SWANSEA CITY

STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

Tuesday, 16 November 2021

Held at the Swansea.com Stadium, 5pm

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| PANEL | |
| NAME | POSITION HELD |
| Julian Winter | Chief Executive |
| Rebecca Edwards-Symmons | Head of Commercial |
| Andrew Davies | Head of Operations, Facilities and Development |
| Gareth Davies | Chief Financial Officer |
| Terry Sinnett | Supporters Trust |
| SUPPORTER ATTENDEES | |
| The meeting was attended by seven supporters, who put their questions to the panel. | |
|  |
|  |
|  |

Meeting hosted and chaired by Catherine Thomas, Head of Hospitality, Events and Fan Engagement.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

All attendees were introduced and the following questions were asked, with in-depth discussion and answers provided.

QUESTION 1: CLUB FINANCES

*With the Club on a financially secure footing, what is our vision to improve our attractability to those higher earning players and what is the strategy that will allow financial growth, through investment or otherwise, to see us as true contenders for promotion to the Premier League?*

Julian explained that the nature of the Championship is really important for everyone to understand. In regard to financial issues with other clubs and points being lost, Julian pointed out that the future of the club is more important than anybody’s individual high level of aspiration. He added that the club needs to be competitive in the Championship, with the aspiration of being promoted to the Premier League, but it will do so under its own platform. Julian noted that despite the five years of sensitivity to the American owners, we should be pleased with the way they have managed the circumstances.

Julian pointed out that we are all here to grow the revenue base, hopefully from £18 million to over £20 million, giving us flexibility with wage budget. He touched on Rebecca’s responsibility for revenue, including in-house catering and ticketing, specifically discounted season and match by match tickets.

Julian added that as a club we will not buy two players for £40-£50k a week to try and get into the Premier League. We are implementing a well-structured wage model and put players where we think they are in the scheme of things. Julian explained that a new player might not be on the best pay straight away, they all understand where they sit in the scheme, so there is clarity over where they sit when they arrive and where they can be with incentivised contracts.

*Further question - Do you see us in the next 3-5 years being a well stabilised Championship club, and do you see us as strong competitors for the Premier League in terms of promotion? For example, we look at the recent performance against Bournemouth.*

Julian responded that the team played well in the first half of the Bournemouth fixture. Credit had to be given to the opposition, in the second half they changed their approach because they couldn’t cope with us in the first half, they were more aggressive, they were quicker, stronger and more powerful. Julian added that we appointed Russell on the basis that we want to compete; he’s done a brilliant job with the style of play as well as with the players. We aren’t putting Russell under pressure to get us promoted, but we have a strong squad and a great mix of players. We want to compete.

QUESTION 2: ACADEMY

*What efforts are being made to attract the top local talent, in order to develop them and ensure they get a fair shot to make the first team in the future?*

Julian pointed out that the academy moved from category 1 to category 2 and although the categorization protected the compensation rights, there isn’t a great deal of difference between the way we approach a category 1 academy to the way we approach a category 2 academy. This club will continue to develop players regardless of the categorisation.

Julian explained that Nigel Rees, previous academy manager, was replaced by Mark Allen, who has now moved into the sporting director role, with Jon Grey taking his place as academy manager. The history of the club is that it produces players, and strategically it needs to continue developing its own players. There is a significant contribution here from homegrown players; either the ones who joined at primary/secondary school, or those post-16.

Julian added that Mark has done a lot of work on the local scouting network and adapted the coaching curriculum, taking full advantage of Russell Martin who sits on the technical board alongside Julian, Mark Allen and Jon Grey. Julian explained that everyone works collectively, with Russell keen for the youth teams to spend time with the first team, he is seeing a natural blend between first team and youth and desire from a strategic point of view.

