

Points of Blue

Minutes of Meeting – 9 November 2011

Club represented by **Steve Sayer**, Operations Director, **Danny Wilson**, Head of Sales & Service, **Peter Fletcher**, Head of Safety & Security.

Invited panelist: **Mark Logan**, Company Director – Showsec.

Persistent standing

The club was invited to state policy on standing.

CLUB RESPONSE: Persistent standing is tolerated in sections of the South Stand, with additional safety precautions (more stewards, more medical staff). A few people who didn't want to stand have been relocated. Banter with away fans seems part of the attraction, and most grounds tolerate some standing by away fans, though sometimes allocations are reduced, or (e.g. in upper tiers) front rows of seats are netted off. At City the singing section was introduced, not originally intended to extend the area where standing was tolerated. There is a limit as to how far the practice can extend without risking attention from the licensing authorities, and the number of complaints from people in 109 who want to sit, and do not see why they should have to move seats, led to the decision to make this the demarcation line, and that there might have to be physical intervention to maintain the policy. At the Aston Villa game, one man point blank refused to sit down, and it was decided to eject him. The club has met with him, with the Football Supporters Federation involved, and it has been resolved amicably. Fewer than ten people have been ejected from 109 for persistent standing, and because of the problems with forceful ejection, fans who refuse to comply will be written to and their seasoncard disabled. The policy of maintaining 109 as non-standing is approved at the highest level of the club.

Were people buying Seasoncards told they would be able to stand in 109?

CLUB RESPONSE: That has never been the policy. We have no evidence, but it's possible that some people were given wrong information. Letters have been sent to all Seasoncard holders in 109 to reiterate that it is not an area where standing is tolerated, and we will try to relocate people who wish to stand into the South Stand.

Some supporters said that some stewards were generally rude and that they targeted vulnerable people for ejection. Others gave accounts of the incident at the Aston Villa game, including safeguarding issues because of the incident being upsetting for children; some supporters said they'd seen punches thrown by stewards.

CLUB RESPONSE: Alleged assaults (by stewards or anyone else) should be reported to the police. No reports had been made, and no assaults by stewards were seen on the CCTV, with cameras concentrated on the immediate incident. One family had been relocated to the Family Stand after the incident. Instructions and training (for MCFC and Showsec stewards) clearly do not allow for disproportionate force, and the aim is to ensure people's safety and enjoyment (which must include those who don't want to stand, and those who can't, with some areas for wheelchairs being behind back seats in a section). The manager of Showsec said that the company's credibility relies on the actions of its staff (and after the meeting he met with individual supporters to hear their accounts in detail).

What about the video of the incident posted on the internet?

CLUB RESPONSE: There's no evidence of punches being thrown by stewards on the video. There's a steward shown who wasn't there.

How many stewards are on duty at a typical home match?

CLUB RESPONSE: 350 MFCFC stewards, 200 Showsec stewards and others from G4S and IOS for particular tasks (e.g. corporate and disabled supporters). All stewards are expected to work to the same standards, and uphold the City Promise.

Moving the away fans

The club was asked to explain why away fans had been put in EL3 at the Villarreal match and would be again at the Bayern Munich match.

CLUB RESPONSE: Meetings with supporter groups in recent years had emphasised the difficulties of moving away fans from the south-east corner to any other part of the stadium, e.g. having to move existing City fans from their longstanding seat, segregation during and after games, and it had been generally accepted that nothing could realistically be done without some remodelling of the stadium.

However, due to continued feedback from supporters in all parts of the stadium about improving the atmosphere, the club decided to conduct a trial at two Champions League games. At the same time supporters will be widely consulted via two surveys after each trial match and focus groups with supporters who will be directly impacted by the trials. For Villarreal, with very few away fans, the trial was made, placing them in EL3, and there were complaints from many City supporters who had to move.

There were problems with access as one spiral entrance was not available to City fans on levels 2 and 3. The experiment will be repeated for the visit of Bayern Munich who will bring more fans. The aim is to improve atmosphere by uniting the more vocal sections of home support; there were mixed views as to whether the atmosphere was better against Villarreal, but their early goal didn't help the atmosphere.

The idea comes from supporters who would not have to move seats if this became a permanent arrangement. Should the club give more attention to the views of those displaced?

CLUB RESPONSE: Atmosphere is the single most important part of the match day experience when you talk to supporters, regardless of their age profile or where they sit in the stadium. At the current time atmosphere is rated as less than good and scores well behind most other Premier League grounds. The idea to relocate away fans to level 3 does not relate to a single group of supporters, rather it reflects the only feasible option at the current time, based on the current stadium configuration.

