

Rearranged and Midweek Premier League Fixtures – Analysis and Recommendations

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report, produced by members of the Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trusts, is to review the impact on supporters of two types of Premier League (PL) fixtures: those rearranged at the request of TV companies, and those scheduled for midweek slots by the PL. It looks at the distance to be travelled by away supporters, whether there are scheduled trains that can return them after the match and what can realistically be done to address issues raised. It makes a series of recommendations that we believe need to be considered, with regard to the needs of match-going supporters, when compiling the 2017/18 fixture list.

There is widespread acceptance that televised matches are now a permanent feature of the PL landscape, but there is a strong feeling that more can and needs to be done to minimise the negative impact on match-going fans, particularly away fans, of changed kick-off times. Can scheduling be influenced to ensure long-distance games aren't played midweek or on Friday/Monday evenings? Can the minimum amount of notice that needs to be given of a changed kick-off time be extended to avoid last minute disruption to travel plans, enable access to cheaper advance rail ticket purchases etc.?

2. Fixture Analysis

A number of different analyses were carried out, as detailed below. The detail of these analyses is contained in a series of supplementary tables.

2.1. Distances between PL grounds and average per club 2016/17

Table 1 uses *Sportsworldmap.com* data (which uses the fastest journey option from *Google Maps*) to identify the distance between every PL ground, and the average travelling distance for each club. This is useful information when reviewing the impact on rearranged fixtures.

The overall average distance for PL supporters to travel to away games is **156.1 miles**, though this hides large variances. Leicester City have the lowest average travelling distance, 121.4 miles, but Sunderland supporters must travel an average almost 100 miles further to away matches.

This means that driving to the average away PL game, supporters would be looking at a round trip of some 5-6 hours. Manageable if the game is played at 15.00hrs on a Saturday; considerably worse if the game takes place in the evening.

2.2. Displaced PL Fixtures

Table 2 looks at the impact of rearranged fixtures on travelling supporters so far this season (August 2016 to March 2017).

The attached detailed analysis of rearranged fixtures and scheduled night matches for the season to date makes depressing reading:

- Of 127 rearranged games (most for TV, some because of European fixtures), in 29 cases away supporters could not get home by scheduled trains and, in other cases, would need to dash to the station to get the last suitable train.
- In just 34 cases will drivers have a return trip of under 200 miles and in fifteen cases those travelling by car would get home after midnight.
- Of the fourteen Monday or Friday night games announced to the end of March, away supporters can get trains home from just five.

Clearly there are opportunities to reduce the negative impact of such fixtures on supporters by minimising lengthy journeys and, where these are unavoidable, ensuring appropriate subsidised travel is available.

2.3. Midweek Tranches of PL Fixtures

Table 3 looks at the tranches of scheduled midweek PL fixtures for the past five seasons (2012/13 to 2016/17) in terms of the impact on travelling supporters. There are usually three blocks of midweek games during a season.

- No game on 13/14 December involved a round trip for away supporters of under 280 miles and, in every case, arrival home by car would have been after midnight. The scheduling of these midweek fixtures is the responsibility of the Premier League.
- Travel distances for midweek games have not improved. For only 23.3% of such games in 2016/17 would away supporters get home before midnight, and the average journey for 2016/17 (159.3 miles) is

- a) the worst over the past five seasons and b) higher than the season average of 156.1 miles. This is surely something the Premier League should look at.
- The December Midweek tranche of games are being scheduled for later in the month. It is unclear why. The last Champions League / Europa League Group dates for 2017/18 are 5-7 December.
- There are three scheduled midweek fixture dates:
 - 13/14 December – no service trains home for any of the away supporters
 - 31st January – 1st February – service trains home from only two matches
 - 4/5 April – service trains home from only four matches
- That is a total of service trains home from six matches out of thirty.
- For just seven of those thirty games will those away supporters travelling by car get home before midnight.
- There clearly needs to be more consideration of the impact on travelling supporters when compiling night fixtures, avoiding games like West Ham v Burnley, Sunderland v Chelsea, Sunderland v Tottenham and Liverpool v Bournemouth.

2.4. Christmas / New Year Fixtures 2012/13 – 2016/17

The announcement of the December / early January Premier League schedule for 2017/18 season has attracted much comment. It is easy to understand why. **Table 4** looks at the dates of these fixtures over the past five seasons and **Table 5** analyses the impact of these fixtures on travelling supporters.

- Next season, teams will play eight games in the 31 days from 2nd December. That is 21% of their total fixtures completed in a month; more than in any of the last five seasons.
- In December/January 2016/17, most PL teams will play three home and three away PL games in sixteen days. This fixture congestion is unprecedented in recent times. It impacts on supporters financially, at a time of year when budgets are already stretched, and socially, given seasonal family commitments.
- With such short gaps between the New Year fixture & the FA Cup 3rd round, the likelihood of weakened teams picked for the latter increases.
- It is not clear to the authors how much impact Sky/BT have in terms of which dates blocks of games are scheduled for over the Xmas / New Year period, but clearly they have an input.

3. Impact on Travel

Travel by public transport, particularly train, gets more expensive the closer to matches you get. Cheapest fares are often available thirteen weeks in advance so supporters lose their optimum chance with a six week notice period. The less notice given, the higher the cost for travelling supporters.

