

OxVox 'Crowd Management' Forum with Ian Mixter & OUFC Safety Team

Date: Thursday 10th August 2017 (held at Oxford City Football Club)

Club & Partner Attendees: Ian Mixter (Head of Crowd Safety), Simon Gray (TVP Football Officer), John Mulligan (Deputy Safety Officer), Howard Williams (North Stand Manager), Roger Hiscock (Chief Steward), Malcolm Lewis (South Stand Manager), Michelle Walton (East Stand Manager) and Dave Baldwin (East Stand).

Audience of 18 supporters, including OxVox Committee Members JF, SB, AW, ME & JH.

Start: 7.30pm. **Finish.** 9.30pm.

Minutes/Notes

Introduction

Jeremy Faulkner (JF) opened the meeting apologising for lack of numbers following on from the OUFC Fans Forum the previous evening. However, it was felt, a smaller group of interested audience members may see the meeting be more productive and actions able to be taken in the coming months.

Ian Mixter (IM) opened the meeting with several apologies. He apologised specifically for club policy not being relayed to supporters clearly enough and apologised for a number of incidents that occurred last season, that had attracted criticisms from the fan base.

Notably, IM discussed Flag-Gate, Balloon Gate and Flask-Gate. The situation with flags had not changed, the club policy was that flags could be taken in and waved prior to kick off, at half time, at the end of the games and after goals. Flags had to carry the relevant fire certification to be allowed into the ground as per club policy.

IM apologised for the mistakes around balloon-gate. An incident that had seen a balloon confiscated. Ultimately, an external steward had used policies he had been given at a previous sporting event (a Horse Racing event where balloons were not permitted) and had acted in error. An apology had been given and all stewards reminded of OUFC policies and generating an excellent match day experience for supporters.

An issue has also arisen surrounding a supporter being challenged about drinking from a flask. Flask-Gate, as it had been referred to, was dealt with. Supporters are allowed to bring flasks of coffee, tea and other hot beverages into the game. They will not be confiscated.

Ian also confirmed leaks in the stadium roof had been repaired over the summer.

IM also highlighted / reminded the attendees of the comments made on 'YellowsForum' regarding the negative comments made about himself in relation to his competence & the fact he deserved to be lynched.

IM also highlighted that any future further threats to the safety of his family received from OUFC supporters would be reported to TVP.

Green Guide

IM stated that in his opinion the club previously had not been compliant in certain areas of its match day safety operation in relation to the Green Guide and lots of improvements, implementation and changes have been introduced over the previous months by working with SAG & TVP. IM stressed that, in his opinion, the fault lay with the organisation as opposed to any individual & could be traced over at least 7 years.

Mixer Associates

IM is not an employee of Oxford United. He owns his own company, contracted to OUFC, called Mixer Associates. IM stressed that no other individual from the company works for OUFC. The relationship costs OUFC no more / no less than if he were a direct employee.

Stakeholders

As well as Mixer Associates, a number of other partners make up the partners of Oxford United's Safety Team. These include SGSA – Sports Ground Safety Authority, Oxford City Council and Thames Valley Police. Topics of discussion amongst these stakeholders include implementation & monitoring of the Green Guide, Safety issues, broken seats, leaks and car parking.

IM highlighted that supporters' are an important partner in the match day safety operation.

IM identified the Stadium Company as a link to all groups.

The Safety Team Staff

In December 2016, upon the appointment of IM, OUFC had a number of staffing issues that contributed in OUFC having to employ agency staff. Oxford United had 26 of their own staff; they have set about looking to increasing the number and reducing the reliance on employing external companies.

The club have free funding available for training courses and can get interested individuals trained to Level 2 in Spectator Safety.

Following six months of emphasis on trying to improve the staffing challenges, Oxford United now have 52 of their own stewards following a summer recruitment drive. One individual is a retired Fire Safety Officer.

IM highlighted that, with supervisors, OUFC had around 60 staff on its books – still short of the 100+ staff employed around 7 years ago but a 100% increase thus far in terms of stewards compared to the end of last season.

IM reiterated that the club had to employ external agencies to steward games to enable fixtures to be played. Ultimately an admission was made that OUFC had not looked after our own stewards and this had resulted in those individuals terminating their employment with the club. IM talked about the hourly wage being improved. However, a number of stewards had left following unacceptable levels of abuse and confrontation from OUFC supporters. This had to change. IM pointed out that these stewards, in the main, are fellow supporters & were simply carrying out their duties.

