



Newcastle United

Fans Forum Minutes

Monday 22nd February 2016 | Sir Bobby Robson Suite, St. James' Park

Club representatives	
Lee CHARNLEY	Managing Director
Bob MONCUR	Director, 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

Supporters	
Dave ABBOTT	Away Fan Representative
Gareth BEARD	Newcastle United Disabled Supporters Association
Mark BETHAM	Equality Representative
Alan CLARK	Over-65s Representative
Bill CORCORAN	NUFC Fans United
Craig ENGLISH	Corporate Representative
David LEE	Leazes Stand Representative
Paul LOUGHLIN	East Stand Representative
David MAUDLIN	Milburn Stand Representative
Jonathan MILLER	Supporters Branch Representative
Brian PARKIN	NUFC Fans United
Lynne PARMLEY	Newcastle United Disabled Supporters Association
Taylor PAYNE	Members Representative
Bryn TENNANT	Young Persons Representative

Apologies	
Steve COLE	Supporters Branch Representative
Steve HASTIE	NUFC Fans United
Darren MILLER	Long Distance Fan Representative
Sharon RAVENHALL	Women's 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.

Updates were provided from the previous meeting, with the club moving forward with its plans for a new digital platform.

As part of its development phase, Fans Forum members will be invited in to meet the club and help shape its digital output. This will include a new Fans Forum section and input on how the Forum is promoted, as well as discussions around membership, nufcTV and other digital offerings.

David Maudlin (DM) referenced Everton and Liverpool's supporter groups and their positive relationships with their respective clubs, with Everton's Fans Forum particularly prominent.

"Alan Clark (AC) acknowledged the club's efforts with the Fans Forum and encouraged wider promotion to encourage and better enable fans to direct their concerns to the Forum members for review at subsequent meetings. AC believes this is important in eliminating cynicism towards the process, both from fans and the media."

LM outlined that the current website design is restrictive in terms of Fans Forum pages and that a new platform would enable the club to produce a much more fan-friendly and efficient system in the near future.

Taylor Payne (TP) suggested that the navigation to the Fans Forum contact page from the club website was a key problem and that its prominence could be improved.

DM and Brian Parkin (BP) added that local media could be considered in promoting the Fans Forum, its members and key talking points from meetings, while Jonathan Miller (JM) advised that local radio would also be a very useful platform.

The club agreed with members' views. Wendy Taylor (WT) stated the club would discuss options with local media outlets in order to give members the opportunity to discuss their experiences on the Fans Forum.

2. Supporter items / open questions

On the pitch

The club received a number of questions in advance relating to football operations including on-field results, season targets and transfer policy. The club invited questions and a discussion on these topics.

Dave Abbott (DA) referenced Steve McClaren's (SMc) post-match television interviews and suggested the head coach's positivity after recent defeats was dividing some supporters.

AC suggested that a number of post-match interviews had been geared towards overly-protecting the players and deflecting blame from the squad. AC: "While it is natural for the head coach to want to protect his players from undue criticism, fans feel he needs to more readily acknowledge under-performance."

The club emphasised the challenges coaches and players face when interviews take place so soon after high-pressure matches but noted fans' feedback.

Craig English (CE): “The aim at the start of the season was top eight but we’re miles away from it. Where does the club feel it has gone wrong this season?”

The club stated it is collectively reviewing all areas on an on-going basis in order to identify problems and learn from them. The club had previously stated it would not achieve all of its aims within two transfer windows but given its transfer activity to date, it absolutely accepted a higher league position was expected at this stage.

Paul Loughlin (PL): “With 12 games to go, is the club in a crisis?”

The club disagreed but understands its current league position and acknowledged it was very disappointing.

The club explained that the squad’s recent training camp in La Manga, Spain, was designed to help find solutions on the pitch in the final 12 games of the season. The camp was wholly focused on training and recovery, as well as a game.

The club appreciates the work required to move up the table and remains confident that it will remain in the Premier League at the end of the season.

DM: “What is that belief based on?”

The club believes the quality in the squad and some of the team’s performances this season are positive indicators, but acknowledged that performances had not been consistent.

TP: “Why is there seemingly no price for failure at NUFC. For a number of years now the club's own targets have been failed to be met by those tasked with ensuring they do both at a coaching and boardroom level. The only person to lose their job at NUFC in the last eight years at these levels was the one man who achieved his target and that was Chris Hughton. This worrying trend is mirrored in the playing staff, where poor performances by so called big name players are rewarded by another start for the first team due to a lack of options and depth in certain areas. How does the club expect to improve when there is seemingly no price or consequence for underachievement?”

The club believes the squad now has strong options in most positions, enabling changes in team selection to be made where the head coach sees appropriate.