QUESTION 3: CLUB FINANCES

*With the parachute payments stopping, will the American owners invest into the club more? And if so, will there be more transfer funds made available for Russell Martin and the team?*

Julian stated that last year ownership invested, via a loan note, around £10-13 million. Jake Silverstein invested half, Jason Levien and Steve Kaplan matched that and some of our other shareholders contributed smaller amounts, into a convertible loan note. This club is a debt free club, apart from the convertible loan note, which is designed to leave the club debt free. We have capacity in the loan note to be able to do more and there will be a need this year for them to do more. We need to understand what we need from the January window and get through the beginning of the summer window. Our financial year is from August, so if a player is sold in July, then it would go into this year’s numbers.

Julian pointed out that if the club can sell players for value, they will be sold but will be replaced. This summer there was a need to invest in the team, so we did with Joel Piroe, Michael Obafemi, Flynn Downes etc. Ownership know that there needs to be a contribution, we don’t yet know what that amount will be, because we don’t know whether we will trade in January or in the summer, but there is the ability for them to use the loan note to do so. There will be a blend of ownership contribution and trading.

QUESTION 4: OTHER

*What do you do as a club to support players across the club for their mental wellbeing? For example, coping with retirement, preparing for the future, gambling etc.*

Julian recognised that we have a duty of care to our players. He pointed out that the club was the first to do the social media boycott, following the racial abuse that some of our players received. Matt Grimes felt passionately about the boycott and everyone agreed to do it. Our actions then set off a movement that other clubs followed. Julian connected Matt with the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA), which supports players through education and opportunities in community initiatives.

Julian explained that in our academy we have an education officer and we have a club safeguarding officer who are very proactive with young players, with a process that is followed through education and safeguarding.

Julian added that the club more recently launched the Former Players Association, which has some very high profile former players that we are also able to utilise. Leon Britton has now come back and as part of Leon’s role in the under-23s environment, he is to be a mentor for young players but also the bridge into the first team environment. We also have some ad hoc sports psychologist, which is down to support staff and coaching staff to determine where that is needed.

Rebecca explained that we have strategic partners, including Swansea University and Gower College Swansea, as well as other educational partners. There is a variety of education being done outside of football within the academy. Rebecca added that external people are regularly brought into the academy to educate on gambling.

Rebecca mentioned that when she started in the club four and a half years ago as digital media manager, one of her first projects was to digitalise the player onboarding manual, which in turn meant that we were the first club to launch a player app which is live and interactive. The app can send notifications to each target group of the playing team, with a comprehensive diary of who they can contact, along with contact details for the PFA for any concerns the players may have.

In regard to the Former Player’s Association, Rebecca mentioned that there is a massive array of former players who still live in/near Swansea, and it’s great to learn more about their backgrounds, how they have transitioned into new careers and the support that they need from us, which could be something small but means a lot to them.

Julian added that the idea of the Former Players Association was presented to Lee Trundle, Leon Britton and Alan Curtis, who now sit on the committee. The FPA sits under the Swans Foundation and it has multiple priorities, to engage with people so they can communicate with us, and the social side like the Question of Sport night which is a chance for them to lead on an event with all money going to the Former Player’s Association. The committee then decide what happens with the money, but it goes into a pot to help former players who may have fallen into difficulty. Rebecca used the example of Lenny Johnrose, stating that is why we need money to be able to support our servants who pledged their lives to this club.

Julian pointed out that he is a former player, with both Huddersfield and Sheffield United, and he is welcome at both clubs anytime because he is a former player. Julian added that former players who don’t have a connection with the club won’t ask, because they are too proud. It’s important for them to know that the club cares about them.

QUESTION 5: FAN ENGAGEMENT

*When our players take the knee, how can the fans support the club and the players further, and continue the important message around inclusion and diversity within our club and our local community? Something more than the standing applause. For example, could a stand do something each home game on a rolling basis? Flags, cards etc to show the players, the club and our visitors that we are a club where family inclusion and diversity is at the heart of everything we do.*

Julian stated that in the last month Matt Grimes has been proactive in speaking to him in regards to taking the knee. Julian pointed out that taking the knee is a player led initiative, so if the players were to decide that they no longer want to do it then we would support them. Julian mentioned that he is open to fans communicating with Catherine and the Supporters Trust with alternative ideas, because the more we can do to support the better. Julian added that the players all appreciate the fans supporting the taking of the knee.

