

6 November 2019

Dear Abdallah

We are writing to you on behalf of those Oldham Athletic supporters who have concerns about the future of our football club and in particular those listed at the end of this letter.

"Push the Boundary" is a group of supporters who have common concerns that our football club is being run in a way that is contra to its best interests. The group has been founded by four supporters but we believe has the support of a large proportion of the fan base. Following the release of our independent group, signatures supporting this letter to you, have risen to 596 in the space of a week. This clearly shows the level of dissatisfaction and disconnect that supporters currently feel, at the current state of our beloved Oldham Athletic Football Club.

The purpose of this letter is to express our specific concerns about the direction that Oldham Athletic appears to be taking under the current Board of Directors.

We fully appreciate the state that the football club was in at the time that you were in negotiations with the previous owner and that these issues stretch back several years. It is far from ideal that Oldham Athletic Football Club no longer owns Boundary Park or the land upon which the ground is located. This will always hugely impact upon the amount of revenue that the club is able to generate. It was also apparent to most supporters that the club was on the brink of insolvency prior to your purchase. It is not unreasonable, however, for the supporters to assume that these were things that you were aware of following the due diligence that you performed prior to the transaction. The fans have a right to believe that having taken the decision to purchase the club, you were able and prepared to fund it in the medium-term whilst you worked to ensure that it could be self-sufficient.

The work that you are undertaking to address what you see as the injustices of the past is reasonable if you believe that there is a realistic prospect of success but this cannot be allowed to affect the day to day running of the club.

Supporters choosing to attend matches generate the club's most important income stream and this will continue to be the case. If supporters become disenfranchised and cease to attend games it will be exceptionally difficult to either entice them back or replace them. This has been witnessed over many years, not only at our club but across the English game.

Whilst there are issues at the club which date back to the time of the previous owner there are also a number of issues that are either unique to your tenure or have grown in prominence since you became the owner. These issues include:

#### **Poor player recruitment**

Ultimately supporters are most concerned with the product on the pitch and it appears that this season we have the poorest quality playing squad in living memory. We have a large squad but with very few players who appear to be of the standard required to compete at football league level.

With Gevaro Nepomuceno out on loan, there is only one player within the squad who was purchased by your predecessor and that player, Mohammed Maouche, was effectively signed by you prior to the takeover (you confirmed at the recent fans' forum that you had funded signings prior to formally completing the takeover in January 2018). The only other players remaining from before your takeover have come through the youth team. The quality of the squad, therefore can only be the responsibility of you, the Sporting Director and the various managers or head coaches that you have employed over the last two years.

#### **Our Sporting Director**

It is our view that recruitment is being driven by the Sporting Director and that he has not demonstrated that he is capable of performing the role with which he has been entrusted.

We feel that you have been badly let down by those responsible for recruitment but we do not believe that there is any accountability by those making big errors in this area. It is also difficult to understand the recruitment policy based upon the large number of signings who are clearly nowhere near the level required.

In the vision that you set out on 21 May 2019, you stated *"through sensible recruitment, continuing support for the academy and use of my own extensive network of players in Europe, the quality and value of the playing squad can be enhanced incrementally and over time"*. So far we see no evidence of this. Indeed, the 2018/19 squad appeared to be weaker than that in 2017/18 and the 2019/20 squad appears to be weaker again. This is clearly not an incremental enhancement.

#### **An unsustainable turnover of managers**

What this club needs is stability and yet we have seen five different managers or head coaches in charge of the first team in the last year (one of them on two separate occasions). This is alongside the constant turnover of players that we referred to above. It is difficult to see how we can build a successful team with so much flux at the club.

It is apparent that the reasons for managerial changes have been varied with two having their contracts terminated, one resigning and one being replaced, reappointed and then declining to accept a new contract. What has been consistent, however, has been rumours and comments from these managers after they have left the club regarding interference in player recruitment and team selection.

We are sure that you understand the need for stability and, again in your vision for the club you emphasised the importance of "*an excellent Head Coach to lead the playing side of the organisation*". Since that statement we have appointed and replaced one coach and moved on to another.

There has, however, been a lack of clarity as to what you expect from a manager demonstrated by your update to supporters on 12 September when you stated that the new team had needed "*some time to gel together but I am encouraged and assured by recent performances. The Board are fully behind Laurent and we look forward to the rest of the season*". A week later, having lost no more games, Laurent had been removed from his post and replaced.

The suggestions that the person responsible for leading the playing side of the club are unable to do so without interference is a further concern. The results that we have witnessed suggest that this is having a detrimental effect and leads to questions as to whether those participating in such interference have sufficient knowledge of League Two football as to be able to contribute effectively.

