



# Newcastle United

## Fans Forum Minutes

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2015 | Sir Bobby Robson Suite, St. James' Park

<b>Club representatives</b>	
Lee CHARNLEY	Managing Director
Bob MONCUR	Club Ambassador
Kate BRADLEY	Head of Newcastle United Foundation
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

<b>Supporters</b>	
Dave ABBOTT	Away Fan Representative
Gareth BEARD	Newcastle United Disabled Supporters Association
Mark BETHAM	Equality Representative
Alan CLARKE	Over-65s Representative
Craig ENGLISH	Corporate Representative
Steve HASTIE	NUFC Fans United
David LEE	Leazes Stand Representative
David MAUDLIN	Milburn Stand Representative
Brian PARKIN	Gallowgate Stand Representative
Sharon RAVENHALL	Women's Representative
Bryn TENNANT	Young Persons Representative

<b>Apologies</b>	
Steve COLE	Supporters Branch Representative
Paul LOUGHLIN	East Stand Representative
Darren MILLER	Long Distance Fan Representative
Taylor PAYNE	Members Representative

## 1. Introduction

The group was welcomed to St. James' Park by Lee Marshall (LM) on behalf of Newcastle United.

Introductions were made around the table, including new members Mark Betham (MB), Alan Clarke (AC), Craig English (CE), David Lee (DL), Sharon Ravenhall (SR) and Bryn Tennant (BT).

Kate Bradley (KB) was welcomed back to the Fans Forum following maternity leave.

Apologies: Steve Cole, Paul Loughlin, Darren Miller and Taylor Payne.

Members had been emailed the 'What is the Fans Forum' document (<http://www.nufc.co.uk/page/Fans/FansForum/0,,10278~3462654,00.html>) to outline its set up and objectives and hard copies were provided.

Meeting protocol was outlined, with full details of the use of official, agreed meeting minutes explained prior to any alternative reports, reviews and/or tweets being published.

Updates were given from the previous meeting in July 2015 including club communications and social media usage, transfers, the distribution of Forum minutes, stadium visitor guide and 2015/16 reciprocal ticket pricing deals.

Gareth Beard (GB) spoke positively about the trip to Manchester City organised for 64 members of the Newcastle United Disabled Supporters Association (NUDSA) which had been organised by the club. GB reserved special praise for Martin Herdman from the Newcastle United Foundation, who accompanied NUDSA on the day.

GB explained that the trips are of huge importance to disabled fans and that without them, only a very small proportion of disabled supporters could benefit from other away game incentives.

## 2. Supporter items/open questions

LM explained that this section would be open to members' questions on any topic, starting with issues that had already been received as agenda items in advance.

The Fans Forum contact section of the club's official website was outlined (<http://www.nufc.co.uk/page/Fans/FansForum/0,,10278~3462537,00.html>), with members advised that they would receive messages directly from supporters.

### Club Vision

David Maudlin (DM): "Publicly, Steve McClaren has stated that he is excited about Lee Charnley's vision for the club. What is that vision?"

### Cup competitions

DM: "After the debacle in the League Cup, can the club assure fans that:

- a) We will continue to play a strong team in the remaining cup competition
- b) The players are aware that their efforts and performance must be 'much improved' for the FA Cup.

BT: "I'd also like to ask about the cup games. What is seen as a priority at this point in the season?"

## Transfers

BT: “What direction does the club see it will be taking regarding transfers and the progression of the squad in future?”

Brian Parkin (BP): “Fans and pundits seem united in their belief that we don’t put enough emphasis on signing players with Premier League experience. Is this something you’re looking to address to help the team in terms of leadership and also to help other new signings settle into the league?”

CE: “I also feel that the club’s stated transfer policy of signing younger players with a decent sell-on value should be questioned, particularly given our current league position and – in my opinion – our need for strong, experienced, vocal leaders on the pitch. We’re in danger of becoming a stepping-stone for players. Will the club confirm its investment will continue?”

The above questions were grouped for the purpose of discussing a Newcastle United email that was sent to the club’s supporter database from Lee Charnley, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2015 (see attached Appendix).

Titled ‘A new chapter – a message from the boardroom’, the email gave a clear outline of the club’s aims and objectives including finishing in the top eight of the Premier League and a commitment to winning a cup.

The email also outlined the club’s approach to transfers and commitment to investing in the squad in forthcoming transfer windows.

