

Saints Voice Panel Meeting - Monday 16th September 2019

In Attendance

Saints Voice

Tara Doel
Yasmin Wiseman
Mark Chee
Mark Middleton
Louise Burke
Zoe Wilson
Mike Sadler

Southampton Football Club

Martin Semmens CEO
Toby Steele Managing Director
David Thomas Chief Commercial Officer
Anthony Cole-Johnson Director of Sales
Matt Silvester Ticket Office Manager
Mark Hannibal Head of Venue Safety & Security
Khali Parsons Senior SR Manager
Charlie Read Head of Marketing
John Russo Director of Catering Ops
Joe Fox Food&Bev Manager
Daniel Whittington Senior SR Advisor
Andy Darbyshire DFO, Hants Police

Apologies:

Paul Boon Director of Catering
Kate Tarry Director of Brand & Marketing
Jason Kenny Superintendent, Hampshire Police (Football Lead)
Oliver Boast Saints Voice Panel Member
James Whitworth Saints Voice Panel Member
Katie Maidment Smith Saints Voice Panel Member

Minutes:

Welcome
Introductions of new staff members
Update from previous meeting
Meeting Start – 6.00PM

Sustainability;

ZW – We have seen what you have been doing – reusable cups, getting rid of single use plastic at the training ground and so on. How do you feel this has gone, what has been the reaction, and what are your next steps?

ACJ – We feel the reaction of the supporters has been really positive. We have a Sustainability Working Group and we are building the strategy out beyond just our fans, to our suppliers and partners. We are happy with where we are and the progress we are making.

KP – Do you have any feedback on the new initiatives?

MM – Reusable cups have been received well but fans don't know where they should put them

JF – There was a delay with the bins and signage we requested, which are on the way.

General discussion around other sports, and how they promote sustainability

JF – We have been working hard behind the scenes to look at the entire journey from supply to sale.

Mike S – Can we please talk about membership boxes and how much material was used for just a small credit card size item? It seemed incredibly wasteful (example of box provided)

ACJ – Absolutely a learning point for us. We went big on the box and following previous feedback we didn't spend big on the contents and moving forwards we need to find the middle ground and endure we show our appreciation for our fans whilst remaining sustainable and sensible with the packaging and contents.

Mike S – Are there any plans for clappers this season? And do the players like them/does it affect their performance?

DT – Clappers are polarising, and regardless of whether you like them or not, they do create a large amount of waste and this is something we need to weigh up. The clappers have a certain lifespan and then you need something different.

CR – We spoke in the fan engagement focus group, and we monitor feedback from our surveys, and I think that we will be trying new things.

Martin S – From a player perspective, they are very focused on the noise in the stadium, and it does have a huge effect on them.

TD – Is it possible flag sizes could be similar to those at the England Match?

DT – We have to take into account cost and environmental factors

Discussion around flags, sizes, environmental impact, the England fixture

KP – It may be useful to set up a follow up meeting for fan engagement to unpack this further and share thoughts and ideas.

Martin S – Is there anything we can learn from the recent England fixture in terms of atmosphere?

Mike S – The high number of away fans in home areas helped create noise and atmosphere, although it is not something we would want to replicate in the Premier League.

TD – I had the band behind me in the Chapel and thought it was great.

Membership;

MC – We would like to understand the rationale behind Saints+ (Saints Plus) membership? What are membership plans for the future? And how has the take up been this season?

Matt S – We looked at data to see how memberships were being used. Majority of the supporters purchased a membership last season to have priority on tickets – so therefore we introduced the Saints+ membership so we could give a better value discount – last season was only £2, so we wanted to bring in something with a higher discount for the supporters coming to more games. It's been popular – vast majority of supporters who purchased memberships, have the Saints+ membership, so sales have been good. We are ahead of where we were last year.

ACJ – This was part of the wider ticketing piece, wanting to give more value to season ticket holders and more discount for fans that came to multiple matches. Saints+ Membership gives us the opportunity to reward more such as the £5 off category A. Been a really strong take up. We will continue to monitor and develop.

