



STRATEGIC PLAN - 2023

Background

The TUST board first identified the need for a strategic plan during the uncertainty surrounding the early days of Clarke Osborne's ownership. His reasons for acquiring the Club were unclear but certainly appeared to be motivated by residential and / or commercial development opportunities. The biggest concern was that he would acquire the freehold of Plainmoor from the Council and commit to the redevelopment of the site without securing an alternative ground. Such concerns were predicated on his apparent failure to deliver on previous promises to build new sports stadiums.

The Club's relegation to the National League South in April 2018 (its lowest ever level) only increased supporters' concerns. However, the appointment of the experienced and respected Gary Johnson as manager in September 2018 signified an upturn in the Club's fortunes and some fans' perceptions of the owner. Johnson took the team to the brink of the Football League when losing the National League play-off final in 2021 but we now find ourselves back in the NLS and regional football

Poor performances on the pitch in recent seasons and a continued lack of communication from the club and its owner or his appointed directors about his plans and objectives has focused minds on various concerns regarding the Club's future.

The level of debt owed by the club to Mr Osborne's holding company, Riviera Stadium Ltd, stood at £3.6 million at 31st March 2022 and the club's finances continue to be opaque. The current debt is estimated to be £5-£6m.

While no suitable site has been identified within Torbay or its environs, Mr Osborne has reiterated to shareholders, in a rare statement at the Club's AGM in September 2022 his intention to build a new stadium. This has inevitably led to speculation and anxiety regarding the future of TUFC's spiritual home of Plainmoor.

As the world of football contemplates better governance of the sport through MP Tracey Crouch's Fan Led Review and the resultant White Paper, the club continues (at the time of writing) to refuse to engage with TUST, the only functioning group representing Gulls fans with over 400 members. It is a democratic, not-for-profit Community Benefit Society, regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. It is run by a board of dedicated volunteers who have more than 400 years of supporting the club between them.

TUST'S APPROACH

Our aim is to be as prepared as we possibly can for any change of circumstances. We have a Strategy Team made up of board members and co-opted TUST members which has been working up plans for a range of scenarios over the past few years.

This includes three potential scenarios; the owner seeks to sell the Club, the owner withdraws his interest but we are able to save the Club or the Club folds and we launch a phoenix club (which has been successfully achieved at a number of similar clubs such as FC Halifax and Hereford United).

For each of these scenarios we have identified necessary actions under five headings; football, finance, governance, supporters and PR. For each of these we have then prioritised our actions into those that can be carried out now (in advance of the event happening), those required immediately upon the event occurring, those needed during the following three months and longer term tasks.

We have a contingency fund of approximately £60k to facilitate the action plan. We are under no illusions that we could buy the club and have no ambition to do so. The fund exists to enable us to facilitate one of the preferred outcomes but not to sustain the running costs of a football club. We believe that, in the event of a serious threat to the future of the Club, a significant number of new members, volunteers and financial contributions would come forward. This has been the experience of other clubs in similar situations.

TUST recognises the need to keep a range of stakeholders informed of its concerns and its plans for addressing these, as well as its other routine activities such as community engagement and support for the women's team. We meet regularly with the local MP and senior councillors and we have an excellent partnership with the Torquay United Community Sports Trust and other groups.

We are members of the Football Supporters Association, which can provide a wealth of experience and support for any scenario.

ACTIONS TO DATE

- Kept the Football Supporters' Association (FSA) informed of our concerns and identified the support they can offer.
- Liaised with Trusts of clubs which have experienced similar scenarios, including community owned clubs.
- Considered the possible governance structure for a future club.
- Considered potential sources of funding.
- Prepared a comprehensive list of known Torquay United 'sympathisers' such as influential local people, celebrity supporters, ex-players etc.
- Planned for an emergency meeting of supporters if required – venue, host etc
- Prepared template statements for press, media and leaflets
- Identified the need to ensure a unified approach to any crisis (other clubs have experienced difficulties when more than one group have ended up with conflicting objectives, eg; Bury FC)
- Identified at what level the club might play in the league pyramid.
- Worked on cost projections for on field and off field activities and potential income.

Structure of the Plan

TUST has a mission statement which it aims to achieve through five key objectives. Each objective has a number of supporting statements. This Plan takes each of these and adds flesh to the bones by indicating how the objectives will be delivered or monitored. Specific actions are also shown where appropriate and these will form the basis of an on-going Action Plan.

MISSION STATEMENT

TUST seeks to ensure the long-term sustainability of our club for the benefit of current and future supporters and the wider community. It promotes the highest standards of governance and inclusivity.

OBJECTIVES

1 REPRESENTING SUPPORTERS: Being the democratic and representative voice of supporters and strengthening the bonds between the Club and the communities which it serves.

1.1 Owners, managers, players and staff come and go, supporters and their communities are permanent.

Whatever success they bring or future plans they may have, owners will leave at some point. We will constantly monitor the current ownership and prepare for any such change depending on the circumstances at the time.

Managers and players also come and go and we will not and should not have any influence over this but we will naturally monitor such matters as part of our general interest in the well-being of the Club.

