DCMS, [Sporting future – first annual report](#), p20).

1. The current position

1.1 *Football Spectators Act 1989*

From 1 August 1994, under the *Football Spectators Act 1989* (as amended), all football clubs in the English Premier League and Championship have been required to provide all-seated accommodation. Clubs promoted to the Championship for the first time have up to three years to convert any standing areas to seats. Once converted, grounds must remain all-seated, even if a club is relegated from the Championship.

The all-seated policy arose from Lord Justice Taylor's report into the Hillsborough Disaster of 15 April 1989. The report observed:

There is no panacea which will achieve total safety and cure all problems of behaviour and crowd control. But I am satisfied that seating does more to achieve those objectives than any other single measure. (Paragraph 61)

[...] Apart from comfort and safety, seating has distinct advantages in achieving crowd control. It is possible to have disturbances in a seated area and they have occurred, but with the assistance of CCTV the police can immediately zoom in with a camera and pinpoint the seats occupied by the trouble-makers as well as the trouble-makers themselves... (Paragraph 64)¹

1.2 Sports Grounds Safety Authority

The 1989 Act set up the Football Licensing Authority (FLA) to operate a licensing system for grounds used for designated football matches² and to monitor local authorities' oversight of spectator safety. From November 2011, the FLA's responsibilities passed to the [Sports Grounds Safety Authority](#) (SGSA).³ The all-seater requirement is enforced by means of conditions in the licence issued to clubs by the SGSA:

The primary purpose of the licensing scheme is to enforce the Government's policy that all clubs in the FA Premier League and Football League Championship plus Wembley and the Millennium Stadium must have all-seated stadia and that any standing accommodation in Football Leagues 1 and 2 is of the [prescribed standard](#).

The annual licence issued to each club specifies the areas of the ground to which spectators may be admitted. Under the provisions of the 1989 Act it is an offence to admit spectators to any of the above grounds, or parts of those grounds, which are

¹ [The Hillsborough Stadium Disaster: 15 April 1989: Inquiry by the Rt Hon Lord Justice Taylor: Final Report](#), Cm 962, January 1990

² A designated match is defined under the *Football Spectators (Designation of Football Matches in England and Wales) Order 2000* as "any association football match which is played at Wembley Stadium, at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff or at a sports ground in England and Wales which is registered with the Football League or the Football Association Premier League as the home ground of a club which is a member of the Football League or the Football Association Premier League at the time the match is played".

³ Under section 1 of the [Sports Grounds Safety Authority Act 2011](#)

not licensed. Conditions in the licence do not apply to other (non-football) events taking place at those grounds.⁴

The specific licence conditions are prescribed in secondary legislation made by the Secretary of State under section 11 of the 1989 Act.⁵

The SGSA notes that there are currently 72 all-seated international, Premier League and Football League grounds in England and Wales, plus several others in the lower leagues.⁶

⁴ SGSA website, [Regulation - licensing](#) [accessed 9 May 2017]

⁵ *Football Spectators Act 1989* (as amended), section 11

⁶ SGSA website, [All seated football stadia](#) [accessed 9 May 2017]

2. Calls for change

Improvements in stadium design and technology, the wishes of some fans to stand at matches, and the success of 'safe standing' areas in some European countries, have led to calls for the introduction of safe standing at Premier League and Championship grounds.

2.1 Opinions of football supporters

Football Supporters' Federation campaign

In March 2011, the Football Supporters' Federation (FSF) launched a safe standing campaign to "persuade the Government, football authorities and football clubs to accept the case for introducing, on a trial basis, limited sections of standing areas at selected grounds in the stadiums of Premier League and Championship football clubs".⁷

The [FSF website](#) includes further details of the campaign, including examples of what safe standing areas might look like.⁸

On 11 December 2012, the [FSF hosted an event in Parliament](#), sponsored by Roger Godsiff MP, to make the case for safe standing and for small-scale trials at Premier League clubs.⁹ At the event, Bryan Drew of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), said that his organisation was "very happy to engage" in the debate about safe standing but that ACPO would "need to be convinced that [any] change would enhance safety and security."¹⁰ The match day commander for West Midlands Police, Superintendent Steven Graham, said that he backed a trial of safe standing areas.¹¹

Supporter surveys

There have been numerous surveys in the past few years that have shown strong support for introducing safe standing sections. They include:

- 90% of the 1,400 surveyed by the Everton Supporters Trust want to see safe standing introduced at Goodison Park;¹²
- 96% of the 7,239 surveyed by the Arsenal Supporters' Trust are in favour of safe standing being introduced in English football grounds;¹³
- 96% of the 2,354 surveyed by the Welsh Conservatives supported the introduction of standing areas.¹⁴

⁷ FSF website, [Safe standing campaign](#) [accessed 9 May 2017]

⁸ FSF website, [What does safe standing look like?](#) [accessed 9 May 2017]

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ FSF website, [The Case for Safe Standing in Football](#), [accessed 9 May 2017]

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Everton Supporters Trust website, [Evertonians support safe standing](#) [accessed 9 May 2017]

¹³ Arsenal Supporters' Trust, [Safe standing survey of Arsenal Supporters](#), March 2017

¹⁴ ["Safe standing pilot backed by 96% of fans"](#), *Welsh Conservatives News*, 16 February 2015

2.2 Club support for safe standing

English Football League

In June 2013, at the Football League's annual general meeting, over two thirds of clubs voted in favour of a motion to explore safe standing trials.¹⁵

The findings of a consultation on the use of standing accommodation at Football League grounds were presented at a meeting of League clubs on 6 February 2014.¹⁶ A majority of the clubs wanted the Football League to:

- Ask the Minister for Sport to review the 'all-seater' stadia requirement for Championship clubs;
- Approach the SGSA to request rail seating to be licensed in Football League grounds;
- Permit clubs to accommodate supporters standing in rail seating in the Championship; and
- Permit clubs to revert from seating to standing in League 1 and 2 following relegation from the Championship.

