



Arsenal Football Club Fans' Forum
6pm–8pm February 15th 2022
Online Video Call Meeting

Fans' Forum Membership 2021/2022

16-21 Rep	Liam Patel
ADSA	Anne Hyde
AISA	Richard Smith / Geoff Bedingfield
AST	Akhil Vyas
Club Level	Fred Dowd
Ethnic Minorities	Draco Wang
Family Section	David Hurrell
Gold	Darren Epstein
LGBT	Joe White
Over 60's	Richard Stubbs
Red	Ben Buckstone
REDaction	Raymond Herlihy
Silver	Vacant
Supporters Clubs Domestic	Dave Harrold (Arsenal Scotland)
Supporters Club Overseas	Peter Host (Arsenal Denmark)
Women	Linda Duffy

Arsenal representatives

Arsenal FC	Khali Parsons – Senior Manager Fan Services (Chair)
Arsenal FC	Vinai Venkatesham – Chief Executive Officer
Arsenal FC	Mark Gonnella – Media, Communications & Community Affairs Director
Arsenal FC	Juliet Slot – Chief Commercial Officer
Arsenal FC	Tom McCann – Venue Director
Arsenal FC	John Beattie – Stadium & Facilities Director (apologies)
Arsenal FC	Sharon Cicco – Head of Event, Safety & Security and Operations
Arsenal FC	Mark Brindle – Supporters Liaison Officer
Arsenal FC	Mic Conetta – Head of Digital Experience
Arsenal FC	John Dyster – Disability Access Manager (apologies)
Arsenal FC	Jim Gay – Fan Services Manager
Arsenal FC	Amy Trynka – Venue Projects Strategy Manager (apologies)

Minutes

1) Welcome

Mark Gonnella welcomed and thanked the group and shared that he is stepping down as Chair of the Fans' Forum after 10 years in order to Chair the Arsenal Advisory Board. MG handed over to Khali Parsons (KP) to lead.

KP welcomed Arsenal's Chief Commercial Officer Juliet Slot (JS) who introduced herself and shared some of her previous experience at Fulham and at Ascot and expressed her excitement at working with the teams here at Arsenal.

KP also welcomed the Supporters' Clubs Domestic representative Dave Harrold (Arsenal Scotland) and thanked Jake Coare in his absence for his contributions as Silver Member Representative. This position is now vacant and elections are underway for a new Silver Rep.

2) Minutes and Matters Arising

Minutes of previous meeting were agreed.

3) Arsenal Update

Vinai Venkatesham reiterated the welcome and began by picking up on team updates. He said we had been very active over the summer transfer window and recognising that it is still early days explained that the Club are happy with the signings made. All have settled in well both on and off the pitch, each getting more game time than we might have anticipated which is positive.

Results wise, in cup competitions **Vinai** expressed disappointment about going out so early in the FA Cup. The Club has a proud history in the FA Cup and in a season when not in Europe the domestic cups are even more important. We had a better run in the Carabao Cup but sadly didn't get our day at Wembley. However, there is plenty to play for in the league. It is currently a strange league table to try and interpret with so many postponements and delayed games, but we are in a good position and in contention for European places.

Vinai said that he shared last time we met that we were never going to be able to do everything we wanted to do or needed to do in one window. The rebuilding started last summer and of course there are plans to strengthen the squad this coming summer, if the circumstances allow it. He said we have just come out of a January window, a difficult window to do business in in. We expected we might well have a quiet January but were focused on seeing if any of the things we wanted to do this summer could sensibly be brought forward. In the end this didn't prove possible.

He explained we were much more active in terms of outgoings, that our squad is lighter for the rest of the season, with just PL games remaining.

Vinai moved on to the Women's side where we had an active January bringing on board three new players, and also just before the January window renewing Leah Williamson's contract with us. We were delighted to do this. The team is sitting at the top of the WSL, a really competitive table with not many points between the top teams. We have a Champions League quarter final coming up against Wolfsburg, another big game for the women's team to be held at Emirates Stadium. We have had a couple of successful games at The Emirates so far this season – against Chelsea and Barcelona. We are also holding the NLD in March at Emirates

Ben Buckstone asked whether there had been any discussions about bringing players in on loan or was the plan to introduce young players if required. He also asked if there was any chance of us signing Jack Wilshere.

