

## **IFRCS45 Helen Antoniazzi, Head of Public Affairs, Football Association of Wales**

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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau Rhyngwladol | Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Effaith Gostyngiadau Cyllid ar Ddiwylliant a Chwaraeon | Impact of Funding Reductions for Culture and Sport

Ymateb gan: Helen Antoniazzi, Pennaeth Materion Cyhoeddus, Cymdeithas Bêldroed Cymru | Evidence from: Helen Antoniazzi, Head of Public Affairs, Football Association of Wales

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The Football Association of Wales (FAW) is the third oldest association in the world, having come into existence in 1876. The association has governed football in Wales continually since that date and has a duty to protect, promote and develop football in Wales.

'Gorau Chwarae Cyd Chwarae' is the inspirational motto of the FAW. Team play is the driving force at the heart of Welsh Football and connects all those involved in football in Wales – it unites Welsh players, volunteers, coaches, supporters under a single banner.

The FAW's 2021-2026 strategic plan for Welsh football shares a vision to create a leading football nation, one where the game is inclusive, accessible and successful. Underpinned by the FAW values of excellence, family and respect, the FAW's strategic plan is for a global, local Wales.

### **1. What impacts has reduced funding had on your organisation and sector so far?**

The Football Association of Wales is seeing a 21% reduction in direct support to football from Sport Wales, phased in over the 3 years from 2023-2026 (£1,019,985 to £805,000).

This results in a substantial real term reduction in revenue funding from Welsh Government (via Sport Wales) over the last 10 years. Applying year on year inflation

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to the figure of £1,062,252 received in 2013 and using forecasted levels of inflation for future years, “real term” funding from Sport Wales should be £1,450,608 in 2026.

This 61% reduction of real term funding has been compounded further by the fact that football in Wales is growing at such a rate.

In 2013, with 49,242 registered players, funding was equivalent to £22 per registered player in Wales.

In 2023, with 105,603 registered players at the end of the season, funding was equivalent to £10 per registered player in Wales.

In 2026, the FAW is on track to have over 120,000 registered players in line with our “Ein Cymru 21-26” Strategy and the funding that we expect to receive will be an equivalent of £7 per registered player in Wales.

These continued funding reductions result in trying to balance an annual cost reduction exercise with high performance whereby we are having to make decisions around variables such as the development of new programmes at a community and grassroots level, and the length of international age group camps, and the numbers of players and support staff at such events. We have exhausted looking at procurement alternatives and further funding cuts would result in a further scaling back of such activities or removal of some provisions entirely.

*Note: Prior to 2023, funding from Sport Wales sat within the FAW Trust (now Cymru Football Foundation). However, with the amalgamation of the Trust and the FAW, it has been assumed as one entity for comparison purposes, as the FAW is now the body that is in receipt of the funding from Sport Wales.*

In addition to this reduction in direct revenue funding, football in Wales has also been affected by cuts to local government funding which has led to a variety of consequences including reduced access to facilities; delays to facility development; increased hire charges for facility use; and a loss of staff and expertise to support participation in football and other sports.

## **2. What measures have you taken in light of it, such as changing what you do and how you do it?**

With 105,603 registered players at the end of 2023/2024 season, football is the number one ‘team sport’ in Wales in terms of public interest and participation (UEFA image research 2022). Football is also the number one team sport for

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participation and one of the highest for latent demand among children and young people, figures show that 64.3% are school age children are playing football with 42.9% expressing a desire to do more (School Sport Survey 2022). The FAW are therefore well placed to work in partnership with, and in support of the Welsh Government to ensure maximum impact and successful activity outcomes through football in Wales - delivering a flexible and enjoyable offer for all ages that can touch all communities. We are constantly changing and testing new ways of pushing back the boundaries of our achievements, learning lessons from our approach and most importantly by talking to our potential customers i.e. developing our on-line Coach and

Club Cymru learning portals; ramping up our exciting Be Football Strategy for females; innovating in the field of youth education and leadership; instigating new facility models - collaborative hubs; female friendly guides; brokering a new grounds maintenance partnership and business model; expanding provision for disability football; implementing our PAWB strategy to make football more equal, diverse and inclusive.

We simply cannot fully achieve our ambitions to develop these initiatives and deliver the strategic goals, without appropriate resources.

Demand for participation in football is increasing, particularly amongst young girls, which we have seen in the significant 135% increase in registered junior girls' participation, from 5,687 in 2018/19 to 13,375 at the end of the 2023/24 season. Latent demand was 31.4% in 2022 (School Sport Survey), indicating plenty of headroom for growth in this area.

