

# Birmingham City FC Supporters Clubs Forum

## Thursday 7 November 2019



**Location:** St. Andrew's Stadium

**Chair:** David Brown (Supporter Services)

**Birmingham City FC representatives:** Claire Boden (PR & Engagement Manager); Wendy Buswell (Retail Manager); James Corrigan (Commercial Sales Manager); Aamir Javaid (Ticketing Manager); Lungi Macebo (Chief Operating Officer); Jessica Poulson (Chief Marketing & Brand Officer), Colin Tattum (Head of Media & Communications); Edward Zheng (Director).

**Supporters:** Accessiblues (Steve Portman + carer); Blues 4 All (Bik Singh); Blues Trust (Cliff Horrocks); BCFC Forum (Dave Smith); Birmingham Supporters Club (Linda Goodman); Central Blues Travel (Tony Routley); KRO Birmingham (Lee Harris); Northside Blues (Chris Sinclair); Redditch Blues (Lynda Courts); independent supporters (Charlie Glover + carer, Duncan Green, Louise Hopson + carer, Mark Marshall, Paul Vale, Walton Wilkins, Emma Willock).

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Tonight's agenda:

### **Ticketing**

- Why have the club introduced a £20 charge for a season ticket holder to change to another seat? (*Redditch Blues*)

This charge has been in place for the last two seasons due to the number of times supporters have wanted to relocate to different seats within the same block. The same process is followed at numerous football clubs and events venues across the UK.

### **Safety**

- Why do we have to put up with chaos on the away coaches? On Saturday, the gate did not open for us to access the car park toilets until just before departure time. Most of the stewards did not turn up and there were only two stewards to man five coaches, leaving fans to steward themselves. It was pandemonium and bags were not searched as people got on. Surely this is not acceptable? (*Debbie Brick*)

There have been issues in terms of parking and convenience on the away coaches this season due to Coventry City's home matches taking place here at St. Andrew's. We accept that this has been a learning process for us especially as the Coventry deal was arranged so close to the season beginning, and we have listened to supporter feedback to try to improve things – e.g. in securing a different car park after the Brentford game.

All we can do regarding Saturday's mishap is apologise. The usual number of K2 stewards were requested to attend and did not turn up. There is an investigation taking place and these individuals will not be asked to work here again. K2 are deeply sorry for the inconvenience caused.

- K2 staff continue to use the disabled toilets in the Gil Merrick Lower. These are toilets where the lid does not raise and it is being urinated on. Can this please be stopped? (*Accessiblues*)

This is unacceptable and will be raised with the stewards.

- Are all stewards trained at dealing with anti-social behaviour? (*BCFC Forum*)

Yes, all stewards are fully trained and certified.

- If you go into a pub/restaurant/cinema and smoke you will be asked to leave very quickly. If you behave in an anti-social manner in any establishment you will also be shown the door. So how come some people can get away with breaching the rules every home game and nothing is done about it? (*BCFC Forum*)

If an incident is reported to the stewards in that instance it can be dealt with. A report has been passed on to the Safety team about smoking in Block 11 and this is being addressed in the pre-match briefing for the Fulham fixture.

## **Brand & Marketing**

- Why is the music inside the ground played at such a high level? Even though you are sitting next to a person, you cannot carry out a conversation without shouting at each other. (*Redditch Blues*)

We are always trying to find the right balance when it comes to the pre-match build-up and are more than happy to take suggestions on board. Previously there had been complaints that the tannoy is not loud enough. We will bring it down a level for the Fulham game – please give us your feedback afterwards!

- BluesTV is a fiasco. It's completely unacceptable that I was NOT ABLE to watch five matches in the first two months because of errors on their end. I tried to chase down a value refund for one/each match and I'd get kicked around to different people or turned down. I even suggested a discount to the store which seemed more than fair. Most companies employ damage control – why not have it for BluesTV? (*BCFC Forum*)

Other than the opening game of the season (Brentford away), we are not aware of any serious issues with this season's broadcasts. That particular issue was down to a third-party ISP supplier's technology failing and thus the stream going down.

In this user's case, without knowing his/her specific profile it is impossible for us to comment on what has gone wrong. In general we are aware that the product is not yet where we want it to be

but it is getting there. We are in constant contact with our stream providers and website providers to iron out kinks and we appreciate the continued patience and support of our subscribers.

- Can you advertise the Cookhouse menu? The food is amazing but the people around me are not even aware of it. *(BCFC Forum)*

The Cookhouse menu is listed on bcfc.com prior to every home game and will continue to be. We are looking into posting it on Facebook and Twitter for those who do not regularly check the website.