The distinct subject areas in the email were:

- Spending and transfers
  - Financial strength
  - Clear strategy
  - Board structure
  - Long-term viewpoint
- Steve McClaren and his team
- A new chapter in how the club communicates

The club accepted that not all supporters would have received the email and hard copies were made available to Forum members. After supporters had examined the email, questions were welcomed on all areas.

DM: “The club has stated its aims of finishing in the top eight of the Premier League and winning a cup and while that’s carried by the media, not everyone will be aware of how the club is going about that.”

AC: “The thirst for information from fans about the club is unquenchable so I’d encourage the club to continue with the emails. Personally, however, I haven’t received one yet.”

The club explained that by law, only supporters who had given prior permission to be contacted by the club could receive these email. Accordingly, work is already underway to review the club’s data in order to present more supporters with more opportunities to ‘opt in’ to future correspondence from key individuals across the football club.

In addition to emails, the club underlined its commitment to servicing the demand from fans for information and engagement via social media and all other available means of communication.

AC: “The current ‘hot issue’ for the vast majority of fans is the transfer policy. Undoubtedly, this is directly related to the poor start to the season. It has been widely reported in the media that the current policy may be under review, and this has further heightened the level of interest in this key issue.”

While accepting the start to the league season had been disappointing, the club underlined its commitment to the transfer policy that had been outlined to supporters in the email on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. This focuses on buying players whose careers are “on the way up”, rather than buying players who are nearing the end of their careers. The club believes that this is in its best interests and will help it to achieve its goals in the medium to long term.

The club stated that its aim was to secure players who could improve individually and collectively, rather than focussing on potential sell-on value. The club turned down substantial offers in the summer 2015 window because it has no need or desire to sell its best players.

BP: “Could the club compliment the new players with players who have Premier League experience? They could benefit some of the younger ones, especially in weaker areas of the squad.”

The club’s policy on recruitment remains unchanged however, as previously stated, it may consider exceptions in specific circumstances.

Steve Hastie (SH): “Will the 25-man squad system have an impact on what the club does in January? If there is a long-term injury, would the club changes it policy then?”

The club stated that it wanted to avoid a scenario of having players above the 25-man squad who it was paying but who were not available to play even if fit.

ST: “Is there any scope for the 25-man squad rule to be changed or voted out in future?”

The club’s view was that the 25-man squad system is unlikely to change.

DM: “The cups and derbies are absolutely the focus of most fans and we’ve had our worst performances in those areas in recent years.”

The club reaffirmed that its aim is to win a cup competition and that players and all members of staff had always understood the importance of derbies.

## **Kick-off times**

CE: “Another issue raised is the ability of TV companies to alter kick-off times at short notice, often after fans have paid for transport and hotels in advance. With the new TV rights deal, can the club confirm if there have been changes in the timescales TV companies are allowed to select televised matches?”

LM stated that television companies begin looking at potential broadcast selections around three months in advance of fixtures and final selections are usually confirmed 6-8 weeks beforehand. The club announces its fixture changes at the earliest permitted opportunity.

Most recently, the Premier League gave the club advanced warning that its fixture against Everton at St. James’ Park on Boxing Day was likely to move to a 5:30pm kick-off. While unconfirmed at that stage, the league and broadcasters gave the club the opportunity to confidentially approach transport companies and local authorities about public transport provisions. The kick-off change has only recently been confirmed but transport discussions and planning are already at an advanced stage.

The club's view was that late fixture changes are now only in extreme circumstances and that the Premier League is working to lessen the impact on fans.

Dave Abbott (DA): "There used to be a rule where if an attendance fell below the stadium average, Sky would make up the difference. Is that still in place?"

The club stated that this was no longer in place but explained how part of the money generated from TV rights is distributed to clubs in line with how often they are broadcast live.

SH: "I was at a Premier League meeting with fans of all the other clubs in the summer. Fans – especially those on the west coast – were amazed that Newcastle and Sunderland had a pilot scheme with Virgin Trains East Coast (VTEC) whereby train tickets could be changed if a game was selected for TV. Can the club publicise the deal with Virgin more?"

The club outlined previous promotions of the deal on its own website and social media and pledged to continue with this as soon as away tickets go on sale, particularly for fixtures in London which require travel to and from VTEC's primary route of Newcastle – Kings Cross. VTEC had also publicised the deal independently and this was picked up by regional media.

