

Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2024. James Herriott Suite/ 6:00pm

**Attendees:**

Sunderland AFC	Kyril Louis-Dreyfus (KLD), David Bruce (DB), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Steve Davison (SD), Kristjaan Speakman (KS), Chris Waters (CW)
BLC	Jim Gilling (JG), Peter Oliver (PO), Phil Pollard (PP), Cath Reid (CR)
Red & White Army	Andrew Hird (AH), Ewan Moffatt (EM), Paul Nelson (PN), Dave Rose (DR), Jane Hughes (JH)
Senior Supporters	Michelle Barraclough (MBa), Malcolm Bramley (MB), John Heppell (JH)

**Minutes**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- a. **Kyril Louis-Dreyfus:** KLD started by welcoming the Supporters' Collective to the meeting and stating his objectives for the session. These included listening to supporters and hearing their direct feedback to develop a stronger understanding of feeling and sentiment amongst the wider fan base and establishing an environment to move forward.
- b. **Red and White Army:** PN also provided an opening statement on behalf of RAWA, which stated:

*"In light of the significance of this meeting, RAWA have felt compelled to make an opening statement prior to the main agenda. A huge amount of feedback has been collated by RAWA from member emails, social media, message boards and via an open meeting held last week. We are not swayed by extreme points on social media - that should never be the barometer of fan feeling – but we are very confident in what the mood of the majority of the fanbase is. The Emirates FA Cup third round tie was a complete mess, and whilst this debacle alone has had an impact on how supporters perceive the way our Club is run, it has also brought into focus what are now long-standing concerns. The message from fans to the owners and decision makers at the Club is very clear. We have had enough. We have had enough of being taken for granted. We have had enough of being an afterthought. We have had enough of "pound-shop" merchandise - when it's actually in stock. We have had enough of a level of customer service that would make a League Two Club blush. We had enough of the lack of pride in the Stadium and in the Institution that is SAFC. We have had enough of decisions that walk all over the sensibilities and pride of generations of Sunderland supporters. RAWA has attempted to push matters relating to all these issues for two years. There was some initial acceptance that you inherited a mess, and the academy and other football matters were the priority. But now we are tired of raising the same issues and sadly, we are at the point now where if you cannot illustrate progress and make firm commitments to change, with deadlines, RAWA must question whether it is worth continuing to engage with the club and walk away."*

- c. **Branch Liaison Council:** All other supporters' groups endorsed the statement made by RAWA. JG added that the BLC were equally as concerned and were questioning future involvement should action not be taken in response to

supporter feedback. JG concluded that he has been a supporter for over 50 years and before Christmas, he was very enthusiastic about the season. However, the NUFC arrangements and off-field changes have now resulted in him feeling deflated and he no longer looking forward to games, home or away, which he suspects is a sentiment shared by thousands of others.

- d. **Meeting format:** CW then communicated the meeting format and general housekeeping. PP requested that each meeting moving forward starts with a review of previous actions and suggested these be kept in a separate document to commit and track outcomes that demonstrate supporter feedback is not only received but acted upon. The Club agreed this was a good idea and will own this item moving forward, presenting updates at the start of each supporters' collective meeting.
  
- e. **Football operations:** Although Sporting Director Kristjaan Speakman was in attendance, all parties agreed to focus fully on the Club's business operation considering the feedback received by Supporters' Groups from their members. These matters will be discussed at the next meeting.

