

Democratic Renewal

Independent Review of 2025 Dons Trust Board Elections



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Summary

This report is an independent review of the elections to the Dons Trust Board in the Autumn of 2025. The elections were completed successfully, in that voting took place and the candidates with the most votes were elected. But the campaign period was marked by controversy, including the exclusion of one nominated candidate for failing a code of conduct, a first for the Trust, and the resignation of others, including board members and candidates, following this.

The review was based on a call for written submissions from members, interviews with relevant people and an examination of key documents and evidence in the run up to and period of the elections. Because the controversy of the election was reflected in the evidence I received, I developed an argument map to chart the different views, which is included in this report.

One central finding is that, despite some weaknesses, the rules for the 2025 Elections were duly constituted. This means that the election results were legitimate and should be accepted by members as such. At the same time, these weaknesses need to be addressed so that the preparation and running of future elections to the Dons Trust Board have a more clear and formal foundation.

The most sensitive question has been around the handling of allegations of misconduct. It is entirely appropriate to hold those who stand for election to the Board to account for any relevant misconduct. Most other member-owned organisations at scale will do the same. However, the process for implementing this needs to be improved.

The review makes six practical recommendations to tackle these weaknesses:

1. changes to the role of the Election Steering Group to give it a clear formal mandate to act on behalf of the members
2. improved options for member engagement so that candidates have more of a chance to present what they can offer
3. an enhanced role for the Independent Scrutineer and the introduction of 'term limits' (a maximum period anyone can act in this role) to ensure their continued impartiality
4. transition to the use of the new Disciplinary Policy as the way to examine issues of conduct for the eligibility of candidates
5. a cleaner, more robust election appeals process, with the final decision resting with the Independent Scrutineer rather than the Board
6. the introduction of 'affirmative voting' by members where there is no contest for elections.

These six changes would improve the clarity and accountability of the democratic process. But there is also a need to restore more of a democratic culture in the Trust.

After so much has been achieved by members pulling together as a team, the 2025 Elections were characterised by a level of conflict and mistrust that can get in the way of encouraging the best people to come forward for elections. There will always be debate and difference, but keeping this civil is important. If not, things get more insular.

It is notable that the most entrenched views this review encountered were among older men who are longstanding members. As much as they have to be proud of, the future of the club rests on more than them – there will be a need to welcome in new skills onto the Board and to win a new generation of supporters, male or female, young or old, perhaps too, local or international.

Drawing on best practice from member-owned organisations in the UK and around the world, there are therefore further steps proposed to foster democratic renewal in the Trust.

The first two relates to Board skills. The purpose of elections is not to choose the most popular people. It is for members to be able to choose candidates with the right competences overall for them collectively to lead the Trust. The recommendation is to:

7. Be clear and open on what expertise and lived experience is needed on the Board.
8. Encourage all Board Directors to complete the well-regarded Board Member Core Training run by the Football Supporters Association.

The third relates to the benefits of a more diverse set of people on the Board. The overall aim in time should be to make elections – and being the experience of being on the Board - a safe experience for anyone with the right skills to come forward. The proposals are therefore to:

9. Develop a future pipeline of Directors by better using the Youth Advisory Board and embracing the need to bring in people with missing skills and lived experience through the limited number of places available for Board co-option.

These are the core recommendations. They sit at the heart of a comprehensive set of twenty two options and recommendations overall, addressed to the Dons Trust Board and membership. These are set out at the end of this report.

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Introduction

The Dons Trust was born out of a collective refusal to let a community asset be stripped away. It is a model of ownership based on the principle that a club belongs to its fans.

The legal model for the Dons Trust is a Community Benefit Society. Unlike a private company where the goal is to maximise profit, this is akin to a co-operative where the purpose is to steward a community institution for the long term. The Board is elected by members and acts for them in leading the Trust, including oversight of the club board.

This is a democratic model but this does not mean that members should make all the decisions. That is not how the Trust is set up and it is not how most membership organisations work. The Board is there to do the heavy lifting on behalf of members.

For a Community Benefit Society, the most common driver for success, or the most common cause of failure where it is missing, is 'good governance'. What is this?

