



sharing experiences to improve disabled access and services for disabled fans



Report on the 8th annual South West Disabled Fans' Experience Forum held at Bristol Rovers FC on 18th October, 2018

The Forum was attended by representatives from a number of clubs and Disabled Supporters Associations in the South West including; Exeter City, Bristol Rovers, Yeovil Town, Newport County, Swansea City, Torquay United, Plymouth Argyle.

The Forum started with an Overview of the afternoon's agenda and what the Forums are all about and what we think clubs and supporters alike could gain by working together, then we went onto Self-Introduction of Delegates.

First presentation of the afternoon was from Bristol Rovers FC - Commercial Manager, Tom Gorridge who updated everyone on the recent physical changes at the club including two new temporary stands, a new accessible club shop, Supporters' Bar and toilets. The improvements had been funded by the club, the city council and club sponsors.

Next up was Ruth Hopkins (NRAC Auditor; General Manager and Head of Access and Development) from Level Playing Field. Ruth reported on the outcome from their recent strategic review and then shared what they were all about and also showcased their new logo and a sneak preview of their new website plus reports on the new CPD accredited training courses Level Playing Field now offers including, Disability Inclusion & Etiquette Training, Disability Access Officer Training, Stewards and Front Line match day staff training and developing DSA Governance Training that will help to safeguard the associations and avoid some of the problems if, for example a committee member steps down at short notice.

The Level Playing Field 2019 Weeks of Action dates have been agreed (2nd March to 17th March) and everyone present was keen to get involved. The theme for 2019 has not yet been decided but there was a general feeling from some of the delegates present that clubs should set their own themes based on the projects that are happening at their own clubs. As always, Level Playing Field sees Weeks of Action as an opportunity to celebrate what's being done well, to share the good work, to inspire more disabled people to attend games and to improve the match day experience for disabled fans.

After the fantastic presentation from Level Playing Field we then heard from Matt Bennett of the Bristol Rovers Community Trust who spoke about Disability Football and engaging with local disability groups. They work closely with Bristol City FC to provide opportunities across the city.

The Forum stopped for a short break and all delegates enjoyed the great sandwiches kindly provided by Bristol Rovers.

The Forum continued with Bristol Rovers Disabled Supporters Association chairman Clive Marshall who spoke about his personal experience as a disabled football fan and how he'd become involved with the DSA. The DSA are currently looking to increase their membership and to get more people involved and Clive thanked the club for its support and the access changes they have already made. The Bristol Rovers DSA was set up around 18 months ago with help and support from Level Playing Field "Working Together".

Next up was Stadium Manager Dave Parker of Bristol Rovers who spoke about the changes that had been made since he joined the club and how his personal experience having a disabled family member and disabled close friend had given him a greater understanding and awareness that made it easy for him to prioritise access. He also spoke about the Access Audit the club had commissioned from Level Playing Field and the action plan that was generated. This had helped the club plan what needs to be done and how some relatively small changes had made a big difference including; new wheelchair user viewing areas, dropped kerbs, access ramps and lights and emergency alarms in all the accessible toilets.

The Forum finished off with some interesting general discussions about what's happening at other clubs including Yeovil Town DSA who are speaking to local schools asking pupils to tell their parents and grandparents about the facilities for disabled fans at Yeovil Town in case they would like to attend a game.

One of the discussions around increasing DSA membership included whether calling them "Disabled" Supporters Associations may put some people off if they don't want to be pigeonholed or categorised. Everyone agreed that good access benefits everybody, not just disabled people.

There was talk about the ageing population and engaging with fans who may have dementia with some of the clubs attending already becoming "Dementia Friendly" having undertaken specific training and the benefits of some engaging with the "Sporting Memories" charity which was also discussed. This led onto a discussion about ageing supporters who may have restricted mobility but want to remain in the seat where they have always sat, despite it becoming increasingly difficult to access it. It was agreed that offering them an alternative easy access seat and having a one to one discussion was probably the best way forward.

We asked all delegates attending this SWDFEF to remember "TEAM" – Together Everyone Achieves More and Sharing experiences to improve disabled access and services for disabled fans.

Ruth Hopkins of Level Playing Field said, "I was delighted to be invited to attend and present at the 8th SWDFEF Forum. I'd like to thank everyone for making us feel so welcome and for giving us the opportunity to provide an update on Level Playing Field. SWDFEF were the first regional Forum to be set up, and with the founders' permission (Nick Saunders and David Munn) Level Playing Field has been pleased to deliver the concept around the country."

"We now have annual regional Forums in the North West, the Midlands, London, Wales, The South Coast and we are currently looking at the North East. They are becoming increasingly popular and we value the opportunity to engage with the groups and to share experience. Thank you to everyone who attends and to the host clubs for their generous hospitality."

We at the SWDFEF would like to thank all delegates for another great Forum and to Bristol Rovers FC as fantastic host and a big thank you to Ruth of Level Playing Field for her presentation and the permission given to use most of their own report on the above Forum. Level Playing Field's report can be found @ <http://www.levelplayingfield.org.uk/news/south-west-disabled-fans-experience-Forum-2018>

Next year's SWDFEF will be held on 17th October at Exeter City FC.