



## Supporters' Collective meeting

### Sunderland AFC Supporters' Collective Meeting: 10 October 2024

#### Attendees

<b>Sunderland AFC</b>	David Bruce (DB), Paul Kingsmore (PK) Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Chris Waters (CW), Steve Wood (SW)
<b>Branch Liaison Council</b>	Jim Gilling (JG), Cath Reid (CR), Joanne Youngson (JY) Peter Oliver (PO)
<b>Red &amp; White Army</b>	Andrew Hird (AH), David Rose (DR), Jane Hughes (JHu)
<b>Senior Supporters' Association</b>	Malcolm Bramley (MB), John Heppell (JH)

#### Minutes

##### 1. Introduction

**New Club attendees:** Paul Kingsmore and Steve Wood attended the meeting as Club representatives for the first time and both received a warm welcome.

**Paul Kingsmore:** SAFC's new Chief Operating Officer provided a brief background of his experience. PK worked in public service and higher education before spending five years at Chelsea Football Club as Director of Operations. At SAFC, he oversees facilities, safety and security, ticketing, and HR and safeguarding, and he also has overall responsibility for all matchday operations.

**Steve Wood:** Recently appointed Head of Safety, Steve Wood provided an insight into his career, having previously worked for the National Coal Board and as a Police Officer. He started working at the Club as a steward before taking on the position of Deputy Safety Officer and now Head of Safety.

##### 2. Review of action log

**Additional updates:** CW provided an updated action log and opened the floor for fan representatives to raise any additional points. JG asked about the priority of the planned roadshows, raising that supporter/Club interaction is a high priority for fans. CW encouraged the groups to collaborate with the Club on this and this process will continue outside of the meeting.

##### 3. Summer and early-season progress update

**Stadium of Light:** DB thanked everyone in and outside of the room for the input and support provided to help improve facilities at the Stadium of Light, acknowledging the tremendous work Chris Ferguson, Head of Facilities and his team have undertaken across all major summer projects.

- DB also references the suggestions made by the Supporters' Collective at the last meeting-regarding the new ticket office location and design, which resulted in a redesign of the space.
- DB added that Kyril Louis-Dreyfus and the ownership group have invested heavily to improve fan experience, referencing that this summer's work was the most in 20 years.
- DB concluded that 5G test events will be held towards the end of this year or the beginning of next to improve connectivity at the Stadium of Light.

**Food and beverages:** DB explained that the Club has agreed a new and improved partnership with Molson Coors. He complemented their range of brands and committing to delivering the best possible experience for fans.

- DB reported that the introduction of the exclusive Vaux Roker Roar beer has been a success, outselling the previous beer by five to one.
- DB added there has also been a positive uptake of the six new food options introduced this season and the additional click-and-collect services now in place. The aesthetics of some of the concourse bars have been also updated.



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**Sustainability:** Ready Eco, the Club's new sustainability platform, launched recently. The many initiatives highlighted include new biodegradable cups, Hummel kits made from recycled plastics, and a new stadium waste management solution. Being a sustainable club is important and DB is keen to share these initiatives with the fans.

**Partnerships:** The commercial team has worked hard to increase the number of regional business partners working with the Club. DB added that engaging with local businesses and the community is integral to SAFC's strategy.

**SAFC Women:** DB congratulated supporters for breaking the Barclays Women's Championship attendance record, with over 15,000 fans at the Wear-Tyne derby fixture. The match was an excellent showcase for the women's team and DB confirmed there will be three more women's team games at the Stadium of Light this season.

**Servicing:** JG remarked on the positive feedback received regarding the new help area of the website. DR also noted fans have noticed the improvements the Club is making and that the Club was listening to the fans. MB concurred, acknowledging the progress is being made off the field and this has also been helped by good on-field performances.

### 4. Retail

**Product accessibility:** DB acknowledged there have been some challenges with product availability to date but he believes this will be resolved. The contract and complete range of product design and production was conceived in less than a year, which is largely unheard of in professional sports. The Club and its retail partners are also learning all the time. DB is keen to offer a range of products for all groups within the fanbase.

- DB expressed that the Club is anticipating a busy period leading up to Christmas and that the retail team is working hard to ensure there is sufficient availability for all products.
- DB also acknowledged the support of Spreadex in agreeing to some unsponsored kit being made available in the Club store after requests were made by fans to wear product without a betting brand. There are only two other clubs in the country that offer this to supporters.–

**Counterfeit Merchandise:** DB highlighted the issue of fans purchasing counterfeit product. The Club referenced examples of mascots, ball people and matchday photography all being affected by fans in the offending product.

