



Newcastle United Fans Forum Minutes

Wednesday 25 April 2018
Magpie Club
St. James' Park

Club representatives

Lee CHARNLEY	Managing Director
Nicole ATKIN	Head of Business Development
Kate BRADLEY	Head of Foundation
Lee MARSHALL	Head of Marketing Comms (chair)
Eddie RUTHERFORD	Head of Facilities
Steve STOREY	Head of Safety and Security
Stephen TICKLE	Ticket Operations Manager

Supporters

Gareth BEARD	NUDSA
Steve COLE	Supporters Clubs
Craig ENGLISH	Corporate representative
Peter FANNING	NUST
Steve HASTIE	NUFC Fans United
Jon LANE	Members' representative
Phil LEE	East Stand representative
Jill MORRIS	Long-distance supporters
Lynne PARMLEY	NUDSA
Bryn TENNANT	Young persons' representative
Steve WALLWORK	Away fans' representative
Kris WOODS	Gallowgate End representative

Apologies

Mark BETHAM	Equality representative
Alan CLARK	Over-65s representative
Sharon RAVENHALL	Women's representative
Daniel THOMPSON	Milburn Stand representative
Martin TYRRELL	Leazes Stand representative
Wendy TAYLOR	Head of Media

I. Introduction

Lee Marshall (LM) welcomed attendees and outlined meeting protocol. The club would aim to produce detailed minutes before sharing them with the group in advance to capture any feedback and amends.

The club apologised for delays in the regularity of Fans Forum meetings.

Phil Lee (PL) was concerned that the club could be seen as not being committed to the Fans Forum process.

The club accepted that view but hoped that supporters who had been involved with the process since 2013 would acknowledge how committed the club has been to communicating openly as part of the Forum.

Steve Hastie (SH) stated that Arsenal run Fans Forums on matchdays and enquired as to whether this would be possible.

The club advised that several members of the management team would be operational on matchdays and that this would negatively impact the time and attention that could be given to meetings.

Peter Fanning (PF) suggested committing to dates for future meetings would send out a positive message about the club's commitment to the Fans Forum.

The club agreed and has proposed the following dates for future Fans Forums: Tuesday 28th August 2018; Tuesday 12th February 2019; Tuesday 21st May 2019. The club will also invite members to a Premier League game as a group in November 2018.

2. Agenda items

The club received a number of questions from supporters in advance of the meeting and the subject areas were added to the agenda accordingly.

Ticketing update

The club held a ticketing workshop that was attended by a number of Fans Forum members in August 2017 and wished to begin by providing an update.

Members were given an information sheet, which outlined how many away matches had been accessible to season ticket holders, members and general sale during the 2017/18 season.

The club wanted to break some misconceptions around its loyalty points system and also propose some potential future developments to the system.

The document indicated that seven away matches (out of 17 to date) had required supporters to have five or more loyalty points, while three went on sale to all season ticket holders, two reached members and five reached general sale.

Fans with 15 loyalty points could have accessed tickets for 13 away matches, while 0 points provided access to ten matches.

Nicole Atkin (NA) explained that the club is continuing to look at improvements, such as protecting loyalty points for people whose circumstances may change (loss of employment, moving away to study) and possibly ring-fencing a small away allocation for affiliated fan groups in host cities (i.e. Newcastle United Supporters Club London for games at Arsenal, Chelsea, etc.).

Jon Lane (JL) produced an independent survey amongst supporters and suggested ring-fencing tickets in this way may not be popular amongst most supporters based on feedback.

Steve Cole (SC) suggested that Newcastle United Supporters Club London would only require 10-20 tickets, which JL believed would be acceptable.

Gareth Beard (GB) believes this would be a positive change. Steve Wallwork (SW) questioned how this would be administered.

The club suggested this would be only open to official members of identified groups and could be distributed via a ballot. The club will consider the above when drafting amendments to its policy and will share this with Fans Forum members for their input shortly.

New online ticketing system

PL asked about a proposed new online ticketing system that had been mentioned by the club in 2017.

The club confirmed that it has appointed a new ticketing provider, SeatGeek, in order to provide the best possible purchasing experience on desktop and mobile.

