

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The future of rugby in Wales, HC 1440](#)

Wednesday 21 January 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 January 2026.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ruth Jones (Chair); David Chadwick; Ann Davies; Gill German; Gerald Jones; Ben Lake; Llinos Medi; Andrew Ranger; Henry Tufnell.

Questions 1-60

Witnesses

[I](#): Richard Collier-Keywood, Chair, Welsh Rugby Union and Abi Tierney, Chief Executive Officer, Welsh Rugby Union.

[II](#): Grant Berni, fan representative, Ospreys Supporters Club, Lynn Glaister, fan representative, Cardiff Rugby Supporters Group, Iwan Griffiths, member of the Crys 16 Supporters Trust Committee, Scarlets Supporters Trust and Daniel Hallett, fan representative, Dragons Supporters Club.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Richard Collier-Keywood and Abi Tierney.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this oral evidence session of the Welsh Affairs Committee. My name is Ruth Jones and I am the Chair of the Committee. Our session today is on the future of rugby in Wales, and I am very grateful to Abi Tierney and Richard Collier-Keywood for appearing before us in person—it is really helpful. May I add that it is a pleasure to see you back in your role, Abi, and we wish you well on your ongoing recovery?

Today's session is an opportunity to cut through the noise and ask questions about rugby in Wales—not on past challenges or missteps, but on how we secure the future of rugby from grassroots to the national teams. I am grateful to the many members of the public who have been in touch with us on this subject. I am particularly grateful to the many constituents who have stopped me in the street, the supermarket, the pub or the church to share their thoughts on the state of Welsh rugby.

Welsh rugby is not merely a sport; it is a national institution and source of identity, as well as a major contributor to economic and community life across Wales. It is therefore essential that decisions affecting the game's future are taken transparently, on the basis of sound evidence and in accordance with the highest standards of governance.

I warn you now that we are expecting votes at some point during the afternoon, so my apologies in advance for any delays that they may cause. If the bell sounds, I am afraid that Committee members will have to leave to vote.

Let's return to rugby, with thoughts about the highest standards of governance and sound evidence firmly in our minds. Let me begin by asking you both a question. We have heard from many people that rugby in Wales is in a state of turmoil, with the future of professional club rugby unclear and widespread opposition to your reforms. Cardiff is in administration, high-profile players like Jac Morgan, Dewi Lake and Aaron Wainwright are all leaving for England, and there have obviously been disappointing results on the pitch. Can you explain how you intend to solve these problems?

Richard Collier-Keywood: Good afternoon, everybody. It would probably be a good idea if I started back about two years ago, when we put the board together. As you rightly say, at that point in time, governance was in a state of flux following the BBC programme earlier in 2023. I spent the first six months between July 2023 and the end of the year actually improving governance by recruiting a brand-new board. As you probably realise, we have four elected members of our board, who are drawn from the community clubs, and we have eight members who are appointed, including myself and Abi.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We have spent the last two years as a board building a sustainable future for Welsh rugby. Let me explain to you some of the components of that. First, over that period, we have professionalised and put in place good governance. I hope you will find that we are a well-run board, with well-run committees, who look at evidence before we make our decisions, and think through all the options and come to conclusions.

Secondly, when I first arrived, we were absolutely up against our banking covenants. The WRU was in special measures from our major bank, and we could not do anything financially without talking to our bank at the time, which was NatWest. We really were totally up against it from a financial perspective. For the last year and a half or two years, we have been improving the finances of the Welsh Rugby Union. We issued our accounts at the end of the November for the year to 30 June 2025, and that showed a really significant increase in our earnings profile. That meant that we were able to put Welsh rugby on to a sustainable footing. It was a year of transition, and there are better things to come ahead of us. Basically, the economic rock on which we are based is now much stronger, and that was an essential prerequisite.

Over the course of today and tomorrow, we are actually announcing that we have completed a major refinancing of all the debt in the Welsh Rugby Union, repaying both National Westminster bank and the Welsh Government through the Development Bank of Wales. We have fully repaid, and we are now being backed by two organisations, which again set the bedrock for the future of Welsh rugby. They are Goldman Sachs and HSBC, neither of which would have invested in us if they had any concerns about our governance or the future plans that we have put forward to them. I think that is a real statement of positivity about the future of Welsh rugby. We are now on a sustainable financial footing.

Turning to rugby, which is obviously our business and, ultimately, the reason we are there, we found a system that was essentially broken. To give a bit of context, coming through covid, the Welsh Rugby Union and the four professional clubs were starved of resources. When I first came into this role, we were putting together a player budget of about £4.5 million per club, which is about half of what many other clubs that you would recognise as successful were getting around the world. The future of Welsh rugby was imperilled, and the investment in the pathways by the WRU had not been there, because of a shortage of financial resources, hence why we were so focused in the first year and a half on putting the financial resources in place.

To pick up the story from where we are today, we have a plan to invest somewhere between £6.5 million and £7 million into our clubs, which will make them much more competitive on a European and national stage.

Q2 Chair: Let me stop you there, because we are going to talk more about the finances later. Basically, the WRU is subject to ongoing widespread criticism, and you are also facing the prospect of an extraordinary general meeting. Do you believe that you have sufficient support among the fans, players and club officials to take Welsh rugby forward?



Richard Collier-Keywood: Yes, we do. We understand that it has been a time of turmoil. We are both strong Welsh rugby union supporters, so we feel that as well. Unfortunately, the rugby system was broken, and the pathways were broken. We announced back at the end of October, following what I think was the largest consultation in Welsh sporting history, a way forward for that, which included an investment plan of £28 million over five years essentially to fix that problem, and we are at the start of it.

We also announced a reduction, which I am sure we will want to talk about, in the Welsh professional clubs from four to three. That is not only the affordable way forward, but the way forward that will enable our rugby to improve. When we sat down as a board and looked at the rugby players that we had in the system who were Welsh, we did not feel that we had enough for four teams. We had something over 30 non-Welsh qualified players who were being paid for our professional clubs in Wales—frankly, that was a waste of money in the longer term.

We have gone back to saying that our goal is to have three clubs. Very importantly, the investment we have made will connect the community clubs to the regional sides, or the new three clubs. That involves 12 PDCs—player development centres—across Wales, which means that there will be much more opportunity for young people in Wales to see icons and to play in an environment where they get first-class coaching.

Chair: Let me stop you there, because we can obviously read the details. Thank you very much for that. I will hand over to Ann Davies, because we are interested to get into the detail and the strength of feeling.

Q3 **Ann Davies:** Abi, you are chief exec of the WRU. As custodians of rugby union in Wales, how do you evaluate its cultural, social and economic significance to the country? I am thinking in particular of the Welsh language in my area of west Wales, where our players have the opportunity to develop their skills naturally from grassroots—from the village club level, in my patch—through to regional rugby. How do you evaluate that element?

Abi Tierney: That is a really good question. I used to go with my grandad to watch Barry play on the weekend, and I loved it. I loved the sense of being part of a community and part of a family. Those interactions made me who I am today. That is why I wanted this role. In Wales, rugby matters so much to so many people. It is not just a game; it is part of the fabric of our society. Evaluating it is almost hard, but I will tell you some of the ways we do that. One of the ways is the economic contribution that rugby makes to Wales. The stadium makes a significant contribution to Wales in its own right, but then you go to some of the rugby clubs and they are often the heart of the community, and sometimes the only asset left after other things have had to shut, so they drive the economy there. We evaluate that.

Our annual report sets out the impact that rugby has on things like community cohesion, mental health, education and educational



attainment. All those things are really important. The Welsh language is critical. We want to promote it more and more. We do everything that we can bilingual. When we are recruiting people, we look at whether they understand and value Welsh culture. We evaluate all that in the round. However, it is almost intangible in some ways, because it is a feeling as much as a number, if that makes sense. The female pathway in north Wales is one of the best; we see some brilliant female rugby players coming through. I am really excited for this plan. We can put some fantastic infrastructure in north Wales, which has been under-invested in in recent years.

Q4 Ann Davies: One of my biggest concerns is grassroots rugby, which we will come to in detail later. The village clubs inevitably feed into our semi-professional clubs and then on to the regions. What support are you giving to the hundreds of volunteers to maintain that stream of players? Please do not take this personally, either of you, but I do not truly believe that the WRU understands the importance of grassroots rugby in Wales, by which I mean our village clubs and the support they need. Our national team players start in those village clubs. It is not like in England, where you have academies within private schools. We do not have that in Wales; it starts in our villages. It is so important for that steady stream of players to come through—Max Boyce famously talked about the factory that produces our outside halves. That is not being supported, and it really needs support.

Abi Tierney: I hear that you do not think we are supporting that, so we need to get better at communicating it. We have introduced a new club investment model this year across all our clubs. We are looking to ensure that those clubs are supported and that volunteers are supported to run as effective a club as possible. With that comes training, education and genuine support for those clubs. We are getting very positive feedback from the clubs on that club investment model.

Also, as part of the plan, we are investing more in community clubs. We are not taking money from the community and the grassroots and putting it into the professional game, because of the work we have done to stabilise the finances. Even this year, we have increased the investment in community clubs by £250,000. We have also already secured £1.5 million of grants for our community clubs, which we are working with them on, and we have implemented a facilities grant this year to improve their facilities as well.

With the new club investment model, as clubs go through the accreditation—we have some clubs doing that first—that will enable them to be well governed. It is about increasing the diversity in those clubs, from all different angles, and enabling those clubs to really run. At the heart of this, although a lot of the news and coverage is on what is happening in the professional game, there is brilliant work going on at the grassroots level.

Q5 Ann Davies: How many grassroots clubs have you visited? You have Nantgaredig, which is just down the road from me, and Penybanc, which is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

just up the road. How many clubs have you actually gone into to speak to the people there?

