

OxVox COMMITTEE MEETING

Date: Saturday 31 December (held at Oxford United, Kassam Stadium, OX4 4XP)

Attendees: Simon Bradbury (SB), Jem Faulkner (JF), Daryl Eales (DE), Greig Box-Turnbull (GBT), Ian Mixer (IM)

Start: 11.30am **Finish:** 13.00pm

Minutes/Notes

1. Introductions

(a) DE and GBT introduced Jem and Simon to New Interim Safety Manager, Ian Mixer.

2. Ian Mixer

Ian introduced himself and provided SB and JF with an overview of his background. IM had served in the Metropolitan Police for 20 years, 10 years in the British Transport Police. He had gained 2 degrees in Crowd Safety Management and was passionate about this role and clearly had a wealth of experience, from public and private sectors [work at music festivals / shopping centres]. Ian had been in post for only four games, including the Walsall fixture later that day.

The early part of the meeting discussed Steward abuse. The abuse was wide-ranging and been subjected to the employed OUFC stewards and the Agency staff. However, Ian had personally been subjected to abuse, specifically a threat made to himself and his family after the Oldham fixture. The matter has been reported to the TVP. IM wishes to move on. This type of behaviour would not be tolerated to any member of club staff.

- (a) IM had accepted the role following Neil Holdstock's recent departure. IM had presided over the Oldham, Macclesfield, Northampton and Walsall matches. He had been Neil's 'match day' deputy since August 2015.
- (b) IM agreed there had been an over-reliance on agency staff. This had been the case for some significant time, as a direct result of Oxford United being unable to retain its own stewards. Stewards had left or refused to work due to numerous reasons, including verbal abuse they had been subjected to. As a result, OUFC have found it difficult to recruit for this role. IM shared supporters' concerns regarding the NVQ Level 2 Spectator Safety Qualification.
- (c) Agency Staff had been used all season and had been pre-booked prior to IM's appointment.
- (d) IM is in the process of drawing up short, medium and long-term solutions to a variety of challenges he has been faced with. The club intended to address criticisms from both supporters and official bodies including TVP and H&S organisations.
- (e) Supporters who feel, moving forward, the need to inform IM about poor standards in stewarding and customer service would need to take the steward's number and make a formal complaint that could be investigated fully and necessary action taken if required.

3. Flag-Gate and Balloon-Gate

(a) The unfortunate situation around waving flags, named internally and by supporters, as Flag-Gate had been a big issue. DE has publicly stated he could have handled the situation differently and that the club had met with the Ultras to discuss ways to move forward. There seems to be a continued impasse and we hope that the two parties could find some middle-ground.

Ultimately, the constant waving of flags during the game broke match regulations. Small flags could be waved during the game but the large flags on telescopic poles were not to be waved unless before kick-off, half-time, full-time or after goals. This was the rules and if it hadn't been implemented or enforced previously, then the club were in breach of regulations. IM stated that he was in the process of contacting other football league clubs regarding their flag policy before meeting with supporters about the matter towards the end of January 2017.

(b) There had been reports and an investigation done into a steward confiscating a balloon from a small child in the South Stand. IM apologised whole-heartedly for this situation and explained that the steward in question was only doing what he felt was correct. The steward involved works for other football clubs where balloons are prohibited and he followed his instructions and implemented those rules during the Northampton match. All stewards have since been briefed about that incident and balloons clearly are not on the 'confiscation' list.

(c) Flasks – the club stewards are allowed to let supporters enter the ground with hot flasks. Alcohol is prohibited from being taken into the ground.

4. Boxing Day – vs Northampton

The previous home fixture, the home game versus Northampton, had seen a huge presence in stewards. The decision had been taken to position stewards throughout the stands to help direct people into their seats in a quick and orderly fashion. As a result, the queues at the turnstiles were reduced and all supporters had taken their seats by 3.04pm. This was deemed a success but IM stressed the reasons for the large numbers of visible stewards. This followed complaints from previous Boxing Day with supporters unable to sit in their allocated seats due fans sitting in the wrong seats. The number of match day staff was worked out using a formula based on size of crowd and the police category for the fixture. This fixture it was 113.

5. East Stand

As minuted above, small flags were perfectly acceptable to be waved during the games. Telescopic flags were not to be waved during play.

IM talked about two safety groups, the SAG (Safety Advisory Group) and the SGSA (Sports Ground Safety Authority). Both groups are trying to get Oxford United to put a fence up at the back of the East Stand, where there is the flat elevated step (where the Ultras put their flags up). Both IM and OUFC are against such a move and want to work with supporters to make that agenda point redundant. However, running on this area or placing yourself in danger when trying to fix banners would see the club find it difficult to stop this move coming into force. IM wants, and OxVox agree, to find ways to educate supporters of these dangers and issues as opposed to blanket enforcement.

IM's role is ultimately to protect the club officials and football club by making the ground a safe and friendly environment for all supporters.

(a) IM noted that it had been highlighted that some supporters in the East Stand were occupying 2/3 people per seat and this was highlighted on the CCTV footage. This is an area that supporters need to take responsibility of their actions for.

6. North Stand

IM moved on to discuss the challenges facing the North Stand. SGSA believe OUFC have one of the worst segregations in the country, separating home and away supporters. SAG / SGSA once again, are pressuring the authorities and club to erect a fence to separate home and away supporters.

Again it is worth noting that IM is trying very hard to prevent this action coming into place. He is preparing some options for the club and for the SAG / SGSA to consider.

As a Supporters Trust, we would expect to see some significant resistance to such a move and will work with IM and OUFC to explore alternative options. We don't want to become a football club with fencing being erected around the stadium.

