Meeting of Blackpool FC and Fans' Progress Group

Thursday 10th December 2015 Presidents Lounge, Bloomfield Road Stadium

STARTS at 6pm

Present: Fans' Progress Group (FPG)

lain Tarpey (Chairman), Terry Greenhow, Nick Bell, Ron Matthews, Peter Wadeson

Present: Blackpool FC (**BFC**)

Neil McDonald (NM), Karl Oyston (KO), Mark Ridgway (MR)

Apologies: Rachel Haines (FPG)

The minutes of the previous meeting 7th Sept 2015 were accepted as being a true and accurate record.

FPG opened up the meeting by confirming they have contacted a number of Blackpool supporter groups and had already held dialogue with the BSA. **FPG** advised that they have contacted the BST who have twice promised a response but are currently awaiting their reply, nevertheless information will still passed on to them. BASIL had confirmed they are a non political group and do not want to take part. Yorkshire Seasiders have replied and will receive information from the FPG.

FPG stated there is a consensus amongst supporters that the club must have direct dialogue with a supporters' group to comply with Football League rules, it was confirmed by the club and **FPG** that it isn't the case, other than that clubs should have a Supporters Liaison Officer (Mark Ridgway). **FPG** also informed the meeting that they are now an associate member of the Football Supporters' Federation (FSF) and intend to launch their own website by month end.

1) Team Results And Recruitment Policy

FPG asked **NM**: What's your plan to improve the teams competitiveness and how does the club plan to reverse the teams falling league position?

NM said: In my opinion recent performances deserved a better points return than we'd got, I've got a points target in mind to establish a consistent run of form. The main way to improve competitiveness is through recruitment bringing in better players for every position, and that whilst systems and formations can be changed and we need to find the right balance between a passing and a longer ball game, but we have players who can adjust. Relegated clubs often have difficulties recruiting new players following relegation, our summer recruitment was decent enough considering the bad press. January targets have been submitted with a mix of younger and more experienced players and the process is underway with Nick Alford the Club Secretary and Karl. The players we bring in have to be able to go straight into the first team to strengthen it and not just come as squad players, we intend to replace and let 2 or 3 players leave, and hopefully add a few more as well.

KO said: The targets are realistic and players I intend to try and recruit to strengthen the first team, we aim to ensure we have a sufficient number of players whose contracts don't expire before the start of next season, to provide continuity and a stable platform to work from. As I've previously said player contracts are now typically 2 years with a 3rd year option, but that depends upon the players age and specifics, every deal is different.

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FPG asked **NM**: How do you and Karl work together on transfers?

NM said: The offers have to come from both himself and Karl. There's been deals where not everything has been right. There's a selection process, so if the number one target doesn't want to join, you go for the number two and so on, however a high percentage of the number one targets have been signed.

FPG asked **KO**: You've previously said, once targets are identified and agreed you're responsible for doing the deals is that still correct?

KO said: Yes

FPG asked: Has the club's stance on agent fees changed given the figures that had been reported recently?.

KO said: The stance hasn't changed, the agent fees published recently were for the 2014/15 season not the current one, as reported. I don't dismiss the idea of paying agents, and deals won't stand or fall on agents' fees, however there must be value for the club.

NM added: It's difficult to predict the demands a player will make, circumstances dictate the value and there are different ways in a transfer to avoid agent fees. The three players the club has paid for this season are Brad Potts, Jack Redshaw and Mark Cullen who can all improve.

FPG asked for a more specific figure on the amount of intended January 2016 transfer targets. **NM** said: 19 new players in the summer was a big turnaround, I've so far run with a tight squad. The priority in January are permanent signings, not loans, because I'm trying to work six months ahead, knowing the loan rule changes next season. I hope to recruit at least three, but I'd be happier with up to five.

FPG asked: Is the club is looking to make any of the current loan players permanent transfers?. **NM** said: I'd definitely consider it, two or three have been excellent and it would be ideal as the club knows what they're about. Morale and spirits are excellent within the squad and football staff, and apart from putting the ball in the back of the net, all is well. All my staff and I have been out watching games and targeting players and not just youngsters, with targets coming in from all angles.

FPG asked **NM**: Given you recently stated that you believe 'off the field' issues are affecting player recruitment, and that some clubs don't want to loan players to us, how does the club plan to overcome these issues?