MC – One thing that has been done well is having two plus memberships and two junior memberships – little fearful that the juniors wouldn't have the opportunity to take advantage of these offers along with me, but they can.

Booking Fees;

KP – On to booking fees – your point was that the charge is incurred online but not in person?

TD – A lot of supporters have messaged us regarding the price rise of booking fees of £1 increasing to £1.25. Charge is per ticket not per transaction, across the season this could potentially cost the price of another ticket.

Matt S – The Club is charged for every ticket that goes through on our system – an individual price per ticket + annual booking fees.

TD – Fans complaining that it is not enforced on the ticket window, when buying in person.

Matt S – Disappointing to hear as this should be enforced at the window – will take back to staff and educate. Most likely that staff will find it difficult to enforce in front of supporters who may complain. Will make sure training and development is delivered to make sure consistent across the board.

ZW - Can we increase communications to decrease kickback?

ACJ – Will look into how we can make the process and charge clearer.

ZW – With Bournemouth tickets – why couldn't season ticket holders purchase additional tickets under their own supporter number?

Matt S – Every supporter who purchases tickets has to have a registered supporter number, for safety reasons. It is essential that we know who is in the stadium. However, if you do have an issue, we have a call back button so that you can request a member of the team contact you directly.

To add, we are currently reviewing new ticketing systems, that make it easier for supporters to purchase tickets – less click throughs and less clunky.

Online ticket purchase;

KP – While on the subject of ticketing and online purchase shall we jump to the agenda point around online purchase for disabled supporters?

Matt S – Current system limitations mean that disabled supporters are unable to purchase tickets online as there is nothing to limit the sale of wheelchair spaces or ensure the allocation of a free enabler seat. Our agreement with our current provider is coming to an end, and this capability is a ‘must have’ moving forward. It is so important for us to work towards having something that is fit for purpose for all supporters. To put it into perspective several other football clubs including Liverpool and Norwich have the same challenges.

MM – we used to have a dedicated phone line for disabled supporters – are we able to discuss why this has been removed?

KP – It’s not that this service has been ‘removed’ for disabled supporters – the telephone number went through to the same team, so although a different telephone number it wasn’t going through to a different team. Therefore, the service was not quicker or better. However, we are happy to look at ways we can make the process easier for supporters perhaps with a dedicated call back service. The number of disabled fans that purchase match by match is very low, the majority are season ticket holders, but perhaps we can be proactive in how we engage with disabled fans that travel to away matches.

Training Kit;

LB – I and other supporters have observed the price of the training kit seems to be expensive. I’ve done some online research and when compared against other teams in the Premier League, the base cost of ours are far higher (examples of other clubs were given). Kids want to wear these items, and these can be outside of the price range for many supporters and families.

ACJ – Firstly it’s important to understand that the training kit we have on sale is not a ‘replica’ version of kit, which many other clubs sell. Under Armour showcase technical training wear designed for athletes and is exactly as the players wear. We do have an Athleisure range for those that are looking for comfort and affordability.

DT – Under Armour is a global brand and is highly technical, hence why they don’t produce replica versions – they believe in producing the best training wear possible. This is also a point of difference for them when competing against other rival brands. This is one of the positives of partnering with such a quality brand, but we understand this is also a challenge given the price. We as the club are thinking around the and producing other training wear, such as the kit the staff currently wear.

ACJ – We, as I’m sure the vast majority of other clubs do benchmark their products against other teams and part of our role as a club is to ensure that whilst we understand top athletes use it, how can we replicate these within affordable price brackets for supporters.

ZW – Can we communicate this with the supporters?

ACJ – Of course we can look at ways we can tell our story better.

Martin S – It is important to understand that we don’t have complete control over what is retailed – as a partner Under Armour have a huge say in what is sold. What I can say though is that it is really good kit!

TD – Just to touch on our kit release – releasing on a Saturday and what was a match day made it really difficult, especially with the Fanzone and lots of queues and so on. Can we not release on a Friday? We could also have bought on Friday to wear on the Saturday.