This is due to go live before the end of the season (subject to a final round of testing) so that supporters can check on their account status, loyalty points and payment dates etc. before new season tickets go on sale.

The system will also be tested with the sale of tickets for the European Rugby Champions Cup Final, which will be held at St. James' Park in May 2019.

NA thanked the attendees of the workshop for helping to shape the new system.

The club has also appointed a new payment provider and CRM provider in order to improve the overall ticketing experience.

Safe standing

LM noted that a number of members had enquired about safe standing in advance of the meeting and stated that a public petition demanding a debate in parliament had passed 100,000 signatures.

Steve Storey (SS) advised that the club's stance had not changed but acknowledged the progress of the petition. SS outlined West Bromwich Albion's unsuccessful bid to trial rail seating and suggested that in his view, he felt such a trial would be unlikely until the legislation changes.

The club outlined that the Premier League is now engaging with its 20 constituent clubs to gather data to better understand the issue of standing within football stadia, particularly with regard to injuries.

JL suggested that fans did not expect safe standing to be introduced quickly, but that there was a groundswell of opinion in favour of it – a view shared by Steve Wallwork (SW) and PF.

JL stated that he would like the club to back the campaign and contribute to the momentum.

PF outlined a recent meeting between the Premier League and supporters groups including Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) and the Football Supporters Federation (the FSF), during which the Premier League's existing data had been questioned.

The club pledged to share the public petition on social media on the following day. This was published on the club's Twitter and Facebook accounts on Thursday 26th April 2018.

Supporter safety at Strawberry Place

SH reported that there had been no recent communication to supporters from Newcastle City Council about the impact of road closures on Strawberry Place during the current season. SH stated that a police inspector had advised that there would be no possibility of closing the road before matches due to traffic flow.

The club outlined the council's lead role in traffic management and disclosed that small changes had been made throughout the season to test road closures at particular times.

SS believes post-match closures are working very well and also outlined pre-match closures had taken place ahead of a recent rugby union fixture between Newcastle Falcons and Northampton Saints, where a fanzone was in operation.

SS advised that the club was due to have a debrief with the council and partner organisations at the end of the season and would plan for next season accordingly.

PL asked why pre-match road closures were put in place for rugby matches and not for football.

SS stated that rugby fixtures and Magic Weekend had been standalone events and that organisers had wanted to create a street carnival atmosphere in Strawberry Place. SS believes the success of The Big One (Newcastle Falcons v Northampton Saints) may encourage the council to close the road in advance in future.

PF requested that he, GB and SH be invited to the end-of-season debrief with the council. The club will pass the request on to the council.

Visiting supporters' location

PF advised that the location of visiting supporters at St. James' Park had been raised by the FSF at a Premier League meeting with a view to moving them to a pitchside location. PF stated that this move would not be supported by NUST.

The club was given dispensation to accommodate away supporters in the upper tier of the Leazes Stand as normal for the entirety of the 2017/18 season. The club explored all options for the potential relocation of away supporter. Based on the information presented to it, the local authority would not approve a change in relation to the away supporter location due to spectator safety, most notably when exiting the stadium.

PF stated that the FSF had advised it would be filing a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in order to access the club's report, believing it to be a public order issue rather than a safety issue.

The club stated it would be happy to meet with the FSF to discuss the matter and will give the FSF sight of its report without the necessity to file an FOIA request.

The club stressed again that it had invested time, effort and money to explore all possible options for visiting supporters using independent consultants.

Jill Morris (JM) asked if the club's position will be challenged in future.

The club clarified that it does not envisage any changes to the current location of visiting supporters.

The Premier League has written to advise that it will not be challenging the club and local authority's position.

The only caveat would be if the club redeveloped the stadium, at which point the issue would have to be revisited.

Accounts

PF asked when the club's next set of accounts will be published.

The club explained that a date has not yet been set for publication but that the next set of accounts would detail the considerable financial impact of the club's relegation to the Championship for the 2016/17 season.

Stadium expansion

The club had received a number of questions in relation to this issue after recording a large number of sell-outs during the 2017/18 season.

