

**Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC  
Fans Focus Group Meeting Minutes  
Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021**

**Opening:**

The Meeting is held by ICTFC CEO Scot Gardiner from the ICT Boardroom with some members of the focus group and some via Zoom Video Conference.

**Present:**

Attendees: Scot Gardiner - ICTFC CEO (SG), John Robertson – ICTFC Sporting Director (JR), Stevie Riley (SR), Peter Mutton- ICT Supporters Trust (PM), Steve Houston (SH) Christine Bruce – ICT Travel Club (CB), Rosemary Webb – ICT Travel Club (RW)

**Agenda Items:**

- **General Club Update**
- **Conclusion of recruitment of new Head Coach**
- **Season Tickets 2021/22**
- **Club Stewarding**
- **Club Finances and future sources of income – ICT Concert Co and ICT Property Co**
- **The Club's Academy**
- **The Community Trust**
- **Question and Answer**

**Meeting Transcription**

**SG Opens the Meeting**

SG: This is the first fans focus group meeting. We first broached this a few months ago, we wanted to have a fans focus group so we could bounce things into your thoughts and contacts and you have the opportunity to do the same with us.

It's critical and very important to listen to the fans. If everyone comes into the process open minded and we won't agree all the time but hopefully if we can't all agree then we can agree to disagree. Anything we say is on the record and you can speak to anyone about it unless stated but I don't expect much of that to happen at all.

**SG gives an update in regard to the recruitment process for the new first-team Head Coach and the launch of 2021/22 Season Tickets.**

SG: The club received 85-95 applications for the Head Coach job. The club then put together a long list of 13 people, four were in position as a manager or had been in the past, five had been assistant/interim managers only and the last group of four were seen as the up-and-

coming coaches in Scotland. All 13 had applied and the club broke it down to a list of four that were interviewed, and Billy Dodds was subsequently appointed.

The meetings were held in Aviemore in the Munro Construction boardroom to retain privacy as there was Vaccine clinics being held at the Stadium. Billy Dodds was probably always favourite for the job, but it was explained to him that we had to go through the process as there were some very impressive applicants.

### **Season Tickets 2021/22**

SG: I didn't want to launch season tickets without the appointment of a new Head Coach. We were always working on something looking to add to the Season Ticket offering.

SG: last season's price (2020/21) was frozen and then reduced pro-rata to reflect the 13-home game season. The club would have taken a different decision in regard to the streaming offering if it knew it would be behind closed doors for majority of the season. The advice from the SPFL/SFA was that the first 3 games would be streamed.

Pixelott when it was getting set up looked fantastic, we were told it was HD, could do all these different things but ultimately they failed to deliver during the season.

Our plan is to announce that 2021/22 season tickets for a 36-match season will be frozen at last season's 27 game price for everyone that renews. The club has done some new investing into a new streaming service called ICTV and that will be included with all season tickets.

Cameras and commentators will be located on West side of the Stadium. The plan is for Iain Auld to be the regular lead commentator and for his co-commentor to be different guests and ex-players through the season unless we can settle on a pairing which really works, in which case we may look to bring in a third summariser.

Everything we're seeing from the SPFL/SFA says that all our season ticket holders will be able to attend in person next season. Unless there's another new strain of the virus, our capacity allows us to house all season ticket holders in the Stadium under current guidelines.

The club are currently looking into what our capacity is with social distancing at 2 metres and 1 metre but whatever the case we can have all existing season ticket holders in the Stadium. We will potentially not be able to have away supporters or walk ups.

PM: If the number of season ticket holders were to be increased, how would that effect things?

SG: We should still be fine. We have a few buffers, but it comes down to if distancing is either 1 or 2 metres. It looks on all fronts that we are fine which is very encouraging. While social distancing is in place, we may not be able to have supporters in the exact seat they buy.

Therefore, the streaming service will be free for all season ticket holders so if we're under restrictions supporters can make the choice to watch the match at home. Some clubs have looked at the prospect of if someone comes to the game then they can't watch the game online as well but we aren't going to do that.

