



Minutes of the Supporters Collective meeting held on Wednesday 26th May 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Meeting held in Riverview Brasserie, Stadium of Light.

Attendees

Sunderland AFC	Kristjaan Speakman (KJ), Steve Davison (SD), Oscar Chamberlain (OC), Chris Waters (CW)
Branch Liaison Council	Jim Gilling (JG), Cath Reid (CR), Phil Pollard (PP), Joanne Youngson (JY)
Red & White Army	Andrew Hird (AH), David Rose (DR), Michael Lough (ML), Ewan Moffat (EM) Jane Hughes (JH)
Senior Supporters Association	Malcolm Bramley (MB)
Supporters Liaison Group	Mike Hillam (MH), Kevin Charlton (KC)

CW welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Actions from Previous Meeting

- CW thanked fan groups for key messages put out about season cards.
- CW has joined Sunderland Together charity group.
- Card / cashless payment will be implemented. Support to be provided by Chris Waters.

Sunderland AFC Progress Report

SD reported that the first board meeting was recently held and discussed operational performance during the pandemic and set the budget for moving forward. Stadium wi-fi has been launched in the bowl, it was available to supporters at the play-off game. There were approximately 2,500 logins, some teething issues are being addressed. The club is committed to using technology to improve the match day experience.

Concerts are being secured for next year. Promoters are keen to come as the stadium is well suited to hosting concerts. Engagement from across the city is a key component of this.

SD is happy with how the season card campaign went, there are approximately 21,000 purchased for next season. Hospitality sales have gone very well. There has been less engagement with younger fans and this is in common with many other clubs and a hangover from the pandemic / streaming views

JG asked when new season cards would go on sale. Season tickets will go on sale again after refunds have been completed for 20/21 non renewals, probably in a couple of weeks.

JY asked if the DD option would continue. SD said it was currently being looked at but hopefully it would be an option. Note: We have a meeting next week to finalise arrangements for the next phase of the season card campaign.

CW confirmed the play-off semifinal second leg had sold out. CW noted that the previous work on the match day bubble by the supporters working group with Steve Neill was crucial in getting fans back. Supporters adhered to the rules, arrived at their allocated time, everyone was seated by 15.25. Fans were keen to be back, and it went well. SD noted the digital ticketing process worked well but CW is keen to work with all fan groups on familiarising fans with how to use their digital tickets. Phase 1 sales went well, however Phase 2 demand far outstripped supply. SD believes this is the first time ticketmaster had worked on a pod system like this, agreeing the first day was a success but there



were challenges on Friday with the volume of fans purchasing tickets. Fans at the game were a credit to the club and SD thanked them.

PP acknowledged the great work by Steve Neill and the ticket office staff throughout the process.

In the June board meeting, policies will be reviewed and updated, budget planning will continue, and the next phase of investment will be planned.

To be successful going forward the club must properly represent the community and build trust. The football club has experienced the worst period on the pitch in our history. It is also clear that the city has ambitious plans for redevelopment of the city centre and a vision for a more positive modern outlook. With a new ownership and management team it seemed a good time to revisit our, culture, identity and purpose. We want to retain our historic values but also look forward to becoming a modern forward looking football club at the heart of the broader community of the city and beyond. We have employed some external consultants to ensure we get an independent and complete view. Over the summer they will be engaging with staff at the club, supporters, businesses, and local institutions to get the full picture.

SD is excited about the new home shirt which will be launched at the beginning of July.

There are 3 long-term project areas for future investment, some of which will be in place for the start of the 2021/22 season. There will be electronic points of sale at all kiosks, it will be cashless within the stadium. This will significantly reduce queuing times. Redevelopment of the Academy has begun, with internal changes to accommodate new teams. Investment is needed to help teams work together and to update facilities. Hospitality will be improved; executive boxes and corporate facilities are being upgraded. SD said there will be further infrastructure and technology investments in the future.

Football update

KS believes the team has shown, at times, the type of football we want to play; that a long-term approach must also meet short term goals. The club is beginning to build high quality football domains. More off pitch appointments are expected, which will be integrated with elite performance on the pitch.

The Ladies' team application for the Championship has been submitted and a decision is pending. The club will underwrite the cost of a functioning women's team and recognise that this will cost more in the Championship.

