

Supporters' Collective meeting
Tuesday 12 March 2024
James Herriot Suite

Attendees	
Sunderland AFC	David Bruce (DB), Steve Davison (SD), Kristjaan Speakman (KS), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Chris Waters (CW)
Branch Liaison Council	Jim Gilling (JG), Cath Reid (CR), Joanne Youngson (JY)
Red & White Army	Michael Conroy (MC), Ian High (IH), Andrew Hird (AH), David Rose (DR)
Senior Supporters' Association	Malcolm Bramley (MB), John Hepple (JH), David Smith (DS)

Meeting minutes

1. REVIEW OF ACTION LOG

- A. This is Wearside:** Creating the action list has been key in aligning supporter feedback with real actions and activities at the Club. DB confirmed SAFC have been talking to the *This is Wearside* flag group about future displays. MC suggested inviting a representative of *This is Wearside* to the next Collective meeting.
- B. Ticketing working group:** The working group has been very helpful. After a positive initial meeting, MC asked about a follow-up meeting. SD confirmed this will reconvene after feedback from the board on ticketing proposals.
- C. LGBTQ+ fan group:** The launch of the LGBTQ+ group *Pride of Wearside* has gone very well. Following the dedicated LGBTQ+ history month matchday, the group gained many new members.
- D. Action log feedback:** AH appreciated the production of an action list and believes it is a good visual summary of the meetings' outcomes. However, he raised concerns that the actions weren't owned by any party and questioned how outcomes will be measured, suggesting more detail was required before the list could be disseminated. They will be an expected part of the minutes (DR). SD suggested a revamp to include SMART targets.
- E. Printed ticket charge:** CR queried the validity of the £5 charged for printing Newcastle tickets, arguing that these fans had been displaced by the Club who did not activate their plastic cards for the replacement seat. Fans had not 'forgotten' their cards as set out in the ticketing terms & conditions and this action could not be considered complete. SAFC said they would further review the application of this charge.
- F. Ticketing operation:** In response to MB, SD confirmed proposals for a fundamental overhaul of ticketing services, including how enquiries are handled, will be presented to the board for review on 14 March. The proposals include a comparison of practices at Clubs of similar size and features other aspects bespoke to SAFC.
- **Post-Board meeting update:** *Proposals for improving all aspects of supporter services including ticketing were presented to the Board on 14 March. The Board welcomed the proposals and were supportive of the intent to deliver a better service, aligned with fan centricity, with clearly established targets for all engagements with supporters. They have questioned some of the specific elements, which require further consideration before the proposals can be approved. We are still on track to make all the changes by the start of next season, some of which will be implemented and felt by fans during the season ticket renewal period.*
- G. Future meetings:** OC confirmed that from the 2024-25 season, collective meetings will be held after Board meetings, not before, to ensure SAFC can communicate from a place of greater clarity. A proposed timeline will be discussed at the next meeting to ensure the process put in place establishes a constructive two-way engagement between the Board and Supporters' Collective that drives continued positive actions. DR welcomed this; it will allow fan groups to

prepare a report to be submitted to Board, with feedback then presented at the Supporters' Collective meeting.

