

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response from Gareth Jones

Dear friends,

I would first like to thank the Committee for showing interest in the Welsh Premier League. During my time as Chair or Secretary of Carmarthen Town Football Club, this is the first time for this situation to arise.

In order to facilitate debate, I will follow the format set out in your original e-mail:

Footballing standards

As someone who has a varied background in the footballing world, I believe that the Premier League has led to an improvement in standards. By now, it is recognised as a league of quality, particularly in respect of those teams in the upper echelons. Clubs are having an opportunity to compete in European competitions, some more successfully than others.

By now, player quality has changed for the better. In the past, a relatively small group of good players was seen moving from club to club, based on the money on offer. These days, players have the opportunity to develop within their clubs and to attain a very high standard. It is a very good shop window for players of excellence.

League format

As a club, Carmarthen had doubts about cutting the league to 12 teams. We abstained from voting at the key meeting, but given that the Football Association of Wales (FAW) had the casting vote, we knew what the outcome would be!

After two seasons, the general feeling among our fans (based on detailed research) was that more teams were needed. They find watching the same clubs four times to be boring. The general view is that 16 is the ideal number of teams, along with a high-quality League Cup.

As a club, we have opposed the notion of summer football. Volunteers run the Carmarthen FA, and it is usually harder to get stewards and so forth in August. As a teacher, I would personally have no hope of securing time for football and a holiday!

Other practical reasons have been identified for not playing in the summer. Traditionally, our crowds are much smaller in August. Traffic is an issue when travelling on summer weekends. The pitches are hard, making it more difficult to play attractive football.

Our feeling is that there is scope for more midweek games, particularly in September and October. What is wrong with launching the league season on the bank holiday weekend at the end of August? There could be games on Friday night, Saturday afternoon and Monday, and these could be local fixtures in order to reduce travel problems.

Having a break in January is a very good idea. We could then have games on the Easter bank holiday. Easter Monday is a traditional football day in west Wales.

I would like to see more support for teams that reach European competitions. The FAW has expertise that could be of great value to these clubs e.g. providing a dietician. They could also secure competitive fixtures for these teams before they play. Maybe the teams could spend a weekend or more in Cardiff or at a special centre in order to prepare in greater detail.

The development and progress of players/coaches

The Premier League has spurred improvement in players and coaches. The work done by our academies is very valuable (two of our youth team members have been in the first team squad since Christmas). By standardising coaching qualifications, domestic and UEFA licences have compelled clubs to hire quality coaches. We now need support to maintain and promote the work done by the academies.

We feel that the impact that licences are having on the standard of team coaches in the Premier League needs to be looked at. Are these standards too high at present? It is very difficult for clubs to shoulder the cost of coaching coaches. The number of coaches that possess the necessary qualification is low, and these coaches are therefore scarce (thereby increasing their cost to a club!). We therefore suggest that officials look at this.

The quality of coaches has improved, but others need greater opportunities to obtain the same qualifications. The cost of pursuing a coaching course (an 'A' course costs more than £3,000, and a 'Pro' course more than £8,000) is out of individuals' reach. We suggest that an agreement is drawn up between the FAW and the coaches. The coaches would receive a grant for completing a course, and they would have to pay it back should they leave the club to which

they are tied before the end of a specific period of time. Until this happens, the quality of coaching will remain static. The league needs continuous new blood if it is to flourish.

We also feel that better use needs to be made of experienced coaches with the top qualifications. At present, they work for one club only. How about using their knowledge and skills by dispatching them to lower-placed teams in the league so that they can share their experiences? This could form a part of their continuous professional development.

There are many more opportunities for young players. There are representative teams at all levels, and they hold their own against representative teams from other countries. The academy system works, but there are clubs in the system that do not contribute fully to its activities, which has consequences.

External contributions

Although the clubs in the Premier League focus on their first teams, their contribution to local football is also very important.

One regret is the fact that players can no longer sign up to play for two clubs. It is not possible for a club like Carmarthen to maintain a large squad of players. In the past, we collaborated with other clubs to keep players fit and to develop young players who were too old for youth teams.