### **Falling crowds**

We have seen attendances reduce consistently over the last almost 30 years from average crowds of over 15,000 in the early 1990s to around 4,500 when you took over. This season, however that decrease appears to have accelerated with an average of under 3,500 across the first eight matches which included one crowd boosted by free tickets for school children. This appears to be due to a combination of the poor quality of football on show and a frustration about the direction of the club. Without not only stemming, but reversing this decline it is difficult to see how the club can have a successful future.

The fans forum in early October was a big step forward in fan engagement in that for the first time since your arrival the Board sat in front of a wide group of supporters and were willing to answer questions. We applaud this and hope that it can be repeated in the near future. It was noticeable, however, that the attitude of certain members of the Board was antagonistic. It is fair to say that there was an amount of anger in the room which was not conducive to open debate but it was felt that some members of your Board were not prepared to listen to or answer some reasoned questions. We implore you to engage openly with the supporters. We and they genuinely do want what is best for the club.

### **The dismissal of backroom staff**

The way that you run your business behind the scenes is something that is your prerogative and we recognise that you may have been left with some employees from the previous regime that you do not feel could take the club forward. The nature of a small club like Oldham Athletic, however, is that there are strong connections between the town and the supporter base. This also means that there are connections between those working at the club and both the supporters and the businesses who have provided sponsorship and financial support in the past.

The number of staff who have left the club feeling aggrieved over their dismissal is, we believe, playing a direct role in further reducing the number of people paying to attend games at Boundary park and is causing companies who have provided sponsorship for many years to walk away.

The number of grievance cases being levied against the club over the last year has been staggering. We acknowledge the comments from Adam Moralee at the fans' forum suggesting that this is normal but we beg to disagree. The odd employee taking a former employer to a tribunal may be usual but the number doing so against Oldham Athletic feels highly excessive.

The impression given by a number of staff who have left the club and indeed from some still at the club is that there is something of a culture of fear whereby staff feel that they are unable to voice concerns where they have them.

The sight of former employees who have supported the club for many years being removed from the stands on a match day is unedifying and undoubtedly causes further bad feeling between the Board and the supporters.

The issue of unpaid pension contributions, which we appreciate you have stated has now been fully dealt with, also damaged the relationship between the club and current and former employees which will have added to the effects noted above.

### **Well respected players departing the club**

The comments above regarding backroom staff can also be applied to some players who have departed the club.

You will be well aware following the fans' forum that there was a great amount of good feeling for Peter Clarke and that the decision not to offer him a new contract at the end of last season left a bad taste in the

mouths of a large section of the fan base. Whilst that decision was no doubt taken for footballing reasons, the way in which it was handled was viewed as showing him a lack of respect. A small formal thank-you to our departing captain would have gone a long way to appeasing those who were sorry to see him go.

A number of other players have also left the club in unusual circumstances including Ousmane Fane, Jack Byrne and Gevaro Nepomuceno. On each occasion we have been told that they had departed following disciplinary issues but it is surprising to us that such issues are so commonplace when they have been very rare historically. Does this tie back to the culture within the football club?

#### **Use of the hospitality facilities in the Joe Royle Stand**

As you are conducting an investigation into this we will not get into the detail but it is only right to say that the loss of this revenue stream is a concern to supporters and it further alienates local businesses who have previously used this facility but are now offered far inferior facilities at the club.

We hope that you can try to address the breakdown in relations between the club and the people who are currently running the Oldham Events Centre.

#### **Ongoing losses**

You have spoken at length about the funding that you are having to provide to the club on an ongoing basis. We understand this and would not wish you to think that we do not appreciate the personal cost to you of doing so.

The concern, however, is that as a bystander it does not feel as though these losses are being stemmed and indeed your reference to having to find £200k in September indicates that they may actually be increasing. Should you become unwilling or unable to continue to find such funding, where does that leave the football club? Whilst we look at our near neighbours, Bury, with more than a hint of sorrow, what comfort can we take that their fate may not be something we face in the coming years? At present, by your own admission we are reliant upon your continued financial support. If you were to lose interest, and with no ties to either the club or town that is a genuine fear, we would find ourselves in huge financial turmoil.

Are you able to provide comfort to the supporters that the monies that you are investing in the club are not in the form of loans which may become owed to you in the event that you chose to leave the football club?

Having outlined our concerns, we invite you to either:

- **show us that this club can change under your leadership and commit to tangible steps to achieve this;** or alternatively
- **find somebody that will and dispose of your interest in Oldham Athletic.**

Oldham Athletic is a proud football club with a set of supporters who have shown remarkable loyalty to it over decades of decline. We implore you to treat the club, its supporters and the community that it represents with the respect that they deserve.

We are committed to peaceful and law abiding protest and until our objectives are satisfied, Push the Boundary will be a constant source of friction on behalf of those whose views we represent. We will be doing all that we can to ensure that their voices are heard and that Oldham Athletic is not damaged by the actions taken by this Board.

We have had enough of empty words, you will be judged on the action that you take not on rhetoric.

Yours sincerely

PTB