Good governance is the framework of rules, practices, and processes by which a club is directed and controlled. It is in effect a 'social contract' between members and their elected representatives. Among other things, it requires:

- Transparency: that decisions are documented and communicated appropriately.
- Accountability: that there are clear lines of responsibility, including from the Board back to the members.
- Formality: that key decisions need formal agreement.
- Confidentiality: that there is recognition by members that there will always be some sensitive matters that will need to be kept in confidence by the Board.
- Fairness: that procedures should be designed to avoid unfair practices, including enabling people to have a right of reply, or appeal, when there are judgements on them and that such decisions are made by neutral parties.

In this context, good governance must be done, but it must also be seen to be done. The aim is that the electoral processes must aim to be transparent and fair enough that even those who disagree with the result can trust the integrity of the process that generated it.

This review is offered in the spirit of such a democratic renewal at the Trust.

1. About the Review

The purpose of this review is to conduct an independent examination of the decisions, processes, and governance applied during the 2025 Dons Trust elections. Following significant member concern and the resignation of board members and candidates, this review focuses specifically on:

- The development, approval, and execution of the 2025 Election Rules.
- The application of "Rule 10" and the subsequent exclusion of one candidate.
- The effectiveness of communication and engagement platforms (Discord, YouTube).
- Recommendations to ensure transparency, accountability, and trust in future electoral cycles.

The review was conducted between December 2025 and February 2026 using the following evidence base:

- **Call for evidence:** Online submission of evidence, with the option of anonymity, at the start of the review.
- **Stakeholder Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with individuals representing the Dons Trust Board, the Election Steering Group (ESG), candidates, and independent observers. (See Appendix 1 for the full list).
- **Documentary Analysis:** Review of Board minutes (March 2025 – October 2025), ESG recommendations, member communications, and the Society's Constitution.
- **Platform Review:** Analysis of moderation logs on Discord and recorded hustings content.
- **Written Submissions:** Consideration of a detailed timeline and statement provided by the excluded candidate.

I am grateful to everyone who fed in and was so welcoming to me coming in as an outsider (a Charlton Athletic supporter, with long expertise on co-operative models, currently Chair of RUSS, an inspiring community housing project in South London), unpaid, to review the sensitive series of events around the 2025 Elections. In simple terms, the Elections did what they needed to do, which was to enable members to select candidates for the Board. But the process was not straightforward, generating controversy, eroding trust and prompting some to withdraw. My brief was to review all this and recommend how the Elections can work better in future.

This is my report to the Board and members of the Dons Trust.








2: Argument Map

All the people that I interviewed on the state of democratic elections at the Dons Trust expressed their opinions openly and honestly. Even so, I found a pattern of ‘he said, she said’. People asserted their interpretation of events, at times entrenched but often only part of the whole picture. The following table maps out the key arguments that I encountered.ⁱ

Argument Map: 2025 Election Review

A balanced analysis of central tensions and competing perspectives

 Agreement of Election Rules	
ARGUMENT: SUPPORTIVE Rules followed the policy mandate set in March 2025; absence of a formal August vote was a minor administrative oversight.	ARGUMENT: CRITICAL Major items such as restricting candidate rights require formal, minuted Board approval to be legally binding.
 Exclusion for Past Conduct	
ARGUMENT: SUPPORTIVE Essential to protect the reputation of the Trust and the safety of volunteers from persistent abuse.	ARGUMENT: CRITICAL Represents "gatekeeping" by the Board; suitability should be decided by members at the ballot box, not by a committee.
 ESG Independence	
ARGUMENT: SUPPORTIVE The ESG operated independently as a specialized group of volunteers, free from direct Board interference.	ARGUMENT: CRITICAL ESG status as a board-appointed "Working Group" creates circular accountability and allows for perceived institutional bias.
 Informed Choice for Members	
ARGUMENT: SUPPORTIVE Hustings and manifestos provided sufficient information for members to differentiate between the standing candidates.	ARGUMENT: CRITICAL Barring a high-profile critic and the subsequent withdrawal of others deprived members of a full spectrum of choice.
 Democratic Communication	
ARGUMENT: SUPPORTIVE Some Board matters always have to remain confidential, but communication is relatively open. Moderating Discord was needed to prevent debate becoming toxic.	ARGUMENT: CRITICAL Strict moderation and the "Exceptional Item" gagging order suppressed legitimate dissent and reduced democratic legitimacy.

