



Supporter Collective Minutes

Thursday 23rd February 2023, Stadium of Light

Attendees

Sunderland AFC:	Steve Davison (SD), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Chris Waters (CW)
Supporter Groups:	
Branch Liaison Council:	Cath Reid (CR) Joanne Youngson (JY), Jim Gilling (JG),
Red & White Army:	Andrew Hird (AH), Dave Rose (DR), Ewan Moffatt (EW), Jane Hughes
Senior Supporters Association:	John Heppell (JH), Michelle Barraclough (MBa)
SAFC Supporters Liaison Group:	Paul Andrew (PA), Miles Cobain (MC), John Bolam (JB), Jeff Smith (JS)
Spirit of 37	Michael Conroy (MCo)

Apologies

Malcolm Bramley

1. Away End Relocation / Supporter Behaviour

SD described the extensive consultation since Christmas, with the ownership, internally, Sunderland Council, the SGSA and a meeting with supporter groups.

The consultation began after missile throwing by away fans at the Stadium of Light had become a developing issue over the past two seasons, culminating in a head injury being sustained by an 8-year-old Sunderland fan when a vape battery was thrown by a visiting fan at our home match against Burnley on 22nd October 2022, and after concerns raised by supporters to the club via the supporters' collective.

The club introduced a process of seizing coins, vapes, and power banks, agreed by the supporters' collective, and the Safety Department has since introduced an enhanced search regime for visiting supporters. Coins, vapes, and power banks are now not permitted in the away end subject to assessment by the Safety Department. All coins seized have been donated to a charity of the visiting club's choice. Vapes and power banks are placed in envelopes with the owner's details, put into a safe, and then returned after the match.

There has been significant positive feedback from away supporters as the process has prompted questions and engagement between visiting supporters and stewards. This tactic has proved to be successful with the only missiles thrown by away fans since it was introduced on 5th November has been 3 boiled sweets and 3 coins.

Permanent netting was re-considered, but the Club still believe the best approach is to eliminate the potential missiles as the first line of defense. The Club researched potential netting, and felt it wasn't necessary given the reduction of missiles since the Burnley game.

The Club is currently researching options in relation to academic research into missile throwing by supporters. The Club has also engaged with the EFL and SGSA to expand such research across football. In response to a question from JY, SD confirmed the club is committed to funding the research, regardless of EFL involvement and believes there are many local academic institutions that could be engaged in the research. DR referenced academic research already in existence that would be useful. SD believes new post-covid research or the collation of existing behavioural research is needed but a starting point is all of the research that has been carried out to date.



SD concluded that there is no perfect option without risk or impact to supporters and that any move of the away supporters would result in at least 2,500 home supporters being displaced. Returning away supporters to their original location was lobbied against by supporter groups and, after further consideration following the development of Sheepfolds and new bridge, this wasn't a viable option. All other moves resulted in significant infrastructure spending and complexities around ingress and egress and that the only remaining option was to leave the away supporters where they were and maintain the enhanced search procedures. The club also proposes to install rail seating in the home and away ends at the end of next season.

Supporter groups identified safety as the most important factor in positioning the away fans at the recent meeting (AH). JH doesn't think most fans realise what is happening in the North Stand. Missile throwing has been reduced because of the new strategy, but moving fans into the lower bowl will not prevent missile throwing (SD).

DR noted the lack of further consultation with fans and EM that many fans were expecting a consultation process and would be disappointed that there has been none. As the fans were not moving, there was no option available for SD to take to the fans. JY noted that no fan consultation was needed as the away fans aren't moving.

PA said that there was not a perfect solution that all fans agree on at the moment but believes that supporters will be pleased to know away fans are staying where they are. SD referred to the extensive research carried out since the supporter group meeting on the subject, recognising that there was no perfect solution.

The club has been placed on FA Report 6 times this season (SD). 3 of these reports have been for missiles thrown at the pitch at the Stadium of Light by home fans, 2 reports related to behaviour by SAFC fans away from home and 1 report related to missiles thrown by Burnley fans at the Stadium of Light. The total number of missiles thrown by home supporters on the above 3 reports is over 15. The most missiles thrown at any one match is 9, thrown at the Fulham FA Cup replay match.

Objects include vapes, coins, plastic bottles, plastic cups, a toy rubber dog, and a bingo dabber.

Objects are mainly thrown from North Stand Lower and South Stand. There are ongoing investigations into offenders from 4 incidents captured on CCTV.

These reports only represent the number of incidents reported by match officials - the actual number of missiles thrown by Sunderland fans at the Stadium of Light is significantly higher. Most recently at the Sunderland v Bristol City match, there were 4 incidents of missile throwing at the pitch by Sunderland fans which were not noted by the match officials, these missiles were thrown from the South Stand and North Stand Lower and included a glass bottle.