The squad review has been completed. An analytical approach has been used to build a youthful energetic team for the future. Tough decisions have been made for the long-term future of the team. A player recruitment model has been developed. It is an evidence-based system that will build a bespoke analytical player recruitment model within 5 years.

KS outlined the Academy of Light development areas; pitch maintenance at both the Academy and the Stadium is now part of normal operations; the pitch will be replaced each year. KS acknowledged the work of Bob Murray and John Fickling in establishing the academy and providing space to build a sustainable club.

A lot of planning has been done on player recruitment, and now divisional status is known, this can move forward. A football philosophy has been identified; industrious players, who make bold decisions and have creativity. Post Covid, there could be unknown factors in the transfer market with agents, players and clubs. KS will look at the details and see if things are being delivered.

DR acknowledged that the football set-up seems to have been well thought out and asked if there was a specific model from another club that was being used as a template to success.

KS was wary of cutting and pasting a previous model, preferring to use past experiences to develop a successful strategy. It is all about working together to develop strategies and an organisational structure



that work for Sunderland AFC; the head coach & data analysis team need to work together to ensure an element of future proofing.

Pre-season is being clarified at the moment. Teams are making decisions later than usual as there is still some uncertainty about where teams will be allowed to travel. We will be taking a sensible approach given the current climate.

MB raised the issue of information vs consultation, agreeing that while some things need to remain confidential, there are issues fans can be informed about. MB referred to the gaps in recent season ticket Q&A information that caused issues for fans groups and the club. This could have been partially alleviated if fan groups had been consulted.

SD agreed it is the intention to consult when possible, but time constraints can hinder this, as with the season card announcement. The aim is to have the best outcome for everyone.

EM asked about the price increase for next season's season card. SD could not confirm prices but said not to expect a big increase.

Match day Experience Survey Presentation

SD explained that the intention of the survey was to find out what were the most important matchday experience activities to fans. The board is trying to base decisions by using data and evidence. There were almost 12,000 respondents. SD acknowledged the questionnaire may have been too long on this occasion.

JY supported the use of more surveys going forward as it helped fans feel included.

SD reported that two areas were most important to supporters and all demographic sub-groups throughout the survey:

Catering including food & drink options, pricing and waiting time.
Concourse facilities including turnstile queuing, mobile signal and toilet cleanliness.

A further 1,500 comments were submitted by supporters. All individual feedback will be populated and given further consideration.

CR made a request for baby changing facilities within the stadium.

KC asked about the plans for an outside smoking area. SD did not rule it out, but recognised the difficulties surrounding checking fans in and out had to be overcome.

SD summarised the survey's main findings regarding transportation; the park and ride is used by a lot of fans from outside of the SR postcode, SD is aware of the challenges surrounding transport and this needs more investigation. The club would like to engage with more supporters outside the area and work alongside the branches in providing more transport options.

Most fans go to a pub in the city before the game, many arrive later to the ground after an extra pint.

JG described the highly social element of pre-match drinking, fans meeting friends in the pub.

SD would like to see a higher proportion of fans to come earlier into the stadium.
CW mentioned that over 75% of the survey supporters are arriving 30 minutes before kickoff. The club are looking at offering incentives to fans to arrive at the ground earlier but appreciate that both the stadium environment and offerings need to compete with the local pubs and restaurants.



Supporters Collective Meeting

AH queried whether the proposed footbridge from the City Centre would impact positively or negatively on arrival times, given the pre-match routine of supporters.

SD agreed it could exacerbate the problem if the club does not respond to it. SD is aware that prices inside the stadium are not competitive and the club are looking at addressing this.

ML believes the stadium does not have a specific identity, being a soulless bowl at times.

SD would like to have more engagement on improving the concourse environment. It must be an environment fans want to be in. Initiatives at Tottenham / Macclesfield were cited as examples as well as using local projects to improve the environment.

JY & CR agreed, suggesting engaging local schools and art groups in this. The Red and White Army has some artwork initiatives on hold, which can be given the go ahead. SD was keen to engage with the local community in developing and improving the concourses.

EM suggested more shelving on the concourse would be useful, allowing fans to put their refreshments down.

DR mentioned that the EFL had worked with the Fan Experience Company which has considerable expertise in this area and could provide valuable insight. DR to arrange an introduction to Fan Experience Company.

