



Newcastle United

Fans Forum Minutes

Thursday 23 February 2017
Sir Bobby Robson Suite
St. James' Park

Club representatives	
Lee CHARNLEY	Managing Director
Nicole ATKIN	Head of Business Development
Kate BRADLEY	Head of Newcastle United 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
Mark BETHAM	Equality representative
Alan CLARK	Over-65s representative
Steve COLE	Supporters Clubs
Craig ENGLISH	Corporate representative
Peter FANNING	NUST
Steve HASTIE	NUFC Fans United
Phil LEE	East Stand representative
Jill MORRIS	Long-distance supporters
Lynne PARMLEY	NUDSA
Sharon RAVENHALL	Women's representative
Bryn TENNANT	Young persons' representative
Martin TYRRELL	Leazes Stand representative
Steve WALLWORK	Away fans' representative
Kris WOODS	Gallowgate End representative

Apologies	
Jonathan LANE	Members' representative
Wendy TAYLOR	Head of Media
Daniel THOMPSON	Milburn Stand representative

I. Introduction

Lee Marshall (LM) welcomed all attendees to the meeting and meeting protocol was outlined. Introductions were made around the table, with seven new members (five present) joining the Fans Forum.

Website launch

An update on club business was given from the previous meeting. This included a successful launch of the club's new digital platform, which was shaped by Fans Forum feedback.

Nicole Atkin (NA) confirmed that the new website - introduced in December 2016 - has had double the number of visitors than the previous site had in a like-for-like period.

LM outlined that free NUFC TV and a number of new features had proved to be very popular and that the club is inviting fans to continue offering feedback as its digital development continues.

Fan groups

The club also outlined the work of Gallowgate Flags - a fully independent group of supporters orchestrating displays at the Gallowgate End - and placed on record its thanks to all involved in the campaign for their hard work and dedication to backing the team. A second group - Wor Hyem 1892 - has recently formed to add vocal backing and the club is continuing to offer its support to both initiatives.

2. Supporter items

The club received a number of questions in relation to the current season, Rafa Benítez and the January transfer window ahead of the meeting. Accordingly, those questions were invited from the floor.

Alan Clark (AC) outlined that he had spoken to a large number of fans prior to the Fans Forum meeting and stated that reports around the January transfer window had been particularly concerning. AC asked for clarity from the club on its transfer operations.

The club confirmed that nothing had changed in regards to the manager's position, which remains as was outlined last May, when a new contract was signed.

The club outlined the difficulties that existed in bringing in signings that would have genuinely enhanced the squad during the January window, which is inherently a challenging window, but confirmed it had made firm efforts to bring in players who would improve the team.

The club stated that while there was a willingness to strike deals for the right players, they were unable to bring them to fruition at a level that served in the best interests of the club. The club recognized the disappointment, felt by all, but emphasised the categorical belief in the current squad and the players within it.

The club concluded by stressing the importance felt by all to now focus positively on the path ahead, rather than continuing to reflect backwards.

Phil Lee (PL) asked for assurances in relation to funds being available in the summer transfer window ahead of the 2017/18 season.

The club confirmed that plans were now progressing well for the summer, with manager Rafa Benítez working with Lee Charnley and the scouting team. While conversations about specific summer targets and budget are ongoing, the greater focus is presently on pushing for promotion and getting the best from its current players.

Steve Hastie (SH) identified reports about the club's transfer operations that had appeared in the Mirror newspaper, which has had a commercial agreement with the club. SH suggested that such reports had been given greater credence by supporters as a result.

The club stated that, given the relationship with the Mirror, it understood why supporters may attach more weight to stories that appeared in this particular publication. The club explained, however, that it has no editorial control or influence over this or any other newspaper.

PL stated that Rafa Benítez has been a unifying factor at the club, which was why supporters had become nervous at the end of the January transfer window.

Kris Woods (KW) asked if the club could consider releasing a statement in response to any future media reports that it believed to be inaccurate.

The club explained that with such high interest in the club and the sheer volume written about it, it wouldn't be productive to respond to every report.

The club further emphasised the importance of looking forward to the ultimate goal of promotion and that responding to every media report which raised concerns for supporters could result in the opposite effect.