The club outlined its work to achieve a stable base, which it believes will help it to realise its aims in the medium and long term.

It was stated that frank discussions do go on internally and that the club’s models and systems are continually challenged in order to understand why targets aren’t reached. The club identifies where it has gone wrong and then works towards the solutions.

BP: “The club says internal discussions and meetings do take place but how can fans have confidence when we have the same issues?” BP pointed to some recent transfers as examples.

The club explained that in January, it looked to add a better balance to its squad and had been more flexible with its transfer policy than in previous windows, with the club looking at some short-term options and expanding its age parameters. The club explained that it is continuously reviewing its processes but that it would not make rash decisions.

CE: “Do you not think the squad is a bit lopsided?”

The club reiterated its belief that the squad now has strong options in most positions, but did look to strengthen in other areas in January.

TP asked if the club was struggling to move some players out.

The club explained that any transfer requires a buyer, a seller and the willingness of a player to move. When one or more elements are missing, deals cannot happen. The club did attempt to move on a number of players who are not currently playing during the window and remains open to doing so.

BP outlined his concerns that the team lacks quality defensively.

The club explained that a willingness to invest in players was not the issue but that the right options had to be in place for that to happen. While the club looked at a number of targets in January, the right options that would improve the squad were simply not available at that time.

DM asked if the club could turn to contingencies if targets were not available.

The club emphasised it had stretched its transfer parameters in January but that a number of reasons were behind players not being available at that particular time. As well as defensive targets, the club also noted it had lodged a club-record bid for a centre forward, which was rejected.

Despite that, the club felt it had a very positive transfer window given the calibre of players it was able to attract and the clubs those players had dismissed in order to come to Newcastle United.

The club accepted it sees the same weaknesses that fans do but that not every change has been possible despite significant progress in the last two windows.

TP asked if previous targets who were unable to move in January would be “ready to go” in the summer.

The club stated that deals would not necessarily be at that stage but after conversations in January, dialogue will be continued with regard to several targets with a view to them coming to Newcastle during the summer window.

BP: “Are some clubs easier to deal with than others?”

The club explained that it generally has a good relationship with all clubs. However, clubs have the prerogative to retain their players if they do not wish to sell.

In terms of clubs looking to buy, they may perceive Newcastle to be a difficult club to buy from because of the club’s reluctance to sell their best players.

AC: “We seem to be regularly top of the Premier League injury table. Are the club looking into this and also the players who are regularly injured?”

The club outlined the immense amount of data it gathers in order to analyse players’ performance on a daily basis. While some injuries have been unlucky, the club pays very close attention to recurring injuries in order to lessen their frequency and ensure as many players are available to play as possible.

Ticket pricing for 2016/17

AC acknowledged the positive step taken by the club to reduce season ticket prices for under-18s for the 2016/17 season and asked what the club's wider policy is.

The club's intention is for all season ticket holders to achieve better value than buying on a match-by-match basis, whether through a long-term price-freeze deal or on a one-year deal.

BP: "Does the club have any plans in the event of relegation as far as season tickets are concerned? In the event of relegation, does the club intend to reimburse any fans on the direct debit scheme if they decide to cancel their season ticket?"

The club is confident of remaining in the Premier League and, as a result, has not discussed plans in such detail across the business at this stage.

Steve Hastie (SH) sent in a question about away ticket prices and asked if the club supported plans to introduce a league-wide price cap.

The club chose not to make its decision public due to clubs' on-going discussions with the Premier League about away fan initiatives. However, Newcastle United has been very proactive in terms of affordable home and away ticket pricing.

LM was part of the Premier League's Attendance Working Group, which created the suite of ideas that were put to Premier League shareholders recently. LM explained that while some ideas appeared to work well for some clubs, they would not work for others and they were therefore not voted in.

The club explained that getting 14 clubs (the minimum threshold to pass a new Premier League rule) to agree on one specific measure is difficult but that talks were moving in the right direction with all clubs.

DA advised that ideas such as subsidised travel would not work for Newcastle United, given not all fans travel by bus and because there is already a train offer available for Newcastle and Sunderland fans with Virgin Trains East Coast (VTEC).

JM noted that the VTEC deal was positive but that it had restrictions.

The club agreed that free or subsidised travel would not be its preferred initiative based on fan feedback.

DA pointed to some of Newcastle's reciprocal deals with clubs such as Everton and Stoke City as examples of how lower prices are of more benefit to fans.

BP asked if it is difficult to work with clubs based in London when agreeing ticket prices and allocations.

The club outlined that supply and demand for tickets likely dictated clubs' approaches, rather than geography. Some clubs know they will sell tickets to home fans at the price they set, which we understand to sometimes be very high, rather than offering cheaper tickets to more away fans.