### **Stadium expansion**

BP: "Currently, Liverpool, Chelsea, Spurs and West Ham are due to overtake us when it comes to stadium capacity. Manchester United, Manchester City and Arsenal are ahead of us. Why were plans proposed to extend the Gallowgate End scrapped in the past and will any planned development behind Gallowgate hinder the potential to expand the stadium in future?"

The club referred to similar questions in previous Fans Forum meetings in May 2014 and October 2014 during which the history of the land and its sale were discussed. The club's view has not changed.

### **Rugby World Cup fixtures**

AC advised that the condition of the St. James' Park pitch following the three Rugby World Cup matches had been a significant concern for supporters. In the event, the club's ground staff did a terrific job in repairing the pitch with relatively little time to do so.

AC felt the ground staff should be commended for their efforts to produce a very good playing surface for the home fixture with Norwich City.

## Department updates

### Ticketing

Sent to Taylor Payne: “Recently, the Chelsea game saw a ticket price reduction from last season for the public but not for members. The attendance then fell 4,000 short of last season. Public price reductions will worsen the situation where in some places, a season ticket costs more than single tickets. Almost every other club in the Premier League publishes its pricing brand for the whole season alongside season ticket prices. Why do Newcastle not do this and allow supporters to make an informed choice on which tickets suit them?”

Stephen Tickle (ST) stated that most season ticket holders are on longer-term price-freeze deals, with others on one-year deals. The club uses a price matrix to ensure season ticket holders always make a saving and receive the best possible value in relation to single match ticket prices.

ST stated that the club doesn’t confirm single match prices for all home fixtures in advance because specific fixtures can be changed between categories depending on demand. For example, if a fixture is switched to a Sunday, it may move down to the next cheaper category as fewer tickets may be sold if it is broadcast live domestically.

While Chelsea ticket prices may have fallen slightly, that will be offset in other games throughout the season using the pricing matrix. The emphasis remains on giving season ticket holders the best value.

Sent to DA: “I was hoping you would be able to raise the recent Twenty’s Plenty campaign which saw all 92 clubs protesting against the price of away tickets in England.”

DA: “This is gaining publicity and the club might want to show some solidarity.”

CE: “I’ve been asked to raise the question over away ticket pricing I’m aware the club appear to be open to reciprocal pricing on away tickets, which is to be applauded. However would the club be prepared to take it a stage further and back the FSF ‘Twenty’s Plenty’ campaign?”

LM outlined the club’s work to drive away ticket prices down, particularly through reciprocal price deals with other clubs as opposed to price subsidies in isolation. The club has struck three deals this season and ten in total. Away ticket prices have fallen as low as £15 for adults in games involving Newcastle United and West Bromwich Albion.

While the club is committed to driving down away ticket prices, it outlined that prices at some clubs in the Premier League remain relatively high. This could prove problematic to a league-wide blanket price close to £20.

LM sits on the Premier League’s Attendance Working Group which is convening to identify ways to increase away match attendance and enhance the experience for travelling fans.

DA: “The club mentioned it may look to make nufcTV free for fans. Have you pursued that?”

The club confirmed it is part of a wider review of its digital strategy which would also encompass a new website, which would potentially be up and running in 12 months’ time. Further announcements would be made as it progresses.

DA: "What percentage of away tickets actually go to supporters?"

ST stated that usually 95-96% of away tickets go to fans. Of the remaining tickets, the vast majority is allocated to players for friends and family. A smaller allocation is made available to sponsors.

DA: "Why can't fans buy away tickets if they are not season ticket holders?"

The club's policy over the past 5-6 years has been to prioritise season ticket holders then members, with most away games selling out to those groups before a general sale period would be possible. This also enables the club to trace tickets to individuals should incidents occur. The club doesn't envisage a change in that policy.

## **Facilities**

AC: "Several fans have raised concerns over the effectiveness of the PA system in some areas of the East Stand. U97-98 is variable but generally weak and in some areas it is fine. An effective PA system is clearly vital for health and safety reasons and perhaps the overall effectiveness of the system should be re-evaluated."

Eddie Rutherford (ER) confirmed that problems had been detected in small areas in the past and had been rectified. ER will visit the affected area on matchday in order to resolve it.

ER confirmed that the general PA system was separate to the system used in emergencies, which would be audible everywhere.