My other question is about the whole of Wales aspect. Gogledd Cymru is hugely under-represented, without any professional rugby at all, so how can we call it a national game? I believe that rugby is a national game; I am really passionate about this. Rugby is our national game, but how can we call it a national game if it is not represented Wales wide?

But first, how many clubs have you been to—village clubs?

Abi Tierney: Genuinely, too many to count, I would hope, from my perspective. I went back to one last week. The last time I went there it was blue skies; this time, it was raining. I recognised a lot of people in the club. I try to get to one every week or two, if I can. I turn up at the district meetings, but I also try to get to clubs and see a game, because that is where I connect. I do it as much as I can, because I am conscious that, if I am not out there hearing, listening to and meeting people, I do not know whether we are doing the things that we need to do. I do not keep count, but I have been to local clubs regularly over the last two years.

Q6 **Ann Davies:** What about the point about Wales-wide representation?

Abi Tierney: Yes, it is really important. One thing that has happened, if I take some of the impacts in north Wales most recently—I have been up to north Wales and met with our clubs and members there—is that, because of the financial situation and because of covid, we have lost some investment in north Wales. As part of this plan, we are going up in March to talk to them about how we can invest in north Wales going forward, so that it does feel like a national game. We have some ideas that we want to share with them. At the moment, you are right to be frustrated and to be asking for more support and investment in Wales, not just at the grassroots level but right the way through, and we are committed to that as part of our plan going forward.

Q7 **Chair:** Richard, would you like to say how many local games, or local derbies, for instance, you have been to in the last six weeks or so?

Richard Collier-Keywood: I have tried to do one a month during my tenure. That is roughly my goal, and I think that I have probably just about achieved that.

Abi Tierney: You have to remember that Richard is there one day a week, as opposed to me being there full time. I think that we have to reflect that he has other commitments, but we do go, genuinely. I was at the Scarlets game on Sunday. You mentioned local derbies. I try to get to those games too.

Chair: It is good to know that board members are getting out as well, though, and not just the chief executives. That is very important.

Abi Tierney: They are, absolutely.

Q8 Andrew Ranger: Thank you both for coming today. To add to that, you have the One Wales strategy, but it frequently treats community games like a monolith. What works for a small population club in Bala, for example, does not scale for a city like Wrexham, which is my area. How is the strategy nuanced to help with the differences between the high-growth, high-population centres in north Wales and the smaller ones that my colleague mentioned?

Abi Tierney: It is a really good question. Having been to Bala, you recognise, even just getting there, how different it is from Wrexham or some of the heavier-population areas. At its core, the club investment model that I talk about—I am really happy about it, and maybe we should have put this in some of the appendices; we are going to do some videos about what we are trying to do—is about saying, “How are these clubs different, and what is the different support that they need?” It is not one size fits all.

If I go to a club, there are all different factors that drive it and what it needs, depending on the population, the demographics or how many schools feed into it. There are a number of different pillars in the investment model that will enable it to be targeted to where the club is, its evolution and what support it needs. We have structured our community game and the support we put into it with our rugby engagement officers, who are assigned to each patch, know that patch and understand what is different about that patch, so that they really build relationships. Those clubs will know who their person is—who they can reach out to, contact and work with on what they need. We are trying to make it as localised as possible. Best practice comes out of that, because clubs that have similar challenges can learn from other clubs because they will see what they are doing. We are trying to build that in as well.

Richard Collier-Keywood: Abi, it might be worth saying a little more about the significant move we made to rugby engagement officers to improve the support we were giving to clubs.

Abi Tierney: There was a really interesting example in north Wales. We previously had hub officers—you will have heard news about that, and some of your constituents have probably talked about it—but we did not have consistent coverage. Where we had hub officers, they were brilliant. They often did a fantastic job and had built relationships. However, they were paid for partly by schools. A lot of schools can no longer afford to fund their bit. We found that some areas had no coverage at all, and others still had great coverage. We did not feel that was a fair way of running the system when we only have so much money to spend. We chose at the time, through consultation with our council and our member clubs, to change that model so that there was consistent coverage. Now, every area has a rugby engagement officer—a named person they can work with—so that there is not unequal coverage.

Q9 Andrew Ranger: Some engagement officers are dealing with nine schools and several other things, and in other places you have almost a 1:1 ratio. How does that work in reality?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Abi Tierney: We did clear analysis based on demographics, number of clubs and number of schools. We even looked at the distances that engagement officers would have to travel so that we do not have a disparity. It is not a perfect system. We are monitoring it closely. We have just done a six-month review, and we will continue to do that. We have tried to make sure that all the officers' jobs are doable and that everybody gets as fair a share of that input as they can.

Q10 Henry Tufnell: It sounds as if you are approaching this like a management consultancy might. Have you considered the feeling from the community about the way you have done it? You talk about demographics. Are you aware that you may not have managed to bring your stakeholders with you because of the language and because of the way that you have approached this?

Abi Tierney: I have seen that criticism. I am not going to apologise for being data and evidence-led, but hopefully you have also heard that I absolutely believe in and have a passion for the Welsh culture and the sense of community and family in Wales.

We were going to fail as a union and at all levels. We had not invested; we did not have the money. Had we not taken an evidence and data-led approach, we could not have secured the future of rugby. You have to somehow find a way to bridge the two. I think you can have a data and evidence-led approach that protects Welsh rugby and puts it on a sustainable footing going forward. Perhaps we need to reflect on how we are describing that and the language that we are using, but when I am out in the clubs, I am not getting that they are disconnected from it. I am not hearing that.

Q11 Henry Tufnell: Community clubs have called for an extraordinary general meeting. That indicates that maybe it is not all okay at the community level. Your response is that it is just going to set back improvements following the report that came out that labelled you as sexist, homophobic and misogynist. Is that not quite a strange way to approach it? Your grassroots are saying one thing to you and then your approach is something different.

Abi Tierney: We have not received anything from the community clubs.

Q12 Henry Tufnell: What about Central Glamorgan Rugby Union?

Abi Tierney: It has written to other clubs. One associate member club has written to other clubs to see if there is support for an EGM. As of today, we have received nothing back. We have spoken to every single district. For those who are not aware of how we work, we have clubs and each club is part of a district. We are not hearing that there is general support for it. Again, it is about the news and how it is covered, but we have not yet had any call for an EGM.

Richard Collier-Keywood: Coming back to your professional point, or management consulting point, I would say that there is a balance here. When I first arrived, it wasn't to do with leading with evidence; it wasn't to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

do with looking at data at all. I think Abi has really professionalised that with her team, and that is really important. If we are making very important decisions for the future of Welsh rugby, which is a massive economic contributor to Wales, I think everyone would want it done properly and professionally, and that is what Abi and her team have brought to it. That is not the way we communicate most of the time, depending on who our audience is.

Being at a board meeting is fascinating. There are four elected members around that table, and eight people who are appointed. I think 11 of us are Welsh—we would identify as being clearly Welsh—and one would identify as being English. Around that table there is a very strong voice from community clubs, which is brought by the four elected members. They do a super job of representing the council, made up of 19 people, which we meet with regularly; we brief them after every board meeting and have conversations, slightly more strategically, every couple of months with them. There is a really strong community voice around our table.

Q13 Henry Tufnell: Coming back to the culture point, in terms of evidencing the governance changes that you talked about having made since the independent review, are there more examples that you can provide to the Committee about how you have used that review to embed systemic changes within the WRU?

Richard Collier-Keywood: The first thing is that we have been very clear about what behaviours are acceptable, both inside WRU circles and at clubs. I spent a fair bit of time in my first six or 12 months talking to individuals where behaviours were challenging, and we have tried to role model those behaviours ourselves in terms of how we operate. Also, we have opened up very clear whistleblowing and direct complaints, which are not necessarily anonymous. We have dealt with those complaints transparently and, I think, very fairly, with everyone involved feeling heard.

I will come back to one very difficult period of time, which was with the Welsh female players' contracts. I was contacted by one of the Welsh players, effectively as a whistleblowing exercise, about how they felt they had been treated. We sent two of our board members to do a detailed investigation of that. We found that a lot of what they said had been true. We apologised for it. I fronted a lot of those meeting with the Wales women players directly, together with two of our board members who almost worked full-time on this for maybe six weeks, and we reached, I think, a successful conclusion. That was an example of us taking poor behaviours very seriously, acting on them and dealing with the people involved.

Abi, do you want to talk about some of the culture work that is going on?

Abi Tierney: Yes. That is why I was really interested in, and very reflective on, your question on the data, Henry, and the idea of professionalisation almost being at odds with, or in conflict with, the things



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that I love about being Welsh—community, family, a collective sense of belonging, etc. They can come together in a really powerful way, and I think it is what is unique about Welsh rugby, so we are doing that culture work. We are learning about how we can improve and make sure that our communication does represent our values. That is really important.

On governance, one of the things that I would say has changed, based on what I hear—we had a meeting today with our clubs where we were talking through our financial results from last year—is that when I am out there talking to our members, because we are a membership, they say, “You are so much more transparent than we have had before.” Previously, I think WRU was seen as this black box over there, but we are out there and our CFO went to every district meeting to present our results from last year and was very happy to take any challenge or questions and provide extra information if there was some.

Part of governance is about being held to account by our members, who are also our shareholders, which is why we also said that an EGM is part of their process if they want it, but I do believe that we have put other mechanisms in place now for people to feel they can raise questions, raise challenge, and scrutinise our decisions and what we are doing.

Chair: Can I make a plea? We have a lot of questions we want to ask you, so brief answers would be much appreciated.

Q14 Ben Lake: I will do my best to be brief too, Chair. Mr Collier-Keywood, you mentioned in your opening remarks that you had successfully refinanced a lot of debt and—I believe I heard you correctly—it was both the NatWest debt and the Welsh Government debt. Would that be the £35 million with NatWest and then the £18 million commercial loan?