ML asked about plans to retain 16 – 20 year-olds and suggested further development of the Roker End. Many young people feel disengaged, and the traditional rite of passage has been lost.

SD agreed these fans need to be engaged. Young people do not accept anything that is passive, there needs to be active engagement of teenagers.

DR has seen ultras across Europe engaging with the teenagers; making flags etc., becoming part of the fan movement.

PP asked if anything can be done with the Foundation of Light to be involved in engaging the younger generations.

SD wants to build a stronger relationship with the Foundation. The Foundation of Light is very good at engaging younger fans. There is work still to be done with teenagers.

EM suggested setting up a working group to address the issue. SD agreed.

The survey results on the Fanzone were as expected; weather in the North East is an issue, it needs to be covered / indoors. It does provide the opportunity to target different groups with different activities.

AH suggested looking at Tranmere Rovers' Fanzone.

JG pointed out that some League one clubs have better fan zones than SAFC, with covered areas & live music.

CR saw the Fanzone grow in popularity when it was moved to the Foundation of Light, where a range of facilities and activities are available.

SD knows the Family Zone needs love, attention and investment.

When asked if the priority for next season was improving the stadium concourses or the Fanzone, some believed the stadium is a priority, others thought the Fanzone.

On the way forward, SD said there will be improvements in pricing & quality of refreshments, with a cashless payment system. More engagement was needed to improve the concourse, to attract younger fans, develop the Fanzone & to work with specific fan demographics.

PP said the survey can be used as a baseline that is periodically reviewed. SD believes the club must be led by what fans want especially related to the matchday experience.



Board Representation

The Red and White Army had received questions from members around the makeup of the ownership group, AH asked for details of roles and responsibility of the new board.

A number of new directors were appointed to the board following the last board meeting. They then passed their director's test with the FA and were subsequently appointed, and we made the public announcement on 6th May. Maurice, Juan and Simon have been appointed to ensure the interests of all the new ownership group are fully represented. SD was appointed as the Chief Operating Officer. This will enable the club to make more operational decisions at the SAFC board meeting without referring matters to the Mercator holding company. This will eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy.

KLD said he has the power to make the decisions and run the club at the last meeting, DR asked if the balance of power across the club had changed after Kyril Louis-Dreyfus talked of an ownership group.

SD replied KLD is the main shareholder. There is a shareholder agreement outlining how the company will operate; KLD can make some decisions unilaterally, other decisions require shareholder agreement.

JG asked if existing non-executives were still on the board. SD confirmed Dave Jones, Tom Sloanes are non-executive board members.

Club Finances

As SD had said previously he would not comment on the financial dealings of previous ownership groups. Fortunately, as a UK company the accounts are published annually which enables the public to review the finances of the Football club every year. It should be remembered that during the last year the football club sustained substantial operational losses as a result of the pandemic which required all the owners to fund the operations of the football club. The extent to which this occurred will be included in the next set of annual accounts.

SD also confirmed that there was nothing in the share purchase agreement that impacted or altered the financial loans between SAFC and Madrox.

Since becoming the main shareholder Kyril along with the other current owners are investing in the football club and this has included investment in the infrastructure of Academy as well as the Stadium of Light and in the recruitment of key staff in the Academy and Black Cat House

Sale of Young Players

AH noted that a £3.5 million profit, in the 2020 accounts, from Academy sales was used for day to day running costs and asked what measures were being put in place to stop the sale of academy talent and how players would be retained.

KS explained clubs run an academy to provide elite opportunity for local players, develop players for playing minutes on the pitch, and to create potential assets. Young players will have different reasons for participating at each age. The club has to be aware of individual aspirations and opportunities. There must be a strategy to retain players / parents, be a positive narrative about SAFC role in this and change the recent trend. Many local players want to play for their local club. Youth development has to be collaborative and inclusive. The Academy must be the right place for each player and players have to be able to see a pathway to success. KS has the responsibility to lead a team capable of demonstrating to parents their child is valued by the club and Sunderland is the right club for them.



At Birmingham, KS had youth players involved in first team activities on match days, ML asked if that would be considered. It is an option, but KS said it must be appropriate for each player's development.