NM said: Recent pitch invasions and protests hadn't helped, a Premier League player had read about the troubles at the club and was put off. It's up to me to convince players to come to Blackpool, I'm selling the club by demonstrating how the players we've brought in have done well on loan recently, and that Blackpool is still a big club to play for, the players we've attracted so far really wanted the challenge of playing for Blackpool.

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2) Young Player Development

FPG asked for an update on Henry Cameron's injury recovery.

NM said: Henry starts his rehabilitation in a couple of days following his recent surgery. It's fantastic that the club has produced a full international which shows we can develop players. Clark Robertson and Colin Doyle have caught the eye of their national team managers too, a few of whom like Gordon Strachan have been down watching them.

FPG asked **NM**: How aware are you of young players in the club's academy?.

NM said: I've seen the U18's play on a number of occasions, and I get reports from the younger levels. They play against professional clubs all the way through so it is a high standard. You'd be shocked if you knew how many current first-team players across England came through those clubs' own academy.

KO said: The youth team needs to sign nine scholars a year and that seven of this year's nine have been produced by our own academy, with a further two to be confirmed.

FPG asked **NM**: How do you manage the big jump for young players from youth team football to the senior side?.

NM said: If youth team players do well they're pushed forward and train with the first-team squad, we play matches against them on Thursday's and Friday's, and that they do further technical work when the first-team is off, including video analysis and extra training.

FPG asked : Was sending young players out on loan to gain first team experience part of their development ?.

NM said: I threw Henry Cameron into the first-team because he impressed during pre-season, Luke Higham needs to be here developing with me, he's learning so much a loan wouldn't benefit him. As I've said youth team players who do well train with the first-team. Bright Osayi-Samuel has been involved most weeks and the Lancashire Senior Cup provides an opportunity for others. The intensity of training is high and good enough so players don't always need loaning out, and it's complemented with behind closed door friendly matches were we can.

FPG asked: Has the clubs policy changed in order to improve the clubs chances of keeping youngsters from leaving the club and signing professional terms elsewhere?.

KO said: The policy is to try and retain the better players that the academy and youth team produce. Neil and the coaching staff are selling the first-team opportunity, and career prospects, properly. Some players however, will go for short-term financial gain, rather than the opportunity to prove they're good enough to be a professional footballer, young player contract terms are normally linked to the number of first team performances, the more they play the more they get paid.

NM said: Look at amount of first-team games the likes of Henry Cameron and Bright Osayi-Samuel have played compared to the players who went to Stoke. I know I have to sell the ideal of training and playing for our first-team, and that I must give out opportunities. It must be a step up to new incentive-led contracts, they have to earn the deals which can drive players on. When a youth team player plays in a Blackpool team, scouts will come and watch them.

KO continued by staying: Scouting starts as young as 7 years of age, so it's important the academy continues to provide a good environment for the development of young players, who wish to progress through the club, to earn a professional contract, the quality of coaching here is the same and as good as many premier league clubs, but players have a greater opportunity of reaching the first team at Blackpool which is something parents need to perhaps consider. Young players should sign a professional contract before playing in the first team in order to protect the clubs interests, putting them on show could be risky.

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KO asked the **FPG**: Do you think young players should be kept out of the first-team until they sign a professional contract?

NB said: Personally I wouldn't play them, until they've signed professional terms.

TG said: The club shouldn't put obstacles in front of the manager, he should be given youngsters to play if they're good enough, even if they haven't signed professional terms, not signing a contract is a risk that should be taken if the manager finds it necessary.

FPG asked **NM**: Does the training ground put potential signings off?.

NM said: You don't take players to the training ground, you take them to the stadium, and that's the same at every club I've been at.

KO commented that it may be a good idea to invite the Academy Manager to the next meeting. All agreed.

FPG requested that a website article be written about the Academy and how the club develops young players, **MR** agreed to action this.

3) Coaching Staff & Scouting

FPG asked **NM**: Are you happy with your coaching staff and what does the scouting network consist of?.