Vinai explained whilst it was not the focus we did consider loans but did not find a sensible deal. He agreed with Ben that successful January loans were not common.

In relation to Jack – Vinai said he has been with us for 2 or 3 months now, and he has been fantastic, brilliant to have around the training ground, training with the first team regularly, working with Per in the Academy, working with our younger players. There are no plans to integrate him into the first team, but it's been great having him around.

Akhil Vyas asked whether targets had changed with top four now an option, explaining looking at the league table now he would be disappointed not to get top 4.

Vinai said that if he had been asked at the start of the season what success would look like he would have said that what we need to demonstrate is that we are making progress and moving in the right direction, with European qualification being part of that. If you look at the table now, we are in the mix for a top 4 place, so of course we will fight for that and to finish as high up the table as possible.

Richard Smith: asked how the Club views the Europa Conference?

Vinai: Explained the tournament has primarily been created to provide more opportunities for Clubs in the medium to smaller (lower co-efficient) European countries to compete in Europe. From an Arsenal perspective, it has pros and cons. The cons are that it is not the European competition we aspire to be in and adds to fixture congestion. The other way of looking at it, it is still a European competition, gives opportunities to play some of our younger players and provides funds to invest back into the team.

Stadium Investment

Vinai explained that a number of initiatives are in progress around the stadium, all of which have been informed by fan feedback.

- Draft beer is now available in the Upper Tier
- A fan working group is being set up to help us develop new stadium banners
- Stadium Crests will be replaced
- Turnstile readers will be replaced or upgraded to improve spectator flow rates
- Light boxes will be replaced on the inside of the lower tier
- Big screens will be replaced over the Summer
- Looking into PA system (will take time) and also connectivity (challenging and not clear what will be possible)

Vinai encouraged fans to keep feeding back to us and asked if there is anything missing from this list, or something you think we should be considering to please let us know.

Darren Epstein asked: Given how new the stadium is, is there any recourse against the builders for the poor condition of the roof, and has any thought been given to installing solar panels on the roof to offset some of the Club's carbon footprint?

Vinai explained that was not the case on the roof. Regarding solar panels – we are looking at the possibility but weight loading will be an issue.

Safe Standing Update

Tom McCann shared an update on where we have got to on our approach to Safe Standing. We do have a subgroup of fans working on this, some of which were on the call. We are actively looking at how we could introduce Safe Standing moving forward.

There is currently a pilot ongoing with 5 Clubs – Chelsea, Manchester City and Manchester United, Spurs, Cardiff. They all have Safe Standing installed and will be running this to the end of the season and taking and sharing learnings from this.

Tom explained we could only implement Safe Standing in the lower tier. The 'rake' of the upper tier is too steep for us to introduce it up there.

There are a number of different scenarios and considerations for us which are complex, such as the impact on the people in those areas in lower tier (would likely need to move, and to more expensive areas of the stadium if they didn't want to stand), and whether we would have to segregate sections of the stadium to prevent overcrowding (leading to capacity reductions and fan experience issues - no longer being able to walk around concourse to meet others).

Tom said that we have three potential options, all of which are likely to be very expensive to implement. We are working through this with fans, with the next meeting this week

where we will be working through a survey for fans to gain a deeper understanding. We will survey season ticket holders, upper and lower tier, and match by match purchasers that have been to a match in the last 3 years.

David Harrold asked if we could include supporter clubs in the survey?

Tom agreed that is a good idea.

Richard Smith asked if the Club would really rather not do it?

Tom McCann answered that no, we want fans to understand the complexity and implications as part of gathering their views.

Joe White thanked Tom for the update and asked what lessons the Club are learning from clubs taking part in the trial, and how we are considering any impacts on reporting of behaviour issues in the stadium. It is currently easy to report an incident including seat numbers.