The North Stand Fence. The club accepted that some supporters felt the North Stand Fence was over-zealous in crowd control. It had been used regularly; yet had been brought in for higher profiles matches. IM was going to evaluate this on a match-by-match basis based on a number of considerations. The decision was for it not to be used for the Walsall game for example.

It was a new investment for the club and its use saved the football club considerable amounts of expenditure as opposed to policing costs. The use of the fence saved £1500 per fixture instead of using the police. Interestingly, the club were looking at 'hiring' it out to other football clubs.

7. OUFC Stewarding and Agency Staff

The club are currently considering options for a recruitment drive to acquire more permanent OUFC stewards. Generally these people are also Oxford United supporters. Recruiting your own stewards clearly has a host of benefits to both the club, but more importantly to our supporters and our matchday experiences.

The safety certificate states that we required a minimum of 57 stewards to open the ground. IM has re worked the figures and believes we need 67. Oxford United have currently 39 of their own stewards. However, note that for higher category games (those selected by TVP) more stewards are needed, which would invariably mean recruiting agency staff. With agency staff, costs go up, so the need to recruit our own stewards is important [Certain attendances require around 150 staff].

- (a) Should you be interested in becoming and training to be a steward, OxVox would suggest you make contact with the club expressing your interest once the advertising campaign is launched.
- (b) Recruitment was now a key agenda point as OUFC used to have significantly more of their own stewards on their books.
- (c) The Green Guide is the 'rule book' for running a safe sports ground. This was being used and was the benchmark for what the club would like at our ground.

One of the clear messages from members and our supporters had been the recent aggressive behaviour of some stewards, sourced from agency companies. Oxford United currently access a number of agencies, including SRM of Hertfordshire and Platinum Security from Faringdon.

Both OxVox and Club had received recent complaints about these agencies. Some of their staff had been difficult to engage with, had stood deliberately in front of spectators during games – refusing to move when asked, had been enforcing checks on tickets and confiscating items. IM noted the use of agency was not ideal and that he had been in discussions with both in recent days.

IM assured that all stewards were to be briefed by the Club later that day. SB & JF were invited to attend the first briefing at the conclusion of the meeting, which we both did. GBT also attended and addressed the stewards, as a one off, before IM took the briefing. Following the fixture, it had been apparent from feedback that most stewards had behaved in a very different manner to the previous fixtures. [This could be because a number of Boxing Day Staff had never previously attended the Kassam Stadium and were unaware of the high standards required]. Positive feedback about being helpful, polite and enhancing the matchday experience was obvious.

- (d) It was important for OxVox to confirm that all the agencies had been booked in advance by the previous Safety Officer and that IM and OUFC were honouring those bookings over the Christmas and New Year fixtures. Without a home league game for some considerable time, IM would be able to look into appointing whom he felt was appropriate.
- (e) Following complaints, the agencies would look to provide new workwear in order to remove any perceived 'Swindon' related branding from inflaming tensions between supporters and agency staff.

8. Soft Ticket Checks

This had been implemented at the back end of last season when it became apparent that tickets were being misused regularly by a group of supporters. Ultimately, adults were using 'child tickets' to gain entrance to the ground, resulting in significant loss of income to the club. This process had become more visible this season as checks were introduced.

Any supporter, who has made a mistake by trying to enter on a child ticket or other concession, is now invited to the ticket office to upgrade on the mistake.

Summary

There were some key points taken from the meeting about the severity of our situation and the challenging task ahead for the new safety officer.

1. It is completely unacceptable for any member of club staff to be subjected to any form of abuse and deplorable for any member of staff to be subjected to threats.
2. If problems continue, it is quite possible the club will be faced with reducing capacities, financial penalties and points deductions (Smoke Bombs).
3. The running at the back of the East Stand on the wet and hazardous concrete behind the last row of seating was a serious H&S issue. The club has to protect its supporters and itself from prosecution.

4. The club want value for money from their stewards. Ian will be addressing this over the coming months. IM also stressed the need for better value for money from TVP.
5. The club want to recruit its own stewards from within the fan base and local community. Training would be required and sensible rates of pay.
6. ALL SUPPORTERS have a responsibility and duty to contribute to a safe, passionate environment and to help, if possible, to enhance the matchday experience.
7. Whilst some decisions are not going to be universally accepted it is important to understand that the Board are making some decisions in the best interests of the club.
8. Correspondence from Christian Blunt of TVP and Richard Rockall from SAG about policies and procedures was damning and IM has kindly accepted the task of resolving these issues.
9. Agency Staff – notably the SRM and Platinum – have been working as agency staff at Oxford United since 2014 / 2016 respectively. This is not a change as a result of a new Safety Officer being appointed. IM noted the no Oxford United Staff had left since his appointment; indeed two former staff had expressed a desire to return.

Balloons, small flags, flasks of non-alcoholic drinks, scarves are all very welcome at Oxford United.

OXVOX Comments

In addition, Ian Mixer and OUFC offered to attend and speak at an Open Forum about the challenges the club face and how we as supporters could support and help for the benefit of our club. This is an invitation that may, subject to interest, be able to be facilitated at a future OxVox meeting.

It is apparent that previous staff held commercial and financial interest in other stewarding/security companies as well as occupying safety roles at Oxford United. Clearly this presents a host of issues, problems, and conflict.

It was felt from SB and JF who were in attendance, that the new appointment deserved every support possible from the club and fan base.

The Trust also expressed an interest in offering sponsorship, subject to committee consensus, on supplying OUFC/OXVOX branded stewarding workwear to Oxford United stewards.

We agreed that the club would set up a designated email address that IM and members of the club would have access to for supporters to provide positive experiences and constructive criticisms about the matchday experience. This should be announced in due course.