3. My Findings

3.1 Procedural Validity of the 2025 Rules

I encountered significant debate as to whether the 2025 Election Rules – and specifically Rule 10 which touches on the conduct of would-be candidates - were given a proper formal birth. I conclude that they were.

The Board took an explicit policy decision in March 2025 to include "past conduct" as an eligibility criterion. While the full set of final rules was not formally voted upon in a single minuted resolution in August, the rules were in line with the Board's established direction and were therefore duly constituted for the 2025 election.

However, the lack of a clear final "sign-off" on the wording for the full Election Rules, or at least the new amended sections, was a significant lapse in governance formality. The process for setting the Election Rules needs to be tighter.

3.2 Application of Rule 10

The decision to exclude a candidate under Rule 10 was based on evidence, the most substantive of which appeared to be a 'cease and desist' letter issued by the Club's lawyers relating to posts by the candidate. This was taken as prima facie evidence of misconduct. A prior statement by the candidate expressing contrition more widely was also considered. The actions of the ESG were consistent with the rules, but a weakness of the process to address in future is that it lacked a formal "right of reply" for the candidate to contest the evidence before a final ruling.

3.3 A "Missing" Rehabilitation Pathway

Rule 10 is poorly drafted and it had the effect in 2025 of tipping the ESG into a judicial rather than an administrative role. One specific omission is whether past conduct breaches represent a permanent bar on candidate eligibility or whether there can be a rehabilitation process. The ESG's 2024 recommendations included both a past conduct bar and scope for rehabilitation. Although the Board suggested in April 2025 that all ESG recommendations were accepted, the rehabilitation component was lost before the final rules were published. This omission, not least in the context of efforts by some Board directors to set in train a process of reconciliation (albeit with no explicit reference to or expectations around eligibility for elections) exacerbated the sense of unfairness.

3.4 Digital Platforms and Moderation

The Discord platform proved problematic. Moderation is a challenging and resource intensive activity and can generate as many disputes as it resolves. Over the 2025 Elections, moderation required sensitive judgments at high speed, during a period of intense volume. I consider that a "siege mentality" emerged over the Elections, where moderation was perceived simultaneously as too strict by some and insufficient by others.

4. Recommendations: Structural Reform

4.1 Setting the Election Rules

The responsibility for drawing up rules for the conduct of elections is on the Board, in line with the framework of the constitution. These rules should evolve, but greater care needs to be given to the design, implementation and communication of these where they change.

Going forward, making a decision on whether a candidate is eligible on the basis of their past conduct needs some safeguards to be in place. The risk otherwise is that judgements are subjective or based on uncertain evidence. As a matter of natural justice, it is preferable that someone who is subject to sanctions around past behaviour should have the chance to set their side of the story, and a right of appeal if the judgement goes against them.

To load this responsibility onto the ESG is unhelpful, as it distracts from the core role of running the elections. It is not clear anyway that an ESG would necessarily have the skills to assess the case and make this judgement anyway. The simplest way to achieve this, given that candidates are either members, volunteers or Directors, is to use the Disciplinary Policy. This policy allows for due process in how cases are adjudicated, with rights of appeal. The Election Rules on this would then simply be to bar candidates who have had a disciplinary case upheld against them where the sanction is then exclusion from future elections, ensuring a "right of reply" and due process.

What about challenges of inappropriate behaviour over recent years, given that the Disciplinary Policy is new? I recognise the case for supplementary criteria in the Election Rules to cover the transitional period (up to three years) prior to the introduction of the Disciplinary Policy. There is a judgement call for the Board to make here in applying this, depending on its view of the evidence and fair process around the consideration of this. The concern for appropriate conduct in my view is a valid and significant one for good governance. If so, while the 2025 Elections were the first to see candidates barred on these

grounds, the very same considerations may apply for the next round of elections while the new and improved framework of disciplinary and election process takes shape. ⁱⁱ

4.2 Future Scope of the Election Steering Group (ESG)

Remarkably, the ESG has no clear constitutional status and it has no formal terms of reference for its work. While it has operated well enough for many years, the lack of a clear, agreed mandate and expectations is poor practice and this needs to change.