The club has been warned by the league about the behaviour of our supporters. Sunderland is not the only club facing such problems. SD raised the issue because it needs to be addressed or the club will face fines and / or restrictions on allocations at home and away games.

CR noted that Northumbria police has identified an increase in racist behaviour at fixtures this season via Kick it Out reports. The club would like to see more bans and criminal charges, as appropriate, following behaviour at matches (SD).

DR asked if the club would be implementing the EFL's Sanctions Guidance Policy. SD agrees with many elements of the policy and that it is a step forward.



MCo commented on a group of people who didn't attend the game, but gathered outside the stadium to taunt away fans, particularly at Fulham. SD confirmed it was an ongoing investigation and CCTV was being shared with the police. JY suggested deploying street marshals. AH suggested an anti-social behaviour dispersal order for the area around the stadium.

Action

- The Club to draft a statement for fans groups to consider around the location of away fans

2. Premier Concourse / Season Tickets 2023/24

SD confirmed certain sections in the premier concourse will be opening next season. Prior to early bird season cards, current season ticket holders, approximately 1800, who previously sat in the premier concourse will be given the option to return. They will have the opportunity to select their seat in the available blocks. These premier concourse blocks will include all price categories.

Remaining season ticket holders will be able to renew at the price for this championship this season. One third of season tickets holders will see no change to the cost of their seat.

There will be changes to pricing areas; a premium price for centre line seats will be reintroduced but this will be accompanied by new concession options for that area. CW confirmed this decision was based on supporter feedback. SD believes this pricing structure offers good value compared to other championship clubs. Next year's season card price was 13th as compared to last year's prices. This will mean the prices are considerably below average prices in the Championship for next season.

JG is concerned that those who bought early bird season tickets last season may be disgruntled about a price increase. SD said these fans have benefitted this season; buying a Championship product at a League One price.

DR noted that supporter groups had not been consulted on pricing. SD agreed but felt the pricing was fair and reasonable and is consistent with the commitment given by Kyril when he joined – to be no more than the average Championship price when playing in the Championship.

SD has been part of the EFL working group on ticketing. There has been an increase in fraudulent use of tickets and identifying fans committing offences across the EFL is becoming an increasing problem. SD believes digital ticketing will be mandatory across premier league and championship soon, including away game tickets. SD wants the club to be an early adopter of digital tickets. The club will be introducing a new entry system which will improve the entry experience for fans. The proposed contract will incorporate all future upgrades including facial recognition. SD acknowledged that this change would present some fans with difficulties. SD advised that ticketing regulations will evolve to reduce fraud and identify those committing bad behaviour. It is likely that within the next few years digital ticketing will be mandatory across PL and possibly the Championship. The club wants to help supporters adapt to this inevitable change and believes this can best be done by becoming an early adopter which allows supporters more time to learn to adapt. The club is introducing a new entry system to facilitate this and will be switching to digital ticket purchases.

Autorenewals will account for 15,000 season ticket holders. They won't need to do anything. Everyone else can purchase digitally, either with a full credit card payment or set up a direct debit. In parallel the club will set up a support centre in the Beacon for anyone without sufficient technology or capability to purchase their season ticket. Supporters can also buy over the phone or face to face, but this will incur a



£10 service charge. SD anticipates a reduction of work for the ticket office, but the nature of the work will change to deal with enquiries and complex problems.

There will be a free 'seat move' period at the end of the early bird purchase window. After that time, a charge will be applied to move seats.

SD confirmed a physical season ticket will still be available if fans are unable to access a digital season ticket. The arrangements for this will be announced nearer the time.

A transfer of a season ticket for an individual match will be possible by emailing the ticket office, a single digital ticket can be issued.

OC confirmed there will be a significant communication to explain all the changes.

The direct debit scheme will be retained and is still provided free of charge to fans by the club. Approximately 250 to 400 direct debits are declined each collection period. These individuals will be emailed to request payment and season cards will be suspended if payment is not received. Season tickets can be reinstated once the debt has been settled.

CR and MB agreed this was an appropriate course of action.

All existing season ticket benefits will be retained, but the club intends to address descriptions, to ensure clarity.

Personal assistant tickets and car park passes will be bought online next season.

EM asked if the Black Cat Point system would be returning to a 3 year collection period as before.

CW confirmed that the plan is to do this. The club are also looking to address the problem of supporters sharing their membership numbers on social media pages. This shouldn't be happening and prevents new supporters and younger fans having the opportunity to buy away tickets and build up their Black Cat Points to attend future away games.

