



Sunderland AFC Supporters' Collective meeting: May 2024

Attendees

Sunderland AFC	David Bruce (DB), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Robert Holmes (RH), Chris Waters (CW)
Branch Liaison Council	Jim Gilling (JG), Phil Pollard (PP), Peter Oliver (PO), Cath Reid (CR)
Red and White Army	Andrew Hird (AH), Michael Conroy (MC), Ewan Moffatt (EM), David Rose (DR)
Senior Supporters' Association	Dave Smith (DS), Michelle Barraclough (MB), Lynn Glendenning (LG)

Minutes

1. Introduction

Apologies: Apologies were received from Steve Davison due to illness and from Kristjaan Speakman, who was out of the country on work affairs. The Supporters' Collective highlighted the importance and level of questions received from fans relating to SAFC's football operation and the Club also recognised this, updating that a talk-in with KS and the new Head Coach has been scheduled to take place in Quinn's Sports Bar during pre-season. This ticketed event will be open to all supporters and provide an open forum for fans to discuss on-pitch matters.

Action log: Supporter Liaison Officer Chris Waters (CW) provided an overview of the updated action log, which will be published alongside the meeting minutes.

2. Finance & Governance (DB)

Annual accounts: In response to a question submitted by the Red and White Army concerning the recently published accounts for 2022-23, Chief Business Officer David Bruce (DB) acknowledged that most Clubs operate on a loss basis. The EFL Profit & Sustainability rules mean a Club can lose £39 million over a three-year rolling period and based on the latest published accounts and the forecast for 2023-24, the Club is well within this limit. This is a real positive when ensuring the Club is run responsibly and sustainably. Until the end of last financial year, the owners had funded the Club to a total of £18m and last year funded £5.5m.

SX Global: In response to a question submitted by the Red and White Army, DB confirmed KLD & JS bought SX Global last year and was not able to comment further. Some staff were invited to attend an event and give feedback. In January, SX Global was registered in Black Cat House. There are no permanent employees based there and no Sunderland AFC staff time is directed to SX Global.

Ownership: KLD reiterated his commitment to SAFC at January's meeting. DR conveyed that many fans do not necessarily feel that commitment. DB stated that KLD is 100% committed and he believes that recent developments relating to the Club's stadium and retail operation provide evidence of this.



Organisational structure: Considering the imminent departure of SD and changes recently announced to DB's role, DR asked again for an organogram to be put on the website. DB reiterated that the Club is committed to providing an overview of the organisation and a version will be available at the next meeting,

3. Ticketing

Servicing: Ticket Office Manager Robert Holmes (RH) confirmed telephone responses had temporarily been outsourced and the Club receives updates daily. 1,400 calls were handled in the last three weeks and 400 enquiries were passed on to the Club. 250-300 emails are handled daily by ticket office staff.

Seat moves: Seat moves can now be managed online. RH is aware that the system does not currently allow season ticket holders to move people in their network, only people who purchased tickets together in the same transaction. 1,200 fans successfully moved their own seat in 24 hours without having to go to the ticket office. This is up from zero last year and shows the messaging and system has plenty of upside.

- Some parents are unable to move their child's seat, EM asked what they should do. Under-14s cannot be moved online and they should visit the ticket office. RH is working with the provider to allow people to move people in their network. The intention is to expand the self-service opportunities for fans.

Direct debit payments: If direct debits have not been taken, but should have been, CR asked what their options were and sought confirmation that those affected by non-payment or collection would be given the opportunity to pay missed payments and to pay the remaining three payments by direct debit. RH confirmed this would be possible.

- CR advised the BLC had been approached by a number of supporters who are on auto renewal scheme but have been advised that their seat is no longer available as they had not renewed their season card. CR agreed to provide RH with details of supporters affected.
- The ticket office is issuing a bank update and an SAFC email confirming how payment can be made. RH reassured fans that everyone who has received a bank mandate has their season ticket protected. RH offered to look at individual cases and reiterated that no seats have been cancelled.

Ongoing sales: The season ticket purchase window is still open, and DB is proud of the number of season ticket holders renewing, particularly after a disappointing season.

