

# **Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee**

## **Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League**

### **Response from Robin Evans**

#### **The administration of the Premier League**

Though it is often observed that the Premier League is vital to Welsh football, it appears that neither the system of administrating the Premier League, nor the system for making decisions, achieves what would be expected of many similar systems in terms of being inclusive, democratic and transparent, and that this runs counter to the interests of the Premier League, the individual clubs and the public.

#### **Grass roots**

Some stadia/pitches have seen considerable development over the years, but it appears that there is no clear strategy to raise pitch/stadium standards in the Premier League, and this includes a lack of financial support.

Many of the academies at Premier League clubs do good work, but are they losing prospective players because of the strength of the English system? We must also ask whether there is an operational strategy for raising footballing standards at every level in Wales.

There has been major improvement in bilingual provision by the Football Association of Wales (FAW) in recent years, but is there a strategy for promoting bilingualism/normalising the use of the Welsh language at every level e.g. from registering players, on the one hand, to the provision of bilingual comments on the loudspeaker at matches, on the other?

#### **Premier League Clubs**

It is evident that standards on the field have risen over the years, partly because of the professionalism of some clubs and the efforts of others to attain those standards. Yet the question remains as to what support the Football Association of Wales will be able to provide to ensure the professionalism of clubs and professional clubs.

Crowds: The increase in support for one or two clubs has ensured that crowds have risen in percentage terms, yet the truth of the matter is that the clubs have not, on the whole, managed to increase their local followings significantly. The Premier League, individual clubs and the FAW in particular need a specific strategy to increase crowds.

#### **The media**

On the whole, the strategy to raise the profile of the Premier League has failed, and we must question the extent to which the blame for this lies with the FAW and the Premier League itself.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Premier League receives coverage, though this is fragmented and characterised by an attitude that the league is of secondary importance to the English system and to the rugby. Then again, there are several examples of games receiving extensive coverage, and therefore attracting sizeable crowds, due to the direct approach of the media. Regrettably, there are some core problems that must be resolved:

The failure of British broadcasters to place Welsh football on an equal footing with Scottish football in terms of reporting on games.

ITV Wales ignoring the Welsh Premier League entirely.

BBC Cymru/Wales and S4C. It has been noted above that several aspects of this provision must be complimented, but also that it is very inconsistent e.g. when the results are reported on Radio Cymru/Wales, we are told who the scorers are for all of the clubs in the English Premier League but not who scored in the Welsh Premier League. Is the Welsh Premier League seen as a national league, and should the games in the league receive the same coverage as games in the English system involving Swansea/Cardiff?

### **The press in Wales**

It appears as though the coverage provided by local papers is very good. Regarding the four national papers – *Y Cymro*, *Golwg*, the *Daily Post* and the *Western Mail* – the last of these is easily the most disappointing.

In respect of the British press, you should try to find the results of Welsh Premier League fixtures in the *Guardian/Observer*, including the online versions, for example.

### **Europe**

If relative success has been achieved in Europe, is it fair to say that that was down to the efforts of individual clubs, and not because of the FAW? We must ask how the FAW/Premier League wishes to:

Raise standards generally among the Welsh clubs

Specifically, help the clubs prepare for their annual European battles

Is there not scope to hold a competition for the clubs before their European journey begins? For example, all four clubs, in turn, could play against the Wales Under-21 team and two teams from smaller countries on the European continent e.g. Real Sociedad (which could bring along youth teams as well in order to promote cultural exchange). This would assist preparations and attract crowds as well.

What financial/administrative/practical support is the FAW giving clubs that play in Europe?

## **The National Assembly**

What kind of relationship should the FA and the National Assembly have? It is easy enough for international authorities to declare that politicians should not interfere, but if the activities/remit of the FAW are the subject of ridicule, then there must be intervention.

## **Community clubs/local businesses**

It appears that footballing standards in Norway have risen because businessmen realised that investing in clubs could generate significant income through the transfer of talented players to other countries. Would it be possible to develop Premier League clubs as professional community businesses, with professional players – on central contracts, for example – working within their communities and being funded by the FAW and the public purse? The aim would be to ensure that clubs are active, progressive and lively within their communities, but that they also have a business plan aimed at generating profits by nurturing players to be sold to major clubs.

## **In conclusion**

If we want to raise standards in the Welsh Premier League, we must have a vision that responds to, and capitalises on, our specific situation here in Wales - through collaboration between various partnerships, including those that involve the Welsh Government.