Tom McCann responded that it is a little early in the trial, which started in January with few games played so far. Indicatively it seems to have been received well. However, some of the clubs in the trial do have standalone stands and therefore natural segregation, so we would be more interested in feedback from a club with a similar stadium design, like Manchester City. We will take the learnings that we can but not all will be relevant to us. In terms of reporting of anti-social behaviour, it is a very good point which was also raised at the Advisory Board Meeting, this is absolutely something we are considering throughout the process.

4) FANS FORUM 15/2/22 QUESTIONS

Draco Wang – Ethnic Minority representative

Several supporters have voiced their concern about the lack of gender and racial diversity on the Arsenal Advisory Board. Could you ask if it still possible for the Club to consider adding 1 or 2 members so wider interests are represented?

Mark G agreed that this was a really good point, and that we have attempted to make it a diverse board with representation from disability and LGBTQ+ fan groups. We also have representatives for younger fans and international supporters' groups.

We have also appointed Khali as chair of the fans' forum to the board from our side along with Juliet in her role as Chief Commercial Officer.

We share the concern about lack of female and ethnic fan representation and have raised this with the fan groups on the board. We are looking at ways to address this as a matter of urgency. All fan reps were elected by their respective groups other than the young fans' representative who was co-opted by the club.

Draco Wang followed up with further question: Regarding the Japanese media operation, we discussed via emails since the last meeting, I am yet to hear from the media team. Please let me know if there is any update.

Mark G advised that we are doing a full review of our brand approach, and this includes our media operation and where we want to focus. He said we will be in further contact when we have more clarity which will be by the end of the season.

Draco: Amazon's documentary is the perfect platform to promote the club's stance for diversity and equality. Is that such a content in the production process/ if not is it possible to do so? (I understand the confidentiality and complication involved, please let me know if we could not discuss this in our meeting anyways)

Mark G said the Amazon documentary is a wonderful opportunity to shine a light on the club. The focus is on the men's first team, but we are involving the filmmakers in a wide range of activities across the club designed to show Arsenal in its best light. The documentary will show every aspect of the club and our day-to-day workings. This will include our women's team, the Academy, our work in the community and also celebrate our diversity.

Darren Epstein - Gold Member representative

Given the club has earned a significant amount of money with the Socios partnership the ASA ruling showed Arsenal were inadequately warning fans about a high risk, unregulated product, do the club feel in hindsight that they shouldn't have involved themselves in selling a product whose risks fans didn't properly understand?

And, with the club having said they'd be seeking clarity on the ASA ruling, and "an independent review" as quoted to CNN by a club spokesperson. Why is the club doing this? Why are they unhappy about displaying the ASA warning - which is an important fan protection? Did Socios ask Arsenal to do this? And who is covering the legal costs? Can you also advise if Socios have an in-perpetuity license agreement, or is it a standard license agreement that has an expiry?

Juliet Slot explained that as she is new to the business, she has been looking closely at how we approach commercial partnerships. She said we conducted due diligence before signing with Socios as we do with all partnerships. This includes thorough analysis of business ownership, financial stability, and reputation risks.

There are several deals that we turn away that don't meet the standards required.

She has done a lot of work to understand this so that she can report back in more detail to the AAB and to the fan forum this week.

Firstly, Juliet stated that we want fans around the globe to be able to engage with the Club in different ways, and a digital token gives fans the opportunity to take part in polls, competitions, and the chance to visit a match in the Socios box.

Juliet went on to explain that crypto currency is used to buy a token, but at no point do we encourage fans to buy crypto to trade. Crypto currency is a complicated area, and we understand that some are nervous about crypto currency because it is new but is with us for the long term.

In relation to the ASA ruling, Juliet was clear that we are not pushing back on putting protections in place for our fans. We are calling for more clarity on the requirements in this unregulated area, so everyone knows what is expected in future.

We took extensive independent legal advice before our first poll and included advisory notes for fans in our promotion as we felt that was the responsible approach. We pay all our own legal fees.

Socios have also been clear they support regulation to provide the right guidelines for consumers and have approached the Premier League for clear regulation, and for fans not to feel concerned about engaging with their Clubs in this way.