- JG asked about the number of season cards sold to date. DB replied about 1,000 less than this time last season.
- EM queried some young fans being charged an adult price when they should have qualified for an under-22 season ticket. RH confirmed that anyone 21 or under on 1 August 2024 will qualify for an under-22 season ticket. Anyone who has been overcharged should contact the ticket office to be refunded.
- MC questioned the confirmation for fans automatically renewing their season card, leaving some unsure if renewal occurred and suggested sending an email.

Servicing improvements: RH confirmed the Club is to implement Zendesk ahead of the new season. It will be a comprehensive area for fans to ask the club about a range of topics, including ticket purchases and



events. This resource will be updated regularly to support fans and will be the first port of call for queries and an important initial step for fans seeking assistance. It will put trending searches at the top, which will be intuitively changed in response to demand.

- A live chat option will also be available and resourced appropriately. Fans can log issues and will be given a case number for continuity of support and accountability. This contact flow will ensure queries are answered in a more timely and accurate fashion. The goal is for fans to be able to self-serve before they need to call or visit the ticket office.
- DR agreed it sounded like an excellent improvement in terms of efficiency and improved support for fans, freeing up staff resources for fans who need more assistance or have difficulty accessing online services.
- EM stressed it was important to emphasise that Zendesk would be a portal that would connect to a member of Sunderland AFC's staff. RH agreed. Initially, the interaction will be with a chatbot, but fans will be added to a queue to be served by staff.
- LG concurred that communication will be key when this is launched, and that clear communication must be sustained afterwards.
- Zendesk, the forthcoming website and new online store must be launched effectively. DB wants fans to know that these products and services are available, adding the communication needs to be appropriate to show that support is available.

Non-digital season tickets: RH has received a reasonable number of non-digital season ticket requests, approximately 2,000, and has already spoken to the Senior Supporters' Association and the Red and White Army about handling these requests. Anyone who has requested a non-digital season ticket will be contacted by the ticket office and asked five questions to help identify the support they need. Calls will begin on the w/c 13 May. Most will be sent an SAFC branded, NFC season card before the season starts.

- EM asked if a charge would be made for non-digital season tickets. RH confirmed there would be no charge for a physical ticket.
- EM pointed out some NFC tickets which worked initially, didn't work throughout the season. The code had to be shown to gain entry. Generally, this is device related, but RH confirmed all digital tickets will be reset. If anyone struggles to use the NFC ticket, there will be a download option. There will be articles, videos and help available via Zendesk. DR added it appeared much more thought out than last year.
- In response to a question from EM, RH advised that anyone who missed the request deadline for a physical season ticket to contact the ticket office. Lost tickets will get a print at home option. Tickets can only be downloaded once. There will be extra support on turnstiles for the first home game of the season (RH).

Ticket sharing: Ticket-forwarding and transfer will be made easier, and RH is looking at a print at home/downloadable version as well.



Season ticket delivery: Digital season tickets will be sent out from mid-July, approximately w/c 16 July, one month before season starts. All physical cards will be sent via post, and nobody will have to collect them from the ticket office.

Digital support: There will be digital help provided by the Club. RH intends to run three workshops at Quinn's Sports Bar for fans to drop into during the summer. Help will be provided on a range of topics, including how to download their season ticket to a phone, how to forward a ticket and how to print at home.

Working group: MC thanked RH for the effort to improve this and acknowledged RH's inclusion of the work of the ticketing working group on this. RH confirmed the working group will continue, with the next meeting to be scheduled in mid-June/July. RH intends to have a published ticketing policy, which will be a joint piece of work with fan groups.

Ticket office relocation: RH outlined the ticket office's relocation to the north-east corner of the Stadium of Light. There will be eight windows. The intention is to give a better matchday experience. There will be troubleshooters in the queue to improve experience and reduce waiting time. The ticket office has been temporarily relocated in the club shop this summer.

- CR asked if a health & safety assessment has been carried out and agreed by the Safety Advisory Group (SAG) for queuing in the area. She cited concerns that the ticket office queue, particularly when fans who have issues with tickets are sent back to the ticket office, would be between queues for turnstiles 35/36 and 37/38. RH confirmed a full health and safety assessment has been done.
- Improved communication via email and via Zendesk should offset many of these issues. There will be an extensive testing period and extra resources deployed for the first match of the season (RH).
- AH queried the presence of physical barriers in the North-East corner to differentiate ticket office and entry queues. RH confirmed these will be in place.