The reason we were taking legal advice at the moment was because it was our intention to offer season ticket holders who renew their season ticket shares in the club, gifted by the club, up to the value the supporters' season ticket.

We're taking legal advice as I think that it is a great idea but the club lawyer and accountant have said we need to check a few things. It would treble our current number of shareholders and I would have to write to existing shareholders for a majority in favour of it. The Board and I are very supportive of the idea. I would be great as part of the TogetherNess campaign to say thank you to season ticket holders to staying by us and that they were shareholders now. There's 8 or 9 points which we must go through, but it is something I'd like to do as a genuine thank you for what everyone did. Because there was a spell during a season where we could have been in trouble without external help and supporters were unbelievable. I had calculated when we were going to run out of money. I would have done everything to avoid that, but I knew the date we'd run out of money if we didn't manage things properly.

We got passed that and Ross Morrison, Allan Munro, David Cameron, Liam Dalgarno, Gordon Fyffe were all aware of it. We know what we would have had to have done if we got to that stage. We'd have had to take pretty drastic action to get new investment in. Thankfully we didn't need to do that, the fee we received from the Scottish/UK Government was an enormous help. I'm not ashamed to say the day we received that it was quite an emotional moment.

If we can't gift shares to each season ticket holder to the value of their season ticket, then our second question is can we take the total value of season ticket sold and gift that in shares to the Supporters Trust or the Community Trust.

PM: I think that sounds positive and people will be really happy with that. I think a lot of people have felt they've been short-changed with the Pixelott system, which didn't work as the club intended, so for the club to be giving something back would be positive.

The one thing I would say people will be looking for transparency for how things have been turned around for a financial perspective, you mentioned the funding from the Government, but I assume that there needs to be more money coming in than just that.

SG: We will come onto the financial side of things in due course.

CB: The shareholder idea could lead to more season ticket holders sales. I think it's positive idea.

RW: Last Season sounds fans paid full season ticket price and paid extra 20% as a donation to the club. Will that be the same this year?

SG: We discussed that, and we didn't know if we'd put that option in or not. We didn't want to be cheeky. It would be much needed and depending on what happens with the shareholding thing, we'll probably have a further discussion about it.

SG: Because so many people did donate last season, we ended up with something like only losing revenue of just under 10% even though the season ticket price had been reduced by a quarter.

SH: Will there be an option for a TV-only Season Ticket?

Once we reach the cut off point for renewals in July that is something that we would be able to announce if legally possible. We understand there's a market there because we know we have a lot of central belt-based supporters. The reason we don't want to launch that at the same time as we want as many people as possible to renew and a TV only season ticket will be a reduced rate to a normal season ticket.

SR: Would it be possible to give supporters renewing a discount on new strips?

The home strip is critical to us. We need to drive the sales of the home strip. Season Ticket already gives supporters discount in the shop. We're not looking to give a further discount on kit.

Just on kit, we have two new strips coming out this season. We'll keep the pink strip as a third kit for a further season. All away kit has been delivered, all the training kit has been delivered in April and the home kit is due in on 15<sup>th</sup> June. We're very pleased with the kits for the new season. The club signed a 4-year deal with Puma last season and the main sponsor will remain as Intelligent Land Investments.

### **Club Stewarding**

SG: Just to discuss the Stewarding at the club. When I first arrived here, we used a company which I wasn't happy with. They used a lot of people who were came in buses from the central belt.

They had no idea where fans seats were and it wasn't good enough or pleasant enough for leisure/entertainment offering. We terminated that contract, and the new stewarding company was due to begin the week after the last match before COVID. The new company is called Anubis Security, they were due to be our new stewarding company.

The reason we picked them was because they were going to open a new office in Inverness, we then would be able to employ local people to come to game which would be a tremendous help. For the two games which we did have last season, Anubis stewards worked those games and we got very positive feedback and had some local people working at the games.