The views of potentially displaced supporters are not underestimated at all, and clearly their opinions carry a great deal of weight. The surveys can identify views from different parts of the stadium for this purpose. There is no commitment to making this permanent, and the status quo is certainly one option. Any permanent arrangement would be costly in terms of extra turnstiles, toilets, and safety aspects. The present arrangement is probably the safest in the Premier League, and any alternative would not be as safe. Before any decision is reached all the relevant authorities must be satisfied that the operation and infrastructure meet the highest safety standards.

The supporters at the meeting generally agreed with the principle that the current arrangement is not perfect, but it's not broken either.

Other stadium issues

Why do some people have to move seats for European games, then find City fans have used them?

CLUB RESPONSE: UEFA and UEFA Champions League Partners have an option to purchase an allocation of tickets on East Stand Level 2 for all Champions League matches. The size of this allocation increases as the competition progresses. Seats are also taken on Level 3 of the Colin Bell Stand and East Stand for an expanded commentary area and camera position respectively and we lose the front two rows of seats on Level 1 of the Family, East and South Stand due to the increased height of the perimeter advertising boards.

Supporters on the Champions League Cup Scheme who are impacted by these requirements are relocated to alternative seats before tickets go on sale to non Cup Scheme members.

Seats which are not purchased or used by UEFA are placed on sale to our supporters as soon as notification is received from UEFA which has been as late as 4 days prior to the match in some areas.

Are Level 2 prices decided for next season? The padded seats are nice, but these and the other perks do not justify the extra charge.

CLUB RESPONSE: We've not confirmed prices in any area of the stadium for the 2012/13 season.

Is smoking allowed in City Square, especially at the food tables?

CLUB RESPONSE: The area is not part of the stadium but comes generally under the City Council's ban on smoking on all their premises. Enforcement may be difficult, but we'll look at putting no smoking signs on tables.

Supporter comment: Thanks to the club for free parking for the derby game screenings at City Square.

Ticketing

Can we choose seats from a plan for away games?

CLUB RESPONSE: Tickets for away matches are sold on a 'best available' basis across all three sales channels (online, in person and telephone) in line with the order of sale instructed by the opposing club. If a supporter has a specific requirement eg. an aisle seat, we will do our best to assist but this cannot be guaranteed.

Since the service was launched at the start of the season, the number of supporters purchasing tickets for away matches online has increased significantly and we've received a lot of positive feedback on the ease of purchasing in this way. Subject to loyalty point qualification criteria and availability, the online sales channel is open 24 hours a day.

Can we still book seats for friends?

CLUB RESPONSE: Yes, tickets can be purchased online for supporters who are connected through 'Friends and Family'. If you wish to purchase tickets for friends, who are existing members, over the telephone or in person, you will need to be in possession of the respective names and supporter numbers and be prepared to answer certain security questions including date of birth and full postal address.

Is it right that someone with fewer loyalty points but on a Cup Scheme gets priority over someone with more points not on the scheme?

CLUB RESPONSE: This was clearly communicated in the membership renewal pack. Attendances at home Cup matches have been lower than hoped in recent

seasons. A price cap on tickets for domestic Cup matches, up to but not including the Quarter Final, was also introduced to incentivise sign up to the Cup Scheme and in turn encourage better attendances. Sign up to all three schemes has increased significantly on the back of these changes.

Can we not buy tickets for disabled people online?

CLUB RESPONSE: We are looking to introduce a solution. The challenge is how to confirm and validate the proof of disability.

Why can students get cheaper one-off tickets than student Seasoncard holders?

CLUB RESPONSE: Whilst a small allocation of tickets is made available to students via local universities and colleges, there is no guarantee that this will happen for every home match. These seats are located in areas of the stadium that are the last to sell (eg. back of Level 3) and a choice of location is not provided. From time to time, the tickets are discounted though this is not always the case.

Miscellaneous

Customer services - response times have been awful, especially when the matter needs an urgent reply. This was particularly frustrating around the time of the Napoli match in September.

CLUB RESPONSE: We accept that call waiting and email response times increased significantly earlier in the season. Cup Scheme issues, delays in the mailing of Blue Membership cards and ticket sales restrictions for the Napoli match all impacted on service standards.

Most days, call waiting times are minimal and email responses are sent within hours of receipt (during regular office hours). We are also investing in a more detailed FAQ section on the website to reduce the need for telephone or email contact.

Are catering prices creeping up, or portions getting smaller?

CLUB RESPONSE: Beer prices have come down, some food has gone up. We're not aware of any changes to portion sizes.

The next meeting of Points of Blue will be early in the New Year.