Panel eight bricks: This new ticket location means brick holders in panel eight will have their bricks placed in a new location.

- A series of communications have been put out to identify as many fans as possible and to get updated addresses and emails. These ran across website and social media, PA announcements at the Sheffield Wednesday game and via physical signage on panel eight. DB acknowledged that this is a pain point for fans and the Club will be looking to work with all fans affected.
- The club will soon send all buyers of the bricks a physical note and an email if a matching record exists. This will include all relevant information about the move and what to expect. Two locations are being assessed. The Club is looking to expedite the delivery of the bricks and have them in place for the start of the season.



- Given the inconvenience of this move, the Club will have initiatives in place to help fans who have been part of this change. These will be communicated once contact has been made with all brick holders.
- MC recalls a 'find your brick' feature that used to be on the website and suggested this would be a good feature to reinstate.
- DS asked if fans could keep the original brick when it was removed from panel eight. DB agreed that, if possible, yes, they could, but was not able to confirm it was an option.

4. Retail Update (DB)

Hummel: The partnership announcements with Hummel and Fanatics have been well received (DB). SAFC is one of Hummel's primary global partners and this will ensure the Club is provided with bespoke/custom products for fans.

Fanatics: Supporters can expect high levels of standards and service from Fanatics. The store is to move to Black Cat House, a much better facility for retail. The space is being cleared and there will be significant investment in the refurbishment. There will be a new online store, which is underpinned by Fanatics eight-figure yearly investment. The Club will benefit from testing and performance information from Fanatics' broader network of properties. For example, if something works on the NFL site, it will find its way to the SAFC store almost instantaneously.

- MB asked if the current retail staff would be retained. DB confirmed the staff will TUPE across.
- PP stated that the detail provided regarding the Hummel and Fanatics contracts sounded positive and that it should allow for better levels of supply and service in future, but also questioned how much risk was attached in entering such lengthy contracts. DB confirmed it is five years for Hummel and 10 years for Fanatics. The Club are pleased to commit to this and provide high quality product and service for fans. There are a number of performance measure built into contracts that would allow for an exit from the contracts if they were not performing.

Former stadium store: In response to a question from EM relating to the future of the former stadium store, DB stated that the Club is exploring creating an entry level hospitality space in this location.

2024-25 kits: The home kit collection is due for release at the end of June; the away kit at the end of July and the third kit at the end of August.

- PP raised feedback from fans regarding sizing in relation to the recent Hummel retro releases in that it was inconsistent with traditional sizing and asked if a more detailed size guide could be provided for any future releases. A size guide will be provided, and DB is aware that there is a size differential between current and retro kits.
- EM asked if future releases could be earlier, in time for Father's Day 2025 for example, and if Club merchandise would be available to purchase in town. DB is addressing this. The goal is to have it



available as early as possible but there are factors to consider. Pop-up shops will be appearing in the stadium, and these could be moved around to other locations. Online, Fanatics can cope with exceptional digital demand which should make merchandise available without levels of fan frustrations. In response to a question from EM, DB confirmed the club intends to have a Click & Collect option available for online purchases.

Front of shirt sponsor: AH asked if it would be possible to buy a Sunderland shirt without a gambling logo on it. DB has listened to fan concerns on this and is working on it.

5. Fan engagement

Stadium walkthrough: Referring to the recent stadium walkthrough, DB thanked groups for providing specific issues from fans which identified many pain points, toilets, steps, locks, holes in the roof etc.

- Chris Ferguson, Head of Facilities, is proud of the stadium and keen to address concerns. DB is looking at a way to flag issues when found, so they can be logged more appropriately. MC suggested using an app to log issues.
- There will be a new reporting app next season that will enable fans to anonymously and immediately report in-stadium concerns relating to fan behaviour and safety. OC believes the technology could be expanded to include stadium issues.
- CR asked about the locks on the west stands toilets, which had previously been reported as a safeguarding issue. DB will review this as a priority.
- AH welcomed Leo Pearlman's recent post on social media. DB wants to work with fan groups to develop Sunderland's identity on the approach to the stadium and the surrounding area. MC noted that pennants used to hang from the lampposts surrounding the Stadium, but these have gone.
- The Red and White Army and the Spirit of '37 have tried to improve the atmosphere and look of the stadium, but without Club support it didn't get great traction (AH). The Club and the fans must work together.
- The newly launched This Is Wearside Flag group would like to do more displays next season at men's, women's and academy matches (DB).