- DB added the Club has worked hard to maintain competitively priced official kits and is keen to look at how to combat counterfeit merchandise given its links to organised crime. Fans buying these kits have an inferior product and it results in no revenue flowing back to the Club for investment on and off the pitch.
- CR commented on the length of time some fans had to wait for the new shirt, leading some to find unofficial suppliers. Having to pay for online returns also discourages some fans from online purchases. CR suggested making next season's new kits available for pre-season.

**2025-26 feedback for Hummel & Fanatics:** DB reported a period of unprecedented early success. Sales for this season are significantly higher than previous campaigns, and before a ball was kicked already broke last season's numbers. The product offer and range, which is custom to SAFC, has been key to this success.

- DB notes that we are now viewed as a priority partner for both brands and he also referenced how important it was for Kyril Louis Dreyfus to attend the kit launches. KLD viewed this as an opportunity to connect with fans and show his appreciation.
- Local and worldwide sales have been outstanding, and DB sees this as a reflection of the amazing fan base.
- DB also recognised Hummel's ability to respond to Fanatics' request for ordering more stock, something that would have not been possible in previous seasons.
- DB would like any fans with feedback regarding retail to contact the club via the [AskSAFC\\_contact](#) page.
- JY believes the success of the new range reflects how much heritage and history mean to the fans. DR agreed, noting how fashionable retro ranges are. DB agreed it is important to tell the story of the city and he was pleased the range had appealed to all fan demographics.



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- While noting that the mini-kit pricing was reasonable, AH highlighted that the price of child sizes particularly with printing, can become expensive, querying if some pricing concession or additional incentive be introduced to encourage purchase.
- In response to JG's question about season ticket holder discounts, DB confirmed offers will continue to be available during the season for season ticket holders.
- DB underscored the importance of this area. Any fan who is willing to pay money for product and then proudly wears our brand deserves high levels of service and a superior product.

### 5. Ticketing

**Experience & Servicing:** The new ticket office is now open and PK believes the new location is much more accessible, adding that the feedback from fans has been positive. Work is still being done to improve ticketing services and the Club is looking to recruit both permanent and temporary staff. The restructuring will also ensure the processes adopted are more fan focused.

- DB knows developing a customer service ethos is important and appointing a new Ticket Office Manager who is motivated to deliver best-in-class service is key to how the Club will change the sentiment around the ticketing experience.
- DR agreed that a customer-focused Ticket Office Manager is good but stressed there are nuanced aspects to the job that are football-specific.
- PK added that the Ask SAFC helpdesk has been successful but there are still improvements to be made. Response time is generally less than 36 hours for those users who select 'ticket' as the line of enquiry.
- DR and CR noted that many fans are still encountering issues contacting the ticket office or getting a response to queries. DR added that even tech-savvy fans have unusual requests which need a human solution.
- Last week, MB once again rang 30 EFL Clubs. 29 answered the phone and he was able to speak to someone in the ticket office. Only at SAFC was this not possible, noting the Club had promised improvements before without any marked change.
- PK acknowledged this and committed to improving the phone service. Once more staff have been recruited, more time will be allocated to answering phones, which remains a preferred contact method for some fans. This was added to the action log.

**Away Ticketing:** After a brief discussion on the issues relating to away ticket allocation, including the introduction of a ballot, it was agreed to table this item until 7 November when more time will be given at the Ticketing Working Group meeting.

**Ticketmaster:** The current existing partnership with Ticketmaster ends in 2025 and PK will be considering all options for the Club from the 2025-26 season.

**Non-digital alternatives:** The Club is happy to provide non-digital tickets for fans who need them but intends to review procedures for other fans who may request non-digital tickets out of preference.

**Engagement:** MB emphasised the need for the Club to discuss with fan groups, in advance, planned changes to policy and practice. DB acknowledged the importance of consultation with fans, which is reflected in the Fan Engagement Plan.

### 6. Fan experience and engagement

**Themed weeks:** DB referred to the recent launch of Founders' Week and Heroes' Week. Founders' Week celebrates the history and the heritage of the Club. Heroes' Week will celebrate Sunderland's special relationship with the armed forces and other service people. These new initiatives are designed to drive fan connection and engagement, commercial opportunities, and breakthrough media moments.

- The Club intends to have a range of dedicated matchdays during the 2024-25 season and beyond. CW thanked fans and groups for their continued support in bringing these matchdays to life.
- CW will work with JY and the Heaven Branch ahead of the Sheffield United memorial game.



