

Statement From Ann Budge

Hearts owner Ann Budge today released the following statement on the club's official website.

Given that we are now more than half-way through our financial year (31st December 2015), and indeed our football season, it seems a good time to issue a brief progress statement on club performance. I will also take this opportunity to address a couple of issues that have been very much to the fore in recent weeks.

1. Business Update

I am delighted to be able to report that on the "business" side of things, we are making good progress and have had an excellent first half-year. Thanks, as ever, to the magnificent support from the fans, we have enjoyed home sell-outs for almost all of our league matches this season, along with record-breaking figures in our various hospitality suites. This translates into real income for the club, and in turn is helping us fund the continuous improvements we are trying to put in place.

Our sponsors, our benefactors and our FOH pledgers have also been magnificent, and with their continued financial support we are making real progress with a number of our new initiatives – our memorial garden is now complete and official opening times will be announced shortly; our museum project is moving ahead strongly and we are still planning to open in Summer 2016; our community pitch project is well underway; and the plans for our new stand are also progressing nicely, with more information scheduled for release in early March, all going well.

Many of you will know that our retail franchise with SRM comes to an end this year. We have been discussing the transition back to an in-house operation for several months now and I am

pleased to announce that this hand-over will take place on 31st January, 2016. I would like to take this opportunity to thank SRM Management for their services over the last 7 years, while at the same time asking all supporters to be patient while we implement this major change. Nothing much will change on day one, but please bear with us for what we see as an exciting opportunity to do things differently. Gradually, over the next few months, we will introduce some new processes, practices and indeed product lines.

While all of this is going on, day-to-day business carries on as ever. This includes, of course, the development of our Youth Academy, which is going from strength-to-strength; the development of our professional football operation, supported by our expanded coaching team which now boasts a number of new faces. This is all helping us achieve another highly successful season "on-the-field", and equally importantly, is setting us up for continuous improvement as the club builds for the future.

In summary, therefore, I am delighted to say that things are going really well across all areas of the club.

However, as we all know, progress is rarely totally without its challenges and we continue to deal with issues as they arise.

I urge you all to read the next section carefully, and not to under-estimate the significance of successfully addressing this issue for the future well-being of the club.

2. Unacceptable Behaviour at Football Stadiums

We have made it clear over the past 18 months that unacceptable behaviour will not be tolerated by the club and have indeed gone so far as to ban a number of our supporters from the stadium. We have stressed repeatedly that we want Tynecastle to be a family-friendly stadium where all supporters can come and enjoy the atmosphere in one of

Scotland's most iconic stadiums, in a safe and carefree environment.

It was, therefore, with much regret that for the third time this season, we had to call the Police...in this case to the Hearts v Motherwell game...due to rival fans fighting in the streets, in the immediate environs of the stadium...both before and after the game. I cannot begin to tell you how angry this makes me, when we are working so hard to put the club back at the heart of the community. Instead of talking proudly about the team's superb performance, or indeed our supporters' unprecedented loyalty (yet another home sell-out), I am instead having to hold meetings with the authorities regarding how we are going to address this behaviour problem.

The outcome of these meetings is quite simply that we have had to agree that we will have no Police-free matches, between now and the end of the season. This will cost the club between £40,000-£50,000.

Apart from the reputational damage that this behaviour causes the club, its employees and its supporters, this is £40,000-£50,000 that we cannot put towards our stadium and facilities improvements programme.

Allowing a tiny minority of supporters to bring the club's reputation into disrepute is something we will not tolerate. We will be clamping down on supporters who behave unacceptably. This will mean more stringent checks and more surveillance both inside and outside the stadium. While this is very disappointing, we are confident that the majority of true supporters will agree that action must be taken.

On a similar note, many of you will have seen in the media that Hearts is under formal investigation because of a number of incidents that took place during the recent Hearts v Dundee United fixture. I will, of course, robustly defend the club's position on this matter, but there is one area which I cannot

defend. In particular, it would appear that excessive verbal abuse was directed at the opposition manager. While the manager (Mixu Paatelainen) was personally both understanding and pragmatic in his acceptance that "this happens", it has been reported by the match delegate that this reached unacceptable proportions. As a consequence, additional stewarding will be put in place in this area of the stadium, along with video cameras, and any behaviour of this nature, in future, will be robustly dealt with.

In summary, we will now have a police presence at all matches, along with additional stewarding... all at a significant cost to the club. I would also remind you to use the Help Text line should you feel something needs to be addressed.

3. Scottish Cup Ticket-Allocation

Finally, I would like to comment on the forthcoming derby game between Hearts and Hibs.

Firstly, thank you as ever to the circa 12,500 season ticket holders who have once again demonstrated their support for our club and our team.

Inevitably, there will be a number of fans who are disappointed not to have secured a ticket, and to these individuals, I can only apologise. Demand has simply outstripped supply. The price of success, some might say.

On another note, however, I would like to acknowledge those supporters who contacted the club and/or myself to express their disappointment and, in some cases, their anger that they were unable to purchase their season ticket seats for this match.

I can only assure them that considerable thought went into how we could most "fairly" allocate the tickets, given that we have 13,500 season ticket holders and 12,500 seats available.

We did put out a statement prior to the tickets going on sale which aimed to explain, as clearly as possible, what we were doing and why. Not everyone who initially complained had read the statement, of course, and when the logic was explained, most were accepting of the fact that we were trying to be fair.

That said, there remains a very small number of supporters who believe they have been treated badly or have not been shown the respect they deserve for having been long-term season ticket holders/FOH pledgers/members of the 500 club, etc. To those supporters, once again, I can only apologise.

I would also take this opportunity to clarify a couple of misperceptions, however.

Not all Roseburn Stand season ticket holders are "new". A large number moved their seats and have been season ticket holders for some time. It was, therefore, felt to be inappropriate to give priority to season ticket holders in other stands... something that some complainants felt should have happened.

A number of season ticket holders referred to "my seat" in their complaint. Can I just remind everyone that buying a season ticket entitles you to use that seat for all league games and gives you priority to buy a ticket for major games...as indeed happened in this case. However, it does not guarantee first call on "your seat". This is simply impossible if we are not to single out any specific group for preferential treatment.

Anyone with any kind of disability, which means a proposed process does not work for them, should please contact us and explain their problem and ask us to help. We will do our best to assist. We cannot anticipate every problem...but if we know about it, we will try to help.

I am aware that there will be a small number of supporters who

continue to feel we have handled this badly. However, I am assured that the majority of supporters with tickets are not unhappy and will be sitting either in their season ticket seat or very close to it.

Thank you all for your continued support. The Board, the Senior Management team, the Staff and, of course, our Football Department...remain totally committed to making Heart of Midlothian a club to be proud of.

Meanwhile, Hearts have announced that tickets for their William Hill Scottish Cup tie with Hibernian at Tynecastle on Sunday week have sold out for home supporters.