

Gwyn Derfel's Presentation to the Senedd

I'm fortunate enough to have experienced the WPL from three different perspectives:

Supporter / broadcaster / administrator.

"I firmly believe that we have a good product which deserves better coverage." Not my words – but John Hartson's.

The bold introduction of the "Super 12" format has led to more meaningful and exciting football and the fact that the average WPL attendances since the new format was introduced show a 26% increase while the general European trend shows marginal decline seems to vindicate the decision.

We must accept that there are fundamental challenges facing the future development of the WPL ;

1) Playing Surfaces

2) Attendances

3) Sustainability

- 1) A number of playing surfaces in the WPL are to be commended (some thanks to substantial investment from the FAW). Unfortunately some pitches are unacceptable at certain stages of the season. This does not encourage growth in standards or supporter numbers.
- 2) Although this season attracted the second highest attendance average since the League was formed – we must accept that the WPL must attract more supporters – especially families. The FAW will introduce stringent directives to our referees to clamp down on swearing at WPL matches next season in an attempt to make our games more family friendly.
- 3) Sustainability is essential for all WPL clubs and to lower league teams who aspire to play in our National League. At present one WPL club only generates 7% of its income through the turnstiles. The financial pressures on club committees is substantial and a lot of hard work is required to balance the books on an annual basis.

I firmly believe that the introduction of 3G/4G pitches could contribute greatly to improve all of these three key elements.

In a perfect world, I'd personally prefer to see WPL football played on high quality grass pitches – but we have to live in the real world and there's no doubt in my mind that 3G/4G pitches can transform the fortunes of all of our WPL clubs.

Bangor City could, and would, continue to play on the excellent grass pitch at Nantporth but would place their new generation facility in the car park area. This would offer a permanent home to their nomadic academy, a first class training venue for the first team and would also engage the local community – women's teams and social players. This would increase participation levels and would also place the football club at the heart of the community.

The needs of clubs like Prestatyn, Newtown and Bala Town are very different from Bangor City's. Their 3G/4G pitches would be used as their main playing surface. Their attitude is certainly "If it's good enough for the Ukraine national side – it's good enough for us !"

The introduction of a new generation pitch could annually save up to £60,000 per club and would encourage a higher technical standard of football. At present the vast majority of clubs pay other training facilities – but the new system could generate income to the clubs and enhance community engagement.

Here are a few examples;

TURKEY – already has a significant 3G strategy and the government has just announced that a further 350 3G pitches are to be introduced.

SWEDEN – The town of Umea is located 70 miles north of Stockholm (Population 100,000). During the past 10 years – the government has invested in 20 3G pitches. This has strengthened links between the town's football club and the local community, increased participation levels which has obvious health benefits and the project has also raised awareness of the importance of being a good citizen which has lowered crime levels in the town.

SCOTLAND – A single payment of £592,000 has been given to Scottish Third Division side Annan Athletic for a 3G playing surface. The finance for the facility includes money seized from criminals in the Scottish government's Cashback for Communities scheme.

NORTHERN IRELAND – (Population 1.5 million).

The government has recently committed £36m towards stadium development in the FAI Premier League and has a specific new generation pitch strategy. There are already 121 synthetic pitches in Northern Ireland and another 207 are planned in their government's present 5 year plan. On average these pitches are used up to 90% capacity.

Crusaders and Cliftonville play their matches in the FAI Premier League on 3G pitches.

Crusaders had to find 15% of the funding for their 4G surface and the remainder was invested by government agencies. The club is responsible for managing and maintaining the facility and is obliged to allow local schools to use the facility free of charge on a weekly basis.

Crusaders are very happy with this arrangement because it has strengthened links with the local community and has reduced ground maintenance costs significantly.

It has also meant an additional annual saving of £12,000 which was paid to other venues for training purposes.

The Crusaders generate income by allowing local community teams to play on the pitch and at the end of its 10 year life span will not require further government assistance to replace it.

Closing Comments

Simply the introduction of their new generation pitch has strengthened links between club and community and has helped make Crusaders a sustainable business.

A similar investment at WPL grounds could offer similar benefits to our National League clubs. It could transform football in our communities, offer sustainability and increase the number of players and supporters involved in Wales' most popular sport.

Diolch am eich hamser / Thank you very much for your time.