The Football League said it would "engage with the relevant authorities and stakeholder organisations". Chief Executive Shaun Harvey commented: "this is both a complicated and sensitive matter that will need significant debate. Therefore no-one should assume that it will lead to overnight change".¹⁷

The FSF welcomed the League's position and called for "a small number of controlled trials of safe standing areas" to facilitate further debate.¹⁸

Bristol City originally proposed installing a safe standing section as part of the redevelopment of its Ashton Gate ground,¹⁹ but reversed its decision due to planned 'rail seating' not being licensed by the SGSA.²⁰

In March 2017, the *Guardian* reported that the SGSA had agreed to "establish a process" for rail seating to be introduced in Football League grounds that are not subject to the all-seater requirement. The Football League's Chief Executive said this decision was more

'Rail seating'

Rail seating is one method of implementing 'safe standing'. Several German football clubs use it in their stadia, including Borussia Dortmund and Wolfsburg.

Each ticket holder is designated a seat in the stadium. The design allows for the seat to be 'locked' upright, allowing supporters to stand. Each row has a safety barrier to improve crowd control.

For games with all-seater requirements (such as UEFA or FIFA tournaments), the seats can be unlocked and the rail seating becomes a seated section.

¹⁵ ["Football League clubs vote to "explore" safe standing trials"](#), *FSF News*, 11 June 2013

¹⁶ ["League clubs consider results of standing consultation"](#), *Football League News*, 7 February 2014

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ ["Football League to lobby Government in major move for safe standing areas"](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 2014

¹⁹ ["Ashton Gate becomes first UK stadium with rail seating"](#), *Bristol City Football Club*, 12 February 2014

²⁰ ["Bristol City's Ashton Gate 'will have no rail seats at opening'"](#), *BBC News*, 23 October 2014

symbolic than practical, as he did not expect many clubs to take up the opportunity.²¹

Premier League

On 17 November 2016, Premier League clubs discussed safe standing at one of its routine meetings. In a statement, the Premier League said these were “initial discussions” and there was “no overall consensus on the matter”.²² The Premier League said it would conduct research into safe standing and the clubs agreed to hold further talks.

Clubs in support of safe standing were believed to be West Ham, Crystal Palace, Watford, Sunderland, Hull City, Swansea City and Burnley.²³ In addition, Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur have designed their new stadium developments to incorporate rail seating if the law is changed.²⁴

In response to news that the Premier League was discussing safe standing, the BBC reported that [Hillsborough Family Support Group](#) secretary Sue Roberts said it would be a “backwards step”.²⁵ [The Hillsborough Justice Campaign](#), on the other hand, supports a “full and objective debate”.²⁶

2.3 Celtic’s safe standing section

In July 2016, Celtic installed nearly 3,000 “rail seats” in its stadium.²⁷ It is the first ever safe standing section in a UK football ground.

Previously, the Scottish Premier League made it a condition of membership that clubs had to have all-seated grounds. This requirement was relaxed in 2011.²⁸ Clubs would be allowed to apply to pilot safe standing areas in their grounds. This requires the approval of the relevant local authority. Celtic received permission from Glasgow City Council in June 2015,²⁹ after first having their proposal rejected in 2014 for not offering “enough safety assurances”.³⁰

²¹ [“Safe standing a step closer after Football League’s green light for rail seats”](#), *Guardian*, 10 March 2017

²² [“Premier League statement on safe standing”](#), *Premier League*, 17 November 2016

²³ [“Safe-standing initiative given a lift by Premier League mood swing”](#), *Guardian*, 16 November 2016; [“Premier League moves nearer to safe standing with 13 clubs indicating interest”](#), *Independent*, 16 November 2016

²⁴ Chelsea Football Club, [Supporters’ consultative forum 2016-17: 1st meeting minutes](#), 12 September 2016, p7; [“FAQs: Stadium”](#), *Tottenham Hotspur*, last updated 5 July 2016 [accessed 10 May 2017]

²⁵ [“Safe standing: Premier League clubs to have further talks”](#), *BBC Sport*, 17 November 2016

²⁶ [“Safe-standing initiative given a lift by Premier League mood swing”](#), *Guardian*, 16 November 2016

²⁷ [“Celtic open new safe standing section in win over Wolfsburg”](#), *BBC Sport*, 16 July 2016

²⁸ [“SPL Statement: Rule Changes”](#), *Scottish Professional Football League*, 19 December 2011

²⁹ [“Celtic secure green light for rail seating”](#), *Celtic FC*, 9 June 2015

³⁰ [“Celtic: Safe-standing proposals not met with approval”](#), *BBC Sport*, 13 August 2014

3. The Government's position

In February 2017, the Government said it was “unconvinced” by the case for safe standing:

Since a rail seating section was installed at Celtic Park, there has been growing speculation that such accommodation could be introduced into Premier League and Championship football grounds. Government remains unconvinced by the case put forward for re-introducing standing accommodation at football grounds covered by the all-seater requirement, but will continue to monitor how it is working at Celtic.³¹

In November 2016, the Minister for Sport, Tracy Crouch, said:

The Government believes that all-seater stadiums are the best means to ensure the safety and security of spectators at football grounds in England and Wales. All-seater stadiums have helped improve crowd management, crowd behaviour and policing. They provide better and more comfortable facilities to enjoy football matches, which has helped encourage inclusivity and diversity amongst those attending.³²

³¹ Department for Culture, Media & Sport, [Sporting Future – First Annual Report](#), February 2017, p20

³² [PQ 54333](#) [on sportsgrounds], 22 November 2016

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).