Richard Collier-Keywood: There was about £12 million outstanding to Welsh Gov, I think, and the full amount for NatWest.

Q15 Ben Lake: You mentioned that Goldman Sachs and HSBC had agreed to invest. Did they invest more than just to cover the previous debt, and if so, could you share with us the terms of that investment—the length of time for repayment and the rate?

Richard Collier-Keywood: I am doing a little bit of this from memory; if I get it wrong, I will go back on the record with you later. The core terms are that it is shared roughly equally between Goldman Sachs and HSBC. Obviously, with HSBC being more local to us in Cardiff, they will provide the main core banking facilities for us. We have a £50 million total debt from them with £5 million for specific projects on the side of that, so £55 million in total. The terms are better than what we had before from Welsh Gov—by about 1 percentage point, I think. This obviously changes; I think our terms are something like SONIA plus 2.75%.

We originally intended to refinance out for 10 to 20 years. The reason we approached Goldman Sachs originally was because we thought we would get a better, longer-term deal on the US paper markets. Largely because of some of the turmoil that we need to sort out first, we did not think that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

going to the US paper markets at this point in time for a 10-year or 20-year debt would be appropriate. Having taken some advice, we have done a refinancing for about three and a half years, which we see as essentially a bridge to get us through the next three and a half years and enable us to make the investments that we have committed to in this cycle. Probably in two or two and a half years' time we will start to go out and feel our way into a longer-term debt refinancing. Part of that would be to do with some significant redevelopments on the stadium and related areas.

- Q16 **Ben Lake:** Thank you for that detail. You mentioned the stadium; I noticed that on Companies House there is a charge on 19 January. Is that related to this financing deal with Goldman Sachs and HSBC?

Richard Collier-Keywood: Yes, it would be.

- Q17 **Ben Lake:** On the £5 million that you say is effectively hypothecated, are you able to elaborate as to what those projects will be?

Richard Collier-Keywood: I am not actually sure that we have determined all those projects yet. The other thing that is very relevant, in terms of where you are going with that, is that we did a deal in November with Aramark as a new food and beverage catering supplier. Although some of the terms of that are commercial, they put a very substantial amount of money on the table to enable us to do improvements in the stadium to do with our food and beverage offering. Obviously, that gets recaptured through their contract over a period of time. We will not get any of that done before the forthcoming Six Nations, but we hope before the Nations championship later this year our fans will start to see some brilliant changes in their experience of food and beverage in the stadium. One of the other stadiums that Aramark has is Everton. We visited some of the other ones that Aramark has done in the competitive tender that we put out. I think you will see a big improvement and positivity from fans.

- Q18 **Ben Lake:** I very much hope so, but 3.5 years is obviously not where we would want to be. I know that is probably not where the union would like to be either. I am interested, if you are able to share a bit more, about the information and business models that you presented to the investors in order to get them to invest. Specifically of interest is whether there are any ticket revenue targets or assumptions, or sponsorship, because I think a lot of those deals are coming up. Also, how might they relate to the structures of the professional game?

Richard Collier-Keywood: We put in place a five-year plan, which we shared with our two debt providers. I spent many happy evenings on the phone to the United States talking to one of them about the details of those plans. There are obviously some significant uncertainties there: we are engaged in an arbitration with Scarlets and there is the head injury litigation, which we are engaged in together with World Rugby and the RFU. We had to represent fairly what was going on in those situations. Those five-year plans were pretty detailed. They involved revenue by source, our cost base and then—coming down to what we have been very focused on over the last two years—our earnings, so EBITDA. At that

point, we make distributions to our professional clubs and our community clubs as well, but we do track that line.

To commit to this refinancing, it was essential for us to take all our regional clubs off what we call PRA—the Professional Rugby Agreement 2023. That agreement, basically, shared the economic risk of the union with the four professional clubs. I will simplify it hugely for the sake of time, but it had a guardrail in it that meant that the WRU could not earn more than £1 million a year going forwards. When I came into this role, we had a potential debt mountain of between £30 million and £40 million. Not many people would be interested in refinancing that level of debt if you could only make £1 million of income, because you could not afford to repay it.

Getting all the clubs off PRA 2023 was an essential prerequisite to creating financial stability for the clubs going forward. I know there has been a lot of noise about that, but we could not have done the refinancing unless we removed all the clubs from PRA 2023 and put them on to a new professional rugby deal, which we will be in the midst of negotiating over the next few months.

Q19 Ben Lake: You might be able to provide the Committee with some of the detail lines in the five-year plan in written form, but what was the model that was presented to the debtors for this refinancing agreement—in terms of the professional game and the number of clubs? What is in your plan?

Richard Collier-Keywood: There was a number for distributions to professional clubs. That is because we were assuming a different number of professional clubs when we started this process than when we got into the refinancing in detail in November and December. The number we focused on was the distribution number because, essentially, that is what they were interested in. They were not interested in how many; but in what the level of the distribution was.

Q20 Henry Tufnell: How is responsibility divided between the WRU and the regions in respect to repayment of covid loans?

Richard Collier-Keywood: I was not there at the time, so I am doing this somewhat by historic record, but, basically, my understanding is that Government banks did not want the covid loans, which included some of the CBILS loans, to go directly to the clubs because they did not feel like their credit risk was manageable. So, all the loans for covid came via the WRU, which passed them on to the four professional clubs.

Q21 Henry Tufnell: So repayment sits entirely with the WRU?

Richard Collier-Keywood: Repayment to the banks, or the Development Bank of Wales, which was the outstanding one when I came into this role, was the responsibility of the WRU. The WRU had lent that money on to the four professional clubs, so there were back to back repayments coming from the professional clubs to the WRU, which then enabled the WRU to make those debt repayments to the banks.

Q22 Chair: Going back a year or so, the WRU attempted to agree a new



HOUSE OF COMMONS

licensing agreement with all four clubs, but within in a few short weeks you had gone down to saying you could have only two, and then in the autumn you were talking about three clubs. You can understand not just the clubs' uncertainty but the public's uncertainty about where you are going with all of this. Why the changes? Why are you chopping and changing?

Richard Collier-Keywood: One of the things we spotted as a board was that, for the reasons I outlined—from a financing and stability perspective—we needed to change the basis of the way in which professional rugby was financed in Wales. That led us to a decision to put in place a new professional rugby agreement—we call it the PRA 2025. I will turn over to Abi for a bit, but I will maybe come back in at the end. Abi, did you start that negotiation in June 2024?

Abi Tierney: We started the strategy and development process, collaboratively with the clubs, in February 2024, and we agreed by June 2024. That looked at what would be the optimal number of clubs based on our population size, the financial ability of the union and player cohesion, which includes how many players we had and the pipeline. We made a decision with the clubs at that point in June 2024 that we were going to stick with four clubs, and we made that as a joint decision. It was felt that the most important thing at that point was to get all four clubs on to a new agreement with more money, because at that point they were not competitive. We made that decision in June 2024, and we put an offer on the table in August 2024. We were still negotiating that in May 2025.

Q23 **Chair:** You could not get the Dragons and the Ospreys to agree.

Abi Tierney: At that point, we were still negotiating it with all four clubs. We had put the offer, in principle, on the table in October. There was so much history there, and I was coming in new. There was a lack of trust on both sides—Henry has touched on the covid loans—and there was a huge amount of anger at the WRU. When you are trying to negotiate a new deal, that lack of trust makes it really hard, so we were taking our time. The clubs were also working really hard, so there was a genuine commitment on all sides to get a deal done.

In the intervening period, we lost all the games in the autumn Nations, we lost all the games in the Six Nations, and Cardiff then went into administration in the April. All these headwinds—this is not just for Welsh rugby actually; these headwinds were actually happening elsewhere as well. You have seen what has happened in England with some of the sustainability of its rugby system.

When we got to that point in May, when we could not get all the clubs to agree—we got the Ospreys and Cardiff to agree—we sat and took the difficult decision as a board to say, “Things have changed too much. We cannot keep doing this.” Despite what we had thought was the right answer almost a year previous, too many things had then changed. Sometimes, there is a leadership question you have to ask, and just



keeping on doing the same thing and going along the same path is not necessarily always the right thing.

Richard Collier-Keywood: There were probably three or four broad themes that we wanted to achieve going from PRA 2023 to PRA 2025. First, we wanted to change the economic risk to the clubs. One of the things that the clubs told us was that it is very difficult to manage with variable income. Because there were clawbacks, if the WRU did badly financially, the WRU clawed that money back from clubs under PRA 2023. The economic risk to the performance of the Welsh Rugby Union was vested on the four clubs in PRA 2023. We recognise that that was not the right place for it; we should be the ones taking that economic risk, because we were the ones who were actually trying to manage the money machine of the stadium and other things. We thought it was fair that it be transferred to us. The first thing we wanted to give the four professional clubs was certainty going forwards over the next few years.

The second thing we wanted to give them was an increased amount of money. You heard me say earlier that, when I came into this, I think we had about £4.5 million per player in the squads. From PRA 2025, I think it was at least moving to £5.5 million the following year, then to £6.5 million, to get us into a period of time in which we were putting competitive money on the table.

The third thing we offered in PRA 2025 was a change to the balance sheet risk in the clubs. Again, when I was involved in this, the clubs had variable levels of debt, ranging from roughly £5 million up to £10 million—it was that order of magnitude. These were clubs that were turning over £10 million or £12 million. You should not have that much debt involved—it was crippling the clubs—so we made an offer to all the clubs to capitalise up to £3 million of that debt, take the debt repayment away and take the interest payment away.

The final component was that we did want a little bit more control over the rugby because it was difficult for us to get the rugby system working seamlessly—I am particularly talking about the men's game here—between the men's international game and the men's club game. There was so much friction in that system and, as Abi said very well before, there was very little trust between us and the clubs, and we have tried to be open and change that over the last two years. That was the fourth thing we wanted to achieve. That was the backdrop for why we were trying to go from PRA23 to PRA25.