## 2. EMIRATES FA CUP THIRD ROUND

### A. Allocation and stadium configuration

- SD began by stating that SAFC did not want to provide an allocation of 6,000 away tickets to NUFC.
- He continued to by detailing Emirates FA Cup competition regulations:
  - 191. For Competition Matches other than a Semi-Final or the Final, the Away Club shall have the right to claim either (a) up to 15% of the tickets issued (up to a maximum of 9,000); or (b) if the Ground is not all ticketed, up to 15% the Ground's maximum capacity, provided that: 191.1. the tickets are for admission to a fully segregated area; and
  - 191.2. the request for the tickets is made within four days of the relevant draw.
  - 192. The Home Club shall comply with any request for tickets made in accordance with Rule 191.
- NUFC requested the maximum of 15%.
- During discussions with the FA, Safety Advisory Group and Northumbria Police, SD continued that the three options for housing away fans were the North Stand Upper, South Stand, and entire North Stand. Safety and operational viability dictated that the entire North Stand was the only option. The factors that led to this conclusion were as follows:
  - The South Stand (Roker End) was dismissed due to it being our home end.
  - We wouldn't have been able to carry out the enhanced searches required for 6,000 fans housed in the upper tier only.
  - Housing both home and away fans in the North Stand would have created a complex number of challenges, including fan interaction upon entry and exit.
  - By only housing away fans in the North Stand, we were able to create a fully segregated zone outside and inside the stadium.
- SD understood that the North Stand Lower is not traditionally an away end, and it was only considered as competition rules determine all safe and operational viable options must be explored to satisfy the request of the away Club. He added that SAFC were not the only Club

impacted by this, with home fans also displaced in this season's competition and highlighted examples of when Liverpool travelled to Arsenal and Bristol City travelled to West Ham United.

- SD also addressed historical instances whereby regionalised opposition were given a smaller allocation than competition regulations state, adding that SAG governance has changed and the decision making for a Middlesbrough fixture would have involved two local policing bodies, which adds another layer of complexity. It was also added that Middlesbrough likely requested more tickets but none of the current SAFC staff were around during that time to confirm. NUFC's allocation was also only permitted if they committed to facilitating and funding a bubble trip environment on coaches to and from their stadium.
- In response to a question from EM on why the North Stand Upper only was discounted, SD explained the club did not expect an allocation of 6,000 to be approved and a lower allocation would likely have seen North Stand upper used. There were four SAG meetings and numerous ones with the police. The FA reiterated that Sunderland had to comply with the rule when approached, but the club did not test this and did not push back. EM believes fans would expect the club to push back on this, but SD felt the Club had no grounds to challenge the regulations, which also dictated that in the event of a replay, SAFC would have been given 6,000 tickets at St James' Park.
- AH asked if the safety officer had pushed back on allocating away fans the North Stand lower after the upper only was discounted due to an enhanced search of every away fan not being operationally viable due to the volume of attendees. SD replied that the Club looked at how many could be safely accommodated in North Stand upper only before considering any allocation in the North Stand lower. The match operated safely and there were only six arrests at the match, 15 ejections of away fans in home areas – 14 of which were in hospitality – and there were no delays to fans entering the stadium.
- AH believes the visuals associated with the Club's handling of the allocation of tickets have been appalling. DR stated the Red and White Army had to convey fans' extreme disappointment and anger that the Club did not push back and believes that if the Club had, the FA would have asked for a local solution to be found and this would have led to a lower ticket allocation for NUFC. SD reiterated that he spoke to the FA several times before approaching NUFC and doubted a lower allocation would have been permitted.

## **B. Fan displacement**

- CR advised that many North Stand season ticket holders were unhappy that they could not purchase their tickets until all season card holders in other areas of the stadium had purchased their tickets, as they could have purchased non-season ticket holder seats during this period. She added that the BLC are aware of several groups of supporters sat in the North Stand, who sit together and were not able to purchase their tickets together in phase one.
- SD replied that as only 5,500 seats would have been available to the 4,000 north stand season ticket holders in phase one, most of which were single seats, the decision was taken to have season ticket holders who were not displaced buy their seat before allowing North Stand lower season ticket holders to buy theirs, when more tickets would be available for their selection.
- SD also acknowledged that greater consideration and engagement could have been applied throughout the process to ensure fans had visibility into these steps.