Stadium developments: There will be considerable capital expenditure on the stadium this offseason (DB)

- New floodlights will be installed that can create light shows and be synchronised to music to improve the atmosphere.
- A new PA system will be installed. The Club is working with a global brand. It will be a state-of-the-art sound system that can also contribute to improving the atmosphere.
- Safe standing will be introduced in the Roker End and the North Stand Upper.
- A state-of-art stitch-pitch will be installed.
- 5G will also be available in the future, with this project ongoing.



New pitch and memorial garden: The Club is working with fans who have family members whose ashes have been laid on the pitch.

- Families will be invited to have a moment at the pitch and to mark the spot where loved ones are laid. Soil will be extracted and held before being given a permanent place in the expanded memorial garden.
- CR requested that the Heaven branch and affected families be involved in the expansion of the memorial garden. The Heaven Branch has ideas and plans they can share on this issue. CR asked if the Club would be using the plans discussed with the Heaven Branch, which included the building of a new memorial wall.

2023-24 matchday experience: The Club has had a number of success stories from the stadium operation this season.

- Enhanced searches and CCTV has seen a 70% reduction in pyrotechnic use by away fans. The Club has worked with a local professor to research fan behaviour and use insights for matchday management.
- There is a new sanctioning policy that is based on a restorative approach to club sanctions in circumstances where there has been a breach of the ground regulations.
- The Club has operated a zero-agency matchday service since February in the concourse facilities, which will ultimately improve service over time
- The concourse and executive catering department recently received a 5-star hygiene review.
- Three click and collect kiosks have been launched on the concourse, with more to come.
- Five new food options will be provided on the concourse, moving away from traditional options.
- There will also be a trial kiosk in the south stand, offering guest menu options each month.

Website and app: A new website and mobile application will be launched this summer (OC). In addition to the Zendesk support platform and an improved online store experience, this will provide fans with a deeper level of content and an improved user experience.

6. 2024/25 season

Pre-season fixtures: The Club's pre-season opponents will be confirmed shortly. They are expected to be announced following the conclusion of the European domestic season. EM asked if the venues were known. DB confirmed they are not known yet. OC added that the Club's domestic pre-season fixtures will be announced very soon (OC).

Roadshow talk-ins: Plans for the roadshows across the region continue and will be rolled out next season.



New broadcast deal: LG asked about the impact of the new EFL broadcast deal on the Club. OC believes the new deal is good for the Club, with the value of the EFL's total deal standing at near £1 billion.

- OC expects more details to be announced in the coming weeks but confirmed domestic streaming (UK and Ireland) by Clubs would no longer be permitted from 2024-25.
- DR confirmed that the EFL has committed to longer lead-in times for televised games, which is good news for match going fans.
- DB is aware that improved TV coverage makes it more important that the in-stadium experience is unique and unmissable. The Club has a well thought out strategy to improve things and the forthcoming changes will demonstrate the Club's commitment to improving the supporter experience.

7. AOB

Employee behaviour: EM raised concerns about a social media video which alleged an employee expressed support for Newcastle United to representatives of the visiting Club prior to a home game. This follows reports of similar comments made by other employees towards Sunderland fans at previous games. DB requested video and will speak to the security and safety team. DB reiterated that fans will be able to report any unprofessional or inappropriate comments to the Club next season.

Black Cats Bar: CR reported continued unrest amongst some fans regarding this incident. Whilst acknowledging individuals or their job role should not be disclosed, fans wanted to know how and why it happened. Was it down to lack of staff or staff working long hours? Some fans want to know why it happened (PP). DB referred to the statement made at the previous meeting. CR advised that, while aware the Club has recorded this as closed, it is something fans still want an answer to and an assurance that this would not happen again. AH suggested a clarification from the Club for a plan if a similar situation was to happen in the future would be useful.

Future meetings: A revised structure for confirming meeting dates will be in place from the 2024-25 season. Agenda points will be sent prior to each board meeting, with the collective meetings taking once week later. This will enable the Club to communicate at meetings with greater clarity.