Q24 **Chair:** I am still not clear, though: why could you not persuade the Dragons and the Ospreys to sign?

Abi Tierney: The Dragons and Cardiff signed; Ospreys and Scarlets did not. They felt that they had not been given sufficient assurances. It was over the Cardiff administration. They asked for a couple of things that we felt we could not agree. We gave them assurances that we would sell Cardiff and that we did not want to keep it indefinitely, and we said that we would be completely transparent on any money we spent on Cardiff.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

One thing they asked me to do that I could not agree to was that, as owners of Cardiff—we had taken it on when it went into administration—they asked us not to put in the money that owners were expected to, which I felt—and I took the decision with the support of the board—would have meant Cardiff would be left to basically decline. I did not think that was right: it would have led to redundancies, to players leaving and to poor performance, and, if we were trying to sell Cardiff, it would have lost its value. I did not think that was the right answer. We were not putting any more money in; just the equivalent of what the other three clubs were putting in.

Then the debate became, “You need to give us that additional money that you are giving Cardiff”, but that was not affordable for us. That was the key bit. We agreed to a lot of other assurances in a legal side letter, because we had got the deal agreed, but we could not agree to those two additional elements.

Chair: I am sure we will pick that up with the supporters afterwards—I am just conscious of time.

Richard Collier-Keywood: The final element was quite important: they wanted to sign off on how we sold Cardiff. We were not prepared to do that, because the reason we acquired Cardiff in the first place was to stop ourselves from having a more than £20 million liability. We wanted to be able to deal with Cardiff in the right way going forwards, and to not be in the hands of the four professional clubs when taking that decision. It was our risk, and we felt that we should manage it.

Q25 Gill German: The WRU set about a consultation on the reduction from four clubs. What do you believe will be the benefits to rugby in Wales of moving from four to three clubs? Bearing in mind that the WRU’s consultation made the case for model D—two professional clubs—and said that it was optimal for financial stability and sporting performance, will three teams be able to achieve your financial and sporting goals?

Richard Collier-Keywood: The first thing to say is that we recognise that change is painful, and we went into this understanding that it would be very painful for groups of supporters. We did not know which groups of supporters that would be, but it would be painful for some. We also knew that there would be a great deal of media speculation and interest, and it would cause uncertainty in the game.

We tried to deal with one important aspect of that upfront: we guaranteed all player contracts across the board. We did not want the players to feel exposed through the consultation period, and we explained that to players face to face in a couple of consultation meetings. We went into it with two clubs because we were concerned about the lack of concentration of players playing with each other. As a board, we talked about it; we could probably have gone out with three clubs as well.

The things we were trying to balance were that having three clubs would probably give more playing opportunities to our key players and two clubs



HOUSE OF COMMONS

would give fewer, having three clubs would be more expensive as you would be funding three rather than two, and finally the question of how much of the infrastructure that just does not exist today in Wales would we need to pay for from a centralised basis, with all clubs participating.

I will give you a couple of examples of that. We had interacted a lot during the summer with the retired international players from Wales. One of the key themes they told us was that that group of players were so good because they went through a national academy, there were relatively few of them and they got significant amounts of coaching, so we wanted to replicate that in a national academy. We have announced that we are going back to a national academy, albeit on three sites, but it will be run much more similarly to how it was run in the past, which we think is important.

The second thing, which is widely trailed in the media, is that we are always second to the game in trying to find the new Welsh talent outside of Wales—the people who live on the borders. In the very first Professional Rugby Board meeting I went to, there was a debate about someone we had lost to England. I was passionate about that, and I was like, “Why are we complacent about this issue? We should be fighting for talent tooth and nail.” The new £28 million investment includes a talent management and identification unit, which will be much more proactive in finding that talent, whether it be inside or outside Wales, and supporting players through their education and into a semi-professional or professional club. Part of that is about building up the SRC—Super Rygbi Cymru—to create an improved playing environment as a bridge into professional rugby.

Abi Tierney: It is really interesting for me. My last day before I took medical leave was when we announced the consultation and I started to come back in when the results were coming back, so I was probably one step removed in quite a useful way. First, it was a genuine consultation. We were criticised at the start, with people saying, “They won’t listen” or “They won’t make this a genuine consultation.” As Richard said, it was a fine decision at the board about whether it should be three or two clubs. There were some really strong views, based on all the data we were discussing earlier, that two was the best answer, and there were very strong views that it should be three. It was a fine decision, so it was a genuine consultation.

When we went out, the optimal model was two, but we put the other options in there and then we listened. The fact that we had all those responses—it was one of the biggest consultations that has ever taken place in Wales—shows the passion. It would be awful if we had apathy, but we don’t, which I will take. When the responses came back, we genuinely listened and we said that we will do three, because people had told us that it was the right answer. As Richard said, it still is not an easy answer, but for me, the biggest theme that came out from reading the consultation was that everybody agreed we needed to do something different and we needed to change.



The stronger footing that we are on financially means that those three clubs did not actually need a huge amount of sacrifice in terms of the money that we are still investing in them, which is good. Some of the transformational levers remained—Richard just mentioned the national academy, and there is the investment in the pathways. What I have learned over the last two years is that we had stopped investing in the pathways. We had stopped putting investment into some of our key areas in Wales. We said as a board that we can do three but we cannot afford to water down the rest of it, and we have not done that.

The other transformational lever is much more significant alignment on the rugby operations. We will be building things like talent and insight. We will build much greater connections between the national team and the clubs. I would have been far more worried, Gill, if we had lost that in the reform process, because that is where the transformation comes from for me, much more than the three or two club model.

Richard Collier-Keywood: I will add one other feature. Obviously, our clubs play in the URC, which I am sure we will want to talk about—not to give you a segue into the next topic. I did quite a few of the consultation meetings with Dave Reddin, and the one thing that came back consistently was: make the best choice for Wales. That may be an odd thing for me to say. At the time, the URC were pretty clear that there were two acceptable answers for them. One answer was two clubs, and the other was four clubs. Three clubs were not acceptable because they could not manage it within their competition structure.

When I did the press briefing at the end of the consultation, I was very clear that we are moving to three clubs, even though that is difficult from a URC perspective. There are a broad range of potential solutions, and I am pleased to say we are working collaboratively with the URC on that. But I think we made the right decision for Wales, without being beholden to a championship that our clubs were playing in at the time.

Chair: I am sure we will come back to that, because obviously it is about what is best for Wales, not what is best for the URC, and fans have many strong opinions on that.

Henry Tufnell: Do you think—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: My apologies. We will have to suspend the sitting. We have two votes now, and we will be back as quickly as we can.

Sitting suspended—

On resuming—

Q26 **Chair:** Welcome back to this oral evidence session on the future of rugby in Wales. I understand that you would like to make a correction for the record, Mr Collier-Keywood?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Richard Collier-Keywood: Yes, thank you. I said before that the new financing facility was £50 million, but it is actually £55 million, plus the £5 million on the side, which is for unspecified capex projects at the stadium.

Chair: Thank you very much; that is really helpful. I am conscious that there is another vote to come. We are going to push on as far as we can and see how far we get; my apologies for the interruptions.

Q27 **David Chadwick:** First, may I say thank you to you, Chair, for arranging this session? It is very timely and I hope we can keep going with it.

I want to come back to the question about the hub officers, because that has come up a lot in the conversations I have had with clubs, including Trebanos, Ystalyfera, Ystradgynlais and Brecon. You have talked about their removal; can you confirm whether there was a consultation on removing those hub officers? If so, when it was?

Abi Tierney: As part of the redesign process we consulted our council—our elected members who represent the districts—and the community game board, who oversee the community games. It is the same people on those, and they were engaged in that process. Once we had made the decision, we engaged with the individuals. The challenge we had is that the hub officers are actually employees of the schools, so it was not our formal role—they were not our employees—to consult with the hub officers. If consultation from—

Q28 **David Chadwick:** Did you consult with the clubs, or was the consultation with other people?

Abi Tierney: We consulted with representatives of the clubs, in terms of the district members who sit on the community game board.

Q29 **David Chadwick:** Thank you very much. The Ospreys are the most successful regional side in Welsh rugby, rooted in Swansea and the surrounding communities, including many of the communities in my own constituency. How will the formal tendering process to decide the three professional teams operate, and when will there be an outcome?

Abi Tierney: At the moment, the process we are going through is that we are trying to get to—

Chair: Order. I have to suspend the session again for the Division.

Sitting suspended—

On resuming—

Chair: I thank everybody in the Gallery and particularly our witnesses for their patience. David Chadwick was halfway through his questions.

David Chadwick: Thank you, Chair. We were talking about the formal tendering process to decide the three professional teams, and when there will be an outcome.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Abi Tierney: I have now had the advantage of having had a few minutes to think about it. I want to start with this, because I heard your impassioned plea for the Ospreys. One of the things that I hear every day is passion for all four clubs—we have representatives for all of them in the Public Gallery—among the supporters. I acknowledge that they are all important. They all have history and heritage. Change is difficult, and having recognised that change had to be made, there aren't going to be any easy decisions.

The process we are going through at the moment is trying to reach a consent route with the clubs, rather than having to go through a formal tender. The reason we are doing that is because a formal tender will take time and effort, and what Wales needs right now is some certainty going forwards. The Chair mentioned at the start losing players, and the impact of that on fans and staff.

We are in that process at the moment. Only if that process fails will we have to go to tender. Our focus at the moment is on trying to find a consent route to reach a decision. If that does fail, then a tender process will take the time that it will take. We have in our plan that it would take six months to do the tender process, and then we would reach a decision.

David Chadwick: Richard, do you have anything to add?

Richard Collier-Keywood: No.