### C. Black Cats Bar

- SD stated that selling tickets to Newcastle fans in the Black Cats Bar was not a consideration when determining allocation and the position of away fans. However, after the allocation and configuration was confirmed and the North Stand deemed the only location, a decision to open and charge Newcastle for usage was made as this area was unable to be used by Sunderland fans.
- SD noted that Club branding and iconography was present in the space and to ensure it wasn't damaged the Club agreed with Newcastle to cover these with generic designs and requested for these to be submitted.
- MB believes Black Cats Bar was handed over for commercial reasons and asked how much revenue it generated. SD confirmed tickets were £500 +VAT and approximately 300 were sold.
- MB strongly conveyed that the decision to not simply close BCB was an absolute disgrace. Recognising that he was part of the decision to grant NUFC access to BCB, MB addressed KLD directly and stated that he, and the management team, had completely misjudged the importance of an SAFC versus NUFC derby, both today and historically. This decision, and its consequences, will be thrown in the faces of Sunderland fans forever and is one of the worst decisions the Club has made since taking over the Club.
- The perception is that decisions were taken to make as much money as possible (PN).
- KLD added that the allocation of tickets and financial distribution of revenue was dictated by competition rules and nothing else. SAFC received share of ticket revenue in line with the competition rules.

### D. Internal investigation

- EM asked when the investigation would be concluded. KLD replied that stage one had concluded and that a serious error of judgement has been identified. The Club makes no excuses for this mistake and KLD apologised, adding that the Club needs to take steps to ensure it never happens again.
- An emergency board meeting was held the evening the pictures of the Black Cats Bar were released.
- MB stressed the importance of announcing the findings of any review after publicly announcing an investigation would take place.
- KLD stated the Club will be taking serious action and the outcomes will be communicated as transparently as possible. **(ACTION)**
- SD added that the club needed to understand the environment in which the decision to brand BCB in black and white was taken. PN suggested the environment was selling tickets at £600 each and wanting to make NUFC fans feel at home.
- SD added that the investigation is ongoing and out of respect for those involved, it would conclude internally.
- KLD reiterated that the allocation of tickets and financial distribution of revenue was dictated by competition rules and nothing else. SAFC received share of ticket revenue in line with the competition rules. He concluded that it was a tremendous mistake, and the Club needs to take steps to ensure it never happens again.

### E. Fan consultation

- DB cited the busy Christmas fixture period and pressures on the business as a reason for an oversight in consultation with fans, but acknowledged the Club could and should have liaised with fans and apologised that this did not happen.

- MB rejected the concept that there was no time to discuss the matter with fans. JG concurred, adding that fan consultation would have identified many problems which could have been avoided. Fan groups were involved in the organisation of other high-profile games and the club's senior management has made some massive errors, which have ruined their relationship with many fans.
- It was also noted that the fans groups are very responsive to requests for consultation, often at late notice, including between Christmas and New Year in 2022, so it is not the case that there was no time to meaningfully consult.

### **3. RETAIL AND TICKETING**

#### **A. Customer service**

- DB stated that customer service has not been good enough and explained that fan servicing must be at the core of the Club's future ethos.
- He added there are some service restrictions due to ongoing contracts and agreements that cannot be addressed until these expire but confirmed that performance within those contracts will be addressed and work is on-going in the background to define the future path.
- As the Ready To Go online forum representative for the Red and White Army, EM explained that he has found it draining answering questions that should be addressed by the Club. He asked if extra staffing and resources would be provided in this area to ensure fans can ring the ticket office and receive answers to emails answered, etc.
- DB replied that it is not acceptable to not get a response in a timely manner, but DR stated that these concerns have been raised by groups for two years and asked what the Club is committing to.
- In response, the club committed to sharing initial plans for customer service improvements relating to the Ticket Office by Friday 16 February. **(ACTION)**
- AH reiterated that these issues have been discussed at many meetings and nothing has improved. He continued that SAFC have a Premier League infrastructure and fan base, but staffing levels do not reflect that and employees are constantly having to be reactive rather than proactive in helping fans.
- KLD replied that resourcing has improved overall, but it is not evident in customer service. He added that supporters are the most important thing to the Club and the aim is for Sunderland to become the most fan-centric Club in the country. There is an action list and fans will be able to see improvements. **(ACTION)**
- JG believes actions contradict this, stating this is the first supporters' collective meeting since February 2023. KLD reiterated that fans will see improvements within 6 months. **(ACTION)**
- DR asked if KLD read the minutes of these meeting and asked if he would commit to reading them moving forward, whilst proposing a supporters' collective report is submitted at board meetings to ensure full awareness of concerns and sentiment. KLD agreed this was a good idea and committed to this moving forward. **(ACTION)**

#### **B. Kit partner and retail**

- DB revealed that the Club will have a new technical partner and an updated retail operation from the 2024-25 season. Although the Club can't confirm suppliers at this stage, they clarified it is not Sports Direct and stated that an April announcement is pencilled in.
- When identifying these solutions, DB explained the focus was on aligning with partners who prioritise Sunderland, offer best-in-class, bespoke services and have fans at the heart of their

offering. This includes custom products and ranges, availability, and superior service levels. An elevated offer will also be provided for women through a broader range of products, and juniors, who will have a direct takedown of adult ranges. Three times as many units have been ordered compared to the current season (2023-24).

- DB added that these changes are a result of previous formal and informal engagement meetings with fans and listening across social media, concluding that fans should expect to see extensive improvements in this area very soon. (ACTION)
- DR noted that it is still easier to buy a NUFC shirt in the City of Sunderland than an SAFC shirt and asked about merchandise availability across the region.
- DB agreed merchandise must be more widely available, adding that the new retail operation partner is world leading and work is being done to identify suitable outlets. (ACTION)
- PP reminded the Club of the consistent feedback from supporters around levels of kit supply, including the late timing of kit launches. He suggested that the Club is missing out on revenue due to these issues and referred to clubs launching new kits for the final game of the season. This will allow for sales during summer periods rather than what seems to have been Sunderland's approach of launching kits on the eve of the season.
- While there are many factors and variables to consider – inside and outside of the Club's control – DB stated that the Club want to ensure the kit is available to fans as soon as possible and the new partnerships commencing in 2024 will give SAFC greater control over this. (ACTION)

### C. Ticketing

- CR provided examples of poor customer service and why a phone service should be provided. Examples included a fan having to travel from West Yorkshire to resolve an issue with obtaining a plastic ticket when this could have been resolved by telephone.
- She also noted that some fans were charged £5 for printed Emirates FA Cup tickets at the Ticket Office, but Club representatives in attendance advised this charge should not have been in place and they were not aware this had happened, but stated they would review. (ACTION)
- She continued that supporters' groups have to support fellow fans when the Club should be doing it, adding that a phone number is needed for fans to contact the ticket office.
- SD replied that the club has committed to using Ticketmaster's telephone support service during peak times, adding that they were utilized to facilitate more than 3,000-contacts per day (phone, email, in-person) during the Emirates FA Cup purchase period.
- MB called 30 EFL clubs ahead of the meeting and every ticket office answered his call and successfully transferred him to a requested department – only Sunderland didn't answer.
- CR confirmed she also called each Championship and League One Club, and every ticket office answered except SAFC.
- SD confirmed that a new ticket office manager, Robert Holmes, has recently been appointed and he is currently working to address issues within the operation.
- JG welcomed the appointment of a ticket office manager and CR praised the impact made already by RH.
- DB added that there are only a handful of providers that can meet the demands of ticketing at SAFC and acknowledged the needs of all supporters must be considered when implementing a solution. There are 18 months left on the Club's contract with Ticketmaster.
- In response to a question from EM, SD confirmed non-digital tickets season tickets would continue to be available next season.
- CR stated ticket office staff were publicly blaming the digital ticket roll on the EFL due to league regulations. This is an SAFC decision, and the Club stated it would address this inaccuracy. (ACTION)

- SD reiterated the Club's commitment to sharing initial phase one plans for customer service improvements relating to the Ticket Office by Friday 16 February.