Rebecca added that we have recently set up a supporter Equality, Diversion and Inclusivity (EDI) group alongside Proud Swans, the DSA, Jacks against Racism, Her Game Too, an ethnic minority group and the Supporters Trust. Rebecca informed the group that we will be launching a new text number to report discriminatory behaviour within the stadium. Rebecca acknowledged that the taking of the knee has become a routine and now we need to look at what else can we do. Rebecca pointed out that the club’s media team have been in touch with Facebook and Twitter, as well as other social media companies, to find out what is going to be done by these companies to stop the abuse.

Julian noted the EFL meeting on November 24, which included presentations to EFL clubs from Facebook/Meta in terms of what they are doing.

Julian added that Matt Grimes wants to see sanction, and we now need to close the communication gap. Julian expressed that Matt and the team are more than happy to continue with taking the knee, he isn’t critical of the club and is happy with how we have dealt with issues. Julian informed the group of something called the equality standard and that we are an intermediate level club, which covers everything that we do, including our HR policy.

Andrew noted that there are things we are doing in the background, mechanisms which will aid us to get through these issues, but it is going to take time. There are a raft of things, visual statements as well as the text messaging service that will help us. The text messaging service is something we can use as a club and you can use as supporters to get direct contact with our safety team. We will deal with it and we will not tolerate it. People may feel intimidated and feel they can’t report issues for fear of repercussion. We can isolate individuals, monitor them and take whatever action is necessary from there.

We have a working group within the club in regard to fan behaviour which Terry sits on and Cath is very active. This is a collective with our safety officer, operational team and customer service side of the club, to come up with the appropriate level of action for individuals who do not comply.

Julian explained that fan behaviour isn’t necessarily racist behaviour, even though it can be, but following lockdown, inappropriate behaviour has become more apparent. Andrew added that issues with fan behaviour is a national problem rather than a club problem, but that there has been a spike since lockdown. Julian pointed out that during the roll out of Covid passes and checks, fan behaviour has improved, with a much calmer match day experience.

Catherine added if something is reported via the text service and the issue can be dealt with straight away then a steward will do so as discreetly as possible. The text service was an idea from supporter groups. The club has also recently launched an inclusivity survey. Catherine encouraged dialogue between supporters and the Supporters Trust, meaning information can get to the right places and differences can be made.

QUESTION 6: FAN ENGAGEMENT

*Can away supporters be moved to the North West corner, therefore giving the home supporters more places to sit whilst giving the away team less of an advantage for their fans to be heard throughout the game. Most clubs in modern stadiums do this, probably for this very reason. Obviously, if the away following is bigger then they have to go in the North stand but otherwise put them in the corner.*

Rebecca explained that at the moment we have season ticket holders in all areas of the stadium. During the Premier League years we had 14-16k season ticket holders, and people have since migrated. We have a group of home supporters who are placed in the north west and the north east. We have to offer the opposing club a percentage of our capacity, meaning it is difficult to put away supporters in a corner.

Andrew added that we do move visiting supporters from time to time, as we did for the Plymouth game, where it is easier for cup games as away support is limited. The design of the stadium doesn’t naturally lend itself to having away supporters in that area regularly. Andrew pointed out that we have a responsibility on FA Cup games to offer visiting supporters 15% of capacity for the away end, which may include north east and west corners.

