



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

Minutes of the Supporters' Collective meeting held on Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

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Meeting held in Riverview Brasserie, Stadium of Light.

### Attendees

Sunderland AFC	Kristjaan Speakman (KJ), Steve Davison (SD), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Chris Waters (CW), Michael Laidler (ML)
Branch Liaison Council	Jim Gilling (JG), Cath Reid (CR), Phil Pollard (PP), Joanne Youngson (JY)
Red & White Army	Andrew Hird (AH), David Rose (DR), Chris Blyth (CB), Michael McAllister (MM)
Senior Supporters Association	Michelle Barraclough (MB), John Hepple (JH)
Supporters Liaison Group	Steve Dean (SDe), Paul Andrew (PA), Kevin Charlton (KC)

### Apologies

Senior Supporters Association    Malcolm Bramley

CW welcomed everyone to the meeting.

### Sunderland AFC progress Report

SD presented a business update identifying 3 areas of priority; developing a playing staff capable of promotion from league one, increasing revenue, to fund the team and in the long term improve services, and the safe return of fans to the Stadium with a positive experience. Last point was the most challenging. There were unprecedented challenges involved in reopening the Stadium of Light, including several operational changes, Covid affecting a significant number of staff, including ticket office staff, numerous supply chain issues, including shirts. SD gave credit to the staff for working long hours and adapting to changing job roles to cover absences.

The ownership group are committed to running a sustainable football club and have developed a budget and plan that reflects this.

SD discussed the research undertaken with fans, local businesses and stakeholders to determine the identity and purpose of SAFC as a business and its importance to the long-term future of the club. The information gathering phase is almost complete and SD will be moving into further discussions with the consultants. This research will help to prioritise efforts and clarify focus going forward. SD believes SAFC are possibly the only football club to undertake such an exercise.

Reflecting on the first 6 home games, SD recognised that there are several areas that need further attention and improvement, engaging supporters (ticket office, hospitality), complaint handling (streamlining of the process), communication (a more structured



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

approach is needed), improved marketing of the Ladies team. SD believes incremental improvements can be made to all processes, but it is important to fully understand what is going wrong when the stadium is fully operational if the long-term goal of being supporter-centric is to be met.

DR thanked SD for his honesty in acknowledging mistakes and planning for improvement and asked if there were plans to strengthen front line customer service departments. SD recognised that new and additional skills were required across the staff teams to develop a supporter-centric approach and that some recruitment will be necessary to support the change

After 10 months in post, KS is still learning about the business and uncovering new things and as a result will be in a better position in December, after a year, to make judgments about future progress. From a performance perspective, football sustainability is completely aligned to the business model of the club

The recent transfer window was incredibly challenging, KS's aims were to add value and quality to the squad and believes we have a squad of players committed to doing well and achieving promotion. The average age of the squad has been reduced, 24.7 years in the league which is roughly 4 years younger than the average last season. KS is happy with the playing staff and the plan is being executed but recognises that there are still areas to address. All football decisions are aligned to the philosophy, players are brought in to offer specific skills to the team.

KS noted that the players and staff do recognise the support given by the fans and gave huge thanks to the fans for this.

It was brought to KS's attention that written and social media appeared to over emphasise the use of data to recruit players. While data is used it was one strand of the due diligence undertaken to collate evidence on which to make a decision. KS was keen to point out, we are a people business and before a decision is made, all aspects of the player are considered.

The fit for purpose structure is taking some time, but KS is ensuring that it is being done in a calm, structured and methodical way. KS reported that several back-room and Academy staff have been recently recruited, but there are still some roles to fill.

The start of the Ladies season has been frantic after the late notice of promotion. A general manager has been appointed and a 3–5-year development plan for the team is currently being prepared. Infrastructure issues at Eppleton have held up promotional ideas for the ladies' team but this will improve in the future.

KS recognised that late decisions have been made to cancel league games due to international fixtures and that this has made things difficult for fans. Cancelling a fixture must be carefully considered. KS said our approach was to try and play fixtures, so the team are not playing catch up in the league later in the season. We are seeking to avoid potential fixture congestion, but ultimately, we are only in possession of the details 8 days before the fixture in question.

KS confirmed that changes at the Academy of Light were nearly finished and were already helping to develop the club's football philosophy. An example was provided where the layout of rooms and technology are being utilised for player reviews. An improvement plan has been established. This includes interviews with every new player arriving from the summer, seeking feedback on improvements that could lead be implemented. Head of



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

Domain meetings schedule and Football Management Team meeting schedule have been introduced. There is technology implementation, and work on the bringing the football philosophy to life. There are regular player audits to evaluate how players are performing. Academy staff have been rolling out changes over the last 3 months and the next phase is about to be implemented.

PA asked if it had been a conscious decision to recruit players who were good role models.

KS replied that players are human, that they must be the right people to represent the club both on and off the pitch. That is why all aspects are considered when recruiting players. SD agreed that evidence-based decision making is important and helps mitigate risk in recruitment. A staggering amount of evidence was reviewed during the transfer window by KS and his team, to ensure performance continuously improves.