Juliet explained that we do not have an in-perpetuity contract with Socios. We hope to have a long-term relationship with them, but she can say that should that relationship come to an end Arsenal will honour any tokens that remain in the hands of Arsenal fans, as these tokens are meant to engage with Arsenal. This will be an engagement that the club will develop to reflect good value for the tokens held. We are taking our fans on this journey, and there is value to be had in engaging with the Club through votes, polls and experiences

She said we are not encouraging fans to trade currencies – we are giving opportunities for fans to engage with us via a digital fan token. If fans are uncomfortable doing this then they shouldn't buy the tokens, there are many other ways to engage with the Club via My Arsenal Rewards, through supporter groups and via Fan Forums, and our membership program.

Darren Epstein said that he is concerned that Arsenal has shared this as a token for life, but the Socios website states that the token will lose its voting right at the expiration of the partner's agreement. It is hard to see how you will honour a partner's agreement at the end of an agreement. Darren also shared that the value of a token has gone down 66%. He also asked what happened to the rest of the 40 million tokens and stated that we are asking fans to buy tokens, lose money and buy more tokens.

Juliet responded to clarify that members and Season Ticket Holders got a free token to use which is non-tradable. The intention is for them to keep the token and use it to vote and not to trade.

Darren said that he believed the partner is encouraging fans to vote, and that all it has given is 3 polls in 7 months.

Juliet responded that 100 people have enjoyed the Socios box as part of this engagement. She also said that many more polls and engagements were planned but this had been slowed down due to the ASA ruling and the club's attention to that, and the requirements following the ruling to ensure that all the protections were in place in the language attached to any future promotions.

Richard Stubbs spoke about the values of Arsenal, and that he doesn't believe Socios represents these values, and was firmly against the Arsenal name being linked to them.

Peter Host spoke as a representative of overseas support and a fan of different forms of engagement but expressed his vehement opposition to Socios as a partner.

Fred Dowd Expressed his own disappointment in the Club's involvement in Socios and crypto and said he couldn't see what Socios offered that the Club couldn't do in house with My Arsenal Rewards systems. He also spoke about an email from the Club last year offering a free tour of the stadium, which was dependant on joining an eToro seminar which he felt was another example of the club giving access to experiences but having to engage with something they didn't want to do.

Darren Epstein

Can the Club not add a button to request recorded delivery option for away tickets. A lot of fans are receiving tickets either on the day or post game. At a cost fans can choose to ensure a timely receipt.

Khali Parsons responded that we have added this option in response to your feedback and request. However, I think it is important to highlight that this is a costly option for fans and not one we recommend. During the Nov-Jan period we had a high number of away matches close together, some with big allocations. The postal service along with our own team were impacted by the spike in COVID cases in the UK during this time. We understand that this did result in delays for some in receiving their tickets. We don't expect this to be an issue moving forward. We encourage fans to get in touch if they experienced delays outside of this unusual period so we can understand why this is the case and offer resolutions should they not receive their tickets within the expected timeframe.

Anne Hyde – Arsenal Disabled Supporters Association representative

Anne had questions around the booking of tickets for disabled fans and the processes they go through, but this is now outdated following progress in this space. Anne and ADSA has worked with Khali and the new Disability Access Manager testing new features of the system which, while this initial testing stage was a "fail" there is a further session in place to work through the feedback and move towards a better online service for disabled fans.

Anne also went on to share that in recent weeks both Jon and Jacquie as the new DLT team have been fantastic and working closely with ADSA. The relationship is really positive, and she took the time to thank them and Khali for their recent engagement and work.

Liam Patel – 16/21 Representative

A potential return of Arsene Wenger to the club was hinted by Mikel back in November when he stated, 'I think he will be a great help for the club' and 'we would be delighted to have him much closer'. Has there been any communication between the club and Arsene since then? Would the club share Mikel's views in wanting Arsene to assist the club in some capacity in the future and do Arsenal think his guidance will benefit the club currently?

Vinai responded that there is nothing but love and admiration for Arsène from the Club. He is always welcome here, but of course with his new role at FIFA he is in Zurich, and travelling, much of the time. There are no plans for a formal role. He believes Mikel was responding to media asking if he would like him to be around which of course we would.

