

## **Election Steering Group**

### **Report on 2022 Dons Trust board elections**

#### **1. Introduction**

This is the main report of the Elections Steering Group (ESG) on the Dons Trust (DT) board election held in 2022. It is scheduled for presentation to the Dons Trust board (DTb) on 8 February. We will leave it to the DTb whether it wishes to make the full report or a redacted version available to trust members or the public as appropriate.

It follows a verbal presentation and accompanying slides presented by myself (David Hall) to the DT Annual General Meeting (AGM) in person on 19 December 2022.

The report is structured this year to cover all areas of the election process rather than the key points. I am planning to stand down this year so this will hopefully make the job easier for the team heading it up in 2023.

There are various recommendations which are proposed. We haven't in the report attached any level of importance to these, but some are clearly of more significance than others.

#### **2. Elections Steering Group (ESG) composition**

The membership of the ESG this year was:

David Hall

Matt Breach

Julian Edwards

George Jones

Neil Springate (Independent Scrutineer from the Fulham Supporters Trust)

We were notified on 29 August 2022 by Martin Newton (DT Secretary) that the previous Chair (Alex Folkes) was not going to be available this year so after discussion with the remaining team we agreed that I would chair jointly with Matt Breach although communications would generally be sent out from the ESG as a whole.

In previous years the Election Rules have stated that the DTb will appoint the chair of the ESG and ESG members, but given the late timing the chairing and membership arrangements were put forward by the ESG itself to Kris Stewart and Michele Little (DTb Chair and Vice Chair) and the DT Secretary for agreement to ensure the regular timetable was not delayed.

My thanks to my fellow team members and for their input and support to the process this year.

Recommendation 1: As I am standing down this year it is recommended the DTb enter into discussion with the remaining members of the 2022 ESG and initiate a process for recruiting to cover any gaps as necessary well before August 2023.

### **3. Timetable**

A detailed timetable was drawn up and agreed with ESG members and shared with the DTb ahead of an article with the key dates which was originally scheduled for the Leyton Orient programme of 10 September. This broadly followed the format used in 2021. However with the postponement of that game because of the Queen's death the article was published online several days later on the DT site and the club website here: [Stand up for election at our fan-owned club - News - AFC Wimbledon](#)

We feel that this broad timetable still works but we make some recommendations later on with regards to specific timing of nominations and member eligibility deadlines and the voting period.

Recommendation 2 - The first meeting of the 2023 ESG should be scheduled for August or even earlier (around June when the fixtures come out) to ensure key dates in the process are agreed and shared with the DTb.

### **4. Key changes to process in 2022**

There were several changes to the process in 2022 which required incorporation into the ESG planning including these key ones:

1. As noted in the article there was an increase of the DTb to 10 members meaning an additional place was available in the 2022 election.
2. The inclusion of an extra 1-year place due to the resignation mid-term of Graham Stacey. This was increased to two 1-year places following the resignation of Niall Couper on 16 October after nominations had opened.
3. The addition of a Guidance Note for prospective board members from the DTb and terms of reference for the four sub groups.

Recommendation 3 – whilst the ESG was able to accommodate these changes in 2022 and the resignation of Niall Couper was a result of exceptional circumstances we would continue to request that reasonable advance notice be given to any key changes to the previous year's process as this can have a bearing on print costs (see section 12 below).

## **5. Election Rules and Nominations Process**

We broadly stuck with the Election Rules and Nominations Process from 2021 other than prohibiting candidates from proposing one another and any continuing DTb member proposing a candidate. The former was missed by one candidate in 2022 and resulted in him having to find a different proposer during the 2022 process.

We also made the Rules clearer to indicate that members aged 16 or over could vote but could not stand until they were 18 and added a section for the new DTb guidance note and terms of reference with a request that candidates indicated which sub group they wished to belong to.

The Nomination forms were sent out and posted online on time on 8 October and an article was included in the programme on 15 October against Sutton. A revised announcement was posted on the DT site and ProBoards on 18 October after the number of vacancies was increased.