Four members of the stewarding team are now being trained to NVQ Level 4 in Spectator Safety. The Green Guide requirements of a safety officer are that they are working towards the Level 4 qualification. IM stressed that continuous professional development will play an important part of staff development this season.

IM has to report to Benn Brown of Oxford United, not Mick Brown – club secretary. IM and Mick Brown have meetings and dialogue on crowd and safety issues but Benn Brown is the reporting member of club staff on Safety issues.

Criteria for becoming a regular steward is that the attain the Level 2 Qualification and are fit, mature, of good character with duties that carry out ticketing checks, assistance of spectators, not watching the 'game' and aiding with safe operation of the event.

Other courses exist that include Crowd Management Conflict which some senior stewards are enrolled upon.

Moving into this season, from the Portsmouth Home fixture on the 12 August, all stewards will wear new uniform. The club had purchased 200 new OUFC safety jackets, 250 club ties, all jackets had been numbered and some jackets had job title on the reverse. All this needed to meet the Green Guide criteria.

The team had signed up to a new ethos called P.R.I.D.E. This set out core principles, Professionalism, Respect, Integrity, Dynamic Team and Excellence in all that the match day staff do.

Got a Problem?

If spectators and fans had an issue the recommendation was to speak to your nearest steward, who may request the assistance of the stand manager. This would enable the issue to be dealt with and/or resolved at the time of the incident in most circumstances.

OxVox

Following on from OxVox's gift to the community last year that saw the Trust pay for Rose Hill Primary school students and disadvantaged individuals who were part of ASPIRE (a local enterprise helping people back into work) to go to the Checkatrade Final, the club had taken on stewards from ASPIRE and had been able to offer employment. IM thanked OxVox for bringing that group to his attention.

The Stands:

IM went through stand by stand the specific challenges and concerns he had been made aware of.

NORTH STAND

BAILEYS Concessions

Bailey's Refreshment were going to have new shirts, similar to that of Coventry City, where they have staff adorning T-Shirts, welcoming the visiting supporters to the stadium. This was going to be in the AWAY section. It was hoped this would soften the aggressive behaviour of some away crowds, that had seen cages fitted over the refreshment concourses to PROTECT STAFF from physical abuse and merchandise being stolen from over the counter!

The Rapid Expansion System

A topic of hot conversation from supporters. The Rapid Expansion System was a crowd management measure designed to protect supporters from confronting each other. It was used when intelligence suggested potential crowd dis-order.

It can be hired out to other clubs, to enable some revenue to be received when not in use at Oxford United fixtures. It also helps stop terrorism, such as large vehicles being ploughed into large concentrated groups of people (as seen in Christmas attacks in recent months/years).

The club would attempt to inform supporters by the club website in the days leading up to a home game, if it were to be in place. This would be a work in progress and would try to relay this to supporters to prevent inconvenience.

IM noted that better communication was required regarding the use of the RES.

North Stand Segregation

New segregation doors had been fitted which were far stronger and were compliant with the current Green Guide.

Family Stand BLOCK 22 – part of the North Stand

Unfortunately stewards were to check tickets due to abuse in previous seasons and over pre-season. There were supporters trying to gain entry to the game by using concession tickets.

IM highlighted the concern of some family groups sitting in the Family Section of the behaviour of lone males / groups of males without children within the Area. IM reminded the room that the section was a family section & behaviour should reflect such.

Olly's Den – only children supporters in the Family Stand could gain access to Olly's Den prior to games. This was because people cannot move stands once entry had been given in another stand. It is a breach of the safety certificate. However, IM was keen to find a resolution and a suggestion was being considered for a gate to be used, GATE S, to allow children/adults into the Olly's Den before they had to exit through GATE S and back out of the stadium – they would then head to the correct stand. This seemed to be a good compromise but needed IM to get approval and get implemented.

Pyrotechnic Problem

Oxford United had a serious PYRO problem that would be dealt with. It was a major health and safety issue for those inhaling the smoke and potentially for the individual holding it or setting it alight. The room was shown some horrific injuries from culprits around Europe. The smoke bombs have to stop.

IM identified that he had now employed a fire safety steward for future home fixtures.