The review considered getting an outside body to run the elections. The ESG itself recommended that the 2025 Elections be administered by an outside agency with expertise on elections and this remains an option for the future. However, the administration of the 2025 Elections were not the points of controversy and there is a case for saying that even if an agency were used, it can help still to have an ESG to act as point of liaison or oversight for the society. Commissioning an external election agency may be a future option, for example if an effective ESG cannot be formed, but I don't recommend this for now as a way to improve the quality of democratic decision-making.

I believe that the ESG should continue as a volunteer group, as the volunteer ethos at the Dons Trust is a strength. However, the ESG should be a purely administrative body, focusing on technical integrity and member engagement rather than a panel to adjudicate on past conduct. It should operate with a budget to commission activities and, as now, with operational support from the Secretariat, including liaison where appropriate with communications team at the Club.

Core Responsibilities:

- **Logistics:** Manage the election timetable, deadlines, and voting dates.
- **Validation:** Verify candidate eligibility based on objective criteria, such as membership, age, assurance on English Football League (EFL) test.
- **Manifestos:** Manage formatting guidelines and cross-platform publication.
- **Engagement:** Organise or commission hustings, match-day kiosks, and/or digital candidate sessions.
- **Permissive Platform Moderation:** Facilitate open debate on official Trust election channels (e.g., Discord). The ESG's role is to ensure a vibrant space for member scrutiny, stepping in only in instances of clear breaches of communication standards or the Member Code of Conduct.
- **Ballots:** Coordinate with any external providers for secure voting and verification.

- **Support:** Provide candidate inductions and technical FAQs to reduce entry barriers, maintain communication with candidates over the election, including any matters around campaigning breaches.
- **Reporting:** Deliver a post-election report on turnout and administrative performance.

Board Responsibilities (Distinct from ESG):

- **Rule Setting:** The Board retains sole authority for drafting and approving the Election Rules. The ESG may provide technical feedback but holds no drafting power.

4.3 A Handover Protocol (Disciplinary Link)

To ensure the ESG remains independent of behavioural adjudication, a formal handover protocol needs to be established:

- **Referral:** The ESG will not adjudicate "conduct." The ESG is of course empowered to monitor and challenge infringements during the Election period, but any significant behavioural concerns flagged during the election by the ESG would therefore be referred to the **Society Secretary**.
- **Triage:** This triggers **Stage One (4.2)** of the *Dons Trust Board Disciplinary Policy*.
- **Due Process:** Conduct issues are handled via formal disciplinary channels, ensuring a full investigation and right of appeal outside the election window.
- **Appeals:** Administrative appeals regarding ESG decisions remain with the Independent Scrutineer.

4.4 Role Profile: ESG Chair

Purpose: To lead the ESG as an independent administrative function, recognised within the constitution, to widen trust in the election process.

Key Principles:

- **Stewardship:** This role would be a good fit for trusted members who have had experience of governance at the club and are no longer directly involved.
- **Independence:** The Chair provides a layer of separation between the active Board and the election administration.
- **Neutrality:** The role focuses on enabling the ESG to be effective as a team in the planning and administration of elections.

- **Appointment & Affirmation:** While the appointment to this role is a Board power, it should be affirmed by members as a single-item matter at a Members' Meeting or AGM.
- **Term Limit:** Appointed for up to two years, with the scope for reappointment for up to two further terms (i.e. six years) before a break, to ensure there is scope for fresh perspectives.

4.5 Role Profile: Independent Scrutineer

Purpose: To provide independent oversight of the election and serve as the final arbiter for administrative and procedural appeals.

The Dons Trust has been well served by the current scrutineer, including in 2025, and members owe him considerable thanks. At the same time, as with financial auditors, it would be good practice to have a term limit on this role, with immediate effect, to give open assurance on the independence of the process.

The appeal process in 2025 went directly to the Board, with some communication between individual Board members and the ESG chair alongside this. Having a robust and independent appeals process adds to the legitimacy of the overall elections process, so I recommend steps to strengthen this. First, there should be one single pathway to appeals, which is to the Independent Scrutineer. Second, I recommend separating out the role of Independent Scrutineer from the wider, ongoing work of the ESG, so that they bring a neutral perspective rather than having been involved in ESG decisions.

