

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response from Russell Todd

Dear Clerk of the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

I am very grateful for the opportunity to submit my views on the Welsh Premier League in the context of the committee's inquiry.

I feel as though I should confess that I have not attended a league game since I was a student at Aberystwyth University in the late 90s. However, I would like to see the league improve, develop and bid for the attention of football fans in Wales.

While I was studying at Aberystwyth, there was a feeling among many of the young men there that the league was a bit of a novelty. Among the English students (and many of the Welsh ones too) it was fashionable to poke fun at the league: standards were very low; the players were not fit enough; the facilities were poor; and the pitches were more suitable for growing cabbages than they were for playing football. Many people considered it to be a 'non-league'. It was certainly a 'non-English-league', yet this label had deeper connotations—namely that the league was an amateurish, low-quality irrelevance to anyone with an interest in 'proper' football.

Nevertheless, I feel that, in the eyes of many Welsh people, the league has improved since then. It has national status. Therefore, while no-one believes that the league is as strong as the English Premier League, many Welsh people appreciate the fact that it is separate from that league, rather than being subordinate to it. The profile of the league has improved, and BBC Wales and S4C (in particular) should receive a great deal of credit for this. Where it struggles, in my opinion, is in the relevance stakes. That is, in the eyes of Welsh people who follow football—usually, fans of Swansea City, Cardiff City, Wrexham or the other clubs in the English pyramid (the 'Exiles'), as well as those who support English clubs only—there are no links between their clubs and the clubs in the Welsh Premier League:

- their clubs do not play against Welsh Premier League clubs in competitive games (apart from games in the former FAW Premier Cup, when the non-Welsh Premier League clubs would play weakened teams, and friendly fixtures)
- their clubs have not bought many players from Welsh Premier League clubs (apart from Mark Delaney, Lee Trundle and Owain Tudur Jones)
- a great many players reach the English Football League, but almost none of these reach Championship or Premier League level, where the status and profile of players are massive
- the Welsh Premier League is not relevant to the national team—no-one has represented Wales while playing for a Welsh Premier League club (aside from Mark Delaney, Owain Tudur Jones and Steve Evans)

The FAW has tried to facilitate the return of the Exiles to the Welsh Cup and through the FAW Premier Cup, but the Exiles have no appetite for this. Therefore, the Welsh Premier League clubs will have to force their way onto the Exiles' radar by developing players and selling them on to them. This is what clubs in many European leagues do (for example, clubs in the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Ireland). In the early days of the Welsh Premier League, too many English players would finish their careers in the league or would come over to earn easy money (indeed, a popular complaint of the Welsh Premier League, even now, is that it is full of 'Scousers'). The Welsh Premier League should invest in coaches and in pathways that would allow these coaches to work with those who coach at the elite level, and in facilities. Player quality will improve, and the investment will generate profits if the players progress to the Football League. The FAW and the Welsh Premier League should assess continental models rather than follow an English model that does not promote sustainable youth development.

The quality of the Welsh Premier League will continue to improve after the recent changes to its format. There are more competitive games towards the end of the season because there are yields available to the majority of teams as the league is split into two. This is a good innovation. If greater importance is attached to some games, will this inspire greater interest among broadcasters and editors? Ultimately....perhaps. I hope that the administrators of the Welsh Premier League do not feel as though they should tinker with this format.

I am passionate about the national team. I seldom miss home games and I follow the team abroad as well. Yet I have seen nothing about the Welsh Premier League in the context of these games, apart from a few articles in match programmes. Where will the people who can promote the Welsh Premier League and its fixtures come from? Where are the offers for child concessions? Where are the advertisements and the promotions? The Welsh Premier League has to sell itself when it has the opportunity to do so among those who have an interest in, and a passion for, Welsh football. FAW roadshows have visited Welsh Premier League clubs (such as Airbus UK) and those at lower levels (such as Ton Pentre); I know people who have visited Welsh Premier League clubs for the first time through roadshows.

One thing that holds the Welsh Premier League back is its lack of profile in the Valleys, Newport, Cardiff and Swansea, where so many Welsh people live. Nothing is being done to tackle this in the short term. In truth, clubs from Cardiff and the Valleys that have competed in the Welsh Premier League have suffered financial difficulties (Grange Quins, Inter Cardiff, Ebbw Vale and Cwmbrân), and this casts a shadow over clubs in these areas. For example, many teams would have no interest in joining the Welsh Premier League if they were to win the Welsh League. Ebbw Vale FA suffered huge financial problems following its success in the Welsh Premier League and its appearance on the European stage. What is the incentive for teams to succeed if problems such as these are to follow?

I welcome this inquiry, but I would be concerned if the Assembly or Government tried to force changes on the FAW's business that could lead to FIFA sanctions.

Russell Todd