



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

RR/KS/MD

Rt. Hon Mark Drakeford MS
First Minister of Wales
Welsh Parliament,
Cardiff Bay,
Cardiff,
CF99 1SN

13th October 2020

Dear Mark,

Re: Return of fans to spectator sports

Throughout this pandemic, the vast majority of individuals, businesses and communities in Wales have followed the rules and guidance set out by the Welsh Government in order to keep themselves and their families safe. It is right that certain measures were put in place to reduce the spread of coronavirus and lessen the devastating impact it can have on our society. However, it is also right that these measures are changed and adapted when the risk of coronavirus can be mitigated – such as in allowing the return of fans in a reduced capacity to spectator sports like football.

Grass-roots football clubs have been in turmoil since March. Having the season suspended and matches having to be played behind closed doors, if at all, has had a huge impact on the financial stability and daily running of many small, local clubs. For many smaller clubs, the revenue provided by fans is vital and is needed for clubs to survive.

Without the revenue provided by dedicated and loyal fans, many clubs – who are already struggling financially, face the risk of closure. Consequently, it is critical that fans are allowed back inside football grounds soon as local football is simply unsustainable without fans attending matches.

Fans' attendance at matches not only provides a huge financial benefit direct to football clubs but also has important social and economic benefits to both fans and the local community. Football clubs often have a brilliant inclusive atmosphere, acting as a community hub for fans of all ages, genders and backgrounds. This has been demonstrated by the amazing work clubs have carried out during the pandemic including delivering food parcels or hosting phone calls with elderly fans. Moreover, football clubs are also key employers for the local area and support local jobs and regional businesses.

If clubs are not able to remain open due to the lack of fan revenue, it would be a huge loss for many communities.



Local football clubs are also incredibly important to fans on a personal level, with smaller clubs providing opportunities for individuals to stay healthy, develop their sporting skills and meet new people. Lockdown has highlighted the devastating impact that social isolation can have on individuals, so it would be detrimental to many fans' mental health if they were further prevented from seeing friends and attending a football match in a safe and secure way.

Therefore, I would encourage the Welsh Government to reconsider their policy regarding spectator sport, and allow a partial, safe return of fans to attend football matches. Many clubs have already complied with Covid-19 guidelines and have made their grounds safe through the introduction of one-way systems, screening and temperature checks as well as extra rigorous cleaning practices.

This highlights that stadium environments can be modified to be Covid secure and can house fans safely at a reduced capacity. At a time when clubs are struggling financially and will have spent extra money making their grounds Covid compliant, it is simply not fair to penalise football clubs and cause further financial harm and uncertainty.

As many football clubs have grounds which are largely outdoors, stewarded and highly regulated, if socially distanced plans are put in place, the risk to fans is minimal and it will be safe to allow fans to return. The Football Supporters' Association have stated their support for allowing fans back into games, stating that feedback from members at test events have "confirmed high levels of compliance with all the health and safety measures put in place" and that members "felt safer at games than they have done in many other social situations".

I would also encourage you to consider the success of allowing the return of fans to football matches in other European countries. Germany are following a similar phased return to spectator sport and are welcoming back fans to stadiums at a maximum of 20% capacity. This measure has been well supported in Germany, with 63% of those polled by regional broadcaster ARD in favour of the return of fans. In both France and Italy, a maximum of 1000 fans will be allowed in football grounds, with Italy looking to increase the number of fans in stadiums to 25% of their capacity.

If other countries can safely allow the return of fans to football, it is right that Wales looks to do the same, giving Welsh grass-roots football a real chance of thriving, not just surviving, in a post-Covid society.

In my constituency of Delyn, Flint Town United FC are one club that would hugely benefit from the return of fans at a reduced capacity. Having been promoted to the Cymru Premier League this season after a long 22 year absence, it would be devastating to see their hard work be lost – as without the return of fans in some form soon, it will become financially unviable to remain open.



Like many smaller clubs, Flint Town United FC face high financial costs as the season restarts and matches resume, yet this year they do not have their usual income from fan ticket sales or food and drink sales so are struggling to remain financially afloat. While Flint Town FC have a capacity of 1962 in their ground through a mixture of seating and safe standing areas, allowing a capacity of just 15 – 20% of fans (300- 350 people) would make all the difference and allow the club to be in a position to get through this challenging period and come out the other side in a strong position.

If clubs within the Cymru Premier League are deemed competent enough to be able to hold games safely, it is also likely that these same hard-working clubs and other grass-roots clubs, are able to safely arrange for fans to return.

With quarter final success during the last Euros in 2016, Wales is fast developing a global reputation for football at an elite level. However, success on the global football stage starts from a grass-roots level. If we don't support grass-roots clubs now, by permitting fans to return to their local club grounds, we risk losing them forever.

Simply, football is not the same without fans. I urge the Welsh Government to reconsider their policy on allowing fans back into spectator sport such as football for the benefit it brings to the fans, the local economy and football clubs – who are the lifeblood of so many local communities across Wales.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Rob Roberts', written over a horizontal line.

Rob Roberts MP
Member of Parliament for Delyn

CC: Rt Hon. The Lord Elis-Thomas PC MS, Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism