



Minutes of the Supporters' Collective meeting held on Thursday 21st July 2022 at 5.30 p.m.

Attendees

Sunderland AFC:	Steve Davison (SD), Kristjaan Speakman (KS), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Lindsay Douglas (LD), Michael Laidler (ML), Chris Waters (CW), Karen Casey (KS)
Supporter Groups:	
Branch Liaison Council:	Cath Reid (CR) Joanne Youngson (JY), Malcolm Fail, Phil Pollard (PP)
Red & White Army:	Jamie Bogle (JB), Michael McAllister (MM), Dave Rose (DR), Rebecca Wilkinson (RW)
Senior Supporters Association:	Malcolm Bramley (MB), John Heppell (JH), Michelle Barraclough (MBa)
SAFC Supporters Liaison Group:	Paul Andrew (PA), Miles Cobain (MC)
Spirit of 37	Patrick Scott (PS), Michael Conroy (MCo)

Agenda

1. Finance, Governance & Structure

SD provided a business update. The club has been exceptionally busy with the play-off semi and final, the concerts, university graduations and now the 2-week preparation for start of the season. An incredible amount of work has been put in by SAFC staff to make all of these happen and SD is proud of the work everyone has done.

The club continues to work to the five strategic themes as presented a year ago:

- Establish a high-performance culture across the Club.
- Developing a football philosophy based on Sunderland's values and identity.
- Opportunity for young players through a holistic development programme.
- Evidence-based decision making embracing data and technology.
- Aligned and engaged with community, supporters, and businesses.

There has been progress in all areas, although Covid has limited some of the planned engagement activities. The Board is increasingly confident with the strategy, but SD said the club is very much at the beginning of the project rather than at the end of it. The aim is to be a top 25 club in England in the short term and ultimately a top 10 team - both on and off the pitch – in the long term.

On ownership, SD gave credit to KLD for his patience and determination to get the change in ownership that he wanted. KLD had previously attended a Supporters Collective Meeting on 03/03/22 and made a number of commitments, all of which he has completed. From the outset the board agreed to adopt a sustainable model, 'what we spend, we have to earn'. The club is looking at progression over a number of years; consolidation this year and then building upon that. SD is determined to build a business and playing structure fit for the Premier League that works for SAFC in a modern world. SD is aligned with the



recommendations of the Fan-Led Review and will continue to work on building relationships with fans and local businesses.

Physical investment in the stadium has not been possible because of concerts, graduations and a shorter close season. The World Cup winter break will give an opportunity for some further infrastructure improvements. The club has been investing in people; an HR manager has been appointed who has identified staffing requirements going forward. More work recruitment is expected.

The club successfully hosted 3 concerts. SD is pleased with the profitability of these which will make a difference to the playing budget available and benefits the city overall. SD is in negotiation for concerts for next year. The plan is for 3 but no contracts have been agreed. SD was pleased with the positive feedback from promoters and on the graduations but has listened to the issues that arose and will make sure these are addressed.

CR was pleased that the safeguarding hub was in place for all three concerts and was successful. SD said promoters had commended SAFC for the approach that had taken to hosting the concerts.

MCo was concerned that hosting concerts would prevent improvements being made to the stadium. SD does not think this will be the case in the long term. This year was unique as it had been a long time since the Stadium of Light had hosted a concert, so much staff time was required to get the stadium ready. In future changes to infrastructure will be possible alongside the graduations and the concerts. This year's concerts identified issues to be addressed that can be transferred to football matches, particularly regarding facilities for disabled fans. SD is mindful of which events are suited to be at the stadium and which ones are better suited to other venues in the city but increasing non-football revenue is vital to the success of the club.

As the club prepare for the championship season, SD shared some benchmark comparison with clubs similar to Sunderland AFC, e.g. Leeds, West Bromwich Albion, Sheffield United, Norwich in the last pre-covid season, 2018-19.

