

Dons Trust Board (DTB)
Redacted minutes of board meeting held at 7.30pm on 23 May, 2018
The Prince of Wales, Wimbledon

DTB members

Matthew Breach (Vice Chair)
Colin Dipple
Mark Davis (Chair)
Roger Evans
Tim Hillyer
Cormac van der Hoeven
Jane Lonsdale
Sean McLaughlin
Charles Williams

In attendance

Hannah Kitcher (Secretariat)
Terry Langford (Secretariat)

1. Introduction and apologies

Apologies were received from Nigel Higgs and Tom Brown.

On behalf of the DTB, Mark asked Cormac to thank the Prince of Wales public house for providing the meeting room.

2. Oversight of Football Club Board

Mark reported on a meeting he had with Erik Samuelson on 14 May, and the board discussed issues relating to performance management and line management responsibilities as well as Club strategy.

Subsequent to his meeting with Erik, Mark had met with Joe to discuss Golden Goals. The meeting had ranged wider, including the approach to producing a strategy.

Mark reported that the marketing assistant Billy Hunt had started this week and this was helping Joe to make progress on improving income.

Jane pointed out that equality of gender in the Club is still concerning, with the majority of managerial roles being male.

The visibility of Football Club Directors and DT Board members was discussed, including the idea of FCB Directors periodically being available to meet fans at the DT kiosk.

It was agreed that Mark and Matt would meet with Erik to discuss the issues discussed.

3. Relationship and communication with members and fans.

Mark posed the question "how do we want to set the right relationship with our members and fans?"

Jane wanted to establish that all the DTB members were in agreement that there is a disconnect between the Club and its fans.

Cormac considered that there is an illusion of a disconnect, particularly on match days, when DTB members are readily accessible to members. He would like to see the poor communication concerning the season ticket changes to be the catalyst for the Club to get on the front foot to improve communication with the fans. He acknowledged that, whilst a lot of good work was being done on the website, there were other social networking avenues to explore, particularly on match days. It was important for fans to feel engaged on match days.

Sean did not consider the issue was as bad as some people are making it out to be. He appreciated that there was a small minority that were vocal. He acknowledged that the Club could always do better and try and learn. He agreed that the season ticket communication was handled badly.

Tim considered that there was a perception there was a disconnect. However, when challenged by a fan about what the DTB were doing about it, Tim offered a discussion with a DTB or FCB member but the fan had backed down. Tim was concerned as to the underlying cause of the perception.

Charles considered that it was not so much a disconnect but rather differing expectations about what issues the members should be consulted on. He did not think that the DTB all have the same view of this. Concerning the season ticket issue, the DTB had decided in good faith on the changes to the rules. He said that the DTB should consider what is delegated to the DTB and what is to be consulted on, and then agree this with the members. The strategy would help a lot with that. It was important that people felt they had been listened to.

Matt did not think there is a disconnect. There are many methods of communication and the DTB were always available to talk to. Expectation management is key: if people think they are going to get consulted on something and then they are not, they are going to get upset. It is up to the DTB to manage those expectations. He considered that when we get things wrong and we are pushed on it, that this is healthy. He considered it important to avoid things building up but did not consider that there was anything fundamentally broken.

Roger considered it was right to apologise for the handling of the season ticket issue. He also considered that sometimes we should be ready to push back a bit because although someone is vocal it does not necessarily mean they are right. The volunteers that he had had discussions with at the recent volunteer away day had a totally different view and did not consider that there was a disconnect.

He did not consider that either the DTB or the FCB are very good at reaching out to people, to canvas their opinions, before and after the game, either in the bars or in the car park.

Mark observed that some of the offensive comments he had read on the threads actually made him feel the disconnect the other way around. He suggested that when a person receives abuse in that way, then, rightly or wrongly, it is a human reaction to become defensive, so the tone of some recent communications might just be a natural human reaction.

Jane disagreed with the majority of the previous comments citing the eight pages on one thread of comments collated on the Board Webjam about the Club and the DTB. She was concerned about the comment "it is only on social media" and pointed out that this is the way people now communicate. She considered there is a problem at the Club at the moment because, rightly or wrongly, the DTB had appeared to rubber stamp the ticketing proposals. She considered that the DTB would be remiss in their duties if they did not consider the issue of communication properly.

Mark reminded the DTB that the issue of a disconnect had first been raised around seven months earlier, and not in response to the ticketing issue. A decision would need to be made about what stance the DTB should adopt in dealing with the fans and members that creates a positive rather than a negative connection.

Sean considered that it would be wrong to dismiss the concerns but also wrong to give them too much credence. If the DTB were going to listen to the comments, then do they then have to act on them. He added that the season ticket changes had been discussed by the DTB and they were approved - they were not rubber stamped.

Tim advised that, since 2002, he had never experienced such venom as he had recently about the 80% rule. Fans still do not understand the logic of the 80% rule and some feel strong enough to walk away from the Club. In a previous role as a retail director he was responsible for customer service. It had been his experience that sometimes it could be healthy to let situations blow up, listen to them, deal with them and then say no.

Cormac commented that the DTB should look at what they are doing on Instagram and Twitter as this is how his pupils discuss the Club. He advised that this was the way this age group now communicates. He suggested after a match inviting people to have a meeting with Joe or someone else from the FCB, to discuss a particular topic or to give them the option to raise issues.

Colin advised that a lot of people he had talked to liked the Club, do not run it down on social media and are fed up with the people that do so.

Matt did not consider there was a disconnect but rather a perception of a disconnect. If someone perceives it, then that is their reality. Therefore, how do you change that perception? He considered that, when it is on a one to one basis, that perception seems to disappear but, as a group, it is there.

