

A plan that hit the target

Former VIP director CRAIG NORRIS celebrates the launch two decades ago of a famous CASC project

The start of the 2014/15 season marks the 20th anniversary of an initiative that had far-reaching impacts on Charlton Athletic.

It entrenched a collaborative working relationship between the club and its supporters. It demonstrated the value that could be added to the business by utilising the ideas, knowledge, skills and energy of enthusiastic volunteers. And it laid the groundwork for a major expansion in the numbers following the club through the 1990s and beyond.

The need for something to be done is pretty clear from the name the initiative was given: Target 10,000. Charlton's average attendance in 1993/94

had been 8,056 and, apart from the final top-flight season at Selhurst Park in 1989/80, the club had not recorded a five-figure average gate for 16 seasons, only one of which had been below the second tier.

We had been back at The Valley for nearly two years and although attendances had risen following the return, many crowds the previous season had still fallen well below the paltry 8,300 capacity.

But the real genesis of Target 10,000 was the confidence supporters gained from the Valley Party and everything else that went on around the return home in December 1992.

The supporters' club (CASC) had begun developing new support while the team was still playing at Upton Park, putting on coaches from Maidstone when the local League club went under in pre-season.

The board itself had

introduced a Primary Junior Reds scheme offering nearly-free season tickets for U11s, while the fledgling community scheme had given away match tickets to Bexley and Greenwich schools in the final months of exile.

However, the restricted capacity at The Valley initially offered little scope for such initiatives. It was the opening of the east stand on April 2nd, 1994, that opened up the opportunity, and the supporters' club was ready.

After the excitement of the Valley Party a number of us had continued our involvement by taking an active role in CASC.

I was now vice-chair and committee meetings often included discussion about what the next steps to rebuild support should be.

A major concern were the perceived high prices for casual fans, but with a restricted capacity little could be done

about this. There was also a strong belief that we had to offer positive ideas rather than just criticism.

Discussion to identify what these solutions might be was wide-ranging. Included in the mix was the mushrooming CASC activity in Kent and beyond, begun two years earlier in Medway by Mick Everett, as was an article on initiatives by the Oakland A's baseball team put forward by Paul Watts and many other ideas.

To draw the various strands together, secretary Rick Everitt and I produced a paper for consideration by the committee with a view to presenting it to the club as a plan of action.

The point was never to represent the narrow interests of supporters simply by making cheap or free tickets available.

Indeed, the objective of Target 10,000 was set out in the opening paragraph as "to raise the hard-core Charlton support to the point of financial breakeven and beyond".

After discussion by the committee a number of minor improvements were made and the document was formally agreed. The next stage was to get it adopted by the board.

Despite the impact of the Valley Party there was still a body of opinion within the football club that wanted to keep supporters at arm's length.

However, there were some factors in our favour: CASC chair Steve Clarke had been elected to the football club board to represent the members of the Valley Investment Plan (VIP) and good relations had been established with a number of individual directors, especially Richard Murray and Martin Simons, who at that stage were joint vice-chairmen.

Private discussions were held with Richard to set out the broad principles and what the process might involve.

I believe the explicit focus on building the core support to improve the financial position of the club and the fact that we envisaged most of the work would be done by supporters, minimising cost to the club, were key to his backing.

Indeed, following the major workload involved in running coaches and trains to the team's fifth and sixth-round FA Cup ties the previous spring, against Bristol City and Manchester United respectively, CASC had seen a need to take on a part-time member of staff itself.

This was to be Wendy Perfect, already the volunteer

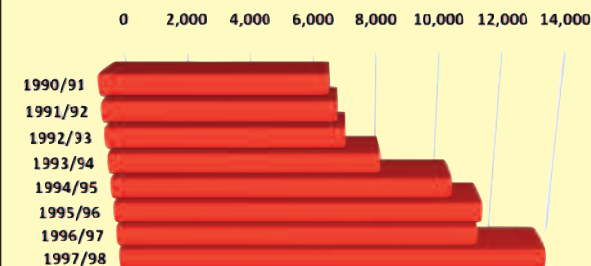
printed up for distribution to supporters' club members and also appeared in full in VOTV51.