Key Principles:

- **External Independence:** Ideally an experienced member of another supporters' trust or a governance professional sourced via the Football Supporters Association (FSA).
- **Scope:** Not a direct participating member of the ESG but able to act as a neutral point of appeals
- **Finality:** The Scrutineer serves as the final internal stage for appeals during elections, preventing the Board from acting as judge and jury.

Appointment & Accountability:

- **Appointment:** Formally appointed by the Society Board.
- **Term Limit:** Set by the Board but **should not exceed five years**, providing a professional benchmark for independent oversight.

4.6 Affirmative Voting

An uncontested election means that there are more places than candidates, so that those who are standing and eligible to do so are elected automatically. I agree with those that suggested to me that it would add a level of democratic legitimacy for Board directors appointed in this way to be subject to an affirmative vote by members. This does not need to be complicated. One option, for illustration, is a model highlighted by the FSA, which is a simple resolution at a members meeting, passed on a majority of members present, of a list of candidates duly elected. If this is not passed, then this prompts a vote by individual names on the list, one after the next. Affirmative voting of this, or other suitable form, would be a small but positive step to improve the line of accountability between members and the Board.

4.7 EFL Owners and Directors Test

Not all the candidates who stood in 2025 knew what the terms of the EFL Owners and Directors test is. This cannot be left to chance. The wording relating to the test on the Nominations Form for candidates - and in parallel in the Election Rules - should be strengthened to require candidates to give positive assurance that they are not likely to be disqualified by the terms of the test.

5. Recommendation: Board Skills

How does the board have the competence to lead the club into what may be a challenging future?

The financial risks of operating in a loss-making league and the handling of options on bringing in investment are critical to the club's health. Good governance is central here.ⁱⁱⁱ

So the simple answer is that the Board needs the skills to do its work, including in its strategic leadership role of supporting the club and other boards and holding them to account. This is a key dynamic that was largely silent in the 2025 Elections.

The purpose of elections in a community benefit society, the legal model of the Dons Trust, are to source the people who together have the right skills and capability, including mix of diversity, to lead the society - rather than the purpose of elections being to identify the most popular people who put themselves forward. There needs to be an understanding of the skills mix required on the board and as part of this a recognition of the importance of diversity, including lived experience that can form part of the skills and expertise required for the board to take action. Part of these may be about the competences of people as director's including independent thinking and an understanding of the role of the director in a governance context.

There are different ways in which member-based organisations can address this skills element. Two relatively common options to help can be to:

- Include in the elections communication a statement of where there are relevant skills or lived experience that may have been under-represented in the past, so that candidates with these are encouraged to put themselves forward for election.
- Invest in governance skills, for example by arranging for all Board Directors over time to complete the well-regarded Board Member Core Training run by the Football Supporters Association.

6. Options: A Democratic Culture

6.1 Improved clarity of governance

There is a "governance gap" between the Society's Constitution (the Rules) and the operational policies used to conduct the 2025 election. Where the Board operate without clear, documented votes on key matters, it is harder for members to know that there is a formal chain of accountability at work.

While there were changes on the Board relating to this, the same lack of clarity and formality left with an uncertain status the earlier attempt at reconciliation by two Directors with the candidate who was barred from standing.

Key to a more mature clarity of governance is for the Chair and Secretary to be supported to integrate a greater clarity and formality of Board processes around key matters. This does not mean longer Board meetings. Done right, more formality will underpin a more effective delegation of and accountability for the business of governance.

6.2 Member engagement

Communication in advance of and during Elections can be improved, to: engage members; encourage candidates to come forward and; support members in making informed decisions. Not everyone takes information in most easily in the form of manifesto statements, so other channels can help, alongside the established pre-recorded Hustings, such as:

- A live event, allowing members to ask questions of the candidates, following a Question Time format with a good host to manage this, to be live-streamed and available on demand following this.
- Arranging opportunities for candidates to be by the kiosk around match day games, or in the Phoenix pub.

