

Election Steering Group

Report on 2024 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 2024. 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, but it should be recognized that there have been significant abuse, plus a threat of legal action, from some quarters during this campaign.

The report is structured this year to cover only the key points of the election process. It should be noted that a brief review of the recommendations from the last full report (2022) shows that the only issue which hasn't yet been addressed is that, if anything, the candidates for the election and make-up of the DTb is even less diverse than in 2022. This could be partially addressed by Co-Option, but needs further thought at the DTb. One possible route to this is increase participation with the AFC Wimbledon Women organisation, which could easily be positively encouraged.

2. Elections Steering Group (ESG) composition

The core membership of the ESG this year was:

Matt Breach

Julian Edwards

Tim Hillyer

Neil Springate (Independent Scrutineer from the Fulham Supporters Trust)

George Jones (Deputy DTb Secretary – as was) acted as an associate member of the ESG, largely providing support to IT and the set-up/use of the election tool

Despite several adverts on the DT website and Club OS, no volunteers put themselves forward to support the ESG prior to the start of the election process. Martin Drake and Dave Gowns both agreed to join the group after personal appeals, but subsequently Martin decided to stand for election and David stepped down during the election period.

My thanks go to my fellow ESG members along with George, Martin and David for their input and support to the process this year.

3. Timetable

The group first met in June, and a timetable worked out for the campaign at that first session more or less came through unscathed.

4. Election Rules and Nominations Process

The rules and nomination process were unchanged from previous years.

In the end we received 13 nominations for the 8 vacancies, with one nomination being initially rejected for a significant number of major errors. The rejected nomination was then withdrawn by the candidate once they understood the election was to be contested.

Subsequent to publishing the list of candidates, we were contacted by a further individual who had attempted to submit a nomination form but used an incorrect (and non-existent) email address inadvertently publicised by the DT. Despite replying with 2 emails pointing out that a nomination form had not been received at the correct address, the individual did not make such a submission and directly entered into the appeal process. That appeal was rejected by the Independent Scrutineer, and then a further Rule 30 appeal was rejected by the DTB.

5. Manifesto Publications and Content

No specific issues were found with the manifestos, although the ESG have a view that the 800 word "long" manifesto may be excessive in length.

An issue occurred when the list of candidates was issued as the ballot forms went out with the links to the manifestos embedded in the announcement not working as intended (and also the previously generated "random order" was not used in the communications, and they were listed alphabetically). This highlighted a key issue that needs addressing; the ESG has no direct method of communications with members other than via the election tool, and the interface with the DT communications volunteers is somewhat haphazard. Errors were made by both parties, and the fragmented nature of the set-up meant that none of these were picked up when they should have been.

6. Hustings

Our original plan for Hustings was to use the same route as previous elections, but the 9Yrs Podcast were not able to support this year. Fortunately, Graham Stacey stepped in to hold brief interviews with the candidates and publish them; this worked well and our thanks go to Graham and his colleagues Gary Davies and Joe Paton.

7. Election Tool and Reminders

This year was the first election run using the new Election Buddy tool, replacing the previous Smart Survey and Survey Monkey tools. Once the voting membership list was provided by the Membership Secretary, the tool was able to import the data and manage all ballots and reminders with minimal oversight. The tool provided a real-time view of the number of ballots cast, the current voting totals and other statistics such as the average number of votes cast per ballot. The tool was a big improvement over the previous tools, with reminders only being sent to those who had yet to vote, and a feedback system to highlight any emails that were not received so we could follow up on those members to check their address. It also ensured a random ordering of the candidates' names on the ballot presented to each member, so any potential bias through ordering was removed. Ballots and/or reminders to 28 members' email addresses were highlighted as "not delivered", so a very small percentage.

The voting patterns seen were fairly consistent with previous elections, with peaks of votes being cast at the start and after each reminder with a steady trickle in-between. This is particularly encouraging as the large increase in membership thanks to "auto-enrollment" did not lead to a decrease in engagement.

The number of votes cast per ballot was fairly low at 4.8 (10079 votes cast across 2106 ballot papers), possibly an indication that there was a wide distribution of views expressed by the candidates and that members were only selecting those with whom they had a high degree of agreement. Indeed there were a fair number of ballots where only one candidate received a vote.

8. Non-Electronic Ballots

Since the ballot box was damaged at the end of the last election, a new lockable box was purchased this year. This was used to collect ballots that were sent in by post, and was present at the DT kiosk on match days for any in person votes.

