

02/03 (ELC)

FOLLOWING the much-publicised disturbances prior to the Watford v. Luton Town Worthington Cup tie, Watford officials swiftly met with their Police counterparts.

As a result of this meeting, the club released the following statement to give an overall picture of what occurred – inside and outside the stadium – and why certain decisions were taken.

In case you didn't see or read this statement on the club website or in the local media, here it is in full:

From the outset, the club and the police treated the Luton Town Worthington Cup tie with the utmost sensitivity. It was given a Category C rating - in other words, it was given the highest possible rating in terms of the need for numbers of police and stewards. In fact, staffing levels were in excess of those normally associated with a Category C match. The match was all-ticket for both clubs. This decision was taken because of the previous history surrounding matches between Watford and Luton. Making the game all-ticket ensures - as far as is humanly possible - that away supporters do not gain access to areas of the stadium that contravene the club's segregation policy.

The club had its full complement of stewards, which included those hired for the evening from a specialist stewarding company.

Therefore, there were more than 150 stewards on duty at the stadium, as well as more than 150 police. Police numbers were subsequently significantly increased when they called up specialist teams from as far afield as Northamptonshire - a contingency put in place by the Police prior to the day of the game.

The duty of stewards at any game primarily relates to safety and maintenance of Football League ground regulations. The Police have a primary

responsibility, and authority and powers, relating to public order and criminal offences that may occur.

During preparations for the game, there was full and lengthy consultation between the club's Safety Officer and the Hertfordshire Constabulary. Further, there was similar consultation between Hertfordshire Constabulary and their colleagues in Bedfordshire.

In terms of being ready for the game, the club felt it had done everything possible in terms of liaising with all other agencies with regard to ensuring public safety.

Part of the pre-planning dictated that there would be police positioned in the centre and at both lower corners of the Vicarage Road Stand. These police officers would be equipped to deal with any situation.

However, these plans were thrown into turmoil by a large number of public order incidents at various venues in and around the town, starting several hours earlier and culminating in the most serious scenes in Occupation Road, approximately 30 minutes before the scheduled 7.45pm kick-off. Therefore, police officers who were intended to be inside the ground in the Vicarage Road Stand were never able to reach that position, because they were instead dealing with what was serious violent disorder immediately outside the ground.

Meanwhile, there was a second group of individuals inside the Vicarage Road Stand who decided to climb over the wall and onto the perimeter of the pitch. Stewards at the front of the stand simply could not contain the numbers of individuals concerned.

It is obviously very unfortunate and regrettable that there were no police available to prevent this happening. But, at the same time, those very police officers were dealing with an even larger

and more ferocious incident outside the stadium.

The club took the decision not to remove stewards from the front of the Rookery Stand, and instead kept them in place, thus preventing - as far as possible - any individuals running down the pitch to the Vicarage Road Stand. In the event, a very small minority managed to do so, but the club's decision prevented far larger numbers.

The club are thankful that the incident on the perimeter of the pitch did not result in greater numbers of injuries, although it was clearly extremely regrettable that such an incident happened in the first place.

In the meantime, the club were aware that the violence outside the stadium had severely delayed the entrance to the ground of many supporters. That fact, coupled with the need for calm to be restored inside the stadium, led to the decision to delay the kick-off for 15 minutes.

The match itself was commenced and completed without further significant incident, and without any threat to player safety.

After the final whistle, the pre-planned method of dispersal of the crowd - which did meet with criticism from home fans - did prove to be wholly justified and, we understand, was completely successful in as far as the police have told us there were no subsequent incidents. It is worth considering that this dispersal operation covered the entirety of the Watford and St Albans district. The club accepts there was inconvenience to its own supporters, but this will always be a secondary consideration to the primary objective, that of maintaining public safety - for everyone.