The next stage was to see if our ideas would work.

Geographical promotions, providing blocks of tickets to groups, regular coach travel, working with local secondary schools, Kids for a Quid and targeted newspaper offers, particularly via the *Mercury*, where Rick was sports editor, were among the approaches.

All ticket promotions were subjected to rigorous analysis at the steering committee to evaluate their impact and cost-effectiveness. While there was

Average attendances 1990-98



travel organiser, who soon became a key contact for and contributor to Target 10,000.

Steve duly presented the paper to the board and with the support of Murray and others it was accepted.

The first step was to establish a steering committee. This was chaired by Murray and included football club staff as well as representatives of the supporters' club and Junior Reds, Jason Morgan on behalf of the community scheme and others who might be able to contribute.

Recognising the risks around the wider perception of what we were doing, we also wanted to maximise the buy-in and understanding from existing fans, so the document was

much public support, the undercurrent of criticism from within the club and among some supporters was that such activity would cost the club money as people would feel their season ticket was devalued or would use promotions to attend instead.

However, the committee took great care to ensure this was not easily possible and generally offers were narrowly targeted and not repeated too frequently within the same season.

Local Target 10,000 committees were formed and from 1995 fans led and delivered a programme of summer events, giving Charlton a profile at well-attended outdoor festivals taking place at Plumstead Common, Blackheath and Hornfair, as well



Here is the paper: Craig Norris with an enthused Wendy Perfect introducing Target 10k at the 1994 CASC AGM

as further afield.

We had always seen the title of the initiative as of flexible meaning, so that we could reinterpret the objective from a 10,000 average crowd to 10,000 home supporters and then 10,000 season-ticket holders.

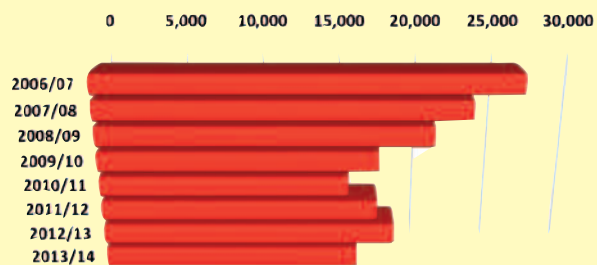
What was striking, however, was that the progress over the following four years was largely made regardless of Charlton's performances on the field, with the team slipping from 11th to 15th in 1994/95 and despite reaching the play-off semi-final

helped rebuild their club.

As well as the many newcomers there were also lots of former supporters coming back for the first time since the 1980s or earlier and they were almost universally impressed by the transformation of The Valley from the dilapidated state in which they had last seen it. Often it encouraged them to return.

Crucially, Target 10,000 had a narrative that was about carrying on the work from the campaign to get home – and very quickly it had momentum too.

Average attendances 2006-14



in 1995/96 falling back to 15th again in 1996/97.

Looking back I felt that we would make some impact over time but was taken aback by the way the concept took off. My strongest memory is of sitting in the ground in February 1995 for a Tuesday night game against Tranmere Rovers and watching as the crowd grew to 11,890. The previous season the game had attracted 6,666.

While I am proud of the way CASC conceived and facilitated Target 10,000, its success required two other components: firstly, a football club board prepared to be open and consultative and, most importantly, scores of fans who took up the challenge and brought groups from their school, junior football club, youth group, work colleagues, and so on, to The Valley and

Following promotion to the Premier League in 1998, season-ticket sales rose immediately to 17,000, the surplus capacity we had targeted disappeared, notwithstanding the opening of the upper tier of the west stand, and I thought that was the end of my involvement.

Even when capacity reached 27,111 following the opening of the new north stand in 2001/02, the club's own marketing work and the appetite for top-flight football led to an unprecedented sequence of 51 consecutive home league matches at which the attendance exceeded 25,000.

And when there was a shortfall it was usually in the take-up of the away allocation.

