



Newcastle United

Fans Forum Minutes

Wednesday 10 August 2016
Sir Bobby Robson Suite
St. James' Park

Club representatives

Lee CHARNLEY	Managing Director
Nicole ATKIN	Head of Business Development
Lee MARSHALL	PR and Supporter Liaison Manager (chair)
Eddie RUTHERFORD	Head of Facilities
Steve STOREY	Head of Safety and Security
Wendy TAYLOR	Head of Media
Stephen TICKLE	Box Office Manager

Supporters

Dave ABBOTT	Away Fan Representative
Gareth BEARD	NUDSA
Mark BETHAM	Equality Representative
Alan CLARK	Over-65s Representative
Craig ENGLISH	Corporate Representative
Steve HASTIE	NUFC Fans United
David LEE	Leazes Stand Representative
Patrick LOUGHLIN*	East Stand Representative
David MAUDLIN	Milburn Stand Representative
Brian PARKIN	Gallowgate Stand Representative
Taylor PAYNE	Members' representative

Apologies

Kate BRADLEY	Newcastle United Foundation
Steve COLE	Supporters Branch Representative
Darren MILLER	Long Distance Fan Representative
Sharon RAVENHALL	Women's Representative
Bryn TENNANT	Young Persons Representative

1. Introduction

Lee Marshall (LM) welcomed all attendees to the meeting and meeting protocol was outlined (no live tweeting or recording, production of official minutes to be approved by the group).

Introductions were made around the table, with mention that six current members will reach the end of their tenure at the meeting's conclusion.

LM drew attention to recently supporter information, namely club updates on season ticket refunds (due early September) and season ticket entry cards (keep last season's card unless moving seats).

The club's head of business development, Nicole Atkin (NA) - who joined just before the previous Fans Forum meeting - was introduced to the group.

2. Digital development

NA gave supporters an update on how the club's digital strategy is evolving, with a new website set to be launched later in 2016.

The club stressed how important fan involvement is in the process of producing a new site. Fans Forum members - including outgoing members - will be invited to be part of the process as the site is built and tested.

Supporters were asked to offer initial feedback on their current experiences with the existing website.

Alan Clark (AC) made reference to nufcTV and asked if the club can reach more fans by following similar models to clubs such as Manchester United and Liverpool. AC also passed on comments from overseas fans who were keen to see a match archive added.

NA emphasised the importance of nufcTV to its digital strategy and acknowledged that in its current set up, potential viewer numbers are restricted because content is behind a paywall.

The club explained that producing a standalone television channel via satellite TV carried very high costs and that one of the primary aims of its digital strategy is to enhance nufcTV as a dynamic, interactive platform for all supporters via mobile, tablet and desktop.

NA stated that the main aim of its digital strategy is to make club channels the first port of call for all supporters.

Gareth Beard (GB) noted that the new website will need to consider the needs of supporters with visual impairments and offered the assistance of the Newcastle United Disabled Supporters Association (NUDSA).

NA welcomed NUDSA's involvement in the website testing stage, which will also include expert input from staff and partners with almost two decades of experience in digital development.

New digital partners

Craig English (CE) commented that the website is not currently user friendly and asked for clarity on when the club's existing digital agreement was reaching a conclusion.

LM outlined the benefits and opportunities of a new digital partner, which will make the website a much greater experience for fans.

NA explained that the club's current digital agreement was coming to an end and that it had appointed new digital partners during the close season.

As a result, the club has produced a specification for its new website, which is currently being built.

Once the initial build is complete, the club will introduce it to a small number of supporters for testing before then launching a beta version of the website which all supporters can experience and feed back on.

The club is on target to launch the new website in December 2016 and is committed to continued development and improvement into 2017 and beyond.

Buying tickets online

The club accepted there were a number of limitations around purchasing match tickets on its existing website, which it wishes to address. Fans Forum members were asked for their feedback.

AC, Patrick Loughlin (PL), and Taylor Payne (TP) all commented on problems they have had when purchasing tickets via the website, which compares far less favourably to sites of other clubs and organisations.

The club confirmed that the company behind its online ticketing system is launching a new version, which will be available shortly. The club will also look at alternatives to ensure it continues to offer the best service that it possibly can.

TP asked if the club could improve the process via mobile, citing significant problems in the purchasing process.

NA outlined that a large proportion of supporters now use mobile devices to enter the website so mobile is an integral part of the club's ongoing digital development.