Due to the reductions in funding we have not been able to fully meet demand with appropriate provision. This has particularly impacted, and delayed, the development of new, targeted programmes and projects specific to Women and Girls Football, Disability Football and football in underrepresented or deprived communities.

It has also restricted and reduced our ability to develop new leaders and volunteers within the grassroots game which will have a knock-on effect on the future creation of new provision.

Many of our grassroots clubs have waiting lists for children looking to participate as they are unable to cope with the increasing demand. Furthermore, due to a lack of suitable facilities in many areas, the facilities that do exist are oversubscribed.

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Due to financial pressures on local authorities, many have increased hire charges for facilities leading to a postcode lottery in this regard, while in some local authorities, children are able to access facilities for free, in others, hire charges can be as much as £200. This is a particular issue in regard to artificial playing surfaces, with 69% of respondents to an FAW survey telling us they are either not very or completely unaffordable (FAW Grassroots Strategy Survey, 2023).

Another impact of cuts to local authority funding has been a reduction in head count and a loss of expertise in sport management, grounds maintenance and in areas of planning.

### **3. To what extent will these impacts be irreversible (e.g. venues closing, or specialist skills being lost rather than a temporary restriction in activities)?**

Reductions in funding have impeded our ability to recruit new expertise and specialist skills, and to develop innovative new programmes which would enable us to target more underrepresented communities.

It is important that we are able to meet demand for participation in football. The danger is that if children are not able to participate in football, or other sports, when they are young, they are less likely to lead active lifestyles as adults. This will have a negative impact on the government's ambitions to improve public health. A 2021 UEFA Social Return on Investment study suggested that Wales benefits from over £205 million in healthcare savings from football participation, growing to a projected £250 million in 2026.

Strategically, we have prioritised investment in grassroots facilities which we are delivering through the Cymru Football Foundation (CFF). Poor facilities are the number one issue affecting players and clubs, and pitches are deteriorating with worsening weather conditions, with over 40% of matches being postponed by weather in some winter months. Currently across Wales only 21% of pitches are rated at 'good' standard; only 23% of changing facilities are rated at a 'good' standard and 54% state that artificial pitches are difficult to access. The FAW and CFF have a vision to bring facilities across Wales into the present day which will achieve improved playing, volunteer and spectator experiences; while also leading to a substantial social return on investment in enhanced health, education and economic benefits to communities across the country. We have been working with determination to achieve this vision and through the CFF, over £9m has already been invested to create inspirational, fit for the future facilities across Wales, £3m of this has been invested into the 30% most deprived communities

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and over £2m invested into facilities directly benefitting women and girls' teams. We have already seen the positive impact of this investment including 77% increase in usage, and 98% of people's experiences improved, with 96% saying they now feel a stronger connection with their community.

We want to be able to invest at least £10m a year into improving facilities in communities across Wales to bring them up to standard. While we are investing in this ourselves and collaborating with a number of different partners in delivering on this, Welsh Government support is a key element of that and cuts in funding from them will impede our ability to achieve this vision.

We have already seen that reduced investment in football can have particularly pronounced impacts for people with disabilities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. From a disability perspective, the reduction in funding and specialist workforce has been a factor in the collapse in recent years of the North Wales Pan-Disability Football League, some International Representative Sides and discontinuation and non-expansion of a Disability Football Coach Education programme. This disproportionately affects individuals who already face significant challenges, limiting their access to inclusive and supportive football environments. Despite reduced funding, we are looking to address this, we have in 2024 appointed a Grassroots Manager for Disability &

Inclusion and are currently working to re-start some of these and grow participation amongst disabled people.

#### **4. What interventions would you like to see from the Welsh Government, beyond increased funding?**

**Disability Football** – Football is the number one team sport for school age participants with a disability (School Sport Survey 2022). We would like the Welsh government to work with us to bring about system change to support Disability football. To enhance accessibility and participation, there is a need to better integrate national programmes like H-DAP (Healthy Disability Activity Pathway) and NERS (National Exercise Referral Scheme) with local disability and health investments, ensuring cohesive support for disability football. This connection would maximise resources, promote inclusivity, and provide more tailored opportunities for individuals with disabilities to engage in football. Nationally we are developing a disability football framework however this may be most successful with a whole systems approach where non-football partners including Regional Sport Partnerships and Family Information or Adult Services within local

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authorities, or Health Strategies, recognise the potential of disability football and support its growth.

**Football in schools** - Football can significantly enhance education by fostering teamwork, leadership, discipline, and resilience, skills that are transferable to the classroom. It encourages physical fitness, which is linked to better concentration and academic performance. Additionally, football can engage students who might otherwise be disinterested in school, promoting attendance and social cohesion. Ensuring that football is available to all girls in school is crucial in tackling negative, outdated gender stereotypes, promoting gender equality, and empowering young women and girls. The FAW would like to see greater minimum requirements for sport participation in the curriculum, and for football to be made available to all girls in schools, which would ensure that all students benefit from these advantages, supporting the Welsh Government's goals of improving both physical and mental health, and creating a more inclusive and dynamic educational environment.

**More broadly**, it is important that the Welsh Government recognises the contribution that football makes to Welsh society, beyond being simply a sport. The Football Association of Wales is committed to harnessing the power of our sport and play a crucial role in achieving many of the government's key social objectives, including improving mental and physical health, promoting equality, enhancing Wales' international profile, boosting the economy, and supporting the Welsh language.

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) has actively promoted equality and inclusivity through initiatives like our PAWB strategy, which increases participation among underrepresented groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. This effort aligns with the Welsh Government's commitment to equality across the nation. Football's role in addressing social inequalities is particularly significant in marginalized communities, where sport serves as a means of social mobility and cohesion.

Internationally, Welsh football has been a powerful vehicle for promoting the nation's identity. The success of Welsh national teams has raised Wales' profile, contributing to the government's goal of enhancing global standing. Football's global popularity also boosts national pride, attracts tourism, and drives investment, benefiting the Welsh economy. Additionally, football supports the Welsh language by providing a platform for its celebration and normalisation, particularly among young people, aiding the government's target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

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The FAW has also been a strong partner in supporting Welsh Government campaigns against racism, misogyny, and violence against women and girls. Football's influence, especially among youth, makes it a critical ally in challenging these issues and shaping societal attitudes.

In summary, football in Wales provides significant social returns, contributing to health, education, equality, economic growth, and cultural identity. The FAW's work is integral to the Welsh Government achieving its broader social objectives, particularly in the nation's most vulnerable communities.

**5. To what extent do the impacts you describe fall differently on people with protected characteristics and people of a lower socioeconomic status?**

Football is the number one team sport for school age participants with a disability, from ethnically diverse communities and in areas of deprivation (School Sport Survey 2022). The FAW would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate the significant impact football plays in the addressing inequality in sport and to demonstrate the robustness of our own data and insight in our decision making. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic saw many societal inequalities exacerbated, including those impacting on sport. Free School Meal (FSM) banding is used as a measure of socioeconomic deprivation, with FSM1 being the least and FSM4 accounting for the most deprived. Findings from the 2022 School Sport Survey showed that pupils from FSM1 are, across Wales, significantly more likely to participate in sport than their peers. Meanwhile, pupils in FSM4 are significantly less likely to participate in sport than their peers. In football however, the highest proportion of participants (67%) were from FSM4 schools, bucking the trend of poverty and low participation.

Reductions in funding have impeded our ability to develop new, targeted provision for people with disabilities, and to develop programmes that have wider community benefits that would align with government objectives such as anti-racism, public health, and social cohesion.

In terms of investment in facilities, we regularly see the negative impact of the lack of appropriate facilities for many of our participants, particularly from our female and disabled user groups. The women and girls' game has seen significant growth of over 120% in the past five years but unfortunately a lot of changing facilities predate that growth and are not fit for purpose. Examples include changing rooms with only male toilet facilities and no sanitary bins. Over 37% of surveyed players told us that the changing facilities they used were either poor or

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terrible. This increases to 49% if we take only female players. One respondent told us they were “Cold and dirty. Often no toilet roll or soap. Rarely sanitary bins as not designed for female use” (FAW Grassroots Strategy Survey, 2023). Similarly, a lack of accessible toilet facilities can affect disabled users. In addition, there are some instances where changing rooms are not being provided at all for junior participants which is a safeguarding concern. While we are working hard to address this through investment in facilities by the Cymru Football Foundation, reductions in funding affect the speed at which we can bring about change.

Many football clubs act as hubs for the local community, often providing access to services such as mental health support, food and clothing banks and a place where the local population can gather. In many deprived communities, the local sports club is the only remaining community facility.

**6. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?**

The Welsh Government and policymakers should not overlook the wider social value of football, as its impact extends far beyond the pitch. Football contributes significantly to the economy, generating jobs and stimulating local businesses, particularly in communities where other industries may be in decline. In 2021, UEFA placed the value of football participation in Wales at £553 million, rising to £692 million in 2026. It also plays a crucial role in education, promoting teamwork, leadership, discipline and resilience among young people, which enhances their employability. Football's contribution to public health through increased physical activity is vital for reducing long-term healthcare costs. Moreover, the sport fosters equality and social cohesion by bringing together diverse communities and providing a platform for challenging social issues. Ignoring these broader benefits would undermine efforts to build a healthier, more inclusive, and prosperous Wales.

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