By the summer of 2004, however, the club was finding that it did not always sell out home areas without price reductions and giveaways,

especially for televised games or less attractive opposition.

At the same time the board was looking at the next stage of the club's development and proposals were drawn up to expand the capacity of The Valley to 40,600.

Chief executive Peter Varney saw a need to underpin the planning application by creating and demonstrating the extent of surplus demand. Rick, meanwhile, had given up his full-time role as the club's communications director in 2003 after five years, allowing him to refocus on marketing.

Thus in August 2004, exactly a decade on from Target 10,000, the board – now chaired by Murray – agreed a proposal from Peter to establish a new Target 40,000 committee.

This time Simons took the chair, meeting with fellow board members Varney and David White, as well as Wendy Perfect, who by then had also served as VIP director and would join the club staff that December. The fans would also be represented by the other elected directors, Mick Gebbett, Sue Townsend, and later Ben Hayes, as well as Steve and myself. Steve Kavanagh, who eventually became chief executive, was a later addition, as was 2010 VIP representative Craig Parrett.

Initially the new committee focused on targeted promotions for low interest and televised games to try to bring lapsed fans, new fans and those just attracted by Premier League football to The Valley.

Integral to this was Valley Express, officially launched in early 2005. Test runs from Thanet, begun by Rick and Wendy in August 2004, suggested that those taking it up were not just existing attenders but often lapsed or occasional fans whose interest was activated by the transport offer.

With a flat fare of £5 the



Launch day: Alan Curbishley and the players promote the new Valley Express service from Kent in 2004/05

service required a small subsidy from the club, but this was more than covered by the extra revenue generated.

By the final Premiership season, 2006/07, there were 40,000 journeys made on Valley Express over the campaign and group ticket bookings alone generated £200,000 in revenue.

As with the original initiative, the core principle of Target 40,000 was the forensic analysis of all activities, promotions and Valley Express to assess effectiveness.

Care was taken to build up and share data to allow us to make these analyses as fact-based as possible, rather than rely on anecdotal evidence or personal experience. These then fed into the proposals made to the board in respect of season-ticket and matchday prices.

In short, the process ensured that the business case was robust and provided a rationale that could be referenced and reviewed if individual directors had any concerns. I consider it testimony to the work of the committee in seeking to maximise revenue while building long-term support that these suggestions were in most years adopted by the board.

These initial successes were

to some extent derailed by relegation in 2007 and the committee's remit altered to seeking to maintain season-ticket sales and maximising income – essential to give the club the best chance of returning to previous success.

The most eye-catching of these initiatives was the proposal that those buying a season ticket for the 2007/08 Championship season would receive a free season ticket for the 2008/09 Premier League season if we went back up.

Interestingly this suggestion came from outside the Target 40,000 committee, from director Greg Bone, but was put up for scrutiny there like most everything else. The committee alighted enthusiastically upon the idea as the kind of fresh thinking we were seeking, as did the fans, because season-ticket sales dropped by just a fraction of one per cent.

The offer was repeated the following year, but with the progressive decline on the pitch it became harder and harder to attract and retain support.

Nevertheless, the committee continued to meet and the lessons of the past were effectively applied in 2011 with the return of Football for a Fiver,

as well as the aggressive season-ticket price reductions during a difficult spring.

However, with the previous owners' removal of experienced club staff such as Varney, Kavanagh and Everitt, the impetus behind Target 40,000 was lost and the committee last met in 2012.

In appointing someone to run club development and freezing Valley Express prices the current owners appear to be more interested in these ideas than the previous regime. However, the 2012 purge means that the collective knowledge built up over the last 20 years no longer resides within the club.

Many times we looked at ideas from elsewhere but always through the lens of what we had learnt about our own club's fans: their response to promotions, geographical location, and so on. This allowed us both to develop support and to provide the board with a strong business case for what we were suggesting in good times and bad.

My understanding is that season-ticket sales for 2014/15 have fallen below 10,000 again, which suggests that sooner or later the issues faced by Target 10,000 and Target 40,000 will have to be addressed again.