Liam followed up with a further question about flags being distributed pre-match throughout the Clock End before the pandemic and asked why this stopped? **Mark B** confirmed that the flags stopped due to Covid concerns but pointed out they did make a return at the Liverpool Carabao Cup match albeit at the North bank end due to higher allocation of away tickets. We hope to return to the tradition very soon COVID restrictions allowing. He said we will have to re-educate fans that these flags are in fact 'returnable' as we had a far higher non-return rate at the Liverpool game. The North Bank crowd surfer will also return for the Leicester game.

Liam: also asked whether the club discussed with the group of fans in Block 26 about the need to avoid foul language in the family enclosure? **Mark B** explained that both he and Stadium

management / stewards are constantly monitoring and in regular dialogue with the group and they have been and will continue to be reminded about behaviour. He said the core of the group is very enthusiastic and driven to create a better atmosphere for all in the ground, the issue sometimes is with others who latch onto the group and cause issues.

Jake Coare – Silver Member representative

Would Arsenal Football club investigate whether they could adopt policies of other clubs where non-season ticket holder could have access to away matches?

Tom McCann: We have no current plans to change our policy from prioritising access for Season Ticket holders, however we will continue to keep this under review to ensure we have the fairest possible approach and will advise this group of any changes moving forward. The challenge is the exceptionally high demand for a very small number of away tickets for each match.

Recently members of Arsenal have experienced issues using the box office tickets not being activated at certain or correct times to be brought by members! Would the club investigate the issues members have faced using the box office of Arsenal Football club?

Tom McCann: We experienced some teething problems earlier in the season with the introduction of Digital Ticketing and the reissuance of 150,000+ new membership cards. However, we're confident we have resolved these issues now and any problems with activation of tickets should be very rare exceptions. In a number of situations, fans who raised the issue of 'deactivated cards' were actually trying to use the old card, so we have also resolved these issues and we believe all fans are aware of the new cards for this season. We are always working to improve the ticketing experience of our fans and receive reports of issues after every match, so we are constantly trying to improve.

In the events of Arsenal reaching Cup finals/ FA Cup semi-finals at Wembley would it be possible to see if a certain number of tickets could be ringfenced for silver members?

Tom McCann: Priority will continue to go to Season Ticket holders, but Silver members have always been the next priority group to receive access to Cup Finals and Semi-Finals – most Semi-Finals have been offered to Silver members, though we accept Finals are harder to access. We will continue to keep this under review and any changes to this policy will be communicated to this group.

Tom also asked a question of the Fans' Forum:

Something that has been raised by a couple of people is whether we could consider an approach in a future season, not giving a Season Ticket Holder the right to renew their season ticket if they don't use their ticket for a specified number of matches. Which is to say, an individual can attend the match themselves, sell the ticket on the Ticket Exchange, or transfer the ticket via our Ticket Transfer function. We would also like to have a donate option soon so that a ticket can be donated to the Arsenal Foundation or Arsenal in the Community.

Should our fans do none of those 4 things and a seat goes empty for a fixed number of matches the proposal potentially is that we would not allow them to renew and the season ticket would be offered to a fan on the waiting list.

Tom believes a similar policy has been adopted by Manchester Utd and he thought he would use this opportunity to share this with the forum and see what thoughts are on this.

Raymond Herlihy said that the challenge of empty paid seats has been one that had been discussed many times over the years, and that this sounds like an effective solution to that. He feels that

people must take their responsibilities as a Season Ticket Holder seriously as most do, and it is frustrating for all to see empty paid seats. He would certainly endorse this in his capacity as REDaction rep.

Darren Epstein expressed his approval, and said that addressing this is overdue.

Akhil Vyas: AST has been clear on the need to address this for a while, and this is a time that you can justify this as Ticket Exchange and Ticket Transfer is greatly improved, and the donate option would be great.

Tom McCann clarified that if we took this approach we wouldn't do so until the 23/24 season, as it was only fair to give fans the opportunity to ensure they were utilising their seats for 22/23 in accordance with such a policy.