Supporter Appointed Representation on the Board

SD appreciated this is a topic of importance to the supporter groups, especially since the recent debacle around the European Super League. SD is also aware that the government has instigated a fan led review of the governance of football, which may make recommendations around how football clubs should operate going forwards. It is hoped that all will all get the potential to contribute to this review.

SD was aware there have been times in the past where there has been great distance and alienation between the SAFC board and the supporters – this isn't something we want to see repeated. We already have established Supporter Collective meetings although appreciate some were cancelled prior to the latest takeover. As a football club we welcome the opportunity for structured discussion between the supporters and the club.

We all have a common aim and want Sunderland to be as successful as possible over a long-term sustained period. We are therefore proposing to set up a joint working group over the period of the Government Review. Our aims would be:

- To revisit the current supporter engagement to ensure we have the best and most effective arrangements to achieve long-term sustained success.
- Ensure we do our best to represent the requirements and best interests of Sunderland football club and the community and do our best to influence the Government Review.
- Oversee the implementation of any changes in engagement resulting from the government recommendations.

Obviously as part of this review all engagement models will be considered including supporter representation on the board.

DR agreed a working group to discuss fan involvement on the board was a good idea, highlighting changes at Liverpool FC, where a written agreement has been drawn up between Spirit of Shankly and the club regarding fan representation. Change will be coming to football governance. The fan-led review is an opportunity to establish an independent regulator and could provide the potential for a golden share for fans to protect heritage. This also could be a significant challenge for the individual supporter on the board, however it feels like this is the direction of travel for football, so it is good that the club wants to be ahead of the curve on this.

SD is happy to discuss it further, aware that there are other stakeholders across the city; university local authority, non-football fans, who can also be involved.

JY did not think a fan on the board is needed as engagement at Sunderland AFC is good.

JG believes the club are already ahead of the curve with the engagement meetings and these potentially have more value than a fan on the board.

PP suggested that it may be difficult to select someone with the necessary board skill sets from fans groups and it may be more appropriate to ensure supporter voice is heard at board level rather than supporter representation.

JY asked if there were women on the board and whether this had been considered. SD confirmed diversity on a board is good, and boards with greater diversity have generally been more successful.



Ticketmaster - Play Off Semi-Final Ticketing

CW explained that the play-off semifinal ticket sales was a new experience for the club as demand rarely exceeds supply at the Stadium of Light. September's match day bubble collaboration helped in the preparation for the game.

Over 9,000 tickets were sold in Phase 1. 850 tickets went on sale in Phase 2. There was confusion over the website queuing system; the queue was to get on the website not to buy tickets. When attempting to buy tickets, an error message was sent if another fan had those tickets in their basket. CW agreed that the messages on the site could have been clearer to avoid the confusion.

EM suggested seats could have been removed from sale once they were in a basket and returned if the purchase was not completed.

CW agreed the error message gave the wrong impression that tickets were available. Fans have suggested that the number of tickets required could be allocated rather than selected.

CR had several issues with branch members, particularly for disabled fans. Fans could have been allocated tickets in the West Stand, some were in the Premier Concourse.

JG said Ticketmaster had received some bad press, but they did a tremendous job in a unique set of circumstances, as did the ticket office staff.

MB placed on record the work of CW for all his efforts to help fans. He has done a tremendous job.

Any Other Business

MH asked when the ticket office would reopen. SD said no decision has yet been made.

PP asked that nothing be put on message boards until the release of minutes by the club, so that communication to all groups is consistent.

CW said minutes from all these meetings will be put on safc.com as well as fan group sites going forward.

KC asked if there were any plans for live streaming for U23 & Ladies games. OC said there were plans for it but it would be dependent on the league the Ladies will play in (which would be subject to broadcast restrictions) and facilities available at away clubs.

Actions from this Meeting

- A Concourse Artwork working group to be established.
- A fanzone working group to be set up including representation from the Foundation of Light.
- A working group to ensure positive engagement with the government review and to consider options for better supporter engagement and the potential for supporter representation on the board.
- Family Zone working group to be set up.

Next Season's Meetings Schedule

Meetings will be scheduled for September, November, February and April, returning to 4 per year. The Senior Supporters group will have a second representative and CW will re-invite the Disabled and Escort group to the meetings.

SD thanked everyone for attending and presented Chris Waters with the BLC's Unsung Hero Award. CW thanked everyone and said as a Sunderland supporter it is a pleasure to help fellow fans.