H. Internal investigation: Kyril Louis-Dreyfus provided an update on behalf of the Club's Board of Directors:

- *'Following the conclusion of an internal investigation requested by the Club's Board of Directors, we identified that a serious error in judgement was made in relation to the Black Cats Bar. We now understand how this error in judgement was made and have identified where accountability sits, confirming that the action taken was inexcusable and more importantly preventable. Although employment law prevents us from sharing any information, all staff involved in the matter were interviewed and following the conclusion of a detailed internal enquiry, the appropriate levels of action have now been taken to conclude this process. At the last meeting with supporters' groups, we made a commitment to putting fans at the heart of all that we do. That commitment is unwavering, and as supporters you will soon start to see meaningful change. We understand where we need to improve, and this includes an ongoing requirement to continually develop our people and refine our processes. In the coming months, we are excited about bringing that commitment to life and embracing it throughout all levels of our Club.'*
- JG and JY found it no different from what was said at the previous meeting. The statement offers no reassurance that it won't happen again. JG then asked the groups were we all happy to accept the KLD statement as a closure to the Black Cat Bar issue.
- DR noted the limitations of the statement. The Black Cats Bar was a major error of judgement. This, and the lack of engagement surrounding the decision, has led to deep mistrust of the club which still exists within the fan base. This can only be addressed through action; the statement does not offer much confidence or comfort to fans. The lack of engagement with fans on this issue reflects a lack of resources within the club and affects the ability to get things done in a timely fashion (DR), any additional pressure such as a big cup game over-stretches the club's resources. MC believes the statement could have been stronger. This could impact on season ticket renewals. IH sees it as part of a bigger picture regarding customer service.
- The key issues are why did it happen and what lessons have been learnt (AH).
- MB reiterated the disgraceful decision to use the Black Cats Bar during the Newcastle game. Many fans cannot understand why the Black Cats Bar was handed over to away fans, believing it was for financial reasons and fans find that unpalatable. The benefit of fan consultation at an early stage must be a lesson learnt from this.
- DR acknowledged that KLD is minuted as saying the whole approach to the Newcastle match wasn't for financial reasons (18 January 2024), but logic suggests otherwise and that is what many fans think. It was very disappointing. There must be actions that illustrate improvement in many areas if trust and confidence is to be restored.
- The Club appreciates that a series of actions for improvement will be needed over time to regain trust (SD).
- SAFC will take comments from the meeting back to KLD.

2. FOOTBALL

- A. Overview:** KS provided an in-depth presentation to cover requested topics before taking questions on each section.
- B. Context and information:** KS provided an overview of the Club's football strategy, highlighting the focus on building a team and growing the Club. Areas of improvement were also referenced, as was the significant progress made throughout the past 2.5 seasons.
- C. Intent and progression:** The focus and intent are on progression and naturally when progression is not easily identifiable on the field, decisions will draw criticism.

- Development of the culture, infrastructure, people, and processes at the Academy of Light continues at a fast pace, but KS appreciated it is difficult for fans to feel connected to things they don't continually see.
- The team at the AoL feel some of the external debate around a lack of investment is unfair considering the volume and frequency of improvements across the football operations, including the men's, women's and academy programmes. These improvements are vital to develop sustainable and successful teams and youth programmes.
- KS accepts that making bold, difficult and often complex decisions come with risk, and when the Club is trying to move the dial, setbacks may happen.
- Providing lessons are learnt and the Club is honest in its assessments when things don't to plan, reflecting and improving, this is part of the process in establishing continued success.

D. Head Coach: KS continued by presenting the process to appoint a Head Coach, which has been previously shown to the Supporters' Collective, but has been evolved and refined from previous appointments.

- In response to a question from JY, it was confirmed that Michael Beale was part of the Club's tracking process. Earlier in the season, supporters were looking forward to coming to the game, but JG noticed a change in football style that had affected this.
- KS referenced that this was also recognised within the Club. The intention was to enhance the playing identity and improve results. In a desire to improve, Michael placed a focus on not conceding certain types of goals – this negatively affected the playing style too much.
- In response to a question on the Head Coach appointment process, the Club highlighted the importance of the process, but referenced that it does not guarantee the right outcome.
- It does however ensure an easier review of viable candidates, mitigate risk, and aid the evaluation process, which the club undertakes after each Head Coach appointment.
- DR noted that until the arrival of Michael Beale, managerial appointments had been relatively successful under KLD's ownership and while this appointment was underwhelming and unpopular, many fans were prepared to give Michael Beale the benefit of the doubt despite serious reservations, but the results and performances meant this was short-lived.
- Fans acknowledged the good work that has been done in previous seasons, but the appointment of Michael Beale left fans perplexed. DR believes amendments to the appointment process will be welcomed by fans.
- IH reiterated the stark contrast in approach between Tony Mowbray and Michael Beale, particularly regarding young players, and referenced differences in post-match interviews. KS responded that whilst the Club and Head Coaches can be aligned on a specific topic, each individual is different in their approach when communicating.
- Ultimately, it's the Club's role to ensure communication is as aligned as possible, but we also have to understand the different context and impact that results may have on interviews.
- DR asked if the ownership would back an ambitious appointment of a coach that's in work with another club. JY stated that there is a perception that many things at the Club are being done on the cheap. AH agreed, noting that the appointment of an unemployed manager gives the impression that there is a resourcing issue.
- KS felt there was little correlation to a compensation fee and future success – there are simply too many variables. Opportunities must be viable and sensible, but that does not mean the Club wouldn't source a Head Coach currently in-post at another Club.