QUESTION 7: FAN ENGAGEMENT

*I am a season ticket holder, as are my two sons (11 and 7 years old). We live in Bristol and make the trip down for most home games and wondered what the club is doing to support young fans and grow the fan base?*

Rebecca explained that when we looked at the demographics of our supporters and given when we left the Premier League, the demographics of season ticket holders against match by match purchasers, there were a lot of younger match by match purchasers, with the main barrier for season ticket holders being price. When we looked at the tiering of season ticket pricing, we noticed that other clubs in the league offered an under-12 season ticket, so last season we introduced it for the first time as well as decreasing the price of a child’s season ticket by around 70%. We want to futureproof our fan base and at that time the average age of our fanbase was 49 and following last season’s changes this dropped to 45.

In regard to the Junior Jack movement, Rebecca added that we have introduced a whole new platform for fans to interact. We will be doing a Junior Jack takeover for an upcoming game where they will actively take on roles within the club. There are lots of things we are trying to do now that we haven’t done before, this is the start and we need to drive the average age of supporter down. Following the changes made last season, an extra 800 children’s season tickets were sold.

QUESTION 8: OTHER

*1) Season ticket holders who left their money in the club during the 2020-21 season received hardly any benefit when renewing their ticket for 2021-22. How about another discount on future season tickets, or even a respectable amount gift voucher to spend in the club shop? Even a free shirt?*

Rebecca explained that we were the only club who did any kind of discount. All of the Supporters Trust were wowed with what we were doing, with £1.7 million in discount. It was a difficult time because of the streaming costs the club incurred to deliver this service to its supporters. We tried to produce a show rather than the basic coverage with a four-camera mix instead of one. We tried to find the right mix of being able to financially reward the season ticket holders, and at the time there was an option of a retail bundle, streaming and other options. Rebecca expressed that she genuinely believes we went over and above other clubs.

Terry added that there was a huge cost to the club in regards to the streaming element. The Supporters Trust endorsed the actions of the club.

*2) I strongly believe season ticket prices for younger (primary age) children should be one price across the stadium. Children often sit with their parents who are existing ticket holders in the East or West stand, but seat availability in the family stand no longer offers much choice as those who bought tickets as children in 2012 are now adults themselves yet remain in their original seats. The difference in pricing structure for children’s season tickets is grossly unfair on parents/carers.*

*Additionally, as many of the Championship matches are 19:45 kick off on weekdays, most primary age fans do not attend as it is too late with school the following day, so there should be a lower price bracket for these fans.*

Rebecca responded that as previously mentioned, the positioning of supporters in the stadium is something being worked on as we do have an amazing facility in the south stand that isn’t being maximised because the demographic isn’t right. Through our ticket strategy it is really important that we get the right people in the right areas, having the right expectations and knowing what the atmosphere is like in each stand.

Rebecca added that she is hoping we can keep children’s pricing as low as possible, however there are some pinch points in certain areas of the stadium which may include people moving, for example there are some areas of the stadium that only have drinks and no food. Rebecca explained research shows the age of a fan that chooses the club they will follow is seven, so we strategically work with the Swans Foundation as that is the age they have the most interaction with children in schools. Again, it is about building and encouraging our future fan base.

QUESTION 9: CATERING

*Delighted with the improvement since the club took back control of the catering. Have the club got any further ideas in adding to the recent improvements?*

Rebecca explained that the main reason of bringing catering in house was because during Covid we wanted to make a big stand and support local businesses before looking further afield. This also meant we could make sure the food quality is as good as it could be, along with setting our own price points. As an example, we brought back the Vetch pasty, and we work with Gower Coffee, Gower Brownies etc. Rebecca added that the next movement will be getting the right types of food in the right places, with different needs in each area. We want to continue building local suppliers into commercial partnerships, being creative and ahead of the curve.

Julian added that during Covid the club’s expectation was that we would not have fans for the remainder of the season. We appointed the general manager for catering and a few other members of staff, under the impression that we wouldn’t have fans for the remainder of the season, then we had little notice we could admit fans for the Barnsley play-off fixture. The in house catering team is now fully functional, and the fans are seeing this in action. Being cashless is helping with speed of transaction and Julian believes it will keep getting better and better.