We've had to use the North Main Stand concourse as a gym due to all gyms shutting during the lockdown and we didn't have a gym at the stadium. This probably led to the injuries we

had at the start of last season as they had no core strength and had injuries that long distance runners get.

The gym equipment in the concourse clearly can't be there when the new season starts. So one of the projects that John Robertson is working on, building a new on site gym at the Stadium that the players can use and potentially fans/personal trainers/clubs who may want to rent the gym.

Due to the temperatures in the Main Stand concourse, we have now installed permanent heaters in that concourse. We'll be looking to add more, and these will now be present for when fans return to use the concourse.

### **SG gives update on the club's finances**

SG: Coming onto Finance. We submitted our reported accounts last night, yesterday was the cut off point. All business were given some extra time due to the pandemic. At the last AGM we reported losses of £875,000 which was for season 2018/19. That was the season I just joined the club. That's why we called an EGM, we said we can't do this, this isn't sustainable, we're going to go under.

The directors having to produce around £80,000 per month to pay the wages. That's impossible especially in the Championship when you have little or no revenue from away supporters. We set up multiple ways of turning the business around. We brought in brilliant new board members in Allan Munro and David Cameron. We announced at that AGM that we'd be working on establishing two new companies, Inverness Caledonian Thistle Concert Co and Inverness Caledonian Thistle Property Co.

The Property Co would be looking to generate revenue alongside Intelligent Land Investments. That was part of the first contract with Intelligent Land and we'd look to generate a six-figure sum from ICT Prop Co.

Because we lost our two concerts in the summer there, in Tom Jones and West Life, and because the likes of Live Nation and DF Concerts have pulled up the draw bridge on their concerts apart from the more conventional venues, so even if we wanted to insert ourselves in on the concert scene we couldn't because they aren't going to the far reaches of the UK, We took the bull by the horns on the front and set up our own Inverness Caledonian Thistle Concert Co.

The business is registered at the stadium and the board of directors will be largely the same as the football club. We have full transparency. The reason we've set the company up is put on our own concerts. So, we've taken on the role of promoter. Instead of getting a flat fee from a promoter – which could be 60,000 – 100,000 we will take on the entire concert. We pay the artiste, get our own production team and that way we will be able to capitalise on the stadium as a concert venue fully. The risk is you take on all the risks of the concert not going well.

It'll cost us about 7 figures to put on a concert, but the opportunity is you could make a lot more money. The reason we set up ICT concert Co is twofold. The first one is to protect the football club. On one front by generating cash outside the football club, we cannot exist as a full-time elite football club in the Championship with our crowds. If we're in the Premiership, we could do it and break even. In the Championship it isn't possible, you will lose money year after year. So, you either have to go part-time or come up with a new business plan. The new business plan is ICT Prop Co and ICT Concert Co.

We got the backing to fund the concert co and that's what we've done. We're days away from announcing our first concert. We won't be a venue that goes against everything else in Inverness. We will have one weekend per year where we host concerts. We can only do that because the season finishes in May and starts in July.

We're not going to be an all-year venue. We have a grass pitch, and we believe that's what is best for us. We don't want a plastic pitch even if we could do more with it. We have invested in our grass pitch and want to keep it as a fantastic surface.

We want to have one weekend per year for concerts which will generate 6 figures for the club and 6 figures also generated for the club from ICT Prop Co. That will alleviate a lot of our ills if we still happen to be in the Championship. That's not our intention, the reason for generating this money is to invest into the team because we don't want to make money, we just want to stop losing it and reinvest into the football club.

The reason these two new companies will exist is also to make sure that nobody can just come in and shut us down and take this wonderful bit of land and turn it into something else. The other reason they are separate companies is if we had a disaster in either one, it doesn't take the football club down. It's the directors of each limited company that must bear the losses. No profit can be made from these two companies, they can only pay the profit into the football club.

