

Notes of Sheffield Wednesday Supporters Engagement Panel

Date: 13 February 2021

Time: 9.00am, via Zoom

In Attendance

Panel Groups: Chris Clayton (North West Owls), Dave Higgins (Wednesday Ladies), Simon Hodgkinson (North Yorkshire Owls), Paul Holmes (Wednesdayite), Martin Pryor (West Midlands Owls), Ashley Rogers (Wednesday Week), Steve Scotthorne (Retford and Worksop SWFC Supporters Club), Jon Wakefield (South West South Wales Owls), Steve Walmsley (Sheffield Wednesday Supporters Trust), Eve Winstanley (Hoyland Owls), Paul Woolfson (London Owls)

Panel Individuals: Dave Buttery, Kerrie Footit, Paul Hodgetts, Philip Rushforth, Saif Salih, Alan Smith, Joel Sorby, Ben Wier

From the club: Dejphon Chansiri (Chairman), Trevor Braithwait (Director of Communications & Chair)

Welcome and Introduction

TB welcomed new members to the panel: SH, CF, KF, SS

TB stressed that the supporter panel strategy is very much a two-way process to avoid replicating regular Q&A engagements of the past. The club welcomes all ideas, initiatives and proposals from the panel. TB outlined the importance of a Terms of Reference (ToR) to which the panel agreed.

ACTION: TB to collaborate with the Football Supporters Association (FSA) who will assist in this process. A draft ToR will be distributed to the panel for agreed sign off.

The ToR relevance is underlined by an issue arising from the introductory gathering of the panel on 23 January. A verbal agreement was made that no reporting of the process would take place until agreed and signed off by the panel to ensure accuracy and avoid potential miscommunication. A discussion was held regarding a statement on social media seemingly made by the Supporters Trust (it has since transpired it was made by a member of the Trust) following 23 January. The club and members of the panel said this statement breached the agreement and also contained numerous inaccuracies. DC explained he did not feel comfortable to proceed given the agreement in place and the absence of an explanation from the Trust. SW was asked for his views, the Trust refuted both claims, and the panel was informed that SW would have to report back to his board for guidance. After further discussions with no resolution, the panel suggested that in the absence of an explanation, the Trust should stand down in order for the agenda to commence. SW took the decision to leave.

ACTION: The club were since informed by the Trust that this matter was referred to the FSA. The Trust suggested a mediation process in which the club was happy to partake in a bid to resolve this issue and move forward in a positive way. A mediation meeting took place on Wednesday 3 March, attended by the club, the Trust, the FSA and two members of the panel, PR and KF. The Trust have requested the following to be included in these notes:

“It is unfortunate that there were some missteps in communications between the Trust and the Engagement Panel/Club following the introductory gathering of the Engagement Panel on 23 January 2021, the Trust accepts it bears a part of the responsibility for that and apologises to the club and the other Panel members. The results of these missteps were not helped by the fact that there were no minutes kept of the introductory gathering held on 23 January to serve as an accurate record of the meeting. The Panel is in the early days of its formation

and this is something that will be useful for all parties to learn from. The Trust did not intend for the Trust Update to its members (dated 29 January 2021) to be published on one element of social media, the Trust acknowledges that this publication caused some difficulties for the club and for Panel members, we apologise for the difficulties caused. The Trust fully acknowledges and accepts that the club, and some members of the Panel, may believe that some of the Trust update was inaccurate.”

The club pointed to its original engagement strategy statement of January 20, explaining that January 23 was an introductory gathering and an overview would only be published in formal meetings thereafter. The panel, the club, the Trust and the FSA consider the matter closed and all parties would like to place on record their thanks to Ashley Brown of the FSA.

Agenda previously set by the panel commenced.

Strategy

Club Strategy - What is the Short, Medium and Long Term Plan for SWFC?

Can the chairman outline his vision for the next 5 years and how the club plan to achieve this?

DC opened by saying please bear in mind the language barriers and sometimes he will not always have the right words and some words can be misinterpreted. Moving to the first agenda point, DC said he has addressed this situation in detail in media briefings and club statements but was happy to reiterate. DC said football is a unique business with budgets made on a season by season basis, not the same as a regular business. Planning too far ahead is very difficult depending on divisional status. DC stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted significantly on future planning regardless, not just at SWFC but football clubs around the world. DC explained the club did its best to push for promotion in 15/16 and 16/17 but fell short so had to step back and reassess. A rebuilding process was necessary but there are no guarantees in football. DC said of course he is aware of the criticism of recruitment but it is easier to judge any player with hindsight. Every player wants to give their best and sometimes players prove to be right for the club and sometimes not. Players cannot just be let go if transfers do not work out, football is not like normal business because contracts are in place. DC said the club came close to the Premier League twice, and after that had to rebuild. Every club has the same ambitions, those with parachute money have the advantage but every signing has been made with the best intention.

