

Supporter Group Collective Meeting, 4th December 2019

Attendees

Sunderland AFC:	Stewart Donald (SD), Neil Fox (NF), Louise Wanless (LW), Chris Waters (CW), Jamie Lauder (JL)
A Love Supreme	Martyn McFadden (MM)
Branch Liaison Council	Jim Gilling (JG), Cath Reid (CR), Joanne Youngson (JY) Malcolm Fail (MF)
Red & White Army	Andrew Hird (AH), Dave Rose (DR), Paul Nelson (PN), Jane Hughes
SAFC LBGTQ	Sam Wise
Senior Supporters' Association	Malcolm Bramley (MB), Michelle Barraclough
Sunderland Liaison Group	Paul Andrew (PA), Mick Hillam, Steve Dean (SD), Jeff Smith (JS)

Following a supporters collective meeting on November 21, the chairman (who was not present at this meeting) was unhappy with some of the content and answers contained within the draft minutes, which he felt did not reflect the club's viewpoint.

Taking appropriate action, the chairman then asked to reconvene the meeting (on December 04), where he answered all of the queries from the first meeting and discussed a number of additional topics with the fans groups representatives who were present.

The full content of the meeting is laid out within the minutes.

CW thanked everyone for attending and hoped this meeting would be able to give some final answers that have been pending from the club

1. Matters arising

To be covered in forthcoming agenda points.

2. Finance and Governance

AH (RAWA) raised the inconsistent messages in the public domain about potential takeovers in the summer, asking for clarification, if possible.

SD confirmed not much can be revealed but it was the purchaser's decision. The intention was always to keep the current off-pitch management team at the helm, but the investors opted for loan agreement instead. They liked the City and the people but are private people. The investors picked up on the excitement of the fan base about their proposed involvement, viewing it as a business opportunity which they wanted to succeed but which would also be an incredibly high-profile investment for them. This loan agreement is currently the best option for the football club, over and above any other proposed investment opportunities

PA (SLG) ask if this would be a one-off payment or part of a long-term involvement.

SD identified 3 key factors that helped secure the investment: they were impressed with what was already being done, they could see the club's potential and they liked the individuals involved. It was the best option for the club, and not for SD personally, as this agreement has many secondary benefits associated with it: analytics, medical science, sponsorship and concert opportunities.

MM (ALS) asked if SAFC assets had been used as collateral.

SD stated the money has been loaned to Madrox and secured against all their assets which is Sunderland AFC. If the loan defaults, SD, Charlie Methven & Juan Sartori lose their money and the club gets new owners, who SD has found to be good honourable people, interested in the development of the club, he believes it would not be in their interest to sell off the club.

SD outlined possible concert opportunities at the Stadium, saying a concert at the Stadium of Light is a catalyst for revenue for the entire city and both SD & NF would be interested in bringing more concerts to Sunderland.

JG (BLC) pointed out that how the investment / take over was reported in the press did not help fans to understand the nature of the investment but acknowledged that subsequent explanations by SD had helped with this. DR (RAWA) concurred, saying that this further explanation of the investment with its associated benefits is good for fans to hear.

After a question from DR (RAWA), SD estimated the worth of the club to be approximately £30-50 million. NF reminded the meeting that investment comes with no guarantee, but everything is positive for the future. SD agreed, continuing to say the current owners didn't need the money, but this opportunity and all its associated benefits was a good deal, FPP Investments are solid partners, but all of the risk is against Madrox and its investors not the Club, it is win-win for the club and consequently supporters.

AH (RAWA) asked what the 5-year plan for the club would be. NF replied it would be steady sustainable growth on and off the pitch. SD continued saying that if we get this right, fans can expect to have a realistic shot at getting back to the premiership, but it must be managed correctly. The ship has been steadied, but still must be fully turned. Investment, concerts etc. are part of this process. We need to get out of this league and are well resourced to do this. He wants to be watching premier league football with Sunderland. After NF said the money had not yet been touched, Jeff Smith (JS) asked when it would be expected that this recent investment would be drawn upon. SD confirmed that the capital expenditure programme at the Stadium of Light and Academy has been funded internally, there had been some investment from SD in the summer to cover additional costs: increased scouting team costs, academy investment.

LW hoped that the club being on an even keel would be great news for fans to hear.

3. Football direction and Strategy

SD said SAFC's aim is to have an overall transfer surplus from transactions, improvements in the recruitment team will help with this. Some of it will be developed over time; the building of trust between staff. It is also about getting to know the league, the players available and developing a successful recruitment process, 6 more scouts have been appointed nationally for the academy, and 4 more staff employed internally at the academy.