The number of people receiving ballots and communications by post this year reduced to 57 despite the very large increase in the membership. In the end we only received 7 ballots by post or in person, which suggests we are close to the point of considering not to offer this option. The ESG recommends that we no longer offer automatic mail out of ballots. There was one member who did receive their ballot electronically, but their autism meant that they were unable to make a considered choice from the comms received. This does suggest that we do need to retain an option to mail out or provide paper copies at the DT Kiosk on matchdays on a request basis.

It should be noted that costs this year were minimized by exploiting concurrent mailings where the DT were sending out communications about the Restricted Actions resolutions.

9. Overall Results

Overall turnout this year was 34%, with 2106 ballots returned from the 6270 members who were entitled to vote. The % turnout was very similar to previous elections, which given the huge increase in membership numbers should be considered a great achievement. The Results of the election were as follows:

<u>Candidate</u>	<u>Votes</u>		<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Elected</u>
Martin Drake	760	✓	7.54%	X
Alex Folkes	714	✓	7.08%	X
Ivor Heller	1619	✓	16.06%	X
Simon Hood	792	✓	7.86%	X
Simon Howson-Green	578	✓	5.73%	
James Longhurst	834	✓	8.27%	X
James MacDonald	691	✓	6.86%	
Sean McLaughlin	1020	✓	10.12%	X
Graeme Price	930	✓	9.23%	X
Adam Procter	586	✓	5.81%	
Dominic Proctor	664	✓	6.59%	
Ian Robinson	891	✓	8.84%	X

The margin between the last candidate elected and the first unsuccessful candidate was small, but large enough to ensure the manual count (of paper ballots) was again of no impact. Overall, the election ran very smoothly once the ballots were issued and the correct manifesto links were made available online and through email.

10. Lessons To Be Learnt

The biggest issues this year were around communications. The first critical area was “external” communications. As mentioned in Section 5 above, there were mistakes in website articles and emails introduced by both the ESG and the DT. The lack of clarity around who was responsible for what, with the inability of the authors to check embedded links themselves, contributed to this unfortunate situation. A standard list of contact email addresses and links could easily be created and kept live by the DT, with all such references in communications then done by “cut and paste” to minimize the chance for error.

Going forward, a solution could be to have a dedicated communications POC from the DTB as an associate member of the ESG. There could also be merit in that POC running a small team tasked with publicizing the election (and potentially coordinating hustings) – this is an activity that isn’t really in the remit of the ESG and is clearly something we are currently unable to drive.

Internally, the issues with trying to run a dynamic activity by committee with largely only email communications tested the ability of the ESG to function as a cohesive group. Several issues arose that required an almost instant response and generally immediate decisions were made by myself with the rest of the group being made aware of the situation. This is certainly not ideal in a collegiate situation, and whilst I believe the majority of the group did agree with all decisions made, it was not usually until “after the event”. Unless the election timeline is significantly extended – which has other drawbacks and given it already lasts over 6 months from end to end is unlikely to work – it probably needs to be recognized that the ESG Chair is the main decision maker, who will engage and seek advice from the remaining members as far as possible. A dedicated WhatsApp channel, or equivalent, may help getting more real-time involvement and should be considered.

Lastly, our independent scrutineer wishes to put on record a concern from his perspective. He was concerned that the concurrent Restricted Actions exercise may have acted as a distraction from the electoral process (which was also a reported concern during the “Back In 2 Ticks” campaign a few years back). This was not to down-play their importance in DT business, but he believes future elections should have a 'clear run'.

11. Conclusions

Whilst I suspect the costs would be too high to be palatable, consideration should be made to hiring an external specialist company (such as Civica) to run our elections to ensure they are seen to be fully independent. Given the abuse (including libelous comments) targeted at ESG members on social media during the course of the election, coupled with (or even driving) the lack of new volunteers, this may be the only route open to the DT soon!

Consideration should be given to tightening rules around members' behaviour on Social Media and via email – it does not seem acceptable to have potential candidates for a position on the DTB acting in a manner which would give rise to sanctions for anyone currently covered under the Volunteers' Code Of Conduct (VCoC). The ESG believes that going forward, any candidate who breaches the VCoC should be disqualified from the election (this may be extended to past behaviour, subject to agreement of a process to allow for "rehabilitation"). A prudent approach may be to send all prospective candidates a copy of the VCoC and the EFL "Owners and Directors" criteria. Prior to the ballot being finalized we should ensure each nominee formally agrees to abide by the former and provides assurance they will pass the latter. Ideally, successful candidates will be "cleared" by the EFL prior to the DT AGM such that any issues can be resolved by promoting the candidate with the next highest vote total.

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