



Welsh Premier League Review

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) welcomes the National Assembly for Wales' Communities, Equality and Local Government inquiry into the Welsh Premier League (WPL).

We believe that our National League has grown significantly in regards to playing standards, infrastructure, governance, coaching development and media coverage since its inception in 1992 but understand and appreciate that more work is needed to continue to raise the standards and the profile of the WPL further in the coming years.

Cooperation between the Welsh Assembly Government and all involved with the Corbett Sports Welsh Premier League can only be good for our National Football League, our local communities and the health of our future generations.

A Brief History of the League

The Welsh Premier League was born out of political necessity in 1992. Welsh football had lost a (British) championship and not yet found a role. This situation was being exploited in FIFA circles by African and Asian nations who resented the independent status of the four British associations, and who saw the participation of the senior Welsh clubs in English football as a contradiction of that status. The problems set by local geography and the economy, together with the presence of its powerful English neighbour, had prevented Wales forming its own national championship until the F.A. of Wales took the initiative and founded the League of Wales.

The twenty original members were drawn on a roughly equal basis from all parts of the country, and from the Welsh League and Cymru Alliance League in particular, Bangor and Newtown joining from the Northern Premier League. The inaugural season's champions were Cwmbran Town, who thus became the first Welsh club to play in the European Champions' Cup.

Super 12

In accordance with the previous FA of Wales Strategic Plan, the Welsh Premier League was reduced to 12 clubs with effect from season 2010/11 in order to improve playing standards and competition.

In the most radical shake-up since the birth of the League of Wales in 1992, six clubs were relegated into the Cymru Alliance, including founder members Caersws and Connah's Quay, and the 2009 champions Rhyl.

Selection for the "Super 12" requires a valid FAW domestic club licence, which assesses clubs under six criteria:

- Sporting (youth structure and player medicals)
- Infrastructure (stadium)
- Personnel and administration
- Legal
- Financial
- Club charters

There are 35 mandatory infrastructure criteria requirements, including;

- Minimum 1500 capacity with 500 covered seats
- Minimum 500 Lux floodlights
- 13-person capacity home and away dugouts
- TV studio

Club Licensing

Since 2003/04 the WPL clubs have had the opportunity to strive for the UEFA Club Licence, which is a pre-requisite for participation in UEFA club competitions. This was a catalyst for improvement at some clubs in the WPL, but others without European ambition remained stagnant.

Subsequently, since 2009/10 the WPL and the clubs seeking promotion from the two feeder leagues below have been required to comply with the FAW Domestic Club Licence. This ensures good governance and regulation as well as the sustainability, viability and development of the clubs on and off the field.

An annual independent audit is conducted to decide on the merits of every application. This is subsidised by the FAW as well as the cost of player medicals, Safety Certificates and audited accounts.

In 2004, 29% of the Welsh clubs who applied for an UEFA licence reached the required standard and by 2011 the success rate was 92% - A clear indication of improved standards and governance.

All managers in the WPL now have to have a UEFA 'A' licence and all 12 clubs have a member of the coaching staff who has either attained the higher level 'UEFA Pro' licence or is currently on that specific course.

Another compulsory and key element is the WPL Youth Academy structure. This allows close links and cooperation between the FAW and Welsh Football Trust to develop grow and improve football in the communities of Wales as well as develop WPL and future Welsh international players.

The FAW is also proactive in increasing the importance of clubs within their communities with the recently launched 'Grow Your Club' initiative and has also offered clubs guidance regarding generating additional private investment through the 'Shared Access' scheme.

'Grow Your Club'

The FAW is continuing its policy of club support and development to assist the clubs to become more vibrant, visible and viable.

The FAW successfully applied for a UEFA grant to provide the necessary financial resources to make this initiative successful. The programme is in place for the duration of the 2011/12 football season.

A number of workshops have been held all over the country to give clubs a helping hand – practical ideas and examples of what has worked across club football to grow and sustain revenue and community engagement.