The football will always come first and that budget has to be separate to day to day running of the club. DC said in the back office he has and will always try to improve the club on every level where possible. DC stated that revenues have been higher than any time in the past pre-pandemic and the club will always look at every which way to generate revenue. Regarding the stadium, DC explained its age, design and location makes it difficult to facilitate particular improvements but will always improve areas where necessary and feasible.

The panel asked: Who are the senior management team? DC listed the SMT:

Academy Manager: Steven Haslam

Club Secretary: Lindsey Hinton

Director of Communications: Trevor Braithwait

Executive Head Chef: Rob Cox

Finance Director: John Redgate

General Manager: Alastair Wilson

Head of Community Programme: Marcus Brameld

Head of ICT: Jonathan Price

HR Manager: Louise Carpenter

Operations Manager: Richard Stanford

Ticketing Refunds

Ticketing refunds (Season tickets and away tickets): An obvious area of concern for many fans (most of whom understand the club's predicament). Would the club consider appointing or giving specific responsibility to a named 'Ticket Refund Officer'? A point of contact for fans in hardship.

Could the club, via the TRO, issue weekly updates on the current refunds (%ages done, still to do etc)?, could this panel help with this? Or get volunteer fans to call season ticket holders at weekends /evenings to assist the club.

DC thanked the panel for these suggestions. DC talked through the complexities of the switch to a new ticketing system, with associated issues that have significantly slowed the process. The club issued a detailed statement outlining the situation and DC has reiterated in recent media interviews that everyone who has applied for a refund will receive one, even if he were to leave the club.

DC said that few clubs would issue regular updates on progress in terms of a timeline of refunds and some clubs have not issued refunds at all, instead offering iFollow passes. DC said he wishes to facilitate all refunds. DC apologised but does not feel that such a reporting process would be fair on those who are yet to receive a refund. DC said staff are working as hard as possible within the constraints of the system and the current situation and underlined his commitment to honouring every refund.

DC said staff speak to supporters by telephone and email and these lines will always be open as points of contact. DC thanked anyone who would consider a voluntary role but explained the time required for anyone to become conversant with the ticketing system and the required dedicated training. DC totally understands the fans' concerns and said all he can do is his best for both sides.

ACTION: Staff are currently working from home and will continue to engage by all means possible with supporters. All emails will be answered.

The Future as a Wednesday Fan – Football in a Post Covid World

Are there plans to invest in the infrastructure and schemes to make them feel part of the SWFC family? The supporters of the future. What's the plan for the club to welcome the future generations and going forward, keeping them coming back? How are the club intending on building stronger bridges to community?

DC outlined the club's more recent community outreach such as building Owls in the Park into one of the most successful football community events in the country, alongside other dedicated occasions such as WAWAW Fun Day and significant resource injected into the relocation and restructure of the Family Zone. The club has welcomed local businesses to offer products in the Megastore. The club wishes to support the local community in every feasible way and will continue to explore initiatives to do so. DC said his intention is to work hand in hand with local businesses where possible to generate revenues for both sides, with a policy to join forces with SWFC fans first before going elsewhere. DC stressed his intention is for SWFC to be perceived a family club while acknowledging there are areas for improvement.

DC said we want to engage with the community young and old and if the club can offer help in any way in the community, we will try our best to do so. DC encouraged the panel to assist with that strategy. DC said it is another frustration of the pandemic that the players have had to cut back on their community engagements,

particularly over the last Christmas period, and the pandemic has led to cancellation of Owls in the Park for two successive years. The club have adapted where possible, engaging in a raft of community activities, such as the players and staff reaching out to supporters of all ages by telephone – this has continued behind the scenes following the initial dedicated day that attracted significant media exposure. The club have also supported and actively promoted a range of physical and mental health platforms available to the community during lockdown. Working in tandem with the Community Programme, club staff members delivered hundreds of food hampers to Wise Old Owls members over the holiday period. The club have embarked upon numerous strands of support, some in the public domain and some not, and have also reached out to the community by underlining the commitment to help local people in any way possible given the everyday effects of COVID-19. The club have also worked consistently over the lockdown periods with local and national charities, helping to raise much-needed funds and spreading key messages. The panel complimented the club's social media output and outreach and suggested further ideas and initiatives.

ACTION: The club is committed to increasing and enhancing its community engagement and will amplify work with all stakeholders internally and externally to achieve this in the short and long term. Joined up initiatives with the panel to be explored. TB to take that feedback back to the social media team and explore the feasibility of ideas suggested involving video production focusing on matchday staff members of the 'unsung heroes' ilk.

If post Covid, we all have to be in the ground at 2pm for a 3pm kick-off – what will we do, how will the club entertain us, encourage us to increase in-ground spending? Above the current £2 average (as previously mentioned by the chairman)

The panel suggested various different food outlets at the ground, supporting recognised brands and products on matchday and designated club staff to oversee and incentivise on each stand to try and increase productivity. The panel said a regular complaint is speed of service. So whichever stand is the most productive, staff get a benefit for example, create competition and incentives.