The likes of Virgin Rail earn significant revenue from match-going supporters, home and away. This should give the Premier League the power to strike attractive discount deals for supporters. Further, the Premier League should talk to relevant train companies with a view to ensuring that special trains can be run for matches with anti-socially timed kick-offs.

On a related issue, subsidised away travel needs to continue at all Premier League clubs, particularly for those matches where travel home by public transport is not feasible. The £30 away price cap should not mean an end to subsidised travel, especially when games are rescheduled at anti-social times.

Travelling supporters are often impacted by scheduled weekend rail works, particularly on rearranged Sunday fixtures. Much weekend maintenance is scheduled several months in advance. Effective information exchange between the PL and the relevant rail companies should enable the impact of such works to be lessened, and also to help ensure that sufficient rolling stock is provided to meet supporter demand.

4. Results of Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust 2016 Survey

Price was only fifth on the list of factors influencing the decision to apply for an away ticket. The time and date of the game was by far the biggest influence, with 82% of respondents citing this reason. Other key factors were location, travel options including cost of travel and work commitments. It is clear that kick-off times, and especially late changes to them, are the most significant issue for fans when deciding whether or not to attend matches. Some 80% said they were inconvenienced by fixture changes, with 77% wanting better alignment of ticket on-sale dates and application announcements with TV picks.

5. Impact on Specific Clubs

In many cases, less than half a team's Premier League games are at 15.00hrs on Saturday. The attached detailed analysis of Tottenham's PL games (**Table 6**) over the past five seasons strongly reinforces the point.

Over seasons 2011/12-2015/16, 32.5% of all PL games were played as scheduled, 41.5% of all games were rescheduled for TV, and 26% due to cup commitments (Europa League, League Cup Final & FA Cup).

Using Chelsea as a further example, of 76 home Premier League games over four seasons (2012/13-2015/16) just 28 kicked off at 15.00hrs on Saturday (36.8%), and only 20 out of 76 away games (26.3%). Taking both home and away into account, just 31.6% of Chelsea games kicked off at the traditional time. Inevitably the impact on supporters of other clubs will be equally significant.

6. Notice of Kick-Off times

The notice period for fixtures rearranged at the request of TV companies is supposedly a minimum of six weeks but this target is regularly missed and for the March - May games the target is reduced. Reduced notice periods impact on travel costs, taking time off work etc. for both home and away supporters.

7. Recommendations to PL and TV companies

7.1 Notice Period

R1. The minimum notice period of six weeks' for Premier League games kick-off time rearrangement should be reviewed with a view to an increase to enable supporters to book cheaper travel, optimise their chances of taking annual leave, reduce impact on family life etc. Once agreed, there should be rigorous adherence to that minimum target; not the case at present. If, for whatever reason (e.g. European or FAC fixtures) the agreed minimum target cannot be met for individual games, match tickets for all supporters (home and away) for that game should be subsidised by a significant amount, season tickets holders similarly compensated and heavily subsidised away travel offered.

R2. Clubs should align home and away ticket sales with TV fixture change announcements to ensure supporters do not buy tickets they cannot subsequently use.

7.2 Fixtures Rearranged at TV Companies Request

R3. For rearranged Saturday and Sunday games, fixtures involving clubs at the far ends of the country should be planned such that travelling supporters are not forced to get up absurdly early, or get home extremely late, in order to travel to the game. As an example, earlier this season Southampton played at West Ham at 16.00 on a Sunday, whereas Watford played at Burnley at 20.00hrs the following day. There were a number of suitable trains home for away fans after the former game, but none after the latter, which is a 440 mile round trip. There is clearly a strong case for reversing fixtures like this.

7.3 Midweek Games

R4. No match in the midweek blocks of games (at any time of the season) should be scheduled more than 150 miles away, except for those 3-4 clubs at the extremity of the country for whom this is not possible, though in those cases every effort should be made to minimise journeys. Overall, the average for each block of ten games should be less than the overall PL average. Fixtures over 200 miles (which would require a four hour drive each way) should be avoided.

R5. The late-year midweek group of fixtures should be scheduled early in December to better space games out for match-going supporters.

7.4 Away Travel

R6. Clubs should automatically run subsidised travel in a continuation of the Away Supporters Initiative – some do, others do not, following the introduction of the £30 away cap. It is not clear what the pan-PL position is.

R7. The Premier League should work with train companies to try and optimise use of special trains for away supporters for matches where travel by public transport is difficult or impossible.

R8. For matches where the availability of service trains means that special trains are not necessary, the Premier League should use supporters' purchasing power to work with train companies to optimise discount offers on regular trains for match-going supporters.

R9. Dialogue between the PL and the relevant rail companies on planned weekend maintenance should be introduced, enabling the impact of such works on travelling supporters to be lessened.

7.5 Festive Period Matches

R10. Six games in sixteen days is a ridiculous schedule for match-going supporters over the 2017/18 festive season and clearly should not be repeated.

R11. No team should play more than one away game further than their average journey between early December and the New Year fixture. For Boxing Day games, where there are no trains, away travel distances should be minimised and less than the club's average.

8. Next Steps

This report, and the related analyses, will be circulated to the PL and TV companies in advance of meetings currently being scheduled, as a basis for discussion, with a view to identifying and agreeing opportunities to improve the 2017/18 fixture list from a supporter perspective.

Tim Rolls 13/02/2017