DT – That is a very good point. This year, with issues with the kit launch we prioritised pre-orders and then released for sale as soon as we could. We would have liked to have had the kit earlier and fulfilled pre orders in time to have the kit on sale before the Saturday.

Discussion around where kit was sold on a matchday followed.

Fanzone;

MM – Feedback from supporters is that this area has been well received – awesome, love it. First match, supporters did message about queues, however they still wanted to check it out! They also commented on the size – saying it was too small – supporters would like it bigger? Also, that the closing before the Manchester United fixture wasn't publicised well enough, as it was an early game – with people turning up and it not being open. Food wise, people loving pizzas, however some fans questioning price and sizes. Can it be sold by the slice?

JF – The aim is to be different from the concourse. The menu has introduced items that are suitable for families – such as an entire pizza, which would feed 3 or 4. You make a good point about the size and price, and we certainly look at different options.

MM – Somewhere between a pizza and sausage roll – mid price point! Northam has the Chinese, which is really good, and has plenty of options.

JF – John Russo is our new Director of Catering is now on board, and he can help push those conversations with our partners. We now have hotdog bikes to help with demand outside as this is a high seller, but certainly the Fanzone has given us the opportunity to explore new avenues.

JR – We are going to be rotating the menu in the Fanzone, keep it fresh and new.

MM – Other feedback – people love the Big Screen, however some people saying resolution wasn't great when displaying certain programmes (Sky Sports News).

DT – Licensing only allows us to open from 12pm, so with different kick off times there will at times be different opening times. We need to think about how we communicate this better.

KP – What else can we do that would reach a wider audience?

MM – Was in the pre-match E Mail as I remember reading this, but could it have been communicated via Social Media?

Martin S – Are the opening times due to restricted sale of alcohol?

DT - Agreement with the council means that we are currently only permitted to be open between certain times.

MH - We are exploring whether this can be extended to see how this can benefit supporters on a matchday.

DT – This is one to sit down with the council with – as I’m sure you are all aware it took us some time to get the go ahead from the council, but now it is up and running it gives us the chance to discuss these restrictions.

KP – where else would you see these details or (supporters) seek out this information? Can we communicate with our social teams to work on the communication?

LB – Facebook definitely, as sometimes it can get lost on twitter.

CR – *Discusses different platform options* – Twitter could be the perfect solution for our ‘hardcore’ supporters but would need to be done in the correct way to ensure it was highlighted. Facebook is a much wider audience, so may not be as practical. Platforms are used in a different way to engage fans and don’t want this to get lost in content. Will talk with our Social Media team.

JW – Could this be ‘pinned’ on Twitter to be the top heading on a matchday?

CR – We have done a matchday page now that gives as much information as possible – we will look into ways we can drive people to that page and see how we can use this. Sounds like that, because there is so much to communicate, info essential to some fans is getting lost. Definitely one to take away and see how we can develop!

ACJ – Just to add, we had over 1100 users of this area for our Liverpool fixture, although we were capped at 300 capacity at any one time. Now we better understand the space and how it is used we can raise this a bit higher. The space is designed to be flexible.

MM – My understanding is that if you built a Fanzone that could hold 600, with only 300 in it will look empty!

DT – No current plans to expand, however we are definitely open to the idea of a bigger space in the future if the popularity of the area demands this.

Catering;

LB – (Season Ticket Holder in the Itchen) – new food options are really good, but matchdays the queues are still horrific. Doesn’t seem to be any order and staff seem clueless. Think you are missing a trick.

YW – Feedback for food options has gone well – new menu has been commented on a lot, so congratulations on that! I have received feedback that the ST discount isn’t being properly applied. Supporters have also stated that they are not receiving discounts from smaller stalls and only concourse units?

JR – Discount should be going up until kick-off in all areas.

JF – Valid point about partners at smaller stands – this may not have been properly communicated.