The panel also suggested 'pop up' food outlets in or around the footprint of the stadium, perhaps behind the North or South Stand to try and attract people and their children into the ground rather than purchasing from the vans outside. These vendors that would be going to fairs and fetes but for the pandemic have lost business and this would support them, while the club takes a concession.

DC thanked the panel for the suggestions. He said that last year the club tried to improve the number of kiosks on the Kop and North Stand but were held back because of regulations. DC said he is committed to offering a variety of food outlets but it is important to balance the cost of the investment to satisfy regulations against revenues. DC said the club had sought permission to convert the North Stand car park into a 'beer garden' of sorts with a variety of food outlets and entertainment but again regulations prevented this in addition to the consideration of investment versus revenue. DC expressed the club's frustrations but pledged this remains on the radar on an ongoing basis.

ACTION: TB said he will consult with the respective senior managers to report back on the details of the regulations and licenses required. Managers to possibly attend future meetings.

TB referred to the panel's concerns over the matchday experience for when supporters return and stressed that all ideas are open for consideration and full feedback will be given accordingly.

ACTION: All initiatives and ideas from the panel welcome and to be discussed and/or submitted at future meetings. The club is committed to improving the matchday experience where possible as we hopefully look forward to the return of supporters to the stadium next season.

DC also suggested that the panel may wish to form 'sub groups' focusing on specific areas of the club such as the matchday experience and bring suggestions and ideas to future meetings.

Club Hierarchy

Who is running the Club on a day to day basis? With Mr Chansiri in Thailand and the absence of any CEO or COO, who's making the decisions? Could these people be invited on a regular or to answer pertinent questions to future meetings?

DC explained he has an experienced senior management team with whom he has daily contact and day to day decisions are made as a collective. DC makes board level decisions. DC stressed he is working harder in Thailand than he would were he in Sheffield. DC expressed his frustration at not being able to facilitate his normally regular UK visits given the pandemic.

ACTION: Panel meetings will evolve over time, including the possibility of senior staff attending meetings where applicable and relevant to the agenda.

The operating structure of the club, to also include the structure of the club, who are the key personnel and their areas of responsibility. Can their contact details along with their roles be published on the club website?

DC outlined the roles of the senior management team as per the above and their areas of responsibility. Contact details for all departments are currently on the club website.

ACTION: Department heads to be added to the website individually.

Are there any plans for a restructure and employment of middle management to help the running of the club on a day to day basis? What's the long-term situation with advisors?

DC emphasised he has an experienced senior management team with many years of football experience in place. He said the club have invested significantly in the development of staff to strengthen skillsets and encourages his whole team to think 'outside the box' and not just focus on football. He also welcomes business proposals from non-football individuals or organisations if beneficial to the club. He stressed again that if he feels any change is necessary, he would always make that or any other changes in the best interests of the club immediately. The debate touched on the situation of advisors which DC said he has explained in detail before and will willingly explain again in the next or future meeting/s as a stand-alone agenda item.

Any Other Business

The Panel asked about any issues concerning the underfloor heating that led to the postponement of the Swansea fixture. DC explained that the heating system presented serious problems in January. Strenuous efforts were made on an ongoing basis to overcome these problems, internally and externally. However, with little work being possible on the pitch given the freeze during the second half of the Wycombe game and the subsequent falling temperatures, the match referee postponed the game before Swansea made the long trip to Sheffield. The requirement of a replacement main boiler system will take a significant period of time given the complexities of the system.

TB and DC thanked everyone for their attendance and the meeting was closed.

Date of next meeting to be confirmed.

Notes and Observations

The panel have since noted the following:

“We readily acknowledge the inherent unpredictabilities of running a professional football club. We also concede that the effects of the pandemic and uncertainty over our league status have blown off course any imminent prospects of a return to the Premier League. For this reason, we would like to see, at least in outline, a more clearly defined and targeted development plan aimed at survival in the Championship or a first season promotion from League One.”

DC has asked for more specific questions which he will address within the realms of sensitivity at the next meeting/s.

Regarding the matchday experience, the panel has also since put forward suggestions such as BeerJet UK & Ireland and the Yoyo app with ideas and video links such as Caffè Nero’s award winning payments and loyalty app. The panel suggested local sponsorship deals for faster beer dispensaries with the likes of Thornbridge and requested these ideas to be discussed in detail at a future meeting/s.

In summary, from the club’s perspective, engagement of this level has never before taken place at SWFC, the club is committed to make this strategy a success. All parties note that the conversation can stray from agenda items but the aim moving forward will be for meetings to stay to the agenda, presented by the panel, so not to elongate the length of meetings and to aid the reporting process. AOB will cover issues of time sensitivity. The club has sought guidance from the EFL and FSA in terms of structure and reporting and will publish overviews/notes such as these from every formal meeting on the SWFC website as points of reference and in the interests of full transparency. The EFL has highlighted this engagement strategy as good practice and the club, in full collaboration with the panel, look forward to building a firm foundation for the future. The club places on record its thanks to every supporter group and individual who applied to be part of this evolving process.