CB notes that a generation of young players have recently been lost and asked what changes have been implemented to retain young talent.

KS acknowledged that some players will stay with the club and others may move on. The current cohort must be influenced in a positive way to see their future at the club based on individual circumstances whilst mitigating external influences. It takes time to build trust, but KS is confident that relationships are being built that will attract and retain young players.

Academy players want to play first team football, SD believes that the dynamic is changing as young players have been given a chance to play in the first team in the last year and a new legacy is being created.

DR commented that a buzz has been created and children are now looking forward to coming to the match again

### **Daily Interface between club and supporters**

SD acknowledged that all these areas require substantial improvement, believing that the club were a little overwhelmed but after the initial pressure of the start of the season a more structured approach can now be taken.

### **Ticket office**

SD said the service in the ticket office had not been good enough at the beginning of the season. There were problems with the telephone system, a faulty batch of season tickets were delivered, covid absences meant other staff were covering unfamiliar roles. In hindsight, the ticket office should have been opened for longer. The ticket office will be open on matchdays and the day before. Match tickets are now available for sale on the day. Improvements still need to be made; SD wants to provide a better service to all supporters.

Referencing lead in times for ticket sales, SD said the club will only put home tickets on sale when games are confirmed and will not be affected by TV games or international fixtures. Away tickets have been a challenge as there is a national shortage of ticket supplies, although this appeared to be improving

JG asked if there were two different databases with the club and on Ticketmaster for Black Cat Points that allowed people to buy away tickets they were not entitled to.



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

CW confirmed there was an issue with the Black Cat point phases for the Fleetwood Town away game, where a limited number of tickets were purchased outside the point category. This issue has been addressed with Ticketmaster and fixed. A few supporters haven't been able to purchase away tickets in their phase recently. CW confirmed that if any supporter experiences this in the future please can they call 0371 911 1973 to resolve this directly with the ticket office.

MM asked if the club had noticed any change to the buying patterns of fans pre- and post-covid.

The vast majority are bought online, with SD noting a spike in purchases between 11pm and midnight the Friday night before a home game. SD wanted to remind fans that tickets can be bought online 24/7, on the phone 5 days a week and on matchdays and the day before in the ticket office. The change to digital ticketing did not go as smoothly as SD would have liked but he believes there is now a reasonable balance between digital and physical ticketing purchase options.

### **Action**

- CW to report back on processes and experiences of ticket purchase

### **Merchandise**

SD explained that all online sales during covid operated from the stadium store, but it soon became clear that a physical shop was needed, and it took time to move the online shop to a warehouse and prepare the shop for opening. The most successful shirt launch since being in League one was followed by disruption in the supply chain. A delivery is due soon. The shop has been opening on match days and the before. SD is planning to have sufficient shirts for the Christmas market.

SD liked the shirt design but questioned the use of a transfer badge rather than an embroidered one

SD asked about potential interest for sales of the Ladies team merchandise.

### **Website**

In the long-term, the website needs a substantial upgrade. SD expects small changes to be made in the short term, covering the quality of information provided, a consolidation of contacts and emails to the club, online hospitality sales and a '3 clicks to buy' format. It is intended to provide supporters with a mix of on-line and traditional engagement for all services that are provided.

### **Supporter inclusivity**

#### **Cashless**

CW confirmed a one-to-one service is going to be provided to any fan that needs help to buy tickets online but that most fans experiencing difficulties were coming into the ticket office on a match day or the day before to make their purchase.

No official request for support from anyone has come in following SD's interview so far.



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

SD said the decision to move to digital ticketing was not taken lightly but is probably the correct decision

### **Sunderland City Cards**

CR asked if fans would be able to purchase the card at the Stadium of Light.

ML has spoken to The Bridges and the Sunderland Bid teams about plans to widen the scheme. The card will be available to buy at the Beacon of Light.

JY suggested the ability to top the card up could be more inclusive and asked if the SAFC to buy cards and sell them to supporters.

JG asked if season cards could be used as a payment card.

In the longer-term SD confirmed that we will be linking all club systems which will simplify payment arrangements and provide more benefits to supporters.

### **Digital Support BLC and SID project**

CR noted that the BLC had previously helped fans needing digital assistance and hoped to link future support to the mental help hub

The club has acquired funding to house digital technology at the Beacon of Light and ML intends this to be used to help supporters who are digitally excluded. ML encouraged supporter groups to be involved.

SD acknowledge this is a societal problem that the club is keen to engage with and are committed to helping

### **Action**

- BLC to work with ML on publicising and supporting fan use of the Sunderland City card

### **Inclusivity / Diversity Officer**

In response to inclusivity, diversity and discriminatory issues, DR shared the Premier League's Equality, Inclusion and Diversity Standard that monitors, assesses and awards a standard based on set criteria. While recognizing that this wouldn't be possible overnight, DR believes it is a good standard to aim for.