We've put together a production company. Not a penny from the football club can go to this. It has been seeded with capital for the Concert Co and we have a promotion and production crew and everything else.

Everything we do we're trying to keep it in the Highland region. We're going to try and keep all our business surrounding the concert with the and regenerate the Highland economy. It is to make us money and it is, so we become a bigger pillar of the city and the region because we're doing the right thing.

If it's possible to do it in the Highlands then that is Plan A, if it can't be done in the Highland then we'll get Scottish companies from the central belt and if that's not possible we go to the third plan which is elsewhere in the world.

SH: That sounds really good and it is something that the club should be banging the drum about.

SG: Yes we will do that once the concert is announced. There is no point doing this if we don't make a virtue of it. We have a three year business plan for the concert co. we know

exactly where we're going. All the people in that business plan have been told to get quotes from Highland region businesses first. We're going to do an economic impact assessment before we do the concerts. We think that will help us politically as we move to do other things.

SR: Have you had some feedback from the council about the new concert company?

SG: It has been massively positive. We've had Visit Scotland, Event Scotland and the new Inverness board all speaking to us, and they all think this is fantastic. As we'll be bringing between 18,000 – 23,000 to the stadium per night over two or three days. If we stick to this and hire local, then it has an even bigger impact. That's our intention and we're hoping the first announcement will have the impact I think it will because it is massive in my opinion. We will then announce a second act down the line for other days but that's where we're at.

We submitted our accounts last night and we've gone from a £875,000 loss to a £326,000 loss which is a hell of a turnaround. That 326,000 loss pains me greatly but we're projecting next year, to be even closer to break even.

PM: When you say next year, is that for the season which has just ended?

SG: That would be from June 2019 to June 2020. This includes March, April, and May in the pandemic. Our turnover was down a large amount, and our retail was up 20%. We still had a host of home matches and play-off to play before the end of the season. I'm not happy to still be making a loss but I'm happy to get us down to that number. It is huge credit to the Chairman and board who have come in and we're projecting for breaking even then going into the black. That doesn't take things like transfers into consideration. Believe me that is a huge leap forward to cut the losses by that number.

PM: Is the plan for the AGM soon?

SG: We have 21 working days where we have to give notice. So, there will be an AGM in the next four or five weeks. Last year we needed to give personal guarantees with our accounts, but we didn't have to do that this year. We're seen as viable and we've to show our plans, our contracts for the concerts and the development. With these going ahead we're good to go. We weren't seen viable as a full-time club previously and hence the note re us as a going concern previously.

### **SG gives update on club's academy**

SG: With our Academy. We're taking great leap forward with our Academy. We have 110 kids in any given season. We have 102 parents that are making financial contributions to us, small but important, because the academy was losing a six figure sum each year.

The easiest thing to do would have been to cut the academy but we doubled down on it and we now have more coaches than we previously had and better kit. To see last week, where the Scotland Under 21 squad come through where Rangers have 6 players, Caley Thistle have 4, Man City 2 and the rest have 1 is unbelievable. We have a number of club sniffing

around our academy players at the moment but we're hoping to announce some other signings from academy shortly.

John, you went to see our Under 18s the other day. What did you think?

JR: I think we got another five or six more than capable of stepping up in the next couple of years. They are very similar to the group previously from two years ago. I think 8 of them managed to play in the first team at some stage and we had great pride that when we played Buckie Thistle last season that we had 9 of the 15 which were academy players.

Last year's other 18 weren't the best group but you have that sometimes, but I was hugely encouraging as we beat Ross County 4-2 and I think we have another four or five from that group if they continue to work hard then there's a real opportunity for us.

SG: We're looking to take every aspect of the football club up a level. John was late to this meeting and it was because we was speaking to Billy Dodds and Scott Kellacher, who was thankfully healthy enough to come in for a chat, and we're looking to announce the appointment of a new Head of Physical Performance in the coming days.

