

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

The Welsh Premier League

I am submitting this response as an individual, an enthusiastic supporter of the Premier League and a supporter of Aberystwyth Town Football Club.

Since the Premier League was established, I feel that one of its main weaknesses is that there is no obvious strategic plan in place for establishing the league as a strong, professional entity. I feel that one of the reasons for this is that the product has not been developed sufficiently to be marketed in a suitable way.

In my opinion, a number of factors need to be considered to ensure that the product is attractive to an audience of fans, media and sponsors.

The clubs

When the Premier League was launched at the beginning of the 90s, all teams were given a fair opportunity to apply to be a part of it. Since then, those clubs have been required to improve their facilities and provision for fans. This is commendable, yet there has been no consideration of how best to market the game. Although this is a controversial plan, we need to consider the possibility of creating regional teams for the Premier League, which would boost crowds and raise standards. This should, in turn, increase the league's appeal for sponsors and the press.

In respect of mid-Wales, it is good to see teams like Newtown, Caersws, Aberystwyth and Carmarthen competing, but the reality of the current economic situation means that it will not be possible to maintain high standards in the long term, given that the player pool is not deep enough. As a result, the product to be marketed is of insufficient quality for a national league. The move to reduce the number of teams in the league has certainly increased interest levels in the latter half of the season, but in order to take full advantage of this, consideration should be given to shrinking the league further in order to raise standards, and possibly to the notion of establishing a second division for the national league. This would enable more significant investment to be made in the development of resources such as high-quality grounds, which would be available for high-profile games e.g. international age-group fixtures.

There is a need to recognise the clubs and areas where there is strong core support e.g. Bangor, Rhyl, Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, and to consider how it would be possible to build on the support that is already there to make the product more attractive for commercial backers and sponsors. The product is more attractive if it can be shown that 500-600 fans attend regularly rather than showing teams that find it tough to draw fans in their dozens.

Summer football?

There has been some debate about changing the structure of the season, but I do not believe that those discussions have been structured in a strategic way. Mature debate and consideration is needed on the idea of having a mid-season break e.g. between December and March. The pitches are at their worst during this period and, once again, they do not convey a professional national league image. The Football Association of Wales would need to consider how it could help the clubs to deal with a lack of income in this period, but the system could benefit clubs that compete in Europe, given that they would still be playing when European competitions start in the summer, unlike the current situation.

Another option to be considered is to change the season entirely so that it starts in March and runs through the summer, similar to other leagues in Europe. As noted above, this could help clubs that play in Europe, and it could also entail more press coverage, **given that it would not compete** with the English football season.

I realise that this would represent a significant change, but we need to have this discussion, and it needs to be led maturely and strategically by the Football Association of Wales.

The media

The coverage afforded to the league by our media in Wales has improved in recent years, but it remains an ad hoc situation on the whole. The television programme **Sgorio** is on every Saturday afternoon, and this is certainly a boon that brings Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking viewers together successfully.

Despite this, the general coverage provided by other media in Wales is extremely disappointing. I accept that priority is given to the clubs that play in the English leagues, but the coverage given to the league by our “national newspaper” – *The Western Mail* – is pitifully weak and shallow. While BBC radio, on the whole, at least provides the league results, this is often not the case in respect of the television news services provided by the BBC and ITV, particularly during evening bulletins on weeknights when games are played.

The Football Association of Wales, with support from the National Assembly, needs to pressure broadcasters to remember that we have a national league and that it deserves a due amount of coverage. Having said all that, in light of my previous comments about improving standards and marketing, media coverage should follow on naturally from this.

Community clubs

Finally, we need to consider the role of football clubs within their communities. We live in a society where obesity is an increasing problem, and where a lack of physical exercise among our children and young people is a huge challenge. It would be possible to consider developing the role of clubs to contribute to this agenda, not necessarily by boosting competitive football, but by boosting physical activity and by developing their role at the heart of their communities, offering activities for boys and girls alike.

In tough economic times, this could generate a profitable source of income for the clubs and, if it is administered appropriately and strategically, for the Football Association of Wales as well.