

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response from Kevin McNab

WELSH FOOTBALL TRUST EVIDENCE SUBMISSION:

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES COMMUNITIES, EQUALITY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT INQUIRY INTO THE WELSH PREMIER LEAGUE

Introduction

1. This paper sets out the Welsh Football Trust's (WFT) evidence for the Committee's inquiry into the Welsh Premier League (WPL). It explains the role of the WFT, the extent of its interaction and support for the WPL and provides information for each area of the inquiry's terms of reference.

Background

2. The WFT was formed by the Football Association of Wales (FAW) in 1996 to ring fence funding for grass roots football development. It is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. The Board of Trustees is comprised of 14 members. Seven Trustees are nominated by the FAW and seven are independently recruited through open advertisement. The WFT is the governing body's agent for increasing participation, delivering training to coaches and volunteers and identifying and developing talented young players to support the future success of national teams.

3. The WFT has no involvement in the governance and administration of the WPL. Its main interactions are with the clubs, providing:-

- training and mentoring to WPL coaches and managers;
- support for coaching and the improvement of standards at WPL Academies;
- support for club development projects via our network of Football Development Officers.

In 2008 the FAW and WFT formed a sister organisation, Welsh Grounds Improvements, which distributes FAW monies as grant aid to WPL and feeder league clubs for grounds infrastructure projects.

Standard of football

4. It is difficult to assess objectively whether the standard of football in the WPL is improving. One indication of improvement is the increased coefficient score awarded to the League over the past five years by UEFA which relates to performances of Welsh clubs in European competitions.

Osian Roberts, Technical Director and Assistant Coach to the Wales national team, has stated publically that the League deserves better public and media recognition for the product that coaches and players produce on the pitch.

5. In 2010 the League was reduced from 18 to 12 clubs and a new play-off format introduced to support improvements in playing standards. A coach education and mentoring programme for WPL managers and coaches funded by the FAW and delivered by the Trust over the past four years should complement this structural change, as will continued investment in Academies that identify and develop talented players aged 12 to 19 years at WPL clubs.

6. Standards off the field have been raised in recent years through the FAW's introduction of a Domestic Licence that clubs must achieve to gain promotion to and retain membership of the League. The licence criteria ensure clubs achieve good governance, financial sustainability, provide good facilities for players and spectators and establish youth development structures via an Academy programme. The FAW has also introduced a 'Grow your club' initiative that provides advice and support on club management and organisation and securing additional sources of funding.

Competition format

7. Last year the FAW consulted stakeholders on further changes to the WPL format. The option of a summer league was considered but:-

- the impact of a summer football on regional feeder leagues;
- a lack of TV interest due to competition from major sporting events;
- traditional views amongst those consulted that football is a winter sport;

prevented this development. However the introduction of a winter break in January to avoid bad weather was agreed. The Trust is aware that WPL officials monitor best practice and developments in the national leagues of other countries ensuring that future innovations may at some point be proposed.

Development and progression of players, coaches and managers

8. The League plays an important role in developing players and coaches for domestic, professional and international level football. The WPL Academy programme for players aged 12 to 19 was established in 2002 and is funded by the FAW from UEFA solidarity payments for participation in European club competitions. Clubs that achieve the required criteria receive UEFA funding to support the operation of Academies Last year the clubs shared €240,000, approximately £19,000 per club. The Academies have produced a number of players who have progressed to professional clubs and national squads. WPL clubs can be compensated by professional clubs for developing players that secure professional contracts. Shrewsbury Town FC recently paid Aberystwyth

Town FC €37,500 for one of their Academy players. Senior players have also progressed from the WPL to play for Football League clubs including Owain Tudur Jones from Bangor City FC and Lee Trundle from Rhyl FC who were both recruited by Swansea City FC.

9. The WPL has also provided coaches and managers with good experience and a platform for future progression. Nigel Adkins, presently manager at Southampton FC in the Football League Championship, began his managerial career at Bangor City FC and Osian Roberts started on the senior coaching ladder with Porthmadog Town FC. The Domestic Licence requires WPL Managers to have a UEFA A Licence for league entry while a UEFA Pro Licence is a pre requisite for participation in European club competitions. In 2008 the FAW agreed to fund the WFT £100,000pa for four years to support WPL managers and coaches to gain UEFA coaching licenses. At present 115 managers and coaches have received free coach education and mentoring support – 15 have achieved the Pro Licence, 47 the A Licence and 53 the B Licence.

Participation and equal opportunities

10. The Trust is supporting WPL clubs with wider community engagement to develop their infrastructure of players, coaches and volunteers as part of its Focus Club Programme and the FAW's 'grow your club' initiative. This includes the provision of more opportunities for socially excluded groups including women and girls, the disabled and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities. Activities include, turn up and play sessions, holiday football camps and the formation of new teams. WPL clubs are generally reliant on a voluntary workforce in all areas of club activities which can restrict their vibrancy and growth. Clubs would benefit from a small professional workforce that included marketing and business development expertise to support future infrastructure and revenue growth.

Infrastructure and resources

11. Player wage inflation and the provision and maintenance of quality facilities for spectators are the most significant challenges WPL clubs face. The FAW's strategic plan highlights financial fair play to meet UEFA stipulations and the introduction of a salary cap based on a club's turnover as two important objectives to be achieved by 2015.

12. Welsh Grounds Improvements has awarded £2.6m in grant aid for grounds infrastructure projects since 2008 of which £725,000 has been awarded to WPL clubs. The rest has been allocated to the Cymru Alliance and Welsh Football Leagues and all leagues down to level four of the national football pyramid. No significant awards have been made to the League since 2010 because WGI policy has been to prioritise funding to the regional feeder leagues now that all WPL clubs have achieved the Domestic Licence. This is to ensure that there are a sufficient number of clubs in the feeder leagues with the pre requisite facilities for promotion to the WPL, thereby maintaining a robust structure of promotion and relegation throughout the national league pyramid.

13. A commercial partnership with Sharedaccess, a company that develops telecommunications infrastructure, was established last year. The relationship will provide clubs throughout Wales, including WPL clubs, with potential funding to improve floodlighting and other ground infrastructure. The Trust is aware that the FAW is in negotiations with S4C, the League's TV broadcast partner, to extend the present contract for a further three years and is committed to ensuring any revenue from the present and future deals is reinvested into the League's development.

FAW Strategic Plan

14. In January 2012 the FAW launched a revised strategic plan for Welsh football. The Association held a number of stakeholder events and consulted with a broad range of representatives from all levels of the game including the national league. One of the strategy's key actions is to raise the profile and standard of the WPL so that it inspires attention and participation. The strategy states that the vision for success is 'to develop a Premier League and domestic competitions that have a strong identity with the Welsh sporting psyche'. Central to such success is the development of WPL clubs as community hubs via the expansion of 3G artificial pitches to improve community engagement and participation. Another aspiration is to develop three regional facilities at Premier League grounds capable of hosting UEFA international team and club competitions.

Summary

15. In summary:-

- playing standards are improving and the league deserves better recognition from the media and Welsh public;
- coaching standards have also been enhanced by an FAW funded programme which has supported WPL managers and coaches to achieve UEFA Licence coaching qualifications;
- the competition format has been reviewed and modifications implemented. Best practice and improvements to national leagues in other countries are being monitored by the FAW and league officials;
- the FAW Domestic Licence has ensured clubs focus on improving governance, club organisation and infrastructure development;
- clubs are working towards improved engagement with the wider community and socially excluded groups;
- maintenance and development of club infrastructure and player wage inflation are the most significant challenges clubs have to face;
- funding has been allocated to WPL clubs for grounds infrastructure development and the provision of Academies. Other support programmes have also been provided;

- WPL clubs would benefit from professional marketing and business development expertise;
- raising the profile and standard of the WPL is an integral and important dimension to the FAW's strategic plan.

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