AC agreed a club response would have appeared defensive and hoped that meeting minutes would allay supporters' concerns.

Steve Wallwork (SW) asked if the manager believes the current squad is strong enough to gain promotion.

The club cited recent examples where the manager had backed his players publicly. The club emphasised that its activity in the summer transfer window was geared towards creating a strong, balanced squad. The club never planned to make wholesale changes during the January window and accordingly, had benefitted from the large volume of summer signings being at the club from the beginning of the season and therefore integrating for much longer.

The club also disclosed that it had received offers for some of its players in January but had turned them down in order to maintain its current squad.

Peter Fanning (PF) explained that footage of the club's chief scout, Graham Carr sat next to Mike Ashley at a recent match had sparked further debate about the club's transfer operations.

The club explained that the owner attended matches in early January because matches afforded the best opportunity for bringing key individuals together to discuss transfers and other club business.

Bryn Tennant (BT) asked if the club would need to sell players in the summer in order to bring others in.

The club explained that it does not need, or intend, to sell key players in order to fund arrivals. However it confirmed that any funds received during the summer would contribute to the overall transfer budget.

Shirt sponsorship

The club stated that positive progress has been made in relation to a new sponsor for the 2017/18 season and that an announcement will be made as soon as the club is in a position to do so.

SW asked if that would affect the stadium name after outgoing sponsor Wonga exercised their right to buy the naming rights and return it to St. James' Park in 2012.

The club stated that the name will remain as St. James' Park and that the naming rights had not been included in discussions with potential sponsors.

The club outlined that it is in a long-term relationship with its kit manufacturer, PUMA. The club also confirmed that kits had been selected for next season, with an order to be placed shortly on kits for the following 2018/19 campaign, due to the required lead times.

Jill Morris (JM) asked how the club is performing commercially.

The club highlighted that being in the Premier League creates the best possible platform for a good commercial performance, but that nevertheless the club continued to perform solidly in this regards, with new avenues for revenue being continually explored.

The club stated that its potential shirt deal benchmarks very favorably against comparable clubs in the Premier League.

Stadium enhancements

LM stated that the club is receptive to fans' ideas on how facilities and atmosphere can be enhanced at St. James' Park and invited questions.

Martin Tyrrell (MT) questioned whether the club - if promoted - would be moving away fans to pitch level in line with a recent Premier League rule change.

GB stated that this issue was a concern for disabled supporters, who worry they would have to move. A wider discussion followed, with contributions from SW, PF, MB and others.

The club explained that in response to the rule change, a number of independent assessments had been made in relation to the safety concerns around moving away fans.

The results of such assessments, which are supported by the local authority, have been presented to the Premier League and discussions are ongoing.

Singing section

The club explained it has had informal discussions with groups including Wor Hyem 1892 in relation to a singing section.

LM noted that dedicating a section of the stadium to a group of fans would require other season ticket holders to be moved. However, the club remains supportive of efforts by Gallowgate Flags, Wor Hyem 1892 and others that have already seen the South East corner become an 'unofficial' singing section.

This area has grown naturally, with more supporters moving to it gradually.

MB suggested that the atmosphere has improved generally but believes fans across the ground are responsible for the atmosphere in their section.

LM explained that supporters in other areas of the ground - including the East Stand and Gallowgate - had shown a willingness to be involved in flag displays and supporters from across the stadium had given generously to Gallowgate Flags.

PL asked if the club could make any changes with regard to a singing section at the end of the season.

NA explained that renewal information had already been issued to supporters for next season, with January being the usual month for this process to commence. As a result, the club would need to consult with supporters much earlier if changes were to be made.

NA explained that the club was offering support to fan-led initiatives, by amplifying their messages through its website and social media channels and would continue to do so.

The club confirmed that for any supporters not in favour of a change in atmosphere or activities around them, the club will be happy to liaise with them directly to address any concerns and facilitate seat moves.

However, no recent complaints have been made by any supporter in regard to this matter.

Safe standing

PL asked if the club was in favour of a potential 'safe standing' area at St. James' Park.

SS confirmed that he and a delegation from Newcastle United had recently attended a fixture at Celtic Park to assess the 3,000-capacity rail seating area in place at the ground, which has been permitted by the SPFL and Glasgow City Council.