The club stated that the average adult away ticket price at St. James' Park so far this season has been £30.

FA Cup

DM referenced previous debates about team selection in the FA Cup and noted the strong line-up selected by Newcastle for the third round tie at Watford this season. DM noted that supporters were concerned that the FA Cup appeared to be in decline.

DA suggested scrapping replays would adversely affect smaller clubs.

The club's view is that Premier League clubs value the FA Cup but the club feel that changes could be made to benefit the competition.

Membership

TP: "Five years down the line from the introduction of membership for away tickets, is there any plan to change it?"

The club outlined the background of why membership was linked to away ticket sales. The club is currently reviewing the membership scheme and is considering a number of options with a view to improving it for supporters.

All members of the Fans Forum will be invited into smaller focus groups to offer feedback and contribute to its development.

New training ground

SH on behalf of NUFC Fans United asked for an updated on the club's proposed new training ground building.

As noted in the last Fans Forum (October 2015), the club explained that it had reviewed its construction plans to see if enhancements could be made. Those improvements have been added, resulting in a superior facility to the original drawings. Those plans are with architects and the club will proceed at the most appropriate time. The club still has the same desire to improve those facilities.

TP asked if relegation would affect those plans.

The club has not discussed that scenario to date.

Training camps

Bryn Tennant (BT): "When the new training centre facility is complete, will that mean training camps like the recent trip to La Manga are no longer necessary?"

The club stated that training camps would still be an option, given the benefits of having the players training together and bonding as a team for an extended period.

Mark Betham (MB) suggested that club had come in for criticism for the training camp following the recent defeat at Chelsea.

The club explained that it selected La Manga very carefully and plans were already in place in advance of the Chelsea game. The location enabled the squad to focus solely on training without distraction.

It also presented the club with an opportunity to arrange a match given the proximity of other teams on training camps, such as Lillestrøm SK, given the extended period of time between Premier League games.

PA system (East Stand)

PL and BP had received feedback from supporters about the East Stand PA system being inaudible in specific areas. GB and AC suggested it was still difficult to hear announcements clearly. Bill Corcoran (BC) suggested the settings needed altering and that it was a long-term issue.

Following the last Fans Forum meeting, the club had a report commissioned by engineers who identified that a bass speaker was damaged. This was subsequently fixed. The club has also worked closely with audio-visual company ADI to assess sound levels and will continue to monitor them in-line with fan feedback.

Bar 1892

DM referenced an email from a supporter regarding issues with the signage outside ladies toilets in Bar 1892.

ER confirmed signage is in place but that he has looked at supporter feedback following the last Fans Forum meeting. ER stated that the club has identified a potential location for more ladies toilets within Bar 1892, which would hopefully alleviate some of the issues raised. The club would look to address this in the summer.

Corporate

CE stated corporate Wi-Fi access seems to have stopped in hospitality areas this season.

ER encouraged CE to ask matchday staff (employed by Sodexo Prestige, the stadium catering partner) for access codes, which should be supplied.

BP asked if stadium Wi-Fi would be rolled out to all supporters.

The club will consider options as part of its digital consultation process with Fans Forum members.

Catering

CE raised concerns about the quality of food in hospitality areas.

The club encouraged CE to supply additional information, which will be passed to Sodexo Prestige.

The club outlined that review meetings do take place after every game, which consider all supporter feedback.

Accessibility

GB asked about the possibility of introducing a sensory room for at St. James' Park, similar to the facility recently installed for supporters with autism at the Stadium of Light.

The facility has been discussed by the club's equality and accessibility staff. Steve Storey (SS) and ER are currently liaising with the stadium manager at SAFC in order to view the facility.

Academy

CE stated that a friend's son had been charged for coaching by the club's Academy.

Kate Bradley (KB) confirmed that there are charges for the Foundation's advanced coaching programme, which contribute to the costs of putting on the courses. KB asked CE to forward on correspondence to confirm which coaching programme it related to.

The club confirmed that youngsters who are invited to train with the club's Academy are not charged as it is an entirely separate operation to the Foundation's soccer schools or advanced programmes.

3. AOB

Stadium screen – post-meeting update

PL tabled a question in relation to an additional stadium screen. The feasibility of a second screen has been discussed but its status remains as per the previous Fans Forum minutes: a second screen would provide visibility to an additional 7,000 fans but is not planned in the immediate future.

Focus groups

The club will be meeting Fans Forum members in smaller focus groups before the final meeting of the season to share ideas about the club's future digital strategy.

Next Fans Forum date: May 2016 (end of season).

**Issued by Newcastle United
in association with supporters.**