EAST STAND

Potential New Section

It was with great interest that IM began to talk about an ULTRAS SECTION. The Ultras had gone through some work with IM and his team about implementing a dedicated Ultras Section, as seen for example, at Crystal Palace FC.

An image mock-up was shown of Block 13 but some challenges needed to be overcome, notably those existing fans in that area and some financial costs would be needed to infrastructure including new barriers etc. OxVox offered to assist and requested financial figures to consider a proposal to IM, OUFC, Ultras and Firoka (N.B – we have begun as a Trust to investigate this proposal further – contact to be made with the Ultras).

IM stressed that whilst such a section might be possible, it should come with the consensus of the East Stand fan base. IM would not place the interests of one group above that of another.

Ball Stopping System

IM stated that he had arranged a new ball stopping system that would be erected before the match and during warm-up to stop 'head-strikes' to supporters from wild football's (eight such incidents in the last two seasons).

The new ball stopping system was being sponsored and funded by B&L Associates Witney Limited for a 2-year period. Thanks were made to B&L Associates by IM.

SOUTH STAND

IM raised the unacceptable language and behaviour that had been reported in both the SSL and SSU. The foul and abusive language, in some cases, had reached serious proportions.

A number of examples were given and OxVox were astounded to hear of some of the abuse that had been subjected to our 'own players this pre-season' and to fellow fans, including small children.

This was unacceptable and would not be tolerated.

WEST STAND (or the FENCE END)

Subsequent consideration had been given, following OxVox's dialogue with FIROKA over a fourth stand for the Newcastle FA Cup game, to look at options for a fourth stand by IM. It was felt that a safe standing stand, of circa 800 seats, could fit behind the goal without much infrastructural changes. It would be a non-alcoholic stand and further stands could be erected into the corner of the N/S – W/S corner.

OxVox would re-visit this and discuss with both OUFC and FIROKA.

PLANNING FIXTURES

IM explained to the room the intricacies of planning for a home fixture. For example, 120 stewards would be needed for the upcoming Portsmouth fixture. The discussion of supporter behaviour was re-visited so the room could understand that this impacted heavily on the category of fixture; which in turn impacted on decisions relating to staff numbers, agency staff etc.

FOOTBALL OFFENCE ACT 1991

A decision had been made to remove to gates, pitch side, either end of the South Stand. This would enable the steward to be re-allocated to a different part of the stand. Entering the field of play remains a criminal offence, warning made to supporters in those areas.

OX-TALES

A new system was being used by stewards, called OX-TALES. It was a database of supporters who were classed as risk supporters. OxVox were to discuss this further as it was the first time we were made aware of this system.

The system would be an APP and stewards could identify supporters of risk (OxVox naturally have some questions to follow about this system).

AREAS OF CONCERN

On a match day, IM and his team, have areas of concern. This includes them being responsible for all areas in the car parks, including customers visiting other amenities.

The club were also being monitored by Oxford City Council's licencing officer following supporters smuggling alcohol back into their seats after half-time.

New batch of tickers had been ordered by the Ticket Office which would have a new text on the reverse with a text number to inform stewards of bad behaviour or persistent standing in the stands. A steward would be deployed to the incident to investigate the report.

Cladding – following GRENFELL, the club were on a list to have its cladding checked by the authorities. Stadium not seen as a priority yet, as residential properties were to be done by the government first and foremost.

Terrorism – supporters simply advised to be alert and not alarmed. Report anything and be vigilant.

Clear Bag Policy – the club would implement a new clear bag policy to help with terrorism or bad behaviour. The club shop was handing out clear bags following a purchase in the club shop. Clear bags were allowed in the ground,

Rucksacks – Rucksacks were to be banned from the North & East Stand moving forward.

IM stated that more details would follow on the OUFC website.

IM invited OxVox to help during the season with a full evacuation of the stands. More details to be provided once this had been planned.

The club were looking for additional staff to be turnstile operators or match day stewards, please contact the club for more details.

Smoking pens had been erected at the back of the East Stand to address the smoking in toilets. The understanding from the audience was smoking still continued in toilet cubicles.

Regarding flag sizes or queries, anyone with a flag looking to identify if size was an issue, were to contact Ian Mixter in the first instance at imixter@oufc.co.uk

OxVox requested that the club send out a monthly update of stadium issues and updated news and this was to be considered by IM and the Safety Team.