SD advised that tickets and ground regulation terms and conditions were being revised and welcomed input from fan groups.

A discussion was held on preferred customer service methods; face-to-face, email and telephone. As the club moves to more digital ticketing, SD sees the ticket office being more of an enquiry centre than a ticket office.

CR stated all options need to be available as preferences and needs are different for every fan. supporters want to get through to somebody.

DR agreed all need to be available, continuing customer service needs to be easily accessible. PA believes the service level must be good, supporters just want to know they will be helped.

SD thinks it will be a big change for staff to provide an enquiry centre rather than to only sell tickets.

SD proposes to operate a hybrid system of ticket office opening hours and telephone support. At particularly busy times. ticket office opening hours will be extended but conceded that queues will be inevitable at some times.



The customer experience is not particularly good, DR thinks fans accept that at busy times queues will happen but stressed that more investment is required; in resources, on administration and on all service aspects of the club, asking how clubs of a similar size manage their customer service.

These clubs have many of the same issues, SD intends to define what service the club is providing and determine how best to deliver it. SD recognises that the resource load will change as the club moves to digital ticketing. Many issues arise from forgotten and lost season cards. Triaging emails is still a big issue.

DR commented that the feeling is that the club is under resourced in this area and does not think that the workload will be reduced significantly due to the size of the fan base.

SD wants to offer all three service options and changes need to be made to facilitate this.

3. Euro Bid

SD thanked supporters' groups for their support, with the bid to be a host venue for the 2028 Euros, commenting on the excellent BLC video. The FA has extended the deadline and asked for an additional offer which the club has submitted. The club has done all it can and hopes to be successful in its bid.

4. Family zone

CW revealed that the club is looking at potentially relocating the family zone to the premier concourse for the 2024/25 season. This would provide a clean slate to launch a new area for junior supporters and provide the club an opportunity to introduce age restrictions for purchase.

EM wondered if being so far from the pitch would be an issue for children.

The NextGen cashback scheme will be available for the Stoke game and CW will monitor the potential new area at this game and gather feedback from the schools and local clubs on their matchday experience.

PA agreed putting the family zone in the premier concourse was a good opportunity to create a dedicated area, the current family zone is a thoroughfare.

CR would like to see more support to get children into the Beacon on matchdays, Samson and Delilah, visits from injured players. Ongoing restructuring of the club including comms, fan engagement, marketing, ticketing departments is affecting this. OC believes this should be in place for next season.

5. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

DR has previously offered the support of the FSA on this and asked for a meeting with the club specifically on EDI.

The club is audited on EDI, SD's challenge has been to get this fully addressed at all levels and in all ways. Staff have been completing training, but SD is aware that things need to improve, suggesting a meeting with the Head of HR, Kayleigh Tague.

DR commended the club and the player for taking action against the Diallo song. OC confirmed Amad Diallo was happy to do it.

Action

- A meeting with Head of HR to be arranged prior to the next meeting



6. AOB

MB had previously asked for the minutes of the Supporter Collective meetings to be on the club website. CW confirmed that this had been actioned and all minutes were now up to date on www.safc.com/fans

SD said the club was about to announce sustainability plan in line with the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals, particularly Good Health and Well Being, Affordable Clean Energy, Sustainable Cities and Communities & Climate Action. SD already has an agreement from KLD and is awaiting board approval. This strategy makes the club a better business, reduces the club's carbon footprint and allows engagement with local partners. It is a positive long-term plan, working closely with the city, that could incorporate supporters' benefits.

EM offered support of the Red and White Army with this. SD welcomed input from fan groups.

CR highlighted that the walk around the stadium, an action point from August 2022's meeting, has not taken place. Issues exist that are affecting the matchday experience. Fans are not seeing any improvements. CW asked if one rep from each group would be available for a meeting. All groups agreed to provide a representative.

CR raised the issue of disabled access for wheelchair users at Eppleton Colliery Welfare as it is poor. SD has assessed it and structural changes are cost prohibitive. CR suggested using the shelter where St John's ambulance currently sit at an area for disabled supporters.

EM conveyed many fans' disappointment at the late cancellation of the Middlesbrough TIFO display. CW confirmed that Spirit of 37 and the club are in dialogue on this, a follow up meeting has been arranged next week.

EM questioned why Business Club members had not had any events recently. They should have been contacted and SD asked EM to pass names to CW who will contact them.

Action

- The facilities team and a fan representative from each group will complete a walk around the stadium on Thursday 30th March
- Security team and Spirit of 37 to meet to discuss flag displays in the Roker End going forward
- EM to pass Business Club names to CW