- A short 50 word summary by candidates of their Manifesto to put alongside the candidates' name, with links to the full text
- Liaising with fan initiatives that could offer unofficial podcast opportunities for candidates to take up. With independent questions managed by the fans involved in those initiatives, this may be a less formulaic approach to introducing candidates.

There is also a need for member education, to explain to members over time how the society works and what kind of organisation it is. Some comments during the interviews claimed that a fan-owned club ought to behave in certain set ways, but without any real-world reference point to this, such as other co-operative and mutual bodies. It will help that new governance rules, if agreed, are written in ways that are much shorter and more plain English, with more developed secondary policies sitting behind this. The rules are essentially an agreement of the members on how the society should run, so this is an opportunity to build more of a shared understanding with active members and the many members who are not regularly voting.

6.3 Voluntary but not Amateur

The Dons Trust needs to professionalise its operations without losing its enduring voluntary spirit. True professionalisation means supplementing the role of volunteers with clear role profiles reviewed each year, alongside a financial investment in training, development, and performance reviews. Training or mentoring on the distinctive role of society secretary, offered by the Football Supporters Association, and around moderation of community platforms, offered by social media consultancies, ought to be high on the list for the Secretariat. But these are illustrations, the principle of learning and development support applies to all volunteering roles in the club. One option is that a Board Director, with relevant skills, act as a champion for volunteer learning, development and performance for the Trust.

6.4 Dons Trust Values

All membership organisations have to evolve ways to ensure that members behave with responsibilities and not simply rights. The very first successful modern co-operative, the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers recognised this over 150 years ago, when they issued a code for members, which included advice which would be relevant to the Dons today: *“choose your leaders wisely and then give them your support”*.

The evolving system around conduct at the Dons Trust was implemented in relation to one individual over the 2025 Elections, but the underlying concern has been around a principle and not a person.

The 2025 Election Rules was a step towards a process for managing challenges around conduct. As I have suggested, this lacked the full process that it ought to have, in particular a Disciplinary Policy (one that is now agreed) and a clear statement or code of expectations, not just for Board Directors or volunteers, who have enhanced responsibilities but for all members.

One example is the International Statement of Co-operative Identity. This sets out the following ethical values: honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others. If these longstanding values, or others, had been referenced in the formation of the society, which is akin in most ways to a cooperative or mutual entity, then it might have been easier to address behavioural challenges as and when they arose.

One option would be to evolve a code of expectations for members in line with a reiteration of the Club's Values. This could help to prevent and address challenges around behaviour and would act as a reminder that all members are part of a larger team.

6.5 Common Purpose and Renewal

Having restarted the club, risen through the ranks, raised the necessary finance from members to build the ground, and finally returned to Plough Lane, the club must now find its common purpose again.

From outside, it seems to me that the next great challenge is one of renewal: how to pass the leadership of the club onto a new and more diverse generation of fans. The "old boys club" mentality and casual aggression towards new or more diverse voices must be actively countered if there is to be space for more inclusive participation in and around Board Elections. One female Dons Trust Board member who stepped down talked on the Same Old Wombles podcast of "the personal online abuse I was getting"..." which I found really tough at the time and affected me more than I was anticipating."^{iv}

The quality of appointments to the women's club board shows that there is scope to benefit from more of a gender balance. The experience of using the limited spaces that exist under the rules for co-option to broaden the skills and diversity of the Board, often leading to people standing in open elections is a positive and welcome one.

On age, one option as a step towards renewal could be to make better use of the Youth Advisory Board, to act as a genuine sounding board for the Dons Trust Board on its work for the future of the club, and in particular the engagement and experience of young people around this.^v

