

Dons Trust Elections 2020

Report to the Dons Trust Board

Alex Folkes, Chair - ESG

This is the first of two formal reports to the Board that will come from the Elections Steering Group.

This report details the mechanics of the elections process and the results and is therefore relatively short. The second report, which we hope to have ready for the January meeting, will analyse all aspects of the process and make recommendations for the future and which we would ask the Board to consider in good time for the 2021 elections. In anticipation of the second report, we have asked for feedback from key stakeholders in the election - candidates, DTB members and others - and we would like to repeat this request and invite comments from anyone.

The ESG

The ESG consisted of myself as Chair, David Hall, George Jones and Julian Edwards. Neil Springate of the Fulham Supporters Trust agreed to be our independent scrutineer.

Process

Following an internal discussion, the ESG proposed a revised set of rules and timetable to the DT Board on 17th September. A number of small suggestions were raised and the final rules signed off on 23rd September. The final rules are attached as an annex to this report.

Nominations opened on 3rd October.
Nominations closed on 30th October.

We publicized the elections through various means including Mailchimp emails and reminders to members, posted letters where appropriate, articles on the DT site and via social media and in the digital programmes of course

The ESG took the decision to close the membership list for the purposes of the election on the date of close of nominations. This meant that candidates and voters had to be fully paid up (ie not in arrears) on 30th October in order to participate.

The ESG received 11 nominations. Each nomination needed two proposers (who could each only propose one candidate). One candidate listed a proposer who is an employee of the club. That candidate was advised that this was contrary to the rules and he substituted an alternative proposer before the nominations deadline.

Each candidate was invited to submit a manifesto of up to 800 words and a precis manifesto (which would appear in a matchday programme) of up to 120 words. There were some restrictions on what could be said in a manifesto. A number of candidates submitted manifestos or precis manifestos which exceeded the word count (we used Microsoft Word to check these) and were given the chance to re-submit. All did so within the required timeframe. One candidate submitted a manifesto which we felt contravened the rules for what could be said. They were advised of this and agreed to change the wording within the required timeframe.

The order of candidates on the ballot paper was determined by a random draw conducted by Neil Springate. The manifestos were listed in reverse order.

Campaign and hustings

Owing to Covid, the normal campaigning activity, especially on matchdays, was not possible. We anticipated this in our rules and reminded candidates of their responsibility to adhere to Government guidelines to protect the reputation of the DT and club. We anticipated that the 9 Years team would want to host a hustings and they did so on Sunday 15th November. Although the ESG had no power to control the

editorial content of an independent group, we asked them (as we would have asked others) to give equal access to all candidates - something they happily did with each candidate having a 20 minute interview with one of their team.

We sought other groups associated with the club who might be willing to host campaign events of one sort or another, but none were forthcoming.

Balloting

Under current arrangements it is understood that DT members have to opt in to being contacted via email and the vast majority do so. However a small number continue to receive paper-based materials via the post. Of the 3415 DT members at the time of the membership list closure, 210 have requested paper. One member who normally receives email communications asked for a paper ballot and we were able to accommodate this request.

The ballot papers were sent out on 5 November, 1st class, via The Wimbledon Print Company, a local printing and mailing house. They were timed to arrive on Saturday 7th November. This was also the date that the email ballot packs were sent out. Because of the various restrictions due to Covid, the ESG had a long debate about what postal address to use for the return of paper ballots. With his consent, we opted for David Hall's home address as it is around 5 minutes walk from the Centre Court store in Wimbledon town centre. He used the DT ballot box to store ballot envelopes as they were returned and this was sealed until the count.

There were 52 email addresses which were shared between at least two members (114 members in total). In order to facilitate these members, ballot emails were sent out in a number of batches as Survey Monkey (the system we used to run the online ballot) would otherwise only have permitted one vote from the email address. This is not ideal and will be picked up in the second report.

Of the 3,205 email ballots, Survey Monkey records informed us that 16 bounced for one reason or another. The records also informed us that 38 people had opted out of Survey Monkey. We managed to get 8 of these people to opt back in. For the remainder and the bounced emails we set up a weblink to the ballot form which we sent out to them via Mailchimp or in some cases individually via the Elections email address.

We also received a number of enquiries from members about missing ballot papers, most of which were resolved by directing people to their spam / junk boxes but in some cases where it could not be located, we offered the other approaches above. We set a deadline of 3 November to notify us of any mislaid ballots. Whilst the turnout was better this year (see below) it remains a concern that many emails remain unopened and some apparently do not arrive (despite the system suggesting no problems) so we cannot be sure whether they are actually being received – something we will address further in our second report.) In the past the ESG has allowed members to do replacement paper ballots at the ground on matchdays at the DT kiosk. Clearly this was not possible this year but will hopefully be an option again in the future.