Q30 **David Chadwick:** What do you anticipate will be the impact on the popularity of rugby in the region that eventually loses a professional side? We have heard a bit about the potential impact on the Ospreys' proposed move to St Helen's. Could you factor that into your responses? As I said earlier, the Ospreys are the most successful team, and this decision could clearly have a deleterious impact on Welsh rugby.

Abi Tierney: I repeat: whichever team is no longer there out of the four, there will be impacts for all of them. We are very aware of the impacts on any of the four teams. For the Ospreys, I absolutely get how important rugby is in Swansea. One of the things we have heard today is that it is not just about the professional team, and our investment is not just about the professional men's team; it is also about the grassroots and the clubs, and we are increasing our investment there.

It is about the Super Rygbi Cymru; you have Swansea RFC there. It is about investing there as well. It is about the women's game. It is the player development centres. It is what we are doing with the regional training centres as well. Whatever decision we make, and we are in that process right now, we will be looking at how we can secure rugby in that way—so looking at all those different pathways and therefore trying to mitigate the impact of losing one of the teams.

Q31 **David Chadwick:** Do you expect match-going fans to switch allegiances to a new side?



Abi Tierney: No, I think that is unrealistic for fans who have supported the Ospreys, Scarlets or Dragons all their life. That came out in the consultation. What is special about Welsh rugby is the rivalry. To expect that would be really naive. What you can do is think about how you attract young fans and young audiences coming through to play and to support their local teams and so on. It is about how you build that younger audience.

The other challenge that we are facing in rugby is that we have an ageing audience. We are losing fans. We have seen attendance drop for all the regional teams over the last few years. We have seen attendance drop for the national team, so if we are going to grow the sport, a really big challenge is to grow participation and that fandom. I think it would be naive to think that fans would switch allegiances.

Q32 **David Chadwick:** If there is no club there, clearly nobody will be going to watch rugby there, so how will you ensure that enthusiasm for rugby does not wither in those areas without a direct connection to a professional club?

Abi Tierney: I think it is about all the things that I have just said at the pathway level. One of the things we really want to talk to you about—it's hard, because we are in a confidential process at the moment, so I do not want to move to solutions.

If I am talking at a generic level, it is about all those different pathways. It is about a child at the age of six picking up a ball and wanting to play rugby, and making sure that there are the opportunities to do that, whether that is in north Wales, in west Wales, in Cardiff or in Gwent. That is really important, as is making sure that, throughout that participation, boys and girls have opportunities, fantastic coaching, great facilities and fantastic match officials. All of that ecosystem is really important. If the national team then also starts to succeed, that gives people role models and inspirations—again, men and women—for them to look up to.

Q33 **Andrew Ranger:** You talked about investing in community organisations. FAW is doing lots of aggressive investment in 3G pitches, but rugby clubs are miles behind. Without those, they cannot generate passive revenue and all that kind of thing. That capital investment is really needed.

The other thing I want to quickly flip to is whether the WRU will commit to fighting for free-to-air TV for major Welsh games, because that is the shop window. If the audience out there that you were just talking about loses that access because it is behind a paywall, they are not going to be able to see their national team. It is not going to create that inspiration, get people involved, and bring in that younger audience and those players.

Richard Collier-Keywood: Let me very briefly take the easier one of the two. We are absolutely seized of the fact that we need to improve facilities. So many rugby matches are called off in Wales because of flooding and so on, so it is clear that we need to work on that. My plea back to all of you is that we need support from the Government and the Welsh Assembly to make that capital investment across Wales. That would

be my point. We were asked to make point that by one of the member clubs in a webinar we were on less than four hours ago.

Abi Tierney: That is another thing we need to communicate better, because we are investing a lot in facilities. Because we are so much more widespread and we have so many more clubs, it takes longer to make that impact.

On free-to-air TV, the balance we have is that broadcasting are revenues going down, and broadcasting revenues are a big bit of our income that then gets invested into the clubs. Both national broadcasters—the BBC and ITV, where we have free to air—are struggling to invest the amount of money that they have previously. We need to have competitive tension in the system as well.

There is a real balance, because if we keep losing that broadcasting income, we have less money to invest into the game. So I absolutely recognise how important it is to have free-to-air TV as much as we can, and you will see that in the Six Nations this year. It is a really fine balance. We talk a lot about it as a Six Nations board and we really challenge it, particularly in Wales.

One of the great things we have in Wales is our relationship and partnership with S4C, with the Welsh language used there. The partnership we have there is one we really value, both at the URC and Six Nations level. It is really important that we keep that, too.

Chair: We will finish this first panel before 4.45 pm, and then bring in the second panel.

Q34 **Henry Tufnell:** Do you think the WRU is over-centralising rugby in Wales? Does that create fundamental problems should you experience issues as an organisation in the future? How resilient does that make rugby in Wales?

Abi Tierney: You mean centralising in terms of the rugby operation side of it—

Henry Tufnell: Yes. Effectively, you control the whole thing—all operations are within your purview, to an extent. The extent of that centralisation can create problems in the sense that it falls entirely on you as an organisation.

Abi Tierney: We looked at the different models and where is succeeding. The smaller the population you have, the smaller the number of players. We do not have the population and the players coming through that somewhere like South Africa or France has. The countries that really succeed are the ones that have more collaboration—I will call it that—and more control over the small number of very rare and brilliant assets. That includes places like Ireland, where they have much more alignment between what they do as the IRFU and the provinces. It also happens in New Zealand, where all their players are nationally contracted. We have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

looked at what places succeed with a small population and tried to build that in.

You have a really important point on the success of the implementation and making sure that we build that in collaboration with our clubs. A lot of this is about new investment; it is not us taking what is happening in the clubs and centralising it. You mentioned the talent insight, but we don't have that at the moment. It is not about centralisation; it is about building something new and world leading to enable us to do better. But it is also about phasing that and not trying to go too fast too quickly.

Henry Tufnell: Richard, do you have anything to add?

Richard Collier-Keywood: In the interests of speed, no—I know you are short of time. That was a good answer, Abi.

Q35 **Ben Lake:** I am going to come back to the finances. What, if anything, did the 5-year plan that you presented to the two providers have to say about anticipated private investment in the regions or the professional clubs?

Richard Collier-Keywood: We made assumptions in that plan around the level of private investment that would come into Welsh rugby. I am doing this from memory, but it was pretty consistent with the situation today, whereby we achieve between £1 million to £1.5 million per club per year from private investors.

Q36 **Ben Lake:** Thank you. That is very useful detail, and it leads on to my second question. My understanding is that in order to attract private investment, some of the major drivers for interest will be the influence over the playing and the running of the club itself. Under the proposals for the new structure, it effectively seems as though you would be denying private investment those opportunities, so what would be the incentive? If you won the lottery, why would you invest?

Richard Collier-Keywood: That is a very good question. We have three great sets of private owners in place at the moment, but they are all very different. We have some people who we would call benefactors, who have supported Welsh rugby for years and years and years. They have been tremendously valuable in that system. We also have a private equity investor in the shape of Y11, which is behind Ospreys. They still have a lot of local passion for it—one of the leaders behind that comes from Swansea—but they also have a professional investment mandate to discharge. Part of the issue is that we have different motivations among some of the owners today.

Moving on, we are trying to have consistency, going forward, in terms of how we treat the private owners. It is not our intention in the new rugby operating model to exclude them; we want them in there. Some of them go out to South Africa to try to find good young Welsh players in South Africa, and we want to encourage that. We don't want to exclude anybody from that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

They have particular skills in running the clubs, which we want to encourage. We do not want to take on the running of three professional clubs going forward. That is not our vision for the WRU. They have a lot of skills and they have a lot of experience in Welsh rugby. They know their teams and they know their people really well, and we want to make sure that we harness all of that in the model going forwards.

I will give you one example. Steve Tandy came to the board earlier on this week—I think it was on Monday—and he told a very interesting story. He is fabulous. He's great. The word we like is "collaboration"; that is really what we want going forward between the clubs and the Welsh Rugby Union. Steve is hugely collaborative and he has been really well received in the professional clubs. He has spent a huge amount of time out with those clubs and the players.

He told the board a story. Basically, he wanted a day with the players—not a physical camp but just bringing them into camp, with the players coming in—prior to the Six Nations. He told the board that it took him between five and six days to organise that one day, shuttling backwards and forwards between the clubs to try to find a day when the players were off. We need that kind of cohesion, which we do not have at the moment, to save his time and stop the friction in the system.

This is not about control. This is about collaboration between ourselves and the owners going forward. But the situation needs to improve, because there is too much friction in the system. If we really want to succeed at the highest levels, that is what we need.

Q37 Ben Lake: The assumption for the investors is that it is about £1 million to £1.5 million per region under the current model. Is that for four regions or three?

Richard Collier-Keywood: Under the current model, it is obviously for four regions—

Ben Lake: Yes, so is that what they think they are supporting?

Richard Collier-Keywood: Going forward, we are trying to have a financial deal that involves, hopefully, less complexity than where we were before, and that encourages the current regions that survive into the three regions going forward to, primarily, repay their existing debt to the Welsh Rugby Union. We want to make sure that that debt gets paid off first. Then on top of that, if we do make profits at the club level—remember that we are supporting all the rugby costs at the club level—we would like some money back to contribute to the rugby costs that we are currently paying. Broadly, that is the nature of the deal on the table, post-PRA25.

Q38 Ben Lake: So everything will continue to work, as it were, provided the current levels of private investment are held up for the next three and a half years. Is that what you are saying?

Richard Collier-Keywood: Yes.



Abi Tierney: In moving to a fixed funding system, an increased funding system and a simpler funding system, we need to make sure that we are not going to end up in another Cardiff situation where any of the clubs are struggling financially. We have really worked long and hard on a deal that will secure those clubs going forward. That was another thing that we had to reflect on: none of the clubs were financially thriving when we were going through all the consultation and all the negotiation. We have to make sure they are sustainable.