Appendix 1: List of Interviewees and Submissions

Interviewees

- **Angus Fox**, Dons Trust Board (DTB) Chair and AFC Wimbledon (AFCW) Plc Member
- **Graeme Price**, DTB Vice-Chair and AFCW Plc Member
- **James Longhurst**, DTB Member and AFCW Plc Member
- **Ian Robinson**, DTB Member (Resigned September 2025)
- **Hannah Kitcher**, DTB Member
- **George Jones**, DTB Secretary
- **Reece Wheeler-Kelly**, DTB Assistant Secretary
- **Michele Little**, DTB Treasurer and Vice-Chair of AFCW Plc
- **James Ledward**, DTB Member and Candidate
- **Martin Drake**, DTB Member and Candidate
- **Alex Folkes**, DTB Member and Candidate
- **Chris Atkinson**, Candidate (Elected)
- **Matt Thornett**, Candidate (Withdrew September 2025)
- **Simon Hood**, Candidate (Elected; resigned due to conflict)
- **Sam Spencer**, Candidate
- **Ian Hicks**, Candidate (Withdrew September 2025)
- **Matthew Breach**, Chair of ESG
- **Julian Edwards**, ESG Member
- **Tim Hillyer**, ESG Member
- **Neil Springate**, Independent Scrutineer
- **Gary Davis**, ESG Member
- **Graham Stacey**, Hustings Organizer
- **Nicola Cave**, Governance Adviser, Football Supporters Association

Written Submissions

- **Shane Bellamy (Candidate classed as ineligible under the Election Rules):** While Shane Bellamy submitted a detailed and extensive timeline of events from his perspective, he declined to participate in a formal interview for the review. He stated: *“I don’t consider the review to be independent given the structure and process communicated by the Dons Trust Board nor the previous involvement of Co-ops UK.”*
- **My thanks to all those who submitted evidence to the open call at the start of this review.** This input was invaluable in helping to shape the lines of enquiry I took in interview and around the evidence that I looked for in order to assess what took place over the course of the Elections.

Appendix 2: Selected Anonymous Stakeholder Quotations

The following reflections were captured during the interview process:

- *“Nothing that I've seen is that new; nothing stands out as good or bad when you've seen as many elections as I have.”*
- *“The People's Front of Judea.”* (In reference to internal factionalism).
- *“In retrospect, it was not wise to ask the ESG to be arbiter on matters of past conduct.”*
- *“There is an 'Us and Them' mentality coming through.”*
- *“A constant barrage of finding fault.”*
- *“In retrospect, this was a mistake.”* (Regarding the decision to enforce strict confidentiality for Board members in relation to the appeal).
- *“Each new Dons Trust Board carries the perceived failures of previous Boards, because it is couched in people's minds as a single entity. But it is not.”*
- *“The communications isn't good enough.”*
- *“We own the stadium, you get goosebumps when you walk in.”*
- *“It took someone to say ‘as a Director, you can't bet on a football match’ during the election for me to realise this. It wasn't obvious in the advance materials.”*
- *“As the election progressed, with all that was going on, communication with those of us who were candidates was poor.”*
- *“Each new Dons Trust Board carries the perceived failures of previous Boards, because it is couched in people's minds as a single entity. But it is not, often operating with entirely different people.”*
- *“It is down to the members. If someone is toxic, no one is going to vote for him.”*
- *“The new rules were not agreed by the Board. They blatantly lied.”*
- *“We need to be on point and professional with our financial situation.”*
- *“We are a welcoming club.”*
- *“We have a big job on our hands to get a wider range of candidates. We are not doing enough to break down the barriers.”*
- *“Social media changes the environment for elections with new challenges, for the Dons Trust as for every other election.”*
- *“I can't believe what we have done; kudos to all who have made it happen.”*

Table of Recommendations

	Category	Specific Recommendation	Details & Context
1	Election Structure	Election Rules	Within the framework of the constitution, the Board is responsible for drawing up election rules with the ESG providing technical feedback but no drafting powers
2		Reform the Election Steering Group (ESG) Role	Transition the ESG to a purely administrative body focused on technical integrity and member engagement rather than conduct adjudication.
3		Establish a Formal ESG Mandate	Define a clear constitutional status and formal "Terms of Reference" for the ESG.
4		ESG Chair	Board to appoint the Chair, but have it affirmed by members at a Meeting. New role profile set with a term of appointment of up to two years, with the scope for reappointment for up to two further terms (six years in total).
5		Independent Scrutineer	Segregate the role from the broader remit of the ESG, ensuring a neutral perspective. Formally appointed by the Board for a term limit of no more than five years.
6		Strengthen Election Appeals	Create a single appeals pathway to the Independent Scrutineer as final arbiter, ensuring the Board does not act as "judge and jury".
7		Introduce Affirmative Voting for Uncontested Elections	Use a simple resolution at member meetings to confirm candidates in uncontested elections to increase democratic legitimacy.
8	Candidate & Conduct	Use the Disciplinary Policy for Eligibility around conduct matters	Bar candidates who have had a disciplinary case upheld against them where the sanction is then exclusion from future elections, ensuring a "right of reply" and due process.
9		Transition to sole use of the Disciplinary Policy	Consider the need for supplementary, transitional criteria on misconduct given that the Disciplinary Policy is new
10		Implement a Handover Protocol	Where the ESG identify significant behavioural concerns in an Election context, these are passed to the Society Secretary to be handled via the formal Disciplinary Policy.
11		EFL Owners and Directors Test	Strengthen the Nomination Form to require candidates to give positive assurance they are not likely to be disqualified by EFL terms.