To further improve the Association's Governance, the 'Grow Your Club' initiative will also investigate the introduction of a Salary Cap in the Welsh Premier League to encourage best financial practice.

Shared Access

The FAW also recently launched a new joint partnership programme with an organisation called Shared Access that will provide further infrastructure improvements into grounds throughout the country.

Shared Access is a private, well capitalised company who finance, develop and manage shared communications infrastructure for wireless operators. The FAW and the company feel that mutually beneficial agreements can be reached that would assist clubs in the development of their infrastructure.

Should a club's location prove suitable and they agree to host the infrastructure, Shared Access will deliver a floodlighting solution at clubs which meets, and in some cases exceeds, relevant regional and grassroots competition standards.

This will create valuable improvements for club's training facilities to increase participation and possibly create new revenue streams.

Business Apprenticeship Proposal

The FAW will be piloting a scheme over the summer months - in conjunction with Pro-Stream and Skills Active - with one WPL club to generate extra resources and strengthen community links.

The project will provide;

- a) A business apprentice who will focus on business areas such as Social Media, Web Site development, data base growth and active selling.
- b) A community coach will work alongside the Trust with a focus on schools where they will be able to develop the club brand, create a direct pathway between the club and the community and open up possible sponsorship opportunities.

The FAW is confident that all WPL clubs will eventually participate in this scheme.

TV Rights

In 2010 the FAW agreed with S4C to become the broadcast partner for the WPL. Live matches are broadcast every Saturday afternoon and a highlights show on a Tuesday night. The present TV deal comes to an end this season.

Negotiations are on-going at present regarding future WPL contracts between the FAW and S4C where it is hoped that a new agreement will last a further 3 seasons. S4C broadcast a minimum 36 live programmes + 36 highlight programmes on Tuesday nights and also have 'Sgorio Stwnsh' highlights on Fridays specifically aimed at a younger audience. The use of well-known personalities such as John Hartson and Malcolm Allen – and their praise of the standard of football, has raised the profile of the WPL.

The FAW is committed to invest any revenue generated by the WPL through the television deal back into the development of the league. The FAW is also working on a proposal to award clubs hosting 'live' matches a facilitation fee for their cooperation.

We are also discussing the possibility of entering a joint venture with S4C and a commercial frost sheet company which would guarantee that any WPL pitch for a featured live game could go ahead in conditions up to -4 degrees Celsius.

Club / Ground Facilities

Whilst there is much being done to continue to raise standards in Welsh domestic football, the club and ground infrastructure is below standard.

Almost all grounds in the WPL and other leagues throughout Wales are either fully owned or rented from local councils. The costs of maintaining and upgrading these facilities are hindered by the lack of investment from other parties.

This often means that playing surfaces are not maintained to the level which will encourage further development in playing standards - which will in turn enhance the reputation of our National League and increase participation levels. The FAW acknowledges the commitment and investment of individual clubs such as Airbus UK Broughton. Their £30,000 outlay two seasons ago has seen a marked improvement in the pitch at the Airfield.

The FAW has invested up to £600,000 per annum through the sister company, Welsh Ground Improvement (WGI) in addition to the other initiatives mentioned, but has not been successful in persuading local or national Government of the importance of on-going and match funding investments.

European Comparison

The FAI has received 35 million Euros from the Government to raise participation. The Irish Government has also implemented a capital investment programme in the past 5 years which includes a minimum 40 million Euros investment in the Aviva Stadium.

The Sports Capital Funding Scheme also offered clubs in the Airtricity League – a match funding scheme to improve ground facilities.

Monies invested into Football in most other UEFA Countries outweigh that of the investments of local councils and the Welsh Assembly Government here in Wales.

This year the Irish Government continues with its £110 million ground investment scheme to upgrade football, rugby and Gaelic stadia and the Turkish Government has just announced that they will fund the installation of 350 3G pitches.

The Football Foundation in England was founded in 2000 and is jointly funded by the Premier League, the FA and Government and invests £30 million every year in grass roots and community projects.