Their average attendances were between 20,000 - 28,000; turnover was between £21 million and £40 million excluding parachute money (Sunderland will be at the top end of this comparison); Sunderland AFC compared well in terms of non-footballing revenue; all clubs compared had a wage bill of over 100% of income; squad value varied greatly (building player squad value will be a key metric for Sunderland going forward as this is an integral part of the strategy); the average age of the squad ranged from 23.8 – 27.3 years (Sunderland is likely to be at the lower end of that age range).

Match day

All executive catering has been insourced, beginning with the concerts, SD said, and the club is committed to offering the highest standards. There has been a huge changeover and gaps at senior levels remain within the catering staff. Venue sales have also been in-sourced, SD believes SAFC are the best people to sell our venue and this adds to our stadium flexibility all aimed at enhancing revenue generation.

Traditionally, SAFC fans arrive later to the ground than fans at other clubs. With the pending changes to the Roker End for the first game of the season, SD is encouraging fans to arrive early to avoid delays; kick off is unlikely to be delayed unless there is a serious safety issue due to the fixture being televised on Sky Sports.



The club is committed to improving matchday day experience and will be trying new things to build the atmosphere. SD is aware that fans will not always agree on what is best, but club will be trying to engage as many fans as possible.

Concerns continue about the behaviour of a minority of fans. SD said that if the club do not show improvements with this, there will be restrictive measures imposed. The EFL has written to the club outlining the sanctions that can be imposed if supporter behaviour does not improve. 35 people were banned last year, compared to an average of 3 or 4 in previous seasons. SD confirmed that everyone who set off a pyrotechnic device in the stadium was identified and sanctions imposed on them. Most were away fans, but for the first-time pyrotechnic devices were let off by home fans.

MCo said Spirit of 37 were already messaging about fan behavior but believes supporters can only do so much the club must act too. They are encouraging fans to leave pyrotechnics at home. SD agreed that it was important for fans and the club to work together to make a difference.

The BLC has also pushed the message that there is impact on people's day to day life outside football if they are prosecuted for offences at football matches as they could get a criminal record. This may prevent offenders getting jobs, international travel etc. (CR).

DR believes the difficulty is getting the message to the fans bringing them in; periodically the football authorities look to address this issue, but DR thinks Spirit of 37 are best placed to address this, with the support of all fan groups and that a message from a manager or a player may go a long way to getting the message across.

SD knows how it impacts people's health and people must understand this. If fans see it happening, we all have a responsibility to identify individuals and report it. SD reiterated the serious risk to the club and supporters if we do not address this issue together.

PP referenced the previous information provided by Steve Neill, specifically the concerns around the temperature and chemicals.

OC summarised the discussion, saying the message should convey the risk to yourself, the risk to others and the risk to the club, including limiting fan engagement activities and possible sanctions that can be imposed.

2. Football Update

KS is happy with the quality of the summer signings to date and the structure of the deals. Squad composition and transfer business have been consistent with the club's overall strategy and our intention was to secure permanent transfers first. As Premier League teams return from pre-season training, loan deals can enter the final stages of negotiation. Several players are expected to be brought in before the transfer deadline. KS is confident the calibre of player required will be secured.

Off the field, additional positions have been filled. Jamie Harley has been appointed Head of Sport Science; a nutritionist is set to join. Changes at the Academy continue; an American style locker room and lounge has gone down well with the players; the gym has been refurbished.

KS was pleased with the 1-year extension of Category 1 status awarded to the Academy and is hopeful of achieving a 3-year extension when next assessed.



The composition of the Women's squad for next season was confirmed early; Melanie Reay is now full-time. Alex Clark knows there is work to be done but KS is pleased with progress.

When asked by PA if things were going in the right direction, KS said an aligned strategy and vision helps, as does better resourcing. KS is proud of work that has been done, acknowledging the team effort throughout the club, but knows there is still a lot of work to do.

The club are committed to retaining academy players and will work hard to achieve this. These players must be shown that there is a pathway to the first team. KS believes the club is in a good place; young players are being given the chance to be involved with the first team.

SD said the club working hard to compensate the loss of several academy players 3-5 years ago.

DR asked if the alignment and progress was a benefit of changes in ownership. Dealing with less people is always easier, KS believes that clarity in the vision helps, as well.

