

The Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response by Gareth Williams

Response to the inquiry into the running of WPL by the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee, National Assembly for Wales

Response on behalf of Porthmadog FC

The New WPL Format

Though the WPL has made a major contribution to the development of football in Wales there is deep concern throughout Welsh football regarding the current Welsh Premier League format.

An examination of the reasons given for the change will reveal that the objectives set out have not been achieved.

A major problem from its inception has been the failure of the league to attract fans in sufficient numbers. Most certainly there has been no genuine increase in attendances. If the introduction of the new format had not coincided with the return of Bangor City to the top of the table then the average attendances would have slumped seriously. This season 16 of the top 20 attendance figures have involved Bangor.

Total attendance in 2009/10, prior to reorganisation, was 84,802 but last season 2010/11, 65,107 past through the gates. In order to gain a tiny average increase large numbers of supporters, who had previously attended WPL games, have now been lost as supporters and interested parties.

It was ridiculous to take for granted that supporters of clubs who lost their WPL place would transfer their allegiance to other WPL clubs.

With clubs playing each other six or seven times in a season the repetitive nature of the league means that boredom soon sets in, interest wanes and supporters vote with their feet.

There is no evidence either that the reduction in the number of clubs has produced a corresponding improvement in standards.

The new format brings with it many anomalies, the most ridiculous being the fact that the club in 6th spot can lose all its games in the second half of the season and still remain 6th and gain a play off place for Europe!

There is evidence that playing matches on Friday, Saturday and Sunday has proved unpopular with supporters and players alike. The WPL need to recognise that the players are part-timers and travelling for 4-5 hours after a game on a Sunday and then working on a Monday is a disincentive for talented part time players to sign for a WPL club.

The travel difficulties are a social problem that AMs need to focus upon as the resolution lies in their hands. Though distances between north and south are not huge travelling between them

along the roads available is very expensive and above all time consuming. The WRU has already given up on National Leagues and football clubs will look again towards the English system because travel along motorways is available.

By playing so few games on a Saturday the WPL gains little focus on Saturday Sports programmes.

A popular myth also goes out through the window. It went like this, "If clubs only showed more imagination and arranged their fixtures on dates other than Saturday afternoons, then crowds would increase substantially." No one can believe this any longer.

The reorganisation was a search for a quick fix. It hasn't worked and the call for summer football appears to be another easy answer. It would however be fraught with so many problems that it would probably be another failure.

The sole reason for the allegiance of many clubs to the new format is the selfish one that the limited finance can be divided between 12 clubs and not 16 or 18.

The format was not the result of careful thought but rather stumbled upon when they went with a 12 club league rather than a 10 club league.

Member clubs, their infrastructure and resources

The infrastructure in place hardly seems to be one that can support fully professional clubs. TNS would appear to be the exception, where the business acumen of Mark Harris has laid down sustainable foundations. Otherwise the flirtation with full time professionalism seems to have been fraught with insecurity. Over dependence on one major backer also comes with huge risks. There must always be a place for part time genuine community clubs as they are broad based and sustainable.

Player development and academies

There has been a huge improvement in standards of coaching thanks to the work of the Welsh Football Trust

But unfortunately the FAW limits financial support for Academies to those operated by WPL clubs. They receive in excess of £20,000 each.

Many second tier clubs have Academies which contribute to player development and make a wide social contribution.

The Porthmadog Academy has performed well reaching the Wales Academy Finals day during the past three years. Many players have moved on to Academies with professional clubs like Manchester United, Everton, Wrexham and Shrewsbury.

The Academy has also won the Tom Yeoman Shield for U-11s in an all Wales competition

The Academy serves a wide rural area in Meirionnydd and down the Llŷn Peninsula. If it were not for the existence of this Academy these rural youngsters would be denied the opportunity of developing a skill and an interest and all clubs in the area would suffer from its demise.

Providing this service in an area, where there are few companies to sponsor the activity and **no money from the FAW, puts the existence of this Academy in jeopardy.**

Strategic Plan 2012

This document must rank as one of the best to emerge from the FAW -ever.

The suggestion that all area associations should adopt a set of rules which coincide with those of the FAW and that they adopt common processes and ways of working is especially to be welcomed. The same goes for the proposal that the disciplinary procedures of all area associations should be centralised on the FAW portal.

However the move to make the one player one club rule apply to Academies will undermine academies in rural areas. Travelling is a problem and there is no common sense reason for preventing young players playing for their local clubs and also attending and representing their Academies.

Gareth Williams

[On behalf of Porthmadog FC]