

# Meeting between SAFC and Supporter Groups

## Tuesday 16 January 2018

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>Attendees</b> | <p><b>Sunderland AFC Representatives</b></p> <p><b>Martin Bain (MB)</b>                      <b>Chief Executive</b><br/> <b>Steve Neil (SN)</b>                      <b>Safety Manager &amp; Chair for the evening</b><br/> <b>Jacqueline Gourlay (JGO)</b>      <b>Head of Operations &amp; Change</b><br/> <b>Chris Waters (CW)</b>                  <b>Supporter Liaison Officer</b><br/> <b>Sophie Ashcroft (SA)</b>              <b>Communications Manager</b><br/> <b>Adam Capper (AC)</b>                  <b>Senior Football PR Officer</b></p> <p><b>Representatives of Supporter Organisations</b></p> <p><b>David Rose (DR)</b>                      <b>RAWA</b><br/> <b>Michael McAllister (MM)</b>          <b>RAWA</b><br/> <b>Chris Thompson (CT)</b>                <b>RAWA</b><br/> <b>Ian Crow (IC)</b>                         <b>RAWA</b><br/> <b>Jim Gilling (JG)</b>                        <b>BLC</b><br/> <b>Jim Douglas (JD)</b>                      <b>BLC</b><br/> <b>Jane Hughes (JH)</b>                      <b>BLC</b><br/> <b>Cath Reid (CR)</b>                        <b>BLC</b><br/> <b>Steve Dean (SD)</b>                       <b>SLG</b><br/> <b>Michael Ganley (MG)</b>                 <b>SLG</b><br/> <b>Paul Andrew (PA)</b>                      <b>SLG</b><br/> <b>Peter Shippey (PS)</b>                    <b>SLG</b><br/> <b>Maureen Fenwick (MF)</b>              <b>Disabled Branch</b><br/> <b>Malcolm Bramley (MBr)</b>            <b>Senior Citizens Group</b></p> |
|                  | Tuesday 16 January 2017  |
| <b>Venue</b>     | Carling Lounge, Stadium of Light 18:00 to 20:00  |

### Welcome

SN opened the meeting welcoming everyone for attending and explained the format of the meeting.

Introductions were made by all present in the meeting.

### SAFC Presentation on Fan Engagement

SN began the meeting by discussing the makeup of the various supporter groups and the need for a consistent approach, removing the need for the club holding multiple meetings to satisfy various groups and the outcome being confused messages coming from various groups.

SN summarised the club's efforts on fan engagement and dialogue to date, explaining that SAFC had exceeded EFL guidelines in meeting with various supporter organisations, with 2,256 hours spent engaging with supporter groups or forums in the past year.

SN then presented a chart showing the reach of supporter groups that the Club have been engaging with and noted RAWA's reach. The starting point was for the club to take every person on their database, which totals 370,000. A percentage was then taken based on each supporter organisation's reach which they presented as the following.

|                 |         |
|-----------------|---------|
| SLG             | - 0.01% |
| Disabled Rep    | - 0.02% |
| Senior Citizens | - 0.04% |
| BLC             | - 0.6%  |
| RAWA            | - 0.6%  |

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SN stated this is leaving 99% of fans unrepresented or unaffiliated which represents an opportunity for all. The aim of the presentation was to promote the need to work together, be more representative (increase reach) and make the club supporter/dialogue process more transparent, efficient and meaningful.

SN then addressed the supporters' organisations collectively as to an approach going forward.

DR (RAWA) said he agrees with the thrust of the presentation; that supporters need better representation and that RAWA would be happy to work alongside other groups to help improve club/supporter dialogue. However, he said it would be remiss of RAWA reps not to dispute the figures, advising SAFC quoted 58,000 reach for RAWA in the presentation which included 2500 members – explaining the co-opted set up based on this as part of the 370k database RAWA's reach is closer to 20%. DR questioned the use of the 370k database figure and suggested a more reasonable figure would be average attendances from the past few years.

JG (BLC) advised the BLC represent 22 branches and an excess of 2,500 supporters, this would give a figure of 7.4% supporters reached. However, he also stated that whilst the figures could be shown differently the picture they painted would remain unchanged.

### **Supporter Groups working together**

DR advised from a RAWA perspective, they are happy to work alongside other supporter groups to make structured dialogue more effective and efficient.

JG confirmed the BLC would also be happy to work alongside other supporter groups to support structured and effective dialogue. JG also stated the need to retain the BLC's identity and purpose, however JG was supportive of the benefits of RAWA. JG advised the BLC's aim is to attract more members, unfortunately feedback from fans have included "what's the point, nothing happens" when the club are asked to action certain things. MB responded if a member of his staff has committed to something and failed to meet that commitment, he would like to know and make sure that is rectified.

PA (SLG) advised he could see no problem in the SLG working with supporter groups to improve communication, he also advised he would have to speak to their members about how things might work going forward and meet to discuss further. PA also suggested SAFC should communicate various meetings to fans, for example a "you said -we did", which would go towards building positive relationships with supporters.

MF and (Disabled supporters group) could see no reason why the Disabled branch could not work together to improve communication to their members.

MBr (Senior Citizens Group) also advised they would be happy to work alongside other supporter groups to improve 2 way communication.

MB stated that the club did not want to dictate to the groups and it was for the groups to decide. He stated the belief that for the purpose of structured dialogue the most obvious route would be an amalgamation of the groups, with one or two leads who would be the club's main point of contact. This would possibly involve a new identity and its own chair etc. RAWA and BLC were against the setting up of an entirely new supporter organisation, stating that providing the other groups can agree a working process there should be no reason each group can't come to combined meetings where all groups can agree the agenda beforehand. MB asked how will the club know who is the main point of contact for practicalities like setting dates and arranging agendas.