PF outlined that NUST has pushed for stadium expansion at the Gallowgate End for a long period of time.

PF advised that NUST had previously met with construction firm Tolent, which was involved in potential redevelopment of the Strawberry Place site. Tolent produced a report to show that the Gallowgate End could be cantilevered and extended to accommodate an additional 8,000 – 10,000 supporters.

PF stated that NUST would not make a business case for the redevelopment as they did not feel it would be viable, but they believe the club would want to have more supporters inside the stadium if it could.

LM highlighted the club's comments from two consecutive Fans Forums in 2014, which indicated that extending the Gallowgate would not make sense commercially and that its view was likely to remain unchanged in the short and medium term and potentially the long term.

At that time, the club also stated that selling St. James' Park to build a new stadium was not an attractive or realistic option.

SW asked if demand for tickets had changed since 2014. PF suggested that the size of television broadcasting deals could make financing stadium expansion easier. SH suggested that the club could keep expansion as a possibility rather than ruling it out, particularly with high demand for ticket.

The club reiterated its stance that outlaying what could potentially be tens of millions of pounds to expand would be unwise financially.

The club stated that there is demand for tickets for 'bigger' games but that this is not always the case for other matches, when demand tails off.

The club highlighted Saturday's match against West Bromwich Albion, which had originally sold out. The visitors returned a block of seats on Level 7 in advance, however those tickets were being sold in very small quantities each day, indicating that demand was not especially high.

JM asked if there is a waiting list for season tickets.

For this season, the club reached a 'soft' cap of around 40,000 season ticket holders. The club will reassess this cap if necessary depending on renewal levels.

The club stated that - prior to the redevelopment - its waiting list had approximately 18,000 supporters. The club does not feel that there is excessive demand for tickets in most cases.

SW asked if any fresh developments had been made where Strawberry Place is concerned.

The club checked on the status of the land before the Fans Forum meeting and reported that no progress has been made by developers.

Fixture scheduling

SW outlined a number of fixtures throughout the season that had been rescheduled to the detriment of supporters. This included the recent match at Everton, which was moved from 3pm on a Saturday to 8pm on a Monday after tickets had gone on sale. SW asked if the club can veto changes.

PF advised that the Premier League had recently suggested to fan groups that clubs do have a say when fixtures are rescheduled.

The club outlined the process of kick-off slots being approved and voted in by Premier League clubs.

As part of broadcast agreements, the Premier League and its clubs must use best endeavours to deliver the selected fixtures.

The club explained that there are very limited reasons as to why a club could refuse a broadcaster request and this would unlikely be for any other reason that safety or policing issues.

The club understood the impact on supporters caused by the rescheduling of its match at Everton, which was way beyond the parameters set by the Premier League. Given the exceptionally late selection, the club committed to easing some of the financial burden on supporters left out of pocket after booking for the original date.

JM stated her frustration that the Premier League had not stuck to its original deadlines for broadcast selections.

The club understands those frustrations and believes the Premier League may need to undertake work to show supporters the complexities of selecting fixtures in allocated slots.

LM advised that the club communicates fixture changes to supporters as soon as the Premier League and broadcasters give it permission to do so. This was an issue most recently for the rescheduled match at Tottenham Hotspur, which was due to Spurs' participation in the UEFA Champions League and FA Cup, as well as the necessity to reschedule a match with Brighton.

Manager and transfers

Kris Woods (KW) asked if the club is making progress in extending Rafael Benítez's contract.

The club stated that the manager has a year remaining on his contract. As the manager has publicly stated, discussions to extend his contract are ongoing.

PL asked if the club was willing to back the manager in the transfer market.

The club stressed that its conversations with the manager are ongoing and include discussions around the transfer pot available.

JL suggested fans accept that the club will not compete on transfers with clubs in the Champions League, but that there was an expectation that the club could compete on transfer fees with fellow promoted clubs and clubs of a similar stature.

The club stated that relegation to the Championship had undoubtedly given clubs that had remained in the Premier League an advantage financially.

The club also discussed, in addition to transfer fees, that there are often significant costs such as its wage bill and agents fees that are not factored in or referred to. The club also noted that figures attributed to transfer fees in the public domain were often inaccurate.