YW – It just feels as though all the information is falling on deaf ears and nothing is seeming to change or help? We as a group keep trying to give ideas but the queues and service still continue to be poor! So many E Mails and comments about it all the time, but nothing seems to be changing.

LB – Lots of people in the queues, speaking about the queues, complaining about the queues – it is beginning to become a joke! Signage is still really difficult to read and supporters commenting on this also.

JR – Are you speaking about the black background boards with the white writing? Understand it's not the easiest to read, although there is a lot of info we have to share.

JF – We did have to rush some things to make sure they were ready for the new season with so much going on this year. We are now looking at different queuing systems, such as a 'Disney/post office' queues. We have to work with Health and Safety to make sure any solutions or trials meet safety regulations. We are also soon to introduce 'queue busters' which will be used to help direct people to smaller queues, less busy areas, dedicated service points. We have also introduced a buddy system, where one member of staff will be on the till and the other member of staff will grab the food and drink, which has been helping with service times. We have our beer token areas back now, which will also help speed up sales. You are correct though; the queuing systems are a massive challenge.

TD – Halftime is such a small window of time to allow supporters to buy products.

JF – It is so frustrating to hear it when supporters provide poor feedback regarding our staff. We are working on a training plan which will ensure that best practise is delivered more consistently. Also progressing employment or development of higher skilled staff to be team leaders and managers to ensure each concourse unit is firing on all cylinders every game day. We also now have a pre-pouring system, where staff work towards pouring up to 300-400 pints before half time to speed up queuing time and work as an efficient team – our staff do work hard, but we do understand that we have tight windows and we need to work hard to get it right.

MC – I sit in the family end, and the thing that makes the biggest difference are the staff members who walk around proactively - because they are attracting supporters away from certain areas to help with queues. We talk about atmosphere here at the stadium, and we won't get that if half the crowd are still on the concourse waiting to be served.

DT – We have got more products that supporters want to buy, but frustrating for us that we can't quite get the queuing system to work in a way that allows our supporters to buy these products - we will work closely with the team to make sure ideas are introduced and continue to try different things until we get it right.

LB – Brought this up a year ago, and it's difficult to appreciate hard work when you don't see any changes.

TS – important to understand the location of the concourses – if we could build the stadium again, we certainly wouldn't build it the same. You may not always see physical evidence of us developing, but that doesn't mean the team aren't working incredibly hard to make it better for our fans. It is frustrating for us – you are right that we are missing a trick, we absolutely know.

Discussion around cashless stadium

TS – A lot of people like idea. Several stadiums have implemented this or working towards this. if we were to consider doing it, do you think this would be well received? Although it will ultimately speed up queues, would this be too big of a culture change?

ZW – For a lot of supporters, such as myself, who live in London this idea is already implemented within other parts of life, however other cities have not reached this point. Have to look at Southampton as a whole.

MC – could be a good way of teaching kids to use cards etc.

TS – We know this is the direction the world is moving in, but would our demographic welcome this?

KP – Potentially a bigger piece around this, perhaps we could look at a focus group around queues and half-time service.

JR – We can't change the physical footprint, so important to make sure we maximise potential of staff. We would love to be able to offer supporters the chance for a second purchase but understand currently we are quite some way from that. Look at potentially introducing one 'cashless' queue or alternative 'cash' queue in the future.

TD – we brought this up at the last meeting, but would it be possible to sell books of beer tokens?

JR - Discussions are underway, although we have to look at all aspects such as potential for counterfeiting, age checks and so on.

Connectivity;

TS – We are further forward with connectivity having found a solution to the question of space to house the necessary equipment. We are now moving forward with the next steps, which include establishing whether telecoms providers will come on board.

DT – The blocker, which was finding the space for the 'control room' has now been solved. This paused the process for a few months, but the good news is we are moving forwards.

TS – We are further down the road than we were, and we can assure you this continues to progress. This is a long-term project though and won't see completion for some time.

Gasworks;

TD – Could we discuss the rationale behind it. Lots of disabled/elderly supporters contacting us saying this has affected matchday routines. They were using it before and after the match, but only available now to members in Kingsland. Fanzone has been introduced but obviously with winter coming up and the weather worsening!