As a club, we are organising a football festival for primary schools during the summer term. Out of necessity in a rural setting, the teams will be mixed. We will collaborate with primary schools and participate in the Show Racism the Red Card initiative in order to raise awareness of contemporary problems in our society. We will also ensure that we comply with equal opportunities legislation. We are grateful for the licences in this regard.

The position of the Premier League in Welsh sport and within the media

This is dependent on personal attitudes. Personally, I feel that there is insufficient support for the Premier League within the corridors of the FAW. Positive support is provided by some members, but not by all. Until there is a positive relationship, the league will suffer.

We feel frustrated on occasions when decisions are made without consultation e.g. the decision regarding who is allowed to play in the Welsh Cup.

The league is criticised in the press. The lack of a team in south-east Wales is primarily responsible for this, as well as a lack of enterprise by the press in the west. How important are newspapers to young people these days?

Maybe the BBC is sulking because it lost the contract to broadcast Wales games! The clubs are not informed of what is going on. Is it the same state of affairs with the *Western Mail*?

We have to praise Rondo Media to the skies. Its coverage of live games on Saturday afternoons is superb. The programme *Sgorio* has been a part of football supporters' culture in Wales since before the establishment of the Welsh Premier League. Seeing Carmarthen's fixtures on the same programme as the likes of Barcelona lifts the heart. It is a shame that there is no financial value for the Premier League clubs in relation to the use of their resources for broadcasting live games.

An opportunity was missed when the Principality's sponsorship period came to an end. It is a Welsh company with Welsh products. One wonders whether enough work was done to ensure that the contract was extended. This is the time to ask what role is played by the FAW's marketing officer. No one has ever seen him Carmarthen, for him to share his skills!

We must also ask why an expert had to be recruited, using grant funds, for the 'Grow Your Club' project. Our last meeting was very similar to a GCSE or AS business class! Would it have been possible to obtain a grant for improving broadcasting facilities?

The clubs

I am not in a position to comment on other clubs.

In Carmarthen, the club is run by volunteers. The club runs the following teams: under 12s, under 14s, under 16s, under 19s, the second team (in the Carmarthenshire league) and the team that plays in the Welsh Premier League. In addition, we run development sessions for pupils of primary school age.

The club is a key part of the community. To date, we have built partnerships with Bro Myrddin Welsh Comprehensive School, Carmarthen Quins Rugby Club and Carmarthenshire County Council in order to search for funds to improve leisure facilities in the town. It is a very ambitious project.

Our club is used as a community centre, with more than 20 different organisations using it at different times. It hosts arts groups, a computer group, weight-loss classes, and social events organised by parents' groups to raise money for local schools and charities. The club adopts one local charity annually (the local hospice is receiving our contributions this year).

Our relationship with the businesses of the town is very positive. Without their support, Carmarthen would not be a member of the Welsh Premier League. It is tough to maintain this through the work of volunteers.

We are very fortunate in respect of resources. We have a stand that holds more than 1,000, car parks on both sides of the field and changing rooms hopefully on the way, thanks to the generosity of the FAW. The club has a lease for over 90 years at Richmond Park. Regrettably, the Romans had once settled there, and any development these days ensures a visit by CADW.

Work is needed to improve the quality of the pitch. Again, volunteers are busy, but without the relevant human and mechanical resources, the pitch is not going to improve in the near future unless the relevant authorities invest.

Improvements in the quality of pitches are primarily going to raise the standard of games and raise the league's profile. Games are broadcast live at present, and some of our pitches are not good enough (I include Richmond Park in Carmarthen in this observation). Investment is needed in our pitches.

An annual budget is set for our teams, and detailed inspection and monitoring activities are conducted. We must ensure that there is no overspend.

At present, we are looking into the possibility of establishing a charity section at the club that will be able to attract more grants or gain access to additional sources of capital. We are grateful to Carmarthenshire Council for its support in this respect and also to Llandovery Rugby Club.

2012 Strategic Plan

The strategic plan is welcomed in general terms. The Premier League does not occupy a prominent position, but there is time to flesh this out in the future. The clubs must have a voice in doing this. This could foster the appearance of a much more professional league, in which everyone co-operates.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to respond to the Committee. This is only the opinion of one club, but it is an entirely honest one. We are very proud to be members of the Welsh Premier League and want it to flourish in the future. A successful national league is key to the development of football in Wales.

GARETH JONES