

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response from Kevin McNab

Dear Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee,

Welsh Premier League

Firstly, if you look at Welsh football as a whole, the National team is on the up, Swansea City have had a great first season in the Premier league, Cardiff City are near the top of the Championship hoping to have another chance at getting into the Premiership and Wrexham are close to gaining promotion back into the football league.

If you then look at the structure below Wrexham there isn't a lot to shout about and I feel this is where time and much needed funding needs to be spent to have a viable and attractive product to offer.

The Welsh Premier League (WPL) needs to be the flagship for Welsh football and I certainly do not mean it to start to try and rival the English system but it needs to have a much higher profile and quality product than it currently has.

The more successful Cardiff and Swansea City become and their need to compete with the more established clubs in the Premiership the more they will be scouting Europe and the rest of the world for young, quality players which will make it even harder for the local quality young players to make it into these clubs academies. Therefore the profile of the Welsh Premier League needs to be raised so that the young players coming through in Wales have a quality product to aim for as their football skills and ability improves.

I feel at the moment the WPL have an academy system because they have to and not because they want to and that it ticks one of the boxes when it comes to receiving funding from UEFA.

There is a lack of quality coaches and a majority of those that do coach have a "win at all costs" approach rather than putting the technical aspects across and the need to develop players first. The academy league structure needs overhauling both financially and technically eg all clubs received notification at the start of the 2011/12 season that Under 12 football would be 9 v 9 and played on smaller pitches, which a vast majority of the clubs were delighted about, however the notification was withdrawn very quickly as the clubs hadn't been consulted!

Sometimes the FAW need to lead and insist on changing the format for the better – smaller sided games is widely recognised, and proven throughout the world as being the way forward for developing young players skills and technical ability.

Why is there a need to consult on this?

Surely by telling the WPL Academies that they will be piloting this format for the 2012/13 season, before rolling it out through all levels of the game, rather than asking them what do they think has got to be better and those that object need to take a wider view of the development of the game throughout the world and not solely within their own club/league. The FAW do not have to go to various other footballing nations to see if smaller sided games works – it has been proven time and time again!

New Zealand and Australia have revamped their football from grassroots level up and you can see the benefits this is bringing to very strong Rugby playing nations – they regularly qualify for international competitions at all age groups for both male and female teams.

The WPL Academy system needs a dedicated officer as a point of contact – at the moment Andrew Howard oversees all aspects of competitions in WPL, and a great job he does to, however he needs help. Often games are easily called off, there is a lack of officials to take charge of the games so a dad or coach volunteers in order for the boys to have a game and ends up getting abused for getting a decision wrong or is deemed to be favouring one of the teams and there needs to be more regular visits on match days to see that clubs are adhering to the FAW Academy codes of conduct in terms of coach/parent and player behaviour – this does vary from club to club and in some instances coaches and players behaviour can leave a lot to be desired.

By having a better run academy system this will develop and improve the up and coming players that will be the future of the WPL and in time will improve the overall standard of the WPL and therefore make it a more viable and marketable product.

I can only talk from my experiences at Llanelli AFC and their academy structure whereby very few academy players get to experience or have a chance of playing for the 1st team. There is minimal involvement from the 1st team management and players with any part of the academy yet most other WPL teams look at the Llanelli Academy as the blueprint for success and how youth development should operate. The club have a great Academy Director but he becomes more and more frustrated at the lack of opportunities for the talent that is being produced and in time the players become despondent and many move on to play for other clubs within Wales as they have more chance of playing/training in the 1st team.

Llanelli have always been keen to develop the younger age groups (8-11) so that you get the local boys involved in the academy system at an early age and develop their skills at an early age, however this can be challenging as not all clubs have this range of age groups so

providing them with regular fixtures can be hard and generally the academy teams are not accepted in the local leagues for the sake of a game –as part of the Academy funding mini football should be included with regular fixtures.

In the FAW Strategic Plan they state they are going to insist on a “one player one club” ruling, at Llanelli we have implemented this but get slated for it as we are the only academy doing it – the sooner the FAW enforce this ruling the better as you often get players missing academy games on a Sunday because they have been injured playing for their local club on the Saturday – again summer football would alleviate this problem, also the boys tend to train once with the academy team and once with their local team on a weekly basis and again this is not good for the players development – 2 nights a week training and 1 game a week with the academy would be ideal.

At Llanelli we have several players that have been with us since the age of 8 and are now playing for our U12 team and because the academy system only operates U12, U14 and U16s these boys have nowhere to go next season as there is no U13 team to play for and there is an abundance of U14 players as most of this year’s U14 team was last season’s U12s and therefore have another year at the U14 age group.

Suddenly you have a group of players that you have developed through the academy structure from U8, 9, 10, 11 and then U12 and then there is nowhere for them to go apart from back to playing for their local teams for a season until they can come back and try out for the U14 team, a lot do not return so the past 5 years spent developing them has gone to waste – the FAW needs to add U13 and U15 age groups to the academy system.

There is a lack of quality and affordable training facilities throughout Wales and what facilities there are several sporting clubs of varying standards are vying for the time and space to train their teams, a majority of the facilities are outside and can be poorly maintained and there is a definite lack of indoor facilities that are affordable to all. A move to summer football could answer a lot of these challenges as the weather would generally be warmer and dryer and due to the lighter nights less need for floodlit facilities and be able to train on grass areas.

I hope this has given you a small personal feel for the way things look below the WPL but if this was improved then it would naturally improve the WPL as a product.

Thank you,

Kevin McNab