

## **The Jags Foundation – A Vision**

***To be an outstanding membership organisation, supporting a successful and sustainable Partick Thistle FC.***

### **Thistle's fan ownership journey so far**

Normally, fan ownership arises out of a catalyst event. For example, a football club might face acute financial distress or is run badly by antagonistic custodians, who the fans want removed.

Neither of these applies to Thistle's fan ownership journey because of Colin Weir's generosity at two key stages. Firstly, he helped to clear Thistle's bank debt in 2015, something that significantly strengthened its long-term financial position. Secondly, he bought the shares with a view to donating them outright to a fan-controlled vehicle. This sidestepped the need for such a vehicle to raise substantial capital in order to buy-out a majority shareholding.

These admittedly fortuitous circumstances present their own challenge. The absence of a catalyst event has dampened the perceived "urgency" for fan ownership among the Thistle support. The Covid-19 pandemic has also made it more difficult for the Foundation to engage with fans face-to-face, to persuade them of the merits of fan ownership and to mobilise fundraising potential among the support.

There is vast and untapped potential in the Thistle support to grow both Foundation membership and fundraising substantially in the coming years. The new democratically elected Foundation board is determined to unleash that potential and thereby to strengthen the football club that means so much to all of us.

### **What do we want the Foundation to be?**

We want to build a "best of breed" supporters' organisation. This means building an organisation that:

- gives real democratic influence to its members
- listens and responds to members priorities and concerns
- provides significant and sustainable financial support to the Football Club
- mobilises the talent, time and experience of the wider Thistle support
- provides a focal point for, and strengthens, the wider Thistle and Maryhill communities.

At a practical level, this means building an organisation that has the capacity to fundraise, and to demonstrate that the Foundation is a responsible and sustainable destination for the majority shareholding. But this emphatically is not the sole purpose or motivation behind the Foundation. It should, in a broader sense, be the glue that sticks together the wider Thistle community.

The success of the Foundation is going to depend on pulling together different parts of the Thistle family and ensuring that their activities mutually support one another. This isn't just about a relationship between the TJF Board and the PTFC Board. It's about Thistle in its many guises. Whether that's the Women's Team and the

Academy, the heroes on the pitch or the future fans off it, the Thistle fans in the business world or the those giving back to the local community, we can be greater than the sum of those parts by fostering a collaborative culture in and around the club.

This isn't going to happen overnight and will be an evolution rather than a revolution. It is a project the full benefits of which will be reaped by future generations of Thistle fans. The opportunity to put a fan ownership vehicle at the heart of everything Thistle does may not come around again: it's time to seize that opportunity.

## **Member Engagement**

All successful fan-ownership vehicles get member engagement right. We have learned a great deal from the Fan Engagement Index (FEI) and the experience of other clubs in this regard. The FEI was previously published annually by Fan Insights, but has since been taken over by Think Fan Engagement.

The FEI suggests that fan owned clubs consistently do better at engagement than those which are not fan owned. More importantly though, it also helps to illustrate the key features of good engagement between football supports organisations and their members.

Their approach is to split assessment of effectiveness into three key areas:

- Dialogue
- Governance
- Transparency

We fully intend to embed these three behaviours into everything the Foundation does over the coming months.

In terms of dialogue, we are reaching out to different fan groups and organisations and will be using our events programme to engage current and potential members.

In terms of governance, we have already taken steps to ensure that the Foundation's rules better reflect its status as a members organisation, and have allocated clear and meaningful roles to each board member.

In terms of transparency, we will lead by example by keeping our members informed about what we are doing on their behalf: including how their membership subscriptions will be used to support the club.

By embedding these desirable cultural traits in the Foundation, we think we can engage far more of the fan base than has been the case to date, and transform the experience of what it means to be a Thistle supporter. With the Foundation at its core, Thistle can build one of the best fanbase relationships in Scottish football. The Foundation should be an organisation Thistle fans **want** to be a member of to avoid the "fear of missing out".

The more of the Thistle support we mobilise, the more effective the Foundation will be as a fundraiser: both for the club's footballing activities and other initiatives.

## **Strategic vision**

Fan ownership should not involve a compromise for Thistle's ambitions on the park. TJF's vision is to see Thistle back in Scotland's top-flight, and being run sustainably at that level. That means ramping up fundraising so that the club is supported financially no less well than comparable clubs in private ownership.

Fan ownership will work best if everyone is pulling in the same direction and the model of ownership is simple and well understood by the fans. We would look to engage with the Trustees of the PTFC Supporters Trust to convince them to transfer their shares to TJF.

TJF will not run or manage the Club day-to-day. It will, however, set the strategy and ethos of the Club Board. As majority shareholder TJF would seek to review and assure its members about the governance and finances of the Club, supporting the strategic aim of "sustainability".

By growing the Foundation membership, we can broaden the base of financial support for the Club, making it both more stable and more sustainable. By giving fans a real and personal stake in the club that they part-own, we make it easier for the Club Board to budget and plan for the future.

Fundamentally, football is also about entertainment. We think supporters can play a key role in influencing the matchday experience at Firhill for future generations. Other fan-led clubs have placed a high premium on this. St Mirren notably consulted its fans on away fan provision at Old Firm games, for example. Making fans feel like they have a stake in their matchday experience will be vital to retaining our current support and attracting new fans through the turnstiles.

## **Who is our Community and why is it important?**

The Foundation is one part of a wider footballing, social and geographical community, with many shared experiences, motivations and connections. We want all members of the Partick Thistle community to feel a shared sense of belonging, and alignment to the club.

Our community includes:

1. Partick Thistle FC (Comprising TJF members, supporters, staff and players, volunteers, Club board, other shareholders)
2. The Community of Maryhill (Comprising the football club, residents, business, social organisations, educational facilities, etc.)
3. The Community of Glasgow (Expanding on all the above to encompass the entire city, notwithstanding we share the footballing city with certain other clubs)
4. Other PTFC-related communities (e.g. Proud Jags, Jags for Good and the PTFC Charitable Trust)

5. "The Nomads" and other Supporter Exiles (those supporters and members who live outside of Glasgow)
6. The Fan Ownership Community (Comprising of likeminded organisations and clubs throughout Scotland)

As the Football Supporters Association has put it:

*"Professional football clubs are not just ordinary businesses. They have a special status in their communities, built upon the loyalty of fans over generations and the important part football clubs play in the lives of millions of ordinary people. Professional football clubs are the greatest expressions of community identity in our nation."*

### **Summary of vision and benefits of fan ownership**

We believe that fan ownership is a model capable of adding value to Partick Thistle because:

- Owners are part of the community
- We are invested emotionally as well as financially
- We measure success in multiple ways – not solely league position (important though that is)
- We don't stand to gain in a personal capacity from the Club's success
- There is always accountability through the democratic election of the TJF Board and ultimately Club Board directors
- Everybody plays their part in the whole – players, management, employees and supporters
- We oversee the ethos of the Club meaning there is always alignment throughout the club.

The Partick Thistle community has the skills, financial resource, commitment, passion and drive to make a success of fan ownership. What it need at its heart is a vehicle to unleash that potential. We believe the Foundation is ready and able to become that lynchpin holding everything else together.