

SUNDERLAND STADIUM OF LIGHT – RESTRICTION ON GENERAL SAFETY CERTIFICATE

Report of the Deputy Chief Executive

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to recommend to Committee that a revised limit be imposed upon the number of tickets made available by Sunderland Association Football Club to the visiting fans of Manchester United for the fixture on Sunday 13 May 2012.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975 requires that the General Safety Certificate contains a safe capacity relating to the maximum number of spectators permitted to enter the stadium for the specified activity.
- 2.2 The setting of that capacity involves assessment both of the design and physical conditions of the stadium together with the Club's ground safety management structure.
- 2.3 Since the advent of the "all seated" stadia which came about as a direct result of the recommendations made by Lord Justice Taylor into the Hillsborough Disaster, an emerging trend for fans, particularly those of visiting teams, to stand in seated areas has been noted.
- 2.4 This action of fans standing in seated areas is recognised as a major safety concern as it introduces the risk of injury to spectators and others from falls, surging and crushing.
- 2.5 The ability of the Club to manage the crowd, and access into the crowd by Police, Ambulance Service or St Johns is severely affected due to the blocking of stairways, gangways and vomitories.
- 2.6 The action also impacts upon customer care as spectators behind standing fans have no alternative but to do likewise whether they wish to stand or not.
- 2.7 The Sports Grounds Safety Authority (formerly the Football Licensing Authority) recognises the problem and in August 2002 together with other representative bodies within Association Football produced a document "Standing in Seated Areas at Football Grounds" outlining the

problems associated with such action. The document is reviewed by all co-signatories at stocktaking meetings held every 6 months.

- 2.8 In 2005 the Chief Executive of the Football Licensing Authority wrote to all Chief Executives of Certifying Authorities reminding them of their roles and responsibilities in respect of fans standing in seated areas and requesting that they instruct Safety Advisory Groups to take up the issue. This instruction was repeated in 2008 due to an increase in the scale of the problem.
- 2.9 In 2009 Crowd Dynamics, a consultancy specialising in safety and crowd behaviour was commissioned by the Premier League to conduct a study into the safety issues arising from fans standing in seated areas.
- 2.10 The resulting report stated that progressive crowd collapse is not possible if the crowd is all seated and only standing at moments of excitement. However it said that a standing crowd jumping in excitement carries a higher risk of a progressive crowd collapse and that aggravating factors such as the rake of the deck and whether the crowd is dynamic or stable will significantly affect the likelihood of progressive crowd collapse.
- 2.11 The report went on to say that “the impact of this can be significant and as such, standing in seated areas must be regarded as a significant risk.”
- 2.12 The General Safety Certificate issued to the Club under the safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975 states in Condition 4 “The Holder (Club) shall retain control over the whole or each part of the sports ground and shall take all necessary precautions for the reasonable safety of spectators admitted to the sports ground. The responsibility for the safety of the spectators at the sports ground lies at all times with the Holder, who shall produce a written statement of Safety Policy”.
- 2.13 The Club’s own Ground Regulation 13 states that “Nobody may stand in any seating area whilst play is in progress. Persistent standing in seated areas whilst play is in progress is strictly forbidden and may result in ejection from the ground”.
- 2.14 At the beginning of season 2003/2004 the Football Licensing Authority introduced a proforma to be completed by football club safety officers throughout the Premier and Football Leagues recording the behaviour of both home and visiting fans. The recording of this information is now carried out by the Premier League.
- 2.15 The data built up from that reporting procedure and from information recorded by the council’s building control team from match day inspections has identified standing in seated areas as a trend by the visiting fans of a number of clubs including those of Manchester United.

- 2.16 The monitoring process will continue through the season 2011/2012 and the information received on the behaviour of the fans will be used to supplement information already held by the Council.
- 2.17 Committee will recall that at a number of previous meetings approval was given to set limits for the same reasons on visiting fans for fixtures against Clubs including West Ham United, Leeds United, Cardiff City, Aston Villa, Manchester United, Manchester City, Sheffield Wednesday, Liverpool and Newcastle United.
- 2.18 Committee will also recall that at its meeting held on 26 March 2012 it resolved to approve the setting of a limit of 1700 visiting fans for the fixture with Manchester United on Sunday 13 May 2012 on the grounds of authorising the Club to take all necessary precautions for the reasonable safety of spectators at the game as per Condition 4. The figure of 1700 was a level proposed by the Club which with the resources available on the day, the Club felt was able to ensure compliance with both Ground Regulations and General Safety Certificate requirements and was contained within the Clubs safety management plan for the match.

