

HUFC Fans Panel - Review
Thursday 31st August 2017
Victoria Park

Attendees: Pam Duxbury, John Blackledge, Mark Simpson, Becky McNamee, Ron Harnish (Trust), Tony Norman (Friends of HUFC), Neil Appleyard (HUDSA), Mark Carroll, Bob Cross, Julia Newton, Simon Dove, Pauline McSweeney (Hartlepool United FC Supporters Association), Michael Evans, Andy Wilson, Paul Norton.

Apologies: Phil Dunn, Walter Walker, Mike Lewis, Barbara Wiffin.

Meeting Commenced at 6pm

PD Welcomed John Blackledge to the meeting.

JB Asked Panel members to introduce themselves.

All Panel members introduced themselves followed by JB introducing himself.

1. Format of the Fans Panel

PD Thanked members for feedback regarding format of the Fans Panel. The last Panel focused quite a lot on matchday and that was after we received so much feedback from the first game of the season.

PD Stressed importance of the Panel to the Club and how much she values the feedback. Asked if members felt the Panel should be refreshed on regular basis, what are views of current Panel?

RH Suggested bringing somebody in to chair the meeting to keep things running tightly. If you have one rep from each supporter group and then one from all areas of the ground, make sure fans know who they are and they can then feed anything back through them.

PD Agreed, need to look at how to facilitate that as the engagement part is falling down.

SD Suggested having a different Panel representative in the Lounge before a game so that people can come and see them with any issues, with a different representative every week.

JN Whoever the members of the Panel are should be highlighted.

JB Asked members what they were hoping to get from the Panel.

NA Explained he has been trying for 16 years to get a new Disabled Enclosure, his aim of being on Panel is to finally see a new one introduced.

MC To have open channels of communication with the Club. People want to know as much as you can say to them.

JN From my point of view, the Club is a big part of my and my family's life, I just would like to part of helping it to be the best it can be, coming up with ideas and suggestions on how to address issues / problems. Engagement with the fans is going to take some time as there isn't the trust there. I would like to be part of the reengagement, building trust.

JB Agreed, it would be good if people came not only came with a problem, but came with the solution as well.

JB We just need a clear channel of communication. The Panel should not be about whether or not there is a mirror in the female toilets, we should be talking about the bigger issues that affect the Club and the direction in which we want to go. We would love people to come and join in and volunteer. There is a lot of work that needs doing around the ground. I have had a conversation with some of the staff about what we need to get done and we need to be proud of what we see around the ground.

PD We wanted the purpose of this to be an opportunity to speak to fans in an open way. We obviously had the bigger agenda items like the Season Tickets that we discussed and that gave us the confidence to go forward knowing we were going in the right direction. We have made several other decisions based on consultation with this group.

SD My view is that since you came in, you have done a lot more positive than had been done in the past 35 years I have supported the Club in terms of communication. For fans to be allowed into the Football Club is quite a big thing. I do think that there has always seemed to be a hidden agenda with some people in the past.

JB From our point of view, there is no hidden agenda. We just want to make the Club sustainable and get back into the EFL.

PD A lot of clubs just meet the minimum number of 'fan engagement' events that are required to tick the relevant box but we want it to be genuine engagement.

AW The way it comes across, you are not just here for the ride.

RH The credit rating of the Football Club before Christmas was zilch, an Experian check this month reported the level as 47, which can only be a positive when looking for investment. So there must be something going in the right direction in the background.

JB This is all about the fans, we want more to come to games, over 4000, or 5000.

TN We will get that if we get it right on the pitch.

JN You have to have the experience right on a matchday ready for that to happen.

RH The team is the be-all and end-all.

PD To deal with some of the smaller issues, it may be better to send them through to us and we can address them, so that we are not going over the same things in meetings.

JB I am happy to sit in a room full of people and answer questions.

PM You could be more visible on a matchday, walking around the ground.

RH That would need to be structured.

PD Agreed, would need to think about that.

ACTION: HUFC to look at possibility of having Panel representatives in Lounge before games (by 23.09.17).

3. Children Initiatives / Engagement

Mike Lewis suggested a Q&A with the Manager for young fans to attend.

PD Great idea.