Right across the board in the Academy. One of the things John is working on is a new training hub. If any of you know the Royal Academy's playing fields. We are making a bid to take that on a turn it into a facility that the Royal Academy can use during the day, and we can use as our Academy Hub.

Our Academy team will be able to train and play there, our Women's team, Women's Development and Under 17s can train and play there. It's a massive legacy project that our girls and academy players can play and train at and at other times our Community Trust can use.

There will be times Inverness Athletic and the Royal Academy will also use it. It requires some investment. It is a bit of a bog at one end where it's flooded all the time. John and I had a brilliant meeting with the council about it and we no await meeting with the council to bring this forward.

We're working with the Highland Rugby Club, on a project for their centenary which is exciting for them but we're helping them do it. We're helping Clach, we're gifting them our pitch covers. We have a very clear vision of how good the club can be and what a positive influence it can have.

John has been having meeting with Sports Scotland about the potential infrastructure grants we can get in relation to the training hub and in relation to things we're doing here. He's been speaking to Football Partners Scotland about the same thing. He has massive respect within the sporting and football world and he's worked in the real business world. That's why I was really happy to get him as Sporting Director because I know when John gets a project it will get completed.



## **SG gives update on Community Trust**

SG: On the subject of the Community Trust. We were always working to make the Community Trust a stand-alone business. What was happening previously was the club was subsidising it. It was a Community Trust by name but not by nature. We needed it to do more work in the Community and get a more serious board.

Just before the pandemic, we were working with the Community Trust so that it could become stand alone and it could pay for all the employees they have. Could pay for all their activities. If they needed a hand, the club was there and hopefully we'd be able to help in some way shape or form. We still went ahead with that even during the pandemic.

We now have David Milroy and also some other "heavy hitters" on the board of the Community Trust. We're working with the Department of Work and Pensions about the Stadium potentially becoming a hub for Youth employment which will be great for us and the region.

We have regular meetings with the Community Trust board and while I'm not a board member I can add where the club can help.

Our AGM will be in a few weeks. We're not perfect right now. We have some challenges but we're on the right road. The Chairman is brilliant and is massively dedicated to the cause.

## **Questions**

SR: What is the status of the Highland Football Academy in Dingwall?

SG: We own a third of the Highland Football Academy in Dingwall. John can back me up on that.

JR: We own a third of the Astroturf, a third of the grass pitch and a third of the indoor academy. As do Ross County and as do the Highland Football Academy.

We are looking to set certain days with the Highland Academy board where we have first refusal at those times.

SR: If the Academy project goes through, would we look to sell the stake we have the HFA?

JR: There would still be times where we'd look to use it. For example, the Astroturf doesn't cost us to use it for any games so there's still a value for us to be able to use it. The Highland Rugby Club is fantastic but if we use it then it comes with a cost. Dingwall doesn't come with a cost. It's not something we'd be looking to walk away from at anytime soon.

CB: I don't think the identity of the club is out there enough to attract more supporters and more younger fans to come along to matches. In terms of merchandise it would be great to have a city centre presence.

SG: In terms of getting a city centre presence, we will hopefully have a section in the new Highland Hospice Shop which is in Inverness town centre and it's a big building. We will have our pink products and as it moves along.

CB: Have we thought about putting out questionnaires to supporters on Matchday to see what they want. Just to open a dialogue with fans, which some fans feel there's no dialogue.

SG: This meeting is the first stage of that. We will look to grow this group to have more people on it. I'm open to that because we're trying to be more successful. Try to get people to buy more things and have a better time here. I speak to the likes of Stevie Riley about merchandise, but it doesn't have to always be about something you are selling. It can be about improving things, so we're completely open to it.

John coming on board will be a big help to me because there's not enough hours in the day. It is an epic task to turn the whole club around. I see this meeting as a good thing where we're able to speak to be able to feed things in.

RW: I think we all agree the communication is really bad from the club. We need to improve it. We could maybe do a quarterly newsletter to say what is happening.