3.0 PROPOSALS

- 3.1 Following the meeting on 26 March 2012 a number of meetings and exchanges of correspondence have taken place between Sunderland and Manchester United football clubs which has resulted in a revised safety management plan for the fixture being received from Sunderland Football Club on 18 April 2012.
- 3.2 The plan details the agreed close collaboration between the Clubs particularly in respect of tighter levels of control at point of sale of tickets to visiting fans. In previous games the allocation of tickets to visiting Manchester United fans was by way of a lottery involving around 30000 applicants.
- 3.3 The revised safety management plan intends that priority be given to a well established "loyalty pot" which exists within the Manchester United fan database and informs that just short of 50% of tickets will be made available to that group. As the name suggests these fans have been long term supporters of the Club and as a result attract benefits not normally available to the general fan base, benefits including priority for tickets for high profile matches.
- 3.4 Clearly the "loyalty pot" status is cherished by those fans which fall within its category and as a result it is felt that the selling of a significant proportion of tickets to that group will attract a more compliant crowd than perhaps received in the past. To reinforce this point it is also intended that a letter be issued by Manchester United at point of sale to remind loyalty pot members of the consequences of not observing

ground regulations and safety certificate requirements which would include the removal of loyalty pot membership status.

- 3.5 The revised safety management plan describes the intention to sell tickets to the loyalty pot group in the lower tier rows 1- 15. By placing loyalty pot members within these “front of house” seats it is expected that not only will they be compliant and sit in the seats provided, but also that their actions will have a positive impact upon those fans behind them.
- 3.6 The revised plan also goes on to describe actions that Manchester United will undertake through leading figures at the Club to encourage fans buying tickets to adhere to ground regulations.
- 3.7 It is also proposed that an additional resource of up to 100 Manchester United stewards will be put at the Clubs disposal to assist in the match day operation.
- 3.8 Sunderland Football Club for their part have suggested within the revised plan a refined ticket selling policy which would allow for rows of seats to be kept vacant within the overall visiting ticket allocation to allow for access by stewards and police into the heart of the crowd if necessary.
- 3.9 Further the Club propose the removal from sale of all end of row seats within the visiting allocation which would help to prevent aisles becoming blocked if fans did stand during the match.
- 3.10 The revised plan also spells out clearly that the Club through its match day stewarding operation and supported by Northumbria Police intends to eject from the stadium any supporters who disregard ground regulations and attempt to stand persistently.
- 3.11 After examination of the revised safety management plan and discussions with the both Clubs, it felt that as a result of the additional measures proposed within the plan, the maximum number of visiting fans for the fixture could be set at a total of 2282 as suggested in the revised plan prepared by Sunderland Football Club in conjunction with Manchester United.
- 3.12 This revised number of visiting fans is set at a level which the Club through their revised safety management plan feel confident in being able to observe safety concerns and to carry out enforcement of Ground Regulation 13.
- 3.13 Details of the revised plan and the recommendation of Committee will be reported to the Safety Advisory Group at its meeting on 20 June 2012.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Committee is recommended:

- 1) To approve the setting of a limit of 2282 visiting fans made up of 1064 from “loyalty pot” members and 1218 from general season ticket holders, for the fixture with Manchester United on Sunday 13 May 2012 on the grounds of authorising the Club to take all necessary precautions for the reasonable safety of spectators at the game as per Condition 4.
- 2) To authorise the Deputy Chief Executive to follow such procedure and issue such notice needed to obtain compliance with the proposed restriction.

Background papers

Sunderland Stadium of Light General Safety Certificate

Football Licensing Authority document “Standing in Seated Areas at Football Grounds”

Crowd Dynamics report

Letters dated 8 April 2005 and 28 April 2008 from Chief Executive of Football Licensing Authority to Chief Executives of Certifying Authorities

Revised Safety Management Plan prepared by Sunderland Football Club in conjunction with Manchester United.