Q39 **Ben Lake:** My concern is that it is not an attractive enough proposition to attract more commercial and private investment. However, in the interests of time, perhaps you could write with that detail.

Abi Tierney: I am very happy to.

Richard Collier-Keywood: The two-second version is that they would all lose money, and we substitute the loss of that money, broadly, to pay for the players. That is fair do's, because we also benefit from those players playing nationally, but that is the thing. I think I read somewhere that, typically, PRL owners put in £5 million a year on average to sustain those rugby operations. They are all different, but rugby clubs around the world generally do not make money. If I was a private investor, would I be thinking about investing in them? Yes, because I love rugby—and the key is in that.

We are trying, with Y11 and Ospreys, to create a different model. The importance of all that is that rugby clubs can be valued on the basis of their turnover, if you are thinking about other forms of sport, so it is very handy to have a private equity player in that market to help us understand that and to support us and work with us as we think about how best to create an environment over the next five to 10 years that will attract investment for investment's sake.

Q40 **Gerald Jones:** I want to talk a little bit about structures. You have said previously that competition income does not cover the cost, and that the overheads for professional clubs are high. I suppose the primary question is: is the URC the right competition for clubs in Wales? As a supplementary question—we are short of time, so I will delve into this as well, if I may—

Chair: You have time, Gerald, and this is quite important, so do please take it.

Gerald Jones: Okay, well we will go with the initial question first, and then we will come back to the rest.

Abi Tierney: We are in the URC currently; it is the competition that we are contracted to be in, and it is one that we will continue to be in for the foreseeable future.

Q41 **Gerald Jones:** Some supporters' representatives have said that they would rather that professional teams competed in the English league rather than the URC. Is that a realistic ambition, and is it something that the WRU intends to explore?



Abi Tierney: It is a really good question, and we heard it so loudly in the consultation. There are two things, aren't there? We are under a contract with the URC, and it is a competition that we are supportive of and very much a part of. Then you also have England with the PRL. We are trying to explain to people that it is not something that we can decide; that is not something that we can do.

But are we working collaboratively—given some of the challenges facing rugby globally, in terms of falling fan bases and falling broadcasting revenues—to think about the optimum competition structures for the future, and having conversations as unions, but also with those competitions? We are, and they are really good, constructive conversations to look at how we build the best. Is it realistic to have competitions where there are more games? It is those big derby games, which I remember as a child, that everybody wants back. We are talking about it, we are exploring it, we are looking at it, and we are doing that in as collaborative a way as possible, but in the meantime we are committed to the URC.

Q42 **Gerald Jones:** I think that was part of the discussion: those big derbies of the past and whether those would be more attractive, both to match-going fans and to television audiences—and obviously there is an income source from that. That is certainly something that has been put forward as worth exploring.

Abi Tierney: I agree, but it is not in our gift at this point in time. We have to be really clear: it wasn't that we decided that we did not want to do that; it is not within our gift to make that decision. But we absolutely understand; we have heard it, and we will be working with the competitions and with the other unions to look at different options going forward.

Richard Collier-Keywood: It may be worth repeating, because this came out massively powerfully, as Abi said, during the consultation. At the moment, we understand that perspective—we totally do—but as we have said, and I said in the press conference at the end of the consultation when we announced what we were doing, we have an enduring contract with the URC, so we are committed to the URC, end of story. We also have, as part of that contract, a ban on playing in any other competition up to the end of 2028. That is where we are today. To get into the PRL, we believe every single one of the 10 owners would have to invite us and the RFU would have to consent to that. We have not received that invitation yet.

Q43 **Chair:** I think the point is that the fans want it. I live in Newport. I can go to Bristol or Bath dead easily; I am not going to go to South Africa for a Friday evening event. As you say, it is an overwhelming suggestion from the supporters—the fans—and the clubs. They would really like this. We understand the point about contracts, but it would be good to see the WRU have the ambition and to say, "We acknowledge. We hear you." We have heard a lot this afternoon about communications; you talk to the banks a lot. The supporters would like you to talk to them about where



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you are going forward. I think that is really important.

Abi Tierney: I agree. As a fan, I absolutely get it. But I will be really honest: we have partners in that competition that need us in that competition, and that we have a contract with. It is a bit like me saying, "Actually, I'm a bit more attracted to that man over there, but"—you know, we can't do that. It is really important that we have loyalty and commitment to the other unions in that competition that we are in a partnership with at the moment, to make that work as best we can.

Does that mean that we are not talking to them and to the other unions about the future structure of competitions and how we make them as attractive as we possibly can to fans? We absolutely are. A really good example is the Nations cup, which is starting this summer. I am really excited about that. What were the autumn nations and our summer tours are becoming a competitive structure. That is about engaging new fans and exciting current fans.

We absolutely know that we have to improve and do things differently, but we also have to respect the contracts that we currently have and be mindful of what we are able to do within those.

Q44 **Chair:** I suppose I respect that, but I also understand that divorces can be amicable and the second marriage can be much better and more profitable. I will just leave that—

Abi Tierney: You are taking my analogy—

Richard Collier-Keywood: I don't think we want to go any further with that analogy!

Q45 **Llinos Medi:** I want to go back to grassroots rugby, especially for me in Ynys Môn and north Wales. You said that you are data-led and evidence-led, which is quite concerning for us in north Wales, where there has been a lack of investment and of recognition of the need to support rugby in north Wales. You also mentioned girls' and women's rugby in north Wales. I want to thank the volunteers, because that has not happened due to leadership from the WRU; it has happened from the grassroots and it has happened from MônStars in Ynys Môn moving up. I can see those girls representing Wales now, but they started due to a volunteer. I am deeply concerned that there is not a clear recognition of the importance of grassroots in the strategic, long-term vision for Welsh rugby. The cloud over the WRU is turning our young people away from the sport and the confidence they have in it, and from wanting to represent not just their community and their region but their country in this sport.

You also mentioned the investment in the player development centres. I do hope that they will not be data-led, because, due to the population of Ynys Môn, it will not be recognised. We have created amazing rugby players without that support; imagine what we could do if the support was there. Are you genuinely ready to invest in Ynys Môn and in north Wales, and not going to turn around and say that, due to population, we are going to be forgotten and it is not going to be—as Ann said earlier—a



game for our nation, but a game for half our nation?

Richard Collier-Keywood: I will give a very quick answer. The data actually shows that we are under-invested in north Wales. That is why we are going there in the second week of March to have conversations about how we can fix that, and we now have the centralised investment to enable us to start to fix that. I mentioned north Wales at least a couple of times when I was talking about investment at the end of the press conference, when we had gone through the consultation, because we realise that we have under-invested in north Wales and we want to change that and fix it, and we now have the ability to do so.

Q46 **Llinos Medi:** I will put the same point to you, Abi, because that commitment for the people of north Wales is so important.

Abi Tierney: I can hear your passion and the depth of feeling. I am inspired every day by the volunteers and what they do. We do invest in north Wales—we put money into every one of those clubs—so I would not want you to think that we are not doing that, because we are. The clubs up there are brilliant; I just think they are absolutely fantastic in what they deliver to their communities and what they deliver to inspire people to pick up a ball and play.

We do invest. We need to invest more, but we need to do that right, and in a sustainable way. That is the really important question, because we do not want to say, “We’ll do this,” and then have it not be sustainable. We have to make sure that it is sustainable, that it works and that it delivers the improvements that we are looking for.

Richard Collier-Keywood: Over the last two and a half years, we have gone away from sticking plasters over things. We want to have a sustainable future; we want to make sure that the things we decide are there for the medium to long term. That is what we are really saying about looking at data and stuff like that. Yes, we are absolutely seized of the opportunities in north Wales.

Chair: Thank you, Abi Tierney and Richard Collier-Keywood. What you have said this afternoon has been really helpful to us, because it has expanded our knowledge, but I have to say that we have had an awful lot of emails, letters and documents from fans, supporters and players who are unsure of the comms strategy. I urge you to make sure that your communications strategy is key; otherwise, you are at risk of coming over as autocratic and dictatorial, and we do not want that. We want rugby to get back up off its knees, and get on with it in Wales. That was a really helpful session. Thank you very much for your time and patience.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lynn Glaister, Daniel Hallett, Grant Berni and Iwan Griffiths.

Q47 **Chair:** It is my pleasure to welcome you to this oral evidence session of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Welsh Affairs Committee, looking at the future of rugby in Wales. I thank the four regions that brought their representatives in front of us this afternoon—thank you for your time and patience today. We look forward to hearing from you. Can I ask each of you briefly to introduce yourself and say which region you are from and what your role in it is?

Grant Berni: I am Grant Berni, vice-chairman of Ospreys Supporters Club.

Daniel Hallett: I am Daniel Hallett, chair of the Dragons Official Supporters Club.

Lynn Glaister: I am Lynn Glaister, and I am chair of CF10 Rugby Trust, which is one of the supporters groups at Cardiff.

Iwan Griffiths: I am Iwan Griffiths. I am a member of Crys 16—Scarlets Supporters Trust.

Q48 **Chair:** Thank you very much; that is helpful. I suppose the most pressing question that has been asked of us is this: can you explain why the recent proposals from the WRU have caused such angst and upset among supporters? Why the outrage? There is definitely a whole load of outrage there. What part of the WRU's model do you actually dispute? Do you dispute it all, or are there specific points that you dispute?

Grant Berni: That is a grand opening question in terms of the amount of information—I could take an hour. In terms of the chaos caused, people don't like change. When you look at the way the consultation has been carried out, the first question is: "Do you think there is a need for change in Welsh rugby?" Everyone is in agreement that the answer is yes, but how that is done—how it is achieved—everybody has a different view on.