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- JY and CR thanked the Club for confirming the date of International Fans' Day (Swansea City, 4 April 2025) so early, as this allows fans from around the world to plan.
- DB added that the Club is also looking to introduce a third themed week that celebrates the makers and creators, past and present, within the region.

**Stadium Experience:** The Stadium of Light is now home to brand new state-of-the-art PA and floodlighting systems. DB explained how these investments have enabled the Club to enhance the matchday experience, including the pre-match show.

- DB added the goal is to build the noise in the stadium so that the players have an advantage when the game kicks off.
- The Club have also introduced a new call to arms, a lighthouse visual and foghorn sound, that indicates to fans that the players are in the tunnel ready to enter the field of play.

**Safe standing:** SW is pleased with all aspects of the introduction of safe standing. As a high-profile Club, SGSA, EFL, and FA inspectors have already visited the stadium. The investment in rail seating has reduced migration, which is very positive. Fans in surrounding blocks will now be consulted on their views moving forward regarding the installation of additional safe-standing areas.

- CR agreed safe standing has improved the matchday experience, although the barriers do slightly reduce the space when passing through rows.
- The FSA campaigned for 20 years for safe standing and DR welcomed its introduction.

**Early leavers:** DB raised the issue of fans leaving early, noting that when national media talk about it, it hurts the Club and it is something we should all be working to address. Fans leaving takes energy from the stadium and it is likely the team feel the impact of this. DR concluded that there is no one reason for people leaving early, but it does appear that the habit of leaving early is developing.

- The Red and White Army will survey members and the wider fan base on this by January 2025 and the Club will support this action.

**This is Wearside:** DB placed on record that the new flag group has been a pleasure to work with and have exciting plans for future displays. The visual look that their work brings to the stadium is another factor in the game experience having a unique SAFC edge.

**Fan behaviour:** SW has been working with Dr A. Lowerson, who has helped introduce the EFL sanctions policy. Overall, SAFC fans have been very well-behaved this season, home and away. The police have had very few ejections. SW commended fans for their behaviour.

- CR confirmed that the Dedicated Football Officer for SAFC has seen Clubs deploying less police at stadiums when Sunderland fans are visiting. MB acknowledged this as a positive reflection of Sunderland fans.

**New hospitality experience:** DB noted it is important to grow commercial revenues and one way to deliver this is to expand the premium/hospitality offering. Delivering a wider product offer to fans in this space is a key driver. The old Club store will become a new entry-level premium space.

**Pre-season review:** DB recognised that fans are passionate about attending pre-season fixtures, so aims to consider the technical needs of the team as well as the travelling requirements of the fans in the planning of next season's pre-season preparations. The Club is proud that so many fans want to travel to pre-season and support the team.

- JY & CR shared some issues fans experienced during this summer's trip. CR thanked SW for assisting fans with issues and encouraged fan consultation in preparation for summer 2025.



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**Memorial garden:** CW updated that 105 families of fans whose ashes were laid at the pitch marked their loved one's ashes before the new pitch was laid (CW). These are being safely stored before being re-interred in the new memorial garden.

- CW thanked JY and the Heaven branch for helping to create a permanent area for fans to visit and reflect. Families will be invited to attend the area privately before the garden is opened to the public.
- JY shared the appreciation of the Heaven Branch members and bereaved families that the Club had listened to them and their wishes for an extended memorial area. It will look amazing, acknowledging the two years of work that has gone into this process.

**Panel eight bricks:** 70% of fans with bricks on panel eight have been contacted. CW urged fans to reach out if they had not already done so if their brick was in panel eight, which will be relocated in the West Stand. The text and brick order will be replicated exactly. Some fans have visited the position of the new panel, and the bricks have been ordered.

**Fan Panel:** DB is looking to set up a digital forum to obtain rapid fan feedback. More details will be made available in due course. The Club see this as an important way of engaging with fans between meetings with the Supporters' Collective.

**Fan Engagement Plan (FEP):** While a commitment to fan engagement has recently become a strengthened EFL requirement, regardless, DB confirmed it is the core Club priority, the Club wants to make fans central to everything it does, and the business strategy reflects this new ethos.

- The club is ready to promote the FEP to the wider fanbase and is working with the FSA to confirm the process to elect additional independent fan representatives to the Supporters Collective.
- DR commented that the FSA have seen many of these plans and Sunderland's is one of the very best they have reviewed.

### 7. AOB

**Next meeting:** A date for the next Supporters' Collective meeting was set. This will take place in December.

**Working groups:** Dedicated working groups will meet throughout November to discuss stadium experience, ticketing, and the engagement of younger supporters.