During the 2016/17 season, the club took a considerable gamble to invest significantly in the team in order to gain immediate promotion. By way of example, the club committed heavily to its wage bill, which was well beyond not only its competitors in the Championship, but also many clubs in the Premier League.

The club strengthened in summer 2017 and also made offers to buy players in January prior to acquiring players on loan.

PL added that he hoped the club is already working with the manager on its targets for the forthcoming summer transfer window.

The club explained that the recruitment process is year-round and doesn't stop. The manager and recruitment team are talking about targets for this window and have been for some time.

PF suggested that the club's commercial income may not be contributing as it could.

The club explained that it works incredibly hard to grow its commercial revenue, which is why a number of high profile rugby matches and a summer concert over multiple nights have been secured.

The upcoming Ed Sheeran concerts are lucrative for the club and have been structured so there is no risk to the club.

The club has planned to introduce such events for a long period of time and accordingly, it has invested significant funds in pitch technology to enable such events to take place without having a detrimental effect on the playing surface used by the team.

The club takes a lead role and collaborates with other organisations to bring events to the city. The club believes it has a stronger relationship with other sporting institutions and organisations across the city than it has had for a long time.

The club is giving particular focus to its partnerships model, and its recent investment in a state-of-the-art crowd-facing LED system is part of those efforts.

In addition, the club outlined deals such as its catering operation which requires further detail. In short, while outsourcing its operations reduces commercial turnover, this is overall a more profitable relationship for the club.

PF asked if the club is still up for sale.

The club stated that the position has not changed and if or when there is anything to update, the club would do so.

SW asked if the club had options to buy any of the players it currently has on loan.

The club confirmed that it does have an option to make Martin Dúbravka's loan move permanent but does not have a similar option for Kenedy.

Foundation 'Pitchside' project

Members were shown a promotional video for Newcastle United Foundation's vision for a new community hub, which will be located just yard from St. James' Park.

Narrated by Shola Ameobi, who benefitted from facilities at an existing building on the site, the facility will have sport at its heart and will also offer community space, classrooms, a gymnasium and a rooftop football pitch.

Kate Bradley (KB) talked the group through the plans.

The club intends to invite Fans Forum members in to gain a greater insight into the plans and also take members on a site visit.

The club continues to be incredibly proud of the Foundation and believes that it doesn't often get the attention it deserves.

SH and PF spoke positively about Newcastle United Foundation and a recent showcase event which took place at the House of Lords. This took place to give MPs a greater insight into the Foundation's work as it raises funds for the project outlined above.

3. AOB

Ball boys/girls selection

SW raised a concern over the suitability of some ball boys and girls positioned around the pitch.

KB outlined that children are a mix of Academy players, Foundation participants and often local boys/girls clubs and competition winners. They are briefed and practice the role but some may find it an overwhelming experience. The club will look at how the ball boys and ball girls are selected in order to improve efficiency.

Video assistant referees (V.A.R)

SC suggested that fans in the East Stand may not be able to see on-screen decisions made using V.A.R if the system is adopted by the Premier League in future.

The club advised that the Premier League clubs at a recent vote had not adopted V.A.R. Testing is ongoing for at least another season and clubs believe that period of time could be used to improve its use and also educated players, managers, supporters and pundits about the process.

Newcastle United Fans' Food Bank

SH gave an update on the Newcastle United Fans' Food Bank campaign. He thanked the players and Rafa Benítez for contributing personalised artwork for a recent North East Art Collective blind auction, which looks set to raise significant funds in aid of vulnerable people in the city.

SH thanked Newcastle United for its wider support for the food bank and stated that matchday collections have been responsible for around £150,000 of produce and cash donations in just 15 months.

The food bank will have a presence for the Magic Weekend and Ed Sheeran concerts and has also been at Kingston Park following a presence at Newcastle Falcons' match at St. James' Park.

Newcastle United Fans Food Bank directly benefits the West End Foodbank – the largest food bank of its kind in the country. To find out more, please visit <https://newcastlewestend.foodbank.org.uk/>.

ENDS