We had a few enquiries during the process but whilst we understand there was a lot of discussion on social media in the preceding period we only had one submission by 4.30pm the day before the deadline of midnight on Saturday 29 October. We subsequently received two on the evening

of 28 October, a further five on the morning of 29 October and a further five during the last hour or so before the midnight deadline.

There were (as in previous years) a number of errors in the submissions to address (missing short manifestos and pictures, incorrect word counts, missing and incorrect emails / phone numbers etc) alongside the usual membership checks (some of which raised a few queries) but we managed to complete everything and confirm with candidates by 31 October so an announcement could be made.

Whilst we do not set quotas on the sex, age and ethnicity of candidates it is worth noting that all thirteen candidates were white males. Some of the candidates were younger. In previous years female candidates have often finished top of the polling.

Recommendation 4 – In hindsight choosing a Saturday deadline for submissions may have been one cause for the last minute nominations. It is suggested that to avoid the extra weekend work for the ESG team a Friday deadline be introduced. We would also ask candidates to double check their submissions before they send them to us. It is proposed the ESG work with the DTb to make guidance to prospective candidates even clearer and publicise this on the website and in matchday programmes.

Recommendation 5 – the DTb consider whether it needs to do more to encourage and promote more diversity among candidates to reflect DT membership.

Recommendation 6 – that the Dons Trust make it clearer that members who are 16 or over are eligible to vote but require they set up different email addresses in order to do so (see also Recommendation 14)

## **6. Manifesto Publications and Content**

As in previous years we asked for a long manifesto (max 800 words) and a short one (120 words) for a match programme. The longer ones were published per the timetable on the DT and ProBoards sites on 2 November (with individual links and a combined document) and paper copies were sent out a day before.

The mini manifesto was prepared and included in the rearranged Leyton Orient programme on 8 November. These shorter ones were then subsequently published on the DT and ProBoards sites.

One candidate (Richard Shepherd) enquired whether he could use a QR code for his mini manifesto in the programme. After careful consideration we decided it would be better to use one QR code link for all the manifestos. We felt we couldn't publicise Richard's suggestion during the election but thanked Richard privately for his idea.

Richard also asked whether he could use graphs or tables in his main manifesto. This is not something we had encountered before so decided not to agree it in 2022 but the ESG can see the benefits of it. This would mean making a decision on how it would contribute to the wordcount in order to be even handed although as in previous years there is nothing to stop candidates posting additional information such as graphs and tables on ProBoards or via separate online links / websites.

One candidate asked us to add some extra text after the manifesto deadline as he had not used up his word count. We had to refuse the request but again reminded the candidate that there is an opportunity to use ProBoards to add supplementary views.

An error was made by the ESG when copying one of the candidates main manifestos which was fortunately picked up by the candidate within a few hours of publication and was rectified immediately with an apology.

Another candidate asked for an incorrect figure to be rectified in his manifesto. After careful consideration and a robust exchange we decided to make a tracked change to the figure as the ESG felt the figure could otherwise have been misleading.

Both these corrections were announced on the DT elections page.

We received one enquiry about the content of a manifesto after it was published but the person raising the issue chose not to pursue the complaint after it was discussed openly on ProBoards.

Recommendation 7 – a reminder be included in the ESG and elections communications to request candidates check any facts and figures before submitting it to the ESG and where appropriate include sources. We also

ask the candidates use a respectful tone when engaging with the ESG over any corrections.

Recommendation 8 – that consideration be given by the ESG in future as to how graphs and tables might be reflected in the Wordcount.

## **7. Hustings**

As in recent years the 9 Years Podcast Team was lined up to do some hustings. Whilst the ESG does not take direct responsibility for the hustings we do encourage fan groups to organise these and we offer advice on how these should be run to ensure they are fair.

Unfortunately due in part to the number of last minute submissions and internal arrangements within the 9 Years team, they were unable to organize the hustings this year on their preferred date of 6 November.

We were subsequently approached by the Same Old Wombles (SOW) to do a podcast. SOW is run by a team which included two of the 2022 candidates. Our initial advice was that this would be inappropriate and we were exploring other options (this included doing Zoom interviews on Wimblecomm – the charity I Chair – by an independent person not associated with the club).