When a club adopts a strategy that is different to most other clubs, owners can question progress in the beginning. SD believes clear progression has been seen, the squad is worth more than it was and will build on the success achieved so far.

JB asked what success would look like next season. The heart says promotion, but KS believes we must take a balanced approach after 4 years in League One. Next season, consolidation and adaptation to the Championship will be important as the squad has limited experience at that level. Small margins will be important and as will reflecting on progress throughout the season both on and off the pitch. The players and Head Coach are looking forward to next season. KS believes it will be good to keep the positive vibe between players and fans going.

MM believes fans would appreciate a solid first season in the championship.

3. Ticket Office & Club Store and Communication / Customer Service

While having no criticism of the ticket office staff, CR believes that the current opening hours of 10:00am – 1:00pm does not help working fans, phone numbers are incorrect, and people are prevented from buying tickets.

LD confirmed that the current arrangements allow supporters to contact clubs via email, ticket.office@safc.com, and they will then be contacted by telephone. There is no longer a call centre to handle incoming calls. There is a de facto queuing system via email which logs the order in which queries are submitted. Work is still to be done on addressing ticket office opening times and methods for contacting the ticket office. Technology infrastructure changes are still required to put ticketing facilities in the shop. There is an increasing shift to digital purchasing, and the club wants to be at the forefront of that technology.

ML concurred that the primary source of contact is the ticket office email, the club will ring fans back. The club don't advertise any telephone numbers and haven't done so for some time. The club could arrange for a third-party call centre, but this would likely only enable ticket sales and not address complex ticketing issues.



The biggest frustration for senior supporters' members is that they cannot speak to someone, at a club of our size, MB thinks that should be possible.

DR agreed. Most RAWA feedback from members is about poor customer service touch points and not just from older fans, asking why bigger and smaller clubs were better at this. Investment in the non-football aspects of the business is still required. Fans need to hear that the club acknowledges the issue and see a timeline for improvement (DR).

MCo agreed that even tech savvy fans have issues with ticket office and shop opening times.

The club needs to understand the specifics of the problem; asking if it was a genuine issue or if it was a perception of a problem, there is a considerable difference between a quick transaction of buying a ticket and a more complex ticketing issue.

When asked about having an outlet in a city centre shop, such as Nike, SD said the club makes a greater margin by selling our own merchandise and as we are in the business of making money to invest in the playing staff, so this was not a preferred option.

PP asked if there was benefit in adopting more modern technologies such as a online chat approach. SD acknowledged the problem of not being able to call the club and accepted the preference of some people to call the ticket office and the issues of those who have technological challenges. SD may not fully have understood the totality of the problem but wants to understand the problem in order to develop the best solution.

Agreeing that shop and ticket office issues were concerning fans, PA said lack of shirt availability for the play-offs suggests the club should look at alternate merchandising, such a T-shirts

LD reported excellent retail sales last season, with very little excess stock. She was frustrated that the new home kit was not readily available. This was caused by a covid 'hangover' in the Far East with production and transport issues. The kit that was available was put on sale and was just a part of the overall order. The bulk of the order has not been received. Next year, hopefully the kit will be received in April and can be put on sale early if required.

When asked about the possibility of buying an adult shirt without a sponsor's logo on, LD said this was not contractually possible, adult shirts must be sold with the sponsors logo on it.

PS asked why the away kit had away not been released. LD confirmed it had now been received and would go on sale as soon as possible. The home kit is expected to arrive on the 6 August and be available soon after. New product ranges for the 22-23 season will be available soon.

LD added that many clubs were experiencing problems with new kit supply. In reality our strong relationships with the suppliers have helped ensure we weren't as badly impacted as some other clubs. LD confirmed infrastructure changes to the shop are underway. The shop will be opening and selling tickets soon. Footfall and the nature of queries will be monitored, and the ticket office will still be open on a matchday.

SD there will always be a complex range of issues, providing options to deal with this is the key. Following the meeting the club confirmed the following changes.