- KS sought informal fan feedback in early January to better understand supporters' opinions and referenced that listening to different perspectives is part of improving.
- JG believes the next appointment is crucial. KS agreed but added that all appointments – irrespective of timing – are equally important.
- MB asked if an assistant coach could be appointed beside any potential new Head Coach and KS confirmed a Head Coach would be able to bring in an assistant coach(es), providing it was an appropriate recommendation. He added that the Club are also keen to maintain consistency and continuity across football operations, as like new ideas, input and people, this will aid success.
- DR asked what assurances KS could give fans on the immediate period and the timeline for Head Coach recruitment.
- KS explained that the Club has confidence in the team and the team behind the team. There are players returning over the coming weeks and although it's a difficult moment, we need to be together.
- He referenced the exceptional support at Southampton and believes fans will maintain a positive focus towards the team.
- On the Head Coach search, he added that the Club consciously had a period of reflection after Michael Beale's departure and are now engaging in meetings with prospective Head Coaches. This will flow into formal interviews and a decision.

E. Transfer windows: KS explained the player recruitment process and working practices, detailing the long-term vision, underpinning strategy, Club values, decision-making structure, and key stakeholders.

- The strategy is set by the Club's Ownership Group and Board of Directors, who then appoint a Sporting Director to lead on this area of the Club.
- A Head Coach is then appointed on a very transparent set of principles and as a member of the leadership team, is involved in every of the stage of the player recruitment process.
- The recruitment process was then explained, and focus was placed on where the Head Coach integrates into this process.
- A pre-meeting question relating to the Club's assessment of the previous two transfer windows was covered, with KS responding that context is key for every individual. Not every player is signed to start regularly in the team within the first six months and some adapt and perform at different rates. There are no guarantees with players transitioning and adapting.
- The Club provides support for players, including language classes, to help improve their communication skills and integrate them into the group, and in the case of some players, we must also consider the non-football transition.
- DR said most fans would agree that the team lacks experience in key areas and a tweaking of policy could help the young squad, adding that early in KLD's ownership, more experienced players were signed. AH referenced Alex Pritchard, Danny Batth and Corry Evans.
- KS cited Corry Evans and the re-signing of Luke O'Nien and Patrick Roberts to longer term contracts, adding that senior players in Bradley Dack and Nazariy Rusyn also signed in the summer. Anthony Patterson, Dan Ballard, Dan Neil, Jack Clarke and Adil Aouchiche are also amongst the players to have over 100 senior appearances each, with others beyond or nearing that milestone.
- KS believes supporters want good players regardless of age and the Club wants good players, adding that we are always to trying to find the right balance.
- DR asked about the lack of a proven striker at the Club and stated the current output from strikers has been poor, asking what the Club will do to address this.
- KS stated that last summer the Club identified players to play in the team, who to date have found it difficult to impact the central role with a regularity of goals.

He added that any lack of output has not been through a lack of effort or work on the training field.