Sent to AC: "There seems to be a reliability issue with the lifts in the Milburn Stand up to Level 7."

Mark Betham (MB): "There used to be no control on how many people used the lifts. Now, stewards are limiting their use well below capacity."

ER confirmed that two lift engineers are on site on all matchdays to ensure lifts remain in use and that disruption had been minimal during the current season. ER added that the club has relaxed lift access for fans so more people are using them, resulting in larger queues.

Steve Storey (SS) stated that instructions on limiting lift access were not a club directive and that they were operated in relation to weight capacity, not number of people. Safety and security will ensure stewards are aware of this to ensure efficient use of lifts on matchdays.

AC: "The current big screen is only visible from the Leazes and Milburn Stands. I have been asked to enquire as to whether there are plans to install a second system, perhaps at the South West corner, to eliminate this anomaly."

The club is aware of the issue and has looked at that option but confirmed it is not something that is planned in the immediate future.

ER stated that approximately 40,000 fans can see the current screen. A new screen in the South West corner would benefit approximately 7,000 fans, with 5,000 fans potentially unable to see either screen.

DM: “Some of the fans want to continue their 17<sup>th</sup> minute tribute. Is that something the club could put back on the screen?”

LM confirmed the club had originally put a graphic on the screen until the end of the 2014/15 season following suggestions in the public domain and conversations with the Fans Forum and the families of John Alder and Liam Sweeney. The club spoke with both families about the screen again in the summer and agreed to remove the graphic as originally planned. The club has a permanent memorial at St. James’ Park and continues to support fans’ efforts to remember John and Liam.

David Lee (DL): “Is there a reason the club doesn’t show replays on the big screen?”

The club confirmed it was unable to show some replays as a league rule. Clubs are not permitted to show replays of negative or controversial incidents; an issue which had arisen during Swansea City v Stoke City recently.

Sent to SR: “There is only one set of ladies toilets in Bar 1892, demand for which is so large now that you have to either leave your seat before half-time or miss the start of the second half. Neither option is acceptable... I hope the club will give this a bit more priority to this issue as it has been raised more than once before and the problem is spoiling matchday for us.”

DA stated there was a similar issue in the Leazes End.

ER stated that toilets are based on the number of male and female supporters in any respective area of the stadium. The club confirmed it will monitor the queues and will look at how facilities can be better placed.

SR asked how that might be achieved.

The club confirmed that as part of improving its data processes, it would be identifying how the facilities at St. James’ Park can best meet supporters’ needs in relation to supporters’ purchase history and crowd demographics.

SR asked if the club could give an indication of timescale for completion of the review, which the club was unable to provide at this point in time.

## **Safety and Security**

BP: “Is there an update on safe standing from the Premier League? If they wanted to trial it, would we be a club that wanted to pioneer it?”

LM confirmed safe standing had been discussed in previous Forums, both in January 2014 and July 2015. SS stated that the legislation hadn’t changed so the club – and other clubs – wouldn’t commit to trials.

SH suggested that Aston Villa has been receptive to trialling safe standing and that perhaps other clubs would support it. However, SH felt Richard Scudamore (Premier League chief executive) had been vocal in opposing safe standing, which could rile some supporters.

The club suggested that this view may be based on conversations with government and/or other Premier League clubs and their unwillingness to re-introduce standing.

Sent to MB: “The awful chanting about Adam Johnson (Sunderland AFC) needs to be stopped... the club don’t need fans singing like that.”

SS advised that it's difficult to stop supporters singing particular songs. However, the conduct of supporters on matchday would be observed by the safety and security team at the Stadium of Light and Northumbria Police.

DA stated that it had been discussed at recent police meetings.

More generally, the club continues to be behind the Football Supporters Federation's 'A Derby to be Proud of' campaign, which encourages supporters to make the derby a memorable day for all the right reasons (<http://www.fsf.org.uk/latest-news/view/A-Derby-To-Be-Proud-Of>).

### **3. AOB**

#### **New training facility**

DM: "Are there any updates on the club's new training facility?"

The club took the original decision to delay construction for two reasons. Firstly, its league position at a time when it was required to sign contracts for work to start in May 2015 and, thereafter, to minimise disruption in the first season of a new head coach.

The plans have since been revisited to see if any enhancements can be made and that is on going. The club is committed to upgrading its training facilities at the most appropriate time.