#### 4. STADIUM EXPERIENCE

##### A. Development and maintenance

- SD started by communicating some of the changes made to the Stadium of Light's infrastructure since the last supporters' collective. These included:
  - Quinn's Sports Bar refurbishment
  - Montgomery Suite refurbishment
  - Significant spend on structural steelwork and paintwork, which is severely impacted by the stadium's proximity to the coast.
  - Extensive investment in executive and public catering to enhance services, including implementing click-and-collect technology and additional equipment.
  - Upgraded all public areas of the stadium to LED lighting, excluding the Premier Concourse.
  - Improvements to the Stadium of Light pitch; investing in equipment, people and processes.
  - Continued redevelopment of the Academy of Light, including the Terrace (player and staff refectory).
- SD added that the transformer failure at the start of October has put immense pressure on our internal operation and unfortunately, this has delayed further proactive stadium improvements.
- DR stated the stadium looks rundown and that there is an air of neglect around it that must be addressed. DR asked how it will be improved.
- CR added that the the PA system is awful and needs to be replaced.
- KLD replied that the club has invested and will continue to invest in the infrastructure, but appreciated a lot of this had taken place behind the scenes and stated that fans should see tangible improvements shortly.
- PN suggested the Club shares good news items with fans to make people aware of the improvement plan, which could also be published and detail lead staff, clear actions and timelines. MB agreed fans would welcome this.
- SD confirmed there are internal development and improvement plans and agreed sharing general objectives publicly would be of value. (ACTION)
- JH referred to an action point from the previous meeting for supporters' collective representatives to walk around that stadium with the facilities manager and highlight concerns. This took place, but actions could not be shared with fans as the Club did not agree to action points that could be shared, rendering the meeting meaningless. RAWA attempted to have this signed off by the Club seven times, which is completely unacceptable. CW acknowledged this mistake and apologised.
- KLD agreed this is unacceptable and the Club must be better.
- PP suggested that more walkabouts should be held involving supporters to identify stadium issues and improvements before asking the Club to commit to at least one per year. (ACTION)

##### B. Away supporter location

- SD recalled that this was discussed in 2023 and since then measures had been introduced to address previous issues. These include:
  - a. Searching all away fans upon entering the stadium.

- b. Operating enhanced searches of away fans for high-risk fixtures.
  - c. Enhancing the Club's internal CCTV network.
  - d. Banning coins and vapes in the North Stand Upper.
  - e. Investing in improved LED lighting in the North Stand Upper.
  - f. Proactively engaged with opposition clubs ahead of all fixtures.
- These have dramatically reduced incidents, and the Club has also commissioned an independent consultant to review how continued improvements can be made and results from this have already informed and will continue to inform additional operational changes.
- SD added that the Club's existing operation is extendible to 3,000 away fans, as required by the Premier League.
- Referring to the PL rule requiring a pitchside presence of away fans, DR asked if there were plans to move the visiting supporters and added SAFC should treat fans as we would like to be treated. He concluded that the location of away fans negatively impacts the ambient level of atmosphere, but stated this is only his opinion before urging the Club to consider a full consultation with fans on the location of the away fans to put the matter to bed one way or another.
- KLD replied that everyone has a different opinion, and that there is no easy solution.
- SD agreed the Club would consider the request for fan consultation on this subject. (ACTION)

### **C. Safe standing**

- SD confirmed dialogue has continued with the SAG and SGSA, explained that some risks, including migration, must be eliminated before safe standing can be implemented. He added that the Club has started to tackle migration over the past 18 months and it has reduced, but additional work needs to be done.
- Investment in rail seating is being discussed at the next board meeting and fan consultation will begin immediately subject to board approval. (ACTION)

### **D. Spirit of '37**

- CW confirmed that the Club will be engaging with the Spirit of 37 to understand what the future holds for the group. The Club supports the fantastic displays that this group delivers. (ACTION)
- The RAWA noted the frustration across the fan base at the difficulties SO37 faced in putting on the displays, including the recent derby day display. DR added that many fans have raised but respected that a separate meeting will take place with the people involved with SO37.

## **5. COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT**

### **A. Supporter touchpoints**

- DB stated that many of this has been covered earlier in the meeting but reiterating that SAFC is committed to improving its service culture. We understand we have let fans down in certain areas and know improvement is central to how we move forward, as will working with the Supporters' Collective.
- DR added that fans must be at the heart of all the Club does. There must be dates in the diary that the club commit to and there should be working groups for key topics. (ACTION)

### **B. Communications and digital**



- OC revealed that a new digital services partner has been confirmed and this agreement will commence in 2024, and include a new website and mobile app.
- A new three-year business strategy and brand strategy are also currently being finalised and this will inform a new comms and engagement strategy.
- MB referenced that not all fans are on social media and asked that all official communication channels be used to communicate news; KLD's apology regarding the Black Cats Bar and significant senior staffing appointments have not featured.