JR: Scot has said when we worked at Hearts in the commercial department that there's no such thing as a bad idea. The city centre presence was a perfect example of that. On the newsletter, yes now we have got all the email addresses that is something we can look at.

From the management point of view, when you're the manager or head coach, you only focus on one thing and that's to try and win on the Saturday. Everything else is, not irrelevant but you have to understand the hard work everyone does here for you to be able to go out there and play, but it insular as all you think about is the result.

We need to look at the fact it is a cold stadium and how do we address that. When you look at our support, with respect, it is an aging support as it supported the club right at the very start. How do we attract new people to come? You guys and ladies as fans may have a better idea to try and influence people to come and what to try to get them here in the first place and try and hook us.

This summer shows, with the European Super League, how much the fans do care about their clubs.

SG: The criticism about communication is noted but I don't think it is as bad as I you say. In terms of putting stuff out there, this is for the guys who are online, when we tweet something 90% of our own support probably didn't see it. If we put something on at a certain time or If I do an interview, then not everyone is on it so they don't look at it. It's finding better ways to get the message out there.

SH: I'm based in Glasgow and interact with the club on Twitter but I don't think the club is too bad with communication. We may have to clarify what communication do people want

because there's a lot of negativity with Twitter and such. You put an announcement out this morning about Billy Dodds but instantly people are being negative.

SG: I think online we're good with communication we're good but that's not everyone. I need to do better then and take it as a constructive criticism that we need to do better with it. I agree if there was an update with different topics, this where we're at this is what we're working on, these things are coming this why we did this. We'll start that right away. I think we're better than we were when I came in online but I totally take it on board.

PM: I think when you do communicate it generates more questions than answers.

SG: Take the Billy Dodds announcement. Social Media is inherently negative, very rarely does someone go on a say how great something is. When you beat the likes of County everyone is unanimous that it is great and brilliant. The next day to say you'll do something and that's terrible. It's easier to say negative things than positive. I don't really look that intently and the only time I really look is when we put a new design of a strip up. If you get more positives than negatives with a strip, then it'll do well.

We'll look to find a good way of putting a regular newsletter out there.

SH: I look to buy something online from the club each month to contribute. I know other clubs such as Dundee and Hearts have it so you can set up a direct debit. Is that something the club would look at?

SG: It's a fair point. We don't think there's the volume of people at the moment for doing it. There's been a lot of things we've held back on because of the season we've just had. People were giving donations and adding things all the time. We didn't want to have our hand out all the time. We've always thought we should offer value. We are at contract signing point for new lottery where it would be on your phone and all the money goes into our academy.

It's going to be called Nessie's Numbers and it is going to help fund the academy. Rangers have one called rising stars and people put money in because it goes to the Academy. I think it is a fair point but we're just not there at the moment. We're just looking to create more value. Just on the website, our website isn't good, as an experience our retail offering isn't good online either. You'll see that change in the coming weeks and months as we're working on new site and retail site. We're going to improve that experience to make it much better.

SH: For the monthly payments, it was marketed correctly, it could be seen as helping to support and improve the club. Maybe there's a prize draw for a signed shirt or something.

SG: At Hearts, I was involved with the Foundation. If you gift something for it then it is all taxable. If there's a benefit, even entered into a draw, then it is taxable. So, there's 8,000 giving £17 on average per head then they can't even give them a small pin badge. The second they do it all becomes taxable.

We were trying to come up with ideas that make it easy for people and provide value. Nessie's Numbers for example at least there is going to be a prize there. I think we're trying to look at thing but we're looking to offer value.

SR: On the Matchday experience. Is there any plans to open up the sports bar following games?

SG: We're looking at various things to improve it. We've had discussions with the social club and looking to see what we can do.

**Final Points:**

- **Possibly meeting every 3- 4 week for future meetings.**
- **Something to be published to the website about meeting.**
- **Other members to be invited for future meetings**