Moving on from the issue of whether or not there is a disconnect, Mark asked what the Trust and Club should do differently to improve communications with members and fans.

Charles considered that the football side of things is separate from how the other side of the Club is run. On the football side of things there would not be a huge amount the DTB could do other than appropriately question and monitor, without undermining the CEO.

Jane suggested that the Club should hold an open meeting four times a year where there is no agenda. It would give the fans the opportunity to raise issues. This would often defuse a situation before it got out of hand. She suggested that we should acknowledge an issue when there is one and apologise when we have got something wrong. Jane also considered it was important that the FCB members came out on a matchday to mix with the fans and oversee operations.

Colin pointed out that the Club had over-achieved in the last three or four years and this should be explained to the fans.

Mark suggested that everyone should put forward their ideas about how to improve the communication with the members and fans. Then the Communications and Engagement Committee (C&EC) could come back with some proposals. Mark asked the members of the C&EC whether they had the capacity to turn a discussion into concrete proposals. They responded by saying they wanted to wait and see what was discussed.

Matt opined that, of all the suggestions discussed that evening, the proposal for open meetings was the most useful.

Charles suggested using such meetings to feed back what had been discussed at the previous DTB meeting, and also to flag up what would be on the agenda at upcoming DTB meetings, so that the board could gather members' views on the topics for discussion. He also suggested sending a regular monthly newsletter by email to members.

Jane felt that talking about the playing budget winds some people up. She thought it was refreshing to hear Terry Gibson talk at the Thirtieth Anniversary Dinner when he did not mention the budget once. She reported that four people came up to her after the dinner and commented favourably on this.

Cormac suggested putting a page on the website asking the members what ideas they had. Then, when talented people came forward, we should make sure they feel valued and part of the process. He suggested that every month

we should identify an issue and suggest members come up and discuss the issue with us. Then, in six months' time, we should include on the SGM agenda the issues that members keep bringing up.

Roger considered that DTB members should up their game on match days by meeting fans and finding out what they think. Jane noted that some DTB members ensured they were available on matchdays already. Roger considered that the DTB should instruct the FCB to be more visible on match days, albeit this was not something the Operations Director could realistically participate in, given his match day duties.

Referring to the Academy's acquisition of players when Brentford closed their academy, Tim noted we remain keen on the academy system. Is the decision to have an academy the type of question we would want to put to members?

Referring to the break-out groups at the last DT SGM, Jane said that people wanted to know and understand what happens next with suggestions. They wanted to know what happened with the results of the survey conducted last year. During the open meeting they considered the discussions were closed down too soon, when fans wanted to continue the debate. With issues concerning the running of the Club, she considered that the members would look to the DTB to fill those gaps and do something about it, for example with the catering concerns. She therefore considered that the DTB either needed to manage those expectations or do something about it.

Mark summarised that there were some definite messages that had come up during the discussions: the FCB should engage more on match days; there should be more use of surveys, including by the FCB; the C&EC would produce a thread on the Board Webjam for DTB members to contribute further suggestions.

4. Brief reflections on first half of the year

In consideration of the time left for discussion Mark postponed this discussion.

5. Update on stadium options consultation / crowd funding

Roger advised that to go through a crowd funding exercise the Trust would need to seek permission for a Restricted Action, similar to the Back in Two Ticks process. The Stadium Committee considered that a specific group would need to be set up to undertake this, with the right experience and background.

Mark advised that the sale of shares was a Category B Restricted Action. In common with a Category A Restricted Action, approval required a high turnout and enhanced majority. However, there was no requirement for the vote to be conducted on two separate occasions. Timing was a consideration, i.e. the difficulty of mobilising a vote over the summer, during the off-season.

Jane reminded the DTB that Back in Two Ticks had cost approximately £15,000. She felt that the reason there was such a high turnout was because everyone got something through the post and some were contacted on the phone. She suggested this would need to be replicated again, particularly as everyone was currently turned off looking at their emails due to the GDPR.

Regarding the process of consulting fans and members on stadium options, Roger advised that the FCB were still waiting to receive the final stadium costs from Scotts. The Club would then know how much it had to spend on the options and in turn how much it needed to raise from the crowd funding. Erik expected to receive the final costs from Scotts in early in June.

Jane reminded the DTB that they had originally told the fans that the meeting would be in May, then early June. It would now be prudent to update them that there had been a delay in receipt of the final stadium costs and that a meeting would be arranged once the costs had been received.

Mark advised that he did not consider the crowd funding consultation to be the responsibility of the Stadium Committee. He considered it should be made up of members of the DTB and perhaps some other people who had previously been involved in Back in Two Ticks.

Matt suggested the DTB should advertise for suitably experienced volunteers to form this group, given how stretched DTB members were on other matters.

6. AOB Update on GDPR privacy notice - GDPR

Tim advised that the previous week he had sent Mark a draft version on a privacy policy, which was heavily derived from the Club's privacy policy. This had been thoroughly reviewed with Chris Mappley.

Tim had incorporated the changes Mark requested. He was waiting for a brief statement which should go on the Club's website and then be replicated on the Trust's website. It would, in effect, state "as a member of the DT you have asked us to do this and here is a link to our privacy policy". Tim was content that this was sufficient for our requirements.

Mark summarised that the privacy notice would go on the Trust website. It would then be emailed to members (and posted to those not on email). He suggested we should put a quick news item on the front of the Trust's website that the DT had updated their privacy policy, with a link to the policy.

Tim advised that the DT definitely had active consent to continue to email members.

The meeting concluded at 10.30 pm.

Dates of the next meetings: 19 June 2018 and (to be confirmed) 9 July 2018. Sean advised he would be away for both these meetings.