PD Suggested that fans can submit questions for the Manager to the Club and these are asked to him as part of his pre-match press.

MS Agreed, will introduce this.

NA Could you put a picture of the team somewhere and leave a gap so that the young fans can get in the photo?

NA Do you still do tours of the ground for schools / disabled supporters? They were very popular when they used to be done years ago.

ACTION: HUFC to plan Kids Q&A with Craig Harrison and players for October half term (by 30.10.17)

HUFC to appeal for questions for CH to be included in pre-match press (by 22.09.17)

HUFC to look at putting a team picture in the ground for young fans (by 30.09.17)

HUFC to look at possibility of re-introducing ground tours for schools etc. (by 30.09.17)

4. Fan Involvement / Share Buying

TN I know that the Trust is looking to buy shares in the Club, would you consider opening it up so that fans can buy shares, that gets all fans involved in it?

JB At this moment in time 99.6% of the shares are held by HUFC Holdings. The objective is to put some part of this Club into fans ownership but anyone who does invest will have to show how committed they are to doing that, to the Club and to the town. If there is someone who comes in and wants to take over the Club and there is a lot of support for that then I will step back but it is a case of how much do they want it.

PD I was speaking to someone at Chester at the National League conference and they said the best thing about their club is that it is fan-owned. But the worst thing about the club is also that it is fan-owned.

Discussion about the various models of fan-owned football clubs.

PD The worst thing from our point of view is the in-fighting between fans.

JB Agreed. We all want the same thing, the best for the Football Club. If we have different factions wanting to do different things, we have lost before we start. We would like every fan to come together and all be in it together. We can't do it if we are divided.

SD If you put money into the Club now, what would you get for that money? Mentioned the option that Newcastle had used whereby a supporter paid a certain amount of money and got a Season Ticket for life. But for the everyday fan to put money in, what would they get?

JB It is a voice in Hartlepool United.

- JB We also plan to reinstate the AGM.
- PD Everyone is aware of the debt of the Club. We are massively losing money and with relegation, we suffered more loss. Ownership is one thing but in reality, the Club now needs to come back to sustainability, with matchday income, improving commercial links, particularly on the 340 days of the year when there isn't a match on at the ground. We need to look at the community aspect of the Club and the business aspect.
- RH We could learn a lot from the other clubs in this league as lots of them survive on smaller budgets, with the community supporting them.
- PD Agreed, we are looking to learn from this.
- PN Suggested keeping catering cabins open after the game to get income as fans leave the game.

Actions: HUFC to look at keeping some catering cabins open as fans leave the ground (by 23.09.17)

5. Questions For John Blackledge

- MC Explained he had collected questions from fellow supporters at away games. Asked JB how long he saw his investment lasting and what his short and long-term plans were for HUFC.
- JB To start with, I never thought I would be in this position. I will be here as long as it takes to make this Club successful; if it takes two years, four years, five years – that will be what it is. From my point of view, I don't believe it should only be one person who should have the debt in the Club, we should have an Executive Board of people to add something, whether that be 3, 4 or more people. And that way, if one person decided to leave, it is not such a shock to the system.
- MC Does the club still intend to turn down any approaches from potential investors/consortiums as has been previously reported in the local press; who for whatever reasons are not on board with the level of proposed Supporters Trust involvement in the future of the Club?
- JB If someone said I have £20m and I am going to do this for the Club, we would then go back to them and say they would have to engage with the fans in some way.
- AW If for example we had 5000 people paying £1 per week into the Club, would that money come into the Club for salary capping?
- PD It can go towards signing players, yes. Wycombe Wanderers have something similar in place to help fund player signings.
- JB There is always the option of crowd funding but we would rather have people investing in their Club. If we had 5000 people paying £1 per week, that would go a long way at this level. This is something we will have to look at.
- JB Another question we had asked how committed I am, I have invested £1.2m – does that show my commitment?

6. AOB

- ME Do we still have Pools Goldline?
- PD Yes.

AW Send me the leaflet and I will email to the Trust members.

PM I will put them in the Corner Flag.

SD I will put in Morrisons.

TN I will distribute some too.

ACTION: HUFC to distribute Goldline leaflets to Panel members (by 22.09.17)

Meeting Closed

Next Meeting: Thursday 28th September @ 6pm