

Date: 27th March 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), Darren Moore (first team manager)

*** Darren Moore has since been taken ill as a result of COVID-19 – from everyone at the club and everyone on the panel, get well soon gaffer.**

Approval and matters arising

Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2021 were approved as a true and accurate record by all parties in attendance. TB and the panel agreed that community engagement items requested would be included in these minutes as set out below. TB has met with Richard Stanford and Rob Cox on licensing regulations and available space around the stadium and both senior managers have expressed a desire to attend a future meeting to speak directly with the panel to explain in detail.

TB stressed the engagement process is very much a two-way platform and not a sole Q&A with the chairman. The club are more than happy to take questions on all matters but encourage ideas, feedback and potential initiatives from the panel. This forms part of the Terms of Reference (ToR) document shared prior to this meeting and distributed to the panel immediately after. ToR was drafted by TB following consultation with the Football Supporters Association (FSA), whom the club would like to thank.

Fan/community engagement

All parties recognise the importance of engagement, from which this process stemmed. The panel requested a snapshot of engagement items following the previous meeting: TB sets out the below:

- Announcement of 'A Helping Hand' initiative where SWFC offer assistance in the community to supporters impacted by COVID-19
- Lee Bullen received EFL national award for contacting and arranging a private meeting with a supporter suffering with his mental health as a result of the pandemic
- Continuation of players contacting supporters through lockdown
- Media team coordinating and producing personal player video messages to supporters and bespoke letters from the club to help with a range of varying requests
- Adam Reach engaged with three local schools in a virtual Zoom call as part of World Book Day

- Andre Green conducted a virtual seminar with aspiring youngsters on the path to becoming a professional footballer
- Sam Hutchinson conducted an hour-long Q&A with Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) post-graduates as part of the club's ongoing relationship with SHU.
- Promoted club partner Cadbury's project with personalised chocolate bars posted to our Wise Old Owls.

New Business (agenda set by panel)

Season Tickets 21-22 panel points for discussion:

- *Range of options to season ticket holders regarding their unused 20/21 season ticket account (as was done for 19/20) and that one of the options should be a full refund*
- *Rethink ticket pricing strategy in order to try to re-engage with supporters, even if we retain Championship status. Look at an offer of compensation to those who rollover into 21/22 or beyond*
- *If relegated, adopt a ticket pricing strategy that is commensurate with football at that level, this would involve significant reductions compared to 20/21 prices*
- *If relegated, 20/21 season ticket holders who rollover to 21/22 should be offered some form of compensation as they did not purchase their season ticket to watch League One football at expensive Championship prices*
- *The club make a public statement on the progress of 19/20 refunds – how many refunds have been made, how many are left to complete and the approximate date when the process will be completed*

DC thanked the panel and stressed that whatever the future holds, all parties must try and achieve what is best for the club and the fans. DC said we are trying our best to get through the refund process, we cannot commit exactly but aim to hopefully finish at the end of May in what has been an extremely challenging football season. DC said we are currently looking to the future and potential options – he reiterated that credits will be issued for 20/21 Season Tickets as previously communicated. Regarding the prospect/impact of relegation, DC said everyone at the club is 100% focused on staying in the Championship. As leader, DC said he must believe this can be achieved. DC said in the event of relegation, pricing will be realistic and he is happy to answer all questions on ticketing matters at the end of the season. DC said of course there are plans for the future and they would be better addressed once the season is over.

General ticket pricing

DC said he is open to reducing prices but the club must be sustainable, the owner cannot continually make up shortfalls. He said no problem to raise the questions but invited the panel to offer solutions/alternatives in addition to simply reducing prices. DC is happy for the club to break even, not concerned with profit, but he must protect the club.

Further debate was held on ticketing and DC explained the current situation is challenging because of the impact of COVID-19 and the team's position, and said he has overall responsibility for the club and wants the fans and club to be together. DC appreciates the support of all fans and acknowledges that fans will want cheaper tickets and/or rebates if in League One but added if we were promoted would the same principle apply, he said of course not and he would never ask that but it should be fair for both sides.

DC stressed everyone at the club is working as hard as possible to generate revenue across all areas in the current situation and we are open to all tangible suggestions. He said he is aware that some fans want him to leave but repeated that he is doing the best he can for SWFC and helping the club survive in the most trying of circumstances.

The panel agreed there are two sides to consider and aim to work together and build a shared approach. The panel voiced concerns that 55% of supporters requested refunds from 19/20, that is not a minority, they are genuinely concerned relationships have been damaged and one way for fans to communicate their message is to ask for a refund. Some will genuinely need that money because of the impact of the pandemic. The panel said we all have to think about how we have got to this position and how to avoid it in the future and sustainability is crucial. The panel said they realise no one can demand reduced prices and not recognise the impact on the club. They can help on how to begin to build the shared understanding about what the fans think is realistic in terms of what they can contribute and what DC can contribute as no one can demand DC must spend his money on the club. The panel said we all need to look how we can increase revenue by increasing attendances rather than just increasing prices, conversations would be helpful over what the panel can help with in working together to connect fans and the club over realistic expectations to build a sustainable future.