- Our big screen is a big disappointment. There are replays of goals but the screen should also be used to supply in-match information such as goal scorers, yellow cards and substitutions. If other clubs can do it, why can't we? Or is the Club more concerned with advertising revenue than providing a service to supporters? *(BCFC Forum)*

We take this feedback on board and agree there is room for improvement. A lot of effort does go into the graphics used pre-game and at halftime – birthday messages etc., which continue to be very popular. Unfortunately, we are limited in terms of what we can do during the 90 minutes due to the software our big screen is fitted with. We will investigate upgrade options for next season.

### **Commercial & Retail**

- The Blues Store advertises a range of ladieswear online but on visiting the shop none of it was on display. When inquiring at the counter we were told there was little demand for it so it had been removed from display. Why advertise it online if it's not available in the shop? Whilst perhaps it's not popular how do you expect to sell the current stock if not on display? *(Birmingham Supporters Club)*

Due to logistics and space constraints we cannot have all our online stock on display in the store, however we take this complaint onboard and will ensure there is more womenswear on display moving forward.

- Why are we wearing the yellow kit so much for away games? We have a grey away kit but we hardly wear it. I feel I have been conned into buying a grey away kit we hardly wear. *(Redditch Blues)*

This has happened in the past where a previous season's away kit has been drafted in as a third kit. Due to the colour, the grey kit is not always the best option in terms of clashes and does not stand out as well as the yellow against certain teams. The grey kit will be worn again soon, as and when is appropriate, and we will continue to wear the yellow kit for games where we feel it will benefit our team the most on the pitch.

### **Kiosks & Refreshments**

- The new pies have gone down terribly with everyone I know. How long are we going to have to put up with them? *(Debbie Brick)*
- The pies are still awful. Can we please have back the ones we had last season? *(Redditch Blues)*

- The pies! Why are you trying to fob us off with inferior pies at a higher price? This is penny-pinching off your fans of the highest kind. Sales must have gone down so can you please bring back our Pukka pies at the original price? *(BCFC Forum)*
- When is the earliest the Club can cancel the Hollands pies contract? *(BCFC Forum)*
- I bought a Hollands pie last week for first time. The quality compared to Pukka is noticeably inferior. Why were they changed? *(Redditch Blues)*

We have received a lot of feedback on the pies this season and are aware of supporters' concerns. On 20 September, we took the unprecedented step of releasing a statement about this on the Club website.

Speaking openly from a commercial perspective, the decision to partner with Hollands was one that was in the clear best financial interests of the Club. We were in negotiations to continue with Pukka but they were not prepared to come close to our previous agreement and so we determined it necessary to put our pie supply out to tender.

Hollands are a massive pie brand who are partners with a considerable number of football clubs, for example Manchester City and Leeds United, and offered a far better all-round deal for the Club.

Hollands' offerings are different to Pukka's, mainly in terms of the pastry. Pukka is puff pastry whereas Hollands is a shortcrust pastry. Change often brings about a negative reaction and it is common for fans up and down the country to react negatively to a change in pie supplier – other clubs including one local to us have experienced something very similar. It is worth noting that Pukka, when they first became our supplier, were controversial and the target of many complaints.

We continue to work closely with Hollands to improve their offerings and tailor them to our fans. They have conducted numerous taste tests and are in the process of adjusting their recipes, particularly for the balti pie. They have in fact been at the Club this afternoon to update us on this and as a staff we have tried a total of nine new balti pie recipes, narrowing it down to two which we believe are superior. We will be inviting a select group of fans to join us in taste testing these in the coming weeks before a final decision is made as fan feedback has been crucial to this whole process.

In terms of pricing, we have this season increased the price of pies for the first time in six years as part of an overall pricing review. As a Club, our costs (staff, utilities, etc.) have increased year on year, but the prices we charge have stayed the same. We are still extremely competitive in our pricing, and Coventry City fans have been delighted with the price of refreshments, having been charged more at the Ricoh.

- Fastpay is still problematic. Queues move slowly and staff are often unsure on how the system works, leading to further delays. Would introducing VISA contactless payments be a consideration for the future? *(Louise Hopson)*

Yes, contactless is something that we are investigating for the new season alongside cashless.

Having said that, there is no reason why cashless can't work and be equally (if not better) than contactless. Major brands such as Starbucks have more than 70% of their custom using a cashless method through their mobile app as opposed to contactless. Big clubs like Bayern Munich are 100% cashless throughout the stadium and this is massively successful.

As a Club, we recognised last season thanks to your feedback that there was room for improvement with Fastpay, and the process was too slow. We have worked closely with the Fastpay providers, Tappit, and invested heavily to improve things. We have implemented an online solution at the kiosks which eliminates the QR code step from last season. The uptake and success of the system has since improved noticeably – now over 20% of our matchday takings come via Fastpay and feedback has been much better. We are confident that this trend will continue throughout the season.