BT: "Due to high loyalty point demands, newer, younger members are struggling to get away tickets. Can the system be reviewed? At Manchester City, loyalty points drop off after a period of time."

DA and CE felt that younger fans should be required to accumulate points via 'less attractive' fixtures first just as other fans had done in the past to earn access to fixtures such as the derby.

MB suggested the club could look at other ways to introduce loyalty points, such as other home cup fixtures.

ST confirmed this had been discussed previously and that the club understood the issues.

The club gave supporters a loyalty point for the home cup tie with Sheffield Wednesday and will look at other options to reward supporters within the current loyalty point system.

SH: "Will the club be part of the city's service on Remembrance Sunday?"

The club confirmed it plans to once again participate as it has in recent years.

#### **Promoting the Fans Forum**

The club will continue to promote the Fans Forum via the club's official website and social media channels and will include it in selected matchday programmes at members' request.

#### **Next meeting date**

February 2016 (post-January window).

**ENDS**

Issued by Newcastle United Football Club  
in association with supporters

## Appendices

*'A new chapter' – A message from the boardroom*

Email from Newcastle United to supporters

2<sup>nd</sup> September 2015

Dear supporter,

As the transfer window closes, we are delighted by what we think has been a very strong summer of business for our Club. We've secured ourselves four exceptional new senior players in Georginio Wijnaldum, Aleksandar Mitrovic, Chancel Mbemba and Florian Thauvin, as well as landing the exciting emerging talent of Ivan Toney.

I hope you've been impressed by what you've seen from them so far. We are confident they will continue to improve and will add significantly to the quality and success of the team.

In addition, we were delighted to agree a new deal with our Captain, Fabricio Colocchini, who on and off the field is showing the drive and determination we desire from our Captain and one of the figureheads of our club.

### **Spending, Summer Window 2015**

I know that conflicting reports from outside the club can make it hard to understand what we've spent in the window. I want to take this opportunity to confirm that the net amount spent this summer is £52.6m, with £51.5m cash paid out.

On top of the transfer spend, our wage bill for the year to 30 June 2016 will increase by a minimum of just under £9m as a result of our activity during this transfer window. I'd also like to highlight a few key messages:

- **Financial strength**... the decisions we've made over the past few years have given us the financial strength to net spend significantly this summer, as well as retaining those key players who were in demand from other clubs.

*We'll continue to spend on the squad moving forward and have no need or desire to sell our best players.*

- **Our strategy is clear** – quality over quantity... We want the best young players available to us.

*We have brought in high-calibre players that will make an immediate impact.*

- **A new board structure**... the Board have worked very closely together during this summer window. We want a squad that is strong defensively, combined with plenty of creativity, attacking intent and flair.

*We are all of one mind when it comes to our vision for the squad.*

- **A long term strategy**... we're delighted with the players we've brought in, but we always knew that it would take more than one window to reshape and restructure.

*This is the start not the end. It will take time and number of windows to get where we want to be.*

We are in a very strong financial position. To allow us to continue in this vein, we need to ensure that the club's finances remain just as healthy over the coming years. We ask that you trust us in this process. We want our club to progress and be the best it can possibly be.

## **Steve and his team**

We have set Steve a target of a top-eight finish and to win a trophy. Everyone at the club is driving hard towards that goal. However, all of this rebuilding and reshaping isn't something that can happen overnight; it will take time.

I have complete faith that what he and his team are implementing will give us the best possible chance of success as a club and I would ask that you give Steve and his team, your team, all your support while we strive to deliver this reshaped vision.

## **A new chapter**

In recent years I know that some of you feel a divide has opened up between the club and the supporters. We accept responsibility for the things we have done, or not done, to contribute to this, but with Steve's arrival and a new season ahead of us, we have been presented with a real opportunity to make progress as a club together.

Often our mistake has been that we've not communicated well enough with you and I assure you going forward, this is something we will do better.

I hope you can see from activities such as the pre-season open/family day, the emails like mine that are now being sent directly to your inbox, and with a fresh focus on engaging with you far better on social media, we are showing we have a desire to connect with you.

What is absolutely clear is that when we are all pulling in the same direction and you are one hundred percent behind the players who wear our shirt, it makes the difference.

Your support is magnificent and truly valued. On behalf of the board and all my colleagues, I hope that this can be a new chapter of positivity and progression for Newcastle United on and off the pitch.

Best wishes,

Lee Charnley  
Managing Director