ACJ – There is a bigger piece around the change – we had to upgrade our press facilities, so we lost one of our premium lounges. We also spent a lot of time and money upgrading the Virgin Media Hub to the Gasworks and ultimately it didn't really work in that format.

We had lots of different moving parts, so what we did this year was look to move towards a hospitality and membership hybrid.

We are aware of the affect change this may have had on supporters attending fixtures at St. Marys, but please could we reiterate that we always welcome supporters to contact us should they require any additional assistance. We have spoken at length behind the scenes and believe the offer we are providing is fair. We moved it specifically to Kingsland because supporters were not using the area effectively or fairly with many rushing to the area just so they could use the outside area to smoke. We wanted to ensure this area was being maximised by supporters who wanted a different experience to the concourse areas. Last season queues of 30-40 people were trying to get in, but the numbers outside smoking were taking up the spaces in a way that prevented us maximising it as a food and beverage area.

Where we are at now is a hospitality/membership hybrid which offers a great space for fans looking for a different experience. If any supporters feel the concourse, Fanzone, or membership of Gasworks doesn't work for their specific needs they are welcome to contact myself or Matt to discuss further.

TD – Has this has the uptake you thought it would?

ACJ – We are there or thereabouts. We have a significant number of members and have around 50 spaces we sell on a match by match basis – we reinforce online that this is only for Saints Fans.

Moving Away supporters;

TS – We wanted to provide an update on where the club where in regard to moving the away supporters to a different location.

We had said that we would take it next to the Safety Advisory Group, but we have chosen to pause that. We have done the work to establish that it is feasible, what the potential costs would be, what we would need to achieve behind the scenes. It was clear from our own research and the great feedback you all gathered that there is an appetite to move the away fans, but that supporters are less keen if the move affects them specifically.

We have to prioritise how we spend money in the stadium. We know it is an emotive subject, and this is not to say we won't look at this again in the future, but now isn't the right time for us.

Away fans in home areas;

MH – Recently had two big matches against Liverpool and Manchester United, and following some issues we wanted to reiterate that we do not knowingly sell tickets to away supporters in the home end. We work with Matt S and the ticket office to identify supporters where for whatever reason tickets have been passed on to away supporters. We have an action plan with the ticket office and supporter relations to help limit this. Just to be clear, if we are made aware of any issues arising from away fans in home areas, we will identify the supporters and issue bans.

LB – For the Liverpool Match, I saw two Liverpool supporters in the Itchen Stand with shirts on.

MH – Various different reasons why they have arrived in the crowd - If someone is persistent enough, of course they can find a way to buy a ticket unofficially. We are always mindful about how we address the issue, doing our best to make sure we don't draw attention or negativity. This can be a challenging situation. Can be really emotive, especially when dealing with children with opposition shirts.

Some visitors purchase tickets for friends or relatives in innocence or buy from unofficial sources. It's not always the away supporter that is causing an issue. We need to make sure we minimise potential problems and try to get that message across that away fans are not permitted in home areas, but that if they do manage to gain entry our own fans behaviour should not cross a line.

We have communicated with those who have been known to give tickets away to make sure they understand the issues and bans have been given to supporters who continue to do this.

LB – Don't understand why supporters wouldn't abide by rules – just don't understand it.

MH – Supporters don't necessarily understand impact they will have. Perception is they have come for a good day out and won't cause issues, but it is the reaction to them that can be a problem.

DT – Education piece – do we send anything out with tickets, that have any comms?

Matt S – ticketing comms have been improved, highlighting specific issues, however not in every ticketing product sent out. A lot of the problems re international fans that don't understand our regulations.

MM – Yes, we get a lot of overseas supporters attending in Northam who don't understand that sitting within home areas is an issue, as they can mix in other countries.

