

17 February 2026

Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport & International Relations Committee 26/02/2026: The Future of Rugby in Wales

Dear Delyth Jewell MS, Chair,

Firstly may I thank you and the whole committee for undertaking to shed some light upon what is currently being done by the Welsh Rugby Union behind closed doors. The WRU's actions will have a major impact, not only upon the future of rugby throughout Wales but also upon the sporting aspirations and opportunities of Welsh girls and boys for many years to come. It will therefore have an equally profound affect upon Welsh culture and community identity across Wales.

I hope that you will receive and have a chance to consider my notes below ahead of the meeting and I hope they will be of some use.

The Nature of the Problem

The problem faced by Welsh rugby today is not the number of professional clubs. The players who brought the Welsh men's national team such outstanding success in the first Gatland era were nurtured and developed by the four professional clubs, in cooperation with their local clubs and an effective national academy system. Cracks began to appear in the player base when the WRU disbanded the national academy, devolving responsibility for it to the four professional clubs and then constraining their budgets.

The alleged "structural problem" of having four professional clubs is being used by the WRU to deflect attention from its own culpability in failing to develop with schools and local clubs a fun, engaging and nurturing programme that will offer more children opportunities to enjoy playing the game and to continue enjoying it into their teens, thus helping them to grow and mature with the camaraderie and sense of belonging that are intrinsic to the game of rugby. If such a programme were to be activated with urgency across the whole of Wales then the player base would increase and the professional end of the continuum would, in time, reap immense benefit. So, too, would a whole new generation of rugby players right across Wales, becoming in the process a part of the local identity and the lifeblood of our communities. This, surely, is the whole point of Welsh rugby.

Consultation

Having mistakenly decided to focus on short term finance and the “elite” end of the men’s game for a quick-fix reform, the WRU then set about justifying its decision via a sham consultation exercise. Carefully engineered closed questions and selected, highly edited data were designed to support a pre-determined outcome. For respondents with enough stamina to soldier on to the very end, there was an opportunity to add a free-text contribution. Sadly, this element was not reported upon and no analysis of it was published, so one is left to conclude that it was ignored.

The Current Proposal

We have now been presented with a naive and simplistic “solution” to a self-determined problem. It adheres to the mechanistic $x+y=z$ school of personal and player development that pays no regard to the reality of how rugby lives deep within the veins of our communities. It seeks to deny generations of children across a huge tract of deep-rooted rugby country the scope to aspire through school and local club to professional rugby, all within a nurturing context of shared identity. It is not just in the towns that this absence of aspirational scope will be felt: from the Aman to the Llynfi valleys, from Pontyclun to Powys the villages that produced Sir Gareth Edwards, Justin Tipuric, Jack Morgan and so many more will no longer be able to offer a local path to rugby excellence. The result? A dwindling player base, and those with the highest potential making their way across the bridge to the English school and academy system, possibly not to return.

Mis-Management of Process

There are too many examples of how the current WRU process has been mis-managed to list them all here. There are also grounds upon which the WRU and Y11 are open to legal challenge and these are being pursued by the City & County of Swansea so I will not rehearse them here. Some examples of WRU mis-management are, given, though, in the broad categories below:

Lack of Transparency

In October 2025 the WRU Chairman promised “a fair and transparent process” to decide which three clubs would be retained. By the end of October he was saying it would be done through a consultation process, carried out completely behind a veil of commercial confidentiality: a veil that has, in the following months, been stretched to ripping point and is, in itself, actionable.

Lack of Objectivity

When the decision to reduce the number of professional clubs to three was announced, the CEO of the WRU demonstrated that the selection of the three was to be anything but fair by stating that it was “unthinkable” that the capital city would not have a professional team. She later suggested that Ospreys could merge with Swansea RFC to play in the SRC at semi-professional level. Not the objective approach we had been promised and a clear indication of the WRU’s bias.

Chaotic & Prejudicial Timing

Arbitrary deadlines have come and gone, resulting in genuine harm to the wellbeing of players. Within the space of nine months the WRU has veered from a favoured four clubs to two, then to three. The desperation to conclude the sale of Cardiff Rugby behind closed doors to Y11 **before confirming the future of the professional clubs** is as bizarre as it is prejudicial to the outcome of the process to decide which three clubs survive. Again, hardly transparent and hardly objective.

“Can’t Afford It”

The WRU has chosen a particular model for financing professional rugby in Wales in order to maximise its own control over every aspect of the game and to stifle local initiative. They claim that under this model funding is only available for three professional clubs and seek to severely constrain the scope for clubs to act upon their own initiative. This is not what the WRU was established for and other financial models are available.

If you strip away the current WRU leadership’s power and control obsession, you will be left with a WRU that is much closer to what it was always intended to be: a servant of the game and a benign shepherd for those clubs seeking to promote the benefits of the game at all levels across Wales.

Professional club owners, investors or benefactors, need to know that they have the freedom to act within the broad scope of their roles to promote and develop the game and to build the success of their rugby without unnecessary restrictions and constraints imposed by a governing body that sees itself as the “controller” of the clubs and sees the professional clubs as its rivals.

A good professional club owner will be happy to fund the activities of a national academy in its area and to cooperate with national academy coaches. They will also be happy to conclude a sensible international player release agreement, subject to fair and adequate compensation for the periodic absence of its principal assets, the international players.

To do this and to remain competitive the clubs will need to recruit a modest number of experienced, high quality non-Wales-qualified players who have the ability and the wish not only to perform as players, but to act as mentors for the younger developing players. Each of the current professional clubs can point to past NWQ players who have made a hugely beneficial impact on their younger players, who in turn have gone on to represent Wales with distinction. The capacity to do this is essential to facilitate the clubs' development and survival and also to ensure that a steady stream of high quality developing players is fed through to the national academy, age-grade representation and ultimately to the senior national squads.

The key to making this work is critical mass. Wales needs four professional clubs to ensure that all young players of potential have access to a sufficient number of professional clubs who can nurture them and help them to grow in the game within their community identity.

Wales cannot afford not to.

Yours sincerely,

Bill Ronan