DC said he is happy to follow suggestions if the books can be balanced but there are no guarantees in football. If any proposals protect the fans and the club, DC happy to accept.

It was agreed the FSA ticketing charter, which was published three days ago, can be discussed at a future meeting when the immediate horizon is clearer.

TB said if the panel wish to produce a draft viable document based on previous and current questions that is fine. TB said all clubs are in contact with each other on a daily basis sharing good practice and information, we are all facing the same strains with revenues decimated. He said the club is receptive to all ideas and initiatives, it would be remiss not to be.

The panel said they will take these points away. Both parties agreed the engagement strategy is in its early stages so agreeable processes will evolve. The panel said they are formulating their own separate strategy meetings which the club welcome. The panel said they have a collective of expertise and knowledge within so they can look at different aspects, but more importantly see this as a two-way conduit, stressing that no one is here to antagonise, they are here to help where possible.

DC said he is not expecting a full business plan or similar, just an outline in principle to determine if any particular proposal from the panel could work. DC said thank you for wanting to help, this is one of the reasons why we set up this panel, to help the club, not the owner as the club will always remain. He said the club wants to have good engagement with the fans.

There was a further debate on general engagement and the panel applauded the club for its social media activity during long periods of lockdown. In particular, engaging with supporters suffering with mental health and generally trying to boost morale, pointing to the ongoing efforts of player engagement and the EFL award given to Lee Bullen.

TB thanked the panel and explained the positive impact of sending personal letters to supporters, which have been far better received than for example signed merchandise. He said the last year has changed the mindset of many and internal strategies have evolved in turn. TB said our young supporters, children of all ages, are

affected hugely by lockdown and small things like a Wednesday player taking part in something so simple as reading sessions means the world to schools and the children.

Meeting other members of staff, including Darren Moore (DM)

The panel wish to offer support across all areas of the club and feel by inviting staff and getting to know the people inside the club would be beneficial. This would add more weight in demonstrating that the panel do not wish to have just a Q&A with DC. Without the chance of welcoming DM to SWFC in person given the pandemic, it would be nice to do so virtually. DC agreed and called DM, who then logged into the meeting and said he would gladly attend in the future. The panel welcomed DM to the club and wished him every success. DM said his focus is completely on the performance of the team and to maximise the remainder of the season. DM said he had no hesitation to take up this opportunity at SWFC and is fully engaged in trying to get the club where it wants to be.

We believe that hiring a director of football and a CEO is what's needed to provide stability and a long term plan to the football club. Can the Chairman discuss his thoughts on this?

DC said he has already explained his views on a Director of Football (DoF) but will do so again. DC believes if the manager is to have the final say on recruitment and team selection then a DoF would be a contrast if it was DoF making player decisions and not the manager. DC said the final say on football matters should sit with the manager as he is the one who works with and selects the players. DC said we have a 'committee of football' rather than one DoF position, with the manager having final say, if we have one DoF we are reliant on that, we have more than one voice. DC said this is a similar system from the beginning of his ownership which saw two play-off seasons and accepts since then the position of the team has declined. DC said there are ups and down in sport, all clubs will have some player recruitment that is a success and others not, the same as most clubs all the way to the top of the Premier League.

Regarding a CEO, he repeated that what is the best for the club, he will do. He said it is not uncommon in Asia where you can take the role of CEO and chairman for example at the same time. DC said he has an experienced senior management team (SMT) in place and sub-committees too. Everyone works as a collective. The panel mentioned the football side of the club and DC said that the SMT listed on the website is primarily back office administration staff, academy manager Steven Haslam aside, the first team football side is separate.

DC confirmed the club has scouting networks that cover every division, with additional and separate scouting systems in place for the academy.

Injuries

The panel questioned if ongoing injury issues are caused by the condition of the pitch and/or training facilities. DC said that normally, all the pitches are re-laid at the end of every season but the pandemic has made that plan impossible and the pitch surfaces have suffered at almost all clubs as a result. But DC said the science suggests that while it is easy to blame the pitches for injuries, this is not the case. The data points to the general physical elements of training and playing, especially in such a congested calendar, it is the same in the Premier League, not just the Championship. DC said of course the overused pitches do not help but are not the root cause of injuries. He said significant pitch investments have been made at the main stadium and training ground and confirmed the pitch renovation at Hillsborough and Middlewood Road would begin as soon as the season is over.

Any other business

The panel suggested they can be used as a consultation vehicle, for example in terms of the annual customer charter, could certain drafts be run past the panel for feedback prior to publication? TB said the club would have no issue with that proposal.

The panel said they will arrange a separate meeting to discuss positive moves forward with the engagement strategy and making the process as smooth and productive as possible from their perspective.

The panel asked the club to give consideration to providing the top five issues that the panel could work on prior to future meetings. After consideration over this suggestion, the club would stress that a key part of the process, as advised by the FSA, is for the agenda/s to be fan-led in the interests of openness and transparency. However, should the club wish to raise any particular subject/s this can be built into future agendas.

SWFC Ladies recognised the exposure given by the club regarding the recent curtailment of the season, which led to positive coverage in the local media. Great feedback received from players and parents. TB thanked DH for the feedback, after which the meeting was closed.

Date of next meeting

To be confirmed