After a further approach by SOW, where they indicated they would proceed anyway, we gave our guidance on how they should be conducted (including using independent Chairs) and asked that they reinforce the message that these were not 'formal' ESG approved hustings.

A couple of the candidates nevertheless felt uncomfortable about participating and one went on record on social media and ProBoards with his concerns. We also received a small number of emails raising concerns about the way the hustings were set up. Whilst we felt the emails and published posts lacked an understanding of the ESG's position we felt that intervention would only inflame the situation and sought instead to just re-emphasise our position as an advisory body rather than the arbitrator on hustings.

The hustings took place in three sessions on 13 November and the recordings were subsequently posted on the DT site.

The ESG listened to the recordings and in our view the events were conducted in line with our guidance. We haven't checked on the numbers who listened to the podcasts but this could be useful research ahead of next year's election.

Recommendation 9 – Hustings appear to be a perennial issue. We repeat that this is not something we believe the ESG should get actively involved in (it would be like the Returning Officer also being the BBC) but we would ask once again that any organisations or groups of fans planning to conduct hustings engage with the ESG as early as possible in the process so that guidance can be sought and ensure that information can be disseminated to members and prospective candidates as appropriate.

## **8. Engagement on ProBoards**

A separate section was set up on ProBoards for members to engage with candidates both individually and collectively.

Whilst ProBoards has been used before, the organisation of the pages for this helped the ESG and members to track activity and engage with candidates. Debate on this was in the main conducted civilly and constructively to discuss key issues being raised by the candidates.

Whilst we did monitor much of the debate on ProBoards we do not actively monitor other public social media channels. If we had received a specific complaint, we would have investigated it but in the main the emails we received were general comments about the process rather than specific call for actions against any individual candidate.

Recommendation 10 – we believe ProBoards is a very effective way of members engaging with election candidates (rather than say more public social media) and would propose the DTb further encourage members to sign up on the site and use this during the election process.

## **9. Membership deadline for voting**

As has been the case in recent years a deadline of 30 October was set for being eligible to vote and this was even more widely publicized this year.

The 30 October date has previously been set to coincide with the 90-day 'grace period' from 1 August that the Membership Secretary has set for paid renewals.

As 30 October fell on a Sunday this year there was at least one case where payment might not have been processed due to bank transactions not being cleared until a weekday. In one case this was exacerbated by the change in BST the previous night for an overseas member.

With the move to DT renewals now being set for the end of the season to coincide with Season Ticket renewals further consideration will need to be given to the date for voting eligibility. If the 90-day grace period continues this will finish earlier so a cut off date for voting will need to be set independently.

Recommendation 11 – that the cut off date for voting be discussed at an early point with the Membership Secretary to avoid any confusion in 2023 and that the cut-off date ideally be set on a day other than Sunday.

## **10. Survey Voting Tool and Reminders**

The voting membership list was provided by the Membership Secretary in time for ballots to be sent out on the planned date of 12 November. Because of the time lag in sending out postal ballots the paper documents were prepared ready for dispatch two days earlier.

The vast majority (96.5%) now vote online which saves the Dons Trust a considerable amount of money.

The Dons Trust moved to Smart Survey since the 2021 election and there was some additional work familiarizing myself with the software but it was largely intuitive and similar in some ways to Survey Monkey.

The electronic ballots were sent out once again in batches due to a number of members using the same email address (see section 11) and as in 2021 we planned 4 reminders. The first reminder was scheduled for 19 November, one week into the 22-day ballot period.



However, in the days preceding the planned first reminder the ESG was asked by the DTb if Smart Survey could be used for another DT survey. It also emerged at that time that there was a cap on the number of emails sent out per month of 10,000 (there was no such limit with Survey Monkey).

This created some concerns around the number of reminders and we asked that the other survey be put off which was agreed by the DTb (we understand at one point Survey Monkey was going to be reopened for the other survey). In the meantime, we agreed to defer the first reminder till this had been resolved.

Notwithstanding that we also asked whether the 10,000 cap could be lifted as this would have had an impact on the number of reminders we could send out. Whilst we waited for an answer on that from the DTb we enquired directly to Smart Survey about the costs of this.