IC (RAWA) said it's important that club and fans don't get distracted by labels of supporter orgs etc. but that RAWA will continue as an independent group and would commit to sharing information which will also encourage supporters to join and increase the reach of the meetings that take place between supporter groups and the club.

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JG confirmed, we are all here in this room to work together, it may be that we need to set a new charter and communication route.

MG (SLG) said that we're all fans and want the same things. He expressed frustration at the commitment from the Club to meet with the SLG in recent months. MG stated the SLG offer something different to reach via social media and can help cater to some of the older supporters.

SN asked if DR could talk to each group and hopefully agree how the fans want to work together that will be workable in terms of practical liaison with the club. MB asked if such a proposal could be produced within 4 weeks. No one objected and agreed it must be done quickly to allow us to progress with the actual dialogue very soon.

**AP1: DR to look at a consensus with groups to agree the process of dialogue with the club (who the main points of contact with the club will be etc)**

CT (RAWA) asked if the club can provide a copy of the presentation. JGO agreed.

**AP2: Club to provide supporter reps at meeting with a copy of the presentation.**

### **Club Finance (agenda item requested by RAWA)**

DR began by saying RAWA had canvassed supporters via social media, message boards and through meeting with co-op reps and have a number of points to raise but given time constraints the burning question among fans is the club's financial position and lack of player investment. He confirmed that fans are aware some information may be commercially sensitive, however, we would ask the CEO to be as transparent as possible up to the point that it becomes detrimental to the club.

The questions raised are below and were answered by MB.

*1. From the outside, it appears that the biggest threat to the club's viability would be an inability to repay or refinance the loan from the Security Benefit Corporation. In view of that:*

*a) Is the club confident that this will be achieved by July 2019 and can you tell us how the club plan to achieve this?*  
**MB confirmed SAFC are committed to repaying or refinancing by July 2019. This secured debt is one of the outgoings that must be serviced, and the owner is committed to servicing that debt.**

*b) Is the current lack of spending on player transfers related to this need? Not in itself but as one of a number of things that is resulting in an inability to invest as much into player recruitment as he would like. The owner is still "writing cheques" to cover deficits in running the club.*

*c) How can we be competitive on the field and meet these financial obligations? He believes Chris Coleman, despite how it might look by some recent on the pitch performance, is changing the culture and mindset of the playing squad. In terms of player recruitment, we are primarily operating in the loan market and working hard to bring in players with the right attitude and desire. He would like to recruit beyond loans but that is not possible within the current financial situation.*

*2. Is the club currently on target to meet Championship FFP requirements? Will the owner commit funds to ensure that FFP limits are not breached? Yes.*

*3. We are clearly in a period of austerity which is attempting to correct previous errors. How far are we in that process, and when can we expect the bottom to be reached? Where are we on that "curve"? MB confirmed the owner is continuing to write cheques to cover deficits and those deficits have reduced due to the movement of some players, considerable reduction of playing staff wages and the efficiencies put in place in the day-to-day staffing and running of the club. He regrets that some staff had to be made redundant, but this was part of an overall plan to get the club to a position where it can begin to rebuild. MB confirmed he does not speak to the*

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owner on a day-to-day basis but has guarantees that he will help to service debts and other deficits whilst the club works to “living within its means”, or if a suitable buyer comes forward and of course will listen to anyone who is right for Sunderland. The owner is not holding out for an unreasonable price. MB said that if, and when the club is sold no fan will consider the sale price to unreasonable.

MB indicated that whilst there might be still some further reduction in the overall overhead, we're very close to being at the bottom “of the curve” and moving towards a point where we can start building again. The CEO confirmed he has an understanding of the frustrations directed at him from fans, but he is operating within the parameters he has inherited and is trying to work towards self-sufficiency.

DR asked if it would be possible for the club to produce an illustration of the club's finances/plan in layman terms. A document that fans can share that will help to easily digest the situations we're in. MB agreed to take that away.

**AP3: MB to look into producing a document for fans that will explain as fully as possible the financial position/plan.**

DR stated that whilst a diplomatic and positive discussion is taking place in this room about structured dialogue we can't ignore that there is huge anger and frustration within the fanbase with many calling for demonstrations/protests. DR reminded the room that RAWA are representative and democratic, so we could well be part of that protest if that is what members want. IC said as a RAWA co-opt rep for SMB he can confirm there is more appetite to protest. He asked if MB reads the SMB. MB said no. IC said that is probably just as well!

MBr (Senior Citizens) Drew on his experience of assistant secretary of Sunderland and secretary of Derby and provided an in depth discussion on football club finances including the use pro and cons of bringing in loan players.

DR asked what would MB say to those fans looking to demonstrate.

MB said he can understand fans frustrations and anger and why there would be calls to demonstrate. If fans want to protest with the aim of pushing the owner out, then it is common knowledge that the owner is willing to sell the club should the right offer come in. If protests are against him or the “regime” then it's part and parcel of the job he's paid to do. The CEO asked that any potential protestors consider the impact such may have on the young players who are already going through a hard time and any demonstrations won't help confidence or performances on the pitch. Chris Coleman is working hard to keep us up and he believes the manager has started to instil real change in the dressing room. MB said he would also point out that protests only play into the hands of the opposition.

IC asked for assurance that in future meetings the club will be prepared to discuss things like supporter experience issues. MB said they would welcome these discussions.

SN brought the meeting to a close, thanking everyone for attending.