NM said: I've got two lead scouts, one to cover the north and one for the south, and we cover Scotland as well. Each opposition team has at least two scouting reports done on them before we play them, I rely on people I trust to watch players and report back to recommend further scouting. Richie Kyle and Steve Banks and I are often out looking at players at all levels. Our fitness coach Scott Armstrong has been a breath of fresh air and has been excellent, and may be able to commit more time dependent upon is rugby career. The physio Phil Horner has been here a long time and does an excellent job, the kit man has been also been a breath of fresh air and our analyst Adam Whiteside has been excellent. He went to watch Wigan play in the JPT last Saturday and the staff travel the country to get a better idea of the opposition. I'm happy with my staff and everyone compliments what we do. The staff have an opinion and it's all taken on board. It's himself, Richie Kyle and Steve Banks on the training field.

FPG asked: Whilst it's fantastic that the club has promoted from within and given Richie Kyle an opportunity, does he have the required experience and player respect to assist?.

NM said: Richie's been very good and has good experience on the training field. He does stand back at times but he's done alright and is still learning, the staff are doing a decent job. It's helped him not having a squad in place when he took up the role, so the new players have only known him as already being there.

FPG asked: Do you need any more staff or a more experienced assistant?

NM said : No I'm happy with what I've got

FPG asked: What's the situation regarding Nile Ranger, why has he not been sacked?.

KO provide a fully reply that will be published at a later date.

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FPG advised **NM** that the FPG's remaining questions were club related rather than team related and that he could leave the meeting at this stage if he wanted to. However, **NM** said he would like to remain present as he was both interested in and impressed with the FPG's work and wanted to learn more.

4) Legal Actions and Club Issues

FPG asked : Can you provide us with an update on the legal actions being taken ?

KO said: The Sun newspaper is being sued for a defamatory story even though the club had confirmed it wasn't true, action against 5 Live for comments made by a Premier league player had finished following an apology from the player. There's Police action being taken against seven people who weren't identified on the club's supporter database for the attack on the director's box, two have been dealt with and received banning orders, whilst five others have pleaded not guilty and are due to appear in court.

KO also said: Two other individuals have been charged by the Police with the criminal charge of harassment, whilst three cautions for harassment have been issued by the Police. In addition there's an ongoing civil case between the club and another supporter.

KO also said: The pitch invaders will be offered an amnesty, subject to signing an acceptable behaviour order. However, we are waiting for a Police report following the Huddersfield pitch invasion which is expected within the next 2-3 weeks that may result in further actions being taken.

FPG asked : Could the £40,000 damages be waived from David Ragozzino ?.

KO said: No it wouldn't although the actual figure is £100,000, some of the abuse was vile, in person and on email and text. He's lost his job because of emails sent from work accounts, and several attempts to settle were rejected by him.

KO also said : Another person's claims that I'd produced a gun during a confrontation were proven false by CCTV evidence.

FPG asked: What is the criteria for supporters being entered on to the club's database?.

KO said: It includes everyone who has bought a match or season ticket. The club can't sell tickets to supporters unless they're on the database which extends back to before 2001. There's been six cup finals since 2001 so the majority of supporters should be listed on the club's database.

FPM asked : Do complaints made by stewards about individuals affect selling tickets to them in the future ?.

KO said: They're flagged up and the ticket office must speak to the stewards before selling them tickets again.

FPG asked: What are the thoughts of the Football League and FA on what the club is doing? **KO** said: The club must ensure there's no repeat of the Huddersfield and Lancaster incidents. The club must be seen to be doing everything it can to prevent any protests affecting the integrity of the football competitions of which it is a part of.

FPG asked **NM**: What are the players' thoughts on the situation at the club at the moment?. **NM** said: I've tried to create a bubble and a siege mentality, if supporters aren't happy the squad have got to try and make them happy, but everyone gets abused when it doesn't go right. There's been no trouble at all with the players and they've tried not to make excuses.

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FPG read out an email (see below) sent in by a long standing supporter to the FPG, and asked **KO** "What can you do to reassure the many supporters who may feel the same way?"

"I really do see that spending on the team in the premier league could have been greater, and I with most reasonable fans weren't expecting £10m's being spent. I would have even settled for a new training ground but none of these have happened.

We were sold the 'Riga revolution', which implied a change. As a Blackpool fan I now feel mugged, there has been no change in the direction the club is headed or the way it is run, so it was just lies. He has my money and I turn up as and when I can bring myself to do so. I feel like Karl is laughing at all those who bought 2 year season ticket deals in the desperation of belief that it might actually be changing.