- The Club continually review all aspects of performance, including forward play, and they are seeking ways to improve. This includes the central position and other areas of the pitch where goal contributions have also not been as high as anticipated.
- The Club also feel they need to prepare for the future, as they don't believe challenging market conditions will change. As a result, they have invested in some younger profile players like Luis Hemir and Eliezer Mayenda and retained exciting talents in the academy, such as Timur Tutierov and Trey Ogunsuyi.
- KS added that in January, the Club made significant efforts to sign two forwards where the associated fees were considerable. Unfortunately, they were not able to complete these deals for reasons outside of the Club's control, including the individual preferences of the players and their parent Clubs. One of these players was over 30 years of age, which was an area highlighted earlier.
- Insight into some of the research conducted when building a forward line was also provided to add an additional layer of context to this topic.
- MC stated there is a perception that Jack Clarke will leave in the Summer and asked what plan is in place for this should it happens. The Club feel they have one of the best forwards in the league in Jack Clarke and therefore KS understands the speculation. However, the Club is not motivated to sell in any position and feels the contract planning undertaken to date places the Club in a place of strength. The current crop of players love being at the Club.
- MB queried the influence of agents and KS acknowledged they have some influence. The Club maintains a positive dialogue with agents and more importantly, with its players.

3. TICKETING AND HOSPITALITY

A. Stadium structure: As the Club embarks on the season ticket renewal process, SD felt it was important to share details of the introduction of licensed standing areas. Fans groups have supported the principle of the introduction of licensed standing at the Stadium of Light, as did results of the last Red and White Army supporter survey. The Club proposes to introduce an initial phase next season impacting both the home and the away ends. Extensive discussions have been held with Sunderland City Council and SD is confident they will be approved. DB has put together an engagement plan for season ticket holders who will be impacted, particularly if they do not want to stand. Further engagement will be required before the Club decides on any further phases of licensed standing.

- Last season the Club had missiles thrown by the fans of at least three Clubs. SAFC have made two changes since the problems of last season. Firstly, an enhanced search for high-risk games has reduced incidents in 2023-24. Secondly, the Club has commissioned work to look at ways in which it can make changes to improve the behaviour of both home and away fans. This has resulted in numerous minor changes. The impact of both initiatives has seen significant reduction in issues with away supporters. There is no evidence that changing the location of away fans will reduce missiles being thrown, or more generally improve their behaviour. The Club are therefore not changing the location of the away fans and will be installing some rails to improve the safety of the away fans.

B. 2024-25 season tickets: The Club's proposals are being presented to the board for approval, including the pricing, but SD confirmed season tickets will be going on sale later this month (March 2024). The announcement is expected to be sent mid-March.

- DR noted there had been no consultation with fans on pricing. SD acknowledged this, stating that KLD aimed to provide a mid-Championship priced competitive season ticket, but any decision on cost would be made by

the Board. An additional benefits package aims to balance price with value for money and is an important part of the service.

- The Club has taken on board feedback given by fan groups regarding season ticket benefits and there will be a revised benefits pack, including retail discounts at the shop and online, exclusive ST offers and priority event access.
- DR advised the Club that, after no consultation on this matter, there would be a fan backlash if there was any price increase. AH concurred, a price increase in the face of ongoing customer service issues would not be well received.
- Everyone will get a digital season ticket. A non-digital ticket will be available in addition to a digital ticket. Season tickets will be issued far earlier than last season, expected to be early July. DB and SD placed on record the improvements made by Rob Holmes, Ticket Office Manager, to the ticketing experience at the club. SD asked to engage with fan groups regarding the distribution of digital and non-digital tickets to ensure we provide the best possible service.
- MB is aware that non-digital tickets are needed by senior supporters, and other groups of supporters, and requested that communications from the Club be clear on how to get one, with no evidence of eligibility required.
- The Club is retaining a free direct debit scheme option for payment. JG commended the Club for maintaining interest-free instalment payments.

C. Hospitality: DB believes hospitality should be available and accessible to all fans, not just the corporate community.