*Further question – Is the catering a good revenue stream or is it just part of the match day experience?*

Rebecca responded that it is a good revenue stream. It is not currently a major profitable part of the organisation but there is potential.

Andrew added that in 2018 the club took on the responsibility of managing the stadium. We are now looking at the footprint of the stadium to see how we can develop it better. It was created as a multi-use stadium, so we have the ability as club and as a business to change things going forward, and how we can reconfigure catering offers and using wider footprint to be better at what we do.

Rebecca noted that for example that we don’t want to have one concert each year, we want to have two, three or four. We need to think about what promoters look at and what will make them choose us.

*Further question – Is it viable to keep the eateries open after the game? For away supporters?*

Rebecca said that one positive thing about us having the catering in house is that we can be dynamic, and we already do this with hospitality because we employ the staff and have this control.

QUESTION 10: FAN ENGAGEMENT

*What’s the likelihood of Swansea City introducing a safe standing area at the stadium?*

Julian stated that a pilot is currently ongoing with five clubs. We have got the view that we will let others do the pilot. It is more complicated here because of the rugby and concerts and the cost of adapting the stadium. We have done the work in the past as this has been on the agenda on a national level for some years. We’re open to the idea but there is a way to go.

Andrew added that this stadium was designed in response to a set of circumstances that happened in the 1980s, and legislation came into place in the 1990s and the stadium was designed in the 2000s. The stadium is not designed to be stood in and the legislation is very specific. Our stadium can be adapted to accommodate the rail seating, similar to what Cardiff City are using in their trial. There will be variations which is why the pilot is in place.

QUESTION 11: COVID PASSPORTS

*I do not have a problem with Covid passports. What concerns me is that they are just viewed on one’s phone. The QR scan is supposed to show a picture of the actual person referenced on the QR scan. Why are the QR scans not checked as required to ensure that it is the person entering the stadium?*

Andrew explained that the club asked Welsh Government the same question and that we have been the first club to deal with the introduction of Covid passes. We have been at the forefront of the implementation of the methodology that Welsh Government have been describing. We looked at our Ticketmaster scanning system to see if it could do this, but they couldn’t. The QR code verifying system will only work on phones, then we would have the issue of having to give every person who would be scanning a mobile phone. This was not practical.

Moving forward, hopefully there will be a means by which we do what you are suggesting, but on the scale we would need would be a massive challenge.

We need to find a balance between us checking everyone individually and the risk of it becoming a safety issue. Visual inspection is successful. The trial we ran last season with Barnsley had no reported cases of Covid transmission.

Julian added that Welsh Government voted this in without the technical legislation to support it.

*Further question – How are the away supporters made aware of the Covid pass?*

Julian responded that we communicate with the away clubs and they communicate the information to their supporters.

*Further question – Do you reject fans who don’t have a Covid pass?*

Andrew responded that we do, but the response we have had from our supporters has been absolutely fantastic.

QUESTION 12: OTHER

*Are there any plans to make Swansea City a really sustainable club following the lead of Forest Green?*

Julian explained that around a month ago the EFL issued something called the Green Code, which is encouraging all clubs to follow a greener future. We are going to get a consultant in to review what we currently have in place. We are recycling and we are committed to signing up to a green agenda, but we don’t have one at present. The consultant will come in and speak to all departments to see where we are and where we need to get to. Then we will speak to green code administrators and to Forest Green.

Andrew added part of it is about control. Previously we didn’t have control of certain assets but now we have control of all assets. We have pockets of very good practice and there are areas that are more challenging. Both of our training grounds, Landore and Fairwood, have solar panels everywhere. Here we have a massive space that could house them, with a big roof space that catches a lot of water and we don’t recycle any of it, so these are things we are looking at already but we need to get a specialist in to help us. However, it is firmly on the club’s agenda.