On the evening of 20 November the ESG was unable to access Smart Survey and we enquired from Hannah Kitcher (who had designated access by the DT as a retiring board member) what the issue was.

She investigated on 21 November. Eventually it emerged that the DT Chair, Kris Stewart had been in touch with Smart Survey himself about the 10,000 cap but had to register himself as the sole user to make the necessary change. The ESG never got a direct reply from Smart Survey.

Whilst the outcome was helpful with regards to reminders it did cause several hours of consternation where we felt the electronic system may have been breached.

When we eventually logged back in using Kris's log in we were satisfied that nothing had been done to affect our confidence in the results (see section 16). We used Kris's log in for the rest of the election.

The first reminder was eventually sent out at lunchtime on 22 November and subsequent reminders on 26 and 29 November and a final one on 2 December the evening before the final midnight deadline on 3 December.

As demonstrated at the AGM and in Appendix 1, many members do need reminders to vote, as many people tend to open emails and forget about

the content. The increase in response rate happens each time there is a reminder.

At one point early in the process we were concerned that the overall response rate would be significantly weaker than in 2021 (against which we were tracking turnout) but this eventually caught up and if we had continued for one further day (like 2021) the turnout would have been almost identical.

We did get one or two enquiries about the adequacy of the Smart Survey software and as in previous years with Survey Monkey some email providers appear to present greater problems than others. For example, there appeared to be more difficulties with BT email addresses this year although a number of BT users did respond so it could relate to the way settings are configured. We decided not to investigate further this year.

As in previous years we also offered the webmail option and replacement paper ballots where emails had not been received and made an even greater effort to publicise that in 2022 on the DT and ProBoards sites and via matchday announcements. Webmail links require lots of extra work because we have to allocate individual ballot numbers and send via the DT elections email address, so we try to avoid that, but wanted to ensure that everyone could vote if they wished to.

There may have been other factors influencing overall voting behaviour this year (eg the distraction of the World Cup). However, overall, we were satisfied that the electronic response rate was reasonable compared to previous years and the availability of reminders certainly helped. Having run the electronic surveys as DT Secretary as part of the successful Back In Two Ticks campaign in 2015, when we had a very high turnout threshold to achieve twice, we know it is possible to connect with members via email but it has to be promoted and monitored effectively.

As a separate unrelated note, I read recently about the Carbon cost of emails. This does not tend to be picked up yet in the financial cost. The DT may want to investigate that in due course.

Recommendation 12 – electronic survey tools are far cheaper (financially) and in the main we are happy with the turnout but given the importance of elections in how we run our club we think it may be useful to assess other tools (in conjunction with specialists in this field) to conduct

elections for the Trust to ensure that the process meets the levels of scrutiny and high standards we want to maintain at the club. In doing so we may also want to consider the Carbon cost of repeat emailing alongside the financial cost.

Recommendation 13 – in the meantime we believe it is important that in future access to the election survey is only provided to the ESG and the DT Secretary during an election period and that issues such as capacity of software for reminders are addressed early on in the process.

## **11. Duplicate Email Addresses**

As noted above and identified last year we once again had to make changes to accommodate members who share an email address. We did ask this be addressed in our 2021 report but understand that other priorities came to the fore in the last year.

In 2022 there were 77 email addresses with two users, 14 addresses with three users, four addresses with four users and one address with seven users.

In order to ensure fairness on this in 2022 we sent out an email via the DT ESG address to holders of multi-use emails reminding them to give other members access to the email account in order to vote.

The main reason why this happens, we think, is where Junior Dons are registered at a young age by a parent but don't get changed over when they reach 16, sometimes because they are unaware their children are now eligible to vote.

This is a difficult area, but we do believe it still needs to be addressed. Despite some evidence that our ESG email had some impact it was apparent that in some isolated cases repeat voting of the same people was happening which suggested other family members might not have been given the chance to vote independently.

Recommendation 14 – the ESG requests that in future the DTb introduces a system which requires all voting members have a unique email address in order to vote. This may mean notifying Junior Dons when they reach

16 that they need to change their email address well before the elections start. Allocating just one vote per email address would also prompt this.