The proposal that was put out in the consultation initially to go to two teams caused outrage among supporters and clubs, because it did not look realistic that, if we did that—if there were just two professional teams—we would be able to support a national team. From the start, the preferred option looked wrong, and from that point onwards you were in a battle between saying, "Well, two doesn't work; three's got to be better than two," and being told, "We haven't got the money for four teams any more"—you talked about this earlier. It has gone from, "There's definitely funding for four teams" to "We've looked at it again; there's not funding for four teams with all the other things we want to do." It almost feels as if the elite level is the area that is suffering because of mismanagement in the game over a long time, not just in the last two years.

Daniel Hallett: Historically, the Dragons have not been the most competitive team. Initially, when that happened, the daggers were out for us, but we are fortunate that we have a very strong ownership group who are just at the start of the journey to make us a more competitive team and a more financially viable team as well.

From our point of view, we were slightly more comfortable, as we own our ground and we have that stability built in, but the historical



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mismanagement, or the lack of commercial advancement from the WRU to create the funding available, which Grant mentioned, was still concerning for us. If we continue the way we are going, would we be comfortable that the operation of the WRU would be to the benefit of the professional clubs?

Lynn Glaister: I think the reason people care is that there is real emotion there. There is a real passion for the sport. You are always going to have difficulties when you are bringing emotion and passion into it, but you have to, because that is what makes us great on the sports field—when you have passion, your team is doing well, your supporters are calling out and all that. The reason it is a problem is that we care, and we will continue to care.

It is the length of time that everything has taken. There is an anger about the historical neglect by the WRU—albeit the previous regimes of the WRU—which led us to having underfunded clubs. That has meant that we have not been able to fund—it is not just about players. At one point, we were down to one member of a communications team. We jokingly call them a team. It is things like that.

It is that anger, and it is waiting for things to get better. There are the pathways, and we can see some things that are going well, and they seem to be getting cut off—but we are waiting. It is also the lack of women's teams linked to the clubs. There are so many things—sorry.

Chair: No, I understand completely. It is helpful to have that.

Iwan Griffiths: As a trust, we reached out to our supporters with a questionnaire. We found that 90% of them were against the WRU proposals. Reasons stated were that they were against the central hubs and the central academies. They are also against the control of rugby at regional level being taken away from the regions. Those are just two.

Obviously, people are also worried that if we lose a team, it might be their team. Each of the regions has a unique perspective particular to its region, but a lot of our supporters are worried about the impact on the Welsh language in west Wales. It is a large area, and they are worried that there is a lack of evidence about how that gap would be filled, from a social and economic perspective, as well as a cultural perspective, if a region was lost.

Chair: Thank you very much. Let me move on to Gerald Jones.

Q49 **Gerald Jones:** As we all know, in lots of towns and villages that passion for rugby is there at all levels. The structure that is currently in place is relatively recent, so could you describe why there is such an attachment to it?

Lynn Glaister: We dispute that our history is recent. Cardiff was one of the ones that signed a very different agreement when it happened in 2003, so we strongly believe that we have a long and proud heritage.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

People get connected to their teams and their areas, and the worry is that if you go down to fewer teams, where are you going to get that next generation of supporters? You don't really want to jettison the ones who are there now; you want to be building on them, rather than moving on and thinking, "Well, we can bring the younger generation in." Actually, they need some of the people who have been around for a while to run the supporters' clubs until they can take them over, and maybe make them more exciting.

Grant Berni: All the clubs that we are looking at now are born of elite clubs from the last 100 or 150 years. Some of them existed in more of the form that they are in, but other clubs are fresher and quite different. But there is now an entire generation of rugby supporters who have supported nothing but these new professional elite teams. When we originally went to a regional concept, if you didn't want to support a regional team, you were left with the teams that you already had.

If we make a change now and drop a region—it doesn't matter which one you drop—there will be a massive hole in that community. There will be an effect on community clubs, because kids will not necessarily be that interested in rugby and might not go to community clubs. Community clubs and the semi-professional clubs will suffer, and ultimately that goes through to the elite and the national team, so we have real concerns that dropping clubs will have an impact on the heart of rugby in Wales.

Iwan Griffiths: Referring to what Lynn and Grant said, youngsters these days want to play for a team that they identify with. That will be the Scarlets, the Blues, Newport or the Ospreys. Taking that away from them and making it Team A versus Team B takes that excitement away. They feel a connection to the clubs that are currently there, and that gives them impetus to progress with their rugby careers. That gives them encouragement to see the success of these teams.

Daniel Hallett: All the clubs have worked really hard over the last 23 years to build their identities, pathways and followings in their areas. Kids in the Gwent valleys want to play for the Dragons—I know there will be some who won't, probably due to parental or grandparental influences. Their goal is to go down that pathway and end up playing for the Dragons. We can see that in Newbridge products such as Elliot Dee and Ollie Griffiths, who sadly had to retire. Those players do not come from a single area; they come from a wider base. If we take away one of those bases, you are potentially losing a whole raft of potential players.

Q50 **Gerald Jones:** If we get to a situation where a new structure is established—under the current proposals, the four will be reduced to three—do you feel there is a real risk that fans in the disbanded region will lose interest in the sport? That is about young fans in particular, but fans generally.

Daniel Hallett: We didn't do a survey of supporters; we had a fan forum with quite a lot of supporters in the room, and we basically did a show of hands. We asked, "If the Dragons disappeared, would you go and support



HOUSE OF COMMONS

an east Wales team playing out of Cardiff Arms Park?" Nobody put their hand up. We asked if they would do it if they were playing at Rodney Parade, and nobody put their hand up. There is no appetite for a potential merger or for jumping ship to another team who have been historical rivals. Again, you are going to be alienating a large swathe of the population who are putting, and have put, thousands of pounds into following their teams.

Lynn Glaister: I would also say that the identities that have been built up over however many years are really important. A lot of the stuff that has been going on with the women's teams is great, but do any of you know what area each of those two teams represents? They have names that don't mean a lot to a lot of people, and that is potentially a problem. I think that if you end up naming a team East Wales or West Wales, it will never build any identity.

Iwan Griffiths: Our survey revealed that 81% of our supporters who filled in the questionnaire would not support a team based in Llanelli without the Scarlets branding or the history and heritage associated with that brand. I think that proves this. The plans put forward by the WRU assume that loyalty is transferable, but I do not think it is. I think it risks disengagement, because some of those fans told us that they would walk away from the sport altogether.

Grant Berni: I would back that up. We have all done the same thing: because of the nature of the WRU survey, we all independently took it upon ourselves to ask our own membership how they felt. And we get the same answers across the board, effectively. People are loyal to an identity and a brand that we have built up.

Q51 **Ann Davies:** To pick up on what you said earlier, the rivalry and tribalism—for want of a better word—is what Welsh rugby is all about. You can think about the local derbies we have, even in our community game. I am thinking of Pontyberem and Tumble. My word, the whole villages were out there. This is how we have built up rugby in Wales; it is what rugby is in Wales.

What should the WRU be doing to make the professional game more popular? Is part of that about getting out of the URC and into an Anglo-Welsh league? Of course, attending matches just across the border, coming from Bath, Bristol and Gloucester, is so much easier than travelling from Italy, South Africa and so on.

Grant Berni: One hundred per cent.

Ann Davies: I am not putting words in your mouth. *[Laughter.]* Well, perhaps I am. I will leave it to you.

Grant Berni: Yes—100% yes. If you are thinking of dropping regions, look at the number of competitive derbies you would have left. Oh my God, there would only be—*[Interruption.]* Yes, they would halve. It would be absolutely tragic. If you want to encourage people to come along, they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

want big spectacles; they want to see their heroes playing in front of them all the time. I won't keep going, as I would be hours on that.

Daniel Hallett: I agree. I would much rather nip across the bridge to Bristol than jump on a flight to Cape Town. Apart from the economic consequences, there are historical rivalries between the Welsh teams and, specifically, the west of England teams.

Grant Berni: The important thing with derbies like that is that crowds will build over time, and if crowds build, sponsors are more interested in putting money into clubs. It will then improve and improve, as far as I can see. If you can build crowds, build interest and build sponsorship money coming into Welsh rugby, it's all for the better.

Lynn Glaister: With the current league we are in, I think we are seeing the death of the away supporter. That is the reality. People used to save to go to the internationals. They would save all year to go to Italy, France and so on. Then, when the European cup came in, it was, "Oh, we can add a couple of European trips as well." But now, for our league, you are talking South Africa, Ireland, Scotland—every other week there's a game as big as that. I think that, currently, all our teams are advertising trips to South Africa, which are being run by different groups, and basically it's about £3,500 to go to what will be two matches. I went to Limerick a couple of months ago. You end up spending quite a lot of money by the time you have your flight and your hotel, and I think it is killing the away support. It is killing us going there and, conversely, it is killing people coming to our games. That is why we treasure the derbies. I went to Exeter last week on the supporters' bus, and that was achievable.

Daniel Hallett: Also, you look at the contrast with the Christmas derbies—full houses and lots of passion. Why can't we have that every week?

Iwan Griffiths: For the record, I did go to South Africa last year to watch the Scarlets, but it was a very expensive trip, and that limits the number of supporters who can go. I think we possibly had about 200 supporters from the Scarlets region at both the games. That is 200, isn't it? Not everybody can afford to fly halfway across the world to see their team.

At last week's Scarlets-Northampton game, for instance, I think five or six coaches were going up from Llanelli. I know on Twitter there was a reaction by one of the Northampton supporters, who said that the Scarlets crowd was the best they had had at Franklin's Gardens all season, and that they would fully advocate an Anglo-Welsh league. That is coming from an English club, which I think just shows that it could work on both sides of the border. We have asked our fans this as well, and 86% said they would prefer an Anglo-Welsh competition to what we currently have.