Reminders

During the period of the ballot, we sent out four reminder emails. Each was sent to people who had not yet voted. We did not think that the cost of mailing reminders to paper voters could be justified.

The first reminder was sent out on 16th November, the day after the hustings event. As with all reminders, it included a suggestion to read the candidates' manifestos before voting. It also included a link to 9 Years YouTube channel which had the videos of each candidate husting. Members were therefore able to watch either the whole thing or individual candidates hustings.

The second reminder was sent out on the 28th November.

We sent two further reminders in the last 48 hours. The first of these was on Friday 4th December and the second timed to go out after the Bristol Rovers match on Saturday 5th December with just a few hours to go before voting closed.

We will provide recommendations for reminders etc in our second report, but our initial thought is that the number sent was a good balance.

In addition, the club ran a number of announcements of the election and carried the precis manifestos in the FA Cup matchday digital programme against Crawley (this was 15 days later than planned because of the postponement of the Wigan match). We will discuss publicity and the role of the club in the process as part of our second report.

Count

The ballot closed at 23.59 on 5th December. The count took place the next day. Due to Covid restrictions, myself and David Hall were the only ESG members physically present, although we were assisted by David's family. Both other ESG members and Neil Springate were present throughout via Zoom and we had two cameras covering the count, which was also recorded.

In total, there were 1310 ballots cast via 'normal' Survey Monkey and 10 ballot cast via the special weblink procedure described above. 59 paper ballots were returned, of which two were invalid by reason of being blank or spoiled. This is a turnout of 40.3% overall - an increase of around 10% on last year.

The result:

Luke Mackenzie 707
Freddy Flaxman 300
Xavier Wiggins 889
Charlie Talbot 744
Trevor Williams 556
Andy Silvester 326
Roger Hobkinson 381
Niall Couper 634
Hannah Kitcher 1062
Phil Moody 158
Dennis Lowndes 529

Hannah Kitcher, Xavier Wiggins, Charlie Talbot and Luke Mackenzie were therefore elected for two year terms and Niall Couper elected to fulfil the remainder of the term of Mark Davis following his resignation.

Announcement

The plan for the announcement of the results had been that we would send an email to the candidates and to the current Chair and Secretary of the board. At the same time, we would post the results on the DT website and pro-boards. However, we were approached by the 9 Years podcast team asking if they could run a results show. We asked the DT Chair and Secretary of their views and, with their permission, agreed to push the announcement back by a short time. The 9 Years results show was in addition to the other activity which all ran as planned. However, we note comments about this aspect being last minute and rushed and we will be making suggestions for future election announcements in our second report.

Analysis

Whilst no record was kept of the number of paper ballots received on each day and there is, of course, no way of tracking how voting on paper ballots progressed, it was possible to record via Survey Monkey the number of ballots cast electronically on each day and also to see for which candidates each ballot was cast, although we only produced this in an anonymised form. The reasons for doing this study are as follows:

- Because we can see each candidate's recorded number of votes over time, we would be able to see if there were any significant spikes or troughs. Although these in themselves would not be indications of foul play, they would be a prompt to investigate. In the event, we can see that each candidate's vote progression was on a broadly straight path.

- Looking at the number of ballot cast on each day enables us to judge the effectiveness of reminders etc. We can see that there were six days when the number of votes was higher than average:
 - The first two days of voting when 105 and 106 votes were cast;
 - The day after the hustings when we sent the first reminder and included a link to the hustings videos, when 111 votes were cast;
 - The day of the second reminder when 120 votes were cast;
 - The day before the poll closed when we send a third reminder and 145 votes were cast;
 - The last day of voting when we sent a last minute reminder (after the Bristol Rovers match) when 234 votes were cast.

There has been a discussion about the timing of the ballots vis-a-vis the manifestos and that issue will be covered in our second report. However, it is worth noting that a significantly higher proportion of ballots were cast in the final 48 hours compared with the first 48 hours.

Both of these charts are attached to this report as annexes.

Conclusion

I would like to give my thanks to all of the candidates for their good humour and spirit throughout the election process. I also want to thank the current members of the DT Board as well as John Stembridge and David Grows for their assistance with the election.

Neil Springate, George Jones and Julian Edwards provided great support and ideas and I thank them for their commitment, but my special thanks must go to David Hall who managed all the online processes of the election as well as providing invaluable advice throughout.

Alex Folkes, 10th December 2020