Post Meeting Note: Ticket Office and Shop

Following the previous meeting of the Supporter Collective in April we agreed to make changes to the operation of the ticket office and shop. These were always planned to be implemented for the start of the next season. We are still making all the changes intended. The changes we are making are:

- *Shop opening with the ability to sell tickets during weekdays.*



- *Ticket Office open matchday and matchday-1.*
- *Full review of all away ticket processes.*
- *Commitment to reduce complexity of other processes.*

We are a few weeks late in implementing all of these changes as a result of the focus on servicing the play-off games. We have had no time since as a result of the concerts which has led straight into the preparations for the new season. We appreciate this has been frustrating for supporters.

After the meeting last week, we realised the proposed changes above were not going to be adequate in themselves, but we also didn't fully understand the problems we were dealing with. To start to enhance the changes we are already making we will open the phone lines on a regular basis as part of a trial starting on Monday 15th August. During the time between now and 15th we can properly configure the phone system to deal with the queues properly as well as setting up appropriate messaging. We will collect data from all our activities in the ticket office and shop and present this back to the supporter collective in November to allow us to learn and adapt our services.

SD was contacted by Reading FC, as were all championship clubs, with a £20 reciprocal away ticket deal. At the time the club were contacted SAFC had already set their budget and ticket prices. SAFC is committed to affordable football for all as evidenced by the early bird season card prices. SD felt that agreeing to this would not impact those clubs that were charging higher prices. Bristol City and Sheffield United are charging £33 for Sunderland fans. SD shared a draft letter to both clubs raising concerns over the prices being charged. After reviewing all Championship clubs ticketing arrangements some are bypassing the spirit of the EFL regulations by operating a membership scheme that lowers the price for all home supporters and not away fans. SD believed the best approach is to set an overall price cap to be adopted by all clubs in the league and will raise the issue of a price cap with the EFL.

DR applauded the club for approaching the EFL about an away ticket cap, agreeing a letter to Bristol City and Sheffield United is a good idea. A £30 cap is likely to be acceptable to most fans; although it would be equivalent to the premier league cap, DR accepted that ticket revenue is an important finance stream for EFL clubs.

4. Stadium of Light

DR said RAWA had received many comments from members about how tired the stadium looks in its 25th year and asked about a pathway to improvement. PS agreed, commenting that the men of steel cannot be accessed due to overgrown grass, the latticework & lower car park is a mess, the flags outside the stadium are filthy, the murals from St. Peter's to the stadium need improvements.

SD the club had received the Stadium of Light's 25-year report and while safety must be addressed first, improvements could be done in tandem. The World Cup break will be an opportunity for stadium repairs and to make some changes. PP suggested a small group to do a work around this and develop a snagging list. SD agreed.

JY spoke of how the Heaven Branch are taking responsibility for the memorial garden and suggested other groups could look at similar projects.

SD said approximately 31,000 season cards had been sold including hospitality. On average we expect to sell 4000 matchday tickets for games next season. SD expects that the Premier Concourse will be open



for some matches during the season when it is warranted. It is unlikely that we will sell enough season cards to justify this for the whole season. LD said the Premier Concourse may be open for season ticket holders next season subject to season card sales, and the commitment to season ticket holders originally in Premier Concourse to return to their seats remains.

DR asked SD to confirm that the club are behind the introduction of safe standing and would be committed to it in the future. SD said the club were under increased pressure from SGSA and the SAG on this. It was discussed at a recent EFL meeting. SD said grounds originally designed to incorporate rail seating were more positive about rail standing than stadiums originally designed to be all-seater. Bob Eastwood, the EFL's Head of Safety, is doing a review of findings from early adopters, which the club will be interested in seeing. SD raised a concern that introducing rail seating may encourage others in seated areas to stand.

PS disagreed, believing it strengthens the case for enforcing seating as fans will have the option to stand. SD is supportive of safe standing if there is a positive cost benefit analysis. It will cost up to £1 million to convert an area of the Stadium to rail seating, so the club will not be rushing into it and will wait to see the benefits will be.

MCo is concerned that if persistent standing in a seated area is not addressed, it will lead to sanctions. SD is focusing on preventing the migration to the Roker End. If migration is addressed, PS believes many of the other problems will be resolved.