We recognise the importance of other members of the Club's staff, some of whom make a significant contribution and may be in post for long periods. We will seek to build positive relationships with such employees and offer support where it is appropriate to do so.

Supporters and their communities are relatively constant. There is a nucleus of 1,500 – 2,000 supporters who will attend through good and bad times but a potential for the club to increase this considerably if the team is successful. Average league gates in the 2022/23 season were 2,422 with a low of 1,430 and a high of 4,908. We will seek to encourage greater awareness of the Club and in turn higher attendances which is key to its future success.

In addition, there is a significant level of away support. This is particularly due to the number of exiled supporters who attend away games – a reflection of the high level of migration of local people to other parts of the country, mainly for education and employment reasons. We will seek to engage with such exiles through regular communication and opportunities for them to meet our board members or contribute to our activities.

During the Covid pandemic and to some extent since, the opportunity for supporters to stream matches has increased the ability to 'attend' games.

- 1.2 We are independent from the Club and therefore have no conflict of interest.

We will always act independently from the Club. Whilst seeking to be supportive and constructive we will act in accordance with TUST's objectives as determined by our members.

Any actual or perceived conflicts of interest will be recorded in the Register of Interests.

- 1.3 We will be a critical friend of the Club and a force for change, where appropriate.

We aim to be positive in our support for the Club but are prepared to be critical where necessary, providing constructive challenge.

We will campaign, lobby and consider appropriate action to support this objective.

- 1.4 We wish to work with the Club at all levels to ensure its long term sustainability.

We want to build relationships with those involved with the Club from top to bottom, from the owner to the junior sections and volunteers.

Unfortunately, such support has not been welcomed by the Club in recent years and there is currently no meaningful dialogue between TUST and Club representatives.

- 1.5 We support the continued use of Plainmoor but are open to alternative proposals providing they are sustainable.

We believe that Plainmoor is a suitable stadium for the level of football we are likely to attain in the foreseeable future. As The Gulls' spiritual home, we believe that the majority of supporters wish the Club to remain there.

We strongly believe that the Council retaining the freehold of Plainmoor is essential. To offer some protection against it being sold, we have registered it as an Asset of Community Value.

We recognise the need to maximise potential use of the Club's facilities and believe that the merits of installing an artificial playing surface, available for community use, should be considered and evaluated.

We are, however, willing to work constructively with the ownership to consider any plans to relocate the Club providing that such plans are transparent and realistic. Any new stadium must be completed and a binding agreement in

place for the football club to have sustainable, affordable, long-term use of it before the use of Plainmoor is terminated. It must also be within reasonable travelling distance for supporters but not necessarily within Torbay's boundary.

- 1.6 Our aim is continuous development as we build, maintain and strengthen community bonds with the Club.

We will strive to move the Trust forward by building on existing community initiatives, reaching out to potential new opportunities and strengthening the dialogue between the Club and the community.

2. PROMOTING SUPPORTER INFLUENCE: Achieving the greatest possible supporter and community influence in the running and ownership of the Club.

- 2.1 We seek ways for supporters to become positively involved in the decisions that are made by the owners of the Club, which may include board membership should this be appropriate.

We would like to develop a positive and supportive relationship with the Club and seek to ensure that the supporters' voice is heard.

This would enable us to provide a positive influence in the running of the Club by providing direct feedback from our members and the fan base generally.

This has not been possible with the current directors but the principals embedded in the current White Paper may facilitate this to a degree.

We accept that TUST representation on the board is not a realistic aspiration at the current time.

- 2.2 We will aim to ensure that the ownership's motives and long term plans are in the best interests of the Club.

We will provide an independent view of the Club's direction whilst understanding that the supporters and owners may have different values and objectives. We recognise and understand that any owner is likely to seek a profit.

- 2.3 We promote regular and constructive dialogue and initiatives with representatives of the Club and with other supporter organisations, both at Club and national level.

We seek to maintain a meaningful dialogue with the Club in accordance with the principles of a Memorandum of Understanding (to be agreed between the parties) and via regular liaison meetings with appropriate Club representatives.

TUST is a member of the Football Supporters' Association representing supporters' groups at all levels of the professional game. We will engage with the FSA to gain from its knowledge and provide feedback of our own experience

We will also maintain good working relationships with the trusts of other clubs and provide support where such clubs are facing difficult times.

TUST was a founding member of the South West Supporters Trust Group, a forum for the trusts of many of the regions clubs to share ideas and concerns.

- 2.4 We will be prepared to act if the existence of the Club is ever in jeopardy and will do everything we can to find a way of ensuring its continued survival as a sustainable football club.

We see this as one of our main objectives but hope we will never need to action it. Many clubs at all levels have hit crises and we need to be prepared for such a situation, our biggest challenge.

We have identified ways in which significant finance can be accessed at short notice if required to ensure the immediate and longer term survival of the Club. These include the potential for a Community Share Issue, which has been successfully used by other clubs in crisis situations. The FSA are well versed in providing advice on the process.