You cannot continually treat people like that, for one we are customers, for two it indicates the level of respect or otherwise he had for the fans. Outside of football customers go to another shop with their business. I believe the owners never thought the fans could bring themselves to vote with their feet. We are now at this position and fans are voting with their feet. Trouble is I don't think Karl remotely cares, so despite any good intentions you have as a group it seems you are fighting a losing battle"

KO said: You can't give any reassurances in football because I've got no control over results and spending has no direct relation with performances. Supporters aren't being exploited it only costs £8 per game with the two-year season ticket deal and getting the best deal on player salaries and agents fees helps us minimise the cost to supporters. There's always higher targets and when one thing is ticked off the list, something else will become the stick to beat me with, and rightly so because you should always try to progress and have ambition.

KO continued: I couldn't predict that the appointment of Jose Riga wouldn't work, any decision made is taken with the best chance of success intended, I made a mistake but I don't take any joy in relegation and I very much care about the clubs current situation. Supporters must see that things are improving and that I will continue not to speak publically nor use the clubs website to make statements.

FPG commented that fans know the club is in a good state financially, so investment could have been greater before relegation.

KO said : Fans were saying the same things when I took over, saying 'spend some money', but it's about structure, personnel and positivity, not money.

5) Club Ownership and Supporter Groups

FPG asked: What is the clubs position with regards to the BST offer to take ownership of the club? **KO** said: There wasn't an offer but an invitation to give the football club, Segesta limited and all cash balances to BST which is valued at £32m. They admitted they had no money of their own and we asked them to provide further information and reasonable answers, but the club wasn't given sufficient details nor introduced to any of BST's professional advisors, we were genuinely concerned for the long-term future of the club, had it been handed to BST, therefore the approach is rejected.

FPG asked for an update on Valeri Belokon, but **KO** confirmed there was nothing to report at this time.

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FPG said to **KO**: We are still trying to encourage you to have dialogue with other supporter groups.

KO said: The FPG is a way and means for all supporters and supporter groups of suggesting improvement and change where needed, the FPG's Chairman is invited to attend board meetings, and is treated as if he's a director and has been provided with a board pack, including an agenda and financial statements for the forthcoming meeting. Any reasonable requests made by the BSA to the club will be facilitated were possible, but there won't be a direct relationship with any other supporters' group, other than the FPG.

The FPG's offered an olive branch to the BST, who so far have refused to have an interaction with you, the BST made a mistake about their vote not to have contact with you.

FPG said: We're an independent group and have never professed to represent other fans unless they ask us to do so, although we're not an 'elected group' this is something we aspire to, and is contained within our Ethos. We need to determine how we best work with other supporter groups going forward and whether to invite them to join us or work alongside them. We'll continue to communicate with supporters via email as we do now, and produce and publish minutes of meetings and attempt to have dialogue with other supporters' groups.

KO said: I've read your Ethos you sent me I think it's excellent, it clearly sets out your aims and beliefs, which is not to become a PR body for me or the club.

6) Facilities

FPG asked for a progress update on the new training ground work.

KO said: We're expecting a planning decision imminently, the asbestos has been removed professionally and once planning consent is received the existing buildings will be knocked down, construction work will be broken down into sub-contract packages and will start as soon as we get consent.

FPG asked: When do hope to be able to complete the work?

KO said: The aim is for all the work to be finished for the start of pre-season training 2016.

FPG asked : Are there any implications for the East Stand given planning consent expired November 2015 ?

KO said: There's no issues to be concerned about at this time, a current safety certificate exists and the stand remains available when needed.

FPG asked for an update on the 53 Suite.

KO said: The PCT (Primary Care Trust) leave in December 2015, building work on a new 53 Suite in the West Stand starts soon. The current 53 Suite will become hotel rooms which takes affect from the start of the 2016/17 season.