SD agreed that it was a high priority, but that it was also a question of timing and resources, particularly as changes to the stadium may be necessary to meet diversity requirements as a concert venue.

DR suggested a director be appointed with responsibility for this area of work.

### **Action**



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

- SD to raise the responsibility for Equality, Inclusion and Diversity at the next board meeting

### Match day activity

#### Communication on road closures

CR asked if road closure information could be shared on the club's social media platforms

OC said there were clear avenues of communication now in place to share this information with the fan base and encouraged fan groups to send him this type of information for the club to publicise.

#### Fan Zone Review

The fan survey identified key areas of concern for SD. As a result, food and drink prices have been reduced to a 10-year low, there are a wider range of food and drinks, and a cashless stadium has improved service times.

CB agreed, it was the easiest it has ever been to buy a pint at half time

JG asked if reduced prices were being publicised sufficiently.

A conscious decision was made for a soft launch of the Fanzone at the Beacon of Light and other pre-match incentives as SD was keen not to over promise. This has ensured a more complete offer can be made after identifying some teething problems, building gradually.

JY suggested another bar is needed in the Fanzone.

KC asked if more vegan options would be available.

ML confirmed vegan options were currently available.

SDe asked if meal deals be available in the future.

SD revealed the club would over time be improving the options as we learnt more about the supporter requirements.

CW and ML have worked with the Beacon to host the Fanzone. CW asked for feedback on the initiative.

JG asked for greater publicity for the Fanzone and activities that are be available



## Supporters' Collective Meeting

Better signage is already in place, there is a dedicated page on the website and content is being built into the pre-match email sent to all fans.

The BLC held craft activities in the mental health hub to entertain and engage children and intend to continue this at future matches.

A Fanzone in Sunderland needs to be inside, engaging families, through the sport activities available for children, and older supporters, who wish to have pre-match refreshments in a warm environment. SD is conscious that 15–25-year-olds are not as engaged as he would like and wishes to engage this cohort further. Perhaps the busker, who plays on the concourse pre-match, will engage this group. SD knows there are deep held rituals amongst supporters, leading to 50% of fans entering the stadium in the 10 minutes prior to kick off. The club would like to address this, but this would mean significant changes in routines for supporters.

PA suggested some fans were coming early to the game as it is a more covid secure environment and the club could look at the offers made available to these fans

JY said the bands in the Fanzone are great, as was Rob Mason when he was invited to speak to fans

MB wondered if players not involved could visit the Fanzone pre-match.

Covid has prevented this up until now, but ML believes it will be possible in the future.

### **Reboot of RAWA Roker End flags**

The Roker End flag display has been continuing but many flags need replacing. DR said this could be a way of potentially engaging that missing generation currently not catered for in the Fanzone.

#### **Action**

- RAWA will provide CW with a paper to develop & regenerate the Roker End flag display

### **Supporters conduct at away games**

A minority of fans boo players taking the knee. SD asked supporter groups to encourage fans to stop doing this. This and some abusive chants are not presenting Sunderland in the best light.

DR thinks we all need to set out our stall about the type of club we want to be

KS believes we must be conscious of how this affects the mental health of the players and the future recruitment of players. The fans are a big part of the recruitment process





## Supporters' Collective Meeting

The club need to do more to promote the positive things we stand for, SD asked for fans groups to support the club with this messaging

Promoting community interaction and our values is something PA believes can be developed over time.

CB reflected on the positive change over the years in the nature of the terrace chants

### **Safe standing at Stadium of Light**

PA asked if the club are thinking of introducing this

SAFC's stance has always been to watch the government position and continue to monitor the situation but are awaiting a change in legislation

DR confirmed early adopters can apply to introduce standing areas in the top 2 tiers of football from January. These rules don't apply to league one but will hopefully be an issue in the future.

PA thinks introducing standing could lead to a change in atmosphere and offer a different experience to fans

When it is more prevalent, SD thinks it could be quite exciting but would require significant planning and resourcing to introduce.

JG asked about drinking in the ground and any potential changes to legislation

DR it was an ongoing conversation with government and fans groups nationally.

### **Reopening of the Premier concourse**

CR asked if the Premier concourse would reopen as some fans were keen to return

SD confirmed that the long-term plan is to reopen the premier concourse. Decisions will be made when attendances are regularly 35,000. Staff and their guests are currently positioned in the premier concourse to make ticketing logistically easier, to limit the number of stewards required and to easily facilitate staff benefits.

When the Premier concourse does officially reopen, fans who previously had season tickets in that area will be invited to return to their seats

CB asked if part season cards would be available this season

SD confirmed the club will be offering part season cards.

### **AOB**

### **My Club, My Shirt**





## Supporters' Collective Meeting

DR confirmed that SAFC will be taking part in the FSA's Fans for Diversity My Club, My Shirt campaign. It will involve a gallery of images that promote the city of Sunderland, the football club and the diversity of our fanbase

### Action

- RAWA to work with club on My Club, My Shirt campaign