Q52 **Ben Lake:** Thank you all for coming along this afternoon. Lynn, from a fan's perspective, what are your feelings about the current situation with Cardiff's ownership? You are, of course, very welcome to refer to recent events.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lynn Glaister: We are just devastated in so many ways. After going into administration, we have had a year or more of asking whether we would have a club. We were saved by the WRU, and we are, as ever, very grateful for its work to make that happen. What we want more than anything is a positive future, and we want a positive future in which we will not be seen forever as the people who killed off another team. That has been the overwhelming emotion over the last 24 hours. We are massively proud of Cardiff. We want Cardiff to survive and be there, and we will fight for that all the way.

It is just the feeling that we almost have a shackle around us from the start, plus the fact that we do not actually know what the deal is. On Monday, we knew that they were making a decision, and within half an hour the news broke—whether it was a leak or whether somebody had made up a story that hit near the mark. However, we still do not actually know what the deal is, and it is just massively frustrating. Legal owners come and go, but we very much feel like the emotional owners of the club.

At the moment, we feel quite hurt, but we have total sympathy with the other partners in our worry. I did a double-headed interview with somebody from the Ospreys supporters club yesterday, and what they are going through is just terrible. If I have a message for the WRU, it is that secrecy is fine, but secrecy when there should be transparency is a problem. Leaks or vacuums that allow stories to be made, when there should be confidentiality, are causing a problem.

Q53 **Ben Lake:** Because of the recent announcement and events, Grant, can I also ask you about the current situation?

Grant Berni: There is massive turmoil within our supporter base at the moment. The thing that frustrates people is the lack of information. I am pretty sure that, if an agreement was made on Monday, there would have been a plan for this week to contact all the relevant parties in the right order, to roll it out in the right way.

However, that leak happening within half an hour means that players are finding out online, in the evening, that they are potentially not going to have a club, and we do not even know if that is the case. Nothing is signed yet, and deals are not done. The supporter base feels one thing, but there are players, backroom staff, coaches and community set-ups who are in a real state of limbo. I feel so sorry for them, in terms of their mental health right now.

Q54 **Ben Lake:** To turn back to you, Lynn, it is not necessarily the ownership model that is causing the greatest concern; it is the uncertainty and, as you mentioned, the fear that it might lead to consequences for another partner and your club then being held responsible for it in some way.

Lynn Glaister: We may or may not have concerns about the ownership model when we find out what it is. At the moment, it is the anxiety and the worry about that, isn't it, really?

Grant Berni: Yes. The sooner we have clarity, the better.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q55 David Chadwick: This question is for Grant. Jac Morgan, Adam Jones, Justin Tipuric, Dan Edwards, Bleddyn Bowen, Robert Jones, Rhodri Thomas, Arwel Thomas, Andy Lloyd—I am sure you have worked it out. They have one thing in common: they all come from the Swansea valley. If Ospreys were to disappear from Welsh rugby, what would be the impact on our communities and on Welsh rugby in general?

Grant Berni: The first thing is that when you look at the junior sections in clubs, they struggle. There are lots of merged teams in various age groups up the Swansea valley. If you get rid of the Ospreys, that is going to shrink even further, and I fear for the existence of some of the smaller clubs—not just the junior sections but right the way through to the first teams. There will be irreparable damage if you take out a club in the Ospreys region—the professional team—but the same applies anywhere. If you look at those names that have been produced within 10 miles of each other, it is a hotbed of rugby going up the valley.

Q56 David Chadwick: Iwan, one of the topics raised earlier was the impact of the cut to the number of hub officers. There was discussion about whether or not there was a consultation on that. A consequence of the cut in the number of hub officers working in schools is that for South Powys and Merthyr one hub officer is trying to cover nearly 70 schools. I am curious about the troubles created by geographical distance. How successfully have the Scarlets supported and engaged with people across such a large geographic area?

Iwan Griffiths: They have been quite successful actually: 40,000 young people are engaged through the Scarlets Community Foundation, spread across Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Sir Gaerfyrddin and some of Powys as well. Despite the troubles they have had recently, they have still managed to put these things in place. Again, that is a big concern, because if that region was cut, how would that gap be filled? It is not just about that; it is about jobs and the money that region adds to the local economy. The Scarlets added £17 million to the local economy last year; over five years that is £87 million. If it was quoted on pre-covid levels, that would be £102 million over five years. There are 330 jobs and 220 suppliers to the Scarlets, so there would be quite a big impact on the community if it lost a region like that.

Chair: Absolutely.

Daniel Hallett: You can map that across all four, as well.

Chair: If we had time, we would go into the details. The socioeconomic impact is massive—

Ben Lake: As is the linguistic impact.

Q57 Chair: Yes, absolutely. I think that is sometimes underestimated.

Grant, your Ospreys supporters' material shows where the support comes from across Wales, and I am fascinated, because there is nothing in the Cardiff region.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Grant Berni: There is a little bit about where you are born and a little bit about where you might end up living, and a lot of people just find Ospreys later in life. We have gone out, and in the next few days some stuff might come out in the media on what we have done around understanding people who live outside or just within our area. Seventy-eight per cent of the people who responded to our survey live within Swansea, Neath Port Talbot and Bridgend. Everybody else is spread all over the UK, and some people are out in Europe—some supporters travel from Madrid to games.

Q58 **Chair:** My point is that Cardiff is not represented in that area, and we are talking about a takeover, which seems interesting.

Grant Berni: With the numbers we came back with, we are assuming that people are being honest about where they live when they fill in this survey for us.

Chair: I did not doubt it; it was just striking.

Grant Berni: It was quite striking when I saw how many were living in Pembrokeshire as well. It was a bit of a surprise to us.

Q59 **Chair:** Let me ask quickly about the WRU's approach to the professionalism of women's rugby. We are talking about two professional women's teams and then potentially three regions. How do you see that aligning? Let me start with you, Iwan, and then work down the panel.

Iwan Griffiths: There is a mismatch, isn't there? I am not sure that has been thought through properly. Maybe it has, but the evidence has not been put to us. You would have thought that if you have a regional team, there would be a women's team associated with that region. If you have three or four regions, you have three or four women's teams. I do not see any evidence to say that two women's teams and three men's teams will work.

Lynn Glaister: The first women's world cup was held in Cardiff, and that is really important to us. Our community foundation director is an ex-Welsh international. It is just desperate to us that there is not a women's team in the capital city of Wales.

I would say that if one of those women's teams exists, we as supporters would want it to be in Cardiff, where you can build on support for the other Cardiff teams. You can also bring in the excellent networks we have with Cardiff schools rugby and Rhondda schools rugby, which are doing excellent work on the pathway for boys, and we want to see that emulated for women. We also have the universities. We think that you can build a team, and we would like to see that again.

Chair: Dan, what are your thoughts?

Daniel Hallett: The women's game is relatively in its infancy, considering its maturity and the structures underneath it. The proposals in the consultation seemed to want to run before they could walk. There is no fully professional women's team in the world. There are professional players, but they are interspersed with semi-professional players.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Most of the Welsh internationals are playing in the English league. Yes, we want to get them back, but is bringing them back without the structures underneath to give them opportunities worse than them being in the English league, where they have professional set-ups, play and train alongside players from other nations, and get their skillset and professionalism higher?

Yes, I would like the women's teams to align with the men's teams. Personally, I would prefer it to be four, but we will not go into that. I think there is a lot of work to be done initially to get to that stage, and I do not think we are anywhere near that at the moment. It does need an awful lot of investment, which is definitely needed and definitely welcome.

Grant Berni: I think alignment with the universities would help in developing that fundamental player base in the women's game as well. There is something to be said, isn't there? We talked about lightning and thunder—nobody knows which one is which at the moment.

In terms of identity, there has to be alignment with the clubs. It does not matter if it is only two out of three, or even one. There has to be a brand that is easily identifiable and that people can get behind. I think that if you had a women's version of a men's team in any one of the regions now, there would probably be a lot more support for those teams, just through identity, with people loving a brand and being proud of it.

Lynn Glaister: I think it is a laudable ambition, because you see women in football and it has taken off, hasn't it? We are lagging behind in rugby with women's representation. I say "we"—there's WRU, the clubs, everybody. We need to embrace women's rugby, make it work, and find a way to market it.

Q60 **Chair:** I will use the Chair's prerogative and ask one last question. On going forward, you have all talked about the communications between you and the WRU, with varying shades of opinion. If you had one plea to the WRU about the future, what would it be? It seems that we are on the cusp now. We are a nation of rugby lovers—we are passionate, and you have seen that from Members in Committee today—so what would your one plea be to the WRU?

Daniel Hallett: Two things: be open; and do not leave a vacuum for other stories to be sucked into that are outside your control—not your control, but outside the actual truth.

Lynn Glaister: That is the thing. I agree with Dan—leaving the vacuum for stories. We are all victims and probably all do our own finding out of rumours and passing them on. That is damaging. We need to make decisions clear and ensure that they are communicated as quickly as possible in a 24-hour media world.

Iwan Griffiths: It runs a lot deeper than just cutting a region. What needs to be considered seriously is the effect that that will have on communities and in the socio-economic impact on the areas. The WRU really needs to consider that. Once it puts such things in place and moves



HOUSE OF COMMONS

one away, it cannot just say later, “All right, we made a mistake”, and put it back in two years’ time. It is not easy to fix things later, especially something like this, so I would ask the WRU to consider these things carefully—a lot more carefully than it has.

Grant Berni: I echo that. If shrinking the number of professional clubs does not improve the overall performance of the league teams and the national team, we might never recover. My request to the WRU is: please do not just manage our decline. It is our game.

Chair: Those are powerful messages. I thank all four of our witnesses on the second panel for your patience with us this afternoon. I thank the Committee members who have been here today. It has been an excellent session, and we have learnt a lot, I am sure.