NF explained that recruitment can be a long-term investment; the background and character of each player needs to be analysed and decisions made based on information such as will a young player be suited to moving to the north east, is he mature enough to live alone?

JG (BLC) asked if it was a completely new structure. SD confirmed a new recruitment / scouting team is in place.

NF said SAFC is an anomaly; a category 1 academy at a league one club, we cannot hold onto a player who wants to go to a premier league club, but SAFC have appearance and sell on clauses in the contracts at their new clubs. SD has, as a club, done what can be done to keep these young players, but the reality is if Liverpool, Manchester United, Spurs come calling, Governance rules say we can't stop them leaving at 14 - 15-year-old. That is why 6 scouts have been employed to develop recruitment into the academy.

PA (SLG) asked how it linked to the first team

SD appointed Phil Parkinson (PP) because he believes he is the right man for the job, he knows the league, is well connected and has a lot of experience; we are more ahead of the game, in terms of preparation for the January transfer window, than we were last year, there is a clear synergy at the club. There will be signings for the future.

NF agreed that recent performances have been disappointing and when appointing the new manager, SAFC probably spoke to everyone who has been mentioned in press but, for whatever reason, did not want to come

AH (RAWA) asked about the retention of out of contract players at the end of 2019-20. SD some contract extension options had been exercised, some contracts will be looked at in the forthcoming months, but it is not easy to offer contracts when we do not know which league we will play in next season. SD believes players at the club could not go to a better club, so the club is in a strong position to retain its best players. A new fitness coach has been brought in to work on individual fitness programmes and recovery rates within matches. There is still a lot of work to be done, but everything is in place at the club to achieve results on the pitch. We come up against big, strong teams and need to match these.

PN (RAWA) asked about preparation for the January transfer window. SD explained loan deals are easier to do as you know which players available, permanent deals must be done more carefully, identifying the correct player and looking at the wider social / practical implications of signing them.

DR (RAWA) noted that the club is at an all-time, historical low as a club, there has been a decade of bad decisions and many false dawns and while it is difficult for fans to keep the faith, attendance at both home and away matches remains good. He asked if SD had a message of hope for the fans given where we are. SD replied all off-pitch developments take time, but if the football is not good, it reflects on all other decisions. A positive to take, SD says, is that we did not cut and run, we recruited top people, invested in structure and personnel. He recognised that changing the manager was a gamble, but PP has a proven track record, and SD is putting what the manager needs around him, it might take longer than he would like but the club needs time to get there. The recruitment team is the correct one and we can bring in the right players.

SD continued saying everything behind the scenes is good, the owner didn't cut and run in the summer, the club has new investors, there is a strong recruitment team now in place and there have been overdue improvements to the magnificent facility, that is the Stadium of Light.

DR (RAWA) said Sunderland has a large fanbase and in any large fan base, there will be all elements of support that can be abusive; social media is a problem in society and at clubs across the country and can be particularly vicious in the hour after a game. There is a general problem with abuse on social media but it's not specific to Sunderland fans.

SD acknowledged that previous owners have had issues with personal abuse, as have some of the players and he had himself faced physical abuse. SD knows this can affect players who read about it, and, as a club, must protect the players as much possible, the pressure that comes from playing for Sunderland is huge LW encouraged all fans to take a stand against this abuse.

AH (RAWA) asked how the mental strength / health of the players is managed. NF said all players are offered support on an individual basis.

NF noted that when the fans gets on the team's back it makes it difficult and this makes it easier for away teams to get a positive result but there is no better place to play than at the Stadium of Light, SD commented that players who give 100% are not generally booed.

SD acknowledged we all need to be strong, roll up our sleeves and get on with it. Tony Coton is doing a great job, his team are watching many, many games each week and identifying players that can be recruited, but it is also about buying players at the right time and at the right price. Continuing that the owners had to be careful not to overreact to day-to-day ups and downs. The fans are amazing, sometimes it is the media and some ex-players making it difficult for the current playing staff.

SD and the owners are backed by good investors and thorough, independent due diligence has been carried out on the club determining it to be in a very strong position.

SD believes in the process but knows there is more work to be done. He asks fans to stick with us, be positive with us and to give us and the manager time. Sunderland is a long-term project, the football club can be great, the manager has proven success at this level, SD is rolling up his sleeves and working to get this right. If he is making the wrong decisions, even with the best of intentions, he knows he will not be around for long. He said we need time to get it right, but we must do it relatively quickly.