### C. Fan engagement

- DB believes KLD's presence at this meeting reflects the commitment of the board to fan engagement.
- The Club are going to use the forthcoming *Sunderland 'Til I Die* series as an opportunity to engage with fans; both within and beyond normal parameters. There will be a launch event and an associated retail product range released.
- CW wants to establish ticketing and stadium working groups within the Supporters' Collective and asked for feedback on any other topics/issues which could be included. **(ACTION)**
- There are going to be roadshows and talk-ins involving the senior leadership team across the region, starting in March. **(ACTION)**
- The recent Emirates FA Cup watch party at the Seaburn Stack was very successful and beam backs have returned to Quinn's Sports Bar, with additional open training sessions also planned this season.
- The players are making approximately two appearances per week giving in the local community, as part of the Club's ongoing commitment to having more interaction with the fans.

### D. Matchday

- DB explained that a new fan reporting service will be launched by end of 2023-24, as matchday is for everyone and our stadium environment should reflect that.
- A new pre-match experience has been implemented at the stadium designed to help with the atmosphere and fan connectivity, with new starting XI graphics and other club rituals included.
- Ongoing dialogue with British eSports is continuing to build a new matchday journey for young fans, and longer-term work is ongoing to build moments in our calendar that celebrate SAFC. These include Heroes Week and remembrance weekend.
- A new Player of the Season night will also be launched this season.

### E. EDI

- SD stated that football has to do more when it comes to Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (SD) and that it must be central to the Club's thinking. The EFL's Together project will also drive work in this area.
- The Club would like to establish an LGBTQ+ fan group within the next year and would welcome support from within the fan base to achieve this.
- DR offered The FSA's support through the Fans for Diversity campaign for both consultation and potential funding in this area, reminding that this has been offered for the past two years without take up. **(ACTION)**

### F. Organisational Chart

- SD revealed that new roles equating to 15% of the staff team were added to the business in 2023 but recognized that more additions are required.
- PN asked if an organisational chart could be produced, showing key work areas and plans.
- SD agreed key personnel information should be available on the website and that most companies publish service levels, which the club should consider doing. (ACTION)
- DR raised the option of a fans' charter in the future and DB agreed that commitments to fans must be explicit. (ACTION)

## 6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

### Next meeting

- Next meeting to be set by Club by Friday 02 February.

### Other

- EM asked about the offering in Black Cats Bar for Sunderland fans. It now does not include food and although 'funky street food' is available, it generally consists of a pie and burgers. There is also no longer access to Quinn's Sports Bar after the match.
- DB confirmed the Club is exploring how fans use all levels of hospitality to determine what the future of our hospitality offering will look like – a broader project is planned around this topic.
- DR made a plea to the Club to grasp the opportunity this meeting offers for them to fully understand the mood of the fans and to make tangible improvements and commitments to start rebuilding relations with the wider fan base.
- MB wanted to disassociate many Sunderland fans from the vile, personal comments made online about Club employees. He stated that fans have a right to criticise, but some comments have gone too far.
- In response to a question about 2024-25 season tickets, SD confirmed that season ticket 2024-25 pricing discussions are currently taking place internally.
- KS revealed that pre-season arrangements will be announced at the beginning of February and will include travel package details.
- KLD expressed his gratitude for the honest and informative feedback fan representatives collated from their members and reiterated his desire for the Club to continue learning and improving. The three-year anniversary of his ownership group taking control of SAFC has just passed and he is proud and grateful for all the work that has been done to start rebuilding the Club, but he reiterated that the process is not complete and further progress must be made.
- KLD concluded that although this is a challenging moment and he now better understands the recent frustrations experienced by fans, he has never been more excited by the future, and he hopes to experience many more good moments alongside the Club's supporters.

**MEETING ENDS**