However, SS explained that until legislation changes in relation to standing areas in England, the club could not make any commitments on the issue.

TV scheduling / fixture changes

JM raised the issue of fixture dates changing at short notice after being selected for live TV broadcast and referenced the EFL's pledge at the start of the season to give fans 5-6 weeks' notice.

LM explained that the club had absolute sympathy for any supporter adversely affected by such changes and stated that when insufficient notice has been given, the club has made formal submissions to the EFL. However, when the EFL fix a date for a game, the club is obliged to fulfil the fixture.

Craig English (CE) queried whether the EFL's pledge was a rule.

LM explained that the pledge was made by the EFL and Sky Sports in good faith rather than being established as a rule. Unfortunately, fans had been adversely affected this season as a result of FA Cup replays, with the away trip to Brentford moved back to its original date at significantly less than five weeks' notice.

SW asked if compensation could be offered to fans who may lose money as a result.

LM explained that the club refunds tickets purchased by supporters if returned 72 hours prior to kick-off. However, regrettably, compensation could not be offered for travel and accommodation.

The club encourages supporters to consider refundable travel options but appreciates non-refundable offers booked well in advance can be significantly cheaper.

The club participated in a trial with Virgin Trains East Coast last season whereby rail tickets were changed for free as a result of fixture changes. Sadly however, Virgin Trains decided not to take the trial forward into business as usual.

3. Department updates

Facilities

Smoking and vaping

Two members reported instances of smoking inside the stadium and sought clarification on whether vaping was permitted. SC questioned if stewards could eject supporters caught smoking/vaping.

The club stated that both smoking and vaping are not permitted inside the stadium, as per ground regulations for several seasons. Stewards will be briefed to eject any supporter caught smoking or vaping/using electronic cigarettes.

East Stand facilities

SW advised that facilities in the East Stand are of a much lower standard than in the majority of the stadium and asked if the club was planning to make any changes.

Eddie Rutherford (ER) advised that the East Stand is significantly older than the rest of the stadium, with the other stands being completely redeveloped over the last 20 years.

While accepting that the design and comparative age of the East Stand presents a different set of challenges, ER confirmed that an improvement programme is being continuously rolled out around the ground and that cleanliness remains a focus in all stands.

GB advised of a flooring issue in the North East corner concourse which is affecting supporters.

ER confirmed the club will assess and monitor the area.

Public address system

Questions from supporters were received regarding the lack of clarity from the PA system in specific areas of the stadium.

ER advised that the club had recently investigated this matter and identified issues in how the system was being used, which had resulted in poor sound quality in certain circumstances. With this now rectified, improvements in sound quality have now been reported throughout the ground at recent matches. The club will continue to monitor the issues.

Big screen

As discussed in previous meetings, the club has a site in mind for a second screen and may look to installing it in the medium-to-long term.

Wheelchair storage

Sharon Ravenhall (SR) raised the issue of wheelchair storage inside the stadium.

The club encourages individual supporters to contact the club should this facility be needed.

Tickets

Tickets for disabled supporters

GB advised that disabled supporters are having difficulties ordering tickets through the club's box office, with some racking up significant telephone bills while trying to do so.

Stephen Tickle (ST) advised that the club is discussing its ticketing operations with a number of potential suppliers so that services can be upgraded. In the meantime, ST is now preparing to launch a dedicated local rate telephone number and email address to make the process fast and efficient for disabled supporters and their assistants.

GB also advised that some seats for the recent FA Cup replay with Birmingham City had been sold before season ticket holders could reserve their seats.

ST explained that due to the short timescale between the initial tie and the replay, season ticket holders were only given a very short period in which to reserve their seats. The club apologised for any inconvenience caused.

Away tickets and loyalty points

SW made the club aware that a minority of supporters appeared to be abusing the loyalty points system. A frequent example includes buying tickets and selling them without intending to go to matches, which is stopping fans from being able to attend and build up their own loyalty points legitimately.

SS advised that buying tickets and selling them on to a third party is touting, which is a criminal offence. The club accepted that monitoring third party sales is very difficult but asked supporters to assist by reporting instances to the box office when tickets are being sold illegally.

ST explained that the box office and safety and security teams will continue to work closely to monitor the system.