The Future

The FAW has outlined its strategy in our strategic plan which was launched in January.

The challenge is clear. We need to continue to raise standards even further and increase participation numbers at all levels of Welsh football.

The World Health Organisation has confirmed that 1.9 million people die annually “due to inactivity”.

Working together we can improve our health as a nation, enhance a sense of community through football and increase national pride as well.

The FAW is committed to increasing standards, participation and spectators of the League, but is in need of additional investment in order to make the necessary infrastructure improvements.

Summary

- Our National League is still in its infancy but all aspects of the league have improved significantly since 1992. Strategic changes have been made to the size and structure of the WPL to enhance playing standards and we enjoy unrivalled television coverage for a league of our stature.
- The introduction of the Domestic Licence has demanded an improvement in facilities, coaching standards and financial fair play – all key indicators of good governance.
- Community and business initiatives such as ‘Grow Your Club’ and ‘Shared Access’ show that the FAW is pro-active in offering guidance regarding club development and acquiring better business acumen.
- We have a good product and good people who are passionate about the WPL.
- The FAW is confident that all aspects of our National League will grow and improve even further in the next twenty years.

In order for the WPL to develop further it needs to access additional income streams available to equivalent competitions in other constituent nations of the United Kingdom.

Terms of reference for the inquiry

The extent to which the standards of football in the WPL have developed during the past 20 years

Originally the League was contested by 20 teams but two seasons ago the Welsh Premier League (WPL) was restructured from 18 to 12 teams in a conscious effort to improve playing standards further.

We are currently placed 46th in the UEFA coefficient rankings table and until the restructuring of the WPL we only saw a marginal improvement in our European results.

In the last 3 years the WPL coefficient scores were 0.25 / 0.33 / 0.66. Due to the New Saints victory over Cliftonville (Northern Ireland) in the Europa League last season and their success against Bohemians (Republic of Ireland – ranked 33) in the Champions League the previous season, coupled with Bangor's victory over FC Honka from Finland (ranked 30) which took them to the Europa League 3rd Qualifying round in 2010, our coefficient rankings have grown to 0.875 in 2010/11 and 0.625 in 2011/12 with the important five year ranking at 2.749. With this sustained improvement we will inevitably climb higher

The FAW Technical Director Osian Roberts has applauded the standard of play in the WPL. Roberts himself coached and managed with both Porthmadog and Rhyl and feels the League at times doesn't receive the appreciation it deserves:

"From both a player and manager perspective, I think the WPL deserves more recognition and opportunities".

The competition format, looking at possible alternative models such as a move to summer football

Last year the FAW conducted extensive research in a clear and transparent manner with key stakeholders regarding a number of possible changes to the structure of the WPL. Options included keeping the status quo regarding winter football / summer football / winter football with a month long break in January. The third option proved to be the most popular and was introduced.

Regarding summer football specifically – reservations regarding the impact on the WPL feeder leagues were expressed. Other potential problems also cited were:

- Potential lack of TV interest
- Competition from major sporting events such as the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, World Cup and European Championships contributed to a more cluttered summer calendar.
- Traditional views that football is a winter sport.

WPL officials have a good working relationship with Fran Gavin and his team at the Airtricity League (Republic of Ireland) and are continually monitoring the development of their league.

The development and progression of players, coaches & managers from the WPL

The FAW has invested £400,000 over the last four years in the development of coaches at Welsh Premier League clubs.

When our National League was launched 20 years ago, coaching qualifications were almost non-existent and experience or recently retired players were the normality for appointments. A complete change in mentality has now been developed in partnership with the Welsh Football Trust and through the introduction of Club Licensing, as clubs now appoint suitably qualified Managers. Indeed, all WPL managers have to have obtained the 'A' licence and all clubs who represent Wales in Europe have to have a member of their coaching structure who has obtained the 'Pro Licence' qualification, which is the highest accolade in Europe. Indeed all 12 clubs currently have a Pro Licence holder or a candidate on an existing course, currently working with the first team.