7) The Blackpool Gazette

FPG stated: We have held a meeting with Will Watt of the Blackpool Gazette and have set the foundation for an on-going working relationship, and that Will Watt believed the relationship between the Community Trust and Gazette had been repaired, but **KO** believed this was not necessarily the case, and continued by saying Will Watt isn't, and never has been banned, but won't have complete access to the club, as previously, the club favours media partners they have positive relationships with. **KO** stated Will Watt had told him via email before the start of the season, that he'd speak to his bosses about a commercial agreement, but there was no further contact.

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FPG advised that the Gazette will not cover Community Trust school visits because Will Watt wasn't permitted access to players, and that Will had advised that if the Gazette were to be allowed access to the players present at school visits they would attend and cover them. The **FPG** felt this would give the Community Trust and schools good positive coverage and that the kids would love to see their pictures in the paper, and that this would be a positive step in the right direction.

KO said: If the Gazette covers and publicises community trust events positively, they would by default have access to players present at these events, and that this would be acceptable to the club.

FPG asked: Would about commercial deals with the Gazette particularly contra-deals? **KO** said: I wouldn't consider a contra deal with the Gazette at this time, their readership is approximately 5% of the town's population, so would therefore provide minimal benefit to the club.

FPG said : The difference is basically free advertising for **BFC** and pre-match press conferences for the Gazette.

KO said: I don't intend to advertise in the Gazette, but if they want to do a commercial agreement as is the industry norm like other media partners I'd be willing to listen.

FPG said : The Gazette does influence the views of many supporters, so it would seem advantageous to speak to them.

KO said: If people want the latest information about the club they should go to the clubs website.

FPG disagreed and said rightly or wrongly people do believe the Gazette and continued to attempt to try and bring the parties closer together. **FPG** said the concept is that no money changes hands, the Gazette gets partner status and the club gets free advertising for **BFC** related companies, but **KO** confirmed he wouldn't consider this at this time.

KO said: The Gazette now has an opportunity to work with the Community Trust and get access to players, which is a good chance to benefit those served by the Community Trust.

8) Supporter Ownership

FPG asked: Would the club consider future part-supporter ownership of the club through the issue of shares to those who purchase season tickets?, as this may promote season ticket sales, reward supporters and build community and supporter relations, providing supporters with a greater sense of involvement and ownership of their club.

KO said: I'd be concerned about the ability of all supporters to contribute to losses or fund cash calls in order to support the team manager. Supporter ownership can take the form of shaping policy, which is what the FPG is about, and devolving power on the FPG to make decisions on behalf of the supporters.

FPG said: The club seems to be in a period of falling attendances, and next season we could lose more.

KO said: If this were the case I'd have to reluctantly adjust budgets to compensate to ensure the club doesn't lose money, but I'd hope this could be avoided.

FPG said: We believe the issue of free shares with a season ticket could have a very positive effect for the club including the generation of further income through increased season ticket sales and developing positive supporter relations.

KO said: I'll get the company secretary to run an exercise to find out how many shareholders are active season ticket holders before we discuss it further.

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FPG said: OK get the company secretary to carry out the exercise but we're sceptical about what it would achieve as it may be likely that current shareholders purchased shares for financial benefit only.

9) A.O.B

FPG asked: Does the club have a commercial manager?

KO said : Catering and hospitality has been out sourced, there's no current position required for a commercial manager.

FPG informed the club that an FSF away fans survey indicated that last season Blackpool had finished bottom of the fans survey and suggested the "20 is plenty" campaign as a way forward for away fans to save money which may increase sales due to lower prices, whilst Blackpool fans would also benefit at our away games too.

FPG said: This would provide national recognition and would improve the club's status in the football community, whilst benefiting our fans by saving them money. The FSF are getting negative stories about Blackpool, but we are trying to making positive strides towards improving this perspective. The club scored poorly in other areas of the FSF's survey which needs addressing. **KO** said: I'd like to know more about the survey, can you pass on a copy of the survey and details of the "20 is plenty" scheme so we can look at it. I'll get a finance study done on it and we can talk more about next time.

Details of the survey and scheme were passed onto Karl at the meeting for further consideration.

FPG asked : Would the club be willing to provide a hospitality box so the FPG could donate it to a local charity for a home match ?.

KO agreed to this, but extended his offer for the remainder of the season for a different local charity for each home game. A box in the south stand which have an en-suite bathroom can accommodate 10 people, whilst a west stand box will accommodate 12. Alternatively a table in the VIP lounge which caters for 10 people could be offered instead. **NM** also added that he would endeavour to make some players available to visit the box prior to match kick-off. **KO** asked the FPG to let him know what they wanted to do and he would facilitate it. The **FPG** agreed to action this further.