Having said this, we still also recognise that improvements need to be made and we appreciate fans' patience and support on this matter and always welcome your feedback.

- Why does the Club still not offer VISA contactless when even Carlton Town FC in the eighth tier of the football pyramid do? *(BCFC Forum)*

The only area currently without contactless is kiosks. All other areas of the stadium have a contactless payment solution. Having said that, as above, we recognise that we need to build this infrastructure for the future and are looking into the cost implications of doing so.

- I would like to ask about the pricing in The Changing Room bar underneath the Tilton. Is there still an offer on pre-kick off prices? These are not advertised anywhere, and some matches we receive a discount and some weeks we don't. I thought all drinks prices have to be shown by law? When the bar staff have been asked, they seem unsure themselves. *(Emma Willock)*

Yes, we do have an offer on a pint of Amstel for £3.50 before kick-off. This is in place for every game. We don't currently have any signage up for this but will look to arrange it.

#### **Misc.**

- Can the Club contact Birmingham City Council to ask them to make an effort with the local area? The rubbish left by the locals around the stadium and surrounding areas is appalling – it does not look good for the Club or the city and has very little to do with littering from fans. *(BCFC Forum)*

We are aware of the problem. This has been raised with the Council including at the latest local Safety Advisory Group meeting and we await action.

- Why does nothing ever get done about hot water in the toilets? *(BCFC Forum)*

Extra hot water tanks have been added in recent seasons where possible, however there unfortunately remain a small number of sinks where the plumbing does not allow for this, as is common at several other stadiums that are of a certain age.

- Are there any plans to renovate the Main Stand? *(KRO Birmingham)*

This is not currently seen as a priority.

- Can the Club provide an update on how the #belong campaign is progressing? I know we were aiming for the Premier League Advanced Award, having achieved intermediate status a few years ago. *(Blues4All)*

We continue to promote diversity and equality across the Club – not just as part of the #belong campaign but because these are at the heart of our core values. We are committed to eliminating discrimination and creating an environment in which everyone is not only respected but valued, and will continue to work towards the Advanced Award.

### **Board & Finances: Response from Director Edward Zheng**

- Is this a trial period for Pep Clotet or is his position secure? (*KRO Birmingham*)

As we stated when Pep was appointed, we are not looking for anyone else for the Head Coach position. This still stands.

Pep has done a very good job and we have an excellent working relationship with him and his staff. We are all united and together in what we are doing and in the goals we want to achieve. As you will have seen, Pep has been nominated for Manager of the Month today.

- A series of questions regarding FFP, profitability and sustainability and the overall vision for the Club. (*Blues Trust*)

As we are sure you can understand, financial details are sensitive and we do not comment on speculation. Some matters have to remain private and confidential, as they would in any business.

As a Club we cannot go into specifics, but we are mindful of EFL regulations and we continue to operate in a manner which reflects this but at the same time also helps to fire our ambitions.

As the board of Birmingham City Football Club, we need to be aware of trends to deal with and face new situations and act accordingly. In the modern football area, nothing can be assured as definite for any team. The only thing that holds in our hands is to give everything we can to scratch what we want, and avoid what we don't want.

We hope that the fans have the same confidence and brave hearts as us, standing alongside with the Club and the team.

Every single club has its problems. You can't always sort them out in the short term. But we know where the right direction is and we are on our way heading there.

Our main objective and principal remains: to get this Club back to the Premier League.

We have started on a new journey with a new philosophy, a new way of playing and new strategies. If not this season, then we look to the next to try and realise our ambitions. We learn from what we are doing now and try to improve even more.

We believe that attacking football, possession-based, is the best way. Not only is this the most effective way, but also it is entertaining and enjoyable to watch. I am sure you will agree that some of our performances and football this season has been exciting.

In our last five matches alone, we have had 99 shots.

The Club has generally played a certain way since relegation. This had to change. We have therefore committed to bringing through our talented young players. Our recruitment strategy has a clear focus.

Look at the impact our youngest ever player, Jude Bellingham, has made. Odin Bailey too. Five Academy players have made their debuts this season. Ivan Sunjic (just 23) is a fantastic player, Dan Crowley (age 22) and Fran Villarba (age 21) also.

We have just signed Jeremie Bela, another player of a good age we believe will be able to help us.

We are all aware of the areas of the team and squad where we need to strengthen. Our focus is very much on the winter transfer window and, without revealing any targets, we have things in place.

There is a lot to be positive about and with your continued, passionate support, we can move forward together to the place where we all want to be.

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Followed by an open discussion and Q&A.