Matt S – Came up at Premier League ticketing meeting recently, and all clubs are having the same challenge. Did a big initiative 5-6 years ago – big piece in programmes, however demographic has changed to more international fans, so they have now targeted broadcasting to make this clear.

AD – On a bigger scale there are resale sites and websites created to sell tickets illegally, and then taken down as soon as they are sold. Memberships are bought by touts knowing that high profile fixture tickets can be purchased, tickets can be sold on and then they are not concerned about the membership being blocked or banned as they have already sold the tickets on for inflated prices. You then have people buying tickets online that don't understand the laws and rules, turning up as away fans in home areas or being refused entry or ejected. It's a difficult problem to solve.

Mike S – Liverpool match was much better this year – it appeared much better in the stands.

Matt S – This would have been down to new initiatives such as stopping 'print at home' tickets as these are easier to duplicate and sell on.

KP – The reaction to away fans can vary in different parts of the stadium – whilst in some areas it does not create a volatile situation, there are areas where supporters will seek out away fans in order to create a problem.

TD – One issue I was asked to raise is that supporters who sat in Itchen North, felt as though they were being goaded by away supporters in boxes behind – understand they shouldn't react, but felt it was difficult not too.

ACJ – Our hospitality area is a neutral area and all supporters are welcome. Box holders can be Club Partners or Seasonal Guests, some of which on occasion will invite supporters of the opposing team in. What we have seen at previous matches is that, if an away supporter makes themselves known (celebrating etc), there are fans that are too eager to react.

We have taken steps to address any problems – we have put barriers up between the two areas, and communication/a letter has been sent to supporters sitting in these areas. We are aware that certain parts of our supporter base/areas of the stadium can be more aggressive towards away supporters and because of this we insist supporters don't attend in colours and to be respectful of where they are. If their behaviour does not meet our expectations in hospitality, they are ejected.

KP – We wish for both sides of that divide to have a positive experience and we don't want to see our own fans behaviour result in their ejection. If there are any further issues, we would invite any supporter to pass these on to us and we will discuss further.

Special Guest Speaker – Andy Darbyshire – Dedicated Football Officer;

Discussion around the Football Unit and the role of a Dedicated Football Officer.

AD – I am the Dedicated Football Officer for Southampton, 3 of us cover all of the clubs in Hampshire. We have a wealth of experience working all home and away fixtures, as well as working with England fixtures on occasion.

We would like to engage further with football fans and the broader fanbase. Dialogue between fans and police (home and away) is important to the success of policing at football.

The vast majority of Southampton FC Supporters are fantastically well behaved, and only a small section of supporters cause a policing issue.

We prefer work with fan groups to help educate and regulate behaviour. We work closely with the Club – education over enforcement. You will be aware of Football Banning Orders and how they are successfully used.

We have a categorisation of matches. C – High, B – Medium, A – Low. Dependant on history of fixture, intelligence received, methodology behind categories.

Do the panel have any questions?

MM – do you have people who monitor social media? There are a lot of groups attempting to stir supporters up. On Twitter individual people hiding behind false names, and Portsmouth Match seems to be bringing people out the woodwork.

AD – *discussion around how police monitor social media and current supporters/groups using platforms such as Twitter that are a cause for concern. Talked about the thresholds for prosecution.*

AD - @saintsfcop is my handle on twitter for any supporter that may have questions - will always do best to answer questions and assist where I can.

Another point I would like to bring up is Racism in Football – Nationally Racism has gone up, around 70% from the 18/19 season. Are you all individually aware of the SFC Report Number? I would ask if we could push this, as it allows us to address issues at the time. Will help us take positive action there and then, so that everybody can enjoy the match.

**Discussion around experiences at matches, at Saints and unrelated to saints. **

AD – SFC and their supporters have got a really good name nationally and we want to ensure this remains the same.

Discussion around Portsmouth Match and steps taken by police to ensure supporter safety. AD shared some additional plans such as the special train for Saints fans

Action Points:

New members

Potential focus group around concourse queues and service

Thank you

Date for next Meeting – 9th January 2020

Close/Meeting finish – 8.00PM