JG (BLC) referred to PP speaking at a recent talk-in, in which he held the room, impressed with his answers and his insight into the team. JG asked if PP could do more of these as it would be good hear the manager's views.

MB (Senior supporters) asked if the club could make more use of the official website to speak to the fans, clarifying roles of key individuals. SD confirmed he will be making future statements on the website and through other official channels.

4. Non-Football structure and Direction of the Club

PA (SLG) asked if SD was happy that the off field, organisational structure, was in place
NF confirmed Tony Davidson's departure was amicable and a result of family considerations. SAFC are in a strong place with a lean team in place to run the club. The owners are very hands on.
SD made a lot of changes after he bought the club, immediately cutting unnecessary costs. Getting to Wembley twice helped financially but streamlining is still required. The Stadium of Light is potentially a huge source of income but requires capital expenditure improvements as it is 20-year-old.

DR (RAWA) asked if it would be possible for the club to provide a structural chart of hierarchy and roles at SAFC.

Action Point: SAFC to produce a chart outlining organisational structure

5. Match Day Experience

CW: suggested a working group be created from the Fans Collective that can look at this in a more focused way, to give it a greater time commitment than is possible in this meeting.

AH (RAWA) agreed it is ongoing experience and is common for fans and, referring to matters arising from a previous meeting, asked about the potential for a smoking area to prevent people smoking in the toilets, which remains an ongoing issue.

SD agreed to look at it after a meeting of the match day experience sub-group and if, costs and safety advice are not prohibitive, he would support it in principle

AH (RAWA) returned to an action point from a previous meeting concerning the relocation of away fans which had been discussed from both an atmosphere and safety perspective.

SD confirmed that the safety team are looking at measures that can be introduced to keep fans safe; potential introduction of netting, but due to related infrastructure costs had no plans to move the way fans. NF noted that there had been a reduction in police presence in the stadium, which was welcomed.

DR (RAWA) recognised the steps that had been taken but commented that full consultation with all supporters would be required if they away fans were to be moved.

6. BLC / Foundation of Light - Mental Health Hub

JG (BLC) told the meeting that the BLC's Mental Health Hub at the Beacon of Light is a result of a change in focus of the BLC in recent times.

CR (BLC) gave a background to setting up the match day Mental Health Hub at the Beacon of Light, the fundraising activities that have helped finance it and the growing interest is growing nationally. CR has been

talking to Huddersfield Town, who have expressed an interest and asked if the BLC would support them in opening their own mental health hub. Several clubs have expressed an interest in support from the BLC to set up a mental health drop in at their stadiums. The FSA has spoken to Chelsea, Liverpool, Swansea City & Spurs about potentially setting up their own Hubs.

PA (SLG) compared it to the sensory room; an initiative beginning in Sunderland that can spread across the Country

CR (BLC) asked if the club could use its various platforms to promote the hub

JY (BLC) asked if the club would be agreeable to a national mental health / football conference being hosted at the Stadium of Light. SD congratulated the BLC on the setting up of the mental health hub and confirmed the club would help to promote it via website and social media. SF and NF confirmed the club would be happy to support the BLC hosting a national mental health hub at the Stadium.

7. Sunderland ladies

JG (BLC) recognised that the ladies team need sponsorship, stating that several branches are sponsoring individual players

SD agreed, the ladies team look like they will be promoted, and the club is supporting their bid for promotion as necessary, but the Ladies' team need more fans to support them, to make it a viable business option. SAFC are determined to get the ladies promoted, SD wants to get them on the website and find ways to increase interest.

CR (BLC) raised a question from received via social media as to why the ladies do not have their names on their shirts.

Action Point: SD will investigate lettering (or lack thereof) on the SAFC Ladies' shirts.

8. International Fans Day

JY (BLC) revealed the International fans day which will welcome Sunderland fans from around the world will take place on February 8th, 2020. It has gained momentum in the last five months and currently has 69 attendees coming from 23 worldwide destinations already registered. Both the club and BLC continue to push this on social media, the club website and through the local press. The five-day itinerary starts with a tour around the stadium then a fans' party at the Sunderland Fans Museum; SD has agreed to a talk in with the International fans who rarely get an opportunity to attend such an event.

Fans interested in this event need to register for Health & Safety of activities.

9. A.O.B

AH (RAWA) informed the meeting that Roker Report had started a crowd funding page to raise funds for the Sunderland Foodbank and Soup kitchen and had raised £8,830 in 3 days, showing once again the generosity of Sunderland fans

Following on from this, LW reminded the meeting that the Foundation of Light's 'Give a Quid' day for the is going to be on 14th December, Blackpool (H). All funds will go towards combatting social isolation