

Notes from the SUFC Club/Supporters Group Forum, October 2024

The club and supporters' representatives recently met to discuss a wide range of items affecting many aspects of club life. The aim is to have this forum meet three or four times per year.

The club was represented by Tim Allison, Victoria Otto, Matthew Disley and Jack Daly.

Supporters were represented by:-

- Alison Holloway - Chair of the Supporters' Club
- Claire Loughlin - Supporters' Liaison Officer
- Dave Farebrother - Secretary, Supporters' Society (the fans "Trust")

Promotion to the EFL inevitably meant that the old model for running the club had to change. The workload was too much for volunteers and the financial model was not suitable given the significant increase in costs. There is no going back to that old structure if we wish to remain in the National League or EFL. It is understood that, in general, people can be uncomfortable with change and there will be some who cannot accept the different approach. Consideration will be given to better management of future changes.

It was agreed that the overall objectives of all involved are a better matchday experience, increased attendances, increased sense of unity and a successful club.

There was a general discussion about away travel, drums, the home matchday atmosphere, crowd behaviour and how to grow the attendances for our women's games.

Specific points discussed were:-

Communications

We have 2,000+ regular crowds. Many of these people rely on modern social media comms and not the traditional word of mouth that worked so well when gates were much lower. The club does put out necessary information but it was agreed that the comms can be more proactive and there is a need to use a wide mixture of approaches to engage with everyone. It was agreed that through this forum, and other means as appropriate, the club would seek to engage more with supporters when considering major actions and decisions.

Car Park

It was stated that in terms of the match day experience, the condition of the car-park sets a poor first impression. The club explained that contractors were already engaged to undertake significant repairs and, in fact, the heavy machinery was already on site with a view to commencing work that very day.

It was also stated that enhanced lighting for the car park is on the agenda, will be installed as soon as is practicable

Stadium Maintenance and Safety

The Ground Safety Officer, Mike Chenery, now has a wider remit to not only manage match days and the safety arrangements ahead of all fixtures but also general repairs and maintenance.

Matchday Facilities

The club's traditional pre-match lunches remain very popular, and are held in the MBA Lounge. Because of this, the MBA Lounge is restricted to diners before 2pm on Saturdays. After that there is an area that can be used by anybody, but admission does require people to have been into the stadium first, there is no direct entry from the car park. Fans can also use the players' bar at all times and, of course, the home fans' zone behind the Collingwood Road end. The club acknowledged a desire to cover the fans' zone but costs are currently prohibitive. Many clubs have open-air fans' zones.

The 1898 Lounge (was the VP's Lounge) is reserved for members of the 1898 Club and guests.

Wheelchair Area

It was agreed that the current arrangement is not ideal but the club still gets good feedback from a lot of away fans. Ways to enhance this area are being considered. That whole area of the stadium is not licensed for spectator access at this time other than for wheelchair users etc. Work is underway to bring the old female WC in the disused brick block in the north-east corner back into use as a fully accessible WC

Away Fans

Additional segregation gates will be in place soon, and there is some flexibility around which areas can be used for away supporters, subject to anticipated crowd levels.

Park Side Development

This would have happened if we had stayed in the EFL. Plans are in place for a preferred scheme and various other options have not been ruled out, but this work would obviously be expensive and has to be part of the club's overall business plan.

Pavilion

Our original planning consent expired, but we were eventually able to renew. Of course, the costs for completion have gone up over the years, with several factors largely out of the club's hands contributing to the delay. However, the steel structure is already on site (in the car park) and it is hoped to complete it in due course, but the location might change as a consequence of many other factors.

Who's Who

There have been many changes in personnel in the club's hierarchy and administrative positions in recent years, largely an inevitable consequence of promotion into the EFL. A "Who's Who" is already on the club's website and plans are in place to review this and to include photographs.

Ambitions

We all share the same goals, to return to the EFL as a minimum and Tim explained that the Board has ambitions to become more than just a "surviving" EFL 2 club : although of course we share those ambitions with almost every other professional club.

Ownership

There is lots already in the public domain about who the directors are, their motivations etc

Catering

It was not generally thought that pricing is excessive. Comparisons have been made with other clubs at our level to confirm that the pricing structure and quality of offering are broadly similar. The club and caterers are, however, exploring different options as it has been noted that some clubs have been able to make catering a highlight of matchdays and help[to drive attendances.

Club Shop

New fan arrangements do impact this but the current structure cannot be relocated, although the long term aim might be to have a shop back inside the stadium. There are plans to have a limited range of goods available in the fans' zone.

Open Evening

The Supporters' Club has arranged an Open Evening for fans after the game at home to Maidenhead on 16th November, the Supporters Trust will also be represented. The aim is that some players, maybe the manager, and club officials will be able to attend to meet with and talk to fans'. It will also be an opportunity to encourage more supporters to join the Supporters' Club and/or The Trust. For anyone who is unsure, the difference between the two fans' bodies is that The Trust (Officially the Sutton United Supporters' Association) is a company, registered with the Financial Conduct Authority, and a legal entity is able to own shares in SUFC Ltd. The two groups are not in opposition and very much work together, each with a different area of focus.