Anne Hyde said that disabled supporters don't yet have the facility to use TX and TT in the same way non disabled fans can. She thinks that this would be harder for disabled fans if improved options were not in place.

Tom McCann and Khali Parsons reassured Anne that the different challenges around exchanging and transferring for disabled fans would be carefully considered.

Raymond Herlihy – REDaction representative

League Cup home games. Each of the ties this season saw huge turnstile queues before Kick Off. What plans do AFC have to avoid this next year in the event of further home ties?

Tom McCann explained we have a workstream in place to look at exactly this. The League Cup presents a unique challenge because it is an elective purchase in General Admission and as a result, thousands more tickets than usual are purchased either in the Friends and Family sale and/or on General Sale. We have also found that there is a consistently late walk-up pattern for League Cup matches, which puts further pressure on the turnstiles. We have tried to communicate around this and have offered the BOGOF beer offer this season to drive early arrival. Looking ahead, we have recently made a significant investment in upgrading every turnstile reader ahead by the start of next season, so we expect this to help – as well as further improvements to our Digital Ticketing functionality. We're aware of the challenges here and will continue to do so ahead of next season.

Seat numbers faded or missing, does not help fans unfamiliar with the stadium find their seats. Improved signage required? Please provide comments from SM around migration from upper to lower.

Mark B on behalf of JB/SC We have just renewed the first 10 rows in the lower tier. We do check for missing numbers, but the condition of the first 10 rows is a challenge

Richard Stubbs – Over 60s representative

To what extent are Arsenal Membership clearly aware of different categories of supporters, eg Those aged 60+, and also within that category the precise names/ numbers who attend actual

games, utilise 'ticket exchange', are part of 'away support', buy/ go to Carabao Cup games, utilise concessionary scheme etc

Tom McCann Our data in this respect is robust. The Season Ticket Amnesty gave us a chance to ensure our data is as accurate as possible and provided our fans have submitted the correct data in the system, we have a clear picture of our fans' activities.

Joe White – LGBT+ representative

On a side note, the 16th Feb marks the GayGooners 9th birthday as we move into our tenth year of being collectively visibly LGBT+ at the Arsenal. We've seen a rise in reports of homophobic chanting from fans which signifies the importance of our work and the work the Club does on inclusion. What more do the Club hope to achieve by the time of our tenth anniversary in 2023 and how can supporters get involved (whether LGBT+ or not?).

Mark G Can't believe it's coming up for 10 years. I remember Stuart Selby coming to me to say he wanted to form a supporters' group for gay Arsenal fans. We put a piece in the programme and it's amazing how far we have come together.

As a Club we need to continue our work with you to drive out discrimination of all types. This is an ongoing issue for society and we need all right-minded fans to continue to call out discrimination when they see or hear it.

As a Club we will continue to stand with all our supporters. I'm pleased that we've worked together more closely in the run up to this month's campaign. We should put a group to work together even more closely to ensure the 10 year anniversary is marked effectively.

Akhil Vyas - AST

At a previous Forum Kroenke Sports Enterprises (KSE) committed to covering all of the costs of the European Super League including legal fees and fines. As this issue is still on-going and extraordinarily as Arsenal are still members of the ESL with a lot of legal work on-going, can we have confirmation that this is the case and a statement of what these costs have been?

Vinai We confirmed that the costs are being covered by KSE.

Is there any way supporters can avoid paying the booking fees when buying their own season tickets? If not shouldn't these costs be included as part of the advertised ticket price as they are a mandatory part of the cost. For instance, a League cup ticket in the Upper tier is £21.75

Tom McCann Our booking fee structure has not materially changed since we moved to the Emirates in 2006. We do not make a profit from fees collected / charged – our position is always that we aim to cover the costs incurred by our Ticketing and Access Control partners, but do not look to profit from this. We will be introducing greater ticketing functionality next season and as such, as always, we will be reviewing our fee structure to ensure it is fit for purpose. Specifically on the League Cup, we need to be conscious of the revenue-share element of these fixtures, so we need to be clear on the difference between the cost of the ticket and the cost of the booking fee.

AOB

Nothing raised

Next Meeting

TBC