The North Stand had gaps last season, PA asked if the identity of the North Stand could be addressed. Something like this is organic, but SD hopes bigger crowds will fill out these empty seats.

JY is concerned about items being thrown into the North Stand by visiting fans. SD is reluctant to fit netting, but away fans have been moved back from the front seats. More away fans are expected this season.

5 cash-back matches have been identified for next season, CW encouraged local schools, Durham FA and Russell Foster teams to access the offer. PP asked if housing associations could be included in the offer. ML agreed to look into it.

Moving the family zone will not be feasible this season but SD said it may be an option next season. MCo raised concern about groups of adults purchasing tickets in the family zone who are not necessarily behaving in a family friendly way.

Action Point

- SD, maintenance team member & fans' reps to a walk around the Stadium of Light to identify issues and to develop a plan.
- ML, CW & PP to look at the possibility of including Housing Associations in the Cash Back Scheme.

5. EDI Update

SD confirmed Kayleigh Tague joined the club as HR Manager in May and has been making a great impact on business and work streams. She has met with the director responsible for EDI, Igor Levin, and will have further meetings in the next few weeks. The appointment of a head of HR gives greater scope for future development and has affected recent recruitment.



CW confirmed the EFL's EDI Code of Practice is close to completion. The club will be looking to appointing an EDI champion from within the supporter base. DR offered the FSA's assistance through Anwar Uddin. Anwar would be happy to meet up and discuss a plan of action on all matters EDI with the club. Anwar Uddin, the Fans for Diversity Manager, has significant experience in this area. SD accepted the offer. MCo also offered his assistance with this.

6. Review of Actions from 2021/22 Season Meetings

CW confirmed tours of the Academy of Light have started for supporter groups. This began with a tour for the Senior Supporters Association. Approximately 120 supporters watched a first-team training session and met the Head Coach and players afterwards. MB thanked the club on behalf of members. More tours will be held in the future.

Meetings between supporter groups and the club continue regarding proposed changes to the Roker End.

The club have begun reviewing the arrangements for processing branch applications for away tickets. This needs further work with dialogue with the branches required. Currently processing away tickets takes more time in total than all other ticket related activities.

Action Point

- CW, The FSA & MCo to work with the Head of HR to identify and appoint a supporters EDI Champion

7. AOB

PS was disappointed that the Spirit of 37 Wembley display did not happen. Fans were incredibly generous with donations and to repay that trust, there will be 38,000 placards at the Coventry game and a huge new surfer flag. Spirit of 37 aims to improve the matchday atmosphere while promoting Sunderland and the local community. PS encouraged fans to arrive early to the game to be part of it. It will be the only full stadium display this season. The club has offered their social media platforms to promote early arrival, and PS thanked them for this.

PS said Spirit of 37 intends to do special occasional displays through the season. SD asked for plenty of notice so the club could support the efforts of Spirit of 37. MCo thanked SD but is keen to be an independent fans group. All agreed the plans were amazing.

DR shared RAWA plans to commemorate 25 years at the Stadium of Light. Members had been asked to share their favourite moment, the top 5 will be identified and a vote will be run to determine the best moment.

JH raised the introduction of parking charges at the Stadium of Light, particularly regarding Senior Association members, asking if there will be an exempt area for disabled supporters attending meetings. SD confirmed the club were taking part in a consultation exercise, as part of council's strategy.



Supporter Collective Meeting

JB asked if the club had been approached by a fan tokens or cryptocurrency company and what the club's position on this is. The club has been approached by 4-6 companies, but it is not something SD is engaging with at the moment but as the industry progresses, may happen in the future.

DR said the FSA will lobby for appropriate regulation of this industry.

Ashes cannot be scattered on the pitch; JY said the Heaven Branch will be adopting the memorial area. Volunteers will tidy the area. B&Q, the Foundation of Light and former players are involved in a forthcoming project to paint a pebble for your loved one. OC asked JY to email details so the club could support the initiative.

Action Point

- JY to email OC details of the memorial garden