FAW Technical Director Osian Roberts who has been integral in obtaining critical acclaim for the standard of coaching in Wales believes that the quality of coaches here compares very favourably with other similar nations:

"I've worked with these guys on their UEFA A and Pro licenses and I think that two or three are now ready to step up. Nigel Adkins at Southampton is an example of what can be achieved but I think that we have managers in the WPL who are playing great football and deserve a chance".

How can the WPL develop players and increase player participation levels and equal opportunities?

The WPL academies are a prerequisite of the Domestic Licence and are hugely important in the process of identifying talent for WPL and will become revenue streams for the clubs when players are sold on.

To use one club as an example, Shrewsbury Town have recently been ordered by FIFA to pay Aberystwyth €37,500 for their development of Tom Bradshaw and two of their other academy products Alex Samuel and Rhydian Davies were recently invited for formal trials with Newcastle United which could lead to further financial gain for the club for their development of young talented players. All three players were schooled along the Cambrian Coast and Aberystwyth Town's academy clearly provides a regional centre for excellence.

A significant development is happening next season regarding Women's Football when a 12 team National League is contested for the very first time, with all areas of Wales represented

The WPL's standing within the Welsh sporting landscape and its visibility in Welsh media outlets

The WPL currently enjoys extensive TV coverage on S4C – which includes a live game on Saturdays, two highlights programmes during the week and an expanding on-line provision. English language commentary is available on live games.

However the WPL is frustrated at the lack of support given by other terrestrial and non-terrestrial broadcasters as well as other media outlets.

The FAW has employed people with extensive media background to build on these relationships in a positive manner.

The member clubs, their infrastructure and resources

The FAW has increased annual average investment significantly recently in the WPL and invested heavily in the next generation of players through the Academy Scheme:

	WPL (£)	Academies (£)
2004	71,737	119,456
2005	91,514	121,271
2006	96,661	119,501
2007	112,663	114,461
2008	185,470	114,204
2009	127,848	137,315
2010	102,120	147,522
2011	224,266	227,421
Total	1,012,279	1,101,151

During the same period the annual investment in Ground Infrastructure into levels 1,2,3 and 4 of the FAW pyramid system has doubled from £300,000 to £600,000. This total outlay of £3,335,267 has been deliberately invested in grounds in all parts of Wales to serve all communities in our country.

Although the FAW understands that leisure is a non-compulsory element of local government's fiscal budget – it is frustrating and disappointing that none of this significant investment has been subjected to any match funding schemes, from local or central government, which could benefit clubs and communities throughout Wales.

The FAW cannot continue to sustain this level of investment.

How the FAW's recent Strategic Plan 2012 will contribute towards strengthening the WPL, and how the WPL will contribute towards the Strategic Plan's aims

Consultation

In preparation for the Strategic Review the FAW spoke to people across the entire range of Welsh football to gather their thoughts and listen to their comments regarding the current state and future development of our game.

Strategy

The Welsh Premier League is an integral part of the FAW's vision and future commitment and is embedded in the whole ethos of our strategy document.

The WPL is the highest in standard and prestige within our pyramid system and is clearly stated as a key element of the "team" of Welsh football as we aspire to inspire attention and participation.

Pathway

The WPL is highlighted as one of the key actions to be led by FAW departments to "raise the profile and standard of the national game, providing a pathway to the international stage for players and referees in the WPL".

Governance

Governance and Financial Fair Play is all directed at sustaining and improving WPL clubs. These are key elements in our licensing strategy. The introduction of a soft Salary Cap, which would be a percentage figure based on a club's turnover is key to this.

Youth Development

The Academy structure is directly aimed at ensuring quality home-grown Welsh players is nurtured.

Developing club grounds and "football hubs via 3G artificial pitches" is obviously relevant to clubs in our top division as is the aspiration to improve "three regional grounds to be available for U21s and Women's International matches"

It is clearly stated in our vision of success that the aim is to develop "A Premier League and domestic competitions that have a strong identity within the Welsh sporting psyche". That is our genuine aim and goal for the WPL.