## **12. Printing and Postal Costs**

The number of people receiving by post this year reduced to 119 but the membership database suggests more than half of these also have email addresses but choose not to receive communications that way.

As in 2021 we left the locked ballot box with reception and asked staff to insert the unopened envelopes into the slot. We also took it down to the DT kiosk for each of the four home matches played whilst the ballot was open.

On one occasion in the final week the catch and lock just dropped off the ballot box as I was ascending the stairs at the ground. I notified club staff the following day to keep an eye on the box whilst it was in their care for the rest of the voting period. The catch has yet to be repaired.

The paper turnout, including ones received at the kiosk, was lower than we expected with just 19 returned. This may have been a combination of postal charges and the postal strike. We enquired at the office after closing date about any delayed post but were not notified of any late deliveries (not that they would have counted).

The voting pattern of those 19 voters did not show any marked difference to the electronic vote and given the size of the difference between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> candidates we did not wish to make an issue of the broken catch to the ballot box at the time, but it does need repairing and we think this needs to be monitored closely in future as it could be an issue for closer elections.

The DT has recently commissioned a survey enquiring about members views on using post to communicate with members.

The cost of sending out paper copies this year for the election was £2,295 (or just under £20 for each of those 119 members). This is clearly quite high so needs to be addressed. We continue to use Wimbledon Print

Company in Haydons Road (as does the DT) which works well. They have been very responsive, and we believe fairly cost effective given our requirements.

Recommendation 15 - Whilst it will be necessary to continue providing paper voting to some members, we believe that where members have access to email they should use that. The catch to the ballot box needs to be repaired and monitored in future should it be damaged again.

### **13. Separate Elections Address for Scrutineer**

We introduced a separate email address for Neil Springate this year as the independent scrutineer ([elections2@thedonstrust.org](mailto:elections2@thedonstrust.org)) which only he had access to from the ESG.

The purpose of this was to ensure that the ESG itself was held accountable to members so they could contact our scrutineer about any issues. Neil received some emails but these were on similar issues to those raised above (in particular the hustings process). We nevertheless believe this approach should be continued in 2023.

### **14. Matchday presence on DT Stall**

The ESG had a presence at the DT kiosk from the launch of the nominations through to the final day of voting encompassing eight matches in total. Whilst some days were more active than others, we think our presence there did help support the election.

This year we made an extra effort to get our presence noted in the pre matchday guide on the club site and in prematch stadium and half-time announcements which also helped with exposure, we believe.

### **15. Liaison with DT / club on promotion and online comms**

Generally speaking the liaison with club and DT officials throughout the process worked well this year. We worked closely with Amanda Bynon at the club and with Chris Slavin and Laurence Lowne for match day announcements. John Stembridge continued to provide very able support

as Membership Secretary, Martin Newton as Secretary and Michele Little as Treasurer. We also had help from various DTb members including Hannah, Graham Stacey and Niall on communications and Hannah and Kris with Smart Survey. Our thanks to all of them.

Particular thanks must go to Gary Jordan who always provided a very prompt and responsive service throughout the process getting information posted on the DT and ProBoards sites as well as getting articles edited and prepared for the matchday programme.

## **16. Overall Results and Personal Statement**

As in recent years I monitored the voting patterns by candidate over the duration of the election and provided that information at the AGM. This is also attached at Appendix 2.

I monitor that throughout to ensure that any unusual patterns can be spotted (and investigated if necessary). Fortunately, this year the gap between the last successful candidate in 7<sup>th</sup> and the first unsuccessful candidate in 8<sup>th</sup> was very large (around 200 votes) so there were no contentious marginal issues to address.

However, that will not always be the case so it will be important to address the issues considered in this report for elections going forward. As the club moves forward in becoming more professional the challenge will be to do the same with our systems in the Dons Trust.

I, along with other colleagues on the ESG, have always tried to be as professional and independent as possible but that is not always easy as a fan as we all have our own views. At some point it may be necessary to bring in an outside agency to run our elections.

David Hall  
Elections Steering Group  
5 February 2023