David Maudlin (DM) offered positive feedback on the ticketing system online but accepted mobile would be a useful addition.

nufcTV

The club stated that its intention is to give nufcTV much more exposure to a wider audience globally and it is currently exploring options in this area in line with its new website development.

NA invited Fans Forum members to a workshop later in August, which will enable the club to collate and consider feedback before a potential relaunch of nufcTV in future.

This will include feedback on the club's membership scheme, with a view to reviewing what membership means to supporters and refining its benefits.

TP asked if the new website will be dependent on the club being promoted.

The club confirmed that it is committed to launching its new website as originally planned this season.

Brian Parkin (BP) emphasised the growing desire from fans to receive instant videos, images and updates on social media. TP asked if the club could add to its output by streaming pre-season matches.

LM explained that the new website and digital partners would present opportunities for streaming pre-season games in future. In the meantime, the club has stepped up its content on existing channels including Twitter and Facebook, as well as recently launching Instagram and Snapchat accounts.

SH asked about the possibility of beam backs of away matches this season, especially given the size of some Championship stadia and the high demand for away tickets.

The club explained that there is criteria which has to be satisfied in order to beam games back to St. James' Park but the club is already exploring that option.

GB and AC commented that they don't receive club emails despite being signed up.

The club stated it will update their individual email addresses immediately and will be ensuring sign-up is much easier for supporters via the new digital platform.

Fans Forum pages

TP, CE and AC suggested the Fans Forum needed greater visibility across club channels, including clarity on what the Forum aims to do.

As part of its new website, the club will be introducing a prominent Fans Forum section to ensure the Forum has far greater visibility.

LM encouraged supporters to provide feedback on how they would like the Forum to develop in future and the club remains open to considering all options.

3. Supporter items

Fans Forum members were encouraged to raise questions on any club matters to club representatives.

Membership

TP (Members' representative) and DM outlined feedback from fans which was critical of the club's membership scheme. TP suggested that supporters were purchasing membership purely as a way to access away tickets, rather than as a badge of honour or belonging. AC questioned the future of the membership model.

The club outlined its commitment to a membership concept and will meet with Fans Forum in a separate workshop shortly to review what membership means to supporters. The club has recently adjusted adult membership to become a season-long product, with a view to relaunching the scheme next summer with brand new benefits.

The club also explained that it had discussed the issue of away tickets during the close season and confirmed away tickets will be offered on a general sale basis for selected games during the 2016/17 season.

Dave Abbott (Away fans' representative) welcomed the re-introduction of a general sale but urged the club to continue prioritising supporters with the most loyalty points.

The club stressed that season ticket holders and members will continue to receive priority to away tickets as normal, but general sale will be offered to all supporters only if availability remains. This is mainly expected for midweek games where the club is offered a significant allocation.

Match travel

DA asked if the club had any plans to reintroduce club travel for away games.

The club confirmed there are no plans to reintroduce a transport scheme in the foreseeable future.

Reciprocal away ticket pricing

SH asked if the club has any plans to pursue lower away ticket prices with Championship clubs on a reciprocal basis, as it had successfully in the Premier League.

The club explained that discussions around reciprocal prices had received a lukewarm response amongst Championship clubs, with most keen to control their own pricing structures.

The club believes that the success of reciprocal pricing in the Premier League was aided by the Away Fans Fund, which does not exist in the EFL. As a result, the impact on clubs' revenues in the Championship would be far greater.

DA asked if there is a rule in the EFL which states there must be equal ticket pricing between home and away fans who in comparable seats. DA raised a concern that Newcastle United fans could be charged significantly higher ticket prices away from home this season than fans of the same Championship clubs when they travel to St. James' Park.

The club is continuing to offer what it feels are fair ticket prices to away fans at St. James' Park but will review league regulations to see what impact they have on Newcastle United fans travelling away.

Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST)

TP and SH welcomed renewed dialogue between the club and NUST given the unity that currently exists in the club's fan base, with a view to NUST potentially returning to the Fans Forum.

The club expressed it was open to entering into dialogue with NUST representatives and a meeting will be scheduled in due course.

Shirt sponsorship

AC, DM, David Lee (DL) asked for clarity on when the club's current shirt sponsorship with Wonga will expire. DM presented a question from a supporter which asked if the club would give fans the option of printing a charity on the front of the shirt next season.

The club confirmed that its contract with Wonga will definitely expire at the end of the current season and the club is in discussions with a number of potential new partners.