We will also identify businesses and individuals with wealth who may be willing to invest in the Club and initiatives which enable funds to be raised from those of more modest means, such as Crowdfunding.

It is recognised that it is impractical and inappropriate to hold large sums of cash on account to address such crises but we will maintain sufficient funds to facilitate intervention and rescue of the Club in such circumstances. We have a Forever Yellow fund to meet the costs of legal, financial and other advice which will inevitably be necessary if we are to ensure the club's survival.

We will draw on the significant experience of the Football Supporters' Association and its professional advisors in such circumstances.

We will prepare a draft Business Plan for this scenario. Whilst recognising that this can only be of indicative value at present, it will provide a framework for assessing the potential of the Club should a rescue plan be required at any time in the future.

Whilst saving the Club would be the preferred option, we recognise that this may not be viable or sustainable. We have done a lot of work to prepare for the launch of a phoenix club if needed. There are many examples of other clubs where this has proved to be successful and we will draw on their experiences.

The priority is to be as prepared as possible for such circumstances by identifying sources of assistance, finance and professional advice including the experiences of other clubs which have faced similar circumstances.

It is worth repeating at this stage that ownership of the Club is not one of TUST's objectives and seen only as a last resort and probably only a temporary solution.

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Promoting responsible and constructive community engagement and encouraging the Club to do the same.

- 3.1 We will support the Club in becoming a successful community focused football club.

We see engagement with the wider community as essential to the future development and success of the Club.

We will not only seek to build strong community links and promote the Club ourselves but encourage the Club to do the same.

We believe transparent and open communication from the Club is critical to this objective.

- 3.2 We seek to develop and strengthen the relationship between the Club and the community, both within South Devon and further afield.

We will be proactive in building the Club's relationships with the community including the business sector, education establishments and the wider catchment areas.

- 3.3 We will keep supporters, communities and their representatives informed on critical off-field issues, ensuring they are sufficiently informed to influence decisions.

TUST is a non-political organisation.

We will, however, ensure that those with influence in local and national politics are kept aware of issues affecting the Club and its supporters and offer advice where we believe it is in the interests of our core objectives to do so.

We will also inform and consult our members on such matters of interest.

4. GOOD GOVERNANCE: Operating democratically, fairly, sustainably, transparently and with financial responsibility and encouraging the Club to do the same.

- 4.1 We promote excellence in governance to ensure the credibility of TUST.

We will follow best practice in our governance and be transparent and open to scrutiny.

We will maintain a suite of policies setting out our procedures for achieving this.

- 4.2 We will encourage good governance in all that the Club does.

We believe that good governance underpins the long-term success of any football club. There are numerous examples of clubs at all levels which have enjoyed short-term success but fallen foul of poor governance and subsequently hit difficult times.

We welcome the recommendations of the Fan-Led Review and support the proposals for improved governance in the White Paper.

We will hold the Club to account in this respect as we believe its reputation as a community focused club is built on its governance.

- 5. BEING INCLUSIVE: Being a positive, inclusive and representative organisation, open and accessible to all supporters of the Club regardless of their age, income, location, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality or religious or moral beliefs.**

- 5.1 TUST is democratic and we're proud of that - every single member is as valued as the next and entitled to a position of equal standing, where collectively they vote on the trust's direction.

We aim to be seen as the principle representative body for Torquay United supporters with a strong identity as such.

Our Rules set out TUST's democratic principles and these are upheld by the elected board.

We encourage member involvement, both formal and informal, and will consult our members on all key strategic decisions.

The reality is that, in common with many similar organisations, only a minority of supporters are members of the Trust and only a minority of TUST members are active participants.

- 5.2 From the TUST membership there is an elected Board of Directors which holds regular meetings, minutes of which are published.

The board consists of up to 10 committed supporters from a variety of backgrounds who bring a complementary range of skills. The board's business is conducted in an open manner with minutes produced in a timely fashion and published.

There will be rare occasions when, of necessity, the business of the board needs to be confidential but we endeavour to keep these to a minimum.

- 5.3 We aim to further the understanding of supporters and the community as to our purpose in order to encourage them to join us and work with us in making our great club a successful and sustainable asset to our community.

We will use a range of methods to promote the role and performance of TUST and to encourage membership. These will include networking with the business community, out-reach events, social media and promotional literature.

We will set membership fees at a level sufficient to support our objectives whilst remaining as affordable as possible to supporters.

- 5.4 We recognise the importance of young fans for the future of the Club and will actively seek ways to support and involve them, directly or through initiatives with the Club and other organisations.

We do not see direct involvement in junior supporter schemes as one of our activities but we are very keen to support and promote appropriate groups and organisations that work with and encourage the supporters of the future.

We will provide financial assistance for such schemes where appropriate to deliver the TUST's objectives.

Review

This Strategic Plan will be kept under review by the board and updated on a regular basis with significant changes of policy or direction requiring the formal approval of the membership.

And finally, in summary;

We want long term sustainability and good governance for our football club so that we and our successors can enjoy supporting it for generations to come. It is that simple.