

STAR operations meeting with Reading FC employees

In attendance:

Jackie Evans (JE) Director of Operations / HR

Ray Booth (RB) Stadium Manager

Dave Evans (DE) Community Trust Manager

Mark Bradley (MB) Chief Communications Officer

Rob Coleman (RC) Supporter Services Manager

Mark Ilsley (MI) Head of Merchandise

Paula Martin (PM) STAR Chair

Ben Thomas (BT) STAR

The below notes relate to the meeting held with the above people regarding the most recent and most pressing issues brought to us by members and non-members alike.

Season Tickets

MB explained that there were unprecedented issues with the ticket provider. These were due to a mixture of human error and covid related problems. It was explained that these issues were completely of the company's doing and that at no time did the company in question criticize or suggest it was anything else than their own fault. MB acknowledged that it was frustrating as the research had been done well in advance of this company taking on the contract to oversee the delivery and production of the season tickets themselves and it was a very reputable company that was appointed. When pressed by STAR about communication on this and if the problems could have been shared earlier with supporters, MB stated that these problems continued to mount and diversify and were a "moving piece" so it was difficult to communicate with clarity when the club were continuing to learn of the variety of issues being experienced by supporters and delivery partner's shortcomings. MB detailed the amount of work the ticket office put in to rectifying these problems as soon as they occurred, working incredibly long hours to rectify problems that were caused externally of the club. STAR agreed that this was not the fault of the club and re-iterated their thanks to the department for solving the problems as quickly as possible. MB explained that, to the club's knowledge, despite all the issues encountered the impact in terms of fans missing any games as a result, was very minimal and because it didn't affect the entire fan base, they made every effort to get in touch with those affected by the problems via email rather than asking supporters to join a long queue on the phone lines. MB said that the club have received a lengthy timeline of events from the company and as a result of these issues agreed to waive fees relating to the fulfilment of the cards and the packs. MB also explained that the problems needing solving were complex and individual to supporters and so recruiting agency staff would not have eased the situation easily.

STAR explained that as a body, we appreciate and value the work the employees of the club have continued to do in very difficult circumstances. STAR explained that they understood the criticism from fans towards the club and shared their experiences of the criticism they have faced as supporters trust. STAR highlighted their understanding of the confines in which the club and its employees had been working and reiterated their desire to continue to work with the club in getting answers from them around the main issues fans have but also that the club need to continue to communicate effectively through their social media channels and emails to supporters.

Catering

STAR explained that their members had not been satisfied with the level of catering on offer this season and the closure of catering outlets around the stadium had diminished the matchday experience for fans. STAR again raised the availability of Blue Collar food and the club acknowledged that they are trying to develop the range of food on offer. They acknowledged that it has not been as varied as they would want and that now festival season has finished and other large scale events are beginning to end, there would be more availability for fans in terms of food. For example, the recent Indian street stall in the Fanzone was well received and offered different options (though arrived late because of motorway problems). The club again stated that recruiting staff was difficult in this climate and that they had to choose and select carefully which bars and stands to open and where. STAR challenged this point as a line of communication to fans, stating that they did not think communicating this effectively to supporters had been done. The club said it had been, but acknowledged that this is an area they will continue to communicate with fans using the previous tool of the 'ahead of the game' articles published online. Again, STAR pressed the club on these lines of communication and suggested they re-advertise the 'Royals Support' Twitter page as a source of matchday information and sending this information via email.

Programmes

The club confirmed that the economies of scale were not effective enough to continue producing matchday programmes. They explained that it was a difficult decision that no one liked. STAR understood this, but again explained that the programme was always a good way of communicating with fans, which the club accepted. STAR explained that they have explored possible options of reintroducing the programme which the club would support in principle, but the production and distribution at many games pre-pandemic meant that they were actually losing money and the club stated that they need to protect what money they do have. There will be a 150th magazine produced, which is expected to be released for the Luton home game. There were also discussions held about the idea of creating a monthly magazine for fans which isn't completely off the table, but is currently sidelined to workforce and cost issues. The club explained that the new app that has been produced, whilst not meeting the needs of the fans who want a physical publication, does allow supporters to keep up with the news items and information that would be printed in a programme anyway. The club aim to produce App-exclusive content which will deliver features which the programme would normally deliver free of charge to all App users.

Ticketing issues

Namely, the QPR game. The club acknowledged that is far from ideal and that it was very unlikely to happen again. The club pointed out that there were a number of issues, which began with QPR selling their tickets without any criteria in place, which meant that the demand for the game was much higher than their ticket office anticipated. The club acknowledged that there were lessons to be learned from this game, but also stated that if too many restrictions were put in place on tickets, it would stop genuine Reading fans attending and importantly new potential Reading fans from attending. STAR pushed the club on removing those fans who were causing trouble, particularly in the lower west stand and asked if postcode checks should and could have been carried out. The club confirmed that post code checks were done as was significant social media research, but as an example, some of the fans who were taken from the stadium were actually QPR fans from Bracknell, which highlights how difficult it is to assess eligibility from a postcode scrutiny point of view. The club confirmed that prior to the game, many fans had their tickets cancelled and were refunded accordingly as they were proven to be away fans with home tickets purchased. The club confirmed that senior stewards had left the club and that the stewarding team was stabilising now. Regular meetings with stewards are held prior to and after every game. STAR recognises that to understand issues at home games a board member will shadow the chief steward at a game next month. The club reiterated its desire to keep working and promoting Club 1871 and that they want to work with fans in creating a safe, vibrant and respectful environment and the current system is agreed with the local authority and the SGSA. The issue of safe standing was raised and the club explained that at the moment, they cannot advertise the South Stand as a 'standing areas' but if fans do want to stand throughout the game elsewhere it is more of an anti-social issue than a safety issue. The safe standing agenda is still in its early stages and the club will continue to monitor this. The club praised the fans for the atmosphere at home games so far this season.

Community

STAR asked about the possibility of players and staff re-engaging with the community - fan panels, school visits, community events as these go a long way to creating a bond and affinity with the club and current players. The club explained that it was at the mercy of the national picture in terms of covid and restrictions but agreed that where possible, this needed to begin again. The club explained that some players had begun visiting schools again but this was limited by their training and playing commitments along with the need to follow both club and EFL covid guidelines.

Covid passports

The club asked STAR to prepare supporters for the possibility of the need to use covid passports to enter the stadium, as per government guidelines. The club explained that should this need to happen, supporters will be briefed on entry requirements and that the game at Swansea will show what may happen as the Welsh Government will be implementing this after our game in Cardiff.

Who's who

STAR explained that there was a lack of transparency about the staffing structure, both at first team level, but also at board and commercial level now there is no programme. STAR said they would like to see something on the website, with contact details where applicable, for heads of department and roles within the first team.

Kingsley & Queensley

They are not dead! They will be coming back soon to home games.

Fan panels and forums

The club acknowledged the importance of these events for supporters to have their say on the club and its operations, particularly with regards to matchday. However, mid-covid these events have been difficult but they will return as soon as possible and regular meetings with STAR like this one will help to address supporter issues and take on fan feedback.

Next meeting: 17th November