The club outlined that shirt sponsorship remains a key revenue driver for the club and it was therefore important for the club to secure the right sponsor for next season and beyond.

The club is not intending to have a blank shirt next season and because shirt sponsor contracts stipulate that a company would have the right to its logo on all kit, the club will not be offering a printing option on the front of the shirt in the way requested.

DM asked if the stadium name will change once the Wonga sponsorship agreement ends (Wonga previously purchased the stadium naming rights).

The club confirmed that the stadium name will remain the same.

SH asked if the club would be looking closely at its partner brands.

The club explained that it has a clear idea about the style of brand it would like to see on Newcastle United shirts but also had to take revenue potential into consideration and strike a fair balance.

EFL Trophy

DM asked why the club declined an invitation to field a team in the EFL Trophy.

As per an official statement at the time, the club is supportive of young Newcastle United players taking part in the tournament in principal.

However, the club was initially told it would not be invited to field a team and therefore made a commitment to young players that they would be able to go out on loan to gain experience.

The club subsequently found out it had been invited to field a team via Sky Sports.

The club's final decision was that it would be better for young players to be immersed in a first team environment out on loan for a significant number of games, rather than what could be a handful of games in the EFL Trophy.

Training Centre

TP asked for an update on the club's new Training Centre plans.

The club explained that it had enhanced its initial Training Centre plans significantly and that discussions had taken place with Rafa Benítez prior to any work commencing.

Following those discussions, it was agreed that knocking down the entire building could be extremely disruptive, particularly given the team's current focus.

The club also has to factor in the reality of a loss of revenue associated with dropping out of the Premier League.

Accordingly, the club is exploring how the building could be developed modularly; enabling the team to remain in the Training Centre while still allowing for significant improvements to the building infrastructure.

Eddie Rutherford (ER) confirmed that in the meantime, significant investment had been over the summer months to enhance the layout of the current building and gym in consultation with Rafa Benítez. There has also been a brand new artificial surface laid at both the training centre and Academy.

The club reemphasised its original commitment to significantly improving the club's training facilities going forward at the right time and finances permitting.

Academy

AC asked about Rafa Benítez's role at the Newcastle United Academy and about any changes that had been made since his appointment.

The club stated that Rafa Benítez has taken a keen interest in the club's Academy and that discussions and planning are ongoing regarding its development. The club will continue to communicate any future changes at the earliest opportunity.

Since the meeting, Steve Harper has been appointed as the club's Academy goalkeeping coach.

Women's team

TP commented that the club should be commended for recently strengthening its ties with Newcastle United Women's Football Club (NUWFC) and asked about the logistics of NUWFC using the club's Academy.

The club confirmed that scheduling is continuing with a view to all of NUWFC's first team games will take place at the Academy. Some development games may still need to take place elsewhere in the short term.

Squad

TP asked if Rémy Cabella's move to Marseille has been made permanent.

The club confirmed that the transfer has been made permanent (public announcement followed on 11/08/2016).

4. Department updates/questions

Facilities

BP passed on a question in relation an issue with the PA system in the Gallowgate End.

ER asked for seat information in order to look closely at the specific area of the stadium in question. BP has supplied the details.

SH commented that some areas of the stadium exterior looked like they needed cleaning, while there had also been a persistent issue with wet flooring at the Gallowgate End.

ER advised that the issue with the wet floor at the Gallowgate End outer concourse was due to it being exposed to the elements. The area is now subject to pre-match checks and a cleaning routine in advance of supporters arriving.

In addition, all flights of internal stairs and lateral gangways in the lower bowl of the stadium have been painted over the summer and a maintenance schedule is in place to continue stadium improvements.

The club encouraged Fans Forum members to contact the club at any time should issues arise at the stadium on matchday.

5. Rafa Benítez

Rafa Benítez kindly gave up part of his evening to join the meeting and took time to meet Fans Forum members individually.

Rafa remained at the meeting for around 45 minutes and enjoyed an informal, off-the-record chat with supporters about their experiences supporting the club, his time on Tyneside so far and the season ahead.

Rafa presented outgoing members with a small signed item on behalf of the club as a gesture of thanks for the time they had committed to the Fans Forum.

6. AOB

Fans Forum development

The club asked members to offer their recommendations for the future of the Fans Forum, which they will share via email. The club reaffirmed its commitment to developing the process for the benefit of all supporters during the 2016/17 season and beyond.

Next meeting:TBC