- A pre-Christmas promotion for tickets to the Montgomery Suite was successful at introducing hospitality to a general fan audience.
- After upgrades to Quinn's Bar and the Montgomery suite, the focus for next season will be on improving service and providing value across all the products on offer. The Club intends to survey fans to canvas a variety of opinions and insights that can frame a future master plan for hospitality.
- JG asked if the Black Cats Bar was going to be replaced by executive boxes. DB confirmed it will not be.

4. FINANCE

A. Publication of annual accounts: The Club's audited accounts will be published at the end of April and will include a detailed commentary of 2022-23 finance.

- DR acknowledged the comments being made about Sunderland being a sustainable Club, and asked if the accounts would reflect this. They will, SD confirmed. Many clubs who have recently published accounts show significant losses, the owners have and continue to cover losses.
- SD is also confident that the Club will have no issues regarding Profit & Sustainability rules but is waiting for official confirmation from EFL, as are all Clubs. Running an effective business will become increasingly important to sustaining a Football Club, added SD.
- DR sought clarification on reports of a multi-million pound loan taken out against the Stadium of Light. SD said any suggestion of a loan is pure speculation. If the Club were to take out a loan against its stadium or training ground, it would also appear on Companies House immediately.
- SD was disappointed with the recent news that the Premier League had failed to agree a proposal for financial redistribution to the EFL, noting that it is going to take much longer to sort out. There is likely to be more stringent financial rules implemented by the Independent Regulator, but the timing of the introduction of the Football Governance Reform Bill is now more uncertain than ever.

B. Investment: Since KLD acquired control, he has continued to invest in the Academy of Light, enhancing the environment to improve player performance, SD. Year one focused on regulatory compliance. Year two on upgrading hospitality areas. This summer, the Club is focusing on the stadium bowl.

- The floodlights, the PA system and the pitch will be replaced, and rails will be installed in licensed standing areas. All these projects, coupled with the replacing of the temporary transformer, will be implemented ahead of the new season.
- DR, JY & CR all raised continued issues with leaks in the roof, the cleanliness and working order of concourse toilets, training of staff in concession stands and turnstile stewards.
- MB relayed reports of poor customer service affecting the ordinary fan's matchday experience, covering ticket entry, food choices, inconsistent management of standing in seated areas, and sitting in allocated seating.
- DR asked if these would be addressed as part of the stadium bowl investment plan.
- The Club is creating priorities for the Stadium of Light, which may differ from the priorities of others. After a long period of no or little investment, there is still a lot to do, and it will take time. SD confirmed there are finite resources to cover all on and off the pitch expenditure.
- DR believes the fundamentals must be addressed and urged senior staff to experience the stadium as the average fan does and asked what the Club plans to do about these issues.
- SAFC will host an annual stadium walk around in April with members of the Supporter Collective. This will highlight any improvements needed as part of the on-going summer improvement plan.

5. FAN ENGAGEMENT

- A. End of Season Awards:** The Club's End of Season Awards will be a celebration of the men's, women's, and academy teams. DB believes it will be a fantastic evening to celebrate all that is SAFC and urged fans to attend. JG commented that this was a corporate event and not affordable for most fans.
 - CW confirmed that the long-standing BLC Player of the Year Awards will be held in Quinn's Sports Bar at the end of April for branch members. JG reported confusion among fans, who thought that the BLC event had been replaced.
- B. Website:** DB announced a radical update of the website, with improved ability to access news and information on key personnel, on an advanced platform.
 - SAFC will engage with fan groups to understand their requirements when planning the new site.
- C. Open training:** CW confirmed an open training session will take place on Wednesday 3 April. Tickets will be £5 per adult, with children admitted free with an accompanying adult.
- D. Pre-season tour:** The pre-season tour to Spain has been announced, with an official travel and accommodation package also available for the first time.
 - DS raised concerns about significant price increases that fans were seeing; an increase of £200 per person, in the space of 2 hours.
- E. Technical kit partner:** This will be announced in April, with new home kits available in late June.
- F. Next meeting:** This will be held on 9 May 2024.