12		Establish a Rehabilitation Pathway	Address the "missing" pathway by defining if and how past conduct breaches can eventually be cleared for future eligibility.
13	Board skills & diversity	Define Required Expertise	Be open about the specific skills, expertise, and lived experience currently needed on the Board.
14		Board Training	Encourage all Directors to complete the Football Supporters Association (FSA) Board Member Core Training.
15		Develop a Future Pipeline	Use the Youth Advisory Board and co-option spaces to bring in under-represented groups and new talent.
16	Member Engagement	Diversify Hustings Formats	Supplement recorded sessions with options of live Q&A "Question Time" events, match-day kiosks, and fan-led podcasts.
17		Simplify Communications	Add in 50-word manifesto summaries and encourage plain English around any changes in the constitution to build more of a shared understanding across members.
18	Voluntary but not amateur	Professionalise Volunteer Roles	Supplement the voluntary spirit with clear role profiles, reviewed on an annual basis, training, and performance reviews. Board champion identified for volunteer learning, development and performance.
19		Invest in training / mentoring for the Secretariat	Secretary to complete FSA Secretary Training. Consider training for moderation of community platforms.
20	Governance Culture	Formalise Board Processes	Chair and Secretary to ensure that key decisions (such as rule changes) are documented via formal, minuted votes to maintain a chain of accountability.
21		Set clearer expectations on behaviour in line with Club Values	One option to consider is to evolve a code of expectations for members in line with a reiteration of the Club's Values. This could help to prevent and address challenges around behaviour and would act as a reminder that all members are part of a larger team.
22		Common purpose and renewal	Consider how to pass the leadership of the club onto a new and more diverse generation of fans. In this context, i) an 'old boys club' mentality and casual aggression towards new or more diverse voices must be actively countered to allow for more inclusive participation ii) better use the Youth Advisory Board, to act as a genuine sounding board.

Notes

ⁱ This is known as an ‘argument map’, a model developed by pioneers in participatory democracy, where the aim is to encourage deliberative conversation rather than a dispute in which one side does not listen to the other. The map is not comprehensive, but these seem to me to be the principal points of dispute at stake.

ⁱⁱ However the Board choose to do this in future, the Election rules, including the basis and process for decisions on conduct should be set well in advance of the Election period, so that this is clear to all potential candidates and their supporters.

ⁱⁱⁱ As the late great Johnston Birchall concludes in his review of co-operatives around the world which have operated with minority investor owners: *“if the voice and interests of members are fragmented, then the focus of investors, on financial returns to investment, can crowd out other ways of working and serve to unpick the advantages for members that a well-performing co-operative can have. In other cases, the tensions can potentially have productive value. Tensions do not have to result in conflict and there are examples of creative governance design that can encourage good communication and the alignment of interests.”*

^{iv} Ann-Marie Godfrey joined the Board in April 2022, an active fan with football sector expertise, stepped down later in the same year. She participated in a Same Old Wombles, podcast, Season 3 – Episode 6 – Franchise and Resolutions, quotations from 24 – 25 minutes in. As the host remarked, on introducing his guests: “I can’t imagine standing, the vitriol sometimes...”

^v This is a proven model which has, with care and attention, worked well in other co-operative or membership settings. The panel would be designed to support opportunities for young people to increase their voice in the running of the club, including accessing training and development that could support them stepping forward to stand for future elections.