LM explained that the club has opened up away tickets to general sale for the first time in several seasons to make away match tickets accessible for more supporters.

With lots of interest in loyalty points, LM will be inviting Fans Forum members to be part of a club focus group, which will assess fans' ideas to develop the system.

Away Fans Fund

SW asked about the Away Fans Fund, which had previously benefitted fans travelling to away matches through a range of subsidised incentives.

LM explained that the fund was a Premier League initiative but that it has since been replaced by a £30 cap on away ticket prices at all top flight fixtures. The club explained that it had subsidised a trip for NUDSA to the Championship fixture at Preston this season using leftover funds from the previous campaign.

Safety and security

Behaviour of travelling fans

SR reported that the behaviour of some Newcastle supporters at away grounds recently had been intimidating for families and asked what support the club could give in this area.

AC asked if Newcastle United stewards attend away fixtures.

SS confirmed that Newcastle United stewards only attend if requested by the home club and that had been the case during the FA Cup fixture at Birmingham City.

LM advised that all clubs should have a reporting mechanism whereby fans can alert stewards and police to specific concerns at the stadium. Fans at St. James' Park can text the word HELP followed by the stand, row and seat of offending supporters, then the nature of the offensive behaviour, to 60070 (charged at your standard network rate).

SH advised that during previous meetings with Northumbria Police, the force had issued cards containing the details of police 'spotter' officers who travel to all Newcastle United away matches.

The club will liaise with Northumbria Police on how spotter details are made accessible to the public prior to away matches and also to explore other methods for supporters to make safe contact with spotters during matches.

SS advised any supporter experiencing difficulties at away grounds to report their concerns to Newcastle United's safety and security team, who will take up the complaint and make representations on fans' behalves. The club has the ability to ban supporters even if police action is not taken.

Potential disorder at St. James' Park

MB explained he had observed some home supporters waiting at Leazes End exits in order to wind up away fans in recent weeks.

SS confirmed the club was aware of this issue and after liaising with Northumbria Police, the club issued communications via the media to publicly discourage this behaviour. Supporters continuing to do so face the possibility of being arrested and banned from the stadium for life.

Strawberry Place

Questions were received in relation to fan safety at Strawberry Place, specifically if it can be pedestrianised at full-time in order for fans to disperse safely.

SS advised that the club did not own the road and explained that it had been pedestrianised in the past by Newcastle City Council and/or the police either to accommodate fan experience facilities or for security reasons. This included large-scale non-club events such as the Olympic Games, Magic Weekend and Rugby World Cup. SS stated that the club will make further representations to the City Council.

4. AOB

Stadium wi-fi

CE asked if the club was considering introducing stadium-wide wi-fi for supporters.

NA confirmed the club is continuing to look into options but advised it is a significant infrastructure project which requires a complex solution.

ER stated that significant investments had already been made in boosting phone signal at the stadium but this was continued to be tested by the demands of 50,000+ crowds each matchday.

LM explained that the club will continue to enhance the content across its PA system, screen and digital platforms in order to give supporters the essential in-stadia information they require.

Club in the community

The club congratulated Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) and NUFC Fans United on their joint effort to boost the Newcastle West End Food Bank, which is the largest of its kind in the country.

A collection prior to the Newcastle United v Derby County match generated three tonnes of donations from supporters. The club pledged to continue its support in promotion the campaign.

SH thanked the club and fans for its support and confirmed that the collection point will continue for all home matches with a Saturday, 3pm kick-off for the rest of the 2016/17 season.

PF believes the campaign is a reflection of the club's importance in the city and echoed SH's comments in relation to the club and its fans.

Newcastle United Foundation

SH wished to take the opportunity to praise the Newcastle United Foundation's Eurofit programme, run in conjunction with Glasgow University.

The fitness campaign is designed to help supporters of all ages to be fit and active and gain an appreciation for the health benefits of sport. The programme includes walking football, circuit training and advice on diet, health and general wellbeing.

The club will be sending the Foundation's latest Annual Review, released just last month, to Fans Forum members.

The Annual Review can also be downloaded by supporters, here:

<http://www.nufoundation.org.uk/file.aspx?id=1409>.

Next meeting date: May 2017