The **FPG** asked for an update following their request to the club prior to the meeting to host Carlisle United's next home match on 28th December due to severe flooding of their pitch and local community, **KO** stated he had been in contact with Carlisle's chairman and had offered to make Bloomfield Road available, consequently Carlisle's FA Cup tie with Yeovil on the 10th January 2016 (KO 2pm) is now to be played at Bloomfield Road.

Meeting Closed at 10pm.

The **FPG** had a number of other questions to ask, but due to the lateness and duration of the meeting these shall be saved for the next meeting. However the three questions below were asked via Email after the meeting, club responses included.

FPG asked: Some supporters were angry that the manager sent out a weakened team for the recent FA Cup tie at Barnet, with approx. 300 fans travelling 450+miles and paying £23 for tickets, many felt this was disrespectful to supporters and very expensive.

- Why did the club agree to an expensive £23 ticket price for a 1st round FA cup tie?
- Why did the club not contemplate some form of reward for those fans who purchased tickets (e.g. free travel to the game or a free ticket to 2nd round had we have progressed?)

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Nick Alford replied: To confirm, we weren't happy that the prices were set so high by Barnet and expressed a wish for them to be lowered. However, as the home club, they largely dictate the pricing, and as they matched their league price and what they have traditionally charged for cup fixtures, the FA would have supported their stance so there was little that we could do in reality. It is worth noting that if a replay had taken place we had set the prices and £15 for an adult ticket and £7 for U19's/over 60's.

FPG asked: We would like the club to consider establishing & developing a 'Youth Supporter' scheme that targets teenage kids aged 14 to 16, with free entry to home matches without an adult for registered members, kids of this age are trying to do more things without their parents for a little freedom, so being able to go to a football match with their friends instead might be a way of targeting this age group, and perhaps also consider a meeting place / young person's entertainment area where they can socialise.

Sarah Nibloe (Ticket office manager) replied: Think the Young Person membership is a good idea. We could run it alongside the Young Seasiders Membership which is aimed at younger supporters. We should look into doing this ready for next season. The Membership we currently have is £5 per season and offers definite value for money. We currently have almost 600 members which is I feel is good in the current climate. The Seasiders Bar would need to stay open and Ash Hackett (community trust) mentioned possibly being able to acquire some play stations.

FPG asked: For the remainder of the season would the club be willing to issue in addition to the Fit2Go program free complimentary tickets to all junior / senior schools and Junior football clubs in larger numbers to help develop young supporters of the future, and create a more positive atmosphere at games to help drive the team forward. We suggest 100 tickets to each school / club for all remaining home games, adults will need to be able to use these tickets as well to accompany and supervise their children. This may also generate additional income brought about by sales or snacks, drinks and programs etc..

Ash Hacket replied: Happy to distribute more tickets, if you wish, to schools. But the question back to the group should be is this for Blackpool schools (30 primary, 7 high schools and 4 special schools) or all schools across the Fylde coast?

I'm unsure sending 100 tickets to each school to every game is a good idea, but we could select specific games through the season and make a fuss by having extra staff attending and maybe corner off specific areas for the group, so non selected players could go over and visit. Maybe the East Stand next to the press? So it also gets a bit of coverage.

Actions Arising

- 1) Develop supporter group relationships FPG
- 2) Player recruitment to strengthen 1st team, January 2016 transfer window KO, NM
- 3) Website article about the Academy and how the club develops young players MR
- 4) Provide update & implications of Police report following Huddersfield pitch invasion KO
- 5) Commence & complete training ground improvements on receipt of planning consent KO
- 6) Gazette player access at community trust school visits KO, NM
- 7) Report on how many shareholders are active season ticket holders, and discuss further KO
- 8) Conduct finance study of the '20 is plenty' scheme and investigate further KO
- 9) Review FSF away fans survey, and investigate further KO
- 10) Hospitality Box for use by local charities FPG, KO
- 11) Academy Manager to attend next meeting KO
- 12) Hold further discussions with club on questions asked after the meeting FPG, KO

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